**Unexpected**

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**Unexpected**

by [AlexWSpark (orphan_account)](http://archiveofourown.org/u/AlexWSpark)

**Summary**

Banquet AU: In which one impulsive midnight decision leads Victor Nikiforov to Yuuri Katsuki and, of course, everything changes.
a.k.a Drunk!Yuuri has no chill
a.k.a Victor experiences #allthefeels

**Notes**

Unexpected - Part 1 of Banquet/Post-Banquet AU

Hello! I wasn't kidding in the tags, I really did write this when I should've been sleeping. I have a lot of banquet and Victuuri feelings and I needed to get them out so...here we are. Hope you enjoy! Feel free to leave your comments, I welcome feedback :)

[Find me on Tumblr](http://archiveofourown.org/u/AlexWSpark)
Like There's No Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

I like to picture Victor Nikiforov getting his suits custom made in the same way John Wick does. Except, instead of planning mass murder, he's planning mass swooning.

Welcome to Chapter 1 of Unexpected! The rating may eventually go up, but first...#thefeels

Sochi Grand Prix Banquet

Victor Nikiforov was bored. The banquet started off as it usually did, with more exaggerated pomp and circumstance than Victor cared to indulge in tonight. Sure, he was the star of the evening, what with winning yet another gold medal. He was also a vision in his suit, his well-groomed appearance and jeweled blue eyes coveting the gazes of many men and women in the room. But he felt constrained by the fabric tonight, and being gaped at like that was something he was beginning to marginally tolerate. Yakov would have his head otherwise and he didn't have the energy to withstand a late-night lecture on etiquette.

He spent much of his time looking for a way out of the hall, wishing he had Makka with him to keep him company. The poodle's presence was one of the few things that kept him in good spirits. Unfortunately, people kept coming over, asking questions, making unnecessary small talk, acting like they were his friends when really, Victor could care less about having them near him. Not today. Nonetheless, he put up his facade, played the part and then resumed planning his escape.

"Are these events really necessary?" his fellow Russian Yuri Plisetsky yawned next to him. Victor shrugged and sipped on his drink; he itched to knock the damn thing back if only to numb himself. He'd been feeling out of sorts since the press conference, and had been unable to shake the inexplicable sensation all evening.

"How soon are you starting practice?"

Victor took yet another sip at that question, "Sometime next week. I have a couple things to take care of in Sochi before I head back to St. Petersburg."

Yuri nodded, "I'll see you then. I think sneaking a drink is in order if I'm going to sur...vive...what in the fuck?"

Victor followed the younger skater's disgusted leer and found himself staring at one Yuuri Katsuki who was on the floor displaying some rather stunning dance moves given that he was clearly under the influence of several (hundred?) flutes of champagne. Victor's expression wasn't one of disgust though. His eyes twinkled suddenly at the sight before him.

"Well here's something you don't see at every banquet," he said animatedly. Yuri narrowed his eyebrows.

"For someone who placed last, he seems rather happy to further embarrass himself, don't you think?"
Victor said nothing but recognized the fierce anger lurking within him that immediately flickered at Yuri's words. Truthfully, he had watched Yuuri's performance and despite fucking up much of the technical aspects of his routines, his footwork had been incredible. It felt like he was watching someone create music with their body. He had felt the same unexplainable anger then. Why didn't the passion in Yuuri's movements ever reach his eyes?

'It has certainly reached them now.' Victor found himself grinning as Yuuri shed his tie and lifted his shirt from his pants, moving to more complex movements, including a headstand that was definitely going to leave him with a resounding headache in the morning. Victor's fellow competitor, Chris Giacometti joined the fray and Yuri, against protests as crude as he could muster at such a social gathering, found himself in an all-out dance off. The entire spectacle drew a not-so-approving crowd and Victor watched as multiple pictures and videos were enthusiastically shot. He took the opportunity to shoot his drink, not out of frustration anymore, but because the complete personality shift that Yuuri had undergone was beginning to turn him on.

Then, much like the dazzling effects of a lightning bolt, something extraordinary happened. Victor felt a hand take his own and pull him onto the dance floor. There were gasps and murmurs from the crowd, and Chris and Yuri cleared the way, sharing a shocked glance at this new, very unexpected development. Victor found himself dancing an odd combination of ballet and flamenco with a very drunk Japanese ice skater who, hours ago, had barely looked him in the eye.

The way he looked at him now, his smile as refreshing as a sunbeam, his eyes carefree and filled with laughter...the way he touched Victor, his hands nonchalant in its placement, drawing even more raised eyebrows from onlookers...the way he guided Victor along the floor, taking charge of their movements, his breath hot and wild on Victor's face and neck...it was thrilling!

Victor, for one of the few times in his life, wanted everyone to gape and followed Yuuri's lead, delighting in the crowd's confusion. He tipped his leg into the air, as Yuuri posed at the side of him, cradling Victor's cheek and steadying himself with a hand on Victor's thigh. Victor rested a supportive hand on the man's back, just in case. They dissolved into giggles and Victor felt more free in that moment than he had ever felt before. If Yuuri Katsuki laughing in that devil-may-care way was the last thing he heard in his life, Victor would stroll willingly into the afterlife.

He found himself wishing Yuuri wasn't so inebriated. He wouldn't remember a damn thing in the morning and this was something worth remembering. Victor never wanted it to end. They shared a final, contented grin as Yuuri dipped him, his lips mere inches from his own, before being parted as their coaches were called to deal with the situation. Victor reluctantly let Yuuri go, following a fuming Yakov out of the hall. Yuri still looked repulsed by the whole thing, personally offended that Yuuri had dared to watch in Victor's direction, much less touch him, but he thankfully kept his thoughts to himself. Victor wasn't in the mood. Photos from inside the banquet were not allowed on social, so there was no harm done to any of their reputations.

As he moved further from the beautiful storm of Yuuri Katsuki, he found his initial indifference returning. It felt like he was walking back into a prison of his own making. Victor, seeing what lay outside the wasteland of his conflicted emotions, glanced back at the hall.

'In vino veritas,' he thought.

Victor walked out of his hotel room, unable to sleep. He hadn't gotten much rest in the past few days, except the stolen hours right before he competed. Yakov hated when he did that, so he slept mostly to see the steam shoot out his coach's ear. Not surprisingly, he found Chris engaged in some lascivious activity outside his own room, his male companion struggling to get the door open.
Victor chuckled, "Still up are we?"

"You could join us," Chris winked at Victor, "we don't have to be rivals tonight."

"In a past life, maybe," Victor smiled and kept walking as the two men finally made it into Chris' hotel room.

Victor remembered the days he sought such temporary gratification. He'd been young, provocative, an instant charmer whose roguish good looks seduced the masses wordlessly. Even though he retained much of his flirtatious tendencies, those past moments were nothing more than empty pleasures now, something he had no desire to fill his life with anymore.

'I wouldn't mind filling it with more dancing,' he thought as he reached the elevator, 'I hope he's doing okay.'

He stepped into the lobby and made for the entrance, thinking a late night walk was just what he needed to clear his head. He usually imagined Makka at his side to help fill that lonely void. He slowed down as he approached the hotel's information desk, touching his cheek thoughtfully. He closed his eyes, imagined the hand that lay there at the banquet and then turned to the man at the desk.

"Goodnight Mr. Nikiforov and congratulations! How can I help you tonight?"

"I was hoping you could tell me what room Yuuri Katsuki is in? I have something to return to him." Victor included the white-lie as a backup. He was relieved when the CSR asked no further questions.

"That's no problem. All the Grand Prix guests seem to be up and about tonight," he typed in Yuuri's name, "He's in three-three-five. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, thank you. Have a good night."

Victor walked back to the elevator, unsure of what he was doing, or why he was doing it. But the feel of Yuuri's hands lingered on him, and as far as he was concerned, there was no harm in checking in on a fellow skater, especially a drunk one.

The logic, self-serving as it was, kept him balanced as he stepped out onto the third floor. For someone who had put himself on display like that, he really didn't like to be around people. All the other finalists were on the fifth floor. Victor didn't complain; he was quite happy there was no one around to witness his spontaneity. This wasn't something Victor had planned on doing, and he felt somewhat unguarded by the way his mind became completely one-track.

"Three-three-five," Victor said to himself, and with a deep breath knocked soundly on the door. There was a low crash, and an audible 'Fuck' from the other side of door. Victor smirked, but as the door opened, his expression morphed into something else altogether.

Yuuri stood in a tight pair of boxers, his hair disheveled, and eyes glazed. His body was lean, the muscles defined. He'd clearly taken a bath not too long ago, as droplets of water fell from his hair and rolled across his body. Victor rested a hand calmly on the wall, but his insides were going fucking insane. It made no sense. Victor didn't know the man and yet, he couldn't shake the sublime attraction that flared within him. If his knees buckled now...

"Victor...Nikiforov..." Yuuri drawled. Victor found his voice somewhere between the lust he abruptly felt, and the unknown territory he stood in.
"Hello Yuuri, I just wanted to check in on you. You're okay, right? You remember the banquet? You had a lot to-"

But Victor never finished because without warning, without stopping to realize he was half naked and still wet from the shower, without surveying the consequences of what he was about to do (though, how could he, he was still pretty drunk), Yuuri grabbed the front of Victor's shirt, pulled him in and kissed him like there was no tomorrow.
I think about Drunk!Yuuri the way I think about chocolate. Too often. Eros intensifies.

A couple of seconds of pure shock was washed over by the strongest carnal urge Victor had ever experienced. He'd been with many a person, men and women alike, but no one had ever kissed him like this. The desperation of it, the heat on his tongue, the thunderstorm in his moans, Victor felt something uncoil rapidly in his chest. The entire thing was ripe with emotion, filled with strange comfort and familiarity, as though they'd been doing it for years. Yuuri clung to his shirt, while his other hand traveled to the small of his back and pulled him in, erasing the space between them. Victor buried his hands in Yuuri's hair, drinking in the feel and taste of this impulsive man, fully prepared to snap, and did nothing to stop him when he pulled him into the room and shut the door with his foot.

The bathroom light cast a soft glow on their entangled forms. Victor was now slightly damp from Yuuri's still wet body, and a pressure that hadn't been aroused in a long time took up residence in his pants. He was losing control, willingly resigning himself to feel anything and everything he could, and Yuuri seemed content to take him further off the edge with his glorious mouth. Victor pressed himself against the younger skater, his hands fucking everywhere now. The unbridled rush, the shameless proximity, the touching, the moans, the champagne...

Wait. He tasted like champagne...oh shit.

Victor's awareness came rushing back and he reluctantly pulled his lips away from Yuuri's own, but still held him close, "We really need to keep you away from alcohol, don't we?" he joked. Yuuri smiled at him, showing no offense that they were no longer kissing. He seemed oddly oblivious, as though roaming in a dream. He held Victor's face affectionately and the Russian felt his insides ricochet at being stared at with such genuine warmth. It was all he could do to say fuck it and see where the night led. But he didn't want to take advantage of Yuuri, and as willing as the man seemed, it didn't feel right to impose on him like this.

He took Yuuri's hand and kissed it lightly, wanting to reassure him, "Let's get you to bed. You're going to have a hell of a hangover. How did you even manage to make it in and out of the shower alive?"

Yuuri still didn't speak and allowed Victor to steer him to the bed. He briefly thought to look for some extra clothes to put Yuuri in but he was already comfortably on his side and curled into a rather adorable, drunken ball. Victor tucked him in, brushing some water from his forehead. His hand was trembling, the kiss fresh on his lips.

"Victor..."

Victor looked at Yuuri's face; his eyes were already closed, "Yes Yuuri?"

"Why did you...look so unhappy..."

Victor's eyes widened, "W-what do you mean?"
But Yuuri didn't reply. Victor stood listening to his soft breaths, the unexpected question, from the mouth of the most unexpected person, replaying in his mind. When did Yuuri find the time to make that observation?

He shook his head and made to leave, but a hand reached out and grazed his own, "Am I...dreaming..."

Victor's smile was sad, in more ways than one, "I don't think it will matter in the morning."

"Okay...will you...stay..."

Victor hesitated, once again feeling like an intruder. But, he found himself unable to say no. He looked around the room and saw a well-sized armchair off to the side. He pulled it towards the bed, as close as he could without having to prop up his legs, and relaxed into it. Yuuri's hand found his thigh once more.

"You dance...like your heart...is on fire..."

Victor was floored. What was it with this man tonight? Victor held his hand, stroking gently, "It was Yuuri. It...it burned for you."

"Tell me...why..."

Victor paused. He could lie. Should he lie? Yuuri wouldn't know the difference. Victor weighed the options and, wanting to take advantage of this unanticipated outlet to voice his inner demons, decided to take a risk, "Your technique on the ice is beautiful, did you know that? You have the skill but you lack the confidence. I have the skill but I'm starting to lack the inspiration. Everything is just so fucking monotonous now Yuuri. I keep telling myself I'm stronger on my own. What if I'm wrong? I'm twenty seven years old and I have nothing real to hold on to. You showed your confidence tonight, and that kiss showed your eros. It filled me with hope. Maybe one day I'll feel that kind of freedom. Maybe one day you'll show it on the ice."

"You...inspire me...but I failed..."

"Failure doesn't define you Yuuri. What you do next will. Tell me, what will you do now?"

"I'll skate...with you..."

Victor held Yuuri's hand a little tighter, "I would love that."

"Be...my coach..." Yuuri squeezed Victor's thigh, not noticing the tears now falling onto his hand. Victor covered his face with his free hand. What was even this night? Was it some kind of test? Was it fate?

"I'm no coach Yuuri," he wiped his eyes, "They say I only think of myself after all."

"Mmm," Yuuri yawned and drifted into a peaceful sleep, a major accomplishment considering the state of his liver. Victor watched over him, a great depression settling in him. Even though he'd revealed his troubles, here was another moment he started wishing Yuuri would remember. He would never know of their kiss, or how deeply he had cut with his innocent speech. He wouldn't remember dancing with him, or touching him, or looking at him with those magnificent eyes that shone like starlight. It felt too cruel.

Victor kissed his hand again, and leaned against the armrest. 'Just another few minutes,' Victor thought, looking at his watch. It was almost two a.m.
It would be another hour before Victor found the will to leave Yuuri's room.

Yuuri's alarm rang out, the shrillness dragging him out of sleep and into immediate agony. His entire body ached, but his head was the worst of the pain.

'Way too fucking loud,' he thought while his hand searched awkwardly for his phone, eventually finding it lodged under his pillow. He squinted at the time - eight a.m. Yuuri groaned and rolled off the bed, bumping into an armchair that he couldn't remembering moving. He absently began returning it to the corner, wondering what had possessed him to sleep half-naked, only to see something glint from the corner of his eye.

"Hmm?" he stooped, ignoring his sore legs, and fished a well-crafted silver watch from under the chair. It was minimally designed but luxurious in its elements and heavier than any watch Yuuri owned. Before he could decipher how the expensive timepiece had ended up in his room, his headache triggered a thick haze of nausea. He dropped the watch and phone on the chair and sprinted to the bathroom.

'Oh fuck, how much did I drink?' Yuuri tried to remember anything from last night and found a giant gap between arriving at the banquet and currently regurgitating much of what he'd eaten in the last twenty four hours. Why the fuck did he listen to Celestino? He should've rescheduled his flight and left Sochi right after the finals.

What a fucking nightmare the past two days had been. Yuuri gripped the sink, his stomach churning. Hungover, disappointed, broken, and missing a large chunk of his memory from the night before. This was not the way to start the morning.

Victor could not fucking believe he had dropped his watch in Yuuri's room. It was the only explanation at this point. He cursed himself as he retraced his steps early that the morning, and inquired about it at the front desk with discretion. Nothing had shown up in the lost and found, and Victor had triple checked his room. He made a note to ask a staff member to check Yuuri's room later.

'Goddammit,' Victor fumed, 'What is with the past twenty-four hours? How much more ridiculous can it get?'

He stood in the lobby, under the guise of saying goodbye to Yuri but silently hoping a certain skater hadn't already left for the airport. He listened to the younger Russian detail his plans for practice next week. Victor nodded and offered random advice, mostly to calm his nerves after being so careless. He sent his thanks to the universe that he was wearing shades as Yuuri exited the elevator. His eyes lit up in a way that lay his feelings out on his sleeve.

Yuuri checked himself out, and then stood alone on the opposite side of the lobby, scrolling through his phone. His coach stood at the front desk sorting out his own business. He looked like hell, the dark lines, bloodshot eyes, and uncombed hair impossible to miss. Victor's heart was speeding up though. Did he remember anything? Did he find the watch? Was he deliberately not looking in his direction? How had things escalated so quickly?

'Would you look at me Yuuri, for fuck's sake!' he shouted inwardly.

He couldn't take it anymore. Victor excused himself from his current discussion and casually strolled towards Yuuri, drinking his coffee as he bridged the gap. 'Stay calm, you're just greeting a fellow competitor, this is not a big deal,' Victor thought.
"Excuse me," he said and Yuuri nearly dropped his phone. The man looked up at Victor, not with longing, not with laughter, not with starlight in his eyes. No, it was replaced with something blank and unreadable, as though Victor was a common stranger. Yuuri shoved his phone in his pocket, took his bag and walked out of the hotel without a word.

Victor watched him go. He'd been right in his assessment at least; Yuuri didn't remember a damn thing. He was still battling whether that was a good or bad thing. But even worse, he was back to fully ignoring him. It was the second time in too few hours that it had happened and it would be many months before he admitted how much that single moment had hurt.
What Will You Do Now?

Chapter Notes

Phichit = #friendgoals, #lifegoals, #lovegoals, #allthegoals okay.

*Three months later*

Yuuri surveyed his bare room. His belongings were already boxed, save for a few loose articles and trinkets which he planned to stick into his carry-on luggage. There were dozens of tiny holes across the walls of the room, a patchwork reminder of the collage of posters he and Phichit had created since they'd been sharing the apartment. He sighed at the sight, turning away as the memories inched too close for comfort.

He'd finished college, *finally*, having taken an extra year to get the task done while he pursued skating. As much as it made him happy to have accomplished something, he was now caught in a loop of worry about what his next move should be. Heading home to Hasetsu was something of a last resort. Yes, he loved his family, and he missed the comfort of his small castle town but, no matter which way he sliced it, he missed skating more. It wasn't easily noticeable, especially after his disaster of a performance at Sochi, but it lingered below the surface. Pulsing. Waiting.

Yuuri wished he knew what he had to give it so he could feel whole again.

After breaking ties with Celestino, Yuuri never went to rink during his former coach and Phichit's practice times. Phichit knew he opted for quieter times, when it was generally just him alone. Yuuri never told him what he did during those hours on the ice but it was Phichit, and some days Yuuri was convinced he was all-knowing. Phichit also kept all their conversations light, fun and filled with traditional Thai music. There was no mention of next season. As far Yuuri was concerned, the furthest he could ponder was graduation. Any more, and he would break, just like he'd done in Sochi.

"Is that everything Yuuri?" Phichit pulled him from his thoughts. Yuuri smiled at his best friend.

"I guess so. It's not like there was much to begin with," he joked.

Phichit nodded, giving the small space a once-over; his eyes landed on a stack of glossy, curled paper poking from under Yuuri's bed. He made to bend to pick them up but Yuuri shook his head.

"Leave those." Phichit recognized the strain in his voice, "It doesn't matter." The way Yuuri's eyes lingered on them screamed that yes, it did fucking matter. It would always matter. It was the reason he'd fought so hard to get to the Grand Prix finals in the first place.

Phichit immediately steered the conversation away from that particular brand of quicksand, "The shipping company should be here in an hour. C'mon, lets take a walk. Want to grab something to eat?"

Yuuri brightened just enough that Phichit could latch onto it and continue directing Yuuri towards more positive thoughts. He launched into a detailed synopsis of traditional Thai cuisine, and begged Yuuri to, again, explain what his favorite dish, katsudon, tasted like. By the time they'd sated their
hunger, and returned to the apartment, Phichit had, for the time being, cheered Yuuri up some. It had become more difficult to achieve it, but Phichit was unapologetic in making sure Yuuri spent as much time in a good mood before heading back to Japan.

Neither of them wanted to admit it, but things were going to get difficult for Yuuri. Like it or not, something had to give.

They stood in the airport, tucking away their emotions in silly jokes and evanescent small talk. When Phichit eventual said 'Fuck this' and crushed him in a hug, Yuuri's eyes were swimming with tears, "Don't be a stranger Yuuri. I mean it. Message and call me as often as you like because I'll be doing the same. I don't care about the time difference, okay?"

Yuuri returned the gesture, a rare show of emotion to a friend who'd stuck by him through all his unsociable moments, "I will. I'm really sorry I have to leave like this." He mind wandered to the way Celestino had looked at him, his words of understanding and encouragement not meeting his eyes during their last conversation. Yuuri was used to that, used to being looked at with pity. He had an archive of such expressions for times he needed it least, like that godforsaken bathroom he'd found himself sitting in after his free skate in Sochi.

"You don't owe anyone an explanation, least of all me," he said firmly, and there was nothing but fierce resolve in his voice, "There's still time to make a decision, and whatever you choose, you know I'll support you."

Yuuri was nodding, fighting the tears; when he looked up, Phichit saw all the helplessness he'd been bottling for weeks spill over, "I-I don't know what to do Phichit. How do I come back from this? What should I do?"

Phichit pulled him into another protective hug, and rubbed small, calming circles into his back, "I know how much you love skating Yuuri. It's not something you can hide. I also know how much Sochi took out of you. It doesn't have to be the end. It was just one moment. It doesn't define you Yuuri."

Failure doesn't define you Yuuri. What you do next will. Tell me, what will you do now...

The voice was low and fleeting in the back of his mind. Somehow, it cleared his vision and breathing just enough that he heaved his way back from a mild breakdown. The voice was accented, soft and reassuring. It wasn't the first time it had swirled through his mind, leaving him with a fresh warmth that straightened his thinking, if only temporarily.

"Don't stress yourself out on the flight," Phichit continued, "There'll be time to think about what you want to do when you get back home. I know you haven't slept in the past few days. Please get some rest, do it for me, okay?"

Yuuri nodded and Phichit beamed, "Take a selfie with me. C'mon smile!" Yuuri obliged, because Phichit had that effect on him. He listened to the silly quip Phichit invented on the spot and found himself smiling wide and bright as the camera flashed. He would take that feeling on the plane and to Hasetsu. He needed to archive more of the good things than the bad. He would need those good moments to take him through the next few weeks.

Yuuri lay in the middle Ice Castle, his hometown rink, staring at the ceiling. He felt better tonight, ready, in a sense, to do something other than be depressed. He drew random shapes along the ice with his fingers, humming quietly. The words flowed through his mind as he sounded the melody:
Stammi vicino, non te ne andare
Ho paura di perderti...

He knew the translation well, having memorized it many months ago. Love wasn't a concept that Yuuri thought of often or had ever felt beyond the familial aspect of it, but if he had to attribute the feeling to something, it would be this song.

'If he's skating this for someone,' Yuuri's chest was tight, 'They're lucky. It's beautiful.'

"Hey Yuuri!" He turned to see Yuuko leaning against the barrier, "I got your message. Are you okay?"

He got to his feet, and skated to her, "That was quick," he was nervous, "I wanted to show you something. You of all people should appreciate it."

She clapped her hands excitedly, "Just seeing you on the ice makes me happy Yuuri. Is it a new routine?"

Maybe one day you'll show it on the ice...

Yuuri heard the voice, and it bolstered his spirit, "Not exactly. I've been practicing it since the GPF ended," he handed her his glasses, "Will you watch?"

She nodded eagerly as Yuuri took up position at the center of the ice. He bent his left foot slightly behind him, the tip of the blade against the ice. He relaxed his arms, bowed his head, and let that soothing voice in the back of his mind drown out the world around him. Realization dawned on Yuuko. That stance...holy shit.

"Aria," she murmured, fumbling for her phone to record the moment.

When Victor played the video, his heart went straight back to the Sochi banquet dance floor. He smelled the champagne, felt the hand on his thigh, heard the exhilarated breaths of a man who'd discarded his inhibitions, if only for a night.

Here was that same man, giving his soul to the music, his eyes again brighter than starlight, unaware of what the video would become. Yuuri perfectly replicated his free program Aria: Stay Close to Me. He frowned, restless now. Home alone in his apartment, with Makkachin staring at him as that hot anger highlighted his eyes, Victor could freely express his emotions. And right then, he felt a mixture of something very raw, and very unstable. He got off the couch, petting Makkachin in apology as the confused poodle jumped off of his lap. He didn't know what had come over him but he wasn't so naive to think a simple video of someone dancing his free program would rile him up like this.

No, it was solely Yuuri Katsuki responsible for this disorientation. Again. Fuck. Those focused but vulnerable coffee-hued eyes, now filled with the freedom Victor wished he'd seen on GPF ice, the freedom that still warmed him since the banquet, the freedom that led to a kiss that, on more than one occasion, woke him up in the middle of the night and directed his hand to his cock. He couldn't look away. Those eyes spoke volumes and Victor ran a finger over the phone's screen as though he could reach out and touch Yuuri's face.

He re-watched the video. The routine lowered some of the technical aspects but otherwise showed a completely different skater than the one who'd competed with him last year. His footwork was sexual and the control he demonstrated was filled with confidence. Why the fuck hadn't Yuuri Katsuki been on the podium with him? Victor couldn't understand it.
He paced, his eyes never leaving his phone. His mind kept feeding him vivid memories of the banquet and that fucking kiss. Victor had been enthralled, playing into the hands of the drunk skater, knowing it wouldn't last forever. Except, it was still there, looped in his mind. He hadn't forgotten the bold request that Yuuri had made. Be my coach, he'd said. Victor ran a shaking hand through his hair. Fuck, why was he shaking?

"It was a drunk moment," Victor reasoned, "it was forgotten."

'Not by you,' his inner voice mused.

"I thought I let this go."

'Clearly not."

"All he needs is to always hold that conviction and he'll slaughter the competition."

'Indeed. He's more talented than he realizes. But he won't and you know it."

"This is insane. I can't just leave Russia to be his coach. What about next season?"

'Please. How much do you really care about next season? And by the way, no one said coaching him was the solution here. Seems you've given this a thought or two before, hmm?'

"I had the man's tongue in my mouth. I thought about a lot of things that night."

'But we aren't talking about that night. It's about right now. That video proved his capabilities. You've skated your whole life, you know talent when you see it. He should've stood on the podium at the Grand Prix. He should've qualified for the World Championships."

Victor massaged his temples, "If I do this."

'When you do this."

"Fine! When I do this, how do I get him to see what I saw that night?"

'Kiss him."

"I want him to trust me, not punch me."

'Okay, then channel all those years of experience and put it to good use. Sure as hell beats picking at the dregs of your inspiration."

"And if he decides he doesn't want me as a coach?"

'Then really kiss him."

Victor sighed. He scrolled through his pictures, and found the one he had selfishly taken in Yuuri's room that night. Victor had finally convinced himself that it was time to get some sleep but the memory of what had transpired between them wasn't enough. He'd wanted something tangible.

He let the video play one more time for good measure, after which he booked his flight to Japan.

Yuuri was currently on the ground, a phone clutched in his hand as people screamed at each other. The room spun around him and he was cold sweating as though ill on his death-bed. The phone vibrated incessantly as messages poured in from, literally, around the globe.
"How many times do I have to tell you rascals not to use my account without permission?!” Yuuko yelled, pointing and waving her phone like she was crazed. Her daughters, Axel, Lutz and Loop, launched into rushed apologies and explanations in unison which only served to make Yuuko shout even louder. Takeshi tried in vain to soften the situation, reasoning that it couldn’t cause much harm.

"It's just one video! Okay fine, it's viral but c'mon-"

"Are you mad?!" she rounded on her husband, "Minako is losing her mind, the views are rising that fast! And look at him! He's basically catatonic! That cannot be healthy!"

The five Nishigoris stared at Yuuri's unmoving form, wondering if moving him right then was wise. Yuuri could be sensitive that way. Loop poked him tentatively with her toe which provoked Yuuko back into her tirade. Takeshi held his head with a prolonged sigh. It was going to be a long night.

He kneeled next to Yuuri, "Hey, you okay there? Let me check your head for any bumps."

Yuuri let himself be moved, sitting up and wincing as Takeshi found a rather nasty bruise on the back of his head, "C'mon, let's go to the kitchen. Yuuko will be at it for a while."

They walked to the next room, and Takeshi went searching for the first aid kit. Yuuri sat quietly, the phone still clenched in his hand. The notifications were non-stop ever since the video went viral. Yuuri put his head between his legs, pretty sure he was going to throw up a year's worth of food very soon. Takeshi rubbed his back gently, worried by how green Yuuri's face was becoming.

"I'm really sorry about this Yuuri. My girls are sometimes too precocious for their own good. But...is it so bad? Yuko said your skating was amazing. I know you like to keep practice skates to yourself but you shouldn't feel embarrassed that people are seeing it."

Yuuri couldn't speak and Takeshi, forever the understanding friend, tended to his bruise without another word. Yuuri couldn't bring himself to say why he was really upset. Skating Aria - Stay Close to Me meant so much more to him than words could express. It didn't matter much what people thought of it. He didn't skate that particular routine for anyone but himself.

He was upset because Phichit had left frantic messages that the video had been sent, multiple times, to Victor Nikiforov since it blew up on social media. His email, his Instagram, his private messages, Victor had to have seen it by now. Yuuri's face burned. He'd humiliated himself at last year's Grand Prix and now, he was being unintentionally humiliated by three skating otaku. If the triplets were older, Yuuri may have taken his anger out appropriately. Right then, he was trapped in a carousel of awful thoughts, round and round they taunted, making his migraine worse by the second.

'I'm sorry Victor,' he reflected sadly. As it was, Victor Nikiforov would likely write him off as a joke for daring to attempt something as sacred as Stay Close to Me. Yuuri retreated further into his shell, sure that nothing would help him recover from this shame.

Victor stood in the airport, smiling down at his longtime coach Yakov, who, as usual, was infuriated with him. Victor was amused as persons passed them with wary glances. He saw some fans think twice about approaching them, and part of Victor felt happy. He wasn't in the mood to take pictures or sign autographs. He just wanted to get on the damn plane but Yakov was hell bent on believing he could change Victor's mind.

