The Ice Magician's Apprentice
by IDetestTragedy

Summary

Becoming a new employee of the Circus! on Ice came with a lot of responsibilities. Could Yuuri live up to everyone's expectation as the apprentice of the world-famous Ice Magician? As for his sleeping arrangement, did staying in the same bed as Victor Nikiforov count as a privilege or a constant heart-attack?

Notes

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Warnings: cloak and dagger faux-historical AU sets in an imaginary world based mostly, but anachronistically, on the mixture of late Edwardian and First World War eras
Yuuri slipped between the canvas tent flaps that made up a four-sided bathroom enclosure, having cleansed himself afresh. Due to his new employment with the *Circus! on Ice* troupe, he had to shower outdoors regardless of the encroaching winter. The hand-pumped shower was connected by two water tanks via separate pipes—one for the cold water from the nearest river and the other for boiled water that needed to be refilled every morning. The troupe members took turns for cooking duty on a daily basis. Such was one of the downsides to living nomadically, he noted.

Still, this was a small discomfort in preference to the leering eyes of the soldiers in the barrack where he had lived until the day before. While he could enjoy the warm water from electric heaters in the military base, his privacy was negated in the communal showers. Once, a beefy soldier had even slapped him on the ass. The soldier's friends had laughed aloud. After all, Yuuri used to be a mere factotum at the high-ranking officers' disposal. Who knew what would have happened back then if a colonel had not stridden in their direction?

Water could wash away dirt from one's body, but not troubles from one's mind. Yuuri forcibly dismissed the events preceding his awakening that morning. The guilt constantly encumbering him would not dissipate. He'd had everything he could possibly ask for all in one place for a single moment, only to botch it up the next.

Meeting Victor in person was the best thing in Yuuri's life. No, scratch that. Being kissed by Victor was … or maybe both moments were. At any rate, they would have remained so, if only Yuuri had not been so careless as to let himself become inebriated with vodka the previous night, only to wake up partially naked in a bed next to a totally naked Victor.

He shuddered anew at the memory regarding the tipsy dance he had performed amid the generous helping of drinks—before vertigo had gripped him and his surroundings had faded to black. Other than the head-splitting hangover aftermath, Yuuri's body suffered no pain. Didn't this mean he had forcibly taken Victor? Victor showed no sign of bereavement, but that might have just been an act of benevolence. While Victor had conveyed his love for Yuuri through both words and action, there was still a fair chance that he had not consented to copulate with Yuuri just a few hours after their encounter. A sober Yuuri wouldn't have willed that, anyway.

Had virginity slipped away from him without the vaguest memory as to how it had transpired? Just how heinous had he been to treat his lifelong idol as a mere object of lust? Would it have been better if he had never met Victor in person so that the one he treasured most in the whole universe wouldn't need to be subjected to such agony and ignominy?

Yuuri wiped his tear-streaked cheeks with the back of his sleeve. *Running away forever won't solve anything. I'd better apologize to Victor and do whatever I can to straighten things out.*
He looked at the tear-stained sleeve. Victor's sleeve. The shirt garbing his body and the toiletries he had just used were all from Victor. That man must have predicted that the shirt would be rather tight around Yuuri's waist and its sleeves would have to be rolled, for he had promised to shop together as soon as they arrived at the next destination. Yuuri pulled the shirt's collar and inhaled deeply, trying to scrape any vestige of Victor's scent out of the fabric.

'Dearest Victor, I gave you the worst possible first night, but I will make amends to you with everything I have.'

A shadow swooshed swiftly past the grass near Yuuri's feet, and Yuuri looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of a small black bird. The sight of a jackdaw at that time of the year in that part of the world struck him as quite uncommon, so Yuuri wondered if this particular one missed its flock during migration.

The closer Yuuri ambled in the direction of Victor's tent, the louder the hammering of his heartbeat grew. Unlike at the squadron's barrack, there was no door to knock. Yuuri decided to announce his presence before he lifted the tent flap and ducked inside. "Victor, may I come in?"

"Yuuri!" Having garbed himself to look presentable, Victor emerged from the tent. He beamed more radiantly than any of his portraits in the newspaper could possibly depict, urging Yuuri with an impulsive wish to re-comb his hair and smooth out his shirt. "There's no need to be so formal. We're roommates, after all." Like an old buddy, he slung an arm over Yuuri's shoulder and guided the shorter man inside.

The geniality nearly brought tears to Yuuri's eyes again. What did this man do to deserve defilement? This saint did not deserve a monster like him.

At least a third of Victor's belongings had been packed into wooden trunks. The rest were still lying haphazardly. The bed sheets with Yuuri's vomit from that morning, mercifully, had been discarded. "Victor, you should rest after…" Yuuri clenched his fists. "…last night. I'll handle the rest of the packing."

"Yuuri, I'm all right. Why do you look so worried?" Victor did the courtesy of looking back at him even though his hands were making room for magic show apparatus in an open trunk.

"Victor, last night, if I—"

"Victor, Yuuri, Yakov wants everyone at the big tent," a feminine voice Yuuri presumed to be Mila Babicheva's called for them outside the tent.

"Coming," Victor replied in a sing-song and laid down what seemed to be a doll-house inside the trunk. He rose to his feet and stepped outside.

Eyes downcast, Yuuri followed. The glorious morning with its fresh smell of dew on grass and gentle caress of sunlight did nothing to dispel the clouds of grief in his troubled mind. The camp ground hummed with the pleasant greetings of "good morning" exchanged by the rest of the troupe members.

When Yuuri's feet had brought him in front of the largest marquee, the presence of an additional pair of shoes next to the tent flap seized his attention. His gaze traveled upwards and met that of a beaming Victor, holding the flap open for Yuuri to pass. How could that gentleman treat him so kindly still?

"Victor, you shouldn't have."
Something in Victor's stiff shoulders told Yuuri that perhaps his voice sounded more rebuking than he had meant to be. What if Victor thought he disliked the gesture because it made him feel like a disabled person incapable of even opening the entrance himself?

"I mean, thank you. Sorry. I was surprised. No one ever opened a door for me before," Yuuri whispered, not desirous to draw attention in the quiet marquee.

Victor's tense shoulders noticeably relaxed. He was about to reply, but Yakov started to speak, so he settled with a smile, before turning his attention to his old coach on the stage. The ice from the previous night's show had melted, so Yakov needn't wear skates to stand there. The other troupe members were standing on the outer ring of the stage, some still with bed hair and dressing gowns, others donned in pristine shirts and smelling like soap.

Despite his guilt, Yuuri couldn't help but appreciate how breathtaking Victor's beauty was. It took him a while ere he could digest Yakov's words properly. If his ears had not played tricks on him, the last few sentences from the ringleader's mouth mentioned a messenger and a change of plan—not that it made any difference to Yuuri, who knew next to nothing of what the initial plan had been.

Yakov held out a letter. "And as such, we shall be heading for Briechyndt Town in Mheadaure. We are to retrieve the information acquired by a secret agent in jeopardy. Should circumstances deem it possible, we shall also rescue said agent, who has disguised himself as a footman in Viscount Evrawg's mansion. Now, go break down the tents. We'll depart after the morning meal."

Murmurs broke among the troupe members.

"Georgi, heat the sealing wax for this reply, and then tie it to the messenger's leg." As the crowd dispersed, Yuuri questioningly watched the old man entrust his most obedient disciple with a tubular object reminiscent of a cigar's size. The color, however, appeared to be too dark to be one.

*Tying a tube to a person's leg? Talk about unconventionality,* Yuuri commented in his head.

"And here I thought we could get a warm winter this year…," Yuuri heard Leo sigh as the latter exited the marquee. "But this means we can build snowmen!" Guang Hong—one of his best friends—replied with overt excitement. "And ride the sled, too!" his other best friend, Phichit, added with equal zeal.

Now that the marquee was almost empty, Yuuri started to notice a jackdaw near the edge of the proscenium. The bird was pecking a handful of grains—scattered on purpose by a staff member, it seemed. Could it be the same creature as the one whose shadow had flown past him earlier?

"Have you been to Mheadaure before, Yuuri?" Victor jovially asked while they sauntered behind the throng of staff members.

Yuuri shook his head, pushing away any thought of how Victor's lips would taste.

"It's definitely colder than this country, but it's a nice place." Victor offered his hand, and Yuuri perceived with both dreadful and dreamy realization that Victor wanted them to hold hands on their way back to his tent.

Yuuri looked around. None of the troupe members held hands. The practice for two grown men to hold hands without a reason must be just as outlandish here as everywhere else. How to turn Victor down without turning his hopeful expression into a dejected one, however, was the real issue.

"Victor," Yuuri took a deep breath, "I—"
“Yuuri, come here.”

At Yakov's commanding voice, Yuri Plisetsky turned back at once, while Yuuri hesitated.

"Not you. Him." This time Yakov pointed at Yuuri with his index finger. "Argh, having two members with the same name is confusing!"

Victor suggested, "In that case, shall we call the younger Yuri 'junior' henceforward?"

"AS IF I COULD EVER BE THIS SORRY-ASS' SON!"

"What about 'Yurio' then?" Mila, who crouched nearby to tie her shoe lace, touted.

Yakov closed his eyes as if contemplating the nickname. A few seconds passed before he gave a slight nod of the head. "Yurio it is."

"What?! That's not even my name, you addle-brained hag!" Yuri yelled with both hands on his hips.

Now standing on her feet, Mila teased him further, "Then do you prefer us all to start calling you 'Yuratchka' from now on?"

"That's so damn unfair! I was here first. If you want to make a fool of anyone by changing their name, it should be his!"

Yakov intervened, authority in his voice, "Didn't Nikolai teach you to respect those older than you?"

Yuri eyed the old man with a venomous glare before storming off from the marquee. "Leave my grandpa out of this!

Yakov's gaze trailed across the tent to find Yuuri, who was rooted to the spot where he had been standing during the entire argument.

"Now that you've become a part of our big family, I'd rather explain things to you myself than leaving it to…” He glanced at Victor "…other dubious sources."

"I can fill him in properly," Victor pouted, no trace of real offense in his face and voice.

"About the meals and cleaning duty, maybe. Not about the true essence of this troupe. Besides, your magic show props must be waiting to be packed."

Nothing could calm Yuuri's racing heart when Victor left him and the ringleader alone in the marquee. Yakov's piercing look scrutinized him, drawing beads of cold sweat out of his forehead. Was the elderly coach displeased because the attire clinging to his body belonged to Victor?

"You have raw talents and devotion." The old man finally broke the silence. "I can see why he is so smitten with you. But know this, brat, if you ever betray Victor one day, it is I who will pay you back in spades. Even if he forgives you, I will never rest—return from my grave, if necessary—until I find you and tear you bone from bone with my bare hands. Do we understand each other?"

Yuuri's chest tightened. Did ravishing Victor in his bibulous state count as treachery? Would he be good enough for Victor? "Y-yes, sir."

"Now, tell me, how do you think this troupe defray its food, costume, stage props, salaries, advertisements, vehicles, and all other necessities?"
"Uh, from the admission ticket sales, sir?"

"That covers half of our expenses at best."

Yuuri called to mind the brand of drinks and sport equipment suppliers, among some other merchandise, embroidered onto the marquee. "Then … sponsorship?"

"Exactly. But not all sponsors are satisfied with us merely displaying their brands. Depending on how much they contribute, they may require certain services from us at opportune times. And we are on our honor not to confide the favors we do for them to outsiders."

"Does going to Mheadaure count as one of those services?"

"You catch on rather fast." Yakov's mouth was poised to articulate more words, but he paused, eyes darting alertly at the far end of the marquee. The flap opened to reveal Georgi bearing a tube sealed with red wax. On silent feet he strode toward the jackdaw at the corner and secured the tube onto the bird's leg.

'That's the messenger?' Yuuri observed amusedly. If so, it made sense that the tube containing the letter was designed in a similar color to that of the jackdaw's legs and feathers for a better camouflage.

Ostensibly deeming Georgi's arrival to be non-intrusive, Yakov continued, "Victor chose you for your skating ability and magician's potential. I don't expect a greenhorn such as you to be deeply involved in our upcoming cloak and dagger operation, but you must at least not get in the other members' way. Watch them and learn; one day, you will be able to perform tasks just as complex."

Yuuri nodded. Georgi let the bird perch on his forearm as he carried it outside. Yakov spoke to Yuuri, "If you have no further questions, you may help Victor with packing."

"Coach." Yuuri performed a respectful saikeirei bow, fists clenched with resolution. "Please hone me into a man worthy of Victor Nikiforov."

The pause that followed made Yuuri hazard a guess that perhaps Yakov was taken aback. Then the silence was broken by the old man's calm voice, though not without scrutiny. "Remember you're the one who asked for this."

Slowly, Yuuri straightened his bent torso as Yakov declared, "You will be trained even more rigorously than any of my other students who have started at an earlier age. Your timetable will be so full of skating, ballet, ballroom dance, and magic stunt practices that it'll hardly leave you extra room to breathe. Are you sure that's what you desire?"

*Victor deserves only the best.* Yuuri answered with deference, "Yes, sir."
Redemption

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's first day as a circus troupe member.

Chapter Notes

Credit: This chapter is beta-read by rasclieboobear & The Kindly One

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Redemption

Victor's tent was absent of its occupant by the time Yuuri ducked under its flap. Judging from the equal absence of toiletries, however, it was not hard to deduce where Victor was. Yuuri gave a brief pat at Makkachin's head, and then began packing Victor's belongings into the trunks. He could tell the dog was well-trained—noticeably better than his own Vicchan when the aforementioned poodle had still been alive. Makkachin occasionally ran back and forth to fetch him smaller magic apparatus to the trunks, but sat quietly on her haunches when Yuuri handled the clothes.

Victor returned within minutes, humming a merry tune and smelling of soap. A sudden vision invaded Yuuri's mind: he was hugging Victor, peppering him with little kisses along his nape and whispering sweet nothings into his ear, and Victor was giggling back at him. Yuuri shook his head, desperately trying to dispel his unhealthy imagination. Why should the same soap he had used smell so intoxicating on Victor?

"I hope Yakov didn't treat you too harshly?" Victor asked with a subtle hint of apology.

"Not at all. He's… He acted as a true leader and a coach should." No doubt Yakov would see it as his duty to monitor Yuuri's progress with utmost care and attention since Victor was as good as a son to him.

When Victor's lips pecked the side of his forehead, Yuuri thought he was still drowning in his illusions for a shocking moment. The kiss was so light yet affectionate, and it reminded him of the description of fairies' whispers in his childhood books.

"Breakfast?" Victor asked, offering his hand at the same time.

Maybe it was because some of the burden in his heart had lessened after talking to Yakov, but this time, Yuuri didn't hesitate to take Victor's awaiting palm. Together, they strolled across the circus ground, Makkachin trotting behind them. With Victor's warmth next to his own, Yuuri felt that the grass was lusher than moments before and the celestial spirits heralded an ode of peace.

In a matter of minutes, Yuuri's mouth was agape at the sight of the banquet before him. Three long
tables were joined to make an extremely elongated buffet for a plethora of food, each mouth-watering in its own right. War had brought scarcity in supplies; how many years had it been since Yuuri had seen so much food gathered in one place? It had to be some sixteen years ago, when his family had still been running their inn, before the war had razed two-thirds of the world's population.

Furthermore, the heterogeneous range of the variants formed a stark contrast to the uniformity of military rations in the barrack. Since the troupe did not belong to any particular nation, they had never received rations from the government. It was a streak of fortune that some members were blessed with excellent hunting and fishing skills.

"We don't have a buffet like this at every meal. At any other day, the ones with cooking duty would ladle the food onto each plate." Victor chuckled at Yuuri's bewilderment. "Simply because we are to leave today, we're trying to lighten the horses' burden by reducing as much supplies as possible."

Discounting Yuri Plisetsky's glares, the other troupe members received Yuuri no less cordially than they had during his welcome party the night before. He made some new acquaintances with the stagehands, costume makers, and props artisans.

"Hey, Yuuri," a voice that belonged to the previous night's show emcee addressed him. "I doubt you've been introduced to my fiancée. This is Isabella Yang. She takes care of the skaters' costumes, and boy, I've never met a finer seamstress all my life!"

"Oh, J.J., stop it." A black-haired woman who stood next to Jean Jacques Leroy smiled, her tone sounding not the slightest bit chiding.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"Well, well, well, aren't you hoity-toity?" She smiled again. "Just call me Isabella."

"Isabella." Yuuri shook her hand. In this closer proximity, he smelled her flowery perfume. It made him wonder that given the choice, would Victor rather bed a fragrant woman than an alcohol-reeking man like Yuuri?

"You're spacing out. Too lost for words because you're entranced by my fiancée's beauty?" J.J. jested good-naturedly, wiggling his eyebrows.

Yuuri professed, "You are indeed blessed with a fiancée of rarefied beauty. However, it piques my curiosity as to what species of destemmed grape those belong." He pointed at a large bowl of pale green small egg-shaped fruits on the table behind Isabella. "The grapes in my country have different shape and color."

"You mean the olives? They're no grapes. They're mostly pressed for their oil, but these ones are salted. Try them."

"Yuuri, try this, too." A man, a few years younger than him, handed him a tubular fried-dough pastry using a pair of tongs. He had thick eyebrows and brown hair parted in the middle, and Yuuri recognized him as Leo de la Iglesia. "Churros con chocolate have been my family legacy for generations," he explained while handing Yuuri a small cup of chocolate for dipping.

"It's delicious, Leo. Thanks," Yuuri answered with a mouthful. A tinge of sadness punctured through his conscience when he recalled that his mom would have reprimanded him for this lack of manners and that the aforesaid mother no longer existed in the world to do so.

*It's all right. This is your new family,* he reminded himself while listening to Leo's blabber that his
mother preferred *champurrado* to be served with the churros.

"What's shampoo ... la ... doe?"

"Champurrado." Leo laughed heartily. "It's a chocolate-based atole, prepared with lime-treated-corn dough called *masa de maíz, masa harina*—that is, a dried version of this dough—unrefined whole cane sugar called *panela*, water and milk. You can also replace the masa harina with corn flour, should you desire, but that's not what I use for this recipe. Some people also like to add cinnamon, anise seed, vanilla, ground nuts, orange zest, or eggs."

"Leo has a sweet tooth," came another voice. It belonged to a shorter and younger man with a lighter shade of brown hair and eyes, freckles swarming around his nose. Ji Guang Hong was approaching with a tray of sliced hams. "Here, Yuuri, you should try this. It's the freshest *jamón ibérico* I could find in the butcher shop this morning."

"Or you can always have tomato, garlic, and olive oil sandwiches if you'd rather not stomach heavy meat in the morning." It was Phichit Chulanont who skittered in with a large plate of bread this time. Compared to the other two, he seemed closer to Yuuri's age, and he had the friendliest smile in the troupe—with the exception of Victor, of course. "Say hello to *pan con tomate*."

Yuuri thanked them and took a slice from each. He also tried a small helping of what seemed to be an omelet, except for the potatoes mixed into the eggs. He personally preferred if the potato and eggs would come as separate dishes, but loved trying new cuisines on the whole.

With the military, it was the exact opposite. Throughout their marches, the soldiers of his country ate rice-based meals and miso soup no matter where they went rather than adapting to the local food. As a consequence, the Kyouki soldiers had explored half a dozen countries across the globe but could only be acquainted with their native victuals unless they ate out in their free time—all for no reason other than national pride. It wasn't that Yuuri disliked native food; in fact, if he had to choose one favorite dish, he'd unhesitatingly pick the *katsudon* cooked by his mother. Even so, Kyouki culture was not the sole goodness on the planet. He didn't understand why nations couldn't respect one another and live with harmonious differences instead of aiming to unify the world under the force of a single civilization.

A white and dark gray husky dog trotted aloofly past Yuuri. Like Makkachin, he behaved well in spite of being unleashed. Like his owner, who ignored Yuuri's attempt at friendly greetings, the dog ignored Makkachin's.

"Did I offend him, or did something bad happen between those dogs?" Yuuri asked the nearest person standing: Emil Nekola.

Emil grinned. "Nah. Don't worry about it. Seung-gil's dog is... Well, let's say he shares the same personality as his master. Off the ice, Seung-gil always looks like he's dressed for a funeral and doesn't talk without an urgent cause. He bears no ill will, for no one in this troupe has given him any cause for offence, as far as I know. Look."

Yuuri's gaze followed the direction of Emil's pointing finger. The girl who had skated in pair the previous night, Sara Crispino, dashed toward Lee Seung-gil with a bright smile and utmost geniality, only to be subjected to the same silent treatment as Yuuri was.

Holding back against a mound of cupcakes had proven to be not the easiest thing to do in life, but Yuuri pulled through despite the mouth-watering sight of those *magdalenas*. He gained weight easily; he had to keep his diet under control if he wanted to stay on the ice and become Victor's worthy partner.
After washing down the meal with a cup of café con leche, Yuuri rejoined Victor to return to their tent, but he was halted by a tall man with long eyelashes whom he recalled to be Christophe Giacometti.

"Here, take these packed lunches for you and Victor. We all eat in our separate wagons since we won't be stopping during the journey. And by the way, nice dance last night." Chris gave him a thumbs up and went on his way, unintentionally impelling Yuuri to recall what had transpired after that dance: Victor's ravishment.

Upon reaching the tent, Victor went straight to pack three steel hoops into his largest trunk. When he turned around to retrieve another object, he came to stand toe-to-toe with an ambushing Yuuri. Victor's brow arched even higher as Yuuri yanked his collar, bringing the taller man's face less than an inch away from his own.

With a step forward, Yuuri placed his knee between Victor's thighs and pressed their foreheads together. With Victor's hot breath fanning across Yuuri's own, Yuuri spoke, "Victor, whatever I did to you last night is beyond pardon. All I ask is this: allow me to use the best of my ability to make you happy for the rest of my life."

There was a period of stunned silence, during which Yuuri's head was haunted with the imaginary screams of Victor's refusal. Then the moment passed, and Victor's face contorted into an impish grin. "As tempting as the 'rest of your life' part sounds, you did nothing to deserve my resentment."

"But I—" Yuuri took a deep breath. Must he articulate every ignominious syllable? "In my soused state, I ruined our first time by forcing myself upon you."

"After your fifth bottle of vodka, you fell into deep slumber. I carried you to my bed and you slept soundly next to me until this morning."

"Then, when I woke up, why were you ... n-n-na ... well, you wore naught but your own skin?"

"I always sleep in the nude, except when the night is unbearably cold."

"Y-you—!"

"Does this mean the earlier offer about you spending the rest of your life by my side is no longer valid?" Victor made a face that reminded Yuuri of Vicchan when he desired a treat. It was not something Yuuri could refuse without immense guilt.

"Well, I—"

"Not to worry, Yuuri." Without preamble, Victor's adorably cute expression shifted into something unfamiliar. There was hunger in his eyes and predation in his lips that gave Yuuri trouble breathing. "You've been chasing me all those years. Now it's my turn to do everything within my capacity to ensure you'll stay."

Yuuri's breath caught in his throat as the taller man's body pressed against him. His nostrils feasted upon the scents of Victor's soap and freshly laundered shirt. It incited him to inhale Victor more and lick him and eat him and drink him. He succumbed to the smell and to the rushing heat from his body.

As Victor bent his head, his devilishly handsome face blurred and merged onto Yuuri's. A hand on the small of Yuuri's back pulled him up onto his tiptoes. Victor's parted lips tasted like the coffee they'd had at breakfast. A sense of surrender, an overwhelming tide of warmth, washed over Yuuri, making him weak with want. Time stopped; the space around them evaporated. This was Victor
Nikiforov—the sun in Yuuri's sky, the god of Yuuri's universe, and the reason Yuuri's heart kept beating.

Victor kissed Yuuri softly at first, and then with a gradation of intensity that made him cling to Victor as the only tangible pillar in a vertiginous world. Victor claimed him with such fervency that Yuuri could scarcely believe the kiss was happening. That insistent mouth was parting Yuuri's quivering lips, sending unspoken tremors along his nerves, evoking from his inexperienced self the sensations he had yet to know he was capable of feeling. The kiss was nothing like the one they had shared the night before. There was nothing chaste present; only the pent-up yearning that had been building inside.

He found himself melting into Victor as his lover's free hand slid into his hair, holding him possessively. The next thing Yuuri knew, he reached up for Victor's neck. His mouth welcomed his partner's, and their tongues met in a dance of flirtation and passion. Instantly, Yuuri's body burned, shocking tingles of sensation racing up his entire being.

Drawing back when breathing became a necessity Yuuri could no longer delay, he was acutely aware of how his heart pounded too frantically and of his pulse thudding out a chant: More! More! More!

There was a fleeting second in which Yuuri tried to push his thoughts away, but then his gaze locked with Victor's, and all his inhibition evaporated. He leaned in, lips finding Victor's once more. He didn't even realize he was shivering with euphoria before he sensed the pressure of Victor's fingers. His beloved was clutching him to steady his buckling knees and trembling body. The thought alone sufficed to imbue his cheeks with scarlet. Thus, he hid his blushing face on Victor's chest.

"Yuuri, I want us to kiss again and never stop, but the caravan needs to leave soon." Victor intoned, his elven-fair countenance troubled.

Yuuri noticed Victor's Adam's apple moving up and down as its owner spoke, and a notion flitted across his mind. He moved his lips to Victor's throat. Choosing a spot along the slope of Victor's neck that could still be covered by shirt, Yuuri placed his mouth in a circular shape over his partner's skin and sucked hard on it. He was cognizant of the hitch in Victor's breath, but he met no resistance from the older man.

"You're marking your territory on me," Victor remarked with no hint of displeasure after Yuuri pulled away; if anything, pride permeated his tone, and joy radiated in his eyes.

With relief, Yuuri explained, "It's my promise to continue where we left off before that mark fades away."

Victor pecked Yuuri on the forehead before he resumed packing.

The rest of the morning bustled with people moving trunks to their covered wagons. They took turns to leave their respective tents and help the others, the burden of carrying a single trunk shared between two or more men per journey. Phichit, Leo and Guang Hong shared the same tent—which explained why it was bigger than the others, not counting the circus marquee. Emil seemed to share his tent with Michele. Chris' tent could accommodate two, as well, but with all the commotion of furniture moving, Yuuri couldn't determine who Chris' roommate was. Most other troupe members—at least the ones who hadn't folded their tents—inhabited single person tents. That was when Yuuri found out that none of those individual tents rivaled Victor's due to the number of magic show apparatus in his possession.
Naturally, Victor's demand of extra space was not limited to his tent only. As Yuuri found out two and a half hours later, Victor was allotted one wagon for his exclusive use plus another to be shared with two stagehands. The other troupe members shared a single wagon between three or more passengers. For instance, the Crispino twins, Emil, and Mila occupied the same wagon.

The town of Gontreda with its magnificent hills and ancient aqueducts gradually disappeared in the haze of the overcast day as Yuuri was safely tucked between Makkachin and the heaped trunks inside Victor's wagon. Upon offering to hold the horse reins for Victor, Yuuri was told, "We can switch in a few hours. For now, I'd like you to practice lock picking."

Yuuri nodded. Then, remembering that Victor was facing the draft horses pulling the wagon instead of him, he answered, "All right."

"Take two pieces of wire and the simplest tumbler lock you can find in the second trunk to your left. The upper one. Then grab some pen and paper from the bottom trunk."

Yuuri did as he was told and brought them all unto Victor at the jockey box. "I'm going to show you how it's done first, and then you can practice on your own. Write how long you need to finish on each try. Here, use my watch."

Placing the rein on his lap, Victor pulled out a golden watch from his pocket. Its round cover gleamed in the sun as he handed it over to Yuuri. "Once your timing improves, you can move onto using a single pin without shaping it to an ideal L, and then change to a more sophisticated lock. There will be instances in which you don't have the luxury of time or using both hands, you see."

Yuuri promised himself to pay attention to the fullest so that Victor wouldn't need to repeat the lock picking demonstration and neglect the reins for too long. The two horses might be proficiently trained, and yet…

"Lock picking is more art than science, so you definitely have to develop a feel for it. Locks have their differences, but share the same basic principles," he heard Victor say. "The most common way of picking a lock involves the combination of a pick and a tension wrench. The pick pushes a series of pins up and out-of-the-way so that they no longer block the lock's plug from rotating. The tension wrench applies rotational torque to the lock, just as a key would. Since you won't have the access to the proper lock picking tools on stage or in an emergency, I'll have you practice using pins made of scrap wires straightaway."

Victor held out the tumbler lock. "This lock is composed of five fundamental components: the plug, driver pins, key pins, springs, and a housing to hold everything together. Our utmost concern, however, is the shear line. This line is the gap between the plug and housing. With the proper key, it pushes the key pins flush with the shear line, and the driver pins are forced out of the plug."

"Erm, Victor, I'm confused."

"Let me illustrate it." Showing no sign of impatience for Yuuri's obtusity, Victor took a sheet of paper and began to draw.

When Victor finished the picture, Yuuri discovered Victor's lack of talent in sketching. Even his handwriting was far from tidy. Nevertheless, the fact that Victor was not as perfect as Yuuri had envisioned gave him the feeling of new affinity. They were closer. Victor was a mortal of flesh and blood, just like him.

Victor continued, "Every pin holds a different distance from the true center-line of the plug due to variations in where the holes are drilled. When we apply rotational tension to the plug, one pin will
bind between the housing and the plug first. This pin is called the *binding pin* and defined as the farthest pin from the plug's true center-line. While the pin is bound, we push it to the shear line with our pick. The plug will turn ever so slightly as it finds the next farthest pin to bind on."

Yuuri’s head was swimming in circles of confusion again, but this time, Victor took the initiative to illustrate his point without Yuuri asking for it.

Victor inserted the pin into the lower part of the keyhole. "Start by placing the closed end of the wire into the keyhole and pressing downward until you bend the pin ninety degrees. Now the wire has become an L-shaped pin. Apply slight pressure in the direction you would turn a normal key."

Victor's next movements were so fluid that Yuuri forgot to breathe while watching him. "With a rocking motion, use the tip to lift the pins to the shear line, one at a time. Listen for a click as the cylinder rotates forward, stopping at the next pin. When you pull your pick out, the driver pin will catch the edge of the plug, thus staying above the shear line. Once all the pins are set, the plug will fully rotate and the lock will disengage. Voilà!"

"How do I know when I'm applying too much pressure?" Yuuri inquired.

"If your wire is bending a lot, it's probably too much, and the driver pins will bind below the shear line. You ought to have enough give to let the driver pins rise above the shear line, but have enough torque that when they start dropping down, an edge of the driver pin catches the plug as it starts to rotate." Victor gave the lock and wires to Yuuri to try.

The record of Yuuri's lock picking timing had extended to the third page of the paper when he heard the pattering sharply overhead. Sheets of rain were beginning to spatter against the wagon cover. He scrambled from trunk to trunk in hasty search for a raincoat.

"Victor, it's time to switch."

"And let you drive under the rain? I don't think so, my love."

Yuuri tried his best to ignore the heat creeping up his cheeks at Victor's term of endearment. The butterflies inside his stomach, however, refused to stop fluttering even as he spoke, "I have no wish to see you ill."

"That doesn't mean you should be the one to catch the cold."

"Then we'll decide by *janken.*" Yuuri covered Victor with the raincoat. "In the meantime, wear this."

"Thanks. What's *janken*?"

"It's … um, you could say it's rock-paper-scissors. Rock wins against scissors, scissors win against paper, and paper wins against rock. To produce a rock, you simply show your closed fist. If you want scissors, let out your index and middle fingers. For paper, show an open palm. There are also variations of accompanying lyrics, but let's not worry about them."

Thus, Victor and Yuuri pumped their fists together. In the end, Yuuri's fist stayed as it was, while Victor showed an open palm. Perhaps Victor read Yuuri's mood while he stubbornly wanted to switch the driving.

"My win. You stay where you are, Yuuri."

"Can't I at least replace you while you are eating … unless rain-soaked bread is your favorite
food?" Yuuri persuaded Victor, and Makkachin sided with him, whimpering pleadingly to her master.

"Very well." Victor handed the reins to Yuuri and ducked underneath the wagon cover. He did not, however, settle down before planting a small kiss on Yuuri's cheek and petting Makkachin's head.

True to his word, Victor returned to driving as soon as he finished his meal. Instead of arguing, Yuuri listened to the gravel crunch beneath the rolling iron tires. For the first time in his life, he marveled at how wagon covers were designed with outward bevels so that they kept rain from coming in under the bonnet. Then he resumed his lock picking practice, having successfully reduced his time from over twenty minutes to less than five per try.
Without the hangover to distract him anymore, Yuuri fully appreciated his bed mate's gloriously naked body for the first time.

The dimming illumination of the sunset put an end to Yuuri's lock picking practice; the last thing he wished was to risk burning Victor's possessions by lighting a candle in a moving wagon. Hitherto, he had succeeded with the many variations of both knob and deadbolt locks, although he still needed to use both hands. With some luck and more practice, he might have been able to do it single-handedly the next day.

A cold draft of wind gave Yuuri a shiver, prompting him to search the trunks for two coats. He delivered one to Victor and wore the other on his own person.

"Will you let me drive now?"

Yuuri already felt his heart skip a beat the moment he laid eyes upon Victor's smile, backlit by the waning sun in the crimson sky. Withal, the older man's choice of words served only to maximize the fluttery sensation inside his stomach as Victor responded, "As you wish, love."

In the last rays of the sun, long shadows heralded the wagons wherever they went. The darkness that vested the waterfall dispersed even farther across the sky as it crept from beneath the murmuring conifer woods. The path turned around a gargantuan rock boulder and blended into the somberness of soughing trees. On they proceeded in a long winding file. When they left the woodlands at last, they found that the realm had been immersed in twilight.

It was the redolent scent of salty air pervading the thoroughfare, rather than the vision of a large body of water that told Yuuri the ocean was nigh. Within minutes, the caravan skidded to a halt. Celestino Cialdini negotiated with one of the ship's captains and, miraculously, he arranged the troupe members to go onboard for the voyage that very night—whether by words or by coins, Yuuri did not know.

With over thirty wagons coming onboard, it took more than two hours to get them all settled. However, they departed without further delay afterward. The cry from the ship's steam turbines perforated the susurrations of the waves. As the moonlight shone upon the ocean's surface, Yuuri wondered how that glittering water would look under daylight.
After ushering the horses into the stables and the livestock into the animal pen, the troupe members had a quick supper, bade one another goodnight, and then retired to their designated cabins. Although it came as no surprise that Yuuri was allotted the same room as Victor, he jumped in a skittish manner when Chris winked at him and whispered, "Enjoy your honeymoon."

While the cabin did not sing with the glory of a cruise ship, its amenities were considerably better than most places Yuuri had visited. Balancing elegance and function, the wood-paneled room featured a writing desk, a seating area, and a queen-size bed of matching sycamore. It also led to an adjoining bathroom.

Chris' quip about the honeymoon might not have been far-fetched; after all, this was to be Yuuri's first night together with Victor without Yuuri falling into slumber. He tried to clear his mind as he stood by the door and knocked.

"Come in," Victor's cheery voice answered him from the other side.

When the door swung open with a little push from Yuuri, the sight it revealed was more than he was prepared to take in. Victor was stripping all of his garments. Did the word "shame" not exist in his vocabulary? Couldn't he reconsider his habit of sleeping with exposed skin while in the company of a bedmate with whom he had merely been acquainted less than forty-eight hours prior?

Without any hangover to distract him, Yuuri appreciated the full beauty of Victor's naked body the first time. Every contour of his stature defined grace in the likeness of the marble statues in art galleries. The tapering from those sturdy shoulders to a slender waist was connected to flawless clavicles, a hairless chest, peachy nipples, and sculpted abdominal muscles. Yuuri's mouth watered at the sight of those jutting hip bones. His knees weakened with desire at the smoothness of Victor's thighs. His heart raced across the length of the ship and back again at the thought of how the sizeable endowment hanging between Victor's legs would feel when it penetrated him.

Although the light from the oil lamp on the nightstand was soothingly dim, Yuuri doubted he could snatch some much-needed sleep with all the tension inside him. A living perfection was so tangibly near, and with Victor's lustrous eyes focused solely on him, Yuuri felt he was the one naked. He decided he'd better establish some rules for himself. Calm down. Take a deep breath. Rule number one: Victor is not a god.

The rule failed to restore order in Yuuri's mind.

Yuuri's gaze followed Victor's every move with the same entrancement as a hypnotized victim. The mattress dipped as his god—er, roommate, that is—settled himself upon it. Each undulation of Victor's muscles ignited Yuuri's ache to touch him. No matter how loud his mind screamed You mustn't be aroused just from watching a man climb a bed! his body refused to listen.

Not that Victor's encouragement of "Yuuri, come to bed" was helping.

Did Victor expect him to sleep in the nude, too? If so, wouldn't the absence of covering disclose the shameful truth regarding the bulge between his legs? He had promised to continue their kisses before the hickey faded from Victor's skin, but this didn't mean they ought to be carnally engaged right then, did it?

Yuuri must have appeared overly insecure because Victor assured him, "I won't do anything to you without consent."

"Y-You don't expect me to sleep without clothes?"
"Not unless you want to."

After putting his blue-rimmed spectacles on the nightstand, Yuuri rolled onto the bed and covered himself with such precipitate haste that Victor's portion of the blanket was violently tugged. "Sorry about that."

As Yuuri hurriedly fixed the blanket back upon Victor's recumbent (and tantalizingly naked) body, Victor placed a palm over his hand.

"Eek!" Yuuri screeched out of reflex. Then he added, "Sorry, I was… I mean… I overreacted. Sorry."

"Yuuri, relax."

"Yes."

"You aren't relaxing."

"I am."

Rather than pressuring Yuuri, Victor released Yuuri's hand. "I was worried lest age has reduced my charm on you."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, it seems that my actions have brought you nothing but discomfort thus far. You were even reluctant to hold hands with me and you didn't react at the sight of my bare body before tonight."

Yuuri knew right away, even without a mirror, that he was blushing. Heat pervaded his cheeks up to the tips of his ears and his breath became feverish. He heard himself murmur, "But now you know that it's not like that at all. Quite the opposite…"

Victor's hand tenderly brushed across his cheek. "Blushing like this, you're so beautiful."

"You're the one who's beautiful. I'm not."

"Can't we be beautiful together?"

Yuuri squirmed. Victor was inordinately kind to him, but he knew what his own value amounted to. Katsuki Yuuri had never been anything more than just a mediocre being, a nondescript entity, a dime a dozen man absent of physical charms.


Victor pulled back, gazed lovingly at the shorter man, and held Yuuri's hands in his own. "You're the best thing in my life."

No one had ever treated him so preciously, and a part of Yuuri wanted to cry. However, biological necessity urged him to break their skinship. "Victor, I need—bathroom!"

Yuuri was about to dash toward the en-suite bathroom when a strong grip encircled his wrist.

"Let me help."
"You don't need to." Yuuri's pitch sounded nearly an octave higher.

"I am responsible for your predicament."

"No, you—well, yes… But I can see to it myself."

"Yuuri, I'm a man, too. There's no need to feel too embarrassed."

Swayed between decorum and desire, Yuuri bit his lower lip. Libidinous thoughts intruded upon his unwelcome consciousness, battling against whatever morality his school teachers had drilled into his person.

"Please?" Victor revealed his ace of hearts by displaying the puppy eyes that Yuuri was incapable of resisting.

A sigh signified Yuuri's defeat. "Just… Just do what you must." He was fully aware that he didn't treat Victor justly by showing the older man reluctance, while in truth, his heart was wild with anticipation. Even so, how could he cope with the embarrassment of what was to come?

"Sit here, Yuuri." Victor patted the middle of the bed.

When Yuuri gave him a hesitant look, he said, "I promise I won't do things you aren't ready for."

As soon as Yuuri complied, Victor sat behind him, each leg flanking Yuuri's. He peppered the side of Yuuri's neck with little kisses, one hand sliding across the expanse of Yuuri's clothed torso. His other hand unzipped Yuuri's trousers before settling around the base of Yuuri's erection.

Victor started stroking Yuuri's length experimentally. Careful fingers ran up and down, as though silently beseeching him, *Don't ask me to stop. Don't ask me to stop.*

As if Yuuri could ever want to stop! The friction from Victor's hand turned out to be nothing like when Yuuri touched himself. He became overly aware of the shirt covering his back being the only barrier separating Victor's bare skin from his own. With desire conflagrating inside him and the primal center of his loins taut as a bow, he grew fervid with need. His hips came up, bucking into Victor with desperation, although such action made him flush with embarrassment.

The tepid puffs of Victor's breath against the side of Yuuri's neck wooed him with unspoken passion, while his dexterous fingers affectionately stroked and squeezed every inch of Yuuri's pliant flesh. A startling sensation rushed up Yuuri’s spine, eliciting a gasp from him. His breath stuck in his throat until he exhaled into a whimper. Thick, white liquid spurted from his length.

Yuuri's chest puffed up and down, his privates throbbing. It mortified him to last barely more than a minute while Victor was stroking him, even though it had been almost three weeks since Yuuri had last sought absolute privacy to take care of what the soldiers dubbed as "a man's need" in the barracks.

It would have taken minutes for Yuuri's breath to decelerate to a normal pace, but he had no such patience at the moment. He had to know Victor's reaction. *Had to.* He whipped around, only to find Victor's benign smile. That man could have sneered something along the lines of "That was fast." Instead, Victor simply gazed at him blissfully.

Willing himself not to stare at the lower part of Victor's enticing body, Yuuri queried, "Victor, what about you? I mean, well, since you're a man with your own need, too…"

Victor blinked, but then he assured Yuuri, "Thanks, I'm fine."
Yuuri cursed to himself as he watched Victor step into the bathroom. How could he expect Victor to be aroused from watching him, while the entire process was so ephemeral? The sound of rushing water filled Yuuri's ears. Victor didn't shut the door, and at any rate, he returned too soon to do anything more than wash his hands.

*What am I to do after this? It feels awkward with just the two of us here. If only there weren't any ban for pets in the cabin!*

"Do you miss Makkachin?" Yuuri remarked when Victor handed him a wet towel to wipe himself.

Victor smiled and laid himself supine on the bed. "Yes, but she'll be all right. This isn't the first time she has to sleep in the animal pen."

"How often does the troupe travel?" Yuuri put the used towel on the nightstand and joined Victor in bed, snuggling under the blanket.

"Annually, it ranges from three to ten times for seafaring and sixty to ninety times for journey by land. We never stay in one town for more than a couple of days—five at most, if the city is densely populated. Do you travel a lot, Yuuri?"

"No. Other than the military marches, a few times for family vacations, and a couple of skating tryouts, I don't travel." Glancing at Victor's unease, Yuuri hastily appended, "Ah, it doesn't mean I don't like to travel. I just didn't see any need to, especially since my family inn could always use extra hands."

*And I'm looking forward to traveling with you,* Yuuri wanted to say, but swallow back those words out of bashfulness. Instead, he changed the subject, "The newspaper articles mention that Yakov found you four months before your thirteenth birthday, and then the two of you traveled together. He trained you to become a world-class figure skater, and after your first win at the national competition, he established *Circus! on Ice.* What was it like to become his first student?"

"Well, Yakov was strict—and still is, mind you—but he has always been kind. He gave me a puppy who would become Makkachin's mother because he noticed I cried a lot. I was pretty depressed after my family's death. In fact, the first time Yakov met me was when he fished at my village's lake." He paused to inhale a sharp intake of breath. "I tried to drown myself."

"Why? You were still twelve, weren't you?" The confession bewildered Yuuri. It was never mentioned in any newspaper. The moment he realized that the question was too personal, it was already too late.

To Yuuri's utmost relief, Victor didn't seem to mind. "Twelve and orphaned. My parents, my sister, and everyone I knew in the village were massacred by the enemy troop. All the women were dishonored of their marriage beds and the maidens were deflowered before they could even bloom. The male population was forced to watch at gunpoint. The cries of my mother and sister still haunt me across the years."

"Oh, Victor…" Yuuri did not think. Body reacting faster than his mind, he was hugging Victor tightly before he knew it.

Victor continued, "Then the enemy soldiers gathered us all at the village square. They took their time shooting us one by one, sneering at every plea and every tear spilled for our family, friends, and neighbors. My father was begging them to spare my sister and me when they shot him. He fell with eyes wide open and tears streaking his cheeks. So did all other villagers. The only thing that kept me alive was the pendant in one of the inner pockets of my coat, which I had just fetched from
the jewel smith on an errand for my mother. Its thick gold locket had prevented the bullet from piercing through my chest. Still, I passed out from the impact, and I guess the soldiers didn't bother to check for any pulse. When I came to, I found myself amid the sea of corpses in a deserted, ransacked village."

"I'm sorry." Yuuri tightened his hug, voice stifled in his throat. In truth, he meant it not only as a condolence for the tragedy that had befallen Victor's village, but also an apology for making Victor recall those painful memories. If only the right words would surface! It occurred to Yuuri that as the younger of the two children, he used to be comforted by his parents and elder sister instead of the other way round. Nor could his scanty number of friends hone him adequately in the art of solacing the distressed.

Victor shook his head. "It's all right. I want to tell you about the part of me that isn't celebrated in mass media. Yuuri, I don't want you to choose me without knowing the real me."

Yuuri kissed the top of Victor's head. He didn't let go of his hands, and the two men fell asleep whilst embracing each other.

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Hours later, Yuuri learned that waking up next to an utterly naked gorgeous figure wasn't healthy for his heart. It thumped wildly enough to jump out of his ribcage at his close proximity with Victor's radiant hair, dainty eyelashes, perfect nose, and soft lips. Oh, what would he give to glide his fingers upon Victor's smooth skin!

*But what if Victor awakes because I disturb him?*

Yuuri decided to forego the idea and go back to sleep.
The Morning Ritual

Chapter Summary

When it came to Victor Nikiforov, watching him shave was tantamount to morning arousal.

Chapter Notes

Credit: This chapter is beta-read by rasclieboobear & The Kindly One

4

The Morning Ritual

The next time Yuuri opened his eyes, sunlight had filtered through circular plate-glass windows overlooking the glittering ocean. The part of the bed next to him was vacant, but its sheets were still warm. Having fumbled for his spectacles, he instinctively thought to check the bathroom. The sound of water remained absent and the door ajar, but just to be sure, he stepped inside.

There, his god of a roommate was standing before the washbasin, looking at the mirror while sliding a razor across his foam-covered chin. The view was nothing short of mesmerizing, and it held Yuuri captive.

With the blur of sleep cleared from his mind, Yuuri struggled to chase away the impure thoughts of Victor's glorious nudity. He focused on the razor because watching anything else—the alluring fingers, the sinful jawline, and the elegance of an inviting neck—would rouse tingling sensations in the pit of his stomach. Victor stood there, completely oblivious to his effect on Yuuri as the blade angled, dipped, skimmed across Victor's flawless jaw, orchestrated by efficient fingers with pronounced grace as well as precision.

Efficient.

How efficient those very fingers had been while they touched him so thoroughly the previous night!

A shiver ran down Yuuri's spine. Even a fool would have the decency not to repeat the same blunder, and yet… The more propriety rebuked him into giving Victor personal space and privacy, the more his feet refused to move away from the spot.

A too-willing audience savoring every step of Victor's morning ritual, Yuuri held his breath, watching the shape and sharpness of the metal. The blade glinted in the morning sunlight from the window, and as Yuuri shifted his glance, his eyes riveted to Victor tilting his head, exposing the length of his throat. A dark spot took up residence on the otherwise unblemished skin, and Yuuri beamed with pride that he was the reason for the mark's existence.
How he wished to leap to Victor's side and reinstate that proof of possession over him that very second!

It was not until Victor had finished dabbing the aftershave that he turned to the side with his blindingly handsome smile. "Morning, Yuuri. Would you like me to shave you?"

Yuuri squeaked, "No! I mean—" He cleared his throat. "—that wouldn't be necessary." It had been folly of him to think that Victor had been truly ignorant to his overt ogle.

"No, but it would be lovely."

"I was just watching you because I haven't found any newspaper article featuring a shaving Victor," Yuuri replied, his tone too defensive to corroborate honesty.

"Were you waiting for me to finish so that you can use the bathroom?"

Yuuri's anxiety escalated as he saw Victor's lips curving upwards. He hoped with all his might that Victor hadn't noticed the tent in the middle of his trousers.

"You know that was not my intention. Don't tease me!" Yuuri rushed out of the bathroom.

"Wait!"

Yuuri wouldn't. He was going to jog across the ship, despite his raging hard-on, until that part of him calmed down from fatigue.

At least, that had been what he was prepared to do until Victor's hand covered his on the door handle. Victor was standing directly behind him, slightly out of breath from sprinting across the cabin. In life, there were things classifiable as wonders, and being hugged from behind by Victor Nikiforov definitely counted as one of them.

"I'm sorry. There's an old saying: when a man falls in love, he'll bully his love interest to show his affection. I guess that applies to me." The solemnity in Victor's apology melted Yuuri's bones and filled him with dizzying yearnings.

"Unhand me," Yuuri demanded through gritted teeth, aware of how his morning breath contrasted with Victor's minty one.

Victor removed his hand from Yuuri's, but in lieu of keeping it to himself, he wrapped it around Yuuri's waist. A tender kiss, tentatively slow, planted itself on Yuuri's nape just above the collar of his shirt. Yuuri stood completely still, the inaction of his body in direct contrast to the frenzied tumult building within it. It was no use pretending that he didn't wish to be held by his idol; he had all the chance he needed to shift his own body or push Victor away.

"Let me tell you a secret," Victor murmured behind Yuuri's ear. "When a man sees his lover so adorably draped in his own clothes, his mind has one purpose only." He licked the shell of Yuuri's ear. "Can you guess it?"

'To strip the garment off his lover,' Yuuri answered in his mind. However, to cover his own inner turmoil, he retorted, "We'll be late for breakfast and—ah!" he gasped at another delicious probe of Victor's sinful tongue. "—Makkachin … we … we need to feed her."

"In a moment, my love. For now, we need to make certain you won't be scolded for indecency in public." Without further ado, Victor scooped Yuuri and deposited him on the edge of the bed.
"Wait!" Yuuri's pitch sounded too high to be classified as anything but a squeak.

"You said it yourself that we had no time to waste so as not to be tardy for breakfast." Down on both knees, Victor placed himself between Yuuri's parted legs.

"But—"

Victor bent until his face was directly in front of Yuuri's clothed pubes and unzipped Yuuri's trousers.

"I shouldn't be letting you do this" was Yuuri's moaned protestation as he felt Victor take out his throbbing member.

"Rest assured; nothing I do will make you limp today."

When Victor lowered his clean-shaven face to kiss the tip of Yuuri's erect flesh, Yuuri's body jerked, but he didn't make any attempt to re-zip his fly. He merely squirmed as Victor's beguiling tongue circumnavigated his girth. It was the weirdest sensation, as if he was falling into a pit by the name of desire, and only Victor could pull him up or plunge him farther down.

_Not only did Victor touch me so intimately last night, but he also sucks me this morning. It's too much!_

"V-Victor, that's enough. I can—" The rest of Yuuri's words whirled into oblivion the moment Victor took Yuuri's erection into his mouth.

Heat surged up Yuuri's spine, brushing off his remaining inhibition as Victor's mouth swallowed his length. He may or may not have made a low, breathy noise; everything whirled into delirious heat, and the only thing Yuuri knew was he didn't desire Victor and his wonderful mouth to stop. _Ever._

Except, of course, Victor did.

Cuss words had poised themselves at the tip of Yuuri's tongue when he discerned what Victor was doing. He watched, stunned, as Victor licked a few pearly drops of early desire streaking from his hardened member.

"Victor!"

"Hmm?"

