Blackbird
by sixpences

Summary

The year is 1942, and Europe is at war. Captain Victor Nikiforov, an intelligence operative for the NKVD, has been trapped in Berlin by the German invasion of the USSR. Posing as a Nazi industrialist, his days are spent charming information out of Axis diplomats to try and keep the Red Army fighting another day.

Yuuri Katsuki, a foreign-educated bureaucrat in the Japanese Embassy, has secrets of his own concealed beneath his unremarkable demeanour. When he uncovers Victor’s real identity, it will alter the course of both of their lives forever.

Notes

While I am striving for historical accuracy as much as possible in writing this story, I am not an expert on the events of World War II or the early years of the Cold War, and there is a
limit to the information that can be gleansed with no academic resources at my disposal besides Google. I have also taken conscious historical liberties at times, because this is a fanfic.

There is no avoiding the fact that this is a story about fascism, and about totalitarianism in other forms. This is also a story about resistance, resilience, duty, hope and love, which always abide through them.

With many thanks to Izilen for providing useful details and for reassuring me that this first chapter didn't suck.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Berlin, Part One

The whole world is looking to you as a force capable of destroying the brigand hordes of German invaders. The enslaved peoples of Europe under the yoke of the German invaders are looking to you as their liberators. A great mission of liberation has fallen to your lot.

Be worthy of this mission! The war you are waging is a war of liberation, a just war. Let the heroic images of our great ancestors inspire you in this war! Let the victorious banner of the great Lenin fly over your heads!

- Joseph Stalin, November 1941

Stefan Rittberger was tall, muscular, with the ash-blond hair and blue eyes of the ideal Aryan man. He was a business owner and an industrialist, supporting the well-oiled German war machine and strengthening the ties of industry amongst the Axis nations. He was an eligible young bachelor, planning to choose his wife and begin a family once the victory of the Reich was assured. He was a proud member of the NSDAP, passionately committed to nationalism and the advance of the German people.

Stefan Rittberger was the mask that Victor Nikiforov wore every day, and neither the Russian nor German language had enough words for how much Victor despised him.

It was January 1942, a bitterly cold and snowy evening, but in the Italian Ambassador's second reception room at the beautiful new embassy building on Hohenzollernstrasse it was perfectly warm. Victor sipped cautiously at his glass of wine, observing the room. It was mostly Italian embassy personnel that night, a smattering of Germans, a few of the Hungarians. Crispino himself wasn't around, but his son was more than making up for his absence, keeping the wine flowing. Quite a lot of it was flowing into his mouth. Heavy drinking was supposed to be unbecoming of the virile, healthy new Italian male, but then fascists were always hypocrites as well as liars.

Victor wished he could stop thinking about Leningrad. Most of what was printed in the German papers was a complete fabrication and a slur on the brave character of the Soviet people, of course, but even with their forces beaten back from Moscow the Nazis were still camped around his home city like filthy wolves, starving its children, despoiling its beauty. He had no doubt that the Germans were doing all they could to destroy the city before they were inevitably driven out.

"You seem very deep in thought, Herr Rittberger."

He blinked, and looked down to his right. "Ah, good evening Signorina Crispino. I was contemplating things much too dull for one of your delightful parties." He smiled at her as charmingly as he could. "How are you?"

The young Italian woman at his side sighed deeply. "Just looking at another night to be spent sobering up my brother. He never drank this much at home."

"Oh, I hope he is not unhappy here in Berlin? You always speak so well of the city yourself."

"He's quite happy, just a degenerate." Sara Crispino could never quite seem to hide the emotion in her voice, which was one of the reasons Victor liked her. The fascists made a terrible waste out of passionate, clever women, and she was much cleverer than most of the men around her seemed to realise. "I think my father is still hoping that the strong morals of you German men will be a good
influence on him."

"I am sure the Führer would be delighted to hear that Ambassador Crispino thinks so highly of the German people." Of course he would. Victor had, thankfully, never met the man, but it was obvious what a self-important, bourgeois peacock he was. Sometimes just living in Berlin felt like being crushed under Hitler's gargantuan ego.

"Well if Mickey keeps drinking he might change his mind." Sara gave him a little wink, and then her voice went quieter. "By the way, if you're still interested in Macchi production I may have something for you."

"You are so kind, Signorina." She was both the best and worst kind of informant, slipping bits and pieces to a man she thought was a greedy German industrialist just because she was bored and wanted to prove something to herself. If Victor was another kind of man he'd surely have taken her to bed just to solidify things; in all probability she was still expecting him to one of these days. She would be waiting a long time. He would do many unsavoury things for the Soviet people, for the cause of international socialism, but he thought that they should all be things he could at least be convincing at.

"Stefan, so good to see you!" Victor felt a big hand clasp his shoulder as Elemérer Terták came alongside him, nose already red and his breath heavy with wine. "And the lovely lady too." Sara gave him a smile that was only slightly murderous. For as long as Terták had been stationed in Berlin he really ought to have known her name. "It was you who was interested in our Hungarian railway network, wasn't it, Stefan?"

"Oh, certainly." Few subjects could possibly have been as crushingly boring, but indulging the man in his strange hobbies and obsessions had yielded some excellent information in the past. "Perhaps one day I will have the pleasure of travelling on them."

"With a fine young wife, eh?" Terták patted Victor's back and leaned around to leer at Sara.

"I am so sorry, gentlemen, please excuse me," she said, declining to look at Terták but holding Victor's gaze for just a fraction too long before turning and heading for the door. Victor glanced at the clock on the mantlepiece. He'd need to wait a few minutes.

"Ahh, she plays so hard to get," Terták said sadly. "You haven't asked Crispino for her, have you?"

"Oh Elemér, you know I am much too young to be marrying myself off just yet." He turned on another charming smile. "Besides, the Signorina is beautiful but it would be wrong of me not to take a German wife, for the strength of the people."

"Ahh, you party men. All the more for me, eh?" Terták turned to take another glass of wine from a passing waiter; Victor took another small sip from his own. Crispino might be a fascist and a brute but even he would hardly pawn off his daughter to a Hungarian drunk who didn't even know her name.

"Elemér! Stefan! Buonosera!" Michele Crispino staggered as he approached them, grabbing at Terták's shoulder for support and causing them both to wobble. "So good for us all to celebrate in this unholy German weather, eh?"

They shouldn't have much to celebrate, unless the boy was drinking on behalf of his Japanese compatriots across the street, but Victor nodded and raised his glass. He might be trapped in this hellhole but he could at least toast Comrade Stalin and the brave people of Moscow in the privacy of his own head. The Crispino boy was also an excellent distraction for Terták, allowing Victor to slip
quietly out of the door that Sara had vanished through earlier.

The hallways of the embassy were no less lavish, lined with thick, textured wallpaper and hung with paintings. The ambassador seemed to be enamoured with a particularly ugly style of art, all lines and hard angles and muddy colours. Some of the pictures might be intended to represent something, but who could even discern what? It was probably best not to dwell too long on the motivations of any artists approved by the PNF.

He followed the corridors where the lamps were lit, eventually stopping outside a room with light spilling out under the door. He knocked once, then twice in quick succession, before pushing it open.

"Herr Rittberger."

"Signorina Crispino." She was sat imperiously in a high-backed chair behind a desk, leaning forward with her fingers steepled over a manila envelope that lay between her elbows. The light came from the desk lamp, which threw bold shadows over her face. Her dramatic flair was something Victor couldn't help but admire. He stood opposite her and picked up the envelope, letting the papers inside spill out over the desk; maps, manufacturing reports, deployment schedules for a new line of Italian fighter planes and the orders already placed for several by the Luftwaffe.

"It's not much," she said apologetically, "but it seemed interesting." Victor took his microdot camera out of his trouser pocket and began photographing the documents. Sara watched him impassively, until he was about halfway through, when she said, "You're planning to invade us, aren't you?"

Victor took a split second to compose himself before looking up at her. "I beg your pardon, Signorina?"

"Once you beat the Russians. That's what you want this for, isn't it? One day Hitler's going to come over the Alps like Hannibal and besiege Milan just like he has Leningrad, only without this accursed winter in the way."

Victor returned to photographing the papers. "You seem remarkably calm about such a horrible prospect for your great nation."

She laughed, but there wasn't any humour to it. "What's the difference between one fascist and another? At least if we were at war, Papa would be recalled and we would go home. I miss Florence, and Rome too. Berlin is your home, you don't know what it's like."

He thought of gulls calling, the sea wind, long, bright summer nights. "I can't imagine."

"Or maybe the Russians will beat you, and then it will be them at our gates. You know that they let women serve in the Red Army? Papa says it just shows how wicked communism is, that they have truly abandoned God."

"You have many morbid thoughts for such a lovely young woman." He finished the last page and slipped the tiny camera back into his pocket before gathering up the papers and beginning to sort them back into their original order.

"Do you really think me lovely?" Sara leaned forward across the desk again, contemplating Victor now. "You know, I think you were the only man in that room tonight who has never tried to proposition me."

He really didn't want to know if she included her brother in that. "A man can appreciate beauty and still have no wish to possess it," he said. It was probably the most honest thing he'd ever said to her.
"A most diplomatic reply, Herr Rittberger." When Victor handed the envelope back to her, the expression on Sara's face was almost fond.

"I strive to be diplomatic in all things." He winked at her, and she rolled her eyes.

"I am sure you will excuse me for not seeing you out," she said, rising from the chair and switching off the lamp, leaving them both shrouded in gloom. He smiled and nodded as she opened the door.

"Until next time, Signorina."

When he walked out to his car the snow had stopped falling and the moon had emerged from amidst the clouds, strange silver light reflecting off the drifts along the pavements. Victor had known winters colder than this, but none so bitter.

The Landwehr Canal was still completely frozen over. Yuuri's front tire skidded slightly as he turned off the main road onto the path through the Tiergarten that ran along the canal banks, and he shifted in his saddle to stay upright. With his glasses tucked away in his coat pocket the freezing cold air made his eyes water, and he squinted into the distance to watch for anyone coming in the other direction. He felt heartened, at least, that even the Germans were hampered by just how bad this winter was, and that he didn't look too much like a soft foreigner in his heavy coat and with a long wool scarf wrapped around his face. His hands on the handlebars were starting to ache with the cold.

In Hasetsu he had often resented the drawn-out humidity of the summer, how it made you want to do nothing but lie down in the coolest spot in the house and wait for nightfall, but right then he would have given almost anything to be at home, sweating through his jinbei. On the frozen surface of the canal a group of geese paced angrily back and forth, as if they had been personally betrayed somehow by the weather. At least the park looked beautiful in the snow, the branches of hundreds of bare trees delicately outlined in white as if by some artist's brush, criss-crossing each other and reaching into the pale clouds.

It was going to be a quiet day. The Colonel was still on that tour of German armament factories that he had declined to drag Yuuri out on, and the Ambassador would be at one of those lengthy Foreign Office meetings for most of the day. There was plenty of paperwork that Yuuri could catch up on, perhaps enough to extend his hours in the cosy, heated office rather than return home too early to his considerably less cosy rooms. Then again, the last time he had cycled home through the Tiergarten late at night he'd had to swerve to avoid a fox and almost broken his ankle when his bicycle went over in the snow. If he had to die in Berlin, he would rather it not be of exposure in a public park.

The path gave way to a broader street, cobblestones making the whole frame of his bicycle rattle. Yuuri pulled his scarf back up over his nose.

He dismounted after turning the corner onto Hohenzollernstrasse, and bowed politely to Iwamoto-san at the embassy gate as he wheeled his bicycle through. The poor man was wearing enough layers of clothing to appear twice his actual size. Across the street the Italian embassy looked like something out of a story, the soft pink of the plasterwork seeming much brighter than usual under the building's heavy blanket of snow.

Yuuri had thought it would be wonderful, once, to travel the world, to live in beautiful foreign cities, to have sights such as this become his everyday.

The fireplace in the embassy lobby was banked high and giving off a delicious amount of heat, and Yuuri closed his eyes happily as he peeled off his gloves and began to unwind his scarf. In the corridor behind him he heard voices approaching, speaking in German.
"So sorry that you have travelled in this weather for nothing, Herr Rittberger." The Ambassador's second secretary usually reserved that ingratiating tone for superior colleagues.

"No, no, Higuchi-san, today I have learned an important lesson about using my telephone when it snows! Please do pass on my warmest greetings to the Ambassador." And that was a voice he recognised, and really wished that he didn't.

Yuuri opened his eyes just as Higuchi-san emerged into the lobby alongside the tall German man. When Stefan Rittberger's gaze fell on Yuuri it was like a physical touch and he almost flinched at it.

"Ahh, Katsuki-san, you have not been frozen in your bed then." Before Yuuri could bow Rittberger clasped his still-cold hand in a firm handshake, and it would have been unthinkably rude not to look up and meet his eyes. "I trust that Colonel Nakamura is well?"

"Yes, the last we spoke." He worried that if he looked at Rittberger too long, his suspicions would show on his face. There was something about the man that just wasn't quite right, beyond his hair so pale it was practically silver and his manner much more familiar than any other Nazi Yuuri had ever met; something in the way that he looked at Yuuri specifically just a little too long, made his handshakes and touches a little too firm. He had been puzzling over the matter since he had first met Rittberger nearly a year and a half ago.

If it had been 1937 again, a lazy autumn in Oxford and not a freezing winter in Berlin, Yuuri would have been more than a little put out to have not been invited for a late night rendezvous in the man's bedroom by now. And had it been Oxford, and Rittberger some cavalier son of the British upper classes, he probably would have said yes. But although he doubted that the Nazis had been as effective at purging German homosexuals as they claimed, he couldn't imagine why a respected member of the NSDAP would be silently propositioning a Japanese bureaucrat of all possible men, or why he would persist when Yuuri had made every effort not to respond to him.

Perhaps he needed to be more circumspect. There were too many secrets to keep here, and not all of them his own.

"I am afraid I must go to my office now," he said quickly, hoping that both men mistook his flush for a residue of the cold as he pulled his hand back and bowed. "Herr Rittberger, Higuchi-san. Good morning."

The house would have seemed very sparse to a visitor, had Victor ever had any. As it was, it suited him just fine. He had a sitting room with a chair, a bookcase and a writing desk, a bedroom with a bed to sleep in, and the basic accoutrements of a kitchen for the days he didn't take his meals at the restaurant on the street corner. Stefan Rittberger might wear fancy suits and drive a Steyr, but behind closed doors there was no need for Victor Nikiforov to live as if he was any better than the workers of Germany.

He stared at the page of his book, barely registering the words. There was very little edifying reading material to be obtained in Berlin, without taking unnecessary risks to get hold of banned books, but his hopes that poetry would be at least bearable were being thoroughly dashed against the rocks of Agnes Miegel's simpering verses about the glories of birthing German children. At least she didn't seem prone to indulge in the kind of awful Jew-hating most other Nazi-approved German writers were churning out. That disgusting book of Gottfried Benn's had made excellent tinder.

Victor had thought about becoming a poet, as a child- not as a sole occupation, of course, but as another way to uplift the Soviet people. It was like music, or dance, a way to open up everyday things and see the beauty inside of them. Perhaps, once the war was over, he might try to write again.
Battles might be glorious, but putting the country back together once the Nazis were driven out would be a long and cruel labour.

He didn't like to let himself think for more than a moment about what would happen if the Nazis were not driven out—about what fate would befall him, almost entirely alone in a hostile city. It was down to him and comrades all over Germany to guarantee victory for socialism.

He sighed and set the book down, finally giving up on Miegel. The next time he visited the bookshop he would have to look for something very old, perhaps some dull novel about being an even duller farmer in former Prussia or something like that, with no talk of blood and fatherlands. He stood up from the chair and, hands in his pockets, walked over to the fireplace. On the mantelpiece was a small, framed photograph, the only truly personal possession he had brought with him. It was a picture of his mother, seated in the front room of their family home in Leningrad, smiling into the camera. The photo was blurry but his memories of that moment were so strong that it didn't matter; he could smell the woodpolish-and-smoke scent of the room, hear the sound of her laughter.

They could still be alive, his mother and father both. He didn't know for certain. Everyone he had known at home, everyone he grew up with, was a fighter, tough and strong and dedicated, from old Pyotr next door, who had lost his hand fighting the Tsarists, right down to tiny, ferocious Yura, who made working at the bakery for his grandfather seem like a military mission.

It was only because of his mother that he could be there at all, that he could make his own stand against the Germans from far behind enemy lines. More than thirty years ago she had left behind a life of wealth and comfort here in Germany to join his father in the socialist struggle. She had brought him up to speak German as well as Russian, in anticipation of a future where the boundaries between their nations would be dissolved. And she had left her affairs here in enough of a tangle that it was not too difficult for someone else to slip into the Rittberger family name and to take up their finances. The first rule of espionage was always that the best lies were mostly true. Victor picked up the photograph, let the light reflect off the glass and obscure it. People always told him he looked just like his mother, with her pale hair and her eyes like the summer sea.

"For you, Mama," he murmured, kissing the glass before setting it down again, slipping his hands back into his pockets and glancing at the desk. He had made a drop earlier in the week, but he hadn't had a face-to-face meeting with Major Feltsman since the end of November, nearly two and a half months ago now. The man lived like the ghost of a vagrant, moving from city to city across Eastern Germany. Perhaps with the weather this poor he could finally persuade the Major to let Victor buy him a hot meal the next time they met.

He sat down at the desk, opened the top drawer that was full of stationery and meaningless correspondence, and slid his hand to the back, pressing his fingers against the right spots in the thin wood veneer to open the second compartment. The letter that he drew out would have looked innocent enough to anyone who committed themselves to breaking into his house, searching his desk, and finding the various secret compartments in it, but Victor was familiar enough with the simple cipher now that the surface text barely registered.

Concerns remain about Japanese neutrality pact. Befriend Oshima.

It was an old order, but one that was still giving him grief. Sara was a great deal of help with any Italian matters, besides Terták's flapping jaw he had plentiful sources among the Hungarians, and the Finns he had started to cultivate last year were shaping up rather well too. But for all the Japanese were polite and eager to please they were uncommonly tight-lipped. He had been trying to befriend Oshima since the man was assigned back to Berlin.

Perhaps he needed a different tactic. The new military attaché, Colonel Nakamura, was much
younger and more amiable, and might be pleased to get some German attention of his own in the same way Oshima played lapdog to Hitler. And of course it was Nakamura's handsome young assistant that, every time they met, Victor found entirely too distracting.

Yuuri had been lucky to be able to purchase the radio second-hand. A brand new 'People's Receiver' would not only set him back considerably more of his weekly salary, but none of the models for sale now could access shortwave frequencies, keeping their owners as confined to official government broadcasts as could reasonably be managed. He kept it tuned to German stations most of the time, lest one of his neighbours in the building overhear something, but it was comforting to be able to turn the dials and instantly be transported beyond the country's borders.

Some unknown but clearly wonderful soul at the BBC Overseas Service ran a regular French-language broadcast of jazz music on a Saturday afternoon, and it formed the background noise as Yuuri worked on a letter to his mother. It was always an exercise in the careful excision of information. Anything potentially sensitive would be caught by the censors, of course, although being too loose-lipped would be a black mark against him, but there wasn't much of his own daily life in Berlin that he wanted to share.

He took a long drag on his cigarette and looked down at the paper, his own precise characters.

Dear mother

It seems that there are still many days until the arrival of spring. How have you and father been? Thankfully I am doing well, with the help of my colleagues here. In Berlin there has been a great deal of snow, but I am still able to ride my bicycle to work at the embassy.

Truly his mother would be fascinated by stories about his bicycle. Yuuri sighed and ran a hand through his hair, which was hanging loose and shaggy around his ears. The pomade had mostly washed out and his tin was almost empty. Just another thing to add to his to-do list.

My work is very interesting still, and it is an honour to be able to serve the Emperor overseas even without being in the military.

His mother knew perfectly well that most of the reason he had gone into the foreign service in the first place was to avoid the military.

You must tell me if you would like me to send some photographs of the new parts of Berlin that I have been to, the buildings are very interesting.

She had always loved pictures of Oxford; the weeping willows by Magdalen Bridge, the tall, arched windows, how soft the buttery yellow sandstone looked even in grainy black and white.

Sometimes he felt as if he needed to write another letter in parallel, with everything he couldn't say. I miss you. I hate being here, but I couldn't be at home either. I want the war to be over. I want the war to have never happened in the first place. I don't want to be so alone.

He had been happy enough, as a child. School was strict, and hard work, but he had been good at it. Even when he grew a little older and began to realise that he was not normal, that he felt about other boys the way he was expected to about girls, he had responded by throwing himself into sport alongside his studies to work out his physical frustrations, kendo and running and even ice skating in the winter. He had met Ryuichi-kun through kendo, had discovered that they both wanted to linger after practice and learn other things together in dark corners where no-one else could see.
And then there was Minako-san, his mother's cousin who for most of his life he had known only through the costumed photograph his mother insisted on keeping in the tokonoma and the wild stories that were always told about her. Okukawa Minako who had been the first Japanese woman to dance ballet in Paris. Okukawa Minako who had travelled the world, had lived in New York and in London. Okukawa Minako who didn't marry until she was almost forty years old, and her husband was an Englishman. Okukawa Minako who one day wrote to him directly, as if Yuuri actually registered at all in her glamorous life, and had suggested that if he wished to seek an education abroad, she and her English husband would support him in coming to Oxford.

Maybe a youth spent trading risk for pleasure had primed him for it. He went, and for three beautiful years he almost felt free. He mastered English, learned German and French and a little Italian, bested the sons of dukes and baronets at cricket and even took a few of them to bed. He spent his long holidays lodging with Minako-san and Professor Celestine, who alternated between doting on his wife, cursing someone called Fermat, and creating complex number puzzles for them all to argue about over dinner.

And then he had graduated, returned home, passed the civil service exams, and when he set foot in Europe again it was in Berlin and the whole continent was at war.. Six months later, the RAF bombed the airport where he had landed.

Ryuichi-kun was married now.

A crow cawed loudly outside his window, startling him, and Yuuri checked his watch. He had almost missed it. He pushed the unfinished letter home to one side, stubbed out his neglected cigarette in the ashtray, and reached for the radio, turning the dial away from the announcer's beautiful French and into a sea of hissing static. It was a frequency he knew by heart. Gradually a melody came through the white noise, a few simple piano notes. He reached into the desk drawer for a very specific notepad.

"Cigarette, Alyosha?"

Victor waved the offered packet away and Major Feltsman took one for himself and lit it. It was March and the weather was just about bearable enough for two men to sit in a public park together and make polite conversation. Victor kept his hat pulled low over his eyes, obscuring his face to the various people also taking advantage of the first signs of spring.

"My mother enjoyed your gifts from Rome, thank you," Feltsman said.

"There shouldn't be any problems getting more, if she wants them."

"Oh, you know how she loves to get presents," Feltsman chuckled. Not for the first time, Victor wondered what his actual mother was really like. "But you know it is her birthday soon, and what she would really love would be something from Tokyo."

Victor whistled softly. "She does have exotic tastes. There's a railway line from here into Italy, but it's much harder to get even little things from so much further away."

"You'll try for her though, won't you?" Feltsman stood up, and gestured with his hand for Victor to do the same. "I'm cold, walk with me."

They wandered along a gravel path for a while, silently. Victor studied Feltsman out of the corner of his eye. He looked put-together enough that it didn't seem strange for him to be walking with a man in Stefan Rittberger's fine winter coat, but it was obvious that their work was wearing him down. His
face was deeply lined, hair gone entirely grey. There was a hunch to his shoulders now that came from more than just the cold. Just as Feltsman called him Alyosha, the hero, the trickster, the name he was given for Feltsman was Grandfather, and the man had never fitted it better.

When they came around a corner into a little area surrounded by evergreen trees, Feltsman pressed his newspaper into Victor's hands. "It's the usual. But something in there you need to read right now, so I can destroy it." They could speak a little more openly here, away from the crowd near the park entrance.

Victor frowned, thumbing through the pages until he found a small envelope. It was neat and clean with no addressee or other markings, but the scrap of paper inside was warped from water damage and heavy with the censor's black ink. He tucked the newspaper under his arm and moved a little further from the path, into the trees, He unfolded the letter and flinched slightly as he recognised the scrawling handwriting.

Dear

Hope this finds you, wherever the fuck you are. Captain is sending a post bag back on one of the supply trucks on the ice road. If you're reading this it wasn't blown up and Ladoga is still frozen. Also you are not dead, I suppose.

It's shit here. Hope less so where you are. Regret to tell you that after and both your mother and father have passed. We miss them. Grandpa is sick, but .

If you're not dead, hope you have shot a lot of Nazis. I'm up to 50 now. Mila is still ahead of me. They make such easy fucking targets when they and . I know you worry, so don't, okay? We are strong here.

Your comrade

Pte. Y

When Victor looked up, Feltsman came alongside and snatched the letter back from him, striking a match and letting the flame catch a corner of the paper. Victor watched as the desperate missive of a child in Leningrad dissolved into ashes.

"Why wasn't he evacuated?" Victor hissed. "They got some of the civilians out before the Germans had the city surrounded, didn't they prioritise children? He's barely sixteen years old, why is he signing off as a Private?"

Feltsman shrugged. "If you were in command in a besieged city, would you be telling able-bodied volunteers, 'sorry, you are too young'? Or checking too closely if they told you they were not? If he is old enough to shoot rabbits, he is old enough to shoot fascists."

"This is no time to be making up fucking proverbs," Victor whispered again, in Russian this time, which earned him a furious look from the Major.

"If we were not in public I would strike you, Alyosha. Do not think that just because you prance around this city in your bourgeois clothes I am no longer your commanding officer. We speak in German or not at all. You know that."

Victor had hoped that Feltsman would hit him. He needed something to take the edge off the anxiety that had surged through his body at the thought of some scumbag handing little Yuri Plisetsky a gun,
sending him out to risk death alongside a girl only three years his senior. At least Mila would be old enough by now to at least have the semblance of making decisions for herself. And his parents. His parents. His eyes were filling up with tears and if he wasn't careful he was going to cry in a park in the capital city of Hell itself.

"Snap out of it," Feltsman said between his teeth. "Shit, I knew I should have held that fucking letter back."

Victor took a deep breath, lifting his eyes to the murky clouds overhead before wiping at them with his gloved hand. "No. I apologise, Grandfather. Thank you for bringing it to me. It is good to hear from home, even if…"

"Yes," Feltsman said, and his tone softened just a fraction as he added, "I'm sorry."

"It's no different for anyone else. Everyone is losing people." Victor curled his fingers into fists. "But we will win the war."

"Think about Tokyo," was all Feltsman said in response, before walking away. Victor followed him back onto the path, and when he glanced back behind them there was a moment when he thought he saw something move behind the trees, black against the slowly melting snow. He blinked, and it was gone. Probably just a bird.

It was the sort of thing a character in a bad novel might do. Yuuri had just come out of the barber’s, adding a new tin of pomade to his bag of shopping, when he had seen Stefan Rittberger step out of a gleaming car on the other side of the street. He had his hat pulled down low and his coat collar turned up against the cold, and to someone who didn't find him extremely suspicious he probably would have looked normal enough, but something in Yuuri said that the man was up to something. So, like an idiot, he followed him.

Rittberger walked casually into a small park a little further down the street. Yuuri hung back behind a family who were having a very loud conversation. He watched as Rittberger looked around with affected casualness before taking a seat on a bench next to an old man reading a newspaper.

"Good morning, Grandfather," he heard Rittberger say. Yuuri didn't think he had ever seen two Westerners who looked less related. Rittberger was pale, slim, elegant, whereas his companion had a stocky build, a square face and a ruddy complexion. The old man offered him a cigarette, and then started making conversation that Yuuri couldn't quite make out over the noise of the other people around. Something about his mother? Yuuri edged a little closer, pulling a battered tram timetable out of his coat pocket and pretending to study it. His ears pricked up when the old man mentioned Tokyo. They were talking about gifts. If Rittberger was importing goods from Japan that might begin to explain his interest in hanging around the embassy.

When the two men stood up and started walking off together Yuuri began to follow again, hanging back further now they were moving into a quieter section of the park. Thankfully there were plenty of trees and shrubs he could duck behind to break the lines of sight. When the two men stepped off the path into a dense cluster of trees, Yuuri seized the opportunity to slip around to the other side, where he could hear their conversation quite clearly. This was, naturally, the point at which they stopped talking. Rittberger was reading something.

Yuuri kept his breathing as quiet as possible, thinking about sneaking around after kendo practice, tiptoeing back to his own rooms after college curfew at Wadham.
And then Rittberger and his 'Grandfather' were talking again, about sieges and children and 'the Germans' as if that was something that neither of them were, and then Rittberger's strained voice slipped into a language Yuuri understood very little of, but could clearly recognise. Russian. Why did Rittberger speak Russian?

Yuuri turned his head ever so slightly, catching sight of Rittberger's profile between the trees. The man looked like he might be about to cry, and Yuuri felt his heart clench a little in sudden sympathy. 'Grandfather' didn't seem to share the sentiment.

"Do not think that just because you prance around this city in your bourgeois clothes I am no longer your commanding officer," he snapped, and oh, that would be why they spoke Russian. Yuuri put a hand over his own mouth to cover any involuntary sounds of shock. The handsome, blonde Nazi who had been practically courting the ambassador recently, who had been subtly flirting with Yuuri for as long as they had been acquainted, was a *Soviet spy*.

Yuuri barely registered the rest of their conversation, and only just managed to pull himself completely behind a tree in time as the two men walked away. He could feel his heart racing, his whole body flooded with nervous heat.

His obligation was entirely clear. He should go at once to the police, to the Colonel or the ambassador, to anyone in authority who could have such a threat to the war effort dealt with at once. It was his duty to Japan. But it was hardly the first time that the weight of Yuuri's duty went to war with his soft heart and was utterly defeated, and it wasn't just his homeland that he had an obligation to, after all. He thought about the way Rittberger smiled at him, let his touches linger, things that had always been suspicious but were now entirely transformed by knowing the sort of man he really was. This was going far beyond a bad novel.

He was still fighting his jangling nerves when he sat down in a nondescript café a little while later, ordering a cup of horrible German tea in the hopes that it might help calm him.

"Good afternoon, Herr Yuuri, good to see you!"

The familiar voice still made him jump a little. Yuuri turned his head and gave a slight nod of greeting as the bearded man folded himself into the chair opposite. "Good afternoon, Emil."

"Have you ordered? You getting lunch, or not?"

"I'm having tea, I'm not really hungry."

"Well I *am* hungry. Practically starving." He gestured at himself. "Soon I will be nothing but skin and bones!"

Emil was certainly slender, but he looked a long way from death's door. He was a dancer, something you could tell even when he had a thick winter coat on just from the way he moved, and his troupe's choreographer currently had the government's favour so they certainly wouldn't be left to want for anything. Emil beckoned over the waitress and made an extensive order. He spoke German with a heavy accent that Yuuri still couldn't quite place.

"Here, you don't look well." Emil had a cigarette between his lips now and had rolled one across the table to Yuuri, who picked it up gratefully and accepted Emil's light. The tobacco would help his nerves settle too.

"I hope you've been well?" he asked politely.

"Oh, you know, busy-busy. We have a new show debuting next month for Easter, so there is a lot of
practicing to do. It's all about the glory of German conquests." Sadness, deep and raw, flickered across Emil's face before he composed himself. "I hope your dancing with ink and paper is good too, Herr Yuuri."

"Not a lot changes from one day to another." Except for those days when he decided to interrupt his errands to eavesdrop on Soviet agents. He inhaled a mouthful of smoke and leaned back in his chair as the waitress set down his tea and Emil's coffee,

"Ah, the simple life." Emil reached into his coat pocket and took out a crumpled newspaper. "Well if you could break your simplicity for a little while there's a great review of our last performance in here, if you'd like to see it?"

Yuuri reached over and took it out of his hands, and their eyes met. They weren't friends, exactly- he didn't even know Emil's surname, and didn't plan on finding out- but they had another kind of camaraderie.

"I look forward to reading it." He folded the paper away into his bag. "You know, I was thinking about that old choreographer of yours. I haven't heard from her in a while."

Victor had been waiting to see Colonel Nakamura for less than half an hour and Katsuki was already on his third cigarette. It was as if he'd been replaced with some kind of automaton that ran on smoke and awkward silence. If he had, it was a very good likeness- just as handsome as the original.

Perhaps the only advantage of being assigned in Germany was that most of the time, when Victor met a good-looking man, he could very quickly stifle any feelings of attraction by reminding himself that the object of his potential affections was almost certainly a Nazi. And even if he did manage to find a man who was neither a fascist nor a collaborator, taking a lover would dramatically endanger the effectiveness of his cover identity. The Japanese might not be fascists per se, but they were servants of an imperial regime just as oppressive as the rule of the Tsars.

And yet there was something different about Katsuki. He had felt it the moment they met at some dry function in the summer of 1940, what was supposed to be a brief introduction. Beyond his controlled demeanour there was a fire in his deep brown eyes, something beautiful and passionate and extraordinary, and Victor had been captivated. He knew Katsuki was playing a role, too; if he wasn't a homosexual Victor would purchase and eat a whole shop full of hats. He probably should have tried harder not to flirt with the man so much, but then the fact that Katsuki so thoroughly shut down someone he thought was a Nazi just seemed like another mark in his favour.

It was extremely silly. Victor was much too old for this sort of thing. He wondered if Katsuki's hair was as soft as it looked.

"Are you sure you don't wish to make another appointment with the Colonel, Herr Rittberger?"

Take me to your bed at once, Captain Nikiforov, his mind supplied unhelpfully in Katsuki's voice. He smiled warmly. "I am happy to wait for a little longer, thank you."

"I could send for some refreshments?"

"No, no, that won't be necessary. Thank you, Katsuki-san."

For half a second Katsuki looked at Victor as if he had two heads, before returning to his work and his cigarette.

If he could seduce him, Katsuki might be able to solve all Victor's problems with getting reliable
information out of the Japanese embassy. But he wasn't about to give up his cover, and while he might have been able to stomach it with someone else, he hated the thought of finding out that for all his charm and mystery Katsuki was the sort of man who would fuck a Nazi. He knew it was incredibly selfish to put his imaginings of the inner life of a man he honestly didn't know very well ahead of the security of the Soviet Union's eastern borders, but it blocked his way regardless.

There was still no sign of Nakamura. Victor stretched out his arms and stood up from his chair, walking over to inspect the two shelves of books in amongst the office's files and records. Most of the titles were in utterly impenetrable Japanese, but there was a copy of Rommel's book on infantry warfare, and German translations of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and some Machiavelli. On the lower shelf, tucked in the corner against the wall, was a small collection of books that looked quite different, even if he couldn't read the characters on the spines. Some of them were in languages he could recognise, though- a slim volume simply entitled *Poems*, in English, another, larger book called *Middlemarch*, and one in French, *Romances sans paroles*. Victor felt the small hairs at the nape of his neck prickle. Katsuki was watching him.

"Colonel Nakamura has a very diverse taste in literature," he said, not turning around. If Nakamura was a fan of English poetry Victor would eat a whole factory of hats.

"The Colonel is a very learned man," Katsuki said diplomatically, and for a moment he was quiet. "But, ah, the books at the end of the bottom shelf are mine."

Victor ran his fingers over their spines, lingering on the French book. It had been a while since he'd had any call to speak the language, but he was sure he could still read it perfectly well. He drew it off the shelf and turned it over in his hands before looking around at Katsuki, who was still watching him.

"May I borrow this?" he asked. "I run out of reading material so quickly."

"Oh," said Katsuki, and his face was suddenly very red. "Oh, yes, of course." He looked down and had started fumbling for a fourth cigarette when one of the telephones rang, and he went for it so quickly Victor was surprised he didn't fall out of his chair.

"Hai, Katsuki to moushimasu," he said, and then nodded as if the person at the other end of the line could see him. There was more nodding, and more Japanese that Victor couldn't follow, before he hung up.

"Colonel Nakamura is deeply sorry, Herr Rittberger, but he simply will not be able to see you today."

Victor sighed. "Oh well, nothing to be done about it. I am sure he is a very busy man." He walked the few steps back to Katsuki's desk. "Perhaps I will be able to see him another day, and also return your book?"

Katsuki looked up at him and there it was again in his eyes, a whole universe tightly locked away. "I will check the Colonel's diary."

He was going to talk to Rittberger, or whatever the hell his name really was, but he had to do it right. They needed somewhere neutral, somewhere quiet, but not so far away from other people that Rittberger could just shoot him and run off, or whatever other dastardly things a Soviet agent might do. Yuuri tightened his grip on his handlebars, squinting against the rain that was spilling off the brim of his hat and into his eyes. He was planning a clandestine meeting with a foreign spy and all he could think about was that time Horatio Greenhough-Smith had invited him to go punting on the
Cherwell and Yuuri had managed to fall in the river whilst trying to climb into the boat. He was not the sort of man who did these kinds of things.

He had cycled right across the city to Treptow, into a neighbourhood that the Nazi government probably would not want foreign diplomats to see. There were broken windows, boarded-up doors and shop fronts, and what establishments were open looked decidedly different from the smart, clean image of the city centre. He slowed to a stop in front of a narrow, grubby building, dismounting and hoisting his bicycle up onto the pavement before locking the back wheel. He wasn’t sure he had the right fare for the tram, and certainly didn't want to have to walk all the way home in the rain.

The man who ran the boarding house curled his lip and looked Yuuri up and down with a faintly disgusted expression.

"Only room is the top floor," he said, his German slow and condescending. "Lots of stairs." He looked Yuuri over again, as if expecting him to collapse with just the thought of such physical exertion.

It was really quite fascinating how Westerners managed to believe that Japanese people were weak and incompetent, and yet at the same time that they were terrifying, cruel warriors. Yuuri smiled and nodded politely, only giving over part of his mind to imagining poking the man in the chest with a shinai. "That won't be a problem." If they met at the top of the building there would be less chance for them to be overheard. He paid for a week, not that he would need it, and the manager’s grim expression softened at the sight of reichsmarks being counted out into his hand.

The rain didn't let up until he was almost home, and he laid out his soaking wet outer clothes by the radiator to dry before switching on the radio and clambering onto his narrow bed. He pulled the blanket around himself for some warmth. The French-speaking BBC announcer introduced something by Duke Ellington and Yuuri closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall, trying to lose himself in the smooth piano and bright, swinging brass. Somewhere out there were people dancing, enjoying playing their instruments, and absolutely none of them were in any way involved with spies.

When the song faded out he was only half paying attention to the announcer, until he realised that she was talking for much longer than usual.

"It was so beautiful at my cousin's house this morning," she said, her accent pure cut-glass Paris. "The blackbird sang even in the winter."

Yuuri couldn't suppress a shiver even as he pulled the blanket closer around himself, rising and crossing the room to his desk. He hadn't sent any personal letters within Germany before, but he knew the right address.

There was no guarantee that any letter he wrote would manage to make the whole brutal journey between here and Leningrad, or even get past Feltsman, but Victor felt like he owed it to Yuri to at least try. His handwriting felt awkward in the Cyrillic alphabet, shaping each letter very precisely as if he were a child.

Dear Yura

Thank you for your letter. I am indeed still alive, and it is good to hear that you and Mila are also. Thank you also for giving me the news about my parents. We can all mourn in the proper fashion once the enemy has been defeated.
I am sure that as a comrade-in-arms you will understand that I cannot tell you anything about my current posting. Please nevertheless be assured that I am devoting my whole heart to victory.

He sighed. There was really no way that Yuri wasn't going to read that as 'I have shot exactly zero Nazis', which was the truth, but not one he would interpret very generously.

I am glad, too, to hear that the situation in the city is improving. I have full confidence that you will soon be free, and able to join in pushing the invaders out of our land for good. Your courage, and that of all the defenders of Leningrad, is a shining inspiration to all. Your selfless love for our people gives us all strength.

Please don't get yourself killed, he wanted to say. Not for Leningrad, not for the Soviet people, not for anybody. You're only a boy. But there were few things he could say that were more likely to inspire Yuri to go out and get himself shot than 'please don't'.

Remember to rely on your comrades to support you, and to support them in turn. Victory will only be achieved when we fight together as one. Please give my best regards to your Grandfather, and to Mila and your commanding officer.

Your comrade

Capt. VMN

Victor didn't think he had said anything particularly worthy of censoring, so hopefully most of the letter would be legible if it ever did reach little Yura. He blotted the paper dry and folded it, pushing it to the side of his desk, before sliding out of the chair onto his knees. The largest hidden compartment in the desk was at the back, built into the space behind the drawers, and it took very precise manoeuvring of what seemed like an innocuous bit of decorative carving to get it to open. What it contained was probably the most precious object in the whole house. He drew out the heavy black case carefully and set it back on the desk before thumbing the combination lock to get it to open.

It wasn't the kind of complex rotor machine that surely dwelled in many dark back offices in Berlin, but it was enough to encipher simple messages to accompany his microdot film drops. Victor put his pen between his teeth and gently shifted the rings and rotors into the right position for the day of the month.

Italian presence to increase. He carefully tapped out each letter of the message into the machine, and wrote down the resulting ciphertext. Units likely to arrive via Black Sea in summer. The extensive report and exchange of letters that Sara had somehow managed to get for him this time showed far too many purchase orders from German manufacturers than would be needed for the single corps the Italians currently had fighting in Russia. Now they were done pissing around in Africa it seemed they were turning their attentions closer to home. He could only hope that the Americans finally entering the war would keep the Japanese busy enough in the Pacific to prevent them from striking the Soviet Union from the east.

Victor sighed, leaning his forehead on his knuckles. Trying to conceptualise the state of the world at the moment was like imagining a juggler with twenty balls in the air, the slightest hesitation or tiny breath of wind liable to cause catastrophe. One lieutenant making a bad call under fire, one ship caught in a storm at the wrong time, one freak accident at an airfield in England or a factory in Kazakhstan, and the fates of millions of people could be decided.

Or it could be one mistake by a lone intelligence officer in Berlin.
Out in the hall the letterbox rattled, causing him to look up. What little correspondence he got by conventional means usually related to his real or fabricated holdings as Stefan Rittberger, and it was extremely unusual to get something by the evening post. He took a few moments to safely lock up and hide away the rotor machine and then walked out towards the front door. There was a small envelope on the doormat with a Berlin postmark. He tore it open.

_Herr Rittberger_

_I would be delighted if you would join me for dinner this Friday at 7pm, at the address below._

_Regards_

_Y. Katsuki_

_PS. No need to return the Verlaine if you haven't finished it._

Well. Either this was an extremely elaborate trap, or Katsuki was actually offering himself up to have information seduced out of him. Victor had seen the man's handwriting enough times to be fairly confident that it was not a forgery, and frankly 'repressed Japanese bureaucrat' would have been the strangest Nazi honeytrap ever. He couldn't be too careful though. There was no return address, so Katsuki was obviously very confident in the allure of his invitation. Victor folded the note and slipped it into his trouser pocket.

It was Friday. Every particle of air around Yuuri seemed charged with static, tension prickling the hair on his neck. He couldn't concentrate on work for more than a few minutes at a time, and practically leaped across the room every time a telephone rang. The Colonel was in a foul mood too, which didn't help, and treated Yuuri to a long and shouted lecture about scheduling and the poor quality of his lunch. When he finally cried off early, pretending an upset stomach, he had to stop at a tobacconist on the way home to buy another packet of cigarettes.

He felt like he was preparing to actually have a fancy dinner with Rittberger. What should he wear? Should he actually bring some food, in case the Soviet spy was hungry? He stood in front of the small mirror over his washbasin for half an hour, slicking back stray hairs and fiddling with his tie.

He shouldn't go. He should fake his own death and go and join the French Resistance, or become a monk, or move to Australia, or literally anything other than this. Maybe the foreign service would send him home if he pretended to have gone mad. Maybe he had gone mad.

His watch read six o'clock. Yuuri took a deep breath, splashed a little cold water on his face, and headed for the door.

Victor had done a lot of dangerous, idiotic things in his life, whether it was skating on the barely-frozen Lake Ladoga as a child or ditching university in a fit of revolutionary fervour to join the army, but this could easily have been the worst.

He cleaned and loaded his service pistol, normally kept well out of sight in a box under his bed, and secured it in a shoulder holster so it was mostly hidden under his jacket. He'd already made his weekly drop with the only live information he had, and anything else of note was hidden around the house in the spots that Feltsman would know to check if anything happened to him. He hadn't cleared this with the Major, which was going to get him a serious chewing out, but there was no point being an independent field operative if he wasn't allowed to take some risks on his own. If it
came to it, he was confident in his ability to shoot first.

The address that Katsuki had given him was some distance across town, much further out than Victor would have imagined any embassy to allow its staff to live, and indeed as he drew closer he began to doubt very much that Katsuki did actually live here. If this really was a casual meeting for dinner then it had better not go on too long or he’d risk having his car stolen.

He pulled up in front of the narrow, sad-looking boarding house, and let his hands rest on the steering wheel while the engine cooled. He still didn’t know what he wanted this to be. If Katsuki wanted to be seduced by Stefan Rittsberger- or even do the seducing himself- Victor would need to dispose of the silly fantasies he’d been nurturing about the man and allow the situation to work to his advantage. If things went south… fuck, Victor hated the thought of having to shoot an attractive man, especially one he’d come to rather like. Nor did he especially relish the thought of having to cover it up afterwards. Feltsman would certainly want to ask a lot of very pointed questions about what, exactly, he had been doing alone in a room with a strange man in a seedy part of Berlin, the kind of questions that could cost him his commission and his freedom even in the midst of war.

But he had come all the way out here. Might as well see this through to the end.

The front door of the boarding house was open but there didn’t seem to be anyone in the front hall or what he imagined must be the communal rooms. He took the stairs two at a time, counting off the numbers on the doors he passed. His heartbeat sounded louder and louder in his ears as he climbed, until the stairs ran out in front of a scratched wooden door. Room 10.

He knocked.

"It's open," came the voice from inside.

The room was starkly lit from a single, unshaded light bulb overhead. Katsuki was sat at a small table immediately beneath it with a cigarette between his fingers, the smoke drifting slowly towards the bare window. He seemed calm in the manner of someone expending a great deal of energy to maintain control. He didn’t look up as Victor closed the door behind him and came over to sit in the chair opposite.

God, he was unfairly handsome.

"Good evening," Katsuki said, looking out towards the window before taking a long, nervous drag on his cigarette.

"Well," Victor said, "I'm obviously not here for a dinner party." He leaned back slightly in his chair, trying to affect relaxation while making it easier to reach for the pistol holstered under his jacket. "So why don't you spit it out?" There was a long pause, even the sounds of the city below barely seeming to register in that small, tense room.

"You're Soviet intelligence," Katsuki said in his flat, accented German, still staring out the window.

Fuck.

He mustn’t have told anyone yet, or Victor would be having this conversation with an SS officer in an underground room somewhere, but he definitely was going to have to shoot Katsuki, and figure out some way to get out of the building without being seen, and-

"You're not in any danger from me," Katsuki continued, "although I would advise you keep that gun you're carrying in its holster." He turned to look at Victor then and flashed a nervous smile that made him look almost vulnerable. "I invited you here because my handler advised me to make formal
contact with you."

"Your… handler?"

"At MI6."

Victor was vaguely aware of the fact that his mouth had fallen open. Katsuki was working for the British.
Chapter Summary

The worst winter of the twentieth century thaws into spring, and while something new and unexpected begins to blossom between Yuuri and Victor, the stormclouds over Europe only grow darker.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter contains discussion of the Holocaust.

We are still masters of our fate. We are still captain of our souls.

- Winston Churchill, September 1941

Victor had no idea how long they sat there staring at each other- or rather, how long he stared, slack-jawed, at Katsuki, while Katsuki regarded him like one might an undetonated bomb.

"But you're-" he stammered, "I mean you… shit," and all the tension left his body in a strange giggling laugh. Back in the autumn Feltsman had made an offhand reference to a potential British mole somewhere in the Japanese command, but the idea that not only was it someone in the Berlin embassy but that it was the very man Victor had been desperately trying not to make eyes at for months was incredible.

"I was hoping that we could agree on a mutually beneficial method of sharing information." Had Katsuki somehow become significantly more attractive in the last few minutes? Victor was sure that he had. He dragged a hand through his hair.

"Shit," he repeated. "I just… wow. And here I was hoping you’d lured me out here so we could fuck."

Katsuki flushed bright red at that and Victor worried for a brief moment that he’d said too much, that maybe he had managed to misread the situation even more colossally than he thought. He was probably too potentially useful to MI6 for them to care, but being known as a homosexual would have him off to one of Himmler’s labour camps almost as fast as being outed as a communist and a spy.

"You're an interesting man, Herr Rittberger," was all Katsuki said, though.

"With things as they are," he replied, "I think you had better call me Victor." If Katsuki had seen through his cover already there was no reason not to be at least moderately honest.

"Oh? So it's not Stefan? I would never have guessed." There was a little twinkle in his eyes and Victor realised he was being teased, teased by this truly, extremely, unfairly handsome Japanese
man. "Then you can call me Yuuri." Victor's mouth twitched into a smile. It was an odd coincidence, but the way he said it was subtly different from little Yura's name. Katsuki- Yuuri- dropped his cigarette and snuffed it out against the floor with his heel, then reached across the table to very briefly brush his fingers across the back of Victor's hand. "This evening I'm afraid we have many things to discuss. Another evening, well, we'll see…" and he blushed again.

Strategically, this was going to go very badly, because there were few idiotic things Victor wouldn't do to keep seeing him blush like that.

"So what sort of arrangement did you have in mind? For, ah, sharing information?"

"I know the Soviets are concerned about a Japanese assault from the east. If I have any information of immediate tactical relevance, you will have it straight away. Other things I may need to seek clearance on first. In exchange, I would like similar access to anything relevant to British interests from whatever informants you have."

"Surely the British have people among the Italians and the others-"

"Surely they do," Yuuri interrupted smoothly, "but when it comes to information, more is better, wouldn't you say?" He placed his hands flat on the table. "I want a mutual agreement to share what we both know, not to be another informant that you string along. We're allies, aren't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we are. Allies. Comrades." Victor extended his right hand and Yuuri lifted his own to clasp it "I will have to inform my controller, of course, and seek clearance of my own. But we have been in search of better information from the Japanese for some time now, I am sure he will approve it."

"Understood." Perhaps it was Victor's imagination but he could have sworn Yuuri squeezed his hand a little before letting go. His hands were so warm.

Victor leaned back in his chair again, almost feeling able to relax. "In the interests of the mutual exchange of information, it would be beneficial to know how you discovered me."

Yuuri rested his chin on his hand, "You seemed… unusual. At least in the way you were with me. I hadn't met a Nazi who… well, as a friend of mine once put it, who seemed to dance at our end of the ballroom."

Victor felt his own face heat. He was never going to so much as glance at any handsome men in the line of duty ever again. Except Yuuri. He felt he had carte blanche to look at Yuuri as much as he liked now.

"So one day I saw you in the city and decided to follow you. I saw you meet with an older man, and you spoke to him in Russian and he told you off for being bourgeois. That made it rather obvious."

Feltsman really should have hit him. Victor covered his face with his hands. "Please forget anything that you noticed about him. He isn't your concern."

Yuuri looked like there was something awful and teasing that he still wanted to say, but mercifully he just nodded. "Alright. I obviously can't offer you conclusive evidence in return that I am who I say I am, but here." He made a show of taking his jacket off, revealing a shoulder holster of his own with a small revolver close against his chest, which he drew out slowly whilst maintaining eye contact. "This is British army standard issue. Not that I'm either British or army, but I don't think there's many of these in Berlin." He laid the weapon on the table for Victor's inspection. Where the stock met the frame the word 'Enfield' was engraved over a clumsy likeness of a crown.
"You are a fascinating man," Victor murmured, half to himself, and then looked up. "I don't suppose you'd care to explain how on earth you came to have this assignment?"

"I received my university education in England, and I have… friends in British intelligence. When I came to Berlin, they contacted me, and I felt…" He swallowed hard, visibly, and looked away, fingers twitching around a non-existent cigarette. "In Japan, we believe very strongly in the importance of duty, of the obligations that we have to fulfil to one another and to our country. But I cannot pretend that I have a duty to my homeland and nothing else, or that duty is all that matters. This war is wrong. Maybe more than any other war ever has been. Sometimes I feel as if the whole country is sick with it like a wasting disease."

He was right. There was a foulness at the heart of German society. "You know about the prison camps, then. That they don't only send criminals, but people whose only offence is being Jewish, or being sick, or being…." *Or being like us.*

"Who *doesn't* know about the camps?" Yuuri's voice was suddenly cold as stone. "Japan has prison camps too, all over Asia. The ambassador thinks we have much to learn from our German allies." His lip curled in visceral disgust.

"Then it's our duty to end it, Yuuri." Victor picked up the English revolver and pressed it back into his palm. "However we can."

The cold night air stung Yuuri's cheeks as he pushed the bicycle hard back across the city, speeding along darkened streets normally too busy with traffic to maintain this kind of pace. There was still anxiety hissing and crackling in his limbs, the aftershocks of the evening.

Victor was not what he had expected, either from the slivers of real personality that infused the Rittberger persona or from Yuuri's own imaginings of what a Soviet military officer and spy would surely be like. He was charming in an unaffected sort of manner, easy to tease, and yet all of it overlaid on bedrock-like conviction of the righteousness of his cause. Their shared cause, Yuuri supposed, at least as far as the defeat of the Axis powers was concerned.

He thought of the way Victor had said his name, *Yuuri*, like turning over something precious in his hands. He still wasn't entirely used to the way Westerners used one another's given names so casually. In Oxford he was 'Katsuki' to most, and the men who called him just 'Yuuri' had good reason to do so. But Victor's real name was a gift and a weapon both that he'd felt he needed to return in kind.

The blackout left the sky overhead spilling over with stars, as if he were hundreds of kilometres from any city. He couldn't name a single constellation but it was the same night sky he remembered from home, the same that bloomed over the darkened towns and cities in England too. Maybe Minako-san was looking up at the same stars tonight through her old telescope.

It was dangerous but he had kept the first letter she had sent him two years ago, somehow sneak ed into a diplomatic bag from Switzerland. Yuuri supposed if anyone did find it in the old cigarette packet crumpled underneath his socks, it would read normally enough, even if his having a letter in English from a Japanese relative was a little odd. He had certainly been surprised himself to realise a paragraph into it what he was actually reading.

The Cholmondeley Code, Professor Celestine had named it, a Christmas puzzle for his wife that had turned into a game for all three of them as 1938 dawned and the Hilary term began. Yuuri still didn't fully understand the mathematical concepts behind it, but he could read it well enough, even if he was more used to seeing phrases like 'I was beset by ten cats disguised in an overcoat' than 'You
must know that Japan is following a dark and evil path in this war'. The nostalgia and the moral imperative together made a powerful combination.

There was a great deal still that he didn't know, and didn't care to. It wasn't hard to imagine how Professor Celestine, with his De Morgan Medal, must be serving the war effort. Anyone who had ever met Minako-san would know just how capable she was of blustering, bullying or outright flattening even the most stubborn parts of the British establishment into letting her do what she wanted. But he didn't know how far her network spread, beyond himself and Emil and whoever made the PO box drops and pickups in Switzerland that enabled them to communicate across the lines of conflict, how many other men and women around the world were feeding information back to a retired ballerina in the English countryside. It could be hundreds. Thousands. He wouldn't have put it past her.

Yuuri slowed to a stop at a crossroads and peered in each direction for the sign of any masked headlights. Victor would be driving home too, in his fancy car. Yuuri couldn't help but wonder what his house looked like inside. Was it as flashy and brash as Rittberger, or had he made it into a little Russian haven filled with red flags and portraits of Lenin? Back in Yuuri's office he had said that he liked to read, and had mentioned before they parted ways tonight how much he was enjoying Verlaine. Perhaps he kept works of Pushkin or Chekov to remind him of his home.

Yuuri felt a shiver run down his spine that had nothing to do with the cold. Verlaine would never remind him of anything besides lying naked in Tristan's bed at Wadham, the room full of candles, and having the first Arriette read to him in an endearingly terrible French accent. He wondered how Victor's voice would sound speaking French.

It would be a bad idea to sleep with him. A worse one to make it a habit. But after tonight, after seeing Victor stammer and blush and call Yuuri 'fascinating', and yet move with a soldier's powerful deliberateness and speak about the Nazis with steel in his voice, he wanted to quite terribly. It didn't help that Victor might be the only person for thousands of kilometres with whom he could be anything close to honest, and that seemed like a far greater intimacy already than anything that involved taking their clothes off.

He was riding a bicycle on urban roads, no matter how late at night it was. This was not the time to be fantasising about what, exactly, it would be like to slowly unbutton Victor's shirt.

The ride home failed to tire him out enough to sleep right away, so he sat up with a candle lit and a cup of precious genmaicha, letting the wheels of his mind spin as midnight turned into the first hours of the morning. He didn't know if the Soviets had broken the Angōki B-kata encryption yet, but even if they had a copy of the operator's manual would be unlikely to be declined. Troop movements in the north Pacific, even directed at the Americans, would be of interest to them too. And for as long as Ambassador Oshima kept Hitler's ear then Yuuri would have access to the kind of information normally reserved for the German high command.

He and Victor would be useful to each other. If they might be something else to each other too, he still had to decide.