"You must be joking Vitya! Japan? To coach him?! I beg you, tell me this is one of your outlandish jokes."

Victor kept smiling, his mind occupied by unruly black hair and velvety lips, and Yakov's anger rose
in wake of the obstinate silence, "If you leave now, you can't come back, you do realize that right Vitya? You career cannot survive this."

"We'll see," Victor brushed some stray lint off his jacket and picked up his bag, "stay in touch will you? After all, you were the best coach I've ever had."

"Vitya, I implore you-"

Victor held up a hand, his patience waning, "Yakov, I've never done ninety percent of the things you've asked, but you've always trusted me to find my way. Why is this any different?"

What could Yakov possibly say to that? Victor was a right pain in his ass, but it was one he respected. Yakov watched his student walk to his gate with a heavy sigh.

'I hope you know what you're doing Vitya.'
Yuuri isn't the only one who needs a stiff drink. We all need a stiff drink. Except Victor. He needs a cold shower. (Okay, Yuuri may need a cold shower too).

The room was dark, hot, thick with volatile pleasures and frenzied whimpers. Victor's teeth sank into the flesh below the underside of his knee, as his fingers trailed ever so slowly along his inner thigh, brushing against his erection, lingering, then down, down to circle his entrance.

It was calculated torture.

He crushed his lips against Yuuri's own, capturing the delicious moan that escaped him as he slipped one finger and then another into him. Yuuri clawed into his shoulders, his back arching at the ecstasy overtaking his body. When he replaced it with his thick hardness, thrusting in with a low groan, Yuuri careened over the edge, his cries flagrantly loud as he lost his fucking mind under the care of Victor's exquisite cock. He dug into the sheets, repeating Victor's name wantonly, sweat dripping down his chest. Victor bit his neck, sucking hard, and Yuuri left trenches in his arms, back, ass...

Closer...right there...harder...Victor...

THUD!

"Fuck. Not again..." Yuuri blinked at the ground now inches from his face. He adjusted himself out of the uncomfortable blanket burrito he found himself trapped in, rubbing his shoulder as it throbbed from the impact. His glasses were askew. He sighed, having forgotten to take them off yet again. It was a miracle they were still intact. He removed them, rubbed his eyes and lay unmoving for a while, annoyed with himself. It was a passing cloud of anger though. This wasn't the first time he had a dream like this, and it wouldn't be the last. In the privacy of his mind, his twenty-three year old self conjured outrageous but admittedly blissful moments that he could neither fight, nor wanted too most of the times.

He tried to think when they'd started...hmm...sometime around the Grand Prix. How fitting. He shrugged and closed his eyes, letting the dream fade before hunting for a clean pair of boxers.

Hiroko Katsuki beamed up at the incredibly handsome Russian standing in front of her; her son had excellent taste if she did think so herself, "Welcome to Yu-topia Akatsuki! I trust you had a pleasant trip Mr. Nikiforov?"

Victor immediately became fond of the plump woman, "Victor is fine Mrs. Katsuki. It's very peaceful here. Thanks for accommodating me."

"Ha! Like I could turn away my son's favorite ice-skater. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Do you know where I can find Yuuri?" Victor looked around, "I thought he'd be here at this hour."

"He's up at Ice Castle. That's Yuuri for you, he spends most of his time there. If you hurry you might
Yuuri skated away his agitation, spending more hours on the ice than his current form really allowed. After the Grand Prix Finals and as he finished college, he'd binge eaten his way into a rounder shape not conducive to the demands of the sport. But, it was the only thing that kept his mind occupied after Aria and especially after that dream. It was stressful being around his family for long periods, especially since he still had no idea what he was going to do with his life. Not that he believed they would impose on him like that. It was just difficult not to admit that he was well and truly lost. So, he skated. It hurt because of his extra weight, and he could barely manage the combinations loops and flips after a while, but it kept his spirits up and kept him moving. Just him and the music. Nothing else mattered, for now.

He took a break and leaned against the barrier, kneading his knuckles into his side, breathing heavily. Fuck, he really needed to start exercising. The weight was suffocating him. He regretfully remembered the two pork cutlet bowls he'd gobbled at dinner the previous night. He promised himself not to be so irresponsible later. He may not have made a decision about his competitive career but if he continued down this road, Minako would hang him up and strip the fat from him herself. He shuddered. That was not the visual he needed.

He stretched for a couple of minutes before returning to the ice, not noticing that his phone was lighting up every couple of seconds. If he'd cared to give it his attention, he would've see the stream of messages from Minako, Takeshi, Yuuko and his mother:

*Victor is at Yu-topia?! Did you know about this?! I'm on my way. /M*

*Vicchan is very sweet Yuuri! How come you've never spoken to him before during your competitions? He's headed to Ice Castle to meet you. /H*

*Yuuri, what the hell?! The triplets are going crazy with the news, though they've promised to keep off social media until we hear from you. Are you still at Ice Castle? Is Victor really there?! I'll be there soon! /Y*

*Yuuri, you need to look at your phone, we dont want you fainting again! Answer my calls you dumb-ass! /T*

Yuuko rushed to Ice Castle as soon as Hiroko messaged her. She tiptoed into the viewing area and found Yuuri to be the only person in the building. She let out a long breath, 'Geez. I knew it couldn't be true.'

She went back to the skate racks, and bent to fix some of them that were out of place. She heard the door slide open and waved a dismissing hand.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed for a private session tonight. You can come back in the morning. Have a good night."

"Is it Yuuri Katsuki's session? His mother said I might catch him here."

Yuuko froze. That accent. That was...but that was impossible! She turned and found herself face to face with Victor Nikiforov, the Russian legend himself and his pet poodle who had jumped onto the counter to greet her. She blinked, petting Makkachin automatically, sure this was a joke.
"Is it okay if I go in? I'd love to see him finish up."

"S-sure."

Yuuko went into autopilot. When Victor fucking Nikiforov was out of sight, she scrambled for her phone to text Takeshi.

Yuuri was deep in his own world. Training in Detroit had been difficult for him. People were always there, talking, critiquing, interrupting his thoughts. Alone on the ice in his hometown, he didn't have to worry about a soul bothering him. He was grateful to the Nishigoris for going out of their way for him. The place was all his once it wasn't booked in advance. He smiled, concentrating on his feet, warming down from the day's practice. The ice gave an almost fairy-tale glow at this time of the evening; it was another reason Yuuri liked staying at Ice Castle so late.

He took no notice to Victor who stared at him with unhidden want as he glided across the ice.

'One, you need to tone that look down. Remember, he doesn't know about the banquet. And two, try not to scare him. It's already complicated enough as it is.' Victor nodded to himself, reconfigured his expression and stepped onto the ice.

Yuuri had no idea he was being followed until a second set of skates appeared in his field of vision, alerting him that he wasn't alone. Confused, he slowed a bit and looked up into the gorgeously sculpted face of Victor Nikiforov.

"WHAT THE-"

Yuuri gasped, jumped back, and naturally lost his footing. He would've surely ended up with another bruise on his skull if Victor hadn't reflexively grabbed his arm and pulled him forward. Yuuri's arms went around the Russian's neck, stabilizing him but heightening a rather awkward situation. Victor lips were so close, and he could see the exact specks of green in his eyes that no picture could ever capture. It was innocent given Yuuri's blunder, but the smirk on Victor's face looked so deliberate.

'You. Need. To. Fucking. Stop.'

He begrudgingly released the petrified skater, "Hello Yuuri. Lovely night."

Yuuri gaped, flabbergasted, "V-Victor? Wha-" He glanced over to Yuuko and Takeshi who were at a complete loss on what action to take. They'd been so sure Hiroko got things mixed up. Yuuri was now convinced he'd skated himself into a delusional state. 'I've gone mad. I'm hallucinating.'

Victor was battling his own emotions. He'd tried on the plane to reconcile the fact that Yuuri wouldn't remember their initial encounter and what it would be like meeting him for the 'first time'. But he couldn't help himself now. He reached out and tipped Yuuri's chin gently, ignoring his inner voice screaming bloody murder at him. Victor didn't care, not yet. He was...relieved to be close to Yuuri again.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here?"

Yuuri's entire face down to his collarbone went red, "O-okay. Why are you here?"

"I'm going to be your coach Yuuri. I'm going to get you to the Grand Prix Finals. And you're going to win."

Yup. There was the confirmation that his insanity had finally manifested. All those months of
keeping everything buried in the pit of his stomach had culminated in this pipe dream. Yuuri wrapped a hand around Victor's own and moved it from his face, "Excuse me." The hand felt real. It felt...familiar. Yuuri needed several stiff drinks.

But Victor wasn't finished. He rested a less suggestive hand on Yuuri's shoulder now, "Aren't you going to talk to me?"

"I really just want to go home," Yuuri moved away from his touch, overwhelmed by it.

"Yuuri..."

How did Victor Nikiforov even know his name? Why was he looking at him with such intensity? This had to be some kind of sick joke. Yuuri shook his head, "I'm going home."

Victor nodded, the memories holding him a little too closely. They both needed to calm down. Victor hadn't realized how much seeing Yuuri again would affect him. Every few seconds he was back in the hotel, back in Yuuri's room, drinking champagne from his lips.

Yuuri left the rink, not even stopping to greet the Nishigoris. They let him go quietly, still unsure of what to say or do. Victor skated towards them, frowning, "He's stubborn."

'This is entirely your fault. How many times do we have to go through this? He doesn't remember the fucking banquet. He doesn't know you. You can't expect him to look at you that way just because you wish it was so.'

Yuuko's defense for her friend flared; legend or no, Yuuri's quirks were off limits to strangers, "It's nice to meet you too Victor. You sort of showed up out of nowhere. What did you expect him to do?"

Victor was sheepish, "I'm sorry for the trouble. Honestly, I just wanted to get that initial conversation out of the way. I didn't expect him to be this cold."

"Uh, how would you respond in a situation like this? And why are you talking like you know him?" Takeshi pointed out.

Victor smiled; he didn't need to lie here, not really, "When you've seen someone skate at a competitive level, you don't need to talk to them to learn who they are," he watched them share a confused look, "Did you think I was joking? I want to be his coach."

"You watched him..."

"I watch all my fellow competitors. But Yuuri's viral video was quite..." Victor grinned through the umpteen rush of emotions, "Well, I guess we'll see what he has in him. If he ever talks to me that is."

"Give him some time. He'll come around," Yuuko said, still coming to terms with what Victor was saying, "he's been having a rough few months."

"Try not to push too hard," Takeshi followed his wife's lead, "and ease up on being in his face like that, as least until he's comfortable with all this."

Victor, at the very least, had the good sense to appear apologetic for his behavior.
Yuuri's feet dragged him home. His heart was pounding, shell-shocked by the dramatic turn the evening had taken. Yuuri shut his eyes tight at the memory of Victor approaching him in Sochi. It was the third time he'd walked away from the man because, just like then, it didn't make any fucking sense and that uncertainty sent Yuuri's mind into the abyss of 'what ifs' and 'whys'. Not to mention, he couldn't remember ever having someone so willingly within his vicinity, much less looking at him with a mixture of curiosity, ease and...lust?

Yuuri shook his head. No. Bullshit. Victor did not fly from Russia, leaving behind his decorated career, adoring public, and die-hard fans to look at him in any way or become his fucking coach. He was a reject. Victor was a god. That was that.

Yuuri forced the competing impressions out of his mind. All he wanted to do was soak in the hot-springs, take a couple shots of whiskey, and go the fuck to sleep. He would wake up in the morning, and things would be back to normal. He'd skate, attempt to think about his career, and hopefully not self combust from feeling like a total failure.

All those things were clearly too much to ask for.

"YUURI!" Minako's boisterous tone set his eyes rolling; she assaulted him as he stepped through the door, "I was just about to come see you! If I'd known Victor was at Ice Castle with you-"

"You would've known if you didn't hang up on me," Hiroko rarely pursed her lips but Minako could be such a quandary, "You really need to contain yourself sometimes."

"That's besides the point! Plus, when have I ever gone overboard, hmm?"

Yuuri could write a book on the subject and it still wouldn't capture Minako's excessive personality. Any other night he would've gotten a laugh out of it; after all, Minako was practically family. Now, the joke was a tumbleweed in his mind, barely registering with his wholly sour mood. He cracked his neck, and made random gestures in the direction of his room.

"I'm going to bed. I really don't want to be disturbed tonight."

Hiroko was concerned; Yuuri looked a bit ill, "Are you okay dear? You want me to prepare a tray for you? You can eat from your room if you want."

"That's fine," he was grateful, "I'm really tired-"

"Victor!" The women suddenly squealed in unison. Yuuri felt the presence behind him and he heard the cutest bark, accompanied by a mass of fluff and paws climbing up his leg. He scratched behind the dog's ear, swallowing rapidly. The insanity of it all was ebbing away to reveal the very unexpected reality. He wished he could zip his jacket to his forehead and disappear.

"Are you also Yuuri's family?" Victor stepped next to him and winked before greeting Minako with
his trademark charm, "Good to meet you."

"Good lord you are beautiful," Minako mewed. Hiroko sighed into her hand. Yuuri's mind was suddenly and very uncomfortably occupied by his dream from that morning. Of all the times for it to make an appearance.

"Well, that's enough for one night," Yuuri moved away from the gathering, gritting his teeth. Makkachin seemed unamused by his abruptness.

"Let's at least have dinner-"


Exasperation laced his voice and he could care less if they noticed. It wasn't directed at them anyway. It was all for him. He disappeared around the corner much to Victor's disappointment; he was getting quite tired of Yuuri walking away from him like that.

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Minako, having regained the no-nonsense segment of her manners, eyed Victor critically, "So the reports are true? You're taking next season off to coach Yuuri?"

"Much of it is exaggerated and speculative, but yes, that part is correct."

"Why?"

Victor raised an eyebrow; thus far, everyone had indirectly questioned the sincerity of his actions, "You are all very protective of him."

"Damn straight," Minako poured them both another drink, "I've known Yuuri since he was a boy. He spent most of his time in my ballet class, and I've spent my life watching over him as he skated. Familiarity breeds comfort, you know? He's no genius but he works hard. He's a fighter. And you haven't answered my question."

"I believe he can win gold. I want him to believe it too."

Minako narrowed her eyebrows, "That's not much of an explanation. I hope you're not so blind not to realize what you are to Yuuri. He doesn't mean anything by his avoiding you. He's just scared."

"Of me?"

"Of what you represent, Victor," she swirled the drink in her glass, "so let me ask you again, why do you want to coach him?"

Victor could see that the flippant behavior he'd used to breeze pass the Nishigoris wasn't going to work with Minako. He allowed himself to look back on the banquet before dropping his act a bit, "Because he asked me too."

"Excuse me?"

"He doesn't remember though. He was quite drunk that night," Minako's eyebrows vanished into her hairline, "Let's keep that between us, yeah?"

"Oh god, please tell me you didn't up and leave Russia on the whim of a drunkard. Yuuri and alcohol are a dangerous combination."

"It isn't quite that. He may have been wrecked but the request was genuine. For a long time I
convinced myself otherwise. But his video...

Minako saw something bright and authentic in Victor's eyes, "What?"

"He doesn't know it but he showed his true self during that skate. A nudge in the right direction is all he needs. I...I need him to see it."

"Need?" Minako laughed softly, "Alright Victor, here's a I've-had-five-drinks story for you. Back in my ballet days, I met someone. Tall, handsome, content to shower me with every pleasure. It was as romantic as you can imagine, as are such youthful serendipitous encounters. But what stayed with me over the years was the look he'd give me every day. A once in a lifetime kind of gaze, like I was the only thing in the world he could see."

Victor drank, his wall quickly going back up but the message and his expression were already clear. Minako topped him off.

"Victor, I don't know what encounter you've had with Yuuri and even I'm not going down that road, for both your sakes. But if you're doing this for yourself, it won't work. Yuuri hates being toyed with and he actually hates losing in every respect. So either you're here for him or you go back to Russia. There is no in between."

"It's completely for him but...it's a little for me too," Victor admitted, "one thing I know for sure is that I'm happy to be here. I wish Yuuri was too."

Minako felt pleased by his honesty; it still wasn't a full answer and there were clearly details missing, but it was real moment and she let him have it. Here was a different Victor Nikiforov from the one lauded on the ice, "He is, trust me. He's coming to terms with it. Remember, twenty-four hours ago you were nothing more than a dream. Give him his space and, when he's ready, show him what you just showed me."

Victor smiled, "Thank you Minako. I'll do my best."

Yuuri scrolled through the reports that Phichit forwarded his way. Not that they needed too; a quick search brought up dozens of articles on the situation.

Russia's top ice-skater retiring?

Coach Nikiforov? Rumors circulating about next season.

Who is Yuuri Katsuki? How a viral video inspired a five-time world champion.

(Exclusive) Will the career change be permanent?

It couldn't be real. It couldn't. Much of it was abstract since neither Victor nor his coach Yakov had made official statements to the press. There were however many zoomed in photos of both men talking in the airport, and of Victor heading towards his flight to Japan. It wasn't proof of anything but the sounds of his longtime idol moving around in the room next to his was. Yuuri looked back at his phone as it vibrated.

Yuuri? /P

He'd forgotten to reply to Phichit, Sorry! No, we haven't talked yet.

Yuuri, for the last time you're not dreaming! Celestino's getting word from other coaches. Yakov isn't
confirming much, but he's saying Victor is there for you. /P

That's insane. /Y

They're saying it's Aria. Yuuri, you have to talk to him. You can't hide in your room forever. /P

Phichit...who would want to coach me after Sochi? /Y

Apparently Victor fucking Nikiforov. /P

Yuuri choked out a laugh. He drifted back to listening to...Victor's low footsteps. Makka's barks made him smile. It couldn't be real. It couldn't.

Except it was.

"My coach, huh?" Yuuri murmured, spreading his arms above his head, "Why Victor? Why did that video of me skating Stay Close To Me matter so much?"

Something else was nagging him since he'd removed Victor's hand from his chin. The silliest thought had crossed his mind: 'I've felt this hand before.' It was impossible, he knew that on the surface, but his mind seemed adamant on refuting the obvious. He combed back his hair, taking his glasses with him, feeling the way his heart vibrated in his chest as a more rational understanding of the night began presenting itself. His lips curved up. His spine was tingling. He was happy. And he was downright exhausted from the night's barrage of emotions.

He yawned, rolling off his bed to get undressed. Maybe he could sneak into the hot springs and wash the whirlwind off of himself. He glanced contemplatively at the door just as a loud scratching noise emanated from the other side. It was followed by a distinctly adorable whine. Yuuri held his breath, opened the door and found Makkachin sitting happily in front him, his tail a blur as it went from side to side.

"Hey you," Yuuri squatted to pet him, "Sorry about earlier boy. It's been a hell of a night."

He heard rustling from the room further up, and soft whistling that made his smile wider. He patiently waited for Victor to step out his room and stand amidst the multitude of boxes he was yet to unpack. He was dressed in one of the inn's robes, and his cheeks were flushed from the hot springs. For all the pictures Yuuri had collected over the years, nothing compared to seeing him in person. They shared a much less stressful moment together and Yuuri could again swear he'd experienced this exact level of calm before.

"Goodnight Yuuri," Victor said. Yuuri didn't know why, but those two words held so much weight, as though there were a thousand unspoken things attached to the otherwise simple remark.

"Goodnight Victor." Yuuri ushered Makka into his room and quietly closed the door.

Victor took Minako's speech with him to sleep. As far back as he could remember, Makka was the friendliest dog on earth but he never slept with anyone except Victor. If his poodle going to Yuuri had been the only thing that happened tonight, it would've been enough to make him feel better about his choice to be there.

Yuuri woke with a stiff right arm thanks to Makka hijacking it sometime during the night. He extricated it and cuddled the poodle closer as compensation. He was Vicchan, except bigger, and Yuuri felt ridiculously attached to him now, a feeling he was happy to run with. Last night had been much too confusing. He wanted to start the morning with a more open mind.
When he heard the knock on his door, Yuuri didn't wonder about the intrusion into his personal space. For once, he concentrated on archiving the good, "It's open!"

"Still in bed?" Victor voice was between sleep and waking, "I thought we could have breakfast together, if that's okay."

"It's only six a.m. I'm not ready to get up yet. Plus, I don't think Makka will let me," he reminded the Russian. Victor's laugh was a thing to bottle.

"Do you mind...if I sit with you?"

Yuuri looked at Victor upside down with a kind face; last night, for some inexplicable reason, was starting to feel far, "Feel free, I guess." He gestured to the general area. Victor wanted to crawl under the covers with him. He settled for the floor, close to Yuuri's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about last night."

Yuuri shrugged, "I overreacted but in my defense, I had no warning," he paused and stroked Makka's ear, "Um, why do you want to coach me Victor? No offense, it's just a bit surreal for me."

"You've showed you have the skill to win." And the eros to match it.

It was such a matter-of-fact answer, and Yuuri felt his heart seize, "B-But...last year's Grand Prix..." He left the sentence hanging, face hot with embarrassment.

"Yes?" Victor asked patiently.

"How is that worth more than..." You? Your career? Yuuri couldn't bring himself to say either one. Victor didn't respond. He leaned his head back against Yuuri's bare arm. It was still warm.

"Let's start with a strict exercise routine. There's not much I can do with you until you're back to your weight at last year's Grand Prix. Daily running and ballet, to loosen those muscles, and whatever other regime you're accustomed to. I can start putting together your programs for this season. I have some ideas for both of them and we can brainstorm additions as you progress. And don't worry about my coaching fee, we'll sort that out when you win something. Deal?"

Victor was being so adamant, bypassing Yuuri's failure at the Grand Prix as though it wasn't enough of a reason to abandon him; Yuuri breathed out, "Sure, thanks, but I have a condition."

"Hmm?"

"You have to answer my question. Not today if you don't want to, or tomorrow. But at some point..." I need to know why I matter so much.

Victor wanted to be annoyed at the traits he'd picked up from Minako, but instead he felt strengthened by the bold statement; 'It would be an interesting conversation and I'd like him to know how he made...makes me feel, one day.' "Deal."

Makka yawned, and strolled onto Yuuri's chest, settling down so his paws were on top Victor's head. The two men chuckled.

"Will you tell me something about yourself?" Victor asked gently.

Yuuri couldn't believe the change in comfort from last night; it was like another universe entirely, "Um, I love pork cutlet bowls. You should try one for dinner tonight."
Victor closed his eyes, "Something else to look forward too."

They dozed off for a bit, settling into each other's company like matching puzzle pieces. When Yuuri opened his eyes an hour later, he was enamored to find Victor still with him, snoring lightly.
Minako and the entire Nishigori clan enlisted themselves as Yuuri's personal cheerleaders, pushing him to his limits to get him into shape. Between consistent sets of intense cardio and Minako's back-to-basics ballet sessions, he wondered if he would survive long enough to slip into a pair of skates again. Victor would join them in the mornings before moving to the rink which Yuuri wasn't allowed to step foot on until he was of the specified weight. Yuuri pretended to be annoyed while basking in the underhanded challenge, and Victor skating on his home ice. The triplets, now frequent fixtures at the rink, accumulated daily content in the gigabytes.

"Uh," Yuuri eyed them suspiciously but Yuuko shook her head.

"They've sworn on their love of skating otaku that it's just for our personal reference. Even I can't say no to getting this all on camera," she leaned on the barrier, watching Victor land yet another perfect quad flip, "He's amazing isn't he?"

Yuuri's eyes were on their way to regaining its starlight, "In a word."

The hardest move of all was writing off pork cutlet bowls, made worse by Victor helping himself to seconds and thirds each night. Yuuri would shoot him truly dirty looks as he picked at his lean meats, salads, fruits, non-fat milk, and water, and Victor would respond with the most innocent smile that fooled everyone except Yuuri. Switching from the mouth-watering comfort of carbs and fats to such a stringent diet was fucking difficult but Yuuri was determined not to let Victor get the upper-hand. Plus...those brilliant smiles usually made Yuuri's day.

Two weeks in, he could feel the positive changes, the overload of energy in the mornings, the greater resistance to exhaustion, the way his legs held up under pressure. He also slept a lot better, especially with Makka snuggling next to him for most of the week, something that comforted Victor greatly. Makka unofficially became the middle-dog in their budding relationship, giving to Yuuri what Victor couldn't. It was a struggle for him; seeing Yuuri sober didn't change a thing about how Victor felt. If anything, the fierce resolve and day-one honesty drew him further in. But he needed to do this right. He needed Yuuri to continue trusting him. He needed Yuuri to see himself before he saw him.

'But...what if he never sees me that way again?'

As if to ease his constant ache, Victor noticed a piece of paper neatly tucked into Makka's collar one morning. He removed and unfolded it, his eyes lighting up at the question handwritten there:

**What's your favorite thing about St. Petersberg?**

Victor gave Makka a sleepy head rub, "What's he up too boy?" The dog gave an encouraging bark
and he smiled, his mind wandering for the first time in weeks to Russia. That night Makka returned to Yuuri's room with an answer and a question from Victor. Yuuri shook with delight; the idea had come to him all at once and it had taken days to build the courage to execute. So far, their verbal conversations were seventy percent professional, the remainder being quieter interactions that had Yuuri reddening at each turn. He found he still couldn't get very personal, until now. He wrote his answer and headed to bed; Makka would wake him in the morning for delivery. And thus, an unconventional but pleasant back and forth was established, with Makka doubly pleased with all the extra attention directed his way.

They awoke one day to a swarm of reporters in Hasetsu. Everyone except Hiroko and Victor seemed overwhelmed by the sudden crowd. Someone had leaked a picture of Yuuri and Victor outside Yutopia to the Japanese and Russian press, and this undeniable proof of Victor's intentions for the upcoming season saw them fighting for explanations and exclusives. Victor shielded Yuuri, already seeing the panic creeping into him, answering questions without actually saying anything substantial except that yes, this was real, yes, he was coaching Yuuri, and yes, he would qualify for the Grand Prix Finals.

"Thanks Victor," Yuuri was beyond grateful for him handling them. He hated reporters.

Victor ran a soothing hand over his back, "Anytime," he didn't like that Yuuri was trembling slightly, "C'mon, let's take a walk."

"But, running-"

"It can wait."

Three weeks in saw them never having a meal without the other present. Dinner sometimes happened in either of their rooms, depending on whether one of their notes required verbal elaboration. As the days passed, Yuuri found it easier to open up about his hometown, his life, and the things he loved, and each day, Victor maintained an acceptable balance between being Yuuri's coach, the memories from the banquet, and understanding the boundaries Yuuri established. No matter where he was, Victor found a middle ground, and they relaxed there until Yuuri was ready to move forward again.

The day he slipped on his control saw Yuuri skipping one too many steps during his daily run and cutting his forehead from an ungraceful fall. Victor, ignoring his protests, guided him back to Yutopia, sat him down firmly and cleaned the shallow injury. He applied medication, dressed it carefully and then pressed his lips to Yuuri's temple, causing them both to freeze.

Victor's insides knotted, 'Three fucking weeks. Why am I like this?'

"Yuuri, I'm sorry, that was-"

"No, no it's...that's okay," Yuuri's cheeks were burning but he had no intention of alienating Victor like their first encounter.

"Yuuri..."

"No, really," Yuuri heard the skepticism and wanted it gone, "I don't mind."

And Yuuri meant it. The boundary moved back some from that moment; he let Victor stay closer to him, not minding him leaning on his shoulder during meals, or brushing strands out of his face after exercising, or combing through his wet hair after soaking in the hot springs. The last one was his
favorite. It left him with butterflies and bolstered the intensity of his dreams (Makka was NOT a fan of ending up on the ground with Yuuri), but...he liked it. He liked Victor. He felt drawn to him in a much more visceral way that kept the idea that he'd experienced something similar alive and well in his mind.

Yuuri weighed himself on the fourth week and gave a celebratory 'whoop!'; he was finally back to Grand Prix standards. Excited, he jumped into his sweats, texted Victor to let him know where he was going, and did a quick run to the beach to settle his adrenaline. He barely broke a sweat, but his heart was good and pumped. He did some stretches, enjoying the changing colors on the horizon. The scenery only improved as Victor strolled towards him, his hair swaying in the soft breeze.

"I'm back to my original weight," he said as Victor settled into the sand next to him, "How soon can we start?"

"Today, if you like," Victor smiled, "Good work Yuuri."

"Does this mean I can have-"

"The diet stays until you've won the Grand Prix."

Yuuri sighed; it'd been worth a shot. He sat next to Victor and was surprised when he handed him a Makka note from the day before. Alarm bells set off in Yuuri's mind, "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just don't know how to answer it."

Yuuri looked down at his scribble: **I'm really not a big fan of airplanes, trains are easier. My turn - tell me one of your favorite moments.**

"I'm sorry if I got too personal-"

Victor looked directly at him, his eyes burning, "You don't ever need to apologize for being curious. I love it."

Yuuri blushed under the intense gaze. Victor returned his eyes to the ocean, "I don't want to lie to you, that's all."

Yuuri wasn't entirely sure what was going on but the look on Victor's face spoke of something faraway and beautiful, as though an old memory had seared itself permanently on his soul. He didn't know why, but it made his heart beat faster. The silence that followed was strangely therapeutic as they stumbled into an unexpected dimension of their relationship. Victor got up and dusted his pants.

"Meet me at Ice Castle when you're ready."

They were back to their usual selves as soon as they hit the ice. Yuuri bookmarked their exchange on the beach for later contemplation. Right now, he was determined to take advantage of Victor's expertise and make him promise to show him all the techniques he knew. If he was going to revive his career and compete at the Grand Prix again, he needed to be better than flawless. Victor agreed; it was going to be a steep learning curve, but he couldn't say no to Yuuri's fiery request if he tried.

"It's like he's a different person," Yuuko said proudly, as she and Victor watched Yuuri warm up, "I've never seen him like this."

"He has no intention of giving up. I love that," Victor smiled, "It'll be a difficult road from here on
"What's next on your agenda?"

"Introducing him to the choreography for his short and free programs, and teaching him some new jumps, including a quad flip."

Yuuko was a bubble of enthusiasm, "You really believe he can do it?"

"Of course," Victor stepped onto the ice, "Don't you?"

"You look hesitant."

"I'm not! Just nervous," Yuuri took a deep breath, "I attempted them some time back but could never land it. I've avoided adding them to competition for that reason."

"Well, you said teach you everything I know."