"That's—" Yuuri lowered his volume; it start to sink in that shouting wouldn't change what had already transpired. "—dirty."

"Mm…" Victor hummed but swallowed all the same. He even ran his tongue across his lips to consume all the remnants.

"How could you!" Yuuri whimpered and buried his face into his palms.

"Yuuri, so this is what you taste like. I desire more." Victor looked up at Yuuri, nuzzling into his crotch and glancing up—cheeks flushed, eyes ablaze, lips sleek and parted.

Yuuri's heart thudded and his arousal throbbed. He watched Victor plunge again, working on the rhythm to fit more and more of Yuuri's heated flesh in his mouth, until he could feel its sensitive tip hit the back of Victor's throat. Yuuri gave in to his body's unashamed need for more attention from
Victor's mouth, closing his eyes as Victor started sucking on him in earnest.

Victor's tongue danced over his pulsating member, prodding persistently at its slit until Yuuri tilted his head back and threaded his fingers into Victor's hair. Victor accepted this as encouragement; he pulled back and bobbed down again, falling into a rhythm of several shallow plunges followed by one deep.

The third time Victor took in all of Yuuri's length, the sitting man grabbed Victor's head on reflex, tangling those silvery locks in violent knots. The action made the seducer grow more confident. His worshipful hands roamed along Yuuri's inner thighs, making Yuuri feel as though the trousers had been peeled off from his limbs, all the while Yuuri's body tautened from its need to thrust against the tantalizing torment of Victor's mouth.

On the stage, Victor's tendency to surprise the audience had been renowned; in bed, his tendency to surprise Yuuri was yet to be discovered. He elevated Yuuri's throbbing member, dragging a wet trail with his deft tongue from base to crown of the underside without taking his heated gaze off Yuuri's flushed face.

Passion pooling into the base of his stomach, Yuuri burned with a need that only Victor could assuage. In vain did he try to stall breathing out strangled moans, discomfited but desperate with the yearning for more. He could no longer even tell whether he groaned in agony like a man under torture or moaned promiscuously like the seduced victim of a love god.

"Vi—aaahh!" Yuuri cried out. His body shuddered into a spasm. The gathering heat in his groin had built up an inevitable backdraft, and he came undone. He arched his back and saw white explode before his closed eyes. His partner had drawn away completely the frenzied, blazing need that rolled inside him.

Victor tightened the grip of his mouth around Yuuri's pulsing manhood as it spilled into his throat. Later, as Yuuri was still gasping for breath, Victor removed his mouth from Yuuri's flaccid manhood with a wanton pop.

It was only after the bliss had subsided and Yuuri's breath had decelerated that he started to notice Victor's lack of endeavor to disgorge what he had swallowed. Eyes widening in shock, Yuuri chided, "Victor, that's unhygienic! Spit it out!"

"Never," he replied in a sing-song voice. "I've finally received something from you."

"Victor!" Yuuri invoked the most reprimanding tone he could muster, but then he caught a glimpse of Victor's erection. Eager to return the favor, Yuuri appealed, "Lie down."

"Aren't we in a rush?"

"We can't let you be the one getting scolded for ind—"

"Yuuri," Yakov's voice resounded from the other side of the door, just as loud as a sergeant taking the squadron's attendance in a roll call. "Are you arisen?"

"Yes, coach," Yuuri frantically replied.

"Have breakfast, then meet me at the ballroom in half an hour."

After an apologetic look at Victor and a promise to make up, Yuuri dashed toward the bathroom and took the quickest shower in his life.
The absence of gilded ornaments and marble flooring made Yuuri believe that the so-called ballroom could be converted to a room of more versatile functions, from a business meeting to a not-so-glamorous party. As a matter of fact, it appeared no different from an ordinary empty hall, except for the fact that an old woman was presently standing in its center. Her aged years had sapped the strength of her body although it had not robbed her hair of its prominent brown color. Her slim frame looked fragile, her face wizened and deeply lined despite the thick application of make-up. When she spoke, however, her voice was paradoxically strict, "So you're the one who has caught Victor's attention. Show me your \textit{élevé}.'

'She's a ballet instructor?' The ballroom was equipped with neither \textit{barre} nor floor-to-ceiling mirrors, but they were aboard a ship in lieu of inside a studio. Yuuri flexed his toes before rising all the way up to \textit{full-pointe} from flat feet.

Her expression remained inscrutable as she commanded, "Do some stretching exercises. Take your time. Ready your muscles to perform \textit{fouetté turns} without injuring yourself.'

"Just don't stop until I say so.'

\textit{Maintaining as much stability in his hips as possible, Yuuri bent his knees outward with his back held straight. He put his arms out to get momentum to spin. Too slow will prevent you from feeling the momentum and too fast will prevent you from controlling movement.} Yuuri recalled what Minako-sensei—the ballet instructor in his hometown—used to remind her students. He whipped his leg around to the side as his foot was retracted to his supporting knee, creating the impetus to rotate one turn. Then his leg returned out nearing the end of a single rotation to restart the entire leg motion for successive rotations.

On his fourth turn, Yuuri saw eagerness flicker in the old woman's dark eyes, and on his tenth, she ordered, "Continue with a \textit{fouetté jeté}.'

Yuuri's breath hitched. 'Of all ballet moves, she just has to pick the one I'm least confident in.' He inhaled sharply and began to leap. He threw one leg into the air and pushed off the floor with the other, jumping into the air and landing again on the first leg.

As he had expected, the ballet instructor was not pleased. Not only did she frown, but she also said, "Now perform a front split.'

Yuuri's stomach lurched. With his solid core, he needn't spend extra energy to keep his body in alignment; the real reason he didn't achieve a beautiful split \textit{grand jeté} was his nondescript level of flexibility. The ballet instructor knew this perfectly well.

Keeping his legs apart as far as possible had always been something Yuuri couldn't do painlessly, but the timing of holding his breath and releasing it while he dropped his crotch onto the floor did help. Still, to sit in his split without a \textit{dance belt} would be excruciating.

"Enough. You need to work more on your hip flexors along with the inner thighs and the hamstrings,' the aged woman commented when Yuuri's crotch was five inches from the floor of veneered plywood and his expression had contorted with pain, the muscles behind his knees screaming in agony.
"So, you will take him?" Yakov inquired the moment Yuuri rose to his feet.

"He needs one-on-one training before he can join my class," she affirmed to Yakov. Next, she turned at Yuuri. "I am Lilia Baranovskaya, your new ballet instructor. Acquire yourself a dance belt. Our practice begins in half an hour."

###

"So, how's the training with Lilia?" Victor asked Yuuri at lunch break.

"It might be the most nerve-wracking ballet session I've ever practiced thus far."

"Oh, many of Lilia's students say the same thing," Victor chuckled. "I guess perfectionism is part of her nature, being a former prima ballerina and all. At least you managed to pull through it." Victor sipped his glass of lemonade.

"But tell me, why are you still looking tense even though the ballet is already over for today? You've barely even touched your seafood paella."

"The next lesson is ballroom dancing."

"One of your fortés," Victor pointed out.

"What I'm good at isn't necessarily good enough for this troupe. Earlier, Yakov asked Lilia whether she'd take me as her student. Had she refused, wouldn't I be kicked out of Circus! on Ice?"

"What? Of course not!" Victor asserted incredulously. "You'd simply be assigned to a different instructor, that's all. Lilia's the best, though."

"You mean, if … if I fail the selection test for the ballroom dancing class, I don't have to leave the troupe?"

Victor laughed aloud. "Actually, there won't be any selection for any class other than Lilia's; she's selective about the required skills for her students. I guess Yakov purposely didn't warn you so that you didn't have time to be nervous this morning."

Yuuri exhaled in relief, and his shoulders drooped. "And thanks again for the dance belt." Yuuri willed with all his might not to blush. It had been bad enough he had to run around the ship, trying to find Victor only to ask for a pair of T-back underwear. He had been spared from the embarrassment of donning Victor's used briefs for everyday wear because Victor happened to keep some new ones in his wardrobe. Embarrassment hadn't spared him when it came to the dance belt. All in all, Yuuri had been fortunate enough to be able to digest Lilia's lesson while wearing an object that used to wrap Victor's most intimate part.

"I'm glad to be useful."

Yuuri knew that Victor did not refer only to the dance belt, but also to satiating Yuuri's baser desires. His only consolation was that at least Victor mentioned it without any trace of complacency.
Chapter Summary

Yuuri was worried lest the dancing lesson would be as intimidating as the ballet one, but he had Victor by his side this time, and that made all the difference.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is beta-read by The Kindly One & Angelycious

5

Dancing Partners

Having assumed that every lesson was mandatory, Yuuri was surprised to discover that not every skater took ballroom dancing. He was more surprised still to learn that, despite such an option, the only ones absent were Mila, who was reputed to fail at every attempt involving synchronization with a partner, and Seung-gil, who adamantly refused to partake in any activity requiring inevitable dependence to a partner. The coaches believed that students who learned with passion rather than those who merely acquiesced to compulsory lessons would achieve a better result. For the same reason, dancing lessons were not limited to skaters only; non-skaters such as Isabella and a couple of stagehands became regulars in the class.

The most delightful surprise of all, however, was the room itself. Now that it hosted the people who treated him just as warmly as his own family, it was hard to believe that this was the very location wherein he had practiced his first ballet session with Lilia a few hours prior. The ballroom no longer intimidated him. If anything, it felt reassuring. His colleagues were there. Victor was there, with him. Everything would be all right.

Since Michele would glare and growl at anyone who ever asked Sara for a dance, she became his partner at every session by default. As Isabella's sole reason for attendance was to spend more time with J.J., she, too, never partnered up with another skater. That left the rest of the male skaters to pair up among themselves.

"Who's your usual choice of a partner?" Yuuri asked when Victor held his hand and led him to the dance floor. He couldn't help feeling guilty of robbing someone of his partner.

A grinning Chris raised his hand. "That'd be me. Ah, but don't fret. Nothing gives me more happiness than to see lovers dance passionately." He winked at Yuuri before approaching the younger Yuri.

"Li'l Yurio, would you—"

The teenage boy snapped at him, "That's not my name! Away with you!"
Phichit tapped Chris's shoulder from behind. "Seeking a partner?"

"You still have this … guilty look upon your face," the sound of Victor's voice made Yuuri return his attention.

"Without me, the dance routine of this group wouldn't have been disrupted."

"If our paths had never crossed, my world would have been an empty shell as I'd live on as an incipient being until I breathed my last without ever knowing true love."

To Yuuri, it felt as though the room temperature had risen a hundred degrees.

"Victor," Chris joked in a mock-reproving tone, "You bad boy. What have you done to poor Yuuri to make him blush so fervently in public?"

It was not only Phichit, but also Leo and Guang Hong standing close by, who giggled.

Victor whispered into Yuuri's ear, "If dancing with me bothers you that much, we can always switch to different partners after each style ends. A song is usually repeated up to three times for corrections before the class moves on to another ballroom dance type."

Yuuri intended to tell Victor that he was not bothered, but at that moment, all the chatter in the class died down because of Celestino's instruction, "All right, now that everyone has warmed up and paired up, let's start today's session with a cha cha."

Yuuri took his position facing Victor. He placed his left hand on the outside of Victor's right shoulder, while holding Victor's hand at his eye level. In this manner, he let Victor take the masculine role in the dance. He also stood slightly to the right of his partner so that when they stepped forward and back, their knees wouldn't hit.

"Who's Celestino's partner?" Yuuri asked barely above a whisper, taking care not to draw everyone else's attention.

Victor answered in an equally low volume, "Park Min-so is this class' other dance instructor, as well as Seung-gil's skating coach. She was indisposed the night we held your welcome party."

Perhaps because this was not the first time Yuuri danced with Victor, the cha cha was relatively easy compared to their foxtrot and paso doble a couple of nights prior. Neither instructor directed any correction at them during the three times the song was played.

Still, the music ended too soon for Yuuri's liking. It was with a heavy heart that Yuuri watched Victor step away from him. True to his word, Victor asked Phichit to dance with him, which left Yuuri to partner with Chris.

Yuuri found syncing with Chris to be almost as easy as syncing with Victor. They swung their hips through each step, creating a fluid motion and a sensuous atmosphere during the mambo. Chris was an exceptionally gifted dancer in his own right, and Yuuri was certain that Chris' performance wouldn't change even if he were to dance with a lesser man. It was with a mix of disappointment and relief when Yuuri did not detect jealousy flaring in Victor's eyes after Phichit commented that Yuuri and Chris danced the raunchiest in the class.

A five-minute break found most students with either drink or toilet needs. Isabella approached Yuuri and told him that she would need his measurements for the upcoming stage costumes. Before returning to her fiancé's side, she added, "And bring Victor when you go to the tween deck after dinner."
Post-break, the *bolero* dance became Michele and Sara's turn to shine. As expected from pair skaters, the fluidity of their attitude lifts was unquestionable. Amid the elegant flutter of Sara's gown and the athletic grace of Michele's footwork, they moved slowly and sinuously across the floor, weight on their toes. To Yuuri, syncing with the other skaters proved to be harder than expected. His experimental pair up, as proven at first by his experimental pair up with Guang Hong, while Phichit danced the bolero with Leo, proved this. They switched to Yuuri – Leo and Phichit – Guang Hong pairs during *samba*.

The most challenging sync for Yuuri was a *waltz* with Otabek. He continued to glance longingly at Victor and Georgi, while having a hunch that Otabek was in a similar state towards Chris and Yuri. J.J. and Isabella, however, glided around the veneered plywood floor so smoothly that they almost appeared to be weightless.

The class concluded with a *rumba*. Not a second was wasted; Yuuri did not think twice about scuttling to Victor's side. He bowed, wordlessly asking Victor for a dance with which he desired no other partner.

Unlike the sultrier choice of most rumba music, the melody flowed with the dreamy cadence of a music box—a fairy tale come to life. Through unspoken agreement, Yuuri led the dance by stepping forward with his left foot and Victor followed him by stepping backward with his right foot. Watching the rhythm of Victor's breathing, Yuuri synchronized their steps on the balls of their feet in a side-by-side *progressive walk*. This was Victor Nikiforov—the person to whom he had single-mindedly devoted himself since the age of nine—and dancing with Victor felt as natural as dancing with the extension of his own limbs.

Yuuri whirled Victor in *spiral turns*, which rose and sank so smoothly around the axis of Victor's body while Victor swiveled one full turn to his right, allowing his right leg to curl around his left before stepping out. What a master of temptation! Yuuri could only seduce Victor back by swiping him off the floor in one fluid motion with a *hip lift spin*. He had his doubts about lifting a man taller than he was, but here, Victor put his ballet technique to brilliant use: helping Yuuri to support his weight during the lift by putting pressure through his left arm and pushing off of Yuuri's shoulder to boost him upward. That man always knew how to set Yuuri's heart aflame.

Upon landing, Victor gyrated slowly while pivoting on a single leg and lifting the other knee-high, while Yuuri rotated around him. Their movements represented Yuuri's life before they met—how he had poured his heart and soul into someone who hadn't known of his existence. It had been foolish of him to close his eyes and tell himself that his dreams would one day come true. Even so, what else could he do, when every thought had led him straight to an entity named Victor Nikiforov despite the miles separating them?

Their next choreography symbolized their present courtship. First, Victor extricated himself to stand face-to-face with Yuuri, seeing him for the first time in a new light. Then, Yuuri spun himself to chase Victor. Once the distance between them was reclosed and he held Victor in his arms, the intensity of their dance was increased by sharp eye contact. The stillness of their upper body, while adding dramatic intensity, also emphasized the strong, sensuous leg and foot movements. At last, at long last, Victor reciprocated Yuuri's feelings. With impeccable timing, their bodies flirted in swirling entanglements through their *reverse top*. They switched the masculine and feminine roles again in the *three alemanas* that followed. It was better from both practical and aesthetic standpoints that Yuuri with his inferior height should be the one to be spun under Victor's raised arm. While Victor led and created proper spacing for his turns with flawless accuracy, Yuuri guessed that Victor selected that move because of the meaning it alluded. They faced the same direction before the second turn, indicating they had the same goal. The delayed walk in the second *alemana* showed how Victor was willing to wait for Yuuri, his apprentice, to
catch up to him before proceeding to the third alemana.

Victor held Yuuri by his waist and hip lift spun him, but he added a touch of his own to Yuuri's previous choreography by supporting his partner's uplifted thigh. Then he spun and dipped Yuuri, lips pursuing his partner's in vain as Yuuri tipped his head back flirtatiously.

*How come the dance floor feels more spacious?* Yuuri momentarily wondered.

As they entered the fun position, with Yuuri going on Victor's left side at an arm's length ninety degrees to him, it began to dawn on Yuuri that, having stopped dancing, the other couples scooted to the edges to give them room. Hesitation seized Yuuri. Although the instructors had not issued an order for him and Victor to stop, the class was supposed to be all about skill-honing practice in lieu of whimsical fascination. Nevertheless, the moment his gaze locked with his dance partner's, all his doubts dissipated. He found himself drowning in the depths of the illimitable abyss that was Victor's eyes.

They continued with a *circular hip twist*. Yuuri resumed his masculine role and Victor was dancing Yuuri's mood—flirtatious, alluring, inviting. Yuuri responded no less boldly. He twirled Victor with a *rope spinning* like adding an extra twirl to a lariat that began with Victor's spiral. With every movement of his tempting body, Victor provoked Yuuri further, *Ravish me with your dance, seduce me.*

Their dance ended with Yuuri down on one knee and Victor leaning onto him at an oblique angle, lunging forward with bent knee in front and retaining balance with his straight leg at the back. Their faces were so close together that their foreheads nearly touched, and Victor's hand affectionately caressed Yuuri's face. Although a voice in the back of Yuuri's head reminded him for the umpteenth time that day that they were in the midst of a dance class, the rest of him wanted to lunge forward and capture Victor's tantalizing mouth right there and then. He had a justifiable suspicion that Victor knew exactly what he was feeling and deliberately presented those sweetly parted lips for him. Victor's expression melded into a look of passion, but only stillness lingered on his lips. He waited for Yuuri, daring him to continue with a sensuous gaze. That minx!

"*Bravi! Bravissimi!*" Celestino clapped so hard that everyone else immediately followed his example. The other dancers were smiling openly, and Isabella was even wiping off J.J.'s tears with her kerchief.

A broad grin spread across Victor's exulted features, and Yuuri thought he could drink in that exuberance for hours. A wave of euphoria engulfed his entire being.

"Kiss him!" Phichit yelled and repeated the demand by stomping his foot. (Un)fortunately, the other dancers were of one mind with him. Yuuri felt his face burn with chagrin, but he was too elated to care. Amid the chorus of "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!", he rose to his feet and dipped Victor, one hand lifting his partner by one leg, the other holding him by the nape.

"Ooooommhh~" the audience cheered when their chaste kiss ended. Another wide grin graced Victor's delectable lips, tempting Yuuri to plant more kisses on them, but he held back for the sake of modesty.

###

Carrying Makkachin's meal in a bowl, Yuuri dashed to the animal pen before dinner. There, he petted the brown poodle, apologized that he didn't visit her sooner, told her to be patient for a couple of days more, and promised her a walk at the earliest convenience once they arrived at their destination. He carried Makkachin's empty bowl—presumably brought by Victor that morning—
When Yuuri arrived at the dining hall, Victor stood on the far side of the room, engaged in a deep conversation with J.J. and Chris. Thus, Yuuri fixed himself a plate without disturbing them.

"Yuuri, come and sit with us," Phichit genially addressed him, waving his hand.

Grateful for the invitation, Yuuri carried his tray toward Phichit's four-seat table. Leo scooted to the side to give him room.

"How was your day?" Guang Hong, who sat opposite Leo, asked.

"Morning was intense. When it comes to flexibility, Lilia made it clear that I have room for improvements."

"So you're taking ballet," Leo replied between mouthfuls. "That explains those suave moves during today's dance class."

"And you?"

"Me, Guang Hong, and Phichit take gymnastics. We specialize in acrobats."

"How long have you studied acrobats?"

"I started at four," Phichit answered.

"Me, since five," Leo said.

"And I, six," Guang Hong added.

"So you didn't join this troupe at the same time?"

"Nah. Come to think of it, I probably have the silliest reason to enroll." Phichit swallowed his quesadilla before continuing, "Leo here wanted to finance his family and Guang Hong attended the circus in pursuit of higher education—he frequently won local tournaments in his hometown, you see." Phichit took another bite and said, "Me, au contraire, came because of a family feud."

"Oh, Phichit, I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's not as serious as it sounds," Phichit wave Yuuri off. "It's just because, you know, my aunt used to flaunt my cousin's acrobatic skills, and my mom couldn't stand it. So she sent me to join a world famous troupe and, needless to say, she invited half the town to celebrate when I passed the entrance exam."

"There's nothing silly about that. I—" Yuuri held back his tongue, discomfited at the thought of his reason.

As if reading his thoughts, Phichit said, "You joined for Victor's sake. You're a Victor specialist. Yeah, we knew."

Yuuri sipped on his drink as an excuse to hide his blush. He had hoped that it wouldn't be crystal clear to all troupe members how much he took a fanatical interest in Victor.

"Speak of the devil~" Leo teased in sing-song.

The moment Yuuri's eyes fell upon Victor's striding figure, the urge to straighten his collar and
slick down his hair revisited him. He gripped his fork harder than necessary, wishing the room did not feel strangely airless just because of the radiant smile of a man bringing a tray of food.

While Yuuri remained bashful of the other skaters' reactions to his relationship with Victor, Victor seemed to bask in it. He couldn't lean on Yuuri owing to the gap between their tables, but that distance didn't stop him from feeding Yuuri an *almeja en salsa verde* from his own fork. "Yuuri, say ahh~"

Yuuri shifted uncomfortably as Phichit, Leo, and Guang Hong eyed him with growing interest. Moreover, Victor seemed to glow when he offered Yuuri the clam in green sauce. "Just one bite, Victor, then I'll eat the rest by myself."

Victor nodded, but Yuuri's table mates chorused, "Daawww, there's no need to be shy~"

Not that Yuuri admitted it aloud, but the clam *did* taste more delicious coming from Victor.

###

"There you are." Isabella smiled at Yuuri and Victor the moment they reached the tween deck, the sea breeze ruffling their hair.

She pulled what appeared to be photo albums as well as a sketchpad from a large bag next to her. "Victor, here's the design you requested. Have a look at these samples and choose which material you'd like for your new stage costume. I'm going to make another one for Yuuri, but with a contrasting color."

As soon as Victor took the catalogs of fabric samples, Isabella turned to Yuuri. "Lift your arms sideways."

Isabella wrapped a measuring tape around Yuuri's chest, and then jotted down the result on a notepad. "You can put them down now," she said while scribbling.

"Wow, amazing!" Victor's eyes beamed and his mouth melded to a heart shape as he scrutinized the sketchpad. "This part here will hide the fiberglass body cast without making me look stout."

Isabella's lips curved at the compliment. She measured around the base of Yuuri's neck, followed by the circumference of his waist and the fullest part of his hips.

"Are all skaters fitted with new costumes once the troupe moves to a new location?" Yuuri asked Isabella.

"No, the new costumes are sewn when we decide on a new theme. That's done once or twice a year —except for Victor, that is. He needs a replacement costume on every show, since it's going to be sliced and burned during his guillotine and cremation tricks." Isabella squatted to measure the length of Yuuri's inseam.

"Is there anything that catches your eye?" Isabella asked Victor as she rose to her feet.

"It's a tough choice between this, this, this, this, and this." Victor pointed at five different squares of garment.

The way Isabella rolled her eyes gave Yuuri a suspicion that this occurrence always happened whenever Victor was involved. "Why don't you let Yuuri decide for you?"

"Good idea! Yuuri, which one do you think would suit both of us the best?"
Yuuri scooted closer. He touched the fabrics and felt the friction created by his gliding fingertips. "This one may not be comfortable for dancing, so it's out of question." He stroked the other four once more before casting a glance at Isabella. "Do you have a flashlight with you?"

"Yes, but why?" She queried with raised eyebrow. The lamps on the deck and the gibbous moon above should provide enough illumination.

"I'm trying to compare which one looks best on stage, and a flashlight beam is the closest equivalent to limelight we have right now."

Isabella took out a flashlight from her large bag and held it for Yuuri while he inspected the four options. At length, Yuuri decided, "These two stand out more than the rest. Since Victor's costume is burned on almost a daily basis, I think we should pick the one that costs less."

"Wise thinking," Isabella commented.

As she made note of Yuuri's final choice, Victor took Yuuri's hands in his own and beamed at him, "Give me a reason not to fall in love with you all over again."

Even though Yuuri chided, "It's just costuming. Don't exaggerate!" the fluttery feelings inside him wouldn't leave.

Isabella started to return the catalogs into the bag, but Victor halted her, "Wait, there's another set of costumes I'd like to discuss with you." Then he turned to Yuuri and pecked his forehead. "You may go ahead to practice lock picking."
The vehicle deck had been a vast space to park the troupe wagons on the ship, but now it inspired Yuuri with eldritch horror. Nonetheless, instead of encountering a ghost or two, he saw Chris and his lover engaged in a promiscuous activity.

Yuuri's intuition told him that if he were to practice in his and Victor's bedroom, he wouldn't be able to concentrate, thanks to the visualizations of a naked Victor; because of this, he planned to practice in the game room as soon as he collected the materials from Victor's wagon in the vehicle deck.

Finding the vehicle deck was quite straightforward; entering it was not. The deck was passable by way of a set of stairs, with which Yuuri descended. He bemoaned not borrowing Isabella's flashlight, for he failed to find the light switch for the deck. It was hard to believe that the place had been so lively when the troupe members had arrived the night before; at present, its deadly quietness grew more and more akin to an ageless void and its stale air heavy with the mustiness of years.

Heart thundering in his chest and a ghastly chill prickling his skin, Yuuri stepped forward. In the eerie hush, the unwelcoming floor condemned his weight upon it, shrieking with every step he took. Except for a few spots where moonlight could afford to reach, he found darkness swallowing the whole place. Disquieting shadows prowled the vehicle deck as dauntingly as vast grave markers in a cemetery yard.

Fear gnawed on Yuuri more tenaciously than a dog on a bone. He had to clench his jaws together for the shivering to cease; the rising tide of fright tore away the remaining courage within him. He prayed with all his heart that nobody would ambush him as he advanced through the somberness of the place that exuded eldritch gloom.

It was his memory of where each vehicle had been parked rather than sight that aided more to the quest for Victor's wagon. Veiled in sinister blackness, the wagon towered above him like the abode of some malefic warlock. Yuuri swallowed and climbed aboard the lightless vehicle.
Nothing will spring from any of those trunks! he convinced himself as he couched on the shadowy flooring of the wagon, banishing the thought of the piled-up trunks as the threatening silhouettes of formless creatures.

Lurking in that shadowy corner was the trunk Yuuri sought. Silently he congratulated himself for thinking to place the locks and stationery on the top of the heap. Without haphazard exploration, he wouldn't have been able to locate them no matter how hard he strained his eyes. He simply refused to spend a moment longer than necessary in the company of gut-wrenching ebony stagnation. Panic rising within him, Yuuri's sense of time was affected; causing hours and seconds to converge until he wasn't sure how long had passed anymore.

Then it came. For the first time, Yuuri heard a sound other than the sound of his own heartbeats. A sound in the likeness of a distant echo pierced through the formerly silent vehicle deck.

Yuuri felt the icy tentacles of apprehension spread outward from the middle of his chest. He could still make a run for it.

However, what Yuuri's mind dictated, the rest of his body refused. Concentrating hard, he tracked the source back to where it had come from: behind the door on the near side of the wall. If memory served him right, a ship's crew had informed the troupe members that what lay on the other side of the door was the steerage, where the ship's supplies were stored.

With morbid curiosity and taut nerves, he made his way to the door with its erstwhile hinges. In a place so devoid of light, trepidation gripped Yuuri more tightly than ever, every inch of him quivering in anxiety. The sweaty hand, with which he held his chest, did nothing to calm his palpitating heart.

In the closer distance, the formerly indeterminate sound grew more intelligible. At first, it sounded like the faintest of whispers. After Yuuri strained his ears, it sounded like a low, guttural growl, which gave him a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach and made his skin crawl.

The door's keyhole was distinguishable from the light it emanated. Yuuri bent and peeped through it, taking care so that his lenses wouldn't bump onto the solid brass in front of him. As though afflicted with palsy, he stood immobile. Numbness invaded him like a contagion, spreading through every vein, freezing his entire being.

Amongst the barrels of drinks and sacks of food ingredients, stood two anthropoid figures by a portable oil lamp. While the lamp's yellow light could never wholly dissipate the shadows within the steerage, it adequately delineated the individuals amid the dank, mildew-like room. From his vantage view, they were standing in profile. Chris was the one in front, bending to lean against a pillar that Yuuri guessed to be a limber passage, where pump water collected. The other one, immediately behind him and facing his back, was a brown-haired man—one of the stagehands, if Yuuri remembered correctly. The most indecorous fact of all, however, was that the two men's trousers were lowered to their ankles.

The brunet gripped Chris' waist with one hand and hooked the other around Chris' neck, pulling the other closer so that the full length of his erection filled Chris in its entirety. Chris gave himself over to his partner's attentions, head lulling backward, breath breaking over sighs and moans, the splays of his fingers tightening around the pillar. The brunet pulled out, only to push inside again with sharp little thrusts that made Chris whimper. Seemingly as necessary as breathing, the sound of their skin slapping and hoarse panting echoed off the steerage's walls.

Although Yuuri knew in theory about what men would do when they were united in flesh, seeing the action in real life was a scale too intimidating for his inexperienced body. Why would people
seek carnal pleasure if it seemed *that* painful? Would Yuuri subject Victor to such treatment or let himself be subjected by Victor? Neither option appeared to be agreeable.

"Ahhn!" Chris moaned so loudly that his voice reminded Yuuri of the present predicament. None of Chris' body language struck Yuuri as a physical struggle from sexual coercion, but what if that man had blackmailed Chris into submission? Although Yuuri had no confidence he could triumph over the stagehand single-handedly, there was still a possibility of him combining force with Chris to overtake the stagehand. Still, a precise timing was necessary to catch the violator unprepared.

Sliding his hand inside Chris' shirt, the brunet dragged his fingertips against the span of Chris' chest before pinching where Chris' nipple must be. His other hand traveled downward, grasping Chris' manhood to pump it in time with his thrusts. The man in the back changed the angle of his thrusts, inducing shallow jolts to make the man in front eyes flutter shut and to make his mouth fall open, breathless and needy.

"Oui! Là—ah!"[1]

Chris displayed an expression Yuuri had never seen before. It was agony and ecstasy combined, pure promiscuity that he undoubtedly wouldn't summon in the presence of others. The brunet kept rolling his hips, moving faster and faster. Chris moaned again, knees buckling and thighs trembling; he was still standing only because his partner's arm encircled his waist to support his weight. As the brunet moved fluidly within Chris, Chris swayed his hips in counterpoint. Their bodies fit so perfectly, seemingly sharing their very breath as they moved as one. Yuuri's sex twitched.

"Ngh! Plus… Plus fort!"[2]

"Chéri, es-tu certain?"[3]

Chris nodded and even wiggled his buttocks. "Tu sais comment j'aime—ah—te sentir exploser en dedans de m—aaahh! Ne me provoque pas à supplier pour ton grooos phallus~"[4]

Yuuri gulped. The Kyouki army had once marched through Chris' country, and he learned some basic phrases enough to comprehend a few words from the present discourse. While Yuuri's weak grasp of the language did not afford him much ability to understand the back-and-forth between the pair in accurate details, from what he could gather, Chris was handing out instructions to his partner. Even so, it remained hard to believe that Chris welcomed the press of another's masculine part so deeply inside him. Also, was it normal for the receiver in an act of intimacy to spout words that were beneath one's dignity? They sounded almost like … what Yuuri assumed to be the words a harlot would say to entice her customer. The textbooks that Yuuri had ever come across made no mention of such reaction.

The man standing behind Chris dipped his head forward while tilting Chris' chin sideways, making their mouths meet in what must be a deep kiss. From that angle, Yuuri couldn't see very well because the brunet's head covered it, but even after the two lovers parted, a string of saliva still connected their lips. Then Chris' lover spoke, his voice far too gentle for a complaint, and he used the common tongue instead of his native language, "Last time it was role-play sex, and tonight it's semi-public outdoor sex. Why do I always put up with your kinks?"

"Because you're hopelessly enamored with me."

The sudden realization filled Yuuri with horror. He backed away from the door, heart pounding in his chest and legs shaking beneath him. Beads of sweat dripped down his face. The breath he had
unconsciously been holding in now burst forth from his lungs. What had he done, trespassing against the mutually consenting couple’ privacy in the form of voyeuristic perversion!!

Yuuri retraced his steps back to the upper deck, running all the way and not daring to cast any backward glance. The visualization of what he had witnessed that night would haunt him for the rest of his tomorrows.

As soon as Yuuri resurfaced from the stairs and the fresh night air swiped across his face, he inhaled deeply several times, staring at the vehicle deck where he had the audacity to watch the occurrence moments before. Only his pounding heart and tenting trousers testified that the raunchy activity had indeed transpired.

Yuuri looked up. The stars in high heaven sparkled brilliantly, untroubled by humans’ mundane quandaries.

The game room became the remotest suitable place to be. After seeing a fellow troupe member in that state, Yuuri knew he'd feel a great discomfort meeting anyone in the eye. Concentrating on lock picking was not possible either. The contortions of pain and pleasure, the grunts and moans, the recurrent slapping of flesh … all those replayed repeatedly in his mind. If only those visions would fall away into the shadowy realm of the night!

Sleep, it appeared, would be the most sensible choice. Sluggishly, guiltily, Yuuri returned to his cabin. He made a brief visit to the nearest toilet along the way with the intention to take care of the problem in his trousers. However, as soon as he fantasized Victor squirming and moaning in pain underneath him, his erection shriveled.

The slight thumping of Yuuri's heart had not completely ceased when he reached his and Victor's cabin. With one last uneasy breath in an attempt to steady his roiling emotions, Yuuri pulled the door open. The moment he entered, Victor greeted him with a smile that at any other time would make his breath snag in his chest. Upon seeing Yuuri's troubled expression, however, Victor asked, "Yuuri, does it give you great pain to see me? Did a catastrophe befall you during practice?"

"Nothing. I'm turning in early tonight," Yuuri answered without looking at him. At least putting on his spectacles on the nightstand afforded him that much excuse. He lay down with his back facing Victor. Even as he closed his eyes, he could sense Victor's approaching fingers, hesitating inches behind his back before retreating. He was grateful for the personal space Victor decided to give him.

In spite of the awkward discomfort, sleep refused to sprinkle its sand of drowsiness upon Yuuri that night. Minute after dragging minute, Yuuri remained awake with closed eyelids. Victor had drifted off to sleep sometime after each of his concerned inquiries had been met with Yuuri's stubborn silence. Yuuri's heart had ached more and more with every syllable Victor had uttered "Confide in me, Yuuri. Give tongue to the problem, and I'll endeavor to the utmost to help. Let me be your friend in this as in so many other things."

Yuuri reached for the nightstand, fingers fumbling in the dimness of a night lamp on the ceiling. He had to strain his eyes even after he managed to procure the pocket watch Victor had entrusted to his keeping. Two fifty seven a.m., it said.

With utmost care not to stir the sleeping Victor, Yuuri rose from the bed, stuffed the lock picking materials into his pockets, and tiptoed outside. The nocturnal wind swooshed past him, its chilling hand making the hair at Yuuri's nape stand on end. He could only be thankful that the walk between the cabin and the poop deck did not stretch for more than ten minutes.
He was still shivering when he arrived at the vacant game room. Having switched on the light, Yuuri lurked at one corner, near the billiard table, and began practicing right away. The focus he studiously devoted on the lock picking techniques served to be a positive distraction.

Since Yuuri had made significant process on the two-hand lock picking, he tried the one-handed version. Although the lock wouldn't budge at first, it didn't discourage him. He had expected that much.

At last, after the countless tries and sore fingers of his dominant hand, he accomplished it by holding the picking wire with his first three fingers and the tension wrench with his last two. He had been so engrossed in his endeavor, however, that he had forgotten to record the time. The windows displayed that dawn was breaking, and the sky had shifted from the darkest indigo to a more golden red.

To ascertain that Yuuri's success was not a fluke, he tried the single-handed lock picking a few more times, recording the time he spent on each attempt. Only when he was satisfied did he leave the game room.

He thought he might as well jog on the way back—it'd be a good exercise for his muscles. The temperature had not improved much since Yuuri's walk hours prior; a thin mist was parading around, carrying chill with its tendrils of obscurity. A hooded figure was leaning forward against the railing when Yuuri reached the bridge deck. Although he only saw the figure from the back, it was clear that he was doing a standing ballet split with one leg supporting the body weight and another hoisted skyward to form a straight vertical line. Then the wind blew the hood to reveal nape-length, bob-styled flaxen hair.

"Yurio?"

The figure turned around, a scowl etching his otherwise angelic face at the sound of that name.

"Tch! What are you doing here, pig?" the younger Yuri replied with a disgusted tone and brought down his leg.

"Jogging. Do you always stretch like that every morning?"

"Every spare time I get throughout the day! How do you expect to maintain flexibility if you only do it occasionally?! What a cretin!"

So this is what Lilia meant by I needed to work out my flexibility, Yuuri concluded.

Yuuri asked, "Can I do it, too?"

"Heck if I care. It's your body, good riddance!"

Yuuri thought it would be best not to mention that the teenage Yuri could ask him to go away if he so desired.

Yuuri began with lighter stretching exercises before proceeding with the split. Like before, he winced from the pain as his leg elevated past shoulder length.

"If you force it, muscle sprain is the best thing you can hope for. Your spine's way too taut!"

For a pugnacious teenager who nearly always ended his sentences with expletives whenever they conversed, Yuri helped Yuuri so attentively. He even held Yuuri's ankle to help him with the balance.
Victor had just come out fresh from the shower when Yuuri returned to their cabin. His shoulders tensed the moment he laid eyes on Yuuri.

With a sharp intake of breath, Yuuri delivered his apology, "Victor, I'm sorry about last night."

Victor's eyes searched for Yuuri's. "Is it the military that gave you unease? Were you feeling guilty about leaving without telling your brothers-in-arms? Or perhaps worried about the punishment for deserters?"

Yuuri shook his head.

"Did you miss your family and friends?"

Yuuri shook his head again. "That's not the reason I w—anyway, it's nothing."

"Then, is it about me touching you intimately? I didn't know you hated it so much. I—"

"No, Victor!" Yuuri's volume rose momentarily, then he resumed in a softer tone, "This isn't about that."

"Tell me, Yuuri. You know that I desire more than just being your idol. The role of your friend, brother, father, coach, closest companion, and lover … I want them all."

Yuuri chuckled. "That's greedy."

"I can't help it. I've never felt this way with anyone but you."

"Victor, stop with those cheesy lines of yours." Yuuri was grinning before he could stop himself. He offered, "Shall we visit Makkachin together after I take a shower?"

"As long as you let me take your answer to my proposition as a yes."

Yuuri sighed. "In time, Victor." He saw dissatisfaction in Victor's eyes, but was grateful that the older man didn't press on. Deciding that it would be best for him to distract his roommate's mind at the moment, he took out a lock and two wires out of his pocket. "Behold!"

"Yuuri, that's wonderful!" As soon as Yuuri finished demonstrating what he had learned overnight, Victor's lips curled, but the smile did not extend as far as his eyes.

I thought you'd be happier than this. Perplexed at Victor's lukewarm reaction, Yuuri intoned, "Is something amiss?"

"I'm impressed that you've come to such an achievement in such a short time." Victor gently took Yuuri's hands in his own. "But 'tis not my wish that you sacrifice sleep or any other form of rest because of it. And if this were the reason you suffered last night, I'd rather not burden you with such an assignment in the future."

No less gently than how Victor had gathered his hands, Yuuri extricated them. Caressing Victor's chin, he murmured, "The lock picking is not to blame. If anything, it actually helped to clear my head this morning. Without it, my head would still be in turmoil this very minute, and I doubt I shall be ready to start the day."

Yuuri headed to the bathroom. Just before he closed its door, he intended to catch a glimpse of Victor's expression, but was met with Victor's back as the older man was smoothing the bed sheets. Whenever it concerned garments—be it attire or bedding—Victor was always unquestionably neat
after all, in contrast to being a messy eater he was. Hoping that the mood would improve between them, Yuuri removed his clothing and stepped under the shower.

Chapter End Notes

1."Yes! There—ah!" [return to text]

2."More… Harder!" [return to text]

3."Darling, are you certain?" [return to text]

4."You know how I love—ah—the feeling of you crashing inside me—aahh! Don't tease me into begging for your biig phallus~" [return to text]
Chapter Summary

Yuuri’s first magic trick lesson came at last! While he was still worried about sex, he heard that a mission might require seduction. With a new resolution, he asked Victor to be his first.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much ChiaRoseKuro, The Kindly One, Angelycious, & Delcesca Newby for beta reading this chapter.

The Last Evening Aboard

"You are ready to join the others," Lilia concluded at the end of their one-on-one ballet tutoring session, a slight hint of pride evident in her usual stern tone. "Practice starts at eight the day after the morrow."

"What of the morrow?"

"With the ship berthing some time in the afternoon, everybody will need to arrange for our departure. Has Yakov prepared the travel documents for you yet?"

"Uh… I don't know, ma'am. I shall ask him directly."

"You do that. Class dismissed."

Although Lilia taught ballet, she was no less strict than a military officer. The local ballet instructor in Yuuri’s hometown was more affable, though this did not mean Okukawa Minako would be lenient to whining students who couldn’t perform the correct techniques.

When Yuuri found Yakov, the old man answered, "Your travel documents are being taken care of as we speak. Collect them from Georgi on the morrow. Also, ask Phichit to take your photograph before lunch."

Phichit beamed with joy as soon as Yuuri relayed Yakov’s message. However, Yuuri did not grasp the reason for this reaction until his photography session had ended, upon which Phichit took several more photographs of the ship, the ocean, and any passer-by. The way Phichit's eyes twinkled as he turned the winding knob to adjust the bellows of the folding camera gladdened Yuuri. Knowing that his friend could access the otherwise-inaccessible apparatus made his photography session all the more worthwhile.

"Say, Phichit, would you have dreamed of pursuing a career as a photographer, had you not met
"I'd still like to become a photographer." Phichit smiled, pride and fondness in his tone. "No one's going to be young enough to perform acrobatics forever. At the very least, I'd like to be able to capture the moments and eternalize them within photos when my hair turns gray and the troupe abounds with posterity."

"Shall I help you hold the camera while taking a picture of that fishing sailor?"

"That'd be lovely. Thanks, Yuuri."

###

That afternoon, the troupe performers practiced their circus skills together. To avoid unnecessary packing and unpacking, they refrained from using larger apparatuses, such as trapezes, trampolines, and cyr wheels. Unacquainted with any of his rink mates' skills, Yuuri simply gawked in awe at his colleagues.

Guang Hong manipulated the devil sticks with high dexterity. He lifted, struck, and stroked a baton, stabilizing it through gyroscopic motions between two control sticks. His best friend, Leo, showed intense focus by juggling eight bottles at the same time. Meanwhile, his other friend, Phichit, displayed as much concentration as he spun six plates on the poles he held with outstretched arms. Seung-gil walked on stilts just as naturally as he would on his own legs, his expression akin to a bored schoolboy's on a languid afternoon—until his hair became entangled in overhanging cobwebs as he passed perilously close to the ceiling. Georgi naturally gravitated toward hat manipulation technique. The youngest performer in the troupe, Yuri, fashioned a series of complicated moves with his jumping ropes. The most amusing of all was Otabek, whose constant deadpan persisted as he swung tethered poi weights through a variety of rhythmical and geometric patterns.

The others trained in pairs: Mila and Sara danced to their baton twirling, incorporating somersaults, coordination, and accurate throws into their metal rod exchange. Lying on his back, Michele applied antipodism to spin a somersaulting Emil with his feet.

"At a loss for what to choose?" Victor's voice pulled Yuuri from his reverie. He turned around, only to find his roommate walking up to him.

"Circus skills are the only practices that don't involve the formality of coaches. Every performer helps another, for we trade our skills as equals. We swap equipment with one another after some minutes, as the more skills we master, the better," Victor continued.

Yuuri replied, "I've never tried any of those. I don't even know where to start."

"In that case, I'd like to suggest the most basic trick for sleight of hand. If its advanced stage is performed correctly, you'll even be able to pull a tablecloth without agitating any of the filled glasses atop it. Besides, those who master sleight of hand techniques will have a firmer grasp of juggling, baton twirling, and many other circus skills."

Yuuri found his formerly slumped back straightening and his shoulders squaring with his determination. "Yes, please! I'd like to learn that. Which tool should I obtain?"

In lieu of stopping near Yuuri, Victor strode past him.

"Uh, Victor?"
"Yuuri, can you show me my pocket watch?"

Yuuri fished in his left trouser pocket; however, it turned out to be empty. He tried all his other pockets, just in case, but the aforementioned watch was nowhere to be found. Guilt settled heavily within the depths of his guts. Not only was the watch made of gold, but it could potentially hold some nostalgic value for Victor. What if it was the last gift from his deceased family member?

"I'm sorry, Victor, it seems I lost it."

Victor's expression remained inscrutable, perhaps because he had been accustomed to exhibiting a poker face while performing his magic tricks. Whatever the reason was, Yuuri would rather be scolded and blamed for his carelessness than receive the silent treatment.

Victor held out his fist, then slowly unfurled his fingers. The golden pocket watch lay in the middle of his open palm.

"You found it?" Yuuri exhaled in relief. "Thank goodness! Where was it?"

"I took it from your pocket."

"You mean just now? But how did you even know that your watch was in my left pocket?"

"Given you have managed to lock pick with your dominant hand, it is only natural to assume that you'd wish to master it with your other hand, as well, especially since you aren't the type who'd be satisfied with anything less than perfection. Little things such as taking a pocket watch, holding chopsticks, and brushing your teeth with your left hand are good starting points for training one's ambidexterity."

"Even so, I didn't feel any skin contact. Aren't pickpockets supposed to steal their victims' belongings while pretending to bump against them on the street or stall them for time?"

"Ah, you're talking about misdirection. The demonstrations just now are examples of advanced mastery, which require dexterity and speed rather than trickery. For beginners, it is, indeed, much more achievable to use misdirection. By diverting the audience's attention, a magician will be able to perform his tricks more seamlessly. Of course, misdirection alone wouldn't suffice to achieve the desired result, so it is usually combined with simulation—to give a false impression that something has been enacted, even though it hasn't—and other such elements."

Yuuri must have displayed a confused expression, for Victor said, "Let me show you the application of those elements."

Victor showed Yuuri the pocket watch in his left hand, as well as his open right palm, before transferring the watch to his right hand. Next, he closed his right hand into a fist, while his left hand retrieved the pen from Yuuri's shirt pocket. He used that pen to tap his right fist and, when he opened it, the watch was gone. Victor subsequently revealed his left hand, only to prove that the watch had "magically" disappeared.

"Wait, that watch never left your left hand, did it?" Yuuri reasoned. "Otherwise, there'd be no need for you to switch hands in the first place."

"Very good, Yuuri! You've looked past the simulation." Victor's smile broadened into a grin, revealing a wink and two rows of white teeth. "I'll walk you through what happened."

Victor let Yuuri see his open palms; the left held the pocket watch, whereas the right was empty. "First element: the palm—that is, holding an object in what seems to be an empty hand." He slid
the watch downward until the crook of his fingers completely covered it. "Second element: the ditch—that is, secretly disposing of an unneeded object." He pretended to pick the watch with his right hand, while it remained dormant in his left hand. "As you already guessed, this is the simulation. Next is the misdirection: I'm using your pen to tap against my empty right hand, which would fool most people into thinking that the pen's movement instigates some supernatural power, thereby making the watch vanish. Of course, it wouldn't matter if I used a ruler or a key or any other object to replace the pen."

"If I'm not mistaken, there's also a variant where the performer replaces one object with another, isn't there not?" Yuuri asked. "For instance, the magician reveals a flower at first, and then they cover it before revealing a rabbit."

"For tricks that involve substitution, you'll need to prepare two or more objects and incorporate the steal and load elements into the trick."

"Steal and load?"

"Yes, secretly obtaining a needed object and moving that object to where it is needed. Wait here; I'll procure the necessary equipment to demonstrate it." Victor scuttled to the edge of the room, where a trunk containing small apparatus resided.

When Victor returned about two minutes later, he brought a plain green scarf and asked Yuuri to inspect it, thereby confirming that there was no trick concealed within. Once satisfied, he pinched the cloth with his left hand, while showing Yuuri that his right hand was empty.

"This color-changing trick suits a parlor magician with an intimate seating arrangement for the audience more so than a stage show, where the audience is seated far away, so you won't be expected to perform this in our show. However, various iterations of sleight of hand are always handy to know." Victor pulled his right hand into a fist, as if he were holding the handle of a mug, before stuffing the plain green scarf into the top of it. When the scarf was about halfway in, he pulled it out of the bottom. Strangely, it had turned into a white scarf with brown polka dots. While it wasn't hard to guess that Victor must have hidden the polka dotted scarf beforehand, the fluidity of his movements was certainly not to be gainsaid. Victor continued to bury the rest of the plain scarf into his fist as more of the polka dots one was revealed. Once he removed the newly transformed scarf with his left hand, he opened his right fist to show Yuuri an empty palm.

"Can you guess at the trick, Yuuri?"

"Only parts of it. I can't imagine the exact tool, but you must have used it to hide the polka dots scarf—otherwise, its edges would protrude through gaps in your left hand. Naturally, the implement must be small enough for your hand to conceal—your left one, to be precise, because you purposely withheld it from view but freely exposed your right palm before and after the trick. Anyhow, this object is designed so that you can easily transfer it to your left hand to show me that your right hand holds nothing. It also needs to be something that enables the cloth to be gathered in a compact form—in other words, something akin to a container."

"Impressive! Now look very carefully at the reversed process and see if you can unravel the trick completely."

Victor stuffed the polka dotted scarf into his closed fist, just as he had previously done with the plain scarf. This time, when he pulled it all the way out, it became the plain green scarf. Once again, he showed Yuuri his empty right palm.
"Have you completely figured out how I make the scarf change colors just by passing it through my hand?"

"I wouldn't say completely." Yuuri frowned. "I can only surmise that your way of transferring that tool is by lifting it at the same time as you stick your finger inside, so that your movement seems natural. In that case, it'd make sense if it has a sleeve-like shape and opens at both ends—and it's probably bendable, too. Or, at least, it'd have some degree of flexibility."

As soon as Yuuri finished speaking, Victor lifted him by his waist, hoisting him high in the air, and twirled around the room with him. "Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri, you never cease to impress me!"

Phichit wolf-whistled. "Hey, newlyweds, you should be practicing other things!" Chris murmured, "Ah, l'amour..." with a dreamy expression. Meanwhile, the flaxen-haired Yuri yelled, "That's repulsive! We're in public, you uncivilized swines!"

Ignoring their rink mates' reactions, Victor still had the gall to kiss Yuuri on the forehead, despite the latter's fluster.

"V-Victor, I didn't get the trick completely, so … uh, could you … explain the rest, please?"

"Well, since you ask so nicely~" With his signature wink, Victor handed Yuuri a small, flesh-colored tube.