"I hope you don't intend to make a habit of summoning me, Alyosha," Feltsman grumbled in between shovelling eintopf into his mouth. "This had better be important."

Victor felt like it was no small achievement to have finally convinced the Major into eating with him, even at this rather run-down and quiet beer hall. It had only been a few weeks since they had last seen each other but he looked thinner, more pinched even with the weather warming. Victor picked at his own plate of bread and cheese. "I think you will be pleased, Grandfather. I have made a
wonderful new friend from Tokyo."

"So you finally found a Japanese skirt to make your Italian girl jealous with. You didn't need to tell
me in person."

The mental image of Sara Crispino engaging in some sort of catfight with Yuuri over him was
entertainingly absurd. "Much more interesting than that. My friend and I are engaged in the same line
of work. He may be from Japan, but he has a lion's heart."

Feltsman spluttered around a mouthful of his stew. "You are joking," he said.

"I would never joke with you, Grandfather."

"You joke with me constantly. Sometimes I think your entire existence is a joke."

Ouch. "Well at the least I am not joking now. Didn't you tell me last year that somewhere our old
friends from Sakhalin had a piglet squealing? I found him for you." He smiled and ate some more of
his bread.

"In Berlin, of all places," Feltsman muttered to himself. "So what is your friendship worth to this
piggy-lion?"

Victor shrugged. "He will let me know a lot of very important things as soon as he has them, and
maybe other things too if his own grandfather approves. He wants the same from me. I told him that I
would of course need to seek your counsel."

Feltsman made a noise around the food in his mouth that sounded a lot like 'for once in your damn
life'. He swallowed and asked, "Do you believe him?"

"Yes," Victor said immediately. "He showed me a gift from his family." Truthfully he had believed
Yuuri even without seeing his English revolver. For all the exact revelation was a shock, Victor had
always known that he was more than he seemed.

"Okay." Feltsman was quiet for a moment. "I will think on it, and send it on. For now, be as friendly
as you think is proper."

"Wonderful!" Victor beamed and took another bite of his meal. "By the way, this cheese is very
good, would you like some?"

Feltsman glanced at the empty tables around them before he spoke. "Not with this," he said quietly,
gesturing a little with the beef dumpling on his spoon.

"Oh, of course, my apologies." The Major was a good communist and not given to oppressive
bourgeois superstitions, but Victor supposed he had his customs and who could blame him for
holding tight to them, living in a country like this.

"I also have a letter, if you are able to send it," Victor continued. "To my young friend at home."

"You've as much chance with tying it to a bird's leg and hoping very hard as getting it to him
overland," Feltsman said.

"I still have to try, Grandfather. And think what it must mean to everyone at home to hear back from
old friends." Victor might have been trapped and almost entirely alone in Berlin but at least he had a
kind of freedom, the ability to walk the streets without fear of enemy bullets, to go to bed at night
with his belly full of food. He couldn't imagine that friendly words and encouragement wouldn't be
almost as welcome in Leningrad as food and medicines.

"Fine. I'll see what I can do."

They finished the remainder of the meal in relative silence, and Feltsman refused to let Victor buy them another course. Victor flicked his last crust to a starling lurking by the door and handed over the letter to Yuri as they left, watched him tuck it away in a pocket on the inside of his coat. It was only when they were about to part ways that Feltsman grabbed him by the elbow.

"Look, Aloysha, this lion of yours... be careful of yourself."

Victor frowned. "Of course."

"I know there are things a soldier may do in the line of duty that he would not at home, whether for victory or for his own selfish comfort. Do not think I am not aware of what kind of a man you are." Their eyes met and Victor felt suddenly chilled by the ice in Feltsman's gaze. "But remember the kind of man that you need to be. That your comrades need you to be. I believe you can be better."

Then he turned and was gone, disappearing into the streets. Victor felt something in his chest crumple in on itself.

"It may be easier for you to photograph and then destroy this on your own time; I assume you have colleagues in Moscow who can translate it."

Victor nodded furiously, still thumbing through the Angōki manual as if he could read it himself. "This is excellent. Extremely valuable."

"I should also have an opportunity in a week or so to access some of the Ambassador's recent correspondence. I will keep you posted on that."

"Thank you, Yuuri."

He had met briefly with Victor a few times in the month since their detente at the boarding house, but this was their first official information exchange, in a room in a very average hotel that Victor was paying for. They sat cross-legged on the bed with papers spread out in front of them, knees touching companionably.

It was strange just how easy it was, this comfortable, collegial relationship that they had developed despite all their differences. Victor did not spout quotes from Marx at any and every opportunity or talk incessantly about a working class that he was not a part of like the communists Yuuri had known in England; he was funny and thoughtful and kind, and would interrupt all but the most serious of conversations to point out a dog. None of which helped in the slightest with Yuuri’s resolve to, for the moment at least, keep their relationship strictly professional. And clothed.

On that front they were both in their shirtsleeves, Victor having discarded his waistcoat too and loosened his tie. Even casual and dishevelled there was an elegance and almost ethereal beauty about him. His ash-coloured hair was swept back away from his face, and this close Yuuri could see how long his pale eyelashes were.

He shook his head slightly and picked up something Victor had got out of the Italian embassy, a series of hand-copied letters concerning the building of landing craft for a planned invasion of Malta.

"I don't know how you transmit information, but that will need translation too, of course," Victor said, his tone apologetic.
"Oh, I can read Italian. Most of the time, anyway. My speaking ability isn't that good though."

"So learned," Victor said, not even attempting to disguise the admiration in his voice. "It is a beautiful language. Very romantic. Wasted on fascists, wouldn't you say?"

"Mmm," Yuuri said noncommittally, scanning the letter. A lot of it he couldn't actually understand, but from what he could it seemed the correspondence would be very useful.

"Say something to me in Italian." Yuuri blinked, and looked over at Victor, who seemed to have decided to drop any attempts at work and was reclining against the headboard. He made a winsome face. "Won't you? Anything at all."

Yuuri racked his brains. "Ah… *il mio battello è pieno di anguille.*"

"Wow, amazing!" Victor's delighted smile was practically heart-shaped. Yuuri hoped he didn't ask for a translation.

"It's not that impressive. Some forty million Italians all speak it better than that."

"Has anyone ever told you how very bad you are at being complimented, Yuuri?"

Yuuri set down the papers in his hands and turned to look at Victor again. "Is complimenting me a part of our work here today?"

Victor made a face as if he was trying to think of something light-hearted and jokey to say, but then sighed instead. "I am sorry. I shouldn't press you if you don't really want… besides, I should know better than to neglect my duty for bourgeois indulgences. Let us continue."

He started to sit back up but Yuuri held a hand out to stop him. He might not know quite what to do with the man's flirting, but he certainly didn't mean to provoke a reaction like that. "Is that what they call it in Russia? An 'indulgence'?"

"No. Usually they are much less polite than that." The fact that Victor wouldn't look him in the eye now seemed as pointed as a direct gaze. "It is something that… in the first years after the revolution, when I was still a little boy, they did away with the power of the Russian church and its laws, and there were homosexual men who served openly in the government. But Comrade Stalin saw that we had a great deal of work to do if we were to match the capitalist powers, and destroy the fascists, and that for the good of Soviet society such things should not be permitted." He cleared his throat. "It is temporary, of course, as many things are to ensure victory. I know that Comrade Stalin is a good man, a just man."

It was probably not the best time for Yuuri to share his own opinions on the goodness and justness of Stalin. He reached over and touched Victor's shoulder gently. "In Japan it is not against the law, but it's not something to be spoken of, and no matter what you are supposed to marry and have children like a good citizen. In Britain it's illegal, at least for men. There was a famous writer who went to prison for it at the end of the last century, and wrote a long poem about his time there. I could lend it to you if you wanted."

"Maybe."

"But it's not a neglect of anything to just… be what we are. It's not good to always be outcast and ashamed. I didn't mean to make you feel like that."

Victor shook his head. "No, please. I make myself feel like this. I think people always tend to shun things that are different, even if they find such things in themselves."
Yuuri shrugged. "I always felt different. This was just the reason why."

Victor looked up at him again, those lovely blue eyes dark with sadness and shades of worry, but he studied Yuuri's face intently. "Yuuri, if we are having a heart-to-heart then please allow me to say this now, and if it is not what you want then I swear I will never mention it again."

"What is it?"

"Perhaps I am being too forward, I don't know what your expectations are, the books I have read about Japan did not discuss such things, but, ah… you surely must know that I would very much like to kiss you."

He hadn't expected Victor to say something like that so soon, but it was the simplicity of the request that startled and charmed Yuuri all at once. Not a desire for them to go to bed together, or to become regular lovers; only a kiss. And he seemed so concerned that even that could offend Yuuri. It might have, if this were his first time among Westerners. But it was only a kiss. Yuuri had kissed plenty of men.

He didn't respond, only reached up to take his glasses off, and then slid his fingers up from where they still rested against Victor's shoulder to the back of his neck before he leaned across the distance between them and pressed their lips together.

Victor made a small, surprised sound, their noses bumping as he shifted his head. He found Yuuri's other hand and clasped it, intertwining their fingers, before tentatively parting his lips. Yuuri leaned into him, the first taste of Victor's mouth on the tip of his tongue, his fingertips tracing nonsense patterns as they slid along the side of Victor's neck. Yuuri could feel the rapid beat of his pulse beneath his soft skin, knew it was a match to the thrumming in his own chest. He grazed his teeth ever so gently against Victor's bottom lip and felt an arm reaching around his middle in response, pulling them closer together. His hand strayed down further and further still, until his fingers brushed against the soft wool of Victor's tie and he grasped it. When he gave it the gentlest of tugs Victor moaned softly into his mouth and tried to pull Yuuri even closer, until he was practically in his lap.

It was already a long way from being only a kiss. Yuuri could feel those long eyelashes brush against his cheek, smell the herbal scent of Victor's soap, taste the delicious heat of his mouth all over his tongue. He was aware in every part of his body that they were already sitting on a bed, that he could easily kick away all their papers and press Victor down into the mattress and let him have much, much more than a single kiss.

In the end it was Victor who pulled away, breathing hard as he leaned his forehead against Yuuri's. Their hands were still intertwined and Yuuri could feel him trembling slightly. Still, there was a smirk in his voice when he said, "So may I assume that you would also like to kiss me?"

"You make many assumptions for a man who still doesn't know me very well." Yuuri couldn't help a smile.

"But I want to," Victor said, and his tone had shifted from teasing to a breathless whisper. "I've wanted to know you since the first time I met you."

Yuuri closed his eyes.

"I know it's dangerous," Victor continued, "I know. But we are already risking our lives together, and were risking them apart for years. And I've been… it's been over three years since I've heard anyone call me by my real name."
"Victor…" Yuuri said almost involuntarily, and then he was being kissed again, brief and chaste but no less thrilling.

"Yes, like that," Victor said, and even with his eyes closed Yuuri could tell that he was smiling. "It doesn't have to be complicated. We are two people who work together, who desire each other, and who aren't exactly presented with a plethora of other prospects. I'm certainly not, ah, how did you put it, 'stringing along' any of my informants."

Yuuri opened his eyes a fraction. "Has telling men they're your only available option worked well for you in the past?"

Victor frowned. "Yes?" Then he chuckled. "I forget you are not a soldier, Yuuri."

"You don't exactly make it sound appealing."

"Well it does enable me to meet a lot of interesting men." Victor leaned away and brought a hand up to stroke Yuuri's cheek. "Even if I am terrible and distract them from working."

Yuuri laughed. "I don't really mind this kind of distraction."

Victor's face was wide and unguarded when he said, "Then will you meet me here again tomorrow night?"

Victor had not felt this nervous since he was sixteen and sharing a tent with Dima Kotin when their Komsomol division went to assist with the harvest. And while Dima had been a kind boy with a sweet face and gentle hands, he was certainly not a dashing, handsome MI6 agent who spoke five languages and had doubtless gone to bed with half the men in England.

He sat down on the end of the bed. Just as he'd said to Yuuri yesterday, there was no need for this to be complicated; they were simply two comrades of an alike mind seeking comfort in one another. One day, be it months or years from now, the war would be over and they would part ways in the joy of victory, and perhaps in his old age Victor would tell stories about the beautiful Japanese man who had seduced him in Berlin. There was no need to dwell on the way that Yuuri's glasses would slowly slip down his nose as he read, the sound of his laughter, the fact that he loved poetry and music and literature. None of those things were of any consequence.

The sound of a knock followed by the door opening startled him, but as if summoned by his thoughts it was only Yuuri, turning to carefully lock the door behind him.

"Sorry, it took a lot longer to get into the staff entrance today."

"It's okay." He should probably get up, say something suave, kiss Yuuri, anything. He felt glued to the bed. Yuuri looked at him for a long moment before reaching up to fiddle with his slicked-back hair.

"Look, before we- before we do anything, there's something I need to make very clear to you." Yuuri kept his gaze firm but his hand seemed to be shaking slightly. "I'm not a woman."

Victor blinked. Had he misheard? Was Yuuri's German failing him? "Yuuri, please let me assure you that if you were, neither of us would be here right now."

Yuuri sighed. "No, I mean… I've known a lot of Western men who were very unhappy about the fact that they liked to go to bed with other men, and some of them seemed to think that if they went with a Japanese man, maybe any Asian man, that I would just lie there and smile demurely and they
could pretend they were fucking a girl like somebody normal. I need to know if that's what you think this is, because if so then we remain colleagues and nothing else."

Victor finally managed to rise to his feet. It stung, more than a little, to have someone cut so swiftly and so ruthlessly into his own feelings of shame, but at the same time he felt a flood of protective affection swell inside him, angry that anyone, ever could have used a man like Yuuri so callously. He crossed the room to the door, reaching out and taking Yuuri's hand.

"I don't want anything like that," he said softly. "In fact I- I was actually hoping you would- that is to say, I haven't been with very many men." He looked down, wishing he felt like less of an idiot boy admitting to some misdemeanour. "Only two, in fact; one when we were both boys and hardly knew what we were doing, and then one other when I was at the military school training to become an officer. I imagine you are very far ahead of me when it comes to experience of, well, this." He gestured between the two of them, hoping that the heat that had risen in his face was not too obvious.

"Okay," Yuuri said, and his tone was tender now, as soft as his fingertips under Victor's chin, lifting his head again. "Thank you for telling me that." He slipped his other hand out of Victor's and, still holding his gaze, began to unbutton his jacket.

It felt like a dream, like another life. He was walked back across the room to the bed, clothes dropping on the floor, Yuuri's hands seeming to be everywhere and his kisses positively bewitching, and Victor wasn't fumbling, wasn't too eager, every movement of his body matched and mirrored by Yuuri. Victor felt the mattress at the back of his knees and wrapped his arms around Yuuri's waist as they fell backwards onto it together, laughing.

"Best be careful of these," he said, reaching up to take Yuuri's glasses off; he turned away to set them on the bedside table but almost dropped them when he felt the heat of more kisses being pressed against his neck. He'd wanted this, wanted and berated himself endlessly for wanting, since the moment they met, wanted Yuuri's kisses and the length of his body pinning Victor to the bed and his elegant, precise fingers pulling down Victor's braces and tugging his shirt out of his trousers.

Yuuri's hand was hot against the bare skin of Victor's stomach, and then he shifted his weight suddenly and it was replaced by his lips.

Victor felt absolutely certain that he was going to *die*.

He grabbed Yuuri by the shoulders and pulled him up just enough to start divesting him of his own shirt and vest. In the lamplight Yuuri's bare skin was a pale but brilliant gold, impossibly beautiful, and Victor swallowed hard against the sudden lump in his throat.

"Is everything okay?" Yuuri squinted down at him, somehow completely unaware of his own loveliness. He brushed Victor's hair back from his face and slid the pad of his thumb across his lips. Victor pressed a kiss to it.

"Everything is *wonderful,*" he murmured and drew Yuuri's thumb into his mouth, sucking gently and feeling positively delighted by the blush that spread down Yuuri's neck to his chest, by the way that Yuuri ground down with his hips and bit his own lip against a groan.

For a while there was very little talking, one another's noises muffled with kisses, words replaced by touches and the desperate movements of their bodies against each other. Yuuri was strong and assured just as Victor had hoped, but so tender and delicate too that he could almost cry. There was a reason, a very good reason, why Victor wasn't supposed to fall in love with him, but he was damned if he could remember what it was.

It was only when they were both entirely naked, when Yuuri had him in hand and was stroking him
almost lazily, that Victor broke away from their slow kiss, panting. "Do you have, um," and how on earth had he managed to speak German for his entire life when it was clearly the most complicated language in the world, "do you have… stuff?"

Yuuri quirked an eyebrow, his hand never stilling. "If that's what you want."

'Want' didn't even begin to cover it. "Yes," he said, "please, I need you to."

"Oh? What exactly do you need, Victor?" Yuuri's breath was hot on his neck, and Victor was now completely sure that he had already died, that contrary to all scientific reasoning there was an afterlife, and that it was amazing.

"I need you to fuck me," he said, and Yuuri kissed him.

It turned out that the 'stuff' was in the pocket of Yuuri's trousers, which an earlier Victor had in extreme thoughtlessness thrown across the room, and he couldn't help a little whine when Yuuri climbed off the bed to retrieve them.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find these now?" Yuuri said, his tone almost conversational, as he dropped a cold, plastic-capped tube and a little foil packet onto Victor's chest before climbing back onto the bed. "You're very lucky that I'm diplomatic staff; I might as well have had 'perverted foreigner' branded on my forehead."

"Yes, I'm definitely lucky," he said. Yuuri paused, at that, and then cupped Victor's face in both hands and kissed him soundly.

"Just keep talking to me," he murmured. "Anything that's uncomfortable, that doesn't feel good, tell me immediately, alright?"

And he did his best, against the mounting inadequacies of the German language, against the high fever in his mind and the other plane of existence that his body had gone to inhabit, against the feeling of Yuuri's teeth nipping his earlobe and his voice whispering, "Victor, Victor, yes,", until speech abandoned both of them and left only desire on their tongues.

Yuuri offered him a cigarette, after, and he took it with shaking hands, leaning in to share the flame of a single match. His whole body still felt hypersensitive, afterimages scattered across his skin, Yuuri over him and around him and inside of him. Tomorrow he would no doubt feel guilty, like he always did; for now there was only a delicious warmth in his heart like slow-burning embers.

"So did you enjoy the benefits of my experience?" Yuuri asked in a teasing tone. He had put his glasses back on but his once-neat hair was still loose and messy with sweat. Victor laughed, and then coughed on the unexpected lungful of smoke.

"I think you could say that, yes." He took Yuuri's hand where it lay between them and lifted it to his lips for a kiss.

"I wish I could stay," Yuuri said softly, looking away as he took a long drag on his cigarette. Victor had known that they couldn't, of course, but some part of him had still imagined that he might fall asleep with Yuuri in his arms, might wake beside him and start his day with a kiss, might be permitted something almost like a normal life for a few scant hours.

"It's alright," he said, even though it wasn't. "But… I would like to do this again."

Yuuri turned back to smile at him and Victor's heart skipped and stuttered. "Yes. Yes, I would like that too."
"You seem in good spirits, Herr Yuuri."

"Well it's hard not to be, on a beautiful day like this." Yuuri gestured with the hand holding his cigarette, trying to encompass everything bright and green and growing all around them, the Tiergarten full of new flowers. It was as if the long, awful winter had been some sort of collective bad dream. It was almost July, the slow heat of summer seeping up through the roads and pavements, and outside of the office, at least, a man could finally go about with his jacket off. Over their heads a flock of swifts wheeled and called restlessly.

"That's true," Emil said, stopping at Yuuri's side to bend and sniff a rose at the side of the path. "But I think you have found other reasons to smile too, eh?" He nudged Yuuri in the ribs with an elbow and grinned.

"Oh don't worry, my mother would be far too upset if I married a German girl." Although perhaps substantially less so than if she knew what he was actually doing, at least as far as his real mother was concerned. Minako had never said anything to him about it, but she was much too perceptive not to have noticed the sort of company he kept in Oxford.

"Well as long as it's only the weather that's run off with your heart." Emil smiled again but his gaze was shrewd and assessing. Yuuri shook his head. Explaining that he had found a lover with whom he could be honest and enjoy himself, but that it was nothing more than that, would go a long way over the hard line around personal information that he had silently established with Emil from the beginning. Let the man watch a little closer if he needed to.

It wasn't even as if he and Victor saw each other that often, and when they did it was normally for work and nothing else. Sex required a degree of safety and privacy that was difficult to come by in Berlin, even when one of them could sneak up a hotel's back staircase or arrive hours before the other. And if it felt good just to be around him, to see Victor smile or feel the touch of his hand, that was only normal when it came to one's bed partner and newfound confidante.

They passed a little group of girls playing Himmel und Hölle, their court sketched out on the path with chalk. Emil paced one of them, hopping and jumping on the bare path alongside her, until all the girls stopped the game to stare at him, their disapproval undeterred by his cheery smile.

"Even the children have learned fear," he said sadly once they were out of earshot. "At home, I'd have half those girls challenging me to a fierce battle of wits and hops, and leaving me crushingly defeated." He glanced sideways at Yuuri. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to ask where home is for me. I can't go back there anyway."

"Can any of us, after this?"

"If you have a house, and a family still in it, of course you can." Emil sounded suddenly bitter. "My uncle was a priest. He decided that when the Nazis set up camp on your doorstep, it is time to be a fool for Christ. And my mother was the bigger fool who went along with him. My whole village is-well, you read the papers, I'm sure you can guess. There's no-one left for me."

"I'm- I'm so sorry." Yuuri couldn't help the stammer in his voice. It was too easy sometimes, living in a city far from the front lines and after nine months of no air raids, to let the war be a matter of headlines and telegrams rather than blood and bone.

"I don't know how-how we came to have mutual friends, I don't know exactly what your situation is, but there's a difference between choosing to walk away from your home and having it burned to the ground behind you." He nudged Yuuri with his elbow again and it was still friendly, but firmer.
"So if you've found some girl who makes you happy then be happy, but don't be complacent."

"I understand."

They waited until a group of boys in the uniform of the Hitler Youth were well out of sight before Emil crouched down and moved a few rocks that lay among the roots of a large oak tree, revealing a small hole in the ground. He reached in and drew out the old, cleaned-out coffee tin that Yuuri had hidden there that morning on his way to work.

"Ahh, coffee, my love," Emil said, all smiles again. "You always bring me the very best, Herr Yuuri."

"I hope it meets expectations."

"Well for that I would have to consult a real connoisseur." Emil glanced around them again and then stuck out a hand, which Yuuri shook firmly. "I'll see you next month."

The Italians had displayed exactly zero interest in making purchases from any Rittberger textile factories for as long as Victor had been in Berlin, so when he was invited for a meeting at the embassy about a bulk order of woollen twill Victor knew it was the closest thing to a personal invitation Sara Crispino could send him. He nodded and made the right kind of noises, even managed to smile benignly as Mussolini's glorified military tailors ranted about the 'fucking Russian winter', and if when a secretary came to fetch him for 'a word with the ambassador' he sighed with relief, it was only very quietly.

He hadn't expected to be shown directly to the ambassador's actual office, and felt a moment of trepidation as he was shown into a narrow hallway and through the secret extra door, until he realised that the high-backed chair by the window was occupied by a small woman with her hair loose around her shoulders and his tension dissipated into an amused snort. Next time she would probably summon him to the Staatstheater and have herself accompanied by a chorus line.

"Thank you for granting me this audience, Signorina Crispino," he said, making a bow towards her like Yuuri might.

"We need to talk," she said, and her voice sounded unlike he'd ever heard it before, past her usual dissatisfaction and into a cooler anger. His pulse quickened again and he crossed the room to her slowly. He didn't have his pistol and while the idea of shooting anyone at all, let alone the Ambassador's daughter, in a busy embassy building was absurd, he couldn't help but feel the lack of it against his side.

"If you are unhappy with our arrangement in any way, Signorina, you only have to let me know-"

She cut him off as he approached the desk not with words, but with the pointed shove of a piece of paper across its surface towards him. Victor picked it up, squinted enough to discern that despite the near-indecipherable tiny handwriting it was in German rather than Italian, and began to read.

After a paragraph he didn't need to glance to the end of the letter to know who its author was; two, three paragraphs in he felt his stomach folding in on itself with nausea while the skin on his arms prickled with goosepimples. He didn't look up but the weight of Sara's eyes on him was like the judging gaze of some nonexistent deity, stern and utterly merciless. The signature at the foot of the page was a scrawl and a lightning bolt over a primly printed 'A.H.'.

Victor looked up.
"What are you doing?" Sara hissed, and her tone was colder than a thousand Russian winters. "Tell me right now. Why does he want us to send our Jewish internees to Poland?"

Victor tightened his fingers, feeling the letter crumple in his hands. "Will you believe me if I say that I honestly do not know?"

"Clearly you don't expect that I should."

"Do you think all Germans are his personal confidantes?"

Sara gave him a flat look. "I know for a fact that all Germans let him win a fucking election. At least I can blame our dictator on the monarchy."

"Your dictator who has put Italian Jews in camps just like ours."

"You think it's fine, don't you?" she said, rising from her chair and making maybe a metre and a half of height feel like she was towering over Victor. "I thought maybe you were a different kind of man, but you're just like the rest of them. Sweep all the undesirables out of the sight of society, make your women into nothing but vessels, burn and conquer and raze what you can't steal. And if someone else is doing the filthy work that makes your own path clean, so much the better. It doesn't even occur to you how much I've argued with Papa about these things, that I've written to the government myself, that I've been angry about this for years, that I thought maybe whatever it is you're up to could fuck around with the war enough to change things and that's why I helped you. You arrogant piece of shit."

"Sara-"

"Shut up," she snapped. "Even if you don't know, are you so stupid that you can't guess what your glorious Führer is doing putting people on trains into Poland that never come back? Don't tell me you haven't read his fucking book. Why else would he be so kindly offering to help us deal with our 'problem'?"

"Sara I really didn't know," he said, and to hell with the fact that he never used her first name, that he knew he was skirting terrifyingly close to much deeper secrets. "I don't- I could never-"

"So what are you going to do about it, Stefan? Oh, what's that? Nothing?" He had no idea how the Italians decided their religious matters, but if sheer moral authority had anything to do with it then Sara was becoming a very good candidate for Pope.

"And I suppose you are?" he retorted, with unwarranted petulance.

She sneered at him for a second, then leaned over the desk, snatching up a pen and a piece of scrap paper. Her hand moved across it swiftly and he saw Otoniel Crispino appear, the lines neat and familiar. "I've been able forge Papa's signature since I was ten," she said, and then continued, her letters shifting into swooping arches as she wrote underneath it, Benito Mussolini. "That's a new one, but quite a good likeness wouldn't you say? I could send all the letters I wanted with these. Tell all kinds of people 'no'."

If the men in her life had been underestimating Sara Crispino, Victor realised he had to count himself among them. He bowed again, this time without a trace of mockery. "Signorina, I... you're right. I cannot just say that I disagree and do nothing about it." He swallowed hard. "But we are alike in that, like you, I am not what I might appear to be. I am unable to say any more to you than that."

Her expression shifted from disgust into sudden calculation, and he could practically hear her running through the checklist in her head; British, American, Soviet, Polish, French, Czech... his
German was accentless, he could conceivably be any of them. But she nodded slowly.

"I suppose that's good," she said, "because originally I was planning on refusing to have anything to do with you anymore."

"I would be very sad about that." Victor would have missed the clever, frustrated girl, and this new, incandescently angry woman even more so. "Signorina I would never want to talk down to you, but please be careful. Use discretion. You can help many more people if you keep yourself safe and act in secret than you could in some sort of one-time blaze of glory." His mouth twitched into a smile. "Though I'll admit blazes of glory are very tempting."

That finally got a hint of a smile out of her, and she lowered herself back into the ambassador's enormous chair. It really did suit her. "You can keep the letter, if you want. Give it to whoever's holding your leash. Maybe someone will finally drop a fucking bomb on the Chancellery."

"Grazie, Signorina." He hesitated for a moment and then asked, "So will I be seeing you again?"

"Unless I find out you lied to me today," she said, "you had better believe you'll be seeing me again."

The letter burned like acid in his breast pocket as he left the embassy, as he started up his car and drove home. He could easily imagine how people used to believe in curses, in the evil eye; it felt like it had a weight and a substance far beyond that of a single sheet of paper. He would photograph it for the Major, and for Yuuri, and then throw it in his fireplace and hope that cleaned off the stain.

Feltsman didn't need Victor telling him to be careful, as if he didn't know well enough the danger he lived every day, but he wanted to anyway, wanted to keep his comrade safe from the horrors the letter hinted at, to do something to kick against the worthless cage of his fake identity. He wanted to carry that bomb into the Chancellery himself. He prided himself on keeping his anger close and controlled, where he could use it and not allow it to use him, but this was straining him at the seams. There had to be victory for socialism, for the Allied nations. The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

It was still hot and humid in the first days of September, the closed window of another anonymous hotel room keeping the air around them stale. Sensible men would not have been lying in bed half on top of one another, but then fixing that aspect of their situation would have required moving and Yuuri was loathe to do that. Under his palm he could feel Victor's slowing heartbeat.

"What are you thinking about?" Victor asked softly, his eyes still closed. Yuuri moved his fingers very gently back and forth.

"Hasetsu," he said. "School must have started again by now. It still feels like I only left a year or so ago, but I'll be twenty-five in November. Time just runs away."

"Mmm." Victor turned and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "I hadn't realised you were born in such an auspicious year."

It took Yuuri's brain a few moments to connect the dots. 1917. Of course. "I'd never thought of that."

Victor drew his hand slowly up Yuuri's back to settle at the base of his neck, stroking gently. "I wish I could see this home city of yours one day. You always speak of it with such fondness."

"It's small, and quiet, but it's lovely in its own way." He could almost see it, like a glimpse into another life; cycling through Hasetsu's winding streets with Victor, walking along the beach with the
sea wind all around them, standing in the crowds together for Shūki kōreisai and eating fresh new harvest rice. It was too beautiful to ever be possible.

"I think you would like Leningrad too. It's a big city, with many old and beautiful buildings, but at the mouth of the river there are islands where you can feel like you are somewhere very small. There's even a whole island that is just a park. Once it was private, reserved only for the aristocracy, but the government has made it for everyone in the city to enjoy."

"It sounds wonderful." Even if he would never see it himself, Yuuri hoped that something of the Leningrad Victor remembered would survive the war. He deserved something good to go home to.

"Yuuri, could I ask a favour of you?" Victor was still stroking the back of his neck. "Would you mind if I sometimes spoke in Russian to you?"

"I'm afraid I only understand a few words."

"I know, I don't mind that. It's just... everywhere I have to speak German and only German. Everything I read is German, unless I have borrowed it from you and then maybe it's English or French. I think in German. All my dreams are in German. And even if I say things out loud in Russian to myself, at home, the walls of my house are German and they don't care. You don't need to understand me, but I know you would care. You would listen."

Something rose up high and crashed like a wave in Yuuri's chest, and he turned to kiss Victor on the mouth as if that could somehow suppress it. "Of course," he said, and Victor smiled.

"Thank you," he said in German, and then, so softly no-one but Yuuri could have heard, "Tovarishch moy, ya dumayu, chto ya vlyublen v tebya."

Yuuri turned his face into Victor's neck, feeling the low vibrations of unknown words as Victor continued, like music heard from many floors below. It could have been any language or none at all; he could discern enough meaning from Victor's tender, reverent tone.

He hadn't meant for this to happen. He hadn't meant to end up standing on the precipice too, so ready to fall, so unable to catch himself. He knew perfectly well how not to love someone, how to hold enough of himself back, how to focus on the other person's faults until he could keep himself safely detached, but it had all failed him in the face of this sad, lonely, ridiculous blond communist murmuring to him in Russian like every strange word contained its own magic. He breathed in slowly.

It was long past the time when they both should have left, back to their separately false lives. Yuuri shifted his leg closer in between Victor's, kicking the crumpled bedsheets further away from their feet. He could stay a little longer. Millimetres from his ear, Victor was still whispering foreign words that could easily become familiar.

"The fact that you keep getting these is almost enough to have me believing in God again, Alyosha." Feltsman had a new scarf on, wrapped up to his ears and only pulled down a little in the front so he could speak. It was fairly late in the evening and the park was nearly deserted, a flock of jackdaws in the tree overhearing chak-chaking to one another and helpfully covering any conversation.

This time the letter hidden in Feltsman's week-old copy of Der Stürmer was torn as well as water damaged, and Victor had to hold the two parts together carefully to make out the words.

Dear [[[[[
Very glad you are not dead. Sorry to hear that you are obviously a terrible fucking shot, should have expected it though. Mila and Grandpa and Mama all say hello. It's still shit, but we do get so things are a little better. I have heard that in the new year although

Have you heard that some guy wrote a whole symphony about us? They are playing it all over the world. Mama went back to work for the Radio Orchestra so we could have it here too- not just on the radio, but in speakers all over the city. Played it for the Nazi shitheads too, right after which I don't think they liked very much. I thought the end bit went on far too long, but I like knowing that people are still thinking about us. If there is music where you are, you should try and hear it too.

The handwriting changed then, Yura's haphazard scrawl exchanged for a large, looping script.

Hello!

I just wanted to add something to Y's letter so you know he is not lying about the rest of us not being dead. We definitely aren't. We are holding the line here, and will hold it until Hitler himself comes to the city gates. Then I'll shoot him. I heard on the radio that Comrade P is so famous now she's left the front and is travelling the world to help the Red Army, which gives me more time to catch up to her kill record. Hope this finds you well, or finds you at all.

Your comrades

YNP & MAB

Victor gazed at the letter for a moment longer before clutching it to his chest. Mila's mother had been a party colleague of his own parents and he remembered first meeting her only weeks after she had been born, being sat down on the sofa and fussed over as someone handed him a pink, squalling bundle of tiny human. His hair had been quite long then, almost to his shoulders, and she had grabbed it and pulled almost hard enough to make him cry. She and Yuri were always the loudest, toughest, most energetic of all the children in their neighbourhood, running wild with dirt all over their white Pioneers shirts, full of big plans and promise.

They must be worse than starving in Leningrad by now, even with supplies coming in over the lake, even with military rations that both of them probably split with their families. Even if they survived, their childhood had been shredded and burned in front of them. When Victor joined the army at eighteen he had never heard the sound of a gun being fired, never seen the aftermath of an explosion.

"I'll be needing that back," Feltsman said, holding out his hand. Victor clung to the torn letter for a few moments longer before relinquishing it to the Major and his matchbook. They were both silent, watching it go up in flames.

"Do you have anything else for me, Grandfather?" Victor asked eventually.

"No, not today." Feltsman gave him a slow, measured look, before saying, "You're happy."

"You make that sound like an accusation."

"Happiness is not reliable, Alyosha. It's probably the worst thing that can happen to an agent." He took out a cigarette and lit it, smoke trailing upwards into the yellowing leaves above them. "I told
you to be careful of yourself with that Japanese boy, and you seem to have taken it as a suggestion and not an order."

Victor felt his heart tense up in his chest. "I don't know what you mean."

"Let me be clearer then. Frankly, in any other situation I wouldn't really give a shit what twisted activities you wanted to get up to on your own time, whatever the law says. But just because no-one's taken a shot at you recently doesn't mean this isn't the front line. You have a duty to fulfil here, and it is the only thing that matters."

"I haven't forgotten my duty." Anger surged up inside him before he could properly suppress it. "I'm a homosexual, not a coward. Nothing has changed that makes any difference to my work here."

"And if he decides to switch sides? He's already betrayed one country; if he flips again and you're too besotted to see it, will our Pacific fleet go to join the Americans' at the bottom of the ocean? Or what if he's discovered, and as soon as Himmler looks at him sideways he starts squealing about how he's been buggering a man named Rittberger? Do you want to be worked to your death in stripes and a pink triangle? I spend every waking hour thinking about what's at the end of that railway line for me if I put even one foot out of place. Happiness is bad news for you, Alyosha."

It was absurd. Feltsman didn't know Yuuri, didn't know that he was one of the bravest men Victor had ever met, didn't know that he was moral to the bone, that he hated fascism just as much as any Soviet soldier, that he was gentle and kind and devoted, that instead of enmired in shame he made Victor feel uplifted, like twice the man he could ever be alone.

He didn't say any of it, despite how desperately he wanted to, only stood up from the bench and looked down at Feltsman in the remnants of the evening light. "If you give me a direct order as my commanding officer then I will, of course, obey it. If you do not, then our business tonight is concluded." And he turned and walked away.

Either language being overheard could potentially get him into trouble, but for some reason Yuuri felt far more nervous about English than French, and he kept the radio's volume turned down low, hunching over his desk with an ear close to the speaker and twisting his wrist uncomfortably to bring his cigarette to his lips. The BBC French and German services were good, and clearly having money thrown at them by the Foreign Office for their propaganda role, but the most accurate news always went out in English.

"In further international news for the week," the announcer continued, "a statement was read in the House of Commons on Thursday by the Foreign Secretary, Mr Anthony Eden, from all governments of the United Nations, concerning the reports received about a new and abominable form of repression being visited upon the Jewish people of Europe by the German government. Mr Eden made a second reading of the statement for the press, of which we now present a recording."

The radio hissed and crackled with extra static as it segued into the recording, and Yuuri fiddled with the dials. Eden's accent ran along that sharp, straight line between Eton and Oxbridge that was deeply familiar to him, words clipped and vowels extended over their edges.

"...numerous reports from Europe that the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe..."
Yuuri drew in a long mouthful of smoke. They'd been heard. Whether it was him or Victor, the Czech or the Polish governments in exile, another agent elsewhere entirely, or some combination of all of their efforts, someone at the other end of the long wire was listening.

"...None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation or are deliberately massacred in mass executions..."

Eden's voice betrayed no emotion. It was what men like him were trained for. Yuuri had slipped in amongst them, the natural tones of a voice raised speaking Japanese apparently meeting the standards of stoic British repression all too well. At home, his feelings were always harder to hide.

"...The above mentioned Governments and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination. They declare that such events can only strengthen the resolve of all freedom loving peoples to overthrow the barbarous Hitlerite tyranny. They re-affirm their solemn resolution to ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end."

"After Mr Eden read the statement the House rose and held a one-minute silence in sympathy for the victims," the much clearer voice of the announcer continued. "James A. De Rothschild, Labour MP for the Isle of Ely, made an emotional speech on behalf of British Jewry thanking Mr Eden and the United Nations for their declaration…"

Yuuri sat back in his chair and exhaled a long plume of smoke towards his ceiling. Silences and solemn resolutions wouldn't do much for the people being thrown from the frying pan of the ghettos into the fires of Hitler's new incarnation of hell, but then who in Westminster had any more power than he did to actually, practically help? Bombs would only end the lives of those they intended to save, and Eden and Churchill could have half the British Army parachuted into Warsaw and Oswiecim and only see them slaughtered too. The sheer, unrelenting powerlessness of the situation was like a rot in the bones, like a scream swallowed so hard it was permanently stuck in his throat.

And he wondered, too, how long it would take for the idea to traverse the continental divide, for a general or a minister or even the Emperor himself to propose that, to make way for Japanese colonists, the camps that stretched from Korea to the Philippines should be turned from forcing their prisoners into labour to industrialising their murder. For all he knew, secluded thousands of kilometres away, it had already begun.

They had to win. There was no other end that bore thinking about. His doubts and fears and those long, sleepless nights fretting over his obligation to Japan went up like so much tobacco smoke in the face of something this unimaginably monstrous. Out of his window he could see a long way across the city even on a cloudy winter's day, all the way east to where Victor lived. Tovarishch moy, he'd called Yuuri. My comrade. At least they both could hold fast to that.

There would be no fireworks for Silvester like Victor remembered from his first year in Berlin, when the city triumphantly rang in 1939. Doubtless there were still parties across the city, people drinking wine and eating their marzipan pigs, but they were well hidden under blackout curtains and muted by the ongoing grind of the war. Goebbels's newspapers had largely stopped reporting anything about Stalingrad that could be mistaken for an actual fact, which meant that likely things were going very well for the Red Army, and the winds of favour in the African campaign seemed to switch sides every day.

The distraction of what celebrations were occurring had also made it easier to arrange something
much more exciting than any fireworks show; Yuuri in his shirtsleeves at the table in Victor's small, Spartan kitchen, eating cold sausage and dense rye bread and looking as if he belonged. And tonight, he would stay, and they would sleep in the same bed until the morning. Victor sipped his glass of water slowly, smiling.

"I'm sorry the sausage isn't great. I think all the tasty pigs ran off to join the Free French." Yuuri snorted a laugh and Victor's smile widened. "The bread is pretty good though, right? I think the local baker has his eye on me."

"More likely on the reichsmarks you slip him alongside your ration coupons."

"Do you really hold my charms in such low esteem?"

Yuuri winked at him over a mouthful of bread and Victor felt himself blush a little, like a glorious idiot. It had been a long time now since he'd last tried to deny it to himself. He hadn't entirely lied, all those months ago when he'd told Yuuri that it wouldn't be complicated; this is perhaps the simplest, purest thing that he's ever felt. All his guilt seemed like it could only skid around on the surface now, constantly swatted away by Yuuri's bright smile, his bravery, his humour, his handsome face. Love made him so much more, so much better. There was nothing in it to hinder him.

Yuuri folded up the crust of his bread around the last piece of the sausage, took a bite out of it, and reached absently across the table with his free hand. Victor intertwined their fingers. "This is nice," he said. "Being here, with you."

"I'm sorry it's not a proper new year feast."

He smiled. "Well I wouldn't want to eat too much, given that I'm much too ill to make it to the Shōgatsu celebration at the embassy. It would have been nice to have some mochi though." At Victor's puzzled expression he made a vaguely circular gesture with his bread. "Little rice... I suppose they're a little like cakes, or dumplings? They steam rice, then mash it until it's smooth and sticky. You eat them at the start of the year for good luck."

"My mother always said that for luck in the new year, she needed a kiss." Victor smiled hopefully. Yuuri winked at him again, put the last bit of bread in his mouth and chewed with gusto, and Victor huffed. "You are a cruel man."

Yuuri swallowed and then lifted their joined hands, turning them over and pressing a soft kiss to Victor's palm while looking up at him over the rims of his glasses. It was beyond cruel. "Where else do you need luck?"

"Oh," Victor said, standing up so fast his chair fell over, "oh, everywhere."

With Yuuri even the small, simple furnishings of the house felt extravagant, Yuuri who sat himself on the desk to be kissed on top of all Victor's secrets, Yuuri who backed him into the bookcase and then, distracted by reading the titles over Victor's shoulder, tried to pick an argument about Goethe, Yuuri who looked as if there was nothing else he would rather do in the world than be led up the narrow staircase to the bedroom.

Victor didn't switch the light on so they were free to leave the curtains open, unobstructed starlight and the frosty glow of the moon spilling into the bedroom instead, tracing every line of Yuuri's body in finespun silver. No matter how many months or years the war would give them, Victor didn't think it would ever stop feeling like a dream, like something that could never really happen. Yuuri held him in close by his tie and kissed all the sense right out of him.
"You should sit down," Yuuri murmured, undoing Victor's shirt buttons from the bottom.

"Should I?"

"Mmmmm." Yuuri gave him a gentle, playful shove towards the bed and when Victor did as he was told and sat, Yuuri nudged his legs apart and dropped onto his knees between them. "God your floorboards are too hard," he grumbled, but he pressed a kiss to the inside of Victor's still-trousered thigh nevertheless.

Normally Yuuri's hair was slick and smooth with pomade, only a few unruly locks daring to fall away, but tonight it was freshly washed and fell messy and loose around his face. Victor tangled his fingers in the soft strands, trying not to give in to the urge to grip hard, tug, as Yuuri unbuttoned his trousers and put his mouth to work. He settled for combing his hands through it frantically, whispering encouragements.

It was no wonder that Yuuri made such a good agent. No-one would suspect that the quiet, bespectacled assistant to the Japanese military attaché, who chain-smoked out his nerves and stammered on the telephone, was the same man who'd left marks all the way up to the line where Victor's shirt collar sat, who could completely undo a man with his hands and his lips and his tongue. He was incredible, a contradiction and yet somehow not at all, just the many parts of a whole that had Victor reeling with the desire to know every single facet of him.

"Fuck, Yuuri," he gasped, and then slipping into the language that here, only here, was permitted to him, "ya- ya tebya lyublyu."

When Yuuri had finished, when Victor had fallen backwards onto the bed suffused with bliss and he climbed up after him, he leaned over Victor and gently brushed a stray eyelash off his cheek. "I know," he whispered, and after a long moment of searching Victor's face he added, "me too."

It was many hours later when the watery sunlight of the first day of 1943 slid across Victor's closed eyelids and he groaned and squinted, rolling onto his side to make a face at the little clock on his bedside table. Sitting beside it was a pair of round, steel-rimmed glasses, and his grouchiness dissolved into a smile.

"No, it's sleep," Yuuri mumbled behind him, and Victor rolled over again to face him, drawing Yuuri into his arms despite his protestations.

"Good morning," he said, the warmth in his heart far outshining the cool winter sun. Yuuri grumbled something in Japanese against Victor's shoulder, but he snuggled in closer too. "I think we have a little time before you'll need to leave."

"Good," Yuuri said, finally lifting his head and allowing the gentle good morning kiss that Victor had been dreaming of for months.

"But before any of that," Victor said, feeling his voice catch a little, "there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Oh?" Yuuri frowned, seeming a little more awake now. Victor stroked his hair.

"It's not- it's something I wanted to give you, too. Because of everything you've given me." Maybe Yuuri would be thinking of documents and photographs and slips of information, but that wasn't what he meant. "It's Nikiforov."

"What?"
"Captain Victor Mikhailovich Nikiforov. That's my real name. All of it."

"Oh," Yuuri said, and he looked down and then back up into Victor's eyes, and for a moment the only things he said were silent. "Well, you already know my full name," he continued eventually. That contemplative look drew across his face, the kind that wouldn't settle until he found exactly what he needed. "But there's something..."

"You don't have to tell me anything, I just wanted-"

"No, Victor, I want to." He rested a hand against Victor's chest, palm flat over his heart. "My handler, at MI6, she's someone I- someone I knew in Oxford. I would stay at her house sometimes, and every morning no matter the season there was a blackbird who sat in the pear tree that grew against the back wall and sang a great racket as the sun rose. You could hear him from every bedroom. We'd always shut him at to shut up, but he never would. When she wrote to me here and asked me to work for her, that's what she called me. A blackbird, singing at the rising sun no matter who tried to keep me quiet." He smiled softly. "So that's my other name, the one the British call me. Blackbird."

Victor thought of the flag that flew over the embassy, a sun burning blood red, thought of Yuuri in his office somewhere beneath it, unassuming and yet utterly indomitable. "I like it."

The long Easter weekend saw Berlin shut down as much as any city ever did, banks and offices closed, shops and restaurants curtailing their hours, and people spilling out instead into the parks and gardens that were flushed with the new warmth of spring. It also provided the perfect cover for Yuuri to tell his landlord he was spending the weekend staying with friends, tell his colleagues he was going to stay at home and catch up on reading, and take a small suitcase a few kilometres by tram to Victor's house.

They were careful about these things. He had visited Victor's house exactly three times, and only stayed the night at the new year; Victor had been to his much less spacious rooms in Charlottenburg only once, never staying. But, when they could, it was nicer to be in one another's homes than in stale hotel rooms, better to meet somewhere comfortable and private than exchange information in parks and cafés. And it meant being able to let their intimacy slip out of the purely physical and into the day-to-day of their lives, having a small taste of something almost normal.

It had been almost a year now, since they had embarked on this affair that had transformed Yuuri's life in Germany, a simple arrangement between colleagues that had spiralled out of control in a way he could not bring himself to regret.

Victor was sitting up next to him in bed, intently focused on the latter half of Middlemarch and making a series of increasingly horrified faces, all of which were entirely distracting Yuuri from getting more than a chapter into Le Meneur de Loups.

"Is it really like this in England?" he eventually asked, turning to Yuuri and pointing an accusatory finger at one paragraph. Yuuri put down his own book and peered through his glasses.

"Well, no, I don't think most English people have that much trouble with their marriages."

"Not the marriages! The money." Victor gestured with the book for emphasis. "There is not a single character in this book whose problems are not all caused by money! Dorothea cannot do as she likes because of her fat-headed husband's money. Doctor Lydgate gets himself into debt just to please his wife. Fred is, let us be honest, an idiot, mostly about money. And everybody writes multiple wills because they are all so confused about their money! If these people would only set aside their
fortunes, come together with the workers of Middlemarch, and cast off the chains of capitalist oppression, they would all be much happier!" The look on Victor's face was so deadly serious that Yuuri had absolutely no idea how to respond, until he slapped Yuuri on the shoulder, threw his head back and laughed. "Oh darling, you believed me."

"Sometimes it can be very difficult to tell if you're joking or not," Yuuri said, feeling himself blush, which sent Victor into further peals of laughter.

"Really though, it seems a very terrible way to live, so governed by one's finances. And before Comrade Marx had even written his manifesto to enlighten them!"

Yuuri sighed heavily, deciding to give up on Dumas for the time being. He set the book down on the floor beside the bed and padded over to his open suitcase. His only other reading material was that week's edition of Das Reich, which he drew out from underneath his clean socks with no small amount of distaste. When he climbed back into bed with it Victor made an even more dramatically disgusted face.

"Do you have to read that in the bedroom?"

"Would you like me to climb out onto the roof and read it there?" Yuuri unfolded the paper across his knees. "Normally I only have to risk my life to get the news from the BBC."

"I don't think you can call anything in that paper 'news'." Victor, setting aside the monetary woes of Middlemarch, leaned over Yuuri's shoulder and jabbed at the page. "Look at this filth, still carping on about their war crimes in Poland that they have decided to blame on the Red Army, as if anyone could believe such things."

Yuuri's stomach dropped like a stone, and he immediately, fiercely regretted bringing the newspaper with him. It had been a little over a week now since the disturbingly triumphant announcement on Radio Berlin that the Germans had uncovered the grave of some 12,000 Polish soldiers, murdered by the Soviets at Katyn in 1939. It was as melodramatic as all Nazi propaganda pieces, full of the usual vicious language about the evils of the Bolsheviks, but the rhetoric was carried on an attention to detail that was decidedly uncharacteristic of Goebbels. It could easily be a fabrication. But something niggled at the back of his mind about it, about the possibility of truth. He turned the page over very quickly.

"Yuuri, please look at me."

It had been a mistake, allowing Victor to learn how to see right through him like this. He kept his eyes trained downwards.

"Yuuri. You don't... you can't possibly believe such reports?"

"I don't know," he said, voice as flat and cool as he could make it. For a while Victor was quiet, and Yuuri hoped beyond hope that he would let it rest, that he would go back to joking about the Middlemarch revolution and Yuuri could read the book reviews or something else reasonably harmless.

"So what other opinions of Herr Goebbels's do you agree with?" Victor's voice had gone very high and faint. Shit. "That your friends in London are perfidious warmongers who forced Germany into a conflict? That the Poles kidnapped thousands of German children? That we- that I am a bestial subhuman?"

"You know I don't think those things. Please don't do this."
"So why have you suddenly decided that the Germans are trustworthy on the matter of my comrades being brutal murderers?"

Yuuri finally looked up then, throwing the paper down against his knees. "I said I don't know, Victor, not that I've made up my mind! Have you even read or listened to any of the reports? They set up a commission, they brought in the Red Cross and people from all over Europe. This isn't the same as the things they invent whole cloth."

"Oh, well, a commission, I beg your pardon. I know I for one do my very truest and most honest work with a pistol to my head."

"Is it so impossible for you to believe that there could be some truth behind it?"

The look that Victor gave him was horrible. "To believe that my people, my comrades, the Soviet army that is sacrificing more fighting men and women in the cause of liberating Europe than all the other Allied powers combined, could have slaughtered innocents as if- as if we were Nazis- when we only advanced into Poland four years ago in order to protect its people? I would rather die."

Exactly how many obvious lies was Victor prepared to believe? "Our side hasn't been blameless since the war started. Do you have any idea of the kind of reports I've read about the war in Asia? That the British take the skulls of my countrymen as trophies, that the Australians and Americans kill Japanese soldiers who surrender rather than take them as prisoners, that sailors swimming away from their sunken ships are shot in the water. It's disgusting."

"So if Das Reich printed something about how actually it was the English who built prison camps all over Poland, and look here is, oh, maybe Maréchal Pétain to promise that it's true because he is such an expert, would you believe it and turn traitor all over again?"

Yuuri had crushed the paper between his hands before he even realised it. Of all the possible words that Victor could use, of course he chose the one that cracked through Yuuri's ribcage and went straight into his heart like a knife. He kicked the covers away and got out of bed, turning his back on Victor.

"Yuuri, wait…" Oh of course now his tone had softened again.

"You sit there and accuse me of being taken in by Goebbels," Yuuri said, pulling his shirt back on and trying to button it with one hand while he gathered up his other things into the suitcase. "You accuse me, when you're the one who's happily swallowed every bit of Stalinist propaganda that's ever been presented to you. Of course I fucking believed that you thought Bolshevik revolution was the best ending for a George Eliot novel! You probably think you wouldn't have to clean this fucking house if the mop and bucket would only collectivise themselves! Sometimes you're a real person and sometimes it's like I've just tuned in to Radio Moscow." He could feel how red his face was and kept his eyes down, away from Victor, as he stalked back across the room for his shoes. "Call me a traitor all you want, I'd rather be a traitor with a clear mind than a patriot without a single thought of my own." He slammed the lid of his suitcase closed and clicked the clasp.

"Yuuri… please don't go." Victor had climbed out of bed now too, stopping a few feet away from Yuuri like he was an animal that might attack. Yuuri swallowed hard and forced himself to meet Victor's eyes.

"I need some air. And a cigarette. I'll contact you in the usual way to arrange our next meeting, Captain Nikiforov."

He let the front door slam behind him as he left.
Before you make a comment 'correcting' my use of the term 'United Nations', please consult the primary source I am quoting in that scene. Thanks.
Berlin, Part Three

Chapter Summary

The tide of the war has turned against the Axis nations, but the oncoming Allied victory likely means an end to Yuuri and Victor's relationship—something that is only hastened by the resumption of air raids on Berlin.

Chapter Notes

Just as a reminder before you read this chapter, this story is tagged as 'angst with a happy ending'. Okay? Okay. Buckle up kids.

With many thanks to renaissance for assuring me that I wasn't getting gentile on everything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its stupidity. War settles nothing.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 1946

Yuuri had only the vaguest idea of where he was. He had been walking for several hours since making his dramatic exit from Victor's house. It was Easter Sunday and so not even the most dogged bus or tram drivers were at work, and while he had initially needed to wander, smoke and clear his head, the later it got in the afternoon the more pressing his need to return home became. His stomach was growling from a lack of lunch.

His fury at Victor was no longer hot enough to make his face red and his hands shaky but it still burned in his mind; that idiotic self-righteousness, that ridiculous aggrieved tone, the fact that he knew Victor was thoughtful and intelligent and perceptive— he couldn't do the work if he wasn't— but that there was always that iron wall in his mind around anything having to do with the integrity of communism and the Soviet Union.

When he had first begun to notice it, notice the way that Victor would slip out of his own voice and into prefabricated propaganda phrases like they were quotations from some holy book, he had felt sympathetic. Even after all these years there were deeps ruts worn in his own mind by the thought-terminating pet phrases of the Japanese government, comfortable lines of least resistance when encountering a threatening idea. But Yuuri didn't let it control him. It didn't take the mind of a genius to see that while Japan might have many advantages, it was not somehow uniquely pure, or to consider that perhaps the other peoples of Asia might have their own opinions about being united under divine imperial rule.

Victor was more than capable of realising that his country wasn't perfect, that it was just as capable of horrors as the British with their brutal empire or the Americans and their cities built by slaves. It made no difference to the importance of their present cause, and it certainly didn't make the crimes of
the Nazis somehow lesser. It wasn't as if Soviet culpability at Katyn was even a proven fact, only a possibility. But just mentioning it had been like cornering an animal, all Victor's sharpest defences coming out.

Yuuri wondered just how long Victor had thought of him as a traitor.

With a heavy sigh he set down his suitcase and sat on a low wall in front of a tall building of flats, startling a rook from the little garden behind him as he reached into his coat pocket for his cigarettes and a match. Wandering around dwelling on his emotions was only likely to get him more lost. The sky was still clear and the sun was sliding down towards the western horizon; if he followed it he would at least be heading towards the right side of the city, and with luck he might find the ship canal or even the Spree, and have a much better idea of where he was. Panicking wouldn't solve anything. He took a long, soothing drag on the cigarette.

He was staring at the patterns the smoke made in the cooling afternoon air when he heard a car approaching, and then the sound of its engine cutting out, the jerk of the handbrake, and a door slamming.

"Yuuri!"

He turned his head. Victor looked dishevelled; no coat on, no tie or waistcoat under his jacket, and his hat was at a very unflattering angle. His face was red and as he jogged up the street Yuuri could see that his eyes were puffy and a little bloodshot, almost as if he'd been crying. He slowed to a stop a few feet away, and Yuuri focused on keeping his hand steady and breathing in another slow mouthful of smoke.

"Thank goodness, Yuuri, I was so worried, I realised there wouldn't be any trams running but I didn't know which way you'd gone and I wanted to find you before dark, and I…" He tapered off and made a small, heart-wrenching sound at the back of his throat.