"I did."

"Good. Now, let's go through the choreography for your short program."

*On Love: Eros* was ice-skating seduction. There was no other way for Yuuri to describe it as he watched Victor embody the music, skating like a man on a mission to quench his love-starved body. Yuuri's eyes were drawn to Victor in an entirely new way, surveying the invitation from his throat as he tilted his head back, the way his hands encircled the air around him like a long-lost lover, the dramatic accentuation of his hips and ass...When Victor finished his demonstration, Yuuri was sweating. The dreams flashed through his mind in rapid succession. Was Victor fucking with him?

"So, what do you think?"

"I, uh, yes," Yuuri's coherence was that of a potato. How had they gone from that moment on the beach to this?

Victor smirked, "Is there a problem?"

"Nope. I've got it."

"While you're skating, I also expect you to be thinking," Victor said, "What does eros mean to you? It's the only way you can exude a unique persona to enhance the program. It has to be solely you." Yuuri got the impression Victor was enjoying putting him in this uncomfortable position. The skate was basically sex on ice.

He was delving into overthinking territory, but Victor made his mind and heart stop by coming within an inch of his face, "No one but you knows your eros Yuuri," Yuuri could smell Victor's shampoo and it was making things hazy, "can you show it to me?"

'Can you show me the Yuuri from the banquet?'

It was a grueling couple weeks of practice. At the end of each day, Victor prepared a bath of epsom salts and Yuuri soaked his feet with relief. The pain was not as aggravating as his inability to decipher his personal understanding of eros or land some of the newer jumps. Victor massaged the tension in his shoulders, giving advice on his form and movements.
"Let's ignore the jumps for now. You've got the mechanics of your programs down and we'll pick apart the finer details as we go alone. Speaking of which, any thoughts on the music for your free skate?"

"My coach usually picked the music for my programs," Yuuri was apologetic, "I never really gave it my full attention."

"Well, that changes now. Any suggestions?"

"Um, there was an old friend, she composed a piece for me. Celestino didn't seem too impressed though. Let me get it for you..." Yuuri scrolled through his phone for a moment, plugged his headphones in, and gave it to Victor.

"Hmm, it's a start. Let's look at some other options. In the meantime, can she redo it?"

Yuuri nodded, melting under Victor's fingers, "Doesn't hurt to ask."

For all his hard work and nailing the choreography of the detailed programs Victor created, Yuuri couldn't, for the fucking life of him, get the quads right. A month of practice and he was working himself up like a volcano ready to pop. His speed was off, the timing was off, the rotations were off. Fuck. The angrier he got, the sloppier his technique became. Victor watched his attempts, his expression unreadable, and suggested they consider lowering the difficulty, for now. Yuuri was defiant but Victor was equally as stubborn, going so far as to offer a pork cutlet bowl in an attempt to disrupt his train of thought. Yuuri skated straight into his personal space.

"No."

Victor literally had to take a step back, Yuuri was suddenly that close, "Don't be stubborn Yuuri. Changes can be made during the season. You don't need the quads to get through the initial placements."

"Stop it. I will land them."

The look in Yuuri's eyes reminded him so much of when he'd pulled him in for that kiss, "Okay. Let's call it a night."

"I'll meet you later. I want to practice some more."

Victor acted like he didn't hear him, "You can tell me all about your definition of eros. You've been avoiding it for a month."

"Victor, seriously-"

He smiled sweetly, "I was also looking forward to listening to the free skate music. Didn't you say your friend would be finished with it today? Would be a shame if we missed it and kept her waiting for our reactions."

"I'm pretty sure she can wait for the morning," Yuuri's temper was building, "Another hour-"

Victor continued talking over him, "I guess I can eat dinner with Makka, he loves those pork cutlet-"

"Would you stop with the food references?!"

Yuuko, who had been observing the hilarious spectacle, stepped up to them, "Everything okay here?"
"Yes," Yuuri breathed out, "It's-"

"Yuuri has decided to have dinner without me," Victor pouted and Yuuko laughed, "A month of practice and he thinks he's above and beyond his coach's directions."

Yuuri was becoming light-headed and it wasn't from hunger. Victor could be such a manipulative son of a bitch sometimes, "Fine! Let's have dinner." Victor's sudden broad smile sent Yuuri's irritation into overdrive, draining any semblance of rational arguments from him. He felt very tired, very defeated, and found he couldn't think straight. Victor's frivolity, in all its utter absurdity, was driving him into an almost dreamlike state of resignation.

"Just give me a few minutes to pack up," and in a move directed by some outside force that had sat in waiting since Sochi, Yuuri leaned in, brushed his lips against Victor's own, put on his guards, and headed towards the locker room.

Yuuko gasped. Victor touched his lips. And Yuuri kept walking.
From One End of the Spectrum...

Chapter Notes

Phichit is the purest ray of sunshine...he's also capable of severe burns.

You could hear a fucking feather drop in the place.

Yuuko, who seconds ago was harboring astonishment from Yuuri calmly kissing Victor, was now feeling her excitement build. Something had to give and she was glad Yuuri's frustration had chipped away his defenses resulting in this gem of a moment. It wasn't like she and everyone with a page in Yuuri's life hadn't expected it. Probably not so abruptly and publicly, but nonetheless, the signs had been there from the beginning. She found herself recalling the way Victor had skated to him on their first meeting, practically ripping Yuuri from his shell into a bright new world where he was the center of Victor's attention. Yuuko still didn't know what to make of that; it wasn't like Yuuri had ever spoken to Victor before that day. For one video to have inspired such a string of adventurous occurrences...

She gave pause as she studied Victor's face. He hadn't moved, and for all Yuuko knew he'd stopped breathing altogether. His hand still floated over his mouth which had formed a small 'O'. There was shock, that was to be expected. His cheeks were slightly red and Yuuko would bet good money that you could count on one hand how many times Victor Nikiforov had blushed in his life. But, for Yuuko, it was his eyes that brought things home. It spelled out a deep pining that no amount of joking or charm could hide. Not that Victor looked prepared to talk his way out of this. If anything, he appeared well and truly content that he'd just been kissed by his student.

She and Takeshi had discussed it at length over the last two months, pulling material from their daily outings to the rink to watch Victor and Yuuri destroy the concept of personal space. Initially, there were some opinions thrown around concerning Victor's intentions and whether he had the right to enter Yuuri's life like this. Those fears were quickly assuaged as they watched the two skaters envelop each other with their respective traits. There was so much respect, appreciation, endearment, and ease shared between them, like two old souls who'd spent an eternity together. They even seemed oblivious to the wide berth everyone created to allow them time to delve deeper into their relationship.

But pining...damn...that was a lot deeper than what this moment warranted. In her opinion, no matter how close they were, two months was not enough for Victor to look that hypnotized. Had something happened between them before? No, that couldn't be it...Yuuri had steered clear of Victor during the Sochi Grand Prix and they'd never met before that. Yuuko tiptoed a few times, the motion helping to quell her rumination. She didn't want to make a ruckus (just yet) in case she prematurely disturbed the atmosphere around Victor but her benevolence was short lived as Minako entered the rink in her usual one-woman-band kind of way.

"You guys are still here? Geez, what does a girl have to do to find a drinking partner in this town? Victor, are you up for..." she caught Victor's spaced expression and Yuuko dancing on her toes, her smile wide and telling, "Someone want to clue me in?"

"Yuuri kissed him," Yuuko blurted.
"WHAT?! When?!

"Just now," Victor blinked, like waking up from a spell, "Funny, he had me at 'let's have dinner.' Yuuko couldn't restrain herself and collapsed into scandalous laughter.

"Maybe you should push his buttons more often," Yuuko teased.

Victor's flush was unmistakable now, "I was just thinking the same."

Minako grinned, "Well, I owe Hiroko some money," she surveyed the area for Yuuri, "Is he okay? Where'd he go?"

Yuuko pointed to the locker room, "I'm not sure if he's realized what he's done. He sort of walked away like it was a normal occurrence. Imagine being that riled up from not being able to land a quad."

"Maybe I should go talk." Victor began, his cognition returning.

"No, you guys head out," Minako immediately raised a hand as Victor opened his mouth to protest, "Victor, be reasonable. You know how Yuuri can be. Let me check on him. I'll walk him home when he's ready."

It took a full two minutes for Yuuri to realize what the fuck he'd done. Time then slowed to a debilitating kind of crawl as he touched his own lips in disbelief. His bag and skates fell in a pile at his feet, as he buried his face in his hands and his mind went into red alert.

'I kissed him. I kissed Victor. Oh god. Oh no. Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck.' His fatigue was replaced by an acute hysteria at the sheer stupidity of his actions. What had he been thinking? How was he going to justify this? What on earth was Victor thinking? Oh fuck, this was an exploding can of worms that spread for miles and miles.

Victor's chaste kiss the day he'd bruised his head was one thing, even his dreams were manageable because it wasn't broadcasted to the world, but this? This had to be crossing a line.

His mind chose right then to start playing its tricks on him again. Those lips... Yuuri was sidetracked now, the brief taste of Victor more vivid than a sunrise. He'd been with one or two people before, went further than kissing with the second but if you asked him to recall the sensations, he could barely locate the memory. Victor though... Victor's lips... how could he remember something he'd never had?

"Yuuri?"

He literally jumped, tripping on his bag, and landing in a painful sitting position on the bench, "Minako! Shit, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was looking to steal Victor for some shots and instead I found a soap opera."

Yuuri blushed and hid his face again, "Oh god. Oh fuck. You know? Do they know?"

Minako was trying to contain herself as Yuuri rambled, "Yuuri, they were standing right there. One of them was the recipient of your kiss. I'm pretty sure they know."

Yuuri groaned, "Is there any chance I can stay here and hide forever?"

"Not a chance," she sat next to him, "something tells me you don't want to anyway."
Yuuri wouldn't deny that, but he couldn't admit it out loud, "Is Victor...is he still here?"

"He headed back to Yu-topia," the right decision by how pale Yuuri was at this point, "A little breathing room never hurt, right?"

"I cannot believe I let his provoking get to me like that."

"Interesting, usually when someone provokes me I punch them, not kiss them."

"Minako, please," Yuuri's voice muffled as he squeezed his face further into his hands, "How am I going to look him in the eye after this?"

"I don't know, probably the same way you've been looking at him for the past two months?" Minako moved Yuuri's hands from his face and held them supportively, "Be honest with me Yuuri, didn't part of you want this to happen?"

Yuuri looked a bit startled, "Well...u-um...it's...I-I...," he collected himself with a deep breath, "He's Victor Nikiforov and he's my coach Minako."

"And your point is?"

"This is a little over the top, don't you think?"

Minako was patient; Yuuri wasn't deliberately being obstinate, he was being defiant in the face of something that seemed too impossible, too unreachable for someone like him, "Let me walk you home. You can tell me all the different reasons you think this is too crazy and I guarantee you I can disprove them all."

Victor paced about his room, fussing over his pajamas, fiddling with his phone, looking at the picture from Yuuri's room in Sochi, glancing at the clock every twenty seconds, staring at his door...Makka stopped him by basically sitting on his feet.

"Am I that wound up boy?" Victor took a deep breath, "Okay, I'll sit."

Makka dutifully moved and then jumped into his lap when he sat crossed legged on the bed. Victor hugged the poodle closely, his presence keeping him grounded as his mind revisited Sochi. Yuuri Katsuki, the drunk ice-skater who'd reached out to him on an otherwise uninspiring night and stolen his heart in the process. The mark he'd left with Victor was irreplaceable, and now here he was again adding fuel to a fire he didn't know he'd lit. It was uncanny; what were the odds of Yuuri upping him twice with his lips? He'd honestly believed he would be the one to initiate a second kiss and much later on than this.

Yuuri continued to surprise him, on the ice and off. Victor had only wanted to get his mind off of the damn quads. He hated that Yuuri was overlooking his overall progress. And yes, Victor was a little manipulative when he needed to get Yuuri out of his own head but for it to lead to an unintentional kiss? To think they would end up here...

It'd been lighter, gentler, lacking of champagne but the spark was stronger than ever. Victor ran a couple fingers over his lips for the hundredth time. He sighed and played with Makka's ear, waiting to see where the night progressed.

When Yuuri returned to Yu-topia, Hiroko informed them that Victor had already had his dinner and bath. She immediately noticed Yuuri deflating at the news and rushed to assure him that everything
"He said he didn't want to be occupied when you got back," Hiroko said, "Put something in your stomach before you, ah, go to bed, okay dear?"

Yuuri glanced at Minako who smiled in agreement. It was puzzling; how was it that everyone seemed so calm about all this? Yuuri nodded, and tried to get his heart rate under control as he went in search of some food. It was evident he was using it as an opportunity to stall, but Minako and Hiroko made no further comments. Yuuri, selecting fruits and vegetables like it was his last meal, was too busy to notice his mother triumphantly claiming money from his ballet instructor.

He ate slowly and then took a long bath, sneaking around the hall and pretending like he couldn't see that Victor's light was still on. He got dressed and sat on his chair, the water from his hair soaking into the headrest. 'This is stupid,' he chastised himself, 'you have to face him sometime.'

His phone lit up and Yuuri saw Phichit's message in all-caps: **YOU DID WHAT?**

*Don't make me type it again.* /Y

*Well, I'm not surprised.* /P

*What?* /Y

*Considering how inseparable you both are, something was bound to happen.* /P

*He's my coach. We're...friends...?* /Y

*Want to bet?* /P

Okay, they weren't friends. And they weren't just coach and student. There was something else there. Somewhere amid his denial, Yuuri had known that for a while. He bonked his forehead against the desk, knowing there was no response he could give Phichit that his friend wouldn't immediately tag as bullshit. The silence became so thick around him that he nearly snapped his neck when he heard Makka's scratches on the door.

"I thought you were with Victor tonight," Yuuri said and let him in. He noticed Victor's door was opened halfway, light streaming into the hall. He looked down at Makka and immediately saw the note in his collar. With a shaky breath, he plucked it out and opened it: **It's okay. I didn't mind. Whenever you're ready.**

Yuuri stooped and scratched under Makka's chin; he adored how accommodating the dog was, "What do you think boy?" Makka licked his hand and left Yuuri's room back to Victor's. Yuuri took a few seconds to collect himself and then followed the poodle.

Victor was sitting at the edge of his bed, fondly petting Makka for being such a good boy. He looked up to find Yuuri sans glasses, his cheeks red and hair still wet. Victor's breath caught. It's not that he wasn't used to seeing Yuuri during or after a bath but tonight...it seemed felicitous.

"Hey Victor."

Victor let Makka settle at his feet, "Hey Yuuri."

Silence...and then Yuuri did the complete opposite of what he'd done the first time he'd met Victor. He went at top speed to the other end of spectrum and launched into a rant that Victor would later swear was gibberish.
"I'm so sorry about what happened tonight. I don't know what came over me. You're so stubborn sometimes. I just shut everything out and then... oh god, please... I'm grateful you're coaching me and being around you is great and spending time with you is strangely simple now and I really don't want to lose you..."

Victor blinked; at least drunk Yuuri talked in slow sentences, "I... did not catch any of that."

Yuuri attempted to start over but no more words would come. All his energy was siphoned out with that incomprehensible delivery and all that was left was lots of nervous fidgeting. Victor smiled and patted the empty space next to him. Yuuri took the three steps to him and sat down, feeling better when Victor automatically brushed some wet strands out of his face. He tipped Yuuri's chin, exactly as he had done the first time they'd met.

"I'm okay with it," Victor reassured him softly, "Honestly... if you didn't already know, I've wanted to kiss you for a long time."

"W-What?" Yuuri was sure he'd heard wrong.

"You didn't see it?" Victor chuckled, "I guess I had more restraint than I thought."

"I thought..." Yuuri took a deep breath, "I thought..." and the words failed him again.

"Tell me," Victor was whispering now.

"I thought you were flirting for the sake of it. I didn't expect... I didn't think you felt the same way."

Each word seemed to drain the air from Yuuri's lungs. Victor's hand moved to his cheek and he was so close now.

"Why wouldn't I? You're amazing Yuuri. I can't think of any other place I'd rather be than right here, with you."

Yuuri was rapidly getting lost in Victor's sparkling eyes, "Tell me why."

Everything is just so fucking monotonous now Yuuri...

"It isn't monotonous anymore. I feel... relaxed when I'm around you," Victor leaned in, "I feel free."

Yuuri let the words wash over him as he closed his eyes and felt Victor's lips touch his own. The tension melted from Yuuri's body as Victor cupped his cheeks and worked his mouth in slow, deliberate motions. Yuuri didn't know what he had expected when he'd stepped into Victor's room but it wasn't this pleasant reciprocation; the man seemed so composed, so sure that this was okay and what could Yuuri do now except to stop denying the part of him that insisted this was exactly where he should be.

They stayed that way for a long time, not rushing, not diving into more provocative territory, content to enjoy the first layer of this wonderful place they'd stumbled upon. When they finally parted, forehead to forehead, Yuuri had to say something.

"I could swear..." he whispered.

"What?"

"That we've..." Yuuri ran a shivering thumb along Victor's lower lip, "Sorry. I can't think."

Victor's heart fluttered; was the memory somehow residual? Did Yuuri recognize his kiss? "Neither can I," he planted a single sweet kiss on the side of Yuuri's mouth.

"Victor?"
"Yes Yuuri?"

"Can we sleep together tonight?"
A Man Who's Had an Epiphany

Chapter Notes

Do you think Christophe has flashbacks to Yuuri's thighs? I sure do.

Early morning after the Sochi Grand Prix Banquet

Victor stepped off the elevator, at the end of a long yawn. His body felt heavy, begging him to put himself to bed, but his mind was alive with his recent and worthwhile excursion into the world of Yuuri Katsuki. So many surprises in one night, Victor was finding it difficult to think straight. A public dance, a stolen kiss, an unexpected dissection of his life. He walked slowly, wishing a certain pair of hands were still on him, wishing he could spend a lifetime and then some with those velvety lips. More than anything, he wished he was still watching over Yuuri. He knew he had to leave the room but fuck, he hadn't wanted too.

He looked up to see Chris sauntering out of his own room, looking like a man who'd been satisfied ten times over. He chuckled at Victor's approach.

"Still up I see? Funny, I thought I was the nocturnal skater in the group now," Chris winked approvingly, "Dare I ask where you've been?"

Victor was all innocence and indifference, "Can't a man take a midnight stroll?"

"He can. Though I doubt it takes him three hours to get back to his room," he smiled, "It's been a long time Victor."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Please," he scoffed, "I barely keep my cock to myself on the ice, much less for off. You really think I can't see the way you're glowing? Someone made a fine dish out of you."

Victor smiled, "Some things never change, I guess."

"So tell me, how's our intoxicated Japanese skater doing tonight?"

Victor's lips twitched and Chris laughed, "C'mon Victor. I was headed downstairs for a drink. Join me."

They headed to the bar and Chris called from a bottle of their finest vodka. They took a couple shots as tradition. Chris poured the third with a curious smirk.

"Was he a good fuck?"

"Christophe," Victor sighed; he was more than used to the man's brusqueness but this hadn't been some cheap one-night stand and talking about Yuuri that way irked him, "I didn't sleep with the man. He's transcended drunk," Victor rolled his eyes when Chris stared at his lips, "He jumped me at the door."

"And, of course, you took your piece," Chris delighted in Victor's selective reticence, "Okay Victor.
I'll cut you some slack if you tell me one thing."

"What?"

"Why do you look like a man who's had an epiphany?"

Victor tipped back his drink and reached for the bottle, "I've missed these talks, I really have." It was only half sarcasm.

"Well, since you went celibate, there aren't many people to talk to at this hour of the morning. My dates are usually well and fucked and sleeping like babies."

Victor shrugged, "What can I say? I got tired of sneaking out of hotel rooms."

"Yet here we are."

"It wasn't deliberate this time. Which part of 'he's drunk' don't you understand?"

"So...you would've stayed under less questionable circumstances?"

Victor poured another drink in silence. Chris studied him with a knowing grin.

"He's an amazing dancer. Gorgeous ass, legs to sink your teeth in," the possessive look on Victor's face was a thing of beauty to Chris, "Well aren't you just smitten."

Victor savored the vodka, "He won't remember when he wakes up. I don't think it matters as much as you think it does."

"Oh Victor, we've known each other for a long time. Everyone at the banquet probably thought you were resurrecting your past persona but I saw the way you looked at Yuuri. You can't lie to me," Chris was thoughtful, "Did you imagine what he would look like on the ice with that fire in his blood?"

"I'm still imagining it."

Chris nodded sincerely, a rare gesture he reserved for his and Victor's relationship, "Well, I think I've made my point," he slid off the high chair, "Goodnight Victor, always a pleasure."

"Goodnight. Thanks for the drink."

"Anytime."

Victor took a final shot of vodka for the hell of it. He ran a finger along the rim of the glass, feeling each and every crack that had formed in his heart over the course of that conversation. He sighed and looked at the...time...

"Oh fuck," Victor muttered; his watch was gone.

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**Present**

Victor blinked awake as his alarm sounded. He patted along the side table awkwardly before he located his phone and squinted at it. Five a.m., the usual time he started his mornings in Hasetsu. The tiny, annoyed groan that vibrated along his shoulder blade clearly did not approve of the intrusive noise. He turned it off and felt the length of Yuuri's body relax against him again.
He had no desire to get out of bed today.

*Can we sleep together tonight...*

*I...I don't want to overwhelm you...*

*I know...but I need to stay...*

Need. He needed to stay close to Victor. The only response he could muster at that point was a nod. He'd been prepared to let Yuuri take refuge in his own room, allow him to internalize the night's developments, maybe sneak around with him in the morning for more kisses. But here Yuuri was, wrapped around Victor, their legs intertwined, his hand laying peacefully on his thigh.

He listened to Yuuri breathing, the act creating little circles of heat through his t-shirt that quickly dissipated before being replaced by another soothing one. It was a pleasant sensation, intimate, and he found himself hoping to always wake up amidst this kind of serenity.

Yuuri's hand spasmed gently against him as he shifted, cuddling closer, his lips brushing against Victor's neck before he settled back into the pillow. The connection was transient, negligible even, one of a hundred kisses they'd shared in the last few hours. But Victor's mind went still, his breathing became heavier, and his heart pulsed with a kind of maddening force. It was surreal. Victor couldn't understand how these little things were affecting him so.

'It's because he looks at you now. He kissed you. He's sharing your bed. It's more than you ever dreamed would happen.'

He reached under the blanket and laced his fingers with Yuuri's, pulling his arm around his chest, wanting to get lost in this feeling, lost in Yuuri's arms, lost in the comfort and simplicity of it all. He wondered if he could feasibly call off practice today so they could stay in this wonderful bubble. Imagine what everyone would think if they never made it downstairs.

"Mmmph..." Yuuri grumbled against him.

Victor wasn't sure if that meant he was up. He gave it a few seconds and smiled when Yuuri mumbled sleepily.

"Alarm. Too loud."

"Sorry," Victor had hoped it wouldn't pull Yuuri from sleep, "I forgot to reset it last night. I know you hate waking up this early."

Yuuri accepted the apology by placing a small kiss on his back that warmed Victor's whole body, "Morning run? I need another..." he tried to stifle a yawn and failed, "...two hours. Minimum."

"Not today," Victor turned so he could face Yuuri. The younger skater's hand went around his waist, inadvertently thumbing at the waistband of his pants. His eyes were closed, there was a faint smile on his lips, and his hair was scattered in an appealing way across his forehead. It was rather sexy, Victor decided. He felt the Sochi monster growling; it had been mild-mannered last night, allowing them both space to acclimatize, but now, as the reality of Yuuri lying next to him continued to invade his senses, his pupils dilated, he licked his lips, and his inner voice took a rare backseat. With nothing to stop him, he slid a hand to the nape of Yuuri's neck, pulled him forward, and woke the man up with a open-mouthed kiss that brought forth a moan more delicious than anything Yuuri had sounded the night of the banquet.

"Victor, god..." Yuuri breathed before sliding his tongue along his own. Victor felt a hand move
under his t-shirt, leisurely and methodically mapping his skin. He felt a rush of emotions; no one had ever touched him like that, like he was something to be treasured. A fire blazed in him and he adjusted his position so he straddled Yuuri, balancing on his right hand as he drove his tongue into Yuuri's mouth with heated desperation.

Their boundary was further eroded with Yuuri ripping Victor's shirt off before pulling him back to his lips, fighting the sleepiness to enjoy the rapturous feel of Victor on top him. His silver fringe tickled his cheeks, and Yuuri ran a hand through it to the back of his head before tugging in an untamed motion so he could access Victor's neck. He felt the man gulp, experienced the soft vibrations as Victor murmured in Russian and came to terms with Yuuri's own greed. He keened at the velvety lips, the slow graze of teeth, the impatient and relentless sucking that made him forget to breathe.

The creation of a second mark on the base of his throat sent Victor over the edge. He pulled Yuuri into a sitting position with him, discarded the man's shirt in one swift motion, pressed their bare skin together, and locked him in a vicious kiss. The nails on his back were fucking glorious.

"Yuuri..." Victor combed through his hair, his breath shallow as Yuuri bit into his lower lip.

"Good morning..."

"To you too," Victor felt a familiar pressure both in his pants and below him. He glanced at Yuuri's hands running along his pants and immediately registered the way they wavered against him. He moved the hair from Yuuri's face, and found confirmation of the faint hesitance in his eyes. Oh Yuuri. With a fierce inner resolve, he promptly hushed the monster within him. The mad urge needed restraint. That restraint was wherever Yuuri drew the line. He took his hands and kissed them in turn before getting off his lap. He waited for Yuuri to settle back on the bed with him and then pulled the blanket around them. Yuuri looked mildly amazed by his intuitive movements.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry-"

Victor wasn't having it; he cut Yuuri off with a swift kiss, "Yuuri, let me be clear, I will never ask or expect you to do something you don't want to do. I'm happy wherever you're happy. If you're uncomfortable, you can tell me."

"This is fine, this morning was fine," Yuuri nuzzled his shoulder to show his relief, "It's not that I don't...I just started wondering if...have you ever been with someone?"

"Yes."

Yuuri figured that would be the answer and it wasn't so bad now that it was out in the open, "Men? Women?"

"Both," Victor said plainly; there was no reason to lie to Yuuri about this, "You?"

"Men. But...not sex."

Victor kissed his forehead, "There's no rush Yuuri. Besides, I want to enjoy getting to know this side of you."

Yuuri blushed. What was with Victor always meeting him halfway? He seemed to go out of his way to care for him, so much so that he'd left behind the only home and the only thing he'd ever known to travel to Japan and befriend him. The thought made Yuuri recall a certain question from their first
early morning together.

"Victor, can you tell me something?"

"Hmm?"

"Why is all this worth more than your career?"

Well, where to start? There's you surprising me twice in the same night. Then inspiring me with Aria: Stay Close To Me. Then again with your resolve. And your lips. And us sleeping together. And waking up together.

Victor figured this was a good time to come clean a bit, "I watched you skate in Sochi. I didn't know why it made me so angry until I realized that you belonged on the podium."

"W-what?" Yuuri paled, "But...I fucked up. I-"

"No. No," Victor reached out to his distressed face, "Yuuri, it's not always about the technical you know. The body has to be in-tune with the music and you were, except it didn't reach your eyes or heart. Your mom told me about Vicchan, so I understand why you were nervous and distracted. I just...I needed you to see what I saw," he kissed Yuuri's nose, "Do you know why I chose On Love: Eros for your short program? Because I know it's there Yuuri. You have no idea the eros you possess."

"You make it sound so simple..."

Victor felt his hand tremble as he remembered the way Yuuri had latched onto him at the banquet, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." No hesitance.

Victor trailed his fingers along Yuuri's lips, "It's the same reason you're producing your free skate. I want you to embody the music. I want to see you skate like...like your heart is on fire.

You dance...like your heart...is on fire...

"Don't you mean dance?" Yuuri said offhandedly.

"What? 'God Yuuri, your subconscious is going to kill me.'

"Oh, never mind. Stray thought I guess," Yuuri sighed, "I've been concentrating on the quads too much haven't I?"

Victor summoned his best Yakov impression, "Welcome to the point I was trying to make yesterday."

Yuuri groaned and then yawned as his drowsiness started to overtake him again. He draped a leg over Victor's own and made a pillow out of his shoulder. Victor's hands encircled him, running along his back and through his hair, and he hummed softly as Yuuri's breathing settled. The tender motions lulled Yuuri back to sleep.

"The dreams don't do this justice," Yuuri murmured.

Victor smirked, "Dreams?" but Yuuri had dozed off. Victor gracefully archived that tidbit for future use.
Victor awoke to a face full of fur. He automatically scratched at Makka's head, and the poodle licked his chin and stretched across his chest with a lovable whine.

"Yuuri?" he murmured but all he got in response was Makka's mild bark. He rubbed his eyes and focused on his dog's collar; he smiled at the note sitting there: I didn't want to wake you, you looked so peaceful. I'll be at Ice Castle. Btw...thank you.

"Did you sleep on my face to make sure I'd get this?" Victor got up and hugged Makka who looked absolutely pleased with himself, "Thank you for being there for Yuuri."

He looked over at the space next to him, the blankets still tousled from last night. He strayed into a reverie but it was no longer orchestrated by that faithful night in Sochi. It was now filled to bursting with the mark Yuuri had etched on him on last night, literally and figuratively. He felt brand new emotions flowing through him, things he'd ignored for two decades, feelings he didn't think existed until Yuuri.

He checked his phone as he hurried out of bed. Twelve forty-five. Victor couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in this late. He felt sure that the reason Yuuri hadn't woke him was because they'd probably never have left the room. They'd been in and out of sleep all morning, unable to keep their hands off each other. He relished in the memory, took a quick bath, got dressed in record time, and barely managed to grab his equipment as he hustled out the door, Makka right on his heels.

On my way. And, you're welcome. ν

So one-track was his mind, busy typing the message and wanting to get to Ice Castle to meet Yuuri, he nearly collided with Hiroko as he came down the stairs.

"Sorry about that," he steadied himself, "I wasn't looking."

"That's okay Victor," she was all smiles, "Yuuri headed out about an hour ago. He said his music was ready and he'd wait for you at the rink to listen to it. But before you go," she took his hands as only a mother could, "have some lunch. I'll put together something for you to take for Yuuri."