Seeing some bits of the polka dotted scarf inside the soft tube's open ends, Yuuri deduced, "So, before the trick began, you had hidden this scarf in here for a switch later. You must've inserted one of the fingers on your left hand into the tube in order to conceal it in your palm. Since the middle finger is the longest, it'd be the easiest choice. I guess that was the stealing part. The reveal of your empty right hand was the misdirection. Then, after the tube was hidden in your left fist, you passed this scarf through your empty right hand, whilst secretly transferring the tube from one hand to another—which, I guess, is the loading part. It appeared that you stuffed the other scarf into your fist when, in reality, it went into the tube, so that's the simulation. The green scarf went into the top half of the tube, pushing the white-brown one out of the bottom. After you finished pulling out the newly transformed scarf, you secretly inserted your finger into the tube again and concealed it in your left hand. Only then can you show me your empty right hand and complete the illusion."

"As expected from my number one apprentice~" Victor beamed and leaned forward, in preparation for kissing Yuuri again.

This time, Yuuri put his fingers on Victor's lips just in time to stop him. "Knowing this trick alone won't aid me in mastering sleight of hand, though."

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step."

"Only if the traveler keeps stepping in the right direction," Yuuri grumbled. He began to see why Yakov had doubted Victor as a coach. As a seasoned skater, Victor Nikiforov was flawless; as an inexperienced coach, his skills left much to be desired. "You yourself said that was an advanced level of pickpocketing. Shouldn't you teach me some beginner's techniques first?"

"Mm, but when you master that advanced technique, you're guaranteed to master countless magic tricks involving sleight of hand in no time."

Yuuri pursed his lips. "Say you have a skater who barely knows how to glide. Would you teach them a quadruple lutz without introducing smaller jumps, like the bunny hop steps?"
"Come to think of it, you have a point."

Yuuri had assumed Victor would teach him something simpler, until the older man prompted, "Shall we try once more?"

"But I already emptied all my pockets."

Victor had already paced past Yuuri before the sentence was completed.

Yuuri inspected himself. No alteration happened to his pockets—instead, his belt had gone missing. It was fortunate that the trousers Victor lent him were tight around the waist, so they did not drop in the absence of the belt, else he would have lost more than just an item of clothing.

"To the victor goes the spoils," Victor remarked with an unrepentant smirk, holding up the belt with one languid hand.

Despite Yuuri's bewilderment, Victor declared, "I'm going to put this belt inside my back left trouser pocket. Now it's your turn to steal it from me."

This is going to be a long, long day. Yuuri repressed his sigh.

###

As he was still having difficulties meeting Chris' eyes without stuttering, Yuuri sat with Phichit's group again at dinner. Victor had been summoned to Yakov's quarters—apparently, the ringleader was checking the circus players' progress when he discovered Victor's attempts at training. Presently, he was giving Victor a stern lecture.

Leo started the conversation by asking, "What do you think we'll need to do for the sponsor this time?"

"Probably retrieving a stolen family heirloom or something of that nature," Phichit suggested.

"Or it could be clearing slander from a reputed individual," Guang Hong added.

Yuuri queried in undisguised wonder, "Didn't Yakov command us to retrieve information and rescue a secret agent, who disguised as an employer in a nobleman's house?"

"Whoa, you actually paid attention to Yakov's speeches?" In addition to Leo's incredulous tone, his eyes seemed to bulge out of their sockets.

"Didn't you? You even complained about wanting a warmer winter."

"Aye, I do recall Yakov mentioning Mheadaure … in fact, is there any soul here who dares not? But who cares about those other little details?"

Phichit asked, "Did you always listen wholeheartedly to whatever the teachers said at school, Yuuri?"

"Of course. Everyone else did too, did they not?"

Exaggerated gasps burst from Phichit, Leo, and Guang Hong's mouths.

"What's with the melodrama?"

The three exchanged snickering glances until Yuuri shifted uncomfortably. Instead of sitting
through their amusement, he inquired, "Anyway, what do you think our mission will involve?"

To Yuuri's relief, Phichit answered the question. "At the first stage, we'll need to gather information to assess the situation better. To do that, we'll scatter and disguise ourselves as strangers with different backgrounds and occupations. This way, we can integrate seamlessly with the locals and learn about the target's habits, strengths, weaknesses, and other such information, which will help greatly for later stages. We use every means possible to gain as much information as we can, from money to deceit to seduction."

Yuuri's fork clattered against his plate. "Seduction?! As in, prostituting one's self to acquire information?"

Yuuri was vaguely aware of Leo and Guang Hong shooting Phichit a warning look before he blabbered, "Relax. So far, only four members of the troupe have used the seduction method."

Considering Victor's flirtatious demeanor as well as his status as the troupe's first and most celebrated member, Yuuri bet he was one of those four. Spikes of jealousy picked Yuuri's heart.

Guang Hong consoled Yuuri, "It doesn't have to be that way. There will be options. You may even be given the opportunity to switch if the circumstances are favorable."

Yuuri nodded half-heartedly. No matter what he ate afterward, the food tasted insipid. He also declined Phichit's offer to go to the saloon together after dinner. Instead, he headed straight to his cabin.

Taking a deep breath, Yuuri strode toward the bathroom. He cleansed himself more thoroughly than he had ever done in life. Upon his completion, he climbed into bed and covered his unclothed body with the blanket. He awaited his roommate, hoping that his body wouldn't prove to be a disappointment to Victor.

In Yuuri's attempt to calm his nerves, he inhaled deeply, exhaled, and inhaled again. Penetration was said to be painful at first—however, if the partner did it correctly, the process would turn into a pleasurable one. At least, that was what Yuuri had read all those years ago, while skulking behind the towering rows of bookshelves that were concealed from prying eyes in the public library. Discomfiture had kept him from borrowing the book; he wouldn't have been able to bear the librarian's disapproving eyes if he had sought permission to bring such a wanton book home.

At any rate, if sexual intimacy was going to involve discomfort to some degree, it was better that he should endure the pain. Victor was far too precious to be subjected to such physical agony. Furthermore, there would most decidedly be an issue with masculine pride. It wouldn't do for Yuuri if his lifelong idol were to suffer an inferiority complex from being subjugated by a mere man like him.

Victor deserves only the best.

The minutes glided by in silence, and it was with a lingering sense of dreadful yet eager anticipation that Yuuri waited. Compared to the prospects of what he was about to do with Victor, the idea of being caught under enemy fire behind a barricade of sandbags seemed significantly less daunting.

It was not until half an hour had passed that the door opened, revealing a humming Victor. "Yuuri, what bothers you? You appear uncomfortably tense."

With a sharp intake of breath, Yuuri uncovered the blanket. His pulse thundered in his ears with
great intensity; indeed, a visceral cascade of dread swept over his entire body, lighting up every single nerve in the process. He felt a keen sense of apprehension, as if he had made a fatal misjudgment that would impair their relationship forever. His cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment as he saw Victor stop dead in his tracks, eyes widening at the exposure of bare skin. That heated gaze seared him—his skin, his mind, his bones, his soul—until there was no part of Katsuki Yuuri left that did not become enfeebled by dissipation.

Having labored long in thought, Yuuri came to terms with a single solution. He steeled himself and replied, "Victor, I am yours to take. I wish you to be the one…" The words "to penetrate me" died in Yuuri's throat.

The look in Victor's eyes indicated that the older man understood him nevertheless.
Sovereign of the Gibbous Moon

Chapter Summary

“Television broadcasts and newspapers never mentioned your horrendous drawing or your barely-legible, angular and squishy handwriting. They also neglected to enlighten your fans of your prim and proper self having stubble, not to mention your approximations of a spoiled brat’s whine almost every time Yakov refused to grant your whimsical wishes. They certainly never highlighted the fact that any and all food would taste better whenever it was from your fork.”

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much ChiaRoseKuro & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

For an eternity of protracted seconds, neither man moved. Victor simply stood there. He lapsed into thoughtful silence, seemingly pondering over his course of action under Yuuri's anxious stare.

At length, Victor came to Yuuri. He sat on the bed and held Yuuri by his hands. "Yesterday you avoided me and tonight … this… Tell me, how can I not worry about whatever bothers you?"

"I desire no one but the one I love in the matters of the flesh. If this isn't possible every single time…” Yuuri inhaled sharply. "…at least, for my first time, I want it to be with you."

The look on Victor's face took an irrevocable turn of alarm. "Yuuri, what's this all about? You're not … leaving, are you?"

"To gather information, troupe members are occasionally required to employ seduction techniques—or so I heard."

"Yuuri, I'm not proud of my bodily exploits." Victor squeezed Yuuri's hand more tightly. "But now that we've found each other, never again shall I bed another person who isn't you."

It broke Yuuri's heart to see Victor's eyes turn glassy and to hear his timbre quaver, but he shook his head. "I don't want to be an obstacle to your career. It's enough for me knowing you won't surrender your heart to the ones with whom you must seduce."

"Do you think my affections for you extend only as far as that of an emperor who would favor one concubine over the rest?" Victor's voice wasn't shrill in the slightest, yet it sliced through the air and permanently shattered the serenity of the night. The message was clear enough from the betrayed look in his eyes.

"What else can I believe? You're the Victor Nikiforov—a man whose perfection is out of everyone else's leagues!"
"I thought you were different … that you were not one of the crowd who regarded me with awe, yet confined me to a lofty pedestal." Unless Yuuri's ears deceived him, there was a crack in Victor's voice. His frame was trembling. For all that his reputation preceded him, Victor's mind was as fragile as a wine glass, and the mire of his thoughts were clearly descending into a pit of depression.

All Yuuri's life, he had never seen Victor in such a vulnerable state before. He wanted to say something—anything—to console the man he admired. However, Victor spoke first, his tone flat and his face aloofly emotionless, "It would appear that I deluded myself into thinking I meant more than a mere idol to you."

Yuuri's throat seized up. He needed to convey—yell—if necessary, *No! I don't think of you as just an idol—not anymore, at least!* but his statuesque body was incapable of doing anything but stare.

The knock on the door obliterated any chance at talking. Instinctively, he bolted for the bathroom while Victor approached the door. However, Yuuri did not shut the bathroom door tightly enough to prevent himself from hearing anything that may transpire in the cabin.

"Victor, may I borrow your checkerboard? I'm tired of cards." The inquirer's mellow baritone was unmistakably Chris'.

Victor replied, "Sure, it's in my wagon. Let me retrieve it from the vehicle deck."

"No, no, I don't wish to trouble you. I thought you'd stow it in this room. Don't worry; I'll make do with another game."

"No, it's fine. I was planning to take a stroll and get some fresh air anyway."

"Oh, all right then. Would you like to play with us? Yuuri's welcome, too. We can take turns."

"He's predisposed in the bathroom. As for me, I have a craving for a night stroll."

The cabin door closed and Yuuri could no longer hear their exchange. Seconds passed with no sign of either man coming back.

Having donned his raiment, Yuuri exited the bathroom with a heavy heart. Victor, *precious* Victor, was hurt because of his words. Why hadn't he thought of Victor's position? As a world-class magician and the troupe's best performer, he had probably been consumed by loneliness, constantly out of other people's reaches. Considering J.J. and Chris had their respective partners, yet someone as dashing as Victor didn't, it'd make more sense if he had tried to fill the position and failed in his attempt. What if the state of his mind had been on the verge of breaking down and was disillusioned with true love before he had found Yuuri? What had Yuuri done to efface the frail hope that had barely bloomed within Victor?!

Contrary to Yuuri's belief, Victor did not pay Makkachin a visit. He had wrongly assumed that Victor would want to spend time with his long-time best friend, but the dingy animal pen was devoid of any human presence. A few sheep, masticating on hay, stared at him from behind the wooden slats, while the cows kept their backsides facing him. The bales of straw stowed above the horses' stables didn't seem to be a viable hiding place for Victor, either. Makkachin rose to her paws and wagged her tail in greeting upon catching a whiff of Yuuri's scent, but Yuuri gave the poodle nothing more than a brief apologetic pat on the head before hurrying on his way, dazed and unaware of his surroundings.

Upon reaching to the lower deck, Yuuri felt something wet streaking down his temple. He wiped
it, but his breath caught when he noticed a red blotch on the back of his hand. He must have bled after knocking against a hay rake in his haste to leave the animal pen. The howling night wind seemed to reproach him for the tactless quarrel with which he had hurt his most treasured person.

It took Yuuri another three quarters of an hour to comb through every nook and cranny of the ship before he eventually located Victor. His roommate was bent forward with his diaphragm pressed to the taffrail of the ship's stern and his head buried between his folded arms. Under the light of unsympathetic stars, Victor's quiet sobs articulated his state of equable sorrow and amplified the twist in his stomach. The usually sprightly and self-assured ice magician looked so vulnerable that Yuuri wanted nothing more than to reach out to him and hold him close to comfort him and keep away his insecurities.

Victor had always fitted in every conversation, suave enough to sound pleasant and endearing in his childishness. Hence, Yuuri had assumed that a man like Victor would be surrounded by friends too numerous to be counted. The disconcerting fact that he had no one to confide in—not even Makkachin, with whom he shared a berth every night—unveiled another facet of him that hadn't so much as manifested in Yuuri's mind before; Victor was an introverted soul who barricaded his mind and shielded his years of loneliness with a mask of affability. It reminded Yuuri of a poem he had read a long time ago:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes —
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

It aggrieved Yuuri to realize that Victor had sincerely sought a bond with him, only to be treated like an object of worship all over again. Whilst it was unsurprising that Victor had become upset to such a degree, the knowledge that he had caused Victor's sorrow to overflow only created more wounds in his heart.

"Television broadcasts and newspapers never mentioned your horrendous drawing or your barely-legible, angular and squishy handwriting. They also neglected to enlighten your fans of your prim and proper self having stubble, not to mention your approximations of a spoiled brat's whine almost every time Yakov refused to grant your whimsical wishes. They certainly never highlighted the fact that any and all food would taste better whenever it was from your fork."

Victor turned to face Yuuri. Although tears and snot dripped still from his otherwise adorable features, the moonlight dazzled his well-defined figure with its radiance. It had never crossed Yuuri's mind that the great Victor Nikiforov could appear so fragile, and beautifully so at that.
"It was your skating that first drew me to you all those years ago, but subtle details that prove you're an ordinary man have made me become even more addicted to you. Being your fan is no longer enough. Watching you skate doesn't give me the same rapture as skating with you. When I'm with you, I feel love coursing through my veins—and the more I learn about you, the more impressed I become. I couldn't help feeling insecure that I wouldn't be worthy of you." He drew a sharp breath. "But I lacked the courage to admit it sooner. Forgive me."

Victor blinked and more tears fell from his eyes, sparkling brightly as they plummeted into the shadows below. The mystique rays of the gibbous moon lit his milky-white skin aglow and made his platinum hair glimmer, not unlike the fairy kings of yore. With a complexion so fair and a countenance so charming, could the mesmerizing figure before Yuuri's eyes be any less divine than Divinity himself?

_No! That treatment is not the kind Victor wants_, Yuuri mentally chastised himself.

"Is that dry blood on your forehead?" he heard Victor croak, voice anguished and hoarse from excessive crying.

Yuuri nodded.

Wiping the excess fluid from his countenance, Victor grinned. "Were you so remorseful that you banged your head against a wall?"

Relief spread through Yuuri's being, warming him from the inside. Hearing such a jest out of Victor's mouth was tantamount to the peaceful feeling when he watched fireflies in a summer night.

Thus, he responded in kind, "The haunting guilt blinded me to my surroundings, so a hay rake decided to remind me of its existence. It left a parting gift, naturally."

"Serves you right." Much to Yuuri's surprise, Victor stuck out his tongue.

"Victor," Yuuri sighed, "how old are you?"

"As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth."

"In that case, I have no choice but to ask those tongue and teeth of yours directly." Yuuri charged forward, pivoting Victor's calf over his shin and catching the taller man before he collapsed onto the ground, all in one fell swoop.

Victor gasped. Their stances made them appear as though Yuuri had just dipped Victor in a dance. Looming above the older man, Yuuri touched his mouth to Victor's throat and felt it quiver. Then his lips grazed the slender arch of that throat, one hand hard and flat against Victor's spine to support the taller man while his other hand caressed Victor's jaw.

When Yuuri sought Victor's permission for a kiss, his field of vision became consumed by teal eyes conflagrating with passion. He pressed his lips to Victor's, felt the fluttering of Victor's eyelashes against his cheeks and breathed the air that Victor sighed out. Then Victor was reciprocating his kiss so earnestly that a pair of arms even draped themselves over Yuuri's back.

Yuuri's tongue traced lightly along Victor's lip, enticing the older man to grant it entrance. Yuuri's heart contracted with a thrill of excitement as Victor met it with his own tongue instead. Victor's tasted faintly like his dinner from a few hours ago, rum, and maybe a bit of ocean salt. Yuuri fervently sucked Victor's lower lip into his mouth until Victor's breath was rushing down his throat in soft gasps and moans, but he couldn't stop drawing the essence of Victor Nikiforov into himself.
It tasted intoxicating—as rich as surprise and passion could be—and it fanned the flames of Yuuri's cravings more.

Victor wound his fingers in Yuuri's hair, tugging and pulling until the slant of Yuuri's mouth was what he desired it. He made it impossible for Yuuri to not be at the mercy of his nips and kisses. His deftly sinful hands lowered, teasing their way down Yuuri's back with alluring drags before they settled on the twin mounds of Yuuri's rear, splaying to knead Yuuri's flesh and pull him closer. As if that hadn't been enough, Victor also raised his leg until his ankle hooked the small of Yuuri's back, allowing him to meet the debauched rocking of Victor's hips better.

As he lost track of time, Yuuri reveled in the way Victor bit him back, sinking his teeth into Yuuri's tongue with deliberate playfulness and sucking it. Heat suffused Yuuri's being as his teenage fantasies years were rekindled, causing him to respond all the more frantically to Victor's caresses. The fierce movement of Victor's mouth against his own fueled Yuuri's desire and diffused it throughout him until there was not a part of his body that didn't ache for Victor. When Victor moaned as Yuuri deepened the kiss, their earlier fight in the cabin felt like it had occurred worlds away.

Victor's adept fingers danced across Yuuri's back, tormenting every nerve within his body until his senses were screaming internally for that seducer to free his body from his confining attire. The swollen heat between his thighs, so alluringly close and yet so frustratingly far away from the place where he most desired it, made his body jerk helplessly against Victor's.

Yuuri coerced himself to end the kiss, already missing the alluring warmth of Victor's lips even before their faces were fully separated. Even though Victor gave him a perplexed look, the intensity of his gaze was too much to bear. It was as if Yuuri had just kissed the sovereign of the gibbous moon.

"You're heartless, Victor. Like an incubus, you tempted me so artfully every night, yet rejected me so cruelly when I asked you."

"I will not grant the wish of a mere fan—I never do," Victor replied, "but it will be a different story for the wishes of my lover."

Yuuri needed no further encouragement. He seized Victor's hand and, together, they sprinted all the way down to their cabin. Every place bereft of Victor's warmth longed for his touch. Arousal coursed so violently through him that he could scarcely draw breath without igniting destructive tremors of sensation.

At least he was not the only one to feel this way. As soon as the door closed behind them, their impatient hands divested their bodies of their outer garments with the same speed deer would flee from a pack of hounds; both all too eager to return to their lover's heated skin.

Will there ever be a day when I find no pleasure in this? Yuuri realized dizzily as he came face to face with the living work of art that was Victor's body. Propriety had prevented him from doing more than admire that figure with his eyes … but tonight, he smoothed his palms against Victor's chiseled torso.

Victor cradled Yuuri against himself until the sensation of their bare flesh pressed against each other made him shudder; caught fast in the coils of sensations, it was so intense that his inexperienced body could scarcely contain them. Yuuri's heart pounded faster and faster as he felt Victor's masculine hardness against his own and a leg slipped between Yuuri's. Victor's hands slid inside the waistband of Yuuri's briefs, skimming his hips before grasping the round softness of his bottom and kneading the flesh so tantalizingly that his entire body quickened. Fully knowing that
pressing himself against Victor was a feeble response, at best, Yuuri still couldn't spur himself to do anything else. Victor's touches left him weak with want, too powerless to retaliate, and nothing else could cure that.

As soon as their underwear was out of the way, Yuuri summoned the courage to ask, "Is it all right for you to enter me?"

Victor ceased his fervent touches and looked Yuuri in the eye, but no words came out of his mouth.

"You … don't wish it to be so?"

"It's not that, Yuuri—I had simply been led to believe that you preferred the other way around, given aspects of your demeanor."

"It seemed to me that it'd please you more to be the one penetrating," Victor explained when Yuuri bestowed a questioning gaze upon.

"That thought has indeed crossed my mind … but that wasn't my intention tonight."

"All right, if that's what you wish. I suspect I'm going to be delighted with it either way, since I'm with you."

There was no way Yuuri could suppress the butterflies inside his stomach with that statement coming out from Victor's own lips.

Chapter End Notes

*Excerpt from We Wear the Mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896)
The Partner of His Affections

Chapter Summary

Did you honestly expect anything but smut after reading the last chapter?

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much ChiaRoseKuro, The Kindly One, & Angelycious for beta reading this chapter.

9

The Partner of His Affections

"Are you certain about this?" Victor asked again as he gingerly laid Yuuri on the bed sheets.

Yuuri brushed his fingers along Victor's forearm in encouragement. "As certain as can be."

Victor kissed Yuuri on the mouth again and somehow managed to make it deeply intoxicating, arousing and tender at the same time. Yuuri felt the heat beneath that satiny-soft surface, enticing him deeper with its tantalizing hints of desperate passion, so much at odds with Victor's gentle exterior. It made Yuuri think that Victor could be far more passionate yet withheld himself for Yuuri's sake. His heart swelled within his chest as he traced his fingers along Victor's jaw, gazing deeply into his lover's eyes.

"Yuuri—my love, my heart, my soul—tell me I'm not dreaming … that I won't wake to find an empty bed in a world where we never even met in person."

Although Yuuri knew Victor was an expert at the art of flirtation, he couldn't suppress a full-body shiver in response to such words. He squeezed Victor's hand and promised, "These a full-body shiver fingers will hold yours when you awaken in the morning."

Victor kissed him again and, for one dazzling moment, Yuuri forgot how to breathe. The world outside their cabin ceased to exist. The way Victor's tongue caressed his own… God almighty, could ever there be anything more divine? Yuuri felt like putty in Victor's expert hands, ready to sink into the mattress and reform into whatever his lover desired.

"Yuuri, I spent a lifetime running from the myriad ghosts of my past … but, with you, I've felt something that urges me to remain," Victor's words came out strained, as if he was trying to prevent something from choking him. Breath puffed in the shell of Yuuri's ear, hot and moist, whilst his partner's erection rubbed up against him, hard and pulsing. "Oh, Yuuri, my love…"

Yuuri's hands looped over Victor's nape, burying his fingers in his hair and pulling his partner closer to him. "Do whatever you wish with me." He locked his legs around Victor, heels digging into Victor's backside to urge him forward. "I'm all yours."
"Not everything about you is what I wish."

"In that case, I wish you'd never let me go. Stay close to me tonight."

Victor brought the back of Yuuri's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Your wish is my command."
Victor paused to inhale rather sharply. "Ah, but penetration without proper lubrication would hurt. I think it's best if I run to the kitchen to ask for some olive oil first."

"At this hour? You wish to announce to the whole ship that we're about to engage in carnal pleasure? I'd rather endure a night of pain than a lifetime of shame!"

Victor heaved a sigh, but then a fond smile tugged at his lips. He shifted to peck Yuuri's forehead and promised, "I'll be as gentle as possible. Lie on your stomach, my love."

Upon following Victor's instructions, Yuuri was seized by an immediate sense of loneliness. Even a few seconds without Victor's charming countenance was enough to make his heart constrict.

As though sensing Yuuri's unease, Victor consoled him by peppering little kisses down his exposed back, worshipping every pore and caressing every curve. In between his tender ministrations, he gently murmured, "This position makes it the easiest to control one's strength. It should hurt less than other methods."

Victor braced himself on his elbows on either side of Yuuri's thighs and bent to kiss the base of Yuuri's spine. The sensation of Victor's mouth against Yuuri's skin, exploring the shape and texture of his loins made him tremble with desire. Although it felt like a lifetime before Victor's hands were spreading his ass cheeks, Yuuri was startled when a pliant slickness slipped into the little dip of his rear. It did not feel like a finger and was too small to be an erection, which could only mean…

"Victor! Y-You don't need to put your tongue in there—hngh!"

Yuuri mewled when those sinful lips eventually descended upon his puckered entrance, making him arch wildly against his partner at the onset of an uncontrollable pleasure. As Victor's warm breath caressed the sensitive skin around Yuuri's opening, beads of early desire rolled down his erect length. It took all of his self-control not to press against Victor's face so that he could get more of that skillful tongue in him, yet nothing could prevent his inner walls from clenching around it.

It was, perhaps, a blessing that Victor knew no restraint as a doting lover. His tongue kept teasing Yuuri's most intimate crevices despite Yuuri's embarrassed protests, and the only time he paused was for an adequate amount of saliva to pool in his mouth, slack lips hovering over Yuuri's contracting furrows. When enough had gathered, Victor allowed the fluid to trickle down into Yuuri's tight heat, wetting the passage in preparation for what would enter later.

When Victor replaced his tongue with his finger, Yuuri felt no pain. After wetting his finger, he slathered as much of the liquid as he could. By the time Victor pushed his finger fully inside his partner, his tender ministrations around the sensitive rim coaxing moan after moan from Yuuri's lips.

Emboldened by the absence of Yuuri's objections, Victor eased another digit, which elicited a breathless gasp from Yuuri at the sensation of being stretched open. Although it stung, the pain was gradually overridden by blissful pleasure. He inhaled deeply as those questing fingers twisted, pulling out and pushing back in at a greater speed until Yuuri's surprised squeak punctuated the slick sounds of Victor's fingers penetrating him over and over again. Even knowing that this was
how it felt when one's prostate was touched couldn't dull the fire blazing through his body, setting each nerve it touched alight with unquenchable passion.

With Yuuri's squeak as his beacon, Victor scissored his fingers, twisting to find that spot again—that one location which could elicit the dirtiest responses from Yuuri. It did not take long until Victor's third finger joined in, only to attack the same place over and over again. Yuuri had to bite his lips to suppress his needy whimpers.

"Vic … tor … no more!" Yuuri simultaneously besought and commanded through his labored panting as Victor incessantly plunged his fingers at just the right angle. "I can't last…"

Lightheaded and breathless, Yuuri turned his head to glimpse at Victor through hazy eyes when those persistent fingers continued to inflame his nerves with yearnings. "Victor, please! I'm already at my limit…"

"I … likewise!" Victor husked darkly as he withdrew his fingers with an obscene squelch, a look of unadulterated need on his face.

Yuuri had barely recognized the blunter and thicker organ against his opening before Victor breached it with a nudge of his hips.

The air was punched out of Yuuri's lungs in the moment Victor's flesh penetrated him. He buried his face into the pillow to muffle his breathless cry, hands scrabbling for the bed sheets beneath him as his thighs quivered and his toes curled. After the tip of Victor's erection was completely encased in Yuuri's heat, Victor paused, waiting for Yuuri's frenetic and shallow breathing to slow down.

"Yuuri, my love, I won't force it in. Please try to relax for me, if you can."

At the sound of Victor's soothing voice, Yuuri opened his eyes and unclenched the bed sheets. When his breathing evened out somewhat, Yuuri realized that the pain was not as unbearable as he had feared—either because he had mentally prepared himself for it or because Victor had, as promised, been excessively gentle in penetrating him.

"I'm… Victor, just … proceed…"

The fullness inside him, while foreign, was certainly not unwelcome. Yuuri felt himself tightening around Victor, embracing every round and every length of the older man's girth until he had molded himself around its entirety. He felt affection radiating from the man above him in the thrusts of his hips and the caresses of his fingers.

Yuuri could not prevent a drawn-out moan from slipping out of his mouth, especially not when he was in a state like this. The pulsing flesh inside was filling him to the brim, leaving no room to care about the world beyond his fingertips. There was just their bareness, skin against skin, combined with a near-lifelong yearning that pulsed in the depths of his heart. He couldn't tell where his body ended and where Victor's started; their two entities were melting into one with every second that passed.

Victor moved in and out of him so gently that Yuuri almost cried out at his tenderness. As the warmth of Victor's body enveloped him, Yuuri's spine arched to press himself closer, all thought of embarrassment dissipating as his body burst into flames from his beloved's all-encompassing touch. Yuuri forgot where they were, what time it was, and everything else save for the fact that he was in the arms of his beloved Victor. It had been the illustrious skater who had captured Yuuri's heart, but it was this person—the partner of his affections—who could fill filled him with such
utter bliss.

An extremely embarrassing, high-pitched sound burst out from his mouth, one that was both peculiar and familiar to his own ears. It wasn't until it had completely faded from his throat that he realized he had been squeezing his eyes shut. How easy it was for Victor's ministrations to evoke a discomfiting outburst from his vocal chords!

Even so, discomfort was the furthest sensation Yuuri felt in the throes of passion. Victor, Victor, Victor!

Just the sensation of Victor's lips exploring Yuuri's back was enough to make him ache with further need. He twisted against his lover and gasped with pleasure when Victor's dexterous hands slid lower, cupping the rounded softness of Yuuri's bottom and pressing him closer. Yuuri yielded himself completely, melting against Victor, inciting his lover to fit their bodies together whilst filling him so perfectly.

Yuuri could only exhale in shaky response when Victor tremulously confided into the dip of Yuuri's shoulder, "Yuuri, darling, I love you. There's no one on the planet that I love more than you."

Victor was undoubtedly the very embodiment of sex. Before, he didn't know if anything could ever feel so wonderful, but now there was nothing he desired more than the fervid slide of Victor's length in and out of him.

Yuuri's breath stuttered with his heartbeat when Victor's hard flesh reached that one deep spot inside him, making him see nothing but white. A few more nudges against his prostate, combined with the friction of his length against Victor's perfect body, was enough to make him come with a loud wail. His entire being tensed in the aftermath as his fingers fisted in the bed sheets tightly enough to rip them apart.

The moment Victor stopped moving his hips, Yuuri offered him a frantic apology, "I'm sorry it was too soon. I couldn't—"

Victor's only answer was to tip Yuuri's chin up for a gentle kiss. Their lips fell together languidly, slow and warm despite Yuuri's unexpected orgasm a little earlier.

Victor gently pulled out to give Yuuri the chance to roll out from beneath him. As Yuuri did so, he watched contently from the side, seemingly unconcerned by his own raging arousal.

I love you, Yuuri thought. His gaze wandered aimlessly over Victor's comely countenance, then traveled downward to find Victor's sculpted abdominal muscles, laid bare all to Yuuri's pleasure alone. Despite reaching his peak just a moment before, something within him was already yearning for…

…more?

Yuuri's fingers traced Victor's regal jaw line and then sturdy shoulders. "Shall we continue?"

"In a moment, love. It must be quite unpleasant for you in your over-sensitized state."

How could Victor be so patient despite the obviously aching need in his loins? Despite the lethargy from his afterglow, Yuuri spread his legs in invitation. "It's all well with me. More than that, I desire you."

Positioning himself between Yuuri's open thighs, Victor captured Yuuri's lips with his own before
trailing his kisses downwards. When Victor brushed playful nips against Yuuri's ribs that left marks across his torso, Yuuri found himself gasping uncontrollably at every touch. Yuuri's softened erection had not regained its full robustness yet, but it had most definitely twitched with anticipatory eagerness.

"Victor, don't make me wait any longer..." Yuuri arched into Victor, body pliant and mind expectant, until their heated skin pressed against each other.

Once Victor's hips were flushed against Yuuri's, he leaned down to capture Yuuri's lips again in a sloppy, open mouthed kiss. Amidst the struggle for air, Yuuri's unfocused gaze drifted across his lover's features as he reciprocated the kiss in kind.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that Victor was incredibly mindful of Yuuri's condition—so mindful, in fact, that Yuuri was beside himself from the lack of friction. He began bucking against his partner but, no matter how much strength he used, Victor continued to tantalize Yuuri with his inaction instead.

It wasn't until Yuuri ground his groin against Victor that the latter tentatively rolled his hips against Yuuri's. This time, the gradual rigidity of Yuuri's organ confirmed how ready he was.

Victor positioned his length against Yuuri's entrance and rocked back forward, a low groan escaping him with almost every drag of their bodies against each other. He began to set a rhythm of slow, reverent movements that conveyed everything he felt towards Yuuri.

Yuuri shivered in sheer euphoria as their hips connected again. With his thoughts turning to mush, he allowed his body to communicate through his actions. Soon they were moving at a faster pace, hips snapping sporadically and mouths emitting gasps of enraptured. Yuuri's moans quickly devolved from whispery purrs to urgent mewls with each successive kiss.

One mere look gave Yuuri the full realization of how insanely beautiful his lover was up close, especially when passion momentarily augmented his gorgeous face. He could have never imagined the Victor Nikiforov reduced to nothing more than gasps and groans and grunts, but now... Those teal eyes saw only Yuuri, the sweat beaded across Victor's smooth skin was because of Yuuri and those gentle fingers refused to separate from Yuuri. At this moment, no one in the whole world was granted access to this gorgeously moaning Eros—no one other than Katsuki Yuuri.

You're mine, Victor.

It could have last a minute or an hour—Yuuri could not tell, so wrapped up was he in Victor's loving presence. There were flashes of devotion in Victor's eyes, moans that permeated the marrows of Yuuri's bones, the rhythmic slap of flesh against flesh and something welling in the pit of Yuuri's stomach that threatened to devour him whole. Messy kisses occupied their mouths, with Victor's breath puffing into Yuuri's mouth at sporadic intervals. Yuuri didn't know what fuelled the tears springing forth from the corners of his eyes, but his hammering heart bade him not to let go of his partner's shoulder. When Yuuri moved, Victor moved with him, fanning the flames of his passion until an inferno threatened to consume Yuuri whole.

"Victooo~nnh!" Yuuri made a noise that was somewhere between a gasp and a groan. There was no stopping or controlling his moans, not when his insides were aflame with ardor and his muscles were clenching from the sheer emotion in Victor's glimmering eyes.

Then, without preamble, Victor shifted to the side, hoisting one of Yuuri's ankles onto his shoulder and exposing Yuuri to his passionate gaze.
Judging by the burning intensity of his cheeks, Yuuri knew he must have been blushing harder than before. He tried to bring his leg down, only for Victor to thwart his efforts by leaning forward and pressing his torso against the back of Yuuri's suspended thigh. Not only did Victor's upper body prevent Yuuri's leg from coming down, but this position also facilitated Victor's deeper thrusts.

"V-Victor!"

Victor's only answer was to grab Yuuri's other ankle and part his legs even further. The tip of his length pressed intimately against Yuuri's innermost recesses, trailing electricity in its wake. His sac dominantly and seductively brushed against Yuuri's opening.

Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut and clenched the sheets beneath him, surrendering to Victor's ministrations by baring his entire being to his lover. Only Victor had ever seen this side of him, and only Victor would ever see this side of him again.

"Yuuri…" A gentle finger wiped the single tear that beaded from the corner of Yuuri's left eye.

"You aren't hurting me, Victor. It's just … this is … I…" Yuuri bit his lower lip briefly, and then demanded, "Kiss me."

The moment Victor's lips touched his, Yuuri felt a jolt spark within him. Even though this was not the first time Victor had kissed him, each and every one elicited a different feeling. At the moment, it was as though a human-sized bubble had encased him, immersing him in absolute safety and elation. Every pant he drew into his lungs only served to enhance the blissful sensation diffusing throughout his being. Every nerve tingled with the excitement of Victor's delectable touch as their mouths fell ravenously upon one another, demanding responses that each was more than happy to give.

When a slick tongue deftly slipped between Yuuri's lips, he was vaguely aware that he responded with a drawn-out moan. More, was the only word that echoed through Yuuri's mind as an adventurous hand swept onto Victor's back, fingers digging desperately into his lover's tender flesh as Victor overwhelmed him with indulgent affection.

This is Victor … there's no other in the universe with whom I'd rather be, Yuuri privately admitted, losing himself in a sweet surrender of lips against lips, tongue twining around tongue and bodies pressed together. Eventually, he broke from the kiss, turned his head to the side and demurely uttered, "I'm all right now. Do continue."

As loving fingers slid to interlace with Yuuri's, Victor resumed the incessant pace of his hips, continuously hitting the spot that wracked Yuuri with pleasure whilst making him forget his own name. Victor's mouth returned to Yuuri's, endeavoring to recapture the ghost of that special phrase Yuuri was too shy to re-articulate.

When Victor's hips began gyrating fluidly, Yuuri's universe fell into a state of delirium. The ceiling was swirling with colors, but there was no vodka to blame—not this time. Hence, Yuuri did the only thing he could: reciprocated Victor's movements with equal ardency. His newfound eagerness must have spurred even more enthusiasm within Victor, for his beloved rammed into him even more feverishly.

The guttural sounds emerging from deep within Victor's throat grew in tandem with the episodic gasps slipping from Yuuri's lips as his beloved repeatedly moved within him. No matter how much he tried to stifle his voice, Yuuri lost all self-control when strong fingers brushed against his hips and tightly held on. His entire body shuddered, ecstasy and agony blending into one excruciating
kaleidoscope of sensation that combusted within him. Yuuri moaned, utterly incapable of speech as his body trembled on the precipice of overwhelming pleasure, before his climax ripped through him for the second time that night.

Through the haze of his ardor, Yuuri sensed Victor's attempt to withdraw from him. He could guess that his lover meant well and wished to allow Yuuri the opportunity to savor his climax without interference, but being bereft of Victor's length was the last thing Yuuri desired right now. Crossing his ankles at the base of Victor's spine and clenching his muscles around Victor's pulsing girth, Yuuri wordlessly pleaded with Victor to stay inside him.

Thankfully, Victor offered no resistance—if anything, he became more passionate, more eager, and more assiduous in his motions. With every thrust, Yuuri's sanity vaporized, the discomfort from his over-sensitized body eclipsed by the ecstasy in his lover's expression.

*The sound...* Yuuri realized bashfully. Dear Lord, did he just *croon*?

Every nerve and every fiber in Yuuri's body thrummed with pleasure. As much as his dignity would have refused to show it, his actions decided otherwise, for breathing regularly became toilsome and the contentment on Victor's charming face did not help in his endeavor at all.

When Victor kissed him again, Yuuri felt his partner's eyelashes flutter against his cheeks. He tightened his legs around Victor's waist and tangled his sweat-slicked fingers in his lover's fine silvery hair, and reveled in the way his beloved pounded and pounded and *pounded* into him. Unable to stay still whilst in the throes of such ardent passion, Yuuri grasped at Victor's upper arms and marveled at the bicep muscles flexing beneath the splay of his fingers. Wrapped in the undeniable presence of his lover, he plunged into the chasm of sexual madness right alongside Victor.

"Yuuriiii!" Victor cried out as he slammed his hips forward one last time, burying himself to the hilt inside Yuuri as he poured all of himself with all his love and strength.

The universe exploded around Yuuri, rendering him almost delirious with pleasure as he felt Victor's body finally achieve fulfillment within his own. Joined so inseparably, and with Victor's seed filling him so completely, it was hot and lascivious—far more intimate than anything Yuuri had ever experienced before. Most importantly of all, though, it branded him as Victor's.

"Yuuri... my Yuuri..." Victor breathed, his chest heaving up and down at violent odds with his gentle murmurs.

Yuuri felt he nearly came a third time, simply from listening to the way his name rolled off Victor's tongue and feeling Victor's pulsating length twitching inside him. *This* was Victor Nikiforov. This was the light of his soul, the fire of his loins, and the joy of his life. As Yuuri's gaze caressed his lover's features, tears started streaking down his cheeks.

*Seeing you skate for the first time was fate and joining the troupe to become closer with you was choice ... but loving you was entirely out of my control, Victor.*

Victor's fingers trembled as he wiped the tears from Yuuri's face, his teal eyes filled with concern. "Dearest, have I wronged you?"

"No, I..." He swallowed past the lump in his throat and continued to confess quietly, voice low and barely recognizable—even to his own ears. "I'm so happy that I'm scared... What if this must end one day? The Victor Nikiforov that I've known for years used to be so far away ... and yet here you are, right beside me. We're breathing the same air. When I extend my hand, I can touch you."
And you're looking at me full of concern, which those photos of you could never do."

"Oh, Yuuri, my love, I will never, ever leave you," Victor assured him, his voice barely above a whisper. "Not even a thousand lifetimes could inspire me with joy like your love does, and nothing I do will ever be enough to repay you in kind." Then he sealed his vow with a long, lingering kiss upon Yuuri's lips. Slipping out of Yuuri's body with careful movements, Victor laid his head on Yuuri's chest as their heaving breaths slowed into a more placid cadence.

They kissed for a while more, relishing in the warm afterglow of their lovemaking, before snuggling under the blankets. However, the sensation of something viscous streaking down his thighs made Yuuri squirm a little, but the aftermath of Victor's zealous lovemaking necessitated only the most minimal motions on his part. He winced as he moved, but answered "I'm just a little sore; it's perfectly all right," when Victor's brows furrowed in concern.

"I love you so much," Victor told him, rubbing their noses together with a joy so lucid that Yuuri felt his vision blurring over again. Under the covers, he reached for Yuuri's hands, clasping them in his own and pulling them up to bestow kisses upon each of them.

Euphoria supervened, and Yuuri met the peace of oblivion. A pair of lovers abed with sweat whilst wrapped in each other's presence—what a harmonious feeling it was! With their legs tangled like this, Yuuri was reminded of the western bread he had once consumed whilst marching with his troop; a "pretzel," if memory served him right. He spent the time idly skirting fingers over the dips and curves of Victor's tantalizing figure, the beating of their hearts synchronizing into a melody that only they themselves could hear.

"Yuuri, that was amazing! You were fantastic! Phenomenal, even!" Victor exclaimed sometime later, smiling so dreamily that Yuuri could clearly see a heart in his mouth and bliss in his eyes. The comments made his stomach flutter warmly, even as his cheeks also flooded with warmth.

You've stolen my line, Victor, Yuuri inwardly confessed, since the courage to speak it out loud was not in his possession.

Then Victor's smile faltered into a creased brow of concern. "But was I good enough for you?"

"Of course you were. Why ask the obvious?" How could you doubt yourself after making me climax twice in a row?

"Well, I couldn't be sure since you're my first man."

"First? But you executed such perfect techniques..." It would be a lie to say Yuuri was not disappointed about Victor's amorous pursuits in the past, even though such experience had indubitably contributed to tonight's wondrous lovemaking. Nevertheless, he took satisfaction in the knowledge that he would be the only one whom Victor intended to spend the rest of his tomorrows.

"I did receive tips here and there." After a brief glance at Yuuri, Victor hastily added, "With pen and paper, of course, not through the act itself."

Yuuri couldn't help but smile as he stroked Victor's silvery hair.

"What about you?"

As tempting as it was to hide himself under the pile of blankets until Victor dropped the question, Yuuri braced himself and answered, "You know I had no experience with romance before. You said it yourself, the first time we met."
"It appeared to me that it was probably the first time you went on a tryst. I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to assume you've never had any love interest."

Oh, Victor… Why do you have to ask? How can I tell you that you're the only person I ever masturbated to?

"Well," Yuuri drew a sharp breath. "There was this girl … Yuuko, who was my rink mate and neighbor. She was beautiful and kind so, whenever my classmates asked about any girls I was interested in, I found myself mentioning her name in my teenage years."

Victor gazed at Yuuri contemplatively. After a while, he opened his mouth and spoke his mind, "Is it just me or does that sound as though you didn't feel any need to choose her if the circumstances didn't demand it? Moreover, if the options weren't limited to girls, it seems as though you probably wouldn't have chosen her either."

Yuuri sighed. Why must Victor be so perceptive at times like this? "It is just as you pointed out—although I didn't realize this until I heard of her engagement to my other rink mate, Takeshi. At that time, what I felt was 'oh', rather than 'ouch'; rather than feeling bitter, I felt happy that my childhood friend had found her own happiness. They were even blessed with triplets … before the bombing, anyway."

Victor pursed his lips and ruminated pensively, before grimacing a little and adding, "I still fail to understand why you once thought you were romantically interested in her, Yuuri. Weren't there other pretty girls in your hometown?"

"She and I shared the same hobbies."

"So she skated … and what else? Surely she wasn't the only rink mate you had?"

*We loved to collect posters and newspaper scraps about you, but please don't make me say it, Victor!* "It's unfair that you bombard me with such probing questions about her when I've never asked you a single question about any of the women you dallied with in the past."

"Then I'll tell you about them." Victor beamed.

"Uh, I do *not* believe that would be a good idea. You have every right to maintain your privacy."

"Just as I have every right to let my beloved know."

At Victor's insensitivity, Yuuri considered growling and threatening him with a pointed, *May I remind you that there are many ways in which a man may ill-treat his lover?* However, he decided against it in the end. Victor might hold equal—if not greater—dislike for Yuuri's imperfections, yet he had never breathed a word of complaint.

"Very well," Yuuri acquiesced although he was already disliking the direction their conversation was headed. As much as he appreciated Victor's honesty, he could not be certain whether his heart would be capable of handling his jealousy.

"It was a mixture of pity and curiosity that made me lose my virginity to a woman seven years older than me. She missed the companionship of men, since her husband had been enlisted in the military, along with every other man in her village. From the beginning, it was clear that what had happened between she and me was bound to be a one-time affair."

The more words poured out of Victor's mouth, the more reluctant Yuuri was to hear them, yet he tried his best not to cringe. Oblivious to Yuuri's internal struggle, Victor continued, "After learning
that lust wasn't necessarily accompanied by love, I find it easier to lose myself in the act. When the troupe journeyed to another town and a pretty girl my age offered herself to me, I didn't reject her. The next day, when she and her local friends giggled as they saw me traversing through the marketplace, it was the first time I discovered that there was such a thing as prestige by association."

Yuuri's heart ached. Victor—dearest, lovely, and kind Victor—did not deserve that at all!

"Soon afterward, I began to incorporate seduction into the missions I undertook. Knowing that the troupe was ever-moving and that I needed not expect to see those girls again made the act easier. However, I thought God had finally granted me a chance at true love when I met Melinda. She…"

Victor swallowed thickly.

Yuuri caressed Victor's forearm as gently as he could. "Victor, if remembering all these things only hurt you more, you don't need to tell me."

Victor shook his head and smiled wanly before continuing. "She was a southern farmer's daughter—sweet and handsome enough to be loved by the locals, both young and old, whilst possessing the skills to make the best berry pie. The only thing she didn't tell me was that she'd approached me for the sake of creating one last happy memory before she died from her terminal illness. When I revisited her house the next day, I was met with a white shroud over her unbreathing face. Her father handed me a letter—her last message to me, which I read in the barnyard where we had ambled aimlessly just the day before. How laughable it was that I, without a care in the world, had been so carefree with she, who had anticipated doom so close at hand!"

Victor's jaw clenched for a moment before he resumed, "Though I knew she deserved as much happiness as everyone else and that she had no choice in the matter of contracting such a fatal disease, I couldn't help but feel … used. A part of me wished to yell at her for choosing me as her experimental partner to fulfill her wishes, for she had doomed me to be a victim of heartache for the rest of my life."

Yuuri intended to tell him that it was perfectly normal to feel as he did, but his voice did not work. Transfixed by Victor's words, Yuuri allowed him to continue, "I'm a terrible man, aren't I? Despite her suffering, the girl endeavored to apologize to me with her dying breath, yet I sulked at her words. It became harder to trust others afterward. Everything I said while flirting was superficial, and bed sport during missions became nothing more than a pleasurable duty."

"Victor," Yuuri caressed the silvery strands of Victor's hair, "Is this why you have no true friend, even though the troupe members all treat you so kindly?"

Victor turned so sharply toward him that Yuuri thought he might have offended his partner. However, when Victor spoke, his voice was filled with the deepest admiration instead. "Is it that obvious to you after just a few days around me? Many others have assumed that Chris is my best friend." Victor softly laughed as he shook his head incredulously. "You really are my specialist." He took Yuuri's hand and brushed his lips across the back. "I once thought that my barren heart could no longer nourish love, yet I'm so thankful that you've proven me wrong. I love you—not only for who you are, but for what you have shaped me into."

Ignoring the burning heat of his cheeks, Yuuri quickly changed the subject. "Will I receive a reward, then?"

"Mm-hmm. We'll just have to wait and see what kind of reward you're after, dear."

"I had this kind of reward in mind, actually." Yuuri kissed Victor's clavicle reverently, brushing his
lips against his lover's smooth skin, before he dragged his tongue downward to lave at the areas that he suspected to be ticklish for Victor. Each time he guessed correctly, Victor rewarded him with a peal of laughter, gradually chasing the ghosts of their past back to their rightful places.

When Victor's laughter had receded into drowsy giggles, he murmured, "Yuuri, I don't wish to fall asleep."

"We shall be driving the wagon on the morrow; you'll be needing all the sleep you can get."

"But reality has finally become better than my dreams. What if I awaken and never again feel all that I've felt with you?"

"If you ever lose that feeling, I will devote the remainder of my life to restoring that sensation. Goodnight, Victor."
The Rapturous Morn

Chapter Summary

What would be the best way to spend the last morning onboard ... other than sex?

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much ChiaRoseKuro, The Kindly One, & MyOu LiFe for beta reading this chapter.

10

The Rapturous Morn

Despite Yuuri's promise, his hand wasn't holding Victor's when he awoke the next morning. Thanking God that Victor was still asleep, he hastily interlaced their fingers.

He was about to lie down beside Victor again when he heard a light, "I see someone cheating."

Victor winked at him.

When he'd loosened his fingers from their white-knuckled grip, Yuuri giggled and bantered, "For a good cause."

"But cheating nonetheless. And cheaters must be punished." Victor rolled over until he was on top of Yuuri, and then assaulted him with a barrage of kisses.

Feeling the indecent twitches in his loins, Yuuri interrupted his lover's affectionate 'punishment'. "Vic—mm—tor … will there be … mmh … enough time?"

"Aww, but Yuuriii~" Victor whined, "I'd hate to leave you and the warmth of our bed." The adorable childishness of Victor's plea did not match the raunchy grinding of his hips against Yuuri's at all.

As much as Yuuri's conscience knew better than to overindulge in Victor's presence and neglect his duties, his loins continued to twitch with every provocative drag of Victor's crotch against it. With the sternest tone he could muster, he pushed the taller man to the side and chided, "We're in need of a shower, Victor. Off with you!"

Yuuri deliberately avoided glancing back at Victor, who was surely sulking at his rejection. Deep down, he was convinced that his resolve would crumble if he were to lay eyes on Victor's 'abandoned puppy' look. However, his strength was undermined by the way his legs shook feebly beneath him, and he quickly lost count of the times he almost fell as he wobbled towards the bathroom.

"Yuuri!" Victor sprang from the bed to catch him after one particularly worrying stumble. Panic
laced his tone as he bombarded Yuuri with questions, "What have I done? Oh, dear! Forgive me, I've never been on the receiving end before, so I didn't—Is it still painful?"

"I can manage," Yuuri replied, swallowing his guilt—not only for reproaching Victor just a moment before, but for his present attempt to push Victor away. His lover's proximity brought a homey scent with it, which made it all the more difficult for him to refrain from inhaling every last whiff of it from the room. He had been hopelessly infatuated with Victor Nikiforov for the last fourteen years, yet how was it possible for him to continue falling deeper in love with every waking minute?

However, Victor refused to let Yuuri go. He wrapped his arms around Yuuri's waist and gently prodded him from behind, so as to prompt Yuuri in taking further steps while providing a solid support for him at the same time. There was nothing erotic in the gesture; if anything, it reminded Yuuri of a doe encouraging her newborn fawn to walk.

Once they were inside the bathroom, Victor even turned the shower knob for Yuuri and adjusted the temperature accordingly. Yuuri didn't have the heart to shoo him outside, so he allowed Victor to brush his teeth and shave at the washbasin. After just a few seconds, though, he had avert his gaze lest he lost his resolve.

