Love in Exile

by MartyMuses

Summary

Once a well know ballet dancer in St. Petersburg, Victor Nikiforov finds himself exiled to Sakhalin Island as a political convict in 1881. As a man sentenced to katorga he will never return to European Russia or his life on the stage. Known as the "Edge of the World," his life on Sakhalin could not be further from the life he once knew. Strange circumstances lead his path to cross that of a young Japanese man, one of the very few still living on the island. Katsuki Yuuri leads a life of exile of a different kind, one that is largely self-imposed. Drawn to each other, despite their differences, something slowly begins to grow between them. When a narrowly avoided tragedy leaves them stranded together for a long, cold Sakhalin winter, they are challenged to face what their relationship really means, and what future it could possibly have.

Notes

Author's Note: Hi! Welcome to my obscure historical AU for Yuri!!! On Ice. It has been a very long time since I’ve been inspired to write fanfiction, a very long time since I have loved something the way I love YOI.

I’m a huge lover of history and love a challenge when writing. So as the idea to write a fic for this show slowly crept up on me, I couldn’t help but gravitate towards a historical AU setting. I’ve been intrigued by Sakhalin Island and it’s unusual history of overlapping Russian and Japanese influence since I studied East Asian History in college, so choosing Sakhalin as the backdrop for a historical setting was exciting and fun for me. I’ve put a lot of time into researching for this fic - again I’m a bit of a history nerd, so accuracy and believability are
very important to me, and I never halfass anything, especially my writing.

I’ve tried in integrate the historical aspects into the story naturally, but I will provide some historical notes at the end of each chapter for those readers who would like to know more. Also, please feel free to drop by or follow the tumblr blog I have created for this fic, where I’m collecting a lot of my research notes, will post extra information, update announcements, and will be happy to answer questions: martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com

So please enjoy the story! As always, feedback and support is appreciated!
Part 1: Victor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I have seen Ceylon, which is paradise, and Sakhalin, which is hell.”

- Anton Chekhov, circa 1890

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Autumn 1888 - V.N.

“That’s three times now I was certain I was going to die. You know, it’s funny, I don’t think most people consider the possibility of a bear playing a part in their death. Though this is Russia, so perhaps more people should. We have lots of bears. Also tigers - if you are in Siberia. I didn’t see any when I was there, but the men in the etapes told stories. About tigers.”

I wait, but there is only silence in the small room. I turn my head to look at him, but he isn’t looking at me. He’s looking studiously down at his low, Japanese style desk, feet tucked under him and crossed at the soles. It amuses me that I can see them so perfectly folded under his bottom even in profile. I wonder what he is writing. I watch him carefully move the brush across the page as he holds back the sleeve of his yukata. I still think it looks like a dressing gown.

“Am I boring you?” I ask, hoping he will say no.

“No,” he says. “You were talking about tigers.”

I smile, pleased he’s been paying attention. “Only that, being a Russian, one ought to consider the potential part a tiger might play in one’s death.”

“There are no tigers here, Mr. Nikiforov.” His accent makes it difficult to know if he is amused or irritated or neither.

“No, but there are in Siberia.”

He pauses then, straightening, setting his calligraphy brush aside. His movements - like the movements of most Japanese I have met - are always graceful and economical. In a way they remind me of the ballet, and for a moment I ache with homesickness. He turns towards me, somehow able to keep his legs folded beneath him as he pivots. He cocks his head as he looks at me, the rims of his spectacles catch the light of the lamp. He folds his hands in his lap. And I think - not for the first time - that I am falling hopelessly in love with him.

“But we’re not in Siberia. We are on Sakhalin,” he says, and now I see the quirk at the corner of his mouth and I know he is amused.

“We are,” I agree with a sigh.

His expression softens and he looks down, gaze averted from mine. There is something there, like sadness or loneliness. “And you wish you were not. You would rather be in Siberia?”

I study him for a moment, and there is quiet in the room again. Quiet unlike anything I have ever heard anywhere else. I think I can hear the snow falling. “No,” I say after a moment. “You are not in Siberia.”
He raises his head, face red with a blush that is beautiful. “That-” he stammers, “that is a ridiculous statement! You’re only saying so because if you had been in Siberia and attacked by a tiger I wouldn’t have been there to take care of you and you probably would have died.”

I laugh at that, and at him. His wide eyes, his red face, his flustered affect. But the laughing hurts and I wince and groan before recovering myself with a ragged breath. “You’re right, probably.”

He stands with a huff. “Luckily for you this is Sakhalin and it was a bear and I am here.”

“Yes, lucky for me.” I chuckle as I watch him stand and walk around the sunken fireplace. An irori he calls it. I like watching his socked feet on the woven floor mats. “What are you doing?”

“Heating some water to make tea and hope it puts you back to sleep.”

I smirk faintly, watching him pull the lever that lowers the kettle over the fireplace. Then he opens the sliding wooden door to the balcony, which lets in a blast of cold air, though I barely feel it under the thick blankets draped over me. “So I was boring you.”

“No,” he says again, coming back inside with a pot full of snow. He kneels beside the irori, rubbing his hands together before adding coal from a nearby basket. He puts the pot of snow into the coals. “I just think you need to rest. The doctor said you can’t possibly make the trip back to Korsakovsk Post until your leg can bear your weight and your ribs have mended enough for the ride back in a sled over snow.”

He bustles around, getting up to go to the shelves, getting this and that. I think he is also making rice.

“And if the winter goes on too long the snow will become too much even for a sled. Then you are stuck here until spring, or until you can walk back by yourself, Mr. Nikiforov.”

Sometimes I think he just likes saying my name.

“I don’t think I would mind that, Katsuki-san,” I say with an impish smile.

He snorts rather abruptly and then starts to laugh, waving his hand at me as he hovers over the irori. “Please don’t. It sounds ridiculous when you say my name like that.”

“Then you should teach me proper Japanese,” I answer matter of factly.

There’s a moment of quiet again. “No,” he says finally. “No, there really wouldn’t be much point. All the Japanese in Kusun-Kotan speak Russian.”

“I could speak it with you.” My voice softens. There is another moment of quiet.

“No... no.” His voice seems like it’s carrying something heavy. “You should close your eyes. I’ll have some tea and rice for you soon.”

I fall silent then, but I don’t close my eyes. I watch him from the futon. My leg aches terribly and the crude cast around it is heavy and uncomfortable. I feel hot and itchy under my bandages. I wonder if I will ever dance again.

I watch him, falling in love with every economical movement of his body.

By all rights I should be miserable. My body broken, left to be cared for like an invalid. I should hate my circumstances: lying on this futon day in and out, the close, ever present companionship of
this young man into whose care I was left.

He must resent me, and I ought to resent his resentment. And yet he accepted my care as if it was the most natural thing in the world, with a bow and murmured words of acquiescence. He has never made any complaint other than telling me to go back to sleep or get more rest. Even when I wake him in the night, crying out in fevered pain that wrenches me from sleep, he doesn’t complain. He rises quietly from the futon next to mine. Checks my forehead for fever. Queries me quietly in the darkness. Inspects my bandages for bleeding. Brings me water and a cool or warm towel for my head. And then waits until I fall asleep again.

I should be ashamed to be cared for like this.

I should be ashamed and miserable.

But I’m not. Lying here, watching him, knowing he will sleep beside me tonight and be there if I wake; that we will spend tomorrow together while he writes or bustles about, tidying up for lodgers that are never coming, while I blather pointlessly about tigers and bears... I am happy. Happier than I have any right to be, and happier, maybe, than I have ever been.

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St. Petersburg, Russia, 1881 - V.N.

When I was a young man I was foolish. I think that can be unilaterally said of young men. But in my case I was more foolish than most, an unfortunate side effect of my station in life.

My family was wealthy, and somewhere in the low middle of the aristocratic pecking order. We had a big house near the water and my mother and father threw parties there. They were lavish and anyone who was anyone in St. Petersburg usually turned up. So I had an easy childhood, fawned over by my mother’s friends. I looked more like a girl when I was little, and I was always dressed up and paraded around for the parties. When I was about six or seven, recognizing my boredom and in an effort to keep me from the foibles of most bored young boys, my mother enrolled me in the school of the Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg.

I excelled at ballet. I have no false modesty about my abilities as a dancer. I premiered on the Mariinsky stage at only fourteen. I was beautiful and talented and quickly gained both popularity and fame. Vitya they called me as they threw flowers on the stage. At parties I would dance in my bare feet, drunk and happy. Sometimes I would dance the women’s parts, to the raucous amusement of our party guests. I drew the attention of lovers early, both men and women. Though I learned quickly enough where my preference lay.

Because I danced and was a member of the ballet I did not have to go to University, even though I thought it might be fun. My parents encouraged me to focus on my career, on my notoriety. They enjoyed it at least as much as I did. But to me dancing wasn’t work, despite how much time and effort I put into it. And so there was always a somewhat unfulfilled, idle feeling about my life at that age.

Young men grow restless easily.

It was at one of those upper crust parties that I met my first Narodniki. He had a bored, superior air about him that I couldn’t help but be attracted to. People were always fawning over me, but his eyes barely even looked at me. I learned from a friend he was a Polish noble enrolled at the Polytechnic, and I honestly thought that was rather boring. I might not have approached him at all had I not overheard a young woman call him - in all seriousness - Kotik, “Kitten,” like that was his name. It
sounded like a pet name a lover uses, but that’s not how she said it.

“Kitten, is it?” I asked with a laugh, approaching him, drink in hand. “Is she your lover then?” I knew she wasn’t, but I asked anyway.

His eyes moved over me finally. He had a stern set to his mouth and dark brows and dark hair, but there was a fineness about his features. Due to his nobility, I suppose. After a moment he turned towards me. “No. It’s just a nickname.”

I eyed him with what I fancied was a conspiratorial gaze. I was already drunk. “I see. You don’t find that embarrassing? Being called Kitten?”

“No, not at all. It’s something only my friends call me,” he answered coolly.

“Can I call you Kitten?” I asked, my lips curling at the corners. I saw then that spark of grudging interest in his eyes that told me I could have him.

He stared at me for a long moment and then smirked suddenly, chuckling. “No, I think you’d better not. For now anyway.” He held out his hand. “Ignacy Hryniewiecki.”

His hand was warm in mine and considerably solid, though still soft like the hands of the aristocracy always are. “Victor Nikiforov.”

“Ah. The dancer. I’ve heard your name, but didn’t put it to your face,” he said with a faint, returning coolness. “I don’t go to the ballet, or really patronize any of the arts unless it is the work of the people.”

My brows raised at that. “The people? I’m not a person?”

“You are not a narodnik, no. One of the common people. The peasantry. That’s what I mean. Poetry. Folk art. That kind of thing. Things with real Russian spirit. I have no patience for the ‘arts’ that serve no purpose other than to amuse the bourgeoisie.”

I just nodded. “I see. Ballet is... one of those arts?”

This innocent enough question lead to my first lecture on the philosophies of the Narodniki, the “Populists.” One of many social and revolutionary movements within Russia that made lofty the virtues of the common peasant, and called for the denunciation of the upper classes. I can’t say that I was particularly interested in the plight of the common man, their values, or the state of oppressive Tsarist rule. But I was enamored with Ignacy Hryniewiecki. And every word he said was like the poetry of the people he loved so much.

Eventually I, too, would call him “Kitten,” which was the name he was called in Narodnaya Volya, the People’s Will. Usually I would murmur it in his ear when we were done fucking in one of my family’s many beds. Because of Ignacy and my restlessness, I was easily pulled into the seemingly harmless world of these socialist idealists. I was a fringe member of the People’s Will at best. Usually just showing up to meetings for Ignacy’s benefit so I could drag him off with me after.

Our trysts weren’t really intended to mean anything, I still had other lovers and I think he found my sexual appetite rather un-populist. My bourgeoisie hedonism seemed to irritate him, and I would just laugh at his serious face. But I think - I know - along the way we developed an earnest tenderness for one another. It wasn’t love. I didn’t love Ignacy, but I cared for him. About him.

So I was happy when he asked me to walk with him through the city one Sunday morning.
“Tomorrow,” he said when I came to call on him Saturday evening. “Come on a walk with me in the morning. There’s something I want to show you.”

I didn’t usually like going out early on Sunday, and had planned to get quite drunk that night. But there was an odd earnestness about him. Something almost desperate for me to say yes, and so I did, happy to be wanted by him.

It was March, so technically spring, though in all truth March is still winter in St. Petersburg. It was cold and the streets were slushy from cart wheels and horses and people walking. We walked along the Catherine Canal, and I couldn’t help but think that Kitten was oddly tense and alert. We hardly talked at all and when I spoke to him he answered only with grunts or single words.

Then suddenly he took me by the shoulders and pressed me against the stone railing overlooking the canal. He kissed me hard and then said simply, “Stay here, Vitya,” before hurrying off down the crowded street.

Blinking after him I did as I was told, thinking he meant to bring something back for me. I enjoyed surprises. I ignored the stares of people who’d seen us kissing, and waited a few long minutes before the sound of clopping hooves and heavy wagon wheels drew my attention. Coming over the bridge was what could only be a royal convoy. The big, black carriage of the Tsar was impressive and foreboding, and sad somehow.

I straightened up to show my respect when suddenly an explosion ripped the air apart.

There was screaming and confusion and the cart upended. I covered my ears, sucking in a terrified breath as I scanned the crowd for Ignacy. I saw him, and to my horror he was standing close to the procession. The Tsar had stumbled out of his damaged carriage, unhurt, but obviously rattled. I breathed a sigh of relief.

And then my Kitten yelled, “It’s too early to thank God!” and threw something at the Tsar. There was another explosion and both the Tsar and Ignacy were engulfed in it. There was just more screaming and panic. People fled from the bridge and the narrow canal street, shoving one another.

I also ran. Perhaps that might seem cowardly, that I ought to have gone to Ignacy, to see if he was alright. And maybe if I had truly loved him I would have. But I didn’t. My lover had - in all likelihood - just killed the Tsar of the Russian Empire. I wanted to be nowhere near him.

I ran all the way home and didn’t leave for several days. At first I thought everything might be alright. The news of the assassination was everywhere, and everyone knew that the Tsar’s police force was rounding up all of the members of the People’s Will that they could find. But surely that didn’t mean me!

I hadn’t believed in any of their silly claptrap. I’d only wanted Ignacy’s attention. Certainly it had been fun to play at being the revolutionary, but I’d never actually wanted to do anything revolutionary.

Of course they came for me. I was easily recognized on the streets of St. Petersburg, and plenty of eyes had fallen on me when Ignacy had kissed me in public like that. The police were offering rewards for information on members who might have been involved in the assassination. I’d been there. They’d seen me with Ignacy, the man who’d killed the Tsar, only a few minutes before he threw the bomb. Of course I was involved with the People’s Will. What other explanation could there be?

My mother shrieked when they drug me out of the house. My father blustered and was for once in
his life at a loss for words. Had I told them sooner they might have gotten me out of the city. Might have hidden me, but I hadn’t really believed I would be accused of participating in an act of revolutionary violence, let alone treason and assassination.

They held those of us they’d rounded up together in a miserable prison for weeks, which turned into months as they questioned us and other witnesses. We, the People’s Will, waited for our trials.

Waiting in those prisons was the first time I was sure I was going to die.

But when the trials finally came they were over quickly enough with little care or attention paid to who was really involved in what. We were all associated with the assassins. So we were all - to some degree - guilty of political dissent. Those directly involved in the assassination plot were hanged. Perhaps it was my parents’ influence or money, or even my own popularity that ensured I did not. Or perhaps they actually believed my testimony and saw that I had done little wrong other than make very bad choices about my friends.

No, I wasn’t hanged. Instead I was sentenced to *katorga*, penal exile, sent away from European Russia, never to return.

I was glad I wasn’t going to die. But when I was told I was being sent to Sakhalin, I thought it might have been better if I did.

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Autumn 1888 - V.N.*

I’m awoken by the sound of raised voices, both of which are familiar and dear to me. Blinking blearily towards the sliding door that leads to the vestibule, I push up on my elbows. Immediately my ribs protest and I gasp softly in pain, but I don’t lower myself back down onto the futon. The heater table laid over me makes it difficult to sit up any further.

Katsuki-san - or Yuuri as I sometimes call him - calls it an *oki-gotatsu*. It’s ingenious and I think perhaps one of the best ideas the Japanese has to export: a low square table attached to which is a thick blanket on all sides. Beneath you can set a coal burner or hang it from the underside of the table. This way you can stay quite warm even in the coldest weather just by staying under the blanket.

Of course you have to be careful not to upend the coal burner. Which, despite much preemptive worrying from Katsuki-san, I have not managed to do yet. Between the *oki-gotatsu* and the ever burning *irori* I have yet to be cold here despite the miserable season.

The door flies open with a loud, sharp crack of wood on wood, and my darling little brother is standing there. Face red, hair wild, green eyes shining with anger, but also concern. He is adorable.

“Yuri?” I try to sit up a little more and wince.

“What is this about you being mauled by a bear?!” He is shouting and I can see Katsuki-san behind him, frantically grasping for the back of his wool coat.

“Please, take your boots off!” He’s tugging on Yuri, trying to pull him back onto the lower dirt floor of the vestibule.

“Huh?” My little brother can make any sound a snarl. Lip curling, he stares with unabashed derision at the poor Japanese man who has obviously been hit by Yuri like an unexpected storm. “What the fuck do my shoes have to do with anything? I’ve come to see my brother. Now let go of me, you
“Yuri!” My voice is like a whip crack. “Do not be rude to Mr. Katsuki. Apologize and take off your boots.”

Yuri balks and then flushes and flusters. He deflates and turns around abruptly, shoving Katsuki-san’s hand away as he sits and starts to unlace his boots. “Sorry,” he grunts.

I watch them both, Yuuri hovering, obviously anxious as he waits for Yuri to take off his boots, and then following him into the room, looking at me nervously. “Mr. Nikiforov you should lie back down.”

I smile softly at him. “I told you to call me Victor.”

He flusters at that and then mumbles something I can’t hear. Or maybe it was in Japanese. Either way it is almost more adorable than Yuri.

“Why would you want to lie down? You look like an invalid,” Yuri snaps, sitting down behind me and abruptly putting his hands on my shoulders, pushing me forward to force me to sit up further.

My cast-bound leg jerks beneath the low table and my ribs scream in pain. I gasp. A cold sweat comes to my face. My hand windmills, seeking something to steady myself on, and it slaps loudly against the low table as my knuckles go white.

Yuuri is at my side immediately. “What are you doing?!” he cries, physically shoving Yuri aside. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him sound angry before. It’s an exciting new experience despite my pain.

His arms cradle me as I lean back, taking pressure off my ribs.

“I’m...I’m sorry, Vitya,” Yuri gasps quietly, looking at me with wide, scared eyes. “I thought it was only... they only said something about your leg. I didn’t think it would hurt you.”

I smile at him, though I know it must look strained. There is still pain tight on my face. “It’s alright, Yuratchka. You just need to slow down. I’m always telling you so.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles again, and I can tell he is about to cry.

“Yuri?” Katsuki-san’s voice is infinitely softer and kinder than the one he had used only a moment before. “Will you help me make your brother comfortable? See that cushion with the back there?”

Yuuri glances cautiously at the strange cushion chair near the little desk Katsuki-san writes at sometimes. “You mean that thing?”

“Come, sit under the oki-gotatsu with your brother,” he says gesturing to Yuri. “I’ll... give you some privacy and then make some tea and something to eat.”

Yuuri gawps at Kastuki-san sullenly as he lowers the pot over the irori, green eyes following him suspiciously until he shows himself out the way they both came in. Yuuri bows and shuts the sliding
door to the vestibule much more quietly than my little brother had opened it. Slowly Yuri’s eyes return to me, and he sniffs once as he wriggles closer and under the blanket. I chuckle at the look of surprised delight that crosses his face at the warmth he finds there.

“Well at least he is keeping you warm,” he grumbles.

I smirk faintly. Katsuki-san is doing much more for me than that.

“Did you come all the way from Korsakovsk by yourself? On foot?” I ask.

“Of course,” he sits up haughtily. “As soon as they came back and told me what happened and I got that letter from him,” he tosses a disdainful look towards the door, “I wanted to come. But of course I couldn’t because of work and then the snows.” He wilts a little. “I tried to come with the doctor last week, but I couldn’t. There was too much work and they sent me to Alexandrovsk Post to help with a cargo shipment from Nikolaevesk.” He looks at me almost pleadingly. “I came as soon as I could.”

“I know.” I smile at him softly. “You didn’t have to come at all, Yuratchka.” My hand seeks his under the warm blanket, and he grips it tightly, like it is a lifeline, as he has done many times in our years together.

“Yes, I did!” He hisses, and now he does start to cry suddenly. “I was so worried. I couldn’t believe they just left you here to be cared for by some stranger some... some Japanese! Not even a Russian.”

I purse my lips and squeeze his hand. “Yuri, listen to me. Mr. Katsuki has been very kind and very caring. He has probably saved my life, and he is my dear friend now. Please be respectful of him, and know that I am being very well cared for.”

He stares at me in silence for a moment, wearing the expression he knows I cannot read through. Then he says bluntly, “So did you really get mauled by a bear?”

“I laugh softly, amused by the absurdity of the question. “Well... Not exactly. There was a bear, and I’m sure it would have loved to maul me, but no, it didn’t actually get the chance.”

“So then what happened?” he asks, a look of mild irritation coming over his pretty face.

I smirk and sigh. “It was the horse. I was riding the road outside of Korsakovsk--” I leave out the part where I was doing so only to visit Katsuki-san at the minshuku, “--and the bear came out onto the road. It’s very late in the year for one to be awake, so something must have disturbed it in its den, or perhaps it hadn’t eaten enough and needed to find more food.” I shrug and sigh at the inevitability of the end of my tale. “Whatever the reason there was a bear. It stood up on its hind legs and then made as if to charge. I pulled out my revolver to fire a shot to scare it, but I also scared the horse, which was already very skittish. He reared and his hooves slipped on the icy trail and we went over together. I tried to jump clear, but my foot was caught in the stirrup.”

I close my eyes, remembering the heart wrenching feeling as the horse lost its footing. The split second I thought I might escape unharmed, and the moment I knew the horse was going to land on me. The cold sweat returns and my brows crease for a moment as I relive the whole thing and then take a deep breath.

“Well, the horse landed on me, of course. My entire left leg was caught under it. It’s been broken pretty badly, but the doctor said it should heal as he was able to set the bones and he didn’t think any of them were crushed.” I smirk faintly. “Then to add insult to injury, the damn beast stepped on me and kicked me in the ribs as it was struggling to get up. At least two are broken, according to the doctor.”
I give Yuri another faint smile. “That’s why I can’t sit up very well yet.”

Yuri wilts a little at that. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I... I’m sorry.”

I squeeze his hand. “It’s alright. I’m fine now.”

We sit in silence for a few long moments and I wonder what Yuri is turning over in his head. He always prefers time to think on his own. After a moment his fingers move in mine.

“How long until you’re better?” he asks quietly.

“I don’t know. The doctor thinks I probably won’t be able to travel back to Korsakovsk until the spring. The snows will be too heavy once real winter sets in and a sled ride will likely be too rough.”

He looks at me intensely, green eyes blazing. “Then I want to stay here with you and the Jap.”

I blink, furrowing my brows. “Yuri... You can’t just...” I sigh. “I’m already imposing on him more terribly than anyone has a right to. I’m completely in his care, he cannot be asked to take care of you, too.”

He bristles visibly. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me! If anything I would be helping him. I can help take care of you. Help you get strong again so we can go back to Korsakovsk together.”

His fingers tighten in mine again. “You took care of me all these years. I should be doing the same now. When you need me, I should be here.”

I look at him for a long moment, and I feel a sad heaviness in my chest seeing how much he has grown. At 15 my Yuratchka is certainly not a child. He has had a harder life than anyone I know, and living in a penal colony that is saying something.

I love him terribly. Sometimes it frightens me how much, and I think I must know the fear and love of a parent. Though he is not my child and not even truly my brother, somehow he is still mine. He is in my bone and my blood. I touch his cheek. “What about work? We need money. The house? Food? The gardens? The horse? We can’t just expect Mr. Katsuki to feed and house us both out of his own pocket because he had the misfortune of finding me.”

His expression becomes determined and I can tell he has prepared arguments for me. “Work will practically stop completely once winter and the heavy snows come, so no one will miss me. We have money saved and we can rent the house back to the Governor. He can let it to convicts or visitors or officials, or whoever. Then we’ll be getting some money and keeping squatters out will be his responsibility.” He leans forward, his expression imploring and eager. “And I will be helpful and respectful to Mr. Katsuki. I promise. I will help with chores or shoveling snow or whatever he wants. Please, Vitya... please. Don’t... don’t leave me alone in Korsakovsk all winter.”

That attacks my heart, as I’m sure he knew it would. Not just because I do not want him to be alone and lonely, but because there could be real danger in doing so. We live in a penal colony with convicts of all types: murderers, rapists, thieves, pedophiles. Yuri, even at his wildest, is beautiful. He is slender and slight with the face of an angel. I have protected him as long as I have known him from scum who would possibly harm him. To leave him alone is also to take away that protection. And the winter makes bored and desperate men of many.

“Yuri...” I says, hesitantly. The door slides back again before I can say more and Katsuki-san comes back with a tray with tea cups and bowls for soup. He pours hot water from the kettle over the *irori* into a tea pot and then into each of the soup bowls, stirring each for a few moments with a pair of chopsticks.
“I’m sorry. It’s not much,” he says, setting the tray on the oki-gotatsu.

“It’s more than enough,” I say.

“What is this?” says Yuri, staring into one of the bowls of soup. He sniffs at it cautiously.

“It’s miso soup,” Kastuki-san says, and I can tell there is a bit of fraying at the edges of his voice.

“No. Soup has potatoes in it.” Yuri sits back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Not Japanese soup.” Katsuki-san moves closer to me. He’s used to helping me eat. I can tell from the expression on Yuri’s face that he is displeased by the familiarity with which Katsuki-san brings the bowl of soup to my lips and steadies my head with his hand.

I hold my breath and wait for the moment I feel his fingertips curl ever so slightly at the nape of my neck.

Siberia, Russia, Spring 1882 - V.N.

In 1881 there were two ways to get to Sakhalin Island. The first was overland through Siberia along the Amur Cart Road. The second was via ship from the Black Sea and out into the Indian Ocean and around Asia. I’ve heard the horror stories of both, and lived the horror of one. When I learned I was to be marched overland with a group of convicts all headed into katorga in Siberia and beyond, I wished for a ship’s passage. Later, when I heard what it was like on those ships, I was glad I was able to see Siberia on foot.

They waited until spring, nearly a year after the assassination of the Tsar at the hands of my Kitten, before they began our march. This allowed for two things:

The first was for the convicts and the families of convicts, who had chosen to follow them into katorga, to make arrangements for the long trip and their even longer life in exile. Homes, furniture, belongings all had to be sold. Trunks with warm clothes and enough food and money had to be packed. Horses or mules sometimes had to be purchased.

The second was for ensuring we would spend only one winter crossing Siberia, a trip that generally took eighteen or more months on foot. If we left in early spring we were likely to reach Sakhalin by late summer the following year.

Because of my status as a political convict - rather than a criminal one - and my family’s position and money, I was allowed a full trunk of my own into which were packed mostly warm clothes, a couple pictures of my parents, some of my favorite books, and a good amount of gold and silver bullion, which my mother was clever enough to have hidden in a false panel in the bottom. A good thing, too, as the guards made no secret of searching the convicts’ belongings and stealing whatever was found to be valuable.

The political exiles were lucky in that we were not forced to walk fettered to one another as the criminal exiles were. Those poor and destitute men were shackled together 8 to 10 at a time and forced to march like this for hours on end throughout the day and often into the night if we were not making good time. And making good time was nearly always impossible, because shackled men do not move very swiftly. The fetters and the cold caused no end of anguish, and not just for those who had to experience it, but for those - like me - who had to witness it.

I thought I had seen and known suffering in the prison in St. Petersburg, but at that time I was still an
utterly naive child when it came to the ways a man can suffer.

The men shackled together marched first along the road, with those like me who were not shackled but still kept under guard marching next. Behind followed a sad and bedraggled collection of wives, husbands, children, and even elderly parents who had all chosen to follow their condemned family member into exile. I wondered then what kind of love or dependence could have inspired anyone to willingly follow another down this road.

At night we would stop at *étapes*, way stations set along the road. They were neither comfortable nor clean nor even safe. Here murderers, rapists, thieves and charlatans slept in the same cramped rooms as the wives and children of their compatriots. Violence was frequent, as was the abuse of the aforementioned women and children.

It was at one of these étapes some time into our march that I first noticed Yuri Plisetsky and his grandfather. The old man had apparently been growing sicker as the march went on and his coughs and ragged breathing were a matter of concern among the guards. Fear of tuberculosis was strong, and the old man was separated from the rest of the group by force so as to ensure it would not spread among the sleepers in close quarters.

Exhausted and despondent as I was, I hardly paid attention, even when I heard a young boy’s cries for his grandfather. Such cries were common. It wasn’t until they took on a different quality, one of utter terror that I looked up from my disgusting meal of cereal gruel and potatoes. The boy was being drug into a dark corner by two filthy men with hard, dark eyes. No one else seemed to notice, or else they were simply too engulfed in their own misery to care.

Almost without realizing, I was up and after them, my porridge forgotten. I was no fighter, but ballet had made my body strong and fast. I suffered a split lip and a black eye, but had given at least one bloody nose by the time the guards realized what we were about and came to break up our fight. When we were pushed apart I took the boy with me. The hard eyed men glared at me, their sport ruined, but they couldn’t say anything about it with the guards close at hand.

We returned to my spot along the wall, which someone grudgingly gave up when they saw me return. The boy - who I admit I had thought a girl at first - was shivering and crying, obviously frightened out of his mind. I didn’t have much experience with children, but I found it wasn’t so difficult to anticipate what he needed.

“It’s alright, little one. Those men won’t hurt you now,” I said soothingly, petting his dirty blond hair back from huge, wet, green eyes. “Where are your parents?”

“They took grandpa away,” he wailed, sniffling.

“Oh.” It was all I could think to say, as I didn’t know if ‘took him away’ indicated that he’d died or that something else had happened. He started to cry softly and I stroked his hair again. “My name is Victor. Would you like to stay with me until your grandpa comes back?”

For a long moment the boy stared at me owlishly and then said bluntly. “Will you try to touch me?”

Taken aback, I couldn’t help but bark a laugh, but then shook my head. “No. No, I will not.”

“Grandpa said there are bad men that will try to touch me. You aren’t a bad man?” his eyes narrowed on me, keenly appraising for such a young boy. I wondered what his life had been like up until now.

I smiled softly, feeling a twinge of sadness even as I did. “No,” I said. “I’m not a bad man. Just a
That night, and most nights after, Yuri slept curled against my chest and tucked inside my jacket. The next day his grandfather - in respect of his ill health - was released from the shackled chain gang and made to come march with the political exiles. Yuri, not having any other family to march with, stayed with us.

We got to know each other well, and together the old man and I shared the burden of looking after the wild young boy. When Yuri got too tired to walk or his feet bled from blisters or cold or damp, I would carry him on my back or on my shoulders. In the etapes the three of us would always sleep together, the old man and I making a shield of our bodies to keep Yuri safe from the unsavory characters we were forced to live with.

Being together made the march more tolerable. I would tell them of my life in St. Petersburg, the parties my mother threw, the ballets I had danced in, the wondrous sights of the city. They would tell me about their farm, the scrubbed white walls, the vegetable garden and the chickens they kept. They told me how Yuri’s parents had died of tuberculosis, the old man giving me a look that told me he knew his own fate was to be the same. We never talked about what we had done to be convicted of katorga.

And then, one morning in winter, the old man could not rise from the hard, cold boards of the etape. I knelt close to his side and told him not to worry, that he could die in peace, that I would care for his grandson. He died with a smile on his face, stroking Yuri’s cheek with gnarled, near frost-bitten fingers. Yuri cried, and so did I, but we had to keep moving.

I carried him all that day. And sang to him all that night. And that is how he became my little brother, my bone and my blood. My Yuratchka.

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Kosakovsk Post and Kusun-Kotan were very real places on Sakhalin Island during this time. In fact Kosakovsk Post still exists today as the town of Korsakov. It is located at the very south of Sakhalin Island along the shore of the Aniva Bay. A search on Google Maps will reveal it to you.

2. Nardoniki - Long before the Russian Revolution in 1917, which dismantled the Tsarist autocracy and eventually lead to the rise of the communist Soviet Union, Russia was full of socialist ideals and smaller scale revolutionary activities aimed at elevating "the people" and stripping the aristocracy of its power. Various separate groups and movements sprung up from time to time, but as a whole, individuals who espoused socialist beliefs were referred to as "nadrodniki," or populists.

3. Ignacy Hryniewiecki was a real person (I couldn't have made his name up if I tried) who really assassinated Tsar Alexander II with a bomb. His nickname in the Narodnaya Volya really was Kotik, or "Kitten." As to his sexuality or habits of taking lovers, I have no historical knowledge. His relationship here with Victor is purely a fictional devise for this story.

4. Oki-gotatsu: The predecessors of today's electric "kotatsu" came into use during the
Edo period (1603 - 1868) in Japan, and were originally stationary and placed over a recessed grate filled with charcoal. The oki-gotatsu, a portable version, utilized charcoal burners or charcoal placed in clay jars.

5. minshuku: a minshuku is a traditional Japanese inn, similar to a ryokan in form and function, the difference generally being grandeur and size. A minshuku is usually equated to a hostel and a ryokan with an inn. I use minshuku to describe Yuuri's inn, because I feel that a ryokan gave a much grander impression.

For more historical notes and information visit my tumblr blog dedicated to this fic: martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com
Part 2: Yuuri

Chapter Summary

Once a well known ballet dancer in St. Petersburg, Victor Nikiforov finds himself exiled to Sakhalin Island as a political convict in 1881. As a man sentenced to katorga he will never return to European Russia or his life on the stage. Known as the "Edge of the World," his life on Sakhalin could not be further from the life he once knew. Strange circumstances lead his path to cross that of a young Japanese man, one of the very few still living on the island. Katsuki Yuuri leads a life of exile of a different kind, one that is largely self-imposed. Drawn to each other, despite their differences, something slowly begins to grow between them. When a narrowly avoided tragedy leaves them stranded together for a long, cold Sakhalin winter, they are challenged to face what their relationship really means, and what future it could possibly have.

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Thanks to everyone who has taken an interest in this story! I've received some really sweet comments, and I'm really glad people are enjoying it.

This installment goes into more detail about the history of the island and the relations between Japan and Russia. In preparation for writing this story (and also just because I'm a history nerd) I read Anton Chekhov's "Sakhalin Island," which is a non-fictional account of his trip to Sakhalin in the early 1890s, when he went around to all of the Russian settlements and conducted something of a census, collecting peoples' personal stories and accounts of life on the island. I'll provide more information on this in the historical notes at the end of the chapter.

I'd also like to apologize that the majority of this installment has not been beta'd. My beta'er/bff has been very busy and is currently in Washington D.C. to participate in the women's march, and won't be back until next week and I didn't want to wait that long to post the next part. I read it over and edited it myself numerous times, but again I apologize for any typos or badly constructed sections I didn't catch myself.

Once again please leave questions or comments if you have any, or visit this story's tumblr blog (martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com) where I'll continue to post additional historical and research information, or my personal blog (martymuses.tumblr.com) where I mostly reblog stupid shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Autumn 1888 - Y.K.

I am selfish. I know this. I can’t help it. I’ve been alone for so long. Felt alone for so long.

And then he was here. And we were alone together.
I know that it’s wrong that it made me happy. I know he is suffering and in pain and probably hates everything about being here with me. About being away from his home and the people who are his countrymen. Everything about me and this place must seem so foreign to him. Even my accent is probably atrocious, even though he assures me all the time my Russian is perfect.

I’m sure he’d rather be in a bed and not lying on a futon on the floor. I’m sure he’d prefer a real stove to the oki-gotatsu. I’m sure he will prefer his little brother’s company to mine. He will be coming back soon. Today or tomorrow, probably. And then they will spend the winter alone together. And I will simply spend it alone once again.

I’ll have to prepare one of the empty rooms for myself and pull out another oki-gotatsu from the storage. I’m sure they will prefer for me not to be in this room with them all the time. Well, it’s no bother. Coal is one thing we have no shortage of here in Karafuto.

Will he be alright at night if I’m not there to help him back to sleep? I chew the inside of my lip absently.

“Yuuri?” the soft, lilting way he says my name jolts me. No one ever calls me by my given name in Kusun-Kotan. I have no family here and no close friends either. I’ve told him it’s kind of embarrassing, but he persists. I don’t think he knows the false sense of intimacy it creates between us.

I blink and look at him. I hardly realized I’d just been sitting and daydreaming under the oki-gotatsu. His brows are furrowed in a look that is either worry or pain. “Yes? I’m sorry. I was lost in thought. Can I get you something?”

There is movement under the blankets of the oki-gotatsu and I feel his fingers grasp my yukata. There is that sense of having my breath stolen. “Are you worried? About Yuuri coming here? I can still tell him to-”

“No! No, it’s fine,” I say, perhaps too eagerly, shaking my head. I have to right my spectacles. “It’s as he said. It will be better for you to have someone you can rely on here. And it will be less lonely for you.”

His fingers tighten on my yukata. “I am not lonely,” he says, his voice soft but firm. “And I know I can rely on you. I am more worried about it being easier for you.” A faint color brightens his pale face, and I think it makes him look a little younger. “You have had to suffer every indignity my condition imposes along with me.”

I’m blushing too. There have been many indignities over the past several weeks. For both of us.

“I haven’t minded,” I murmur softly, looking down at the top of the table. “I’m... happy, actually. To help you. It’s not as if I ever have any guests or real work to do.” I swallow, gazing at the grain of the wooden table, rather than at him. “Having you here... makes me feel useful. Even though I know it’s my fault all of this happened in the first place.”

More color comes to my face. I feel it burning my ears as I rub the back of my neck.

I feel him staring at me. I can always feel him when he watches me.

“Why do you say that?” he asks after a moment, and there is something veiled in his voice.

I glance at him, but his expression is disconcertingly unreadable. “Be-because I asked you to come and visit again. It was a selfish thing to ask. I know the road from Kosakovsk Post is not very good, especially this late into the year. It’s icy and bad for walking and worse for horses. I... shouldn’t have
He’s quiet again for a moment and then says wryly. “How do you know I was coming to see you?”

I roll my eyes and tsk, looking at him now. “Where else were you going on the road between Kosakovsk and Kusun-Kotan? To see the Consulate? Or maybe you were craving pork buns?”

His eyes light up and he pushes up on his elbows. “Do you have some?”

I laugh. “No! But I can get some tomorrow if you like.” I can’t help the softness that I feel when I smile at him. I wonder if it makes me have a stupid expression. “But you were coming here. Weren’t you?”

He smirks and blows his ash blond hair from his strange, blue eyes. “Yes. I was coming here. Not because you asked me to. Because I wanted to. I wanted to see you again.”

I shake my head, bemused. “Why?”

His gaze catches mine and for a long moment we are just staring at each other. He slowly pushes up further from his elbows to his hands. I see him grimace a little and I want to tell him to lie back down, but my mouth doesn’t open. I just stare at him.

“Do you really not know?” he asks, his voice soft.

I swallow and my heart thuds hard in my chest. Why is my mouth dry? I lick my lips to make it easier to talk and I swear his eyes flit to my mouth for a moment. “No,” I say, but the word is almost whispered.

“Can’t you guess?”

I swallow again. A cold, aching feeling settles in my chest. I can guess, and before I can stop myself I voice the words that speak my fears. “You pity me.”

It’s like my words strike him. He flinches and a look of confusion comes over his face. He gawps at me, and then strangely, he groans.

“Yuuuuuri,” he groans my name as if exasperated, deflating with a disgruntled chuckle as he lowers himself back down into the futon.

I gape and lean towards him, afraid he’s hurt himself somehow. “What? What’s wrong? Did you hurt your ribs sitting up?”

“Noooo,” he groans again and covers his eyes with one forearm. “You are so impossible. You are so... so bad at this.”

What am I bad at? What is this? What have I done?

“I’m... sorry,” is all I can think to say.

He chuckles faintly and then moves his arm enough to peek up at me with those blue eyes, which are now amused, but also... heavy looking. “I don’t pity you. Can’t you think of any other reason I would come?”

I stare back at him, but I really want to look away. It’s like his eyes are trying to strip all my skin off and see something underneath. “Um...” I worry my lower lip, playing for time to come up with something.
He sighs and smirks wryly. “Nevermind.” He looks away suddenly, turning his gaze towards the door leading to the porch. “Is it snowing outside?”

“Ah... yes. I think so. It was a little earlier.”

“Good!” He suddenly tosses back his blankets. “Help me up, please.”

I scramble to his side, helping to support him as he pushes up again. “Are -are you sure? Do you need to...go? I can bring the chamber pot.”

“No!” he snorts and then chuckles, “Well, maybe, but that’s not why. I just want to get up and watch the snow. The doctor said I should move around some, right? So I don’t get wasting sickness and sores and whatever.”

“Well... yes,” I answer reluctantly. I still don’t like him getting up too much. I worry about his ribs not being fully set. One of them might puncture a lung and then he would probably die and I would...

I feel a little woozy and we sway briefly as I help him awkwardly to his feet. He gasps as we catch ourselves.

“Are you alright, Yuuri?” he asks, looking a little startled. He is depending on me to keep him safe. To keep him from falling over. My face heats up in embarrassment.

“Yes, I just... forgot how heavy you are,” I say with a sly grin.

He snorts. “It’s the cast.” His tone is dry and I chuckle.

With his arm around my shoulder and my arm around his waist I know it’s wrong to feel so happy he is so close to me. When Yuri comes back he is to bring a crutch from the infirmary in Korsakovsk. That will make Victor’s life easier, but it will mean I won’t have much reason to be close to him like this anymore. I relish the moment, the warmth of his body, the solid feeling of him under the borrowed yukata he’s wearing. He smells a little sweaty, but also somehow wonderful.

Together we make our way across the tatami and out the sliding door to the porch. There are bark sandals there to step into and I help him with his bare foot. It’s cold, but also a little refreshing. The wind isn’t blowing hard, and in the soft evening colors of the setting sun the falling snow looks soft and peaceful.

“I could bring the oki-gotatsu out. If you like,” I say, glancing up at him.

His gaze is soft and beautiful as he looks out at the falling snow. “No,” he says after a moment. “It’s good for me to stand.” His hand tightens against my arm and I tighten my grip reflexively, afraid he is losing his balance.

He looks at me and our gaze locks again. Before I met Victor I didn’t know a man, that anything, could be so foreign and so beautiful.

“Besides,” he says softly, “if we stand like this I get to be close to you.”

I stare at him dumbly. I wonder what my face is doing, because his eyes flick over it for a moment before returning to mine.

“That’s why I came back. Because I wanted to be close to you.”
My chest is falling apart.

His finger strokes my cheek, beneath my chin. “Don’t you also wish to be close to me?”

I try to open my mouth, but I can’t just yet. Too much is happening inside me all at once. I have to take a moment, stare at him, breathe deeply, before I can finally manage, “Yes.”

I have never seen a man smile more beautifully. He tips his head towards mine, touching his cheek to my hair.

“Thank God,” I hear him sigh in relief.

_Sakhalin Island, The Far East, 1882 - Y.K._

There aren’t many people left now who were born in Karafuto, or Sakhalin as the Russians call it. In fact among the Japanese here in Kusun-Kotan there is only myself and a few very young children of the people who live here for the sake of the Consulate.

But it was different when I was growing up.

When I was growing up this place was called Oodomari, and it was a proper Japanese village that occupied what we currently call Kusun-Kotan and the settlement the Russians have dubbed Korsakovsk Post. People had been coming north to Karafuto for decades in order to make their fortune trading in the abundance of natural resources. Fish, lumber, furs, whales, seaweed: these were the things people came to Karafuto for. Those who could stand the harsh climate made good money at it, and there were small Japanese settlements and even military posts all over the southern part of the island and along the coast, especially along the Aniva Bay.

While we were settling the southern part of the island, the northern part of the island was being settled by the Russians. Our two empires came to an agreement sometime towards the middle of the century that allowed for mutual colonization and governance of the island with the rather informal agreement that the Russians would stay to the north and we would stay to the south.

Of course what exactly was “north” and “south” was never well defined and there was no official border. We often had Russian traders and workers coming through our settlements, and some even lived and worked with us in certain seasons. I’m sure the same was true in the other direction as well.

In fact in Oodomari we saw Russians so often that many of us picked up the Russian language even from a very young age. This was particularly encouraged in my family due to our business of running the _minshuku._

My family were not traders, but rather innkeepers in the traditional Japanese sense. With so many seasonal people and traders moving between settlements and trading posts along the roads, having places to stop and stay overnight or while in town on business was imperative.

My grandparents came here all the way from Kyushu with my father when he was a youth. They thought at first to make their fortune in trade, but found they had little aptitude for it and so established the _minshuku_ on the western outskirts of Oodomari. They worked very hard to make it as traditional as possible, wanting to create a true Japanese establishment even so far away from what was properly considered Japan.

It was here on the outskirts of Oodomari that I was born and here that I’ve lived my entire life,
helping my family run the minshuku. When we were younger my sister, Mari, and I played often with other children in the village. We played along the beaches and bluffs, collecting mussels and other mollusks to put into nabe. We played with Ainu children and their dogs, too, chasing one another up and down Oodomari’s streets when they came in from their villages to trade or work.

There was a school where we learned how to properly read, write, and speak and were taught the history of Japan. But we were wild, Karafuto children, and Japan, real Japan, seemed very far away to us even though on clear days you could stand on the bluffs and see all the distant shore of Hokkaido.

When I was about ten things suddenly changed. News came to us from the village officials that the Meiji Government had signed a new agreement with Russia, turning over the entirety of Karafuto to the Russians. We gained the Kurile Island in exchange, but to be truthful I have no idea where these islands are or who lives there or why we wanted them.

Almost overnight the villages emptied and the settlements disappeared. There were no more children for Mari and I to play with. The Ainu all but disappeared as well, retreating back to their villages, or leaving Karafuto altogether along with most of the Japanese.

Oodomari became Korsakovsk and Karafuto became Sakhalin.

A small Japanese presence remained in the form of the Consulate at Kusun-Kotan, through which all relations with the Russian Empire are maintained. What is left can hardly be called a village or even a settlement. All of the old Japanese buildings are gone for the most part, with only one or two exceptions, one of them being the minshuku. Even the name “Kusun-Kotan” isn’t Japanese, but rather the Ainu name for the valley we now occupy. The Consulate building, a large white, Western-style house, takes up most of the settlement. Around it are a small collection of other buildings. Some serve as private dwellings, others storehouses, and one is a shop run by an industrious family who provides Kusun-Kotan with Japanese goods and foodstuffs.

My family was one of those who were asked specifically by the Consulate to remain. They wished to maintain the minshuku, more as a symbol of Japanese presence and culture than out of any real necessity to have a place for people to stay. Though over the years a number of officials visiting from Japan and the odd trader have indeed been guests here.

Because staying meant we would have no real way of making any income the government officials agreed to pay us a good stipend and to take care of our basic supplies such as rations of rice and tea and dried fish. So it wasn’t such a bad deal, really. For several years we maintained a relatively easy and peaceful life.

Then my grandparents died and Mari came of marrying age. Of course there was no one left on Sakhalin for her to marry, so my parents took her back to Kyushu, hoping our extended family’s connections might make a suitable match. I remained to take care of the minshuku in their absence.

Only, they never came back.

My sister did find a husband, a fairly wealthy one at that, which surprised everybody since she was an absolute nobody from an utter backwater that wasn’t even technically part of the Japanese Empire any longer. But my sister was always very charismatic, even if she wasn’t a classical beauty.

My sister’s husband’s family owned several onsen, which are common in Kyushu, and one had just passed to him to manage. Because of their experience running the minshuku he was all too happy to offer my parents a permanent place in his home for their help with the management of his property.
All of this was explained to me in a letter that I received shortly after my seventeenth birthday. They’d been gone since the spring and it was then almost winter. In the letter they urged me to abandon the _minshuku_ and join them in Kyushu. They told me all this could be arranged with the Consulate, so I went to speak with them.

“So, that’s how thing are,” I said, feeling almost embarrassed, having shown the Consul the letter from my parents. “They’re very eager for me to join them in Kyushu, but... I don’t know what that will mean for the _minshuku._”

The Consul was a man named Suzuyama. He dressed only in Western clothes and had a very large and unusually thick mustache, which he also wore in a Western style, brushed out at the ends. He was very intimidating.

“Unfortunately if you leave, that will mean the _minshuku_ will have to be abandoned. There is no one else living in Kusun-Kotan who knows how to run it, and the expense of bringing someone over from the mainland would hardly be worth it.” He frowned, stroking the end of his mustache thoughtfully. “That would be very disappointing to us. The _minshuku_ is a real source of pride for the Consulate. You uphold the Japanese spirit of this outpost.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, I realize the Consulate feels that way, but without my family here...”

“Consider also that as one of the very few born in this region you have a unique and irreplaceable connection to this place. You are also one of the very few who learned Russian as a child, and to lose your knowledge of the local history would be terrible. You are uniquely positioned to be indispensable to the Consulate and to serve the Emperor in a truly admirable fashion.”

I couldn’t tell if he was pontificating or being serious. That made me more nervous and I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yes, I... uh... I can see your point, but I’m not sure I could manage the _minshuku_ on my own, you see.”

Suzuyama-san waved his hand dismissively and smiled at me rather too broadly through his mustache. “But you’ve already done so for the past six months or more. It’s not as if you have any guests to speak of. And we’ll continue to supply you with whatever you need and pay you a stipend as well. In fact I’d be willing to make you an official employee of the Consulate. They’ll be bringing in greenhorns now and then to serve as the officials here, and you would make an admirable tutor for them in local customs, history, and even in Russian. They’ll be school taught, of course, but that doesn’t always mean much when it comes down to actual application, especially for foreign languages.”

Being praised made me even more uncomfortable. “No, no. I don’t think my Russia is all that good.”

“Well, I think you are underestimating yourself,” Suzuyama-san said with a little bit of an indulgent, fatherly smile. Then he took a deep breath. “At any rate take a day or two to consider what I’ve told you. I really would consider it a great personal favor if you continued on here, Katsuki-san, and I think you would be doing your duty not only to the Emperor, but also to the place of your birth. I know it must be difficult to be apart from your family, but you’re a young man and it’s natural for young men to go out on their own at your age.”

I bowed and thanked the Consul for his input, and told him that I would think about it and come meet with him again in a few days. I then left with the distinct impression that my request for assistance was more or less being dismissed.

To be honest I had no great desire to leave Sakhalin, as much as I missed my family. I was born there. It was my home. Even if it was not Japan anymore, it was the place I wanted to be. I had only
been to Japan proper - if you can call Hokkaido properly Japan - a handful of times. It felt immense and foreign and inescapably busy, though I was told the port town we visited was considered quite small compared to the cities of the southern islands. I couldn’t imagine moving to such a place and leaving the wild beauty of my home behind.

So I remained, agreeing to continue to run the minshuku if the Consulate would continue to pay my stipend and provide me with supplies and additional work. I wrote to my family telling them my decision.

I received little resistance from them. They wrote that they missed me, but that they understood my desire to continue in the tradition of the family. They felt I was quite admirable, in fact, for my dedication to my duty and the Consulate.

This response was... not what I had expected, and it was incredibly depressing for me. I’d thought they’d make some fuss, try to convince me again to come to Kyushu. Perhaps I’d even hoped the would convince me. Life alone at the minshuku was terribly lonely. Even with relatively frequent visits to the consulate it was always jarring to return to the empty inn at night.

The irori burned for no one but me. I needed to lay out but a single futon each night. I drank tea alone, ate alone, sat on the porch and watched the wind in the trees alone.

And thus it was for the next six years of my life.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Autumn, 1888 - Y.K.

I’ve never stood this close to someone for so long. No. We aren’t standing close together. We are embracing.

I’ve never embraced anyone before.

Victor’s body is warm and solid, and heavy. The latter I guess is not surprising seeing as I’m the one more or less keeping both of us upright. Yet I feel diminutive next to him. My head fits under his chin, and he only has to lift it a little bit.

What is this feeling he makes me feel?

I close my eyes. Victor shivers. My eyes snap open.

“We have to go back inside,” I say, leaning back, straightening up, trying to turn and pull his arm back around my shoulder.


“You’re cold. You shouldn’t stay out here too long, your body is weak.”

“I’m fine,” he protests, confounding my attempts to pull away from him.

“Mr. Nikiforov,” I say in my most authoritative voice.

His hand is like an icy vice on my wrist and I gasp as I turn towards him again. His expression is intense and his eyes are dark and heavy. They make me want to fall over. “Do not call me Mr. Nikiforov ever again.”

His voice is low and commanding. I’ve never heard him speak like that before. My breath comes out
in a quivering rush as I stare at him wide-eyed. “Alright... Victor.” His name is practically a whisper.

Victor’s expression softens, but it’s sly somehow. He reminds me of the *kitsune* my grandmother used to tell stories about. “*Podari mne potseluy.* Then I’ll let you take me back inside.”

I stare at him silently for a moment. My brain works hard and fast trying to translate. Give him... what? *Potseluy?*

My gaze must become confused and blank in my thinking, because Victor’s expression is suddenly equally confused. “Do... what?” I ask.

We stare at each other for a moment and then he smiles, tightening his arm around me, pulling me closer. His eyes take on that heavy look again. “*Potseluy menya.*”

There’s that word again. Repeating it doesn’t explain what it means. I blink at him and it seems like his face is getting closer to mine. I put my hand on his chest with the intention to push him back a little, but it ends up just resting there.

“I don’t know what that means. *Potseluy.*”

Now Victor is the one blinking at me. “Oh,” he says after a moment and then chuckles. “I suppose it’s not a word you’d be likely to hear talking with traders and government officials.” He gets that *kitsune* face again. “It’s hard to explain. Maybe I should show you?”

I don’t realize just *how* much closer his face is to mine until I feel his breath on my lips and I realize he is about to press his mouth to mine. I gasp in mortified horror, my whole body flushing red.

“*Ie!***” My hand comes up from his chest and slams into the underside of his jaw, causing his head rock back violently. He makes a choking sound of surprise and his arms windmill as he stumbles away from me. Of course this doesn’t work out very well, because his casted leg is nothing but useless deadweight and he cries out as he begins to fall backwards.

“Victor!” As fast as I’d shoved him away I am grasping at him again, my fingers grabbing manically at his haori to pull him upright. I’m smaller than Victor, but I’m strong from years of maintaining the *minshuku* by myself, and I manage to keep both of us from falling over by getting one arm around him and grabbing the side of the house.

We are both panting in fear and flushed with adrenaline. I can hear the hammering of his heart and my own. He clings to me and I feel him tremble and take a ragged, painful breath. Grabbing him like that I must have aggravated his ribs.

“Victor,” I gasp, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that... It’s just-”

“It’s fine,” he cuts me off, his voice strained. “Just. Let’s go back inside. Like you said before.”

I swallow, filled with guilt and shame. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Together we carefully navigate our way back into the *minshuku*. I help Victor onto his futon and cover him with blankets before pulling over the *oki-gotatsu*. He looks pale and drawn and there is sweat on his forehead even though I know he is chilled. He keeps his eyes shut tightly and doesn’t try to speak to me. I know he is in pain.

I feel wretched.

I put fresh charcoal from the *irori* into the pot under the *oki-gotatsu* and then set about making a pot
of tea into which I can mix the bitter red medicine the Russian doctor gave me for Victor’s pain. Laudanum, he called it.

“Victor?” I say softly, kneeling down next to him and sliding my hand gently under his upper back. “Can you sit up a little? You can prop yourself on my lap, but you should drink this. It will help with the pain.”

His blue eyes open slowly and he swallows before nodding. Carefully I help him sit up a little and then shift so that he is lying back against my thighs. My hand cradles the back of his head as I hold the bowl to his lips. I hold it there as he sips carefully, the angle is awkward, but he manages a few swallows before shaking his head a little. I set the bowl aside and dab at the liquid on his chin with the sleeve of my haori. His eyes drift closed again and he relaxes against my lap.

I find my fingers stroking through his hair and I feel that heavy, warm tenderness I’ve come to associate with being close to Victor slowly replace my guilt and embarrassment.

I don’t notice him moving until I feel his cool fingers questing for my free hand. He sighs softly as he laces our fingers together and lets our hands come to rest on his chest. An anxious, happy feeling overcomes me.

“Victor?” I say softly after a few moments. His eyes open just barely and we look at each other upside down. “I’m sorry. About earlier.”

His eyes open a little more and his lips spread a little in a faint smile. “I’ve never been hit before for trying to kiss someone.” He flexes his jaw a little then and his brows scrunch in discomfort. “You’re very strong.”

I flush darkly. “I’m s-sorry!” I stammer again, hanging my head a little. “It’s just that... I... i-in my culture... that is for Japanese... it’s...” I pause and take a breath. “It’s not something we do. I mean... not... often. Not... casually.”

His brows lift a little. “You think I was being casual?”

“N-no! No. It’s just...” my eyes cut away. Looking at him is more than I can take. I take another deep breath. “We call it kuchizuke. It’s... a forbidden kind of thing. Something that - for us - is more or less the same as... sexual relations.” Saying the last part makes me flush even darker. “To kiss someone,” I hope I said that correctly, “it’s like making a promise. It’s very... significant.”

He’s quiet for a little while and I can feel his eyes on me as I continue to stare over towards the irori. Finally his fingers squeeze in mine. “Then I am the one who is sorry. I should not have assumed my kiss would be welcome.” I peek back at him and he smiles at me softly. “In Russia a kiss is important, but it is not like what you are describing. One can kiss someone they desire, or someone they love, or a brother or parent or even a friend. A kiss can mean many different things. It is all in the way you kiss.”

He smiles a little awkwardly to one side. “In Japan there are only two kinds of kisses: the ones you get in the bedroom and the ones you give a baby. We do not kiss friends or family. It is very intimate. Talking about it... doing it openly, it’s very taboo.”

“I see,” he says softly. “Then again, I apologize, and I understand why you would be so shocked that you had to strike me.” There is a teasing quality to his voice. “It must have been awful to almost be forced to take such a taboo action with me.”

I flush and look away moodily, though my insides are squirming around. “Now you’re making fun
He chuckles faintly. “Only a little.” His fingers squeeze mine again and I feel him drawing my hand towards his face. Before I can pull it away he is pressing his lips gently to my knuckles. They are so soft. It sets my body on fire. “I will just have to wait until you are ready to make me that promise before I try to kiss you again.”

Sakhalin Island, Kusun-Kotan, Spring, 1888 - Y.K.

The first time I met Victor was at one of the social gatherings between the Consulate and the Officials of Korsakovsk. This usually meant the District Governor, the Governor of the Korsakovsk Prison, the Chief of the District Police, the Prison Doctor, the Staff Doctor, one or two of the military officers, and any number of lesser officials from the postmaster to departmental secretaries. This retinue of Russian officials was often accompanied by one or more visitors to the island: scientists, authors, military officers, businessmen, and even aristocrats.

These social gatherings occurred rather frequently in good weather. Even in the winter time, when the roads between Kusun-Kotan and Korsakovsk were good enough to ride or pull a sledge on, the two parties would find excuses to visit one another. Everyone was bored on Sakhalin.

Sometimes the two groups of officials even made up ridiculous “official celebrations” as an excuse to carouse and carry on and flatter each other, exchanging medals and honorary titles. Even non-officials from Korsakovsk - at least who were not convicts or carrying out penal labor - frequently visited the Consulate and Kusun-Kotan just for a change of scenery and to browse the Consul’s collection of Russian and French novels.

I didn't always - or even frequently - attend these social gatherings, though Suzuyama-san encouraged me to do so. On this occasion, however, the weather was very good, which is unusual, and I found the thought of the walk to the Consulate and a little gathering rather enjoyable.

I arrived just in time for the official introductions.