Victor couldn't remember the last time he'd been on the receiving end of such maternal warmth. Something about her made him feel very homey, so he followed her and made no fuss as she went about serving him lunch.

"So," she said, her cheerfulness never fading, "Minako told me there was some excitement at the rink yesterday."

"That's one word for it," Victor heard himself say. He blushed (and the times that has happened could still be counted on one hand) and shook his head apologetically, "That was extremely rude, I'm sorry-"
She looked amused, "That's quite alright. And just so we get it out of the way, I'm not trying to interrogate you Victor. My Yuuri's smiles have been brighter everyday since you became his coach. As far as I'm concerned, you're one of the best things to ever happen to him."

Victor was unprepared for all this extra attention from Yuuri's mother, especially presented so delightfully matter-of-fact, "That's very kind of you. It's been wonderful getting to know him. As for coaching him, I just want to show him who he already is."

"Yes...he's always struggled with his confidence," Hiroko looked deeply affected by that fact, "But he still works so hard. We've all missed him terribly but we're more proud of him than he knows."

"There's a lot to be proud of," Victor said, "And I say that both as his coach and his...um..."

"Boyfriend?"

Victor promised himself to never disappoint this amazing woman, "Well, Yuuri hasn't labeled it. Us. This. Um, it's entirely up to him. I want him to be comfortable with everything going forward."

She once again took his hand and beamed at him with admiration, "You don't need to look so nervous. You've asked about Yuuri before and as much as you tried to pass it off as research for your coaching, I could see it plain as day. I know how you feel about him. And from what I know about this side of Yuuri and what I've gathered about you, you both need each other more than you're letting on."

"Gathered about me?" he asked curiously.

She smiled in a way that told him he couldn't fool her, "I've run this hot-spring for a long time. You get a good sense of people after a while. I can see the loneliness in you. I see the hesitation to open up to people. You use your charm to make people think they've gotten under your skin, and that's fine. I'm sure you have your reasons. Everyone is entitled to live their life to their choosing," she gave his hand a little squeeze, "My only request is to please take care of each other. Yuuri's never opened up like this before and I'll gladly wager that neither have you."

Victor hadn't cried since that night in Sochi but this exchange brought him very close. He gave a grateful nod and ate his pork cutlet bowl, wondering how a place he'd only spent a few weeks in could feel so much more like home than Russia.

"That was very good," Minako said, handing Yuuri his water bottle, "I've never seen you so relaxed. I assume everything went well with Victor?"

Yuuri was flushed, partly from practice, "Something like that."

"How modest. Last I checked, neither of you have been this late to practice. Ever."

"Is everyone keeping tabs on us?"

"Like you need to ask."

Yuuri gave a private smile and didn't say anymore but Minako saw it, the exact same look she'd seen on Victor's face when they spoke that first night. In all the years she'd spent instructing Yuuri, never once did he exhibit this kind of open desire. Even when they'd skyped while he was in Detroit, and Yuuri had hesitantly reveals minor details about his attempt at a relationship, his words had been devoid of sentiment. It seemed he'd delved into the territory more out of curiosity than endearment, and quickly exited each scenario because, in his words, it wasn't for him. Now, Minako felt solace in
Yuuri's new demeanor; as much as it had pained her to hand over money to Hiroko, the woman knew her son.

Please. *It's all about having the right person in front of you. Yuuri will make the first move, I guarantee it...*

You're insane! Victor is a rock star. I'm sure he's used to getting his way. *Not that I'm saying he'd take advantage of Yuuri but he doesn't exactly hide the way he feels...*

*Victor Nikiforov would like us all to believe he's a rock star. Just you wait. Yuuri will surprise you all...*

Minako smiled at how easily she'd been duped. Victor was a lot of things, but when it came to Yuuri he was just himself. And whatever had happened between them before Hasetsu had instilled some level of self-discipline in the way he approached Yuuri. He would never have made that first move. He'd wanted Yuuri to come to him, if he wanted too, if he possibly felt the same way.

They brought out the best in each other and she was confident that it was all either of them really needed.

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The way Yuuri skated to Victor as he entered the rink would have anyone believe they hadn't just spent the night together. Victor, as he always did, tucked some of Yuuri's flyaway strands behind his ear.

"Your mom sent you this," he held up a small care package, "Want to have some before we continue?"

"Not yet. Can you hand me my phone and headphones?" Yuuri gave Victor the right earpiece, "We forgot about the music after all." Victor chuckled and leaned against Yuuri as he scrolled through his phone excitedly.

They listened intently to the piece. Yuuri watched Victor with baited breath while the latter shut his eyes with a concentrated frown. He lit up as it went on and then nodded in full approval. The rousing piano was perfect and he could already envision what Yuuri would become on the ice with this music serenading him.

"Will you show it to me?" Victor whispered, his breath inviting on Yuuri's lips. Yuuri chased it with a quick kiss and took position at the center of the ice. This routine was personal, meant to show his journey as a skater, his hardships, failures, determination and, above all, his hope. Victor became entranced as Yuuri skated; the difference in passion from the night before was making him see stars.

*It filled me with hope. Maybe one day I'll feel that kind of freedom. Maybe one day you'll show it on the ice...*

'It hasn't been twenty four hours. The improvement in his form is incredible. Is this...is it us Yuuri?*

He clutched his chest, slowly forgetting the basics of inhale, exhale. It was in that moment, watching the super nova that was Yuuri Katsuki, that Victor Nikiforov fell hopelessly in love with him.

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After practice, Minako had suggested they celebrate his best session yet with a night out at some new lounge she was dying to patronize. He'd said yes, mostly because Victor looked ready to let off some steam but still rolled his eyes as dramatically as he could when Minako gushed about the fun they were going to have.
"Minako, this isn't going to be a repeat of-"

"Yuuri! You swore we'd never speak about that again!"

"Yes well, I'm just making sure-"

"Oh, so you've forgotten about your little incident that night-"

"Minako!"

He smirked at the way Victor had pouted himself into a minor fit as he tried not to outright beg Yuuri to tell him the secret. Yuuri had dodged every question, not even relenting when Victor attempted to lick the truth from him. That was too good a story to give up for free, he'd said. Victor's eyes had darkened seductively at the challenge.

Yuuri was now spending more time than his entire life combined choosing from his already bare wardrobe, convincing himself that he was just being thorough in his choice of clothes. It was a thinly veiled lie to himself; even though Victor had practically seen him in everything he owned, save for maybe two dressier shirts, some semi-casual t-shirts and some jeans, being together with Victor in public always rattled his nerves a little.

He pulled on a deep blue, long sleeved shirt over a pair of black jeans that he hadn't worn in ages. He fixed his hair like he usually did when skating (Victor often commented how handsome he looked with that style), and rolled the sleeves up to the elbow.

"What do you think Makka?" Yuuri pressed his hands against the fabric and did a turn to make sure he looked presentable. The poodle gave a sleepy bark that he took as approval.

"Yuuri!"

'Shit, have I been up here that long?'

"You can come in Victor."

Yuuri glanced behind as he walked in then did a cartoonish double-take. The universe didn't amply prepare him for the sight of Victor in a blazer. Somehow the addition of that one piece of clothing accentuated the entirety of him. He looked positively edible. It reminded him of...well...the banquet. It wasn't a full suit but from the waist up, it was too similar not to acknowledge. Yuuri made an unidentifiable noise as he remembered not being able to look in Victor's direction during the Sochi Grand Prix. How times had changed.

It was only when he managed to look from Victor's body to his face that he noticed the same brazen hunger playing out in his blue eyes. Yuuri was quickly realizing that his initial hesitation that morning on taking things further probably wouldn't last as long as he thought. They gravitated to each other and indulged in a rather messy kiss that tasted strikingly of whiskey.

"You've been drinking," Yuuri didn't wait for a response. He was too intoxicated by Victor's cologne and how the tipsy Russian shamelessly dug his fingers into his hips.

"You were taking forever. If I'd known I would've stayed up here," he lined Yuuri's jawline with half bites, half kisses before nipping playfully at his earlobe.

"Am I going to meet drunk Victor tonight?"

"If you want," Victor loosened two of his buttons, moving the shirt past Yuuri's shoulder so he could lay a matching bite meant only for his eyes. The uncontrollable moans and the way Yuuri held his head right on the spot was all the response Victor needed.
Victor trailed kisses along his collarbone as he fixed Yuuri's shirt, "A prelude, if you will."

That prelude was Yuuri's first step in constructing his personal definition of eros.

The lounge was just bright enough that all the colors periodically flashed against the walls gave a striking, if not somewhat dizzying effect. Both Victor and Minako had gone through half a bottle of whiskey before he'd checked on Yuuri and were now loud, excited and ready for more drinks. Yuuri's favorite part of all the craziness was Victor being extra close to him, playing with his hair, kissing his neck, trailing his fingers under his shirt, on the small of his back, whispering exceptionally dirty things every couple minutes. It kept Yuuri in a pleasant bubble, and he slyly made note of Victor's words for later use.

Minako, being her usual outgoing self, was surrounded by several swooning men before they got through their first drink. She was absolutely beautiful, there was no doubt about it but Yuuri still fixed her with a mock scowl for the good old days. He forgot to pretend to be annoyed when Victor put a suggestive hand around his waist and handed him a shot.

"You were brilliant today Yuuri," Victor's hand slid down to his ass, "Stunning. I can't wait to see you compete."

"I still have *On Love: Eros* to work on. We're not out of the woods yet."

"I love it when you get all serious about your programs," Victor cooed in his ear. As loud as the music was, Yuuri found it all too easy to shut out the noise save for Victor's praise. He took the shot and kissed Victor with a wide smile, not really caring who watched them.

"May I steal your Russian beau for a minute?" Minako drew Victor away from Yuuri, "Time to make some men drool."

Yuuri could only laugh as Victor gave him a parting wink and happily followed Minako to enjoy some friendly spectacle creation. He sat at the bar, ordered another drink and soaked in his ballet instructor and his...hmm...what exactly were they now?

Boyfriend? The word felt strange in his mind much less if he said it out loud. The label felt lacking, not nearly sufficient to sum up what Victor meant to him. He'd spent his life looking up to Victor, and then weeks as his student, and now, lots of lips and hands and heat. Yuuri wasn't sure how or why things had fallen into place like this, and it did scare him a little, but things felt...right. For now, he focused on that feeling.

Yuuri drank a second shot, admiring Victor in his inebriation, the way his hair flowed with him as he moved, how tight his pants became in all the right places as he and Minako incorporated their respective skating and ballet expertise. His smile was blinding, and when he looked over at Yuuri, he bit very obviously into his lower lip. Just for him.

Unfortunately, his antics was attracting the attention of other patrons and Yuuri began noticing the way they were staring at Victor, fantasizing, lusting after him. Him dancing with Minako was one thing; the woman had a low threshold to all things gorgeous but she was nothing but platonic with Victor. The people around them did not share that constraint and looked read to pounce. Yuuri, to say the least, was not amused.

He took another two shots in succession, driving the louder voices out of his head that would've kept him safely at the bar. He marched over to Victor, pulled the man towards him and dipped him in one smooth motion. Victor could feel the wild storm raging in the younger skater.
"Let's make everyone in here jealous."

Victor's eyes sparkled in the lights, "Lead the way Yuuri."

They moved instinctively into what was an almost replicated version of the banquet dance. Victor immediately recognized where Yuuri was taking him, and surrendered to his most favorite moment ever. Their moves made no sense with the current music, and the sexual undertones were more palpable than Sochi, but the crowd they attracted didn't seem to care. They were cheered on, with Minako being the most exuberant supporter of their display.

"You dance like your heart is on fire," Yuuri whispered when they were once again cheek to cheek.

"It is Yuuri," Victor saw only starlight, "It burns for you."

"Did we meet each other in a past life?"

"I fucking hope so. Wouldn't have been nearly as exciting without you."

"Victor..." Yuuri's voice was filled with memory, "Have we danced before?"

Victor nodded; he didn't give in because of the alcohol, he simply couldn't lie to a direct question like that from Yuuri. A pause, a disbelieving laugh and then a full carefree grin later he held onto Victor and brought their lips together, oblivious to the roar from everyone around them.
The drive home, while uneventful, made Yuuri appreciate the little things in his life. Minako, the
drunkest of the trio, linked her arm with his and dozed off on his shoulder, mumbling how
eventhing it was to see him look so happy, and how beautiful he and Victor looked together, and
maybe they should make these nights out a regular thing. Yuuri snorted at that, but then Victor kissed
the crown of her hair and he instantly lightened up. Good thing he'd stopped at six shots, it would've
been a shame to forget how natural this all felt.

After bribing Victor with a generous kiss because the man seemed adverse to any kind of space
between them tonight, Yuuri guided Minako into her apartment and sat her on the couch. She lay
down right there and closed her eyes, ready to drift to sleep. Yuuri found a blanket and covered her,
leaving medication and water on the coffee table for when she inevitably woke up with a hangover.
"Thanks for tonight Minako. For once, you meddled right." The barely audible 'hmph' signaled that
she had heard him.

When the taxi deposited the two men at home, Yuuri tried to sneak them as quietly as he could into
Yu-topia, a ridiculously difficult endeavor because Victor refused to be more than an inch away from
him at any given moment. He insisted on distracting him with wonderfully sloppy kisses that made
Yuuri giggle before he remembered that they really needed to make it upstairs before they woke
anyone. Victor's intoxication was manageable enough (he certainly handled his alcohol better than
Yuuri); he was still in charge of his senses but his impulse control was completely shot. He only
seemed interested in languorously touching Yuuri, ignoring all the other immediate priorities in front
them. Yuuri couldn't deny that it was driving him crazy; any excuse to have Victor's hands on him
was worth it. But there wasn't much they could do being exposed like this.

"Victor, don't go up the stairs backwards," Yuuri scolded. He really wanted to avoid injury on both
their parts but Victor wasn't listening in the slightest; his hands were under Yuuri's shirt and he
buried his face in Yuuri's hair.

"You smell amazing zvezda moya," his words were singsong and Yuuri hadn't the slightest idea
what he'd said in Russian, but it sounded beautiful and flustered his heartbeat. He was acutely aware
of how tight the front of Victor's pants was becoming, feeling the bulge pressing against his thigh,
and seriously, how was Yuuri supposed to maneuver them anywhere with Victor obviously so
aroused, pressed against him, slowly grinding his hips forward. He took a deep breath and continued
moving, almost missing a step because Victor's tongue was gliding along his jaw as he whispered
more endearments, in English and Russian, that ate away at Yuuri's sanity.

They eventually made it to Victor's room, locked in a raging kiss that Yuuri initiated at the top of the
stairs because the teasing Russian had murmured something about how dexterous he was. Shoes
were haphazardly kicked off, Victor's jacket was impatiently tossed away, and they struggled to
unbutton each other's goddamn shirts which, with no light and blood rushing south, felt like the
longest task they'd ever undertaken. Victor pulled Yuuri's own off first, and backed him as
noiselessly as he could into the wall.
"Where's our boundary tonight Yuuri?" Victor's hand raked against his chest and the only thing stopping Yuuri from declaring 'There's none!' was his own common sense in taking manageable bites of this still new closeness. Small steps, or Yuuri would lose his mind.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, discarding Victor's shirt, pulling him close, enjoying the flush that spread all the way to his chest.

Victor smiled, his hands making quick work of loosening Yuuri's pants, "Another prelude," he tugged it down, slipped a hand into his boxers and watched Yuuri's eyes roll back with sharp breath, "Is that okay?"

"Please."

Victor's hand was around his hard, throbbing cock and fuck, did it feel good. His strokes were deliberately slow, as though gauging for a reaction which came in the form of a dirty kiss that momentarily stayed Victor's hand as Yuuri bit hard into his bottom lip, and swirled his tongue over his own. It was demanding, forceful and something inside him snapped at the possessiveness of it. Victor dropped low, roughly pulling Yuuri's boxers and pants past his knees, his tongue darting to the curve of Yuuri's cock. Yuuri swallowed the moans, hushed the whimpers because if he dared to open his mouth, he'd wake the whole town.

"Victor..." Yuuri gasped, the slow burn of his tongue circling his tip, moving across the length of him, laving down to his balls was so fucking overpowering and Yuuri couldn't breathe and holy shit, what could possibly feel more divine than this? He wanted to fuck that perfect, teasing, manipulative mouth right now. How Victor was restraining himself under all this heat, all these new sensations, hearing Yuuri say his name like that, was a miracle in itself. He glanced up, made eye contact with him, saw the unbridled hunger, the fire, the shameless need. Fuck, Yuuri looked gorgeous, begging without saying a damn word. Still watching, he took Yuuri into his mouth, trying to hold his hips as he instantly bucked forward. Yuuri barely managed to contain his whine, his hands tugging at Victor's hair as the man worked him talented mouth around his cock.

"Fuck," Yuuri grabbed one of Victor's hands, almost fighting to pull it away so he could surge forward. Victor was stronger here though, and Yuuri found he couldn't concentrate very long on any one thing, the rhythm of Victor's sucking too deep, too exquisite, too fucking mind altering. He surrendered to it, covering his face, wanting to scream Victor's name, wanting to scream a lot of things actually. He was so close now, so close, just like that, don't stop Victor, keep going...

The pleasure blazed like a wildfire and the strength of it escaped Victor's grip as he hit the back of his throat and came with a blinding force. Victor wrapped his arms around Yuuri's hips and took it all, letting the wave settle, waiting for Yuuri to buckle slightly before getting to his feet and holding him tight. They both stood breathing heavily, sweat mingling between them, a warm buzz about their bodies.

"Shower?" Victor whispered with all the energy he had left.

"Not yet, let me take care of you."

Victor chuckled, guiding Yuuri's hand to his crotch; the pressure had subsided and the area was unmistakably damp, "Technically, you already did." Yuuri rested his forehead against Victor's chest but not before Victor noticed, with much amusement, the short but smug grin that crossed his face.

(Exclusive) Victor Nikiforov and Yuuri Katsuki heat things up.
Five time World Champion back to his playboy ways?

Victor Nikiforov's career is ruined. Here's why.

Why Yuuri Katsuki will never qualify for another Grand Prix.

From bottom of the ranks to the arms of a World Champion (it's one way to win gold!)

A storm brewed in the online world. Many of the pictures were shrouded in neon lights and hampered by the endless photobombs but there was no mistaking who the two men were. They'd both made quite the splash after Victor announced himself as Yuuri's coach but that general conversation had faded considerably, until now. The stories, varying from the practical to the downright obscene, spread like wildfire across the internet.

Phones were beeping around the world. Chris scrolled through the articles, not caring about the words, only the pictures. He grinned, and sent a message to Victor: 

*I guess it mattered more than you thought it did. Btw, I'm always open to a threesome *wink*/C

Yuri Plisetsky could not believe what he was looking at. Was Victor out of his fucking mind? He left his career for *this*? He should be in St. Petersburg, on the ice with him. He shook with rage as the articles kept pouring in and dialed Yakov, obscenities thick in his mind.

"EXPLAIN THIS SHIT TO ME!" He yelled as his coach picked up.

Yakov sighed, "Language Yuri."

"NOT TONIGHT OLD MAN! TELL ME WHY VICTOR IS CAVORTING AROUND WITH THAT...THAT..."

Yakov had seen the meat of the stories and he'd expected Yuri to be pissed, "Victor does what he wants. You should know that by now." Yuri continued to rant but Yakov knew better than to take his words at face value. He pinched the bridge of his nose, shutting out the shouting as best he could. He concentrated on how happy Victor looked in the pictures. That had been his first observation. Perhaps it wasn't so bad that he'd taken the season off.

Phichit was screaming, so thankful that Celestino wasn't in the rink to see him abandon his practice. The pictures were so good! There was even a video?! Holy shit, Yuuri had moves! And...oh...that kiss! Phichit felt relief flood him. Yuuri had always been a conundrum, closed off, difficult to get to know. Unlike so many others, Phichit had the world of patience for him because Yuuri was actually a really nice guy and a good friend. He typed a frantic message, as fast as his fingers would allow:

*YUURI, LET ME KNOW WHEN WE CAN TALK ABOUT THIS, MESSAGE ME SOON OKAY!*/P

Yuuri lay awake, his fingers running of its own accord along Victor's arm. The Russian was sprawled over him, his face buried in the curve of his neck, his snores not as annoying as it could be since Yuuri was already up. He felt for his phone, sure it was around six a.m. by now. He hadn't gotten much sleep, keeping watch over Victor in case he woke up during the night with headaches or otherwise.

'Oh,' Yuuri realized when he couldn't locate the device, *I left it in my pants.' He exhaled, satisfied by the memory of last night. He was loathe to leave the bed but he really needed to get some water for them both, and use the bathroom. He gently extricated himself from Victor, whispering his intentions as the man stirred. Yuuri's words seem to soothe him back into slumber, and he planted a soft kiss on his shoulder in thanks.
He located his jeans in the pile from last night, pulled his phone from the pocket, and swiped into an onslaught of messages. His phone was vibrating as he held it. ‘Huh? Did something happen?’ he thought, clicking on Phichit’s own first and clamped his hand over his mouth to prevent from screeching. So many pictures, various video clips, reports...oh fuck. Victor and him dancing and kissing the night away in Hasetsu. Shaking now, he typo-ed a browser search to see how much damage had been done. Yuuri leaned weakly against the chair; it was fucking everywhere. There were even several reporters in his inbox requesting statements on his and Victor’s relationship and how it would affect the upcoming season.

Fuck, it was the viral video all over again. No, no this was worse. How could he be so careless? Everything ultimately found its way onto social, even in a small town like Hasetsu.

And Yuuri felt it right then. Panic. Small at first, like a pin prick. Then, festering, consuming, roaring in his bones. It grew and grew as he opened more articles, and read through more emails, until his mind short circuited and all he could feel was the pain in his chest as he approached hyperventilation. He exited Victor’s room, swaying as he walked to his own, barely noticing that Makka followed him closely. He sat down on his chair, and rubbed his chest, taking long, shaky breaths in an effort to calm down. The last time he’d felt like this was Sochi. After he had humiliated himself. And he had ranked last. Yuuri choked as he recollected the moment.

’Oh god. What if...what if I fail again? They're all convinced I will. What will that do to Victor? A year wasted...because of me.’

The thought made him convulse, made him doubt his choices. No amount of reasoning could backtrack his thinking now. This brought him right back to reality. His reality. The one where he couldn't see past his own incapacitated view of himself. The past two months blurred into the background and Yuuri once again found himself on the floor of that bathroom at the Grand Prix, crying into his knees. The memory bled into his present, sending him spiraling. He wasn't calming down. Oh god. He wanted to throw up. The tears came, hot and devastating as he choked.

He'd accepted the reality of Victor coaching him, easing into it, and then easing into this new feeling without stopping to think how it would affect them. How it would affect Victor. Why? Because of some past encounter he still couldn't wrap his mind around? Look where it had gotten them. Look at the position Victor was in. The things they said about him...

Yuuri couldn't take it anymore. He was crying too much to see or think straight. His head was spinning out of control. Distance. He needed distance. He got dressed, took his equipment and sprinted past Victor’s room with a heartache that threatened to consume him.

It took endless barks and nudges and then an outright defiant jump on his back for Makka to wake Victor. The fresh burst of pain finally dug him from sleep. He reached behind him, absently petting at his disgruntled dog.

"What is it boy?" Victor felt around him and found himself alone. He got off the bed, watching Makka bark wildly and shuffle to the door as though itching to head out. There weren't any notes in his collar. Victor stared in confusion, wondering where Yuuri had gone. Only when he located his phone did he finally understand the commotion. Fuck. Oh fuck. Victor looked through his notifications, getting more incensed by the second. He cursed himself for not taking this into consideration before they headed out last night; he was used to the public’s drivel but Yuuri definitely wasn't.

With an infuriated growl he jumped into the first pair of sweats and jacket in his line of sight, rushing out of Yu-topia into the early morning chill. He bicycled to Ice Castle, Makka right with him, his
mind racing. Yuuri hadn't left a text or a Makka note and Victor knew something wasn't right. How much of that shit did he read? He should've warned Yuuri, protected him, discussed with him the possibility of ending up a primary target for every forum, blog post and social commentary. Victor muttered angrily in Russian as he bolted through the door. Yuuko was there, her face a mask of worry.

"Victor! Yuuri called and begged me to come in. I think he wanted someone around, he looks awful," she held up her phone, "I just saw them. Those tabloids are disgusting."

"Is he okay?"

Yuuko had never heard Victor sound so enraged; he evidently didn't care about anyone or anything except Yuuri, "He hasn't said a word. He went straight on the ice," she handed him some skates without him having to ask, "Go ahead. I'll keep the place clear while you guys talk."

"Thanks Yuuko."

Yuuri glided along the ice, following no real formation or routine, just long movements that Victor knew was his way of attempting to regain his composure. He skated to meet him and as soon as they locked eyes, Yuuri broke into tears.

If Victor could, he would gladly ruin every one of those fucking reporters, "Yuuri..." he reached out and felt deep relief when Yuuri didn't pull away. He'd been preparing for all reactions, knowing how strained the situation was, "It's okay. It's all rubbish. It's okay, shhh."

He let Yuuri cry into his shoulder, gently rubbing his neck and back, holding him as close as possible so maybe Yuuri's rapid heartbeat would sync with his steadier one. He wasn't sure how long they stood there but at some point, Yuuri went quiet, and his breathing was less stunted.

"I'd cry too," Victor mused, "if I was as gorgeous as you. Those pictures were on point."

"This isn't funny Victor."

"The press, the forums, all of it, they see what they want to see. It doesn't mean anything Yuuri."

"Your reputation."

"Is very much intact because last I checked, you're stunning."

Yuuri knew what he was doing and wanted so much to allow the teasing to reel him in and make him feel better, but the panic was too potent. He pulled away from Victor, "How can you be so damn calm about this? What about your career?"

"That's also intact," Victor said slowly, hating the distance Yuuri put between them, "Being your coach doesn't mean I stop being a figure skater. Like I said, they'll write whatever gets them more hits."

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"They say I stole you," Yuuri said, his voice heavy and weary.

Victor broke into a grin against his better judgement, "Well, that's not entirely wrong."

"Can you be serious for one second, please," Yuuri took another couple steps back; he was starting to shake again, "Why are you only thinking about me?"

Yuuri was more than an arms length away now and Victor was becoming nervous, "Because I care
about you. Yuuri, I want to be here, coaching you, being with you.” Loving you, "What does it matter what anyone says or thinks? We both know better."

"It matters Victor! This,” Yuuri gestured to himself in a vertical motion, "is not worth more than you or your career. It isn't worth the things they called you. You being here with me will ruin you. This is a-"

"Stop."

Yuuri's eyes widened, startled by how vivid the anger was in Victor's voice but it still wasn't enough to bring him back from the edge, "Victor."

"No. Stop it. Because if you say what I think you're about too..." Victor sighed heavily, "Just. No."

"You can't tell me you didn't consider-"

"Yuuri."

"A liability to your career Victor, that's what-"

"No."

"You deserve better than-"

"That's enough Yuuri!" Victor was shouting now.

Yuuri matched him volume, "If you won't say it then I will! This is a mistake Victor!"

Victor shut his eyes and thought back to holding Yuuri's hand in Sochi. He thought to last night and Yuuri recognizing their dance. The memories flayed him. He fought the emotions, those fucking tears, that rawness that left him exposed. He couldn't show that to Yuuri, not now. His tone was tight, controlled, "Your routine yesterday was fucking flawless. I couldn't take my eyes off you. Not that I've ever had that problem, but something changed yesterday. We both know what that is. Don't you dare insinuate that I would think my coming here was a mistake."

"What if I made a mistake?" the words were out Yuuri's mouth, unfiltered and hurtful, "What if saying yes was a mistake? What about when the season starts? Would we have taken this to competition? You're Victor Nikiforov for fuck's sake."

Victor felt his heart retreat away from this havoc, "Are you...did you think there was an expiration date?" his eyes were cloudy, "Is that what you think of me? You think this is what I do? I go around attaching myself to people only to leave when it supposedly becomes inconvenient to me? Fuck Yuuri." He pulled out his phone, stared at it with that faraway look from the beach, and then handed it to Yuuri.

"The code is twenty eight ten. In my pictures, there's a folder labeled Grand Prix banquet. Keep the phone as long as you want. When you've calmed down and want to talk, let me know. But...not today. I...I can't look at you today."

Yuuri stood frozen, glancing from Victor's phone to his retreating figure with a strangled sob.
"FUCK!"

His profanity echoed through the empty rink. He didn't move from his current fallen position, feeling his body pulsate from the crashes he'd made over the last four hours. He botched every quad, swears flowing like a waterfall when he ended up on his ass after each attempt. He smashed his fist against the ice, ignoring the bruises that had already formed there from other similar bouts of rage. If he kept this up, he was going to injure himself. His feet were pleading with him to take the fucking skates off; he could feel a slight moisture around his toes that he knew was a mixture of sweat and blood.

His calves and thighs were jelly; they wouldn't hold up much longer under this kind of assault. His mind, which had churned itself into a mess after Victor left the rink, was now a desert of white noise. He'd loved skating since he was a boy, revered it when Yuuko first showed him a video of Victor dominating the ice, and then chased it relentlessly, trying to find equal ground with the Russian legend. He reflected wryly on the fact that skating was the only long term commitment he'd ever made. He rested his head on the ice, letting the cold seep in, letting himself go numb. He'd become so accustomed to having Victor there with him, a constant sight, his grounding, that being alone in the rink felt like some alien world. The space was eclipsed by melancholia and regret and it made Yuuri sick.

'Don't think about anything. Get up. Skate.'

He cursed again, wobbling as he got to his feet, and, completely ignoring that his body was running on fumes, worked into the speed and momentum for another quad. He failed. Miserably. His shoulder took the brunt of the impact and it hurt like fucking hell. He did it again and again until all that was left was physical pain, and the look on Victor's face when Yuuri demonstrated his utter lack of eloquence and sensitivity.

Victor didn't deserve that. Yuuri didn't think for a second that his coaching or their eros was a mistake. His consternation had ripped the word 'tact' right out of his vocabulary. But...he was worried, dreading that the things those assholes wrote would come to pass and cripple Victor's future. It could be for the best, him going back to Russia, rejoining that elite skating world he so obviously belonged in...

'But...you don't want him to leave. It would kill you.'