Yuuri looked away. The expression on Victor's face was enough to make him forgive him on the spot, but the curled-up, thorny centre of his mind absolutely did not want to do that.

"Please, Yuuri." Victor's voice hitched, like it was caught on a nail. "If you don't want to come back, or even to talk, I can drive you home. I just couldn't leave you to walk all that way, and I… I don't like fighting with you." He sounded like he might be crying again, and Yuuri was weak, far too weak. "I want to make it better."

Taking one last drag on the cigarette, Yuuri let the end fall to the pavement next to his feet. He exhaled hard, trying to will the nerves and the frustration out of his body with it.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go somewhere we can talk."

They ended up parked behind a boarded-up church, hidden from the street in the long shadow of its ivy-wreathed spire. Yuuri started out of the windscreen as Victor turned around on the seat to face him.

"First of all, I am sorry for what I said about you. That was a cruel word to use. I know that you do what you do because it's right, and I admire that enormously."

"Thank you," Yuuri said stiffly.

"And I'm sorry for- for making unfair accusations. I was just very upset, and I didn't understand." Victor sighed. "I still don't understand, but I can't… I hate this. I don't want to fight with you. I want to go home and eat dinner together and talk about books and forget about all of this."
Yuuri swallowed hard. He wanted that too, wanted to savour the last whole night they would have in each others' company for who knew how long. But he wanted to do it with having to tread on eggshells like he always did. "I thought that you would be able to understand. That it's possible for a country to do both good and bad things, that nothing is just one way or the other." He fiddled with the hem of his jacket. "I still care about Japan, even if I'm working for her enemies right now. And I doing that work doesn't mean I don't hate what the British did in Asia, and hate that they still sit on stolen land all over the world and act like they're doing the people there a huge favour by robbing them blind. This is politics. It's complicated."

"But we're better- we're supposed to be better than that," Victor said, and his voice sounded newly strained, desperate. "I know our allies have done awful things even if they now rightly oppose the fascists. Before the revolution, Russia did many terrible things too. People who worked the land were owned by their landlords. Sometimes the government would decide to blame some event on the Jews and stir up great violent riots to destroy their homes and murder them. And we were hardly kind to the nation of Japan. But that was before we embraced communism. It's the best system of government, the right way for people to live and to work together to become strong. We're not the same as the capitalists and the imperialists."

"They taught me similar things in school," Yuuri said, turning to look at Victor at last. "About Japan. That we are superior, that our Emperors are descended from gods, that imperial rule is the best kind of government and it is our duty to conquer the whole of Asia and unite it under a single throne. I was a good candidate for the foreign service because I speak three European languages fluently, but I know that if I'd gone to university in Japan instead of studying with 'corrupting Westerners' I wouldn't just be somebody's assistant. In some ways it's good that what I really do makes me so nervous, because to Colonel Nakamura and the other senior staff I just look weak and stupid and therefore not a threat." He sighed. "I don't- I don't mean to say that the Soviet Union is exactly like Japan, or at all like the European fascists. But can't you see that so many of the things that you say about your country are just things you've been told that you have to think, not anything that you've genuinely thought of for yourself?"

Emotions passed across Victor's face like clouds in a high wind, confusion and conflict and pain. "Yuuri if I think about these things too much, I can't do what I do here."

"I seem to manage perfectly well," Yuuri said with a huff.

"And maybe you wouldn't if you were hiding not just a part of yourself, but everything." He clenched his fists. "You have to lie to your colleagues, to be careful around them, but they call you by name and speak to you in your own language. You write home to your mother. You live your own life. I live the life of a man I despise with every single fibre of my being. I see posters in the street about how my people are vermin to be exterminated. I have meetings with members of the government who offer me the slave labour of my captured comrades in Herr Rittberger's factories, and before the war is over I fear I may run out of viable excuses as to why I only wish to employ Germans to whom I have to pay a wage. My parents were both killed by the Nazis and my home city has been a battlefield for nearly two years now. The only times I can speak my father's language are with you, and I love you but you can't speak it back to me."

Yuuri froze. They had said it, of course they had, but never in a language they had in common, with that last veil of deniability torn away. The four syllables echoed in his head, ich liebe dich, like Victor had tapped into the soul of them again and used it to entrance him.

"I have to know that I am living through this for a good reason," Victor continued. "I have to know that we are right, that we are better, that when the Red Army pushes the Germans back across Europe we will be liberators, and that-" his voice went very quiet "-that I haven't just spent my years
here fighting for the camps to be emptied of German prisoners and then filled again with ours."

Something stung at Yuuri’s eyes and he lifted his glasses up to rub at them, hand coming away wet. "I just… I hate having conversations with what your government tells you to believe and not with you. I wish you could think about these things for yourself."

"Okay," Victor said, "I understand." And then softly, almost to himself, "I wish I could too."

Yuuri reached across the seat to where Victor’s hand was still curled into a fist in his lap and gently unfolded his fingers, glancing quickly at the empty area around the car before pressing a brief kiss to his knuckles. "I think I’d like to go back to your house now. If that’s okay."

"Yes," Victor said, and he rubbed at his own eyes, "yes, it’s okay." They looked at one another for a long moment, something about it feeling as tentative to Yuuri as that first evening together almost a year ago now. Yuuri squeezed Victor’s hand between both of his own, suddenly fiercely unwilling to let go.

"Victor," he said, and it was like reaching out across a great emptiness and touching something solid and real. "I love you too."

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**Dear Yura and Mila**

Victor paused, chewing idly on the end of his pen. He had been putting off responding for months now, but with a permanent land route established into and out of the city since January he could be much more confident of a letter actually reaching them.

*Thank you for your good wishes and greetings again; please give my best to everyone in return. It is good to hear that your dear Mama is also still with you, Yura, and working too.*

*I wish to express my great delight and extend my congratulations to you and your comrades in your success in breaching the German line at last. I have never felt so proud to be a son of Leningrad as when I think of your bravery and strength, and of the complete rout of the German forces that I am sure must be close at hand. I regret that it may be some time before I am able to hear the piece of music you described, but I will seek it out when I can, and am sure that it will inspire the same courage and pride in any of our allies who hear it.*

He wished he could find out who the composer was. Yuuri hadn’t heard anything about it on his periodic listening to the English radio, but it wasn’t as if he was glued to the thing all day. Victor couldn’t help but daydream about them listening to it together, huddled close around Yuuri’s little receiver, being able to share something of the city through music even if Yuuri would never be in Leningrad with him.

He hated that thought. Surely there was a way, even if it took years; when the laws against homosexuals were rescinded, when communism came to Japan or to Britain, when all the borderlines between them would fall away and they would be free to love one another. He would wait for Yuuri, if he had to.

*As for Herr Hitler, if he is foolish enough to show up at your doorstep then please do give him my warmest regards before you pull the trigger.*

Some fool had given Mila a little toy slingshot as a birthday gift once, and half the windows in the neighbourhood had ended up broken. He had no doubt she was absolutely terrifying with a rifle.
Victor leaned back in his desk chair, looking towards the ceiling for inspiration. If he could write whatever he wished, he would talk about the way all the chatter amongst his contacts and informants had turned much darker since the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. He would write about the growing unease from the Italians about Allied operations in the Mediterranean, about their vulnerability now that Tunisia was lost to them, about how on the other side of the world the Americans and the Australians were severing Japanese supply lines and driving them out island by tiny island.

He would write about love. These idiotically brave children were as near enough to family as he supposed he could come now. He would write about how he had never imagined such a thing, that even living at the heart of Hitler's den of snakes he had found peace and companionship and something that made him feel transformed, born anew. He would tell them that even in the deepest darkness you may still find a comrade who has lit a match.

Be a light to one another. The spark has been struck; now it is up to all of us to fan it into an inferno.

The image still lingered in his mind when he met Feltsman in their usual park, purchasing a hot frankfurter wrapped in a bread roll and slathered with mustard from a vendor at the gate and munching on it as they walked.

"Could I ask you a personal question, Grandfather?" he asked, once he'd traded the letter for another folded-up newspaper.

"Have we not had more than enough personal conversations to last both our lifetimes?"

Well it wasn't a no. "I know you are not a religious believer, you've said so yourself. But you hardly ever let me buy you food- you certainly wouldn't today- and when you do try to keep to all those rules about it, even though you must know that they could be doing anything at all back in the kitchens out of your sight. Why do you do it?"

"It's really none of your business," Feltsman said, voice thick with irritation, but just as Victor was about to apologise he sighed. "My father was a rabbi, a very devout man, and the things you learn as a child, they get into your instincts, your bones. When he died and the Great War began a month later and I realised there couldn't possibly be a God I couldn't entirely shake it, but I didn't exactly put in a lot of effort to stick to his precepts either. And then here…” He gestured around them, to the groups of people in the distance. "I'm powerless here. The kind of work that we do is vital, but fuck me is it slow. But at least I know that snivelling little man in the Chancellery is just as powerless over what's in my heart- in my bones- as I am to go and stick a knife in his neck like he deserves. While I'm still alive and free, I'll thumb my nose at him however I fucking can. It's not the details of it that matters. It's what it means."

A spark, a flicker of light to defy the darkness. Victor smiled around his sandwich. "Thank you Grandfather. I think I understand a little better."

"Good." Feltsman looked at him sideways. "Now don't ever ask me about myself again. And that is an order."

"A toast!" Victor cried, giving Yuuri a top-up, and gods only knew where he had managed to get a bottle of marsala but it was warm and heady and Yuuri raised his glass. "To our brave, bold, and I am sure extremely handsome comrades who feast tonight on… some Italian food that I can't think of! To the Canadians and the Indians and the French, and I think there were a few British men involved too, no?"
"To a free Sicily!" Yuuri agreed, clinking their glasses together before swallowing half of his in one gulp. It buzzed and hummed pleasantly on the way down.

"To General Eisenhower, whose name sounds German, but he isn't, so that's okay!"

"To Mussolini fucking off back to the pit he crawled out of!"

"Oh, that's a good one iskorka moya!" He'd taken to that term as a nickname a few months ago and Yuuri still had no idea what it meant, but he loved how it sounded, all rough and sibilant in Victor's accent. Victor giggled and leaned over, slipping his arm around Yuuri's waist. "To Herr Hitler joining him there in very short order!"

"As we would say in Oxford, jolly good show!" Yuuri set his glass down on the desk so he could wrap both arms around Victor's neck, pulling him into a kiss that was wine-sweet and intoxicating. Victor leaned into him, pressing their bodies close and shifting his hips in a little rhythm, as if they were dancing. His mouth slid over to the corner of Yuuri's jaw.

"I wish I had a radio," he said wistfully. "A proper one, like yours, so we could listen to your English stations. Or maybe some Americans playing jazz." He took a step back and then forwards and back again, Yuuri following him with only a little alcohol-infused wobbliness. "I would love to dance with you."

"I'd like that." Yuuri glanced sideways and noticed that Victor's glass was decidedly more full than his own, and he slid one of his hands down and into his trouser pocket to retrieve a single pfennig. With the speed and stealth befitting an undercover spy, he dropped it into Victor's wine.

Victor looked into the glass, back up at Yuuri, and into the glass again. "Why did you do that?"

It was perfectly obvious, wasn't it? "Now you have to drink the whole glass," Yuuri said patiently.

"I do?"

"Yes." Yuuri hiccuped. "I pennied- pfenniged you. It's the rules."

"Oh, the rules," Victor said, his tone implying an understanding that did not show on his face. Nevertheless he downed the glass in one go, leaving the coin to rattle at the bottom, and turned back to Yuuri with a grin. "Are there other rules?"

"Hmm," Yuuri said, reaching back around Victor for his own glass. It would be unfair of him not to finish his too. "Yes. Lots."

"You should tell me," Victor murmured, leaning back in, and Yuuri thought that no matter any fancy outfits he would always look most beautiful like this, in shirtsleeves and bare feet, two buttons undone at his collar and his braces starting to slide off his shoulders. "I like it when you tell me what to do."

It had been good- great, really- the first time they slept together, the laughter and the discovery and the end of years of unpleasantly forced celibacy on both of their parts. But they knew each other now, knew how to touch and where to linger, how to drive each other utterly mad and then gloriously relieve it, and it was like nothing else Yuuri had ever experienced. Most of the men he'd been with, it had been one or two nights and barely enough to recall one another's names. Whatever it had been between him and Ryuichi-kun was too stilted and secret to really blossom, and perhaps he might have got there with Henry in his first year but Yuuri had grown too tired of being woken up at 6am by him leaving for rowing practice to put up with him for very long. Tristan had been the closest and Yuuri had loved him, really, as best as he knew how, had loved his sense of romance and
his gentle humour, but he had never felt this deeply known, this strange connection that went past their words and into the ways his and Victor's bodies moved soundlessly together.

The twin Nazi insistences that everyone should be having lots of (German) babies, but that nobody should be having any fun whatsoever whilst making them, made getting hold of both condoms and decent lubricant an increasing chore, but there were plenty of ways to have fun without them. They tumbled into bed giggling, hands pulling clumsily at each others' clothing, and Victor's kisses were sloppy but he knew just how much pressure to apply with his lips and his teeth to leave a mark at the juncture of Yuuri's neck and shoulder that would linger for days. He tangled a hand in Victor's hair, biting his lip hard as Victor pushed his shirt right off his shoulders and began to trail his mouth down Yuuri's chest.

He wanted every mark, every scratch, wanted Victor enfolded into the truth of his body where Yuuri could always keep him. He wished his fingers could leave permanent prints where they grabbed at Victor's shoulders, both of them covered in one another until 'mine' and 'yours' became the same word. They might have drunk wine and toasted the Allies, but past the joy and the alcohol haze he knew they could both feel it, the knowledge that when the victory they both longed for came this would be over. Men like them were never allowed to have anything that lasted, but he wanted, oh, he wanted Victor forever.

"Love you," Victor murmured against his stomach, pausing between kisses to unbutton his braces and his trouser fly, "love you, Yuuri, my spark, my light," and then he lifted his head and their eyes met. "You look sad," he said after a moment.

Yuuri shook his head. "I'm fine."

"You are not." Victor raised his eyebrows. "I don't know about you but I'm not about to put my mouth on a man's particulars if he's going to look so miserable about it."

"You talk like an old housewife," Yuuri said, wheezing a laugh, and stroked Victor's hair. "Fine. When we win, I'm going to lose you. I want us to win. We have to win. But I don't want to let you go."

Victor's throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he ducked his head again to press a kiss just beneath Yuuri's hipbone. "Me neither," he said, his voice a heated whisper. "But until that day, until Marshal Vasilevsky marches through the Brandenburg Gate, I belong to you." He kissed again, a fraction lower. "And for all the time we have, I want to enjoy every-" another kiss, lower still "-single-" and another "-moment."

"If-fuck- if you're not the death of me first," Yuuri managed, both sadness and his remaining drunkenness suddenly whittled back to leave a very sharp awareness of exactly where Victor's mouth was- and where it wasn't. He felt Victor smile against his skin, hum a little, and he clenched the fingers of his other hand in the bedsheets. "You're an awful man. I can't believe I love you."

"But you do," Victor murmured before he finally, finally stopped teasing, and Yuuri closed his eyes and let himself forget there was anything else.

Ambassador Crispino really did look like shit. Victor sipped his champagne, observing the man from across the room. His hair was neatly swept back but it looked limp and greasy, and if the dark circles around his eyes were an indication then he probably hadn't slept at all in the six weeks since the fall of Sicily.

Had he been a betting man, Victor would not have picked Hiroshi Oshima as the one to host a party
to cheer up Berlin's diplomats in the wake of the first Allied landings in continental Europe, but he was making a decent go of it. The doors at the back of the embassy ballroom were open to the beautiful Japanese gardens outside, where a flock of house martins wheeled and burbled in the last of the day's light. In the corner a string quartet was playing some stirring Beethoven.

Yuuri was here too, somewhere, looking unfairly gorgeous in evening dress. They had exchanged glances earlier in the evening, probably lingering a little longer than they should have, but even if there was any reason for Stefan Rittberger to trouble himself with a bureaucrat when he could be sweet-talking ambassadors, Victor didn't entirely trust himself to stick to the persona. He already wanted terribly to ask Yuuri to dance.

A few feet away from her distressed father, Sara Crispino looked rather better rested but just as agitated, her eyes flickering around the room and her hand clutching her champagne glass as if it were a weapon. Victor set his own glass down on a passing waiter's tray and weaved his way through the crowd towards her.

"Signorina Crispino," he said smoothly, touching her elbow. "Would you care to dance with me?" If he couldn't ask Yuuri then at least he had someone here who was almost a friend.

Sara's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Of course, Herr Rittberger." She thrust her glass into her brother Michele's hand and let Victor lead her out onto the floor.

"Your father looks like he's about to drop dead," Victor said as he settled his hand at her waist. "Has there been any news?"

"No," she said. Dancing seemed to make her less restless. "I'm not sure what he's more afraid of, getting recalled for political reasons or hearing that we've officially surrendered. He and Marshal Badoglio have always hated each other."

Victor raised his eyebrows. "You think there's going to be an armistice so soon?"

"Only an idiot would pretend we can still fight when the whole Mediterranean belongs to the Allies. And our idiot is in prison now." This time she smiled properly. He and Yuuri might have celebrated the capture of Sicily, but Victor doubted there was anyone in Berlin happier to see Mussolini's ignominious fall than Sara Crispino.

"Do you think you'll be safe in Berlin when it happens?"

"Papa has always been a friend to Herr Hitler," Sara said, with a tone and expression as if she'd just said he enjoyed dining on live slugs. "If our government claims neutrality. I doubt there will be a problem for us individually. If they decide to join the Allies and declare war… well, Papa may decide he'd rather stay in Germany and claim asylum or something ridiculous. That would be difficult for me."

"You know if you need any assistance…"

Sara looked up into his face. "I'll be fine. I won't have you harping on at me about not taking stupid risks and then let you take them instead."

Victor was about to respond when he heard a sudden hubbub of voices further back in the room; the music continued but they and several other dancing couples stopped to crane their heads. Ambassador Oshima was standing in a close huddle with Colonel Nakamura as one of the younger military officers attached to the embassy- Lieutenant Iwamoto, he thought?- gave a verbal report in rapid but rather too loud Japanese. Victor could see Yuuri a little distance away from them, his eyes
widening as Iwamoto continued. Whatever it was, it was something big.

"My dear signorina, are you sure your name is not Cassandra?" Victor murmured.

A split second later the ballroom doors slammed open and a group of men in the sinister grey uniforms of the SS marched into the room. The string quartet squeaked into silence in the middle of a movement and the Japanese officers beside Oshima snapped into alert formation around him.

"Officers, what is the meaning of this?" Oshima asked the Gestapo loudly. They saluted him and one handed over a folded slip of paper.

"My deepest apologies, Herr Ambassador, but we have direct orders from the Führer."

Oshima studied the document for a second and then nodded, jerking his head towards the back of the room and saying something too quiet for Victor to make out. The SS men strode in formation across the ballroom, people nervously parting before them, until they reached the corner where Crispino was still lurking miserably with his son.

"Ambassador Crispino," the lead officer said with a volume clearly intended to carry across the whole room, "you are required to come with us into state custody."

The colour drained from Crispino's face and Victor felt Sara's hand grip his shoulder hard.

"What has happened?" Crispino said, his voice so high-pitched it was almost a wail. "Please, tell me what has happened. The Führer knows I am a loyal man, if my government has-"

"You are not under arrest, Ambassador," the officer said, the unspoken 'yet' painfully clear. "We are here to ensure the protection of you and your family until the order and loyalty for which you stand can be restored to Italy."

A wave of whispers rippled across the room at that. Victor kept his expression regretful, but inside his heart leaped in his chest. Italy must have surrendered. Even with the whole country still full of the German troops deployed for its protection, there was no way Hitler could hope to hold it by force. One of the three great powers of the Axis had fallen. Two to go.

Crispino was visibly shaking now, his head bowed shamefully. Behind him Michele hovered, more than a little drunk and clearly wondering what he ought to do. Crispino didn't lift his head as he called, "Sara, come here."

One by one the people around them began to turn and stare at Victor and Sara instead. "Shit," she sighed, not at all quietly, and it took an enormous amount of Victor's willpower not to laugh. She extricated herself from him, rolled her shoulders back, and walked across the room with all the calm imperiousness of a Sforza of old.

"It only seems to be you that they want, Papa," she said when she reached him. "Isn't that so?" she directed at the Gestapo.

"Fräulein Crispino if you would kindly-" one began, but she cut him off.

"No, I don't think I will kindly. Papa you must do as you are told, I'm sure, but I don't see why Mickey and I must have the party ruined for us."

"Don't be a child, Sara. We all have to go. It's for the good of the country as well as for our own good."
"Well the country is making some new choices about what's good for it, wouldn't you say?" The pure innocence of the smile that she flashed her father and the SS officers both was genius. Victor had once thought her made for the stage, but her performance now was precisely calculated politics.

"Our orders are only for the Ambassador-" one of the Gestapo began before his superior snapped, "Silence!"

"You will come along Sara," Crispino said, "and you will cease to disobey your father in public." He reached out and grabbed her arm and then twisted hard, causing her to yelp in pain and stumble forwards towards him. Victor's whole body went tense, but then there was a great shout of "No!" and a heavy thump.

Crispino was on the floor. Standing over him and looking entirely confused at himself was Michele, glancing back and forth between his fist and his prone father as if still trying to piece together the precise relationship between the two. The entire ballroom had gone deathly silent.

"Well then," Sara said, smoothing her skirt. Victor knew she must be terrified but from a distance she looked utterly composed. "Officers, it seems you have your man now, ready for transportation. Mickey, darling, would you mind walking me home?" She held out her arm to Michele and he took it, still dazed but clearly grateful for her direction, and together they walked back across the ballroom and out through the door.

The long, unchanging drone of the all clear was still sounding as Yuuri staggered out of the cellar with his neighbours into a late November morning, loud enough to almost drown out the other noises filtering in from the street outside. It had been a long, long night, half-sleeping propped up against a cold brick wall, woken over and over by the Jäschkes' baby crying and the thunder of the bombs.

He didn't need to hear it from Minako-san to know that this was the start of a new campaign. They'd had a raid back in March, a few consecutive nights as August turned into September, but nothing that had kept people out of their beds for more than part of the night, nothing like the long hours under fire that they'd endured the previous week and last night.

He followed Herr Lindemann from the ground floor out towards the front door of the building, desperate for a little sunlight and air. He would have to try and make contact with Victor soon to check on him. His house didn't have a cellar but he was close to a public shelter, so surely he would be fine. Surely.

When the front door opened Yuuri flinched, first at the bright morning sunlight and then at the dust that went straight into his mouth and nose, that hung in the air like a pallid cloud. He couldn't help but inhale some and half-choked on it, doubling over as the fine particles scratched at the back of his throat.

"Can you help? Please, can someone help?"

When Yuuri scrunched up his eyes and looked up again there was a young woman, clothes covered in dust and dirt, standing at the foot of the porch stairs and clasping Lindemann by the hand. She looked vaguely familiar, the sort of person Yuuri might have nodded 'hello' to without ever managing to learn her name.

"My little sister, my son too, they're trapped, if only someone could move some of the beams but she says she can't move her leg and I can smell smoke, please, I'm so scared..."

Lindemann looked like the proverbial rabbit in the headlights. Yuuri didn't know much about him,
beyond the fact that he worked as a clerk and had been invalided out of the army for some health condition or other, but it was enough to know that he wasn't exactly the best sort of person to call on for feats of derring-do. He came down the steps, removing his hat then slipping off his jacket and taking care to get his shoulder holster caught up inside it. He always kept the revolver on his person during air raids; it was the last thing he'd want found in the rubble if his building got bombed out.

"Where are they?" he asked the woman, rolling up his shirtsleeves with one hand.

The trapped girl's name was Annika, and she probably had a broken leg. Yuuri stood in front of the wreckage of the building across the street and tried to assess how they could work around the damage. It had seemed simple enough once he'd realised there wasn't actually a fire, just a matter of shifting two beams and allowing the girl and the child in her arms to scramble free, but between her thin-lipped description of the pain and the grey, bloodless look on what he could see of her face he'd realised that it wasn't going to be that easy.

"If you can get Rudi out then just leave me," Annika called from under the debris. "If you move too many things trying to get me free then the whole thing might collapse and kill us both."

"Absolutely not," Yuuri called back. It was just another mathematical puzzle. Where did the beams overlap, where was the load of what remained of the building sitting, where could the weight be shifted or held back. A few other men from his own building and others on the street had gathered around; behind them an elderly couple had produced a teapot and cups from somewhere and were trying to comfort Annika's sobbing sister.

Herr Kielmann from the building next door sidled up alongside Yuuri and pointed at an especially precarious pile of bricks. "Look, I think if we get a couple of guys to hold that long beam there back it should save those from falling while we do, and then the rest of us would be able to make a decent route in for the kid to get out and for someone to carry the girl out of the way. What do you think?"

Yuuri had absolutely no idea why this man whose name he barely knew seemed to be treating him like the head of this little rescue operation, but he nodded and beckoned over some of the more capable and less petrified-looking men standing nearby. While they started to work he crouched down by the little gap in the rubble and explained the plan to Annika.

"Whatever you do, try to move your leg as little as possible even once we've got you free, alright? Until we can get you to a doctor you might make it a lot worse."

She nodded. He could still hear the boy, Rudi, sniffing, but he was no longer bawling for his mother like he had been when Yuuri had first crossed the street to the scene.

"You'd better hurry up, this won't hold for very long," Kielmann called, and Yuuri started lifting up the smaller planks and pushing back piles of shattered bricks and mortar that were keeping the pair trapped. As soon as the gap was big enough Annika boosted Rudi up out of it, into the arms of Herr Jäschke, who immediately leapt down to deliver him back to his mother.

"You can't clear much more or I think the whole thing's going to come down!" Jäschke called back from the street. Yuuri glanced around, then shoved another beam out of the way, took a deep breath, and reached into the hole.

"Hold on to me," he said, and Annika looped her arms around his neck as he gripped her around the waist and pulled. She let out a little shriek of pain, sharp in his ear, but then her full weight was on him and he staggered backwards, fumbling for his footing in the rubble. All at once there were hands at his back supporting him, hands taking her weight too, helping him to lay her down carefully in the road as behind them the building let out a shuddering groan and collapsed a little further.
Yuuri's head felt suddenly thick, buzzing with static, and he had an intense craving for nicotine. There were sounds that were almost like clapping and cheering but far, far away; someone was thumping him joyously on the back but he could barely feel it. He licked his impossibly dry lips and looked up, trying to comprehend the crowd through the thin layer of dust on his glasses.

Standing by the steps up to Yuuri's building, holding his discarded hat and jacket in his arms, was Victor.

"Excuse me," Yuuri mumbled, "please excuse me," and people were still touching him, trying to talk to him as he pushed through the throng, and Victor had stood up too, and held Yuuri's eyes for a long moment before he slipped into an alleyway. Yuuri glanced over his shoulder to check that no-one was following before he went after him.

"That was incredible- incredible!" Victor started to babble as soon as Yuuri came around the corner. He tugged Yuuri's glasses off and began cleaning them with his own handkerchief after returning Yuuri's clothes and holstered revolver. "You were as calm as a general under siege, Yuuri, my Yuuri, so clearheaded and of course all those men followed your lead, how could they not, and you saved their lives, both of them, I'm so proud, you were just amazing!"

Yuuri leaned back against the wall of the alley with a heavy sigh. He was shaking. When had he started shaking? Victor took off his scarf and wrapped it around Yuuri's neck.

"Do you want to go up to your rooms and fetch your coat? Maybe some brandy, if you have any? I don't have my hip flask with me. Or maybe I should just take you to get a cup of tea-"

Yuuri shook his head. "It's fine. I should leave soon anyway, I'll be late for work."

"No, that's why I'm here. There's no work for you to be late to, at least not this morning. I heard it on the radio at the public shelter; Hohenzollernstrasse was hit last night and the Japanese Embassy was almost totally destroyed. I just had to make sure that you hadn't been working late and got stuck there or..." The look of worry that passed over his face was one Yuuri could well sympathise with. Victor stepped in a little closer, one hand coming up to touch Yuuri's cheek very softly.

"Well. Wow. I really don't know how to feel about that," Yuuri said, closing his eyes and leaning into Victor's touch. "God, I don't know how to feel about anything right now."

"You're tired and in shock, iskorka moya," Victor murmured, "maybe you should just go home and get some sleep, or if we meet up a few streets from here where I parked I could drive you to mine and make you some tea and-"

"Katsuki-san?" The unexpected voice seemed to scrape on all of Yuuri's raw nerves and he shuddered as Victor stepped away, abruptly but a little too late. Standing a few metres into the alleyway was Higuchi-san from the embassy, staring at them both, and the expression on his face somewhere between confusion, disgust, and triumph. He took another step closer. "Rittberger?" he said, his voice rising an octave.

"Now Higuchi-san I'm not sure what you're doing here or what you think-" Victor began, all brash, wealthy Rittberger, but Higuchi-san cut him off with an unpleasant snort.

"I always knew you loved Westerners too much, Katsuki, but I didn't think it was like this. Or that you'd go acting out your perversions with a German." He gave Victor a scrutinising look. "If he really is German. What was that he just called you, Katsuki? Iskorka? Sounds Polish. Maybe Russian." He made it sound like a horrible insult, like the prospect of either was even worse than the fact of Victor being a man. "I came all this way because Colonel Nakamura wanted to make sure
you were still alive and have you called in, but he might be rather disappointed when I tell him what his prized assistant likes to get up to in filthy alleyways with enemies of the state."

The static was rising in Yuuri's ears again. Victor was talking suddenly, rapidly, but he couldn't make out any of it; his vision was filling with Higuchi-san's pointed, sneering face, the horrible glee in his voice ringing like a bell, and Yuuri's hand was under his jacket and then brandishing his revolver in a single, seamless movement.

Both of the other men stopped talking.

"You won't tell anybody anything," Yuuri managed, his voice sounding strange in his own ears. His hand was unnaturally steady as he levelled the gun.

"Yuuri, be careful," Victor hissed.

"You don't have it in you," Higuchi-san said, arrogance trying to mask the fear that flickered across his face.

"You won't tell anybody anything," Yuuri repeated, gritting his teeth. He felt as if he was watching the scene play out from somewhere far outside his own body, like this was happening on a stage or a cinema screen. He had to protect their work. He had to protect Victor.

"I'm going to enjoy reporting you, Katsuki."

There was a noise like a trapped firecracker going off, a sudden bolt of pain from Yuuri’s palm to his shoulder, and Higuchi-san's pale grey coat bloomed red.

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Yuuri was slouched below the window on the passenger side of the car seat, his hat pulled low and his arms wrapped tightly around himself. Victor couldn't help glancing at him when his eyes should really be on the road.

It had been the right thing to do, and they both knew it, so he wasn't going to waste time saying it aloud. He didn't know what kind of disciplinary measures the Japanese might inflict on civilian embassy staff, but the best Victor could have hoped for would be a short trial and a long train ride—and that was assuming nothing got uncovered about what they were really doing together besides lurking in 'filthy alleyways'. He could see the way Yuuri was shaking, though, for all he tried to keep still. The first person you killed could be the most monstrously evil man to ever walk the planet; it didn't mean that they wouldn't be with you forever.

The city's morning traffic was only made worse by the aftermath of the air raid, whole streets blocked with rubble or just slowed to a standstill by firefighters and rescue crews trying to get from place to place. The only thing Yuuri had said since they'd run out of the other end of the alley was that they needed to get to the Theater des Volkes on the north bank of the Spree and knock at the stage door. It must be his emergency extraction plan.

Yuuri would have to leave Berlin. Victor shoved the thought down hard with everything else roiling in his stomach. He took a right down a narrow but empty street, the car rattling on the cobblestones, and then finally back out onto the main road and over the ship canal.

*Everything will be fine,* he wanted to say, *don't worry, I'll fix it, I'll make everything okay again.* He wanted to roll back the whole morning and stop himself from coming to find Yuuri, from putting them both in that position, from being much too fucking obvious when they were still in a public place…
"Take the next left, I think," Yuuri said quietly, peering cautiously out of the window. "We need to come around the back of the building, and avoid being seen."

"Okay." They drove between tall, red-brick buildings, slowing for a little throng of cyclists, a woman crossing the street with a pram. It seemed absurd that all these people were still going about their lives as if nothing had happened, picking up in the aftermath of another bombing raid and carrying on like the world wasn't cleaved entirely in two. There were signs for delivery drivers pointing towards the theatre and Victor followed them until they pulled in to park in the building's shadow. Yuuri let out a long, shuddering breath and Victor reached across the seat to touch the back of his hand.

"Right. I'm okay." Yuuri opened the car door and stood up straight as he got out, but there still seemed to be something hunched over about him as they headed for the stage door. Someone opened it only a moment after Yuuri knocked, a small, young woman with delicate features who looked both of them over curiously.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to Emil. Please tell him his blackbird needs to come home to roost."

The woman nodded without a hint of puzzlement and disappeared, closing the door after her. Victor jammed his hands inside his coat pockets, forcing himself not to reach for Yuuri, to hold him, to extend any of the physical comfort that they'd both grown so accustomed to. It hadn't even been two years yet. He'd thought they would have so much more time.

When the stage door opened again they were ushered inside by a tall man with a neat beard and a shock of dark blonde hair. He clasped Yuuri by the shoulder and gave him a sad look, then a more measured, assessing one to Victor.

"Who's this?" he asked coolly.

"You can trust him," Yuuri said, and then glanced back at Victor himself. "This is Emil. He does- he has done a lot of things to help me here in Berlin. Emil, this is-" and he hesitated, clearly not sure which name to use.

Victor bit the bullet. "I'm Victor," he said, extending a hand to Emil, who shook it cautiously. "Can you help Yuuri one last time?"

Emil turned out to be a member of some kind of dance production, the other employees of which were either the most laid-back people Victor had ever encountered, or, more likely, were all in on Yuuri's MI6 spy ring. They were ushered into a quiet backstage area with a blessedly comfortable sofa, and some kind soul produced a tot of brandy for Yuuri's shock. Emil himself had a number of hushed conversations just out of Victor's earshot, and then came back over to them carrying a cardboard box, a pen and a notepad.

"Herr Yuuri, I'm going to send someone to your home to sort out your belongings, so you need to make a list of anything that you definitely need to take with you and anything you have that needs to be destroyed, as well as your address and your keys." Yuuri nodded mutely. "I've got your Takahashi passport and the travel permits here for you. Is there any use asking if-?"

Yuuri shook his head. "I'm so sorry Emil, I kept your visa at the office where I could make sure it was always up-to-date, but the embassy was bombed last night, it's probably under three feet of rubble."

"No, no, I understand. I'm sure Frau Arabesque can sort me out another exit plan. You make your
list, I need to make some telephone calls." He disappeared again and Victor could only sit, trying not
to fidget, as Yuuri carefully wrote out two lists of his belongings. To keep, some of his books, his
coat, a spare pair of shoes. To destroy, a one-time pad, a hidden letter, the radio set that had brought
him so much joy.

There was nothing of Victor that he could either take or leave. Of course they had never given each
other presents, beyond a few borrowed books and meals made at home, but now he wished they had.
"Take my scarf with you," he blurted out, tugging on the soft lambswool still looped around Yuuri's
neck.

Yuuri looked up at him then, the first time he had really looked right at Victor since he shot Higuchi.
His face was awful, dog-tired and miserable, but there was still that tenderness in his gaze that could
break and heal Victor's heart all at once. "I will. Thank you," he murmured, and then a moment later,
"Victor, it's not your fault."

"If I hadn't raced over to you like an idiot-"

"I probably still would have had to do this if they dug my desk out of the rubble. I didn't keep many
things at the office, but I think the discovery that I was keeping a visa live for a man who technically
doesn't exist-" he gestured in the direction that Emil had gone "-would have made my position
precarious at best." His tongue came out and wetted his bottom lip. "We were always running on
borrowed time."

"Okay!" Emil sounded much more cheerful as he reappeared, clapping his hands. "Herr Yuuri, I
have just this moment spoken with a man named Lutz in Switzerland, who will be happy to get you
over the border. You should be able to get travel by night trains to Friedrichshafen, but we agreed
that it is best if you don't leave directly from Berlin." He looked at Victor then, another measuring
gaze. "Could you get him to Leipzig this evening?"

"Yes," Victor said immediately.

"Victor you don't have to-" Yuuri began.

"Yes I do." They looked hard at each other for a long moment, until Emil cleared his throat.

"Right, so, that's good. Herr Yuuri, do you have your list?" Yuuri offered it, along with his keys.
"Perfect. I will send Lucie over to your place, who you met at the door? She's a stagehand so she's
good at going unnoticed. The others here all know what we are about, of course, but I have asked
them to give you some peace and quiet. Maybe try to sleep a little before the evening? It's a long way
to Switzerland."

After much fussing over Victor losing the entire day— as if any of Stefan Rittberger's appointments
were of any importance at all right now— and another tot of brandy for his nerves, Yuuri finally
allowed himself to be laid down on the sofa for some rest, his head in Victor's lap and an old stage
curtain offered by Emil as a blanket. Victor tucked Yuuri's glasses into his coat pocket, stroked his
hair as he drifted off to sleep, and kept his eyes fixed on Yuuri's face. He had to memorise every
detail, every curve and angle, the way the light and shadow fell over his features. He had no
photographs of Yuuri, no keepsakes, only the fragile locket of his memory.

He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't. He needed to keep himself together for Yuuri's sake, to see him
safely away with love and a smile.

It was hours later when Yuuri woke, groggy and with stubble showing across his chin. Lucie had
delivered a suitcase of his belongings and another one of the troupe had brought them some food,
which Yuuri set at hungrily. Victor still couldn't seem to find his appetite.

"You'll want to be leaving soon," Emil said, sticking his head around the corner as Yuuri was finishing. "There's a fast train from Leipzig to Nuremberg in about three hours, then you just need to change again at Ingolstadt." Yuuri nodded and stood up to put his coat on, and Emil came over and looked directly at Victor. "I know you won't tell me who you are, and I'm not going to ask, but if I'm right in guessing then, well, if you ever need any help yourself, come here. If the person who answers the door tells you there's no Emil here, just ask for Bohemian. Then they'll know you're one of us."

"Thank you," Victor said, reaching out and grasping Emil's hand with both of his own. "Thank you, all of you, for everything. I don't know how to repay you."

Emil smiled gently, and tipped his head towards Yuuri, who was checking through his suitcase. "If even a fraction of the things I've passed on from him were useful to London, then he's more than worth any risk. You can repay us by getting him safely on that train."

The sun was beginning to set as they drove towards the city outskirts, the dimmed headlights of the Steyr shedding only a thin pool of light on the road ahead. Victor made a habit of keeping an eye out for new checkpoints cropping up in Berlin, but once they were out into the countryside they would be vulnerable to being stopped. Neither of them looked remotely respectable, red-eyed and unshaven, and while he had a little cash in the glove box bribing soldiers was always a risky affair.

In the blacked-out streets he had to focus even more carefully on the road, but all he wanted to do was look at Yuuri, to drink in the sight of his handsome face, to remember the way his body had looked sprawled naked and utterly relaxed between the sheets of Victor's bed only weeks before. But the more time he spent looking at Yuuri the harder it was to ignore the tiny voice at the back of his mind that said, you could go with him.

He couldn't. Of course he couldn't. The passport in Rittberger's name was back at his house, and while Yuuri's planned border crossing would probably be less than entirely legal Victor would then just be stuck in Switzerland. The British wouldn't have any interest in him unless it was to deliver him back to the Red Army as a deserter for court-martial and execution. It was a ridiculous idea.

But he could go. If he wanted to.

"You'll need to be careful to stay safe on the trains, if any soldiers or the Gestapo board," he said. I wish I could be there to protect you. Yuuri turned and met his eyes and even in the dim evening light it was clear that he knew Victor far, far too well.

"I still have my gun," Yuuri said quietly. "I'll keep my eyes open. I don't think I'll be able to sleep anyway."

Victor swallowed. "Will you write to me? Once you make it into Switzerland, I mean. Just so I know that you- that you made it safely." So I have something of you to keep.

"Of course I will. As soon as I can."

Victor gripped the steering wheel tighter. He wished he could just drive and keep driving, Yuuri beside him, all the way south across France and Spain to Portugal, or over the Alps and through the Salò Republic to southern Italy, to hurdle across Europe to the sea and when he could smell salt in the air again he'd know they were both free.

They were a few kilometres away from Leipzig when it started to rain. Yuuri reached across the seat
and touched Victor's elbow. "Could you pull over before we get into the city?"

Victor pointed ahead, to where the weak headlights illuminated a little tree-sheltered spot by the side of the road. "There?"

"Perfect."

And Victor had hardly put the handbrake on when suddenly his hat was knocked off his head and Yuuri was in his arms and kissing him like a dying man, hot and fierce and desperate, their mouths sliding against each other, and Victor's hands were under his coat and clutching at his waist while Yuuri's ran through his unkempt hair. Victor's heart shattered in his chest like glass, razor-shards digging into his lungs and ripping at his stomach. He knew with sudden, terrible clarity that this was it, his first and his last great love affair, that he could meet a hundred thousand other men and none could even begin to compare to the one cradling Victor's head in his hands and kissing him like he was the very fount of life. He had found the love of his life, and he was never, ever going to see him again. He wrapped his arms tight around Yuuri, pressing their bodies together. He'd thought that morning that all he wanted was more time, but there would never be enough time with Yuuri, not even if they had forever.

"I love you," Yuuri said against his mouth, "god, Victor, I don't want to go, I don't want to leave you, not ever."

"Yuuri, my Yuuri," he mumbled back as Yuuri kissed along his stubbly jawline, "why can't I go with you, I can't be without you," and Yuuri gripped his shoulders hard and kissed him again, painfully tender.

"Listen to me Victor," he said when they parted, foreheads pressed together, "you have to keep going, keep working. The war isn't over yet. We all need you to stay in Berlin, even if-" and his voice hitched upwards "-even if there's nothing I want more than to take you with me. This is bigger than both of us. It always has been."

"I know, iskorka moya," Victor whispered, and he had never meant the nickname more. Yuuri was beautiful, impossible, bright as a flame. "I know. I love you so much."

When they stopped again, at Leipzig's darkened station, Yuuri paused to set his suitcase on the car bonnet and open it despite the rain, taking out a book. He pressed it into Victor's hands.

"It's Verlaine's Romances sans paroles," Yuuri said when Victor squinted to try and make out the title. "The first book you ever borrowed from me. Think of me when you read it, won't you?"

Victor held the slim volume close against his chest, shielding it from the weather and keeping his arms from acting of their own accord and reaching for Yuuri again. "Always," he said.

"Well," Yuuri said, picking up his suitcase and looking sideways, down at the rain-slicked pavement, anywhere but at Victor's face. "Take care of yourself, Captain." And then he was through the station doorway and gone.

Victor managed to get himself back into the driver's seat before it overtook him. On the dark street of a foreign city, surrounded by the sound of the rain, he pressed his face into his hands and sobbed.

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Every time the train out of Ingolstadt shuddered to a stop at another tiny rural station Yuuri clenched his fists in his coat pockets, peering out along the platform as best he could for any sign of soldiers or members of the Gestapo boarding. My name is Herr Takahashi he repeated to himself. I am travelling for work. I work for Ambassador Oshima. Here are my papers to prove it. He had given
into his nerves and lit one of his few remaining cigarettes when, a few hours after midnight, the door to his compartment slid open.

The man who entered, however, was not like any soldier Yuuri had ever seen. He was tall and held his rain-soaked hat in his hands, showing off a head of thick, golden-blond hair. A pair of *pinces-nez* perched on the bridge of his nose, and a small and neatly trimmed goatee and moustache adorned his chin and upper lip. He leaned against the frame of the doorway as the train started moving again, eyes raking over Yuuri from head to toe.

"Salut beauté," he said, before letting the door slide closed behind him and dropping into the seat next to Yuuri. "Or should I say, Herr Blackbird."

Yuuri looked at him warily. "Who are you?" he asked in French.

"Oh thank god, I thought we would have to speak German the entire time." The man stuck out a hand. "To you, I suppose I'm Lutz, but I'd much rather you called me Christophe. I'm here to get you to Geneva."

Yuuri shook his hand in a minor daze. "Katsuki," he said, "I'm Katsuki. I wasn't expecting an escort."

Christophe chuckled. "Goodness, you really have no idea do you? If I don't deliver you to London wrapped in a pretty bow it's more than my head's worth. You were our man in Berlin, Monsieur Katsuki. I'd be surprised if good old King George himself doesn't want to shake you by the hand."

Yuuri inhaled hard on his cigarette, coughing on it like he was still a boy. Christophe patted him on the back. "You look like you could use some sleep once you finish that."

"I don't know if I can."

"It's worth a try though, isn't it?" Christophe looked him over again, his rather licentious gaze from before had now turned kindly, almost parental, for all he couldn't have been much older than Yuuri.

"Well, sleeping or not, I'm here to keep you safe. Arabesque would probably storm across the continent herself if I let anything happen to you."

Yuuri managed a small laugh at the mental image of Minako-san carving a trail of vengeance across France on his behalf, for all his head throbbed and his chest ached. "I don't know why they haven't just parachuted her into Berlin to deal with Hitler personally."

"The whole war would be over in an hour at most," Christophe agreed.

He didn't expect it but between the slow rhythm of the train and Christophe chattering mindlessly to him in French, Yuuri did manage to drift into a fitful slumber, all his dreams underlined in the engine's low rumble. When he was woken by a hand on his shoulder the sky was a little lighter and he could just make out the sign on the station platform. Friedrichshafen. The rain had stopped but there were still clouds passing slowly overhead.

"End of the line, Monsieur Katsuki," Christophe whispered, and stood up to take Yuuri's suitcase down from the luggage rack. "Keep your papers close at hand, but most of all just stay by me, and if I tell you do something, do it exactly and straight away, okay?"

Yuuri nodded, feeling if anything even drowsier as he followed Christophe off the train, watched him slip something to one of the guards and receive something else in return. Then Christophe grabbed him by the elbow and pulled Yuuri along behind him into the darkness, not through the gated checkpoint but around the back of the station building. There was a high fence topped with
barbed wire and a padlocked gate, but Christophe produced a key out of his coatsleeve with a wink and a flourish and unlocked it.

"If there's one thing this war has taught me," he said, after locking the gate behind them and placing the key under a rock, "it's that it actually pays to have friends in low places."

He led Yuuri through darkened streets of the strange town and down to the shore of a great body of water, glittering in the dawn-tinged moonlight that flickered between the passing clouds, and put his fingers between his lips to let out a low whistle, three tones that rose and fell. There was a long, silent moment before Yuuri heard the sound of a rattling boat engine approaching from around the nearby headland.

"You don't get sea-sick, do you?" Christophe asked. "I don't have a paper bag so you'll have to lean over the side."

"I think I'll be okay," Yuuri replied, although his stomach was churning from his poor sleep and from everything else that had happened in the last impossibly long twenty-four hours. Their ferryman was short and stout, a cap pulled down over his bushy grey hair, and after helping Yuuri into the boat like a perfect gentleman and clambering in gracefully himself, Christophe spoke to him in something that sounded like German but with no words Yuuri could recognise enough to latch onto.

Their progress out across the lake was slow and smooth, all the noise and shaking of the train exchanged for the soft, soothing lap of waves against the hull. The cold night air was too much for Yuuri to fall asleep again, but he slipped into a kind of waking doze, a trance of water and moonlight. There was something on the horizon that dipped in and out of view, glittering golden like a desert mirage. When Christophe came up to join him at the bow of the little boat, Yuuri pointed towards it wordlessly.

"Oh, that's only Romanshorn," Christophe said. "It should take us about another half, maybe three quarters of an hour to get there."

"Why is it so," Yuuri struggled for the best word, "so bright?"

Christophe gave him a curious look, then understanding dawned. "We don't have a total blackout in Switzerland," he explained. "Most of the major cities, yes, but here on the border keeping at least some of the lights on means the Americans and the British know they need to go a little further to drop their bombs."

"So there's streetlights?"

"Yes, silly," he said affectionately. "Would you like me to take your picture with one, as a souvenir?"

Yuuri grumbled at him but kept his eyes on the distant gleam of the town as they grew closer, like a lighthouse beam reaching out across the grey water.

He slept more deeply on the next train, the tension slowly starting to dissipate from his body into nothing but bone-deep exhaustion. Christophe seemed sleepy too when he woke Yuuri again at a big, open station, busy with people on their way to work. It was full daylight now, white and cool.

"Welcome to Zürich, Monsieur Katsuki." Christophe picked up Yuuri's suitcase again, holding the door of the compartment open for him. "I feel like shit and you look even worse, so we're going to meet a friend of mine who can put us up for a night or two. Is that okay?"

Yuuri nodded blearily, having to hold on to the side of the train car to avoid slipping as he stepped
down onto the platform. His whole body ached for a soft, comfortable bed, like his home in Berlin, like-

No. He didn't want to follow that thought. Christophe led him through the morning crowds and out into the streets. There was a clean-smelling wind coming up from the south, dew frosted on the roads and pavements, people all around them speaking in the same not-quite-comprehensible German that Christophe had used with the man on the boat. When they stopped it was outside a building that stood out sharply from the others on the street, striped in soft red and yellow sandstone and with two short, fat, dome-topped towers on its roof.

"Synagogue," Christophe said casually when Yuuri gave him a quizzical look. He glanced at his watch. "We're a little early, Shacharit won't have finished yet, but no-one will mind if we wait in the lobby. Come on."

They sat down on hard chairs in the plain little room just inside the front door. Through the double doors ahead of them Yuuri could hear singing, a chorus of men's voices in a language like none he had ever heard before. It reminded him a little of Evensong in Wadham Chapel, the slow tones of the choir singing the Magnificat, but where that had been airy and laid over the ringing organ this was richer and softer too, the unaccompanied voices rising and falling in gentle reciprocation. The room was very still and there was little noise from the street outside, only the singing like a stubborn rebuff of silence.

Yuuri was exhausted, two days' worth of stubble on his face and his clothes still full of grit and dust, but he felt suddenly alert as the chorus of voices gave way to a single, deep baritone. He had seen buildings like this in Berlin, scattered around the city, broken down and graffitied and burned with no more singing between their walls, but here hundreds of kilometres and a whole world away this place was defiantly, brilliantly alive.

His eyes were prickling when the double doors opened and people began to spill out from the main room into the lobby. Several of them smiled and nodded in recognition at Christophe before giving Yuuri an interested stare, but when a short woman with dark, greying hair under her hat emerged Christophe leapt to his feet and opened his arms wide to her.

"Miriam!" he cried, and bent down so she could embrace him tightly and kiss him on both cheeks.

"Chris, you sweet boy," she said in German, a German Yuuri understood, "who did you pull out of the Bodensee for me today?"

"Miriam, my darling, this is Herr Katsuki." Christophe waved towards him as Yuuri got unsteadily to his feet. "Miriam was my first, you know," he added with a wink. She swatted at him.

"What this awful young man means, Herr Katsuki, is that I was the first person he helped across the German border, just like he did you."

"1934," Christophe said, pressing a hand to his heart. "I remember it well. He's just come from Berlin too."

"Oh," Miriam said, and a wistful and impossibly sad expression came over her face, like someone seeing in the distance a person they had long since given up for dead. She reached out and clasped Yuuri's hand. "Well first I think I should get the both of you some breakfast and let you sleep, but later… will you talk to me about it? About the city?"

It flashed through Yuuri's head like a film reel run at triple speed, bombed-out buildings and propaganda posters, flowers in the Tiergarten and jackdaws in the snow, ration books and barber
shops and the creak of his bicycle saddle and the bright red blood on Higuchi-san's coat, and in the still centre of the maelstrom there was Victor, Victor, with his bright blue eyes and Yuuri's heart in his hands. "Yes, of course I will," he said, and let himself finally start to cry.

Stefan Rittberger was dead.

It had been a pricey hit in the end, costing Victor his good watch, two pairs of cufflinks, and most of the reichsmark notes he had remaining to have the esteemed men of his Volkssturm squad swear up and down that Rittberger had been shot, sir, shot in the head and then the Russians advanced and he was behind the enemy line, sir, no hope of retrieving the body, very tragic indeed.

Stefan Rittberger was dead, and in 1945 at the end of April a man almost as hollow and empty broke into his house, the sound of artillery fire booming like thunder through the streets. There was little here that Victor wanted to retrieve and more that he really hoped would go up in a bomb blast or a fire, wiping Berlin clean of his presence here forever. He had the photograph of his mother in his breast pocket, wrapped up in the brief letter he had received from Zürich a year and a half ago assuring him of Yuuri's safe arrival in Switzerland. He'd already smashed the rotor machine with a hammer once the Red Army had encircled the city. He packed a little satchel with a few provisions and Romances sans paroles, and holstered his service pistol at his waist.

In the bedroom he pushed through Rittberger's expensive suits and reached for a box at the very bottom of the wardrobe. It wasn't his officer's cap or a proper military tunic, but the short leather jacket was Soviet issue, one tiny piece of truth that he'd held onto for six and a half years. He tossed away his suit jacket carelessly and slipped it on over his waistcoat, buttoning it up over his chest.

Victor ran a hand through his hair, grown shaggy in recent weeks. The last eighteen months he had spent like dry grass in the wind, living Rittberger's life like a ghost and doing his best not the register the existence of his own behind it. But the jacket was something real, some fraction of Captain Victor Nikiforov that hadn't disappeared into the night headed for the Swiss border. He straightened his back, lifted his chin, a soldier again now at last. Through the bedroom window he could hear the crack and rattle of gunfire somewhere nearby. He tied Stefan Rittberger's fanciest, most expensive white silk handkerchief to a stick and headed out into the street.

About half a kilometre away there was a Red Army infantry platoon shoring up their position in a small plaza, and as soon as Victor hove into their view he had three rifles pointed at him over the barricade. He raised his hands, waving his makeshift white flag, and slowed his approach.

"Stop right there, Nazi!"

Victor let the flag hang loose in his hand and felt his heart skip as he called in Russian, in Russian, "Comrade, please may I speak with your commanding officer?"

The rifles didn't falter, but the soldier who had first spoken responded in the same language and it was one of the most beautiful things Victor had ever heard. "Who are you?"

"My name is Captain Nikiforov. I am an officer of the NKVD and have been on a top secret assignment in Berlin since 1938." He smiled softly. "It is very good to hear the voice of a comrade again."

One of the rifles vanished behind the makeshift barricade, and after a few moments a helmeted head appeared in its place, belonging to a young man with a square, dour-looking face. Victor couldn't make out his epaulettes but from the way the riflemen moved aside for him he must be the officer.
"If you really are an agent then you know there's a phrase you need to give me," he said.

It was one of his mother's favourites, embroidered and framed in their family kitchen since Victor was a child. "In the words of Comrade Lenin, 'every cook must learn to govern the state'."

The young officer stood up then, waved his men away and clambered swiftly over their barricade, and reached Victor in a few loping strides before he stopped and saluted briskly. His face was still shuttered and stern but a hint of excitement danced in his eyes. He couldn't have been more than a year or so past twenty. "Lieutenant Altin, sir, 150th Rifle Division."

"Lieutenant," Victor said, returning the salute. He was a little sloppy after all these years but it felt good, right, natural. "What can I do to help you?"

Arthur pressed a fresh, hot cup of tea into Yuuri's hands as Glyn turned up the volume on his radio.

"The end of the war in Europe is a step closer today as American and Soviet troops joined forces at the River Elbe," came John Snagge's crisp, clear voice from the speaker. "The commanders of a United States division and of a Russian Guards division met at Torgau, south of Berlin, on the 26th April at 1600 hours local time. There was much camaraderie amongst the officers present as Lieutenant William Robertson of the United States Army and Lieutenant Alexander Silvashko of the Red Army formally shook hands in front of a group of photographers. In a statement issued by Downing Street, Prime Minister Winston Churchill welcomed this development, saying, 'We meet in true and victorious comradeship and with inflexible resolve to fulfil our purpose and our duty. Let all march forward upon the foe.'"

Glyn looked sideways at Yuuri across the desk. "Still doesn't sound like there's any reports from Berlin, old chap."

Yuuri sipped his tea, wincing both at the heat and the taste. "I can't imagine the German army can hold it much longer, if the Soviets are already at the Elbe."

"Well if this is anything to go by, their high command has already gone completely crackers." Arthur gestured at the stacks of paper on his and Yuuri's desks. Their current primary task, as translators, was to sort out the tactically critical decoded Enigma transmissions from the chaff, but if the last couple of weeks were any indication then the German leaders were trying frantically to command armies and units that existed only in their own minds.

It had been nearly a year and a half since Yuuri had arrived in London and been feted like a homecoming war hero, since he had been waved through the bureaucracy and given a British passport and a job in this small, cozy office on the fourth floor of the MI6 building as if both were his natural due. Suddenly he was an expert, even called into meetings above his security level because someone wanted an opinion on Berlin diplomacy or the political situation in Tokyo. There was talk of giving him a medal. It still didn't quite seem real.

"Did you want to try Radio Moscow later?" Glyn asked. "If we get the Russian or the Arabic programme I don't mind translating."

"If it's not too much trouble."