When the Russians entered, the whole entourage of them, they didn’t strike me as anything unusual, just vaguely familiar faces with pouchy cheeks and thick beards and mustaches. We greeted and introduced ourselves in the formal fashion, all very orderly. And then at the very end Mr. Bely stepped forward, his arm around the shoulders of a tall, straight, unusual looking young man.

He looked young, for one thing. Nearly all of the Russians I had met on Sakhalin, even the traders, looked old, or at least aged far beyond their actual years. Life on the island wasn’t easy and the climate was harsh and temperamental, and most of the Russians settled there didn’t actually want to be settled there. Perhaps part of his youthful appearance was because he had no beard, which is uncommon among the Russians. He was pale everywhere. I’d seen blond hair before, but his hair was like the color of wood ash. Even his eyes were pale. A pale, but still vibrant blue.

He was dressed in something that looked to me like a costume next to what the officials wore. His shirt was bright red, perhaps the brightest red I had ever seen. It had gold embroidery and a wide sash that was almost like an obi. It fell well past his hips. Beneath he wore plain black pants, which appeared very fitted in my opinion. He looked... extravagant.

But perhaps what I found most intriguing of all was that he was in his stocking feet. The Russians almost never took their boots off before entering the Consulate. Which we, as Japanese, found rather appauling, but of course never said anything about. We would just wash the floors when they left.
“I’ve brought a special guest today,” Mr. Bely, the District Governor, spoke up. “A new resident of Kosakovsk Post, who I am very pleased to now count among my residents.” He beamed grandiosely. “This is Mr. Victor Nikiforov. He’s recently relocated from the northern district of Alexandrovsk. I think we can all agree that was a very good decision.”

There was a little rash of conspiratorial chuckling. The Russians from the Korsakovsk District always talked about how much worse things were in the north. Worse climate. Worse government. Worse convicts. Worse everything.

“Mr. Nikiforov,” Mr. Bely went on, “was once a member of the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg! A very well known person and a very talented one.”

I wondered to myself how he had ended up on Sakhalin.

“I have brought with me a gift for the Consulate today, and have asked Mr. Nikiforov to help with the presentation. I am hoping you will be delighted by both the gift and Mr. Nikiforov. It will take me only a moment to make preparations.” Everyone murmured politely in anticipation.

Mr. Bely then left Victor’s side and hurried away with some of the other officials. Victor said nothing, just stood with a pleasant if somewhat bland smile on his face. Everyone else bustled after Mr. Bely, wondering what he was up to. I stood a little apart, probably looking bored, wondering when it might return to the minshuku.

I looked down, fiddling with the front of my haori.

“You’re the only one here that looks like you feel as out of place as I do.” The unexpected voice made my head jerk up, and there was Victor, standing right in front of me. “You speak Russian, I hope?” he said it a little apologetically, as if to say his hope was only because he didn’t speak Japanese, and extended his hand in greeting.

“Ah, y-yes. Yes, I do.” I took his hand to shake it, as you’re meant to do with Westerners. Yet even as I took his hand I instinctively bowed as I introduced myself. “Yuuri Katsuki. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Ah, yes!” suddenly Suzuyama-san was next to me, yanking me upright, an arm around my shoulders. I felt jostled and I let go of Victor’s hand, steadying my spectacles. “This is Mr. Katsuki. His Russia is very good. He runs the inn on the western road to Korsakovsk. He was born here on Sakhalin. One of the very few locals.”

Victor’s eyes widened in interest at that. “Really? I didn’t know there was an inn or a local left here.”

“Oh, well... It’s not that exciting, really. The minshuku is small and a little run down, and it’s just me there, so.”

“Don’t be so modest, Mr. Katsuki,” Suzuyama piped in, puffing up a little with pride. “It’s a very authentic and traditional Japanese establishment. You should visit. It will make you feel like you are in a whole other country.”

Suzuyama-san had said this to any number of Russian officials over the years. A few of them did actually come to see the minshuku, but most of them never came back for a second visit. I wasn’t a particularly great conversationalist despite my much touted proficiency in Russian, and most of them didn’t care for what spare Japanese cuisine I could provide.

“I will,” Victor said. His smile was soft and sincere. It made my chest hurt a little. Before I could reply he was called away by Mr. Bely. “That’s my cue,” he said with a wink. “Maybe we will talk again later, Mr. Katsuki.”
I didn’t say anything. I just goggled after him, his bright red shirt leaving a trail in my eyes. Then Mr. Suzuyama pulled me forward to join the others for the presentation.

The gift, presented with a flourish from under a cloth, was an ariston organette, a mechanical music player. The whole of the contraption resembled a very beautifully crafted black box. This one with silvered edges and fanciful writing on it. A crank handle protruded from one side and on the top was a series of little metal pegs all in a circle in the middle and gilded arm that swung in and out of place from the outer edge.

Then the District Governor produced a thick paper disk, setting it neatly on top of the box and swinging the arm over it. With a flourish he began to turn the handle and immediately the ariston sprang to life with music. It was wheezy and out of tempo, but it was beautiful. We all gasped in amazement and ogled over the contraption quite enthusiastically. Even I couldn’t help but draw close to it, smiling and clapping my hands together in wonder.

Mr. Bely played the disk through once or twice and then paused, asking us to all step back a little. As we did, Victor stepped forward and we all backed up a little more, giving him more space. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought he looked a little embarrassed even as his expression and gaze were distant, like he wasn’t looking at us, but at some place far away.

Mr. Bely started cranking again.

It was a bit of an odd combination: the off tempo, wheezing music and Victor’s extraordinarily graceful movements. But after a few moments none of us were really paying much attention to the music. We were all just watching Victor.

Perhaps some of the Consulate’s officials had seen ballet performed before in one of Japan’s large cities, or even on a trip abroad. But I had never seen anything like it. It was like his body was making emotions. I would never have imagined someone could move like that. It was like he was floating, like his body was weightless. It looked effortless.

It was - he was - beautiful.

In that moment, I thought I could watch him dance forever.

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Karafuto - The most commonly used Japanese name for Sakhalin. Historically it has also been referred to as "Kita-Ezo" or "Northern Ezo," Ezo being the original name of Hokkaido. When Japan reclaims ownership of the southern part of the island after the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 it becomes Karafuto Prefecture. After WWII Russia regained full control of Sakhalin once again, but even in Japan today the island is usually referred to as Karafuto.

2. The Meiji Government - This story takes place in the 1880s, about twenty years after the Meiji Restoration (also known as the Meiji Revolution), during which the Shogunate was overthrown and the Emperor of Japan was "restored" to the throne. Preceding the Meiji Restoration was a period of time in Japan's history known as the Edo Period (1603 - 1868), during which Japan maintained a policy of near total isolation. During
this time contact with foreigners, especially Westerners/Europeans was extremely limited, and the only European power that was allowed to carry out any trade with Japan whatsoever was the Dutch. There's a lot more that happened here that I won't go into, but after the Meiji Restoration Japan once again opened itself to trade with foreigners and welcomed foreigners into Japan. It also began to very rapidly modernize, Westernize, and industrialize.

3. Western Style - Yuuri notes on several occasions that things are in or of "Western Style." From the way Suzuyama dresses and wears his mustache to the Consulate building itself. This isn't out of deference to the Russians, this was the current fashion of Japan itself. In order to be seen as a modern society and pull itself out of the feudal days of the Edo Period, Japan took on many Western fashions. While traditional Japanese aesthetics and dress were of course preserved it was very common and stylish for men to dress in suits, smoke pipes, carry canes, etc. basically anything that was fashionable in Europe was fashionable in Japan. This was especially true of government officials and military personnel. However Japan also strove to preserve its traditions and that sense of old Japanese spirit. This is one reason the Consul is so adamant that Yuuri and his small, but traditional establishment remain in Kusun-Kotan.

4. Extreme kissing - Up until very recently in Japan (even within the last couple of generations) kissing has been a Really Big Deal in Japanese culture. Traditionally the intimacy of a kiss was equatable to actually having sex. It's still more of a big deal in modern day Japan than it is in many modern societies. Most of us have probably read a manga or seen an anime or drama where there are couples who are considered "officially together" long before they have a first kiss. In the 19th century kissing in Japanese culture was considered more or less a taboo one simply did not discuss, and one would never kiss someone they were not in a very serious relationship with. Even then it would be in the privacy of the bedroom and most likely during or leading up to sex. A kiss was like a promise that you intended to be with that person forever. They didn't even have a very good word for kissing back then. "Kuchizuke" literally just means "mouth touching." So romantic.

5. Relations between Kusun-Kotan and Korsakovsk - Anton Chekhov spends several pages in "Sakhalin Island" talking about the Consulate at Kusun-Kotan. I've used some artistic license in this story in describing what life in Kusun-Kotan is like, but the part about them having social gatherings and superfluous official celebrations with the Russian officials is more or less true. The two groups of officials got together and visited each other frequently, and were generally very friendly and cordial with one another. All of the officials posted at the Consulate spoke Russian and often French and English, and they did indeed have a much envied collection of foreign novels that delighted the Russian inhabitants of Korsakovsk, who were free to visit the Consulate as they pleased.

6. Victor's outfit - The shirt Yuuri describes Victor wearing is in the style of a kosovorotka, a traditional Russian men's shirt. However, the one he is wearing is actually part of a ballet costume he once wore on the stage. Hence its fanciness and the rather tight black pants. It is Victor's favorite costume from the ballet, and the only piece of his past as a dancer that he brought with him to Sakhalin.
A new chapter, finally! I apologize it took so long to get it up. I caught a cold a couple weeks ago and there's been a lot of stressful stuff going on at my work, so I wasn't able to really focus on writing for fun. This chapter was also just difficult for me to work through. There was a lot of historical information I wanted to convey, but I also wanted to not bog the story down in too much historical exposition. So I had to rework it multiple times. I'm happy with the result, and hope you will be, too.

I really want to thank everyone who is reading and supporting this story. I've received a lot of really wonderful comments (which I love!) and a couple of readers even drew adorable fanart of "Love in Exile" for 'victuuri week' on tumblr! (I've reblogged them to martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com). I was so excited and touched that they loved the story that much. So please continue to share your thoughts with me, and share the story with your friends!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Early Winter, 1888 - V.N.

“Well, Mr. Nikiforov, all things considered you’re doing quite well. Not every man gets rolled on by a horse and makes a good recovery.” The doctor sits back, obviously uncomfortable sitting on the floor. Yuuri brought him a pillow, but that only seemed to make him more uncertain of how he was supposed to comport himself.

Yuuri looks relieved at the doctor’s words, and my little Yuratchka grunts, presiding over my checkup with a surly expression on his cold-pinked face.

“That’s good to hear,” I say with a faint smile. “My ribs have been much less painful this past week.” Barring the episode on the porch a couple nights ago. I notice that Yuuri shifts a little as if he’s thinking the same thing.

The doctor nods, reaching for his bag. “A healthy man’s ribs should heal past the point of pain within three to four weeks, and be fully healed within six. So I don’t think you’ll have much more trouble with them. You can remove the bindings today without any consequences.”

I nod and then look at him, pursing my lips. “And... my leg?”

The doctor twists his lips. “It’s difficult to say with your leg in the cast. But you have normal feeling in your foot and toes, so it’s probably healing well.”

I wiggle my toes a little. And a little is all I can manage. “No chance the cast can come off then?” I ask sardonically, smiling to one side.

The doctor chuckles. “No. I’m afraid you’ll be living with that quite a while longer. Your break, as you know, was quite complicated. All three major bones of the leg. Even with the cast on you need to be careful. I brought you crutches, but don’t be overzealous about moving around. You should remain on bed rest, or at the very most sitting up.”
I notice that he glances at Yuuri when he says this. Yuuri nods. He looks very serious. “I make sure he rests most of the time, doctor.”

The doctor grunts faintly and nods. “That’s good. And the cast needs to remain dry. I think I mentioned that last time.”

“Yes, we’ve been careful when bathing.”

Both the doctor and Yuri give the Japanese man a strange look, and his face turns red.

“There’s a bathroom,” I clarify. “Mr. Katsuki helps me there and I use a basin. I haven’t been bathing in the sense of getting in a bath.” There’s no way I could even get into the narrow, steep-sided _ofuro_ in the _minshuku_’s bathroom in my current condition.

“Oh,” the doctor says after a moment. “Well that should be fine. And try to stay inside. Your body is weak and there is a chance you could develop complications like pneumonia.”

“Any chance we can go back to Korsakovsk?” Yuri says suddenly. We all look at him.

The doctor frowns and I think he looks a little embarrassed. Or maybe like he is making excuses. I can’t imagine he’s in any hurry to get me back to Korsakovsk when it just means he would have to tend me in the infirmary there. This arrangement is probably fairly convenient for him.

“I don’t think that would be wise. The trip back on a sledge or even in a sleigh would be slow going and likely quite rough. And like I said it’s a bad idea for Mr. Nikiforov to be exposed to the cold. There is also the chance that it could cause complications with the break. Jostle something loose, or encourage clotting. That can be very dangerous. No, I really think it’s best that he simply remain here. He seems comfortable enough and well taken care of, thanks to Mr. Katsuki’s hospitality.” He smiles a bit wanly at Yuuri.

“It’s nothing,” Yuuri says, faint color still lingering in his cheeks. “It’s... nice to have some company. The winters are long and dark. And his care isn’t complicated. I have to cook and clean for myself, so... it’s nothing to do for one more.”

Yuri makes a derisive grunting sound.

“Yes, yes, just so,” the doctor says amiably, nodding. “I’ll, ah, be on my way then. I’ll leave some more medicine with Mr. Katsuki in case of pain or if a fever develops.”

“Thank you, doctor,” I say, leaning back against the _zaisu_ , which is what Yuuri calls the floor chair. I watch the doctor in his rough suit get awkwardly up off the floor. Yuuri rises smoothly next to him and then politely sees him to the entryway, taking the medications, and then waiting as the man bundles himself back up for the trek back to Korsakovsk.

Yuri arrived with the doctor about two hours ago, and we’ve barely been able to talk. I look over at him now. “See? You had nothing to be worried about. I’m well taken care of. I told you.”

“The doctor didn’t ask anything about what he’s feeding you. That soup was salty and disgusting and a man can’t live on rice and tea. You need meat. I’ll make sure you get some proper food. I brought supplies from the larder. Potatoes, salted meat.” He pauses and then grins with a wink. “Vodka.”

I bark a laugh at that. “And where did you get vodka?”

He sits back, folding his arms haughtily over his chest. “I have my sources. You’re not the only
My eyes narrow at that and I can’t help but glance towards the door, relieved to see that Yuuri is still assisting the doctor, though he glances back at me as if sensing my gaze. I look quickly back at Yuri. “I am not a kulak and neither are you,” I hiss under my breath.

He snorts and smirks. “Is that what you tell your new Japanese friend? That you’re just a nice guy?” His green eyes narrow a little. “Does he actually know anything about your life in Alexandrovsk?”

Yuri is sitting close enough that I can grab his wrist before he can pull away. I yank him towards me, wiping the cruel, smug expression off his face. “You will not—,” I say, my voice low and even, “—say anything of this nature to Yuuri. And you will never refer to me or yourself as a kulak again. That life is behind us. That’s why we came to Korsakovsk.”

He makes a little sound of discontent and pulls against me. “Ok, fine! I was only teasing. Let go!” he hisses.

“Not until you promise.” My grip tightens.

“I promise. I won’t say anything to your precious Mr. Katsuki. I was only messing with you.”

I let him go and he pulls back with a sour expression on his face.

“Your sense of humor’s not as cute as you think it is, Yuratchka,” I say dryly.

He pouts crossly for a moment and then I reach over to brush my fingers through his hair. “Don’t be like that. I don’t want to fight with you. I’m happy you’re here.”

He peeks at me, still sullen. “Really?”

“Of course!” I smile brightly. “We’ve always been together, haven’t we? Why wouldn’t I miss you?”

He shifts towards me a little and slumps, deflating, his hands folding in his lap. “I don’t know. I guess... you’ve been different these past months. Since we moved to Korsakovsk. Since...” his eyes lift towards the front door beyond the entryway where Yuuri is leaning out, presumably watching the doctor to make sure he doesn’t fall on the path to the road, “you met him.”

I understand a little more now. My smile softens and I stroke his hair. “It’s not a bad thing to change. It’s ok for you to change, too. It doesn’t mean you aren’t still my Yuratchka, or that we won’t always be brothers and be together.”

He swallows and looks back at me. “I don’t know how to change. I have nothing without you. And I won’t forget the promises you made to me.” His gaze becomes a little more intense.

“Haven’t I kept them?” I answer quietly. “I got us to Korsakovsk.”

Sakhalin Island, Alexandrovsk Post, Fall 1883 - V.N.

The second time I thought I was going to die was when we first arrived at Alexandrovsk Post. Walking through Siberia for nearly two years, I had accustomed myself to the thought of living in one of those little Siberian villages. They were quaint and a little roughshod, but they were proper villages with fields and shops and lively villagers.
I thought that wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe I could teach dance lessons to robust Siberian youths when my hard labor sentence was over.

But what I had imagined is not what greeted us when we arrived in Alexandrovsk. It was nothing like a quaint Siberian village for all of the efforts it was making to emulate one. It was swampy and cold and gray. Men - convicts and settlers alike - slaved day in and out to drain the land and clear the bogs to make something of a habitable location.

Alexandrovsk was known as “The Paris of Sakhalin.” And there was something of a proper town with streets and shops and buildings, but everything looked as if it was hobbled together hastily. The season during which any work could be done was short, and the rest of the time it was deathly cold and blizzards and storms blew in up the Alexandrovsk River from the sea.

In the town proper lived all of the Post’s officials and the ‘elite’ villagers, primarily political prisoners and members of the intelligentsia who had been exiled for ‘problematic ideologies.’ But the settlers, convicts, and peasant-exiles lived in barely habitable conditions, sometimes with two or more families crowded into a single shoddy cabin. Supposedly, Sakhalin was an agricultural settlement, but the “farms” were nothing but empty, rock pitted fields. Nothing grew there except potatoes and hay, and seed grain was more often eaten by the starving farmers than actually planted in the ground.

How could anyone live like this? How was I going to live like this?

No. Not just I. We. Yuri was my foster brother now. I was responsible for him, his care, his life.

As a convict, I had expected prisons, but there was nothing quite like an orderly prison yet built in Alexandrovsk when I arrived. At that time there was only a prison yard and no barracks or cells for prisoners. The convicts lived together or even with their families in “yurts,” which were dug into the earth.

These places were the embodiment of earthly misery. Because the land was swampy and boggy and, because it was almost nearly always raining on Sakhalin, they were never dry. Water sometimes gathered on the earthen floors inches deep. And the roofs and walls mouldered and molded, crumbling off in muddy lumps. People slept piled together for warmth in sheepskin jackets just trying to stay dry.

I lived in one of these places when I first arrived in Alexandrovsk, crowded in with about six other convicts and Yuri. It is the most miserable memory of my entire life.

In the mornings the convicts were made to go to the prison yard where we would receive arbitrary assignments of work for the day. Everything from construction to painting to clearing roads, draining bogs, felling trees, cutting firewood. There was nowhere safe for Yuri to stay alone, so the only thing I could do was keep him with me throughout the day. He would help me with whatever work I was assigned and throw rocks at anyone who looked like they might give us a hard time.

In the katorga system, every convict was sentenced to some hard labor. Depending on the severity of the crime, sentences varied widely, as did the rights of each prisoner. As a political convict, rather than a violent one, my sentence was relatively light, and I could expect to be done with my hard labor and granted “settled-exile” status within a couple of years.

That’s how mother Russia settled these undesirable expanses of her empire. Exile all of your convicts and then turn them into settlers.

It might not sound so bad, but being a member of a settlement meant maintaining a household and farming or carry out some kind of trade. This was, I promise, no easy feat in a place like Sakhalin
where nothing grew and, without money or influence, you would likely have to build your house with your own hands, felling your own trees, and dragging them in freezing weather from the forest. If you didn’t freeze to death, you then had to find a way to support yourself. At least as a prisoner you were given prisoner’s rations.

Hard labor lasted only so long, but settled exile was a life sentence.

For me, though, things turned out differently.

What was probably a month or so after my arrival on Sakhalin, I was suddenly approached while chopping wood by an official with a ponchy face and clean military uniform.

He seemed flustered, almost breathless, and introduced himself as Mr. Grankin, the Prison Overseer. He went on to say there had been some oversight about my status all because he had been away at Dooay the past month and hadn’t been there to oversee the arrival of my group of prisoners.

At that time I had neither been sleeping nor eating well, and nothing he said to me seemed to make any sense. Still, I found myself following him with Yuri in tow to the prison offices.

It wasn’t until we got inside that he stopped talking, turned around and realized that I hadn’t come along with him alone. He looked down at Yuri with a quizzical expression. “And who is this?”

Yuri’s hand tightened in mine.

“This is... Yuri. I’ve adopted him as my foster brother. His family died on the trip from Siberia. He’s an orphan,” I explained, squeezing the young boy’s hand.

“Oh.” Mr. Grankin said, straightening up. “That’s marvellous. We have few enough children on the island as it is. But we do have a school in Alexandrovsk. How fortuitous for you, Yuri.”

Yuri didn’t say anything, he just scowled up at the prison official.

After a moment I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Mr. Grankin. I’m afraid I haven’t been following you very well. Can you explain again why it is you’ve brought us into the offices?”

“To get your belongings.”

I frowned. “Oh. Well... to be honest it’s probably best for them to remain here. There’s nowhere to put my trunk in the yurt and it’s likely to get ruined because of the damp.”

Mr. Grankin laughed. “But you’re not going back to that place! I told you, Mr. Nikiforov, you’re not a prisoner, you’re a reformee. Certainly you still have to carry out your hard labor sentence, but you don’t have to live in the prisoners’ quarters. You’re from a good family, a member of the aristocracy. You’ve some money you’ve brought with you, I assume? Well you’re entitled to it as a reformee. You can rent as a lodger, or if you have enough even purchase your own place in town. There are always people leaving Alexandrovsk and nothing here is very expensive.” He leaned in towards me conspiratorially. “No one really wants to be here. As soon as anyone earns their peasant-exile status the first thing they do is send in a petition to move off the island.”

I blinked at him, unsure I had heard anything he said correctly. “People can leave Sakhalin?” was the first thing my mind fixed on.

“Well, yes, certainly. The free persons, obviously, but once a convict earns peasant-in-exile status - after the obligatory ten year settled-exile period - you can petition to go anywhere in Siberia you like.” He frowned then, giving a sympathetic expression. “Not back to European Russia, of course,
you can never go back there, but most anywhere in Siberia. Hell, anywhere in Siberia is better than even the nicest part of Sakhalin!”

He laughed out loud and clapped me on the shoulder, which made my bones ache. “Didn’t anyone tell you any of this? They really ought to do a better job of preparing you poor sods before marching you all the way out here.”

I swallowed and shook my head, trying to process everything Mr. Grankin was saying. “No. No one really explained anything. At least not that I remember. Perhaps my lawyer explained it to me after the trial, but I was rather in shock then.”

“Ah, yes, well I imagine you would be. It was quite an affair. Must have been quite a scandal. But you’re a young man still, aren’t you? Only two years hard labor, and probably a few months of that will be commuted. Ten years as a settled exile... Just think in twelve years you’ll still be a relatively young man. Not even forty yet! You could still have a good life in Siberia. Something to look forward to!” He laughed again and winked at me. “Of course we’re supposed to encourage you to stay, but Sakhalin isn’t a place for decent people. Let the real criminals have it, and welcome to it.”

“So what you’re telling me is that I still have to carry out my labor sentence, but that I can spend and earn my own money and live anywhere I like in the settlement?” I thought about the bouillon in the false bottom of my trunk.

“Yes, precisely,” Mr. Grankin said with a satisfied nod, and then leaned in towards me in a conspiratorial manner again. “And to be completely honest you don’t have to carry out your labor sentence yourself. You could always pay a settler to stand in for you. That’s the perk of having money in a place like Alexandrovsk. I can help you set yourself up quite comfortably and you can live out your exile with relatively little to worry about except the foul weather.”

It seemed very odd to me that the Prison Overseer was the one telling me all of this, and right out in the open in the prison offices. I wondered what the catch was. I had the gut feeling that maybe I shouldn’t trust all of my affairs to Mr. Grankin, but seeing as there was nobody else at present to help me I had little choice.”I see.”

“Now, now, Mr. Nikiforov,” he said in jolly manner, patting my shoulder again. “Don’t worry about the details right now. Why don’t we find your belongings and get you settled?”

That night, I sat in a real bath for the first time in more than two years and cried. I was able to shave and see my face, which had grown gaunt. Yuri and I ate a real meal and slept in a warm, dry bed. It was heaven. I spared not even one thought for my former compatriots in the yurts.

Within another month I had a small house of my own, Yuri was going to school, and I’d learned what life in Alexandrovsk Post was really all about.

It was about money and smuggling and gambling and prostitution and exploitation. And all of it was run by Mr. Grankin and the District Governor. Convicts were made the personal servants of officials and their households. In the prison yard gambling and the sale of contraband alcohol and tobacco fueled the business of loan sharks. And when the husbands couldn’t pay back their debts, the women had little choice but to whore themselves out or become the mistresses of Alexandrovsk’s ‘elite.’ I was even told by Mr. Grankin that I could take a woman if I wanted one, and keep a house servant or a cook.

I didn’t care to do so, but I couldn’t refuse Mr. Grankin when he set me up to work under him as a maidanshchik, selling contraband, running card games, and making loans in the prison yard. It meant I didn’t have to do hard labor, and it entitled me to the favoritism of the officials. It was a thug’s
work, a *kulak’s* work. It was far from honorable, and I did many things of which I’m not proud.

And when I wasn’t acting as a thug for Grankin, I was entertaining Alexandrovsk’s elite society with my notoriety. I went to their dinner parties, I danced to their sad imitation of music, and I fell into bed with more than a few of them. I played the curiosity time and time again. The exiled celebrity. Witness to the murder of the Tsar. The beautiful dancer. The dangerous *kulak*.

I was a delightful contradiction.

Had it just been me, I might not have cared whether I had a house or the protection of the officials, or the attention of the elite of Alexandrovsk. But I wanted to be able to give something to Yuri. To provide him with some kind of life that was better because I was in it. He had to live in this God awful place through no fault of his own. At least I could make it as good a life as possible.

Selflessness was new to me, and it gave me a self righteous high even as I plunged myself into debauchery. I told myself everything was for him.

On the nights when we were home alone we would read to each other and talk and laugh. I taught him how to dance and we would dance together across our shabby parlor acting out scenes from my favorite ballets.

“You’re a natural, Yuratchka!” I laughed, and he beamed at me, pleased by my praise. “If we were back in St. Petersburg, I would put you to the Imperial Ballet School and one day we would dance on stage together.”

He laughed, twirling in place. “We would?!”

“Yes! And everyone would applaud for us and throw us flowers and cry our names. ‘Vitya! Vitya! Yura! Yuratchka!’ And they would say, Victor’s protege is the most beautiful boy in all of Russia!”

Yuri squealed with excitement at that and began to hop up and down. I took his hands and we spun around together until we were dizzy and fell to the floor, laughing.

“Will we really go someday? To St. Petersburg? I want to see the stage you danced on, Victor.”

His words made me smile sadly. “Ah, Yuratchka, you know I can never go back to St. Petersburg.” We sat up and looked at each other. He frowned at me, troubled. “But you can go. You don’t have to stay here. You’re a free person, Yuri. When you are grown you can leave me here and see the whole world.” I smiled at him and reached over to stroke his face.

He grasped my hand. “I don’t want to go without you. We’re brothers, we’re family. And one day you can leave Sakhalin. Mr. Grankin said so. We’ll go back to Siberia.” He perked up a little. “Maybe they have theaters there. Siberia’s very big.”

I chuckled. “It is. It is a very big place.”

“We could go to Vladivostok. It’s growing. I heard some of the sailors talking about it. I bet there will be a theater there by the time we leave Sakhalin.” His young face was tense and earnest.

I smiled to one side. “Maybe. I guess we can find out someday.”

“Promise?” he perked, sitting up straight. “Do you promise that someday we’ll leave this awful place and these awful people together? We’ll go to Siberia and have a good life?”

I snickered, ruffling his hair. “Our life isn’t *that* bad. We have this nice house.”
He frowned. “I don’t like the things they make you do. You’re always unhappy.”

I sighed at that, cursing Yuri’s observant and precocious nature. “I don’t like doing them either. But life is hard here.”

“Then promise we’ll leave someday.”

I took a deep breath. “Ok. I promise.”

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Early Winter, 1888 - V.N.

I should not get as much enjoyment out of watching Yuuri and Yuri as I do. It isn’t unlike watching two tom cats, tails lashing, waiting for the moment to strike. Or maybe more like a cat and a dog. The dog biding its time before chasing the cat away, and the cat waiting for the perfect opportunity to box the dog’s ears.

Yuratchka has been here with us almost a week now, and I think he is regretting his decision to come. He is obviously bored and going slightly stir crazy. He has always been busy and energetic. Much to my dismay as his guardian.

Right now they are playing cards, which I find highly amusing, because usually Yuri is quite good at cards, and he’s quite smug about it. But he didn’t think to bring a deck with him from Korsakovsk, so they are playing a Japanese game called Koi Koi with cards he is unfamiliar with. And he is losing.

“I win.”

“What?! No, you don’t! What is that?” Yuri’s finger jabs angrily at the cards Yuuri has placed on the top of the oki-gotatsu.

Yuuri sits back, crossing his arms over his chest, and I can see that he’s enjoying himself. “Ino shika chou. It’s one of the hands I told you about. With this combination there’s no way you can possibly get more points than I have.”

Yuri grinds his teeth and glares across the top of the oki-gotatsu. “Fine. Are you going to be a pussy and cash out your points then?”

Yuuri taps his finger thoughtfully against his chin and then chuckles. “Yes, I think I will.”

“Uugh! What is the point in playing cards if you aren’t going to take any risks?!” Yuri slaps his hand against his cards, sending them scattering. One almost flies into the irori and Yuuri makes a horrified choking sound as he scrambles after it.

“Yuri!” I can’t help but laugh even as I admonish him. “Don’t be such a sore loser. And don’t be so destructive.”

“This is a stupid game!” he exclaims standing up suddenly, nearly upending the oki-gotatsu. There is another horrified sound from Yuuri as he scrambles back over, sticking his head under the blanket to make sure the coal burner has not spilled.

Yuri stomps away towards the entry way.

“Where are you going?” I call after him, frowning.
“I going back to Korsakovsk and I’m getting a real deck of cards and then I’m going to beat you both at stoss!”

I laugh, making a helpless face. “Three people stoss sounds boring. We don’t even have anything to bet.”

“It’s better than that shitty Jap game. Besides, I’m bored.” I watch him tug on his boots.

I can’t help but frown. “If you leave now you shouldn’t try to come back tonight. It will be dark.”

“It’s fine,” he grumbles. “I could use a normal Russian meal. I’ll let a room and check on the house and the horses tomorrow. We shouldn’t trust the Governor to run our affairs properly anyway.” He pulls on his heavy winter coat and yanks his fur cap down over his blond hair. With his scarf wrapped around his face he looks like a floating pair of green eyes. “I’ll see you later. Try to feed him something other than rice and that salty shit soup.”

Before either of us can reply he’s out the door, shutting it hard enough to make snow fall off the roof. We hear it hit the ground with a soft plaf.

Yuuri looks at me. “I guess he really doesn’t like being beaten at cards.”

We both giggle at Yuri’s expense and then, as if we both realize we are now alone for the first time in a week, we stop and just look at each other. Faint color comes into Yuuri’s cheeks.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, unable to keep a little tease from my voice.

He chuckles and shakes his head, looking away. “Ah. Nothing.”

My eyes hood a little and my fingers grope around under the blanket until I find his leg. “That it’s nice to be alone again?”

He glances back at me. Shy, skittish, beautiful. “Maybe,” he admits, looking down at his hands.

“That is what I was thinking, too.”

Our eyes meet again. He swallows. I wonder how fast his heart is beating.

How do I bridge this final distance between us? How to I bring him closer to me? I feel as if I’ve come as far as I can without his help.

“Yuuri,” I say softly, meaning to shift closer to him gracefully, but the cast makes everything I do cumbersome. It knocks against one of the legs of the oki-gotatsu and the whole thing jumps a little, which startles him.

I sigh. At least he’s looking at me now, his eyes wide and round behind his spectacles.

“Do you remember when I said I wanted to be close to you and you said you also wanted the same?”

He swallows and nods.

I cant my head to one side. “What does that mean to you? To be close to me?”

His eyes become even wider and his entire face turns red before he looks away quickly. His fingers twist together in his lap. “Ah... well... I... I just... I like it. The time we spend together. And... before. When you used to visit. When we’d talk and go on walks and... that sort of thing. I don’t feel lonely when you’re here.”
“Oh.” I feel a confused sort of disappointment at this. “So. You enjoy my company.”

“Yes!” he answers emphatically, looking over at me. “Very much so.” He nods, looking relieved.

I furrow my brows. “But that isn’t so much being close to me as just having me around.”

“Oh, well...” He starts fidgeting again. I watch his tongue wet his lips, and sigh, wanting to be his tongue. “I like... actually being close to you. I mean... when we sit close together or I brush your hair back or... when our hands... touch sometimes... And how it was on the porch that night.”

Until I tried to kiss you. I smirk, but don’t say it out loud. I observe him for a moment longer and then rest my chin in my hand, elbow propped on the oki-gotatsu.

“Yuuri,” I ask curiously, “have you ever had a lover?” I’m hoping he knows what this word means, as attempting to explain or demonstrate might earn me another bruised jaw.

The expression on his face shows he understands. And also clearly shows me the answer. Strange that I had not considered the possibility he was a virgin.

“No,” he finally answers.

He looks embarrassed, but I can’t tell if it’s because I’m asking or because the answer is no. Maybe it’s both.

“Why not?” I ask softly. “You’re very beautiful.”

The look on his face is an odd mixture of pleasure and consternation. “Is that... really something you should call another man?”

I laughs softly. “What? You don’t think I’m beautiful?”

He furrows his brows and looks a bit defeated. “No, you... you definitely are.”

“See?” I smile broadly. “So? Why haven’t you had any lovers?”

He fidgets again. “That’s a very personal question,” he deflects.

“This is a very personal conversation.”

He twists his lips and I watch him wrestle with what he wants to say. After a moment he just sighs and shrugs. “I guess... there just wasn’t ever much opportunity. Most of the Japanese left Sakhalin when I was still a boy. Then my family left when I was sixteen so there was no one to do any matchmaking. I’ve been alone here since then. I mean there’s the people from the Consulate and Kusun-Kotan, but most of them are married or... well... not anyone I’d be interested in having as a lover.”

“What about the Russians?” I can’t help but ask with a sly grin.

Yuuri takes a deep breath and I watch him roll his eyes. “The traders are all disgusting, unshaved, unwashed, and smell like vodka. The officials are all ponchy, sallow, and have very large mustaches. The settlers are all depressed and also generally unwashed and many of them have venereal disease because of the rampant prostitution in the Russian settlements. And the convicts are worse than any of the others.”

I laugh out loud at his appraisal of my fellow Russians. I can’t say he is wrong. Most of the Russians on Sakhalin are exactly as he described. “I apologize for my sad and unwashed countrymen and their
large beards and penchant for vodka.”

He glances at me and chuckles. He is so lovely when he smiles in earnest.

“Well,” I say after a moment, “when you put it like that I guess I can’t blame you. I would not want my first lover to be an unwashed, syphilitic, depressive either.”

He laughs a little again, but I can tell he is embarrassed. He rubs the back of his neck, glancing away again.

I reach over to touch his cheek, turning his face back towards me. “But, might I suggest, that while I am a Russian, I am relatively well washed, clean shaven, and do not have venereal disease. Do you think I am an acceptable option to be your lover?”

Yuuri stares at me, wide-eyed and still. He is so completely silent that I think he has stopped breathing. His sudden, sharp intake of breath tells me that I was right. I hold his gaze, fingers still on his face, quiet, waiting.

“What?”

I smile to one side, hooding my gaze as I stroke his jaw. “I’m saying I could be your lover. Do you want to be my lover?”

He stares at me. I wonder what he is thinking. I wonder what he will say.

“How many lovers have you had, Victor?”

I didn’t think it would be that.

The question takes me off guard and I stiffen a little. Why is he asking? To assure himself I would be an experienced partner, perhaps? No, that seems very unlikely. Does it bear some moralistic value to him? Or is he wondering if I am a lecher?

If I tell him how many lovers I’ve had he will definitely think I am a lecher.

But I should not lie to him.

My lips twist a little and I withdraw my hand from his face. “Why are you asking?”

He swallows, and there is high color in his cheeks, but his expression is somehow defiant. “I want to know. You asked me and I told you the truth, so why wouldn’t you tell me?”

I sit back a little, brows furrowing. “It’s not that I won’t it’s just... I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about it.”

He takes a short, sharp breath and looks away a little. “So it’s a lot. That’s what I figured. Someone like you.”

My eyes narrow a little. “What do you mean, ‘someone like me?’”

“You were a famous ballet dancer, weren’t you? And you’re...” he gives a soft sound that is like a laugh, but it is not a laugh. “You said I’m beautiful, but next to you....” He shakes his head. “I’m incredibly ordinary. You’re...” He seems to struggle with his words and when he speaks again his voice is so quiet it’s difficult to hear. “Before I met you, I had no idea anyone could look like you. That’s how beautiful you are.”
He looks down into his lap.

“What are you trying to say, Yuuri?”

“I just don’t understand why you’re trying so hard to... seduce me. You could have anyone you want. You probably have had anyone and everyone you’ve ever wanted.”

I smirk faintly. He isn’t wrong. “Who is there for me to want, but you?” I lean towards him, grinning a little teasingly. “The unwashed, unshaven, syphilitic masses of Sakhalin, or the ponchy, mustachioed officials that you have also rejected?”

He blinks and stiffens at that, looking over at me, his expression hurt. “So, I’m the least repulsive of your options?”

Is that what I said? That’s not what I meant to say. I start to backpedal. “No. No, Yuuri, that’s not what I meant-”

“Then why would you...? Do you enjoy teasing me?” His voice wavers. “It’s enough for me just to be close to you. I’ve never had something like that before. I’ve never had anyone but my family, and even they’re gone. I’ve never even had a real friend before. I know it’s pathetic. So why do you have to make fun of me for it?”

There are tears forming in his eyes, and I can tell from his knotted expression that he is trying very hard not to let them fall. He shakes his head, scrubbing at his face desperately.

I try to think of something to say, but my mouth just hangs uselessly open as he continues to talk.

“I know I shouldn’t be happy that you’re here with me like this,” he says angrily. “I know that it’s all my fault you got hurt. I know it’s wrong to be selfish! Maybe I deserve it, but why do you have to be cruel asking me something like that? Do I want to be your lover? How can I answer that, knowing you’d never ask someone like me if you were back in Russia, living the life you used to have? Don’t ask me just because I’m here and it’s convenient! Don’t pursue me just to amuse yourself, or... or abate your boredom! It’s not fair when... you mean so much more to me than that.”

His face is misery. What have I done to make him believe the things he is saying?

“What? Yuuri, no.” I try to take his hand, but he pulls away from me, sniffling ferociously. “I would never be cruel to you. I was not teasing. Why do you think that? I-”

“Then what?! Why would you pretend to want me?!”

“I’m not pretending! It’s because I love you!” The words escape like angry bees. They hover in the air, buzzing in the sudden quiet.

The tears Yuuri hasn’t shed now fall in two silent, perfect lines down his face. I shouldn’t think he is beautiful. I have never been good with tears.

“Yuuri...” I whisper with all the tenderness I feel for him, reaching to touch his face and wipe away the tears.

There is a sharp crack from the front door being shoved open.

“It’s going to fucking blizzard! I can smell it in the air!. No way I’m freezing to death in a snow drift for a pack of cards!” Yuri’s voice is an intrusion.
Without a word or a sound, Yuuri pushes my hand away and wipes his eyes with the sleeve of his yukata before standing in one smooth motion that hurts my soul. I hear the softest sniffl as he turns and quietly slides back the door leading into the west room that connects to the ofuro.

“Yuuri, wait.” But he slides the door shut on my words.

Yuri leans in from the entryway where he’s been struggling with his coat and boots. “It feels like a funeral in here.”

I look at him and grind my teeth, eyes narrowing. “God damn it, Yuri. Did you have to come back right now?”

We look at each other and I know from the tightness of his jaw and the angry burning in his eyes that he heard my outburst to Yuuri. It wasn’t a coincidence he came in at that very moment. He stares at me accusingly for a long moment and then looks away, pulling off the rest of his heavy clothes.

The day passes into evening and Yuuri doesn’t emerge from the other room. Yuri sits by the irori reading a book. He doesn’t talk to me.

Eventually he makes dinner for us - smoked fish he brought from our larder in Korsakovsk, leftover rice, and vodka. It’s the first meal I’ve eaten here that wasn’t prepared by Yuuri. I eat without any enthusiasm. Yuri washes the dishes in the tub on the porch with hot water from the kettle, and then sets the dishes on a towel to dry just like I’ve watched Yuuri do countless times. Apparently he’s been paying attention.

He helps me get settled in for the night and then lays out his own futon near the irori. Yuuri still hasn’t come out of the west room. It’s the first night I’ve lain down to sleep without him next to me.

In the near dark I gaze at the closed door between us. It must be cold in there. I want to speak to him, to somehow fix whatever it is I’ve broken. Was confessing my feelings also some kind of taboo? How have the Japanese people lasted so long when romance and affection seem to be anathema to them?

Or is it just that it shocked him, or frightened him maybe? Or was he embarrassed because of Yuri’s return? Or does he still not believe me? Does he still think I am toying with him? Why did he think I was doing so in the first place? I have never been anything but genuine with Yuuri. He is the only one who has made me feel these earnest feelings.

“Yuuri...” I call softly.

“Shh! Go to sleep, asshole!” Yuri snaps.

I sigh softly and frown. “Goodnight, Yuuri.”

The room is quiet save for the soft, occasional pop of the coals in the irori. I watch the door, straining my ears for some suggestion that Yuuri is there beyond the thin paper screen. My eyelids grow heavy and I close my eyes, beginning to drift into sleep.

Something moves close to me in the darkness. My eyelids flutter as something slides over my mouth. I inhale sharply, startled, my eyes flying open. The pressure over my mouth increases. It’s a hand with long, cool fingers. Yuuri’s hand. I can smell him. My eyes seek him in the darkness, and after a moment I can faintly make him out by the dim light of the embers in the irori and what moonlight comes in from the windows.
He leans over me, a finger pressed to his lips for silence as the other hand covers my mouth. I wish I could make out his face better in the darkness, but all I can tell is that he isn’t wearing his spectacles. I stare up at him, still and silent.

After a moment he shifts and lifts my heavy blanket, sliding onto my futon next to me. I take a sharp breath, opening my mouth to speak, but his hand covers it again before I can. I furrow my brows. Is he worried about waking Yuri, or is it something else?

He wriggles closer on the futon, pressing in against my side. His legs bump my cast. His head comes to rest on my shoulder, stretching close so that I can feel his breath against my neck and ear.

He feels cold, and I think I can hear his breath shivering. I push my arm under him and wrap it around his back, wanting to warm him. He doesn’t pull away.

“Did you mean what you said?” he whispers suddenly in the dark. His hand loosens over my mouth just enough for me to speak.

“Yes,” I breathe, opening my mouth to say more, but he covers it with his hand again before I can.

“Don’t talk unless I say so. I need this to be clear. Everytime we talk things get muddled.”

I swallow and then nod, tentatively pressing my open palm against his back.

“I’ve been thinking,” he whispers into my ear, “about what you said. That you love me. About being my lover. You really meant that?”

He lifts his head a little and I turn mine towards him, able to make out his face and his bright eyes in the darkness. His hand loosens on my mouth again. “Yes,” I answer again.

Yuuri looks at me for a moment and his eyes search my face. “I’ve never been in love. I don’t know what it feels like.”

I can’t help but smile against his hand. He doesn’t want me to talk, so instead I grasp his wrist lightly, pulling his hand away from my mouth. He resists a little, but then lets me draw it away and to my chest, sliding it inside the front of the borrowed yukata. I press it over my heart and its presence there makes me aware of just how fast it is beating.

His eyes widen a little. I reach between us, fishing for his other hand, which I guide to his own chest, pressing it against the same spot above his heart. I hold my hand over his, able to feel how his heart races just as mine does.

“It feels like this,” I whisper.

I hear his soft, sharp intake of breath and then feel his face press into my neck. His fingers curl over my heart.

We lie still and quiet in the dark for a long time, but I know neither of us is close to sleeping. I don’t say anything. I just let him be there with me.

Finally he whispers, “I don’t know if I’m ready to be your lover.”

I smile a little sadly at that. I’m not really in any position to be anyone’s lover anyway. My hand strokes gently against his back and he stiffens a little before allowing himself to relax against my side again. “That’s alright. I just want to keep growing closer to you.”
I take my hand from his chest and stroke my fingers under his chin, lifting it so that we are looking at each other. Our faces are so close that I ache with the desire to kiss him. But I don’t, though the panicked look on his face tells me he thinks I might try.

“Will you help me, Yuuri? I can’t do it all myself. You have to open up to me, to trust me, or else there is only so close we can be.”

He stares at me and finally he swallows and nods. “I’ll try.”

I chuckle quietly and cup his cheek before drawing his face towards mine. I feel him stiffen, but I only press my lips to his forehead and then once against the bridge of his nose. Even this makes a soft, embarrassed sound escapes him, and his hand has become a fist on my chest.

Before I can kiss his face again he shoves it into my neck, where it is safe from my attentions. I laugh softly.

“I love you, Yuuri.”

“Go to sleep!” he hisses and I feel him breathe deeply against my skin a few time. He adds in a murmur, “You need a bath tomorrow.”

I snort, though now I feel self-conscious. “You can go back into the west room if I am that offensive.”

He giggles quietly and lays his hand back over my heart. “Goodnight, Victor.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Ofuro - An ofuro is a Japanese style bathtub. In the story Victor refers to a "bathroom" in the minshuku, but really it's more of a "bathing room." There's no toilet there, it's just a room used for washing. During this time period ofuro in homes and inns were generally steep-sided wooden tubs that had wood or coal burners built into the side to heat the water. In Japanese culture even today you don't actually wash in the bathtub. You wash yourself off with soap and water before getting into the bath, which is used primarily for relaxation and detoxification purposes.

2. Katorga - The Russian penal system of exile and penal labor was established in the 17th century as a means to both punish convicts and settle unpopulated and remote areas of the Russian Empires (primarily Siberia). While the katorga system went through a number of reforms and rose and fell in popularity over the centuries, it persisted up until the Russian Revolution in 1917. Even then the system largely remained in place, only now under the control of the Bolsheviks who transformed the system into gulag labor camps. Though the gulag institution was officially closed in the 1960s, the legacy of the katorga and gulag systems has left it's mark on in the Russian penal system even today.

3. Convicts, Reformees, Settled-exiles, and Peasants-in-exile - Under the katorga system an exile could hold various statuses. Initially you were a convict, and even then there were various levels depending on your crime and sentence, ranging anywhere from a few years to ten years to life sentences. Convicts carried out hard labor, had no right to
own property or money, and were technically to be imprisoned (however due to a number of factors many convicts actually lived outside of the prisons). Reformees were usually convicts who had either served out most of their sentence or who were not considered particularly dangerous (political prisoners were often started off as reformees). Reformees still often had hard labor sentences, but had limited rights and could own property, money, and live outside the prison either as a lodger or in their own home. Settled-exiles were those who had served out their entire prison sentence. For ten years a settled-exile was required by law to maintain a household and function as a contributing member of the settlement to which they were assigned. After ten years settled-exiles earned peasant-in-exile status, which basically gave them all of the rights of a normal Russian peasant with the stipulation that they could not live in European Russia. They could, however, petition to leave their original penal settlement and live anywhere within Siberia.

4. Kulaks - The word "kulak" literally refers to an upper class of peasant, one who owns land, has money, and by this token is in a position to loan land and money to less fortunate peasants. They were generally disliked by other peasants and portrayed as being userers and corrupt lovers of money. The term "kulak" during this time period (I have no idea if it continues to have this meaning today) colloquially came to refer to a shady character who involved in money lending, extortion, black market trading, gambling, and just generally being a bit of thug. The term "kulakism" was used to describe how business was generally run throughout penal settlements in Siberia and the Far East.

5. Maidanshchik - This term is related to the term 'kulak' and 'kulakism.' A 'maidan' was a term for an area used for trade, like a village square. The 'maidanshchik' was the person who oversaw the trade and activities going on in the maidan. Within penal settlements and the prisons the terms were used to describe the black market trade, gambling, and smuggling going on inside the prisons (and sometimes in the settlement at large). The maidanshchik was in charge of overseeing these activities, maintaining their order, bringing in goods, running games of cards, lending money, etc.

6. Stoss - A very popular game in the 19th century. Also known in the West/America as Faro. It was easy to learn, had a good return on bets, and was played widely throughout gambling parlors, pubs, and saloons of the time.
Part 4: Yuuri

Chapter Notes

Well my attempts to get this chapter out faster than the last one didn't really work out. I apologize again for having to wait for weeks for an update, but my schedule and my betaer's schedule IRL are pretty cramped.

This chapter really focuses on the development of Yuuri and Victor's relationship from the time they first met at the Consulate. It's a bit longer than the previous chapters, because there was a lot that I felt needed to be told at this particular juncture in the story. It's a pivotal point both for Victor and Yuuri as characters (possibly also for Yuri) and for the progression of the story. I plan to have future chapters focus much less on the past, with fewer "flashback" sections and more forward movement of the story line.

Thank you all for reading! And for all of your wonderful comments and your excitement for the story. I'm really, really enjoying sharing it with you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakhalin Island, Kusun-Kotan, Late Spring 1888 - Y.K.

The second time I met Victor was also at the Japanese Consulate. The officials were having another celebration of some kind, and to be honest the only reason I attended was on the off chance Victor would be there again.

I'd never thought about anyone as much as I thought about him in the days and weeks following our first meeting. I would sit on my porch for hours, looking into the forest and just think of him. I imagined him dancing, the brightness of his shirt, the distant expression in his light eyes.

Thinking of it filled me with a feeling I couldn’t quite place. It was somehow both melancholy and sweet, and it left me with a wonderful aching in my chest.

I was nervous when I arrived at the consulate building, but also gratified to see that Victor was indeed in the company of the Kosakovsk officials. Though that day he was dressed much more plainly in woolen slacks and suspenders over a linen shirt, the sleeves of which he’d rolled up to his elbows. He looked like he’d just come from work, and I found it curious that he didn’t seem to care that he was dressed so casually when everyone else was in their uniforms and suits.

Everyone but me. As usual I wore traditional Japanese clothes. Today a pair of wide legged hakama over my plain black kimono. I owned only one Western suit, which was a hand-me-down from another official and fit me poorly. I wore it only when its necessity was impressed upon me by Suzuyama-san.

True to my own tentative and cowardly nature I couldn’t bring myself to approach Victor, instead choosing to conceal myself behind my compatriots and steal glances at him. He talked so easily with everyone, and it was obvious that anyone he talked to was charmed by him.

I found myself envious of that ease. I’ve never really liked being around a lot of people, and I can’t claim to be much of a conversationalist.
Eventually, feeling frustrated with myself for my inability to take any kind of action or even approach the beautiful Russian, I sought solace with a bottle of sake on the long, wide veranda of the Consulate building.

Spring and summer on Sakhalin could be pleasant, though more often than not it was dreary. That day was the kind of day that couldn’t make up it’s mind about the weather. It wasn’t particularly cold, but it wasn’t warm either, and the sun kept trying to poke out from the overcast skies, which drizzled intermittently. It was the kind of day that made me nostalgic for my childhood.

Yet there I was, a grown man, drinking alone, daydreaming about a man only a room away, in what had suddenly become a rather melancholy downpour. The absurdity of my life made me swear under my breath and groan as I slugged back the second half of my cup of sake.

With another self-pitying moan I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the side of the building.

“Am I intruding?”

The voice spurred me into an upright sitting position and I turned my head - too fast apparently because my vision swam for a moment - to see Victor standing only a few feet away. He was looking down at me curiously, holding a bottle and glass of his own. I goggled at him silently.

He smiled and held up his bottle and glass. “Seems we both had the same idea. Can I join you?”

I stared for another moment and then collected myself. “Ah! Mr. Nikiforov. Yes. Yes, please. You’re not intruding.”

Chuckling he sat down next to me, leaning back against the wall, setting his bottle of what I assumed to be vodka next to my sake bottle. “You seemed to be having heavy thoughts.”

I blinked at him. “Oh. No.” I smirked faintly. “I was just thinking about the absurdity of life.”

He barked a laugh at that and took a sip of his drink, looking at me with what seemed a somewhat sly smile. “And what is the most absurd thing about your life right now, Mr. Katsuki?”

You, I thought, my eyes cutting towards him. And then immediately flushed, realizing that he’d remembered my name. “Actually, I think almost everything about my life is absurd. This island, the Consulate, the inn I run that has no guests, this weather, these parties.”

I sighed and leaned back against the wall again. The sake was making it easier to relax, so I poured myself another cup. Victor peered at me curiously for a moment and then chuckled, looking out at the rain. “It is a rather absurd place, isn’t it?”

We were quiet for a few moments, each of us drinking our respective drinks. And then he asked suddenly, “What was it like growing up here?”

I raised my eyebrows, surprised by the question, but not finding it difficult to answer. “Normal, I guess. When I was a child this was a normal village, as was Korsakovsk. We called it Oodomari. I went to school, played with my sister and the other children, helped my parents work. I was like anyone growing up in the countryside. The winters were long and cold, but they’re like that in Hokkaido, too, so I’ve heard.”

He watched me, nodding a little. “Your Russian is very good, better than anyone else at the Consulate. You hardly have any accent at all.”
I laughed a little at that, pleased to be praised by him for anything. “Well, we had a lot of Russians coming through even back then. Traders and trappers and workers of all kinds. Sometimes they stayed at the minshuku. It was easy to pick up as a child. You know how children are, they learn everything easily.”

He made a thoughtful sound at that. “Yes, that’s true. Still it’s commendable to speak a foreign language so well.” He smiled at me, and I felt pleased again.

“You don’t speak any foreign languages?”

“Oh, no I do,” he said pleasantly. “English, French, and German.”

That made my ability to speak Russian seem far less commendable. “Oh.”

“And a little bit of Polish, but that’s only because I had a Polish lover for a while.”

I stared at him, sure my face was bright red. “I see.”

He blinked at me and then laughed. “Oh, I embarrassed you. I’m sorry. You Japanese are much more reserved than I’m used to.”

I shook my head. “It’s alright. I’m... well, I don’t converse a lot in general. I live alone and I only come to the Consulate now and then, so I’m probably just not that good at it anymore.” I take another swallow of my sake.

Victor raised his eyebrows. “You live alone? In an inn? What about your family?”

I shifted a little, uncomfortable with the personal questions. “Ah, well...” My fingers fiddled absently with the front of my haori and I stared out at the dismal scene of the muddying road on the other side of the veranda railing. “They went back to Japan some years ago.”

He leaned towards me, his bright eyes wide. “They left you here alone?”

I flushed. “No!” I said defensively and then immediately felt embarrassed for snapping at him. I ran my hand over the back of my neck. “No, I mean... I could have joined them, but I chose not to. I stayed here on Sakhalin, because I wanted to.”

He scrutinized me for a moment and then leaned back, reaching for the bottle of vodka to pour himself another glass. “I see. That’s interesting. You’re probably one of the only people in the whole world who had the chance to leave Sakhalin and didn’t take it.”

There was a brittleness to his voice that made me look at him more closely. The beautiful man in the rough work clothes.

“I take it you didn’t come to Sakhalin of your own accord,” I hazarded, watching him as I sipped my sake.

His lips pulled to one side. “No. I came here as an exile. A convict.” He looked at me with a sardonic expression as if daring me to ask what he’d done.

“What did you do?”

“I had a Polish lover,” he answered with a sly grin.

His answer confused me and it must have shown on my face, which felt hot again.
He laughed and looked away, taking a long swallow of his drink. “I got involved with the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Sometimes you just get swept up in things.”

“You were a dancer, before that? In the ballet. Isn’t that what Mr. Bely said?”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything. I stared at his profile for a long moment.

“Your dancing was beautiful. I couldn’t look away. I would love to see you dance again,” I said before realizing. My heart beat fast at my own forwardness.

For a moment he didn’t look at me, but then our eyes met and he smiled. It was a softer, sadder smile than what I’d seen before. “Then I’ll dance for you again someday.”

My mouth opened, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Then he was standing up. “I should go back in. Thank you for allowing me to intrude on your solitude.”

“I didn’t mind. I have plenty of solitude,” I responded. After I’d said it I thought the words sounded kind of pitiful, but he chuckled.

“I said I would come visit you at your inn, didn’t I? I’d still like to. How do I get there?”

“Oh, ah...” I pointed out into the rain towards the road leading out of Kusun-Kotan where it forked. “Follow the road going north out of the Consulate. It’s less than a mile. It’s hidden a bit in the trees, but there’s a sign. And it’s the only path leading off the road.”

He looked out towards where I was pointing. “The road goes all the way around back to Korsakovsk, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s like a loop. It’s a bit further, though, if you come from the other direction. Two miles or so. Coming past the Consulate is a little faster.”

“I see. Well then,” he looked down at me. “Until next time, Mr. Katsuki.”

He left me feeling excited and nervous, and not long after that I quietly departed the Consulate to return home so I could be alone with my feelings.

Even though Victor told me he would come visit, I didn’t actually expect him to do so. I’m used to people making polite promises that both parties understand aren’t meant to be kept.

I was taking advantage of a good patch of weather, chopping wood to make charcoal about a week later when I thought I heard someone calling from the minshuku. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I assumed it was someone from the Consulate coming to deliver supplies or just to visit since it was a nice day. So I called back in Japanese and then went back to chopping.

I’d just brought the axe down with a solid swing when I heard, “Mr. Katsuki, you’re looking very fit today.”

“Hah?” Startled, I realized it was not someone from the Consulate standing on the path leading back towards the minshuku but Victor. I was glad at that moment that the axe head was buried solidly in the stump, because if I’d been holding it I was certain I would have dropped it.

There I was: covered in sweat; red from my exertion and the sun; wearing nothing but my nobakama; my short yukata tossed haphazardly over a wood pile; chest, shoulders and arms bare. And there he was: the picture of composed perfection in a fine linen shirt nearly as blue as his eyes and a pair of leather boots that came up to his knees.
I must have looked like some wild man, because he was staring at me with an intensity I had not seen before.

“Mr. Nikiforov!” I gasped. “I... forgive my appearance, I was not expecting guests.”

He smiled at me. “Oh, no, please don’t apologize.”

For some reason his expression made me want to pull my yukata back on, but I was covered in sweat and really needed to wash off before I redressed.

“And you don’t have to stop on my account,” he said as I stepped away from the stump to pluck up my discarded yukata. There was a hint of amusement in his voice, and I was embarrassed to think he was laughing at me.

“No, no. Of course I’ll stop. You’ve come as a guest. I apologize I wasn’t at the minshuku to greet your properly.” I left the axe where it was, making a mental note to come back and finish my work later, and then moved past him up the path.

“No need to apologize. This greeting was quite nice,” he answered as he followed behind me.

Something in his tone made me glance back at him over my shoulder, but he was just smiling at me with a smile that made me feel even hotter than I already was. “Oh. Well. Alright.”

I looked ahead again only to see that there was a monster at the head of the path in the minshuku’s front yard. I’d already screamed and backpedaled into Victor by the time I realized it was a horse.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in alarm, his hands bracing themselves on my shoulders.

I huffed and deflated, leaning away from him as I placed a calming hand over my heart. “N-nothing. Your horse startled me. I don’t have my spectacles on.”

He laughed at that, and I felt his hands squeeze my shoulders before I could pull away from him, mortified. “I’ve noticed there aren’t many horses at the Consulate. I guess you aren’t used to seeing them very often. Though I’d think it would be very convenient for you to have one since you have to do all the work around here by yourself.”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.” The horse was staring at me and I was trying to figure out how I was going to get past it without touching it or getting bitten.