Yuuri clenched his fists. Of course he didn't want to lose Victor. He was only trying to...

'Hurt him. You were trying to hurt him. You wanted to give him a viable reason to walk away. You didn't even stop to think it through.'

He stumbled to his feet and found his guards, stepping off the ice for the first time that morning. His body crumpled against the barrier, knees creaking in gratitude. He took up Victor's phone, turning it over and over in his hands as though the secrets would fall out. It had stopped vibrating for the most
part. Yuuri stared at the unlock screen, hesitated, then put the phone down.

'Sochi? Is that where we danced Victor? How fucking drunk was I?'

Yuuri grabbed his phone instead, still too worked up to entertain any new information, even if he'd been craving those answers since his first encounter with Victor. What he needed right now was perspective. He messaged Phichit: *Hey...got some time to talk? /Y*

His phone rang a few seconds after and, as always, Phichit was his usual jovial self, "Yuuri! It's so good to hear from you! Oh my god, those pictures were amazing! And that video, I've never seen you move like that! Some of that belongs on the ice you know! Tell me you're incorporating it into your...Yuuri? Yuuri, are you there?"

It took Phichit a moment to hear the snifflies; Yuuri was quiet because he was crying. The sound troubled him, "Hey, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine," Yuuri was mortified that he'd broken down for what felt like the hundredth time that morning, but he could control the tears as much as he could control the weather, "It's n-nothing."

"Liar," Phichit said gently, "You overdosed on those stories didn't you?"

"They said Victor would never return to the ice, he's wasting his time when he should be in Russia, I'm just an excuse to take time off, no amount of coaching can bring me-"

"Yuuri, calm down. Take a deep breath for me," he listened as Yuuri did as he said, his breathing sounding like a man who'd almost drowned, "Okay another. Good. One more," he waited for him to normalize some, "Where are you?"

"The rink."

"You're there alone? Where's Victor?"

"I-I don't know."

Phichit frowned, "Did you guys get into a fight?"

"Y-yes," Yuuri blanched, "Phichit, the things I said...I blew it. I didn't mean too. The words just spilled out. But...he's better off, right? I'm not worth the risk. He can leave Hasetsu. He'll be free of this bullshit."

Phichit wished he was there with Yuuri, "Did Victor say that? Does he agree with any of it?"

"N-no but-"

"What exactly did you say to him?"

The guilt was like sludge in his bloodstream, "I told him it was a mistake. All of it."

"Yuuri," Phichit said patiently, "Remember when you first met me in Detroit? You were so shy and you seemed so surprised when I, in your words, put up with you. I just wanted to be your friend because, contrary to what you may think, you're pretty awesome. Now, multiply that mentality by the looks Victor was directing your way last night. Was that a mistake?"

"You've never met him Phichit," Yuuri said stubbornly, "He could be thinking-"

Phichit interrupted him again; he needed to force Yuuri out of this rut for him to see reason, "Yuuri, I
want you to tell me about the past month. We haven't talked in a while and I want all the details. So, fill me in on everything about you and Victor."

"Why?"

"Humor me. Please?"

Yuuri sighed, "Okay."

Phichit knew bits and pieces since they kept each other updated via messages, but this was about the bigger picture. Yuuri started off his story professional enough, a lot of technical details and getting attuned to rigorous sessions that tested his strength and stamina. Slowly, because Phichit knew it hurt to talk about Victor at a time like this, Yuuri began mentioning him, talking about his remarkable choreography skills and how incredible it was that they produced his free program together. Victor didn't act like a coach, and he was a manipulative and petty bastard when he wanted to be, but he was always himself and somehow that made all the difference.

Soon, Yuuri was focused on emphasizing how Victor motivated him, believing in his capabilities, making him feel stronger and more confident. It led into more intimate specifics about their relationship, the build up to that entertaining kiss, and Victor never asking for more than Yuuri could give. He admitted to skating his free program with a fresh outlook, knowing deep down that everything would be okay. With Victor's eyes on him, he felt like he could conquer the world.

Phichit listened to him with an enchanted smile; he'd known Yuuri for a long time and this was Yuuri 2.0 in the making.

"Now," Phichit instructed, "think about everything you just told me versus all the stories you read this morning. Which one are you going to take at face value? The bastards out there who don't give a fuck who or what they ruin, or Victor Nikiforov telling you he wants to be there, and be with you?"

"Phichit," Yuuri wavered, "it's still complicated-"

"Yuuri, listen to me. You're my friend and I worry about you all the time, especially since Sochi. Do you know why I'm so excited for this season? Because I want to compete with you. I want us to advance to the Grand Prix. It's been my dream for a long time. You have it Yuuri, you have what it takes to stand on the podium but you don't need me to tell you that. You said it yourself, your free skate yesterday was your best yet. Victor inspires something special in you. He sees you. It's definitely one of the most beautiful things I've ever laid eyes on. You were so busy reading that crap, did you look at the pictures? Did you watch the video? Can you honestly tell me that Victor has ever looked as content as he did with you last night? Find me one picture, one video, any kind of proof and I swear I'll drop it."

Yuuri knew no such media existed; he would know, he'd idolized Victor for years. It still didn't feel like enough, "But his career-"

"Is entirely his business Yuuri. He is free to compete, or take time off, or retire on a tropical island. He made a choice to take the season off and coach you and he's been very honest with you about the way he feels. How offended would you be if someone questioned the way you lived your life? How would you feel if you loved someone and they labeled your choice a mistake?"

Yuuri felt his heart break; he didn't fail to notice Phichit using the word 'love', "I'd feel like shit actually."

"Exactly. Now imagine how Victor feels. Seriously, how did you manage to escalate things so far in
two days? You could've given it a week, geez."

Yuuri dragged his sleeve over his face, "Another flaw. I'm full of them."

"You think Victor doesn't know that? You told me he always meets you where you are, no matter the issues you're having. Why do you think he does that?"

Yuuri was silent and Phichit knew his point was prying his friend's defenses open, "You care about him a lot. This is different from Detroit. You actually let Victor in. Be honest, do you want to him to leave?"

"No...I don't," Yuuri managed.

"Has your skating improved?"

"Yes."

"Has your life improved?"

"Drastically."

Phichit was serious, "Then as your friend, let me be the one to tell you that you need to apologize to Victor for the things you said. It wasn't fair to him Yuuri. You need to fix this."

Yuuri's hand hovered over Victor's phone, "What if...what if I went too far?"

"Well...I think it's time for you to meet him where he is."

Yuuri's eyes welled again, "I really miss you, you know that Phichit?"

"I miss you too Yuuri. Promise me we'll see each other soon on the ice."

"I promise."

____________________________

"Hi Hiroko, it's Minako. Is Victor doing okay?"

Hiroko sighed, "He got back from the beach an hour ago. He gave me the usual kiss on the cheek but he looked so depressed. I didn't have the heart to ask anything or stress him out. I already spoke to Yuuko. Did you check in with her? Is Yuuri still at Ice Castle?"

"Yeah. Yuuko says he's been running himself ragged all morning. She's sticking around, just in case. She's really agonizing over what happened."

Hiroko was sad, "I thought the pictures were rather adorable. They both deserved a good time. They've been working so hard."

"I hope Yuuri doesn't push him further away," Minako rubbed her neck; she was still sore from last night, "Yuuko told me some of things she heard Yuuri say. I know he can be...dramatic, but that was a lot to throw on the pile."

"I can't wait for them to prove those reports wrong," Hiroko said fiercely. She could feel Minako's restlessness through the phone.

"But...how are you so sure they'll don't recover from this?"
"They will," Hiroko was firm, "We need to have faith in them both."

"Heading out?" Yuuko's face betrayed her cheerful voice. Yuuri handed her his skates, not bothering to hide his enervation.

"Yeah. I'm going to get something to eat, maybe take a walk."

"Okay. We're open if you want to come back this afternoon. But, between you and me, I think you should take it easy." She eyed the bruises on his hands and arm critically. Yuuri glanced at them too; he looked like he should be quarantined.

"I'll try."

Yuuri took an absent stroll into town, stopping at his favorite spot for some ramen to fill the hole in his stomach. He and Victor often went there after marathon practice sessions. It really didn't taste as good without Victor next to him. Not to mention, more than once he bent to pet Makka, only to look down and see an empty space. That stung. Makka's company was always the link in those rare moments Victor wasn't next to him. He felt untethered, drifting further into a smothering blackness where the light in Victor's eyes was extinguished by his fucking verbal diarrhea. He pushed his bowl away; it was dreadful to recollect it, to replay Victor walking away from him.

'I...I can't look at you today...'

He walked to the beach, the music of the waves and seagulls evoking poignant nostalgia. He settled on the sand, took off his socks and shoes, wincing as he did, and dug his toes into the sand. Probably not a good idea since he hadn't treated the abrasions, but he needed to feel connected to those quiet afternoons they'd spent here with Makka. Victor dedicated so much of that time to glancing at him, his eyes bright with affection and longing. Had he ever looked at him any other way? The answer was a resounding no. Yuuri blinked at the sky, wondering why these significant details occurred to him after the fact. It didn't matter if they were lying winded in the middle of the ice, or sightseeing around Hasetsu, or taking soothing dips in the hot springs, or rummaging through Victor's old costumes...there was never a time Victor wasn't admiring him.

What was the phrase he'd used last night? Yuuri pulled out his phone and sounded the words in his head as he typed. It was misspelled but his browser corrected and translated it. Zvezda moya - my star. His heart clenched. That, more than anything else, brought him wholly out of today's bleak abyss.

'I'm so sorry Victor. God, I'm a jackass.'

Armed with the resolve he'd been searching for, Yuuri took out Victor's phone and punched in the code. He smiled at the background of Victor and Makka in front of Hasetsu Castle. With a deep breath (because there was no turning back now), he accessed the gallery and found the folder. The little thumbnail alone left him dumbfounded. His hand was really far up Victor's thigh. "So it was the banquet," he mumbled as the pictures loaded. His jaw went slack as he scrolled through the dozens of images; the evidence was immortalized and glaring at him but Yuuri ran through all the far-fetched alternatives. A body double. Photoshop. A fucking alternate universe.

He couldn't believe how many pictures there were. How long had they danced for? Wait one fucking minute...a video?! Yuuri nearly dropped the phone, he was trembling so bad. His face was hotter than the surface of the sun as he watched himself take Victor's hand and delight him on the dance floor. Victor looked positively thrilled to be in his arms.
'I remember thinking about this! You looked so unhappy at the beginning of the night and I fantasized about doing something to make you smile. I never imagined I'd actually do it. Is this...is this your favorite moment? Is that why you wouldn't answer the note?'

He actually did scream upon finding the shots of him in an apparent dance off with Christophe and Yuri. How much alcohol did he fucking consume? It was insane that he couldn't remember any of this. How could this have been a contributing factor to Victor coming to Hasetsu? Usually sane people went in the opposite direction of public displays of social lunacy.

Torn between (mild) amusement, shock, and confusion, he swiped to the last picture and went stiff. Was that...a hotel room? Victor's hand was holding...his own? Yuuri stared between his arm and the picture, second guessing what he was seeing. The dance made some level of sense, fine. But this...how? That would mean...Victor had been in his room? No...it couldn't be. Why would Victor have gone to the third floor? There was no reason for it. Yuuri was utterly gob smacked until he noticed something else in the picture, something that had him shoving his feet in his shoes, giving no thought to the socks or the chaffing that was about to happen. He ran home, his fingers tracing along his lips.

He dashed into Yu-topia, Minako and his mother a peripheral blur. He jumped the stairs three at a time, ran through the hall (Victor's footsteps in the closed guest room both scared and comforted him), and into his room. He very nearly collapsed because his body was on fire now, but somehow he managed to pull open his desk draw and produce the watch, Victor's watch, from the back of it. A quick comparison with the picture confirmed everything. It was like something switched the light on in his mind. He knew.

'We kissed! We kissed in my hotel room in Sochi. That's why I recognized your touch. That's why I felt the pull when I met you. Oh Victor!'
What if I made a mistake...

Victor's cringe was imperceptible. An odd pain spread from the middle of his back, as though someone had stepped behind him and drove a knife there. He tried to appear unfazed, tried not to let the words sink too deeply, tried to be objective. Yuuri was upset, he was scared, this was a defense mechanism, he was instinctively pulling away.

But for all his empathy, Victor felt utterly betrayed.

What if saying yes was a mistake...

What was he referring too, coaching him or them being together? Did the distinction even matter at this juncture? It certainly didn't to Victor. How could Yuuri be so heartless? There was no other word to describe it. To ask those questions was to negate the trust they'd build. To even think it, taking the word of outsiders over Victor's own, made him feel like an easily discarded toy. Hadn't their time together meant anything? Wasn't remembering their dance supposed to be a door to more wonderful things?

He'd planned to show Yuuri the pictures today. After practice, he would've taken him to the ocean and told him the story of how a man, shining brighter than starlight, drank himself into a beautiful haze of passion that left Victor perpetually floored. Now, he was handing over his phone and turning his back because if he stayed in range of this disaster of an exchange, he wouldn't survive it.

The more distance he put between himself and Ice Castle, the more his stomach turned. But baring his vulnerabilities in exchange for Yuuri's composure was something he did not fucking deserve. It was a harsh stance. On the one hand, he'd fallen asleep last night listening to Yuuri's heartbeat. On the other hand, his self-preservation roared to life in the face of this cruelty. It aggravated him having to accommodate both sides; he never wanted to deliberately think badly of Yuuri but he felt unsure of how he would manage being close to the younger skater after this.

His head was pounding. It wasn't that Victor didn't know how he felt. He'd known for a long time just what Yuuri Katsuki had done to him. He'd gone to the third floor of the hotel in Sochi because he'd needed to see Yuuri. He'd spent the months after that fucking pining for the man. He would've given anything during that time to be dancing with him again. Even now, if he hadn't reciprocated Victor's feelings, coaching him and being a part of his life would've been enough. Yuuri was beautiful, so fucking beautiful and seeing him skate with the confidence that his drunk persona had hinted at was, in short, bliss. If Yuuri let him, he'd spend his life doing whatever it took to keep the brilliance in his eyes.

Right now though, Yuuri's words were under his skin, wearing him down syllable by syllable.

'I've made so many mistakes in my life. Woken up next to so many people and felt nothing. Yuuri made me feel safe. How could he rip that away so easily today?'
Back in the day, sex meant nothing to Victor. It was easy to simply detach from the moment and let it happen. Quench the want, fill the void, and then exit the space. The first time he'd stealth-ed out of a hotel room, sore in all the right places, he was sure he'd found it. A plug, so to speak, for his loneliness. The fact that the satisfaction was temporary didn't matter. Doling out pleasure, rough and dirty, left his mind blank, something he desperately craved whenever he was off the ice. He'd been a self-serving piece of shit, but then so had the people he'd slept with. They didn't know him, or cared to know him. As he got older and began finding himself at the bar with Chris, warming his desensitized heart with vodka, the loneliness became a constant.

The compulsive one-night stands became fewer as the years passed. He returned home to Makka and, out of the eyes of the press and his fans, he shut himself off. It wasn't so bad but...it wasn't so good either. He felt trapped. Regretful. He concentrated on skating but there was only so far it could take him. He knew what he needed but didn't think it was obtainable. It was a depressing cycle.

Yuuri had brought him right up for air at the banquet, then with his viral video, and every single day he woke up in Hasetsu. Yuuri was a better man than most. He didn't exploit him or harbor fan-made expectations of him. He treated him like a human being. Victor could've been anything he wanted. Anything. And Yuuri chose to have as he was.

'Please come back to me Yuuri. I can't promise I'll go easy on you. But I can't lose you. Please fix this.'

Makka's excited bark brought him back to the the present. He looked around, slightly dazed, and realized he was on the beach. He hadn't been consciously aware that he'd walked in this direction, but then, there wasn't another place he would rather be (except maybe their ramen spot). Makka took a free run on the water's edge; he loved here as much as Victor did. He often asked Yuuri to watch the ocean with him during their downtime and Yuuri always looked charmed by his simple request. They hadn't been here since their kiss. Victor sat down, mostly because that memory lay waste to much of his motor functions. He wanted to kiss Yuuri on this beach. He wanted to tell him that he loved him. Above all, he wanted this morning to fucking cease to exist in their history.

Wishful thinking.

Makka trotted over and shook water all over him. Victor knew what the gesture meant, "Are you upset you didn't get to stay with Yuuri?"

At the skater's name, Makka's tail wagged like crazy, "I don't know what to do boy. It hurts."

Makka licked his hand and settled into his lap. Victor stared out at the ocean, wondering whether Yuuri had looked at the pictures yet.

_Hiroko looked up to find Victor and Makka entering Yu-topia covered in quite a bit of sand, "Victor, you're back early! Is Yuuri with you?"

Victor leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, "Good morning Hiroko. I'm letting him practice on his own today."

Hiroko could be blind and still see through that bullshit; she'd noticed the way he tensed at Yuuri's name and Minako had already climbed out of her hangover to inform her about the press' brutal coverage, "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine."

His voice was balancing on a tightrope. Hiroko nodded, letting her smiles ease him, "Alright. Would
you like something to eat then? I can bring it up for you, if you want."

"Sure. I'd like that."

Hiroko watched him go, his shoulders sagged, his eyes dull. The morning had not been good to him. She got her phone and called Yuuko.

"Hello Hiroko, is Victor back at Yu-topia? I messaged but he never responded. He left Ice Castle in a hurry."

"He's here," Hiroko said, "Is Yuuri okay?"

"He's skating. It's...it's bad. I don't want to disturb him but I'm so worried. He said some things..." Yuuko's voice was quiet, "I wasn't part of that fight and I felt run over."

Hiroko frowned her way through Yuuko's account of the argument. She swore to herself that if any of those reporters made another appearance in Hasetsu, she would drown them in the hot springs, "Can you stay with Yuuri please? Just until he calms down?"

"Sure, I wasn't planning on leaving anyway. I'm thinking if he doesn't stop by lunchtime, I'll try to talk to him."

"I appreciate that Yuuko, thank you."

Victor brought his laptop out of sleep, and quickly exited the browser, not in the mood to look at any of his social accounts. If he saw one more article painting Yuuri in an unfavorable light, he would fucking explode. Instead, he browsed through a folder with all the videos Yuuko's triplets had filmed at the rink. He found one of his favorites, him and Yuuri finishing their fifth run through of On Love: Eros before lying right on the ice, totally winded. Yuuri's head was cushioned on the lower part of his arm while they laughed.

It was pathetic. This was the longest they'd gone without talking, or being in each other's presence. It made him feel confined and he hated it. However, he wanted the space to breathe. Fucking hell. The exasperated noise he made brought Makka protectively into his lap.

His Skype rang in the middle of the video. Victor paused it, shaking his head. What the fuck was Chris doing up? It was barely morning in Switzerland. Victor sighed and answered the call.

"Don't you ever sleep?"

Chris was all patronizing and sultry tones, "Victor, darling, sleep takes away from hours of pleasurable activities that I would much rather be indulging in. I thought you already knew that or didn't last night teach you anything?"

Victor couldn't help it; the taste of Yuuri would never leave his lips, "Did you call just to mock me?" Chris raised an eyebrow; the edge in Victor's voice resembled glass shards.

"Actually, I was worried. I've been trying to reach you for hours."

Victor massaged his temples, squinting, "Sorry. It's been a rough morning and...Yuuri has my phone."

"Oh?" Chris smiled, "The pictures?"

"The pictures." Victor repeated because it was gnawing away at his fucking soul.
Chris considered that for a moment, "Ah. You're fighting. I take it those reports didn't sit well with him?"

"No. They didn't."

"Did the drunken kitten break your heart?" The question was sincere, not teasing, and for Victor, there were no words to answer it.

"Victor?"

"Like I said Chris," Victor said through gritted teeth, "Not a good morning."

Chris had never heard Victor sound so demoralized, "What did he say exactly?"

"It's a mistake."

Ouch. That young man had sharp claws, "I'm sure he didn't mean it. You remember how difficult it was for us, learning to manipulate the press? They pounced because you became so private. Yuuri is fresh meat. That's why they went so far, to provoke you."

"Are you justifying what he said to me?"

'Victor Nikiforov, not wanting to be pushed away. I should've made this bet with him years ago.' Chris thought. "Not at all. You have every right to feel the way you do. You can't bottle that up. Let it run its course."

"So what's your point?"

Chris was not used to this kind of darkness from his friend; he tried to pacify him, "You're both on the same page when it comes to being crazy about each other but there are other pages that need work. This fight, however bad, is one of them. Yuuri clearly has deep insecurities and the years you spent locking yourself away is another story entirely. Those things can't be glossed over. This was bound to happen and I think it's best it happens now."

Victor stroked Makka's fur; the poodle wasn't the only one who missed Yuuri, "He recognized the dance and the kiss, can you believe that?"

"I'm not surprised," Chris smiled, "He didn't touch Yuri or myself, yet he made it his business to physically take you onto that dance floor. I call it like I see it and that wasn't your average fan or schoolboy crush. That was the champagne revealing deeper things. Foreplay, if you will."

"Then why do this? Why say something so fucking-"

"Victor," Chris chided, "Let it run its course."

Victor sighed at the reiteration, "I..." He trailed off. Something about his tone concerned Chris.

"Victor, are you thinking about leaving Hasetsu?"

"No." Immediate, firm, truth.

He tried another route, "But you're rethinking your feelings?"

"No." There it was. Reluctance. He wondered if Yuuri knew the damage he'd done.

"I'm not saying to forgive him. Not until you're ready, at least. Just..." Chris' worry slinked into his
voice, "Let's not go back to four a.m. drinks, okay?"

Victor couldn't answer. He was terrified and any sound would articulate that. Chris waited a few seconds then said goodbye, hoping that both men found their way through this unfortunate trouble.

Still fairly wet from his bath, Victor curled into bed with Makka, pulling the blanket up to his chin. It smelled of him and Yuuri. He moved his bangs from his face and closed his eyes, inhaling the distinct musk. It both soothed and wounded him. He fiddled with Makka's ear, wanting to sleep his way through to dinner. The sleeping pill he'd taken should allow him to drift so he wouldn't have to think for a few hours. He was shifting, trying to find a comfortable position when he heard Yuuri's loud footsteps echo from the stairs. He was on his feet and marching to his door as Yuuri bolted down the hallway.

But...he couldn't bring himself to open it. He stood with an outstretched hand that grasped at air. The strain was frustrating. He wanted to check on Yuuri, he really did but...

'You still can't bring yourself to look at him, can you? You can't blame yourself that watching old videos is all you can handle right now.'

Victor stood with tears in his eyes, listening to the audible thump that emanated from Yuuri's room. It almost sounded like he'd dropped to the ground. He then heard an indistinct noise, like a muffled laugh, but it was difficult to know for sure. What did it mean? Was it the banquet folder? He sat against his door and blinked away his emotions, keeping an ear out for whatever other sounds wandered his way.

Yuuri lay on the floor, Victor's phone in one hand, and the watch in the other. His body didn't seem to care that he was still in his filthy clothes, it welcomed the relief of not moving. He compromised by using his heels to slip his shoes off, whispering apologies to his feet in the process. He wanted to go to Victor, but 'not today' resonated loudly in his mind. So, he'd crumbled to the floor, and proceeded to come to terms with the serendipitous nature of their bond.

He didn't know when he fell asleep, but it must've been for hours because he woke to a dark room. He exhaled, not feeling the pulsing ache as much anymore. His hand closed around the watch and Yuuri smiled. When he’d checked out of the hotel, he had every intention of handing it over to the front desk. He couldn't explain why he'd convinced himself to hold on to it. Now he knew.

Yuuri sat up slowly, gauging his muscles and limbs for any permanent damage from the morning. Everything seemed intact, although his feet were a bit too swollen for comfort when he stood up. He rested the phone and watch on his bed, and stripped off his clothes, looking around for a towel and robe. He tiptoed out of his room, tentatively checking for any light from Victor's own. There was none and it was quiet; perhaps he was also caught in a nap. What Yuuri wouldn't give to be under the covers with him.

After letting the heat from the springs temper his bruises, he got dressed and slipped both of Victor's belongings into his pocket for no other reason than wanting to have a part of Victor with him. There still wasn't any light from the man's room; maybe this was a good time to get some food. He went down to dining area and bit his tongue to stop the gasp when he saw Victor right there, having his dinner. Was he sneaking around to avoid him too? Probably. Victor's back was to him but there was no mistaking the way his body tensed upon realizing that Yuuri was behind him. Fuck. Yuuri's conscience took action, telling him to go straight back to his room and starve, not wanting to make the day any more uncomfortable than it already was. He nodded to himself and made to leave, only pausing when he remembered Victor's phone.
Yuuri turned around and carefully bridged the gap, sliding the device next to his hand, fighting every urge not to touch him. "Thank you for letting me see them," Yuuri whispered. Victor's hand twitched, but he made no other movement. Yuuri left him in peace, not wanting to force him into a conversation. He deserved his space and Yuuri deserved the rejection.

'I'll make this up to you,' Yuuri promised, 'Please don't give up on me yet.'

The morning brought with it more palpable tension. Yuuri hadn't slept, spending the night becoming a connoisseur of every fine detail of the watch. He listened as Victor moved around, knowing he was ready to leave when he heard Makka's telltale bark. God, he missed that poodle. He got out of bed and prepped for the morning, ultimately arriving late for practice. Victor spared him a bare, cold glance, not bothering to comment on his tardiness. It was only fair, he didn't expect Victor to magically fall into his arms, but fuck, it made him miserable and he never wanted to see it again. He consciously tugged at his long sleeves covering the bruises, not wanting to guilt Victor into talking to him. If he noticed the ones on his hands, he hid the observation well.

"On Love. Run it for technicalities."

Yuuri bit back a protest. Was that routine a suitable choice after yesterday? It struck him as very masochist. But, Victor was his coach and he was here doing his job, which was miles better than being ignored. Yuuri nodded and took up position on the ice. Needless to say, it was not a good day for Eros. Sure, Victor's sublime mouth had more than extended his definition of it, but neither of them had anything close to sexual notions on their mind. Trying to skate the routine without the requisite mindset only diminished the choreography.

"Again."

Yuuri followed the order. That's what it was. Victor's usual lightheartedness was replaced by a taunt stance that Yuuri hadn't yet figured out how to break through. He was unreadable, and his far proximity was the only thing occupying Yuuri's mind.

"Again."

The word held such animosity. The only reason he wasn't being stubborn to offset Victor's pettiness was because he had created this rift. He had to pay the toll for his stupidity. It didn't matter if Victor was doing it on purpose.

"Again."

Yuuri gritted his teeth. His idiotic quad attempts from yesterday still sat in his bones, and the pain was rapidly reviving. It would only get worse if he put appeasing Victor above his own well-being. He'd completely forgotten to soak his feet in salts last night and he didn't know how much longer he could ignore it.

"Again."

'I need to do something. I can't handle much more.'

"Again."

Yuuri under rotated a jump and tumbled. It wasn't as nasty as yesterday, but it still elicited a weary groan. He shifted onto his back and closed his eyes, breathing hard, counting all the things he needed before he could consider skating today: sleep, a meal, a massage, Victor's lips. To stand a chance of obtaining that last one, he actually needed to confront Victor about the banquet, which seemed
incredibly unlikely under their current circumstances.

"Are you okay?" Victor skated to him, faint concern in his features.

"Yes." Why was he lying? He was anything but okay. Victor seemed to be asking himself the same question if his glare was anything to go by. He extended his hand and Yuuri took it, getting to his feet with a pained grunt. Without warning, Victor took advantage of his lowered reflexes and grabbed his upper arm, his nails digging through the fabric. He pulled up Yuuri's sleeve to the elbow. Fuck. He attempted to wrestle his arm back but Victor's grip was unmovable.

"You can't practice like this."

"I can."

"Your form has been off since we started," Yuuri could smell the anger coming off him, "Why didn't you treat these injuries?"

"I'm fine, really." What the hell was he doing? Yuuri had no idea why he was fighting so hard to continue when he had no stamina and no eros to fill a shot glass, much less take him through another few hours of skating. His unintentional inflexibility seemed to exacerbate Victor's mood. He tugged hard on Yuuri's arm, until they were basically nose to nose.

"Take off your skates. It was not a friendly or flirtatious tone. He sounded dangerous. Yuuri didn't know if to be afraid or hopelessly turned on. In spite of the situation, his mind leaned towards the latter.

"And what if I don't?"

As quickly as he had seized him, Victor let him go. Like Yuuri, he also had no idea why he just did that. He knew Yuuri was in pain, it was obvious from the moment he got on the ice. Yet, he'd pushed and pushed, trying to sort through his emotions, trying to be Yuuri's coach first. Victor didn't like being at the mercy of his feelings, not like this. Why were they even practicing? Why weren't they talking about the fucking banquet-

"Why were you in my hotel room in Sochi Victor?"

He looked at Yuuri, genuinely startled, "I went to check on you," he said automatically, "You were drunk."

"You didn't know me," Yuuri said slowly, "Why did you care? No one except Celestino knew what room I was in, which means you either had to ask him or the front desk. Why go through that trouble?"

His oddly specific line of questioning was throwing Victor off, "I just told you-"

"You've never lied to me. I know we're fighting but don't lie to me about this. Why did you come to my room Victor?"

Somehow, giving in to Yuuri's demands required so much effort, not because Victor didn't know what to say, he just wondered if this was the right moment to say it. Yuuri folded his arms, and waited. He hadn't planned to blurt out the question but being that close to Victor's face had erased his reservations.

Neither of them noticed the young blond man that walked into the rink, flanked by Yuuko who was equal parts shocked and fangirl-ing. They didn't see the way he looked at them, his famous punk
attitude on full display. They didn't hear the obscenities he muttered under his breath as they stood staring at each other instead of, oh, skating.

"HEY VICTOR!" Yuri Plisetsky shouted. They turned at the intrusion, eyebrows raised, "WE NEED TO TALK."
**Zvezda Moya**

Chapter Notes

Yuuri speaking Russian and Victor speaking Japanese is my entire soul and then some.