"Oh, anything for a fellow Wadham man, you know that." Glyn adjusted the volume back down as Snagge began to wax lyrical about Eisenhower. "Berlin must really be something for you to miss it so much, Katsuki. Did you have a sweetheart over there? I hear the German gals are very pretty."

Yuuri looked down into his teacup and focused on keeping his hands steady. "Oh, no. Nothing like
The Königsplatz was still heavy with the smoke of artillery fire, huge muddy ruts left across its once-pristine lawns by the tank tracks. The sun was setting but there was still an occasional crack of gunfire from the windows of the Reichstag, the German snipers inside apparently not believing in the concepts of either bedtime or momentary ceasefire. Victor crouched in the shadow of a T-34 with a group of other officers, as Colonel Zinchenko paced in front of them and gestured with a cigarette.

"I don't have to explain what this means," he said. "The Reichstag's a shithole, no-one but rats has used that building for a decade. And I do mean actual rats, not the Nazi kind." One of the young lieutenants sniggered. "Fuck knows where that moustachioed little German shit is really hiding himself. But Comrade Stalin has been very clear about this objective. And just think of it, comrades! To see the sun rise on May Day with the Red Banner flying over the very heart of the fascist beast! Once the sun is fully down we'll make another assault on the building. We take it tonight."

"Sir," Victor said, sitting up on his heels.

"Nikiforov?" Zinchenko gave him a cool look. Victor couldn't entirely blame him. While he'd managed to procure himself a helmet and a coat with captain's stars on his epaulettes, he still looked like a civilian playing dress-up amongst these men who'd fought their way across half a continent.

"Sir, once we engage the Germans inside it would provide excellent cover for someone to climb the outside of the building and raise the flag before we even needed to capture the upper floors."

"You volunteering?" The Colonel tapped a finger against his lip. "If the Germans came out onto the roof you'd be defenceless."

"Two men could hold off a squad from the right position up there. And if they're pinned down by the main attack inside they won't put too much effort into getting a couple of Reds off the roof. We can have the flag flying over the Reichstag at dawn even if the building isn't entirely ours yet."

"I'll do it," Lieutenant Altin said suddenly at Victor's side. "I'll go with him. He's right, sir, there's only access from the inside to the roof on one side, so the statue in the centre is defensible."

Zinchenko looked between the pair of them. "Alright. Kondrashev has the banner. Good luck."

"Have you ever climbed the outside of a building before, sir?" Altin asked, once they'd procured the flag, some ropes, and a few extra boxes of ammunition.

"Nope!" Victor said cheerfully. The new carbines loaded much more smoothly than the rifles he'd trained with before the war; he settled the bolt back into place and slung the weapon over his shoulders. "I climbed a lot of trees as a Young Pioneer though." It would perhaps have been overly generous to describe the expression Altin made at that as merely 'sceptical'. "Look, if we come around the barricades there the rubble is high enough to get us most of the way up onto that ledge at the side, and from there we can sling the ropes to get us up onto the edge of the roof. Or you can climb on my shoulders, you don't look very heavy."

Altin seemed to be trying to decide whether or not that was a compliment as they got closer to the building. The near-quiet of before had descended back into the usual noise of the last week, shouting and bursts of coordinated rifle fire as the rest of the 150th Division made another attempt at the Reichstag doors. Further out into the city he could hear the aerial bombardments continuing, an occasional flare of distant fire registering at the edge of his vision. They crept around the side of their barricades, eyes peeled for the glint of German guns under the boards at the windows. Victor raised
his right hand and signalled to Altin to follow and they both went into a crouching run around to the side of the building.

Once up onto the first ledge they stood with their backs pressed against the wall. Through the nearby window Victor could hear running footsteps, barked orders in German. He lifted his eyes to the half-crumbled cornice overhead. There didn't actually seem to be as many potential spots to hook a rope as he'd hoped, but as he was trying to pick one Altin patted his arm, and then gestured to their left where a column had been shredded by bullets and shrapnel into a reasonable set of foot- and hand-holds. Victor nodded and they edged along the side of the building towards it.

On the rooftop the footing was precarious, loose tiles sliding underfoot and deep sloping pits where the structure of the building had failed during the long-ago fire. They picked their way mostly along the cornice, leaping over gaps. In the centre of the building, in front of the ruined dome, was a soot-stained statue of a woman on horseback, clothed in rippling fabric and crowned. Victor gave Altin a boost up onto the higher central section of the roof and climbed up after him. He could still hear gunfire in the building below, but it was clearly distant, with no indication of German troops about to leap out to defend the honour of their stony lady.

Altin stopped by the statue and reached around himself to where he'd strapped the flag and pole to his back. Once he had it free he offered it to Victor, who shook his head.

"No," Victor said, as quietly as he could over the noise of the battle beneath their feet. "It should be you, Lieutenant." He stood by the hindquarters of the carved horse and offered his hands to give Altin a leg up. Once he was up onto the statue Victor unslung the carbine from around his shoulders, keeping it steady in his hands as he glanced around them. He looked upwards again just as Altin reached the statue's shoulders and, his hand covering its face, jammed the flagpole between the arches of its crown. A gust of wind caught it at once, a great field of red with the golden hammer and sickle at its apex fluttering out in the moonlight. In the plaza below, sparks flew upwards from the tank crews' campfires, hurtling into the dark night.

It might be days, even weeks until the final surrender, months until they could turn over Hitler and his ministers and generals to the full justice of international law, but in that moment Victor knew that it was over. They had won.

It was a quarter past eight on a beautiful summer's morning in Hiroshima when a little boy fell out of the sky.

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Since it's not all that clear from context, iskorka is the diminutive of iskra, meaning 'spark'- a significant word.

If you would like to hear music from the real-life choir of the Synagoge Zürich Löwenstrasse where Yuuri and Chris meet Miriam, you can check out some audio samples on their website here.
London, Part One

Chapter Summary

Four years since his escape from Germany, Yuuri leads a quiet life in a London still recovering from the Blitz, haunted by his memories of the war and the birth in Japan of the world’s new atomic age.

Even with a promotion to Major, Victor’s new assignment to Britain is a career dead end, leaving him isolated and grappling with a crisis of faith in his lofty ideology- and in himself.

In the same city again, former comrades find themselves on opposite sides of a new conflict that could be the last in all human history.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This life we live nowadays. It's not life, it's stagnation, death-in-life. Look at all these bloody houses and the meaningless people inside them. Sometimes I think we're all corpses. Just rotting upright.

- George Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying

It was a sound beyond sound, light beyond light, the things inside of an atom searing through all human senses and setting the air on fire and there was nothing left to scream into, nowhere to run, nothing but the light and the heat and the sound-

Yuuri jerked awake, the obnoxious blare of a bus horn cutting through the thin glass of his bedroom window. He ran a hand over his face, which was drenched in sweat, before fumbling for his glasses so he could check his watch. Half past seven. He had forgotten to set his alarm clock again.

With a sigh and a grimace at the sudden cold, he slid out from under his blankets. In the bathroom he splashed some water on his face and then worked up a good lather on his shaving brush before applying it to his face, following after it with his razor. A proper English gentleman would rather be late for work than leave the house without shaving, and if there was one thing Yuuri had remaining in his life, it was doing his best to be a proper English gentleman. At least as far as anyone could see. He avoided his own eyes in the mirror and focused on the feeling of the blade against his skin, pressing just too gently to draw blood.

The sun was rising and filling the flat with watery January light. Yuuri scraped a meagre amount of his jam ration onto some toast and did his best to eat and dress at the same time, brushing crumbs off his shirt and fumbling in the dresser for his socks.

In some ways it always felt like January in London. In Pimlico the white-plaster buildings and narrow streets gave the whole place a chilly air, interrupted only by the jagged, still half-open wounds of the Blitz. Yuuri dragged his bicycle out of the hall and down the front steps and set off into the cold morning. It wasn't raining yet, which was a blessing, but the smog sat heavy and brooding around the rooftops and muffled all but the harshest sounds. He had followed the same
route every weekday morning for four years now, across Vauxhall Bridge Road and through the back streets of Westminster to the tall street corner building from which a fading empire conducted its global espionage.

Or, according to the sign on the door, where Yuuri and his colleagues arranged for the manufacture and sale of fire extinguishers.

"Decide to sleep in today, did you Katsuki?" Arthur called in a friendly voice as they passed in the fourth-floor stairwell.

"At least I haven't started taking off early every afternoon to keep up with Mrs Dale's Diary."

"You wound me, sir! Lunch today?"

"I'll let you know."

Once his office door was closed behind him Yuuri breathed a sigh of relief, lighting a cigarette from the box he kept on the bookshelf and surveying the leftover work from last week still strewn across his desk. There was some continued nonsense from nationalist military holdouts in Japan that the Americans had completely botched the translation of, and the usual cross-boundary plotting from German communists in the British occupation zone. Thirteen years ago, when he'd first come to England, this all would have seemed terrifying. Four years ago, when he'd left Berlin under the cover of nightfall, it would have seemed terrifyingly mundane. Now it was just routine, to have the world's secrets pass in front of his eyes to be carefully dissected and reassembled into the English language. He blew a mouthful of smoke up at the ceiling and sat himself down in the desk chair, pulling the Japanese text across towards him.

If the rain held off until the afternoon then maybe he would go to lunch with Arthur. If not, then he didn't particularly want to have to come up with an excuse as to why he didn't have his umbrella. The trouble with working in the secret service was that too many of your colleagues were extremely good at sniffing out lies, and Yuuri knew that if he got started with 'oh, I left it on the bus,' before they'd even received their food Arthur would have squeezed it out of him that he had forgotten it at Tristan's, and he wouldn't be going back for it.

Being a valued intelligence asset made his colleagues finding out that he was a homosexual less of a dangerous prospect than when he had been a foreign bureaucrat in Nazi Berlin- and Arthur was a good egg, for all he'd gone to Durham- but he would rather keep his private life to speculation and comfortable euphemisms wherever possible. And frankly, he didn't want to discuss Tristan with anyone.

He should really have known better by now than to keep meeting the men Minako unsubtly pushed at him. Perhaps he was still softened up from her introducing him to Celestine's new doctoral student back in October, which had resulted in an actual friendship, if nothing else, or perhaps it just hadn't occurred to him that she might consider an old boy-friend to be a good prospect for hurling in his direction.

When they were twenty they had loved each other with all the arrogant naïveté that twenty-year-olds possess. Now they were thirty, and while Tristan had spent the war cheerfully reporting from New York and Washington for the BBC, Yuuri had stolen secrets and killed a man in cold blood and embarked on an utterly foolish and yet all-consuming love affair with a Soviet spy.

It wasn't his fault he had dreams that coiled and lingered, wandering back and forth across the line into nightmares. It wasn't his fault that in the darkness one lean, blond-haired man could look a lot like another.
But it didn't matter whose fault it was; he still needed to buy a new umbrella.

Yuuri made his notes mindlessly, smoking the cigarette almost down to his fingers. Four years was more than enough time to have moved on, four years spent in a new country with an entirely new life. All over the city they were patching up the cracks, restoring the streets and buildings or putting up entirely new ones in their place. The government was in the business of rebuilding the whole country in a new image, perhaps the closest a nation would come to socialism while retaining a monarch and a parliament.

But there were still places where the bombs lurked undetonated in the ground, places a world away where even years after the blast something lingered in the soil and in the bones, waiting to metastasise.

'and Karl Marx, born May 5th 1818, died March 14th 1883'

Victor stared at the plaque on the ground at his feet, the little bunch of daffodils sagging in his hand. It was so small. He'd just turned ten years old when Lenin died, and his parents took him on the slow overnight train to Moscow to pay their respects at the tomb in Red Square, with thousands of other mourners. It had been grand and solemn and not a little terrifying, all of it befitting a man who had altered the course of history.

And yet here the English had put Marx into the ground with his wife and family and marked it with his birth and his death as if nothing of note had happened in between. Victor crouched and laid down the daffodils amongst a few other bunches of flowers.

"I came here to talk to you," he said, in the German that they had in common. The still cemetery offered no response. "I know you're not really there, but in novels sometimes people do this, so I thought... well. I don't really know." He looked down at his feet. "Did you think this is what would happen? If you'd known, would you have said things differently?"

Karl Marx, sixty-five years dead, said nothing at all. Victor kicked listlessly at the grass. He couldn't decide which would be worse; if he had known, had set political fire across the world and known exactly what kinds of horrors would come out of it, or if he hadn't, and had been just another idealistic fool. Maybe it was fitting for him to be buried like any other man, when so many had gone into the ground in his wake completely unmarked.

Victor looked up at the grey sky, and then down again at his watch. He would need to head back to the station soon if he didn't want to be late for his six o'clock lesson at the college. He had been in London for a few months now and while the trains and the remaining tram lines were fairly simple to figure out, especially the Underground, the buses seemed to operate mostly on the principle that if you weren't born knowing how to navigate them, you shouldn't try. He wasn't exactly sure that his presence or lack thereof made much of a difference to whether or not his little group of adult students progressed in their Russian grammar, but failing to turn up would probably lose him the job, and while it wasn't the small salary from Lewisham College that paid his bills it was nice to at least pretend sometimes that it did.

He looked at the Marx family grave for a few moments more before turning and heading back along the winding path to the main entrance, loosening his scarf a little. It was cold in the winter here, certainly, but much less so than winter in Berlin, and practically a warm spring day compared to January in Leningrad.

The embassy here could handle correspondence much more efficiently than fumbling a letter to Feltsman and hoping it would get out of Germany; he would have to write to Yura or Mila soon and...
ask how the reconstruction of the city was progressing. He still felt a lump in his throat when he remembered seeing them both again, finally, at the opening of the Museum of the Defence of Leningrad two years ago. They had looked much older than he had expected, the shadows of the war in their eyes, but were still bursting with pride in their dress uniforms and both practically glittering with medals. An Order of Lenin each, on top of everything else. Yura had punched him when Victor had picked him up in a hug, but not very hard, which was probably about the closest he would ever get to affection from the boy. Or young man, now. Yura was almost twenty-two, and would graduate from pilot school in the summer.

Victor had his own collection of medals, of course, tucked away in a drawer in the new flat in Moscow that he had inhabited for all of six months; the Great Patriotic War medal, the Berlin medal, Battle Merit for his ten years' service, and the Red Star even before he could make it fifteen.

He kept them in the drawer because he didn't like to look at them. He didn't like to think about them.

Ahead of him a young woman was coming down the pavement in the opposite direction, led along by a large dog of indeterminate breed but undeniable enthusiasm. Victor smiled at the dog without even thinking about it. A person who didn't smile at a dog would surely be beyond lost. But the woman dragged it to a halt and stood still a metre or so away from him, and after a moment Victor realised she thought he had been smiling at her. Oh dear.

In his experience so far, the best way to get English people to leave you well alone was to be very obviously foreign, so he pointed at the dog and said, "She is very beautiful," in Russian.

The woman looked him critically up and down and sighed. "Sorry love, this is Highgate, not Hungary," she said, and then gave a tug on the dog's leash and walked on. Victor watched the dog go.

Train and tram back to Deptford. Walk to the college. Stand at the front of a classroom and attempt to explain verb conjugation to a group of adults, fully half of whom seemed to believe that learning Russian would magically transform them into hardened revolutionaries. And then home to the boarding house and supper from Mrs Pauley, and an evening empty of everything but his own awful thoughts.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. He wasn't supposed to be skulking around in the shadows in the capital city of an ally, the spider in a web that spread right into the British establishment, waiting for secrets to catch in it and be devoured.

He hunched his shoulders forward against the breeze. Sometimes, late at night, he wondered if Yuuri had stayed in Britain, or if he had found some way to return home to Japan, or gone elsewhere in the world entirely. He could even be living in London somewhere right now. But even if Victor had a clue how to find him again, he knew he didn't deserve to. Yuuri was the most instinctively, unabashedly heroic person that he had ever met, a man who had thrown away his upbringing and his national loyalty to do what was right.


"So Yuuri, do you think we'll have time later for me to pop in and have a word with your tailor?"

Yuuri turned away from the sign detailing the entrance fees- six shillings apiece, not exactly the cheapest sightseeing outing- and looked back at Phichit, who had crouched back down to try and get a shot of the Tower of London with the bridge in view behind it.
"Why would you want to do that?"

"Well, for one thing, clearly no-one's told him about this 'cloth rationing' business that's been going on for, oh, a decade now, and that you don't actually have to wear a waistcoat every single hour of the day anymore." Phichit got up from his crouch and gestured in Yuuri's general direction as he rolled on the film in his camera. "Also, I was thinking about getting a new jacket made."

"Do you really have the budget for that?" He knew Phichit was on a generous scholarship, but surely not so generous as to be throwing money and ration coupons at Saville Row on a whim.

"Well, no," Phichit admitted, "but I was thinking of having one made up with the word 'Thailand' embroidered on the back, in very bright letters." He made an anguished face. "I have met maybe ten people who don't immediately think that I'm Indian, which you know I wouldn't really mind if it weren't for the fact that when an Englishman thinks you're Indian in this year of our whatever 1948, he'll proceed to interrogate you for half an hour on your opinions about partition." He accepted both a cigarette and a light from Yuuri as they progressed towards the Tower entrance. "I come to this country to study mathematics, to pursue my research, and all I get is a bunch of ugly white men who seem terribly concerned with whether I'm a Muslim or a Hindu."

"What on earth do you tell them?"

"It depends." Phichit paused to blow two successive smoke rings into the air while Yuuri paid their entrance fees, delighting the woman in the ticket booth. "The first time, I thought I was being terribly clever by suggesting that he had forgotten about the Sikhs. Never try to explain the existence of Sikhism to a man who has a double-barrelled surname and no chin, Yuuri. Another time I pretended to have suddenly forgotten how to speak English, but that didn't work. Sometimes I do attempt to explain that there are other countries in Asia besides the ones the British colonised. Once, I will admit it was after a few glasses of wine, I told the chap that my opinion on partition was that everyone would have been spared a lot of bother if the British had fucked off out of India a lot sooner."

Yuuri cleared his throat and made a gesture with his head towards the family behind them, the mother of which had both hands clapped over the ears of a truly thrilled-looking little girl. Phichit's eyes widened and he waved his hands. "Sorry!"

"Bloody foreigners," said the girl's father, pushing past them.

"It's always either one or the other, isn't it?" Phichit remarked once the family was well out of earshot. "Either you're a foreigner or a pansy. Do they not know you can be both at once?"

Yuuri laughed as they wandered out into the big central courtyard of the Tower. He had been summoned to Oxford by Minako and the pair of them sent out to dinner together only about a month after Phichit had arrived in the country, but what had been shaping up to be yet another awkward evening had been defused almost immediately when Phichit looked him up and down, said, "sorry but you're not my type," and then proceeded to spend the rest of the night eliciting Yuuri's funniest stories about Oxford life and telling his own, rather more hair-raising, ones about combining undergraduate study with running messages and creating ciphers for the Free Thai Movement. Phichit was so intelligent it was almost scary, but so affable and open with his friendship that it was impossible not to like him, and while Yuuri had a few colleagues from overseas- and Minako, of course- it was good to have a friend who knew exactly what it was like to stick out like a sore thumb amongst the British, and who made the most hilarious jokes about it.

"So anyway," Phichit said as they paused to admire one of the Tower guards in his truly ridiculous uniform. "It's been ages. How have you been? Any news?"
"Oh, it's very dull." Even if his day job had been the sort of thing he could discuss with friends, he wouldn't have much more to say about it. "Although I did read in the paper this week that an old friend of mine won a medal at the Olympic Winter Games- a silver, for Switzerland."

Phichit looked impressed. "Giacometti, in the figure skating? You're a very well-travelled man." The way his eyes slipped sideways more than implied exactly where he imagined Yuuri had travelled.

"Not like that. I met him during the war."

"Oh Yuuri, as if I don't know exactly what everyone and their mother was getting up to during the war."

Yuuri waved a hand. "Honestly, Phichit, it wasn't like that. He helped me, and a lot of other people besides, but I wouldn't have… at the time I…"

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me," Phichit said, taking a drag on his cigarette and giving Yuuri a kindly smile. "I know you don't like to talk about the war. Most people are the same."

Yuuri sighed, blew out some smoke, and changed the subject. Phichit would always let him. "So was there anything in particular you wanted to see here, or did you just want to make me spend an inordinate amount of money on you?"

"Well we could go and look at the Crown Jewels and guess which shiny rock got stolen from where?" Phichit turned in a circle, looking around them. "No, wait. I want to talk to those guys." He pointed at the little group of ravens sitting on low perches on the lawn and got his camera back out of his coat pocket. "Come on, Yuuri, let's take pictures with them!"

Once the ravens had been thoroughly documented on film, and the origins of the Crown Jewels even more thoroughly disparaged, they walked a little way into the city away from the river and found a café for lunch. Phichit drank the terrible coffee with enthusiasm and made another valiant attempt at explaining the subject of his doctoral thesis to Yuuri, who resorted to smiles and polite nods after the words 'prime factorisation'.

"So did you want to go to the Salisbury this evening?" Yuuri asked, once they were halfway into some very bland soup. "You can stay over in my spare room, if you don't meet anyone."

"How dare you tempt me with Saturday night at the Salisbury when I have so much work to do?" Phichit wagged his bread roll in admonishment. "You know Professor Celestine will have my head- or worse, make me do summer exam marking- if I don't get on with my outline."

"Well it would be nice to have company."

"If you go to the Salisbury on a Saturday night by yourself I can promise you, you won't want for company."

Yuuri shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It wasn't that he was somehow incapable of going out on the town by himself. His knowledge of London's underbelly was comprehensive enough after four years here, having been bolstered by what he could remember of the weekend after the '36 Boat Race, when a rather delightful Cambridge man named Guy had decided to show him the city and ply him with wildly expensive alcohol. He had a vague recollection that Guy had been a communist, which really Yuuri should have taken as an early warning sign. But there was something so desperately lonely about it, as if even in the busiest pub or on the most crowded dance floor everyone else still existed at a distance from him. At least with Phichit he could get something out of the other man's enthusiasm, even if he couldn't feel any himself.
When they put their coats back on to leave, Yuuri let his hands linger on the soft, olive-green lambswool of his scarf. It had travelled halfway across a continent with him without a snag or a tear, but he had worn down with mindless thumb strokes the embroidered label on one end, where the words 'Rittberger Wollmühle' were now just barely visible.

"...a highlight of the session was the impassioned speech made by the Hon. Sara Crispino (FDP), condemning rumoured American interference in the election on behalf of Democrazia Cristiana. Crispino was elected to the newly instituted Chamber of Deputies following eighteen months in the transitional Constituent Assembly, as one of the first group of women ever elected to the Italian Parliament, and was notable there for-"

"Major!"

Victor sighed, and lowered his copy of the Manchester Guardian as Popovich slid into the chair opposite him. "How many times have I told you not to call me that in public?"

Popovich's eyes went wide and he ducked his head. "Sorry si- I mean, Alyosha! It's been a very long week."

Victor folded the paper and nodded politely at the waitress as she set his coffee and biscuits down in front of him. At least here at the Daquise it didn't matter so much if they were overheard; the café was an embassy favourite for a reason. "Your boys giving you trouble?"

"If I may have permission to speak freely," Popovich said, without pausing to be given it, "what sort of disciplinary action would I be looking at if I were to punch Hicks?"

"Depends how hard you hit him," Victor said. The promotion to Major was almost certainly the last one of his career, but one of its few benefits was in getting to supervise the controllers of British agents, rather than having to deal with them directly. Popovich's Hicks and Tony were the two highest-placed agents currently operating in the country- one in the Foreign Office, the other literally in Buckingham Palace itself- but they were by all accounts both completely insufferable, and Hicks was a notorious drunk.

"On Thursday we met in the usual pub, and he laid a folder with a government 'secret' stamp on it on the table as if there were not at least forty other people in the room! He has no discretion!" Popovich reached over and took one of the biscuits from Victor's plate, taking a mournful bite out of it. "If this English brat causes me to be discovered and imprisoned forever thousands of kilometres away from my darling Anya, I swear I will-"

Victor waved a hand to cut him off. Complaining about one's agents was fair enough, but after one anguished, lovelorn monologue about his beautiful young wife back in Moscow he had no desire to ever let Popovich run with that subject again. "You photographed the information though?"

"Yes, of course. It's in the usual place."

"Good." He sipped his coffee. "Hicks is yours and it's your job to keep him on his leash, but that is as much about letting him run as he wants as it is about reeling him in. If he can't be discreet then move your meetings. He may be an idiot, but he's an idiot we need."

"Yes. Okay." Popovich ate some more of his stolen biscuit before he continued, in a much quieter voice. "By the way, Alyosha, have you heard anything from anyone else about H-E-R?"

It was absolutely none of their business either way. "I have not."
"It's just that ever since Tony brought it up to me last year he seems terrifically conflicted about it, and I worry that if the British finish the bomb before we do it might prompt him to do something silly."

"If you ever have suspicions that he might be going to turn then you need to tell me immediately, Kresnik." Victor set his coffee down and leaned across the table. "Bomb or no bomb. If Tony talks to MI6 then Stanley and Homer are fucked, and so are we." He wasn't senior enough to be privy to what, exactly, Stanley and Homer's positions were, but he knew they were all part of the same immensely valuable little gang from the British elite and that if one of them went down the others would surely follow.

"I don't believe he'll turn, but I think something that looks like such a defeat for us would unsettle him very badly." There was something fervent, a little mad in Popovich's eyes. "If there's ever anything we can do— we must have a Soviet bomb first, Alyosha, the future of socialism depends on it."

Victor suppressed a whole-body shudder. The thought of socialism depending on the possession of a weapon that could level a whole city in moments was revolting. Bad enough that the Americans were so mad with power as to have developed the things in the first place; now the rest of the world was on a race to catch up to them. He sipped his coffee again. "Unless you are planning to assassinate a lot of British physicists then I doubt that there is. Did you have anything further to report?"

Once Popovich had left, taking another biscuit with him, Victor finished his coffee and wandered through the darkening streets towards the Oratory, newspaper tucked back under his arm. He would have to cut out and keep the story about Sara. After she and her brother had fled Berlin in the wake of the Italian surrender he had wondered if he might find a way to write to her after the war, introduce himself by his real name, but his current position certainly did not allow for him to be writing to an Italian politician, even a communist one. At least he knew she finally had the opportunity to flourish.

Behind the church doors he could hear the choir singing as he ducked around the pillar where Popovich made his drops. There were three cassettes of film in the package along with his usual long-winded encoded note; Victor always had to edit them down before they went in the bag at the embassy.

Still, what Popovich lacked in finesse as a spy he more than made up for in dedication. Was this how Major Feltsman had felt, looking at Victor in Berlin and seeing a young man burning up with ideology, ready to make any kind of foolish sacrifice for his righteous cause? He had tried to tell himself that in Germany he had been fighting against a far more dangerous and monstrous evil, that in any case he hadn't known what was happening at home, and had no way of knowing what would begin in the wake of their victory. Sometimes it could be a comforting lie.

Victor paused in front of the Oratory, the statues on its roof looming against a cloud-streaked sky bathed red from the sunset. He put a cigarette to his lips and struck a match to light it, the first mouthful of smoke mingling with his breath in the evening air.

"I'm just saying that I wish you would telephone more often," Minako said, spearing a piece of salmon on her fork and somehow managing to eat it at him. "I know you aren't writing to your mother anymore and when I write to her I would rather not have to fabricate everything I have to say about you."

Yuuri sighed heavily and pretended to be very focused on picking the bones out of his Dover sole.
The food at the Special Forces Club was always very good, no matter how strict rationing became, and it was one of the few places in London where the two of them could speak together in Japanese without incurring a lot of hostile looks. But then maybe the hostile looks could have been a distraction.

"I telephone when I have something to tell you, which isn't that often. And you know I can't write to her."

"Nonsense," Minako said. The war years had left wings of grey in her brown hair, which only made her look more distinguished. "The only people who would be opening your letters now are the Americans. And you know your mother and father were both against the war- and paid for it dearly- even if they didn't oppose it quite as, well, quite as dramatically as you."

Yuuri pushed a potato around his plate. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" Minako set her cutlery down and reached across the tabletop to clasp Yuuri's hand. "I know you feel that you can't go home; I don't think I could either, even once Celestine retires. But it doesn't mean you have to cut yourself off. It would make them both so happy to hear from you."

He tugged his hand away, scooping up a forkful of fish and putting it in his mouth to avoid having to say anything. Whatever Minako might feel about the war, about her own role in the defeat of Japan, had nothing to do with him. She didn't know the way she had always been talked about at home, already half a traitor for her career and her marriage even before she started to work for British intelligence. Her allegiances were as public as her performances always had been. But Yuuri had no idea if anyone at home even knew the extent of his treachery, or that he had killed a countryman to protect it.

He could not, would not, regret making a stand against the fascists. But he was the man who had had handed over the Angōki ciphers to the Allies, who had passed on every scrap of information that came through the embassy whether it related to the war in Europe, Africa or the Pacific, and in return the Americans had mined Hasetsu harbour and burned Fukuoka to the ground, and in the skies over Hiroshima and Nagasaki they had ripped apart matter itself. It had been right to oppose Japan, but it didn't make it any easier to face what his opposition had wrought.

Minako studied him with her head cocked to one side, eyes full of a concern that wasn't really warranted. "Fine. I suppose I can't force you to be a halfway decent son. Please at least tell me that you are sometimes leaving the house even without Mr Chulanont to drag you out of it. And don't say you go to work, work doesn't count."

"I enjoy time alone," Yuuri bristled. "You know I like to read." He had recently finished The Idiot and was halfway through Notes from Underground for the third time; if he kept up the Dostoevsky streak he might actually be able to finish The Brothers Karamazov this year. Did Minako really want to deny him the ability to say he had got to the end of Karamazov?

"And have any nice young gentlemen leapt out of a book at you recently?"

"A lot more than have leapt up from your little set-ups." That came out nastier than he'd meant it to, and Minako leaned back in her chair.

"Oh believe me, that is over and done with. Did you know that poor Tristan's father telephoned me, after whatever it was you did to him? Do you think I ever wanted to spend a Friday afternoon having a conversation with a Member of Parliament about not encouraging his son's, and I quote, 'unchristian proclivities'? He was such a sweet boy in Oxford, Yuuri. I thought you'd like to see him
again now that he's back in the country."

As if that wasn't entirely the problem, that Tristan was still a sweet boy at thirty and Yuuri most
decidedly was not. "All I did was forget my umbrella at his flat."

"Yes, I'm sure." Minako gave him that half-analysing, half-pitying look again. "Look, Yuuri, if you
want me to back off then I'll back off. You don't have to call. We can have lunch less often. We
won't try to force you to have dinner with us when we're in London. But we both worry about you.
You don't seem well. It's one thing to enjoy your solitude, it's quite another to shut out every other
part of your life." She paused then and reached down into her handbag before pulling out a small,
printed flyer and sliding it across the table to him. "But just one thing, please. We'll both be coming
down for this, on the May Day weekend, Celestine has been very involved in the preparations.
Please do think about coming."

Yuuri picked up the flyer.

The Fabian Society Presents
Dmitri Shostakovich's
Symphony No. 7
performed by the Brent Symphony Orchestra
7pm, 1st May
Blackheath Halls

with a retiring collection to aid European refugees in Britain

He blinked. Number Seven was the Leningrad symphony. It had been one of the first things he'd
looked up, only weeks after arriving in London from Geneva, still raw and bloody with heartbreak.
But he hadn't been able to bring himself to seek it out. It would have felt like a betrayal to listen to it
without-

"Okay," he said, folding the flyer and slipping it into his trouser pocket. "I'll try to be there."

Victor stared down at the page on the desk in front of him, the blank paper staring unforgivingly
back at him.

Dear Yura

What did he even have to say? 'Hope you haven't crashed a plane since we last spoke'? 'Can't tell
you where I am again, but at least there aren't any Nazis'? Soon-to-be Junior Lieutenant of Aviation
Yuri Plisetsky now knew perfectly well that Victor wasn't just off commanding a company in a very
far-flung part of the Soviet Union. Even if Victor said as little as possible, he was liable to work it
out.

Dear Yura

It wasn't as if he could spill his real thoughts out even if the censors weren't reading. Where Victor's
heart had once ridden high on pure ideology, Yura was all ferocious, stubborn patriotism. It didn't
much seem to matter to him what the Soviet Union did, just that it was the Soviet Union while it did
it. Maybe that was something Leningrad had taught him. Country first, through ice and famine and
dread. Victor ran a hand through his loose hair. Keeping it longer only made him look more foreign
here, but the will to cut it just wasn't in him.
Dear Yura

There was a knock at his door. "Mr Mikhailovich? Are you in?"

Victor jumped slightly in his chair before he stood up, dropping his pen back onto the desk and crossing the little room to the door. Balancing his weight between the doorframe and his walking stick was Paweł Osadnik, who was rarely to be found above the ground floor of the boarding house. Victor wouldn't exactly call him a friend, but he was always good for conversation at dinner. He had been shot down by the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain and survived, but with a terrible limp. Victor waved him into the room and pulled over his armchair, which Paweł sank into gratefully.

"Is everything quite alright, Mr Osadnik? Those stairs can't be good for your leg."

Paweł waved a dismissive hand. "It's nothing, nothing. I will be fine. I wanted to ask you something. A favour, maybe?" Victor nodded for him to continue. "There is a regular meeting of Polish veterans in Hammersmith that I go to, once a month. A friend of mine, my old Flight Commander, he owns a car and normally will come and drive me, but he has taken very ill, and to get there on the trains by myself with all those stairs in the stations…"

"You'd like an escort?"

"Only if you are free, of course, and you would be most welcome to stay for the meeting! I do not know if you speak any Polish, Mr Mikhailovich, but we often have English guests there too."

"Would your comrades not be unhappy that you brought a Russian?"

Paweł looked away, towards the still-open door. Victor didn't know how much the man knew beyond what got reported in the British press. He had seen more than enough of occupied Poland for himself. "Some of them, perhaps. But you cannot be much of a Soviet if you are living over here in exile with the rest of us, can you?" He smiled. "Tell you what, if anyone is rude to you then I will tell them that you are my dear friend who has personally carried me on his back up the staircase of the deepest station on the Underground, and that your honour is unquestionable."

Victor looked him over. Bad leg or no, Paweł had retained plenty of his military muscle. Victor wasn't sure he could carry him down a flight of stairs. But he nodded. It wasn't as if he had any pressing Friday evening appointments, except with a letter that he couldn't seem to write.

Their journey was uneventful and involved no bodily lifting at all, though Victor had to put on his very best 'idiot foreigner' act so they could take a breather amongst the crowds when they changed trains. The meeting was held in a draughty little hall attached to a church, and Victor had a cup of very milky tea pressed into his hands by an elderly but extremely forceful Irishwoman as soon as they stepped through the door. Paweł patted him on the shoulder in thanks before disappearing into a group of friends, leaving Victor to stand at the side of the room and listen to the incomprehensible conversations. Polish seemed to exist in much the same relation to Russian that English did to German. It had been very confusing, when he had first come to this country after years of speaking German daily and getting his English entirely from books, to realise that words he thought he was hearing were not really there at all.

"Another stranger in a strange land, eh?" The man who had appeared alongside Victor, clutching his own cup of weak tea, had a single strand of his slicked-back, greying hair that had sprung loose and hung forward over his angular face. For some reason it reminded Victor a little of Yuuri. The self-identified stranger extended a hand. "Haven't seen you here before anyway. I'm Cholmondeley. Celestine Cholmondeley. Professor."
Victor shook his hand. "Victor Mikhailovich. I came with my neighbour, Osadnik; he doesn't do very well alone on the Underground."

"Ahh so you're a good egg then. A Russian egg, judging by that name. Fabergé, perhaps?" The man's accent was nothing like the everyday English one would hear on the streets of London; it was so crisp and polished Victor half expected to see his own reflection. "Well I'm here for a friend too; Mr Zygalski over there. Terrific brain, absolutely terrific. Smashing chap."

"Was he a war colleague of yours? It seems to be the pattern here."

Cholmondeley's laugh likely wouldn't have sounded forced to anyone not versed in deception; as it was Victor knew that whatever he said next wasn't entirely the truth. "Goodness, no, I spent most of the war wandering the streets with a football rattle and telling people to close their blackout curtains. But we work in the same field, now, and he has helped a great deal with an event we are holding on May Day. Here." He produced a flyer from his jacket pocket and handed it to Victor. "One of your own composers, Mr Mikhailovich; it'll be the first English performance since the end of the war."

Victor unfolded the piece of paper and stared at it. Shostakovich. The Leningrad symphony. He had heard it in snatches on the radio, half a movement here and there, but never in its entirety and certainly never in concert. It stood for a kind of bravery that he knew he fell short of, a kind of resilience that he had held for six years in Berlin and then let go entirely in his long journey home.

But Cholmondeley was looking at him very hopefully, and he couldn't very well be so rude to a man who he had only just met, a man who clearly hid some interesting secrets behind that affected eccentricity. "It sounds quite wonderful. I will try to be there."

The lobby and bar at the Blackheath Halls were busier than Yuuri had expected. He recognised a number of people at least to look at, as friends of Minako and Celestine's from the Fabian Society, and a few of them from the papers as Labour MPs; Minako herself caught sight of him through the crowds and smiled warmly as she waved. He picked up his programme and tried to make as inconspicuous a way as possible into the main concert hall. The lights were still up and he took a seat at the end of a row near the back, listening with half an ear to the stagehands' chatter as he thumbed through the programme.

"Never in my life have I dedicated my compositions to anyone. But this symphony - if I succeed in its realisation - I shall dedicate to Leningrad. For all that I wrote in it, all that I expressed in it, is tied up with that beloved native city of mine, is connected with the historic days of its defence against fascist oppressors."

The first half of the booklet was given over to an extensive description of the siege and defence of Leningrad, and of the symphony's première in its namesake city in August 1942, when the city could only be resupplied by a dangerous route from the north via the Neva River. The illustrative pictures were not as grisly as some that Yuuri had seen, but they told their own story of the cold and starvation that had imprisoned the city for three years. The last, though, was a photograph of some of the musicians who had performed the piece during the siege, wrapped up in more layers than Yuuri would have thought an indoor, August performance would have warranted. There was a balding, bespectacled man with a conductor's baton, a dark-haired woman posed with her violin held in fingers that looked practically skeletal, a tall, bearded man who seemed to be leaning on his cello for support, and at the front of the group a short woman with long, pale hair and a hunger-pinch face who nevertheless stared into the camera with the piercing gaze of a soldier, a clarinet clutched in her hands like a rifle.

Her eyes seemed to linger at the back of Yuuri's vision as he turned the page to the section detailing
the symphony itself, with notes from the conductor and a short history of the amateur orchestra performing, proudly detailing the many concerts and recitals they had continued to hold through the worst months of the Blitz. He couldn't help but wonder what the fates of those people in the photographs of Leningrad had been, if they had survived the war, if any of them had known-

"Yuuri! I'm so glad that you decided to come!" Minako sat down beside him and immediately pulled him into an embrace, then leaned back to gestured to the women behind her. "Caroline, Eirene, this is my cousin, Mr Yuuri Katsuki. Yuuri, this is Eirene Jones from the NEC and Caroline Ganley, the MP for South Battersea. You haven't been introduced before I don't believe?"

The younger of the two women, with dark hair in a tidy perm and a truly prodigious forehead, leaned over to shake Yuuri by the hand. "I haven't had the pleasure, Minnie my dear, but of course we all know who you are, Mr Katsuki."

Yuuri felt his face heat. "I hope Minako hasn't been saying too much."

The women- she must be Eirene, with that Welsh accent- chuckled at him. "Oh goodness, as if we wouldn't otherwise have heard of the Japanese man awarded a George Cross. How delightfully modest! I had believed it was a virtue of the Japanese, until I met Minnie." Minako's laugh suggested that this was a well-worn joke, and Yuuri let himself fade into the background of the three women's conversation until the lights in the room began to dim and the orchestra filed out from the wings into their seats.

While he'd always had an appreciation for a wide range of genres, from bombastic ondo to delicate violin partitas to the heart-swelling brilliance of jazz, Yuuri had never managed to grasp much of the complex and largely-Italian vocabulary of music. A piece was fast or slow, soft or loud, it made him feel one way or another or he didn't like it at all. There were few other ways to describe the way music would tug at a person in that part of the mind that was far behind any language.

The Leningrad symphony was a story, a great artistic landscape of sound the likes of which Yuuri had not heard for many years. The brass called like bugles over sweeping strings before fading through soft woodwinds to the single voice of a flute, the sound of great glories and delicate beauty past, which was cut through sharply by successive groups of instruments repeating a military motif over the relentless march of snare drums. He thought of German soldiers marching in formation through Berlin, of the more sinister way one would sometimes see officers of the Gestapo moving about the city, proceeding on some dark mission or other. He could hear air raid sirens in the frantic call-and-response of the brass.

The programme informed him that the second movement was entitled 'Memories', where softness spiralled up into a wild, discordant medley before slipping down again. Yuuri leaned forward, straining to hear. It was as though the orchestra laid out a map of Leningrad in the air, each instrument pulling the imagination down one street or another, leading island-to-island over a great, grey river amongst buildings climbing steepled and domed into the sky. And in the safety of the darkened room, lifted by the rising swell of the music, Yuuri allowed himself to think of Victor, Victor who had run through those same streets as a child, who had mourned them through all his years in Berlin, who if he had made it out of Germany alive was surely living in them again now.

The thoughts carried him through into the fourth movement, 'Victory', from its soft trepidation through the long and frenzied build. The percussion crashed, and sweat gleamed on the foreheads of the violinists as their bows swept back and forth, and even as the brass rang out in a victorious final march there was something sorrowful and bittersweet in the circling of the strings. A city in ruins, an innocence that could never see daylight again.

When the orchestra had thundered out of the symphony's last, glorious notes, the room erupted into
applause. Yuuri clapped fervently, feeling like the music was still echoing inside his bones, and as
the audience eventually began to file out Minako rested a hand on his shoulder. When he turned his
head her face was flushed and passionate, like a hundred ideas had been unleashed in her mind. He
wondered sometimes if she missed the ballet, with all its pomp and glamour and glory, what it must
be like to climb down from the stage where thousands had admired you and become someone almost
ordinary again.

"Drink?" she asked. Yuuri could only nod dumbly.

In the lobby she held on to his arm as she elbowed her way forcefully to the bar, and ordered them a
gin and tonic each. Yuuri lit a cigarette just as their drinks were pushed across the bar to them; he
offered one to Minako but she declined.

"Where's Celestine?" he asked, having to lean right into her ear for a chance of being heard. Minako
exaggerated a shrug, but turned her back to the bar to look around the room for her husband. Yuuri
watched the way she turned her wedding ring around her finger with her thumb, a tic she'd had for as
long as he'd known her. He knew the second she spotted Celestine from the way her face brightened
and she stood up a little straighter.

There was something very beautiful about two people who had known each other for a long time,
who were settled into one another's rhythms but who could still bring that kind of light to each other's
faces after so many years. The feeling that twisted in the pit of Yuuri's stomach might have been
envy, if it wasn't so hollow and cold.

Celestine pushed through the crowd to wrap his wife in a generous hug and kiss her on the cheek; it
was a little beyond the usual bounds of English propriety, but then that was the benefit of being a
minor branch of the very grand Cholmondeley family. He shook Yuuri's hand too, very warmly, as if
it had been years since they'd last seen each other instead of months.

"Yuuri! So good that you came." He beamed. "I was wondering if you might like to meet a new
friend of mine, he is here tonight too? A lovely gentleman, I am sure you would like him, just give
me a moment!" He slipped back into the crowd and Yuuri shot a pointed look at Minako, who
shrugged again.

"What?" she said. "I said I wouldn't be trying to introduce you to any more men. I can't control him."

"Well that's a lie."

"Oh come on now-"

"And this is my wife, Minako, and her cousin!" Celestine elbowed his way back into view, a slightly
shorter man behind him, and it seemed like the space between Yuuri's heartbeat and the next
stretched out into minutes, hours, because it was impossible, absolutely and completely impossible.

Standing behind Celestine with a cigarette in his hand, as if summoned across a continent by the
music, was Victor.

He looked tired, like he'd aged much more than the four years since Yuuri had seen him last. His
pale blond hair was longer now and gathered up in a knot at the back of his neck, although some still
fell forward over his face as it always had. His clothes were much more ordinary than the expensive
suits he'd worn in Germany, just on the respectable side of shabby. But his eyes were the same, that
endless summer-sea blue, brimming over with uncountable emotions as they stared at each other.

"Yuuri, this is Mr Victor Mikhailovich; Mr Mikhailovich, my wife's cousin Mr Yuuri Katsuki."
Some external and polite force took control of Yuuri’s voice and croaked out, "It's a pleasure to meet you.”

Victor said nothing at all. Apparently believing that his matchmaking duties were done, Celestine turned bodily into a conversation with Minako, leaving the two of them surrounded by people and yet entirely alone.

It was as if the rest of the room had been frozen in time, or suddenly emptied. Yuuri pulled in a lungful of smoke from his cigarette to distract his hands from the riotous, overwhelming urge to reach for Victor, to grab him, to pull him close. If Yuuri touched him he would know for certain whether or not this was some kind of elaborate hallucination, but if he didn't then he could stay staring at Victor and if his brain was slipping away into madness then at least he could enjoy the fall.

Victor's tongue came out to wet his lips. "Yuuri?" he said, almost entirely a question, and the sound of his voice was like a fresh bruise over scar tissue, the pain going far deeper than the blow. Sound, heat and reality roared back in.

He worked in Soviet intelligence. There was only one possible reason why he would be in London. Yuuri thought of the endless streams of Stalinist invective out of communist parties all over Europe that passed across his desk, of all the posturing and obfuscation from the Kremlin about their own pursuit of the bomb, of Stalin's closing iron grip on nations the Soviets had claimed they were liberating from the Nazis. Victor had been clever, sweet, kind, loving, wonderful, but never anything less than an ardent communist. They used to share a common enemy. Now the lines of war were being re-drawn and they were on opposite sides.

Yuuri slammed back his gin and tonic in one go and finally managed to turn away, pushing the glass back across the bar before stubbing out his only half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray. He grabbed Minako by the arm and jammed his other hand in his pocket.

"Here," he said, fishing out a few ten shilling notes and pressing them into her hand, "for the collection, have to go, sorry, long bus back to Pimlico, see you," and he couldn't turn back, couldn't look at the spot where Victor still stood rooted to the floor like a statue, had to get out into the cool evening air before he could start to breathe.

He'd never got over it, never even started to move on, and now the wound was broken open again and Yuuri thought it might kill him.

It was the sort of thing Popovich probably would have liked, had Victor been mooning after a woman anyway. He stood on the corner of a street lined solidly with pale-coloured buildings, their entrances flanked with grand pillars. He had never been to this part of London before, but it was close to all the great focal points of British power and practically oozed money.

Perhaps he had misheard? He had not been in the best state of mind to register anything beyond the pure, incredible fact of Yuuri standing in front of him, and Yuuri had been speaking very rapidly when he bid his hasty goodbye to his older cousin. But there wasn't anywhere else in Victor's Geographer's A-Z of London that sounded anything like 'Pimlico', so if this wasn't it then maybe he didn't live in the city at all.

It was the sort of time of the afternoon that he imagined Yuuri might be returning home from an office job somewhere. Victor would walk around the area and, if he didn't see him, he would let the matter go. If he allowed himself a few foolish dreams, a heated fantasy to keep himself company at night, that was his own business. He had no class to teach this evening, no agents to meet, and could allow himself a few hours of idiocy before returning to his daily life.
He didn't know what he would do or say if he did see Yuuri. It wasn't as if he'd forgotten that the man he now knew himself to be did not deserve the kind of passionate, beautiful love that Yuuri had given him so freely. For all he knew, Yuuri's reaction on Saturday night had been that of a someone who had moved on to a better, more honourable lover, and found it distasteful to be confronted with his past. Victor lit a cigarette to try and quiet the noise in his mind.

A bicycle bell rang behind him and he turned sharply, but it was only a boy on a heavy delivery bike trying to spook a pigeon out of the road. Victor sighed. If Yuuri did live here now, in this place where even the untouched bomb sites looked wealthy, perhaps the English had elevated him to some grand position and there was no circumstance under which he would be seen with a scruffy Russian émigré. The Yuuri he had known hadn't been like that, but Victor knew all too well just how much a few years could change a person.

It was a mark of his deep distraction that he didn't notice for quite some time that he was being watched; the sudden, gentle touch on his sleeve startled him even more than it usually would and he dropped his cigarette, hand clasping at his side for a gun that he only rarely carried here in Britain. A metre or so away from him stood Yuuri, one hand still balancing his bicycle while the other shrank away from Victor as if that brief touch had burned him.

"What are you doing here?" Yuuri asked in English, his face gone very pink. As the panicked haze cleared Victor could see that he was trembling very slightly.

"Yuuri," he said, like a fool, like it was the only word he knew. His brain had slowed to half speed. "Yuuri, I... it's you. You're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"Um. Somewhere?" They had spoken to one another in French, once or twice, but this was the first conversation they had ever had in English. It was not going very well. Yuuri had a hard, wary look on his face that Victor realised with a sudden ache in his chest that he recognised from their first ever honest conversation, when Yuuri had revealed his real identity in that dank little boarding house room. They had been next to strangers then, and they were strangers now again.

"How did you- why would you-" Yuuri sighed, dipping his head, and Victor let himself properly look at him, in a way that he hadn't been able to through his shock on Saturday night. He was dressed in a very smartly tailored charcoal grey suit, with a tie of black, green and gold stripes tucked under his waistcoat and shoes polished to an absurd shine. He wasn't wearing a hat and his hair was shorter but worn loose and artfully tousled rather than slicked back as it always had been before. In that moment there was nothing on Earth that Victor wanted more than to tip his chin up and kiss him, even here on the street in broad daylight. He couldn't, mustn't do that to Yuuri, but the desire ate at him anyway.

"I haven't changed employers," Yuuri said, barely above a whisper, his eyes still trained on the pavement. "Since we last met. And unless you have... you must know we can't do this."

Oh. Oh. Victor felt his heart plummet. Of course MI6 wouldn't let a man like Yuuri go, any more than Victor could waltz back to Moscow and announce that he was going to become a potato farmer and where was his military pension. And to think that it had seemed like too much when all that stood between them was the blood covering Victor's hands. A dutiful man would turn away right now and report Victor to his superiors; all he could do was trust that Yuuri was still led by his conscience before his duty.

"I know," he said, and hated it. "I know we can't... things won't ever be the way they were." Yuuri made a strange little sound then, both hands now gripping the handlebars of his bicycle hard. "But it
wouldn't need to mean anything much if I could- could see you sometimes. If we could just see each other and talk, a little. About things that aren't work."

Yuuri was silent and Victor began to brace himself for the inevitable oncoming rejection. At least he'd had a few moments longer to see Yuuri as he was now, a few moments to fuel his memories anew. It felt like his heart would tear itself in two from the pain, but he had lived all these years with it in pieces so surely it could go on beating after this too. But then Yuuri turned and unwrapped a chain from underneath his bicycle saddle and then walked it a few steps before locking it up against a lamppost. When he looked back at Victor the wariness on his face had softened.

"My flat is-" he began, and then shook his head. "Walk with me?"

They exchanged only a few words as Yuuri led them through the streets, skirting the fence around a large building site before they emerged onto a road along the river bank. The Thames was dark and murky, the twin, smoking towers of a power station rising across the water. Yuuri stopped in the shade of a beech tree and took a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from his jacket pocket.

"You never used to smoke much," he said, as Victor accepted one.

Victor shrugged his shoulders. "It helps," he said, and Yuuri gave him a look of understanding so familiar and dear that it burned. At the edge of the water a cormorant stood with its wings spread out to dry, glittering with water droplets like stars.

"I'm glad to know that you survived the war," Yuuri said, setting off again at a more sedate pace. Victor walked beside him.

"It was a pretty close thing at times," he said, with a levity that he didn't feel. "And you are well, I hope?"

Yuuri brought his cigarette to his lips. "I'm well enough."

"You look very..." The English word that came to the front of his mind was 'handsome', but it felt too flippant, like he was flirting. "You look good. You must be doing well here."

"You wouldn't think it, but it's a quiet life." Yuuri glanced sideways at him. "Rather lonely, actually."

It certainly didn't seem as if Yuuri had found himself another lover. Not that that was any of Victor's business.

"I don't know if there is a city in the whole world that isn't lonely. Whenever there's too many people in one place, it's impossible to make a connection to any of them."

"But we're all alone right here," Yuuri said, gesturing at the empty pavement lined with trees, the silent width of the river.

"Yes," Victor agreed quietly, "yes we are."

They shared a long moment of silence then, the slowly setting sun at their backs, a train rattling across the bridge behind them.

"Do you have a telephone?" Yuuri asked eventually.

"There's one in my boarding house that I can ask to use, yes."
"Mine is Belgravia one-oh-one-six. I'm- well, clearly you know the sort of time I usually get home from work, and I'm usually in at the weekends. If you call, we could arrange to meet for tea, perhaps lunch from time to time. Like you said, to talk." He turned to look back the way they had come, the sunset reflecting like a flame in his brown eyes. "It's- it's very good to see you again."

Yuuri took the stairs to the fourth floor two at a time, his heart racing even before he started. He wasn't exactly known for lingering over lunch, but it was hardly out of character for men of his position to take a good portion of the afternoon for it either, so there was no reason for anyone to find it suspicious that he was only returning to the office a little before three. What he didn't want anyone to see, however, were the emotions he didn't think he could keep off his face.

It had been one thing to meet Victor unexpectedly at the concert hall, to be surprised by him on the street and have the kind of stilted exchange that defined their profession. It was another entirely to sit across from him in a café and hardly even notice the blandness of corned beef sandwiches and horrible English tea for the way he felt entranced by their conversation.

Victor had always been able to bewitch Yuuri with his words, and even though he spoke English with a strong accent and much less natural ease than he did German, that certainly hadn't changed. They talked mostly about literature, where it had always started, a subject made much more interesting in a free, democratic city where Yuuri could write him a long list of recent English novels to look for at the library. Victor, to his credit, said he had been reading T.S. Eliot since he came to London, and spoke at length about a French novel Yuuri hadn't encountered yet about lovers torn apart and then reunited by the Nazi invasion and the French Resistance. He had kept his eyes trained on his food as he described the plot, as if looking at Yuuri would bring it too close to the bone.

They spoke a little, too, about the last years of the war. Talking about Switzerland was too close to the wound of their separation, but Yuuri told him about London in the second phase of the Blitz, the summer of 1944 when planes gave way to the terrifying silence of the German rocket bombs, and the jubilant crowds that thronged Whitehall when the victory in Europe was announced. Victor's stories about Berlin in the wake of Yuuri's departure were very sparse and emotionless, but he described with the most beautiful expression how when the Red Army came to the city at last he had helped a comrade climb to the top of the Reichstag to raise the Soviet flag, just days before the final German surrender.

He was still so beautiful, so impossibly enchanting. Yuuri sat at his desk and breathed hard, head in his hands. If they kept their conversations to safe places, to their shared interests, the past, the weather, anything at all, surely he wasn't doing anything treasonous. Victor said he was teaching Russian language classes for adults at Lewisham College; it wasn't as if Yuuri knew for certain that he was in London on MGB business.

It wouldn't matter if he did. Victor could have spent the whole afternoon probing him for British state secrets, and there was still no part of Yuuri that could have turned him in.

But they were both clear about where the line around this would be drawn. This wasn't like Berlin, where they were both lonely and isolated and had sought comfort in one another. They could be friends who met from time to time, who made conversation about things that didn't really matter, and when Victor inevitably left London perhaps the burning in Yuuri's heart would have cooled enough to finally let him go.

There was a knock at his door and Yuuri lifted his head, trying to compose his face as it opened and Glyn stuck his head in.

"Heard you were back from lunch, old chap, I just wanted to check if you'd- I say, is everything
alright?" Glyn's bushy eyebrows creased in concern.

"Fine, fine," Yuuri said, waving his hand, "just thinking too much. Were you after those JCP communiques?"

"Absolute mind-reader," Glyn said as Yuuri stood up to hand him the folder. "Where would we be without you?"

Much less vulnerable to Moscow, Yuuri thought as he closed the door.

Even if it hadn't been for Yuuri's invitation, Victor would still have valued any excuse to be out and about on a Saturday rather than holed up in his room. Mrs Pauley was selling the boarding house and even when there weren't prospective buyers poking about everywhere there was a great pallor of unease about the place. Even Pawel was making an effort not to be at home. So Victor had left early and walked most of the way here, to stare at the King's ridiculous house where Popovich's agent lurked about, and at the grand roads around it. The gleaming golden statue atop a pillar at the roundabout's centre wouldn't have looked out of place in Leningrad.

Victor leaned against a streetlamp and felt his heart lift as a familiar figure on a bicycle came around the roundabout, one hand holding his hat down against the wind as he swung a leg over the back wheel and slowed to a stop at the kerb.

"Sorry I'm late," Yuuri said, cheeks a little flushed. "Nearly got run down by a bus driver on the Vauxhall Bridge Road."

"It's fine, I haven't been waiting long," Victor lied. It wasn't as if he had a better use for his time anyway.

"I thought we could take a walk in St James's Park; it's not big but it's lovely in the summer."