The night before, Yuuri had marveled at the divine beauty of Victor's naked body. That morning, even after their intense love-making, he had willed his lover's resplendent figure to embrace him again. He could only hope that Victor was too preoccupied to watch Yuuri cleanse the remnants of dried semen from inside his crevices.

Luck, it appeared, had decided otherwise. The moment Yuuri turned around, he was met with Victor's smoky gaze directed right at his rear and Victor's erect length in all its full glory. He gasped but did not move to cover his eyes, for nothing could save him from this embarrassment.

Yuuri was not the only one who was taken aback. Victor apparently had not expected Yuuri to turn around at that precise moment either, if his widened eyes were anything to go by. Furthermore, his hand also missed the stubble he was supposed to shave, causing his razor to score a narrow strip across his chin instead.

"Victor, you're bleeding!"

Victor set the razor aside before proceeding to clean his injured chin with cold tap water. Next, he approached the shower stall, much to Yuuri's confusion and panic.

"Victor?" Yuuri extended his arms, reaching for Victor's chin with the intention of checking his latest wound.

A smoldering gaze flared in Victor's eyes as he caught Yuuri's wrists midway and held them in a dominating grip that made Yuuri's heart flutter in his chest. It was as though something had snapped within Victor, blowing his usual gentleness asunder like chaff before the wind when he delved in for an urgent and ravenous kiss. With the press of his face, Victor tilted Yuuri's head back, prying Yuuri's lips open with his tongue and inhaling a quick breath just before his lips fell upon Yuuri's.

As they kissed, they wrapped their arms around each other in a heated embrace. As his muscles relaxed and his body became pliant, Yuuri pressed his body as close as he could to Victor's. In response, Victor tightened his arms around him, shifting his weight ever so slightly to instigate friction between their lengths as he moaned and kissed him even more hungrily. His hands spanned and cupped Yuuri's soft roundness, contriving to torment Yuuri with incredibly intimate caresses.
that he ached to prolong.

How Yuuri wished to melt into Victor until their bodies blended together and they were one … but now was not the time! Breaking the kiss with a breathless gasp, he rested his forehead against Victor's.

"We really mustn't do this when we're pressed for time."

In lieu of offering Yuuri any verbal response, Victor abruptly released him, before approaching the toiletry rack behind Yuuri and fetching a bottle of liquid soap from it. Yuuri heard the bottle being pumped a few times, but before he could wonder at his lover's actions for long, he felt something nudge his rump. His breath hitched as he realized Victor's erection was coated with the viscous liquid.

He opened his mouth with the intent of chiding Victor, but the hardened member slid effortlessly between his slightly parted thighs, its pinkish tip caressing the base of Yuuri's sac in the process. Yuuri's body jerked at the sensation of Victor's length brushing against his genitals. When it grazed by him, tracking wet trails of early desire fused with shower water all over his own stiffening length, his legs instinctively came together, tightening the channel so as to obtain more friction between their bare skin. The sensation was far more titillating than what Yuuri had anticipated, for there was no pain; only pleasure.

All thoughts of reprobation vanished on the tip of Yuuri's tongue, superseded by a needy whine instead. He helplessly watched Victor thrust back and forth, fanning the unquenchable flames of desire that flared higher with every motion. As Victor's slick thighs repeatedly bumping against the back of Yuuri's, the latter found it even more impossible to stifle his moans. He savored every inch of the intense journey, from the way the hard ridges of Victor's flawless abdomen pressed so intimately against his back to the way his lover's soap-lathered palm began to stroke his taut manhood. Victor's other hand roamed down Yuuri's chest, where it playfully circumnavigated Yuuri's nipple and then pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. Yuuri lost himself to Victor—to his wondrous rhythm, to his addictive slickness and to everything his impossibly attentive lover made him feel.

"Yuuri, you're…" Victor spoke with such admiration that it took Yuuri's breath away. However, he did not finish his words; instead, he bit down on the sloping juncture of Yuuri's neck, eliciting a startled gasp from Yuuri.

Below, Victor's member pulsated more wildly, before spurts of pearlescent liquid jetted forth through the gap between Yuuri's thighs. Yuuri flushed at the sight of his partner's bodily fluids splattered across the floor, for this was the first time Victor had ever come before him.

"There," Victor panted raggedly. "You're mine and everyone at the troupe will see the proof for it."

Glancing back at his lover, Yuuri huffed and muttered, "You're impossibly embarrassing."

Instead of a verbal reply, Yuuri received nuzzles along the expanse of skin on his back. Within seconds, the nuzzles turned into kisses, which quickly wended their way down. Then Yuuri felt a clamp on the fleshiest part of his bottom. Although it didn't hurt, as Victor had covered his teeth with his lips, being bitten in a spot where no one would normally touch him was decidedly awkward for Yuuri.

"Victor!"

The bubbly giggles that escaped from Yuuri's lips only served to heighten Victor's enthusiasm as
his chomps drifted away from his buttocks. He even went as far as to kneel and lift one of Yuuri's leg in his playful pursuit to mark his lover's body.

Then he moved to the front.

Leaning in, Victor drew the tip of his tongue across a more sensitive portion of Yuuri's groin. Yuuri gasped, but Victor proceeded to mouth at it regardless, brushing his lips across the tender skin and dragging more of his tongue up until he was nosing the flesh right below Yuuri's sac.

Yuuri had always been drawn to the sheer magnetism of Victor's charm. Hence, when he saw Victor shift until he was down on his knees, nuzzling into his crotch and glancing up—eyes hypnotic, cheeks flushed and lips slick—it was too much for both Yuuri's paralyzed mind and his throbbing, oversensitized flesh when it effortlessly slid into Victor's mouth. The kneeling man worked Yuuri's erect length deep into his throat over several heart-stopping moments, swallowing and pulling out again in a seemingly never-ending cycle of hedonistic indulgence. The mere intensity of it convinced Yuuri that Victor was actually going to suck the life out of him, right through his—

"Ahn~" Yuuri moaned. His hips rocked tremulously without his consent, pushing his length deeper into Victor's throat as his inevitable climax abruptly overwhelmed him.

Although Victor was choking a little, he continued to swallow around the column of Yuuri's flesh throughout the entirety of his peak. One of his hands kneaded Yuuri's thigh whilst the other clenched lightly around the shaft again, steadying the appendage as he licked its underside clean of a few pearly drops.

The universe became a whirl of pleasure as Yuuri stared, transfixed and trembling violently, down at Victor's lips. In response, Victor licked the tip again then ran his tongue across his lips.

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Needless to say, they were very, very tardy for breakfast. The ship's crew had already cleared away the buffet food, but a member of the kitchen staff took pity of them and gave them each a piece of bread, a bowl of gruel, and an apple.

Afterward, they visited Makkachin together and were greeted with enthusiastic barking as well as a shower of canine saliva.

"Sorry, we're late," Yuuri told Makkachin, grimacing a little at the stickiness on his shirt as he patted her head. "Are you hungry?"

Makkachin answer with a long lick across Yuuri's chin, which could have easily translated as "It's all right." or "Definitely! And you look scrumptious!"

"You'll be out of this animal pen within a couple of hours—and then the three of us are going to be together again." Victor hugged her and Yuuri simultaneously.

For some reason that Yuuri could not quite fathom, his heart swelled within him. The exuberance diffusing through his being at his proximity to Victor and Makkachin made him feel as though he had gotten his family back. It perplexed him because Katsuki Toshiya, Hiroko, and Mari had never been so liberal with physical contact—indeed, neither were most people of Kouki, to the point where parents never kissed in their children's presence.

On their way out, Victor and Yuuri saw Christophe and his lover petting a white, long-haired cat.
"I'm going to write a shopping list. Have you any plans, Yuuri?" Victor asked once they were out on the tween deck.

"I'll go for a walk, then. See you in a while."

"Isn't it a beautiful morn, Yuuri?" Phichit greeted, when they passed each other on the promenade deck later.

"Yes, it is." Yuuri tried his best to keep his timbre steady, but something in the way Phichit wiggled his eyebrows and the suggestive tone he used unsettled Yuuri. What if his moans had been too loud and Phichit had heard them? Desperate to change the subject, Yuuri scanned his surroundings for inspiration.

"What a huge iceberg! To think we've yet to enter the Month of Frost!" he pointed at the distant objects clustered on the horizon.

Phichit turned around to look at the direction Yuuri was pointing. "Ah, that's no iceberg; it's The White Cliffs of Rotherfyn. Those white-chalk cliffs are famed as an iconic landmark and a symbol of home and wartime defense, as they stand guard at the Gateway to Mheadaure. It's not a surprise that their east cliff, with its commanding view over the channel and its imposing height of over three hundred feet, is a position of natural strength and has been incorporated into many a city's fortification since prehistoric times."

"So, we're going to land soon? Drat! I forgot to collect the documents from Georgi." With that, Yuuri rushed away.

Georgi, as it turned out, had already vacated his cabin. When Yuuri peeked through the open door, neither the person nor his belongings were present. Thus, Yuuri ended up inquiring after Georgi when he passed just about every single troupe member, as most were in the middle of moving their belongings from their cabins to their wagons. However, Georgi had not lingered in one place; some saw him at the promenade deck, others at the poop deck, and still others at the bow of the ship.

It was not until Yuuri had arrived at the ship's stern that he finally found Georgi conversing with Yakov. He waited until the ringleader had finished talking before he informed Georgi, "I'm supposed to collect my travel documents from you."

Before Georgi answered Yuuri, Yakov beat him to it, "Yuuri, have you not collected those documents yet? I expected better from you. Not all countries look kindly upon us, no matter how renowned our name is. What do you suppose would happen if an immigration officer denied us entry because a single person failed to present his travel documents?!"

"I'm sorry, coach. It won't happen again."

The old man pinned Yuuri with his piercing gaze and a forbidding frown. In the end, he said, "Remember this, Yuuri: Victor may have his talents and expertise, but it doesn't mean he's flawless in other areas. You'd do well to be your own judge when it comes to your own affairs. If Victor continues to prove an adversary to your discipline, I'll have no choice but to provide alternate rooming arrangements for you."

Yuuri could only hope that his gulp was not too conspicuous. "Yes, sir."

Yakov beckoned to Georgi, "Go. Get the documents." Then he turned to Yuuri, "Bring everyone hither."

When the troupe members had assembled, Yakov announced, "We are going to land soon. As
Mheadaure is a nation of stricter social codes than our last stop, I must remind you all to behave. We are not to draw unnecessary attention. Also, the stockings worn in ladies' performances must be thick and anything but flesh-colored."

"We've been there before," Yuuri heard Mila muttering under her breath behind him. "What encouraging advice this is!"

"Team A," Yakov called.

Mila gasped out a half-choked "Yes!" Sara, Michele, and Emil chorused their reply more readily.

"Once we arrive at the port, you are to disguise yourselves as two honeymooning couples and exchange the currency as needed." Yakov entrusted two pouches to them.

Next, he instructed. "Team B, you're in charge of food supplies."

Eight stagehands, including Chris' lover, acknowledged their allotted duty.

"The rest of you, drive the wagons to the edge of town. Teams A and B, you must head there as soon as you are done with your tasks. We shall depart at once. I shan't stand for any delay."

Victor raised his hand. "I shall drive the Crispinos' wagon."

The moment Victor finished speaking, Georgi's hand shot in the air. "And I, the other."

Yakov nodded. "Do any of you have questions?"

When no one inquired, the ringleader dismissed them. Before retiring to the vehicle deck with the rest of the troupe, Georgi handed Yuuri a large brown envelope. It contained three sheets of paper, folded separately but held together with a cardboard cover: proof of his health status, a passport, and a visa—the last of which was required because Yuuri came from a different continent. Every single page differed in measurements from the paper of his own country, but the contents were similar; for instance, the passport was valid for two years and bore a photograph and signature, along with a personal description that included details like his facial structure, complexion, and other such features. A simple thank you was nowhere near enough to do justice for the wonders Georgi had conjured up overnight for him.

Yuuri followed Victor, intending to spend a little more time with him in private before they parted. To his amusement, Victor did not walk back to the poop deck where their cabin was located, but headed towards the ship's stern instead.

"Don't we need to pack, Victor?"

"I already did that. Our bags are in my wagon now."

"Sorry, I should have helped."

"I'm used to packing alone. It's not unmanageable," Victor assured Yuuri, no bitterness in his tone. However, the way he gazed at the sky and sighed afterward did not sit well with Yuuri.

"Is something the matter?" Yuuri asked.

"No … it's just that I have this … whim, I suppose…"

For all Victor's caprices thus far, he had never openly admitted to any of them as a whim. This made Yuuri arch his eyebrows. "Of what nature?"
"When I saw couples embracing each other on a ship deck overlooking the sea, I used to wonder how it'd feel."

"Didn't we kiss and embrace on the deck last night?"

"Yes…" Victor left it hanging, before a spark ignited in his eyes and he rapidly continued, "But I was too focused on you to spare the slightest attention to the ocean at that time."

Yuuri glanced at the white cliffs yonder, calculating the amount of time it would take for the ship to reach its destination. Taking Victor's hand, he led his lover closer to the taffrail. "I suppose I have to take responsibility for distracting you last night."

The smile that graced Victor's face looked more like that of a love-struck teenager than a globally renowned magician. Unable to resist its magnetic pull, Yuuri could not help but smile back in response.

"Is this closer to your expectation, sir?" Yuuri japed as he wrapped both arms around Victor's waist. He ended his question with a tiptoe that enabled him to stick his tongue in Victor's ear.

"Am I allowed to say no?"

Delighted to hear Victor's giggled response, Yuuri swirled his tongue and licked more thoroughly. "You are, if I am allowed not to believe you."

When Victor's giggles had eventually subsided, he stared at the wispy white clouds in the sky and confessed, "It gives me no pleasure to know that we shall be driving separate wagons."

"You brought this upon yourself, Victor. Someone else must have driven Team A's wagon prior to your offer, since you had nobody else to take care of your own wagon before I joined the troupe."

Victor's mouth wobbled on the verge of a pout before he muttered a string of complaints instead, "You're cold-blooded, unkind, insensitive, ruthless, uncaring, heartless, soulless, uncompromising, cruel…"

"Don't they all mean the same? And is that the scorn of a pregnant woman I hear? Yuuko used to rave like that about her husband when she conceived the triplets, my goodness!" Yuuri huffed. "I'm not blaming you for wanting to help your friends in need. All I ask is that you bear with any consequences that may arise from the choice you yourself made."

"Weeeeell~" Victor's childishness began to shine through when he drawled his syllable in a lilting singsong and made the face that was bound to chip away at Yuuri's resolution. "If I didn't do it, I wouldn't get my farewell hug, welcome-back hug, and the kisses in-between!"

"Remind me why I'm so in love with you again?" Yuuri rolled his eyes, but proceeded to kiss Victor anyway.
A Tumultuous Foray

Chapter Summary

For the first time since Victor came into his life, Yuuri experienced a separation.

Chapter Notes

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Even before the ship's gangplank was lowered for the troupe's wagons, Yuuri could not help noticing how lively the Port of Rotherfyn was. Like any other port, it was bustling with sailors carrying commodity to and from the ships, vendors raucously hawking their seafood, and the tears of joyful reunion and sorrowful parting alike between seafarers and their loved ones. Unlike most, though, this particular port harbored a number of war ships that were ready to be launched at a moment's notice—though Yuuri could not tell whether those warships would still be stationed there in times of peace. From this distance, Yuuri could make out the crenelated walls of a castle chiseled from the cliffs—centuries-old remains that enlivened the spot, marking it as one of the most frequented tourist attractions in the country.

As Yakov had warned, the customs official assigned to the troupe did not grant them unimpeded access. Of all the numerous desks manned by serious-looking officials by the shipyard, why had they be called forth to this particular desk, whose official looked like he had just swallowed a nasty fish bone?! There was another desk with a large signboard overhead that stated: "group of ten or more" located at the end of the row, but the person in charge was nowhere to be seen.

The accursed official's bushy ginger mustache bristled as he demanded proof certifying that Circus! on Ice's fame and troupe members were authentic. After scrutinizing the stamps of past entry dates on each of the troupe members' passports, he declared, "All of you have visited Mheadaure before, except for one man." He held out Yuuri's passport to Celestino, who stood foremost in the queue. "This newest member of yours … how do I know he isn't an illegal immigrant using your troupe to slip into this country?"

"My dear chap, of course he's one of us! He's a newfound talent who has become one of our most cherished dancers—we can't afford to leave him behind when we depart from this country in a few weeks' time," Celestino assured him.

"A dancer, eh?" The officer crooked his index finger at Yuuri, who was sandwiched between Phichit and Victor in the queue. "Oi, you there, show me what you've got."

Dread seized Yuuri by the throat and began suffocating him. Performing in front of the audience
had never been his forte—not to mention that one wrong step would prevent the entire troupe from entering Mheadaure. He tried to swallow past his bristling fear, but consternation gnawed a hole in his stomach like acid through paper. With his body as heavy as lead and the mid-morning air gusting icily on his skin, he stepped forward.

Since it would be ridiculous if Yuuri were to perform a ballroom dance for the customs officer with neither partner nor music as accompaniment, he opted for a folk dance instead. He shied away from the traditional dance of his native country, instead opting for a style more familiar to the officer. He pushed the ball of his foot across the floor and dropped his heel at the same time, and then switched to his other foot before switching back again in rapid succession.

Naturally, Yuuri would have been able to produce better sounds had he worn proper tap shoes. Even so, he was more than grateful to both Victor and Seung-gil for his current footwear. Being the one closest to Yuuri's size, Seung-gil had lent Yuuri his spare shoes on Victor's suggestion, because Yuuri's military boots—the only footwear he had in his possession since joining the troupe—would evoke suspicions of spy work. To Yuuri's mild surprise, no shred of reluctance had colored Seung-gil's expression when he had relinquished his shoes. He even advised Yuuri on how to look calm at customs so as not to draw suspicion to himself. Clearly, there was more to Seung-gil than what his forbidding exterior might suggest.

"You're clogging!" The official's lips curled. "Blimey, I've never dreamed that the clog's fame would travel across the seas to the Ortus Continent!"

Yuuri thought it would be best if he held his tongue. The origin of the dance he was performing certainly came from the same root as that of the clog but, about half a century before, immigrants had fused their primitive footwork with the clogging steps to create another style of dance by the name of buck and wing. In this manner, Yuuri tapped out audible beats by striking the concrete rhythmically, dancing to the merry tune of farmers after a bountiful harvest that only he could hear.

In the end, the mustached official returned the troupe members' travel documents and let them pass. Even so, what a striking difference in service this was! No employee would dare to treat customers with such disrespect in Kouki. "Are you sure you can afford our merchandise?" was unheard of and it was always "Thank you for your patronage," no matter how small the purchase might be. In larger stores, there were even those specifically employed to open and close the doors for customers whilst greeting prospective customers or bidding them farewell at the end of their visit, irrespective of whether they ended up buying anything.

After a latrine break, the troupe proceeded as per Yakov's instructions. The twelve people appointed to grocery shopping and exchanging money went on their way. However, the moment Victor took the first step to approach the Crispino wagon, an unknown pain clutched Yuuri's heart. He stood there in a daze, paying no heed to the wintry coastal draft blustering around his still form. A peculiar loneliness descended upon him, leaving him with a hollow feeling in his stomach and a gulf yawning between his beloved and he. In his years as a freak—a boy in a country that considered skating to be a feminine sport—solitude had become his constant companion. Yet now, when he was with someone who accepted his passion, why did Victor's imminent absence encumber him with an unease he could not define? This feeling was one that Yuuri could not grasp, so he grasped the only thing he could to anchor himself.

Before Victor mounted the Crispinos' wagon, Yuuri yanked Victor's coat, pulling the taller man behind the covered wagon and hiding him from the others' sight. Only then did Yuuri smash their lips together. He felt Victor's hitched breath and contracting muscles beneath him but, within seconds, the older man relaxed and kissed him back with equal passion.
Perhaps it was the caprice of the moment or perhaps it was the risk of getting caught, but Yuuri felt as though he was kissing Victor anew. His heart contracted from the thrill of his excitement as he leaned in to instigate another kiss, for the first meeting of their lips had been too ephemeral to count as gratifying. He pursued Victor as his lover drew back, recapturing those delectable lips covetously with his own. Naturally, their second kiss lasted longer, and their third one longer still.

When Yuuri separated from his lover at last, Victor murmured in a daze, "Wow, if this is what I'm going to acquire with each parting, I ought to suggest we drive separate wagons more often."

Before Yuuri returned to Victor's wagon, Chris winked at him. "I saw that, lovebirds."

Yuuri almost missed a step as he mounted the wagon, attempting in vain to staunch the thoughts in his head. How many more of them would tease him for that spontaneous kissing session?

Betwixt the town of Rotherfyn and the glens beyond it arose the caravan route which the troupe intended on taking. Over a hundred and fifty streets spanned the stretch of land from the ocean to Rotherfyn's gates, crisscrossing every which way to connect every place for pedestrians' and vehicles' shared convenience. Travelers traversing them were seen marveling at the domes and spires wherewith the lofty buildings were surmounted.

Yuuri held the reins the way his father had taught him as a young boy of twelve, driving a cart for his future errands. He called to mind how Toshiya had smiled with a sense of pride when Yuuri did it correctly for the first time. When Yuuri had halted the cart right in front of the inn and assisted Toshiya in unloading barrels of rice wine, his mother had smiled, too, albeit with less pride and more of something melancholy. Later, she ruffled Yuuri's hair and praised him, "My little boy is growing up." It was the last time she treated him like an immature child; thereon in, she touched him less often and allowed him much more freedom, provided that he held himself responsible for every action he took.

Heat stung Yuuri's eyes and tears began to prickle at the corners as the memory washed over him. He wiped them, berating himself for allowing his thoughts to wander unchecked. His bereavements for his family had often intruded upon his leisure time at the barracks, most especially when he stared at the ceiling from his top bunk bed at night. However, thoughts of his dead family had never plagued his mind when he had been in Victor's presence.

Ah, that's it. Victor.

Yuuri clutched at his chest, valiantly pushing Victor's absence to the back of his mind. Would Yuuri's parents permit their son to entangle himself in a romantic relationship with a man? No answers were forthcoming to Yuuri, no matter how long he dwelled upon them.

Although his parents never spoke of it once Yuuri and his sister were no longer toddlers, he knew that, deep down, his parents longed to see one big family—with his sister's husband, his wife, and their children—all maintaining the inn. Perhaps Mari remembered this too, which was why her sixteen-year-old self had insisted on remaining unwed unless her future husband was willing to marry into the family. Hiroko and Toshiya initially encouraged little Yuuri to look up to Victor and practice harder than anyone else in ice-skating, yet creases of worry started to emerge on his parents' brows when Yuuri's voice had deepened with adolescence and Victor's posters and newspaper cutouts still decorated his bedroom wall. Still, they had never mentioned it and so Yuuri responded in kind. He had tried to convince every single living soul, including his own, that he adored Victor's skills and nothing more.

That had indeed worked before Yuuri met Victor in person.
There was no conceivable way that Yuuri could ever meet the tofu vendor he used to frequent on his mother's errands, the old man who used to fish on the bridge three blocks away from his parents' inn, or the various sellers he'd pass in the village again. Yet everyone in the *Circus! on Ice* troupe had kept him from wallowing in their absence, for he could not be truly lonely if there were still comrades around him.

With a lighter heart, Yuuri gazed at the lush pastures and the glens yonder. The caravan had left the outskirts of the town and headed for the wilderness. His reunion with Victor was nigh!

When the wagons lumbered to a halt, Victor was the first to dismount. Arms outstretched, he ran towards Yuuri, who also hopped off his own wagon with Makkachin in tow. Although Yuuri was usually not too liberal with skin contact, his inhibitions evaporated in the midday sun, letting him rush to Victor's side with equal fervor and embrace the taller man with all his might. Only in Victor's arms did Yuuri feel safe, no longer prey to the ghosts in his mind.

Makkachin barked once, gently reminding Victor that she was also there for him.

"Yes, I missed you, too." He crouched and petted her. All too soon, though, teams A and B arrived, for their lack of transportation was offset by their lighter traveling needs.

*Poor Makkachin! She'd be able to stretch her paws more had we more time.* Although Yuuri tried not to let the disappointment at their short break upset him, Victor still squeezed his hand and gazed at him with concern.

"Ugh, could you cads be more repulsive?! You parted for barely an hour!" the teenaged Yuri squalled, nose scrunching in disgust.

Yuuri merely grinned, for he had been accustomed to little Yuri's conduct: the more the boy showed disapproval towards anyone, the more he cared about them. Such behavior was not unknown to him; after all, in Yuuri's native country, people like this were deemed *tsundere*. What did bother Yuuri was the glimpse he caught of a sighing Georgi as they returned to their respective vehicles. He asked Victor about this as soon as they found themselves within the privacy of their covered wagon again, "It may be presumptuous of me to assume this … but Georgi has displayed signs of displeasure in my presence a number of times. Did I unknowingly offend him?"

"Ah, that'd be the memory of Anya haunting him. She used to be his sweetheart until she chose a soldier over him. You were wearing a soldier's uniform the first time you came, remember? Besides, Georgi becomes prone to fits of melancholy whenever he spots a happy couple."

"Oi, big forehead and fat pig, you'd better not do anything untowardly there! We'll leave you behind if you do!" the teenaged Yuri hollered from his own wagon.

Victor and Yuuri grinned at each other, before Victor took the rein and Yuuri contented himself with watching Victor's back as his lover sat on the jockey box. After a while, he took out some rubber balls to practice juggling. It was one of the things he thought he could do without disturbing Victor, since he had grasped the basic of juggling two objects but was yet to perfect the art with three or more of them.

The caravan rode past small hamlets and was occasionally greeted by friendly farmers either plowing their fields or on their way to and from ram sales. The farmers were typical of the area with their ruddy features; though they were dressed to answer the demands of propriety, they were also prepared to lay down their hoes at a moment's notice and arm themselves in defense of their homeland. At the sight of a sheep dog patrolling a flock of grazing sheep, Makkachin whined and lay on her haunches.
"I'm sorry. I know you want to run around after being cooped up in that pen for three days." Yuuri patted her head. "As soon as we stop for a break, I'll take you for a short walk." Despite his reassurances, Yuuri couldn't help peering at the darkening clouds with furrowed brows.

In due time, the caravan trundled over the winding slope of a grass-ridged glen. At the far left of the glen loomed mountains, their jagged peaks swathed in swollen gray clouds. Far below them, a leaping stream had continued to run down from the high pass behind, cleaving a narrow path between pine-clad crests to flow out through a stony gate and pass into a wider vale. The wagons traveled on until another stream lay before them, where roaring water gushed steadily over black rocks glistening in the afternoon sun and sent it spraying high into the air. The water was so clear that one could see the stream's bottom so, naturally, they stopped there to refill their water bottles.

Michele smacked Leo over the head for spouting a toilet joke in Sara's presence. J.J. presented his water bottle to Isabella the moment he lifted it from the stream's surface, which she accepted with a gracious smile. As promised, Yuuri let Makkachin out. However, his attention was not on Makkachin when she encircled him three times. Even after the dog amusingly turned her attention to a passing frog, he continued to stare pensively into the stream long after she had gone.

Victor approached him from behind, jestingly poked Yuuri's cheek with a finger. "A penny for your thoughts?"

"I was wondering … why scattering ashes across the water's surface is considered tantamount to a burial in several countries."

"Yuuri..." Victor enveloped him in an embrace. "Did you know that I didn't honor my family with a proper funeral either? Instead, I tried to drown myself ... but Yakov mercifully arrived at the lake and saved me in time. We gathered the corpses of anyone in the village and burned them as one, even though Yakov's backache bothered him before we finished piling the dead. After we managed to stack them into a large pile, we were too tired to do anything more than offer a simple prayer for them. Pulling back to stare into Yuuri's misting eyes, Victor quietly said, "What matters most is that we're living to our utmost for them. I believe your family wouldn't blame you for not scattering their ashes; no one could distinguish their bones from the debris after such large scale bombing."

Guilt bubbled up in Yuuri's insides. Here he was, whining to a man who had suffered far worse than he, yet all his mind was concerned with was the way Victor had read him with nary a hint. Overcome by amazement and other emotions roiling within him, Yuuri could only eke out a short, "I know."

"But?"

Blinking away the onset of tears, Yuuri confessed, "I haven't repaid their love and kindness. My family always supported me when I skated, even though this meant the three of them had to serve customers on their own whenever I practiced at the rink. Even at the age of thirteen, I sometimes found myself grumbling when mother asked me to shovel away the heaping snow that blocked our inn's entrance. I took my fortune as a Katsuki for granted until my neighbor, Sadatoki, left his parents' house at the age of nineteen because he found no joy in his family business. Their family used to be famous blacksmiths for generations but, in my era, they produced kitchen knives and gardening rakes instead of swords and arrowheads."

At the sight of Victor's arched brow, Yuuri explained, "Unlike the way of life in this continent, it's both uncommon and indecorous in my country—or perhaps the majority of countries in the Ortus continent—that a son should leave his parents' house. When he gets married, his bride would leave her own family to live with his parents. My sister demanded the opposite and became a spinster for refusing tradition."
Victor mulled over the explanation before returning to his lover's confession. "Yuuri, you're too hard on yourself. It's perfectly normal for children to grumble when they're told to do chores, and no child can ever compete with parental affection. Their love and kindness knows neither bounds nor measurements."

Victor turned Yuuri around before he spread his arms again, and Yuuri relished in the feeling of being wrapped anew in them. They lay down on the grass to snuggle until the younger Yuri emerged from behind some bushes. The teenager was about to shout his usual expletives but silenced himself the moment his gaze landed upon Yuuri and Victor's, comprehension welling in his bondi-blue eyes. He turned around and returned to his own wagon without a word.

"It seems Yurio always finds me in embarrassing situations," Yuuri chuckled. He rose to his feet and offered Victor his hand to help him stand. "Come, let's not keep the others waiting."

As if on cue, blinding sheets of lightning rent the sky and thunder clapped sharply overhead, almost drowning out Victor's voice as he called for Makkachin, who was still running around and enjoying her newfound freedom. The remaining troupe members idling by the stream rushed back to their respective wagons. In a matter of minutes, the rain was falling hard and the wind drove it against their wagons so that their draft horses had to suffer its icy stings whilst drudging their way along the narrow track that wound above the river.

To their right, Mount Hiwyndholt loomed in the distance, growing ever darker and loftier as the miles went by. Despite the inclement weather, the luxuriant pines added an air of serenity to the scenery as the caravan rode on. However, it was impossible to enjoy their presence when they rode with all the speed they could gain, never pausing upon fear of arriving at their destination too late. As well-trained and enduring as the horses were, there were still numerous miles to go.

Upon seeing the trees lying broken and strewn all over the ground, Yuuri wondered if an avalanche had caused it. Some of those trees were entirely destroyed, whilst others were bent and leaned upon jutting rocks or neighboring trees. As the caravan climbed higher, the path became intersected by ravines. When he glanced down at the vale beneath, he saw perennial mists creeping up from the rivers that ran through it and twining in thick wreaths around the bulbous clouds shrouding the mountain summit. Rain continued to pour from the somber sky.

The draft horses slowed considerably and Yuuri had no choice but to whip them, even though he did this with just enough strength to keep them going. It pained his heart to lash the animals who had pulled their wagon despite such terrible circumstances.

Perceiving Yuuri's hesitation, Victor called out from under the wagon cover, "Yuuri, let's switch."

Yuuri shook his head; Yuuri shook his head, for the thought of having Victor do his duties made his heart clench.

"Yuuri, come. Let me drive," Victor insisted.

Yuuri clung to his stubbornness by shaking his head more vigorously.

"But Yuuri~"

Yuuri stayed still for a few seconds, before letting out a weary sigh and looking ahead with a determined yet troubled gaze. "You may drive once the ground becomes flat again," he answered with finality in his tone. He did not wish to argue with Victor, as the beating rain compelled each speaker to raise their voice in order to be heard. The air would produce a concussion in reaction to their loudness, which would be sufficient to draw destruction upon the head of the speaker at an
The dreary afternoon had faded into a darker shade of slate-gray as murky clouds drifted disconsolately over the pathway, making the day shift into a drabber one. The caravan turned away from the mountain path and bent its course northward.

The towering peak of Mount Hiwyndholt had receded into the darkening sky as eventide fell. Ahead, a combe drew near—a great bay in the mountains, out of which a gorge yawned open. Ever steeper and narrower than the ravines they had passed, it wound inward under the montane shadow; only the rook-haunted cliffs, speared against the sky like formidable ramparts on either side, emerged from the shadows to block the moonlight. A village lay a few miles away to the far side of the vale, but this was not the troupe's destination.

Under the beating rain and along the slippery pathways, the wagon at the fore of the caravan became stuck in a ditch. Celestino and the two stagehands in it immediately dismounted, unloading as much of their belongings as they could to help their draft horses pull the wagon out of the ditch. To make matters worse, the mud clung to their boots each time the men lifted their feet, slowing their progress and making their bodies burn from the effort. More treacherously still, the thick morass gave way under the men's heels at the worst moments, just when their position was the most precarious, so it was a struggle between too much traction and not enough of it. Meanwhile, a storm was gathering around the peaks of the mountain they passed earlier. Dark clouds joined thick layers of fog in skulking in front of the hazy moon. When the wagon was finally pulled out, they did an emergency repair with the aid of other troupe members by replacing the right back tire's hub, with plans to do a more thorough repair once they found less hilly terrain.

Although night encroached upon them, it was not until nearly two laborious hours later that the tumultuous storm began to subside, allowing the track widened out as the water puddles receded. By then, men, women, and animals were all fatigued—for though they had ridden slowly, they had ridden with very little rest. Hour after hour they had trudged up and down—over passes, through vales, and across countless rivulets. The moon, which had been obscured by a great sailing cloud, was riding out clear again. With evident relief in his tone, Yakov sent Phichit, Leo, and Guang-Hong on horseback to scout for a suitable campground.

At last, their tiresome journey terminated at a forest clearing, wherein they halted to set up camp under the starry sky and the waxing moon. People who lived nearby called the forest Deoiridh, after a pilgrim who had sacrificed her life to save the village children in times of yore.

When Victor opened the trunk containing his camping equipment and pulled out his tent, Yuuri asked as his hand gently scratched Makkachin's ear, "Why can't we sleep right here? What's wrong with sleeping in the wagon?"

"Well, it'd be inappropriate for the women to share the same wagons as the men. And Yakov said if one or two tents were erected, the rest followed—it's proof of the troupe's solidarity."

Yakov might be Victor's mentor, but it was hard to imagine that this man was the one who taught Victor to take a woman by the waist and a bottle by the neck. The old man's orthodox view on gender segregation only strengthened that view. However, the notion piqued Yuuri's curiosity on other matters. "Victor, did you learn magic tricks on your own, or did Yakov teach you?"

"Mostly on my own, though I often get my inspiration from watching other magicians. Without Nikolai—Yurio's grandpa and Yakov's old friend—I may have never considered becoming a magician. He's the one who took my fourteen-year-old self and three-year-old Yurio to a magic show. Now, when I dwell upon it, the magician's skills were nondescript and he relied too much on covering the objects he manipulated with a large piece of cloth … but that show opened my eyes to
what I could do with my career."

As Yuuri gathered a lantern, two hammers, and some nails, Victor asked, "What about you? What inspired you to be a skater?"

"You," Yuuri mumbled. Judging by the heat creeping up his cheeks and ears, he knew he must have blushed. His only consolation was that he was crouching with his back facing Victor.

To save himself from further embarrassment, Yuuri blabbered, "But there wasn't many choices when it came to dancing and skating. In my hometown, there was only one skating rink and one ballet studio. Most of the children who used to practice with me quit because of the war, since parents did not wish for their children to so much as prowl the streets without them … but most of all, it was because all of them were girls. Even now, most Kouki residents were too small minded … they regarded boys who skated or danced to be disgustingly effeminate." Yuuri held his tongue for a few moments, before he uttered, "That's why I didn't have any close male friends and, when I became an adolescent, the parents of those girls didn't wish me to go anywhere near their daughters."

Yuuri barely registered the dull thud of the folded tent against the wagon's floor before he felt Victor's arms embracing him. They stayed like that for a while, until Yuuri eventually assured Victor. "Thanks. I'm all right now. We'd better pitch that tent before more rain falls."

Yuuri followed Victor outside and together, they started erecting the tent. Although Yuuri had some experience setting up his own bivouac during his eleven months in the military, his speed paled in comparison to Victor's years of practice. He had barely finished one corner when his partner had completed three.
Morning found Yuuri nauseous from nervousness, even though the heavenly scent of morning dew melded with the petrichor and pervaded the air. Despite Victor's repeated assurances—"You'll be fine. Lilia isn't going to expel you because you made mistakes in her class."—Yuuri's complexion was still tinged with a hint of green.

"That depends on how many mistakes I make, isn't it?" Yuuri replied weakly. "I've never been good enough for her and now I have to dance in front of the whole class…" He buried his face in his hands.

"If it's any consolation to you, the class isn't overly large." Victor patted Yuuri's head as though he were an overlarge puppy. "Lilia wants to give each of her students the proper attention they deserve, so she only allows a maximum of six students per class."

"Does Lilia arrange another slot for the other skaters' ballet classes, then?"

"No, Lilia is a tad too intense for most of our members … so they opt for the other ballet instructor, who also doubles as Guang Hong's skating coach."

Yuuri clutched his stomach as his nausea worsened. *In other words, Lilia's class is for the elite—*but *I'm at the very bottom and the slightest mistake will rescind my right to participate in that class.*

"Yuuri, are you all right? Here, drink this." Victor handed him a glass of water.

After thanking Victor and gulping the water in a few desperate mouthfuls, Yuuri asked, "So, who else will be taking Lilia's class with me?"

"I'll be there with you." Victor took the empty glass from Yuuri's hand so he could set it down on the nightstand, but his fingers lingered against Yuuri's skin for a protracted moment before they withdrew. "And then there's also Yurio, Georgi, Chris, and Otabek."

Yuuri recalled that those four, along with Victor and J.J., were the best dancers during the ballroom lesson. It was understandable that someone of J.J.'s nature wouldn't be comfortable under
Lilia's disciplined teaching … but being compared to five of the troupe's most talented dancers was certainly not a cheerful prospect, either.

The ballet lesson that morning turned out to be held in the most unique setup Yuuri had ever laid eyes on. The stagehands had assembled interlocking panels to form the portable dance floor and installed portable barre on opposite sides of it. Since there were no bystanders in the forest, there was no need to conceal the makeshift dance studio with a marquee. Thus, for the first time in his life, Yuuri was going to have his ballet lesson on a rectangular patch of brown flooring in the middle of a lush clearing. The view reminded him of his childhood fantasy, where dancers were summoned to the court of the sylvan elves, and this thought cheered him immensely.

However, just as Yuuri had begun to assume that everything might be all right after all, another trial awaited him. The sight of Victor stretching in white tights would not give him peace, whether it be in his mind or his loins. With every alluring flex of those gorgeous muscles, Victor's voluptuous buttocks beckoned him and Yuuri longed to caress every part of his lover. When Victor lay flat on his back and extended both legs skywards, how Yuuri wished those thighs were against his torso while he thrust himself into Victor's tight heat!

'Nononononooot!' Yuuri tore his gaze from his lover and proceeded to do his own stretching routine. He had to think of something—a rotten chicken carcass infested with maggots, maybe, or the drunken elders in his hometown dancing with comical paintings on their stomachs—anything would do, as long as the mental image did not involve Victor!

When Yuuri eventually calmed himself, he abruptly realized that it had been wrong of him to assume that either Chris or Victor would be the best ballet dancer in the class. If anything, that title belonged to the youngest member of the troupe: Yuri Plisetsky. As he stretched, leaped, and turned on the portable dance floor, Yuri enchanted every onlooker with his sylph-like grace. It was plain to see who would stand under the spotlight as the troupe's lead when Victor eventually retired. Although Lilia bestowed her attention equally amongst her students, Yuuri had a hunch that the younger Yuri was the apple of her eyes. It seemed as though there was glint of loving care in her eyes whenever she corrected the teenage boy's posture.

Nevertheless, Lilia was not the only one who showered Yuri with affectionate gazes. Otabek did too, although he only did so whenever Yuri was not looking in his direction. Yuuri wondered if his love was unrequited, since young Yuri did not seem to treat Otabek any differently from the others. Otabek himself danced with vigor, every movement the very definition of masculinity. If Yuri's fairy-like grace brought the wonders of far-off fantasies to mind, Otabek's inspired adventures from epic sagas. Behind him, Georgi danced by the book—flawless in terms of its technicality and precision, but otherwise emotionless in its execution. It made Yuuri wonder if his spurned romance had inflicted that much damage upon Georgi's lonely heart.

When the class concluded and Yuuri immediately rushed to Victor's side, he could not pretend that the way the white leotard clung to Victor's lower half had no part in his haste. He was about to make small talk when a hand fondled one of his buttocks from behind, startling him. The surprised yelp Chris earned from Yuuri caused the whole class to turn around and stare at them. Lilia nearly dropped the disk she was removing from the gramophone when she had ascertained the cause of Yuuri's exclamation. "Would that your sensibility be on par with your dancing, Christophe Giacometti!" she sternly rebuked, after Chris had delivered his apology before Yuuri and the entire class.

When Lilia left, Chris apologized to Yuuri once more. "Yuuri, I'm really sorry. I went too far with my jest in hope of catching a glimpse of Victor's jealous expression. And, well, seeing how you
danced ballroom before, I believed there was a fair chance you'd grope me back instead."

"It's fine, Chris—truly it is. But why would you wish to see Victor jealous in the first place?"

"He had never been possessive before, but he clings to you at every available opportunity. Victor
has always been a perfect role model for other skaters, since he's always smiling and never appears
to be nervous, but he has turned into a more and more of a spoiled brat since you came. Naturally, I
wanted to see if he could be angry, but..." Chris stealthily glanced at Victor, whose expression
remained indecipherable, before continuing, "Anyway, I shouldn't have used you to achieve my
aim. Yuuri, if there's anything I can do to amend—"

"You owe me no further apology. After all, I should be ashamed for causing such a ruckus." When
a thought crossed Yuuri's mind, he groaned aloud. "Now everyone will be annoyed with me for
doing something like that. Lilia may even reconsider taking me as her student!"

"Surely not! You're an excellent—I repeat, excellent—dancer! Yuuri, my dear, your tour en l'air
could no more be deemed abysmal than Victor Nikoforov could be ugly."

Yuuri chuckled a little. "I still required corrections during the class, mind you."

"And so did everyone. Besides, Lilia corrected you less than twenty times in one full session. That
in itself is quite a feat."

"What do you mean? You and Victor were both corrected less than ten times."

"After years of practice, Yuuri. Look at you! It hasn't even been a week since you joined us, yet
you've been admitted into the top ballet class and received less than a quarter of the corrections I
received when I first joined at the age of fifteen."

Yuuri blinked, unable to form a verbal response. How could being compared to Chris' fifteen-year-
old self make him feel better? Besides, Yuri Plisetsky was obviously the best ballet dancer at the
age of sixteen. Before Yuuri could voice his thoughts aloud, Chris had left with a wink and a
lightsome wave. When Victor's eyes narrowed at Chris' retreating back, Yuuri suspected that
rousing Victor's jealousy might have been easier than Chris initially envisioned. With that thought
in mind, he hurriedly tugged on his lover's arm and led him in a different direction.

The students left for refreshments, but they were to return within fifteen minutes for their next
lesson, joined by the rest of the skaters. On their way back, Yuuri and Victor passed a rectangular
wooden enclosure that was less than a foot high. Around its perimeter were the stagehands, who
were busily attaching triangular brackets that acted as supports for the detachable boards. To one
side lay a folded heap of white fabric that Yuuri believed was the liner for an ice rink.

"We're finally going to skate!" Excitement filled Yuuri to the brim, so much so that he even forgot
about being in plain sight as he hugged Victor.

"Not 'til early in the evening, I'm afraid," one of the stagehands told him with a genial chuckle.
"The water needs time to freeze."

"Then we'll be skating under the stars!" Yuuri grinned even wider. It had been years since he'd had
the luxury to indulge in such an experience, and the anticipation only made him feel giddier inside.

"Quite the romantic, aren't you? No wonder our Victor is so smitten with you!" The rest of the
stagehands laughed good-naturedly and, although Yuuri felt a light blush making its way up his
cheeks, he continued clinging to Victor's doting arms.
###

The stage dueling lesson turned out to be every bit as ridiculous as Yuuri had envisioned, with cardboard sword fights, theatrical falls, exaggerated twists and turns that exposed each fighter's vulnerability to their opponents' attacks, and much more nonsense besides. They formed two groups—two fighters belonged to the first group, while the rest fought as a mob. Every three minutes, they took turns to swap in and out of the first group. Despite having no love for the melodrama of stage dueling, it was a necessary element in the troupe's shows, which was the only reason why Yuuri endured them. At least stage dueling was a weekly and not a daily lesson; it made it easier for him to last the hour.

After the lesson, Yuuri took another peek at the ice rink. This time, fewer stagehands were present, so it wasn't terribly difficult for him to see that the liner was already in place and was currently being filled with a mixture of glycerin, ether, nitrogen peroxide and water from many a copper pipe. It was this solution that froze water when the air temperature was above zero, according to one of the stagehands.

The next lesson, combat survival, took place after lunch. Like stage dueling, the lesson involved a continual rotation of partners, but it retained none of the earlier theatrics or lightheartedness. Yuuri found himself mercilessly pounded into the ground by every skater, even those with a smaller stature or who were of the fairer sex—for although Kouki had an extensive range of martial arts spanning the likes of judou, karatedou, aikidou, kendou, or kyuudou, Yuuri had never shown any interest or aptitude towards them during his childhood. Endurance through the persistent throes of painful practices, coupled with an obligation that condemned him to bear the burden of fatigue was not something he would willingly indulge in. The miserly hours he had today left him with perilously little time to learn much, let alone enjoy anything about the lesson. While none of his opponents used their true strength, being nothing more than a glorified sandbag for nearly two hours made him yearn for the solace of the ice rink all the more.

"Yuuri, is all well with you?" Victor rushed to Yuuri's side as soon as the combat instructor had left.

Yuuri nodded in response, but felt a peculiar urge to shake his head so he could have an excuse to pull Victor toward him and cling onto the older man for the rest of the afternoon.

*What is the matter with me?* Yuuri questioned himself. He had never felt this way toward his family and friends in his hometown. It was one thing to cling to Victor's arm when his lover offered it, but to initiate the skin contact himself... Could one night of physical intimacy with Victor alter him this drastically?

"There's still time until the ice rink is ready. Shall we take a walk with Makkachin?" Yuuri asked, attempting to distract himself with the question. Then, with a sudden burst of confidence, he took Victor's arm in his own even before the older man had said "yes."

A wide smile graced Victor's lips. "Wow, Yuuri... Which spirit has imbued you with bravery and allowed you to initiate such a gallant move?"

Yuuri simply leaned his head against Victor's shoulder in response, reveling in their closeness as they walked back toward their tent to fetch Makkachin. They passed Guang Hong, who paused in his animated chat with Leo to blush at their intimacy.

Since they were going to walk through a forest and not farmland, they did not bother restraining Makkachin with a leash, allowing her to trot happily alongside them instead. Yuuri was grateful that the poodle was not instigating a boisterous chase, for his fatigue had not fully receded from his
body yet.

At the distant sound of babbling water, Makkachin veered to the right in pursuit of its source. Victor and Yuuri willingly followed her, as they had no particular destination in mind, but followed at a far slower pace than the excited dog. With every meter they ambled, the sound grew louder, until the trio eventually found themselves standing at the gravelly bank of a swollen river.

"I've never seen a bridge like that before." Yuuri pointed at its beam-like deck, which was composed of long, thin stone slabs propped on well-worn rock piers. As he stepped closer to examine the structure straddling the rapid water, the pebbles crunched underneath his shoes. *Seung-gil's shoes*, Yuuri reminded himself. He had tried to return them to their rightful owner, but Seung-gil had convinced him to keep them until Yuuri could obtain his own pair from a cobbler.

Oblivious to Yuuri's tangential thoughts, Victor explained, "That's a clapper bridge. You'll see quite a handful of them in this country. This one must have been built centuries ago, when the water level was far lower than it is now."

Yuuri cast a longing gaze at the bridge. The piers were submerged beneath the currents, save for the topmost portion connected to the bridge's deck, and those stones, dappled with watery patches that shimmered under the sunlight, appeared to be slippery. Even so, he wanted to traverse it despite the risk of ruining his borrowed shoes—or worse, incur a sprain from failing to maintain his balance … not to mention pneumonia, should calamity descend upon him and force his hapless body into the river.

"It may be best if you take off those shoes," Victor spoke, as though he had read Yuuri's mind.

Yuuri blinked slowly at Victor. "You aren't going to forbid me from stepping onto there?"

Victor shook his head, something mischievous and wild flickering in his eyes. "On one condition: Makkachin and I must also cross the bridge with you."

Removing his shoes from his feet, Yuuri remarked, "I see you have faith in your swimming ability."

"It's the one thing I'm confident in, apart from skating and sleight of hand." Victor removed his own shoes, too.

"Are you certain that your most notable forte isn't your seduction techniques?" Yuuri quipped, nudging Victor's shoulder with a languid smile.

Pinching the counters of his shoes together with one hand, Victor solemnly replied, "My seduction skill is history."

"But your supposedly defunct skill is still working, even as we speak."

"Oh, so it dares to make you an exception without consulting me first?" Victor wiggled his eyebrows and allowed a silly grin to grace his features. "In that case, I shall have a word with it. Now, where is it hiding? Is it here?" He kissed the side of Yuuri's forehead. "Nope. Here, then?" He kissed Yuuri's cheek. "Still no. What about here?" He aimed for Yuuri's lips, but Yuuri thwarted his efforts at the last moment.

Rather than docilely accepting Victor's kiss, Yuuri angled his face to press his mouth against Victor's throat. He nipped at it, but not hard enough to leave any semi-permanent marks. Awkward questions and discomforting glances from their rink mates were to be avoided at all costs.
"You do love my neck, don't you?" Victor giggled.

"The fault lies in that gorgeous neck for tempting me at every available opportunity," Yuuri replied as casually as he could before meandering closer to the bridge.

The clapper bridge was not wide enough for two abreast and, truth be told, Yuuri was glad that Victor had not opted to cross the bridge first, as it spared him the embarrassment of being caught blushing at his lover's complacency. Upon taking the first step onto the bridge's beam, though, Yuuri found himself shivering from the cold stone beneath his bare foot. However, the dulcet sound of water passing beneath him was enough of a distraction for the small discomfort, allowing him to brave another step forward and advance. Even so, the stone bridge was treacherously smooth from centuries of intermittent use; hence, he took his time, carefully picking out one foothold after another. Knowing that Victor and Makkachin were at his heels lessened the pall of terror whenever he stared into the cold water that threatened to submerge them whole.

Much like the embankment whence they had come from, the opposite side abounded with trees and shrubbery. Both Victor and Yuuri wiped their wet feet with the largest leaves they could find before slipping their shoes on again. Nevertheless, when they had wandered from the clutches of clingy brambles and espied a hamlet in the distance, they wordlessly retraced their steps back toward the river.

Midway, Victor halted in front of a large, slate-gray rock that barely reached his chest. The jagged rock possessed a cavity large enough to accommodate a child, but was definitely too small to fit the description of a grotto. In a fit of childish merriment, Victor crouched down and settled himself in that alcove—yet, even with his back pressed against the rock's wall, he still could not fit all of himself in there. As a result of this, his shoes were jutting out rather awkwardly from the rock.