“You don’t like horses?” he asked, surprise in his voice. I just grunted. He chuckled. “This is Ten’. He’s quite gentle.”

I narrowed my eyes at the horse, wondering if my eyesight had worsened to the point I was also becoming colorblind. Ten’ meant “Shadow” if my Russian wasn’t failing me. It seemed the kind of name you’d give a black horse. But the horse in front of me was quite certainly chestnut colored.

“Your horse... isn’t black,” I pointed out. “Why call it Shadow?”

Victor sighed a little despondently and brushed past me on the path. “I always wanted a black horse. But on Sakhalin we make due.”

I was relieved beyond words when he took it upon himself to gallantly lead the monstrous animal away from the trailhead. It followed him, deceptively docile, and I edged past them towards the entryway, disappearing into the minshuku while Victor searched for a place to tie the beast.
“Please wait there, I’ll be right back!” I called over my shoulder as I shut the door to the vestibule and then took a moment to calm myself.

I hadn’t cleaned. I hadn’t prepared any food or drink. I wasn’t bathed or in any fit state to accept company. And yet Victor Nikiforov, the object of my recent penchant for daydreaming, was now waiting in the inn yard for me to welcome him into my home.

After allowing myself a moment of panic I threw myself into motion, tidying the main room, stoking the irori, and then dashing into the bathroom to drag a wet cloth across my sweaty face and body before changing into a clean yukata. I even managed to comb my hair back with my fingers and find my spectacles before reappearing in the entryway.

Victor was leaning against his horse’s flank, examining his fingernails.

I bowed, unable to fight the ingrained compulsion, as I apologized. “Forgive me for making you wait. I wasn’t expecting company. But please, come in.”

“I didn’t mind waiting,” he answered amiably. “I should apologize to you for stopping by unexpectedly and inconveniencing you. I can come back another time.”

“No! No, please, come in. You told me you intended to visit. I should have been prepared.”

We made our way into the vestibule, apologizing back in forth in what I thought a very Japanese conversation to be having with someone who wasn’t Japanese.

“Ah... If you wouldn’t mind taking your boots off,” I said with an apologetic smile as I slipped out of my woven sandals and onto the raised floor inside the vestibule.

He looked down at his fitted, knee high boots and then back at me. “If I take them off I’m not sure I’ll be able to get them back on again without boot hooks. Riding boots are not made for taking on and off easily.”

I wondered why anyone would wear a pair of boots they couldn’t easily take on and off. We stared at each other for a long moment. Then I politely pivoted back off the raised floor and into my sandals. “Let’s sit on the porch.”

“Next time I will be sure to bring my boot hooks,” he said, following me around the side of the building to the back porch that overlooked the woods. Usually I wouldn’t want anyone wearing their outdoor shoes on the porch either, but at least I could scrub it down easily enough.

I stepped out of my sandals as I mounted the porch, leaving them on a paving stone. I slid back the doors that opened into the main room of the minshuku so that Victor could see inside. He perched himself on the edge of the porch, leaving his booted feet on the ground, peering inside curiously.

“Can I get you something to drink? I have tea and sake. If you’re hungry, I don’t have much to offer, but I can make some soup or...” I tried to go through what I had in the pantry in my head. “Something.”

Victor chuckled. “I’m not hungry. What is sake?”

“Sake? Oh, it’s like wine, kind of. It’s alcohol made of fermented rice. It’s the vodka of Japan,” I said with a grin.

His brows rose at that. “I like vodka.”
“Then you will probably like sake,” I said, rising to my feet and disappearing inside. I didn’t drink all that often myself, but I had several good jugs of sake I kept on hand for when I had visitors from the Consulate. I filled a decorative bottle with the clear liquid and arranged it on a tray with a couple of cups and some dried nori wafers, which were about all I could find in terms of something to snack on. Then I returned with the tray to the porch.

Victor was looking out at the woods, which were filled with afternoon sunlight. “It’s quite beautiful here. The woods on Sakhalin always seemed menacing to me, but... this view is somehow lovely.”

I followed his gaze. I’d sat and watched the woods from the porch so many times that it didn’t really seem like anything special to me. “Oh. I’m glad you think so. It’s quiet here, so lots of animals pass by if you’re patient enough to just sit and watch.” I pushed the tray towards him a little and then knelt to pour the sake, holding back the sleeve of my yukata.

We drank together for most of the afternoon. I don’t remember what exactly we talked about, but I do remember that the more we drank the easier the conversation became. At some point, as the sun grew lower and the air grew colder I even let him come inside despite the fact that he was wearing his boots. The mud had dried well enough on them by that point anyway.

We sat around the irori on cushions, Victor leaning back against a zaisu as I heated water to make us some tea in an effort to get something other than sake in our bellies. He leaned towards me suddenly, reaching out to tug at the sleeve of my yukata.

“Mr. Katsuki, I have to ask you something.”

I blinked at him owlishly. “Alright.”

“Is this... a dressing gown?” He tugged at the sleeve indicating he meant my yukata.

“What?” I flushed darkly.

“Why are you always wearing a dressing gown?” His cheeks and nose were tinged pink with tipsiness.

“It’s not a dressing gown!” I flustered. “It’s a yukata. It’s completely normal Japanese clothing.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “No one else in the Consulate wears this.”

“Not when you come to visit, maybe. Besides they’re all officials and military men. They have to wear uniforms.”

“You don’t have to wear a uniform? You can wear your dressing gown?” he was leaning closer, examining my sleeve.

“I told you it’s not a dressing gown.” I tried to tug my sleeve away. “It’s a yukata.”

He stared at me for a moment and then abruptly his attention shifted to my legs and the hem of my yukata. “Are your legs bare under there? Or are you wearing pants?”

He plucked at the hem, trying to pull it up.

“Mr. Nikiforov!” I spluttered, pushing at his hand, though I couldn’t help but start giggling.

“Tell me!” he laughed. “I’m curious!”

“That’s not an appropriate question!”
“They’re just your legs. Tell me! They’re bare, aren’t they?” The look he gave me was sly and mischievous, the corners of his lips curling upwards impishly. It made my heart beat fast.

“They’re bare,” I admitted, and he burst into laughter. But it wasn’t cruel or mocking. It was just drunken and silly. It made me laugh more, too. I still don’t know why my legs were so funny at that time.

Once I regained some of my breath I looked at him, now sprawled on the tatami and shook my head. “Mr. Nikiforov, I think you should go home.”

“Why?”

“Because you are drunk.”

He grinned at me upside down. “You are also drunk, Mr. Katsuki.”

“Yes, but I’m already home,” I answered sardonically.

He pouted at me. “But this is an inn, right? I could just stay the night.”

“What about your horse?”

He frowned at that. “He is probably hungry and thirsty.”

“Probably. Can you ride home like you are?”

“I am not that drunk,” he said indignantly and then started to giggle again. I giggled a little too and we stared at each other as it began to grow darker outside. “Will you call me Victor?”

I blinked at that, color rising to my face. “What? No, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?” his voice was like that of a petulant child. He sat up. “Aren’t we friends now? In Russia friends call each other by their given names.”

I blushed even darker. Friends? We were friends now? “W-well, even so. In Japan it’s very... only very close friends and family and children call each other by their given names. So... no, I can’t call you that, Mr. Nikiforov.”

He actually pouted at me. “So, I cannot call you Yuuri?”

I gawped at him, my heartbeat suddenly erratic. “N-no! No, you absolutely cannot!” I spluttered, embarrassed beyond all reason.

He pouted some more and looked like he was going to throw himself back onto the tatami. Before he could I put my hands on his shoulders and started pushing him towards the door to the vestibule. “Mr. Nikiforov, I think you’d better go home before it gets dark.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No, of course not. But it’s getting dark and I... need to finish chopping wood.”

“In the dark? That sounds dangerous.”

“It’ll be fine.” I had no intention of going back to chop wood that evening. But I needed him out of my home, because I needed to be alone with all the thoughts and feelings he made me think and feel.
He let me hustle him along, only making a few petulant sounds as I saw him out the door and into the inn yard where his horse was still patiently waiting for him. Though I swear it gave me an unpleasant glower.

With a huff he went and untied the beast before very gracefully swinging up into the saddle - especially for a man who’d been drinking for the better part of several hours. I had to admit that even though I disliked and distrusted his horse he cut a very dashing image up there on its back. Even if he was disheveled from drinking.

“Can I come visit you again?”

I fidgeted a little, straightening the front of my yukata. “Yes, alright. Just wear better shoes for taking off next time.”

He grinned. “I will. And you’ll see. Someday you’ll call me Victor, and be happy for me to call you Yuuri.”

It felt like my face turned purple. “Good night, Mr. Nikiforov!”

With a laugh he waved and rode away back towards the road. I watched until he he was out of sight and then went back inside only to collapse on the tatami. He left me feeling exhausted.

After that day Victor came to visit me often. Sometimes more than once a week. Sometimes his visits were short, and sometimes they lasted most of the day. I took him on walks through the woods and up onto the bluffs where I’d roamed and played as a child. I showed him how to gather clams and limpets and mushrooms and made him nabe as I’d done when I was younger.

Alone in the minshuku we would drink and eat and talk. And once in awhile he would dance for me, and only for me. Sometimes they were practical demonstrations - this move is called this and this one is this - and sometimes he just danced. In his stocking feet and his work clothes or barefoot wearing fine linen he would dance in silence, moving to music that only he could hear. Sometimes I thought that I could hear it, too, like it was pouring out of him with every movement of his body. My eyes drank in every graceful shape of him.

He convinced me once or twice, against my better judgement, to ride Shadow with him. I’d clung to the saddle as if my life depended on it, even though he kept one arm around my waist. It was terrifying, but exciting.

He taught me how to shoot his pistol. That was also terrifying. And also exciting.

Everything about Victor was terrifying and exciting.

All summer long we grew closer as friends, but I never called him Victor and I would never let him call me Yuuri.

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Winter, 1888 - Y.K.*

What does it mean to be loved by someone? What does it mean to love someone in return?

These are the two questions that have occupied my mind for the better part of a month. I turn them over in my head on an endless loop.

Sometimes in the evenings I catch myself just staring at Victor thinking to myself, This man loves
He’s whispered it to me many times, making my ear tingle and my skin prickle with heat. He’s said it against my bare skin when we lie close to each other at night. He’s even shouted it at me a time or two from the porch while I was working outside.

Every time he says it, it’s startling.

This man loves me. This man cherishes me in a way no other person ever has. But what does that mean? As soon as I start to grasp for the meaning of Victor’s love, I find myself lost in a bewildering maze of intangible emotions.

There are questions. There is uncertainty. There is doubt. So much doubt.

Yet he keeps telling me, I love you, even though I have never, even once, said it back.

Do I doubt my feelings for him? No. I know I love him. I ache with loving him. Every touch, every glance, every dark night spent beside him, tells me I love him.

So why is it that my emotions are spun up inside me like a web that I’m caught in? The more I struggle inside myself the more stuck I become, unable to break free and share them with him. Unable to cast them aside. Unable to do anything but wonder what purpose any of this could serve.

If I tell him I love him, it will only hurt that much more when I become just another of his past lovers.

I’m startled out of my thoughts by the sudden appearance of Yuri coming down the path from the minshuku. It snowed heavily last night and I’ve been outside the better part of the morning ruminating on my usual train of thought as I clear the snow from the inn yard and the path to the road. Though to what purpose I don’t know. It’s not as if the road will be clear or as if anyone is coming. The doctor was here again last week to check on Victor. I don’t expect him again for a while.

Still, I’ve found that manual labor is something of a distraction.

I straighten up, looking at the young Russian boy as he trudges towards me, bundled up against the cold and the snow. I can’t see his face well under his large, fur lined hat, but I know he is glowering at me. Ever since Victor’s confession Yuri has done nothing but glower at me.

Weeks of glowering are wearing thin.

“Are you headed to Korsakovsk?” I ask, my breath puffing out in a white cloud.

“No, I’m going to the moon, Katsuki,” he sneers. “Of course I’m going to Korsakovsk. Where else would I go on this god forsaken shit hole of an island?”

He pushes past me on the narrow part of the path I’ve managed to clear of snow. “Besides. I’m sick of sitting around watching Victor make moony faces at you while you play shy and innocent. It’s disgusting.”

I blush to the tips of my ears. “I am not playing shy and innocent!” I bluster. “I’m just... not used to the attentions of someone like Victor.”

Yuri snorts and turns to look back at me, his green eyes bright under the fold of his hat. “Well, don’t worry. They won’t last long. He’s forgotten more lovers than you could count on your fingers and toes together. You won’t be any different.”
His words speak to all of the fears I’ve let build up inside me these past weeks. It feels like being stabbed in the guts. But what surprises more than how much it hurts is how angry it makes me.

My eyes sting with unshed tears and my face stings with the cold. “You are a bitter, hateful boy,” I snap.

That makes him smile. “You don’t know the half of it. Enjoy your night alone with Victor. I’m sure he’s looking forward to being disappointed by you again.” He turns away, waving a hand dismissively as he continues on towards the road.

I take in a sharp breath, the cold air piercing my lungs like needles. “You don’t have to hate me just because you’re afraid of losing him. It’s not as if I’m trying to take him away from you!” I shout, knowing just as well as he does where to hit to make it hurt.

Yuri freezes and then turns around with a snarl, reaching down to grab a handful of snow, which he throws at my face. Most of it dissipates before it hits me. “As if you could! You think you could take him from me? I dare you to try, you bumpkin piece of shit!”

Before I know what’s happening Yuri’s launched himself at me, pushing me down into the snow with a ferocious growl. He shoves snow inside the hood and neck of my Gilyak parka. “I’m his brother!” he snarls. “He will never care about you more than he cares about me. You have no idea what we’ve been through. What he’s done for me!”

I splutter, trying to fend off Yuri’s hands as he pushes more snow onto my face. It’s like he’s trying to blot me out with it. I struggle to push him off, but it’s hard to get any leverage in the deep snow bank.

“Just because you have a pretty fucking face,” he growls, “doesn’t mean anything! I won’t let you keep him here. I won’t let you give him a reason to stay on this fucking prison island.” He grabs the front of my parka and shakes me, pulling me up from the snow drift. My head is spinning and I’m glad I left my spectacles inside. “He promised me we would leave this place together. I will not let him break that promise to me for you!”

I cough and furiously push against him, shoving his chest as hard as I can. “Get off of me!”

Yuri sprawls backwards with a gasp of surprise. He obviously didn’t expect me to be as strong as I am. He catches himself and kicks at me, spraying snow in my face again. “Go fuck yourself!”

We stare at each other furiously. There is snow inside the neck of my thick parka and in my hood, which I push back angrily, pulling clumps of snow out of my dark hair. “As if I would be jealous of you,” he bristles, scrambling to get up. “You call me a little boy, but look at yourself. You don’t know how to love Victor like a man,” he sneers. “All you can do is coyly bat your big brown eyes at him and blush. He’ll get bored of you. He gets bored of all of them.”
Yuri turns away from me abruptly, trudging up the path towards the road. I sit in the snowbank for a few moments longer and then swear under my breath, yanking my hood back up. “You think I don’t know that?” I mutter to myself.

I try to go back to my work, but I’m freezing cold now and wet inside my parka, the melting snow soaking into my short, padded top. I start to shiver and can’t stop. I have to go inside.

I strip out of my wet parka and boots in the vestibule, shivering as I wrap my arms around myself.

“What happened? I heard shouting.” Victor’s voice carries through the sliding door.

My face is red with cold and anger and embarrassment. “It’s nothing,” I call back, standing there in my wet clothing. I hiss as a runnel of ice cold water drips down my spine.

I can’t stand here in the vestibule. It’s nearly as cold here as it is outside. But I don’t want Victor to see me like this either. My frustration wells up inside of me and I scrub at my face, trying desperately to hold back my tears.

“Yuuri?”

I hear the familiar sound of Victor crawling across the tatami, dragging his cast along. He’s gotten rather creative with his mobility lately. There’s a grunt and the door slides back. Victor peers up at me, pushing himself up on his hands as he sits on his good hip.

“What are you doing standing out here?”

“Nothing. I was just... My clothes are wet, so I was... thinking.”

“Yuuri, are you crying?”

“No! I’m not crying.” I step up into the main room, stepping over Victor as I try to make my way to the side room so I can change. And hide myself.

He looks after me, bewildered by my brusqueness. “Where are you going? Why are you all wet?” I hear the door slide shut. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, I just need to change.” I’m almost to the door.

“But how did you get all wet in the first place?” he asks again.

I wheel around, frayed to the very end of my rope. “Your little brother tried to smother me in a snowbank in a fit of jealous rage! Or maybe he was just trying to freeze me to death. He kept shoving snow in my face and parka. That’s how I got all wet.”

Victor’s eyes grow round and he blinks at me owlishly. “Yuri did that?” He starts to laugh. “How amusingly childish.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, it was hilarious. As was being accused of trying to steal you away from him to trap you on Sakhalin forever like some black widow! While also being told I have no chance of doing so, because I’m just an impotent child that can’t satisfy you, and won’t be able to hold your interest any longer than any of your hundreds of other lovers have! As if I needed him to tell me that!”

Victor’s eyebrows raise almost to his hairline. We stare at each other, and in horror I realize that I just said all of that out loud.
Before he can say anything or before I can burst into tears, I turn around and reach for the door.

“Yuuri.” His voice has that low tender quality that makes my legs weak. “Come here and talk to me.”

I want to tell him that I don’t want to talk right now, but it feels cowardly. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, fingers pausing on the door frame. He’s asked me to be open with him, to let myself draw closer to him. I told him I would try, but have I really?

I swallow and steel my nerves. “Alright. I just want to change first.” My voice sounds thin even to me. I glance back at him over my shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

He looks after me as I disappear into the east room. It’s cold and dim and quiet in here. My grandparents’ shrine is set in the tokonoma near the window. I’ve always liked this room. It has a peaceful feeling to it and smells like incense.

The smell reminds me that it will be New Year’s Eve soon. Victor will be here with me for shougatsu. I don’t know why, but the thought suddenly makes my chest hurt and it feels difficult to breathe for a moment.

I manage a few deep breaths, and then take my time changing into a clean yukata and warm, padded haori. I don’t bother putting my spectacles back on. They’ll probably just get fogged up with tears.

As I change I think about Victor, waiting patiently in the other room. Waiting patiently for these past weeks, and for how long before that? I think back on our relationship through the spring and summer and fall. When did I start to feel this deep, aching feeling for him? I think it was the very first time I saw him dance.

And what about Victor? When did he start to fall in love with me? Was it love rather than pity that kept bringing him to my door even back then? Even before that awful day I found him on the roadside?

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Autumn 1888 -Y.K.

The day of Victor’s accident was normal until I heard the gunshot.

It wasn’t common to hear guns within earshot of the minshuku. It happened occasionally when the settlers from Korsakovsk went out hunting or when an escaped convict was unlucky enough to get caught in the forest nearby. But I had never heard a gunshot so close before.

Troubled and curious I stepped outside, wondering what was happening so close to my home. I ventured as far as the road, and might not have ventured any further if I hadn’t seen Shadow standing some ways down the icy roadway, his ears twitching back and forth as he pawed nervously.

Victor was not in the saddle.

I still didn’t like Victor’s horse, but I’d become more familiar with him over the past months. He eyed me suspiciously as I approached, picking my way carefully along the icy ruts. It had snowed lightly through the morning, no more than a dusting, but it made the going that much more treacherous on the frozen ground.

It took a few attempts, but eventually the beast allowed me to grasp his reigns. I was filled with a sense of foreboding as I looked down the road. I didn’t see anything, but it curved not too far away
and my view was obstructed by the forest.

“Mr. Nikiforov?!” I called, carefully leading the horse behind me. I could see smudges in the light snow cover from his hooves, so I knew it had come up the road from the west, towards the bend.

When I cleared the bend I saw him lying several yards away, halfway in the road. Fear leapt from my guts to my throat.

“Mr. Nikiforov!” The horse fought me as I tried to run to his side, so I let go of the reins and ran to him, crouching at his side. “What’s happened? I heard a gunshot. Are you shot?”

I cradled his head up off the ground, only to find my hand become warm and sticky with blood where it touched him. He was barely conscious. There was blood under his head and it stained some of his ashen hair crimson. It took me a moment to realize there was also blood coming out of his tall boot. His blue eyes had a glazed look to them and it seemed he could barely keep his eyelids open.

“N-no...” he rasped. “There was... a bear. I shot... The horse... fell on me.” His hand twitched toward the ditch and I saw his pistol lying in the frozen scrub.

I looked over his body more thoroughly. As relieved as I was that he hadn’t been shot, I couldn’t keep down the sense of panic rising into my throat as I realized just what his leg looked like. “Your leg...”

“Broken. I’m certain. And... my ribs.”

“Stop talking,” I said immediately as a tinge of pink stained the corner of his lips.

I took several deep breaths to calm myself. Living in a place like Sakhalin all my life, I wasn’t completely ignorant of what to do for an injured man. But I knew he was going to need the help of a real doctor, and soon.

I touched his face. It was cold. I touched his fingers. They were colder. I had to get him somewhere warm.

I shrugged out of my haori and laid it over him. “Mr. Nikiforov,” I cupped his cheek in my hand and turned his face towards me, waiting for him to focus on me. “Try to stay awake. I’m going to find something to splint your leg.”

“Kat- Katsuki...”

“Shhh. I’ll be right back.” I went first to collect Victor’s pistol, and then ducked into the forest off the road.

Fallen branches were abundant, so it didn’t take me long to find something serviceable. Growing up in the near wilderness, all the villagers had learned the basics of first aid and triage. Running wild in the forests and bluffs as children scrapes and sprains and breaks had been common. And they’d been even more so among the adults who wrestled with fishing nets and felled trees and ran trap lines.

In that moment my teachings came back to me with unexpected clarity, and I knew with a confidence that was uncharacteristic just what to do.

Using my own sash and a couple leather ties from Shadow’s saddle I splinted Victor’s leg as best I could given what I had to work with. I was thankful for his stiff, tall riding boot, which acted like a splint for his lower leg. I had no idea where his leg was broken or in how many places. All I could do was stabilize it as best I could, hoping it would suffice.
He made small sounds of pain as I worked, but I thought that was better than if he’d fallen silent.

“Mr. Nikiforov?” I said softly, but firmly, turning his face to look at me again. He was so pale. My heart trembled in my chest and I felt like I might be sick. But I didn’t have time for that and neither did he. “You have to get up now. I’m going to help you, but it’s not going to be pleasant. But you have to get up. Alright?”

He swallowed and I smiled at him as he nodded.

It wasn’t easy getting Victor on his feet. I hated every moment of it, knowing that he must be in incredible pain. But he kept a stoic face, and cried out only through clenched teeth. By the time we were upright he was sweating and shaking.

“It’s going to be alright,” I said, not having any idea if I was telling the truth or not.

The horse, much to my surprise, now proved himself to be a useful creature. I doubted he had any sense of guilt over having caused his master’s plight, but he presented himself, allowing Victor to cling to the saddle as I maneuvered to crouch in front of him.

“I’ll carry you on my back. Put your arms around my neck,” I said, looking back at him.

He looked confused and a little delirious. “Are you strong enough? Wouldn’t the horse be better?”

“How are you going to get up there? I’m strong enough to carry you on my back, but I’m not strong enough to lift you into a saddle. Please, Mr. Nikiforov, trust me. We need to get you inside so I can go get you real help.”

He hesitated a moment and then with a little cry of pain, limped forward, practically falling against me. As soon as his arms caught around my neck I had my arms looped under his thighs, lifting his feet from the ground as I started forward. He made another sound of pain in my ear. I could hear his breath, rasping and erratic. He didn’t feel heavy at all.

“I’m sorry. I know you’re in a lot of pain. Please, bear with it. It’s not far.”

I have never been so happy before or since to enter the minshuku. Victor had gone concerningly limp against my back, his head lolling against my shoulder. I didn’t know if his state of unconsciousness was good news, but it did make rolling him off my back and laying him out next to the irori relatively painless. For both of us, I hoped.

I tried to wake him again, but he only muttered unintelligibly, his eyelids fluttering a little. In the end all I could do was cover him in a thick futon blanket, stoke the irori and go for help.

It was the first and only time I’d ridden a horse by myself. I don’t have a very good recollection of exactly how I managed to get the beast under my control and get myself into the saddle, but I knew that the faster I got to the Consulate the better chance Victor would have of surviving, and this fueled my determination.

Once I got there, the medic from Kusun-Kotan could be dispatched to the minshuku and a messenger could be sent to Korsakovsk to summon their physician. These were the thoughts that drove me as I clung in terror to Shadow’s reins, sawing them back and forth with little to no idea of how to actually control the animal.

But we made it somehow, and I was more than happy to pass the beast off to the medic, who quickly collected his medical bag and raced back to the minshuku. I was a little jealous of his obvious ability to ride a horse much better than I could. Shadow was probably relieved to be rid of me.
When I’d explained the whole story and the Consul had sent someone to fetch the physician from Kosakovsk, I hurried back to the minshuku on foot. The days were growing shorter and shorter and even though it was only early evening it was already almost dark by the time I arrived.

The medic had administered an herbal sedative, wrapped Victor’s ribs, and bandaged his head where it struck the ground in the fall. But he had not made any attempt to further treat his broken leg. He said he knew only that the break was complicated and that it was best to leave it to the Russian physician as he would be far more trained in such things.

I didn’t argue with him. Instead I made tea and soup and then knelt at Victor’s side as we waited. Victor hovered at the edge of consciousness. His breaths were raspy and shallow. Each time he took a breath I felt pain in my own body.

Holding his cold hands between my own I talked to him softly about nothing in particular, but I liked the sense that my voice was keeping him from drifting too far away. Occasionally I was rewarded by a faint quirk of his lips or a brief opening of his sky colored eyes.

It was over an hour later when the physician arrived, escorted by the man who’d been sent to fetch him. Not too long after Mr. Bely and Suzuyama-san also appeared. I couldn’t remember the last time I had so many people in the minshuku. But at that time it just felt like they were all in the way.

The physician was taking his time examining Victor’s leg and pondering over it. He’d had to cut him out of his boot and pants. The shape of the exposed leg was all wrong and the bone had broken the shallow skin of his shin. His lower leg was covered in sticky, clotting blood. I couldn’t look at it for more than a moment. Instead I kept my eyes trained on Victor’s face.

He was so pale he almost looked gray. His lips had a blue tinge to them and they appeared thin in his drawn face. He came awake about halfway through the physician’s prodding examination, blue eyes fluttering open and immediately he jerked in pain and confusion, taking a rattling, gasping breath.

“Keep him still!” the physician barked.

I put my hands on Victor’s shoulders and pushed him down hard against the tatami. He stared up at me, eyes wild and scared. “It’s alright, Mr. Nikiforov! The doctor is here. Look at my eyes. Just look at me.”

After a brief moment he seemed to come to his senses as he gulped for air, but there was still fear in his eyes. “Mr. Katsuki... what’s happening?”

“You fell from your horse. You broke your leg. Do you remember?”

He looked up at me blearily and then his vision seemed to clear for a moment. “You saved me.”

I smirked faintly, shaking my head. “I don’t know if I’d go that far. The doctor is the one who will save you.”

“No, it was you,” he murmured and then slipped away a little again.

I watched his face go slack and then jerked my head up as I realized I was being addressed. The physician was holding an amber bottle out to me, trying to get me to take it. “Make him drink this. Several good swallows if you can. Then chase it with some alcohol. Setting the bone isn’t going to be pleasant.”

“What is it?” I asked cautiously as I took the bottle.
“It’s laudanum,” he replied tersely. “Just do as I say and then get ready to hold him down.”

That sentence filled me with trepidation, but I managed to get Victor’s head up and with a little coaxing and by stroking his throat I got him to swallow as much of the liquid as I could. Mr. Bely handed me a bottle of vodka, which I also managed to get into Victor with some effort. He seemed dead to the world after that.

Until the doctor started setting his bones.

I had nightmares about it for days, even weeks after. Victor’s body jerking rigidly as he cried out hoarsely in delirious pain. The doctor jerking on his leg, getting the other men to pull and twist. The sound of the bones grinding together and snapping into place. The look of fear and pain in Victor’s eyes as I held his chest and arms down with all of my might. The next day I would see that I’d left bruises.

Thankfully either the laudanum and vodka I’d given him or the pain itself drew him back into unconsciousness before the end. By the time Victor’s leg was bandaged and securely splinted I was utterly exhausted physically and emotionally.

Still I went through the mechanical process of serving tea to the men who now conferred with one another over Victor’s state. I paid little attention to what the men were saying, preferring simply to watch Victor’s pale face and chest, making sure it kept rising and falling.

This man was precious to me, and I was very afraid he was going to die in my home.

“Mr. Katsuki?”

The sound of my name drew my attention away from Victor once again, and I looked over at the gathered men. “Yes?”

It was Mr. Bely who spoke up. “We decided that, with your agreement, it would be best to leave Mr. Nikiforov here for the time being. His state is fragile and moving him might upset his injuries. Mr. Suzuyama has agreed that it would be alright for him to remain in the care of the Consulate for now.”

I glanced at Suzuyama-san who just nodded to me. I looked back at Mr. Bely and then bowed to him and the other men. “Then I will do my best. Please leave him in my care.”

The men made a collective sound of relief and approval and then, just like that, began to dissipate.

Only the physician approached me again. “I will leave you with some medicines. It’s likely he will have fever and chills on and off. This,” he pressed a blue bottle into my hand, “will help with the fever. You can mix it into drink or spoonfeed it to him. Not too much at a time. This,” he pressed the amber bottle into my other hand, “is the laudanum. It’s good for pain and as a sedative. If he becomes very feverish he may have delusions. Give this to him and he’ll go right to sleep again.”

He gave me a number of other instructions and told me he’d be back the next morning with some additional supplies to aid me in Victor’s care, and the equipment he’d need to make a cast for Victor’s leg. Until then I was to try not to move him, and to give him tea or water if he woke up again, but no food for the time being.

Then he left with Mr. Bely, who’d gone outside already. I imagine the close quarters of the main room filled with the smell of blood and fear and sweat had gotten to everybody. I saw them off from the vestibule, glad to see they were taking Victor’s horse with them.
I went back inside and, not knowing what else to do, knelt at Victor’s side. He was still and breathing relatively normally, if still shallowly. I adjusted the futon blanket around him, tucking it close to make sure he kept warm. I checked his forehead for fever and then just sat, watching his sleeping face.

That was the first moment I truly understood the depth of what I felt for Victor, his importance in my life, and the utter devastation I would feel if I lost him.

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Winter, 1888 - Y.K.*

I take a deep breath and step back into the main room, sliding the door shut behind me. Victor has dragged himself back over to the *oki-gotatsu*.

“Do you... want some tea, or something?” I hedge.

“No. I want you to come sit and talk to me.”

I swallow and take another deep breath before walking towards the *irori*. Rather than sit under the *oki-gotatsu* with him, I kneel formally on the tatami, facing him as he turns towards me. I look at my lap, hands curled on my thighs. For several long moments we’re silent.

“Did Yuri really say those things to you?” he asks after a moment.

I nod a little. “I’m not angry with him. I know he’s just worried about you, and... he doesn’t like me. It’s been the two of you for a long time, so I understand if he feels like I’m intruding.”

Victor snorts softly. I can’t see his face, but I can imagine it. “You’re too forgiving, Yuuri. He has no right or reason to be rude or cruel to you. He has a great talent for both rudeness and cruelty. I will speak with him.”

I look up finally. “You don’t have to. It’s not like he said anything I didn’t already know.”

Victor stares at me with an expression I’ve never seen before. I can’t tell what it means. We’re quiet again for a long moment and then he sighs and furrows his brows, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I thought I understood what was happening between us, but I don’t. I don’t understand anything about you or what you are feeling, or what I have done to make you so distrustful of my feelings. I thought if I just kept telling you, kept reassuring you then they would reach you. But there is something in between us that I don’t know how to overcome, because I don’t know what it is. Why won’t you tell me?”

I frown and look down at my lap again. I don’t know where to begin or how to even make what I feel make sense.

“Is is... because I’m a man?” he asks after a moment, and I can hear the trepidation in his voice.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t care about that.”

I hear him sigh in relief. “Then because I’m a foreigner?”

I purse my lips. The difference in our cultures makes things complicated, but it’s not really insurmountable. I shake my head again. “No. I’ve been around foreigners my whole life. I don’t care about that either.”
“Because I was a convict? Or because I’ve had many other lovers? What is it? Yuuri, please tell me.” His voice has an almost desperate, pleading quality I’ve never heard before.

I swallow and look up, meeting his eyes. The expression on his face makes my heart ache. “I don’t know how to explain,” I begin.

“Please, try.” The urgency in his voice makes me feel guilty.

I take a moment, looking around the room, at anything but him as I collect my thoughts. Finally my gaze settles back on my lap. “It’s not anything about you in particular, or anything that you’ve done to make me doubt you. It’s my fault that I can’t just accept your feelings and be happy. I’ve always been like this.” I look up at him. “I can’t just be happy when something good happens. It’s like... I can’t accept that something good would happen to me. I have to think of all the ways something good will turn into something bad and it ruins everything, because I can’t stop thinking about it.”

He studies my face intently. “What sorts of bad things do you think about?”

“I think about how disappointing it would be to love someone like me. How I must pale in comparison to the beautiful people you’ve loved before. How one day I’ll just be another former lover. Maybe one you won’t even think about at all once you’ve left Sakhalin.”

I look down at my lap again, fiddling with the fabric of my yukata. “Yuri told me about your promise to him, but even before that I knew there was no way you would stay here once you were allowed to leave. And even before then you might... will probably get tired of me. Once you’re better and go back to Korsakovsk and can resume your normal life. It’ll be easy for you to drift away.”

I feel my emotions welling up inside of me and I rub at my eyes with the back of my hand, not wanting to cry, but feeling like it’s inevitable. “I know it’s silly to worry about something like that now. But I can’t help it. I... I had gotten used to being all alone here, and now... now I think about you leaving and about being alone again, and I... I can’t stand it. It’s the most miserable feeling in the world. H-how much worse would it be if I really let myself admit that I was in love with you?” I let out a soft sob, my throat aching from trying to hold more back.

It’s quiet again for a few moments. A coal pops in the irori.

“This is what you’ve been thinking about for almost a month?” he asks me softly.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I know it’s foolish, but I can’t help it. I’ve never felt like this for anyone before and I’m terrified to embrace it only to lose it.”

“Do you think I’m not also terrified?”

The question takes me off guard and I look up, meeting his eyes. Victor’s fear had never crossed my mind. His expression is so full of longing that it is almost pitiable, and it shakes me down into my core.

“I’m the one who has thrown open my heart, who tells you every day how I feel. Every man fears rejection and the pain of lost love. Do you think I’m any different? Why? Because I’ve had many lovers, because I lived a privileged life once? Do you think my feelings will only last so long as I am in your care?”

I choke on my emotions and bow my head, squeezing my eyes shut. A few tears roll down my cheeks. “All of that.”

He leans towards me, and I feel his fingers wrap around mine. My hand curls reflexively around his.
“You are right. I’ve had many lovers and I have left them all behind. I have left my entire life behind. I can’t go back to that life. And no matter how privileged and glamorous it might have been, it was also an empty life. Please believe me when I tell you, that I have never loved anyone before you. You give me more than all of my admirers in St. Petersburg. I could never forget about you. You are my first love.”

I cover my mouth with my hand. His beautiful words fill me with a happiness so great that it is painful.

“Yuuri, please look at me.”

Tentatively I lift my face and raise my eyes. My heart is hammering so wildly that I can hardly breathe. His expression is so full of tenderness and longing that it takes my breath away.

“Do you love me, Yuuri?”

I make a choking sound as I open my mouth. For a moment I’m so breathless I can’t even speak. But then I manage to gasp in a breath.

“Yes. I love you, Victor.” Even though I’d known I loved him all along, saying the words releases a stone in my chest. I feel trembly and light. I feel free of the tangled web inside my mind.

I love him. He loves me. We are in love. It doesn’t have to be more complicated than that. Not right now.

He smiles at me softly and laces his fingers into mine. “Do you know how long it will be before I can leave Sakhalin?”

I swallow and shake my head.

He smirks. “Seven years.” He chuckles. “Yuri hates you over a promise I can’t even keep for seven years. Isn’t that silly?”

I blink, the last remnants of my tears falling from my lashes. I laugh a little, flushing, feeling silly myself for worrying over something that now seems so remote.

He squeezes my hand. “A lot can happen in seven years. By that time you may be the one who has grown sick of me.” He chuckles. “Or you may have left to rejoin your family. Or just maybe,” he leans towards me a little, his beautiful blue eyes hooded and soft, “you will be so in love with me that you will come away with me and we will leave Sakhalin together.”

His words fill me with excitement and trepidation. I stare at him, wide eyed and flushed. I don’t know what to say.

He draws my hand off my lap, bringing it to his lips. I can feel his warm breath tickling my fingers. “You said that a kiss was like a promise, didn’t you?” He presses his lips to my fingers, closing his eyes. “Then I promise that I truly love you. That you will never be just another lover. I will never forget you or leave you behind.”

His words are everything I need them to be. My fear and nervousness are not gone, but they are not strong enough to trap me anymore.

My fingers tremble as I pull them away from his lips, sliding them onto his face to caress his cheek. I swallow, studying his face as he turns it into my touch. His long, light eyelashes that nearly touch his cheek bones. His sharp, straight nose. His high forehead. The way his mouth curls up at the corners
like he is about to share a secret. He is so beautiful and I ache with how much I love him.

I swallow, taking a deep breath. I have been cowardly. I want to be bold. To show him my love is not just a word.

I move closer to him, pulling his face towards mine. His eyes flutter open and we look at each other as I lean closer. Our foreheads touch. I feel his breath, suddenly uneven, on my face.

“If you’re going to make me a promise with a kiss, do it properly.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for a heartbeat longer and then simply melt together.

My first kiss is dazzling. His lips are perfectly fitted to mine like they were made only for me. His hair is soft between my fingers when I caress them. He pulls me as close as he can, his hand on the back of my neck, guiding my movements expertly with his mouth and touch.

I breathe him in. His skin smells sweet and a little sweaty.

I taste him, metallic and warm on my tongue.

We are awkward in our blind attempts to get closer to one another. Him caught halfway under the oki-gotatsu, unable to move his broken leg. Me in my fumbling inexperience. We are left giggling and breathless. It is wonderful.

We gaze at each other, each of us flushed and bright eyed. He strokes my cheek and runs his thumb over my lips.

“I gave you my promise. What is yours?” he asks me softly.

“But to be afraid,” I breathe, but then shake my head, smiling a little “No. That I will love you, even though I am afraid.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Hakama and kimono - If you're like me when you think of hakama and kimono you think of the wide legged, pleated hakama pants and fancy elaborate kimono worn by geisha and at formal occasions like modern Japanese weddings. However, the terms hakama and kimono can actually refer to a wide variety of different styles of traditional Japanese clothing that vary depending on the season, formality of the occasion, and other factors like social class. A yukata is a cotton, lightweight kimono worn primarily in the summer or at home as comfortable indoor wear. This is what Yuuri wears most of the time, as he's usually at the minshuku. But it wouldn't make sense to depict Yuuri as wearing yukata out and about during colder or inclement weather, so he is wearing a more formal ensemble at the Consulate this time around.

3. Units of measurement/distance - In this chapter Yuuri describes the relative distances between the minshuku, the Consulate, and Korsakovsk in miles. This is NOT historically accurate, however, I'm going to write using the Imperial measurement system (inches and miles), because I want to make it easy for the majority of readers (apologies to those who use the metric system) to conceptualize distances and physical
space without getting really confused and bogged down in unit conversions. One reason it would be extra confusing if I used the historically accurate systems of measurement is because at this period of time both Japan and Russia were using their own special measurement systems that were neither the Imperial system nor the metric system. The Japanese used a system called "shakkanhou" and the Russians were using a system based on cubits, which were called "arshins." The shakkanhou system was adopted from China around the 8th century AD, and has a base measurement of the "shaku" which is approx 18 cm or the average length from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger. The old Russian system was loosely base on Imperial measurements with today's standard inches and feet, which were called "duyim" and "fut," respectively. But that's about where the similarities end. The "arshin" was considered the equivalent of a yard, but was actually only 2.33 feet (rather than 3 feet) and a milia (a mile) was 24,500 feet (rather than today's 5,280 feet). Yuuri probably would have been familiar with the Russian system as well as the shakkanhou system. So while, yes, I do strive for historical accuracy I do not want to spend a lot of time getting into distance/measurement conversions in the body of the story, especially for those people who prefer to skip the historical notes. But if you want to know how Yuuri would have described the distance in historically accurate terms: the minshuku is a little less than two verstas north of Kusun-Kotan, and about three verstas from Korsakovsk in either direction.

3. Nobakama - Nobakama is a style of hakama that are traditionally worn by field workers and other laborers. Unlike other styles of hamaka, which often have wide or blousey style pant legs, nobakama are tight to the leg from around the knee down. This is for ease of motion during work. Sometimes these are also referred to as yamabakama (mountain hakama).

4. Nabe - Japanese hot pot. (We know Victor loves hot pot. lol)

5. Yuuri's Gilyak Parka - Winters in Sakhalin are much colder than your average winter in Japan, so it made sense to me that the local Japanese population would have adopted some of the indigenous peoples' warm winter clothing through trade. The Gilyaks (also called the Nivkh) were one of the indigenous people of Sakhalin (along with the Ainu and Oroks). The Gilyaks had a lot of contact with and did a lot of trading with the island's settlers. So Yuuri bundles up in an animal skin and fur parka rather than more traditional Japanese cold weather clothing made of cloth or straw.

6. Tokonoma - a recessed alcove in traditional Japanese rooms where the house's most valuable items or other objects of importance are displayed.

7. Shougatsu - Traditional Japanese New Year celebration. In 1873 Japan officially began celebrating the New Year on January 1st, according to the Gregorian calendar (January - December), rather than the Chinese lunar calendar. So at the time of this story, 1888, Yuuri would be celebrating New Year on January 1.

For more historical info and additional notes visit www.martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com
Part 5: Victor

Chapter Notes

Hi friends! Welcome to Chapter 5 of Love in Exile. As you may have noticed the rating has gone up to "M" with this chapter. As a head's up that rating is likely to go up again.

I realize that starting the fic out without a strong rating may mean that some people may have started reading the story not realizing it would eventually include mature and explicit sexual content. Seeing as this is the fanfiction community I don't really anticipate that being an issue, but if you are a reader who IS uncomfortable seeing this kind of content, but want to be able to continue the story, please send me a message or leave me a comment and I may consider publishing (or otherwise making available) a censored version of this and future chapters that include sexual content.

In other news I have finished outlining the rest of the story. If things go to plan (and every writer knows they don't always) the entire fic should be 10 chapters. I'm hoping having he outline makes it a bit easier for me to write and produce updates more quickly, but we'll see.

Thanks everyone for your continued interest in the story, and for every lovely comment and word of support I've received. I love you all. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Winter, 1888 - V.N.

Yuuri smells like incense and woodsmoke and sleep. He fits against my body perfectly, his back against my chest, my arm around his middle. Yesterday seems like a dream, but he is the proof that it was real. I smile into his dark hair as my chest squeezes with delightful emotions.

The front of Yuuri’s yukata is completely open. My hand slides against the warm, bare skin of his belly. And then lower.

He comes awake with a startled little gasp, jerking against me. There is a heartbeat of silence and then, “Victor!” His voice is a rushed hiss through his teeth.

“Good morning, Yuuri,” I murmur in his ear. My hand moves and he squirms. His fingers close lightly around my wrist.

“Victor, what... are you doing?” he huffs.

“Just saying good morning,” I purr as sweetly as I can.

“Nnn... You shouldn’t do that.” His fingers tighten a little, but he doesn’t try to pull my hand away.

“Why? You seemed to enjoy it quite a lot last night.”

“That was-! We were... we’d been...” He lets out a hot huff of breath and I feel him shiver as I touch him. “It was nighttime, and... this is morning...”
“That seems like an arbitrary distinction.”

“It’s not!” he snaps, but he’s still squirming against me. “There’s a routine, and... Yuri will be back
today, and...” He stops for a moment, panting softly, “I need to... get up and clean, and... wash...”

Yuuri’s neck arches and he makes the most wonderful little noise.

“You can do all of those things when I’m done saying good morning.” I smile and press my face into
the crook of his neck, kissing him and breathing in his smell.

“This isn’t... a proper greeting,” he huffs, but the fingers around my wrist are now squeezing me in a
different way, unconsciously keeping tempo with my own fingers.

“It is a lover’s greeting,” I murmur. “Much better than a proper one.”

He doesn’t seem to have a rebuttal for that, and there is no more talking for a while, only breathing
and more of those little noises.

We had explored each others’ bodies for the very first time the night before. After our first kiss, all of
Yuuri’s inhibitions unraveled. I suppose he was not exaggerating when he told me a kiss was as
intimate as sex, because after we’d finally broached the kiss, Yuuri was swept along quite easily. Or
perhaps enthusiastically is a better word. He had that sweet nervousness all of the inexperienced
exhibit, but he was not reluctant to touch and be touched and to kiss and be kissed.

We didn’t make love. I think it’s best that is left for when my leg is free of this cursed cast. Until then
any efforts will probably leave both of us frustrated and embarrassed.

I can not bear the thought of our first love making being mediocre. I want it to be the most perfect
thing he has ever experienced.

For now this will be enough for both of us, I think.

By the time he comes Yuuri’s fingers are tangled in my hair and he is flushed to the tips of his ears.
He makes the sweetest noise and then pants beside me, open mouthed and glowing with the
remnants of his pleasure.

It is so gratifying it is almost intoxicating.

With a faint smile, his dark eyes hooded with sleep and sex, he turns his face towards mine, looking
over his shoulder. I prop myself up on my elbow and look down at him. “See? Better than a normal
good morning, wasn’t it?”

He chuckles and his already flushed cheeks become even pinker. His fingers relax in my hair and
flex against my scalp. “I guess it was.”

My eyes trace the lines of his face and then fall to his lips, which are bright with color, flushed from
his orgasm. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

This question seems to embarrass him more than necessary considering the circumstance. But after a
moment he squeezes his eyes shut and nods, tugging at my hair. So I kiss him. His body seems to
rise up off the futon a little as if my kiss makes him float.

As far as I’m concerned we could spend the rest of the day like this and never bother getting out of
bed. But Yuuri has other ideas, and before I can draw him back into more carnal endeavors he has
wriggled away from me with a giggle and rolled out of the futon. The way he ties his yukata closed
as he stands has an air of finality about it that makes me sigh with disappointment.

I roll onto my back and watch him as he starts to putter around, folding up his bedding and carrying it away, though I notice he strips the covering from the futon. Then he adds charcoal to the irori and starts to prepare breakfast. He never tells me to get up, but I can feel him willing me out of bed.

Finally with a sigh, I toss back my blankets and go through the usual struggle of using my crutch to get myself standing. Yuuri watches me surreptitiously from the irori. He knows I don’t want him to help me, and I know he desperately wants to. Or perhaps he is stealing glances, because I have absolutely nothing on. But probably it is because he wants to make sure I don’t fall over.

Taking a deep breath I begin to stiffly make my way towards the porch so I can relieve myself. I hate how the foot of my cast drags against the floor.

“Victor.”

I pause, looking over at Yuuri. He is watching me with a furrowed expression. “Yes, Yuuri?”

“Please, put something on before you go outside. It’s too cold for you to be naked on the porch.”

“But my yukata is...” I look around the room and see it lying in a heap not far from the door to the vestibule. It went quite a bit further than I thought it would when I tossed it aside last night. “It’s all the way over there.”

Yuuri rolls his eyes and then chuckles a little, getting up to retrieve the garment for me. He helps me into it and the way his hands linger on my skin is not lost on me. He reaches around my waist from behind to tie the sash closed with the same finality as his own. But he lingers, pressed against my back, hands resting on my stomach. I lean back against him with a soft sigh.

“It’s heaven to feel you so close,” I murmur softly.

His face presses against my shoulder and his arms tighten around me for a moment. Then he lets go, returning to his place beside the fire pit.

Breakfast is quiet and subdued, and we both seem to be lost in our own thoughts. Occasionally we catch one another staring at the other and then we smile and giggle. It’s like being a school boy. It’s been so long since I have felt anything like this.

After breakfast Yuuri prepares the bath for himself, starting the water heating in the ofuro. He helps me carefully make my way to the bathing room with him. We’ve bathed here together many times now, but it feels different today as we step down onto the wooden floor and he helps me disrobe.

Removed from the main room, which is warmed by the irori and the oki-gotatsu, it’s cold enough in here to see our breath in soft white puffs. Cold air comes up through the wooden floor boards, which are purposefully set apart from one another so that the bath water can drip down between them. I shiver and puff out a breath. Yuuri turns to face me, hands moving to my sash. I grasp them lightly, stopping them. He looks up at me quizzically.

“It’s cold,” I say, my voice petulant.

His eyebrow raises a little. “It’s always cold in here, Victor. You should be used to it by now.”

“I know, but... can’t you warm me a little first so I don’t feel it so much?”

He flushes so beautifully, and I can see his sharp little exhalation. But he acquiesces to my request,
wrapping his arms around me and lifting his face to mine so that I can kiss him softly on the lips. His arms are very steadying around me and his feet remain firmly planted on the floor. Even in this moment he is protecting me, holding me upright, guarding against the possibility I may lose my balance. I have never thought of myself as someone who needs to be protected, but I have also never felt safe like this with someone before.

My hands cup his face, cradling it like it is the most precious thing in the world.

“Are you warm yet?” he murmurs, his breath tickling my lips.

I smile and chuckle softly. “It will have to do. I sense your impatience.”

His lips press against mine again and I feel them quirk to one side as he smiles against my mouth. Then we carefully make our way across the cold boards towards the ofuro. He helps me out of my yukata and then down onto a low wooden stool just in front of the tub’s heating stove. It’s ambient warmth feels wonderful and I sigh contentedly, even as he pulls my casted leg awkwardly out to one side so it will remain dry.

For the first few weeks that I was in Yuuri’s care I was hardly able to do anything for myself, so I have been bathed by him a number of times by now. But it feels different today. There is a tingling anticipation in my skin as he pulls over a second stool and a bucket with soap and wash rags.

Lifting the wooden lid from the ofuro he fills the bucket with water, which steams pleasantly in the chilly air, and then proceeds to dump it in its entirety over my head. The shock of hot water and cold air makes me jerk and grumble, shivering as he readies another bucket full and then pours that over me as well.

Yuuri giggles. “You always look like I’m torturing you when we do this.”

I wrap my arms around myself, my wet hair hanging pitifully in my face. “It’s cold!”

“That water is hot!” he laughs.

“But the air is cold,” I retort. “You are lucky you get to sit in the bathtub.”

He chuckles. “Even if you could sit in the ofuro you’d still have to wash off first. Those are the rules.”

“That is a stupid rule. Who bathes before getting in the bathtub?” I shiver, closing my eyes and concentrating on the warmth of the stove on my back.

Yuuri fills the bucket one more time and then sets it down, sitting on the stool next to me. He soaks two washcloths and then drapes them over my shoulders. The heat of them feels heavenly. “Only everyone in Japan,” he responds with a smirk. “The ofuro isn’t for cleaning yourself. I’ve told you. It’s for relaxing.”

“When I have this stupid cast off I’m going to sit in your ofuro for an entire day.”

Yuuri begins to slowly wash my back, the soapy cloth moving over my skin in circular motions. “That’s fine with me, so long as you help me chop all of the wood it will take to keep it heated that long.”

I smirk at that. “Will you be chopping wood with me, wearing nothing but your pants?” I waggle my eyebrows at him and laugh.
“Not if it’s still winter, I won’t,” he answers matter of factly, missing my reference to our first meeting at the minshuku.

I chuckle a little and wait patiently for Yuuri to finish washing me.

My mind wanders absentely, and I think about all of the wood I chopped in Alexandrovsk. The endless stacks of logs. The bitter cold. The sounds and sights of human suffering all around me. It is distinctly unpleasant, as thinking of Alexandrovsk always is. I feel a small panicky surge and take a sharp breath as my heart is suddenly beating fast.

I press my hand to my chest.

“Victor?” The circular motions of the cloth pause and I can feel Yuuri peering at me. “Is something wrong?”

I swallow and shake my head. “No. I just... felt a little dizzy all of a sudden.” I look at him with a smile.

His expression tells me he’s not convinced, but after a moment he just purses his lips and removes the cloths from my shoulders. “Maybe the water is too hot.”

“Mmm. Maybe.”

Sakhalin Island, Alexandrovsk Post, Winter, 1887 - V.N.

I don’t remember at exactly what point I realized that Yuri and I had to get out of Alexandrovsk. Perhaps it was shortly after I almost beat a man to death for short changing me on his loan repayment. Or perhaps it was when the owner of the family bathhouse - a pleasant euphemism for the brothel - casually mentioned to me that beautiful young boys were scarce and likely to fetch high prices. Or perhaps there simply came a moment when I realized I would go insane if I had to listen to the sounds of human suffering first thing in the morning much longer.

Regardless of the impetus, I knew I had to get out of the life of degradation I’d become accustomed to in Alexandrovsk Post. Grankin and the other officials had so deeply entrenched me in the seedy workings of the settlement that I could see no way out other than to leave all together. But I was still a settled exile. I did not have the right to choose my own place of settlement. I was at the whims of the administration.

I might be able to easily secure resettlement within the Alexandrovsk District, but the only other settlement of any size was Duay, which by all accounts made Alexandrovsk actually look like Paris. Duay was a true prison settlement built around coal mines, the labor for which was all supplied by convicts and settlers who hired themselves out to take the place of convicts who could afford to buy their way out of physical labor. I heard horror stories of mine shafts so narrow a man had to hold his breath to get through. Of tunnels that flooded in the never ending rain. Everything covered in soot. The entire settlement enclosed by cliffs. No way out but the churning gray sea.

I’d heard of the other districts, the Tymovsk and Korsakovsk. The Tymovsk district was close to Alexandrovsk, though, and the settlements were small, and relatively in worse condition than the settlements of the Alexandrovsk district. They sent fewer fit settlers there and being on the eastern coast the climate was just as cold if not worse due to the cold currents of the Sea of Okhotsk. which by all accounts made Alexandrovsk look like paradise.

But Korsakovsk was a different matter. Firstly it was far to the south of Sakhalin in the area that had until relatively recently been occupied by the Japanese. The climate there - while still miserable - was
considerably fairer than in Alexandrovsk. Rumor also had it that the corruption of officials like Grankin and the District Governor of Alexandrovsk had not spread to Korsakovsk due to it being so far removed. It seemed like a place Yuri and I might be able to start over. I didn’t want him falling into the kind of life I had.

I considered for months how I could get a transfer approved. Bribery was always plausible, but I thought Grankin might consider me too valuable to his enterprise in the long term to accept even a large bribe. There was also blackmail to consider. I’d been privy to plenty of dark and dirty secrets and no small amount of the depravity of Alexandrovsk’s social elite. But the question was: would anybody care whether or not their dirty laundry was kept secret? Was any of it a secret in the first place?

Certainly none of them had enough shame to care about exposure to one another. And even if I was to threaten to inform the officials back in Russia of what was going on, I had my doubts that anyone either on Sakhalin or in Russia would care.

So this left me at an impasse of indecision, until I hit upon the thought that perhaps if I just asked and made the proposition seem beneficial to Grankin and his cronies, I might get what I wanted.

When I was a younger man I almost always got what I wanted. When had I lost my confidence that I could still do so?

So I went to Grankin’s one night after dinner. The winter had been especially harsh and the cold that night was the kind that bit right through whatever you were wearing and ate you down to the bones. Even bundled up in lambskin and fur I was visibly shivering when Grankin answered his door.

“Vitya, to what do I owe this surprise?” he greeted me jovially enough. He was wrapped in a velvet smoking jacket and hustled me inside before too much heat could escape through the open door.

“Good evening, Ivan. I’ve been wanting to speak with you. A miserable night like tonight seemed as good as any to do it.”

He chuckled at that. “Well at least you knew I wouldn’t be out, eh?”

He showed me to his sitting room, where I was glad to stand by his fireplace, politely declining to sit. He offered me a glass of vodka, which I did not decline.

“So, what is it you want to speak about? Someone giving you trouble I need to know about?”

I sipped my vodka, letting it’s flavor settle on my tongue as I shook my head. I swallowed slowly, letting the liquid set fire down my throat. “No. It’s more of a personal matter.”

Grankin’s eyebrow rose at that, but he didn’t say anything. I took another sip. Finally I looked at him steadily, and said simply, “I want to leave Alexandrovsk. I want to be transferred to the southern district. Yuri would go with me, of course.”

For a moment Grankin just stared at me as if he wasn’t sure he’d heard me correctly and then he let out a quick guffaw. His ponchy face jiggled a little with the sharp exhalation of air. “A transfer to Korsakovsk district? That’s what you came to talk to me about?” His eyes narrowed. “What on earth makes you think I would help you secure something like that? You do good work for me. I have no desire to see you leave Alexandrovsk.”

I took a deep breath and then another sip, nodding. “I assumed you would say something to that effect. But we’ve known each other nearly five years now, and, as you said, I have done a lot of good work for you. I consider you a friend, Ivan. I thought perhaps that would count for something.”
He grunted at that, and I saw his lips twist under his mustache. He wasn’t used to people dealing
with him plainly as I was, or appealing to his better nature. He swirled his drink in its glass. “What
reason do you have to want a transfer? You have everything you could want here in Alexandrovsk: a
good position, plenty of money, favor from the officials. Why move?”

I took my time answering, sipping my drink and letting the flavor diffuse in my mouth again. “It’s
warmer for one thing,” I said with a chuckle. Grankin snickered as well and we exchanged wry
smiles. Then I shrugged. “Really, it’s to do with Yuri. He’s small, as you’ve seen. The weather here
is hard on him, as is the outdoor work. His only other options here are working as a house servant or
following in my footsteps. And more to the point I’m afraid he’s going to get pulled into prostitution.
I’ve already received offers from one of the bath houses.”

Grankin snorted. “You think there is no hard labor, foul weather, or prostitution in Korsakovsk?”

I shook my head. “I know that Korsakovsk is run more above board than Alexandrovsk. I know that
things there are much stricter. All of our relations with Japan are managed there, so there’s more
opportunity for him to get clerical and government work. I want Yuri to go back to Russia some day.
He’s free, there’s no reason he shouldn’t, but I don’t want him going back with the mentality of a
criminal.”

Grankin’s brows raised at that. “And staying in Alexandrovsk will make him a criminal?”

I chuckled. “Won’t it? I’m a criminal. You’re a criminal. All of the officials here are criminals. Then
there are all of the convicts. Rapists, pedophiles, murderers. Growing up around nothing but
criminals, of course he will become a criminal.”

I saw him stiffen and his eyes darken a little at my words. He didn’t like being called a criminal, but
he knew the truth of the matter.

“You think things in Korsakovsk are so much better?” he sneered. “There are also convicts and
criminals there.”

“Of course. There are criminals all over this island. That’s its purpose. But you and I both know that
Korsakovsk doesn’t operate the same way Alexandrovsk does. There is very little criminal activity as
far as smuggling, gambling, and money lending there. Even the prostitution is on a much smaller
scale. No one has the kind of hold over Korsakovsk that you and the other officials have over
Alexandrovsk.”

Another grunt from Grankin. He was looking at me unpleasantly.

I took another sip of my vodka. “Which brings me to the second part of my proposition.” I looked
evenly at the paunchy man in the smoking jacket. “Were you to wish to expand some of your
business into the southern district you would need someone there you trusted to coordinate for you. I
could be that person. We could both get something out of my transfer.”

