**Bear Your Soul on the Ice**

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**Bear Your Soul on the Ice**

by SassySalchow (diedraechin)

**Summary**

At age fourteen, Katsuki Yuuri had been determined to be Japan's next great figure skating hope, but with no coach that would never happen, so his ballet instructor packs him up off to Russia to train with Yakov Feltsman. The Yakov Feltsman, otherwise known as the coach to rising figure skating star -- and Yuuri's idol -- Viktor Nikiforov.

(It occurred to me that I should say that the title is not a typo. It's purposely "bear" as in "to carry")

Translation into 中文 available: 【授权翻译】把灵魂放在冰面上 by elbereth

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**Notes**
So I came across some art on tumblr where younger Viktor interacts with younger Yuuri and I thought, hmm, I'd like to write a story about that. So I did.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Yakov sighed and looked up from the phone on which the text message had just arrived. Out on the ice, Viktor was being, well, Viktor and instead of practicing his step sequence like he was supposed to, he was instead working on transitions to jumps. Jumps were not at all the weakest part of Viktor’s programs, so there really was no reason for him to be spending his time right now, before competition season, working on them.

“Viktor! That does not look like your step sequence!”

The eighteen-year-old skated over, sliding sideways on his skates in a stop that sprayed ice out from under his skates, just barely missing Yakov. The old man sighed.

“But what I was working on was more fun. There’s no surprise in step sequences.”

Yakov crossed his arms over his chest. “You may have been the best in Juniors and you may have won Europeans, but you haven’t yet brought me home a Senior Grand Prix or a Senior World’s gold. You can worry about surprises when you can bring those back to Russia.”

The reminder of his bronze medal finish at the just-finished Grand Prix caused Viktor to get that stubborn set to his jaw that Yakov just absolutely hated. There would be no reasoning with his skater now.

“I won gold at Nationals this year too.” Stubborn and petulant.

Yakov hummed. “Yes, you did, though afterward you also said there was absolutely no competition. Georgi sulked for a week.”

With a toss of his head, Viktor’s long ponytail left his shoulder and floated down his back. “I didn’t mean to hurt Georgi’s feelings.” He sighed. “I even told him he should spend another year in the Junior Division before he tried to move up, but he didn’t want to listen to me.”

Yakov nodded. They’d both tried to convince the younger skater that he should wait until he was seventeen like Viktor had, but in a surprising show of disobedience -- which Georgi was usually not prone to -- he’d insisted on moving up to the Senior Division.

“You’d have an easier time at the international level if you worked on your step sequences. Get them up from a level three to a level four.”

Viktor just rolled his eyes at his coach as he leaned against the boards. “My step sequences are just as good as the competition’s, even if they aren’t level 4s.”

“Fine.” Yakov stepped away from the side of the rink. “If you don’t want to practice, get off the ice.”

Viktor’s face fell. “Yakov!”

“I mean it, Viktor. If you’re not going to do what I tell you to do, then get off the ice so I can work with the students that actually want me as their coach. I have a new one coming in today.”
Viktor bit his lip. “You have a new student?” And Yakov knew what Viktor really wanted to know. *Is he as good as I am?*

“I do. Fourteen-year-old from Japan. Going into his first year at the Junior level internationally.”

“Japanese? Does he like anime?”

Yakov sighed. “Off the ice.”

As usual, however, Viktor didn’t listen to him, and instead skated out to the middle of the rink before going into a runthrough of the short program he was skating this season. Even without the harder step sequences, Yakov knew that Viktor stood a good chance of getting gold at the Europeans again. Better now that the German skater that had injured himself during practice a few weeks ago wasn’t able to return. And if rumor that the top two competitors -- Tabito Uemura and Moon Ui Hwa -- were considering retirement turned out to be correct then, yes, there would be less competition at Worlds. All of this was just conjecture, however, and he had other things to worry about -- like the new student that his wife insisted he take on.

He watched Viktor skate for a while until he heard the click of heels in the hallway. He turned away from the ice to see Lilia walking next to a younger Japanese woman and a boy trailing behind them, a black skate bag on his back.

The boy’s eyes were focused down at the ground. He didn’t look like a skater; didn’t even look like the skater his wife had shown him a video of, either.

“Yuuri,” the Japanese woman said before continuing in brisk Japanese. Whatever she said had the boy looking up with excited eyes as he rushed over to the rink to stare at the skaters. Well, one skater. Viktor.

“He’s a fan of Viktor. Has been since the World Juniors in Bulgaria.” The woman’s Russian was passable, if heavily accented. “Minako Okukawa.” She held out her hand.

“Yakov Feltsman.” He shook her hand. “Your name, it sounds familiar.”

“She was the principal for a season after I left the Bolshoi,” Lilia supplied. “Yuuri is her student.”

“He has a ballerina for a skating coach?” Yakov sighed.

“No.” The woman’s laugh was bright. “I’m his ballet instructor. He shared a coach with two other students in our hometown, but they never got very strong results when they competed on the national level and decided to give it up, so the coach moved.” She sounded angry, and Yakov couldn’t blame her. For a coach to just up abandon a student who was performing well and could manage to compete at the international level… “So I called Lilia, since I knew that she’d married you and you are incredibly well-known in the figure skating world. I was just hoping that you’d have a recommendation for a coach. I never imagined that you’d offer to take on Yuuri.”

Yakov nodded gruffly. “I saw potential. His step sequences are incredibly advanced for his level, and his spins are beautiful. I’m willing to give him a year here. Only then will I decide if I want to take him on permanently.”

Minako smiled. “He won’t disappoint you.”

“If he does, I’ll at least give you a name of another coach. I have very high expectations of my skaters.”
Yuuri gripped the edge of the boards and stared at Viktor. He was absolutely amazing! He couldn’t
wait to tell Yuuko… He sighed. He’d have to text her, he guessed, since he wouldn’t be seeing her
at the Ice Castle anymore -- instead of skating with Yuuko (and Nishigori) he’d been brought here to
Russia. He was excited. He’d be training with Yakov Feltsman! The Yakov Feltsman, Viktor’s
coach -- which means that he’d be training with Viktor. His face heated and he looked down at the
toes of his sneakers. How was he supposed to even step foot on the same ice as Viktor?

“Do you like anime?”

Yuuri frowned. His vision started to swim and he could feel the tears prickling at the edges of eyes.

“Do you like anime?”

All he wanted was to be the best figure skater that he could be and show his idol that he was good,
but he wasn’t. Not really. Loads of skaters were better. Japan’s ace was better than he was, even
even though they all said he was about to retire and then Japan wouldn’t have an ace at all.

The harsh sigh broke through his sudden burst of melancholy and he looked up. Slowly Viktor’s
face swam into focus, his eyes bright, bright blue. The posters he had on his wall didn’t do them
justice at all! They were a clear ocean blue; not the hue of a stormy sea, but a calm one, when the
sun was shining and there weren’t any clouds.

“English?” Viktor was saying.

Yuuri started. “A… a… a little.”

“Anime?”

Yuri frowned and shook his head. Why would Viktor ask him about anime? It didn’t even make
sense. “I skate.”

He didn’t expect the snort of laughter and was a little insulted. He could feel his bottom lip starting
to quiver and he bit it hard.

“Oh, no! Wait! Sorry!” Viktor was stepping off the ice and shoving his skate guards on. Yuuri
blinked quickly and scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his palm. “No, please, I wasn’t-- Damn.”


Yuuri looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

“I just… of course you are a skater.” Viktor poked at the shoulder strap to Yuuri’s skate bag. “Why
would you be here if you weren’t? So I thought… It was funny.”

Yuuri open and closed his fists before finally tugging them into the arms of his jacket and playing
with the edge of the sleeve. He couldn’t look Viktor in the face, so instead he looked at Viktor’s
neck and the jut of his collarbones. He bit his lip again.

“I like anime.” Yuuri looked up and Viktor smiled. “I like anime, that’s why I asked.”

“Oh.” The world was a very strange place. He was standing next to his idol, Viktor, even talking to
him -- well, Viktor was talking at him -- at the very rink where Viktor trained. And instead of
discussing how Viktor was one of the few skaters in the whole world that could currently land a
quad Lutz, they were talking about anime. “I watch some.”
“Naruto, Bleach or One Piece?”

“Um. Fullmetal Alchemist.” Yuuri twisted the edge of his sleeve tighter in his fingers.

“Oh! I don’t know that one.” Viktor smiled and leaned on the wall of the rink. “Is it good?”

Yuuri nodded slowly. “But I don’t have time. Really.”

Viktor sighed. “Because you skate. Me too.” He stretched his arms over his head. “But sometimes I just need to take my mind off of things.”

Yuuri scrunched his forehead, trying to make out what Viktor could mean by that. His English wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t good either. He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Viktor waved a hand dismissively, his eyes focused on something behind Yuuri. “I think Yakov wants you. It’s better to not keep him waiting.” Viktor laid his hand on top of Yuuri’s head for a second and then ruffled his hair. “Go on.” And without another word, Viktor had taken his guards back off and was skating away on the ice.

“Yuuri!” Minako’s voice called him and Yuuri started to back away, not wanting to take his eyes off the other skater. Viktor had started a spin on the ice, his ponytail flying behind him. Yuuri took a deep breath and sighed as he turned away, heading over to his ballet instructor and new coach.

***

By necessity, Yuuri ended up keeping very odd hours. His alarm clock went off around three in the morning six days a week, and by four he was getting onto Skype to be tutored in his classes -- and how weird was it that he could talk to a teacher over video chat, something that wouldn’t have even been possible just two years ago? That usually lasted for three hours or so, off and on. By then it was seven and “lunchtime”. Minako usually made them something high in protein with lots and lots of green vegetables and very little taste.

He missed his mother’s katsudon.

Then he would do some of his homework for an hour, and then it was ballet. Minako had bought a barre and set it up in the living room. In fact, the living room had basically just been converted to a ballet studio. There was one at the rink that they could use, but Yuuri kept getting so anxious when his rinkmates crowded in the doorway that he could never focus and inevitably he’d fall right out of his fouette turns before he’d even reached ten. So home had become his ballet studio with Minako supervising.

After ballet was break and then they’d head to the rink where Yuuri would meet with Yakov. His favourite days, if he was to be honest, were the ones where Yakov was too busy yelling at the other skaters to really pay much attention to him. Yakov’s method of coaching was loud and brusque and Yuuri hated it, but he was never going to tell anyone because he was being coached by Viktor Nikiforov’s coach and that was… That was the best thing in the world.

Even if he hated it.

So the days that Yuuri was mostly left to himself because of someone else getting yelled at were definitely the best days. More often than not it was Viktor who was on the receiving end of Yakov’s displeasure, which Yuuri found surprising. Viktor in real life was nothing like the Viktor in his magazines or on the television. Viktor in real life was… well, he was goofy. Silly. A joker. Always ready with a laugh.
It made Yuuri nervous.

Everything about St. Petersburg made him nervous and anxious, apparently.

It was an especially bad day. He hadn’t done well on a math exam and was having trouble with his English and Russian lessons. Every time he tried to say something in either language to Minako all morning, he just ended up making a hash of it and had to explain himself in Japanese when she obviously couldn’t figure out what he was saying. He was homesick, and every time he heard a gull cry, he felt like he wanted to cry himself.

On top of that, there was an invitational coming up -- one that was important if he wanted to get a spot in the Junior Grand Prix when the next season started after the summer. Not to mention the World Juniors in a little over a month. It wasn’t the first time that Yuuri thought that the gold medal he’d ended up with at the Junior Nationals had to have been a mistake.

He put his earbuds in and started stretching, ignoring everything around him. The music was his ballet and contemporary dance playlist, so there might have been a bit heavier emphasis on melancholy than was good for him, but he didn’t care. He could lose himself in the music and that was exactly what he planned to do.

Stretching complete, he laced his skates and stepped out onto the ice just as the strains to a new song started. Taking his time, he drew shapes and figures into the ice with his blades before turning and going into a slow-moving step sequence, just skating anything that came into his mind. He sped up and did one of his strongest jumps, a double axel, then slid into another step sequence and moved into a layback spin, bringing his skate up to the back of his head before transitioning into a Biellmann spin.

As he came out of the spin he stopped for a moment before pushing off again into yet another step sequence, this one faster and harder than what was even in his program. It was the step sequence that he’d worked on with Yuuko, the one from her senior program -- the hardest part of her program, she had told him. He felt guilty that he’d always taken a joy in this particular sequence of steps and found it freeing. He ended with some hydroblading, his fingers brushing along the ice as he went in a circle.

Yuuri sighed as he got upright and skated to a stop. He really needed to start work; he couldn’t afford to goof off all day. He had to make sure that his triple loop was solid; he was still a little shaky on the landing, and it was a required element for his short program. He hated that jumps were always so hard. Maybe he should have found a partner and gone into ice dancing instead. He shook himself and the thought away. When he did manage to land a jump solidly, it was the best feeling in the world.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his gloves, tugging them on as he skated around the rink, stretching his legs some more. If he was going to slam into the ice, he wanted to be prepared.

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“дерьмо.”

Viktor turned to look at Katerina, who stood next to him at the boards watching Yuuri skate.

“What?”

“Not even I can transition that good from a layback to a Biellmann. How does he do that?” Katerina had her chin resting in her hand as she watched.
Viktor shrugged. “He’s younger than you?”

She rolled her eyes. “If you’re insinuating that he can do that because he’s more flexible, Vitya, you’re an idiot. I know the kid is flexible, you only need to watch him stretch to learn that. No, I’m talking technique. There’s no pause, no jerk, it all just flows from one pose to the next and his spin speed is perfectly regular unless he wants it to speed up or slow down. It’s flawless.”

“But his jumps are shit.” Viktor watched the step sequence with a critical eye. That was definitely a high level three, if not a level four step sequence. Why was a first year junior doing it? It was certainly harder than his own step sequence. He gritted his teeth. Viktor hated it when Yakov had a point, he really did.

“He’s younger than you.” Katerina chuckled when he shot her a disgusted look. “He’s going to be challenging you eventually, Vitya. You’d better be prepared.”

Viktor flinched when Yuuri hit the ice and skidded across it for a couple feet after botching the landing on his triple loop. “Not if he can’t even master that jump.”

“Oh, how’s your flip coming along?”

He turned away from the ice and sighed. Everyone at the rink knew that he was trying to nail a quadruple flip, but hadn’t managed it yet. Once he did, though, there would be no stopping him. Not only would he be the only one who could skate it, no one else would dare try. Not for a while, anyway. “It’s great. I land it cleanly all the time now.”

Her laugh was loud and derisive. “Really? I heard you landed on your face last night.”

Viktor narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you ready to retire or something? Isn’t it almost Mila’s turn to skate?”

Katerina’s hand landed on his shoulder. “Sorry. I just find your overblown self-confidence amusing. But no, I still have a few more years left in me before I call it quits. I’m only twenty-two and my half-sister isn’t even ready for Juniors yet. She’s still training with the Novices.”

“Viktor! Katerina! Why are the two of you not on the ice warming up?!”

It was Viktor’s turn to swear as he shucked off his blade guards and stepped onto the ice. It was too early in the day for this shit.

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He couldn’t breathe. He definitely couldn’t breathe. Air was moving in and out of his mouth, down his trachea, along his brachioli and filling the aveoli, but still, he couldn’t breathe. He swallowed, his vision swimming, blurring, the edges getting black and dark. This was so not good.

Then there was a sharp clap on his back and he looked up, everything snapping into focus -- or mostly into focus. Yakov already had his glasses tucked into his jacket pocket.

“Don’t let it get to you, Yuuri. You know how to skate the program. This isn’t even a major event.”

He nodded, but he still felt like the world was tipping at a precarious angle and that he was ready to fall off the face of the Earth, literally, at any second. Everyone was counting on him putting in a good showing. He needed to do well here and at World Juniors to earn a spot in the Junior Grand Prix. He needed to do well there to cement his future as a figure skater. A couple years in Juniors and then he’d move to Senior division, and then he’d be skating against Viktor.
Skating against Viktor.

Viktor, who had nailed a quadruple flip in the last practice before they all left for this event.

How could he ever think that he would ever be able to compete against Viktor?

He shook his head, scattering the thoughts, but their effects on his nerves lingered. His fingers stretched against his palm, trying to reach the edge of his sleeve so that he could tug on it, feel the fabric against the pads of his fingers, but he couldn’t. So he flicked his fingers against his thumb. Once. Twice. Three times. Four.

Another solid thump on his back and he let his arms fall to his side. “I’m fine, Coach Yakov.” His Russian was still shaky, but he was trying.

“Just go out there and skate your heart out.”

And he did. Skate his heart out. It ended up shattered and spread out across the ice like a glass figure that had fallen from the top shelf and hit a marble floor. Shards of what should have been a flawless performance were scattered from one side of the rink to the other. He’d fallen on two out of his three jumps; his step sequences and spins were still good, but he was rattled and knew that they weren’t as good as they should have been. He was disappointed.

Yakov was disappointed, too. He could see it in the sharp downturn of his coach’s mouth as Yuuri made his way to the kiss and cry. He hung his head, buried his face in his hands.

“Stop it, Yuuri. You have to look up. You’re a skater.”

He dropped his hands, did as his coach told him to and tilted his head up. He was glad that he couldn’t see very well without his glasses. It was bad enough that he could feel the disappointment from everyone. Even if they didn’t even know who he was, he knew that everyone was disappointed.

And his score, well, his score didn’t even bear thinking about.

Yakov’s hand settled on his shoulder. “You have the free skate tomorrow. You’ll make it up then. Your free skate is stronger than your short program, after all.”

***

Yuuri pushed his face into the pillow and whimpered. He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t put on music to dance. He couldn’t skate. And he was a nervous, anxious wreck. He was failing right and left.

He rolled over and looked at the ceiling above him. It was that unfamiliar sort of familiar that all hotel rooms shared. He let his head fall to the side to look at the clock. It wasn’t quite midnight. He’d fallen asleep and skipped the men’s senior short program. He felt kinda bad about it. He had really wanted to watch Viktor skate and would have had really good seats in the stands, too.

As in all things in his life, he was a failure. He was even a failure at being Viktor’s fan and a failure at being a good rinkmate. He sighed and pulled the blanket up over his head, breathing against the fabric.

A knock had him folding the blanket down and staring at the door, confused. The second knock had him swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and staring at the door some more. The third knock had him running for the door, especially once it was accompanied by Viktor’s voice asking him to open up. He did, flinging the door wide. Viktor was standing on the other side wrapped in a coat
and scarf and hat, his silver hair braided and falling over his shoulder, his skate bag on his back and a paper bag gripped in one gloved hand.

“Come on.”

Yuuri blinked at him and Viktor shook his head and walked into the room.

“If you don’t hurry, the food will get cold and I’m not going to give it to you until you’re dressed and have grabbed your skate bag. Street food needs to be eaten outside.”

Yuuri swallowed and grabbed his clothes before darting into the bathroom to get dressed. He didn’t know what was going on, and the month or so he’d spent as Viktor’s rinkmate didn’t give him any clues either. His idol was sort of strange. Some days he’d be incredibly aloof. Others moody. Occasionally, he’d be clingy. He was never not nice. Brusque and insensitive sometimes, but never not nice.

Yuuri smoothed his hair down in the mirror and checked that his clothes matched before leaving the bathroom. Viktor was sitting on the edge of one of the beds, flipping through a textbook that Yuuri had brought with him. It was probably History, but Yuuri couldn’t even remember, and it wasn’t like Viktor could read it anyway.

Viktor looked up. “Good, you’re dressed. Grab your skate bag and let’s go!”

Without thinking, Yuuri did as he was told, following Viktor out of his room and down the hall to the elevator, then right out of the hotel. It was only after they’d walked a block that Yuuri realised he was being an idiot. Viktor or no Viktor, he shouldn’t just leave the hotel without telling his coach! He skidded to a stop on the sidewalk.

“Viktor?”

Viktor turned and smiled at him. “Oh, yes, food!” He pulled a filled bun of some sort out of the bag and handed it to Yuuri. His mouth immediately started to water and his stomach growled. “You skipped dinner. Yakov said you were sleeping.”

He nodded, his mouth already full of the first bite and they continued walking. “This is good.”

Viktor laughed, light and bright. “I’m glad. I didn’t know how they’d be, but they smelled good, so I thought they’d do. We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?” His voice was muffled around the bite of bun in his mouth.

“The rink! I felt like skating and I know that you always feel like skating, so I thought we could go together.”

Yuuri’s brow furrowed. “But how--”

Viktor lifted a finger to his lips. “It’s a secret.”

Yuuri just shook his head and followed. If Viktor could really get him time on the ice he’d probably fall in love with him or something. The idea made his face heat up, so he stuffed more of the bread into his mouth. It really was good.

True to his word, Viktor got them into the building, past the guards and onto the rink. He didn’t think that Viktor would manage it with a piece of folded paper that he’d shoved into the latch of the athlete’s entrance on his way out, but there, stretching out before them, was the ice.
He didn’t even wait a minute. He fell to the ground and started tugging his skates on, glad that he’d pulled on a track suit and not something like jeans. He probably looked like an idiot because he was hurrying so much, but when he looked up, Viktor was on the floor right next to him, tugging his laces tight. Yuuri laughed.

They helped each other up and then stepped out on the ice; Viktor first, since he’d figured out how to get them into the rink, and then Yuuri. He didn’t have his music, but he found that he didn’t need it. It wasn’t like when he was training at the rink in St. Petersburg. Viktor wasn’t loud if there weren’t a lot of other skaters around. In fact, even in St. Petersburg, if Viktor was seriously skating, he was always quiet, like it was just him and the ice and they were communicating. Yuuri definitely understood that feeling.

He glided across the ice. Then he danced across the ice. And with each slide of his blades across the slick surface, he could feel the tension and anxiety drain out of him -- off his shoulders and down his back, down his legs and out of his skates, skittering across the white surface. He broke into a spin, a quiet laugh bubbling up before he went back to moving, slowly and thoughtfully, across the ice.

He didn’t know how long he skated, but eventually he tore his eyes away from his blades and the ice and looked for Viktor. He wasn’t that far away. What surprised him was how focused Viktor was on him. His bright blue eyes were glued to him, watching.

“Um…” He flushed. Viktor’s gaze was so intense that he had to look away, but he could still see him from the corner of his eye and didn’t miss it when Viktor smiled.

“You’re at home on the ice.”

Yuuri nodded. “Or in a ballet studio, but there isn’t enough room in the hotel to do proper ballet exercises.” He started to do the step sequence from Yuuko’s program again. The faster movements kept up with the jumping of his heart. He was skating with Viktor! Not training, just skating! It was almost like they were friends…

He nearly stumbled, but caught himself.

“What did you just think of?”

Yuuri looked up. “Huh?”

“I’ve seen you run that step sequence more times than I can count and you’ve never stumbled, even though it’s incredibly hard. So what did you just think of?”

He could feel his whole body get hot and knew that he had to be red from head to toe. “Uh. That… um… that this is like skating with a friend.”

Viktor’s smile was blindingly bright and Yuuri pushed backwards a little before spinning around to a stop.

“I like the sound of that. Friends. Yes. That’s exactly what this is, Yuuri! Skating with a friend.”

“But… um… I’m…”

In two strong glides Viktor was next to him, grabbing Yuuri’s hands and dragging him across the ice. “You’re not having enough fun!”

Yuuri gasped, letting himself be pulled along. Suddenly, Viktor let go and he was speeding along the
ice. Yuuri caught himself into another spin and let the momentum carry him, changing positions once and then again. He laughed as he came out of the spin and chased Viktor across the ice.

Viktor was laughing, too.

This was nice. This was better than nice. This was the most fun Yuuri had had on the ice since he’d left Hasetsu for Russia.

They skated for a while longer. Viktor talking first nonstop about anything and everything, then eventually coaxing Yuuri into telling him about the one anime he knew anything about. Viktor swore up and down that he was going to find it and then they’d watch it, even if he had to make Yuuri do on-the-spot translating into English. Yuuri stammered that there was no way he could possibly, that he just wasn’t good enough, but Viktor was laughing and speeding up and Yuuri just found himself caught up in his joy of the ice.

He managed to land the triple loop he’d fallen on during his short twice without realising it.

“VIKTOR!”

They both skidded to a halt. Yakov was standing at the entrance to the rink.

“Uh, oh.” Viktor glanced at him. “I think we’re in trouble.”

Yuuri bit his lip, but then he grinned. “I think you’re right.”

***

They had gotten in trouble. Quite a lot of trouble, but apparently Yakov knew whose crazy idea it all was, so really Viktor had gotten into twice as much trouble as he had. But Viktor didn’t seem to care, the angry voice of their coach just rolling off his back like it was nothing.

When Yuuri’s free skate came, the nerves came back, and the rink was swimming in and out of focus again. The terror was rising up, sitting heavy in his throat, but when he caught sight of the ice, the same ice that Viktor and he had snuck time on two nights before, Yuuri found his anxiety lessening and becoming manageable. He nodded to himself and stepped onto the ice, skating a couple of laps before taking his place in the middle of the rink.

When his scores came in he was no longer in fifth place (out of twelve), he was in first, and when the last skater came off the ice and received their score, Yuuri, while not at the top, was just one step below. He’d managed to snag a silver at his first international event. Yakov patted him on the shoulder and told him “good job” in Russian.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
дерьмо -- Der’mо -- Shit/crap.

Since we know that Minako is in her early fifties, probably, in the anime, I figure that Lilia is probably in her late fifties, maaaaybe early sixties, so I have it that Minako and Lilia know each other and respect each other as ballerinas.

Also, out of necessity since we don't see any of the last generation of skaters in the
anime, I've had to make up some Original characters, but no worries, the favorites will definitely be showing up eventually!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Yuuri prepares and competes in the World Junior figure skating championships in Germany and Viktor is, well, Viktor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yakov sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Viktor! Stop!"

With a cheery laugh, Viktor let go of Georgi’s jacket and skated over to the side where Yakov was standing, once again almost spraying him with ice as he did so. "But Yakov--"

“No. No ‘but Yakov’s from you. Off the ice. I need to work with Georgi and you’re being a distraction. Go… do something else.”

Viktor stuck his bottom lip out and pushed his long hair out of his eyes. “Such as?”

“Dance. You’ve been skipping again, according to your ballet master.”

With an overdramatic sigh, Viktor sunk onto the ice and laid down. “I’m tired. Can I take a nap instead?”

“No.”

He rolled over so he was lying on his back. “Can I go home and play with Makkachin, then? I’ll take her for a run.”

“No. Now stop being a drama queen and get off my ice.”

Yakov yelled some instructions at Georgi as Viktor dragged himself -- so very slowly and with very audible sighs -- out of the rink, grabbing his blade guards and putting them on.

Finally taking a breath, Yakov turned to him. He was probably going to regret this. “Go into Studio B. Yuuri is in there with his ballet instructor. She’ll probably help you with your forms as well, but don’t tell anyone. You know he hates it when the students all rush to watch him.”

Viktor gave him a bright smile and headed off. Yakov knew that the younger Japanese skater had begun to fascinate Viktor, and Yakov intended to use that to his advantage. When in Yuuri’s company, Viktor settled down and focused, and slowly -- too slowly for Yakov’s liking, but at least it was something -- Viktor was drawing the younger skater out of his shell. The fact that ballet lessons had moved back to a studio in the rink was a sign of that.

“Yakov, did you see?”

Yakov turned to Georgi. He was supposed to be doing quad toe loops and it looked like he hadn’t fallen on his ass this time, so: progress. “Better. Again.”
Minako looked up when the studio door began to open, quickly resetting her mind to Russian so that she could scold whichever skater had the bright idea to walk in on her and Yuuri practicing this time. The harsh words died in her throat at the sight of the platinum blond head that poked in. “Viktor.”

He smiled and slid into the room, shutting the door soundlessly behind him. “Yakov told me that you might help me with my form if I got off the ice and let him work, Minako-sensei.”

With a sigh and a smile, Minako turned to Yuuri, who was stretching on the floor of the studio, his head turned to look at them. “Is it all right?”

Yuuri nodded and dropped his body over his outstretched leg. “I don’t mind, as long as Viktor didn’t announce it to the Novices. Katya’s sister keeps trying to sneak in.”

Viktor shook his head and sunk down on the floor a little distance away from Yuuri. He tugged a hair tie off his wrist and shoved it in his mouth as he began twisting his hair up into a messy sort of bun. “No, Yakov swore me to secrecy and I knew that if I told anyone, he wouldn’t let me know when you had ballet training anymore. So I decided I should behave.” The words were a little garbled, but still understandable.

Yuuri snorted. “What did you do?”

“Me? I didn’t do anything.” Viktor had finally taken the tie out of his mouth and was securing his hair. “I was just tired and was holding on to Georgi’s jacket so he could pull me around the rink.”

“Oh, is that all?” Yuuri switched from a split to a straddle, walking his hands out until he was flat on the ground.

Viktor nodded and started stretching. “I know!”

Minako hid her smile in her hand; Yuuri’s sarcasm always seemed to go right over Viktor’s head, but she was glad that Yuuri had somehow managed to befriend the other skater. She’d been worried that Yuuri would always hold him up to this impossible ideal and keep as far away from him as he could manage, but the other boy had wormed his way past Yuuri’s defences.

“If you’re all stretched, Yuuri, we’ll start working on your développé. I know you wanted to incorporate one into your spiral next season. Then your step sequence forms.” She turned to Viktor. “Let me know when you’ve stretched.”

From the corner of her eye, she could see Viktor staring at her student, his mouth hanging open just a bit. She could even understand it. Sometimes Minako regretted introducing Yuuri to skating, but he’d been so lonely, and a little boy being the primo ballerino of their small town was not conducive to him making many friends. At least with skating he had Yuu-chan and Takeshi-kun.

Yuuri would have been an amazing ballet dancer, but now he was an amazing ice skater and she couldn’t be prouder of him.

Minako nodded her head at her student. “Can you do it wearing a skate yet?”

Yuuri shook his head and slowly brought his leg down before going up on his toes, bringing his other leg up from behind in an arabesque and holding the position. “I’m a bit above ninety degrees, but that’s not enough.”

“You’re putting a Y-spiral into your routine?” Viktor sounded impressed.
Color rose in Yuuri’s cheeks and he nodded, bringing his leg into a passé before returning to his start position.

“Cross-grab, right?” Viktor was bent over at the waist with his hands flat on the ground. His voice was a little muffled as his shirt was covering his face.

Minako turned back to Yuuri, who was bringing his leg up in his développé again. He was focused, but he answered anyway. “I can already do it as a cross-grab. I wanted to do it unsupported for the increased difficulty, so I’m working on holding the position longer during dance practice.”

Viktor whistled and pushed off the ground into a handstand. He didn’t hold it very long before crumpling to the floor with a laugh. “You don’t do things by half measures, do you, Yuuri?”

“Are you implying that you do, Viktor?”

***

In the end, Yuuri was the only Men’s Junior skater under Yakov’s tutelage that had made it to World Juniors. Viktor had tried to convince Yakov that he needed a vacation and should therefore accompany them to Germany, but Yakov was having none of it, telling him that if he didn’t practice when the assistant coaches told him to -- and how they told him to -- he’d be in no physical condition to actually compete in the World Championships in Tokyo, and Yakov would pull him out.

The idea of not competing in Worlds was terrifying enough to Viktor that he dropped the crazy idea of attempting to go to Germany.

“Yakov,” the most annoying and yet talented skater he’d ever had the displeasure to train called after them as they left the rink. “Bring me home something German! Like Lebkuchen! And Yuuri, don’t forget to bring home a gold medal!”

Next to him, Yuuri stiffened and looked down at the ground. Yakov sighed. They’d be travelling with his ballet instructor, but even the familiar presence wasn’t enough to get rid of the anxiety that riddled the skater. Yakov really didn’t know what to do about it, and Viktor, with his casual comments of gold medals, didn’t help either. But there was time for him to come up with something that could maybe help the boy.

In the end, though, nothing he said seemed to work. This was the biggest competition that Yuuri had faced and he seemed to be crumbling under the pressure. Minako kept speaking to him in soft Japanese as he ran through his routines off the ice in a side hallway after stretching. Yakov kept his eyes glued to his steps and barked out a rough critique when Yuuri skipped over half the sequence.

Stopping with one foot lifted and pointed, Yuuri’s shoulders drooped and Yakov was treated to a death glare from the ballet mistress that could rival his wife’s. Yakov sighed and put his hand against his forehead. What would work for most of his skaters -- his brusque attitude -- never worked well for Yuuri.

Yakov coughed. “Yuuri.” Then he took a deep breath. He had to go slowly. “Your short program is strong. We’ve put in the cross-grab Y-spiral and that has increased the difficulty considerably, so you don’t have to worry about even trying for a triple axel. The double you have is fine. Along with the other small changes we’ve made to your programs, you should easily be able to make the podium.”

It was true. Yakov knew the competition, and there wasn’t anyone better than Yuuri. He’d seen him skate those two programs without error more than once during practice. If he could do that now,
then he’d win gold. But the pressure of saying that, Yakov knew, would overwhelm him. He didn’t know how to deal with this boy as one of his skaters.

With what he hoped was a calming hand on his shoulder, Yakov walked with Yuuri to the ice.

“Skate your heart out.”

Yuuri gave him a nod next to the boards and took a couple of laps before taking center ice. Yakov saw the way Yuuri clenched his fist and flicked his fingers against the palm of his hand a few times before taking his starting position. When Yuuri didn’t start at the right music mark and his face lost all color, Yakov knew that the boy wasn’t going to be able to shake his nerves.

“Oh, Yuuri.” Minako’s voice next to him was quiet.

Yakov grimaced as Yuuri fell on the triple axel and stepped out of his triple loop. They’d switched the triple axel out for a double on purpose. The triple wasn’t required until Senior Division and Yuuri was still weak with it, so why would he stick it back in?

“That boy hates making compromises,” Minako remarked.

Yakov growled. “Reminds me of another skater I know.”

Finishing his bows, Yuuri skated straight off the ice, ignoring the flowers and small stuffed animals that had been tossed onto the rink after his skate to go straight into the “Kiss and Cry”. “Minako-sensei, I…” His breath caught in his throat and he collapsed between Yakov and his ballet instructor.

Yakov put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “What were you thinking putting that triple axel back in?! The point difference isn’t worth the deductions for a fall like that. When you fall early in your routines, it always causes you to mess up your later jumps as well. If you’re going to skate with me as your coach, you better listen when I tell you to do things! I can’t handle another Vitya!”

Yuuri sniffled, his face scrunching up and he hid his face in his hands. “I’m so sorry!”

Huffing, Yakov softened his voice. “It wasn’t so bad as all that.” He glanced over at Minako, who was stroking Yuuri’s back.

When Yuuri’s score was finally announced, it was indeed reasonable. The extra difficulty on his spins and steps, paired with the Y-spiral and other touches, gave him an incredibly good PCS score to go with his mediocre TES. Yakov could feel the edges of his mouth quirking up into a small grin. This was definitely a solid placement. Yuuri still had a chance at the podium.

***

“Yuuri?”

Looking up from his skates, Yuuri glanced over to where Minako was leaning against the wall of the rink. He didn’t know how Yakov had gotten him some private practice time on one of the rinks, but he didn’t care. The sharp sound of his skates cutting through the ice was soothing, and his mind focused on it as if he were clinging to a life raft. He could feel his emotions roiling like the ocean during a thunderstorm, from the time he left the ice until the point where Yakov announced that he had a little over an hour of rink time after dinner that he better make use of. He’d been skating for fifteen minutes without his ballet instructor saying a word, but now that she’d said something he knew he had to answer her. “Yes?”

“You did good today.”
He spun around and dug the back of a blade into the ice, stopping. “Good?” His voice was sharper
than it usually was when he spoke to Minako, but he could feel the anxiety clawing at his throat,
right next to the crushing disappointment that threatened to strangle him. “Good isn't enough.”

“Yakov said that you could still make podium.”

Yuuri narrowed his eyes. “Of course he did. It's his job as my coach to say things like that. We all
know that it's a joke I even made it to Worlds.” He shoved a gloved hand into his hair and tugged.
“That thirteen-year-old Italian skated better than I did!”

“Crispino kept his axel to a double.” Minako didn't flinch at his glare. “I would even bet that his
skating isn't what upset you the most.”

He pressed his lips together in a tight line.

Minako shifted her weight to her other foot, cocking her hip out and just stared at him for a minute
only continuing when Yuuri refused to say anything. “The way his sister ran up to him in the Kiss
and Cry after his skate made you miss Yuuko, didn’t it? She always waited for your scores with
you.”

Sighing, Yuuri threw himself into a spin and skated down the length of the rink. He built speed,
turning once and then twice before jumping. He landed the triple axel with a solid thunk, his free leg
coming around in a graceful arc. And yet a jolt of disappointment surged through him. If he’d only
done that in his short program. Too little, too late. Always too late.

“Nishigori confessed. Yuuko and him are dating now.” He skated backwards, angling his skates in
long curves across the ice, making graceful patterns. He had always liked the way that the grooves
his skates cut into the ice crisscrossed, like a work of art with him as the artist. Taking a deep breath,
Yuuri willed his heart to slow down, to beat normally, to not squeeze in a strange way when he
thought of Yuuko. To think of something or someone else instead.

Viktor. He was probably practicing for Worlds right now.

“Yuuri…” Minako’s voice was soft with a slight tinge of worry to it.

He shrugged as he skated past her in a spread eagle, jumping up into a double axel, stumbling a bit.
He sighed. “I skate. I don’t have time for anything else.”

“Just don’t let any of this affect your free skate.”

Yuuri just stared. “The only thing that affects my skate is my inability to do it.”

***

Mila was hanging off Viktor’s shoulders in the break room where they had the large TV set up.
Technically, they weren’t goofing off, since they were watching a skating competition. Viktor
leaned forward and tugged the almost ten-year-old around him by the waist so she settled on his lap.
Katerina came over and ruffled the hair on both of their heads before plopping down into the seat
next to them.

“Katya, stoooop!”

“Her!” Katerina tugged on Mila’s long bangs. “Never. Aren’t you supposed to be practicing with
the Novices?”
“Yuuri is about to skate his free skate! Viktor came and got me.”

Viktor had a cheeky grin on his face. “Of course I did. I wouldn’t want to watch the World Juniors without my favorite Babicheva.”

“What’s his position before going into the free skate?” Katerina frowned.

The TV cameras had focused on Yuuri’s warmup. His features were taut, and it looked like he hadn’t slept well. “Sixth. He’s skating first for this group.”

If she was surprised by how serious Viktor sounded, she didn’t let it show, turning back to the screen. “I’ve never seen him skate this with the music.”

Viktor tilted his head to the side. “It’s a Django Reinhardt song. I skipped lunch to watch him do a run through before they left.” On the screen, Yuuri had taken the ice and was standing next to the wall as Yakov spoke to him. The camera was focused on his back which looked stiffer than usual, the black suspenders over the white shirt bringing more attention to his posture.

“Huh, I thought for sure that he would have done something classical instead of jazz.” Yuuri was taking his laps around the ice before stopping just off center.

Mila shifted on his lap and he readjusted her. “I was pretty surprised myself.” The music started and Viktor couldn’t help the smile. Yuuri was good at surprising him.

“‘Nuages’. Interesting choice. Starting fast and then slowing down.” She gasped. “Those steps, though. No Junior should have steps like he does.”

“*I'm going to have steps like Yuuri’s when I get to Juniors.” Mila was leaning forward with her hands pressed to Viktor’s knees, and she startled a little as Yuuri performed a combination jump with barely a stumble.

“Of course, крошка, I’m sure your steps will be just as beautiful as his.” Viktor sighed. “He skated it better during practice. He’s too stiff.”

Katerina nodded next to him. “But his spin position is still beautiful, and he hasn’t had a major error yet.”

Viktor furrowed his brow as Yuuri took off for another jump combination. He knew the moment he saw the take off that Yuuri wasn’t going to make the landing on the first jump, and he didn’t. He rolled on the ice and got up, unable to do the second jump of the combination. His timing was off as he entered the Choreographic Sequence; he just couldn’t seem to get into the music again, lagging a beat behind for most of the last third. His final two jumps didn’t go well either: the first seemed rushed, like he was trying to catch up and the second was overrotated. Viktor sighed. Yuuri had skated better at the invitational they’d gone to, he knew.

Yuuri obviously knew it as well as he left the ice.

He heard the deep intake of breath next to him. “He skates so well here, what happens?”

Shaking his head, Viktor set Mila on the ground. “If I knew that, I’d fix it. Then I’d immediately regret it because he’d be an actual threat when he hits Seniors.”

Katerina looked at him from the corner of her eye. “You wouldn’t regret it at all. In fact, you’d relish the challenge.”
Yuuri quietly opened the studio door and dropped his bag down next to the entrance before sliding down the wall. In the center of the room, Minako was working with Viktor, going through every form for his Choreographic Sequence and tweaking his arm and body placement accordingly.

Slipping his sneakers off, Yuuri took his dance shoes out of his bag and pulled them on, tying off the laces as he watched Viktor twist and contort his body. It was fascinating. His season might be over, but Viktor still had his World Championships in two weeks. Yuuri wished that he could go back to Japan for them, but he still had training. Taking time off would just mean he’d have to diet again.

Yakov said that his next set of programs needed to be stronger than this year, and that he had to work on his triple axel and triple flip if he was to stand a chance in the Junior Grand Prix qualifiers. A fourth place finish at World Juniors was apparently good enough that Yakov was sure he’d be assigned to qualifiers for the JGP.

Minako walked over to the stereo system and turned on Viktor’s free skate music. Viktor was waiting in the center of the room, frozen in his starting position. This was probably the last runthrough he’d do with Minako, so Yuuri started his stretches, keeping one eye on Viktor as the other boy moved through the motions of his skate. Every so often Minako would mimic a pose, and Yuuri could see Viktor looking at her as he kept moving, taking the note on body positioning and filing it away.

Viktor really wanted the gold medal.

Yuuri pressed his forehead against his legs as he grabbed his feet and took a deep breath. He didn’t really want to be here today working, but Yakov had threatened to personally drag him to the rink if he skipped one more day. He’d already hidden for two after they’d come back from Germany, and two days seemed to be the limit to what he was allowed to mope for.

He was getting no sympathy from Minako, either. She thought fourth place was good. But it wasn’t. He should have done better. No one would tell Viktor that fourth place was acceptable. Yakov would probably turn purple with yelling if Viktor came in fourth because of some stupid mistakes. Not that Viktor made mistakes -- all Yuuri had to do was look over at where he was working on his forms to know that Viktor Nikiforov would not be having any dumb slip-ups on the ice in Tokyo.

Stretching out into a straddle took longer than usual as he hadn’t done it for a few days. Skipping days was the worst thing he could do for his flexibility. He’d get it back, but it always took more time -- time he didn’t have; time that should be spent practicing -- stretching.

The song came to an end and Yuuri looked over at Viktor in his final pose: head tilted back with his eyes closed, arms crossed, with one curled around his neck and the other cupping the side of his face. Strands from his ponytail were sticking to the side of his face and the back of his neck as he took some deep breaths. He might not have been skating, but he put his all into the movements on the dance floor. After a minute, he broke his pose and grabbed his water bottle, which had been propped up against the mirrored wall.

“Well?”

Minako was smiling. “Very good. I wish that we were going to Tokyo with you, but Yakov says that Yuuri needs to stay and work on his triple flip and triple axel for next season.” She looked over at him and smiled. “I think he wants Yuuri to make the podium at the Junior Grand Prix.”
Viktor spun on the ball of his foot to face him. “Yuuri!” He did a leap and collapsed over Yuuri’s back.

His breath left him in a rush. “Viktor, I can’t breathe!”

“But I’m so proud of you! You came in fourth!” He sat back on his heels and Yuuri sat up and just stared at him.

“Fourth is nothing to be proud of.”

Tilting his head to the side, Viktor narrowed his eyes. “It was your first real international competition, wasn’t it? And it was World Juniors. I’m sure that you were nervous—”

“I screwed up! Not just on my short program, but on my free skate as well!”

“I know. I saw.”

Yuuri blinked. “You… you watched it?!?!” A new level of embarrassment that Yuuri hadn’t known existed opened up before him.

“Of course!” Viktor’s voice was bright and cheery as ever. “Katya, Milochka and I did. I think there were a couple of other skaters in the room as well, but the three of us watched together. Mila loved your steps, as always.” He paused, the smile leaving his face as he suddenly looked serious. “What I don’t understand is why you put the triple axel back in on your short program. I know that Yakov took it out, but you put it back in, even though you were already flustered from the late start. It was a horrible decision. I’m not usually one for listening to Yakov when he does things like that, but you should have. As for the free skate, it was going good until that triple toe loop combination. Your shoulders were completely out of alignment. I knew you were going to fall as soon as you left the ice, but a fall like that was no reason for you to get so out of sync with your music. Usually you’re so much better about—”

“STOP!”

Viktor snapped his mouth shut and looked at him. “Yuuri?”

Yuuri dragged his knees up and wrapped his arms around his legs. “I know, Viktor. I know all that.” His voice was quiet, and he could hear the tremor in it. He dug his nails into the fleshy part of his palm, trying to calm himself. “I know all that.” He wasn’t any louder, but at least his voice wasn’t quivering.

“Oh. I guess Yakov already said it all.” Viktor sat down next to him. “Were you nervous?”

Yuuri nodded. He heard the door to the studio shut, but he didn’t look over, keeping his gaze focused intently on the toes of his dance shoes.

Viktor hummed in thought. “I don’t think that I’ve ever been nervous of skating in front of people, so I don’t think that I’m any help.”

Yuuri’s laugh was small and a little bitter, but still heartfelt. “I’m not surprised that you don’t know what nervousness is, Viktor. You were born to be on the ice.”

“Do you really think so?”

“The way that you move when you’re on the ice, and the stories that you tell with your programs… The world would be a much less interesting place without them.”
“Yuuri! That’s the nicest compliment!” He beamed. “I like watching you skate too, you know.”

“You do?”

Viktor nodded. “The musicality in your movements is just amazing, and I may be a bit jealous of your step sequences. I never thought step sequences were nearly as interesting until I saw yours.”

Taking a deep breath, Yuuri looked at Viktor with hard eyes. “I don’t want to stop skating. I’m going to do better next season!”

“That’s what I want to hear!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Nет - Nyet - No
крошка - kroshka - little one/crumb

It occurred to me after I wrote the chapter that I screwed up the Crispinos ages. Michele and Sara shouldn't be old enough to compete in Juniors -- they'd be twelve, not thirteen, but oh well. We'll just pretend that I didn't because it serves a purpose and I really don't want to make up yet another OC because no one in canon is old enough yet to be in Juniors. :P
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Viktor prepares for Worlds and doesn't give up on wanting to surprise the audience just because Yakov says to. ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“There is no better way to learn your triple axel than to watch it performed flawlessly and then try it yourself.”

Yuuri took a deep breath and looked at Yakov, who was standing just off the rink. The space was practically empty; the only other skater on the ice was Viktor, who was currently running through his step sequence from his Short Program. “You want me to watch Viktor?”

Yakov gave him a short, gruff “да.”

Turning back, Yuuri focused his attention on the other skater. It wasn’t like watching Viktor skate was a hardship; he still considered himself a fan of the other skater, after all. Viktor remained his idol, even if the image of who Viktor was as both a skater and a person had shifted. “Okay.”

“You’re going to be skating with Viktor from now on. I’ve switched his rink time to overlap with yours.”

His eyes went wide and his jaw went slack. “But--”

“This is what is best for Viktor. He calms down and focuses better when you’re the one on the ice with him, and he no longer makes you nervous. Take advantage of him. And don’t think that I haven’t instructed him to watch you when you’re doing step sequences, because I have.”

Like there was anything that the Viktor Nikiforov could learn from him. Sometimes, Yuuri thought that Yakov was insane. At least the coach had stopped yelling at him. For the most part, anyway.

“Today, your focus is the triple axel and basics. No flips, no loops, no salchows. Understand?”

Yuuri nodded and pulled his gloves out of his pants pocket, tugging them on. “Yes, Coach.”

“Good.”

Pushing off the wall, Yuuri started skating laps in order to warm up, making sure that he gave Viktor a wide berth to avoid crashing into him. The rink was bigger than the one he’d started out on in Hasetsu, but it was usually more crowded. Having Viktor and just Viktor on the ice with him was nice. It was quiet. No need to stick his headphones in for warm ups, and he could really appreciate the sound of his and Viktor’s skates on the ice. It was among Yuuri’s favorite sounds in the world.

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“Teach me Japanese, Yuuri!” Viktor landed the triple axel and skated over to the wall, spinning once before stopping to lean casually against it.

Yuuri blinked as he sped by. “You want to learn Japanese? Is this because Worlds is in Tokyo?”

Viktor bobbed his head in a yes. “Exactly!”

Yuuri rolled his eyes as he got into skating position for his triple axel. The take off went well, but there wasn’t enough energy and he fell to the ice, slamming both of his knees hard. He grunted and pushed himself up, brushing the ice off his pants and gloves before turning to Viktor. “What did you want to learn to say?”

“‘How sweet! You’re the best fan ever! Of course I’ll give you an autograph!’”

Closing his eyes, Yuuri started skating around the rink to build up speed. As he passed Viktor, he looked over. “How about we start with ‘Good morning’ or ‘This is a pen.’?”

“I guess.” Viktor sighed. “Not nearly as interesting.”

“おはようございます。”

Viktor repeated the words over and over while Yuuri focused on his jump. This time, when he left the ice he knew he was going to land clean and breathed a sigh of relief as he did just that, gliding backwards along the ice.

Repeating the sentence one last time, Viktor looked up and said, “Got it. Next.”

“Well, you should have picked up a couple basic words like ‘Yes’ at least from anime, right? So, what about ‘I’m glad to meet you’?” Yuuri slipped into a sit spin before transitioning into an upright, then pushing off the ice to skate next to Viktor as he moved down the rink. “おあいできてうれしいです。I bet your Japanese fans would love it if you could say that to them.”

Victor spun into the center of the ice and started his step sequence for his short program while repeating the phrase.

Yuuri watched for a minute before skating to the other side of the rink to start a step sequence of his own. He knew that the sequence Viktor was working on was in a Serpentine pattern, and if he timed it right, they could cross each other on the ice. Things didn’t go as planned, though, and Viktor grabbed him around the waist as he passed by, sending both of them into an out of control spin that left them sprawling on the ice.

“Showoff.” Viktor pushed the hair which had come out of his messy bun out of his face before leaning back on the ice.

Yuuri’s heart clenched. Was Viktor mad at him? He was just goofing around with step sequences like he always did. If he’d messed up Viktor’s practice… “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean… I wasn’t trying to distract you! I just…” Yuuri looked down at the ice and the way the back of his blade was digging into it. The cold was seeping into his pants, and while he was used to it -- having spent a lot of time with his butt on the ice while working on his jumps -- it never became a comforting feeling.

Huffing, Viktor’s pout dissolved. “Yuuri.” Viktor lengthened the first vowel of his name into a whine. “Did you even realise how long it took me to get the choreography for this sequence down? And you just go and make something up on the fly? It’s not fair.”

“I’m sorry.”
“Блин! I’m not mad.” Viktor looked down at his skates and pushed himself up off the ice before holding a hand out to Yuuri. “I’m jealous. My step sequences weren’t nearly as strong as yours when I was in Juniors.”

“I loved your step sequences.”

Viktor blinked at him as he pulled Yuuri up.

He rubbed his hands over his butt, trying to warm it up and get rid of the remaining ice as he skated around. Viktor was still standing in place. “Watch me.” Yuuri closed his eyes and skated backwards, gaining speed as he went to the other side of the ice. He’d done this step sequence so many times with Yuuko, skating side by side as they talked about their favourite skater. In his head he could hear the music from Victor’s free skate two years ago. He twisted and turned, bending and moving as close as possible to the way that Viktor did.

His face was flushed, but not from exertion, as Yuuri took a lap around the rink once he’d finished. His heart was hammering in his chest, and he didn’t want to see the way Viktor was looking at him as if he was some insane stalker fanboy for memorizing part of the routine he’d performed. What had he been thinking, asking Viktor to watch him perform part of his routine? As if he, Yuuri, could do it justice. He really wished the ice would crack and swallow him whole.

Before Viktor had even half a chance to say anything, Georgi and Katerina were on the ice. Russian too fast for him to even try and understand was suddenly all around him. The quiet intimacy of having the ice to themselves was broken.

Yuuri just hoped that he hadn’t ruined the mood well before the other Russians showed up. He gave his triple axel one more try, but his thoughts were still scattered over the skating session with Viktor, and the noise of more people in the rink was clanging around in his head. He fell, sliding across the ice. Yeah, Yuuri thought, he was definitely done for the day, as his nose brushed the cold surface.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up and skated over to the exit where he’d left his blade guards. He tugged them on before heading over to his bag.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen that look on Vitya’s face.”

Yuuri looked up at his coach, who was staring at him. Furrowing his brow, he turned to look back at Viktor, now goofing off with Katya while Georgi was talking. Yuuri had a feeling it was about a girl. All Georgi ever talked about was girls.

“He looks like he usually does to me.”

“We happened to see your rendition of Viktor’s step sequence from his last year in Juniors. He set the World Record with that free skate, you know.”

Nodding, Yuuri gulped down some water. “I know. I’m sorry, Coach. I know I was supposed to be working on my triple axel and not playing around.”

Yakov thumped his hand on Yuuri’s shoulder and Yuuri flinched. “Don’t doubt yourself and don’t quit. The look Viktor was giving you—He wants to compete against you, Yuuri. That was the look of someone that wants to duel on the ice.”

Yuuri swallowed. That… that didn’t actually sound fun, and yet… Yuuri relished the very idea of it, but… He clenched his jaw. “I’m not good enough to go up against Viktor.”

“Yet. You forgot the keyword, Yuuri. Yet.”
When Yuuri opened the front door, the last person that he’d expected to see there was Viktor. But that was exactly who was standing there, a leash was wrapped tight around his right hand and a handle of a bag in the other. Makkachin was busy wrapping the other end of the leash around Viktor’s legs.

“Uh, Viktor… I thought we were picking up Makkachin in the morning, before your flight.”

When the dog heard her name, she barked and jumped for Yuuri, tugging down Viktor, who hadn’t quite dropped the leash in time. Yuuri bent down and gave her a pet for being such a good dog, rubbing behind her ears like he knew she liked. “Don’t worry, Makkachin, you’ll have so much fun with Minako-sensei and I.”

Viktor laughed and stepped inside. “I’m just glad that she doesn’t have to go to the kennel this time. She doesn’t mind it so much, but I know she’ll have more fun with you. So thanks for that, but dropping off Makkachin wasn’t the real reason I came.”

“Oh?” Yuuri reached out for the bag of Makkachin’s supplies for the days that Viktor’d be gone, but Viktor held on tight to the handle.

“Hi, Minako-sensei! I need to borrow Yuuri for a minute, can you watch Makkachin?”

Minako looked up from the sofa where she was watching TV and sipping beer and waved her hand. “No problem. Come on, Makkachin, I’ll give you pets while the boys do whatever. Just don’t set the place on fire or cause any damage. I want to get my deposit back!”

Viktor laughed. Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. And Makkachin happily ran over to jump on the couch and get all the affection a tipsy Minako could supply.

Not wasting a moment, Viktor grabbed Yuuri’s wrist and tugged him down the hall, looking in the different rooms before he spotted the one he wanted. He pulled them into the bathroom and shut the door, locking it.

“V-Viktor?!”

He pressed his finger to his lips and fished out a plastic bag out from underneath all of Makkachin’s food and toys. With a grin he pulled out the box that was inside and held it out for Yuuri’s approval.

“Hair dye?! Black hair dye? Viktor--”

“It’ll be amazing and I need your help! I don’t want to dye all of my hair, just the ends, but it’ll be too hard. Besides, it’s temporary and this is the last competition of the season. Yakov doesn’t think that my quad flip is ready for my free skate, and I really want to surprise the audience. This is perfect! Say you’ll help me.”

“Viktor.” He knew his voice was disapproving, but Yakov would skin both their hides if Viktor showed up at the airport tomorrow with black tips and found out that Yuuri had helped him do it.

“I’m not taking no for an answer, Yuuri.” Again with drawing out his name into a whine.

Yuuri stared at the ceiling for a minute before dropping his shoulders and nodding his head. “OK, fine. What do I have to do?”

When Minako found them thirty minutes later, she rubbed at her eyes, murmuring that she had to be
seeing things because there was no way that Yuuri was helping Viktor dye his hair the night before Vikt
was supposed to leave for the World Championships, because Yakov would kill all three of them.

Viktor just laughed. “But Minako-sensei, this will be perfect! I’ll get extra PCS points for sure.”

“Oh, the judges suddenly care about costume choices now?”

Viktor stuck his bottom lip out. “Not really, but they should.” Viktor tilted his head back. “It’ll be
fine. I have a plan. Yakov will never know that Yuuri helped me.”

With a sigh, Minako stepped into the bathroom, taking things from small and cozy to outright
cramped. If Makkachin tried to join them, they might get stuck from the sheer amount of bodies.

“Here… let me help. I have more experience than the two of you. If you’re doing this, it should at
least look good. God help me, but you’re an idiot, Viktor.”

By the end, Yuuri was glad that his hair was black and short. He may have admired Viktor’s hair as
he looked at the posters, but the sheer amount of time and the number of steps they had to repeat
twice to make sure that the dye at the bottom was dark enough -- not to mention the rinsing and the
conditioning and the blow drying -- took ages. But it looked amazing. Yuuri had seen Viktor’s
costumes before, and this, well, it really was perfect. If someone printed a poster of Viktor in his free
skate costume with his hair up and dyed like this, Yuuri was going to have a hard time not buying
the poster, even if buying posters of Viktor now almost felt a little weird since they were rinkmates
and… friends.

Viktor’s hair was now platinum at the top and gently grew darker to a grey until the very tips were a
dark blue-black. He pulled it all up in a ponytail before gathering his coat, pulling a hat out of one of
the large pockets. He tucked every last strand of hair up under the hat. “It has to stay a secret.” His
eyes practically twinkled as he laughed. After giving his dog as many pets, hugs and kisses as he
could, Viktor stood up at the door. “Wish me luck?”

“Like you’ll need it.” Yuuri smiled. “Bring back gold, Viktor.”

***

Glancing over at Viktor, Yakov narrowed his eyes. The skater was up to something, he knew that.
Had known that since he showed up late at the airport, almost causing them to miss their flight to
Tokyo. But Viktor had been very careful about keeping his distance from Yakov, and since they’d
been in public since Viktor had shown up at the airport, there was nothing that Yakov could do or
say.

Viktor tugged his hood down a little more over his forehead. It was unlike him, but he had slipped a
lightweight black hoodie on under his red tracksuit jacket with “RUSSIA” emblazoned in white
letters on the back. He had his phone out and flipped open, and was looking at his messages. The
notification sound hadn’t stopped from the time he turned it back on after they’d landed.

“Vitya?”

Viktor looked over at him, pulling his suitcase with his skating kit behind him. “Yakov?”

“What did you do, Vitya?”

Vitya stuck his phone back in his pocket. “Nothing. Are we going to the hotel first?”
Yakov had a feeling that he was quickly getting too old for this shit. His fear was confirmed when Viktor came bounding into the lobby for the pre-dinner meetup wearing a conspicuous hat. Viktor did not wear hats. At least not in the way he was currently wearing it, with his hair all pushed up underneath.

“Yakov! People are already talking about my hair on LiveJournal!” Viktor seemed inordinately pleased about this.

Blinking, Yakov looked at Viktor. He was clearly waiting for some sort of reaction from him.

“What is a LiveJournal?”

Viktor sighed and tilted his head back against the chair he was in, lifting one leg to dangle it over the arm. “Yakov, that is so sad. It is only the best thing ever. I post pictures and talk about my skating and my fans can leave comments and things. I posted a picture of me in front of the airport that I had Katya take after we arrived with the announcement that I am officially in Japan for Worlds.”

Yakov waved his hand in dismissal. “I don’t give a crap about that nonsense, Vitya. Why are they talking about your hair?”

Viktor smiled. “Everyone thinks I’ve cut it!”

For a second, Yakov felt like he couldn’t breathe. Vaguely, somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if this was the sort of feeling that Yuuri went through before every performance; if it was, he’d have to upgrade his opinion of the skater. It wasn’t that he cared if Viktor cut his hair, it was the idea that he’d do something that rash right before the World Championships. He was almost afraid to ask. “Did you?”

“Of course not! Everyone just thinks I did!” Viktor stood up. “I asked Yuuri what his favorite food was, and he told me it was this thing called katsudon, and I think that’s what we should all have for dinner.”

Yes, Yakov thought, he was definitely too old for this shit.

The reality was actually, in Yakov’s opinion, worse. He’d let Viktor have his fun of hiding his hair under hats and beanies at all the public practices leading up to the competition, but when Viktor changed into his Short Program costume, Yakov thought for sure that he would strangle him.

“You dyed it?”

“Just the bottom half or so. Isn’t it amazing? It looks even better in the ponytail that I’ll wear it in for the free skate, but I’ll admit, it looks pretty good braided like this as well.”

Behind Yakov, someone started laughing.

“Alexei!” Viktor brushed past Yakov and gave the man a hug.

“Vitya, are you still giving Yakov a hard time? Shouldn’t you have matured a bit since I last saw you?”

Unsurprisingly to Yakov, Viktor flushed. “He wouldn’t let me put the quad flip in my free program.”

Before Viktor, Alexei had been the skater that Yakov had been most proud of. He’d won World Championships and medaled at the Olympics, and if he hadn’t done so much damage to his knees and back, he probably would have skated longer. Viktor had idolized him when he’d first started
training with Yakov. Yakov knew Viktor was better.

“You can land a quad flip? Are you serious?”

Viktor just grinned. “Of course. I’m going to be the best skater in the world. I’ll prove it when I win gold here.” Viktor sobered. “Lyosha, did you come to see me skate?”

“I figured that if I was going to watch Katya skate, I might as well watch you skate as well.”

Nodding, Viktor crossed his arms over his chest, his mirth replaced with seriousness. “Don’t say anything about my step sequences. I already know. They’ll be more challenging next season.” Viktor turned, grabbed his MP3 player, and left to find a corner to start his warmups, tugging his hood up again to cover his head.

Alexei looked at Yakov, who could only shrug. “I have a new student that has finally convinced Viktor to focus a bit more on upgrading the difficulty of his step sequences. I don’t think he likes the fact that a fourteen-year-old can outdo him.”

“Training a new Junior to be the hero of Russia already? Viktor’s barely started his career. Don’t you already have Popovich as a backup?”

Yakov just shook his head. “I took on a Japanese skater--”

“Katsuki Yuuri? You’re coaching Katsuki Yuuri?” Alexei nodded. “It hasn’t really been publicized where he’s gone for training, just that he’s no longer at his home rink.”

“Is he that big a deal here in Japan?” There was no way for Yakov to know. It wasn’t like he could read Japanese, and his conversations with the ballet teacher were mainly focused on Yuuri’s training regimen. It had never occurred to him to ask her what Japan thought of Katsuki as a skater, if she even knew.

Alexei nodded. “He is. I’m sure you know Tabito announced his retirement after that fall at Four Continents; apparently, it aggravated an old back injury and he wouldn’t be able to skate well here at Worlds, so he just called it early. Japan doesn’t really have another Men’s skater that can compare. There are a couple, but only one qualified for Worlds and no one really expects him to place in the top twenty, let alone the top ten. Katsuki, however, the Japanese Skating Federation has high expectations for. He finished fourth this year at World Juniors, right?”

Yakov rubbed his chin as he watched Viktor warm up. “He could have made podium. I should have called you. Sometimes I forget that you ran off and married that Japanese skater. What was her name?”

“You know perfectly well Riku’s name. You were at our wedding. You’re just mad that she stole the gold out from under Katya’s nose when Katya was seventeen.” Alexei laughed. “So what is your opinion on Katsuki?”

“Mixed. Beautiful skater. His step sequences are already up to Senior level, his spins are practically there. Needs a little work on flying entries, but that’ll come. His jumps are inconsistent.”

“But he’s only fourteen, so there’s time.”

Yakov nodded. “The real problem with Yuuri is his nerves. If I could fix that, I’d know that I’d have a decent skater. Better than decent, actually. As it is, I don’t know if I’m going to keep him on past the end of the year. I don’t think my coaching style works well for him.”
The former skater stuck his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “You mean that he doesn’t do well when he fails at something and you just yell louder? I can’t imagine why.”

“You should visit St. Petersburg and give me your opinion. You train Juniors, and if I remember correctly, you’re not training anyone at the moment.” Yakov looked back at Viktor, who was now running through his step sequence down the hallway. “Vitya is already looking forward to him skating Seniors.”

“Viktor made a friend? Like an actual friend? Or like he is with Georgi?”

“No, Viktor did more than make a friend. He made a rival.”

***

Yuuri just stopped, one hand on the doorway and the other clutching the laptop he was carrying. He really should have expected that every single skater, regardless of who their coach was, would be crowded into the room, after all, Viktor was a strong medal contender for Worlds this year, and almost every skater that trained at this rink was Russian. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. Maybe he should try to find a different place to watch it.

Before he could back out of the room, though, Minako was pushing him forward. “Katya’s little sister is jumping up and down on a chair trying to get your attention, you know. Apparently she’s saving you a seat.”

“What about you?”

Minako just shook her head. “I think the break room the coaches use has a TV as well, so I’m going to try my luck there. As long as you’ll be all right?”

Yuuri tugged his bottom lip between his teeth, biting down and trying to figure out what to do. He really wanted to watch Viktor’s skate, but… The decision was made for him when Mila stomped her foot on the chair she was standing on before opening her mouth to suck in a large lungful of air. Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for Mila’s yell -- probably in Russian -- and hurried over trying to cut it off.

The yell never came. Mila grinned as Yuuri sat down next to her and put his laptop on the table. He didn’t usually use the rink’s WiFi, but he had always watched Worlds with Yuuko, and he wasn’t going to stop just because he was in Russia and she was in Japan.

He wasn’t even on for a minute when the messages started rolling in. Mila’s red hair blocked his view for a moment. “That looks weird.”

Laughing, Yuuri typed a quick response to Yuuko about who he was watching with. “Well, I could say the same for the Russian alphabet, you know.”

“So you think that Viktor can beat Stéphane and Moon?”

Yuuri turned his head to smile at her. “I do.”

Russian started flowing around them and someone gasped. Looking up, Yuuri caught sight of the TV camera panning over the next group of skaters practicing.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Looks like Alexei Turov is there. Did you see him watching Viktor warm up?
カツキ丼 says:
Yeah, everyone is murmuring about it now.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Think he’ll make Viktor nervous? I mean, you’d have to know, you’re rink mates now. Wasn’t Alexei his idol?

カツキ丼 says:
Shut up. It’s not like I know everything about Viktor.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Pretty sure you do. You got a miniature version of his dog. Oh, do you know what Viktor does with his poodle when he leaves for competitions?

カツキ丼 says:
Makkachin is staying with Minako-sensei and I this time, actually. Usually he puts her in a kennel.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
!!!! Does he know about Vicchan?

Mila punched his shoulder. “Vitya is going on the ice!” She jumped up on the chair. “Давай!”

“You’re awfully strong for a nine-year-old.”

Mila just smirked.

Everyone went silent when Viktor took off his team jacket and hoodie and handed it to Yakov over the barrier. The announcer started talking in fast Russian as the camera zoomed in closer.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Oh my god! Did Viktor dye his hair?!

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Yuuri, why aren’t you saying anything? It really looks like Viktor dyed his hair, but I can’t tell. Even the announcer is saying that they can’t tell if he dyed his hair or just braided ribbons into it, or what. It almost looks like a mohawk, doesn’t it?

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Do you know? !!!

カツキ丼 says:
He dyed it. It’s… Yeah.

Viktor waved as he skated to center ice and took his position, wrapping his arms tight around his waist. The first sounds of his short program song started and he began moving across the ice. Everyone in the break room was silent; even Yuuko said nothing as the program continued. When he nailed his last jump -- a quad toe loop, triple toe loop combination -- and spun into his ending pose, everyone screamed. His program had been perfect and flawless.

Yuuri’s emotions were raging. Jealousy and admiration battled for dominance in his chest. His heart raced, but his stomach dropped. He wanted to be the one standing on the ice panting after such a perfect program. And yet… Viktor was amazing, and Yuuri wouldn’t have taken away the beauty of that skate from him. After all, he knew that he’d never be able to skate like that. Viktor was a genius, everyone said so, and Yuuri -- he was just an average skater from a small town in Japan who lucked out that his ballet instructor knew the wife of Viktor’s coach. Maybe one day he’d manage to stand on the podium under Viktor, but part of him seriously doubted it.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
THAT WAS SUPER COOL! Did you see that final combination? AMAZING!

カツキ丼 says:
…
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
    What is it?
カツキ丼 says:
    Sometimes I wonder... nothing. Never mind. It's even better with the music. He’s really refined
    the program since the GPF

Yuuri debated his next comment, but sent it anyway.

カツキ丼 says:
    His free skate is going to be even better.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
    I can’t wait!

***

From: カツキ丼
Sent: Monday, March 26, 2007 11:04 AM
To: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Subject: Re:101 Reasons that I’d leave Takeshi for Viktor Nikiforov in a split second

1. Did you see that free skate?
2. He’s hot.
3. The choreographic sequence of his free skate.
4. His hair is better than mine.
5. His triple axel is a thing of beauty
6. He’s a thing of beauty.
   (cut for length)

26. He met with some fans the morning before his free skate outside of the arena and he spoke to
   them in JAPANESE!
27. The ending pose of his free skate.
28. Honoka says that the way he says おはようございます。 is the CUTEST THING EVER
29. That upward camel spin was seriously amazing.
30. His hair.
31. He lands quads like it’s no big deal.
   (cut for length)

56. Honoka also says that she almost fainted when he said かわいい because it was just that
    adorable.
57. Did you see his step sequence during his free skate?
58. He was cuddling a poodle plushie in the Kiss and Cry.
59. He blew kisses to his fans.
60. His hair, oh my god, it’s really hot like that, Yuuri.
   (cut for length)

100. Do you think his hair is as soft as it looks?
101. He put up a picture of the poodle plushie wearing his silver medal on his Livejournal.

>>
>>57. Did you see his step sequence during his free skate?

WHAT? Seriously, you’d dump Takeshi because of his step sequence? I think I’m insulted. Mine
are better.
WHAT? Seriously, you’d dump Takeshi because of his step sequence. I think I’m insulted. Mine are better.

Do you really think that?

Do you really think that?

Yes. No. All right, they aren’t.
I can dream, can’t I?

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
да - Da - Yes
おはようございます。 - Ohayou gozaimasu - good morning
おあいできて うれしいです。 - O ai dekite ureshidesu. - I'm glad to meet you.
Блин! - Blin! - (Pancake) Darn
アイス・カサル・マッダナ - Ice Castle Madonna (Yuuko’s screen name)
カツキ丼 - Katsukidon (Yuuri's screen name)
Давай! - Davai! - Go!
かわいい - Kawaii - Cute

***
Ah, life before Twitter and Instagram. I was totally going to give Viktor a twitter until I discovered that while twitter did exist, it was still six months away from its big debut at SXSW so that didn't make sense, but LJ was huge with Russians, so it worked out. ;)
Ah technology... it moves so fast and makes me feel so old. :D :D :D Also no iphones!
Life before smartphones. I had to actually had to try and remember what that was like!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Yuuri and Viktor deal with coaches and music selections

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is sort of a bridging chapter and the next one might be as well. Since it's between competition seasons now. :) And it's a little shorter as well. Apologies.

The banquet for the Figure Skating World Championships was well underway, and Viktor was bored. Yakov was keeping an eye on him, reminding him of the alcohol consumption laws in Japan every time a waiter came by with a tray of champagne. So instead of celebrating properly, Viktor was sipping on sparkling water. He looked around at all the skaters mingling. He’d spent most of his time after arriving talking with various sponsors.

“Je veux vous féliciter.”

Turning around with a smile on his face, Viktor greeted the Swiss skater. “Merci. Congratulations to you as well on your bronze, Stéphane.”

“Christophe here says that you met at last year’s Europeans.” Stéphane motioned to the young blond man next to him. “He competed in Worlds as well this year.”

Viktor did not actually remember meeting Christophe, but if he said so, then he’d believe him. He was constantly forgetting things that didn’t have to do with skating. “How did you do?”

“I made it past the Short Program. I came in twelfth.”

Viktor closed his eyes for a minute, trying to remember if he’d seen either of the programs. “You skated to some Swiss folk music, and your costume was based on--”

“Tracht, yes.”

“That’s the traditional clothing, right? Like Liederhosen?”

Christophe and Stéphane both laughed. “Pants like that don’t exist.” Christophe’s laugh was almost a giggle, it was cute.

“Oh?”

“You called them ‘song pants’.”

Viktor’s cheeks flushed with color, but he began laughing too. “Well, even if you weren’t wearing singing pants, I think you’re just going to get better with time, Chris. Soon we’ll be on the podium
When he smiled, Christophe looked younger than he was, and Viktor could easily imagine him running through some Swiss meadow in his short program costume.

***

Yuuri was on the ice when the door to the rink opened. He had just started a spin, and the red of Russian jackets all blurred into a long red smear as they moved toward the door. He switched positions and feet to drop into a sit spin, focusing his eyes on the tip of his skate. He then moved into an upright spin, bringing his hands above him. Finally, he finished his spin and stopped -- using his toe pick to make the stop sharp, as if he was ending a program -- and looked around to see what the commotion was.

Viktor was back.

And not just Viktor. Alexei Turov was standing next to him and all the Russians were swarmed around them. Even if his grasp of the language had been better -- which it most certainly wasn’t -- Yuuri doubted that he’d be able to understand what was being said with the voices all overlapping and loud, trying to be heard over one another.

“The spin was good, but you should have picked a higher difficulty position for your camel spin, Yuuri.”

He snapped his head around. Yakov was standing at the edge of the wall, and Yuuri skated over to his coach. “Sideways, maybe?”

Yakov nodded. “You certainly have the flexibility to pull it off.”

Yuuri pushed off the wall to go, try but Yakov called him back. “Wait a minute, Yuuri. There’s someone I wanted you to meet.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Lyosha!”

As Yuuri watched, Alexei, former Olympic medalist, extricated himself from the crowd of Russian skaters that surrounded him and made his way over to the rink, Yakov, and by extension, Yuuri. His mouth went dry and every thought he had fled from his brain.

“Alexei, this is Yuuri Katsuki. And Yuuri, this is Alexei Turov. I’m trying to convince him to take over as your coach. He’s here to evaluate you.”

Alexei held out his hand, and Yuuri just stared at it. This was not real. This could not be happening. This was not his life, being introduced to Olympic medalists and told that they might be taking over from a world-renowned figure skating coach as your coach… but…

“Coach?” Was he not good enough to stay with Yakov?

Something of his thoughts must have showed on his face, because Alexei laughed. “Don’t look so insulted, Yuuri. I followed your career at the national level; you’re quite talented. Since my retirement, I’ve focused on training Juniors.”

Yakov crossed his arms over his chest. “Alexei is a softer touch.”
Blinking, Yuuri looked back and forth between the two men. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Yakov is very Russian. Brusque and loud, but only means well. I imagine that he’s not quite what you’re used to, having grown up in Japan. Can you skate your short program for me? I’d like to see it.”

“From this last season? Yes, but—” Yuuri stopped talking and blinked. “You speak Japanese?!”

Alexei had an accent, but that was definitely Japanese; Yuuri had replied in kind without even thinking about it.

Alexei just smiled. “Not as well as I’d like, but it helps to know the language since I live in Osaka.”

“Ah, that’s right, you married Riku.”

With a chuckle, Alexei turned to Yakov. “See, even a fourteen-year-old knows my wife’s name. You have no excuse now.” He turned back to Yuuri. “Go on, show me what you’ve got.”

Yuuri skated out to center ice and got into his starting pose. 

He felt light-headed, his heart seemed like it was about to beat right out of his chest, and his vision started swimming, the edges going dark and his frame of vision getting smaller. But even so, he needed to start moving. The song was already playing in his head, but it sounded as if it was coming from underwater, the notes dull and quiet. This actually felt worse than when he’d performed his short program at World Juniors. Clenching his fists, he forced himself to make the first moves, slower and out of sync with the music in his head, but he did them. Nothing was as sharp as it should be. Even his footwork was sloppy. If his future in figure skating was being determined by this skate, he was about to be kicked out of the sport altogether.

“Stop!” The sharp voice cut through the downward spiral of his thoughts and he stopped moving, letting himself be carried down the length of the rink on momentum only. His gaze focused on the toes of his skates. “Yuuri, come here.”

Sighing, Yuuri skated over to the edge, never taking his eyes off the ice. He could feel the tears prickling at the corners of his eyes, but he fought them down. “Sorry, I know that was awful.”

“No, I shouldn’t have put you on the spot like that.” Alexei was leaning on the edge of the wall. Yakov had gone back to where Viktor was still showing off his shining silver medal from Worlds. “I heard that you get stage fright, but I didn’t think it would affect you on the practice rink.”

Yuuri whipped his head up. He knew he must look incredulous, but he was. “You’re Alexei Turov! You’ve won so many medals. Viktor idolizes you! I mean, you’re the reason Viktor got into figure skating. That’s like… It’s like…”

“Like?”

“You’re my idol’s idol. It’s… intimidating.”

Alexei, when he laughed, sounded good-natured, and it relaxed Yuuri somewhat. “Please tell me that you haven’t told Vitya that he’s your idol. He doesn’t need more of a swelled head than he already has.”

“Viktor doesn’t have a swelled head! He works hard.”

“I know. I was still competing when Yakov took him on as a Novice. He had just finished his first year in Juniors when I retired. I thought he was going to throw his skate at my head when I announced my retirement.”

He was going to skate for Alexei Turov. 

He felt light-headed, his heart seemed like it was about to beat right out of his chest, and his vision started swimming, the edges going dark and his frame of vision getting smaller. But even so, he needed to start moving. The song was already playing in his head, but it sounded as if it was coming from underwater, the notes dull and quiet. This actually felt worse than when he’d performed his short program at World Juniors. Clenching his fists, he forced himself to make the first moves, slower and out of sync with the music in his head, but he did them. Nothing was as sharp as it should be. Even his footwork was sloppy. If his future in figure skating was being determined by this skate, he was about to be kicked out of the sport altogether.

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“I know. I was still competing when Yakov took him on as a Novice. He had just finished his first year in Juniors when I retired. I thought he was going to throw his skate at my head when I announced my retirement.”
Yuuri bit his lip to keep from laughing. He could picture it, actually. Viktor getting worked up enough to throw his skate. He wouldn’t have meant it, but it would have gone flying anyway. Alexei was right: this was just his practice rink. If he could skate while Viktor watched, he should be able to skate while Alexei Turov watched. He didn’t say anything right away, sticking his gloved hand into his pocket and pulling out his MP3 player.

“I’m going to try again, but I want to skate my free skate instead.” Yuuri unwrapped the cord of his earbuds from around the player and stuck them into his ears.

Alexei just nodded and Yuuri turned on his skates, heading out to the middle of the rink while he brought up the music for his skate. He listened to the first few bars, the music flowing through him, its upbeat sound reminding him of the fun he had whenever he skated this piece in practice. With a press of a button, he started the song over again, quickly stuffing the MP3 player back into his pocket before it started, and got into his starting pose.

This time, when he skated, it felt different, and he knew he was doing a better job. He could feel it, the way his skates slid across the ice during his step sequence; even the flying entry on his sit spin went better than it usually did. When he landed his triple axel cleanly, he could feel the smile on his face as he flowed into the next bit with a twizzle. And when he finished, a wave of relief, redemption and excitement -- with just a shade of disappointment -- flowed through him. That was how he had wanted to skate at Junior Worlds.

Tugging on the cord of his earbuds, he looked over at Alexei. He was smiling.

“I think, Yuuri, that we’re going to have some fun working together.”

***

Minako took a breath and leaned against the wall. Yuuri was laughing, actually laughing, as he skated.

“Is that as fast as you can go, Yuu-kun?” Alexei clicked his tongue and skated the step sequence that they’d spent the morning on just a bit faster.

Yuuri bit his lip and watched Alexei’s skates, slowly letting momentum carry him around the rink, only adjusting his direction when he thought he might get in his coach’s way. With a nod, he started speeding and then went into the step sequence, starting with the choctaw turn before going into a twizzle, followed by a rocker turn and a loop, then another choctaw.

“You’re being too nice, Lyosha!” Viktor smiled at Minako as he walked by, his skates thudding on the padding that surrounded the rink before he pulled off his guards and stepped onto the ice.

“Working on speed and not complexity at the moment. Aren’t you supposed to be picking your music today?”

Viktor shrugged and fell into step beside Yuuri. At first he was a half step behind, but then they two of them synced up and ran the sequence from one side of the rink to the other.

Minako chuckled and walked up to the barrier. “Yuuri has been chasing Viktor for the last two years.”

“That must be why his step sequences are so good.” Alexei leaned with his back on the wall and propped himself up on his elbows. “I don’t think Yuuri realises that he’s better than Viktor at what they’re working on right now. I doubt either of them realise that Yuuri slowed down to match Viktor.”
“Better?” She knew her surprise must have leaked into her voice.

“Yes. And if you look at it subjectively, their ages and where they are competitively, the fact that Yuuri can keep up step-wise is impressive.” Alexei kept his eyes glued to the two skaters on the ice. “If Yuuri slows down his progress, though, Viktor will speed forward. That boy is a monster. I’m glad I retired when I did. I wouldn’t want him nipping at my heels to be the best skater Russia has.”

Sucking in a breath, Minako asked the question that had been nagging her for the last week. “What does you being here mean for Yuuri?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. I came to evaluate him at Yakov’s request.” Alexei raised his voice. “Yuuri, I want you to work on your triple loop. Viktor, do a few and nothing fancy.”

“Yes, Coach!”

“Really? Not even a little fancy, Lyosha?”

“You heard me, Vitya.” He turned away from the ice and looked at Minako. “Yuuri has potential. So much potential. Yakov has trained a lot of students that have gone on to win a lot of medals, including myself. I haven’t.”

Minako nodded.

“When I started working with skaters, I made the conscious decision to not work with skaters past Junior level. Many never go on to skate at the Senior level. Their talent maxes out, or they choose to focus on school, or the years of competition finally become too much.” He shrugged. “I’ve never coached a student, even at the Junior level, who was competing internationally. Yakov thinks I can do it, and I want to, I think, if it is Yuuri. But is having a coach that will only stick around for a couple of years until he makes his Senior debut what’s best for Yuuri?”

“Yakov isn’t even sure he’ll keep Yuuri on.”

Alexei sighed. “He won’t. I’m almost positive about that. And not because he doesn’t like Yuuri, but because he does.”

“Then why?”

“Yuuri shrinks when Yakov really gets going on the other skaters, and he’s training too many of them at the moment to always have time to keep Yuuri at one-on-one level. Having him work with Viktor helps them both, but right now when he’s juggling music selections and choreographers, and making decisions on technical aspects… it’s a lot.”

“You think that Yuuri is going to get lost in the shuffle.”

Alexei shook his head. “I think that Yuuri won’t push back, and it’ll be detrimental to his development as a skater. I’ll show you.” Turning back to the boys on the rink, Alexei waited while Viktor completed the triple loop before skating out of Yuuri’s way. “Vitya, what did you tell Yakov when he gave you the list of music suggestions for this season?”

Viktor looked over at him and smiled, pushing his hair off his shoulder. “His suggestions were awful! I tossed the list in the rubbish and told him that I’d bring him better options before the end of the week.”

Snorting, he looked over his shoulder at Minako. “How likely is Yuuri to do something like that?”
She shook her head. “He would never.”

“Yakov expects his skaters to push back, so he’s like a formidable brick wall. A brick wall with lots of little chinks in it, though. Some skaters are more… well, Viktor is like a wrecking ball, and I bet Mila is going to be the same. Whereas Katya, she’s a bit more subtle, working bricks loose one by one -- she picks her battles with Yakov.”

“And you?”

“I was like Georgi. I liked the fact that my coach was always behind me, a force to be reckoned with and respected, though sometimes I think Yakov wishes I had been a bit more like Viktor. That I could have gone farther and done better if I ignored him more often.”

“And Yuuri in this metaphor?”

Alexei looked at her, his expression a little more grim than it had been. “Granted, I haven’t known Yuuri for very long, but,” he paused and tilted his head to the side. “Yuuri doesn’t see a brick wall with flaws at all. Yakov, to Yuuri, is an unassailable barrier made of smooth steel, stretching up beyond his vision. The end-all and be-all of skating coaches.”

Minako sighed. She knew Alexei was right.

“What do Yuuri’s parents think of his skating?”

“They don’t. It isn’t that they don’t support him, they do. They’d move heaven and earth for their children, but they’re busy running their inn.” Minako looked down the rink, where Yuuri was in the middle of a layback spin, Viktor watching carefully as he skated laps around the edge. “I wouldn’t be able to be here in St. Petersburg with Yuuri if they didn’t. Mari, his sister, is working at my snack bar and his parents are doing the administrative tasks for it.”

“I thought you were a ballet instructor.”

Minako laughed. “I am that as well, but I closed up my studio for a few months while I brought Yuuri here and got him settled. I’m heading home at the beginning of June.”

***

“Have you picked out your music yet?”

Yuuri looked over at Viktor as they walked across the bridge. It was a rare free day for them, and Viktor had laid claim to Yuuri’s time. He’d originally planned to try and chat with Yuuko, but Minako waved him out the door with a comment that he needed to go and “be a youth of some sort” at least some of the time.

He suspected that she had plans to go drinking with Madame Baranovskaya and Yakov. No doubt he’d find her at some point passed out on the sofa. As long as she didn’t get tangled in the throw again, it wouldn’t matter, though.

“No. Yakov said to wait until Alexei gets back early next week.” Yuuri paused to look out over the water and Makkachin stopped next to him and sat on his foot. He just looked down and smiled at her, rubbing her head.

He felt Viktor’s fingers brush past his hand as the other boy reached down to pet his dog too, tugging a little on Makkachin’s ear before pulling his hand away. “So Lyosha is going to coach you?” Viktor sounded excited.
Chewing on his lip, Yuuri looked over at his companion. The tips of Viktor’s ears and nose were red from the wind. It was April, and yet it was still freezing. To Yuuri, at least; Viktor only wore a slightly heavy jacket, and was nowhere near as bundled up as he was. Yuuri tugged his scarf tighter around his neck. “He needs his wife’s permission. Or at least that’s what he said before he left.”

Viktor laughed. Yuuri found the sound incredibly pleasing. It was always so cheerful and buoyant. Light. Happy. It lifted his spirit in unexpected ways. Like when the sound of the seagulls made him homesick. On those days, Viktor would do something stupid or silly and laugh himself hoarse, and Yuuri forgot about the seagulls and the sound of the ocean hitting the sand for a while.

He still hadn’t found a cure for making the ache go away when he thought about his mother’s katsudon, however.

“Alexei is wrapped around her little finger.” Viktor put his feet on the bottom railing and leaned back, gripping the top railing to keep from falling onto the sidewalk. “Have you met her? Riku?”

Yuuri shook his head. “No. But she’s famous in Japan. Like Alexei and you are here.” He rubbed at his ear with one hand; it felt like his lobe was slowly going numb. Longingly, he thought of the hat he’d left lying on the table.

Viktor stepped back from the railing and turned to face Yuuri. “You’re cold and I’m hungry. Let’s go and get food. Then to the bookstore, and finally we can go and skate!”

Chuckling, Yuuri shook his head. “We can’t skate. Our blades are being sharpened, remember?”

With a scrunch of his nose, Viktor sighed. “They might be finished with ours by the time we get back.”

“And if they aren’t?”

Viktor grinned. “Then we’ll go back to your apartment. I found a copy of that anime you told me about.” He dropped his voice. “Fansubbed into Russian.”

Because of course Viktor would find a way to pirate it.

They started walking again, Makkachin happily bounding around them and somehow managing not to send either face-first into the cement of the sidewalk. “What about you? Have you chosen your music?”

Viktor waved his hand. “Yakov and I are going through a period of creative differences in regards to my music. We’ll settle it eventually.”

Yuuri just shook his head. “I can’t believe you argue with Yakov as much as you do. Shouldn’t you just go with the music he suggests? It’s not like he’d pick something horrible.”

“I can’t believe you don’t argue with him or Alexei. There is no point skating to a piece of music if it doesn’t light a fire in your soul, Yuuri. The story and how it makes you and the audience feel are the most important parts to any program.” Viktor turned his head to look at him, his ice blue eyes flashing with so much passion that Yuuri had to direct his gaze to the sidewalk instead. “What story do you want to tell?”

***

Alexei plugged the USB drive into the laptop they’d set up in one of the dance studios and leaned against the barre. Yuuri was sitting on the floor, hands pressed into the wood floor behind him and
legs spread wide. He’d been in the middle of stretching when Alexei had knocked and asked Minako’s permission to interrupt, which had been quickly granted.

He hadn’t even had time to drop his stuff at Yakov’s place. His suitcases were pushed up against the wall in Yakov’s already-cluttered office.

“Like I said, this was Riku’s one request when she sent me off here. No one has skated to this song since she did it at the Olympics. She wants us to consider it for your free skate.”

Yuuri nodded and Minako double-clicked on the file. The bright, sharp sounds of a Japanese koto filled the room. They recognized the song instantly.

“‘Sakura’?”

Alexei nodded. “It won’t be an easy piece to choreograph or perform, but I think you could pull it off. Are you willing to consider it?”

“If I don’t, are you getting back on a plane tonight for Osaka?” Yuuri looked up at him with a smile.

“I might wait until the morning.”

He watched as Yuuri exchanged a look with his ballet instructor once the last notes finished. Yuuri shrugged. “I don’t need to consider it.”

That was certainly a faster refusal than Alexei had been expecting. He had some other options in mind that he could discuss with Yuuri. It wasn’t like Riku would really be upset at the fourteen-year-old. At least not much.

“I’ll skate to it.” Yuuri went back to stretching. “It’s different from what I’ve skated to in the past and I doubt that I’ll skate to something like it again, at least not for a while.” His voice went soft. “Besides, it reminds me of home.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Je veux vous féliciter. -- I want to congratulate you.
Merci -- Thank you.
Tracht -- Traditional clothing in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria
***
Ok, so a couple things about the first scene. I wanted to introduce Christophe and I thought that this interpretation made so much sense (given Viktor's description of what he was like when he was younger) and would also be hilarious. The whole exchange about song pants is actually based on a common mispronunciation of Lederhosen that my husband ridicules (He's German). Also young Christophe in tracht would be ADORABLE. Seriously google Schweizer trachten. It's a little bit different from the German trachten that people are familiar with. (In my head his short program costume this year was totally based off the black jacket type.)

I also kept Stéphane's standing in World Championships. He was the reigning champion and came in third in 2007. (Usually I would never use an actual figure skater, but he's part of the canon universe since he made a cameo in the final, and I thought it wouldn't
be right to just erase him from the world's history when he was actually competing.)
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The Grand Prix assignments are in! (And Yuuri's life is about to enter a period of upheaval)

Chapter Notes

I expect that I'll be slower posting during the week (I have a toddler who is very demanding time wise) and then faster on the weekend. So here, have another chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Slowly, Yuuri lifted his leg into an arabesque. It was well and good to be able to do it quickly and hit the position in time with music, but he knew that the real challenge came in doing it slowly and in holding the position until he could feel his leg shake. Practice was slow, performing was fast.

“Нет! Ещё раз! You are moving too fast, Viktor.”

Behind him, Yuuri could hear the grumbling. Yakov had stuck Viktor into ballet lessons with his wife as a punishment. Or at least that’s what Viktor had said, though Yuuri was hesitant to believe him. Viktor thought most training that didn’t occur on skates was punishment. Yuuri, on the other hand, was beginning his ballet training with Madame Baranovskaya so he’d be used to it before Minako left to return to Japan. Minako told him that she didn’t want him to feel overwhelmed when she left.

He didn’t like thinking about Minako leaving. She was a bit of home in this very foreign country. She was family. After all, she’d been teaching him ballet since he was three. But he knew that she couldn’t stay here indefinitely. He bit down on the corner of his lip to keep the sigh from escaping. A hand tapped his shoulder and he looked up.

“Développé.” Madame Baranovskaya wasn’t actually looking at him. Her gaze was still on Viktor, and she was frowning.

Yuuri slowly lowered his leg out of position and turned around at the barre so he was facing Viktor. He brought his leg up through passé before continuing, straightening it out into the développé that he was working on. He’d been making progress, and was now ready to try for the unsupported Y-spiral in the Sakura program. Alexei was planning on it.

Viktor stuck his tongue out at Yuuri once the former ballerina had turned around and wasn’t looking at either of them. Yuuri shook his head in response. He couldn’t afford to laugh; he’d break his position. Instead of stopping, though, Viktor just started making more and more funny faces until Yuuri couldn’t help the squeak of laughter that escaped. He gave up and broke position. “Viktor! That’s not fair.”
“What’s not fair is that I’m being forced to take ballet lessons at all.”

“Most skaters cross train--”

“I know.” His voice was a whisper. “But she’s like a torturer!”

Yuuri bent over to grab his ankle while lifting his leg up through arabesque until his free leg was pointing directly up at the ceiling in a penché. They had talked about putting an illusion spin into his short program. “She isn’t. Minako-sensei can be just as bad.”

“I doubt that.”

“You’ve never taken her advanced ballet classes, so how would you know? You’ve only crashed my one-on-ones. Besides, she likes you.”

Behind him he could hear Madame Baranovskaya’s sharp sigh. “That’s enough, Viktor. Yakov expects you on the ice in twenty minutes.”

With a delighted squee -- there really was no other word for it -- Viktor dropped his leg and crouched down until he was eye level with Yuuri. “I’ll see you on the ice later?”

“I think so. Probably.”

“Eighteen minutes, Viktor.”

Viktor didn’t hesitate. He grabbed his things and ran out of the room.

“Your coach wanted you to do a step runthrough. I expect every movement to be as sharp as you would make them on the ice, Yuuri.”

“Yes, Madame.” Yuuri stopped what he was doing and moved into the center of the studio. It wasn’t an exact science or art, trying to mimic what he did on the ice in a dance studio. But it was a normal sort of exercise, so he was used to the changes that he’d have to make. He got into position and waited for his new ballet mistress’s starting command.

“You’ve trained him well, Minako. I’ll admit, if he wasn’t a proper danseur, I probably wouldn’t want to take him on at all. Though I don’t know if putting up with Viktor is worth it.”

Minako chuckled from her position in the corner of the room. “I had nothing to do with that. You can blame your husband for it.”

“Oh, I do, believe me.” Madame Baranovskaya inhaled sharply. “Begin!”

***

Yuuri leaned against the rink barrier under the pretenses of doing stretches before his choreography session with Alexei was supposed to begin. Viktor was on the ice, doing a musicless run through of his proposed short program for the next season. It wasn’t complete, Yuuri knew that much, but it was definitely at least three quarters of the way finished.

Viktor went into a spin and leaned back into a layback position. Yuuri hadn’t seen him do one since his Junior days, but there it was, and as he expected it was flawless; he didn’t grab his skate, opting instead to let his arms go over his head as if reaching for the ice itself. Yuuri sighed a bit wistful. He really wanted to skate on the same ice as Viktor as a competitor. Even moreso now that he knew Viktor personally.
The idea of challenging Viktor was heady and made him lightheaded, but not in the way that his anxiety usually did. This was... well, it was like the time him and Yuuko snuck some sake to try from his parents bar and got a little drunk. The idea of being able to challenge Viktor felt overwhelming, but he wanted it. Yuuri really wanted it. It would be fun and terrifying -- but in a good way.

If he was honest with himself for even half a minute, he wanted to be better than Viktor. He wanted to win against Viktor.

Mari-nee-chan always said he was too competitive for his own good. At the moment, Yuuri agreed with her.

He took a large step back and bent over, hanging onto the edge of the rink as he stretched out his back, keeping his eyes locked on his sneakers until the muscles along his spine felt less tense and coiled.

When he returned his gaze to the ice, Viktor was going into a triple axel. His jumps were always exceptional, and this one was no different, though Viktor didn’t seem particularly pleased with it. He stopped going through the routine and pressed a finger to his lips as he drifted along the ice.

Eventually, he skated over to Yakov and the two started speaking in Russian. Or rather arguing in Russian, if the downturn of Yakov’s lips and the flush in his face were anything to go by.

Yuuri shook his head.

“Skates on, Yuu-kun. We’ve got work to do. I want to see that Y-spiral and the step sequence. Then we’re going to work on the back half of your free. I’ve talked with Minako and I think you’ve been frontloading your programs when you should be backloading them, but we won’t know what you can handle until we test it out.”

Tearing his gaze away from the argument happening across the ice, Yuuri walked over to the bench and took his skates out of his bag. He slid off the soft poodle blade covers that Yuuko had given him for his birthday and replaced them with his worn-out pair of hard guards before slipping the skates onto his feet and lacing up. He should look into a new set.

“What do you mean by backloading?”

“You have more than half your jumps in the front. If you put more of them in the back instead, it will increase your base score because they’re worth more.”

Biting his lip, Yuuri nodded. “I know, but--”

“But nothing. Not only that, but the jumps are what make you most nervous, right?”

“Yeah, which is why I usually want them out of the way.”

Alexei shook his head. “You don’t have a problem focusing on the ice, but you do get flustered if something goes wrong. A misstep at the beginning brings down your whole routine. Now I want to work on that, but I also want to have a plan in place in case something happens, and I think that switching the majority of your jumps into the back half is a good starting point.” He crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at Yuuri. “Unless you don’t think you can do it, in which case--.”

Yuuri snapped his head up. “I can!”

When Alexei smiled at him, it was wide and proud and smug and Yuuri realised that he’d been masterfully manipulated by his coach. He pressed his lips into a tight line. “That wasn’t fair,
Alexei chuckled. “Maybe not, but I got the answer I wanted. You’ve got ten minutes to warm up on the ice, and then I’ll be out there and we’ll start working on this program. You’ve got to make a decision on your short program music soon, though.”

“I’ll listen to my options as I warm up.” Yuuri pulled his ever-present MP3 player out of his pocket and went to get onto the ice. He skated around slowly as he put his earbuds in and sorted through the playlists, looking for the one that had all of his short program options. He needed to find something that would complement “Sakura”, but had a different feel to it. And something that reminded him of home as well. Or maybe something that reminded him of his parents.

This whole “picking out his own music” thing was harder than it seemed, but Viktor had a point and Alexei had only offered suggestions for his free program, never his short program. He supposed that he could ask Alexei to pick something out for him, but well, he was trying to change. Viktor was practically choreographing his own routines now and he never let Yakov dictate what his song choices were.

Yuuri sighed and sped up, turning on one foot so he was skating backwards around the rink instead. He liked looking at where he had been before turning again to look at where he was going. His past, his future, and where he was on the ice right at that moment.

Russia.

Yuuri exited out of the playlist. They were mostly songs that reminded him of the ocean, but none had seemed to fit. But there was a piece that he’d thought of skating to before, though never had the courage to tell his coach about. It was a Russian waltz.

He skated over to the edge of the rink. “Lyosha!”

If his coach was surprised by the diminutive, he didn’t show it. He just came over to where Yuuri was holding out his earbuds. Once they were in, Yuuri pressed play.

“‘Shostakovich Waltz no. 2’? This has nothing to do with the ocean or Japan, or home.”

“Technically, right now, isn’t my home here? Besides, I think I want adjust my theme.”

“To?”

“‘Past and Present’. ‘Home’ is fitting, but sad, and everytime I listen to any of the songs on my potential short program list it makes me wish I was back in Hasetsu. I don’t know if I can handle competing if the pieces are making me that homesick.”

Alexei reached out and ruffled his hair. “I like this. I think it could work very well. It’s dramatic and bombastic while ‘Sakura’ is elegant and calming.”

“Do you really think so?”


***

Yuuri let himself be pulled toward the ice. Katya was practicing off to one side and the rest of the second rink was empty, so it wasn’t like they were going to be in anyone’s way -- always his biggest concern.
Mila dropped his hand when they reached the barrier and bent over to pull off her bright pink blade guards. They reminded him of the ones that Yuuko had for her skates, and he smiled. Mila practically jumped onto the ice.

“Yura, hurry up. You’re taking too long and you promised!”

Shaking his head, Yuuri pulled his own blade guards off and stepped onto the ice. He didn’t know when Mila had started using the colloquial form with him, but it wasn’t like he cared; not really. It was sweet. “I did not, Milochka. You asked if I would skate with you, and then answered for me before I even opened my mouth declaring that it was a definite promise.”

“Same thing.” She balled her hands up into fists and put them on her hips. “A promise is a promise. If I’m going to have step sequences like yours by the time I reach Juniors, you need to help me with my counter turns!”

Yuuri skated around her in a circle and watched as she shifted on her skates to keep herself facing him. “Step sequences like mine? Don’t you want to have steps like Katya’s instead? Or Viktor’s?”

She shook her head. Her short red hair whipped in front of her face before she pushed it out of the way. “I don’t. I want the best steps. So that means yours.”

He stopped, dragging one skate behind the other. “Best?” Yuuri sighed and shook his head. “Mila-”

“Less talk, more counter turn help!” She pushed her lips out into a pout.

“All right.” He shook his head. There really was no arguing with Mila. He just wished that she didn’t get her hopes up on the quality of his step sequences. She had such good role models in the other skaters, he didn’t understand why she’d fixate on him. “So, counter turns, huh? What’s your problem with them?”

“Yakov said my edge quality was poor.”

Yuuri skated a bit, then began doing a series of counter turns, waiting to see if Mila would start to mimic him on the ice. She watched for a minute, her eyes glued to his skates, before she stepped off and started. He saw what Yakov meant immediately. It wasn’t that she wasn’t on the right edge, it was just not as sharp as it should be. “You’re not moving from your forward to backward edge enough, so it looks a bit sloppy.”

Mila scrunched up her face and did a few more counter turns while Yuuri watched. She was so determined. It reminded him of himself a couple of years ago, when he and Yuuko would copy Viktor’s programs. They’d work so hard and be so happy when they got the moves just right. Nishigori had always mocked him, but Yuuri had caught him practicing some of the moves as well.

But that was back when the three of them dreamed of competing together for Japan on the international stage.

He sighed. A sharp pang of homesickness was stabbing him in the chest, and he lifted his hand to press the butt of his palm hard against his sternum trying to physically will the feeling away. He didn’t have time to be homesick or upset. He had programs to learn.

And a very demanding Novice with too much time on her hands.

Viktor swooped over and lifted Mila up over his head. “That was a superb counter turn, Milochka! Where’d you learn to do that so well?” Yuuri hadn’t even seen or heard him enter the ice.
“Vitya! Put me down! I don’t want to be your pairs partner! If anyone is going to do lifts, it’s going to be me!”

Viktor laughed and brought Mila back down so that her skates were touching the ice again, then spun them around. “But you’re as light as a feather. Besides, I came to collect Yuuri.”

“Yura is helping me. Go away, you can’t have him right now.”

Viktor laughed. “Ah, if only, крошка, but I am here by Yakov’s and Lyosha’s request.” He turned his sharp gaze onto Yuuri. “They’ve announced the Grand Prix assignments for both Juniors and Seniors.”

Yuuri spun himself to a stop. “Did I… Did I get an assignment?”

“One? You got two. Yakov said that with your finish at World Juniors, the Japanese Skating Federation would choose to assign you, and they did.” Viktor reached out and grabbed his hand. “Now come on. Yakov and Lyosha are waiting. Or did you not see Katya already head off the ice? Even Georgi got an assignment in the Senior Grand Prix.”

Mila skated over to the edge. “Really? Yura has to go now?”

“We’ll work together again later, Mila, promise.”

“This time it’s a real promise, so I’m holding you to it twice as hard!” She stomped out of the rink, putting her blade guards on.

“Did you really get onto the ice just to get me off the ice?” Yuuri sat down and loosened the laces to his skates so he could tug them off and wipe down the blade with a cloth before putting his soft covers back on. He went to grab them, but Viktor got his hands on them first.

“かわいい! I want a pair.”

Yuuri smiled. “I’ll ask Yuuko where she got them and see if maybe I can find you a set.”

Throwing his arms around Yuuri’s shoulders, Viktor hugged him. “That would be the best thing ever. Makkachin blade covers! How did I not know that these existed? I feel so left out!”

They were the last to arrive in the break room where the coaches had gathered the skaters that had made it into the qualifying rounds of the Junior and Senior Grand Prix. Yakov glared at them, but Yuuri had a feeling that it was more for Viktor and less for him. Or at least that’s what he hoped.

Yuuri would be skating in the Harghita Cup in Romania at the beginning of September and the John Curry Memorial in the UK in October. It was the last JGP qualifier, and was right before the first of the Grand Prix qualifiers that the Seniors would be skating in.

“Skate Canada and the Trophée Eric Bompard? I was really hoping for the Cup of Russia.”

“Do you know any of the skaters that you’ll be competing against?” Almost everyone had left the break room after getting their assignments. Yakov was off in the corner talking to Georgi and Alexei had gone to get something, telling Yuuri that he’d be back.

“Christophe Giacometti.” Viktor pointed at one of the names. “He barely qualified. Came in twelfth at Worlds. Swiss, so of course he knows Stéphane. He’ll be skating at at the Trophée Eric Bompard as well. He’s sweet, but I don’t think he’s much competition, at least not yet.” He moved his finger over to another name. “Cao Bin, Chinese. He’ll be at Skate Canada. Don’t know him
well, but he was in the qualifying competitions last year. I think he placed eighth point wise overall so he had just missed making the Final. He’s a year older than me and is kind of a robot.”

“A robot?” Yuuri couldn’t help it, but an image of a Mobile Suit Gundam with ice skates emblazoned with the Chinese flag appeared in his head. Obviously, that wasn’t what Viktor meant, but it was an amusing image nonetheless.

But Viktor wasn’t looking at him and was instead staring at the list of competitors. “He’s incredibly proficient, technically. Not as good as I am, of course, but he’s still good. Has a couple solid quads and isn’t bad at step sequences, but performance wise, he’s way too stiff. I think that’s what kills his overall scores-- low PCS. He bears watching, though.”

Dropping his chin into his hands, Yuuri watched Viktor. It was rare to see him this serious off the ice. Viktor tapped another name. “James Weber. American. Incredibly expressive on the ice.”

“Everyone knows who James Weber is.”

Viktor nodded. “His last two seasons haven’t been the best, though. It was a shame about the Olympics. I thought for sure that he would have medaled. And then the injury right before the Grand Prix Final last year that made him pull out. But there’s a rumor that he’s changed coaches, so he bears keeping an eye on. Maybe it’s a good thing that I’m not competing in the Cup of Russia. Going up against both him and Stéphane before even reaching the Final just would not be fair.”

“Shouldn’t you feel bad for Georgi then, since he is competing in the Cup of Russia?”

Lifting his shoulder in a gentle shrug, Viktor grinned. “The Grand Prix isn’t only about being the best in the world, but also about having luck when it comes to your assignments. And I have amazing luck.”

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Yuuri brought both legs up against his chest on the couch and settled his chin on top of his knees. Viktor was messing with a cable, trying to hook up Yuuri’s laptop to the TV in the living room so they could watch FMA on the larger screen.

“I think that should do it.” Viktor pulled the laptop toward him and opened the files. Yuuri was just glad that he’d had enough warning to change his desktop wallpaper before Viktor had come over. It would have been beyond embarrassing for Viktor to see a picture of him from this past year’s World’s free skate. If he couldn’t buy a poster, Yuuri figured he could at least save some pictures of the skate, and the one of Viktor with his arms spread wide and his dyed hair flying behind him in a ponytail was perfect for his desktop.

It didn’t matter that they were friends, Yuuri was still a hopeless Viktor Nikiforov fanboy. He bit his lip on a sigh. He really didn’t want Viktor to ever find that out. Luckily, one of the default pictures was a sakura branch, and given his free program for the upcoming season, it almost seemed intentional.

“I just had a brilliant idea.”

Biting his lip again and doing his best not to groan, Yuuri shifted to look at Viktor better. He didn’t actually have to look at the screen, since the anime was in Japanese and it wasn’t like he was good enough with Cyrillic to catch more than a few words here and there in the subtitles. Viktor saying he had a brilliant idea was usually -- almost definitely always -- not a good thing. “What is it?”

“The ending song. That’s going to be my exhibition skate! I can wear all black with a red coat, it’ll
be amazing!” He paused, turning around to face Yuuri as said ending song began to play. “Even better, I can have one sleeve designed to look like metal! Then I can take the coat off at some point.” He turned back to the screen. “There. Right there at that point is where I’d do my quad flip!”

Yuuri gave up and laughed. He could see it. It’d be a fun routine, no doubt. “Should I write down the song title and artist for you?”

Viktor turned and beamed at him. His smile was so bright, but not in a blinding way. He really liked it. “Yuuri is the best!”

Flushed, Yuuri turned away. “I’ll do it before you leave. Actually, Yuuko might be able to get an MP3 of it. I mean I started watching because Nishigori was watching it and I wouldn’t be surprised if he had digital copies of the songs.”

“Are they your rinkmates from Japan?”

Yuuri nodded. It was strange to hear them referred to as rinkmates. They were his friends. Had been his only friends until he came here.

Instead of starting the next episode, Viktor turned on the couch where he was sitting to look at Yuuri. Yuuri could feel the intensity of those bright blue eyes on him even without looking. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he was suddenly uncomfortable with the attention. He shifted, curving his back a little more, sinking further into the curled up position he was in.

“Do they still skate?”

“Yeah, for fun, I guess, but they’re not competing anymore. Nishigori’s parents own the rink. Yuuko moved from an even smaller town to Hasetsu with her parents when she was... eight or nine, I think.”

“Yakov said you all shared a coach.”

Yuuri finally tilted his head to look at Viktor. “We did. At first it was just Yuuko’s parents that were paying for the coach, but when Nishigori started skating for competitions, they split the cost.”

“And you?”

“I didn’t start with the coach until I was almost ten myself. I mean, I skated with him before that, but they were just lessons that anyone could take at the rink. There was a small group of kids, most were younger than me. I mean, Hasetsu never had a skating instructor until he came.”

Viktor settled his cheek on his hand. “I’m surprised you started so late. You’re really good.”

Yuuri drew in a deep breath. “I’m not, actually. I just had a lot of time to practice. If I wasn’t doing ballet, I was skating. You were right when you said I’m at home on the ice; it clears my head and I’m at peace. It’s a little strange to not be able to go to the rink whenever I want, though.”

“You miss it?”

“The rink in Japan?” Yuuri paused. He had to think about it. The rink itself, yes and no. Ice Castle Hasetsu was in a perpetually rundown state, with fading paint and dinged up lockers, but the ice was always well maintained. He missed the freedom of being able to call Nishigori even late at night to ask if he could skate, and being let in without a word. He missed goofing off with Yuuko (and even Nishigori, if he was honest with himself). But the rink here in St. Petersburg was so much nicer and larger. It was an actual Olympic-size rink. And he did have friends here.
And Viktor was here.

“Yes. And no.”

Viktor lifted a brow, but didn’t say anything.

“I want to skate, and I can’t do that back in Hasetsu. Not like I can here.” Yuuri sighed. “It was
awkward at the end. I came back to Hasetsu from Tokyo with a gold medal, but Nishigori didn’t
come close to the podium and Yuuko was so disappointed with her placement. I wasn’t expecting
them to decide not to continue. Especially Yuuko. She used to say that skating for her was like air.
I felt a bit betrayed, I guess. I thought the three of us would always skate together.”

Viktor’s toes pressed against his ankles, but Yuuri didn’t move, keeping his arms tight around his
knees.

“Then my coach quit when he got a better offer in Hokkaido, and I couldn’t even really blame him --
going from three students to one was a drastic cut in income. Though Minako-sensei did.”

“I’m Team Minako-sensei, for the record. That was a shit thing to do as a coach.” Viktor’s gaze
hardened for a moment, and then just as quickly it softened and he smiled at Yuuri. “But it’s my win
since you came here to train! And not only that, but it brought Alexei back to Russia, too. Better
than a birthday.”

Yuuri laughed. He didn’t see how him training in Russia was a plus for Viktor -- it was a plus for
Yuuri, but it was impossible to be the other way around -- but having his idol back must be exciting.

“You’re both staying, right?”

Looking over at Viktor, Yuuri caught him chewing on his bottom lip for a second. Yuuri’s brow
furrowed. “Well, yes. I mean, I guess. My parents signed a contract with Yakov for a year that
included the coaching fees and rink fees and everything. Technically, Alexei is working for Yakov
as my coach. Or at least that’s the way it was explained to me. Then there is the apartment, and
that’s leased for a year. So it only makes sense that I don’t leave here.”

“And after?”

Yuuri looked down at the toes of his socks. “I don’t know. The next coaching contract will be with
Alexei directly, but we haven’t even started talking about it. I don’t even know if Alexei will want
to keep coaching me.” He sighed. “And now Minako-sensei is leaving since she can’t keep
babysitting me indefinitely.”

“I’ll have to come over more to make sure that you don’t get lonely.” Viktor’s voice was bright, and
Yuuri knew that he wasn’t joking at all.

“You’ll have to ask Alexei. He’s moving in when Minako-sensei moves out, and then Riku will be
coming as well. The JSF doesn’t need her to be physically in Japan at all times, apparently, though
she might go back to Osaka from time to time. Alexei says they’re still working it out.”

Viktor groaned. “That is not fair. Your coach is going to be so much stricter than Minako-sensei!”

“This is true, we probably won’t be able to get away with dying your hair again.” Yuuri finally
uncoiled, dropping his legs down and looked at Viktor. His hair was down and draped over one
shoulder, the ends still black, though the color had faded somewhat. “Your temporary dye isn’t
turning out to be so temporary.”
Viktor looked down at his hair as well, picking up a lock and twisting it around his fingers. “I know. Who knew that blond hair stained?”

“What are you going to do with it if the color doesn’t go away by the beginning of the season? Will you cut it?”

“No! Oh my god, no! That’s… No.” He gathered his hair into his hands and brushed his fingers through it. “I might try to color the ends again. Just over the part that’s already dyed. At least until I can cut that part off. I haven’t decided yet, but I am not cutting it.”

Yuuri bit his lip for a second before he smiled. “I’m glad. I like your hair long.” He paused. That was strange. He shouldn’t say that sort of thing to Viktor. “So does Yuuko.” There, that was a little better.

Viktor didn’t seem to care if it was weird, though. He looked thrilled. “Really?”

Pulling his hands into his long sleeves, Yuuri rubbed the fabric between his fingers and palm. “Yeah. She joked that she’d break up with her boyfriend for you and your hair was almost a third of the reasons.”

“Wow!”

Yuuri’s eyes went wide. “Oh god! No! I didn’t say that. Yu-chan will kill me! It’s not… We don’t...” He pressed his hands -- still tucked into the sleeves of his shirt -- against his face and groaned.

“Yuuri, your ears are red.”

“Shut up, Viktor!” Yuuri didn’t move his hands from his face, and eventually he felt Viktor twist around on the couch. It was only when the sounds of the Fullmetal Alchemist opening song started that Yuuri dropped his hands.

“You know, I wish that Edward had more style with his hair. I like a good braid, but his is so boring.”

Yuuri smiled. “You could always try a four strand braid. For your costume, I mean.”

Viktor tilted his head to the side and glanced at him. “Hm. I don’t even know how to do that.”

“I... I do. I learned how so that I could help Yuuko.”

“Really?!” Viktor jumped up and ran over to his backpack, quickly rifling through it before jumping back onto the couch. In his hand he had some hair elastics and a brush. “Show me! Right now! You can do it while we watch, right?”

Taking the brush and elastics from Viktor, Yuuri nodded slowly, and shifted all the way back into the cushions to make room for Viktor to sit in front of him. Which he did. Excitedly. Brushing his fingers through Viktor’s hair once before he started to brush it out with gentle strokes, Yuuri wondered how was this even his life? And how was Viktor’s hair so soft?
Translations:
Нет! - Nyet! - No
Ещё раз! - Yeshcho raz! - Again
крошка - kroshka - crumb/little one (term of endearment)
かわいい! - kawaii - cute
***
If people are interested, I was thinking of actually maybe using my tumblr to post links or titles to the songs that I have the characters use in their programs. (Apparently, I use tumblr wrong according to my husband. He says just sitting and going through the yuri on ice tag is not how tumblr works. Who knew?)
You'll notice that the names of some of the Grand Prix qualifiers are different. I'm going with what they were called back in 2007 which is where the story currently is time wise.

Also, Poofiemus, see, Viktor's hair is totally still dyed even though it's been months. :)


Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The summer of Yuuri’s discontent: Minako leaves, his coach moves in, and there are a couple uncomfortable (for him) revelations.

Chapter Notes

So I totally wanted to post this last night, but my husband totally wanted to sleep instead of edit the chapter. I mean really, prioritizing sleep over my fanfic. How dare he. ;) So he edited it when he came home tonight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minako straightened from where she was bent over the large suitcase on the bed and turned to look at Yuuri, who was holding onto the doorframe. “Don’t give me that look.” She sighed. Yuuri looked awful. His eyes were red-rimmed and the tip of his nose was a dusty pink.

Yuuri swiped his wrist under his nose as he took a deep breath. It was obvious that his nose was running. “Minako-sensei, don’t go.” His voice cracked and he shook his head. “I can’t do this.”

Stepping away from the side of the bed, Minako crossed the room and settled her hands on Yuuri’s shoulders. “You can. You already are.”

He just shook his head some more. “But you’ve been here--”

“I didn’t go with you once to the rink for the last two weeks, Yuuri.” She sighed. “I thought today you were going to show me your programs? My going away gift.”

Yuuri narrowed his eyes. “Because you really deserve a going away gift for abandoning me.”

She pushed her finger against the tip of his nose and he ducked away. “That level of petulance sounded almost Nikiforovian.”

Yuuri’s laugh was a sharp bark, but it was still a laugh. “God, don’t. Fine.” He straightened his spine. “I’ll show you my programs and make you regret that you have to go back to Japan.”

Ruffling his hair, Minako smiled down at Yuuri. “I already do. I’m leaving my best student in Russia.”

Yuuri didn’t talk to her as they walked from the apartment to the rink. He mostly kept his head down, and she caught him tucking his fingers into the worn cuffs of his light jacket. Even though it was June, the weather was still cool -- at least to them. It was still early morning, so it was even cooler than it would be after midday. Minako shivered and pulled her own jacket a little tighter.