"I would like that very much." Victor stepped forward to help Yuuri haul his bicycle up onto the pavement. It was much heavier and sturdier than the one he'd ridden in Berlin.

"Let me just find somewhere to lock this giant beast," Yuuri said, fumbling for the chain wrapped under the saddle. "You know why there's hardly any railings anywhere in this country? They all got melted down and turned into Spitfires. Whoever came up with that policy must have been a bicycle thief."

"Actually," Victor began, and almost lost the rest of his sentence in the bright, interested way that Yuuri turned to look at him. "Actually I was wondering if… you see, I have to either walk or get the train everywhere in this city, I can't even begin to understand the buses, and I thought about getting a bicycle but…"

It was worth all the embarrassment in the world to see the look of completely unabashed glee that came over Yuuri's face. "Victor," he said, incredulous and delighted, "are you telling me that you don't know how to ride a bicycle?"

"I do!" he protested, "I do, it's just been a very long time! And they drive on the wrong side of the road in this country!"

"I'm afraid I don't have my tool roll to take the pedals off so you can learn to balance."

"I know how to balance!"
"And it's got three gears, that might be a bit complex for you."

"I know what gears are! I can drive a car!"

And Yuuri was laughing at him now and no amount of indignation could have kept Victor from joining in. They laughed their way down the sloping path into the park, emptier than it might have been on a less windy May Saturday. When the ground levelled out Yuuri leaned the bicycle over in Victor's direction.

"If you crash it and buckle a wheel-" he began.

"I won't crash it!" Victor grumbled, but he winked at Yuuri and was rewarded with a small blush as he took hold of the bicycle and pulled the right pedal up into place with his foot. This was supposed to be one of those things that you never forgot. He saw little children cycling all the time. It wasn't hard.

Technically what happened in the next few seconds was a fall rather than a crash, but it still knocked the wind out of him to feel the bicycle twist out of his control, skid off the path and onto the lawns, and then tip over and land hard on his leg when he fell. Yuuri came over to pick it up off him, concern warring with a truly cruel and vicious amusement on his face. Victor stood up, put his hat back on and dusted the grass off his trousers before holding his hands out for the bicycle again.

His second attempt was smoother, and he made it a good few metres down the path before squeezing the brakes to a nervous stop and hauling the bicycle around to return to Yuuri. The third time he managed to make the turn where Yuuri stood without stopping and was off down the path again, and after a moment he glanced back to see Yuuri jogging after him, smiling in a way that made his heart clench, not in pain, but in pure and simple joy.

This was happy, this casual playfulness between them, the way that Yuuri teased but hadn't hesitated to let Victor fool around on his bicycle, the fact that despite having been apart for longer than they'd first known each other it was just so incredibly easy to be around Yuuri, no matter what they were doing. In the saddle he was high off the ground and with the wind against his face it felt almost like flying. He turned around again and slowed to a stop when Yuuri caught up to him, where the path turned off to a bridge over the lake that ran the length of the park.

"Okay, so you can ride a bicycle," Yuuri said as he dismounted, holding his hands up in defeat, and once again Victor wanted terribly to kiss him. He didn't care if it was in public, didn't care how little he deserved it, only wanted and wanted selfishly as Yuuri took the bicycle back from him and began to walk out onto the bridge. Victor followed and Yuuri touched his arm gently when they stopped at its apex.

"Look," he said, "from here you can see the Palace, and then in the opposite direction is Downing Street."

"The King could take a boat to visit Mr Attlee," Victor said.

"I think usually they do things the other way around."

"I don't see why. They say Britain is a socialist country now. A democratic socialist country." Yuuri gave him a worried look, as if Victor was stepping out into dangerous territory, but before he could respond there was an enormous clap of thunder overhead, and as they both looked up the heavens opened.

It seemed as if they were both drenched to the bone in seconds, and certainly they were by the time
they had both run off the bridge and into the meagre shelter of a willow tree on the lake's bank. Water dripped off the brim of Yuuri's hat, his glasses fogging as he pulled at his wet jacket; Victor could feel his own damp shirt and soaking wet trousers clinging to his skin.

"Well," Yuuri said, speaking loudly over the noise of the rain and another peal of thunder. "There goes a walk in the park. Do you live far?"

Victor made a face. "Deptford," he said. It was a long walk even in the best of weather, and a miserable trip on public transport with his clothes soaked through. Yuuri looked away, then back at him again, that searching expression on his face, although from the crease in his brow it seemed like the search was an internal one.

"It's only about ten minutes back to my flat," he said eventually. "I'll give you a lift; you sit up on the saddle and I'll stand in the pedals."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I used to give our neighbour's daughter a lift home from school like that almost every day. Until she got engaged and her fiancé didn't care for it."

It was certainly a romantic image, one that the selfish part of Victor wanted very much to indulge. Yuuri slung his leg over the bicycle and held it steady so Victor could clamber into the saddle, holding on to the nose of it to settle himself.

"Comfy?" Yuuri asked, and he didn't look back but Victor could hear the smile in his voice.

"Perfect."

"Right. Hold on then."

And they were off into the downpour. Despite Yuuri's assurances it felt very precarious, especially once they left the park and were out onto London's chaotic roads. He focused on the vee of Yuuri's back in front of him, those strong shoulders that tapered down to his waist. At the corners of his vision the buildings and the bomb-made gaps between them flickered like a coded message, a hidden secret. They were going back to Yuuri's flat; they would be completely alone together there in a way they hadn't been since before the RAF bombed the Japanese embassy in Berlin. Something all hot and cold at once tingled its way up Victor's spine.

The first thing they did when they got through Yuuri's front door was shed their hats, jackets and shoes. Victor wasn't wearing a waistcoat and to stop himself from focusing too much on the way his wet shirt clung to his chest, Yuuri hurried into the sitting room to get a fire going. The rain was still rattling hard against the tall windows, running down them in great sheets. Victor followed him into the room more slowly, looking around with obvious interest.

"This is very lovely," he said. Yuuri glanced back at him over his shoulder as he rolled up some newspaper for tinder.

"It's home," he said with a shrug. He could hear Victor padding around the room in his socks as he built up the fire, layering wood on top of the newspaper and topping it with coal before reaching for the matches. When he lit it the flames leapt up eagerly from the dry paper, letting off a sudden burst of heat that was very welcome even at the start of summer.

Victor had wandered over to one of the two sets of bookshelves either side of the fireplace and was running a finger along the spines. He stopped when he came to a small frame that was propped up
against the collection of dull Dickens novels that had been a gift from Celestine. Yuuri watched as Victor picked it up, the rain-soaked light reflecting off the silver cross as his finger traced a circle over the words. *For Gallantry.*

"You have a medal," Victor said, still staring at it. Yuuri scratched the back of his head.

"Yes. It's called the George Cross. They created it in the second year of the war, to award to civilians."

"What is it awarded for?" Victor was still completely fascinated, tilting the frame back and forth so the light could catch it again and again.

"Um," Yuuri said, trying to recall the words he'd heard three years ago as the King of England, who'd looked almost as nervous as he had felt, had pinned it to his chest. "For, um, 'acts of the greatest heroism, or of the most conspicuous courage, in circumstances of extreme danger'. I think that was it, anyway."

"That sounds about right." Victor set the medal back down and turned, and the look on his face made Yuuri want to melt, pride and admiration and something deeply and profoundly sad underneath them. It was beyond dangerous to have Victor in his home. If the rain didn't let up soon Yuuri felt he might do something unaccountably foolish. He took off his waistcoat and laid it over the back of an armchair, then sat down on the sofa to peel off his socks. His trousers were still completely soaked, but if he took off his trousers in front of Victor there would really be no more pretending about what they could do here all alone behind closed doors.

Yuuri had never been good at putting duty ahead of his own heart.

Victor came over to sit on the sofa too, a respectable distance away at the other end but still painfully close. He held out his hands to the fire to warm them. There was another great clap of thunder outside, but with the fire crackling and the rain against the glass there was something comforting and homely about it. Yuuri regarded Victor out of the corner of his eye, watched the golden firelight play across his skin as a droplet of water fell from the little bun at the back of his neck. It rolled down his spine and into the collar of his shirt, and Yuuri wanted to chase after it with his mouth. The easy joking of the park, where they were protected from themselves by the publicness of the space, had completely fallen away, leaving only overwhelming desire simmering in his chest.

"I won't impose on you for too long," Victor said, still looking into the fire. "Just let me dry out a little and then I'll be on my way."

"No," Yuuri said without even thinking, "you can stay." Victor turned his head and their eyes met, the air between them feeling suddenly thick and still. "Please, stay," Yuuri repeated, and his hand was stretching out across the sofa towards Victor as if by some force entirely of its own.

Victor swallowed audibly and stood up, the moment shattering. "I should go," he said, leaning in towards the fire and patting at his clothes as if it would dry them faster, "I should go, you don't know what I- you can't want-"

It was the stupidest decision Yuuri had ever made in his life, and he would never, ever regret it. He stood up in a single motion and grabbed Victor by the elbow, turning him so they were standing face-to-face in front of the fire.

"Yes, I can," he said, and kissed him.

Thunder rolled again. Victor had gone still for a moment in shock but then he was kissing back
hungrily, mouth open, his hands grasping at the back of Yuuri's shirt. Yuuri surged up on his toes, arms going around Victor's waist to pull him close. His glasses were pressing against the ridge of his nose and he broke away only to pull them off, throw them onto the sofa, and kiss Victor again, harder, as if they could make up for all their years of separation if they were only close enough. He could feel the heat of Victor's body radiating through his damp clothes, and arousal crackled through Yuuri's nerves like the wood being consumed in the fireplace.

It had been inevitable from the moment they had laid eyes on each other again, the inexorable pull of each others' gravity. Yuuri pulled the back of Victor's shirt and vest out of his trousers and slipped his hand underneath, touching his skin as if for the the very first time, and Victor groaned into his mouth. Greed raced through him, the overwhelming need to pull every rain-soaked item of clothing off of Victor's body and drag him to the bedroom, keep him there forever and shut everything else away.

Yuuri pulled away again, gasping for breath, staring into Victor's almost drunken-looking face. He felt as if he might die if he didn't start kissing him again immediately. How on earth had he lived so long without this? How had he even begun to imagine that there could be someone after Victor?

"I do want you," he said, breathlessly, voice low. "I always want you. Will you come to bed with me?"

Victor's hands came up to cup Yuuri's face, thumbs softly tracing along his cheekbones. That sorrow from before still lingered in his face and Yuuri wanted to kiss it away, to touch him and hold him and make love to him until all that either of them could feel was bliss. "Yes," he whispered, "god, Yuuri, yes," and Yuuri kissed him again before taking him by the hand and leading him out of the room.

The flat was over two floors, the bedrooms up a short flight of stairs and past the door that led out onto the tiny rooftop balcony. Yuuri could feel Victor's burning, adoring gaze on him as they climbed the staircase, replaced again by his hands as Yuuri pulled them both, stumbling, through the bedroom door. It was full of the same cloudy grey light as the sitting room, filtered through the fine lace curtains. Yuuri kicked the door closed and grabbed at the buttons of Victor's shirt. He'd have to wear it home again when he really did leave so it wouldn't do to rip it, as much as Yuuri wanted to.

"Mein liebling," Victor whispered, his chest heaving under Yuuri's hands, and then slid into something rapid and stammered in Russian that Yuuri couldn't follow. He leaned in to kiss the hollow of Victor's throat, newly revealed under the open collar of his shirt.

"Ai shiteru yo," he murmured and Victor raked a hand through his hair, making a small, soft noise as if he understood. Maybe he did. Across all their shared and disparate languages, they had always found ways to communicate beyond words.

They went slowly now, in the quiet of Yuuri's bedroom, in contrast to the frantic way they had kissed in the sitting room. Despite well-worn memories their bodies were different now too. Victor had a long, narrow scar on his left forearm, and a little round, puckered mark on the front of his shoulder with a larger, matching one on the back. Someone had shot him. Yuuri moved around him on bare feet to press his lips softly to each side, feeling him shudder.

Victor sat down on the bed first, tipping his head back to be kissed. Yuuri reached around and tugged off the little elastic that held his hair in place, running his fingers through it as it fell loose. It was still damp at the ends, but even softer than he'd remembered. Victor's hands settled at his hips and coaxed him in, until Yuuri had climbed up onto the mattress to straddle his lap, and their bodies fitted against each other like broken halves of a whole.

He couldn't believe that only earlier today he had tried to convince himself to refuse this, to hold
himself away from Victor's kisses and his warm, strong arms, from the utter devotion that ran like a
vein of gold through his every touch. He could only hope that the same message was conveyed in
return, that whenever his fingers combed through Victor's hair or traced patterns over his skin it
spoke in the same wordless language they shared. *I missed you*, his hands cradling the back of
Victor's head as they sank back into the blankets together, *I need you*, his lips against the fluttering
point of Victor's pulse, *I love you*, his face pressed into the crook of Victor's neck as his hands sought
the fastenings of both of their trousers.

It was all hands and friction and slow, open-mouthed kisses, completely lacking in finesse and so
beautifully honest that his heart could overflow from it. Their legs were entangled, bodies pressed
together. Yuuri wanted to throw shut every bolt on the door and keep out all the storms of global
politics that intruded on them, that had conspired to keep them apart. Victor was *his*, before anything
and everything else, and he was determined to have him.

Against the window the rain continued to fall.

Chapter End Notes

You can listen to Shostakovich's 7th Symphony, "Leningrad", [here](#).
Chapter Summary

Reunited in London, Yuuri and Victor begin to find a delicate kind of peace in the midst of their conflicting lives, even as the former Allied powers tussle over Berlin. But the tension between their private and personal lives is brought to a head by events even further away, as political turmoil arises in Leningrad and the attention of the world turns towards Korea.

Chapter Notes

So three things:

1) Apologies for the longer-than-usual delay between chapters, I have been on holiday and it turns out I can't write for shit with my parents around constantly.

2) There is fanart for this fic now?? That's a thing that's happened?!

drowingpamore drew Yuuri from the end of chapter one
highcoast drew Victor seeing Yuuri again in chapter four
erengelion drew Yuuri reading (and smoking) and Victor and Yuuri having some emotional smooches

3) Please note that this chapter contains discussion of war crimes, including a mention of sexual violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I could tell him, too, that to know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom.

- Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited

Victor woke with cool sunlight spilling across his face, sprawled in the unfamiliar sheets of a bed larger than any he had slept in for years. He blinked, pushing through the dark shapes of his dreams to his memories of the previous evening. Right then he was alone in the room, but this was Yuuri's home. Yuuri's bed.

He turned his face into the pillow, breathing in the mingled scents of laundry soap and Yuuri's shampoo. It was so simple and comforting, no matter how unfamiliar the setting, to wake to the echoes of a lover's presence even without him there. As he blinked off the haze of sleep he could hear noises from below, Yuuri moving about in the rooms downstairs.

Every second of this was precious. He wanted to remember the weight of the blanket, the colour of the light, how every bit of furniture looked, the warmth and contentment still suffusing every part of his body. They had spent almost the entire afternoon and evening wrapped up in one another,
speaking only in snatches, lazily rekindling everything that had been so abruptly snuffed out that November day in Berlin. It had been a purely selfish indulgence that Victor knew he would treasure for the rest of his life, but it was morning now and he had to be honest with Yuuri. He would never see this room again after that.

The bedroom door opened with a quiet creak and Victor looked up to see Yuuri stop in the doorway, leaning against the frame and regarding him. He was wearing his glasses and a pair of trousers and nothing else, and holding a glass of water in one hand. The light that fell over him from the windows made his soft smile seem radiant.

"Good morning," he said, straightening up again and coming back over to the bed. "Or guten morgen? I meant to ask yesterday if you'd rather we spoke in German." He set the glass of water down on the bedside table and climbed on top of the blankets, reaching over to tuck Victor's hair behind his ear.

Victor's mouth went very dry. "English is fine," he said.

"What do you fancy having for breakfast? We ate the last of the bread last night but I've some oats to make porridge, and a whole half-dozen real eggs from my colleague whose wife keeps chickens, and-"

"Yuuri."

"What is it?" Yuuri's hand, which had been idly stroking his hair, suddenly stilled.

It would be so much easier for him to do this without looking him in the eyes, without seeing that expression of gentle, loving concern on his face. "I have to- I have to tell you some things. About me. I know we said we weren't going to talk about work, but that was before… and you deserve to know. To know what I am."

Yuuri's hand started to move in his hair again, combing through it with his fingers and untangling the knots of sleep. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

Victor leaned into the touch a little and bit his lip. At least he knew where he ought to start. "Do you remember that Easter in Berlin, where we argued about what had happened at Katyn?" Yuuri nodded. "Well I… I need to apologise again. Because you were right. It- we- it was my comrades in the NKVD. They murdered over twenty thousand Poles who had been imprisoned in camps, for no reason. And that's… that's only one of so many things."

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He sat up a little in the bed, still forcing himself to look Yuuri in the eye, and pointed at the gunshot scar on his right shoulder, the one Yuuri had kissed last night with so much ignorant tenderness. "This? Did you wonder if I was shot by a Nazi during the capture of Berlin, something very daring and grand? No. I was shot by a Jewish girl in the Polish countryside. She and her sisters had survived the Majdanek camp, but when the Red Army came to liberate it some of the men- some of my comrades-" he spat out the word with all the foulness it deserved "-they found that there were girls there- they were barely more than children, Yuuri- and they…" He swallowed hard. There was no completing that sentence out loud. "She had managed to steal one of their pistols and killed the men who did it, and they escaped. I was travelling towards Minsk with an ambulance driver and we saw this group of girls walking along the road, so I asked her to stop and got out, thinking we might be able to help them. But all they saw was another man in a Soviet uniform. I was lucky that the driver spoke some Polish and she could talk to the girls, and that we weren't with anyone else who would have fired back at them right away. None of them would come near me, they wouldn't let us drive them anywhere, but I had her give them all the spare ammunition I had."
"Did you think this story would make me somehow like you less?" Yuuri asked softly. Victor frowned at him and shook his head.

"It doesn't matter if I did a small thing that was only human and decent. What matters is that it shows exactly how everything was a lie. Everything about us being liberators, bringing freedom and socialism to people brutalised by the Nazis. I saw whole villages and towns burned to the ground by the Red Army, people robbed, beaten, murdered. You know the camp the Germans called Auschwitz, the worst one of them all? We took it over, we Soviets, to house our German prisoners." He could feel the nausea rising the way it always did when he allowed himself to think about these things too long, let alone say them out loud. "And when I got back to Moscow, I learned… I always valued the fact that I got wind of the German invasion before it happened, that I sent all the information I could, even almost the exact date ahead of time, and that no matter how bad it was, surely I had helped it to not be any worse. But he- Stalin refused to believe it. The army was so underprepared. Other agents, the British, the Americans, all of us warned him, but of course he knew better. So twenty million people died." His throat was rough, voice barely above a whisper. "And I'm still there. Still an officer. Still a spy. For an egotistical madman, for a country of men that would tell a girl she was free and then try to destroy her."

Yuuri's expression was unreadable. Victor closed his eyes. "I'll get my things. I'm so sorry. I should have told you everything before we- it was so selfish of me and I know you must-"

"Victor, please look at me."

He opened his eyes again but kept them trained at a point below Yuuri's chin, far away enough from his surely entirely judgemental gaze.

"You know I gave details of all the Japanese ciphers and encryption technology to the British, and thereby to the Americans, right?" Victor nodded. "You're tone didn't sound as harsh as he'd anticipated, but perhaps he was missing some nuance of English. "And you know that they claim the reason they used the bomb on Japan is because they were tracking troop movements, that they knew exactly how bloody and difficult an invasion would be? That was because of me. Because of knowledge I gave them years before." He exhaled slowly in a way that was somehow sadder and emptier than just a sigh. "I grew up about a hundred kilometres away from Nagasaki; an old friend of my father's lived there and we would visit sometimes. There was a tram route we always took in the city, where you would round a corner and suddenly see the whole harbour, the hills around it, the sky and the ocean beyond…" Victor did, finally, look up then. Yuuri's eyes were glistening with moisture. "I don't know if it was the right or the wrong thing, if a land assault would have been worse for Japan in the end. I don't even know how anyone could begin to decide that. All I know is that there are beautiful things, and there are thousands of people, that are gone now forever. Because of me."

There weren't any words. Victor opened his arms and Yuuri kicked the blankets back to slip underneath them and into his embrace. Their foreheads pressed together and Yuuri made a little nuzzling motion. "I won't say that it doesn't matter. Of course it matters. But you're not- don't you see, Victor, we're the same. We've always been the same."

He didn't know quite what to do with a statement like that, but even after everything they'd done together yesterday he was still ravenous for intimacy. With their faces so close he could study every shade of colour in Yuuri's eyes, the way sepia faded into a ring of bronze and gold around his pupils like a lion's mane. His palms pressed against the cool skin of his back. "The war is supposed to be over," he murmured. "But inside me, inside my head, it's still happening."

"I know," Yuuri said, just as quietly. "I have awful, suffocating dreams, some nights. As if I'm
trapped and the bomb is falling, over and over, and there's nothing I can do."

"Sometimes even when I'm awake I'll hear a noise, or smell something, and in my mind I'm in Berlin again, or Warsaw or Minsk." Yuuri's hand settled on his shoulder, stroking back and forth just shy of the scars. "I'm a soldier, I spent the whole war preparing myself for the day I would see combat, but it's not the fighting that stays with you. It's the things that men do after- in victory or defeat."

"Oh Victor," Yuuri said, his eyes heartbreakingly tender, "and you thought I would push you away now, after yesterday, after all these years...? You'd have to be thousands of kilometres away again for me to stay away from you."

Even under the great weight of their conversation, it felt as if Victor's heart grew suddenly lighter, stepping up into the air. "I'm still in love with you, you know," he whispered.

Yuuri squeezed his eyes closed for the briefest of moments. "I don't think I ever stopped," he said.

"I don't want to put you in any danger."

"Nor I you," Yuuri said, and his face tightened suddenly with worry. "If you think this- if you need this to stop, then I will stay away, I don't want you to think-"

Victor almost laughed; instead he turned his head to kiss Yuuri very gently on the mouth, despite the awkward press of his glasses between their faces. "I don't care how much danger there is. If you think I am somehow any more able to keep my hands off you..." He moved them a little against Yuuri's back, as if to demonstrate. "I'm not completely sure that I'm not still asleep. Are you sure that you're real?"

In response Yuuri took his glasses off and kissed him again, not gentle at all, tugging at Victor's bottom lip with his teeth, licking into his open mouth, sending fresh heat prickling all through his body. "I can show you exactly how real I am," he said, pulling back even as Victor tried to follow, "but I would like to eat some breakfast first."

At that, he did laugh. "You said you had some real eggs? You'll never eat an omelette better than my grandmother's recipe."

"I'd like that." Yuuri's smile was as warm as a promise, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"So," Minako said, hefting another box out of the boot of her car and balancing it on top of the stack already in Yuuri's arms, "tell me about him."

"About who?" At least he was carrying enough now that she probably couldn't see his blush. He shifted his balance, trying to brace his back better as he stepped up onto the pavement.

"Don't try to be coy with me, Yuuri," she said, closing and locking the car door. "I watched you spend three years breaking the hearts of half the young men in Oxford. I know when you've met someone."

"I didn't break anyone's heart!" he protested, following very carefully as Minako walked up the front path to the door.

"Of course you didn't, that's why Dot's poor boy spent three of Celestine's tutorials sobbing into his problem sheets because you didn't want to see him again after he let you fall in the Cherwell."

She had to be exaggerating. That awkward attempt to go punting was still one of the most
embarrassing things that had ever happened in Yuuri's life; if he hadn't seen Horatio again after it was only to preserve himself from dying of shame.

Minako held open the front door for him. "I can also tell when you're trying to change the subject. I want to know who it is that has you smiling like that. It's been far too long a time since I've seen it."

"At least let me put these things down first," Yuuri said, stalling. He and Victor had discussed, briefly, how to approach the fact that, as far as Celestine and Minako knew, they had been 'introduced' at the Fabian concert. Either he would have to lie about everything- and Minako was perhaps the best lie-spotter who had ever worked for MI6- or they would have to create a half-truth about some kind of instant connection that night. A small, selfish part of him wanted to keep Victor entirely to himself, but another part was almost giddy at the idea of sharing even half a version of him with the few other people in his life who he was close to.

"Oh just put them in the sitting room. I'm only here for two nights, I can sort them out properly once we both come down for longer in the summer. I'll put the kettle on, and then I want to hear everything."

Minako and Celestine's London house was a delightful mishmash of international influences; Italian furniture, American paintings, a beautiful Turkish kilim in the hallway leading to the kitchen. The kettle starting to whistle on the stovetop was typically English, but Minako had a proper kyūsu and a set of Hasetsu ware teacups for enjoying her closely-guarded supply of real sencha. She let him have a packet or two now and again for himself, as if she were his grocer and he only had a few coupons a year.

Yuuri sat down at the kitchen table and Minako looked expectantly at him over the countertop. "Well it's only really been two weeks," he began. Two weeks in which he and Victor had seen more of each other than they might have in two months in Berlin. If he hadn't agreed a while ago to meet Minako today they would doubtless be spending another Saturday completely lost to the outside world. "But it's… it's been nice."

"So who is he?"

"Actually… do you remember the gentleman Celestine introduced me to at Blackheath Halls?"

Minako, in the midst of pouring, almost dropped the kettle. "Yuuri! After I spend years introducing you to all the nicest men I know, you go for his choice? I'm hurt."

Perhaps if she'd seen fit to set him up with the long-lost love of his life. "We happened to meet again by chance later that week and hit it off, and, well, you know."

She came around the counter and set down the still-brewing teapot on the table, then teacups for each of them. "What was his name again? Mr Mikhailovich?"

"Yes," he said. "Victor." It was the first time he had ever said the name aloud to someone else. It felt good.

"He's Russian then?" She lifted the lid of the teapot to check it and, satisfied, began to pour it out into their cups. "It's why we thought you might get on with Mr Chulanont, or he with you. Sometimes it's easiest with people who already know what it's like to be an outsider."

Yuuri leaned down to inhale the smooth and delicately bitter scent. Minako might be a long way from a master of senchadō, but it was still perfect and achingly reminiscent of home.

"I have never had a cup of tea made by an English person and not thought, why exactly did you
"The English are idiots, Yuuri," she responded, "and I say that as one British citizen to another. So Celestine told me what he learned about this Victor of yours when they met, but it wasn't much. He's here as a teacher?"

"Yes, at Lewisham College. He claims not to be very good at it." Whether that was honesty or just a flash of humility he hadn't been able to tell yet. Victor had always excelled as a performer, at slipping into a role, but the patience that was the other side of their work, and surely crucial to handling language beginners, came much less naturally to him.

"As long as he's good at other things," Minako said with a wink. Yuuri felt his face burn and he tried to hide behind his teacup.

"I'm not discussing that with you!" he spluttered, and she laughed.

"Oh please, I might be old but I'm not dead yet. Why, when I was your age I had a young French lover who was very-" Yuuri was overcome by a sudden, loud coughing fit, and Minako waggled her eyebrows at him. "Fine, I'll speculate on my own then. He is very good-looking. Even with that hair."

Victor could have hair down to his waist and probably still look good with it; as it was Yuuri loved the way it spilled forward into his face when they kissed, how it looked fanned out on the pillow, the way Victor had shown him how to comb it back and tie it at the nape of his neck. When he glanced back at Minako she was giving him a look that was equal parts fond and knowing. She reached over and patted his arm.

"It really is good to see you looking happy again, Yuuri. I'd like to see you smiling like that all the time."

"I- I really like him." It was a hilarious understatement, as if he'd said that he liked to breathe.

"Well Celestine will be away for most of July and the first week of August- he and Mr Chulanont are attending some workshops at the IAS in Princeton- but once he's back perhaps you and your young man would like to visit us here for dinner?"

It was just so incredibly normal, almost as if Minako and Celestine were any old English couple and Victor was a young woman Yuuri might be going to propose to. It wasn't as if they had forever, but he would take what he had while he could. "Let me know a date that would suit you."

No matter how many times he read the headline, it didn't change.

"GRAVE CHOICE BEFORE WESTERN ALLIES," it read. "RUSSIANS CALL FOR FUSION WITH EASTERN ZONE."

Victor had, it was true, been paying very little attention to the news over the last month. Suddenly all the empty spaces of his days seemed filled to bursting, even when he wasn't stealing time away to spend with Yuuri; it seemed as though in the summer London bloomed with a romance to rival Paris, and he wanted to experience it, wanted to watch the ships on the river and sit in parks reading poetry and actually live in the city for as long as it would have him.

It would have been hard to miss the dock workers' strike, especially as he'd had to adjust some of his usual travel routes to avoid crossing the picket lines, and there were conversations to be overheard on public transport on the matter of Empire Windrush and her recent passengers from Kingston that
ranged from amusing to downright alarming, but the situation in Berlin had somehow managed to pass him by entirely.

"The question which is likely to present itself most urgently and starkly to the Foreign Secretary is how far we are now prepared to go in our determination to remain in Berlin. Are we, for instance, prepared to risk the use of force and the possibility of war? Such an issue, appalling to contemplate though it may be, had certainly been considered by the United States before the present Berlin Crisis came to a head."

He felt sick. In his mind and memories Berlin existed in a strange continuum between its pre-war glory and the shattered half-ruin that he had looked back on from the bed of a shuddering military truck just over three years ago. Berlin was grey-coated Gestapo and the white blanket of winter snow, it was brown-uniformed children and the blood-red Nazi armband, it was buildings stained black with artillery smoke and the hot yellow sparks from a hundred fires. And it was people, too, thousands and millions of them, all of whom outside of the Russian sector now had their power and transportation lines cut off, due supposedly to 'technical faults'.

"These excuses, for such they are, need not be taken at their face value," the Guardian correspondent opined, and Victor felt another wave of nausea. He would have done, given half the chance, not so long ago. Part of him still wanted to find some way to justify it. The British press might not be Pravda but they were hardly free of their own biases, and the matter of the introduction of the new German mark could doubtless have been handled more diplomatically on the Western end of things. And surely, surely Marshal Sokolovsky would not allow the people of western Berlin simply to starve. Even if Victor had lost his illusions about the morality of the Soviet Union's leaders, it would seem to be a grave tactical error if the ultimate aim was to unite Berlin under Soviet control.

And they were provoking the Americans. Who on earth knew what Truman might be thinking, sequestered an ocean away, who knew how fast or how slow the power he now possessed would drive a man to madness. Stalin was already entirely mad and he couldn't have a single plane sent to obliterate a city. How many times would the Americans allow themselves to be bitten before they decided to swat the fly?

He had been trapped behind enemy lines once before. He wasn't sure he could live that way again.

"Alyosha!" The cheery greeting cut through Victor's moody thoughts and he looked up and nodded his head as Popovich sat on the bench beside him. He had his jacket off and slung over his shoulder, and made up for his lack of a waistcoat by wearing a belt instead of braces, as if he were living at the very cutting edge of fashion. He smiled like they were old friends and gestured out at the river with the half-eaten banana in his other hand.

"Beautiful day, isn't it? Ahh, comrade, I fear that I am growing too fond of this city. I will become as a man torn between two great loves; his faithful wife that awaits him at home, and the beautiful foreign mistress who has bewitched him."

If she had to put up with him talking like this all the time, the esteemed Mrs Popovich would probably be glad of anything that kept him away. "I have a packet for you from the embassy, here."

Popovich actually clapped his hands as Victor handed it over. He was, of course, engaged in the business of watching Victor just as closely as he did his British agents, but this seemed to go beyond a nervous over-performance in front of a mark. Perhaps he really was just like this. He ripped open the packet with gusto, flicking through a few papers before drawing out an envelope and pressing it to his chest with the hand still holding his banana.

"I knew I would hear from her soon." Popovich glanced sideways at Victor with a concerned
expression. "May I assume that you do not need to destroy my correspondence after I read it?"

"As long as she's not included any state secrets in that envelope, you may do whatever you want with it." Frankly, Victor couldn't bring himself to care. Even if he got himself arrested and by some bizarre circumstances the British police deduced from Popovich's mushy letters that he was a Soviet agent, there was nothing concrete to link him to either Victor or the embassy. Every agent under him hung at the end of their own little spool of silk.

"Oh wonderful. It's just that I know such things happened to comrades in Germany." He glanced at Victor again, more curious this time. "I heard that you have the Berlin medal, Alyosha."

"I didn't realise I was an object of such gossip."

"Is it gossip to admire a man's service? Where would any of us be without heroes to admire, to inspire us to strive onwards?"

As if there were any version of reality in which Victor could be considered a hero. "I served in Berlin for several years. It was not a situation in which one received a great deal of personal correspondence. We are much freer and safer both here, with the embassy to protect us."

"Indeed, we are very fortunate." Popovich pointed at the newspaper still laid open on Victor's lap. "You must be glad to see how close we are now to winning Berlin a second time, after the glorious-"

It came as almost as much of a surprise to Victor as it did Popovich when he grabbed his wrist hard, causing the remains of his banana to drop onto the pavement with a sad little splat. "Did you actually see combat during the war, Kresnik, or did you spend all of it piloting a desk?"

Popovich bristled at that. It was the first time Victor had seen him look anything close to angry. "I commanded a rifle company at Kursk. If you will remember, it was there that we finally began to drive the Germans back. And I rooted out a great many spies with SMERSH."

"An open battlefield is one thing. Combat in the streets of a city is another entirely." Victor shook his head, dropping Popovich's arm. "There was nothing glorious about it. We fought tooth and nail for every street corner and square, each room in every building. I wouldn't wish war on Berlin again for another thousand years. If you still think it glorious when you are home again, take your young wife on the train to Leningrad for the day and see for yourselves what war really does to a city."

Popovich was still regarding him with a sullen expression, as though offended at the intrusion of reality upon his daydreams. Victor folded the newspaper and dropped it onto the bench as he stood up.

"Until next time, then."

"Well this is invigorating, wouldn't you say?" Glyn said, offering his lighter. Yuuri dipped the end of his cigarette into the flame and gave him an unimpressed look over the rims of his glasses. "Come on Katsuki, don't tell me you'd rather be working on some staid bit of paper in that stuffy office of yours. This is what it's all about, fresh from the horse's mouth."

"Please let's have this conversation again when you're the one doing simultaneous translation from your third language into your second one," Yuuri said. "I never thought I would actually be hoping for some kind of political upheaval in Japan, just so I could listen to a language that doesn't give me such a headache."

"I suppose I forget you're not British sometimes," Glyn said thoughtfully, and Yuuri was forced to
give him another look. "Oh look, I didn't mean- it's just that you're a regular sort of chap, that's all. There's no need to look so offended." He winked. "It could be worse, I could have called you English. Now that's an insult."

The vast difference that Glyn considered to exist between himself and any man born two miles on the other side of the Welsh border was somewhat amusing, as if he didn't look and sound exactly like anybody else who'd been to public school and then up to Oxford.

"So how long do you think they can keep it going?" Yuuri said, changing the subject. Even on a break from the meeting, with other translators taking their places, it was still hard to keep his mind on anything but the desperate new operation to keep western Berlin supplied.

"Plainfare? Fucked if I know. At this rate we're not going to have a single cargo plane left on British soil by the end of the summer. People are already unhappy enough about still being on wartime rations so we can feed the Germans; how much goodwill can we keep up if we're pouring aviation fuel into Berlin too? Which is, of course, assuming that some nutty Red with a vendetta doesn't take a shot at one of our planes first."

"Or they shoot one down deliberately. They still outnumber us about three-to-one in ground troops. If they somehow know that there aren't actually any Silverplate bombers on this side of the Atlantic…"

Glyn shuddered. "Have you read the Operation Unthinkable plans? Bit above our pay grade, but they're out of date since the Americans dropped the bomb so they're easy enough to lay hands on. Good choice of bedtime reading if you don't want to sleep for a few nights." He took a long drag on his cigarette, staring absently down the corridor. "You know I lived in Chiswick during the war? On the road where the first V-2 hit. Damned lucky that Cece and the children were in Monmouth with my parents at the time. And of course the Soviets have the old rocket factory now, and Lord knows Stalin isn't any more merciful than Hitler."

"Do you think we should give up Berlin?" Yuuri asked quietly. It was so strange for the city to be a hypothetical, a point on a map, a piece in the global political game, when it was still so vivid and real in his memories.

"It might be easier," Glyn said, just as softly. "But then it was easy to give up the Rhineland, and Austria, and the Sudetenland, until we finally decided we couldn't give up Poland. You don't settle up with tyrants. There's no satisfying them."

The door beside them opened suddenly and Arthur stuck his head out. "Grace us with your presence, won't you Sharp? Poor old Newberry's really struggling with this chap's Estonian accent. We're alright on the German, though, Katsuki, you can cool off a little longer."

Glyn put his cigarette between his teeth at an upwards angle and stuck his chin out in a passable Roosevelt impersonation. "Duty calls," he said, in a much less passable American accent, and followed Arthur back through the door, leaving Yuuri alone in the corridor.

He ended up arriving late to the restaurant in Southwark that evening, chaining up his bicycle hurriedly before he pushed his way through the door. Victor was already seated at a table near the back, nursing a glass of water. His face flushed with relief when Yuuri sat down.

"I thought you'd stood me up," he said with a lopsided smile, taking a cigarette from Yuuri's offered packet. "And I think the waiter is expecting me to try and rob the place. He keeps walking past and glaring at me."
"Well I did bring the getaway bicycle," Yuuri said, lighting Victor's cigarette and his own before picking up his menu. "Sorry, I got caught at work. It's... busy." He glanced at Victor's face but despite the fact that he must have known exactly what was keeping MI6 busy at the moment, he only nodded politely and looked down at his own menu.

"This is nice," he said after a while. "I always wanted us to go out for dinner together in Berlin, but of course we couldn't. And there are so many interesting places to eat in London! I was across the river in Tower Hamlets the other day and saw a real Indian curry house. Maybe we could go there next time?"

It certainly would be interesting to watch someone who had grown up on borscht and bratwurst eat their first curry. "We can eat anywhere you like. I mean, as long as it's not too expensive. I'm not taking you to dinner at the Savoy."

"You wound me, Yuuri," Victor said, and winked. He reached his hand a little way across the table and then stopped, clenching and unclenching his fingers. Instead, underneath the table along the side by the wall, Yuuri slid his foot to rest against Victor's, toes against his ankle. Victor moved his foot slightly in response.

Yuuri knew what treason felt like, the ice in his blood and the itching paranoia between his shoulder blades. This wasn't anything like that. Whatever part of him was morbidly curious to find out exactly what Victor knew about Berlin, and perhaps more pertinently what he knew about what the British knew about Berlin, felt markedly less important than the part that wanted to know if Victor had had a nice day and if he was sleeping well and what he had thought of *Out of the Silent Planet*. This was as normal and comfortable and *happy* as his life had felt for a decade.

"So I thought the Lewis book was very good, up to a point," Victor said, as if overhearing Yuuri's thoughts, "but he really flubbed the ending. The main character travels back through space with two other men who want to kill him, with good reason, but it's fine because the mystical aliens keep him safe with their... something? It wasn't explained? Ransom should have stayed on Mars."

"I thought so too. It's the same as in *The Hobbit*, the obsession with returning home no matter what the cost. Or what hoops the plot has to jump through."

"It was better in *The Hobbit*. He went home, but home was different, and so was he. That's what it's really like." His eyes were very soft when he looked up again. "Would you like me to come back to yours tonight?"

"Yes." His inclination was to always hedge around these things, but there was no point in that with Victor. "If it won't upset your landlady."

"Oh she doesn't care what I do," Victor said, waving his hand dismissively. "So what are you going to order?" His foot shifted again, teasing at the hem of Yuuri's trouser leg. It was completely and utterly incredible, what the simplest gesture from him could do.

"I'll have whatever you're having."

It was only when he was walking back along Deptford High Street from his afternoon classes, squeezing through the crowds around a busker playing the violin and carefully sidestepping a painfully obvious pickpocket, that Victor remembered that today was the day that the new landlady, Mrs Conway, would be taking over the boarding house. In terms of his day-to-day life it shouldn't make much of a difference- certainly all the tenants' rental agreements would continue to be honoured- but he was at least curious to meet the woman. And she could well turn out to be a
horrible cook, which would make a significant difference to one aspect of his life.

He turned the corner onto his street just as a large moving van pulled away from the kerb, and was reaching into his pocket for his keys when he noticed the first sign of the new regime. The front window of the boarding house had always held a notice taped to the inside of the glass listing available rooms and rates, but there was now a hastily hand-written addition stuck underneath it.

\[\text{NO COLOURED S}\]
\[\text{NO IRISH}\]

Victor blinked and read it again, then frowned. Suddenly whether or not Mrs Conway could put together an edible Lancashire hotpot seemed like a very minor concern. What, precisely, was supposed to be the difference between dirty foreigners of the likes of himself, or Paweł Osadnik, or the French gentleman who had moved out last month, and a man from Ireland or the Caribbean? Would it harm her in some way to take their money and provide them with a roof and a meal in exchange?

He was making himself agitated. He wanted to be agitated. He clenched his keys in his fist, and opened the front door.

Mrs Conway was busying herself with unpacking boxes in the small study off the dining room, and only glanced up briefly when he knocked on the open door.

"Whatever it is, can it wait?" she said. "I am quite busy."

Not only did it seem the best way to make his point, but acting the idiot foreigner seemed to drive a certain sort of English person completely mad; presumably it was much the same as the sort who would see fit to put a notice like that in the front window of their establishment. He cleared his throat, preparing to speak with the thickest accent he could manage.

"Please, Mrs New Landlady, I do not understand," he said. "I come home, I see sign in window. It says we are not allowed colours, yes?"

"Doesn't apply to any of the current tenants," she said, not looking up. "But I am very confused!" He stepped into the room, placing his palms flat on the desk and feigning an expression of deep concern. "What colours are allowed? In winter, I have nice blue scarf to keep warm- is blue colour okay?" He feigned a little gasp. "Or is it people colours?" He pushed up his jacket sleeve and unbuttoned his shirt cuff to do the same, thrusting his arm practically under her nose as she finally looked up at him. "Is okay? Or is bad colour? What if a man who is purple wants a room? Or green?"

"Mikhailovich, isn't it?" Mrs Conway pushed his arm away and gave him a withering look. "The Russian one."

"Yes, but 'Russian' is not colour." He paused and then clapped a hand to his mouth melodramatically. "Is Russian bad colour in English? Because I am… a Red?"

"My predecessor clearly did not exercise a great deal of discernment in choosing tenants," she said, her face turning quite pink. "Starting from today this is going to be a respectable establishment. I understand that you, Mr Mikhailovich, have a habit of ignoring the curfew. Residents are not to be out of the house after 10pm. It is a condition of your tenancy."

While the most contrary part of him would have loved to have seen her expression had he informed her that he spent his evenings away in the arms of a handsome young man, he would rather this not
end with his being arrested. He waved a hand dismissively instead. "Is hard to tell time on your English clock. In Russia, we have Soviet clock. Hand-made by Stalin. Much better."

"You have been known to stay out all night, Mr Mikhailovich! Or for several days in a row, with no prior notice! I know you commies are godless heathens but surely you have some basic sense of morality and decency. I will not have the men under my roof dallying about with unsavoury women, or worse still, misleading innocent young English girls."

"So the woman is worth more if she is English? This is what new sign means too, yes?" He looked her straight in the eye and let the corner of his mouth curl up into a nasty little smile. "You think money is worth less to you if a man is not English?"

The colour of Mrs Conway's own face had progressed now through various shades of pink to a furious, dark red. "If you leave this room right now, Mr Mikhailovich, I may forget this conversation and you may yet keep your tenancy."

Fuck that. "But please, Mrs Landlady, how much is my money worth?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bronze farthing, shoving it under her nose. "Or is it the wrong colour?"

It was only when he was standing out on the street again, with two suitcases full of his belongings and without the remainder of the month's rent, that he paused to consider that a Friday evening might not have been the best time to pick an argument with his racist new- and now former- landlady. There were not a great deal of places that he could go, and certainly nowhere he would be able to acquire replacement long-term accommodation on such short notice. So once he was back on the High Street he squeezed himself into a telephone box with his suitcases and dialled the Belgravia exchange.

Yuuri picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Yuuri, I have a small problem." He cleared his throat. "My new landlady is a- what do you call it, a 'Tory'? Well anyway, to give you the gist of the story, she is no longer my landlady. Except it's getting quite late now. I wondered if you could help."

Yuuri laughed. "You could have just said that you wanted to come over tonight."

"Oh but you see that would be a breach of my curfew. Which I no longer have."

"You are going to have to give me the whole story when you get here." Yuuri's voice was soft and warm despite the distance of the telephone line; Victor cradled the receiver to his ear.

"I'll tell the train driver to hurry."

He may have embellished a few of the details later, over a simple supper at Yuuri's kitchen table, but it made him feel a lot more funny and suave and a lot less impulsive in the retelling. Yuuri put his head in his hands and practically howled with laughter as Victor extolled the virtues of the Soviet clock, made more accurate and efficient by the collectivisation of its inner gears, and which would refuse to bow to capitalist oppression by acknowledging the whims of landlords and the notion of curfew.

"Anyway," he said once they had both mostly calmed down, "do you know if I'll be able to start looking for somewhere else tomorrow, or will I need to wait? I don't want to be under your feet all weekend."

Yuuri gave him a contemplative look then, resting his chin on his hands for a while before he spoke. "You know… I have a spare room." His eyes flicked away nervously and then back to Victor's face.
"It wouldn't be unusual for a single, professional man to sub-let a bedroom to a lodger. If you wanted."

Victor almost dropped his fork. Of course it was entirely Yuuri, to upend his entire life in a single moment and make a bad situation into the best thing imaginable. "Do you really… is that a good idea?" The embassy had his Deptford address, of course, but it wasn't as if they had ever sent anything or anyone there. Would it matter much if he simply didn't inform them that he had moved? Wouldn't it be worth the risk to get to live with Yuuri, to make him breakfast and come home to him and fall asleep in his arms every single night?

"I mean, not if you don't want to, of course, I can help you find somewhere else, and if you'd rather you can actually sleep in the spare room, that's absolutely fine, but--" Yuuri was blushing and Victor cut him off by reaching across the table to grab his hands. As if there were any question of his not wanting to.

"If I were to ever say 'no' to the prospect of waking up beside you every single morning, I hope you would call a doctor immediately," he said, running his thumbs over the backs of Yuuri's knuckles. He lifted one hand to his lips for a kiss and watched the way Yuuri's eyes softened, his whole face suddenly brimming over with emotion. It was more than he could have hoped for in his wildest, most fitful dreams, more than he could have ever imagined in those frantic days in Berlin when his attraction and admiration for Yuuri had tumbled headlong into love. The world was at peace, however unsettled, and for now at least he could have this.

Yuuri carried his suitcases up the stairs to the bedroom, opened the doors of his wardrobe and the drawers of his dresser. "Let me help you unpack," he said, flicking open the clasp of the first suitcase as Victor sat down cross-legged on the floor beside him. But when he lifted the lid, he paused. On top of Victor's hastily folded shirts was a slim, well-thumbed book, the cover torn and repaired with tape, soot stains around the edges of the pages. Yuuri picked it up and looked at it for a long moment.

"You haven't taken very good care of it," he said eventually, voice thick.

"Well there was a war on, you see."

"I never bought another copy. I always meant to, but it seemed… I think it felt too much like admitting this one was gone for good."

Victor leaned over and rested his head on Yuuri's shoulder, nose brushing his jaw. "It doesn't look like that just because it went all the way back to Moscow with me. I read it. A lot. By the end of the war I had half of the poems memorised." He turned his head, breathing in the evening scent of sweat and cigarette smoke on Yuuri's skin. "It didn't make it any easier. But it made me feel like I hadn't completely lost you."

Yuuri turned his whole upper body to press a lingering kiss to Victor's mouth, richer and sweeter with meaning than a thousand verses. There were promises on the tip of Victor's tongue, words like 'never' and 'always' tumbling over one another, and as long as he kept silent then none of them ever had to become lies. He slid an arm around Yuuri's waist and caught his lower lip between his teeth as he felt a little tug on his tie, followed by a much more insistent pull. They slid backwards in an awkward, delightful tangle, until Yuuri was flat on his back on the bedroom floor with Victor on top of him, still kissing, his legs shifted apart just enough for Victor to settle between them. It felt like the weight of the years, the still barely-fathomed depths of emotion between them, only made his blood burn hotter. He wanted, needed with a ferocity that was almost frightening. Yuuri's other hand was pulling his hair loose clumsily, the heel of his bare foot sliding up the back of Victor's calf.
"I think," he said, once Yuuri had moved his attentions to the underside of his jaw, "that- ahh- I'll unpack in the morning."

Yuuri paused, murmured, "Good idea," and then continued.

"So, should we- um, bed?"

"Hmm." Yuuri tipped his head back, considering the situation. "No. This is fine." His foot was still moving back and forth against Victor's leg in an incredibly distracting manner.

"But I'm an old man. I might hurt my back."

"You're thirty-four."

"Exactly. Practically ancient."

"Victor," Yuuri said patiently, "seeing as you live here now, do you really want to restrict the offending of delicate English moral sensibilities to one item of furniture?" He made a face as if deeply pained. "I- we- have so much furniture." He punctuated the statement with a little roll of his hips that made Victor curse, loudly and quite involuntarily, in Russian.

"A good point, well made," he said, and Yuuri grinned and tugged on his tie again, pulling him back down into a kiss. On top of the open suitcase beside them lay the long-travelled, war-battered copy of Paul Verlaine's Romances sans paroles, returned home at last.

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It used to be just another one of the various ways in which he was odd- a true sign of 'confirmed bachelorhood'- that Yuuri was thirty years old and had never really lived with another person before. He had been a child in his parents' house, and something very like it when he stayed with Minako and Celestine in Oxford, and then it had been a year and a half of small, temporary lodgings in Tokyo before he was sent to Berlin. Having a haven of solitude had been important to him there even before it became necessary for his real work, and he had taken on this flat at an embarrassingly low rate from the Cholmondeley estate as soon as he was out of the close quarters of debrief in 1944.

So it was strange, still, to wake up warm every morning with the heat of another body in his bed, to have another toothbrush and razor in the bathroom beside his own, to walk into the kitchen and find it already in a mess of dishes around someone else cooking. He had certainly not expected to discover that he was, in fact, incredibly petty about things like which side of the sink the soap belonged on and the proper way to order his meagre amount of jars of herbs and spices, nor had he anticipated just how frequently he could be almost out of the door on the way to work before realising that the reason his shirt seemed to fit oddly was that it wasn't his shirt.

And it was strange in the most fantastical, improbable, wonderful way that the cause of all his gripes and all his surprises was Victor. He already knew that sleeping beside him was like having an extremely affectionate furnace in the bed, and had an idea of his ability to turn meagre rations into actual meals, but he couldn't have imagined how it would feel to come home to Victor reading in the sitting room, to open the wardrobe and see both their clothes hanging there together, to kiss him in a way that was easy and familiar, confident in the knowledge that he could do it again whenever he liked.

It was utter madness, surely enough to have any doctor on the National Health send him straight to an asylum, to be sharing his home and his bed with a man he knew to be a Soviet spy. He didn't care. He felt as if he had been dead and half buried and was suddenly alive again, as if he had been living in darkness and Victor had struck a match.
That morning Yuuri was making another attempt at the letter to his mother that he had been drafting and re-drafting for several months while Victor stood at the high window behind him, nursing a mug of coffee and watching the passers-by in the street. He would put a hand out occasionally and touch Yuuri's shoulder, not for any apparent reason other than the simple comfort of the contact.

Yuuri sighed and leaned back in his chair. No matter how many times he re-wrote it, how many stock phrases he dredged up from his memories of school, he couldn't seem to put words together in any kind of order that didn't make him burn with shame. Victor's hand settled on his shoulder again, lingering this time, his thumb moving back and forth.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "Well, I do, but I don't know how I can possibly say it."

"It's to your mother, right?" Victor set his coffee down on the desk and leaned over his shoulder to study Yuuri's rather sloppy kanji, uncomprehending but interested. "What are you trying to tell her?"

Yuuri tipped his head back against Victor's chest. "That I'm sorry. That I miss her. That I love her. But I can't... I don't know the right words to use, and in Japanese there are so many rules about how you should write a letter. Like this." He ran his finger down the page, alongside a line of characters. "It's August, so I have to start by talking about the summer weather, and hoping she is staying cool and healthy, and here I have to make some remarks about my own health. If I don't use the correct phrases it just comes across as rude, especially when I haven't written to her in so long. But it feels completely absurd to go from talking about the heat to apologising for having been a part in the USAAF dropping aerial mines in Hasetsu harbour. It's like I'm trying to write two different letters at once."

"I've been trying to write a letter for months too," Victor confessed. "I don't have any family left, but there are people I grew up with in Leningrad who survived the war, my old neighbours, the children of my parents' friends. One of them- and he was only a boy at the time- managed to get letters out to me during the worst months of the siege. He went to train to be a pilot; he'll have graduated now. And I haven't written to him since I came to London."

He wanted very, very badly to ask what was holding Victor back from writing to his young friend. They had spoken very little about the Soviet Union since Victor's self-recriminating confessions the morning after they'd first slept together again, but he saw the way Victor looked as he read the paper, noticed how he always kept the radio tuned to the Light Programme whenever they were in the same room. Pushing at the subject too hard would mean confronting too many other things about their delicate arrangement, saying too many things that they needed to leave unsaid. But Victor continued without any prompting.

"He has the same name as you," he said, taking Yuuri's discarded pen and turning over one of his crumpled drafts. "Well, you don't say it quite the same way, but I think you would write it the same." He wrote the Cyrillic letters large and slowly, ю-р-и-й, sounding out each for Yuuri as he went. 

"Although normally I call him Yura. Little Yura. He's very sensitive about being short. He didn't get enough to eat during the siege, I don't think, but it's actually an advantage if they let him do what he really wants to do in the air force. He says he's going to pilot a rocket ship into space."

Yuuri turned to look properly at Victor's face, to take in the expression of loss and longing that cracked like ice in his eyes. "He still believes in it, then," he said, very tentatively. "Like you used to."

"Nobody who survived Leningrad believes in the Soviet Union," he said, his tone laced with bitterness like a poison. "They don't need faith. They have blood. But I don't know if I have any left..."
It was strange how the way he talked about it reminded Yuuri of the religious men he had known. Christianity remained almost as bizarre and incomprehensible to him as it had when he'd first come to the west, but he'd seen the way it sat heavily on peoples' shoulders, even had the unpleasant experience of being woken up in the middle of the night by an American gentleman, with whom he thought he had passed a mutually enjoyable evening, sobbing into his Bible. And he'd seen how it could hollow someone out when faith faltered and left them, all at once like a thief or slowly like a lover losing their interest. Victor deserved more than that, more than the empty afterimage of a cruel, secular deity.

"There are other people I should write to as well," Victor said, pulling the paper back and beginning to spell out names again. "Yulia, little Yura's mother, she was my mother's best friend. And Elisabet and Alexei, my parents' colleagues, and their daughter Mila- it's Lyudmila, really, like this, but she would murder me if I called her that. She's at a military school now too, training for her commission. I could even write to Major Feltsman, who was my controller in Berlin. They finally let him retire." He flashed a little smile at Yuuri. "He was a good man. He didn't approve of you, but he knew and he never said anything. And I suppose one day I should try to find a way to write to Zhenya." His smile faltered then, and he stopped writing the name three letters in, ж-е-н.

Yuuri suppressed the urge to ask who, exactly, Zhenya was to make Victor look like that. Victor knelt down beside the chair so he could press his face against Yuuri's shoulder. "Is it very silly that I feel bad telling you, as if I had been unfaithful?" he whispered. "After the war, I went back to live in Moscow. I met him there. I never knew his full name, just that he was quite important in the party. He was married, of course, an unmarried man can't get anywhere in politics, but I left him when I discovered that his wife didn't know anything about it. I think it's one thing to marry because you must and to have an understanding between you, maybe even marry a woman whose tastes are the same and watch one another's backs. But it's another thing to let a woman believe that you love her when you never can. And after you... I can live with secrecy, but I couldn't be with someone who was so ashamed. Not anymore."

"It is silly," Yuuri said. "We both thought we would never see each other again." Victor nuzzled a little closer at that, as if in protest at the very mention of such a thing out loud. "Minako and her husband had been trying to throw virtually any and every man of our sort that they came across at me since the end of the war. Quite literally; I was at the VE Day celebration with them on Whitehall and as soon as Mr Churchill was done speaking on the radio it was all, 'oh, Yuuri, isn't it wonderful, also you simply must meet our friend Hamish something-something'. Some of them were very nice. Some were…" and he took a deep breath. "Actually at the start of the year Minako had me meet an old friend from Oxford. Not just a friend. We were together for most of our third year. About half of the men I knew in Oxford died in the war, two were in Japanese POW camps and won't speak to me- or can't, maybe- and a lot of others have moved away, or settled down, now we're all older and it's no longer fashionable to be, well, our sort. But Tristan spent the war in the United States working for the BBC, and had a real jolly time of it."

"With no air raids and no invasion and getting to turn up late and act like the whole war was their idea? I can imagine."