Now this gave Grankin pause. He examined me carefully, taking another sip of his vodka. “It is true
that we’ve had little luck expanding into the Southern district. Mr. Bely, the District Governor of
Korsakovsk does everything by the book. A true patriot to Mother Russia. And he is very hard on
those he discovers conducting illicit activities.” His eyes narrowed a bit. “You might find yourself in
a very unpleasant situation were I to take you up on this proposition and you were found out. Bely
would not hesitate to flog you and throw you back into prison. And a real prison this time. Not the
comfortable two years you spent here in your own house chopping wood now and then while you
worked for me.”
“I understand that,” I said. “But what is best for Yuri means a lot to me. Eventually I hope to convince my parents to adopt him so that I can send him back to St. Petersburg. At that time, if things are going poorly under this Bely’s watchful eye, I can always be transferred back to Alexandrovsk.” I grinned a little. “Besides, we both know how charming I can be. It shouldn’t be too hard for me to win the trust and affection of the Korsakovsk officials.”

Grankin smirked and chuckled at that. “That is true.”

“Of course I would need time to establish myself and those kinds of relationships before we began doing business. To put myself above suspicious.”

Grankin took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “I haven’t agreed to anything, Vitya. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

I shrugged. “Of course not. I’m just saying that I think it’s worth your time to consider. I want to protect Yuri, you want to increase your profits. We can help each other, as we have these past years.” I took the rest of my drink down in one swallow. “Just think about it, Ivan.”

He grunted again.

I set my glass on the fireplace mantle. “Thank you for the drink.”

“You could stay for another. No need to hurry off. It’s still cold outside.”

I chuckled and tugged my hat and gloves back on. “This is Sakhalin, my friend. It’s always cold outside.”

Grankin laughed and I said goodnight, showing myself out.

He took his time considering my proposal, and I didn’t push him too much on the subject, but I also made sure it never went completely out of his mind. Eventually, after discussing it with the District Governor and some of the other officials, they agreed it might be a good chance to try the waters in the southern district, and to see if establishment of new enterprises there - particularly in the smuggling of alcohol, which was outlawed on the island - might be possible.

So on a fine day in early spring, Yuri and I boarded a ship bound for Korsakovsk. Waving from the deck we bid farewell to the ‘Paris of Sakhalin.’

What Grankin and the others didn’t know was that I had no intention of assisting them with their dirty dealings once I actually got to Korsakovsk. Once I was out of their reach nearly 400 miles away, established, and under in the protective good graces of the upstanding Mr. Bely, I didn’t imagine there was much any of them were going to be able to do about it.

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Winter 1888 - V.N.*

Despite Yuuri’s fussing and worrying, Yuri didn’t return, leaving us with another night alone together. I show him something new with my mouth.

He makes us take another bath in the morning. It’s just as cold and just was wonderful as the one from the day before.

Now, tucked under the *oki-gotatsu*, I write a letter to my mother while Yuuri kneels behind me, idly combing my hair. The tenderness I feel in his fingertips is not new, but the way his touch fills me with this aching glow is.
“Victor?” he asks quietly after a while.

“Hmm?”

“Do you celebrate the New Year? Or, rather, how do Russians celebrate the New Year?”

I look up at that and his fingers still, his hands settling on my shoulders, and I grin.

“With a huge party. New Year’s is the most important holiday in Russia. It’s a time to spend with family and friends, give each other gifts, stay up late, and hope for a visit from Ded Moroz and Snegurochka. Of course that’s mainly for children,” I chuckle turning my head over my shoulder so I can see him. “Why?” I furrow my brows, suddenly realizing that I’ve completely lost track of the date. “Is it already New Year’s Eve?”

Yuuri chuckles, and he smiles almost bashfully. “In a couple days.”

My eyes widen. “Really? It didn't seem that late in the year already.” I try to track backwards over my time at the minshuku, and then I realize the reason for my disorientation. “Ah, Japan follows the Gregorian calendar,” I smile faintly. “In Russia we follow a different calendar. Christmas and New Year come a couple weeks later.”

Yuuri shifts, wriggling under the oki-gotatsu next to me. I put my arm around him and he leans in against me. “Oh. I see. Well, in Japan it’s nearly New Year's Eve.” He looks up at me curiously. "Christmas... is a Christian holiday, yes?"

I nod. “It falls on December 25th. But because we use different calendars December 25th in Russia is January 7th in Japan and a lot of other European countries, too.” I chuckle.

Yuuri furrows his brows. "That's very confusing."

I chuckle. "I know. It also happens to my birthday!"

He gives me a puzzled look. "Which one? December 25th or January 7th?" he asks.

I shrug and laugh softly. "Both, I suppose. Depending on whether we are in Russia or Japan."

Yuuri just looks at me for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. "Well. If it's December 25th it's already come and gone." He frowns a little and looks down at the table top. “I’m sorry we missed it. I didn’t know. I only just realized it was almost shougatsu the other day. Er... that’s what the Japanese call New Year’s Eve.” He looks up at me and smiles a little. “It’s also the day that everyone in Japan celebrates their birthday.” A lovely flush comes into his cheeks. “I guess it's not New Year's in Russia yet, but if you'd like we could all celebrate together on shougatsu. You and me and Yuri.”

There is a sweet, hopeful look on his face that I am utterly charmed by. I cup his face and draw it close to mine. I hear his soft intake of breath just before I kiss him. “I would like that very much, Yuuri.”

His hand finds its way to my chest, and he murmurs my name. “Victor...”

The front door bangs open with a familiar clack. Yuuri is out from under the oki-gotatsu and halfway across the room in a matter of moments.

I sigh in defeat and disappointment. “Yuuri.”

“I'm back and I've brought the mail.” I hear Yuri bumping around as he changes out of his heavy
winter clothes. I prop my chin in my hand and watch the door to the vestibule. Yuri enters a moment later with a bundle of letters.

I sit up straight. “Wow. That’s a lot of mail.”

Yuri glares at me. “When was the last time you actually thought to have someone collect it? It’s probably been accumulating since you broke your stupid leg.”

“Ah,” I chuckle, “that’s true.”

Yuri comes to sit under the oki-gotatsu with me.

“You should greet Yuuri,” I admonish him.

Yuri glares at me a moment and then looks over his shoulder at the other man. “Hello.”

Yuuri mumbles a reply, but my little brother isn’t paying him any attention any longer. He looks back at me with sharp green eyes, keeping the packet of letters neatly under his hands.

I reach for them, but he swats my hand away. “Before I give these letters to you, we need to talk about something.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Does it have to do with why you were gone an extra day?”

His face unexpectedly turns scarlet. “What? That... I never said I was coming back right away! That has nothing to do with anything! I was just waiting for the mail shipment to be unloaded. It seemed stupid not to wait.” He sits back and crosses his arms over his narrow chest defensively. And then, thinking better of it, snatches up the packet of letters.

I blink at him, unsure what to make of his reaction to what was meant to be a more or less innocuous comment. My eyes narrow and I peer at him closely. “Oh?”

Yuri glares at me and then snorts, looking away. “Shut up. You don’t know anything.”

I chuckle at that. “Apparently not.”

Yuri huffs and looks back at me, bringing his hand down loudly on the table. “And that’s not the point!” He unties the bundle of letters, taking about two thirds of them and setting them on the table. “These are letters from you family and friends. Probably mostly for the holidays and your birthday, I imagine.” He pushes the stack of letters towards me and then holds up the remaining letters.

“And these,” he waggles them in the air for emphasis. I notice that the first one has been opened. “These are from Mr. Grankin.”

A cold rush goes through my body and I swallow, sitting up straight. I look at Yuri, my expression sober. “Give them to me.”

“I read all of them,” he says, his voice dripping.

I clench my teeth and glance over towards the irori. “Yuuri, could you please give Yuri and I a few moments alone?”

Yuuri shifts and looks between us, his expression confused and a little nervous.

“No,” Yuri snaps, banging his hand on the table again. “He should stay.” He looks over at Yuuri. “You think you are in love with Victor? Then you should know who you are in love with. You
Yuuri’s beautiful brown eyes widen at that and he looks at me and then at Yuri for a moment before I see him swallow. He sets his jaw and his expression becomes serious. “I do love Victor.” He looks at me, getting up, not to leave the room, but to join us at the oki-gotatsu. “Yuri is right. I should know whatever this is about.”

I stare at him silently for a moment, a fluttering feeling of fear in my stomach. Then I glare at Yuri. “You had no right to open those letters and read them, and you have no right to drag Yuuri into this.”

“And you had no right to hide this bullshit from me. You told me we came to Korsakovsk to have a new life and then I read this shit!” He throws the letters down on the table. They hit with a soft plaf and then scatter apart. There must be five or six letters. When was the last time I had opened one? When was the last time I’d written back? I’d put Grankin entirely out of my mind, but apparently I was not out of his.

I reach to gather up the letters. Yuuri picks one up. “Who is this...,” he focuses on the address on the letter, “Grankin? Why is he writing to you so much? Is he... a lover from Alexandrovsk or something?” The expression on his face is heartbreaking.

“No,” I say, barely able to contain a laugh at the thought of being Ivan Grankin’s lover. It’s utterly repulsive. “Grankin... he... he helped me secure the transfer to Korsakovsk. He’s an official from Alexandrovsk.”

“More like a gangster,” Yuri grunts.

I purse my lips and glare at my little brother. He just waves his hand towards me and then towards Yuuri. “Tell him everything, or I will. Including what’s in those letters.”

“How am I supposed to know what’s in the letters. I haven’t read them yet,” I snap.

“Then I’ll tell you! Threats! That’s what in them! Threats from Grankin, because you apparently forgot you made a deal with the devil to get us down here!”

There’s silence around the table as I glare furiously at Yuri. This is the last thing I wanted to be discussing with either of them, but most especially with Yuuri. He has no idea about my life in Alexandrovsk. I can’t bring myself to look at him.

“Threats?” he says quietly, and out of the corner of my eye I see him begin to take the letter out of the envelope.

“Don’t.” My voice is pleading as I turn my head to look at him. “Please, Yuuri.”

He looks back at me and then quietly sets the letter back on the table. For a long moment he just sits quietly and then he takes a deep breath and reaches out across the table to take my hand. “Victor. Please tell me what this is all about. Everything. Please.”

His soft words fill me with shame and I can’t look at him. I close my eyes for a moment and then glance briefly at Yuri. I can’t even be furious with him. I swallow and then look back at Yuuri, lacing my fingers with his before I begin to speak.

“I don’t know if you have any idea what life is really like in the Russian settlements here. Korsakovsk... it’s like paradise compared to the other districts. Up north everything is run by corruption. The officials are all stealing from the government and taking advantage of how desperate people here are. Smuggling, black market goods, gambling, prostitution, loan sharking... it’s just the
normal way of life in Alexandrovsk. Money is the only thing that matters there. Everyone is paid off to look the other way, to do nothing about any of it. Most of the convicts and exiles and even the settlers live in conditions so deplorable you could not even imagine, Yuuri.”

I purse my lips, feeling my sense of guilt and shame increase. It’s hard for me to look at Yuuri. My sweet, pure, Yuuri.

“I had money when I came to Alexandrovsk. I am from a wealthy family, I was an important person in St. Petersburg, so... it was easy for me not to live that kind of life. I became involved with the officials, with the town’s wealthier citizens. I worked for them, helping them run their dirty businesses in exchange for privileges most convicts and exiles would not have. I did this for various reasons, but Yuri was one of them. If I was in prison there was no one to protect him, to give him a decent life.”

I know my expression is miserable and pleading as I look at Yuuri. It’s hard for me to tell what he is thinking. “You understand that, don’t you?”

He glances at Yuri, who is just sitting stonily, looking at the top of the table. He meets Yuuri’s gaze briefly with a shrug. After a moment Yuuri nods. His hand is still in mine.

I tell him more than I want to, but I find that now that I’ve started I can’t stop. It is like a confession of my sins, something I have needed, the lancing of a festering wound. I tell him about my role as a kulak, about the ways I entertained the officials and the socialites of Alexandrovsk, the beautiful house I lived in with Yuri. I tell him about the dirty work I did for Grankin. How for five years I just let it all wash over me, deadening something inside of me.

I tell him and now also Yuri about the deal I made with Grankin and other officials. My desperation to get out of Alexandrovsk and away from the cesspool of a person I had become. The hope I had to start a new life, an honest life, in Korsakovsk where Grankin couldn’t touch us regardless of whatever deal I had made. My intention to never keep my end of the bargain.

“And now we are here, receiving threatening letters from him,” Yuri says flatly.

I haven’t read the letters yet, so I don’t know what they say, or what they are threatening. He could try to force my transfer back to Alexandrovsk. I had counted on my relationship with Mr. Bely and the other officials in Korsakovsk to protect me against such a thing, but with my accident and having spent the last several months at the minshiku, those relationships have been sorely neglected. Mr. Bely’s had a chance to show me off to the Consulate and other visiting officials. At this point he may not kick up much of a fuss were another transfer to come down the line.

I take a deep breath and look up. Yuuri’s face is bizarrely neutral and it makes me uneasy. I swallow and look at Yuri. “I can stall him. He doesn’t yet know about the accident. I will write to him, and tell him what happened. It will at least buy some more time before he expects action on my part.

“You think he will just accept that?”

“What choice will he have? It’s not as if it’s a lie. What possible work could I be doing for him in my current condition. He is probably mostly angry that he hasn’t heard from me. I’ll... find a way to calm him down. I’ll need to read all these letters first.”

There is silence around the table again for a few long minutes. “Yuri,” I finally say, “you should start bringing some of our belongings back to the minshuku. Just in case. Money. Warm clothes. Small valuables.”
“Just in case of what?” he grunts.

I sigh heavily. “Just do as I say. It will be better to have them close at hand.” I glance at Yuuri. “You still have my pistol? You didn’t give it to Bely after the accident?”

Yuuri blinks and then shakes his head. “No, I kept it for you. It’s in the other room with your clothes.”

I nod and then look back to Yuuri. “And ammunition.”

Yuri nods, but Yuuri becomes agitated. “Ammunition? Victor, what are you planning?”

I shake my head, looking at him earnestly. “I’m not planning anything. I’m only taking precautions.” I reach for his hand. “I promise, no matter what happens I won’t get you involved in all this.”

“What do you mean? I’m already involved! You’re living in my home. You’re... I... I love you. Whatever happens to you involves me!” His expression has a pained, desperate quality to it.

Yuri shifts uncomfortably and then stands. “I’m going to go take a bath. Is the water hot?”

Yuuri blinks and glances up at him dazedly. “Ah, yes. I used it this morning. The burner’s gone out, but you can relight it, and the water should still be hot under the lid.”

Yuri nods and leaves us alone. We sit in silence for a few moments.

“I’m sorry,” I say finally. “I know you must be disappointed to learn all these unflattering things about me. I’m probably not the man you thought I was.”

Yuuri looks at me for a long moment and then furrows his brows before crawling over to sit beside me again. For once his closeness makes me nervous. He looks into my eyes and then touches my face.

“The man you are is the man I fell in love with. It doesn’t matter who I thought you were. I’m sad to know I didn’t know you at all, and sad to know you didn’t want me to. But now I understand you so much better. I know what you’ve been through. It makes you real, not the idolized dream you’ve been.”

My heart thumps and flutters in my chest. He leans closer to kiss me. “I’m not disappointed, but I am scared. I don’t want anything to happen to you, or to take you away from me.”

I breath him in, closing my eyes, and it’s only then that I realize there are tears falling down my cheeks. How badly have I needed to know he would still love me? I turn my face into his touch and let myself cry softly through gritted teeth.

He kisses my face and presses our cheeks together. “Shhh, Vitya.”

I choke a little. It’s the first time he has ever called me that. I wrap my arms around him tightly and press my face into his shoulder.

We hold each other like this for a long time, and he just lets me cry. I have never liked to show so much emotion to others, but with him it doesn’t make me feel weak, and I don’t mind being vulnerable to him. When my tears have dried and I manage to compose myself he kisses me again and we assure each other of our love.

Then, though it takes all of my will, I being to read the letters from Grankin.
Sakhalin Island, The Far East, New Year’s Eve, 1888 - V.N.

Yuuri has been busy since yesterday when he trekked into Korsakovsk and then Kusun-Kotan to get food for New Year’s Eve with Yuratchka. I told Yuuri it wasn’t necessary to do anything special, but he insisted that he prepare some traditional New Year’s food he called osechi-ryouri. To which Yuri replied he was going to be damned if all we ate was a bunch of disgusting Japanese food on the biggest holiday of the year, even if it wasn’t really New Year's Eve.

So off they went together. I admit I was a little worried they were going to kill each other before they made it safely back, but my fears turned out to be unfounded, as they returned in quite pleasant moods with a sledge full of foodstuffs.

Today they’ve both been up since very early cooking. They let me continue to sleep only after dragging my futon into the east room and leaving me there until I grew too cold to sleep any longer.

Now it is late afternoon and the two of them are still poking around the irori. The mixed smell of Russian and Japanese food is odd, but also oddly appetizing.

I watch as Yuuri carefully places everything he has prepared in square, stackable boxes, each full of little compartments for different dishes.

“What is the purpose of putting it all in there? Why not just put it on a platter?” I ask, chin in hand, leaning tiredly against the oki-gotatsu.

Yuuri looks up from his work. The way he’s tied his sleeves back with a cord is amusing to me for some reason.

“The point of making osechi is to be able to eat it for several days, and not have to cook during the holiday. So you fill up these bento boxes and then stack them together to preserve the food. Then you unstack them and eat what you like and stack them back up again. That way you can enjoy the time with your friends and family and not worry about inauspiciously burning your house down at the start of the year,” he explains with a chuckle. “It’s a little silly, but it’s tradition.”

“It seems like a lot of work for just the three of us,” I say absently.

He looks down at the food he is arranging and flushes a little, his expression becoming soft and a little melancholy. “It actually makes me really happy,” he says softly. “I haven’t prepared osechi since my family went back to Kyushu. There’s always a gathering at the Consulate, but I haven’t celebrated shougatsu with anyone I really care about in a long time.”

My heart flutters at that and I smile, touched by his sweet words. “Yuuri.”

“Ugh, you two are so sappy. It’s just fucking New Year’s Eve.”

I smile wryly at Yuri. “You say that, and yet you’ve been slaving away cooking just as long as Yuuri.”

“Only because I didn’t want to have no option but to eat more salty shit soup. And there’s never enough meat, and he doesn’t eat any cheese. Who doesn’t eat cheese? You can’t have New Year’s without meat and cheese and herring and potato salad. And I tried to make pirozhki, but there’s no oven. I can’t make fucking pirozhki without a fucking oven!”

His outburst makes me laugh out loud. “I think we will have plenty to eat without pirozhki, and it’s not like there is any good flour in Korsakovsk anyway.”
Yuri just grumbles at this.

Bored and tired as I am, I have to admit that watching the two of them working side by side and seemingly getting along makes me happy. It is like we truly make a little family.

Things have been calmer than I expected in the wake of the revelations brought by Grankin’s letters. The next day Yuri took the letter I’d written to him, explaining what had happened with my accident and apologizing for my lack of correspondence. I further explained that things were likely to be delayed longer, because I would likely not be returning to Korsakovsk until later winter or early spring, and my connections in the settlement had suffered. I doubted any of this would make Grankin happy, but it was, at the very least, the truth. For now there was no point in fretting and we had all agreed not to discuss it further over the holiday.

When the cooking is finished, we sit around the oki-gotatsu and play card games and tell each other about traditions in our own countries. Yuuri reads us some Japanese poetry he calls haiku, and while it sounds quite lovely, especially in Yuuri’s voice, something must be lost in translation, because when he translates the poems into Russian they don’t tend to make a lot of sense.

We eat late and then open the doors to the porch, moving the oki-gotatsu just inside the opening, so that we can huddle around it and look out at the night and the falling snow as we drink sake and vodka. The cold air is sharp, but the heat from the fireplace and the oki-gotatsu along with our padded haori keep us warm despite. It also gives us an excuse to sit close together, not that we really need an excuse.

“We’ll be able to hear the bells ringing at the small shrine in Kusun-Kotan at midnight,” Yuuri says. “They ring 108 times. One for each of the human sins so that we can start the New Year with a clean slate.”

“That’s a lot of sins,” I says with a chuckle, sipping my sake, which has been warmed and feels wonderful going down my throat in the cold air. “Good thing this bell tolling will wash them all away. I don’t know if I could repent for that many the old fashioned way.”

Yuuri chuckles and begins to stand up. “I’m going to pray at my grandparents’ shrine. I’ll be back before the bells toll.”

I smile up at him and nod, watching him disappear into the east room. Then silence settles between Yuri and I. I feel the letter in the pocket of my padded haori.

“Yuratchaka,” I says after a few moments. “I want to talk to you about something.”

He’s been staring out at the snow, but now turns his head to look at me. He’s cradling a cup of a warm, sweet drink Yuuri called amazake, between his hands. His ears are tinged with pink.

“Are you going to yell at me for being mean to the bumpkin?”

I chuckle at that, shaking my head as I smile at him. “No. I actually thought you two have been getting along quite well lately.”

He grunts at that. “I don’t hate him as much as I did. Especially now that he knows about everything in Alexandrovsk.”

I arch an eyebrow. “What does that have to do with anything?”

He shrugs a little, twisting his lips. “I don’t know. I just feel like... I can accept his feelings for you more knowing he knows, and won’t just leave you because you aren’t really some dazzling, dancing
prince.”

“And what about my feelings for him? You can accept those, too?”

He shifts a little and I see something flit across his face. He shrugs a little. “I liked that it was just us. That it’s always been just us. I didn’t care about your lovers in Alexandrovsk, because I knew you didn’t care about them. I knew you would always choose me over them. I guess I knew everything you did was for me. I was used to that. And then... when we got here and you met Katsuki... I knew your interest in him was only for yourself. I wasn’t used to that. It made me feel insecure. But, I...”

he looks over at me and his expression is conflicted, his pale face flushed in embarrassment, “I want you to be happy, too. And I know that there are things you want, that everyone wants, that I can’t give you.”

I smile at him softly, reaching over to pet his hair. “And there are things you should want that I can’t give you.”

He flushes at that and I notice his green eyes cut away from me. I cant my head, curious. I touch the envelope again, and then take a deep breath.

“In fact there is a whole life that I can’t give you, Yuri. That’s what I want to talk to you about.” I pull the letter from my pocket and lay it on the table, sliding it towards him.

He looks down at it and then looks at me skeptically. “What is this?”

“It’s a letter from my mother. We always have kept in touch. I’ve told her many things about you. How smart you are, how talented, how beautiful. You’re a free citizen of Russia, Yuri. You’re only here because you had nowhere else to go. You can go back to European Russia anytime you like.”

He looks at me suspiciously. “What are you getting at?”

I smile faintly. “My mother’s not the only one I’ve written to about you. I’ve also written to my old friends in the ballet, my old instructors. They all said they would be interested in meeting you given that I’ve provided you with preliminary instruction. Of course much of that is likely just politeness, but with the right introductions and connections you might secure a spot in the Imperial Ballet School, despite your age. You’d have to work hard if you hoped to join the company.”

Yuri stares at me, his expression incredulous. For a long time he is silent. And then, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about sending you back to St. Petersburg to live with my parents and have a future. They’ve agreed, and will even consider adopting you depending on how things go.”

He stares at me, his green eyes wide. “You... want to send me away?” There is a tremor in his voice.

I furrow my brows. “No, of course not. But it’s not about what I want. It’s about what’s best for you and your future. You don’t have to live this miserable life here on Sakhalin. Remember I used to tell you about St. Petersburg, about dancing? We used to talk about what it would be like to go back.” I take his hand and squeeze it. “You could have that life, Yuratchaka. You could be happy.”

His face scrunches up a little. “I’m happy here with you. I don’t know anything else. Why would I want to leave?”

“Yuratchaka,” I touch his cheek, “you don’t know what happiness is.” I smile at him sadly.

He swallows, his expression rather miserable. “Is it because you have him? You can send me away
I shake my head. “No! Yuri, listen to me!” I take his face in both of my hands. “I love you. You are my brother. What I want is only what is best for you. It has nothing to do with Yuuri. If I was merely a selfish man I would keep you here with me always. You are my family.” I look intensely into his green eyes. “But I want more for you. I have always wanted more for you. This is the only way I can give it to you. Life here on Sakhalin will never be better than it is now, and it might become much worse considering everything with Grankin. Even if someday we are able to leave Sakhalin together, life will still be hard, and who knows what we will have to do to get by. I don’t want you involved in all of this shit anymore.”

He looks like he might start to cry and then abruptly pulls his face out of my hands, looking away. I hear him take a shaking breath as he rubs his forearm across his eyes.

I feel defeated and sad looking at him. “Yuri. Just... read the letter from my mother. You don’t have to decide right away. You couldn’t leave until the spring at any rate. But, please... do think about it, about the life you could have in St. Petersburg.” I lean towards him to stroke his hair again. “I don’t have to be the only person in your life. You could have friends, teachers, my parents. You could meet someone special and fall in love. I want all of that for you.”

He just sniffs and takes a deep breath. “Fine. I’ll think about it. That doesn’t mean I’ll go, though. This is the only life I’ve known. And who’s to say I can’t have friends or... fall in love here?”

I smile softly at that. “No one, I suppose. There just aren’t many people your age on Sakhalin. I’ve always felt that wasn’t fair to you.”

“I said I would think about it,” he growls. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore now.”

Distantly I hear the deep peel of a bell. I look up into the dimly lit, snow filled forest. “Ah. It’s almost midnight. That must be the bell Yuuri mentioned.”

There is another peel and the door to the east room slides open. “I lost track of time,” Yuuri says, quickly coming out and settling down next to me. He shivers a little as he pulls the blanket of the oki-gotatsu around himself.

I smile at and put my arm around him, drawing him close to my side. “You’re just in time.” I reach for Yuri with my other arm and pull him close as well.

I sit close with the two people I love most in the world beside me. We are silent, listening to the peal of the bell as it chimes 108 times. On the final strike I say softly. “Make a wish.”

I close my eyes and wish that the happiness of this moment might never end.

Our eyes open and we look at each other. I grin at Yuri and then steal a kiss from Yuuri, which makes him gasp in surprise. I laugh aloud and shout out into the falling snow, “S Novym Godom!”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Districts - At the time this fic takes place there were three districts established on Sakhalin. The Alexandrovsk, Tymovsk, and Korsakovsk Districts. Each has a district
governor, and the Governor of Sakhalin Island also maintained his primary residence in Alexandrovsk Post. Alexandrovsk was the primary district, and for the most part all prisoners/settlers came through Alexandrovsk and were assigned their place of settlement by the officials there. Thus most of the “good” settlers (and women) remained in Alexandrovsk and the other two districts were sent the less desirable, older, more decrepit individuals.

2. Duay - Alternatively spelled Dooay, this was one of the oldest settlements on Sakhalin. It was south of Alexandrovsk on the west coast, and known as being an absolute misery pit. Here is what Anton Chekhov had to say about Duay: “... a dreadful, hideous place, wretched in every respect, in which only saints or profoundly perverse people could live of their own free will.”

3. Alexandrovsk and ill-repute - Chekhov talks a great deal about what is going on in Alexandrovsk in “Sakhalin Island.” Here are a few excerpts just to illustrate what exactly Victor is referring to when he talks about the city’s depravity: “... the clandestine trade in alcohol was carried on in [Alexandrovsk] on the very widest scale... They brought in alcohol in... barrels and the usual vessels, as the minor authorities had been bought off and the higher-ups turned a blind eye.”

“The majority of the people settling in Alexandrovsk are those who have come here from European Russia with money, and illegal means are a great help to the population. Buying up prisoners’ clothes and selling them in big bundles in Nikolayevesk, exploitation of the natives and newly arrive prisoners, the clandestine trade in spirits, loaning out money at very high interest rates, gambling for large sums at card games -- the men engage in all those activities. And the women, both exiles and the free ones who had come voluntarily with their husbands, earn their living by depravity.”

4. Osechi-ryouri - This refers to traditional foods prepared and served during shougatsu. They differ from region to region, but are generally foods that do not need to be refrigerated and will keep for several days so that they can be eaten for the first few days of the New Year and no require anyone to do more cooking during the holiday.

5. Russian New Year - Traditionally and still today New Year’s Eve is the big winter holiday in Russia, even more so than Christmas. There are traditional foods (today New Year salads are apparently a big thing) and parties and customs such as gift exchanging and the New Year tree (much like the Christmas tree). Ded Moroz and Snegurochka are similar to Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus, and Ded Moroz serves the same purpose of distributing gifts. Snegurochka, however, is his daughter rather than his wife.

6. The Gregorian and Julian Calendars - The Gregorian or "new calendar" is the calendar that is most widely used in the world today. Prior to 1582 most Western (European Christian) countries used the Julian Calendar or "old calendar." In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII decreed a change to the Gregorian Calendar for the Catholic Church. Most Western European countries followed suit. However, the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe did not adopt the Gregorian calendar. In fact the Gregorian calendar was not adopted for civil purposes in most Eastern European countries until the early 20th century (1900s). Today all European countries, even those with Orthodox churches, follow the Gregorian calendar for civil purposes. However, Orthodox Churches, including the Russian Orthodox church, still use the old Julian calendar for religious purposes. This means that Christmas in Russia is celebrated on January 7th of the Gregorian calendar, but in the Russian Orthodox church this date corresponds to being December 25th according to the Julian calendar. During the historical period of LiE
Japan had adopted the Gregorian calendar, but Russia was still using the Julian calendar for both religious and civil purposes. Hence the date mix up concerning New Year's Eve. However, Victor, being well educated, would have been familiar with both calendars, since many other European countries at the time were using the Gregorian calendar.

7. Amazake - Literally “sweet sake” this is a traditional Japanese drink that traditionally is made from “kasu,” or the leftovers of the sake-making process, with steamed rice and water. This version has a very low alcohol content. Today there is also a non-alcoholic version. Both versions are then allowed to ferment until the drink becomes sweet. It’s very nutritious and good for your digestive system and also delicious. It looks a bit like watery rice pudding and is usually served hot.

7. S Novym Godom - The Russian New Year’s greeting.
Part 6: Yuuri

Chapter Notes

Welcome to chapter 6! Thank you for sticking with the story through my slow updates. And thank you everyone who has left me wonderful comments and kudos and supported the story with recommendations and fanart. It means a lot to me, as I put a lot of time and effort into this story. So it makes me really happy to know people are enjoying it.

I'll be heading overseas for a vacation next week, but will be bringing my iPad along, so I'll hopefully get some more writing done while I'm relaxing in the English countryside!

As always you can follow my sideblog dedicated to this story for updates and additional historical info and tidbits: martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com
Or my personal blog to watch me reblog shitposts and art: martymuses.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Winter 1888 - Y.K.

It’s strange how quickly the last month and a half has passed. After New Year’s Eve, everything has settled into a routine of normalcy. The new intimacy between Victor and I is a part of that routine. Victor’s increasing health and mobility, as well as his increasing frustration with his captivity, has also become a part of it. I know he looks forward to the day he will be free of the cast almost as much as I dread it, as it means he will be leaving my care.

I feel guilty for my continued doubts and for relishing the concrete proof that he still needs me. Will things really not change when he goes back to Korsakovsk? How can I go back to the way things were before, not seeing him every day, not spending every night beside him?

I try not to think about it too much, but sometimes I catch myself staring at him and turning these thoughts over in my head.

Yuri’s presence has also become something of a predictable routine. He returns to Korsakovsk about once every two weeks and stays for at least two days. Then he returns with the mail and supplies, and whatever money or belongings Victor has instructed him to bring to the minshuku.

Like most Japanese buildings, the minshuku is built above the ground, raised up on supports. The resulting empty space beneath the polished wooden floor is about a foot off the ground. It’s in this space beneath a hatch that is normally covered by the tatami that I hide everything Yuri brings back with him.

I like even less to think about why these things might need to be hidden here, and under what circumstances their retrieval from hiding might be necessary. But Victor assures me frequently that it is only a precaution. That I don’t need to worry, and he’s only concerned with things being stolen in his absence from Korsakovsk.

I don’t really believe him, but I also don’t want to not believe him. This is what I’m thinking about as I sit on the tatami directly above the hatch, playing stoss with Victor and Yuri.
There was a blizzard a few days ago, hopefully the last of the season. But even though it is close to the end of winter, spring is always unpredictable. The snow has stopped, but we’ve been cozily snowed in for several days.

So it is a surprise when I hear someone announce themselves at the door and come into the vestibule.

“Shitsurei shimasu!”

I look up from the game. “Eh? Suzuyama-san?”

I get up quickly and crawl to the door, pulling it open. It is indeed the Consul standing in my entryway, slowly unwrapping himself from his winter coat and scarf. I bow, greeting him, trying not to let my surprise or fluster show. What on earth has he come here for in such miserably deep snow?

“Please, come in Suzuyama-san. The snow is terrible. You must be freezing. Can I get you some tea? Please come sit by the **irori.**” I say, speaking in Russian. With two Russians sitting within earshot it would be very rude to speak a language they couldn’t understand. Although, in all honesty, having spoken nothing but Russian recently, it’s probably as much out of reflex as it is politeness.

To my surprise, however, when Suzuyama-san answers me it is in Japanese. “Thank you for your hospitality, Katsuki-san. However, I am afraid to say that I did not make the hike here just to pass pleasantries. There is something I need to discuss with you - have needed to discuss with you for some time. Might we speak in private?”

I blink and then glance over at Victor and Yuri. They are both looking at us with curiosity. I’m sure they are wondering what Suzuyama-san has said. I look back at him and bow. “Yes, of course. Do you mind speaking in the east room? It’s still difficult for Victor to get around.”

“Victor?” He regards me curiously, and I flush, realizing how it must sound to him, my casual reference to the Russian man.

“Mr. Nikiforov,” I correct myself and smile wanly at Suzuyama-san.

He regards me with an unreadable expression for a moment and then nods. “Of course, that’s fine. I will, however, be delighted to have some tea.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” I bow to him again and then show him to the east room. It’s cold and I apologize for the chill in the air, but he shrugs it off. I light a couple lamps and then ask him to please wait while I prepare a tray of tea.

There is an odd, unpleasant feeling in my stomach as I shut the door on the east room and hurry over to the **irori** to prepare the tea.

Victor leans towards me. “What does he want? What did he say?”

“Shh!” I glower at him and then shake my head, murmuring back. “I don’t know what he wants. He only said that he wanted to speak with me about something in private.”

Yuri grunts. “Why does it have to be in private? Neither of us can understand your chitter-chatter.”

I look at Yuri and huff softly. “Because it would be rude to speak openly in front of you in a language you can’t understand.”

Yuri rolls his eyes. “That’s stupid. What a ridiculous thing to be worried about.”
I sigh and shake my head, pouring hot water into a tea pot. “It’s a very Japanese sentiment. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Yuri just grunts. Victor purses his lips. “I hope it isn’t bad news of some kind.” He glances towards the door to the east room.

“I don’t know what it is, but I can’t keep Suzuyama-san waiting,” I say hurriedly, arranging two tea cups on the tray before picking it up and walking to the door. I look back at the two of them. “Just... keep playing without me.”

I enter the room carefully, placing the tray on the floor between Suzuyama-san and myself, bowing again. “The tea will need to steep a little, but it will be ready shortly.”

Suzuyama smiles at me and nods. “That’s fine. Thank you, Katsuki-san.”

“It’s nothing.” I swallow and sit up, looking at him directly. I fold my hands on my lap. “What is it you need to speak with me about?”

Suzuyama clears his throat. “It’s something I should have come to you about earlier. But I knew you had your hands full caring for the Russian man.” He eyes me with an arched eyebrow. “I had not realized that another of them was taking advantage of your hospitality.”

I realize that he means Yuri, and that I had not discussed his staying with me with the Consulate. Should I have? I was technically their employee and the minshuku under their purview. I balk a little.

“I apologize, Suzuyama-san, I had not thought to discuss it with you. The young man is Mr. Nikiforov’s brother. He came to help me with Mr. Nikiforov’s care. He’s been very helpful and has brought supplies for them from Kosakovsk. His presence here is not burdening the Consulate or me, I promise.”

He holds up a hand to stop me. “It’s fine, Katsuki-san. It was a heavy burden to ask you to care for a stranger all on your own. It is good that you’ve gotten some assistance from the Russians. Were our good relations with them not paramount, I would never have imposed such a responsibility on you in the first place.”

I bow again. “It has been an honor to serve the Consulate. And a pleasure to get to know our Russian neighbors. It has not been a burden at all.”

Suzuyama chuckles at that. “Even raised in this barbaric place your parents taught you fine Japanese manners, Katsuki-san. That pleases me, and I hope it will make what we must discuss easier on you.”

A ripple of dread goes through me at those words and I lift my head. What on earth has Suzuyama-san come here to speak to me about?

“Please, do not keep me in suspense.”

He smiles at me faintly. “I will be returning to the mainland this spring. I have lived out my usefulness to the Consulate here, and am being reassigned to another post.”

My eyes widen a bit. Suzuyama-san is not the first Consul I have known, but he has been the longest standing one. The appointment to Sakhalin is not a coveted one, and usually the officials posted here stay only a few years before the are granted reassignment back on the main islands.

“But that is something to celebrate for you, Suzuyama-san,” I say with a smile, feeling a sense of
deep relief that this is all he had to tell me. I lean forward to begin pouring the tea. “I haven’t much, but I am happy to be able to share a congratulatory cup of tea with you. I can also bring sake. I have a little left.”

He chuckles. “Thank you for your congratulations. I won’t be polite and say that I am not looking forward to returning to Japan. Though I am proud of the work we have accomplished here on Sakhalin in my time as Consul, and will look back on this post with more fond memories than unpleasant ones.”

I smile at that and hand him his cup of tea before taking my own, enjoying the warmth of it between my hands, which have quickly been growing chilled in the unheated room. “I will be sad to see you go, Suzuyama-san. I’m sure that the Russians will be as well. They’ll want to throw you a party.” We share a chuckle at that.

“I appreciate your kind words, Katsuki-san. But, unfortunately, there is more to what we must discuss than merely my departure from office as Consul.”

My brows raise and that little feeling of dread returns. “Oh?”

He nods and then takes a deep breath, sighing. “Yes. As you know, with my departure, there comes a replacement. He has already been chosen. His name is Kazu. I know little about him other than that he is well spoken of and well liked by those he has worked with. I have corresponded with him a little, sharing details about the post, that sort of thing. He seems competent at the very least.”

I nod, wondering where I fit into this conversation.

Suzuyama purses his lips and sighs through his nose again. “I’ve already been told by the Consulate General that Kazu-san’s appointment will bring changes to Kusun-Kotan. The expense of supporting the village is not one that the government finds necessary. The few civilians who remain - all receive support or stipends, or have been made employees of the Consul, so that they can support themselves.”

“I see,” I say quietly.

He clears his throat a little. “Under Kazu-san’s leadership the Consulate will no longer be supporting the civilians who cannot make their own living. In fact the Consulate General has already counseled me to encourage all remaining civilians who are not strictly necessary to the operation of the Consulate - or married to officials - to return to Japan.” He gives me an apologetic look, frowning under his thick mustache. “In the view of the government, Kusun-Kotan is not meant to be a civilian village. It is a government posting, and there is concern that maintaining a civilian presence here on Sakhalin threatens the terms of our treaty with Russia.”

I stare at him blankly for a moment. As the meaning of his words catch up with me a sick, dreadful feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. My fingers tremble around my cup of tea.

“You... you’re saying that I have to leave Karafuto. To leave the minshuku. That’s what you came here to tell me, isn’t it?” My voice feels thin.

He nods and his expression is unexpectedly sheepish. “It is. And I must apologize to you Katsuki-san. You came to me all those years ago when your family left and asked for my assistance to leave as well. At that time I convinced you to stay, telling you how important your presence was to Kusun-Kotan and the Consulate and the government. And now I am the one who has to tell you that you must leave. After making you stay. It is shameful. Please, forgive me.”
To my utter surprise and even embarrassment, Suzuyama-san bows low to me. His deference makes me extremely uncomfortable, and mixed with my other emotions it’s almost too much to bear.

“No, please. Suzuyama-san, you don’t need to apologize. It’s not your decision. I understand that. I... I...”

I don’t want to leave. Not now that I have Victor. “What happens if I don’t want to leave?” I voice the first of my thoughts. “Will they force me to go?”

Suzuyama-san sits up, and I can tell he is surprised by my forward question. “I don’t know, Katsuki-san. But they will at the very least no longer provide you a stipend or supplies. You will be on your own to support yourself, and we both know the minshuku has done no real business in years.” He smiles at me a little sadly. “I know this has been your home all of your life. But your family is waiting for you. Life in Japan is exciting and you will have many opportunities there. Your sentimental attachment to this place is understandably strong, but when you think of it objectively, you have no reason to stay here. I urge you to see this as a chance to begin a new chapter in your young life.”

I stare at him for a long moment and then just bow my head, nodding. “Thank you, Suzuyama-san, for coming in person to tell me this news. I do congratulate you again on your new posting.” I look up, my expression conflicted. “Do you know when Kazu-san will be coming? How long do we have before we are expected to leave?”

“It won’t be until the late spring, I imagine. Or maybe even summer. It depends on the weather here and the weather in Hokkaido. He will be moving his entire household, so it takes some time to arrange and conditions must be good.”

I nod.

He smiles a little. “So you have some time to make arrangements. There are several ships that leave from Korsakovsk that travel to Hokkaido every few weeks. And from there you can go overland or by sea to Kyushu to meet your family. I don’t imagine there are too many belongings here you’d need to take with you. Everything can easily be replaced back in Japan.”

I nod again. It’s sad, but he’s right. There’s very little in the minshuku that would be worth taking with me if I left. The thought is incredibly depressing. My entire life spent here, and there’s hardly anything from it worth saving.

We look at each other and then sip our tea quietly. The main topic of conversation over, we make pleasant, polite small talk for a little while. When our tea is gone, he excuses himself, saying he must make the trek back before it gets much later. I agree, and politely show him to the door, watching him bundle back up. I can feel Victor and Yuri’s curious eyes on my back the entire time.

When Suzuyama-san is gone I close the door to the vestibule and sit for a moment, staring at the pattern on the screen. It’s faded and blotchy from moisture and discolored in places from mildew and mold. The wet climate on Sakhalin does not go well with the Japanese penchant for using paper. I touch the door with my fingertips.

“Yuuri?” It’s Victor’s voice, curious and with just a hint of concern. “What happened? What did he have to tell you?”

I swallow and turn around to face them. For a moment I can’t find my words and my gaze drops to my lap and my calmly folded hands. “There is going to be a new Consul. He will likely come in the late spring or early summer.” I frown a little, my fingers twisting together. “When he does - the government - are going to remove the civilian presence from Kusun-Kotan. He said that the cost of
supporting the remaining villagers is too high, and that there is concern that having a civilian presence is in conflict with the terms of our treaty with Russia.”

I look up at Victor, my brows furrowed and my expression twisting as I talk. He looks stunned. “It means I’ll have to leave Sakhalin, the minshiku, you... my whole life. They’re... cutting off our support. Our food, our supplies, our stipends. They’re sending us all back to Japan.”

My emotions have gotten the better of me and I am crying now. I cover my face with my hands. “Why is this happening? Why now?”

There is a moment of silence and then Victor exclaims, “We won’t let that happen! You don’t have to go. Even if the Consulate doesn’t want you to stay here or in Kusun-Kotan, you can come live with me and Yuri in Korsakovsk! It’s going to be alright.”

I swallow and shake my head. “Would they even allow that? I’m not a Russian citizen, and you’re not a free settler. You said yourself that Korsakovsk isn’t like Alexandrovsk. That you can’t just buy your way into doing whatever you like. What honestly good reason could you give Mr. Bely for allowing me to live with you?”

He balks at that and I can tell that he hadn’t expected me to have a good argument against his immediate solution. “Well, I don’t know, but... if he won’t then maybe we’ll all three of us go back to Alexandrovsk. That would possibly solve both problems of Grankin and this nonsense with the Consulate.”

Yuri snorts. “And puts you right back under Grankin’s control, living a life you hate.”

“It’s better than the alternative!” he snaps. “I won’t lose Yuuri.”

“But you’ll forfeit the better life for Yuri you moved here for in the first place?” I interject. My heart aches and my stomach is sick.

Victor and Yuri both balk at me, and I see Victor wilt a little and Yuri stiffen. They exchange an awkward glance.

“No, I... I still want a better life for Yuri. Of course I do,” Victor says, and he slumps in on himself a little, as if defeated.

I feel that same sense of defeat. First everything about Grankin and now this. It feels as if fate is turning against us.

Finally I go to sit at Victor’s side, relinquishing my embarrassment and usual composure in front of Yuri in favor of letting myself become enveloped in his arms. “I don’t want to leave,” I whisper into the fabric of his yukata. “This is my home. It’s always been my home.”

He strokes my hair and my back soothingly. “I know. It’s not fair. But we will think of something. Maybe you can convince this new Consul to let you stay, or to hire you as an official at the Consulate. Your Russian is very good, better than anyone else’s. Surely that is valuable to them.” He kisses my hair. “And even if the Consulate won’t hire you or continue to support you and the minshuku, couldn’t you stay if I did? I could be your patron.”

“I don’t know,” I murmur miserably. “I don’t know if the cost is just an excuse. Suzuyama-san said the government didn’t want civilians staying on Sakhalin regardless. So even if you did it would probably only be a matter of time before we were mandated to leave.”

“And it’s not like you have endless amounts of money, Victor,” Yuri grunts. “I’m not saying we’re
close to destitute or anything, but if you’re not going to be working for Grankin, then right now what you have left of what you brought with you is what you have. It will be a lot harder for you to make money in Korsakovsk as a legitimate settler. You have to be careful with your money, especially if the solution to the Grankin problem ends up being you have to pay him off to leave you alone. That’s not going to be a cheap bribe.”

My feelings sink even further. Yuri’s words are cold, but they’re true, and I know he’s not saying them just to be contrary. Victor does have to think about himself and his own situation. Delaying Grankin because of his injury will only work for so long.

I look up into Victor’s brilliant, blue eyes. “I don’t want to lose you either, but we have to think of something that makes sense for everyone.”

“Then why don’t we all just fucking go to Japan?” Yuri’s voice, sharp despite his age, makes me turn my head.

“What?”

He looks at me, arms crossed over his narrow chest. “Why not? You have to go back to Japan. Victor has to get away from Grankin. I’ve never wanted anything to do with this shithole of an island to begin with. I’m also a free Russian, so I can go wherever the fuck I want.” He looks directly at Victor now. “So how hard can it be to smuggle one person across the straight to Hokkaido?”

Victor stares back at Yuri and slowly shakes his head. “All of the ships leave from Korsakovsk. It would be almost impossible to get on board undetected. And if I was caught…” He swallows, and shakes his head. “Escapees are either executed or sentenced to a lifetime of hard labor handcuffed to a wheelbarrow.”

I sit up straight and shake my head. “No. I don’t want anything to happen to you because of me.”

Victor puts his hands on my shoulders and then glances at Yuri. “I’m not saying that it couldn’t be a possible solution, but... it would be a very serious undertaking with very serious consequences for failure, and not just for me.” He furrows his brows and frowns. “If I was to try to flee Sakhalin, you would have to return to St. Petersburg first. I wouldn’t undertake anything so risky without knowing your future was secure.”

Yuri glowers at Victor, his lips pulling into a snarl. “Stop fucking bringing that up! I told you! I don’t want to go back to St. Petersburg!”

I glance at Yuri. This is the first I’ve heard about this. “What are you talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter!” he huffs, slamming his hands down on the oki-gotatsu and pushing himself up onto his feet. “Don’t make it my fault you don’t have the balls to try to get off this piece of shit island.” He turns away from us and then stomps across the room to the door to the porch, sliding it open with a crack. A gust of freezing air bursts into the room and he steps out onto the porch in his stocking feet, closing the door behind him.

“Yuri!” I call after him, scrambling to get up. Victor’s hands grip my shoulders.

“Just let him stew. He’ll come back in shortly.”

“No!” I snap. “It’s freezing cold out there. He at least needs something to bundle up in if he wants to stew on the porch.”

Huffing, I push away from Victor and get to my feet. I retrieve a haori and a futon blanket from the
spare room and then grab the coal burner from under the *oki-gotatsu*. Victor watches me with a resigned expression as I open the door to the porch and step out after Yuri.

I shut the door and glare at the young Russian now standing to one side of the doorway, his arms wrapped around himself and shivering.

“What do you want?” he snaps at me.

“Why are you so stubborn? It’s freezing out here.”

“There’s no privacy anywhere in this place. Where else am I supposed to go to fume about how stupid Victor is?”

I sigh and toss the haori at him. “Put that on.” I unfold the blanket, wrapping one side around my shoulders and then the other around Yuri’s. He’s too stunned to resist me as I pull him down onto the porch with me, swaddling us deep in the blanket with the coal heater.

He makes a strangled sound of indignation and surprise. “You don’t have to stay out here with me.”

I shrug. “It’s warmer this way.”

He curls his lips, but doesn’t say anything else. He looks away and for a while we sit in silence.

“What was that about you going back to St. Petersburg?” I ask finally.

He stiffens next to me. “Why should I tell you?”

“Why shouldn’t you tell me?”

Yuri looks at me, his expression unreadable. I gaze back at him calmly. After a moment he takes a deep breath and puffs out one of his cheeks. “Victor arranged for me to go back to live with his family in Russia, without talking to me about it, or even asking me if I wanted it. He thinks he can just decide what is best for me. It’s always been like that. When he became my guardian, when he started working for Grankin, when we moved to Korsakovsk. And now this. He never thinks to ask me what I want.”

His young face falls and he curls his arms around his knees, hugging them tightly to his chest.

“What do you want?” I ask softly.

“To have a life of my own.”

I mimic his posture. My toes are cold. “ Couldn’t your life be in St. Petersburg?”

He snorts. “Of course you also want me to leave.”

His words surprise me and I lift my head off my knees, looking at him intently. “No, I don’t. Why would you think that? I’ve never wanted you to leave or not be here, Yuri. You’re important to Victor. And... I like you. Even if you don’t like me very much.”

He glowers, but I think there is some pink tinging his cheeks. We’re quiet again for a little while.

“You love Victor, right?”

“Yes,” I answer.
“And when you love someone... you want to do anything you can to be near them, right?”

I blink at the question. “Yes.” I sit up a little and lean towards Yuri. “Why? Do you have someone that you feel like that about? Someone you don’t want to leave Sakhalin for?” I ask the question teasingly, but his reaction surprises me.

His slender shoulders sag and he drops his head. His blond hair falls forward, blocking his face from my view, but somehow I know he looks... sad.

“No,” he says quietly, and the tone in his voice breaks my heart. “There’s no one like that for me. Even if I wanted it... there’s no one.”

I purse my lips and then lean against his side. “I used to think that, too. That there was no one for me in this whole world. That I was just alone, and always would be. But then I met Victor. And now he’s here and so are you. I’m not alone.” I reach up to brush his hair back so that I can see his face. It seems to startle him a little bit, but he doesn’t pull away from me. “That person is definitely out there for you. For all you know they are waiting for you in St. Petersburg.”

He looks at me for a moment and then smirks faintly. “Or Japan.”

I chuckle at that and nod, conceding his point. “It’s possible, but we’re not going to come to any decision about anything today. It’s cold out here and Victor is probably about to drag himself through the door wondering what we’re doing out here.”

Yuri smirks at that. “He’s such a baby.”

I grin. “He can be. Let’s go back inside.”

He takes a deep breath and then sighs, the air coming out in a white puff. “Alright.”

__Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Early Spring 1888 - Y.K.__

“I hope the roads were clear enough for Yuri to make it back to Korsakovsk.”

Victor chuckles from the futon. The gloomy weather has contributed to his penchant for napping in the afternoon. “That’s the third or fourth time you’ve said that outloud.”

I turn to look back at Victor over my shoulder. “Well, it’s been raining so hard. The roads do occasionally wash out. And there’s so much extra water from the sudden snow melt.”

He cracks open one blue eye and turns his face towards me. “If the road hadn’t been passable he would have come back. Why are you so worried about this?”

I sigh and my shoulders sag a little. “I’m just worried about everything. This thaw means it’s already spring. We don’t have that much time to figure out what we’re going to do, Victor.” I chew my bottom lip.

He sighs softly. “Yuuri, I told you, there isn’t any point in worrying now. Nothing can be decided or done until I get back on my feet. It won’t be long. You just need to be patient. I know that you have a tendency to worry, but please trust me.”

I turn to face him more fully. “I do trust you, it’s just-” My words are cut short by sounds from the front yard. It sounds like... hooves? Wagon wheels?
“Tien! Settle down you stupid beast. Stop trying to bite her!” Yuri’s voice, muffled but clear, comes through the front door. I glance at Victor and he pushes himself stiffly up on his hands.

Without saying anything to Victor I slide back the door to the vestibule and step into my sandals, walking out into the entryway. There in the yard is Yuri astride Tien, who is harnessed to a flat bedded wagon. With them is the physician from Korsakovsk sitting atop another horse. If they were able to ride the horses here that means the roads are clear of ice and snow, which means...

They’ve come to take Victor back to Korsakovsk.

I feel the breath whoosh out of my lungs as if someone has struck me in the stomach. I knew it would be soon when the thawing rains started, but I didn’t expect it to be today. I’m not ready. But I also have no choice.

The physician approaches me and I bow to him out of habit.

“Mr. Katsuki, you will be relieved to know that we’ve come to relieve you of your burden. The roads are clear and Mr. Nikiforov’s leg should be well and healed by now. There’s no danger in transporting him back to Korsakovsk.” His voice sounds very chipper.

“I see. This is unexpected. I will need to get Mr. Nikiforov’s things ready.” I glance at Yuri who just shrugs at me before he slides out of Tien’s saddle. I wonder if he had planned this when he left that morning. I look back at the physician. “Please, uh, just wait here a moment. Mr. Nikiforov was napping. He’s still in bed.”

The physician raises an eyebrow at that. “I’ve seen him in bed plenty of times by now, Mr. Katsuki, I am his doctor after all.”

“I understand that, but a man still has his pride. Please, just wait a few moments.” At that I turn on my heels and go back inside, sliding the door firmly shut. For a moment I kneel by the doorway, staring at Victor while he stares back at me. “They’re taking you back to Korsakovsk.”

“Yes, I heard.” I can tell he is trying to suppress his excitement for my sake.

I lower my gaze. “I’m not ready for you to go,” I murmur, pressing my hand to my chest.

“Yuuri...” His voice is soft. It almost sounds like he is trying to comfort a child. “I will be back very soon. We’re going to get everything straightened out now. You’ll see.”

I nod dumbly. My chest is squeezing so hard it makes it hard to breathe.

“Yuuri, please come here.”

Without looking up I crawl to the edge of his futon. His hand cups my face and lifts it, drawing me into a soft kiss. His kisses still make me feel like I am coming apart.

“Remember my promise,” he murmurs softly and then kisses me again. “Nothing has changed. Nothing will change. I love you.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “I don’t know if I can stand to be here without you at my side every day.”

“I will be back very soon.”

“But not to stay. Not like now,” I hiss, lifting my eyes to his. “What’s going to happen to us,
Victor?”

He takes my face between both of his hands, the intensity of his gaze, suddenly sharp and penetrating, makes me gasp softly. “Nothing. We are going to be together one way or another. Just like we promised. I will not lose you, and we will be together all the time soon. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” I whisper, but my insides are still tight and aching.

He kisses me again, harder this time, but only for a moment before he sits back. “Help me get up and go out front. Then bring my things.” I nod and begin to rise, but he grabs my wrist suddenly. I look back at him. “Except my pistol. I want that to remain here.”

Those words make a cold knot in my stomach, and I stare at him for a long moment before I nod slowly again. Then I help Victor to his feet and out into the vestibule. He shouts a cheery greeting to the physician and Yuri. They chat, the three of them upbeat and happy as I help Victor bundle up in the thick winter coat, hat and gloves he hasn’t worn since the night I found him on the roadside. I wrap his exposed foot and leg in an ill fitting boot, but he doesn’t complain.

Then as Yuri and the physician help Victor into the wagon, I go back inside to retrieve the small bundle of his personal belongings. The remains of the clothing he was wearing that night, his bundled letters, and the two packs of playing cards we’ve been using to play stoss. I wrap it all together in a faded furoshiki.

Yuri comes in a moment later, face pink from the still chilly air, blond hair damp and a little wavy from some drizzle they must have encountered on the ride back. We glance at each other a bit awkwardly.

“I just need to grab the clothes I left here.”

I nod. “Of course. They should be in the west room.”

He nods back and disappears into the adjacent room. He’s only gone a few moments before he returns with the rucksack of his few belongings. He shuts the door and then turns, staring at me for a long moment. I blink at him from behind my spectacles. He looks awkward, and his face is turning red. I’m about to ask him if something’s the matter when he suddenly blurts out, “Thank you for taking care of him. And... also of me. Being here... spending this winter together wasn’t as awful as I thought it would be. I’ll... see you again soon, I guess.”

I can’t help but smile softly, touched by his efforts. Kindness doesn’t come easily to him. “I hope so. I’m sad to see you go. Both of you.”

He grunts. “It’s not like we’re far away. So don’t be all melancholy about it. You know Victor will be right back here as soon as he can.”

I nod, smiling faintly. “Yes. But it will still be lonely in the meantime.”

Yuri grunts again. “Let’s go. I don’t want it to start raining again.”

“Right.”

We walk back out into the front yard. Victor is bundled into the wagon. I’m gratified to see that the physician - or Yuri - thought to bring blankets for him. His eyes track me across the yard. I hold up the bundle of his belongings. “Your clothes, the cards, your letters, as you asked.”

“Thank you, Kastuki-san,” he says, his eyes soft and teasing.
I smile in spite of myself. “Please take care of yourself. I know you are eager to be back on your feet, but please listen to the physician and don’t over do it.”

The physician is climbing back into his saddle. “The leg will be weak after the cast comes off, so I think he’ll find it difficult to overdo things too much.” He chuckles. “But don’t worry, Mr. Katsuki, I’ll make sure your efforts don’t go to waste.”

I glance at him and nod. “Thank you.” I look back at Victor, wanting to touch his face or lean over the wagon and kiss him, but I refrain in front of the physician.

“I will come to see you very soon,” he says to me softly and I see the same conflict in his eyes. I settle for reaching to take his hand, squeezing it tightly, as tightly as my chest squeezes in on itself. “I’ll be here.”

Yuri tucks his bag into the wagon with Victor and then fluidly mounts Tien, chirping to him. With a light flick of the horse’s reins he and the cart begin to move. I hold onto Victor’s hand for a moment longer, finally letting go as the wagon - and he - are pulled away from me. Our eyes stay on one another and he waves to me with his charming smile.

Does he know how empty watching him go makes me feel? Even if I know he will be back, it’s not the same. I feel so alone again as I watch the wagon make it to the road and then turn out of sight.

I stand after they’ve gone until it starts to drizzle. Then I turn to go back into my empty home. The home that I am going to have to leave very soon. The only home I have ever known. The irori pops quietly, but the sound seems loud in the empty room. Victor’s futon is still spread out on the floor, and I don’t hesitate to lie down.

It smells like him, and I bury my face in it, pulling the blanket up over me. Strangely, as I lie there surrounded by his smell, feeling the waves of loneliness wash over me, I think of my family. And it is only when I try to imagine their faces and find it difficult that I begin to cry.

Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Spring 1888 - Y.K.

In the wake of Victor’s leaving the past months begin to feel like a dream. The extra futons cleaned and put back into storage. The tea for one. The quiet evenings on the porch watching the rain. I sing to myself in the ofuro and talk to myself in Japanese as I begin to clean and take stock of everything in the minshuku in preparation for my eventual, inevitable departure.

It’s almost like everything has gone back in time to before Victor was here at all. Only now there is this aching in my heart that I can’t be free of. A memory of happiness.

A week passes. Then two. Why hasn’t he come back?

I finally receive a letter from my parents. The pages are full of excitement and sadness. They cannot wait to see me, will ready a place for me in Kyushu, but are sad to think of the home they built being abandoned. My mother includes a short list of things she wants me to pack.

I begin to wonder if maybe this is the way things should end. Perhaps it is best if Victor doesn’t return, and I simply, quietly leave Sakhalin. No heart wrenching goodbye, no struggle against fate, no scheming or planning for an impossible future.

That would probably be for the best. Victor has probably realized it as well.
During the day this is what I convince myself of. But at night my mind whirls and churns, and I can’t help but fear that what keeps Victor from me is something much worse. I think of those letters from that Grankin man. What if he has been imprisoned? Or hurt? Or sent back to Alexandrovsk to face the other man’s wrath?