“I’m looking forward to going to the beach when I get back.”
Yuuri sighed. “Will you take Vicchan for runs? You know how much he likes splashing in the ocean.”

“I can. Though he’ll probably be mad that I didn’t bring you back with me.” She paused. “You know that skating here is good for you, right?”

Nodding, Yuuri looked up, but not at her. They were crossing the bridge, probably about halfway to the rink by now. “I do know that, but it doesn’t make me miss home any less.”

“You want to skate, right? This is what you want to be doing? Because if it isn’t--”

“You know it is.”

“Yeah, I do.”

They lapsed back into silence as they continued their walk. A bit of anxiety wiggled its way up Minako’s spine in a strange sort of itch that she couldn’t scratch. It was a lot to ask of a fourteen-year-old: moving to a different country with a vastly different culture and spoken language while expecting him to live and socialize in a third language that was native to no one involved, all in order to pursue a career that was incredibly competitive as well as taxing on both mind and body. Sometimes, she thought, they expected too much from Yuuri.

But she knew that he would surpass not only her expectations, but everyone else’s. He was strong. Even if he didn’t believe that about himself. She just hoped he would one day.

Yuuri pushed the door open. The air was even cooler in the building than it was outside. The complex had three rinks, so it was only to be expected.

Alexei was waiting by the door to the second rink. He’d been leaning against the wall with his arms casually crossed over his chest until he caught sight of them. Then he frowned.

“Yuu-kun?”

Yuuri shook his head at his coach. “I’m going to go warm up, all right?”

“Yeah, of course.” Alexei stepped away from the door, letting Yuuri slink by. “Make sure you stretch!”

“He always does.” Minako looked at the door Yuuri had gone through and frowned. “This is good for him, right?”

Alexei shrugged. “It seems like I’m always answering that I don’t know, but I don’t. It can be though, if he’s strong enough. Is he all right?”

It was Minako’s turn to shrug. “Right this second, probably not, but he’ll be all right. I honestly believe that.”

“Free program or short program first?” Alexei asked when they entered the rink almost thirty minutes later. Yuuri was already on the ice, skating figures.

“Short.” Yuuri skated to the center of the ice and got into his starting position. He didn’t move immediately when the music started, but when the main melody began, he pushed back and let one foot carry him in a stationary circle before switching feet and doing the same in the other direction. He took off across the ice, feet crossing over in front of each other as he gained speed, turning to
glide backwards before starting a series of steps. And as the music crescendoed, he leapt into his triple loop, landing perfectly.

“Good, Yuu-kun.” Alexei smiled. He hadn’t been loud enough to be heard over the music, but Minako could hear the pride. Yuuri’s loop had been weak last season, but this was much stronger. She watched as he moved into a sit spin and, as he changed feet, shifted from a basic to a side position. Yuuri was always good at spins.

His step sequence was amazing, but she had never expected anything less from Yuuri. Each turn and step as he weaved around the ice looked as if he was actually dancing in a ballroom instead of on skates. She bit her lip to keep from letting out a cry, but it managed to escape when he landed a triple axel beautifully.

When he finished -- coming out of a combination spin and ending in a bow -- Minako clapped for him. And she wasn’t the only one; Yakov, Viktor, Katya, and Georgi had all come in as well. She watched as Yuuri straightened and squinted his eyes toward the side of the rink before skating over.

“What? Alexei, you promised that no one but you and Minako-sensei were going to watch me!” He was flushed a deeper red then he had been when he finished his short program.

Alexei held out his water bottle and set a small towel on the barrier. “I didn’t even tell them you were skating.”

Katya smiled. “Viktor and I heard the music and snuck in, and then Yakov and Georgi came to find us.” Bracing against the barrier, she lifted herself up and over until she could ruffle Yuuri’s hair. “That was awesome.”

“The base value is definitely higher than what he had last year, but can he handle having two of his three jumps in the back half? And you put the triple lutz-triple toe loop combination at the very end.” Yakov’s voice was gruff, as usual, but Minako thought she caught a slight hint of approval as well.

Alexei turned and grinned at Yakov. “He seemed to handle it just fine.” He looked back at Yuuri. “You did that really well, but your spiral into the triple axel needs a bit of work.”

Yuuri nodded. “It felt... loose. I know I can do it better.” He turned to face Minako. “Minako-sensei?”

“I loved it.” She really had. “You’re going to win all the medals with this.”

Yuuri shook his head. “It’s not... I... you heard Alexei, my spiral definitely needs work.”

Alexei patted him on the shoulder. “Let’s take a break. I don’t want your free program to suffer because you go into it winded.”

Yuuri nodded and stepped off the ice, grabbing his blade guards from Viktor’s outstretched hands. Viktor touched Yuuri’s shoulder as he bent over to put them on. When Yuuri looked up, Viktor just nodded and then turned and headed to the exit.

“I’m going to get on the ice, Yakov,” he called from over his shoulder.

Yuuri didn’t seem upset that Viktor hadn’t said anything, and was instead guzzling down water as he leaned against the barrier, talking to Katya and Georgi. Minako turned to the two coaches and raised an eyebrow, looking at the door that Viktor had gone through.

“There is no way that step sequence will get marked anything other than a level 4.” Yakov smiled.
“Especially with the way that Yuuri expresses himself during it. The shifts in balance all increase difficulty and I counted, what, thirteen difficult turns and steps?”

Alexei nodded. “I was aiming for a level 3, but Yuuri insisted that he could do better.”

“I think that the step sequences remind him of dancing.” Minako smiled.

“Well, Lilia has only told me a thousand times since she took over his ballet instruction that Yuuri was obviously a dancer first. I think she’d introduce him to the ballet master at the Bolshoi if the boy would go willingly.”

***

From: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Sent: Thursday, June 28, 2007 8:04 PM
To: カツキ丼
Subject: [image] Vicchan!!!

Minako-sensei brought Vicchan to the Ice Castle and Takeshi and I decided to let him run around on the ice while his parents weren’t looking after hours. Don’t worry, he didn’t damage the rink or the ice at all. He’s too little to do that! U^\(\_\_\_\_\_\)U (^ o ^)

Oh, and your parents wanted me to tell you that they’re sending a box of things. I got another set of those poodle blade covers and asked your mother to stick them in the box. Did Viktor really want a set?!

[image attached of Vicchan slipping on the ice near Yuuko as she does a spiral in the Biellmann position]

From: カツキ丼
Sent: Friday, June 29, 2007 12:04 PM
To: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Subject: Re: [image] Vicchan!!!

Vicchan! I miss him. Yuuko, can you have my parents pack Vicchan up too? Yes, I know that you can’t, but… yeah. I can’t believe you two brought him into the rink. Don’t do anything to get in trouble!

Yes, he did. He’s asked at least twice more. Usually whenever he sees mine. Though Viktor hasn’t been around as much the last week or so. He did an ice show somewhere, I’m not sure where, and then he’s been working on his programs so he’s been quieter than normal. Thanks for sending that MP3 by the way.

In exchange for the picture of my darling boy, have a picture of this darling girl.

[image of Makkachin lying down on top of Viktor and Yuuri as they sit on a couch]

From: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Sent: Friday, June 29, 2007 2:14 PM
To: カツキ丼
Subject: Re: Re: [image] Vicchan!!!

神さま! Viktor Nikiforov has no right to look that cute! What were you two doing?
Yuuki, when am I going to get a picture of you skating?! You got one of me!

From: カツキ丼
Sent: Friday, June 29, 2007 8:35 PM
To: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Subject: Re: Re: Re: [image] Vicchan!!!

Watching anime on a rest day. He brought Makkachin along for “cuddle time”. Should I tell Nishigori about how cute you find Viktor?

I’ve been doing a lot of choreo and practice sessions… but… if you really want…

[30 sec video clip attached of Yuuri performing the step sequence in his short program without music. Viktor is in the background on the ice, watching intently.]

From: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Sent: Saturday, June 30, 2007 7:10 AM
To: カツキ丼
Subject: WHAAAAAAAAAAAT?!!!!!!?

YUURI!!! WHAT?! IS THAT STEP SEQUENCE FOR REAL?!

I thought you were kidding when you said that your step sequences were better than Viktor’s, but you totally weren’t! When did this happen?

I wish I could make the video bigger without it going all grainy. I want to see the look on Viktor’s face!

***

Skating to the edge of the rink, Yuuri grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink. Alexei was looking down at his notebook, where he’d written down the things that he wanted Yuuri to work on and his thoughts of Yuuri’s performance. Yuuri looked over, but it was all in Cyrillic and he couldn’t figure out much.

“Coach?”

Alexei looked up. “Yes, Yuu-kun?”

“My step sequence…” Yuuri trailed off. He didn’t know how to ask what he wanted to know. It was egotistical, but Yuuko -- who had shown him how to skate in the first place -- had said… “I just… I…”

Alexei leaned forward, resting on his crossed arms on the barrier as he waited for Yuuri to continue. Yuuri knew that if he didn’t, Alexei would drop the subject for a while. He gave Yuuri time, which he appreciated.

“Yu-chan said that my step sequence was really good when I sent her a clip of it, and I just wanted to know if that was true.” The words came out in a rush directed at the ice between his skates. He couldn’t bear to look up at his coach. What if Yuuko was just being nice? It just wasn’t possible that his step sequences were that good. God, Alexei must think he was the most egotistical, self-absor--

“Your step sequences are better than a lot of Seniors. They’re better than Viktor’s. At least for now.
Viktor has been trying to rework his step sequence for his free program because of it.” Yuuri jerked his head up and Alexei just raised a brow. “Were you expecting me to say something else? Did you think Milochka was dragging you out to the ice to help her because you weren’t the best?”

“I thought that I was just the easiest to bully into it. She spends so much extra time here because of Katya’s schedule.”

Laughing, Alexei shook his head. “Yuuri, I never worry about your step sequences, and you shouldn’t either. They’re wonderful. Now, your jumps on the other hand still need work. You’re still wobbling on that triple axel landing in the short, and it’s not much better in the free. I really don’t want to drop it down to a double, so that’s what I need you to work on today.”

Yuuri nodded. “All right.”

“Good. I have to leave for the airport. Don’t overwork yourself and don’t be late coming home. Riku has been looking forward to meeting you.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“You know where you can find Yakov if you need help.”

Yuuri bit down on his lip to keep from smiling. “Yelling at Viktor or moaning at Georgi.”

“Exactly.”

***

Yuuri shook his head as he tossed the sesame seeds into the pan. “はい、はい。I know, Mom. I won’t burn them.” He shook and tossed the pan, waiting until he heard the first signs of crackling before pouring the seed out and into a mortar. “See. I told you. I’ve done this before.”

From the screen of his laptop, Yuuri’s mother beamed and grasped her hands together. “I knew making sure you could cook some things would come in handy!”

Minako was sitting next to her. “If you could cook, why did you never cook for us when I was living with you in Russia?”

Flushed, Yuuri looked down at what he was doing, grinding the seeds for the Gomaae sauce. “I don’t know. I guess once I tried Alexei’s cooking, I decided it’d be better for all concerned if I cooked for myself at the very least.”

Minako chuckled. “You didn’t mind the Russian food that everyone was giving you when we first arrived.”

Yuuri cast a dark look at the screen as he added the soy sauce and sugar and started mixing. “Not even Alexei could finish his own Stroganoff. Makkachin turned her nose up at it.”

“Makkachin?” Yuuri’s mother looked back and forth between Yuuri -- through the computer -- and Minako.

“Viktor’s dog.”

“Oh, is Viktor a rinkmate?”

From somewhere behind his mother and Minako, Yuuri could hear his sister chortling with laughter.
“Yes, Mom, Viktor is a rinkmate.”

More laughter.

“Shut up, Mari-nee-chan!”

Before he could really get mad at his sister, Yuuri heard the door to the apartment open.

“Yuu-kun? You better not be out after curfew!”

Minako’s eyes went wide as if she was wondering what Yuuri had been up to in the few weeks she’d been gone. “Alexei gave you a curfew?”

Yuuri shrugged. “Sort of. He calls it a curfew, but it’s no different from before. If I didn’t have school lessons so early in the morning, it wouldn’t be so early in the evening that I need to be back here by.” He turned away from the computer for a second. “I’m in the kitchen. I made some grilled fish and sides if you want any.”

It was only after the petite Japanese woman came through the kitchen door that Yuuri even remembered that his coach was going to pick up his wife at the airport.

“Ri… Ri… Riku-san!”

She smiled. “You must be Yuuri-kun. Are you speaking to your parents?”

He looked from the pestle in his hand to the computer screen, where his mother and Minako were still in frame, and back to Riku. “Ah, はい. My mother and my ballet instructor.”

“こんばんは.” Riku bowed at the screen. “I’m Turov Riku. You must be Yuuri’s mother and… Okukawa Minako?!” She whipped her head to look at Yuuri. He was even more flustered than before and the pestle fell out of his hands to clatter with an angry thud onto the kitchen floor.

“What’s going on—” Alexei held up his hands in front of him when he caught the look on his wife’s face. “I’ll rephrase that. What did I do?”

“The Minako-sensei you were talking about was the Okukawa Minako?”

“I… I guess?” Alexei looked toward Yuuri, but since Yuuri had no idea what was going on, he just shook his head rapidly.

Riku sighed and pressed her manicured hand to her forehead. “I’m so sorry, Okukawa-sensei. I had no idea that you were acquainted with Yuuri-kun. I haven’t heard anything about your career since you retired. Your performance of *Giselle* was one of my favorites.”

Minako had a small blush covering her cheeks. “Ah, it’s quite all right. When I stopped dancing I returned to Hasetsu, where I grew up and opened a studio. I’ve been instructing Yuuri since he was about three.” She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Thank you. I followed your career as well, Riku-san.”

“You did?!”

“Of course. I’ve been a fan of ice skating for years. I was very surprised that you suggested ‘Sakura’ for Yuuri. You skated it beautifully at the Olympics.”

Riku blushed. Apparently everyone looked up to someone else.
Yuuri climbed as high up on the bleachers as possible and sat down with his water bottle and the magazine that had been tucked into the box that his parents sent. From his perch, he had a good view of the main rink. On the left, two groups of Novices were going through compulsory step exercises; Yuuri could pick Mila out easily by her bright red hair. On the right, Viktor and Georgi were working on jumps, from the look of things.

Technically, Yuuri should be warming up and getting ready to head into the second rink for practice, but he really wanted to go through ON ICE. Most of it wasn’t really anything he paid attention to. He didn’t need the magazine’s tips on how to perfect a rocker, or which company had the best boots and blades; he knew his rocker turns very well and wasn’t yet ready to buy a new pair of skates, though he probably would have to within the next year. He dogeared the page with some tips on how to land flips and axels better, and then flipped to the center. Folded inside were two double-sided posters, and he knew that one of them was of Viktor. The cover had said that the three Worlds medalists and Tobito Uemura all had a poster. There was no way that Yuuri was going to open the poster in the rink, though -- especially not when Viktor was practicing. He did hope that it was a shot from the Worlds Free Skate, though.

What Yuuri was really looking for was the article about Grand Prix contestants that were “Must See”. Obviously, Viktor would be one of them, as would Stéphane, but there were others that he might not recognize. Newer faces, like the ‘Christophe’ Viktor had mentioned. Really, Yuuri just wanted to know what skaters Viktor was going up against in his assignments.

He turned the page, and there was a full page picture of himself. What? He scanned over the words. Apparently, it was an article about Japan’s hot new Junior talent: Katsuki Yuuri. What?!

This had to be a horrible mistake. He read faster. There were quotes from Alexei about his training! And there were a couple of pictures from training sessions here at the rink, though the full page was a shot from his Short Program last year.

Katsuki Yuuri, with his masterful step sequences and fantastic spins, is about to set the Junior Division on fire.

Yuuri glanced at the byline. Morooka Hisashi. He’d never heard of him before, and Yuuri was pretty familiar with the normal journalists for the magazine.

Snapping the magazine closed, Yuuri darted down the stairs and looked around to see if Alexei was anywhere.

“Yuuri!” Viktor skated over to the edge. “You’re pale. Are you sick? You shouldn’t skate if you’re sick because it’s easier to make mistakes and get injured. That’s what Yakov always says.”

Yuuri just shook his head. “I’m fine. I need to find Alexei. Some journalist wrote an article and--”

“Is it about you?” Viktor took the gloves he wore when practicing jumps off and wiped his hands on his pants. “Can I see?” Yuuri didn’t think, just handed the magazine over to Viktor, who quickly flipped through the pages until he found the article. “Aw, it’s in Japanese. I can’t read Japanese.”

Blinking, Yuuri looked at Viktor. He’d handed Viktor the magazine. The one with a giant poster of Viktor that Yuuri had every intention of thinking about maybe putting up on the wall of his bedroom. The one with the embarrassing article about him in it. What had he done?! “Uh…”

“When you’re done with it, do you think that I could have the page with you from your short program last year?”
“Uh… what?” Viktor hadn’t just asked for--

“Actually, could I have both pages? The shot on the top right from practice is really good. I wonder if this is why Lyosha was taking pictures a month or so ago. If it is, I wonder if he’d give me a copy.”

“Uh…”

“Yuuri?” Viktor looked up from the magazine. “Can I?”

His brain wasn’t actually working, but he opened his mouth anyway. “Sure.”

“Thank you!” Viktor closed the magazine and handed it back. “I should get back to jump practice. If I want to keep the quad flip in my free skate, I have to make sure that I can land it cleanly every time.”

Yuuri just stood at the edge of the rink and watched as Viktor skated back down for practice.

“Yuuri, are you warmed up?”

His coach’s voice restarted his brain, which had apparently completely shut down. He held up the magazine. “I didn’t know you read ON ICE. A college student who was doing an internship with them contacted me about writing a piece on you. He’d seen your performance at the Junior Nationals at the end of last year and when you got selected for the JGP, he approached his supervisor about writing a short article.” Alexei smiled. “We’ve got to start getting your name out there.”

“We do?” Yuuri’s stomach dropped.

“Of course.” Alexei frowned. “Are you all right? You aren’t sick, are you?”

He didn’t know what was the most anxiety-inducing about the whole situation. Was it Viktor wanting the pages? (And why would he want them, anyway?!) Was it the idea that someone would read the article and get the wrong impression of him, that he was a skater that mattered? Was it that he knew Alexei was right and he needed to get his name out there if he was competing internationally, but--

He felt Alexei’s arm settle around his shoulder and he could sort of hear words that sounded like a language he knew, but he couldn’t make any sense of them. Like a robot, he just walked in the direction that he was pushed and sat down when the pressure on his shoulder indicated to do so.

“Yuuri?” He shook his head. “Yuuri?”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Yuuri pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, pushing up his glasses in the process. “I… why me?”

“Because you won gold at Junior Nationals and then came in fourth at World Juniors. You’ve impressed people.”

“I’m no one.”

Alexei took a deep breath and settled his hand on Yuuri’s shoulder. “All right. Here’s how this is going to work from now on. No more interviews unless you know about it. I just didn’t want to distract you, since you were working on getting the choreography down for your programs and I
know that you don’t like attention.”

“I really don’t.”

“However,” Alexei’s voice was firm, and Yuuri knew that even if he didn’t like what Alexei was about to say, he couldn’t argue against it. “We can’t refuse every interview. I’ll make some time in your schedule so we can talk about how you want us to handle this in the future. I really didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable this time. I’m sorry for that.”

“Viktor wants the article after I’m done with the magazine.” Yuuri didn’t even know why he said it. The words had just been stuck in his throat, clawing their way up until they came out.

Alexei chuckled, and Yuuri just looked at him. The smile on his coach’s face was happy and relieved a bit of the anxiety crawling under his skin. “Of course Viktor wanted it. He’s a fan. If you tell Mila about it, she’d want it too. In fact, you should. I’d like to see Viktor get in an argument with a nine-year-old that he can’t possibly win.”

Yuuri covered his face with his hands and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
アイス・カサル・マッダナ - Ice Castle Madonna (Yuuko's screen name)
カツキ丼 - Katsukidon (Yuuri's screen name)
神さま! - Kamisama - God
はい - Hai - Yes
こんばんは - Konbanwa - Good evening

***
Riku has appeared. Hopefully she lives up to expectations. :)

So I decided to make those music posts after all. They can be found on my tumblr: diedraechin.tumblr.com The first one will be going up tonight.

Next time we’ll have the first event of Yuuri’s first JGP journey. I spent most of today while I was writing it trying to decide between the two scenarios I have for how he’ll place.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Yuuri goes to his first JGP competition with Alexei as his coach and Viktor is an idiot (a lovable idiot, but still an idiot)

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I had to delete and reup the chapter... *sigh*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“That boy will be the death of me.”

Alexei sat down in the chair across from Yakov in the office. He didn’t need to ask what boy, because the answer was obviously Viktor. The answer was always Viktor.

“And what has he done this time?”

Yakov shook his head and started sorting papers. “He’s started a war with the ten-year-old.”

“With Milochka?” Because if Viktor was always ‘that boy’, Mila was always ‘the ten-year-old’ -- at least now that she’d had her birthday. It didn’t even matter that there were a fair few ten-year-olds that took lessons at the rink. “Why?”

“If I knew, I would make them settle it, but I have no idea.” Yakov heaved a heavy sigh. “Yours. His first qualifier is almost here. Is he ready?”

Sighing, Alexei leaned back. “Yuuri’s triple Salchow needs a bit of work, but he only has the one and it isn’t like he can’t land it. He’s just more likely to step out on the landing than with any of his other jumps. The spiral into his triple axel is better, but still not perfect. His step sequences, spins and transitions are all perfect, but I don’t even need to tell you that. Overall, we’re in good shape for Romania.”

“Finally, some good news. What will he be doing for his exhibition skate, should he place?”

The question that he had hoped wouldn’t come up. He’d been avoiding it. “I, uh, haven’t discussed an exhibition skate with Yuuri.”

“What?!?” Yakov had always gone straight for yelling. He’d never change. “What if he wins a medal, what are you going to do?” His former coach narrowed his eyes at him. “You don’t expect him to do well?”
“Oh, I expect him to do very well. Not gold, though, that’ll be going to Aaron Reyes unless he has a dismal free skate, which I doubt. Word is he’s in top form. No, I think Yuuri will take bronze.”

“Then he needs an exhibition program.”

Alexei nodded. “You’re right, he does, but I think if I even say the words ‘exhibition program’ he’ll freeze up and won’t place at all. It’ll be too much pressure, like he thinks that if he doesn’t win he’ll be a complete failure.” With a sigh, Alexei leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “I still haven’t figured out what is going on in Yuuri’s head, but whatever it is, it can become a huge hurdle that he doesn’t know how to get around. I’m trying to avoid that from happening, but I don’t know if I can. Not 100% anyway. You told me this was just a case of really bad ‘stage fright’, but there’s more to it than some performance anxiety.”

“I was afraid of that. If he can’t keep it together, his career is going to be short.” Yakov pinched the bridge of his nose. “Nonetheless, Lyosha, you can’t have your skater go to Romania unpre--”

The door slammed open, knocking into the bookcase next to it and almost toppling the display that contained Yakov’s two Olympic gold medals. Alexei leaned back and saved it before it tipped over the edge.

“Yakov, I need to take the rest of the day off!”

Viktor was flushed and disheveled, and had an astonishingly bright pink pair of blade guards clutched in one hand.

“ Aren’t those guards a little small for your skates, Vitya?”

Viktor looked down at the guards and then back to Alexei. He smiled. “Maybe. Just a bit. Good thing they aren’t mine.” He turned back to Yakov. “So can I? Leave for the rest of the day?”

“Absolutely not!”

“But, Yakov--”

“No ‘but, Yakov’s. You have to keep preparing for the Grand Prix. You still haven’t finalized your free skate. You’ve been working on the step sequence for almost a month.”

Viktor tapped the skate guards against his chin. “There’s just something missing, and I don’t know what. I have the requisite number of steps, but the flow feels wrong and I don’t know how to fix it.” He sighed.

“Viktor, bring my guards back right now or I’m going to send Katya after you!”

Turning around, Viktor stuck his head out the door. “I’m busy talking to Yakov. If you didn’t want your things to just walk away, maybe you shouldn’t have had your sister steal my property!”

Alexei just stared in shock as Yakov’s face kept changing color, from pink to tomato red to a rather disturbing shade of purple. He could practically feel the coach’s blood pressure rising to dangerous levels. So he did what anyone who didn’t want to have to deal with their boss going into cardiac arrest, leaving them to deal with a bunch of unruly figure skaters, would do. He grabbed Viktor by the elbow and pulled him out of the office, closing the door as quickly and
quietly as he could before hauling the boy back to the rink.

“Guards.” Alexei held out his hand.

“But Lyosh--”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He was going to turn into Yakov. The thought was equal measures of disturbing and frightening.

“Fine, why?”

It was Katya that answered. “They were bickering over some magazine and I told Viktor that it was unbecoming of an eighteen-year-old to be arguing with a ten-year-old, and that he should just give Mila the magazine because she is much less likely to drop the whole thing than he is. So I grabbed it, gave it to Mila, and thought that was the end of it.” She looked over at Viktor. “Though apparently I was wrong. This has been going on all week.”

Alexei bit his tongue to keep from laughing. He had to act like a coach. “This is about ON ICE?”

At Viktor’s nod, Alexei groaned. He hadn’t actually thought they’d take it this far, but…

“Mila! Where are my Makkachin blade covers?!”

“If you didn’t want your things to just walk away, maybe you shouldn’t--”

“Where’s Yuuri?” The last thing Alexei wanted was for his skater to find out about the war between his two biggest fans; he didn’t know how it would affect him on an emotional level, and he wanted to keep Yuuri focused before they left for the Harghita Cup.

Katya pointed down the length of the rink. Yuuri, who hadn’t been there a couple minutes ago, was now going through his warm-up with his earbuds in. Knowing his student, he probably turned the volume up to drown out the bickering.

Viktor and Mila both quieted as Yuuri slid into position to hydroblade. It wasn’t anything that they had put in Yuuri’s routines, but when he came out of it, he entered into a familiar series of steps that Alexei recognized from past warm-ups. Normally, he would follow with a flying camel spin -- which Yuuri did. It would be better as a jump, Alexei thought. This had to be some sort of routine. If the music was appropriate, and with a bit of polishing -- like changing that camel spin to a jump -- they could maybe use this for his exhibition skate.

One problem solved; now for the other, louder one.

“For now, each of you take one of the two pages.”

The two skaters looked back at him incensed. “But, Lyosha--”

“For now. I have an extra copy of the magazine that I don’t need. If you two get along until after we get back from Romania, I’ll give you the page you don’t have.”

“Really?!” Mila did a small jump on the ice where she’d been stranded; Viktor had yet to release her blade guards.

“If I hear that Yakov had to scold either of you when I get back, you’ll be stuck for all of eternity with the single page that you have.”
“I want the short program picture!”

“I want the page with the practice rink photos!”

Easier than expected.

***

Yuuri left his suitcase by the door and collapsed face-first onto the bed. This was it. The beginning of the end of his entire skating career, and he hadn’t even stepped foot onto the ice. He groaned and pushed himself up onto his elbows. Fourteen and already washed up.

He wondered if Alexei realised how ridiculous it was that they’d come all the way to Romania just so Yuuri could crash and burn.

He should have pulled out. Told the JSF that he wasn’t really all that good, and that there were plenty of other skaters they could have sent in his place. That the gold medal he’d won last year had been a fluke. A one-time thing.

Oh God, he had to skate the day after tomorrow.

In the Junior Grand Prix.

His cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID before sliding it open to accept the call. “Vitya!”

“Alexei texted Yakov to tell him that you all arrived at the hotel a few minutes ago. Said you went straight to your room, and didn’t even answer if you wanted dinner.”

A strangled sort of sound escaped from Yuuri, and he slapped his hand over his mouth.

“Vitya, give me the phone.”

“Milochka wants to tell you something.”

Sighing, Yuuri spoke, “Yeah, sure.”

“Yuuri, Давай! Don’t forget that you’re the best skater there!”

Mila’s optimism was in no way comforting. If anything, it made him want to hide in the bathroom and huddle in a corner. How could he go back to Russia after this to train if he did as badly as he expected to?

He heard Viktor sigh, so he knew he’d taken the phone back. “You know, you’re better than you think you are. I’ll be waiting to find out the results, so you better not disappoint me.”

“What?!” Viktor thought he’d win? His shoulders felt so much heavier with the added weight of that particular expectation on him.

“You heard me. Don’t disappoint me. You have to bring back a medal.”

“Viktor…”

“Vitya! Сейчас же вернись на лед, придурок!” Yakov’s booming voice yelling carried perfectly fine through the phone and into Yuuri’s ear.
“Oops. Better go! Bye, Yuuri!” And then the call disconnected.

***

Not a single thing went right during the practice sessions. The ice was different, the air was different, the people were different. It was all just… off. Yuuri even felt that he was different, and not in a good way; different in a way that made him feel like his skates were on the wrong feet, even though he’d checked three times that they were, in fact, on the right ones.

Halfway through a runthrough of his short program he completely forgot how to do a twizzle. *A twizzle*. He loved doing twizzles and yet -- as he drifted along the ice -- he couldn’t for the life of him remember how. His muscle memory was failing him. He could feel his programs slipping from his memory and vanishing, curling up into the sky like smoke, never to be seen again.

His stomach flipped and twisted as they walked back to the hotel.

“Hungry?” Alexei asked. He hadn’t said anything when Yuuri had skated off the ice and took off his skates without a word.

Yuuri didn’t know what Romanian food was like, but he was pretty sure that he could eat all of it. Even with the way that his stomach felt. He shook his head. It was a bad idea.

“How was practice?” Riku was waiting for them in the lobby of the hotel.

“I can’t skate. I seriously don’t even know how to.” Yuuri toed the tile with the tip of his sneaker. “I’m just going to uh… go and put my stuff in my room.”

Sighing, Alexei nodded. “Be back in fifteen minutes?”

“Yeah, sure.” Or not. He had no intention of leaving his hotel room until their flight back to Russia. Where he’d go back to the apartment and pack up his things, and then run back to Hasetsu. That was a solid plan. Except for the whole going back in defeat thing.

He’d have to think about his options. Maybe he could join or a circus. Take up Madame Baranovskaya on her offer to introduce him to one of the ballet masters of a dance company. She knew so many of them. There was always the option of finding a good bridge to take up residence under.

When the knock came eighteen minutes later, Yuuri knew that there was no getting out of dinner with his coach and his coach’s wife. He opened the door, expecting to see Alexei standing there and frowning, but instead it was Riku with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Don’t worry Alexei, Yuuri-kun. Come on.” She tilted her head to the side and stepped back from the door.

There was something about the woman that made him immediately listen. Maybe it was because she was Japanese and some of her mannerisms reminded him of his teachers in school back in Hasetsu. Maybe it was because she wasn’t any taller than his mother, with a demeanor like Minako-sensei’s when she was teaching ballet. Maybe it was the no nonsense way that the Japanese -- non accented, unlike Alexei’s and without a dialect, unlike his parents -- dripped from her lips. She never spoke to him in English unless there was someone who didn’t speak Japanese with them, and even then she was known to sometimes slip into their shared native language. It didn’t even matter if Alexei was talking to Yuuri in rudimentary Russian or in more detail in English, languages that she knew.
はい, Riku-san.”

“No one is mad.”

He furrowed his brow. “I’m mad.”

“Ah, that’s worse than no one being mad.” It was the only thing she said until they were back in the lobby, where Alexei was waiting for them. He just stuffed his hands into his pockets and led them down the street, commenting that the staff at the hotel had recommended a couple of the Italian places that were within walking distance, and that he wouldn’t even say anything if Yuuri opted for a plate of pasta or a pizza.

“Wow, I must have really done bad if I’m allowed to carb out like that.”

“No, I’m just going to work you three times as hard tomorrow if you do.” Alexei shot back.

Yuuri bit his lip on a smile.

After they ordered, but before their food arrived, Alexei leaned forward and Yuuri knew that this was it. The lecture that he knew was coming was here. And now there was no escaping it, because he was really looking forward to the pasta he’d ordered and had no intention of not eating it. Life just wasn’t fair.

“Yuu-kun, what do you want to accomplish at this competition?”

The question didn’t make sense. “Isn’t the goal to get a gold medal?”

Humming in thought, Alexei lifted a brow and looked at him as if he was turning the question right around on Yuuri. When Yuuri didn’t reply, Alexei asked a different question. “Is that what you want to accomplish here, Yuuri? You want the gold medal?”

“Of course.” And then he shook his head. “I do, but... I mean a gold medal would be nice, but I’d settle for skating without embarrassing myself like I did in practice today.”

“That sounds like a manageable goal.” Riku leaned back in her chair.

Yuuri put his head down on the table and sighed. “It’s a pathetic goal. I should be chasing that gold medal.”

“Why? It’s your first Junior Grand Prix, and you’re only fourteen. Don’t worry, you’re going to win the gold at the Junior Grand Prix Final before you move up to Seniors. I’ll make sure of that. But you don’t need to medal this time.”

He sat up and stared at his coach. “You wouldn’t be disappointed if I didn’t medal?”

“Ah, I didn’t say that. I would be. I want you to medal; I think you have the talent to. I mean you’d have to have pretty clean skates, since a couple of the older boys have a quad and triple axel in their free program and therefore higher base scores, but it’s still possible. I’m fairly sure that you have one of the highest difficulties in the short program, where quads aren’t allowed. And if you score high enough there, it could boost your score reasonably to make up for not having a quad in your free.”

Yuuri leaned forward. “That spiral into my triple axel would have to be perfect. I’d need a GOE of +3.0.”
Alexei nodded. “You would. And I’d suggest trying to sit lower into your sit spins. I know you can do it.”

By the time the food came, Yuuri felt somewhat better. He still wasn’t sure that he could skate the way that Alexei said he would need to, but he was pretty sure that he could execute a twizzle and maybe even a mohawk turn.

When he stepped onto the ice for warm-ups the next day, the rink no longer felt as strange, but he still felt out of place. He was small compared to many of the competitors. He’d felt this way last year at World Juniors, too. In fact, he recognized quite a few of the skaters, like the lanky American who had come in first and definitely had a quad in his program.

The need to run off the ice and hide was slithering up his legs under his costume, wrapping around his gut and settling there like a heavy, slowly writhing snake. He swallowed down the sudden burst of nausea and skated faster. Faster past the reigning World Junior Champion and around the rink, sucking in a harsh breath as he did so, before going into a flying entry for his camel spin. Like Yakov had suggested, he kept the sideways positioning; curving his body backwards, he grabbed his skate, mentally counting the revolutions. It wasn’t what his choreography called for and would count against him if he tried it in his program. But right now was practice, so he turned his body, shifting his hand on the blade of his skate, and pulled up into a Biellmann spin. There was something about knowing that he could do this when others couldn’t that helped. Just a little. Grounded him.

It did not get rid of the snake -- a python, it had to be with the way it was constricting around his intestines -- writhing in his belly. The anxiety peaked again when he came out of his spin, breathing heavy. He wasn’t winded from the spin or practice, but from everything else.

Please let this competition finish.

He was skating in the middle. All the downsides of skating first and all the downsides of skating last. He had to wait and watch others skate before he got onto the ice, and would be mentally comparing his skating to theirs. Then after he got off the ice, he had to wait to find out how much better the skaters who came after him would do. All the minuses, none of the positives. He sighed.

“What do you want to do right now?” Alexei’s voice cut through his whirling thoughts.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe I should rephrase my question. What do you need right now?”

Yuuri took a breath. “I should watch--”

“But should. Not can. Want or need. That’s what I’m asking you.”

Nodding, Yuuri looked down at his skates. What did he need? “I need to text Yuuko.”

Alexei dug his hand into his pocket and fished out Yuuri’s phone, holding it out. Yuuri took the phone in his hand and just stared at it. He didn’t usually text anyone in Japan. The fees were high and there were other ways of getting in touch, but right now… Yuuko had gone to every competition with him. Had supported him from the very beginning. It was him that she had hoped would compete against Viktor on the ice one day, not Nishigori. And this skate today was a step in that direction.

He opened his phone, brought up her contact, and quickly typed out a text:
Worried I’m going to fail. I really suck at skating. Wish you were here.

Yuuri kept his phone clutched in his hand as he went through his motions to warm up. He didn’t really expect to hear back from Yuuko -- again, international texts weren’t cheap-- but when his phone buzzed just a couple of minutes before he needed to get onto the ice, he smiled and opened the text.

Yeah, you suck all right, that’s why you’re in the JGP. Really. Yuu-kun, you’re the best skater I know. Wish I was there too.

He didn’t once look at the skater who was before him as he left the ice; just stared at the words on his small cell phone screen. He could imagine her eye roll as she typed out the message. He knew that he couldn’t count on Yuuko to help him every time, but he was glad she’d been able to respond. Handing the phone back to Alexei, he bent over, took off his blade guards and stepped onto the ice, slipping off his jacket as soon as the smooth surface was under his blades.

“You ready?”

Yuuri handed his jacket over and then smoothed down the soft material of the embroidered vest he wore underneath, his fingers slowing as they encountered the bumps of the silver thread which created the leaf pattern. He focused on the feeling of it on the pads of his fingers. “Not at all.” But he smiled.

“That’s all right. Just remember, the only people who are watching are the ones that you want to be watching. No one else even exists. Just like during practice.”

Swallowing, Yuuri pushed away from the wall and skated around the rink, zigzagging from one side to the other as he stretched his arms and legs. He had a waltz to perform.

***

Yuuri was breathing heavily when he stepped off the ice, but Alexei was right there with water and a towel and a hug.

“Good job. Not perfect, but so good.”

“I didn’t fall.” It was the only thing that Yuuri could think of to say. “And I remembered how to do my twizzles.”

Alexei laughed and led him over to the Kiss and Cry with an arm around his shoulders. “You did. And you barely wobbled when you landed that triple axel. Your PCS should be phenomenal.”

When his scores came in, he was in first. Yuuri couldn’t really believe it. But there were two more skaters, and one was Aaron Reyes, the American who’d won gold at World Juniors, so Yuuri didn’t think he’d hold on to the lead that he had.

But he did, barely.

***

Nervous energy was making Yuuri’s right leg bounce up and down in a fast rhythm; faster, somehow, than even his heartbeat. He and Alexei had joined Riku up in the participant stands after he’d received his score for his free skate. He was was in third, and there was only one more skater to go.
Yuuri hadn’t had nearly enough of a clean free skate to truly make podium, but then no one had expected one of the favorites to pop his quad and then wipe out on a triple-triple combination.

He glanced down when he felt a small hand on his knee, then looked over at Riku, who was sitting on his right. “Riku-san?”

“Did you do what you set out to do, Yuu-kun? Not embarrass yourself?”

Grinning, he nodded. “I think so.”

“So anything from this point on is just gravy, right?”

“Just gravy?” Yuuri looked to his left at his coach.

“It’s a stupid English phrase he picked up from somewhere. It means something like ‘above and beyond your original expectations’.” Riku was giving her husband that soft and exasperated look that Yuuri had come to know quite well in the few months that he’d lived with the two of them. Usually, that look was followed by Alexei kissing Riku and Riku pushing him off with a teasing warning, and Yuuri quickly excusing himself because it was so very awkward to be in the room with them.

And now he was stuck in the middle. Literally. Heat crawled up his neck and flushed his cheeks. This was worse. There was no bedroom to hide in while Alexei and Riku were being cute and romantic.

He didn’t even spare another thought for the scores until they were called out. He didn’t even remember the skate. Not really. It wasn’t as interesting as any of Viktor’s, and wasn’t even as good as Aaron Reyes’s, who had managed to jump from fifth to first on the power of his free skate alone.

“It’s a shame that he fell on his triple axel and wasn’t able to follow up with the single loop and triple toe loop of that combination. His hopes of receiving a medal have been dashed, but he scored enough for a strong fourth place finish.” The announcer was talking.

“Does that mean—” Yuuri started and looked over at Alexei, who was beaming.

“Yuuri Katsuki of Japan, in his first-ever Junior Grand Prix event, has managed to snatch a bronze medal at just fourteen. Manuel Espisito from Spain has taken silver, and Aaron Reyes from the United States has claimed gold with a very strong edge over the other competitors.”

Riku’s arm slipped around his shoulders, and then Alexei leaned over to embrace them both.

“What are you going to skate for your exhibition piece, Yuuri-kun?”

It was only then that Yuuri realised he’d never even thought to put together a program for his exhibition, and Alexei had never said anything about putting one together.

“I… I don’t have anything. I didn’t think I’d medal, so… I don’t even have a costume.”

“あなた, you’re his coach! How could you not make sure that he was prepared for this possibility?”

“I, uh, didn’t want to put any pressure on him.” Alexei turned to Yuuri. “What about that warm-up you do? It’s got to be a program of sorts, you always have your earbuds in and the moves are consistent.”
Yuuri stood up when they called for the medalists so the medals could be awarded. “Uh, it’s just a thing I do based off a performance that Minako-sensei has done at dance recitals. So, it’s not like a real program or anything.”

The three walked down the steps and down the hall that would lead them to the edge of the rink. “But it’s enough that we can tweak it at practice in the morning so you’ll have it ready by tomorrow night, and we’ll let Riku look through your clothing options. I’m sure she can put something together.” Yuuri laced up his skates as he waited to be called to the podium. They didn’t waste much time; they were already rolling out the carpet and podium. In just a few minutes, he’d be skating out to perform his bows. He handed Alexei his jacket.

Then he was standing on the podium -- granted, the one closest to the ground -- at a Junior Grand Prix qualifier. This was not real.

It was even less real when the gold medalist leaned down to congratulate him, holding out his hand. “That was an amazing short program. Congratulations. I look forward to skating against you again.”

***

Riku stood at the edge of the rink, holding a video camera as steady as possible. She knew that there would be official coverage, but there was a possibility that Okukawa-sensei wouldn’t see it, and she wanted Yuuri’s ballet instructor to see this. Especially since it might be the only time it was performed.

Yuuri was skating in loose circles on the ice, occasionally kicking a leg up and shaking it a little. He wasn’t used to skating in jeans, but they were loose enough that he’d be fine. They’d checked his range of motion when deciding what he should wear. The three-quarter-sleeve T-shirt she’d found at the bottom of Yuuri’s suitcase was plain, just gray with deep red sleeves, but it looked good. He looked fourteen.

“Skating to ‘Speeding Cars’ by Imogen Heap is the bronze medalist in Men’s singles, Yuuri Katsuki. The piece was choreographed by Minako Okukawa, Alexei Turov and Yuuri himself.”

Yuuri waved and skated to the center of the ice, dragging one skate behind him to get into position. He started slow, skating in loops and spirals and some turns before speeding up to perform a double axel. He kneeled and dragged his foot behind him as he slid across the ice and then slid in a circle, getting back onto his feet as if it was the most natural thing in the world before skating backwards.

When he went into his first spin, even Riku had to catch her breath. It was very similar to the spin she’d done in her own performance of ‘Sakura’ -- from a back sit spin, changing feet to come up into a camel spin, then position into a sideways camel spin, before shifting into a Biellmann spin. The boy was as flexible as a rubber band, and she wondered how long it’d last.

His triple lutz-triple toe loop combination went great. And as he slid on the ice on his knees with his hands braced up in front of his chest, the music faded out and the audience started cheering.

The JSF would have to talk him into doing a show in Japan over the following summer. He’d be popular with his expressive skating, and it’d help offset the costs he’d accrue skating and travelling internationally. She’d even let them talk her into performing.
From: ミナコ・ベノアー
Sent: Monday, September 10, 2007 3:10 AM
To: カツキ丼
Subject: Speeding Cars!

Yuuri! Why didn’t you tell me you were going to adapt that for your exhibition? I could barely watch it because I was crying. You made me cry! It was so beautiful. And the way you replaced my fouetté turns with jumps or spins and then that Y-spiral you did was perfect. It was better in your exhibition skate than it was in your free skate. How you managed that in your jeans I’ll never know.

I can’t believe you credited me for choreographing that. When I put that dance together, I did it for myself and not for skating at all, but thank you. I never thought I’d see a dance I choreographed translated for the ice.

From: カツキ丼
Sent: Monday, September 10, 2007 7:10 PM
To: ミナコ・ベノアー
Subject: Re: Speeding Cars!

I didn’t actually have an exhibition skate planned. We threw it together the night before and practiced it a couple of times the morning of based off some adaptations I had made because I use it as a warm up sometimes. You know how much I loved that routine.

Most of the jumps were put in there by Alexei after I dug up a youtube video Yuuko posted online of one of the recitals where you performed it. Riku-san, by the way, has been going through all the videos of your dancing on Yuuko’s channel now that she knows it exists.

I’m just glad you aren’t mad.

From: ミナコ・ベノアー
Sent: Tuesday, September 11, 2007 10:36 AM
To: カツキ丼
Subject: Re: Re: Speeding Cars!

Why would I be mad? Yuuri, sometimes you really are ridiculous. I’m the complete opposite of mad, I’ll have you know.

You were on the local news, by the way. I didn’t know they were going to cover you during the sports portion, so I failed to record it, but it was a cute little piece about how our local boy snagged a medal in a big time Junior figure skating competition in Europe.

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Yuuri put his head down on his desk as he read the latest email from Minako. That was so embarrassing! The news?! And by local news, he knew that she meant the news for the region, because Hasetsu was too small to have an actual news channel. Their news was covered with all the other cities in the region.

At least no one he trained with watched Japanese news programs because he’d die if this got around. It’d be worse than Viktor telling everyone about that article in ON ICE.
Translations:
Давай! - Davai! - Go!
Сейчас же вернись на лед, придурок! - Seychas zhe vernis' na led, pridurok! - Now get back on the ice, you moron!
はい - Hai - Yes
あなた - Anata - you (but in this case a term of endearment between wife and husband)
ミナコ・ベノアーア - Minako Benois - Minako's screen name
カツキ丼 - Katsukidon - Yuuri's screen name
***
So this has been sitting for a couple days as I waited to get a Russian translation from my husband's writing partner. :) Thanks to cryoclaire! (If you like cyberpunk, go read their webcomic Drugs and Wires.

Someone created a spotify playlist based off this (not the songs used, but inspired by) under "bear your soul on the ice". Thanks!

As what will become usual, I'll post the song(s) for the chapter (and even a costume inspiration this time) on my tumblr at some point tonight most likely. And if anyone knows Japanese and can do a one sentence translation for me, let me know, otherwise I'm using google translate. :P I try not to because it's not the best, but this time, I kinda need it.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Yuuri gets ready to skate in his second ever JGP qualifier, but first he has to deal with Viktor being... Viktor. (really, there’s no other way to put it... adorkably annoying maybe?)

Chapter Notes

Happy YOI Wednesday! Have a chapter. :D A long one even.

As usual translations will be at the bottom. And many many thanks to my translators cryoclaire (Russian) and Yuurisvicchan (Japanese) :D And to my poor husband who edits this sucker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alexei leaned on the barrier next to Riku, who had a laptop balanced in front of her pointing out to the ice. “That transition needs some work.”

Yuuri spun around a couple of times and skated over to the edge. “It’s awkward, but it’s such an important part of the dance that I don’t want to change it too much.” He looked at the screen. “Minako-sensei, what do you think?”

Minako tapped her chin with one finger and stepped back. She was in her studio back in Hasetsu, between dance classes. “Let me... Hmm. One minute.”

Riku tilted the screen so she could see what Minako was doing.

Yuuri smiled. He loved watching Minako dance and was glad that Riku did as well. “Right there, that’s the grande allegro, it’s too important to completely change.”

Riku nodded. “Most definitely. It’s absolutely beautiful.”

Minako came back closer to the camera. “What about doing an outside spread eagle for the first part and then a spiral in arabesque, and then--”

“A flip,” Alexei interjected. “I’d like it to be a triple flip, but if Yuuri is more comfortable with a double, that’ll be fine. It’ll almost look like that leg twirly thingy that male dancers do.”


Alexei shrugged. “I haven’t needed ballet terminology for so long that I’ve banished it from my mind.” He grinned.

Yuuri nodded. “Tour en l’air, that has to be what he’s thinking of. Though really it could be either.
Let me try? Outside spread eagle to spiral in arabesque, leading to a triple flip. I’ll need a decent amount of speed. Once without and then once with music?”

“No problem.”

The moves definitely felt more true to the original choreography. He hadn’t been sure about polishing ‘Speeding Cars’ into a proper exhibition piece, but Minako had insisted and Riku was quick to agree with her. And then Alexei had joined in, and by that point it was three adults against him, a fourteen-year-old who had to be reminded to listen to his coach and former, albeit reluctantly, ballet instructor. And once Madame Baranovskaya found out, it was over. There was no arguing at all. He was not allowed to make a mockery of the beauty of a piece choreographed by a highly decorated and respected ballerina.

He had almost a month before his next Junior Grand Prix assignment and then another month before Junior Nationals, so he had time. Alexei and Yakov had insisted that he’d definitely need a polished exhibition skate for Junior Nationals at least, because he was sure to place there. He was going to argue, but when he opened his mouth Yakov just reminded him that he was defending his gold medal. Yuuri had never thought about it that way.

But Yuuri wasn’t going to think about that. It made him uncomfortable and edgy. He just wanted to focus on what he was working on right then.

The adjustment to the choreography worked amazingly well with the music and he was just a bit shaky with the flip landing, but it had probably been one of his strongest landings yet -- especially since he couldn’t really land it at all when he first came to Russia. He skated back over to the group with a smile.

“Beautiful, Yuuri.”

“Thanks, Minako-sensei.”

“Okukawa-sensei, did you get the email with the costume?” Riku tilted the screen again.

“Oh, I did! I love the concept. It’s very simple, but it works so well with the song and it pulls in the last minute styling you did for the exhibition in Romania. And I’m sure that Yuuri would be more comfortable with a proper skating suit. And Riku-chan, I told you that you can call me Minako-sensei if you wanted to.”

“I could never.”

***

“If you were two years older, you’d be making your Senior debut. Then we could talk Yakov into letting us share hotel rooms when we compete together, and it’d be so much more fun. When I go to a competition with Georgi, he insists on telling me all about this crush he has on one of the pair skaters, but everyone -- and I really do mean everyone -- knows that she’s in a relationship with one of the female ice dancers and--”

“He has a crush on Dmitri’s partner, Svetlana?”

“See, I told you, everyone knows, and yes, he does.”

Yuuri zipped his suitcase shut and tugged it off the bed, sitting down where it had been instead. Viktor was sitting up against his headboard with Makkachin draped across his lap.
“Dmitri and Svetlana are skating in this qualifier.”

“So they’ll be in Sheffield with you?”

Swinging his legs up onto his bed, Yuuri nodded. He let his toes sink into Makkachin’s fur and wiggled them until she let out a breath with a quiet “whuff”. And just like when Vicchan made that sort of sound, Yuuri smiled because it almost seemed like a laugh. “Since we’re rinkmates, our coaches have planned for us to have meals together.”

Viktor leaned his head back and looked around the room. Usually, when Viktor came over, they would stay in the living room, but since Yuuri needed to pack, Viktor and Makkachin were hanging out in his bedroom instead. Yuuri was just glad that he’d had an opportunity to turn his poster over so instead of Viktor on his wall, it was Tabito Uemura.

However, Viktor scrunched up his nose when his gaze settled on said poster. “Your room would look better if you had a more photogenic figure skater up on your wall. Tabito, really?”

“Oh… He’s Japanese.” It really was as good a reason as any, especially since it wasn’t Tabito’s face that was usually on display. He wondered what Viktor’s reaction would have been if Stéphane or Moon had been on the flip side of that poster instead.

Viktor pushed Makkachin’s head off his lap, got off the bed, and walked over to the poster. Delicately, he picked the tape off the wall and lifted the corner up. “Oh! It has something on the other side! Let’s see!”

“Vi… Viktor!”

“Please, Yuuri?”

Yuuri dropped his face into his hands, not daring to look. He really couldn’t ever say no to Viktor, and right this second that was a huge problem. And much as he tried to tune out what was happening, each little rustling sound from the paper made the muscles in his neck tighten.

“It’s me! I love it! This side is so much better, since I’m much better looking than Tabito. Where’s the tape, I’m going to fix this right now!” Yuuri felt the poster brush over his feet, then heard the rustle of Viktor going through his desk supplies, presumably searching for the tape. “Ah ha!”

Yuuri finally gathered enough courage to peek between his fingers at what Viktor was doing, and he was indeed smoothing the poster of himself back onto the wall. Yuuri wanted to sink through the floorboards.

“This is a really nice shot. I wonder what photographer it was. Do you know, Yuuri?”

With a sigh, Yuuri stood up, walked over to the poster, and leaned down to look in the corner where the photographer’s name was printed in tiny font. “Kuno Yoshida.”

“Do you want me to sign it, Yuuri?”

Viktor looked smug. He must have grabbed a permanent marker from Yuuri’s desk when he went hunting for the tape, because he was now twirling it between his fingers. Yuuri went back to the bed and collapsed, staring at the ceiling. “Sure, you can if you really want to.” He really did want Viktor to sign it, but he would never in a million years let that slip. Viktor would be unbearable if he knew. “But it’s not a big deal. I mean, you’re my rinkmate. Now, if Tabito signed it…” Yuuri wouldn’t have cared at all, but again, wasn’t telling Viktor that.
“Yuuri!” The way that Viktor whined his name almost made Yuuri laugh. “So mean!” Viktor threw himself onto the bed next to Yuuri -- it was a single and in no was designed to hold two teenagers and a standard poodle, so they ended up all pressed against each other -- and Viktor wrapped his arms around Makkachin’s neck. “Makkachin, you love me, right? Even if Yuuri is being terribly mean to me.” Makkachin squirmed her way free and gave Yuuri a slobbery lick on the chin. “My heart is breaking. No, it’s broken. My heart is broken.”

Yuuri couldn’t help it; he turned his face into Makkachin’s fur and started laughing, and didn’t stop until he was gasping for breath and his sides ached.

“That is no way to react to my best friend and rival and dog betraying me, Yuuri.”

Yuuri snickered and looked at Viktor. He was pouting. If Yuuri had a camera he would have taken a picture because it was just too much. “I get the first and last, but how can Makkachin be your rival? I know my dog can ice skate, but I’ve never seen Makkachin on the ice.”

“Really, Yuuri?” Viktor stood up and went to the poster on the wall, making a big production of uncapping the marker as he did so. Yuuri sat up, propping himself up with his hands behind him, and watched as Viktor scribbled a bunch of Russian on the corner edge, then signed his name with big loops. Or at least what Yuuri knew to be his name. Seriously, Viktor’s signature looked nothing like anything but a loopy scribble.

“What does it say?”

“Aren’t you learning Russian?”

“Viktor…”

“Her! Figure it out yourself.” He reached over to where he’d dropped his bookbag by the door and pulled out a folder, holding it out to Yuuri. “Now you. Go on.”

Shaking his head, Yuuri opened the folder -- and came face to face with the page from ON ICE that featured him in his Short Program costume for ‘Send in the Clowns’. “I thought Mila got the magazine.”

Viktor sighed. “I had to be on my best behavior while practicing for weeks to get this from Alexei. He kept adding conditions! First it was ‘don’t get scolded while you are in Romania,’ and I did that. Then he said that I had to actually use our sessions with Yakov’s wife to practice ballet and not goof off or try to distract you. So I did that. Then he said--”

So that was why Viktor had turned into an almost model skater? “Wow.”

Holding out the marker, Viktor looked at him. “Sign it.”

“I’ve never done an autograph before.” Heat started crawling up neck and spread over his cheeks.

“Even better, I can be your first!” Viktor tapped his finger against his chin after Yuuri took the marker from him. “What do I want you to put…”

Yuuri didn’t wait for Viktor to decide because he’d probably decide on something obnoxious.

Виктор - 滑る理由はヴィクトルです。 - 勝生 勇利

“What does it say?”

Yuuri shook his head. “I’ll only tell you that the last four characters are my name in kanji.”
Pushing his hair out of his face, Viktor looked at him. “That’s the way you’re going to play it?”

Yuuri just nodded.

After Alexei came in and told Viktor to “go home already, damn it. Do you know what time it is? We have to go to the airport in the morning,” Yuuri looked at the Cyrillic on his poster. He really couldn’t read it. Most of his Russian lessons had focused on verbal communication – he only knew how to write a few names: his, Viktor’s, Alexei’s, Yakov’s, Mila’s and Katya’s. Glancing over at his Russian-Japanese dictionary, he sighed. Maybe in the morning.

Моему лучшему другу и сопернику, жду не дождусь выступить против тебя.

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Yuuri scratched the back of his head and glanced around. It wasn’t like the rink was that big, so getting lost was completely pathetic and ridiculous and he should be ashamed.

“Need help?”

Whipping around, he came face to face with an olive-skinned girl with dark hair about his age. “Uh… I can’t find the Icicle Room. I’m supposed to meet my coach there.”

Her brows lifted. “You don’t look Russian. Isn’t that where the Russian skaters are having a meeting of some sort?”

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded. “It is. I’m not. I train in Russia with Alexei Turov.”

“You’re Yuuri Katsuki! Our coach was telling Mickey about you!” She grinned. “Apparently you have an awesome step sequence in your short program that he really wants Mickey to pay attention to.” When Yuuri’s eyes went wide, she started. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m Sara Crispino. I’m skating in Junior Ladies and my twin brother is skating against you. He’s really nervous; he didn’t do very well at the Talinn Cup and said it was my fault, because our coach said I needed to stay in Italy and practice for the Croatia Cup, since they were only a week apart.” Sara brushed her hair back over her shoulder.

That was a lot of words. And while Yuuri understood every single one of them, at the same time not a single word had actually sunk into his skull. “Oh.”

“You don’t say much, do you?”

“Uh… I… Hmm.”

Yuuri’s stuttering was cut off when a boy ran down the hallway and grabbed Sara by the elbow. “SARA! You disappeared! I thought I told you to stay next to me. You don’t know who could be roaming around the halls and anything could have happened to you!” He narrowed his astonishingly purple eyes at Yuuri, and Yuuri shrunk back.

“But Mickey, this is Yuuri Katsuki and I was just trying to help him find the Icicle Room so he could meet his coach. Don’t you want to ask him about his step sequence, our coach--”

“Like I need to watch some guy’s half-assed attempt at a step sequence in order to better my own. I know what I’m doing.” He pointed down the hall. “Go that way and turn right. It’s not like this place is so big it’s possible to get lost.” Mickey -- was that really his name? -- turned away, dragging his sister with him.
“Bye, Yuuri! If I don’t get a chance to talk to you again, good luck!”

Lifting his hand, Yuuri waved. He felt like a tornado had just descended and whipped him around before dropping him back to the ground. Still, he followed Mickey’s directions and was at the door to the Icicle Room in less than a minute, silently opening it just enough to squeeze through.

The very fast and fluid Russian that Yuuri could sort of half-understand at this point was still going strong. It was some sort of pep talk to the Juniors that were skating at this competition; there were quite a few. Yuuri was even going up against two of them in Junior Men’s.

“Давайте!” All the athletes chanted at the same time. So the meeting was over.

Alexei nodded in Yuuri’s direction. “How much of it did you catch?”

Yuuri shrugged. “A third maybe. I think I heard something about ‘beat Japan Yuri’.”

“Leonid has the two boys competing in Junior Men’s and told them that beating you is their goal post. Be careful, one of them is pretty good. Sixteen -- so around Georgi’s age -- and has a quad already, but isn’t very good at it.”

“When will…” Yuuri trailed off.

“When will I let you start trying quads?”

Yuuri nodded. “I’m going to need them, aren’t I?”

“For Juniors? No, you don’t, not really. You happened to get assigned to Romania, where there were a few Juniors, including the reigning Junior World Champion, who could do a quad toe loop, but more than that, do it well. I’m not going to let you attempt to learn them for at least another season, though. You can win without them.”

Yuuri furrowed his brow. “Why?”

“Because I’ve been tracking your height, and letting you start next year is foolhardy. I’m pretty sure you’re going to be hitting your major growth spurt sometime soon, and we’ll have to work on making sure that you don’t lose anything. An increase in flexibility training is definite, and I’m going to have to talk to Yakov about the best way to keep your jumps from falling apart. He has more experience with that than I do.”

Yuuri didn’t know what he expected, but it wasn’t the answer he got. He knew he was growing. He’d even started looking at new boots and blades on the internet, hoping to be ready before he started feeling that dreadful pinch in the toes he remembered all too well from last time he’d waited too long to replace his skates. Maybe he shouldn’t have given that ON ICE issue with the article on the best boots and blades away.

It made sense, though, he thought as he followed Alexei out of the small meeting room and toward the main area of the rink. Riku had set herself up in one of the stadium chairs, and was talking on her phone. She had that tightness around her eyes that signaled she was arguing with someone. Alexei must have seen it as well, because he steered them away to look out at the ice instead.

“Am I wrong?” his coach asked.

“No, just surprised. I never really gave much thought to growing taller and the effect it would have on my skating, just whether or not I’d need new skates.”
Alexei laughed. “That sounds familiar. I think I was the same way around your age. So we’ll let you shoot up a bit in height next year, and then we’ll start you training on quads. All of this is future talk, though. This weekend, your focus needs to be on the competition. How are you feeling?”

*Are you going to fall apart like you did in Romania?* was the question that Alexei was actually asking. Yuuri knew better than to be glib with a response and really thought about it. The last month had gone well. He was more sure of himself and his programs on the ice. The worry and the fear were still there, simmering in the back of his mind and waiting for a crack in his mental fortitude so it could bubble over and swamp him. But right then, at that moment, he felt good.

“I think I can do this.” Cautiously optimistic.

“Good. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

***

Some days were good. The sun would come up, birds would sing, and even little things seemed to roll off his back and not bother him.

Those sorts of days were Yuuri’s favorites.

Yuuri shivered when he got onto the ice. It was as if he could feel someone -- or more than one someone -- staring at him as he began his warm-up for the practice session. He rubbed his arms as he worked through some figures and the footwork of his step sequence for his short program. At one point, he caught the angry gaze of that Italian boy, Mickey Crispino. He didn’t know why Mickey looked so angry at him, but he did. Yuuri shuddered. Instead of starting to work through his jumps, he skated over to Alexei to grab his water.

“Everything all right? You seem a bit more hesitant than usual, Yuuri.”

Dragging in a lungful of the cold rink air, Yuuri tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. “I feel like I’m being watched. It’s a bit creepy.”

Alexei just tilted his head to the side, not surprised by the comment. “You are. Leonid’s skaters both have their eyes on you, a couple others as well, and that Italian skater--”

“Crispino. He looked pretty angry when I caught him.”

Alexei hummed in thought.

“Yuuri!”

Yuuri turned his head and saw the girl from the day before -- Sara, if he remembered right -- stepping up to the barrier. “Uh, hi.”

“Hi!” She was exuberant with energy to spare, and sort of reminded him of Mila in the way she’d bounce forward onto the balls of her feet and smile. It was cute. “Was that your step sequence? It was amazing! I can really see why our coach wanted us to see it. I can’t wait to see it in your program!”

He swallowed. “Thanks. Um. Really, thanks.” Part of him wanted to say that he didn’t deserve the praise, that it wasn’t anything special, but remembering the constant rebuttals of Viktor and Alexei -- and Yuuko, and even Yakov, occasionally -- had him biting back the words. The words *learn to take a compliment already!* were bouncing around his head in Viktor’s cheery Russian accent.
The next thing he knew, Yuuri’s legs were covered in ice shavings as Mickey ground to a hockey stop next to him. “Get away from my sister!”

“Mickey!” Sara shoved her hands on her hips. “I was talking to him. You don’t have to be rude, he’s a fellow skater.”

“Yeah, and everyone is saying that he’s going to get gold here. I don’t need to be nice to a competitor.”

Sighing, Yuuri bent over to brush the snow off his pant legs. “It’s fine. I get it. I should… I should get back to work.” He turned back to face Alexei. “Jumps next, right?”

Alexei was frowning as he looked at the twin Italian skaters. “Yeah, work your way up slowly and don’t do your triple axel.”

“Don’t?”

Alexei just nodded and turned his attention to the skaters on the ice. “Or your flip. Don’t do that one, either.”

Usually, Alexei always had him run through those two jumps since they were the hardest for Yuuri, along with his Salchow (which shouldn’t have been hard, but there was just something about Salchows that Yuuri hated). But if that’s what his coach said to do, then he’d do it.

Back on the ice, the staring started again. He fell hard on his triple loop, and after that no one paid much attention to him and it became much easier to skate. He landed his loop and Salchow cleanly and smiled toward his coach, but Alexei wasn’t paying much attention. Taking advantage of his coach’s inattention, Yuuri sped up and jumped his triple axel, happy when he landed it cleanly.

The stares were back, and magnified. Yuuri sighed. He needed to get off the ice. He really didn’t like being watched and examined like this; the attention raised the hairs on the back of his neck and made him want to squirm. It was different than when his rinkmates watched him; this was just uncomfortable. Giving in, he skated to the exit, grabbed his guards and stepped off the ice.

“I thought I said to not do your axel.”

Yuuri frowned as he slid on his guards. “I know, but I thought…”

Alexei had his arms crossed over his chest. “Thought what, Yuu-kun?”

“That you didn’t want me to screw it up in front of people.”

Snorting, Alexei shook his head. “No, I didn’t want you nailing it in front of people, and what do you go and do? One of the most perfect triple axels I’ve seen from you yet. Really, Yuuri, just listen to me. Or have you been spending too much time with Viktor and his insubordination is rubbing off on you?”

Yuuri didn’t have the heart to tell Alexei that according to Minako, he’d always had a bit of an insubordinate streak, so instead, he just ducked his head and said, “I’ll listen, Coach.”

***

Some days he would manage to keep his anxiety down and yet -- much to his disappointment -- Yuuri would still go on to have not-so-good days.
These seemed to be the most prevalent sort of days.

When Yuuri woke up, it was with stiff shoulders and an odd sort of twinge in his back; not painful, but also not great when he had to skate his Short Program later. He stood under the hot spray of the shower longer than usual and rushed to get dressed before walking down the hall and knocking on his coach’s door.

Riku opened the door and he walked in. Her suitcase was packed and near the door, and she was frowning.

“What’s going on?”

She sighed, avoiding his question. “You look stiff.”

Shifting his shoulders, he winced. “I think I slept wrong, or something. My shoulders are stiff and my back isn’t great.” He glanced back at the suitcase. “Why are you packed?”

“Because there are idiots trying to organise things back in Japan.” She sighed again. “Yuuri-kun, I won’t be able to watch you skate.”

“Oh.” Oh. Riku needed to fly back to Japan. There was probably something wrong with the upcoming preparations for Nationals or maybe even the NHK Trophy. He wished he didn’t feel as disappointed as he did. These sorts of things happened. He knew that. Riku was busiest during the season, just like he was. Besides she wasn’t even his coach. It wasn’t like Alexei was leaving. He looked around the room.

“He went to get me some coffee and something to eat on the train to the airport. It would have been nice had they picked someplace a little more convenient to an international airport for an international competition…” Riku trailed off. “Yuuri-kun?”

He didn’t say anything and just took a couple steps closer, his gaze focused on the point of her heels. He didn’t see her reach forward, but felt her hand rest on his cheek.

“You’ll be fine. Just skate as you always do, and it will be beautiful. Alexei will text me how you are doing. And Yuuri-kun, you can text me if you need to.”

He looked up and closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. She laughed a little, but hugged him back.

The door behind them opened and then they were both caught up in the arms of his coach. “Group hug!”

“Alexei! Yuuri-kun probably can’t breathe, you oaf.” Riku pushed against her husband and waited for him to step back before dropping her arms from around Yuuri. “He needs to see a sports masseur today before his short program.”

His coach turned to look at him. “Stiff? Did you fall asleep in a strange position or something?” Yuuri sighed. He didn’t like the idea of going to get a massage, but his shoulders were definitely stiff enough to mess with his form. He nodded and held himself still as Alexei reached out to touch his shoulders, probing the muscles with his fingers lightly. “All right, I’ll make that call and then I’ll take Riku to--”

“I am perfectly capable of taking myself to the train station, ばか. You have more important things to take care of.”
Yuuri also didn’t like that his stiffness was being treated as a more important issue than Alexei taking Riku to the train station, even if he knew, subjectively, that it was.

***

Yuuri flicked his fingers against his thumbs a couple of times and then tugged the sleeve of his jacket down over his palm and worried the cuff with his fingers. He could feel the nervousness and anxiety hovering right at the edge of things, but he rolled his shoulders -- much less stiff after the massage, but still not in top form -- to shrug it off. He could do this.

He just had to think about the ice, and the music, and the skating. Like he was going out there to do a run through on the second rink back in St. Petersburg. Just another day.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in.

“Ready?”

Yuuri nodded and leaned down to take off his guards and step onto the ice. Spinning around, he took his jacket off and handed it to Alexei. “I guess.” He rolled his shoulders again and looked down at his skates on the ice. He was skating last, but was trying not to think about the score that he’d need to beat to end up first.

“Yuuri.”

When he looked up, he was staring at Alexei’s fist. Laughing, he made his own fist and gave him a fist bump. He skated around a couple of times as the announcer called his name and then went to take his place at the center of the rink.

Yuuri had always loved the way that this song ebbed and flowed around him as he skated to it. It was almost organic in the way that one move led to the next, and then the one after. It was truly a routine that was made for him.

And he wasn’t doing it justice.

His movements were much more shallow than usual, his shoulders pulling when he went to reach; the flying entry into his camel spin was fine, but he knew he looked stiff as he twisted into the upward position on it.

Skate through the pain. Dance through the pain. It was one of the first lessons that he learned. Bruises, sore feet that were chafed and raw, painful arches, legs that felt like they didn’t even want to bear his weight anymore. He could handle those, but he’d never felt this stiff on the ice before and he hated it.

The spiral was in arabesque position, and Yuuri had never been more glad that it wasn’t a Y-spiral because the thought of trying to do that made him cringe. And the moment he went into his triple axel, he knew that he wouldn’t land it; could feel that he tilted too much in the air and was going to fall, but he rolled with it, got up and kept going. That’s the way skating worked, after all.

He ended in his bow and looked at the ice as he dragged a harsh breath in. Damn it. He straightened and skated a bit away, bowing to the various stands before looping around to exit the ice. A small plush Totoro landed on the ice in front of him and he swooped down to pick it up. Cute.

Alexei wrapped him in a hug as soon as he stepped off the ice and started to lead him to the Kiss & Cry, reminding him that a fall was only a small deduction.
“But my PCS is going to be lower than it usually is.” Yuuri sighed. “What else can I do to get this stiffness to disappear? I don’t want it affecting my free skate.”

“Are you all right?”

Are you going to fall apart? Yuuri didn’t say anything until after his scores came in. Third. Not as bad as he thought it would be, but he’d been hoping -- before going out on the ice -- for first, like he’d had last time. He sighed. “Can I not do dinner with Dimitri and Svetlana and Coach Kuznetsov?”

I’m going to fall apart, please don’t make me be around other people.

Later, with a heat pack draped around his neck and over his shoulders, Yuuri leaned forward at the small table, his dinner half eaten and forgotten; his phone pressed to his ear.

“And then I was horribly off-axis on my triple axel and fell.”

“It happens.”

“To you?”

Viktor laughed. “Of course it happens to me. The day you left, I faceplanted on a quad flip because there was too much tilt. Then I followed it up with a jump that didn’t have enough height because I was overcompensating and hit the ice again.”

“Even if you’re only saying that to make me feel better, thank you.”

“I’m not. I think Katya even got it on video. She was recording so I could look at the playback. I think she even got Yakov yelling at me to get my head out of my ass and focus. Though he probably said it in Russian, so you might not understand. I’ll show it to you when you get back.”

“Are you nervous for your first qualifier?”

“No. I’ve been trying to decide what I want to eat in Quebec. Have you ever heard of poutine?”

“Poutine?”

“French fries, cheese curds and gravy.”

“And Yakov is going to let you eat that before a competition?”

“Maybe I can have it after I win my gold medal.”

Yuuri picked up a pen and scribbled on the corner of the pad of paper, ubiquitous in hotel rooms across the world. “Awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“If I’m not sure of myself who will be? Besides, I finally found the missing piece to my step sequence in my free skate. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I was watching ballet videos online and was… inspired.”

There was something about Viktor’s voice that sent a chill down Yuuri’s spine. “Ballet videos?”

“After you got back from Romania, Katya heard Lyosha and his wife talking about how your
exhibition skate was inspired by a dance that Minako-sensei did. So Katya asked Riku about it and-

“No.”

“Yes! There were a lot of videos of Minako-sensei dancing, but do you know what else there was?”

Yuuri thunked his head on the desk repeatedly. “No. Nonononono.”

“You! Little baby Yuuri dancing! You really were quite good.”

“Viktor, please tell me that you didn’t--”

“I don’t know what’s better, your musicality on the ice or off.” Viktor sighed. “Anyway, you never told me that you had danced to the piece that I chose for my free skate.”

Honestly, Yuuri hadn’t even remembered that he had. Minako taught him dances when he’d go to her studio for practice, and then he’d find out about the recital -- usually at the last minute -- and just go and let muscle memory carry him through. It was mindless in a way that skating never was, and the dances were never really difficult. Not since he’d decided to focus on skating, at any rate. He was just there to fill time between the little ones that Minako had to herd on and off the stage.

“I’m going to go drown myself in the bath. I can’t believe that you found those videos. I can’t believe Yuuko posted them. I should tell her to take them down.”

“NO! You can’t. I need them.”

“Viktor, you’re being--”

“Don’t finish that sentence. Just listen to me. When you skate ‘Sakura’ tomorrow… I want… I want you to forget everything else. Just skate the music.”

***

Just skate the music.

What did that even mean?

There were days that Yuuri felt that he was cracking apart, splitting into too many pieces to count. That the shards of himself were left scattered across the ice, or the ballet studio, or his hotel room, sharp and pointed and painful. These were the days that were accompanied by a rush of static in his ears and an uncomfortable feeling writhing under his skin. And Yuuri hated them.

Even though he woke up without the stiffness in his shoulders and back from the day before, even though the warm-up went better than he thought it would, even though Alexei smiled at him and gave him an approving nod as he stepped off the ice -- that feeling, the one that kept him from skating the way he wanted to, was still there.

Yuuri found a seat as far away from the others as he could, put his hands over his ears, and looked at the ground in between his skates, focusing on the ugly pattern of the carpet. He could feel Alexei put his hand on his head, ruffling his hair just a bit, but not saying anything, and Yuuri was happy for that. He knew that he was making his coach nervous, worried, and apprehensive, but he didn’t know how to stop it. What he could say that would relieve the worry he was causing?

“Yuu-kun?” The voice was quiet, but close to his ear. Yuuri looked up. “A message for you.”
Alexei held out his phone.

<<息をして。私とアレクセイが君を信じさせて下さい。ただ息をして。>>

He was as grateful for the familiar shapes of the Japanese characters as he was for the words themselves. Breathing deeply, Yuuri looked up at Alexei. “Ok.” He’d breathe and just skate the music.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Нет - Nyet - No
Виктор - Viktor
僕が滑る理由はヴィクトルです。- Boku ga suberu riyuu wa Viktor desu. - The reason I skate is you.
勝生 勇利 - Katsuki Yuri
Моему лучшему другу и сопернику, жду не дождусь выступить против тебя - Moyemu luchshemu drugu i soperniku, zhdu ne dozhdu' vystupit' protiv vas - To my best friend and rival, I can’t wait to compete against you
Давай! - Davai! - Go! (cheer)
ばか - baka - idiot
息をして。私とアレクセイが君を信じさせて下さい。ただ息をして。- Iki wo shite. Watashi to Aleksei ga kimi wo shinjisasete kudasai. Tada iki wo shite. - Breathe. Let Alexei and I believe in you for you. Just breathe.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The season progresses at a faster pace now that the Grand Prix series has started and the Junior Japanese Nationals falls right in the middle of it.

Chapter Notes

So things are going to pick up speed a bit, and this is the first taste before it slows down juuuuust a touch again. I was going to stop it before Japanese Junior Nationals, but that didn't work out, so instead of being slightly shorter than the norm, this one is once again slightly longer (about the same as the last chapter). Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yuuri dropped his suitcase and skate bag next to Alexei’s into the trunk of Yakov’s large Volga sedan and climbed into the back. Alexei was already up front, fiddling with the radio while Yakov glared at him.

“We’re going to be sitting in traffic for the better part of an hour, right? We can at least listen to something.”

“I forgot how annoying you can be in the car, Lyosha.” Yakov swatted at Alexei’s hand.

Alexei just grinned at Yuuri. “Aren’t you going to congratulate him, Yakov?”

Yuuri slouched down in the back, heat rising in his cheeks. There wasn’t anything that he should be congratulated for. Not really.

“You could have had gold if you didn’t fall on that triple axel. But since you did, silver will do.”

Yakov’s voice was brusque and sharp, and yet proud. Yuuri was better at hearing the latter than he had been when he had first come to Russia.

“Not only that, Yakov, but he’s an alternate for the JGPF! First year competing and he’s an alternate! First alternate, even!”

Even though he’d gotten silver, he still was only an alternate. The top skaters had for the most part placed in the top two for their events. If Yuuri had wanted to be part of the JGPF, he had needed to win gold. Yuuri tried not to think too much about how much he had wanted it. Silver had felt like a loss.

“I was pleased with his free skate. It was probably the best it’s been, but I still think you can do better on it, Yuuri.” Yakov turned into the traffic that would carry them back to the rink.

Yuuri nodded. He didn’t really remember much of the free skate. Just the music. “I know. I’m planning to focus more on that in the time between now and the Junior Nationals.”
He could see Yakov’s nod, his hat tipping forward as his head did. “Lilia expects you in the studio for a good couple of hours tomorrow. Said something about ‘Moldau’. If she’s mixed up your piece and Viktor’s piece, just tell me. I kept saying that your free skate is to ‘Sakura’ and Viktor’s is to ‘Moldau’ but she just looked at me like I was an idiot.”

Yuuri bit his lip and sighed. “Viktor found a video online of me dancing to ‘Moldau’ that a friend took and uploaded last year.” He sighed again, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his jacket. He needed to be careful to not wear the cuffs too much since it was an official jacket of the Japanese skating team.

“So that’s what the idiot has been going on about.”

“Did you dance often, Yuu-kun?” Alexei had turned around to look at him again.

Yuuri shrugged. “I learned routines and such, mostly for practice and to help Minako-sensei during recitals. There would be times that I danced while she prepared the little ones to go on stage. It wasn’t a big deal or anything.”

Alexei hummed and returned his attention to the road. “Why don’t you rest a bit? I’ll let you know when we’re at the rink. I’m sure people are excited to see your medal.”

Yuuri didn’t argue with him, even if he was sure that the majority of people would be more interested in the silver medal that Dmitri and Svetlana had won -- and with it, their place in the JGPF for pairs. After all, they were part of the Russian National team and Yuuri was a foreigner, one of just a few that trained at the Ice Palace.

He tugged his MP3 player out of his pocket and put his earbuds in. It didn’t really matter, since Alexei and Yakov had started speaking in fast Russian and Yuuri couldn’t understand most of it.

He’d dozed off and was gently prodded awake by his coach. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and rubbed hard before climbing out of the car. Alexei was already holding onto his skate bag.

Mila was the first to reach him when he came through the door. He wasn’t used to people literally throwing themselves at him, but he managed to catch her just fine. “You did it, Yura! You got another medal!”

“Congratulations.” Katya was next. She pulled her half-sister off him and gave him a thumbs up. “We’re all proud of you.”

Viktor was on the ice going through his free skate, and Yuuri caught his breath. Viktor really had found the missing piece to his step sequence, though Yuuri had no idea how the ballet videos he’d watched of Yuuri had inspired the other boy. Yuuri clutched the top of the barrier with both hands and just stared. One day… one day, for sure, he was going to skate like that.

When Viktor finished, he caught sight of Yuuri and smiled. “I knew you could do it.”

***

“Do you remember the choreography for ‘Moldau’?” Madame Baranovskaya’s voice was as brisk as ever. “I’ve been putting off asking until the qualifiers were over.”

Yuuri turned at the bar to go through his frappes with his other foot. It wasn’t normal for Madame Baranovskaya to interrupt him while he was going through his barre exercises unless she really wanted him to work on something. “I don’t know. It was over a year ago.”
“Instead of center work, we will see if you remember it.”

“Oui, Madame,” Yuuri acknowledged as he turned again, ready to start the last part of his barre: Grand Battements. He stretched at the barre before getting into position in the center of the studio, nodding at Madame Baranovskaya when he was ready.

When the music started, he fell into the routine, clearing his mind as he worked through each of the steps, each movement flowing into the next one. A slow turn there, and then a small jump and a larger leap. The petite allegro. A series of fouette turns. Then his ending position on the floor, in a grand bow. He stopped before the music did, his routine much shorter than Viktor’s free skate.

“Beautiful, Yuuri. A work of art, as always.” She smiled at Yuuri as he stood up, though the expression quickly disappeared from her face. “We will work on ‘Sakura’ for the rest of the hour, and then Viktor will join us. After he completes his barre, you will help me with his step sequence for ‘Moldau’.”

Yuuri felt his eyebrows shoot into his hairline, but didn’t say anything as Madame Baranovskaya was already clapping at him to get into position. He knew this drill by heart. They would work all the parts slowly, checking his positioning and flow, and then he would go back to full speed. He wanted to get this right for Nationals. It was important.

When Viktor came in, he was definitely more focused than he usually was; Yuuri could only suppose that it was because he was so close to Skate Canada. He’d be competing against the reigning World Champion there, and Yuuri remembered that he’d also mentioned a Chinese skater that Viktor thought bore watching.

Helping Viktor with his step sequence actually meant performing ‘Moldau’ repeatedly, but stopping in a pose whenever Madame Baranovskaya demanded. There were times he swore she wanted him to stop in midair, but waited until he landed before yelling at Viktor about body positioning and how to be tensed but relaxed simultaneously.

“There! See! Use your eyes and look!”

Yuuri’s arm was stretched out over his head, gently curved and fingers partially tensed just so as he kept his position in releve with his free leg behind him in an attitude. He could hold the position for maybe five more seconds, and hoped that would be enough.

In the end, he managed seven seconds before he crumbled. Dropping his leg, he shook out the tensed muscles as he went to get his water. This was worse than learning the thing in the first place.

Viktor was mimicking Yuuri’s body position down to the weight distribution, but not the leg positioning. He was probably going to be doing a turn of some point. Maybe a choctaw or a mohawk. Yuuri looked at him again with a skater’s eye. Choctaw, definitely, Yuuri thought.

“Хватит! Take a break, Viktor. We will continue in a bit. Yuuri, you are done for the day. Do not skate. I’ve put you through more than usual. Make sure to rest your legs.” With that, Madame Baranovskaya left the room.

“How do you do it?” Viktor tilted his head to the side and pulled the elastic out of his hair. Damp, messy waves fell over his face and he pushed them aside. “You make it look easy.”

Yuuri sat down next to him and handed Viktor his water bottle. The other boy accepted it with a smile before taking a long drink. “How long have you been dancing?”

“I started lessons shortly before I started skating in the Novice division, so around ten. I had great
“Flexibility, so it wasn’t very challenging.”

“No wonder your technique is a bit all over the place and a mess. You’ve never taken it seriously.”

Viktor scoffed at him. “I do too!”

“Not in the way you take skating seriously.”

“Of course not! Skating is… life.” Viktor handed Yuuri his water bottle back and started pulling his hair back up off his neck.

Yuuri watched him quietly for a minute. “I started dancing when I was three because my sister wanted to take lessons, so I wanted to take lessons and wouldn’t stop complaining until my parents gave in. Minako-sensei thought it was adorable.”

“I bet it was.”

Yuuri shook his head. “I loved it. I was going to be a danseur. I was going to win a Benois like Minako-sensei. Every lesson she taught, I took to heart. Even at five. So I’ve been dancing for almost twelve years. The first time I put ice skates on I was six, maybe seven, and it was so much fun, but I honestly only really got serious about skating just about three years ago.” The why he would leave unsaid. If Viktor had managed to translate what he’d written, he already knew, and if he hadn’t… well, Yuuri wasn’t going to say it out loud. Ever.

“Three years?” Viktor sounded a little breathless and whistled. “Do you love it?” Viktor lifted his hand to his hair and tugged the elastic back out with a look of frustration. Taking the cue, Yuuri held out his hand; Viktor dropped the elastic into it and turned around.

Yuuri slowly combed his fingers through the other boy’s hair, catching some tangles, but worked them out without pulling. “Yes. Even more than dancing. It’s why I switched my focus, but ballet… I’ll never stop loving it. It’s just not the same. It’s more of a safe haven for me than skating.” He paused. “Do you have pins with you?”

Viktor stretched out his leg and hooked his toe around the strap of his bag, dragging it over. “I should.” He started rooting around and pulled out a brush, holding it over his shoulder until Yuuri finally got the hint and grabbed it. “So is skating not a ‘safe haven’?”

Yuuri took a deep breath as he pulled the brush through Viktor’s hair. It was kind of like when he’d do Yuuko’s hair, but hers was thicker and sometimes, on really humid days, felt like it would swallow him. Viktor’s was more like a cascade of water, one that flowed over his hands and through his fingers. He started braiding it; a crown would keep it off his neck and out of his eyes, and Viktor wouldn’t have to worry about it falling into his face.

“It is, but it’s not the same. I’m more attentive when I skate. It’s not that I don’t have to be attentive when I dance, but neither am I hurling myself at a dance floor at a ridiculous speed. A pirouette will never be as fast as the rotation on a triple axel.”

“And the ice is a very unforgiving mistress.”

Yuuri laughed and settled on his knees to finish his braiding.

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Katya had Mila in her arms when Yuuri opened the door to the apartment. “Thanks.”
“We didn’t need to watch it live, you know. They’re rebroadcasting it at a reasonable hour.” Yuuri led the pair into the living room. He had his laptop set up on the side table next to the couch, and directed them to the other end.

Katya put Mila down. “Need to watch it live,” Mila huffed as she stretched to take over all the available space.

Katya just snorted, and Yuuri couldn’t blame her. Mila was being a little ridiculous; had been since she found out that Yuuri was planning on watching the Skate Canada free skate live after he admitted that he’d seen the short program live the day before, and had insisted that she get to as well.

“The only reason that I was even going to is because I’m already awake at this time. Breakfast for me was almost an hour ago.”

Riku poked her head out of the kitchen. “Girls, do you want anything? There will be сырники when Alexei gets up, which will be approximately two skaters before Viktor.”

“Tea? Please say there is tea.” Katya yawned.

“Of course. Proper Russian tea, I take it?” Katya just nodded. “Mila?”

“Hot chocolate!”

Yuuri hid his laugh behind his hand. Katya was shaking her head.

“What about cocoa instead?”

Mila sighed and got comfortable after Yuuri squeezed into the little space Mila had left him. “Tea, but with milk.” She looked at Yuuri’s computer screen. “Are you going to be on chat again?”

Yuuri nodded. “Probably, unless Yuu-chan decided to not watch it, which is unlikely.” He opened his chat window, but Yuuko was still offline. Not surprising, as it wasn’t quite time yet. He went back to his word processing program and saved his document. He wasn’t going to get any more work done on his essay at the moment, and working on it now would just make him a bad host.

He pushed Mila’s legs -- which had somehow migrated to his lap -- off of him and went into the kitchen to grab the tea for Katya and Mila. On the way back, he stopped by his bedroom to see if Makkachin had woken up from her spot at the foot of Yuuri’s bed. She had, and bounded out of the room, promptly jumping onto the couch to claim Yuuri’s seat for her own.

“Makkachin, down.”

She just “woofed” quietly.

“Everyone seems to want your spot today, Yuuri-kun.” Riku took a seat in the large armchair next to the lamp.

He sighed. “Tell me about it.” He physically picked the dog up and set her down on his lap. “We’re going to watch Viktor soon, so be good.” The dog spilled over his lap and her tail insistently thumped against Mila’s arm, making her giggle. He flicked the TV on and flipped through the channels until he found Skate Canada broadcast. They were already interviewing people.

“There’s Viktor!” Mila bounced up on the couch and pointed. Viktor was in the background, talking to Yakov. His hair was braided into a crown not unlike the one that Yuuri had done when
they were practicing a week or so ago, and Yuuri wondered if it was to hide the dyed ends of his hair. This time Yakov had dragged Viktor to an actual hairstylist, who had -- through some sort of black magic and a lot of time -- managed to turn the dyed but faded black ends into something that resembled fire. The effect had been stunning with his short program costume, but wouldn’t go well with his free skate at all.

By the time Viktor was about to go on, Alexei was awake and complaining that viewing parties should not be allowed to take place before five AM. And yet he ceased muttering as soon as his plate of сырники was put into his hands and dug in, dipping bites into the generous helpings of sour cream and jam that Riku had put on the side.

“He could pull a quad axel out of his ass and it wouldn’t compare to the deliciousness of my wife’s cooking.”

Katya barked a sharp laugh and doubled over.

“あなた! There are children.”

“Who all train with Yakov. If you think that even Mila hasn’t heard worse--”

“Mostly when he’s yelling at Viktor, though,” Mila piped up. She’d shifted so that her head was on her sister’s lap and her legs were on Yuuri’s again, and Makkachin somehow filled the cracks of space around the ten-year-old, pressing her muzzle to the crook of Yuuri’s arm.

“I know you miss him, girl. Just watch.”

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Are you seriously awake for this?
カツキ丼 says:
Yes. With company over, even.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Viktor’s dog is not company. How is the pup anyway?
カツキ丼 says:
Well, yes, Makkachin is taking up more than her fair share of the couch, but my coach and Riku-san and a couple of rinkmates are watching as well.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Shhhh. He’s in position!
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
The commentator here is saying how his program is much more lyrical than it’s been in the past. That Viktor’s ballet ability is showing.

Yuuri snorted. Yes, it was Viktor’s ability in ballet that was showing.

“His PCS is going to be higher than normal. The work that you and Lilia did with him last week before he left is paying off. He might actually manage to get that step sequence marked as a level four, as long as he doesn’t miss a single step. He doesn’t have room for error on that.” Riku leaned forward.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Did Viktor Nikiforov just land the first quad flip in the history of competitive figure skating?!?!?!?!!!
カツキ丼 says:
Yes, he did. He’s super proud of that jump. Even if he does still fall on his face when he’s trying to land it a third of the time.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I refuse to believe that Viktor is less than perfect in any way.
カツキ丼 says:
I am so telling Nishigori about your crush.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
As long as you don’t tell Viktor, we’re good.

***

Viktor smiled as he entered the hotel bar. He’d spent the last hour with Yakov at his side, talking to various sponsors. He now had at least four or five business cards stuffed in the pocket of his Russian national team jacket, and Yakov probably had another ten or so. There was no way that Viktor could take all the offers, but the cologne one he probably would. If only so he could take the trip to Paris for filming the commercial.

“Viktor, bonsoir!” One of the French skaters -- ice dancing, nineteen, came in fourth -- ran up to him and quickly pressed kisses to both of his cheeks. He vaguely remembered seeing her after his free skate. “Élodie. Don’t tell me you forgot!”

“Never, ma chère.” He had.

“Come! Drink with us. We even convinced Cao to join us.” She grabbed his hand, easily intertwining her fingers with his, and led him over to a large corner booth where a group of skaters were gathered with open bottles of champagne in front of them. “I found him!”

“You collect good looking men like some girls collect plushies.” Carolina -- German pair skater, twenty-one, came in second -- said.

Sepp -- Carolina’s brother and pairs partner -- scoffed. “Just because you can’t get a boyfriend…” His accent was thicker than his sister’s and harder to understand, and Viktor vaguely wondered why.

Élodie’s fingers were still resting on his arm as Viktor reached forward for a glass. “What are we celebrating?”

“Winning. And since you’ve the only gold medal at the table…” Élodie leaned in close, her breath brushing over the shell of his ear. “Why don’t you make the toast?”

***

“Is Yakov still yelling at you about those tabloid pictures of you and the French skater?”

Viktor sighed. “Yes. He’s absolutely livid. It was just a bit of kissing in the corner of a bar. What does it matter? I won gold.” He skated past Yuuri and flung himself into a series of twizzles. “Gooooooold!”

“Yes, yes, we’re all impressed. But will you be able to do it at the Grand Prix Final?” Yuuri laughed. He was supposed to be working on his free skate for Nationals, but Viktor’s exuberance was making it hard to focus.

Viktor spun and skated back toward Yuuri, sliding on the ice before getting up and rotating into a rather spectacular scratch spin. Yuuri recognized the series of moves from Viktor’s exhibition skate. Viktor only answered when he came out of the spin, a bit breathless. “But of course! Italy can wait, though. First I need to win it in France! Three golds in the Grand Prix series. That’s the plan. Then Nationals, and then Europeans, and then Worlds!”
“You sound like a villain in a cartoon.”

Viktor’s laugh was contagious. He’d practice later.

***

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I know that practically every skater in the history of ever has done Firebird, but Viktor’s is by far my favorite.

カツキ丼 says:
Mine too. I will never skate to it. There’s no way I could ever be so good.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
You will be. You’re coming home after Junior Nationals, right?

***

The articles that came out after Viktor’s gold medal-winning performance in France weren’t overshadowed by any articles in tabloids this time, but Yakov’s yelling was still present when they got back from Paris.

“What did you do this time?” Yuuri was stretching before going out on the ice. There were only a few more days before he and Alexei left for Sendai and the Junior Nationals.

“Flirted with the cute Swiss skater I met at World’s last year. Or did I meet him at the European championships? I can’t remember. Either way, Christophe was adorable. His blush is cute, too. Not quite seventeen yet. We were celebrating my win!”

“If you become as bad as Georgi, I will never speak to you again. I don’t want to hear about girlfriends and boyfriends and whatever. Why does everyone feel the need to pair up?” Yuuri tugged his skates on and quickly laced them up. “Come on. You promised to help me with my free program. I want to get it right at Junior Nationals.” Yuuri stepped onto the ice.

“I’m not pairing up. Just having a little fun.” Viktor made a face at the mere idea of ever becoming as lovelorn as Georgi before skating over. “Fine. I’ll work. We should start with your triple axel, since that’s the jump that went sideways at your last competition. What was the entrance for the first one?”

Yuuri showed him the transitional steps and then skated away to watch Viktor as he did the steps, followed by an absolutely perfect triple axel. “Can you do it again? I want to watch your skates this time.”

***

Yuuri pulled his travel mask down off his nose as he followed Alexei down the corridor toward the main hub of the airport. He was exhausted. Getting from Saint Petersburg to Sendai involved too many transfers for his liking, but it was necessary. Riku had been in Japan for a couple of weeks already, so they’d be meeting her at the hotel.

“Yuuri!”

Yuuri poked his head around his coach and caught sight of Minako-sensei and Yuuko, holding a large banner with his name on it between them. He flushed and ducked his head back behind Alexei.

“Yuuri! Don’t hide behind your coach! You’re here to defend your gold medal!”
He could feel the eyes starting to turn and look at him. Whispers of “Is that Alexei Turov?” “Didn’t he win gold at the Olympics?” “Is he training a Japanese skater?” were floating around, and he just got more and more red.

Alexei laughed. “Oh, this is great! Look, Yuu-kun, you’ll have fans in the stands!”

“Minako-sensei, why?”

“If I missed seeing you compete in a domestic competition, I’d have to give up my title as the president of the Katsuki Yuuri fan club.”

“There’s no such thing as the Katsuki Yuuri fan club,” Yuuri groused. “And I wouldn’t want one, anyway.”

Alexei put his arm around Yuuri’s shoulders and moved him forward. The four of them were starting to head toward the parking garage. “You might have to fight Vitya for that title. He’s been devouring videos of Yuuri from back when he danced for you.”

Yuuko screeched. “Wait, wait, wait! My videos? He’s been watching the videos I posted? All the comments from VN are actually VIKTOR?” She screeched again and grabbed Yuuri’s arm. “Did you hear that? Viktor Nikiforov has been commenting on my YouTube videos!”

Yuuri did not want to know what the comments were. Or maybe he did. No, he definitely didn’t.

“Yuu-kun, why is Viktor watching videos of you?” Yuuko was bouncing up and down as she held onto Yuuri’s arm. He’d missed this. Her unparalleled exuberance when it came to ice skating and Viktor. There was a reason they were friends.

Minako grabbed his rolling suitcase and fell into step next to Alexei. “Yuuko, you remember where I parked, right? Don’t get lost.” And with that said, she turned to Alexei and started firing off all sorts of questions about Yuuri’s training. Their conversation quickly melded into some sort of half-Japanese, half-Russian mix of words, with most of the Russian coming from Alexei and the Japanese coming from Minako.

Being multi-lingual was weird.

Yuuko must have thought so, too. “Do you understand any of that? I mean, I understand most of what Minako-sensei is saying, but…”

“They’re talking about my jumps.” He paused. “And Alexei just asked about dealing with growth spurts in ballet.” He shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to it, I guess.”

“So what’s it like skating with Viktor? Do you get to share the ice with him at all? You don’t really ever talk about your training much when we email.” Yuuko finally dropped his arm and they walked a little further back from the adults.

Yuuri couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, we skate together a lot, actually. Yakov pairs us up because I’m quiet and don’t distract Viktor as much. I think. Anyway, a few days before I left, Viktor was helping me with my free skate. I’m going to try and win gold again.”

Yuuko snickered and Yuuri turned to look at her. “What’s so funny?”

“Just... Try? Yuuri, you’re the top contender for gold here. The scores that you’ve been pulling at the JGP qualifiers are much higher than pretty much any of the competitors here. There’s a reason that the JSF pushed you to go international.” Yuuko gave him that look she used to before his
competitions when he’d get really nervous. “I know these things since I’ve been following the junior circuit. I might not be competing anymore, but I’m not out of the loop.”

“I wish you were, though.”

“Competing?”

Yuuri bobbed his head in a nod.

Yuuko sighed. “I didn’t like it the way you did. You want to be the best, Yuuri, and you hate losing so much that it pushes you to try harder. Not winning never did that for me; I never got that thrill from competition that you do.”

He bit his lip.

“So you need to go out there and skate, and show all of Japan just why you have a former Olympic medalist as your coach.”

***

Yuuri had pulled just about the worst number he could have for Junior Nationals. One. He was skating first, and then all the other skaters would have the opportunity to beat his score. If he didn’t rank in the top twenty-four out of the thirty skaters competing, he wouldn’t even have the chance to perform his free skate.

He sighed and stretched his arms out behind him. Breathe. That’s all he had to do. Just breathe and skate.

“Katsuki-kun?”

Yuuri turned his head. There was a young man with spiky brown hair, probably about Viktor’s age, standing next to Alexei.

“Yuu-kun, this is Morooka-kun. He’s interning with ON ICE and wanted to ask you a couple of questions and get some pictures of you warming up. Is it all right?” Alexei asked. His face was carefully schooled to a neutral expression, but Yuuri saw the underlying message: Do you want me to send him away?

Yuuri took a deep breath and thought about it. He felt… nervous and on edge. He didn’t want to be skating first, and was worried about how he’d do. He really wasn’t in the mood to answer any questions, and the determined look on Morooka’s face was a little daunting. Maybe a compromise.

“He can take the pictures now, but I don’t want to answer questions until after I finish skating my short program. Is that all right, Morooka-san?”

Morooka nodded. “Yes, of course. I’m just writing a piece on the Junior Nationals and I wanted to make sure that I get a chance to talk to you, since you’ve been doing such great things internationally--” He cut himself off. “Later. Yeah. Sorry.”

Yuuri nodded and turned to brace himself against the wall. He lunged back to stretch out his quads, dropping his head as he did so. Breathe once. Again. Straighten and switch sides. Eventually, he completely forgot that he was even having his picture taken -- at least until he heard the click of a shutter as he laced his skates for the six-minute warm-up that would immediately precede his skate.

When he stepped out onto the ice, he forgot all about it, though, and just skated around for a couple
of laps before launching himself into a double axel. He knew a couple skaters were watching him, but it wasn’t with the same intensity that he had experienced at Sheffield. It was easier to ignore.

His short program went better than it did at Sheffield as well, and when his scores came in, he found himself smiling. He didn’t know how long he’d stay in first, but his score was good enough that Alexei said he shouldn’t have to worry about making the cut off, and that was the important thing.

“Katsuki-kun?”

Yuuri took a deep breath and smiled. Alexei promised that he’d end the interview as soon as Yuuri got overwhelmed. All he had to do was look at his coach, and that’d be it. “Morooka-san. You had some questions?”

***

Twenty-nine skaters came after him, and not a single one had managed to top Yuuri’s short program score, though a couple came close. He’d be skating last at the free skate.

***

西郡 (1/2)
Do you know how obnoxious it is that you skated first and still ended up in first?

西郡 (2/2)
Also... Congratulations. Yuuko said she’d punch me if I didn’t say that. So consider it said.

Yuuri handed the phone to Yuuko and raised a brow.

“I did not!”

He laughed. “I know. Nishigori always says things like that, though. It’s just the way we are.”

***

Riku smoothed down the fabric at his shoulders and smiled. “I think this is my favorite costume.”

“You’re biased.” In a minute, he’d have to go out onto the ice and skate a program to music that had won Riku her Olympic gold medal. If there was anytime that he wanted to do a good job on skating ‘Sakura’, it was right here and now at Junior Nationals.

“You’re right. I am completely biased.” She lightly touched Yuuri’s cheek. “頑張って.”

Yuuri stepped onto the ice and turned to face Alexei, who just held out his fist. Yuuri bumped it with his own again before skating around the perimeter a couple of times, taking his place in the center after he’d been announced.

The moment Alexei had played the music in the ballet studio in Russia, Yuuri knew that he had to skate to it. It was a visceral reaction in him. There were so many feelings shifting and changing every time he skated to the music. Everytime he danced to it, even. Terror. Pride. Nervousness. Love. Homesickness. Patience. Anxiety. Sadness. Hope.

His first movements were long and sharp, moving with the harsher notes of the koto, continuously gaining speed until there was a break, a pause, almost like a breath, and he launched himself into his triple axel, his leg sweeping around in a graceful arc. Now he started skating in earnest, each move slow and deliberate and filled with how much he’d missed Japan the last year, because it had really almost been a year since he left.
His skates cut into the ice and he told the story -- not of his skating, but of his love for his home in Hasetsu, his history there. He went into a sit spin, sliding into a sideways position just as he’d discussed with Alexei. And when the music picked up, he entered into his step sequence. It wasn’t as difficult as the one in his short program, but he loved it just as much. This turn led to the path across the bridge, that one up the steps of the Ice Castle, and a twizzle to turn himself around, bringing him to the castle with its hidden ninja house. Each turn, twizzle, chassé and hop led him home, to the onsens where he’d grown up.

When he landed his triple flip, it was the moment he dumped the water over his head to rinse before sinking into the hot water of the baths.

His choreographic sequence was like running on the beach with Vicchan; his triple lutz-triple toe loop combination was like splashing through the waves and getting soaked. The transitional steps were practicing Viktor’s routines with Yuuko, and his last combination jump -- a triple axel, single loop, triple loop -- was the end of every silly argument with his sister, when they made up and she’d push his shoulder. There was nothing about this program that he didn’t love, that didn’t make him want to cry.

His final spin was a tribute to Riku, who had brought him this song and the opportunity to skate it. Alexei had changed it just a bit so it was closer to the one she’d done at the end of her own program: a combination spin, starting with a sit spin, transitioning to a camel spin and sideways camel, then shifting into a Biellmann spin.

He went into his final pose, the light catching the pink crystals on the back of his shirt, glinting like falling sakura blossoms during the season.

He couldn’t remember if there was a mistake he made. If his skates had shifted wrong or if he’d wobbled a landing. He couldn’t even hear at what level the applause was, if there was any. He dragged in breath after breath. It didn’t even matter.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Oui - yes
Хватит - Khvatit - Enough!
Сырники - syrniki - quark (farmer’s cheese) pancakes
アイス・カサル・マッダナ - ice castle madonna - Yuuko’s screenname
カツキ丼 - katsukidon - Yuuri’s screenname
Bonsoir - good evening
ma chère - my dear
西都 - Nishigori
頑張って - Ganbatte - Good luck (lit. work hard)
***
So, I finally typed out 'Sakura' and what Yuuri thinks when he skates it and I hope I've done it justice. I've been purposely avoiding it until now because I wanted to address it when he was in Japan.
And we see a glimpse of flirty Viktor. Oh, Viktor....
At some point tonight/tomorrow, I'll be putting up the music and costume post on my tumblr, so if you're interested, stop by!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

After his performance at the the Junior Nationals, Yuuri gets to spend a little time home in Hasetsu...

Chapter Notes

There are a few little quirks with the formatting of one of the parts, but I didn't want to make it too complicated to read and post, so I've kept things as basic (and as similar to the layouts from 2007) as possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuri bowed, short of breath and sweating, but with a smile on his face. He spun around on his skates to bow to the other side of the stands. Not too far away, he saw an onigiri plush and skated over to grab it before waving and finally heading off the ice. As he got closer, he saw that Alexei had his arm around Riku’s shoulders, that and she was covering the bottom half of her face with her hands.

Had he done badly? But no, it had felt like such a good skate, and Alexei was smiling at him.

He grabbed his guards from Alexei and ducked down to put them on.

“勇利、素晴らしかった。ありがとう。” Riku’s voice cracked and he looked up. She had tears in her eyes. “If I’m going to cry, I should do so in the Kiss and Cry, yes? Come on.”

The stands weren’t nearly as full as they’d be for the NHK tournament that started in four days’ time, but the crowd seemed pretty loud. Yuuri turned around and caught sight of the large screen where they were running playbacks of his free skate. Yuuri’s breath caught. It didn’t even look like him. That wasn’t him, was it?

When Yuuri’s score did come in, he blinked. It was higher than he was expecting. He squinted at the monitor displaying it to make sure that he’d heard them right.

“It’s a new personal best, Yuuri-kun!” Riku exclaimed. “I know it doesn’t really count since it’s not an ISU score, but it’s the best you’ve ever skated your Free Skate!”

“And what a performance to earn it on.” Alexei patted his back. “You skate like that, and you’ll definitely make the podium at Junior Worlds!”

***

Yuuri pressed his face to the window of the cab. Alexei laughed, but it didn’t seem to faze Yuuri at all; he was practically vibrating with energy, had been since the train pulled into Hasetsu Station.

“What is so very fascinating outside the window?”
“Everything.” Yuuri didn’t turn away. “One block down that street we just passed is Minako-sensei’s ballet studio. And we’re just about to pass my school…. There!” Yuuri pulled his face away from the window and turned to look out the other side. “And that’s the convenience store that Yuuko, Nishigori and I would stop at after school before we went to the Ice Castle! They have the best rice balls.” Yuuri paused for breath. “And if you go that way, you’ll hit the bridge that takes you across the water to where the rink is, and there is a man who fishes there every morning. He’s a little bit grumpy sometimes, but he’s really nice. And Vicchan and I would run along the beach even in winter! Hasetsu used to be known as a vacation destination.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’ll have to thank your parents for putting me up.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes just a little. “They run an inn. They’re sort of used to it.” Then he had a moment of realization. “Alexei! The onsen! We have the best hot springs in Hasetsu. There are only a couple of others that are still operating, but ours is by far the best. You’ll love it! And my mother’s katsudon! Since I won gold at Junior Nationals, I get to have katsudon, right?”

Alexei just smiled at him and nodded. “One katsudon for every medal you’ve won. So you can have it three times before we leave. But not all at once!”

When the cab pulled up to the onsen, Yuuri jumped out, bouncing impatiently from one foot to another as Alexei paid the driver and pulled their bags out of the trunk. He followed Yuuri through the gate and up the path to the entrance and through the front door. A woman just a few years younger than Minako was standing in the common area with her hands clasped in front of her and an almost watery sort of smile on her face.

Yuuri was toeing out of his shoes as fast as he could.

“ただいま!” Alexei heard the crack when the word came out of Yuuri’s mouth and watched as he fell into the petite woman’s arms and pressed his face to her neck. Yuuri was never very physically affectionate with anyone, but this seemed to be an exception.

“おかえり,” she whispered, putting her hand to the back of Yuuri’s head and stroking his hair. “We watched you skate. It was beautiful, Yuuri.”

Yuuri started shaking, and Alexei knew that he was crying so he quickly looked away, bending down to undo the laces of his shoes before putting his and Yuuri’s shoes into the cubbies by the door. This was a private moment between mother and son, and not for anyone else to intrude on.

“Turov-san, welcome.” Yuuri’s father wasn’t a tall man, but he had a soft kind face and held his hand out in a Western-style greeting.

Alexei bowed. “おじゃますます。”

Toshiya-san smiled and bowed in return. “It will be our pleasure to host you, Turov-san. You’ve taken such good care of our son the last few months.”

“It was mostly Riku doing the caretaking. We’d probably starve if it were left up to me to cook.”

Yuuri had his back to Alexei and was scrubbing at his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

“Yuuri-chan, おかえり。 Hey, are you going to say hello to Vicchan or not? He’s sleeping on your bed.” A young woman walked into the room and ruffled Yuuri’s hair before offering her hand to Alexei. “I’m Mari, the kid’s older, and better, sister.”

From the corner of his eye, Alexei caught Yuuri sticking his tongue out at his sister’s back before
running down a side hallway. “I’ll be back, Lyosha! Vicchan, ただいま!’”

***

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri ‘Moldau’
da_victor (1 month ago)
Amazing!! - VN

da_victor (4 weeks ago)
I think I’ve watched this 50 times!!! It’s still incredible! - VN

da_victor (2 days ago)
I was wondering. Oh. I’ve been commenting and I don’t even know if you can read English. I hope that you can read English. If you can’t you should probably find someone who can read English so that you can understand this because it’s important. Are you going to be uploading videos of Yuuri Katsuki’s programs from the Japanese Junior Nationals???? I’ve looked all over and I can’t find any. There might be some, but I can only search in English and Russian. Please help!!!!! We need to see it!!!!!!!! - VN

Comments on Okukawa Minako ‘Speeding Cars’
da_victor (1 month ago)
Wow! - VN

da_victor (2 days ago)
I know I already asked on another video, but are you going to post videos of Yuuri’s performance at Japanese Junior Nationals??? Please say yes!!! - VN

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri ‘Alone in Kyoto’
da_victor (1 month ago)
When was this? No seriously. When? - VN

da_victor (1 month ago)
No words! - VN

da_victor (3 days ago)
Please please post more skating videos! - VN

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri ‘Send in the Clowns’ - SP
da_victor (1 month ago)
This was Japan’s Junior Nationals last year, right? That’s a really clean program. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him skate it that well. - VN

da_victor (2 days ago)
I know I already asked on another video, but are you going to post videos of Yuuri’s performance at Japanese Junior Nationals??? Please say yes!!! - VN

swinging_mini_amie (1 day ago)
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! すごい!!!!!!

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri ‘Waltz No. 2’ - SP JJN
da_victor (1 day ago)
You are heaven sent! Thank you thank you!!! MB says thank you too. So does KB. And YF… well, you don’t want to know what he’s shouting, but thank you!!! - VN

icecastle_madonna (1 day ago)
You’re welcome! You train with Yuuri, right? In Russia?
da_victor (1 day ago)
Yes! I’m sure he’s told you all about me! - VN

icecastle_madonna (1 day ago)
Not really. Yuuri doesn’t really like to talk about himself. I’m used to it.
da_victor (1 day ago)
I know! I had to find out about these videos in the most roundabout way. It really isn’t fair that he was keeping them from me! They are amazing! - VN

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri ‘桜 (Sakura)’ - FS JJN
da_victor (1 day ago)
Tell him that he made KB cry. - VN
da_victor (1 day ago)
And that he made LB cry too. - VN
da_victor (1 day ago)
Oh, and that I’ve never actually seen YF make that sort of face. I think it may have been a smile, but I’m not sure. One can never tell. - VN
da_victor (7 hours ago)
And that if he doesn’t reply to my texts I’m never talking to him again. Seriously. - VN
da_victor (4 hours ago)
Also can I embed this on my LJ??? Please??? - VN

***

“Did you?”

Yuuri skated around the periphery of the rink before leaning in and gently curving. He always thought that it was a little bit sad that compulsory figures had been gotten rid of; he would have been really good at them. “Did I what?”

“Reply to Viktor’s texts? He said he’d never speak to you again if you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did, but he’s lying. It’s not that he wouldn’t speak to me, it’s that he’d sulk. And a sulking Viktor is worse than a Viktor who isn’t talking to you.”

Yuuko finished tying her skates and stepped onto the ice. “Does he really? Sulk?”

Yuuri nodded and grabbed her hands, pulling her into a pair routine that they’d tried to learn ages ago. It went better than when he was ten. “He also pouts; he lays down on the ice like it’s the end of the world when Yakov tells him to do something that he doesn’t want to do. But almost everyone just skates around him when he does it. I still get a little flustered when he does it to me, though.”

Yuuko giggled, and they skated side by side like they used to. It was peaceful. Yuuri had really missed it. He’d missed just about everything in Hasetsu.

“Why didn’t you tell me about how close you were with Viktor?” Yuuko went over to the side of the rink and stopped, leaning against the barrier.

Yuuri followed, stopping on the ice a few feet away. He looked down at his skates. “It’s weird.”

“ Weird? You’ve admired Viktor for ages! We both have!”

“That’s the point, though, isn’t it? I was never supposed to actually meet Viktor! Let alone become friends with him. It’s… surreal. And if I talk about it… I don’t know. It’ll disappear.”

“You think he’ll stop being your friend if you tell people that you’re friends with him?” Yuuko’s voice had that blend of disbelief and annoyance that was one hundred percent her. “You do realise that he’s left dozens of comments on my YouTube videos. Right? The secret is out.”

Yuuri shook his head. “No, it’s not that. It’s like it really will just vanish. Sometimes, I think it’s all a dream. Everything. The golds at Nationals, and having Alexei Turov as my coach, and
participating in the Junior Grand Prix. Those were dreams! Not reality.”

“Oh, Yuuri.”

“I know, I’m being ridiculous, but… Every day I go and skate at an Olympic-sized rink with professional and internationally competitive skaters, and—”

“Yuu-kun.” He looked up. “You’re an internationally competitive skater.”

“I know! How is that even possible?! It’s not like I’m talented or a genius like Viktor—”

“You are talented. You won gold at Junior Nationals, with more than a ten-point difference between you and second place! If you were skating in the Senior division, you would have placed in the top ten, and that’s without a single quad in either of your programs. That’s talent.”

“Yuu-chan, I…”

Nishigori skated over, distracting them from their conversation. “Hey, Katsuki, we had a deal. The first one to land a triple axel cleanly would teach the other one how to. Come on. Show me how you do it.”

Yuuko did a little hop. “Yes! Yuuri, show us your jumps!”

***

“We want Yuuri to go to high school.” Toshiya-san sat down at the low table across from Alexei and Riku, who had arrived the two nights before. It was the first time that Alexei had seen Toshiya-san leave the offices and back rooms of the inn.

Mari set down the last of the drinks in front of Alexei and stood up from her kneeling position. “I’m guessing I don’t need to be here for this, yeah? I’m gonna go smoke a cigarette really quick, and then I’ll take care of the customers in the main room.”

“Thank you, Mari. Just let them know that you’ll be back in a few minutes. I think they’re watching a rebroadcast of a Sagan Tosu football match, so they won’t really care.” Hiroko set her folded hands on her lap. Minako-sensei was seated next to her, a serious look on her face.

Alexei was a little surprised. He wasn’t really used to coaching at this level, but the few students he’d had had always gone on to high school even though it wasn’t necessary for them to in Japan. It was better for them. He’d assumed that Yuuri would, but thinking about it a normal high school here would be difficult to balance with his training and competition schedule. He wasn’t competing on just a local or national level anymore.

“We want him to attend university as well. He has a chance for a scholarship like Tabito and Riku-san received if his skating is good.” This time it was Hiroko who spoke.

Riku smiled. “Yes, I agree. I never regret that I had the chance to attend university even if it took longer to finish the courses, and I am glad that you’re thinking about Yuuri’s future like this.”

Thank god for his wife. Alexei wasn’t quite sure if he would have been able to handle this conversation on his own. It was fate that she didn’t have to leave to go back to Sendai until the morning.

“Did you attend university, Alexei-san?”
“Uh, no. I skated, and that was enough for Russia.” He smiled. He probably should have, but he had absolutely hated school when he was younger.

“Ah.” Toshiya-san nodded. “Neither did I or Hiroko. Or Mari, for that matter. She didn’t have the interest in it and said that she didn’t plan to leave Hasetsu or the inn, and to leave it to the dreamer to dream big. She was talking about Yuuri, of course.”

“Toshiya called up the international schools in Saint Petersburg, but we do not think that they are a good choice for Yuuri. The curriculum is intense and wouldn’t leave time for his skating, and they do not make exceptions for athletes. It was also never an expense that we were expecting to have to take on when he started skating.”

He reached under the table for Riku’s hand. He was nervous and didn’t even understand why. It wasn’t like Yuuri’s parents were planning to take skating away from him.

It was Minako that spoke up next. “Hiroko and Toshiya-san have been talking with me about this because I left home to train in ballet around the same age that Yuuri is now. Actually younger, really, but I left the country at around fifteen. If he was still planning to be a danseur…” She paused and tilted her head to the side, a fond smile on her face. “Well, I would have pulled strings and sent him to the same ballet academy I attended. The whole issue of schooling wouldn’t even have to be addressed because it’d be taken care of. There aren’t academies like that for figure skating.”

Alexei smiled. “No, the closest you get to that are Yakov’s summer camps.”

Hiroko was smiling. “What we’re saying is that we don’t really know what to do. We don’t understand skating the way that you and Riku-san do. Not even as much as Minako-senpai does. All we know is that Yuuri loves it.” She turned to look at her husband, her smile faltering a little. “And we know he’s good at it. We just don’t want it to be everything and then have Yuuri left with nothing if something goes wrong.”

Riku squeezed his hand. Skating injuries weren’t unheard of. One of Riku’s rinkmates when she’d been young had to have back surgery because of an injury, and she never skated the same again. She’d only been sixteen, with a whole career in front of her that basically went up in smoke. Alexei himself knew enough skaters whose injuries ruined their chances of truly ever being competitive again. And sure, if they had enough medals or wins, they could transition to coaching fairly easily, but those that didn’t weren’t so lucky. He knew he was probably looking frustrated, but he really didn’t have much of a clue on what to do. He was out of his depth and there was no Yakov to run off to for advice.

“あなた?”

Alexei turned to look at his wife. “Hm?”