Yuuri bent down toward him and asked, "What are you doing?"

The reply Victor gave him was a melodramatic one, accompanied by a furrowed brow and soulful gaze. "Who goes there? And why are you out on so wretched a night as this, fair traveler?"

"Victor's love of drama has returned," Yuuri told himself, before he decided to play along anyway. "I'm naught but a wanderer seeking shelter until the weather lessens."

"Do come and join me, good sir. You look famished. I would gladly break bread with you—but alas, not even the smallest crumb can be found on my table."

"Fret not, o fair man o' the hamlet. No victuals could satisfy me better than your very own kiss."

Bracing himself on the rock wall for balance, Yuuri kneeled on the ground and leaned forward to grant Victor the kiss he had previously denied his lover. The stark contrast between the hard ground beneath his knees and the soft flesh of Victor's lips urged him to continue their contact longer than propriety would allow. He noticed Victor gasping for breath, but pursued his mouth again once Victor had refilled his lungs.

Every last one of Yuuri's nerves seemed to catch fire as Victor's lips molded against his, soft and demanding. Generally, he was inclined to cringe at the word "explosion," for it triggered the sad memory of his hometown's annihilation, yet Victor's activities had bestowed it with a new meaning in Yuuri's mind. He could never get enough of the explosion behind his eyelids and inside his chest whenever they kissed; as soon as it ended, he was seized by the visceral urge to reconnect with his lover so that they could ignite the sparks together, over and over again.

He was relishing in Victor's moan when a sudden pain stung his left index finger. "OUCH!"
Yuuri drew back at once, eyes zeroing in on his throbbing finger. He examined the rock and was dismayed to see a red ant crawling near the spot where his finger had been.

"We must seek help this instant!" Victor sprang from the rock, unceremoniously yanking Yuuri by the wrist as he rushed back towards the river.

Victor immediately dipped Yuri's stung finger in the icy water as soon as they reached the river. "Are you all right? Do you feel nauseous or dizzy? What about your breathing? Is there any chest pain at all?"

"Victor, calm down. It's an ant's bite, not a scorpion's."

"The damnation that stung you could be a fire ant! If left untreated, its bite can swell into a white pustule that lasts for days and leaves a scar if you scratch it!"

Yuuri gulped as his forehead beaded with sweat at the imagery. With a graceless stagger, he hauled Victor to his feet and headed towards the bridge with a worried, "We'd better make haste, then."
13

Return to Skating

By the time they reached camp, crimson and golden hues tinted the cerulean sky. The troupe's doctor nearly choked on his tea when Victor unceremoniously yanked the flap of his tent open, screaming, "EMERGENCY!"

As soon as Victor informed the doctor of Yuuri's misfortune, the short man approached his shelves of bottled medicines. Before he took any of them, he let his fingers hover over a salve tube as he queried, "All right. What's the shape of the ant's mandibles?"

"I don't know! Yuuri was bitten, for buggery's sake! Did you think I had time to check?!"

The doctor cast Victor a disconcerting glance before he faced Yuuri and more or less iterated the same questions that Victor had asked en route to the bridge. When Yuuri had shaken his head to all the questions, the doctor finally retrieved a jar of salve for his patient. As he applied the ointment, he told Yuuri, "There's a high possibility that the ant attacking you is a Myrmica rubra, also known as a common red ant. That species is abundant all over this continent and can be found living under stones, fallen trees, and soil. They are aggressive, often choosing to attack instead of retreating, and are equipped with a sting, though—thankfully—they lack the ability to spray formic acid. You'll be fine if you leave the bite alone. However, should the itch persist for more than half an hour, see me again."

"Thank you, Doctor Willemsen. And, um, sorry about the ruckus."

The doctor's benevolent expression turned grave—far too solemn for comfort, and more than enough to set Yuuri on edge. "Before the two of you leave my tent, I must complete my diagnosis. Victor, you have been inflicted with a mortal wound."

Yuuri sprang from his seat. *Why didn't this demented doctor treat Victor first if his condition had been a far graver peril than my trifling ant bite?* As he cast a worried look at Victor, his lover frantically examined his body from head to toe before asking, "Where?"
"Right there." The doctor pointed at Victor's chest, directly above his heart.

As Victor's fingers fumbled to unbutton his shirt to check for any wounds, the doctor allowed a grin breaking through his formerly stern countenance when he continued speaking. "Of all the weapons in the world, I now know love to be the most dangerous. When did you fall so deeply under Yuuri's charm? You've fallen deeper and deeper with every passing second—so much so that it's impossible to pull you out now."

Yuuri gawked. He had always assumed it was him who had been enchanted by Victor so shamelessly and hopelessly … yet here was another who opined that it was the other way round.

"How can you be so certain of that, doctor?" Yuuri questioned.

"Why, I've never heard Victor cuss since I first joined this troupe—yet he did just that today, for he holds you dear in his heart. Yuuri, the days I've known you can easily be counted with a man's fingers, but that doesn't mean I'm blind to the time you spend waiting for Victor at meals or the blatant yearning with which you watch him in almost every activity you share."

The doctor rose from his seat to offer them a handshake as his grin softened into a sincere smile. "On that note, allow me to congratulate the both of you for finding true love with each other."

###

The sun was beginning to set when the skating lesson commenced at four, as was common in Mheadaure this time of year. After going for a quick jog outside the rink, jumping onto the ice, and some stretching at the rail, Yuuri joined the other skaters in stroking around the rink. As they did forward and backward crossovers in both directions, followed by forward and backward edges, brackets, rockers, and counters, Yuuri managed. However, when he turned during his first mohawk, his gaze happened to meet Yakov's, causing his speed to decelerate as he found himself on a double inside edge, feet open and momentum broken.

*How did I make such a basic mistake?!* Yuuri chided himself. He expected Yakov to shout from behind the rail but, somehow, the berating never came. Rather than dwell on his mistake, he corrected himself and continued with a choctaw, which, mercifully, became his saving grace.

The lunges, shoot-the-ducks, bauers, pivots, and attitudes that followed did not pose a problem for him. Victor and the younger Yuri were the only male skaters who could attain the biellman and, though Yuuri understood that not everyone could achieve such flexibility, he could not help but feel insecure in the knowledge that a sixteen-year-old executed a technique he could never hope to perform with such mastery.

When break started, Yuuri's body turned toward Victor on its own accord. However, before he could hope to reach his lover, Yakov called him back, forcing Yuuri to turn around and glide toward the old coach instead. He halted with a right t-stop before the rail, right in front of the ringleader.

"Most of your jumps are decent. You definitely need to learn the quads, but you'll regain the fluidity in your doubles and triples after you reacquaint yourself with the rink over a few more sessions. Now, you already know why you made such a beginner's mistake in your first mohawk, don't you?"

"Yes, sir." Yuuri's head hung low, subdued by the ringleader's piercing gaze. *So, Yakov is the type who scolds afterward...*
The next seven minutes consisted of Yakov lecturing Yuuri on his stage fright and how he was supposed to survive if he blundered whenever his eyes met with a member of the audience. When Yuuri felt properly chastised, Yakov finally moved onto the next topic—which consisted of more lecturing. "Watch for under-rotations! You twist your upper body too much before your skate leaves the ground. Your torso often makes the full rotation, but the skate hits the ground short because it wasn't aligned with the rest of your body." When, at long last, the senior coach allowed him to join the others, most of the skaters had finished their break.

"Are you all right? Yakov's words of wisdom tend to be drawn out, but you shouldn't worry about it. He does it with every practice session." Victor handed him a glass of water. His teal eyes were soothing when they met Yuuri's tired gaze, as though the senior skater could somehow sense Yuuri's inner turmoil, but all he could muster was a small yet grateful smile in response to Victor's concern.

As Yuuri sipped his drink, he saw that, just as Victor had claimed, Yakov engaged himself in admonishing the younger Yuri. No other skating coaches rebuked their student as censoriously.

"Are you enjoying the evening?"

Yuuri nodded. "I am." It was not a lie, as he had certainly missed the ice after being separated from for so long. Indeed, the one night he had skated with Victor had been nowhere near enough to sate him for the previous week, let alone this one too. "But are you enjoying the evening?"

Victor gazed at Yuuri as though he had looked upon the most beautiful entity in the universe, and smiled. "I am now."

The two men's faces were so close that each could feel the other's breath fanning over his face, along with the heat their bodies emitted from their intimate proximity. Though they were physically separated, the air seemed to crackle between them. Victor smelled so homey to Yuuri that he longed to bury his face into the slope of Victor's neck, if only so he could breathe his lover in better. The fact that Victor was charming in every sense of the word—that he was the image of both grace and sprightliness—only heightened Yuuri's desire.

We're in the middle of a group practice, Yuuri desperately reminded himself. To distract his mind from its inappropriate thoughts, he remarked, "I'm thinking of practicing alone tonight … just to regain the feeling of being on ice."

Silent but comprehending, the sympathy in Victor's expression told Yuuri that the senior skater must have gone through this phase himself. "I wouldn't advise that, as we have to rise early tomorrow. Do bear in mind that it's our turn to cook, Yuuri."

"Oh. How are our cooking rosters decided? Is it done by drawing lots?" Yuuri asked Victor.

"No, we decide at the beginning, for everyone may choose to their heart's desire. Of course, we're still allowed to switch, but few people ever choose to do so."

"Hmm…” Yuuri's brow furrowed. "No one asked me to form a group with them, so how do you know that my turn is tomorrow?"

Victor smiled brightly, wiggled his eyebrow, and slung his arm around Yuuri's shoulder. "Because you belong in my group, naturally! You don't think I'd rather be apart from you when we could be together, do you?"

The frown on Yuuri's face dispelled the grin from Victor's, causing wariness to creep into his tone
as he asked, "You … don't like it?"

"Of course I love being with you, spending time in your presence or even just within earshot of you. I enjoy every second of your company, I really do. I just … well, why would you discuss the music I'd like to use when I'm performing with you but not inform me about my chores? It was as though—no." Yuuri's hand covered his mouth as his gaze drifted from Victor's clouding features.

Genuine worry flickered in Victor's pleading eyes. "What? Yuuri, tell me."

"No, never mind. I was just being silly."

Victor shook Yuuri's shoulders, forcing Yuuri's gaze back to him. "Tell me, Yuuri. Please."

Yuuri stared thoughtfully at his lover, taking in the raging storm barely contained within his eyes and the plea on his parted lips. "It's just … I couldn't help but wonder if you'd lost faith in my choice-making abilities."

Victor blinked, incomprehension coloring his countenance. "I didn't think that far, actually."

"But you do know that I'd still end up choosing you if I were given the chance, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"Then all is well." Tenderly, Yuuri cupped Victor's cheeks in his palms, before idly caressing the taller man's jaw.

"And since you two are done with your domestic exchange, can we resume practice?" Mila asked from the rink, hands on her hips, but even the sternness in her posture failed to conceal the smile she was holding back. Behind her, the teenaged Yuri had no such qualms about expressing his disgust as he mimed vomiting.

Having gone through the basics, the skaters practiced their stage routine, with Yakov adding some choreography for Yuuri during the mob scenes. Yuuri endeavored to redeem himself by skating in earnest, which culminated in a near-miss with Guang Hong. Given that this was the only mishap, it was not a catastrophic practice overall.

Solo performances followed the stage routine. The skaters formed quartets, each occupying a quarter of the rink. To Yuuri, this proved to be immensely helpful, since not all eyes would be focused on him.

Nevertheless, Yuuri was overcome by the desire to skate with his lover the moment he saw Victor executing a graceful quadruple toe loop on the other side of the rink. From that moment on, every movement Yuuri made was aimed to parallel Victor's. While no throws or lifts were involved, Yuuri matched his timing to Victor's so that they moved in unison, thereby creating the impression of an impromptu duet. Their individual camel spins were akin to side-by-side camel spins, despite the distance that separated them. If one was to ignore J.J. in the front left and Chris in the back right, one would see Yuuri and Victor skating harmoniously. At the end of their skate, Victor was facing him, and Yuuri reached out to his lover as though they were a pair of star-crossed lovers obstructed by harsh circumstances.

"Yuuri, Victor, the audience won't be paying to see the Katsuki-Nikiforov pair skating show!" Yakov yelled from behind the railing.

"Sorry, sir," Yuuri answered as he glided to the side, moving towards Yakov whilst making room for the next group of skaters on the rink. Victor, for his part, simply flashed a sheepish grin at the
senior coach.

Yakov had not finished admonishing them both when the younger Yuri, Georgi, Seung- Gil, and Otabek began skating their own routines. While it was no surprise that Georgi skated by the book and was the closest one could get to a living manifestation of technical accuracy, much like his dancing in the ballet class, Yuuri had not expected to see glistening tears on Georgi's face. Yuuri stood, open-mouthed, as he attempted to figure out whether his bad eyesight was playing tricks on him, but he was spared his wondering when more tears continued to roll down Georgi's cheeks.

"Yuuri, are you listening to me?" Yakov roared.

Yuuri tore his gaze from Georgi and squeaked, "Yes, coach."

Yakov turned around to see what Yuuri had been observing, only to groan aloud when he spotted Georgi. "He's at it again. He cried whenever he skated and danced in the month following that treacherous wench's desertion, and now … when he restrains himself, his skating becomes soulless, but when he pours his emotions into it, tears inevitably gush from his eyes."

Yuuri remembered how emotionless Georgi's ballet had been that morning. Perhaps it was his fault for gaudily displaying his mock pair skating with Victor—otherwise, how else would Georgi be reminded of the girl who had forsaken him? When he heard Yakov sigh, "Poor lad … so young, yet so devastated at the hands of a single seductress," Yuuri decided he would speak with Georgi. However, as soon as Georgi's turn was over and Sara, Mila, Emil, and Michele entered the rink, he rushed away, announcing that he needed to use the toilet.

"Georgi," Yuuri called, the moment Georgi with his freshly-washed face. "What will die when they drink, but grow larger when they eat?"

"Fire," Georgi replied unenthusiastically. "Yuuri, I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, but I'm fine." With that, he slouched away, leaving Yuuri to stare at his retreating back.

"Give him time." Victor gave Yuuri a brief pat on the shoulder.

At the end of the class, Phichit demanded a group photography session. He flashed them a wide grin as he instructed, "All right, everyone, please stand together on the rink!"

"Won't you ever get bored of taking our photograph every time we arrive at a new destination?" Sara queried.

"Not by any measure!" Phichit replied cheerfully as he tinkered with the camera, adjusting it to ensure that everything was at its most optimal setting.

Michele grumbled, "It's just a clump of trees behind us. When the photo is placed with the others in your album, how will you be able to tell we're here in this particular forest?"

"That's a good point, actually," Phichit grinned even wider as an idea struck him. "We should hold a banner bearing the name of the place we're in."

Sara threw Michele a dirty look as everyone groaned. To everyone's collective relief, Emil interjected, "I'm sure Phichit will be thrilled to create that banner himself next time. However, I find myself in dire need of a drink, so can we finish this soon?"

It was not until Phichit had declared he was satisfied after taking their picture as they crouched, stood, and from behind a bench elevating the camera that Yuuri understood why the skaters were weary of his photography sessions. It seemed as though Phichit would have gladly manhandled
them into various other poses and manipulated the apparatus to capture every angle if he had been given permission to.

The stagehands had set benches close to the rink to ease the removal of their skates, an act that Yuuri greatly appreciated in the face of his bruised feet, thanks to the thorough training after his long absence from the rink. Even so, Victor kissed Yuuri's midfoot as soon as he'd taken off Yuuri's left skate and declared, "I love your feet. They have wandered over the hemisphere, through the land and across waters to bring you unto me."

As much as Yuuri knew he should reprimand Victor for sharing such embarrassing sentiments in public, his lover's voice resonated deep within him, numbing his senses and making him oblivious to everything other than Victor Nikiforov.

When Victor lifted Yuuri's leg and brushed his lips against the fabric clinging to the underside of his knee, Phichit's playful snicker rang distantly through the air. The cheery skater was facing Leo and Guang-Hong, but it could not have been any plainer that he addressed his words to Victor and Yuuri as he announced, "Dinner is beef stew … if anyone isn't too preoccupied to get it, that is."

Victor and Yuuri left for the meal hand-in-hand with a smile on their countenances.

###

Like lunch, dinner was served on three long tables arranged in a single row. The only difference was that, during lunch, the troupe members came and went as time allowed, whereas everyone gathered simultaneously at dinner to indulge in a lively feast. By the time Victor and Yuuri arrived, the seats at the joined tables were nearly full, compelling them to sit separately.

Yuuri stared longingly at Victor, who took an empty seat amid the stagemen on the far side of the table. They had detached themselves from each other for barely a minute, and yet he was already beginning to miss Victor. *Is infatuation supposed to be so soul-consuming?* he wondered as he sat next to Michele, who was bickering with his sister.

"So, what do you think, Yuuri? Isn't Mickey a bothersome scandalmonger?" Sara craned her neck backwards so she could see Yuuri better from behind Michele's head.

"Huh? Sorry, what were you asking?" Yuuri immediately tore his gaze off his lover and turned to face Sara.

Instead of repeating herself for his benefit, Sara rolled her eyes at him. "You didn't pay attention to a single word I said, did you?"

"Uh…"

She huffed. "First Seung-Gil, and now you. Why do men keep ignoring me? Am I too atrocious to behold?"

"No, no, you're pretty," Yuuri replied as quickly as he could.

Michele growled.

"Very pretty," Yuuri hastily corrected, but Michele only growled even louder in response.

Sara chuckled. "I was speaking in jest. Besides, Yuuri, you're irrevocably enamored with Victor, aren't you?" Mila, who sat opposite of Sara, chuckled even harder at her words.
Yuuri shoved a large spoonful of stew into his mouth to avoid confirming her insinuation, before quickly changing their conversational subject, "So, how long have you two been with the troupe?"

"Since before we were born," Michele curtly answered. "Our mother used to be the troupe's makeup artist, but she died giving birth to us."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Sara assured Yuuri. "Everyone here treats us like a real family anyway, so we're happy enough. Besides, we wouldn't even know our mother's face were it not for the portraits Yakov showed us, so we don't really miss her."

Why was it Yakov who showed you her portraits? Why not your father? Yuuri wanted to ask, but he held his tongue. Despite this, Michele picked up on his unasked query and explained, "We were born posthumously because our father died in battle. With no husband to make ends meet for her, she joined the troupe—and before you say you're sorry again, don't. She didn't spend a long time with the troupe, but we were told she was happy."

Yuuri began grimacing in sympathy, before his brows furrowed at his recollection of the Victor's tale. "Wait, it doesn't add up. Victor said he was the first member of the troupe when he was twelve, but you're about five years younger than him."

Emil, who sat next to Mila, said, "We were betting on how many minutes it'd take you to realize that taradiddle." He, Michele, Sara, and Mila convulsed into fits of laughter. Finally, when they were moderately composed again, Sara added, "We became a part of this troupe when we were fifteen years and six months."

"No, fifteen years and seven months," Michele argued.

"It's six."

"Sara, I'm telling you it's seven!"

"Six!"

"Seven!"

"Let's settle with six and a half. So, what made you choose this troupe over other ones?" Yuuri queried.

Yuuri felt, more than saw, Mila's expression darkening and Emil's grip tightening on his spoon. The Crispino twins stiffened, but Michele's tone was flippant as he answered, "Why not? This is a world-famous troupe, the pay and facilities are good, and we like skating anyway."

Rather than probing them further, Yuuri replied, "I see."

###

In their tent, later that night, when Victor was brushing his hair before the mirror of his dressing table, Yuuri remarked, "Why are Emil, Mila, and the Crispinos averse to being questioned about their reasons for joining this troupe?"

"Well, Sara was gravely ill from food poisoning and Michele bore a stab wound when we first met. Six years ago, when the troupe visited the twins' hometown, the Crispino Family was among the
most affluent, yet there were rumors about the twins' late father remarrying three years after his wife's death. After his own death, the twins' stepmother coveted his assets for herself and her infant child."

"They ran away from home because their stepmother tried to kill them..." Yuuri pressed a hand to his mouth, his suspicions at the twins' differing story falling away as nausea washed over him. If their light tale had been concealing something like this ... it would certainly explain their reactions at the dining table earlier. Still, how horrible must it have been to be driven away from one's home through such cruel means?

"Neither Mila nor Emil fared any better prior to joining the troupe, but that's enough for one night." Victor kissed Yuuri goodnight and decisively ended all conversation there.

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Despite Victor's advice about getting enough rest in preparation for their culinary chores in the morning, Yuuri rose from bed at an hour that was midway between moonfall and sunrise, when all the other troupe members were wallowing in deep slumber. He assumed that the trickiest challenge would be to creep across the tent without waking Victor, but he quickly figured out that doing so without rousing Makkachin from her sleep proved to be a more formidable task. The dog first craned her neck from the foot of the bed before attempting to follow Yuuri outside, whining pitiably when Yuuri whispered, "No, stay." Victor stirred and turned over, making Yuuri's heart race faster. Gradually, Victor's breathing evened out and his body relaxed into the abyss of sleep. Nonetheless, it was only after his lover began snoring again that Yuuri allowed himself to exhale in relief.

Yuuri had already made up his mind to practice skating alone, so as to keep up with the rest of the troupe. The next official practice session would have to wait until the day after tomorrow. This was because, despite having ridden for long hours and being far out upon the western plain, more than half their journey still lay before them.

To Yuuri's surprise, the rink was not empty. A brown-haired stagehand he recognized as Chris' lover was smoothing it with an ice resurfacer. What dedication, to work at such ungodly hour! Yuuri surmised. He seems to be finishing up, so perhaps I can skate soon.

With the growing intention of brewing himself a cup of coffee before practice, Yuuri turned toward the food supply tent, but he had barely walked ten paces when he heard a loud thud from behind him. He spun around at the noise, only to find the stagehand sprawled over the ice.

Yuuri rushed toward him. "Are you all right?"

He intended to offer his hand, but the man had already scrambled to his feet by the time Yuuri reached the edge of the rink. Nonetheless, the brunet regarded him with an amiable smile after he'd brushed down his trousers. "Yes, thank you."

"May I help you with smoothing the ice?" Yuuri offered. Years before, Yuuko's parents used to let him help with their ice rink.

However, the stagehand made no move to acquiesce, which became more evident when he said, "Thank you for your kind offer, but the deed is already done. Besides, that wasn't the reason for my fall."
At Yuuri's concerned gaze, he continued, "I shouldn't have tried spinning again. More than one
doctor told me so, but I couldn't resist. I love skating."

"Doctor? Are you injured?"

The man nodded. "Well, it's mostly just the scars that remain now. I fell from atop a train whilst
chasing an enemy during a mission. I can still walk, but twisting my limbs in a skating or ballet
maneuver is no longer possible."

"You used to be a skater…" Realization dawned on Yuuri, mixed with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I can still have access to the rink and live together with the one I love, so God has not
made my life devoid of happiness."

Yuuri nodded at the stagehand's words, before a thought struck him. "I didn't quite get your name."

"Oh, it's Masumi." The brunet offered his hand for Yuuri to shake. "Masumi Heinrich Gauthier."

"Katsuki Yuuri. I must say, your first name sounds a lot like a name from my native country."

"Because it is. See, I got my middle name from my mother and my family name from my father,
but the first time they met was at a theater during a stage play, which was performed by a Kouki
traveling troupe called The Glass Mask. They named me after their favorite character in it."

"Darling, there you are!" Chris called, his dressing gown fluttering around his ankles as he strode
toward them.

From the possessive way Chris latched onto Masumi's fingers and the seductive way he batted his
long eyelashes, Yuuri knew that Chris wouldn't take "no" for an answer when he asked his lover,
"Why don't you come back to bed?"

Yuuri waved his goodbye at their backs and proceeded with his warm-ups. He went through all the
basic techniques one by one to loosen his muscles, before he continued with the jumps. There was
less than a fifty-percent chance he could land a quadruple while practicing with the others, but the
chance rose to seventy percent when he practiced alone.

Since the sun would not rise until well after seven in the morning during this time of the year, the
only way Yuuri could guess the time was by observing the tents for signs of activity. He would
rather not risk crushing the watch Victor had lent him—an event that would almost certainly occur
if he kept it in his pocket during practice.

For the umpteenth time that morning, though, Yuuri failed. A really small imperfection during
takeoff could cause a chain reaction, which had resulted in his complete and utter failure. He had
opened up from his tight rotating position too soon as he had taken off, which meant that he had
ended up tilting off-axis and was subsequently unable to locate his feet when he landed. If that
hadn't been bad enough, he had also collided into the railing as he slid across the ice.

Please, God, give me more time with Victor, if only just for now. Yuuri prayed as he hoisted
himself up and grimaced at the way blood dripped steadily from his nostrils. He did not know how
long Victor would be patient enough to bear with his second-rate abilities, or to what extent he
himself could survive the exhausting training sessions ahead.

Woof.

Yuuri turned towards the sound, only to spot Makkachin trotting alongside Victor. It was hard to
discern the expression on Victor's face when the morning was so poorly lit, and it became even more difficult when he arrived at the edge of the rink and promptly covered the upper half of his face with a hand. Anxiety washed over Yuuri instantly. What if Victor was disappointed in Yuuri for not heeding his advice? If this were Yakov, he would definitely launch into a lecture about how important it was for an athlete to get some rest, continued by a lengthy admonition on the proper number of hours one must dedicate to it each day. However, Yuuri's anxieties dissipated when Victor removed his hand and extended both arms out to hug him.

Yuuri glided toward him at his top speed so as to throw himself in those open arms. "Victooo—"

Victor slid sideways at the last second, a cheeky grin plastered upon his features, as Yuuri fell to the ground once more.

"Watch out for that nosebleed," Victor teasingly chimed, but he mollified Yuuri somewhat by immediately offering his hand to Yuuri. However, what left Yuuri with no room to rebuke Victor was the clean kerchief Victor handed him afterward.

Yuuri warned Victor, "The blood stains may not vanish even after vigorous washing."

"Then it'll be a memento for your bravery." Victor handed the kerchief to Yuuri.

Unbidden, a smile tugged at Yuuri's mouth. His past self would have probably framed Victor's kerchief and hung it on his bedroom wall, but his present self was content with asking, "Shall we start cooking?"
Chapter Summary

Despite his experience working at his parents' inn, Yuuri had not acquainted himself with culinary art.

Chapter Notes

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14

Catastrophic Cook

"Since you used to work at your parents' inn, you must be knowledgeable in the culinary arts," Victor casually remarked as the two of them strode toward the tent housing the troupe's ingredients. He had commanded Makkachin to take a walk by herself while they cooked, as Yakov did not allow pets in the kitchen for reasons related to food hygiene.

"On the contrary, I have yet to acquaint myself with it."

Victor lightly replied, "Surely you jest."

However, Yuuri's countenance was serious as he explained, "I'm afraid not. The kitchen used to be my mother and sister's domain. I usually assisted my father with cleaning the premises and running supply errands instead."

For a second or so, Victor seemed to freeze where he stood, but his cheery attitude quickly returned to him. "Well, we'll figure something out. Everything will turn out well."

"Victor, are you saying that you and I are the only ones in this group … and that you also can't cook?"

Victor laughed. "As lovely as it sounds to have our honeymoon, two cooks alone will be nowhere near enough to feed so many mouths in time. No, Chris and Masumi will be joining us shortly. Chris is a decent cook, but Masumi's culinary skills can rival that of a chef's."

"That's a relief." Yuuri tried to omit the memories of Chris and Masumi in the throes of passion that he had witnessed a few nights prior, while keeping his fingers crossed with the hope that this would not affect their collaboration while cooking.

Victor tied up the storage tent's entrance flap to one side so as to keep it from being opened and closed unnecessarily whenever they retrieved an ingredient. Certain that any cook would need a pan, basic seasoning, and a spatula, Yuuri began to assemble them on one of the two worktops.
As Yuuri did so, Victor explained, "Those who are on cooking duty are also on water heating duty."

"For the showers?"

"Yes. Thankfully, the stagehands have already arranged hoses to transport water from the stream, so we don't have to go back and forth with a bucket in our hands. Alas, the same can't be said for filling and refilling the tank with hot water. We'll have to keep boiling water and pouring it in, pot by pot, until there's enough for everyone to shower with."

"We'd better start then." Yuuri filled a large copper pan with cold water from the tank and watched as more gurgled in from the river to take its place. The stagehands had designed the machinery that was attached to the hose, just as Victor had told him earlier, which would suck water up from the stream every time the water level decreased in the tank. When they had enough water, or when the troupe was preparing to leave, they could simply switch off the machine so that the caravan would not need to be burdened with an excessive water supply.

Victor did likewise, minus the loitering, and quietly stood beside Yuuri when their four pots were settled on top of the cast-iron wood-burning stove. The stove could hold up to eight items of cookware at a time, but Victor had decided to reserve the other four for later use.

As they waited for the water to boil, Yuuri asked, "What do you reckon we'll be cooking this morning?"

"I bet Masumi would want to cook something other than sausages, bacons, scrambled eggs, and baked beans in tomato sauce since we had them yesterday. Also, we won't make toad in the hole with mustard-onion gravy, like what the previous group cooked for yesterday's lunch."

"Do you suppose we'll be having soup, then?"

"It's possible we'll have that for breakfast. We're going to have our lunch and dinner on the road, so the food then must be made easier to hold." Then Victor grinned in an expression that Yuuri could only describe as a harbinger of mischief. "May I borrow a kiss? I promise I shall give it back."

Rising to stand on his tiptoes, Yuuri already began to calculate the number of kisses this would cost Victor, even as his lips approached the taller man's—an interest rate of ten kisses from Victor for each kiss Yuuri gave him would not sound bad at all. A smile tugged at his lips as his lover's deft fingers ran through his dark locks, caressing him adoringly in stark contrast to the desire burning in his eyes. Soon, the same fingers slid down Yuuri's neck, brushed along his jawline, and settled on Yuuri's chin.

Kissing Victor was always, always, a sensational experience. Thus, when the sound of footsteps brought an end to their kisses, Yuuri found it hard to suppress his whine. Even as his lips regretfully pulled apart from his lover's and their breath misted in the air between them, he could sense the intensity in Victor's eyes—an inextinguishable fire that conflagrated Yuuri's soul and made him itch to burst out of his skin. The man right before his face was ravishingly gorgeous, and he desired nothing more than to kiss him again—a sentiment which, judging by the newcomers' expressions, was not difficult to pick up on.

"We can return in a few more minutes, if you wish," Chris teased.

Masumi, who stood next to Chris, set his gaze determinedly on the carriage clock he was placing in the center of the nearest worktop. The extraordinary length of time he spent on lavishing that nondescript clock with his attention could only mean that he was trying not to meet Yuuri and
As Yuuri wondered whether the dark sky could conceal his blush, Victor casually replied, "You needn't leave. We don't mind showing you a kiss or two, do we, Yuuri?"

Rather than respond to Victor's teasing, Yuuri quickly asked, "What are we going to cook today?"

"I'd like to know your favorite dish, Yuuri. If we have the ingredients, we may try cooking that," Masumi answered, relief apparent in both his face and his voice. Knowing Chris, who had no inhibitions regarding public displays of affection, Yuuri could only imagine why Masumi shunned the prospect of being demanded to kiss Chris in front of Victor and Yuuri.

"Oh, I love katsudon the most. It's deep-fried pork cutlet coated in breadcrumbs and served on top of a bowl of rice, together with eggs, sautéed onions, and other condiments … but we don't normally keep rice in our food stock, so we should probably cook something else." Besides, my mother would be appalled if she were to cook katsudon for breakfast.

"Hmm, you have a fair point there; rice isn't a staple food in this continent, so we only buy it on occasions." When a few moments had passed, Masumi suggested, "What about we try making katsudon without the rice … and have the pork with potatoes instead?" Before Yuuri could respond, he quickly added, "If that's all right with you."

"Yes, of course." Clad with oven gloves, Yuuri removed the freshly-boiled pot of water from the stove as he explained, "When the breadcrumb-coated pork isn't served with rice, we call it tonkatsu. Though it isn't a dish you'd normally find on a breakfast option, either."

"This tonkatsu dish you're describing bears a great resemblance to one of our national dishes." Masumi replaced the removed pot with another pot of cold water. He glanced at Chris, who was replacing Victor's pot, before he continued speaking. "Where we come from, there's a meal called wiener schnitzel. It goes well with either pork or veal. We don't really eat it for breakfast but, since we'll have our lunch and dinner on the road today, I suppose we can allow for some concessions today. Could you please tell me how you'd normally cook tonkatsu?"

"Uh, as far as the cooking process goes, I don't know any specifics, unfortunately. My mother and sister were the cooks, so the only help I provided was washing the raw ingredients," Yuuri said, as he brought the water pot to the water tank located just behind the storage tent.

Although Masumi did not reply, most probably because of the storage tent blocked his view, Yuuri suspected that Masumi was disappointed with his response. As soon as Yuuri returned with another pot of cold water, he apologized with a subdued, "I'm sorry that I'm so useless at cooking."

"No one is useless," Chris assured Yuuri. "Chopping the vegetables and butchering the meat are still chores which are necessary to cooking."

"Butchering…" Yuuri repeated in horror, feeling as though all his blood had been drained out of his body. He was so accustomed to purchasing sliced meat in the marketplace that he had never once envisioned performing the grisly job himself.

"Yuuri, are you all right? You look rather pale," Victor remarked, concern written on his face.

A part of Yuuri told him to say yes, I'm fine, but he knew he was not—especially not with the combination of bile and guilt clogging his throat. His mouth opened, but no words would come out.

"Yuuri, is it all right if you fetch the eggs?" Masumi asked as he rolled his sleeves up. "Chris and I can butcher the pigs."
Yuuri nodded weakly.

"So, does that mean I'll be peeling the potatoes?" Victor asked.

"That would be greatly appreciated," Masumi confirmed, before he slung a waterproof apron over his neck.

As soon as Yuuri found a basket, he set forth for the hens' coop. He inspected for any soiled straw in the nests and replaced any that were too filthy as he collected the eggs. He also discarded broken eggshells as he worked, so as to prevent the hens from developing a taste for their own unhatched young.

On his way back, he could only bite his lower lip when he caught a glimpse of three fattened pigs' carcasses hanging upside down from tree boughs on meat gambrels. Blood dripped rhythmically from them, only to fall into the buckets underneath them. Chris and Masumi were methodically skinning them by carving vertical strips of hair off the animals' skin, but Yuuri could not bear to stare for very long. As Yuuri turned away, he pondered over how hypocritical it was for him to eat meat regularly yet not have the guts to slaughter the animals from which his meat was sourced. It reflected nothing of the doctrine of actions and consequences by which his parents had educated him, but that did not stop him from shuddering whenever he thought of Chris and Masumi's unenviable task.

A heap of peeled potatoes was waiting on the table when Yuuri arrived with his basket of fresh eggs. He peeked into the two pots atop the stove, but found that the water in them was not even bubbling.

"I already emptied those pots and refilled them with water," Victor piped up from his seat.

"Thanks." Yuuri took a seat beside Victor, grabbed a paring knife, and helped his lover peel the rest of the potatoes. He had peeled vegetables before, on the few occasions when the inn had been overcrowded with customers, so he knew how to do it—albeit without the speed of a professional chef.

They sat in silence for a while, until Yuuri queried, "Victor, have any of your missions ever involved killing?"

"Yes. Killing humans is not something doable for a guiltless heart, but I still find it more bearable than slaughtering helpless cattle," Victor replied, as though he could grasp what had been bothering Yuuri. "It helps to bear in mind that the ones I assassinated had committed grave crimes and were capable of defending themselves."

The dawning sun had traversed the eastern horizon and thoroughly suffused the sky in auburn and gold when Chris and Masumi returned with two large containers of sliced pork. Droplets of water beaded their waterproof aprons and there was a faint trace of scarlet splashed on Masumi's left forearm that nobody decided to mention.

Having just returned from emptying boiled water into the tank, Yuuri asked, "What can I do to help you?"

"Could you fill that tray with a mixture of flour and dried bread flakes in equal parts and then season it with some salt and pepper? Once you're done with that, crack a dozen eggs into a basin, if you will," Masumi answered without taking his gaze off the pork bones that he was individually lowering into a pot of simmering water. Afterward, he turned to his lover and inquired, "Chris, could you take care of the milk?"
"Sure, darling." Chris left for the cow pen.

Masumi chopped some onions, carrots, and celeriacs, and then cooked them over a low heat. Next, he cut the pork into smaller pieces; some were diced finely whilst others were sliced thinly, but most of them were shaped into escalopes. Every now and then, he would glance at the clock and temporarily leave the pork to stir the bone stock and the vegetable *mirepoix*.

"Masumi, how would you like the potatoes sliced?" Victor asked upon immersing the last peeled potato into a basin of water.

"Cut each one into sixteen wedges, please," Masumi answered while laying the escalopes on a chopping board. Once he had pounded them all with a wooden mallet, he lightly sprinkled them with salt and pepper.

"Darling, look what I've found!" Chris called out excitedly. His right hand was holding a pail of milk, but his left was clutching a bunch of herbs that Yuuri could not identify from his present position.

"Parsley!" Masumi's face melted into a smile, even as he poured the mirepoix into the hot stock. "Good! We don't need to use our dry supply then. Fresh ingredients taste best."

"I'll mince them as soon as I'm done making the cream," Chris offered. "Mm, that gravy smells great."

"Thanks, dear." Masumi twitched, before hurriedly saying, "Yuuri, could you bring enough loaves of bread for our lunch?"

Before Yuuri entered the storage tent, he caught the smirk tugging on Chris' lips as the tall man poured the milk into a pan. It made him wonder if Masumi regretted his word choice. Perhaps he was embarrassed to address Chris with terms of endearment whilst in public, which was a sentiment that Yuuri could certainly sympathize with. Even so, when Yuuri returned with a number of loaves in tow, Chris switched on the stove and acted like nothing of significance had transpired.

As soon as Yuuri re-emerged from the tent with the last of the loaves they needed, Masumi asked him to slice the bread and slather them with mayonnaise. Since they were going to have pork salad sandwiches in the wagons in the afternoon, Yuuri started on tearing apart some lettuces, arugula, and other salad vegetables. He noticed Masumi tapping his foot as his glimpses alternated between the shredded greens and the clock.

"Darling," Chris cooed. "It's all right. We'll make it in time." He rubbed Masumi's shoulder briefly before returning to his own station.

Yuuri was slicing individual cherry tomatoes into halves when Masumi said, "There's a quicker way of doing that."

Masumi transferred all the tomatoes from the chopping board onto a plate, before he covered that plate with another plate of identical size. He pressed the makeshift lid to secure the tomatoes in place with one hand and fluidly slid a long knife through the gap between the two plates with his other hand. The moment the upper plate was removed, the tomatoes on the lower plate were already halved. "*Et voilà!*"

Yuuri could only gape in response.

"Which vegetables do you normally serve tonkatsu with?" Masumi asked Yuuri, after he had replaced the boiled bath water with another pot of fresh water.
"Cabbage. It's normally julienned and eaten raw," Yuuri said, as he watched Chris siphon the thickened top layer off the heated milk and transfer it from the pan into a basin.

"Cabbage salad it is then." Masumi agreed. "Victor, once you're finished with the potato wedges, could you julienne some cabbage? Six of them should suffice."

To Yuuri, six cabbages seemed too minuscule an amount in comparison to the meat from three full-grown pigs, but then he remembered that the pork would be served across three meals, whereas the cabbages would only be in their morning one. **Masumi is experienced in cooking for the troupe members; he must know best.**

"Sure," Victor chirped, humming a merry tune as he continued slicing the potatoes.

Yuuri raised his brow at Victor's cheery response. He had assumed that Victor would whine about how the cabbage's unsavory odor would cling to his hands. Did this mean that Victor exclusively showed his flaws to Yuuri? He could not help but smile at the very thought whilst filling the bread with pickles.

"Thinking of something dirty, Yuuri?" Chris teased. As Yuuri flushed at his insinuations, Chris stored the basin of thickened milk in an ice box, before returning to pour the rest of the milk into jugs. Afterward, he worked on replacing the boiled bath water with more stream water.

"I'm not!" a flustered Yuuri eventually replied.

Humming in response with a rather telling smirk remaining on his face, Chris chopped the parsley he had plucked earlier. He was using the most peculiar knife Yuuri had ever seen—one that consisted of a semicircular blade with a handle on each end. Underneath the incessant grinding of that knife, the herbs were crushed with a speed unparalleled by any ordinary straight-bladed knife. When Chris noticed Yuuri's curious gaze, he informed Yuuri that such a knife was called a **mezzaluna**, which meant "half moon."

"Chris, could you make some pie bases?" Masumi requested while seasoning the thin slices of pork with powdered nutmeg, cloves, the parsley that Chris had just finished mincing, and other herbs that Yuuri failed to recognize. He flipped the meat over at an awe-inspiring speed and did the same with the other side.

"Oh, we're going to have meat pie for dinner? Lovely." Chris took out a tub from the ice box, before he fetched the flour sack and some of the remaining eggs. After he had diced some butter from the tub, he kneaded the small lumps into the flour that he had scattered over his cleaned worktop. He shaped the kneaded flour into a cratered mound, then poured the de-shelled eggs into it and kneaded all the ingredients together.

Masumi was searing the seasoned pork slices with occasional glances at the clock when Yuuri put down his butter knife and said, "This is all the bread still suitable for sandwiches. The rest of our bread is too stale, I'm afraid."

"Are they moldy?"

Yuuri shook his head, but then the hissing sizzle of the meat against the frying pan reminded him that Masumi's back was facing him. "No. None of them are."

"Good. We can still turn them into bread pudding for dessert. Remove their crust before you break them into crumbs, Yuuri." Masumi glanced at Chris, who was flattening his dough with a rolling pin. "Need a hand?"
As soon as Chris replied, "Thanks, love. I'm fine," Victor called, "Masumi, I'm done with the cabbages. What else should we add to the salad?"

"Slice some walnuts—two handfuls of them will do. Put them in a separate bowl and let those who aren't fond of nuts mix them into their own salad portions."

Having finished searing the pork, Masumi took out several dried herbs and a bottle of olive oil from the kitchen piano. He mixed them in a bowl and brushed the herb-infused liquid over the potato wedges that Victor had lain on baking trays. He left to pour the boiled water into the water tank as soon as he had put the potatoes in the oven, albeit not before leaving Yuuri with the task of mixing the bread crumbs with specific quantities of beaten eggs, sugar, cinnamon, milk, butter, and raisins.

Passing Yuuri on his way to depositing a bowl of walnuts on the dining table, Victor quipped, "Have you found changing the water tedious yet?"

"Well, there are times when I wished that the hot water would spring from the ground, like it did at my family inn, but I also enjoy working with you, Chris, and Masumi." Yuuri answered whilst pressing the egg mixture into the crumbed bread with the back of a fork.

"Especially me?" Victor winked.

Yuuri lightly bumped Victor with his shoulder in response, a smile tugging at his lips.

After Masumi had placed another pot of water on the stovetop, he asked Victor to chop some onions and spring onions. Meanwhile, he himself mixed several ingredients and whisked them into a salad dressing. He also told Yuuri to put the four large casserole dishes bearing the pudding into the oven once the potato wedges were crispy enough to be taken out.

"It's time to whisk the cream," Masumi remarked after another glimpse at the clock, only to notice that Chris was still lining the pie dishes with dough. Rather than ask someone else for help, he strode toward the ice box and brought out the thick milk that Chris had stored there earlier.

Masumi's attention was focused on the whisk which he was vigorously using on the thickened milk when Yuuri fetched a pot of boiled water from the stove. His right foot caught in the foot of a worktop as he passed by and, although Yuuri managed to keep a hold on the pot in his gloved hands, some of its agitated content still splashed out.

"Argh!" Masumi screamed, boiling water scalding his forearm.

"I'm sorry! Oh dear, I'm so sorry!" Yuuri set the pot on the worktop so that he could tend to Masumi.

"It's … fine—I'm fine," Masumi wheezed, agony evident in his expression. The skin of his forearm had turned red and swelled slightly, gaining a shiny sheen that sickened Yuuri the moment he beheld it.

Having relinquished his pies, Chris scuttled to his lover's side. His eyebrows bristled and his voice quavered as he said, "Dear, we must get it treated posthaste. Come, I'll take you to the doctor."

"No," Masumi grunted through gritted teeth, wincing at the pain. "I can go there by myself; you take charge of the cooking. Time's running out." He left for the doctor's tent, casting Yuuri one last glance and an assurance. "Accidents can befall anyone. Trouble not your mind with it."

Shivers of guilt coursed through Yuuri's body as he watched Masumi leave. Although Victor
approached him, stroked his hair, and assured him that everything would be all right, the shivering refused to cease.

Chris clapped his hands once to get Yuuri's attention. When he spoke, his face appeared calmer and his tone sounded more level. "Now, the wheel of cookery will not grind to a halt because of one incapacitated cook, so let's continue where we let off. Yuuri, I'll need you to take over Masumi's unfinished task and whisk the cream until it forms stiff peaks. It does take quite some time, and you may wish to alternate your hands in the process. Will you do that for me, please?"

Yuuri nodded, for his body was still quivering and his will was too weak for him to form anything verbal in response. Accident or not, the fact remained that he had injured an innocent man, and a fellow troupe member no less. Even so, he set out to complete his assigned task once he had finally poured the boiled water into the water tank. There was neither brittleness in Chris' voice nor fury in his face, but that did nothing to ease Yuuri's mind. After all, Chris had the right to bear some ill-will against Yuuri, especially after injuring one so dear to him—had their positions been reversed, Yuuri knew he would not leave anyone who had wronged Victor unscathed. However, as his arms grew tired from whisking the milk into cream the ache helped him to focus on what needed to be done, rather than the guilt and regret of his foregone accident.

Diluting a few spoonfuls of cornflour with a glass of cold water, Chris addressed Victor. "I'll finish the pie gravy that Masumi started, and then I'll do the seasoning for the wiener schnitzel. Could you continue lining the pie dishes with the dough?" Then he instructed Yuuri, "When you're done with the cream, plunge the pork escalopes into the eggs that you've already set aside, and then coat them with the flour that I'm going to season. Make certain you cover both sides thoroughly."

Yuuri did as Chris had instructed, although he had to pause halfway through so he could pour the boiled water into the water tank again. Despite resuming the task immediately afterward, Chris had finished heating up some oil in a huge frying pan and was beginning to place the breadcrumb-coated pork into the hot oil before Yuuri could complete his task. Soon, the meaty aroma made all mouths water.

Chris was frying the last batch of the pork escalopes when Masumi returned from the doctor's tent with a bandaged forearm. Yuuri's eyes turned glassy, but Masumi saved him from another string of apologies, when the stagehand caught sight of the bread pudding that had come out of the oven and beamed at Yuuri. "Congratulations, Yuuri! You've successfully made your first pudding."

Later, when the cooks had taken showers and joined their fellow troupe members at the table, Yuuri finally learned the difference between tonkatsu and wiener schnitzel. Typical tonkatsu was at least twice the thickness of wiener schnitzel, thus requiring the chef to possess a higher level of skill if they wanted to ensure that the meat inside was thoroughly cooked and that the crumbed skin outside retained its crispiness without getting burnt. The tonkatsu coating was coarser because it was made entirely of flaky bread crumbs and tasted flavorless on its own, for the dish was supposed to be consumed in conjunction with a tangy brown sauce. On the other hand, the wiener schnitzel coating was softer because of the partial flour mixture; moreover, it tasted rich on its own because the seasoned breading made it flavorful.

As breakfast progressed, Phichit nudged Yuuri from behind. When Yuuri turned to him, he wiggled his eyebrows and teased, "Tell me, to which of the cooks do I owe my thanks for this excellent cooking?"

"Masumi did most of the cooking," Yuuri answered matter-of-factly. He could tell from Phichit's jaunty tone that the latter was trying to lighten his spirit. Perhaps his expression appeared gloomier than what he had credited himself for. While he appreciated the shorter skater's kindness, he could
not bring himself to act in a convivial manner.

However, Masumi craned his neck to look at them and added without any resentment in his tone, "The bread pudding is purely Yuuri's. I didn't take any part in it."

"Why, Yuuri … you have a hidden talent for cooking!" Phichit clasped his hands in front of his chest.

"The pudding looks … well, it's not appetizing enough," Yuuri muttered.

"What scandalous thoughts are you inferring?" Phichit gasped melodramatically, before chuckling. "Bread pudding ought to look like that. Sure, it isn't the prettiest of desserts, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating—and yours has a nice, fulfilling taste. It's a flawless result on your first try! Doesn't this occasion call for a celebration?"

*I would have celebrated it if my cooking session hadn't gone awry.*

Victor appeared with a bowl of bread pudding and invited himself into the seat next to Yuuri's. He spoke in a reproving tone despite the smile permeating his face, "Phichit, you're stealing my lines. Now how can I praise my Yuuri without sounding like I'd copied you?"

"When words fail, use actions." Phichit winked cheekily.

"Great advice." Without further ado, Victor leaned forward and kissed Yuuri on the cheek, before exclaiming, "A kiss for the champion of my heart."

"Victor!"

Yuuri's embarrassed protest served only to fuel his lover's boldness as he kissed Yuuri's other cheek. "And another one for the fairest, shiest, yet most endearing man in the vicinity."

The other skaters laughed heartily, save for Seung-Gil and Otabek, who kept their unperturbed bearings, and young Yuri, who cussed, "Disgusting imbeciles!"

Victor replied by feeding Yuuri the pudding from his own spoon.

After breakfast, they all broke camp. Yuuri offered to help Masumi with the packing, but the stagehand convinced him otherwise with a gentle, "I'll manage." Even Chris went out of his way to wink at Yuuri and quip, "He's going to use this opportunity to ask me to pamper him, so don't worry about it." With Celestino's supervision, everyone moved at a fast pace so that they were ready to leave within two hours. The caravan wagons travelled in a long file, passing through the folds of the land like shadows.

Yuuri spent a fretful hour ruminating in deep thought as their wagon trundled along, regretting much of the injury he had inflicted upon Masumi. Victor had bidden him to take a nap to compensate for his early practice that morning, but his crushing guilt drove away any and all hints of drowsiness. Thus, Yuuri decided to practice lock picking and learned, to his surprise, that he could accomplish it faster when he mindlessly set about the task, not knowing what he was doing until he had completed it all. He wondered whether this was the sort of reasoning that propelled Georgi's emotionless dancing for the last five months.

Soon enough, Yuuri set aside his practice to absentmindedly brush Makkachin's fur and give her all the grooming she deserved, but his thoughts continued to linger on Georgi. *It wouldn't do for Georgi to suffer interminably. But who can cure his love wounds? Setting him up with a random coquette would only give him further heartache once the troupe inevitably moves to a new*
Yuuri racked his brain in an attempt to recall all female members of the troupe. The seamstresses and makeup artists were all married to the stagehands, which left Sara and Mila as the only courtable girls in the troupe. The former clearly vied for Seung-Gil's attention, although he had never returned her advances, but what about the latter? Was there any chance that Mila and Georgi could fall in love with each other? Perhaps Victor could aid him with a strategy or two.

The sun was already westering as the caravan rode alongside the River Lohreinydd, bathing all the lush pastures in a golden haze. The wagons followed a beaten way that wended north-east along the montane foot-hills and crossed streams great and small. At length, a ravine opened before them, and they began to ascend the mountain that overhung it.

As the caravan climbed higher, the hill assumed a more picturesque and fascinating visage: at one point, Yuuri spotted a castle ruin clinging to the precipices, while others revealed cottages peeping forth amongst the trees hither and tither. Wondrous, likewise, were the karst caves along the way. All these were augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Gneaffryt Mountain, of which verdant peaks towered above all it could see.