How would I know? Would Yuri send me word? Should I go to Korsakovsk looking for him?

My fear and my indecision keep me up most nights. When the morning comes I am too exhausted to think on it any longer, and then my quiet day of resignation begins all over again.

True to Sakhalin’s nature the spring weather is unpredictable and generally unpleasant. The sun shines very infrequently between heavy, gray clouds and it moves between drizzle, downpours, and persistent little snow flurries. Is it the weather that is keeping him away?

One afternoon I decide to go into Kusun-Kotan. I need to post a reply to my parents and I’m curious if there are any spring foods at the tiny grocer’s shop. In Japan sakura are blooming. I have never seen sakura, but am familiar with their pervasive presence in my culture. Sakura flavored teas and cakes and other strange, pink goods are all the rage this time of year. I wonder if there are sakura trees in Kyushu where my family is living.

Maybe next year I will see them bloom. The thought gives me a strange, not entirely unpleasant sensation of melancholy.

On my walk back to the minshuku it begins to rain. It’s more than a drizzle, but not exactly a downpour. Water drips from the brim of my wide kasa. I watch my feet on the muddy road so as not to lose my footing.

By the time I make it back to the minshuku I’m cold and tired and wet and thinking about sitting next to the irori or possibly taking a long soak in the ofuro. Looking forward to the simple pleasure of being warm makes me smile faintly and look up as I enter the yard.

My heart stops in my chest.

He’s sitting on a stump under the eaves, elbows on his knees, hands folded together. Even from here I can see the blue color of his eyes.

“Victor,” I breathe, eyes wide at the sight of him.

He stands, a lopsided smile on his impossibly handsome face. “I wondered if I was going to have to wait for you all day.”

I don’t realize that I’ve stopped moving until I suddenly lurch forward running towards him. My heart is leaping. “Victor!”

He catches me as I throw myself into his arms. He staggers back a bit, catching himself with a little grunt. He chuckles faintly and I look up at him, water sluicing down my back off the kasa. “Careful. My leg is still weak. I can’t go tossing you about just yet.”

Despite his words his arms are warm and strong around me. I plant my feet, fingers gripping the fabric of his woolen jacket. “Where have you been?” I say before I can stop myself.

Victor’s brows furrow a little and he frowns. “Recovering and taking care of some important business. My affairs were all out of order, and at first I could hardly walk even without the cast.” He takes my face in his hands. “I’m sorry. I wanted to come much sooner. I missed you so much.”
My heart aches and my stomach is twisting in agonizing knots of joy. “I thought... I worried...” I feel tears prickling behind my eyes.

Victor smirks wryly and strokes my cheek with his thumb. “I knew you would, despite what I told you. I would have sent Yuri, but he’s taken work on one of the cargo ships for a few runs.”

I just stare at him, soaking in the sight of his face. His hair is slightly damp, the ends darkened by rain. His skin is so pale and so perfect. His blue eyes pierce me to my core. All of my resolve and resolution over parting ways is dissolved utterly in just that brief moment.

“I want to kiss you...” he murmurs.

“Yes,” I breath, closing my eyes and leaning up into him. But something stops me.

Victor chuckles. “But your silly hat is in the way.”

I blink and color comes rushing into my face. “Oh! Yes, it is.” I laugh, flustered and then lean back, rubbing at my eyes with one hand, causing my spectacles to become askew. ‘Come inside. The weather’s awful and it’s cold.”

“Mmm.”

Together we walk into the vestibule and I begin to take off my wet outerwear. It’s strange, but suddenly I feel nervous and fluttery like I did when Victor and I first began to grow close. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as he sits to take off his boots. I notice that he holds his left leg out a bit stiffly.

“Did you walk all the way here?”

“Mmm. I didn’t want to ride Tien and have to tether him outside all night in the cold and rain.”

The words ‘all night’ strike me and I feel my face heat up and my heart begin to hammer all over again. “Oh.”

I slide back the door to the main room, going to the irori to stoke it so the room warms quickly. When I look up Victor is standing just inside the door, looking around the room with a distant expression on his face. I wonder if the past months have seemed like a dream to him, too.

I notice for the first time that he is carrying the furoshiki I gave him when he left, though whatever it is carrying is much smaller than the bundle he left with.

“Victor?”

My voice draws him out of his reverie and he blinks, looking at me with a grin. “Sorry. I was just remembering everything that happened here.”

My brows furrow a little. “Good memories?”

He laughs. “How can you ask? They are the best memories.” His smile is soft and as warm as sunlight.

I flush happily. “Yes. They are.”

“We will make many more happy memories, Yuuri.”

I swallow and nod, though I lower my eyes, afraid that Victor will see the uncertainty I feel in them.
His feet are soft on the tatami as he walks over and kneels next to me. I look up, opening my mouth to say something, but the words catch in my throat as he removes my spectacles. The tips of his fingers are chilled against my heated face. Without speaking he smooths back my damp hair, awry from being under the *kasa*.

My eyelids flutter in time with my heartbeat. He pulls my face to his. Our lips touch and then press together. His mouth is warm, but the skin of his face is cool. I inhale his scent, made bright from the rain. We don’t talk.

His hands reach for the sash of my yukata. My fingers fumble with the buttons of his linen shirt. I want to feel him. I ache with the need to be as close to him as I can be. This feeling... this desire... I’d forgotten it in such a short time. Or maybe I’d just pushed it aside, unable to bear it.

Victor has my yukata fully open in a matter of moments. I rise to my knees so that he can touch me through my underclothes. I cling to the front of his shirt, unable to focus on undressing him, unused to the mechanics of his Western clothing. I moan his name. My voice trembles.

“Yuuri...” he breathes my name like a sigh of relief. “Will you let me make love to you?”

“Yes.” I gasp the word without hesitation. “Please.” Anything to be closer to him.

Victor pulls me into his lap, my thighs straddling his hips. His hands seem to touch me everywhere at once, cold and hot at the same time. I’ve given up on his shirt and plunge my fingers into his damp hair, gripping it tightly as we kiss.

“We should... get a futon...” I gasp between kisses.

“Why?” he pants in response. “We can make love just like this.”

“Oh,” I pant, pressing my forehead to his. I can’t say I know much about such things beyond what Victor has already taught me. We have touched and kissed and tasted each other fully, and everything he has taught me has been wonderful. So I have no reason not to trust him. “Show me,” I sigh before pressing our lips together again.

I feel him smile against my lips.

With his help I do eventually manage to get his shirt undone. The planes of his chest and the contours of his strong arms feel wonderful beneath my hands. A little more mutual effort and we manage my undergarments and the front of his pants. He lets me push them down a short ways and then stops me.

“That’s far enough,” he murmurs and his face has an uncharacteristic flush of embarrassment to it.

I look at him curiously. “What’s wrong?”

His lips twist to one side and he holds my gaze a moment before his eyes cut away. “My leg, it’s... not very attractive. It’s scarred and atrophied and... Well. Let’s just say I won’t be dancing again any time soon.”

I frown softly, taking his face in my hands. “Do you think I care about that?”

He gazes into my eyes, his hands steady on my waist. “No. But I care. I’m a vain man, if you haven’t noticed.” He smiles wryly.

I stroke his face with my fingers. “You are so beautiful, Victor. There’s nothing you ever need to
hide from me."

“I know. Later you can take them off. Just... for now let me cling to my foolish vanity.” He smirks a little. “Besides. It’s rather exciting to have some of your clothes on while making love.”

I can’t help but smirk at that. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Then let me show you,” he murmurs, leaning up to graze his teeth against my jaw as he pulls me back into his lap. Our naked flesh meets and I gasp as my eyelids flutter and my head tips back.

“Ahhh...”

His hands on my hips, he guides me to move with and against him. It leaves me breathless, hot and dizzy. I don’t notice him undoing the furoshiki, which he has kept conveniently within reach, but I do notice when he slides his hands down to cup my backside and his fingers - slick with some kind of oil - slip between.

I gasp and jerk, startled. My hands grip his shoulders.

“Shhh. Relax,” he murmurs. I swallow and nod, flushed and unable to help the nervous trembling of my legs. I take deep breaths beside his ear. “Relax.”


I moan.

And I melt.

It feels like it goes on forever. Not that I have any desire for it to stop. It feels so strange yet so good. My body begins to move of its own accord, hips rolling, feeling him inside me and against me.

I hear his voice through the haze in my head, but can’t make out what he is saying. Are they words or just sounds? Whatever they are... I love them.

At some point either I have had enough, or he has had enough, but whatever the reason he pulls his fingers free. I hiss at the strange feeling left inside of me. A feeling of wanting. His hands are moving my hips again, positioning me for him. I raise my head to look into his eyes. He holds my gaze as he takes me.

My breath comes in hiccupping gasps. At first I don’t like the feeling as he pushes up and pulls me down. But the initial pain is the worst of it. And when it passes my body is pushing itself down, my legs spreading. Something is blooming inside of me. My hips rolling to take him in. All of him.

We come together fully, and he holds my hips, pulling me flush to him and keeping me there. Not that I have any desire to pull away. He is - in this moment - the only thing that matters. We kiss. My fingernails dig into his shoulders. I moan his name into his mouth and drink in his breath.

Victor’s arms come around me and we begin to move, slow at first, but escalating quickly. I have never felt anything like it, never imagined anything so good. The pain and pressure and pleasure all coalesce into this ecstatic feeling that is almost too much for my body to contain. I feel like I will fly into a million pieces or crumble, and always there is that melting, blooming feeling deep inside of me.

We move together, warmed by each other and the soft glow of the irori. Victor’s mouth and hands
worship my body, and he makes beautiful, sweet noises against my skin. The look in his eyes when they meet mine makes me tremble. He doesn’t need to tell me he loves me, I can feel it in every movement of his body.

Our bodies arch together and we cling to one another, fingernails clutching and scratching on bare skin. We kiss with a hunger I haven’t ever felt before. It isn’t rough, but it’s needful, almost something we can’t control. I want to ask him why he’s been keeping this from me all these months. But I have no words, I barely have any thoughts.

I have come before at Victor’s hands and made him come as well. But it has never felt anything like this. It happens so suddenly that for a moment I’m not sure what is happening, and I gasp in fear at the intensity of it. My back bows, I leave red marks on Victor’s shoulders, and I toss my head back as he pulls me hard down against him and holds me there.

The sound I make is unrestrained and utterly immodest, but I am helpless to control myself. I don’t even want to. My body grows tight, trembling around him. Victor comes with me. He growls. He grabs my hair and pulls my neck to his lips, marking me inside and out. I shiver in delight.

“V-Victor...” I moan, my body still tense in the throes of my climax.

And then it’s over and I feel like I am floating, weightless and formless in Victor’s arms. My eyes flutter open to bare slits as I pant. His lips are still on my neck, kissing and licking my bare skin. I hold onto him and he keeps me steady in his arms.

After a time he reaches up, cupping my face and drawing it back to his. We kiss in a way that makes my heart ache. Our foreheads rest together. We breathe in each others’ soft, panted breaths.

“Are you alright?” he murmurs.

“Mmm. Yes. Very much so.”

“I thought so. Just wanted to be sure.” I can hear the amusement in his voice.

I smile, looping my arms around his neck. “We can do it again?”

Victor laughs and squeezes me tightly. “As many times as you want. But now I think we should get the futon.”

“Yes,” I say, breathless. “I admit I wouldn’t mind lying down for few minutes.”

We separate carefully and I pull out two futon mattresses while Victor finishes undressing himself. I say nothing about his leg, bringing him a clean yukata, one that he often wore during the winter. Then we lie down together, my head on his chest, my arm draped around him as I curl close to his side.

I ache with how much I have missed the sound of his heartbeat. I want to ask him about so many things: Grankin, the minshuku, what we will do when the new Consul comes, Yuri and St. Petersburg. But it is all heavy and depressing and I don’t want it to ruin the wonderful glowing feeling that our lovemaking has left.

We doze a little and then wake and make love again. This time on my belly. The next time on my back. He offers to allow me to have him, but I flush and tell him, “Not yet.” I am still exploring all of the ways we can make love in this configuration.

We manage to pull ourselves apart long enough to eat dinner and take our very first bath together in
the ofuro. We sleep naked and tangled together.

In the morning I know we have to part again and so am reluctant to get up, even as Victor kisses me awake.

“Yuuuuri,” he murmurs softly against my skin. “Wake up, beautiful Yuuri.”

“Why?” I answer sleepily.

“Because I have to go.”

I frown. “No.” I wrap my arms around him and kiss him firmly. “Stay.”

“I can’t.” He nips my lip and I draw back with a little gasp of surprise.

“That was mean.”

Victor chuckles and strokes my wild hair back from my face. “It was. But I really must go. There are still a lot of things I have to take care of. Smoothing things over with Grankin, charming the District Governor, trying to make a plan for you and me.”

I swallow. “We have to talk about it soon. We don’t have much time. It’s already spring, Victor.”

He purses his lips. “I know. I promise. I will come back very soon and we will make a plan. I just need a little more time to work things out on my end.”

I wish I understood what all of that meant. I search his face, but he doesn’t give me anything more. Finally I sigh. “Alright. But, please, don’t be gone for so long again. I couldn’t stand it.”

He strokes my face and kisses me again. “I won’t. I promise.”

After we rise I walk Victor to the road and kiss him goodbye in the early light of morning. I watch his back as he walks away, and I notice that his gait is not as even as it used to be. I frown softly, wondering when I will see him again, before returning to the minshuku and my solitary routine.

But my thoughts remain full of Victor. The memory of his touch on my skin and his voice, soft and sweet in my ear, keep me company. I find myself pausing for no reason in my daily chores to touch my lips, smiling, because I remember the warmth of mouth upon mine and the taste of his tongue.

I daydream of his next visit. Of the things we will do. Of the new ways of lovemaking he will show me.

And then that night, just after dinner, I’m surprised once again by the sound of hooves in the yard. My heart leaps in my chest, thinking Victor has already returned to spend another night by my side. A giddy rush makes me shiver.

But it is not Victor’s voice, high with alarm, that reaches me. It is Yuri’s. “Katsuki!”

Something much less pleasant goes through me like cold water. I rush outside to see the young man dismounting from Tien. Victor is not with him. He is alone.

“Yuri? What is it?” My heart pounds. Why has he come here?

He rushes towards me. He looks frantic, his green eyes huge in the near darkness, his blond hair a wild mess. How fast had he ridden here? “Where is it? Where is Victor’s gun?!”
His question confuses me, and I shake my head, like I’m trying to clear it. I hold up my hands, to calm him. “What? The pistol?”

“I know he left it here. Where is it? I need it!” He tries to push past me, but I grab him.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on!” I grasp both of his shoulders firmly and give him a little shake. The sight of him fills me with anxiety. I have never seen him like this.

He shoves against my chest, but not hard enough to break my grip. He’s seething, but then after a moment he almost seems to crumple, his young face contorted in fear and panic. “They took him. They locked him up.”

I don’t want to understand the words he is saying. So instead I ask, “Who?”

“Victor! Are you stupid? Who else would I be talking about?!”

My chest squeezes so tightly I almost can’t breathe. Who has him? What have they done with him? Why have they done it? I open my mouth; all that comes out is, “Why?”

“I don’t know!” Yuri wrenches free of my grasp now, but just begins to pace anxiously. “Something to do with smuggling. But he hasn’t been doing any of that shit! He would have told me. All I can think is that... that Grankin pulled something. Got him arrested, or... or did something stupid and got Victor caught in the middle. That stupid fat fuck!”

My mind whirls. Grankin. Of course. It would be something to do with the man who had so long controlled Victor’s life. But I thought we had more time. Victor said he could delay him... I press the heels of my hands to my eyes. Images of the night before swirl in my mind. Was our first time together to be our last? Had the last six months been nothing but a cruel joke? Just when he returned to me, could fate just pluck him away again?

My anxiety claws at the inside of my skull, warring with my conviction to be with Victor. It tells me I am not strong enough, that there is nothing I can do, that I should resign myself to my fate and Victor to his. I hate that voice. I hate it so much I want to scream.

Instead I squeeze my eyes shut and take several deep breaths, pushing it down, covering it over, replacing it with something hard and cold and steely. I’ve fought battles with myself my whole life. I will not lose now.

“Yuri, calm down.” My voice sounds strange, calm and authoritative. He looks at me, clearly as surprised as I am at my composure. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Shitsurei shimasu - A common way of announcing oneself when coming into or arriving at someone else's home. It literally means "I'm being rude!" (by coming into your home and disturbing you).

2. Furoshiki - A square piece of fabric that is used to wrap item in, making them easy to carry.
3. Japanese undergarments - traditional male undergarments are called fundoshi. Similar to a loincloth the fundoshi is usually a length of cotton that goes between the legs and is secured with a cord around the waist.
Chapter Notes

1/3/2018 Updated - If you are re-reading this fic for the umpteenth time you may notice that this chapter has been updated. I realized during a random read through of my own that an entire section of Chapter 7 had been omitted from the original posting! (100% my fault during the copy and paste process from the master file.) It's actually a really important scene and I couldn't believe that no one had ever noticed that it was missing. If you're new to the fic, congrats! You get the full version on your first read through.

Hi friends! I'm sorry the new chapter took so long to get up. I had hoped I'd get some writing done while I was on vacation, but that just did not happen at all. (I had a really great time tho!) And of course when I got home I had to put my life back in order from having been on vacation. This chapter was also a huge struggle to get through. It fought with me all the way. It made me go back to the drawing board on some points I thought I had all figured out. That's what I get for writing an outline!

And we can finally welcome the appearance of a character that I originally had no intent of including in this story at all! But here he is, appearing none the less as if I have no say in the matter. If you were clever you noticed him added to the tags.

Thank you all for being patient! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

As always you can follow my blog dedicated to this story at: martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com
or my personal blog (beware of shitposting) at: martymuses.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakhalin Island, Korsakovsk Post, Spring 1889 - V.N.

I should not have been surprised by my arrest. To be completely honest I suppose I wasn’t surprised. If anything my surprise came at its timing. I thought - erroneously - that I still had more time. And I had hoped that by the time I ran out of time it wouldn’t matter anymore.

But Grankin’s patience with me had worn thin earlier than I’d anticipated. Or maybe this wasn’t about patience at all. More likely it was about power. My arrest had been arranged only so that he knew that I knew it could be done. Even as far away from Alexandrovsk as I was, I wasn’t out of his reach. As I’d hoped I had been.

In retrospect that hope seemed both desperate and naive.

Once I returned to Korsakovsk, I did what I could to reestablish and ingratiate myself to Bely and the others. But a famous dancer isn’t much good if he can’t dance, and the weather wasn’t yet good enough to expect visiting officials who might be interested in my simple notoriety, good looks, and charismatic conversation skills.

Grankin’s letters and their contents weighed heavily on my mind. He insisted that I get things moving by the spring when the shipments between the mainland, Alexandrovsk, and the other...
districts would increase. And if I didn’t have some sort of plan to our mutual benefit by that time he had plenty of colorful threats in mind. He would have me flayed, send Gilyak mercenaries to drag me back to Alexandrovsk by my neck, have me flogged, have me imprisoned, ruin me in various creative ways, ensure I was returned to Alexandrovsk in chains, or worse, sent to the Tymovsk district or the coal mines of Duay.

Most of this I took as the ravings of a small, fat, unhappy megalomaniac.

But there was one threat I took very seriously. The threat that he would find ways to do harm to those I cared about. As far as he knew the only person I cared about was Yuri, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have eyes on me in Korsakovsk. Or that he couldn’t or wouldn’t find out about Yuuri if I resumed my frequent visits.

Staying away from him and the minshuku was a conscious decision. One that ate at me day and night. I ached to be with Yuuri, just to see his face, so much that if it wasn’t for the rest of the mess of my life to keep me distracted, I might have quite literally gone insane.

Knowing that my absence and silence would also hurt Yuuri was worse still. But I was terrified that rumors would spread. That news of our attachment would catch and somehow he would become embroiled in this mess.

It’s ironic that fate waited just long enough for me to return to him before playing its hand.

I’d only gone down to the docks, because I knew Yuri was returning on the Baikal that day. I wanted to welcome him home, but he was still working, helping unload the freight. So I watched while I waited.

He’s much stronger than you would expect of someone so small and wiry. It’s hard work, but he never flinches from it. He worked alongside another young, dark haired boy, and I don’t know why but I got the impression that they were close somehow. They didn’t talk much, but maybe that is what made them seem close: despite very little verbal communication they worked side by side seamlessly.

They smiled at each other.

I didn’t recognize the other boy. He wasn’t a settler, not from Korsakovsk or Alexandrovsk anyway. Part of the ship’s crew then? Someone Yuri had worked with before or only just met during the last sailing?

A friend? Something more? A secret he’d kept from me?

Could he be the reason he stayed longer in town when the mail came in?

My train of thought intrigued and troubled me. I would be happy if it was true that Yuri had a friend. There are so few young people on Sakhalin. But why not tell me?

Caught up in my thoughts I did not notice the guards going through the unloaded goods. Nor did I notice when their attention suddenly turned to me.

“We found it! Like the telegraph said! A crate of contraband. Vodka!” one of them called out. I looked at them, curious as to what they’d found, and was unnerved to see them staring directly at me.

“That is unfortunate. Detain Mr. Nikiforov.”

The voice of Mr. Bely came from behind me. Turning, startled, I saw him standing with two more
guards further up the dock. They had rifles. He was looking at me with a mixture of disappointment and contempt.

“What?” I asked stupidly, and had only a moment to brace myself before the guards were on me, grabbing my arms and twisting them behind my back. My muscles spasmed and I gasped in pain, clenching my teeth. “Wait! What are you doing?! I haven’t done anything!”

“Take him to the cell in the prison office. I wish to speak with him there.”

The guards pushed my head down as they propelled me forward. All I could do was splutter. “What is this about?!”

“Victor!” Yuri’s footsteps on the dock were fast and loud. “What are you doing? Let him go!”

I strained against the men holding me, trying to twist around and look over my shoulder. “Yuri, don’t! Stay back. I’ll get this sorted out.”

My words didn’t deter him. He threw himself at one of the guards, grabbing his arm and trying to yank him away from me. “Let him go! He hasn’t done anything!”

“Yuri, stop!” Surprisingly it was another voice that said these words. Still craning my neck around, I saw the dark haired boy running after Yuri just in time to catch him as the guard shoved him back.

I heard the click of a rifle being primed and panicky fear welled up in my guts, cold and awful, threatening to choke me. “Yuri, stay back!” I shouted again, a tinge of desperation in my voice. The two guards beside Mr. Bely had both readied their guns.

“Control yourself, young man, or you will find yourself arrested as well. If one of my men doesn’t shoot you first.”

I couldn’t help the snarling sound I made between my teeth. Yuri’s face twisted in rage and for a moment I was terrified as it seemed he was about to spring forward again. But the dark haired boy’s arm snaked around him, holding him firmly in place. He said something in his ear, and my little brother crumpled a little.

I didn’t know his name, or what he meant to Yuri, but I thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

“It will be fine, Yuratchka,” I said as glibly as I could, just before the guards grabbed my hair and shoved my head forward and down again.

I was escorted none too gently to the prison office and deposited into the small holding cell kept there for disruptors of the peace and questioning. There was nothing in the cell. No bed. No chair. Only the floor and the bars, which clanged shut loudly behind me as I was shoved through the cell door.

I turned around immediately, wrapping my hands around the bars as Mr. Bely came to stand before me. The guards took up silent positions to either side of the cell.

“I am disappointed by this turn of events Mr. Nikiforov,” he said calmly, twisting his lips, and there was a note of sincerity in his voice.

I looked at him evenly. “I wish I knew what turn of events you were speaking of Mr. Bely. My sudden imprisonment is a bit of a surprise.”

He made a thoughtful sound and then produced a neatly folded telegram from his pocket. “I received this several days ago from Alexandrovsk Post.” He unfolded it slowly and then began to read. “V.
Nikiforov known kulak. Smuggling to Korsakovsk. Shipment suspected among Baikal cargo.”” I watched Mr. Bely as he folded up the telegram paper and put it back in his pocket. “What can you tell me about this telegram?”

I pursed my lips and shook my head. “Nothing. Though apparently you found something among the cargo you think you can attribute to its veracity.”

“A crate of vodka, apparently.” He met my eyes evenly. “As you know distribution of alcohol by anyone but the government is illegal on Sakhalin, Mr. Nikiforov.”

“And you think I would be stupid enough to be so obvious? I would at least make some attempt to disguise what I was smuggling.” The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of it.

“Spoken like a man who has had some experience with such things.”

I stared at him, pursing my lips, but didn’t make any response.

“And there is the curious fact that you were at the dock, watching the cargo being unloaded, as well as the fact that your younger brother just happened to be working on the ship carrying this particular crate of illegal goods.”

“Yuri had nothing to do with any of this,” I ground the words between my teeth.

Mr. Bely canted his head to one side. “And how could you possibly know this if you had nothing to do with it yourself?”

I took a deep breath and looked him in the eyes. “Neither of us had anything to do with it. Leave Yuri out of this.” My nostrils flared as I clenched my teeth, filled with rage not only at the implication that Yuri could be at risk, but at my own powerlessness. “Who sent the telegram?”

Mr. Bely’s eyebrow arched a little. “Why does it matter?”

“Was it Ivan Grankin by any chance?”

His other eyebrow rose to join the first.

“That man is a worse crook than any of the criminals in your prison,” I spat. “If you found ‘smuggled’ vodka in the freight it’s because he put it there himself, and then sent you that telegram to implicate me.”

Mr. Bely was quiet a moment. “I know very well that the officials in the northern districts do not appreciate the letter of the law in the same way we do here in the south. I know how Alexandrovsk is run, and it disgusts me, Mr. Nikiforov. That is why I do not take incidents such as these lightly. I have rooted out every attempt that has been made to bring that corruption to my district. Ivan Grankin is a crook, you’re right, as are all of the officials in Alexandrovsk. This, too, I am aware of. But I can see no reason why it would be to his benefit to sabotage his own smuggling operation.”

I took a deep breath, grasping now at the slim chance that I might actually win Bely to my side. “There is no operation. Grankin agreed to my transfer thinking I would help him and the other officials spread their smuggling to Korsakovsk. But once I got here, I refused to work for him, and this is his retaliation. I have no desire to see the corruption of Alexandrovsk brought here! He sent that vodka and that telegram knowing it would lead to my arrest. That’s the only reason!” My knuckles had become white from gripping the bars.

Mr. Bely was quiet again for a moment and then looked down at his feet, tapping one thoughtfully.
“Strangely enough I don’t find what you say to be entirely preposterous, Mr. Nikiforov. But regardless it is your word against his, and the quickest way to be rid of this problem is to simply be rid of you.” My blood felt like ice water in my veins. He looked back up, meeting my eyes. “I don’t want you in Korsakovsk any longer. I don’t need you or Mr. Grankin causing me headaches or sewing disorder in my settlement. I will be sending you back to Alexandrovsk where you and the Prison Overseer can deal with each other directly.”

My stomach sank like a stone. “You can’t do that,” I croaked. “I came here to get away from that place. My... my brother...”

“Is a free settler, and welcome to do as he wishes. Whether that means returning to Alexandrovsk with you or remaining in Korsakovsk. He is old enough to be considered an adult. His work on the docks should be enough so that he can support himself.” He smiled a little grimly. “Of course, that is assuming you are correct in your assertion that he is not involved in these underhanded business practices.”

“I told you, he has nothing to do with any of this!”

“Yes, that is what you told me.”

I stared at him through the bars, and after a moment I closed my eyes, trying to keep the overwhelming feeling of despair welling up inside me at bay. He was dangling Yuri in front of me like some kind of bargaining chip. I didn’t know why, or what it was he wanted from me in exchange for my brother’s safety. “Mr. Bely, please. I am begging you. Yuri is a good boy.”

We stared at each other for a long moment and then he grunted. “I won’t look further into his potential involvement granted that he behaves himself, and that you accept your fate and leave Korsakovsk without a fuss. You are popular and well known, and I don’t know who else you might have been working with here. The last thing I need on my hands is some kind of uproar among the prisoners and settlers because of you.”

My brows rose at that. So that’s what he was afraid of? Some kind of riot? On my behalf, or whipped up by me? The thought seemed ludicrous. But if it was truly a fear of the District Governor then perhaps there was something I didn’t know.

The Korsakovsk District was orderly and free of corruption, but the officials were also known for being heavy handed when it came to punishment and discipline. Unpopular prison wardens and palachs, the men who carried out floggings, had been killed in the past by unhappy and vengeful convicts at many prisons. If you were already convicted of murder and sentenced to serve a life-sentence of hard labor, where was the harm in adding another murder to your score?

I smirked faintly. “I think, Mr. Bely, you overestimate my popularity and the influence I might have here. I’ve been in Korsakovsk barely a year, and much of that was spent convalescing with the Japanese. I don’t think you need to worry. Nobody will even notice I’m gone.”

He grunted again. “For my sake I hope you are right, and that you will serve as an example to remind the others that corruption is not tolerated in Korsakovsk.”

My eyes flicked up to his, an unpleasant feeling roiling in my stomach. “What do you mean by that?”

“You have committed a crime in the eyes of the officials, Mr. Nikiforov. And crime begets due punishment-”

“You said you were sending me back to Alexandrovsk,” I cut him off, the unpleasant feeling
becoming something more like fear.

“And so I am. But before you will have a date with the palach. A public flogging will serve as a much better deterrent than your quiet disappearance from the settlement, especially if - as you say - no one will even notice you are gone.”

I had never been flogged before, but I had seen it and I had heard it and I knew that men had died from it. The rozgi. The plet. The knout. These are the weapons of the palach, each more terrible and severe than the last. Strapped face down to the kabila bench a man loses not only all ability to defend himself, but all dignity.

A weak feeling made my knees buckle and I slumped forward against the bars. I heard Mr. Bely make a soft, tutting sound. “I know this is unfortunate, Mr. Nikiforov. In all honesty, I liked you, and was glad to have someone of some interest in my settlement. They keep all of the interesting people for themselves in Alexandrovsk. But you have to understand that maintaining order in this settlement and within my prison is my duty to Russia, and to all those who are in my care. If it makes you feel any better I will instruct the palach to go easy on you.”

To my mortification, I was trembling.

Mr. Bely tutted again. “Until arrangements can be made I think the cachots noirs will be the best place to keep you, Mr. Nikiforov. That will save us both the trouble of shackling you and keep you out of any trouble with the other prisoners.”

Sakhalin Island, Korsakovsk Prison, Spring 1888 - V.N.

The one blessing I cling to in all of this is the knowledge that Yuuri will not be witness to any of it. He is, and hopefully will remain for some time, blissfully ignorant of my fate.

This is the thought I comfort myself with now as I sit in the utter darkness of my singular cell, the cachot noir, cut off from the other prisoners and most sound and light, reflecting on what put me here.

Is Yuuri still happily dreaming of our future together? The one that I recklessly promised him?

Is Yuratchka cursing me for stealing his own future? If only I had been able to send him to St. Petersburg before all of this happened. I hope he escapes this island. Perhaps, once everything has come out, he will go with Yuuri to Japan and leave the dark memories of Sakhalin behind.

Or maybe he will stay with the dark haired boy from the dock. I am sad that I will probably never know who he is or what he means to my little brother. Unless he returns with me to Alexandrovsk - assuming that I will survive the flogging. Thinking of being there again without him, without anyone, fills me with selfish loneliness.

I am a wretched man.

I worry Yuri is making a scene, challenging the officials, that he will get himself thrown in here with me. Will he come to my flogging? The thought makes me sick to my stomach, but there is nothing for me to throw up. They have not fed me. I don’t know how long I’ve been here.

Surely no more than a day, but it’s difficult to tell when it’s so dark and quiet.

It is terrible being alone with my thoughts and the anticipation of my fate.
First the flogging. Thinking of it fills me with a visceral, physical terror. I know it makes me a coward to fear something other men in this place endure frequently. The knowledge of my cowardice only makes it that much worse.

And then the return to Alexandrovsk. What will Grankin do with me once I am sent back there? Have me flogged again? Shackle me and put me in prison like a common convict? Or simply make me return to his service, to my old way of life?

I wonder if I will ever see Yuuri again. Might he come to see me off? Would I even want him to?

I close my eyes in the darkness and think of him, drawing up every detail of his face and body in my mind. His dark eyes, the way they sometimes sparkle. How his round cheeks color when I tease or compliment him. His charming lack of self-awareness. The simple gracefulness of the way he moves.

His kindness. His patience. His gentleness. His humility. His softness. His fear of horses.

I laugh softly, and it makes me feel like crying. I wanted so badly to know him so much more.

I wanted to give him everything. To protect him from any more disappointment and loneliness in his life. But who am I to protect anyone? I could not even protect myself. I think of how, so often in my life, I have failed the people I care about.

Disappointing and shaming my parents. My blithe disregard for the feelings of my admirers. Not giving Yuri the life he deserved, or keeping my promise to him. My lack of conviction in the beliefs Ignacy died for, even though they are the reason I now sit in prison.

Strange to think of him now. Not that I don’t ever think of him. I still do. I still puzzle over what it was that he really wanted from me. Why did he bring me along that day? Did he think it would change me into a true believer? Or did he just want someone nearby? Someone he knew would be watching? Someone he knew would grieve for him if he was caught or killed?

I try not to think he just wanted me to get caught, though it has crossed my mind. It is too bleak a thing to believe, and makes my memories of our time together too sad.

I’m lost in my thoughts about all the disappointments of my life when the key to my cell scrapes in its keyhole and the door opens, flooding the dark interior with light that is so blinding to me that I must close my eyes.

“Get up, Nikiforov. It’s time to go.”

No. I don’t want to. Please don’t take me to the kabila.

The thought races through my mind, and I mean to say it aloud, but nothing comes out. I shrink away from the guard when he enters the cell. He just looks at me and sighs, like he has done this a hundred times before and is tired of his job.

He grabs me around the arm and hauls me to my feet. He propels me towards the cell door and I stumble out into the hallway, still shielding my eyes from the light, which is actually not very bright at all. It is only the candle light from a few wall sconces.

Impossibly the air out in the hallway is worse smelling and heavier than that in my cachot noir. If I hadn’t already felt like gagging, I surely would have now. The light and smell makes me dizzy and disoriented. My weak leg is aching from sitting and lying on the floor.

“Let’s go,” the guard says again and gives me a push from behind. I make my way forward,
surprised there is not another guard to help escort me. I suppose they don’t assume I’m much of a flight risk with my lame leg.

He leads me through the prison and out into the prison yard. The light of the sun is truly blinding now. So much so that I have no sense of what time of day it is, only that it is bright. When I falter in the light he takes my upper arm again, pulling me forward. His grip is tight, but not that painful.

It isn’t until we’ve gone some ways that I realize he is not taking me into the part of the prison yard, where most floggings are conducted. He seems to be taking me towards the main part of town and the prison office. Bely must have really meant it when he said ‘public flogging.’ Such things can practically turn into a festival for the townsfolk.

I groan softly. There is no way Yuri will not see it now. My heartbeat grows faster and faster, fear balling in my stomach the closer we get. Then the prison office is before us, but strangely, through my shaded eyes, I do not see the *palach* nor the *kabila* set out in front. Perhaps they intend to do it in the main square and Bely wishes to escort me himself.

All this pomp is now beginning to seem ludicrously overkill. I almost laugh as we mount the office steps and the guard holds the door open, pushing me inside with a large hand on my back. The prison office smells like wood polish. I hear soft, faint voices as the guard escorts me to Mr. Bely’s office.

And the sight that greets me there leaves me utterly bewildered.

“I’ve brought him, Mr. Bely,” the guard says, giving me one last little push into the office.

Mr. Bely, standing behind his desk and looking rather sour, looks at the guard and then dismisses him with a wave of his hand. “Thank you, Mr. Petrovitch.”

The guard leaves, but I barely notice. I’m staring dumbfoundedly at the three men in the room with Mr. Bely: my Yuratchka, Yuuri, and, strangely, the Japanese Consul, Mr. Suzuyama. They are all staring back at me. And perhaps strangest of all is that Yuuri is wearing a suit. An unfashionable and ill fitting suit.

I stare at him, feeling dazed, and yet drinking him in. The face I thought I might never see again. Those bright eyes looking back at me, burning behind his spectacles. I want to run to him, but my legs feel like wood.

“What... is happening?” is all I can think to say.

Mr. Bely makes a clucking sound and raps his fingers against his desk. “It seems, Mr. Nikiforov, that you have made good friends at the Japanese Consulate.”

I drag my eyes away from the other three to look at Mr. Bely. I don’t know what to say, because I don’t know what this is about. It’s then that I notice the small pile of letters on his desk and I recognize them immediately as the letters from Grankin. My eyes snap back to Yuri and he looks back at me, somewhat smug.

Now more confused than ever I look back at Bely with furrowed eyebrows. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bely, I’m not following.”

“It seems Mr. Nikiforov, that you were most likely not lying when you told me that Mr. Grankin may have set you up. These men have presented to me numerous letters in which Mr. Grankin has threatened to take such or other vindictive action against you.”
His words still confuse me. He’d as much as admitted to my face that he didn’t care whether I was telling the truth or not. He only wanted my troubles with Grankin to not be his troubles. Why would the letters change anything?

Mr. Bely clears his throat. “Mr. Suzuyama and Mr. Katsuki have also expressed concern for you. They feel quite responsible for your well being after having cared for you so graciously during your convalescence. Mr. Suzuyama has especially vouched for your character and laments that your return to Alexandrovsk would deny the Consulate of your company.” I can tell from his tight lipped expression that Mr. Bely is not happy about what he is saying.

“And Mr. Katsuki has confirmed that you indulged to him in confidence your pre-existing troubles with Mr. Grankin and your desire to leave the corruption of Alexandrovsk behind you. Provided with this information, and the assurances of the Japanese Consulate regarding your character, I find that I was likely hasty in my assumption of your guilt.”

I look at Suzuyama and Yuuri, understanding now that they have somehow orchestrated my release, and either convinced or strong-armed Mr. Bely into reversing his decision to send me back to Alexandrovsk.

“I see,” I say after a moment, the words leaving me in a rush of air. My relief is so great that I feel weak and wish I had something to grab onto. “Then I am deeply in the debt of both Mr. Suzuyama and Mr. Katsuki, who certainly did not owe me this great kindness. I am now even more deeply in your debt and that of the Consulate.”

I bow, knowing from Yuuri that this is the proper way to show my appreciation. It is an odd feeling when both Suzuyama and Yuuri bow back to me.

“It is our pleasure, Mr. Nikiforov,” Suzuyama says. “I was quite shocked when I learned of your predicament. You should also thank your younger brother for having the presence of mind to seek our assistance in demonstrating your guiltlessness. He is a very bright young man.”

I straighten up and look at Yuri, who looks as pleased by the praise as he does defiant. Only my Yuratchka can embody such conflicting emotions so perfectly at once. “He is a very bright young man. I am very proud of him.”

Mr. Bely clears his throat, irritated to have lost all of our attention. “Yes, it is fortunate such information was brought to my attention so quickly.” He looks sharply at me now. “But you will understand, Mr. Nikiforov, that for now I do not wish for you to leave Korsakovsk Post unaccompanied. I still have a number of concerns regarding this matter, and while I trust the judgement of our Japanese friends, it is my prerogative to keep you where I can see you.”

I hear his words, but I know what he is really saying: Don’t go trying to hide behind the Consulate’s skirt again. You may be free from prison and remaining in Korsakovsk, but I can still make your life hell. I don’t like being embarrassed in my own domain.

“Oh, of course, Mr. Bely. I am very grateful for this turn of events. And I will do whatever I can to prove to you my sincerity.”

He grunts and then waves his hand, dismissing me. “You are free to go. Please try not to make any trouble, Mr. Nikiforov. And I hope your leg continues to heal. I do so hope we will get to enjoy seeing you dance again.”

Those words make my skin crawl. I know my worth to these people. Without it I have little to protect me. I just smile wanly back him.
As we begin to file out of the office Suzuyama turns to Mr. Bely with a broad grin and extends his hand. “Please don’t forget about my going away party. We are very much looking forward to seeing everyone at the Consulate.”

Mr. Bely laughs and extends a hand, shaking Suzuyama’s vigorously. It is as if he has forgotten all of the unpleasantness in the room. “I will not, my friend. I have a full crate of contraband vodka that needs to be disposed of.” He laughs and winks at the Japanese Consul, and I have that crawling feeling in my skin again.

The shipment of smuggled alcohol that nearly destroyed my life, now Mr. Bely’s party favor.

I suddenly need fresh air and I turn, walking as quickly as I can out of the prison office. I stand in the street, gulping in great breaths. I close my eyes. The world feels like it is spinning around me.

“Victor?” Yuri’s voice is alarmed as he hurries after me. “Are you alright? You look very pale.”

I nod, trying to slow my breathing, closing my mouth and breathing through my nose. I feel him put his arm around me. “Victor, let’s go home. You need to eat and drink and sleep. You’ve been in prison nearly two days.”

Two days? It had been that long. Had I slept at all?

I look around for Yuuri, suddenly afraid he is simply going to disappear before I can see him, speak with him. He is standing by the office steps trying not to stare at me. Suzuyama follows him slowly out of the building.

“Shall we return, Katsuki-san?”

Yuuri glances at him and I can tell he is nervous about what he is about to say. “I... would like to accompany Mr. Nikiforov home. Just to ensure he is alright and see if there is anything I can do for him before I return to the minshuku. I also was going to speak with some of the people at the port. I need to begin making arrangements for my return to Japan.”

Suzuyama smiles, and it seems a sad smile to me, even though it is mostly hidden behind his mustache. “Yes, of course. No reason not to since you are already here. Please come by the Consulate later if you can.”

“I will.” He looks at Suzuyama for a long moment and then bows to him more deeply than I have ever seen him, or anyone else, bow. He holds that position for a long time until the Consul very shallowly returns the bow. They exchange words in Japanese and then Suzuyama heads towards the east road out of town by himself while the three of us silently make our way to my house, which is closer to the docks.

My head is still spinning by the time we are inside. It seems completely unreal that I have been released. Fifteen minutes ago I was certain I was about to be flogged nearly to death.

The door shuts behind us and for a long moment I just stand there in the relative peace and safety of the house I bought when we moved to Korsakovsk. It’s lavish by the standards of the settlers, but nothing in comparison to the house I grew up in. It hardly even compares to what were the servants’ homes.

“Victor?” Yuri’s voice draws me out of my scattered thoughts again and I look first at him and then at Yuuri, the both of them standing, looking at me worriedly. And I completely lose control of myself.
Face in my hands I sink to the floor, dissolving into sobs of relief, released fear, and incredulity.

They surround me, wrapping me in their arms, anchoring me with the reality of their embraces, their smells, the warmth of their breath on my skin, and the sound of their voices in my ear. All mixing together in a blanket of the two people I love more than anything in this world.

Eventually I am able to cling back to them, wrapping them in my arms and squeezing them as tightly to myself as I can. My joy at their existence is overwhelming. For a long time we just crouch like that on the floor, holding each other, reassuring one another.

Finally, when I’m able to compose myself to some extent, they help me back to my feet and deposit me on the couch in the sitting room. Yuri goes to the kitchen to bring me some food and water.

Yuuri stands in front of me struggling out of his suit jacket and dropping it on a nearby chair with a sound of disgust. I stare at him, now in just a buttoned up waistcoat and shirt and what I think is meant to be an ascot.

He must feel my gaze, because he looks at me sheepishly. “I know. I look ridiculous. I hate this suit, but I didn’t want to stick out too much coming into Korsakovsk. I don’t know how Europeans can dress like this all the time.”

I chuckle softly. “I don’t know about ridiculous, but you certainly don’t look... like yourself.”

He twists his lips at that and I take his hand, pulling him onto the couch next to me. “Hold still,” I murmur softly, leaning over to undo the ascot and unbutton the top two buttons on his shirt. He looks a little less like he is going to strangle himself to death. “There. Better?”

“Mmm.” He looks into my eyes and then reaches up, slim fingers touching my forehead as he brushes my hair back from eyes and tucks it behind my ear. “Your eyes are red from crying.” His hand cups my cheek. “It must have been awful, whatever they did to you.”

I close my eyes and swallow, shaking my head a little. “They didn’t really do anything to me. Not physically. I just thought I was never going to see you again. I thought...” My stomach twists and I pause, taking a deep breath. “I was going to be flogged and then sent back to Alexandrovsk. And I had no idea what Grankin would have in store for me there.”

“What happened when you were arrested?”

I sigh, telling him about the telegram, the shipment Grankin planted, how they arrested me off the docks.

“I tried to tell Mr. Bely about Grankin, but he told me he didn’t care whether I was lying or telling the truth. He just wanted to be rid of the problems I would cause him, and use me to set an example for the others.” I shudder a little in spite of myself, still unable to shake the fear of the kabila.

Yuuri’s soft, warm lips press against my cheek and I feel his fingers smooth through my dirty hair. “It’s going to be alright. You’re safe now, Vitya.”

I snort softly at that. “With both Bely and Grankin looking over my shoulder? I doubt it.” I sink back into the couch and look at him. “How did you know I was arrested? How did you convince Suzuyama to help you? He hardly said two words to me the whole time I was staying with you. I got the impression he viewed me as an irritation.”

Yuuri laughs faintly at that. “Yuri came to me almost as soon as you were arrested. He wanted your pistol. I think he planned to try to break you out of the prison himself.”
I snort. “I’m glad you didn’t let him try.”

We smile wryly at one another. “He was furious with me at first, accusing me of cowardice and all kinds of things. When I finally calmed him down and had some time to think about a plan... getting the letters and going to Suzuyama was really all I could think of. The letters proved that Grankin wanted you working for him, that you hadn’t done what he wanted, and that he was threatening retaliation. But I knew that even with that it wasn’t likely Mr. Bely was going to listen to Yuri and me. We were nobody to him.”

He takes a deep breath and reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together in my lap. “But I knew Mr. Bely wouldn’t want to upset Suzuyama-san and the Consulate. Besides wanting to maintain good political relations, he relies too heavily on the Consulate for other things like entertainment and sake.”

He’s quiet for a moment and he looks down at his lap. There is a red tinge to his cheeks and ears.

“I knew that Suzuyama-san felt guilty for telling me I had to leave Sakhalin when he was the one who convinced me to stay all those years ago when my family left.” I study his face as he twists his lips. “It didn’t... it wasn’t very respectful for me to use that against him. It was underhanded, but it was all I could think of to save you. I played on his guilt and his sense of owing me something to convince him to do me this favor on your behalf. I think he realizes now the depth of my feelings for you. What I asked of him was... very shameless. He must know I wouldn’t have done it for just anybody.”

I can’t claim to really understand Yuuri’s obvious guilt and shame. I learned how to manipulate others at a very young age. Using what I know about others to get what I need from them seems like second nature. I wouldn’t have thought twice about it.

Here between us stands another cultural chasm.

Even though I don’t really understand why, I do understand that it was very difficult for him to do what he did for me. I squeeze his hand. “Thank you, Yuuri. You have saved my life twice now. And you have given more of yourself for me than anyone else ever has.”

He looks at me, wide eyed and flushed. “Victor...”

I smile at him warily and touch my forehead and nose to his. “Thank you, my love.”

He makes a soft, strangled sound in the back of his throat, and if I were less exhausted and less traumatized from the past two days of my life, I might not be able to resist the temptation to show him the various ways in which a couch might be employed in the art of love making. But as it is, it is all I can do to just breathe him in.

“Victor.” Yuri’s voice is flat and unamused. “I need you to untangle yourself from Katsuki and eat and drink something. And then we need to talk about what we do next.”

Yuuri and I both look up at him. There is a sort of grimness to his young face, and when I glance back at Yuuri I see the same expression mirrored there.

Yuri carries a tray with some salted fish, broth, bread and a glass of water on it. It doesn’t look very appetizing, but if I really haven’t ate or drank anything in almost two days I know I need to. I start with the water as Yuri comes to sit on the chair next to the couch.

“You can’t stay in Korsakovsk,” he says simply. “We got you out of prison, but Bely was obviously not happy about it. Suzuyama won’t be around much longer, and then you won’t have the opinion of
the Consulate to protect you.”

I take a deep breath and lift my head wearily, looking at my younger brother with a faint smirk. “You’re right. And now that Grankin has played his hand and ensured my uselessness to him, there is nothing to stop him from retaliating in a more... permanent way. Should he desire to do so.”

Yuuri looks at me with furrowed brows. “Do you really think he would go that far?”

I shrug, poking at the fish and then deciding instead to sip the broth. “It wouldn’t be difficult for him to hire a Gilyak mercenary or bribe a convict to kill me. And Bely probably wouldn’t care.”

“The sooner we leave this place the better,” Yuri says, his face set determinedly in a scowl. “The longer Victor stays here the more opportunity Grankin - and Bely - will have to make his life hell, or put him back in one of the prisons.”

Yuuri takes a deep breath. “So then... you’re talking about running away. Escaping Sakhalin altogether.”

“Of course that’s what we’re talking about, Katsuki. Try to keep up,” Yuri snarls.

“Yuri.” My tone is an admonishment.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Yuuri rubbing the palms of his hands on his thighs. “Where... will you go?”

I look up from my broth, blinking at him. He looks back at me with an almost fearful expression. “To Japan. To be with you. Where else would I go?”

His expression relaxes and he smiles softly, looking down into his lap. “I don’t know. I just didn’t want to assume that’s what you would want. Japan is... I mean... You wouldn’t know anyone else there and you don’t speak Japanese and it’s very... very different. Even I’m not sure how much I’m going to like it, and I’m actually Japanese.”

I lean over to kiss his shoulder. “Of course it’s where I want to be if you are there.”

He glances up towards Yuratchka. “What about Yuri? You can’t just assume going to Japan is what he wants, too.”

Yuri makes a grunting sound. “I’m the one who originally suggested it.”

I look at my little brother, furrowing my brows. “You can still go back to St. Petersburg. The Baikal can take you to Nikolaeyovesk and from there -”

“For the last time, Victor,” he growls at me, “I’m not leaving you to go back to St. Petersburg. So stop bringing it up.”

I stare at him for a moment, feeling all of my dreams for him slipping away, but knowing also that they are my dreams only. After a moment I nod. “Fine. So where does that leave us?”

“Getting out of Korsakovsk and making the crossing to Hokkaido,” Yuuri says. “So... first of all we need a boat; then we need someone who can actually sail it across the Souya Strait; and then we need to get you out of Korsakovsk and to the boat and across the strait without being caught or killed... or drowning.”

“Doesn’t sound too hard,” Yuri says nonchalantly.
Yuuri purses his lips. “The waters of the strait are known for having very strong currents. Fishermen used to drown in the waters outside the bay all the time when I was growing up. Making the crossing is dangerous. The only kind of boat we’re likely going to be able to get our hands on is a small vessel from... maybe one of the Ainu villages or... scavenged from an abandoned fishing village. And none of us are exactly seasoned sailors. We might be able to hire one of the Ainu to take you, but even then it’s still dangerous, and there’s always the chance that they’d turn around and sell you back to the Russians for the escapee bounty.”

I look at Yuuri, pursing my lips and then smirk. “Like Yuri said, doesn’t sound too hard.”

He smiles at me lopsidedly and then sighs. “It would be much safer if we could find a way to smuggle you aboard one of the steamers actually sailing for Hokkaido.”

I twist my lips and there is silence for a few moments.

“I might know someone,” Yuri says suddenly, his voice cautious. “Someone who could help us. With the sailing thing and... maybe with the smuggling thing.”

We both look at him with the same expression, brows raised, incredulous. He scowls.

“I’ve been working on and off the ships for a couple seasons now. What? You think I didn’t get to know any of the sailors?” He purses his lips. “I think I know someone who might help us,” he repeats. “I can bring him here.”

“I don’t know that getting someone else involved is a good idea,” Yuuri speaks up. “Every other person who knows is one more person who could betray you to the officials.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Yuri is responding to Yuuri’s words, but he’s looking only at me, his green eyes blazing. “You have to trust me.”

I look back at my little brother, seeing in him the child he used to be and the young man he has become. He is fierce and loyal, and I know he would never do anything he thought would put me at risk. I also know instinctively that he is talking about the dark haired boy from the docks. I think of how he put his arm around Yuri, holding him back, keeping him safe. He is someone that would protect my Yuratchka.

I nod. “I do. Go get your friend. I’ll finish eating. Then the four of us can talk, and maybe make a plan.”

Yuuri shifts next to me. “Victor you need to sleep.” I feel his fingers push through my hair. “And you could also use a bath. Maybe this should wait until tomorrow. You’ll be thinking more clearly. You’ve been through a lot.”

Yuri stands up abruptly. “You think because he trusts my judgement he isn’t thinking clearly?!”

Yuuri’s head snaps around. “What? No! That’s not what I meant! I just think that if we’re all planning something this dangerous then we all need to be as sharp as possible. Victor’s been locked in a dark cell thinking he might die for two days. That he would never see either of us again. He needs to get some rest!”

Yuri makes a tsking sound and crosses his arms, but he offers no rebuttal. He just glowers at us.

I suddenly feel very weary. I close my eyes for a moment and then look back at my younger brother. “Yuuri is probably right. Why don’t you go and speak with your friend now? Bring him here if you need a private place to talk. Explain to him the situation. Find out if he is even willing to help us. If
he is, then tomorrow we will all talk and make a plan. In the meantime, I’ll get cleaned up and get some rest. Nothing is going to change between tonight and tomorrow.”

Yuri makes a huffing sound of frustration and throws up his hands. “Fine. I’ll go talk to him. I just... I hate this fucking town and this fucking island. I want to leave them both behind as soon as possible.”

“I know,” I say softly. “We will. I promise.”

Yuri looks back at me with a narrow expression. “I will make you keep that promise.” Glancing once at Yuuri, he stalks away, grabbing his coat as he leaves the house.

As I finish eating Yuuri heats up water for a bath. “This is barbaric!” he calls from the bathroom.

“What is?” I call back with a smirk of amusement, walking down the hallway. I notice his shoes are sitting neatly outside the bathroom door.

“This entire room. This tub is tiny and there is nowhere to wash off and what is that?” he is pointing to a porcelain chamber pot. The luxuries of indoor plumbing now so common throughout Europe remain by and large a fantasy on Sakhalin.

“It is exactly what it looks like.” I stand in the doorway, leaning against the door jamb.

He gawks at me. “But... you bathe in this room. That’s not... it’s not...” His hands mill the air like he’s searching for something. “It’s not hygienic!”

I smirk at him, amused at how frazzled he looks, and at the fact that he is still in his waist coat. “What can I say, Yuuri? All Europeans are filthy barbarians. Even me.” I chuckle tiredly as I walk into the bathroom.

He groans. “At least take off your shoes, Victor...”

I walk up to him, very close, and look into his eyes as my fingers begin to undo the buttons on his waist coat. “You’re going to get this all wet.”

He falters and gawks at me, cheeks faintly flushed. “I... I wasn’t going to take a bath. I was just... getting some hot water for you.”

I continue to slowly undo the buttons. “You won’t even stay to help me wash?”

He lets out a little huff of breath, his eyes flicking to my lips and then back to my eyes. “I... I wasn’t going to take a bath. I was just... back to the minshuku.”

I slide my hands under the waistcoat and push it off his shoulders. He doesn’t resist as I help him shrug out of it. “Why? Stay here with me.”

Yuuri swallows, and I reach for his hand, pulling his arm up so that I can undo his cufflink and begin to roll his sleeve back.

“I... I didn’t think it would be alright for me to stay in Korsakovsk. I’m not Russian and...” He lowers his eyes, frowning softly. “I don’t want you to get in any more trouble.”

I take his other arm, rolling back the other sleeve. “No one knows or cares that you are here. Please,” I murmur softly, waiting for him to lift his eyes again before I say, “stay with me tonight.”

My voice is more pleading than I mean for it to be, but the thought of not having him close is too
much for me. Everything is so precarious now. Thinking I had lost him... knowing that I still could, I need every moment I can get.

He holds my gaze for a moment and then swallows and nods a little. “Alright. I’ll stay.”

He lets me kiss him softly, his hands now on the front of my shirt, undoing my buttons. It’s so thrilling to feel him undress me. My hands find his hips, squeezing and pulling him closer.

He grunts softly against my mouth and I feel him squirming in my grasp. “Vic...tor...” he mumbles, between my kisses.

“Hmm?” I query against his lips. He giggles and tries to pull away from me, turning his face.

“Stop! You smell like a barn and you need to get in the bath tub.”

I graze my teeth against his jaw. “What do you expect when you start undressing me?”

He snorts and yanks my shirt out of my pants. “I’m undressing you for the bath, because I thought you were tired.” He puts one hand on my face and pushes it away. “And you can do the rest yourself, because you obviously have plenty of energy despite not having slept in nearly two days.”

I laugh and step back, sliding my suspenders off my shoulders and pulling my shirt off. Yuuri looks away modestly. “How can I help myself? I thought I would never taste your lips again.”

I watch color spring into his face and he looks at me out of the corner of his eyes as I continue to disrobe. “You... can taste them later. After your bath.”

My eyes hood. “Don’t think I won’t.”

Sakhalin Island, Korsakovsk Post, Spring 1888 - V.N.

Despite how weary I feel, sleep does not come easy. Even with Yuuri at my side I only drift fitfully in and out of the shallowest sleep. Every time I begin to sink deeper it is as if I am sinking into the darkness of the cachot noir , and I come awake again with a little start.

Each time I wake Yuuri is there to stroke his fingers through my hair and murmur to me softly in the darkness. It reminds me of when I first began recovering at the minshuku. The nightmares, the feverish dreams, waking confused and disoriented, and always Yuuri there to soothe me and tend to my needs. His cool fingers on my face and stroking back my hair. The sharp taste of tea and laudanum gently held to my lips. A faint song in a language I didn’t understand, with melodies so strange and lilting that their beauty haunted me.

How could I do anything but fall utterly in love with him?

Just after dawn, when my bedroom has begun to fill with a gloomy, pale light, he speaks, soft and low, “Are you having nightmares?”

I blink my eyes tiredly, having come awake again for what feels to be the hundredth time. My head rests on his chest, my ear close to his heartbeat. “No. It’s more... my body just won’t let me go fully to sleep. Every time I almost do I come awake again.”

Beneath the heavy quilt I run my hand lightly over the small swell of his hip and the faint dip of his waist. “Am I keeping you awake as well? I’m sorry.”
“No. I can’t sleep anyway. Your bed is too high off the floor. I keep feeling like I’m going to fall out of it as soon as I close my eyes.”

I can’t help but smile faintly at that. I wrap my arm around his middle snugly. “I wouldn’t let you fall out.”

He kisses my hair and strokes his fingers around the sensitive skin behind my ear. “Once we’re in Japan, we’ll only ever sleep on futon, and I won’t have to worry about it,” he murmurs teasingly.

“Once we’re in Japan...” I repeat the words, drawing my hand up to rest on his chest. It seems like a far off dream.

“We’re going to make it, Victor. We’re going to have a happy life together.”

I smile at that, almost afraid to believe him. There is so much that could go wrong, and my recent experiences still hang over me like a dark cloud. “I just wish you’d actually taught me some Japanese like I asked.”

He sighs and chuckles. “Well, had I known I probably would have.” His fingers gently rub my ear. “We still have some time. What do you want to know how to say?”

“Mmm...” I prop myself up on my elbow, resting my cheek on my hand as I look down at him. His short, dark hair fans out prettily against my pillows. “What do you think I need to know?”

He studies my face in the dim light. “Maybe... how to introduce yourself?”

“Ok. How do I do that?”

He grins and then giggles, wrinkling his nose. “This feels very silly.” He clears his throat and then says slowly, “Ore wa Bikutoru Nikiforobu desu.”

I arch an eyebrow. “That didn’t sound anything like my name.”

“Most Japanese people will not be able to say your name properly,” he chuckles.


He touches my face and smirks. “I think... that wouldn’t suit you at all.”

I frown a little. “But if people can’t say my name, what will they call me?”

“Mmm... probably gaijin-san,” he chuckles.

“Meaning...?”

“Mr. Foreigner.”

I snort at that. “How will people know they are talking about me? That’s so vague.”