“There’s that school in Osaka.”

It took a moment, but he figured out what she meant and frowned. “The idol school?”

Riku sighed. “You know that there are professional athletes that attend as well. No other skaters, though, I don’t think. But they do deal with strange schedules and such, and make allowances for performances, competitions, and matches. It’s the reason that program exists. After all, not everyone moves to Tokyo.” She frowned and turned to face Yuuri’s parents. “It is, however, expensive, but not as bad as the one in Tokyo.”

Toshiya-san nodded, his mouth in a grim line.
“If we can get a decent price for rink time and fees,” Alexei started.

And Riku finished, “Yuuri can live with us and there wouldn’t be the cost of rent, just board. It’d be possible to maybe keep it in the range of cost for training in Saint Petersburg. And well...”

“Well?” Minako pressed.

“There are a couple of ice shows this coming summer that have asked about Yuuri performing. JSF-approved, of course. The pay from those would help to offset the costs. If Yuuri has any interest, and if Hiroko-san and Toshiyo-san are willing to sign the papers allowing it.”

***

“Oh, wow, it’s perfect! I knew that you said your friend customized figures, but I didn’t think it’d turn out this good!” Yuuri turned the former *Fullmetal Alchemist* figure around in his hands. Now the bottom of Ed’s boots had small silver blades on them and his hair had been repainted to a more platinum hue, with the tips colored to look like the flames Viktor’s hair was currently dyed. Leaning closer, he inspected the base, which had been painted white with pale blue curving lines crisscrossing over each other. “Oh! He even added skate trails!”

Nishigori slapped Yuuri on the back and Yuuri had to struggle to keep his grip on the figure. “I told you he was amazing, right?” He paused. “Did you really not want one for yourself? Yuuko and I were going to get you an exact copy for your birthday.”

Yuuri shook his head. “No. Viktor should have the only one in existence. One of a kind. Just like him.”

He knew Nishigori was rolling his eyes, but he didn’t care.

“YUURI!”

Yuuri looked over to where Yuuko was currently using Nishigori’s laptop to surf the internet. “What? Did something happen to Viktor?”

“No! Of course not. I’m sure he’s fine. It’s you!”

“What’s me?” He looked down at his clothes to make sure that nothing was ripped or torn.

“They announced the poster for next month’s *ON ICE*! And it’s you! Look!” Yuuko pushed back her chair and angled the screen so that he and Nishigori could see what was displayed. Yuuko was on the main page of the *ON ICE* website and indeed, there was a small thumbnail of him next to a headline under their news section: *Katsuki Yuuri, Japan’s Junior Nationals Gold Medalist Poster!*”

“I’m dreaming, right? This is just a dream? They wouldn’t put me on a poster! Who would want a poster of me?”

“Me!” Yuuko gripped the edge of the desk chair and spun around once. “And you better sign it next time you’re home from Russia.”

Yuuri just shook his head. “Only because you know me, Yuu-chan.”


Frustrated, Yuuri ran his hand through his hair. “Yes, but I’m only fifteen. As in I literally just
turned fifteen yesterday.”

“In a sport where you’re done and will probably retire with shot knees or back problems in your mid-to late twenties, I don’t see what your argument has going for it. I was fifteen last year and I came in twenty-sixth. Some obnoxious thirteen, almost fourteen-year-old came in first. First.” Nishigori grinned at him. “Damn. I wish I could remember his name.”

Yuuko laughed, but bit her lip to stop when she saw Yuuri glaring at her. “He has a point, Yuuri. It’s not like it’s a one off. You won twice in a row. The second time with over a ten-point difference. You train with the Viktor Nikiforov. Alexei Turov, Olympic gold medalist, is your coach. You made Riku-san, also an Olympic gold medalist, cry when you skated a routine using the music that won her her Olympic gold medal. You medalled at two JGP qualifiers this year. Should I continue?”

Yuuri pulled the collar of his track suit jacket up to cover his face, which was burning up. “No.” His voice sounded small to even his ears. When Yuuko laid all the facts out like that, it made him sound much more impressive than he felt he was.

“Okay, okay. We’ll leave the gold medalist here alone,” Nishigori teased.

Yuuri just groaned.

“Are you coming back after Junior Worlds this time?”

Yuuri nodded. “Actually, I might be coming home to Japan permanently.”

***

“Ah, it’s a shame that Viktor isn’t skating in the NHK Trophy.” Yuuko sighed. “Do you know anyone who is, Yuuri?”

Yuuri just shook his head. “No. But Viktor knows that Christophe guy.”

Yuuko squinted at the screen. “Christophe Giacometti. I haven’t really come across his name before. Is he any good?”

“I don’t know. He placed in the top fifteen at Worlds and he’s apparently about two years older than me. He entered the Senior Division right at fifteen. He didn’t place high enough in Paris to make it to the Final even if he wins gold here.” Yuuri’s phone started ringing. He only spent a second looking at the ID before flipping it open. “Алло.”

“Yuuri, I’m bored!”

“Is it Viktor?” Yuuko mouthed at him.

Yuuri just nodded at her. “The NHK men’s short program is about to start and you’re bored?”

“Yes?”

“Why was that a question? Shouldn’t you be curious about who’s going to make it to the Final?”

“Well, it’s not like I have to worry if I’m going to make it in. I have the highest combined score, so I’ve already qualified. Wait. Are you watching it? Watch with me! Please, Yuuri. I haven’t been allowed on the ice all day, and Yakov and Lilia are being cruel to me.”

Yuuri furrowed his brow. “What did you do? Why weren’t you allowed on the ice?”
“I fell practicing my quads and jammed my knee, so Yakov said that I had to rest it. I’ve been stuck at home for the last two days. Alone. With no one to keep me company. Not even Georgi!”

“Did Makkachin run away?”

“No, she’s curled up with… Yuuri! You know what I meant.”

Yuuri bit back a laugh. “All right, all right. I’ll stay on the phone, but you have to be quiet while people skate. And I’m putting you on speaker, since I’m watching with Yuuko and Nishigori.” Yuuri pressed the button for speaker and set the phone down next to him.

“Yuuko? That’s icecastle_madonna, right? I love your YouTube channel! Post more videos of Yuuri skating! Do you have any from when he was lit—” Yuuri ended the call.

“Yuu-kun! That was mean.”

His phone beeped with a text message.

Виктор
Извини. I’ll be good.

To Viktor
Fine. You can call back.

***

“Well, we put in all the paperwork when we thought that Russia would be a more permanent thing.” Hiroko was petting the small russet poodle in her arms, who yipped away happily. “Yuuri was always incredibly attached to Vicchan, and it seemed wrong that he couldn’t have him for company. So, even though it will probably be for only a few months...”

Riku reached out and rubbed the top of the toy poodle’s head. “Oh, we don’t mind. He’s much smaller than Makkachin, and we’ve had that beast over for a week at a time recently. And we’ll have her again during the Grand Prix Final. Do you think that they’ll get along?”

Mari leaned down and rubbed her nose against Vicchan’s. “Well, Vicchan gets along with every dog he meets pretty much. At least around here. Though I don’t know how he’ll react to Yuuri taking care of another dog. He might get jealous.”

“If it’s a problem, we can always have Viktor go back to putting Makkachin in a kennel. He’s done it for years.” Alexei smiled at how the small poodle seemed to bask in all the attention he was getting.

“I did it! I fit Vicchan’s things into my suitcase! I can’t believe he gets to come to Russia with us! You’ll love it, Vicchan. There’s a great park not too far from the rink, and you can be best friends with Makkachin!” Yuuri took his dog from his mother and held him close. “But you’re going to have to be good on the planes. We have a lot of travelling ahead of us. You can’t be loud, okay?”

Vicchan just licked his nose.
Translations:
勇利、素晴らしかった。ありがとう。 - Yuuri, subarashikatta. Arigatou! - Yuuri, you were amazing.
ただいま - Tadaima - I’m home
おかえり - Okaeri - Welcome home
おじゃまします。 - Ojamashimasu - “I will disturb you.” (greeting when coming into someone’s home)
すごい - sugoi - wow
あなた - anata
Алло - Allo - Hello
Извини. - Izvini - Sorry
***
OMG, the talented r95irth did a sketch of Yuuri's Sakura costume for me!

And thank to Yuurisvicchan for the translation of what Riku says to him after his Sakura skate! (If the rest of the Japanese is horrifically wrong, it's my fault.)

There isn't any music this time, but I might put up a teaser or something on my tumblr. You can also ask me anything in the comments or on tumblr... though I won't give away spoilers! :P (Also that idol school in Tokyo is totally a real thing! Who knew... I just created a second one in Osaka because it makes it easier.)
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Viktor discovers twitter. The puppies meet. And everything changes.

Chapter Notes

So a couple things... I’m trying a linked footnote system to help with the translations. Let me know if it works and/or is annoying, etc. Apparently it doesn’t work... Sorry! I removed the faulty links.

Also, Viktor has officially discovered twitter... So there are sections told from that perspective.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

vnikiforov I have a twitter now! Everyone should follow me! posted from web 3 days ago
vnikiforov I still don’t know what to do with this, but I’m sure it’ll be awesome. Maybe I’ll tweet about my GPF adventures. posted from web 2 days ago
vnikiforov I have met the second cutest dog in existence. Makkachin is still number one, forever. Number one! poodles4life posted from mobile web 2 days ago
vnikiforov 140 characters is hard posted from web 2 days ago
vnikiforov @s8ergrrrrrl Hi! posted from web 2 days ago
vnikiforov @s8ergrrrrrl Of course I’d say hi! You’re my first follower! <3 <3 <3 posted from web 2 days ago
vnikiforov totally following back anyone who follows me! posted from mobile web 2 days ago
vnikiforov @icebaby @rinksidboy @rinkerdink @bladesofglory @beetlelova @rosesrblue Hi! <3 kiss! posted from web 2 days ago
vnikiforov @makkabakka You want to know the name of the second cutest dog? I wish. I’ve been told I’m not allowed to talk about him on twitter because posted from mobile web 2 days ago
vnikiforov 140 characters so not fair! posted from mobile web 1 day ago
vnikiforov @makkabakka rinkmate is shy. His dog is adorbz tho. Russet colored toy poodle. Can’t say more or he’ll stop talking to me. posted from mobile web 1 day ago
vnikiforov @s8rgrrrrrl Of course I don’t want him to stop talking to me! posted from mobile web 1 day ago
vnikiforov @rinkerdink No. But I have posted a vid of him on my LJ! http://tinyurl.com/gt4jyn posted from mobile web 1 day ago
vnikiforov and now he’s not speaking to me. :( :( :( says it’s my fault. posted from mobile web 1 day ago
vnikiforov @tabitofan YES! He is the Japanese Junior Nationals gold medalist. posted from web 10h ago
vnikiforov @tabitofan WHAT? THERE’S GOING TO BE A POSTER IN ON ICE!???!?!??!
vnikiforov @katyababi I don’t know how I’m going to get one copy let alone two. Tell her I’ll try though posted from web 55m ago

vnikiforov Happy GPF everyone! @jweber and the four other skaters that don’t have twitter accounts yet. Why not? posted from mobile web 1d ago
vnikiforov @christophege Chris, tell your countryman to get a twitter. He won’t listen to me. Obnoxious. posted from mobile web 1d ago
vnikiforov @christophege Completely ancient. Are you going to say such things to me after I turn twenty? posted from mobile web 10h ago
vnikiforov @juntoshi thank you! thank you! you are a treasure to Japanese pair skating! posted from mobile web 2h ago
vnikiforov @juntoshi just gave me two preview copies of ON ICE! posted from mobile web 2h ago

vnikiforov In first after short program #GPF #lifegoals posted from text 2h ago
vnikiforov Just found out hashtags are a thing. #hashtag posted from mobile web 2h ago
vnikiforov Got to see Makkachin pulling the second cutest dog across the floor as they play with a rag bone #poodles4life #cutestdogs posted from web 30m ago
vnikiforov @makkabakka I got a skype call congratulating me on my short program score. Would bring Makkachin everywhere with me if I could posted from web 5m ago

vnikiforov @katyababi @jweber @popo_georgi @s8ergrrrrrl @rinkerdink @rosesblue @rinksideboy @juntoshi Thanks for the congrats on my silver! <3 #GPF posted from text 3m ago

Yuuri propped his elbows on either side of the textbook he’d opened on the rink’s edge, though he didn’t look down at the pages that he was supposed to be reviewing on his break. Instead, he was staring at the mass of Russians that had run over to greet Viktor and his silver medal.

“Last time he came in like this, I got a new coach.”
Alexei -- leaning on the barrier next to Yuuri and watching the commotion at the rink entrance -- laughed. “Not hoping to replace me, are you, Yuu-kun?”

Yuuri shook his head. “No. Was Riku-san any good at Social Studies?”
Alexei glanced over at the book. “Which part?”

“Geography.”

“Hm. Dunno. We’ll ask when we get home.”

Viktor threw himself at Alexei, who quickly caught the teenager. “Lyosha, I brought home silver!” He looked over at Yuuri. “Yuuri, I have a silver medal!”

“Mmhmm.” Yuuri didn’t look up from his textbook. ”I thought you said you were going to win gold.”
“Yuuri!” He could hear the pout in Viktor’s voice, and could easily imagine the look on his face. “Congratulate me!”

Chuckling, Yuuri finally turned his face up to look at Viktor. “Congratulations, Vitya.” He turned to look at his coach. “I’m going to do a runthrough of my short and try to memorize this stuff.” He pushed off the side of the rink and gave Viktor a little wave. “You’re coming back with us to pick up Makkachin, right?”

Viktor just nodded.

As his skates touched the ice, he could hear Alexei’s amused voice tell Viktor that the look on his face was priceless.

***

“Makkachin, I’m back!” The dog tore down the hallway with Vicchan right behind her. The two dogs jumped onto Viktor and he collapsed back against the door. “I missed you too, Makkachin. I got you a new toy in Italy!”

Vicchan yipped at his feet and Viktor bent down to pet the much smaller dog. The difference in sizes would never not amuse Viktor, Yuuri decided. “Yes, I got you a treat too, Vicchan, even if your owner is terribly mean to me.”

Yuuri dropped his bag behind the couch. “Mean? How am I mean?”

Viktor shrugged. “I have a new poster for you to sign! It’s amazing. You’re doing the Biellmann spin in ‘Sakura’ and it has just the right amount of motion blur to show that it’s a spin, but the detail isn’t distorted. Such a good picture. And I have a copy for Mila, too. She probably wouldn’t mind if you signed hers as well.”

“I thought Mila was joking when Katya called her and said that you managed to get some copies of ON ICE.”

“Yuuri,” Viktor whined. “You haven’t even been reading my tweets? One of the Japanese pair skaters saw that I wanted a copy, and she gave me the two preview copies that she’d received! She did a spread for them about her costumes for the season.”

Yuuri put his face in his hands. “You use your internet powers for evil,” he muttered.

“I don’t! I use them for the good of the Yuuri Katsuki fan club!”

Alexei laughed from the hallway. “Vitya, you know that Minako-sensei is the president, right? She told me when we were in Japan.”

All movement from Viktor stopped for a moment, and then just as suddenly restarted. “It does exist? With email updates and pictures--”

“No! Nononono! It’s a joke! It’s all a horrible joke! Please stop!”

Viktor picked Vicchan up and held him up to Yuuri’s face so the small pup could lick his owner’s nose, which he did, eagerly. Yuuri reached up and grabbed his dog.

“All right, no more teasing. I have gotten my revenge for your gold medal comment earlier.” Viktor dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a flash drive. “More Fullmetal Alchemist?”
Yuuri nodded, putting Vicchan down. “I’ll go grab my laptop.”

Alexei called after him as he rushed down the hall. “Don’t forget, you’re on your own for dinner. And if the box of ice cream bars mysteriously empties itself while we’re gone, I won’t say anything, but if my Papa’s disappear, then you’re grounded or something. I’ll ask Riku what a suitable punishment is.”

“For eating your chips? There is no punishment. Just don’t break your diet too much, Yuuri-kun.”

“はい。”[1]

“Hey! They’re my favorite chips!”

“And we’re living in Russia, so it’s not like they are hard to come by anymore. We’ll be late, любовь моя.”[2] Riku grabbed his hand and lightly tugged until Alexei started for the door.

“Hands off the chips, Vitya,” he mouthed as he followed his wife out the door. Viktor already had the bag in his hand as the door clicked shut.

By the time Yuuri got back to the living room, Viktor had situated himself on the couch with the chips and a lapful of dog. Vicchan had curled himself up in Viktor’s lap and Makkachin was draped across one of his legs. The hand that wasn’t petting Makkachin was already popping Papa’s into his mouth.

“Yakov is going to kill you.”

“I’m drowning my sorrows at only getting silver. Lyosha shouldn’t have mentioned them if he didn’t want me eating them.”

Yuuri connected the cable -- always easily accessible since this had become a habit -- and put the computer next to Viktor. “I’m making dinner. Grilled fish, vegetables, rice, and soup. I only have to make the fish and vegetables, though, so it shouldn’t take long. You’re eating, right?”

“You can cook?” Viktor turned as much as he could without disturbing the pile of puppies. “Yes, I’ll eat! Do you need help?”

Yuuri was already in the kitchen and called out that he didn’t, but told Viktor that he could go ahead and get things set up. If Yuuri had thought about it more -- actually thought about the fact that he’d left Viktor Nikiforov, his idol, alone with Yuuri’s computer, which had an entire folder full of pictures of him -- he would have realized what a bad idea this was.

But he hadn’t. So when Yuuri walked out of the kitchen with their dinner on a tray, he could only spare a second to thank his reflexes for the fact that he didn’t immediately drop the tray when he saw Viktor scrolling through all the thumbnails.

“Viktor!”

“Yuuri! You have so many pictures of me! I’m flattered! Which is your favorite?”

It took every ounce of composure that Yuuri had -- and a few that he didn’t -- to finish carrying the tray to the table and set it down. He swallowed and didn’t even look at the screen, just answered. “Your performance of ‘The Lilac Fairy’ from Junior Worlds, when you broke the World Record. It was the first time I saw you skate.”

“Really?”
Yuuri nodded. “Yuuko recorded the Championships and brought it to the rink, and we watched it as we were getting ready to skate. But Viktor?” He turned to face Viktor, whose eyes were practically sparkling.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t go through my computer, о боже мой! [4]!”

“But this means that you’re a fan of mine! Isn’t that wonderful?” Viktor dived over Makkachin and gave Yuuri a hug, displacing Vicchan. The other pup responded with a disgruntled bark, then jumped onto the other side of Yuuri and from there onto his lap.

Yuuri’s face was hot and he pulled away. “Can we… can we watch now?” If Vicchan wasn’t liable to wriggle away whenever Yuuri picked him up, he might have tried to hide his face in his dog’s fur.

“Of course!”

When Alexei and Riku returned, they found the two teenagers sprawled against each other on the couch, asleep, with their dogs taking up the rest of the room. Makkachin’s head was resting in Yuuri’s lap, and Vicchan had made himself comfortable on Viktor’s, his head draped over Viktor’s arm.

Riku patted Alexei. “Have fun getting them to bed. Can’t leave them sleeping like that or they won’t be able to skate tomorrow.”

Alexei groaned.

***

Yuuri kept to his patch of ice as he skated his slow figure eights.

“I’d be in so much trouble if figures were still 40% of the total score. Your circle is immaculate and you’re just wearing your normal skates.”

Yuuri smiled at Viktor. “I like figures, there’s something incredibly relaxing about them.”

“You always do them whenever something is on your mind. What’s wrong?”

Yuuri shifted his weight and glided away in a graceful arch from where he had been skating, looping and adding a three turn before switching skates and going back over his line in the ice.

“Seriously in trouble.” Viktor skated until he was in front of Yuuri. “Tell me. You’ve been weird since you got back from Japan and Yakov keeps glaring at Alexei, and I don’t like it when people keep things from me. And the three of you are keeping something from me.”

“I didn’t want to distract you from the Final.” Yuuri skated around Viktor, gathering speed and switching to skate backwards, watching as Viktor chased him on the ice.

“Well, now I have a couple weeks until Nationals in the new year, and even then, there is no way I won’t win gold. I mean, Georgi is good, but I am so much better.”

Yuuri laughed. “You know, you never come off as this full of yourself in magazine interviews.”

“I’m not full of myself, I just like acknowledging that I’m the best there is.”
“Hmm, that must be why Stéphane got to take home the gold medal at the Grand Prix final.”

“He joked afterward that he better retire before I set my sights on him, but there’s no way he would. I mean, the Olympic qualifications are next season.” Viktor paused. “You’ll be old enough. Are you going to debut and try to go to the Olympics? That would be amazing!”

Yuuri shook his head. “No. I don’t think I’m ready to compete in the Senior division yet, let alone try for the Olympics. Besides, there is a rumor that Oda-san will be returning and if he does, he’ll obviously be the one that goes to Vancouver to represent Japan.”

“Well, he’s hit or miss at the best of times. I don’t really consider him much competition at all. If he’s on point he may win bronze, but I’ll be taking home gold.”

Yuuri couldn’t help that laugh that bubbled up. “Definitely not full of yourself at all.” He shook his head and slowed down to match up with Viktor. “I can’t imagine skating without you around.”

“Good thing we’re rinkmates then!” Viktor started to skate faster, planning to goad Yuuri into chasing him, but he stopped and slowed back down when he saw the other boy look away. “I’m going to be very mad at Lyosha in a minute, aren’t I?”

“My parents want me to go to high school. I’ve signed up for an entrance exam at a school in Osaka, though Riku thinks that they might accept me based on my past academic record and my current standing in Juniors.” He continued at Viktor’s confused look. “It’s a school that has a program that caters to idols and competing athletes.”

“But you can stay here until the term starts in fall, right?”

Yuuri shook his head. “The Japanese school year starts in April.”

“Дерьмо! Чёрт! Твою мать![5]”

“Viktor—”

“Everyday! I demand at least one text everyday!” He brushed a lock of hair out of his face. “And if you fail, I will text your phone nonstop until you call me. Do you understand, Yuuri Katsuki?”

“You’re not mad?”

“Of course I’m mad! It sucks! I make a friend and then, because we’re both competitive skaters, he has to move since it’s what’s better for him and his career! Of course it sucks and makes me mad!” He came to a stop on the ice. “I’d love nothing more than to be selfish and say you have to stay in Russia.”

Yuuri couldn’t help the laugh that escaped, even if he didn’t feel like laughing with the tightness in his chest. “And I’m just supposed to listen because it’s you? The Viktor Nikiforov?”

“No. You’re supposed to listen because we’re friends.”

When Viktor looped his arms over Yuuri’s shoulders he didn’t even shrug away. How they didn’t end up in a pile on the ice was anyone’s guess.

***

vnikiforov Thank you all for the congratulations on my gold medal at Nationals! #gold posted from mobile web 2 day ago
Since the Nationals were at our home rink we got to see so many talented skaters. posted from mobile web 2 day ago

@rinksideboy to celebrate? I had a lazy day with the two poodles. The way Makkachin lets the pipsqueak boss her around is so funny! posted from web 1d ago

@rinkerdink he barks with his whole body and eventually Makkachin will just lay down and pipsqueak will lick her nose for a job well done posted from mobile web 12h ago

I am finally allowed to tell my dear followers that the poodle’s name is Vicchan! (so I won’t call him pipsqueak anymore) #poodles4life posted from mobile web 12h ago

RT @Makkabakka OMG! THE DOG IS NAMED AFTER YOU???!?! -- I don’t know, I’ll have to ask. posted from web 8h ago

RT @Nikis_girl Their dog is named after you! SO SWEET!!! posted from web 8h ago

RT @rosesrblue Is the dog a poodle because Makkachin is a poodle? posted from web 8h ago

I’ve been told to shut up and to stop retweeting all the speculation that Vicchan is named after me. I’m wounded, I only posted some. posted from mobile web 2h ago

RT @Nikis_girl Tell Vicchan’s owner to be nice -- I would but he’d just roll his eyes at me. posted from mobile web 1h ago

@Makkabakka I have it on good authority that my antics are incredibly eye roll worthy. Mostly my coach’s. posted from web 5m ago

@tabitofan He says there is no point in getting a twitter since I just post what he’s doing anyway. There’s no me in Japan though. :( posted from web 3m ago

From: カツキ丼
Sent: Monday, February 18, 2008 7:14 PM
To: アイス・カサル・マッダナ
Subject: [attachment] They really are best friends

[Short video clip of Makkachin pulling Vicchan around by a rag bone before running down a hallway and disappearing with Vicchan on her heels.]

Yes, that is Viktor’s apartment in the background. He hates seeing the moving boxes so we’ve taken to watching anime at his apartment instead. And no, I haven’t decided how I feel about the acceptance to Fukuzawa Gakuen. Riku-san and Alexei keep telling me that I’ll be able to take the bullet train back to Hasetsu twice a month for the weekend when it isn’t competition season, so at least I’ll get to see you and my family more often. Have you convinced Nishigori that taking you the ice show this summer in Osaka is the best gift he could give you?

I’ll pass on your congratulations on his European Championship win. Him and Stéphane are really duelling it out this season.

I can’t believe in a week I’ll be heading to Bulgaria for another World Junior Championship. I’m really nervous about it. I didn’t even manage to compete in the JGPF.

Comments on World Juniors Medal Ceremony

da_victor (1 day ago)
I am soo glad that you posted this! I had to get back on the ice, so I missed this bit. His bows are adorable! The silver really complements his costume.
Minako-sensei flew out there to watch, but the rest of us had a public viewing at his parents' house.

I don’t know what a public viewing is, but I watched with two rinkmates. They both started crying because they don’t want him to leave.

His parents open up their inn to the whole town and anyone who wants to watch is invited to come and eat and drink.

***

Mila thundered into the break room, forced herself past all the older skaters that had congregated, and jumped into the empty seat next to Yuuri, latching onto his arm. “No computer today?”

He shook his head and ruffled her red hair. “That wouldn’t be fair to you, since this is the last time we’ll be watching competitions together like this.”

Mila pushed her face against his arm. “Yura, are you sure that you can’t stay?”

“Pretty sure.”

“The other day I heard Yakov say that he never should have brought Alexei back to Russia because he’s losing the skater that actually listens.”

Yuuri bit his lip. “Well, then you’ll just have to show Yakov that you’ll be a better skater than Katya or Viktor by the time you finish Juniors. Or remind him that Georgi listens all the time.”

“Georgi’s girlfriend broke up with him last week, and he was crying while doing a runthrough of his free program. That’s what set Yakov off.”

Yuuri turned and looked at Mila. “How do you know all this? You’re ten.”

She just grinned. “Will he win this time, do you think?”

“I hope so. The French skater is in first going into the free skate, but if Viktor has a clean program and can get his step sequence marked as a level 4, and doesn’t flub his quad flip, yes.”

Mila sighed. “I wish you weren’t going. Now that I’m more confident in my steps, I wanted to work on my spins with you.”

“Says the girl who can currently do a candle spin and a hyperextended Biellmann.”

“But my transitions between spin positions aren’t nearly as clean as yours.”

Yuuri wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Well, then you just need practice. That’s how I got good at spins, you know. A lot of practice. And don’t skip your ballet lessons.”

Their conversation -- in fact, all conversation -- stopped when Viktor took the ice and everyone trained their eyes to the screen.

It was, perhaps, the most moving performance Viktor had done of ‘Moldau’ yet. Each jump was clean, even the flip; the step sequence was absolutely breathtaking, as if he was throwing himself from one position to the next. It really looked as if he was dancing across the ice instead of skating. Yuuri smiled. All that practice had definitely paid off.
When Viktor took his final bow and skated off the ice, everyone in the breakroom knew that he’d just won gold.

Viktor Nikiforov was the World Champion.

***

Yuuri didn’t know why he decided to skate his short program from the year before. Maybe because it was after that failed program that Victor had sought him out and convinced him to sneak into the competition rink to skate.

He pushed off, turning backward as he built up speed. His first jump originally was either a double or triple axel, but now his triple was solid; when he landed it, he smoothly swept around and into his transition. He changed the flying camel spin from something more basic into an upward camel with a bent leg, arms reaching up to the sky.

He wasn’t ready to let go.

He added a couple turns to his step sequence, speeding up just a touch where the music would let him, then went straight into his triple-double combination. The loop was so much cleaner than it used to be. Russia had been good for him and his skating.

But it was time to move on. To his next challenge. He needed to get even better. Win gold at Junior Worlds. Break Viktor’s Junior record.

His triple flip was a bold proclamation of his determination.

And his final sit spin, he pulled tighter into a pancake spin before coming up and hitting his ending pose.

He scrubbed at his eyes with the cuff of his jacket sleeve.

“Yuuri.” He spun on his skates. Yakov was leaning against the edge of the rink. “That’s the best I’ve ever seen that program. Thank you.”

He swallowed. “It wouldn’t have been that good if I hadn’t come to Russia.” He rubbed the cuff between his fingers, the rough edge of the ribbing soothing. “If you hadn’t taken me on… if you hadn’t introduced me to Lyosha… Coach Yakov, I can’t thank you enough.” Yuuri skated over to where Yakov was standing. “Really.”

“Thank me by giving Viktor someone that he’ll find challenging. That gold medal is just going to go straight to his head.”

Yuuri laughed. “I’ll do my best, but I’m no genius.”

Yakov just smiled at him. “Give Lyosha hell. God knows he deserves it. You know, I had brown hair before I trained him.”

Yuuri threw his weight over the barrier and gave Yakov a brief hug. “He says Viktor is the one that made you grey.”

“Lies. It was Lyosha. Vitya is making my hair fall out.” Yakov waved to the ice. “Go back to your skating, Yuuri.”

***
“You stole the remote for the sound system?”

Viktor smirked. “Of course. It’s our last time skating together, so Katya and I made a mix.”

Yuuri started laughing. “A mix?”

Katya skated by and came to a stop next to them. “We did! Even put all the songs on a thumb drive for you. Aren’t we the best ever?”

He nodded. “Yeah, you are.”

It was the closest thing to a public free skate that Yuuri had ever seen at the rink. Well, if a public free skate was entirely populated by ranked figure skaters. He watched from the side as Viktor jumped a triple axel and almost slammed into Georgi, who managed to skate out of the way just in time, yelling what Yuuri knew was a swear at Viktor.

“You have to skate too, Yura. It’s no fun if you don’t skate.” Mila tugged his hand and he joined the fray.

There were more skaters than he thought. Ones he barely spoke to, but at one point or another they all skated up to him to wish him the best in Japan and in high school. Most of them even said they’d miss seeing him around the rink. And every single one said they would be watching his career with interest.

“Is it because Alexei coaches me?”

Viktor shook his head. “Yuuri. One day you’ll realize how talented of a skater you are.”

He looked down at the ice between his skates. “It’s still hard to think that way, even with a silver at World Juniors.”

“I got Vicchan a going-away present. Well, a few, actually. I couldn’t help myself.”

Yuuri laughed. “Makkachin will appreciate getting all the attention again.”

“Makkachin is going to miss that pipsqueak. She’ll probably be more inconsolable than I will.”

“Don’t exaggerate.”

“I’m not.” Viktor looked at him. “Don’t forget you promised to text everyday.”

***

The next morning Yuuri waved at the small cadre of skaters that had come to the airport to see him, Alexei and Riku off. He clutched the gift that they’d given him: an official Russian team jacket. How they managed that, he’d never know. Yakov just reminded him to never wear it to anything official, adding that while he knew that Yuuri wasn’t as stupid as some of his skaters, he needed to say it -- just in case.

Vicchan yipped at his feet -- straining at the short leash he was on -- and Makkachin barked back at him from Viktor’s feet.

“Come on, Yuuri-kun. 家に帰ろう。[6].”

Chapter End Notes
I left out footnotes for Yuuri's and Yuuko's email addresses, but I can go back and add the in if it's confusing...

Also, if you have any idea for twitter usernames for followers of Viktor (or Yuuri for that matter, he'll get a twitter eventually) let me know. I'm really bad at username creations, if you can't tell. :P

Last thing. There is reference to a real life skater in this chapter besides Stéphane because there is one other real figure skater that made an appearance in YOI in canon, and that is Nobunari Oda (he did the commentary with Morooka in the final two episodes). :) He hasn't been brought up before because he didn't participate in the season that just ended this chapter.

One last thing, I'm so sorry. (I might have made myself SAD writing this chapter...)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's first year in Japan goes by in a blur...

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone that commented on the last chapter. I haven't had a chance to respond to them all, but I will!

Also, you'll notice that the pace picks up quite a bit in this chapter. Now that Yuuri and Viktor are separated, the pace overall will go a little faster for now. Not permanently, just to get to the next bit...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yuuri stood between the brick columns that marked the entrance to Fukuzawa Gakuen and took a deep breath before hitching his bookbag further up his shoulder and pulling the cuff of his jacket into his palm -- his horrifically sweaty palm. Students in the “idol & sports” -- or IS -- track didn’t attend the regular orientation, which Yuuri would have missed anyway since he was in still finishing up his season in Russia. Orientation day had been scheduled during the World Championships, and he’d practically begged to stay in Saint Petersburg just a little longer so he could take care of Makkachin one last time.

“Lost?”

He looked at the girl, who had some sort of badge pinned under the school crest on the jacket. “Sort of.”

She gave him a warm smile. “Well, I’m a member of Student Council, so I can help. What’s your class?”

“1-E.”

The warm smile disappeared, replaced with a much cooler one. “You’re in the IS track? Regular students aren’t supposed to talk to IS students. It’s punishable with detention. Are you really?”

Yuuri nodded. “I am. Katsuki Yuuri.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out the piece of paper detailing his class assignment to show her. The smile came back, and Yuuri breathed a sigh of relief. He really didn’t want to start at his new school by getting on the bad side of someone on the Student Council.

“I’m sorry, you didn’t really look like an idol.” The girl had started walking toward the buildings, and Yuuri rushed to keep pace with her.

“I’m not an idol.” The material of the school jacket was rough against the pads of his fingers and he
focused on the feeling. “I’m…” He sighed.

“You’re in the track for sports, then?”

“Yeah. I compete in figure skating.”

“Wow. There’s supposed to be a really good young Japanese skater that placed in some big world competition recently. It was in the paper. Have you met him?” She sounded honestly curious.

“Um… I think that’s supposed to be me. I came in second at the World Junior Championships last month.” He ducked his head down to look at the ground; she could have been talking about one of the other two Japanese Junior skaters that had been sent to World Juniors, but neither of them had come in the top ten. “I just came back from training abroad for a year.”

“Congratulations.” She stopped on the second floor at the top of the staircase. “Your class should be at the end of the hall. All the IS classrooms are in this building. If you need any help, I’m Kiyoura Megumi in class 2-C. It was nice to meet you, Katsuki-kun.”

“Th… Thanks. It was nice to meet you, too.” He watched Megumi turn and rush down the stairs before heading to his classroom and opening the door.

The class wasn’t large; there were less than twenty students, including himself. He could easily tell the difference between the “idols” and the athletes -- overall, it was about an even split, though most of the girls fell into idol territory; a little disappointing after spending a year with Katya and Mila and the other skaters. All of them were looking at him curiously.

It was going to be a long year.

***

Viktor
How was Yuuri’s first day at school?

To Viktor
I’m mad that Lyosha says we’re taking a week off training while I adjust to school.

Viktor
That bad?

To Viktor
Yes

Viktor
Put the poster of me up, it’ll make you feel better

To Viktor
I already did. And it does. Thanks.

Yuuri did not mention that he put all his posters of Viktor up, much to Alexei’s amusement. So there was basically an entire wall in his room in his coach’s house in Osaka, covered with pictures and posters of Viktor.

He made sure to tell Alexei that Viktor could never know.

***
It took a few weeks to develop his new routine. In some cases, being back in Japan was a good thing -- his alarm no longer was going off at three in the morning, so he got to sleep in a couple of extra hours before he had to get up for morning conditioning or training, depending on the day of the week. Alexei had started to add some strength training and wanted him to increase flexibility training, so some mornings were spent in the gym, others just stretching in the free space on the floor of his room, and the rest running 5k.

He actually liked the days where he ran the best. Riku would go with him and they’d either talk or listen to their own music, but she always knew the best running paths to take so he was never bored on his workout. Sometimes Vicchan would join them, but only on the days where Yuuri didn’t have to go to school, since he’d spend half the 5k walking instead of jogging -- hazards of having a toy poodle with little legs, though Yuuri wouldn’t give up Vicchan for the world and was glad that he’d been allowed to move to Osaka with him.

School was miserable. Not as miserable as he thought it’d be the first day, but having to go back to sitting in a classroom for hours on end instead of the few hours of one-on-one lessons he’d had until now was horrible. And he didn’t know how to socialize with his classmates, either. On the sports side there was a tennis player, a judoka, some swimmers, a couple of gymnasts, two volleyball players and a football player who belonged to the U17 team on a national level. Being the only winter sport, there was very little he shared with the rest of the group beyond basic training, and even then, discussing which muscle groups his coach wanted him to work on wasn’t all that interesting to Yuuri.

Then there were the idols. Of the boys, one was a solo artist and the other three belonged to a group, with the last two members being second years. He couldn’t even begin to make sense of the girls, though a lot of the boys commented on the one who was a gravure idol.

Yuuri didn’t understand a word that came out of their mouths.

***

Viktor
Sorry, I didn’t reply to your texts over the weekend.

Viktor
Yuuri. I said I’m sorry. Why aren’t you texting me?

Viktor
Is this payback?

To Viktor
Oh, do I not get to ignore your texts too? Is that not how this works?

Viktor
Don’t be mean. I was busy! I went to Paris for a commercial shoot and met up with Elodie while I was there

To Viktor
That’s the French skater, right? Did the photogs catch up with you?

Viktor
No.

To Viktor
How mad would Yakov have been if they had?

Viktor
So very mad. It was so very worth it.

***

To Viktor
Daily text: Why do I need to know math beyond what I need to determine my TES?

Viktor
You don’t. Have you picked out music yet?

To Viktor
No. I don’t even know where to begin. I need to talk to Lyosha about it.

***

“I’m bringing in a choreographer.”

Yuuri looked up from where he had been practicing an old step sequence. They’d been discussing music, but hadn’t really gotten anywhere. Yuuri had a couple of ideas, and Alexei’s suggestion of maybe making one of his pieces a jazz piece again was a good one, so he’d go back to his playlists again.

He knew that a lot of skaters worked with choreographers and he’d done so in the past, but he had liked having Alexei do his choreography this past season. “Why?”

His coach took a deep breath. “‘Sakura’ would have been stronger if someone else had choreographed it. And I think that a very lyrical piece is good for you as a skater, so, I want someone who can do that. Or rather, a pair of someones, I guess.”

So not just one choreographer. Yuuri frowned. “You’re not going to choreograph either piece?”

Alexei motioned him over to the edge of the rink. “I’ll choreograph one of them, and the other, well, she should be here any minute.”

“I don’t even have music!” What was he supposed to tell the choreographer? What if he hated their work? He couldn’t go against Alexei, could he?

“That’s not a problem. They just came by for a visit.” His coach grinned.

“You look way too pleased with yourself, Alexei.”

“Yuuri!”

Minako was walking toward them from the entrance to the rink.

Alexei leaned on the barrier. “Minako-sensei will be the main choreographer and Riku will be assisting, since she knows skating better. What do you think? Can you work with them.”

Yuuri smiled. “Yes.”

“You smile now, but I think you might need a lot of luck.”

***
Viktor
Yakov is a taskmaster.

Viktor
He says I need to earn my keep and do at least one ice show this summer.

To Viktor
Is that a bad thing? Even I’m doing an ice show.

Viktor
You are? Which one? Where? In Europe? Are tickets on sale now?

To Viktor
I’m going to bed. Goodnight.

Viktor
Yuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuriiiiiiiiiiii!

***

It turned out that one of his rinkmates in Osaka attended Fukuzawa as well, though he’d only discovered this after a session with Minako and Riku while they worked on his short program, set to Chopin’s *Nocturne*.

Takagi Keiko was a year ahead of him, and had done well enough in Nationals the year before to have gone to the World Junior Championships.

“I saw you skate.” She was a few feet away from him on the ice. She looked almost windswept from her work. Strands of black hair escaped from the tight french braid that she kept her hair in while she skated, framing her oval face and dark eyes.

He didn’t really know what to say to her. They were on a rink and he’d just finished a choreo session, so of course he would have been seen… “Um…”

“At the World Junior Championships, I mean. I was there skating in Ladies singles. I didn’t make the Free Skate, though. I saw both of yours. You should have won gold.” Her tone was bright and crisp; though she was a few centimeters shorter than him, the force of her personality almost left him shrinking back.

He flushed; he couldn’t help it. “Aaron Reyes definitely deserved his win. He had an amazing free skate, stronger than mine.”

“You aren’t very good at taking compliments.” She cocked her hip, one fist resting on it. “So I’ve been told.”

Shaking her head, she skated past him to the exit of the rink and grabbed her neon blue guards. “Is it true that you spent a year training at the same rink as Viktor Nikiforov?” Yuuri nodded. “Is he as pretty in person as in his pictures?”

“More so.” He held back saying that he was also a bit of an idiot. That was privileged information, for friends only. And his Twitter followers, apparently. Or anyone stalking Yuuko’s YouTube channel… which was really just Viktor.

“I wish I had done good enough at World Juniors to get Grand Prix assignments. Did you know that
they’re hosting the Junior Grand Prix Final and the regular Grand Prix final at the same time this year? I could have met Viktor Nikiforov!”

He nodded. He’d already made a promise with Viktor that they’d meet at the GPF, him for Juniors and Viktor for Seniors. Viktor tried to make him promise that they’d both take home gold as well, but Yuuri wasn’t that full of himself. It’d been hard enough to say that he’d make the final this year.

***

“Hey, Katsuki!” Yuuri looked over his shoulder. Nakagawa, one of the swimmers from his class, was waving at him to get his attention. “Are you getting a ride to the Sports Plaza? Can I get a lift? I’m late meeting my coach.” He carded his fingers through his short brown hair making it stand up at awkward angles.

Yuuri nodded at the swimmer. “If my coach says it’s all right.”

“He really works you hard. I didn’t realise that figure skating was… difficult, I guess. I saw you hit the ice the other day, but you bounced back up like it was nothing.”

It certainly hadn’t been nothing. The bruise on his thigh had bloomed an awful, yet somehow beautiful, purple-blue and he was reminded of it every time his bag hit a certain spot as he walked.

Yuuri hated the fact that his jumps weren’t going as smoothly as they had the past year, but given that he was breaking in new skates -- and had to request a new track suit from the JSF, as he’d grown close to 10 centimeters since he’d received the last one -- he really shouldn’t have been all that surprised.

“If I’m skating the way I’m supposed to, it should look easy. If it looks hard, then I know my score won’t be very good.” He’d entered into an odd sort of mutual respect with a few of the athletes that trained at the Sports Plaza, which pretty much meant the swimmers. Nakagawa was probably the one he got along with best.

“Have you made arrangements for when they shut the facility down this summer for that ice show?”

Yuuri shook his head. “I don’t have to. I’m performing in it, so I’ll still have access to the ice.”

“Really? I thought that only retired skaters did shows.”

Yuuri looked up; the height difference between the two most obvious when they were standing next to each other. Nakagawa was easily taller than Viktor. Yuuri wondered if height was important when it came to swimming. “That used to be the case when skaters had to be amateurs to qualify for the Olympics and large international competitions, but it isn’t the case anymore. There are just rules that I have to follow to make sure it doesn’t ruin my eligibility.”

“You’re going, right?”

“To what?”

“The Olympics.” Nakagawa said as if it was the only thing that made any sense in the world.

Yuuri waved his hands in front of his chest. “No! I’m… I’m not… That’s a different Division. I still skate in Juniors.” He felt lame just saying it. Of course he should be striving to go to the Olympics. Viktor kept pushing for him to switch to the Senior Division too, but he just didn’t feel ready. “What about you?”
“That’s the goal. I didn’t make it this year, so I’m a little bummed, but I’ll definitely be going to London in 2012! You better watch me!”

“I will!”

***

Viktor
It’s been a week and I still can’t figure out what ice show you’re doing. Yuuri is so mean to me.

Viktor
Mila wants a signed program from it.

To Viktor
I can mail her one. If I send it to the rink, she’d get it, right?

Viktor
Most likely. What about me, Yuuri?

To Viktor
What about you?

Viktor
What do I get?

To Viktor
You didn’t ask for anything.

Viktor
Yuuuuuri!

To Viktor
I’ll send two. But I better receive one from you in return.

Viktor
Deal.

***

Viktor shoved his hands in his jean pockets. It was so warm outside and they were still in the lobby. When were they going to take him to see the ice? If he had to do a show, he figured he’d try to do one in Japan, but when he got the itinerary there was absolutely no free time.

How was he supposed to surprise Yuuri if he couldn’t escape? He sighed.

“We’re just waiting for the last three performers. They’re all coming together.” The producer of the show flipped through some papers, leaving Viktor to look around at the rest of the skaters. He recognized quite a few from the competition circuit. Even Tabito, the former Japanese ace, was here.

“It looks like your back is a little better, Tabito.”

He smiled at Viktor. “It is, thank you. I didn’t do any shows last year while I went through some physical therapy. I hear you’re planning to sweep everything this year with straight golds.”

“Of course!”
“Sorry we’re late!” Viktor recognized the voice.

“Lyosha!” He ran over and gave the other Russian a hug. “You’re skating?”

Alexei nodded. “Riku talked me into it.” He motioned over to Riku, who had started talking with Tabito. Viktor looked past them outside and caught sight of two boys in school uniforms talking; the taller boy with the brown hair was leaning over the shorter one. *They must be friends.* Eventually, they came inside; the lighter haired one waved as he jogged off.

The darker haired boy turned, tugging his bookbag up on his shoulder, and Viktor tried to not be surprised. “Sorry, Alexei. Nakagawa was just telling me he’d make copies of his notes for me for the days he’s in class that I’ll miss.” Yuuri grinned. “Hi, Viktor.”

Four months. He hadn’t seen Yuuri in four months. Yuuri had gotten taller and some of the baby fat around his cheeks had disappeared, but he was still Yuuri. “You don’t sound surprised to see me. I’m hurt.”

“Alexei told me you were performing in this show when he found out from Yakov. And in Sapporo as well.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“I thought you liked surprises.”

Viktor dove for Yuuri and hugged him, but Yuuri pushed him away, much to Viktor’s dismay. “Not here. We’re late because I was getting a whole spiel about proper behavior from the administration at my school.” Viktor was surprised; the Russian was much faster and clearer, even compared to when Yuuri had left.

“Your school sounds awful, but you’ve kept up your Russian.”

“Lyosha’s language of choice when coaching.”

***

“No dating, no phone, no music, no snacks, no--”

“Yes, it’s basically a whole lot of ‘no’. Most of the rules are for the whole school, but the dating and the buying snacks one is specific to the IS track. As is the not talking to the regular students. Or rather, it’s highly discouraged. As role models for young Japanese, we are expected to behave with the utmost decorum.” Yuuri’s put on a strained and stuffy voice for the last sentence.

Viktor laid back on Yuuri’s bed and cuddled with Vicchan. “And you’re stuck in this prison for how long?”

“Three years.”

Viktor groaned.

***

**vnikiforov** performing in Osaka this week. Met up with the second cutest poodle and his owner. #poodles4life posted from mobile web 2d ago

**vnikiforov** Everyone, Alexei Turov and his wife Riku are doing a pair skate at this show! #what?
posted from mobile web 2d ago

vnikiforov #blessed getting to see Alexei Turov skate again. May be jealous of Vicchan’s human for getting to see them put their routines together posted from mobile web 2d ago

vnikiforov #morningrun #osakacastlepark I’ll post a pic later on LJ! So pretty! posted from mobile web 1d ago

vnikiforov group choreography sessions are always… interesting. Pictures later (from this and run!) posted from mobile web 1d ago

vnikiforov https://tinyurl.com/mcan posted from mobile web 1d ago

vnikiforov @makkabakka Yes! It’s the pipsqueak a.k.a. Vicchan! posted from mobile web 1d ago

vnikiforov @specialsnowflake Yes, that’s my former rinkmate’s back. It was the only picture I was allowed to post of him posted from mobile web 1d ago

vnikiforov @icequeen Yes, that is Alexei Turov being ridiculous! #myidol #whatamievenlookingat posted from mobile web 9h ago

vnikiforov @specialsnowflake I don’t know. He makes the rules, I just follow them. posted from mobile web 9h ago

vnikiforov @s8grrrrrl Because if I don’t he won’t hesitate to stop talking to me. posted from mobile web 7h ago

vnikiforov RT @tripleaxel better be careful or you’ll girlfriend will get jealous!!! posted from mobile web 6h ago

vnikiforov @tripleaxel My girlfriend? You shouldn’t believe everything you read. posted from mobile web 6h ago

vnikiforov @tripleaxel After a long discussion via very expensive international call, she says she doesn’t care but that she is my girlfriend. posted from mobile web 3h ago

vnikiforov @tabitofan Tabito is performing in Osaka as well! Are you coming to see him? Let me know, I’ll autograph something! posted from mobile web 3h ago

***

They’d just exited the locker rooms at the Sports Complex and were on their way to join the better-known skaters for post-show autographs when Yuuri heard a familiar voice.

“Katsuki! That was amazing!”

Yuuri turned at the familiar sound. “Nakagawa, you came?”

The swimmer smiled as he approached them. “Of course! I was curious and decided to see what you actually look like skating.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Hi!” Viktor stepped up behind Yuuri and looked over his shoulder.

“Ah. Nakagawa, this is Viktor Nikiforov, he’s the current World Champion.”
“Cool, I guess.” Nakagawa switched back to Japanese. “So, Katsuki, how long did it take to learn all that?”

Yuuri tilted his head to the side. “The skating or just the routine? It usually takes about a week to learn the choreography, and then it’s fine-tuned until competitions. Don’t you have some coming up soon?”

Nakagawa nodded. “Yeah, I do. Regionals. I’m pretty sure I’ll place.”

“Are you two dating?”

Yuuri snapped his head around to look at Viktor, flushing. The only good thing was that he’d asked in Russian. He didn’t know how good Nakagawa’s English was. “No. The rules, Viktor. God.”

Nakagawa snickered and Yuuri wasn’t sure why. “It looks like there are some people waiting for your autograph, so I’m going to go. I’m glad I came, Katsuki.”

“See you in class.” Yuuri lifted his hand and waved. He turned back to the Russian. “What were you thinking?”

“I think he likes you. Maybe. Not sure.”

“Shut up, Viktor.”

すみません。"

Yuuri turned and smiled. There was a small boy, much younger than either of the two teenagers, clutching a poster in his hands. “Hi.”

“Hi, you’re cute. Do you speak English?”

The little kid’s eyes widened at Viktor’s question and he shook his head. Yuuri asked him in Japanese if he wanted Viktor’s autograph. Another shake of the head. “No. I want Yuuri-kun’s autograph!” The boy pushed the poster toward Yuuri as he bowed. “Please! I saw you skate on TV and it was the best thing I’ve ever seen! I’m going to skate too! Please sign it!”

Flustered and flushed, Yuuri took the poster from the kid’s hands. “OK, yeah, sure. What’s your name?”

“Minami Kenjirou! I’m almost 9 and I started skating this summer!”

Yuuri signed the poster and handed it back. “I’m sure you’ll be great.”

“Oh, he has a camera! I’ll take a picture of you two! Yuuri’s first mini-fan!”

Yuuri sighed, but asked Minami if he wanted a picture. The boy practically jumped his height in the air. “Yes, please! This is sooooo coooool! I’m getting a picture with Yuuri-kun!”

***

To Viktor

Daily Text: I was given the option of taking a dance class instead of regular phys ed. Jumped at chance. Completely regret it.

Viktor

Why? You love ballet. And probably jazz, though I’ve never seen you dance jazz, just skate it.
To Viktor
Turns out it was a hip-hop dance class put together for the idols.

Viktor
… You’re doing hip-hop?

To Viktor
Yes, and I’m bad at it! I keep getting told to lower my center.

Viktor
What does that even mean?

To Viktor
If I knew, I’d be doing it and maybe not hating the class so much. I’m going to have to ask one of the idols for help and I hate it.

Viktor
So I told Georgi that the reason he couldn’t land his 4S was because he needed to lower his center

Viktor
He skated around a whole bunch trying to figure out what I meant

Viktor
At the end of the day, he was landing his 4S cleanly! Yakov wanted to know what I said to him.

To Viktor
Viktor! I can’t believe… No, actually I can. How annoyed are you that you accidentally helped Georgi?

Viktor
It was worth it for the surprise of it working.

***

Comments on Katsuki Yuuri Rhapsody in Blue FS [2008 JGP Czech Skate]

da_victor (3 days ago)
Why are his jumps shaky? His jumps shouldn’t be that shaky. They were solid last year! They were better at the ice show this summer even!

icecastle_madonna (2 days ago)
When I talked to him when he got back to Japan he said that he’d been having growing pains the entire competition

da_victor (2 days ago)
No wonder he ended up with bronze. Tight tendons are the worst for jumps.

***

vnikiforov @s8mElodie Why are you mad?

s8mElodie @vnikiforov fais chier! I am not doing this over TWITTER!

***

To Viktor
Daily Text: Yuuko wanted me to tell you that your breakup with that French skater is a hot topic on the forums here.

To Viktor
What happened?

Viktor
This was never the way I planned, not my intention. I got so brave, drink in hand, lost my discretion

Viktor
I kissed a boy and I liked it

Viktor
I don’t even know his name, it doesn’t matter.

Viktor
He was my experimental game, just human nature

To Viktor
You kissed a boy just to try it. And you hoped your girlfriend wouldn’t mind it

Viktor
THIS IS WHY WE ARE FRIENDS!

To Viktor
You’re an idiot

***

It was strange, attending a Junior Grand Prix qualifier with a rinkmate. Takagi Keiko had been -- much to her surprise and delight -- assigned only one qualifier, but it would be good experience for her. The fact that she was calling Yuuri “Katsuki-senpai” was much more disconcerting.

“I’m younger than you!”

Keiko just grinned back. “Yes, but you have so much more experience than I, Katsuki-senpai.”

She was doing this on purpose. She had to be; there was no other explanation for it. “Keiko-senpai, please don’t.”

“Keiko-chan, your coach is looking for you.” Alexei walked up, Yuuri’s badge in his hand.

“OK. One minute. We need to take a picture!” She shoved her camera at Alexei with a hasty ‘please’. “Team Japan at Skate Safari! Come on, Katsuki-senpai!”

Yuuri groaned, but let her pull him next to her. She threw up a cute “V” for victory sign and smiled with a tilt of her head.

Alexei, who was holding the camera, laughed. “Yuu-kun, you look miserable. Try to smile, just a little.”

Keiko grabbed Yuuri’s hand and pushed his fingers into a victory sign as well before pushing up against his side. Yuuri took a deep breath, trying to pretend that he was goofing off with Viktor and Mila and Yuuko and Nishigori on a rink somewhere, instead of letting his anxiety gnaw at him here in South Africa. The smile came much easier then.
Viktor
Your picture was in IFS Magazine, btw.

To Viktor
Congratulations on the silver at Cup of China. I’m sure you’ll win gold in Moscow.

Viktor
Of course I will! I have to make the Final so I can see Yuuri and tease him about his girlfriend.

To Viktor
I was hoping that if I ignored the comment about the picture you would drop it. Not a gf. Rinkmate. Like Mila.

Viktor
I’m supposed to think that you think of that girl like she’s eleven? Because Mila is eleven now. She reminded me.

To Viktor
I’m aware. She got her birthday present, right?

Viktor
Wow, you really don’t want to talk about… what’s her name, Keiko, do you? You turn 16 in a week, it’s all right to have a girlfriend.

To Viktor
Not allowed to have one, remember? Don’t want one. Seriously, what’s with trying to pair me up with her of all people.

Viktor
Do you hate her?

To Viktor
No. It’s just weird. After I won gold in S. Africa, she kissed me on the cheek and it was weird and I didn’t talk to her for two (1/2)

To Viktor
weeks and now it’s even more weird so can we not talk about this? (2/2)

***

Yuuri was tying his skates at the bench by the rink. It was his last long training day with Alexei before they left for South Korea and the Grand Prix Final. Eventually, Viktor had given up on teasing Yuuri, for which he was grateful. He just wanted to focus on his skating, not on romantic entanglements. Viktor should understand that, but given that he’d been matched up with a couple of skaters and even a model or two in recent months, Yuuri wasn’t so sure he did.

Of course, Viktor was taking his skating seriously, but he was also having fun -- or so he claimed just before Yuuri purposefully steered their conversation back to skating. It hadn’t been hard, thankfully; all he’d had to do was tease Viktor that his step sequences needed work this season. He hadn’t expected Viktor to agree, but he did.

Yuuri was glad that most of their conversations were still centered around skating, except back in October; with the announcement of a Fullmetal Alchemist reboot, Viktor had excitedly put aside the
skate talk for a full week.

“Yuuri-kun!” Yuuri looked up. He had taken Yuuko’s advice and had asked Keiko to not call him ‘senpai’, all while looking at her with what Yuuko termed “the saddest puppy eyes in existence, that no girl would be able to say no to.” It had worked, and he was much more comfortable around her now.

“Keiko-senpai?” She had a newspaper clutched in her hand and was running toward him at full speed. If she tripped and hurt her ankle, Nationals would be over for her! “Slow down, Keiko-senpai!”

“I can’t! It’s horrible! Yuuri-kun!” She skidded to a stop in front of him and thrust the paper at Yuuri. He took it from her, his eyes immediately going to the main article in the sports section she’d handed him.

**Gold Medal Favorite Viktor Nikiforov to Pull Out of Grand Prix Final Due to Injury**

Is he out for the rest of the season?

Chapter End Notes

Transliterations
すみません。 - sumimasen - Excuse me.
fais chier! - basically "it pisses me off!"
***

Even though I haven't gone into detail about the skating so much this chapter, I'll put a post up with the music (including the song that Riku and Alexei did a pair skate to) on my tumblr.

(The rules that Yuuri talk about in regards to his school are actually the rules at the idol school in Tokyo that I'm basing this off of. It's incredibly stringent.)

(There are also a couple of Easter Eggs...)
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Oh, Viktor. (Yep, that's the summary)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound was the worst. Halfway between a pop and a crack, it signaled something wrong, something that Viktor did not want. He tried to ignore it, to skate through the pain, looking away when Yakov turned a glare on him. But when his leg locked up and he fell to the ice, his face screwed up in agony, Yakov dragged him out of the rink in short order.

Now in the doctor's office, he had a chance to take stock of the injury. The swelling was bad -- not the worst that Viktor had ever seen and even experienced, but never during the season. He was always so very careful during the season--

Viktor woke, sweating, the sound of that “pop” still ringing in his ears. Wrapping his arms around Makkachin, he buried his face in her fur. What was he going to do if he couldn’t skate?

***

To Viktor
VIKTOR! You’re injured?! Why am I finding out from the newspaper?

To Viktor
What happened?!

To Viktor
Answer me!

***

To Viktor
Please talk to me?

To Viktor
I’m worried. I got the details from Lyosha. He had to call Yakov

To Viktor
Yakov told him you aren’t talking to anyone

To Viktor
Does that include me?

To Viktor
I’m going to call, you better answer.

***
Viktor stared at the ringing cell phone before turning his head away. Makkachin jumped up onto the couch and rested her head on Viktor’s thigh. Absentmindedly, he let his hand fall into her curls and stroked the dog’s head.

It’s a bad tear to your meniscus; luckily, it’s to the outside edge with a good blood supply, so it’s likely it will heal itself. This is a fairly common injury for figure skaters. The extent of the damage is right on the line, though. If the healing is too slow, you might have to undergo surgery, which would lengthen recovery time. We’ll just have to wait and see.

Regardless, you won’t be competing for at least two months.

Two months. He couldn’t even go onto the ice for most of that time, and when did visit the rink, it was only to see the physical therapy specialist who had his office there. Seeing all of his rinkmates -- at least the ones that weren’t in South Korea at the Grand Prix Finals -- training hard made the sting all the worse.

He’d miss Nationals.

He’d miss Europeans.

Would he miss Worlds? Would Russia even send him if he didn’t compete in Nationals?

What about the Olympics? Worlds was the qualifier for the Olympics. How many spots Russia would get would be determined by how well the skaters sent to Worlds would do. Georgi was good. Well, all right. He was certainly better than he had been, but between the three skaters, could they keep their total placements low enough to guarantee them the three spots? Even two spots?

Твою мать!

***

Yuuri closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed to focus on his skating.

“Just like you did at Junior Nationals, Yuu-kun.” Alexei’s hands were on his shoulders. The gentle pressure was meant to help him relax, but there was so much tension that he couldn’t. At Junior Nationals, he wasn’t thinking about an injured friend.

Finally, he stepped on to the ice, skating a bit away from the entrance before turning back to return to Alexei.

“Yura, давай!”

He turned and looked to his left. The call had come from the stands set aside for competitors; Yuuri caught sight of Katya and Yakov standing against the railing. Katya was waving at him, but Yakov had his arms crossed against his chest, face set in its usual dour expression. Yuuri lifted his hand in acknowledgement and smiled.

“Impressive. Usually Yakov doesn’t come out to watch when he doesn’t have a student competing in the level.”

Yuuri turned to look at his coach. “Well, I’m a former student.”

Alexei nodded. “You are. But it’s more than that. You’re going to prove to everyone here why you belong at the JGPF.” He held out his fist and Yuuri bumped it with his own.
Yes, he was.

***

“That was beautiful, Yuuri.” Katya wrapped her arms around Yuuri and hugged him tight. “Oh, I’m so glad that they’re hosting the Junior and Senior Grand Prix at the same time! You’ve been missed at the rink. Milochka wants you to come back.”

Yuuri smiled. In all honesty, he wanted to go back to Russia as well. He wasn’t nearly as homesick for it as he had been for Japan, but he definitely missed the rink and his former rinkmates. The ice had been so much fun. “The JSF has picked up part of my training expenses now that I’m training in Japan.”

“And you’re just a Junior! That’s amazing, Yuuri!”

Yakov nodded next to her.

“Give me your phone.” Yuuri handed over his small phone and Katya immediately started inputting things. “Now that Viktor has turned into a complete diva and has locked himself away from the world, Mila isn’t getting her updates anymore. She still doesn’t have a phone, but here -- you can text me or email me, and I’ll pass them on. You know I’d like to hear from you, too.”

Yuuri took his phone back and squeezed it in his fist. “Is he…” Yuuri sighed.

“He’s fine. Just overreacting. Athletes have injuries, it happens. His therapy is going well and when I get back, we’ll find out how his healing is going.” Yakov paused and looked at Yuuri, brow furrowed. “He’s not talking to you?”

Shaking his head, Yuuri took a deep breath. “He hasn’t replied to a single text or picked up a single phone call since it happened.”

Yakov sighed. “Don’t let him affect your free skate. Katya and I will be watching.”

“Mila wants so many pictures!”

Yuuri laughed.

***

To Viktor
I’m in fourth after the short program…

***

Yuuri closed his eyes as he skated to the center of the ice. There was something about skating exhibition programs that he loved more than anything, and this one was fun. He’d choreographed it with Alexei over the summer, and Viktor had even put in his (unasked for) two cents when he was in Osaka.

A silver was not gold, but it was something that he was proud of.

He zigzagged across the ice to the beat, turning back and forth as he did. His jumps were mostly doubles -- decided on after a charley horse earlier in the day-- but when the chorus kicked in he jumped into a triple flip. He twizzled across the ice before gliding into a spread eagle -- first an outside and then an inside -- cutting an ‘S’ into the ice. Gaining speed, he leaped into a sit spin then
transitioned to a layback spin, catching the blade of his skate in one hand. And when he came out of it, he raced across the ice, sliding into a large circle as he hydrobladed.

His last jump was a triple axel-double toe loop combo followed by another quick series of steps before going into his final spin, an illusion spin. He skated toward the far side of the rink, throwing himself to the ice and sliding across it on his back, staring up at the lights of the arena with one hand lifted up as the music faded out.

***

To Viktor
I got silver, by the way. I don’t even know if you’re reading these.

To Viktor
You’re an ass.

***

To Katya (and Mila)
Do me a favor and throw Viktor’s birthday present at his head for me when it arrives.

Katya (and Mila)
Mila says that won’t be a problem because Viktor is a whiny baby. And that she loved your exhibition skate. Thanks for reminding us about the YouTube channel.

To Katya (and Mila)
I’d actually prefer whining to nothing. Just don’t tell me when you watch things, please!!!

Katya (and Mila)
Now I’ll have to tell you exactly what I loved about all your routines! -M

***

The MRI results were good. The tear is mending itself. If you keep up with the physical therapy, you should be able to get onto the ice in February, so you’ll be fine for next season.

“If I get on the ice in February, will they let me go to Worlds in March?” Viktor stared at Yakov expectantly.

Yakov sighed. “Vitya, you shouldn’t worry about that--”

“I want to be on the ice again! Will they or won’t they, Yakov?”

Shaking his head, Yakov tugged his coat on. “They might. If they think you’re in good enough condition to place high enough, the RSF can make an exception based on your standing instead of a win at Nationals, if we petition for it. If it wasn’t the Olympic qualifier year, though, they probably wouldn’t even consider it.”

Viktor nodded. “I can do it. I will do it.”

“Is there any point in telling you not to?”

Viktor didn’t bother answering as he watched Yakov leave his apartment. He took a deep breath and waited, and when he knew that Yakov had gotten in his car and left for good, Viktor grabbed his keys and made his way out of the building, pausing only to make sure the knee brace was in place.
He hadn’t actually locked himself up; he’d just been avoiding anything skating-related, and was using the doctor’s orders to rest, ice, compress and elevate his leg as an excuse to not deal with people.

He didn’t want to pretend that things were fine. He wanted to be churlish and petulant, rain down scathing retorts, and hurl a skate or two, but that wasn’t good for anyone. So instead he just stayed away.

It’s not like anyone would understand anyway.

His heart clenched. Maybe Yu-- someone… no. No one would understand not being allowed on the ice, and what it was doing to him.

Something had to give, to change. And maybe it was him. He pushed through the door of the shop he’d hobbled his way to. The young woman who’d been sweeping the floor looked up. “Can I help you?”

“I want you to cut it all off.”

***

Yuuri took a deep breath, leaning over with his palms pressed to his knees. He was never going to get used to dancing like this. Ever.

“Yuuri-kun, keep an eye on your levels and make sure that you keep your center low.”

“はい!” He sighed as the teacher turned away and went to grab her water.

“Stay in plié.”

He turned his head to look at the petite girl next to him. Like almost everybody else in the class, Noda Haruka was from the music side of the school -- in her case, a modestly popular girl group, LOVE-LY. “What?”

“Stay in plié. You keep straightening your legs and that’s wrong.” She brushed her short hair behind her ear. “Like this.” Noda bent her knees and got into the starting position. Yuuri rolled his shoulders and matched her. “Yeah.” She did the first couple of moves, twisting her knee in and then back out before doing a quick kick and turn.

Yuuri copied her, trying to remember to keep his supporting knee bent when he kicked. It still felt wrong. Then he felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s it.” Yuri glanced up. Tatsuno Shuji was another one of the school’s musical talents, from a boy band that leaned a little more to the rock side, called EXCITE. “That’s a lot better, Yuuri-kun. Here.” Yuuri took a step back and watched as Shuji rolled his right shoulder in, then sharply snapped his elbow back out before stepping forward and twisting his foot just a little. With a flourish, he slid his feet back, almost like he was walking in place.

Yuuri mimicked him and was about to go on to the next eight-count when Noda-chan laughed. “No, right there, when you’re crossing back, you straighten those legs again.”

He did it again, chanting keep your knees bent in his head.

“So much better.” Shuji smiled, brushing back his bangs -- dyed, like most of the idols were. “How much ballet experience do you have that it makes this hard for you?”
“Thirteen years’ worth.” He ran his hands through his hair. Minako and Lilia would probably be horrified at the sight of his lines being destroyed. “Thank you, though.”

“It’s not a problem. We’re all in this together. I was surprised that they put this class together, but I guess if they have enough students to make hiring the teacher worthwhile…” Noda-chan trailed off. “Don’t you have another big competition coming up? You were in Nationals at Christmas, right? My mom said something about you skating; she’s really into that sort of thing.”

Yuuri nodded and grabbed his water and took a long drink. “Since I’m technically old enough to compete in the Senior Division and I won gold at Junior Nationals, I was expected to skate in Nationals. I didn’t last year, even though I was invited to.”

“I didn’t realize that you were the gold medalist.”

“In Juniors. In Seniors, I just barely made the top ten.” Yuuri smiled. “Takagi-senpai in Year Two competed in both as well. After a bronze finish in Juniors, she placed somewhere in the middle in Seniors.”

Noda-chan dove into her bag, glancing over to make sure the teacher’s attention was distracted before pulling out her phone. She flipped it open and started typing fast. “Sixth isn’t barely in the top ten, by the way. Almost in the top five would be more accurate.” She handed her phone over to Shuji. “Found a video.”

Yuuri’s eyes widened; he clenched his hands into fists at his sides, trying to fight the temptation to just grab the phone for himself. Shuji’s expression didn’t give anything away when he handed the phone back. “Cool.” He slid his hand through his long bangs, smoothing them out and back into place so they were perfect.

Noda-chan rolled her eyes. “Shuji-kun, you should compliment him when he deserves it.”

“He said it wasn’t a big deal, so I’m not going to treat it like it is.” He winked at Yuuri, and Yuuri flushed. He can’t remember if he’d ever been winked at before. Maybe Viktor had once as a joke, but no, he’d never been winked at. How was he even supposed to respond to that? Wink back? He coughed, and shifted back a bit. Noda-chan started laughing.

“Haruka-chan, put the phone away or I’ll have to confiscate it. You know the school policy.”

Noda-chan sighed, but did as the teacher instructed, sliding the phone back into her bag. “So where is the next competition you’re in? I’m hoping Hokkaido. I’ve always wanted to go up there, but we haven’t booked any tours in Sapporo or anything.”

“Sapporo is nice. I did a show there over the summer.” Yuuri paused. “My next competition is World Juniors at the end of the month. It was supposed to be in the Czech Republic, but they moved it to Bulgaria again.”

Shuji finished retying his laces and looked at Yuuri. “Wait, so when you were doing all those competitions in the fall, they weren’t in Japan?”

Yuuri shook his head. “None of them were. My qualifiers were in the Czech Republic and South Africa, and the Finals were in South Korea. Japan gets one of the qualifiers for seniors every year and that’s a much bigger deal, so usually the Junior Grand Prix doesn’t have a qualifier here. Last year I went to Romania and the UK.”

Whistling, Shuji shook his head. “I should have done figure skating instead of becoming an idol. I could be travelling the world!”
“Say that after you have to nurse a bruise that covers your entire thigh, or have to bandage your feet because your skates have rubbed them raw,” Yuuri sighed.

***

Viktor opened the window and tugged his heavy sweater down before heading to the couch and calling Makkachin over. Ten minutes would air the living room out and give him enough time to look through all the messages that he’d missed since he let his phone die. He wanted Yakov to think that he was doing better than great, and a fresh-smelling apartment was the first step. He could deal with the cold that long. He was Russian.

Yuuri
Daily text: Happy Birthday. I told Katya to throw your gift at your head. BTW I am competing in Senior Nationals.

Viktor sighed and snuggled closer to Makkachin. That explained why that gift went whizzing past his head. Katya had only smiled and shrugged when he’d turned and asked her what the hell she was doing.

Yuuri
Daily text: Came in 6th. I flubbed a lot of my jumps in my free skate. Too nervous. Felt like everyone was staring at me and had expectations.

Yuuri
Daily text: You should have seen the sign Minako-sensei made @ Nationals. So embarrassing!

There were days missing. Yuuri must have been annoyed at him, and Viktor couldn’t blame him.

Yuuri

Did he miss Viktor, or just his dog? He scratched behind Makkachin’s ears and whispered “Yuuri misses you. I bet you miss him, too.”

Yuuri
Daily text: Katya says that your PT is going well… Would have been nice to hear that from you.

Probably just his dog, then. Viktor swore he could hear Yuuri’s annoyed tone of voice as he read the messages.

Yuuri
Daily text: Finally starting to get the hang of hip-hop. I think. My classmates are helping.

Yuuri
Daily text: I’m super annoyed that you’re still ignoring me.

Yuuri
Daily text: お前最低だな。

Viktor decided he probably didn’t want to get that translated, though Alexei would probably do it with glee. It really didn’t surprise Viktor that the next text was over a week later.

Yuuri
Daily text: One of my classmates got caught in a relationship with a third year. They made them break up.
Yuuri
Daily text: Yuuko wants to put a video of me dancing hip-hop up on her channel.

He’d have to check to see if Yuuri had let her record him. He skimmed over the rest. More days missing than not. The last two were from the day before. Valentine’s Day.

Yuuri
Daily text: Are Valentine’s chocolates a thing in Russia because they are here. I didn’t think I’d get any, but I did. So v. awkward! What am I going to (1/2)

Yuuri
do for White Day?(2/2)

So Yuuri was dating someone. Viktor wondered if it was that boy from the ice show, or that girl skater. Though what White Day was, Viktor had no idea. He didn’t remember it from any anime he’d seen... He’d have to look it up after he got back from his doctor.

After he got permission to start skating again.

Then he could call Yuuri and... He’d think about that later, because Yuuri was going to be mad and Viktor didn’t know how he was going to deal with that. He shouldn’t have left things for as long as he had. Yakov had accused him of sulking, but Viktor didn’t see it as sulking. His World Champion title was on the line! Besides, Yuuri would forgive him. He was still sending the daily texts, after all.

At least some of the time, anyway.

When his phone rang, Viktor answered it without thinking. “Алло.”

“Mr. Nikiforov?” English. Definitely not Yakov. This was his private number; he shouldn’t be getting calls from people he didn’t know.

“How did you get this number?”

“I’m with Figure Skating Monthly, and I just wanted to ask you some questions.”

Viktor squeezed the phone tightly in his hand. “All interview requests are supposed to go through my coach, Yakov Feltsman.”

“Yes, well, he’s been giving everyone a flat ‘no’.”

“Well, there’s your answer, then.”

There was a sigh on the line, then a cough. “I just wanted to ask you how you’re feeling about missing most of this season. It was supposed to be a really promising season for you, but instead it seems like the Czech skater Dušan Blažek will be sweeping the gold medals after that stunning upset at the Grand Prix Final. How long will you need to recuperate? There are rumors that you’ll be out even for the Olympics next year.”

“Like I said,” Viktor kept his voice calm and inserted a little laugh, even though he didn’t feel like it. “All interview requests need to go through my coach, Yakov Feltsman. Пока!” He ended the call, squeezing the phone even tighter before throwing it at the wall and missing. He could only watch, horrified, as it flew out the window onto the road below.

He jumped up -- displacing Makkachin, who leaped down with a disgruntled yelp -- and raced to the
window, clutching the sill as he leaned out. He made it just in time to watch an electric blue Zaporozhets run his phone over.

Maybe it was all right. It was only a Zaporozhets, after all, some old beater that should have gone out with Communism. How much damage could it do? Viktor grabbed his keys from next to the door and ran down the stairs.

It was not all right. Damn it!

***

To Viktor
Daily text: Wish me luck in Bulgaria.

***

“Viktor, get off the ice, Yura is about to skate!” Mila screamed at him from the side of the barrier.

Panting, Viktor skated to the edge and grabbed his guards. He only had a couple more weeks to get back into shape and re-perfect his program. Provisionally, he’d be going to Worlds, but no official announcement had been made and wouldn’t be until the first of March -- the day of the Exhibition for World Juniors.

“Coming, Milochka. Don’t tell Yakov that I went upstairs in skates, he’ll kill me.”

She just shook her head and ran ahead of him.

A couple of people raised their eyebrows at the fact he was still on his blades -- Viktor always took ridiculously good care of his skates, after all -- but he didn’t care. He’d take them off when he sat down. He was not going to miss Yuuri skating.

On the screen Yuuri was nodding as Alexei talked to him, their heads close together. Riku was standing just to the side and whispered something. Yuuri looked up at her, and the camera caught his smile. He said something else to Alexei, and then, as had become their tradition, gave Alexei a fist bump before pushing off the side and skating to the middle.

Yuuri had changed his costume from the Junior Grand Prix. He was wearing a black jacket that stopped right at the waist, with silver embroidery that ran along the cuffs and arms as well as at the bottom of the back. This was over a deep blue undershirt -- most likely a skating leotard -- and black skating pants that had the same sort of embroidery going down the side of the leg. He’d also slicked back his hair for the first time. Viktor swallowed. He didn’t look like the Yuuri he remembered.

“He looks good, doesn’t he?” Katya sounded approving. “I like it better than the costume he wore at the Grand Prix.”

Viktor just nodded.

Then the music started, and Yuuri threw his whole body into the routine. From the very beginning, his edges were deep and clean, and when he threw himself into a butterfly entry for his camel spin, bending his leg and turning upwards -- it was utterly beautiful. His step sequence was exquisite and flawless as usual, and Viktor knew that there was no way that it would get marked lower than a Level 4.
All three of his jumps had been moved into the end of program. Alexei must have lost his mind to do that, but no, if Viktor remembered right, Minako-sensei and Riku had choreographed the program. Which would be why it looked so delicate and fragile, like it could shatter into a thousand pieces, but Viktor could tell that it was damned difficult; taking everything that Yuuri had and then some. The spiral into a triple axel was immaculate. And his triple lutz-triple toe loop combination was the most perfect that Viktor had seen him do all season.

He spared just a second to glance over at Katya and Mila. Katya had her bottom lip caught between her teeth and Mila was leaning as far forward as she could over the table.

Viktor barely spared a thought for the perfectly landed triple loop as Yuuri moved into his final combination spin. He was riveted, and didn’t even realize that he was holding his breath until the music ended and he gasped loudly as Yuuri finally broke his pose and collapsed to his knees on the ice.

“You three just saw history. I guarantee you that Viktor just lost one of his World Records.” Viktor glanced back and saw Yakov standing in the door to the break room. “I told Riku that moving all those jumps was ridiculous, but she insisted that Yuuri could do it.”

Viktor returned his attention to the screen. By now, Yuuri had left the ice and was sitting in the Kiss & Cry with Alexei and Riku, flushed but smiling. He was clutching some sort of plushie in his arms, but Viktor couldn’t tell what it was. Yuuri was obviously nervous, his leg bouncing up and down as he stared at the screen where his score would be displayed with his eyes squinted.

Because of Yakov’s comment, Viktor wasn’t surprised when the score was announced and was proclaimed a World Record, though Yuuri and Alexei certainly were. Alexei dove for Yuuri and physically lifted him up in a bear hug; his wife just sat back and smiled.

Viktor had never been so glad to lose a record in his life. He shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his still-shiny new iPhone, scrolling through his contacts so he could send a congratulatory text. Next to him, Katya was obviously doing the same thing.

Except there was no “Yuuri Katsuki” in his contacts. “Дерьмо!” His old phone had been so damaged that he couldn’t carry over his contacts, and he’d completely forgotten to get Yuuri’s number from someone. He looked at Katya. “Katya--”

“Her.”

“You don’t even know--”

“If you had remembered to ask me when you were inputting all your contacts last week, maybe I would have given you Yuuri’s number, but...” She looked at him, and Viktor knew it was a losing battle. She was obviously more mad at him for ignoring Yuuri than she’d been that he ignored her.

He then turned to Yakov, only to find that his coach had disappeared again.

After a moment’s searching, he dug up Alexei’s number from his email and sent off a text. His phone’s message notification went off a minute later.

**Lyosha**

I’ll tell him. And no, I won’t give out my student’s phone number. Besides, don’t you already have it?
Viktor
It’s a new phone! I lost all my contacts when a Zaporozhets ran over my phone

Lyosha
Busy celebrating that my student broke your record! No time to listen to you whine!
Don’t leave your phone in the road. Dangerous!

***

Yuuri’s free skate was not nearly as good as his short program. The fire that they had seen the night before was missing, and a Spanish skater took advantage of the opportunity to take gold out from under him. On the podium, however, Yuuri didn’t seem upset as he accepted his silver medal. The Italian who won bronze, Crispino, seemed much more put out, glaring around the first place winner directly at him.

***

vnikiforov d sk8madonna please tell me that I guessed right and you are Yuuko.

sk8madonna d vnikiforov why? Does this have to do with KY?

vnikiforov d sk8madonna yes. I lost his number.

sk8madonna d vnikiforov He already knows that. He’s really mad at you.

vnikiforov d sk8madonna I know. I need to apologize, but I can’t reach him. Please help.

sk8madonna d vnikiforov I can’t give you his number or email, but I can tell you that he has a twitter, but he doesn’t use it much.

vnikiforov d sk8madonna He’s on twitter?! And he doesn’t follow me?! I’m going to have to figure it out myself, aren’t I?

sk8madonna d vnikiforov There are things in life that are worth working for, aren’t there? Is Yuuri’s friendship one of them?

vnikiforov d sk8madonna Always.

sk8madonna d vnikiforov His SP was amazing, wasn’t it? I couldn’t believe it when I saw his new costume, and he broke your record!

vnikiforov d sk8madonna More than. I loved it.

***

ykatsuki: this page does not exist

ykastusudon: this page does not exist

yuurikatsuki: [exists but there are no tweets]
**vnikiforov** d sk8madonna can I have a hint?

**sk8madonna** d vnikiforov it’s not hard.

**vnikiforov** d sk8madonna is it protected?

**sk8madonna** d vnikiforov yes.

**vnikiforov** d sk8madonna is it katsudonyuuri?

**vnikiforov** d sk8madonna I’ll take your silence as a yes.

---

**katsudonyuuri** ヴィっちゃんはコーチの晩御飯を盗んだ。アレクセイは悲しそうな顔をした。posted 2 weeks ago via mobile web

**katsudonyuuri** ヴィクトルはフォローリクエストをした。@sk8madonna ゆうちゃん教えてくれたの？Posted 3d ago via mobile web

**katsudonyuuri** @butterflyswimNS うん，前に会ったスケーターだ。posted 2d ago via mobile web

**katsudonyuuri** @lovelyharuka コマーシャルまだ見ていない。でもきっとよかったですよ。posted 1d ago via mobile web

**katsudonyuuri** @lovelyharuka ごめん，学校で機嫌が悪かった。明日修司君に謝ります。posted 2h ago via mobile web

**katsudonyuuri** @sk8madonna また話せるかも。世界選手権の間にうちにいる。posted 2h ago via mobile web

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**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri I can’t read your twitter

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri I am an ass and I’m sorry.

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri Forgive me?

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov not changing to English for you.

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov I better get a DM every day from you. EVERY DAY.

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri will you reply?

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov maybe

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri I’ll take it.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Твою мать! - basically Fuck!
дай! - Davai - Go!
はい - Hai - yes
お前最低だね。- Omae saiteida na - You are the worst (a terrible thing to say to someone in Japanese... so worse than it sounds... kinda close to asshole... at least that is what my research found)
Алло. - Allo - Hello
Пока! - Poka - Bye
вызываемый абонент недоступен или находится вне зоны действия сети -
vyzyvayemyy abonent nedostupen ili nakhoditsya vne zony deystviya seti - "The person you are trying to reach is unavailable or out of network coverage"
Дерьмо - Der’mo - Shit
Нет - Nyet - No
ヴィっちゃんはコーチの晩御飯を盗んだ。アレクセイは悲しそうな顔をした。
- Vicchan wa coochi no bangohan wo nusunda. Alexei wa kanashi sou na kao wo shita. - Vicchan stole my coach’s dinner. Alexei made the saddest face.
ヴィクトルはフォローリクエストをした。@sk8madonna ゆうちゃん教えてくれたの？- Viktor wa foroo rikuesuto wo shita. Yuuchan oshiete kureta no? - Viktor did a follow request. Yuuchan did you tell him?
うん、前に会ったスケーターだ。- Un, mae ni atta skater da - Yes, he’s the skater you met.
コマーシャルまだ見ていない。でもきっとよかったですよ。-commercial mada miteinai. Demo kitto yokatta desuyo.- I haven’t watched that commercial. I’m sure it was good.
ごめん、学校で機嫌が悪かった。明日修司君に謝ります。-Gomen, gakkou de kigen ga warukatta. Ashita Shuji-kun ni ayamarimasu. - Sorry I was in a bad mood at school. I’ll apologize to Shuji-kun tomorrow.
また話せるかも。世界選手権の間にうちにいる。
- Mata hanaseru kamo. Sekai Senshuuken no aida ni uchi ni iru. - We’ll be able to talk. I’m going to be home during the World Championships.
***
Thanks to yuuris-vicchan and cryoclaire for translations.
This one was a little heavier... usually I wouldn't put a giant block of Japanese, but I wanted that disconnect that Viktor would feel when he finally (after days) gets access and can't read a damn thing. So many many thanks to yuuris-vicchan for that! :D

A note on formatting... I want to try and keep the formatting for tech stuff as similar to where it was tech wise at the time. So that is why Alexei's and Viktor's text exchange was different then what I've done before and different from Yuuri's earlier in the chapter since Yuuri still has a flip phone. And we now also have the addition of direct messages in twitter.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Life has to go on, even after drama.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Yuuri, they just showed Viktor! Did you know?”

Yuuri ran into the main room balancing three bowls of katsudon. He dropped one in front of Yuuko before handing Nishigori his and settling down with his own. He’d saved the katsudon he’d earned for getting silver at Junior Worlds so he could have it with Nishigori and Yuuko while they watched the World Championships. “Know what?”

Yuuko pointed to the screen. “He cut his hair! How could he? Why? This is awful! The worst thing ever! I never would have helped him if I had known that he had cut his hair!”

Nishigori leaned over and rubbed his hand in circles on Yuuko’s back. Yuuri had to look away, so instead he focused at Viktor’s image on the screen. The haircut was good; Yuuri had to admit he liked it, once he’d gotten over the initial shock. It made Viktor look older, but less... obtainable, in a way. Not that Viktor had ever looked obtainable... So engrossed, Yuuri almost missed Nishigori’s comment: “I’m sure Yuuri will pass on the message.”

Yuuko turned and glared at Nishigori. “I’ll tell him myself, thank you very much.” Her frustration didn’t stop her from leaning back against Nishigori, though. Yuuri coughed.

Nishigori grinned in response. “Get a girlfriend.”

“Don’t be so heteronormative, Takeshi. Maybe Yuuri would rather have a boyfriend.”

Yuuri sighed. “Yuuri would rather have neither, since it would ultimately lead to a lecture by the administration of his school.”

Nishigori laughed and they turned back to watch Viktor’s short program, katsudon forgotten for the moment. Yuuko bit her lip through the whole thing, and Takeshi at one point looked away entirely. “He wiped out on a triple axel.”

And then on a quadruple toe loop. “That was supposed to be a combination,” Yuuri groaned.

At the end of the short program, Viktor was in eighth. None of them could remember a time when Viktor had been out of the top five.

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov You ok?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Been better, and yet I still placed higher than Georgi.
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Didn’t he win gold at your Nationals?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yes.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I like the hair, but…

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri but?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Nothing… I guess I’ll just miss braiding it. That sounds stupid. Forget it. It looks good.

Viktor put his phone back in the pocket of his jacket. He didn’t particularly like having to use Twitter to communicate with Yuuri, but Yuuri refused to give him his number, saying that it was more economical for him to use Twitter. Though why he also excluded his e-mail -- Viktor could only guess that Yuuri was still seeking his revenge, and Viktor would indulge him. Of course he would.

Maybe he shouldn’t have cut his hair after all? No; Viktor bit his lip and shook his head until his eyes were hidden behind his new, long bangs.

At least he wouldn’t have to pay roaming charges this trip.

The thought was cut short by the arrival of Yakov and Georgi. Yakov gave him only the briefest glance before pointedly focusing his attention on the rink. “That went about as well as I expected from you, Vitya.”

Georgi smirked just a bit. It wasn’t often that Viktor placed so low. Viktor sighed. “I think I jinxed myself.”

“You were skating much too hesitantly. Your PCS wasn’t nearly as high as it should have been, even with the mistakes.” Yakov motioned for them both to follow him, and they quickly fell into step next to each other. “You need to put your injury out of your mind, Vitya, or else there will be no point in the RSF sending you here at all.”

Viktor nodded.

***

Viktor managed to pull himself together enough to place fourth. It was off podium, but between the three skaters that Russia had sent to Worlds they were able to keep their placements high enough to get two skaters for the Olympics next year.

The banquet wasn’t nearly as fun as it had been in the past. The United States had managed to get three skaters in, as had Canada. Oda coming back for Japan had been a blessing -- they somehow managed to get two skaters in -- but he he had also finished off-podium, landing a few spots lower than Viktor.

No one looked as disappointed as Christophe Giacometti, however, and it bothered Viktor. He liked Christophe. They’d had fun together at other parties, so he approached with two conciliatory glasses of not-so-good sparkling cider. Why the US had to have such a high age for drinking, Viktor would never understand. It was worse than Japan! And at least in Japan he would have been allowed to drink his champagne in peace this time.
“Cider? I think it’s supposed to be apple, but it tastes nothing like it and the bubbles are excessive.”

Christophe looked up at him and gave a small smile, taking the glass from Viktor’s fingers. “I’d rather have Schnapps.” He shook his head. “Thanks to my low placement, Switzerland didn’t get a single spot. At least you have an excuse, coming back from an injury. Stéphane would have made sure that Switzerland would be at the Olympics.”

“But he isn’t here. And if he was, he’d be coming back from an injury, too. Don’t worry about it; there’s the Nebelhorn Trophy in the fall.” Viktor sat next to him, taking the opportunity to size the other skater up. He took a breath as he recalled Christophe’s programs. They would have worked well for him even a year ago, but puberty had changed him dramatically this past year, and in ways it hadn’t Viktor. Chris was taller than him now -- not by much, but his shoulders were definitely broader and his back much more defined. He couldn’t play the innocent boy traipsing through the meadows anymore like he could at fifteen and sixteen. “Why did you choose the ‘Skater’s Waltz’?”

Chris shook his head. “I didn’t, my coach did. Insisted on it. Music like that has worked well for me in the past.”

“I wouldn’t let him choose your music again. You had no connection with it.”

“I know.” Taking a deep breath, Chris slid into his familiar French and lowered his voice. “I am thinking of leaving my coach. I received an offer from my old coach from Juniors. He wants to take me back. Josef Karpisek.”

Viktor nodded. Karpisek was a colleague of Yakov’s, and anyone that Yakov had respect for had to be decent. “Probably a wise decision. Regardless, though, you should take more control of your own programs.”

Chris smiled, turning in to face Viktor more. “Any suggestions, mon ami?”

Viktor shook his head, sending his bangs fluttering. He lifted a finger to his lips in thought. “You should look into Lai’s ‘Love Story’ maybe or ‘A Time for Us’.”

“Très romantique.” His fingers brushed against Viktor’s arm; his thumb caressed the curve of his wrist. “Qu'est-ce que je ferais sans toi?”

Viktor licked his lips. Lines about beautiful eyes popped into his head, but he swallowed them down. Too cliché. Directness would be the way to go. “Tu me dragues?”

“Mais oui.”

***

“So, let’s say that I take your advice and skate one of those treacley love songs,” Christophe paused. “I don’t think I can act lovelorn.”

Viktor rolled over and propped himself up on one hand. “No, why would you? That wasn’t why I suggested them.”

“Then why did you?” Christophe reached up and attempted to brush Viktor’s hair out of his eyes, but the strands of his bangs just fell back.

“The goal is not for you to tell a story of love on the ice, but to coax the audience into falling in love with you.”
A slow smile turned the corners of Chris’s lips up. “Romance the audience?”

Viktor nodded. “Why not? You know how to flirt. Seduce them--” He twisted when the notification sound for his phone went off, the sheets rustling.

“Don’t tell me that you are dating someone. Didn’t you learn from your misadventure with Élodie?”

Viktor laughed as he typed out a response. “Yes, I did, but that’s not what it was. I just need to reply to a friend of mine.”

“While you’re in bed with someone?” Viktor didn’t have to take his eyes off the phone to know that Chris was pouting. He could tell just by the sound of the other boy’s voice, followed by the insistent press of lips to his shoulder.

Viktor bit his own lip. “I don’t think he would accept a romantic entanglement as an excuse for ignoring him.”

---

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Won’t be replying for a couple of days. I’ll be out of town. You still need to send your messages though.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri you won’t have access to your phone?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’ll be in Kagoshima watching Nakagawa swim in a meet. So I won’t have much free time.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri My heart is breaking, Yuuri! You choose Nakagawa over me? Are you sure that you aren’t dating him?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Tell Giacometti to kiss it better. You were photographed in the hotel lobby with his tongue down your throat, btw.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Also, Nakagawa’s a friend. Not one with benefits.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You play dirty.

“We’re on the internet, by the way.” Viktor dropped his phone back down on the nightstand and sighed.

Chris’s fingers wrapped around his wrist. “Do you care?”

“Not particularly.”

***

Yuuri found a spot close to the top of the stands and sat down. He’d never been to a swim meet before -- or Kagoshima, for that matter -- and everyone had suggested that he should take at least a bit of the time off between school terms to do something fun. And if he wasn’t allowed to skate, then hanging out with Nakagawa was kinda fun, too. Besides, they’d planned to see how close to the active volcano they could get.

(And he had finally had a reason to pick up Monhan again on the train ride. Yuuko and Nishigori
had been annoyingly couple-y while he had been in Hasetsu, and as a consequence Nishigori had completely forgotten that Monster Hunter even existed. But when he met Nakagawa in Fukuoka, Nakagawa had immediately brandished his PSP and declared that it was time to get some questing done.)

Furrowing his brow, Yuuri looked down at where the competitors for the 100m butterfly were congregating. He didn’t know how many heats there would be, or in which heat Nakagawa was competing, and he had no idea how to even identify Nakagawa when everyone had swimcaps and goggles on.

“Katsuki!” One of the swimmers started waving his arm.

Yuuri waved back. Black cap with purple lighting along the side. Easy enough to identify. He watched as the swimmer he now knew was Nakagawa climbed the block and got into position, fingers gripping the edge. The signal buzzed and all the swimmers dove in. Not knowing what he was watching -- or just how good Nakagawa was, or even what level of competition they were at -- made Yuuri a little more nervous for his friend, and had him riveted.

And a small part of him knew that Nakagawa looked damned good in his swimming kit.

When he’d started at Fukuzawa, Yuuri thought that he didn’t have anything in common with any of the other sports, but that was wrong. Swimming, he’d learned, was rather like skating; though you were technically competing against other skaters, it was not a direct competition. Rather, it was all about how well you performed on your own terms. Nakagawa said that it didn’t really matter what he placed at this particular meet. He could come in first, but if he didn’t beat his previous time, he’d be disappointed; he needed to get some official times that were in the zone for National and International qualifiers.

Of course, he wouldn’t be upset if he did come in first, though the time for the heats were only important when it came to qualifying for the final. At least that’s how Yuuri understood it.

When Nakagawa got out of the pool and motioned toward the entrance, Yuuri grabbed his bag and made his way down. They still had a few hours before the final and were planning to explore the area around the complex.

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/h6u5ag3 active volcano.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri isn’t that dangerous? Is that the swimmer?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov not particularly and yes. You missed sending a DM yesterday, that means 2 tomorrow. Nakagawa’s awake. Going to play Monhan.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Monhan???

***

“最高!” Nakagawa dropped his PSP into his lap. “I can’t believe we finally managed to beat Lunastra.”

“Perseverance wins.”

“Yeah, it does.” Something in the tone of Nakagawa’s voice made Yuuri look up from his screen. It’d gone a little quieter than it had been even moments before. “I wanted to thank you for going to
Kagoshima with me. The other swimmers wanted to take the rest of break for an actual break since we had a meet right after classes ended, and I really couldn’t blame them. But I wanted to do this one, and going to competitions alone sucks.”

“Uh… yeah, it’s a not a problem, really.” Yuuri turned his attention back to the game, though the only thing on-screen right now was the main menu. “I can’t really understand, though. I go to all my competitions with just my coach and his wife, usually.”

“Katsuki?”

Yuuri turned his head to look at Nakagawa. He was leaning in; the distance that had been between them unexpectedly halved, the scent of the hotel shampoo clinging in the air, masking the sharpness of the chlorine that still lingered.

“Can I?” Nakagawa’s eyes flicked down to look at Yuuri’s lips and Yuuri unconsciously licked them, dragging his teeth across the chapped flesh.

He nodded.

It wasn’t at all what Yuuri expected his first kiss to be. He thought it would be more wet, but Nakagawa’s lips were fairly dry as they moved on his. It stung a little where the thin layer of skin was broken, and yet that didn’t make it unpleasant. It was, in fact, the opposite; soft, pleasing and slow. Yuuri darted his tongue out to wet his lips, but ended up brushing Nakagawa’s lips instead, and that was even better; Nakagawa tasted vaguely of the plum Ramune that he’d had earlier, and it was startlingly nice and very fitting for Nakagawa.

The kiss broke with a soft sound and Yuuri immediately turned his head to look at his lap, his hands clenched into tight fists. What now?

“Katsuki?” Nakagawa sounded hesitant, unsure. Yuuri didn’t like it. Nakagawa was always so self-confident. Unlike himself. “It… uh… wasn’t bad, was it?”

Yuuri shook his head, risking a glance over. “No. I liked it.” Nakagawa was always so self-confident. Unlike himself. “It… uh… wasn’t bad, was it?”

Yuuri shook his head, risking a glance over. “No. I liked it.” His face was warm and he immediately ducked his head back down again, turning the small console over in his hands. All the same, he still caught the grin on Nakagawa’s face from the corner of his eye.

“OK. Good. Want to do another quest?”

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri it took a while, but I finally found a subbed version of the new FMA! We need to watch it at the same time.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov do you know how hard it will be coordinating our schedules? Besides, shouldn’t you be busy planning your Olympic programs?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Shouldn’t you be planning yours too? Are you going to learn a quad?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m not in Seniors, and even if I was, I didn’t place high enough at Nats last time, what makes u think I would this time?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Because you’re Yuuri and the best Japanese skater I know.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t even know what to do with that comment.
Yuuri stepped down onto the smaller box that had been set up next to the one he was using for his box jumps, taking a deep breath as he hopped down onto the floor. The new training regimen was awful. He was in the gym almost every day; some days were box jumps, others one legged squats, and the rest were depth jumps. Granted, he was definitely starting to gain height on his jumps, but it was exhausting. Why did he ever think that learning quads would be a good idea?

Tiredness wasn’t the reason that he was taking a break, though; rather, his phone hadn’t stopped going off for the last three minutes. He flicked it open to look through the notifications as he grabbed his water. A lot of Twitter notifications, but then that was to be expected; between Viktor and Haruka he always had a ton of activity, as neither of them could stop incessantly updating everyone and everything on the platform. There was a text from Nakagawa asking where he was; Yuuri quickly responded that he was in the 6th floor gym. Yuuko had sent a text too, asking when he was going to visit Hasetsu again since it had been over a month. Yuuri had to stop from replying that he’d go back when he knew he wouldn’t have to avert his eyes every five minutes because Nishigori couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

Then there were the texts from Alexei.

Alexei
Trip scheduled for Tokyo next week. Already informed your school. Sponsorship meeting with Mizuno.

That was new. And huge. Mizuno supplied the national team jackets and handled the Olympic outfits. Why they wanted to sponsor him when he wasn’t even going to the Olympics -- that was the real question.

Alexei
And since we’ll be in Tokyo, the JSF wanted to talk to us as well.

Well, that couldn’t be good.

“All right. Katsuki-kun, you’re going to sit on the block all the way to the left and lace your skates up. Don’t finish tying them, though. And pay attention for when we ask you to look up.”
Yuuri nodded at the photographer and headed toward the black block he’d been directed to. The set -- he guessed that was what it was called, at least -- was pretty bare: a simple background, and then two boxes with some space between them. His skates had been propped up against one of them, but whoever had fetched them hadn’t put on the hard guards. He looked around for Alexei, who would have his bag.

“Nikiforov has a pair of poodle covers as well. They’re cute.” Oda-san smiled at him. He’d come back from training in the US just for this shoot.

Yuuri nodded. “He… uh, he saw mine and wanted a set, so I had my friend send a pair so I could give him them.” He wasn’t used to talking to older skaters. He wasn’t used to talking to younger skaters, either. He just wasn’t used to talking.

“I didn’t realize you knew Nikiforov.”

Yuuri waved at Alexei to get his attention and held up his skate. Alexei nodded and went off to fetch the hard guards. “I trained with him for a year in St. Petersburg. We’re friends. Usually.”

“Usually?”

Yuuri bit his lip. He hadn’t meant to say that part out loud. He sighed. “When he’s not being over dramatic and annoying and--”

“So occasionally, then?” But he said it with a smile. “I like him, but he can be a bit much at times.”

Yuuri ducked his head and kept himself from laughing. “Yeah.”

***

The shoot went better than expected. He managed to stay relaxed and seemed to give the photographer what he wanted, but when he got a copy of the print ad, he decided that there was no way he was sending a copy to Viktor. Ever.

The spread was set up along the lines of “Past, Present, Future.” Tabito was posing with his Olympic medal from Salt Lake around his neck with legend “2002 Salt Lake/2006 Turin” printed near his head. Oda was wearing the puffy white official Olympic jacket that Mizuno had designed, accompanied by “2010 Vancouver”. And Yuuri was in the middle of putting his skates on. They had slicked back his hair but let him keep his glasses on, and then they’d printed “2014 Sochi” by his skates. Sure, it was a given that Oda-san would be going to the Olympics at Vancouver, but it wasn’t any sort of given that Yuuri would be going to Sochi!

He dropped his head to the desk. He got it. He understood what they were going for, but he didn’t think that the print would be that literal!

Riku and Alexei were pleased with it, however, and when he sent an email to Yuuko with a copy of the picture attached -- telling her that she couldn’t show it to anyone, even Nishigori, because Mizuno could pull his sponsorship if it leaked -- she’d just replied that it was awesome and that he looked “good.”

Meanwhile, Nakagawa took a picture of the spread with his phone and sent it to Shuji and Nodachan. Shuji wolf-whistled, and Yuuri wished that he’d died on the spot.

His parents were looking forward to the initial release so they could frame it and put it up in the onsen for their guests to look at -- right next to all the medals and awards that Yuuri had won.
In other words, everyone in his life was a traitor.

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You really weren’t surprised by your JGP assignments at all?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No. The JSF told Alexei and I that they were assigning me to Lake Placid and Croatia Cup so I could go to Nebelhorn.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri YOU’RE COMPETING IN SENIORS FINALLY?!!!?!!! You’re going to try for the Olympics too, right? RIGHT?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov NO! Well, maybe. But not because I want to. The JSF wants me to do a soft Senior debut to see how my scores compare.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov They think that my performance at last year’s Sen Nats wasn’t a good estimation of my potential or something.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri WE’RE GOING TO HAVE SO MUCH FUN IN VANCOUVER!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov (ლ‸ლ)(ლ‸ლ)

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuuuuuuuri!

***

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I know it’s last minute, but can you take my weekend intermediate 1 and weekend intermediate 2 classes at the ice castle?

カツキ丼 says:
What? Why? Is it a one time thing?

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
For two weeks. I know that it’s a lot to ask, but it’s just until this session ends. Takeshi is taking all my weekday ones on top of his. I can’t ask him to do the weekends too.

カツキ丼 says:
Yes, I’ll do it. But you owe me. And I’ll need ice time in the evenings since I’m still practicing my choreography and competitions are starting really soon. If it was three weeks, I wouldn’t be able to because I’ll be in the U.S. for JGP. And you still haven’t told me why.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Meet Takeshi and I in Fukuoka on Friday night and we’ll explain.

カツキ丼 says:
Are you two getting married or something? Are you pregnant? I can’t think why else you couldn’t skate but not tell me why over chat.

カツキ丼 says:
Wait a minute. YOU ARE, AREN’T YOU?! I’m calling. Now.

***

Yuuri skated around the edge of the rink, looking over his shoulder so he could keep an eye out for
the other skaters. There were quite a few really young competitors at this particular qualifier; young enough to make Yuuri feel like an old man, and he wasn’t even seventeen yet. When the space was clear, he adjusted into his run-up and jumped his triple loop. It was pretty solid now; more so than his triple Salchow, but then he hated Salchows.

Alexei had pulled the quad from his free skate for this qualifier; he didn’t need the points. Yuuri was, in a way, glad. He didn’t feel comfortable enough with the quad yet; his landing percentage was only in the 60s, and even when he did land it, most of the time the landing was shaky. Best to not try it.

He skated over to the edge of the rink, grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink, taking no notice as another competitor skated up next to him. Yuuri’s mind was still at least half in Japan, but that was only natural with everything that was going on. He still couldn’t believe that Yuuko and Nishigori were married. Forget the whole baby thing. MARRIED. It was a hard thing to wrap his head around, even though he’d watched them at the registry in Fukuoka with their parents. Yuuko was stuck with Nishigori forever now.

“----------

He jumped at the sound of the voice next to him and turned. The small skater from Thailand (according to the emblem on the sleeve of his jacket) was smiling at him. “Hi. Um, I don’t speak Thai. At all. What about English?”

The skater nodded. “Yeah, I do! I just said hello, I’m Phichit! Phichit Chulanont and you’re Yuuri Katsuki! You broke the Junior World Record for the short program at last year’s Junior Worlds. I was watching it back in Bangkok and it was amazing. Your spins were amazing. I think that my favourite had to be the flying camel that you did. How did you get your triple axel so clean? I can’t even land it most of the time yet, so my coach is making me stick to a double.” He paused for a breath and smiled.

“Thanks.” Yuuri scratched the back of his neck. This was like dealing with Sara Crispino, except that he was stuck on the ice and couldn’t just say he had to meet his coach. Skating practice had only started fifteen minutes prior. “Um. Practice. I wasn’t landing my triple axel cleanly until I was fifteen, and even then it wasn’t always consistent.”

“So I’m not too far behind, then! That’s good to know. This is my first year competing internationally. And they sent me all the way to America for my qualifier.”

Yuuri nodded. “It’s my first time being assigned to Lake Placid as well.”

“I know! I started following your career! It’s really interesting. You skate so different from a lot of the other ones. I really like your routines. They’re… I don’t know the word.”

Yuuri laughed. Phichit seemed genuinely disappointed that he couldn’t remember whatever expression he was searching for. “That happens sometimes. Your English is really good, though. You should be proud.”

“Thank you!” Phichit pulled a small camera from a side pocket in his pants. “Will you take a selfie with me? Please?”

“Uh, sure.”

Phichit wasted no time getting into position next to him and arranging himself just so. He must do this a lot, Yuuri thought. “Don’t forget to smile on three! One. Two. Three!”
Yuuri blinked at the flash, but it didn’t even seem to register for Phichit, who was already looking at the picture with a small frown.

“Yuuri, you closed your eyes! Let’s take another one!”

In the end, it took four tries before Phichit was satisfied with the quality of the selfie. “We should take one in our costumes before our skates! Please say that you will!”

Yuuri took a breath but smiled. There was something about Phichit that he just liked. “Sure.”

“You’re the best!”

A bunch of rapid Thai, yelled from a short distance away, broke the moment. Phichit turned and waved at the woman who’d been shouting at him. A tall man with his hair pulled back into a ponytail was standing next to her, looking at them with a thoughtful expression. “That’s my coach. She says that I should be skating and not goofing off. Thanks again, Yuuri! Don’t forget, you promised!”

Yuuri turned back to the barrier and grabbed his water bottle. He was only a little surprised to find Alexei leaning on his elbows next to it.

“LyoSHA! You startled me.”

“Sorry, Yuu-kun. I think that was the most words I’ve ever heard you exchange with a skater that wasn’t Viktor. Good job.” He grinned. “Though I’m surprised he can talk without taking a breath.”

***

vnikiforov Best of Luck @christophegc, @popo_georgi and @yuurikatsuki at Nebelhorn! Wanted to go, but my coach says my programs aren’t polished enough. posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov I had to rewrite that like five times to make it fit. Why can’t twitter give me extra characters! #viktorneedsmorethan140 posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov @sk8ergrrrrrl It wouldn’t really be a special privilege because I need it! #viktorneedsmorethan140 posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov @nikisgirl No, not to compete, I just wanted to watch. I’m limiting my international competitions this year. posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov @christophegc I thought you’d be competing? They’re sending Stéphane instead? Damn. posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov @popo_georgi I know there’s nothing there, but it’s his official twitter. Alexei says I can’t @ his other one #coach’sorders posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov Everyone go and send a lot of messages to @yuurikatsuki to convince him to use twitter like a normal person. #showeryuurikatsukiwithlove posted from Tweetie 1d ago

vnikiforov @iheartkatsuki If he does have a personal twitter, I can’t give it out. I’m so sorry. #showeryuurikatsukiwithlove posted from Tweetie 6h ago

vnikiforov @iheartkatsuki LOVE-LY? posted from Tweetie 5h ago

vnikiforov RT @iheartkatsuki It’s a pretty popular girl group based out of Osaka. Katsuki-kun is
seen with one of the lead singers sometimes http://tiny posted from Tweetie 5h ago

vnikiforov how did I not know about this? #yuurikatsuki #love-ly #love??? posted from Tweetie 5h ago

vnikiforov @sk8madonna I am not helping to spread rumors! I’m trying to get to the bottom of this mystery! posted from Tweetie 4h ago

vnikiforov @sk8madonna it’s not the same thing at all! posted from Tweetie 4h ago

vnikiforov @sk8madonna is he seeing someone? The fans want to know. #yuurikatsuki posted from Tweetie 4h ago

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov What are you doing? STOP. School Rules. Why do you always forget about them?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri you have a girlfriend and you didn’t tell me? Yuuri, I’m hurt.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Noda-chan is not my gf. We live in the same neighborhood. Didn’t realise they were taking our picture. This was months ago!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov usually some other people from class walk with us, but there was a meet.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Months? She’s cute though. You could do worse.

vnikiforov RT @yuurikatsuki Hi. Thank you for all the support. @lovelyharuka and I are not dating. @vnikiforov is an idiot posted from Tweetie 3h ago

vnikiforov @sakuraice He told me I had to keep the last bit. #yuurikatsukiismeantome posted from Tweetie 3h ago

vnikiforov @sk8madonna http://twitpic.com/6b5m #showeryuurikatsukiwithlove posted from Tweetie 3h ago

vnikiforov @popo_georgi is mad that he didn’t get a banner - even though I had nothing to do with that Yuuri banner :( posted from Tweetie 3h ago

vnikiforov @popo_georgi http://twitpic.com/hdd8qvb #showergeorgipopovichwithlove posted from Tweetie 15m ago

vnikiforov @emoisawayoflife Yes, that is @popo_georgi in the background looking unamused at my last minute banner posted from Tweetie 10m ago

vnikiforov RT @popo_georgi @vnikiforov it’s a piece of paper with Davai! and my twitter name written on it in marker. Badly. posted from Tweetie 8m ago

vnikiforov Send help. @popo_georgi is making fun of my penmanship #whyiseveryonesomeantome #don’tshowergeorgipopovichwithlove posted from Tweetie 5m ago
yuurikatsuki: Thanks to all the people who sent good luck wishes to my twitter. I will try to do my best in Germany! 

posted from text 3s ago

---

Yuuri closed his phone and sighed.

“Are you ready, Yuuri-kun?” Riku lightly touched his elbow and motioned to the gate. “They started boarding.”

“No, I’m not ready.” He looked down at her. He’d grown a lot more than he thought he had since they’d first met, but still-- “Can I really compete against skaters in Seniors?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. But, Yuuri-kun?”

“何ですか。"

“It doesn’t matter how you do. Nebelhorn is just practice. Remember that.”

He took a deep breath and nodded, hitching his backpack a little higher on his back. “One step forward, I guess.” And he stepped onto the airbridge, with Riku and Alexei right behind him.

Chapter End Notes

mon ami - my friend
Très romantique. - very romantic
Qu’est-ce que je ferais sans toi? - What would I do without you?
Tu me dragues? - Are you flirting with me?
Mais oui. - lit. But yes (Basically "But of course")
‘最高! - Saikou! - The best!
アイス・カサル・マッダナ - ice castle madonna
カツキ丼 - katsukidon

I was going to try a hover translation thing for this chapter, but I am tired and have a headache and don't want to mess with the html, so maybe next time. Also I'll be coming back to add a link to a timeline. It's about 2/3 done. This chapter is bridging the '08-'09 season and the '09-'10 season. Which means soon there will be Vancouver Olympics! ;)

(Probably not the next chapter though).

Please don't get mad at the Viktor/Chris or Yuuri's kiss with Nakagawa... they're just growing up. Yuuri/Viktor will always be the end game!
Thanks to yuurisvicchan for the twitter translation again!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Everything changes and yet nothing changes at all... (Yep, that's what I'm going with.)

Chapter Notes

Thank you to yuuris_vicchan for the Japanese translation as always!

And thank you everyone for all your support. I'm sorry that this chapter took so long to get out, but, as some of you may have seen on my tumblr or in a comment, I got a bad sore throat and then this chapter just wouldn't ever end. Eventually I had to say enough when I hit 8k words. XD So, it didn't even end where I was originally planning to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yuuri stood at the edge of the rink, frozen. He couldn't do this. He was sixteen and in no way ready to head out onto the ice with all those other skaters. The idea that Japan sent him to be its representative was all sorts of ridiculous. There were five skaters that had ranked ahead of him at Senior Nationals, and each of them deserved the spot more. But it wasn't like there were unlimited spots for each ISU member state -- just one.

“Yura, I want to get on the ice. Take your guards off and go.”

Yuuri jumped at the sound of the Russian and immediately bent down to do as instructed by the familiar voice. It was only after he was actually on the ice and holding on to the barrier that his brain started working. “Georgi?!”

“You knew I would be here, да?”

Yuuri nodded. “I just… sorry. I didn’t mean to block your way onto the ice.”

Georgi ruffled his hair and stepped onto the ice as well. “It is your first Senior competition. It is only to be expected that you would be nervous. You will skate and you will probably not do as well as I and then you will go home and read many messages from Viktor about how amazing you were, да?”

Not being able to stop himself, Yuuri rolled his eyes. “Please, no.”

“He has a picture of you from a Japanese magazine in his locker now. We all make fun of him for it, but I think that Mila is the most jealous because Viktor didn’t get her a copy.”

“You have to be joking.” Not even Yuuri would sink so low as to have a picture of Viktor in his locker at the rink, though he’d certainly thought about it. Repeatedly, even. After all, Viktor was his idol. Why Viktor needed pictures of him, Yuuri still couldn’t understand.

“He is a fan. Says that you don’t even need music for your programs because you create the music. Or something. I usually stop listening at that point. We all know that you had the best step
sequences at the rink. I do not need to listen to his in depth analysis of them. Again.”

“I am so sorry.”

Georgi rolled his eyes and settled his hands on Yuuri’s back, pushing him further onto the ice. “Do not apologize for things that you did not do. Especially Viktor’s behavior. Not even Yakov would take that bullet.”

Yuuri nodded and Georgi skated off.

It made him feel at least a little better, talking to Georgi. The added confidence was enough to keep him on his feet during the public practices before the competition, even if his landings had been a little bit more wobbly than they’d been recently. It was made somewhat better by the fact that no one was paying attention to him, either. At least half the competitors were there to get an Olympic spot for their country, and the ones that weren’t were trying to increase their rankings, probably hoping to eventually make themselves look better for the Olympic team. None of them cared about the Junior who shouldn’t even be competing with them He wasn’t a threat at all.

Yuuri – well, of course he wanted to go to the Olympics. He’d dreamed about going to the Olympics even, but he wasn’t so far gone that he thought he actually ever would. Especially this time. It just didn’t make sense. He wasn’t that good!

The thought cemented itself the next day as he watched Stéphane Lambiel dance across the ice performing his short program. He wasn’t Yuuri’s favourite -- that title was still held by Viktor, would always be held by Viktor -- but there was no way that Yuuri couldn’t appreciate the sheer amount of talent he was witnessing. Stéphane’s spins were divine, and he moved on the ice like he was born to it. Yuuri couldn’t help the wistful jealousy that clenched his heart.

And Yuuri was skating right after Stéphane.

Never had Yuuri wanted to run from the rink more than in that moment.

Alexei must have known though, because suddenly Yuuri found himself being turned away from the ice as Alexei stuck a pair of headphones over his ears. He shook his head when Yuuri just looked up at him.

“I can’t do this, Alexei.” The words weren’t even whispered, just mouthed. Yuuri didn’t feel like he had breath to shape actual words anymore.

He was drowning without a drop of water anywhere near him.

The ice -- cold and cruel -- was going to crack under him, and he was going to fall right through it.

“Breathe.” The command came sharp and cracked across his brain as if he’d been slapped, issued by a small woman who had become almost as familiar to him as his mother or Minako. Riku. “Yuuri-kun. Breathe.”

He nodded once, then twice -- and then Stéphane was coming off the ice, wishing him good luck as he made his way to the Kiss and Cry, and Yuuri felt the world spiralling out from under him all over again.

What was he even doing here?

Alexei grabbed his shoulder, the weight of his hands familiar, but for once, not at all comforting. Yuuri shrugged them off. All the words coming out of Alexei’s mouth and Riku’s mouth -- he
couldn’t hear them, not over the rushing static that filled his ears and made his skin crawl. He turned away, not even giving Alexei the fist bump that had become so commonplace between them, and headed straight for center ice.

When the first notes of his music sounded as if they were being played from underwater, Yuuri knew that his performance was going to be be bad; that the ice might as well have melted away under his skates.

He wanted to quit.

***

**Viktor**
I can’t believe you went all the way to Germany just to watch Nebelhorn.

**Chris**
Like Germany is so far from Switzerland. I took a train.
Two reasons: first I wanted to watch Stéphane because I can definitely learn from my countryman, and second, there’s a ridiculously hot Swiss ice dancer competing. I don’t even know if he’s single, but I could watch him all day, night, whatever.

**Viktor**
That good looking?

**Chris**
Maybe not quite as good looking as a narcissistic Russian skater I could name, but yes, he’s really hot. And well, he definitely wouldn’t text someone else while in bed with me because I’m sure he’s not an ass like someone else I could think of.

**Viktor**
I told you, it was important that I reply.

**Chris**
Don’t care. I will never let you live it down.
Mon Dieu. How precious.

**Viktor**
What?

**Chris**
The skater that just entered the ice. The one skating after Stéphane. He looks like he’s twelve.

**Viktor**
He’s almost seventeen. Older than you when you entered Seniors.
Chris
Are you finally watching?
He’s shaking like a leaf. Poor baby.