The magnificent scene afforded Yuuri the greatest of consolations. The more he drank in, the more it liberated him from the insignificances of feeling, subduing and ignoring his guilty thoughts. To some degree, they also diverted his grief-stricken mind from the accident which he had brooded over since that morning. The glorious mountain, the fertile land with its gurgling ravine, and the hawk that soared amidst the clouds—they all bade him to be at peace.

The sun disappeared slowly before them, heralding twilight in its wake. Yuuri allowed himself to indulge in the evening's crepuscular charm, waiting for a future he knew nothing of.
Yuuri awoke to Victor's wail. As he bolted upright, fumbled for his spectacles, and dispelled the remnants of sleep from his hazy mind in favor of worrying over his beloved, he blurted out, "What's wrong?!"

Victor was facing the mirror on his dressing table, but was covering his countenance with both his hands. In a muffled, shaky voice, he replied, "I can't possibly face you in such a hideous state."

"Victor, what's the matter?" Rising from the bed, Yuuri scampered to Victor's side.

Makkachin was standing tall on stiff legs with her eyes wide open, ears cocked forward, tail straight out, and mouth pressed closed. It was a posture Yuuri recognized all too well, for it perfectly mirrored the look his own deceased Vicchan adopted to signify alertness.

"No, don't look…" Victor groaned.

"How can I help you if I don't even know what has befallen you?" Yuuri caressed the back of Victor's hand in an attempt to coax it to move away from his distressed lover's face.

"You can't help me. Just … just don't look at me today!"

"Victor, what is it?" Yuuri asked with greater urgency, anxiety rising up inside him like bile would when he was severely nauseated.

Victor shook his head stubbornly in response.

Yuuri sighed, but moved to retrieve a mask from one of Victor's trunks and place it on the dressing table. "Well, you can't cover your face with your hands all day, you know."

Victor parted his index and middle fingers apart so that he could peek through the gaps between them. Upon spotting the mask, he petulantly mumbled, "Turn your back."
Yuuri did. However, as soon as he heard the mask's elastic string lightly snap against the back of Victor's head, he turned around again and yanked the mask up with one swift movement, whisking it away before Victor's protesting hands could reclaim it. It was then that he saw a red pimple below Victor's nose.

Yuuri repressed his sigh. "Really, Victor, do you suppose a man cares if a pimple should emerge on his lover's visage? 'Tis not the unblemished face that makes the heart pound."

"But…" Victor whined.

Yuuri could not prevent a sigh from slipping out this time. "No pimple can ever diminish your dazzling beauty."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Truly?"

Weary though Yuuri was of Victor's pestering, he nodded.

"You mean it?"

"Victor," Yuuri snarled.

"And now you're angry at me."

Yuuri would have snapped at Victor if his lover's reply had he not sounded so frail and desolate. Even so, he found it difficult to keep his tone reasonable as he asked, "Do you, in all honesty, believe I'd abandon you and embark on a relationship with another just because of a mark upon your face?"

Victor shook his head. "But I do desire to appear my best in your eyes. At all times."

Yuuri tried to reason, "You have no qualms about displaying your stubble, though."

"Stubble is nowhere near as unsightly as this deformity!" Victor whimpered, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

"My point, Victor, is that you were upset when you thought I loved you as an idol and not a lover … so why am I not allowed to see all of your sides, too? Don't husbands and wives swear to love and cherish each other, and to have and to hold for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health?"

Victor gazed at Yuuri as though he had never lain eyes on him before, hanging on his every word with a rapturous light shining in his own eyes. Bathed in radiant joy, he dazedly murmured, "Yuuri, does this mean … you wish to marry me?"

"Don't change the topic," Yuuri muttered, trying his best not to appear embarrassed.

Alas, it seemed as though none of his words reached Victor through his current state of bliss. His face softened into the widest smile Yuuri had ever seen, and the content sigh which slipped out from his parted lips sounded much too similar to a bride-to-be's during her prenuptial shopping spree for his liking.

There was only one thing left to do.
Yuuri bent forward and angled his head to capture Victor's lips. Although it was feather-soft, it felt like their lips were fully pressed together, irrevocably plunging them into the all-encompassing and never-ceasing joys of love. As Yuuri's tongue traced lightly along Victor's lip, prompting his lover to allow it entrance, the older man met it with his own tongue as he curled his arms around Yuuri's shoulders. The sensation intensified as Victor deepened it in a mess of tongues and teeth. They kissed and licked and nipped at each other's mouths until Yuuri's head spun from it all.

A part of Yuuri longed to push Victor back to their bed and kiss the day away, but the world outside their tent would not stop revolving just because two men felt like snuggling all day long. Still breathing hard from their amorous kisses, he consoled himself with the thought that he would not need to spend the day without his beloved Victor, yet it was all he could do to prevent himself from stealing another kiss.

"There," Yuuri breathed as soon as their lips had separated. "I don't hear you complaining about my morning breath. And for what it's worth, I'd rather kiss a pimpled Victor than an un-pimpled Phichit, Chris or anybody else."

"Does the word 'un-pimpled' even exist?" Victor giggled as his arms roamed across Yuuri's back, applying slight pressure to encourage Yuuri to kiss him further.

"Shall I fetch some pimple care ointment from the doctor's tent?" Yuuri offered afterward.

"I already have the ointment on hand." Victor pointed at one of the little tubs on his dressing table. "It's just that, even after I apply it to my pimple, the ointment will require some time to cure my skin, and it brought me great displeasure to think that you should see me in such a ghastly state."

"So, you've had pimples before, and you let others in the troupe see you … but you wouldn't let me see them?"

"You're an exception—a special case. If I must, I can endure the other troupe members' ridicule, but I can't bear to lose your affection."

Yuuri pressed his face into the slope of Victor's shoulder and mumbled, "Victor, know this: no matter what your appearance is, I'll always be inebriated at the sight of you."

It was not until Victor had dabbed the ointment on his pimple that he iterated, "Yuuri, do you wish to marry me?"

There's no escaping it. With his heart adopting the cadence of a runner's, Yuuri dropped to one knee. He clasped Victor's hands in his own and avowed, "Two men cannot be united in marriage, but know this: Victor Nikiforov, if I were to propose to you, it would be conducted properly."

###

The milk-poached halibut and kipper served during breakfast explained why Emil and Michele had been sighted with fishing rods late into the previous night. Mila had a way with vegetables, and Yuuri had never tasted a more delicious buttered savoy cabbage in his life. The coffee—Sara's special blend—proved to be a heavenly accompaniment to the excellent meal. He made certain to thank the four on cooking rotation for preparing the hearty meal when he finished and stood to leave.

After breakfast, Victor bounced up and down with sheer excitement as he incessantly hummed "first date!" The previous evening, he had wasted no time in acquiring Yakov's permission for a day off to shop with Yuuri as soon as he had set eyes on Frolyndt Town. As soon as the circus
The sun shone brightly and there was not the slightest indication of rain in the air as Victor and Yuuri strolled past burgeoning greenery interspersed with hollyhocks and delphiniums. The grassy fields along the way played host to impromptu cricket matches and children's tag games. As such,
the umbrella in Victor's hand confused Yuuri.

"The people in this country consider umbrellas to be as indispensable as their shoes," Victor explained upon noticing Yuuri's nonplussed expression. "The weather here is too volatile—as fickle as a woman's temper, they say. And this country has the highest rainfall in the continent."

The idea of sharing an umbrella with Victor brought a grin to Yuuri's face. Whether or not they could actually achieve that with hands full of shopping haul was another question entirely—but Yuuri had no intention of spoiling Victor's goodwill.

The streets presented a lively and animated atmosphere, occasioned chiefly by the conviviality of its passersby, yet Yuuri's spirit was at odds with the town's general cheer. While he understood that Victor abstained from holding his hand to shield their relationship from the public's censorious eyes, he could not quench his longing to reach for Victor's slender fingertips. It did not take long for visualizations of him snuggling against Victor's chest to form in his mind's eye, but it took less time still for Yuuri to chide himself. He shared the same bed with Victor at night and practiced with him during the day, so how could he possibly ask for more physical expressions of love from Victor? Nonetheless, his heart knew the truth: no matter how multitudinous his beloved's affection was, it would never be enough to satisfy his greed.

To assuage his fingers' loneliness, Yuuri picked up six pebbles from the ground. He still required more practice with juggling six objects, and knowing that Victor could do up to twelve and Otabek could even do it behind his back only spurred the beginner to practice more. Although such practice was unfailingly tedious, Victor had assured him that he had been a natural at identifying the mechanics behind magic tricks. Still, Yuuri could not help thinking that what he ought to polish first was the skills to capitalize on his talent. He had never juggled while walking, yet somehow the activity proved to be easier than he had envisioned once he had grasped the fundamental principles of juggling. He still dropped one or two pebbles, but he simply picked other pebbles off the ground and continued juggling practice during their stroll.

"You're quieter than usual, Yuuri. Is something bothering you?"

Yuuri's mouth was half-opened to voice his dissent. However, when he caught sight of a pair of lovers holding hands and smiling at each other under the folding hood of a passing cabriolet, he remembered his colleague's forlornness and changed tack. "Actually, I'm wondering about the chances of Georgi and Mila in becoming a couple."

"That possibility is quite remote," Victor answered without the slightest hesitation, as if he had ruminated on the subject himself.

"How can you tell?"

"Well, Yakov's students are like siblings to one another," Victor answered, although an unvoiced 'but' lingered at the end of his sentence.

"Isn't that a good thing, since marriage is more than four bare legs in a bed? After all, without trust and amity in many aspects of life, won't marital relationships fall apart?" Yuuri stole a glimpse of Victor before returning his focus to his impromptu attempts at juggling.

Victor fell silent, and even his cheery expression turned pensive for a while. However, he eventually took a deep breath and spoke with resolve. "Yuuri, you may understand things better if you knew about Mila's past. You must have noticed that Mila isn't inclined to take either pair skating or ballroom dancing classes. The reason she told those who asked was related to her lack of synchronization, correct?"
Although Yuuri had no clue as to how this could be related to Mila's past, he nodded regardless.

"And you've also noticed that she synchronizes perfectly well with Sara for baton twirling and other gymnastic maneuvers, haven't you?"

Yuuri nodded again, his hands still occupied with his juggling.

"It…" Victor sighed. "Truthfully, it's not synchronization that she lacks; 'tis the intimacy with men that she finds intimidating in both flesh and spirit."

Yuuri inhaled sharply, unheeding of the pebbles that fell from his hands and clattered to the ground. Mila had never stuck him as being bashful, let alone timid, especially when he had seen how often she ruffled young Yuri's hair just to vex that lad.

Victor continued speaking with a tone as tenderly as one would speak of one's own gravely-ill sister. "You see … Mila is a strong girl. She would not allow her young eyes to be dimmed by crying, no matter what the circumstances were. Yuuri, we were both blessed with families who loved us, even though the time we spent with them was ephemeral. Mila, on the other hand, was cursed with a father who squandered every coin in his possession on ale and a mother who was too afraid to defy the husband who had beaten her countless times."

Unable to stop himself, Yuuri blurted out, "Why did she devote her life to someone like him, then? Mila's mother, I mean. Was it an arranged marriage?"

Victor sighed, "No, Mila's parents did love each other once … but then the war came, obligating every able man to serve, and that included her father. He was later discharged with a military medal, but it came with a heavy price, for a bullet had irrevocably damaged his right knee, and he could no longer walk without dragging that leg. At first, his friends were proud of him and hailed him as a hero but, when the praises and awe had subsided, he had to live with the fact that no employer would hire a crippled man over the abundance of cheaper female laborers in times of war. The government's subsidization could not sustain his family of seven. So, as the eldest child, Mila had to work from dawn 'til late at night to make ends meet. However, her father did nothing but sit in a rocking chair and inebriate himself with alcohol while wallowing in self-pity. Her mother busied herself with taking care of her younger siblings—one of them was a babe in demand of breast-feeding."

"But even with the monetary grant from the government, the pay for a female laborer in a workhouse couldn't sufficiently provide for such a large family, could it?" Yuuri guessed, sympathy already welling up within him. He had been fortunate enough that his parents had owned a family business and had not been pushed to such extremities.

Victor nodded. "The family was drowning in debts when one of her father's acquaintances paid them a visit and remarked on how Mila had grown into such a beautiful lass since the last time he had seen her. The casual pleasantry inspired her father with a wicked idea, and … not long after, he made an arrangement with a local pimp to station Mila in a brothel."

_What a heinous man, to do that to his own child!_ Yuuri's jaw clenched in fury. If he ever met Mila's father, he would take the utmost pleasure in punching that execrable scum! However, he noticed that the taller man's hands had balled into fists, as well. Perchance Victor felt the same.

"Mila knew that her father was beyond salvation, but she did not expect her mother to ignore her struggles when two brothel sentries dragged her from her ancestral threshold. I remember the one and only time Mila had sounded bitter was when she professed, 'Maybe my mother feared further beating from my father, or maybe the welfare of my younger brothers and sisters mattered more to
her … but I'm also her child. For my family's sake, I quit school and exhausted myself, besotted with the factory's grime every single day. While I don't demand to be given greater affection than what she showered upon my other family members, couldn't she have treated me as equally as she had treated them? Was I no more than an unwanted spare?"

Yuuri shook his head in disbelief; he would have definitely not stayed idle had his sister been in Mila's shoes. "What about Mila's brothers and sisters? Did none of them plead with their parents on Mila's behalf? Surely they wouldn't have wanted her to be sold into a brothel!"

"She didn't mention it … but Mila was barely fourteen at that time, so I doubt that the opinions of children younger than she was would have counted for anything. There's also the chance that her parents had sent them on errands beforehand to keep them away from home when the pimp and sentries' visit, too. At any rate, Mila eventually ran away from the brothel. Unable to trust anyone since then, she had been living off scraps and other sorts of garbage for weeks before Yakov found her. I don't know exactly what Yakov did to acquire her trust, but she was wary of me, Georgi, and pretty much everyone else when we first met, and continued to stay wary of us for a long time to come."

Victor's strides came to a halt. "I don't think I quite understand the meaning behind your words."

"Though Sara harbors a one-sided love for Seung-gil, Mila uses Sara's insecurity and loneliness as an opportunity to … uh…" Yuuri inhaled sharply before hastily blurting, "…become closer to her in a romantic sort of fashion. Or, at least, that's the impression I have, anyway."

Yuuri was prepared for Victor's disbelief and, perhaps, even anger at his assumptions; after all, accusing Mila—who was like a sister to Victor—without any discernible proof was no small incident. However, rather than exhibit either emotion, the words coming out of Victor's mouth were a curious, "Since when have you noticed?"

"Only since yesterday." Yuuri exhaled in relief; Victor was of one mind with him. "At breakfast, Sara was vainly attempting to flirt with Seung-Gil, as per usual. She consulted Mila about the next tactic she should use once he was out of earshot and, when I saw them last, they were holding hands as they walked, deep in discussion. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary from two girls to walk with entwined arms, but now … I suspect that Mila might have used Sara's one-sided infatuation for Seung-Gil to her advantage." Yuuri quickly corrected himself, "I mean, not that she'd do anything indecorous to Sara without her consent! It's just that they share a tent and spend a lot of time together. She's bound to know Sara more than anyone else can, at this point in time. Besides, Michele disapproved whenever a man tried to court his sister, but he doesn't seem to object to Mila's companionship with Sara."

"You're observant, Yuuri. That perspicacity of yours will be a great advantage in stage performances. By analyzing the audience's reaction, performers can decide what to adjust to enhance the entertainment." Victor resumed ambling, a light smile playing at the corners of his lips.

"But that's only if I can overcome my stage fright," Yuuri replied glumly. "At this rate, I may never perform onstage." A part of him reprimanded himself, even as he spoke, for how could he expect Victor to keep loving him if he were to whine so often?

Even so, Victor beamed at him. "Then we'd better start correcting that, my dear. Tell me, what do you find most problematic when you perform? Is it the shock of catching a spectator's eyes which bothers you?"

"That is definitely a factor … but even before I see the audience, the pressure of everyone's
expectations is too high, and that is what cripples me most. It's even worse because I perform in a
group: one personal failure from me would be regarded as the failure of the other troupe members.
I'll besmirch Circus! on Ice's illustrious name."

"Yuuri, it's not all about you. Though you might feel like everyone's going to laugh, criticize, or
judge you if you make a mistake, that is not actually the case. You need to get over feeling that the
world is going to hang on your every mistake. Remember, performers are the ones who know
about their mistakes; in most circumstances, the spectators don't, and will never be any wiser. You
needn't make them aware of a mistake that they didn't even know existed—and if you point it out,
some people will only seek further failures."

"But what if I fall after a jump attempt? Surely a blatant mistake like that would never go
unnoticed!"

"That's where improvising comes in handy. You can't control every aspect of the performance—no
one can—and, sooner or later, something will go wrong. What's important is not focusing on
perfection; it's the ability to adapt to any situation. Don't let your shock show when you're startled
by the unexpected. For one, the spectators possess no copy of the script, so they'll only be able to
tell if something went wrong if you make it obvious; and for another, you are not alone on the
stage. A team of stagehands, as well as other skaters, will be there to back you up. If you fall,
Diedrich can add a sound effect to make the scene appear ridiculous, while Darshana bathes the
stage with colorful lights so that it'll seem as though your fall was always part of the script. Then
the skaters will adjust the scenario to a more comedic approach. Look!" Victor slanted his head to
indicate at an elderly man a few steps away from them.

With a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other, the crouching man was mending the fence
around his house as he sang in a loud and clear voice, "Gildas Turrill is my thane, Mheadaure is
my nation, Frolyndt is my dwelling place, and God is my salvation. When I am dead and in my
grave and all my bones are rotten, sing you this song and think of me and mind I'm not forgotten."

"What about him?" Yuuri asked, once they had obtained enough distance from the man and his
singing had faded away.

"Although he isn't tone-deaf, his voice isn't particularly euphonious. Still, his song has a rather
pleasant ring to it, overall. Why do you think that is the case?"

Yuuri pursed his lips while giving Victor's question some thought. A few possibilities formed in
his mind, but they were all random guesses as opposed to sound hypotheses. "His volume,
perhaps?" he eventually answered, uncertainty evident in his tone. "That man was neither awfully
loud nor timidly quiet, but was comfortably audible from our distance."

"That plays a part, too. But what if he had sung it like this?" Victor began to sing the same song,
but repeated it thrice at the same volume. The first instance was both full of hesitation, and was
punctuated in the wrong places whenever he took a breath. The second time, the tune was
technically flawless, but Victor changed his voice and accent so that he sang in an ostentatiously
pretentious manner, as though he were a sheltered prince who had indulged himself by
impersonating a simple villager. Unsurprisingly, it had resulted in an outlandish impression that
was nowhere near comfortable and which could not be deemed a success in any way, shape or
form. In the third iteration, Victor swapped the order of the phrase "Mheadaure is my nation" and
"God is my salvation" whilst replacing the word "dead" with "gone" in the lyrics as well, but sang
it with such impeccable confidence that it would have been unthinkable for Yuuri to detect those
alterations, had he not been asked to pay attention earlier on.

"From the absence of creases between your brows during my third attempt, I gather that it pleased
you most?"

Yuuri hummed his agreement, and Victor continued, "That's an example of improvisation. When you forget the script, just follow your instincts and substitute a possible alternative. The key is not to fight your stage fright, but work with it instead. The more you resist your anxiety, the more it will work against you. Accept the fact that you will feel anxious. Focus on the performance and your anxiety will slowly fade away. You heard what happened when I lacked confidence during my first try, didn't you?"

Yuuri nodded.

"And why do you think number two wasn't pleasing either, in spite of the correct lyrics?"

"It was out of character. It didn't sound like what the common layman ought to sounds like, and it certainly didn't sound like you either. It sounded…" Yuuri frowned, unsure of whether he could encapsulate his feelings with the right word. At last, he uttered with great hesitation, "…insincere?"

"You're absolutely right. It's important to be yourself. True, you play the role assigned to you on stage, but there's more to it than just impressing the audience. A performance implemented solely to please will only produce the opposite effect; rather than bring contentment, it'll ultimately become an unctuous blarney that elicits frowns instead."

By the time Victor had explained that drinking citrus juice half an hour before a performance could lower blood pressure while caffeine often made one feel more nervous and jittery, they had arrived at the main street. Multitudinous edifices retained the architectural style that had thrived for centuries, with prominent cross gables, hammerbeam roofs, cruck framing, dormer windows, jettied top floor to increase interior space, and oaken half-timbers with wattle and daub walls. Bustling with vendors, the grounds made for fascinating perambulation—regardless of whether it was the domed theater or the spired cathedral, all the buildings evoked the romantic appeal one naturally associated with the golden times of yore.

In a manner that could only befit a professional guide, Victor offered, "As your peregrinations in this town have not been particularly extensive as of yet, and as you might have difficulty unfurling the mysteries of Frolyndt on your own, I place myself at your disposal."

"Or you could just say you'd love to show me around," Yuuri chortled, but willingly went along.
First Date

Chapter Summary

Victor and Yuuri's dreamy first date

Chapter Notes

My gratitude to aesthetic-trash-right-here, fakeyourdecaf, & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

16

First Date

They visited the cobbler's shop first. 'Twas a quaint little shop distinguished not by costly embellishments, but by the begrimed walls that testified its proprietor's industriousness. From the moment the shop proprietor bade them "Good morning," Yuuri was struck speechless. He realized, for the first time, that this was his first conversation with a native speaker. Although Mheadaure was the country of origin for the continent's common tongue, the local's accent sounded so different from the materials taught to him at school, as well as the broadcasts on radio, that he could scarcely understand anything the cobbler was saying. The man did not bother to pronounce the "h" when placed at the beginning of a his words, and whenever a "th" came up, he pronounced it as an "f" instead. It was a wonder that the cobbler had not choked even once, despite the overwhelming number of glottal stops he made ... not to mention the "a" vowel morphing into a sound midway between an "a" and an "o." Naturally, the question "Can oi 'av yer soiz?" made Yuuri pause for a while. After a while, his brain managed to process that the cobbler had really meant to say, "Can I have your size?"

At Yuuri's confused expression, the cobbler looked towards Victor in the hopes that he would explain everything to Yuuri—an attitude that Yuuri did not find surprising, considering his lover's ethnic features. However, as soon as Victor spoke, his accent sounded just as foreign, and the cobbler flung both hands in the air. He spoke more slowly henceforth, and finally reached an agreement for Yuuri's shoes to be collected the next morning.

Even after they had left the cobbler's shop, the local residents' wildly divergent accents continued to perplex Yuuri. In Kouki, people from the same region shared the same accent, but accents tended to vary quite radically in different regions. Those inhabiting the shores of the country's south would inevitably find the west's accent to be somewhat peculiar, while those in the west could not even begin to comprehend why those who lived in the mountainous northern regions adopted the accents of older eras. However, in Frolyndt, the proprietors of the shops where they bought clothes, skates, dance belts, and ballet leotards for Yuuri spoke with varied accents that made each easily distinguishable from the other's.

Victor offered to pay for Yuuri's expenses whenever he could, but Yuuri refused him at every
instance, thereby eliciting a grumble from Victor's mouth. "Why did Yakov have to give you your salary today? And to think that I had been excited to pay for my dearest Yuuri."

Aware of Victor's pout, Yuuri changed the subject by inquiring after the locals' heterogeneous accents. Victor explained that the common tongue, which had spread throughout the world, was the language of the Zemariccho Country—the motherland for a lot of Mheadaure's immigrants over the last three-and-a-half centuries. Excelling in their exports and technology, Zemariccho had grown into the most powerful nation in the world, surpassing even Mheadaure, which had been the richest country in the world until the previous century.

In another half an hour, their lunch drew another whine from Victor's lips. "Yuuri, of all the possibilities, why this?"

They were standing in front of a food cart with "Jacket Potatoes" written on a signboard affixed to the top of it. The park which they had chosen to enjoy their lunch was a vast patch of grass crisscrossed with flagstone pathways, where dogs and their masters were merrily treading upon. Occasionally, walkers would throw some bread, causing broods of pigeons to flock around the crumbs, ruffling their soft feathers while relishing the sun's warmth. The fallen leaves spread across the ground like rich tapestries of amber, russet, and gold.

Victor's tone sounded so offensively sulky that the jacket potato vendor scowled at them both. Yuuri quickly replied, more for the vendor's benefit than his own, "It looks nice, and I've never eaten this kind of food before. Besides, its buttery fragrance tempted me from afar."

"But it's a street vendor," Victor uttered. Although his eyes met Yuuri's with their usual affection, expressive of the utmost good faith and eternally reluctant to inflict pain, his voice remained whiny as he said, "Shouldn't our first—" Victor barely refrained from using 'date' in public, but quickly rephrased it into "—outing together—be celebrated properly?"

Yuuri took the two jacket potatoes they had purchased from the vendor and approached a nearby bench. When Victor had sat down beside him, Yuuri handed his lover a jacket potato. Soon enough, they found themselves watching the never-ending flow of people wandering through the park. While waiting for their piping hot meal to cool down, Yuuri tried to reason with his lover. "Victor, money isn't the proper measure for happiness. We're having a good time eating our potatoes, inhaling the fresh air and watching the pigeons fluttering around us. Isn't this far better than sitting in an upscale restaurant that's so uptight about their patrons' decorum that we can't even hold hands under the table?"

"We can't hold hands here, either." Victor's beauteous lips curled in disdain.

"But we can do … this." Yuuri picked up a neglected newspaper from the bench and unfolded it so that both his and Victor's torsos were completely hidden from view. Before he could lose his courage, he leaned in and pecked Victor's cheek as swiftly as he dared.

Perhaps no one saw—or perhaps everyone did—but Yuuri found that his concern over such trifling matters was vanishing rapidly, especially in the face of his own desires. Victor blinked, probably not trusting himself in believing that the feather-light kiss truly happened. That surprised expression was priceless and, the longer Yuuri observed it, the more the park and the people promenading on its stone-paved paths ceased to exist around him. When Victor's mouth finally curved into a grin, he looked nothing like a renowned magician with a winning smile for all the world to see. In that moment, he was simply a love-struck goof, existing for Yuuri's eyes only. Yuuri had to exert every dreg of his remaining self-control so as not to coax Victor's lips into a passionate kiss. He was indeed blessed with the most beautiful man on the planet as a roommate and lover. Nevertheless, that blessing came with a curse of concealment of affection in public, for
the world was not so merciful to two men in love.

Even though the Month of Frost was still days away, the air nearly numbed Yuuri's exposed skin. *This is far better than the sweltering heat of the southern countries I passed when I was in the military*, he noted. As a result of the chill, there were no flies impudent enough to dispute each meal with their unhygienic perches.

Amid the steam of the hot potato and the creamy texture of the butter, a heavenly combination sprung forth and flooded his senses with its rich taste. Nothing could be as delightful as the moment he set his teeth into the succulent potato, warmed by charcoal and the natural heat of the sun. As for the butter, it was simply divine. The troupe's butter had a nice light flavor, but tasted neutral—although it was not bland or bitter or bad in any way, it was designed for practicality more than for its taste. However, the butter sold here was specially made for baking this particular dish; it tasted harmonious with the potato's fluffy interior and crisp skin.

Once a chunk of potato had made its way down Victor's throat, his eyes sparkled and his adorable lips formed a heart-like shape as he mirthfully exclaimed, "VKUSNO!"

Watching Victor sit there with such a smile on his lips, Yuuri knew for certain that this was the partner with whom he wished to spend the remainder of his life.

Their post-luncheon destination was inarguably the largest structure in town. It was a lofty limestone edifice with corner towers interspersing asymmetrical fronts, embellishment pediment, *dentic* -bedecked *cornice*, and a dominant gable cantilevered out beyond the plane of the wall below it. On the upper floors, rows of intricate *oriel windows*, stacked one above another, tacitly promised treasures beyond measure inside. Colossal letters that read "Bensimon" were carved onto the façade gleamed in the sunlight. Unlike the old architectural style of centuries prior, employed by the neighboring little shops and premises, this one had just started to thrive in the recent years. Although Yuuri had seen some remarkable architectural feats during his military march over half the world, he had never *entered* one. At present, his heart pounded with excitement as he strode past the row of classical columns toward the recessed entrance on the monumental porch.

The building's interior was by no means less impressive. An imperial staircase with painted balustrades awaited every visitor the moment they step their feet at the foyer. The lighting fixtures provided by crystal chandeliers hanging from the lofty ceiling and gilded candelabra fixed to unblemished walls illuminated the relief panels depicting folklore scenes, accentuated with marvelous tapestry every now and then. The marble floors were polished so lustrously that one could see one's own reflection on them. All shop attendants were clad in black uniform and white gloves. One of them was trying to reprimand a spoiled child from playing with the commodity displayed on a *cabriole-legged* counter as professionally as possible without offending the child's miffed-looking, overprotective mother.

Yuuri had heard of the so-called *department store* before. In Kouki, they were present solely within the capital city, albeit rumor had it that the second largest city in the country was currently constructing one. Withal, his hometown was blessed with no such facility. Although, in theory, he knew that he should expect a big box of multiple stores that sold everything under one roof, a sense of awe washed over him as he stared at the opulence of a five-story structure crammed with haberdashery, glassware, personal accessories, household paraphernalia, retiring rooms, and much more. Both the tremendous stocks of varied merchandise in their entirety and the methods of displaying them to best advantage played a decisive role in providing every possible comfort for customers.
At the clock-and-watch section, a snobbish woman in an elaborate gown peered disdainfully at the shop assistant who was holding an exquisitely gilded timepiece. "What a preposterous price! I am trying to present my beloved husband with a gift worthy of his sixty-third birthday. Do you expect me to purchase the very same item as a fishmonger's wife?"

"I'm sure the fishmonger's wife would be greatly relieved that she does not have to stand beside your celebrated radiance, madam. It is my loss nonetheless, and I must satisfy myself by giving my attention to her, should she ever come hither to buy this timepiece," the shop assistant replied with practiced suavity. His accent sounded clearer and far more comprehensible than peddlers Yuuri had visited.

As soon as Yuuri asked another shop assistant to take out a pocket watch from behind the glass display, Victor spoke with a melancholic tone, "Is the watch I gave you not to your liking?"

"'Tis not that." Yuuri vehemently shook his head. "It's a wonderful watch. But I oughtn't keep borrowing your possessions. And wouldn't you need a watch yourself?"

"I have this one." Victor pulled a nickel-alloy cased watch from his pocket. "It's the one Yakov gave me in my early day in the troupe—well, it wasn't called a troupe back then, since there was only two of us." Victor smiled fondly at the watch before pocketing it again.

Yuuri took out the gold watch in his pocket. "What about this one? Is it also an important gift from someone dear to you?"

"Nope. It's what I bought with my first-ever salary. I'd like to you to keep it so you will always remember me."

"Thank you, Victor." Yuuri leaned forward, about to peck Victor's cheek, but then he remembered where they were. In the world they were living, two men could not kiss in the open without risking being stoned to death. He cleared his throat and exhorted, "We'd better see the blankets over there."

In addition to the grand staircases, the department store was also equipped with moving staircases called escalators. Built of motor-driven chain of individually linked steps, these conveyors carried visitors between floors without any short of breath from of climbing. The steps stacked the moment they reached the top, and the handrails moved at the same speed as the moving stairs. Yuuri had only tried an escalator once, at the train station in the capital city, before today. On the upper landing platform, the little boy who was standing in front of him was imploring his parents to ride the escalator again. If Yuuri had been completely honest, he had the same urge.

The homeware department housed sets of teapots and cups as well as several other bric-a-brac that Yuuri was certain his mother would love. He mourned wistfully at the thought, and bought himself a mug. While queuing to pay, he overheard the discourse between two men behind him.

"Don't be a miser. Lend me fifty dwynne," the lean man with thinning hair pleaded.

His rubicund-cheeked companion quipped back, "Not before you return the fifty that you borrowed last week and another fifty you borrowed before that. I'm an ordinary worker, mind. And I've got even more mouths to feed than you."

"Please. Just for a few days. I'll settle all my debts the end of this week."

"That's what you said last week, too. If you're looking for an infinite loan, you should try asking someone like Bensimon. He has done rather well for himself, coming here as a war refugee and now the richest man in town by building this department store, don't you think?"
Oh, so life doesn't prove difficult to all immigrants, Yuuri thought as he handed the money to the cashier.

While mounting the escalator up, Yuuri caught a glimpse of a procession on the neighboring escalator down. On the fore, stood a woman with plain face wearing the most elegant gown Yuuri had ever seen. Behind her, three shop assistants were carrying heaps of boxes and shopping bags. The shop assistant nearest to the customer assured her, "The rest of your purchase will be delivered to your manor, ma'am." Yuuri wondered how often she frequented the store to receive such a courteous treatment.

In the home furnishings department, Victor jestingly veiled the top of Yuuri's head with a damask table linen and commented, "You'd make a splendid bride," causing the nearest shop assistant to turn sharply at them.

Within mere seconds after Yuuri had managed to drag him away, Victor had already found himself another amusement. He pointed at a leather sofa in the home furnishing department. "Yuuri, Yuuri, don't you think that one is perfect?"

Yuuri furrowed his eyebrows. "Perfect for what?"

"Why, for us, of course!"

"Victor, there's nothing wrong with the couch that's already in your—our—tent," Yuuri quickly appended as he was met with Victor's disapproving gaze. "At any rate," he continued as soon as a smile tugged at Victor's lips, "There won't be enough space for both the couch and the sofa in there."

"Then I'll chuck out the old couch."

Yuuri suppressed the urge to whack Victor on the back of his head. So many people were starving because of the war, and yet Victor easily tossed away a perfectly functional item just because he could afford a new one. Still, Yuuri suspected that Victor wouldn't obey reasoning, so he whispered to his lover's ear, "Let me tell you a secret: a large sofa will enable us to sit side-by-side, but a narrow couch will give me a reason to sit on your lap."

As though evincing a joyful twinkle in his eyes had not sufficed, Victor squealed in delight the moment Yuuri pulled back.

Phew.

Curiosity lured Yuuri to the food department, where delicatessen galore awaited. Had there been a department store for squirrels, the collection of nuts of heterogeneous shapes, sizes, and colors here would be sure to impress. In this space called the food hall, a mouth-watering array of cold meat, fruit preserves, candies, confections, and pastries made visitors think that war had never ravaged the world. Every collection was so complete with even the rarest and most exotic imported goods. One of their kind drew Yuuri like a magnet. It lacked the beauty of the gem-like multicolored jelly on the neighboring shelf; in fact, it was shaped merely in square slices. Nevertheless, its aroma of caramelized sugar and vanilla was a charm tenfold the visual appeal of the other sweets. Pointing at the counter, Yuuri asked the sales assistant, "What are those?"

"These are fudges, sir. Ours are made with the freshest milk and creamiest butter to keep them smooth and chewy," the girl behind the counter answered with a professional smile.

"Two bars, please."
"Certainly, sir. Which ones? We have caramel, butterscotch, clotted cream, dulce de leche, dark chocolate, milk chocolate,..." The list went on until she mentioned all eighteen variations on that counter.

Confused with the multitude of choices, Yuuri opted for the original flavor. He gave one to Victor, saying, "You bought me lunch. Now let me buy our snacks."

Yuuri had not planned to visit the gentleman's clothing department, but the dandy strolling next to him dragged him into it. "But I haven't," Victor argued when Yuuri told him that he had bought enough clothes.

Victor's eyes narrowed with pleasure at seeing the rows of jackets and piles of trousers. He picked one and rested the garment against Yuuri's chest. "It looks very becoming on you."

"I'm not buying another clothing article." Yuuri rolled his eyes, not expecting that he would leave with a newly-purchased brown coat, after the deadly combination of Victor's whines and compliments.

Next, Victor tried to purchase a bowler hat for Yuuri, insisting that it was only proper that he bought Yuuri something to commemorate their first date despite Yuuri's protest that he did not need any hat. It was not until Yuuri said, "I'd be delighted if you buy our teas," that Victor relented.

They were heading toward the exit in pursuit of a tea parlor when the sighting of one particular stuffed toy made Victor gasp. He dashed toward it, held it in his arms, and cooed like a little girl, "Aww~ you're so cute. Makkachin's going to love you. You look a lot like her miniature."

Doubt clouded Yuuri as he observed the brown poodle soft toy. Personally, he thought dogs would prefer something more rubbery as a chew toy, but he could not bear to shatter the bliss in Victor's countenance. He found himself nodding and followed Victor to the cashier.

However, an explanation from a shop assistant to the gathering crowd made Yuuri stop in his track. "Thanks to this water heater, ladies and gentlemen, a bath will no longer require menial fortitude." The shop assistant indicated a tall metal cylinder with attached pipes. "This Thermal Valve Model of the Instantaneous Automatic Water Heater is a design that allows users to heat water for on demand applications while not heating, thus saving fuel when not in use. But the best part is you can heat water instantly even without electricity! It is gas-operated, requiring only a change of burner spud orifices. And the result, as you can see here … hot water at your immediate disposal."

For the next several minutes, Yuuri paid a close attention to the demonstration the shop assistant performed and hung to every word he said. When Victor scooted to his side with a paper bag in hand, Yuuri remarked, "We must tell Yakov about this wonderful thing! With it around, no more hot water spillage will occur."

"Oh, the water heater?" Victor replied. "We tried that last year, but it broke down too quickly. The stagehands had tried their best to repair it, but it kept falling into dysfunction every few weeks. We then bought a new one, which exploded after just two months of usage. Thankfully, no one was close enough to get injured."

Yuuri cringed at the word "exploded," yet he quickly regained his bearing. "But couldn't they be coincidences? This water heater is a new model with advanced safety precautions."

"That may be so, but you know how stubborn Yakov can be."

Yuuri pursed his lips. A new determination washed over him. "If nothing I say will persuade him,
I'll just have to present it to him."

Victor quirked his brow.

"I'll save enough money to buy that water heater myself, and then give it to him as a birthday present."

The angelic smile gracing Victor's face as he answered with "Then I'll contribute, too. It'll be faster with two men's salaries, right?" made Yuuri burn with the desire to rub their noses together and melt into each other's arms.

No, I must persevere. We're in public, Yuuri chided himself.

They entered the tea parlor out of necessity rather than leisurely selection; heavy rain beat the cobblestone pavements mercilessly seconds after they exited the department store. Yuuri had never been frightened of thunderstorms, but the idea of getting soaked in the torrential rainfall flooding the narrow cobbled street was not an appealing one. The umbrella that Victor had brought would not stand a chance against the raging wind. A tea room on the corner of the street, facing into the department store they had just left, caught his eye. Victor was quick to agree—he even appeared to be about to suggest the idea of taking shelter himself if Yuuri had not brought it up.

Laura's Cornucopia was packed daily with creative types sipping teas from the local artisans Wright and Sons and brunching on comfort foods like wine-braised beef and baked eggs with oyster mushrooms and black pudding, in addition to their little cakes and finger food served on three-tiered trays. Yuuri took delight in sipping Orange Pekoe tea to wash down a hearty meal of tuna and capers, tucked in under a beautiful blanket of melted cheese on bread. Victor enjoyed his jellied eels with small pies and mashed potatoes. They were not even physically touching, but the exuberant smile Victor directed at Yuuri between the mouthfuls of meal, the affection lingering in Victor's eyes, and Victor's occasional whispers tickling his ear instilled Yuuri with a bliss. Amid the steams of the artisans' teas, they were wrapped in their own little world, shielded from the war-turbulent world outside the tea parlor.

He could probably stay there all day, forgetting who he was and being content enough just to watch Victor, until a crisp voice pierced the air. On his right, an immaculately-attired waiter addressed a man dressed in a little more than rags. "Sir, our restaurant does not permit customers to take spoons home. Kindly return the spoon you have just inserted to your pocket."

"No," the customer replied airily.

"Sir, may I remind you that any manner of theft on shop premises will be dealt with swiftly and severely?"

"I can't. It's doctor's order."

The waiter squinted. Abandoning his professional manner, he sternly demanded, "What kind of doctor encourages his patient to steal?"

"Why, the kind who gives me this medicine." The man held out a small bottle of syrup labeled "Take a tablespoon after each meal."

A man with split chin and sideburns appeared, enveloped by an aura of dignity and charisma, albeit clad in the same attire as the waiter. He bowed politely to the customer before addressing him, "Very well, sir, in accordance to your doctor's order, you may take the spoon home." The
waiter who had been serving the problematic customer looked at his superior scandalously, before the man with sideburns continued, "And in accordance to our lawyer's decree, every item removed from the restaurant premises must be paid in full. Indeed, at the same price as when I bought it from that department store across the street. I still keep the receipt."

The customer cringed and returned the spoon to the table.

Victor and Yuuri extricated themselves from the comfort of the tea parlor when the rain subsided. With the shopping boxes and paper bags encumbering them, they decided it was time to return to the camp. In the course of the recent downpour, the passageway alternated between mud and sooty water. At one corner sat a pile of bricks meant for a sidewalk between a dressmaker's shop and a barber's across the way. Since the sun had already sunk below the horizon for more than an hour, the inclement winds were the only ones keeping them company.

Ushered by the same winds, a sheet of paper landed atop Yuuri's head. Upon removal, he discerned that it was an advertisement pamphlet of a magic show. Magic tricks had never captured much of his interest before because when the performer concealed an object from the audience, it was obvious that he would be anything but honest. He called to mind the show of a man going through a solid brick wall that he had watched with his family when he had been a seven-year-old boy. He couldn't pinpoint the secret trick with precision, but he could guess that when the man's assistants wheeled a panel back and forth, it had something to do with transporting the magician to the other side of the wall.

Now that Yuuri was required to perform magic tricks in the ice circus, he felt he should observe other magicians' performances as study cases if not comparisons. He showed his companion the pamphlet and asked, "Victor, shall we watch this? The show shan't start until seven and the theater is just across that stone arch bridge. We can still get there in time."
Evening Charade

Chapter Summary

Yuuri learned how inferior a nondescript magician's skills could be, when compared to a world-class one.

Chapter Notes

Lots of gratitude to EllaAwkward, aesthetic-trash-right-here, fakeyourdecaf, & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

17

Evening Charade

Victor and Yuuri headed to the theater addressed in the advertisement. The building was located on the western bank of the River Lohreinydd, with the adjacent gardens providing a scenic riverside promenade. The theater's façade bore a banner illustrating a magician with intense eyes, three silhouetted girls standing behind him, and a large writing that read "Magnificent Maximilian" with a smaller one directly underneath it that read "Master of Miracles." Mercifully, the files of people in front of the ticket booths did not hold a candle to Circus! on Ice's quotidian queues.

Regardless of the dingy walls and cigarette holes in the carpet, the stark absence of gilded swirly ornaments and other luxurious furnishings was a telltale sign that the theater had lacked funding during its construction. The patron had possibly hoped for more earnings from ticket sale; however, the upper crust of society shunned the drab place, and the patron's dream of embellishing the building never came true. Function-wise, the theater lacked nothing. It was facilitated with a proscenium-arch stage and a seating capacity of about five hundred spectators across its three tiers: stalls, dress circle and balcony. Victor and Yuuri managed to land themselves on two dress circle seats. The cigarette smoke from the men behind them and the goat-like odor from an elderly man in front of them reduced the evening's pleasance, but other than that, Yuuri was excited to see how another magician's performance would compare to Victor's.

After the light was dimmed and an emcee addressed the audience with standard pleasantry, the curtain rose to reveal the so-called Magnificent Maximilian—an auburn-haired man in his early thirties clad in a magician's cape. Behind him, stood a low pedestal bearing two adjacent boxes of the same girths but differing heights and colors. The taller, white box seemed to be in the capacity of confining a standing adult in its pillar-like structure, while the shorter, black one was less than half its height.

Why is there an extra space on the left? Yuuri wondered, for the short box was set at the dead center of the pedestal, while the tall box was directly on its right, hence rendering the one third the left side of the pedestal empty.

Three girls of ravishing beauty emerged from behind the apparatus, draped in crimson burlesque
bustier and petticoat with a large plume accessorizing each of their hair. Their cleavages showed more prominently when they bent to greet the spectators, to Yuuri's embarrassment. Many of the men in the audience were wolf-whistling, causing a feisty woman on the stalls hit the man sitting next to her with her purse. An older woman with an infant on her lap two seats away from Yuuri made the sign of the cross as she murmured, "By God's wounds, they're turning this place into a whorehouse..." Neither the audience's reaction nor the parading girls in minimized attire colored Victor surprised … which made Yuuri flush even more.

The magician, with rising indignation and great importance, explained the supposedly mystic device loquaciously. Unsure whether this was the customary way a magic show ran in this country or Maximilian's personal preference, Yuuri thought the magician's grandiloquent explanations ruined the supposedly mysterious air about him. It deprived the thrill from the magic performance, bringing his conduct closer to a common street vendor persuading passers-by to buy his merchandise on a marketplace.

One of the magician's female assistants placed herself in front of the pedestal whereas the second girl fit herself behind it. Together, they tipped the white box on its right side with the aid of the shorter box serving as a pivot. Akin to the mechanism of a seesaw, they tipped the tall box again until it landed on the left side of the short one.

So, that's what the space is for, Yuuri concluded.

Meanwhile, the third girl watched contentedly from the side with a gray board in the shape of an arrow as high as her throat until the magician swung the side panel of the box open. It was her cue to hand over the arrow-shaped board to her colleague. As effortlessly as entering through a door, she then stepped inside of it. The magician opened a small door on the front of the box, enough to reveal the girl's head and upper torso. He closed the door and instructed the arrow to be hung onto the nails protruding on the front panel of the white box so that it showed where the side up was.

While the apparatus worked out its trick, the magician's assistants cast their spell of feminine wiles on the audience. The girl at the fore, whose back was facing the audience, bent lower than necessary while tipping the tall box back to its original position to show more of her upper thighs underneath her skimpy petticoat. Her other companion moved with seductive gait so that the audience's eyes were focused on the contour of her body as opposed to the box in their midst.

Once the turn was complete and the tall box was on the short one's left side again with its arrow facing down, Maximilian reopened the small door. The audience gasped in surprise. Obviously, they had expected the girl in the box to perform a headstand and see her shoes through the open door, but what they saw instead was her head and upper torso again. The magician stepped forth to open the side panel, allowing the girl to come out of the box. With no trace of giddiness or fatigue of any sort, she stepped onto the stage again and graced the audience with her smile.

The spectators clapped thunderously throughout the auditorium. Although Victor clapped as well, the lack of enthusiasm in his movements indicated that he did so out of politeness rather than laudability. Unlike his magic shows, where every movement flowed with continuous fluidity, the show by the local magician tonight contained unnecessary movements and comments that were purposely inserted to buy the assistants the time they needed to finish the trick. Still, Yuuri clapped half-heartedly; the performers deserved praise for completing the act without a single mistake, no matter how unimpressive their performance might be. From the moment the assistant blocked the short box with her body, it became predictable that she did so to keep the midsection of the girl in the box away from the audience's view.

"Good Lord, how can this be?" the man with the goat-like malodor blurted.
Yuuri answered in his head, *The moment that girl entered the tall box, she kicked the removable side panel that temporarily acted as a compartment separator. When the magician opened the small door in front to reveal her head, she was still standing in the taller box. But as soon as he closed that door, she moved her lower body into the shorter box, bending forward so that her upper body remained in the taller box. As the other two assistants tipped that box, the girl inside bent her upper body into the lower part of the tall box on the right, which would become the top of the box on the left once the turn was completed. Naturally, she also turned her body so that she faced the other direction and was able to kick open the panel separating the shorter box from the taller box. That way, she could walk back into the tall box and wait until the magician revealed her to the audience again.*

In the next trick, the magician performed solo. Yuuri tried his best not to roll his eyes when the magician took a carving knife and ran it through his forearm as he proclaimed, "Look! It cuts directly into my flesh." He rocked the knife back and forth as though slicing bread, eliciting screams from children in the front row. "This knife has plunged all the way through my skin and muscles, cutting nearly to the bone. And yet, I'm not in agony."

*Even J.J. is nowhere near as tawdry,* Yuuri thought as he watched the magician pulling out the knife from his unscathed arm. Yuuri did not need to touch the knife to guess that the lower part of the blade was retractable into the handle. This part must have had a *semicircular notch that fitted the magician's forearm* exactly. Thus, when placed against the skin, it created the illusion of a blade cutting through flesh. The magician would of course insert the notch back into the handle before showing the knife to the audience.

Halfway through the third trick, Yuuri began to regret watching the show, since the trick grew more and more obvious. At first, Maximilian stood next to a small but thick circular table covered with the kind of cloth that a birdcage would be wrapped in as a surprise gift. He produced a cape-sized rectangular garment and waved it a few times in the air to show that he hid nothing behind it. After many exaggerated, nonsensical gestures that were supposed to be part of a non-verbal incantation, he draped the cloth over his arm and pretended that he had conjured up something out of thin air behind the guileless fabric. He then pretended to set an object onto the table behind the concealment of the cloth, and then flicked the fabric aside to reveal a bowl of water with swimming little fish in it.

Yuuri did not fail to notice that the "table" lowered from the magician's waist down to his hips. He suspected that the tight-fitting circular table cloth had concealed the fish bowl before the show had commenced. While its appearance led the spectators to believe that it was a thick but empty circular table, the bowl was set on a thinner table of similar diameter to the bowl and was hidden inside an identical tablecloth. A weighted duplicate tablecloth was prepared beneath the bowl, and it was most likely to be collapsible. If Yuuri had been in the magician's shoes, he would have employed a *drawstring held in place by the fishbowl, enabling the second tablecloth to spring to the tabletop upon a simple tug.*

With the duplicate table cloth placed over the bowl, the bowl as well as the weighted cloth underneath it became concealed from view. Hence, when the magician covered the table, he was, in actuality, lifting the bowl to release the drawstring. Once the weighted cloth below turned into another "table," he removed the upper tablecloth. In this manner, the fishbowl was revealed. Since the weighted cloth had dropped down to the same length as the former tablecloth, it appeared that the table remained unaltered, at least as far as its size was concerned. Maximilian then disposed of the other tablecloth by tucking it under the cape-like cloth and tossing it to the ground—it was every magician's doctrine to ditch the object no longer usable for the trick, as Victor had told Yuuri a few days prior.
Yuuri recalled Victor's lesson about misdirection, too. *That's why the magician drew the audience's attention away from the table to the cloth.* Vowing to himself to perform better than this shoddy magician one day, Yuuri suppressed a groan as he watched the fourth trick.

Could it be that Victor had not merely flattered Yuuri when he had again and again reiterated his apprentice's prodigious talent in magic? *No,* Yuuri berated himself. *It must have just been a beginner's luck. No luck lasts forever. I'm bound to be wrong sooner or later.*

The music took an eerie turn. Sound effects impersonating spooky ghosts were added to the scene. The emcee announced, "It ain't even All Hallows' Eve, but our Master of Miracles will bring a pumpkin to life!"

When the curtain rose again, the magician was examining the wooden frame of a vacant clothing rack that was set on a low pedestal. Instead of taking the form of a long horizontal bar, the rack looked like a tall arch that could accommodate no more than a couple of clothes hangers. Two of his three assistants from earlier emerged from the side, wheeling in a standard clothing rack bearing a selection of skimpy costumes. Wolf-whistles erupted from the auditorium once more. The men were craning their necks to get a better look, the women cried out in dismay, while the children were clueless about what had caused the uproar.

Maximilian ordered an assistant to choose a costume and hang it onto the arched clothing rack. She complied and left a daring royal purple costume with intricate lace and a pair of matching shoes on the rack. It was then Victor made a jerky motion that made Yuuri turn toward him. To Yuuri's rising consternation, his lover's jaw was set and his face blanched.

"Victor, what's wrong?" Yuuri whispered.

Shock still lingered in Victor's eyes when he replied, "Nothing."