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**Two weeks ago**

Victor walked into Ice Castle, pupils narrowing as he adjusted to the stark light. Makka hopped onto one of the benches and stretched, whining happily when Victor passed a hand over his head. He stood behind the glass doors, a slight uptick on his mouth as he watched Yuuri skate his free program. He'd introduced Yuuri to it only a couple days ago and judging from the way he was currently adding his own flair to the step sequence, it was going to come along splendidly. Victor felt gratified by the sight; this was Yuuri's journey, and the routine should reflect as such. Yuuri was meticulous tonight, and his eyes sparkled as they always did when he was searching for something important.

Victor looked at his phone - 12:35 a.m. The Nishigoris certainly obliged him. The lateness alone kindled a long yawn. He did his best to shake the tiredness off him as he admired Yuuri's movements, the scratch of the ice a constant reminder of his tenacity. He must've gotten lost staring because Makka nose was suddenly against his leg.

"You ready to go boy?" Makka's head ground into him, inching him forward. He'd walked with his equipment, mostly out of habit, having no active plan to disturb Yuuri. It seemed his poodle had other ideas.

Yuuri looked up, the noise of the door easily heard since he'd thought he was the only one there. Upon seeing that it was Victor, looking like he'd been pulled out of a deep sleep, Yuuri's face was contrite. Victor skated to him with a wide smile, and blood gradually returned to Yuuri's face.

"It's okay," Victor assured, "We'll shorten practice tomorrow if we need too."

"We don't need to do that-"

"Will you skate your program with me?"

The interruption smothered the words in Yuuri's throat. It wasn't their first time going through a routine together, but it was their first time alone in the rink and be it Victor extending his hand, or the way the light brought the green specks of his iris to life, or the patch of pink in his cheeks, whatever it was, Yuuri felt unusually bashful. But, they'd been in each other's pockets for so long, this wasn't that much different. So, Yuuri took Victor's hand, willing the tremors from his own.

They moved in extraordinary unison, soft touches and tranquil gazes passing between them. Victor deemed it altogether romantic, a welcomed diversion to the monotony of sleep. Yuuri and his surprises. He wanted to spend his life discovering them.

"You're not supposed to hide things from your coach," Victor said afterwards. Yuuri's reemerged sheepishness was adorable.
"Well, I've been sneaking out here for while, since I was getting fit actually," Victor arched an eyebrow, "On the nights Makka spent with you."

Victor laughed; he should've known, the action was so Yuuri-esque, "I never thought I'd meet someone as stubborn as me."

Yuuri smiled, "How did you figure it out?"

"I got up to use the bathroom and I just...wanted to check on you. You seemed far today. When I saw you and your equipment gone, it was obvious where you were." Yuuri shook his head profusely, having caught the diminished cheer in his voice. It was momentary, but Yuuri was used to many of Victor's tells now. The last thing he wanted to do was worry his coach, or imply that he was disappointed with their sessions.

"I wasn't far because of you," Yuuri said quickly, "I was thinking about the routine. I get carried away with my thoughts sometimes."

They shut off the lights and exited the rink, Makka joining them as they began a slow stroll home. Victor pressed a chaste kiss to the posterior of Yuuri's hand, murmuring in Russian. Yuuri knew the gesture communicated praise, and he knew Victor was tired, hence the slip from English. He leaned against Victor's arm without ambivalence. Skating with him always made these moments so much easier to grasp.

"Hey Victor," Yuuri said, his eyes roaming to the sky, "What do you like most about Hasetsu?"

Victor was occupied with the weight of Yuuri against him; being this close to him at this time of night, with his sleepiness lowering his defenses, it took effort to concentrate. He would need a very cold shower when he got back to Yu-topia, "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Yuuri explained, "I've asked about St. Petersburg. I've been meaning to include this question in a Makka note, but I forgot."

Victor gave it his full attention, "Hmm. The food is amazing, especially your mother's katsudon. Did I say it right?" Yuuri nodded, loving how the word sounded in Victor's accent, "I can't remember when I've indulged so much. Your family is wonderful. Everyone is so friendly and accepting. I love going to the ocean, though I think Makka loves it ten times more," Makka barked excitedly at the word 'ocean', "There's so much I love about Hasetsu. But..."

Yuuri was nervous, "But?"

"My favorite thing about here..." Say it. "It's you Yuuri."

"Me?" Victor frequently showered Yuuri with attention. It had taken some getting used too, but Yuuri couldn't imagine going a day without it now. However, walking late at night, shrouded in the soft glow of street lights, and under a rather scenic night sky, Yuuri couldn't help but feel that Victor wasn't being his usual dramatic self. He studied him for some hint, unsure of how to interpret the answer. What exactly was he trying to tell him? It couldn't be what he thought it was. Attention didn't naturally equate that...did it?

"Yes. You," Victor's smile was different tonight, Yuuri realized. Less heart-shaped excitement and more quiet truth, "Being here, being your coach, this is the happiest I've been in years."

"Victor..." Yuuri was fumbling now, "I don't...I'm not anything special." Victor put an arm around his shoulder, allaying his mumbles.
"You are to me."

And that was that. Yuuri couldn't rebut if he tried. When no suitable responses formed in his mind, he went for the next best thing. He slipped an arm around Victor's waist, like they'd done a hundred times since Victor had kissed the cut on his head, and beamed, "Let's get some ramen."

"Yeah?" Yuuri had his own way of vocalizing his feelings and Victor always looked forward to the small gestures that followed his own candor.

"Yeah."

Present

Yuuri had no idea what was going on but Yuri Plisetsky, the Russian Fairy, renowned Junior Champion, was standing in Ice Castle looking permanently vexed. Maintaining that attitude had to require a level of physical endurance more rigid than that required for skating. Even from this distance, Yuuri felt disturbed by his aura. Victor gave a charming wave, which only served to piss Yuri off further.

"Yuri, I didn't expect to see you in Japan! What are you doing here?" The complete one-eighty of his tone made Yuuri go stiff. The jarring contrast of it to half a minute ago was too much to handle.

"WHY DO YOU THINK?!" Yuri bellowed. Yuuri glanced over at Yuuko, wondering how she was managing with all the shouting, and rolled his eyes when he saw that she'd gone full skater otaku. She caught his eye and pointed excitedly at the compact Russian.

Victor began to skate away but Yuuri, still rooted in their previous moment, slipped his hand into Victor's own. Victor looked back but Yuuri wasn't focused on him or anything in particular. His expression was strange, haunting even, something Victor had never seen before.

"I fucked up," Yuuri said, "I hurt you. I want to fix this." Victor gave his hand a little squeeze. It was non-committal, Yuuri could feel it, and it made his insides hollow. Had he unwittingly made things more complex with his blunt question? He'd had no right to demand anything from Victor before he himself apologized and in much more than three sentences. When Victor slipped away from him, the cold air that passed through his fingers rocked him to the core. He pulled his sleeve back down and followed his coach.

"Is this a usual practice session?" Yuri sneered, "Standing on the ice making small talk? Yakov would have your head."

"Yakov has a range of emotions he can display," there was Victor's animated voice again; Yuuri shoved his hands in his pockets to hide his clenched fists, "And for you it will be rage when he finds out you're here."

"Let the old man rant. I don't care," he fixed his Japanese counterpart with a fiery glare, "I would expect you to be deep in practice piggy. Or is Sochi still holding you back?"

Yuuri bristled; was this guy fucking serious? "I didn't realize you being here for five seconds made you an expert on what I have and haven't accomplished for next season."

Victor and Yuuko, mouths open, closed them slowly, taken aback. They'd both been about to tell Yuri to calm down; things really didn't need to escalate more than it already had. Victor watched the way Yuuri's shoulders squared off, the perfect line of his back, the steely glow in his eyes, the thin line of his lips. He looked gorgeous. This minor rebellion was in stark contrast to the response he'd
given to the media storm. The pictures were having the right effect, the one Victor had hoped for. But...he still didn't know if he was ready to face Yuuri's question. Why did he have to go for the jugular like that?

Yuri smirked, "Well, that's good to know because I need to borrow Victor for a few days."

"WHAT?!" Yuuko squealed and Yuuri hissed. Victor seemed to be considering the reasons for the demand.

"Ah," he said finally, "Agape."

"Yes Victor," Yuri's temper was giving way to his second nickname, the Russian Punk, "I came to collect the latter half of my routine."

Yuuri's head snapped towards Victor, "You choreographed a routine for him?"

"Half a routine," Yuri corrected with a pointed frown, "The other half went with him the day he upped and left St. Petersburg. Thanks for that by the way," he spat.

Victor chuckled though he didn't want too because Yuuri's expression had morphed again and he couldn't decipher it, "I told Yakov."

"You left me with an incomplete routine you asshole!" Yuri was ready to pop, "So I've come to collect and seeing as your little piggy is so comfortable in his abilities, a few days shouldn't be a problem."

Truthfully, Victor may have forgotten his priorities upon watching Yuuri skate Aria: Stay Close To Me. The decision to coach Yuuri simply took hold and there he was, booking a flight to Japan. He looked between the two, Yuri clearly showing he wouldn't take no for an answer, and his Yuuri appearing increasingly obscure, his eyes like black coffee, fixated on him, and...oh...oh. Possessive.

Yuuri was jealous.

Victor did not know how to respond to that. Any other day before their fight, and he would know. Now, it made the decision he was about to make feel spiteful. That wasn't his intention, he hadn't known Yuri would come all the way to Japan. Fuck, this was all so frustrating.

"Okay Yuri," Victor pointed at his Russian colleague, "I'll finish Agape with you. I should've showed it to you before I left. My apologies," he pointed to Yuuri, "You and I can continue our morning sessions. I'll take Yuri in the afternoons."

Yuuko held up her hands, "I'm getting a headache. Let's clear up this name confusion now, please? Do you mind if we call you Yurio?"

Yuri (now Yurio) wanted to curse but Yuuko was grinning at him and somehow, her sprightly attitude calmed him some, "Fine, but it never leaves Hasetsu."

"Deal!" she said with less cheerfulness because Yuuri was feeding her a look of faint disbelief.

"I'm fine with your schedule Victor," Yurio confirmed, "Unless Mr. Tall, Dark and Expressionless has something to say." They all turned to Yuuri. It was true, he appeared to having an out-of-body experience. Yuuko snapped her fingers and Yuuri reacted with a slight frown.
"Victor is my coach. I respect any decision he makes." Yuuri shrugged, and made to move back into position but Victor stopped him.

"Not today. You need to rest."

"Victor, I am fine." He punctuated each word with unhidden exasperation.

"No, you're not," Victor insisted, "I won't have you getting injured. Listen to your coach, for once."

There was something softer in his appearance, but Yuuri saw right through it. He was stalling. Asking about the hotel room had been a premature move.

Yuuri was not a fan of getting backed into a corner in front of anyone, especially their new guest. Yurio's insufferable smirk was so fucking annoying. Yuuri briefly acknowledged his previous response to Yurio's ridicule; not weak and bumbling but clear and caustic. He wasn't a rude person by any means, but the morning had taken an unprecedented turn that he didn't like or want.

What choice did he really have though? Sullenly, he guarded his skates and left the rink with Yuuko. Victor's eyes followed him as he left, hoping he hadn't just dug them into a deeper hole.

"I wonder if it's occurred to him that I'm staying at Yu-topia," Yurio mused contemptuously, "Shame, I wanted to see the look on his face."

"He's what?" Yuuri looked at the luggage next to Yu-topia's entrance, then to Minako, then to Hiroko and back again, "Seriously?"

"Come on dear," his mother guided him inside, "Let's get you some tea to calm down."

Minako followed closely, reading Yuuko's messages, "We should prepare for the press," she said, "I'm sure someone will recognize Yuri...Yurio soon. His fans are one thing, but reporters-"

"If they come near my establishment again..." Hiroko snarled, leaving the rest of her feelings to the worst of their interpretations. His mother's fervent voice made Yuuri feel miles better. He took the tea she'd brewed for him and inhaled it, and for a moment he forgot about the insanity of the past few days. His feet refreshed his thinking with an abrupt pang and he nearly dropped his tea.

"Minako, do you mind helping me with something?" Yuuri framed his tone as light as possible, not wanting to alert his mother to any trouble.

"Sure."

"Mom, we'll be upstairs." Minako took some tea for herself and they headed to Yuuri's room. He made a pit stop to collect some first aid paraphernalia before joining her and locking his door. When he took off his t-shirt and shoes, Minako nearly slapped him.

"YUURI! What the hell happened?!"

He sighed again; he was going to be doing that a lot today it seemed, "I may have ran jumps for, I don't know, three hours? Four? I lost count. I didn't land many of them, as you can see."

"That's why Victor sent you home. How did he even see these?" She didn't mention their fight, but it was clear she had the sense to know they hadn't slept in the same bed last night.

Yuuri surveyed the damage, "He saw the ones on my arm. He knew because of course he would. He knows when I'm in top form."
"Sometimes I feel Victor tries to hide how brilliant he is just for moments like these," Minako pointed to his bed, "Sit. Let's deal with this. Do you want to ice it first?"

"No. It doesn't matter now," he raised his feet off the ground; they were smarting consistently again, "Don't tell mom. Please."

"Fine," she huffed, busying herself with getting the first aid prepped, "But you have to give me something. These bruises are not pretty."

Yuuri flinched as she started spreading ointment; a stinging, burning sensation gradually melded into a cool release. He'd really neglected himself last night, "You already know what happened Minako."

"Yeah, I do but what I want to know is why? I thought you left that kind of detachment in Detroit."

"I did," he said bitterly, "I panicked yesterday. I honestly thought I was doing the right thing," Yuuri felt a relaxing tingle down his spine as Minako moved to check his back, "The whole thing happened so fast. I..." Yuuri dropped his head in his hands, "I never realized until last night how hard it is not having Victor with me. He was right there and I couldn't go to him. The way he looked at me this morning, I deserved it but fuck."

"Did you apologize?"

"I was trying too. Enter Russian Yuri and now I'm relegated to rest status. This is fucking ridiculous."

"Victor wasn't wrong Yuuri. These needed attention. Hold on, let me run a bath for your feet."

While she prepared, Yuuri took hold of Victor's watch. He doubted Victor knew he had it. He kept running his thumb over it until Minako returned with a warm bath and salts. Yuuri's entire body shook with delight at the relief his feet experienced when he immersed them.

"What's that about?" Minako gestured to the watch.

"It's Victor's."

"I've never seen him wearing a watch though," Yuuri frowned and she laughed, teasing, "Don't give me that look. Your boyfriend is a vision. You're lucky all I'm doing is looking."

"He's not-"

"Don't dare finish that sentence," Minako sounded irritated, "I thought you were coming to your senses?"

"I'm just trying to be practical Minako," he said defensively, "We haven't had that conversation. Thinking about it, we haven't talked about this in much detail. I mean, he's always been close to me, saying a lot of things that I just accepted as Victor being Victor, until two days ago."

She was contemplative, "Victor being Victor huh? What's one of those things he said?"

"Hmm," Yuuri smiled at the memory, "I snuck out for a late night skate and he found me. We were walking home and I asked what he liked most about Hasetsu. He said me."

Minako wondered if the man could be any more in love with Yuuri, "What did you think when he said that?"

"I...well, I didn't know what to think. Part of me felt like he was trying to tell me he liked me but it
seemed too much, like I was projecting my own feelings onto him,” Yuuri looked at the watch and felt sharp twinge that wasn't linked to his injuries, "I guess I was wrong. He dropped this in my hotel room in Sochi."

Minako smiled, "Well now."

She didn't look surprised and Yuuri frowned, "What do you know?"

"I didn't know that part," she admitted, "But I figured something happened between the two of you all. It explains a lot about Victor's first night here," she paused, and decided to throw Yuuri a line, "Yuuri, did you know you asked Victor to coach you?"

"I DID WHAT?!!" Yuuri couldn't rise the way he wanted to or risk tipping over the salt bath. He used his fists to push himself up, because he needed to make some kind of movement to ease his shock.

"He didn't say Sochi, but it fits," she put a band-aid over one of the nastier bruises, "He said you were drunk and you wouldn't remember. That was all I managed to get from him. Do you know what else happened that night?"

Yuuri, still stunned, related the story of the banquet dance and the pictures he'd seen yesterday, specifically the one with Victor holding his hand. On an afterthought, he told her how Victor had approached him when he'd checked out of the hotel, a move he'd never understood since they hadn't talked during the GPF. Minako looked entranced by the whole thing.

"So, a public dance, a stolen encounter in your room, a missing watch, and a bold request. Anything else?"

Yuuri's head went from side to side; words were lost on him at this point. Minako gave him a once over before adding some more salts to the bath. She sat next to him and ruffled his hair.

"Yuuri, I'm not trying to give you shit for what happened. I know you get anxious and your first instinct in to put distance between yourself and the thing. I just want you to understand what Victor's mindset was from the moment he walked into Yu-topia. It's more than coaching you, or making you his protege, or seeing you to the Grand Prix. I don't know about you, but I would be so scared to even conceive of taking a risk like that. Jumping on a plane, leaving my life behind, knowing rejection was a possibility. Perhaps if I did, I would have what you do," she smiled nostalgically, "Victor told me not to say anything, and breaking a promise to that man makes me feel dirty, but if this is what it takes to keep you in the right frame of mind for your next conversation, then so be it."

Yuuri nodded, grateful for the information. He leaned on Minako and she rubbed his shoulder comfortingly, "You love him too, don't you?" She couldn't help but get a little teary-eyed when she registered the faintest 'yes' from her longtime student.

Yurio followed every minute detail of Victor's movements as he skated the entirety of *On Love: Agape*. The routine was the complete opposite of his Russian Punk persona, exquisite in the emotions it conveyed. When Victor had first suggested *Agape* and played the music for him, he'd been a cheeky bastard about it. It seemed so outside his usual repertoire.

It was only after Victor asked him to visualize what unconditional love meant to him that his mind drifted to the one person who embodied that sentiment, his grandfather, the light of his whole life. The realization brought with it a relaxation in his form and emotions Yurio never thought he'd show on the ice. Seeing Victor's full choreography made him crave pirozhki something fierce.

"I see you've been refining your feelings for this program," Victor said, recognizing the fondness in
Yurio’s eyes, "That's good. Let's run it through." Yurio nodded slowly, noticing how differently Victor was holding himself. His assertiveness was there, but so was something else. Something vulnerable.

"Were you drinking last night?" Yurio narrowed his eyes as they got into position.

"No. Why?"

"You look a little pale."

Victor gave Yurio one of those insufferable smiles that he knew the teen hated, "Getting quite observant, aren't we?"

Yurio took a deep breath, not wanting to lose his center, "You're a piece of fucking work, you know that?"

They ran the program a couple times, until Yurio was comfortable with the latter half of it. Yuuko and her daughters were front and center, filming for Yuuri's later reference. Yuuko didn't fail to notice the way Victor kept glancing at the door. He'd told Yuuri to go home and yet, he was repeatedly looking for him. She sighed and unlocked her phone; she'd been so starstruck seeing Yuri Plisetsky in the flesh that she'd forgotten the tension between Victor and Yuuri.

Hey, I'm sorry about earlier. I got carried away. I hope I didn't make things more uncomfortable for you. /Yu

You don't need to apologize Yuuko! I could never be upset with you. How's everything going? /Y

It's fine so far. They've been on the ice for a while. I'll keep you posted. /Yu

"That was awesome!" Axel yelled as Victor and Yurio finished another run, and her sisters followed with similar exuberant sentiments. Yurio couldn't help but give a short, rare smile.

"They're cute," he admitted, "Are they always here?"

"As often as they can be. They're quite attached to Yuuri."

"And you?"

Victor wasn't expecting that. He faced Yurio who fixed him with a sharp glare, "I'm his coach Yuratchka."

The younger Russian had no appreciation for Victor's glibness, "Are you high Vitya? Literally everyone saw the reports. I didn't realize you were both so serious about switching careers to danseurs."

Victor was in no mood to entertain this, "And I didn't realize I owed you an explanation."

Yurio stared at him critically, "I hope you know what the fuck you're doing." And with that he began the routine again. Victor watched him skate, eyebrows furrowed; if he didn't know better, he would swear that Yurio was trying to sound protective.

Yuuri, doing as Victor had instructed, spent much of the day in bed. He half expected Victor to send a message or even a Makka note but things were silent save for Yuuko's updates. He buried his head in his pillow, his eyes glassy; it was excruciating how much he missed having Victor around him. He tried not to think about why Yurio was in Hasetsu. Yuuri didn't believe for a second that it was for a
routine, but the remaining possibilities all ended with Victor on a plane and he had no more space in his mind for negative thoughts.

Intermittently, Minako checked on him. She stayed late into the evening and gave Hiroko a hand with Yu-topia. Thankfully, no reports had dropped yet, but it was only a matter of time and she really wanted to be the one to tell them to fuck off.

Yurio and Victor returned around dinnertime, arms filled with shopping. Hiroko chuckled at how much they looked like proper tourists. She took some bags from Yurio's arms amidst his protests that he could handle the weight.

"Sightseeing?" she smiled brightly and Victor could see Yurio getting lost in her motherly charm.

"Victor insisted," Yurio muttered, but he did look like he'd enjoyed himself. Hiroko corralled them to the dining room, bringing out pork cutlet bowls for the two men. As the scrumptious aroma invaded his nostrils, Yurio forgot to be a punk. He dove into the food, ravenous.

"This is amazing, holy..." he glanced around at the room, "wow." And he continued piling food into his mouth. Hiroko clapped her hands, pleased with his reaction.

"Have as much as you want Yurio," she beamed, before glancing at Victor. She smiled at him and proceeded to pour Yurio something to drink.

Victor took advantage of Yurio's forceful appetite, covertly nudging Minako, "Is Yuuri doing okay?"

She nodded, "For the most part. Want to go check on him?"

"I..." he began but his eyes were drawn away from her as Yuuri chose that moment to make his entrance. He was rubbing his eyes, and stretching, and Victor's gaze traveled to the bare patch of skin visible above his waistband.

Yuuri yawned and blinked, and then realized that the room was filled. Yurio sat facing away from him, deep in in a pork cutlet bowl, Victor was staring at him in a way that made his knees wobble, and his mother was swiftly handing him a steaming mug of tea because that was the solution to all things stressful today.

"Come have some dinner."

"Can you bring it up? I have some emails to send." He avoided her eyes because he knew what she really wanted to say, and he wasn't ready to consider giving Yuri Plisetsky a chance.

"Are you sure dear?"

Yuuri surveyed the piles of bags and souvenirs. He had no right to feel it but the jealousy was riding his back. He needed to get it off before he said something else he regretted, "I'm sure." He kissed his mom for reassurance, gave Victor an apologetic nod, and left the dining room.

"Can I have another?" Yurio said breathlessly, failing to notice the tense atmosphere he now sat in. As far as he was concerned, he'd just found the food of the gods. It was almost as perfect as his grandfather's pirozhki.

Yurio would happily sleep in the hot springs if it was allowed. He lamented that they couldn't take a picture since it was against policy but quickly got over it as he sunk further into the water. The place
wasn't a hovel, far from it. It was heaven.

He glimpsed a figure at the door, but it turned out to be a Yu-topia guest. He frowned at Victor, "Something wrong with your little piggy?"

"Hmm?"

"What's going on with him?" he pressed.

"Yuuri had a hard practice yesterday," Victor said, circumventing the meat of the question.

Yurio sighed, "Fine. Are you planning to come back to Russia after the Grand Prix?"

"I haven't really given it much thought," Liar, "We've been busy prepping for the season. Why? Are you asking me to come back?"

"Would you consider it?"

Victor fed him another one of those damn smiles, "Did you call Yakov?"

He scowled at the evasion and the reminder, "Goddamnit. Do I have to?"

"As your interim coach, I say yes, you do. It's better he hears it from you than the press." Yurio cursed darkly and rose from the water. He toweled and slipped into a robe before heading to Victor's room for his phone (they were still clearing a temporary room for him downstairs). He found Yuuri there, playing with an excited Makka.

"Finally out of hibernation?" Yurio asked. Yuuri's reserved demeanor goaded him on, "Don't let me stop you. I'm not sure if Victor told you but I might have to sleep here tonight since they don't have a room ready for me."

Yuuri stood and motioned to Makka to follow but not before Yurio took him by the arm. It wasn't tight, or threatening, but it was firm, "What do I have to say to you to get you to talk to me?"

"Considering that all you've done since you got here is insult me, I'm pretty sure there isn't much you could say." Yuuri was tired. He didn't want to be accommodating or polite. He just wanted to steal Makka, tend to his heart in private, get a proper night of sleep, and get back on the ice tomorrow. Only then could he deal with the reality of Yurio.

Yurio stared at him for a moment, then leaned in close to his ear, "I saw you in Sochi, crying in the bathroom," Yuuri went completely rigid, "Tell me, what kind of skater doesn't retire after that performance? You really think having Victor as your coach will change what you're capable of?"

The only thing that stopped Yuuri from biting back was Yurio's tone. Surprisingly, it wasn't laced with attitude, and the questions weren't meant to be rhetorical, quite the opposite. He seemed to want an honest answer.

After a few seconds, Yuuri spoke, "I was always capable Yurio and I'll fight to prove it. Victor choose to come here, so you can take up the last part of that question with him."

"I will. In the meantime," he let Yuuri's arm go, "I look forward to seeing you on the ice."

---

Yurio was sprawled out on the futon, snoring, the pork cutlet bowls having done their job. Victor silently exited his room and stood staring down the hall. There was an indistinct light coming from Yuuri's room. He'd probably left his desk lamp on.
Victor took a deep breath and made his way there, knocking tentatively, "Yuuri?"

It took longer than usual, but Yuuri eventually opened his door. Victor realized why when he saw his disheveled hair and tired eyes. The light was faint but he could see about five bluish marks on Yuuri's upper body. He ached to touch his lips to every one of them.

"Victor? Is something wrong?" Yuuri asked through a heavy yawn.

"I didn't mean to wake you. Just checking on...Makka." He watched the poodle who was curled on the right side of Yuuri's bed.

"I hope it's okay. I, um, didn't get any sleep last night," Yuuri said slowly, waking up enough to realize he wasn't wearing sufficient clothes, and that his bruises were on full display.

Victor nodded, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Yuuri rubbed his neck, feeling very exposed, "No pain. Feet are back to normal."

"Good," Victor breathed, "Nine a.m. tomorrow?"

"Sure."

Neither of them moved. Victor didn't want to go back to his room and Yuuri didn't want him too either. There was so much to say, so much that needed explaining. Why did it have to be so hard? Yuuri pushed his hair back, fully awake now, drawing courage from the fact that Victor was standing there, putting himself on the line when he could've easily stayed in his room. He was still fighting to meet him halfway, even when Yuuri didn't deserve it.

Phichit's voice rang clear in his mind: Well...I think it's time for you to meet him where he is.

"Victor, I didn't mean it. You're not a mistake. All you've ever done is be there for me. Having you as my coach and having you with me...kissing you, sleeping with you," Loving you, "It means everything to me. I...I know you have every reason not to trust me and I understand if you need more time. I just want you to know that none of it was a mistake," tears lined Yuuri's cheeks, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry Victor, for everything. I have to fix this. Please tell me I can fix this. Please tell me I haven't lost you."

"You...you haven't," Victor was cycling through several emotions from Yuuri's speech, "But...I'm not ready. I...I can't answer your question tonight."

That was enough, "Okay. Wait here." Yuuri went to his bed and reached near to Makka's feet. Victor watched curiously as Yuuri walked back to him, looking down at his closed fist. Using his free hand, Yuuri cupped Victor's own, the touch warm and electric, and with a small smile returned the watch to its rightful owner. A muted cry escaped Victor's lips. He was sure he was hallucinating. Yuuri had kept it? All this time? Why?

Yuuri curled Victor's fingers around the watch, and then kissed his hand, "Goodnight zvezda moya."
What Happens In Hasetsu

Chapter Notes

It's 2 a.m. where I am, so I apologize for any errors. Yurio is fire, ice, and the whole damn cavalry.

Makka lay vertical on Yuuri's chest, enjoying some long overdue attention from his best Japanese friend. He whined lazily as Yuuri played with his ears, and Yuuri felt his spirit lift with each playful sound. All the exhaustion and worry and crazy of the days before were now spreading thin; it was becoming pliable, breakable, and Yuuri woke that morning more mild-tempered than overwrought. It was five-thirty a.m., much too early to be awake, but he'd slept so well that when his eyes fluttered open, he didn't experience that grinding compulsion to go back to sleep. So, he showered Makka with all the love he hadn't been able to since his and Victor's stupid fight.

Speaking of Victor...

Yuuri closed his eyes and evoked, cataloging all the good moments and casting away the bad. It was much like how he'd skated his free program, fearless and poised because, ultimately, his failures truly didn't define him. He wasn't weak. An idiot maybe, but not weak. It was an unquestionable characteristic in everyone's eyes, especially Victor's. There was much in Yuuri's past that he wasn't proud of, things that still triggered bouts of emotional uncertainty, but every time he stood on the ice with Victor, those things vanished, seared by the sheer allure of their relationship. Yuuri skated for himself, yes, but he also did it for Victor. He wanted to keep surprising him. He wanted to show him exactly how much his being in Hasetsu meant to him.

Yuuri's hand palmed the empty space on his bed. Admittedly, waking up without Victor wasn't an activity Yuuri wanted to get used to. Parting with Victor last night had been a feat in itself. Hearing Yuuri speak in his native tongue had compelled Victor to reach out to him, to take Yuuri's face into his hands and bring his lips as near as he could without kissing him. Everything proceeded to slow around them, narrowing down to the simple act of breathing against the other. And Yuuri knew. All at once, he knew. He knew what Victor was trying to communicate, he could sense it in the way Victor pressed his forehead against his own, could hear the unspoken words from his slightly parted lips. Yuuri knew, because he'd always known. There was just no denying it anymore. Not when he was experiencing the softest touch and all he could see was waves of blue-green and all he could feel was an overwhelming sense of yes.

The kiss never came, but Yuuri didn't mind (so much). A more significant factor was now in play. Yuuri vowed never to take it for granted.

Makka stretched then flopped back onto his stomach, apprising Yuuri to his stilled hand. Yuuri smiled fondly at the mass of fluff, making up for his inattentiveness with a vigorous head rub, "Have I ever thanked you boy? For making it easier to get to know Victor?" Makka licked his chin, and Yuuri rewarded him with a soft hug. He began moving his blanket aside, and Makka diligently jumped off of him while he stumbled out of bed.