Viktor
Shut up, Chris. I want to see this.

Chris
You could just ignore my messages.
But you won’t. Will you?
Viktor?
Seriously? You’re not responding? You’re actually ignoring me?
Oh, that must have hurt, but he seems to be recovering.
Or not.

Viktor
d katsudonyuuri It’s fine. It’s not a big deal.
Seriously. There’s still the free skate, and you can make up the points. Put the 4T back in.
Shit! That’s not for you. Ignore it.
 Fucking phone.

Chris
Were you sending a message to the skater that was just on the ice? That was Yuuri Katsuki?
He was your rinkmate, right?
Viktor?
I think he might be crying. His coach is talking to him. He hasn’t even made it to the K&C.
And now he’s handing Katsuki his phone.
And Katsuki apparently just hung up on whoever it was.
That must have burned.

Viktor
It did.

***

Yuuri wished he didn’t actually understand the words being exchanged at the table between his coach and his wife, but there wasn’t a language that they could speak that Yuuri didn’t understand. Granted, Riku was more proficient at Russian than he was, but he still understood every single word and paused just far enough away from the table to listen.

“I thought it would help. Talking to Viktor helped in Sheffield after that short program. You remember? He won silver that time.” Alexei sighed.

Humming, Riku leaned over Alexei’s plate and helped herself to the chocolate-hazelnut spread her husband had brought back to the table with his bread, meat and cheese. “And the fact that Yuuri-kun still has not given Viktor his phone number again didn’t have you hesitating at all?”
“It’s a good thing I love you, otherwise I wouldn’t let you steal my no-name Nutella knockoff.”
Alexei paused, frowning as he took back the small container and found it empty. “Not even a little bit left. And no, that didn’t even occur to me. Is Yuu-kun still mad at him?”

“No.” Yuuri set down his plate -- scrambled eggs and a single piece of toast, with a small side of sliced kiwi -- before taking a seat to the side of them. “I’m not, but neither am I ready to give him my number again. And obviously no one else thinks he deserves it again, either.” He pushed the eggs around the plate with his fork, wishing that he had chopsticks instead. “But that wasn’t why I didn’t want to talk to him when you handed me the phone.” The last sentence was whispered in Japanese. It felt safer to talk about what had happened in Japanese.

“What was the reason, then?” Alexei didn’t even react when Riku stole his little jar of cherry jam either; his eyes just glanced at the slender hand darting away with the fruit spread before returning to Yuuri.

Sighing, Yuuri picked up a forkful of eggs, shoved them into his mouth, and chewed. There was nothing worse than cold eggs, in his opinion. At least these were hot and had flavor, with little bits of cheese and -- Speck, the sign had read -- plus some sort of green thing, probably parsley. He swallowed. “Sheffield wasn’t my fault. Everything was stiff and my body couldn’t move the way I wanted it to. It was frustrating and I hated every minute of it, but I had done everything I could. Yesterday... there’s nothing to blame except my inability to handle the pressure. I don’t belong at this competition. Maybe I’m just not designed for this. I should be able to compete in Seniors. I should be fighting for a place on the Japanese Olympic team. I should be excited. Instead...”

Riku put down her croissant. “If you think for one minute that one bad performance means that you should quit--” As if she had read his mind, though he might have said something to that effect in the Kiss & Cry. He’d spent last night trying to erase all memory of his short program.

“There’s no way that we’ll let you, Yuu-kun.” Alexei reached over and grabbed his jam back. “Really? Seriously. All that jam on one little, tiny, miniscule piece of bread.” He sighed and pushed his chair out, kissing Riku on the head as he walked back to the buffet.

Yuuri couldn’t help it. He laughed into his eggs, only looking up at the light brush of Riku’s fingers on his arm to get his attention. But whatever she was going to say was lost when another tray was set down next to Yuuri’s.

“Lyosha pointed us to the table.” Yakov sat down, and Georgi settled in across from him. “доброе утро.”

A variety of jams, spreads and honey were casually dumped into the middle of the table. “Help yourselves.” Alexei then dropped a couple of pieces of bread covered in nuts and grains on Yuuri’s plate and grabbed the white toast off. “It’s spelt. High in protein, complex carbs, good fiber content, and easy to digest. It’ll be good before you skate. And it tastes good, kind of nutty. They just brought it out. You can even have some jam if you want, but not as much as Riku.”

“Да, very good. I should send Georgi back for some.” Yakov leveled a hard gaze at Yuuri. “You have some points to make up. Eat good. Skate better.”

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Sorry. I shouldn’t have hung up on you.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri It’s fine. I’m not mad. Just don’t do it again. I probably got ahead of myself trying to go through Lyosha.
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Everyone says that I can do this and I don’t believe a single one of them.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Would you believe me?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t know.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Well, whether you do or don’t, I believe in you. I’ll be watching your free skate. You can land the 4T.

***

He did manage to land the quad toe-loop by some sort of miracle, and his step sequence was good; it flowed around the edge of the rink, looping back to where he began. But his spin -- he just knew that it wasn’t as good. Not as good as Stéphane. Not even as good as Viktor. And definitely not as good as he himself usually did.

Something had wormed its way into his skull and taken up residence in the soft part of his brain, whispering doubts and long tirades of self-flagellation. Yuuri couldn’t recover from it. Not as much as he needed to. His skate wasn’t bad. It wasn’t good. It was worse than both of those things: it was average and forgettable.

Sighing, he slumped down next to Alexei in the Kiss & Cry and refused to look at him.

“You did good, Yuu-kun.”

Frowning, Yuuri glanced over at Alexei before focusing on the monitors. “I didn’t fail. Completely.”

He ended up in thirteenth place. Yakov reminded him that this still put him in the top third, but watching the ceremony as Stéphane, Georgi and some skater from Germany received their medals, it felt like a loss.

***

Nakagawa was waiting by the gate when they pulled up in the cab. He bowed to Alexei and Riku and then grabbed Yuuri’s larger suitcase from the trunk, leaving Yuuri to just deal with the smaller carry-on.

“So how was your first foray into the world of the Senior Division?”

Yuuri furrowed his brow as he led Nakagawa up the stairs into his room, motioning to the other boy that he should just drop the suitcase in the corner. “You texted to say you watched me skate.”

“I did. I had no idea what I was watching you do, and you fell a couple of times the first day, but the second day was so much better!”

Yuuri shook his head and laid back on the bed. “I lost.”

“Pretty sure the guy that came in last was the one who lost. You came in twenty-ish places above him, so not last and therefore you didn’t lose. Technically.” Nakagawa sat down next to him and laid back as well, joining Yuuri in staring up at his ceiling. “Remember that meet I went to, and I did really good in the heats, but then came in seventh in the final? You didn’t tell me that I failed.”

“Hmm. So you’re going to call me out on being a hypocrite. Always a good route to choose.”
Yuuri heard the door open a crack and looked over to check, but no one came in. He was about to turn back to Nakagawa when another creak came from the doorway; this time, Vicchan pushed the door open just enough to wiggle through and ran straight for the bed and jumped on it, nosing Yuuri’s head until he picked the dog up and hugged him.

“Come on. Let’s go and play Monhan on the couch before dinner. Unless your coach is going to kick me out without feeding me.”

“As if that’s ever happened.” Yuuri sat up and set Vicchan down on the floor, then headed toward the living room. The toy poodle followed them down the stairs, running down and then back up over and over until Yuuri and Nakagawa finally settled on the couch and he could curl up between them.

Alexei was sitting in an armchair to the side watching one of the JGP qualifiers. Occasionally, he would tap Yuuri on the hand, nudging him to pause and watch a particular skater’s technique. That one had good jumps, another had fantastic spins. “His step sequence would be better if he didn’t look so bland.”

Nakagawa looked up. “Does he even like skating? He looks like he’s angry about something.”

“Seung Gil Lee from South Korea. Pretty good TES for a skater so young, but absolutely abysmal PCS. He’s probably going to get into the JGPF, but I don’t think that he’s a threat. At least not yet. Crispino took gold at this qualifier and that’s who you’re going to have to look out for, Yuu-kun.”

After dinner, Alexei and Yuuri went back to analysing skaters. Alexei brought up footage from Nebelhorn, going over not only Yuuri’s skates but the others as well -- specifically, those that scored way above him, like Stephane, and far below him. Nakagawa watched for a while before turning back to his PSP and playing through some solo missions. After some time, he fell asleep, his head tipping over to rest on Yuuri’s shoulder.

“Go to bed, Yuu-kun. We can pick this up later. Your boyfriend is obviously tired.”

Yuuri flushed but nodded, elbowing Nakagawa a little until he stirred. “Take the bed, I’ll grab a futon from the hallway closet.”

***

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I don’t know who is more amazing, you or me.

カツキ丼 says:
Why?

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Well, you came back from Nebelhorn and went to Croatia a week later and brought back GOLD. And I found out we’re having TRIPLETS. I’ve been waiting for your qualifiers to end to tell you!

カツキ丼 says:
Triplets? That’s three, right? Three? At the same time? What… That’s… terrifying. 3x Nishigori spawn.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Hey! I’m a Nishigori now too.

カツキ丼 says:
Don’t remind me.
アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I want to name them after figure skating jumps. Wouldn’t it be CUTE?

カツキ丼 says:
Please tell me you took a picture of Nishigori’s face when you told him that? I need it in my life.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Sent. Oh, and my parents are gifting Nishigori and I a trip to Tokyo for the Grand Prix Final as a late wedding present! So I’ll get to see you skate! I’ll get to see VIKTOR skate! I’m so excited!

カツキ丼 says:
He hasn’t even won his second qualifier yet.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Oh, do you think he won’t win?

カツキ丼 says:
He will. I bet him two signed copies of the last issue of ON ICE if he came in over ten points ahead of second place. He only came in three points ahead in the first qualifier, but Mila threatened him with her skates that he better win because she wants one of them.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
That’s the one with the interview you did with Morooka-san, right?

カツキ丼 says:
That’s the one. He’s actually leaving ON ICE to become a junior sportscaster for Asahi TV.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Speaking of TV, when is that variety show thing you did airing?

カツキ丼 says:
You can’t hear me, but I am groaning. I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I don’t know how I let anyone talk me into it. I DANCED on TV. I made a complete fool of myself.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
I’m sure that you didn’t. You were dancing with those friends of yours from your class, right?

カツキ丼 says:
Shuji-kun and Noda-chan, yes. They wanted to do a piece on the “Osaka idols” and somehow I got roped into it because they wanted a sports idol too. I am not an “idol”.

アイス・カサル・マッダナ says:
Says the boy that was just talking about signing a copy of a magazine that he had a featured interview in and has had three, or is it four, posters in? Shuji-kun is the EXCITE guy that keeps flirting with you, right? I heard some girls talking about how hot his new blue bangs are.

カツキ丼 says:
They look ridiculous.

***

Katsuki Yuuri - [大阪のアイドル] Osaka’s idols - [リアリッティー・クライマックス] Reality Climax
Katsuki Yuuri’s appearance on Japanese Variety show Reality Climax with Tatsuno Shuji of EXCITE and Noda Haruka of LOVE-LY. Only interview/game bit and DANCE. Hip-hop dance is to Black and Gold by Sam Shapiro and choreographed by Iwata Aeko. Translation/Subtitles by me. Never have done them before so be nice!

Text Comments (2,672)

Swinging_mini_am (2 weeks ago)
すごい!!!!!

EXCITE_ME_NOW_SHUJI (2 weeks ago)
WHY DID YOU CUT OUT SHUJI’S INTERVIEW PART! THAT WAS THE BEST! HE’S SO HOT!

01010101 (2 weeks ago)
FIRST!

iheartkatsuki (2 weeks ago)
Yuuri’s adorable, but where are the subs for what he says in Russian at the end! I needs to know!

icecastle_madonna (2 weeks ago)
Sorry, I don’t speak Russian so I couldn’t put the translation on there since it wasn’t given in the show.

sk8erfan_711 (2 weeks ago)
I knew that Yuuri Katsuki could dance, but I had no idea he could do hip-hot. That was pretty hot!

iheartkatsuki (2 weeks ago)
Best typo ever!

sk8erfan_711 (2 weeks ago)
OMG! I am so embarrassed! Hip-hop. Hip-HOP!

i_am_a_troll (2 weeks ago)
Oooh how sexy! Take me now!

climax_me_reality (2 weeks ago)
I’m glad you kept the part with the rooster making fun of Tatsuno-kun’s hair. The rooster is my favorite part of Reality Climax. And Hikaru (the host) is my second favorite part. The “idols” were kinda funny. Though that skater
kid, he’s pretty shy to be an idol, isn’t he?

lovely_lova (2 weeks ago)
OMG! SQUEE! OMGWTFBBQ!
Please please please let Katsuki-kun and Noda-kun be a couple! They are just too adorable together!

boylove4456 (1 week ago)
God no! I bet Yuuri-kun and Shuji-kun would be hot together though. I mean Shuji has some written all over him. So hot.
And I bet Yuuri-kun would make an adorable blushing uke.

icecastle_madonna (1 week ago)
The only reason I’m leaving this is so people have context to know that I don’t like these sorts of comments left on my videos. Just because Yuuri-kun and Shuji-kun are known idols, doesn’t mean that you should be saying things like that.
They’re both only seventeen. And Yuuri-kun knows about this channel’s existence. Reading that sort of thing will just make him super uncomfortable. So please don’t.

boylove4456 (1 week ago)
How do you know?! Come on. Don’t be another one of those youtubers that think they have a relationship with their subject. Free world!

icecastle_madonna (1 week ago)
blocked.

shojofan5 (2 weeks ago)
Pretty cute! Glad I clicked on it. Has nothing to do with Osaka though!

EXCITE ME NOW SHUJI (2 weeks ago)
OMG, don’t you understand?! These three are HUGE in Osaka! I mean, I think the girls in my class prefer Nakagawa-kun and Yamato-kun (They’re swimmers, btw, and pretty hot and really nice and not shy like Yuuri-kun is, but... And yeah, I totally go to their school, but like, we can’t talk to them or anything. Their classes are in a separate building, but we see them around sometimes and AHHH!!) but in Osaka in general Shuji-kun and Yuuri-kun and Noda-chan are probably like the most well known second year idols! I can’t believe that next year is their last! SHUJI STAY IN OSAKA FOREVER!

sakura_blossom_4 (1 week ago)
Do they date?

EXCITE ME NOW SHUJI (1 week ago)
No. School rule says no relationships. There are a few in my class that don’t care and do anyway though and the teachers just kind of shrug. It’s different in the idol class though. There was a rumor not too long ago that Noda-chan and Yuuri-kun were dating. I don’t know how it got started, but they had to put on their official Twitter accounts that they weren’t and Noda-chan
even did a segment on the local news where she denied it. I don’t know which half of the school population was more upset:
the girls because Yuuri-kun might have been taken or the boys because Noda-chan was off the market. Personally, my favorite
is Shuji-kun! So much love for Shuji-kun!

No user name (5 days ago)
How do you know that the boys weren’t upset that Yuuri-kun was off the market and the girls were upset that Noda-chan was?

da_victor (2 hours ago)
What happened to your channel? I don’t check for a couple of months and all hell has broken loose. Who are these people?

icecastle_madonna (2 hours ago)
I’m still not talking to you because you cut your hair and I’m mad. But they’re fans. Mostly Yuuri’s. You’ve got competition.
Too bad you lost out on those signed ON ICE issues.

da_victor (1 hour ago)
EIGHT POINTS! That should totally be good enough. TEN is INSANE. And not fair and MB is going to hate me FOREVER.

Milawarriorprncss (30 minutes ago)
da_victor is the worst. Luckily Yura loves me and told me he’d send me the copy anyway.

da_victor (5 minutes ago)
Seriously? He’s sending you a copy and not me! I’m going to have to talk to him. At least I can watch him skate
at practices. I should probably crash one of them.

Milawarriorprncss (30 minutes ago)
And the Russian is: Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда. It means something like “Without effort, you won’t pull a fish out of a pond.” Yakov says it a lot. Means that we have to work for it, I guess. I don’t know. It’s Russian.

***

Viktor sighed and backed out of the YouTube app on his phone, instead opening his Twitter feed.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I’m in Tokyo are you?
katsudonyuuri d Vnikiforov I’m at dinner atm. I’ll message you when I’m back at the hotel
vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri where? I can meet you.
katsudonyuuri d Vnikiforov can’t it’s a school thing. Sorry.

Viktor closed his Twitter app with an annoyed press and switched to text messaging.
Viktor
Chris, have you arrived yet?

Chris
Taxiing. I'll text when I get to the hotel.

Viktor
Why is no one here to entertain me?!

Chris
You can always hang out with your coach.

Viktor
I can just imagine Yakov’s response.
Do you know how red he’d turn?

Viktor
Lyosha, I'm bored.

Lyosha
And I'm having a romantic dinner with my wife.
Yuu-kun will be at the hotel in two to three
hours. I'm sure that he’ll entertain you.

Chris arrived in one. When he knocked on the door, Viktor was in the middle of watching the
Reality Climax video for the nth time; the music was just about to start for the short dance the three
teenagers had performed.

“What are you watching? An exhibition skate?” Chris dropped his carry-on next to the door and
went over to the phone Victor had laid out on the bed. “Wow, they’re good. Are you thinking
about incorporating hip-hop next season?”

Viktor shook his head. “You don’t recognize the guy in the back on the left? I believe you called
him precious at Nebelhorn.”

“Yuuri Katsuki? He can dance?”

Viktor nodded. “I’ve been trying to figure out the moves, but it’s too fast.” At Chris’s incredulous
look, Viktor shrugged. “I told you I was bored and no one was around to entertain me!”

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m back at the hotel. Are you awake? Did you want to do
something?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov My schedule is a little weird since my class voted to take their class trip
to Tokyo and have it overlap with the GPF.
They’re going to watch me skate. And I have a thing with the class in the morning.

Viktor? You usually respond quicker… it’s been almost an hour. Anyway, my room number is 1134

Ok. Talk to you later. I’m going to bed.

Shit! I lost track of time and then fell asleep watching a movie with Chris. Yuuri!!! Damnit. Tomorrow, definitely.

“Morning practice is delayed two hours due to an exhibition and a class field trip of some sort.”

“Seriously?”

“No. But I am going to see what the hell is going on. This isn’t even a normal rink! It’s an arena and is hosting a huge international competition, and practices are on hold for a field trip?!?”

Security didn’t allow them to go to the boards even with their passes, and there was an abnormal amount of extra security patrolling the entrances to the rink as well, all wearing black suits. Definitely not normal.

They were allowed into the competitor stands, though, and here Viktor caught sight of Chris sitting with his feet up on the back of the seats in front of him. He waved, and Viktor tossed his skates down and sat down heavily next to Chris. “Do you know what is going on?”

Chris didn’t stop messing around with his phone, just shook his head. “Come here.” As prompted, Viktor leaned over into the selfie that Chris was taking. “We’re beautiful. This is definitely going on Twitpic.”

“Of course we’re beautiful, like that was ever in doubt.” Viktor looked over to the far side of the rink. There was a skater that looked unnervingly like Yuuri talking to someone who Viktor couldn’t make out. The skater didn’t skate all the way to center ice, only about two thirds of the way out; the way he spun himself into position erased the last doubt in Viktor’s mind. It was definitely Yuuri. He lifted a hand and got into a starting pose that Viktor didn’t recognize.

A voice that Viktor recognized as Alexei’s was saying something in Japanese over a mic, and it was only at the sound of clapping that Viktor looked away from Yuuri and saw twentyish Japanese teenagers sitting in the first couple of rows.

This must be what Yuuri meant by a school thing. Bizarre.

It was a poppy, light-hearted song, in English, and Yuuri skated it beautifully. He ran across the ice and did loops and spins. At one point he pulled off a combination jump of a triple axel, single loop and triple lutz; when he landed the last jump, he paused to laugh at something before spinning in place. The routine was almost childlike, as if Yuuri was hopping and skipping and playing with a little kid.

“Weird choice.”

Viktor nodded at Chris. “It’s not his usual style of skating.” He put his finger to his lips. “There’s
something about it though. It’s playful.”

As the song wound to its conclusion, Yuuri hydrobladed in a soft circle and then held out his arms down and open, as he used to do when Mila would skate at him full tilt across the ice. As if he was expecting a little kid to run into his arms for a hug once more. When the music ended, Yuuri took his bow and skated over to the boards in front of his classmates, who started getting up and heading down rinkside, picking up the dull sort of rental skates that Viktor was very familiar with.

“What is going on, and why does Oda get to be on the ice when we don’t? We’re competing too!”

Viktor followed Christophe’s gaze and saw that Oda was indeed heading toward the teenagers now shakily making their way onto the ice. Alexei and Riku were entering the rink as well.

“Those are Yuuri Katsuki’s classmates. He said he had a school thing this morning, but I didn’t realise they were going to be using the rink.” Viktor went down to the railing. “Yuuri! Oda! Let us on the ice!”

Yuuri waved and then turned back to the couple of students that were holding onto the wall for dear life, offering his hands. Only one -- who looked suspiciously like the tall swimmer that Viktor would occasionally see in photos with Yuuri -- took him up on it. Oda, however, skated over to them.

“Good morning, Nikiforov. And…”

“Giacometti. Christophe. I was at the Trophée Éric Bompard with you.”

“Ah, right! You won bronze.” Oda turned back to Viktor. “I can’t let you on the ice. This is a promotional thing arranged by Fukuzawa Gakuen and the JSF. There are videographers and photographers taking footage of Katsuki and I teaching some Osaka idols how to skate.”

“Seriously?” Christophe sounded put out.

“It’s to encourage interest in the sport. Katsuki is proving pretty popular with teenagers. Especially since he’s associated with two of the big idol groups. His coach is even running a week-long training camp this summer for selected Novices.” Oda shook his head. “Japan wants to become the number one country in figure skating, and the JSF thinks that Katsuki may be the one to do it.” He leveled a look at Viktor. “Watch out. He just might. If I don’t first.”

Viktor laughed. “I’m looking forward to it!”

Oda skated back to a group of girls that were trying to make their way around the rink while clinging on to each other.

Chris leaned against the railing next to Viktor. “Are you going to stay and watch this?”

Viktor nodded. “Yeah, I think so. I want to get on the ice as soon as it’s free, anyway. Might grab the back of the Zamboni so I can get the freshest ice possible, even.” Viktor turned his head toward Yakov. “Yakov, do you think one of those suits would get us breakfast if we ask nicely?”


“Rice and eggs and soup and fish and--”

“Shut up, Vitya. I know. I can’t have given away my prized skater to a Japanese medalist without ever having visited Japan.”
“I thought I was your prized skater!”

“Two Olympic golds and maybe you will be.”

***

“I can’t believe that I’m sitting here watching the Junior Men’s finals. Or that my coach thought it was a good idea. And why did you even mention that you were planning to do this in front of our coaches?”

Viktor grinned as Chris slumped into the seat next to him. “Yakov will be here, too. We were always planning to watch this.”

“Because of Katsuki.”

Sighing, Viktor looked at Chris from the corner of his eye. “He’s my best friend, Chris. Of course I’m going to watch him skate.” He paused, not paying much attention to the surprised look on Chris’s face. “You know that I learned a lot about step sequences from him.”

“He’s four years younger than you. I think you’re lying.”

“And if you ever saw him skate compulsory figures, you’d die of jealousy from his edges.”

“Does anyone actually ever skate those anymore?”

Viktor started flipping through the program he’d picked up. “Yuuri does. When he’s thinking or nervous or worried. He’s—” The rest of the sentence cut off with a weird sort of garbled sound.

“Viktor, are you okay?”

Viktor cleared his throat and looked back down at the full-page advertisement for Mizuno sportswear, swallowing heavily. That was Yuuri, but… what?

Chris whistled. “Wow. Okay. I get it now. Didn’t realize that he wore glasses, too.”

Viktor nodded, not quite trusting his own voice yet. This… this was not what he was expecting to see. Yuuri hadn’t sent him a copy of the print even though he’d promised, and Viktor had sort of forgotten all about it in the meantime.

Why hadn’t Yuuri sent him a copy? He hadn’t been prepared for this! Yuuri looked good. Better than. This… was just not right. He was just a kid. He was only… Дерьмо. He was seventeen now. Had it really been that long since the days when they used to curl up on the couch and watch anime with Makkachin draped across their lap?

“Skating for South Korea, Seung Gil Lee!”

Chris elbowed him in the side and Viktor glared at him. “Come to realizations that you think your best friend is hot later -- though the fact that he’s your best friend and not me kind of annoys me, but makes so many other things fall into place. But that’s for later. There’s skating to watch.”

It took three skaters before Viktor was even aware of what he was watching, and then one more because he really didn’t want to watch a sixteen-year-old lovestruck over his sister skating Romeo and Juliet. Really, he felt bad for the Crispino girl. Everyone had heard about the yelling match Michele Crispino had with their coach when Sara was promoted to Seniors and he was told to stay back in Juniors, but that’s the way it was. Men stayed in Juniors longer -- with some exceptions like
Chris and Georgi, who’d run full tilt into Seniors as fast as they could without looking back.

Most did it slowly, like Yuuri.

Твою мать! Now he was thinking about the Mizuno ad again. Чёрт!

“Skating for Japan, Yuuri Katsuki!”

Viktor had missed a whole other skater. Probably the Spanish skater that won World’s last year. He was tied with Yuuri for points. Viktor leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees.

Halfway through, Viktor heard a muttered “Merde” from next to him. “That’s what his skating was supposed to look like in Germany?” Viktor hissed at him to shut up but nodded.

Like the routine Viktor had seen him perform for his classmates, this one was playful as well, and Viktor wondered why. Yuuri skated around to give his bows with a literal shower of tiny grey plushies falling from all all sides of the rink.

“What are they throwing?”

Viktor pointed to their left down by the boards. “I think little versions of that.”

A whole group of students in uniform shouted “KATSUKI-KUN!” all at once. Yuuri skated over to them with a smile, taking the giant plush with its white-rounded stomach and pointed little ears with him. It was really cute, but Viktor was as lost as Chris.

So he did what he always did. Yuuri’s classmates probably had enough English to understand his question. He stood up and went over to the railing that separated the sections, wracking his brain trying to remember the phrase that Yuuri taught him. “すみません! What was that?”

“Totoro. You really don’t know what Totoro is? It’s… a classic.” The voice came from his left, further up the stands, and Viktor turned to see an obviously pregnant young woman coming down the steps. “Yuuri’s theme is ‘growing up’ this year. I know he told you that. And well, every Japanese child knows Totoro, and so that is what Yuuri decided his short program would be. In fact, both of his songs are arrangements of Joe Hisaishi’s work. You know, the guy that composes for Miyazaki.”

Now that was a name that Viktor recognized! “Howl’s Moving Castle!”

The girl -- woman, though she seemed so young -- nodded and laughed. “Yes. And Spirited Away and Nausicaa and Princess Mononoke, and the list goes on.” She smiled at him and held out her hand in a Western greeting. “I’m Yuuko. Nishigori Yuuko.”

“YUUKO?! Wow! I had no idea you’d be here. And that you were… um…”

“Pregnant? I’m surprised Yuuri didn’t mention it.”

Viktor shook his head. “No, he didn’t. It’s um… Congratulations?” He really hoped that she was happy with her pregnancy. She was… two years younger than he was, if Viktor remembered right. Maybe a little less than two years. Still, so young.

“Thank you!” Yuuko’s personality was just as bubbly in real life as on the internet, apparently. They paused in their conversation to hear the scores. Viktor nodded. Yuuri had had a strong skate, and his scores reflected that. “Good. He was worried that he wouldn’t score well and embarrass himself in front of his classmates.”
“Don’t mind too much. They may be idols, but in general their English isn’t as good as Yuuri’s.”

Viktor looked across to where Yuuko was sitting with her husband -- another thing that Yuuri had failed to mention! “Yours is quite good.”

Yuuko smiled. “Thanks. I wanted to skate competitively on the international level, so I worked on it a lot.”


Yuuko nodded. “I stopped when I realized that I was never going to get past the national level at sixteen. I didn’t have the same sort of drive that Yuuri had. He really hates to lose.”

Viktor had already heard this from Yuuri when he was training back in Russia. He half-listened to the conversation and let his eyes stray over to Yuuri. He was having fun and doing his best to split his attention between the group of his classmates and Viktor, Chris and the Nishigoris.

The swimmer was practically pressed up against him. Well, not exactly, but it definitely looked like there was less room between Yuuri and the swimmer than Yuuri and Yuuko. Viktor hummed.

“Are you worried about your short program tomorrow?” Yuuri had turned to look at him.

Viktor quickly shook his head. “No. I am planning to get gold at the Olympics. The Grand Prix Final is practice.”

Yuuri shook his head at him, but grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll still cheer for you when you fall on your face.”

From the corner of his eye, Viktor could see Chris’s shocked expression, but Viktor himself just laughed. “If I fall on my face, I don’t know if I’d deserve your cheers. It’s been awhile since I missed a quad flip.”

Yuuri shrugged. “I’ll cheer for you anyway.” The smile left his face and he leaned forward. “Viktor. Skate your best tomorrow and I will try to skate mine.”

“We have a deal. Just remember, skate the music.”

“Hurry up, lover boy. 門限は15分後だ。早くホテルに戻らないと。” The idol named Shuji was talking to Nakagawa, the swimmer -- at least that’s what Viktor assumed. He wished the whole sentence had been in English, not just the first part.

Viktor couldn’t tear his eyes away even though Chris was speaking next him in a language that he could understand. Nakagawa kept talking in rushed Japanese to Yuuri as he looked all around the hotel lobby and out the windows of the front. Yuuri just shook his head and said something before looking down at the tile.

And then it happened. Nakagawa reached out to tilt Yuuri’s chin up and leaned forward and quickly pressed his lips against Yuuri’s. Yuuri flushed and pushed him away.

“じゃあね。” Nakagawa smiled, backed up and waved.

“Nakagawa-kun. 行きましょう。”
With a last grin, Nakagawa turned and hurried over to the small group of students waiting for him.

Yuuri caught Viktor staring and shook his head hard, pushing Viktor towards the elevator. His face was redder than Viktor had ever seen it before. Chris gave a laugh and followed them in.

“So--”

“Don’t. Viktor, just don’t. Not right now.”

Viktor lifted his hands up in front of him and pressed the button for the 9th floor. “Okay. I won’t. Want to watch a clip of a variety show called *Reality Climax* before calling it a night?”

Without missing a beat, Chris joined in. “Is that the one with the hip-hop dance to ‘Black and Gold’?”

Yuuri groaned and pressed his forehead against the mirrored sides of the elevator, jabbing the button for the eleventh floor over and over again.

***

Viktor found Yuuri in the athlete’s lounge the next morning. He was curled up on a couch with his MP3 player, listening to one of the playlists that he used to keep his nerves from overwhelming him. They were resurfacing the ice, and he would have the chance for an extra thirty-minute practice session before he had to get off and get ready for his free skate.

Viktor collapsed next to him, a to-go cup of coffee from a little Japanese-French bakery a few blocks from the hotel in one hand.

Yuuri pulled his feet up onto the couch. He’d taken off his skates and had walked to the lounge in just his socks. He poked Viktor in the thigh with his big toe. It was strange, so very strange to be in the same place as Viktor again. Viktor was different, but then Yuuri himself had also changed.

“Melon-pan?”

Yuuri shook his head. “How can you eat that the day of your short program? How can you eat at all?”

“It’s good! I’m so glad that I found this place. I love my new phone. So handy!” He held his phone out to Yuuri, who took it while Viktor made short work of the bread and cookie concoction in his hands. “Next on my list is bubble tea. I need to find out where I can get that.”

“Any high school with a large contingent of girls obsessed with trends and fads. The trucks park on the surrounding blocks and get swarmed as soon as classes let out.” Yuuri didn’t look up; he was too busy going through the different options. If he wasn’t so comfortable with his phone, he might consider getting a smartphone like Viktor’s. He’d miss the TV functionality, though; it was the only way he could keep up with some things, those spare moments between school and the gym and the ice…

“So you and the swimmer, huh?”

Yuuri dropped the phone and cursed. “Дерьмо.”

Viktor leaned back into the couch and laughed until he started coughing. “The first time I ever hear Yuuri curse, and it’s in Russian! How am I ever going to learn Japanese curse words now?”
Picking up Viktor’s phone, Yuuri handed it back, switching the conversation from English to Russian. “Don’t talk about Nakagawa in English, please. We’re trying to make sure that he doesn’t get kicked out of school. I can’t believe he did that last night! In front of everyone!”

Viktor leaned his shoulder against Yuuri’s. “Why would he get kicked out? Because your school is insane and thinks that they can stop teenagers from being teenagers?”

“So don’t think about it. Tell me about the swimmer.”

“Initial qualifiers for the London Olympics aren’t until next year, so he’s just a relatively decent swimmer on the national level with some limited international experience. Even if we broke up, if they thought it could be damaging to their brand, or my brand, or even his brand, they’d ask him to leave. Figure skating is bigger than swimming, at the moment.”

“Not what I wanted to know.”

“I’m afraid to even ask.”

Viktor laughed. “Fine. If you don’t want to talk about your swimmer and if he’s a good kisser, let’s talk about this Mizuno ad that you never sent me and I had to discover on my own in the GPF program! I’m so hurt, Yuuri! How could you leave me to be so blindsided like that?”

“Blindsided, by me sitting on a block tying my skates? It was so embarrassing, They insinuated that I was going to Sochi! Besides, I don’t see you sending me copies of your photoshoots. Like, say, the cologne advert you did of you in a bubble bath.”

“That one was fun.”

“Yuuko wanted to know if you were naked and blamed it on the pregnancy hormones when Nishigori got all bent out of shape. I told her you were probably wearing a swimsuit.”

“Nope! I decided to do it naked! In France there’s a copy where I’m getting out of the bath—”

Yuuri put his hands over Viktor’s mouth. “Stop talking. Please.” He knew his face was beyond red.

Viktor just looked at him with an extra sparkle in his eye, but didn’t move.

“You know, I don’t even want to know. Yuu-kun, the ice is ready.” Alexei just looked at them. Yuuri knew that they had to look a sight, tangled up together on a couch, limbs akimbo with Yuuri pressed over Viktor and his hands covering Viktor’s mouth. Yuuri groaned.

***
Two weeks ago, Viktor had loved Yuuri’s free skate. The layback Ina Bauer, the reach of his arms, so graceful as if they were pleading. The softness to his step sequence, the way he danced across the ice, each turn and twizzle and step perfect. His triple axel was flawless and the way his hand brushed the ice as he hydrobladed to the next element a soft caress.

It was perfect and fit Yuuri so very well.

But as he watched Yuuri skate it, he knew. Viktor hadn’t really given the title much thought before, but now… He knew.

He wondered if the swimmer understood how much of himself Yuuri put into his programs. Never, ever intentionally, but it always bled through.

This was sweet, just like the music. Viktor sighed. It was perfect for his theme and the theme of the song. ‘First Love’.

And even if it made him completely ridiculous, he didn’t want to watch Yuuri skate it ever again.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
da - da - yes
Mon Dieu - My God
dобре утро - dobrye utro - good morning
アイス・カサル・マッダナ - ice castle madonna
カツキ丼 - katsukidon
すごい - sugoi! - awesome!
Дерьмо - De’tmo - shit
Твою мать! - Tvoyu mat' - Fuck (basically)
Черт! - chyort - damn
Merde - shit
すみません! - sumimasen - excuse me!
門限は15分後だ。早くホテルに戻らないと。-Mongen wa juugofun ato da. Hayaku hoteru ni modoranai to. - Curfew's in 15 min. We have to hurry and get back to the hotel.
じゃあね。- ja ne - later (casual goodbye)
行きましょう。- Ikimashou - let's go

No fancy coding on the translations today (even if it'd been my original plan) due to having a sore throat and wanting to post this before I fall into bed for the night.

Timeline! by popularish demand.

I may be a little too familiar with how breakfast at hotels in Germany work and therefore really wanted to write a scene involving breakfast. *is ridiculous, doesn't care*

There are a couple of Easter Eggs. They aren't important or anything. If you want to know: Reality Climax (just the name) is based off the game show in Saints Row 3 (Professor Genki's Super Ethical Reality Climax) I may have loved watching those side missions the most! And Hikaru and the rooster are from Skip Beat's variety show: Kimagure Rock Putting them in just made me giggle, so I did!
I'm forgetting a thing, but I can always come back and add it later! :D
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The GPF comes to its conclusion and the run-up to the Olympics begin! (Nationals and Euros...)

Chapter Notes

I am so so so very thankful for all the comments and I will reply to them all (I am behind). I was absolutely floored by the reception the last chapter got! Thank you all so much!

***

Also CJ recommended a how to on hover translations that I have finally had enough energy to try, and it looks like it might be working! So just mouse over the foreign words, and the translation should pop up! If it doesn’t, translations are at the bottom as always. Let me know what you think of it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

chuchu_phichit d katsudonyuuri ■■■■■■■■■■■■■! That means Congratulations in Thai!

chuchu_phichit d katsudonyuuri OMG YUURI! YOU WERE AMAZING!!! I need more words for amazing.

katsudonyuuri d chuchu_phichit wonderful, stunning, incredible, brilliant, awesome

chuchu_phichit d katsudonyuuri YES! ALL THOSE TOO!

katsudonyuuri d chuchu_phichit No nono no I was just trying to give you synonyms because you said you needed them. I was trying to help.

chuchu_phichit d katsudonyuuri and you did! I love those words! You were wonderful, stunning, incredible, brilliant, and awesome!

katsudonyuuri d chuchu_phichit Phichit… seriously…

katsudonyuuri d chuchu_phichit Thank you

chuchu_phichit d katsudonyuuri Next year I’ll be at the JGPF too! But I guess you’ll probably be in Seniors… My coach says I should be glad about that.

katsudonyuuri d chuchu_phichit … I don’t know. I haven’t talked about transitioning over with my coach yet.

***
Yuuri sat with Yuuko and Nishigori for the Men’s Short Program. His class didn’t purchase tickets for it since Yuuri wasn’t skating, and instead had filed out of the arena to go to an organized dinner. They’d leave for Osaka in the morning.

The thirty minutes he’d spent surrounded by his classmates getting congratulated were probably the longest in his life. And of course there were photographers who made him take off his Japan team jacket to showcase his costume, and an assistant hidden among the students that would polish his gold medal every so often if a photographer mentioned it wasn’t sparkling enough.

Yuuri much preferred the quiet he’d had at past competitions. Though celebrating his first Junior Grand Prix Final Gold with his classmates and friends was nice, the media attention wasn’t.

A quiet cough from the side cut short a photographer who’d been trying to coax Yuuri into an elaborate pose that made him wish a black hole would just open under his feet and swallow him whole. “すみません。Yuuri-kun is needed for some interviews.” Riku smiled at the photographer, then Yuuri. “Yuuri-kun, you might want to say goodbye to your classmates since you won’t see them again, since they leave for Osaka in the morning.”

Yuuri nodded. Riku, both his savior and the bearer of bad news. He did not want to do any more interviews, especially after this circus.

By the time that Yuuri collapsed in the seat next to Yuuko, he was feeling beyond wrung out. Nishigori patted him on the back. “You did amazing, Yuuri! When do I get to see that gold medal?”

He started at the sudden contact. “Oh, I gave it to Alexei for safe keeping. I didn’t want to keep wearing it.”

“As long as I get to see it before it gets locked up in that cabinet that your parents display your medals in. A Grand Prix Final gold medal! I need to hold that in my hands.”

Yuuko chuckled. “You should have kept skating then, Takeshi.”

He waved the comment off. “As much as I enjoyed it, I’m not built for singles figure skating. I would have made someone an excellent ice dancing partner, though.” He gave his wife a loving, meaningful look out of the corner of his eye. Yuuri almost choked. “Though that someone was much too interested in those silly jumps.” He turned back to Yuuri. “Why didn’t you do the quad toe-loop?”

Yuuri shifted in his seat. The skaters were just about to enter the ice for their six-minute warm-up. Yuuri could see Viktor standing next to Yakov, getting a lecture about something. “I didn’t need the quad to win, I’m not comfortable doing it, and it makes me extra nervous knowing that I have to. So Alexei and I decided to scrap it for the rest of the season.”

“Crispino had one.”

Yuuri nodded. “You’re right, he did. And he fell on it and didn’t recover, so he did worse than expected and walked away with a bronze. He could have had silver.”

“I heard him being interviewed. Apparently, he thinks of you as his rival and was determined to one-up you after you landed that quad at Nebelhorn.”

Tearing his eyes from the ice, Yuuri looked at Yuuko. “My rival? What? I don’t have any rivals.”

Nishigori laughed. “Oh my god, Yuuko, did you hear that? Our little Yuuri is so full of himself he
doesn’t think any of the other junior skaters are worth his time or consideration!”

“Tha–that– That wasn’t what I meant at all! Crispino is a really good skater! I think he’s incredibly
talented, and I mean, one day we’ll both be competing in the Senior Division–”

Yuuko rested her fingers on his arm. “It’s all right, Yuu-kun, we get it. Takeshi was just being a
troll.”

Nishigori grinned. “Looks like that Swiss skater that we had dinner with last night is about to start.
Everyone else has left the ice.”

Yuuri hadn’t watched much of Christophe’s programs in the past, but he’d seen enough to notice
there was a definite stylistic change. The music was a simple cello and piano duet instead of a full
orchestration, and he moved much more fluidly. Christophe definitely had dance training and
strength; his quad Salchow was absolutely perfect, and the step sequence was more of a pair dance
across the ice with an invisible partner. Yuuri grinned when he heard Yuuko sigh next to him. It
was definitely good.

After the program was over, Yuuko stood up and joined the standing ovation for Christophe,
shouting to Yuuri that Minako was probably over the moon with because it was everything his ballet
teacher loved in a skater: passion and dance skill.

Yuuri felt a vibration from his pocket and retrieved his phone.

ミナコ先生
You need to take some ballroom dancing lessons. Stat.

To ミナコ先生
Stat is slang for now or something, right? Is this about Christophe Giacometti’s short program?

ミナコ先生
YES! If you meet him, tell him I want to marry him!

To ミナコ先生
He’s eighteen.

ミナコ先生
I DON’T CARE! And ballroom. I’ll text Alexei and tell him.

Yuuri just blinked at his phone, then stuck it back in his pocket. “You were right. And now she
thinks I need ballroom lessons.”

***

Yuuri dug his nails into the soft part of his palm until he could feel the sharp crescents of pain and
shook his head. This did not just happen.

“Did Viktor just pop his quad flip?” Yuuko, equally incredulous, grabbed his arm right above the
elbow and squeezed. He could only nod in response. “Yuuri, Viktor does not pop jumps. He gets
the rotations and takes the fall.”

“I know.” Yuuri took a deep breath and stood. He didn’t care about the rest of the routine or the
score. “I’ll… I’ll find you. Keep your phone on.” He took off down the stairs that would take him
back to the skaters’ prep area. He couldn’t get rinkside, but he could wait at the exit closest to the
Kiss and Cry.
As he approached, Chris reached out and grabbed him. “Do you know what happened?”

Yuuri just shook his head and they waited, staring at the monitor. Viktor, ever the professional, didn’t even look shaken sitting next to Yakov. On the screen he was lifting his poodle plushie and waving and blowing kisses.

“He’s pissed off.”

Yuuri snorted, but nodded. “Yeah, he is.” It was there, in the straightness of his back and the way that he avoided looking at Yakov at all. It was even there in the downturn of Yakov’s lips.

“Did he ever pop the jump when he was learning the quad flip?” Yuuri turned to look at Chris when he asked the question. “I mean, maybe he got into the habit.”

Yuuri shook his head. “He’d eat ice before he opened on that jump, and he ate a lot of ice. Katerina Babicheva has a blooper reel of his best falls. She sent a copy to me via e-mail to cheer me up one day. I should forward it to you.”

Chris’s eyes widened. “I don’t know if Viktor would like that.”

“Viktor ‘my bruises show my dedication to nailing the quad flip’ Nikiforov?” Yuuri shrugged. “I don’t think he’d care. You’re… friends, right?” He looked up at Chris and held his gaze.

“Am I being vetted?”

“No. I don’t get a say in Viktor’s love life. Though he did tell me how much fun you were to flirt with once.”

“He did?!” There was a faint blush on Chris’s cheeks. After that picture from Worlds, Yuuri didn’t really think just a passing mention of flirting would make the older skater blush.

“Yeah. It was before the disaster that was Elodie, but after the tabloids of them in Quebec. I was still training in St. Petersburg at the time.” Yuuri might have said more, but the heavy drape that closed off the area next to the rink was pushed open and Viktor stepped through, his skates thudding with every step.

Viktor sighed as he walked past them and dropped into the first chair he saw, starting the process of undoing his laces. “Yakov, I need ice time tonight.” He paused. “And Yuuri time.”

Yuuri raised his eyebrows. “Me time?”

“You time.” Viktor aimed a pleading look in Yuuri’s direction, knowing full well that Yuuri couldn’t refuse it. “You’ll help me, won’t you, Yuuri?”

Yuuri sighed. “I know we’ve had this conversation before. I’m a Junior skater and you are the Viktor Nikiforov. How can I possibly help you?”

“My step sequence only got marked at a level four once this season. If I want to medal here, that needs to happen. It needs to happen before the Olympics, anyway.” Viktor brushed his bangs out of his eyes and gave Yuuri a smile. “You’ll help me, right?”

Yakov didn’t wait for Yuuri’s answer. “I’ll text Alexei to get his permission.”

Yuuri sighed, but thanked Yakov as he moved away -- probably to make arrangements with the staff for them to stay here, or for a local rink to open their doors. Not to mention texting Alexei.
“You're going to stay up and retool your free program the night before you have to skate it?” Chris sounded amazed.

Raising a delicately clad shoulder, Viktor shrugged. “There isn’t much that I need to do that I haven’t already figured out. I’ll change the triple flip-triple lutz combo to a quad flip-triple loop, and then I’ll put the triple lutz where I had the single triple flip. I should be able to pull off my quad toe-loop toward the end for the points, so I’ll switch its placement with the triple toe-loop that I had there. It’d be pushing it, but I have been working on my stamina. The last piece I need is a stronger step sequence.”

Another vibration. Yuuri took his phone out of his pocket and opened it to look at the latest message. Another note from Alexei; he’d reply after he figured this out. “Why is it weaker this year?”

“Yeah, I’ve never understood how your step sequence was strongest with Moldau and then good, but not as good last year, and then this year…” Chris trailed off.

“Well, this year,” Viktor sighed as he looked pointedly at Yuuri. “Lilia won’t even talk to me since she divorced Yakov, and we all know that I was never her favorite anyway. She avoids the rink at all costs.” He turned to look at Chris. “You’re welcome to tag along, but I know that you like getting your beauty sleep before a competition.”

Chris shrugged. “Josef might not like it. I’ll see.”

***

Yuuri paused by the barrier, resting one hand against it as he bent over and ran his gloved fingers along the sides of his blades. He put his foot down and lifted the other, repeating the action. Yakov and Alexei were up in the small stands, not really paying much attention to what Viktor and Yuuri were up to on the ice. They were both just there to make sure that their skaters didn’t injure themselves.

Viktor’s skates entered Yuuri’s vision and he looked up. “Are you ready?”

Viktor nodded, brushing his bangs out of his eyes and behind his ear, just for most of it to fall back across his eyes again. “Yeah. I’ll show you the step seq--”

Yuuri shook his head as he straightened. “You don’t have to. I know it already.”

“You do?”

Yuuri nodded. “I do it as part of my warm up.” He looked over his shoulder as he headed out onto the ice. “It’s pretty, and I like the music. So I queue it up and do the step sequence.” He started skating laps to gain the momentum that he’d need for the sequence. “I’m not going to do the triple axel that comes before, though. I’m just going to mark it.”

He saw Viktor give him a thumbs up.

He didn’t need the music, could hear it in his head, right before the step sequence, Yuuri went into a spread eagle, then replaced the triple axel with a waltz jump and went into the first counter turn. He let the feel of the music carry him through. *It starts as an argument between the cello and the piano, and then -- a pause, going up on his toe picks -- then the cello and piano wrap around each other at the very end, like a dance -- a twizzle first in one direction, a step, then the other direction -- he spun out, ending the step sequence with the forward drag.*

It was only when he skated back to Viktor and saw the look on the other boy’s face that Yuuri
realized he’d forgotten to take out the one change he’d made to the sequence. He opened his mouth, the apology on his tongue, but Viktor spoke first.

“An illusion? I usually don’t--”

“I’m sorry! I… I just skated it like I do during my warm up, I completely forgot to not do that--”

“I like it. I think I might be able to pull it off, even. I have good balance. Maybe not as good as yours, but, yes, let me try.” He looked over at the stands. “Yakov? Opinion?”

“If you skated like that, you wouldn’t have trouble getting it marked as a four, but you knew that already. Just don’t fall on your ass trying to do that illusion.”

“So I’m keeping the illusion. It’s decided!”

Yuuri groaned.

“Watch my arms and positions for me, Yuuri?”

Yuuri was taken aback by the intensity he saw in Viktor’s eyes -- ocean blue with shadows and highlights, every speckle and flash deeper at the edges and near the pupil. He swallowed hard, unable to say anything, and just nodded. When he bit his lip a moment later -- hitting a part that had cracked from being chapped -- the dull throb recentered him. “Just don’t be surprised if I make you do them off the ice, too.”

“はい、勇利先生。”

He knew that the color was rising in his cheeks as Viktor skated around the edge to gain momentum before mimicking Yuuri’s interpretation of Viktor’s step sequence.

It was strange, seeing it. At the time, his routine felt as if he’d taken Viktor’s skating and run it through Babelfish or Google Translate, and then skated that. Then Viktor had taken Yuuri’s skating and done the same and this, what Yuuri was seeing right now, was the result. And unlike the butchering of languages that online translators were notorious for, this was beautiful. Better than what it had been. Better than Yuuri’s. It was still rough, and Viktor really needed to smooth his arm transitions and weight changes, but this was a step sequence that Viktor could and would be proud of.

“Well?” Viktor set his hands on his hips and stared at Yuuri.

Yuuri bit his lip for a second and then let himself smirk, just a bit. “It’s a start.” No need for Viktor to know just how much he’d already amazed Yuuri. He needed to work for it. Especially if he was going to amaze the judges, too. It was a long way up from fifth.

Viktor smiled. “Then I’ll do it again.”

***

“Tell him that if I don’t get to watch the Men’s free skate with you, he owes me.”

Yuuri laughed into the phone. “I will. What do you want him to owe you? A signed program or something?”

Yuuko’s voice sounded smaller and tinnier over the little speaker in the phone, a fact that always amused Yuuri. “I want an autographed print of the French cologne ad that you mentioned.”
Yuuri could hear Nishigori’s squawk in the background.

“I’m allowed fantasy material! I’m pregnant! If you had all day nausea and aches all over and swollen ankles, I wouldn’t say anything if you wanted a picture of Viktor to—”

“I’m hanging up now because I really don’t want to hear anymore!” He snapped his phone shut and looked over at where Viktor was doing his stretches before the warm-up skate.

“So I need to sign a program for Yuuko?” Viktor’s head was bent over his leg.

“No. She wants a signed copy of the French ad.”

“Oh, did the two of you look it up?” Viktor sounded smug.

Yuuri shook his head so fast his vision blurred for a second. “No. But Yuuko did.”

Viktor smiled. “Not a problem. It’ll have to be mailed, but I’ll send one as soon as I get back to St. Petersburg. Overnight delivery.”

Yuuri muttered under his breath, “Yuuko might appreciate that, but her husband sure won’t.”

“What was that, Yuuri? Did you want me to send you one, too? Okay!”

“What? No! I—”

“Viktor! Skates on. The warm-up starts in under 10 minutes.” Yakov cut Yuuri off as he rushed into Viktor’s prep space, saving him from any further embarrassment. Once Viktor’s skates were on, he followed Yakov and Viktor to the rink, and stood next to Yakov as they watched Viktor warm-up. It was definitely strange. According to the note scribbled in Japanese and English on the bottom of his badge, he was now a temporary member of Viktor’s team. Instead of his Japan national team jacket -- which was safe with Alexei and Riku up in the competitor stands -- Yuuri was just wearing a black Mizuno tracksuit jacket (one of the perks of that Mizuno sponsorship) and honestly, he liked it even better than the official jacket, since this one came with holes for his thumbs and made rubbing the fabric of the cuff against his palms easier.

He was nervous and anxious, and that always led to him fidgeting. Viktor had requested his help on that step sequence, and Yuuri felt that if he didn’t come through for Viktor -- and that if Viktor didn’t make the podium, didn’t win gold -- then it would be his fault.

The buzzing of his phone in his pocket broke him from his reverie and he pulled it out, looking at the message.

007 812 123 4567
I hope the fact that you are standing next to that man by the rink means that you’ve taken pity on Vitya and have corrected his horrific step sequence. Lilia

To 007 812 123 4567
I tried to help.

007 812 123 4567
Do not doubt yourself. You were my student, after all. But no one can make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.

Yuuri really didn’t know what to say to that. Maybe he misunderstood? He turned to Yakov. “A sow is a pig, right?”
Yakov nodded. “Was that Lilia? Is she insulting Viktor?”

Yuuri opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Don’t pay it any mind. She knows he’s a talented skater, if not the most beautiful skater. That’s what she meant.”

He’d have to take Yakov’s word for it. Yuuri turned back to the rink and watched Viktor skate the spread eagle into the triple axel before the beginning of the step sequence. He wasn’t focusing on presentation -- there were too many skaters all on the rink to lose himself like that -- but he was marking the arm movements, and seemed to have remembered all the changes they’d made the night before.

“No matter what happens with Vitya’s scores, thank you.”

Yuuri looked up at his former coach. “Excuse me, Coach?”

“Thank you. You didn’t have to help Vitya, but I am glad that you did. He skates better when you’re on the ice with him. He wants it more.” A pause. “Alexei said you had wanted to quit and not skate in Seniors after Nebelhorn. Don’t. It was bad luck that you had to skate after someone like Stéphane for your Senior debut. Not even Viktor could consistently beat him. You’ll have another chance.”

Yuuri nodded and turned back to the rink. They had a minute on the ice left, then less than ten minutes to do an off-ice runthrough with those arm positions.

Chris winked at Yuuri as he stepped off the ice, and Yuuri flushed -- he would never get used to people winking at him, ever. Chris was skating third, right after Viktor. Oda patted him on the shoulder as he walked by; he was skating fourth.

Viktor was the last skater off the ice. The only skater remaining was the Czech skater, Dušan Blažek. Yakov snapped at Viktor as soon as he was off the ice, and Yuuri and Viktor went back to the prep area for one last runthrough.

***

中川翔太
I thought that you weren’t allowed rinkside during the other competitions

To 中川翔太
You watched Senior Men’s? I was given special access since I was standing in as a dance instructor. It’s a long story.

中川翔太
It was on in the locker room at the sports plaza. I have time.

To 中川翔太
Viktor screwed up his short program and asked me to help with his step sequence. The part that’s like dancing. So I did and we were still working on it (1/2)

To 中川翔太
so my former coach who is Viktor’s coach got permission for me to be in the competitor area even though I wasn’t skating. (2/2)
中川翔太
The JSF didn’t care that you were helping a non-Japanese skater?

To 中川翔太
I don’t know. No one’s talked to me about it. I tried to stay away from everything and I didn’t wear my national team jacket or anything.

中川翔太
I want to go to Hasetsu with you for Katsudon to celebrate your gold.

To 中川翔太
All right. I’ll let my mother know that I’m bringing a friend.

中川翔太
Just a friend???

To 中川翔太
I thought you would want to stay in my room. If I tell her we’re dating 1) that won’t happen and 2) I’ll get lectured since it’s against school (1/2)

To 中川翔太
rules; she’s not like Alexei who doesn’t care as long as my skating isn’t affected. She doesn’t want me to get in trouble with the school. (2/2)

中川翔太
You make good points, Katsuki.

***

“I can’t believe I still haven’t won a gold medal at the Grand Prix Final. How is that even possible?” Viktor glared at the bronze medal in his hands.

“Well, I would have said that it’s as unimaginable as you popping a jump, but there it is. You popped a jump and got a bronze. Not to mention that you touched down on that over-ambitious quad toe-loop combination in the back half and got a lowered GOE, and--”

“Shut up, Chris.”

Chris grinned at him. “Just trying to be helpful and answer your question.” He looked around. “Where’s Katsuki? All skaters are supposed to appear in the exhibition, and he is even performing.”

Viktor pointed to a small group talking. “He’s been abducted by the Japanese contingent.”

“Two silver, a gold, and a bronze between them, right?”

Nodding, Viktor looked back at Chris. “On their home turf, even.”

“The Junior pairs skaters are going to perform even though they got bronze, aren’t they? They look nervous.”

“Well, usually they don’t have the bronze medalists in Juniors skate, so I don’t blame them, but they were invited to and this is Tokyo. I’m sure a large portion of the audience wants to see their medalists skate. Yuuri even said that it’s their first big international win.”

***
When Yuuri stepped off the ice after finishing his exhibition skate, Yuuko was standing there in tears.

“I can’t believe you! You choreographed that? When Alexei told me… It’s about the triplets?”

“Well, I figure that’s how you’ve got to feel about them, right? Like they’re the best thing, even though you haven’t met them and have only seen them through that weird medical image thing that you keep sending me pictures of for some reason.”

“Ultrasound! They’re ultrasound pictures!” Yuuko wrapped her arms around Yuuri’s neck. “You even put in that combination jump we joked about.”

“Has Nishigori talked you out of naming them Axel, Loop, and Lutz yet?”

“Never. Though he keeps putting books of baby names on top of my reading pile next to the bed.” Yuuko sniffled close to his ear. “Thank you. Really, Yuuri, thank you.”

Yuuri returned the hug.

***

“So we have an accord! Les Trois Mousquetaires! We will take our Nationals with gold and storm Vancouver together!”

Yuuri sighed and looked at Chris, who was in turn looking at him with the same sort of disbelieving expression. “I came in sixth last year. I would have to overtake Oda-san and Taku-san, not to mention the three others that came ahead of me.”

“Two things. First, I know you haven’t read that book, especially in the original French. Second, there were four of them, so we’re one short. And -- I lied -- third, I would have to pulverize Stéphane. His ranking is still higher than mine. Doesn’t mean I’m not going to try, but it won’t be easy.”

Yuuri flinched. “Good luck. Stéphane is… very good.”

Viktor frowned at them. “I can’t believe you! Where is your positive thinking? The three of us need to be in Vancouver together! It’ll be amazing! And fun!” He turned to Chris. “Your programs this year are so much better, and I think that maybe you could beat even Stéphane if you could get a bit more consistent on that quad Salchow. And if you tighten up your spins, because let’s face it, Stéphane has us all owned on spins. Even our little Yuuri here.” Then he set his gaze on Yuuri. “And you, everyone knows Oda. He’s excitable, skates into walls, and has inconsistent focus and stamina. And Taku is recovering from an injury. Is he even skating in Nationals?”

Yuuri nodded. “He is. He didn’t skate in the GPS because he wanted to be fully recovered for Nationals, since the Japanese Olympic Committee is making its decision for the Olympic team based partially off the Senior Nationals, in conjunction with the JSF’s opinions. But, and I will remind you of this one more time because you seem to keep forgetting, Viktor, I skate in Juniors.”

Viktor waved his hand. “It’s all about the age. You’re old enough. If the JSF pushes--”

“Don’t.”

Viktor grabbed Yuuri’s shoulders and switched to Russian. “No, you don’t. Yakov told me that you’re scared of skating in Seniors internationally. You have to. I need you to skate in Seniors. Chris will need you to skate in Seniors. He might not realise that yet, but he will. I don’t care about
what happened at Nebelhorn, you’re good enough and everyone seems to know that but you.”

Yuuri shook his head.

“You have a quad toe. There are people skating in Seniors -- that will be at the Olympics, even --
that don’t have a quad at all. You have a ridiculously good triple axel. One of the best I’ve seen.
Stéphane Lambiel doesn’t even do a triple axel as consistently as you. He switches it out for a
double all the time. And your step sequences. Don’t even get me started. I asked you to help me
with my step sequence and I’m the favourite to win gold at the Olympics. This GPF
notwithstanding.” Viktor sighed and pushed his forehead against Yuuri’s. “The only thing holding
you back, Yuuri, is you. So stop.”

Someone coughed, and Yuuri pulled away from Viktor and looked.

“Morooka-san!”

“Hello, Katsuki-kun. I was hoping to get a photo?” He lifted his camera. “I am writing a companion
piece for the Asahi TV website. It’s not often we get to see three competitors getting along so well!”

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded. “This is Morooka-san, he’s a junior sportscaster and did the
commentary for the Junior finalists for Asahi TV.” He glanced at Viktor. “He used to work for _ON
ICE_.”

It was like a light went off, and Viktor’s smile shone extra brilliantly. “You can have as many
pictures as you want! Especially if I can get a copy of the last interview you did with Yuuri for _ON
ICE_!”

“He’s a fanboy.” Chris grinned.

Morooka-san gave a laugh and looked a little confused, but happy. “Of course, that’s easy. I’ll send
a copy to your coach.”

“Oh, no, let me give you my personal mailing address, then Yakov can’t hold it hostage to make me
train.”

Yuuri groaned. One day people were going to start getting the wrong impression.

***

Yuuri loved this arrangement of his Free Skate. Each part spoke to him in a different way. He’d had
so many first loves as he grew up. The first time he did a pirouette for Minako-sensei and she’d
praised him. He thought that ballet would always come first. He practically soared into his layback
Ina Bauer. Then he met Yuuko, and she loved skating and Yuuri, well, he thought she was the most
beautiful girl in the whole world. And she introduced him to skating. And those were new sorts of
first love.

The music changed, getting deeper, and he flowed into a cantilever, the back of his head almost
touching the ice before he came out of it and switched into an inside edge spread eagle. Viktor
would like that; it was unexpected. Viktor, who made his love of the ice an almost tangible thing.
His first figure skating crush. He landed his triple axel and continued.

(A first kiss. Nakagawa.)

A sit spin with a twist.
(His first time being accepted by an entire class who didn’t think his running off to skate all the time was strange.)

A series of transition steps before...

(The first fan letter he ever received. Being the one to open someone else’s eyes to figure skating.)

… a quad toe-loop in the back half.

His love would never be as clear-cut as just romantic love, and this song let him skate them all. A love for the unending number of firsts the ice could give him.

***

“Why did I do that quad toe-loop? If I’d left it out, we wouldn’t even be here. I’d have been closer to the fourth place finisher in points than the second.” Yuuri put his face in his hands as he slouched forward in the small waiting area in the JSF’s offices. Riku patted his back before leaning back in the seat next to him.

If Yuuri turned his head, he knew he’d see Alexei arguing with the head of the JSF, a member of the Japanese Olympics Committee. and Taku Toshiaki and his coach. It was bad enough that he could hear them clearly.

There was no doubt that Oda-san was going to the Vancouver Olympics, and with only two spots, the Senior Nationals silver medalist was the obvious pick for the second slot. So why Yuuri was even here when he had come in third was ridiculous.

“Two points. I was two points ahead of him.”

“Look, don’t argue with me.” Alexei threw up his hands in front of him. “I’m on your side. Yuuri-kun is more than happy to accept the position as alternate.”

“And what about the other senior level competitions?” This from the head of the JSF. Yuuri couldn’t remember his name; he’d only just met the man for the first time that morning.

“Don’t do that to him. You saw what happened at Nebelhorn. Yuuri-kun doesn’t think that he’s ready to skate in Senior division yet.” Alexei sighed and pushed back his hair with a hand. “Look. Next year, have him skate some of the lower level competitions. The Golden Spin, the Finlandia, just not the big ones. Get him some experience because that’s what he needs when it comes to competing in the Senior Division.”

Yuuri didn’t bother listening to what the head of the JSF was saying in response, instead turning to face the woman sitting next to him. “Do you think that he’s right, Riku-san?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation. “Will you be happy as an alternate for the Olympics? I know that Viktor wanted you to go.”

“Honestly? The only Senior Division competition I skated in ever, I came in thirteenth. That’s not the makings of an Olympic athlete.”

“I disagree, but this isn’t about my opinion. If you don’t feel as if you’re ready, then that’s that. Though I don’t think that even Alexei being Alexei could get them to not make you an alternate. I cannot say anything one way or another, since I had to recuse myself from the discussion.”

“Please stay healthy, Taku-san. We don’t want you aggravating your injury and not be able to
Alexei came to stand in front of them and sighed. “You’re still needed for the press conference. They’re announcing you as first alternate. Usually that would be a handwave, but it is unfortunately possible that Taku-san might reinjure himself during practice in the lead up to the Olympics, in which case you’ll have to go to Vancouver.”

Yuuri nodded. “I understand. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? It’s an honor to be selected for the Olympic team, and they really almost did bypass Taku-san because of his injury and put you on the team instead.” Alexei squatted down in front of Yuuri. “Look. I know that you don’t think you’re ready for something like the Olympics, and I get it, that’s huge; going to the Olympics is the biggest deal for a figure skater. But you’ve got to understand that they aren’t expecting you to beat Viktor. Not this time. That’s for Oda to accomplish, if he can. But they do want to send the strongest team possible to Vancouver.”

Yuuri bit his lip. “But what about next year? If they want me to compete in those Senior competitions… You only coach Juniors. Does that—”

“Yuuri. Don’t think about that right now. You need to stay focused on what’s happening right now. And right now I’m not going anywhere. We’ll discuss it after Junior Worlds when we look at my contract with your parents, all right?”

He nodded. “All right.”

“There’s one other thing.”

Yuuri looked at his coach.

“They aren’t budging on the Four Continents. The JSF wants you to go.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
すみません - sumimasen - Excuse me/I'm sorry.
ミナコ先生 - Minako-sensei
はい、勇利先生。- Hai, Yuuri-sensei
中川翔太 - Nakagawa Shouta
Les Trois Mousquetaires - The Three Musketeers
***
So I mention some flaws for our real life skaters... And I feel like I should reference them. Oda did an interview here. And there are quite a few pages that talk about Lambiel's lack of a solid triple axel. (If you listen to the commentary on his 2010 Olympic SP, you'll hear them talk about it as well. (Again, I'm only keeping these two because they were actually in the anime as themselves)
“Yuuri-kun, there’s mail from St. Petersburg for you. I put it on your desk.”

“Thank you, Riku-san!”

Yuuri toed out of his shoes and headed straight for the stairs. It was probably actually for Yuuko, he reckoned; the only thing that he could think of was that ad Viktor promised. But Yuuko had made sure that Viktor had her mailing address in Hasetsu, since she did not want to wait for Yuuri to come and visit and bring it.

Yuuri shook his head. It was a good thing that he would be heading to Hasetsu anyway. He pulled his phone out and went through his contacts until he found Yuuko’s cell number.

She answered right away; she must have been bored. Last time they spoke, she said her doctor had told her to take it easier, which translated to doing as little as possible. “Yuu-kun?”

He picked up the large envelope from his desk and turned it over to look at the address. Definitely from Viktor. “Hi, Yuu-chan. I think Viktor lost your address--”

“Did he send the matryoshkas to you?”

“What?” Yuuri sat down, dropping his bookbag next to his desk.

“Well, when he sent the signed ad he promised, there was a note with it. He told me that he was going to be sending some matryoshkas. One for each of the triplets. Isn’t that the sweetest thing?”

“You already got the ad?” Yuuri suddenly was both really curious about and very apprehensive about the contents of this envelope.

Yuuko made an affirmative noise through the phone. “He sent it overnight just like he promised. I
got it before you even competed in Senior Nationals. When are you coming back for that? Don’t you get katsudon for bronze? Are you bringing Nakagawa-kun again? Because that was fun. I might not be allowed to skate at the moment, but I’m sure I could do better than him if I did.”

Yuuri pressed the phone between his chin and shoulder and started to tear the flap slowly and meticulously. “He’s perfectly capable of skating without holding onto someone. Not well. I mean, it’s not like he’ll let go of the barrier--”

“So he was just looking for a reason to hang onto you?”

“Yuuko--” Whatever he was going to say fled his mind when he caught sight of the contents of the envelope. There was that ridiculous cologne ad -- with Viktor naked, shot from behind, reaching for a towel and giving a flirty look over his shoulder -- but there was another glossy full-page print. This time, Viktor stood in the center of a fairly plain set, barefoot, jeans slung low on his hips so that his hip bones jutted out prominently, black shirt completely unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled up. His hair was tousled and looked like he’d just gotten out of bed.

There was a post-it note in the corner. Since you mentioned I never send you copies of my photoshoots or advertisements.- Viktor

He’d never been happier to be alone at his desk. Not only could he feel the heat on his cheeks; he could feel it crawling down his neck and up along the shell of his ears, too. “I have to go.”

“Yuu-kun?”

“I… I just… yeah. I’ll be back for Euros. We’ll watch at least the Free Skate together, but I have to go now.” He knew that his voice sounded a little strangled, but he didn’t know what to do about it.

“OK. Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s great. I’ll talk to you soon.” He hung up the phone and let his head drop to the desktop with a groan. Why? Why would Viktor send him that? It was…

He turned his head to the side and opened his phone.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Got your pictures.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri They’re great, right?

Great wasn’t the word that Yuuri was looking for. The second one definitely was, but there was no way he would ever say it!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Unexpected is what I was going to say. I didn’t realize we were mailing each other our adverts.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Well, you can email yours if you want, but I thought you might want to put this up next to your signed poster
That was definitely not going to happen. He already got a look whenever Nakagawa came into his room and laid eyes on “the wall of Viktor”. After a second’s thought, Yuuri sat up and slipped the two somewhat risqué images under the bunch of papers and magazines that he kept in his top desk drawer.

***

christophegc d katsudonyuuri Viktor told me your secret twitter name. Is this all right?

katsudonyuuri d christophegc It’s fine. It’s not really a secret. Just not public. You aren’t at Europeans?

christophegc d katsudonyuuri My programs last year weren’t as good as they could have been. I didn’t place high enough to get Switzerland 2 spots.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc And Stéphane won your championships.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri To be fair, I was at a disadvantage. Our Nationals were held four days after the end of the GPF.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri I still managed to come in second, but I do not want to discuss the point difference between Stéphane and I.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc OK. I won’t ask then. But good job on coming in second! My ballet instructor loved your programs, btw

christophegc d katsudonyuuri Did she? Amazing. Is she good, your ballet instructor? It’s been years since I’ve done more than the basics.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc Yes. Minako-sensei is wonderful. She’s won some awards. I used to want to dance like her. She’s making me take ballroom.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri Ballroom is handy when it comes to skating, you’ll see. Most of my cross training is dance based, just not ballet.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc She says some of your steps were basically foxtrot.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri She is good! What awards did she win?

katsudonyuuri d christophegc The Benois de la Danse is the most well known, but she’s won others. She knew Lilia, and that’s why I got to train in Russia.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri You are sneaky when it comes to dropping bombs on a person. You were trained by someone like that?!

katsudonyuuri d christophegc Uh. Yeah. Still am, but only every other weekend when I go home. And well, that’s why Viktor wanted my help.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri So that’s why your step sequences are so good. It’s starting to make sense.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc What is?

christophegc d katsudonyuuri Why Viktor is your fan. We’ll chat again when Viktor skates, n’est–
ce pas?

katsudonyuuri: That’s French for something? Like a question? So like \( \text{か} \). But yes, we can.

***

Yuuri and Nishigori rolled the TV on its stand into the bedroom.

“More to the left! There! I am not missing the European Championships just because some doctor thinks that I need to stay off my feet! I could have gone to the living room.”

Nishigori knelt down and started fiddling with the cables to get everything hooked up. “And just who do you think will carry you to bed when you fall asleep on the couch? Because I love you, Yuuko, but I need my back to not be in pain. I have to work, and Yuuri is a competitive skater that might be going to the Olympics.”

“I am not going to the Olympics!” Yuuri glared at Nishigori before turning to Yuuko. “But I do have to compete in the Four Continents in a few days, so, I can’t carry you either. Sorry.”

Yuuko sniffled. “You two are insinuating that I am big.”

“No, I’m not. Your husband might be, but I’m not. On the other hand, you are carrying Nishigori babies, so let’s just blame the triplets!” Yuuri smiled at her.

Nishigori playfully shoved Yuuri’s shoulder in response; Yuuri let himself fall onto the bed with a chuckle.

“Viktor hasn’t skated yet, right?”

Yuuri shook his head. “He’s skating last since he was first in the short program. The last group should be taking the ice.” On a hunch, Yuuri took his phone out and looked through his messages. “He stopped messaging me after the third ‘Yuuri, you better be watching, or I’ll never forgive you,’ so I’m assuming that Yakov either confiscated his phone or he’s about to start his on ice warm-up.”

With the TV set up, Nishigori flipped through the stations until he found the competition.

“Oh, there he is! I’m really starting to like his hair. I think I might forgive him for cutting it. And his costume is much more understated than usual, but he still looks hot.” Yuuko looked at Yuuri, who was intently typing on his phone. “If Viktor is on the ice, who are you messaging? Nakagawakun?”

Yuuri shook his head. “Chris. He didn’t get to go to Europeans, so we’ve been chatting during Viktor’s skates.”

Nishigori reached out and ruffled Yuuri’s hair. “Look, Yuuko, Yuuri is learning how to make friends!”

“Shut up.” Yuuri ducked away.

“Takeshi, be nice.”

“Someone needs to keep him grounded. We don’t want all that popularity to go to his head.”

The program began. Viktor’s skating was better than it had been at the Grand Prix; whatever had been weighing on his mind at the Final in Tokyo seemed to be gone. It might have been the
reassurance that the official announcement of the Russian Olympic Team had given him, or the fact that his knee wasn’t in danger of getting re-injured. But Yuuri could only speculate. Viktor hadn’t wanted to talk about why he’d popped that jump in Tokyo. And now, everything was softer and more graceful. The harsh edges that had been there were gone.

_Elegie_ by Fauré was, for the most part, a soft piece. The judges would surely appreciate it; it was traditional, but not overused.

“He’s so graceful when he skates this. Look at that hand position!” Yuuko clapped her hands together. “Oh, my, that jump! That was a beautiful triple loop.”

Yuuri nodded. His brow lifted when he saw that the illusion was still in. “I thought he’d take that out.”

“But it’s so fitting for the piece bridging the parts between the cello and the piano. It works well, and he has the flexibility to pull it off. You should know that as you’re the one that put it in! It looks smoother than it had been in Tokyo.”

“Well, he had less than twenty-four hours to learn that change in Tokyo. He’s been working on it since, I guess, but he’d taken it out for the Russian Nationals, so I thought he might have scrapped it.” Yuuri sighed as Viktor entered his final spin. Beautiful.

“I still can’t believe that our Yuuri helps Viktor Nikiforov with his step sequences. I mean, in what reality does that even make sense?” Nishigori quipped. His wife used her foot to push him off the edge of the bed.

None of them were surprised when Viktor won gold.

***

_katsudonyuuri_ d christophegc I’m sorry your teammate lost. Viktor’s skate was perfect though.

_christophegc_ d katsudonyuuri I think we can both agree that Viktor definitely deserved that gold. His 4F is a thing of beauty

_katsudonyuuri_ d christophegc It really is.

_christophegc_ d katsudonyuuri And his step sequence is definitely better than what it was during the GPS.

_katsudonyuuri_ d vnikiforov Congratulations!

_vnikiforov_ d katsudonyuuri You watched?

_katsudonyuuri_ d vnikiforov Of course. I said I would. I was moving a TV and couldn’t reply. Your performance was beautiful and amazing.

_vnikiforov_ d katsudonyuuri You’re going to do just as well at the Four Continents. I’m so angry that I don’t get to skate against you.

_katsudonyuuri_ d vnikiforov You don’t have to be that impatient to beat me.

_vnikiforov_ d katsudonyuuri Yuuuuuuuuuuuri!! Take it back. You know what I meant.
Yuuri was glad that he’d worn one of his old hoodies on the plane ride to South Korea, rather than his team jacket. He’d been so anxious that he’d worn a hole right through the stitching between the cuff and the sleeve. And then he’d rubbed the edges of that between his fingers until the threads started unravelling. There was really very little that could be done to salvage it.

All the worrying didn’t get rid of the anxious feeling crawling under his skin, up his arms and along the back of his neck, sending shivers down his spine and leaving an unsettled feeling at the base that had him shifting and fidgeting more than usual. His chest felt tight and it was a struggle to breathe evenly, yet somehow he managed to not draw too much attention to himself -- at least until Riku put her hand over his wrist, tutting at the state of his hoodie. “You’ll have to switch it out before we get to the hotel.”

Yuuri nodded.

He pulled the plain Mizuno track jacket out of his luggage as soon as they picked it up and shoved his hoodie in. He wasn’t at the rink yet, so there was no need to broadcast his status as a skater yet by pulling out his team jacket. At least this way he could give in to his nervous fidgeting without ruining another sweatshirt or worse, his official outfit.

“Yuuri-kun!”

Yuuri looked up and smiled. “Hello, Keiko-senpai.”

His rinkmate hurried over to them. Yuuri could just vaguely make out Keiko’s coach talking to another coach off in the sitting area.

“I was so glad when they announced that you’d be at the Four Continents too!” Keiko grinned and turned to Yuuri’s coach. “Hello, Coach Alexei. Hello, Riku-san.”

Alexei smiled back. “Keiko-chan. Are you ready for your graduation?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. There’s this, and now I’ve been bumped up from alternate to actually going to Vancouver for the Olympics! Graduation is the last thing I’m thinking about. It can wait until after!”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“For university? Kansai. I didn’t want to leave Osaka, and Oda-san goes there. So I won’t be training at the sport plaza anymore come April. My coach and I will be switching over to the Kansai University rink.”

Riku nodded. “It’s a good facility.”

“That’s right! You went to Kansai University as well! It’s why you bought the house in Osaka.”

Riku smiled. “After so many years, I fell in love with the city.”

“Yuuri-kun! You can go to Kansai University too and then we can train together!”

Yuuri bit his lip. He hadn’t even started thinking about what university he wanted to attempt to get into yet. Everything had been swirling around him nonstop since Senior Nationals and his ill-advised, impulsive decision to stick that quad back in. He sighed.
“You make it sound like training with me would be a chore!” Keiko settled her hands on her hips and gave him that look again -- the teasing look he just didn’t know what to do with.

“It’s not that. I… I don’t know what I’m going to do yet. And I’m nervous about competing.”

“I know just the thing that will help!” She pulled out a slim smartphone and tugged Yuuri to stand next to her in front of one of the long mirrors in the lobby. “Come on. Arrival selfie!” She pressed the circle for the shutter and then frowned. “Yuuri-kun, smile! And put up the Victory sign!”

It took three tries until she was satisfied and she immediately went to upload the picture to Twitpic. “What’s your official twitter account again? I know if I post a picture, I can’t use your normal one.”

“Yuurikatsuki. All one word.”

They were in the elevator when Keiko suddenly screeched. “Oh my god, Yuuri-kun, VIKTOR replied to my tweet!” She turned her phone around. “Look!” She turned to Alexei who was smiling. “What does Da-ba-i mean?”

***

takagik_skates @yuurikatsuki and @takagik_skates in Jeonju for 4CC! Wish us luck! ( *^_^ )/ ~♡ CHU! http://twitpic.com/fky67f3 posted from Twitter app 3m ago

vnikiforov Davai! @yuurikatsuki and @takagik_skates I know you’ll do great! (Cute pic!) posted from Tweetie 30s ago

“Davai.” Yuuri replied, correcting her pronunciation. “It means ‘good luck’.”

“I am so jealous that you know Viktor! He’s the best skater in the world. I was so sad when he missed his jump in the short program of the Grand Prix.”

Yuuri nodded, and kept nodding while Keiko talked on all the way to his room at the end of the long hallway -- which, as it turned out, was just across the hall from her room. Yuuri suddenly felt like this was going to end up being an incredibly long competition. “Keiko-senpai?”

“Yuuri-kun?”

“I’m going to put my things away now.”

A couple doors down, Alexei started chuckling as he swiped his hotel key to open the door. In fact, he was chuckling so hard that he didn’t notice that the light didn’t turn green; his amusement was cut short with a soft ‘oof’ as he pushed against the door to open it and failed.

Keiko, however, didn’t even notice. “We’ll get dinner together, right? I’ll tell my coach!”

“Yeah, sure.” Yuuri smiled as Keiko went back down the hallway toward the elevators.

***

Public practice the next morning was not what Yuuri was expecting at all. He practically dropped his skates as he looked out at the rink the Men’s singles competitors were practicing on.

“Yuu-kun?” Alexei stopped next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Everything all right?”
He nodded. “Yeah. It’s fine.” He sat down on one of the provided benches and laced up his skates. “I know a lot of these skaters. I’ve… I’ve skated with them before.”

Alexei looked out over the ice. “Aaron Reyes. He was Junior World Champion when you came into Juniors. He was at Romania, wasn’t he?”

“He was. There are a few more. I might not know all their names, but I’ve skated with them, Alexei. Well, against them, I mean.”

Alexei smiled down at him. “Well, it wasn’t like they just disappeared. They moved up to Seniors.”

“I know. It’s just… I don’t know what I was expecting. Maybe that American that’s been doing really well, or Cao Bin, or that Moon would suddenly decide to unretire and come back.”

“Well, to be honest, I think that a lot of the Olympic-bound athletes decided against coming to Four Continents, just like Oda and Taku did. They’d rather take the time to practice and get to Vancouver early. Keiko-chan and Aida Masao are going to be getting on a plane to Canada practically the day we get back. In fact, I’m surprised that Aida-san didn’t skip this championship. Europeans had an extra week between.”

Yuuri stepped up to the ice and took his hard guards off, setting them on the barrier. “I’m going to warm up then work on my step sequence and if there’s room, I’m going to try and smooth out that cantilever a bit more.”

“Don’t forget to work on your jumps. I want you to do some quad toes while you’re out there. It’s back in for this one.”

Yuuri nodded and skated out onto the ice, doing his laps; when a skater called his name, he didn’t even think before raising a hand in greeting.

***

Viktor
Chris! Chris! I need help!

Chris
Put1! You’re not hurt are you?
And why would you be contacting me if you’re hurt Where’s Yakov? Or the dramatic rink mate of yours

Viktor
Hurt? No, I’m not hurt.
Physically anyway.

Chris
I’m going to kill you.
I’m seriously confused. What is going on

Viktor
This
[Image: Yuuri, Keiko, Aaron Reyes,
Chris
Yes, I’ve seen it. It’s all over twitter. I think almost every one of those skaters posted it. Well, all of them but Yuuri. He never posts stuff to his official twitter. But then he doesn’t use his other twitter much for actual tweets either.

Viktor
Why isn’t Europe allowed to compete in the 4CC?

Chris
Because the 4CC was created since Europe had it’s own championship already? I don’t know. Please tell me that you didn’t text me because Yuuri is out to dinner with some other skaters and looks like he might actually be enjoying himself.

Viktor
Fine, I won’t.

***

Yuuri tugged his new national team jacket on over the tight-fitting white-to-gray ombre top. He was going to be skating right in the middle of the pack, and his group’s warm-up was going to start soon. Picking up his skates from the bench he’d set them on, he walked out of the locker room and made his way to the prep area where Alexei was waiting. He was about to sit and tug on his skates when Alexei stopped him with a gentle press to his shoulder.

“Yuu-kun. Riku and I, we have something for you.”

Yuuri set his skates down and looked up at his coach and his wife. “What do you mean?”

“Omamori. Of a sort.” Riku smiled at him and held out a small box. “Figure skater style, though.”

Yuuri took the small jewelry box and clenched his fingers around it. He knew what she meant. Charms were a thing in the sport, and Yuuri knew a few skaters that wore them, but he’d never had one himself. He didn’t know what he’d choose if he had to.

“We were planning to give it to you next year when we started adding in some Senior competitions, but you’re at the Four Continents. Now seemed to be the right time.”

Yuuri swallowed, his throat a little tight as he opened the box. Nestled within sat a black rattail cord necklace with two pendants -- or rather, one stone pendant and a Russian Orthodox crucifix.
“I know you’re not really religious, and your parents are more Buddhist than anything, but...” Alexei paused. “Yakov gave me that crucifix before my first Senior competition. I know that this isn’t your first Senior competition, but then...” He shrugged. Yuuri understood. He’d rather not think about Nebelhorn, either.

“And the howlite is from me. It may not have the sentimentality that Alexei’s does, but when I saw it, I knew. It’s a beautiful stone, just like your skating.”

Yuuri nodded, staring down at the two pendants in his hand. The veining on the polished howlite almost looked like skate trails on ice, and he was already familiar with the crucifix. Alexei always wore it, but it had been just one of many pendants, and Yuuri hadn’t even seen this one go missing. It was worn around the edges, undoubtedly from the many times that Alexei had grabbed it before he skated. Yuuri’s eyes stung with the tears, and he didn’t care that he usually didn’t hug anyone; he dove for his coach and Riku. Yuuri thought that Alexei’s laugh sounded suspiciously wet, but didn’t say anything about it when the three of them finally pulled out of the group hug. “Thank you.”

“Here. Let me.” Riku lifted the necklace out of the box that Yuuri was still clutching and moved to hook it around Yuuri’s neck. “There. Now you are ready to go and show them the skating that you love.”

Yuuri was much calmer than he thought he’d be when he finally took to the ice. He skated around the edge before jumping a double axel and then headed to the center to get into position. It was almost like all the pressure just unraveled, leaving him feeling loose and calm. The new weight of the pendants around his neck was strange, yet comforting.

He took off as the first notes started. The butterfly jump for his flying camel was probably the strongest it had ever been. He’d struggled getting a high level on his spins this season, but he felt that he could do it this time. Even his fan spiral felt better, like he’d finally gotten the extension and reach with his legs that had been eluding him.

When Yuuri came out of his final spin he was breathing heavily, but smiling all the same. He took off for the exit as soon as he finished his bows.

Alexei was smiling at him with good reason. When his score was announced, it was a season’s best for him.

***

vnikiforov @yuurikatsuki That was an amazing short program! I’m so proud of you! #4CC

vnikiforov So is Makkachin! http://twitpic.com/gb07hs2 #poodles4life

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Makkachin is still adorable. I miss her. Thank you.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri She gets excited when she sees you on a screen still. You need to visit Russia.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I wish I could.

butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri I don’t like using Twitter to text you, but whatever. Good job.
You did great.

katsudonyuuri d butterflyswimNS Sorry. I didn’t bother getting cell service here. I… I was proud of this skate.

butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri Well, they said that it was a season’s best, so of course you should be. I’m proud.

katsudonyuuri d butterflyswimNS Thank you. Will you be watching the Free too?

butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri I’m going to try, but if I can’t, I’ll hit up Yuuko’s channel for the video. She wouldn’t miss posting this

butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri I’ll definitely be waiting when you get in after. Took Vicchan for a “run” today. He thinks I’m slow

katsudonyuuri d butterflyswimNS you are slow. You’re useless on land.

butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri Miss you.

***

Viktor
I’ve forgotten how to talk to Yuuri

Chris
[long string of laughing emoji]
[animated gif]

***

cchristophegc @yuurikatsuki Great SP! Go forth and nail the FS! posted from Tweetie 5 min ago

statusclitical @yuurikatsuki あの演技はEXCITEイングだった! posted from Twitter app 5 min ago

lovelyharuka @yuurikatsuki よくやった勇利君！ #フィギアスケート #4CC #figureskating #yuurikatsuki posted from text 4 min ago

yuurikatsuki 応援ありがとうございました！FS頑張ります！ posted from web 3 min ago

yuurikatsuki Thank you for your support! I will do my best on the FS! posted from web 30s ago

Yuuri sighed. It wasn’t like he’d done incredibly well. Everyone’s congratulations seemed so premature. He hadn’t even come in first in the SP. That position was held by the Canadian representative, Keith Ryans. Yuuri remembered him, vaguely; he’d done well at the JGPS the year before, but hadn’t made the final. His performance at Junior Worlds wasn’t all that memorable, either.

Alexei kept telling him that sixth place after the short wasn’t bad, that there was a lot of fluctuation in
the scores and that the free skate was the most important for points. And Yuuri knew this was true. It was possible to get from sixth to first, especially since they’d backloaded his jumps, including his quad. Not easy, but if his free skate was strong and he didn’t wipe out on his quad toe, he could do it.

Was he actually attempting to get a gold at a Senior division competition?

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov I’ve really lost it. I had a moment where I thought I could win gold.

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri You placed decently in the short. It’s totally possible! You can do it, Yuuri!

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov Be realistic

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri I am being realistic. Now I have to go and pester Yuuko to upload that skate. I want to see your fan spiral again!

***

Sometimes, Yuuri thought that the subtitle to his life could be *Good, But Not Good Enough*.

That was his free skate all over. He should have been proud of it; after all, it was really close to his personal best. But it wasn’t his personal best, and he had needed *more* than his personal best to win gold. Just as the subtitle went: he’d been good, but not good enough.

He finished just off the podium.

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov I finished fourth. I don’t even know what I could have done different with my free. What do you think?

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri I… I didn’t see it. Yakov had me on the ice. Sorry. :( 

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov At 6:30 in the morning? That’s unusually early for Yakov. I’m surprised he wasn’t watching it actually. It’s a sen level comp.

**vnikiforov** d katsudonyuuri Last ice day before we head to Vancouver, I guess.

**katsudonyuuri** d vnikiforov Oh. Well. I guess that makes sense. You’re going to do great in Vancouver.

**butterflyswimNS** d katsudonyuuri You did awesome! You almost beat your personal best. Finally a thing I understand.

**katsudonyuuri** d butterflyswimNS You watched? I thought you were supposed to be doing laps?

**butterflyswimNS** d katsudonyuuri I called my coach and faked coughed. He just sighed and said that as soon as you were off the ice that

**butterflyswimNS** d katsudonyuuri I better get myself to the pool and jump right in.

**katsudonyuuri** d butterflyswimNS Thank you.
butterflyswimNS d katsudonyuuri Shuji-kun and Noda-chan say good job too. See you tomorrow when you get in.

***

“What do you mean, he twisted his ankle?!” Alexei’s voice was almost a bellow. They were in the middle of the hallway heading toward the elevators and Riku had her hand on his arm, trying gently to shush him. It was six o’clock in the morning and they needed to get to the airport, but apparently the call was too important to wait. “Yeah, I get it, just what does this mean for Yuuri?”

There was a long pause; Alexei grabbed the back of his neck. “No, we’re not going to fly to Vancouver on a ‘just in case’! That’s ridiculous! The JOC doesn’t cover the costs of doing that. We’d be responsible for finding a rink, taking care of the rink fees, and a hotel for three weeks. No.”

Yuuri’s breath caught in his throat. He heard a door open behind him and saw one of the other coaches poke their head out and frown.

“Well, if Taku-san wasn’t in condition to go to the Olympics--” Whoever Alexei was speaking to cut him off.

At the word Olympics -- even spoken in another language -- the curious coach (who had probably been woken up by Alexei’s yelling) nodded and closed the door again. Of course it would make sense to a figure skating coach that any discussion about the Olympics would be loud. Yuuri looked down toward the carpet and tugged the hood of his jacket just a bit further down over his eyes.

Alexei hung up and shoved his phone back into his pocket, then stalked down the remainder of the hallway to the elevators, jabbing his finger hard against the down button.

“Coach?”

Alexei took a deep breath before turning to look at Yuuri. “Yuu-kun?”

“Do I have to go to Vancouver?”

His coach shook his head. “Not yet, anyway. Taku-san is insisting that he’ll be fine after a couple days off his ankle, and isn’t pulling out. So no, you don’t. But the likelihood has gone up. There’s still over two weeks until the Men’s singles.” The elevator doors opened and the three of them piled in. “The JSF wanted you to go out to Vancouver at your own expense and train just in case, but I refuse to put that sort of financial burden on you or your family. Instead, we’ll train at the rink. Intensive. You won’t be having full class days, at least. Just in case.”

Yuuri sighed as the elevator doors closed. Somehow, it felt like he was heading toward his doom.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
put1 - french internet slang; putain - fuck (used instead of OMG in frustration, but not surprise)
あの演技はEXCITEイングだった! - That performance was EXCITEing!
statusclitical - Shuji’s username for twitter. Bad Engrish. From a an anime called
Gravion in 2002
lovelyharuka - Noda-chan's username
よくやった勇利君！#フィギアスケート - Great job, Yuuri-kun! #figureskating
応援ありがとうございました！FS頑張ります！ - Thank you for your support! I will do my best on the FS!

***

(I'mma gonna come back here with a long A/N maybe about Yuuri's usage of twitter instead of text. It basically breaks down into this: Yuuri takes all his winnings (which are small compared to Viktor's because he's in Juniors) and funnels that back into paying for SUPER EXPENSIVE school/rink fees/choreo fees/gym fees/trainer/coach/costumes/etc... So he cut the international text plan out of his phone. Because that was expensive. Twitter is free. :P I'd talk about the phone number thing, but... well... you'll see. ;) )

(I'mma gonna come back here with a long A/N about Sen v Jun competitions and how this works (from my basic understanding) but right now I just want to get this posted)

CHU!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The Vancouver Olympics have arrived! But Yuuri's attendance is still up in the air

Chapter Notes

I forgot to do this when I first uploaded because I started getting frustrated with my tablet. :) There is a scene between Nakagawa and Yuuri in this chapter that skirts "M". Nothing really explicit. If you want to completely skip it, I have bolded the last sentence prior and the first sentence after. "He'd been failing step two all day." Skip down from there to the end of the scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
vnikiforov RT @christophegc http://twipic.com/ns842h Seriously, you’re wearing a speedo outside in Feb in SWITZERLAND? #notevenarussian #3Musketeers posted from Tweetie 1 day ago

vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/h97sn6 #notoutside #stillahottub #3Musketeers posted from Tweetie 1 day ago

vnikiforov @yuurikatsuki we’re waiting #3Musketeers posted from Tweetie 1 day ago

vnikiforov RT @yuurikatsuki No. yuurikatsukiisaspoilsport yuurikatsukineedstolooseup #yuuriputaswimsuiton #3Musketeers posted from Tweetie 1 day ago

vnikiforov @iheartkatsuki I know! He’s totally not being fair. Your fans need this @yuurikatsuki #yuuriputaswimsuiton posted from Tweetie 10 hours ago

christophegc RT @vnikiforov @iheartkatsuki I know! He’s totally not being fair. You’re fans need this @yuurikatsuki #yuuriputaswimsuiton posted from Tweetie 10 hours ago

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Do you realise #yuuriputaswimsuiton is TRENDING in Japan?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Why would you do this to me?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You should give your fans what they want! ;)

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov If I participate in this ridiculousness will you promise not to involve me in something like this again

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Chris started it!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov That wasn’t a promise.

yuurikatsuki http://twitpic.com/js97h3 #notahottub #notaspeedo #notoutside #3Musketeers #facepalm #killmenow posted from Tweetie 2 hours ago

Viktor
Chris I have made a horrible mistake

Chris
[animated gif]
Damn. His boyfriend is hot.
I don’t know if you can compete with that
Is he a pro swimmer? Because he has the body of a pro swimmer
Viktor
Yes. Or well working on it apparently
Goal is London Olympics
Chris… I didn’t think he’d actually do it!
Chris… I don’t know what to do.

Chris
Save the picture to your phone and
get someone to edit the bf out
I know I’m saving it

Viktor
Chris! No!

Chris
Already done. Sorry.

Chris
Hey, just noticed where the bf’s gaze is.
I mean it’s subtle, but he’s definitely
looking
Should I be checking out Yuuri’s butt
next competition?

Viktor
Please shut up. I can’t. Okay.

***
There was just something about the Olympics that Viktor loved. There was spectacle and tradition,
of course, but this -- sitting in the middle of the giant cafeteria with Katya… it was like Turin all over
again. Granted, he’d finished just off podium at Turin, but well, that was fine. This time he was
going to take gold. This time he wasn’t a ridiculous barely-seventeen-year-old desperate to impress
the older athletes and convince himself that he belonged.

“I can’t believe you talked him into it.”

Viktor laughed and grabbed a couple of french fries from Katya’s tray. The Olympics was also the
only time Yakov wouldn’t yell at him for eating as many fries and chicken nuggets as he wanted
because all the athletes were doing it -- as long as he didn’t go too off the rails, calorie-wise. God
bless free McDonald’s! “I probably shouldn’t have, you’re right. But Katya, still better than your
hockey players.”

She shrugged. “I’d prefer Christophe, if I had to choose. Yuuri is like my little brother.”

Viktor just sighed. He was in so much trouble. Obviously, a change of subject was needed -- and as
it happened, Yuuri’s rinkmate was currently heading in their direction with Aida Masao, one of the
other Japanese representatives. “Are you really not going to try to win? That’s like handing the
medal to Masao.”

“I like Masao. Besides, I have an Olympic medal. I’d love to medal again, but I’m one of the oldest
female skaters here, you know that. I barely made the team, and wouldn’t have if Russia hadn’t had
three spots. Peak competition age is younger for female skaters than male skaters. Remember when
all the fourteen-year-olds were competing?”
“No.”

“You know what I mean; you’ve been watching Figure Skating since infancy. Right before they changed the age requirement in Seniors to fifteen. Mila is determined to win gold at Sochi, you know.”

Viktor sighed. “Mila won’t be old enough. She’s ten.”

Katya laughed. “Yeah, and Yuuri’s still fourteen.”

Viktor let his head fall to the table. *So much for a change of topic.* “Why is he growing up hot? My life would be easier if he stayed cute and-or single.”

Katya laughed a little and patted his back. “There, there. You know--” She cut herself off; apparently, the two Japanese skaters had reached their table. “Is everything all right, Masao?”

“Not really. May we?”

The sound of a sharp sniffle made Viktor pull himself back up from the tabletop. It wasn’t coming from Masao, however; it was coming from Yuuri’s rinkmate -- Keiko, his memory finally supplied -- who barely seemed to be holding back full-blown tears. “What’s wrong, Keiko?”

Apparently knowing her name made things worse; she sobbed for a second before rounding on Viktor. “Why… why did you make Yuuri-senpai post that picture?!”

Masao heaved a sigh as she took the seat across from Katya. “Keiko-chan, I told you. He’s not getting expelled, and he isn’t in any trouble. Not with the JSF. Not with the JOC. Not even with your school.”

“Why would Yuuri get expelled over a picture on Twitter?” Katya seemed curious.

Viktor, however, knew how strict Yuuri’s school could be. He felt a sudden spike of unease in the pit of his stomach. “What happened?”

Masao shook her head. “The JSF sent an email to all Olympic-bound athletes, alternates, and their coaches about proper behavior on social media. It was obviously because of that whole swimsuit picture, but it wasn’t like they called him out on it. It was just a reminder that as representatives for Japan -- regardless of whether we are here in Vancouver or still in Japan -- we have a duty to carry ourselves with decorum.”

“Shit.”

Masao chuckled a little at what Viktor assumed was a slightly terrified look on his face. If he had hurt Yuuri’s career--

“It’s fine.” She cut off his thoughts. “There was no way that he could get out of posting something. The JSF is trying to encourage their athletes to reach out and communicate with the fanbase to get people excited about the sport, and your little hashtag was trending. Though I think it’s smart that he went with a competition-style swimsuit instead of those shorter ones that are more popular. I wonder where he got it.”

“Yamato-kun. He’s about Yuuri’s size. Shouta-kun is too tall and his swimsuit would have been too long for Yuuri-senpai.”

“Who’s Yamato? And Shouta?” Viktor was curious. All these boys around Yuuri, and he didn’t
even know them.

“Who’s-- Nakagawa Shouta? Really? You don’t know who Shouta-kun is?” Keiko looked horrified. “How can you talk to Yuuri as much as you do and not know who Shouta is?”

_Ah ha._ “He’s always called him ‘Nakagawa’ around me.

“Ah well, I think I’ve only heard him call him Shouta once. They both turned red right after. It was cute. Yamato-kun is Shouta-kun’s best friend. He’s also a swimmer. He was even in the picture that Yuuri posted. He was the one sitting on the edge of the pool.” She took in a deep breath. “And I know the school wouldn’t actually do anything. If they expelled him for a photo like that, they’d have to expel all the swimmers and most of the male idols… and the gravure idols, too. And definitely Shuji-kun.”

“Why Shuji?” That name Viktor at least recognized as one of Yuuri’s school friends -- the boy from the variety show, the one with the ridiculous blue bangs.

“It’s an EXCITE thing. He posted a picture on Twitter from a photoshoot where the only thing covering him was his electric guitar.” Keiko shook her head. “He likes trying to shock people, I guess.”

Next to them, Katya sounded like she was choking.

***

Viktor grabbed his water from the top of the boards where Yakov stood, arms crossed over his chest. “What should I be working on?”

The surprised look on his coach’s face didn’t escape Viktor’s notice. “Will you actually listen to me and focus on what I tell you to?”

Smiling, Viktor wiped the sweat from his brow. “I just might.”

“Your triple axel. It’s never been perfect.”

“I thought that you’d tell me to work on my step sequences.”

Yakov huffed as he returned his attention to the rink. “I haven’t had to make you work on them lately, much to my surprise. And while your triple axel is good, it’s probably your weakest jump and axels are required.”

Viktor nodded. “What was my GOE on my axels at Euros?”

“A +1 in the short and a +2 in the free. I want you to get +3s on both.”

“Really? A +1?” Viktor sighed. That was not what he’d expected to hear. Well, at least they weren’t negatives.

“Yuuri got a +3 on his triple axel in his free at Four Continents.” Yakov’s eyes flickered over to Viktor for a split-second, gauging his reaction. Viktor could only hope his instinctive cringe hadn’t been too noticeable. “You should have watched it instead of going off and skating your step sequence for four and a half minutes straight.” There was a probing edge to Yakov’s tone there; Viktor’s coach was taciturn enough not to ask direct questions when it came to his star skater’s emotional states, but he was no idiot, either. “You know, Mila gave me a copy of it. We can watch it at the computer lab or on your laptop.”
Viktor shook his head – perhaps a little too forcefully at that. “Didn’t I get a +3 at one of my qualifiers? We can watch that.”

Yakov snorted. “It would be more useful to you to see Cao Bin’s, or Giacometti’s. I didn’t agree with that scoring of +3. I think the judges were blind.”

“So, I’ll ask Chris--”

“But I already have a copy of Yuuri’s free skate. Alexei drilled him on that jump. It was flawless. And this is me saying that.”

Yakov never thought anything was flawless, a fact which Viktor knew quite well. He groaned. “Fine. I’ll work on my axel a little, you can record it and then we’ll watch Yuuri’s free skate and I’ll listen to your critiques.” Viktor pushed off the boards without waiting for Yakov’s response -- and immediately had to duck under an oncoming leg as he nearly slid face-first into another skater’s camel spin.

Of all the times to develop a crush. Was he really doing this to himself? He had a gold medal to win. And if he had to watch the free skate about Yuuri’s first love, then fine, he would. But Viktor wouldn’t like it.

In the end, he fell on the first triple axel, but managed to land the rest, though he knew he’d be hearing Yakov’s criticisms for far longer than usual. None of them would have gotten him a +3 GOE.

***

Viktor’s roommate was named Maxim. Two years older than Viktor, he was the second skater for the Men’s singles, having beaten Georgi by just a half point at the Russian nationals. He trained in Moscow and had a fairly strong quadruple Salchow under his belt, and had done well at some lower level international competitions. At the end of the day, however, his programs couldn’t beat Viktor’s. Beyond those facts, Viktor didn’t really know him that well; they weren’t even in the same practice group.

And once he did get to know Maxim, Viktor quickly wished he hadn’t, because as it turned out, Maxim’s coach didn’t put the same restrictions on him as Yakov had on his skaters. So for the third time in their first week in Vancouver, Viktor returned to their room to find a sock on the door handle. His first option was to get comfortable on the sofa, but the last time he did that, it took all of five minutes to discover that Maxim had brought a screamer home. So Viktor turned on his heel and headed down to the huge lounge (his second option) after grabbing his laptop case.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Send help, he’s at it again.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Same girl?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I didn’t stick around long enough to find out. Maybe I should order a ball gag off amazon.ca and put it on his bed?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov VIKTOR!!!!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I’m down in the lounge with my laptop and headphones. FMA? If I haven’t destroyed your delicate sensibilities.
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I can’t believe you. I have time for an episode before I have to run to the rink. Because Alexei is making me run to the rink.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov This means I’m up to 7.5km a day now. My stamina has never been better.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Well, it is Day Five of the Taku-san hasn’t shown up at the rink for practice watch. You still haven’t heard anything?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No. Not a thing. Or at least Alexei isn’t telling me so that I’ll stay focused on training instead of panicking about Vancouver.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov What episode did we end with?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuri, don’t panic. You’ll see you have nothing to worry about when you get here.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri And we’re on episode sixteen, I think, Ed and Al fought Ling and wrecked automail-topia.

Viktor settled the laptop on the armrest of the couch and brought his legs up onto the couch. They had the whole system worked out flawlessly now, though it had taken five or so episodes before everything worked and they were fully synced up. It was no apartment in Russia -- two poodles draped over them while Yuuri braided his hair -- but it was something, at least.

Viktor sighed wistfully. Wasn’t like his hair was long enough to braid anymore, anyway.

He waited until Yuuri said “go” and then pressed the spacebar to start the episode. Tweetdeck was set up with his DMs on the left side of the screen and his media player taking up the rest.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Oh no. Winry is buying apples so she can make a pie. Yuuuuuuuuriiii!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Ed and Al know! Poor Ross, she feels so bad, but what the hell, don’t lie to Ed and Al, people!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Havok! Don’t! She’s a Homunculus! A hot one, but still, bad idea. Don’t give her flowers!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Is she though? Lust does nothing for me.

Viktor almost swallowed his tongue. Best not to say anything.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m not crying. Are you crying?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri No. Of course not. Shit. It was like Hughes died all over again!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Is it too late to start a twitter campaign to bring Hughes back to life?
Yuuri sighed and let the water from the showerhead hit his back between his shoulders. The whole situation with Vancouver had him on edge and it was clearly showing in his jumps. He wiped out on his triple axel and instead of Alexei’s usual jovial “skate it off, Yuu-kun!” he got a terse “Do it again. You aren’t focusing.”

Which he wasn’t. And he really couldn’t blame Alexei for being short. The situation was making them both tense. Tense enough that Riku had made them сырники for breakfast without Alexei even hinting that he wanted them. Tense enough for her to declare that tomorrow would be a rest day for both of them; tense enough to also inform them that she would be spending half a day with Yuuri to work on his performance, and that Minako-sensei would be coming up to Osaka to do a day-long ballet camp with them. Yuuri would still get his skating time in, but Alexei wasn’t to go near the rink.

They both appreciated it and ate their сырники slightly happier for it.

It didn’t help Yuuri nail his jumps, though. He even knew what he was doing wrong. In general, he was over-thinking things, psyching himself out before he ever left the ice. It was his worst habit when he had first started skating, but he’d worked through it; had learned how to approach the jump, clear his thoughts and breathe through it.

**He’d been failing step two all day.**

Yuuri sighed and pressed his forehead against the cool tiled wall. He was glad that the showers were completely empty, but it would only be so long until people started coming in. This one had the better water pressure, and word quickly got around.

Lips unexpectedly pressed against the back of his neck and a strong arm wrapped around his waist. “Yuuri.”

Yuuri jumped just a little, and spun around so his back was against the tiles and he could see Nakagawa. “Shouta! This is… What are… Not here!”

Nakagawa laughed and slid his fingers through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. “It’s fine. Remember when the pipes burst and this place was out of order for a week?”

Yuuri anxiously looked around. “But it isn’t out of order now.” He glanced back at Nakagawa. “What did you do?”

Nakagawa shrugged. “I may have stolen the ‘out of order’ sign directing people to the showers in the basement. I’ve been waiting for a week to put this plan into action. This is the first time the showers were empty except for you.”

Yuuri was glad that the water was hot and his skin already flushed so Nakagawa – Shouta – wouldn’t be able to tell just how far his blush carried down. He would definitely see it in Yuuri’s cheeks, though; Yuuri could feel how much warmer his face was.

But fine. It wasn’t like he’d had time with his boyfriend in almost a week, thanks to the current training schedule. Not even in school, since Yuuri had only gone twice for half days.
Going up on his toes to lessen the height difference, Yuuri wrapped his hand around the back of Shouta’s neck and crushed their lips together. He could feel Shouta’s smile against his before the swimmer pressed him back against the tiles, hands on Yuuri’s hips and their chests flush against each other.

“Missed you. Alexei has been a task master.”

“He’s training an Olympian. Can’t really blame him.” Shouta nipped at Yuuri’s bottom lip.

“Alternate. Olympic alternate.”

“My bad.”

“Just shut up and kiss me again, already.” Their banter was melting away some of the tension that had been riding high in Yuuri; Yuuri found himself actually smiling under the stream of water.

Shouta laughed and kissed him. And then his hand slipped off Yuuri’s hip and skimmed across his stomach instead. Yuuri’s breath caught; his stomach flipped and he squeezed his eyes shut, knowing perfectly well what was coming next. Even then, he wasn’t completely prepared for the feeling of Shouta’s hand wrapping around him.

***

Viktor prodded Yakov in his arm. “Is that a JOC official talking to Taku and his coach? Because it looks like a JOC official to me.”

“Mind your own business and get back to skating, Viktor.”

“But Yakov!”

“No ‘but Yakov’. I said skate. Now skate. If you want to win gold, you can’t worry about what is going on with the Japanese contingent. Either they will figure things out and Yuuri will be here in a couple of days, or their second skater is going to crash and burn from sheer stubbornness.

Viktor sighed, but did as his coach told him. He had thirty more minutes of ice time before he could do his cool down and go get dinner.

But the situation still nagged at him; kept nagging at him even as he made his way to the cafeteria and settled down to eat. He separated his chopsticks and was about to take his first bite of sushi when a tray clanged down next to him. Looking up, Viktor found that about half of the Japanese skating team had suddenly settled down at his table.

“Hi!”

Keiko shook her head at him. “You should have gone for the katsudon. One, it’s Yuuri-senpai’s favorite and two, it’s so much better than the sushi.”

“Is it really?”

Oda picked up Viktor’s tray with a wink. “I’ll be back.”

In fact, now that he looked around, every single Japanese skater was eating katsudon. And when Katya and her current hockey beau sat down to join them, they had katsudon too. “Did I miss a thing?”
It was Masao that answered. “Taku-san announced that he wouldn’t make a decision on whether or not he’d skate until after the opening ceremony.”

“Men’s short is only five days after that.”

Keiko nodded.

Viktor’s response was preempted as Oda finally returned with Viktor’s tray – and a big steaming bowl of pork cutlet and rice. “There. Now you’re one of us.”

---

**vnikiforov** w/ @takagik_skates @katyababi @m_a_s_a_o @toshi_jun @jojojojo and @Suketa117 +more http://twitpic.com/hbs4f2 #katsudon! #awesome #FSfamily posted from Tweetie 1d ago

**vnikiforov** RT @butterflyswimNS @vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/n1sg34 #katsudon #breakingdiet #don’t care #カツ丼 posted from Tweetie 1d ago

**vnikiforov** RT @statusclitiical http://twitpic.com/n1sg34 #katsudon #EXCITEUNITE #カツ丼 posted from Tweetie 1d ago

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**Chris**
You follow his bf now?

**Viktor**
No, the bf dm’d me and asked me to retweet
Because he wants to support Yuuri

**Chris**
By eating… I don’t even know what
You realise this doesn’t make sense

**Viktor**
Katsudon. Yuuri’s favorite food
Taku isn’t deciding if he’s going to skate until (at the earliest) less than 5 days before the short
And the JOC is letting him.

---

**christophegc** http://twitpic.com/sh9a32 #schnitzel #it’sstillfriedporkandstarch #katsudon #カツ丼 posted from Tweetie 1d ago

**popo_georgi** w/ @milawarriorprncss http://twitpic.com/nao82g #betki #katsudon #カツ丼 posted from web 1d ago

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**a_reyes_sun** http://twitpic.com/abu278 #PRcarnafrita #withplantains #katsudon #カツ丼 posted from web 7h ago
chuchu_phichit http://twitpic.com/bsu5g2 #madeitmyself #katsudon #カツ丼 posted from Tweetie 5h ago

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov WHY ARE YOU ALL DOING THIS TO ME

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You know why

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov It’s his choice and his right to decide. He… if he wants to skate in the Olympics so bad, let him, ok.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuri!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m tired of fighting with everyone about this. I’m going to the hospital to see Yuuko

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri ?????

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri ????? WHAT?!!! ARE THERE BABIES???????????? IS SHE OK?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov She’s fine. She’s in a specialist ward here in Osaka until they’re born. She swears it won’t be until after you skate though

sk8_madonna BFFs @yuurikatsuki http://twitpic.com/ns76ao Only good thing about being stuck in the hospital posted from web 2h ago

sk8_madonna http://tinyurl.com/5y66 Takeshi took the video for me. @yuurikatsuki practicing just in case #katsudon posted from web 2h ago

vnikiforov RT @sk8_madonna http://tinyurl.com/5y66 Takeshi took the video for me. @yuurikatsuki practicing just in case #katsudon posted from Tweetie 30m ago

vnikiforov RT @iheartkatsuki omg, Yuuri-kun! That spin! -- It’s a thing of beauty #3Musketeers posted from Tweetie 3m ago

***

Webpage translated from: 日本のフィギュア・スケーターフォーラム。

skate_nuages
So I was looking at icecastle_madonna’s YouTube channel (because she has the best videos of Yuuri-kun’s skating) and I noticed that some short training videos have been added of him at his home rink in Osaka and well… Look: Video 1
I didn’t recognize that lead up and spin from either of his Hisaishi programs, but then I went back and looked at this: Video 2 (Go to minute 3:25)
That’s his spin from Nocturne last year at Junior Worlds. That’s the short program that he got the World Record for Junior SP on. It’s the same spin!
skating_is_life
It is! I’d recognize that spin anywhere. And it even says that the training video was shot within the last couple of days. Does this mean that he’s switching out Totoro for Nocturne?
If he is, I looked at the base scores, and Nocturne makes him competitive. Especially if he can manage to get close to his WR score. The spins were higher level. I really didn’t like the choreography for Totoro. It was pretty and fun, and I loved the music, but whoever choreographed it didn’t make it as strong as we know Yuuri-kun is capable of. I don’t think they should have brought in that new choreographer for him. The Turovs and Okukawa-sensei are the only ones I’d trust with choreo for him.

---

double_lutz_sundae
So, if he does Nocturne and keeps First Love since it has a quad toe-loop then he’s not just competitive, wouldn’t that make his programs medal contenders? He did finish fourth at 4CC

---
onigiri_master
Against non-Olympic bound athletes. He would have finished 10th or lower if real skaters were there. Katsuki isn’t all that good. His programs are just pretty.
You’ll see, Taku-san will be fine. He just doesn’t want to damage his ankle before the big day!

---
skate_nuages
Taku-san has been in Vancouver since they opened the Village. There are pictures of him having a great time, but he hasn’t been seen practicing once. It’s been just over a week. The OC is in a few days!
But the point is that Totoro wasn’t ever a program that Yuuri-kun was expecting to have to perform in the Senior division let alone the Olympics. Same for any of his programs. Besides, I think that he’s not practicing Totoro now. I think they’re switching it out for Nocturne. Which is the whole point of this thread. (Go here if you want to talk about Taku-san, his injury, his Olympic trip, his programs, whatever. They love him on that thread.)
Though, I do sort of agree that even with the switch, Yuuri-kun would be top 10 competitive, but not podium competitive. Leave it to Oda-san to get a medal.

---

ice_castle_madonna
Can confirm that Yuuri-kun has been practicing Nocturne instead of Totoro.
And I have permission to tell you that the jump elements in Nocturne have been changed. The first jump in the second half has been switched to a 4T. So all his jumps are in the back half and they are ordered 4T; 3A; and then 3F-3T combo

---

double_lutz_sundae
Yuuko! You’re here! How are you?
ice_castle_madonna
Still pregnant. And I’m determined to stay that way until after the Olympics.

---

double_lutz_sundae
Is he ready to go? You were rinkmates before he went international, right?

---

skate_nuages
Wait wait wait!
He’s putting his 4T into Nocturne?!
Now that would be a medal competitive program. If he skates clean. But we’ve all seen him crash and burn more than once. Remember Nebelhorn? I think the JOC would have chosen him to go if Nebelhorn hadn’t been such a disaster.
Don’t get me wrong, I was pleasantly surprised that 4CC turned out so well for him, but I was expecting a massive fail.

---

skating_is_life
I don’t know. He looked like he was about ready to die at the end of Junior Worlds with Nocturne. I don’t think making it even more difficult is the way to go. At least move the 4T up to the front half. It’d still be a lot of points!

---

ice_castle_madonna
Yes, the first jump has been switched out for a 4T. His 3A has been really solid this season.
I don’t know if he feels that he’s ready, but knowing Yuuri-kun, probably not. He could do it if he puts his mind to it though. And he’d have a lot of support among his teammates.

---

onigiri_master
I don’t see why any of us should care. He’s just an alternate. If he was good enough for the Olympics he’d be there instead of training in Osaka for a just in case. Leave it to the real skaters. Yuuri-kun will have his chance in a couple more years.
Even though Viktor will wipe the ice with him.

---

ice_castle_madonna
It’s all just speculation. Yuuri-kun would be the first to tell you that he hopes that Taku-san is feeling up to skating and doesn’t back out. He has nothing but respect for his teammates.
Though I disagree about Viktor wiping the floor with him. I don’t think we’ve seen the full extent for what either of them are capable of.

---

double_lutz_sundae
I don’t get how Yuuri-kun can be so nice when there are all those rumors that Taku-san has been saying that Yuuri-kun’s bronze finish at Nationals was a fluke and that he just doesn’t have what it takes yet to skate in the Senior division and he really should just stick to the Junior level...
competitions.

---

skating_is_life
I think Taku-san is feeling threatened.

---

niki’s_girl
ice_castle_madonna, you think that Yuuri could be better than Viktor Nikiforov? Current golden boy of skating? That’s really funny.

---

layback_spin
Leave Taku-san alone, he’s recovering from an injury! I thought we were supposed to be supportive of all our skaters! Taku-san has a lot of experience and deserves his chance at the Olympics!