He takes a deep breath and then sighs softly with a little laugh. “Where we are going, Victor, you and Yuri will be the only gaijin-san around. Everyone will know who you are.” His dark eyes hood a little and he strokes my cheek. “Maybe they will call you Katsuki Yuuri no gaijin-san.”

“Meaning?”
“Yuuri Katsuki’s Mr. Foreigner.”

I laugh out loud at that and lean down to kiss him with smiling lips. “Yes. That is what I am. The beautiful Yuuri Katsuki’s Mr. Foreigner.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me to him tightly, kissing me back. It is early and I have barely slept, but my want for him is almost desperate.

“How do you say,” I murmur between kisses, “I love you?”

He makes a soft sound in the back of his throat. “That’s...” he huffs softly, “a complicated question. The Japanese have different words for love.”

“Oooh? Tell me more. This is intriguing.”

He smiles and kisses my jaw. “Mmm... you can say, suki desu. It means to like or love something or someone. Or daisuki desu means you like or love it a lot.”

I try the word. “Dai ski dez?”

He giggles. “Close enough.”

I grin. “How else?”

“Koi. It means love, but... this kind of love.” He rubs his leg against mine and squeezes me.

“Wanting this kind of thing with someone. Wanting them physically. But you would very rarely say koi desu or koi shite’iru. I sounds... strange and kind of lewd.”

I make a purring sound of interest in my throat. “But what if it’s true? What if I very much koi dez you?”

He starts to laugh, and I can actually feel him shaking under me. “S-stop, Victor. That’s not how you say that.”

“But it’s true!” I grin and kiss him again, nibbling at his lips. “I koi, koi, koi dez you!”

Yuuri buries his face in my shoulder, laughing for a few long moments and then he gasps for air and falls back in the pillows, grasping my face between his hands. “No! That’s not right. Forget I taught you that.”

I grin at him. “I will not forget.”

He is flushed and obviously embarrassed either by my terrible Japanese or my lewdness or perhaps both. I love that I have made him laugh and smile so much. I stroke his face. “And what else? Is there any other way to say ‘I love you’ in Japanese?”

He smiles at me, but it softens as his gaze becomes coy. “Yes. There is the word ai. It is... love. It can be an abstract concept. But when you say you feel ai for someone else, it’s a deep love, love with your heart. A romantic feeling.”

I gaze at him softly. “So it is different than the... ski and koi love?”

He grins a little, probably at my terrible pronunciation. “Yes. You can suki a favorite food or a pet or a family member or friend. And you can feel koi for someone that you don’t feel ai for - like all of the lovers you used to have, but said you didn’t really love. Koi is like... desire, maybe is the best word.”
“And this ai? This is true love? Not just desire?”

He nods.

“How do you say it? In Japanese. That you love something with that kind of love? With ai?”

He purses his lips and flushes almost darker than I have ever seen him blush before. “It’s,” he croaks a little, “very embarrassing to say. You wouldn’t usually say it out loud.”

I gaze at him steadily, my eyes soft and hooded. “I want to say it anyway.”

He bites his lower lip and looks back at me, furrowing his brows. I wait patiently. “A-ai... shite’iru.” The words quiver as they leave his lips.

“Ai shayru.”

He blinks at that and then lets out a kind of nervous laugh. His arms wrap around my shoulders and he pulls me down further, leaning up to press his lips close to my ear, saying slowly with clear enunciation. “Ai shite’iru.”

I press my own lips to his ear and repeat softly. “Ai shite’iru.”

Yuuri makes a soft choking sound and his arms tighten around me even more. I hear him snuffle and I gently wrap my arms around him, moving to lie on top of him as his legs part to cradle my hips. He is trembling.

“Ore mo,” he whispers, voice strained in my ear. “Victor no koto ga ai shite’iru. Itsumo.”

Though I don’t fully understand the words, I understand the depth of them. My Yuuri, my love. He feels for me as much as I feel for him. I press him into the bed, holding him tightly as I move my hips against his to rub our bodies together in a mimicry of love making.

There is no oil handy to accommodate taking him. But this is more than sweet enough, moving our bodies together as our arms and legs entwine, kissing and touching, as we share the heat of our skin. We take our time, assuring ourselves and each other of the reality and permanence of being together.

And when it is over, we are both finally tired enough to sleep for a few hours before rising for the day.

As we descend the stairs the smell of breakfast and the sound of voices are both coming from the kitchen. Yuri and the dark haired boy from the docks are sitting at the table, talking. The smile on Yuri’s face is not one that I have seen recently. It makes him so beautiful.

“Good morning,” I say casually as I step into the kitchen, Yuuri trailing after me curiously.

Yuri’s smiling face sobers and he stands as if he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t. “It’s about time you got up. I’ve already made breakfast.”

“So I see.” My eyes move to the other boy and he looks at me with an even, almost stern gaze before standing and offering me his hand.

“I am Otabek Altin. I work on the Baikal,” his voice is not as deep as I expect it to be for some reason. He has such a stern sense of gravity about him that I expected it to hold more gravitas. But it is lighter than Yuri’s and it makes me realize he is probably not that much older than my little brother. Not yet twenty, surely.
I smile at him as I shake his hand. “You’re Yuri’s friend. Thank you for restraining him the other day.”

His brows rise, obviously surprised, either that I’d remembered or that I’d noticed in the first place. “I didn’t want him to get hurt.”

“And neither did I.”

Yuri seems fidgety and nervous as he starts to move food from the stove to the table. He looks at Yuuri with a smirk. “Now you will know what real food tastes like.”

Yuuri just snorts and sits down at the table.

I release Otabek’s hand and gesture for him to sit again before sitting myself. “And this is Yuuri Katsuki. He is attached to the Japanese Consulate here. He is...” I glance at him.

“Your lover. Yuri has told me quite a bit about both of you.”

Yuuri flushes at that and we both turn our attention on Yuri. “Oh? Has he? How interesting seeing as he has not told either of us anything about you, Mr. Altin,” I say with a grin.

The young man now also glances at Yuri, who looks back and forth between the three of us for a moment before scowling and practically throwing a pan of sausages down on the table. “What? I don’t have to tell you everything about my life.”

I chuckle and pluck a sausage out of the pan with my fingertips. “Yuri has never had a friend before,” I say conspiratorially to Otabek.

“Mm.” He nods a little and then begins to help himself to the food.

Yuri is scowling at me as he sits down. “If I didn’t want off this island so bad, I wouldn’t have subjected him to you in the first place.”

“Yuri told me about your plan,” Otabek says. “I have to say that I wouldn’t recommend trying to cross the Souya Straight yourself. It’s very dangerous and to avoid being spotted you’d have to go at night, making it even more dangerous.”

I raise my brows, surprised that the young man has headed straight into the topic of my escape without any hesitation. I take another bite of my sausage and watch him as he chews a mouthful of eggs.

“I see. And is there something else you would recommend?”

He nods. “I know the captain of the Baikal. I’ve been working for him since I was a boy. I know that he has taken other escapees from time to time. I could talk to him - in generalities of course - to see if he would be willing to take you. There would be money involved.”

I smirk faintly. “Of course. I wouldn’t expect a free ride.”

He nods again and I notice that Yuri’s eyes remain fixed on him nearly the entire time he is talking.

Otabek takes another bite of his breakfast. He seems very at home in my kitchen. “Because you are already on the bad side of the officials, it would probably be too dangerous to try to smuggle you directly out of Korsakovsk. The guards monitor who comes and goes off the ship very closely. But, after the Baikal leaves port, it could anchor outside the bay, and I could tender you out to it. That
would be much safer than trying to cross the full straight.”

I sit back a little bit. “And you would be willing to do this for me?”

He looks at me with his sharp, dark gray eyes. “Not for you, Mr. Nikiforov. But I would do for Yuri. Gladly.”

“I see.” I look at my younger brother and he is looking embarrassed, pleased, and cross all at the same time.

“There are several places along the shore of the bay that we could leave from. It’s just a matter of picking one, and then coordinating our timing. Depending on what the Captain says it would likely be this sailing or the next.”

“This sailing?” Yuuri speaks up. “That’s only a couple days from now. I haven’t made any of my arrangements to leave the island.” He glances at me, his anxiety plain to see on his face. “You’d be alone in Japan until I could make the crossing. It could be weeks, or... a month or more! You don’t speak any Japanese. You might... get lost or robbed or... or something could happen. Something could happen and I’d never know what happened to you.”

I reach out to take his hand, squeezing it. “Relax, Yuuri.”

“It’s worse to stay in Korsakovsk, isn’t it? Besides, he wouldn’t be alone. I’d be there with him,” Yuri says.

I purse my lips and look back at my little brother. “No. I think you should wait and come across with Yuuri. Buy a ticket on the Baikal. Even with Otabek’s help the smuggling business will be dangerous. If I’m found out or something else happens, it’s better that you’re still here and safe.”

He scowls at me. “That’s stupid. Why would I stay here if you aren’t here?”

“‘To take care of our affairs for one thing,’” I say, sitting back and crossing my arms. “It would be suspicious if I start selling off the house and our belongings myself before I leave. So you’ll have to take care of all of that. You’ll also need to sell Shadow and pack up my trunk and the things I left at the minshuku. I doubt I’ll be able to take much with me when I escape. There are a lot of reasons I need you to stay behind. I know you don’t like it, but I need you to do this for me.”

Yuri continues to scowl, but then after a few moments he grunts and nods. “Fine. If it’s because you need me to take care of things I’ll stay.”

“Thank you, Yuratchka.”

We’re all quiet for a moment, chewing our food slowly, consumed in our individual thoughts. Then Yuuri takes a deep breath, and speaks. “Now the question is just how and when do we get you out of Korsakovsk Post.”

I twist my lips. Staying in Korsakovsk poses certain risks at this point. Bely will surely have sent Grankin another telegram, informing him of the outcome of my arrest and the Consulate’s intervention. He will also let him know he is watching me, which makes me utterly useless to Grankin for the time being. Staying in Korsakovsk makes me an easy target for him. It also means that there is the opportunity for something else to go wrong. For our plan to be found out and for me to be apprehended and imprisoned again before the sailing.

But fleeing is dangerous, too. I could return to the minshuku, but it is likely the first place anyone would look for me, and I do not want to put Yuuri in that kind of immediate danger. So where would
I go? Where could I hide safely for what could be weeks before the Baikal’s next sailing across the straight? If I wasn’t stopped by the guards or tracked down by men from Korsakovsk there were still the Gilyak mercenaries to avoid. They knew the wilderness better than any of the settlers, and certainly better than I did, and they were constantly on the lookout for escapees who always fetched a bounty - dead or alive.

I sigh heavily after a moment and look around the table, but mostly at Yuuri. He’s giving me an anxious look. “I’m not sure. I guess that will depend on the Captain’s decision regarding this sailing or next sailing. If it’s this sailing there’s no point in trying to leave before then. But if it’s not until the next sailing in three weeks, then we might need to make another plan.” I shake my head. “I can’t shake the feeling that I shouldn’t stay in Korsakovsk any longer than I have to.”

Yuuri nods slowly and reaches under the table for my hand. “Then we’ll wait to hear what the Captain of the Baikal says.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes

1. The Baikal - This was a real steamer that went between the Russian mainland, Alexandrovsk, Korsakovsk, and Japanese ports. It’s the ship that Anton Chekhov rode when he visited Sakhalin. I used it in the story partly because it’s historically accurate, but mostly because I had no idea how to make up a name for a Russian ship.

2. Palach - This word translates to “executioner.” This was the individual who carried out corporal punishment at the prisons. According to historical records most convicts paid regular tribute to the local palach (money, alcohol, contraband, etc.) so that should he ever get sent to him for a flogging the palach would not beat him severely enough to maim or kill him.

3. Rozgi - birch rods used for whipping. Usually dipped in salt. (Cause being whipped with a regular birch rod isn’t awful enough.)

4. Plet - a whip or flog that usually had several tail with pouches of lead tied to the ends. If one of these pouches connected with your kidney or broke your ribs, puncturing your lungs you could easily be killed.

5. Knout - similar to the plet the knout had metal hooks attached to the ends of the whip tails. Although use of the knout was technically outlawed in the mid nineteenth century, historical records indicate that it continued to be used in remote places like Sakhalin well into the later half of the century.

6. Kabila - a flogging board to which an individual was strapped face down after having had their pants and shirt either pulled down/up or removed altogether. After being strapped down they would have been flogged with one of the above instruments. A very painful and humiliating punishment.

7. Cachot noir - the “dark cells” were basically the solitary confinement of their day.

8. Gilyak mercenaries - Rather than waste men and resources on tracking down escapees themselves, the prison officials relied on the indigenous people to do it for
them. The prisons offered bounties of money, food, and other goods for escapees, and the Gilyak in particular were well known for being ruthless in their pursuit of escaped convicts. Crossing paths with indigenous hunters was an escapee’s worst case scenario.

9. The chamber pot - Japanese people do not go to the toilet in the same room where they bathe. In a Japanese house the ofuro and the toire (toilet) are in two completely separate rooms, usually nowhere near one another. The fact that westerners put their toilet and shower/bath in the same room is something that dumbfounds and kinda grosses out a lot of Japanese people.

Part 8: Yuuri

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Sorry it took me quite a while to get this chapter up. But it is finally here. I also noticed something really stupid that I did while I was writing this chapter, and that’s that I never updated the "current" date to 1889 after they celebrated New Year's Eve! lol So some of the dates on previous sections are incorrect. I will go back and update them.

Thank you everyone who has been leaving comments and kudos and supporting the story. It really means a lot to me. <3

I hope everyone enjoys the update! We are getting so very close to the end now...

As always you can follow my blog dedicated to this fic at martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com or my personal blog at martymuses.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakhalin Island, The Aniva Bay Coast, Summer 1888 - Y.K.

The first time I took Victor to the bluffs overlooking the Aniva Bay was also the first time he convinced me to ride Shadow with him. I won’t recount in detail the mortification of being boosted - largely against my will - into the saddle, or how I trembled, barely able to breath due to my terror, clinging with white knuckles to the pommel.

The first time Shadow shifted his weight from foot to foot, I was certain I was going to be pitched headlong off his back. “M-Mr. Nikiforov, please, I r-really don’t think I want to be up here,” I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut.

He had chuckled and placed his hand - in a manner I’m sure he meant to be comforting - on my leg. Of course this only made my discomfort all the worse.

“Mr. Katsuki, you don’t need to be so worried. Shadow is very gentle, and I’m not going to let you fall off.”

I cracked an eye and looked down at him only to see that he was reaching for the saddle, lifting one foot into a stirrup. “You are not coming up here with me!” I gasped.

He laughed again and the saddle rocked slightly to one side as he pushed off the ground, lifting himself into the saddle behind me. I cursed very loudly and froze.

“Mr. Katsuki,” his voice was distressingly close to my ear, “I need you to scoot forward a bit so I can actually sit in the saddle.”
“I... I can’t... move,” I hissed, still gripping the pommel like my life depended on it.

“Hmm...” he made a thoughtful sound and then before I knew what was happening one of his arms slid around my middle, gripping me tightly and lifting me up off the saddle, so that he could slide in behind me, effectively pushing me forward.

I was embarrassed beyond all measure, and earnestly thought that a swift death falling from the horse’s back might be preferable to the utter mortification I was feeling.

Victor, however, seemed quite pleased with himself. “There! Much better.” Still holding me with one arm he leaned forward, pressing his chest to my back as he reached past me to snage the reigns from Shadow’s neck.

To my further embarrassment I let out a pitiful mewling sound of distress when Victor gave the reigns a little flick and nudged the horse into forward movement. With slow, yet terrifying steps, Shadow began to plod towards the road.

For the first several minutes all I could do was sit hunched over with my eyes tightly closed. But Victor kept the pace slow and even, and eventually my terror subsided enough that I was able to lift my head. I had to admit that it was rather fun to be so high off the ground, able to see the familiar road in a different way. But as I became aware of my surroundings I also became aware of Victor pressed so tightly against my back, the warmth of his body seeping through my clothes, his arm still around my waist.

It gave me a thrill I had never experienced before, and a strangely guilty desire for it to go on indefinitely. So of course, I immediately tried to put an end to it.

“Mr. Nikiforov. You don’t need to hold onto me anymore,” I said, my voice almost terse as I tried to shift away from him, though there wasn’t anywhere for me to go. With two of us in the saddle we were already taking up nearly the entire thing.

“I don’t mind,” he said, and I could hear the amused grin in his voice. “I wouldn’t want you to fear falling, after all.”

I huffed a little at that. “I think I’m doing alright.”

“Oh? Then you won’t mind if we go a little faster?”

“What? No, that’s not—”

Victor kicked his heels against Shadow’s side and we lurched forward. I gasped and leaned back into him as if seeking shelter. To be honest we were probably only going at a trot, a canter at most, but it felt much too fast after I’d only just reconciled being on a horse in the first place.

I managed to keep my eyes open as we went down the road, taking a much less frequently used and somewhat overgrown track past the turn off for Kusun-Kotan that cut southeast towards the coast. The road used to lead to fishing and hunting outposts further into the wilderness, but now it lead only so far before being consumed by the forest.

As the going got rougher, Victor finally reigned Shadow in, and we came to a stop. “Can we get to the coast from here?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said in an exhalation of relief, pressing my hand to my chest as if that might calm my rapid heartbeat. “We can go due south through the woods.”
Victor made another thoughtful sound and then without any warning slid out of the saddle, jostling me so that I renewed my grip. “Just kick your leg over and slide down. I’ll catch you.”

I looked at him tersely. “This is very undignified.”

He smiled that fox smile of his. “I didn’t know you were worried about your dignity.”

I huffed in mild exasperation and then steeled myself to do as he had instructed, leaning forward and clinging to the saddle as I awkwardly slid my far leg over. Just as I was sure I was going to fall to my death, Victor caught me and lowered me to the ground, which I met with wobbly legs.

“I think I will walk back,” I said under my breath as I teetered away from the horse, still trying to calm my racing heart.

Victor only laughed as he tethered Shadow to a stand of trees where he could graze in the undergrowth as we proceeded through the woods on foot. We didn’t talk much. It was one of the those rare fine days on Sakhalin where the sun was high and bright and brought some warmth with it. The sunlight filtering down through the pine trees gave the forest an almost magical feeling, and we both seemed content to remain with whatever thoughts the day inspired in each of us.

We could hear the sound of sea before we came out onto the bluffs. It was the soft, smooth, rolling sound of waves upon a rocky shore. The forest ended abruptly, giving out onto a narrow strip of low grass and plants at the edge of the bluff. Below: the beach and the waves. Ahead: the green-blue sea and the far horizon, obscured by distant, indistinct shapes. Above: the clear blue sky, the clouds high and few.

I heard a soft rush of air from Victor and I didn’t know if he was gasping or sighing.

“Mr. Katsuki,” he said softly, “how is it you manage to show me the beauty of a place I have always thought so irredeemable?”

I blinked at the comment and looked over at him. He had that same distant look on his face that I’d first seen when he danced for the Consulate. It made my heart ache.

“Well,” I said softly after a moment, “this is my home, Mr. Nikiforov.” I looked back out over the water. “For me, the beauty of Sakhalin is easy to find, because I love this place. Even if I’m the only one left who does.”

We looked at each other and I saw a deep conflict in his eyes, which seemed to make them darker than usual. “I’m sorry. I forget that there are actually people to whom Sakhalin is not a prison.”

I smiled faintly at that. “I never said it wasn’t a prison. I only said I love it all the same.” I looked back at the water, pointing suddenly in an effort to change the subject. “See that dark line to the southwest? Out at the horizon? That’s Japan.”

He looked. “Really?”

“Yes. Only on days like this, when it’s perfectly clear, can you see that far. But it’s still amazing how close it is, isn’t it? Like you could almost just reach out and touch it. A whole new country”

“What’s it like? Japan, I mean.”

The question surprised me, not because it was a surprising question, but because I realized I didn’t know the answer. I frowned and dropped my hand. “I don’t really know. I’ve only been to Hokkaido a couple times, and then only to what was likely considered a small village. Though to me
it seemed like it might as well be a city. It had its own market and everything.” I smiled faintly. “But other than that I only know what other people have told me it’s like, or what I’ve gleaned from reading poetry and stories like the *Genji Monogatari*.”

“What’s that? The... *Genji Mona..go-*” He laughed at his inability to repeat the word correctly.

“It means *The Tale of Genji*. It’s a collection of stories about a handsome prince named Genji and all of his amorous exploits.”

Victor grinned. “Oooh. That sounds like something I would enjoy. I would not have thought something like that to your tastes, Mr. Katsuki. Perhaps there are still things I do not know about you.” His eyes looked heavy for some reason as he watched me, and it made me feel a bit warmer than the sun called for.

I huffed. “It’s considered a classic. It was written hundreds of years ago. It’s not like some French romance novel.”

“Is there something wrong with French romance novels? Have you ever read one? If not then how do you know that’s not what they are like?”

I stared at him with pursed lips. “Mr. Nikiforov, sometimes I think you like twisting my words around just to get a rise out of me.”

He blinked and then laughed aloud. His laughing made him even more handsome. “Mr. Katsuki, I cannot claim that you are entirely wrong.”

*Sakhalin Island, The Aniva Bay Coast, Spring 1889 - Y.K.*

The captain of the *Baikal* decided that it would be best to move things along quickly. It meant less time for something to go wrong, but it also meant we had only three days to prepare for Victor’s escape. Today, tomorrow, and the day Victor would - barring all potential disasters - be taken by Mr. Altin to the *Baikal*.

It doesn’t feel like nearly enough time.

The young Mr. Altin leads Yuri and me to the place he plans to come ashore to take Victor out to the ship. It is a cove along the southeast shore where a small river flows out into the Aniva: the perfect place to bring a small boat ashore while avoiding being seen.

Even though I am fairly certain I know the exact place Mr. Altin described, he and Victor insisted we make the trip there on foot at least once so that I was certain. Victor can’t leave Korsakovsk and I know the island and the coast far better than either he or Yuri, so I will be the one leading him to the rendezvous point.

Which makes me wonder why Yuri bothered to come with us. But watching him walk amiably along beside the other young man, I think it’s probably for the sole purpose of spending more time with him.

Yuri and Victor had always struck me as quite lonely. I had been able to assuage Victor’s loneliness and he mine, but seeing Yuri with the young Mr. Altin makes me think it is the first time he doesn’t seem so lonely. It makes me wonder if going to Japan is really what he wants.

“There’s the beach.” Mr. Altin’s voice pulls me out of my gloomy thoughts, and I realize we’ve
come to the end of the bluff. Below is a flat, relatively sandy beach and the outflow of the little river. Just inside the treeline the remains of a few dilapidated huts can still be seen.

“As I thought, I’ve been here before,” I say. “There was an Ainu village here when I was a boy.”

Yuri looks at me. “Where did they go?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Many of the Ainu villages began to disappear around the same time the Japanese left. When we gave the island to Russia.”

“That’s weird,” he grunts.

I smirk teasingly. “Guess they didn’t want to be Russians.”

He snorts and Mr. Altin begins talking again as if he can’t even hear us. “If you come along the bluffs you’ll have to trek back into the woods a bit to come around and out onto the beach. If you come through the forest you should be able to find the river and follow it out.”

I can’t help but think of Victor’s weak leg, trekking through the woods in the near darkness, avoiding the edge of the bluffs, no lantern for fear of being seen. It’s a walk several miles long.

I try to keep the voice that tells me this is a hopeless plan at bay. But it’s difficult when I begin to think about the consequences of failure.

“When do you think you’ll be here?” I ask.

“As soon as it gets dark. The Baikal will leave port in the evening, sail out of Salmon Bay and around the point to the east where it will moore just out there,” he points to the deep, dark waters off the little cove. “It can’t be seen from Korsakovsk, but even if it is seen there is always some excuse to be made. Engine trouble, bad seas reported. But a lighter spotted coming ashore would be suspicious. Especially once Mr. Nikiforov’s disappearance is noticed. So I won’t leave the Baikal until it begins to grow dusk.”

I nod. This far north it stays light late even only in Spring. “How long will it take for you to get across?”

He shakes his head. “Not long. But I also won’t be able to wait long on the shore. The captain will want to head out as soon as possible so that our schedule isn’t thrown off. A few hours can be made up, but we can’t wait for you all night.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve done this before, Mr. Altin?” I say with a wry smile.

He looks at me evenly. “Mr. Nikiforov isn’t the first thing we’ve smuggled on or off the island, Mr. Katsuki. I would recommend leaving Korsakovsk shortly after sundown. Twilight will remain for at least an hour. It’s best you don’t try to traverse the forest in the darkness.”

“When which means it will still be light when we leave.” I twist my lips. That makes things even more dangerous. I had imagined us escaping under the cover of darkness. “Victor will have to slip out of Korsakovsk unnoticed somehow.”

Yuri grunts. “Stop worrying so much. Bely hasn’t bothered us at all since we got Victor out of prison. All of the officials are preoccupied with this Consulate party, and there’s unrest in the prison. I’ve been keeping my ears open around the town. No one is even concerned with Victor. All he has to do is dress in settlers’ clothes and walk out of town like he’s heading back to his homestead for the night.”
I smirk at that. “Make sure you put a hat on him. Victor’s face and hair don’t exactly help him blend in.”

“I’ll do better. I’ll cover both in mud before he goes,” he snickers. “Then he’ll really look like a settler.”

The three of us laugh, probably all holding the same mental image of beautiful Victor covered in mud. Then as if on cue we fall quiet, gazing down at the beach below us. A heavy feeling settles in the air. Out of the corner of my eye I see young Mr. Altin gently ruffle Yuri’s blond hair, and notice how Yuri leans into him slightly. I hate to think of their inevitable parting and wonder for the thousandth time if taking Victor away to Japan isn’t the most selfish thing I could possibly do.

I let Mr. Altin and Yuri walk side-by-side ahead of me during the hour long walk back along the coast to the road just outside Korsakovsk.

“Well, I’ll be heading back to the minshuku,” I say when we pause, turning and bowing shallowly out of habit.

Yuri furrows his brows. “You aren’t coming back to see Victor?”

I shift my weight a bit. “Not tonight. I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to spend too much time in Korsakovsk. I know I’m probably just being paranoid, but I don’t want to give the officials any reason to be suspicious we’re colluding.”

“Well, I think everyone probably realizes you are fucking Victor-”

Mr. Altin gently smacks the back of Yuri’s head with a glowering look of disapproval. “You don’t need to be disrespectful.”

Yuri turns to him, blushing, but in a huff. “I wasn’t! I was only saying people are going to assume that’s why he’s there, not because we are planning something.”

I hold up a hand. “Either way, I’d prefer not to leave the minshuku unattended overnight.”

Yuri shrugs. “Well, whatever. Victor’s going to be gloomy all night now.”

I smirk wryly. “My apologies for making him difficult for you.” I bow again and turn to walk away before remembering and turning around again. “Oh, actually. I’ve been meaning to ask that you bring whatever Victor is planning to take with him to the minshuku. Tonight, if you can. That will give you an excuse to get away from his gloominess.”

“Huh?” he turns back to me, bristling a bit. “Why tonight? I can’t bring them tomorrow?”

“It will be easier if you bring them sooner rather than later so I can pack things efficiently. And make sure he isn’t bringing anything needless.” I grin a little. “I’ll let you use the ofuro.”

He perks at that and then glances at Mr. Altin, who shrugs. “Fine,” he grumbles. “Otabek is going to be busy working tonight anyway. Though now Victor is going to be even more impossible.”

I chuckle. “Again, I’m sorry. Tell him I’ll come tomorrow. And you can bring his things any time after dark. I’ll stay up.” I smile and bow again. “Thank you for today, Mr. Altin. And for everything you’ve done to help us.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Katsuki. I’ll see you in two days, if not before.”
The words ‘two days’ reverberate down my spine and I feel a sensation of mingled anxiety and excitement. The day after tomorrow is the day Victor makes his escape. The day our future together begins.

I cling to this thought, trying to imagine our life together with my family in Kyushu - a place I have never been. Thinking of the future is much better than dwelling on everything that might go wrong.

I take a bath, taking my time soaking in the hot water, letting it ease some of my tension and fears. Then I prepare myself dinner, eating by myself under the oki-gotatsu on the porch.

I plan to do some more tidying and packing, but in all honesty there really isn’t anything left to do. My spare futon and furniture have already been taken to the Consulate to be distributed among those remaining in Kusun-Kotan. I have only one small trunk I’m planning to take with me to Japan and it has nothing in it but a few changes of clothing, a few books, my hanafuda deck, and a couple of tea and sake sets I’m particularly fond of.

And on the very top, just beneath the lid, sits Victor’s pistol. He says I should keep it, but for what purpose I don’t know. I plan to give it back to him the night he leaves Sakhalin. He will have more use for it while he’s waiting for me in Hakodate than I will here. A man shouldn’t go unarmed into an unknown land.

Maybe that’s why I’ve taken to carrying it with me when I go into Korsakovsk. It fits comfortably against the small of my back, hidden inside the band of my western trousers and the drape of my coat. I’ve tried to leave it with Victor several times, but he always sends me back to the minshuku with it.

About an hour after sundown, I hear hoofbeats in the yard and go out to greet Yuri. He looks so much smaller than Victor sitting astride the tall horse. I take the bridle, steadying Shadow’s head as Yuri dismounts. It makes me unexpectedly sad to think the horse will not be joining us in our new life in Japan. But there is no real way to get him there without incurring outrageous expense or raising suspicions.

Yuri unfastens a saddle bag from either side as I tether Shadow to a tree. “Victor has been impossible. It was all I could do to get him to focus long enough to pack these damn things.”

I chuckle at that. “I suppose I should feel flattered he is driven to such distraction by my absence.”

Yuri frowns at me as we enter the minshuku. “Can you blame him? After everything that’s happened he’s afraid these next couple days are the last you might have together.”

Yuri’s words strike me, not just for their truth, but also their chastising nature. “I... know that,” I say quietly, swallowing around the lump in my throat that has risen up out of my stomach. “I have the same thoughts, but... That’s why it’s more important than ever that we’re careful. We can’t risk something going wrong, or someone getting suspicious.”

“Victor knows that, too. But he still wants to be with you.” He sets the saddle bags down in the middle of the room and looks around quietly. “It feels empty in here.”

“I know.” I frown softly. “It’s hard to believe that soon there won’t be anyone here at all.”

Yuri glances at me. “Are you really ok with it? Leaving Sakhalin? Your home?”

I sigh and shrug. “It’s not as if I have much choice. The decision has already been made for me.”

He grunts softly. “If things had gone differently you might have been able to stay in Korsakovsk
with us.”

I furrow my brows. “Would you have preferred that?” I turn towards him more fully, forcing myself to ask the question that’s been on my mind. “Yuri, do you really want to go to Japan?”

He’s quiet for a moment looking around the minshuku again. “I don’t know,” he says finally. “If life in Japan was like the life we had together here for the winter, it wouldn’t be so bad. But I know it won’t be like that. There will be other people, strange customs, more of your weird food. No one will speak Russian. No one will look like me. I’ll only know you and Victor, and you and Victor have each other, so... I don’t know where that leaves me.”

“You’re still Victor’s brother. He loves you, and I... I’ve come to care about you a lot, even if we don’t always get along. I want you to be happy, which is why I asked if this is what you really wanted.”

He snorts softly. “It’s a little late to change my mind, don’t you think?”

I shake my head. “No. Maybe you can’t stay in Korsakovsk, but the world is wide, Yuri. When I see you with your friend, Mr. Altin, I think it’s the only time I’ve ever really seen you happy.”

“He has nothing to do with this,” he growls and makes a face that tells me he has a lot to do with everything.

“I think he does,” I insist. “You’re old enough to have your own life. I know Victor is your family, but we all grow up and leave our family someday. You could do whatever you wanted. You could become a sailor or a merchant. You could stay on the Baikal, stay with your friend.”

“He’s never said he wants anything like that!” he blurts, face red. His hands are clenched in fists at his sides. “He’s never once said he wants me to stay, or anything like that. So why would I? He’s the one who came up with most of this plan to get us off Sakhalin! If I said I wanted to stay with him he’d probably laugh at me and think I was being childish. We’re only friends. Who... who says something so childish as they want to stay with someone, just because they are the only friend they have? He’d tell me to grow up! People part ways all the time. That’s life.”

My heart aches for him. It is obvious to me now that he has been struggling with his feelings for some time.

“Sometimes they do, yes. But... they don’t have to. Victor... he... he was my friend. The first real friend I’d had since I was a child. And now... now we don’t want to leave each other's side. But we wouldn’t have known that if we didn’t speak up and tell each other.”

“You mean if Victor hadn’t told you,” he snaps.

I balk at his words and flush, feeling an uncomfortable squeezing in my chest. “You’re right. I was a coward and I didn’t really understand what I was feeling. I’d never wanted to hold onto someone like Victor before.” I take a deep breath. “I’m lucky Victor wasn’t as cowardly as I was and we managed to come to understand each other's feelings. But... even if he’d never said anything and we’d never been more than friends, I’d still be heartbroken if I was leaving Sakhalin and knew I was never going to see him again.”

Yuri glowers at me and I can see him seething under his pale skin. His nostrils flare a little and I think for a moment he might attack me again like that day in the snowbank. But he just grinds his teeth and then snarls. “You said I could use your bath.”

I stare at him in surprise, caught off guard by his complete change of subject. “Uh... yes. Yes, you
can. I heated the water for you already.” I gesture stiffly towards the east room.

Without another word he stalks past me, slamming the sliding door open and shut, leaving me alone with the atmosphere of our charged words.

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Late Summer, 1888 - Y.K.*

The thing I liked most about Victor’s pistol was not how heavy it felt in my hand, or the little crackling sound that was hidden inside the louder report, or even the way it kicked in a predictable and satisfying manner with each shot. The thing I liked most about Victor’s pistol was that I wasn’t terrible at shooting it.

In fact I even hazarded the slightly inflated self-opinion of being somewhat good at it. I’d found the thing terrifying at first. The first time Victor had shown me how to shoot I’d nearly dropped it, I was so afraid of the sound it was going to make. But after that first shot I came to find firing the pistol... quite invigorating.

We went out into the forest to practice shooting a number of times over the summer, and while I couldn’t draw as quickly as Victor or do any of the fancy handling he’d demonstrated, I had good, steady aim, and I could fire with accuracy at several targets in quick succession.

The day was gray, like most days are on Sakhalin, and there was a damp chill in the air that belied the fact that summer was soon going to be giving way to autumn. I could tell from the way the air smelled that it was going to rain soon.

With a final report I shot the last target, a piece of deadwood lined up on the log of a felled tree, sending it flying with that satisfying sound of impact the bullet makes when it hits something it sticks in. I turned to Victor with a grin, lowering the pistol.

“Riding horses, shooting guns,” he laughed. “You’re like a cowboy, Mr. Katsuki.”

I raised my brows. “A cowboy?"

“Yes, like from the American West.”

I looked at him quizzically, awaiting further explanation as he walked towards me. He reached out for the gun, which I handed to him. After a moment he chuckled and shook his head. “Never mind.”

I frowned a little. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand the reference.”

“It’s fine. Thinking about it now, I don’t suppose there is any reason for you to. Suffice to say that cowboys are rugged and wild men who ride around on horses and shoot guns. Like... Buffalo Bill! They are widely romanticized.” He grinned as he checked the chambers of the revolver and then slid it into the holster at his hip.

“In America.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“So, why have you heard about these cowboys?”

Victor laughed. “People tell lots of stories about them. They publish them in newspapers and in books. People even write plays and sing songs about them.”
I tipped my head to the side, curious. “Even in Russia?”

“Yes. Even in Russia we have newspapers and book and plays and songs.”

I huffed a little and rolled my eyes. “I just meant... nevermind.” I tipped my face up to look at the gray sky through the canopy. “It’s going to rain. We should go back.”

Victor looked up as well. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t argue with me and we set off through the dense forest, making our way back to the minshuku. We’d spent enough time together over the past months that we were able to be in one another’s company without talking, which relieved me, because I never considered myself all that engaging when it came to conversation.

But a thought struck me just as I heard the first faint pat of a raindrop in the trees above us. I glanced at Victor. “I’ve never thought about it before, but I’m surprised that you are allowed to own a gun.”

He looked at me with raised brows and then he smiled wryly. “Why? Because I’m a criminal?”

I flushed, wondering if my comment had been rude. “Well... I guess. But I suppose it’s more that with how strictly the Russian government regulates everyone’s lives here, I’d think it would be one of those things they didn’t want people to have.”

He’d laughed at that. “I guess that’s fair enough.” He shrugged. “My life is relatively comfortable. Even as an exile I have money, so I can more or less get whatever I want. Even a gun.”

“Oh. I see.” I thought about that. I didn’t really understand all of the intricacies of life in the exile settlements. I’d often wondered what exactly it was that Victor did. He wasn’t a prisoner and he seemed at liberty to visit me whenever he wanted. I’d seen him in worker’s clothes before, but I honestly couldn’t tell if he had an actual vocation beyond attending parties at the Consulate and dancing for the officials. And for some reason it seemed inappropriate to ask.

“What I find curious,” Victor said after a few moments, “is that you don’t have a gun.”

I frowned and snorted softly. “Why would I have a gun?”

“You live all alone in the woods with bears, natives, and potentially escaped criminals. I would think - of all people - you should have a gun.”

I had never considered the possibility that I might need to own a gun. It seemed unnecessary, even if they were entertaining to fire at practice targets. “Well, I’ve never had any trouble with any of those things. It seems like having a gun might just invite new trouble.”

“Would you like to keep mine?” he asked, glancing at me.

“No!” I said incredulously.

“I can get myself another.” His voice was earnest.

“I don’t need your gun, Mr. Nikiforov,” I said firmly.

He twisted his lips and sighed, almost looking pouty like a child. “Now I’m going to worry about you all alone with no way to defend yourself.”
I laughed. “I’ve lived all alone with no way to defend myself for six years. I hardly think now is the time to start worrying about it.”

We came out into the clearing where I chopped my wood and then headed up the path to the minshuku. Shadow’s bulk, tethered in the inn yard, slowly came into view. The rain was starting to patter down quite regularly.

“Maybe I should just come live here with you.” His voice held that smiling tone. “Then you wouldn’t be alone and I would have my pistol to protect you.”

“Somehow I don’t think the Russian Officials would approve regardless of how much money you have. Besides,” I looked back at him over my shoulder as we stepped into the vestibule, “it’s hardly polite to just invite yourself to live in my home.”

He sighed. “This is true. Especially since you still don’t consider me a close enough friend to let me call you Yuuri.”

My whole body felt hot. “Mr. Nikiforov,” I said a little sharply, turning around. “Do you want me to send you home in the rain, or do you want to come in for tea?”

He furrowed his brows, expression becoming thoughtful. “I feel like you are asking me a trick question. But I would prefer to come in for tea.”

“Good. Then I trust you will continue to refrain from using my given name.” I tersely slid back the door and motioned for him to enter.

He chuckled, giving me a wry smile as he stepped out of his boots. “Yes, Mr. Katsuki.”

*Sakhalin Island, Korsakovsk Post, Spring 1889 - Y.K.*

“Yuuuri.” Victor’s arms wrap around me from behind, trying to drag me back into his bed. “Don’t leave. Stay the night. It’s our last night together.”

I grunt in exasperation, trying to pull away from him, but losing, putting us in a stalemate as I sit at the edge of the bed. “Victor, don’t say that. It sounds morbid. This not our last night together. It’s just your last night in Korsakovsk.”

“But...” he squeezes me, sitting up to press against my back, “what if it is our last night together?”

I grit my teeth and wrap my fingers around his wrist, squeezing. “It’s not. And acting as if it is will only invite misfortune.”

He presses his lips to my shoulder and I hear him inhale the smell of my skin. “You didn’t stay last night either.”

“I told you. I don’t want to leave the minshuku unattended. All of your things for the journey - your money - are there. And I need to finish making preparations.”

He snorts. “You have made your preparations five times over. I know you. Stay with me.” His arms tighten around my middle. “It’s already almost dark. It’s dangerous if you go now.”

I sigh. “Victor.”

He begins to drag me backwards and to my own irritation with myself I begin to let him. It’s not that
I want to go, or that I want to leave him, but I can’t shake this restless sense of anxiety that tells me I need to get going.

“We can make love again,” he murmurs, lipping at my ear, which immediately turns scarlet.

“We’ve been making love all day.”

He chuckles. “I know. It’s wonderful. It reminds me of St…” He cuts himself off abruptly.

It’s like he’s poured cold water all over my blushing ears. “Victor,” I say again, my voice quite short this time. “I need to go back to the minshuku.” I pull away from him and this time he lets me go.

“No, Yuuri, I didn’t mean anything by that. Being with you is not like anything else,” he pleads, looking at me, rumpled and disheveled in the bed sheets. Why is he so beautiful even when he’s impossible?

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing my eyes. “I know, Victor, but-”

There is a sound that I can only describe as the loudest thunder I have ever heard. The world shudders and I think for a moment there is an earthquake, but it lasts barely a moment. Victor is up and out of bed, alert and uneasy.

“What… what was that?” I ask, looking at him. I can feel how wide my eyes are.

He shakes his head, looking towards the window. “I don’t know. An explosion? It was too close for it to have come from the mines, and it’s too dark for them to be working in any case.” He goes to the window and I follow behind him.

Along the street below curious people are appearing in their doorways, and to the north there is an ominous red glow and a streak of black smoke rising into the twilight sky.

“That’s… the military post barracks?” he says, almost curiously and then steps back from the window. “Get dressed. I have to find out what’s happened.”

There is a sinking feeling in my stomach. Whatever is going on, it seems like a bad omen. I don’t say anything, but quickly begin to pull on my awkward western clothes. Even though I know I still stand out it makes me feel like I blend in at least a little bit.

By the time we are both dressed and downstairs we can hear raised voices coming from the streets outside. The sound is alarmed, confused. Victor doesn’t hesitate to throw the door open and step into the street. I stay back in the dimly lit parlor where no one will see me. I hear him calling out to people, asking what’s happened. No one seems entirely sure. They are all making wild suppositions.

A few moments later Victor comes back inside and looks directly at me. “Stay here.”

“What?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Stay here. Don’t let anyone inside unless it’s Yuri or Otabek.”

I blink at him, feeling a confused sense of panic rising up. “Why? What’s going on?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know! That’s what I need to go find out. But I can hear shouting from the direction of the barracks and prison.” He takes me by the shoulders. “Just stay here. I will come right back. Keep the door locked. Don’t go out.”

I try not to feel alarmed, but it’s impossible. My heart pounding, I nod. “Alright. Just... hurry back.”
The set of his lips is grim and I wonder what he’s thinking. Then he hurries back outside and I lock the door behind him. The anxiety of not knowing what is happening floods me, making me feel almost sick to my stomach.

The waiting is awful. I pace. I sit. I get up and look out the window. The sound of voices, raised and shouting, grow louder and louder, but I can’t make out what they are saying, or what is happening.

It feels like an eternity, though it is probably no more than ten or fifteen minutes before Victor returns, banging on the door. “Yuuri! Let me in.”

I’m only too eager to comply, and when I open the door it is not only Victor standing there but also Yuri and Mr. Altin. The all have the same expression on their faces. Something between fear, worry, and excitement.

“What is it?” I gasp as they push inside. Victor locks the door behind them. “What’s happened.”

“The prisoners are rebelling,” Yuri says. “They blew up the munitions storage at the military barracks and began a riot in the prison yard. They’re pushing into the streets, some are trying to flee. Korsakovsk is going to dissolve into chaos.” I can’t help but think that there is a certain tone of glee in his voice.

Victor nods. “Bely alluded to being concerned with unrest when he interrogated me after my arrest. I guess it’s come home to roost.”

Wide-eyed, I look between the three of them. “What... what does this mean for us? For our plan?”

Otabek shakes his head. “The *Baikal* probably still won’t leave until it’s scheduled tomorrow evening. We haven’t finished loading the cargo. So there’s no point in changing the plan now.”

“Except that by tomorrow this little rebellion is going to quashed and the settlement and the surrounding area are going to be crawling with guards, soldiers, and mercenaries trying to round up escapees. And making sure no one else gets any ideas,” Yuri says, crossing his arms over his chest.

We exchange glances again.

“Which means I need to leave now,” Victor says. “While the guards and soldiers are busy dealing with the prisoners and everything seems like chaos. This is the perfect time.”

My heart is going so fast I feel like it is going to come out of my chest. “What then? The boat’s still not leaving until tomorrow. Where will you hide until then?”

“We’ll go to the *minshuku,*” he says simply.

I glare at him. “You don’t think that’s the first place they would come looking for you if they find you’ve run off?”

He sighs in exasperation. “We will figure something out, but we need to leave now while we have the chance! Tomorrow is going to be too late.”

“He’s probably right.” For some reason it’s hard to argue with the evenness of Mr. Altin’s tone. “And there is the possibility the *Baikal* will try to leave early. The sooner you can get to the beach tomorrow the better.”

Victor nods, chewing his lip. He looks at Yuri and then at Mr. Altin and then back. After a moment he takes a deep breath. “Yuuri should leave on the *Baikal* tomorrow as if he’s working the next
sailing. The officials will be looking for scapegoats after the embarrassment of the riots and probably numerous escapees and casualties. I don’t want him staying here anymore.”

Yuri wrinkles his nose, glancing at Otabek. “I’m not arguing. It’s not like I wanted to stay anyway, but what about the house, Shadow, the rest of our belongings?”

Victor shakes his head. “Does any of it matter? There’s enough money with my things at the minshuka to see us through for a while. The rest of it... is just details.” Despite his words I see that it pains him to say.

After a moment Yuri grunts. “It’s fine with me. The sooner I leave this place the better. I could just go with you now.”

Victor shakes his head. “It’s still dangerous. There will still be guards and soldiers looking for escapees. It’s better if you just go tomorrow and act like everything’s normal. With everything going on there is a good chance they won’t ever realize I’m among those who have fled. I haven’t left the house much since my imprisonment, and no one has come to check on me, so it’s possible no one will miss me for a while.”

Yuri takes a deep breath and then sighs, shrugging. “Alright, fine. I’ll stay with Beka until we leave tomorrow.”

Victor turns to Yuri and squeezes his shoulders before pulling him into a hug. “Then I will see you on the Baikal.”

Yuri returns Victor’s embrace, squeezing his eyes shut. “Please be careful.”

Yuri and I exchange a glance over Victor’s shoulder. I wonder if he’s thought at all about my words to him the last night.

When they step apart Victor turns to Mr. Altin. “Please take care of Yuratchka for me. Make sure he makes it safely aboard the Baikal.”

“I will. I promise,” he says solemnly and then holds out his hand. Victor smiles wryly and then shakes it.

We each put on a thick sheepskin coat and ushanka. Spring is still cold at night, but it’s more to make us blend in than to protect us from the elements. Before stepping outside I feel Victor’s hand come to rest on the small of my back, and I know without him saying so that he is feeling for the pistol. Making sure that I have it on me. The metal presses against my skin and I look up at him with a grim purse of my lips. He returns my look with a smile, and then opens the door, pushing me out onto the street.

Yelling, shouting, and the clamor of whatever is going on at the prisons can be heard clearly out on the street. Occasionally we hear the report of a rifle. People are rushing through the settlement, calling for water for the fire, calling for weapons. Others are ducking inside, locking themselves in tightly and pulling the shutters. Yuri was right. It’s chaos.

I follow along with Victor through the streets, more or less following the flow of people. We don’t want to look like we are obviously moving against the tide. It works to our benefit that the buildings of Korsakovsk are built close together rather haphazardly. Once we leave the general flow of people we can move between them more or less unseen.

I’m earnestly surprised how easily we make it to the edge of the settlement. Out of habit I make for the road leading towards Kusun-Kotan, but Victor grabs the sleeve of my coat and pulls me back.
“We can’t leave by the road. They’ll likely have it blocked off already. We should go east through the woods and then cut north until we intersect the road further up.”

I have no logical argument to this, so I nod and reach for his hand. My heart is still hammering wildly in my chest and I’m nearly breathless with my fear of being caught. Our fingers card together.

“Stay close to me, Yuuri. Everything is going to be alright. Don’t let go of my hand. ”

I take a deep breath, searching for his eyes in the darkness and the shadow of his thick fur hat. “I won’t. Let’s go.”

Then we’re in the trees, leaving Korsakovsk behind. The going is slow, but we make steady progress. Occasionally we stop, listening to the fading sounds of the uprising behind us, trying to sense if we are being followed. But everything remains quiet, save for the faint din left behind.

I can hardly believe it when we actually find the road. Without the thick cover of the trees, the moon and stars actually shed decent light on the worn dirt track. We wait, tense, to make sure it is not being patrolled and then we run. Hand in hand we run headlong, feet following the familiar road that leads to the minshuku. Victor is already limping, but he either doesn’t notice or he is ignoring whatever pain his leg is causing him.

The elation of our success fills me with a giddy feeling. But it is short lived.

We’re nearly to the minshuku when I hear hoofbeats on the road behind us. My stomach sinks.

“Oh God, Victor!” I hiss, glancing back at him. He’s fallen behind me, almost letting me drag him along by the hand. The pain of his leg has caught up to him, and in the pale light of the moon I can see how drawn his face is.

He looks back over his shoulder and I hear him groan wearily. “Shit.”

“We’re almost there. Come on!” I tug him forward, and he inhales a sharp breath through his teeth as he stumbles. I can see the turnoff to the path that leads to the minshuku. We just need to get off the road.

The hoofbeats are louder, and they’re fast. Are they chasing someone down or just patrolling the road for escapees? Either way, they’ll be on us soon.

“There’s someone on the road! They’re making for the woods!”

The voices are distant, but clear. They’ve seen us.

I hear Victor growl and surge behind me as if he’s regathered his strength. His hand pushes on my back and shoves me forward. “Go the minshuku! I’ll distract them. You can play the damsel in distress. Tell them you saw the other man run through your yard into the woods.”

“What? No! I’m not leaving you!”

There is a rifle shot, like the crack of a whip. The bullet ricochets off the packed earth of the road a few yards from us.

I grab Victor’s hand again and yank him after me. There is another rifle report. The hoofbeats are like drums pounding in my ear. Victor stumbles on his weak leg, his foot catching a stone or a rut, and he falls, and I fall with him, rolling into the grass at the side of the road. I hear Victor moan.
“Don’t try to get up! Stay right where you are.”

I push up onto my hands and knees despite the words. Two men on horseback in military uniforms pull up on the road. For a sickening moment I think they’re going to run Victor down, but they stop just in time and one slides out of the saddle.

“Just our luck. Two of us. Two of you. We both get a full bounty.” His voice is cruel and unpleasant. “And it’s the same bounty whether you’re dead or alive. Even better.”

The soldier reaches for a bullet to reload his rifle.

My eyes meet Victor’s. They look silver in the moonlight. His gaze his hard, scared, full of regrets for a life not spent with me. I don’t want him to die.

I love him.

I have a gun.

Before the soldier can cock his rifle and before I am aware I’ve made the decision to shoot him, the pistol is in my hand and I am upright on my knees. The other soldier, the one still on his horse barely has time to open his mouth to warn his friend before I’ve put a bullet into his chest. The man on the horse cries out angrily, lifting his rifle off his lap, but he’s already fired and hasn’t reloaded.

All I have to do is pull back the hammer on the revolver and fire again. He tumbles from the horse’s back.

The horses, trained to remain calm in battle, merely prance away a few yards in irritation.

Victor pushes up on his forearms, looks at me wide eyed, and then over at the two soldiers as he rolls onto his hip. The one that fell from his horse has a hole in his head. He is obviously dead. But the one closest to him gurgles. The sound makes me sick to my stomach.

I’ve just killed two men. Even if one’s not all the way dead yet. He will be soon. I killed them to save Victor. I didn’t even hesitate.

Love is truly terrifying.

I see Victor get stiffly to his feet, pick up the revolver, and fire one more shot into the gurgling man’s head. He goes silent.

For a few moments Victor just stands there with the gun in his hand, and I crouch at the side of the road. Neither of us says anything. I don’t think either of us knows what to say. Finally he turns towards me, sliding the pistol inside his coat and reaches down to take my hands, pulling me up to my feet. My legs feel as if they won’t hold my weight. He pulls me against him and I wrap my arms around him, pressing my face into his neck.

“I... I killed... I killed those men,” I gasp. “I didn’t even hesitate. I just shot them.”

“You saved my life,” he hisses into my ear, holding me up. “You saved both of our lives, Yuuri. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that. You saved us. They were bad men.”

“You don’t know that,” I croak. They could have been anybody. Fathers, brothers. They were certainly someone’s sons. They could have come to Sakhalin to make their fortune so they could marry their sweethearts. I feel like I’m about to start crying.
“I know you didn’t want to kill these men, but it was necessary. And I know you are upset. I’ve never killed anyone before either. But right now we need to get these men off the road. Someone will find them, and they will come after us.”

“Won’t they come after us anyway? Surely someone heard those gunshots.” I sniffle, holding back my tears, trying to control myself.

“There were lots of gunshots tonight. Who knows what came from where? Let’s just get them off the road. Alright?”

I nod, swallowing, trying not to feel sick.

“Can I let you go?”

“Yes. I’m... alright.”

I stumble a few steps away from Victor when he releases me. I watch as he bends to slide his arms under the first soldier’s arms, dragging him off the road. Steeling myself, I take a deep breath and do the same with the second soldier. We drag them some ways until we are sure we can’t be seen from the road. It seems unfair to hide them. They should have the chance to be buried properly or returned to their families, shouldn’t they?

Will someone find them someday?

They look sad, lying next to each other on the forest floor. I wonder how long it will take animals to find them. The thought makes my stomach churn.

Victor slides his hand into mine and squeezes. I look up at him, dazed.

“Thank you, Yuuri. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

I shake my head. “I’m the one who shot them.”

He looks at me sadly and walks me back to the road. We pause to listen inside the treeline, but there are no more hoofbeats. We pick up the rifles and Victor takes the horses by the reigns, leading them after us as we make our way the last little distance to the minshuku.

I glance towards the woods. “Victor... we can’t... we can’t just leave them there. I can’t live here knowing they’re there... so close.”

He pauses and turns to look at me, still holding the reins with one hand. “Yuuri, you can’t stay here anymore. We’ve killed two Russian soldiers just yards from your home. There’s blood on the road. It’s only a matter of time - likely a short time - before they’re found. There will be questions. You’re not a very good liar. You can’t stay on Sakhalin anymore.

He purses his lips. “Tomorrow we’re both leaving on the Baikal.”

I know his words make sense, but I can’t wrap my mind around them. Leave? Tomorrow? But I can’t just leave. I haven’t said goodbye to Suzuyama-san. He promised Mr. Bely I wouldn’t cause any more trouble. He vouched for me and for Victor. He’ll be so ashamed of me. So shamed by me.

The thought almost makes me feel worse than the fact that I just killed two men.

But I know that Victor is right. My life on Sakhalin is over.

“We can make use of these horses tomorrow. I’ll tether them in the clearing, away from the road,”
Victor says, and I can hear the weariness in his voice.

Once inside the *minshuku* I change, discarding my western clothes. Thinking I’ll be happy to never wear them again. Is it safe for us to sleep? Will more soldiers come in the night? Can I sit on my porch and enjoy the forest one last time?

“Yuuri?”

Victor’s voice startles me. I hadn’t even heard him come in. I look up at him, and feel my heart breaking. Tears begin to soundlessly roll down my cheeks.

“Yuuri,” his voice is painfully tender. He sits beside me and pulls me into his arms. I dissolve into him. He rocks me gently. “I’m sorry. I so, so sorry.”

I cling to him, my Victor. The man I love. The man I have just killed for. The man I am abandoning the only home I have ever known to be with.

“I’m not... ready,” I sob. “I’m not ready to leave.

“I know. I’m sorry, my love.” He waits until I have quieted a little and then he gently takes my face in his hands, tipping it up to look at him. “Yuuri, let’s spend one last night here like we used to. Let’s sit under the *oki-gotatsu* on the porch and drink tea and play *koi koi*. Let’s take a hot bath and sleep together on the *futon*. Then tomorrow we’ll say goodbye to the place we fell in love, and we’ll leave together to start a new life.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. His hands are hot on my cheeks and his eyes are not the clear blue I am used to. They are cloudy, troubled. They are the eyes of a man who carries some great burden.

I used to wonder why Victor started to visit me. At first I thought it was out of boredom and then later out of pity. But I think now, as I gaze at him, knowing everything that I’ve learned of his life that coming here was the way he escaped his exile. The *minshuku* was his respite long before I became his lover.

I press my face into his neck. “I wish we could stay here forever. Just the two of us. I never wanted the winter to end,” I whisper.

“Neither did I,” he murmurs back, carding his fingers into my hair. “I never wanted...” His voice catches and he is silent again for a moment, before he continues, his voice now a whisper. “I never wanted to involve you in all of this. I always wanted to keep you clean, to keep what you were to me precious and separate. I didn’t mean to make you a criminal.”

A criminal... I think he means a murderer. I tighten my arms around him. “I would do anything for you.” I breathe him in down to the very bottom of my lungs, and then lean back to look into his eyes again. “*Potseluy menya.*”

He smiles and his eyes brighten a little. He touches our foreheads together, then our noses, and then our lips. We are alive and we are in love and for the moment we are safe. Is it wrong that I’m happy, even in this moment? Even after everything?

We hold each other for a while, and then despite the dead men in the woods and the fear someone will discover us, we spend one last night together in the *minshuku* as if the winter had never ended.

Chapter End Notes
Historical Notes:

1. Genji Monogatari/The Tale of Genji - Often referred to as the first novel (or the first modern novel) The Tale of Genji’s authorship is attributed to Murasaki Shikibu, a noblewoman and lady-in-waiting at the Heian court in the early 11th century. Just how much of the full Tale of Genji was actually written by Murasaki Shikibu, however, is unknown and sometimes a topic of academic debate. It chronicles the life and many love affairs of Prince Genji, and gives modern readers a fairly accurate glimpse into courtly life in Japan nearly 1,000 years ago. The first partial English translation of The Tale of Genji was published in 1882.

2. The Aniva Bay is the large bay at Sakhalin’s southern end. Some people say Sakhalin Island looks like a fish and the Aniva is the curve of the “fish tail.” Inside the Aniva Bay is a smaller bay called Salmon Bay, in which Korsakovsk sits.

3. Buffalo Bill - A very famous American cowboy and showman, also know as William “Bill” Cody or Buffalo Bill Cody. As a young man he served the Union (the North) during the American Civil War. He began performing in cowboy and “wild west” themed shows when he was in his twenties, and founded Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show in 1883. His show was wildly popular and toured not only the United States, but also toured Europe eight times. Buffalo Bill had many serialized stories and novels written about him beginning in the 1870s. Both his wild west show and these novels helped popularize and romanticize the American West and “cowboys” in the US and abroad.

4. Victor’s pistol - A pistol generally refers to a type a handgun that has a chamber integral with the barrel. Specifically Victor’s pistol is a revolver, a handgun with a revolving chamber that can house multiple bullets, allowing it to fire multiple times before being reloaded. The earliest revolvers were made in Germany in the 16th century, but they didn’t come into widespread production and use until the 1830s-1840s. Victor’s revolver is probably a European model, produced by the French or English, rather than an American Colt or Smith and Wesson.

5. Ushanka - it’s that hat you imagine everyone in Russia wearing. The furry one with the ear flaps.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 9 is finally done. I struggled a lot (as I sometimes do) with the first section of this chapter. Chapter 8 was really the climax of the action in this story, and I knew all along that Chapter 9 was going to be much more introspective, with the majority of the tension being emotional tension. However, a lot of those emotions come from Yuuri, so it was a challenge (although a satisfying one) to write this section from Victor's POV and still portray the complexity of what was happening with the other characters.

In the end I really love this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Sakhalin Island, The Far East, Spring, 1889 - V.N.*

Neither of us sleep much that night. We are both on edge, tense, alert for someone else to come and break our fragile solitude. Lying together on the futon we take turns dozing lightly, waking, listening in the darkness, our senses stretching out, tentative and afraid of what we will find.

But nothing comes. There are a few gun reports, but they are distant. At one point I think I hear someone in the woods outside, but it could easily have been an animal or even nothing at all.