"Anyway it was just… strange. As if I'd gone back in time. Even his flat seemed just like his rooms in college. And I had the most awful dream that night, about the sickness that started after the bomb fell, that it was in the soil and the rivers and spread all over Japan, that everyone at home was wasting away and it... and I..." He turned to lean his forehead against Victor's. "He woke me up because I was screaming. Tristan's a little taller than me, with light blonde hair. It was dark. I thought he was you."
Victor leaned up and kissed him, sweet and gentle and full of understanding. "My Yuuri," he murmured, "Yurochka moy, iskorka, solnyshko, zolotse, stop me if you ever want to know what any of these words mean…"

It worked and he laughed, and kissed Victor again. "Here," he said, and reached for the piece of uncrumpled paper where Victor had written the names of his friends. "My mother's name is Hiroko, like this," and he made each stroke of the characters slow and deliberate, 宽子, so Victor could follow. "Toshiya, my father, and my sister, Mari. Then there's Nishigori Yuuko, my old neighbour, and her husband, Takeshi. They have three daughters. And Machida Ryuichi, he was my senpai- my older classmate. And you met Minako, my mother's cousin." He paused then, before writing out carefully ヴィクトル.

"That's different to the others," Victor said. "The letters aren't the same."

"The other ones are kanji, these are called katakana. It's what you use to write non-Japanese words. That's- that's how you'd write 'Victor'."

"Oh," he said quietly, and picked up the paper, running his thumb underneath the drying ink. "Can I keep this?"

"Of course you can."

If Victor had looked lost before, perhaps the expression on his face now was something searching to be found. It gave Yuuri another idea, and he stood up from the desk, slipping out of Victor's arms and crossing the room to the bookshelves. He took down a small volume with a grey and green cover, and returned to press it into Victor's hands. "I think you might like to read this, maybe. To help you sort some things out. I don't know if you'll agree with it, but… I think the author lived through some things that made him change his mind, like you did."

Victor frowned at it. "Animal Farm?" he read. "Is this a book for children?"

"No, not really. It's an allegory."

"Interesting." He flipped the cover open to the first page. "Oh! I like pigs. They're very funny animals."

By the time Yuuri had finished reading it for the first time he'd wanted to go out and buy two pounds of bacon. "You'll have to tell me what you think of it."

"But what if they don't like me?"

"Celestine seemed to like you enough to want to throw you at me." Yuuri's nonchalance was a product carefully crafted out of an afternoon pacing around the flat and three cigarettes smoked in succession on their bus journey to Kensington, but perhaps it would be more convincing to people who hadn't been with him all day.

"Yes, but that wasn't at his home, and I've barely spoken to his wife." A part of Victor really, genuinely was nervous about the prospect of spending an evening with Yuuri's relatives as his… what would a polite English term be? His gentleman caller? His very good friend? It was strange enough to be invited to dinner by a married couple who clearly knew that they were lovers and didn't seem to mind.

But a deeper, more primally fearful part of him knew that they were not just Yuuri's retired ballerina cousin and her affable English professor of a husband. Celestine was a world-renowned
mathematician who had lied about his war service when they met. Yuuri had always referred to his MI6 handler as 'she', called her a friend from his Oxford days, and he had been connected to, of all possible things, a dance company in Berlin. It didn't take a great deal to fill in the blank spaces of the picture, to conclude that even if they had both returned entirely to civilian life, Yuuri was taking him to dinner with two very dangerous people.

Victor wished he'd had a cigarette on the bus too. He wished they'd cycled over; his newly-purchased former ARP bicycle was an excellent stress reliever, for all Yuuri thought it was ugly.

"It'll be fine," Yuuri said, stopping at a street corner and touching Victor's arm briefly. "We won't be talking about the war. Once they've had a couple of glasses of wine just ask them how they met and we won't hear about anything else for the rest of the evening. And if either of them asks an awkward question… just spill food on yourself as a distraction or something."

"Can't you spill food on yourself?"

Yuuri gestured at himself and gave Victor an incredulous look. "This suit is from Anderson & Sheppard."

And Victor's was from Marks & Spencer. Living in England was a bad influence on Yuuri. No amount of books about farm animals could excuse putting tailoring ahead of one's comrades.

He had read the Orwell book twice now but Yuuri hadn't asked him about it again; truthfully he wasn't sure what he ought to say. The story was a broad brush without being inaccurate per se; of course the Soviet Union was failing the great vision of Marx and Lenin, but that didn't make communism wrong, just the people putting it into practice. And it hadn't exactly been a wonderful feeling to be compared to a trained attack dog- or maybe a big, stupid horse. 'So darling, which easily taken-in fictional animal did you think was the best analogue for me?' wasn't the greatest conversation starter.

He didn't know why Yuuri would want to have that conversation. Things were the way they were. Their situation might have been less damocletian than in Berlin, but even assuming that the utterly mad risks they were both taking came to nothing, one day he would be recalled to Moscow or sent on somewhere else and this would end yet again. Neither of them could change who or what they were, and he couldn't expect to have chance or fate or whatever else bring them together a third time. They should both be focusing on the present, making memories that would last, not following trains of thought that would never amount to anything.

"Right, we're here," Yuuri said, stopping in front of a wooden gate. A black-and-white check path led up from it to a front porch shaded by ivy. When they knocked at the front door it was only a few moments before Yuuri's cousin answered.

"Come in, come in," she said, embracing Yuuri before ushering him through the door. "And you're Victor, of course."

"Mrs Cholmondeley, it was so kind of you to invite me," he said, extending a hand. She took it and yanked him into a hug as well.

"No 'Mrs-ing' under this roof, it's Minako, thank you." She leaned back and looked him up and down with an assessing gaze. "Hm. You could have been a danseur too. A terrible waste, the pair of you." Over her shoulder Yuuri gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes.

This was clearly not to the same fancy standard as the English dinner parties in the novels Victor had read, as Minako led them down the hall into the kitchen, where rather than a clutch of servants
Celestine himself was standing over the large cooker and stirring something in a pot. The room smelled sweetly of tomatoes and basil. He waved hello with a wooden spoon.

"Wine," Minako said like a foregone conclusion, and began rummaging in one of the overhead cupboards before producing four glasses. Victor resisted the urge to down his in one go and quench his nerves as soon as she handed it to him. He didn't need to get loose-lipped tonight.

Yuuri was more relaxed, leaning against the counter by the cooker and nodding along as Celestine started to chatter about something completely baffling to do with crickets and ashes and the Australians. Victor tensed up a little as Minako settled herself alongside him, raising her glass in his direction before taking a substantial gulp.

"Do say if we're ever talking too fast, won't you?" she said. "I don't know how your fluency is, but I thought I was fluent in French when I joined the Paris Opera Ballet and the first few times I was stuck in a room with a group of French speakers rather than just one person I might as well have been on the moon."

"I'm fine, thank you. My classes are much noisier than this."

"Oh of course, you teach don't you? You and Celestine will have to trade horror stories." She gave him a kindly smile. "Don't be so nervous! We're not Yuuri's parents, thank god. And I lived and breathed the theatre for thirty years and we're both part of the Oxbridge academic circle too; you're not the only people we know who are, well, of a different sort." She leaned in a little closer and spoke more softly, as if to tell him a secret. "Yuuri has been very unhappy for a while now. I don't know if he's told you anything about his war service, but I'm sure you can make a guess or two about how Japanese people like us ended up living here afterwards. We're both just delighted to meet the man who can make him look like that again."

She gestured over at Yuuri, who had shed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves and was helping Celestine measure out something that looked more like yellowy-orange sticks than anything else. His glasses were slightly fogged from the heat of the room, but his eyes behind them were alight with a smile, the kind of simple happiness he deserved to feel all the time.

The Cholmondeleys might both be British intelligence, but here they were just two people who cared for Yuuri. That was a place Victor could meet them.

The orange sticks turned out to be a dried form of spaghetti, which Victor had eaten once or twice at the behest of the Italians in Berlin; having turned it to its proper form in boiling water, Celestine began serving it out onto plates and topping it with the thick, fragrant tomato sauce from the other pot. Once they were all sat at the table in the dining room he took his wife's hand and bowed his head as if in some kind of religious ceremony.

"Before we eat," he intoned solemnly, "let us give thanks to my excellent student, Mr Chulanont, who distracted the customs officials and enabled me to smuggle pasta into this godforsaken country. And let us also hope that the consumption of dried spaghetti and a sauce made from Quinton tinned tomatoes does not invoke the wrath of my dearly departed Nonna from beyond the grave, because she did threaten to haunt me on several occasions. Amen."

However suspect a dead woman might have found it the food was simple but delicious, and only enhanced by the wine which Minako continued to be free with. They talked a great deal about Oxford, which Yuuri promised profusely he would one day take Victor to visit, about Celestine's trip to America, the Olympics and the unusual heat of the summer, a play by a friend of Minako's which had recently opened. When they had finished eating Yuuri took Victor's hand and held it on top of the table, face flushed from more than just the alcohol but his chin set high and proud.
Dessert was a slightly scorched bread-and-butter pudding, and it seemed like the right moment to take Yuuri's advice and ask Minako and Celestine about how they met. Celestine pressed a hand to his heart with a smitten expression; Minako sniggered.

"My family have always been patrons of the arts," he said, "and I was brought up to be a well-cultured young man, of course. You're both much too young to remember but oh, there were nearly two decades when there was no finer sight in the whole world than the prima ballerina Okukawa Minako lit by stage lights, bringing the whole audience to tears or to laughter with only her dance. I first saw her perform while I was a young officer in Paris during the Great War, and I still have quite the collection of posters from her productions, you know. And of course one day a good friend asked if I would like to come backstage and meet the most talented dancer in the world, and, well…"

"You must understand," Minako continued for him, "that I met a lot of very stuffy, rich and boring men who thought I would fall over myself to marry them, especially as I was thirty-four at that point which is of course unspeakably ancient to still be unattached, as a woman. So somebody asked if I would like to meet the cousin of the Marquess of Cholmondeley and of course I had to, but I was determined that I wasn't going to like it. And then this gentleman-" she gestured at him with her wine glass "-walked into the room, looked at me as if he'd just had an electrical shock, and as soon as we were introduced he started babbling about algebra and music theory and the geometry of dance. It was the first time any man outside of the ballet had spoken to me as if I had a brain in years."

"I thought I was making the most colossal fool out of myself," Celestine added happily, "but it became one of the most interesting conversations I have ever had. We corresponded for several years afterwards; she edited a monograph for me in 1926. And eventually I offered to take an extended sabbatical, or attempt to relocate entirely, if she would only marry me."

"But retiring to Oxford enabled me to gain my degree, and pursue other interests outside of the arts. And, of course, to grant a request from my cousin Hiroko and have her son spend at least a few years outside Japan."

Yuuri frowned. "I didn't know my mother asked you to invite me to apply."

"Yuuri, the things you don't bother to know about your mother could fill an encyclopaedia," Minako responded dryly. "Now. Brandy!"

They retired to the sitting room with brandy and cigarettes, the alcohol and the smoke settling into Victor's bloodstream and leaving him loose-limbed and comfortable. His thigh pressed against Yuuri's on the sofa and there was no need to hide it, no need for pretence. Celestine had started a long and complicated story about an apparently hilarious incident at the 1947 Labour Party conference, filled with names that Victor vaguely recognised from the newspaper, but he doubled back on the details so many times that it swiftly became incomprehensible.

"Anyway," he said, "the point is that Nye promised he'd give the dog back before conference closed, but there we all were singing, hands on hearts- oh, say, Victor, do you know The Red Flag?"

"Oh, here we go," Yuuri muttered under his breath. Celestine stood up, steadying himself on the arm of his chair, lifted a hand in a theatrical pose and began in a low, droning tenor. The tune was one Victor recognised from many Christmases in Germany, but it had lyrics the Nazis most assuredly would have objected to.

"The people's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
Their hearts' blood dyed its every foooo-ooo-ooold."
Minako suppressed her laughter to join him for the chorus, much more tunefully.

"So raise the scarlet standard high,
Beneath its shade we'll live and die,
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flying heeeeeere."

Yuuri seemed to be on the brink of perishing from embarrassment, and Victor interjected loudly, "Yes, of course, I recognise it." He'd never heard the song before in his life. "That was very good, thank you."

"Oh Yuuri can sing even better," Minako said, a wicked twinkle in her eye as she and her husband sat back down. "Remember when you were working on that essay about the Paris Commune, Yuuri? And you and Robin got very drunk? I think Victor would love to hear what you were singing that night."

Victor glanced sideways at Yuuri, who was giving him another desperate look. But this was much too interesting. "I am intrigued," he said with a wink.

"I'm sure he'll make it worth your while," Minako added, which Victor couldn't help blushing at too.

Yuuri looked positively murderous, but he downed the rest of his brandy and cleared his throat. Celestine started to wave his fingers to a beat as if he were conducting.

"Debout, les damnés de la terre," Yuuri began, his voice tentative and soft, accent tinged with English as well as Japanese, "Debout, les forçats de la faim."

Victor knew the words much better in Russian, but he couldn't help joining in for the next lines.

"La raison tonne en son cratère, c'est l'éruption de la fin!"

Yuuri smiled at him, seeming to relax a little, and Victor slung an arm around his shoulders.

"Du passé faisons table rase
Foule esclave, debout, debout
Le monde va changer de base
Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout!"

Minako clapped and she and Celestine both chimed in for the chorus, voices ringing to the ceiling in tipsy delight.

"C'est la lutte finale
Groupons-nous, et demain
L'Internationale
Sera le genre humain!"

"I like them," Victor said on the bus home, still buzzing from the brandy and itching with the need to pull Yuuri close, to kiss him and taste the remnants of melody on his tongue. Yuuri turned around on the seat in front, glancing around briefly at the other passengers before giving Victor a smile that was as intoxicating as anything they had drunk that evening.

"I'm glad."

"So you see if you construct a logic system that has a multiplicity of truth values- beyond a trivalent
system like Łukasiewicz's- it allows you to represent propositions by degrees of truth, which gets us close to a genuine mathematical model of vagueness."

The man Phichit was talking to- Elliot, had he called himself?- must definitely have been an actor, because the expression of interest on his face was a hard one to fake. He was built like a stevedore and had paid for their first round of drinks; the latter endeared him to Yuuri, while the former was obviously of great interest to Phichit.

"Alright!" Victor said, reappearing at the table with a clutch of glasses held precariously in his hands. "We have a gin sling, crème de menthe, and a gin and tonic, that was it wasn't it?"

"Okay, you can keep him," Phichit said to Yuuri, taking his drink out of Victor's hands.

"I'm so glad to have your permission."

Victor sat back down next to him, handing Yuuri his G&T, and holding the drink he'd got for himself up to the light. "I asked the barman to make a drink he thought I would like. He said it was called an 'Old Fashioned'."

"Oh!" Phichit said, "it's nice, one of the barmen at Lincoln makes a great one. It's an American drink."

Victor made a face, but took a very tentative sip. "Well. I suppose America can't be all bad."

Over Phichit's head Yuuri could see the little raised stage area at the back of the Salisbury's main bar. They had come tonight on the rumour of a live jazz band, and it looked as though they wouldn't be disappointed. A tall West Indian man in an impossibly crisp, jet-black suit was tuning a double bass to notes played on the piano by a British woman in an identical outfit. Elliot started talking about his current rehearsals, perhaps in a bid to save them all from any more mathematics talk from Phichit, and Yuuri sipped his drink and watched as a drummer joined the stage, followed shortly by a man with sleek, pomade-smoothed hair and a saxophone slung around his neck.

"Good evening, good evening, gentleladies and men," the saxophonist called through the microphone, and the ambient chatter of the pub quieted as everyone turned towards the stage. He beamed. "It's been five months now since I came to this country all the way from Kingston-" there was a little muted clapping and he nodded in acknowledgement "-and may I just say, wow, it is fucking cold here." That engendered laughter from all across the room. "Come to England, they said! You're all citizens now, they told us! Didn't bloody mention to pack a scarf!" He lifted his saxophone and played a little comedy trill, to more clapping. "Anyway, we're the Nigel Harriott Band, and tonight I hope to see all of you up on your feet and dancing. Let's take it away on that piano, Max, this one's 'Bye-Bye Blackbird'."

Yuuri felt Victor grip his hand hard, and turned to see him with a huge, delighted grin on his face. "We have to dance to this," he said, and Yuuri could only agree.

There were two other couples already out on the small dance floor in front of the stage as they stepped out, a pair of very young men engaging in an energetic jitterbug and an older couple who were alternating between attempting to copy them and fits of hysterical laughter at themselves. Victor clearly had no idea how to swing dance but he took the lead anyway, settling naturally into the rhythm of the music and letting Yuuri spin away and return to his arms.

"Where somebody waits for me," Nigel crooned into the microphone, "Sugar's sweet and so is he, bye-bye blackbird."
It was easy to forget, in the safe confines of this old corner building, how they'd all had to arrive separately, how the first things he'd pointed out to Victor were the three exits, how earlier that afternoon they'd gone over the two key principles of dealing with the Metropolitan police—speak slowly and keep your back to the light. Yuuri always wore his black, green and gold Wadham tie for a night out; luckily he had yet to face any real prospect of arrest in the years he'd lived in London, but it might provide a little insurance if and when he did.

Victor's face was flushed, laughing, and it was as if they were safe at home behind their locked front door, as if nothing and no-one could touch them, a fantasy as beautiful as the music. When the song closed on a fading snare drum roll, Yuuri shed his jacket and held a hand out for Victor's.

"I'll take yours back to the table if you let me lead for the next song," he said. Victor shrugged his jacket off with a grin. Back at the table Phichit was observing keenly as Elliot leaned forward over the bar, ordering them more drinks.

"I'm going to climb that man like a tree," he said as Yuuri approached, sighing happily. Elliot looked back over his shoulder and winked.

"Not until after you've danced with us, surely?" Yuuri said.

"You go, dance with your dashing Russian. I have work to do." Phichit had already taken off his own jacket and began to roll up his sleeves as Elliot came back over with their drinks. Yuuri patted him on the shoulder as he left. The band had started up again, a Duke Ellington tune that Yuuri had first heard through a tinny radio speaker in Berlin, and Victor was stood up on his toes to look back for Yuuri as more couples got up from their tables to dance. When their eyes met his face lit up, as if they'd been apart for days instead of only moments.

Yuuri set a faster pace in time to the song, twirling Victor around and pulling him close again, watching as strands of his hair began to slip loose and whip about his face, darkened with sweat. When the band moved into a softer, gentler rendition of "Ghost of a Chance" he pulled him close, letting Victor's arms settle around his neck. There was something just a little magical about the dim lights, the smooth bass and the saxophone, the rich contralto of Max the pianist as she sang, "I need your love so badly, I love you, oh, so madly," and Victor's eyes were half-lidded, his lips parted, and here, only here, Yuuri could rise up on the balls of his feet and kiss him.

It was two songs later when Yuuri realised that they had space around them on the dance floor, and he glanced away from Victor's face to see a little circle of spectators gathered around them. He supposed they must look quite the striking pair, two foreigners in each other's arms, a pale, blond Russian and a dark-haired Japanese man leading one another back and forth. For a man who'd spent his formative years in earnest communist youth groups and then the military and the secret police, Victor danced like it was his birthright, like there was music that sang in his blood.

He would have thought that being watched as he danced with Victor would make him nervous; instead it sent something hot and thrilling racing up Yuuri's spine. Everything between them always had to be so secret, but he realised then just how much he wanted to show Victor off, to have anyone and everyone see them and know that they belonged to each other, to lay public claim to him even if they would never be allowed the easy way of slipping rings onto each other's fingers. He watched Victor's eyes flick to their onlookers and back again, and a slow little smile curled at the corner of his mouth. Of course he was thinking the same thing. Their bodies were in perfect alignment, with one another and with the music; why would their minds be any different?

Yuuri led them through "It Don't Mean A Thing", ditching the swing steps for something more akin to tango, Victor clinging delightedly to his shoulder, and in a moment of inspiration Yuuri dipped him to the final flare of the saxophone. His eyes were huge and dark, breath coming in sudden sharp
pants; with all of Victor's weight in his arms Yuuri could feel the thundering rush of his heartbeat against his ribs.

"I think we should take a little break," Victor said, in between quick breaths, and Yuuri knew exactly, exactly what he meant.

The gents' had two separate little rooms instead of wooden stalls, and Yuuri had barely thrown the bolt on the door of one before Victor had him pressed up against it, hands in his hair, kissing him ardently. Yuuri could feel the bass line of another song as it reverberated into the walls, a low counterpoint to their frantic breathing. He knew people had watched them go, that there was only one thing they could have slunk away to do, and it fizzled deliciously under his skin.

"Fuck, Yuuri," Victor groaned in his ear, "I wish we'd brought- I wish we could-" and Yuuri felt like he could die right on the spot.

"Would you like that?" he whispered back. "Against the wall, your legs around my waist, and everybody out there knowing exactly what I'm doing to you?" The logistical matter of whether he actually had the strength to be able to support Victor's weight like that for any length of time could go by the wayside; Victor made the most incredible, wonderful noise and bit his earlobe. "Do you think we made it clear enough?" he continued, hoping that Victor's thoughts still kept time with his.

"That I'm yours," Victor panted, "and you're mine? Yeah." He shifted his body, hips close against Yuuri's and the fact of his arousal becoming more obvious with every passing second. "I think it was clear."

"I thought it could be clearer." Yuuri gave him the smallest nudge, just enough to have him step back against the wall. The space was narrow and there was only just enough room for him to sink down onto his knees. He couldn't hear vocals but the song now was a familiar one, "You and the Night and the Music". He'd danced to it at a party after a formal hall where he'd been pennied three times and couldn't remember much beyond the sound of the scratchy record on someone's great, heavy gramophone.

Victor looked down at him like a man looking straight at the sun. Yuuri unbuttoned his braces and tugged at his trousers. The saxophone was slow and somehow almost melancholy in its seductive drawl, smooth and hot like Victor's skin under his hands, like the taste of him heavy on his tongue, like his fingers combing softly through Yuuri's hair and his voice rasping out wordless sounds. The stall was cramped and it was desperately hurried and gods only knew what the floor was doing to his trousers, but it was Victor and it was perfect, the sound of his own name reverberating against the music from the far room as Victor came apart in his mouth.

They kissed lazily once he got back up to his feet, Victor's hands sliding down his chest even as they still trembled. The song was ending.

"We should go back," Yuuri said. Victor shook his head, palming him through his trousers and nosing his shirt collar aside to kiss his neck.

"What about you?" he murmured, voice still hoarse. "How could I bear everyone knowing I'd left you so unsatisfied?"

The door to the gents' swung open and Yuuri heard the band starting again, Nigel's voice easy around the first lines, "You stepped out of a dream, you are too wonderful to be what you seem," and he pulled Victor into another kiss as someone stumbled into the other stall. "Well, if you insist."
He couldn't make out the alarm clock in the dim light, but Victor knew it was very early in the morning as he slipped out of bed, leaving Yuuri still wrapped up warm in the blankets as he shivered his way around the room picking up his clothes from yesterday. He wouldn't be gone very long and there was no need to go rummaging in the wardrobe. When he couldn't sleep it helped to walk, and London in December might be cold but he'd done the same thing all through the winter in Moscow.

Outside he pulled his scarf up over his nose, as much to filter out the smog as to keep himself warm. The thin layer of snow that had fallen and settled a few days ago had melted and refrozen overnight, leaving the roads and pavements covered in an uneven layer of ice. He walked carefully along the street, past the bombed-out church, down under yellow streetlight towards the river. The Thames was much narrower than either the Neva or the Moskva, and still busy with boat traffic even at this time of night, but the sound of the water soothed him all the same.

In two weeks he would turn thirty-five; in three weeks it would be the new year. Neither was something that mattered enormously on the face of it, but he'd had an itch at the back of his mind since the start of autumn, a sense of something approaching, a decision, a change.

It wasn't as if the thought of defecting had never crossed his mind. He had a vivid memory of thinking in that concert hall back in May, in the moments just after Yuuri had fled, that he would bend his knee to Mr Attlee and the King and the Archbishop of Canterbury and any other stuffy imperialists the British had to offer if it would have brought Yuuri back into the room. But when his mind was clear it was a very different prospect. He might not have any family left in the Soviet Union, but any kind of association with a defector could be dangerous or even deadly, whether to Feltsman in his long-deserved retirement or Yura at the very beginning of his career. As unpleasant as it still made him feel to be working against a former ally, if the work he was doing here in London put any kind of a brake on the British nuclear project then surely that was only a good thing for the whole world. One fewer bomb meant one more city, one thousand or million more people who would live when the war inevitably came.

Ahead the river curved away northwards, and somewhere past the buildings and trees the old Palace of Westminster gazed down through the murk at its reflection in the water. What happened in there seemed to matter to Yuuri, and even more so to Minako and Celestine and their circle of friends that went right up to the high levels of government. What happened in there was transforming the country, from hospitals to coal mines to schools. But what was the point of any of it, when the next election could see it all torn to shreds? He wasn't a fool, he'd read Marx for himself. The Soviet Union might not be truly communist, might be failing in the most dramatic and abominable ways to progress closer to it, but how could a party even be called 'socialist' in the first place if it would let itself be so easily swept aside by the whims of bourgeois voters, if its leaders would bow and scrape to a man who had called himself an Emperor rather than haul him off to be shot?

He wanted to believe in the England that seized its banks and its railways on behalf of the people, that granted citizenship to all its former colonial subjects, but it was still the same England that had laid waste to half the world for three hundred years, the same England where people were turned away from home and shelter just because of the colour of their skin, the same England where he and Yuuri couldn't even go out to dance with each other without rehearsing for an arrest. He would be giving up a country that he had loved and lost for one he had no idea how to feel about at all.

Six and a half years in Berlin had almost destroyed him, but he had fought his way through it for the freedom of the Soviet people and the whole world. He couldn't turn away for so little.

Big Ben rang the full quarters and then four slow peals for the hour as he turned around, heading back to the flat. Inside the front door he shed his coat and boots and unwound the scarf from his neck, breathing in the nothing-scent of old books and cigarette smoke and damp wool, the things that
made up their home. Yuuri stirred as he tiptoed back into the bedroom, squinting in the dull yellow light from the street that spilled under the curtains.

"God you're cold," he grumbled as Victor climbed back into bed, but pulled him close anyway into the warmth of the blankets.

"Sorry I woke you," Victor said.

Yuuri grunted sleepily in response, tucking his head under Victor's chin. Victor pressed his nose into Yuuri's hair until his breathing slowed again, slipping back into sleep. Through the still, quiet night Victor could hear the faint chime of the half hour two miles downriver, still only partway 'til dawn.

Pickavance had offered him a cigarette, which meant that Yuuri wasn't in his office to be yelled at, but that didn't make sitting across a desk from the Director of Requirements himself any less nerve-racking. After staring at him pensively for entirely too long, Pickavance had got up and started pacing back and forth silently while Yuuri tried desperately not to have any awkward thoughts, which of course meant that every single thing that went through his head was completely unspeakable.

Eventually Pickavance stopped in front of the framed map on the wall, an old one that showed the extent of the former British empire in vivid pink. "You did very good field work in Berlin, Katsuki," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Really stellar stuff, and with no training, eh?"

"Well I learned to shoot at Oxford, sir, but-"

Pickavance waved a hand. "Plenty of lads learn a little bullseye shooting and still wet their trousers in the face of a real enemy. Not you though. Nerves of steel, to sit in that embassy every day and sneak information out from under Oshima's nose." He tapped the map over Germany. "And you've been doing good work here too. Wouldn't have thought we'd still need so many German speakers going on four years from the end of the war, but that's the Russians for you, isn't it?"

A Russian had made Yuuri breakfast that morning. Victor had taken to serving porridge with a little heart drawn on the top in golden syrup. "Yes, sir."

"But I wouldn't fault you for thinking, Katsuki, that we're not making full use of your talents."

He shifted in his seat. "I'm not unhappy, sir."

"Of course you aren't. But it just doesn't do for us to let men like you stagnate." Pickavance tapped the map again, much further to the east. "Have you been following events in Korea?"

"As best I can. The elections that were supposed to precede both Soviet and US withdrawal had been a complete disaster, leaving the peninsula split in half with an effective Soviet puppet state in the north and the government in the south violently suppressing any hint of communist sentiment.

"There'll be a war soon, you mark my words," Pickavance said with unsettling certainty. "Once the communists win in China- they will, at this point- I shan't be surprised in the slightest if they and the Soviets decide to back an invasion of the south. And our friends across the Atlantic won't be having that." He turned away from the wall then and leaned back over his desk, facing Yuuri. "Nothing has been definitively agreed yet, but we're thinking of sending you out there."
It was as if he'd said Yuuri was needed on a special operation to Mars. Yuuri coughed hard on his cigarette, and Pickavance obligingly came around the desk to thump him on the back. Once he had recovered, eyes still watering, he managed to say, "But I'm Japanese, sir."

"Yes, Katsuki, that hadn't escaped my notice."

"No, I mean- if you need someone for covert operations in Korea, well, I'm hardly going to be well-received over there. And I don't even speak Korean."

Pickavance waved dismissively again. "We don't expect you to be making friends in Seoul, and you'd officially be based out of the Consul-General's office anyway. You'll need to pick up the language, obviously, and we'll be sending you for some more… hands-on development with some of our former SOE colleagues. And as I said, it's not decided yet, lots of things still to go up the pipe to the Foreign Secretary. But between you and me, if it's not Korea then I think you'd be exceptionally well placed in the Hong Kong office, perhaps even as a deputy."

"Deputy, sir?"

"Deputy to the head of British intelligence out there." Pickavance sat back down in his desk chair at last, and looked at Yuuri over steepled fingers. "Like I said, we're letting you stagnate here, Katsuki, and I won't have it. And it's not just because you're an Oriental chap. I'm sure it doesn't always seem like it, but we are very much aware of the sacrifices that you made to be here, and you're really quite the talent in terms of operations if Berlin is anything to go by. Plus you're not married, and you've no family, which makes it very easy to relocate you." He picked up his cigarette box and offered Yuuri another. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in a little office translating German communists sniping at each other and tripping over their own feet? You're more than that, Katsuki. Much more."

Yuuri felt as though his brain was operating on several seconds' delay as he lit the cigarette, still processing the bizarre idea that he could be put in a position of such staggering authority even on the other side of the world. There was a loop his thoughts were stuck on, bouncing back between the grand but nebulous notion of Seoul and Hong Kong and the simple, solid facts of his life in London. His life with Victor.

Of course it was easy to relocate a bachelor. It wasn't as if Yuuri could ask them to wait while his secret live-in lover tried to secure his own reassignment from the MGB, so they could continue to breach national security together over dinner.

"So what do you say to getting started?" Pickavance slid a small, plain card across the desk to him. "Get in touch with Clifton-Peach over in Training and Development, she can sort you out some textbooks and a Korean tutor. And maybe ask her about Cantonese too. We'll see about sending you away for a few weeks in the spring for proper ops training."

"Yes, sir."

"Right, so that's settled then. We'll speak again once I have some more definite information for you." He stuck out a hand and Yuuri shook it.

It was only when he was back in his own office, a third cigarette between his fingers, that he could really begin to process it. They wanted to send him back into the field, on actual overseas operations. It was a promotion- a big one- and the kind of career opportunity that he was sure Glyn or Arthur or any of the other translators along their corridor would leap at. It would be absurd to refuse, if refusing was really an option at all.
But he had been so certain that he and Victor would have years yet, that when they finally parted it would be because Victor had to leave, and Yuuri could stay amidst all the memories they would have here in London. He had hoped, in the quieter parts of his heart, that some combination of the dramatic changes in British society, the affable Labour politics of Yuuri's small circle of friends, and Victor's own deep disillusionment and misplaced guilt might persuade him, over the course of those years, to shift his allegiances, and with luck and a little wrangling they might never be permanently separated again.

From Seoul or Hong Kong he might be able to take leave and visit home. He was no longer a Japanese citizen— even if he hadn't abandoned all his documentation in Berlin, accepting British citizenship meant he had effectively given it up— but with the continued American occupation he shouldn't have any trouble getting into the country. He could see his family again. He could face in person all the destruction he had wrought, and see if it was still possible to pretend that he'd done it for the good of the country, of the world, standing in those scorched and irradiated ruins for himself. He could find out if Katsuki Yuuri-kun, the awkward, shy boy from Hasetsu, and Mr Yuuri Katsuki, the British spy, could ever be reconciled.

He could still write to his colleagues here, to Minako and Celestine and Phichit. But he would be abandoning Victor for a second time. If Pickavance was right and there would be a war in Korea, the chances of it staying on the peninsula rather than engulfing the whole world all over again were slim. If he went to Seoul there might well be no coming back.

Yuuri stared out of the window at the wintry smog that still lingered even this late in the day, curling dark around the building and muffling the light. It wasn't certain yet. Maybe it would all come to nothing. It was still more than a little absurd that Yuuri would even be considered for such a thing, so he might as well keep it to himself. There was no point worrying Victor over something that might easily never happen.

He could tell that something was different as soon as he came through the embassy door. Victor rarely used the main entrance— too grand, and far too obvious— but his usual side entrance led him past the small library, where Mrs Belenkaya the librarian always had a friendly smile for him and often some homemade lepeshki. But today the library door was shut and locked, and the corridors seemed strangely hushed. It was only as he was climbing the stairs to the first floor that he encountered another human being at last, a young man in a long overcoat but wearing the blue-topped cap of the MGB who Victor had never seen before. The newcomer frowned at him.

"Nikiforov?"

"Yes. I'm here to make my usual pickup. Where is everyone?"

"You need to come with me."

"Is everything alright, comrade?" The fellow clearly wasn't an officer, and Victor was mildly inclined to pull rank. He wasn't the habit of letting just any man tell him what to do.

"It is fine. The Colonel only wishes to speak with you."

There was not, to Victor's knowledge, anyone currently stationed at the embassy who held the rank of Colonel, so either he was being had or the ominous absence of Mrs Belenkaya and her biscuits was only the first sign of something worse. He stared at the young man for a few seconds longer before nodding.

They went back down the staircase and then down another into the basement of the building, past a
great array of servants' bells from the time when the building was a grand house of the English aristocracy, to the end of a white-washed corridor where the young soldier stopped to open a door for Victor. With no small amount of trepidation, he stepped through.

The room was very small, furnished only with a desk with a small, hard chair either side of it, and lit by a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. On the other side of the desk sat a man with hair the colour of straw, the golden stripes and stars of a colonel gleaming on the shoulders of his tunic. Victor saluted instinctively. Behind him, the door swung closed.

"Major Nikiforov, sir, as requested."

"Good, good," the Colonel said, "sit down Nikiforov." It was never a good sign to meet with a man who wouldn't introduce himself, but Victor sat anyway. The Colonel took a packet of cigarettes out of his trouser pocket and lit one with a match, the smoke rising in coils to the light overhead. "You're a Leningrad man."

"I am, sir."

"Son of Mikhail and Ina Nikiforov."

"Yes, sir." One day, maybe, the barest mention of his parents wouldn't twist in his gut like a knife.

"Your father worked for the traitor Zinoviev. And your mother was a German."

Victor swallowed hard. "My father was deceived, as many were by Zinoviev's treachery to Comrade Stalin, and immediately denounced him when the truth came to light. My mother abandoned Germany before I was born and never returned. But it was thanks to her that I was able to-"

"Yes, yes, we all know about your war service, Nikiforov. Your many, many years living among the fascists."

"It was a very difficult assignment, sir, but I sustained myself with the certainty of the eventual socialist victory."

"For such a loyal man it is strange that you disobeyed an order to return home in 1937."

Victor frowned. After his transfer into the NKVD he had been ordered almost immediately to Germany to help lay groundwork for his detestable Rittberger persona, before ultimately moving to Berlin. But 1937 had been the year of the great show trials, something else he had only learned about in the aftermath of the war. "As I reported at the time, I had far too many pressing responsibilities to justify the risk of travelling to Moscow. It could have critically compromised the mission."

"Who conducted your debrief?"

"Major Oleg Kovalev, sir."

"Hmm." Surely Kovalev would be fine. He was a loyal Stalinist, and had grilled Victor quite viciously about his involvement with the Nazis. The Colonel leaned back in his chair, shadows looming over his eyes. "You are a friend of Elisabet Babicheva?"

It was not a circumstance in which Victor felt it safe to call anyone on the planet a friend. "I would call her an acquaintance, at most."

The Colonel took a long, slow drag on his cigarette, studying Victor's face as he spoke. "She is a traitor. Did you know that? There are many in the City Soviet, and the Leningrad party, who have
been working to undermine Comrade Stalin, to steal money and resources from the Soviet people to waste on their city, to create treasonous fabrications about how the Germans were defeated."

Victor kept his voice firm and steady. "I am sickened to hear of it, sir. Everyone knows that our victory was due entirely to the brilliance and dedication of Comrade Stalin. May all liars be brought swiftly to justice."

"They will be." The Colonel regarded him in silence for a long time, and Victor's heart started to race. Would Yuuri look for him, if he never came home? Would he create trouble for himself in searching? At least Victor had told him he loved him over breakfast that morning. He'd said it enough, hadn't he, in the months since their reunion? Yuuri knew that he would never just abandon him out of the blue. Not of his own volition. But maybe it would have kept him safer if he didn't know just how ardently Victor felt about him. Maybe he'd been better off not even knowing he was in London.

Victor watched the glowing embers snuffed out as the Colonel extinguished his cigarette against the desk. "That will be all, Nikiforov."

"Sir?"

"You can go." Dark, unreadable eyes met his own. "Unless there is something else you would like us to discuss?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

He was glad he had forgotten his bicycle and would need to walk home, waiting until he was off the main road and well into Hyde Park before collapsing onto a bench and breathing hard into his hands. His tongue felt dry and heavy with lies, shapeless and awful in his mouth. He hadn't felt that close to death since having a bullet go clean through his shoulder in the Polish backcountry three and a half years ago. It didn't matter how long it took until the trial; Elisabet was already as good as dead, Alexei the same. There was the tiniest of outside chances that Mila could escape it, if her commanding officer was kind. Yura's family were studiously politically loyal after what happened to his father, but if this had come to Victor's door then it would hurt him too.

He felt completely disgusted with himself. The lies had come out of his mouth so easily, so naturally, running down the tracks laid in his mind over thirty years. That Stalin had had very little to do with the survival of Leningrad was hardly to be helped, unless he was completely out of step with the propaganda at home and it was now official state belief that Stalin could teleport. That the people who had stayed in Leningrad and fought- whether like Mila with weapon in hand or her mother in the desperate administration of a starving populace- were heroes was something he had naively assumed could not possibly be denied. But of course it could. The truth was just another agent of the Kremlin, to go where it was ordered.

That he had walked out of the embassy alive was nothing short of miraculous, but he might not be so lucky again. Victor looked up at the sky as a flock of crows passed overhead. He had known, even before he really wanted to, that his death might come from a firing squad of his comrades rather than an enemy bullet, but it had never felt this close before, never felt like he had so much to lose when it did.

He stood up from the bench and fished a cigarette and a matchbook out of his coat pocket, lighting it as he began to make his way south and east across the park along the path by the lakeside, water as grey and murky as the clouds it reflected overhead. He and Yuuri didn't talk about work. If they did, the fragile edifice of their relationship would surely collapse entirely. But he still felt the surging terror that had gripped him at the thought of his someday simply not coming home, and what would
become of Yuuri if he did. He had resigned himself to the inevitability of his job, to returning over and over to the Soviet Union like a child who still couldn't bring himself to hate the father who beat him. It was only his own body that bore the bruises, after all. But what happened to him would hurt Yuuri too, now.

As he paused a little way east of the bridge the sun broke suddenly, startlingly through the heavy cover of cloud, the grey water of the Serpentine turned brilliant, gleaming silver, and for a moment Victor was dazzled. The breeze whispered in the branches like it was telling him a secret, and for seconds that stretched into minutes he stood blind and dumb and only listened.

And then he began to laugh. He dropped his cigarette, steadying himself against a tree as it wracked him, laughter that straddled the line into sobs, shaking his ribs until they ached. All this time he had been thinking in the grandest terms, of wars and nations and the great transcendental politics of human nature that Truman and Stalin both seemed hellbent on settling with atomic fire. But he wasn't a president or a general or a martyr or a hero. There was no divine force in the sky directing him this way or that. He was just a man, and his choices could be very, very simple, if he would only let them. If he would only allow himself a single moment of grace.

It wasn't England he needed to believe in. It wasn't any nation at all. It was Yuuri.

When he had recovered enough to set off again he walked faster, across the park and back into the city proper, through the colonnades and leafy green squares of Belgravia, over the railway bridge where the trains shuddered their way into Victoria Station, heading home, home, something lifting his feet and dancing in his vision with sudden silver. His heart had started to race again, but this time there was no fear in it.

The flat was warm and quiet when he closed the front door; he could hear the crackle of a fire in the sitting room, smell that strange Japanese tea Yuuri enjoyed. He hung up his coat and hat, hand brushing against the soft green scarf that he had given Yuuri in Berlin to remember him by, and took a deep breath before walking through the sitting room door.

Yuuri was sitting on the sofa in his bare feet with a loose wool jumper pulled on over his shirt, reading a book and holding a mug of tea against his chest. He looked over his shoulder and smiled as Victor entered.

"You look a little flushed," he said. "Is it still cold out?"

"No, no, it's fine." For a few seconds Victor let himself study him, the soft, dark sweep of his hair, those beautiful, fathomless eyes looking over the rims of his glasses. The man who had killed for him, who he would lay down his own life for without a moment's pause. "But could I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course." Yuuri set down his book and tea and made as if to stand, but Victor came around in front of the sofa and dropped down in front of him, clasping both of his hands. It registered faintly at the edges of his mind that he was down on one knee, like a knight swearing his fealty, like a man proposing marriage. He squeezed Yuuri's hands tight, looking up into his handsome, beloved face.

"Yuuri," he said, "I want to defect."

Chapter End Notes
Do you want to have a 1940s-style jam to the music featured in this chapter? ‘Course you do.

The Red Flag, anthem of the UK Labour Party
L’Internationale (en français, naturellement)

Bye-Bye Blackbird
Cottontail (the unnamed Duke Ellington piece)
I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You
It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)
You and the Night and the Music (instrumental)
You Stepped Out of a Dream
London, Part Three

Chapter Summary

While Victor turns double agent to gather information to hand over to the British, Yuuri agonises over his imminent posting to the far east and the prospect of their being separated a second time. But when an explosion in the Kazakh steppe tilts the world on its axis, even the best-laid plans will go astray.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

- T.S. Eliot, "Ash-Wednesday"

"You want to what?"

In retrospect, there were a few things Victor could have said that would have surprised him more. 'Yuuri, this entire time I've been a double agent for the CIA'. 'Yuuri, I want to join the French Foreign Legion'. 'Yuuri, I actually really hate dogs'. But this. Now. Victor was still looking up at him expectantly from his chivalrous pose on the sitting room floor. Yuuri didn't even have socks on. Surely a basic precondition of receiving a defector from an enemy power was that you ought to be wearing socks at the time.

"I want to defect. To you. To Britain. Whatever." Victor dipped his head and kissed the back of Yuuri's hand. "I'm done. With everything you know that I do and that we politely don't talk about. I don't want there to be anything we don't talk about ever again."

"But… Victor…"

A slight frown creased his forehead. "I thought you'd be happy."

Yuuri squeezed his hands back, then, and pulled him up from the floor to sit on the sofa. "I am happy, Victor, I am, but it's just… it's very sudden. I didn't expect this."

"Not yet, you mean?" Victor's eyebrows twitched in amusement. "Because you haven't yet found the perfect novel to persuade me to hand in my party membership card and join the Fabian Society instead?"

Yuuri felt his face heat. "I just thought… with enough time, you might…"

"My opinions haven't changed that much. If there's a book out there somewhere to persuade me that the royal family shouldn't be taken out and shot for the advancement of socialism in this country, well, I don't think I'd want to read it." He grinned and Yuuri tried not to flinch. "But it doesn't matter. I don't want to defect because I've decided I love the King and it turns out every problem in the world can be solved by democracy. It's because of you. You're more important to me than anything
else. I'm only sorry it's taken me so long to realise it."

Yuuri's heart swooped high and dropped again just as suddenly. Victor was still smiling delightedly, thumbs running over the backs of Yuuri's hands, and half of Yuuri wanted to kiss him breathless for this dramatic declaration of love. The other half shrank back, afraid. How could he possibly be enough, after everything Victor had been through, to throw away his entire life for? And how could he let Victor do this now, when he might not even be in England anymore by the end of the year?

"So what do I need to do? Should I talk to your employers? Does Minako have a politician friend I could go to?" Victor looked away contemplatively towards the window. "Or maybe I should make myself more valuable first. There is a lot of information I could get for them about our agents in Britain, and more things besides. The more I can give them, the easier this will be."

"You probably also shouldn't be living here, either, when you do it," Yuuri ventured.

Victor's face drooped. "You're right," he sighed. "It would cause far too much trouble for you if they knew that we... it will probably be a while before things die down enough that I can be your lodger again and not raise too many eyebrows. But it'll be worth it, won't it? I don't mind waiting a few months, even another year or two, if it means getting to have my whole life with you." He let go of Yuuri's hand to stroke his face, and Yuuri closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"It's a shame I can't just marry you," he said. "That would make this all a lot easier."

Victor laughed. "But who would wear the dress?"

"I think you'd look quite fetching in white lace."

"You're right. I could ask Ambassador Zarubin to give me away. Let's invite both governments. A true marriage of Heaven and Hell- but which is which?" Victor's other hand came up to frame Yuuri's face and he kissed him with a smile on his lips. "I don't care if some priest or registrar wants to hear me make promises to you or not. I'll make them anyway. Anything you want."

"I just want to know that you're sure," Yuuri said. "I know you don't feel the way you used to, but trust me, Victor, betraying your country isn't a small thing. It's permanent. Once you do this, there's no going back."

"I'm sure about you," Victor said, and Yuuri's heart flipped over in his chest again. "One of these days maybe I'll have you read some Marx, Yuuri. Countries don't matter. How is it anything but an accident that I was born in Russia and you in Japan? A different set of circumstances and maybe you would be Swedish and I would be Rhodesian, or you would be Colombian and I would be Filipino, or- or anything! What matters is... well, what matters is the international solidarity of the proletariat in revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie, if we're talking about Marx." He put a finger to his lips briefly, as if putting a pin in that thought. "But what mattered to you, more than your country, was that the world not be engulfed in fascism. And what matters to me is you. Being with you. Living with you and loving you and never having to leave you. Never one day going out and not coming home again and you not even knowing why."

He really ought to tell Victor about his possible reassignment right now, but the words wouldn't come, not with him looking at Yuuri so tenderly, hand still stroking his face. He didn't want to be the one to shatter this moment. Instead he turned his head and kissed the heel of Victor's hand. "Okay," he said. "But I think we need to do this slowly and carefully. There was an NKVD agent who tried to defect to MI6 just after the end of the war, in Istanbul, and he... disappeared."

"Oh, Volkov? That was probably because we have several agents in MI6 and the Foreign Office."
The total calm in Victor's tone was incredible; Yuuri couldn't help but feel a sudden flush of panic.

"What, amongst the typists? The cleaning staff?"

"A little higher up than that," Victor said with a smirk. "You know, if I can find out their real names, I think that would be worth a lot. The man in Buckingham Palace too."

Yuuri studied his face, more than a little incredulous. He didn't seem to be joking. If he wasn't, and there really were Soviet spies working at high levels of the British government, the implications were frightening, but information like that would surely guarantee that Victor would be granted asylum. Maybe Yuuri could just say no to Korea and no to Hong Kong and somehow not have it seem suspicious, and within a year or two they would be able to embark on a real future together.

It would be a future of carefully guarding against arrest, living quietly and circumspectly, a future that could be swiftly curtailed when the next war came like so many had in London before, but it would also be a future of falling asleep in Victor's arms every night and watching his ash-blond hair turn truly grey, of sharing the paper and arguing over dinner and having the kind of comfortable, ordinary stability that most of society thought homosexuals completely incapable of.

"We could get a dog," he said stupidly, the tail end of a train of thought that he hadn't vocalised, but Victor beamed with that adorable, heart-shaped smile.

"We could get five dogs," he said, in a manner that suggested that this was something he'd given a lot of thought to. Perhaps he'd already chosen some names. Yuuri couldn't help but smile back, and then Victor was kissing him again and they were both laughing into it as Yuuri climbed into his lap, loosening his hair and running his fingers through it.

"We'll get as many dogs as you want," he said. "I promise."

The embassy library was open and Mrs Belenkaya greeted him with a smile, but it was cooler than usual, slipping off her face as soon as Victor began to look away. He pretended to browse the collection of English translations of Stalin's writings and watched out of the corner of his eye as she fussed about behind her desk, as if hers was a very real and serious job and not a role she had largely created for herself after her husband's posting here.

In truth he was buying himself a little breathing time before heading upstairs to make his pickup in Mishin's office. If he was out- and he often was, given that Mishin was as much of an administrator of student and travel visas as Victor was a teacher- then it would be an excellent opportunity to search through his files for anything worth copying. Discovering solid evidence of the real identities of Hicks, Tony, Homer and Stanley would need to be his priority, as he'd discussed with Yuuri, but there were surely many other things that MI6 and the British government would love to lay their hands on that Victor could gain access to here.

Paranoia crept up his spine on thin, insectoid legs as Victor eventually ducked out of the library and made his way through the corridors. Was this how Yuuri had felt all the time in Berlin, like a tiny animal stealing through a predator's den? He felt as though his treacherous intent was written all over his face for everyone to see. Any moment now a soldier or a diplomat or the tea lady would leap out of a door and point an accusatory finger, because the way he was climbing the stairs or holding his hat made it clear that he was hellbent on undermining the Soviet Union at the behest of his British lover.

Yuuri would never have asked this of him, but there were many things Yuuri would never ask but that Victor would do readily and whole-heartedly for him if the need arose. He felt as if he
discovered more of them every day.

Mishin's first floor office was unlocked but empty. Victor slipped inside, picking up the slim envelope from the man's out-tray marked with an 'A' for 'Alyosha' and surveying the rest of the room. It would be best today to simply check the various cabinets and file boxes for the location of more sensitive bits of information, and wait for another occasion to sift through them. Somewhere in London there was surely a shop that would sell him a microdot camera and film, or perhaps he could ask Yuuri if he had some way of obtaining one. He began with the boxes furthest from the door, alert for the slightest sound of anyone coming along the corridor, let alone Mishin himself returning.

The problem was that an awful lot of the paperwork in the little room was related to the issuing of visas. In the wake of the Allied victory and the almost simultaneous election in Britain of an at least nominally socialist government there had been a great swell of feeling towards strengthening ties between Britain and the USSR, with an accompanying upswing in travel from the former to the latter even as both countries struggled to begin rebuilding themselves. Consequently, there was a lot of useless paper that Mishin seemed to be averse to getting rid of. Probably made it easier to hide things.

Victor flicked through box after box of dull applications and supporting documents before moving on to a filing cabinet. At the back of the bottom drawer he found something at last. There was a dossier on an agent codenamed Liszt whom he was vaguely aware of, who had smuggled decrypted German transmissions out of the secretive British codebreaking headquarters during the war- his real name was Cairncross, but there was little on his post-war activity and he seemed to have shrunk into a small fish. Behind that was exactly what Victor had been looking for- a thick folder with a small, faded photograph clipped to the inside of a smiling, blond young man with a cleft chin. Homer. He was currently stationed in Egypt for the British foreign service, second in rank only to the ambassador. Victor had known for a while that it was largely thanks to Homer's prior service in Washington that the Soviet Union had as much information as it did about the United States's nuclear armoury, but now he knew the man's face and, more importantly, his name. Donald Maclean.

For a moment he contemplated slipping the folder into an envelope and walking out of the embassy right now, cycling straight across the city to Whitehall with it tucked under his waistcoat and taking it to the Foreign Office. This dossier would be more than enough for Maclean to be dragged home from Cairo for questioning, and maybe he would give up the other three himself. But as Victor was thumbing through the file, skipping past photographs of Maclean's wife and children, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor. He shoved the file back into its place in the drawer, kicked the filing cabinet closed, and had just managed to compose himself as the door opened and Mishin stepped in.

"Oh," he said, pushing the door closed behind him. "Hello Alyosha."

Victor looked up from studying the contents of the envelope he was supposed to be there to pick up. "Good afternoon," he said warmly. Mishin didn't return his smile.

"Did you need something?" he asked tersely, pushing past Victor to his desk. Victor resisted the temptation to glance at the filing cabinet he had so recently been rifling through, to check if he'd closed it properly or not. If he hadn't, looking at it would only draw Mishin's attention.

"Oh, no, just making my pickup. I hope you are keeping well, comrade."

Mishin grunted, looked at Victor, and then looked pointedly at the door. Victor's smile faded. Last time they'd actually spoken he'd been quite friendly, enthusing about his favourite Fadeyev novel and his two young sons. But apparently the disfavour of Leningrad now ran very deep indeed. He nodded a goodbye and left.
On his way home he stopped off at the Café Daquise for a cup of coffee, and to actually look through his envelope. It was mostly the usual instructions and matters to pass on to his agents, but there was a smaller envelope at the very bottom, with the address completely blacked out but a Soviet stamp and postmark in the corner. He ripped it open with a fingernail and sat back in his chair from surprise when he recognised the handwriting.

Dear Vitya

It has been too long; I hope you are keeping well. I have thought often this last year of our many conversations about my mother, but I wonder if you recall the time we spoke of my father? These days I think of him more and more. Perhaps it is time for me to finally follow the path he would have wanted for me, before I am too old. By the time this reaches you I may have moved, so don't look for me here. Will send on my new address when I can.

Your comrade, and loving Grandfather

Victor glanced around the almost-empty café before reading the letter again. He had exchanged a couple of very stilted letters with Feltsman after the end of the war, but it had been quite obvious that the old man had no interest in maintaining contact with his former agent, and certainly they were not on the kind of terms where he would write affectionate letters signed off as though his codename was their actual relationship. And why would he talk about changing address, and about his relatives? When they had worked together any reference to Feltsman's mother had of course meant the Soviet Union, but his father… he had mentioned once, and quite memorably, that his actual father had been a rabbi.

Suddenly all the strange pieces of the letter fell into place. Feltsman must be going to Israel, and was an honourable enough man to have written to Victor, and probably others amongst his former colleagues, to warn him in advance. The timing, only a few weeks after Victor had been questioned about the Babichevs, was abysmal, but at least he could have a stern denunciation of Feltsman prepared in advance should he need it. And who was Victor to fault another man for defecting, for following his heart instead of his duty for once?

He realised that he should probably begin to work on similar letters himself; to a few colleagues, to Yura and his mother, to Mila if she was still free. It would be difficult to find a way to couch his message in terms innocuous enough to fool the censors, but he owed it to them to do it, and it would be the closest he would be able to come to wishing anyone goodbye.

Victor finished his coffee, left a few coins on the table, and headed back out to where he'd locked up his bicycle. He'd known this wouldn't be a path without its sorrows when he'd chosen it, but the reward that awaited him was worth every single one of them. He stood up in the pedals and pressed hard for home.

Yuuri remembered thinking, a year into his and Victor's sporadic and clandestine affair in Berlin, that they had reached some kind of pinnacle of intimacy, of interpersonal connection; it seemed frankly absurd to look back on, as Victor led him teasingly up the stairs to their bedroom. They had been building up to this all day, from an all-too lingering goodbye kiss as he'd left for work to flirting and grabbing at each other as they made dinner, and now Victor was taking off his glasses for him and unbuttoning his waistcoat and kissing his neck just a little too softly to bruise.

There was something vast and impossibly beautiful about spending all day dreaming of the man he would come home to, about making love to him greedily and ferociously at night and waking in his arms the next morning, about sharing every small and mundane thing in their lives. There were fewer
secrets between them every day, and soon, soon there would be none at all.

"You don't need to be so careful," he murmured, as Victor began to slowly unbutton his shirt. "Clothes just came off ration, after all."

"You won't mind?" When Yuuri shook his head Victor grinned wolfishly and gave him a searing kiss as he grabbed both sides of Yuuri's shirt and pulled hard, buttons popping off and skittering away across the floor as he pushed it back off Yuuri's shoulders. He wanted Victor to tear him open, to be laid completely bare to him at last, wanted to be the mending of one another's broken places and the promise that nothing would ever hurt them again. His hands tangled in Victor's hair, stroking and tugging, and then he was backed up against the bed and he dropped them lower to grab hold of the back of Victor's shirt and pull hard as he let himself fall backwards.

For a second Victor only looked down at him with wide eyes, his shirt torn clean up the back to the collar, but then he was scrabbling to pull it off completely, clambering up onto the bed himself. Their hips were moving against each other entirely involuntarily as they kissed, open-mouthed and hungry, and Victor groaned delightedly as Yuuri rolled them over, hands against his shoulders to pin him to the mattress.

"Yuuri," he gasped between kisses, "Yuuri. I love you."

They said it almost every day now, easy as anything, but he'd never get tired of hearing it. "Tell me in Russian?" he whispered, kissing along the edge of Victor's ear.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Victor said at once, his voice dropping half an octave.

Yuuri pressed his nose into his hair. "Ich liebe dich."

"Je t'aime, je t'aime à la folie."

"Ti amo."

"This game isn't fair," Victor said with an audible pout. "You speak more languages than I do."