***

“I’m guessing that Yuuri will be arriving tomorrow? Taku looks like he’s limping. He sat out the Parade of Nations, but I think that everyone expected him to.”

Viktor shook his head. “They talked about it. Riku, apparently had to leave because she was so frustrated with her bosses. The JSF has refused to help Yuuri find accommodation or a rink to practice at in case he’s a last minute replacement. They don’t want to seem as if they are pressuring Taku to step down.” Viktor sighed. “Do you know how much even the crap motels are charging for rooms in Vancouver?”

Katya sat down. “An Olympic gold medal?”

Viktor snorted. “Close. Lyosha was looking into them flying into Seattle. Then if Yuuri got the call, they could be in Vancouver in an hour.”

“But?”

“How’d you know there was a but?”

“There’s always a but.”

“Politics. The JSF and JOC don’t want Yuuri here because then it looks like they don’t believe Taku, his coach, or his physical therapist. They don’t want Yuuri in Seattle because he’d still need to fly here from there. They don’t want to pick up the tab for Yuuri’s trip because it’s not JSF policy to fly in alternates until it’s decided that they will be competing, and at that point they are no longer alternates and are actual Olympians. If he comes -- at his own expense -- he’d have to keep a low profile and keep away from the games, stressing that he’s not an Olympian until he gets called in. If he gets called in. They don’t even want him visiting the Village on a guest pass or attending any of the events, because the media in Japan has been all over this.”

“So basically the kid can’t win.”

“Basically. They made a mistake not sending him over and setting him up right when everyone was arriving and Taku ‘twisted’ his ankle.”
“That wasn’t a twisted ankle. He sprained it. He’s lucky he didn’t break it again. Yuuri should just stay in Osaka.” Viktor looked at her. “He’s actually staying in Osaka?”

“You just said he should.”

Katya gasped. “I know, but… wow, does Alexei have some balls.”

Viktor chuckled. “You already knew that.”

“Honestly, I don’t get it. I know that it’s the Olympics, but if he’s injured—”

“Taku’s retiring immediately after the games. He didn’t make it to Turin. This is his one and only chance to compete in the Olympics, and I think he’s betting everything on it.”

“You mean risking everything for it.”

“It’s not much of a difference, really.” Viktor sighed. “I think Yuuri is handling it better than anyone else. The only thing he’ll say on the matter in public or private is that he hopes that Taku-san can compete.”

***

“Was that a contraction?!” Nishigori panicked and practically dropped Yuuri’s tea into his lap in his rush to get over to Yuuko’s side. Yuuri barely managed to grab the cup in time as the hot liquid splashed over the side, lightly burning his hand. He sucked in a breath.

Yuuko shook her head and pushed her husband off of her. “No. I’m just uncomfortable and huge and have a bit of heartburn.”

Yuuri looked at the ceiling. No, it was definitely a contraction – another contraction, even. Yuuko had admitted that her contractions had already started the last time Nishigori had left the room, but she didn’t see any reason to get her husband all worked up. After all, she reasoned, it wasn’t like they were close together or even consistent; they were completely random and hours apart. Supposedly -- and Yuuri would be the first to admit that he knew absolutely nothing about how this whole baby-having thing worked -- contractions could start over a week before the real birth.

“I will not go into labor until after the Olympics.”

Yuuri had to grab onto the armrest to keep from moving and drawing Nishigori’s attention. That was another flat-out lie; childbirth may have been a closed book to him, but even he knew that babies did not keep to the schedule their skating-obsessed mother wanted them to. Yuuko would probably last until after the Men’s Free Skate, but there was no way she’d see the rest.

“Yeah, you’re right. The nurses would tell me if you were in labor.”

Except that Yuuko could be very persuasive, and the nurses mostly thought that husbands were useless. If Yuuko wanted to keep it under wraps, they would keep it under wraps. Apparently, she’d been teaching them all about figure skating this last week in preparation for the Olympics, and the nurses decided it was the least they could do in repayment.

“Taku-san is skating in the first group, right, Yuu-kun?”

Yuuri nodded. He’d been given a break until after the Men’s Free Skate. Then it was back to classes and a normal training schedule. He couldn’t wait.
“I can’t believe they called sixteen hours before the short program to see if maybe you could fly to Vancouver. SIXTEEN HOURS. That’s less than a day!”

Yuuri had never heard Riku raise her voice like she had when she snatched the phone away from Alexei. “Especially since it takes over eleven to fly there. Well, even then, Taku-san was insisting that he’d skate, but his PT finally broke ranks and said that he wasn’t sure. Public practice was apparently hard on Taku-san yesterday.”

The mention of Taku-san was enough to get Nishigori to return to his seat and stop focusing on every movement of Yuuko’s fingers just in case some signal of the triplets’ arrival was imminent -- which even the nurses had told them it wasn’t. “Let me just say that this whole thing was handled incredibly poorly.”

An orderly rolled in a small TV on a stand and started hooking it up. He smiled at the group. “I was really sad to hear that you wouldn’t be skating, Katsuki-san. All of Osaka was rooting for you to go.”

“恐れ入ります.” Yuuri took a deep breath and smiled. He was doing this for Yuuko. “I really appreciate the staff being able to find a small TV. I know that it isn’t typical to have it in the room.”

“Oh, anything for Katsuki-san! Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll be going to the next Olympics.” The orderly waved as he walked out of the room.

“You know,” Nishigori broke the silence that had descended when the door closed again. “It feels weird using Yuuri’s relative celebrity to get you special treatment, Yuuko.”

“Yuu-kun doesn’t mind. Do you?”

Yuuri sighed. “Not really. It’s just strange. Everyone has been really nice to me lately. Alexei and I stopped by this bakery that he likes not far from the rink on the way home the other day, and I walked out with a bag filled with wrapped melon pan and red bean paste buns because the owner knew I liked them. Alexei just smiled and told me to not eat them all at once.”

Nishigori looked at Yuuri expectantly. Yuuri sighed and reached over for his bookbag, pulled out one of each treat and tossed them over. Of course Nishigori would realize that he’d brought some with him. Nishigori wasted no time in opening the red bean paste bun and biting into it. “This is really good!”

“I know.” Yuuri turned to Yuuko, who was going through the stations to bring up the Olympics coverage. “Do you want any?”

She shook her head. “No. I really meant it when I said I had some heartburn.” She shifted. “Oh, look! They’re about to begin!”

The skaters for the first group were all on the ice for their warm-up, and the little clock in the top right corner was ticking down how many minutes they had left. Yuuri recognized some of the skaters in the first group beyond Taku-san. There was a young skater from the Philippines that had skated at the Four Continents; Yuuri didn’t know him well, even though he’d been skating Juniors for a year. He was probably the youngest competitor in the Men’s singles. Then there was the Spanish skater that Yuuri had skated with in Juniors last year. They weren’t friendly, but they’d shared the podium at both the Grand Prix and Junior Worlds the year before.

Taku-san was the third skater for the group, and Yuuri found himself holding his breath as he took the ice. He’d jumped a couple of doubles during the warm-up, but not a single triple.
Yuuri spotted the problems immediately. He’d watched Taku-san skate this program before -- had seen footage of him skating it -- and it wasn’t as good as it usually was. The first spin was going to be scored a level two at most; the change foot didn’t go well at all. Then he doubled his triple axel and even two-footed the landing. Yuuri sighed, wanting to look away, but he forced himself to keep watching even as Taku fell on the flying entry into his camel spin. That provoked an involuntary wince; it really had looked like Taku’s ankle had collapsed under him when he landed.

Taku-san skated an extra lap, skipping a transition, and shook his head at someone by the boards before going into his combination jump. It was supposed to be a triple-double. He doubled the first jump and if he wanted the element to count, he needed to make the second jump a triple.

Instead, Taku-san went down.

When he picked himself up, he skated over to the edge to the judges and spoke to them. There was some nodding between them before Taku made his way to his coach, gliding more on one foot than the other.

It was obvious that he wasn’t going to finish the short, which meant he’d be automatically disqualified from the free.

Yuuri felt his chest clench.

He could have done so much better.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
カツ丼 - katsudon
 сырники - syrniki
日本のフィギュア・スケーターフォーラム。 - Japanese Figure Skating Forum (or something like that)
恐れ入ります - osoreirimasu - thank you... but polite for a service rendered that takes someone's time etc

***
Hover translations will have to wait
omg I am never formatting on a tablet again. it is the worst thing in the world. seriously. hate it. (3 hours to FORMAT)
but I love you all. So please be patient for hover translations and complete translation list... it might be a bit out of order... did I mention I hate editing on a tablet.
Seriously, if there are any issues, let me know in the comments and I will take care of them when I am back in Germany tonight. Io has been patient and it is time to see some Paris
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The short program for the Olympics Men's Singles continue and when the Free Skate comes around, some things change.

Chapter Notes

There is a link at a certain point in the chapter. I suggest caution. It's not bad -- not triggering, SFW, etc. It's a song... just... yeah.

Thanks to yuurisvicchan for the Japanese translation as always! And to fangirlandiknowit and pigalle for the help fixing the Swedish! :D

Hover translations are available (to those not on mobile, since it doesn't work on mobile).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_yuurikatsuki_ I was really really looking forward to Taku-san’s Olympic programs. I wish him a speedy recovery and a quick return to the ice. #OlympicFS posted 35min ago from text

_yuurikatsuki_ 拓さんのオリンピックプログラムを楽しみにしていました。拓さん早く良くなってアイスに戻ってください。#OlympicFS posted 30min ago from text

Viktor rolled his eyes. He was supposed to be warming up and getting ready to skate, but he was scheduled third from last and had quite some time yet. So he decided to stretch and scroll through Twitter, even if it made the vein at Yakov’s temple throb as he glared at Viktor. But Viktor really didn’t care. More than that; he didn’t give a shit . It hadn’t even been an hour and already the Olympics hashtags were blowing up with the disaster that was Taku’s short program.

Yuri’s response was perfect: Classy. Considerate. Humble. Caring. Which meant that Alexei didn’t write it. Riku might lent a hand, but it was more likely that Yuuri had written it himself.

#shouldhaveorderedthekatsudon was probably Viktor’s favorite hashtag of the many that had popped up from the whole debacle, and he idly wondered if there was a way that he could get away with using it without Yakov confiscating his phone for unsportsmanlike behavior.

_christophege_ http://twitpic.com/m851ej snacking while watching #mensFS cheering for Stéphane to bring home the gold! #Stéphane4gold #shouldhaveorderedthekatsudon posted 5min ago from
"Viktor! Off the phone, you addicted idiot!"

Viktor sighed and bent over, putting his hands flat on the ground. He needed to focus, not think of ways to sneak hashtags onto his Twitter. He shoved the jack for his earbuds into his phone and backed out of the Twitter app, instead bringing up the playlist of music he used for warm-ups.

Three songs in, the music for his short program came on and Viktor seamlessly moved from stretches into an off-ice runthrough. But he wasn’t prepared when his program music ended and gave way to the first strains of ‘First Love’, of all things. Viktor stopped; if he closed his eyes, he could see Yuuri’s Free Skate in vivid detail. Not the one from the GPF, and not the ones that he’d watched with Mila from Yuuri’s qualifiers. No, the one he now pictured was the routine he’d seen in the computer lab of the Village from the 4CC with Yakov standing at his shoulder; the one with the perfect triple axel. And really, Yakov was right. It was flawless, and Yuuri fully deserved the +3.0 GOE he had received. Viktor would need to up his game if Alexei was going to turn Yuuri into a jumper like that.

They’d watched the first half of Yuuri’s program five times that evening, and it was on the third playthrough that Viktor finally realised that he’d made a mistake in Tokyo. He didn’t even know how he missed it, because it was right there at the very beginning: a very brief tribute to Moldau.

Viktor would like to think that it was his Moldau, but if this was about First Love, then it had to be Minako and ballet. And the upright layback spin -- well, that had to be Yuuko. He’d gone through every video on her channel, even the ones that had no views; even the ones that didn’t have Yuuri’s name in the title. There were a few of her, her husband, and Yuuri messing around on the ice when they were younger, and she’d spun just like that.

So, if Minako and Yuuko were represented, then the split jump before the steps that led into the cantilever… that was for him. Viktor. Yuuri had even performed the step sequence from the Lilac Fairy that that particular split jump had been in for Viktor, back in Saint Petersburg. And the triple axel that Yakov wanted him to watch so badly... that had to be Alexei.

He should have known that Yuuri’s love wasn’t so straightforward or simple.

All the same, he really had no desire to watch the part that was clearly for Yuuri’s boyfriend, so he’d insisted that they start over instead of continuing . Yakov gave him a strange look, but didn’t question the request even after the fifth time.

Viktor sighed. Yuuri should have been here in Vancouver. Maybe if Taku had managed to go on the ice and pull out a wonderful performance, Viktor would have been glad for him. Instead, he fucked it all up, skating on an ankle that wasn’t fully healed and screwing up his entire short program -- just so that he could say he skated in the Olympics! Taku was just lucky he didn’t permanently injure himself.
It pissed Viktor off.

So Viktor held onto that anger when he stepped onto the ice for his group’s warm up.

Then he held onto it when he stepped onto the ice for his short program.

Viktor knew he’d had trouble connecting to the simmering rage that was supposed to be embodied in this piece, but he had wanted to do something different at the time, something unexpected, with a roughness instead of a grace. Devil instead of angel.

And the piece was definitely dramatic. It was a chance to spread his wings in a sense, and Taku’s performance at the beginning of the night finally managed to light that missing fire. He’d chosen a spin that looked stronger and more masculine -- in direct opposition to the softer, more androgynous style he usually went with for his first spin -- and put his quad flip in the front as well. Then, when the music softened for a short bit -- that was where he put his sit spin with a twist.

The first jump in the back half was his triple axel with an entry from a spread eagle, and it went so much smoother than ever before. The practice had been worth it. Viktor ended with his combination spin, looking up at the ceiling of the arena and breathing heavy. He bowed. It was so quiet; nothing but the sound of the assistants’ skates as they came out to collect the plushies and flowers from the ice. And then suddenly, the crowd roared.

***

“Viktor Nikiforov has finished his short program with a score of 94.28! Not only does this place him in first after the short program, but he has beaten his previous personal best by 2 points and now holds the World Record for Men’s Short Program!”

Yuuko frowned at the screen. “Didn’t he already hold the World Record?”

Yuuri pulled out his phone. “No, some other skater held the World Record for short. I think he scored 92-something with Firebird. He has the World Records for Free Skate and combined, though, when he won gold at Worlds with Moldau. So now he holds all three.”

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Congrats on being in first and new WR!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t know what had you so fired up, but it was an amazing skate. I can’t wait to see your Free.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Really, it stole my breath.

“I am so excited for his Free Skate, you have no idea!” Yuuri just looked at her. “OK, maybe you do. But it’s different now! You’re friends. You don’t have a silly crush on him anymore.”

“If you’re insinuating that you’re more excited to see him skate than I am because you have a crush on him, I should remind you that you’re married -- to someone else -- with babies literally about to arrive any second.”

Yuuko did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at Yuuri. He laughed.

“Not any second! After the Olympics.”
Nishigori just shook his head at the two of them from his chair, still holding vigil next to Yuuko. “You know, since Yuuri is the one with all the posters up, I think it’s safe to say that he still has a bit of a crush. But you know how he is; he’ll deny it because he doesn’t want to ruin their friendship, or whatever.”

Yuuri turned his head away, color high on his cheeks. “I’m dating Shouta-kun. I can’t have a crush on someone else.”

Nishigori’s response was a derisive snort. “Oh please. Who do you think told me that you still have all those ridiculous posters up? Your boyfriend is well aware of your crush.”

“Takeshi, leave Yuuri alone…” "mmmphf." Yuuko suddenly closed her eyes.

“What was that? Are you in pain? Are they coming?!” Nishigori was out of his chair and grasping her hand in less than a second.

“You should probably tell him, Yuu-chan.”

“Not… until… after… the…. Olympics…”


“Her last one was over five hours ago, I don’t think she needs a doctor yet, but what do I know? Yuu-chan, should I--”

Yuuko brushed Nishigori’s hand off her. “I’m fine. It’s just a little heartburn. I am not having these babies until after I see Viktor Nikiforov win an Olympic gold medal. Do the two of you understand me?”

Yuuri shook his head. “And your husband says that I’m the one with the crush.”

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Sorry. I had a lot of press that I had to do and when I got up to my room I just hit the bed and didn’t wake up until morning.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  I still had my sneakers on. At least tracksuits are comfortable.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Yuuri?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Sorry, I was working on math. I still hate math. What am I going to do if I actually need math?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Buy a fancy calculator? Pay someone?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Good point. But I am not paying someone to do my math. I really liked your SP. What were you thinking about?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  that Taku is a selfish ass and ended up embarrassing himself and Japan and that the JSF #shouldhaveorderedthekatsudon

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Please tell me that hashtag isn’t trending.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  All right I won’t. Probably don’t want to check twitter then.
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  brb going to drown myself in the bath

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Yuuuuuuuri! Don’t do that! Watch an episode of FMA with me instead.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  It’s after midnight. I actually have to go to class in the morning.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Just one. I have a new World Record! Celebrate with me!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  You’ve been skirting that record all season, it was bound to happen. But fine. Just one.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Oh, no pressure, but Yuuko refuses to give birth until after you win Olympic gold.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Then I’ll do my best tomorrow. So you better watch. Yuuko too.

***

優子
Don’t bother coming. Can’t watch the FS. They took my TV away.

To 優子
Why did they take your TV away?

優子
Labor is the worst thing ever. I hate Takeshi. I never want him to touch me again

優子
So not only am I in pain

優子
I CAN’T WATCH VIKTOR!

To 優子
YOU’RE IN LABOR?! Like labor labor? Not the sort of labor from the other day?

優子
They say I have hours to go. I don’t want to do this for hours.

優子
Please kill Takeshi for me. I hate him. These contractions hurt so much.

優子
Yuu-kun, I don’t want to have these babies. I’ve changed my mind.

To 優子
You can do anything. You’re the Madonna of Ice Castle Hasetsu.

To 西郡 豪
Tell me when they’re close. I want to be there, but I’ll go crazy if I’m just sitting in the waiting room.
To 西郡 豪
Also, she’s told me to kill you. I’m assuming that I shouldn’t listen?

西郡 豪
I’m going to be a father and I’ve never been more terrified of anything in my life. What have I done?

To 西郡 豪
You probably should have thought about this back in June or July or whenever you did whatever to get Yuuko knocked up.

西郡 豪
THREE. There are going to be three of them. We’re going into this already outnumbered!

西郡 豪
What did we do to deserve this?

To 西郡 豪
Something horrible, I’m sure. I hope it was fun.

To 西郡 豪
Are you going to tell me when I should come or not?

西郡 豪
Yeah. I will. Their honorary uncle needs to meet them. Also, I’ll need you to convince me not to bolt.

To 西郡 豪
You bolt and Yuuko won’t have to ask me to kill you. I’d do it anyway. The Russians will hide me.

西郡 豪
Yeah, they probably would.

***

西郡 豪
My parents are telling me not to freak out. How can they tell me that? Do they not know how my life is going to change?

Yuuri laughed at his phone and decided he’d wait to reply to Nishigori until after the next skater had finished, so he turned back to face the TV. The first group had ended. Oda wouldn’t be skating until the last group. Same with Viktor and Lambiel. Yuuri leaned back and sighed.

“What is Yuuko going to do if Viktor fails to win gold?” Riku’s voice was teasing.

“I don’t think the triplets will care. They’re determined to come. I think it’ll be a race to see if Viktor skates first, or Yuuko gives birth first.”

“How long has she been in labor for?”

Yuuri shrugged. “Active labor -- whatever that is -- for about seven hours or so. I know she was having some contractions when I was in there watching the short program with them.”

Riku just shook her head. “I can’t imagine.”
“I’ve known about this almost as long as they’ve known about it, and I can’t imagine Yuuko and Nishigori as parents. I mean, really? What age can you put a child in skates, anyway?”

“If they’re good at walking? Two or three. Though they’d probably have to use a stability device.” Alexei responded even though he wasn’t really paying much attention; instead, he was flipping through his notes.

“Is that when you started?”

“I started around three or four. I can’t remember. I just know that I can’t remember a time I wasn’t on the ice. I imagine those three will be the same with their parents working and running the rink in Hasetsu.” He paused. “Did you see that spin the Canadian just pulled off?”

Yuuri nodded. “His free leg was a little sloppy, but the rotations were pretty good. Good speed, and everything was tight.”

“Yes. I haven’t seen anyone pull off a better triple axel than you yet. Granted, we’ve only seen the bottom six, but they’re all incredibly good skaters to have made it not only to the Olympics, but the Free Skate.”

“I know.” Yuuri sighed. “Viktor said that he and Yakov worked on his axel.”

Alexei nodded. “Yakov sent me footage. He’s using me as an indirect jumping coach for Viktor, apparently, so I told him I’d send them an invoice. It’s better, but it still has a bit of weakness to it. I think he’s been slacking off on some of his conditioning. I know he doesn’t like the forward entry as much and that boy would rather spend all his jump time on that stupid flip.”

Yuuri laughed. “I don’t think Viktor thinks that his flip is stupid. He’s the only one in the world who does it.”

“Yeah, well, why waste time learning the flip when you can work on the Lutz? It’s what you’re going to start working on after Junior Worlds.”

Yuuri bit his lip and leaned forward. “Are you talking about a quad Lutz?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“What about the Salchow and the Loop? And the Flip?”

Alexei sighed. “Because you just love doing triple Salchows.”

“No, I hate them, and that’s the point!”

“Listen to me, Yuu-kun. You can do a quad Lutz. It might take a while -- your quad toe still isn’t perfect, so we’ll still going to be spending a lot of time on that -- but there’s no reason not to go with teaching you the Lutz. With the exception of the Axel, you hate edge jumps.”

Yuuri leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling. “So, does that mean that I just skip the order I’m supposed to learn jumps in?”

“You’re not just learning the fundamentals anymore, Yuuri. You’re skating at practically the highest competitive level. You probably should have already made the switch over to Seniors, but I was hesitant because you didn’t think that you could do it. And now... Well, you were an Olympic alternate. There’s no doubt in my mind that you could have done well in Vancouver. We’ll see what the JSF wants to assign you to next season, but I’m going to start training you to go up against
Viktor. The way I see it, I have at least a year left coaching you.”

Yuuri sighed. He didn’t want to talk about leaving Alexei and Riku. He liked being coached by Alexei, but well, he knew that there were reasons that Alexei didn’t like coaching seniors. The biggest reason was the politics, which they’d all just gotten a huge dose of. But Alexei said he’d coach Yuuri until he graduated from high school. So, a year. After that... After that, they weren’t going to talk about until the season ended.

“I learned my triples in order. Well, mostly in order. I learned the loop and the flip at the same time, but after the Lutz. But that was because of short program requirements.”

“And I’m saying that you know the fundamentals of the jumps, so there’s no reason to work on a Salchow when your frustration with Salchows will just undermine your progress. At this point, it only makes sense to go with what you’ll be strongest in. This isn’t the Axel. You don’t ever have to do a Salchow in Seniors if you don’t want to, though your triple is finally starting to come together and well, avoiding Salchows completely just limits your options. Why do you think Stephane always downgrades his Axel to a double? He doesn’t like them, but he has to do them. It’s a requirement. He doesn’t particularly like edge jumps at all, and I don’t think that you of all people can blame him.” Alexei gave Yuuri that look that said “You know I’m right” and well, Alexei was right.

Yuuri’s phone went off again. Since he didn’t know what to say in response, he looked at the latest message.

西郡 豪
They said it’ll be soon. That there will be pushing and… Yuuri. Soon. Just… WHAT?

Yuuri bolted out of his place on the couch. On the screen, the next group of skaters were just finishing their warm up.

“Yuuri-kun?” Riku pressed her hand against his arm.

“Uh. Nishigori said soon. That it’ll be soon. So...” He paused. “I guess I’m going to go to the hospital.”

Alexei shut off the TV. Yuuri looked at him. He shrugged in response. “It’s recording. Riku and I will go with you.”

Yuuri dashed upstairs to get the little gifts he’d picked up the day before. He’d special-ordered three little outfits with “Future Olympic Medalist” embroidered in English on them -- wiggle room, just in case they decided figure skating wasn’t for them. Who knew, maybe one would take up swimming. It wasn’t such a bad sport.

When they finally got to the hospital, however, it turned out that “soon” didn’t actually mean imminent. No, it turned out “soon” meant sometime in the next couple of hours, probably. Not definitely. Probably. Most likely based on statistical averages.

Alexei had turned the TV tuner on his phone back to the free skate and was watching with his earbuds in, still taking notes. Yuuri knew that over the next couple of days they’d be dissecting every single skater, spending more time on the skaters that Yuuri was likely to go up against and less on skaters that were rumored to be retiring soon.
Suddenly, Alexei groaned and Yuuri looked over at him. “What happened?”

“Oda snapped a lace. He’d had a really good flow going too, but right during all those jumps he does in a row during the soft part—” Yuuri nodded at Alexei to keep going, since he knew what he was talking about. “His right lace snapped. He fixed it and finished his program, but it ruined his flow and you could tell that it messed with his headspace.”

Yuuri grimaced. Having to stop in the middle of a program for an issue like that was the worst. And trying to relace a boot in under three minutes was stressful at best. Japan wasn’t having much luck at this Olympics in Men’s Figure Skating, apparently.

“I doubt he’s going to make the podium now.”

Yuuri nodded and leaned back in his chair. It was hard and uncomfortable, and he was nervous, both for Yuuko and Nishigori -- who really seemed like he was on the verge of a breakdown, which was so atypical that it kind of made Yuuri really want to laugh at his friend -- and for Viktor and the other skaters competing half a world away. Instinctively, he pulled at the cuff of his jacket and worried the fabric between his fingers.

“Second to last skater just finished. Viktor is about to take the ice.”

Yuuri stood and headed over to watch the coverage over Alexei’s shoulder. It was Viktor, after all. Viktor was talking to Yakov by the edge of the rink, nodding, and then saying something in return. The announcers always talked over these conversations, so there was no way that Yuuri could hear what they were saying, even if he’d had an earbud in.

With a last nod, Viktor turned and started to skate a lap around the edge of the ice. Yuuri bit his lip. Viktor was in first after the short by a solid amount, but the Free was always where it counted the most. And if Yuuri couldn’t have the gold, he wanted Viktor to have it. He only felt a little guilty about that, but then Oda was already placed low enough that he wasn’t making the podium at all.

Despite the lack of sound, it was easy to tell when the music started as Viktor started to move, lifting an arm up and spinning in place on his skates. He was always so beautiful when he skated. Yuuri didn’t think that anything could make him look away.

Behind them, the door to the hallway crashed opened and Nishigori stumbled out. The faint sound of a baby screaming could be heard from behind a closed door. “I have to… but… Number one is here!” And then Nishigori turned and fled back down the hall.

Alexei had put aside the phone, the tiny image of Viktor skating still going. “Number one?”

“They haven’t agreed on names yet.”

“Still? Haven’t they been arguing about it for months?”

Yuuri nodded.

They were just about to pick the phone back up to see the end of Viktor’s program and the scores when Nishigori ran out and declared that the second had been born.

The third arrived right before the medal ceremony. Ten minutes afterwards, they were all allowed into the room.

“Did he win?” Yuuri shouldn’t have been surprised at Yuuko’s question, but he was.
“Uh…” Yuuri wasn’t sure. Well, he was sure, but at the same time, he didn’t actually know.

“Yes. Viktor won gold. No new World Record this time, but he won gold.” Alexei put his phone back into his pocket. “I think that you’re the champion of the moment, though, Yuuko-chan.”

She shook her head and looked down at the little bundle in her arms. Nishigori had another infant and her parents the last.

“So what are you going to name them?”

Yuuko smiled. “Axel, Loop, and Lutz.”

Yuuko’s mother clicked her tongue. “Yuuko, really, I know that you want to call them that, but wouldn’t it be better as nicknames?”

She shook her head.

“Yuuko gets to name them whatever she wants. She could have called them Viktor one, Viktor two, and Viktor three if she wanted.” Nishigori came over and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Yuuko is amazing.”

“And I just won seventy-five hundred yen.”

“Yuuri-kun!”

Yuuri grinned. “Mari-neechan was on Nishigori’s side. I knew that in the end, Yuu-chan would win. Really, who in their right mind would bet against Yuu-chan?” He looked down at the baby cradled in Yuuko’s arms. She was so small and wrinkled and looked downright strange, so of course she was beautiful.

***

vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/kajb82 GOLD! posted 10min ago from Tweetie

christophege RT @vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/kajb82 GOLD! -- Congratulations, Viktor! Félicitations, Viktor! posted 5min ago from Tweetie

katyababi RT @vnikiforov http://twitpic.com/kajb82 GOLD! -- Like there was any doubt. молодец! posted 5min ago from Tweetie

popo_georgi Поздравляю! @vnikiforov posted 3min ago from mobile web

milawarriorprncss Поздравляю! Congratulations to my second… no, third favorite skater @vnikiforov posted 3 min ago from mobile web

vnikiforov @milawarriorprncss Who’s your first favorite if it isn’t me? posted 3min ago from Tweetie

milawarriorprncss @vnikiforov @yuurikatsuki Really, you had to ask? posted 2min ago from text
vnikiforov @milawarriorprncss Fair enough… so who’s your second? posted 2min ago from Tweetie

milawarriorprncss My sister, @katyababi! You better not get full of yourself now that you’ve won Olympic gold. I’m rooting for @yuurikatsuki in Sochi! posted 30sec ago from text

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Did you see?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Shouldn’t you be telling me that I’m amazing?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Seriously, where are you? I want you to congratulate me!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov おめでとう!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Sorry, I didn’t see you skate. I’ll watch it when I get home.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m sure it was an amazing skate. I saw the very beginning and… Congratulations on your gold medal!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You didn’t watch me?

Viktor
CHRIS! Yuuri didn’t watch me skate!

Chris
Seriously? Why not?

Viktor
I DON’T KNOW! I only just got him to respond to me!

Chris
I’m sure there’s a reason.

Viktor
One good enough to explain why he wasn’t watching me skate?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I wanted to send a picture, but I don’t have your number. So Lyosha is sending it.

Lyosha
[image attached Yuuri, Nishigori, and Yuuko all next to each other and each holding a baby.]

Viktor
WHAT?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  YUURI!  WHAT?!  ARE THERE BABIES?!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  I saw you take the ice and then… well… they must have been anxious to see you skate too

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  because they were all born before you even stepped down from the podium

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Nishigori is holding Axel, she was born first.  Yuuko has Loop, doomed middle child already.  I have Lutz.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Did she really? After jumps?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  She did.  Her’s and Nishigori’s parents aren’t thrilled about it, but I think it’s cute.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  I promise I’ll see you win your next Olympic medal.  Even though it’ll be silver.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Silver?  And just who do you think will beat me?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Me.

Viktor’s breath caught. He clutched his phone tight against his chest for a second before exiting out of Twitter and opening his text messages.

Viktor
Chris… I might be a little in love
With someone completely unavailable

Chris
His reason was that good, huh?

Viktor
I guess… no, it’s what he said after

Chris
And what did he say?

Chris
Viktor?
Are you going to tell me?
Viktor
No.

***

c harmonb d christophegc  So how’d you get out of watching Viktor skate? He’s not even mad.

c d katsudonyuuri  I was at the hospital. Yuuko was giving birth to the triplets. Axel was born just as Viktor took the ice.

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  That would explain it. Tell Yuuko congratulations.

c d katsudonyuuri  I will.

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  Ok. I’m curious. He said that you said something to him after telling him why you missed his skate. What was it?

c d katsudonyuuri  What?

c d katsudonyuuri  Oh. Just that I’d see him win silver in Sochi.

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  Silver?

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  Wait. Did you tell him that you were going to win gold in Sochi?

c d katsudonyuuri  … Yes. I shouldn’t have. I can’t beat Viktor, I know that, but sometimes…

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  No. No. C’est incroyable. Parfait. Seriously. You should remind him of this ALL THE TIME.

c d katsudonyuuri  No, I shouldn’t. He hasn’t said anything since. I think I made him angry. I should have just stopped at Congratulations.

c d katsudonyuuri  I really don’t know what got into me.

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  A competitive fire! I think Viktor’s just not used to being teased. Seriously, I bet he likes it when you tease him.

c d katsudonyuuri  Has anyone ever told you that you’re a little strange?

c harmonb d katsudonyuuri  You wouldn’t be the first. And Yuuri, you’re forgetting something important.

***

The Village -- in fact, all of Vancouver -- was just one wild party, the fast-approaching closing ceremonies the final hurrah for what had been an awesome Olympics. Athletes jumped from one building to another, many ending up exactly where Viktor was: in one of the lounges, at the eye of what was quickly turning into a raging party.
Someone had brought in a lot of alcohol and everyone was drinking and celebrating Canada’s gold medal in what multiple people had assured Viktor was the only sport that mattered to Canadians at the Winter Olympics: Hockey.

And part of Viktor had to admit that he liked this, he really liked this. Figure skating parties could be so very boring. Classical music played at soft levels, wine and champagne; talking to sponsors, maybe joking around with a few of the skaters that you were closest with. But they were definitely not known for being fun.

This, on the other hand, was fun. So he grabbed a beer and slid between two people further into the room. A bunch of athletes from the Whistler Village had just arrived, and he wasn’t surprised when he found Katya settled on the lap of some bobsledder of unknown nationality, giggling. Yakov was going to kill them if they showed up for the closing ceremony drunk, but did it really matter when over half the athletes arriving would be equally plastered?

He plopped down on the couch next to Katya and her new bobsledder beau. Well, probably a bobsledder. He could have also been a luger -- was that what one called a person who luged? -- or a skier for all Viktor knew, but something about the man definitely, firmly suggested he had bobsledding in the blood.

“Viktor!” Katya leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, much sloppier than she would normally. “This is Jens! He skis and is Swedish!” She brushed her hand through the bobsledder’s blond hair. It wouldn’t be the first time Viktor’s can’t-miss hunches had come up short.

Viktor gave a short bark of laughter and nodded. “Hello, Jens! I see you’re becoming acquainted with the Belle of Russian Figure Skating.”

The Swede made an odd, almost slurping sound, more like sucking in a bit of air around a mint really quickly. Viktor looked at Katya, completely confused.

“That means ‘yes’! Isn’t it amazing?”

Viktor didn’t know much about Swedish, but he was pretty sure that yes was “ja”, pronounced with a rounder sort of vowel than the German. But as he wasn’t Swedish, he wasn’t going to argue.

“Viktor! Viktor! He has a sister! She skis too! They’re both Olympians!” Katya had leaned further over and was now patting his cheek with her hand. Viktor wasn’t sure that he’d ever seen her so very drunk. She was going to be regretting this come morning.

“I introduce!” Jens stood up, still holding Katya, which just sent her into gales of giggles. Viktor quickly pulled out his phone and started filming because this needed to be documented, consequences be damned. “Anna! Kom hit!”

A tall, charming and svelte woman, blond hair piled high on her head in a messy bun, came over. “Jaha, självklart hittade min bror en rödhårig. Jag heter Anna. Och du?”

Viktor’s knowledge of German stopped at ja and nein, and his knowledge of Swedish was even worse. So he simply smiled. What else was he supposed to do when faced with a rather beautiful woman speaking to him in a language he had no hope of understanding?

“Your name?” She smiled.

“Viktor.”

“Nilforv! Figure Skating!” She turned to her brother. “Han vann guld i konståkning!”
“Grattis!” Jens switched Viktor’s drink out for a full one shamelessly grabbed from someone walking by.

Anna smiled and sat down on Viktor’s lap, giving him a smile. “No room. Can I sit here? Okej?”

Viktor laughed, only sparing a glance at the bit of couch next to him before he settled his hands on Anna’s hips. He tried to mimic the odd slurping sound, much to Anna’s delight; she leaned forward and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Viktor, I love the Swedish!” Katya giggled as Jens nuzzled her ear.

All four of them eventually stumbled to the closing ceremony slightly more drunk than they should have been, and when Yakov spotted them, he just threw up his hands and stalked away. Most of the coaches were adapting a hands-off manner, and Viktor was glad that Yakov had decided to mimic that for once. Then again, gold and a world record did buy a certain amount of leeway...

Anna and her brother were fun and Katya and Viktor ended up spending most of their evening with them. Even when they’d split up at one point, Jens eventually found them and wrapped his arm around Katya’s waist, saying something like “Hej sötnos” which Katya decided was the most endearing thing ever. And that was the last that Viktor saw of Katya until they met outside the Village the next afternoon, nursing twin hangovers and getting ready to head back to Russia.

His conversation with Anna was stilted when it involved words. Her English was all right, but not as good as her brother’s, so they eventually found other ways to communicate. And Viktor remembered what he liked about women’s bodies, most important being that they were nothing like the slight frame that certain figure skaters had -- certain figure skaters who would be scandalized at the thought of anything untoward happening, no doubt. Yes, Anna might have had thighs that many skaters he knew would have killed for, but there was still a sort of softness to her. Yet she was still fiercely independent and knew what she liked, and didn’t hesitate to communicate that to Viktor.

It wasn’t a bad way to spend his last night in Vancouver, all things considered.

The buzz of the alcohol was still slipping along his veins as he made his way back to his room in the Village, his key not quite fitting into the lock the way it should. The water bottle that Anna had pushed into his hands as he left her room shortly before dawn was half empty and the plastic crumpled. He pressed his forehead against the door and tried again, stumbling when the door finally opened -- not because he’d managed to make his key miraculously work, but because the clanging he was making had finally woken up Yakov, who just glared at him.

“At least I had fun and was safe?”

Yakov muttered something in Russian that -- even though it was his native language -- Viktor’s brain was too buzzy and tired to make out, so he just smiled and pushed down on the mercifully sockless handle of his door.

Maxim woke up when Viktor blundered against his bed, banging his shin with a sharp curse -- in Swedish, because he could, since Anna had been kind enough to teach him. “Jävlar.”

“Did you wear it? Your Gold Medal Currency?” At Viktor’s flush, he laughed. “Hope you had fun.”

Viktor sighed and collapsed onto his bed. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d done something stupid, because drunken sex was probably never a good idea, but then…
Viktor
i dont what time where you at
wrong bj no strungs?

Chris
It’s noon. I was having lunch and just
choked on a rather nice red wine
Sounds like you had fun at least.
As long as he wasn’t married.

Viktor
goot to kno
anna wasnt. but swedish is bad.
my. /should be a my.

Chris
Didn’t you swear off girls?

Viktor
tall blond pretty. different..

Chris
Ah.

Viktor
you bettercome to Sochi
you and yuuri both. katya is retiring
if I have to spend all of sochi wit
georgi or this guy, I might kill 1
. milajus a BABY.

Chris
I am screenshoting this convo
Btw
Because it is amazing.
Don’t think that Yuuri will be the only one
making you work for that gold medal

Viktor
I wont.
U ASKED?????????

Chris
Mais oui. Tu es trop adorable.

Viktor
… fusk you. using français.
Je te deteste

Chris
You still owe me a kiss at Worlds.
I am so collecting.

Chris
Enjoy yourself, Viktor.
Use it to get over your little crush.
He’s too young for you anyway

Viktor
Jus a little

***

“I am so glad that you are friends with Viktor.”

Yuuri laughed and took out yet another set of ridiculously ruffled baby clothes out of the newly arrived box. “What even is this? It looks like a skating costume for an infant.”

Yuuko squealed, grabbing it out of Yuuri’s hands. “Ahh! It’s amazing! Takeshi, the girls have miniature skating costumes!”

“Because the creepy Olympic mascot plushies weren’t enough. Also, Loop just went back to sleep.”

“You do realise that if I’d gone to Vancouver that the girls would have been getting those same plushies, right?”

Takeshi pounded Yuuri on the back with one hand. “And they still would look a little creepy. But then all mascots do. Even the Ice Castle’s.”

Yuuri picked up the phone when it made its notification trill.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  It’s official. I’m withdrawing from Worlds. Yakov thinks it’s for the best. Since I won gold at the Olympics

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Are you really all right with that decision?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  I don’t know. I’m still going to Turin, I’m just not going to be competing. I’m going to cheer for Chris

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Who are they sending for the second position to Worlds? I heard Taku WD too.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  The fourth place finisher from Nationals.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  You’ve got to be kidding me. They aren’t sending you?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  The JSF wants me to focus on Junior Worlds. I’ve never won it. Even last year, I only got silver

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  It’s a different short program than what you’ve been practicing. When do you leave?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Tomorrow. The Totoro choreography is easier than the Nocturne choreo. Even the former Nocturne choreo.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  We started working on it again once we knew that Vancouver definitely wasn’t going to happen
vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You should be doing both Championships. Then we’d get to spend time together in Turin.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Well, I’m just trying to keep my head down until the end of the season.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov BTW, Yuuko loves all the stuff. You seriously didn’t have to send a box of things. A YT comment would have made her day.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I couldn’t help it! Katya and I had fun shopping in Vancouver and we sent a list to Mila of things to get in Russia.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov But did you have to include baby skating costumes? They can’t even go on the ice yet. Alexei says 3.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Are you saying that Yuuko didn’t like them?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov They’re her favorite of course.

“Yuuko?” Yuuko’s mother came in with a much smaller box. “You have a package from Switzerland.” She shook her head. “Who do you know in Switzerland?”

Three baby onesies with Swiss flags later, and Yuuko decided that Yuuri needed to become friends with someone from every single country -- and introduce them to her, of course.

***

“Yuuri!”

Yuuri looked up and saw Minako holding up her ridiculous sign. “Did you really have to bring that, Minako-sensei?!” He was happy that she had decided to accompany them to Junior Worlds, but at the same time, knowing how much attention she was going to direct toward him had his stomach flipping.

For the first time, he’d come to a competition with the intent to win gold. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to win. He always wanted to win, but he had never let himself actually admit to anyone, not even himself, just how much he wanted it. This time, as they packed the last of his costumes, he’d looked up at Alexei and Riku and told them that he was going to win the gold medal, and that none of the other skaters could stop him.

Obviously, he’d really gone insane, and he still hadn’t come to his right mind because he still felt that way. It was an odd sort of confidence that weighed between his shoulders and made him want to squirm in his more hesitant moments. But he knew that he was going to get back on the plane to Japan having won Junior Worlds.

He just wished that he could do it with a few less people staring at him as he walked through the airport.

Minako smiled as she fell into step beside him, sign folded under her arm. “Are you going to show me the adjusted spins for Totoro during public practice?”

Yuuri glanced at Alexei, who nodded. “Yes, I can. I think they’re better than what I had during the Junior Grand Prix Final, so my score should be a little stronger.”
“Good. That’s what I want to hear.” Minako smiled. “Lilia says that Yakov has a student competing this time, so I’m sure you’ll get to see him. That’ll be nice.”

Yuuri bit his lip. In a way, it would. He’d have his ballet instructor and two of his coaches watching. The pressure was definitely on. If he didn’t win, it’d be more than just disappointing. He had to win. He had the talent. Yakov had told him that when he was fourteen, and it was something that Alexei stressed all the time. He just had to apply it.

***

Yuuri was running through his stretches next to the rink. He didn’t particularly want to go into the back rooms at the arena for warm-ups, so he’d decided to just do some modified ones rinkside. He bent over and wrapped his hands around his ankles, pulling lightly until he could really feel the stretch up the back of his thighs and along his spine. The playlist on his MP3 player was a bit poppier than what he would usually use, but then Keiko-senpai had promised that this was great music to stretch to. She wasn’t completely wrong, but most of all, it cut out a lot of the loud voices from the rink around him.

Because of that, though, he missed the Thai teenager approaching, repeatedly calling his name until he finally gave up, bent down and loudly cried “Yuuri!” next to his ear.

Phichit was as excitable in person as Yuuri remembered, and his skating had only gotten better in the few months between the Lake Placid qualifier and Junior Worlds. In fact, it’d gotten good enough that he was probably looking at a top ten finish. And when Yuuri met up with him at the rink for practice, Yuuri told him as much. Of course, it was easy to keep track of when the other skater posted as much as he could of his skating on YouTube.

“But you placed fourth at your first Junior Worlds.”

Yuuri nodded. He remembered. “I’d thought I’d done horribly.”

Phichit shook his head. “You really thought that finishing just off podium your first year competing in Juniors was bad? Why?”

Thinking back, Yuuri could barely recall. The anxiety he could remember. The self-doubt and the self-loathing were all still clear. So was the memory of Viktor hugging him and draping himself over Yuuri’s back while he stretched. And scolding him--

“At the time, my coach told me to take out the triple axel and put in my double. My double was strong, but my triple wasn’t. I should have listened to him.” Yuuri sighed. “I thought I should’ve done more to win, I guess.”

Phichit shook his head. “Do you realise that I’m one of the very first figure skaters representing Thailand?”

Yuuri leaned against the boards and looked at the younger skater. He had a lot of growing left to do, but would probably still be shorter than Yuuri when all was said and done. “That’s amazing, Phichit!”

Phichit bobbed his head in a nod. “I know! It really is! I want everyone in Thailand to know how fun figure skating is. Not only to do, but to watch.”

Yuuri smiled.

“And I can’t have fun out on the ice if I’m terrified of doing bad. So I’ve decided that I’m not going
to be scared of that. You should do that, too.”

Yuuri’s breath caught. He wanted to explain, he really did, but how? It was only something that he was starting to understand recently himself -- through many conversations with many people: Shouta, Viktor, Yuuko -- even Chris, once. His anxiety. He couldn’t just shut it off because someone told him to, or because it was detrimental to his career. It wasn’t just about the ice. It was... everything. Yuuri hummed. He guessed he’d try to explain it like he had to Viktor, the first time they’d talked about it. “Do you ever get an earworm of a song you absolutely hate?”

“That I hate?”

Yuuri nodded. “Something that just buzzes around in your skull and won’t go away?”

Phichit shook his head. “I’ve gotten earworms, but they’re mostly the kind I dance to!”

Yuuri laughed and pulled his MP3 player from his pocket, scrolling until he found the song he was looking for. He held out an earbud to Phichit, who took it and put it in his ear with a smile. Oh, that poor boy. If he only knew... Yuuri pressed play.

It took only a couple of seconds before Phichit yanked the earbud out and attempted to hand it back. Yuuri shook his head and pointed back to his ear. Frowning, Phichit put it back in. “Yuuri, this song sucks.”

“It’s pretty horrible. Christophe Giacometti sent it around as a joke, said it was better than a ‘Rickroll’.”

With the press of a few buttons, Yuuri set the song to repeat. Phichit frowned again; the tinny racket hadn’t even finished fading out before the track restarted. “Why are you doing this to me?” Yuuri held his hand out and Phichit gratefully handed the earbud back. “That’s the worst thing ever.”

Yuuri settled back against the boards with a soft sigh. “Yeah, it is. And I can’t shut it off. But instead of that song, I have a million other things running through my mind, and there is no off switch or pause button. There’s no way to even mute or turn down the sound. None of it is positive. It’s never a ‘but hey, you won gold at the GPF, you’re awesome!’ it’s all ‘remember when you totally fell apart at Nebelhorn and pretty much everyone realised that you had no right to be on the ice?’”

“So what do you do?” Phichit leaned against the boards as well. He seemed curious.

“I’m still trying to figure that out. Alexei, my coach, he tends to have me listen to music, and sometimes that helps if it’s music that I can really get into. Dancing can help, so a lot of times I’ll practice. The thing that helps the most is getting out on the ice and just skating, not routines, but compulsory figures. Not always an option at competitions, obviously.”

“Yuuri, that sucks.”

Yuuri laughed. “Yeah, it does. Luckily, it’s not everyday.”

“So you don’t have that song playing in your head right now?”

Yuuri shook his head. “No, not right now. I’m pretty relaxed at the moment.”

“Will you skate with me, then?”

Yuuri nodded and followed Phichit out on the ice. Occasionally, Phichit would ask him to do
something -- usually a spin or a bit of a step sequence from one of his past programs -- and Yuuri could see from the corner of his eye that the younger skater was just soaking it all up, from the way Yuuri’s skates cut the ice on a rocker to how he let his body move in counterintuitive directions as he moved across the ice; even the way he shifted his weight on the skate to turn his body into a more difficult position on a spin.

If he was given the opportunity to spend one more year in Juniors, Yuuri thought that maybe he’d try to be a little more outgoing and talk to the younger skaters. Especially if they were like Phichit.

***

Yakov watched as Yuuri stretched a bit away from everything with his earbuds in, not paying attention to anyone as the overhead lights caught the silver embroidery on his costume. He seemed relaxed, but then the competition was over and they were heading into the exhibition, and Yuuri had always excelled at exhibition skates. The young Russian skater Yakov had come with was standing at his side and just watched the gold medalist prepare, not having placed on the podium himself. Yuuri had smiled at him and told him not to worry; that if he was good enough, Yakov would keep him on -- after all, Yuuri had been in his exact position just a few years ago. Yakov didn’t point out that he hadn’t kept him on, and had instead handed him off to another coach entirely.

Maybe Yakov should have kept him on, though he doubted that he would have been as good for Yuuri as Alexei was proving to be, this ridiculousness with the Olympics and this exhibition notwithstanding.

“Are you sure that you want to do this? It’s not exactly subtle. You didn’t pressure him, did you?”

Alexei shook his head; his arms were crossed over his chest. “I asked. That’s all I did. He put all that work into this program. It wouldn’t be fair for no one to see it.” He paused. “Everyone who has seen the finished product agreed with that. And it wasn’t like we could replace the short with it. It’s not compliant with the regulations for a Junior short program.”

Yakov sighed and took his cell phone out of his pocket, firing off a couple quick text messages. It wasn’t like Alexei didn’t have a point.

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“Was that Yakov? Was he checking up on us?”

Viktor nodded and sat back down at the table in the breakroom. Katya was on one side and Mila was on the other. “Just wanted to make sure that we were watching the exhibition. I sent him back a message that Yuuri was skating, so of course we were watching it.”

“I really liked his exhibition piece from the Grand Prix Final, it was so much fun. And you said that it’s about the babies his friend just had, right?” Mila leaned forward on the table, letting her feet lift off the floor.

“That’s what he told me when I asked him. Did I show you the picture?”

Mila nodded. “When you got back from Vancouver. I made you, remember?”

“Oh, right.” He hadn’t. Viktor let his head rest on his hand, returning his attention to the TV coverage.

“And now the Junior Men’s Singles gold medalist, Yuuri Katsuki!” They watched as Yuuri entered the rink, waving.
“Viktor? That costume.” Katya put her hand on his shoulder. She sounded breathless. “Do you think...?”

Viktor’s breath too caught at the sight of the black costume with its silver embroidery. He hadn’t seen this ensemble since Junior Worlds the previous year. “God, I hope so.”

“What will be skating to his short program from last year, Chopin’s Nocturne .”

On cue, Yuuri spun around in place and took his starting position on the ice.

“Wait, this isn’t the program from the Grand Prix. I’ve seen this one loads of times.”

Viktor shushed her. “Milochka, I have to do some math. Shh.” He glanced at Katya. “PCS?”

She nodded. “I can do that. I’ll try for GOE as well.”

Mila just frowned at her teammates. But then the music started, Yuuri started skating, and she was no longer interested in them; her gaze focused solely on Yuuri as he began his routine.

Yuuri was not, in fact, skating the same program from the year before. No, he was skating the modified one, the one that he would have skated at the Olympics if the JSF had managed to pull their collective heads out of their asses. And everyone who was watching and had followed the drama surrounding the Japanese Men’s Singles at the Olympics would know that.

Even the spins and his step sequence had been tweaked and modified; the flying entry had been moved to his sit spin, which he pulled in tighter than he’d managed in the past. When Yuuri finally jumped his quad toe, it was like catching your breath; the steps leading into the triple axel — absolutely flawless — were a release. His upward camel spin was stunning as he twisted into position.

After Yuuri completed his combination jump and went into his combination spin, Viktor realised that he’d been so enraptured that he’d completely forgotten to do the usual scoring math. All the same, it was only when Yuuri hit his final pose that Viktor dove for the pad of paper they kept on the counter in the back and started furiously scribbling notes and numbers. Katya immediately joined him, pointing out when he got the order of something wrong. Together, they thrashed out the base values of each of the elements, then started with adding in GOE.

In the middle of those frantic calculations, Viktor’s phone suddenly chimed with a new text message. Viktor took it out of his pocket and tossed it to Mila. “See who it is, крошка.”

“Yakov. He says that was probably worth about 91 points and that he would have been in fourth after the short, just edging out Oda, but that his free wasn’t strong enough for a podium finish regardless.” Mila frowned. “Was that what Yura would have skated if he’d competed in Vancouver?”

“Most likely. It was rumored that he’d switched out Totoro for Nocturne .” Katya ruffled her sister’s hair. “But his exhibition skates are always stronger than his actual skates.”

Viktor nodded. “Even so, if he’d skated it relatively cleanly, he’d have been in the top ten after the short.” He paused. “How much trouble would I be in, do you think, if I tweeted just the hashtag?”

“He’d take your phone away for a week, most likely,” Katya replied.

Viktor was tempted to do it anyway.
Alexei clapped him on the back, and even Yakov favored him with a proud nod as he headed back to the prep area to take off his skates.

More surprisingly, the silver medalist, Michele Crispino, followed him.

“Good job, Katsuki. I’m glad I got to see you skate your potential Olympic program.”

Yuuri bit his lip. “Thanks.” All things considered, that was probably the nicest thing that Crispino had ever said to him. He’d have to tell Sara that something was wrong with her brother.

Yuuri fished his phone from the pocket of the jacket he had tucked under his arm. He’d barely unlocked it when the notification sound went off. He scrolled past the message from Shouta wishing him congratulations from earlier and found the new message.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri #shouldhaveorderedthekatsudon

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Shut up.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri No.

Yuuri chuckled and clenched his phone tightly in his hand, swallowing past the lump that had formed in his throat the second he’d seen Viktor’s DM. He could feel a flush climbing up the back of his neck -- thankfully, it wouldn’t be noticeable with the heat of exertion that had highlighted his cheeks in a dusky rose.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Yuuri’s tweets are the same, just in different languages
優子 -- Yuuko
西郡豪 -- Nishigori Takeshi
Félicitations -- congratulations
молодец! -- molodets! -- well done
Поздравляю! -- Pozdravlyayu! -- congratulations
おめでとう! -- Omedetō! -- congratulations
Kom hit! -- come here!
jaha, självlklart hittade min bror en rödhårig. Jag heter Anna. Och du? -- Right, of course my brother would find a redhead. My name is Anna. And you?
Han vann guld i konståkning! -- He won gold in figure skating!
Grattis! -- Congratulations!
Hej sötös -- Hey sweetnose. But not like a human nose. Like an animal nose. Like a cat's nose.
jävlar -- literally devils but used as for fuck's sake or oh shit
Mais oui. Tu es trop adorable. -- But of course. You're very adorable
français -- French
Je te deteste -- I hate you
крошка -- kroshka -- little crumb
***
That weird yes that Jens did. The slurping thing? It's actually a thing in Northern Sweden!: https://youtu.be/URgdIAz4QNg

Yes, that song is evil. That song has been known to give me a panic attack. Io thinks that song is HILARIOUS. Yes it was actually released, no I have no idea what the record companies were thinking...

Also there have been a lot little BYSOTI drabbles posted over on my tumblr if you want to go and check them out. They should be all tagged. There's a bit of BYSOTI meta over there as well -- specifically about the Taku and JSF situation and where I drew inspiration for it from.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Viktor tries to deal with things and fails. A little. The season comes to a close, but Yuuri finds that he has a packed off-season and it's just begun.

Chapter Notes

BYSOTI(D) has FANART! OMG! I can't forget that I forgot to post last chapter and this chapter! But luckily I remembered before this chapter had been up for long!

The talented guadiumg on tumblr drew the swimsuit picture! Here!
#yuuriputaswimsuiton
And the talented marcate on tumblr drew Yuuri’s MV costume (from one of the drabbles)! Here! #ripViktor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the cab pulled up to the house, Yuuri wasn’t even surprised to see Shouta waiting outside the gate, straddling his bike, Vicchan at his side. As usual, the dog was already straining against his leash, eager to bark at the car. No, Yuuri wasn’t surprised, though his chest still clenched a little at the sight. If it was possible, Shouta always met him after he came back from a competition.

Yuuri followed Alexei and Riku out of the back of the cab and went around to retrieve his luggage from the trunk, but Shouta was already hefting Yuuri’s large suitcase out of the trunk, leaving Yuuri with just his carry-on.

“おかえり.” Shouta’s voice was quiet. Yuuri smiled and leaned into his shoulder for a minute before bending down to pick up Vicchan, tucking the dog close with one arm as he wiggled and squirmed in a desperate effort to lick his master’s face. With his free hand he grabbed his remaining luggage and followed Alexei and Riku into their house.

Alexei, as was the norm, just dumped his suitcase next to the door and headed into the kitchen in search of food. Riku smiled at them and then went to follow her husband, reminding him that the fridge was practically empty, that, no, prawn crackers did not constitute real food, and that if he wanted something real to eat, they should make a trip to the store.

“Upstairs?” Shouta asked, hand still resting on Yuuri’s large suitcase.

Yuuri just nodded as he unhooked Vicchan’s collar and put him down. “I bet Lyosha wants a hello, too.” And so Vicchan rushed off, bounding toward Alexei and the promise of at least one handful of treats -- all told, his coach spoiled his pup as much as he did.

By the time he got upstairs, Shouta had already pushed Yuuri’s suitcase against his closet. Yuuri dropped his things and just sort of looked at him. He hadn’t seen his boyfriend in almost a week and had barely talked to him, just some exchanges through Twitter, but… Yuuri had missed him. Seeing
him made his heart tighten in a funny way. He wouldn’t say it was love. That was such a weighted word. If he was speaking English, maybe. Russian, most likely. But in Japanese, no. It wasn’t love, but it was definitely a very strong sort of like.

Love, to him, was something that was just too big. Too… scary. But this -- him and Shouta -- was just right. Hands that fit together in a clasp when their fingers tangled. Knowing smirks when someone said something about how they were always in each other’s company. He was easy to relax around; always ready to play a game or watch something, never demanded more of Yuuri’s time than he was willing to give or could give. But then Yuuri did the same to him. Yuuri didn’t think that he’d ever be able to be with someone who didn’t have a schedule with demands like his. How could they even begin to understand? They couldn’t.

Shouta could.

“Do I have something on my face? You’re staring.” Shouta looked down at his shirt with a frown. “Did I get some sauce on me from lunch? I went to that Chinese gyoza place., the one that you’re not allowed to eat at anymore. I figured it’d be better to go before you got back then after and--”

“You don’t have anything on your shirt. Though it’s really mean to mention the gyoza place. I was so bummed when Alexei added it to the list of restaurants that were off limits. Especially now that I’m officially off-season and can’t even go once in a while.” Yuuri crossed the distance separating them, letting his backpack drop to the ground. He pressed his hands to Shouta’s cheeks. “I was just thinking that I missed you while I was in the Netherlands.”

Shouta’s eyebrows went up. “Really?” At the same time, his hands went to Yuuri’s waist, gripping the fabric of his shirt and drawing it taut over Yuuri’s stomach.

Yuuri nodded. He brought Shouta’s head closer to his own, negating the height difference, and kissed him. It took less than a second for Shouta to start kissing him back, his hands sliding around Yuuri’s back. Yuuri leaned back for a second, breaking the kiss, and looked at Shouta, smiling. “I won gold.”

“I know. I saw.”

Yuuri shook his head. “I won gold at Junior Worlds. That’s like… like… better than nationals. I’m the best Junior skater in the world.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and’?” Yuuri bit his lip.

“And when are you going to beat that gold medalist on your wall and be even better?”

Yuuri kissed Shouta again, deeper and hungrier, licking into his mouth and letting his fingers tangle in the short strands of hair at the back of the other boy’s head. Shouta groaned and pressed closer, and Yuuri really, really, really hoped that no one was going to knock on his door and interrupt them now, even for something as stupid as letting him know they were going to the store.

Yuuri stepped back, pulling Shouta with him until they could topple onto his bed. It was small, but so much more comfortable. He pulled away for another second. “I’m working on it. I’ll get to Seniors, and then you’ll see.”

Shouta rolled them so he could lean over Yuuri. “Good. I want to boast that you’re a World Champion without having to put Junior in front of it.” He playfully nipped at Yuuri’s bottom lip.
“I’ll get there. I want to win.” Yuuri slipped his hands under Shouta’s shirt and over the well-defined muscles of his abs. Yuuri’s season was ending, but Shouta’s was just about to begin; it was obvious he’d been putting in extra time, something that Yuuri could appreciate.

“I know you want to win. You always want to win, even if you never say it. You wouldn’t be a competitive athlete if you didn’t.”

“Hmm.” Yuuri relaxed back into the mattress and pulled off Shouta’s shirt, letting himself admire the lean musculature of his boyfriend. There wasn’t much bulk, just strength, mainly focused on his shoulders -- and, as Yuuri knew, his upper back. “No more talking, рыбка.”

“No talking?”

Yuuri kissed Shouta again to shut him up.

***

Viktor laid back on Chris’s bed with a soft yawn. Since he’d gotten into Turin, they’d spent a good many hours talking about the Olympics and what it was like. Now Viktor was lightly dozing as Chris occupied himself by playing with Viktor’s phone.

“You saved the picture of Yuuri with his friends where he’s holding one of the babies?”

Viktor yawned again and nodded. “I couldn’t not. Those babies were born while I was winning an Olympic gold medal. They’re special!”

He caught a glimpse of Chris’s disdainful expression before shutting his eyes again. It wasn’t even that late, but he was tired all the same. Yakov had definitely made the right call when it came to withdrawing Viktor from Worlds. He’d been running on a high for a week or so after the Olympics, but his energy levels had since crashed. There was currently no way that he could physically turn in as good a performance as he’d done at the Olympics, so he wasn’t even going to try. It seemed strange, but skaters had been doing it this way for ages.

“Who is ‘Redheaded Menace’?” Chris asked. The other skater had apparently gotten bored of Viktor’s photo galleries and decided to start scrolling through his contact lists instead. Viktor rolled onto his side to look at him. “Katerina Babicheva?”

Viktor shook his head. “Her sister, Mila. Trust me, she’s much more of a menace. Especially when it comes to Yuuri merchandise.”

“I’m not even going to ask. Why are some of your contacts in English anyway?”

“Felt like it.”

“I am changing ‘Swiss Meadow Boy’ to ‘Swiss Heartthrob’.” Viktor watched Chris’s fingers change his contact information with a hint of amusement. It wasn’t like he couldn’t change it back. And no matter what his phone said, Chris would always be the meadow boy. “‘Travesty’?”

“Georgi.”

Chris rolled on the bed and laughed. “That’s kind of perfect. I take it “Very Grumpy Man” is Yakov?”

Viktor laughed, too. “But of course!”
“So who is ‘Winry Will Always Win’? I don’t even recognise the country code.”

For a moment, Chris’s words didn’t even make sense; try as he might, Viktor did not remember having a contact like that. Then the penny dropped. “Chris, give me my phone back. Now.”

***

Yuuri started to wake up slowly, not sure why he was waking up at all when it was still so dark outside. Then he made out the ringing of his phone by his ear and instantaneously went from dead asleep to awake. If someone was calling him in the middle of the night, it had to be an emergency!

“Answer your phone before I toss it out the window.” Shouta rolled over and scooted to the edge of the bed, pulling Yuuri’s pillow out from under his boyfriend’s head so he could shove it over his ears.

Yuuri slammed his hand over the phone and opened it, pressing it against his ear with a groan without even bothering to look at who was calling. “もしもし.”

“Yuuri! I HAVE YOUR NUMBER! HOW… WHEN… IT WAS IN MY PHONE!”

Viktor was much too awake for Yuuri to deal with in any sensible manner. Yuuri wasn’t even thinking straight, so he said the first thing to come to mind. In Japanese. “It’s taken you four and a half months to realise that you had my number?”

“Did I wake you up? Why are you speaking Japanese?!”

Yuuri forced his brain to switch into Russian. It was easier than English, especially since Alexei only spoke Russian with him in the morning, claiming Japanese was hard when he wasn’t properly awake yet. “You’ve had this number for four and a half months, and the first time you decide you’ll call is at four thirty in the morning. Viktor, really?!”

“Is it really four thirty in the morning?” There was a pause. “Oh! It is! I didn’t realise it was so late. Yuuuuuuuuuri, why didn’t you tell me that you put your number in?”

“I thought that you might have—”

“Seriously? Yuuri, are you really going to have a conversation in RUSSIAN in the middle of the night? Can I still throw your phone out the window? Or push you onto the floor? I think the futon is still down there.”

Yuuri sucked in a breath. “Shouta—”

There was a gasp in his ear over the phone. “You have someone over. Sorry. I didn’t realise. I’ll go.” Viktor abruptly hung up.

“Viktor?” Yuuri stared at his phone in his hand for a minute before groaning and dropping it back down on the bedside table, then burrowing his way back under the covers. It was too early to deal with any of this. And though he tried, Yuuri failed to retrieve his pillow from Shouta.

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Sorry. I didn’t think things through apparently. I was just excited.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  It’s all right. Just… try to be more mindful of the time, OK?
Yuuri frowned at his phone again, not quite sure why it made that much of a difference, but not wanting to get into it with Viktor of all people. He shook his head and dropped the phone back into his pocket. He’d deal with it later.

“Are you ready, Yuuri?” Shouta put his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder.

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

***

Viktor was bouncing on the balls of his feet. As a non-competitor, he really had no business being at the Worlds rink during public practices, but he wagered that the organizers really couldn’t bring themselves to tell an Olympic gold medalist that he wasn’t allowed rinkside. Besides, he’d technically come here with Yakov and Georgi, but he didn’t want to talk to either Yakov or Georgi at the moment. No, this was an emergency, and there was only one person he needed right now.

“Chris! I got it all wrong! They were in Hasetsu! So of course they’d be sharing a room.”

Chris had only gotten one blade guard on before Viktor had rushed in to tell him the news. With a shake of his head, he adjusted the other guard and started heading for the changing rooms, Viktor trailing just one step behind. Behind them, Georgi was still practicing, with Yakov yelling things at him from the side. The usual, really.

“So, you asked him if he and the boyfriend were sleeping together, and he said ‘no’.”

Viktor shook his head. “Not in so many words.” He paused, taking his phone out and looking at the exchange again. “It was implied.”

Chris leaned over so he could glanced at the screen, too. “Yeah. I definitely see a ‘no’.” He looked up, expression darkening. “Oh wait, no, I don’t. I see someone who doesn’t want to talk about what he gets up to with his boyfriend... and an idiot who can’t even use the backspace key to keep from coming off like an idiot when he’s typing.”

Viktor frowned. “If you aren’t going to be supportive, I’m not letting you have my phone anymore.”

Chris shrugged as he began unlacing his skates. “If I hadn’t been playing around with your phone, you’d still be oblivious to the existence of Yuuri’s number on it.”

Viktor suppressed a pout. It wasn’t his fault that he had so many contacts. Every single skater wanted to be in his contact list, it seemed. But Chris had a point. Viktor sighed. “I’m being ridiculous.”

Chris nodded. “Look. They’re teenagers, I’m sure they’ve done something –”

“No.”
The Swiss skater sighed and slipped into his red and white jacket. “We’re in Italy. Let’s go find some good espresso. Maybe some gelato. For you, not me. I have to skate. And you still haven’t told me about Anna.” He wrapped his arm around Viktor’s shoulders.

“You’d rather hear about the Olympic party than claim your kiss?”

“Why not both?”

***

The gelateria that they found was a bit out of the way, but according to Chris, the reviews that he’d found were good, and it was unlikely that his coach would find them if they went to a place that was more off the beaten track. It was strange for Viktor to find himself relying on Chris for translation. Granted, French and Italian were both Romance languages and he most likely could have managed on his own, but being half Swiss-Italian, Chris was fluent in both.

Chris shoved two scoops in a little cone at Viktor and then led the way to a cafe across the way. “Did you want one?”

Viktor shook his head and looked down at his gelato. “What do I have anyway?”

“Fior di latte e cannella.” Chris paused in thought. “Sweet cream and cinnamon. They’re good flavors. Don’t complain.”

Viktor snorted, but enjoyed his gelato while Chris settled in and ordered his espresso. In less than a minute, a cup was set down in front of him.

“That was quick.”

“This is Italy. Coffee isn’t something you linger over. Not when it’s expected that you’d do this more than once a day.” Chris winked and took a long sip from his small cup. “So, tell me, are the Olympics as wild as everyone says?”

Viktor nodded. “When I was here in Turin in oh-six, Yakov tried to keep me away from the parties since I was so young. He wasn’t worried about me getting drunk so much as --”

“The rampant sex? Supposedly.”

Viktor nodded. “I don’t even think he was pleased with what happened in Vancouver.”

Chris laughed and paid for his coffee and they left, Viktor still working on his gelato. “But it was fun, right? So many beautiful people, and everyone must have been in pretty high spirits.” He paused and swiped a bite, an actual bite, of gelato from Viktor’s cone, then wiped his bottom lip with his thumb. “So, when the three of us -- you, me, and Yuuri -- all make it to Sochi, we’ll have to light the town up. How old will Yuuri be by then? Twenty-one?” Viktor groaned and looked away. “Porca miseria! Look. He’s seventeen. He’s a teenager. Do you know who else was a teenager and decided to sleep with you? I was barely eighteen--”

“That was different--”

Chris grabbed Viktor’s arm. “Why? Because I was the one with the crush? Because it was one-sided? You think I didn’t know that going in?”

Viktor looked away, Chris was making him feel guilty. “I’m sorry.”
“I’m not looking for an apology. I don’t want an apology. It was fun. I enjoyed myself, and well, we came out of that just fine. We’re friends now. What I’m saying is that whatever is going on with Yuuri, it’s probably not forever. Just let it run its course.” Chris smiled. It was a bit sad, and Viktor had the sinking suspicion it was for him, not because of him.

“I know. You’re right, but still—”

“Viktor!”

Viktor turned and waved at the petite Japanese skater hurrying toward him. “Toshi-san! You got my message?”

“I have something for you. I even remembered to pick up a second copy for your rinkmate. You said that she is a fan of Yuuri-chan’s too, right?”

He nodded. “Milochka. She gets upset if I don’t bring her her own copies.”

“You have a Yuuri merchandise supplier?!” Chris leaned against a building and started laughing.

“Shut up.” He turned back to Jun. “Ignore him.”

“It’s all right. Yuuri-chan is pretty popular in Japan anyway, and we all know that you’re friends.” Jun flipped up the flap of the messenger bag that she was carrying and pulled out two copies of *ON ICE*, flipping one open. “So there’s a poster. It’s the entire Olympic figure skating team, including the alternates. The other side is the speed skaters, but I don’t think you have any interest in that. Yuuri-chan and Keiko-chan look so very determined and serious.” Jun giggled.

“Oh?”

She nodded. “It’s actually pretty funny. They were both in the middle of their exams during the interview and photoshoot, so they weren’t really thinking about Vancouver at all. Fukuzawa isn’t exactly an easy school. But it made for a great picture.” She showed Viktor some pages in the middle. “So this is the interview. It was sort of a roundtable, so each athlete ended up with a little profile.”

Viktor looked over the page, caught sight of Yuuri’s headshot, and smiled.

“There were some fun questions. Like here.” Jun pointed at one of the lines. “They asked what got us into skating. Apparently Yuuri had a couple of friends who skated.”

Viktor nodded. “They’re nice. I’ve met them.”

“And here is Keiko-chan teasing Yuuri-chan about not using his Twitter all that much.”

“Well, he does have his private one.”

Jun nodded. “Off the record, she was teasing him about not using his private Twitter, either. Apparently, all the content about him come from the accounts of his friends. *On* the record, it was about the lack of pictures of himself. She said he should post more selfies.” Viktor caught her looking at him from the corner of her eye. “Something you fixed while we were in Vancouver, though.”

Viktor laughed. He really had bit off more than he could chew, asking for that swimsuit picture.

“If you want anything else translated, just find me.” She smiled. “Bye, Viktor. Giacometti-san.”
Chris waved. Once Jun was out of sight, he turned toward Viktor, finally, barely managing to quell his laughter. “You’re going to check all of his friends’ Twitter accounts, aren’t you?”

Viktor shrugged. “Maybe.”

***

It turned out that only half of Yuuri’s friends had protected Twitters, but that all of the ones that weren’t posted the occasional picture or video. And while no one was tagged in them, if you knew the person, it was rather easy to identify them.

In other words, Viktor had found a treasure trove.

Unfortunately, the true treasure turned out to be the Twitter of Yuuri’s boyfriend, the swimmer. Viktor was supposed to be watching the Original Dance with Yakov, but instead he was on his iPhone getting glared at. But really, it wasn’t his fault.

He’d found video. It wasn’t much. The clips were only about 15 seconds or so, but they were plentiful. The YouTube account wasn’t actually a name, just a bunch of numbers, and all the video uploads were titled with the numerical date that phones tended to automatically give multimedia content. And there wasn’t a single word in any language in the description. In other words, unless you were linked, there was no real way to find these videos.

And Viktor had a favorite. At first, it was the one of Yuuri laughing with his friends. It was cute, and Yuuri looked rather carefree.

Then it was one where Yuuri looked all serious while studying in a school library.

But eventually, through the swimmer’s Twitter, Viktor found it. 201007020113.mp4 It was fifteen seconds of Yuuri performing a Bielmann spiral out on clean ice, dressed in his usual workout wear, the only sound that of his skates cutting into the ice. It was probably incredibly early in the morning. And the look on Yuuri’s face was just peaceful. Gorgeous. Everything. The tweet that Viktor had followed to this video was just the link and a single kanji: 雅. Viktor had no idea what it meant.

He’d also never tried to select text on his phone or in Tweetie before, and couldn’t figure out what to do. This posed a problem. Trying to find a Japanese skating acquaintance that was competing and flat-out asking them was off the table; if he did, they’d know that he was Twitter-stalking Yuuri, and then Yuuri would know and would probably never speak to him again.

It was annoying.

How did someone even use a Japanese dictionary, anyway?

“Put your phone away.”

“But Yakov, I am trying to solve a mystery!”

“I don’t care. Put your phone away. You could have stayed in St. Petersburg if all you wanted to do was solve phone mysteries.”

Well, no, he couldn’t have. He didn’t even know that there were mysteries to be solved until he’d come down here for Worlds. Viktor sighed. “Just a quick text to Lyosha, and then I promise I’ll put it down.”
Viktor

How do you use a Japanese dictionary?

Lyosha

Really? You’re trying to look up kanji aren’t you?
By the radical. It’s a pain if you don’t know what you’re doing.
Draw it out. Take a picture and send it to me.
If I don’t recognize it, Riku will.
Or you know, I’ll use the dictionary.
I don’t have time to walk you through it when Men start soon.

Viktor took a screenshot, enlarged the part with the kanji bigger, then started digging through pockets to see if he had a pen or paper -- which of course he didn’t. He was about to ask Yakov, but the preemptive glare quickly dissuaded him.

It was only then that Viktor realised that he didn’t need to write it out!

Viktor

[enlarged image of image of kanji]

Lyosha

Well, it’s blurry.
This is why I told you to write it out.
But I’m pretty sure that’s Miyabi.
It’s… a concept.
Go use Wikipedia.
I don’t have time for this nonsense.

Viktor smiled, dropping his phone into his pocket. He’d have time to look it up later. Specifically, while Yakov was preoccupied with yelling at Georgi, which should start any minute.

Viktor followed Yakov down in the back where Georgi, who was skating in one of the middle groups, was currently stretching. Chris had drawn a number that actually had him skating in the last group, so he was just sitting in a rest area going through his phone.

“Yuuri, by the way, has wished me lots of luck. He’s watching with Yuuko while Nishigori and her in-laws take care of the triplets for a few hours.”

Viktor frowned. “I didn’t know that the two of you were really in contact.”

Chris raised an eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t we be? You’re the one who gave me his Twitter information and told me that was his preferred method of international texting.” Chris moved his finger over his phone. “Come here. Let’s post a picture!”
Viktor slid down next to Chris and leaned his head against the other skater’s, staring at the back of the camera as the flash went off. Chris turned the phone around and looked, then nodded to himself. “Perfect. Who needs a mirror when we have me!”

Viktor laughed. “Should we do another with the pouty duck face?”

“Oh, perfect!”

So they did.

vnikiforov spending time with @christophegc before he skates! http://twitpic.com/kah8w2 #3musketeers #2outof3ain’tbad #WCFSTurin #yuuri’sturn

christophegc spending time with @vnikiforov before I have to start getting ready. http://twitpic.com/hoa986 #3musketeers #2outof3ain’tbad #yuuri’sturn

yuurikatsuki @vnikiforov @christophegc are we really doing this again?

vnikiforov @yuurikatsuki YES! #yuuri’sturn Make it a duck face.

yuurikatsuki @christophegc Good Luck, Chris! We’re looking forward to your skate! http://twitpic.com/h76bg2 #3musketeers #letmewatch

yuurikatsuki (Good Luck to all the skaters participating in the WC in Turin.) #WCTurin

“He didn’t do the duck face.” Viktor pouted.

Chris snorted. “I knew that he wouldn’t. If it has to go on his official Twitter, he’s much too serious about it.” He looked over at Viktor. “Did you find any good pictures?”

Swallowing, Viktor nodded. He wasn’t actually sure about sharing this with Chris. Truth be told, he didn’t want to, but… He held out his phone. “The swimmer takes little video clips sometimes, too.”

Chris let out a low whistle as the footage played. “I was never that flexible. I mean, I’m flexible ,” he winked, “but I’ve never been able to pull off a Bielmann like that. He looks comfortable.”

Viktor sighed, and it probably sounded more wistful than he had intended it to. “He loves skating more than anything. The swimmer captioned it with ‘Miyabi‘.” At Chris’s blank look, Viktor continued, “I asked Lyosha to translate the kanji, but all he said it that it’s a concept and I should look it up. He’s testy when I interrupt his pre-skating viewing rituals.”

Chris snorted and took out his own phone. “‘Usually translated as "elegance," "refinement," or
"courtliness", and sometimes to a "sweet loved one"." He paused. “I’m guessing that since it was the swimmer -- doesn’t he have a name?” Viktor shrugged in response. He did, and Viktor didn’t care to use it. It was petty, but Viktor didn’t care. “All right. Since it was the swimmer, I’m guessing he meant it as the last one? Wikipedia has a bunch of how it’s part of Japanese aesthetic too, but, it doesn’t seem as likely, really. I mean, who would think like that?”

Viktor nodded. Chris was probably right. And as annoying as it was to know the definition, Viktor still liked the video. He needed to see if there was a way to save YouTube videos to his phone before he drove up the hit count too much.

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HAS JAPAN’S MEN’S SINGLES PEAKED?

Taku, Oda and Katsuki implode

By Shay Browne

International Figure Skating Monthly

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Another figure skating season has come to a close, and as much as we all would have liked to see Viktor Nikiforov leave Turin with a gold medal to match the one he took in Vancouver, we instead got to see a surprise with a new Swiss skater taking the gold. Christophe Giacometti, edged out the Chinese representative Cao Bin by just a few points with the former World Champion, Pierre Fournier from France, taking bronze.

Nikiforov may have found a true rival in the up-and-coming skater -- one that he is apparently friends with off the ice, if their constant Twitter exchanges are anything to go by. Maybe even more, if pictures from Worlds in LA last year mean anything -- the two were caught sharing a kiss in the lobby of the skaters’ hotel after the World Championship Banquet.

Usually, a Japanese skater would be on the podium as well, but since Tabito Uemura retired, they’ve been having some trouble. Hopes had been pinned on Nobunari Oda and Ryoichi Taku to win at the Olympics in Vancouver back in February, but the two skaters only went on to disappoint. Taku, still recovering from an injury that had sidelined him for the first half of the season, was unable to finish his short program, thus disqualifying him from the free skate. It as no doubt a disappointment to end his career on such a note, as the skater has since announced his retirement.

Meanwhile, Oda actually had a very strong short program, putting him within reach of the podium and promising a repeat of his of his performance at the Grand Prix Final in December, where he ultimately came in above Nikiforov to win silver. But a lace snapped midway through his Free and what had started out as a strong skate imploded.

Oda’s downward spiral continued at the World Championships in Turin at the end of March. He did not even manage to make it to the Free Skate portion after he singled every one of his jump attempts in the short program, leaving the Japanese Nationals fourth place finisher as their only hope for a medal at Worlds. Instead, Honzo Dewa finished fifteenth.

But Japan should have seen this coming, as their skaters have been imploding since the start of the season. At the Nebelhorn Trophy in Germany back in September, the youngest of Japan’s top three skaters, Yuuri Katsuki, suffered a full-blown panic attack ringside prior to his short program, and ultimately failed to perform to the levels seen in his Juniors finish. Given the evidence, it’s doubtful Katsuki has what it takes to be competing in the Senior division, mentally or physically. His programs at the Four Continents Championships were also lackluster, and the only reason he managed to finish as high as he did -- placing fourth-- was due to the fact that so many Olympic-
bound athletes -- such as national teammates Oda and Taku -- decided to not attend in favor of preparing for the bigger competition.

As the Olympic alternate, many thought that Katsuki should have been sent to the Olympics instead of Taku when worries about Taku’s injury resurfacing first peaked. This writer, however, feels that the Japanese Skating Federation made the right call in going with a tested talent instead of a volatile youth that perennially underperforms when given chances at higher level competitions.

While many will say that the only gold medals that the Japanese Men’s Singles brought in were won by Katsuki, they were all at the Junior level. While that is all well and good, the true prestige for a figure skater representing their country is at the Senior level, and ultimately at the Olympics. It’s no wonder that Katsuki has chosen to stay in the Junior Division longer than some of his peers, such as Switzerland’s Christophe Giacometti, who made his Senior debut at fifteen as soon as he was age-eligible. After all, it’s much easier to compete against skaters who are younger and less experienced.

***

Chris

Remind me to refuse any and all interviews by this Shay Browne. She already called once.

Viktor

I didn’t even have to tell Yakov. He was getting an earful on the phone from Alexei

Chris

So he’s seen it?

Viktor

Yuuri? Of course he has. And he doesn’t want to talk about it. I brought it up and he stopped responding to my messages for over an hour. And he didn’t even try to make up a lie that he was busy.

***

“So because the decision makers at the JSF are idiots and Japan’s skating is getting roasted -- along with my skater, who is doing phenomenally and in no way deserves the shit he’s getting at seventeen -- your bosses want me to invite that shitheel Taku to help with the Novice training camp I’ve been putting together for months?!”

Riku took a deep breath and laid her hand over Alexei’s, which had become a fist on the table. “あなた, lower your voice. Do you want Yuuri to hear you? There isn’t a language spoken in this house that he doesn’t understand, and you know that.”

“He deserves to know the bullshit that the JSF is trying to pull to save face.”

“I agree. But not in such terms, perhaps?”

Alexei forcibly relaxed his hand, pressing hard against the top of the table. He shook his head. “No.”
Alexei couldn’t stop the small smile that came unbidden to his lips, though he tried. “That’s not fair, Riku. You know I’m weak for when you call me that.”

“I do. One day; just let him impose one day. Both you and Yuuri-kun will be the bigger men this way. Yuuri-kun will get added exposure, and the up-and-coming Novices that you’ve selected will all get a boost as well.”

“I hate when you make sense.”

“Such hate for your wife? You must be in a constant state of it.”

Reaching out with one hand, Alexei brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. “I could never hate you. You might annoy me, but I could never hate you.” He sighed. “Do I have to decide now?”

“No. I told them that we have to go to Hasetsu on business for a few days, but that you’ll make your decision upon our return.”

“Fine.”

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Yuuri finished placing the cups of tea in front of everyone, then knelt down to the side of the table next to his parents. These meetings between Alexei, Riku and his parents had become their own sort of ceremony, though the subjects of discussion were rather mundane now: finances, typically, or making sure that things were in order so that Alexei wouldn’t have to come to his parents for things like handling contract negotiations and signatures, or dealing with the school administration at Fukuzawa.

Really, Yuuri wasn’t even needed for these meetings, but it was his life, and his parents insisted that he take part. So did Alexei and Riku.

“Yuuri?”

Yuuri turned to his mother. “Yes, Oka-san?”

“We need to discuss college and what that will mean. You know that we want you to attend university.”

He nodded. “I know, and I think that I want to as well.” He paused, wetting his lips with his tongue. “I haven’t not been thinking about it.”

All four adults smiled at him, but it was Alexei that spoke next. “That’s great, Yuu-kun. What do you want to study?”

He took a deep breath. “Sports psychology.”

Riku smiled and his parents beamed. “Oh, Yuuri, that sounds wonderful!”

He didn’t know if his parents would even understand why, but he could see it in the way that Riku was looking at him that she had an idea about his motivations. “I… I don’t know if I’d be a good coach one day like Alexei. I don’t even know if I’ll even make it in Seniors, so I should have something to fall back on when skating is over for me.”
Alexei snorted; both parents looked at him, visibly shocked. With a groan, Alexei bowed his apologies. “No, it’s not like that. Yuu-kun would be amazing at sports psychology, I honestly believe that. But I also think he is selling himself short on how far he’ll go once he moves up to Seniors.” Alexei paused. “He is a brilliant skater and has the potential to be one of, if not the best skater in the world.” He turned to look at Yuuri. “And yes, I think that you could probably beat Viktor one day, if you put your mind to it.” Riku patted Alexei’s knee. “And I’d like to keep coaching Yuuri even after he leaves high school.”

That was news to Yuuri. He stared at his coach. “Lyosha?!?”

Alexei held up a hand and shook his head. “I would. I’d deal with all the nonsense that the JSF and JOC and ISU could throw at me for this kid, but…”

“But?” The question was asked by Yuuri’s father. His mother had put a calming hand on Yuuri’s elbow; he was biting his lip.

“But Yuu-kun’s school choice needs to take priority. There are a lot of schools around Osaka, I know, but not all of them will enter into arrangements with athletes like Kansai University. And as far as I’m aware, Kansai isn’t known for its psychology program.”

Riku took over. “Yuuri-kun is smart and has put a lot of work into the last two years at Fukuzawa. He has the chance to go to a good university. Maybe not one of the Top 6, but they don’t really want to work with athletes the way that private universities like Kansai will. I think, and Alexei agrees with me, that Yuuri-kun should focus on picking a school that he’s happy with. If you need someone to go look at schools with him -- since we know that you can’t really do such while running the onsen -- we’ll do that for you as well.”

Yuuri’s mother’s hand slipped off her son’s elbow and went to her mouth. It was his father that spoke. “It means a lot to us that you both care about our son’s well-being beyond his status as an athlete. I hope you understand that. As his parents, we miss him when he is studying and training, but Hiroko and I know that he is in good hands with you. So please, continue to look after our son.”

“Of course.” Alexei paused. “So are we all right to put off discussions of what happens after high school until Yuu-kun has gotten a bit further into the process of selecting a university? I don’t think he’ll have much trouble getting into his first choice, between recommendations from the faculty and his grades.”

“Of course, Turov-san. Please help guide our son in this as well.”

Yuuri had to turn away for a second to scrub at his eyes with his fist. He’d been a ball of anxiety about this entire process, and had tried to put off the meeting between Alexei, Riku and his parents as far into the future as possible. He’d been sure that Alexei would tell them that at the end of the school year, Yuuri would be on his own; he didn’t know what he would have done if that had actually happened. (Even if the rational part of his brain -- small as it was in this sort of situation -- insisted that it would never happen.)

Instead, Alexei and Riku were going to help him look at universities. They were right in that there was no way that his parents could take time off from running the onsen to help him with this.

Riku and Alexei both bowed. “We’ll spend some time this coming summer. Since we expect that he’ll get accepted without having to take the exams, getting this settled before the start of the next season would be best for Yuuri’s peace of mind.” Riku smiled at him.
“I’ll admit that I’m a little jealous of your skater parents.”

Yuuri looked at Yuuko. “My skater parents?”

She tilted her head to the side to where Riku -- who had quietly asked if she could hold one of the triplets -- was sitting with Loop in her arms. The only reason that Yuuri even knew that it was Loop was because of the color of the little hat that Nishigori had pushed down onto her head. It was pink. In the background, Alexei was talking to Nishigori’s parents about something or other that Yuuri was absolutely sure was ice-skating related.

“I knew who you were talking about, but I still don’t get it.”

Yuuko rolled her eyes at him. “Seriously? It’s like you have a second set of parents. I didn’t even realise it until my doctor sent me to Osaka to stay in the specialist hospital there for the last few weeks. It was almost like things were back to the way they were before. We hung out all the time whenever you could, though not at the rink, but still. And it was strange to hear you say ‘I have to text Riku to tell her when I’m leaving’ or ‘Alexei says that I have to finish my school work before I can head over. I’ll be done in an hour or two.’” She smiled. “You realize it used to be a phonecall to your mom, or that your dad needed help with cleaning the onsen.”

Yuuri laughed. “I guess you’re right. They’re even going to help me look into universities.”

Yuuko hummed. “Are you planning to stay in Osaka?”

Yuuri took a deep breath and looked out the window, down the steps toward Hasetsu Castle. “I’d like to, but at the same time, they’re right. I should pick a school with a good program for me, not just because it’s in Osaka and near them.”

“But what about your skater sibling?”

“Skater sibling?”

Yuuko put her hand on Yuuri’s elbow, then motioned at Riku, who was cooing at the little girl in her arms while Nishigori stood by beaming with fatherly pride. “Does your skater dad know that your skater mom maybe wants a skater baby?”

Yuuri couldn’t help it anymore. He started to laugh even harder.

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Yuuri looked through the last of the profiles of the younger skaters scheduled to come to Osaka over Golden Week. In total, six skaters in the Men’s Novice division had been selected. According to Alexei, he had gone through about a hundred submissions. Initially, it was only going to be a couple of the younger skaters from the surrounding region coming in for a long weekend, but word had spread and Alexi soon had gotten interest from throughout the country. Now there was a skater from Sendai and two from Tokyo, another from the Osaka area, one from Hakodate, and finally one from Kyushu.

Technique-wise, their skills varied, but Yuuri had found one thing every last one of them had in common: they’d all listed him as a major inspiration.

“Did you finish?”

Yuuri pressed his lips together in a tight line and looked at his coach. “Lyosha, did you use me as means to narrow down your list?”
His coach smiled, then laughed out loud. “Of course. How else was I going to shorten the list? I was expecting it to do more, though. I only got rid of maybe a third who didn’t list you in the top two. I was going to use the top three, but then I’d only have been able to eliminate ten. Are you really that surprised by your popularity among younger skaters?”

“Yes!”

Alexei ruffled his hair. “You shouldn’t be. You’ve been on national TV, dancing and skating. You’ve been the top Japanese Junior skater in Men’s since before I’ve met you. Of course the baby skaters admire you. You even have fans in Russia.”

“I do not!”

Alexei snorted. “I’ll tell Mila and Viktor that the next time I call—”

“No! No, no, no!” Neither of those two would ever let him hear the end of it. At least they had stopped asking him to send copies of ON ICE on the occasions he managed to merit a mention in the magazine. “I thought you meant other skaters. Not ones that I knew.”

Alexei smiled and set a glass of water down in front of Yuuri. “I did. I’m sure that you have fans in young aspirational skaters all over, not limited to Japan. You’re one of the top Junior skaters, and regardless of what idiot British journalists have to say, you’re going to be one of the top skaters in Seniors.” Alexei paused. “When did you become a fan of Viktor?”

Yuuri sighed. He could see the rest of this conversation already forming in front of him, and he didn’t like where it was going. “When I watched him win Junior Worlds and set the Junior World Record.”

“You weren’t even skating competitively then. Two years later, you were winning Junior Nationals. Why wouldn’t young skaters look up to you, especially after your most recent win?”

Yuuri sighed again and put his head down on the table. “Are you sure you want me to help you with this?”

“You’re going to leave me to fend for myself against a bunch of Novices? Yuu-kun, that’s so mean!”

“Fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Help them with their step sequences and spins. I’ll definitely have you skating for them, but I also want you to do what you did with that Thai skater you get along with. You were demonstrating things for him instead of practicing.”

Yuuri flushed. He had hoped that Alexei had forgotten about that. “I know I should have—”

“You won, and that’s fine. If you’d lost, I might have had things to say about it, but you didn’t. So, there are six of them and for the most part, it’ll just be me and you. I’ve brought in a dance instructor, though not Minako-sensei -- I couldn’t afford her hourly rate -- so they’ll have that for a bit on a couple of days, which will give you some free time as well.” Alexei paused. “You aren’t mad about having to skip out on that trip to Okinawa?”

Yuuri shrugged. “It wasn’t like they put much thought into it. It’s just a bunch of the idols. Shuji-kun was upset, but they shouldn’t be surprised. Almost every single athlete is training. I’m the only one in off-season.”
Alexei frowned. “I thought Nakagawa-kun was going with them.”

Shaking his head, Yuuri picked up the piece of paper that laid out the requirements of a Novice program. He hadn’t really ever skated in Novices before, and wasn’t sure exactly how their programs differed from Junior programs. “The swimmers are going to Okayama for training with another group. It’s been organized by their coaches. This is the year they have to decide if they really want to try for London or not.”

***

Yuuri was in the process of getting his skates on when the doors to the rink opened. It was early and everything was pretty empty, so he had been planning to take advantage of the ice before Alexei arrived -- and more importantly, before the Novice skaters started showing up.

Usually, in his off-season, things started to slow down, but that wasn’t the case this time at all. First, there was this Novice camp that Alexei had put a lot of time into. Then the JSF had to stick their noses into it. They weren’t unhappy with the selection of skaters, but they wanted to turn it into a thing; a publicity thing with cameras and pictures and Taku. Then there were the three schools he was going to visit, only one of which was in Osaka. And finally, an ice show with dates in Osaka and Tokyo and Sendai. Not to mention he was now in his last year of high school. Officially.

Everything was overwhelming, and all Yuuri wanted to do was skate.

So he looked over at who was coming into the rink. Surprisingly, it was Riku, two other people he didn’t recognize -- probably representatives from the JSF -- and Taku. Yuuri sighed and tried to get onto the ice without anyone noticing him.

It didn’t work. As soon as he had his blades on the ice, one of the JSF suits was calling out to him. “Katsuki-kun!”

With another sigh, Yuuri skated over to that side of the rink. Ignoring them wasn’t an option; not with Riku there. So he put on a public smile that Viktor would be proud of. “Good morning.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever met Enokida-san, Yuuri-kun.” Riku smiled at him, it was a little tight at the edges, but if he didn’t know her so well, he never would have noticed. “He’s the head of the JSF’s Public Relations division.”

And therefore was Riku’s direct superior. Yuuri bowed. “Hello. It is very nice to meet you.”

“Of course you know Taku-san.”

Again, Yuuri bowed. “Of course. I am truly sorry that your injury has forced you to retire.”

Taku narrowed his eyes just slightly, but bowed back, thanking Yuuri for his concern.

“And finally, this is Teshima-san. She leads the committee for Athlete Development.”

Yuuri bowed. It was a name he was familiar with as Alexei had been in contact with her for the last few months, making sure that his little camp was sanctioned. “Nice to meet you, Teshima-san.” He hadn’t expected someone so young, though. With the exception of Riku, he thought that the entirety of the JSF had been old and male. At least that summed up the types of people he was always meeting from the organization.

“Please go back to your skating, Katsuki-kun. We’re just here to meet with Turov-san and for the press.”
Yuuri thanked them and nodded, his smile now just as tight as Riku’s. How was he supposed to skate after all this? He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out his MP3 player, sticking his earbuds in as he skated around the edge of the rink. He knew what he would help. He needed to work off some of this energy, so he queued up the music for Viktor’s short program. He’d have to change the flip to a triple, but that wasn’t that big of a deal. If he even decided to do more than mark the jumps—no, he’d take it as he went. He skated to the center of the rink. For once he would have the whole of the ice to himself. When the first strains of Prokofiev started, Yuuri slid easily into the program.

He hadn’t had time to properly practice the short program as he had Viktor’s other routines, but he still knew most of it.

Eventually, the music slowed down and Yuuri went into the Ina Bauer, closing his eyes as he sailed across the ice.

When the song ended, Yuuri took out his earbuds. Now that the music was done, he could make out pieces of a conversation in Japanese from the edge of the rink.

“... Nikiforov’s short program from the Olympics.” That was definitely Taku’s voice.

“Yuuri-kun likes to warm-up with Viktor’s programs.” Riku’s voice was light.

“Just don’t let any media get pictures.”

“Nikiforov won’t care. They’re friends.”

“Yes, we know. The Three Musketeers. And that picture.”

And a second voice: “That wasn’t why the media shouldn’t get pictures.”

“In the grand scheme of things, Yuuri’s picture was quite demure and appropriate.” A pause. “And what would you have had him do? The hashtag was trending. Silence wasn’t really an option.”

“If anyone should be taken to task, it’s Nikiforov. The RSF lets that boy run wild.”

“When you have a skater that can pull scores like that, you let him do what he wants. That doesn’t mean that we should be letting a teenager follow in his example.”

Yuuri stuck the earbuds back in. He didn’t want to hear any of this. Instead, he decided that he would skate Nocturne . It was the most passive-aggressive and petty thing that he could think of to do, so of course he had to do it. It wasn’t like they were talking about him as if he wasn’t even there, after all.

At one point he caught Taku watching him as he skated backward, putting more distance between himself and the JSF delegation waiting by the boards. He paused for just a second before turning and heading into his quad toe-loop.

By the time he finished, Alexei had arrived and called him over to the edge of the rink, further from the Riku and the JSF officials. Yuuri shoved his hands into his pockets with the cable of his earbuds scrunched up in one fist.

“In a mood?”

Yuuri looked away. Obviously he was “in a mood”.

“It wasn’t personal, Katsuki-kun.”

Yuuri whipped around on his skates to stare at Taku, who had come over to join them. “What?”

“IT wasn’t personal. At first, when they almost sent you instead of me, I was angry and I snapped about you being young and inexperienced, and I shouldn’t have. I apologize for that.” Taku bowed slightly. “But everything in Vancouver -- it wasn’t personal.”

Yuuri couldn’t stop his eyebrows rising into his hairline. He took a deep breath. “If skating was so important to you, why would you ever risk not being able to skate again for one chance at the Olympics?”

“Didn’t you just answer that question? It was the Olympics.”

Yuuri crossed his arms. “You’re an idiot.”

“Yuu-kun! Apologize!”

Yuuri glanced over at Alexei. That was not a happy look on his coach’s face. He looked back at Taku. “So where did the rumor about my placing third being a fluke come from?” Taku flushed and Yuuri nodded. “Well, then it seems we’ve both said things that we shouldn’t have.”

“Yuu-kun.”

Yuuri skated closer to the edge of the rink. “Fine. You have my apologies.” He bowed.

Taku set his hands on the barrier. “I didn’t realise that you were so competitive. You seemed different at the JSF offices. You gave off the impression that you didn’t even want to go to the Olympics.”

Yuuri took a deep breath. He hated having to talk like this. And he hated having to tell the truth, but... he needed to. “You said it yourself. It was the Olympics. Of course, part of me wanted to go, but not at the expense of another skater’s position. You won. If I hadn’t changed my jump element, it wouldn’t have changed the standings at all. But the point difference would have been wider, and the question wouldn’t have been raised at all.” He paused and looked at Alexei, who seemed to be holding his tongue. “You lied to the JSF, had your coach and your PT -- who should be ashamed of themselves -- lie to the JSF and the JOC about your condition. You didn’t practice in the lead up because you sprained your ankle and could barely walk on it. I was here practicing and working on my program. A program that you just saw me skate. I know I would have made it into the Free Skate.”

“You would have. You’re right, my decision was selfish.” Taku paused. “And I wouldn’t have changed it if I could do it again.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes and then glanced at Alexei, whose fingers were gripping the edge of the barrier tightly. “One day. We’ll be friendly for one day.”

Taku nodded.

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Yuuri slid down the wall of the shower and pressed his face against his bent knees. He couldn’t do this. His chest was tight and it barely felt like he could breathe. He’d had to get off the ice after his confrontation with Taku, and by the time he got his skates off, the edges of his vision were blurring and he could feel the blackness encroaching. He had to get out of there.
He shook off Alexei, assuring him that he’d be back, and went as quickly as he could to the locker room. He needed to get it together before the Novice skaters began to show up. He dragged in one deep breath after another. He had to do this.

He stared at the toes of his socks, sides rubbed black from his skates, just like almost every pair of socks that he owned. He bent down and tore them off -- he had more in his locker, after all -- and looked at his feet, categorizing and listing into memory every new bruise and bit of raw skin. He sighed. It almost seemed counter to how it should feel. Looking at his feet should make him more anxious, not center him, but it did. Physical pain made more sense than the abstract sort that made his heart race and his thoughts spiral.

No.

He looked back at his feet and wiggled his toes, dragged his hand over his foot and picked a stray bit of lint from his socks from between his toes. He focused as much as he could on his breathing. In and out. His feet were a disaster. He laughed, a bit too high-pitched, but sort of calm nonetheless. Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and took a picture, sending it to Viktor.

He pressed his face against his knees and closed his eyes. Five more minutes. He needed to be back within five minutes.

Viktor
Mine are worse, I think. Are you skating?
[Image attached]

Yuuri chuckled and started texting through Twitter.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Alexei’s Novice camp starts today.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Remind me to teach you all the tricks to avoid getting roped into helping. I’ve managed to not help Yakov for years.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t mind. I think it might be fun.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I doubt it.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Are you going to tell me why you sent a picture of your feet?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I need to get back.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuri.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I talked to Taku.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov We have to be nice for cameras and stuff. I really do need to get back.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Well, I’m here. I’m around. Just… send me another picture of your feet. Or your hands. Your elbow. Something
Yuuri laughed. He could do this. He felt… better. Sort of. Not like glass, anyway. Or maybe still glass, but more like that laboratory-grade stuff they used in chemistry; just a little harder to break than normal glass. He stuck his phone back into his pocket and went to his locker to toss his old socks in and grab a pair of fresh ones.

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Three of the six Novices had arrived by the time Yuuri had pulled himself together and got down to the lobby. They had all but swarmed Alexei and Taku, chattering animatedly while their parents or coaches talked with Riku and Teshima-san. The other JSF official, the PR representative, had vanished to somewhere and Yuuri really didn’t care where, Riku’s superior or not.

He wondered how long he could get away with not approaching the group. Right now, no one had noticed him, and he was free to observe. So he hung back, staying out of the way. It wouldn’t hurt for just a few minutes. He’d be spending his week with most of these people, after all.

“YUURI-KUN!” A blondish boy who had just come through the doors with what Yuuri assumed were his parents and sibling rushed over to him, suitcase forgotten. “IT REALLY IS YOU! OH. DO YOU REMEMBER ME?! I’M MINAMI KENJIROU! WE MET. HERE!”

Yuuri motioned for the boy to lower his voice just a little. He couldn’t remember when they’d met and felt bad, but he didn’t even get a chance to apologize before Minami-kun started chattering again, though at a much more appropriate level.

“Right here! I was your first ice show ever! Viktor Nikiforov took our picture. I didn’t realise why he was so special at the time since I didn’t really know much about skating then, but I do now, and my coach even says that I could be pretty good. But all I wanted was to meet you because I saw you skate on the TV and it was SUPER AWESOME, and now I skate and I got picked out of thousands of skaters to be here at this training camp with you!” The boy was beaming.

Yuuri shifted a little uncomfortably. He actually did remember that. Viktor had taken their picture, and then teased Yuuri for what seemed like hours after they left about his little fan. And the name -- yes, he even recognized the name. Minami Kenjirou had been writing him letters for almost a year.

Minami-kun was a little prone to over-exaggeration, though, because it definitely wasn’t thousands of applicants. It’d been only about 100. And even that fact made Yuuri more uncomfortable with the whole situation. It wasn’t like he was a celebrity. He sighed, but smiled. “I actually do remember that now that you’ve told me. That was my first picture with a fan.” He had to physically restrain himself from cringing at the word.

“REALLY?! THAT IS SO AWESOME!”

Minami’s exuberance had finally grabbed the attention of the boys in conversation with Alexei and Taku, and Yuuri soon found himself surrounded.

“Is the rumor that you would have skated Nocturne at the Olympics true?”

“Are you really friends with the Viktor, the Olympic gold medalist?”

“Are you going to be skating in Seniors next year?”

“No, who cares about that?! As long as he’s skating! Did you really do a MV with EXCITE?! Can we see you skate it?”
“Can you teach us how to do a triple axel?!?”

“No! I want to learn how to do his step sequence from Sakura!”

“No! His spin from Totoro, that was my favorite program!”

“Really?! Totoro? Are you a new fan or something?”

Yuuri looked over the heads of the four boys -- no, five, another had shown up in all the commotion -- at Alexei and mouthed “Спасибо, помогите!” Alexei just snorted and shook his head, taking out his phone and pointing it toward Yuuri and his cadre of fanboy skaters.

He was going to kill his coach. If Shuji or Shouta or, heaven forbid, Viktor got hold of that video, Yuuri would die. Die.

“Yuuri-kun! Take a picture with us! Please!”

“Yes! I need to put it on my Mixi!”

“Great idea! Everyone we should exchange Mixis.”

“Yuuri-kun! Will you be our friends on Mixi?”

“You know that he barely uses his Mixi!”

He couldn’t bring it to their attention that technically he didn’t even run his own Mixi account. That had been the brainchild of Minako, Mari and Yuuko, and they took turns posting tidbits of information to it. How he’d gotten celebrity status, he had no idea. Though he supposed the account was attached to his cell phone number, and it wouldn’t have been that hard to verify.

“Here, I’ll take it.” An older version of Minami came forward with a small point and shoot. He was probably about the same age as Yuuri, give or take a year.

“We should, um, maybe wait for the last skater?” Yuuri smiled.

While the group groaned, they relented, and only had to wait for a minute or two; the last skater rushed over to the group as soon as he came through the doorway.

“Super cool!”

“We’re getting our picture taken!”

“Yuuri-kun is going to add us to his Mixi!”

After what felt like a million pictures on six, no, seven devices later, Yuuri managed to extract himself. What had Alexei gotten him into? There was no way that he could handle this level of attention for a solid week.

Alexei clapped his hands and got everyone’s attention, including Yuuri’s. He had to stifle a groan when he realized there was a news crew set up behind his coach -- and that the camera had been focused on the little picture-taking extravaganza. If this ended up on the news, again, Yuuri would probably die, because there was no way to stop it from making its way into his classmates’ hands.

“OK, so there’s a meeting room on the third floor where we’re going to talk about this week. Taka-san has gracefully offered to look at your footwork and jumps to give you some pointers today. And this afternoon we were planning to have Yuu-kun skate for you. Mostly, I want to figure out how I
can help you become better skaters so that one day, when you’re all skating with Yuu-kun here, you can really offer him a challenge!”

That just led to more excited chatter and Yuuri groaned.

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Somehow, through some cruel twist of fate, Yuuri ended up sitting next to Taku at dinner. He’d been aiming for a seat next to his coach -- near the end, where there were limited seats -- but he’d been pointed down the table.

“We’re the entertainment, didn’t you know that?” Taku sounded amused, and Yuuri sort of wanted to punch him.

“Yes. I know. They’re here to learn skating from us.”

Taku tilted his head to the side. “Not from us. From you, and your coach. But mostly I think they want to learn from you. Did you realise that you had fans like this?”

Yuuri shook his head. “I’ve been informed, but I don’t ever really meet any. Occasionally skaters will talk to me at events, but mostly I just go and skate--”

“And win. I may have looked up some of your JGP performances this afternoon. I’d never actually seen you skate in a Junior event before.”

One of the younger skaters, Joji from Tokyo, must have heard the comment, because he’d turned from filling his plate toward Taku and Yuuri. “Really, Taku-san? Yuuri-kun is one of the best skaters in Japan and you’d never seen him skate before?”

“I did see him at Nationals and I caught the Four Continents before I left for Vancouver.”

Kozue-kun from Sendai spoke up. “That’s no good. You should look at his competitions from the previous year. I like the Hisaishi programs, but they have nothing on when he skated Nocturne and Rhapsody in Blue. Nocturne got him the Junior World Record for the short program!”

“Waltz No 2 and Nuages are my favorites.” Minami twirled his chopsticks in his hand and got a look from one of his parents, who were sitting further up the table. The little skater ignored them. “Though I like Rhapsody in Blue a lot, too. I also want to skate to Gershwin one day.”

“Ah, you’re all forgetting Send in the Clowns.” Alexei spoke up from the end of the table. “Yuu-kun, do you remember it?”

Yuuri nodded. He still skated it sometimes, just like he did with Nuages. They were his first programs; he’d never forget them. “Of course.”

“You should skate it for them. The adjusted one. The one that Yakov told me about. I’d like to record it and send it to him. It’s his favourite program of yours.”

Yuuri swallowed and looked away from his coach, only to end up staring down the hopeful-looking gazes of six small skaters. Apparently his skating this afternoon hadn’t been enough. “All right, I can do that. Maybe the day after tomorrow? Will that fit your schedule?”

Alexei nodded. “It will. Are you all excited?”

A chorus of what sounded like affirmatives broke out. Yuuri wanted to sink into the floor and
disappear.

***

“Alexei has a death wish.”

Shouta chuckled across the phone. “I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“I’m putting on little performances for a group of six fanboy skaters, and they ooh and ahh and --”

“Say those last couple of words again?”

“Ooh and ahh.”

“The inflection is all wrong. You should lower your tone, maybe elongate the vowels.”

“Oooh-- SHOUTA!”

His boyfriend laughed. “It was worth a shot. Though I am sharing a room with three other swimmers, and therefore have absolutely no privacy. So I holed up in the bathroom, hoping I could get my boyfriend to tell me a little something that could get me through the next three days. Instead, all I get is complaining about his coach. You have no idea how disappointed I am, Yuuri.”

“Shut up.”

“Usually I don’t mind it when you say that, because I then I get rewarded for closing my mouth, but again, you aren’t here. Want to take the train to Okayama?”

Yuuri sighed. “I can’t.”

“I know.”

Yuuri rolled over onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. “How are your times?”

“They’re good. Really good, actually. I think I’m going to have a great season.”

“I’ll try to go to some of your meets.” It wasn’t like watching Shouta swim was a hardship -- though Yuuri could admit to himself his favorite part was probably watching Shouta pull himself out of the pool.

“I’d like that. I wish you had more competitions in Japan. For some reason, my mother doesn’t think that missing school to watch you skate in the Netherlands would be a good way to spend my time.”

Yuuri laughed. “You saw me skate at the GPF in December.”

“Mmm. Best excuse of a school trip ever.” Shouta paused. “Yuuri--” And was immediately cut off by someone banging on the door. After a moment’s pause, Yuuri could hear a conversation in the background, but it was too indistinct to make out. “I have to go. Coaches are going to do bed check, and apparently I’m not allowed to just take over the bathroom for extended periods of time.”

“That’s a shame. I thought you needed me to tell you something to get you through the next three days.”

“Don’t say things that you don’t mean, Yuuri.”
“Who said I didn’t mean it?”

Yuuri hung up on his boyfriend as he spluttered.

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“Yuuri-kun, will you listen to the piece I want to use as my short program?”

Yuuri smiled, and with a nod came over to where Minami was sitting. Most of the Novices were already waiting on the smaller bleachers by the rink; in a few minutes, they’d start running through some simple step sequences, focusing on going from one type of step or turn into the next. But Yuuri could spare a minute to listen to Minami’s song before he went to the ice to warm up.

He took one of the earbuds out of Minami’s hands and stuck in his ear. There was no mistaking the guitar. Yuuri smiled. “Django Reinhardt. Good choice. I like his music.” Yuuri paused. “‘Bouncing Around’, right?”

Minami practically bounced around himself. “Yes!”

Yuuri had to admit that the song was rather perfect for the younger skater. Lots of energy, but the strong bass strums would tether him a little. “There’s some good opportunities for a nice step sequence, and a strong flourish at the end.”

Minami sighed. “I wish Yuuri-kun could choreograph my short program!”

“That would be so cool!”


“You’ve choreographed your exhibition pieces before!” Minami hopped up and landed straight on his knees on the bleachers. Yuuri winced. The kid should really be more careful.

“I’ve always had help with my choreographies. I’ve never done a piece one hundred percent on my own.” But he smiled at the three skaters. “I’m going to warm up. You all should be on the ice and warm in ten minutes. We’re going to work on some step sequences.”

“はい!”

Yuuri paused at the entrance to the rink. They had about half the space for now, but they’d have the full rink in the evening. He bent over to take his hard guards off so he could get onto the ice.

“They had looked so excited, but now Minami-kun looks crestfallen. What did you do to destroy that young skater’s soul, Yuu-kun?”

Yuuri looked at his coach. “Minami-kun wants me to choreograph his short program to ‘Bouncing Around’.”

Alexei narrowed his eyes. “Do I know that song?”

Yuuri shrugged. “It’s one of Django’s. It very appropriate for him.”

“You could, you know if you wanted to. No one at the JSF would say that you couldn’t choreograph, so your eligibility wouldn’t be affected.”

Yuuri stepped onto the ice and looked at Alexei as he stepped off. “You think I should?”
“If there was ever a piece I think you’d be able to handle choreography for, it’d be a Django piece. And the kid has good musicality. He’d be able to handle most of what you throw at him, and the limitations on Novice programs would make it easier as well. You don’t have to worry about making sure the spins or steps are Level 4, since they’ll only score up to a Level 3. And a Level 3 is still perfectly competitive, should he score high enough to be invited to skate in the Junior nationals.”

Yuuri had read the program requirements for Novices, but… he hadn’t thought about actually making up a program. He’d just wanted to see what they were like so he didn’t teach them something that would be ignored in a Novice competition.

He skated around the edge, hopping to change the direction he was facing so that he could skate backwards while he ruminated. At this point, he knew the ice intimately and didn’t even really have to think about where he was going. He shifted his weight and changed directions, skating around in a serpentine pattern as he dug his own MP3 player out of his pocket and pulled up the song.

Turn. Turn. Twizzle. Chasses. Step. Up on the picks and a little hop. No. What was he doing? He shook his head and skated faster, picking up speed. And then he turned and did a double flip because it would fit just right. And a step sequence would go there -- He sighed. Damn Alexei.

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Viktor smiled and skated over to the edge where Mila was tying her skates, getting ready to spend some time on the ice. It was easier for everyone to schedule ice time once the season ended -- less demand -- though Viktor practically lived at the rink, and everyone knew it.

“I know something about Yuuri that you don’t know.”

Mila looked at him, stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Tell me.”

Viktor shook his head. “No.”

“Tell me, Vitya, or I will make you regret that you were ever born. I mean it!”

“You are absolutely terrifying when you get that particular look on your face. Do you know that?” Mila just scowled, and Viktor couldn’t help himself; he doubled over with laughter, practically cackling. “Fine, I’ll tell you. No, wait, even better, I’ll show you.”

Viktor set his phone out on the barrier and started the video that Lyosha sent him. Mila leaned in close and watched; the sound was small in the rink and barely audible. Her eyes narrowed. “That was a single axel. Why would Yura only do a single axel, and… and a double flip? Is he all right? Is he injured?”

Viktor shook his head. “See that mop of blond hair in bottom left corner?”

Mila’s eyes darted over, then back to Yuuri’s skating. “So?”

“He’s a Novice skater, a year younger than you, and he talked Yuuri into choreographing his short program for him. That’s what you’re watching; Yuuri’s choreography for a Japanese Novice skater.”

Forget the fact that Lyosha had sent the video to strike fear into Viktor’s heart -- and really, Viktor could understand why. A Yuuri who was confident enough to start choreographing, and by extension, start choreographing his own programs, was a Yuuri that could potentially place higher than him on the podium. Especially if he kept racking up jumps. Right now, jumps and more consistent levelling on his spins were the only edges Viktor had on Yuuri. There was absolutely no
point in even discussing step sequences.

Mila snatched his phone and brought the video close to her face, catching her bottom lip between her teeth as she watched again. Viktor just smiled wider. But then Mila sat down, practically ripping her skates off her feet, and the next thing that Viktor knew, she was running around the edge of the rink and toward Yakov’s office in her socks. Viktor kicked off from the boards and started following her. “Milochka! Where are you going?!?”

“Madame Baranovskaya is here today and I have to talk to her! Go skate, Viktor!”

“Madame Baranovskaya can’t choreograph for you this season. Everyone at the rink knows that she’s heading out to Japan because she’s choreogra---” And Viktor suddenly knew exactly why Mila was running off to Yakov’s office. “Damn it, Mila! That’s not fair!”

“I’ll send you a postcard from Osaka!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
おかえり - okaeri - welcome home
рыбка - ribka - little fish
もしもし - moshomoshi - Japanese phone hello
Fior di latte e cannella - flower of milk (sweet cream, sort of) and cinnamon
Porca miseria! - Damn it!
любовь моя - lyubov moya - my love
あなた - anata - you/term of endearment
Спасите, помогите - Spasite, pomogite - Help!
はい - Hai - Yes
Mixi - v. popular Japanese social networking site in 2010
Miyabi - traditional Japanese aesthetic ideal. You should read about it on wikipedia and don't just take Chris's word for things. Bad habit to get into. :) Miyabi on Wikipedia

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Other notes:
Japanese universities... So, I know there are entrance exams etc, but I've also read that students can be accepted without having to take them based on recommendations and grades in high school. And I figure that if a competitive athlete (especially on an international level) was going to be entering a uni that they'd be getting in that way instead of waiting to find out until much closer to the school year.

Also, there are some assumptions/authorial decisions that I have made to make things work within the confines of the story that you'll be seeing in future chapters. I've tried to keep everything as realistic as possible, but sometimes I just need to massage things to make them fit. I'll point out what they are in the notes as I get to them. Shouldn't be any huge suspension of disbelief or anything, I don't think...
Yuuri gets a couple unexpected visitors with an unexpected request while he tries to balance learning his choreography for his new programs and figuring out his future. Meanwhile, Viktor suffers.

Yuuri sighed and stuffed the papers from Kii Academy University into his bookbag as he and Riku made their way out of the administration building.

“Well?”

He took a deep breath. “It’s… nice.”

Riku nodded. “The campus is small, but their psychology program is slightly better than Kansai. They’re obviously willing to work with you. You’d have to switch rinks to the Kansai University rink, since they have an agreement with that school to share rink space and cost. And it’s still close to home. There are a lot of positives for it.”