As dawn breaks the room slowly starts to brighten. Yuuri shifts against my side and sits up. For a few long moments he sits there, still, staring into the darkness. I gently run the tips of my fingers up his spine.

“Victor?” He turns towards me, and I can just make out the outlines of his face.

“Yes, Yuuri?”

“I need to do something. Before we leave. Will you come with me?”

My heart quickens a little. “I’m certainly not going to leave your side, but I don’t know that leaving the minshuku before we go to meet Otabek is a good idea. What if we are seen? Where do you need to go?”

He sighs and I feel his breath against my skin as he leans down close to my face. “To Kusun-Kotan. I... I want to visit my grandparents’ grave one last time, to say goodbye to them. There won’t be anyone here to tend their graves once I leave. I thought I’d have more time, but... like you said, I can’t stay on Sakhalin any longer.” He’s quiet for a moment and then adds softly, “And I want to leave a letter for Suzuyama-san explaining that I’ve left. I don’t want him to worry about me. I’ve caused him enough trouble.”

I stare at him silently for a moment. My caution tells me it’s not a good idea, but how can I deny him this? I draw his face to mine, touching our foreheads and noses together. I breathe in his scent. “We can go, but not by the road.”

“Of course.” His lips find mine in the darkness. “You could stay here if you wanted...”
“No,” I say immediately, my voice almost stern. I swallow and take a breath. “No,” I repeat more gently. “We should not separate. There is no reason to tempt fate.”

“Alright. Let’s go now while it’s still early.”

“Now?” I chuckle. “I’m supposed to want to get up while you are kissing me so sweetly?”

I feel him smile against my mouth. “Neither of us have been getting any sleep anyway.”

“Did I say anything about going back to sleep?” I murmur, reaching out to run my hands up his back again.

He makes a soft sound in the back of his throat and dips his head almost to my chest. He’s quiet for a moment and I wonder what he is thinking. “What it is?”

He takes a soft but uneven breath. “Is... is it alright if... if we don’t... do anything like that right now? I’m sorry, I just... It doesn’t feel right after...”

After we left two murdered bodies in the woods outside? No, I don’t imagine it feels right, I chide myself.

“Of course,” I say softly, wrapping my arms around him to embrace him tightly. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I cannot help but always want you as close to me as possible.”

He sighs and lies down against my chest, tucking his head under my chin. “It’s alright. I just... can’t right now. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for.” I stroke my fingers through his dark, cool hair. “I will never ask anything of you that you are not wanting to give.”

His arms tighten around me and for a few long minutes we just lie together as it slowly grows lighter outside. Eventually we rise and dress. Yuuri folds up the futon, and then writes a quick letter at his desk, the one at which I watched him write many, many letters over the winter. The sight fills me with a bittersweet aching.

We check the horses before we set off on foot into the woods, heading for Kusun-Kotan. We hold hands without speaking, walking along a faint path that cuts through the trees. I wonder if Yuuri often walked this way rather than on the road. It seems like him, enjoying the quiet solitude of the forest.

It is a gray morning, overcast and still not very bright. I’m alert despite my lack of sleep, eyes scanning the woods for signs of trouble. But everything is quiet and we don’t encounter anyone or anything on our way.

The path and the woods end abruptly at the edge of small graveyard. I’ve never seen a Japanese graveyard before, but all graveyards give off the same air of solemnity. The gravestones are funny little shapes. Each is carved with Japanese characters I cannot read.

To one side, what is probably the front entrance, there is a wooden arch that is somehow elegant despite the fact that it looks like it is about to fall in on itself. There is a tiny, dilapidated hutch covered in moss beside it.

It gives me an almost magical, otherworldly feeling. Like I am looking at something that isn’t meant for my eyes.
Yuuri sighs softly next to me. “It looks sadder each time I come here. When I was growing up there was a proper priest in Oodomari who tended the shrine and kept the graves clean. All of these families are gone from the island. Once I’m gone there really will be no one left to come here.”

I glance at him, frowning softly. “This is where your grandparents are buried?”

He looks up at me and nods. “Yes. That’s our family memorial.” He points to one of the stones, this one noticeably cleaner of moss and lichen than the others. “So... this will only take a few minutes. When I’m done praying I’ll take the letter to the Consulate building and leave it in the mailbox. You should probably wait here in the treeline, just in case.”

“Yes. You’re probably right.” I step back further into the trees, relinquishing Yuuri’s hand as he steps forward. He moves with that measured grace I so love, but seeing him moving through the gravestones in the gray, misty morning strikes me with a bittersweet, melancholy feeling. And I think about what I am taking from him, how my life has interrupted his so completely.

I know that Yuuri loves me, but still I wonder if some part of him wishes I’d never come into his life, that things had not changed for him. Had I not pursued him, would he have chosen to pursue me? Would he have fought harder to stay on Sakhalin?

I watch him kneel before the memorial stone and place sticks of incense in a burner, lighting them. The tendrils of smoke curl upwards as he bows his head and presses his hands together. Watching him I think that there are probably many things that I still don’t know about him, or Japan, or the life we are facing together. I want to ask him a million questions.

I suppose there will be time for that later.

I think about my own family. I don’t remember much about my grandparents. Did we visit their graves? Did I ever pray for them? I can’t remember the last time I prayed or even went to church. It was probably before I met Ignacy. I wonder if my parents still go. I haven’t written to them since my imprisonment. Will I be able to write to them from Japan? What will they be told when my departure has been noticed?

Or will they be told anything at all? Will I just slip into a silent absence, a question as to my fate unanswered?

I think, not for the first time, how disappointing I must be to them, and I wish they’d had another son. I wonder if they will be disappointed when they realize Yuri is not coming to stay with them. Or perhaps they will be relieved.

I am so lost in my thoughts that I do not realize Yuuri has left the graveyard. My heart lurches in panic for a brief moment before I remember he has gone to the consulate. Waiting in the woods alone, surrounded by the gray, silent trees, looking over the empty, all but abandoned graveyard is unnerving.

I cannot help but glance over my shoulders again and again. It feels like someone is watching me, as if I am not alone. But there is never anything there, and I hope what I feel are nothing more than the spirits of the past rather than a threat of the present.

“Victor? Are you alright?”

Yuuri’s voice startles me and I realize I’ve been staring out into the woods. I blink my eyes and shake my head a little. “Yes. I’m sorry. I was... thinking about my family.”

“Oh.” The word sounds heavy. “Do they... did you write to them about going to Japan?”
I shake my head. “No. It’s too risky that my mail might be read. Hopefully I can write them once we are safely with your family.” I smile at him wryly. “What about you? Did you write your parents to tell them that you were going to be bringing two foreigners with you?”

He flushes faintly and rubs the back of his neck. “Well... I told them I would be coming to Kyushu. I didn’t tell them all the details. I might have mentioned I would have traveling companions, but not that you’d necessarily be... you know. Permanent companions.”

I laugh at that. “Yuuri! What if your family turns us away? What if they don’t like me? Have you told them anything about me?”

He flushes even more now. “I have! I mean... I told them about you last summer, when you started visiting me. That I’d become friendly with one of the Russian settlers. And I told them about your leg and that you were staying at the minshuku. I haven’t...” He rubs the back of his neck. “I haven’t told them about... that we’re... in love. But I know they’ll understand when they meet you. How important you are to me.”

My smile softens. “Yuuri.” I kiss his forehead. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am. I know I am. They’ll love you.”

We embrace, for a moment, grounding one another in the life we will share as we stand at the edge of this place of death. I never want to let him go. But after a few moments we both pull away.

“Let’s go. This place feels eerie,” I say.

He smirks at me faintly and reaches for my hand again. “Well, there is a graveyard right there.”

I purse my lips and shake my head. “It’s more than that. I feel like my mind is playing tricks on me. I need to get off this island.”

His hand is warm in mine as his fingers squeeze mine tightly. “It’s going to be ok, Victor. We just have to make it through the day.”

The walk back to the minshuku is quick. The horses are still patiently waiting in the clearing, which means they haven’t been found.

“The letter you left for Suzuyama, what did you tell him?” I ask as we enter the minshuku.

Yuuri twists his lips. “Only not to worry about me. That I’d decided to leave on the Baikal’s sailing today, because I had no reason not to. I was only staying, because...” He sighs softly. “Well, I suppose because I didn’t have to leave yet. There was nothing really keeping me here until the next sailing except sentimentality.”

“Will it cause trouble? You just leaving so suddenly.”

He shrugs. “How could it? No one needs me here. He’ll be disappointed I didn’t say goodbye, that I didn’t come to his going away party. He might even think me rude, but... I’m sure once he hears that you have also disappeared he will put it all together. What he’ll think of me - or what he’ll do then -I don’t know.”

“But you trust him, don’t you? He’s helped you - us - in the past.”

Yuuri twists his lips and shakes his head a little. “I don’t know. I don’t know what he’ll do.”
I purse my lips. “If he tells the Russian Officials, they will know where I’ve gone.”

Yuuri’s brows furrow. “But would they really go through all of the cost and trouble to track you down? You’re just one person, Victor. Japan is a big place. And it’s not like Russian officials can just go whatever they want there.”

I bite my bottom lip. “I don’t honestly know. It does seem rather unlikely they’d go to all the trouble. Plenty of exiles have fled to other countries. Still...” I sigh. “I would have liked the peace of mind of not having to look over my shoulder.”

Yuuri steps into my arms and we embrace. “Suzuyama would have figured it out with or without the letter. He knows what you mean to me, even if he’s never said as much. There’s no way he couldn’t have known.”

I stroke my fingers through his hair. “What’s done is done and what will be will be. Let’s just get off this island and worry about the future later.”

We re-pack quickly, Yuuri putting everything into two large furoshiki. All in all it’s no more than a couple changes of clothes each, a few books, and a some odds and ends. He wraps what money he has in a separate furoshiki and tucks it into his kimono, then does the same with what is left of my gold bullion, tucking it into the bottom of one of the sacks. As I watch him, I see his fingers shaking.

“Everything is going to be alright,” I say to him. “We just have to make it through the day. Like you said.”

He nods, but doesn’t respond. We stand together for a few moments, looking at the inn, which will soon be empty. Then I take the sacks and go to fetch the horses, leaving Yuuri a few moments to be alone in his home for the last time.

I saddle the dead soldiers’ horses in the inn yard, tying down our bundled belongings and the two rifles, one to each saddle. I hope we don’t have any use for the guns today, but it’s likely they are worth something, either to trade or sell once we reach Japan. Or possibly for our clandestine passage aboard the Baikal. I stand alone with the horses, adjusting the length of Yuuri’s stirrups, waiting for him for some time before finally going back into the minshuku to fetch him.

Yuuri stands silently in the middle of the room. I have that eerie feeling again. Like there are ghosts in the air.

Everything has been put away. Even the fire in the irori has been put out. I can’t remember a single time it wasn’t quietly burning. The doors to the west and east rooms are open as if the building is being aired, but the door to the porch is closed.

“Yuuri?” I call to him softly.

He startles a little, turning to look at me with an owlish, almost dazed expression. There are no tears in his eyes, but I think what he is feeling is probably beyond tears.

“Are you ready?”

He looks at me for a long moment, looks back at the room, and then nods, taking a deep breath as he turns around. “Yes. I’m ready.” He walks past me quickly, not looking back. The door slides shut with a soft clack behind me. Yuuri flinches a little at the sound, but he doesn’t say anything. His back is straight and his head is high as we walk out into the yard.

“You’ll be alright to ride by yourself?” I ask, smiling at him faintly.
He smiles wryly in response, but there is no warmth in his expression. “Yes. If I can manage a ride to save your life I can manage a plod through the woods.”

I laugh. “I really wish I could have seen that.”

“Mmm.”

I help Yuuri into his saddle, boosting his foot with my hands. I check to make sure his stirrups are the right length, adjusting them a little again. I feel a light touch on the top of my head and look up. Yuuri is pressing his finger again the part of my hair.

I can’t help but chuckle. “What are you doing?”

He smiles back unsteadily. “I don’t know. It was just an impulse. Your head was right there.”

“I wonder if you will still love me when I am old and bald,” I say with a despondent sigh.

“I will love you no matter what,” he says softly, turning the touch into a stroke of his fingers through my hair.

I gaze up at him for a moment and then take his hand to kiss it.

Climbing into my own saddle, I glance up at the gray sky. I wonder if it spells more rain. For a few moments we both sit and look at the minshuku, dark and shuttered and empty. I nudge my horse forward, moving closer to Yuuri so that I can take his hand.

“Thank you, for sharing your home with me.”

He smiles at me faintly and squeezes my fingers, and now there are finally tears in his eyes. “Thank you, for coming to visit.”

With a last look at the minshuku, the only home Yuuri has ever known, and the place where I have been happiest in all my life, we set off for the forest.

We skirt as widely as we can around Kusun-Kotan, aware there may be soldiers from the Consulate patrolling for escapees. When the trees become too dense, we leave the horses, removing their tack and our belongings and sending them on their way with a swat on the rump. They don’t seem that interested in going, and I hope that they find their way back to Korsakovsk and new owners. I think sadly of Shadow, hoping that he too will find a new owner once they discover that I’m gone. If they haven’t already.

We make the rest of the way to the beach on foot. And by the time we get there my leg is aching terribly and it’s raining, a constant, cool drizzle that has everything we have with us damp in a matter of minutes. It’s difficult to tell exactly what time it is with the cloudy skies and dreary, gray light. But regardless, we have a long wait ahead of us.

“We can take shelter in the remains of those huts,” Yuuri says, pointing to the treeline where the little river flows out onto the beach. “This was an Ainu fishing village once upon a time.”

The frame of the hut is still more or less intact, but the grass and thatching that once made up the walls and ceiling have fallen away in many places. Half of the roof has simply collapsed in on itself. We settle near the doorway on the remains of a woven floor mat that has all but disintegrated from damp and mold. The dilapidated hut provides only just enough shelter to be better than being outside. The small space is filled with a musty, earthy smell.
There are the remains of an indoor fire pit, not unlike the *irori*, but we decide that lighting a fire is too risky. So we sit close together to keep one another warm, our arms entwined as we shiver. I don’t say so, but my leg is throbbing painfully. Truthfully, it has been since the night before, but it’s even worse now with the damp. I try to be subtle about rubbing it.

“Your leg hurts.”

I have not been subtle enough.

“Only a little. All that running last night,” I try to sound dismissive as I look over at him.

“You don’t have to hide your pain from me, Victor. I’ve seen you in much greater pain than this.”

I balk a little at that, and feel some color rise into my face. Much of my first weeks with Yuuri after the accident are lost to me. It was all more or less a haze of pain and laudanum induced sleep. Not having to remember it, it’s almost like it didn’t happen.

“I guess that’s true. I don’t remember much about when you first began caring for me.”

Yuuri chuckles faintly, readjusting his clothes to try and pull them tighter around himself. “That’s probably for the best. You weren’t enjoying yourself.”

I purse my lips, looking out at the rain. “It must have been hard for you. Caring for me in that state. Having someone completely dependent on you. It must have been a burden.”

He leans against my shoulder. “No. I wouldn’t call it a burden. I was terrified, of course. I had no idea what I was doing. I was afraid I was going to hurt you or make you worse, or that you would die in my care, because I was incompetent. But when you started to improve, even a little, I was so happy to know that it was partly because of me.” He is quiet for a moment and I feel his arms squeeze around mine. “I was always so happy that you were there. Even when you were very sick. It was a selfish joy, having you with me all the time.”

I turn my head towards him and cup his chin in my hand, lifting his face so that he has to look at me. “I was also happy, Yuuri. Even though I thought you must resent having to take care of me. I, too, felt selfish joy being by your side.”

His brows furrow and the look he gives me makes my chest ache. “Victor...”

Then his arms around around my neck and he is embracing me so tightly I almost cannot breathe. I hold him back, pressing my face into his damp, dark hair. “I love you so, my Yuuri. I would do anything for you.”

He makes a soft croaking sound and then whispers, “I’m the same. I would do anything to stay by your side.”

We hold each other for a long, quiet moment. Then finally I ask the question that has subconsciously preoccupied me for days. “Are you really happy to be leaving Sakhalin with me?” I can feel my hesitancy even as I force the words out.

Yuuri leans back in my embrace and lifts his face. His spectacles are clouded with damp, and I gently remove them from his face so that I can properly see his beautiful brown eyes. He purses his lips for a moment before slowly nodding.

“Yes, although, honestly, I don’t feel like I’m really ready to leave. This has always been my home and I don’t really know anything else. I’m afraid of the unknown world and what it holds in store.
I’m afraid that I won’t be much of a guide to you and Yuri. I don’t know what to expect of a life in Japan. I don’t even know what to expect of my family. It’s been so long since I’ve seen them.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It is warm against my chilled face. “But even a life of uncertainty with you is preferable to one where you don’t exist or can’t be with me. There was never any future for us on Sakhalin. Here everyone is a prisoner, even me.”

His words soothe a rawness inside of me I hadn’t fully realized was there. I smile in faint relief. “I am also afraid of the unknown. But I am more excited for my life with you, whatever it might bring.”

The rest of the day is spent in much the same manner. We huddle together to stay dry and warm. We talk about the future, and tell each other stories about our pasts. In many ways it’s just how we’ve spent all of our time together. Eventually the sun begins to drop and the world outside our dilapidate hut grows gloomy with twilight.

Out on the water, lights appear as the shadowy outline of the Baikal sails around the point of the cove. Our shared relief is palpable and we exchange an excited glance, laughing giddily as our plans begin to come to fruition.

Not too long after, as a deeper darkness fills up the beach, I can hear the faint, soft splashing of oars. It’s time. Otabek is coming for us.

We gather our things quickly and make our way down to the shore. Out in the small cove I can just make out the outline of the tender boat as it slowly grows closer. I want to call out, but I know it’s dangerous. Instead we stand at the edge of the water, nearly bursting with excitement and the fear that now, at this final moment, something will unravel.

Otabek paddles the tender up onto the sandy shore and hops out, wading through the freezing cold surf as if it does not bother him in the least. “You made it.”

I grin. “Yes. And we are very glad to see you.”

He shrugs. “Everything went smoothly once I got Yuri on the ship this morning. He’s been mad as a hornet cooped up all day, but I told him it was safest for him to be out of sight and out of mind.”

I can’t help but snicker at that, thinking of Yuratchka fuming up and down the decks of the Baikal. “That was good thinking. Thank you, again, for taking care of him. I’m in your debt.”

The young man shakes his head. “You don’t have to thank me.” He helps take our packs, tossing them into the little boat. “I managed to sell a few of your things today. Including your horse. There are plenty of people who are willing to give you money without asking questions if you know where to look.”

I smirk. “Oh. I’m well aware of that. I’m even further in your debt now.” I feel relief knowing that Shadow at least will be cared for by someone.

Otabek just shrugs and then motions to the boat. “Both of you get in. I’ll hold the boat and push us off.”

Yuuri looks at me nervously and then takes a deep breath. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a boat.”

“Do you want me to lift you in?” I ask a little teasingly.

He narrows his eyes at me. “I can manage.”
We’re both wet with freezing water up to our calves by the time Otabek pushes the boat off the beach and climbs back in. The tender rocks as he takes his position at the oars and then their soft, rhythmic sound resumes.

“You both may want to stay low. Just in case.”

I do as Otabek suggests, sinking down between of the bench seats. I’m surprised when Yuuri does not sink down next to me. When I look up I mean to say something to him, but his name dies on my lips.

He is sitting up straight, his eyes fixed on the island we are slowly pulling away from. Even if I said his name, I doubt he would hear me. His expression makes my heart ache. It seems almost blank, his gaze distant. But just below the surface is the pain of a heartbreak I too have known. It is the pain of losing all that you know, all that you have held dear.

It is the loss of home.

**Sea of Japan, The Soya Strait, Spring, 1889 - V.N.**

Once aboard the *Baikal*, Otabek had shown us to a worker’s cabin belowdecks. It was too conspicuous for us to stay in a stateroom, although it was likely there were some available. Yuri was waiting for us there, and I’d rarely seen him so happy to see anyone as he was to see us. He even hugged Yuuri, much, I think, to both of their surprise.

I’d expected to go and speak with the Captain, or at least someone on his behalf, to settle the matter of paying for being smuggled off the island, but Otabek assured me that the debt had been settled already with the money from the things he sold and what I’d left with Yuri. The only money we had left now was what Yuuri and I had brought with us from the *minshuku*. All I could do was hope the gold found a good exchange in Japan and that we could earn something extra by selling the rifles.

Exhausted from the nearly sleepless night before and our long day of anxiety, Yuuri and I fell asleep almost immediately.

Now it’s morning and we stand on one of the lower decks of the steamship. We’d been warned to stay off the upper deck, where again we might seem conspicuous to the real paying guests, but even here the feel of the ocean wind on my face is heavenly. I feel light as a feather. I feel free.

Yuuri stands next to me, gripping the railing so tightly his already pale hands are nearly white. He hasn’t said as much, but I can tell that he doesn’t like being aboard the big ship. In fact he hasn’t said much of anything since the night before. I watch him out of the corner of my eye.

His gaze is trained on the distant green shore of what little of Sakhalin we can still see. Sailing through the Soya Strait between Sakhalin and Hokkaido we can see either island depending on which side of the ship we stand on. Personally I prefer to stand on the Hokkaido side and stare towards the land that holds our future. But Yuuri keeps returning to this place at the railing, staring back at the past.

“It won’t be long until it’s out of sight,” he says suddenly. “We’ll sail around the Cape and then... it’ll be gone.”

I move a little closer to him, turning so that I’m leaning my back against the railing. “You are still struggling to say goodbye.” I reach over to brush a piece of his hair, which the wind is toying with, behind his ear.
The touch seems to break the spell the island has cast over him and he looks at me. “I guess I am. I honestly didn’t think it would be this hard. I’m just...” He looks away, not back at Sakhalin, but down into the water churning past below us. “I’m so afraid. I don’t know what to expect or what to do. I’ve never been to a big city like Hakodate. What if... what if I can’t be of any help to you and Yuri? I’m the only one who speaks Japanese. We’ll end up lost or swindled or... or robbed and murdered!”

“Yuuri,” I can’t help but chuckle a little. I turn around again so that I can put my arms around his back. “Many foreigners have fumbled their way through Japan even without the benefit of a Japanese speaking guide. If all else fails I’m sure we can find someone who can help us in one of the five languages we speak between us.” I chuckle. “Though I admit my English, French, and German are very rusty at this point.”

He turns into me a little and I pull him closer. “Besides,” I murmurs against his hair, “you are forgetting that we are very dangerous fugitives. Who would dare to try to swindle us?”

He snorts softly. “Victor, that’s not funny.”

I chuckle. “I don’t know. It’s a little funny.”

“What are you two doing?”

I lift my head and smile at my little brother as he approaches us with Otabek in tow. He is wearing rough work clothes, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the oversized pants held up by suspenders. There is soot or maybe grease smeared across parts of both of his cheeks.

“Yuri! You look so manly!” I call.

He glares at me. “You two are supposed to be acting inconspicuous. Being all lovey dovey on the deck is probably not the best way to avoid drawing attention to yourselves.”

“Yuri’s probably right,” Yuuri says and gently pulls away from me. I pout, but dutifully move away to put a little space between us.

“It would be safer if you both just stayed in the cabin,” Yuri grumbles.

“But that’s no fun. It’s two whole days from here to Hakodate. We can’t just mope around in that tiny room. It’s stuffy and awful.”

Yuri sighs and puts his hands on his hips. “This is one of the only ships that carries passengers to and from Sakhalin. You don’t know who could be on this ship. Someone might recognize you.”

“You worry too much, Yuratchka. What are they going to do? Try to arrest me? Toss me over the side? Go back to Sakhalin just to tell someone they saw me on a boat? We’re not in Russia anymore. Once we’re in Japan we’re free. We’re going to be together and we’re going to have a good life, just like I promised.” I grin at my little brother.

He gives me an unreadable look and then abruptly turns to look out at the water, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, alright.”

His reaction seems odd and I furrow my brows a bit. After a moment he glances at Otabek, but the other young man just looks back at him calmly. “I guess we should get back to work. I can’t loaf around like you two. Just try not to draw attention to yourselves. Also there’s breakfast left in the sailor’s dining room. The captain said you can eat there.”
I blink at his abrupt exit. “Oh. Alright. We’ll see you later. Don’t work too hard.”

Yuuri and I watch him and Otabek head back down the deck. They jostle on another’s shoulders playfully and laugh about something one of them says.

“You should talk to him,” Yuuri says.

“Hmm?” I look back at him. “About what?”

He smirks faintly as he turns his head to look up at me. “Just... talk to him.” He rests his hand on my chest briefly and then takes a deep breath. “Are we brave enough to see what passes for breakfast for the sailors?”

I chuckle. “It can’t be worse than some of the food I’ve eaten in my life.”

The day passes rather monotonously and I lament that we can’t go up into the upper decks to enjoy the parlor or the upper balcony or even converse with the other passengers. But I know that Yuri is right. Now is not the time to become careless. Not when we are so close.

The sailing doesn’t seem to agree with Yuuri much at all. He spends much of the day lying down, and while I don’t mind lying next to him on the narrow bunk we are sharing, I find that I’m restless and simply can’t sleep all day, so I try to read.

We go back out onto the deck together sometime in the early afternoon, just in time to see the very last glimpses of Sakhalin off the stern of the ship. Now just a faint grey-green outline, we watch it fade slowly in the gray mist far behind us. I find that I am unexpectedly melancholy.

I hear Yuuri take a shuddering breath. “I think I’m going to go lie down again,” he says softly, his voice a little hard to hear.

I reach for his hand. “I’ll go with you.”

He pulls it away. “No. No, it’s fine. I’d... I think I’d like to just be alone for a little while.” He pauses and then adds, “If that’s alright.”

“Of course. Whatever you need, my love.” I swallow, unable to deny that him pulling away is hard for me to take.

He looks up at me with a wobbly smile, and I can see that he is struggling to hold back tears. “Why don’t you find Yuri? Perhaps there’s lunch you can eat together.”

I smile back, trying to be reassuring. “Alright. I’ll bring something back for you.”

He nods and then walks back inside the ship. Taking a deep breath I lean against the railing and stare out at the sea for a long time. My own feelings are unquiet. I had never thought of Sakhalin as Russia, but the further we draw away from the island the more I realize that however much it was not Russia, it was still more Russia than anywhere I am ever likely to live again. Soon I will be a stranger in a strange land, where no one speaks my beautiful language.

I want us to be truly happy in Japan, but I wonder if that is possible. And suddenly I know what I’m supposed to talk to Yuri about. I curse myself softly and push away from the railing, going back inside the ship to find my little brother.

Searching for Yuri gives me a good excuse to go prowling the bowels of the ship. I’m dressed more or less like a worker in a linen shirt and woolen pants, so nobody seems to question my presence. It’s
even stuffier and closer down in the hold, jammed full of crates and boxes and even pieces of furniture. Some items are obviously Russian others Oriental. It’s obvious that the *Baikal* does quite a good business as both a passenger and cargo vessel.

I find Yuri - and Otabek - sitting on some crates near the back. I watch them for a moment before making myself known. Yuri is so easy with him. He smiles as they talk, swinging his legs over the side of the crate. It reminds me of how he was when he was younger, when we were alone together and would make up stories about our future selves. It gives me a little pang of jealousy. It feels like it’s been a long time since he’s smiled like that for me.

“I found you!”

Yuri startles and his smile turns into a glare as he looks at me. “What are you doing down here?”

“Looking for you,” I say. “Isn’t that obvious?”

He looks over my shoulder. “Where’s your bumpkin?”

“Yuri, don’t be rude,” I say with a sigh. “Yuuri is lying down. I think the sea doesn’t exactly agree with him.”


I purse my lips in irritation for a moment, but the expression soften again as I look at Yuri. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

He looks at me skeptically. “What? Are you hungry or something? You can just go up to the dining room.”

“No, it’s something else.” I glance at Otabek. “It’s something I’d like to speak with you about privately.”

Otabek nods and slides down off the crate.

“B-beka!” Yuri splutters. “You don’t have to go just because of him.”

I don’t miss the fact that he calls him ‘Beka.’

“It’s fine.” He looks at Yuri with a calm smile. “I’ll come back in a little while. You should have a good talk.” He pats Yuri’s knee before walking off between the rows of cargo.

“Well, it’s not exactly like this is a private place anyway,” Yuri grumbles. “Anyone could hear us back here.”

“But probably no one pays much attention, otherwise you wouldn’t be squirreled away here with Beka, right?” I say as I sit down on a crate of my own, grinning at him teasingly.

He turns bright red, splutters for a moment and then huffs, crossing his arms. “What do you want?”

I purse my lips again. “Why are you so upset with me?”

He balks at that and then frowns, slouching a little. “Well you’re making fun of me, for one thing.”

I smile wryly. “Since when has my teasing been something you can’t handle?”

“It’s not... I just don’t know why you’re always making a big deal out of everything. You didn’t
have to come hunt me down. We could have talked later. We’re sleeping in the same cabin.”

“I just thought it would be good to talk about some things before we get to Japan. While we’re alone.”

He shifts like he’s uncomfortable and rubs the back of his neck again. “Ok fine. What do you want to talk about then?”

I look at him for a moment and then take a deep breath. “I know I haven’t been a very good big brother lately. I’ve had a lot of my own concerns and I haven’t given a lot of time or thought to yours. We didn’t even celebrate your birthday.”

He looks up with an expression of mild surprise. His mouth parts as if to say something, but then he closes it before looking down into his lap again and mumbling. “It doesn’t really matter. It’s not like I actually know when my birthday is anyway. Other than probably the spring.”

“Still. You’re sixteen this year. You’re really not a child anymore. But even so I always assume you’re happy to go along with whatever I want. I never ask about what you want, even though you’re an adult now.”

He looks up at me with a kind of stunned expression on his face. There is faint color in his cheeks.

“Oh. Well... it’s alright. I know you’ve been having a lot of troubles. The accident and then falling in love and being arrested and then planning your escape. You didn’t have a lot of time to think about me. I’m just... glad you didn’t leave me behind. I would have hated being there without you.”

I frown and nod. “I know that was unfair of me to ask. I’m also glad we were able to stay together.” We smile at each other faintly. “I’ve also been thinking a lot about my feelings on leaving Sakhalin, and Yuuri’s as well. It is hardest for him, because it was his home. But I realized that Sakhalin has also been your home for a long time, and that I haven’t thought much about your feelings. That’s not fair of me.”

Yuri twists his lips and then snorts softly, smirking. “I don’t care about Sakhalin. I hated that place. Do you know how many times I thought about sailing away and never coming back when I worked on these ships? You were the only thing that made anything about that place a home to me. I never had any friends, there was nothing to do, and everyone was drunk or miserable, or both. I’m glad we’re leaving. I dreaded coming back every time.”

I feel a wave of relief to hear him say so. I’d wondered if I wasn’t taking him away from a home he secretly loved.

“I’m glad to hear that. Once we’re in Japan and we’re settled with Yuuri’s family, there will be lots to do, and there will be young people for you to meet. We’ll learn the Japanese language and culture and we’ll have a good, happy life there, the three of us together.”

Yuri is looking down into his lap now. I can’t see his face, but I can see him clenching his hands together, fingers twisting. He mumbles something I don’t quite catch.

“What was that, Yuri?”

He looks up abruptly and his face is set with an almost angry look of determination. “I’m not going to live with you in Japan. That’s what I said.”

I blink at him, dumbfounded. “What... what do you mean?”
He swallows. “I wasn’t going to tell you yet, because I didn’t want you to make a big fuss. But... I couldn’t just let you sit there and blather on like an idiot about our perfect life together in Japan. It’s not my perfect life. Maybe you will be happy there with Yuuri, but there’s nothing there for me. I don’t want to learn Japanese and be an outsider all my life. I don’t want to wear those stupid robes and eat nothing but rice and salty shit soup. I don’t want... to just be an extra person in your happy love affair.”

“Yuri, that’s not—”

“Just listen to me!”

I close my mouth and listen, but he doesn’t say anything else for a long moment, like he’s trying to compose his thoughts.

“I’ve never had a friend like Otabek. Someone other than you who really cares about me, who likes me and wants to be around me. When we work together it’s not even like work. We have fun just talking and joking. He makes me feel like I can do anything. And when we’re together we don’t even have to talk. We can just... be together and it’s fine.”

Yuri looks into his lap for a moment and then looks over his shoulder like he’s making sure no one is there listening before he continues.

“I don’t know if what I feel is just friendship or if... maybe it’s something more. I don’t feel like I need to hurry to find out. I just know I don’t want to lose him.” He looks directly at me and his face contorts a little as if the words he is about to speak cause him pain. “Not even for you, Vitya.”

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I sit forward, swallowing. “Yuratchka... why... why didn’t you talk to me about this earlier?”

“Because I didn’t know!” he snaps, and then his race reddens and he looks over his shoulder again. “I didn’t know that’s how I really felt. Not until... until Yuuri brought it up. He knew somehow that I didn’t want to go with you, that I wanted to stay with Otabek. He knew it even before I did. He said I should think about my life and what will make me happy, that... the world is full of possibilities for me.” He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “I’d never really... let myself want anything for myself. I always just thought... being together with you would be enough.” He sighs and looks at my with a terse purse of his lips, eyes narrowed. “Besides, I thought you would just make fun of me anyway.”

It hurts me that he felt this way, not because he didn’t trust me with his feelings, but because I know he is probably right. I would have teased him about Otabek. It’s my nature, it’s how I’ve always been with him. I wonder if it has always hurt him.

I frown sadly. “Oh, Yuratchka. I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel as if I didn’t take your feelings seriously. What you want in life is important to me. But I only know what is in my power to give to you, and I know it isn’t much. You’re not a child anymore. And every man wants his own life. Every man deserves his own happiness. I knew that what I could give you wouldn’t be enough one day. That’s why... that’s why I tried to send you back to St. Petersburg.”

He nods and sniffs, scrubbing at his eyes with the back of his arm. “I know. But that’s not what I wanted either.”

I take a deep breath, the weight in my chest and stomach grows heavier and I know Yuri and I are heading towards a place as brothers from which we can’t return. “So. What is it you do want?”

He furrows his brows and purses his lips and I know he is nervous to tell me. “I already talked to
Otabek about it. He’d never said anything about not wanting me to go to Japan or that he wanted to stay together, so... I was nervous when I told him what I was feeling. But...” his face lights up a little as he begins to smile, “no one has ever looked so happy as Beka looked when I told him I didn’t want to part with him. He was so excited. He said he’d already thought about things we could do together, that he thought I was becoming a very good sailor. For a long time he’s wanted to sail on a bigger ship, a trading ship or a whaler and really see the world. One day he wants to be a captain, have his own ship. He said he thought it would be easy for us to find work on a ship in one of the big Japanese harbors. That we could stay together and... have an adventure.”

“An adventure.” I say the word and it fills me with a kind of dread I’ve felt before. The dread of a parent for their child’s safety. But I’m not Yuri’s parent. I’m not even really his brother. I’ve taken care of him all this time, wanted what is best for him, wanted what will keep him safe and happy. But I know it is not my right to keep him from the life he wants, no matter how much it pains me. I laugh thinly and then shake my head. “Oh, Yuratchka. You just have to say the kind of thing that fills me with worries like an old man, don’t you?”

He purses his lips. “I know you probably don’t approve, but you said it yourself. A man has to make his own life.”

I laugh again and hold up my hands. “You’re wrong. I completely approve, even if it fills me with dread, and knowing you will not be at my side where I can love and protect you breaks my heart.”

I get up then and walk over to the crate Yuri is sitting on. I take his youthful face in my hands and stroke back his blond hair, stringy from sweat and dirt. “You are young and strong and so smart, Yuratchka. And I have given you only the barest of lives.” I smile at him and my heart is at once filled with happiness and sadness, both terrible in equal measure. “Go and have your adventure. Live the most glorious life you can have.”

He makes a choked sound in the back of his throat and his green eyes fill up with tears before he throws his arms around me and buries his face in my chest. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and press my cheek to his hair.

“Thank you...” he whispers into my shirt. “Thank you for... for everything, Vitya. You didn’t have to do anything for me. But you did everything without complaint. Even let me go.”

I smile softly, glowing with my love and sadness. I stroke his hair. “Only on one condition, though.”

He sniffs and looks up at me his expression a little wary. “What is it?”

I smile. “First you and Otabek have to come with Yuuri and me to Kyushu. So that you will know where to come home.”

He stares at me for a moment and then lets out a laugh, even as few more tears roll down his cheeks. He smiles at me the way he used to. “Ok. It’s a deal.”

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**Hakodate, Hokkaido Japan, Spring 1889 - V.N.**

I’m not sure what I expected Hakodate to be like, but whatever it was it’s not what Hakodate is actually like.

When we first arrive in the huge harbor I’m astounded by how many ships - Western ships - are at anchor. As the only open port on Hokkaido, merchants from abroad are forced to come here to trade with the northern portion of Japan. The ships fly flags from Russia, France, England, America, and
many others.

Yuuri and I stand at the deck of the lower balcony, taking in the sight of this strange, foreign city.

The jetties and piers are full of what might be called junks; smaller vessels move about the harbor, transporting goods and people to the moored ships. It is the most civilization I have seen in nearly a decade and it makes my heart race.

“Yuuri, look at this place.” We can see the main street along the harbor. The buildings are a strange mishmash of Japanese and Western styles and the people walking along the piers and the quay wear clothes in many different styles. “It’s amazing.”

“It’s terrifying,” he mumbles.

I smile wryly and reach out to stroke his cheek. “Don’t be so glum. This is our first step on our journey to... Ha...sasu?”

He smirks faintly and looks at me. “Ha-set-su.”

“Hasetsu,” I repeat.

“Which is on...?”

“Kyushu.”

“Which is?”

“Japan’s most southern island.” I grin at him. “See, I have absorbed everything you have told me.”

He chuckles, though thinly. “And can you repeat the phrase I taught you in case we get separated?”

I grunt and twist my lips. “Mmm... Kyushu no Hasetsu...”

“E,” he prompts me.

“e iki ma su. Ikku nohou-”

“No hou. It’s not one word. ”

I huff and cross my arms over my chest. “Ikku nohou wan an de suka?”

He takes a deep breath and then chuckles as he sighs. “No one but me is going to understand you. Try not to get lost.”

I smirk and lean in towards him, murmuring in his ear. “I have no intention of ever leaving your side again.”

His ear turns bright red and I grin, feeling I’ve at least recovered some of the upper hand.

We are the last ones to leave the ship, tendered over to a pier after the other passengers have disembarked. Yuri and Otabek had already informed the captain they’d be leaving the crew at Hakodate and there had been some grumbling, but nobody tried to stop them from leaving.

Once again I’m glad we have Otabek with us. As the only one who has already been to Hakodate a number of times he is able to lead us to a clean, but relatively inexpensive Western style hotel that is often used by travelers staying in the city as they await the departure of their next ship. It’s run not by
a Japanese family, but a Dutch one, which I find surprising for some reason. Luckily the proprietor speaks a number of languages well enough to conduct his business and we muddle through a reservation for two rooms in English.

“We could just share one room,” Yuuri says as we are shown the way down a hallway lit with gas lamps.

“Maybe I want to be alone with you,” I say with a wry smile.

He reddens a little at that. “Well... but the cost, Victor.”

I chuckle. “Yuuri, I’m not so poor yet that I can’t afford two rooms in this kind of establishment for a few days. And one meal a day is included. It’s actually not a bad deal.”

He doesn’t argue any more after that, and once we have put our things in our rooms the four of us meet in the small dining room for dinner and to discuss what happens next.

“There is a Bank of Japan here in Hakodate,” Otabek says as we eat what I can only describe as some kind of fish stew. “Tomorrow you can go and see if you can get currency. Otherwise I’m sure there are gold buyers all over the market. And I’m sure we can find someone to buy those guns. Once we have money we can find passage on a ship headed for the south.”

“My parents wrote that I should sail to Hakata, also called Fukuoka-ku. From there we can make either overland arrangements or find another boat going to Hasetsu. It’s apparently not too far down the coast,” Yuuri chimes in.

Otabek nods. “Then tomorrow morning Yuri and I can take the rifles into the market and sell them. Victor and Yuuri, you go to the bank. We’ll meet back here once we’ve accomplished our goals and then go together to the harbor to look for a ship sailing for this Hakata. I’ve never heard of it, so it’s probably not an open port, which means we’ll need to look for a Japanese vessel.”

We all nod and I feel a palpable sense of relief that we have a plan. We’d been so preoccupied about getting off Sakhalin that neither Yuuri nor I had thought much further. “It sounds like a good plan. For tonight let’s just eat and then we can rest.”

“Suit yourself. Beka and I are certainly not going to just go up to bed and sleep,” Yuri says.

“We’re not?” Otabek looks at Yuri with a raised eyebrow.

“No!” he scoffs. “This is my first time in a big city! You have to go exploring with me!”

“Oh. Well if you want, I’ve been here before though.”

Yuri huffs. “Beka. Don’t be boring.”

The young man snorts and chuckles. “Ok. Yura.”

Yuri chokes on his fish soup, almost spitting it out and I try to hide my laughter at Otabek’s smug expression behind my hand. Beside me I hear Yuuri laughing softly, too, and it warms my heart to see him at least a little lively.

After dinner we go upstairs as Yuri and Otabek go out into the city. I can’t help but be a little worried, even though I know I don’t need to be. Otabek will look after Yuri even better than I probably ever could.
I leave Yuuri in the room for a few minutes as I go to ask about the bathing arrangements and when I return he is sitting quietly on the side of the bed, hands folded in his lap, crying softly.

“Yuuri,” I say his name tenderly as I sit beside him. “Yuuri.” I whisper his name sweetly against his neck before I kiss him, sliding my arms around his waist. “My Yuuri. My sweet, Yuuri.”

“Victor, I... I’m sorry...” he whispers. “I sh-should be happy... I... I am happy, I just...”

“Shhh. You don’t have to apologize.” I kiss his neck again, reaching up to pull the collar of his kimono down, exposing his back and shoulder. I kiss a trail across his bare skin. Yuuri shivers and lets out a shaky breath.

“Ah... V-victor... I don’t know if...”

“It’s alright, Yuuri.” My hands begin to undo his sash. “Love making is also for comfort. Let me hold you close. You don’t have to do anything. Just let me love you.”

He takes a few deep breaths. “Is it really ok? Even if I’m like this?”

I turn him to face me, cupping his face with my hand, stroking the tears away with my thumb. “We don’t need permission from anyone but ourselves to love each other, Yuuri. There is nothing that is right or wrong, unless we say so.” I pull his sash away and let his kimono start to fall open. “I want to make love to you. Will you let me?”

I smile and kiss his cheeks, tasting the salt of his tears. “I will. Let me do everything. All you have to do is feel me close.”

We kiss and then stand so that we can fully undress. I touch him, allowing my hands to indulge themselves in the softness and warmth of his body. I love the sounds he makes, the way his pale skin flushes beneath my fingers, how quickly he melts into my touch. It’s hard to remember now his shy face, his hesitancy, his reluctance even to kiss me. Or that there was a time I doubted that he loved me.

I want so badly to show him the very depths of my love, to reassure him that we are exactly where we are meant to be. I take my time kissing him lovingly, running my fingers through his hair, holding him in my arms as we sway on our feet almost like we are dancing.

Finally we lie down together, and once on the bed I straddle his hips. As I kiss his neck and lips and coo to him sweetly he doesn’t notice as I prepare myself for him. Not until I guide his hand to touch me and he feels the slick oil against my backside does he seem to realize my intention.

“V-victor?” he questions as I press one of his fingers inside with one of my own.

“Let me,” I whisper against his lips, my breathlessness as genuine as my aching desire for him. “Please let me.”

He breathes against my lips, soft panting sounds, and his response is to press his finger gently deeper. My eyes close and I sigh his name as together we prepare my body.

When I cannot wait any longer I sit up, looking down at him with a flushed and hooded gaze. I push up on my knees and with one hand guide him into me. Never do my eyes look away from his as I take him slowly.
It has been so long. I’d almost forgotten this glorious feeling. My legs shake as if I am some virgin boy. I pull his hand to my chest, pressing it over my heart. I want him to feel how fast it’s beating, how hard he makes it hammer. As I seat myself fully, our bodies becoming flush, his fingers curl against my skin. He gazes at me like a man enchanted, his eyes and cheeks still wet from his tears, his thick lashes sparkling.

He is so beautiful. And he is mine.

I move my hips slowly, for myself as much as for him. I want to relish this moment. This first time of having him inside me. Our first love making in this new life together.

Even though I told him I would do everything, he is soon moving with me, making me arch my back and free my voice for him. I want him to know how good it feels. How good he makes me feel. How much I love him.

But I’m not used to this anymore and the shaking of my legs grows worse. I bow down over him, planting my hands in the bedding. My genitals rub against his belly and my insides tighten at the blossom of pleasure. “Hnn!” My brows furrow and my eyes squeeze shut as I gasp in pleasure.

He touches my face, and I open my eyes again. He is looking up at me with wonder. “I never imagined that I could make you make such a face.”

I gasp a breathless laugh at that, turning my face into his touch to kiss his palm. “Of course you can. It feels that good to be so close to you. I’ve wanted to feel you like this for so long.”

“You didn’t say,” he huffs.

I smile against his palm and kiss it again before turning my face back to look into his eyes. “I wanted what made you happy even more.”

His face scrunches up with emotion and I see his lips begin to tremble. “Y-you do make me happy, Victor. Anything... any... any part of you... makes me happy... So happy, I feel like I don’t deserve it.” Tears begin to gather in his eyes again and roll down his cheeks.

I look at him almost sternly, and for a moment my hips still. “You’re wrong,” I hiss. “You deserve such happiness more than anyone I have ever known. And that I can give it to you...” My words choke off as my throat constricts, my own emotions threatening to overtake me. I close my eyes and drop my head further until our foreheads touch and I nuzzle his wet face with my nose. I swallow down the lump in my throat and manage to whisper, “Being your happiness is my greatest joy, Yuuri.”

We gather each other tightly in our arms and cling to one another as we make love almost desperately. Unexpectedly I find him rolling me onto my back, his expression fierce and intense in a way I’ve never seen before. All I can do is stare at him, dazed, as he takes the lead from me, lacing his fingers in mine and pressing my hands into the bed.

Like this we come together for the first time, but it is not the last of the night. He has a surprising amount of stamina, my beautiful Yuuri.

Later we lie together, both breathless, our limbs entangled.

“Are you feeling better?” I murmur softly and he giggles.

“Yes. I guess I was just... I mean, I have been, overwhelmed by everything. I can’t feel at ease. Nothing is familiar anymore.”
“Except for me,” I tease gently, kissing his nose.

“Except for you,” he admits, smiling softly and kissing my chin.

“So, stay close to me, and I will never leave you.”

He lifts his head to look down at me, his smile soft and sweet. I brush his sweat-damp hair back from his forehead, stroking my fingers over his ear. “I will. Wherever you are, that’s my home now. From now on... I’ll try not to be afraid.”

We gaze into each others’ eyes, and I know we are both, finally, free of our exile.

Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Early Summer 1889 - V.N.

The small boat leaves us on a pier in the harbor. It’s hotter here than I expected, and after living on Sakhalin for so long, none of us are handling the heat all that well. I want to take my shirt off, but Yuuri says that’s absolutely unacceptable. So I satisfy myself with rolling up my sleeves. Meanwhile Yuuri has long ago abandoned his formal kimono for the much lighter yukata he used to wear around the minshuku. It makes me feel a little nostalgic. He fans himself as we stand on the pier.

“Well...” he says looking around, scanning the docks and the beaches. Curious fishermen stick their heads up out of their boats and nets to stare at us. “I guess we’ll have to ask someone how we get to my family’s onsen,” he pants, squinting up into the sky. We’d left Hakata early that morning and it was just now about high noon.

“I can’t believe this place is known for hot springs. Isn’t it already hot enough here? Who wants to sit in more hot water?” Yuri grumbles, fanning himself with his hand.

Only Otabek seems more or less unperturbed by the heat. “Let’s go find someone to ask. No point standing here on the dock.”

The four of us make our way down the pier with our sparse belongings, still getting many strange looks from the sun-browned fishermen. I wonder how many foreigners they’ve seen in this town.

At the top of the pier there is an elderly man sitting on a stump that someone has rolled over. He has the thickest, whitest eyebrows I’ve ever seen. He surveys us placidly, tapping out a pipe over his gnarled knee. I wonder if he has some kind of formal occupation overseeing the harbor, or if he’s just an old man from the town who likes to sit and take in other people's business. I have a feeling it’s probably the later.

Yuuri approaches him, calling out and bowing in greeting. The old man just grunts and nods. They converse for a few moments and Yuuri shows him one of his letters from his parents, pointing out their names and the name and address of their onsen. To all of our relief the old man seems to know something; he nods to Yuuri and points to the southeast where the town starts to grow up the side of small mountain. They talk for a moment longer and then as if beleaguered by Yuuri’s questions, the old man stands, grunts and motions us to follow him.

“He says he knows someone who can take us there,” Yuuri says with a grin, though he looks flustered from the conversation.

The “someone” turns out to be a boy I would guess to be around ten years of age, and from what I can gather has a little racket taking money from visitors to lead them to the onsen. The price is one yen.
The old man seems to explain to him where we want to go, but the little boy keeps looking back at us and gawking, mouth open.

“Why is that brat staring at us so much?” Yuri mutters.

“He’s probably never seen anyone with blond hair before,” Otabek answers matter-of-factly.

Yuri doesn’t respond, but I see him roll his eyes. I smile at the boy and wiggle my fingers at him in hello, but this just seems to frighten him. He looks up at Yuuri, firing off a stream of Japanese, to which Yuuri responds by covering his mouth and trying not to laugh. Once he’s composed himself he responds, giving the boy a pat on the head.

Still looking skeptical the boy accepts his payment from Yuuri and then begins to lead the way through the seaside town. It is charming and unlike any place I have ever been. Always close at hand is the sound of the ocean and the soft calling of the gulls. It reminds me a little of St. Petersburg.

Yuuri comes to walk at my side, shifting his pack from one shoulder to the other. “What did our guide have to say that made you laugh?”

He chuckles again and looks up at me. “He wanted to be sure that I was traveling with you of my own accord and that you weren’t a group of... demons, I suppose is more or less the right word, who had kidnapped me and were forcing me to take you to my family so that you could eat them.”

I snort at that. “You’re joking.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “I’m not. I think you are the first Europeans he’s ever seen.”

“We’re going to cause a stir, aren’t we?”

He smirks as he looks up at me. “Definitely. We’re going to have to turn you into an attraction for the onsen. I’m thinking of spreading rumors about you being an exiled Russian prince.”

I laugh at that. “If you think it will help. I will be happy to play the part. I certainly have princely good looks.” I give him a haughty smile and he rolls his eyes, though he’s blushing a little.

“Well... I can’t really say you’re wrong.”

My eyes hood as I look at him. “Mmm... I can’t say I would hate being known as Yuuri’s Russian prince.”

He actually gives me a bashful look and then shakes his head before going back to taking in the town.

The little boy leads us down a road that eventually begins to wind into the mountain the old man pointed at before. The incline isn’t too steep, but my leg still begins to ache a little. Yuuri has been rubbing it for me in the evenings on our voyage south, and it is growing stronger, but it still protests now and then. A few times when I have been alone I have tried to dance. It feels stiff and awkward, but it’s getting better. Every day I stretch and every evening Yuuri massages the tight, shrunken muscles.

One day, I know I will dance again.

The little boy stops abruptly in front of a gate at the left side of the road. He points at it, calls out to us and then darts beneath it, running out of our view.
“Where’s he going?” Yuri asks irritably.

“I think to announce us,” Yuuri answers and the four of us pause at the gate. A wooden plaque is placed at the top of the entryway. “Oh. This is it.”

I glance at him and don’t miss the way his brows are furrowed or the edge of his bottom lip is stuck between his teeth. I reach out for his hand, squeezing. “Are you nervous?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yes. Nervous. Excited. Anxious. I feel a little like I’m going to throw up.”

“You’re being very dramatic, Katsuki,” Yuri grumbles. “Let’s go. I’m dying of heat and this bag is heavy.”

Otabek places a hand on Yuri’s head and ruffles his hair lightly. “Relax, Yura.”

We walk under the gate and down a short, broad path that opens up onto an inn yard. It reminds me vaguely of the minshuku, but it’s far grander, and so beautifully kept that I feel like I can’t take all of it in. The little boy is standing beside the front door, grinning, and there is a short, plump, round-faced woman in a yukata and some kind of jacket standing next to him, peering at us curiously.

Yuuri’s fingers tighten around mine.

It takes her a moment, but then she gasps in recognition. “Yuuri!”

Yuuri releases my hand and bows formally. “Okaa-sama. Tadaima”

“Yuuri! Yuuri!” she cries, rushing forward, ignoring all of us except for her son. She pushes his shoulders up and then takes his face in her hands, squishing it in delight. “Okaeri!”

Yuuri blinks at this and then smiles, emotion springing into his eyes. “Hai.”

They beam at each other for a long moment and then Yuuri reaches for my hand once more. “She says, ‘Welcome home.’”

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn’t already realize this is the end of the main story of Love in Exile. There will be a Chapter 10, but it will be an epilogue. Thank you all for reading!

Historical Notes

1. Japanese burial customs - Today in Japan something like 99% of all people are cremated after their death. However, up until the 20th century, most Japanese were buried and cremation was limited to the wealthy. This is why Yuuri’s grandparents are physically buried in the old Oodomari graveyard. Even today it is common for Japanese families to share a memorial stone. It is not necessary for a family member’s physical remains to be at that location in order to “visit” them or pray for them at the family memorial. Individuals are often represented by placing sotoba (wooden slats with names written on them) around the family stone. Traditionally family members care for the family memorial and visit at least once a year, which is why Yuuri is distressed that no one will be there to do so anymore.
2. The Soya Strait, also known as the La Perouse Strait, is the body of water between Hokkaido and Sakhalin. It connects the Japan Sea between Japan and Korea with the Sea of Okhotsk between Russia’s east coast, Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and the Kurile Islands.

3. Hakodate - In 1889 Hakodate was the largest city in Hokkaido, and the only port on Hokkaido that was open to trade with most foreign nations. It was considerably metropolitan by Japanese standards and had a number of foreigners living and working in the trade industry there. In the spring of 1889 (right when our story takes place strangely enough) Sapporo also opened its port, but only to American traders. Eventually Sapporo would become Hokkaido's capital city as well as its primary trade port. But at the time of this story Hakodate was the place to be on Hokkaido.

4. Kyushu no Hasetsu e ikimasu. Iku no hou wa nan desu ka? - This is what Victor is trying to say. It basically translates to “I’m going to Hasetsu, Kyushu. How do I get there?” It's a pretty simplistic phrase, but Victor is currently struggling with just stringing the right syllables together in the right order. Good thing he didn’t get lost.

5. Closed ports and open ports - Prior to 1853, Japan went through a long period of self-imposed isolation, even going so far as to cut off trade with all foreign nations (save a very few exceptions) In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry from the United States - under instruction from American President Fillmore - showed up at the entrance to Edo Harbor (Edo is the old name for Tokyo) and demanded to be allowed in under threat of force. This event lead to trade negotiations and the opening of two ports to American trade ships (Shimoda and Hakodate) and paved the way not only for other Western nations to negotiate trade rights, but eventually the Meiji Restoration/Revolution. Even so not all ports were open to foreign trade, and ships from foreign countries could only visit those ports which were agreed upon in their trade treaties. Closed ports accepted only domestic (Japanese) vessels.

6. Hasetsu location/geography/climate - It’s a public secret that Hasetsu in Yuri!!! on Ice is based on the actual town of Karatsu. So for the purposes of traveling there I just used Karatsu’s geographical location for the location of Hasetsu. Kysuhu’s climate is considered subtropical with summers in the 70-90s and winters rarely dropping below freezing. After living on Sakhalin, which is subarctic, you can imagine how hot it must seem there.

7. Yuuri’s exchange with his mother - Yuuri greets his mother, Katsuki Hikoro, in a very formal manner, bowing and calling her “Okaa-sama,” which is a very respectful way to say mother. I felt that Yuuri, in his uncertainty and after not having seen his family for so long, would default to a more formal, stiffer manner of speaking, than we see him adopt in the anime. “Okaa-sama. Tadaima,” is Yuuri basically saying “Mother. I’m home.” The formal response is “Okaeri nasai;” however, here Hiroko simply and happily exclaims “Okaeri!” as she takes Yuuri's face in her hands. It has the same meaning of “Welcome home” or “Welcome back” but using this informal version and not returning his bow, she has discarded the necessity for formality, expressing the closeness of family and putting him at ease. It’s an exchange with a subtle sub-context I want to try to share.
Here it is, the Epilogue, the very end of Love in Exile. And I didn't even make you wait for it that long.

First of all I just want to say thank you to everyone who has read the story, sent me a comment, left kudos, recommended this story to a friend or a rec blog, and just generally been there with me on this journey. You gave this story, a truly obscure historical AU written in first person POV (horror of horrors!) a chance, and hopefully you fell in love with it as much as you were already in love with Yuuri and Victor. Hopefully it made you fall in love with them even more.

Writing Love in Exile has been a wonderful and challenging experience for me. It has been a long time since I did any writing that I meant to share with others, and this was a really wonderful experience of getting to do so once again. I have to admit I'm pretty emotional here at the end. This fic made me new friends and gave me renewed confidence in my skills as a writer.

I also want to say a huge thank you to Tmirai, my bff and beta'er. When I was first explaining my idea for this story to her (like back in December omg) she was just kinda like "Well... you've got that crazy look in your eyes, so... you do you." I was tentative and waffling about whether or not I should even bother. But she has supported me all the way through the writing of this story; listened to me whine about plot holes and exposition; let me soundboard my ever evolving story-line; told me truthfully and honestly when my writing was shitty and I was being a lazy fuck; and never got cranky with me when I poked and badgered her to hurry up with her beta. You will never know how lucky you are that she was here, because you will never read the far shittier version of this story that would have happened without her. So thank you, bebe.

Please enjoy the epilogue. <3

Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Summer 1889 - Y.K.

Morning is my favorite time. Those quiet moments when I first wake up to find Victor beside me still asleep. Here the mornings are warm and feel peaceful in a way that is different from the minshuku. There is no irori in our room for me to stoke. No hurry to rise and prepare breakfast. I can lie in bed and just look at him.

He doesn’t usually stir until I get up and push back the screen door that looks out onto the porch and the pocket garden. Our room is small and at the back of the ryokan. It is the only room that overlooks this small garden, and very few guests come to walk in it.

I told my mother she shouldn’t put us in a guest room, but she said it was fine until they made more permanent arrangements and could move us into the family’s living area.

I crawl out from under my futon and pull on a thin yukata and my spectacles before I quietly slide
back the door, letting in the morning sunlight, the warmth of the breeze, and the smell of the garden mingling with the faint smell of sea air. A few lonely cicadas call from somewhere in the woods beyond the garden.

I kneel just inside the doorway, taking in the moment. In a way it’s not so unlike my porch at the minshuku, gazing out into the forest. But things are tame here. The breeze is gentle. The rain is warm. Nothing dark seems as if it might lurk in the trees.

I’m not sure yet if I like it or not. It is beautiful here, but it is not fierce like Sakhalin.

“Yuuri?” Victor’s voice drifts drowsily, as warm as the sun on my knees.

“Yes?” I turn my head to look back at him.

He’s looking at me, his sleepy blue eyes narrow. “Why do you always get up before me?”

“Because if I waited for you to get up first, we’d be in bed all day,” I chuckle.

He stretches and shifts, his long legs poking out of the side of his blanket. “But isn’t that nice? To spend all day in bed? What do we need to get up for? We can finally relax and just enjoy being together.”

I sigh softly and crawl back to the edge of the futon, leaning down to place a kiss on the tip of his nose. “I think we’ve just about relaxed and done nothing for long enough. We need to start making ourselves useful to my parents and my brother-in-law’s family. At least, I do.” His fingers push into the hair at the back of my neck. It makes me shiver a little. “You’re a guest, so if you want to continue to do nothing, I suppose no one will complain.” I kiss his nose again and he uses his hand to guide my face so that he can kiss my lips.