Yuuri paused, and sat up a little. He could say saranghae too, or scour his memory for whatever the phrase should be in Cantonese, but that would require far too much explanation. "Then I'll tell you another way," he murmured, stroking Victor's cheek. "What would you like? What do you need?"

Victor shifted his legs a little further apart and rocked his hips up against Yuuri's, a satisfied little smile appearing on his face when Yuuri cursed and bit his lip. "I can't wait to be yours," he said, "only yours, no-one else's ever again. Won't you show me what it'll be like?" He propped himself up on one elbow and leaned up to whisper in Yuuri's ear. "Remember the very first time, in Berlin? Won't you do what you did that night, and fuck me so hard it changes my entire life?"

Yuuri definitely remembered that Victor had been much shyer and more reticent that night than the man now panting and grinning up at him like the cat that got the cream. It was quite mind-bendingly arousing to see the distance they'd travelled together written all over his face, to feel in his own heated, prickling skin just how much Victor had changed him too, had led him out of his neatly controlled and partitioned life into this continent-sprawling, fate-defying love affair.

He would do the same thing, he realised, as he took Victor's face in his hands and kissed him. If their circumstances were reversed, if he thought they had as much of a chance at happiness together in Moscow as they did in London, he would pack away all his opinions and take a briefcase of state secrets to the Soviets, for Victor. Wars and borders and politics all faded away to nothing next to this. He'd been selfless before, told Victor to let him go and stay behind to fight, but he didn't think he
"It changed my life too," he said, and unbuttoned Victor's trousers.

He wouldn't remember, afterwards, which one of them pulled away to fish the lubricant out of the bedside table drawer, how they got from him pinning Victor to the bed to him sitting up against the headboard with Victor straddling his lap, but he would never forget the way the lamplight reflected warm in Victor's cool blue eyes, the way he tipped his head back until his hair spilled past his shoulders like molten silver.

"There's nothing besides you," he whispered in a hoarse voice as Victor lowered himself slowly, "fuck, Victor, nothing, only you, I love you so much, I can't-" and then Victor was kissing his forehead and his eyes and his lips and murmuring his name over and over like a prayer, a blessing, pressing his hand against Yuuri's chest over his thundering heart.

It was slow and then it wasn't slow at all, something igniting the tinder of all the softly-spoken words between them and licking up into a blaze, and they were kissing with mouths open to muffle any noise, Victor's hands pulling at Yuuri's hair while Yuuri's fingers dug into his hips so hard it would surely bruise, and it felt all at once like his mind had left the atmosphere and yet his body had never been so alive and real. When they tumbled forward together he slipped out and Victor huffed and drew him back in again, his heel settling at the small of Yuuri's back.

This was his future, tangled up with Victor, every part of his life taken over and turned inside out. He wanted nothing else.

It took a while before either of them was recovered enough to make it next door to the bathroom for a glass of water each and a damp flannel. Yuuri curled his body into Victor's, head resting on his shoulder, while Victor's hand traced idle patterns on his back.

"I need to tell you something," he said eventually. "I'll be away for the last two weeks of the month. I'm going down to Hampshire. It's for work, so I can't say- well I mean, I don't really know what it'll involve, but-"

"It's okay," Victor said sleepily, his hand still moving back and forth. "You don't have to tell me. I'm still a dastardly foreign agent for now, after all. But I'll miss you."

Yuuri already knew he was a terrible person, but at that moment he felt it very keenly. "We can talk more about it in the morning."

"Mmm," Victor said, pressing a kiss to the top of Yuuri's head. "Whatever you want, darling."

If only it was as simple as what he wanted.

The summer sun beat down warmly on Victor's back as he walked home, a little paper bag from the grocer tucked under his arm. Yuuri had been away for four days and it was profoundly odd to have the flat all to himself, to eat and sleep and wake all alone. He supposed he would need to get used to it, if they would be apart for a little while when he made his defection official, but he certainly didn't have to like it. Still, the solitude gave him plenty of scope to sort out the various bits of information he had managed to smuggle out of the embassy so far.

He was building up quite the picture of Maclean and his colleague Burgess, whom he had known as Popovich's notoriously volatile agent Hicks. Two young men of a very comfortable background, recruited for their ideological passion, but now probably coasting along more on fear than anything else. In any other circumstance Victor might have been sympathetic. But for all unmasking Hicks could ever do that again.
and Homer would probably be enough, he had stumbled upon tantalising hints about Stanley, the man whom MI6 would doubtless consider the biggest prize as he was one of their own officers. He was coming through London soon on his way from Istanbul to Washington and it was entirely possible that Victor would get to actually meet him, and even if he didn't it was an opportunity like no other.

There were still twinges of guilt in his heart from time to time, to be working against his comrades, to be planning to do to these men in particular what he had spent so many years terrified of happening to himself or to Yuuri in Germany. He had no idea how much their bourgeois background would be able to shield them from going to the gallows for treason, or if the British might seek to either leave them unawares to be manipulated or actively turn them to work back against Moscow. But it was worth any amount of guilt or self-recrimination. He had been giving and giving of himself his entire life, getting only scraps and stones in return, and it was finally time to be selfish.

Something gleamed at the edge of his vision and caught his eye, and he stopped and turned to find himself standing in front of a pawn brokers. In its window display, in between a stately wood-cased radio and a sleek violin, was a small display of jewellery, in the top corner of which were two plain gold bands side by side. Men's wedding rings. They were almost alike enough to be a pair, although as he leaned closer to the window he could see that one had a tiny, delicate inscription on the inside.

Marriage was for normal people, an institution of arcane rules and expectations almost as peculiar as the notion of wanting to perpetually attach oneself to a member of the opposite sex in the first place. But a ring didn't have to be a chain or a burden; a ring could be a promise just like a letter or a scarf or a book, a charm worn close against the skin. It could be a gift before he had to move out of the flat, for both of them to remember the future they were heading towards.

He could feel both rings in the inside pocket of his jacket later that afternoon, as he leaned on the railing around the tiny rooftop balcony and smoked a cigarette. The chimney pots of Pimlico were spread out around him, strewn about with chattering starlings. Yuuri would be home again in ten days and then they could do as they had all through last summer, come up here in their shirtsleeves in the evenings to drink and smoke and talk about nothing in particular. Victor had lived in four of the world's great cities now and it was always the smallest details that he found himself holding the most dear; the cry of seagulls in Leningrad, snow in the bare winter trees of Berlin, watching distant traffic cross the bridges over the Moskva from his Moscow flat, and here the disorderly rooftops of London where dark birds fluttered to and fro under the ever-present smell of coal fires.

Once his cigarette had burned down to its end he took a small notepad and pen out of his pocket, balancing them on the railing to begin drafting a letter. It would probably be the last he would ever send as Major Victor Mikhailovich Nikiforov, officer of the MGB and decorated hero of the Great Patriotic War, and he needed to make every word count.

Dear Yura

I am sorry it has been so long since I last wrote. I hope you are well, and have made a good start in your career in the air force; I'm sure your family must be very proud. I am doing as well as always.

He wondered if Yuri had fallen in love yet, if he would understand if Victor said that nothing was the same as always, that his entire world had grown vast beyond imagining and he would do anything to keep running towards its endless boundaries for the rest of his life.

I know that you understand well the constraints of the kind of work that we both do, and why I may not be able to write again for a while after this. I also know you have a strong and patriotic heart that will bear you through the worst of times and lead you to
It might be a little too subtle, but if he tried to be clearer then the letter would definitely never reach Yuri and the whole point of writing it would be lost. He still didn't know the details of what had happened between Yuri's parents in 1936, but one of the well-known and little-spoken facts of Leningrad was that Lev Zakharov was in the gulag and Yulia Plisetskaya had sent him there. Victor didn't doubt that her son had inherited that same capacity for cold-bloodedness, should the need arise.

The war changed so many things for all of us, didn't it? It made you a man, Yura, and me a very different one. I hope you won't be too angry, now or in the future, to hear that I am proud of you too. You'll leave us all in the dust one day. Think of me when you look down from the stars.

Your comrade

Maj. VMN

He hadn't lingered as long over lunch with Victor as he often did, and it wasn't even two o'clock yet when he walked back into the old building on Broadway where MI6 pretended not to exist. Yuuri was checking his pigeon-hole on the fourth floor when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see Mrs Sugden, Pickavance's long-serving and thoroughly terrifying secretary, standing behind him.

"The Director needs to see you, Katsuki."

"Right now?"

"No, in two hours once you've had a brandy and a nice sit down." She rolled her eyes at him. "Of course right now."

Pickavance didn't offer Yuuri a cigarette when he entered the office, only paused in his pacing long enough to gesture for him to sit down and slide a thin folder across the desk to him. It was stamped in bright red across the centre with the words 'Top Secret'. Yuuri looked up and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Sir, what-"

"You need to read it, Katsuki."

The document on the top was a carbon-copy of a letter bearing the letterhead of the US embassy. It was filled with acronyms Yuuri didn't recognise and a lot of scientific terminology that he couldn't follow, but the final paragraph was more than clear enough.

Should the recommended meteorological flights prove inconclusive, your assistance in the realm of human intelligence is also sought. Projected test sites include previously discussed locations in Siberia, the Arctic Circle, and the Kazakh steppe. No indication has yet been gained from our agents as to the number of devices which may have been tested, or whether others have been built. The Soviet capacity clearly far outstrips our prior estimations, and decisions must be taken at once to curb the further development of their nuclear program.

"The planes will be flying again tomorrow night to try and detect whatever it is they can detect in the atmosphere, we haven't actually picked it up yet," Pickavance said as Yuuri stared dumbly at the piece of paper in front of him. "But we can be realistic men here. The Soviets have the bomb."
They've built one and bloody set it off somewhere, while we were all sat here happily imagining that
they might come close to it sometime in '53 or '54."

Yuuri swallowed hard. The only thing he could think of was Nagasaki in the summertime, the thick,
damp heat and endless cicada song, sunlight glittering in the waters of the bay, and the lone,
gleaming aircraft that had dropped the city's doom out of the sky. He really, really wished he'd been
offered that cigarette. "Why are you showing this to me, sir?" he managed at last.

"Because we've dragged our feet more than enough about Seoul. I'm sure you're a long way from
fluent in the language yet, but I had an excellent report from your time at Beaulieu, and frankly we
don't have any more time to waste. We need you out there, defending British interests in the far east."
Pickavance leaned forward, palms flat on the surface of the desk. "War in Korea now means we're
looking at the world's first nuclear conflict. God only knows what the capacity of the Soviet weapon
is, or how many others they have; all we know is what Hitler didn't, that the Russians can be crippled
and starving and half frozen to death and they'll still fight like rabid animals. The Americans can't just
bomb Moscow and get them to kowtow, unlike… well." He cleared his throat uncomfortably.
"Cigarette, Katsuki?"

Yuuri politely ignored the end of Pickavance's train of thought, and accepted a cigarette and a light.
He turned over the American document and found underneath it a note addressed to himself. It was
sketchy and rather superfluous in its praise of his last five years' service, but very firm in its emphasis
that he was needed in Seoul. At the foot of the paper the note was signed in green ink, with nothing
but the letter 'C'.

"I'm sure you'll be tempted to show off your first green ink, but don't go waving that around,"
Pickavance said. "The chief doesn't normally comment directly on ops to officers, so let that be a
demonstration of our seriousness."

"Is it- is it only me, sir, that will be in Korea? I won't have any colleagues around?"

"We've an established operation out there, and you'll have ostensible colleagues in the Consul-
General's office, of course. But no other officers, once you've been briefed in the field. Unless you
know a lot of other Oxford men of the right sort of family who can blend into a Seoul crowd around
here?"

Yuuri leaned back in his chair and suppressed a sigh. Of course it came down to that, in the end. For
all he had a surname as Japanese as the rest of him, for all Minako wasn't even that immediate of a
relative, through her and Celestine he had been brought under the auspices of the Cholmondeley
family and the appearance of gentry, a guise that could mask any number of sins and made implicit
one's obligation to monarch and empire both. And of course his superiors imagined he wouldn't be
painfully obviously Japanese in Korea, if they'd already mentally blended him into some ancient
English family.

He held his cigarette between his lips and looked through the remaining documents in the folder; a
few notes on Sir Vyvyan Holt, the new Consul-General to the Republic of Korea, some reports from
the existing intelligence network about the activities of Soviet and Chinese agents in the country, and
details and even some photographs of the Korean contacts who'd supplied the information.
Pickavance cleared his throat again as Yuuri was reading the notes on a bored-looking young
military officer named Major Lee.

"I can see when a man's getting cold feet, Katsuki; if it's any consolation I doubt this will be a long
assignment for you. Holt is… well he's a lot of things, but he's not an idiot. He'll evacuate British
diplomats if- when there's a declaration of war."
For a moment Yuuri wondered, as he had before from time to time, if this could be a blessing in disguise. If he was on the other side of the world when Victor defected then there would be very little to link them, little to cast suspicion on Yuuri either for the insulting non-crime of gross indecency or the more serious matter of fraternising with a known enemy agent. They wouldn't be able to live together again for some time regardless. But it was the difference between living like they had in their time together in Berlin, sneaking around and seeing each other infrequently, and living almost as they had in their years of total separation. All the diplomatic protections in the world couldn't guarantee that Yuuri would come home safely, and if the Soviets were as keen on civilian air raids as the Nazis…

If London met its end in a nuclear blast he wanted to be there with Victor when it happened, wanted to be holding him close when the air raid sirens sounded again after these few fragile years of silence. They had sat together in parks and shabby hotel rooms in Berlin and altered the course of the war, of human history, but while history was far out of either of their hands now, they could still have each other.

Pickavance continued as if Yuuri wasn't having an existential crisis right in front of him. "Depending on our meteorological findings we will likely be seeing an official announcement from President Truman about the Soviet bomb before the end of September. We'd like you to be at least in place in Seoul before that, so you've got the next few days to get your affairs in order and then we'll be flying you out on the fifteenth. You'll stopover in Delhi to run a quick errand there too, I'll have Madge bring you the file over. We'll speak again on Monday." He smiled and winked. "What was your old codename, Katsuki? Seems like the Blackbird flies for the empire again."

What bloody empire? Yuuri wanted to yell. He stood up, stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray, and shook Pickavance by the hand, before heading back to his own office with the top secret dossier in hand. He had to find some way out of this.

Meeting Yuuri for lunch in Westminster meant he'd had a fair slog back to Lewisham in order to teach his Friday afternoon class, but it was always worth it, and certainly made it easier to be hanging around waiting to meet Popovich rather than heading home to start dinner. It was starting to drizzle slightly as Victor lit a cigarette, and he ducked further into the shelter provided by the looming bulk of Southwark Cathedral. Popovich always seemed to want to meet or make his drops at churches. Maybe it was the name.

Victor recognised his footsteps as he approached so didn't turn around, but dropped his half-smoked cigarette in surprise when instead of his usual cheery greeting Popovich enveloped him in a warm, brotherly embrace.

"It is so good to see you, comrade!" Popovich exclaimed, stepping back only to clasp Victor's shoulders. "I have just come from the embassy and have the most tremendous news. But please, not here, let's walk."

He kept one hand on Victor's elbow as he led him away, back out onto the main road and towards the bridge. What on earth could have got him so excited? Maybe Popovich, whom he could well imagine never quite grasping the facts of life, had heard that his wife was pregnant or something. Victor could think of few other things that would get him so worked up. But what had he been doing at the embassy anyway? The whole point of Victor's role was to obscure the link between the ambassador's business and their intelligence gathering.

They ended up walking along a narrow, gravelled path alongside the river and underneath the bridge, where as soon as they were immersed in the shadows Popovich hugged him again and began speaking in Russian. "I am so glad to be the one who gets to tell you this, Alyosha. We have done it!"
A great triumph for socialism! Just over a week ago we tested our first atom bomb!"

The words sank into Victor's mind like bullets into treacle, their hot velocity slowed suddenly to an agonising crawl. Popovich was still embracing him- if this went on much longer Victor would begin to question his intentions- and the noise of the road still rattled and roared over their heads. Nothing had changed. And yet everything had changed, apparently, without anyone noticing at all.

"Isn't it wonderful, comrade?" Popovich asked and before Victor could examine the sudden rush of sarcasm in his tone Popovich had snatched his arms away and Victor felt them replaced by the unmistakeable shape of a pistol pressed up against the side of his ribcage. His heart stopped and started again, stuttering like a siren.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Kresnik?" he snapped, trying to sound more authoritative than he felt. In the darkness under the bridge he could only see the light glinting off Popovich's teeth as he sneered.

"I haven't actually just come from the embassy, Alyosha; I was there this morning at about the same time you were. I watched you leave. I followed you to a café in Westminster, and then I followed the man you spent such a long time over lunch with." He laughed like a bad cinema villain. "Do MI6 really think anyone believes that building is there to sell fire extinguishers? I mean I'm sure you'd know the answer to that, given that you're working for them."

Victor's blood was running ice cold, sweat seeping off him everywhere as his skin prickled. Why didn't he carry his gun more often? Why had he so blithely assumed Popovich couldn't be a threat to him? "I am most certainly not a British agent," he said emphatically, given that it was technically true.

"Oh, of course, so you have no idea who that man works for and were just meeting because he is your lover or something." Victor couldn't help a sharp intake of breath and Popovich shifted the angle of his pistol. "He isn't, is he? I've heard the rumours about you, but you always seemed normal enough and I didn't want to believe it."

"Kresnik, whatever it is you think you saw-"

"Don't bullshit me. I know you think I'm an idiot so I've been playing one as best I can these past two years. I've seen the way you act when anything happens that's remotely in favour of the Soviet Union. I know you've been visiting the embassy and hanging around a lot more since what happened in February with all your lying friends back in Leningrad. Maybe you haven't become the King's new lapdog just yet, but you have a treacherous heart."

Victor had to find some way to get hold of the gun. If he could distract Popovich just enough he could grab some gravel from the path, throw it into his face, and might then be able to wrestle the weapon out of his hand. "You call me treacherous, but I'm not the one speaking about the deadliest weapon in history as if it were some kind of superstitious idol to be worshipped."

"Are you ever going to stop believing that I'm an idiot?" Popovich hissed. "This isn't just about the bomb, Alyosha. This isn't even just about the Soviet Union. I'm sure you'd love to have your British masters running the world again, but even they have to know it's not going to be them now. It's America that's going to run around the globe snatching up other countries as prizes and imposing their capitalism on people struggling for freedom, and until now there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. Japan was one of the most powerful nations on the planet and now it's a glorified colony, because the Americans had the bomb and nobody else did. That won't- that can't happen now. We are the world's other great power, and we'll build up an atomic arsenal to rival anything they can create. America will never drop the bomb on another country ever again, as long as they know that
we could do the same to them." He turned his head slightly to look towards the dark river, shadows playing over his face. "It's not just a Soviet weapon. It's the weapon of every wretched and oppressed man, woman and child on this earth."

It was impassioned and more than a little persuasive, but it was also exactly the distraction Victor had needed. He dropped into a crouch, seized a handful of gravel, and shoved it into Popovich's face. Popovich howled at the grit being forced into his eyes, but instead of loosening his grip his other hand whipped up to brace the stock of the pistol and he fired blindly, the bullet whizzing over Victor's shoulder.

"You're a dead man, Nikiforov!" he shouted, water streaming from his screwed-shut eyes as he fired another round, the bullet lodging itself into the mortar of the bridge arch. "We'll find you, wherever you run! The British can't protect you!" Victor hesitated, shifting from foot to foot as he tried to assess the possibility of seizing the gun now, but Popovich shot again and gravel spat up centimetres from his foot. He'd underestimated the man completely. Victor stared at his former agent for a moment more, and then turned and ran.

Yuuri was pacing back and forth across the living room when he heard the front door slam, and he knew that something was horribly wrong the moment Victor walked into the room with his coat and hat still on and his face flushed red.

"Oh Yuuri," he gasped, and wrapped his arms around him tight; Yuuri squeezed him hard in return. "Yuuri, the most awful thing… I've been found out, one of my agents tailed me today and I didn't even notice him, he saw us meet and he followed you back to work too and then met me later today and fuck, Yuuri, my country has built the bomb, I don't, I can't-"

"Shh," Yuuri said, stroking Victor's back and trying not to let the rush of panic overwhelm him, "shh, Victor, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"No, though not for want of trying. He didn't start firing until after I threw gravel in his face, so he wasn't the best shot. But I couldn't get the gun off him, so he's still alive and reporting back to our superiors right now. They still think I live in Deptford so it might take a while but they'll find me, Yuuri, if your people can protect me we need to go now but I don't-"

"I'm going to Korea," Yuuri blurted out, more loudly than he'd intended to. Victor stopped talking at once, and leaned back a little from their embrace.

"What?"

"I'm- I mean, I'm being assigned there, by MI6, as a field officer. Next week. They know about the Soviet bomb test, and they think there's going to be a war in Korea within the next few years." Something tasted bitter on his tongue. "I'm needed to defend imperial interests out there, apparently."

Victor frowned. "This seems terribly sudden. And you don't even speak Korean." He swallowed audibly and added, "Do you?"

Yuuri's stomach dropped hard and he looked away from Victor's face. "Jogeumman," he said to the floor. "A little bit. I've… my boss told me it was a possibility back in January. They wanted to send me overseas, either to Seoul or Hong Kong, so I've been studying Korean and Cantonese. And that's why I was away for two weeks back in May, to learn proper field techniques. I wanted to tell you, but you've been so happy and it had been so long since I'd heard anything I thought they might have changed their minds and I just wanted to make things easier for you to defect and-"
Victor cut him off with a single finger against his lips, before kissing him very softly. Then he sighed. "I wish you had told me sooner," he said quietly, and Yuuri willed the floor to hurry up and swallow him. "But if it keeps you safe-

"How is going to a country on the brink of war safe?" He forced away the enormous weight of shame enough to look back up into Victor's face. "I'm not leaving you again. Especially not if you've been found out. And not for the sake of the British fucking empire."

Victor's agitation was starting to show again as he took his hat off and ran a hand over his hair. "Yuuri, Kres- no, fuck his stupid codename. Captain Popovich knows your face, he knows where you work, and he might not know your name but how many Japanese men are there working for MI6? And he's the direct contact for our two highest placed agents in this country, there's no way he won't have them root you out. Korea might not be safe but from there you could flee to Japan if you had to. You could go home."

"No. My home is with you."

The look that Victor gave him was a hopeless mix of desperation and adoration. "I can't let you get hurt because of me," he said.

"Do you think it won't hurt me to be hiding on the other side of the world and not knowing if you're even still alive?" Yuuri pulled him back into a tight embrace, pressing his face against Victor's shoulder. "I thought I could live without you once, and I was wrong. I told you: I'm not leaving you again."

Victor let out another sigh, hot against Yuuri's ear. "Then what do we do? Do we both leave the country? Where could we go?"

"I don't know," Yuuri said, "but I think I do know who can help."

He'd been happy enough to be able to get hold of Minako at the London house that he didn't really think about what she'd meant when she said she'd have to bring 'company'; now, sitting on the sofa with Victor and being examined like a zoo exhibit by her, Celestine and Phichit, he wished he'd asked her to clarify.

"Well this is exciting," Phichit said, as if they were all on some delightful day out. "Nice to see you again, Victor, how have you been?"

"Oh, um, fine," Victor said faintly. He was looking daggers at Yuuri, who was doing his best to do the same to Minako, who was pretending not to see either of them.

"So," Phichit continued airily, "I'm going to assume that the reason we're all hanging about in Yuuri's sitting room on a Friday evening, instead of being out somewhere having a good time, has something to do with you all being spies."

Everyone in the room turned to look at him, and he casually reached into his jacket pocket and took out a cigarette. "Was I not supposed to know?" he asked innocently, lighting it and then gesturing to each of them in turn. "I mean, Professor, I've read everything you've ever published on cryptanalysis, I know what you were doing during the war. Mrs C, well, either you know a lot of people with really weird names and you somehow bribed your way into membership of the Special Forces Club, or you were definitely a spy at some point. Yuuri, you're fluent in German and you used to live in Berlin, and now you live in London and have a job you're always really vague about. You're incredibly obvious. As for you-" and everyone else turned with Phichit as he pointed at Victor "-well I don't know, maybe you are just a teacher. But it would seem a bit incongruous, with all this lot."

He
paused long enough to blow a smoke ring across the room. "Why are you all so surprised? Good gracious, it's as if you've forgotten I was in the Thai resistance."

Yuuri didn't know where else to look, so he looked very determinedly at his own hands in his lap. For several more seconds no-one else spoke at all. Then Victor chuckled.

"You're right," he said. "We're all spies here, apparently. I'm a Soviet intelligence officer; a Major in the MGB. I've been in London since 1947 to supervise a wide group of agents handling intelligence sources in Britain."

Minako's head snapped around. "Yuuri, did you know about this? About who he really was?" Her tone was suddenly very hard and cold. He started to nod but she cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Wait. In Berlin you had a Soviet contact, another intelligence agent working undercover. It wasn't... he's not..."

He reached over to take Victor's hand and looked up, meeting her eyes. "Yes. That's how we first met. We've known each other since 1940."

Celestine looked shocked, Phichit completely delighted. Minako stared at him flatly for a moment before putting a despairing hand to her forehead. "Did you even try to not have a life directly out of some ridiculous novel? What's next, are you going to tell me you go around at night in a mask and a cape avenging the helpless? Did you escape from an island prison and are even now plotting your revenge against someone? Let's just get this all out into the open."

"I feel like I should add that I have been planning to defect," Victor said. Minako sat down hard into an armchair.

"Oh good. Well done Yuuri, it took nine years but you fucked a communist into defecting. Congratulations. They should move you to counter-intelligence."

Yuuri's face was burning but he cleared his throat to speak. "Look, I didn't invite you here so we could all share our deepest darkest secrets. We need your help, Minako. Victor and I have to leave the country. As soon as possible."

Minako opened her mouth again but Victor squeezed Yuuri's hand and took over talking. "There is a group of four men, all currently in very influential positions in the British government, who have been acting as Soviet agents since they were recruited out of Cambridge in the 1930s. I have spent the last few months trying to piece together information that confirms their real identities and their activities on behalf of the Soviet Union. But I don't have all four of them yet, and a colleague has discovered what I've been doing. These are the same men who engineered the death of Konstantin Volkov in Istanbul. And my colleague knows I'm linked to Yuuri, too."

He ran his thumb soothingly over Yuuri's knuckles before getting up from the sofa and going over to the bookshelves, pulling out the collection of large dictionaries and taking an envelope from behind them. He shuffled a side table around to empty the envelope's contents onto and everyone gathered around it, including Phichit who was apparently now unofficially inducted into the British intelligence services by virtue of being in the room.

"These two they could arrest right now, I think. Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess." Yuuri's stomach took a nasty dive at the second name and he stood up too, pushing in between Phichit and Victor to look at the documents spread out on the table.

"Maclean?" Celestine said, turning over a piece of paper. "Surely not. I met him at the club once or twice, charming fellow but he's Tory to the bone."
"You don't look too well, Yuuri," Phichit said helpfully. Yuuri elbowed him hard, but when Minako raised a pointed eyebrow at him he sighed.

"I, um, think I might have met Burgess once. At the Boat Race. He was a communist then, at least."

"You've met him?" Victor said curiously, and anyone who believed in a merciful god was clearly disproven by the fact that the floor continued to refuse to swallow Yuuri up.

"We... spent some time together. There was a lot of Pimms involved. And champagne. And whisky."

"Yuuri," Victor said, and he sounded strangely impressed if anything. Minako reached down and started gathering the documents back up into their envelope.

"Great, okay, so now we all know that Cambridge is full of communists and Yuuri has a type." Her tone became harder again and Yuuri glanced up to see that she was looking Victor directly in the eyes. "You said there were four men. What do you know about the other two?"

"One of them, I only know that he works in Buckingham Palace. His codename is Tony, but that's not of any real use. The other... I was never able to get anything solid. He came through London recently but all I could find out was his name. Kim Philby."

The name was oddly familiar to Yuuri, although he couldn't place it, but Minako had suddenly gone very pale, and she and Celestine shared a glance. "Are you absolutely certain?" she asked.

"Obviously you have no solid reason to believe me," Victor said. "But yes, I am. Philby is a Soviet agent."

"Christ, he's tipped as a future chief of the service," Celestine said weakly.

"You must know this isn't going to do much without you to back it up," Minako said, looking intently at Victor again. "I'll make sure it gets to the right people, but what am I supposed to say? 'Remember my cousin who had the George Cross and five years' service in MI6 until he mysteriously disappeared recently? Well he fled the country with his lover who was in Soviet intelligence, but they gave me this before they left. I might as well say I got it from Father Christmas.'"

Victor slid an arm around Yuuri's waist; it was a possessive gesture, but a comforting one. "Frankly I don't care if it does any good at all. I gathered this information for Yuuri's sake, to make sure I would be valuable to your government. I showed it to you so you would know how very serious our situation is right now. What you do with it after we're gone is none of my concern." Then he tightened his grip and used a tone of voice Yuuri had only heard from him a few times before, the cool voice of a soldier, a killer. "Assuming, of course, that you do intend to help us."

Minako looked like she had something just as steely to say in response, but Celestine broke in for her. "Yuuri is family," he said smoothly. "Of course we'll help you. If this is..." and his gaze dropped to Yuuri's face, searching. "If this is what he wants."

"I don't want to leave London," Yuuri said, "but I can't leave Victor. Not again."

Phichit made a muffled squeaking noise and then suddenly he was hugging Yuuri- and Victor too, by virtue of his refusal to let Yuuri go. "I can't believe you've been having this incredibly dramatic life for years and you didn't even tell me," he muttered into Yuuri's jacket. "If you don't write to me I am going to hunt you down and talk about Gödel numbers to everyone you care about."
Yuuri couldn't help a little laugh. "I don't even know where we're going, or how or when. But I'll try."

"Assuming I can get hold of the right person, I think we can sort out the where." When Yuuri slipped out of Phichit's embrace to look at her, Minako was regarding him with an expression of exasperated fondness, with what almost seemed like a touch of admiration. "Since I'm sure we'll be getting saddled with the eventual bill, I'm going to use your telephone to place some international calls, Yuuri."

Victor kept his arm around Yuuri as they sat back down on the sofa, Phichit squeezing in on Yuuri's other side and Celestine taking the armchair, looking thoroughly wrung out already. It was getting on for eight in the evening now and Yuuri wondered if he ought to offer everyone something to eat. Not that they had a great deal in the kitchen. Out in the hall Minako was holding a series of conversations in French, presumably with various different exchange operators, but Yuuri had it half tuned out. Victor was stroking his side, leaning his weight ever so slightly against Yuuri's shoulder, and Yuuri remembered the dusty backstage of the theatre in Berlin where he'd slept fitfully with his head in Victor's lap, where Emil and his colleagues had shown them such kindness. He knew, thanks to Minako, that Emil had survived the war, but Yuuri had never thought to try and contact him again. He wished he had. Wherever Emil's home country was, it was probably behind the Soviet line now, and harder to reach out to by the day.

"Merde alors," Minako swore, loudly, and he heard her start to dial again. This time she didn't seem to need to wait as long, and after only a single brisk conversation with an operator she began in very businesslike French. "Lutz. It's Arabesque. Yes, well, I'm quite surprised to be able to get hold of you in your hotel room at this time on a Friday. No, be quiet. You're retired when I say you're retired, and no sooner. Don't think I won't call your mother!" Her footsteps sounded on the floorboards as she paced. "Listen, it's very useful that you're in Paris- I need you to help some friends of mine. A friend of yours too, actually, I'm sure you remember Blackbird. Well if you want to know what he's done you can ask him yourself. Can I give him this number or- ? It should be some time tomorrow afternoon, I should think, Sunday morning at the very latest. Wonderful. Well if I'm ever in Geneva you can call that favour in. Okay. Goodnight."

There was a moment's pause and then Minako reappeared at the door to the sitting room, walking over to hand Yuuri a piece of paper with a telephone number written on it. "You remember Lutz, I take it? If you can make it to Paris, this is the number for the Hotel Chopin, where he's staying. He's agreed to accompany you into Switzerland, and his family can help you with your documentation once you get there. It's probably the closest you'll get to being safe in a country without leaving Europe."

"And it's not illegal in Switzerland," Phichit added quietly. Yuuri turned to look at him and he gestured back and forth between the three of them sat on the sofa. "Being homosexual. I mean, I doubt they'll throw you a parade or anything, but you can't be imprisoned for it. Not like here." He squeezed Yuuri's arm and Yuuri thought of every night out they'd spent together, of the deep, dark undercurrent of fear that ran beneath all of their smiles and their bravado.

"Maybe you'll visit us someday," he said hopefully, and Phichit nodded.

"I'll try."

Yuuri looked around the room again, at his home of five years, at the people who had been his constant through all of them, until his gaze settled on Victor. "I suppose we'd better pack."
guard on the platform, an answering one from the engine, and they were away. Victor pressed his
face to the compartment window, looking back along the long, dark platform to where the weak
lights of the station concourse gleamed. This was the last he would see of London, probably for the
rest of his life. On the seat across from him Yuuri had a timetable booklet unfolded in his lap and a
sheet of paper sitting next to it with the very rough travel itinerary that they had worked out. This
was the last train out of Victoria Station, which would take them down to Dover, and early in the
morning they would take a ferry across the English Channel to Calais. From Calais they would need
to find a train on to Paris, where Yuuri and Minako's mysterious Swiss friend would be meeting
them. From Paris they would head to Switzerland, and an entirely new life.

When they woke that morning they had lingered in bed a little too long and talked about maybe
going to the cinema at the weekend, or finding somewhere interesting to go out to dinner. And now
the flat, that soft, warm bed, all the comfortable accoutrements of a place that had been their shared
home for a year, were gone forever. They had three suitcases between them, filled with clothes and a
few books, two lives condensed down to the smallest amount of space possible.

"I can hear you blaming yourself, Victor," Yuuri said, not looking up from his lap. "This isn't your
fault. I didn't spot your agent tailing me either."

"Can't a man self-recriminate in peace around here?" he grumbled, and Yuuri laughed.

"I know I'm going to feel sad about this in the future. Probably very soon. But right now… aren't
you a little bit excited? To be doing this together. That whatever happens now, we'll be together,
with nothing standing between us anymore." He slid his feet over to rest between Victor's and smiled
at him. Out of the corner of his eye, Victor caught sight of the Thames glimmering with the silver of
the moon and the gold of gas light as they crossed over it. In the inside pocket of his jacket,
centimetres from his heart, he could feel the shape of the pair of rings he had bought in anticipation
of their being separated.

The weight of everything that had happened to them both in the last day was huge, but somehow
those three syllables could bear all of it. Together. He had decided months ago that it was the only
thing that mattered, and Yuuri agreed with him. Victor nudged at Yuuri's trouser leg with the toe of
his shoe and smiled back.

Steam from the engine streamed past the window, obscuring the flicker of lights as they travelled
south and east through the city and the buildings grew further apart. Yuuri had folded the itinerary
back into his coat pocket and was now checking over both of their passports and counting through
the cash that they'd pooled. Minako had yelled at Yuuri until he accepted a handful of notes from her
and Celestine, and Yuuri had for some reason had a small amount of French francs stashed away,
which should tide them over in Calais until they could find somewhere to change their money.

Victor let him reassure himself with double-checking, half his attention still on the dark English
suburbs rolling past the window. He'd lived in London for nearly two years but barely left the city
itself, and this was probably his last chance to see anything of the country. Somewhere behind them
his former comrades would be making plans, Popovich no doubt setting his agents in search of a
Japanese man in the intelligence services, but he and Yuuri were slipping away into the night
together, out of the clutches of history at last.

The thought had first come to him the day he decided to defect, and here was the reality. They had
lived their lives as synecdoches, lonely men bearing whole nations on their backs, but now all that
was left to carry were a few suitcases of their belongings and the dream they shared between them.
Moonlight flickered against the window as the train passed under an arbour of trees.

It was several hours and many tiny, dark rural stations later when the train pulled into Dover in the
small hours of the morning. They alighted with their suitcases and wandered out of the station into the town. It seemed even more war-ravaged than London, the husks of buildings still dotted amongst the whole ones and the moon picking out the shape of a hulking castle on a hill to the north, like some time-worn sentinel. Down at the docks they found an all-night café and spent the rest of the night smoking and drinking awful coffee and watching the boats in the harbour slowly rise on the tide.

Yuuri kept a very tight lid on it, but Victor could feel the agitation radiating off him as they bought their ferry tickets and headed for the small queue for passport control.

"Do you need another cigarette?" he asked quietly.

"I need us to be on the fucking boat already," Yuuri said out of the side of his mouth. "This is an island, Victor. There's only so many ways to get off it."

"Well if we fuck this up let's steal a dinghy and row for it."

Yuuri snorted with nervous laughter and Victor patted him on the back, then stepped forward to present the fake Polish passport under which he'd entered the country in 1947. The gentleman in the booth barely gave it a glance before waving him on into the waiting area.

Once they'd stowed their luggage Yuuri tugged at the elbow of Victor's coat sleeve and led him out from the passenger lounge and onto the deck of the ferry. There were only a few other foot passengers, and a handful more going by car, and no-one else seemed to want to brave either the early morning wind or the steam already starting to pour from the ship's stacks, so they had the outside entirely to themselves.

They ended up standing at the stern railing, looking back over the slowly awakening town, Yuuri sheltering his lighter with a hand so they could both dip their cigarettes into the flame. Victor exhaled smoke with a sigh as the ferry gave out an almighty groan and began to pull away from the dock. He could feel the exhaustion of a long day and a night without sleep beginning to creep up on him, but for now the cool air kept it at bay.

"I'm going to miss it," Yuuri said, leaning forward onto the railing and taking a slow, contemplative drag. "I didn't ever really want to be British. I just wanted to do what was right, and they wanted far too much from me because of it. But I'm going to miss it all the same."

"Yeah," Victor said. There was something about the way the morning light and shadow played across Yuuri's face that made his heart ache, and as he leaned down on the railing beside him he felt the rings shift in his jacket pocket again and thought suddenly of the inscription that ran around the inside of one of them. Yes. This was the time. As the ferry drew further away from land he could see the famous white cliffs stretching away in either direction, the rising sun painting them in all the colours of fire. There was a flock of gulls following in the wake of the ship, and at any other time their high, wheeling calls might have reminded him of Leningrad. But this was a moment all of its own.

When they'd both finished their cigarettes Yuuri stood up and started to move away from the railing, but Victor caught him by the arm.

"Wait, Yuuri," he said. "A few months ago, when we were thinking that I would have to move out of the flat for a while, I bought something for you to have as a memento when we did. For both of us to have, actually. So I think it's time to give it to you now."

Yuuri frowned curiously as Victor unbuttoned his coat and then reached into the inside pocket of his
jacket. The almost-pair of rings were warm where they'd sat against his body for hours. He took Yuuri's hand and pressed one into his palm, and Yuuri looked down at it, then back up into Victor's face, with eyes so wide and dark and beautiful that Victor knew he could get lost in them and never, ever want to be found.

"It's got an inscription," Yuuri said quietly, picking up the ring very carefully.

"Yes, it came like that when I bought it." He had wondered since, from time to time, about the original owner of the ring, about the circumstances that had led to it being in that pawn shop window on the day that Victor would pass by. Fate was something Victor preferred to defy than follow, but it had been briefly kind to him.

Yuuri held the ring up, the English coastline framed inside it as he read aloud, "'Tomorrow, when the world is free'. It's from that song."

"Well, the setting seemed appropriate."

Yuuri looked at him again, deep and serious, and then he stepped in and made the gap between them almost too close for a public space. "Victor, if this is a question… the answer is yes. Yes, every day. For the rest of my life."

Victor felt his heart lift on the sea wind and soar up and up, into the sky on wide, unbroken wings. "I- it was a question," he said, "but it was my answer too. Not just to ask if you would. But to say that I do." He held his own ring close against his palm and reached out to take Yuuri's from him, then took hold of his right hand and slid the ring into its rightful place on his finger. "I do," he said again. "For every tomorrow. Until the world ends."

He could see the emotion welling over in Yuuri's eyes as he copied Victor's actions, taking the ring from his hand and sliding it onto his finger. It was a little tight, and might need adjusting, but the subtle weight of it against his skin was the best thing he had ever felt in his life. Yuuri squeezed his hand slightly before letting go.

"As I understand it," Victor said, "at this point we're supposed to kiss."

Yuuri smiled, and turned back towards the great cliffs of Dover growing smaller and smaller behind them. He took his hat off, the wind immediately whipping through his hair, and raised his right hand against the horizon. The sunlight flashed on the metal of his ring.

"Let's go to the bow. Kiss me when we can see France."

The trouble with making a romantic escape under the cover of darkness was that eventually the lack of sleep would catch up with you, and do it hard. Yuuri felt groggy and more than a little nauseous as he dragged himself and two of their suitcases down onto the platform at the Paris Gare du Nord. It was just past noon, and hours after their meagre breakfast in Calais he was ravenously hungry, but he wasn't sure he would actually be able to keep down anything he ate.

"Oh god," Victor said behind him, sounding as terrible as Yuuri felt. "I think I might have forgotten how to speak French."

Yuuri could sympathise. Even after speaking little besides English for five years he knew he could still switch to Japanese or German at the drop of a hat, but while he could more-or-less understand the rapid conversations that had surrounded them since they had disembarked the ferry at Calais, summoning the right vocabulary from his own mind and getting it out of his mouth was another thing entirely. Changing countries was not a good thing to do when sleep-deprived.
"We need to find a telephone," he said as they came off the platform and onto the concourse. There were sooty-feathered pigeons flitting amongst the crowds, tinny announcements of arrivals and departures ringing to the metal rafters overhead. They were carried along aimlessly in the throng of other travellers until they neared the ticket office, and Victor patted his shoulder and pointed to a row of wooden phone booths.

"So who is this Mr Lutz anyway?" Victor asked, as Yuuri rooted in his pockets for enough centimes.

"I think the better question is who isn't he. When I met him during the war he was a spy and a people-smuggler, but apparently that was just a side gig to being a figure skater and now a two-time Olympic silver medallist. His father is a Swiss diplomat who used to work for the League of Nations, so I think he has some fingers in that pie too."

"And here I am all red-eyed and unshaven," Victor said sadly as Yuuri slipped into the booth and pushed some coins into the slot before dialling the number Minako had given him.

"Bonjour," he said to the receptionist at Christophe's hotel, "ah, je voudrais parler à Monsieur Giacometti. Votre client? Je m'appelle Monsieur Merle." Why did French have to have so many complicated 'r' sounds? It should stop having them until Yuuri had had some sleep, or at least another few cups of coffee. He drummed his fingers on the shelf inside the booth as the receptionist took her time connecting him.

"Bonjour Monsieur Merle," came an old familiar voice at last. "Ça fait longtemps."

"Christophe, you speak English don't you? Oder wir können Deutsch sprechen?"

"English is... bearable. I take it you've arrived in Paris, then."

"Yes, we're at the Gare du Nord."

"'We'?" Christophe sounded surprised. "I didn't realise this was going to be a ménage. How exciting. Well if you're too tired to speak French then I suppose I had better come and get you. Wait for me at the entrance to the metro."

Christophe hardly seemed any older at all when he came up the stairs into the main station, wearing the same pince-nez and tailored grey wool coat as he had years before in Switzerland. He seized Yuuri by the shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks and then turned to Victor.

"You can have a kiss too if you like, but I think we should at least be introduced first."

Victor tipped his hat. "Victor Nikiforov. You must be Mr Lutz."

"Christophe, please. I loathe that codename. You do a double jump once and nobody wants to talk about anything else ever again. And Victor, hmm?" He turned back towards Yuuri. "So this is the lucky gentleman you were always talking about in your sleep." Yuuri blushed, but Victor's eyes sparkled with delight.

"So I'll ask you what I asked Arabesque," Christophe said. "What on earth did you do now, Mr Katsuki? Last I heard you were practically the toast of London, but now you're fleeing the country?"

"It's my fault," Victor cut in swiftly. "I'm being pursued by my former MGB colleagues for treason against the Soviet Union, and they know Yuuri's identity too, so it was no longer safe for either of us to remain in Britain."

Christophe looked at him for a long moment as if anticipating a punchline, then looked back at
Yuuri, who sighed.

"He's not joking."

"Well," Christophe said with only the slightest roll of his eyes, "my skills were mostly geared for evading Germans, but I think I can handle Russians too. I've reserved a room for you at the Chopin- don't worry, they'll pretend not to notice you're sharing- so once you've dropped off your luggage and freshened up we can see about making you both look a little different. My ice exhibition is over but I've still got some business in Paris for the next few days, so you'll need to blend in."

It was a few hours and a lot of coffee later that Yuuri found himself seated in the window of a Parisian barbershop, watching as Christophe and the moustachioed barber held an animated conversation about Victor's hair. Yuuri's was short enough that there wasn't much to be done to change it beyond styling it differently, but Victor's long hair, even tied back in its usual bun and hidden under his hat, was something any Soviet agents in France would surely know to look out for. It would be strange to see him with short hair again, like he'd had when they met for the very first time and Yuuri had thought him only another Nazi to be avoided as much as possible.

"Yuuri."

He blinked at the sound of his name, and got up from the seat by the window to come over to where Victor was beckoning him from the barber's chair. Christophe and the barber continued, apparently unheeding, as Yuuri crouched down next to him. Victor smiled.

"When I've actually had some sleep I'll probably remember properly but… there's a story about a man who had unnatural strength because his hair was long, but his lover cut it off and he became an ordinary man again. Do you know it?"

"I've never heard of it."

"Mmm. Maybe it was a novel you haven't read. But anyway, I was just thinking about it. It must have been a relief. To let go of a burden like that, for someone you love. When I was a young man I thought there wasn't anything I could aspire to more than making my mark on history- it was why I left university to enlist in the army, why I leapt at the chance to join the intelligence service. Now I know there's much bigger things to aim for." He pressed his hand to Yuuri's face, warm skin with a hint of metal. "Thank you for that. For everything."

Before Yuuri could respond the barber was shooing him and Christophe both away, reaching for his comb and a pair of scissors. Victor turned to face the mirror in front of him and closed his eyes, and his silvery-blond hair began to fall to the floor piece by piece.

They passed three days in Paris in relative peace. French came to them both more easily with rest, aided by the fact that most people refused to speak to them in any other language. The weekend slid into Monday and neither MI6 officers nor Soviet agents came to drag them back across the Channel. They walked along the Seine, took shelter from the weather in covered streets, steadfastly ignored the newspapers, and at night Yuuri ran his hands through Victor's freshly-cut hair and kissed him absolutely everywhere. In the hazy light of the evenings, tinged with the cold of the oncoming autumn, it seemed as if the city existed in another world entirely.

It was an illusion that couldn't last.

"If you keep touching it so much it'll start to fall out," Victor said, but still tilted his head into Yuuri's hand. His hair was cropped short all the way around the back and sides and left longer on the top in a way clearly intended to be styled up into a coif, but that allowed it to fall forward loosely into his
eyes. They were lingering in bed late into their fourth morning in Paris, the pull of hunger not yet strong enough to draw them out of the cozy warmth of one another's embrace.

"It's not me that's doing that," Yuuri said with a smile. "Don't you think it's getting a little thinner on its own?"

"How dare you." Victor's face crumpled melodramatically. "I've never been so insulted. I think you should apologise at once. Thoroughly."

Yuuri leaned in to press a soft kiss to Victor's throat, just below his jaw. "Just how thoroughly are we talking?"

Before Victor could respond there was a knock at the door, and they both groaned.

"Ignore it," Yuuri said, but the knock came again, more insistently, and Victor clambered out of bed with a sigh, pulling on a pair of trousers before ambling over to the door. As soon as he opened it, Christophe pushed his way inside, fully dressed and with his face dark and troubled.

"I'm sorry to disturb your lovely morning, gentlemen," he said in clipped, strained French, as Yuuri sat up and pulled the sheets and blankets up around him, "but there are some distinctly shifty looking men in the lobby. Speaking in Russian."

"Is there another way out of the hotel?" Victor asked, slotting bullets into the magazine of his pistol as he sat in a hard chair by the door. Yuuri was still frantically packing up their things, only half-dressed. The Hotel Chopin was tucked into a corner of one of Paris's many covered shopping streets, which had seemed quaint and romantic when they arrived and now seemed like the worst idea ever.

"I imagine there's a staff entrance, but I've no idea where," Christophe said. He was leaning against the wall in a manner that looked extremely nonchalant, but Victor could see the hints of tension in his body, athlete's muscles coiled and ready to spring. "I suppose we could corner a maid or a bellboy and ask, but then we'd probably have to explain that their lobby is full of Soviet agents and I have a feeling that might cause a scene."

"Who's getting into a shootout, Monsieur Soldier?" Christophe raised his eyebrows. "Do you know how many people I walked right under the noses of the Gestapo and out of Germany, without ever firing a shot?"

"So your plan is that we just walk past them?" Victor turned around in an attempt to share an incredulous glance with Yuuri, but he was busy tying his tie.

"Surely you know as well as I do that in our business there's no substitute for sheer bravado. I'll go down and check us all out, then I'll come back up to get you and we all walk out as if nothing at all is the matter and we're all meant to be here. Then we very calmly proceed to the Gare de l'Est and very calmly buy some tickets and very, very calmly get the fuck out of here and onto the next train heading for Geneva."

"And what if they very calmly follow us?"

"If there was ever a transport network built for losing a tail, it's the Paris metro." He stood up from the wall and came over to pat Victor on the shoulder. "The biggest obstacle right now is any of us losing our cool. Have a little faith in me, please. If I got Monsieur Katsuki there out of Nazi Germany, I think I can get us all out of France."
Victor turned around again to look at Yuuri, who was now dressed in everything but his jacket and was loading the chambers of his own revolver. He glanced up, eyes serious behind his glasses. "I trust him, Victor. Christophe knows what he's doing."

Victor sighed. "Okay."

"There we go." Christophe patted Victor on the shoulder again and then straightened his jacket as he made for the door. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Think happy thoughts, gentlemen."

Once he was gone Victor holstered his pistol and went around to where Yuuri was sitting on the bed, and kissed the top of his head. "By this evening, we'll be in Switzerland," he said, as encouragingly as he could. "The start of our new life."

Yuuri tipped his head back and Victor kissed him properly this time, gentle and slow. "I'm nervous too, Victor," he said after, "but I did do this once before." He stood up and slipped his revolver into its shoulder holster before putting on his jacket and patting the spot where the gun sat, hidden. "There's plenty that I'm prepared to do again, for you." He reached for Victor's right hand and brought it to his lips, kissing his knuckle just over the ring. Victor felt warmth blossom in his chest despite the heavy tension in the room.

The door banged open and they both jumped, but it was only Christophe, this time wearing his coat and hat and carrying a suitcase of his own. "Ready to go?" he asked. "Since I made the clearly grievous error of not bringing a weapon on a routine business trip, you two take one suitcase each and keep your shooting hands free. Not that you'll need them, because we're going to be absolutely fine, but… well, you know." He picked up the largest of Yuuri and Victor's three cases and gestured for them to follow suit.

He led them down the staircase in single file, Victor bringing up the rear. Even before they descended the last flight into the lobby Victor could hear two hushed voices speaking in Russian; he caught the word 'Japanese' and leaned forward to whisper in Yuuri's ear.

"Pull your hat down low. Don't let them see your face."

The lobby was small, only a few feet between the staircase and the front door. They were so close. Victor kept his eyes firmly trained on Yuuri's back, resisting the horrible urge to turn and look at the two men seated opposite the reception desk. Christophe was at the door. A little further and they'd be safely away. Just a little further-

"Nikiforov!" barked a voice behind him. "Ostanovis', psina ty predatel'skaya!"

"Time to go!" Christophe yelled, and kicked the hotel door open, careering out into the passageway, Yuuri hot on his heels. Victor pulled his gun out of its holster as he followed behind them, glancing back over his shoulder. The morning crowd was giving them a little cover, but in the distance he could still see two dark-coated men in pursuit, shoving through groups of shoppers who recoiled at the sight of two armed and angry-looking men in their midst.

They burst out onto a back street and Christophe immediately started jostling the door handles of parked cars. "No time for the fucking metro," he said, "let's just hope that some idiot- thank god." He yanked open the driver-side and rear passenger doors of a sleek little vehicle, threw the suitcases into the back, and then produced what looked like a very complicated folding knife from his coat pocket. "Think you can give me some cover while I get the engine going?" he asked, already slipping into the drivers' seat.

"I've got you," Victor said, stowing his own suitcase away before crouching down on the pavement
facing back the way they'd come, cocking his pistol. "Get in the car, Yuuri."

"Are you joking?" Yuuri had gone around to the other side of the car after shoving his suitcase into the back, but apparently only to to use it for cover, his revolver in both hands as he leaned over the roof. Before Victor could argue there was a great clatter and their two pursuers emerged onto the street too, looking around frantically. Victor saw their faces change as the two men spotted them, but a split second later he heard the crack of a gun firing and one of the mens' hats soared clean off his head. Both of them ducked back into the passage.

"You're supposed to aim lower than that," Victor called, trying not to sound too impressed, then ducked instinctively as a bullet whistled over the top of the car. He aimed towards the passage entrance and when one of the Russian agents reemerged he fired once, twice, and was rewarded with a muffled cry of pain.

"If I wanted critique I'd have asked for it!" Yuuri replied tersely.

A bullet whizzed into the tyre of the next car along and it started to slowly bleed air, hissing loudly. Any minute now they were sure to start to hear sirens in the distance, and if there was one thing that would make this situation infinitely worse it would be the police getting involved. He saw movement at the entranceway and shot again, but it was a a feint, and before he could get another shot off one of the men stepped out properly and fired, and this time he heard Yuuri yelp with pain and drop down behind the car.

In that moment it seemed to Victor like everything in the world slowed to a crawl. He felt his muscles suddenly flood with energy, time unspooling around him as he stood up in a single fluid motion and fired. Once, the man staggered backwards. Twice, he dropped to his knees, something red and wet spilling out onto the pavement. Three times, and then there was a sudden roaring in his ears as the car behind him spluttered into life. Reality burst back in with a cold flush of exhaustion and the sound of Christophe yelling his name, and he stumbled into the back seat and then they were pulling away from the kerb. Yuuri was in the front seat, clutching his left arm, and Christophe was hunched over the wheel.

"Yuuri," Victor cried, leaning forward, "Yuuri, did he hurt you, is it bad, darling-"

"I'm fine," he said, sounding distinctly not fine. "I think the bullet only grazed me. It just really fucking hurts."

"Yes, well, it's supposed to," Victor said stupidly, and Yuuri glared at him over the seat. "Here," he said more helpfully, pulling a clean handkerchief from his trouser pocket, "you need to put pressure on it, and keep it elevated. When we can stop somewhere we'll use my tie as a tourniquet."

"I don't suppose either of you brought a map?" Christophe asked pleasantly, making an extremely hard right turn that almost had Victor tumbling on top of all their luggage.

"Are you telling me you don't know where we're going?" Yuuri hissed.

"What do I look like, a Frenchman? Only idiots drive in Paris."

"Can't you just follow the street signs?" Victor asked desperately.

"Oh, Yes, good idea." Christophe glanced back over his shoulder with a slightly mad grin. "You should consider doing this for a living, Monsieur Nikiforov."

They ditched the car in a back street near the Gare de l'Est, Victor's now completely blood-soaked handkerchief abandoned in the front seat. Yuuri had a shallow wound that ran horizontally just
above his elbow, the blood and the bullet damage both wrecking his expensive coat and jacket, but it
didn't look deep enough to need stitches and once Christophe had cleaned it out with brandy from his
hip flask they managed to jury-rig a tourniquet and dressing out of handkerchiefs and ties.

"You don't need to fuss over me," Yuuri said, as they waited in a secluded corner with the suitcases
while Christophe went to buy their tickets. "I told you, I'm fine."

"Who here has been shot before? That's right, me and not you. We should see about getting you a
hot cup of tea once we're on the train, it's good for shock and you lost quite a bit of blood, you need
your fluids." Victor took Yuuri's right hand and squeezed it, running his thumb over the gold ring.
"Let me fuss a little. It's my job now- the only one I've still got."

Yuuri looked down at the floor, and then up again into Victor's eyes. "You killed him. The man who
shot me."

"I did." He'd got his share of kills during the Battle of Berlin, and a few more on the long way home
to Russia, but he'd never had quite this same visceral sense of the rightness of his actions even when
the men he was killing were Nazis. It was, he supposed, the difference between killing for one's
country, and killing for love.

"Good." There was no equivocation in Yuuri's face, a little too pale but handsome as ever. Victor
wanted terribly to kiss him. He would do it again, would run down all the strange and twisting
corridors of his life over and over, gladly, just to be standing here with the man he loved on the brink
of something almost like freedom. He glanced around them and was leaning in to go ahead and kiss
him anyway when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Now don't be alarmed, my amorous friends," Christophe said, handing out their tickets, "but there is
the tiniest chance that I may have overheard another group of gentlemen speaking in Russian near
the ticket office."

"The vaguer you make it the more alarming it is," Yuuri said grumpily. Being shot really did not
agree with him. But Christophe only gave him a winning smile and started to pick up the suitcases.

"It's that kind of optimistic spirit that will surely get us safely out of here, Monsieur Katsuki. Come
along now, international departures are this way."