“Yeah, I know, and it’s definitely a better fit than the one we looked at in Tokyo, but…”

“But we still have a couple more to look at. No one is asking you to decide now. There’s the school in Sapporo, but we can’t go up there until after you’ve learned your choreography for next season. After all, Alexei hired a choreographer from Russia to come and work on your programs.” Riku smiled the same secretive smile she’d been exchanging with Alexei all week.

Yuuri swallowed. After all the cryptic hints, he was sort of terrified by the idea that he’d get to the airport in the afternoon to discover that Yakov had flown all the way from St. Petersburg, and he didn’t think he could handle it. Yakov was a good coach and choreographer, though he didn’t do it very often: But Yuuri wasn’t sure he was ready to go back to Yakov’s gruff way of coaching -- even if it was only for a week and a half while he learned the choreography.

All Alexei would say was that it was someone he trusted to create a beautiful set of programs for Yuuri...

“Yuuri-kun?”

Yuuri snapped himself out of his thoughts and turned to look at Riku with a flush. He hadn’t been listening at all. “Yes?”

But Riku just smiled. “You’ll be all right picking up your choreographer from the airport? We were planning to go with you, but--”

“I know. Business dinner. No. It’s fine. I’m taking the train there and we’ll probably take the train back, but I have the yen if they prefer a taxi.”
Riku smiled again. “So then I’m going to head home so I can get ready, and you’re free to do whatever you want as long as you get to the airport on time.”

“I’m probably going to head straight there, actually. I have my DS in my bag.” He grinned. “It’s not often I have this much free time to actually play.”

“No, it isn’t. You work hard, Yuuri-kun, and it is paying off.”

Yuuri was grateful for the amount of faith that Riku had in his ability as a skater, and he kept thinking about it the entire train ride to the airport. He was so distracted that he kept failing to beat the Kimono Girls; eventually, he shut his DS with a frustrated snap. Stupid Miki and her Flareon. He swore it hadn’t been that hard when he’d played *Silver* as a kid.

His head just wasn’t in the game, apparently. So he shoved the handheld back into his bookbag and reached for his English reader. But when his fingers brushed against the folder with his university documents, he grabbed that instead and opened it across his lap.

Images of Kii Academy and written details stared up at him from the pages. He knew if he flipped through them, he’d eventually hit the prospectus from the university they’d gone to visit in Tokyo.

A knot of anxiety twisted itself around his lungs and heart and squeezed until Yuuri had to look away from the pages, but his mind didn’t stop. This was important. He needed to sort through this, but it was just so hard.

On the one hand, Kii Academy University was in Osaka. It was right there and nothing would really change, other than his home rink. He’d stay living with Alexei and Riku for maybe a year or two before getting an apartment or something -- a small one, probably just a 1LDK, or even a 1DK. He didn’t really need all that much space for just him.

Yes, staying in Osaka was the easiest and had the fewest downsides.

But the program he would enroll in wasn’t the best. It was a general psychology program, and any specialization wouldn’t start until he could pursue a Master’s Degree. He sighed.

But Tokyo -- well, that university’s psychology program did allow for more specialization toward the end of the program. So instead of taking classes that he had little interest in, he would be able to focus on what he wanted.

The problem was that it was in Tokyo. And Yuuri really didn’t want to go to Tokyo.

He sighed again as he switched trains, stuffing the folder back in his bag. The pictures might be gone, but his mind was firmly caught up in the thoughts and just didn’t stop.

Alexei and Riku had accompanied him to Tokyo; even Mari decided to make the trip. And Yuuri was sure that all of them knew how much he didn’t like it. The school was nice and modern and had a wonderful reputation. It was one of the top thirty private universities in the country and the school official that had talked to them had insinuated heavily that Yuuri’s acceptance, should he be applying, was just about guaranteed.

They didn’t have any associated rinks like Kansai did, but the administration and his professors would work with him during the season to make sure that both classes and his international competition schedule wouldn’t get in the way of each other. He wasn’t the only such student that would be enrolled there.

And the program was good.
But it was in Tokyo.

Yuuri had visited Tokyo more than once and he didn’t hate it. But the thought of living there? He couldn’t. Just walking through the streets had left him feeling almost claustrophobic, and he wasn’t claustrophobic by nature. It wasn’t that Osaka was small, but it was nothing like Tokyo. And he had people in Osaka. And it was close to home.

Tokyo was none of those things.

And skating would be hard. He’d have to find a rink and a new coach because he couldn’t -- he just couldn’t -- ask Alexei and Riku to pack up their lives and move to Tokyo. It was expensive and further away from Riku’s family, and he’d already uprooted for him once. They’d moved to Russia for him for almost a year, and they didn’t even know him then!

He couldn’t do that again.

Riku must have known what he was thinking, because she’d just put her hand on Yuuri’s shoulder and said that between her contacts, Alexei’s contacts, and the JSF they would find a coach that could work with him. And the university also had multiple sister schools in various places, which would broaden his potential coach possibilities.

But he’d seen the tightness in her smile and the way that she’d pursed her lips, and how furrowed Alexei’s brow had been. The only saving grace had been his sister butting her shoulder up against him and telling him that he shouldn’t think so hard; that she was pretty sure that figure skaters were supposed to look good, and that he’d give himself premature wrinkles if he kept thinking like that, with the furrow in his brow.

“It’ll all work out, Yuuri. If Tokyo doesn’t feel right, then it’s not right. Something will feel right.”

It was times like that he remembered how much he actually loved his sister, as annoying as she’d been when they were growing up.

Yuuri just wished that Kii had felt right.

There was another option, but Yuuri wasn’t even sure that it was a viable one: Kyushu Sport Science University in Fukuoka.

Shouta was going there. They’d graduated multiple internationally competitive swimmers, and there was no doubt that Shouta would be added to that list. His times at the meets he’d gone to so far had all been good. Really good. And Kyushu Sport Science University was everything that Shouta was looking for in a school. He’d been looking at another private university in Osaka, but when he got back from looking at Kyushu, Yuuri had known.

Yuuri wanted that. He wanted that feeling of “this is going to be the right choice for me”. Not just accepting the best out of a lot of choices that didn’t feel quite right.

He dropped his head into his hands and didn’t look up until the train pulled into the airport.

He couldn’t waste time thinking about this now, though. Yuuri wasn’t quite sure how he was supposed to recognize his choreographer, but Alexei had told him it wouldn’t be a problem. He just had to get himself to the international arrivals and wait. They would find him.

Alexei was having way too much fun with this -- all the more reason why Yuuri was almost positive that he’d see Yakov walk through the customs doors at any minute.
Instead, two redheads suddenly came running right for him.

“Katya?! Mila?! What are you doing here?” Mila dropped her bag and literally launched herself the last few feet toward Yuuri. He barely managed to catch her before falling to the ground with an “oof”. “Milochka! That was dangerous. What if you broke something?”

She beamed at him, her blue eyes alight with laughter. “But I wouldn’t. I knew that you’d catch me, Yura.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to get you to choreograph my programs for this year.”

Yuuri just blinked at her. That made absolutely no sense. He was here to pick up his choreographer. He wasn’t… he didn’t choreograph programs for people. Well, he did that one program for Minami-kun, but that was a one-off, and--

“Yuuri Katsuki. Pick yourself up off the ground. It is unbecoming of a danseur.”

“Madame!” Yuuri scrambled to do as told and just stared at Madame Baranovskaya, his lip caught between his teeth.

“Am I going to receive a proper hello?”

“はい！だ！ Oui !” Yuuri tripped over his words before bowing properly. “I… Alexei didn’t tell me who he got to choreograph for me this season. I wasn’t… Are you really here to choreograph my programs?” He couldn’t help the trace of hope that entered into his voice.

“That boy. He’s as useless as my ex-husband. Of course I am. I have been discussing your program with Minako for weeks!” Her hand landed on top of his head and he swallowed back a smile. “Now. Where are the taxis? I have spent much too much time with these two Babichevas. I will take a taxi into Osaka and you can accompany these two on the train.”

“Oui, Madame.”

“I expect to see you on time for ballet instruction in the morning.”

Yuuri swallowed. He still practiced ballet, but he really only had Minako-sensei’s guidance a few times a month -- if he was lucky. He wasn’t entirely sure that his form was as perfect as it had been. And in the morning? That meant before school. So around 5-ish. He bit back the groan before it could escape. Maybe he’d get a call saying that Madame Baranovskaya’s jet lag was horrendous and he didn’t have to go. It would at least give him a chance to make sure his form was still acceptable.

One look at Madame Baranovskaya, and he knew that wouldn’t be the case.

“Of course, Madame. I wouldn’t dare be late.”

“That is what I like to hear.” She started to turn away, then paused. “I am looking forward to working with you again, Yura.”

He smiled. “Me too.”

And then she did turn away, following the signs toward that taxi stand. Yuuri was definitely going to have to call Minako-sensei and demand to know why she hadn’t said anything!
But first he had to deal with the Babicheva holding onto him with her arms tightly wrapped around
his neck -- and her older sister. “I still don’t understand what the two of you are doing here.” Maybe
that was the wrong tone to take; what if they thought that he didn’t want them here? Because that
wasn’t the case at all. He hurried on. “I’m really excited to see you both!” And he had missed them.
Especially Mila, who he hadn’t seen since he left Russia. But at the same time… “But I don’t
understand why you’re here.”

Katya smiled. “Can we get on the train? Then Mila can tell you all about her insane plan.”

“It’s not insane if it worked! We’re here in Osaka, aren’t we?”

“But you haven’t gotten him to agree yet, have you?”

***

Viktor had been working on choreography for his next season Exhibition piece when he heard the
buzz of the incoming message. It might have been out of order, but he had a need to choreograph for
his Exhibition and absolutely no desire to work on his actual routines. They existed, but not in any
concrete fashion. He promised Yakov that he would get to them, but he had to choreograph for this
new song. He just had to. His life depended on it.

He’d told Yakov as much, too; Yakov had thrown his hands up in the air, stalked to his office and
slammed the door behind him. Viktor was pretty sure that he heard the trophy case crash and a lot of
cursing about crazy Russian skaters doing everything but the things that they’re supposed to do.

So Viktor picked up his phone, expecting messages from Chris. Instead, he got an onslaught of texts
from both Katya and Mila -- the former teasing and the latter gloating.

Katya
Have a picture
[img of Yuuri at barre in tight leggings
working on développé]

Katya
Ooh, here’s another
[img of Yuuri sweaty and smiling while drinking
water and talking to Lilia and Lyosha]

Katya
Can’t forget this one
[img of Yuuri changing shirts]

Viktor
Баба

Mila
I get to take ballet with Yuuri while I’m in Osaka
Mdm Baranovskaya hasn’t yelled at me once!
She even complimented my extension!
Oh, and Yuuri can still do this:
It was not fair that an almost thirteen-year-old -- and oh, it infuriated Mila to no end that she would turn thirteen after the cutoff for the season, so she wouldn’t be allowed to skate in Juniors until next year -- could take pictures like that. She didn’t even understand what it did to Viktor! And he couldn’t just call her “Баба” like he did her sister, though it was still tempting.

At this rate, his heart was not going to be able to handle the Babicheva sisters’ trip to Japan.

Another message came in.

Mila
Yuuri said we could walk with him to school as long as we promised to take Vicchan home!
Look!
[i]img Yuuri in school uniform while pushing his hair out of his face and Vicchan on a leash.[/i]
[i]img Vicchan in Mila’s arms licking her face.[/i]

Viktor had never thought much of school uniforms before, but he was rather sure that this one would haunt his dreams a little.

He opened his contacts and selected ‘Swiss Meadow Boy’ -- much as he liked Chris, there was no way he was going to keep ‘Swiss Heartthrob’.

Viktor
Help. My rinkmates are torturing me

There was no response, of course -- the hazard of texting across multiple time zones. But by the time Viktor finished his morning choreography session on the ice, Chris was up and had replied.

Chris
What are they doing? Trying to steal ice time? Stole your soakers?

Viktor
They ran off to Osaka and are spending one to two weeks with Yuuri
I’m getting pictures that remind me just how flexible Yuuri is and it’s not fair.
Why am I not in Osaka?
Chris
Why are they?

Viktor
Mila thinks that she can convince Yuuri to choreograph her Novice routines for her.

Chris
He choreographs now?

Viktor
Apparently. Lyosha let it slip to me. I think he’s trying to put the fear of Yuuri competing in Seniors so I don’t slack off.

Chris
Slacking off isn’t what you want to do
But it does rhyme

Viktor
Dégage!

Chris
Oui, mon cher

блять. Viktor shoved his earbuds in and went back onto the ice to do another runthrough.

***

“Mila, I don’t choreograph. I mean, I’ve done a little for my exhibition pieces and Alexei has let me tweak some of my step seq--”

Mila put her hands on the table and leaned forward, grabbing Yuuri’s attention and not letting him look away. “Don’t lie, Yura. You’ve choreographed for another skater! Viktor showed me video!”

“Wait, what? How does Viktor have video of the choreography that I did for Minami-kun?” Yuuri whipped his head around and caught sight of Alexei purposely not looking at him. “Lyosha! What have you done!?”

Alexei grinned at him. “I may have sent Viktor a video from when you were demonstrating the choreo for ‘Bouncing Around’ to Minami-kun. It wasn’t like he could do anything with it. It’s Novice level.”

“But why?”

Alexei shrugged and stuffed a forkful of stroganoff into his mouth -- a treat from Riku, since the table was full of Russians.

Yuuri sighed and let his head fall to the table. This wasn’t happening. It wasn’t happening. People were going to start to get the wrong idea. They were going to start to think that he was full of himself. That he could choreograph programs. Other people’s programs. His own programs. He groaned.
Madame Baranovskaya gave a disapproving click. “Yuuri Katsuki. Stop moping about whatever imbecilic thing that your coach has done and treat the food that Riku has put in front of you with more respect.”

He sat up. “Of course. I apologize, Riku-san. Your stroganoff is wonderful as always.”

Riku smiled at him and bit her lip on a laugh. “Thank you, Yuuri-kun.”

“Yuuri, will you choreograph for me?” Mila clearly wasn’t going to let this go.

Yuuri sighed. There was only one way out of it. “I can’t choreograph for music that I’ve never heard, Milochka.”

“Good! I have it! I’ll go get it!”

Another click. “You’ll do no such thing, Mila Babicheva. You will sit down and eat your dinner and then -- after we’ve all had a pleasant meal, and only then -- will you be allowed to show your music to Yuuri.”

“Madame, aren’t you concerned that if I choreograph for Mila, I won’t be paying attention to the program that you’ve put together for me?”

Madame Baranovskaya just lifted one imperial brow at him. “Do you think that I have such little faith in you, Yuuri, that I think you can’t handle working on multiple programs at once? Did I not offer to introduce you to the dancing masters at the Royal Ballet in London and the Bolshoi if you decided that figure skating was not a thing you wanted to pursue? You’d be learning just as much all at once then as now.”

Where all these people got so much faith in him, he’d never know. He wished he could find some for himself.

***

“The Rolling Stones?”

Mila nodded. “It’s a string rendition. It’s good, right? It’ll be amazing. Especially if you choreograph it.”

Yuuri ignored her and focused on the music. It was definitely a skateable piece of music; there was enough variation between parts to allow for some interesting transitions and emotional context. He didn’t think that it was something that he’d skate to, though. For Minami-kun, he’d just done what came naturally, having skated to that sort of music before. But this... He shook his head. “I don’t know, Mila.”

She pouted, then glared. “You have to! Peeeeeeeeease.” And apparently had moved directly onto wheedling.

“I can’t see it. I mean, I know that someone could choreograph something great for it, I don’t know what I would do with it. I could come up with a dance, I think. I have more experience with this sort of music with dance than skating.”

Behind him, he heard Madame Baranovskaya cough as she was saying her good-nights to the Turovs. He hoped that she wasn’t coming down with something.

“So do that! Like you did with Speeding Cars! That was originally a dance!”
“That someone else choreographed!” Yuuri sighed. “All I did was change the elements for skating.”

Another cough from Madame Baranovskaya.

“Yura! Please! I’ll die if you don’t!”

“Now you’re just being overdramatic, Mila. I’m telling you that I don’t know how—” He turned as Madame Baranovskaya coughed yet again. “Are you all right, Madame? Did you get sick on the plane?”

“No, you idiot. She’s trying to point out the obvious.”

Yuuri startled at Katya’s words. The obvious?

“If you can dance to it, Yuuri, you should be able to figure out how to skate to it. Working outside of your comfort zone may be good for you.”

Oh. Oh . When it was put like that, it made complete sense.

He sighed. “I’ll listen and think about it, Mila.” Mila’s squeal was almost loud enough to make him flinch. “I’m not promising anything! Just that I’ll think about it!” Apparently, though, Mila didn’t see the distinction, and launched herself at Yuuri, wrapping him in a hug. “I completely forgot how much you like hugs, Mila.”

***

Mila
Yuuri is thinking about doing my choreography!
While he’s at school, Katya and I are going to explore Osaka
Alexei gave us a list of places he thinks we’ll find interesting
Though one’s a bookstore
Alexei is weird.

Viktor
He’s really going to give in to you?

Mila
VIKTOR! LOOK! I OWN THIS NOW! I HAVE WATCHED IT 10 TIMES!
YUURI IS AMAZING!
[jimg Jewel case of EXCITE’s new album with small image of Yuuri and an announcement of limited edition DVD bonus with MV and interviews]
THOSE STORES ALEXEI SUGGESTED ARE THE BEST!
[jimg of スポーツ magazine with Yuuri on the cover and another magazine opened to a Yuuri photoshoot (not FS related) and a fanbook of Yuuri photographs]
Viktor

…

Mila

Yes?

Viktor

Please say that you’re bringing me copies

Mila

Gotta go!

Viktor

KATYA!

Katya

You want Yuuri magazines even if you can’t read them?

Viktor

Please

Katya

I’ll call Yakov at the end of the week and ask if you deserve any

Viktor

That’s so mean! Please Katya! You know that Yakov won’t ever let me have nice things! Please let me have nice things!

***

Yuuri tugged on his gloves and took a deep breath. Mila and Katya were leaning against the boards next to Alexei.

“All right. I have twenty minutes before Madame Baranovskaya arrives to work on my choreography with me, and I mean, this is rough. It needs a lot of work to actually be a program. I showed Alexei this morning and he says that if you like it, we can move forward. But if you don’t, well, I don’t have a lot of time that I can use to try to do something else before you leave.” He chewed on his lip. “Mila. I’m only seventeen. Are you sure you want me to do this for you? You can get a better choreographer who could really do justic—”

“Yes.” Mila jumped up and down. “Of course! Show me!”

Yuuri sighed and skated out to the center of the section of ice that had been demarcated with cones for his skating session. He stretched his arms overhead and looked back at the group. He didn’t have his glasses on, so they were all a little blurry, but he could tell where each one of them was, even if he couldn’t see the expressions on their faces. That actually made it easier. He didn’t want to see Mila’s disappointment when she saw what he’d come up with.
He nodded, not starting right away; the song was too long and really, the best place to start was about half a minute in. There. He lifted his arms up as the music began layering over and over, then started to move his skates back, slowly and then faster, sliding into an Ina Bauer before continuing on. Just as the music paused, like a breath, he jumped a single axle. This was when the music would pick up, and was a good place for either a jumping pass or a step sequence. He’d gone with a jumping pass; while Mila had decent stamina, it still wasn’t great, so putting the majority of her jumping passes in the front was better. The music also slowed down a little more toward the end, and that would be better for her step sequence. She could keep her edges cleaner. Especially on those rockers.

But that was later. For now, a double jump, then a bit of skating before going into a layback spin. Mila was pretty good at them, and he lifted one arm up to grasp at the air above him before leaning sideways and grabbing his skate into a haircutter. For Mila, he’d suggest going all the way to a Bielmann, but he wasn’t going to do it himself right now.

But the part that he’d had the most fun with was the step sequence. It was slower and not as complicated as what he’d put in for himself, but he thought it’d be perfect for Mila if she could keep her edges clean and the order straight. There was a lot of room for her exuberant personality to show through. She could have a lot of fun with it.

He readjusted the I-spiral that he’d put in for Mila to a Y-spiral, since that was a position that he could pull off. The I position would look better, though, and he knew that it was in Mila’s repertoire.

He stopped and took a deep breath. He didn’t know what she’d think. Or Katya. Or Yakov. It was completely likely that Yakov would hate the program. Yuuri shuddered at the thought. If Yakov hated it, well, he would have to deal with that. He wasn’t going to throw Mila under the bus. If he was choreographing, he’d own up to it -- whether it was bad or not.

He skated over to the edge. “Something like that, anyway. I adjusted some of the positions since I was skating it and you’re more flexible than I am--”

“Not by much,” Katya muttered.

He smiled. “Maybe, but that spiral, I would suggest an I-spiral, not a Y-spiral. And of course the scheduled jumps can be changed, I just tossed a bunch of singles and doubles in there.” He couldn’t bring himself to look at Mila, and she had yet to say anything. So he grabbed his water and took a long drink, tipping his head up so that he could focus on the lights instead.

“Yuuri.”

Yuuri sucked in a breath. Mila sounded upset. This wasn’t good. But he’d told her that he wasn’t a choreographer. He’d just messed around, that was all. Having to balance the different components was hard, and he was sure that someone else could have done it better. He swallowed and forced himself to look at Mila. She was standing at the entrance to the ice, and the only thing stopping her from going on in her sneakers was Alexei’s restraining hand.

“Yuuri! Come here.” She stomped her foot.

Biting back a laugh, Yuuri skated over. He knew she was going to scold him for not doing justice to the piece of music she’d selected, but she looked so small and angry that it was funny. At least he thought she was angry -- right until she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. “I can’t wait until you get permission to teach me it!”

“Wait, you liked it?”
“Of course! I have a Yuuri step sequence all my own!”

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Why didnt you talk Mila out of having me choreograph for her?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I like that you think anyone can talk Mila out of anything.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I mean it.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You know that she’s always looked up to you. Why wouldn’t she want you to choreograph her routine

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov That’s not what I mean. I know she likes the way I skate. So do you, but you wouldn’t ask me to choreograph

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I don’t know. I think having a program Yuuri created just for me could be interesting.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov You can’t see me, but I’m judging you right now.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuuurii! Don’t be like that!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I think you’re familiar enough with Mila and her personality and the way that she skates that you’d do fine

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t like the pressure.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri The pressure? She’s responsible for her scores. Not you.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No, I know, but. I mean… well… What if the person I’m developing a program for doesn’t like it?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Then they’re an idiot

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No. That’s not… It doesn’t work like that. It’s not just they’re an idiot and I move on. That’s not the way it works!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri maybe… this has nothing to do with the way things are supposed to work and more to do with the way you think they work.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m not crazy.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I never said you were. It’s Macaron Chacaron

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Please don’t say that name. I’m having war flashbacks.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Am I wrong though?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No

***

Yuuri moved through the step sequence that Madame Baranovskaya had choreographed. He wasn’t
on the ice, and was instead on working in one of the studios in the sports complex. There was no music, but he knew every note by heart after having listened to it for a full week. He stepped out and moved into position for a jump. He was only marking them off the ice; even though he could probably do a full triple rotation, he just didn’t like doing them off the ice since it was hell on his knees. Smaller jumps were fine, but triples, not so much.

“Stop.”

Yuuri dropped his arms, but kept his feet in position. “Madame?”

Madame Baranovskaya had one finger pressed to her lips. “You should talk to Alexei and Riku.”

“About?”

“Changing that jump right there to a Tano. One arm raised would be more beautiful.”

Yuuri paused. “A Tano jump? I’ve never done a variation on arm placement in any of my jumps before.”

“Which is why I suggest that you speak to Alexei and Riku. You have the balance. It will make getting the rotation a little harder, but I think for a toe jump you could do it. That one is a flip, or is it a Lutz?”

“It was choreographed as a flip, but Alexei is thinking of changing it to a Lutz.”

Madame Baranovskaya nodded. “Either way, it should be a Tano.” She paused. “You could probably make your single triple axel a Tano as well.”

Yuuri finally dropped out of position and clasped his upper arm with his hand, squeezing. Focusing on the sensation and letting it ground him. “I… why? For the points?”

Madame Baranovskaya shook her head. “The points, yes, they’d be good, But the beauty of the piece, Yura. It would be enchanting! As your choreographer, I say that you need at least this jump to be a Tano. You are more than capable.” She paused. “It would also make the program stronger for your Senior competitions.”

It would. There was no mistake about that.

“You should use everything and everyone that you can to make your programs the strongest and most beautiful. You would do well to think about that. Mila is using you to get a beautiful program that only you can create. Use her sister. Katya has done Tano jumps before, Riku as well. You have two skaters that can help.”

Yuuri chewed on his lip. He knew that Madame was right. Of course she was, but…

There was just so much doubt. It hovered over him, casting a shadow over everything. He wasn’t even sure what or where he’d be skating. How many of his competitions would be Senior level? Was the JSF even going to put his name in for the Junior Grand Prix? Or would he be taking his one allotted GPS slot as Junior World champion and only be competing in Seniors? There was still a couple of weeks until the assignments came out.

Was he even ready to compete in Seniors without the safety net under him?

“I’ll talk to Alexei and Riku and Katya.” Did he have a choice?
“Then start from the beginning again. And put a hand up when you mark those jumps. Do singles, please. And pay closer attention to your body positions when working through your step sequence.”

“Oui, Madame.”

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuri, I’m bored. Tell me all the magazine titles you’ve been in lately.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov There isn’t a place I don’t ache. Give me a back massage. Oh wait, no, calf massage.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri WHAT?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Sorry. I thought we were asking for things that will never happen.

Viktor could feel his brain actually grind to a halt. He didn’t know how to respond or anything. He could barely think. But all the same, he had to say something. Why was this so hard? Nothing in life had ever been terribly difficult for him, but this -- navigating the waters of having a crush on one of his best friends -- was turning out to be downright impossible.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I wouldn’t say never. If you wanted…

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Not usually, but right about now, definitely. Lilia and Alexei and Mila have been so demanding.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I mean, I don’t mind. It’s work, and I think my programs are going to be great

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov but right now I wish I was home in Hasetsu soaking in the onsen

Viktor
CHRIS I CAN’T DO THIS

Chris
Can’t do what? Shouldn’t you be skating?

Viktor
Probably. Yes. Most likely. Yakov is in Moscow. I can do what I want
But CHRIS
CHRIS Yuuri is messaging me about soaking in a bath And I CAN’T

Chris
Wow, you really have come far! When’s the wedding? His friends married young, right?
Viktor
No, it’s not… God, I wish it was like that
But it’s not.
It’s not flirting or sexual or anything. He’s just
sore from practice
But I can’t stop thinking about him in the bath

Chris
Yeah, can’t help you there.
Or rather, I think I won’t. That’s just too pleasant
an image to destroy.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Aren’t, um. You told me once that Japanese tubs were made for
soaking

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  And you remembered that? That’s rather random. They are. It’s just
that there’s nothing like my family’s onsen

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Stretching out and just letting the water soak into me and relax the
tension of sore muscles is amazing

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  You should really try an onsen one day.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  I should

Viktor
Chris. Seriously. How do I make my brain stop
offering up images as I chat with Yuuri?

Chris?
CHRIS?!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Anyway, why do you want to know the magazines? You aren’t going
to have Mila or Katya buy them, are you?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  They already have. Mila was showing me picture of all her Yuuri
swag. And I want some too!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  WHAT?!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  They went shopping and bought a bunch of things. Apparently Alexei
gave them hints

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  I want Yuuri merchandise too! It’s not fair, Yuuri!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  I hate everyone. As if Shuji-kun walking around with that damn
folder and keychain wasn’t bad enough
Viktor
There’s a folder and keychain! Katya find them for me.
Please.

***

Katya
No. I’m not indulging you
However
[short video clip of Yuuri during jump practice]
He’s been hitting the ice hard all week.
Alexei is kind of a taskmaster. I’m surprised.
Though his voice is quieter than Yakov’s

Viktor
He’s practicing Tanos?

Katya
Yeah. I’ve been working with him on them
He’s gotten up to the double with an arm up.
He should have the triple down by the time competitions start

Viktor
I hate everyone

Katya
Well, you could always try Tanos

Viktor
I’d rather add another quad

Katya
Of course you would.
Have your new ridiculous skates arrived yet?

Viktor
Next week. There’ll be here in time for my ice shows.

***

Yuuri crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the boards. Mila had her hands pressed to her knees and was staring down at the ice.

“It’s harder than it looks!”

Chewing on his lip, Yuuri thought about the sequence. He’d really figured that Mila could pull it off, but the slightly more difficult jump entry wasn’t working. “If we change the timing a little bit, we could put a longer transition between your step sequence and this jumping pass.” He wasn’t sure that it was the best way to go, though. He looked over at Alexei, hoping for a signal, a confirmation;
Alexei just shrugged.

“No, I can do it! If Yuuri can do it, I can do it!”

Her sister started laughing. “Not likely. You know that step sequence is barely choreographed to a Level 3. You don’t focus enough when you aren’t spinning, and your edges get sloppy. That’s why you’re having trouble getting into position for that jump.” She paused and looked over at Yuuri. “If you change that jump to a toe-loop and move the Salchow, she’d have an easier time of it.”

Yuuri nodded. “What do you think, Mila?”

“Let me try?”

“OK.” Yuuri looked up at the ceiling. “You know, I don’t know if I’m cut out for this. I just want to skate.”

Katya laughed again. “Oh, the program is great. It’s just something that Mila needs to work on. By the end of the season, she’ll probably have gotten it down to the point where the original jumps would work.”

“Thinking about coaching, Katerinka?”

“No one calls me that, Lyosha.”

Yuuri’s coach laughed. “Still a fair question.”

“I’m helping Yakov with the young ones. That’s good enough for now. I might move to Moscow. There’s a good coach there looking for some assistants. Not as good as Yakov, but the difference in experience could be good for me. Actually, Yakov is scouting one of his young ones this week.”

“Why isn’t anyone paying attention to me! I’ve been ready for ages!”

They all turned their faces back to look at Mila. She’d slammed a toe pick into the ice and had her hands on her hips, her bright pink gloves standing out against her dark grey pants. The look on her face was almost petulant.

“All right. We’re watching.”

***

“University sounds stupid. Viktor didn’t go. He finished high school, and then that was it.” Mila had camped out on the floor and was looking through the various school brochures that Yuuri had gathered. “I like this one. It looks pretty!”

“You’re only saying that because it’s a picture taken during winter.” Katya snickered.

Sticking her tongue out, Mila handed the paper to Yuuri. “It’s not like I can read it anyways. It’s all in Japanese. Which school is that one?”

“Kino University. Up in Sapporo. I haven’t actually visited it yet. Riku and I are going up to Sapporo after I finish learning the choreography with Madame Baranovskaya, but before the ice shows start.”

“I can’t wait until I’m amazing enough to do ice shows!”

Katya ruffled her sister’s head. “Eventually. You’ll probably be invited to one or two in Russia
once you’re skating in Juniors.”

“Viktor skates everywhere!”

It was true. He’d done ice shows throughout Europe and Asia, in the United States and Canada. He was most likely one of the most well-compensated skaters in the world who still actively competed. But as long as everything was signed off on, it wasn’t like his eligibility would ever be questioned.

“Are you skating in any this year, Katya?”

She shook her head. “No. I thought about it. Almost signed on for a show next month, but really, I just need a break.” She looked at the paperwork that Mila had managed to spread all over and motioned to it. “Sorry about that. Are you sure that you’re not biting off too much? With the choreo sessions and school and the upcoming ice shows and looking at universities, and then the nonsense of Mila’s demands on top of that?”

Yuuri laughed. “Not at all. I’m actually pretty sure that I have decided to do too much, but… I need the income from the ice shows. Even if I manage to get into the university of my choice and get a scholarship to study there, there are still other costs outside of the skating -- which, as long as I maintain a certified status in either Juniors or Seniors, will be somewhat subsidized. Even now, Fukuzawa isn’t exactly an inexpensive school. Quite the opposite. And Junior level prizes aren’t that big.”

Katya nodded. “There really is a world of difference.”

Yuuri nodded. “There is. And… well, it isn’t like I’ll be winning a lot of prizes when I transfer over to Seniors. There’s a lot of competition, and…” Yuuri let his voice trail off. He didn’t need to say anything. Everyone had seen the article. It was one of the biggest figure skating publications in the world, after all. And even beyond that, it wasn’t like anything written there wasn’t something that he hadn’t already known.

No matter what Alexei or Viktor or anyone else said, he wasn’t confident that he could pull off what he had managed so far in Juniors. He felt as if he’d peaked. Seventeen, and his career as a figure skater was about to enter a downward spiral.

But he wasn’t ready to let go just yet. He wanted to do more. He wanted to try.

It was a very strange sort of limbo.

***

Mila did her final spin and moved into her ending pose, breathing heavily as the music cut out.

Viktor whistled. The piece pushed Mila to her limits. And it was pretty. He could see her in a black skating costume, rhinestone accents. Maybe even black rhinestones. He idly wondered if she’d picked something out yet.

The step sequence was easier than what Viktor knew Yuuri was capable of creating, but it was just past Mila’s current capabilities. It’d be good to push her just that bit more. And it brought out all the best things about Mila’s skating. She wasn’t one for the softer pieces that her sister had skated to for years now; they suited Katya better than the spitfire that Mila was.

Yuuri really had choreographed an amazing piece for her, so he didn’t know why she looked so nervous. Yakov would be an idiot to toss it out.
“You’re going to have to work hard. Tomorrow I want to see the simplified version. Katya said there was one?”

Mila sighed, her shoulders collapsing a little. “There is. Yura and Katya made some adjustments to make it easier for me, but Yakov—”

“Do not start the ‘But Yakov’ nonsense. I get enough of that from Viktor.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Yakov sighed. “I’m not saying you can’t skate this one, but I want to see the adjustments, too. There’s no problem with growing into a program, Milochka.”

She grinned and skated over to the sound system to unhook her MP3 player. That left Viktor alone with Yakov. He almost groaned, but bit it back.

“Yuuri choreographed a good, strong program, Vitya.”

“I know, I just saw Mila skate it.” He grinned.

“He’s starting to choreograph around the same age that you started choreographing, and his step sequences are stronger, which means that his choreographic sequences are going to be strong. He has good musicality and—”

“And if I want to keep winning, I need to step up my game. I know.” Viktor looked over at Yakov. “It’s not even sure that he’ll be competing in Seniors.”

“Unless he announces that he’s not interested in competing in Juniors at all, they’ll probably put his name in for the Junior Grand Prix. But what will happen after their Nationals is anyone’s guess.”

Viktor touched his finger to his bottom lip. “At least his free skate was choreographed by Lilia. And you haven’t heard anything about his short? Will he have two versions?”

“No. All I know is that he’s been working on a quad Lutz. Alexei let it slip.” Yakov gave him a look. “You’re the one who’s always talking to him on that birdie thing.”

“Twitter, Yakov. It’s called Twitter. Really, you aren’t that old, you should know this. Well, maybe you are.” Viktor smirked at the glare that Yakov sent his way. “Anyway, it feels wrong trying to get the scoop on my competition.”

“So you admit that Yuuri is competition.”

Viktor’s smile turned from mischievous to bright. “There was never any doubt about that.” He paused. “I think I want to put a third quad in my free skate.”

***

“Obviously, having such a long winter means that we get a lot of student athletes for various winter sports.” Ito, the official that was showing them the campus, smiled at Yuuri. “Though we don’t usually get the figure skaters, I’ll say. Mostly the ones that need snow, but we’ve had some speed skaters. We have a relationship with a very good rink.”

At least there was a rink. That was one worry off Yuuri’s mind.

“As for our program... You said that you were interested in the sports psychology program, Katsuki-san?”
Yuuri nodded. “I did. I was hoping for a program that allowed for some specialization in year three and four, as opposed to a general psychology track.”

“Well, that we do have. It’s among the top ten in private universities in Japan. We even have relationships with other schools both in and outside of Japan, and the ability for distance learning. Arrangements can be made for lectures to be video-recorded or in some cases, you may even be able to Skype in. There are also some online-only classes, but they are limited in options. So if your training takes you elsewhere, you’ll have options to continue your degree without worry. We are aware that many skaters train with coaches in places like the U.S.”

“Thank you, Ito-san.” Riku smiled and put her hand on Yuuri’s shoulder.

Yuuri bit his lip. “My coaching situation after this coming season is still unknown.” He hated those words. Hated them.

“Oh, I see.” Ito paused. “Would you like to see the rink? It is off the campus, but only by a few blocks. As you can see, while it’s not difficult to get into the main city from here, we’re rather closed off from it as well.”

Yuuri nodded. The campus was definitely quieter than the one in Tokyo, and the program was just as good -- and better than at Kii.

Yuuri really didn’t know, though. None of the other schools had felt right, and he still wasn’t sure about this one. They walked the few blocks while Ito pointed out various stores that were popular among the students. Yuuri listened as discussion switched to the different nearby neighborhoods that students tended to live in, as it was assumed that Yuuri would prefer such an option. Yuuri just nodded.

But he was still missing that feeling, that intangible sense that Kino was the right school for him. He accompanied Ito up the steps and through the entrance to the ice rink, Riku following behind him.

The person working the desk just smiled and motioned them through the door.

Normally rinks didn’t have large windows, since it increased the cost of keeping the ice temperature maintained. But Sapporo was cold enough that it wasn’t a huge issue; half the year the temperatures were freezing.

So when Yuuri looked out over the rink, the ice sparkled in sunlight. The panoramic windows ran the length of the rink; glancing up, he could see out to the university campus and the city beyond. It wasn’t as pretty as the rink in Russia, and not as state-of-the-art the rink in Osaka. It wasn’t even as homey as the rink in Hasetsu. But he could skate there.

It finally felt right.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
はい! - Hai - yes
だ! - da - yes
Oui! - yes
Baba - baba - woman (hag)
Dégage! - piss off!
Oui, mon cher - yes, my dear
блять. - blyat
スポーツ - sports
***
There reference to Macaron Chacaron is that it's the song that Yuuri used to explain anxiety to Phichit (and Viktor before that, but it was off screen)

So on Yuuri's profile on the JSF website in the anime it has his university... and there is no agreement on what the translation in. I have had multiple people translate it as Kii University (as in the Kii peninsula... so Kansai region, near Osaka) and Kino. SO! I used both! :D

As usual, if you want to see sneak peaks or get a hold of the drabbles before they get posted to Life and Love Off the Ice here on ao3, you can find all that on my tumblr.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Yuuri has a ton of problems... surprisingly Viktor is not one of them. Viktor suffers (in ways he didn't realize were possible).

Chapter Notes

Ok.
I know. It's been a while.
I had really bad low-grade anxiety (just sort of there, but not too bad, but bad enough that writing was hard) for a couple of weeks and just sort of went to hide under a rock. Lots of TV and fanfic was read instead of writing.
I do want you all to know that I LOVED and APPRECIATED and TREASURED every last comment I got on the last chapter. They were all AMAZING and really helped me tons and tons.

That said.
Io deserves a HUGE round of applause. He edited this chapter even though work was kicking his ass just so I could get the chapter out tonight. I don't deserve him. He is the best boy. Just saying. Please adore him. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I still can’t believe that’s what you ordered.”

Viktor grinned and finished lacing up his skates, drawing the laces tight before holding out his leg. The light glinted off the gold blades on his new boots. “They’re perfect. Now I just have to break them in before the ice shows.”

Katya shook her head. “I guess this is going to be the new normal for the next four years until someone beats you in Sochi?”

“No one is going to beat me in Sochi. They can try, but they’re not going to beat me.”

“Sochi is a long ways off. A lot can happen between now and then, Like Yuuri entering Seniors. And Giacometti is coming into his own, too. The fact that you’ve befriended your rivals sort of entertains me.”

Viktor sighed. “It’s not a bad thing.”

“No, just entertaining. The moment one of them beats you, though, I wonder what will happen.”

Just the thought of going up against both Yuuri and Chris in an actual competition sent a thrill up Viktor’s spine. He knew that he was grinning like an idiot, but he couldn’t help it. “Like I said, they can try. But they’re not going to win.”
“I heard you’re adding a quad Salchow this season.”

“Thinking about it. I have one in my exhibition program. And I know where I’d put it in my Free Skate if I decide to. I have to be ready. Chris has a quad Sal this coming season -- he’s ditching his 4T for it -- and Alexei is being all evil and teaching Yuuri a quad Lutz. I mean really? Skipping him all the way to the Lutz?”

Katya raised an eyebrow. “Hm. I know that you can land a quad Lutz. Not consistently, so you’ve never put it in competition, but you can. What’s wrong with Yuuri learning one? The Lutz is one of his stronger jumps.”

“Of course it is. It’s difficult.” Viktor snapped his hard guards on after casting one last approving look at his new blades, then made his way over to the ice. He glanced back over his shoulder at Katya. “Tell me what I need to fix.”

“Yeah, all right. Where’s Yakov, anyway?”

Viktor shrugged. “He said something about being fed up with Mila and I arguing about something as inconsequential as a DVD, and if I want him to work with me, I am forbidden to bring up how unfair it is that the two of you went to Osaka without me. In fact, I am forbidden from bringing up Japan at all, because it’s a distraction.”

“Well, he’s not wrong.” Katya paused, waiting for Viktor to stop and get in position. “Just another week or two, Vitya. Surely you can do that?”

Viktor stopped in the center portion of the rink half he’d been assigned for practice. The other half had been given over to Georgi, who was working through his short program as methodically as ever, just as Yakov told him to. “I can, but it would be so much easier to make it through if I could just borrow that DVD.”

Katya laughed. “If you borrow that DVD, Mila will never see it again. How anyone talked Yuuri into skating in that costume I will never know, but he is definitely not a little kid anymore.”

Viktor didn’t argue; Katya was right, after all. But really, an almost thirteen-year-old did not need such a DVD. Viktor, however… “He won’t even talk to me about how it happened! Just says that he’d rather forget the whole thing and put it behind him, and then groaned about how Shuji -- I’m guessing that’s the guy in the band -- how Shuji is planning to have the MV projected behind them when they go on tour at the end of the summer.” Viktor dug his MP3 player out of his pocket. Usually he’d do his runthrough without music, but now he was thinking of that stupid J-rock song, and would no doubt screw up his timing. “Though Yuuri says that the routine isn’t bad, just the costume.”

Shaking her head, Katya folded her arms on the boards and leaned in. “True. It’s a really nice routine. I’d like to see him skate it without all the interruptions for the band and the weird CGI nonsense behind him.”

Viktor got into position and then immediately dropped out again. “When do you leave for Moscow?”

Katya sighed. “Before you get back. If you’re going to throw me a party, it needs to be before you leave.”

He stuck his tongue out at her. “What am I supposed to do without your criticisms?”

“Listen to Yakov?”
"That's no fun at all."

***

Yuuri took a deep breath and tried his best to smile at Shouta for luck as his boyfriend opened the envelope. It was the envelope that was going to determine his future -- to a point. The rest hung on Shouta’s swim times, but this -- university -- was something that they were both dealing with.

Shouta just grinned at him before taking the piece of paper out. He wasn't nervous or anxious like Yuuri. Then again, he never was, something that Yuuri sometimes found terribly unfair. Of all the things Yuuri wished for, shedding his anxiety was right there at the top. And he knew that it wasn't right to harbor any sort of resentment toward cool and confident Shouta, so he didn't... except for the tiny, shameful part of him that did. Yuuri wasn't perfect after all -- nowhere near it -- much as he realized that it wasn't fair to hold his boyfriend's lack of nerves against him.

Yuuri reached out and squeezed Shouta's wrist. "I'm sure that they accepted you."

With a small smile and a flourish, Shouta pulled out the piece of paper. He didn't say anything, but the ecstatic expression that almost instantaneously covered Shouta's face told Yuuri everything he needed. "They did. I'm going to University in Fukuoka." He leaned forward and quickly pressed his lips to Yuuri's. "Now all we need is your acceptance to Kii to come through and things will be perfect."

Yuuri bit his lip. He should have said something earlier, but with everything that was going on, he'd forgotten. It wasn't fair. Nothing ever was. He sighed.

"What is it? Did you not get in? That doesn't even make sense. You get great grades!"

"I didn't apply to Kii!" The words tumbled out of Yuuri's lips and into the space between them. Harsh and loud and disastrous.

"You didn't apply to Kii? So... Tokyo?" Shouta's grin was fading.

"We don't have to talk about this now. You got into Kyushuu Sport Science University! It's great news!" Yuuri reached out and threaded his fingers with Shouta's. "I bet Alexei would let me go just about anywhere you want to celebrate. Did you want to go to the gyoza place?"

"Yuuri, where did you apply?" Shouta’s voice was harder than it was a second ago.

Yuuri sighed and looked down at the floor between their feet. Their sneakers matched, though Yuuri’s were a bit more worn out from jogging, a type of conditioning that Shouta got out of most of the time. The work they put into their respective sports really did rule their lives, down to where they were going to go to university. Or planning to, anyway. "Kino. The one up in Sapporo." He hurried on. "I meant to tell you, really I did, but I just... I forgot. I didn't mean to forget, but I did."

"You forgot?" Shouta’s voice was deadpan waiting for Yuuri’s answer, but he didn’t pull away. Yuuri nodded. "To tell me that you applied to a university on the other end of Japan?"

Yuuri nodded again. "It... It was the right fit for me. Their program is really good, and the rink..."

Shouta released an exasperated breath. "You chose a school because of their skating rink?"

Flushing, Yuuri shrugged. "Maybe just a little. I can skate there."

"You can skate here in Osaka, which is just a few hours by train!"
Sucking in a deep breath, Yuuri gripped Shouta’s hand even tighter. "I know, but... the program was better, Shouta. Kii was lacking and Kansai wasn’t an option for me.” He took another, deeper breath. "Besides, you can’t tell me that you weren’t even a little persuaded by the pool when you went to see the Kyushuu campus.”

"It’s a 50m pool! Do you realise how important that is to me? I swim long course and not short, I need a 50m pool!” Shouta paused and then laughed, dispelling some of the tension in the air between them. "All right, you may have a point. Maybe. I just... I thought that you'd be staying in Osaka. Your coach is in Osaka, after all."

Yuuri groaned. "I don't even want to talk about the whole coaching situation. It's horrible and complicated and just... Can we not?"

"Yeah, yeah, we can not. Not now." Shouta tugged, and Yuuri finally took the step that was separating them. Shouta's arms were warm and strong around his shoulders. "It'll all work out. I know it. Distance is nothing. Right?"

"Right." Yuuri wasn't sure that he actually believed him, but for now he could deal with it. He could pretend that everything in his life wasn't entering a state of upheaval and uncertainty. He could totally cope with it -- like a normal person. Except that he really couldn't.

Yuuri swallowed down the nausea creeping up. "Let's go and celebrate."

Shouta laced their fingers back together. "Yeah."

***

"We were thinking that since the show is in Osaka, and EXCITE is so huge here…” The producer for the ice show trailed off. Yuuri groaned. He knew exactly what they wanted. Of course they did. And Yuuri would rather skate anything --anything -- other than that piece in that costume.

"We’ve contacted the band, and the lead singer agreed to produce a scaled back version. He’ll even perform it live for us!"

Yuuri smiled. Of course Shuji-kun would agree. After all, it would make Yuuri miserable and bring attention to himself; for him, the perfect win-win.

“Please say that you’ll do it, Katsuki-kun! Just for this show?”

***

Yuuri sat at the dining table, staring down at the envelope in his hands. It was hard to breathe and his heart felt like it was about to beat out of his chest. “I can’t. I can’t open this. What if they didn’t accept me after all? What if… What if they changed their mind about the scholarship? What if--”

“Yuu-kun, it’ll be fine.”

With a shake of his head, Yuuri looked up at his coach. Alexei had taken a seat across from him after handing Yuuri the envelope. “It’s… unlikely. And… I can’t. Lyosha, what if--”

“Stop. If you don’t want to open it right now, that’s fine. You can open it tomorrow.”

“It’ll just be worse then! The ink will disappear, and I won’t be able to read a single thing!” Yuuri
dropped his head into hands, letting the envelope flutter to the table. He knew that he was being ridiculous, that waiting a day wasn’t going to change anything other than making the intensity of his panic worse, but he was stuck in a circle. He squeezed his hands into fists and pressed them hard against his temples, trying to take focus away from his thoughts and onto that physical sensation.

“Yuuri-kun?”

Yuuri dragged a deep breath in and picked the envelope up. “All right. I’m doing this.” He slid his finger under the seal slowly, taking in big lungfuls of air all the while. Regardless of what was contained inside, he’d know the steps he’d have to take. He pulled the pages out and let his eyes wander over the typed font.

“I’ve been accepted.” He looked up at Riku and Alexei. “Kino accepted me!” They didn’t seem surprised at all. “Oh my god, I’m moving to Sapporo.” Yuuri pressed his hand to his forehead. “What was I thinking?! Now I have to move to Sapporo! I changed my mind, I can’t do this!”

Alexei leaned over and grabbed Yuuri’s free wrist. “One thing at a time, Yuu-kun. You can do this. There’s plenty of time to work out the logistics, and Riku and I will help.”

Riku nodded. “Just remember, Yuuri-kun. You’re not doing this alone.”

“OK. Right.” Yuuri sucked in a deep breath. “There’s time. I should… I should tell my parents!”

Alexei smiled. “You should! They’ll be incredibly proud of you, Yuu-kun.”

Yuuri shoved away from the table and took off toward the stairs, skidding to a halt and spinning around before setting foot on the first step. He bowed to Alexei and Riku. “Thank you both for everything that you’ve done for me up to this point. I… I don’t think that I’d be here, right now, without the two of you. So, uh, thanks.” He looked up, smiled and ran up the stairs as quickly as he could to his room so he could call his parents.

He didn’t get a chance to see the sad smiles exchanged between Alexei and Riku.

***

Yuuri pushed himself up off the ice and got to his knees, and from there back onto his skates. He sighed, brushing snow from his gloves and pants. That could have gone better. But then it could have gone worse, too. He stretched as he looked over at Alexei, waiting.

“You need to get higher and go further.” His coach paused. “You’re about seven centimeters too low and a half meter too short.” Another pause. When Alexei spoke next, however, his voice was a little lighter. “But the rotation was faster. So that rotation, with more height and more distance. I want you to have this jump down before the end of the season. Wow everyone at Worlds when you knock out a quad Lutz.”

Yuuri groaned, skating over to the boards to grab his water, guzzling half the bottle down in one go. Jump practices exhausted him, especially when they were working on quads. He wasn’t a jumping powerhouse like Alexei and Viktor, but if the rumors were right and Viktor was starting to add more quads -- well, it was going to change men’s figure skating. A single quad toe-loop just wouldn’t be enough anymore for anyone. It definitely wouldn’t be for Yuuri.

He ignored the idea that he’d be the one competing at Worlds for the time being; that was just Alexei being Alexei. “Seven centimeters in height? Awfully specific, Lyosha.”

His coach shrugged. “More than five, less than ten. Is that better, Yuu-kun?”
Yuuri shook his head. Seven was easier to visualize. It was firm, not fuzzy. “Seven it is. And half a meter.” Yuuri sighed. “I don’t know. I already feel like I’m at my limit. The height I think I can do. It’s the distance. I’m not going to be able to jump that far.”

Lyosha crossed his arms over his chest. “Really? Giving up already?”

Pressing his lips together, Yuuri leaned against the wall of the rink. “I’m not going to fall for it, Alexei. You can’t trick me again.”

“And here I thought that Yuu-kun had the determination and sheer stubbornness to do just about anything.”

“I can’t break the laws of physics.”

Alexei scoffed. “The laws of physics were made to be broken.” He smiled. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

“In video games! In video games! Realistic physics engines are overrated. Being able to pull off ridiculous stunts is much more fun.” Yuuri couldn’t help the smile that quirked up the corner of his lips. “Skating isn’t a video game, though. And gravity is a thing.”

Alexei laughed. “Just try anyway. I’m your coach.”

Yuuri started skating again, working up speed until he felt he had enough momentum. Until the jump was learned, there’d be nothing fancy about his entry. He focused instead on making sure that he had his edges right and there he dug his toe pick into the ice and pushed off, putting more power into the jump then he had on previous attempts, bringing his arms close and tight into his chest as he rotated, higher and further...

He didn’t stick the landing; far from it. He slid across the ice and knew that he’d have a fresh bruise on his leg come morning, but it felt better -- like four rotations and not three and half, or three and three quarters.

“дерьмо.”

Yuuri pushed himself up off the ice and turned. He knew that voice. And maybe he’d cracked his head when he landed because there was no way that Viktor was here in Osaka.

Except when he turned to face Alexei, his coach was no longer alone. Viktor was standing next to him, satchel slung over his shoulder and a look of disbelief on his face. Yuuri just stared.

“That was four! You got the rotations. Now you just need to land it!” Yuuri could hear the smile in Alexei’s voice. “I knew you could do it!”

Yuuri sucked his bottom lip between his teeth and chewed on it as he made his way over to the boards. “Vi… Viktor? What are you doing here?”

“Ice show!” Viktor winked. “Miss me?”

It’d been more than six months since Yuuri had seen Viktor at the Grand Prix finals in Tokyo, but he wasn’t surprised at the slightly longer hair, currently pulled out of Viktor’s face with a hair tie. After all, no one, except maybe Chris and Phichit, liked taking selfies as often as Viktor did.

“Not at all.”
“Yuuuuuri! Don’t be mean! I switched out a show in Canada so that I could do this one instead! You should be happy! Even came days earlier than I needed to!”

“You’re skating? In the ice show next week? Why?”

Viktor shrugged. “Espionage! I’ve decided that I need to see what my competitors are up to.”

Yuuri blinked. “Oda doesn’t train at this rink. He’s at the Kansai University rink, if he’s in Japan at all. He’s probably in New Jersey right now.”

“Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri. You!” Viktor reached out and tugged Yuuri closer to the boards, keeping a hold on Yuuri’s bicep. Yuuri glanced down at Viktor’s fingers, pale against the dark fabric of his shirt. “I’ve heard rumors of Tano jumps and quad Lutzes.”

“But… I’m not competition.”

Viktor just stared at him. “Yes, you are.”

***

Yuuri landed the triple flip with a solid thunk and moved into the familiar step sequence. He didn’t need the music; he knew this sequence ridiculously well, since he himself had choreographed it. Then heard Viktor’s skates hit the ice and turned so that he could watch as Viktor skated around the edge of the ice they’d been allotted for practice. Technically speaking, Viktor was just borrowing part of Yuuri’s ice -- with proper compensation, of course. Alexei refused to let Viktor be a freeloader on principle.

Viktor’s eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Yuuri looking at him. Yuuri just grinned in response. “That’s Mila’s routine.”

“I’m not a spy!” Viktor scoffed and started racing Yuuri around the perimeter of the half-rink. The other side was taken up with an intermediate group of four, skaters just learning how to do their basic jumps and some more complicated steps.

Yuuri shrugged. “Pretty sure you outed yourself as one when you arrived. Does it matter? You know I skate whatever comes to mind when I’m warming up. Besides, now that I know you’re here to spy on me…” Laughing, he sped up, crossing one foot in front of the other. It almost felt like the rink in St. Petersburg, just Yuuri and Viktor on the ice, pushing at each other. Viktor always made him better. And they had fun.

He bit back the grin when Viktor pouted. “Skate the song from that music video.”

Yuuri shook his head fast enough that he had to spin out into a stop before he lost track of where he was going. “No. I’m…” He sighed. “I’m going to skate that later, probably during this afternoon’s session, so I don’t want to skate it right now.”

“But Yuuri, that’s a one-on-one! Alexei says that I can’t come to that practice!”

“Working on step sequences this morning.” Alexei’s voice carried over and broke into their conversation. “If you want to work on jumps, Vitya, keep a careful watch please.”

“No, step sequences are fine. If I do anything, I’ll make it a single.”

Alexei nodded. “Free skate first, Yuu-kun. At half speed, please. It’s still rough.”
Yuuri nodded and closed his eyes for just a second as he skated along the outer edge, trying to center his mind into the piece of classical piano music that his Free Skate was choreographed to, then slowing it down in his head.

He had to be precise when he started, since the song picked up so much right at where his step sequence would begin. When Lilia had gone through what she had wanted and at the speed that she had wanted it, Yuuri had thought that it had been impossible, but he was getting there. He could do it at speed, but it wasn’t perfect.

But there was still time. They’d probably drill the step sequence for a good half hour.

On the third runthrough at half speed, Yuuri caught sight of Viktor watching him, lips pressed into a thin line. Startled, Yuuri ended up misstepping and doing a counter instead of a rocker, and suddenly the whole thing was off. He sighed and skated around a few times to stretch his legs, then threw in a layback Ina Bauer since it would be a good chance to work out his back as well.

“That’s half speed?” Viktor’s voice sounded disbelieving.

“It’s a fast piece of music. I probably won’t do it at full speed until tonight.”

“One more time, Yuu-kun,” Alexei interjected. “Then we’ll move onto the short.”

Yuuri nodded and started the routine again, keeping one eye on Viktor as he skated over to talk to his coach.

***

Viktor stretched his arms over his head before sitting down on the bench by the lockers. “I’m really not a spy.”

Yuuri laughed and pulled out a fresh shirt from his locker. “I know. Alexei just wanted to give you a hard time. It’s not like Yakov doesn’t know what my program is, or what Alexei is working with me on. They talk. And I know that Katya and Mila were sending you pictures, for some unknown reason.” He closed the metal door and turned to face Viktor, leaning back against all the lockers. “The question is, why don’t I get pictures of you?”

Viktor’s heart skipped a beat, but he grinned. “Yuuri! I didn’t realise that you wanted pictures of me! I would have sent you more. Did you like the ones that I sent before? You never said.”

Yuuri’s face flushed. “That’s not what I meant! Skating.” Yuuri looked down at the floor. “I wouldn’t mind getting pictures of you skating.”

He couldn’t help the way he licked his lips, but Viktor knew he was in dangerous territory. He pressed his palms hard against the polished wood of the bench he was sitting on. “Oh.” Yuuri had blushed when Viktor mentioned the ads. Was he just embarrassed, or did he like them? Did Yuuri find him attractive? “Just skating?”

Yuuri sucked in a deep breath, shoulders lifting, and turned his face up to the ceiling. “It’s not that hard to find your advertisements on the internet, you know. But practice pictures? Candids when you aren’t expecting a photographer? Those are impossible. The only pictures of you practicing are always perfect.” He looked back at Viktor, though the color was still high on his cheeks. “I know you don’t always skate perfect.”

Viktor laughed. “So you want pictures of me on my ass on the ice? Yuuri! That’s not very nice!”
But Yuuri was shaking his head. “No! No, that wasn’t what I meant!” He pushed off the lockers and sank down onto the bench next to Viktor, bumping shoulders as he did so. “I want pictures of you having fun on the ice. Do you still have fun on the ice?”

Viktor tilted his head to the side; he could hear Yuuri’s quiet breathing beside him, but he didn’t turn to look at him. “I do. Sometimes. Not as much as I had when you were there, though. Even less when I go back.”

“Even less?”

He sighed. “Katya is officially moving to Moscow for at least a year. So it’ll be Georgi and Mila and me as Yakov’s main students. Apparently he’s bringing on a Novice as soon as he’s age-eligible early next year, but…” Viktor shrugged.

“You have even less in common with ten-year-olds now then you did when I was there. And Mila is Mila.”

“Mila is a force of nature that won’t share her Yuuri merchandise with me!” Yuuri pushed him and Viktor laughed, throwing his arms around Yuuri’s shoulders in a hug. “Yuuri! You should take pity on me and help me find all the merchandise that I missed out on when I didn’t come with Mila and Katya! Please!”

A cough behind them kept Yuuri from answering. “Shouta!” Yuuri unwound Viktor’s arm from around him, but didn’t move away. “Practice over?”

The other boy nodded and then answered in Japanese before pausing and saying something else, looking pointedly at Viktor while he did it.

They kept talking; eventually Yuuri stood up and walked over to him. Viktor didn’t have a hope of understanding their conversation. It was sort of annoying, and not for the first time, Viktor contemplated taking Japanese lessons. The only thing that ever stopped him was the difficulty combined with the time required. It wouldn’t be impossible to find the time, but neither would it be easy.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Yuuri’s boyfriend press his lips to his forehead before shrugging and walking into the shower room. He turned at the last minute to toss his shirt at Yuuri, who blushed.

Viktor trained his eyes on the wall in the other direction, wishing he hadn’t been there.

***

Yuuri collapsed on the couch next to Viktor. “Anna Karenina?”

He snapped his book shut. “Am I not allowed to read the great literature of my country?”

“You’ve read it before. That’s the only reason I even know what you’re reading. Did you finally finish the The Three Musketeers?”

Viktor nodded. “Shortly after Worlds. I was thinking of getting The Count of Monte Cristo next. Or, if I am feeling in a terribly romantic mood, some Austen.”

Yuuri laughed. “Some author just released a book called Pride and Prejudice and Zombies if you’re looking for a different take on Jane Austen.”
“No. Really?”

Yuuri nodded. “Phichit -- he’s a Junior skater that just moved to the US to train from his home in Thailand -- mentioned it on Twitter.”

“Maybe I should read that instead.” Viktor pulled one leg up onto the couch and turned to look at Yuuri. “What are you reading?”

“In English? *Romeo and Juliet*.” Yuuri scrunched up his face. “I don’t actually like it all that much.”

“And for fun?”

Yuuri rolled his eyes. “I think the last book I read was *Battle Royale*. Nishigori leant it to me. I’m not nearly the reader that you are.”


Yuuri reached out and twisted a lock of Viktor’s chin-length hair around a finger. “It’s about this dystopia where the government makes some junior high kids battle each other to the death on an island. It’s Japanese, I don’t know if it’s been translated.”

Viktor tilted his head but didn’t pull away from where Yuuri was playing with his hair. “Sounds gruesome.”

“It is. It took me forever to read it. There were some really intense parts. But it was good.”

Viktor pulled away and set his book on the armrest of the couch. “We should watch something. More *FMA*, maybe. We’re only a little over halfway through.” Yuuri saw Viktor glance over at him and he smiled. “You can even try to braid my hair or something. It’s at the length that bothers me the most. I can never keep it out of my face.”

Yuuri bit his lip, happiness bubbling up in his chest. “It’ll be like Russia.”

“Yeah.”

***

<vnikiforov>Practice in Osaka! http://twitpic.com/l810sf #3musketeers #2outof3aintbad posted from Tweetie 3 hours ago</vnikiforov>

<vnikiforov>@blueroses Yes! I am here for an ice show! @yuuri_katsuki will be in it as well! Rehearsals start next week posted from Tweetie 3 hours ago</vnikiforov>

<vnikiforov>@quadflip Great username! I like it! But no, I’m only doing a show in Osaka. But @yuuri_katsuki will be in Hakodate? Is that close? posted from Tweetie 3 hours ago</vnikiforov>

<vnikiforov>@quadflip That’s too bad. He’s an awesome skater. posted from Tweetie 2 hours ago</vnikiforov>

<vnikiforov>@teamchris I think @christophegc is staying in Switzerland to train. He might do a more local ice show posted from Tweetie 2 hours ago</vnikiforov>

<vnikiforov>@christophegc It was a super secret stealth operation! Though it would have been more fun with all three of us. #3musketeers #ireadit posted from Tweetie 10s ago</vnikiforov>
Viktor
If you’re up, I need to talk to you.
Yuuri and I stayed up late watching anime.

Chris
Yay?

Viktor
He played with my hair. Braided part of it for me.

Chris
Yay?

Viktor
Chris! This is serious. I… shit. What was I thinking?
I came to Osaka and I’m spending all this time with Yuuri but it’s just on this side of awkward
and I think he realises that something is wrong.

Chris
You mean you aren’t hanging all over him and
being a human leech? Good for you! Self control is important.

Viktor
Fuck off. Alexei is being careful what parts of
Yuuri’s programs I see. And Yuuri has been
teasing me. And he won’t tell me what he’s
skating for the ice show yet.

Chris
Are you still planning to skate to Katy Perry?

Viktor
Yes! And he asked who I was skating about
He thinks it’s YOU.
Will you be my beard?

Chris
No.

Viktor
PLEASE
I don't want things to be awkward between us.

Chris
No.

Viktor
PLEASE! I NEED THIS! HIS BOYFRIEND KEEPS
BEING AFFECTIONATE.

Chris
Pretty sure that’s what boyfriends do.

vnikiforov Warm-up!  http://twitpic.com/kah926 #3musketeers #2outof3aintbad #morningstretches #whydidmyalarmgooffat5am posted from Tweetie 1s ago

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Viktor hit the ice, immediately rebounding as if he was skating an actual performance before stopping with a sigh. From the boards, Alexei called out to him. “That was an utter disaster.”

“I know.” He skated over to get a breakdown of what he was doing wrong with the back counter entrance into his triple axel from Alexei, but his eyes trailed over to where Yuuri sat in the stands with his boyfriend. They were chatting to some kid -- or rather, some kid had gone over to them and was waving his hands around all excited, talking about something while Yuuri kept a patient smile on his face but didn’t interrupt. “What’s the deal with those two?”

Alexei snorted. “You didn’t hear one word I said about your skating just now, did you? They’re dating. So I suppose the normal sorts of things that go on between a couple. I don’t ask, and Yuuri doesn’t tell me. And as long as his skating isn’t affected -- or Nakagawa-kun’s swimming -- I don’t care. Those are the rules.”

Viktor watched the two teenagers wave to the youngster as he went off and made his way back onto the ice; his coach must have yelled at him. “Fan of Yuuri’s?” he asked when the kid passed by them.

“Second-year Novice skater. He’s pretty good, but wasn’t picked for the camp. He used to never try and talk to Yuuri, but he’s started in recent weeks.” Alexei shrugged. “Yuuri’s probably the most decorated skater at this rink, and everyone is hoping that will continue when he moves on to Seniors. It’s not a bad idea for the younger skaters to ask him for advice.”

Viktor took a long drink of water from his bottle before turning his attention back to Alexei. “So then Yuuri is definitely going to be competing in Seniors this year, right?” He did his best to keep the hope out of his voice.

“My god, how did I not realize this sooner?” Alexei dropped his own voice to an almost theatrical whisper. Even though they were speaking Russian, it wasn’t like Yuuri didn’t understand the language. “You have a crush on him. That’s why you’re skating to that ridiculous Katy Partridge song.”

“Katy Perry. Seriously, Lyosha, you aren’t that old.” Viktor let himself look back over to where Yuuri was now in a quiet conversation with the boyfriend. Their heads were close together even though there was a decent amount of space between them, and they were animatedly whispering to each other. He frowned, then sighed. This sucked. “It’s not like that. Yuuri’s my best friend. There are things that I’ll tell him when I wouldn’t tell anyone else. If I’m having a bad day on the ice, he’s the first person I message about it.”

“Uh-huh.”

Viktor glanced at Alexei from the corner of his eye. Alexei was looking smug, damn him. “It’s complicated. And he’s dating someone. And… it sucks, all right? It’s seriously the worst.”
Shouta stood up and grinned down at Yuuri, who hadn’t budged from his seat on the stands as he took another long draw of water from his bottle.

“Back to practice?”

Shouta nodded. “Yeah, I have another hour or so in the pool to go, but I came since it’s my long break. I’m just glad that you were able to take a break. Not that watching you skate is a real hardship or anything.”

Yuuri laughed. “I needed one. Alexei has been pushing really hard. He wants to make sure that when I go to some of those lower-level Senior competitions this year, I’ll have the stamina to hold my own.”

“Stamina is something you don’t have to worry about, I don’t think. Should I tell him that?”

“No! Don’t you dare.” Yuuri stood up. “You’re going to do great at your meet this weekend. You know that, I know that, your coach knows that.”

“Yeah, I do.” Shouta dug into the pocket of the hoodie he’d put on before going into the rink. A bare chest and a swimsuit were not a recommended ensemble for an air conditioned ice rink. Why’d he have to fall for an ice skater? His heart clenched; it was now or never. He took the ticket out of his pocket and held it out to Yuuri. “I know that you’d never miss my meet, especially when it’s here. So I procured an extra ticket for your poster boy over there. Might as well bring him.”

Yuuri took the ticket. “Are you sure?”

Shouta shrugged. “I may not like looking at his picture lining your wall, but I know he’s your friend. And while I’m not giving up on you coming to my meet, I figure you should still be able to spend time with him. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Do you want me to take the ticket back?”

Yuuri shook his head and clenched the ticket tight in his hand. “No! Of course not. It’s… thanks.”

“No problem.” Shouta paused and glanced over at the rink to see if Alexei was waiting for them to stop talking. It wouldn’t have been the first time Alexei had registered his displeasure, tapping his wrist with one finger to indicate that Shouta was taking up too much of Yuuri’s ice time. But Alexei was leaning on the boards, talking and looking at the Russian. Instead, it was the Russian himself that was staring at them, and Shouta turned away quickly. Those bright blue eyes were pretty intense. “I should get back, and you probably shouldn’t be wasting any more ice time.”

“Probably. We’re working on jump entrances today. It’s pretty nice being able to skate with Viktor again. We worked together a lot in Russia.” Yuuri was smiling; it was soft and sweet, and Shouta really wanted to kiss him, but he couldn’t. Not in the middle of the rink, and not when the Russian was looking at them. Even if he could, it wouldn’t have been a sweet sort of kiss. A possessive one, maybe, but— Shouta shook his head. “Come find me when you’ll done. I’ll take a short break to say goodbye, all right?”

“Yeah.”

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Yuuri stopped at the bottom of the stairs and just stared at Viktor. “No. We need to go back to your hotel. You need to change.”

Viktor for his part held his hands out, even though they were in the pockets of his hoodie. The hoodie wasn’t zipped up, and Yuuri could see the shirt underneath. It went ridiculously well with the black designer jeans and half-boots that Viktor was wearing. All in all, Viktor looked amazing. However, if Yuuri let Viktor go to the meet like that, there was a real risk that he’d pass out.

“The building is air conditioned. I’ll be fine.”

“But the pool isn’t. It’s warm and really humid in there.” Yuuri grabbed the bag he’d put a couple of bleacher pads in to sit on. “So we’re going back to the hotel and you’re going to change into something that doesn’t cost so much and won’t give you heat stroke.”

Viktor pouted, but followed Alexei and Yuuri out to Alexei’s car, getting into the back seat. Driving into downtown Osaka wasn’t ideal, but it was better than the alternative: having to leave the meet before Shouta’s heat with an unconscious Viktor. Seriously, a hoodie? What was Viktor thinking?

Alexei dropped them off in front of Viktor’s hotel and told them he would meet them back there in fifteen minutes. Yuuri nodded and pulled Viktor from the backseat.

In the lobby he finally looked over at Viktor, who was still pouting, and sighed. “If Alexei has to pay some outrageous sum to park somewhere for fifteen minutes, you’re reimbursing him.”

“Yuuuuuuri! You’re the one that wants me to change.” They stepped into the elevator. “I just wanted to look nice since we’re going to see your boyfriend swim.”

“Look nice? Why?”

Viktor didn’t look at him, just stared at the mirrored doors of the elevator. “Shouldn’t I always look nice?”

Yuuri sighed. “You always do. It’s not about not looking nice, it’s about not passing out. Trust me, the heat in there is going to murder you. No hoodie, short sleeves, and…” Yuuri bit his lip. “Did you bring those shorts? The long ones? From that selfie you took at the lake?”

Viktor nodded. “Did you like them? They’re really comfortable. Usually I wouldn’t wear them out to something important, but if you insist...!”

“I do!”

Back in the hotel room, Yuuri watched as Viktor stripped off the hoodie and tossed it onto the bed. Then came his shirt, and when Viktor’s hands went to the button of his jeans, Yuuri realized that he was staring and had to look away. But he instead ended up turning his head toward the large mirror on the wall and so caught sight of the tight briefs that Viktor was wearing under his jeans, ones that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. He blushed, but couldn't look away.

“Like what you see?”

“AHH! It’s not like that! I just...” Yuuri spun around so that he was facing the other way and only had the boring hotel wall to look at. Viktor was laughing and it sounded so bright and happy; Yuuri just knew that Viktor would never stop teasing him about this. “I didn’t mean to see anything.”

“I don’t mind.”
Of course Viktor wouldn’t mind. Viktor was practically an exhibitionist.

“It’s safe to look, you know. I have the shorts on.”

Yuuri turned back around. “Safe” was relative here; Viktor might have pulled on the bermuda shorts, but he still wasn’t wearing a shirt. He had moved to stand in front of the closet and was now looking through his options. Yuuri swallowed and sat down on the edge of the bed. He could handle this like a rational human being. Yes, Viktor was hot. He’d known that for ages. He even had those pictures that Viktor had sent months ago as reminders of that. And he knew he was attracted to Viktor. Again, that wasn’t surprising; he’d been drawn to Viktor ever since he realised that boys were at least as attractive, if not more attractive, than girls.

Still, there was just something about seeing a half-naked Viktor in front of him that made his brain short circuit just a little. He sighed. He might as well enjoy the view. He watched as the loose white shirt was slipped over Viktor’s head and finally covered the pale expense of his chest and stomach. Yuuri swallowed.

“Better?”

Yuuri took a step forward and reached out to feel the fabric of the shirt. Not that he needed to; he was already familiar with the material. It was a very worn sort of cotton; popular in Europe for the season, light and airy. But he wanted to touch it just for a second regardless. Shouta would be pissed if he knew...

Yuuri drew his hand away again and frowned, mad at himself for having given in even a little. “Yeah. I don’t have to worry about you as much.”

Viktor traded his half-boots and socks for a pair of deck shoes. “Good. I don’t want you to miss your boyfriend’s swim.” Viktor grinned at him.

“Do me a favor and don’t call Shouta my ‘boyfriend’ at the pool. I know for a fact that some administrators from school are going to be there. He’s practically a shoo-in for the Olympic team at this point if he can keep his times as competitive as they’ve been.”

Viktor grabbed Yuuri’s wrist and pulled him toward the door. “All right. I won’t call him that. I can call him your friend, though.”

Yuuri let himself be dragged through the hotel. “Yeah. Or you could just call him ‘Nakagawa’.”

“Or I could just speak in Russian, and then it doesn’t matter what I call him, since I doubt that your school administrators can speak it.” Viktor’s smile was blinding.

When they got back into Alexei’s car, Alexei just nodded. “Good call, Yuuri.”

“Do I owe you anything for parking?” Viktor leaned forward from the back seat. “Yuuri made me promise to pay you back.”

Alexei just shook his head. “No. I stopped and picked up some water for the two of you. Make sure you both stay hydrated. The ice show is coming up soon. And let me know how Nakagawa-kun does in his heats.”

***

Viktor

(image of a group of swimmers warming up)

The boyfriend is on the left
Chris
He’s a specimen all right
Why are you there?

Viktor
He gave Yuuri a ticket for me. So that Yuuri
could still spend time with me
Or something. I suspect ulterior motives

Chris
That boy is ripped. I’d like to lick that
six pack

Viktor
NO! CHRIS! FUCK NO!
He’s the enemy!
Or something.

Chris
Enemy or not, the boy is easy on the eyes

Viktor
I hate you.

Chris
You don’t. You just like to pretend that you
do.

vnikiforov At a swim meet with @yuuri_katsuki cheering on a classmate. Good luck! posted from Tweetie 5 min ago

yuuri_katsuki RT @vnikiforov At a swim meet with @yuuri_katsuki cheering on a classmate. Good luck! posted from mobile web 3 min ago

yuuri_katsuki @butterflyswimNS 硬張って posted from mobile web 3 min ago

katsudonyuuri 翔太なら出来るよ！ @butterflyswimNS http://twitpic.com/l3ah79 posted from mobile web 30s ago

***

“You go to a lot of these?”

Yuuri glanced over at Viktor, who was sticking his cell phone back into his pocket. “When I can. He’s doing meets all over Japan at the moment to make sure that he has one of the top times in the country for his events.”

“Does he really have Olympic potential?” Viktor was frowning down toward the deck, where the competitors were starting to get into position.

“His coach thinks so. If he makes the London team, he’ll get to go to the Olympics before I do.” Yuuri smiled down at Shouta and waved.
“You should have been in Vancouver.”

Yuuri stopped looking at the deck and instead turned to face Viktor, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Yes, I should have, but I wasn’t and there is nothing that I can do about it. Instead, I got to celebrate with Yuu-chan and Nishigori. All of that is in the past.”

“I hope that Taku realizes that he’s an ass.”

Yuuri shrugged. It didn’t matter. He’d come to terms with the situation, and more importantly, he couldn’t let that debacle affect him anymore than it already had. He had enough stressors in his life without dwelling on the 2010 Olympics, too. “It won’t help anything to complain about it. Taku still can’t skate; might never skate again. Last I heard, he had to undergo a second surgery on his ankle.”

He saw Viktor bite his lip; the inner conflict was written all over his face. There were certain things no skater should ever say about another out loud, but Viktor’s expression all but shouted them. “Don’t.”

Viktor just nodded and leaned against Yuuri. “Fine. I won’t. Can I have some water? It really is warm in here.”

Yuuri shook his head, but reached into his bag and pulled out one of the bottles that Alexei had procured for them. Luckily, it was still cold. He took a sip himself before handing it over to Viktor.

Grinning, Viktor drained half the bottle before looking over at Yuuri, “Don’t they call this sort of thing an indirect kiss?”

Yuuri could feel the color rise on his cheeks, but he rolled his eyes anyway. “Don’t be an idiot.”

With a laugh, Viktor handed back the bottle. “I’ll try. That’s him, right, climbing onto the middle block?”

Nodding, Yuuri leaned forward. “They tend to put the faster swimmers in a heat together and the fastest of those swimmers in the center. Ready to see the 100m butterfly?”

“Whatever that is, sure.”

***

First practice at the arena where the ice show was to be held was hectic. Most of the attention was on Viktor, and he hadn’t been prepared for it. He’d thought that he would just swan in and do his thing, then hang out with Yuuri. Instead, Viktor had found himself all but besieged by various other skaters. He knew them, for the most part, or at least knew of them.

“So, you're the one to beat this season. You and Giacometti.”

Viktor smiled at Cao Bin; the Chinese skater was clearly trying to butter him up. “I certainly hope so, though I hear through the grapevine that you have a quad Sal this season?”

Cao’s own smile was just on the side of shallow. “I do. I hear you're adding one as well. What about your little friend? We're competing at Finlandia this coming season. I know he has a quad toe, but does he have a Sal hiding, too?”

For once, Viktor knew he could talk about Yuuri’s training and not get in trouble. He’d even be telling the truth. “No, he doesn't. Yuuri hates Salchows.”
Cao Bin nodded. “Good to know.” He paused. “What about you? Are you planning on going to any lower level competitions?”

Viktor shrugged. “I leave those decisions up to my coach and the RSF. They haven’t shared my competition schedule with me yet. Yakov says I’m too distractible and am liable to not focus on the skating if I know where I’ll be going too early. Since I agree with him, I don’t mind. Better to focus on the skating itself then where I’ll be skating.”

“I can understand that. Will we be seeing an early version of your programs here?”

“Afraid not. It'll be my new Exhibition program. Which is a lot of fun!”

Cao seemed to lose interest at that point and excused himself from the conversation a minute later, but before Viktor could get to Yuuri -- who had been dragged by Riku into a conversation with one of the ladies’ singles performers -- another skater had cornered him, and Viktor ended up repeating the same thing he'd spoken with Cao about.

And then they were working on the simple opening and ending numbers that the production company wanted for the show. This ice show was going to be televised across Japan, and they were reminded of that fact at least five times while they practiced the comparatively elementary skating choreography.

The bigger task was making sure everyone stayed together. Matching stroke speed and length required the most work; they also had to make sure timings were on point so no one would get injured in a collision.

By the time Viktor collapsed on the couch in Alexei and Riku’s living room, he was exhausted. And from his spot on the floor, head pillowed on his arms on the low table, Viktor could tell that Yuuri was just as tired.

“Perk up, you two. Tomorrow morning you have ice time at the sports complex. You don't have to be at the arena until the afternoon. Yuuri, you're even excused from morning classes so we can get a slightly later start.”

Most of their days were similar. They had personal ice time at the sports complex for an hour or two in either the morning or the evening, depending if they were in the morning or evening practice group for the ice show. Since Alexei was playing de facto coach for Viktor, he had managed to keep the two of them in the same group.

So Viktor now had a front row seat to Yuuri’s program for the ice show, and it took him approximately half a minute to recognize it as the one from the music video. How Viktor was supposed to handle that was beyond him, and his conversations with Chris were all completely useless -- his idea of “advice” was to remind Viktor to get video and pics of Yuuri in that costume.

In the end, he didn't even get a chance to figure out a plan of action before everything blew up in his face.

***

“Can I borrow Yuuri for five minutes, Turov-san?”

Yuuri looked back and forth between Shouta and Alexei. He hadn’t expected his boyfriend to be waiting for him when they arrived at the sports complex. Shouta should have been in the middle of his evening training; instead, they’d found him leaning against the wall near the entrance, obviously waiting.
“Not too long. And don’t go back into that janitorial closet.”

Yuuri flushed. He hadn’t known that Alexei had found out about that. Obviously they’d have to find a new hiding place, but Shouta was usually pretty good about picking those.

But that wouldn’t be why Shouta was waiting; not when he knew Yuuri had practice.

“I just need to talk to him alone for a few minutes.” Shouta’s eyes flickered over him, then over his shoulder to where Viktor was standing. That provoked a frown in the swimmer. This was probably going to be an awkward conversation; Yuuri hadn’t thought that Shouta would be jealous, but maybe… Even though he’d assured him more than once that he was only friends with Viktor.

“Coming?”

Shouta’s voice made Yuuri jump, but he nodded and handed his bag over to Alexei to take into the rink. He didn’t want to lug it to whatever corner of the complex that Shouta had found for them to talk. “Yes.” He wanted to grab Shouta’s hand, but he couldn’t, not when they were walking through the sports complex, so instead Yuuri pushed his hands into the pockets of his tracksuit jacket and tried to ignore the anxiety that was bubbling under the surface and crawling up his spine.

They went up one flight of stairs in the back corner of the building, and then made their way into an empty studio room. “No one’s scheduled to use this room for over an hour.” Shouta pushed the door open and waited for Yuuri to go go inside.

Yuuri nodded as the door closed behind them. “What’s wrong? You wouldn’t ask to talk to me unless it was important. Did you drop in the rankings? You came in first at the meet, and I know that it wasn’t your best time. But it was really close.”

Shouta smiled, but it wasn’t a smile that Yuuri was familiar with. There was an edge to it that made Yuuri even more uncomfortable. It was almost… sad. The sudden feeling of uncertainty tightened in his chest and Yuuri found it slightly harder to breathe.

“I was going to wait. I’ve been thinking about this for a couple of weeks now.” Shouta looked down at the ground. “And I figured if it was going to happen, it should probably happen when…” Shouta paused and took a shaky breath, “When Viktor was here in Osaka.”

Yuuri sighed, slightly relieved. “There’s nothing going on between Viktor and I, Shouta.”

Again with that smile. Yuuri frowned, the feeling from a moment ago doubling in intensity. The fleeting relief was gone again.

“I know. I know that you’re just friends, and that’s what I meant.”

Yuuri backed up and pressed his back against the wall. He wasn’t sure what was happening but he knew for sure that he didn’t like it. At all.

It only took Shouta three steps to be in front of him, and he reached out and pressed his fingers to Yuuri’s cheek before leaning forward and touching their foreheads together. “I hate this.”

“What do you hate?”

Shouta’s voice was quiet. “You’re moving to Sapporo. It’s on the other end of Japan, Yuuri. I’ll never see you.”

Yuuri bit his lip. “I know, but you said that distance was nothing, remember? We’ll figure something out--”
“No. We won’t. We might say that we will, but we won’t. And you know why?” There was so much certainty in Shouta’s voice. This wasn’t the sort of conversation that Yuuri had thought they were going to have.

“Shouta...”

“Because you love figure skating and I love swimming. And we both picked the universities that were best for our careers without even thinking about each other. And don’t tell me you didn’t. You did, and so did I. If I thought anything at all, it was that Fukuoka wasn’t that far from Osaka, and that you’d probably go to Kansai University because isn’t that what figure skaters do? But then you picked Sapporo, and I knew that it wasn’t going to be easy.” He breathed out hard; Yuuri could feel the warm air on his chin. “We care more about our sports than each other.”

“That’s not--”

“Not true?” Shouta moved away just enough to catch Yuuri’s gaze with his own. “Really? If I have to choose between swimming and going to the Olympics and dating you, you know that swimming wins, and you know what? I know that the same is true for your skating.”

Yuuri started to shake his head, but then stopped. It was true. Skating came first. It came before family and friends and… love. Yuuri’s voice caught in his throat. “Shouta, I--”

“I know. I do too. You’re important to me, and I wish that this didn’t have to happen and it sucks, but isn’t it better to just not dwell on it? Besides, it has to be now. My season is winding down, the next few competitions for me aren’t as important, and your season hasn’t started yet. I couldn’t spring this on you in the middle of your season. You’re already an emotional mess during your competitions. Yuuri...”

He sniffled, he couldn’t help himself. “You suck. You’re the worst.”

“I know.” Shouta pressed their foreheads together again and stroked Yuuri’s jaw with his thumb before leaning in and kissing him.

If this was going to be their last kiss, Yuuri would take it -- even if it felt like his chest was being crushed.

Even as the tears spilled over.

***

Yuuri was upset; that much was blatantly obvious when he came back to the rink. Viktor had been waiting for him outside the main doors, ready to tease him, but the look on his face shoved the words away. “What’s wrong?” He looked over Yuuri’s shoulder at the boyfriend, who locked eyes with him for a moment before looking away. Without another word, the swimmer headed for the exit, hands shoved deep into his pockets and shoulders a little hunched.

“Nothing. I want to skate.”

As the glass door closed behind the swimmer, Viktor turned back to look at Yuuri. His eyes were just a bit on the pink side. “Do I need to punch him or something?”

“No. Can we go skate?” Yuuri voice was steady as he pushed past Viktor and drew the rink door open. He headed straight for his bag, pulling his skates out, and set to work on getting ready to go onto the ice.
Alexei was there before Viktor could even start to understand the situation, and Viktor was beyond grateful for that. “Yuu-kun, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Just…” Yuuri groaned and shoved some earbuds into his ears, then went about tightening his laces.

Viktor just shrugged when Alexei turned to look at him. After a moment, he took a seat near Yuuri and started to put his own skates on, keeping one eye on Yuuri the whole time.

He was still in the middle of lacing up when Yuuri suddenly stood up and took two steps toward the ice, then stopped and turned back to face them. “We broke up. OK? Just leave me alone. I’m going to work on my step sequences.”

“блядь.”

Viktor agreed with Lyosha. The two of them looked at each other, then back to Yuuri, who was already on the ice, hard guards deposited on the boards. This definitely wasn’t going to be a normal session.

And it wasn’t. It was probably one of the most tense ice sessions that Viktor had ever been part of. Not once did Alexei stop Yuuri or give direction. He just stood there and watched, brows knotted and lips in a tight line bordering on a scowl. If he said anything, it was always directed at Viktor -- mostly about his edges, but Viktor didn’t care about his edges; not right at that moment.

Then there was Yuuri, who was just quiet and focused, and worked slowly and methodically through his sequences. That aspect Viktor was used to seeing on the ice, but the frown and furrowed brow, and the tense way that he held himself were not. Usually, Yuuri looked serene while skating, as if he were dancing or floating along the ice, completely effortless. Now he looked like the lull before a storm -- ominously quiet, but with tension coiled in every muscle, ready to shatter and crack on the ice like a bolt of lightning. At least Yuuri wasn’t doing anything foolish, like attempting jumps.

Viktor wished that he was good at emotions, but he wasn’t. Never had been. He’d never once managed to help Georgi during his long string of breakups, and he didn’t think that he’d be able to help Yuuri at all, either. So he just skated around, working a little on his own step sequences and spins, but his heart wasn’t in it. He kept checking back on Yuuri almost constantly. He wanted to make this better for him, but he couldn’t. It was the most frustrating feeling in the world.

***

Yuuri didn’t take his earbuds out at all on the way back to the house. He didn’t even talk to them, instead retreating into himself and his own brain. The only thing he said was that it wasn’t necessary for Alexei to take Viktor back to the hotel before heading home. Viktor just shrugged when Alexei looked at him. He’d do whatever Yuuri wanted or needed, and if Yuuri wanted to keep him around, that was that.

So he followed them into the house, toeing out of his sneakers and hanging his jacket up on a hook by the doorway.

“We’ll be in my room.”

Viktor tamped down the shock. He shouldn’t be surprised, but he was. He hadn’t really been up in Yuuri’s room at all this entire trip; what time they didn’t use at the rink was spent hanging out downstairs. So he followed Yuuri up, stopping halfway to call Vicchan. The puppy bounded up the
stairs, quickly passing them; Yuuri smiled at him.

Once inside his room, Yuuri leaned against the closed door and looked at the toes of his socks.

“This just sucks. I get it. I get why he did it, and I don’t even disagree, and it’s better now than later. Later would have just ruined our friendship. We would have grown to resent each other, resent the dedication we both have to our sports, to our dreams, and that wouldn’t be fair.” Yuuri looked up at him. Viktor could see the tears forming at the corner of his eyes, and he could only think please don’t cry, I don’t know how to deal with crying and I can’t ask Chris for advice right now. But Yuuri just scrubbed his fist against his eyes. “I don’t want to resent him, but it hurts.”

Viktor frowned. “What do you want me to do? Hit him?”

“No! Just…” Yuuri shook his head and stumbled to the bed, sinking down onto the edge. Viktor sat down next to him, taking care to keep space between them. This was hard. His chest felt tight, and he didn’t know why; he wasn’t the one that had been broken up with. In fact, he hadn’t even felt as bad during his own breakups as he did watching Yuuri deal with his.

Yuuri shifted back onto the bed and patted his knees. Vicchan promptly jumped up and burrowed his little head against Yuuri’s chest.

That sort of thing Viktor could do; he understood physicality. He just wasn’t sure that it was something that Yuuri would want, or need. It never hurt to offer, though. So Viktor pushed himself back against the wall and spread his legs a little, then reached out. He stopped for a second before wrapping his fingers around Yuuri’s wrist. “Come here.” Yuuri just looked at him. Viktor frowned. “Please?” He hurried on. “But only if you want to. I don’t know what else to do.”

With a nod, Yuuri shifted and moved until he was situated between Viktor’s legs, his face pressed against his chest while Vicchan sprawled half on each of their laps. Viktor’s hands went around his waist and he stroked Yuuri’s back. At the very least, Viktor knew how to hug.

He wasn’t expecting the shaking or the tears, but Yuuri’s face was pressed against him so he couldn’t see the terrified look on Viktor’s face, a fact for which Viktor was grateful. He didn’t want to mess this up. Yuuri needed him to be... something. He wasn’t sure what, but whatever it was, he would do it. So Viktor just stroked his hands down Yuuri’s back and pulled him tighter against him.

This was more than just his crush hurting over a breakup. This was his best friend hurting, and no matter how Viktor’s heart clenched and twisted in his chest -- no matter how being this close to Yuuri hurt him in ways that Viktor didn’t know he could hurt -- none of that mattered. Because there was no way that Viktor could do anything other than be there for Yuuri as long as Yuuri needed him to be. So Viktor kept his arms tight and just closed his eyes. He pressed his cheek against the top of Yuuri’s head and just whispered "Все будет хорошо" over and over.

As some point Viktor noticed that Yuuri had fallen asleep, but instead of pulling away, Viktor just stayed there.

When he woke up, he saw a plate of cold food on Yuuri’s desk across the room. Vicchan had moved to sleep next to him, half on his back. Viktor brushed his hand through Yuuri’s hair and sighed.

He was in too fucking deep.

Chapter End Notes
Translations:
дерьмо - Der'mo - shit
頑張って - Ganbatte - do your best!
翔太なら出来るよ！ Shouta nara dekiruyo - You can do it!
блядь - blyat
Все будет хорошо - Vse budet khorosho - Everything will be OK
***
So... for the first time I've tweaked history by like three months. Just because I NEEDED this. Viktor skating to Katy Perry's Teenage Dream. (So I had it come out just a little bit earlier. Forgive me!)

There's more, but I can't remember what. I'm a little bit broken up that Yuuri's SAD. (Even though I've known this was coming for AGES...)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

The ice show: special effects and after effects...

Chapter Notes

A couple housekeeping things...

Hi! Thank you so so so so so much for all of your comments! They mean the WORLD to me! I keep trying to find time to answer them all and I can't. :( But I'm still trying! I read every single one and they always bring a smile to my face.

Finally... welcome to the land of mutual pining. And well... you'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t look now, but there are a couple of girls behind us sneakily taking pictures of you.”

Yuuri did his best not to roll his eyes at Viktor. “I’m sure they’re not. They’re probably taking pictures of the temple. Or maybe...” He glanced at Viktor. “Of the handsome foreigner.”

Viktor looked flustered for half a second. “Handsome? You really think I’m handsome?”

Yuuri sighed. “You don’t need me to confirm whether or not you’re handsome, Viktor. Of course you are. The magazines all say so.”

“Don’t be so mean to me, Yuuri!” Viktor turned around and smiled at the girls. Yuuri could hear their squeaks at being caught. “写真?”

Yuuri rolled his eyes. “Of course you learned the word for ‘photo’.” Viktor just smiled and beckoned the girls over. Yuuri reached out and turned his hand over so that the palm was down. “If you’re insisting on this...”

“I am!” Viktor smiled happily as the girls approached.

“今日は!” The shorter of the two broke out into giggles. The two girls started speaking quickly about EXCITE; how they were huge fans and how they had wanted to come to see Yuuri perform, though Yuuri was pretty sure that he misunderstood them. They probably had meant Shuji-kun and just mixed up the names. They both bowed and blushed.

Yuuri wished that he could hide under a rock and never come out. “Uh... they do indeed want a picture. They’re in Osaka to see the ice show.” He’d just leave out all the rest. What Viktor didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

“Is that all?” Viktor smiled, and Yuuri got the definite sense that he knew that Yuuri was holding out on him. It was a good thing that Yuuri wasn’t above lying. “Yes!” He turned to the girls. “Of
course we don’t mind.”

The taller girl handed her camera to Viktor and thanked him for his willingness to take their picture with Yuuri.

Yuuri groaned and hung his head. This wasn’t turning out at all like he had planned. “They--”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind taking your picture with them, Yuuri! Go on!” Viktor took a few steps away and fiddled with the camera as the girls stood on either side of him, hands clasped demurely in front of them. “かわいい。” Viktor chirped.

The girls blushed before rushing over to see the picture on the camera. They both squealed and Yuuri desperately waited for the earth to swallow him up then and there.

Viktor waved as the pair scurried down the path back to the nearby shopping district. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Yuuri sighed. “It was horrible.” Just then, Viktor grabbed his wrist and started tugging him down the same path that the girls had fled. “Where are you taking me now? We’ve been going from site to site for five hours, Viktor. This isn’t what I thought we’d be doing on our last rest day before the ice show.”

“I want to go and buy some souvenirs! I saw a little shop on the street before we turned onto the temple grounds. Come on.” He clearly had no intention of relinquishing his grip on Yuuri, so Yuuri just let himself be pulled along. It wasn’t the worst way to spend a rest day, and really, he knew that Viktor was doing it to try and make him feel better. It was sweet, in its own way. And it kept him from eating his feelings, which was infinitely better. “There it is!”

The shop in question was a little bead store that sold bracelets designed to look vaguely like mala meditation beads. Each display had little printed cards underneath explaining what the beads in the bracelet were supposed to represent.

Yuuri wasn’t sure that he really understood what Viktor was going for, so he just followed him around as Viktor looked at each display in turn.

“Which one do you like?”

Yuuri jumped a little at the question. He hadn’t been expecting to have his opinion asked. After a second of looking around, he took a step toward where the blue stones were, fingering the blue aventurine. Out of all the beads on display, they were the ones most like the color of Viktor’s eyes. There was a reason blue was his favorite color, and he’d never admit it to anyone. “This one. I like blue.”

“Hm.” Viktor focused on the little card, reading the not-terribly-well-done English translation written under the crisp Japanese. “It’s a possibility, but I think this one would be better for you.”

“For me?”

Viktor took his wrist again and tugged him a few feet over to where the red stones were. He took one of the bracelets off the display and held it out. “The display says red jasper helps those who get overwhelmed easily.” Viktor slipped the bracelet on to Yuuri’s wrist; Yuuri just stared at the matte red beads. “It wouldn’t hurt, right? And it brings out the flecks in your eyes, which is always a plus in my book.”

Yuuri flushed and looked up at Viktor. “What?”
Viktor just smiled and shook his hair until his now-even-longer bangs covered his eyes. “I know! I’ll get the blue ones for myself and the red ones for you, and then it’s almost like we have a matched set!” Viktor reached out, fingers soft as they brushed against the inside of Yuuri’s wrist to remove the bracelet before going over to pick up the blue aventurine one that Yuuri had shown him. “Wait! Viktor!” Yuuri reached out and grabbed the hem of his shirt. “You aren’t really going to buy those, are you?!” They weren’t exactly the least expensive thing he could get as a “souvenir”.

“Of course I am! Then we’ll have matching charms when we skate.” He paused. “Don’t you want to have a matching charm with me?”

Yuuri croaked. Mortified, he buried his face in his hands and just nodded, not knowing what else to do. Why was Viktor doing this to him?

But of course Yuuri knew why. Viktor was trying to cheer him up, make him forget that he’d been dumped. And Yuuri appreciated it, he really did. He just wished that it didn’t come with a side of burning embarrassment and reminders of his years-old crush.

At least thinking about the torch he’d carried for Viktor kept him from focusing too much on Shouta.

“Then it’s decided!”

As they left with the bracelets nestled in individual boxes safely tucked into a pocket of Viktor’s jacket, Viktor continued. “We have to wear them when we skate. For luck! Like you wear your necklace from Lyosha and Riku.” At the crosswalk, Viktor reached out and fingered the crucifix hanging from Yuuri’s neck. Usually, Yuuri wouldn’t let anyone touch his necklace, not even Shouta, but Viktor was… well, Viktor. Maybe his skating ability would rub off onto the necklace, and then onto Yuuri.

“Didn’t Yakov give you one? Like he did for Alexei?”

Viktor nodded. “He did. He gives one to all his skaters, but I don’t wear it.” He shrugged. “I’m not religious, but my бабушка was. I think she’d roll over in her grave if I wore a crucifix.”

“Ah.” Religion wasn’t really a thing that Yuuri ever thought about.

Viktor just smiled. “But I’ve wanted a charm, and this… I think this works well. Do you think the blue will match my eyes?”

Yuuri bit his lip for a moment, unsure of what to say. Yes? Why do you think I liked them? No. Neither of those were acceptable answers. He took a deep breath. “Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

Viktor laughed, but didn’t deny it.

***

Yuuri sighed as he zipped up his warm up suit jacket over the mesh top of his costume and made his way to the exit to the locker room. He’d pretended to be deep in conversation with his coach when most of the men were changing into their costume so he could avoid them as long as possible. Why was he associated with a trend? It wasn’t like he begrudged Shuji-kun and EXCITE their bump in popularity; he just wished that he’d been left out of it.

Now he just needed to find Riku and go through the embarrassment of having his makeup done.
Yuuri turned and saw Shuji walking down the hallway toward him. He held up a hand in greeting.

“Shuji-kun. You know that I could have skated to just a recording, right? You didn’t have to perform live. Though I did run into some of your fans the other day. They wanted a picture, since I was in your MV.”

Shuji grinned. “We’re boosting each other’s profiles! Isn’t it great?” He fell into step beside Yuuri.

“I was thinking that when things quiet down after the show and your friend there leaves for Russia or wherever, you and I should go to the game center. I’ve heard that you haven’t had much of a chance to go the last couple of months. It’d be fun.” Shuji had shoved his hands into the pockets of his too-tight pants as they walked.

Yuuri shrugged. “I haven’t. Things have been busy with arrivals of one unexpected guest after another.” He looked over at Shuji, but Shuji wasn’t looking back at him. “But that would be good, I think. Thanks.” He smiled.

“Then it’s a date!” Shuji turned so that he was walking backward, allowing him to look at Yuuri as they kept moving.

Yuuri just rolled his eyes. Trust Shuji to be over-dramatic about hanging out at an arcade. “Yeah, sure, all right. You do realise that you’re going to walk into a janitor’s cart, right?”

Shuji squawked and jumped sideways, giving Yuuri only a split-second to avoid bumping into him. “Yuuri-kun, there’s nothing there!”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you could have. You should always watch where you’re going.”

“All right, I’ll try to remember that. Don’t forget you promised to go out with me.” Shuji winked and then took off down the hall -- probably to perform a sound check or something. He had to get the AV squared away before the skaters took to the ice for their warm up, after all. Yuuri turned the corner after him and almost ran into Viktor.

“I saw the singer guy rush off. Were you talking?” Viktor turned the edges of his mouth into a smile, but it wasn’t any sort of smile that Yuuri had ever seen before. Yuuri frowned, knowing his brow was wrinkled, and watched as Viktor’s face changed as if in slow motion. Viktor’s eyes widened and his mouth opened; he licked his bottom lip and then looked away from Yuuri, shaking his head. “Just curious. You’re skating to live music. It can be hard.”

Ah. “Yeah, but Shuji-kun has watched enough skating to know that he can’t mess with the tempo that we agreed on. That wasn’t what we were talking about. He just wanted me to go to the game center with him. You know.” Yuuri shrugged. “I guess he just wants to cheer me up. He knew about Shouta and I…” Yuuri let his voice trail off and dropped his gaze.

Viktor was fiddling with his new bracelet. His Russian team jacket was open, showing off the glimmering shirt and loosened tie of his costume. Yuuri let himself take it all in, from the way that Viktor had tied his hair half up so it was out of his face while he skated to the way the deep V of the partially open button-down shirt showed off the dip in Viktor’s collarbone.

“What do you think?”

Yuuri swallowed and quickly looked up at Viktor. The question had stopped Yuuri from letting his eyes sink lower to the custom stretch denim jeans that Viktor was wearing -- the ones that clung to his hips and ass almost like a second skin -- or where they skimmed over his calves, tight, but not
excessively so. Or where Yuuri knew he could catch just a peek of hipbone if Viktor shifted, letting his shirt and jacket ride up…

“It’s more understated than what I was expecting from you,” is what Yuuri found himself saying.

Viktor tossed his head back and laughed, then winked at him. If Yuuri hadn’t had as much practice dealing with guys winking at him as he did -- and Shuji offered all the experience needed in that regard -- he probably would have blushed. But he didn't, and he'd never been more grateful for that

“I decided to let the skating speak for me this time. Besides, Yakov vetoed the costume with no shirt at all.”

“No shirt at…?” Yuuri didn't even care how his voice cracked. He shook himself. “Are you insane? Not only would skating without a shirt be inappropriate, but what if you fall? You could get really scraped up.”

“No scolding on how I’d freeze to death?”

“You'd work up enough of a sweat… but I can't imagine that it's good for your muscles. I'll leave those sorts of arguments to the professionals.”

Viktor was smiling again -- any trace of that strange fake smile gone -- and they fell into matched steps as they headed toward the ice and their boots. It was almost time for the warm up to begin.

And Yuuri still needed to get his makeup done. Damn.

***

Viktor watched from his place against the wall as Yuuri stretched, his jacket riding up in the back to expose the tight mesh top of his skating costume. Viktor swallowed. Now was not the time to let his imagination run wild. He'd told himself at least thirty times that he needed to be there for Yuuri as a friend. A Friend.

Friend.

But then Yuuri’s jacket pulled tighter across his back and Viktor’s train of thought came to a crashing stop. Instead, he found himself staring at the way Yuuri’s hair brushed against his nape, wondering if Yuuri was sensitive there. The nape of the neck was an erogenous zone, or so one of Katya’s magazines had claimed. (How to drive your man insane!) Would Yuuri shiver if Viktor ghosted his fingers over his skin, tracing just underneath the collar of that jacket? What if he pressed his lips just under the hairline in the faintest of kisses?

Viktor sucked in a deep breath.

Fuck.

Friends. Just how was he supposed to manage that?

He took out his phone.

Victor

How does one do friendship when one has a crush who was just broken up with and yet said friend who one has a crush on is
skating in see through mesh and what basically amounts to bondage gear and is currently warming up not ten feet away and proving to be distracting for all the wrong reasons?

Chris
Well… that's not specific at all.

Viktor
Are you going to help me or not?
Maybe I should just tell him.

Chris
...
Tell him what?
It better not be that you have a crush on him.

Viktor
Why not? He's single. I'm single. He has a zillion posters of me.
He blushes when I flirt with him sometimes.

Chris
Sometimes?

Viktor
If he's not rolling his eyes at me.

Chris
Viktor do not confess

Viktor frowned at the phone.

Viktor
Why not?

Chris
You don't want to be his rebound. You like him too much. It'd break your heart if he backs away because he doesn't want to get burned again.
Give the boy some time.
Be his friend. It's what he needs.
He does not need another relationship.
I guarantee you that he's scared to get hurt again.
If he's even ready for another relationship
Which I bet he's not.

Viktor
What if I miss my chance?!

Chris
He’s seventeen! There will be other chances.

Chris
What’s more important to you? Getting into his pants because he’s hot?
Or an actual relationship?

Viktor
This is a trick question

Chris
I know you don’t mean that. If you did, go ahead and tell him.
Have a fling. But you’ll get no pity from me if he breaks your heart.

Viktor looked away from his phone and toward where Yuuri was bending over his knee. Would Yuuri back away? Was he skittish?

Дерьмо.

So Viktor had to be patient. He could do patient. Maybe. Sort of. Barely.

No. Viktor knew that he was no good at patient. But if Yuuri approached him first, it’d be different.
It would be all right. So Viktor would just have to seduce him on the ice! Perfect!

Viktor
!I have a plan!

Chris
Viktor, I don’t know what it is, but don’t do it.

Viktor
It’s perfect! I’ll make him come to me!

Chris
There isn’t any talking you out of this, is there?

Viktor
Nope!

Chris
[Cary Elwes head hold gif]

***

Yuuri was the last skater in the first half and Viktor was the first skater in the second. Now Viktor watched as the small stage the band would be playing on was maneuvered onto the edge of the ice. Some Novice skaters from the local rink were doing simple tricks on the far end of the rink to a quirky little piece for the minute or so it would take to get the stage into position. From his position at the edge near the performer entrance, Viktor had a commanding view of the whole area. Yuuri
was actually sitting on the edge of the stage, his legs dangling, hard guards set to the side and his blades glinting. He had traded his tracksuit jacket for a high collared one that covered the entirety of the top of his costume, and Viktor pressed his lips together in a thin line. He did not like the jacket at all.

The moment the lights died, some members in the audience started screaming. An assistant came up next to Viktor and flashed a light at the exit so the small skaters could easily find their way out. Viktor helped to hand them their guards as they stepped off the ice.

When the spotlight came on, it was the singer that it focused on. He was saying something in Japanese. Viktor barely caught the name of the band a couple of times since it was in English, and at the very end, Yuuri’s name, barely audible over the screaming of fans from the crowd.

The lights went out again and it was silent, if only for a moment. Then the excited murmurs began. If Yuuri was out there in the darkness, Viktor had no hope of hearing him.

***

Yuuri jumped off the edge of the stage, but before he skated off to take his place, he looked up and smiled at Shuji-kun and got a high five. They’d practiced the process of getting Yuuri to his mark in the dark more than once, so all he had to do was skate straight out and count. Just like in practice. He took a deep breath and did so, spinning into his starting pose just before the crowd quieted and the drums started.

Yuuri smiled to himself. The routine had grown on him, even with the changes they’d made to make sure it took up the whole song. The costume, however…

***

Multi-colored spotlights started flashing and moving across the ice to a hard drumbeat; the main spots focused on Yuuri at center ice as the rest of the rink was covered with a jagged blue and white light pattern.

The jacket covering Yuuri’s top was gone, probably left on the stage, and Viktor bit his lip hard. He was glad that he’d bribed Yuuko into making sure she sent him as high def a version of the performance as she could manage, because if he was filming this from the side of the rink, he would have dropped the camera.

Unlike his normal routines, which tended to the softer side of things, Yuuri took off fast and sharp, the first jump of his exhibition a quad toe loop, just because he could. It wasn’t a program heavy with jumps, so Yuuri was going big with his most stable ones; he’d do a triple axel combination in the back half. Viktor knew that -- the knowledge was there -- but watching Yuuri on the ice, feeling like he just could reach out and touch him as he glided past Viktor doing crossovers, made everything he knew about the program evaporate.

It was like watching Yuuri skating it for the first time.

***

It had been a risk to put the quad in, but Yuuri was glad that he insisted. He tended to do more pure skating and fewer jumps during his exhibition programs, and this one was even lighter on the jumps than usual. The skating, though -- the skating was bolder and riskier, and harder.

It was strange, performing with another act, but it was fun in its own way as well, sharing the ice in a way that he never did during competition season.
Yuuri took a deep breath as the bridge to the song approached; this was where the most complicated bit of footwork in the routine would be. It was also his favourite.

***

When the singing started in fast Japanese that Viktor had no hope of understanding, he didn’t care; he was riveted to the skater on the ice.

Even with the severe makeup and a different type of song, it was obvious that Yuuri was having fun on the ice. Viktor found himself bouncing to the beat and smiling when Yuri did some turns up on the toepicks of his skates.

And the flying leap into his camel spin was just amazing.

The step sequence during the bridge was completely ridiculous, but it was so much fun to watch Yuuri incorporating things from his hip hop classes. At least that was Viktor’s guess, knowing that the routine had been choreographed by a hip hop dancer that worked with the band in the first place.

Viktor licked dry lips as Yuuri let his momentum carry him through a set of spread eagles before going into his final spin for the program.

***

Yuuri caught sight of Viktor standing at the edge of the rink, his eyes never leaving Yuuri as the performance continued. It gave him a small thrill that he could enthral his idol the same way that his idol enthralled him. On the ice. With their skating.

His smile got bigger, but he had to look away as he readied himself for an axle. He took a deep breath and leaped into the air, knowing that he was going to land it cleanly. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind.

And when he went into his flying sit spin, he added a twist before he changed feet to continue the spin, even though it wasn’t in the choreography. It was one of Viktor’s favourite spin positions, and Yuuri knew that he’d appreciate it.

Skating was everything. He loved it.

***

Yuuri was breathing hard as he hit his final position, one fist in the air as if in triumph. His chest heaved, pushing against the leather straps around his chest. Viktor swallowed. He couldn’t cheer or holler -- his mouth was too dry -- but it didn’t matter; the audience was doing that for him. Instead, he got to watch Yuuri give his bows and skate right for him at the exit.

Yuuri was grinning as he threw his arms around Viktor’s neck in a hug. “I can’t believe that went so well! I was a nervous wreck!” He smiled as he pulled away. “Can I get my guards?”

Viktor blinked. “Your guards?” Yuuri pointed to the black and blue guards that Viktor was indeed clutching in his hands. “Oh, yes! Of course!” Viktor handed them over and watched as Yuuri bent down to put them on. Almost unconsciously, Viktor followed a drop of sweat from the back of Yuuri’s neck as it followed the line of muscle, then was absorbed by the leather of his collar.

Viktor groaned and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Everything all right?”
He forced himself to nod. “Just thinking how hard I’m going to have to try to steal your fans away from you!” He smiled his most teasing of smiles.

“Oh, they’re not my fans, they’re Shuji-kun’s. Don’t worry about it too much.”

Viktor watched as Yuuri headed off. Sometimes he wondered what went through Yuuri’s head. There might have been people in the audience who came for just the singer, but more of them came for Yuuri. All Viktor had to do was look up and see the teens crowding at the edge of the stands where the performer entrance was. They were giggling and motioning, and in general going insane for Yuuri as he walked backstage.

Yuuri would have maybe realised it if he ever looked up.

***

Viktor had gone to find a quiet place to do his pre-skate warm up while they resurfaced the ice. Yuuri had gone to change again -- one of the other skaters had pulled a muscle during practice and couldn't perform, so they'd asked if Yuuri could fill in with one of his short programs. Now he had found a spot near the entrance to the rink, where he’d have a good view once Viktor took the ice. A couple of people caught sight of him and called out. He couldn’t possibly be in their way; maybe they just wanted to congratulate him on his program? He shrunk back further into the shadows after waving, pretty sure that was the best course of action. He'd never get used to people recognizing him.

All Yuuri wanted to do was watch Viktor skate, then go and make sure his muscles were still loose before his final performance.

Yuuri jumped as arms suddenly wrapped around his shoulders from behind him. “Vi-Viktor!”

“Пожелай мне удачи?” The Russian was breathed next to his ear.

“Она тебе не нужна.”

“Все равно пожелай.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes. “頑張って。”

Viktor laughed, dropped his arms from around Yuuri, and headed onto the ice without giving him a second look -- a fact for which Yuuri was intensely grateful, because his face must have been the color of a tomato.

***

Viktor did a couple of warmup laps, waving at the audience before he took his position off-center. He liked that about exhibition skates; he could start wherever he wanted, and if he wanted to start in front of the entrance (where, say, Yuuri was) he could. So he stuck his hands into the back pockets of jeans and dug the toepick of his right skate into the ice, sticking his butt out just a little. Enough to tease and interest, not enough to be lewd.

When the singing began, he winked and then started skating. It was a light and jovial sort of performance, and the first strokes of his skates on the ice were just that -- light and jovial.

Eventually, though, he had to take his hands out of his pockets, and he skimmed them up his sides until they were above his head. And then he was gliding, bending backwards before straightening out to put on a burst of speed for the real start of the routine.
Yuuri swallowed thickly. Viktor was… Viktor. And Yuuri could never look away. He always managed to surprise him, even after having seen Viktor skate the piece in practice more than once. But that was practice, and this, Yuuri thought as he followed the other skater with his gaze -- this was performance. There was so much more to it. The costume, the skating, the motions, every air kiss and turn as he worked the ice held the audience, and Yuuri, enthralled.

Viktor loved jumps, and the first one in his exhibition was the promised quad Salchow. He landed it with a solid thunk before blowing a kiss to the audience, then worked a short step sequence across the ice. He danced across the length of the rink, putting his all into the seduction of the song -- and one person in particular.

Yuuri had to come to him.

He ran his hand over his hips and thighs and then back up over his ass. He could hear the crowd’s appreciation, and could even imagine Yuuri joining them.

Yuuri covered his face with his hands. This was just too much. There was no way that he could watch Viktor skate this without blushing. Still, he spread his fingers just a little so he could peek through-- just in time to watch Viktor land his flip right in front of him and then skate off, performing an impressive layback Ina Bauer. And his triple axel from a spread eagle was amazing.

He loved watching Viktor’s skating. Even at its most ridiculous, Viktor’s skating was amazing and mesmerizing. Yuuri adored it.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he turned to see Alexei and one of the producers. Of course; he had to get ready for his skate. Yuuri nodded and glanced again at the rink one more time. Luckily, he’d only miss the very end of the routine, where Viktor skulled his hand on the ice as he crossed the rink and then pointed to some girl in the crowd.

Viktor breathed heavily as he hit his final pose, pointing toward the skater entrance and exit but just a little higher. He couldn’t be too obvious. He grinned and looked for Yuuri.

He wasn’t there.

Viktor was proud of himself that his smile didn’t drop, but it definitely left his eyes. Yuuri had been there! He’d been watching!

Viktor gave his bows and headed for the exit to the rink, waving and blowing kisses the entire time. Once out, he grabbed his guards from Alexei. “Where’d Yuuri go?” His voice might have been a bit too brusque, but Viktor didn’t care.

“Oh. He needed to go and start warmups. We can’t have him injure himself. But he only missed a couple of seconds, don’t worry.”

Viktor pressed his lips together. Yuuri had missed the most important part, but he couldn’t tell Alexei that.
Viktor let go of his suitcase and carry-on, and heard them both topple over and hit the ground with a thud. There was no Makkachin to greet him; no one to greet him, actually. The apartment empty as it always was after a trip, unless he arrived early enough to pick up Makkachin from the kennel on the way home.

This time, he’d optimized his return flight for maximum time in Japan with Yuuri instead of getting home before the kennel closed.

Maybe he shouldn’t have.

No. Viktor knew he wouldn’t have changed anything.

His hand reached out to turn the lights on, but stopped, dropping his hand before it got anywhere near the switch. The light streaming through his windows from the street lamps was more than enough to see by. Viktor bent down and grabbed the paper bag that had fallen with his suitcases and brought it -- and himself -- to the kitchen and the counter. He pulled out the wrapped sandwich, tugging the paper away and hoping that the bread hadn’t gone soggy on the cab ride home.

He pressed the power on the remote to turn the TV on and let the sound of the program -- some Russian remake of some schlocky American sitcom -- fill the quiet apartment. He didn’t care what was on, he just wanted the noise. None of his days or nights while he’d been in Osaka had been quiet. Instead, there had been many nights where Yuuri and he had stayed up later than they should have, watching anime or movies, or even just talking.

It’d been a nice change.

Viktor took a large bite of his sandwich just as his cell started ringing. Yakov. Of course it’d be Yakov. He swiped to answer the call, hitting the little icon for speaker as he did so. “Да?”

“Vitya! You didn’t call! Either before you left or when you arrived! I had to even get your flight information from Lyosha!”

He swallowed, knowing that if he tried to actually talk around a mouthful of food, Yakov would just yell more and louder. “I forgot.”

“You forgot?!”

Viktor reached for the remote, cranking the volume. “Oops.” He heard Yakov grumbling on the other end of the call, but the noise of the sitcom made it almost indistinct. Much preferable. “I’m exhausted, Yakov! I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon at the rink! I have lots of ideas for my free program!”

“Vitya!”

“Пока!” Viktor hung up before he could get lectured anymore and just leaned against the counter, finishing his sandwich as his gaze shifted from his phone to the wrapping from the cafe. He wished that he hadn’t finished the coffee he’d bought while waiting for a cab, but if he hadn’t, it would have been cold by the time he got back. He sighed. He could make tea--

Instead, he just turned, reached for the door of the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water, drinking down half of it before picking his phone up.
vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Home safe and sound! Picking up Makkachin tomorrow morning from the kennel! (苦笑)

Of course Yuuri was probably still asleep. He sighed. Then his notification sound went off. A brief flicker of hope fluttered in his chest, and only grew bigger when he saw that it was indeed a response from Yuuri.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Good! Say hi to Makkachin for me. I still miss her.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I will... you don’t miss me?! Yuuuuuuri! I’m heartbroken!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I just saw you. It hasn’t even been that long.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Still. You should miss me anyway.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Why are you up?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Morning run. I don’t get an off season from training. You know how I gain weight

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m glad you were here. In Osaka.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Me too.