“No,” he murmurs softly. “I don’t want to be a guest. I want to be part of your family.”

His words make me flush with pleasure and I smile, placing my hand lightly on his chest. “Then we have to get up and make ourselves useful. Yuri and Otabek left several days ago now. We have no excuse to laze around.”

Victor sighs, but smiles as he steals another kiss.

Despite my words we spend the better part of the morning alone in our room.

Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Autumn 1889 - V.N.

Today’s task is to go into the village market. Though we have been here for several months, I can’t shake the feeling that my life in Hasetsu is a dream of some kind. No one in Yuuri’s family has questioned my presence or our attachment, my motivations or my past. They have just gently swept us along into their lives.

I see so much of Yuuri in his family. His mother’s kindness, his father’s good humor, his sister’s even, almost cutting intellect. I like Mari greatly. Perhaps I am biased, because other than Yuuri she is the only one I can hold a conversation with in Russian, but even if that weren’t the case I think I would still like her.

She and her husband and their children don’t live with us at the ryokan. They manage their own property further into the mountains. But she visits frequently. Mari has taught me how to smoke from
I haven’t worn western clothing in weeks. In fact I have a sneaking suspicion that Hiroko has hidden my old work clothes, or disposed of them completely. Not that I mind. Already they’ve had two yukata, two kimono, a pair of hakama, and a very warm haori tailored for me. I’m even more or less able to tie my own sash properly now.

Our sandaled feet scuff gently along the road as Yuuri and I make our way leisurely into town.

Yukkuri de. The Japanese phrase comes to mind. Taking things slowly, without hurry. That is how everyday is here. A calm routine I never imagined I could have.

We wake. We dress. We help with chores. We eat together and entertain guests. We play games and talk. We bathe in the onsen. Yuuri massages my leg. We make love and sleep and then a new day begins.

I am frequently requested as a dinner guest by those who come to the ryokan. And even though I still speak very little Japanese - save a few necessary phrases like “please” and “thank you,” “goodmorning” and “goodnight” - they seem to enjoy my company and my conversation. Yuuri is always at hand to translate, and I think he is almost as much of a curiosity as I am.

He says people like to gossip about our relationship and guess at how we came to know one another on Sakhalin. We keep the truth a secret, if only to keep people interested.

A few times I have danced, tentatively, for dinner parties. A yukata is not the most graceful garment to dance ballet in, but the guests have always been impressed regardless. The joy I feel at dancing for others again is unexpected.

It’s hard to believe that it is already well into Autumn. All around us the mountains are slowly catching on fire as the leaves change from green to red and yellow and orange. This time of year, as the colors change, is called kouyou. I am learning that the Japanese are a people who are very sensitive to the beauty of nature. It permeates their poetry, their literature, the feeling of a time of year is somehow embedded in everything around me.

There were chestnuts in my morning rice today.

Yuuri’s hand slips into mine, drawing me from my thoughts. I look at him and we smile at one another.

“What is it?” I ask as he looks at me with an almost wistful expression.

He shakes his head a little. “Nothing, really. It’s just... it’s still somehow surreal, being here with you. Seeing you walking beside me still just makes me so happy.”

I chuckle and squeeze Yuuri’s fingers. “I was also thinking life here is like a dream. A beautiful, quiet dream.”

He looks down the path, scratching the end of his nose. “You aren’t bored? I know it’s not exactly exciting here.”

I laugh. “I think I have had enough excitement in my life for now. I’m quite content with a comfortable, quiet life.” I squeeze his hand once more. “With you.”

He doesn’t look at me again, but I can see the pleased flush on his cheeks.
The road passes into town and now there are other people here and there on the street. They sweep leaves away from their doorways or walk back and forth to the market. There is always a mixture of reactions from people when they see me. Some stare with outright curiosity. Others seem almost afraid and quickly look away, or try to look extra busy, or quickly go back into their houses. Some stare with open hostility, hands on hips, or arms crossed, jaws set in disapproval at my un-Japanese existence in their quaint Japanese village.

I have been told many times not to mind such people, that they simply can’t accept that things are changing, and want to continue to pretend to live in the isolated world of the past.

No matter how I am greeted by the people of Hasetsu, my greeting to them is always the same. A smile, the slight bow of my head, and then--

“Konnichiwa!” I call to a middle aged woman who is staring at us from her garden. I can’t help but wave.

She blinks in surprise and then replies hesitantly. “Ko...konnichiwa...”

 Beside me Yuuri nods to her politely as we continue down the road. After we pass the little house he chuckles. “I feel like you take some pleasure in surprising and scandalizing the villagers.”

I chuckle. “What a terrible thing to accuse me of! I only want to be friendly so that they grow accustomed to me.”

He looks up at me with a fond smile. “I don’t know that anyone can ever truly become accustomed to you, Victor. I don’t think you are quite like anyone else in the whole world.”

My gaze softens and I smile teasingly. “Yuuri. You’ve become quite the flatterer.”

He colors and splutters a little. “N-no! It’s not flattery! I’ve... I’ve always thought that about you. Even before I knew you. I thought... that there couldn’t be anyone else in the whole world that looked like you.” I chuckle, and he scratches his nose again. “Now that we’re in Japan, you’ve probably realized how incredibly ordinary I am in comparison to other Japanese people.”

I frown. “I don’t think you are ordinary in any way, Yuuri.”

He glances at me with a tentative smile. “Well... I’m glad you don’t think so.”

I watch him for a moment. “You know, it’s strange to think that it’s been a full year since my accident. Since you first began to look after me.”

Yuuri glances up, his expression a little surprised. “I... I guess it has.” He laughs wryly. “Somehow it seems... both more recent and so much longer ago than that.”

I nod. “I know what you mean. Everything has gone by so fast. A year ago I could never have imagined this is where I would be, and yet... it’s like it was almost another life altogether.”

“It was,” he says softly.

Before we go into the market we have to walk over a long bridge. We pause in the middle just to take in the sight of the ocean on one side and the bright, rioting colors of the mountains behind us. A faintly cool breeze blows in off the water and I pull Yuuri closer to me. A man fishing from the bridge watches us out of the corner of his eye.

A mischievous thought comes into my head and before I can stop myself I pull Yuuri into a kiss. At
first he melts, as he always does, but almost immediately he stiffens and jerks away.

“Victor!” he gasps, aghast, his face bright red, his eyes wide and scandalized. The fisherman’s expression is utterly magical, and almost as comical as Yuuri’s. I laugh aloud and wink at him before trotting away from my mortified lover.

“I know what everyone will be talking about at dinner tomorrow!” I sing-song over my shoulder, laughing as he begins to chase after me.

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*Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Winter 1890 - Y.K.*

It’s been snowing for several days now. It’s not the heavy, relentless snow of Sakhalin. It doesn’t fill up the woods and the garden and cover the roof the same way. It falls slowly in light flakes, leaving a soft white covering that makes the world look empty and clean.

We sit under an *oki-gotatsu* in the main hall of the *ryokan* sipping *amazake* and playing cards. There are fewer visitors in the winter, and many of our evenings are leisurely without banquets or parties to attend to.

My mother has opened the sliding doors to the porch that overlooks the main garden so that we can enjoy the snowy evening. We’ve lit lamps on the porch so that we can watch the snowfall.

“Have I mentioned how glad I am there are *oki-gotatsu* here?” Victor says with a dreamy sigh, leaning his elbows on the table top.

I chuckle. “Yes. On several occasions.”

“I admit leaving Sakhalin I was afraid I might never enjoy one again. I’m so glad they are not only found in the north.”

“No sleep,” my mother says, gently tapping Victor’s arm and waggling her finger at him.

He sighs. “What is this ridiculous rule about no sleeping under the *oki-gotatsu*? I used to sleep under one all the time at the *minshuku*.”

“Yes, well you were an invalid at the time, and I was deathly afraid you were going to freeze to death.” I chuckle. “Besides, for a lot of the winter there wasn’t much else for you to do other than sleep.”

Victor sighs as my mother repeats, “No sleep, Viku-chan.”

He prop his chin in his hand and smiles lazily. “*Hai hai, Okaa-sama.*”

She giggles, pleased whenever Victor attempts to speak Japanese or calls her “mother.” “*Taberu?*” she asks him, patting her stomach to illustrate her meaning. She speaks to him like a toddler. I find it very amusing.

Victor doesn’t seem to mind. He smiles and sits up, nodding. “*Hai. Hara hetta.*” He also responds like a toddler, patting his own stomach.

My mother is pleased by his response and gets up to go to the kitchen to prepare something to eat. I can’t help but chuckle.

“Why are you snickering?” he asks, looking at me ruefully.
“I’m not,” I say even as I continue to laugh.

“You are!”

I shake my head. “No, I’m just... it’s amusing to watch you two together. That’s all.” I smile at him. “It makes me happy.”

Victor props his chin back in his hand. “It makes me happy, too. My mother was not at all like Hiroko-san. She had nannies and tutors to tend to me. She was always far more concerned with herself. But your mother isn’t like that. She’s kind and sweet and doting. I think she is very happy to have you here. She must have missed you when you were so far away.”

My fingers brush his leg under the blanket. “She’s happy you are here too, Vitya.”

He looks at me and leans toward me a little. “She is happy that I am here, because you are happy that I am here.” I flush a little, leaning closer. His words and the soft tone of his voice still have the power to utterly thrill me. “And I think she is happy we are both here so that she has someone to cook for,” he says with a chuckle. “Especially you.”

His hand move to my leg under the oki-gotatsu and I feel him squeeze my thigh and then my hip. “You’re becoming a bit softer.”

I blink at that. “W-what?”

Victor grins. “Just what I said. You’re not as wiry as you used to be, eating nothing but rice and dried fish and miso soup, and handling everything around the minshuku by yourself. It’s quite enjoyable, having something soft to touch when I hold you.”

I can feel my face turning bright red. “O-oh...” is all that I manage to say. Our faces are very close now and it feels like his fingers are groping around, trying to get inside my kimono. “Victor.” I try to sound terse as I grasp his hand, pulling it away from my lap, but even to my ears it sounds breathy.

He grins at me and leans even closer, his lips now next to my ear. “What else aren’t we supposed to do under the oki-gotatsu?”

My head swoons a little as a hot thrill rolls up my spine. His voice is intoxicating. We are in the main hall, and even though we are currently alone, I know guests might come at any time. I ought to discourage him. But when I open my mouth all that comes out is a lover’s sigh as his lips touch my neck and his hand returns to my thigh.

“Ara ara!” my mother’s voice breaks Victor’s spell, and I jump, banging one of my knees on the underside of the table. I look up to see her carrying a tray of tea and sweets towards us. She gives Victor the reproachful kind of look one gives a child who has been caught doing something naughty. “Dame.”

To my surprise Victor is actually blushing and looks a little chagrined. “Gomen ne, Okaa-san,” he says with a sheepish smile. “Yuuri ga kawaii-sugi no.”

“Victor!” I’m mortified.

My mother begins to laugh, trying to cover it with her hand. “Yes, yes. So cute, Yuuri. Very cute.”

“Okaa-san! Waranai de kudasai! Hazukashii.” I protest, and glare at Victor.

Now he’s laughing, too. “Don’t be angry with me. I’m sorry, Yuuri. You know I can’t help myself.
You really are too cute.”

“Cute and soft apparently.” I grumble.

“Yes, both cute and soft, my Yuuri.” He’s grinning at me, and his eyes are bright with mirth, but also affection. He draws my hand out from under the oki-gotatsu, kissing it with a smile.

I huff and look away from him, towards the garden, which is still quietly, softly filling up with snow. Despite my current embarrassment it gives me a strong sense of nostalgia.

I think the snow will always remind me of falling in love.

_Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Spring 1890, V.N._

“Victor?”

I open my eyes at the sound of my name. Above me is the most unimaginably beautiful tapestry of pink petals. The air is sweet with the faint, delicate fragrance of _sakura_. Spring has come in a sudden burst of color and warm breezes.

“How did I know I would find you here?”

I turn my head, pushing up on my hands from where I’ve slumped over against the cherry tree’s trunk. I look up to see Yuuri walking toward me from the other side of the garden, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

“You’re going to catch a cold sleeping out here. It’s not warm enough yet.”

“It’s so beautiful, I can’t help it. Come and wrap your arms around me so that I can warm up,” I say with a grin. He just shakes his head with a soft laugh, and comes to sit beside me.

“I have something for you.” He smiles and I see his hands twitch inside his sleeves. “Well, two things, actually.”

My brows raise and I sit up a little straighter. “Now I am intrigued.”

From one sleeve he produces a small bottle of _sake_, two small cups cradled in the palm of his hand. “Viewing _sakura_ requires _sake_ if you want to do it properly.”

“Oooh. How very Japanese,” I say with a grin. “What is the other present?”

He smiles gently and pulls two envelopes from his other sleeve. “We’ve finally had some mail come in. You know I can’t read Russian very well, but I think this one is from Yuri and this one—” He hands the envelopes to me one at a time. “—your parents?” He looks at me for confirmation, but my eyes are still focused on the letter.

It is indeed from my parents. I had written them in the fall and never received any response. A lag in delivery was to be expected, but it had been six months. I’d told myself not to expect anything and written off my old ties with Russia in my mind. But in my heart I had still hoped...

I trace the tip of one finger over their names and address, lingering on St. Petersburg.

“Ah, yes. It is from my parents.”
“Yappari,” he says softly, dropping his head against my shoulder.

I smile at him and shift to put my arms around his shoulders, pulling him close. He settles in further against me, his head coming to rest against my chest and shoulder, his hand on my stomach. “Will you read them to me?”

I twist my lips a little and then kiss the top of his head. “The one from Yuri, certainly. The one from my parents...” I hesitate. “I would like to read alone first. If you don’t mind.”

He squeezes his arm around me. “Of course not. I understand.”

“For all I know they have written to completely disown me. And that would be rather embarrassing to read aloud,” I say, trying to make light of the matter.

He chuckles. “I thought you’d probably been disowned already at this point.”

“Well... not officially.” I smile and tuck the letter from my parents into my sleeve and then open the one from Yuri, unfolding the rough paper carefully. A couple of pressed flowers fall out into my lap. One is a brilliant orange. Another a soft pink. The last a bright blue. I pick them up in my hand and hold them in my palm for Yuuri to see.

**Dear Victor (and probably also Katsuki),**

I hope you got the letter I sent from Shanghai. I know I haven’t written in a while, but paper is hard to come by and we haven’t stayed in any ports for very long. First I’ll tell you that I’m fine, because I know you are probably worrying all the time. Otabek is also fine. We are both a little sunburned, though.

Since Shanghai we have been working on a merchant ship that sails around the East Indies and to India and back to China. The seas here are so blue. It’s not like the ocean around Sakhalin. It’s beautiful, and the weather is good most of the time. I’ve seen jungles and elephants and market places completely made up of boats. Sometimes I wish you could see all of these things with me. Maybe one day, when Otabek has his own ship, you will.

I wish I had bothered to let you teach me more languages. Nobody anywhere speaks Russian, except probably people who live in Russia. But Otabek picks up languages pretty quickly. It’s really impressive. He is so capable that sometimes I feel kind of stupid beside him. I’m lucky he is here with me.

I wonder if either of you still miss Sakhalin. I have to say I don’t miss it at all. It was so cold all the time and so dreary. Seeing so many other places, having sunshine every day, and being able to swim in the ocean made me realize just what a pointless and shitty place it was. It seems like a place God could have just done without making. The rest of the world, even Hasetsu, is so much more beautiful. So I hope you aren’t still sad about leaving. It doesn’t deserve for you to be sad about it.

We’re going to be in port for almost a full week, so the crew gets some leave. Otabek and I heard there is an ancient palace or a temple or something in the jungle outside the city here. We want to go and see it. I wish I was artistic or could afford a camera. I want to show you all these places. But the best I can do is send you some flowers I pressed in the cargo ledger. There are so many flowers, Vitya. In colors I didn’t know flowers could be.

I don’t really know what else to write. I’m fine, like I said. I do miss you. It’s still strange I don’t have you to talk to. Sometimes I even dream about the minshuku. Tell Katsuki that now that I’ve eaten a lot of strange foreign foods, that his salty shit soup is not the worst thing I have ever had to
eat. I hope that you are both taking care of each other since I’m not there.

I don’t know when we will come back to visit. Maybe after a few more sailings in a year or so. I will bring you presents when we come. And Katsuki too.

Love your little brother,

Yuri P.

As I read the letter I can envision Yuratchka doing all of these things. Walking through jungles and mysterious foreign markets. Swimming in crystal blue water with Otabek. Smiling always. It makes me happy and sad all at once, and I miss him terribly. My throat grows tight with emotion, and by the end my words are croaking a little.

Yuuri’s arm tightens around me and he lifts his head to tuck his face against my neck, kissing me softly. “Vitya,” he murmurs.

I rest my face against his cool hair and sigh softly. “Reading his words makes me feel lonely, even though I have no reason to be.”

Yuuri sits up and looks me in the eyes. “Of course you feel lonely. You miss him. You were together for such a long time, and you gave so much of yourself to raise and protect him.” He cups my face in one hand and touches his nose to mine. “It’s ok to feel lonely and to miss him.”

“I’m not unhappy, though,” I say, wanting to confirm these feelings to him.

“I know. I’m happy, too, even though I still sometimes miss my old home.” He chuckles. “Even if Yuri doesn’t think it’s worthy of such feelings.”

I kiss him softly and then sit back against the tree. “Let’s have a drink to the places and people we miss.”

“Alright.” He pours us each a small cup of sake, handing mine to me as he holds his up. “Kampai.”

“Kampai,” I echo with a smile. The sake is warm, and as always unexpectedly strong at the end. But it feels good settling in my belly.

Yuuri shifts and lies down beside me, resting his head in my lap. It seems an uncharacteristically intimate gesture for him while we are sitting somewhere that is technically within public view of the ryokan. But I am not going to complain. I stroke my fingers through his dark hair.

“Your Japanese is coming along,” he says after a moment. “Your pronunciation is vastly improved.”

I chuckle. “Well it does help to hear it spoken all the time. Maybe I would learn even faster if you stopped talking to me in Russian.”

He looks up at me with raised eyebrows. “Oh? Do you want to try?” he smiles, teasingly.

I tap my lips thoughtfully. “Mmmm... perhaps not all the time. But for an hour or two a day, it might not be a bad idea.”

“I won’t talk to you like a baby like my mother does.”

I laugh. “I wouldn’t expect you to baby me.”

“Well, we can try it. It isn’t good for you to have to rely on me to communicate properly.”
“No, but it does mean that you have to always be by my side. And I certainly don’t mind that aspect of it.” My nails lightly scratch his scalp as I stroke his hair.

His face colors just a little. “I can still always be by your side.”

I smile softly. “I know.”

We sit quietly like this for a while, my fingers in Yuuri’s hair, and I am reminded of how he used to do this same thing for me. When I was tired and in pain he would take my head in his lap and gently soothe me with his fingers in my hair, talking to me softly, reading me poetry, or telling me a story. More than the laudanum or the herbal remedies of the physician at Kusun-Kotan, Yuuri’s touch and voice was what made so many of my nights bearable.

I don’t notice, but my fingers still in his hair as I reminisce, my gaze distant. A light breeze moves through the cherry tree’s branches, making petals gently fall around us.

Yuuri turns his face upwards to look at me, and he must see that I have gone somewhere else. A tiny crease forms between his brows. “Victor? Is everything alright?”

His voice draws me back into the present and I look down at him. Two pink sakura petals have fallen into his hair. He is so beautiful, so caring, so full of life and the love he has given to me. I smile at him tenderly.

“Yes, my love. Everything is perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Yukkuri de - this phrase simply means to “take your time” or to do something “in a leisurely manner.” For me this phrase contains a very Japanese sentiment of not having to hurry things and that it’s alright to move at your own pace. I imagine that Hiroko probably encourages both Yuuri and Victor to ‘yukkuri de’ as they settle in and adjust to their new life in Hasetsu.

2. Konnichiwa - Is the greeting used during the day time. It is equivalent to “good day” in English (though in English that phrase seems very old fashioned). Other greetings include: “ohayou gozaimasu” (or simply “ohayou” or alternatively “ohyou-san” depending on your dialect) which is equivalent to “good morning”; “konbanwa” which is equivalent to “good evening”; and “oyasumi nasai” or “oyasumi” to say “good night, though as in English this is reserved for when you are actually going to bed.

3. No sleeping under the kotatsu (oki-gotatsu) - This is a one of those inexplicable rules of life in Japan frequently enforced by Japanese mothers. There are various reasons given about why you should not sleep under a kotatsu, though the one most often quoted is that you’ll catch a cold.

4. Victor and Hikoro’s first Japanese exchange - I think the context makes it pretty obvious what they are saying to one another, but just for the sake of clarity: Hiroko: Taberu? (Eat?) Victor: Hai. Hara hetta. (Yes. I’m hungry.)
What’s amusing about this exchange is how simplistic Hiroko’s question is (literally just the un-conjugated verb for “eat” with a question intonation, not even an actual “ka”) and how crude and/or childish “hara hetta” is. Most adults would not use this expression unless they were among very close friends and also maybe being real bros about it. So the only reason Victor would know this phrase is if Hiroko taught it to him, because she can’t help but talk to him like a little kid. This is why Yuuri thinks they speak like toddlers and is so amused by it.

5. Victor and Hiroko’s second exchange:
Hiroko: Ara ara! Dame. (Hey now! That’s bad.)
Victor: Gomen ne, Okaa-san. Yuuri ga kawaii-sugi no. (Sorry, mom. It’s just that Yuuri is too cute.)

The word “dame” literally means “bad,” but using the word by itself can have a bit of a more complex meaning. It can be interpreted closer to “that’s not allowed” or “that’s not ok” or even “that’s naughty” depending on the context. One word, so versatile. So Hiroko’s light chastisement might be less literally translated to something like “Hey now! Don’t be naughty,” which might retain a bit more of the feeling of her actual meaning.

6. Okaa-san! Waranai de kudasai! Hazukashii. - “Mom! Don’t laugh, please! That’s/It’s embarrassing.”

7. Yappari - it means something along the lines of “as I thought” or “so that’s how it is afterall”

8. The East Indies - The East Indies are the lands of South and Southeast Asia. In a more restricted sense, the East Indies can be used to refer to the islands of Southeast Asia, especially the Malay Archipelago.

9. Kampai - Japanese toast when drinking. Like the English “cheers!”
Part 11: Mirai e - Yuuri & Victor

Chapter Notes

So I really hadn't intended to write anything else about Love in Exile. Then last week on my YOI/fanfic tumblr blog I opened up drabble prompts in celebration of a follower milestone. I'm not sure what I thought people were going to submit as prompts, but I wasn't expecting the majority of prompts to be for more scenes related to LIE. (Maybe that was a stupid over site on my part lol) That result was that I don't know how to write an actual "drabble" so I just ended up doing a shit ton more research and created a collection of 5 scenes that chronologically follow the end of Chapter 10/the Epilogue. In fact they tell the story of what I had already imagined Victor and Yuuri's future to be, but had more or less intended to keep to myself.

In the end I thought it was a shame not to share them with the larger readership of LIE, as I know a lot of people don't follow the blog. And maybe everyone wants to know what's going to happen in 2 years, 5 years, 10 years, 20 years... So I decided to clean the "drabbles" up and properly put them together into a kind of "Extras" chapter, a look into the further future of Victor and Yuuri and also Yuri and Otabek in the world of LIE. Which is what "Mirai e" means: Into the Future.

So I hope you enjoy this unexpected extra dose of Love in Exile, and the a glimpse into the future of our favorite former Russian ballet-dancer-turned-exile-turned-fugitive and the formerly-lonely-Japanese-boy-from-Sakhalin who loves him. (And also an unexpected cameo from another of the YOI cast :o )

Lots of love and thanks to icecreamandcoffee, peachypotpourri, caffeinewineo, sheepskeleton, and gardeninglifegoals for sending me the prompts so that I could write this additional LIE material.

If this still isn't enough for you and you are still sad that LIE is over and you haven't checked out my new fic "Stranger Than Fiction" then I urge you to do so. It's very different from LIE, but I think you will like it. ~_^

Follow me on tumblr and twitter!
http://martymusesloveinexile.tumblr.com
@martymuses

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Summer 1890 - V.N.

I love dancing when I know Yuuri is watching me. Even when it is for the entertainment of guests at the onsen I imagine it is for him.

Over the past year my leg has become strong and my movements fluid and effortless. Like my body has remembering something or finally shaken off a heavy sleep. I like to practice in our room, the doors open to the porch, no music but what I hear in my mind. I wear work clothes, because they are fitted and I can freely move my legs.
If I am lucky he comes to watch me. Like today.

“Like what you see?” I ask, pausing to look over my shoulder.

He is standing in the doorway, a wistful expression on his face. “I still don’t know how you can move like that. You look like you’re floating.”

I laugh softly and then turn around, reaching out my hands towards him and beckoning. “I could show you. Maybe you could learn to float as well.”

He snorts and color comes to his cheeks. “I don’t think so.”

“Yuuri! Come on. Come dance with me.”

He glances over his shoulder and then steps fully into the room, sliding the door shut behind him. “Victor, I don’t know anything about dancing...”

“I’ll show you. Just a few things. You’re already in your work clothes.”

His footsteps are light on the tatami. “Should I take my socks off?” he asks a little sardonically. I always prefer to dance in my bare feet.

“Only if you want to,” I respond, my hand still extended. I wiggle my fingers, signaling that I want his hand in mine.

After a moment of hesitation he obliges. I pull him close, placing his hand on my shoulder before I slide mine to the small of his back. I grin as I look into his eyes and waggle my brows. “This isn’t ballet, but this is one way two people can dance together.”

“Yes,” he says a little breathlessly, his eyes going crossed as he tries to look at me so close up. “I saw people dance like this at the Consulate parties.”

“Ah. Then you should know that when I step forward,” I step forward, nudging his foot to step back, “you step back.” I move us in a half turn to the side and then step back, pulling him along with me. “And when I step back, you step forward. I lead, you follow.”

He steps on my foot. “Sorry!”

I chuckle. “It’s fine. We’ll just practice like this. I step, you step. Forward, back. To the side. Turning a little.”

He’s stiff and awkward at first, but I’m genuinely surprised how quickly he falls into a smooth and easy waltz with me. We make simple boxes around the room. One, two, three... one, two, three... one, two, three...

In my head I hear Blue Danube and I begin to hum it softly. His brows rise and he chuckles at me. “What’s that song?”

“A popular waltz. I’ve danced ballet to it as well.”

I twirl us around and then dip him without warning. His hand tightens in mine and he makes a croaking sound. I hold him like that, looking into his eyes, which are wide behind his spectacles. His back bows quite nicely under my hand. “You’re quite flexible, Yuuri.”

“This is how people dance in Europe? I’m almost on the floor.”
I laugh and pull him upright. “There are many ways to dance. But, yes, this is one.”

He takes a step back. “Do you miss it a lot?”

My expression softens. “Of course. I used to dance at parties all the time.”

He smirks. “Sounds exhausting.”

I laugh. “It was! But I was young. I never tired of it. But even more than the dancing I miss the music. I would love to take you to a symphony some day.” I reach for his hand again and pull him back into a dancing position. We resume our slow waltz.

“The only Western music I’ve ever heard was on the ariston at the Consulate. The one Bely presented the very first day we met.”

“The music was terrible,” I say with a chuckle, but my gaze is soft. “But it was a very good day. The first day I met Yuuri. You were so stiff. Yet I thought you looked exotic standing there in your Japanese clothes when everyone else was in suits and uniforms.”

“Me? Exotic?” he snorts. “Compared to you in your red and gold dance costume? Hardly.”

I laugh and wrap both of my arms around him, forfeiting our waltz in favor of just swaying back and forth with him close to me. “Mmm... I suppose we have different definitions of exotic.”

His arms circle my neck. We sway and I start to hum again, this time something softer. His fingers find their way into my hair and mine explore beneath the hem of his work shirt, touching the warm, bare skin of his back.

He shivers. I kiss him. And neither of us return to our chores for several hours.

**Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Early Winter 1890 - V.N.**

“Shou-chan, put that down!”

The sound of small feet followed by large feet on the tatami behind the sliding door makes me raise an eyebrow.

Mari and I exchange a glance and simultaneously take lazy drags on our pipes. The feet go by again and she grins, letting her smoky breath out in a white stream from the corner of her mouth. I let mine out more slowly through my nose, letting the smoke hang in the crisp air.

There is a light hoarfrost covering every leaf and stone of the garden. I tuck my feet a bit more snugly under the quilted blanket over my lap. She pulls her haori a bit tighter around herself. We cock our heads, listening to what is happening beyond the screen.

“Shou-chan! Listen to Oji-chan when he talks to you. Come here, and give that to me. I’m not chasing you for fun! That’s dangerous.”

There is a squealing laugh and the drum of little feet intensifies as they hurry past the door again. Yuuri’s steps follow.

“Oji-chaaan?” A tiny, muffled voice joins the cacophony of footsteps.

“What is it? I’m trying to catch your brother. When did you get up from your nap?”
“Oji-chan, peepee.”

“You have to go peepee, or-” there is banging sound and then a sudden, dolorous wailing. “Shou-chan, I told you stop running around! See, I told you you’d get hurt!”

Mari’s eyebrow quirks upwards, but she doesn’t get up. She takes another drag. “It’s strangely cathartic listening to someone else deal with my children.”

I chuckle, smoke escaping between my teeth as I exhale. “Are you sure it’s alright to leave them alone with Yuuri?”

She grins. “He sounds like he’s doing about as well as I usually do.”

The door slides back with a bang. “Hora! You think I can’t hear you two sitting out here doing nothing?”

I crane my neck back to look at Yuuri. He stands in the doorway, his hair messy, his glasses slightly askew, Shoutarou under his arm wailing. He glares at me and then takes one step forward, just enough to deposit Shoutarou into my lap.

“Here. Calm him down. He almost poked his own eyes out running around with hashi.”

Shoutarou looks at me and starts screaming even louder. Even at close to two years of age he still cries almost every time he sees me. “Why give him to me?” I protest. “He cries just from looking at me.”

Mari chuckles. “Don’t feel too bad, Victor. He does that to his own father. It’s not personal.”

I give her a skeptical look and try to soothe Shoutarou even as he squirms in my lap. Mikuko, rubbing sleep from her eyes and looking quite demure appears behind Yuuri’s legs, gently grasping the fabric of his yukata. “Oji-chan, peepee,” she repeats, looking up at Yuuri.

Yuuri looks at Mari expectantly. “Your daughter needs to use the toilet.”

“She’s telling you about it, not me,” Mari drawls, languidly exhaling a puff of smoke.

They stare at each other in that way only siblings can stare at each other. Finally Mari sighs and gives in, grunting as she stands and stretches. “Ugh, this cold is making me stiff.” She holds out her hand to her daughter. “Come on, Miku-chan. Kaa-chan will take you.”

The little girl glances up at Yuuri for a moment and then reaches out to take her mother’s hand. “Ok.” They step back inside and slide the door shut behind them.

Yuuri sits down next to me in a huff, pulling the blanket over his lap. Shoutarou has given up on wailing at the top of his lungs and just makes unhappy sounds as he weakly struggles against the unfairness of life, ending up draped forlornly over both or our thighs as I pull the blanket up around him.

“I think somebody is tired,” I say.

“Nooo...” Shoutarou wails softly in response.

“Well, somebody didn’t want to take a nap. Somebody wanted to run around with hashi and bang into the oki-gotatsu,” Yuuri says with a sigh, reaching down to smooth his nephew’s hair back from his forehead where there is a noticeable red bump.
I chuckle softly as I look at Yuuri. It’s been a year and a half since we came to Hasetsu. It’s hard to believe our third winter together is already well under way. My Japanese is good enough now that I can carry on a conversation. Some of the nuances still evade me, but I get by without offending anyone most of the time.

When alone Yuuri and I still speak primarily in Russian. More for sentimental reasons than anything else, I suspect. I still love to hear his voice speaking my language in his soft, faint accent. And I love to whisper sweet words in his ear I know no one else can understand.

Since it’s winter and there are few guests, Mari has been visiting with her children more frequently. It makes things lively, but neither Yuuri nor I have any experience with children so young. Though I personally think Yuuri is very good with them. And seeing him with Mikuko, who in my opinion resembles her uncle very strongly, fills me with a kind of melancholy sweetness.

I watch him idly stroke Shoutarou’s head as the little boy fights a losing battle with sleep. “Do you regret that we won’t have children?” I ask the question before I realize I’m asking it.

Yuuri looks startled and stares at me for a moment. “I... never really thought about it. I can’t say I ever really wanted children.”

“Oh,” I frown softly. “You seem very good with them.”

He lifts his brows. “What about you?”

I shrug. “I raised Yuri. I think I am alright with just that. Living in katorga I never planned to get married or have children. It seemed unfair.”

Yuuri chuckles and tips his head against my shoulders. I take another drag on my pipe. “Well, then it seems like we’re both content with things just the way they are. I love Miku-chan and Shou-chan, but eventually they leave with Mari. I think I like it that way.”

I grin as I exhale. “That’s good. I would hate to think I have robbed you of something you wanted.”

He lifts his head and looks me in the eyes. “Victor. You have given me everything I have ever wanted.”

I flush in spite of myself and when our lips touch, I find that the thrill of kissing him is as strong as the day I made him that first promise.

**Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Spring 1892 - Y.K.**

It’s been more than two years since the last time I saw Yuri, and I can’t stop staring at him. He’s no longer the pale, wiry youth I knew on Sakhalin. He is now a tall young man just a few centimeters shy of Victor’s height. His skin is brown from the sun and his face has a dusting of freckles that were apparently too pale to notice before. His hair is so bleached from sun and salt water that it’s nearly as pale as Victor’s, though it maintains a yellower hue. The green color of his eyes is vivid against his tanned skin.

But what is most startling of all is not Yuri’s tanned skin or his bleached hair or even his new height and much stronger build. It is his smile.

Before it was so rarely seen, and usually shared only with Victor and then later Otabek. Now he smiles at everyone. He smiles at my mother, at my father, at the guests who goggle at him openly. He
even smiles at me.

Otabek, strangely enough, looks much the same. A bit darker from the sun, but otherwise just as I remember him. Solid, steely eyed, composed. He’s shorter than Yuri now.

They arrived early in the afternoon, and after Victor was able to compose himself and stop fussing over Yuri - and after my mother installed them both in yukata - we sat down to dinner. I noticed, but didn’t remark upon the fact that Yuri didn’t turn his nose up at anything, and I wondered what kind of food he’d been eating in the East Indies.

Now, after dinner, we sit in the main hall, catching up as Yuri and Otabek tell us about their adventures. It’s strange, but it makes me happy to speak Russian again. I notice that Yuri keeps glancing towards the main entry until finally there is a commotion and he rises.

“It must finally be here,” he says with a grin. “Beka, come help me!”

Otabek smiles wryly and gets up. “Excuse me. We’ll be right back.”

Victor and I exchange a curious glance and then look after them towards the entry. After a moment Yuri and Otabek reappear now carrying a chest between them.

“I can’t believe it took those fisherman all day to bring this up here. After we paid them and everything,” Yuri grumbles, setting the chest down in front of us.

Victor blinks at it and then looks at his little brother. “What is this?”

“It’s all the shit we got for you from exotic ports!” Yuri grins. “That box is from China. The guy trying to sell it to me claimed it used to belong to an Emperor or something. I’m pretty sure he was lying, but I thought it was pretty anyway and I haggled him down to a good price.”

The chest is made from a beautiful orangey-red wood, with faded panels of decorative painting, mostly scenery. It’s adorned with brass fittings and a delicate lock on the front. I reach out to touch it, running my fingers over the glossy wood.

“Yuri,” I say after a moment. “This is beautiful.”

He sits down next to Victor, who is also intently studying the box, and grins. “Good. We had to haul it all the way back from Shanghai. What a pain in the ass.”

Victor touches the lock and it springs open. Without hesitation he opens the lid, which creaks gently as the brass hinges open. Inside is a treasure trove of foreign odds and ends.

Firstly the entire box is lined in red silk, probably enough to make a kimono, or at least the lining of one. There are boxes of spices, shells from far away beaches, little statues of local deities, a small ivory puzzle ball, silver jewelry, a bizarre mask, two wooden cows, a brightly colored woven tapestry, a string of copper bells, and more. At the very bottom is a wonderful Indian Buddha cast in what is probably bronze sitting on a lotus flower.

As we pull the items out one by one, Yuri tells us where it came from, what country, what port, what strange things and people he saw there. Otabek chimes in once in awhile, but for the most part he sits quietly, watching us unpack the trunk full of magnificent oddities one by one with a placid expression on his face.

At last, when the trunk is empty, and everything is laid out on the tatami around us, Victor looks at his little brother. “Yuri, you didn’t have to bring all of this back for us. It must have cost a lot of
money.”

Yuri shrugs. “We make good money on the ships. And it’s not so bad if you know how to haggle. Besides, it’s not like it’s just for you. Bekka and I can’t really keep a lot of stuff with us. So this way... someday I’ll be able to look back and remember everything, too.”

Victor turns the intricately carved puzzle ball over in his palm. “I’m a little jealous,” he says after moment, his voice quiet. “All the things you’ve seen. All the places you’ve been. It must be wonderful.”

Yuri shifts, looking a little uncomfortable. “I wanted to share it with you. Even though you couldn’t be there. That’s why every time I thought of you I found something I thought you’d like.”

Victor smiles softly and I feel a little pang in my chest. Does he ever regret choosing the calm life we have now rather than one of adventure like Yuri? If we hadn’t come to Hasetsu, where would we be?

Later that night, after we’ve gone to bed, and the trunk sits in the corner of our room, repacked with its treasures, I lie awake on the futon next to Victor. I can tell from the sound of his breathing that he hasn’t fallen asleep yet either.

“Victor?” I say softly in the darkness.

He turns his face towards me and I turn mine towards him. I can barely make out his features, even though he’s so close. “I know when we first came here you said you didn’t mind how quiet life was. Do you... still feel that way? Or do you wish we’d gone somewhere more exciting, like Yuri and Otabek?”

He’s quiet for a moment and then rolls towards me onto his side. He cups my face with one hand and kisses me. “Why do you always worry about silly things?”

“It’s not silly!” I protest. “I... I want you to be happy.”

“And I have told you over and over again, that I am happy wherever we are together.”

I touch his chest, pressing my hand over the place I can feel his heartbeat. “I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

He touches his lips to mine. Not really in a full kiss, but just so that I can feel him smiling. “And I have none,” he whispers against my mouth, “and enough red silk to wrap you up in.”

I snort softly. “And why would you want to wrap me up in red silk?”

His smile broadens against my lips. “So I can have the pleasure of unwrapping you, of course.”

Hasetsu, Kyushu Japan, Autumn 1902 - V.N.

I watch Yuuri out of the corner of my eye. His brows are furrowed behind his spectacles and his lips purse as he reads today’s edition of the Asahi Shimbun. Well. Here in Hasetsu “today’s edition” is really more like a few days ago’s edition. But it’s new to us.

I calmly eat my rice. The door to the porch is open and a warm, gentle morning breeze comes in off of the garden. It’s been nearly six years now since we built our own small house at the edge of his
parents’ property. In many ways it resembles the minshuku back on Sakhalin. Though I’m not sure if this is a coincidence of a convenient design or something we did subconsciously.

Yuuri makes a sound of disgust and then puts the newspaper down on the table in an unhappy rustle of paper. He slams it with the flat of his hand and then stands, running his fingers through his hair. He paces away from the table.

I wonder if I ought to start hiding the newspapers. Lately whatever Yuuri reads only seems to upset him. I wait a few moments before asking, “Bad news?”

He lets out a whooshing sigh and turns towards me. His face is pulled together in a tight look of anxiety. “It’s nothing but bad news. Russia is still entrenched in Manchuria, and this article I just read is only fanning the flames of Japanese fanaticism. Saying it’s obvious encroachment on our interests on the continent and a staging point for an invasion of the Korean Peninsula. And then pointing fingers at Germany for encouraging Russia’s expansion into Asia.”

“I can’t say any of that sounds particularly surprising. It’s all just political bickering. You shouldn’t let it get you so worked up. Germany has been egging Russia on for ages.”

He walks back to the table and sits down with a sigh. “It said something about a diplomatic delegation being arranged for next summer, but what is the likelihood of any European country taking Japan’s demands seriously?”

I frown softly and reach over to squeeze his shoulder. “Yuuri, I think you are worrying about all of this far too much. What happens on the continent is not really going to affect us much here. The war with China was more than five years ago, and we were already too old to be conscripted then.” I chuckle. “And we hardly even noticed it was going on.”

He looks at me for a long moment and then purses his lips. “Victor, we’re not talking about another war with China. We’re talking about war between Japan and Russia. If you think something like that isn’t going to affect us, you’re putting your head in the sand.”

“You’re worrying too much,” I say soothingly.

“You’re Russian!” he says hotly. “Everyone in Hasetsu knows you’re Russian. All of the officials in the prefecture know you’re Russian. Do you honestly think no one is going to care about that if we go to war with Russia? You could be arrested or... deported! You could be sent back to Russia where you will be shot for escaping katorga.”

My brows raise and I blink at him slowly. “Yuuri... I think you’re catastrophizing.”

He makes a sound of frustration, grabbing the newspaper he knows I can’t read and throwing it at me before he stands up again, this time stalking out onto the porch.

I take a deep breath and then carefully fold the paper before standing and going after him. He doesn’t turn around. He just stands there with his arms stuffed into the sleeves of his yukata, staring out at the garden. I put my hands on his hips and pull him back so that I can wrap my arms around him.

“Don’t,” he says between grit teeth, “tell me that I’m worrying too much. Even if war breaks out and they don’t come haul you away, the fact that we’re fluent in Russian and Japanese is going to land one or both of us in mandatory service to the government.”

I take a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s assume you aren’t worrying too much. What do we do about it? We can’t stop Russia and Japan from going to war if that’s what they want to do. So what do we do, Yuuri?”
He’s quiet for longer than makes me comfortable. Then he finally says, “We leave. We leave Japan.”

His words startle me so much that I laugh. “And go where?”

He pulls away and turns around to face me. “Somewhere no one cares about what’s happening in Asia.” His expression is twisted and almost frantic. I realized just how serious he is, and how frightened.

“You,” I gently grasp his arms. “Do you really want to leave Hasetsu? Our home that we built together? Your family? Our family? Just on the off chance Russia and Japan might go to war sometime after next summer?”

He looks up at me and swallows. “Of course that’s not what I want. But I would die if something happened to you, because we didn’t act when we still had time.” His fingers circle around my wrists. “You don’t... you don’t know how hateful my countrymen can be. Everything is insulated here in Hasetsu, but a war with Russia could blow everything open for us. I’m not exaggerating when I say you could be arrested just for being Russian or forced to leave Japan or that I could be forced into government service.” He looks into my eyes. “The thought of having to flee again, of going through that fear and uncertainty. I don’t know if I could do it again. That’s why we should leave before it gets to that point.”

I stare at him and slowly shake my head. “Yuuri, you already gave up your home for me once-”

“You are my home! Wherever we’re together, that’s where we’re happy. Remember?” He grasps the front of my yukata with his hands. “If nothing happens we can always come back. But if we lose the chance to leave before war breaks out we will regret it, Victor. I know it.”

I let his words sink into me for a moment. “But still... where would we go?”

He swallows. “America. Yuri agrees. I wrote to him a few months ago. He and Otabek have been considering starting a business there. Trade is good, the ports are busy, especially in the northwest because of the gold rush in Canada. And there are immigrants from all over the world there. We wouldn’t stick out. We could just... blend in and...” His face grows paler as he talks. “The f-four of us... w-we’re also family, right? S-so...”

Tears begin to fall from his eyes and I feel his heart slowly breaking just talking about it.

I wrap my arms around him and pull him to me, pressing his face into my shoulder. “Yuuri, my love... shhh.” I rock him a little, pressing my face into his hair. My fingers massage the back of his neck. These are all little things I have learned to gently soothe him. I feel him trembling.

“There is no war today and there will not be a war tomorrow. We still have time. This... this is a big decision, Yuuri. And one I didn’t even know you had been thinking about.”

“I know,” he croaks.

“Why did you shoulder this all on your own for so long? You know I can’t read the newspaper. How am I supposed to know what’s happening if you don’t tell me?”

He takes a shuddering breath and lifts his head to look at me. His eyes are red and I gently remove his spectacles. “I didn’t want it to be real. Not sharing it with you made it less real.”

“And you made yourself sick with worrying about it. From now on, we both worry about it, and we decide together what to do when the time comes.” I give him as stern a look as I can muster. “And I can’t believe you even went and wrote to Yuri about it. The two of you plotting our future without
me.” I shake my head and tsk.

His brows relax a little and he smirks, sniffling. “Well... he knows a lot more about what’s going on in the world than we do. America... he made it sound like it could be a good thing. He and Otabek finally have their own ship now. They can set up business anywhere.” He smiles weakly. “We could finally have that adventure.”

I smirk. “Aren’t we a bit old for adventure now?”

“You’re not even 40 yet,” he snorts. “And you haven’t aged at all since we met. You look exactly the same now as you did thirteen years ago.”

I smile wryly and cup his cheek. “You are just seeing me through the tint of love. I have crows feet.” I kiss his forehead and then his nose. “Can we finish breakfast now and worry about the future later?”

He takes a deep breath and nods, then slips his hand into mine and leads me back into our home.

_Nihonmachi, Seattle, Washington State U.S.A., Late Summer 1906 - Y.K._

I hurry along Jackson Street, sighing in relief to be back in Nihonmachi. The signs give way from the stark, bold outlines of English letters to the familiar, comforting, flowing silhouettes of kana and kanji. I won’t have to fumble through another awkward conversation in English until the next time I go to the big market at Pike’s Place.

I could have made Victor go with me. Considering how heavy the bags I’m now carrying are, I probably should have. But I hate leaving the hotel without one of us there. Not that I don’t trust our few employees, but... Maybe I should have made one of them go to the market with me. Not that their English is generally much better than mine.

“Katsooki-san!”

I wince, gritting my teeth. I keep walking, hoping that maybe if I ignore the man calling my name he will go away.

“Hey! Katsooki-san! Wait up!”

I sigh. I know he’s chasing after me, so I pause, stepping under an awning so as not to be standing in the middle of the sidewalk. “Mr. Leeroy.” I pronounce his name incorrectly on purpose.

“It’s Leroy,” he corrects me with smile. I knew he would.

And it’s Katsuki, I think to myself.

I look at him with a kind of doe-eyed expression of mild expectation and confusion. It’s a look that I’ve mastered since coming to Seattle just over three years ago. It’s the immigrant’s ‘I have no idea what you’re saying, but I’m sure it’s interesting,’ expression. Usually it signals to someone that conversation is pointless and leads them to give up on any kind of verbal communication.

Or course it doesn’t work on Mr. Leroy.

“Anyway, I’m glad I ran into you. I was just on my way to the St. Petersburg looking for Plisetski-”

I hold up my hand and shake my head. “Mr. Leroy. No English.”
“Oh that’s right.” He laughs and grins. “Too bad you don’t speak French.”

In all honesty my English comprehension is pretty good. It’s the speaking part I still struggle with. I wonder what French has to do with anything. We stand looking at each other for a moment.

Jean Jacque “JJ” Leroy is something of a local celebrity. Well, perhaps celebrity is too strong of a word. More like a person of infamous interest.

Originally from French Canada he struck it rich in the Klondike in 1897. Prior to that he’d been a fishman, a dog musher, a cowboy... You name it and he’d probably tried it. Today he runs a number of business in Seattle. A mercantile shop, a saloon and card house, and an outfitting company that runs men and supplies to and from the still booming gold fields of Alaska. As long as gold fever continues in the “Great White North” it seems that Seattle will continue to prosper off the madness of other men.

When our staring contest has obviously gone on too long, and neither of us have given any ground, I sigh and beckon him to follow after me.

By the time we reach the hotel my arms are aching. At least Mr. Leroy holds the door open for me as I step into the foyer.

“Irashaimase...” Victor’s voice is distracted and I know before I look at the front desk that he’s not actually paying attention to the door. He looks up from the novel he’s reading and his eyes light up when he sees me. “Oh. Anata .”

There is a tittering to my left and out of the corner of my eye I see one of our clearing girls covering her mouth with her hand. We briefly make eye contact and she scurries into the cleaning closet.

I sigh, speaking in Japanese. “You know, every time you call me ‘anata’ you make yourself sound like my wife.”

He smiles at me and replies. “What could be better than being Yuuri’s wife?”

I shake my head and can’t help the chuckle that escapes my lips. Then I gesture broadly to Mr. Leroy who has followed me into the foyer. “Please deal with him.”

“Hm?” Victor’s gaze shifts and he blinks as if only just then realizing the other man is there. “Oh! Mr. Leroy. What do I owe for this pleasure?”

“Heya, Niki!”

Leroy he has never called Victor by his first name or even Mr. Nikiforov, but always “Niki.” And I believe that since the first time they were introduced, he has earnestly thought this is Victor’s nickname. Just as he is ‘Jean Jacque “JJ” Leroy,’ I’m fairly certain that he thinks Victor is ‘Victor “Niki” Forov.’

To his credit Victor has never corrected him, and in evidence of his own density, Mr. Leroy has never seemed to notice that no one else calls him “Niki.”

They walk towards each other to shake hands in the middle of the foyer. I should take my parcels to the kitchen, but I want to know what Leroy wants.

“Is your brother around?”

“Yuri? No.” Victor shakes his head. “He is working. Probably at the harbor.”
“Ah, right. What about... uh... Atlin?”

“Altin.”

“Yeah. You know there’s a town up north called Atlin. Had a big gold boom there a few years back.”

“His name is Altin.”

“Right. Anyway, he here?”

“No. He is also with Yuri working.” Victor smiles at Leroy, that bland, neutral, patient smile he reserves for bothersome customers. It strikes me as a very Japanese expression.

Mr. Leroy makes a tsking sound. “Shucks. I was just down there. Nobody’d seen ‘em. Figured they’d be up here.”

“They’re not.”

They just look at each other for a long moment. Victor still smiling that bland smile. Leroy looking like he’s hoping Victor will give something away.

“Ah... well anyway. You let ‘em know I’m lookin’ to hire them to take some cargo up to Nome. Live cargo. Horses,” he says the word like it’s very exciting. He holds up his hand as if he expects protest, although Victor has not indicated he intends to say anything. “Now I know that means outfitting the cargo hold with stalls and whatever else. But I’m willing to pay for the trouble. Good money. You tell him that, Niki. Good money.”

Victor smiles and nods. “I will tell him. Thank you, Mr. Leroy.”

“You know they’re crazy for horses up there. When I was in the Klondike-”

“Mr. Leroy,” Victor cuts him off. “I need to help Yuuri and get back to work.”

“Oh. Uh... right.” He hesitates. “Say, uh... is your back room open today?”

Victor’s smile becomes less bland and more earnest, his eyes grow a little sharper. “Only weekends, Mr. Leroy. Come back Friday. Bring your friends. Use the sentou.”

“Haha, I just might!” He grins and grabs Victor’s hand again. “And I’ve told you a hundred times. Call me JJ. Good to see you Niki! Don’t forget. Tell Plisetski and... uh... his buddy about my proposition.”

“I will. See you on Friday!” Victor sees Leroy to the door and waves him down the street. Then he comes back to me, snickering. “Americans.”

“He’s Canadian,” I say, handing him a few of the parcels. He leans in to place a kiss on my forehead.

“I think that only makes it worse.”

We take the parcels down the hallway to the kitchen where we prepare meals for the guests who pay for them and also for ourselves. Yuri and Otabek are already there, making preparations for dinner. The St. Petersburg Hotel is the only place in all of Seattle where you can get really authentic pirozhki, and the fact that it’s in the middle of Nihonmachi has never seemed to surprise anyone.
“You owe me,” Victor says in Russian. Russian is always the language spoken in the kitchen.

Yuri looks up. “What for?”

“You were almost accosted by JJ Leroy,” Victor grins and waggles his eyebrows.

Yuri groans. “I hate that guy. He’s a kulak.”

“He’s not a kulak. You can’t just call everyone you don’t like a kulak. He’s not that bad,” Otabek says mildly, wiping his floury hands on his apron.

Yuri just gives him a look and then crosses his arms, looking at Victor. “What did he want?”

“He wants to hire your ship and crew to take horses to Alaska. Good money, he said.”

Yuri narrows his eyes. “Where in Alaska?”

“Nome.”

“Shit, he’s crazy! That’s like I might as well sail all the fucking way back to Russia. I could take a day trip to Kamchatka from there. And who the fuck wants to go to Nome? Fucking Alaska. Might as well be Russia.” He throws up his hands and savagely goes back to chopping onions.

“What kind of money was he talking about?” Otabek asks once Yuri is done ranting.

Victor helps me unpack the bags from the market, putting things on the shelves or in cold storage. He shrugs. “He didn’t give me any details, and honestly I didn’t want to keep talking to him about it. You know how he can go on and on. But he said he would pay for the modifications to the hold for the horses. He’ll probably come to play poker on Friday.”

Otabek nods and starts kneading the mound of dough on the counter in front of him. “I’ll talk to him then. Easier to negotiate with a man who’s had a few drinks.”

“You’re not fucking seriously considering barging horses to Nome for JJ Leroy,” Yuri grumbles. “Are you?”

Otabek shrugs, the motion almost lost in the rhythm of his kneading. “Why not. We’re only doing small business now. It’s been a long a time since we’ve gone anywhere interesting.”

Yuri sighs and mutters, “Fucking Alaska. I hate being cold.”

The two continue to bicker, but I know in the end Otabek will get his way. That means Victor and I will need to advertise for a cook for a few months. Business figures start going around in my head as I put up the last of the dry goods.

“You’re very quiet,” Victor’s voice is close to my ear.

“Oh,” I startle a little. “Sorry. I’m just tired. You know I...” I take a deep breath and lower my voice, not really wanting the other two to overhear our conversation. “You know I don’t really like leaving Nihonmachi.”

“Your English is not as bad as you think it is,” he says kindly, stroking my cheek.

“It’s not just about the language.” I glance at Otabek and Yuri and then take Victor’s hand, leading him out of the kitchen. “I’m just... still not used to the city. I don’t know that I ever will be. Nihonmachi itself already feels bigger than any town I’ve lived in. And it’s just a tiny pocket inside
this huge foreign city.”

“It’s not a foreign city, Yuuri. We live here now.”

I blink at that, unsure for a moment what to say or how I feel about that statement. Finally I just say, “I know. And I know you like the city. That it reminds of when you were young.”

“Well... Seattle’s not exactly St. Petersburg, but it’s a lot closer than Korsakovsk.”

I twist my lips into a wry smile. “Or Hasetsu.”

He takes a deep breath and pauses. I turn to face him. “We can go back, Yuuri. The war is over now. Japan won. It even won Sakhalin back.” He takes my face in his hands. “We could go back to Hasetsu. We could even go all the way back to where we started. You know that, right? If that’s what you wanted, you know that I would give it to you in a heartbeat or faster. Right?”

I look into his eyes. I think about his words, about what they mean, about going back to Sakhalin, which is now, once again, Karafuto. I think about us aging together in a quiet room beneath an oki-gotatsu as the snow gently buries us alive. I think about an abandoned graveyard where my grandparents rest, about the sea seen from the bluffs, and mist filling up the forest beyond the porch. Of nabe and tea and making love to the sound of rainfall on the thatched roof.

Then I think about our life in Seattle. The three years we’ve spent here, the hotel we opened together, the sentou in the basement that’s become a gathering place for Nihonmachi. About Victor’s “backroom,” and pirozhki and loud, friendly Americans and the hard working, grateful laborers and immigrants who stay at the St. Petersburg. It’s a strange, busy, hodgepodge of a life we have now.

It’s not like any life I ever thought I’d be living. And sometimes I feel like, at 41, I’m well past the age where I can adjust to so much change. And yet, when I think about it, when I think about leaving, I realize I don’t hate this life.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, pushing up on my toes a little so that our foreheads touch. “I know. And maybe, someday, that’s exactly what I’ll want. But for right now...” I open my eyes and gaze at him. Amazed that his eyes are still as unbelievably blue as the day we met. That he has not faded in any way in nearly two decades. “I’m happy. In this life. With you.”

He chuckles and kisses me softly. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Notes:

1. Blue Danube Waltz - One of the more well known waltzes out there. If you plug it into YouTube chances are you will probably recognize it. Composed by Johann Strauss II and first performed in 1867.

2. Hashi - the Japanese word for "chop sticks." Hashi are considered an instrument that should be treated with respect and care, not run around with so you can almost poke your eyes out. (Lookin’ at you Shou-chan.)

3. Oji-chan - a cute a familiar way to say "uncle." Oji can also be used in a broader application when referring to a male who is older than you, but not SUPER old. Older
than an "onii" (brother) but younger than an "ojii" (grandpa).

4. Asahi Shimbun - one of the oldest and longest running newspapers in Japan. The Asahi Shimbun has been in circulation since 1879.

5. Victor can't read the newspaper - In case you are wondering why Victor can't read the newspaper, it's because newspapers in Japan generally have very high kanji reading levels. While at this point Victor's Japanese is fluent, he is probably not able to read a lot of kanji. Living in a place like Hasetsu there's probably not really any reason for him to have taken the time and effort to memorize thousands of kanji characters. Though I'm sure he knows some common kanji and the two kana syllabaries (hiragana and katakana).

6. The Sino-Japanese War - The "war with China" that Victor references was called the "Sino-Japanese" war, which took place in 1894-95. The war was fought primarily over influence in the Korean Peninsula, and was a resounding victory for Japan. It was the first time in modern Asian history that influence and power shifted away from China in favor of Japan, and it demonstrated the gap between the countries in their efforts to modernize. The civil unrest within China that resulted by this defeat would eventually lead to the overthrow of China's last imperial dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China.

7. The Russo-Japanese War - The war with Russia that is brewing as Yuuri reads the newspaper is the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. Tensions between Russia and Japan had been growing steadily since the end of the Sino-Japanese. Both countries participated in ending the Boxer Rebellion in 1899-1901, an uprising in China that attempted to oust foreign (primarily Christian) influences. In response the "Eight-Nation Alliance" was formed by several major European countries and Japan in order to end the rebellion and protect their mutual interests in China. After the rebellion was quashed each country agreed to leave a force in Manchuria for a set amount of time so as to protect again future uprisings. However, Russia - now eyeing both Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula for itself - just kind of decided it wasn't going to leave and only further entrenched itself in the Asian continent. Japan saw this as a direct threat to it's sovereignty in Korea, and meanwhile many European powers (including the Kaiser of Germany) were encouraging Russia, because they preferred to have a European (read white and Christian) power controlling Asia than an Asian one (Japan currently being the only contender after defeating China). Japan attempted to negotiate an agreement that basically said they wouldn't bother Russia in Manchuria if Russia wouldn't bother them in Korea, but Russia was like "No, we want EVERYTHING!" So they went to war and Russia was soundly beaten by the Japanese, which was a huge blow not only to Russia but also to European ego. Similar to what happened in China, the unrest and civil uproar caused by the defeat at the hands of the Japanese pushed Russia further down the path that would eventually lead to the Russian Revolution and the founding of the USSR.

8. Nihonmachi - Literally means "Japan town" and was what the Japanese neighborhood of Seattle was called up until WWII. Today the area that was known as Nihonmachi still exists, but is part of what is now called Seattle's "International District."

9. St. Petersburg Hotel - Victor and Yuuri's hotel is based off an an actual historic landmark in Nihonmachi, the Panama Hotel. It was a "worker's" hotel, almost more like a boarding house, but had the unique feature of housing a full Japanese sentou (a public
bath) in its basement. It was one of only four sentou operating in Nihonmachi, and is the only intact sentou remaining in the US today (though it is not currently operational). The sentou were very important to the residents of Nihonmachi as many of them did not have private bathrooms in their homes, and they became something like community gathering places to meet friends and catch up on gossip.

10. Gold rushes - The gold rushes occurring in Canada and Alaska in the late 19th and early 20th century fueled an entire industry in the Pacific Northwest of the US, especially Seattle, outfitting and transporting those crazy enough to go north looking for gold.

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