'Might as well head to the rink,' Yuuri bent to touch his toes, 'A slow warm-up might be good for my muscles after yesterday.' He looked through his messages, responding to Phichit that he too hoped everything would be better today, and then took a brisk shower, tip-toeing around the hall so he
wouldn't disturb Victor and Yurio.

And speaking of Yuri Plisetsky...

Yuuri pondered their brief conversation last night as he got dressed. Knowing Yurio had witnessed one of his lowest moments made him uneasy, but it was still low on his list of pressing matters. As much as Yuuri wanted to personally dissect just how much Sochi had been a turning point in his life, it was the rest of his and Yurio's impromptu rendezvous that Yuuri wanted answers on. It made no sense to him. He projected attitude and indifference, gave the impression that Yuuri's retirement was something he craved, yet plainly concluded that he wanted to see Yuuri on the ice. Was the young Russian gauging him? Yurio would be making his senior debut next season and using both Yuuri's insecurities and Victor as leverage to provoke him was a feasible conclusion. The ice could be a cutthroat place after all. However, Yuuri couldn't dismiss that there had been something underneath Yurio's tone, a grudging maturity that his fifteen year old self was still catching up too. What it denoted, Yuuri was yet to discover.

Regardless, Yuuri wasn't in the mood for unnecessary confrontations today. All the anger had done was chip away at his soul. He wanted to spend the morning with Victor filling those cracks, skating like his heart was on fire, and using the time to continue mending their relationship. He zipped up his jacket, ready for the day.

"You want to come with me or wait for Victor?" Yuuri grinned as Makka made a show of nesting in his blankets, "Okay boy. One sec."

Yuuri wrote a note and left it in his collar, leaving his bedroom door ajar before quietly heading downstairs. He made a stop in the dining room to throw some fresh fruit in his bag. As he stepped into the crisp morning air, head down and focused on his phone, he didn't notice Yurio jogging on the spot outside Yu-topia. An annoyed grunt alerted Yuuri to his presence. Yurio and Victor had trained in the same rink in St. Petersburg, so it wasn't exactly a surprise that he was accustomed to early mornings. Yuuri deliberated that he was probably the skater who made it first to practice out of pure spite. The thought made him chuckle, and Yurio shot him a pointed glare, unsure of what was so funny.

Yuuri took a deep breath; come hell, high water or Yurio's insults, he needed to keep it together today. Much of his displeasure at Yurio's presence in Hasetsu had faded, and with the parting jealousy came a keen curiosity to see the routine Victor had choreographed for his fellow Russian. If Yurio had traveled here to ascertain his abilities, then it was only fair that Yuuri emulated that mentality.

"Good morning Yurio."

Being spoken too so early in the day appeared to offend Yurio, "You look like shit."

Yuuri found himself smiling; Yurio wasn't a morning persons, much like Yuuri. Despite the fact that Yuuri was well-rested and had taken a shower, there was that usual trace of grump in his features, "I appreciate the honesty. I'm headed to the rink. Want to take a run?"

Yurio glanced at him, eyebrow arched, "With you?"

"I don't see anyone else around." His gall remark earned Yuuri a low "Pfft". Yuuri shrugged and did some starter stretches, buying Yurio time to make up his mind. He hid the pleased look on his face when Yurio's mutter reached him.

"I don't like to talk when I'm exercising."
"We have that in common," and Yuuri started his run. Soon enough, Yurio fell into step with him and they kept up a medium pace to get their blood pumping. The silence wasn't stifling or filled with yesterday's adversity. It was tolerable, though Yuuri could still feel the young man's punk aura pushing his way. As they passed the beach, Yuuri's eyes were drawn to the area. It had been a while since he and Victor had spent time there. Surprisingly, Yurio's head was also turned in that direction. Yuuri saw the flash of a smile tug at the corners of the Russian's mouth, and he briskly adjusted his gaze elsewhere.

Yurio opened Ice Castle, and powered on the facility. He pulled open the glass doors and gestured to a frowning Yurio who had stopped at the entrance.

"You can join me if you want," Yuuri was pulling off his jacket, "I'm going to run some exercises."

If Yuuri's warmer attitude was affecting him, he didn't directly show it, although he did eventually enter the rink. Yuuri was already on the ice, sighing contentedly; his body responded to his every move with ease. He felt that voracious drive to move, to get lost in the skating. It was good to be back in proper form. His day off had really done the trick. Yurio skated to him, staring intently at the visible bruises on his arm.

"What the fuck happened to you?" he asked, miffed.

Yuuri shrugged, "I overdid it the other day. It's cosmetic now, they've healed fine. It's really not as bad as it looks."

"You shouldn't be putting yourself in danger of injury," Yurio griped.

"I know," Yuuri agreed, letting the teen's concern go unacknowledged; it's probably what he wanted anyway, "The last few days..."

"Right." Yurio didn't ask for further clarity. He moved into a mobility warm up, stretching and releasing as he glided across the ice. Yuuri followed his lead and they ran the moves for about fifteen minutes before resting. Yurio cracked his neck and eased into a perfect standing split.

"It's quiet here."

Yuuri smiled, "Well, since Victor became my coach, they've given us the rink as a home-base. No one is really allowed in now without permission."

"Must make practice easier."

"It does. I never liked practicing around crowds," Yuuri looked around his empty home rink, grateful for the space, "I spend most of my time here."

Yurio frowned, "With Victor?"

Yuuri eyed him curiously; that was kind of a stupid question but he remained patient, "Yes."

"Huh."

Yuuri wasn't sure where he was trying to go, "He's my-"

"Coach. I know," Yurio's frown was deepening, "Why didn't you skate in Sochi the way you skated Aria?"

Yuuri sighed. It wasn't a revelation that Yurio had seen the video, the damn thing had been viral for
"And what about now?"

"Well, Victor believes in me," just saying Victor's name set his chest alight, "And because of that I'm believing in myself. I don't have to worry about him seeing my shortcomings because none of that matters when I'm on the ice. I feel a lot more free with him around."

"So," Yurio lowered his leg, "Those pictures weren't a one time thing?"

Yuuri wasn't sure what he meant or what that had to do with their current conversation but his composure persevered, "The lounge? No. It wasn't."

"He has a sordid past."

Yuuri knew the stories well. Being the greatest figure skater in the world came with its conjectures. But using 'sordid' was harsh, even by Yurio's standards, "That's his business. Victor has always been honest with me. That incident wasn't exactly the highlight of our week, but it doesn't change anything, not my gratitude that he's here coaching me or otherwise."

Yurio watched him closely, "Let's do another round of warm-ups."

Had they come to some level of understanding? Yuuri wasn't sure, but Yurio's expression, while challenging, held no indication of disrespect, "Okay."

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Victor sat on the edge of Yuuri's bed, reading the note he'd left with Makka:

*Up early. At the rink. I promise to go easy until you get here.*

*I miss you.*

Those three words were but the tip of the iceberg of Victor's state, especially after last night. Leaving Yuuri's room had been as heart-wrenching as the same decision he'd made in Sochi. Again, it was the right choice for his own emotional stability, but good lord, Yuuri three quarters naked and respecting his boundaries and whispering sweet Russian nothings and handing over his watch?

Victor groaned. Did Yuuri even know how effortlessly he undid him? He still hadn't decided on when or how to give Yuuri an answer, and with Yurio around, getting into the substance of that conversation didn't seem practical. Okay, that was an extremely weak excuse. As much as he also missed Yuuri, he welcomed the delay. There was something specific he needed to address with Yuuri and he needed to brace himself for that show of vulnerability.

It was after eight a.m. when he and Makka walked into Ice Castle. Yurio was having an actual full and cordial conversation with Yuuko, looking much calmer than usual as they stood at the counter. He seemed to be very taken with her and Victor understood that all too well; as long as he'd known Yurio, the only stories the younger Russian had spouted were of him and his grandfather.

"Hello Yuuko, Yurio," Victor said brightly. Makka jumped up to the counter, happily collecting several pats.
"Early morning for you boys," Yuuko smiled, "I was just asking Yurio what his usual routine in Russia was."

"Did you tell her you'd get to practice hours before me just so Yakov would bite my head off?"

Yurio, previously cool and collected, fumed, "It was your own damn fault, coming to practice at lunchtime. How times have changed."

"Hasetsu has that effect, I guess," Victor's eyes strayed to the glass doors and to Yuuri. Yuuko felt relief at that motion, and the crinkles that appeared as Victor smiled. It was a clear indication that something was going right with the two skaters. Yurio also followed Victor's attentive gaze. There was an expression he'd never seen manifest in St. Petersburg. He resumed his chat with Yuuko, giving Victor the opening to go to his student.

Yuuri landed a clean triple toe loop ahead of noticing Victor's arrival. His coach's disposition was the opposite of yesterday. Those shining eyes and that private smile meant only for him had Yuuri skating to Victor without reservation.

"I thought we said nine," Victor handed Yuuri his water and then swept his damp hair from his face. The red in Yuuri's cheeks became more prominent.

"I wanted to make use of the time," Yuuri said between a cool gulp of water, "Thanks for letting Makka stay with me."

"Thanks for the note," Victor's countenance was dazzling, "What do you want to run today?"

"Free skate. Let's hold off on *Eros* until later this week," Yuuri was vague and Victor wasn't complaining. He pulled out his skates and nodded towards the ice.

"Okay, go ahead. Let's focus on presentation. I want to make sure your body's in order."

Soon, they were on the ice together. Victor did one run through with him (more for the sake of having Yuuri close again) and then watched him on his own, giving minor pointers as they went along. There wasn't much else he could say; Yuuri had transformed the program into a unique personal representation of his journey as a skater. Those late night trips to Ice Castle were undoubtedly well spent. He was relaxed, focused, and profound in his manoeuvres across the ice. Victor was transfixed, his hand unconsciously hovering over his heart. Yuuri was beyond mesmerizing. By the middle of his third run through, Victor was unnaturally quiet.

"That was very good Yuuri," he said afterwards, "Let's take a break."

They leaned against the barrier, elbows touching. Both men were well aware of the rich sparks from that minimal contact. Victor gave him a small nudge, "Did you and Yurio come here together?"

Yuuri made small circular motions with his free arm, "Yeah. We took a run this morning."

"Did it go okay?"

"Better than yesterday," Yuuri was thoughtful, "I get the feeling he was trying to tell me something and didn't want to say it outright."

"Do you mind that he's here?" Victor's arm overlapped his now. Yuuri's heart sped up.

"I did," Yuuri said honestly, "Not so much anymore. He isn't as bad as he makes himself out to be."
Victor was visibly relieved. Yuuri gave him a brilliant smile and looked over his shoulder at the main doors. Yuuko and Yurio were no longer in their line of sight. There was no one watching them. He and Victor were essentially alone. He honestly wished he could take advantage of the opening because Victor's hand was brushing against his waist now. Wait...how had the space inched away so easily?

"Yuuri."

"Sorry, did you say some-" and Yuuri turned to find eager lips in the vicinity of his. He held his breath, didn't make the slightest movement, and got lost in an impossible sea of cobalt. This was Victor's choice. Yuuri couldn't influence this with his own selfishness. He waited, heart pounding.

When Victor did kiss him, it was with a burning, pent up force, and Yuuri realized just how much Victor had been holding back last night. He lavished Yuuri with his tongue, deep and heated, and every moan it elicited was caught between their lips. Yuuri drowned himself in the sensations, curling a fist into Victor's t-shirt, pulling him flush against him. He could cry. This was worth every single word written about them that week, and so much more. How had he been so fucking obtuse? In what universe was it acceptable to push Victor away? This kiss, the blazing, all-consuming passion, the underlying tenderness and authenticity, it was more than Yuuri deserved in so short a space of time.

Yuuko, who seconds before was about to burst through the doors, was simultaneously inwardly shrieking and despairing. 'Fuck! Why now?!' she lamented and knocked loudly on the glass before going in. Yuuri and Victor parted ever so slowly, looking at her in a collective daze.

"I'm so sorry but we have a problem," she showed them her phone, "We knew someone would eventually spot Yurio. I'm surprised no one recognized him when you went sightseeing yesterday."

"He kept his shades on and hoodie up. He has no patience for the press either." Victor explained, the perfect haze around him and Yuuri fading too quickly for his liking.

"Where's Yurio?" Yuuri was grimacing.

"Um, well," Yuuko was apprehensive, dreading a repeat of the other day, "He's outside. There's a crowd. Of reporters."

"Fucking perfect," Yuuri muttered darkly.

"Yuuri," Victor looked equally tense, "I can handle this. We don't have to-"

"Yes. We do," Yuuri pointed towards his guards and Yuuko reached for them, "Let's just get this over with. We've wasted enough time."

It wasn't only practice that Yuuri was referring too.

The press, passing fans, curious onlookers...it was a thick throng outside of Ice Castle. Yuuri couldn't help it, he was shaking and bile was rising in his throat, but his cognition remained sharp. The steady hand Victor kept on his lower back helped tremendously. Yurio joined them on the steps, one below the trio and Yuuko did her best to stay the mass a few feet from her boys (her protectiveness right then was ten-fold), typing frantically with one hand to Takeshi and Minako to get to the rink now. Yurio, noticing the way Yuuri's eyes searched for an anchor, jabbed him suddenly. Their eyes met and Yurio gave a minute nod: Calm down piggy.

The reporters were shouting over each other, and Victor employed his old tricks to coerce them into
settling down. A super nova smile here, a strategic hair flip there, he exuded charm from every pore in his body. Most of the them, and the crowd at large, fell expeditiously into his refined trap.

"Mr. Nikiforov, are you thinking about making a full career switch to coach?"

"Mr. Plisetsky, are you moving your home base to Hasetsu?"

"Mr. Nikiforov, are you considering going back to Russia? Is Yuri Plisetsky in line to be your next protege?"

"Mr. Katsuki, how will this affect your preparations for the upcoming season? Are you worried about your chances given last year's GPF results?"

They answered the questions without much fuss, with Victor tailoring much of them to reflect absolutely nothing. He'd dealt with the press long enough to know what hole to drop them in, and seamlessly picked up from Yuuri's and Yurio's monosyllabic responses. He wished Chris was there to offer his own unique flirtations, like they'd done at so many press conferences in the past. They still considered the on-going debate on the legitimacy of their supposed epic affair one of their best accomplishments (he should update Yuuri on that one, in case he wasn't already aware that it wasn't true).

Through the plethora of inquiries, Victor never moved his hand from Yuuri's back, and set his other hand firmly on Yurio's shoulder. They were both experiencing tremors, the former from nerves and the latter from rage. It was shortening Victor's tolerance for this show and his mouth was starting to hurt from the constant smiling. That patience dipped dramatically into the minus numbers when a snide tone emerged from the crowd.

"Yuuri Katsuki, what are your thoughts on Victor choreographing for a rival skater? Isn't that a fickle move on the part of your coach? Are you concerned about how this affects your, ah, unconventional relationship?"

Unadulterated derision. Nothing more, nothing less. Yuuri's mind fucking snapped.

Several things happened in quick succession. Victor dug his fingers into Yuuri's side as the younger skater made to launch into verbal tirade against that reprehensible question; Yuuri's head snapped to Victor whose eyes, soft and inviting this morning, were now an ice field, piercing and terrifying, fixated on the reporter; Yuuko flanked them a step up, about to announce that this impromptu conference was over; Minako and Takeshi, having arrived minutes before, were all the way to the back looking downright murderous.

But no one made it to another thought or move. Yuri Plisetsky, the Russian Punk, lenient towards this unnecessary waste of his time for the past ten minutes, pointed decisively at the man who was now nothing more than the scum beneath his shoe. His voice was low and ferocious.

"Excuse me? His 'ah, unconventional relationship'? You cannot be fucking serious."

A mixture of gasps, murmurs and stunned silence surrounded them. Both Yuuri and Victor looked like the wind had been kicked out of them. Yuuko was so proud she could scream.

"I'm just trying to get the facts Mr. Plisetsky. As everyone knows, both Mr. Nikiforov and Mr. Katsuki were spotted engaging in less than professional-

"Here's some facts for all of you," Yurio snapped, "Victor is a hell of a skater. Being in Hasetsu doesn't change that. Also, Katsuki's performance in Sochi has no bearing on his capabilities for next season. And their relationship is no one's business but theirs. So how about you keep your fucking
prejudices to yourself."

"Mr. Plisetsky," the reporter faltered, "I'm not trying to be disrespectful but-"

"Fuck." Yurio growled, "Off."

And with that Yurio dragged his colleagues and Yuuko back into rink. He stood enraged, personally offended by that encounter, and it took him a moment to register the three pairs of eyes glued to him, waiting for an explanation.

"Why the hell are you all looking at me like that? You can't tell me that asshole wasn't out of line. Fucking vultures. It's the one thing I hate about being a figure skater."

Yuuko pounced on him, crushing him a hug. Probably because it was her, he didn't put up a fight. He looked over at Victor and Yuuri who wore matching expressions, a mixture of incredulity and awe. Yurio rolled his eyes.

"Last I checked, this was still your practice time piggy."

Yuuri stuck his head into the dining room to find Yurio having his second friendly conversation of the day with Hiroko. Yuuri smiled at his mother, and gestured to the young Russian.

"I was looking for you."

"Is there a problem?"

Yuuri shook his head, "There's a ramen spot in town, it has some of the best food you'll eat, outside of my mom's katsudon of course. Want to get some dinner?"

Yurio's scowl was less distinct tonight, "Fine. Where's Victor?"

"Minako hijacked him about an hour ago so they could destroy each other's liver. We can meet them after, if you want."

"Okay. Let me get dressed." Yurio murmured something to Hiroko before heading to his room. As soon as he was out of sight, Yuuri requited his mother with an appreciative hug.

"I'm glad you came around dear," she said dotingly. Yuuri nodded into her shoulder.

Yuuri waited outside Yu-topia, texting Phichit an update on the day: It went much better. Minor press situation. You'll probably see some stories when you're up. He pressed send and laughed at Makka jumping up onto his leg.

"Victor's going to be wasted tonight," he massaged his fingers into Makka's head, "You'll have to stay with him since I can't."

"And why can't you?" Yurio's voice emerged from Yu-topia's entrance. Yuuri couldn't be bothered to evade the question, not after Yurio's incredible outburst that morning.

"We're still sorting some things out."

Yurio scratched under Makka's chin, "Trust me, however dramatic you are, Victor can outshine you ten to one."

They walked in a full comfortable silence for a few minutes before Yurio spoke, "I like Hasetsu."
"I appreciate that," Yuuri smiled, "By the way, your Agape was amazing."

"Victor's a gifted choreographer," Yurio admitted and he immediately frowned, "Don't tell him I said that. His ego's inflated enough as it is."

"No problem," Yuuri chuckled, "Can I ask you something in return for that?" Yurio didn't object, so Yuuri continued, "Why did you defend us this morning?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Yurio shrugged as though he believed his actions were more matter-of-fact than impassioned. Yuuri marveled at how easily his anger had misled him yesterday.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Yuuri treated Yurio to the best ramen in town, and enjoyed watching his defenses collapse when he filled his mouth with noodles. They ate with gusto and talked about skating, even offering advice on their respective routines. By the time they finished and went to retrieve Victor and Minako from a nearby bar, both Yuuri's coach and ballet instructor were three times as wasted compared to the night at the lounge. As soon as Victor spotted Yuuri, he swooped in, slurring in Russian. The look on Yurio's face clearly said that everyone was lucky they couldn't understand what he was saying.

Yuuri guided Minako as she paid the tab and he thanked the bartender for putting up with their trouble. He wanted to call a taxi but there was no controlling these drunkards; they both insisted on walking so they could enjoy the refreshing night air. Yurio watched the three of them, linked by the arms and laughing. He had to smile.

"I saw that," Yuuri whispered.

"What happens in Hasetsu piggy."

Victor awoke around two a.m., sore and parched. He vaguely remembered being out with Minako and having Yuuri and Yurio escort them home. He vividly remembered Yuuri guiding him into the shower but everything else was basically static. Had Yuuri gotten him out of his clothes? He could only hazard a guess if he'd been the one to finish the task, seeing as he was in his sleep clothes and Makka was the only one in bed with him.

He trekked outside and straight to Yuuri's room, forgetting his manners as he barged in without knocking. Yuuri wasn't there, and neither was his equipment. Victor chuckled, "Oh Yuuri." He backtracked, grabbed his jacket, equipment, and a quick drink of water, and headed out to Ice Castle, ignoring the impending hangover and the subsequent resistance to any kind of late-night exertion.

On Love: Eros. That's where Yuuri's attention lay tonight. He seemed to have come here in his own sleep clothes; his pants were a size larger and his t-shirt was stretched out so it leaned to one shoulder. That sight alone made Victor's breathing more pronounced and his eyes widened as the seconds passed. There was a blinding sexual energy flowing from Yuuri's every move. His entire demeanor heightened it, the way his hair flowed with each movement, his hands highlighting just the right body part with each turn, the eroticism gleaming in his eyes, as though he was being filled to the brim with ecstasy...

Victor braced himself against the wall as his legs began failing him. With his free skate, Yuuri made music. With Eros, he was making love. What had spurred this, at two in the morning no less? What had gotten into Yuuri...
Wait...

Wait...

This momentum he was building. It was flawless. The speed was just right. Victor's mouth opened wide, a cry imminent. There was no turning back, Yuuri wouldn't fail this time...

"YES! YES! THAT WAS PERFECT!" Victor shouted as Yuuri propelled himself into the air and landed the elusive quadruple flip, his signature move. He dropped his bag and ran into the rink, "YOU DID IT YUURI!"

Yuuri wasn't surprised in the least to see Victor. He was overjoyed, and he rode the high of his accomplishment as he skated with desperation towards Victor who met him full force by diving into his arms. They fell onto the ice, Victor's arm securely around the back of his head so he didn't injure himself again.

"I can't believe it," Yuuri panted dreamily, "Victor..." and their lips met in an intense, fiery caress that lay waste to the remnants of misery from the week's roller-coaster events. Victor peppered his cheeks and jaw and neck with sweet kisses, his praises fluidly transitioning from English to Russian.

"What were you thinking about during that skate?" Victor murmured into his skin. Yuuri threaded his fingers through Victor's hair with a smile.

"I had a dream about us," Yuuri said and Victor leaned up to feed him a burning gaze, "So, I came here to work it off."

The dreams don't do this justice...

"Will you tell me about it sometime?" Victor included another searing kiss with his question.

"I thought I just showed it to you," Yuuri mused playfully and laughed when Victor pouted, "I don't mind. It's part of my inspiration for Eros."

"And here I thought your motivation would be katsudon. You haven't had one in ages." Victor's tongue slid along Yuuri's lower lip and Yuuri shivered under him.

"Pork cutlet bowls aren't my only weakness Victor."

"Ah," Victor kissed his forehead, "Let's talk later, okay?"

Yuuri breathed out; those words were the comfort he'd been waiting on, "Okay. Ready to go home?"

"Can we sleep together tonight?"

Yuuri wrapped his arms around Victor's neck, "Yes."
It is once again 2 a.m. and my eyes are swimming but my love for Yurio knows no bounds (including my need for sleep).

Yuri Plisetsky was arrogant.

Why shouldn't he be? He was an extraordinary figure skater. There was no need to be shy about that fact. The media showered him with praises, rival skaters looked on in awe, and any coach would kill to have him under their care. He was young, nimble, and graceful, moving across the ice as though he could soar through the sky at any moment. He was the Russian Fairy. It was all that mattered.

That fact was solidified when Victor Nikiforov himself approached him and offered a compelling ultimatum: "Win the Junior Championships without quads and I'll give you the best senior debut ever." Yuri complied with the request, starstruck that Victor would offer something so valuable to his future. Plus, he was never one to pass up any challenge. The gold medal became his, of course. He never doubted that he would succeed. With his end of the bargain fulfilled, Yuri looked forward to meeting his fellow Russian on the ice with a routine tailored entirely for him.

He never considered the possibility of things deviating from that course, never dreamed that a senior division competitor seven years his senior, who had dragged himself and his routine into hell, would affect his future in any discernible way. Yuri had no concept of failure. So, the sight of Japanese GPF finalist, Yuuri Katsuki, who had for all intents and purposes shown some worth by landing a spot in the top six, stumbling into a bathroom, face covered in tears, well...It. Really. Pissed. Him. Off.

Yuri leaned against the opposite wall outside the bathroom debating his options. He could barge in and demand that the man retire. He could punch him and his emotions into his next lifetime. The deliberations that followed all escalated in obscenities and violent tendencies, and as Yuri quietly pushed open the door, stepping lightly (a skill perfected from years of ballet), he found he couldn't narrow down a course of action. The man was barricaded in the middle stall, feet splayed, his sobs borderline gasping now. Yuri frowned. At least the fool had the good sense to do this in private. This was the complete opposite of a well-adjusted skater.

"You don't deserve to be on the ice," Yuri muttered. His voice didn't travel, nothing could with the man's heavy cries filling the space. There was much Yuri could say, ninety-nine percent of it scathing and berating. The only thing that stopped him from verbally undermining the man's night further was the image of Victor looking at Yuuri Katsuki's performance, his eyes burning in a way Yuri never remembered them looking. It wasn't an expression Victor held for longer than a few seconds, lest someone caught the shift. The media could extrapolate for days if one strand of Victor's hair was out of place, much less something so visceral. That was the one percent, that and Yuuri Katsuki's footwork which, try as Yuri might, he couldn't scrub the man's damn step sequence from his mind. So much potential deluged by doubt and fear. It was demeaning, both to the sport and to the renowned competitors he shared the ice with.

Yuri left the bathroom with a frustrated 'hmph', his mind on Victor's countenance. Perhaps he'd been trying to convey pity. To Yuri, that was a punishment in itself, to be dismissed by Victor Nikiforov,
the skating legend who had the world at his feet.

In Yuri's opinion, Victor's pity (or otherwise) was wasted. Yuuri Katsuki was a dime-a-dozen skater who would never see the view from a podium.

Well here's something you don't see at every banquet...

For someone who placed last, he seems rather happy to further embarrass himself, don't you think...

There was that burning expression again. Yuri must've imagined it, the flash across Victor's face was so momentary this time. He looked on, curses rolling over his tongue but never making it past his lips, as Yuuri Katsuki renounced whatever sense of dignity he had left. As much as Yuri despised these social gatherings, this was repugnant and embarrassing, and for some inexplicable reason, it was rapidly leaving PG-13 territory.

A fucking dance-off?! What did he do to deserve this shit? He should've stayed in his goddamn hotel room, but no, Yakov wouldn't entertain his defiance, not tonight. Why the fuck was he competing with Yuuri Katsuki in this ungodly spectacle? Why was Christophe Giacometti bareback? Why was no one putting a stop to this? And why in god's name was Victor suddenly looking so enthusiastic?

Yuri sighed.

Alright. Fine. Frankly, it wasn't as disgusting as his face was communicating. This was much more bearable than listening to the man fall apart in a bathroom stall, that was for sure. He enjoyed feeling the pompous pricks around them emanate mortification, dressing their obvious disapproval with expressions of mild shock. Bastards. God forbid they live a little.

If Yuri hadn't spent years refining his perfect mask of antipathy, he would be laughing along with his colleagues. Not so much with Chris though. The man played up his sexuality to an almost alarming degree and he was licking his lips lasciviously in Yuuri Katsuki's direction, particularly the lower half of the man's body. Yuri would turn in all his medals if it meant he never had to witness that. Fuck, Christophe and Victor loved to needle a crowd. Speaking of which, Victor's eyes were fixated on the Japanese skater, his grin radiant, and it was reciprocated in kind as Yuuri shed his tie in one fluid movement and stepped towards the world champion.

Inhibitions be damned. Yuri knew the champagne had erased all sense of shame when Yuuri Katsuki laced his fingers through Victor's own and pulled him onto the dance floor. Yuri would've voiced his umbrage if it wasn't for Chris stepping back almost immediately, surprise (and acquiescence?) plastered on his features. Yuri decided shock was a safer option, and he and Chris disclosed as such between them. Victor seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the unexpected diversion. He looked happy.

Yuri recalled that Victor had been fairly quiet through that last day of competition, and for Yuri that boiled down to devoted concentration on the task at hand. Now, he was laughing and grinning, and giving himself freely to a drunkard in front of skating officials, sponsors, and a number of wealthy assholes who were no doubt appalled that Victor would ruin a perfectly good bespoke suit on this ignominy.

Yuri wasn't sure what it meant. He'd never seen Victor look so alive. On the ice he was a god, there was no denying that. But contentedness on the ice was different from the emotion he showed now. It was too nuanced. Strange, considering the expression he'd leveled at the Japanese skater during today's free skate. From the way Chris was cheering him on, it was possibly Victor following his friend's lead, working his playboy persona into the night's proceedings.
Leave it to Victor to find any reason to flaunt his ego.

*On Love: Agape* was sublime. Though it wasn't complete, Yuri felt an inspiring warmth bloom in his chest. Where Victor had found the time to craft it, between travelling and the World Championships, was beyond him. Would there ever be a day when Victor didn't live up to his genius? Probably not, given that he was watching him put together a second new routine. The accompanying music was exhilarating, similar in style to the strains found in Spanish flamencos.

"What's this routine called?" Yuri asked as Victor took a short stretching interlude.

"*On Love: Eros* is the opposing theme to *Agape*. Your routine represents unconditional love. This represents sexual love."

Yuri rolled his eyes, "Of course it does." But he couldn't deny that Victor's choreography was absolutely stunning, "Any reason you chose *Eros* over the other compositions you've been listening too?"

Victor winked, one of his signature gestures when speaking to the media, "I needed to remind myself of something important." Victor's eyes fogged over for a second before he busied himself with his water bottle. Yuri understood his explanation to some extent. *Agape* reminded him of his grandfather, it was that unbreakable familial connection that guided him on the ice. Yuri, however, was not about to ask who or what Victor had to remember in the context of sex. That was not information he ever wanted to be privy to. Surely this was one of his and Chris' ridiculous inside jokes; they savored sending the general skating populace into fits of speculation.

"Thanks for today." Yuri stretched his arms behind him.

"Sure. Are you headed home?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I'll be here for another hour," Victor said. Yuri nodded; that seemed fair. Victor had, as usual, strolled into the rink at lunchtime and Yakov had, as usual, shouted for the entire city to hear. However, Victor was anything but blasé about his career. He simply enjoyed watching Yakov lose his cool.