Yuuri probably wouldn’t respond. He didn’t like having any sort of emotional conversations via chat. He didn’t like having them via phone. He didn’t like having them at all.

But all the same, a little thrill shot through Viktor at knowing that Yuuri had been glad to see him again.

It was just awful timing. Chris was right; Yuuri needed time to heal. Viktor didn’t want to accept it, but it was true. Before Viktor had left, Yuuri had mentioned that he was glad that Shouta had ended things before the season. If they’d stayed together, they probably would have tried to make the long-distance thing work. And Yuuri, once it had ended, was honest enough with himself -- at least that’s what he’d said to Viktor -- to know that it wouldn’t have worked. That it might have ended badly.

Besides, Yuuri had said as he’d laced his skates for their last skate together before Viktor left, he didn’t need the distraction.

Viktor grabbed the blanket that he’d tossed over the back of the couch before leaving for Osaka and curled up under it, going through all the pictures that he’d managed to take while in Japan. The noise from the TV was now a background hum that kept him from sinking too far into his own thoughts.

Yuuri was prominently featured. As he should be, in Viktor’s opinion. He smiled, but eventually it twisted into a frown. This was hard. It was so much easier when Yuuri had been spoken for.
Viktor
Chris...
This is harder than I thought it’d be…

Chris
You need a distraction. And I’ve heard about a great one.
I’ll send you his deets.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
今日は! -- konnichiwa -- hello
かわいい。 -- kawaii -- cute
бабушка -- babushka -- grandma
Пожелай мне удачи? -- Pozhelay mne udachi? -- Wish me luck?
Она тебе не нужна. -- Ona tebe ne nuzhna. -- You don’t need it.
Все равно пожелай. -- Vse ravno pozheley. -- Do it anyway.
頑張って。 -- Ganbatte -- Do your best
Да -- Da -- Yes
Пока! -- Poka -- Bye!
---

Hi! Uh... sorry? ;) But trust me, there'll be some really good stuff coming... soonish?
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

#vikkyswhereat?

Chapter Notes

OMG, YOU GUYS! There's fanart!

guadaming did this incredible collection of colored doodles while I was recovering!

and Io commissioned some art from cryoclaire for a scene from Chapter 15!

There's also a translation into Chinese! How awesome is that?! Thank you so much!

and shemakesmeforget on tumblr made this awesome moodboard as well!

Housekeeping at the end

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuri dragged in a deep breath before he broke his ending pose and looked at the people gathered at the boards. His parents were quietly clapping and smiling, and Yuuri knew that while they didn’t really understand figure skating at all, they appreciated his programs for the work he put into them and the beauty of them. He smiled, too.

“Lilia choreographed you a wonderful pair of programs. I’m almost jealous.”

Yuuri flushed and skated over to Minako-sensei, who’d been standing next to his mother. “I love the programs that you’ve choreographed for me, too!”

She reached out and tousled his hair. “I’m not mad that Alexei convinced her to come and choreograph, not at all. Just promise me that you won’t forget all about your poor ballet instructor when you’re looking for choreographers.” She paused. “Or are you going to start being more like Viktor and choreographing your own programs?”

“No, no, no, no! I could never! I’m… I can’t. I’m not good enough.”

“So you’re saying that you choreographed for Minami-kun and Mila-chan, even though you’re no good. Was it fair to give them such subpar programs, little brother?”

Yuuri pressed his lips tight together and narrowed his eyes at his sister. “That’s not it, either! I… I created good programs for them.” His sister just smiled impishly, making him feel even more flustered. “Mari-nee-chan!”

Yuuco handed Yuuri’s mother the triplet she was holding -- Axel, Yuuri was fairly sure -- and leaned over the wall. “That was super cool! Your step sequence was so fast! I don’t think I’ve ever
seen someone skate a sequence like that before! And, and, and--”

“Yuuko. Breathe.” Takeshi laid a hand on his wife’s shoulder and she dragged in a deep breath.

“And I know you’re going to have the best step sequences ever when you get to Seniors. Better than Viktor’s. Better than Cao Bin’s. Better than Giacometti’s. The best!”

Yuuri flushed and looked down at his skates. “I… I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You’ve got what it takes. Accept it. You got enough that you managed to get a scholarship out of it.” Takeshi grinned.

It definitely wasn’t Yuuri’s dream of the three of them skating together internationally. By now, Yuuko should have been the Madonna of Japan, not just of the Ice Castle. And Takeshi… Yuuri bit his lip. It would have been fine if Takeshi didn’t place higher than Yuuri. But all of that would never come to pass. Instead, Yuuri had one more season -- mixed Junior and Senior -- and then he’d be moving to the other end of Japan...

And moving on to another coach, in all likelihood.

He was not going to think about it.

***

Yuuri bounced his foot and rubbed his thumb along the inside seam of his jacket cuff. The rough material actually made him feel better. It was hot outside, but Alexei had insisted that he bring his training jacket with them to Tokyo. In a way, Yuuri was glad. Wearing the jacket was like a kind of armour.

And at this stage, he’d take all the protection that he could get.

“Did we really have to come?”

Alexei just nodded and went back to flipping through the magazine he’d picked up in the waiting room. The selection wasn’t doing his anxiety any favors: Viktor had been on the cover of one of the international skating magazine, Oda featured on the Japanese title that Alexei was currently reading, and Yuuri was doing his best to ignore the fact that he could see his own name printed on another cover half-hidden in a pile. The only consolation was knowing he wasn’t the cover model for a single one of these.

He would be for the next issue of On Ice!, but he was trying not to think about that, either.

Deep breaths.

“Did I have to come?”

Alexei looked at him over the top of the magazine. “Yes.” Yuuri started tapping his fingers on the plastic armrest of his chair. “Yuu-kun, it’s not like they want to kick you out of the JSF. You’re a certified skater. This meeting is only to determine what level you’ll be competing in for ISU events. It’ll be fine.”

“I want to keep skating in Juniors. I’m not too old yet.”

“I know, but you know that the JSF wants to move you up.”

Yuuri’s brow wrinkled as a thought occurred. “Is my ranking high enough for two placements in the
Grand Prix Series?”  Alexei shrugged.  That would be a yes, then.  “Japan only has one spot in Worlds--”

“You know that they decide who’s competing at Four Continents and Worlds and Junior Worlds after Nationals.  No, this meeting is about the Grand Prix, and only the Grand Prix.”

Yuuri nodded and slumped back into his chair for a minute before righting his posture.  Minako-sensei would kill him if she saw such gracelessness.

Eventually -- and it seemed like two and a half eternities to Yuuri -- they were called into an office.  It felt like all Yuuri’s fears were coming true when the first words out of the official’s mouth were “Katsuki-kun, we want you to compete in Seniors.  Can you beat Nikiforov?”

***

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  And then they went on and on about how from a Marketing perspective that the three of us competing would be brilliant

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  That having this three way rivalry would mean that they could push for more seats at National comps and the NHK

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  It’s like they totally forgot what a clusterfuck Nebelhorn was

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  Wow, Yuuri, I didn’t know you cursed

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  Besides, you have a lot more experience now.  I mean look at 4CC.

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  You mean the off podium finish?

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  You mean your FOURTH place finish at 4CC?

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  That doesn’t negate my THIRTEENTH place finish at Nebelhorn.

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  You read that article… 4CC was a “cakewalk” and I only finished so high because of the ckaters that didn’t compete

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  I so wish I could gif you right now

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  Go to this link for me: giacometti.ch/images/trolling/iampdisappoint.gif

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  Chris!

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  Don’t even.  I don’t want to hear it.

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  And even though I know you meant it as a slight against yourself you do not disrespect other skaters that way.

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  We’ve got your back, so you get ours.  Comprendre?

katsudonyuuri  d christophe_gc  Yes.

christophe_gc  d katsudonyuuri  Good.  I’ll see you at Finlandia. =)
Yuuri tugged the strap of his skate bag further up on his shoulder as he followed Alexei into the rink. He was glad he hadn’t bothered bringing the warmer jacket at all. They might be in the French Alps, but the weather was still peak summer. Which meant it was perfect in Yuuri’s opinion -- not hot, not cold, just right.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he stopped right inside the door to pull it out. Alexei only spared a brief glance at him before continuing on to get Yuuri’s credentials. They were used to this by now, the step-by-step routine of the competitions. And as Alexei figured, it was better if Yuuri had other things to focus on.

---

**statusclitiical** b d katsudonyuuri HEY

**katsudonyuuri** d statusclitiical Hi. Just got to the rink. Alexei is getting my badge.

**statusclitiical** d katsudonyuuri I can’t believe that I’m finally back from touring and you’re starting your competition

**statusclitiical** d katsudonyuuri There’s only a few days left of SUMMER VACATION and you aren’t here! There was supposed to be beach & swimming & volleyball

**katsudonyuuri** d statusclitiical Sorry. I told you it’d be almost impossible to make something work. And that sounds like an anime “beach episode”

**statusclitiical** d katsudonyuuri an EXCITEing beach episode. Game center when you get back.

**katsudonyuuri** d statusclitiical Sure. Got to go.

Yuuri grabbed his badge from Alexei and dropped the lanyard over his head.

“Vitya?”

Shaking his head, Yuuri shoved his phone back into his pocket and set off toward the entrance to the rink proper. The security guard at the door didn’t even stop them to check their badges.

“No, Shuji-kun. Yakov has an intensive training week for his senior skaters going on. Last I heard from Viktor was Wednesday, before Yakov took his phone. I heard from Mila that it got locked up until the end of the week.”

Alexei chuckled and sat down in the bleachers, taking Yuuri’s training bag from him once he’d pulled out his skates. “No wonder I haven’t heard from Yakov. He’s probably getting actual skating out of Viktor for once.”

Yuuri chewed on his lip as he laced up his skates. “I almost feel bad for Viktor, but Yakov has always had a strict no phone policy while skating.”

“I’m sure that he misses the days before every skater had a cell phone that was hooked up to the internet.”

Yuuri looked up and smiled. “But weren’t you his skater then?”
There was a pause; Yuuri watched Alexei’s eyes widen before the edges crinkled and he started laughing. “Just for that, you’re doing extra warm up. No jumps this time. Make sure that if you go into your step sequence, you do it at half speed. Make those skaters think that they have a chance to beat you.”

Yuuri closed his eyes and took a deep breath before walking toward the entrance to the rink. Keeping one hand on the boards, he removed one, then the other hard guard and stepped onto the ice. There were already a couple of skaters going around, working on either program elements or essentials. Yuuri was glad that Alexei would leave him to warm up the way that he wanted to. He stripped off his jacket and bent over the boards to drop it onto the bench just on the other side, pausing only to grab the MP3 player out of one of the pockets.

There was a nervousness that was just under his skin, making him antsy; the need to move was overwhelming. And the one place that Yuuri knew he could move however he wanted whenever he wanted was on the ice, especially during warm-ups before practicing in earnest. Earbuds in, he let his warmup music chase all the thoughts trying to force their way into his brain away.

He had the ice. He had to share the ice, but he had it. He’d looked at the roster of skaters that were expected at this particular competition. As the first JGP event of the season, it was mostly filled with younger competitors just starting their careers; Yuuri hadn’t really recognized any of the names. It wasn’t like when he’d be competing in Japan at the end of the next month; Phichit was skating in that qualifier, and Yuuri was looking forward to it. It was strange, having a friend that he also competed against. It wasn’t the norm for him, and Yuuri doubted that it ever really would be. He’d been talking to Phichit more often; the younger skater bombarded him with e-mails full of questions on just about everything, but mostly skating.

Yuuri had seen a tweet from Aaron Reyes about a new Junior skater in the competition that he had a lot of hope for, but Yuuri couldn’t remember the name, so he shrugged and put the thoughts behind him, instead flowing into his figures. He saw a couple skaters stop to watch him as he glid backwards in a figure-eight; Yuuri just looked away, letting his eyes drift closed for a second as he took a deep breath and got his bearings.

He didn’t care what the other skaters thought of him. If they thought it was strange or foolish that he was doing compulsory figures as part of a warm-up when compulsory figures weren’t even required, that was their business. If he thought he could get away with it, Yuuri would probably do nothing but compulsory figures the entire practice session, but eventually Alexei would give him a look and Yuuri knew that he’d have to focus on other skating. Sighing, Yuuri switched to doing a paragraph double three. He could allow himself one more figure; after that, he knew he should probably start with his step sequence.

Then he could talk to Alexei about adding some jumps. It wasn’t like his jumps were a secret at this point. His quad Lutz was still under wraps, but he wasn’t ready to do that jump in competition; far from it. And even if he could land it consistently enough for competition, it wouldn’t do him any good at a Junior event. The fact that he had a quad toe was more than enough to get him onto the podium. Not that he would be doing his quad toe, either; not at this point in the season. With four competitions before even Junior nationals in November, Yuuri and Alexei had decided to take a slower ramp-up. If he was going to use his quad in competition, it would be at Junior Nationals, or at the subsequent Junior Grand Prix Final.

They hadn’t even agreed if Yuuri should do a quad at Finlandia in October, even though that was a Senior level competition.

No, all Yuuri had to do was skate well enough to get into the JGPF. At least it was an easier task.
than beating Viktor. Yuuri was still in shock that the JSF had even asked him if that was possible! It was beyond Yuuri’s dreams to even skate in a competition with Viktor, and here the JSF was, asking if Yuuri could BEAT HIM?

Yuuri stopped mid-movement and took a deep breath. Then another. He was starting to let the stress get to him. The itchy feeling crawling along his spine was worse than when he’d first stepped onto the ice, and that wasn’t how things usually worked. There was just so much that was going on that was not skating, all piling up on him. Even his figures hadn’t managed to get him to the place that he needed to be, mentally, on the ice. He took another deep breath. There was no reason to start to get worked up. Not now. Not again. He’d done that over a month ago after that meeting, and never wanted to have to work through another panic attack like that. He’d thought Alexei was going to murder the JSF official. Well, at first, Yuuri thought that Alexei was going to murder him for completely losing his composure in front of the representatives, but eventually he’d realised what Alexei was really upset about.

Deep breaths.

Most of the skaters that had been watching him went back to their own routines; a couple were talking to their coaches. One, however, was caught up in a conversation with Alexei and a woman Yuuri assumed was his own coach. Alexei looked up and caught Yuuri’s eye, motioning for him to skate over.

Knowing why Alexei wanted him to join the conversation didn’t make it any easier for Yuuri to start moving, but he had to. He no longer had the luxury of pretending this wasn’t happening. Four meetings. Four potential coaches to replace Alexei.

“Youuri! This is Kora Reilly and her student, Leo de la Iglesia. They train out of Colorado Springs, right?”

Up close, the woman looked younger than Yuuri expected. With her dark burgundy hair cut into an asymmetrical bob, she would have been equally at home choreographing hip-hop routines. She smiled. “That’s right. Great to meet you, Yuuri!”

Yuuri took the hand she extended and shook it, adding in a small bow. It was only appropriate.

“Nice to meet you.” He turned toward the younger skater, then paused as something finally rattled loose in his memory. “Leo! That was it! I’m sorry. Aaron mentioned you!” The young skater’s eyes went wide and he almost tripped over his skates; at the last second, Yuuri managed to grab his shoulder and kept him from falling. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Just before I left for the airport, I saw Aaron’s tweet wishing me luck and telling me to look out for you.” Yuuri smiled. “I can’t wait to see your program.” Yuuri waited, then frowned and turned toward Alexei, who had covered his mouth with one hand through the conversation. Reilly wasn’t doing much better in keeping her composure.

“Hi.”

Yuuri turned back to face Leo. The younger skater had paled rather dramatically and Yuuri sighed when he realised just how discouraging his comments must have sounded. Stupid! If he was going to hang around the Junior competitions for so long because of his own inadequacies, he could at least try to help the younger skaters -- especially the ones that were new to the competition circuit. “Oh. You must be really nervous. It’s your first international competition, right? You’ll do fine, I’m sure. My first Junior Grand Prix qualifier was pretty awful.” He paused, remembering. “That’s actually the first time I skated against Aaron. I was so nervous because he was the reigning Junior World Champion, and I was just this nobody from Japan--”
Alexei sat down hard on the bench and bent over, dragging in loud breaths of air between laughs. Yuuri just stared at him. “Lyosha?”

“I’m… I’m fine. Really. Fine.” Alexei coughed. “He almost quit skating because he forgot how to do a twizzle.”

Yuuri pressed his hands against his face. He’d forgotten about that. How had he forgotten about that? “And Viktor had told me he expected me to bring back gold.”

“I heard. I wanted to strangle him.”

Yuuri shook his head.

“Did you remember?”

Yuuri blinked and turned back to face Leo. “How to do a twizzle? Eventually.”

“He won bronze,” Alexei supplied.

“We had to figure out a exhibition piece because I didn’t have one ready. I didn’t think I was going to get close to placing.”

“It was the first competition I’d gone to with Yuuri as his coach.”

Yuuri frowned. “It was. I got lectured by Riku for upsetting you.” The phrasing made it sound like a bad memory, but it wasn’t. Not at all. In fact, Yuuri wished that Riku was here with them now instead of back in Japan. But it couldn’t be helped. With the World Championships in Tokyo -- not to mention the fact that the Junior Grand Prix had a qualifier in Japan -- the NHK Trophy, the Junior and Senior-level National Championships, and not a single competition taking place in the same venue… Much as Riku wanted to go with them, there was too much for her to take care of.

“The two of you should go back to practice. After that, I’ve made reservations at one of the lodges for dinner and Leo and I can tell you all about Colorado Springs, Yuuri. If you think it’ll sound like a good match, you should come and visit.”

Yuuri nodded, forcing a smile onto his face. “Sounds like a solid plan.” With a final nod he skated back out and circled the edge, picking up speed, not caring what rules Alexei had given him at the start of practice. He shifted into position and took off into a triple Lutz; the landing, while solid, practically knocked the breath out of him. If anything, working on the quad Lutz had made his triple that much stronger.

It only made him feel a little better.

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Yuuri watched from his spot on the bed as Alexei rubbed his eyes, pressing hard with his fingers. “I wish Riku had come. That whole dinner was nothing but a disaster.”

Yuuri bit his lip and let the PSP drop from his fingers. “Well, you did get into an argument about coaching strategies and the importance of -- as you called it -- ‘a well balanced program.’”

“She doesn’t have a single senior skater that can land a quad! Not a single one! It’s like she’s willfully ignoring the fact that Viktor eats quads for breakfast!”

“I thought quads weren’t everything. Besides, Viktor prefers a lighter, protein-heavy breakfast--”
Yuuri cut himself off at the glare that Alexei sent his way.

“I’m packing myself and Riku up. We’re moving to Sapporo and we’ll show Yakov and Viktor that a good coach balances skating skills with jump elements with a heavier focus on presentation.” Alexei crossed his arms over his chest.

Laughing, Yuuri let the idea of it -- of continuing to train with Alexei in Sapporo -- fill his chest with hope for a brief moment. He wanted it, he really did, but… “We agreed. If there is another coach -- one that we feel I can work with, who is already located near Sapporo or near a sister school for Kino -- then you won’t move. But if we can find a different coach, I should at least try.” Yuuri sighed. “You and Riku don’t want to move to Sapporo. Osaka is already far enough from the JSF headquarters, and you complain that you moved to Japan to escape horrible winters and--”

“You’re too mature, Yuu-kun.”

“Yeah, well, I wish I wasn’t.”

Alexei leaned back in the chair he was sitting in and looked at the ceiling. “I moved to Japan to be with Riku, the love of my life.”

Yuuri smiled. “I think the whole skating world knows that you did.”

“Not the point. I did what I wanted, not what was expected.”

***

Yuuri tugged the ribbed cuff of his sweater down into his palm and rubbed the red knit between his fingers. He wasn’t really paying much attention to what he was doing. He was the next on the ice and should have been stretching or prepping, but he wasn’t. Not that needed to; his muscles were loose and his skates were tied tightly. All he had to do now was go out onto the ice and skate the best that he could.

His ears were filled with static, but it was more in the background of his mind instead of the forefront. There was nothing that he could do. Worrying wouldn’t get him anywhere, so instead he focused on Leo de la Iglesia, who was currently running through his short program.

Yuuri didn’t recognize the music, but it definitely sounded like it came from some sort of video game, which was kind of cool; Yuuri wondered why he’d never thought to hit up the soundtracks of his favourite games for program inspiration.

The inconsistent check pattern of Leo’s costume turned into a blur of white and black stripes as he went into his flying sit spin. It definitely was a cool effect; Leo obviously put a lot of thought in his presentation, and his skating skills were pretty good. There was definite room for growth, though. Yuuri tilted his head to one side as he watched Leo dance around the rink, moving from one step to another. His edges weren’t as clean as they could be, but given a bit more time, Yuuri was sure that he’d be someone to watch out for.

He physically flinched when Leo missed his double axel, but the skater himself barely seemed shook, quickly getting up and moving onto the next element of his program. Coach Reilly was nodding her head to the beat of Leo’s music, and from the corner of his eye, he could see her tapping on her arm as she watched Leo perform his routine.

He wondered if Alexei did similar things during his routine, though he was happy not knowing. Skating without his glasses meant that spectators and their expectations were just a vague blur, and he preferred it that way.
The audience was obviously really into Leo’s performance, and by the time he struck his final pose, fresh from coming out of his combination spin, most of the crowd was on their feet. Yuuri couldn’t blame them. Leo enjoyed skating to his music -- that much was obvious -- and his musicality was great.

The audience was so into Leo’s skate that they kept cheering even after Leo left the ice and Yuuri glided on. Things didn’t settle down until after they called Yuuri’s name and he headed from the edge of the ice and into the center. Even with the mistake in Leo’s program, the young skater was obviously going to be difficult to beat.

Yuuri took a deep breath and leaned forward into his starting position, waiting for the first strains of Satie’s *Je te veux* to start.

***

Yuuri rubbed the back of his neck as he stepped off the ice and took his hard guards from Alexei. Silver wasn’t bad. It was a podium finish. It wasn’t gold, though, and Yuuri was sure that everyone was disappointed in him. He’d been the favourite to win gold after his victory at Junior Worlds, but... He sighed. No one ever seemed to realise just how much of a fluke Yuuri’s wins were. He knew well enough that he just wasn’t that consistent when it came to competitions.

“Good job, Yuu-kun!” Alexei patted his back and held out his jacket.

Yuuri turned and lifted an eyebrow at his couch, his hand automatically clutching around the small medal that had just been hung around his neck. “I two-footed my triple axel in the short. And I don’t want to talk about the fall in the free skate.”

“The season is young and the free skate is incredibly hard. That’s why we decided to have you performing a slightly simplified version for a bit. We’ll ramp up the difficulty as the season progresses. It’s better to make the mistakes now, while you’re still getting used to the routine. You act as if coming in second isn’t good enough.”

Yuuri set his shoulders. “It’s not what people expect from me.”

“And you? What do you expect from yourself?”

“To not make a fool of myself. Which is not something I accomplished today.”

Alexei pressed his lips together and looked around. He caught sight of Leo and waved the younger skater over. It took everything in Yuuri’s power to stifle back the groan. What was his coach up to now?

“Leo! What did you think of Yuu-kun’s free skate? In all honesty.”

“Me? You want my opinion?”

Alexei nodded. “You won bronze. I’m curious!”

“Uh. Well, my coach--”

Alexei waved his finger and Leo shut his mouth for a moment before speaking again. “I’ve never seen someone move like that on the ice before!” He turned to look at Yuuri, eyes so focused on him that his gaze felt like a heavy weight. “I’ve seen a lot of classical pieces skated, I don’t usually like them, but that one was… It didn’t matter that it was classical, it was like…. How’d you get your skates to move like that?”
“Lots of practice,” Alexei answered for him.

Yuuri swallowed. “What did your coach think?” If he was going to consider Coach Reilly -- and he had every intention of it -- he wanted to know.

Leo paused, closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, like he was summoning back up the conversation. “Kora said that she’d like to see you try a harder entrance on your triple axel -- something like a back counter -- and that your step sequence could have been even faster because she knows you’re capable of it. You aren’t though, are you? Because that would be a little insane.”

Yuuri looked at Alexei. He knew the surprised look he saw on his coach’s face was mirrored in his own. He hadn’t skated the final form of his free skate in front of an audience that wasn’t close friends and family only. He hadn’t even skated the full version at the rink unless it was a closed session. Viktor was still complaining about that.

Three steps had been removed, and his sequence had been marked as a Level 3 just because he was only doing the sequence at three-quarters speed.

“Your coach has a good eye. I do usually skate that sequence faster.”

“Ah ha! I knew it!” Coach Reilly dropped her arm around Leo’s shoulders. “You really should come to visit Colorado Springs, Yuuri.”

***

Yuuri dropped his bag next to his desk and sunk into his chair before laying his head down. First day back after a month off was always the worst. At least he needn’t ask anyone what he needed to make up. The person he’d normally have turned to for help was unavailable. Sighing, Yuuri turned his head. Shouta was talking to Yamoto-kun, which was pretty normal. A couple of months ago, Yuuri would have been over there as well. He would have nudged his knee against Shouta’s, would have-- Yuuri picked his head up enough just to drop it back down face-first against the desk. He didn’t have time to mope. To pine over what had been.

He was pathetic.

“He whined half of vacation about how he should have put off breaking up with you.” Shuji pulled the chair out from under the desk in front of him and straddled it backwards so he could look at Yuuri.

“No, he didn’t.”

“The thing, Yuuri-kun, that you forget is that I am a recording artiste. And as a recording artiste, I make sure that I can record things at a drop of a… well… I don’t know what the saying is, but the point remains!” Shuji pulled out his phone and started flipping through the options. “Here!” Shuji triumphantly slid the smartphone forward until it was under Yuuri’s nose and pressed ‘Play’.

Immediately, Shouta’s voice could be heard and half the classroom stopped talking.

“No, I mean it, Shuji! I should have waited--”

A crumpled ball of paper hit Shuji on the side of the head, and he spun around to see who had thrown it. Yuuri took advantage of the opening to stop the recording. He didn’t need to know who had thrown the ball; it was obvious even before he looked up to see Shouta, tight-lipped, glaring at Shuji.

Having an ex-boyfriend was surprisingly difficult.
“Fine. Apparently that wasn’t cool. Still, he whined.”

“Don’t be hard on him. It’s not easy for either of us.”

Shuji sighed. “All the more reason why we need to go to the game center! I can’t believe you spent your last day of break sleeping.”

“Do you know how long it takes to travel from the French Alps back to Osaka? A really long time. I deserved that sleep!”

Shuji reached out and ruffled his hair; Yuuri moved his head away as quickly as he could. “I know. But this coming weekend. Game center. I’m telling your coach. I’m telling everyone. There is no getting out of it because you promised, Yuuri-kun.”

“OK, OK.” Yuuri sat up and leaned back in his chair. Shuji had a super-bright smile on his face, and just that cheered Yuuri up a little. He might not have had a boyfriend anymore, he may not have won his last competition, but he still had friends. And that was important. “Game center. Saturday. Do you want to meet up for lunch first?”

“Of course! There’s this little shop I want to try. Really traditional. Lots of donburis.”

“Sounds good.” And as long as Yuuri didn’t get anything deep-fried, Alexei couldn’t be too upset over Yuuri indulging in a don.

***

Yuuri bit his lip to keep from laughing when he finally spotted Shuji-kun waiting for him. He was obviously trying very hard to be inconspicuous, and was utterly failing; looking around, Yuuri spotted two girls across the street taking surreptitious smartphone pictures. They ducked into a shop as soon as they noticed Yuuri looking in their direction, but popped back out just thirty seconds later heading in the opposite direction, giggling all the while.

He waited a moment before heading over to Shuji, wanting to watch what the other boy would do. Spending time with Shuji was always entertaining, but half the fun came from following his little quirks and behaviors; even off the stage, he always seemed to be performing. Sure enough, Shuji soon shifted, tossing his head and setting his hair into disarray; almost on cue, he started to carefully rearrange his hairstyle again, smoothing the blue-streaked strands until they fell perfectly once more. That done, he stuck his hands back in his pockets and leaned against the wall, the sole of one shoe pressed against the concrete behind him. This, too, was a performance, the perfect image of cultivated boredom.

But Yuuri’s stomach growled -- practice had been long and hard, and it took him longer to get down to the restaurant that he thought it would. Squaring his shoulders, he jogged up to Shuji, stopped in front of him and-- Stared. “Why are you wearing glasses?”

Sure enough, Shuji had a perfect pair of the most fashionable frames perched on his nose.

“They’re part of my disguise so I won’t be recognised! Besides, they’re trendy. You know, I bet you could get a sponsorship with a glasses company.” Shuji smiled and pushed off the wall, then reached out and adjusted the specs perched on Yuuri’s nose -- the ones that Yuuri actually needed in order to see.

“Uh. Never thought about it.”

Shuji’s grin got wider. “I’ll talk to my manager! Even better, we can do it together! It’ll be
Yuuri gave up. Shaking his head, he laughed. “I’m starving. I spent four hours at the rink this morning, and that was after a morning run. Can we go in?”

“Yeah! Sure! OK!” Shuji-kun pushed through the entrance and Yuuri followed him to a table in the back. He shouldn’t be surprised; Shuji probably called in advance. Yuuri had heard that it was pretty hard for him to go around Osaka without being recognized, which made Yuuri all the more grateful for his relative anonymity. Yuuri hadn’t even started looking at his options from the menu on the wall before Shuji was talking again. “Their katsudon and kaisendon are really well-known. And I know how much you like katsudon.”

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded. “I do, but I only have it after I win, and only my mother’s. Hers is by far the best katsudon in all of Japan.”

Shuji just smiled at him. “Then you should get the kaisendon.”

Pressing his lips together, Yuuri looked at the prices. The kaisendon was least likely to upset his diet, but if he wanted to really enjoy the game center… “I think I’m going to get the oyakodon. I didn’t bring a lot of yen with me.”

“That’s fine! Don’t worry about it. Lunch is my treat!”

“Shuji-kun, I can’t—”

“No, I’m treating!” Shuji shifted and looked at the waitstaff, who’d been hovering over the table waiting for them to decide on their orders. “An order of kaisendon for Yuuri-kun, and I’ll have the unadon!”

The chef nodded and got turned to work on their dishes.

“Shuji-kun—”

But Shuji jumped in before Yuuri even had a chance to finish the sentence. “What are the Alps like? I may be a famous rock star, but I haven’t had a chance to travel nearly as much as you.” He leaned forward intently, like he was genuinely interested in whatever Yuuri could tell him about the competition. Another performance? With a shrug, Yuuri started talking.

The kaisendon was exceptionally good, and even if Yuuri would have to pay Shuji back on Monday, he was still glad that he got it. With lunch wrapped, they made their way to the game center. Yuuri was pleasantly surprised to discover the cabinet selection was close to that of his go-to game center, and immediately zeroed in one one of the fighting games.

He’d pummeled his way through half the roster before he realized that Shuji had been scarily quiet since they’d entered the center. Looking around, he caught sight of the other boy less than a foot away, just leaning against the cabinet, idly watching Yuuri’s progress. Yuuri immediately felt a pang of guilt. “You know, you don’t have to just stand around and watch whatever I’m playing. If you’re bored…”

Shuji smiled. “I’m not bored at all! Besides, you said that we’d play DDR after this. I bet I’ll beat you.”

Yuuri laughed and turned back to his game, narrowly keeping himself from getting knocked out. “I bet you will. I mean, I don’t really ever play DDR.”
Neither do I, but it’s dancing. How hard could it be?”

Incredibly hard. Both Yuuri and Shuji ended their match all but hanging off the bars at the back of the built-in pads. Not having experience with the game meant that he had no idea how well or badly they had done, and while they certainly weren’t trying at the hardest level, they were both sweating as they stepped down from the platform, laughing.

“That was fun! I should get one of these machines installed in the house.” Shuji grinned. “Could you imagine how EXCITE it would be to have DDR parties?”

“In Tokyo? When you move?”

Shuji frowned. “Oh, right. Yeah. I’ll be going to Tokyo and you’ll be going to Sapporo and Shouta is moving to Fukuoka. Why does everyone have to leave?”

Yuuri shrugged. “Next stage of life, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Shuji’s eyes caught on something behind him and he reached out to grab Yuuri’s wrist. “PuriKuri! Come on!”

“Seriously? Stickers?” Yuuri tried digging in his feet, but it was no use. Shuji had just the right amount of height on him, and his shoes weren’t getting enough grip. “I probably look awful!” That was enough to stop Shuji in his tracks, and he turned around to look at Yuuri.

“You look fine. Well. Wait.” He smoothed back Yuuri’s hair until it vaguely resembled the way that Yuuri usually styled it for most of his performances. “Better.”

“Shuji-kun!”

“I’ve been wanting to do this for ages. Come on!”

Why he always seemed to wind up in a photobooth getting his picture taken in cute poses with cute stickers was beyond Yuuri, but once again, that’s exactly what he was doing. He watched as Shuji added the digital stickers; one that said ‘EXCITE’, followed by a string of seemingly-random emojis. The whole thing was ridiculous.

Naturally, Shuji was loving every minute of it.

statusclitiical Taking time to enjoy life. twitpic.com/jsoi72 from Tweetie 5s ago

“Did you need to tweet it?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

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“Well, they definitely aren’t hard to miss.”

Yuuri laughed. His coach had a point. Phichit was bouncing around, camera in one hand, smartphone in the other, trading back and forth between the two devices as he snapped picture after picture. Celestino Cialdini, Phichit’s coach, was standing off to the side, arms crossed over his chest and a small smile on his face as he watched Phichit take a thousand and one pictures of Tokyo
Yuuri waved with one hand up in the air. “Phichit!”

Phichit whirled around, light on his feet, and immediately spotted them. “Yuuri-kun! You’re here! Finally! I thought that we’d never get to go up the Tower! Ciao Ciao, they’re here!”

“Yes, I see.” Coach Cialdini’s smile grew brighter as he held out his hand to Yuuri’s coach. “Ciao! Ciao! Alexei.”

“Celestino. Is Phichit your current star?”

Cialdini smiled. “He is. For my Juniors, anyway. I have a couple of skaters in Seniors that are having some middling success. An Italian skater and an American skater. It isn’t easy when the likes of Viktor Nikiforov send everyone running to learn more quads.”

Yuuri didn’t get a chance to even say hello; before he could even process it, Phichit was pulling him over to a spot that the younger skater had already picked out. “Right there. Stand just there. If I do this right, I’ll get the red metal of the base part in the shot as well!” Yuuri stood where directed and just watched, an amused smile curling up the edges of his lips as Phichit took no less than five or six pictures on each device before looking at the results, deleting the ones that weren’t up to his exacting standards. “OK, what should I tag this as?”

Oh no. Why did everyone he knew insist on putting pictures of Yuuri up on the internet for the entire world to see? “Uh. ‘My adventures in Japan’?”

Phichit just stared at him. “That is not catchy at all!” With a tut, Phichit began messing about with his phone; Yuuri knew the second the tweet went through because he could feel the notification vibrate from his own phone in his pocket. He took it out, the morbid curiosity of seeing how he was going to be tagged this time too much to resist.

chuchu_phichit In Tokyo with @yuurikatsuki my gold medal friend! twitpic.com/b9ir72 #tokyotower #katsukiyuuri #SBCCup from Tweetie 5s ago

That wasn’t too bad. Yuuri could live with that, especially since it was unlikely to garner much attention. He really needed to get over this irrational fear of being tagged in pictures, especially if he was going to continue hanging around with skaters who lived and breathed social media. Pictures with Viktor were an extra level of terrifying because of Viktor’s sizeable fanbase, but hanging out with Phichit… it wasn’t like either of them were known names, just two Junior-level figure skaters.

Once they’d reached the Tower’s summit, Phichit charged off again to snap pictures of the view, darting through the crowd in search of the perfect shot. It was interesting, watching just how excited he was. It was Yuuri’s first trip to Tokyo Tower as well, but he had never really truly cared about sightseeing this way. Maybe one day.

Phichit came back and grabbed Yuuri by the wrist, dragging him over to where their coaches were in mid-conversation, then coralling the entire group over to another section of the Tower.

“Ciao Ciao, you have to take a picture of this. You’re tall! Come on, Yuuri!” And so Yuuri found himself being positioned in a squatting pose on a glass pane that looked straight down to the ground. “Victory sign, Yuuri!”
“Oh My God, Yuuri-kun! Look at this! Viktor Nikiforov is following me! And he even tagged me! This is the best day of my life! The only thing that could make it better is if I beat you at the SBC Cup!” Yuuri laughed as Phichit swiped through comments on his phone, growing increasingly more excited. “Wait, no! Christophe Giacometti just followed me too! This is the best thing ever, Yuuri-kun!” Without warning, he shoved his phone under Yuuri’s nose, showing off his newest replies.

“Wow, Yuuri!” They’d barely settled into their seats at the restaurant before Phichit reached for his phone again, using the opportunity to go through the notifications he’d gotten through his posting spree on Twitter over the course of the afternoon. “I had no idea that you were so popular! I have so many new followers!”

Yuuri just looked at him over his hitsumabushi. “I’m not.” He wasn’t even really paying much attention, instead focusing on making sure that he was separating his hitsumabushi properly. He hated when he didn’t have a proper fourth portion at the end. “The increase in your followers is probably because of Viktor and Chris, to be honest.”

“I never would have thought to come to such a place.” Coach Cialdini was doing his best to copy exactly what Yuuri was doing since they’d both wound up ordering hitsumabushi, the famous Nagoya specialty; the four bowls he’d been served seemed to confound the Italian. “What’s next, Yuuri?”

“Oh, uh, the first portion is eaten just as it is. The second, you use the small plate here—” He motioned to a dish in front of him. “And just mix it in. The third uses the other plate of condiments, and you pour the tea over it. And then you end by repeating your favourite.”

“I think I’ll just watch what you do. So first is just as is.” Coach Cialdini picked up his chopsticks and started attempting to eat.

Glancing at the seat next to him, Yuuri could see that Alexei was enjoying himself. He’d gone with a more normal, yet still-traditional set meal of all eel, and Phichit had followed his lead.

“But Yuuri, I don’t think these people follow Viktor! I mean, look!” Phichit slid his phone across the table so Yuuri could see. It wasn’t what he expected. A lot of the names were Japanese, for one.
“Ah. Well, no. I’m sorry, you’ve fallen prey to Shuji’s fans.”

“Shuji’s fans?”

Yuuri nodded. “They like whatever Shuji-kun likes. The same thing happened when Shuji-kun pointed out my Twitter account after I skated in his band’s MV. All of a sudden all these people were following me.” Cialdini coughed, and Yuuri looked up to see if he needed help with the next portion of his hitsumabushi. “Oh, your next portion is the one with the small plate of condiments closest to you. Just mix in as much as you want, but if you use it all, you won’t have any to repeat at the end.”

“Ah, thank you. No, I was just thinking that those people might be following you for you, Yuuri.”

Yuuri just blinked at the Italian coach. “Oh, well, I guess. But you have no idea just how popular Shuji is.”

Phichit was still busy looking at his phone and not even paying any attention to the conversation -- at least until Coach Cialdini scolded him about not eating any of his food. Yuuri chuckled as Phichit reluctantly put his phone down and picked up his chopsticks, digging into the unadon in its square lacquered bowl. “Oh wow! This is really good! I’m going to tweet about it!”

Coughing again, Coach Cialdini looked across the table at Yuuri and Alexei. “Suffice it to say that I have a fairly strict no phone use policy in place during coaching sessions.” He levelled his gaze onto Yuuri, who instinctively flinched. “Though I don’t really see that becoming much of an issue.”

“Yuu-kun is incredibly focused during skating sessions in general. What kind of facilities does Detroit Skate Club offer?” This was it: the whole reason that they’d met up with Celestino Cialdini and Phichit in Tokyo before the four of them headed to Karuizawa and the SBC Cup in the morning. Yuuri did his best to pay attention instead of sulking at the fact that this conversation was happening at all. If anything, he should be happy that Alexei was being as supportive as he was in helping him find a new coach. A potential new coach, anyway; at the end of the meal, he still wasn’t entirely sure how happy he’d be working with the Italian.

Yuuri sighed and started on his next portion of hitsumabushi.

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Yuuri landed the triple loop and continued onto the next element of his short program -- a series of transition steps -- before entering into his final combination spin. He’d had more trouble than usual getting into the routine. It was a sweet sort of love song, but he felt so stiff skating it -- stiff in a way that he hadn’t when he was in France, which Yuuri could only attribute to being in Japan. A couple of his classmates had made the trip up to Karuizawa. Shouta had not been among them, and even though it didn’t sting as much as it would have immediately after their breakup, knowing that Shouta didn’t even want to watch him skate--

He hit his final pose, arms outstretched and reaching upwards before his fists closed on air and he brought them back in close to his chest.

He knew as he left the ice for the Kiss and Cry that while he’d had a cleaner skate, the performance wasn’t there -- not in the way it had been in the Alps. and he knew that his score would be a little weak for it.

Alexei wrapped his arm around Yuuri’s shoulders in the Kiss and Cry, but Yuuri found himself
tuning him out. He didn’t want to hear about what he did well, or even what he did badly. He just wanted to get his score and go into the back and find a corner where he could listen to music and not have to deal with anything, or anyone.

His score was exactly as expected: strong, but not as strong as it would have been with a better performance. Still, it was enough to put him in first with two skaters left to go. He took a deep breath and nodded, pretty sure that Alexei had told him “good job,” and left the Kiss and Cry just as Phichit’s short program music was starting.

Yuuri stopped and turned, watching as Phichit started his performance with a series of steps across the ice; he was practically skipping along. It was very lively and Yuuri smiled as he watched him. Phichit definitely had a presence on the ice, enough that Yuuri stopped trying to figure out the level of the Thai skater’s step sequence or his spins as he went through the routine. Instead, he just watched. If he was in the audience, this would probably be his favorite routine. The lightness of Phichit’s double axel and then the speed of his pancake spin; it was riveting, almost more like watching an ice show or an exhibition skate than a skate meant to be scored for competition, and Phichit’s face was just so very open and joyful, even during the more serious parts of the piece.

When Phichit stepped off the ice, Yuuri just smiled and gave him a quick hug, telling him that he loved every second of his routine. Phichit hugged him back and dragged him to the Kiss and Cry, cajoling him into a shared selfie while they waited for his scores to come in. Eventually, Yuuri begged off and headed to the back, heart lighter and ready to compete in the Free Skate the next day.

“Phichit would make a good rinkmate.” Alexei said as he fell into step next to Yuuri.

“I think he would.” Yuuri looked over at Phichit, who was currently jumping up and down because his score had ended up one point and a bit above Yuuri’s. Coach Cialdini was patting him on the back and laughing. He was definitely a supportive coach, if nothing else. “But I’m not going to make any rash decisions either.”

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It ended up being the closest qualifier that Yuuri had ever competed in. He did end up with the gold medal around his neck, assuring him a place in the final in Beijing, but it was close. He’d only come ahead of the second place medalist by the tiniest handful of points, and if his free skate hadn’t been clean, he might have placed second at this qualifier as well. Phichit had claimed bronze after winding up less than a point behind the second place finisher, but declared afterward that he’d take gold at his next qualifier in Germany.

Yuuri probably would have tried to find a way to watch it if hadn’t overlapped exactly with his trip to Finland for the Finlandia Trophy. But he did promise Phichit that he’d be doing his best to keep up with his scores.

“Me too! Do your best to beat Christophe, Yuuri!”

That was asking a lot. But Yuuri didn’t want to say that, so he just nodded. He really didn’t have any confidence in himself when it came to competing in the Senior division, but that’s why he’d pushed for one more season in the Junior division. At the same time, it made him feel foolish, skating with a safety net of sorts.

“Wow, Yuuri, that’s a lot of cheering for you!”

Yuuri flushed. “I... uh... the song is really popular here, is all.”
“I liked it! It’s catchy!” Phichit ran over to Coach Cialdini, who’d been calling for him. Yuuri made his way over, too; a small crowd had already started to gather to greet him. He shouldn’t have been surprised to see Shuji in the middle of it; yet at the same time, a lot of the attendees didn’t seem to be paying Shuji much attention at all. Instead, they were holding out folders and cards for Yuuri to sign, which he did, glad for the fact that having just finished his exhibition skate gave him a good excuse for the increased color in his face. No one would be able to tell that he was blushing. A few in the crowd handed him flowers -- mostly roses, since that’s what they sold outside the venue -- while others pushed some small stuffed animals into his arms.

“I heard that your favorite Pokemon was Arcanine!” exclaimed one fan.

Yuuri smiled down at the small plush. “It is. Thank you very much.” He’d have to be careful to put it where Vicchan couldn’t get to it. He bowed.

Shuji slung his arm over Yuuri’s shoulders. “I’ll never get tired of seeing you skate to that song, though I am disappointed that you changed the shirt.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes and ducked his head as many camera flashes went off.

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One week between competitions was barely any time at all, especially when Alexei and Yuuri were spending a good chunk of training debating whether Yuuri should speed up his step sequence and aim for a Level 4 again, or put the quad toeloop back in toward the end of the free skate. Either would increase his points and make him more competitive, but wouldn’t necessarily make much of a difference in the grand scheme of things. The goal wasn’t to beat Chris; both Alexei and Yuuri were fairly confident that Chris was either going to win gold or at the very least take a spot on the podium. At the same time, he had a high enough ranking that he no longer needed decent placements at second-tier competitions in order to boost his Ranking.

In fact, Alexei had said that he wouldn’t be surprised if this turned out to be Chris’s last season on the second-tier circuit. Now that Stéphane had officially retired from competitive skating, the national title was basically Chris’s. And he had a World Championship as well, even if it was from one where none of the Olympic medalists had competed.

Chris had the confidence to win. Yuuri knew without a doubt that he was meant to be Viktor’s true rival.

So the fact that Chris was waiting for him in the lobby when he walked through the hotel doors with Alexei and Riku in tow was beyond surprising.

“Finally! Viktor told me when your plane was landing, but I feel like I’ve been waiting forever. I’m starving! Let’s go eat.”

Yuuri looked helplessly at Alexei, who just shrugged and took Yuuri’s bookbag. “You have your money, right?”

“Huh? Yeah, but--”

“Go have fun, Yuuri-kun. Alexei and I will check in for you and make sure your things get up to your room.” Riku, even though she was so much shorter than Chris, levelled the Swiss skater with a look that had him flinching. “Do not keep him out late. He doesn’t rest as well as he could on flights, and we want him in peak condition to skate.”

“Yes, Madame Turov.” Chris smiled and led Yuuri out of the hotel, taking them down one of the
nearby streets. “I found a wonderful little cafe. That is where we will go, but first, pictures!” Chris pulled Yuuri close and aimed his smartphone as deftly as Phichit had in Tokyo. “Perfect!”

“Let me guess. You’re going to be putting that up on Twitter?”

Chris looked at him. “Of course not! You don’t use Twitter like that, so why would I put your picture up?”

“Really?”

Chris delicately shrugged one shoulder and directed Yuuri into the cafe. It was chilly out, and even though outside seating was still available, Yuuri was happier eating indoors. “It’s our first competition. Let’s just enjoy it. You can decide later what, if any, pictures you’re all right with me posting.”

Yuuri laughed and looked at the cafe menu, then at Chris. “Do you understand any of this?”

“Not at all!” Chris laughed and motioned over one of the servers. The cafe’s waitstaff didn’t speak much English, but it turned out that this particular server spoke a bit of French. Yuuri had no idea what Chris ordered for them and wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he’d go with it. The food on the plane had been horrible, and he was looking forward to getting something hot and decently made into his stomach.

When their food arrived, it turned out to be a bowl of pea soup and a warm smoked salmon sandwich. It smelled delicious and Yuuri didn’t hesitate to dive in, mumbling ‘頂きます’ before taking the first bite of his sandwich.

“Dinner selfie!” Chris suddenly declared, shoving his seat next to Yuuri’s before wrapping his arm around Yuuri’s shoulder, pulling him close as Chris’s smartphone swung into position. “We should do a silly pose.”

“Chris!” Yuuri frowned at the smartphone.

“Don’t be a spoilsport. Come on. Duck face!” Chris pouted his lips and sucked in his cheeks, tilting his head to one side, and Yuuri really thought about just laying his own head on the table right there, but… why not? Chris said that he wouldn’t post things that Yuuri didn’t want him to, so he copied Chris’s pose and tilted his head back, leaning his shoulder in. Chris snapped the picture and then two more before pulling the smartphone down and looking at the results. “Oh these are great! Look!”

The pictures were indeed silly, but they made Yuuri smile nonetheless. Maybe it wouldn’t be the end of the world if he let Chris put some up on Twitter. “OK, you can use one.”

“Really?” But it didn’t matter, because Chris’s fingers were already flying over the screen of his phone. It was a troublesome process, having to upload to Twitpic and then Twitter. It would be so much easier if it was all contained in one application -- or at least that’s what Viktor always said. Yuuri didn’t do it often enough to find it truly annoying. “Done!”

christpohegc chillin’ in Finland with @yuurikatsuki Give us a kiss? twitpic.com/n285hy #3musketeers #2outof3ain’tbad #FinlandiaTrophy #vikkywhereuat? from Tweetie 1s ago

Yuuri laughed. “He might never forgive you for calling him ‘Vikky’, you know.”

“Would he forgive you?” Across the table from him, Chris rested his chin on one hand.
Shrugging, Yuuri looked down at his soup, mixing it even though it in no way needed it.
“Probably.”

“Then we’ll say it was your idea!”

“Chris!”

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Yuuri grabbed a hand towel from the boards and wiped it across his face before looking up at his coach. In the chill of the rink, the towel felt really good against his face. He’d really pushed himself with his practice, even if he didn’t do a single quad.

“I think going for the Level 4 instead of the quad is definitely the way to go.” Alexei was leaning against the boards from the other side. “What do you think?”

“Hm.” Yuuri dropped the towel and took a swig of water while he thought of his answer. “I didn’t see a lot of quads out there. Cao Bin and Chris had them, but then again they’re fighting for the top of the podium against each other.”

“And what are you doing?”

He took a really slow and deep breath to help with the nerves that were teasing at the edge of his senses, waiting for a crack to appear and knock him off his game. “I don’t know. I just don’t want to make a fool of myself like I did at Nebelhorn.”

“I believe it was my brilliant, talented and beautiful wife that told you that not embarrassing yourself can be a goal.”

Yuuri laughed. “Yeah.”

“Now go get dressed for your interview.” Alexei pushed back off the boards and Yuuri groaned. He was not looking forward to this. It was not just an interview, which was already bad enough. No, there was a photoshoot that was going along with it. ISM, after their less-than-flattering article following the Olympics, had decided to mend fences by doing a piece on Oda and him, and Yuuri was sure that Alexei wasn’t mentioning the photoshoot portion because he knew just how much Yuuri was dreading it.

Yuuri entered the locker room to find Chris sitting on the bench lacing his skates. “Finished already? I’ve only been off the ice for a few minutes.”

“I have a thing I have to do. An interview.” Yuuri ducked his head after pulling his sweaty shirt off. “I am not looking forward to it. I’ll be back for the evening session.” He headed into the showers so he could at least rinse off. If Alexei hadn’t all but forced the interview by combining it with a competition so that Yuuri couldn’t find a way out of it, Yuuri would have simply blown it off. He wasn’t like Viktor and Chris and a lot of the other skaters; the interviews and socializing were just a pain. He sighed as he stepped out of the shower and pulled on a fresh pair of boxer briefs and the “nice” jeans he’d brought with him. He was only slightly surprised to see Chris still sitting on the bench, playing with his phone.

Maybe he wanted to wish Yuuri luck. That’d be nice.

But when Yuuri went to grab his shirt, it wasn’t there. He turned around. “Chris, have you seen—What are you doing?!” He dove for Chris’s phone the instant he realized that Chris had taken a picture of him.
“No, I can’t share this with the Twitterverse? But think how happy all your fans will be, mon ami!”

“Ah! I don’t-- I-- CHRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIS!”

Chris just laughed. “I promise, it shall not go up on Twitter. I’ll even give you a little blackmail in return. Just let me text you.”

And that was how Yuuri ended up with an unwanted picture of a practically naked Christophe Giacometti on his phone. The fact that Chris was not even a full two years older than him defied belief -- at times like these, the age gap seemed so much more vast than that.

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Yuuri leaned against the tree as directed. He was about one thousand and one percent sure that he was doing it completely wrong, but the photographer that had come along with the journalist just kept nodding. So Yuuri just shoved his hands a little further into his front pockets and looked up at the sky. It was better than looking at the photographer, and if it was really a problem, he figured that the photographer would probably say something to him.

In fact, if it wasn’t for the click of the camera and the sound of Alexei talking softly with the journalist a few feet away, Yuuri could almost forget he was doing this whole thing. So he didn’t think about it, and just turned his head to get a better view of the remainder of the park. All told, Finland looked a lot different than Japan.

There were a few more clicks, then the journalist called him over. Yuuri pushed up the sleeves of his shirt a bit so they stopped in the middle of his forearms -- a trick he sometimes used when he didn’t want to be caught fidgeting with the cuffs, or didn’t want to destroy them. Slightly stretched out cuffs were preferable to destroyed cuffs; and a veneer of calm looked better than the anxious wreck he actually was. He sat down next to Alexei and grabbed a bottle of water from the center, wondering if he could get away with just slowly, slowly drinking the whole bottle down in one go so he could put off the interview a few more minutes. Another click from the photographer stopped him, and he glanced up in surprise.

“Sorry. The framing was exceptional. I think the magazine will like the picture.”

Yuuri’s brow knitted. That was unexpected. “I doubt it, but OK.”

“You have an amazing jawline, Mister Katsuki. Ever thought about modelling?”

Yuuri coughed. “No!”

The photographer shrugged and spoke to the journalist for a minute. Something about how the pictures wouldn’t need that much work -- it was nice of the guy to lie -- and he’d be sending the raws over to the office by the afternoon.

Once the photographer said his good-byes, the journalist turned to him with a smile. “So, Yuuri. Last year you competed in some Senior level competitions for the first time. Do you feel more ready this time around?”

Yuuri took a deep breath. It was an expected question, and he’d rehearsed his answer. At least he wasn’t giving it on TV, where he’d probably sound stiff and uncomfortable. “Of course. There was a lot of pressure that I didn’t expect last year, but this year I feel much more ready to compete against the Senior division skaters!” That was a complete lie; he really didn’t. But Alexei had impressed on him that he wasn’t to reveal it under any circumstances, adding that just because Yuuri felt a little out of his depth didn’t mean that he wasn’t capable of competing against the Senior skaters.
Yuuri didn’t know what he was going to do without Alexei.

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Yuuri reached out and snatched a piece of fruit from Chris’s container. They’d found a quiet little bench not far from the hotel and were enjoying the outside. With everything that had been going on, Yuuri hadn’t actually gotten to spend a lot of time with Chris. The change of pace was nice.

“So, you really don’t think you’re ready?”

Yuuri sucked the juice off one finger. “No. And you don’t have to tell me that I’m being ridiculous. I know that even without a quad, my base technical score for my short program is competitive, and getting my step sequence up to a Level 4 from a 3 has helped my free skate. Mentally, I know that I’m not out of my depth…”

Chris was fiddling with his phone, probably snapping more pictures. Yuuri was kind of getting used to it; it helped knowing that he didn’t have to worry about Chris posting anything without his permission. “It’s one thing to know something, it’s another to feel it. And you don’t feel prepared.”

Yuuri nodded and brought his feet up onto the bench so he could press his chin against his knees. “Exactly. I just keep thinking, ‘What if I screw up?’”

“In this case, you won’t make podium and get prize money, but does that matter? You didn’t come to this competition for the prize money.”

“But it’d make things easier.”

“Do you really want to take on that sort of stress, though?”

Yuuri tipped his head to the side and stared at Chris, who’d dropped his phone into his lap and was busy sucking the juice off a particularly ripe piece of pear. He was right -- while the prize money would be a great help, it would be easier, mentally and emotionally, not to put it into the equation. He should do what Riku had told him back in his first Junior Grand Prix and just focus on not embarrassing himself; put on a good show and clean skate. His performance scores were always good as long as he focused on the feeling of the piece.

He could do that. Just let his body tell the story of his short program.

“Thanks, Chris.”

Chris grinned. “Isn’t that what friends are for? For encouragement and taking embarrassing pictures?”

Yuuri groaned. He really didn’t want to see what Chris had snapped when he wasn’t paying attention; if he did, he was absolutely sure he’d try and make Chris delete every last one.

“So…”

Narrowing his eyes, Yuuri looked over at Chris before plucking the last bit of pear from the container. The look on the other skater’s face made it clear the looming question wasn’t going to be one Yuuri would like, which gave him every right to finish off the fruit. “What?”

“I heard from Viktor that things ended between you and the swimmer. Seeing anyone new?”

On second thought, Yuuri mused as he promptly choked on the slice, he probably should have left
Yuuri tugged on his skates and focused on tightening the lacing. It was a good task, one that let him just zone out or focus -- whatever he needed it to be. Like a liminal space, almost. He took a deep breath. He knew that Alexei was just standing off to the side, their credentials lanyards around his neck, arms crossed over his chest, forehead furrowed as he watched. He wouldn’t say anything, though; with the earbuds in Yuuri’s ears now playing the music to his short program, it’d be hard to hear, but not impossible. Satie was a soft sort of composer. A final knot and Yuuri stood up, looking over at his coach, then to where Chris was currently standing with his coach, halfway through his stretches.

Their skating positions weren’t right next to each other, but they were still in the same group.

*You can do this. No pressure to win.*

Yuuri nodded. He could do this.

Riku ran her hands over the shoulders of the thin, red shawl-collared sweater that made up the outermost layer of his costume, smoothing the knit out before straightening the bow tie. “You look like you stepped right off the streets of Paris in the 1920s.”

“Or from that Woody Allen movie that’s coming out next year.” Alexei added.

Riku just looked over at her husband and shook her head. “I heard from Okukawa-sensei how wonderfully you performed this piece at the Ice Castle. Skate it like you did for them.”

Yuuri felt the smile curl his lips as the music started playing. It was a lover’s song. A song for strolling along the Seine and holding hands while staring at the old buildings; a song for the dusky gold of sunsets. A song for falling in love and being in love.

So he skated it that way, telling the story of a chance meeting in Paris, of long walks and quiet conversation. Of staring into each other’s eyes before being pulled into an alcove along the Pont Neuf for a kiss -- a story that Yuuri may have borrowed from the many that Alexei had told while waxing poetic about his wife.

Each step was like a breath, an influx of air and then an exhalation; sometimes slow and long and quiet, sometimes quick, like the mixture of surprise and relief that knocks the breath out of your chest for just a second. And while the person that Yuuri was strolling with in his story had no face or discernible features, it felt like they’d been there for ages. It was a warm feeling, a loving feeling, and that was everything that Yuuri wanted to bring into this skate.

The triple axel came first, shortly before the midway point of the skate. It wouldn’t be worth any extra points, but it came at the perfect place in the song, a point of catharsis of hope. Then a pause for a much-needed breath and a series of steps connecting into his next jump, a combination starting with his quad-toe and followed by a triple toe-loop, a change from the choreography he’d been doing. Lilia had choreographed the second jump to be a loop, but Yuuri didn’t feel ready for that. So he moved on, brushing the feeling off, but that lack of perfection marred the end of the story; the landing on his Lutz wasn’t perfect and the final spin was good, but not as tight or fast as it should have been.

Yuuri got stuck in his own head.

He sighed as he stepped off the ice, clipping first one guard and then the next onto his blades. Alexei
Yuuri just pounded him on the back and congratulated him on a good skate.

Yuuri felt eyes on him and he wondered if people realised how poorly the end of the skate went, when it all started falling apart. He was waiting for the words from Alexei -- the scolding and the point-by-point discussions of the flaws in his program -- but they never came. As it turned out, his scores were good; Yuuri breathed a sigh of relief, covering his face with his hands as Alexei leaned over, lips close to Yuuri’s ear. “Congratulations, Yuuri. It may not be your Senior debut, but it was a good skate, the sort I wished you’d had.”

Yuuri just nodded. He could do this. He could skate in Seniors and be competitive at it. Next year, he would compete in the Grand Prix Series against Viktor, and that thought sent a burst of energy along his nerves, excitement and nervousness and anticipation all swirling together under his skin, leaving him a bit giddy at the realization. Everything else faded out; even Chris’s short program, which landed the Swiss skater in first after the short.

And while Cao Bin came ahead of him and won silver overall, Yuuri still made the podium. He stared down at his bronze medal while the cameras flashed, only looking up when Chris called out and demanded he blow a few air kisses for his ever-present smartphone. Even then, Yuuri was shell-shocked enough that he barely even registered the text from Phichit; the Thai skater had placed high enough in Dresden that he’d probably be going to the Final, and he was looking forward to seeing Yuuri in Beijing!

***

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I can really do this. I can compete in Seniors. I may even be able to beat you.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Not with a bronze at Finlandia you won’t.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov It wouldn’t have been a bronze if I put my quads back in the Free Skate.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Quads? Can you do it? Can you land a 4Lz?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Wouldn’t you like to know? Let’s just say you shouldn’t get cocky.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Yuuuuuuuuuuu! So mean!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov (^•ω•^)✧

***

Viktor stared at the little emoji probably longer than was necessary before locking the phone and slipping it into his pocket. His hands returned to the still-warm coffee cup in front of him; there were butterflies in his stomach, and he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“Viktor.” Another coffee cup was set on the table across from his. Dmitri was slim and tall; he had hair that was shorter than Viktor’s, but still managed to look a little bit messy and windswept in an attractive sort of way. Viktor had seen him at the rink many times, but never really took notice of him before.

“Dmitri.” Viktor smiled. It was stiff, he knew, but he didn’t know how to make it feel natural.

“‘Dima,’ please. We train together. We may not have the same coach, but that doesn’t mean we
aren’t rinkmates.” Dmitri’s smile was wide, full of teeth and very genuine. It relaxed Viktor somewhat. “I’ve been told you might need a distraction. I’ve been told I can be very distracting.”

“By whom, exactly?” Viktor leaned back and bit his lip.

Dmitri shrugged and took a sip of his coffee. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? Besides, wouldn’t you like to find out for yourself?”

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s been a while, but really, two of those weeks don’t count. For those that don’t know, I had surgery at the end of June and it took me a couple of weeks to get back into the swing of things. Luckily Io took time off to help with the demon goat. Unfortunately, summer is evil and it was hot. I sort of cease functioning in the heat. Really, and since this is Germany, A/Cs aren’t really a thing, so I spend most of my time feeling incredibly overheated which leaves me exhausted by the end of the day which really cuts into my writing time. I can’t really write while taking care of the goat (at least for now) he’s in a very active, very demanding stage, so that cuts down my writing time as well. Just please be patient with me.

Also... yeah, I know. This is actually slightly less than HALF of what the chapter was going to be... it’s a monster. Hence the ending. Its a good place to cut. (And I promise, Viktor is much larger presence in the next chapter. All the non-Viktor stuff for this season was at the beginning.)
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Yuuri has a series of run-ins that leave him shook up in various ways as he competes at the Merano Cup and Junior Nationals.

Chapter Notes

GUYS GUYS!!!! THERE’S MORE FANART! Can you believe it?! Because I can’t believe it! I am so #blessed!

This one of Yuuri and Keiko from Chapter 12 is just so cute! I love the way Keiko looks! Super amazing!
This one of Yuuri with Riku and Alexei I just love how heartwarming it is! :D

And since you’ve been waiting for so long... the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Yuuri-kun! Congratulations!” Noda-chan waved from her spot on the windowsill as soon as Yuuri walked into the classroom. It seemed as if everyone was staring at him, so Yuuri ducked his head and just headed for his seat. He really rather hated it when people stared. He had so much work to catch up on, and by the time he caught up it would probably be time for him to leave for Italy. And right after the Merano Cup was Junior Nationals. Then it’d be just a week until the Junior Grand Prix Final in China, and then two weeks after that, Senior Nationals... Yuuri groaned and pressed his forehead to the surface of his desk.

He was never going to graduate.

Yuuri let his breath escape in a quick rush. Would that be so bad, though? After all, if he never graduated he’d never have to worry about finding a new coach. New plan: fail to finish his last year of high school...

No. His parents would kill him. It was a horrible plan, driven solely by Yuuri’s hatred of change. He didn’t want to move to Sapporo. He didn’t want to leave the friends that he’d made at school. He didn’t want to leave Alexei and Riku. He liked things just the way they were.

So of course life dictated that it all change. Again. Just like it had when he’d been forced to leave Russia. Just like it had before that, when he’d lost his coach and had to go to Russia in the first place. “On to bigger and better things!” is what Minako-sensei had said at the time.

Yuuri supposed the same could be said for this particular crossroad.

“Katsuki-kun, we were all pleased to hear about your success at your competition in Europe. Shuji-kun even organized a viewing party for the class. Congratulations.”
Yuuri blanched at the teacher’s words. He’d had to have heard her wrong. He had to have.
Luckily, years of helping at the onsen when he was little kicked in; even though his brain wasn’t
quite functioning at that particular moment, his subconscious knew that he needed to show his
gratitude. So he stood up and bowed to the class, thanking them all for their support.

One thing was sure to Yuuri: his life was unreal.

Just how unreal only came into sharper focus that afternoon while Yuuri was skating. Three solid
landings on his quad-toe, and Yuuri was feeling rather invincible. He knew that his feet would hurt
later and that he wouldn’t want to move from his bed that night, but still, it was a good few hours of
skating.

Yuuri was expecting a smile from his coach, but when he looked over, all he saw was Alexei’s back
and a very familiar tenseness, the one that meant he had his arms crossed against his chest. Yuuri
was fairly sure that he hadn’t done something to upset his coach. But there was a sense of dread that
settled in his stomach nonetheless, and it only turned worse -- twisting and coiling, painfully
tightening -- when Alexei stepped to the side and revealed that he’d been talking to Shouta.

Yuuri dragged his right foot behind his left and stopped out in the middle of the ice. There were a
couple other skaters working on their routines; they smoothly swerved around Yuuri and carried on.
Thankfully, it wasn’t a public skate; a less experienced skater might not have been adept enough to
react in time. Even then, lingering on the ice still wasn’t the smartest thing for Yuuri to be doing.
With a sigh, he pushed off and started moving toward the boards. There was no way he was
stepping out of the rink until he knew it was safe, though. If the conversation turned, he’d want to
keep the quick escape option of the ice open behind him.

“Hi, Yuuri.”

“Shouta.”

Yuuri’s ex shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans and shifted his weight from one foot
to the other. “Can we, I don’t know, talk? Somewhere not… here?”

Of course Shouta knew him, knew that Yuuri wanted to be able to skate off the second things made
him uncomfortable. With a sigh, Yuuri pushed off and swung around to the rink exit. “I guess. If
my coach says it’s all right.”

Alexei was still frowning, but he nodded. “Our time is just about up, anyway.”

Yuuri put his hard guards on and moved over to one of the benches to sit down. Maybe if he
managed to end the conversation quickly, he could still save a little ice time. He leaned back and
motioned to the spot next to him.

“Come on, Yuuri. Please?”

Sighing again, Yuuri leaned over and undid his laces. So much for getting back on the ice today.
“You’ll need to wait for me to pull things together.” He looked over at Alexei. “Can I drop my bag
in your car today?”

Alexei nodded and shut the notebook that he used to track their practices. Normally, they’d discuss
Yuuri’s results immediately afterwards; now they’d probably go over things during dinner instead.
But it wasn’t like Riku-san ever minded them talking shop over dinner.

Yuuri could feel the muscles around his eyes tightening as he frowned. In a few months he wouldn’t
be living with a coach. He’d be on his own -- maybe without even Vicchan for company. The idea
of that clutched Yuuri’s heart into a death grip. He’d hated not having Vicchan that almost-whole year in Russia. He couldn’t do it again.

No. Vicchan was definitely going wherever he was. That was going to be non-negotiable.

“Yuuri?” Shouta was waiting.

No, all that was for later. Later than later, even. He hadn’t even finished talking to potential coaches. He had two more meetings left. They weren’t as prestigious as the two with their bases in America, but they were both willing to work in Sapporo. And before that…

Shouta gave him another look.

“Yeah. All right.” Yuuri switched the hard guards on his skates to the poodle soakers and put his skates in his bag, then stood, swinging the strap over his shoulder and grabbing his Team Japan jacket. It was the first thing that had come to hand that morning, and though it was embarrassing, he still didn’t want to get caught outside without it. It was November and even as an ice skater, he didn’t like the chill in the air. “Yeah, I’m ready. We just have to stop by Alexei’s car.”

Shouta nodded, following Yuuri out the door of the rink, through the lobby and the entrance to the underground garage. When reached Alexei’s car, Yuuri let his fingers linger on top of the car trunk. He was stalling. Of course he was stalling. He didn’t know what Shouta wanted to talk about, but the last time they’d talked had sucked.

Seriously sucked.

His fingers fell to the bead bracelet around his wrist, and the corners of his lips turned up in a smile. He and Viktor had matching charms now. So even though Yuuri’s heart had ended up seriously bruised, at least some good had come of it.

Yuuri caught Shouta looking at his wrist and instantly stopped fidgeting with the beads. “You wanted to talk?”

Shouta took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling of the garage. “I wasn’t wrong.”

The words were like a gut punch, and Yuuri really wished he could have just pushed Shouta in the chest and toppled him then and there. Jackass!

“I wasn’t wrong, but I still wish that I hadn’t done it.” Shouta sighed and looked at Yuuri. “I miss you. I miss talking to you. I miss hanging out with you. You got it. You really understood. I feel like every time I talk to anyone, I need to explain it. Even my teammates. Half of them aren’t sure that they want to try for the Olympics. The competitions are going to be tough.”

“That’s what makes it worthwhile, though. Overcoming those odds. Standing there knowing that you’re better --” Yuuri cut himself off and bit his tongue.

“Exactly!” Shouta’s hands came up. “But it always sounds like I’m bragging or boasting. People don’t get that it’s a goal. That I’m really just beating myself. My times. My scores. I’m better.” Shouta looked at him and grinned. “But you understand. You’ve been doing so well at your competitions, though I know you had to really hate that silver at the one in France. I hope you didn’t beat yourself up too much over it.”

Yuuri sucked in a deep breath. “You watched my competitions?”

Color washed over Shouta’s cheeks and he looked away. “Yeah, I did. My mom had a good laugh
about it when I sat down with her when she put them on. She even tried to convince me to go to Shuji-kun’s to watch the Finland one there, but I didn’t want to be in the same room as your … whatever. As Shuji.”

“As my what?” Yuuri frowned.

“Shuji.” Shouta sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “We actually got into a bit of an argument about it. I keep telling him that he should stop distracting you. You have so many competitions coming up and trying to graduate, but he’s an idiot and he likes you and said he wasn’t going to pass up this opportunity to date you and--”

“I’m not dating Shuji-kun. Why would--? What?” Yuuri looked at Shouta and then the ground, trying to figure out how Shouta thought that they were together.

“Wait. You’re not? But I thought you went on that date to the game center and the purikuri. Do you know how pissed I was that the two of you copied one of our first dates?”

Yuuri looked up. Shouta wasn’t frowning quite as deeply anymore. “That was a… date?”

And with that, the frown changed completely to a smile; suddenly, Shouta was laughing. “You really aren’t. Ah--- I can’t--- can I tell him? Please, let me be the one to tell Shuji that he hasn’t managed to snag you up.” Shouta dragged in deep breaths. “And here I was getting all angry that you might… with him… and oh, this is good. You have no idea how much better I feel.”

“You think Shuji-kun and I… what… that we…” Yuuri could feel the blood rush up to his face, and suddenly he was glad that there was absolutely no one around to witness this conversation. “NO! No! We haven’t even kissed! I didn’t even know that was supposed to be a date!” Yuuri’s voice dropped. “Is that why he wouldn’t let me pay him back for the don?”

Shouta rubbed his eyes, which had started to gather a little water from tears at the corners. “This is great. So great. Yeah, Yuu-kun, you went on a date with Shuji and didn’t even realize it. Do you know how many people in our school would have loved Shuji to take them out? And you thought that the two of you were just hanging out as friends.”

Yuuri flushed, embarrassed and just a little angry that Shouta was finding this so funny. “He never said anything! The word ‘date’ was never uttered!”

Shouta leaned against Alexei’s car and clutched his side. “Most people would figure it out, Yuu-kun. He had his manager drive him to your competition in Karuizawa. There was footage of the two of you shown on the local news with his arm around your shoulders as you signed autographs.”

Yuuri groaned and put his hands over his face. It was so much worse than he had imagined. It had really never occurred to him that Shuji had even wanted to take him out. Yeah, Shouta and him did things like game centers for dates, but that was because they both enjoyed games. They’d gone to the game centers before they’d started dating. And that Shuji and him were filmed and on the news - - the news! He didn’t even remember that. He’d been so overwhelmed signing things for those girls that he just went into autopilot.

How was he going to fix this? Like he didn’t have enough to worry about before they left for Italy! He had a month to straighten this misunderstanding out. “How am I not expelled?”

Shouta shrugged. “I don’t think the school wants to deal with the scandal of expelling one of the best figure skaters in the country with only 5 months left before graduation. Besides, it’s not like either of you said you were dating. Shuji does stupid shit all the time and none of it has ruined his
popularity as an idol yet. It’s like he can’t go down in a scandal. It’s a little disappointing, really.”

“Sometimes you can be a real jerk, Shouta.” But Yuuri smiled. He may have missed this, too.

“It’s Shuji. If Noda-chan and I don’t keep his head from inflating too much, there is no hope of him surviving until graduation.” Shouta shifted from one foot to the other, then took a deep breath. “Can we do this again? Talk?”

“Like friends?”

“Yeah.”

Yuuri nodded. “Of course we’re friends.” He smiled.

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I don’t know where to start. The fact that you didn’t realise that the kid had asked you out or that you actually went

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov It doesn’t count if I don’t know!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri It still counts

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No, it doesn’t.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri We need a third opinion. Hold on.

vnikiforov @christophegc Is it a date even if you don’t know it’s a date because apparently you are incapable of telling if someone likes you? posted from Tweetie 3m ago

vnikiforov @christophegc the “you” is not you. It’s like a hypothetical person. It’s not me either. posted from Tweetie 3m ago

giacomettige @vnikiforov What? Is going on? posted from Tweetie 2m ago

vnikiforov @christophegc Asking for a friend. posted from Tweetie 2m ago

giacomettige @vnikiforov YES. STILL A DATE. #romancebromance posted from Tweetie 2m ago

3x3combo @vnikiforov I agree with Chris! Totally a date! Is it one of your rink mates? #romancebromance posted from Tweetie 1m ago

quadflip @vnikiforov I was so worried until you said it wasn’t you! #pleaseonlyaskmeout posted from Tweetie 1m ago

vikkys_girl @quadflip OMG! Don’t embarass yourself! posted from Tweetie 30s ago

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri So you could see his answer! Also, he agreed with me. So I’m right!
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  I don’t see how getting just Chris’s opinion makes you right

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  3x3combo agreed too!

katsudonyuui d vnikiforov  You don’t even know who that is!

cristophegc d katsudonyuuri  I assume that Viktor is talking to you? Who’d you go on a date with? You were single @ Finlandia

katsudonyuuri d christophegc  Don’t help him! Help me! I’m still single. Oh my god. I don’t want to date anyone!

cristophegc d katsudonyuuri  That’s still not an answer.

Chris
Yuuri went on a date? With who?

Viktor
An annoying idol from his school. He has BLUE BANGS, Chris. BLUE BANGS!

Chris
Yes, because you’ve never made any unfortunate hair dying choices.

Viktor
I’ll have you know that Yuuri helped me dye my hair that time

giacomettigc d katsudonyuuri  YOU’RE THE ONE WHO DYED VIKTOR’S HAIR?!?!??! Also you’re dating an idol?

katsudonyuuri d giacomettigc  WHAT?! Viktor--- ARGH! NO! It’s… ttyl

***

Viktor leaned back on the bed and petted Makkachin with one hand while scrolling through the Twitter app on his phone with the other. Apparently, his question had stirred up quite the controversy. Some people thought he was really asking for himself, and others were wondering if the mystery person was someone that Viktor was interested in -- maybe even the one that had done the asking.

He probably should have thought the whole thing through more thoroughly before engaging with Chris on a public forum. Now the hashtag #romancebromance was popping up all over. Even other skaters were getting in on the action, letting their opinions be known on -- both the question itself and whether it was Viktor who had asked the “someone” on the date, or was the someone who’d been asked.

He was pretty sure Yuuri would be mad if Viktor openly admitted that he was neither; that it was indeed a friend of his. Viktor could count how many people he acknowledged as his friends on one hand, and it wasn’t like Yuuri wasn’t a known quantity on that list.
Actually, Yuuri had been quiet for too long. Viktor bit his lip. He hadn’t meant to make Yuuri angry at him. He didn’t like it when Yuuri was angry at him, but at the same time he always ended up doing or saying something stupid because he was jealous.

Viktor knew he’d definitely gone too far when Cao Bin added an opinion. Cao Bin tweeted less than Yuuri! He really needed to do something. He went back to his direct messages to see if Yuuri had replied; then, like magic, his phone began vibrating in his hand as the chorus to *Teenage Dream* started to blare. Makkachin’s ears immediately perked up and she started barking. Without thinking about whether it was a good idea or bad one, Viktor accepted the call. “Yuuri!”

“Viktor! I can’t believe you! Do you see what is going on on Twitter? Chris messaged me asking if you were asking about me! If Chris could figure it out, my friends can figure it out!” Yuuri groaned. “My life is over!”

Makkachin barked at the phone.

“Oh, Makka, it’s you. How are you, girl? Do you miss me? Vicchan misses you.” And like that, Viktor could hear the tiny barks of Yuuri’s dog in the background and his heart squeezed painfully tight in his chest. Yuuri was cooing to his dog, telling her what a good girl she was -- which Viktor knew to be a lie, because she had once destroyed not one, but two pairs of fifteen hundred-ruble slippers while he’d been at the rink training -- and he couldn’t take how cute it all was. He really just could not take it. Yuuri was perfection.

And not his.

No. Yuuri apparently already belonged to some idol.

Viktor sighed. Just his luck. “Yuuri, it is not the end of the world. No one knows that it’s you except for Chris--”

“And Yuuko. She texted me right before I called you. Her and Nishigori are trying to figure out who asked me out. And it’s just a matter of time. I bet I’ll have a message from Minako-sensei before we even hang up. And,” Yuuri paused, and Viktor could hear Japanese being spoken in the background. It sounded like Alexei, which meant Viktor was probably going to get an angry text. “And,” Yuuri started talking again, “Alexei is wondering what’s going on, and why you can’t keep this sort of shit off Twitter.”

“Did Alexei actually say ‘shit’?”

“YES!”

Then Viktor was definitely going to get an angry text from Alexei. But on the other hand, he was actually talking to Yuuri. *Yuuri called him*! Maybe he should do things like this more often. He could already hear Chris telling him how bad an idea this whole thing was; Viktor shrugged it off. What he actually said was “Wow! I’m impressed I managed to get such a reaction from Alexei with just one tweet!”

Yuuri groaned on his end. “None of this helps me figure out what to do!”

Viktor chewed on his bottom lip for a minute and hummed. What he wanted to tell Yuuri -- end it as harshly as possible, as quickly as possible and never speak to BLUE BANGS again, Yuuri fan or not -- and what he should tell Yuuri -- have fun and enjoy it! -- warred inside his head. He sighed and went with the third option. “I’m sure that there has to be a way to let him down gently?”

“Have you ever been let down gently?” Viktor wanted to laugh bitterly. Yuuri tugged his heart in
every which direction; none of it was what Viktor would call gentle.

“Get dumped on Twitter, remember?”

“You kissed some guy at a banquet! I would have dumped you, too.”

Viktor wished that he could actually see Yuuri. He would have made sure to pout extra attractively at the camera. “Would you really have, Yuuuuuuuri?”

Image or not, Viktor knew that Yuuri was rolling his eyes at him. “Yes.” Yuuri sighed. “Maybe I should call Chris. He might know what to do. Do you have his phone number?”

“Nope!” Viktor buried his face in Makkachin’s fur as the obvious lie slipped from between his lips on pure instinct. Even Yuuri wouldn’t fail to spot such a blatant untruth. Viktor groaned. “Well, you know I never get to actually talk with you on the phone.”

“That’s because it’s expensive, Viktor.”

It really was a shame that Yuuri was missing out on all these wonderful pouts. “You should take more sponsorships, Yuuri. Then we can talk on the phone all the time!”

“The sponsorship! We’d actually be at that together! Vitya, you’re a genius!”

Viktor spluttered. “YUUUUUUUURI!”

“I have to go and call Shuji-kun. Ja-ne!” Yuuri hung up.

On the one hand, Viktor hated being hung up on. He hated it even more when it was Yuuri doing the hanging up. But on the other…

Viktor squealed into Makkachin’s fur and she responded with a cheerful boof. “He called me ‘Vitya’ again, Makka!”

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Yuuri took a deep breath and entered the studio. He still wasn’t sure that agreeing to the sponsorship was the best idea, but he’d get a chance to talk to Shuji and a new pair of free glasses out of it.

“Yuuri-kun, ohayo!” Shuji waved from the makeup table he’d been stationed at. A woman was applying all sorts of things to his face; the sight of it made Yuuri blanch. He’d never really liked the stage makeup he wore when he skated; this, if anything, looked far worse. He sighed and started heading over to Shuji, but was almost immediately intercepted by a tall, lanky man with a pencil tucked behind one ear and dyed pale hair pulled back into a loose ponytail at his nape.

The man bowed in greeting. “Katsuki-san. I am Sasaki Yushin, your stylist for the day.”

Yuuri bowed. “Please take care of me, Sasaki-san.”

He ended up in a chair a bit away from Shuji. Yuuri had planned to talk to Shuji-kun about the whole “was the game center a date?” thing, but there were apparently a lot more people involved in these shoots than he’d remembered from his Mizuno ad. It made sense that you’d need a larger team for video advertisements, but just to shoot a few pictures? And the make-up! When he’d had his picture taken in Finland by that photographer, they’d gotten by with just a bit of highlighter. But now… Yuuri clenched his hands around the arms of the chair, doing his best to not flinch backwards
as the eyeliner started swooping in. His sight was bad enough without losing an eye to an errant liner pencil.

After makeup it was wardrobe, and after wardrobe he needed to get his “glasses” fitted. There would be five changes of clothes and five changes of glasses, with the last three at a different location: outside at a park, and then a museum. It was not Yuuri’s idea of a great day out, but the sponsorship was worth it. It’d easily cover some of the upcoming expenses he’d have over the rest of the season.

And the entire time there was really no space to talk to Shuji. Well, they talked -- traded jokes and short quips -- but there wasn’t any downtime otherwise. Yuuri had already thoroughly given up hope on having a meaningful conversation. Not that he knew what he’d say.

“Yuuri-kun!” Shuji collapsed down on the park bench next to him, stretching his legs out. They were both dressed incredibly stylishly, and in Yuuri’s opinion, ridiculously. But then his day-to-day wear really only consisted of jeans and a shirt, assuming he wasn’t in workout clothes, skating clothes -- which really were just a different kind of workout clothes -- or his school uniform. He tugged at the collar of his shirt, which was rubbing uncomfortably against his neck. How did Viktor do this all the time? He glanced over at Shuji. How did he?

“How do you do this?” He hadn’t actually planned for that to come out of his mouth.

Shuji grinned. “I just do. It’s like playing pretend, you know, when you’re little? All of this,” Shuji swept his arm in a wide arc, taking in all the lights (why did they need lighting for a shoot outside in the middle of the day?) and people and the general bustle of the production, “is just like a game. Today is Shuji the eyeglass model.” Shuji shot him a glance; Yuuri guessed that it was supposed to be a smolder or something and almost scoffed. He should send Shuuji some of Viktor’s adverts so he could learn what a smolder really was. The perfume one, for instance--

“I don’t know if I can do that. Just become someone else, but not. I’m just…. Me.”

Shuji smiled at him, and now Yuuri could see what Shouta was saying: Shuji liked him. Shuji really liked him, and Yuuri… Yuuri decided that his life really sucked right now. He didn’t have time to deal with this on top of everything else, and was probably going to lose a friend over this. “I don’t know, Yuuri-kun, I think you’re pretty perfect.”

“Shuji-kun, I--”

“Katsuki-san! Can we have you over here please?”

Yuuri sighed but nodded, going over to where he was directed.

By the end of the day he still hadn’t spoken to Shuji about their misunderstanding, but at least he mustn’t have been that bad of a model; no one told him the pictures were horrible, and they all claimed that he’d done a good job. Yuuri wasn’t buying it, but it was nice of them to say all the same.

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sk8_madonna @yuurikatsuki Good luck in Italy! All of Hasetsu is cheering for you! posted via text 1h ago

chuchu_phichit @yuurikatsuki ncmpwladcly (That’s good luck in Thai!) posted via Tweetie 55m ago
Yuuri blinked at his twitter messages before shutting the phone off. This was ridiculous. It wasn’t even an important competition, like the Grand Prix Series, or Worlds, or anything. It wasn’t even the JGPF!

“Something wrong?” Alexei paused as he came up to Yuuri, having just finished their hotel check-in.

Yuuri shook his head. “No. Just… A lot of people have sent their well-wishes for the competition.”

“That’s nice of them.” His coach narrowed his eyes. “Was someone missing?”

“No! No. Not at all. It’s just… why? It’s just a B-level competition without a ton of skaters.”

“Just a B-level competition?” There was a hint of amusement fluttering around the edges of Alexei’s words.

“No! That’s not! It’s… I don’t mean it like that! It’s just… I feel like people are making it out to be a bigger deal than it needs to be. Did you know that Shuji-kun arranged a viewing party for the Finlandia Trophy? They all think that this is a stepping stone to bigger and better things for me--”

“Isn’t it?”

Yuuri chewed on his bottom lip. “I just think--”

“That if this really was a springboard into Seniors you’d be at the bigger competitions? Did you forget that that was exactly what the JSF wanted to do with you? As Junior World Champion, you had one guaranteed spot in the Senior Grand Prix, and they were going to use their spot at the NHK to get you a second one if your ranking was too low, but--”

Yuuri could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. Alexei had a point. He could have been at the Grand Prix Series instead. Yuuri looked out towards the mountains. He was getting ahead of himself. He had a plan: build his confidence for at least the first half of the season, and let what would happen happen after Junior and Senior Nationals.

His placement at Finlandia was obviously going to his head.

“Yuuri! Buongiorno!”

It took a second, but Yuuri was able to place the young woman running up to him as Sara Crispino.

“Hello.”

She smiled brightly and leaned in to press an air kiss on either side of his cheeks. “I was so happy to see that you were skating here. Mickey is too! He’s determined to beat you. It’s his first Senior competition, you know.”

Michele Crispino was honestly some of Yuuri’s toughest competition in Juniors; in a way, Yuuri was glad to know that he wasn’t the only Junior skater getting his feet wet in the Senior division without jumping in all the way first. He didn’t have the courage that Viktor or Chris had when they made their transitions.
“I hope he does well.” Not really, but not… not? He certainly didn’t wish for Mickey to do badly, but neither did he want the guy to beat him!

Sara’s laughter was crisp and bright, and reminded Yuuri of taking a bite out of an apple -- sweet, but just a bit tart on the tip of his tongue. He smiled at her. “Oh, when he’s in a mood -- usually when our coach has been riding him on not focusing on the elements he should be focusing on -- he starts going on about how now that you’re on his home turf, he’ll show you how good a skater he really is.”

“Really?” That sounded… strange.

Sara nodded. “Of course. I don’t think that Mickey has beaten you once when you’ve been in a competition against each other. He’s come really close, but then he gets so focused on his technical scores that he forgets to perform and his PCS plummets. And then he ends up looking up at you on the podium again.” Linking her fingers behind her back, Sara lowered her voice. “You know, there’s a rumor that your Free Skate is actually harder than what you’ve been skating. That you haven’t been skating the real version. Is it true?”

Yuuri couldn’t help himself; he laughed. “Is this because of changes I made at Finlandia? I guess it’s true? Alexei and I did decide to switch up some of the choreography for Senior level competitions to make it more competitive. He also was talking about how I shouldn’t peak too early in the season.”

Nodding, Sara shifted her weight to the balls of her feet and leaned in even closer. “My coach is saying the same, but I really want to go all out. I’m hoping I’ll get into the Grand Prix next year.”

“I bet you will.” Yuuri really didn't have time to follow all the ladies’ skaters, but Yuuko did; she only had nice things to say about the Italian’s skating. “You’re one of my best friend’s favorite ladies’ skaters.” Yuuri was a bit baffled by the way the color rose in Sara’s cheeks at the indirect compliment, but he was glad that she was pleased and smiled.

“We’ll talk more later. Right, Yuuri?”

Nodding, Yuuri adjusted the strap of his bag. “Of course. I’m sure you’ll be around during practices.” If the way Sara was usually to be found with her brother and vice versa hadn’t changed, it was definitely a safe bet.

Sara smiled brightly and waved as Yuuri walked off, saying that she’d check which practice group he was in.

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As luck would have it, Yuuri was in the exact same practice group as Sara’s brother. Yuuri still didn't really understand why, but for some reason Michele Crispino had it in for him; he kept glaring at Yuuri every time their paths crossed on the ice. Yuuri shuddered; just what he needed. As if the stress of competition wasn't enough.

When the signal for the end of practice sounded, Yuuri followed the rest of the group to the edge of the exit. A sudden flash from the corner of his eye caught his attention; he managed to press himself up against the wall of the rink just as Mickey hockey-stopped right in front of him in a spray of snow.

He then stomped out of the rink and clipped his hard guards on, all the while pointedly blocking Yuuri’s path. Drawing in a deep breath, Yuuri gathered his energy and looked up at the other skater.
“Can I get off the ice, please?”

“Warm up area, ten minutes,” was all Mickey said before he flounced off.

“Something going on between you and Crispino?” Alexei was obviously trying not to laugh.

Yuuri bent over to snap on his own hard guards. “Maybe, but only in his head.”

Yet ten minutes later, Yuuri was on his way to the warm up room, all the while hoping that Mickey had thought better of whatever was going through his head at the time. Walking into the room, it was completely deserted except for Mickey, who was leaning against one wall looking completely annoyed and yet somehow pleased with himself. It reminded him of how Nishigori would look at him sometimes when they were kids, and how Yuuri had just wished he could punch him in the nose. Sighing, Yuuri fingered the edge of his jacket cuffs and stuffed both hands in his pockets.

“If you want to kiss Sara, you'll have to kiss me first!” Mickey smirked.

Yuuri just blinked at him. Was that supposed to deter him? Kissing Sara had never even really occurred to him before, but if it had, why would having to kiss Mickey first stop him?

“Do you hear me, Katsuki? You have to kiss me first if you want to kiss my sister!”

On the one hand, this was all sorts of crazy. Yuuri was trying to focus on the competition, not on making out with Italian twins! On the other hand, he could at least make Mickey squirm a little in retaliation for driving him up the wall with his insanity. He took a couple of steps forward and Mickey gaped.

“Well, if it's just a kiss.”

Mickey held up his hands in front of him and Yuuri stopped a few steps away, trying to remember how Viktor would pose when he was trying to be seductive in his Twitpics. It wasn't as easy as it looked -- which was to say, not at all -- but Yuuri felt like he had a close approximation. Close enough to fluster Mickey, anyway.

“You’ll seriously kiss me?!”

Yuuri paused. Up until now, he’d been joking around, but if Mickey wanted a serious answer… He shrugged. “Not if you don’t want me to. I'm really not into that.”

“I'm a guy! This wasn't supposed to happen!”

Yuuri almost laughed at the look of pure confusion on Mickey’s face. “You really shouldn't just proposition guys, then. I have no problem kissing one. Ask my ex-boyfriend.”

Michele sucked in a deep breath. “All right, then. But only because you have experience.”

Again, Yuuri blinked. He’d expected Mickey to back down, not double down. “You know kissing you has no bearing on whether or not your sister is kissed, right? She’s her own person, and you can't make those sorts of decisions for her.”

Mickey’s lips thinned, but he eventually nodded.

In fact, Yuuri was about to back away when Mickey grabbed the front of his jacket and smashed their lips together. In terms of kisses it wasn't that good, but Yuuri tilted his head, pulled back a little and softened it until it was more gentle. Before he broke the kiss, he even ran the very tip of his
tongue along Mickey’s bottom lip.

And then before Mickey could say anything or do anything else crazy, Yuuri fled.

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There was nothing quite like the smell of the air in Hasetsu. Whenever Yuuri went back home, he swore that he would never leave again; the promise never lasted, but every time he inhaled that crisp scent of salt and seaweed and freshness, he was reminded of how much he missed this place. The smell rushed through him now; the breeze played with his hair as he made his way across the bridge and headed toward the Ice Castle.

No matter where he ended up establishing his “home rink”, his true home rink would always be here.

Italy had been a bizarre series of events set into motion by the Crispino Twins, and things just continued from there. Having been kissed by not only Mickey but later by his sister, too, had thrown Yuuri off his game just a bit. He went onto the ice not entirely focused, and his free skate had suffered for it. It hadn’t helped that he had sped up his step sequence as well, changing the jump order to something closer to the original choreography. It was all a bit too much, and Yuuri had fallen in the back half on a quad toe loop.

Sara had apologized, but he didn’t hold it against her. Or Mickey. Or anyone, really. It was the first time that Yuuri had had a bad skate and didn’t know how to react. Usually, he blamed himself, or his anxiety, or any one of a million factors, but not this time. Maybe overhearing the audience talk about his skating like it was good as he left the rink to catch the bus back to the hotel had in some way thrown off his usual self-criticism. Maybe Alexei was right in claiming that everyone just had a bad skate once in awhile.

He still came in fifth, and Mickey finally got his wish of beating him with his fourth-place finish -- even if the point difference only came down to fourteen hundredths of a point. Yuuri had caught a few comments saying that he’d deserved to make it onto the podium, and they brought a smile to his face.

The cold recycled air of the rink that blasted him in the face as he passed through the front doors of the Ice Castle was both familiar and comforting. Yuuko, however, was not behind the counter as he’d expected. It was her preferred location to work when she wasn’t on the ice teaching a class; either she had the day off -- which Yuuri found strange, because knowing her schedule, she should have been working -- or was in the back office, which was even less likely. She much preferred to leave the office work to Nishigori whenever possible, and really, Yuuri couldn’t blame her. He’d rather maintain skates than balance books as well.

Instead it was Nishigori’s father who waved at Yuuri as he entered and motioned to the rink. It was a flashback to halcyon days; before Yuukko and Nishigori started working at the rink, it had always been the elder Nishigori behind the counter. Yuuri smiled and dropped his gear onto a bench, then went about getting everything ready for some on-ice time. Even when he hadn’t called ahead, the Nishigoris were always happy to let him have use of the rink whenever he turned up -- the exceptions were class time, public skating, and those times the local small hockey team came in for practice (though they’d offered to give up their ice time if Yuuri ever wanted it, a fact which left him red in the face in embarrassment).

Skates laced, he pushed through the door and into the rink, focused on finding his music on his mp3 player. Minako said she would be around a bit later for a choreography session, and he was eager to make the most of the time. When he looked up, however, he saw Yuuko and Nishigori on the ice,
slowly skating. His heart almost leapt into his throat at the sight. It was like seeing a memory coming back to life -- the three of them, skating together. He’d just about reached the entrance of the rink when Nishigori picked up the remote for the small stereo they used when the main sound system wasn’t an option (going into the booth was a bit of a pain if the music ever needed to be restarted) and fiddled with the buttons as Yuuko headed for center ice.

Yuuri recognized the slightly odd, not quite silent track as one the three of them had used back when they were still burning CDs of practice routine music. In this case, it’d been picked to give them time to get into position on the ice. He swallowed and changed course, taking a seat on a bench close to the boards. Leaning forward, he pillowed his head on his arms on the boards and tried being as quiet as possible. He didn’t want to disturb whatever he had stumbled onto.

The next song was familiar too, but he barely paid it any mind because Yuuko and Nishigori had started moving toward each other, linking hands as they began skating around the edge of the rink, gaining speed. Yuuko switched directions and Nishigori reached out to wrap a hand on her waist as they changed positions on the ice.

Yuuri clenched his fists as he watched Nishigori pick Yuuko up and throw her across the ice. His breath caught and he was too shocked to actually count how many rotations it was, but it didn’t matter. This was... They were skating again! Yuuko landed with a huge smile on her face. Yuuri bit his lip; his feet shifted as they entered a step sequence, dancing across the ice before moving to a transition and side-by-side spins. It pained Yuuri to say it, but spins were probably Nishigori’s strong suit. Yuuri was still a little better, but Nishigori could always hold his own. And Yuuko’s and Nishigori’s side-by-side combination spin was perfect. They were so in sync, more than Yuuri had ever been with Yuuko when they had skated Viktor’s routines together all those years ago.

They landed side-by-side double axels; Nishigori looked like he was actually having fun as he turned and lifted his wife off the ice. Yuuko, bending backwards and gripping her blade with one hand as Nishigori turned, looked at peace.

Yuuri couldn’t look away -- didn’t even want to -- and didn’t notice that someone else had entered the rink until they bumped his shoulder. He glanced over, eyes widening at Minako’s sudden appearance before darting back to the ice and the pair skate, his question obvious in his expression.

Minako just smiled widely.

Yuuri turned his attention back just in time to see a twist lift, and his breath froze in his chest until Yuuko was safe again in Nishigori’s arms and he had set her back on the ice, never once letting go of her hand.

When Yuuko turned and wrapped her arms around Nishigori’s back and froze as the music faded, it was like time started speeding forward at twice the pace it had been. And suddenly, Yuuri could breathe again.

The Madonna had returned to Ice Castle Hasetsu (though with a consort, Yuuri supposed).

“WHAT?! YOU-- THAT WAS---”

“Yuuri! It was supposed to be a surprise!” Yuuko broke from her position in Nishigori’s arms and skated over to the boards. “What are you doing here?!”

“It was a surprise! I am surprised!”

Yuuko’s smile lit her face up. “No, that’s not what I meant! We were going to surprise you at Nationals!”
“You’re going to Nationals?!” Yuuri didn’t even know what to say. They were competing again! He could feel tears pricking at the corner of his eyes and swiped at them with his arm.

“You always were a crybaby.”

“Shut up, Nishigori.” Yuuri laughed. “When did this happen?”

Yuuko shrugged. “It started out as just fooling around about a month after the twins were born. I missed skating. Really skating, like we used to. Teaching the little ones just isn’t the same, and, well, Takeshi wanted to…” she trailed off, looking at her husband.

“I wanted to see the smile she’d have when she used to skate in singles, but even doing her old routines didn’t bring it back. So I thought about ice dancing, but I don’t have your edges. I was playing with the triplets and thought, well, Yuuko doesn’t weigh much more—”

Yuuko shoved him playfully; even Yuuri laughed. It hadn’t been that long since the triplets were born, though they’d be a year old before Yuuri knew it.

“I mean, we’re going to Nationals, but that was pretty much a given since there aren’t that many pair skating couples in Japan. We wanted to have a competitive tech score, and Minako-sensei helped with that.”

“They should change the double axel to at least a triple toe, if not a triple Salchow.” She leaned back on the boards and smiled. “But they’ve got the basics. Not going to be winning any major competitions yet, but…” She smiled at the duo. “We’ll give them a bit of time, right, Yuuri?”

Yuuri nodded. “A triple would be better, and I know Yuuko has it. The question is, does Nishigori?”

“I can do a triple toe!” Nishigori shouted, and then stopped. “Maybe.”

“But since you’ve already spoiled your surprise, Yuuri, you can help us with our step sequence! Nishigori does better when someone can skate it in front of him, but Minako can’t, and I’m not doing well on the mirroring, so… Will you?!”

“Of course. I’ll even help Nishigori with his toe loop.”

In the end, Yuuri got absolutely no choreography done for his own program, but it didn’t really matter. It was a pleasure project, not something for competition, and Minako promised that she’d find a weekend to go up to Osaka and help him with the choreography anyway. It wouldn’t be before Nationals, and that was fine, too. It was just a routine that he felt needed to get out. Helping Yuuko and Nishigori was more important to him, ultimately.

Yuuri wondered what it’d be like to travel to an international competition with Yuuko and Nishigori. It’d be what the three of them always dreamed of, just a bit different. Yuuri really hoped that day would come. Maybe they’d even be at a competition where Yuuri would compete against Viktor...

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“And she landed like it was nothing! I’ve seen some skaters play around with throws, but not like that!” Yuuri was speaking quickly as they walked. “When I asked, Yuuko said he actually preferred doing the throw to doing the jump on her own. And then Nishigori said that she just liked being the boss. But that’s Nishigori, he’s always saying things like that.”

Riku laughed. “I’m glad that the few days they spent in Osaka worked out. They had a weekend of
intensive throw and twist lift lessons with that one pairs coach at the rink while you were travelling for one of your competitions.”

Yuuri stuttered to a stop and Alexei bumped into him. “You knew?!”

Riku smiled. “I am incapable of denying Okukawa-sensei anything when asked.”

Alexei snorted. “It’s true, she can’t. I’m just glad that you don’t have a similar relationship with your idol.”

“My ido-- Oh, Viktor?” Yuuri paused. Was Viktor his idol anymore? Yes, definitely. He still used Viktor’s routines as warm-ups, read every single article about him, and still had what Alexei had called “an unhealthy amount” of Viktor posters hanging on his wall. But at the same time… They talked every day. He wasn’t scared to tell Viktor ‘no’ anymore. Or yell at him. Or roll his eyes when Viktor was being particularly…. Viktorish. “I guess.”

Alexei ruffled his hair and Yuuri quickly ducked away and started walking again. They needed to switch trains so that they could get to Hitachinaka for Junior Nationals -- Yuuri’s last Junior Nationals, even though the JSF had said in no uncertain terms that he could compete the rest of the season as a Senior if he wanted to. Then they’d immediately started mentioning the Winter Universiade, the Asian Winter Games, the Four Continents, the Bavarian Open, the Gardena Spring Trophy, the Triglav Trophy… Yuuri had felt like the floor was slipping out from under him until Alexei interrupted. There was plenty of time to decide where Yuuri would be competing after the Senior Nationals, he said, but they saw no reason to not have Yuuri compete at Junior Nationals as well. It was a competition that he’d been planning for already; the Grand Prix Final, meanwhile, hadn’t even happened yet.

Even though he’d done well -- or at least well enough -- at his two Senior competitions this year, Yuuri still wasn’t sure about the transition to Seniors. It made him jittery and nervous. By now he was familiar with the crawling sensation of anxiety, and change was something that really set it off. And Seniors without the safety net of Alexei and Riku and Juniors was going to be a big change. He wasn’t competition for someone like Viktor or Oda-san, and even if the JSF liked to pretend that he could beat Oda one day, Yuuri doubted it.

“Katsuki-kun!”

Yuuri turned at the sound of his name being called. An older middle-aged man was hurrying over, pulling a suitcase while a younger man -- another competitor, judging by his outfit -- trailed after him. Yuuri recognized the older of the pair; anybody familiar with the Japanese skating scene would.

Sato Genpachi had at one time been a good skater, but not a great one. He’d never achieved a medal at an international event, though he’d gone to a few; lower level competitions, mostly.

But Sato Genpachi had at one time been a good skater, but not a great one. He’d never achieved a medal at an international event, though he’d gone to a few; lower level competitions, mostly.

Once upon a time, he’d been Yuuri’s coach.

“Sato-san.”

Sato smiled thinly. “Katsuki-kun. I never manage to catch you at any competitions, but then so few of your competitions overlap with my skater’s here. Katsuki-kun, this is Tanaka Ryusuke.”

“Katsuki-san, it’s such an honor to meet you!” The young man started bowing quite deeply, and Yuuri could feel himself getting more and more uncomfortable. Alexei tended to keep him away from the other skaters until at least after the short. Their attention always set him up to be quite nervous.
He managed to mutter a “hi” before Alexei sighed and stepped forward so he was standing next to Yuuri. “Sato-san, I’m sorry, but we’re running late for our train.”

“Oh, then so are we. Since we’re all going to the same place, I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re on the same train as well!”

“Yuuri-kun needs to focus before a competition.”

Sato waved a hand. “I’m sure he’ll do commendably. I heard the JSF were trying to get him into Seniors anyway. Why you as his coach wouldn’t encourage the transfer is beyond me. He could have competed in the Grand Prix this season. He probably wouldn’t have medaled or made the Final, but still, why wait?” Yuuri dug his hands into his pockets and clenched his fists tightly around the iPod tucked in there. Noticing his agitation, Riku-san laid her hand on his shoulder for a brief moment and squeezed. “But then, what do I know? I’m no Olympic gold medalist. Just have been training skaters since before you won yours.”

Yuuri glanced up at Alexei. A vein in his neck was throbbing a bit, but the pleasant expression on his face didn’t budge at all. In fact, Alexei’s smile deepened. “True, true. You’d think with so much experience you wouldn’t have abandoned such a young talent at a tender age. To think, you could have been the couch to the Junior World Champion.”

Tanaka-kun tugged on Sato-san’s sleeve. “Coach, we shouldn’t miss our train.” The young man’s face had gone quite red.

“Some of us don’t have so much sponsorship money banked that we can train only one student at a time. Do you still do commercials for that lollipop brand?”

Alexei pinched the bridge of his nose. He hated being reminded of those lollipop commercials he’d filmed in the run-up to the Olympic season all those years ago. Or the fact that people never mentioned the choreography and assistant coaching he did in addition to training Yuuri. He’d chosen not to have a team of skaters, and had the luxury of doing that. He knew he was lucky.

Yuuri knew all this too, and didn’t like seeing his current coach being treated unfairly. “Perhaps, Sato-san,” Yuuri’s voice quietly broke into the conversation, “I can settle this, since I have been coached by both of you.” From the corner of his eye, Yuuri could see Riku’s lips turn up in the smallest of smiles; even Alexei took a step back. “Turov-san has done nothing but support my decisions since he started coaching me. I was the one who didn’t feel ready to move up into Seniors after my performance at Nebelhorn last year, even though my performance at the Four Continents was better. So trying to put that on him is wrong.”

Yuuri took a deep breath. There was a part of him that couldn’t believe he was doing this, but another part of him, a more vindictive part, was glad. “Sato-san, I want to thank you.” Sato-san grinned and stepped forward, looking like he’d won Coach of the Year. But then Yuuri continued. “I should thank you because when you dropped me in the middle of a season, something no coach should do, or at least not without finding a suitable substitute in the meantime -- and I have that on the word of not only an Olympic gold medalist, but the coach for multiple Olympic gold medalists -- I would never have had the chance to study under Yakov Feltsman or Alexei Turov. I wouldn’t have a program choreographed by the former prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet, and I wouldn’t be being courted by multiple coaches who would like to take over from Alexei as I enter Seniors, since he’s well known for only wanting to coach younger skaters. So thank you, Sato-san. You dropping me after I won Junior Nationals the first time was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

And really, it was.
However, it did not stop Yuuri’s stomach from heaving as he walked away after saying goodbye, and he ended up spending ten minutes on his knees in front of a toilet in the restroom of the train station while Alexei stood guard.

By the time he felt settled enough to continue on, they had already missed their train. Yuuri was about to apologize when Riku just shook her head. “I’m proud of you, Yuuri-kun.”

Alexei nodded. “Besides, it was that oaf’s fault we missed the train, and not yours. I’m just glad I won’t be stuck in the same metal tube with him for over two hours. And Riku changed our tickets to the next train, so there are no worries. They even bumped us up to the green cars. There are fans of my amazing wife everywhere.”

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Tanaka Ryusuke had talent; he was young, but watching his performance, Yuuri knew he was not going to win Junior Nationals by a long shot. Yes, he would in all probability make it to the center of the pack, and likely make it to the free skate, too. But there’d be no place for him on the podium. Sato-san hadn’t been the best coach for Yuuri, but he had helped him learn enough to reach the podium, and for that he was grateful.

But as a familiar figure came barrelling towards him, Yuuri reflected that he would have also been grateful for a bit more anonymity.

“Yuuri-kun!” Minami had starting running over to him the second the younger skater exited the Kiss and Cry. Yuuri was slated to skate in the last group, and Minami -- invited to compete at the Junior level because of his bronze in the Novice division -- had been in the first. “Your skating is amazing, Yuuri-kun! I’m going to skate just like you one day! Did you see me skate? I skated really early, but I thought that since you choreographed the program that you might have seen me skate! Did you?!”

Yuuri smiled. “I did. You did really well, Minami-kun. You should be proud.”

Minami looked about ready to cry. Yuuri had a moment of panic before Minami just squealed and jumped high up in the air. “Really?! I was sad since I’m in last place and I won’t get to participate in the free skate, but this is so exciting! You really think I did well?!!!”

“I do. And when you have the required elements for a competitive Junior program, I’m sure that you’ll be making the free skate.”

“I want to win Junior National Champion, too! I can’t wait! Yuuri-kun, one day I’m going to compete against you! Like, really compete against you!”

Yuuri bit his lip. That was something that he would have told Viktor years ago when they first met - - if he hadn’t been so painfully shy. He still wanted to compete against Viktor. A lot.

Next year he would, and he couldn’t wait either.

“Minami-kun, I’ll be waiting. Do your best, because I won’t go easy on you.”

“Yuuri-kuuuuuuuuun!!!!!!!” The only thing holding Minami back from hugging him was the firm hand of Minami’s coach on the boy’s shoulder. She was laughing a little bit and just smiled at Yuuri.

***

Translated from Japanese:
TOPIC: All-Japan Junior Nationals

Another Gold for Katsuki-Kun

sk8ergirl
Score breakdown and analysis below

59 replies

Why isn’t he competing in Seniors yet?

flutz_master
Has he given any interviews about why he’s still participating in Junior competitions? Is he just addicted to winning medals and can’t imagine competing against people that are better than he is? I mean he’s ok, but is he really that great?

katsukifansinceday1
His Mixi says there will be an interview in the next ISM that he gave while in Finland competing at a SENIOR LEVEL competition.

flutz_master
Then why was he at Junior Nationals?

ice_castle_madonna
Yuuri-kun didn’t want to rush into the Senior Division especially while in his last year of high school. He’s attending Fukuzawa and that isn’t an easy school, so he decided to wait until next year while doing some smaller Senior competitions to work up to it. Lots of skaters ease into Seniors.

onigiri_master
I thought that’s what he was doing last year?

kyoto_sk8er
I’m pretty sure he was assigned those placements by the JSF.

flutz_master
I read that he’s in an idol school. I’m pretty sure they all get automatically graduated. So I don’t buy the whole needing to study thing.

onigiri_master
888888888 flutz_master

popsugarstar
I didn’t realize he went to school with idols! Who?

EXCITEable
SHUJI from EXCITE! And the girls from LOVE-LY! And some other idol groups. Yuuri-kun even danced with them on a variety show!!!!

3Lz1Lo3T
Seriously? No, he has to work on his grades. Lots of idols have talked about how the program isn’t easy and how they’re still required to do all the work, they just don’t get in trouble for missing so many days of school due to other commitments!
CandyKaede
I don’t personally know Yuuri-kun, but I do go to Fukuzawa with him. We aren’t allowed to talk to people in the IS track (I’m in the regular classes -- non idol). But I can tell you that they have to do the same work that we do. It’s a hard school, and I’m hoping to get into a Top 6 and I have a good chance to. Rumors around school say that Yuuri-kun and a few others in IS were already accepted based on grades and recommendations alone. He’s really dedicated!

flutz_master
I don’t buy it, but okay.

dont_feed_trolls
[video 10 hours of Yuuri skating]
I think I see someone with talent. Next year is going to be AMAZING. He’s going to make a big splash in Seniors.

statusEXCITE
I HAVEN’T SEEN THIS VIDEO BEFORE! MY HEART! ☆*:・○(≧▽≦)o・*:☆

15 more replies to this thread

Can we talk about skaters that aren’t Katsuki?????? PLEASE

Bad_Engrish
Can we?

5 replies

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

KATSUKI YUURI CHOREOGRAPHS??!!?!

goldenblades
I thought I misheard the announcer on the broadcast I watched, but I didn’t! They really said that Yuuri-kun choreographed it! They even talked about how it’s the first thing he ever choreographed for another skater to compete with, but that he also choreographed a routine for a former rinkmate in Russia that’s also a novice! Anyone know who? I want to see their routine too!

ice_castle_madonna
The skater’s name is Mila Babicheva. I’ll see if I can either find a video to link to or get one to load onto my YouTube channel. I’ll come back with the link!

kisschu
He’s choreographed TWO routines for other people this season?! Why doesn’t he skate to any of his own choreographies? Why?

katsukifanssinceday1
He has! Some of his exhibitions are self choreographed or at least partially choreographed by him.

goldenblades
I will have all your babies if you find that video, ice_castle_madonna

120 more replies to this thread
Minami Kenjiro (Novice) skates to Katsuki Choreography

_yuuri_fan_
[video]

_nikis_girl_
I thought this was going to be one of those videos where the skater tries to skate the program of another skater but it wasn't. I don't get it.

_ice_castle_madonna_
Yuuri-kun choreographed Minami-kun’s program. It isn’t a program that Yuuri-kun skated to, it’s one he created.

_onigiri_master_
just like the tin reads.
Minami-kun is a huge fan of Katsuki-kun and spends a lot of time on his fan board, he’s been talking about his routine for months now. He skated it well.

_nikis_girl_
Oh. I see. Thanks!

78 more replies to this thread

Chapter End Notes

I know it's been forever... and I won't bother with stories... let's just say the demon goat has been much more demanding now that he can make his demands verbally, and I've gotten back into baking and sewing, so my free time is being split up a bit more. But I have in no way forgotten about this story or gave it up -- just needed a bit of downtime, I guess.

I keep thinking that the current chapter is the one that will wrap the season but then it isn't. Partially because I am no good at writing 20k+ chapters like the cool kids. You'll have to deal with just the 10k ones, I guess, and just more of them.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The back half of the season from Viktor's perspective.

Chapter Notes

Sooooooo... It's been awhile. I haven't given up on this story, but I am dealing with some stuff and getting some meds adjusting. So hopefully I'll be well and truly back in the saddle again! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Video: [Katsuki Yuuri All-Japan Junior Nationals FS]

Description: His last Junior Nationals! <3

Click here to see the routine Yuuri choreographed for Minami Kenjirou
Click here to see the routine Yuuri choreographed for Mila Babicheva (thank you V. for the footage!)

Just a note that this channel may not be covering the All Japan National Championships this year. Videos might go up, but they’ll be super late. RL things.

da_victor
I have been waiting and waiting and waiting. (And yes, I saw it via livestream, but I needed to see it again.) It’s better than it was during the JGP Qualifiers and Finlandia and Milano.
But what do you mean you won’t be covering Nationals?! There’s no way I can watch it live! I was counting on you! Please chang your mind!

milawarrirprncss
YUUUUUUUUUURA I LOVE YOU! TEACH ME HOW TO SPIN LIKE THAT!
I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M ON THE SAME CHANNEL AS YURA!
Please please please! I need to see Yura’s skates!

ice_castle_madonna
Sorry. I’ll… find some good videos as soon as they go up and give you the links. That’s the best I can promise! <3

***

“Viktor!” “This way!” “Viktor, can we have a wave?”

Viktor resettled the sunglasses over his eyes and turned toward the flashing lights, holding up a hand
in a wave.

“Are you looking forward to the competition?”

He laughed. “Of course! I live for competition!”

“Do you think you’ll win gold?”

Viktor slid the sunglasses down his nose a little and gave the photographers a wink. “I’m planning on it!”

“VITYA!” Yakov’s gruff voice cut through the yelling of the journalists standing along the entrance to the rink; a moment later Viktor felt his coach’s hand wrapping around his bicep. “We don’t have time for this nonsense. Aeroflot’s flight delay cost you a lot of time.”

Viktor already knew that; he could feel the jet lag dragging at him even now. But he had a presence to maintain: the jovial skater who was always nice to his friends and the press. It was part of his “image”. Still, it didn’t mean that he was entirely ungrateful for Yakov’s interference. “The ice calls!” With another wink, Viktor let himself be ushered through the skaters’ entrance and into the rink.

Of course the first skater that he caught sight of was Chris. He had his back to Viktor and was talking to another unseen party, but that Swiss team jacket from the previous year was all the identification Viktor needed.

“And so we got some coffee at the rink.” Chris sighed. “I can’t believe he has a girlfriend. My life is over.” He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and leaned back a little, but still not enough for Viktor to see who he was talking to.

Fortunately, the laugh that followed the comment was all Viktor needed to identify the other party. “YUURI! CHRIS!” He tugged his arm out of Yakov’s grip and dropped his bag before rushing over. He could hear Yakov’s grumbles about not being his maid, and how limited the ice time was given the day of practice Viktor had already lost, and-- Viktor ignored him and wrapped his arms around Yuuri and Chris’s shoulders. “Finally! The Three Musketeers together again!”

Chris snorted. “I think this is the first competition all three of us have been at since that particular moniker was coined.”

Yuuri nodded. “We were all at the last Grand Prix, but I didn’t know Chris well and we were--”

“SEMANTICS! Let me have this!” Viktor tilted his head so that he could rest it against Yuuri’s. Yuuri promptly snapped his mouth shut. Viktor sighed in contentment before straightening again. “Hey, why isn’t Yuuko putting up the National videos as soon as she can? There was a weird announcement on your Free Skate video from Junior Nationals about it.”

Chris choked. “You follow her YouTube channel?”

Beaming, Viktor nodded. “So does Mila. We have special Yuuri playlists!”

Yuuri shoved Viktor off him and bounced on the balls of his feet. “Don’t say such things! It’s embarrassing! Why do you want a playlist of me skating--”

“And dancing!” Viktor interjected.

Yuuri just groaned. “Never mind. Be weird. And I can’t tell you. Yuuko swore me to secrecy about
it. I don’t know why, but she did. She doesn’t-- Argh. No. I can’t say.” Yuuri shook his head. “Don’t ask. Please.”

“Fine.” Viktor knew that he was probably letting more pout slip into his voice than he ought to, but he couldn’t help it. It wasn’t like Yuuri was going to give him links to other channels that covered him as consistently as Yuuko’s.

“So these videos of Yuuri dancing?” Chris wrapped his arm around Viktor’s shoulder. “Are they like the hip hop one?”