Victor couldn't help glancing around as they made their way across the wide open station concourse.
There was, of course, no-one with a giant sign over his head that said 'MGB agent', but after
everything that had already happened to them that morning almost everyone looked potentially
dangerous to him. Any overcoat could be concealing a gun, any hat pulled low could be hiding the
intent to kill. Yuuri's coat sleeve still gaped open messily over his gunshot wound, and it was sure to
draw the eye of anyone who glanced their way.

"All passengers for Dijon and Geneva, train now boarding at platform twenty-four," called a station
guard ahead of them. "Platform twenty-four for the 11:05 service to Geneva via Dijon!" Christophe
made a smooth turn towards the platform in question.

"Nikiforov!"

He tensed up, still walking forward. The station was crowded. Surely they wouldn't- couldn't- do
anything here. Victor could see two uniformed police officers further down the concourse, batons at
their belts.

"Nikiforov! Ostanovis!"
He didn't turn around. He didn't look back. He was done, completely and utterly done, with obeying their orders. Christophe was at the head of the platform now, their south-eastward-bound train curving down the track towards the bright sunlight at the far end of the station. Victor could hear the sounds of a scuffle behind him, sharp words in French. He kept walking. Christophe stopped by one of the open carriage doors and stepped up into it, glancing back over their heads and smiling.

"I think your friends have found themselves in a spot of trouble, Monsieur Nikiforov."

Yuuri's eyes flashed with something bright and amused as he followed Christophe onto the train, but Victor didn't give a single backwards glance before pulling the carriage door closed behind him with a heavy slam.

They were going home.

Chapter End Notes

*There'll be love and laughter*
*And peace ever after*
*Tomorrow*
*When the world is free*
Bern

Chapter Summary

Between the Jura and the Alps, in an old medieval city straddling a loop in the Aare River, a story ends- and begins.

Chapter Notes

Before you read the chapter, you should go and check out the gorgeous fanart drawingpamore drew of Yuuri and Victor swing dancing from chapter five.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*J'arrive tout couvert encore de rosée*  
*Que le vent du matin vient glacer à mon front.*  
*Souffrez que ma fatigue à vos pieds reposée*  
*Rêve des chers instants qui la délasseront.*

*Sur votre jeune sein laissez rouler ma tête*  
*Toute sonore encor de vos derniers baisers*  
*Laissez-la s'apaiser de la bonne tempête*  
*Et que je dorme un peu puisque vous reposez.*

- Paul Verlaine, "Green", from *Romances sans paroles*

"Yuuri!" Victor paused in the doorway to shake out his umbrella a second time before stepping into the flat and closing the front door behind him. "Yuuri, I found a grocer who speaks French!"

Yuuri came wandering out of the kitchen. He was still in that loose woollen jumper, hair mussed and sticking up a little at the back, and he smiled brightly as he came over to peer into the large shopping basket that Victor had over his arm.

"What did you manage to get?"

"Herbs! I got dried bay leaves and dill, as well as some vinegar, so I'm finally going to make you some borsch. And I got some olive oil, and rice, and a little chocolate." He handed Yuuri a paper bag. "Also I went to the bakers and got another loaf of that zopf bread you liked."

"You're sweet." Yuuri went up on his toes, leaning over the basket to kiss him. "Let me take this into the kitchen and put the kettle on."

Victor propped his umbrella up by the door to dry and hung his damp coat and hat on the coat-stand. Their flat was still strangely empty-feeling, furnished only with the very basics, the rooms echoing with their footsteps and the cupboards mostly bare.

It was February 1950, the start of their fifth week in Bern. After several months in Geneva as guests...
of the Giacomettis, finding legal and somewhat less-than-legal ways to establish themselves as Swiss residents, they had made their new start official here. The flat was in the old medieval centre, on the top floor of a worn-grey sandstone building with a view across the river to where the city spread out into the distance, and it was far smaller than their old place in London, but it was home. That was more than enough.

In the little kitchen Yuuri had put the kettle on the stovetop to boil and was unpacking the shopping from the basket. Victor went over to the cupboards and took out their two mugs, and set them out along with the teabags and a spoon. Yuuri walked past him and pressed a hand to the small of his back as he leaned up to put the sack of rice away, and Victor turned so the hand at his back became an arm around his waist. Yuuri smiled up at him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Victor replied. "Are you having a good morning?"

"It's pretty good at the moment." Yuuri wrapped his other arm around Victor, encircling him. "The view's nice."

"Oh, I'm 'nice'. Such eloquent compliments. It's a wonder half the men in the city aren't swooning at your feet already."

"Just wait until I get a handle on the language."

"You're right, I'll have to invest in a stout stick to beat off your suitors with." He leaned down to kiss Yuuri, slow and soft, until the kettle started to whistle.

The only chairs in the flat were the two at the kitchen table, so they took their tea into the bedroom and sat up against the headboard. It was still sleeting outside, susurrant on the roof over their heads and sliding down the little window, and even with borrowed heat from their neighbours below it was chilly. Yuuri held his tea close against his chest for warmth.

"Once we start working we definitely need to buy bicycles," he said. "Then we won't be stuck with just the shops in the city centre."

"We'll need a bookcase, too, if Minako's going to ship our books over. And enough things for the spare bedroom that we can pretend one of us sleeps there."

"Mmm. And some other furniture for the sitting room. We can't just sit on the bed forever."

"I don't see why not." Victor took a sip to test the temperature of his tea. "It makes it so much easier for me to have my way with you."

"True." Yuuri smiled over the top of his mug, the steam from it fogging on his glasses. "Although if we never buy a sofa I'll probably be dead before I ever get to finish *The Brothers Karamazov*."

"But you have your own Alyosha right here." Victor set his mug down on the floor and reached down to the end of the bed to pull up the blanket over their sock feet. "That was my codename. Not because of that book, though; it's a pretty common name."

Yuuri looked at him for a long moment before reaching out to take his hand. "I think I like 'Victor' better," he said, his thumb moving over Victor's ring. "My Victor."

"You know in Russia we- they usually just use diminutives, when they know someone well anyway. Like Alyosha; it's actually a diminutive for Alexei. It's sort of like a nickname." He picked his tea
back up. "And then there's more affectionate diminutives too, for children or family. Or lovers."

"What are the ones people used for you?" Yuuri shifted, leaning in closer. "You've never asked me
to call you anything but Victor."

Victor looked over at him, then down to their joined hands on the mattress. "I thought it might be
uncomfortable for you. I know names and titles are a complicated thing in Japan, and everyone's Mr
Surname in Britain. And honestly when you called me 'Victor' in Germany it was about as intimate
as anything could get."

"I did regret telling you to call me just plain 'Yuuri', to begin with. It felt like you were propositioning
me every time we spoke."

"To be fair, I was."

Yuuri chuckled. "That's true. But if you wanted me to… I might only be able to speak as much
Russian as you can Japanese, but if it's something you miss from back home, I'd like to give that to
you."

"People I was friendly with
would call me Vitya. That's the basic diminutive." He closed his eyes and let himself remember, let
the pain come and pass through him, breathing into it. "And my parents always called me Vityusha.
That's more affectionate. More personal. You- you can use either. But only if you want to."

Yuuri let go of his hand then, but it was only to lift his arm up and situate himself under it, close
against Victor's side. "It might take me a little while to get used to, but I'll try. Vityusha." He said the
name like something he was turning over in his mouth, like the first word of a new language, and the
sound of it felt soft and nostalgic and yet somehow entirely different to anything Victor had heard
before.

"I'd actually like to learn some Japanese too," he said, tipping his head so it rested on top of Yuuri's.
"I mean, first we both need to learn how to speak Bernese German. But after that. I only know
European languages, so it would be interesting. And, you know, if we ever… if you ever felt like
you wanted to go home, I wouldn't seem like a complete idiot there, in front of your family."

Yuuri was quiet then, but his breathing was a little harder, audible over the sound of the weather.
Victor turned and breathed in the soapy smell of his hair.

"It was just a thought. If you'd rather I didn't, maybe I'll learn Arabic or something. I've always liked
how their alphabet looks."

"I can't tell you what languages you can and can't learn. It's just… Japan. You
know I can't go back, after what I did. And I'm a terrible son anyway, your Japanese would be the
least of our problems."

"I know that's how you feel. But Yuuri… you think you're a terrible son. You don't know what they
think. And if you don't at least try to find out…" He trailed off and took a long, fortifying drink of
tea. "I would give almost anything to see to my parents one more time. To hear their voices, to talk to
them, to have one more letter in my mother's handwriting. I don't want you to have to live with that
too. Not if you still have a chance."

"I'll think about it," Yuuri said noncommittally, which was probably the best that could be hoped for.
"There's no need to rush."
He felt Yuuri's head shift and then Yuuri was reaching for him and kissing him, easy and tender and
tasting of hot, black tea and home. "You're right," he said. "We've got time."

Victor was having a conversation that he couldn't quite understand, and it was driving Yuuri to
distraction. Fränzi had stopped by his desk and their conversation had something to do with bicycles,
and possibly also dogs, but for every word that was familiar there were four or five others that Yuuri
had to concentrate hard to decipher, and by the time he had they'd long since moved on.

These jobs were the reason they'd come to Bern, rather than staying in French-speaking Geneva or
moving to the more cosmopolitan Zürich; Rüdi Scherer was a friend of Christophe's from his
mysterious Circle club, and needed translators to work in his up-and-coming literary publishing
house based in the federal capital. It had seemed perfect. But while they weren't the only immigrants
in the office, the language of everyday conversation was the same as anywhere else in the city.

Yuuri was fluent in German. He had studied German at one of the best universities in the world, for
goodness' sake. But his careful practicing, the neatly-drawn conjugation tables and slavish
vocabulary lists and rote memorisation with which he'd subdued English and French too, and that he
had begun to bring to bear on Korean and Cantonese, were all completely useless in the face of the
Bernese dialect, which nobody seemed to bother to write down at all.

By contrast Victor had, predictably, leapt into it head first. He was still a long way from fluent-
Fränzi's frequent peals of laughter and slower, friendly corrections were proof enough of that- but he
was already soaking up new words and pronunciations like a sponge, augmenting the German of his
childhood with natural ease. Yuuri could have sworn he was starting to pick up an accent too.

He ought to be happy that Victor was settling in so well, that at least one of them was increasingly
capable of holding everyday conversations without all the heavy sighing and reluctance that usually
accompanied trying to get a Swiss person to speak in High German, or the difficulty of finding
someone fluent in French. He was happy. But he couldn't help the fact that it only made him feel
more like a foreigner. When Victor was fluent there would be very little to distinguish him from any
other man born and bred here in between the mountain ranges, but Yuuri would always be an
outsider no matter how perfect his speech. It would always hold both of them back.

"Did you want to join us for lunch too, Yuuri?" Fränzi had stopped by his desk now, speaking to
him in her thickly accented French. "Hans and Susi and Anna are all coming. Victor says neither of
you have had fondue yet, and we have to fix that!"

"No thank you," he said, looking away from her and back down to the papers on his desk. "I'm in
the middle of this chapter. And cheese doesn't always agree with me." It took enough effort to turn
skills gained translating military orders and political diatribes to the task of re-expressing the gentle
Englishness of Lark Rise in German; he didn't need to go interrupting it with an hour or so of lagging
behind his new colleagues' conversations.

"Oh. Well, that's a shame." Everybody in Europe seemed to think it was just awful if you didn't care
for cheese. "Another time, perhaps?"

It was over dinner that evening- a thick vegetable stew, flavoured with smoky Swiss sausage- that
Victor said with clearly deliberate casualness, "I was thinking that perhaps we should try speaking
Bernese German at home too. Instead of French or English. It would help us both to practice."

"You might as well just speak to me in Russian," Yuuri said, chasing a bit of carrot around with his
spoon.
"I know it's hard, but you'll get the hang of it." Yuuri let out a muffled 'hmph' in response, and Victor laughed and reached for his hand. "You're not jealous that I'm better at it than you, are you darling?"

Yuuri snatched his hand away. "Don't be ridiculous," he snapped.

"Well good," Victor said, and the amusement in his voice had turned sour, "because it would be pretty ridiculous, given that you spent eight months learning Korean without even telling me."

"That was different."

"You're right; I'm trying to learn the local dialect so we can both have a better life here, whereas you were busy studying so you could leave!"

Yuuri dropped his spoon back into his bowl. "I was never going to leave you! I certainly wasn't going to go swanning around having conversations in front of you that you didn't understand and inviting you out places where everyone could just talk over you!"

Victor rested his forehead on one hand and sighed heavily, looking at Yuuri through his fingers. "Let me get this straight. You're angry that I'm trying to be friendly with our coworkers, and that I'm practicing the local language with them, and that it's easier for me, someone who grew up speaking German at home, to pick up a dialect of the language than it is for you, someone who learned it at school. Is that really it?"

Well when he put it like that it certainly sounded pathetic. Yuuri stood up from the table, his dinner still half uneaten. "I'm going out," he said. "I need some air."

He didn't feel any less stupid when he got outside, but his anger started to dissipate into the cool of the evening as he leaned against the pillar of the low sandstone archway and took his cigarettes out of his coat pocket. The cobbled street that they lived on was narrow, buildings rising high on both sides with a strip of muted, cloudy sky overhead, and when it was busy it often felt suffocating, but it was quiet and bearable then. To his left was the haphazard array of bicycles belonging to local residents, his and Victor's amongst them. He breathed in smoke and exhaled it upwards towards the lingering clouds.

This was supposed to be easy. They had abandoned all of their constricting responsibilities and duties, left the business of war and politics and death for a quiet, simple life together, and it was supposed to be blissful and wonderful and everything he'd wanted for years, ever since Victor had hurtled through all his defences and straight into his heart. But now they had nothing serious left to worry about they were just fighting about something ridiculous.

Yuuri turned his hand to and fro, smoke trailing from his cigarette, and watched the fading sunlight gleam over the surface of his ring. It still made his heart flutter to look at it, to remember that morning on the ferry and the way the dawn light had played over Victor's face as he slid it onto Yuuri's finger, all seriousness and devotion at once. They'd promised each other tomorrow, every tomorrow, and apparently that meant 'tomorrow, when your lover is being incredibly annoying' as much as any grandiose declarations about peace and freedom.

Behind him he heard the door open and close again softly, and then Victor came around the archway, an unlit cigarette already between his fingers. He didn't look at Yuuri, but leaned up against the wall about a metre or so away and got his lighter out. Yuuri watched him quietly out of the corner of his eye as he lit the cigarette and tipped his head back, his throat a beautiful, pale curve. It was always easier to be angry at Victor when Yuuri didn't have to look at him, didn't have to struggle not to get lost in how utterly, impossibly handsome he was. The most delicate lines had started to develop at the corners of his sea-blue eyes, and they only made him look more striking,
more distinguished.

Yuuri dropped the end of his cigarette on the pavement and snuffed it out with his shoe. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was being an idiot." Victor didn't say anything, but he glanced over and when their eyes met he offered a tentative little smile, so Yuuri pushed on. "I think I'm just... I keep waiting for something bad to happen. I keep expecting that someone will find us, that someone will try to take you away from me again, but every day is just normal so I've got all this stuff building up in my head and I feel like it's going to explode."

Victor stuck out his bottom lip and exhaled a thin plume of smoke. "What does me learning the language make you think will happen?" he asked, his voice quiet and controlled. Yuuri looked down at his feet.

"That you'll fit in properly here, when I never can." He scraped his toe back and forth on the pavement. "That eventually you'll get tired of me holding you back."

"Okay." Victor was quiet for another few moments before he spoke again. "I need you to tell me these things, Yuuri. I know it's hard, but it's worse when I have no idea why you're acting the way you are. Because I always seem to assume the worst too." He took a drag on his cigarette and made a strained little laughing noise around it. "All I could think was that you'd finally realised that I ruined your life, and maybe you were starting to plan ways you could go back to England."

"Victor..." Yuuri straightened and closed the distance between them, glancing up and down the street instinctively before taking his hand. "I was so unhappy in England without you. I was so unhappy in my entire life before I met you. You're everything to me."

"And you know I'll never fit anywhere like I do with you, no matter what," Victor said, turning to face him properly. "The people at the office, they're nice. I want to be friends with them- I want both of us to be friends with them- but as far as they're concerned we're just another two people who've washed up in Switzerland looking for work. They don't know what it means to steal secrets, to live undercover, to risk your freedom and your life because you have to do what's right. I talk to Fränzi about cycling and that cute, yappy little dog of Susi's; do you think I can ever tell her what it feels like to stand in the ruins of a Nazi death camp?" He squeezed Yuuri's hand gently before interlacing their fingers. "It doesn't matter what languages we speak. You're always the one who understands me. The only one."

"I'm sorry," Yuuri said again. "For all the things I've been bad at telling you. And for behaving like such an ass today. After everything we've been through, I didn't think being normal would be so difficult."

Victor laughed at that, a proper laugh. "I think maybe having stupid arguments about things that don't really matter is what normal people do all the time."

"I don't want to make a habit of it though. I don't like being angry at you, or upsetting you." Yuuri leaned in a little closer and added softly, "I love you, Vityusha."

Victor bit his lip, and then dropped his cigarette and took Yuuri's other hand. "Come back upstairs where I can kiss you," he said.

Inside the flat Victor pushed him up against the front door and they kissed as if it had been days, weeks, as if the press of their lips could fix everything. Yuuri looped his arms around Victor's neck and tasted the smoke and the cold in his mouth, felt Victor's familiar hands tracing patterns against his sides, and even if nothing else was at least this was still easy. Loving Victor was the simplest thing he'd ever done. It had always been everything else that came with it that was complicated.
Eventually Victor pulled back, face flushed and his lips already a little swollen. "I love you," he said, "but if I don't finish eating my dinner I might collapse from hunger before we get to do anything fun."

Yuuri leaned in for one final, lingering kiss before following him back into the kitchen. Victor tipped the contents of both of their bowls back into the saucepan, and lit the heat underneath it to warm the stew back up. Yuuri sat down at the table again and pulled over the notepad where they'd been making a short shopping list, suddenly seized with an urge that he knew he had to follow before it abandoned him. Victor watched him from over by the stove as he flipped to the next page and began to write.

"Do you want to know what it says?" he asked Victor much later, sitting up in bed together with the sheets still tangled around their bare legs. It was too early to sleep still, so once they'd worn themselves out he'd carried on writing while Victor read a novel.

"Only if you want to tell me."

Yuuri wet his lips. "Well like you said, I need to get better at telling you things."

Victor set his book down and shifted to lean against Yuuri's side; Yuuri put an arm around him and balanced the notepad on both of their thighs, running his finger down alongside the neat characters as he translated.

"Dear mother

I am sorry that this letter is not written in the way you might expect, or in the way that is most respectful to you. After all this time I thought any letter at all would be better than nothing. I don't know if Cousin Minako has written to tell you, but I am living in Switzerland now. I have put my new address at the end of this letter, as well as on the back of the envelope.

I don't know how much you know about what happened to me during the war, and about what I did, but you know that I went to live in London afterwards so I'm sure you can imagine well enough. I know that a great deal of suffering came to Japan, and some of it at least was because when the time came I chose my conscience, my heart, instead of following my obligations. I couldn't bear to see our country do such awful things, but I understand if you are disappointed, and if you no longer wish to have me for a son.

My life has been very strange indeed since I left for Berlin ten years ago, but I have been lucky enough that it is full of love now, of a kind I never even dreamed of. I know you were disappointed that I didn't wish to marry when I returned from England; I should be honest now and tell you the truth, that I will never marry, but that I am settled and happy in a different way, with another man. If I am still your son then perhaps one day I will bring him to meet you all.

If you do wish to write back to me, please tell me how you and father are doing, if Mari is well, how tall the Nishigoris' girls have grown. Tell me if Hasetsu is very changed now, or if it's still the same quiet, sleepy little place as always. Tell me if the Americans have treated you well, if life is better now years after the war. Please just tell me everything you can. I miss you, and I love you very much.

Yuuri

Yuuri
"You always find the best-looking strays, Christophe," said the man behind the table with a broad smile, glancing down at Victor and Yuuri's passports and the little coloured bit of card that Christophe had handed him before passing them back. "Even without a war on."

"It's my irrepressible charm, Daniel, you know that." Christophe stepped back to re-situate himself between Victor and Yuuri and took each of them by the arm. "Now come along, gentlemen, tonight you are debutantes and I must introduce you to everyone who matters."

The Theater am Neumarkt in Zürich seemed an unlikely venue for anyone to make a grand social debut, but when Christophe led them up the stairs and through the door into the ballroom Victor couldn't help but gasp. The room was decked out in shimmering fabric in shades of blue and silver, draped across the walls in a manner that imitated the shape of waves, with long tables around an area cleared for dancing and waiters carrying trays of drinks in amongst the coloured lights. By the wall in one corner was a group of muscular young men posing in sailor hats and swimming briefs to be photographed, and all around the room were men and a few women dressed in naval-related costumes of varying plausibility.

Victor turned to Christophe, who was shedding his coat to reveal a sailor suit that would be unlikely to meet the uniform regulations of any nation's military. "I didn't expect there to be women here," he said quietly. Christophe sniggered.

"I think you've just put me off communism for life, you must not ever have had any fun back in Russia. Those aren't women, my friend. Here at the Circle Summer Gala, a man can dress exactly as he likes." He pulled a sailor hat out of his coat pocket and, after straightening it out and considering it for a moment, put it on Yuuri's head with a decisive flourish. Yuuri jumped slightly and looked up at him, blinking owlishly. "Come on now, at least one of you should try to look the part."

While Christophe took all of their coats to the cloakroom, Victor moved closer to Yuuri and straightened the hat a little. "You look very cute," he said with a smile. "It suits you."

"I've had some very bad incidents with boats in my time," Yuuri said rather darkly, and then glanced down at Victor's hands. "But some good ones too."

"Well at least this country is landlocked. I bet this room is the closest Switzerland will ever get to having a navy."

"Don't you insult our noble lakes flotilla," Christophe said as he reappeared. "Follow me. I have to present you to Rolf, the high queen of all Swiss homosexuals."

Rolf turned out to be a short, balding man in his early fifties, who rolled his eyes when Christophe introduced him as royalty but offered a handshake and a gentle smile to both Victor and Yuuri. "Welcome, friends," he said, politely following Christophe's lead and speaking in High German, and gestured for them to sit down at his table. "It's always good to see new faces, and from so far afield too. I hope you're both in a position to subscribe, while you're here."

"Subscribe?" Yuuri repeated curiously.

"Oh, don't tell me Christophe let you think this was all parties and debauchery. The Circle is primarily a magazine; we've been publishing since 1942, with subscribers all over Europe and even some further afield. We have short stories, poetry, photographs, and it's very respectable content, of course- I mean, we have to satisfy the censors, but really our kind of people will never get anywhere if everyone else thinks we're just animals, that we have no culture and no morality." He looked them over again and his smile widened. "Oh, you wear rings! That's very nice, I like that."
"They're even more married than you and Fredi," Christophe said dryly. Rolf reached across the table to pat his hand.

"Now, now, no need to be jealous, I'm sure you'll find a nice young man to settle down with one day."

For a fraction of a second something deeply, terribly sad flickered across Christophe's face, but it vanished as quickly as it had appeared and he smiled roguishly. "Well, I've yet to examine the selection tonight," he said, getting back up from the table. "Be back in a little while."

When he had gone, Rolf turned back to Victor and Yuuri. "Anyway, as I was saying, if it's safe for you both professionally then we can get you a subscription set up while you're here in Zürich, and membership cards in time for the Autumn Ball. We have a little lending library in the office, and all the back issues if you want to read those too."

"Work won't be a problem," Victor said. "Do you know Rüdi, ah, from Bern?" This didn't seem like a surname sort of a place. "We both work for him, as translators."

Rolf's eyes lit up. "Well if you're gentlemen of a literary bent then so much the better. We publish in German and French at the moment, but I've had a lot of subscribers requesting we add an English section too so we're looking into that. As I said, we are very discerning in our content, but we do welcome new writers who show the right sort of attitude."

Victor wanted to enquire as to what exactly the right sort of attitude was, but was interrupted by the sound of a few opening notes on a piano, and turned around. On the little stage behind them a man in a very elaborate red silk dress and matching gloves, blond wig a little askew, was launching enthusiastically into a jaunty piece that sounded like ragtime. It didn't have quite the polish and verve of the Jamaican jazz band whose music they'd danced to in London, but it was bright and lively, and Victor could already hear Yuuri tapping a foot under the table.

He turned back and took his hand. "May I have this dance?"

They stepped out onto the floor together. Yuuri was wearing one of his old Saville Row suits, the one that didn't have an all-too-noticeable repair on the left sleeve of the jacket, and looked quite unbearably attractive in it, an image somehow only improved by the incongruity of the little white cap on his head.

"You'll need to tell Christophe he's not getting that hat back," he said, arm close around Yuuri's back as he led them in a simple foxtrot. Yuuri smiled and drummed his fingers thoughtfully on Victor's shoulder.

"Is this something that… interests you? I mean you spent all those years in the military…"

"What can I say, I saw Battleship Potemkin at a formative age." He dipped his head to murmur in Yuuri's ear. "All those brave, revolutionary men in uniform. It was very, uh, inspiring for a young boy."

"I'm sure it was," Yuuri said, and he sounded amused but there was a breathy little catch in his voice too. They were definitely keeping the hat.

There were other couples dancing all around them now, young and old, looking as if half the continent had turned out for the party. Over the music he swore he could even hear a man speaking English with an American accent. Yuuri followed him smoothly back and forth across the floor, his bright, delighted eyes never leaving Victor's face. The song ended and Victor was about to ask if he
wanted to dance again when Christophe swept up to them, followed by Rüdi who was wearing a white naval officer's coat and a matching peaked hat, and carrying a glass of champagne.

"Oh you boys look lovely tonight," he said in slurred French, patting Victor on the shoulder before beckoning them all over to sit down again as the next song began. "I told Christophe you know, I told him, you can't let me keep your foreign friends all to myself. To share is to love."

Christophe waved his hand demurely. "We'd barely arrived in Geneva when last year's Autumn Ball was on, and you know I don't like to haul myself all the way to Zürich at Christmastime. I'm sharing very nicely, thank you."

"Oh hush, there's no hauling involved when it's Zürich." Rüdi turned back towards Yuuri and Victor, the light catching the golden wedding band on his left hand. "Anna and I like to come up quite often, you know, and she's always very fond of nights when there's a Circle function on, since that means it's de facto ladies' night at the Barfüsser and she can have her pick of pretty girls in suits and ties." The arrangement between the two of them was so open as to hardly be a secret at all at work, although outside of the office marriage no doubt gave Rüdi's business ventures a useful veneer of respectability. "And besides, it's nice for all of us to come and have a bit of a party when the whole world is busy trying to drag itself to Hell."

Underneath the table Yuuri squeezed Victor's fingers briefly, before starting to ask Rüdi about the bar where he'd left his wife. Victor let his attention drift, watching a silvery streamer flutter to and fro overhead. War had broken out in Korea two weeks ago, and as much as he liked to tell himself that the shelter of Switzerland's permanent neutrality kept them safe, it ate at the edges of his mind anyway.

He'd told Yuuri to go there. It was in the midst of a panic, to be fair, but he'd still said it. And Yuuri had sat for months on the knowledge that the British wanted to send him. He had apologised, more than once now, for keeping his silence, and Victor couldn't hold it against him when he'd demonstrated more than clearly enough where his deepest loyalties lay, but the Great Patriotic War had left marks in his mind like scratches in an old record, turning his thoughts back and back again in discordant loops.

What if Yuuri had gone to Seoul, while Victor fled the country all alone, or while he happily handed himself over to MI6 and waited for Yuuri to return to him from a country sliding into war? What if Yuuri had been trapped there right now, with North Korean forces advancing, or had been taken prisoner before he had any chance to escape? What if they were doomed to have the world's turmoils always come between them, like barbed wire rolled out between their hearts?

Victor pulled the cigarette packet out of his trouser pocket, barely remembering to be polite and offer it around before lighting his own. He watched the embers flare out of the lighter flame, felt the first breath of smoke like a balm on his nerves. There was nothing to be afraid of. They'd passed months in Switzerland now without even the slightest sign of pursuit from either of their former nations, and had started to build the groundwork of a proper, lasting life together. This was as much a part of it as anything else, to come up on the train to this bright, international city and spend a pleasant evening in the company of men just like them. The Yuuri who worked for a publisher and loved to look out from the high bridges over the Aare would never have any reason to venture into a war zone. The Victor who did their grocery shopping on his bicycle and dodged the trams at the Zytglogge would never have to let him go again.

As he stubbed out the end of his cigarette in the ashtray the pianist began another tune, softer and slower with tones of longing woven through it, and he felt Yuuri's hand slip into his as he leaned close to speak into Victor's ear.
"Dance with me again?"

He'd dance all night. All summer. He nodded, and rose to his feet.

Yuuri was standing in the kitchen starting to flick through the day's post and listening to the kettle come up to the boil when he heard the front door open.

"Did you pick up the cigarettes?" he called.

"No, I didn't!" Victor sounded very excited about that for some reason. "Come out into the sitting room!"

Curiosity piqued, he set the letters down on the kitchen table and walked out of the room. In the sitting room Victor was assembling what could only be described as a nest beside the radiator, the blanket pulled off the back of the sofa and surrounded by cushions. He had his jacket tied around his body by the sleeves in some sort of makeshift sling.

"So I was riding along the road by the river," Victor said, still nesting, "to get to the tobacconists, like I planned, but when I stopped to let some children cross the road I heard this strange sort of crying noise down on the bank, so I got off to investigate and, well." He turned around, reached into the cocoon made by his jacket, and took out a little bundle of brown fur that whined and wriggled in his hands.

"You found a puppy," Yuuri said delightedly, reaching out for the dog instinctively. Victor placed it gently into his hands. Its eyes were open but its legs still seemed a little wobbly as it tried to stand up in his arms. He pulled it in close against his chest and stroked one floppy ear gently with a finger.

"She's female," Victor said, and his voice was strained as he added, "I found her in a cardboard box with a few other puppies who- who didn't make it, but she's a tough little one. I don't really know what you're supposed to feed them when they're that small, but I thought we could give her some milk and maybe something soft, like rice or scrambled egg?"

Yuuri nodded absently, still entirely enchanted with the little creature in his arms. Apparently giving up on the idea of standing, she had curled herself against his chest and started sucking on the tip of his finger, her tiny, blunt teeth against his skin. Victor moved in closer and gently stroked her side, and her paws twitched against the fabric of Yuuri's waistcoat.

"She's just perfect," he said. "I don't know how anyone could…"

"It doesn't matter," Yuuri said, feeling a sudden, fierce rush of protectiveness. "She's ours now."

"I mean we should check with the landlord just to make sure it's okay. And ask Rüdi about bringing her to the office, like Susi does with her terrier; we can't leave her here alone all day."

"But you've already thought of a name, haven't you?" Yuuri looked up into Victor's face, drinking in the soft, adoring expression that he was giving the dog. Victor smiled bashfully.

"My parents wouldn't let me get a puppy when I was a boy- my father said animals made him sneeze- but I had a little stuffed toy dog called Makkachin, who I couldn't get to sleep without. She's exactly the same colour."

Yuuri eased his finger out of the puppy's mouth and touched her gently on her little black nose. "Hello Makkachin," he said. She blinked and yawned at him. "I wonder what sort of dog you are."
"She's a good dog," Victor said emphatically. "I'm going to see what we have to feed her, she must be really hungry."

While he went into the kitchen Yuuri sat down carefully on the floor beside the radiator and the little makeshift dog bed that Victor had put together. Makkachin was still nestled against his chest, making occasional kneading motions with her front paws. She might be warmer if he tucked her up into the blanket, but the urge to hold her close, to shelter her with his body, was overwhelming. He could feel the rapid flutter of her tiny heart, the rise and fall of her breaths. She seemed almost too precious to hold in his hands, strange and otherworldly in her miniature perfection, something completely set apart from the world of war and bloodshed he'd plunged himself into a decade ago. He swallowed hard against a sudden lump in his throat.

"Victor's right," he murmured, "you are a good dog, aren't you?" Makkachin looked up at him again with sleepy brown eyes, and wagged her little tail twice, thumping against his chest.

A little while later Victor came back into the sitting room with a plate of scrambled eggs and a bowl of gently warmed milk. Yuuri placed Makkachin gently in his lap and watched as he started to feed her very carefully with a spoon.

"That's it," Victor murmured, "you eat up and get big and strong, little Makkachin. You'll always have plenty of food to eat now. And we'll need to start buying the paper regularly again, so you don't shit it all out again all over the flat and ruin the floors, won't we darling?"

Yuuri laughed behind his hand. "I don't think I threw Monday's away yet. Let me go and look for it."

He found the paper in the kitchen, and picked up the pile of post he'd left on the kitchen table too. Victor was still gently encouraging Makkachin to eat and drink, stroking her back and half-singing, half-humming something in Russian. Yuuri sat down beside him again to sort through the letters. There were a few that looked official and bill-like that he set aside, one from Zürich that most likely had something to do with the Circle, one festooned with English stamps with their names and address in Phichit's handwriting, and the last-

Makkachin, invigorated with dinner, let out a growly little yap, and it startled Yuuri enough to drop the letter. It fell onto the floor between him and Victor. The address was written in very deliberate, slightly clumsy letters, as if by a hand unused to the alphabet, and over the stamps was a postmark that read in Roman letters, 'Fukuoka, Japan'. For a few moments they both stared at it.

"Would it help if I opened it for you?" Victor asked eventually. "Just to get that part over with?"

"No," Yuuri said, forcing down a nauseating wave of shame to pick up the letter, "no, I can do it." He took a deep breath and tore open the envelope with his thumb, pulling out the single sheet of paper inside, and reached over with his other hand to stroke Makkachin's soft fur as he began to read the very familiar handwriting.

_Dear Yuuri_

_I hope that you, too, will forgive my informality. I am sending another, proper reply to follow this one, but after I read your letter I knew I had to put something in the post to you right away, no matter how short. There are very few days in my life that I would consider happier than today, the day we finally heard from you again. I wanted to tell you as soon as I could that it doesn't matter what you might have done, how you might choose to live, how far away you are from home. You are still our son;_
you will always be our son. We love you more than I have the words to say.

Please write again very soon, and tell us everything about Switzerland. I hope it is not too cold, that you are eating properly, that you are making friends and not hiding yourself away from everybody. I don't know how much it might cost or how difficult it might be for you to come and visit us, so that we can meet this person who has brought you so much love, but I hope it will be soon. Anyone who loves my son is welcome in my home. Nothing else matters.

I promise I will answer all your questions in my next letter. For now I send you my love, across the continents.

Your Okaasan

There were tears tracking slowly down his cheeks. Yuuri pulled his hand back to lift up his glasses and rub at his eyes, and then glanced at Victor, who was looking at him with very wary concern.

"It's okay," he said, sniffing. "It's good. More than good. It's from my mother. She says she'll send another longer letter too, but that she wanted to write as soon as she could to say… to say that they love me. And that they'd like us to visit one day if we can, so they can meet you. I didn't… I wasn't expecting…"

Victor slid an arm around his waist and pulled him in close. Makkachin flopped over onto her side in his lap, and Yuuri reached over to stroke her ears again. He was still crying a little, tears soaking into the shoulder of Victor's shirt, but it felt like a release, like he had finally let something huge and heavy go and was staggering with sudden lightness. Victor reached his other hand over and ran his fingers over the neat columns of Yuuri's mother's writing.

"Is that your name?" he asked, pausing over the two characters.

"How did you know?"

"I saw it written down a few times, at the Japanese embassy. I thought I recognised it." He kissed Yuuri's forehead, and moved his hand back to gently stroking Makkachin, who was drifting off to sleep. "I did find you terribly fascinating, after all."

"I'll translate the rest of it for you too," Yuuri said. "I want you to read it. I think… I think that you'd like her."

"I like anyone who loves you," Victor said, and Yuuri felt his eyes prickling again. It had been more than two years since Victor had moved into their old flat in Pimlico, and they hadn't been apart since, but for the first time he was completely overcome with the fact that they were family, that a line ran all the way through his life from the soft, sea-blown love of his childhood in Hasetsu to their quiet little home in Bern, where the potential of all the years ahead of them lay in Victor's lap in the form of a sleeping puppy.

"Ich liebe dich," he murmured against Victor's shoulder, and felt the arm around him squeeze a little tighter in response.

"Your accent is awful by the way," Victor said back. "I thought the one you spoke normal German with was bad."

"Don't let anyone outside of this room hear you call it 'normal German'."

"You won't tell anyone, will you Makkachin?"
Makkachin grumbled in her sleep. Yuuri felt like it was a distinct possibility that he was going to cry again every time she did something cute. Someone so small shouldn't have such devastating power. Victor had his hand curled protectively over her little body, thumb moving back and forth in her wavy brown fur.

"We should get our own dinner soon," Yuuri said, but made no move to stand up.

"Mmm. In a bit." Victor nudged Yuuri away slightly so he could look him in the eyes. "How do you say it again? Ai shiteru yo?"

"And you call my accent awful."

"Teach me then." Victor smiled winningly, as if it was a prospect no more complicated than when he'd taught Yuuri to make kasha. Maybe it would be. Victor always seemed to exceed his expectations. "I've got to impress your mother one day, after all."

"Then I'll have to do my best."

Yuuri turned thirty-three on a Wednesday, the middle of a slow and dreary week where the days at the office dragged and Makkachin was being particularly dramatic about her adult teeth starting to come in, so they left the celebrating for Friday. Victor stopped on the way back from work and rode the rest of the way home with Makkachin sharing his front basket with a bag of ingredients and a bottle of wine.

When he got in he could hear Yuuri singing in the bath, and smiled as he set out Makkachin's food and a fresh bowl of water. Eleven months of scouring Bern had yet to turn up anywhere selling Japanese food, but sitting at the heart of Europe they had plenty of access to other kinds of foods that he knew Yuuri liked. He set down the wine and a packet of freshly-made gnocchi and started peeling an onion.

By the time Yuuri had finished his musical recital to the soap and made his way into the kitchen, hair still damp and wearing a thick jumper that technically speaking belonged to Victor, he had the tomatoes reducing down nicely into a sauce and was sneaking lardons to Makkachin. Yuuri breathed in deeply and smiled, running a hand through his hair.

"It smells really good," he said, coming over to look into the saucepan. He was nowhere near as inept in the kitchen as he used to be, but still seemed terribly impressed with anything and everything that Victor cooked

"It's your birthday dinner. Better than the leftovers we ate on Wednesday." He gestured around. "I started off frying the bacon lardons, then sautéed the onion and garlic for the sauce in the leftover fat, and now the tomatoes are cooking down with them. They're tinned, but if you wanted fresh tomatoes you shouldn't have been born in November. There's fresh sage to go in towards the end, with the cooked lardons and some capers. Signora Gelmini at the delicatessen says sage is best with gnocchi."

Yuuri wrapped his arms around Victor's waist and nuzzled his shoulder. "Thank you," he said.

"Well when it's my birthday I expect a real Christmas feast. A whole roast goose, like they have in England. Potatoes baked with cheese, like they eat here. Some home-made German lebkuchen. What do they eat in France? Probably something ridiculous, like oysters. I'll have those too."

"It sounds like if I don't poison you you're going to get very fat."

"I'm old now, it's my prerogative to get fat if I want to."
"You're not that old." Yuuri looked up at him over the tops of his glasses. "I've only known you for ten years. We've got a lot of decades of knowing each other left."

He had told Yuuri once, half asleep in a barbershop in Paris, that being with him was a far greater and higher calling than anything he could have done as a soldier or a spy. He hadn't known the half of it. He could feel Makkachin pressing herself against their legs and taste soap and cigarette smoke as he kissed Yuuri on the mouth, familiar warmth pooling low in his belly. It was everything he hadn't even known that he'd needed when they first met, when he had looked into the eyes of yet another Japanese imperial bureaucrat and seen a fire burning there that had captivated him. It captivated him still. He slid a hand underneath Yuuri's jumper and his shirt too, palm against the base of his spine, and felt Yuuri groan softly into his mouth.

The heat of the kiss simmered between them all the way through dinner, through putting Makkachin to bed, stoked by the wine and the strong and slightly sour cherry brandy that had been a birthday gift from Rüdi. Yuuri had the endurance to remain on his feet when Victor was drunk under the table, but it still only took a few glasses to make him giddy and a little wild, shedding his jumper and shirt both in the sitting room despite the winter chill and climbing bare-chested into Victor's lap as they sat on the sofa.

They kissed again, hungrily, Victor running his hands over Yuuri's back as Yuuri's combed roughly through his hair, digging his nails in whenever Yuuri ground his hips down. Victor moved to kiss along Yuuri's jaw and down his neck, nipping and sucking once he passed the line where his shirt collar would sit, and Yuuri tugged at his hair and made delicious little noises at every fresh touch.

"God, Victor, you're good at this," he mumbled. "Sometimes all you have to do is look at me and I'm practically gagging for it. Do you even know what it's like to sit in that office with you all week long thinking about everything I want to do to you? Do you know how hard it is?"

Victor broke away from the flushed red mark he was leaving at the juncture of Yuuri's neck and shoulder and chuckled. "I'm the one who has to sit in that office with you, remember?"

Yuuri looked down at him, face flushed and eyes a little unfocused, and licked his lips. "One of these days I'm not going to be able to stop myself from crawling under your desk and sucking you off."

"Though right now I think I'd like us to move this to the bedroom."

Yuuri was clumsily untucking his tie from his waistcoat now, and he made a whining noise. "Why not right here?"

"We'll wake Makkachin."

"Oh, right." Yuuri paused and glanced back over his shoulder to where she was fast asleep in her bed by the radiator. They had both discovered, in the last few months, that she possessed a great deal of curiosity and a strong sense of injustice when it came to being left out of anything, and that a cold, wet, snuffling puppy nose investigating one's anatomy was quite the mood-killer.

"Put your arms around my neck," Victor said, and when Yuuri complied he slid his own hands down his back to cradle his thighs. Making sure his feet were firmly planted on the floor, he tensed the muscles in his legs and stood up, and Yuuri whooped delightedly and thumped him on the back as Victor carried him across the room and through the hall to their bedroom.
On the bed he crawled on top of Yuuri and kissed him again, shrugging off his waistcoat and shirt as Yuuri determinedly unbuttoned them, only moving away to kiss Yuuri's stomach and make him giggle drunkenly as Victor pulled his trousers down his legs. Naked, they tangled their bodies together, warmed through with drink and desire, and Yuuri panted into their kisses and bit Victor's bottom lip.

"It's your birthday," Victor murmured against his mouth. "What do you want tonight?"

Yuuri paused before framing Victor's face with his hands and moving his head back to look at him. The alcohol made him squint even harder than he usually did without his glasses on, but there was no mistaking the overwhelming love in his expression, enough to drown a man, enough to lift him on a wave higher than any peak in the Alps. He lifted his head and kissed Victor very tenderly before whispering, "Make love to me?"

It always felt as if they were alone in the whole world, as if outside the bounds of the room the rest of reality had ceased to exist and there was only him and Yuuri, skin to skin and hearts and minds bare to each other. They lay on their sides under the blanket, Yuuri's back pressed against his chest, and Victor peppered his neck and shoulder with kisses as he moved slowly, smoothly inside him. After all these years being with Yuuri still made him feel like he had gone a little mad, like a part of his mind couldn't help but abdicate in the face of the pattern of moles on Yuuri's thigh, the little trail of hair on his lower belly, the way he whispered Victor's name and clutched at the sheets and raked his fingers through his own hair.

Victor traced his hand over Yuuri's chest until Yuuri caught it with his own, their rings pressing together as he drew it down, down to where he needed it. His head was tipped back, breathing hard as his beautiful face contorted with want, and Victor would give him anything, would kill again, would die, would tear himself asunder if he had to. He kissed the underside of Yuuri's jaw and tasted the sweat there, and it was enough to set them both shaking.

Afterwards Yuuri rolled over to kiss him, enough heat still in it that despite the alcohol and Victor's terribly advanced age this might be an interlude rather than an epilogue. Victor stroked his hair, sighing happily as Yuuri nibbled around the outside of his ear, slower and softer each time until he stopped altogether.

"Vityusha," he murmured, and the sound of the pet name in his voice still made all of Victor's nerves tingle, "when the bombs come, let's run away to the mountains."

Victor leaned back, looking Yuuri straight in the eyes. They still hadn't entirely broken the habit of determinedly not talking about politics, and the subject of the bomb, of the war raging on in Korea where surely one side or the other could drop it again any day, was one that still sat heavy and silent in Victor's mind. And Yuuri's too, apparently.

"Okay," he said in response, leaning in to nuzzle Yuuri's nose with his own. "We'll run away, and find an old wooden chalet to live in. Somewhere with just enough room for the two of us."

"Mmm. Near a mountain stream, where the water is fresh and clear. We'll bathe in it in the summer."

"I'll teach you how to shoot a rifle, and we'll hunt wild deer. And Makkachin's a clever girl, I bet we could train her to catch rabbits and ducks."

"We'll grow vegetables and herbs too, a whole garden full."

Victor kissed him. "I'm afraid I don't know the first thing about gardening."
"Well me neither, but how hard can it be?" There was a glimmer in Yuuri's eyes, a bronzed reflection of the lamplight. "We'll spend our days tending the plants, hunting, carrying water, chopping wood."

"You should chop the wood. With your shirt off. That's the proper way to do it."

"If you insist," Yuuri said with a smirk. "And in the winter the snow will be metres deep outside, and we'll spend all day curled up by the fire, talking and reading."

"I'll read you Verlaine. All of the Arriettes, while you're wearing nothing but firelight." He kissed Yuuri's parted lips, tasting all the sweetness in his mouth. "'To wander far from women and men, in the fresh forgetfulness of what exiles us'."

Yuuri shivered appreciatively and lifted Victor's hand to his lips, kissing his palm as he ran a thumb over his ring. "You said until the world ends. But I want you after that, still. Let all of the rest of it end, as long as there's still you and me, somewhere alone together."

"Until forever, then," Victor said, and he had never meant anything so deeply, so fervently, holding Yuuri in his arms in the late-night stillness of their bedroom. "Until every city is blasted into dust, until the seas rise and the Sun swallows the Earth, until the universe collapses or explodes, until after all of it. I'll still need you. I'll still love you."

"Yes," Yuuri whispered, and his voice was hard and fierce. "I'll still love you when forever is over and done."

Victor pulled him as close as he could, their chests pressed together and heaving with every breath, and they kissed like forever was already at hand but nothing could compel them apart. He clutched at Yuuri's waist, felt familiar hands sliding over his shoulder muscles as desire bloomed anew in his blood, and he rolled onto his back, the weight of Yuuri's body on top of his like an anchor in a storm, the only thing holding him safe and steady.

"I want you again," Yuuri said between kisses, "when you're ready. If you want."

"I always want you."

Bern in December was as beautiful as a picture postcard, snow settling on the red-tiled roofs of the old city and the streets filled with strings of golden lights. In the face of everyone's mounting inability to get any work done, Rüdi closed the office early on the last Friday afternoon before Christmas, and full of some kind of festive energy Victor had dragged Yuuri and Makkachin both out on a long walk through streets bustling with shoppers.

They hadn't even lived there a year yet and still the city felt so welcoming and familiar even in the bitter chill of the winter, yellow-grey sandstone and colourful window shutters, people all around them speaking in the rolling dialect that he was finally beginning to understand. Makkachin's fur had grown shaggy and was developing a distinct curl, and she seemed to charm every person she gambolled up to on the end of her leash. "She's a very pretty girl," Victor said enthusiastically to an old man who bent down to pat her, and "yes, she's the best dog," to a pair of twin girls whose faces she licked.

There was something enchanted in the air that evening, Yuuri thought, as they wandered out into the Münsterplatz where wooden stalls and food stands surrounded a small ice rink set up in front of the old cathedral. He could feel it in the smell of spices in the air, the gravid weight of clouds in the darkening sky overhead, the way that Victor touched his elbow to point something out, to lead him
through the little market. They bought a paper bag of hot, roasted chestnuts, and a sausage for Makkachin, and sat down at a long table to eat them. Victor got up momentarily and returned with two steaming mugs of glühwein, sweet and heavy with citrus and clove.

"I wish Bern was like this all the time," he said dreamily, gesturing around them. "It's just magical."

"Do you wish it was your birthday all the time too?" Yuuri asked with a grin, chasing down a sweet, soft chestnut with a mouthful of hot wine.

"Well strictly speaking, since Russia changed its calendar when I was four, my birthday could be either the twenty-fifth of December or the seventh of January. So really I have two birthdays." He smiled beatifically over his mug. "That means you owe me ten years' worth of second birthday presents. Cough up."

"Technically it's only-" Yuuri counted on his fingers "-eight years. I wouldn't have given you any second presents when I thought you were German. Actually I didn't buy you any birthday presents at all until two years ago. And I never charged you any rent when you were supposedly my lodger, so I think we're even."

Victor made a very tragic face, and leaned down to where Makkachin was battling the sausage. "He's so cruel to me, little Makka. You are the only one who really loves me." She looked up at him and woofed softly. "You're right, I do deserve all those years of presents. I'm glad you understand."

"Maybe she can pick them out for you. I'm sure you'd like a dead rat and an interesting-smelling tin can."

"She eschews the capitalist norm of buying presents, preferring to gift only the fruits of her own sniffing labour. What a good dog." Makkachin woofed again and Victor reached down to scratch her ears.

"I can't believe my dog is a Marxist," Yuuri said with mock sorrow, reaching for another chestnut.

"Your husband is a Marxist," Victor said, and then flushed suddenly with more than just the wine and the cold air. It was the first time either of them had said it in those terms, in the words of a whole world that was barred to them, but in each and every language they spoke between the two of them it was the only word that could bear on its own even the smallest part of everything that they'd always meant. Yuuri slid the skin off the chestnut in his hands and, after a quick glance around them, reached over to pop it into Victor's mouth.

"I suppose he is," he said, and Victor smiled.

When they'd finished the chestnuts and the wine, and Makkachin had defeated her sausage, they walked back through the market and stopped at the side of the ice rink, leaning on the barrier to watch the people gliding past on skates.

"I used to skate sometimes, when I was younger," Yuuri said wistfully. "Mostly in the winter, although it was still at rinks since lakes don't tend to freeze on Kyushu. I was better at kendo, but I liked how quiet skating felt, just you and the cold and your own thoughts."

"I did too. As soon as Lake Ladoga froze every winter big groups of us would go out from Leningrad to skate on it. They'd clear the snow off a section and we'd stay for hours and hours, drinking hot tea and eating baked potatoes and pirozhki to warm up. We'd go every week until spring came and the ice got too thin." He smiled, the lights of the cathedral sparkling in his eyes. "My mother even arranged for me to have lessons through the summer for a while, with a man named
Panin. I think she would have liked for me to become an athlete."

"Let's do it tonight then," Yuuri said. "The rink's right here, and I don't think it costs much to hire some skates."

Victor beamed. "I'd love to."

They left Makkachin, along with their hats and winter boots, with the attentive young woman hiring out the skates, and stepped out onto the ice together, the need for balance providing enough pretext to grip each others' arms as they made their first slow and careful circuit around the rink. The second time was easier, and the third easier still, Yuuri's muscles remembering the way to hold himself on the sharp edges of the blades, how to translate the slide of the ice beneath him into a delicate grace. The rink was too busy and scuffed for the intricate carving of figures that he'd learned in his childhood, but the calm and the stillness of it was just the same as he'd remembered. Victor picked up a little speed and skated on ahead of him, then twisted around elegantly, skating his fourth circuit backwards and shifting from foot to foot like it was the easiest thing in the world.

"Show-off!" Yuuri shouted to him.

"Oh, this?" Victor gestured at himself whilst still gliding smoothly backwards. "This is nothing. Watch this." He glanced over his shoulder as he performed a few more graceful turns, arms swirling out around him, and then Yuuri watched as he bent both knees deeply and shifted his weight onto the outside edge of his right blade before pushing off into the air. He turned once, skates catching the light, before landing on his right foot again with a flourish. A few of the other skaters on the rink clapped, and Victor glided back over to Yuuri with a boyish grin. "Did you watch?"

"How could I not?" Yuuri wanted to pull him close and kiss him, and had to settle for tugging at the front of his coat. "You looked beautiful."

"I worried I might have forgotten how to do the takeoff. But I suppose some things you never really forget."

"My teachers never liked us doing jumps," Yuuri said as they set off again, leisurely and side by side. "They said it was too showy, that the point of the sport was artistic figures. But I always thought they looked fun."

"There's got to be a permanent rink somewhere in the city. I could try to teach you, if you wanted? I think I can remember how to do a few different ones."

"Okay." Yuuri stepped ahead and turned around to skate backwards himself, balancing on one leg for a few seconds. They could have hobbies now, if they wanted. That was something that ordinary people did.

"We'll show up Christophe and his Olympic medals the next time he comes to visit," Victor continued. "There's nothing you and I can't do, if we put our minds to it."

And Yuuri could well believe it, here in this glittering winter city where the long, hard road that they'd travelled met the one they were only just embarking on, that ran further and further still. "Absolutely nothing."

It was properly dark when they handed in their skates and collected a sleepy Makkachin, and as they made their way out of the plaza and back towards the flat, thick, white snowflakes began to drift down from the sky. They settled along Victor's shoulders and on the brim of his hat, in Makkachin's chocolatey-brown fur, in between the cobblestones underfoot. They turned into a narrow, quiet side
street and Yuuri looked up into the sky as they walked, the flakes falling onto his glasses and melting on his cold-pinched cheeks. Then Victor tugged on his sleeve.

"Yuuri, look," he said quietly, and when Yuuri followed the line of his finger he saw a dark little bird a few metres away, picking along the pavement before fluttering up onto a windowsill. It turned its head towards them, its beak a golden yellow to match the rings around its bright eyes. A blackbird.

Yuuri had never believed in magical signs, in gods or spirits or destiny, but as the little bird cocked its head and regarded him he felt something impossibly vast and yet light as a single, black feather settle on his heart. There was streetlight trapped like gold in every softly-falling snowflake, like the promise of thaw and the summer rains to come, like a love that had sparked to life in the depths of the world's darkest winter and burned on defiantly, still believing in the spring.

He turned. Victor had taken his hat off, pale hair already flecked with snow. Besides the two of them the street was entirely empty, the grace of privacy for a few moments more. Yuuri closed the distance between them, hands on the lapels of Victor's coat, and as Victor dipped his head to kiss him the blackbird ahead of them burst into song. Victor's mouth was warm and he tasted like a thousand tomorrows, and around them every sweet note of birdsong was rising and rising and rising, up beyond the rooftops and past all the limits of the sky.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I'm sorry that the epigraph is in French, but I couldn't find an English translation that I liked and you know it had to be Paul Verlaine. If you speak even less French than I do, here is my own slightly-better-than-Google-Translate-but-still-rather-terrible rendition of it into English:

I arrive all covered again with dew
That the dawn wind froze to my forehead
Suffer my weariness to sit at your feet
Dream of the dear moments that will soothe it

Let my head lie on your young breast
Still full of the sound of your last kisses
Let it be the calming of the good storm
And let me sleep a little while you rest

So, this is the longest thing I've ever written in my life. This is effectively my first novel. And now it's done.

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of you who have read, commented, left kudos, rec'd the fic, messaged me on tumblr, drawn fanart, or otherwise let me know how much you were enjoying this. It's been an absolute pleasure to unfold this story to you.

Secondly, I'd like to thank Izilen, who got me from 'so here's a stupid idea I have for an AU' to actual research and plotting, who read stuff and reassured me it was working, and who engaged me in many insightful and thought-provoking conversations about history, writing, storytelling, and the nature of stories like this. Also she stole some
papers from JSTOR for me and pointed out grammar mistakes for me to stealth-edit, like a true friend.

Thirdly and most Oscar Nightishly, I'd like to thank my parents, for giving me When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit when I was eight and Animal Farm when I was eleven, the developers of Scrivener, without which I would be a disorganised mess, my A level history teachers, who probably didn't think this is what I'd be doing with their lessons in ten years' time, Dr. R, who made me read Kant and Ricoeur and taught me to really, really think, and M, who in her own particular way taught me how you keep living with a shattered heart.

If you are, like me, an enormous nerd, I have compiled the following additional materials on this fic over on my fandom sideblog which may interest you:

- **Complete timeline, 1910-1950**
- 'Historical notes', a post series on various bits of interesting background information
- My writing playlist/soundtrack
- Extra Reading- media that I drew on while writing

You may have noticed that this work is now part of a series. I am not planning to write another story of this length in this universe (I think Yuuri and Victor have had quite enough by now), but there are a number of additional stories that are itching to be told about characters from the show who had minor roles or who didn't appear at all, and one more story about Yuuri and Victor a long way into the future of where we left them. So if that's something you'd like to see, please do subscribe!

Also! One final bit of fun. I will write a short ficlet, set in this universe but about the character(s) of your choosing, for the first commenter who can tell me both the name of the figure skating jump Victor performs in the final scene and why it's significant.

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**End Notes**

Come say hi to me on tumblr at [thetwoguineabook](https://thetwoguineabook.tumblr.com/)

Works inspired by this one:

- [Blackbird by sixpences (Podfic)](https://www.podfic-archive.org/fic/2884) by Rhea314 (Rhea)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofour.org/fic/249839) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!