Yuuri knew better than to press on during such a public event, but he made a mental note to discuss the matter in private upon returning to camp.

Meanwhile, the other two assistants enveloped the rack with a large cloak. The assistant hanging the costume now placed a carved pumpkin in resemblance to an eerily grinning jack-o'-lantern on the pinnacle of the arch. She then pulled the cloak's hood over the glowing pumpkin head. Once the cloak was in place, the magician posed his usual gesture of hocus-pocus. Lastly, he commanded his assistants to rotate the wheeled rack. The horrific music played louder to signify a rising climax and...

…the moment the hooded rack was facing the audience again, the pumpkin had transformed into a girl clad in the purple costume that had formerly been hung. An elderly woman in the audience indignantly accused the magician of wizardry, but the majority of the spectators were impressed. Yuuri had lost the energy to sigh.

There was no doubt that the girl in the purple costume had worn an identical attire beforehand. She had hidden herself behind the wardrobe rack full of costumes, which her fellow assistants had carried onto the stage. Next, she lurked behind the cloaked rack, aided by the distraction her colleagues had provided: they held the large cloak open longer than necessary to hide the girl's path from behind the wardrobe rack to her next hiding spot behind the arched rack. This, combined with their curvaceous bodies and provocative gaits, made the process of blocking the audience's view enjoyable. Once the rack's frontal part was fully covered, the girl in purple slipped inside the cloak unnoticed. The only reason for the arched rack to be set upon a pedestal, as opposed to have wheels directly attached to its frame, had to be for storage purposes. The flooring had to be constructed with rubber or other flexible material, spread over a hollow base, which functioned as a
pocket wherein the fourth assistant concealed the duplicate costume. The hood was likely to be lined with a wire frame that allowed it to hold its shape when the assistant inside removed the pumpkin. As for the pumpkin, a pocket large enough to accommodate its size must have been sewn inside the cloak.

_In short, the girls do all the work, yet the magician is the one obtaining the glory,_ Yuuri thought. _Victor would never choose a trick in which other people labor for his sake._ He checked on the man sitting next to him. _Thank goodness, whatever troubled Victor earlier has subsided; his complexion is no longer pale._

"Ladies and gentlemen, behold the magician's latest torture device!" the emcee announced. Next to him stood a cabinet large enough to host one person, were it not divided into three sections. "We shall witness with our own eyes how this magician will slice a woman in three and remove her torso."

One of the magician's assistants headed straight for the back door of the box. To convince the audience that she remained there, Maximilian opened a peephole on each of the three sections. The top hole allowed spectators to see the assistant's face; the middle one, her waving left hand; and the bottom one, her wiggling right toes wrapped in fishnets. More wolf-whistles ensued, owing to the girl's provocative action. Two more assistants brought what appeared to be a steel slate each.

The magician inserted the first blade into the slit in the upper third of the cabinet and the second one into the slit in the lower third, hence separating the cabinet's three sections, much to the spectators' loud gasps. Next, he slid the middle compartment leftward so that that particular part of the cabinet showed an empty frame, eliciting screams from the auditorium. The loudest, most disturbing, unrestrained one came from the woman sitting in front of Victor. Several heads turned to her, including even the magician on stage. The man sitting next to the screaming woman tried to calm her, assuring her that the girl inside the box would surely recover. Still, it took another minute before the hysterical woman calmed down.

The show continued: Maximilian opened the three peepholes to reveal that his assistant's face, left hand, and right foot were still animatedly intact. He then re-closed the peepholes, slid back the middle compartment, and dislodged the steel blades. However, it was not until he snapped his fingers that the door on the right side of the cabinet opened. The assistant emerged from it, perfectly unharmed.

"This one is tricky…" Yuuri unintentionally mumbled. Then he remembered that he was in public and quieted himself.

However, Victor had already heard him and asked in a low voice, "Your best guess?"

"The steel blades have to be made of a flexible material so that the assistant could bend them to fit enough space for her body in that cabinet. I have no clue about the empty middle part, though," Yuuri replied above a whisper.

Victor winked. "One hint: mirror."

At first, Yuuri's eyes narrowed as he tried to decipher Victor's meaning. "You mean … there's a mirror in that middle compartment, stationed to leave just enough room for the girl's body?"

Gradually, the gears inside his brain connected and rotated together in harmony. "Of course! When the magician slid that section of the box sideways, we were not looking through the cabinet, but at the mirror! Chances are, there's a screen set up to the right of the box that's identical to the screen behind the box. The mirror creates an image that fills in the center of the box; it's an exact duplicate of what we think is the scenery behind the box. Owing to this spoof, it appeared that we
were looking right through the box to the screen behind—from the front, that is. As for her midsection seemingly being dragged off to the left, it stayed in the same place right behind the mirror in actuality. The cabinet must have a secret trapdoor that gives the girl access to the hole. Thus, she could reach her left arm across her body through that secret panel and poke her hand out of the hole. Again, this illusion looks convincing only when seen from the front."

"You never cease to impress me, Yuuri." Victor beamed at him.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, for the final performance tonight, Magnificent Maximilian will demonstrate the powers of bringing forth a pretty lass." The curtain rose behind the emcee to reveal a doll house, set on a pedestal and reaching up to the height of the magician's neck. A sound effect of a wolves howling from a distance accompanied the doll house's emergence. The background screen depicted a blood-red full moon rising above the silhouetted branches of barren trees.

Another pedestal trick? Yuuri groaned inwardly. Don't tell me the girl is going to emerge from a trap door on the floor right underneath that empty pedestal, and then appear in the doll house?

After an ostentatious fanfare, the magician opened the doll house's double doors to show its vacant interior to the audience. He then closed the doors, only to make a series of hoax magical gestures in the air while the lighting and sound effects enhanced his performance. When he reopened the doors, the doll house was no longer empty; the magician pulled out a set of woman's lingerie from it and was greeted by a roar of wolf-whistles.

Yuuri rolled his eyes. He could guess that the magician would close and open the doors a second time to reveal one of his assistants crawling out of the doll house wearing a duplicate set of lingerie, then re-closed and reopened the door to present her fully dressed. The fact that the magician on stage confirmed to Yuuri's prediction only lessened his respect for the performer further. He was looking at the pocket watch that Victor had given to him, desiring to go home soon, regardless of the show's incompletion, when the assistant emerged in a full gown amid a shower of artificial mist. Patience, Yuuri. Didn't the emcee announce that this would be the last performance tonight?

The spectators were clapping, though some men japed, "Shame, she's wearin' a dress now!"

Yuuri expected the magician to bow to the audience and for the curtain to lower, but instead, Maximilian spoke into his microphone, "The illustrious ice magician Victor Nikiforov is here in our midst. How fortuitous!"

Perhaps the magician had noticed Victor's presence due to the hysterical woman's screams from earlier, but Yuuri had a bad premonition that this acknowledgment would not end without conflict.

One of the children in the audience said, "But that bloke ain't wearin' no cape."

His twin added, "And no doves are flyin' around 'im neither."

"The word 'accomplished' is far too liberally applied to magicians far and wide, but the Victor Nikiforov does in fact deserve that distinction, or so I've heard," the magician on the stage spoke, his gaze lingering on Victor just a tad too long, disconcertingly calculative. "I am told you have some impressive reputation as a magician."

Victor answered with a flat tone, "I find my name connected with a little praise."

"Well then, why not grace this audience with a proof of your mettle? Acquaint us with your wonders and let the people see with their own eyes whether you deserve the title of a true
magician, and not a mere trickster."

Victor remained silent.

"What's the matter? Too scared to perform without the ice?" A man in the audience taunted Victor.

Yuuri's brow bristled. What should have been a leisurely outing had turned into a rivalrous contention.
The Magicians' Duel

Chapter Summary

After the show was over, Yuuri learned that Victor had a dark, dark past.

Chapter Notes

Lots of gratitude to EllaAwkward, BetterWithThree101, fakeyourdecaf, aesthetic-trash-right-here, & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

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The Magicians' Duel

Victor's jaws clenched. He allowed a few more seconds of pause before he rose to his feet to address the magician on stage. There was barely a hint of his internal conflict in his voice, which rang loud and clear with the confidence of a seasoned performer across the auditorium. "My friend, tonight is your show. What good would it be for an outsider on a jaunt to partake in your glory?"

"Ah, but what glory could be better than having one's performance graced by the presence of the world's most famed magician?" Maximilian silkily replied.

Yuuri balled his fists. It took no genius to understand the local magician's motive: by defeating the best magician in the world, his fame would be guaranteed to soar. Turning to his companion, Yuuri cast Victor a pleading look, begging him not to take the bait. He had no doubt of his lover's superior skills, but there was no telling if the challenger would cheat or whether the local mob would be irate if one of them faced defeat by the hand of a foreigner.

Withal, Victor glanced back at Yuuri and wordlessly conveyed, I'm sorry; I have to do this. Afterward, he rose to his feet and flashed a professional smile. "It shall be an honor for me to stand on the same stage as you. Since I bring no equipment of my own, you will be generous enough to lend me yours, I trust?"

"Of course, sir." The magician purred. His eyes gleamed with something that reminded Yuuri too much of mischief.

Yuuri opened his mouth in an attempt to warn his lover, but the older man had turned his back to him to leave for the nearest aisle.

"You won't mind if I also ask for the assistance of my apprentice, I daresay?" Victor spoke to his challenger.

It was as though all blood had been drained from Yuuri's body. Dread clawed at him with its adamant chill and refused to let go. He heard the magician's reply of "Why, it'll even be my pleasure to oblige should you ever need any additional assistance from any of the girls here," but
his brain went numb. Akin to a wind-up toy whose key had just been turned, his body mindlessly made its way to follow Victor down the stairs toward the stage. It was by sheer luck that he did not trip on any of the many items that littered the pathway.

Victor declared, "Thank you for your generous offer, but one person is enough."

It could be just Yuuri's biased feeling, but he sensed the hint of a grudge in the magician's expression.

The audience clapped. Some cheered for Victor, but most encouraged the local magician to triumph over the more famous one. If the air in a place could be sucked out to render one suffocated, this had to be what it felt like. The din from the spectators' words, claps, and stomps made Yuuri breathless. He was going to do something wrong. No, he was going to do everything wrong in front of these people. His incompetence would surely mar Victor's perfect record.

*Remember Victor's advice about stage fright,* a voice in the back of Yuuri's head said. Nevertheless, it was no use. His mind was turning blank; he could not even conjure a single word.

"Which device would you like to use, sir? In addition to the ones I used in this evening's show, I'm afraid I carry only two more apparatus as spares: the chalkboard to prove that you can read minds and the coin that's supposed to go through a glass bottle," the magician offered as soon as they arrived behind the stage curtain. The emcee was currently engaging the audience with some jokes to buy Victor time to prepare. Even so, this could not last for more than ten minutes without risking the audience throwing things onto the stage in anger.

"Well, well, well, my friend. I am no mind reader, and as for the latter, I doubt those whom sit at the back will obtain a clear view of the coin defying the solid barrier of glass and go straight through it. I shall try my luck with the doll house."

Yuuri gulped. *Oh dear, surely Victor wouldn't wish me to appear in my underwear in front of the audience?*

Maximilian's eyes twitched ever so briefly before he chaffed, "Are you certain you'd rather not work with the apparatus with which I didn't perform to avoid similarity? I assure you those props are not rigged for my benefit. Nor would my assistants neglect their duty just because they aren't under your employment. We're good people, fair and just."

"My dear chap, who am I to doubt you and your hospitality? It is my own lackluster that I fear while standing beside your celebrated radiance. I must choose with an utmost consideration, and let it never be said that Victor Nikiforov lost because he thought so little of his opponent. It is for this very reason you shall see differences in the way I operate the doll house trick."

Yuuri thought he saw another glimpse of displeasure in Maximilian's expression. However, the magician turned toward one of the stagehands too quickly for Yuuri to make certain of the sight. The next second, the stagehand declared, "We're runnin' out o' fog juice. Can't make fake fog no more."

Fortunately, despite the man's provincial accent, Yuuri still caught some of the words and could conjecture the overall meaning. If Maximilian had given that stagehand the signal not to release the artificial fog and nothing else, the likelihood for Victor—with his legendary skills—to encounter difficulty would be next to naught.

"Have no fear," Victor assured them all. "For my performance, I'd like the theme to be modified. We shan't use the smoke generator at all. I'd like to use a different backdrop. Is there one depicting
"a nursery full of toys?"

"We ain't got nuthin' like that, Mista' Nikiforov," another stagehand answered.

"Ah, a plain one, then. But pale colored—white, cream, or pastel colors, please."

"Right-o!"

"As for the music, could you play something light and cheerful, but with an air of magic and adventure? Think of The Nutcracker or Petrushka—er, well, the early part, that is."

Another stagehand skeptically replied, "Ya tryin' ter mix an abracadabra show wif ballet?"

"Why not? I always skate as I perform my magic show. Without the ice, it's only appropriate if I dance ballet instead," Victor chirped.

One of Maximilian's assistants quirked her lips. She gave Victor no verbal comment, but the intended meaning of her derogatory gaze was clear enough: You won't win just by throwing in some pretty movements. The other two girls seemed uncertain about the winner, while the last—and seemingly youngest—girl blatantly expressed that she was convinced of Victor's victory. Had it not been for the doe-eyed looks and dreamy sighs she cast while staring so intently at Victor's face, Yuuri would have been glad that they had a supporter. With the way things were now, he had no need for jealousy to add to his lengthy list of worries.

Yuuri chewed his lips, unsure if he should be honest with his lover about his prejudiced fear. He inhaled sharply before deciding to ask, "Victor, shouldn't you … um, back down from that magician's challenge?"

"I can't. This extends beyond my personal matter. The troupe's reputation will be maimed if I decline this challenge."

Yuuri clenched his jaw; he could not accuse Maximilian based on an unproven presumption. Hence, he asked, "But is it wise to face a challenge in your present condition?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were clearly ashen-faced earlier. This has something to do with that pumpkin trick from earlier, doesn't it?"

Victor turned to him so sharply that for a second, Yuuri thought Victor was furious to him for prying too far into his lover's privacy. Nevertheless, when Victor spoke once again, his tone bore the same calm as the sea after a storm, "We shall talk about this later. I promise." Victor gave Yuuri's fingers a brief squeeze before resuming in his preparation.

Yuuri bit his upper lip. Here Victor was, preparing his best to face against a rival, and yet Yuuri antagonized, rather than supported him. "What can I do to help you?"

Victor turned toward him, smiled, and began to whisper.

###

Applause had thundered through the hall even before the curtain was fully raised. Numerous spectators wished to see for themselves what the performance of a world-famous magician would be like, no doubt. Indeed, they were not disappointed. Several gasps burst from their mouths as soon as the doll house was in full view. Victor had requested the stagehands to place it on a table,
of which the legs were bared for all eyes to see—hence, negating the possibility of the doll house's connection with a trap door, like when it had been set upon a pedestal.

Afterward, the music played and the audience grew silent as anticipation rippled through them. There had been no time to give specific instructions to the emcee, with the latter buying him time by engaging the audience with jokes up to the very last moment. Thus, he refrained himself from commenting on Victor's performance. Even so, Yuuri was certain that Victor opened his show with a dance. He wished he could see his mentor's captivatingly beautiful movements himself, but that was impossible from his current position. The doll house's roof blocked his view. Victor opened its roof and had asked Yuuri to hide himself on the small platform built inside the ceiling. Even with him on all fours, the space remained cramped and uncomfortable. It left only a few inches gap between his back and the roof. His limbs went through the designated holes to fit into secret compartments in the walls of the house.

In reverse to Maximilian's performance, Victor would reveal Yuuri from above, rather than from below. Cold sweat rolled down Yuuri's temple, making his spectacles slip down the bridge of his nose. Nevertheless, if any benefit could still exist in this situation, it was the absence of other people pestering him. Akin to the calm before a storm, Yuuri felt a tempest brewing in his gut. Then he remembered the conversation he had with Victor on their way to Frolyndt.

"But Victor, don't performers—especially actors—need to play their role with all their heart? How can they still be themselves at such moments?"

"When you fake it, do it not until you make it, but until you become it. Even tiny tweaks count; they can make big differences. Take my impersonation of royalty in disguise during the second time I sang the villager's ballad as an example. It wasn't convincing enough because the only efforts I made was my accent and expression; I did nothing to improve my gesture, and I certainly did not command myself to grasp the role with my heart and soul," Victor had answered.

I can do this, Yuuri convinced himself. I'll pretend I am able to do it, and keep pretending until such time deems it necessary to do otherwise.

Thinking back, the reason Victor had not chosen a more sensational trick, using the "sliced" cabinet, was very likely due to his concern for Yuuri's size. The narrow space behind the mirror in the middle partition would not fit Yuuri's diaphragm … although it probably could have accommodated the younger, slimmer, and more flexible Yuri. For the same reason, Victor could not have chosen the box with the pointing arrow either, even though the magician was perfectly capable of turning the box by himself. As for the goldfish and knife tricks, while there was a chance that Victor had not opted for them because of their less glamorous effect compared to the other three, he was probably more inclined to do so because he desired to educate Yuuri by allowing him to experience firsthand how it truly felt to perform onstage.

A warm feeling dispersed within Yuuri. Victor had done so much for him. Now it was his turn to repay Victor's kindness. Gradually a new strength coursed through Yuuri. He waited as patiently as his strained nerves would allow him to. This is for Victor.

He heard the doors creaking open for the first time and took a deep breath; Victor must have been showing the empty interior to the audience. The moment Victor closed the doors, Yuuri set to work. He placed a doll—miniature Yuuri, as his doting lover had called it—at the center of the formerly empty hall of the doll house. Victor had bought that porcelain doll shortly after he had found the miniature Makkachin cotton-stuffed toy, while Yuuri had been transfixed with the shop assistant's explanation on the water heater. Although the doll's countenance looked nothing like Yuuri's features, it bore glasses and had black hair. From afar, it could indeed pass as his
Yuuri retracted his arms as quickly as he could and closed the panels, which were decorated with patterned wallpapers to serve as the doll house's walls. The distant applause confirmed Yuuri's calculation that Victor was dancing during the intervals instead of posing the dubitable movements that were supposed to signify bewitchment. The claps grew louder. Perhaps Victor performed something with the difficulty level of a grand jeté or even the fouetté pirouettes unaided by proper ballet slippers.

Moments later, Victor reopened the doll house's double doors to return Yuuri's miniature. As soon as the doors shut close, Yuuri hid the porcelain doll in the wall compartment and prepared himself to make his appearance in front of the audience. Had the theatrical fog still been available, he could have pushed the roof-shaped lid upward and then simply rose to his feet. As things were, Yuuri thought it better to improvise by following the Alice in Wonderland route. As though magically enlarged by Victor, Yuuri poked his right arm through one window. He mimed the dramatic movements of struggling through a tight hole without actually breaking the window. Shortly, his other limbs also emerged from the other windows, one by one. At last, he pushed the roof with his back. His head breathed fresh air once more.

Applause erupted from the auditorium. Yuuri blinked back tears of relief as he climbed out of the doll house. Victor offered his hand to help Yuuri and then formally introduced the younger man to the audience as his apprentice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, tonight the far-famed ice magician Victor Nikiforov has once again proven himself a man of remarkable artfulness and perspicacity by turning a doll into a man!" the emcee commented. He spoke more afterward, but the words eluded Yuuri. A wave of euphoria washed over him, for there could be no more gratifying of a feeling than knowing that Yuuri had not ruined Victor's impromptu performance.

Not long after, Yuuri started to think that "had not ruined" the performance might be an understatement. It was an irrevocable success. Still clapping hard, the spectators stood, stomped their feet, and cried out, "Encore! Encore! Encore!"

Yuuri would have stayed there, bewildered all night, should Victor not need to greet the audience with many words of gratitude and a reply to their demand, "I regret we are pressed for time. Our circus troupe established a curfew to all of its members." Then he added with a smile after the audience booed, "No exceptions."

More protests broke out from the spectators. Some even went as far as inundating the ringleader with names that made Yuuri's ears turn red. However, Victor raised his arms in a pacifying gesture and convinced them, "But you can see me and my fellow rink mates in a full performance soon enough. Our troupe is touring this country."

It was only after the audience had their fill of approvals and encouragements that the stagehands dared to lower the curtain. Even so, the echo of Victor's name had not disappeared from the other side of the curtain. The front of the stage was flecked with flowers—bouquets and loose stems alike. The stagehands were clapping one another's hands with satisfied grins on their faces. When one of them told Yuuri that the audience had never reacted so vivaciously for any magic show before, another added, "But of course! Not even the so-called Magnificent Maximilian knew the full secret of his own doll house—asking the lass to keep coming through a trap door and all." He snorted. "Took another magician to show him how it's done, eh?"

The comment triggered the already sour-faced Maximilian to approach them, his eldest assistant following closely behind. While the girl showed them hostility through her glare, Maximilian's
equal displeasure was expressed through tight lips, "Is there anything else to detain you here, sir? You have stripped me of a good name and credibility. Are you going to strip me of a place to perform next?"

Yuuri wanted to argue that the magician had challenged Victor on his own accord and that Victor had accepted it out of reluctance, but when he saw the look in Victor's expression, he understood his mentor's unspoken message. Pride did not matter. The more Yuuri tried to defend themselves, the more irked their opponent would become and the worse the outcome would turn out for Victor and Yuuri. While Maximilian might have a wide network of kin and kith with whom he could rely upon, the circus troupe had no allies there to offer them aid.

As Yuuri followed Victor toward the exit, he heard the magician declare to the stage crew, "I have been defaulted from any chance of triumph from the start, for my contest is not against a man, but against fame."

Having slipped away from the back door, Yuuri had not expected a large number of spectators to be waiting for Victor. Most of them sought a more profound acquaintanceship with the famous magician. Questions including "How could you spin non-stop like that? Didn't it make you dizzy? Can you teach me?" and "I heard that magicians were dependent on their equipment. Tonight, you've proven how wrong that can be!" and "Lordy! That apprentice of yours appeared in that doll house even though there's no passage between it and the floor below—how could that be?" were just a handful among what the fans threw at Victor, despite Victor's repeated emphases that he and Yuuri had a curfew.

Only one little boy addressed Yuuri, "How long have you trained to be Victor Nikiforov's apprentice?"

"A week," Yuuri answered truthfully.

More praises and murmurs of approval erupted. Even so, what Yuuri liked about this nation was that its citizens cared more about personal space than other nations did. None of them patted him on the back or touched him at all … although the two girls who had jostled their way past looked suspiciously like they were trying to steal any of Victor's reachable clothing article.

The pocket watch read a quarter to ten when Victor and Yuuri finally managed to leave the theater. Yuuri remained quiet all the way, still finding it hard to believe that their first date had resulted in such turmoil.

Victor seemed to find Yuuri's silence unnerving, so he consoled him, "Not all townsfolk would greet us merrily. Some complained about the noise, others about how their children nagged to watch our performance during a busy time. There are also those who believe we should exert our talents in our fatherland instead of theirs."

"Some say there is no poison more potent than envy," Yuuri commented. Next, recalling Victor's discomfort during the pumpkin transformation trick, he inquired, "Can I hold you to your promise about telling me what bothered you earlier?"

"I was hoping you'd actually forget about that." Victor chuckled. However, it did not take long for his smile to turn into a sigh. "Yuuri, yesterday you asked me whether I ever killed during my missions. I haven't told you the whole truth. I killed an innocent soul once. A bystander … and a child at that."

Yuuri could not believe his ears. "But that can't be … there has to be a mistake! I-it was unintentional, right?" He turned sharply at Victor, searching for the truth in those teal eyes.
Victor answered barely above a whisper, "She was a mere child, sprightly prancing about in her lacy purple gown—rather like the one onstage tonight as far as color scheme is concerned. In her eagerness to show a perching nightingale to her father, she paid no heed that she placed herself within the proximity of the battle between two assassins. My enemy at the time seized the opportunity to use her as a hostage. She wriggled and squealed in the man's restraining hands, but I was too confident with my shooting skill. The bullet I aimed at the felon hit her forehead instead."

"Well … at least you…" Yuuri could not continue. Even his own voice sounded hollow and foreign. Whatever he said would not be able to justify what he was feeling. This was not the Victor Nikiforov he had idolized more than half his life. This was not the one who glided so flawlessly over the ice and performed all those eye-catching movements. This was not even the love-sick man who fussed about a pimple that morning. This was a stranger in his lover's body.

"I killed her by choice, Yuuri. I was aware of the risk, yet prioritized my mission over her life still. Her father arrived soon afterward, short of breath from running. He shook her body and cried her name over and over … but all he found was the corpse of a man who did not even truly kill his daughter. The real murderer had fled, too scared to pay for his own despicable crime."

Yuuri dropped his shopping bags and boxes on the ground, and threw his arms around Victor's shoulders. "Victor, I don't know how it feels to take another's life, so whatever I say or do may not make you feel any better. But remember this: I love you, and I'll be by your side when you decide to atone for your sins—no matter what your decision will be."

Victor gazed at him, eyes shimmering with joy. "Yuuri, this is the first time you've ever told me you love me…"

"Surely not! I've told you so many ti—oh…Oh." Yuuri gasped. Now he realized that whenever he told Victor he loved him, it had always taken place inside his head. "W-well, it's nothing special. No need to make a fuss about it."

"Of course it is," Victor argued.

"No, it isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

Yuuri sighed. "Victor, aren't we too old for this?"

"Of course not! Love knows neither boundary nor age."

Yuuri rolled his eyes. To change the subject, he remarked, "Victor, aren't you also in possession of a doll house? If memory serves, I caught a glimpse of a similar doll house while packing, albeit painted in different colors and wrought into a different architectural style."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. Mine is made to imitate the traditional log house in my country, called izba."

"Is that why you decided to perform that trick today? Because you know how to operate it?"

"That's one of my reasons."

Yuuri could be wrong, but he detected a tinge of melancholy in Victor's tone.
"There's nothing shameful about choosing what one feels most secure or opting for the biggest possibility to bring one's success," Yuuri assured Victor, assuming that his mentor was dissatisfied by his less-than-phenomenal performance.

"That much I know, Yuuri."

"Then what troubles you, pray tell?"

"That doll house was something I prepared for a stunt involving Makkachin and her mother. Makkachin was still a pup and she would have been perfect for the second appearance whereas her mother, who was about Makkachin's current size, would have been perfect for the third appearance."

As though ice-cold water had been injected into his veins, Yuuri dreadfully queried, "Did she die in an accident during the stunt?"

Victor shook his head dejectedly. "No, she stole some bread from the kitchen when I had been practicing my levitation stunt. It was already too late when Leo and Guang Hong found her curling up in front of my tent, looking so debilitated." With every syllable, Victor's voice sounded more and more like a whimper. Eventually, he said with a repressed sigh, "At least she didn't suffer long after the food was stuck in her throat. She passed on within minutes."

As much as Yuuri knew he should comfort Victor, tears started flowing on their own accord. The memory of his own dog, Vicchan, flooded his brain—how the brown poodle used to accompany him while running errands for his parents, wagged his tail whenever a Katsuki family member brought him treats, and then … the dog's photograph in a black frame on the family altar.

"I'm sorry … I s-shouldn't—" Yuuri nearly choked on his own sob. Victor had put away the doll house that had given him the nostalgic memories of his deceased pet, but he had bravely cast aside his distress this night … and Yuuri just had to rub salt into his wounds despite all of Victor's kindness. The knowledge plunged into Yuuri's chest like an invisible knife.

Victor laid down their shopping bags on the ground. He gazed at Yuuri, full of concern, and patted Yuuri's head. The street lamps had become nothing but feeble splotches of waning light casting a circular glimmer upon the drenched stone-paved thoroughfares. Victor Nikiforov looked divine, glimmering with affection. Yuuri did not think. He resigned himself in the comforting embrace of the man before him. His idol. His colleague. His dearest companion. The love of his life.

After a few minutes had passed, Yuuri had calmed down, settling into a peaceful silence in Victor's soothing arms. He noticed a vast building yonder. Facing the side of the narrow hallways that went off in opposite directions from a spacious reception area were multitudinous rooms with numerous shaded windows and singular lamps shimmering behind a thin curtain of fog. He gestured at it with his head. "Is that another department store? They're still open at this hour?"

From what Yuuri gathered the moment he had turned to his companion, Victor was looking at him with disbelief, as though trying to decide whether his ears had played tricks on him. Nevertheless, in the end, he answered, "No, my love. That's a brothel."

"Oh." Yuuri felt heat flushing his countenance. Just because he used to be a spineless boy who lacked romantic interest in anyone other than Victor Nikiforov and had never even possessed the urge to catch a glimpse of the red light district did not mean he was proud to let the world know about it. He picked up his shopping bags and boxes and piled them in front of his chest until they rose high enough to cover his blushing face.
Of Pets and Their Masters

Chapter Summary

This chapter is about other skaters and their pets.

Chapter Notes

Lots of gratitude to EllaAwkward & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

19

Of Pets and Their Masters

The moment Victor and Yuuri reached the campground, they found J.J. and Isabella sitting on the grassy slope under the stars, his arm protectively slung over her shoulder. She was clearly moping, and he solaced her, "Be in a good cheer, my darling. They were just jealous of your beauty. You could easily eclipse them without any make up, so they were unsettled to see you in such resplendence."

"Oh, J.J.," she sighed. "You're sweet, but I… How can I not be upset to be called a whore just because I painted my lips red?"

"About that, they may be referring to history—you know, this country being so upright about decorum and all," Victor offered.

It was not only Isabella and J.J., but Yuuri who also turned at to Victor with incomprehension in his eyes.

"It is said that lip coloring was invented in Eme-ḡir over three millennia ago by crushing gemstones into dust. However, ’twas the glorious nation of Tawy that popularized it. They used the ointment made of various animals and plants not only as a protection against the harsh desert weather, but also as an attribute of social status worn by both sexes. However, another rumor said that the state of women's facial lips reflects that of their genital lips. Hence, fuller lips were associated with high levels of estrogen, fertility, and the readiness to mate."

Isabella covered her mouth with both hands, while J.J. looked scandalized. Yuuri gulped; a part of him felt the urge to hide himself from view, but the rest of him desired to listen to Victor's explanation.

"Nevertheless, after the decline of Tawyan civilization and Elleas rose to power, lip colorant no longer became the apotheosis of good grooming for the respectable, but rather the garb of harlots. In turn, Elleas fell, but its culture was absorbed by Neotroia, who conquered the world and spread
said culture. Thanks to that doctrine, lipstick was regarded as a symbol of bawdiness in this country. There was a time when those of a more superstitious nature called the red stain on the lips to be the 'devil's work' and considered it as a sin. Parliament even declared that women who 'seduced men into matrimony' through the use of lip and cheek paints could have their marriages annulled as well as face possible witchcraft charges."

Isabella shook her head and threw her arms exasperatedly in the air. "I can't believe this! Where I come from, lip painting symbolizes feminine emancipation, not this … this … abomination!"

For once, the self-assured J.J. seemed to be at a loss for words, and Yuuri discerned that, when it came to Isabella Yang, J.J. would rather be an ordinary man than a celebrity who could only mollycoddle her with insincere words. Yuuri pulled the remaining fudge bar from one of his paper bags and presented it to Isabella. "It's not much of a gift, but I hope you'll enjoy it. My mom used to say that good food would always cheer one up."

She thanked him, and then snuggled close to J.J.'s chest, making Yuuri burn with the desire to do the same with Victor. He hastened his steps, planning to make use of Victor's couch. Of course, earlier that afternoon, he had been lying about sitting on Victor's lap, but now he'd give up a year's of salary if it meant he could have his dream come true. To Yuuri's wonder, Victor lagged behind with an unusual languidness, his expression forlorn.

As soon as they had put down their shopping hauls in the privacy of their own tent, Yuuri went straight to place his palm on Victor's forehead. "Victor, are you indisposed?"

"No," the older man answered without further elaboration.

It was true that Victor's body temperature did not feel out of the ordinary. Still, the lack of chatter was atypical for his chirpy lover. "Tell me what's wrong."

Victor shook his head.

Yuuri changed tactics. He approached Makkachin, petting her excessively, and asked her, "How's your day?"

When she lolled out her tongue and panted happily, he continued, "Aw, good for you. See, Victor and I had a wonderful date and, although some unexpected things happened, in the end, I thought this was still a pleasant experience overall—that is, until Victor stopped talking to me. Has he become upset because of something I did? But how can I amend my mistake if I don't even know where I went wrong? Oh, Makkachin, whatever shall I do if Victor finds me a nuisance after every date? Will there ever be a next date at this rate?"

On and on the soliloquy went, until eventually, Victor sighed and said, "It's not your fault that I'm in low spirits at the moment."

"That doesn't mean I don't want to help. Tell me what has been bothering you, and we can find the solution together."

Victor sighed again. "Yuuri, I realized Isabella needed cheering up, and you gave her your portion of fudge without any ulterior motive, but…" He chewed his lips briefly before continuing in a voice filled with such distress that made Yuuri's heart ache, "The fudge bars are the only couple's item you bought for us on the seventh day after we met. Even though you had no intention to commemorate our one-week anniversary, it still holds a special meaning to me. So, when you gave it away to our friend, I couldn't help but feel … like I wasn't any more special to you than your other friends."
Yuuri could not even begin to understand how and why his lover felt so insecure when Yuuri's mind never ceased to think about Victor Nikiforov from the moment he awoke until he closed his eyes to sleep again. Even so, the melancholy in Victor's tone—a distress Yuuri had never expected to hear from this man—was laced with an unvarnished honesty that stunned Yuuri. He cupped Victor's face with both hands until the taller man was looking down into Yuuri's eyes and whispered, "You silly old duffer, I can search the entire world and still find no one is more special than you. I don't need a souvenir to show you how much you mean to me."

Victor kept his poker face intact and, for once, Yuuri cursed the fact that Victor had trained himself to perform in front of the audience and could hide his expressions as he wished. Pecking the tip of Victor's nose, Yuuri bade his lover, "Oh, do kiss Makkachin goodnight and stop being disagreeable."

"Makkachin will have to wait her turn." Victor leaped forward, hooked his hand over Yuuri's nape, and snatched a kiss from him.

Caught unprepared, Yuuri gasped for breath when Victor dipped his head and moaned when his partner started to caress his tongue feverishly against his. Yes, was the monosyllable that kept echoing through Yuuri's mind, as his lover's adventurous hand found its way down the small of his back, fingers digging slightly into his shirt. He reciprocated the kiss by sneaking his tongue into Victor's mouth. Yuuri was tilting his head for a better angle and an easier access into his lover's mouth when an idea struck him.

"Wait, Victor."

He could almost hear Victor's whine as he disentangled himself from his lover's ardent embrace. Ignoring his guilt, he proceeded to their shopping bags and singled out a small brown bag emblazoned with the Bensimon Department Store logo, before returning to Victor's side.

Yuuri pushed Victor onto the couch, straddled his lover, and remarked, "Now, I believe I owe you a demonstration on how to sit together on this couch." Without further ado, he took out a slice of Victor's fudge, only to clamp its edge between his front teeth and deliver it to Victor's mouth.

"Throughout my career, I've striven to impress the audience with the unexpected. But what you do tonight with just seconds of preparation has outdone years of my efforts," Victor commented as soon as their mouth-to-mouth fudge-feeding was over. He gave Yuuri a dazed, contented gaze that set tingles ablaze inside Yuuri's stomach.

"I learned from the best." Yuuri swept his tongue across his lips. Of this, he had no doubt: the sweet aftertaste from the fudge would disappear minutes later, but the sweet aftertaste from Victor's kiss would last for his whole life long.

###

"Whither go you two?" Yakov grunted as they passed after breakfast.

Yuuri answered, "I need to collect my shoes from the cobbler's, sir."

"Be that as it may, why are you tagging along?" Yakov cocked his head at Victor.

Yuuri sensed displeasure from Yakov's tone, but Victor remained oblivious as he chirped, "I'm keeping Yuuri company, of course!"

Yakov peered at his oldest disciple. "A falsehood of the most scandalous nature has reached me, claiming that you have spread a rumour about our troupe, and how it is to perform throughout the
"Oh, that's no falsehood at all. Circumstances demanded me to make that announcement last night."

Yakov massaged the bridge of his nose. "Why, Vitya, why? You know full-well we're here for a clandestine mission!"

"But, since a caravan of numerous wagons is hard to miss, why not make the most of it? The ticket sales can even cover some of our travel fees. We won't need all of us to masquerade as staffers in the baron's manor—just one or two, and the rest can perform for him in the privacy of his dwelling. Naturally, we need to make our shows a streak of successes to secure his invitation."

Yakov's eyes squinted. "You are confident he will invite us to his home instead of merely attending our show in the tent like other people?"

"Yes. As long as I convince the baron with the reason, that is. And we'll need to send spies first to observe him beforehand … study his likes and dislikes, routines and irregularities, friends and foes, needs and antipathies—the usual standard."

"The target is actually a viscount, but point taken. We shall begin the preparation at once." Yakov turned toward Yuuri. "Go, collect your shoes. We have lots of training as soon as you return." Then he grunted, "Follow me, Vitya. We have a lot to prepare."

Victor beamed and hummed, "You've started to call me Vitya in front of Yuuri even though you never use that pet name in front of the other troupe members except for Georgi, Mila, and Yurio. Does this mean you've accepted Yuuri as one of your own disciples?"

"If you have time to think about trivialities, then set your brain to work out a strategy!" Yakov huffed. He had turned around, so Yuuri could not see his face, but the scarlet shade at the tips of the old man's ears were enough of a telltale sign that he was blushing.

The first thing Yuuri did as soon as he returned from the cobbler's shop was return Seung-gil's shoes to their rightful owner along with his deepest gratitude.

"I wouldn't mind if you wished to keep them," Seung-gil said. He did not bother to explain that he indeed possessed other pairs of shoes, which Yuuri saw lying near the leftmost trunk.

While those shoes had been comfortable, Yuuri had not forgotten why Seung-gil had lent him the pair: had Yuuri worn his soldier boots, the officers at customs might suspect him as a military spy and deny the troupe's entry to Mheadaure. "Thank you, but you've saved me enough. Isn't there anything I can do to repay you?"

Although Seung-gil's head shake was expected, a part of Yuuri still hoped that he could be useful somehow. He could not help but feel rather glum as he parted the tent's flap to exit it.

That was when a tall dog with a thick black, white, and gray coat pranced his way in. The sheet of paper clamped between his jaws did not prevent him from growling at Yuuri. The dog halted in front of Seung-gil and opened his maw to allow his master to collect the paper.

For the first time since his arrival at the troupe's camp, Yuuri saw Seung-gil smile. The façade of indifference he normally preserved in front of everyone else dispersed into unbridled affection before his pet. Upon retrieval, he gave the dog a pat on the head. "You found it. Good boy,
"What does that name mean?" Yuuri asked.

"Respected," Seung-gil answered simply, but Yuuri noticed the younger man moving one foot to the front at a distance of one shoulder width, knees slightly bent, while shifting his weight to his rear foot. The position left his torso half facing Yuuri and his front leg ready to kick.

*That's one of the fighting stances in taekwondo,* Yuuri recalled the combat survival lesson a couple of days prior. *Is he going to kick me if I try to pet the dog?*

Seung-gil's posture relaxed as Yuuri made no attempt to pet the dog. Behind him, Gyeong was eyeing Yuuri, sizing him up and trying to decide whether or not Yuuri meant any harm. He seemed to be ready to bare his fangs any second now.

From the glimpse Yuuri had caught earlier, the paper bore the unfinished pencil sketch of a skating costume. "Did you draw it?"

Seung-gil smoothed the paper. "The wind blew it away before I could finish the sketch."

Encouraged by the explanation the taciturn man normally wouldn't be willing to provide, Yuuri commented, "This brings back memories … my drawing is nowhere near as good as yours, but I also used to design my own costumes and asked my mother to sew them because no one sold male figure skater costumes in my hometown."

Seung-gil made the tiniest of nods. Peradventure he had found himself in the same claw of misfortune.

"May I?"

Seung-gil contemplated this before handing Yuuri the paper. Behind him, the dog narrowed his eyes, with his ears partially held back and his body tense in both indignation and suspicion.

*Perhaps this dog doesn't like that someone else has access to the object he has striven to bring back,* Yuuri thought as he cautiously scooted to Seung-gil's side to accept the paper. Age-mellowed Makkachin was far less aggressive, but there were times when Vicchan had behaved in a similar fashion before reaching maturity.

"Are the skaters in this troupe required to design their own costumes?"

Only if they wish so. I abhor the old costume that had been assigned to me."

Yuuri racked his brain, trying to call to memory the one time he had watched the troupe's performance in the town of Gontreda. "The black necromancer costume?"

Seung-gil's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Yuuri considered the possibility of having offended the younger man. However, Seung-gil's tone was as flat as ever when he spoke, "That's my favorite costume—the only one that was done properly."

"Oh, in that case, I believe I haven't seen the other costume you mentioned."

Seung-gil approached one of his trunks and unloaded its contents. He pulled out a rainbow-colored shirt and a pair of vibrant blue trousers. "There." He tossed the costume at Yuuri, as though the fabric could offend his fingers further if he held it any longer.
"Erm, they're … the polar opposite from your personality, I guess." Yuuri glanced at the unfinished sketch again. "So, you'd like the new costume to resemble crane origami—ah, it's a paper-folding technique in my country."

"Jong-i jeobgi is what the people of my country call it in an adaptation of your country's culture."

Yuuri suddenly felt apologetic that Kouki had invaded Asadal at some points of history even though in other dynasties, it was Asadal that had waged the war against Kouki. The two countries were close neighbors, yet did not get along well with each other. He tried to divert his thoughts back to the matter at hand.

"So, with this crane costume, what sort of song would you like to perform?"

"A quiet song using only string instruments."

"You appear to be sure of what you like and are very organized about it." Yuuri handed the sketch back to Seung-gil. He expected his dismissal from the tent as soon as the paper returned to its owner's hand. Nonetheless, Seung-gil mumbled, "I lost the inspiration to finish this costume design."

A notion struck Yuuri: this was his chance to help Seung-gil back. He asked, "What sort of approach you're looking for?"

"Elegant," came the curt answer.

Yuuri pondered. If a pair of wings were to be placed at the back, the costume would resemble an angel more than a crane. Suppose each sleeve were to be attached with a wing, the costume would appear more appropriate for a children's party. "Hmm … what about making the costume asymmetrical? You've done a great arrangement around the neck and legs. What we need now are a little ornament on the waist and more emphasizing of the embellishments on the sleeves. How do you feel about adding the picture of the bird's head on the left wrist, for instance? Then the wings can be a triangular cape hanging from your left shoulder, but the garment bears the picture of a pair of wings. The other sleeve will depict the bird's tail. The rest of the body shows the landscape that the crane inhabits—not in a naturalistic way, but perhaps with curvaceous brush strokes to resemble mountains, lakes, and trees? Oh, and a couple of crane origa—jongi … er, paper-folding —can also be added on the extra spaces."

"That's brilliant!"

Despite Seung-gil's perfectly neutral expression, the unadulterated admiration in his tone flattered Yuuri. He nearly said a thank you, but Seung-gil's tongue was quicker.

Outside, some skaters were practicing acrobatics. Everyone was practicing in preparation for the show to lure the viscount, no doubt. Phichit was jumping on a trampoline while simultaneously juggling eight balls. Yuuri would have kept gaping at the sight were the neighboring performance not more impressive. Leo stood on a trapeze platform, throwing Guang Hong into the air, who did a somersault before returning to grip Leo's hands. Mila was stroking a devil stick with two other batons, stabilizing it through gyroscopic motion, while standing on the shoulders of Georgi, who was riding a unicycle. A blindfolded Otabek was throwing his knives at a target board. The others' whereabouts were no mystery, since the faint melody of a ballet tune came from the marquee nearby.

While Yuuri gawked, Chris came rolling on a Cyr wheel and told him, "Victor's waiting for you at the rink."
Yuuri hastened his steps to fetch his skates in the tent. The *rink*. Victor trusted him with such a large responsibility, and Yakov allowed it. He had not mastered his stage fright yet. It was by sheer luck that he had not ruined Victor's impromptu magic show the previous night, and at any rate, simply getting out from a doll house possessed lower risk of failure than performing jumps on ice.

He had just emerged from the tent with a pair of skates clutched against his bosom when he heard rustles from the bushes. A part of him urged him to ignore it and not to waste further moments to practice, but curiosity got the better of him. He parted the leaves and found a crouching figure. Even from the back, it was evident that soil and dirt had besmirched the white shirt and trousers. The forearms that kept parting the leaves and creating the ruckus were covered with bramble cuts, some dripping with blood. Even so, judging from the flaxen hair and the slender frame, this figure could not be anyone other than…

"...Yurio?"

The teenage boy turned around, face littered with more bramble cuts and dried tears. Bloodshot eyes glared the moment they laid their gaze upon Yuuri, naming him the most detestable creature they had ever had the misfortune to behold.

"Are you all right? Yurio, what are doing here?"

"Mind your own business, pig!" the lad spat. The next second, he shifted a step further and resumed parting the leaves.

"You're searching for something," Yuuri deduced. "What is it? I'll help."

The younger Yuri barked. "Leave! You have practice!"

"I'd rather not injure myself in the practice due to my mind being anchored on your trouble."

"Not my problem. Go away!"

Yuuri laid his skates on the grass and crouched next to the teenager. "Well, like it or not, I'm here now. The more adamant you refuse to tell me what you seek, the longer I'll stick with you."

Yuri tucked a few strands of blond hair behind his ears and huffed, but finally relented. He answered, "My cat. Long-haired. Round face. Short muzzle. White and brown fur."

"When and where was the last time you saw him or her?" Yuuri asked as they moved on to the next set of bushes.

"He was still eating breakfast when I left for practice earlier."

"So, the cat hasn't been gone for long? Is it not a feline trait to roam on their own and then come back later?"

"How can you say that so calmly when there are wolves out here?! Oh, that's right! You didn't know that we heard their howls and that one black wolf had even tried to scrape some food last evening. You were too busy dating Victor!"

The probability of the cat being devoured, or at least injured, by a larger predator startled Yuuri. Once, his uncle's family had stayed in the inn for a week, bringing their family pet with them. Their doberman intimidated his poodle. On the first day, Vicchan kept hiding and even refused to eat. The next morning, he was incapacitated from the wounds littering his body—the one on his
neck was particularly grave. Finding a doctor who was willing to help non-human creatures, especially since most doctors were in such a high demand in times of war, proved to be a formidable process. When the Katsukis managed to find one, the dog had lost too much blood to survive. As Yuuri buried his best friend in the backyard, he could only wish that doctors who specialized in animals could exist in his hometown one day.

Tears nearly fell from Yuuri's eyes again at the memory. Even so, he steeled himself. He had failed to retrain himself before Victor the night before, but he was not going to repeat the same mistake in the company of this youngster. The sulk in the teenager's tone made him ask, "Yurio, I've been meaning to ask this, but … are you perchance enamored with Victor?"

With a look of revulsion, Yuri barked, "Are you in your right mind? Why would I even fall for an oldster of his age?!!"

"Well, you seem to dislike me more than any of the other skaters. You show no particular hostility toward Phichit, Guang Hong, nor Seung-gil, who are ethnically similar to me, so I don't think your grudge is based on race. There are times when I'm with you and I feel you'd rather having me never joined the troupe. Jealousy is the only other possibility I can think of."

Yuri clenched his fists, plucking two handfuls of leaves without deliberation. "I don't love Victor, all right! Not in that way!!" He rose to his feet and approached the next set of bushes before continuing, "He's this troupe's best performer, and if you ask random passers-by on the street, those who have watched the circus will have heard of Victor's name. Possibly J.J. and Chris, too. But how many of them would know of Leo or Michele or me? My point, is that I can't beat Victor with my current skills. I've been watching him closely to improve myself for the better, and then you just … you just…"

"…came to the troupe and monopolized all the attention Victor could have given to other skaters," Yuuri finished Yuri's sentence for him.

Yuri cast him another glare. "There you have it. Now if you excuse me, I have a cat to find."

They left the flat land and headed to the hilly area to take a better look at the lay of the land—or rather, Yuri did, and Yuuri stubbornly followed despite the teenager's unwelcoming conduct. The din of motorized engines filled their ears as they climbed uphill. When the mounds of grassy soil no longer blocked their view, a procession of military tanks appeared before their eyes. Their model had turned more sophisticated since the last evolution albeit their prototype had been invented in this country no earlier than the previous year. They moved more swiftly and Yuuri suspected they wielded more advanced firearms power.

"It's been so peaceful the last few days that I forgot that the war still rages on," Yuuri remarked.

"What do you expect? Even a child knows the war of the world isn't over yet although this is the second year it has been on and off."

"Still, the citizens lead such a peaceful life and I didn't even spot anyone in soldier's uniform in town yesterday … it doesn't seem that the government needs to dispatch any of those tanks to prosperous towns like Frolyndt."

"Are you blind? Didn't you learn anything during your outing with Victor yesterday?"

Yuuri quirked an eyebrow.

"They're to keep the rabble-rousing labor strike under control, idiot."
"Labor strike?" Yuuri shook his head in disbelief. "The civilians in other countries strive to find work to fill their families' mouths, and the ones here refuse to work because they want higher payment?!" Then the merchandise in the department store as well as the little shops in the town emerged in Yuuri's mind. Putting the multitudes of temptations into consideration, it was not hard to see why Mheadaure residents needed so much money.

Yuuri opened his mouth, about to ask, "How did you know about the labor strike even though you were here all day long yesterday?" when something white caught his eyes.

"Yurio, look!" He pointed at the clump of trees on their east. "There. In that tree. Do you see something's moving? Two of them, actually."

The moment Yuri's gaze followed Yuuri's pointing finger, he rushed toward the tree. Yuuri was on his heels, but his anxiety lessened. Judging by the size of the moving object, the cat was more likely to be chasing something of a similar size. Their speed indicated they were moving in a leisurely pace.

"Pyotya!" Yuri called, eyes glassy and tone relieved, once he reached the tree.

The cat—one of the two cats—immediately leaped from the branch he had been perched on to his owner's outstretched arms. His companion—a beautiful cat of equally long hair, but pure white, simply observed them while licking her paw.

"You're Chris' cat, aren't you?" Yuuri greeted. He remembered seeing Chris and Masumi petting her in the ship's animal pen.

The cat ignored him, but she kept her gaze on Pyotya, who curled up in Yuri's arms, as they left.

###

"Yuuri, there you are!" Victor greeted him with a smile the moment he arrived at the rink.

Sara and Michele were skating in pair, but their choreography differed from usual. They no longer seemed to be trusting each other with their lives, but rather they acted like two former strangers who were recently acquainted.

"Victor, are you skating with them? I mean, performing in one song together with them?"

"Yes, and so are you. Isabella confirmed that our costumes would be ready for fitting this evening."

"Yes, and so are you. Isabella confirmed that our costumes would be ready for fitting this evening."

Yuuri blinked. "Costumes? Ours … as in, the four of us? But how can she finish them so swiftly, considering the plan inspired you only this morning?"

"The plan to perform privately for the viscount, yes. But the plan to dance with you … oh, Yuuri, surely you know me better than that? I couldn't wait to dance and skate with you since the day we met. I already discussed the arrangement with Isabella four nights ago."

"Oh, that's why you stayed on the ship deck after she had finished taking my measurements." Yuuri realized. "So, you, myself, Michele, and Sara are going to wear similar costumes with different colors this time?"

"No, only you and I will dress as kings of opposite sides. You are the ruler who reigns over the darkness, and I, the light. However, when your son, Michele, and my daughter, Sara, meet, they fall in love. We will wage war at first, but love prevails. Everyone will have a happy ending with the
lovers reunited and we—the in-laws—forging an alliance between our two kingdoms."