“Better. There are ones from when he was little and doing ballet--”

“Viktor!” Yuuri groaned. “Stop!”

Chris laughed. “That’s all right, Viktor can tell me all about it on the rink.”

“Isn’t Yuuri coming onto the ice too?” Viktor could almost hear the beginnings of a petulant whine slide into his voice, and quickly swallowed it back.

If Yuuri had noticed, he wasn’t letting on; instead, he just shook his head. “I can’t. Alexei told me I wasn’t allowed on the ice again until warm-ups. I had a really early session before most people arrived for the day. Go. Skate. You missed all the other practice sessions. I’m supposed to meet up with Alexei anyway, and then I’ve been ordered to nap.”

Viktor kept glancing over his shoulder as Yuuri went in the other direction -- at least until Yakov smacked the back of his head with his open palm and snapped at Viktor to focus.

***

Because Alexei had Yuuri on such a tight leash, Viktor didn’t get to see him before he skated. Worse, Yakov absolutely refused to let Viktor crash the Kiss and Cry after Yuuri finished his short program -- a decision Viktor immediately and loudly declared to be unfair. He never got to spend time with Yuuri!

“I’ll give you a whole free evening to spend with Dima.” Yakov groaned as he held onto the edge of Viktor’s jacket. “But there are sponsors here and you lose your head around Yura.”

Viktor pouted. A date night with Dima would be fun, but it in no way compared to time spent with Yuuri. Regardless of the time he and Dima spent together... well, it wasn’t serious, would never be serious. They both knew that. Dima was a distraction and worse, wasn’t even here to distract, since he and his partner hadn’t qualified for the Final. It didn’t even matter that both of their coaches seemed to be on board with their relationship, at least not to Viktor -- if anything, that was a point against the whole situation. Viktor was half-sure that Yakov only approved because Dima’s coach would do whatever Yakov told him to.

Which meant that Yakov basically had complete control over his current “relationship”.

Viktor sat back down and crossed his arms. Fine. If Yakov wanted him to be well-behaved, he would do it -- for now. Viktor was sure that he’d get some Yuuri time -- and Three Musketeer time - - as soon as skating for the day was done. All he had to do was wait for the last skater to finish their short and then everything was fair game.

As soon as the scores were announced, Viktor dashed for the steps. Chris had left right after Yuuri’s skate, seeing as his coach hadn’t been hovering and making demands. He’d even had the audacity to stick his tongue out at Viktor once he reached the aisle. Life was completely unfair.
Chris was now waiting as Viktor exited the stands, sporting a grin that made it obvious he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at him. Worst friend ever! So Viktor took a deep breath and shook his ever-longer bangs out of his eyes before muttering, “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say a word, mon ami…” Chris was definitely trying not to laugh.

Viktor narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t have to. Shut up anyway.”

“Why does Chris need to shut up?” Yuuri was approaching, wheeling his suitcase behind him. Next to him was another skater -- definitely a Junior -- with darker skin and wide, wide eyes, also rolling a suitcase. Behind them came Alexei, talking to that Italian coach -- Chia, or Chestnut, or something like that. Whatever. Viktor didn’t need to know names of coaches of Junior skaters.

But now Viktor had to answer Yuuri and he didn’t know what to say.

“I was giving him a hard time about his hair. Why he decided to grow it out again…” Chris trailed off and shook his head.

“Oh, well I like it. Are you braiding it for your program tomorrow?”

Viktor swallowed and nodded. Where had his voice gone? And why did Yuuri look so good with his hair pushed back and his glasses perched on his nose and his jacket unzipped just enough that Viktor could make out the dip of his collarbone--

“I don’t skate tomorrow, so I can braid it for you,” Yuuri paused and licked his lips. “I mean, if you want. It’d be like Russia again.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

Chris started coughing and Yuuri quickly turned to look at him with a worried look on his face. Viktor didn’t know if he should bless Chris or curse him. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

The younger skater -- who hadn’t said anything throughout the entire exchange -- tugged at Yuuri’s sleeve. “Oh! This is Phichit Chulanont! It’s his first Junior Grand Prix Final!”

Viktor perked up at the name. “You’re the one who posted the Tokyo pics on Twitter! Thanks so much for that! I keep trying to explain to Yuuri that he needs to build his brand--”

“I don’t need a brand!” Yuuri dove forward, trying to physically cut off the conversation before it could get any further. Viktor almost let him, but wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass him by. Instead, he grabbed Yuuri by the shoulders and smoothly passed him onto Chris. Yuuri squawked in indignation, Chris just laughed and let him go.

Phichit was just looking between the three of them, his eyes ever wider and his smile getting bigger and bigger. “THIS IS THE BEST! CAN I GET PICTURES?! PLEASE? NO ONE IS GONNA BELIEVE THIS!”

Yuuri groaned. Viktor, however, was delighted. He liked this little skater already.

***

Viktor switched directions and skated backwards, never taking his eyes off the edge of the rink where Yuuri was now sitting and lacing up his skates. Ice time with Yuuri was so precious to him,
but all the more so when it was just the two of them. Viktor had never been happier than when Chris announced he’d decided not to come, “Even though I’m pretty sure you need supervision.” Viktor’s mouth literally dropped open in response. Thankfully, Yuuri hadn’t been around to see that particularly embarrassing moment -- particularly the part where Chris leaned forward and silenced Viktor’s stuttered protests with the tip of his fingers.

Yuuri was standing next to the entrance to the rink, just watching him. Viktor smiled, leaning forward and grabbing Yuuri’s wrists to pull him onto the ice. He could feel that Yuuri’s balance was off, but he’d never let his best friend stumble, and soon enough, Yuuri had his skates under him properly and was spinning away from Viktor. That meant that Viktor needed to give chase, something he was only too happy to do. They laughed as they followed each other around the ice, warming up.

But if Viktor didn’t start getting his head into the game and get to work, Yakov was going to kick Yuuri out of the rink. So with a sigh and a glance over at his coach, he slid into position at center ice and got into his opening pose. From the corner of his eye, he saw Yuuri skate toward the edge. While he didn’t stop, it was obvious that he wanted to watch Viktor skate, and since Viktor had poured quite a bit of his relationship with Yuuri into his short program, the fact that Yuuri was watching now sent a thrill down his spine.

At least until Yuuri looked down at the ice and started skating something loose and intricate and better.

Viktor stopped right after doubling his quad toe and dug his toepick into the ice, staring. Watching Yuuri was always enthralling; even now, Viktor could almost hear the music as he moved. Whatever Yuuri was skating, it certainly wasn’t skating his step sequence. And all the while, he kept his focus on the ice, concentrating--

Viktor coughed. Yuuri jumped and promptly turned on his skates to look at Viktor. “Sorry. Did I get in your way?”

Viktor crossed his arms with a tsk. “You know perfectly well what you did. What am I doing wrong?”

Yuuri sighed and opened his arms as he drifted back on his skates. “Well. I don’t like this program of yours much. It feels… stiff.”

“Stiff?!”

Another sigh. “Viktor, you… you never listen to jazz or big band, and yet you’re skating to ‘Moonlight Serenade’!”

“Your point? I don’t see you listening to classical music on your free--”

“I do when I’m studying. Which tends to be a problem, because sometimes I come up with really good program ideas, but I’m working and by the time I’m done, they’re gone; I’ve forgotten them, but that isn’t even the point. It’s--.” Yuuri broke off with a groan and a shake of his head.

Viktor paused. This was completely unexpected. Yuuri didn’t like his program! His program about them! Not that Yuuri knew it was about them -- but still, the point remained!

Yuuri skated over and took Viktor’s hand with a tug. If it’d been anyone else, Viktor might have held onto his annoyance, but this was Yuuri and there was no holding onto anything with that hand closed around his. So he let himself be pulled and was pleasantly surprised when Yuuri pulled him
right into his arms. Thank god he’d fussed with makeup before he left his hotel room; otherwise, Yuuri might have seen the color rising in his cheeks so much clearer.

If Yuuri did notice Viktor reddening, he had the decency to keep it to himself. What he did say was, “Look, Viktor. You have to pretend that you’re dancing with someone. Not just someone, but the someone of the song.” Yuuri pressed their palms together and threaded his fingers with Viktor’s; Viktor swallowed. “It doesn’t have to be… Dimitri…. Or whoever Chris set you up with,” Yuuri’s voice was rushed as they moved along the ice in tandem. “But it needs to be someone.” With only a brief adjustment, Yuuri turned so that he was facing Viktor. “And you need to pretend that you love that person. That you want them. Even if they’re not there.” Yuuri dropped his hand and sped up, moved away from Viktor. But the way he was tilted -- the way he held his free hand out -- was like he was reaching for someone. Then he turned into the step sequence -- Viktor’s step sequence, the one he’d stopped watching -- and in that moment, Viktor could see it. Yuuri had changed it; not much, not even the steps themselves, but the way he tilted his body and the balance changes, as if he was making room for a dream person…

“Where did you learn that?” asked Viktor once Yuuri finished the step sequence and came out of a spin.

Yuuri shrugged. “I spent a few days working with a pairs couple. It helped me get rid of the stiffness in my own short program.” He chewed on the flesh of his lower lip. “I just… I wanted to help because it helped me and Alexei even said that the skating was better--”

“It’s fine, Yuuri. I trust your opinions.”

“You do?!” Yuuri came to a complete stop and just stared. “Really?”

“Of course!” Viktor smiled. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Yuuri tilted his head to the side as he fell back into step with Viktor. They began circling the ice again. “I think the question is why would you? You’re an Olympic gold medalist, and I’m… well, I’m not.”

“Yet.”

Yuuri sighed at him, but then a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Fine. Yet.” He paused and switched to Viktor’s other side. “Though you know, when I’m a gold medalist in Seniors that means at best you’d be silver.” He chewed on his lip, then laughed, skating away before turning to look at Viktor. “I think it’d be good though. At least then the medal would match your hair!”

“Yuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuru!” Viktor leaned into the motion to speed up, catching Yuuri around the waist and then spinning him off to the side. When they finally stopped at the barrier, they were both breathless. Yuuri’s cheeks were tinged pink -- either from exhilaration, or the temperature, or embarrassment. Either way, Viktor really wanted to kiss him. Yuuri’s eyes sparkled and suddenly it was like Viktor couldn't breathe. All he had to do was lean down…

The only thing that stopped him, in fact, was Yakov’s sharp cough as he gruffly demanded that Viktor run through the short again with the changes that Yuuri had showed him.

Viktor just nodded and went back to center rink. If he couldn’t kiss him, he could at least skate for him.

***

Two golds and a silver. The Three Musketeers were doing well for themselves. Across the room,
Viktor could see Yuuri chatting to a couple of sponsors from a Japanese sporting company. Alexei and that Italian coach and the little skater Viktor now followed for Yuuri pics were there as well. Yakov was talking to some ISU officials, so there was no way that Viktor would even think of heading over there and Chris was… missing. Viktor could see his coach on the phone, but no sign of Chris! His timing couldn’t be worse; Viktor had just downloaded a new app to his phone that he wanted to try out and could think of nothing better than the Three Musketeers with their medals!

So he floated over to where Yuuri and Alexei had ended up. Yuuri was saying something to his coach in Japanese; Alexei looked about ready to step in with a counter-argument, so Viktor did not interrupt, no matter how much he wanted to. Knowing Yuuri, he was probably making some ridiculous claim about how nobody could possibly want to sponsor him, and Alexei was going to have to talk some sense into him.

That left Viktor stuck making small talk with the little skater and his coach, Cello… No, that was an instrument. Whatever.

At that moment, his phone pinged.

Chris
I just came back. Where are you?

Viktor looked around toward the doors and raised his hand. “You don’t mind if Chris joins us, do you?”

The younger skater -- whose name escaped Viktor completely -- beamed and shook his head, plucking his own cell phone from his pocket. Now, if this Junior skater had a smartphone, why didn’t Yuuri? It was ridiculous. After all, if Yuuri had a smartphone, he could get an Insta-thingy -- if it worked and wasn’t just horrible, like so many other apps -- and then Viktor could have pictures of Yuuri all the time!

“There you are! Viktor, Yuuri and Phichit!”

That was it. Phichit! Now all he had to do was remember the name; doing so was integral to Viktor’s plan to get Yuuri an iPhone, and all the perks that came with one.

Yuuri offered a respectful bow to the sponsor he’d been speaking to; Alexei draped an arm around his shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Viktor could make out some familiar sounds, so that he knew it was Russian, but beyond a syllable here or there he had no idea what Yuuri’s coach was telling him.

“I just downloaded a new app--”

“Is it Instagram?!” Phichit bounced forward onto the balls of his feet.

“Yeah!” Chris laughed.

And then Viktor laughed too, because it looked like they all had the same idea.

“Is this the horrible-sounding photo thing that you told me about? The one that makes everything look square and like old Polaroids?” Yuuri was tugging at the cuffs of his suit jacket. He looked visibly uncomfortable and there was a prominent smudge on his glasses that made Viktor want to
take them and clean them before putting them back on Yuuri as he planted a kiss on his forehead.

A sharp pain in his foot pulled his attention from Yuuri and toward Chris, who still had his attention focused on Phichit and whatever he was saying about Instagram. Yuuri looked at the two of them with an exasperated, yet still soft expression on his face.

“I’m ‘phi+chu’! Get it? It’s like “plus you” and it’s the kiss sound AND it’s the first three letters of my last name! I was super stoked when I came up with it! I’m like a genius.”

Chris smiled, and even Viktor felt his lips quirking up in amusement. “I just went with something easy to find and identify as me. I try to keep my brand easy on search engines.”

“Yeah.” Chris nodded. “‘Christophe-gc’ for me.”

Little Phichit was already bobbing his head and typing into phone. “OK! I’m following you both! But you don’t have anything on it yet!”

“Well, let’s change that!” Chris had his phone in his hand already. “Three Musketeers first?”

“Oh, I’ll take it!” Phichit grabbed Chris’s phone and Viktor pulled Yuuri bodily into the frame.

***

Viktor pouted as he hit refresh on Yuuko’s YouTube channel. It wasn’t fair. He’d been good and patient and hadn’t Googled the standings of Japanese Nationals until after Yakov had told him he was free for the rest of the day. And yet even all that didn’t magically give him enough karma for Yuuri’s program to be uploaded. Viktor supposed that Yuuko might have gone to Nationals to cheer for their favourite skater, but Viktor still felt bereft to not have the video.

He hit F5 one more time. Nothing. So he clicked into the Junior Nationals FS video. A new comment caught his eye:

swinging_mini_amie _ice_castle_madonna said I could post this link here! I upload some of Nationals competition! Go Yuu-kun! http://tinyurl.com/kjlasdfh

Viktor had never clicked a link so fast in his life. And there, the very first video on this person’s channel was a video of Yuuri’s short program from the Nationals. Right below it was an interview -- if the thumbnail was any indication -- and below that was a video of Yuuri and Yuuko standing next to each other with Yuuko’s husband and Minako-sensei behind them. It looked like yet another interview. Viktor hovered over the short program link, but then curiosity got the better of him and he clicked on the third video instead.

Of course it was in Japanese, and because this wasn’t Yuuko’s channel it wasn’t helpfully subtitled
into English for him, either. But still, Viktor liked watching Yuuri surrounded by his supporters. Viktor just thought it was strange that they were interviewing Yuuri like that. Then the footage switched to a pairs couple, which made even less sense. The side-by-side double axels were good, but if they wanted to be competitive, they really needed to make it a at least a triple toe, if not something harder. He narrowed his eyes as they showed the beginning of the death spiral, and as the camera zoomed in, Viktor realised that he was watching not an interview about Yuuri, but an interview about Yuuko and her husband!

He could hear Yuuko’s voice and Minako-sensei’s over the footage, joined by another that Viktor didn’t recognise at all. They must have been asking questions, but it was still in Japanese and Viktor still didn’t know more than the few words he’d picked up here and there; certainly not enough to follow the discussion. But soon enough, they flashed back to the interview round, where everyone -- including Yuuri -- was laughing. Viktor’s heart clenched. Yuuri looked ridiculously cute when he was flushed, embarrassed and laughing. This was not good for Viktor’s heart at all. Mercifully, they quickly cut to the medal ceremony for pairs. Surprisingly, there were only two couples on the podium. Yuuko and Nishigori were given their silver medals before another pair were awarded gold.

Viktor hadn’t realised that the pairs field was so shallow in Japan. Only two pairs competed? Maybe Yuuko and her husband would be sent to a competition next season if their TES were high enough and Viktor could say hi! Maybe he could have another source for Yuuri merch! Which was always a plus in his book.

He really should do something by means of congratulations. Maybe an Instagram post with him and Makkachin and a sign or something! He could tell all his Twitter followers to check it out!

Brilliant plan!

v-nikiforov
[pic with Makka and Viktor holding up a sign that says “Congratulations Yuuko and Yuuko’s Husband in very badly written Japanese”]

<3

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri So not that I’m not happy for Yuuko and her husband because I AM! I really want to see their skates

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Rinkmate mentioned that Jun and her partner didn’t even compete at Nationals. Haven’t they been the gold medalists for years?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Yeah. Last week they took a really nasty fall during a practice. Jun-san got a bad concussion and Sano-san is injured.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri !!!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Yeah. It’s not good. There are rumors of retirement going around. At best he’s going to need surgery

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I’ll have to send a get well soon message then! Or something!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m sure it’ll be appreciated.
Another win at Euros! But look at Chris, he’s catching up. I better start working on that quad axel. LOL!

nikkisgirl OMG are you really going to do a quad axel?! I am so excited!

toelopes Chill out girl. Pretty sure he was joking. No one can do a quad axel. They’re like physically impossible.

skatingfan Do people really take Viktor’s tweets and instgrams seriously?

no1viktorfan Prove those losers wrong, Viktor! Land that 4A!

nikkisgirl Shut up! Viktor is amazing and can do anything! Including a quad axel

quadflip My friend on Android really hopes that you won’t give up twitter! She’s so annyed that instagram isn’t releasing an app for android!

v-nikiforov @quadflip Don’t worry! I’ll never give up Twitter! Or at least not until #getyuurioninstagram pans out!

“VIKTOR! Get off the damn phone right now!” Yakov’s voice carried across the ice and right into the stands where he was sitting, taking the well-deserved social media break a gold medalist like himself needed and deserved. He reluctantly closed the Instagram app and fired up Twitter. Yuuri hadn’t messaged him yet, but Viktor wasn’t that surprised. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised. Yuuri had even turned down going to 4CC in order to make sure that he did well on his exams.

Yuuri was no longer going to be in high school anymore. The next time Viktor saw him, in fact, Yuuri would have officially graduated! His graduation was in mid-March and Worlds in Tokyo were closer to the end of March; Yuuri had already promised to come see him (and Chris) skate. He probably should have taken the option from the JSF to skate at Worlds and skipped Junior Worlds altogether instead of taking his exams a week early just to go to Junior Worlds. But arguing that was pointless; the look Yuuri had given him when he had opened his mouth to make that exact point was one that Viktor didn’t particularly want to see again.

Mostly, Yuuri didn’t want the stress. This was a system he was used to. Get his exams out of the way, then focus on his skating, end the school year and take a break.

“VIKTOR!”

“But Yakov, I’m still frozen solid from the extreme temperatures they made us skate in at Euros! It was negative three, Yakov! NEGATIVE THREE! You should have prepared me better for being turned into a popsicle!” Viktor flashed the puppy dog eyes he had been learning from Makka.

“Prepare you? What? You think I should have had you skate naked during practice?”
Viktor bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“Now that is something I wouldn’t have minded seeing.” Dima settled down next to Viktor.

Viktor brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Yeah, well, it’s not like you haven’t seen it before.”

“Not on ice skates, I haven’t.”

Viktor stood up and tossed the strap of his bag over his shoulder. “Be good and maybe you will, but if I don’t get on the ice soon, Yakov will hand me over to the hockey coach and have me doing suicides alongside them.”

“Poor baby.”

Viktor laughed and gave Dima a wink. “I know. Do you know how many of them have asked me out since the last time Yakov punished me like that?”

“I’d offer to beat them up, baby, but you know I just can’t take on a hockey player. Even for you.”

“Don’t call me baby.” Viktor smiled, though, as he walked down the steps. Dima was a good guy, and almost as bad a flirt as Chris.

“Viktor! You don’t have time to be flirting!” Yakov’s face had taken on a much redder look than usual.

“It’s fine, Yakov! Look! I’m putting on my skates! I’ll pin my hair out of my eyes! I will do a thousand runthroughs and two hundred quad fl--”

Yakov cut him off with an infuriated grunt and turned his back, heading toward the rink entrance. Viktor grinned down at the laces on his skates. He probably shouldn’t take so much enjoyment from antagonizing Yakov. Yuuri would probably scold him.

“Yuri!”

Viktor didn’t recognize the voice, but he did recognize the name and his head immediately snapped up. At the end of the rink was a small blond boy trying to literally climb over the boards onto the ice, tiny skates on his feet kicking out. There weren’t even public rink hours that day, and Viktor didn’t recognize the kid. Regardless, Yakov would straighten them out. He looked around the rink again, but there was still no sign of his Yuuri.

Yakov walked over, physically grabbed the boy by the back of his jacket and lifted him off the boards, yelling at him in Russian. The old man near them just crossed his arms over his chest and smiled fondly before opening his mouth. “Yurotchka, if you don’t want to be here, then we will go back to Moscow and forget about this. You can continue to work with Vasily.”

“No! I’m going to be the best figure skater alive! Definitely better than that stupid Viktor!”

Yakov scoffed. “You have a long way to go before you can get there.”

The little blond gremlin who dared to share his Yuuri’s name crossed his arms and glared, and Viktor just knew he was going to go far. That much passion would no doubt make him fly, just not gracefully. He sighed. Yuri turned and looked at Viktor and those angry little green eyes focused on him, narrowing and evaluating.

Viktor laughed. “Are you going to show us what you can do, little Yurka?”
Red splotches sprang to life on the little Yuri’s cheeks as he stabbed a finger toward him in the air. “You! Don’t call me Yurka! You’re a has-been!”

Another sharp bark of laughter. “But I have barely begun.”

Yuri’s bowl cut floofed out as he shook his head hard. “You’ll see! You’re going to lose so hard!”

Viktor didn’t know if he hated this kid or adored him. He was definitely nothing like his Yuuri, and nothing like Mila. He was no doubt going to turn out to either be a giant pain in Viktor’s ass or a wonderfully amusing angry, yippy puppy to tease all the time. Either way, it was surprising and interesting. “And are you going to be the one to beat me?”

“No! You’ll be buried by the time I’m competing against you, old man!”

Viktor gasped. “Old?”

“VIKTOR! Get on the ice! You promised me 200 quad flips.”

Viktor sucked in a sharp breath. “Fine.” He wouldn’t get to 200, but he was going to show the little puppy just what sort of skater he was.

The little puppy turned out not be nearly as yippy and angry as Viktor thought he’d be -- at least when he was skating, anyway. On the ice, he was focused; still high-strung, but focused. Viktor was impressed. Yurka reminded him of...well, him, when he was small and determined to beat Lyosha into the dust.

Though it didn’t seem like Yurka wanted to beat Viktor specifically, which made Viktor wonder just who he wanted to beat so badly. There must be a skater he looked up to, someone he thought was better than Viktor.

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri And little Yurka keeps sneaking triples when Yakov’s back is turned and more times than not ends up sliding face first across the ice

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I don’t know what’s worse. Sliding across the ice after a failed jump or being called Yurka.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Well Mila and I agreed that we couldn’t call him Yura. You’re our Yura. :)

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov It’s not like I’m training there. You guys can call him Yura too. I don’t care.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri *gasp* NEVER!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I am rolling my eyes at you so hard, if only you could see it.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri You knooooooow… #getyuurioninstagram and I could see it.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I’m going to go back to my trampoline training, thanks.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Do you have the quad lutz yet????

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov No comment. 30 more minutes here then I’m meeting Shuji and some
classmates for karaoke. Why did I agree to that for our date

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri Seriously? You’re going on a date with him?!?!?!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov I promised. It’s no big deal. It’s really just a group of us going to a box

***

Video [KAtsuki Yuuri and Tatsuno Shuji duet KARAOKE!!!!!!!!!!!!]

kumonoseresute
OMG!!!!!!! I AM DEAD! I have died! I have watched this at least 47 times from the grave! They are my FAVES!

swinging_mini_ami
YUU-KUN! You can sing too!

ice_castle_madonna
Go Yuuri!

Viktor
HELP

Chris
Why do you need help? You broke your foot and you won’t be competing in the GPS?

Viktor
What? No! Is that what you’ve been dreaming lately? How are you my friend?! So MEAN!

Chris
I miss gold.

It’s not like you wouldn’t come back and then win all the things after anyway. LET ME DREAM

Viktor
NO
But seriously, I need help!

Chris
What did Yuuri do that made you realise that you are super super gay again

Viktor
https://tinyurl.com/a6hda

Chris
Niiiiiiiiice! He lip syncs good!

Viktor
He’s not lip syncing
Chris
Oooooooooh

Should I find this music and use it as my free program so that you’ll remember and be so flummoxed and gay you can’t skate?

Viktor
I hate you

Chris
*kissy face emoticon*

***

c christophege d katsudonyuuri Soooooo. I saw the youtube video…
katsudonyuuri d christophege omg. Please. No.
c christophege d katsudonyuuri I didn’t know you could sing!
katsudonyuuri d christophege Oh. That one. I can’t. Not really. But I guess I don’t suck? Or at least Noda-chan says I don’t.
c christophege d katsudonyuuri There’s another video????????????????????
katsudonyuuri d christophege NO! Or well, not anymore! Shuji’s manager and Alexei made the poster take it down. A lot of my classmates saw it first I think.
katsudonyuuri d christophege I don’t want to talk about it
c christophege d katsudonyuuri You can’t say something like that and not give me deets!
katsudonyuuri d christophege it was just a stupid video a fan made of Shuji and I in the hallway outside the karaoke box! We didn’t know they were there!
katsudonyuuri d christophege And I didn’t know that Shuji was going to kiss me! We were just TALKING!
c christophege d katsudonyuuri GO HERE::::::: giacometti.ch/images/trolling/omg2.gif
katsudonyuuri d christophege I don’t want to talk about it!
c christophege d katsudonyuuri spoilsport. So are you like together together?
katsudonyuuri d christophege no. we talked after and no. it doesn’t make sense. He’ll be in tokyo and at best I’ll be in Sapporo, worst Detroit.
c christophege d katsudonyuuri you picked a coach?!
katsudonyuuri d christophege Almost. It’s bewteen Cialdini in Detroit and Kato in Sendai though travel for that is being determined
c christophege d katsudonyuuri ooooooh. Does Vikky know?
katsudonyuuri d christophege I want to have made up my mind before I tell him. I can’t ask 4 help
4 every little thing. I don’t want to be his kouhai!

**christophegc** d katsudonyuuri I don’t know what that means, but I’ll take it that it’s not good.

**katsudonyuuri** d christophegc A kouhai is like an underclassman. I look up to him, even if he can be ridiculous. He’s my goal on the ice.

**katsudonyuuri** d christophegc I don’t want him to see me as just some Junior skater he needs to help out. Next year is my first in Seniors

**christophegc** d katsudonyuuri I don’t think Viktor sees you that way. At all. You’re friends! You’ve been friends longer than I’ve been friends with him.

**katsudonyuuri** d christophegc but I was always a younger skater, never his competition. I want to be his competition.

**katsudonyuuri** d christophegc I want to make him worry I’ll steal the gold out from under him. I want to beat him.

**christophegc** d katsudonyuuri I knew there was a reason I liked you.

****

Viktor dropped a large paper bag on the table in the break room, sat down and pulled his legs up. There was no way that he was practicing. Yakov could yell at him for the rest of the day, but he wasn’t budging until after he’d watched Yuuri’s free skate. Mila had already taken the seat next to him and was pulling out all the piroshki he’d bought from their favorite shop, arranging them on a large plate.

“It’s not fair! I should be there skating, too! Then I could see Yura skate in PERSON!” Mila was pouting, and really Viktor couldn’t blame her

“No more fair than him choosing to compete at Junior Worlds instead of Worlds in Tokyo.”

Mila shot him a dirty look. “At least you’ll get to see him! Yura said he was going to Tokyo to watch you skate! It’s not fair! I never get to see Yura!”

“You bullied him into choreographing a program for you!”

Dima groaned as he pulled his chair up and placed it next to Viktor. “Stop. Please. You sound like my twin sisters arguing over their favorite doll.”

Viktor and Mila looked at each other, then Dima, and then back to each other before breaking into laughter. All right, so perhaps they were being a bit ridiculous. Viktor leaned over to press a quick kiss to Dima’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Blech. You two are gross.” Mila grabbed a piroshki off the plate and took a huge bite. Dima grabbed one as well. Viktor hurried to take his share before they were all gone. There was nothing worse than a skater after practice who was starving.

“YURI! GET BACK HERE! YOU’RE ICE TIME ISN’T DONE!!” Yakov’s voice had the power to carry through the entire rink when he was really worked up, and apparently their newest rinkmate knew exactly how to annoy Yakov into that.

The door to the break room burst open and slammed against the wall with a crash loud enough to
drown out the Eurosport announcer introducing the last group of skaters for the Junior Men’s.

“What are all of you doing in here?!” Yurka’s little voice piped up.

“What are you doing in here?” Yurka piped up. “You weren’t here yesterday.” Yuri was shifting from foot to foot in the doorway, looking increasingly annoyed.

“Well, no. Yesterday was my off day and I watched at home.”

Mila grinned. “And I watched with Viktor.”

“And I don’t care enough to watch Junior Men’s. I’m just here because Viktor’s here and I’m on break.”

Yuri gagged a little at Dima’s reply. “Gross. Dating is super gross. Well, you all need to go away because I want to watch this.”

Viktor bit his lip to keep from laughing at the boy. “Tell you what. How about we all watch together. You can even have a piroshki.”

Yuri seemed to perk up at that prospect and dashed over to the table with the plates, pushing at Viktor so that he could be in the middle, right in front of the TV and the food. He grabbed the biggest piroshki off the plate, took a huge bite--

And then spat it out. “GROSS! What is that? That’s not a piroshki! That’s... something pretending to be a piroshki!”

Viktor just stared. That poor piroshki.

Mila shook her head at the boy. “These are the best piroshki in St. Petersburg.”

“Then I’m never having another piroshki in St. Petersburg again.” Yurka crossed his arms and stared up at the TV. “Now shut up! I need to listen.”

Dima leaned against Viktor’s chair. “He takes this all very seriously. He doesn’t even start competing in Novice until next year. It’ll be a while before he’s up against any of these skaters. Most of them will be in Seniors before he starts Juniors.” Viktor just nodded.

Yuri turned and glared. “I said shut up.”

“I think,” Viktor whispered -- still loud enough to get a glare from their smallest rinkmate, “that we should all be quiet.”

It was probably the most awkward time that Viktor and Mila had ever spent watching one of Yuuri’s competitions. From the corner of his eye, Viktor watched Yuuri’s eyes sparkle as they darted around, looking at the figures on the screen. He wondered who captured the younger skater’s attention, but then the camera focused on Yuuri and Viktor no longer cared.

As usual, Yuuri was forbidden from doing any triples during his warm-ups. However, that didn’t stop him from doing a triple axel and landing it beautifully before moving into some step work. The camera flashed over to Alexei at the boards. He was shaking his head at his skater, but with a smile on his face. The announcer rattled off of all of Alexei’s accomplishments as both a skater and a coach before both announcer and the camera turned their attention to a skater waiting by the boards
with their coach -- the South Korean, Seung Gil Lee, according to the commentary. He was watching the other competitors, and Viktor had a feeling he was paying particular attention to Yuuri before he nodded at whatever his coach was saying; with another nod, he headed back onto the ice to run some footwork warm-ups.

“I don’t know why he bothers. He’s never done over a level 3 step sequence in his whole career. He’ll probably skate a level 2. He doesn’t have the triple axel yet either, and won’t even make it onto the podium. The Thai skater’s steps are a lot better, but again only a double axel and his triple Lutz is always a disaster.” Yuri shook his head. “There’s no real competition here.”

Viktor bristled. Of course there was! Yuuri was skating and Yuuri was amazing! Yuuri was the best. He opened his mouth, ready to launch into a tirade, but the tiny glare he received shut his mouth again. This kid was starting to get on his nerves. If he dared insult his Yuuri, Viktor was going to lay into him -- ten years old or not!

Yuri’s brow furrowed. “Did Crispino already skate?”

Mila nodded. “Yeah. In the last group. He’s currently in first place.”

Yuri shrugged. “That’s not really a surprise. He’ll probably make podium. At least I don’t have to watch him and his stupid hockey stops throwing up snow everywhere.”

Viktor couldn’t help himself; he laughed. “Oh, Yurka. I thought you’d like that sort of thing.”

“I told you not to call me Yurka!” He did manage to duck out of the way before Viktor could ruffle his hair. A shame.

The first two skaters -- including Phichit, Yuuri’s bubbly Thai skater friend -- did as well as little Yuri had stated. Phichit skated a great step sequence and his double axel was solid, but he fell on his triple Lutz. Lee, the skater from South Korea, was… robotic, boring, ticking off the boxes, and Viktor would have scoffed too if Yuri hadn’t beaten him to it.

By the time the last skater was on the ice, Yuri had ridiculed every single skater in the final group, including the Swedish skater that had taken first over Crispino. Viktor was preparing his arguments against whatever the little punk was going to say about his Yuuri, and Viktor could tell that Mila was doing so as well. They exchanged a little nod. They could take a 10-year-old down.

The announcer called out the scores for the last skater and then announced Yuuri’s name; from that moment, Viktor’s gaze was glued to the screen. The camera focused on Yuuri and Alexei at the boards; Yuuri nodded, fist-bumped Alexei, and pushed away, circling the ice with his arms spread before doing a little hop and taking his position on center ice. Viktor loved this program. It hadn’t been the same twice all season, constantly in flux, but he had a feeling that today it was going to be the most beautiful rendition of Liszt’s “Liebestraum” that he’d ever seen.

Yuuri sailed across the ice -- sleeves fluttering, every movement fluid and beautiful -- faster and faster, using the speed that Liszt was known to for his advantage. Viktor didn’t think that he’d ever seen such a beautiful and complicated step sequence in his life and he hated Lilia for never choreographing him something like that, even if he knew that Lilia wouldn’t trust him to perform it to the perfection that Yuuri did. Viktor’s breath caught as Yuuri entered his choreographic sequence. The layback was amazing, the bend in his knee as he landed his triple axel immediately after perfection.

Viktor completely tuned out the announcer and if anyone else in the room was talking, he didn’t hear it. Everything was centered on how Yuuri moved across the ice, telling the story of love’s sweetest
dream. And Viktor was there for every spin, the upright camel, the Bielmann, all of it. He could feel his heart soaring with Yuuri and clenching as the music slowed down to the finish; he wanted to reach for Yuuri’s hand, but then, right when Viktor would have made sure the rest of the program was easier, Yuuri took off into a quad toe loop. The landing was magnificent. Viktor felt a flush of disappointment that he didn’t do the Lutz, but he didn’t need that to win. Right now, there was no doubt that Yuuri was going to take the gold medal again.

Yuuri slumped out of his final pose, then reached out and brushed his fingers on the ice.

It was only then that Viktor actually snapped to attention. Mila and Yuri were both shrieking in excitement, Mila jumping up and down on her chair, and little Yurka shouting that he knew Yuuri could do it!

They all stopped and looked at each other.

“Wait, you were cheering for Yura?”

Yuri looked insulted. “Of course! First of all, we share a name, and secondly, he’s the best figure skater in the world. And when he goes into Seniors next year, he’s going to kick Viktor’s ass! And I guarantee you, that skate was enough to finally rip that last Junior World Record you hold for combined score out of your hands!”

Viktor laughed and brushed the tear clinging to his eyelashes away. He certainly hoped so. “You have no idea what I’ve been saving up for Yuuri and his quad Lutz for when he gets to Seniors.”

Yuri spun around. “Yuuri has a quad Lutz?! How do you know that?!”

Viktor laughed. “He won’t tell me for sure, but I’m pretty sure he’s got it.”

“He’s so cool!”

Under the circumstances, Viktor guessed he could live with not being Yurka’s idol after all.

***

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri How does it feel being the TWO TIME Junior World Champion?

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Stop it! It’s not a big deal.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I’m proud of you for stealing my World Record out from under me, you know

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Don’t worry, it won’t be the last time I do it either

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri YUUUUUUUUUUUUR!

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov OMG forget I said that! I don’t know what possessed me. I’m just nnervous about about my exp.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri why? You’ve done it plenty of times.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov Uh. It’s a new one. I choreographed it with Minako.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri NEW! I can’t wait! We’re having a viewing party for the exhibition!
katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  NO! Don’t tell me that! You’ll make me even more nervous!

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  Don’t be! So what is the song? I always like the music you and Minako choose for exhibitions.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Its by Bjork. Just. something I was thinking about during dance a lot and kinda relating to the subtext of it

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov  Anyway, it’s dumb.

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri  I doubt that

It was a piece choreographed to Bjork’s “Venus as a Boy”, although an instrumental version -- most likely at the demands of the ISU.

Viktor choked enough that Yakov had to slap him hard on the back and tell him to pull himself together . Later that day, he watched the video on YouTube more times than he could count. Bless Yuuko and her channel!

***

Viktor coasted around the edge of the rink. It was still early; not many of his rinkmates came as early as he did, but they would probably start trickling in at any moment, so Viktor decided to use the time he had to mull over everything that had happened over the last couple of days.

For one, no longer holding any of the World Records from Juniors, having lost the last of them to Yuuri just a few days ago.

Or watching Yuuri in a skintight black-and-red costume skating to rather provocative song -- albeit without the lyrics that truly made it provocative, but Viktor had already found a fanvid that matched up the version with the lyrics to the skate. The internet was a magical place, and now Viktor could stop running up the views on Yuuko’s video for what Chris assured him was for his purely prurient pleasure.

Yuuri would officially graduate high school just a few days before Viktor would arrive in Tokyo for Worlds. He should take Yuuri somewhere to celebrate and finally get to find out who his new coach would be. Apparently, he’d signed the paperwork right before Junior Worlds.

Everything was going to change, and Viktor couldn’t wait.

He picked up speed and landed a triple axel, though not nearly as well as Yuuri did during Junior Worlds. His head wasn’t in it, and he felt himself tilt too much in the air. There was an uncomfortable feeling under his skin, like he was missing something.

Just then, Georgi crashed through the door with Mila on his heels. Viktor skidded to a stop. Mila looked upset.

“Call Yuuri!”

Viktor skated over to the edge of the rink where he’d set his phone down on the boards. “Why? He doesn’t like me calling him.”

“Yakov doesn’t care. He can’t get through to Alexei and he knows that Yuuri and Alexei were
Viktor’s stomach dropped. He pressed ‘Send’ and listened to the phone ringing as he asked the question he didn’t want the answer to. “Why is he worried?”

“There’s been a huge earthquake in Tohoku. Yuuri was thinking of training there.”

Mila bit her lip and climbed up onto the boards. Viktor wrapped his arm around her. When there was no answer, he dialed the number again.

The ringing stopped and for a split second Viktor panicked, his arm tightening around Mila’s waist. Then he heard it.

“Viktor?”

The line cut out.

Chapter End Notes

Translation
	тупица - stupid (but familial/somewhat affectionate)

***

I have some links to add... I commissioned a fanart of Viktor and how I imagine him looking in this chapter. I'll dig that up and add it.

Also Happy Birthday to Chel! Who has been one of my stalwart supporters helping me to not give up.

Thanks to Cryo for the Russian and as always the wonderful Io who encourages me and edits this monster so it's readable. :P

Let me know if you find any formatting issues that need adjusting. I think I got them all, but I'm tired, so who knows! :D
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Everything Changes. Again. For Yuuri it seems that once he gets used to something, the world flips upside down and he as to start from scratch all over again.

Chapter Notes

I'm still alive! (more info at the end) And I have a chapter for you!

(And I have a good chunk of the next chapter written... enough that if I get a bit more written tonight, you might be getting a sneak peek sooner rather than later on my tumblr.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was silent in the break room; it seemed like the entire rink was watching footage of the catastrophe in Japan on the large TV. Even Yakov had set up a laptop in the corner of the room, his cell phone prominently placed next to him. Viktor caught himself glancing at it almost as often as his own, which was plugged in and charging with the ring volume turned all the way up. When one of those phones rang, no one was going to miss the call. Because he’d get a call. He had to.

When “Teenage Dream” started playing, it was so at odds with the somber mood that everyone glared at Viktor. But Viktor didn’t care; he was scrambling to pick the phone up with fingers that felt as if they’d gone numb. He struggled to swipe and answer. “YUURI?!”

There was a deep breath from the other side of the line, and Viktor felt his heart jump into his throat. What if it wasn’t--

“Hi, Viktor. I’m sorry. It’s… it’s a mess, and it’s been hard to get through to anyone--”

“Vitya, on speaker!”

“Was that Yakov?”

Viktor pulled the phone from his ear and pressed the speaker button before answering. “Yes. We’re all in the breakroom watching footage, it--”

“Yeah. Um. I can’t talk long, but I knew that I needed to call you. Alexei is with Riku--”

“Is she all right?” Yakov cut in in again in his matter of fact sort of way.

“Yeah. Yes, Riku is fine. She’s just really shaken up. She wasn’t feeling well and Alexei cancelled our trip to Sendai because of it, but, yeah. My mother kept calling and calling, but the cell service is bad now with everyone trying to call everyone they know who might have…” Yuuri’s voice trailed off, broken, and he paused. “She was really worried about me, so I spent the most time trying to get through to her. And then Yuuko and Minako were there at the inn and I had to talk to
them. I think my sister’s cell phone got passed around to half of Hasetsu. I’m sorry I couldn’t call sooner.”

“It’s fine. It’s fine. I was just worried.” Viktor looked around. “Everyone was.” It was awkward because there was so much that Viktor wanted to say, but couldn’t. Even switching the conversation from Russian to English -- too many people would be able to understand. But he couldn’t deny the relief on Mila’s face at hearing Yura. Or on the other skaters’, like Georgi or the rest that had trained with him.

“Uh, Alexei just came in, I’m going to give him the phone since who knows how long it’ll take to get through again.”

“Of course!” Viktor watched as Yakov snapped up his phone and started talking -- after switching off the speaker. So unfair. But again, Viktor reminded himself, he couldn’t be selfish.

***

Osaka Idols Spend Graduation Day in Sendai Helping with Relief Efforts

[trio of images showing the Fukuzawa IS track students handing out food and water, cleaning up debris (Yuuri and Shouta), talking to teens and university students (Shuji and Noda-chan)]

Rescue and Relief Missions Swing into Action

***

ISU bulletin: Figure Skating World Championships in Tokyo postponed

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ISU bulletin: Figure Skating World Championships moved to April in Moscow

***

Yuuri sighed and sunk down onto his bed, staring at the pile of boxes that he’d packed his life into. He hated the sight of them. How could he even think of leaving Japan with everything that was going on in his country? It’d be ridiculous to think that Japan needed him, but at the same time, surely there would be something that he could do.

Riku pushed open the door and leaned against the jamb. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this room look so bare without the Viktor posters on the wall. Who would have imagined that I’d miss them?”

Yuuri laughed. “I could leave a few.”

Riku’s own laugh was bright. “I’m sure that Alexei would love it.”

“I have a framed photo somewhere, he could put it on his desk!”

“I think he’d much prefer a life-sized poster. Surely you have one?”

Yuuri flushed. He didn’t quite have a life-sized one. He shook his head. “I’m sure you have better ways of decorating this room.”

“Not for a while.” Riku’s hand landed on the slight swell of her belly. Not many people knew, but they’d told Yuuri almost as soon as they’d found out themselves. “We’re changing over the room
with the dance barre. It’s closer to our room.”

Yuuri’s chest clenched. He was going to miss so much! He ran over to Riku and gave her a hug. “I don’t know if I’m ready to leave.”

She laughed and patted his back. “You are. It’s just a big change. But Minako-sensei and your sister are going to help with your move, and Alexei and I want to know everything that’s going on with your new training regimen.”

Yuuri nodded. “And you. I want to know how you’re doing.”

“Of course, though I’m not going to be having quite as an exciting pregnancy as your friend Yuuko did. Brief stint with dehydration aside.”

Yuuri laughed and backed up a few steps, scrubbing his eyes with his fist. “All right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so emotional about this.”

“It’s all right to be emotional during big life changes. And this is a big life change for all of us.”

“Yuu-kun, are you about ready? Your flight to Sapporo leaves soon, we should be heading out!”

“Go on. Life doesn’t stop just because things change.”

Yuuri nodded and headed to the stairs, but turned at the top of them. “Goodbye Riku-san, and thank you for all you’ve done for me.” He bowed deeply before rushing down the stairs and grabbing the handle of his suitcase by the door. His mother and sister were coming up to Osaka to send boxes of his things home, or onwards to be shipped to his new apartment. But he needed to go to his university orientation.

He’d already said goodbye to his friends at school. The rest of the goodbyes would be said when he went home after orientation and the first few weeks of classes. After all, his things wouldn’t arrive in Detroit for at least six weeks, so he could do at least part of the semester on campus before heading to his new apartment--

The weight of his now former coach’s arm on his shoulder shook Yuuri out of his reverie, and he looked up at Alexei. “The house is going to be very quiet without you tearing up and down those stairs. Though I suppose that means I at least won’t have to worry about the banister giving out anytime soon.”

“You know you’re going to miss me.”

“Yeah. I will.” Alexei paused and took a deep breath. “Hey, if this situation with Cialdini doesn’t work, you know that I’ll take you back in a second.”

Yuuri chewed on his lip and rubbed his fingers along the rough edge of the cuff of his jacket, pausing to let the familiar feel center him. He needed to make the coaching situation with Celestino work. He couldn’t be a burden to his family or the JSF, who were offsetting the cost of so much of his training.

He needed to go to Detroit and be a successful skater. And he needed to do well in his classes so as to not lose this scholarship, because when skating was over, he was going to need career options. The likelihood of him being able to coach or make ends meet though choreography was quite slim, and he’d never have the sponsorship and model level career of Viktor.

And yet he still wanted to say “yes.” So he resisted as much as he could and just nodded.
“Good.”

***

Sapporo was cold, even in April. Yuuri tugged the sleeves of his parka down over the edge of his gloves and trudged up the hill to the rink. He’d only been skating in the rink for a few weeks but it already felt comfortable, maybe because it reminded him of training in Russia. But really, that felt like a lifetime ago.

He pushed open the door and waved at the girl who was working behind the counter. She was a speed skater, internationally ranked, but not good enough for the Olympic team. Saori-san, if Yuuri was remembering right.

“Yuuri-kun?”

He stopped. They never really talked much. She used her work time at the rink to mostly study for classes, and had mentioned that she didn’t mind if he just went into the rink when scheduled without stopping. She was in her last year and needed to focus on her classes. “Yes, Saori-san?”

“I thought you might like the remote for the TV in the rink. It’s empty except for you today, and aren’t the Championships happening now?”

He smiled. Yuuri had been planning to cut his practice short and go back to the small apartment he was renting for the month to make sure he didn’t miss anything. Classes had barely begun, but he could have gotten ahead on his reading between important skaters -- though Alexei would have told him all skaters were important skaters. And he knew that was true, especially since he was moving up into Seniors and those lower level skaters were going to be his competition next season. Though he wished it was Viktor and even Chris that he’d be competing against, he knew he just wasn’t there yet.

He half watched and half skated, and used the re-icing breaks to film some short clips to show where he was at with his practice to his new coach. Celestino didn’t have much to say, and wouldn’t until Yuuri actually went to Detroit. It was mostly a check-in, and for anything that Celestino thought that Yuuri should be working on prior to training for the new season in earnest.

By the time it was Victor’s turn to skate, Yuuri had already finished for the day and was ensconced under the kotatsu at his small table with a cup of tea in his hands. Viktor’s program had been getting steadily better and his step sequence more fluid since the Grand Prix Final. There was a small trill of excitement that went through Yuuri every time he watched, because he had helped. He had actually helped Viktor with his program, and it was unimaginable.

But this time at Worlds, the stiffness was back. Yuuri frowned as he watched. He knew that Viktor and Dimitri were taking a break, but their relationship must have been rockier than Yuuri thought. Or maybe it was just impacting Viktor’s skating because Dimitri meant more to Viktor than Yuuri knew.

It wasn’t enough to let Chris steal the gold medal, but it was enough that their scores were closer than they’d been all season. But Viktor didn’t even look bothered as he waved and winked at the camera.

katsudonyuuri d vnikiforov everything all right?

vnikiforov d katsudonyuuri I just won gold and that’s what you’re asking?! You’re ridiculous. Of
course everything is great

katsudonyuuri d christophegc what’s wrong with Viktor? His skate wasn’t as good as it usually is.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri And it couldn’t be that mine was better than usual? ;*

katsudonyuuri d christophegc oh it was, but still Viktor’s step sequences were much stiffer than usual. And he isn’t being himself on dm

christophegc d katsudonyuuri … I’m not supposed to say…

katsudonyuuri d christophegc say what?

christophegc d katsudonyuuri How can I say this so you know but I don’t say what I’m not supposed to. He didn’t want to come to Moscow. He’s missing his crush.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri Once Worlds was moved and people cancelled coming, he was over it. He only skated bc Yakov and the RSF made him

Viktor had a new crush? Already? Well, Yuuri shouldn’t be surprised. They tended to not talk about these sorts of things; talking about relationships in general made Yuuri uncomfortable, and talking about Viktor’s even more so. He always hated thinking about Viktor being in these relationships with people who didn’t understand him. Because they never understood Viktor; not like he did.

Or Chris.

Maybe… No. He’d hate that even more than one of Viktor’s not-quite-flings.

It would have caused pandemonium if Viktor hadn’t skated at Worlds, especially after it had been moved to Russia. Some people had pulled out, but if Viktor hadn’t competed and won the gold back from Chris, Yuuri was sure all sorts of hell would have broken loose.

christophegc d katsudonyuuri I wasn’t supposed to say anything. Don’t tell him I told you.

Of course Yuuri knew how Viktor got when he was crushing on someone.

katsudonyuuri d christophegc Yeah. My lips are sealed.

***

“The pup did good on the plane.” Mari patted Vicchan’s head as they made their way through the airport to the rest area where the dog could take care of his business. Minako-sensei had already headed over to the taxi stand with their luggage. Well, Yuuri’s luggage really. When moving abroad, it was useful to have extra people whose luggage allotment was available for takeover, so that’s what
Yuuri did.

As they stepped outside, Mari took a deep breath. “Finally, an ashtray. I can smoke.” She wasted no time pulling her pack of cigarettes out. “Damn it, I don’t have a lighter.” She sighed and put the cigarette back in. “I hate flying.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes at his sister while he watched Vicchan sniff the small square of grass. “No, you hate not being able to smoke.”

“True.” She stretched. “And the whole line at Customs was a pain in the ass. Is it always this difficult?”

Yuuri shook his head. “It was Vicchan, mostly. They needed to check his papers. Not to mention my visa and everything.” Yuuri paused and bent down, pulling a plastic bag from his back pocket. “I never said thanks for taking Vicchan to that vet in Fukuoka to make sure all his papers were complete and everything while I was in Sapporo. I know it was inconvenient and I should have just left him in Japan like I did when I first went to Russia, but--”

Mari cut him off. “Hey. You love the little ankle nipper. There’s nothing wrong with wanting one of your family to stay with you.”

Yuuri focused on the task at hand, standing and then tossing the little bag in its receptacle. He looked over his shoulder at his sister and smiled. “Still, it means a lot to me. I know how busy things can get at the inn with just you, Mom and Dad at the inn doing everything.”

“Don’t worry about it, kiddo.” Mari smiled. “I’m going to that little gift shop-like place and hope they have a lighter. You can find your way over to Minako and your pile of luggage all right?”

Yuuri nodded. “Yeah. I think I’ll be able to find her.” He looked back down at Vicchan as Mari walked away. He knew better than to judge places by airports, but he was really hoping that things would be good here in Detroit.

***

But “Detroit” wasn’t actually Detroit at all. “Detroit” was Bloomfield Hills, twenty miles north of the city proper. Being told that he’d actually be out in the suburbs and not in the city was one thing, but actually seeing it was completely different. They’d driven down at least five roads and everything looked exactly the same: same buildings, same cars in the driveways, all the houses with the same colors and the same landscaping in front. It was strange.

“I feel like I’m in some sort of horror movie,” Mari muttered next to him.

Minako laughed. “No. It’s just the suburbs.”

“And the Homeowners Associations,” their cabbie grumbled. He turned another corner and pulled in front of an apartment complex.

Outside the taxi window, Yuuri spotted Celestino standing there with the huge smile that Yuuri never saw him without -- at least while he was with Phichit.

“Yuuuuuri!” Celestino had a way of drawing out the vowels in his name that Yuuri thought he’d never get used to. It was a strange contrast to the way Viktor did it when he was pretending to whine. Yuuri smiled to himself at the thought.

“Hello, Coach Cialdini.” Yuri bowed. From the corner of his eye, he could see Minako laughing.
with the taxi driver as she settled the fare and gave him a tip. He wanted to grimace because this was just one more thing that he would owe her.

“Celestino is fine. We already discussed that!” His new coach slapped him hard on the back and Yuuri took an involuntary step forward. He'd have to get used to this, too. Celestino was definitely not Alexei. He was loud and boisterous, but had trained top athletes and had at one point been the Olympic bronze medalist in men's skating – though that was before Alexei's time, before the quad race had begun, and under the old scoring system. But his step sequences had been some of the best in the world. Between that and knowing one of the other skaters he was training, it seemed to make perfect sense to choose Celestino as his coach. After all, figure skating coaches with credentials like that were pretty slim in Japan.

He already missed home.

“Yuuri. Yuuri? Did you hear Celestino? We’re going to head inside.”

Yuuri started and looked at Minako, who had put her face just an inch away from his. Her brows were furrowed and she had that look; the one that meant she knew exactly what was going through his mind. She nodded and straightened.

“Come on, let's show Vicchan his new home.”

Celestino unlocked the door to a first-floor apartment and ushered them all in. “I had a married ice dance team that just retired, so was able to take over their lease for you. It's small, but two bedrooms, which will make Phichit happy since he's been staying in ‘the House’.”

The “House” wasn't really a house. Well, it was, sort of. An older woman who was a fan of the sport had reached out to the skating club years before after inheriting the huge house from her family. Having never married, she offered to let the younger skaters have a room if they were training away from home. Older skaters usually moved into a dormitory, which was like a college dorm but for athletes training in the area, offering shared common spaces and kitchens plus a room for a fraction of what an apartment would cost. Occasionally, visiting faculty at one of the nearby universities would move in for a semester as well.

That's where Yuuri would have normally moved. Except Vicchan was a priority, and he wasn't going to leave his dog behind; Not when he'd been able to have him in Russia and Osaka. He didn't know how many years he'd be training in Detroit, but even one year without Vicchan would be too much. Vicchan was like a little puppy-shaped piece of home and helped quell his anxiety when things got to be too overwhelming.

Neither the House nor the dorms allowed dogs. In fact, the House didn't allow any pets at all.

So when Celestino had floated the idea of Phichit and him sharing an apartment, it seemed great. Plus Phichit could finally have all the hamsters his heart desired.

Celestino pushed a folder toward him when they'd all sat down in the incredibly generically decorated living room. “At least for this first year, you're subletting through me. So all utilities, etc will be paid by me to the complex and you and Phichit will pay me back. That schedule, along with the apartment rules are in the folder. There's a page of complex rules, and then a page of MY rules.”

Yuuri nodded as he flipped through the pages. He knew about rental contracts from his time in Russia, and from Viktor complaining about his landlord all the time. The one that he wanted and truly needed to read through was “Celestino's Skaters Rules of Behavior”
First rule: no overnight company. He glanced over at Celestino. This obviously wasn’t written for him and was a generic list, but the way that Celestino quirked his brow up made Yuuri think that Alexei had spilled too many secrets.

***

Mari picked up one of the iPhones on display and started messing about with the limited options that were unlocked. “I bet Viktor is happy you’re going to finally have an iPhone. Yuuko was telling me about his social media campaign to make you less of a luddite.”

Yuuri groaned. “I’m not getting an iPhone because of Viktor. Not everything is about Viktor.”

Minako let out a bark of laughter. “You have a dog named after him. Of course everything is about him.”

Yuuri pressed his lips together in a tight line. “That was before Russia.”

Mari slung her arm over her brother’s shoulder. “Funny, I’m pretty sure I just spent almost an hour hanging up posters of him. Not to mention I had to sort posters of him into “Detroit” and “home” piles while you were in Sapporo.”

Yuuri groaned. There would be no explaining to these two the subtle intricacies of his friendship with Viktor, and how it had changed over the years. Viktor wasn’t just his idol, Viktor was his friend, and in some cases his confidant, but not in all. And yes, Yuuri could admit that he had a crush on him, but then who in the skating world didn’t? He didn’t delude himself into thinking he’d ever have a shot with him. Yuuri had seen Viktor’s type. It wasn’t him. And besides, Chris had told him that he had a crush on someone -- not to mention the on and off again thing he had going with Dima, which was currently back on.

Yuuri shook his head and picked up the phone next to Mari’s. “He’s just shiny-new-technology-obsessed and didn’t understand that my flip phone, even though he thought it was so old school, had options on it that a smartphone wouldn’t for me.” He sighed. “Besides, new country, new phone. I could probably get away with the cheapest contract, right?”

Minako narrowed her eyes at the fine print on the brochure, going over the various contract options. “Hm. Well you and Phichit will primarily call Asia on the landline through phone cards. We found that little corner store that sells them for a reasonable price, so at least for now there’s no reason to spend the extra money on the international calling plan. It’s a bit steep.”

“But you’ll be commuting to that university--” Mari started, but Yuuri cut her off with a grumble.

“Don’t remind me. It’s going to take forever to get there via bus.”

“My point being, you’ll probably want a bit more robust of a plan in case you get stranded going to and from these places. It’s a new place, and not even your friend friend Phichit knows it that well. Just the places near school and the rink.”

Yuuri nodded. Living in “the House” meant that Phichit didn’t even need to do his own grocery shopping or cooking, since the house mother did all of that. The kids living there just paid for their share of the groceries and any “officially coach approved snacks”. “And where all the 7-Elevens are between school and the rink, and how long a pit stop would take.”

Minako laughed. “Well, you knew exactly how long you could take for a detour to get onigiri before dance class that you weren’t supposed to have.”
Yuuri flushed. “I wasn’t the only one! Yuuko and Nishigori ate them too!”

***

Yuuri looked at the corner of his laptop screen to check the time. It was taking Minako and Mari forever to pick up food from whatever Asian place that Mari had sworn someone at the airport gift shop had told her about. Or they got lost, which was possible. He should have gone with them.

But he did have a paper that was due, and while his professor was aware that he was moving, he could only give him a little bit of leniency. So Yuuri just sighed and went back to writing.

It was easily another hour before they got back, and by that time, Yuuri was starving.

Minako and Mari were laughing as they came through the door. “Sorry, little bro, but your car is going to smell like Hawaiian food tomorrow. But I guess there are worse things.” Mari set down a bag with takeout bowls that smelled suspiciously good, and not at all what Phichit had warned him Asian food was like in the states.

Being as hungry as he was, Yuuri started poking through the bags, not really parsing what his sister was saying. It was only when he was halfway through what turned out to be a Tuna Poke Bowl that he stopped and stared at his sister, who was looking more amused than anything else.

“What do you mean, my car is going to smell like Hawaiian food?”

Mari just shrugged. “Well, we’re eating Hawaiian. I thought I mentioned that when you started tearing into that bowl.”

“Mari! What do you mean by ‘my car’?”

Minako was just shaking her head, looking at the siblings.

“It’s nothing fancy. It’s used, has a ding on the back passenger side door, and a ton of miles, but the mechanic said it was in good working order and you wouldn’t have trouble getting to and from classes. And the car has a good safety rating. So don’t think I went and did anything extraordinary or something. It’s just makes good sense when you’re travelling from classes and here and to the rink to train. Not to mention that Minako found a couple of dance studios in the area. One of them even needs someone to teach the little kids. But you’d never have time for everything if you had to rely on public transportation. It’s super inconvenient here.”

For a minute Yuuri just let his sister’s words bounce around the inside of his skull. It was almost as if she was speaking a foreign language instead of Japanese. But then it all clicked. “You… you bought me a car?”

“It’s a gift, all right? For doing as well as you’ve done in school on top of skating. You finished high school with better grades than I did. It was the plan. And it’s used. So it’s not like it was a ton of money.”

“It’s a CAR, of course it’s a lot of money—” Yuuri took a deep breath and sniffled. It was almost too much, but now his sister’s insistence that he take the classes and get his license before leaving Japan made so much more sense. “Thank you.”

“Yeah… well, I guess I just wanted to give you something. I might actually miss you.”

***
Unknown Contact
Hey, it’s me
You’ve been terribly quiet on Twitter
You didn’t even reply to my last message there
Is Yakov making you do suicides with the Hockey Team again

***

Viktor
CHRIS
HELP
A STALKER IS SENDING ME MESSAGES

Chris
Oh no
What are you going to do

Viktor
You are not taking this seriously at all

Chris
I seriously doubt it’s a stalker

***

Chris
Called it. He just asked for my help saying that a stalker has found him

Yuuri
He’s the one that wanted me to get an iphone for AGES

***

Unknown Contact
Just for calling me a stalker, I’m never getting an instagram account

Viktor
HOW DID YOU KNOW I CALLED YOU A STALKER? I NEVER REPLIED

Unknown Contact
... Obviously because I am clairvoyant

***

Viktor
I’m being stalked by Baba Yaga.
Chris
You're being ridiculous

Viktor
But seriously, should I contact Yakov? Do I need to change my account information?

Chris
It'd be easier if you just found out who they were and then, I don't know, blocked them

Viktor
Good idea!

***

Viktor
Tell me who you are

Unknown Contact
Someone you know
Obviously

Viktor
I will seriously block you

***

Chris
Stop tormenting him. It's been fun and all, but he's sending me screenshots now

Yuuri
Fine. Seriously though, does he get random unknown contacts on his phone often? No one has that email except 6 people. You, me, yakov, mila, katya, and lyosha. And it's impossible to figure out since it's some alphanumerical nonsense he got off a password generator.

***

Unknown Contact
I can't believe you're making me do this
I always feel so dumb typing
"This is Yuuri. I got my new contact information if you want it"
.Chris didn’t make me do it
You're so mean, Viiiiiiiiiiiiiiiktoru

Viktor
YUUUUUURI!
I'm so sorry!
I should have realised!

Yuuri

No, I really should have just said it was me
.Expecting you to know it was me from some message was stupid

***

Viktor
HOW COULD I NOT KNOW IT WAS YUURI?!
WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME IT WAS YUURI!
TRAITOR

Chris
.I have to get my jollies from somewhere
.And you make it so easy

***

“Hey, so I wanted to talk to you. Just us. Do you have a few minutes?”

Yuuri looked up from his phone. The last few days had been nothing but go, go, go. He’d had to
set up a bank account, switch over his license, fill out paperwork at the university he’d be attending
classes at, fill out more paperwork with Celestino, and still had work for his ongoing courses at Kino
to keep up with on top of everything else. It was one of the first times he had to take a breather.

But Mari and Minako were leaving in the morning. He’d be driving them to the airport.

In the car that his sister bought him.

Of course he had time for her. “Yeah.” He rolled over and sat up on his bed, his sister settling easily
down next to him.

“You still have a lot of unpacking to do. The room still feels, sterile and not like you.”

Yuuri nodded. “The Viktor posters help, I think. And once I get all my school books on the shelves
and have skating gear strewn all over the place and Vicchan tears through that stuffed alligator you
got him, it will seem more like home.”

Mari chuckled. “So the thing I wanted to talk you about…” She sighed. “I don't want you worrying
or anything. I talked to mom before we left. Well, a couple of weeks before we left.”

“Is something wrong at the onsen?”

Mari took a deep breath. “Not really. There’s just been a lot of planning for the future. You did so
well in school, and you’re studying psychology --”

Yuuri flinched. “Oh no. I didn't even think about doing something involving the onsen! Like
studying hospitality or something. I--”

“Yuuri, none of us expected you to. Mom and Dad are really proud of you. They’re glad you found
something you wanted to study. You're not like me. You have a drive and a passion that I never did. Even when I lived for that year in Fukuoka, all I did was work at a restaurant and goof off. I didn't want to go to university, and I knew that I'd be working at the onsen, taking things over eventually, and I liked knowing that I didn’t have to find something else. I don’t mind doing that and supporting your dreams in whatever way I can.” Mari took a deep breath. “This was Mom and Dad worrying about me being alone. I’m twenty-five and not dating and not even showing any signs of wanting to. So they approached me about setting up an お見合い.”

“You're joking. An お見合い?”

Mari waved her hands in front of her. “They were worried I wasn't taking time out to go and find someone.” She turned to look at her brother. “It wasn’t really a conversation that I wanted to have with them. See, I don't want to find someone. At all. Ever. It was either try and explain that to them, or end up talking to someone at an agency and doing something I don’t want to do.”

“Is being alone what you really want?”

“I don't know if I want to stay alone, but I do know that I don't want to get married and I don't want kids. Having someone around platonically, maybe. I joked that if Minako fails to marry a skater half her age, she can always move into the onsen.” She looked away toward the door that she’d closed behind her when she came in. “Mom kind of took the whole thing hard.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She doesn’t want me to be lonely. And, well, she says it’s going to take her a while to get over the fact that she'll never have grandkids but that if it’s what I want, then she supports me.” She looked back at Yuuri. “We have a great mom, kiddo.”

Yuuri leaned against Mari's side. “We do.”

“But all of this is just preamble, really.”

“For what?”

“It got me thinking. We haven’t really talked about things, and I know you don’t want to label anything, let alone yourself. That you probably haven’t even finished figuring yourself out.” Mari stopped and instead of interjecting like he wanted to, Yuuri just waited for her to continue. “I want you to know that I don't care… Th… That might be the wrong way to say it… It doesn’t matter to me if you ever label yourself. I will always love you like you're my annoying little brother and I don’t want you to count anything out in your life if you want it, regardless of who you end up loving. Because you’re destined to love someone, I know that. It doesn't matter if it's a Viktor or a Viktoria.”

Yuuri shoved her. “My relationship with Viktor--”

“-- isn't like that,” Mari finished for him. “I know. But that's not the point. Listen to what I’m saying, kiddo. I want you to know that there’s only one way I'll ever carry a baby, and that is if you and whoever you end up with want one and want me to.” She paused, then smirked at him. “I don't, however, promise to do it it twice. So don’t plan on trying to outnumber the Nishigoris.”

Yuuri's heart clenched and he pushed his face against his sister's shoulder.

“Yuuri, I've seen you with the triplets, and I know about Riku-san and how you fussed over her when she had that really bad bout of morning sickness that sent her to the hospital before everything went to shit. I know one day you’re probably going to want a family, and I don’t want you to feel like it’s not an option or would be too hard, or worry about how to make it happen. Because you
worry about everything. So I wanted to tell you this is an option for you. I want you to know that now, that’s it’s there, so that you can focus on figuring you and this amazing, impossible dream that you’re making a reality. Lots of kids dream about becoming an athlete and going to the Olympics, but you’re so close. You’re going to do great things, and no door should be closed for you.”

“Mari-nee-chan--” Yuuri sniffled.

“Nope. I didn’t let you cry over the car, and I’m not letting you cry over this. You’re my baby brother, all right. I haven’t had many chances to support you over the last four years because you’ve been standing on your own already. And now you’re here, standing on your own still. But know this, I got your back.”

Yuuri pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “I’m going to win a medal in Sochi for you. I swear.”

Mari ruffled his hair. “You better.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations
It's just one and I forgot ow to do hover... so back to the old school way I'll come back in and edit it after I post...

お見合い - omiai - Japanese matchmaking

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So I haven't mentioned this, but my darling little demon goat has turned into a full on Threenager. We're trying really hard to get him into a Kindergarten so I can be a little less insane, but so far, we haven't had much luck. I don't really have a lot of time to write consistently anymore... I don't have a lot of time to do anything anymore, really. (Though, if you're in Northern Germany, my husband and I will be at Dortmund Comic Con at the beginning of next month if you want to say hi).
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Not only does Yuuri have to adjust to a new city, but a new country, a new school, a new coach, a new roommate, and new schoolmates... The summer goes by faster than he thought it would.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you, for all the comments. I love you all and I've read each and every one like 3 times. I've just been in a really rough mental space and unable to reply. So, sorry. But on the other and, you all get a new chapter. That's happy making, right? (aka please don't hate me)

This chapter is dedicated to my coffee suppliers. Sooo much love for you! So so much! Like really, I don't think this chapter would have gotten done as fast without you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuri kept his phone tucked under his chin as he wrote down what he was being told. Celestino was standing on the other side of the boards and reading with his own phone out, ready to start inputting things into his calendar app.

It was only slightly strange for Yuuri to be talking to the JSF on his own behalf. He’d gotten so used to Alexei doing it for him, but had been dragged to enough of the meetings against his will that when the call came, he was ready for it. And it wasn’t as if Celestino could do this for him. He could try, but the man didn’t speak a lick of Japanese beyond “hello” and “where is the toilet?”

“All right. So Nebelhorn and Finlandia again.” Yuuri bit back a sigh. He was not looking forward to returning to Oberstdorf, but that’s where the JSF wanted him. “And either the Merano or the NRW Trophy, depending on Grand Prix assignments, which should be coming out in a few weeks. I’ll let my coach know.” Yuuri said his goodbyes and hung up with the official.

“Just these four?” Celestino frowned.

Yuuri shook his head. “Three of them, plus my Grand Prix assignments. The NHK is probably a given since I’m only guaranteed one spot with my Junior World win, and last year when the case was similar, that’s what they’d planned on doing. Except I opted for competing in the Junior Grand Prix instead.” Celestino nodded. “They want me to start my season early, and you can’t really get much earlier than Nebelhorn when it comes to Senior competitions. They’ll decide January competitions toward the end of November, and everything else will be decided based on standing at Nationals at the end of December.”

“It’s definitely doable. The only issue is if one of my Junior skaters gets assigned the JGP in Romania. But we’ll make something work. Phichit comes back next week from visiting his family in
Thailand. I assume that he’s been in touch?”

Yuuri smiled. “Almost every day. I had to photograph every inch of the apartment. Apparently he has plans. And he doesn’t like the couch.”

Celestino laughed. “I’ll have you know that I’ve had that couch since I moved here.”

Yuuri’s eyes widened. “That’s sort of terrifying, Coach.”

“I can tell you the names of some decent used furniture stores. With the universities around, they have a lot of cheap stuff.” Celestino finished entering the last of the dates and put his phone in his back pocket. “Now, back to work. The next few days we’re going to go over everything you know. I need to evaluate you. I’ve seen what you can do in a competition, obviously, but now I need to see everything else. In the past I’ve started with figures since it’s the very basics, but it’s becoming something that fewer and fewer skaters do well –”

“I skate figures a lot. Warm ups, cool downs, between practicing various elements. Which ones do you want to see?”

Celestino nodded, a smile twitching his lips. “All right then, show me what you have. Start with the very basic figure 8 and work your way up to a double 3.”

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Yuuri hiked his skate bag higher up onto his shoulder as he headed out to the car. It was strange that he’d spend a whole day doing figures and various footwork during training, but it was also nice. And he supposed that Celestino was right, and that by working through and demonstrating all his skills, Celestino would get a better idea of who he was as a skater and how his competition skates compared to his practice skates.

The downside to everything was that Yuuri was discovering that Celestino could be incredibly rigid. Everything was done in the proper order and the proper way. It was so very different from Yakov and Alexei. He never thought he’d find Yakov to have a more flexible coaching style than… well, anyone.

Yuuri pulled his car keys out of his pocket and hit the door unlock button, pleased when the lights on his car flashed twice. He wasn’t looking forward to the drive to campus, but he’d gotten a call from the Asian Studies department about a possible on-campus job that didn’t have set hours, and it seemed like something that could work for him. Of course, he had to go and talk to them about it. And while he was there, he could pick up his student ID and check at the library if he could get access to a specific psychology journal that he’d need for a class. It’d be easier than emailing Kino, since he would already be on campus.

“Goddamn it!”

Yuuri glanced around. A few spots past his car, someone had the hood of their own vehicle up and must not have liked what they found. The hood slammed down again and a dark-haired guy not much older than him sighed, opened his car door and grabbed both a skate bag and a messenger bag from the back seat before pulling out his cell phone and muttering again.

Yuuri pulled his bottom lip between his teeth. Come to think of it, he’d seen the guy coming or going from the rink a few times, but didn’t know his name. He was obviously someone who skated though, and really, the least Yuuri could do was ask if he needed help.

“Um, excuse me?” Yuuri paused a few feet away. “Is everything all right?”
The other skater sighed. “Not really. My car battery is dead. Do you have jumper cables by any chance?”

Yuuri knew nothing about cars, since he never thought he’d own one. “Uh, I don’t think so, but we can check the trunk though.”

The guy dropped his bag on the roof of his car and shoved his hands in his pockets as he followed Yuuri over to his Camry. Yuuri opened the trunk and set his skate bag inside; the skater leaned forward to peer inside and pulled the box of mysterious car-related stuff that had come with the Camry toward him. Yuuri hadn’t even bothered to look through it yet.

“Crap. Guess not. Thanks anyway.” The guy -- and it was starting to annoy Yuuri that he had no name to refer to him as -- ran his fingers through his dark hair.

“Uh, I’m leaving, so I can drop you somewhere nearby if you need.” He bit his lip again. “I’m Yuuri, by the way.”

“Arthur, but I hate it, so you can call me Art.” Art held out his hand and Yuuri shook it. “And thanks, but my aunt lives nearby, just a 10 minute or so walk.” He sighed. “I’m just going to have to email my prof since I’m going to miss my chem exam.”

Yuuri fidgeted. He was nervous and anxious, and felt he was about to do something incredibly stupid, but Art was a skater, and it only seemed right. “I don’t know where you go to school, but I’m headed to Michigan for a meeting…”

“You go to University of Michigan too?” Art look surprised. “Most of the college-age skater kids go to Wayne State from DSC, I thought.”

“Sort of, but not really. I’m going to be taking classes there since it’s a sister school with my university in Japan.” Yuuri shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. “So, technically not a student since I won’t be getting a degree from them? It’s a little complicated.”

“So you’re legit a foreign exchange student. Cool. Yeah, if you could drop me anywhere on campus, I’d be grateful.”

Art jogged the short distance to his car and grabbed his bags before locking all the doors and heading back over to Yuuri’s car. Yuuri just motioned to the passenger side door. “It’s unlocked.”

Art slid in as Yuuri opened his car door and got in too. It really was strange. It wasn’t like him at all. It was something that he could see Viktor or Chris doing for a skater in need. Especially Viktor.

Art let out a low whistle. “Your car is spotless.”

“Well, it’s new to me. I’ve only had it a couple of weeks since I moved here.”

Art chuckled. “Fresh off the boat, then?”

Yuuri shrugged and pulled out of the lot. He hadn’t made the drive to Michigan that often, but it was pretty straightforward and mostly highway driving. Since he was always going at off times, like now, it wasn’t horrible -- just slightly under an hour. “Plane, really. Well, three planes.”

Art nodded, and then was quiet. Small talk had never been Yuuri’s forte. He didn’t know how to keep a conversation going, and having to do so now made his stomach turn into knots. He glanced at the other skater from the corner of his eye. He was tall and broad-shouldered, like Viktor, but his hair was black and his eyes a smoky hazel instead of Viktor’s ocean blue. Objectively, he wasn’t
bad looking. Oblivious to Yuuri’s scrutiny, Art leaned over, grabbed his bookbag, pulled it up onto his lap, and pulled out a thin notebook.

That was a relief. If Art wanted to study, it would take some of the pressure off. Yuuri took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting himself relax a bit more as after he merged onto the highway.

The quiet only lasted ten minutes or so before Art snapped his notebook shut again. “So what are you studying?” Art had turned to look at him, but Yuuri kept his eyes focused on the road.

“Sports Psychology. You?”

“I want to do bioengineering, I think. Technically, I’m undeclared, but I have until the end of the year to decide. My brothers at Alpha Beta Omega think I’m more of a finance kind of guy, so I thought I might take a couple classes on that side of things in the fall.”

The last couple of sentences seemed like complete nonsense to Yuuri. “Your brothers? Alpha what?”

Art let out a low whistle. “It must be incredibly different in Japan. Alpha Beta Omega is a frat, man. Every year there’s rush week, and they have the guys who want to join do all sorts of stupid shit. I mean technically they’re not supposed to, hazing is against school policy, but as long as no one gets hurt, right? I mean there’s more than ABO, but yeah. You should totally try to rush something if you can. It’s the true college experience.”

Yuuri shook his head. “I really don’t know if I’d have the time.”

“Let me guess. The Sochi Olympics, right? I get it. I’m trying for them too, but it’s work-life balance. You’ve got to be able to have some fun.”

Yuuri nodded. “I guess, but I really don’t have a lot of spare time between cross training, and classes, and distance learning, and trying not to go broke in the process.”

“Yeah. It’d be awesome to have like sponsors that could offset the costs. Pay for skates and things.”

Art pushed his notebook back into his bag. “I wouldn’t know how to find any, though.”

“The only sponsors I’ve had either approached me or my coach back in Japan, or were set up by someone else.”

“Wow, you’ve actually had some? You must be good. I don’t really know a lot about figure skating, though.”

Yuuri stayed stopped at the stoplight just a few seconds too long, and the cars behind him started honking impatiently. He tried his best not to have a mini panic attack and put his foot slowly on the gas pedal. “But you train at the Skating Club, I thought… You don’t have the gear for hockey.”

“Oh, no, I don’t actually. Well, not usually. My usual rink is the Ice Box, but it’s undergoing some reno work for a month or so, so I contacted the skating club to see if they had some free ice time in one of the rinks since it’s close to my aunt’s, and I’m living there until something in the frat house opens up. I do short track speed skating, actually.”

Yuuri kinda laughed a little. “And I don’t know much about speed skating. I’ve never trained at a rink with someone doing it before. Well, that’s a lie, but I was only at the rink in Sapporo for less than a month before I moved here. I never even saw the couple of speed skaters that did train there skating.”
“It’s such a rush! Like, the adrenaline you get from it, it’s amazing. When I was a kid and was first taking skating lessons, I had to learn, like, Wally jumps or something. I forget, but I was always just looking to go faster, you know? So I did hockey for a while, but I think I went home and cried for an hour after the first time I got slammed into the wall during a game; even with the padding it hurt so bad. Then I found out about speed skating and I never looked back. I mean this was back in the Hudson Valley before I got into uni, but yeah. I even qualified for Nationals last year. It was awesome.”

Yuuri smiled. This, he understood; the excitement about loving your sport. It’s why he and Shouta got along so well. “So there are heats and stuff, right?”

“And I thought you didn’t know anything about it?” Art chuckled.

Yuuri smiled. “I dated a swimmer. And I mean, I’ve met a few speed skaters, and and they talk about times and stuff. So I assumed.”

“A swimmer, huh? You’re kinda surprising, Yuuri.” Yuuri looked over at Art, who was suddenly looking back at him with an alarming amount of intensity. It reminded him of when he and Chris first met and Chris just looked and looked, like he was the one vetting if Yuuri was good enough to be friends with Viktor. “So how far have you gotten? I guess you skate for Japan, right?”

Yuuri felt the heat rising up the back of his neck and making his ears feel hot. “Um. I’ve done some international competitions and stuff.”

Art laughed. “Now that almost sounds like a humblebrag. Come on, spill.”

Yuuri pulled into the lot closest to the Asian Studies department and started looking for a place to park, trying to keep his nervousness under control. “Uh. Not really. I just skated Junior division. It’s not the division that skates at the Olympics, that’s Senior division. It’s going to be my first year skating that. But I won some competitions.”

Art clapped him on the shoulder. “Good job! It must be awesome to skate internationally. I bet that’s why your English is good.”

Yuuri nodded and shut off the car once he was pleased with his parking job. “Yeah.”

“You should let me buy you coffee. To thank you for the ride.” Art ripped off a piece of paper from the notebook he had earlier and scribbled a number down. “Text me. I can’t take you now, since I’ll be late for my exam if I do.”

Yuuri looked at the number, then took out his phone and created a new contact.

“Text. Or give me your number, too.”

Oh! He meant right then. Yuuri quickly opened a new message. This is Yuuri.

After the chime went off and Art checked his phone, he smiled at Yuuri. “Great! You’re a lifesaver! Later!” He opened the car door and ran in what Yuuri assumed was the direction of his chemistry class.

Once he knew he was alone, Yuuri pressed his forehead against the steering wheel and tried to breathe. He’d done a good deed and the conversation hadn’t gone terribly, and he’d even met another athlete that went to his university. All pluses, right?

Yuuri’s phone was still in his hand, and he pulled up his messages.
Yuuri
I think I sorta made a friend

Lyosha
Good Job, Yuu-kun!

Yuuri
How is Riku-san?

Lyosha
[Image of Riku and Lyosha. Riku has a hand over her face and Lyosha is holding a onesie up in front of her small baby bump] She wouldn’t let me buy ANYTHING Tell her to let me buy things, Yuu-kun!

Yuuri
...
If you really wanted to win this argument, you’d have Minako-sensei text her

Lyosha
You’re right!

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The last time he’d been out here, Yuuri had walked past the little storefront five times before he’d gathered up enough courage to finally go inside. Even then, he hadn’t managed to buy anything; after getting to what he thought the section he needed was, he simply froze at the amount of Cyrillic. The price labels on the shelves didn’t even bother putting anything in English.

He felt his anxiety rise. He probably should have taken the time to learn to read Russian before coming here. He might have also been able to find what he was looking for through an online shop with the help of Google Translate, but it would be so much easier to have a little store that he could pick things up at when he needed them.

Eventually, the constant questioning glare of the elderly Russian woman behind the counter grew too much and terrified him right out the door.

In retrospect, he supposed he didn’t really look like her typical clientele. He had never imagined that finding ingredients for his Japanese dishes would be easier than the Russian ones.

This time Yuuri only walked past the storefront three times before taking a deep breath and heading inside. If this attempt failed... third try was the charm, right? That is how the saying went, or at least he thought it did. Besides, he didn’t have much choice in the matter, though why Phichit had asked him to make something Russian in the first place was beyond him. The Thai skater probably just liked the novelty of the idea.

The old woman was once again perched behind the counter, where an old TV and VCR duo was attached to the wall and playing a stately Russian remake of an American show. It sounded like Doctor Tyrsa, the Russian version of House MD, but Yuuri couldn’t be sure without slinking closer.
He went back down the aisles and wandered, looking at packages and picking up things that looked familiar, like the awful Russian candy that Viktor would always have in his pocket, but just tasted awful on Yuuri’s tongue.

“Do you need help?”

The shopkeeper was standing behind him, and Yuuri almost jumped out of his skin before he started rambling. “I’m just looking for some ingredients, but I only know the names and I can’t read Cyrillic and I don’t know what to do. I was thinking of texting my coach, well my ex-coach, so he could send me the words, but I’m really trying to prove to Alexei that I can do this whole ‘being coached by someone else and living on my own’ thing because I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. Especially after he did so much for me and why can I not stop talking?” Yuuri gasped and shut his mouth, pressing his lips into a tight line.

The Russian woman was no longer frowning; instead, a thoughtful look crossed her face, and she motioned for him to follow her.

**Oh God**, Yuuri thought, **she’s going to banish me from this store forever**.

“Alexei?” She pointed at something framed over the counter. And yes, it was actually a picture of Alexei standing on the podium at the Salt Lake City Olympics, cut out of an old Russian newspaper. Yuuri nodded. “I thought you looked like his student.” She took the can of whatever he’d been holding out of his hands. “Alexei was the best skater Russia ever had.”

It took a minute, but Yuuri finally realised that she was speaking in Russian, and it dawned on him that he’d probably been babbling in Russian this entire time.

“Tell me what you want to make. I’ll help you find the right things.”

Yuuri breathed a heavy sigh of relief and started talking through the list of ingredients Riku had sent him, plus the list of staples she’d suggested to keep in the kitchen.

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“Did you listen to the music I suggested for your Short Program, Yuuri?”

Yuuri stopped in the middle of the ice and looked over at Celestino. “Yes. It’s ‘Lohengrin’. Right, Coach?”

“Very good. What are your thoughts?” Celestino was standing by the boards with his arms crossed over his chest expectantly.

Yuuri had been trying to avoid this ever since he came into the rink that morning, and he’d almost managed it, too; five more minutes, and he’d have to be off the ice and on his way to the airport to pick up his new roommate. Privately, Yuuri had been hoping that Celestino would go and work with the Junior that had arrived from Canada the day before, and just let Yuuri cool down on his own.

Yuuri had the worst luck.

“It’s very bold and bombastic.” And nothing like what I’ve skated before, but Yuuri left that bit unsaid, along with the and I’m not sure it’s very me.

“It is! It’s good! Energetic. Just what you need.” None of those were words that he would have chosen to describe it, but if his coach thought so… “I’ve just about finalized the choreography for it.
Next time, we’ll go over your jumps and I’ll slot them in.”

His choreography was done? But they hadn’t really talked about it. He had agreed to let Celestino pick the music after he’d been pressed, since his coach had said that he’d like to see Yuuri skate something different from the norm. But he’d thought that he’d at least have the opportunity to have a bit of a say on the choreography. Even Madame Baranovskaya let him have a little input.

Or maybe he was just getting ahead of himself. They’d probably discuss it after his jumps. A trill of nervousness slithered up his spine. He’d only ever really jumped his Lutz in closed sessions before, but the DSC didn’t really have many of those since there were more students training there. Which meant that tomorrow, almost everyone who would be at the rink would watch him do a quad Lutz. Yuuri just hoped that he wouldn’t fall.

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[Image of Yuuri’s car in front of airport]

phichit+chu My new roomie has a CAR #newroomie #awesome #ihatethebus #yuuri #whatshouldwenameit

[Image of a rather barren living room]

phichit+chu I can’t believe he’s been living here for like two weeks. Where’s the DECOR! #triptoikea #sorelyneeded #yuuriwhy

[Close up of Viccan]

phichit+chu OMG! I love him! LOOOOOOOOVE! He’s soooooo sweet #figureskatingpoodle #bestdog #dogsofinstagram #vicchan

[Another close up of Vicchan standing on his hind legs for a treat]

phichit+chu Promise this won’t turn into a dog insta, but we're BONDING, okay?! #vicchan #bestdog #figureskatingpoodle

seung-gillee you have a dog now?

phichit+chu @seung-gillee Nope! Vicchan is Yuuri’s dog! Isn’t he cute?!

seung-gillee @phichit+chu katsuki yuuri, yuuri?

phichit+chu @seung-gillee yep! #newroomie #yuuri

v-nikiforov PIPSQUEAK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! [string of heart emojis] MAKKA MISSES YOU! Also Makka is the best dog and the best figure skating poodle. Vicchan can be second.

phichit+chu @v-nikiforov My roommate says he will fight you

v-nikiforov @phichit+chu #getyuurioninstagram
so, over on the left im going to set up a desk with my computer and I want a medal shelf but maybe it should go in the living room and then #getyuurioninstagram can put his there too. I'm thinking of buying a giant Naruto wall scroll to go over the head of the bed

Noooooooo #getyuurioninstagram left all his medals in Japan! How am I supposed to practice receiving my gold in junior worlds now!

can you show us Yuuri's room?

Are you ready to do your jumps?”

Yuuri nodded and pulled on his gloves. “Yes, Coach.”

Celestino didn’t have his hair pulled back tight in a ponytail today, and between that and the fact that he was wearing a headband, it made him look like he belonged in an ‘80s exercise video. Yuuri would have to try to take a surreptitious picture and send it to Viktor; no doubt he would find it hilarious. “All right. I want you to start with your singles and doubles to warm up and then I want you to work through your triples. Toe, Sal, loop, flip, Lutz, and finally Axel.”

Yuuri nodded again and started skating around the rink. He should probably keep all the entries as simple as possible just so Celestino could clearly see his skates and how cleanly -- or, in the case of his triple Salchow, how sloppy -- it could get.

Once the Triples were done, Yuuri skated back to the edge, breathing heavy. Celestino had his lips pressed together in a tight line. “Your Salchow and Loop are weak.”

Yuuri nodded as he took a few deep breaths. “I know. I don’t really like edge jumps.”

“Your Axel is fine.”

Another breath in. “Alexei thought that it’s probably because I’m more confident with the forward entry, in a way. I can see where I’m going. Mentally. I can’t really see much when I skate.”

Celestino leveled a hard gaze at him for a minute and then continued. “We’re definitely going to have to work on those. They need to be solid.”

“Couldn’t I just avoid at least the Salchow in my programs, since I know I don’t get as good grade of executions on it? My loop is fine. Not great, but I don’t usually get marked down on it like I do the Sal. Besides, I have two quads--”

Celestino held up a finger. “Everything comes in an order, Yuuri.” He motioned to the stands
behind him. “Take a break while I work with Leroy, and then you can show me your quad toe.”

“Yes, Coach.” Yuuri grabbed his blade covers from the boards and snapped them on over his blades, then slumped down next to Phichit in the bleachers. “Is he always like this?” Yuuri asked as he grabbed his water bottle and started guzzling its content.

Phichit was merrily chomping on an apple. “Yep! You get used to him, though. And as long as you listen to him and don’t get in unnecessary arguments, he’s super chill. It’s why I like him.”

“You’ve gotten yelled at every practice we’ve had since you’ve gotten back.” Granted, it had only been a handful, but still.

“Ah, but that’s phone stuff. He’s really a kitten when it comes to that. It’s the skating stuff where he’s… what did John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt call him the other day when he was in the locker room? A tyrant.”

“I thought it was ‘John Jack’.”

Phichit shook his head. “It’s JEAN JACQUES.” He said the name extra nasally. “I had to go to a school meeting with him the other day. He’s so…”

“Fourteen?”

“YES!”

Yuuri laughed. “You’re fifteen.”

“Exactly!”

Yuuri would have to take Phichit word for it. He looked over toward the ice. John Jac— Jean Jacques was arguing with Celestino, and Celestino didn’t look happy.

“It’s ‘JJ Style’! Coach, I —”

“First of all say ‘Yes, Coach.’ Second, do the drills that I assigned. Go.”

JJ pushed away off the boards before skating over to his patch to work on what looked like edgework. Yuuri couldn’t help but notice he never actually said “yes.”

“Yuuri!” Celestino smiled in his direction and Yuuri stood up. “Think you’re ready to show me that quad toe?” Yuuri nodded and made his way down the bleachers.

“Ganbatte! Yuuri!” Phichit had his phone out. No doubt he was going to film something. Phichit had been over the moon when he found out that Celestino was evaluating his jumps today, because that meant he’d get to see Yuuri’s quad Lutz.

Setting his guards back on the boards, Yuuri stepped back onto the ice. “Ready, Coach.”

Celestino just nodded and Yuuri took off, using as much ice as he could around the edge to gain the speed he needed before taking off on his quad toe. He landed it with a solid thunk and breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been so worried about it, but from Phichit’s exuberant yell, it must have looked good even from the stands. He smiled as he skated over to Celestino.

“Good. You can tell that Turov really spent the time to make that jump clean. Wish he had spent a bit more time on your triples.”
Yuuri’s smile faltered just a bit. “Do you want me to go and do the Lutz?”

“Do you have a Quad Salchow?” Yuuri shook his head. “Loop? Flip?” Shook his head again. “That’s fine, then. We’ll start working on your quad Salchow after the start of the season. If we’re lucky, it’ll be ready for next season.”

Yuuri blinked. He wasn’t completely sure what was happening. “So, do you want to see the Lutz?”

Celestino shook his head. “Remember what I said, Yuuri. Everything has an order. What order did you first learn your jumps?”

“Wally, toe, Salchow, loop, flip, Lutz, Axel. From easiest to most difficult.”

“And your triples?”

“Toe, loop, Axel, Salchow… then the Lutz? The Lutz might have come before the Salchow. I’m not sure, it depended on what the requisite jump was for the short that season.”

Celestino nodded. “This is why I think your triple Salchow and triple loop are weak. Step by step. Don’t go skipping steps just to compete with Nikiforov.”

“But, Coach--” Yuuri cut himself off as Celestino raised an eyebrow at him, remembering the disagreement with the new Junior skater he’d just watched. “Yes, Coach.”

Celestino nodded and smiled widely at him. “Then I think you can start your cooldown.” He turned away from the boards. “Phichit! Start warming up!”

Phichit ran down to the boards with Yuuri’s water bottle. “Why aren’t you doing your Lutz?”

Yuuri just shook his head and took a long gulp of water. “He wants me to work on cleaning up my triple edge jumps first.”

Phichit’s face fell. “No! I was so looking forward to it! Barely anyone has a quad Lutz!”

Yuuri smiled. “Soon.” At least he hoped so. There was no way he’d ever win against Viktor without it.

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Chris

So what do you think of the assignments?

Yuuri

I’m a nervous wreck over them. I can’t believe both Viktor and I will be at the NHK. The first time I’m competing against him and it’s in Japan and at a Grand Prix event. The fates are cruel and hate me.

Chris

I thought you’ve been looking forward to competing against Viktor
Yuuri
Yes, but… nevermind.

Chris
Yuuri?

Yuuri
It’s nothing. I’m just having new coach growing pains. We’re still feeling each other out

Chris
Ah.

Chris
You know…. I switched coach’s a year into skating Seniors.

Yuuri
And you're going to tell me it gets easier?

Chris
Hell no. I ran back to my previous coach the next year after a dismal placing in Worlds that cost Switzerland it’s spot in the Vancouver Olympics.

Yuuri
This did not make me feel better

Chris
[gif: oops my bad]

On the other hand, lots of people switch coaches and get even better.

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Viktor
YUUUUUUUUUUUURyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!
WE’RE GOING TO COMPETE TOGETHER AT NHK!
AREN’T YOU EXCITED?
IT’S FINALLY HAPPENING!
I’M SO EXCITED
YUURI?
YUURI! ANSWER ME!
YUUUUUUUUUUUR

Yuuri
I’ll tell you how excited I am if you stop using all caps

Viktor
YUUUUUUUUUUUUURyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy
[alternating sad face and crying emojis for 4 lines]
But you are excited, right?

Yuuri
I am definitely looking forward to seeing you

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Yuuri sat down and opened his book. He hadn't actually expected Art to text him about taking him for coffee, so when the text came through he didn't know what to do with it. It took him over an hour just to send back a simple “yeah, sure, when are you free?”

But since fall classes hadn't started yet, it wasn't that hard to find a time when both of them would be on campus and available. Nor was it hard to find a place that served coffee, as there were plenty of them. College students lived off coffee, apparently. Yuuri had arrived early since he was just getting to campus, while Art would be joining him after one of his classes.

“Hey!” Art announced when he finally slid into the chair across from Yuuri. “Hope you haven't been waiting long. What do you want? I'll go and order it.”

Yuuri chewed on his bottom lip. “No, just a few minutes. I lucked out on finding a parking spot.” He looked at the menu over the counter. The majority of it was sugary, milky concoctions that would throw his diet into the bin, and he really didn’t want to get into it with the nutritionist at the rink. She actually thought he was managing is weight pretty well. “Uh… I know better than to order green tea at these places, so I'll go with black tea. No milk or sugar.”

Art tilted his head to the side. “Is the tea bad here? Should we have hit up a different place?”

Yuuri shrugged. “I don't know, but I grew up drinking good quality tea like gyokuro, and I just don't like the typical green tea I find elsewhere. My coach, however, drank this generic awful black tea his mother sent him from Russia because of sheer nostalgia, so I don't think I even know what good black tea is anymore.”

Art chuckled and left to go place their orders, returning a few minutes later with two steaming ceramic mugs. He set them down before going back again, this time grabbing a plate of small powdered sugar dusted cookies with the bottoms dipped in chocolate. “Got these to share.”

This was so awkward! Yuuri didn’t know what to do. “Um. I can’t eat them.”

“Ah. No. I… Um… I put on weight easily, and I need to be careful what I eat, especially during the summer, since it’s my off season.”

Art leaned over and looked at Yuuri from the side, and Yuuri did his best not to squirm. “Oh yeah, definitely see it.” Even for Yuuri, who could have trouble picking up sarcasm, there was no missing Art’s. He flushed. “You should have one. I’ll take the calorie hit on the rest.”

So Yuuri picked up one cookie and took a bite. It was good, crumbly and buttery, and just melted in his mouth, and would probably taste great with that canned and caramelized condensed milk that Viktor used to sneakily buy and keep in the back of his fridge to eat by the spoonful when he had a day of failing to land the quad flip. The stuff was supposed to be layered between cake, but one spoonful of that was just the right amount of cheating without adding the cake on top of it.

Because who needed the cake, really?
Yuuri closed his eyes for just a second and bit his lip at the memory. When he opened his eyes again, Art was looking at him with slight smile curling the edge of his lips. Heat rose in Yuuri’s cheeks and he looked down at his hands, protectively cradling the mug of hot tea.

“It’s a good thing you’re cute, since you’re such a huge liar.”

The comment had Yuuri snapping his head up to stare at Art. “What?! What did I lie about?”

Art lifted one brow. “Wikipedia is a thing, Yuuri, and you have a Wiki page. First result in Google, even. And that is where I discovered you were two-time Junior World Champion -- technically still hold the title -- and gold medalist at something called the Junior Grand Prix… There are a lot of medals listed on that page.”

Yuuri blushed hard. “I… I…” He groaned. “I didn’t want to make it a thing. It’s not that big a deal.”

Art blinked at him. “Yeah, I’m sure college football players who win the playoffs are all ‘it doesn’t matter, because it’s not the Super Bowl.’”

Yuuri didn’t even know what that meant, exactly, but he could get the idea. He buried his face in his hands. “STOOOOOP.”

“I could. But only if we meet for coffee again.”

Yuuri finally pulled his hands away from his face. He knew he was flushed, and he was definitely off center. He didn’t know how to deal with this. And Art wanted to meet for coffee again. Why? “Why?”

“I must really be losing my touch.” Art leaned forward on his elbows and brought his face as close to Yuuri’s as he could with the table still being between them. “I think you’re interesting.”

***

“Yuuri, you’re supposed to be the mysterious knight! A warrior!”

“Hai! Da! I mean, yes!” Yuuri was trying to find the feeling Celestino was looking for as he did the spread eagle that would lead into his triple Axel, but he just did not feel like a warrior at all.

When he was done, Celestino called him over from the boards, sighing loudly when Yuuri skated over to him. “Yuuri--” Celestino had a habit of elongating the ‘u’ and clipping the last syllable of his name in a way that Yuuri had never heard before. There would never be mistaking his coach calling him for anyone else. “You need machismo! More strength! You’re too pretty when you skate.”

Yuuri didn’t think he’d ever heard those words uttered before. He just blinked. “Machismo? I don’t…” Yuuri clenched his jaw. “Yes, Coach.”

Celestino smiled and patted him on the shoulder. He liked obedience.

***

Viktor

I am hiding from Yakov. He wants me to work. With the Junior skaters.
at his summer camp and I don't want to. Little Yurka is being extra grouchy because he has to take ballet and hates it. So he's absolutely no fun to tease at the moment.

Yuuri
You should probably at least help Yakov a little. Besides, you're popular with the younger skaters and they'll listen to you. They'd do suicides if you told them to.

Viktor
That's a great idea!

Yuuri
No! Bad idea. Bad! I was being sarcastic!

Viktor
Hmmm. Then I don't want to go help. Tell me what you've been working on instead.

Yuuri
If Yakov finds out that I'm keeping you from helping …
Fine
My short program, but I'm having some trouble with it.

Viktor
How so?

Yuuri
So my short is very different from anything I've done before for this coming season.

Viktor
Really?!

Yuuri
Yeah, but I'm having trouble finding the character's … voice, I guess.

Viktor
How so. Do you not understand the character?

Yuuri
Not really. Celestino is Italian and this is just a very Western style story, and… It’s different. He says I need more machismo. Wikipedia didn’t help.

Viktor
Machismo?

Yuuri
Have any suggestions of something I could watch or read or anything? I need help, Viktor.
Viktor
Hm
[thought bubble emojis]Ed! He’s pretty macho I guess!

Yuuri
You think so? I guess. Thank you.

***

Viktor
I just got to help Yuuri with his short program!

Chris
He showed you some of it?

Viktor
No. Not yet
But he asked for my help researching a macho character

Chris
Macho?
Yuuri?
Exaggerated masculinity? You?
Yuuri?
....
Um
What did you tell him?

Viktor
To channel Ed from Fullmetal Alchemist!

Chris
...
...
Is that that anime song you did with the red coat?

Viktor
YES!

Chris
[gif: oh god no]

Viktor
So mean!

***

“I can’t believe we managed to fit everything into my car.” Yuuri heaved a huge sigh and collapsed on the floor of the apartment, laying down and taking as much room as possible up. Vicchan bounded into the room and jumped on his chest, happily yipping in Yuuri’s face. “Yes, I brought you home a treat and a new chew toy.”
Phichit pulled his phone out almost immediately. “This is so going on Instagram!” A minute later, he showed off the finished product.

[Image of vicchan. Standing on Yuuri's chest, Yuuri's face is hidden]

**phichit+chu** we only spent a few hours at #ikea #needypup #bestdog #vicchanforfsdogmascot #bestfigureskatingpoodle #fightmenikiforov #getyuurioninstagram

“Did you have to use that hashtag? I don't want an Instagram.”

“Yuuri, it's a popular hashtag amongst the figure skating community! I have to use it for peak visibility. Besides, since your fans discovered I'm living with you, my follower count has really had a nice bump.”

Yuuri just groaned from his prone position. He had no intention of moving, especially since Vicchan had sat down on his chest; he didn't have the heart to tell the dog to move.

“I can't believe Celestino gave us the OK to have pizza tonight!” Phichit had picked up the menu that had been stuffed into their mailbox the other day.

“Technically you badgered him into it. You literally would not stop asking about it until he said fine, but only because we don't have any competitions for a bit.”

“What can I say, he loves me!”

Yuuri grunted. It wasn't far from the truth, really. Phichit was definitely Celestino's favorite pupil.

“Ordered! And now for the ultimate culmination of our day off…” Phichit made a drum roll noise and banged his fingers on the edge of the coffee table -- a nondescript one Yuuri had picked up from one of the second-hand stores near campus. “Time to watch *The King and the Skater*! I can't believe you've never seen it!”

***

Over the next few weeks, a mountain of boxes from Amazon and various online pet supply stores arrived and their contents were systematically stacked in a corner of the living room. Phichit practically bounced with glee with each new addition; Yuuri just stared.

“Are we going to have any room left in the living room when you actually get that monstrosity put together?”

Phichit shrugged. “Maybe? But it’ll be worth it!”

In the end, the “Hamster Palace,” as Phichit liked to call it, went together much more compactly than Yuuri had imagined it would. It did take up the whole corner of the living room, but if he was a hamster and had to live in a cage, Yuri imagined that he’d probably want an elaborate one as well. Brightly colored wheels and tubes and tunnels went from one cage to another and climbed upward in a stack. They’d set it on a table so it wouldn’t be on the floor and would be out of Vicchan’s reach, though they hoped that Vicchan would just ignore the hamsters and their home.

The only thing missing were the actual hamsters. Yuuri and Phichit were waiting until the weekend to hit up the pet store when they had an off day from the rink.
When the day came, Phichit picked an independent pet shop a little more than a half hour away from the apartment, so they piled into the car and Phichit put one of his self-burned K-Pop CDs on and sang along loudly all the way. When they pulled into the lot, Phichit immediately jumped out of the car and ran straight into the store. Yuuri followed a bit more slowly.

Phichit left with three hamsters and all the other things he’d need to care for them that they didn’t already have at the apartment. Yuuri left armed with a good explanation on how they could deal with bringing the hamsters into an apartment where Vicchan already lived and how to get them used to each other, as well as a bag of dog treats and toys.

[Image]

phichit+chu Meet Goldie, Sterling, and Bronzer! The newest editions to the coolest figure skater apartment anywhere! #hamstersrule #figureskaterpets #bestpets #fightmenikiforov

***

Yuuri groaned as he walked into the campus language lab the next morning. “Shall We Skate” was still stuck in his head. He’d found himself humming it as he made breakfast, then Phichit had sung it as he drove him to the rink, and Yuuri had continued to hum it easily halfway to campus.

School still hadn’t begun, but he had a meeting with the director of the lab about being a conversation partner and tutor for students studying Japanese. It was an easy way to make a little money on the side, and the schedule was incredibly flexible.

The director was a small woman and waved him in to sit across from her. She was pleasant, and the meeting went quickly, though she had a lot of questions about his schedule and what he was planning on studying. When she asked if he had any questions for her, the only one that popped into his head was “Which Russian professor do you suggest?”

She smiled. “Russian? That’s an interesting choice.”

He smiled back and pulled at the cuffs of his jacket. “I lived in Saint Petersburg for a year, and I wanted to pick up studying it again.” Yuuri almost felt like he was lying, but it was the easiest explanation without getting into his complicated history with the language. He spoke it conversationally, but after the disaster at the Russian supermarket, he really felt like he should just learn to read and maybe write it, too.

Besides, Viktor would be so surprised when Yuuri knew enough to shoot off a message to him in Cyrillic. And everyone knew how much Viktor loved surprises.

Across from him, the director flipped through a small notebook, quickly at first and then slower. “What level are you. Two, three?”

Oh. “I need to start at the beginning. I don't know the alphabet or anything anymore. I can only spell a couple of names.” Yuuri shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he should explain into how he actually spoke Russian pretty well, but maybe that was just him getting a big head.

“Well, it usually fills up fast since she's popular, but Professor Pavlova has a Russian 1 course she's running on Monday and Wednesdays in the early afternoon.” She jotted something down on a slip of paper before pulling out a form from her desk and writing some other notes on it. “If the class is full, go to her office and see if she'll give you an override. I wrote down that you're going to be tutoring in the language lab. It might help you land a spot. And do mention to her that you've studied
Yuuri thanked her and got up. He’d have to quickly head to the library and see if there was still a spot available so he could register online, and if not, try and get the override. Otherwise, he guessed he’d have to try a different professor, and time was tight: he had a choreo and practice session that night, and the next day he’d booked time at a little dance studio that Minako had found for him before he left.

Yuuri had managed to make it all the way to the library without incident. After Japan, he was enjoying the relative anonymity that being a nobody on a large campus allowed him.

“Yuuri!”

Yuuri turned. Art was heading down the walkway toward him, along with a couple of other guys. They were all wearing pink polo shirts with “ABO” embroidered on the breast and their collars popped.

He blinked. “Hey.”

Art lightly grabbed Yuuri’s upper arm and smiled, but didn’t pull away. “So my frat’s having a big pre-semester party at the house this weekend. I thought you’d might like to come.”

Yuuri blinked. Did two trips for coffee make them friends, the kinds that would invite each other to parties just to be nice, with every expectation of a refusal? Or was it a genuine invite?

He must have been quiet for too long, as Art then continued. “If you'd rather not party, you could always help me move into my room at the frat house.”

*Maybe he did just want to hang out again.* Yuuri worked a smile onto his face. “I can't help with the move, I have long practice sessions all weekend. But I can stop by the party for a bit.”

“Awesome! I'll text you the details and the best place to park!”. Art was gone as fast as he’d descended upon Yuuri. Yuuri was left hoping he'd done the right thing.

***

**Yuuri**
Invited to a party
What should I wear?
I don't usually do this sort of thing

**Shuji**
Those skinny black jeans a tight t shirt and a hoodie. It's not what I would wear, but you'd be comfortable and fit in with the crowd which is what I think you're going for
Send pics

**Yuuri**
No!

**Shuji**
Yes!
Yuuri groaned and dropped his arm over his eyes. For a moment he didn't even know where he was before everything came flooding back.

He was going to get in so much trouble if Celestino found out. Who knew he'd turn into a messy drunk like his dad and Minako? He couldn't have been a quiet and bemused drunk, like his mother; no, it had to be his dad. At least he hadn't done anything too insane, and Art had cut him off pretty quickly. He probably shouldn't have opted for shots over beer; it was just that the season was getting closer and beer was a huge “no.”

Really, he shouldn't have drank at all -- he was underage and he had driven his car -- but he'd been
nervous, and when the drink had been pressed into his hands it went down easier than he'd imagined; the second even easier than the first. It was sharp and cinnamony, and had little flecks of gold at the bottom. Viktor would have loved it. The next three he didn't even think about.

He groaned again.

“You are a surprise a minute, Yuuri.”.

Yuuri turned his head and looked at Art. He was laying on the bed next to him with his head propped up on his hand. He blinked, body stilling in a moment of panic. “We, uh, we didn't--”

Art shook his head. “Not yet, we haven’t.”

“Yet?” Yuuri swallowed.

Art smiled at him and pressed his lips to Yuuri's jawline. “I'm not ruling it out. I hope you aren't either. But I know you have practice. You wouldn't stop talking about how your coach would kill you if you were late.”

Yuuri didn't remember that, but now he did remember following Art upstairs to his room once he got cut off and that things got a bit handsy; after that, everything went fuzzy.

“Apparently I turn into my dad when I get drunk. I must have been a total embarrassment. I'm so sorry.”

Art laughed. “You were a lot of fun, but nowhere near the sloppiest drunk. Don't worry. I'll go down to the kitchen and grab you some coffee. You can't be late to practice.”

Yuuri smiled. “Thanks.”

***

By the time Yuuri got home, Phichit was sitting on the couch with his legs crossed, watching the TV as he ate his breakfast. The younger skater looked positively delighted that Yuuri had been out all night.

“Did somebody get lucky last night?”

Yuuri groaned as he headed towards the kitchen to grab a glass of water. “Lucky I didn't make a complete and utter fool of myself.”

“Well you definitely looked like you were having a lot of fun!”

Yuuri turned and narrowed his eyes at Phichit. “What do you mean?”

“The getyouurioninstagram hashtag was full of epic pics last night!”

Another fuzzy memory -- talking about how his friend had created the hashtag -- bubbled to the surface. He didn't think anyone would use it! They didn't even know him.

“Do you think Celestino would believe me if I told him I was dead and couldn't make practice?”

Phichit was just watching him, still a little too delighted. “Probably not.”

Yuuri's phone pinged.
Viktor

Are you up?
Did you have fun?
Make a lot of friends?
Who is the guy in the polo shirt you took a selfie with?
Shouldn't mine be the first Instagram with Yuuri selfies on them?

Yuuri sighed. “I’m going to go take a hot shower and then head to the rink. Do you need a lift?”

Phichit bounced on the couch. “Yes, please!”

“Be ready to go in like thirty minutes, then.”

Phichit got off the couch to deposit his bowl in the kitchen sink. “Have I told you it’s awesome that you have a car? We really should name it. What should we name it?”

***

Yuuri was in the middle of a sit spin when he heard his phone ringing. So as soon as he ended the spin, he skated over to the boards where he’d left it. Celestino raised an eyebrow at him and Yuuri flushed. He had a good reason, really.

He answered, breathless. “Moshi-moshi.” There was no need to even look at the ID -- the ringtone was “Rhapsody in Blue,” and the only person who had that particular tone was the man who’d choreographed it. Yuuri had gone a little ringtone-happy after Phichit had showed him how to set different melodies for different people.

“Yuu-kun! He’s here!”

“And Riku?”

“Good. So good. I’ll send a picture through in a minute. I wanted to tell you.”

Yuuri smiled into the phone. Ever since Alexei had texted that they were heading to the hospital, he’d been nervous for them. “I’m glad. Go be with them.”

“OK. We’ll talk soon!” Alexei hung up.

“Yuu-ri?” Celestino was looking in his direction.

“Sorry! I know I’m not supposed to have my phone, but I was waiting for that call. I asked Alexei to tell me as soon as he could that Riku and the baby were all right.” Yuuri bit his lip.

Celestino sighed. “It’s fine, but just this once.”

At that moment, Yuuri’s phone pinged and they both looked down. It was a picture message from Lyosha. Celestino waved at the phone and Yuuri opened it.
“Tell them congratulations from me, then get back to work.” With that, Celestino moved back to the other skater he was working with.

“Thanks, Coach.”

***

Yuuri found a seat toward the back of the classroom. He preferred the seats to the front but felt more invisible in the back, so the back it was.

In person, Professor Pavlova was the complete opposite of her name: tall and broad for a woman, she kept her greying hair in a tight bun. In a lot of ways, she reminded him of Madame Baranovskaya.

“I am Professor Pavlova, this is Russian 1, and today we'll be learning how to introduce ourselves and say where we're from.”

Yuuri smiled. He could definitely do this -- but looking around, he saw that the majority of the students were just blinking at the instructor. *Oh. Right. This was a beginner course.*

Professor Pavlova repeated her instructions in English again, and after a little prodding, everyone was taking a turn going around and saying their name, and where they were from. Three quarters through the introductions, Yuuri realized he was probably the only non-American student in the class. The person in front of him finished and turned around, handing the proverbial baton to him.

He could do this even if he hated introducing himself. “Hello. My name is Yuuri Katsuki and I'm originally from Hasetsu, Japan, but I studied in Saint Petersburg for a year and now I'm studying and training here in Michigan.”

Professor Pavlova paused. The rest of the class was staring blankly at him. “Your Russian is pretty good, but that was way too fast. Maybe say it slower, so more of the class could understand?”

Yuuri flushed and repeated himself, making sure to go slower.

On his way out after class twenty minutes later, Professor Pavlova stopped him. “Do you have a minute, Yuuri, or are you going straight to your next class?”

Yuuri shook his head. “No, I'm free.”

“Tell me a little about your Russian, and why you're taking Russian 1.”

Since she asked in Russian, Yuuri figured he should probably answer in Russian, too. “Well, about four years ago I lived and trained in Saint Petersburg for a year, but I was really struggling with the language, trying to figure out how to read it and write it, so I just kind of dropped that part and focused on speaking it. My classes were still in Japanese, so I didn't really need to read it, and I usually had someone around who could read the Cyrillic if I needed it. I can only really read a handful of words and they are all names.”
Professor Pavlova smiled slightly. “You know that ‘Yuri’ is a Russian name, too?”

“I do, actually. My rinkmates called me ‘Yura’ since it’s the diminutive, and some still do.”

“So why do you want to take Russian?”

Yuuri took a deep breath. “I would definitely like to go back one day, but mostly I just feel like there’s this missing spot when it comes to the language, because I can’t read it or even send a text message. I guess I want to be able to write conversationally as well as speak? Maybe read an occasional article or such.”

“Have you tried to learn the Cyrillic alphabet on your own?”

Yuuri sighed. “Sort of. I have taken out my old textbook more than once with that intention, but then just never do it. I was hoping the structure of a class would help get me over that initial hurdle.”

Professor Pavlova put a finger to her lips and tapped. It was something that Viktor did quite often.

“All right. I think what we have here is what I would call an ‘alphabet problem.’ Your grammar isn’t perfect when you speak, probably because you missed a lot of formal instruction, but you are definitely past a Russian 1 class. I would probably put you in Russian 3. Come back to my office and we’ll work out a plan of attack.”

***

Yuuri glanced at the time on his laptop when he heard Phichit’s door open. He’d already gotten about three-fourths of the way through the video lecture from his Psychology 1 class at Kino. A minute later, there was a soft knock on his door, and there was Phichit, standing in his doorway, bleary-eyed and still half asleep.

Yuuri took one earbud out, but didn’t pause the lecture. “There is rice hot in the cooker and some smoked fish and eggs and some various sides. Or you can drink Celestino’s death-by-protein concoction; that’s still in the fridge. I’ll be done in about thirty minutes and we’ll head to the rink for morning practice.”

Phichit nodded, and Yuuri put his earbud back in and started taking notes again. He hadn’t missed much. It was an easy routine that they’d settled into since Phichit started classes at his high school a few weeks back. The situation was similar to what Yuuri had been in the previous year: a fancy private school and uniform, and teachers that wouldn’t get bent out of shape when the boy missed classes for international competitions.

Half an hour later, Yuuri signed out of the school portal and shut down his laptop. Vicchan was curled up at the foot of his bed, and Yuuri scratched the dog behind his ears on his way to the door before picking up his skate bag. “I’ll be back to take you for a walk after practice and before I head to campus, all right? Phichit-kun said he’ll take you out when he gets back, and then I’ll see you tonight, OK?”

Vicchan just looked up at him sleepily, woofed a bit, and then closed his eyes again. Yuuri smiled.

Phichit’s voice rang out from the hall. “I’ll be ready in two minutes, Yuuri!”

***

Yuuri stood in front of the poster in his bedroom, sounding out the handwritten Russian words he was actually reading for the first time. He’d made significant progress with Professor Pavlova these past few weeks -- or thought he had, because even after repeating the words over and over until they
sounded right, it still felt like he was getting something wrong. Because -- did Viktor really write that to Yuuri so many years ago? Did he actually think that?

And what was he going to do with that information?

***

Thankfully, he managed to make it through the afternoon’s practice with only a minimum of distraction. Standing at the boards, Celestino seemed genuinely pleased.

“It's looking much better, Yuuri! Your transitions aren't as stiff, and those triples are all looking better. I think you're just about ready for Nebelhorn!”

Yuuri glanced at his coach as he finished his short program runthrough. It was the first true compliment without a “but” he’d gotten from Celestino.

One more week and he'd be back in Germany.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes:

I have taken liberties with both Bloomfield Hills, MI and Ann Arbor and the area surrounding Detroit. Part of this is because I really don't want to sink to the level of using Google Street View for research purposes and partly because certain things are artistic license for sake of the plot or my own amusement. Hence, the miraculous little Russian store that doesn't exist anywhere but I neeeeyyeeeed. When I think about UofM I'm looking at old maps and internet research and what I know from personal experience about universities in cities (which is not UofM obv.) If you have insider knowledge, I'm more than happy to take it into account (to a point!)

No ABO is not a real frat. Yes, I picked it as the frat because of the prolific amount of ABO fic in yoi fandom and it made me laugh. As for the ABO member I'm sure you all hate already... I will remind you that I said that Yuuri was going to have TWO relationships pre-Viktor... Just saying... And yes, he is very much a DUDE, BRO.

End Notes

If you're interested in sneak peeks and teasers or info about the music and sometimes costumes of Bear Your Soul on the Ice, you can find it at my tumblr

Timeline (with ages!)
Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!