"Er, that sounds like quite a big role you have in store for me."

"It's only natural, given your talents, dear. We will have two duets. The first one is going to be rather long—almost three minutes. This is where we will execute jumps and spins, sometimes mirroring and at other times, opposing. In sharp contrast with our children's gentle, flirtatious movements, our own movements will be aggressive and battle-like. Our second duet will involve more peaceful movements, but it'll last for less than a minute. No lifts. But at least there will be a few seconds in which we clasp our hands."

As much as Yuuri admired Victor's wit to create the opportunity for two men to perform as a couple without defying moral values, no compliment came out of his mouth. His heart raced. I'm going to skate with Victor in front of the audience.

"Do your warm-up exercises, Yuuri. It's our turn next."
Spy Work

Chapter Summary

The troupe paraded across the town and Yuuri took more espionage lessons.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to anjumstar, TheOrdinariest, EllaAwkward, Fate-of-Wishes, lucksthegame & The Kindly One for beta reading this chapter.

The fencing salute used in this chapter is the abridged version. A longer salutation (which involves saluting the audience and the referee in addition to fencer's opponent) is more historically accurate, but feels unnecessary in the situation below).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20

Spy Work

"Corner him, Yuuri! Keep pressing! Don't hesitate!" Celestino instructed from the side of the piste.

As much as Yuuri's mind knew that his hesitation would only impede his own progress—and without progress, he would not be a man worthy of Victor Nikiforov—his body refused to listen. He could not bear to injure Victor, however lightly, despite knowing that the blunt protector at the tip of his épée would prevent him from harming his opponent. Even with the padding of the fencing jacket, the stab would hurt a little. Whilst any jab to the face would be painless owing to the protection of the mask's metal mesh, reaching a man taller than himself would require greater swiftness—a feat Yuuri would be incapable of achieving with his current skill. Most of his attacks were based on reflex and had predominantly been straight thrusts. He had no time to think because Victor's fluid counter-disengagements, parries, and cut-overs fully controlled the pace of their spar.

Victor sprang forward, lunging with his right until the blunt tip of his épée poked Yuuri in the chest. Yuuri stumbled back, out of form, managing to produce only a feeble circular parry.

Celestino groaned, before returning with further encouragement, "Come, Yuuri! Payback for Victor! Jab, jab, Yuuri! Jab!"

There was no time to turn the parry into a riposte. Yuuri made a clumsy attempt to cut, but Victor saw it coming and swatted the blade aside; he pressed forward with a rapid fleche and jabbed for all he was worth. Sweat dripping down his nose, Yuuri blocked desperately. He slashed to the left before recalling that, unlike the blades in his country, this kind was meant for stabbing instead of slicing. As he staggered back, he tried to bring his point to Victor's arm.

Victor slipped away, shoving the lunge aside with ease, causing Yuuri to stumble forward, off-balance for God-knows-how-many-times that morning. The blunted tip of Victor's épée rested
against the collar of Yuuri's jacket.

"That's enough for today!" Celestino called out.

In salutation, both fencers raised their swords to a vertical position in front of their masks, and then lowered the weapons at the full extension of their sword arms with their palms facing down. Upon removal of their masks, sweat streaked down their faces. Victor was quick to continue stripping his glove, yet Yuuri could only wish his heart would not burst as he gawked at him. Why did Victor have to appear so charming in his fencing attire? Well, he looked no less gorgeous in a ballet leotard, daily shirts, or when he was naked in bed…

Yuuri sucked in a sharp breath. He had to refrain from thinking about his god of a lover in such a manner in broad daylight. However, come to think of it, he had not shared corporeal intimacy with Victor since they had disembarked from the ship. Admittedly, the desire had not yet arisen, but thinking back … was it perhaps because they shared the tent with Makkachin, who would no doubt sit and stare should they be united in flesh? Should they send Makkachin outside each time they copulated? Wouldn't the other troupe members read "Makkachin being outdoors on her own" was tantamount to "Victor and Yuuri engaging in carnal pleasure"?

Yuuri's musing were cut short by Phichit's "Ciao-Ciao, Yuuri thinks your accent's sexy" from the neighboring piste. He turned so sharply that the glove he was removing fell from his other hand and thudded against the floor. "I think nothing of the sort!"

A smug grin tugged at Phichit's lips and his eyes gleamed with mischief.

"Yuuri," Victor called with a peculiarly strong rolling of the r. Victor's native language indeed pronounced r's stronger than Yuuri's, but the constant traveling since his tender age had allowed Victor to pick up accents all over the world. He normally pronounced Yuuri with a soft r. Still, it was just one syllable that could be a slip of the tongue. Slinging an arm over Yuuri's shoulder, Victor wiggled his eyebrows. "How's your day, handsome?"

Yuuri sighed. "Victor, we've been together all morning. And why must you imitate someone else? Have you ever heard me complaining about your usual accent?"

"But Yuuri~~~" Victor whined, still refusing to abandon the odd accent.

"I mean it. One more instance of that accent from your mouth, and I'll sleep outside tonight," Yuuri threatened.

"Nooooo!" Victor drawled his objection, his accent returning to normal and his panicked fingers gripped Yuuri in a plea. "It's freezing outside!"

"The cold is more bearable than your unnatural accent." Yuuri loosened the collar of his fencing jacket. And I love you for who you are; why don't you realize that?

"Yuuri," Celestino called with the same tone that Yakov would use whenever he was about to berate a troupe member.

Eek! Yuuri stiffened. "Yes, sir."

"Leniency is a curse to fighters! You must treat every opponent as though he will be your last. You have decent footwork and your arm movements aren't too bad for a beginner, but as for your resoluteness…” Celestino pursed his lips. "…Yuuri, I know you love Victor dearly, but how do you expect to survive out there and return to his side if you can't fight?"
"Sorry, coach."

Celestino squinted. "Your words form an apology, Yuuri, but your face wears a question."

Yuuri swallowed, hoping that his words would not sound too rude to the fencing coach, before asking, "I don't understand why I'd need to fence. Bare-handed martial arts can become necessary when there's no gun available, but men haven't carried swords on the streets for the last two centuries."

"Semper paratus. Always prepared. No one knows what the future has in store for them. You may find yourself in a situation in which you are required to perform a gentlemanly duel during a masqueraded mission one day. Self-defense is always with us. Agents ought to absorb their surroundings, learn as much as possible, and arm themselves for every possible situation," Celestino stated before he walked off.

###

After refreshing themselves, the troupe members were assigned to announce their upcoming show to the hoi polloi. They drew lots, and Yuuri landed himself with the allotment of a female costume. He groaned, "Please tell me it's not true..." but then it occurred to him how equally humiliating it must have been for Victor to pose as "Victoria" nine days prior.

Isabella, on the other hand, squealed in excitement, "Ooh, I have just the right costume for you, Yuuri! Wait here; I shall fetch it!" With that, she flitted off toward her tent.

"Well, I guess this means farewell to my goatee for a while." Chris rubbed his chin. His other hand also held a piece of paper that bore the word "woman." It could have just been a presumption, but Yuuri thought he saw tints of crimson coloring Masumi's cheeks as Chris added in a rather prurient tone, "I'm certainly going to miss it."

*Could it be that Chris grew the goatee for Masumi's sake?* Yuuri surmised. Nevertheless, he and Chris were not the only ones troubled by their allotments. J.J. lamented, "Unbelievable! Why must my kingly grace be buried under the guise of a sorrowful clown?!

Seung-gil turned sharply at those words, eliciting J.J.'s curiosity. As soon as J.J. glimpsed the paper in Seung-gil's grip, he suggested, "Oh, you get the gleeful clown. Shall we swap?"

Seung-gil's eyes glimmered. He had just nodded when Yakov growled, "How can you expect to survive out there if you refuse to do adapt when the situation is less than ideal for you?"

At least some other troupe members found their circumstances more agreeable. Yuuri even noticed a smile—albeit a tiny one—gracing Otabek's usually tranquil expression. The paper in his hand read "giant teddy bear."

The parade itself was quite a refreshing experience. Prior to Yuuri joining the troupe, the only times people had gathered were to see the soldiers' march. The innocent eyes of children hailed them as heroes, but the knowing eyes of adults condemned them as the authors of the misery that plagued the world. Today, the spectators did not draw back in fear, nor did they retire to shut the doors and windows of their dwellings. Instead, the civilians rushed to the streets and watched the troupe with excited faces, brightened with hope at the promise of entertainment. Their ears perked up at the beckoning tunes from the calliope mounted on a vividly painted horse-drawn wagon.

At the foremost, the twirls of Guang Hong's fire poi charmed the beholders' eyes, young and old. Behind him, some of the troupe's seamstresses wore glittering butterfly costumes as they threw
confetti. Leo manipulated three hula hoops around his body as he walked. Georgi rolled a ball from one arm to another, over his nape, and back. Seung-gil juggled a dozen balls while riding a unicycle, the chime attached to his pointy hat jingling with every move. J.J., whose face was painted with a down-turned mouth and a large teardrop across his left cheek, strode on stilts while holding up the sticks to spin ten plates. Otabek pantomimed in his teddy bear costume.

If not for the sake of duty, Yuuri would have grown weak in the knees or even swooned at the sight of elf king Victor. His lover donned a crown of elegantly carved twigs, an olive green doublet with a leaf motif, and forest green danseur tights that accentuated the contour of his buttocks. Although Victor wore fake pointy ears, the silvery wig that fell above his waist reminded Yuuri of the photograph of a teenaged Victor. That was when his nine-year-old self had learned of Victor's existence and become captivated by his skating ever since. Victor's image in the photograph had felt like an unreachable dream back then, but Victor in person was within his grasp now.

The very same Victor Nikiforov intensely gazed at Yuuri like he was the most enchanting creature their planet could offer, despite the plenteous beautiful bystanders in the crowd. A familiar warmth seeped through Yuuri's heart the moment Victor steadied his waist, helping him bend forward over one leg with the other in an arabesque penché. Afterward, Yuuri performed slow and sustained movements, supported by Victor's poise and vigor while lifting him. Throughout their pas de deux, Victor offered a reliable arm to Yuuri for the balancing feats that otherwise would have been difficult without assistance.

The gown Isabella had prepared for Yuuri turned out to be surprisingly comfortable for dancing. It was a V-neck gown of the palest pink with wide sleeves that took some semblance to the upper part of a kimono. However, as opposed to the confinement of a real kimono, Isabella had granted him more freedom of movement by crafting the gown's lower part as a voluminous as an inverted bell tutu. To complete the set, Yuuri wore an elaborately braided wig and ballet tights opaque enough to disguise his leg muscles. According to the seamstress, she was still perfecting the ideal gown for her wedding dress, and this happened to be one of her experiments. Upon handing him the gown, she had commented, "Aren't you glad that kimono are cut out to be one-size-fits-all?"

In contrast to Victor and Yuuri's elegant ballet, Chris and Masumi danced a passionate tango. Chris's gown had a high collar, a long skirt that billowed to conceal his masculine musculature, and flashy tassels to cater to his flair for glamor. Several faces in the crowd blushed as their gazes followed the sways of Chris' body.

Sara held each end of a vast, colorfully-patterned flag to undulate it in a rhythmic fashion to the music. Emil manipulated a lariat into various shapes creating a splendid trick roping performance. Young Yuri leaped around and performed acrobatic tricks in his striped tiger costume under the pretense that he was under the beast-tamer's control. Mila playfully wielded the devil's sticks whilst guiding the tiger's movements. Michele manipulated a hat with such fluidity that even water would envy.

At the rearmost of the performers, Phichit was balancing himself on a rolling globe of seven-and-a-half feet diameter. Behind him, two stagehands were holding a banner with the details of the circus show venue. Distributing pamphlets had been the troupe's preferred method of announcement, but the jamming and maintenance of their offset press necessitated the present parade.

It was then small rocks began to fly toward Phichit. Although most of the projectiles missed him, one hit him in the elbow and another in the face. He wobbled, nearly tumbling from the rolling globe. As soon as began blood trickling from his forehead, a booming roar pierced through the crowd. "APOLOGISE!"
The morning’s merriness wilted like a deflated balloon and the crowd grew quieter until the only sound existing was that of the calliope. All eyes were directed at the source of the commotion.

Yuuri thought of rushing towards Phichit to check whether his colleague had a concussion, but Victor tightened his grip around Yuuri’s waist and shook his head. As parts of the internationally recognized circus troupe, they ought to maintain professional standards so as not to disrupt the procession.

"Attacking a passerby and cowardly hiding yourself in the crowd?! This is not how I've raised you! Apologise this instant, Henry!" The yell cleaved through the deafening silence.

A wail filled the street. The crier was an urchin who had, in most likelihood, lived through less than eleven winters in his life.

The woman standing next to the child deigned to interrupt, affable yet stalwart in her attempt to be an intermediary. Yuuri could not hear what she said from his current distance with the loud music from the calliope blaring in the background, but soon afterwards, the little boy yelled with angry tears streaking down his cheeks, "He's … an enemy… He's … from Śmęangayā."

Yuuri’s breath hitched. Although all troupe members wore ornate eye masks, the color of Phichit's skin—the darkest of the troupe—was enough to suggest his ethnic origin. Leo and Sara's colorings were almost as dark, but perchance the child had been unwilling to risk Leo's hoops or Sara's flag deflecting the rocks.

The man, who presumably was the boy's father, exclaimed again. "Since when have I told you to attack an unarmed man? Do your school teachers encourage you to be a coward?"

The boy dared not open his mouth to reply. He listened in a profound attention instilled with dread. More tears dripped from his eyes, blotting the cobble stones near his shoes.

The woman—presumably the boy's mother—put a hand on the man's shoulder. Again, her soft-spoken voice remained inaudible to Yuuri.

*Circus! on Ice* was purely an entertainment body consisting of multi-national members neutral about the war that had ravaged the planet. It was for this reason that several countries granted access to the troupe. Even so, Yuuri could see that from the child's point of view, he had tried to defend his motherland from the invading foreigners.

The man explained something to the boy. However, since he was no longer hollering, Yuuri did not catch his words. He could only see the child breaking out into a snivel and muttering something in a low volume that Yuuri assumed to be an apology.

Phichit hopped off his rolling globe, fished out a blank piece of white paper from his pocket, and approached the boy while folding the paper. By the time he halted in front of the boy, the child's father began to assuage him, Phichit simply raised his hand, signaling the man to wait. Next, he folded the paper a few more times. He exhibited his white teeth in a smile, dimples on his cheeks, as he presented his impromptu work to the boy. It bore the shape of a dove.

Within an hour after the parade's end, the troupe members had scattered to separate locations for espionage purposes. Since Yuuri was a newcomer with zero experience, Yakov assigned him under a senior member's tutelage.

To nobody's surprise, devil-may-care Victor raised his hand to volunteer. "I can be Yuuri's partner
"Absolutely not! The last thing Yuuri needs is a distraction. He will complete this task with Georgi!" Yakov snapped, a vein of anger bulging out on his forehead.

While it was not surprising to see Victor pout, it was rather disconcerting to see Georgi furrow his eyebrows and repress a sigh. Georgi had been polite to Yuuri, but they rarely interacted … not to mention Yuuri could never get past the guilt of displaying his romantic happiness with Victor in Georgi’s presence as the latter had not yet recovered from his heartbreak.

Thus, the two men perambulated the thoroughfares. Keeping up the pretense as a traveling locksmith’s apprentice and his master, Yuuri followed behind Georgi as the latter advertised, “Locksmith! Locksmith at your service!” every few paces. They took a left turn from the road, uproarious with the traffic of swaying landaus and trotting hackneys and the gliding cabriolets.

Yuuri bit his lower lip. What exactly did his mission entail? Was he supposed to eye every passer-by to find the spy? Could the soot-covered chimney sweeper across the street be a thief in disguise? Could the mill they had just passed hide opium underneath the sacks of flour? Or was he supposed to seek a hint leading to the aforementioned spy instead? How? What if he messed up and ruined Georgi’s hard work or, worse, imperiled his colleague?

Although Yuuri had heard that Mheadaure was a country with rich cultural heritage, it still inspired him with awe to see a large percentage of the public buildings were made of stone that had stood for almost a millennium as opposed to steel-reinforced concrete frame invented in the previous century. Indeed, more than two-thirds of the passageways in the town were paved with cobblestones rather than asphalt. Nevertheless, what made Yuuri admire the nation most was how well it fared against the world war and how its citizens remained the least affected in terms of safety and comfort. There were very few nations that could afford a life with no food rations, normal working hours, and a vast range of amenities for leisurely lifestyles. A telephone booth, painted bright red and emblazoned with the gilded crown symbol, was stationed every half-mile, while a postal box of the same color and insignia stood every quarter of a mile. Of course, the fact that Mheadaure was one of the main suppliers of advanced weaponry did help.

Being one among the wealthiest nations in the world meant Mheadaure was accustomed to multi-national visitors. Phichit’s incident aside, most people on the street did not find the presence of foreigners confounding. Often during his military march, the locals looked at Yuuri as though he had been a walking exhibition of some near-extinct species whenever he had roamed without his platoon.

Mheadaure certainly lived up to its reputation as the country with the highest rainfall on the continent. Although the sky had been light blue with a serene procession of white clouds upon their departure, it grew gravid with raging dark clouds. The street vendors began the preparations to close their stalls, while the travelers afoot hastened their strides. Among these scurried a woman with her hands full of grocery bags. She was about to cross the street when the heel of her left shoe caught on a manhole grating.

A piteous yelp escaped the woman’s mouth as she fell face first onto the muddy street. Her wide-brimmed hat flew a yard in front of her, its feather besmirched with dirt. Her paper bags had torn upon the fall, leaving her vegetables scattered across the sidewalk and her eggs yolks run on the cobblestones amid eggshell shards. Her sourdough bread rolled onto the street and was immediately crushed under the wheel of a passing hansom, which splashed her gown with mud.

Georgi rushed to her aid and Yuuri followed suit.
"Are you all right, ma'am?" Georgi asked as he offered her his hand, while Yuuri gathered her scattered groceries.

"I think so. Thank you..." Her voice trailed off as her gaze met Georgi's. Then she fell silent as if bewitched, her fair hand still clasped in his. She could not have been older than in her mid-twenties, with bouffant auburn hair and lush lashes upon her green eyes. Her crepe gown with its signature S-bend shape of the Belle Époque spoke of her middle-class status.

Yuuri sensed trouble the moment he saw how Georgi's eyes sparkled with more than geniality while looking back at her. He nudged his companion. "We mustn't tarry."

"I shan't keep you any longer. Thank you once again for the hel—ouch!" She tried to rise to her feet, but wobbled. She would have fallen again had Georgi not caught her.

Against Yuuri's better judgment, Georgi insisted on escorting her home, with Yuuri carrying her groceries as well as his own tool bag behind them. She told Georgi where to turn each time they arrived at the edge of a road, and they conversed cordially along the way.

"Do I have the honour of learning the names of my saviours?"

"I'm Takeshi and he's Andrei," Yuuri mentioned the names he and Georgi had agreed upon for today's mission. "And what is yours, miss?"

"I'm Myra. Myra Buslingthorpe."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Ms. Buslingthorpe," Georgi replied.

"Oh please, call me Myra. I can't bear to be so formal after what you two have done for me," she said, but her gaze clearly lingered on Georgi.

Yuuri shivered at the strong gust of wind blowing his nape. "Myra is an exceptionally pretty name, but Ms. Buslingthorpe comes easier to locksmiths."

"Oh, you're locksmiths. Splendid! I have quite a few locks that lost their keys in my house. Would you mend them?"

_Dang! That backfired_, Yuuri thought.

With more pleasantries exchanged along the way, it did not take long for them to arrive at her dwelling. The property was rather small, one of three neat semi-detached houses in Green Lane, a quiet crescent with rotting wooden fences. Composed of lime, sand and stone, its pebbledash walls stood proud as if guarding the frail stained glass embellishment on the carved wooden-paneled Masonic door.

Inside, the house was decorated with polished wood flooring and floral wallpapers. New simulated antiques decorated the entryway, and a military medal was hung on the drawing room's wall, above the book-laden mantelpiece. The warmth exuded by the fireplace comforted them from the harsh wintry weather. Georgi plopped Ms. Buslingthorpe on a sofa across from where Yuuri was standing. A mild smell of the herbs came in through the open window leading to a charming little garden.

She offered, "Tea? Or would you prefer something stronger?"

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, but we have a prior engagement with another client at lunch. It's best if we wrap things up as quickly as possible here," Yuuri said.
"Very well. The ones that need to be opened are my jewellery boxes. They're in the bottom drawer of my dressing table in my room. Alas, it pains me to take even a single step … I'm afraid I can't bring them here."

Yuuri bit his lip. There did not seem to be any other servant in Ms. Buslingthorpe's house other than the one opening the door for them earlier, whom her mistress then sent to fetch some ice from the nearest shop. Refrigeration was a rarity for those who did not engage themselves commercially.

"Well, since it wouldn't be prudent for us to enter your room while you're here—"

"Actually, I was thinking if you or your partner would be so kind as to take me there, I could point out the right boxes," she interrupted.

"Of course, ma'am," Georgi complied.

"Or we can always return another day, ma'am," Yuuri quickly appended.

"No, we're leaving the town soon," Georgi corrected Yuuri. "There's no better time than today."

"I doubt this is appropriate," Yuuri whispered as Georgi made his way to her. More often than not, the coexistence of an unchaperoned woman and men who were not of blood relation in a bedchamber would lead to a scandal. Furthermore, there was also the military medal hung in the drawing room—she had to be the wife or close relative of a veteran soldier. Although this might not necessarily affect his mission, a wave of consternation engulfed Yuuri.

Georgi snorted. "What harm can there be in helping an injured woman?"

"Harm can come dressed up in all manners of kindness. The way she looked at you—"

"Is everything all right, gentlemen?"

Yuuri felt he ought to try harder in warning Georgi, and yet his heart failed him. He could do nothing more than watch helplessly as his companion answered the woman, "Absolutely, ma'am. Shall we?"

Georgi had to ask Yuuri to slow down because it took less than three seconds for Yuuri to open the first of the problematic boxes. "You're pretending to be a locksmith's apprentice, not a cracksman, remember?"

"But shouldn't we remove ourselves from her bedroom as soon as possible?" Yuuri kept his volume low so that Ms. Buslingthorpe would not hear their discussion. Both the dressing table and the settee upon which she rested were located in the boudoir connected to her bedroom.

Georgi was about to reply, but Ms. Buslingthorpe said, "There's another one I'd like you to take a look at."

As soon as Georgi approached her, she pointed at the drawer underneath the low table next to her settee. "It's right over here."

Thus, Georgi bent low, very close to the where she was reclining, when a thunderous roar assaulted their ears. "Two men in my wife's bedroom?! By the grace of God, Myra, tell me what happened…"

Turning around, Yuuri found a man in his mid-thirties, accompanied by a woman nearly twice his age, storming into the room of which door he had left open for the sake of propriety. Should this man be the owner of the military medal, his corpulent body and chubby fingers certainly did not
display any remnants of his disciplined life as a soldier. On the contrary, the woman was lean enough to be classified as "underfed," despite the fact that she wore a lacy tea gown that could only belong to a lady of the manor. In Yuuri’s surprise, he dropped the jewelry box and it snapped ajar, revealing the coruscant gems inside.

"Oh, Emmett, you're home … this is…" she hesitated before exculpating herself. "These men … they tried to … oh, it's awful!" She burst into tears, and the aged woman rushed to comfort her.

"How preposterous!" He opened the nearest window and stuck his head out, face red with wrath. "Constable, help! Two men are trying to rob my house and dishonour my wife!"

"We've committed no such atrocities!" Distancing himself from the jewelry box, Yuuri yelled back to match Mr. Buslingthorpe's volume. "I must ask you, sir, to refrain from denigrating us any further."

"Now, let us dispense with pleasantries. My wife here is a woman of some standing. Are you asking my mother and I to believe that she made improper advances on you?" Mr. Buslingthorpe barked back. His tone was distrustful, but at least he no longer squallled for all the street to hear.

Georgi stated without raising his voice, "Not at all. I merely wish to inform you, sir, of what had transpired. 'Tis Mrs. Buslingthorpe's request for our service pertaining to her dysfunctional locks that has brought us hither after the mishap of her sprain chanced upon us."

Mr. Buslingthorpe's thin lips twitched contemptuously before he collected himself and asked his wife, "Is this true, Myra?"

She nodded, still weeping.

"You two are locksmiths?" Mr. Buslingthorpe arched his bushy brow, indignation receding from his timbre.

"It's a family business." Georgi plastered a polite smile on his face.

The drastic change in Mr. Buslingthorpe's attitude brought Yuuri to his senses. How calm Georgi had been in handling the accusations, while he himself had panicked and raised his voice.

"Family, eh?" The blue eyes under Mr. Buslingthorpe's bushy eyebrows peered at Georgi and Yuuri's differing facial features.

"He's my brother-in-law," Yuuri affirmed. "And sir, if it pleases you, count the jewelry in that box before we take our leave."

The knocks on the door and a baritone voice stating that a police constable was now present interrupted their exchange.

As if spotting dirt on his polished furniture, Mr. Buslingthorpe eyed them and asked with distaste, "How much does my wife owe you for your service?"

###

"I still can't believe we managed to pull that off." Yuuri sighed once they had taken shelter from the heavy rain at a nearby pub. He almost complained about Myra Buslingthorpe's scheme, but held his tongue in consideration for his companion's feelings. Georgi ordered three shots of vodka without further ado, while Yuuri opted for the local specialty: cider.
"She's a sly vixen, that Myra Buslingthorpe," Georgi muttered into his glass. "She punctuated her words with sobs so she wouldn't reveal too much. Neither she nor we had any substantial evidence to back up our claims. Being the least controversial is the safest way to go with the flow." He sipped his vodka before continuing, "She would have made a good spy—I mistook her for one."

"Wait, you mean the reason you agreed to take her home in the first place is because you assumed her to be a spy related to our mission?" Yuuri asked incredulously.

"Her earrings' design bore the insignia of the House of Tittensor—Viscount Evrawg's family heraldry. I couldn't be sure without waiting for what she had to say to us once we were in private. When she lured us to her room, I was still considering the possibility that she might have kept an encrypted message or any other clues in there. I can tell when someone's faking an injury, and hers was genuine."

So, the possibilities of identifying the spy are endless, from the cravat of a public officer to the embroidered kerchief of an old woman? "Oh, Georgi, I owe you an apology. I misjudged you to be romantically interested in her."

Georgi shook his head. "Your assumption is not unfounded. It'd be a lie if I told you I didn't find her attractive. I did wallow in the joy of being desired. For a moment, I dared to dream she'd invite me to bed as a one-time affair so that I could momentarily forget about Anya."

"Y-You were not seeking a more … lasting … relationship with Mrs. Buslingthorpe?"

"How could I? She wore a wedding ring when I helped her to stand, but covered her ring finger with her other hand during the entire itinerary home. She was probably seeking another man's attention so that her husband would turn to her once more."

"What makes you draw that conclusion?"

"Wives seek their husbands' affection. And yet, it seemed that he'd been too busy with his writing to shower her with any attention."

Yuuri quirked an eyebrow. "How did you come to know that Mr. Buslingthorpe was into writing?"

"When that man came in, didn't you see the ink blots on his right hand? He also adapted a slightly hunched posture, which proved that he bent over a desk on a regular basis. Not to mention he'd been too lightly dressed to venture outside and the fact that there were two books written by E. Buslingthorpe on the drawing room's mantelpiece. There were at least thirty books on that mantelpiece, and yet Georgi spotted Mr. Buslingthorpe's name when he seemed to be gawking at Mrs. Buslingthorpe instead? As Yuuri listened, he realized how much he still had to learn when it came to paying attention to the finer details. Then it occurred to him what Georgi must have felt about his crushed prospect of romance. "Georgi, no man's heart aches forever. I promise you."

"You're kind, Yuuri, so unlike Victor. Even though you have the potential for Victor's skills, you have none of his arrogance."

"Victor is a kind soul … although there are times at which he teases."

"That's easy for you to say. You didn't live in Victor's shadows for years."

"Victor feels that as a senior member of the troupe, he ought to be a role model for others, so he puts on a mask of vanity and false confidence. He was a lonely soul offstage."
"Was?" Georgi's eyes squinted.

"That is, uh, until … before I came." Yuuri fisted a portion of his trousers as heat crept up his cheeks.

Georgi smiled. "Victor is indeed a blessed man to have you."

Not knowing how to hide his embarrassment, Yuuri dipped his head and stared at his glass. That was when he heard the conversation from the men sitting at the table behind his and Georgi's. One of them seemed to be bragging about his new girlfriend.

"Wait 'til she gives you a bagpipe," the man in beige shirt responded, and his companions convulsed with laughter.

Yuuri asked Georgi sotto voce, "Is exchanging musical instruments the customary way of courtship here?"

Georgi's face contorted with mirth, but he restrained himself. He answered in an equally low voice, "No; bagpipe is a euphemism for oral sex."

Yuuri did not know which one was redder: the coaster beneath his glass or his own cheeks.

A cold draft of wind assailed the pub as the front door flew open to reveal a newcomer. His thick-set body was hard with muscle and his face textured with scars that spoke of frequent brawls, although the dust staining his coat and the mud caking his boots said that his travels had been long and hard. His skin had tanned and peeled and tanned again repeatedly until it gave the impression of roughly tanned leather.

"Long day, my chap?" one of the sitting customers greeted him when he placed his order of bitter ale.

"It's rough ter land yerself a job nowadays," he grumbled.

Another man sympathized with him. "It's a tough world out there, mate."

"Damn military dogs just hafta make things more difficult! Why put a whole bloody platoon ter babysit a new cargo? Don't those imbeciles have better things ter do? They shooed me and the boys away from the docks since that blasted thing came through the port. Been three days and still ain't got no new job."

_Why do the higher-ups want to prevent anyone from approaching that cargo? Could it contain weaponry? A new type of explosives? Poisonous gas?_ Yuuri took another gulp of his cider.

A smirk on his countenance, Georgi exhorted, "Time to go, brother-in-law. We'd better not keep your beloved Victoria waiting."

Chapter End Notes

It's summer vacation, so chapter 21 will be updated on July 24.
Contrivances

Chapter Summary

It's all about masquerades and tricks.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to anjumstar, TheOrdinariest, EllaAwkward, Fate-of-Wishes & lucksthegame for beta reading this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

21

Contrivances

In the afternoon, the troupe members compared notes as to what they had observed that day. The combined three dining tables would look akin to a long conference desk, were it not for the grass underneath and the laundry lines on the far right. Still, the piping hot gammon and lentil soup provided some comfort from the wintry weather.

According to Emil, the local police had their hands full with serial murders. Corpses kept being washed ashore River Lohreinydd every few hours, and they all bore gunshot injuries. Rumor had it that in addition to their method of execution, all the victims shared one similarity: they had passed the part of the port where a new cargo had been docked.

*Could it be the same shipment as the one mentioned by the man in the pub earlier?* Yuuri thought as he unfolded the collar of his coat to cover his nape.

Hands clutching his cup, Emil carried on. "I took a closer look, but the soldiers didn't know about the contents of the cargo they were guarding. I'd say whatever is inside it must not only be illegal but also highly flammable. For one, the higher-ups were so afraid the truth would come to light that they went as far as executing nosy passers-by. For another, when a soldier tried to smoke, their corporal exploded with rage."

"You're alleging they smuggled explosives for the upcoming battles?" Celestino rubbed his chin.

Emil jutted his chin. "And whoever commissioned the sender cared more about their reputation than the lives of innocent bystanders."

Tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear, Sara affirmed, "The viscount and viscountess are going to celebrate their twenty-fourth anniversary next week on the Day of the Moon. According to the local farmers, the head cook ordered a substantial quantity of apples from them, but Viscount Evrawg changed his mind about the food to be served at his upcoming party. Because of that, the farmers had no choice but to sell the apples they had already picked at half the regular marketplace price before the fruits rotted. That's why we bought them for our candied apple stand."
Those poor farmers! They must have been too afraid to oppose their lord's behest, but still... At the very least, the viscount should have paid half in advance. Doesn't he care about the starving farmers' families who spent their capitals to grow the apples he ordered? Yuuri bit his lip to prevent himself from sighing.

Mila added, "Now the candied apples are taken care of. Who'll attend to the stand?"

"I'll do it." Carla, one of the seamstresses, raised her hand. She always volunteered for any activity that invoked interactions with the younglings because medical reasons prevented her from having a child of her own.

"Much appreciated." Yakov leaned back in his chair. "Make sure you put up the sign for 'Toffee Apples' instead—just as the locals call them."

Michele rubbed the back of his neck. "As I careened around the town, disguised as a beggar, I saw that the viscount looked down at the beggars disdainfully like we were filth, but stopping his brougham to feed starving stray mongrels on the alleyways."

As Michele had needed extra time to cleanse himself from the soot he had applied on himself during his masquerade, he had been the last one to arrive at the dining table for their discussion. Yuuri had mistaken him as a poor and hungry old man who had come to beg for scraps when the former as well as Georgi had arrived at the camp some forty minutes prior. Yuuri had intended to give the beggar some food, but as soon as the beggar turned around, Yuuri had shrieked, "Michele?!" and elicited guffaws from both Michele and Georgi.

On the next turn, Chris reported, "Viscount Evrawg and Viscountess Dwysil have five daughters. Their eldest is married to the Earl of Lisdruannog and they live in the far north. The second and third daughters live at the king's court. One is rumored to be one of the king's mistresses and the other has become a lady's companion to the crown princess. So, only the two youngest ones live with the viscount and viscountess in the manor: the nineteen-year-old Enrhydreg and soon-to-be fourteen-year-old Gwlithen."

"How did you acquire all those details?" Yuuri blurted as soon as Chris recollected that the viscountess had an affinity for fictional works about vampires. Although none of his colleagues shot him a vexed look, he realized that his action disturbed the meeting when time was limited. "Oops, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. Please continue."

A smile graced Chris' countenance. "With a little persuasion, the lady's maid gladly talked."

Yuuri wondered what so-called "persuasion" truly had encompassed. If it involved seduction, would Masumi approve of it? Or does Masumi also use seduction as a tool? What would Victor do if he were in Chris' shoes, now that he has vowed never to seduce a single soul apart from mine?

However, Chris' smile soon melded into a frown. "One thing bothers me, though. While I kept an eye on the viscount's family, there was a man aiming for the same target as mine. He's about an inch taller than me, with medium build. He has a split chin and slanted eyes on his square face. His brown hair is cropped in a military style."

"Keep an eye on that man. If he turns out to be one of the spies employed to protect the viscount's secret, you have my permission to kill." Yakov steepled his fingers.

Otabek affirmed that the viscount had left his manor at approximately three in the afternoon to visit the post office. The post office attendant had confirmed upon inquiry that this routine was repeated every day with rare exception, even though the postman came to deliver and collect post at his
manor every morning.

J.J. recounted, "When I pretended to seek employment in the viscount's manor, there were rumors among the household staff. One of them involved a missing footman. The butler told them that said footman had submitted his resignation, but nobody saw him leaving. I think this is the spy we're supposed to rescue. The viscount must have discovered him in action and hidden him somewhere in the manor."

Although Yuuri wanted to ask, how can you tell that the spy hasn't already been killed? he thought it best not to interrupt J.J., as he had done with Chris. By a stroke of fortune, the younger Yuri satisfied Yuuri's curiosity by voicing the query.

"That's where we come to the second rumor." A complacent grin graced J.J.’s mouth, for Isabella's gaze was transfixed upon him. "There's a certain part of the house wherein the maids are forbidden to loiter around. In fact, they're permitted to do the necessary cleaning only in the presence of the head housemaid, even though the room seems to host nothing of value—just standard furniture with neither jewelry nor a safe."

Yuri arched a brow. "Are you saying that place holds the entrance to a secret passageway or room? Couldn't the burnt remains of the spy's corpse be hidden in that room?"

J.J.’s grin grew even wider. "That leads us to the third rumor. The viscount's family motto—well, I should say the unofficial one, for the official one, which is carved above the staircases, read 'aut illic, aut nullibi,' which means 'either there or nowhere'—"

"Get to the point!" Yuri snarled and stomped his foot at the same time.

Although the twitch on J.J.’s face overtly indicated his displeasure with the obnoxious teenager's interruption, he resumed his explanation. "As I was saying, the family's covert motto is nemo vos impune lacescit or 'no one wrongs us without punishment.' That family would exact vengeance at all cost, and the spy is their only clue to learn his sender's identity. I wouldn't be surprised if the spy's mouth is forcibly being held open to prevent him from biting down the suicide pill stored in his fake tooth, in addition to other body restraints."

Yuuri swallowed. The gruesome image of a bleeding man—blindfolded, gagged, and tied up to a medieval torture device—manifested itself in his mind. How could J.J. talk about such a prospect as lightly as talking about the weather with no one aghast? Although Yuuri supposed this was a commonplace for spies, he couldn't help but shudder at the thought of how he would feel if Victor were to be the one in a similar mortal peril. He stole a glance at the man sitting next to him, who was gnawing on a biscuit without a care in the world.

Yuri huffed. "Lucky for you; you didn't have to follow a couple of shopping hags around. Anyway, the viscount's two daughters spent hours selecting a gift for their parents' anniversary. Their mother adores blood-red. Their father prefers black."

One of the seamstresses opened her notebook and told Yuri, "You must tell us in greater detail about their preferences. We'll adjust the costumes to win their favor when we perform at their manor."

"And the stage decorations, too," one of the stagehands added.

"Before we move onto the discussion of the stage performance," Yakov interposed, "do you have anything to report, Victor?"
"Despite not being a gardener, the viscount's gamekeeper took painstaking care of one particular plant in his master's property: *jimsonweed*. And in addition to the pheasants and hares, he carried a small pouch to the manor." Victor answered in-between his munches.

Celestino squinted. "Hmm, the devil's trumpet. While it can be used for analgesic, anesthetic, or other curative property, when there's a spy to be tortured, wouldn't it make more sense if the viscount has been using the *Datura stramonium*..."

"...as a hallucinogen and truth-drug during torture?" Victor completed Celestino's deduction, his words would have sounded impressive had it not been for his relaxed timbre and the crumbs speckled around his mouth.

###

After the troupe agreed on the show's choreography and sequence, the seamstresses and stagehands set to work while the performers began their practices. For this reason, Victor bade Yuuri to bring Makkachin on a ten-minute leisurely stroll while he prepared the magical apparatuses for Yuuri's lesson.

The table that usually laid folded in Victor's oaken trunk was standing erect upon Yuuri's return to their shared tent. It was laden with a set of crayons, a stack of paper cups, five tubular objects of unknown function, a knife, a drinking straw, a roll of yarn, and a piece of rope. Standing behind the table, Victor exhorted, "Let's start with one of the most basic tricks. You need to build an awareness of the varieties of tricks out there even though we won't be using parlor tricks in the upcoming show."

Victor lifted the rope, which turned out to be about two feet long. He folded the rope in two in order to make a loop in the middle, and then cut through its center with the knife. After returning the knife to the table, he twisted the cut ends of the halved ropes with his free hand, and in an instant, the rope had been restored whole.

"You know how it's done, don't you, Yuuri?"

It was too easy. "You didn't cut the rope," Yuuri hypothesized. "You concealed a shorter piece of rope in your hand before the trick commenced. This is the one that you actually gathered into a loop and cut in the middle. You raised it above your fingertips, while the long rope was beneath it, covered by your fist and out of the knife's way. The twisting of the short sliced pieces was just a diversion for hiding the proof."

"Very good." Victor smiled and held out his hand. Two pieces of rope, no more than three inches each, lay in his palm.

"Next is a variation of the same trick." Victor unrolled the yarn and cut about two feet of it. Having picked up the straw, he threaded the yarn through one end of the straw until it resurfaced on the other end. He bent the straw in the middle and, after severing it with the knife, he proceeded to stack the two pieces in one hand. When his other hand pulled the supposedly halved yarn, it came out as one piece instead.

"Can you tell me the similarities and differences between the previous trick and this one?"

"Well, since you showed me your palms while cutting the yarn earlier, you weren't hiding any replacement in them—that's the first difference. In this manner, you prove that the yarn hasn't been tampered with, unlike the rope. So, the trick must lie in the straw." Yuuri bent and picked up the two halves of the straw.
"Here are the proofs." Yuuri pointed out at the vertical slit on each straw piece. "When you cut the straw, you didn't slice the yarn together with it. You must've slit the straw lengthwise before the trick began, and then tugged both of the yarn's ends until its middle part went down through that opening as you reached for the knife. Your hand covered the yarn that was safe and sound below the blade, similar to what you did earlier with the rope. Since the yarn is still fed through the two remaining ends of the straw, it creates the illusion of two separate pieces hanging from inside. You deliberately held the straws partially stacked without letting the middle part of the string show before you slid it out as one uncut object. As for the straw pieces, you let them fall to the ground so that they can't be examined."

Victor's lips curved upward. "I have nothing to correct."

Next, Victor took a handful of crayons and placed both hands behind his back before spinning around until he faced away from Yuuri. "This trick is one of the simplest mental telepathy dupes that even a child can accomplish. Pick one of the crayons, Yuuri, and then put it in my empty hand."

Yuuri made sure not to choose his favorite color. Afterward, Victor spun around again until he faced Yuuri with his hands still behind his back. When he brought his hands to the front, all the crayons had already been gathered in one hand. "To build anticipation, you'd need to ask your audience to imagine the crayon and clear their minds of other thoughts while depositing their chosen crayon in your empty hand. Also, it's favorable to announce the right answer using the elimination method so you appear striving, but since we're short of time, I'll just say you picked this one."

Singling out an orange crayon from the rest, Victor dared with a playful tone and a dazzling smile upon his countenance, "Surely, you can enlighten me how I identified the crayon of your choosing even after mixing it with the others?"

Yuuri stepped forward and held open Victor's hand. An orange streak ran across his thumb. "There. You used the crayon to colorize your skin. When you moved your hand to pick the crayon from your other hand, you took a peek of the color it left behind and matched it with the right crayon."

"Excellent. Now, the next trick is the more dangerous version of the mind reading dupe." Victor separated five unknown tubular objects from the rest of the bric-a-brac cluttering the table. At a glance, they appeared to be snow-globe bases; however, on a closer inspection, Yuuri discerned that a slit occupied the center of each base, whereupon Victor lodged the knife with its blade facing up into one of them. Then he unstacked five equally identical paper cups of matching diameter. "Yuuri, I'd like you to cover these five bases with the cups and mix up their placements."

"You're going to point out under which cup the knife is hidden?" Yuuri guessed as he complied.

"Uh-huh," Victor confirmed and turned his back.

"Ready," Yuuri announced as he retracted his hands. The five of circular bases now appeared to be wearing hats of upside-down paper cups.

Eliminating one at a time, Victor crushed the paper cups bare-handedly until only the last cup remained. Yuuri could not help but wince each time his mentor paused for a dramatic effect during the process. He had assumed that Victor would merely uncover the right cup rather than exposing his hand to the risk of a pointy blade. Still, Yuuri waited until Victor had removed the last cup—uncrushed—and revealed the knife beneath it, before shaking his head and said, "I don't like this one."
"You can't figure out how it's done? That's rare," Victor teased, his tone laced with curiosity rather than disappointment.

Yuuri shook his head. "You probably marked the knife-holding base beforehand to make sure you wouldn't hit it."

"Guilty as charged." A wide grin across his face, Victor held out the base with the knife for Yuuri to inspect. It had a minuscule dent.

Yuuri ignored it. "I just … I can't have a peace of mind when you do this trick even though it wouldn't bother me if some stranger were to do it. Remember when Maximilian performed an arm slashing trick with his carving knife? I doubt I'd be happy to see that long blade pretending to slice your forearm."

"In other words, you can't bear the possibility of seeing me in pain, even though it's just a pretense?" Victor leaped toward Yuuri, his eyes sparkling with joy. "Aww, Yuuri~"

Yuuri twiddled his thumbs. "No one would love to see their dearest suffer." Nevertheless, he allowed himself to indulge in Victor's comforting embrace and inhale his lover's scent for a minute before stating in the firmest tone he could muster, "We should practice some more for tomorrow evening's show."

Although the disappointment in Victor's eyes was obvious, he released Yuuri. "As to be expected from my number one apprentice!"

"Your one and only apprentice," Yuuri corrected him. "Though I think it may be better if you start adding to the number of your apprentices."

Victor blinked. "Why?"

"Your performance in Gontreda is almost like a one-man show. Georgi did close the coffin and push the gurney, but you're the one who did all the escape-from-death acts. While it is a remarkable feat in itself, it also shows how … reluctant you are to be dependent of others. There's no need to shoulder the burden of being the world's greatest ice magician alone. The other troupe members have long become your comrades without you realizing it."

Victor fell into a contemplative silence with a forlorn look in his eyes. Fame had undoubtedly distanced sincerity from him. In fact, based on his account on the types of girls who thirsted for his affection, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to assume that he had constantly been surrounded by sycophants and those who'd simply use him for their personal gain.

Yuuri approached Victor. "I used to have no friends my age. The people in my hometown considered men who were engaged in skating to be too effeminate and, in Kouki's history, such a disposition was often associated with theater and uh, prostitution. However, I was blessed with a supportive family. My parents' eyes held a longing glint whenever their friends talked about how their sons got married and took over their family businesses, but not once did they pressure me to create my own family." He stroked his lover's hair. "Victor, both our families have perished, but I believe there's a reason God has brought us together. We're here for each other now. And the other troupe members, too. We're all here to become one big family."

Victor's eyes found Yuuri's in an affectionate gaze and he murmured, "You never cease to surprise me, the brightest star in my sky."

A smile tugged at Victor's lips before they landed on Yuuri's.
To Yuuri's relief, no one mentioned that both his and Victor's lips were swollen by the time they had joined the others for skating practice. Enthusiastic cheers corresponded to Victor's announcement for the new choreography when he assured them that it would not affect the stage decoration and costume.

"Based on the tricks you've just explained, I think we can master the incorporation of the additional magic practice to our skating in a timely fashion." Phichit beamed. "None of them are overly complicated to achieve, while they're sure to amaze the audience."

As the performers and stagehands proceeded to help Victor taking out the apparatuses, Mila asked, "Why the sudden change, though? You've never asked us to be deeply involved in your performance before."

"Oh, I think we know why." Chris cast Yuuri a meaningful glance punctuated by a wink.

Yuuri stayed behind after everyone had finished practice that night, since the success rate of his quadruple salchow was too low for his comfort. Victor had told him that it would be all right if he performed it as a triple instead, but Yuuri would not be able to forgive himself should he fail.

Still, he failed.

"Don't pull your left shoulder back as that leg comes around! You'll end up losing most of the power in your jump." A voice surprised Yuuri.

He spun around, only to find a teenage boy, arms akimbo, near the rink. "Yurio, you returned here … just to see how I fare?"

"Don't be absurd! I just needed to get my gloves." Yurio turned his back and started walk away, both hands in his pockets.

"Thanks for the tip," Yuuri chirped.

"Consider it as payment for finding my cat."

The reply came as a grumble, but it brought a smile to Yuuri's lips nonetheless. One his next attempt, he concentrated on the balance between his upper and lower body. Yuri had been correct: Yuuri had been too focused on his legs that he'd neglected the position of his shoulders.

The stentorian claps from the auditorium when Yuuri performed the jump the next evening proved how helpful Yuri's advice had been. Yuuri's stage fright did not ruin his quadruple salchow as he skated together with the entire cast except Victor in a fanfare preceding the world's best ice magician's appearance.

Beneath the sentinels of stars, the circus marquee stood. With Victor's "advertisement" at Maximilian's show the other day, not even the cats-and-dogs rain deterred enthusiastic circusgoers from queuing in front of the ticket booths. The mobile mini tents of umbrellas lining up in processions before entering the marquee looked like little goslings huddling up to the mother goose.

The skaters pretended to be townspeople conducting business on an ordinary day. Then Celestine's voice narrated, "The town is lively with the hustle and bustle of its denizens. Despite this peaceful façade, the town is under the control of a dreadful gang known as the Shark Wings. They monopolize trades and, with such a strong financial background, they can do anything as they
please. Anyone who opposes them will face execution. Yet, hidden behind the soot-covered masonry stands one vigilante."

The jocund music took a more mystical turn. The skaters retired behind the stage. In their place, the backdrop of a brick exterior wall with a hollow entryway accessible via low stairs was presented in the middle of a circular dais. Then, as the dais rotated, the lights dimmed except for a single spotlight in the middle. On the other side of the wall, plastered with pastel-colored wallpaper to imitate the interior of a building, Victor made his appearance, positioning himself in front of the bottom step with his back facing the audience.

"Can a single man oppose an entire evil organization? Who is he to have such audacity?"

Victor made a few twirling gestures with his hands and, gradually, he began to levitate.

"He's afloat!" a little boy in the first row pointed out loudly enough to be heard backstage.

From behind the stage curtain, Yuuri saw Isabella beaming with pride as her work played a significant part in the success of Victor's act. A well-concealed vertical slit on Victor's trousers allowed his right crus to come out. His right shoe had also been cut to allow his foot to slip out undetected. From the audience's point of view, he appeared to hover above the floor. However, from the sides and backstage, onlookers could see that Victor merely stepped out of his rigged costume and rested his right foot onto the first step. To prevent his right shoe from dangling too far away, the inside edges of its heels were attached with Velcro.

"He's a magician!" Celestino announced. "Neither wires nor hydraulic lifts help him off the floor; just extreme concentration and telekinetic power!"

The audience booed, and a teenage boy even squalled, "Lies!"

Celestino continued in an upbeat tone, "But of course you shouldn't just take my word for it. Ladies and gentlemen, behold the proof!"

The dais rotated once more. This time, Victor stepped through the entryway so that he remained in the audience's view along with the restored brick wall. In lieu of keeping his back at them, he displayed the signature smile that elicited squeals from several girls in the audience. Slowly, he raised his arms, and his body rose along with them. Inch by inch, his entire being left the floor.

A few stagehands entered, two from each side of the stage, carrying a rectangular steel frame larger than the one typically used for holding full body mirrors. To prove that no part of Victor's body was supported by a string, they wheeled the metal around the floating magician.

"There really is no string… Good Lord, that bloke defies gravity!" a man exclaimed amid the mishmash of amazement and disbelief in the audience.

Behind the stage curtain, a stagehand drove forward a modified tractor to push the mechanical arm through the slit flexible rubber panel hidden in the wall directly behind the magician. This extended metal arm was equipped with a magnetic plate, which would correspond to the one strapped to the small of Victor's back and concealed by his flamboyant costume. With Victor's body blocking the view, the audience took no notice of the magnetic plate attachment by way of electromagnetism, which afforded them the view of a "floating" magician the moment the tractor operator elevated the mechanical arm.

A small section of the frame was made of foam rubber painted to assume the appearance of metal.
It bent and snapped back into place once the extended mechanical arm had passed through the gliding frame, thus dismissing the possibility of the supporting steel rod from the audience's minds. As the tractor operator lowered the mechanical arm, the audience saw Victor's gradual landing. The moment his shoes touched the dais floor, the auditorium erupted in a cacophony of applauses.

The audience's cheers faded into white noise when a flash lighting up the ceiling caught Yuuri's eye. He still had the remains of a victorious smile on his lips when a section of the theatrical fly system crashed down onto the stage. Amid the sparks from the four lamps on the fallen truss and the audience's screams, Yuuri's yell was just as pointless as any other, but in his memories it would never pale. With dread clawing him, the evening's pleasance fled him with the irrepressible influx of horror.

"VICTOR!"

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be updated on either August 7 or 9.

ETA: Chapter 22 won't be ready 'til indefinite time. I lost my motivation to write.

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