Even so, Victor had been eerily hushed since returning from the World Championships. He'd barely indulged Chris' nonsense during the press conference in Saitama and if that wasn't a sign, Yuri didn't know what was. He wasn't the only one who observed it; their rink-mates, Mila and Georgi spent an inordinate amount of time hypothesizing the reason for Victor's lackluster mood. He skated as he always did, with the flair and brilliance of man born to be on the ice but if Yuri had to narrow down where the subtle changes had begun, it would be the Sochi Grand Prix.

Yuri's suspicions only increased when he'd happened on Yakov and Victor having a conversation at a respectable decibel.

"Vitya, I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong."

"What makes you think there's something wrong?"

"You haven't caused any level of trouble since Sochi. So, either I have ascended into the afterlife or...?" Victor never answered the question but his sigh spelled frustration. Since then, Yakov tended to stay with Victor at the rink past his practice times. It wasn't unlike Yakov to show concern for his skaters, but it was unlike Victor to allow it without being a wise-ass. Yuri wondered if someone had
broken Victor's heart.

He shrugged; that was rink gossip influencing his thoughts. Victor's extracurricular activities weren't exactly a secret but he'd never faltered in competition. Victor was the top figure skater in the world, a five-time world champion, a prodigy in every sense of the word. Yuri was sure his uncharacteristic quietness was simply intense commitment to keeping his audience wonder-struck during the upcoming season.

Who cared if Victor was a playboy? None of that mattered when he wore gold around his neck.

Yuuri Katsuki tried to skate Victor's FS Program (Stay Close To Me).

Yuri's grip on his spoon tightened and he promptly lost his appetite. Was this some sad attempt to delay fading into obscurity?

"You didn't learn after Sochi did you piggy?" Yuri scoffed. What skater would let themselves go like that? "Retire you dumbass. Save yourself this humiliation." He closed the video barely ten seconds into the routine. 'Internet sensation' or no, this was as far as this piggy would get to any kind of worthwhile recognition. Yuri could only imagine how insulted Victor would be when he watched Yuuri Katsuki gut his free skate.

Victor never showed for practice. Yakov refused to say why on the first day. On the second day, he seemed to have turned grayer. Three days passed before Yakov had no choice but to face Victor's impetuousness. While he gave little information to the media regarding Victor's exact motivations and whereabouts, he was candid with his skaters. Yuri's shouting shook the foundations of the rink.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE'S LEFT RUSSIA?!!"

Yakov sighed, "He's gone to Japan. He's taking next season off."

Yuri's mouth was a loop of unconscious jaw exercises, "Taking the- WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT MEAN?! WHAT IS HE DOING IN JAPAN?!!"

"He's going to coach Yuuri Katsuki."

Yuri blanched and his volume only rose from there, "ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!"

"Language. You need to calm down Yuratchka."

"WHAT ABOUT AGAPE?! THAT SON OF A BITCH LEFT ME WITH HALF A ROUTINE!"

Yakov massaged his eyes, "I believe it may have slipped his mind."

"WE'RE GOING-"

Yakov went absolutely rigid, a clear and imposing show of power over the direction of their conversation, "No. We are not." His voice was grave, "You will respect Vitya's decision. As for your short program, I acknowledge that he is in the wrong here but I've watched Victor work on latter half of Agape. We'll be able to complete the routine ourselves."

"You support this?" Yuri sputtered, "You support him moving to Japan to coach that pig?"

"I have always trusted Vitya to find his way. This is his decision." Yuri glared at his coach; that answer was too neat, too impeccably wrapped to pass as anything credible.
Yuri had no space for support or respect. Only loathing.

In a move Yuri could only describe as conciliatory, Yakov contracted his ex-wife, Lilia Baranovskaya, to take Yuri under her wing. Her high features, and strict prima ballerina demeanor was as intimidating as they came but Yuri felt no fear. When she demanded that Yuri hand over his body if he had any intention of winning gold, he’d yielded his soul. There was no room for failure. As far as Yuri was concerned, it was time to take advantage of his youth and all that entailed to show everyone exactly what he, the Ice Tiger of Russia, was capable of. He would make Victor regret leaving Russia. He would make that pig wish he'd retired after Sochi.

Yet, for all his anger, Yuri wouldn't touch his short program.

"You need to address this-" Yakov tried.

"No."

"Yuri, Victor isn't coming back to Russia."

"You don't know that."

It wasn't the first time they were having this conversation. Yakov estimated he could reiterate the point another two or three times before he exploded. Lilia was making good use of Yuri's passion and ire, pushing him far beyond his usual limits. His free skate was shaping into a stunning revelation of his abilities. But he needed to face Agape. Yuri didn't understand. Yakov himself wasn't sure he understood Victor's rationale. He thought Sochi was just another one of Victor's elaborate exhibitions.

It never crossed his mind that his world champion would develop feelings for the drunk Japanese skater.

Yakov's constant nagging was beginning to affect Yuri. He found himself thinking 'Victor isn't coming back' at randoms moments each day. It made him sick. What the fuck was Victor really doing? He was impulsive, flirtatious, and the walking personification of trouble but this was overdoing it. It was one fucking dance. That did not warrant Victor taking a sabbatical from his career to fuck around in Japan with a failed figure-skater. Yuri clicked on the video: Yuuri Katsuki tried to skate Victor's FS Program (Stay Close To Me).

He paused it after five seconds.

He threw his phone across the room.

He picked it up and duplicated the process before dropping his phone again.

The rinse and repeat moves went on for about an hour before Yuri, exhausted from the day, sat on his bed and grudgingly watched the piggy skate Victor's free program.

"What the-" he whispered after the first viewing.

He watched it again.

And a third time.

"What. The. Fuck."
'He deserves to be on the ice. He was born to be on the ice.' Yuri covered his mouth as though he'd said the words out loud. It wasn't just his footwork. It was his everything. Why skate like this in private? Why fuck up on the world stage? Was the piggy insane?

'I'm still better than him.' But the thought was like sand slipping through his fingers. Yuri couldn't deny what he'd just watched. Saying he was better and testing that confidence on the ice were two different things.

'He'll never make it to the GPF. Not after last year. Victor can't save him.'

They were empty words, all of it. He believed them as much as he believed Victor would come back to Russia.

The next day, Yuri went straight to Yakov and asked to see the rest of Agape. The old man gave him a relieved smile.

That pose...that was an exact replica of their banquet dance! Yuri shook his head as he scrolled through the articles. The piggy had been wrecked though, there was no way this was something he had initiated, which meant that Victor was the culprit for this media storm. Yuri cursed under his breath; the man was supposed to be concentrating on his career, it hung by a thread as it was. He'd called Yakov to vent but much of his words were born from a swelling rage. He didn't care who the piggy chose to frolic around with, but he did care if Victor was being less than sincere.

Why he cared, though...

"Do you think Victor's fucking with...Katsuki?"

Mila was thoughtful, "Are you actually interested in Victor's affairs outside skating?" he leveled a scowl at her and she laughed, "Hey, you've always avoided the gossip, so I'm just curious."

"Hard to ignore it now," Yuri lied, "The pictures are all over the internet."

Mila nodded, "I've known Victor to be a lot of things but those pictures were something else."

"Meaning?"

"You'll hate me for saying this, but you'll understand when you're older."

He kept his annoyance at a minimum, "So, is that a no?"

Mila studied him curiously, "No. I don't think he's messing around. Not this time."

Yuri sat in the airport with a frown, shrouded in dark shades and an over-sized hoodie. This was arguably one of the most reckless things he'd ever done. He could barely explain it to himself when he booked his flight to Japan. The words were jumbled, mismatched, and complicated. He closed his eyes and focused on the sentences that he'd managed to form:

'The piggy's Aria skate was amazing.'

'I need him on the ice at next season's GPF.'

'Victor better not be denying the piggy his potential.'

'I will rip Victor to pieces if he is. If not, I'll only rip half of him for abandoning Agape.'
Feeling protective of someone that he didn't know was extremely jarring for Yuri but he was driven by one thought: 'Yuuri Katsuki deserves to be on GPF ice.' There had to be a reason he fucked up in Sochi.

Yuri had to make sure he wasn't going to fuck up a second time.

Hasetsu was an invigorating breath of fresh air. As soon as Yuri stepped off the train, he felt instantly relaxed. The tension from the flight, his roaring anger over the past two months, it melted away like heated butter. It wasn’t a feeling Yuri had expected, but it was one he welcomed. All he'd known was skating. Competing. Winning. It was nice to know something less demanding for a change.

Yuri glanced at the paper he'd scribbled on. It wasn't difficult to find the address of the hot-springs and the rink known as Ice Castle; both became public knowledge after Victor's presence in Hasetsu was confirmed. Yuri asked around as surreptitiously as he could on the fastest route to Yu-topia, using vacation as his go-to explanation. It wasn't long before he found his way there. He met a plump woman at the entrance who was the splitting image of Yuuri Katsuki.

"I'm Yuri Plisetsky. I'd like a room."

Hiroko ushered the teen inside, his name jolting her memory. Victor had fondly mentioned him a few times when she'd asked about Russia, "Hello Yuri! Welcome to Hasetsu. Are you looking for Victor and our Yuuri?"

"Yes. Are they at practice?"

He was poised, curt, and just a little bit nervous. Hiroko's unwavering friendliness tended to have that effect on people like him, "I'll point you in the right direction. Leave your things there. We're a bit busy, but I'm sure we can find a room for you to stay in while you're here."

Yuri didn't know why this woman made him feel homey but her smiles were warm and welcoming. He couldn't be rude to her if his life depended on it, "Thank you."

Yuri shut Victor's door as the piggy left with Makkachin. He didn't know why the man was hiding or why Victor was avoiding any question on the subject, but he didn't like it. Victor had gone from flustered, as he and his student stood in silence on the ice, to flashing Yuri that million dollar smile that he reserved solely for the press. His walls had been up ever since. The most Yuri could work out was that they were fighting and the media was obviously responsible for their disagreement. Why neither of them were fixing their issues and opting instead to tip-toe around each other was the source of much vexation for Yuri. He wanted to throw them into a room and throw away the fucking key. This was not the way for a coach and student to behave.

At least he had confirmation that Mila was right. Victor wasn't an unfriendly person by any means, but his interactions with the piggy carried transparent undertones. They cared for each other, and Yuri didn't have to be a full-fledged adult to make that conclusion. How deeply it ran was another question entirely.

He accessed his contacts and clicked Yakov's name, planning on keeping their conversation as short as possible.

"Yuri. I'm almost afraid to ask." Yakov sounded tired.

"I'm in Japan."
"I figured you were."

Yuri had been preparing for a confrontation, sarcasm at the minimum, but not this forbearance,
"That's it?"

Yakov sighed, "Yuri, we finished Agape. You said yourself that you wanted to show Vitya exactly
what you're made of. So, unless I'm missing something, you're not there for him."

Yuri's mouth fell open but he quickly recovered, "I'll be back in a few days."

"I understand."

"Seriously old man-"

"Yuri, stop. I'm not going to fight you on this. If you can't say out loud the real reason you're in
Japan then you are not ready to have any conversation on the matter," Yakov exhaled, "I'll see you
soon."

Yuri didn't have time to contemplate what he was about to do, nor did he need too. All he knew in
that moment was the vehement mixture of outrage and the blistering cold front that originated from
the two men behind him. It was synchronous, apoplectic, and primal. Yuri's glower followed suit.
He'd never paid attention to how the piggy interfaced with the press, but Victor Nikiforov had never
once let his cheerfulness and charm slip in front of them, much less descend precariously into a
ballistic state.

Yuri was used to Victor's nonchalance about the gossip that followed him. He neither confirmed nor
denied any of the stories, only laughed and winked and flaunted his alluring good looks. Yuri had to
swallow his smirk as he realized just how much had changed. The way the two men rose to each
other's defense, possibly envisaging what line they could cross that wouldn't result in jail time, it was
satisfying as hell to experience.

'This isn't a game to either of you, is it? Do you love each other, is that it?'

That lounge incident was enough trouble for his colleagues for one week. So, Yuri saved them the
inconvenience and did the one thing he'd wanted to do since he got to Hasetsu, the thing he thought
would've been directed to them and not some outsider. He pointed at the reporter and gave him a
piece of his fucking mind.

Yuri stood with Yuuko, watching through the glass as the piggy ran a particularly stunning step
sequence, the variations emotive and soulful. Victor stood close by, observing his student intently.
Yuri recognized the burning look in his eyes.

'It wasn't pity you showed in Sochi, was it Victor? You saw his potential too. And you weren't being
a playboy at the banquet. You were fucking whipped.'

"Katsuki's a completely different person," Yuri commented.

"You can thank Victor for that," Yuuko smiled, "You know Yurio, for someone who goes out of his
way to be this punk..." She let the sentence hang, wanting Yuri to give his explanation freely. He
wanted to be indignant at her prying, but Yuuko was incredibly likable and Yuri was all out of
disgruntled thoughts and actions.

"There are some things I don't tolerate," he said, "This morning was one of them."
"If you don't mind my asking then, why are you really here?" her voice was gentle, "Yes, the routine but even that strikes me as odd. Why didn't you come to Victor earlier? Or why didn't you and your coach finish it yourselves?" Yuri narrowed his eyes and she clarified, "I'm not asking for Victor and Yuuri. They can have that conversation with you themselves. What I meant, and you've probably already noticed it, is that we're all protective of Yuuri, Victor by extension, and now I find myself feeling the same way about you."

Yuri sighed. His compulsion was to lie, to hide behind the attitude but...would it really hurt to be honest for once? "Yakov insisted I respect Victor's decision. I wouldn't have given a damn if he wasn't so adamant about it. So, we worked on my free skate, and I refused to touch Agape for a long time because I honestly believed Victor would come back. I knew he was torn about next season but I never expected..."

Yuuko nodded, "You wanted him to coach you."

"Who wouldn't?" Yuri mused, "Victor gets on my last nerves but no one can deny his brilliance. I'll be making my senior debut next season and I intend to win gold at the Grand Prix. I thought Victor was the key, both as a choreographer and a competitor."

"So, what changed?"

"Aria."

"Yuuri's video?"

Yuri leaned against the wall with a sigh, "When it went viral, I didn't care but when Victor left Russia, I had to face it. At first I thought Victor was looking for any reason to take some time off. When I watched the video..." Yuri gave a small, wry laugh, "It was my own fault for underestimating the piggy."

"Hold on," something dawned on Yuuko's face, "You flew to Japan, by yourself, in the middle of training, because you thought Victor was using Yuuri?"

Yuri huffed a breath, "I just wanted to make sure Victor wasn't stroking his own selfishness."

"That's actually sweet. A bit rash, but very sweet," she grinned, "You do know you could've called right?"

Her teasing was actually endearing, "Well, after those pictures this week, I wanted to see it for myself," he studied the duo and said the words he hadn't been able to say to Yakov, "I don't need Victor on the ice."

Yuuko made an educate guess as to who Yuri did want on the ice with him. She ruffled his hair affectionately and he gave an appreciative grunt, "Are you sure you're only fifteen?"

He gave her a rare smile, "Don't get me wrong. I'm going to win gold. Competing against the best will only make my victory sweeter."

"Of course," Yuuko laughed, "Whatever it takes to motivate you right?" She watched Yuuri land a clean triple lutz and smiled at Victor's pleased expression, "They've had a rough few days but they always bring out the best in each other, on the ice and off."

"Well, I hope that carries through to the season because if the piggy doesn't make it to the Grand Prix, I'll fly back here and set them both on fire."
As puzzling as it was, he and the pig-...Yuuri were having dinner, in public, and it actually wasn't a horrible experience. It was enjoyable spending time with a...friend? It wasn't like he was about to ask, or ever refer to the man as anything but 'piggy' out loud but Yuri assumed that's where they were headed. Yuuri Katsuki was really easy to talk to once you started to know him. There were traces of his banquet personality when he laughed and shared details about hometown and Yuri felt thankful that he hadn't shattered the man's heart back in Sochi.

The only thing he would've liked to erase from the evening was Victor's unabashed Russian comments about the curvature of Yuuri's ass, among other very suggestive declarations. Yuuri looked at him for some indication of what Victor was saying, but Yuri was having no part of that mayhem.

'Fucking hell Victor, keep it in your pants.'

All in all, it was a good night. It was nice watching Victor so comfortable with Yuuri and Minako. It was nice to see Yuuri more outgoing than he'd thought possible after Sochi. It was really nice to smile at the sight and have Yuuri tease him about it.

Yuri liked Hasetsu. A lot. He would have to make the most of the rest of his time here. He sneck a glance at Yuuri and Victor, who shared a wholly affectionate gaze despite the latter's intoxication. He bowed his head, hiding the widening grin on his lips.

'You're both fucking idiots.'
Memories of Sochi

Chapter Notes

This 2 a.m. thing is getting out of hand. At least Victor has Chris' teasing to keep him company.

The next chapter *should* end this arc, after which I need some sleep before starting Part 2 :) 

P.S. Listen to Ed Sheeran - Barcelona. It's Victuuri as fuck.

St. Petersburg, two months after the Sochi Grand Prix

"Oh my god guys, it's Victor Nikiforov!"

"Holy shit, he's even more perfect in person!"

"Victor! Victor! Can we get a photo?!"

"Victor, will you do a live video with us?!"

Over the years, the screeches, exaggerated fever, and overall entitlement to his time blended seamlessly into the other, and for Victor, the encounters were now whittled down to a science. Mega-watt smile, twinkle and wink, and enough magnetism to reduce most persons to twenty percent speech capacity.

Victor Nikiforov, the legendary Russian figure-skater. Or, as he cynically referred to himself, Victor Nikiforov, the commodity.

Before Sochi, his illustrious public image was as entertaining to him as it was to the press. He managed it well, albeit with less enthusiasm than his younger days. Chris ardently accounted for the deficit during competitions (bless him). His fans didn't seem to care either way; the mask of him was worth more to their social media accounts than the person that hid beneath it. Victor couldn't blame them; he was conscious of what he represented, especially within his home country. Perhaps, if their circumstances were switched, he would seek the same type of satisfaction that came with meeting a celebrity.

Impressionable youth and all that.

After Sochi however, after Yuuri, he scarcely saw anything else. It was extreme tunnel vision, a fixed line of vision filled with flyaway locks and starlit eyes, Victor's secluded corner of a world that rushed around him. The memory ached and assuaged him, and one day that nucleus came to a middle. A group of fans bounced towards him as he left his personal tailor to work his magic on a suit for the World Championships banquet (if only he had another dance to look forward too). Victor put on his mental lab coat and went through the process, as always. One of the men extended his selfie stick, capturing five excited smiles and one satisfactory one.

"We've always wanted a commemorative photo! Smile everyone!"
It wasn't until Victor was unlocking his apartment door that a wave of horror loomed over him.

*A commemorative photo? Sure...*

'Oh fuck,' Victor went numb, *I said that to him at the arena. Did he...fuck, did he think I mistook him for a fan?*

The recollection of the error in his phrasing was much like being tossed into a wind tunnel. It set him violently adrift, extricating him from where he stood frozen and dropping him into Yuuri Katsuki’s shoes. Drunk Yuuri was an anomaly, a shooting star bursting through the sky, stealing wishes and continuing without fear into the night. Sober Yuuri, however, required tact, a trait Victor severely lacked at the most inopportune moments. He'd never meant to be cruel. It had been an excuse to rope Yuuri into conversation, something Victor actively pursued after the podium formalities. But his search came up empty. Yuuri was no where to be found. Then, as Victor resigned to leaving with Yuri and Yakov, there he was, leaving the arena with Celestino Cialdini.

Of all the words Victor could've strung together. He slapped his forehead at how badly he had fucked up.

*I'm so fucking selfish. I was only thinking about myself. I'm so sorry Yuuri.*

The rest of his day was steeped in miserable groans and interminable moping. All this time, he’d carried the brief meeting like a wounded puppy, the image of Yuuri, expression blank, eyes heavy with unshed tears, an indelible contrast to the man who'd lit his heart on fire. Victor covered his face and buried hands and head into Makka's fur. If he'd been hurt in that moment, imagine how Yuuri had felt.

Insulted? Sidelined? Dismissed?

*Rejected?*

And then a second, more devastating realization hit him: Victor would never be able to make it up to Yuuri.

He'd casually called in some favors, requesting information on Yuuri Katsuki's intentions for next season. Much of it leaned to his retirement. The rest of it made him furious. The connotations in the messages, the friendly intelligence betraying a sub-current of contempt.

Yuuri Katsuki was *not* a dime-a-dozen skater. Far from it.

Victor choked on his sadness and anger when his phone rang out next to him.

"Victor darling!" It was Chris, "Did you get my messages? I'm here for a couple days. Want to get some dinner?"

Victor vaguely recalled Chris telling him about some meeting or the other, "Sure. Our usual spot?"

"Sounds good to me. Are you okay? You sound startled."

"I'm fine. Makka toppled me over."

"Of course," Chris let that one pass, "I'll see you in a few hours."

Victor strolled into the Four Seasons, dressed to the nines in slim black slacks and a striped navy oxford shirt under luxurious black cashmere. The motions of sorting through his wardrobe had, at the
very least, cleared his mind for an hour. He pulled the scarf from his neck, and fingered the buttons on his peacoat as he entered the bar, drawing all eyes in the room to him. He avoided them all save for Chris. The hotel staff knew them well, and were a pragmatic presence in a sea of whispering admirers.

He and Chris were safely tucked away in a private enclave, away from prying ears and eyes. Victor leaned back against the rich leather with an audible sigh. He'd dwelled himself to a massive headache that continued to mock the aspirin he'd taken earlier that evening. So be it. Alcohol would be the next salve on his list.

"The usual?"

"I think I need something stronger tonight." *Something as strong as Yuuri's lips.*

Chris placed the orders, adding a pointed 'Keep them coming' at the end of it, "You look miserable Victor. Your face that is. The rest of you is to die for."

"That's comforting," Victor drawled, "You never mince words, do you?"

"Not with you. We wouldn't be friends if I did."

Victor managed a smile, "I remembered something stupid I did. My day pretty much devolved from there."

"Hmm. Italy? Or perhaps Moscow?" Chris snapped his fingers, "Canada. That was a hell of a night."

"Is this a hobby of yours?"

Chris smirked, "Relax, I'm only teasing." A round of drinks reached their table and Victor took a healthy mouthful of it, the mixture of sweet and tart quite pleasant on his tongue. Two drinks fluxed in his system while Chris was still halfway through his first. Victor ignored the questioning looks in favor of lighter conversation.

"How's that mystery partner of yours doing?"

Chris obliged him with a smile, "Very well. Beautiful man. Notoriously private, which I actually like."

"Does he know we've fucked?"

"He knows *all* the stories."

Victor laughed, "Understanding *and* trust. That's the dream."

"Two thirds of it, at least. You're forgetting love."

Victor's already uneven cheer wavered. He chased the sinking feeling with another drink. Chris watched him curiously.

"You want to tell me what's the stupid thing you did in Sochi?"

Victor was brooding, "I really don't."

'It's been a while since he's been this preoccupied', "Victor, forgive me for this, but what happened after he kissed you?" Victor suddenly looked like the chair was swallowing him, "I ask out of"
concern, and just a bit of curiosity because I get the impression that the kiss was only one of several important things to happen that night."

"Like I told you, it doesn't matter as much as you think it does."

"Really? You're probably right," Chris fished his phone from his pocket, unlocking and scrolling through Instagram with an overtly casual flick of his thumb, "I guess this post of Yuuri wouldn't be something you're interested-"

Chris tried to cover his enjoyment of Victor emphatically snatching his phone out of his hand. Victor was partially sure it was another one of his friend's many points, and there would be nothing for him to see except the physical admission of where his thoughts lay...except...

"Prekrasny." It was a shot of Yuuri from the back. He wore the staple practice gear, black sweats, soft blue track t-shirt. His hands bracketed him delicately, fingers gently pointed down. His head was bowed, the nape of his neck an invitation. Light streamed in from the windows, casting an ethereal glow on his stance. He looked set to draw magic from the ice, leaving all in his path spellbound.

"He's still in Detroit," Chris sipped his drink, "His friend Phichit Chulanont posts regular updates, including some of Yuuri. I've been keeping an eye on the possible contenders for next season and discovered the photos."

"Why didn't you send them to me?" It was an audacious thing to say, but Victor's regard was out of the window, on a plane, and storming Yuuri's American rink. Many of the pictures of Yuuri were side shots, or far off studies, and they were almost always without the obstruction of people. Victor was sure this Phichit had sought his permission to post these, with the comfort that Yuuri was fairly shrouded in mystery. Even his tags didn't include Yuuri's name. His own checks after Sochi came up pretty blank; Yuuri was undeniably and unforgivingly private.

"We haven't talked about Yuuri since our last drink Victor. You've been quiet on the subject and I figured you had your reasons. I didn't want to upset you."

Victor shot him a glare, one he quickly retracted. He returned his friend's phone with a sigh, "I'm sorry. You're right. I have no right to be angry."

"I prefer you angry than sitting behind your walls," Chris was concerned, "You've been far the last few weeks. On a side note, is everything coming along okay for the WFSC?"

It was a testament to his and Chris' relationship that they were able to speak frankly about competitions where they were usually pitted as rivals (among other suggestions), "Everything's fine. My routines are in order. But..."

"Yes?"

'But what the fuck does it matter anymore?' "I've been thinking about Aria. I don't know why, but whenever I skate it now, I feel like something's missing."

Chris shook his head, thoroughly amused. Victor was a hopeless romantic and he didn't even notice it, "I'll send you the username of Yuuri's friend," he waved Victor's rebut away, "You're a terrible liar darling. Consider this a very belated birthday gift. Take it, and give the world the Aria they never thought they'd see."

World Figure Skating Championships, Saitama, Japan
"Last up is Victor Nikiforov from Russia. It's clear he's Russia's hero, the cheers are deafening! After the short program, he leads Giacometti, in second, by a huge margin..."

Victor greeted the crowd, shimmering, blossoming and charming, his usual appetizer of flair and poise. They ate the overture up, starved for more from the legend himself.

The main course, however, would be different tonight.

Victor had taken Chris' unexpected gift, and his sage advice, holding both close as he polished *Aria: Stay Close to Me*. He gave his heart free reign to guide him wherever it wanted in those last weeks of practice. He dreamed of nothing but Sochi, and instead of waking with an ache in his gut, he woke to newly lit inspiration.

*Aria* was now his love letter to a stunning collection of stars and wonder masquerading as a human. It was his response to a dance that would be his center of gravity tonight. It was his ode to a kiss that would flay him down to his last breath.

Tonight, he skated for Yuuri. Only Yuuri.

The cheers from the crowd gradually melted into a reverent, anticipatory silence. The collective holding of breaths, quiet gasps, bodies so shocked that hands never collided, mouths so unhinged that vocal cords were temporarily decommissioned. Such was the intensity of his skate, the rapturous passion, the rawness, his usual impermeable nature stripped bare for the ice.

Victor knew how he looked, knew that his body conveyed something oh so precious, so coveted, so inherently alien to anything he'd shown before in competition. Each movement wove the intricate story, each loop and flip carved the subtext of devotion, each outreach of his hand seemed to denote something tangible in front of him, invisible to everyone except the skater.

Victor Nikiforov, god of the ice. That's what the media regularly called him.

Tonight, he was no god. Tonight, that power lay in inky black strands and laughter too beautiful for the earth, in magnificent eyes that saw him and hands that lingered like an old wound.

By the end of it, the arena was thunderous with applause. But Victor heard none of it save for a familiar voice.

*I'll skate...with you...*

'You just did Yuuri.'

Chris watched from the stands, mesmerized. The gold would go to Victor and good fucking god, he deserved it. But, underneath the pride he felt for his friend's performance was heartfelt sadness.

*I hope you get to tell him Victor. I hope one day you can say the words.*

The consensus was without refute. Victor Nikiforov's performance of *Aria: Stay Close to Me* was his best of the season. When asked about his inspiration for such a career defining moment, as this was his fifth consecutive gold medal, Victor wanted to say the man's name on live international television. He wanted to say, "This is dedicated to Yuuri Katsuki. I wanted nothing more than for you to stay close to me."

And the genuine comment was on his tongue. It would be so easy. Eighteen simple words and the
stars would align. He got swept up in the thought of Yuuri hearing him, shocked at the revelation at first, but then he would understand, he would remember Sochi, they would finally reunite, and would be free to lose themselves in hundreds of perfect kisses.

So easy.

Which, of course, it wasn't.

'I can't do that to Yuuri. I can't just say 'fuck it' and be selfish. I did enough damage in Sochi.'

So, he flaunted his signature charm, made a memorable quip and left the media in a collective state of heart-eyes.

His mood sunk during the press conference and it must have been noticeable because Chris kept glancing in his direction. Victor took a deep breath and tried to drive the louder questions from his mind: Where was Yuuri now? Was he doing okay? Would he return to figure-skating? Did he watch Victor's skate?

"Victor, what do you have in mind for next season?"

Victor rolled his eyes at his last thought, which apparently coincided with the press question because the camera flashes increased at his inadvertent cheek. Victor imagined that the detachment radiating off him was palpable through the room, or so he felt given the uncertainty that gripped him as he was forced to take stock of his life.

The truth were undeniable. No matter how much tonight's performance was a culmination of his career, or whether or not Yuuri had watched his performance, he would never know how Victor truly felt.

The thought was acid sizzling through his battered heart.

Victor didn't fare any better at the banquet. Every single person who dared to brush against him turned his insides to ash. He didn't care that they were important officials or sponsors or whoever else was invited to this puppet show, these fuckers had no business touching him. That right belonged to one man.

Chris honed in on the growing revolt in Victor's eyes and, in due course, delicately extricated his friend from the mess of it all, steering him safely away from possible chaos. They rode the elevator and walked down the hall to Victor's room in silence. As they stepped inside, the weight of the night dropped, taking Victor tiredly to the edge of his bed.

"They make me want to vomit." He settled his face in his hands, exhausted.

Chris sat with him, careful to leave space between them, "If it's any consolation, your performance was breathtaking. The rest of it, well, after all these years, it feels secondary. We're celebrities after all."

"Fine, but I am not a fucking thing Chris," Victor's voice was splintered. He took a long breath, and out, bathing his face in heat, "He walked away from me twice in Sochi."

"What?" Chris looked surprised, "When?"

"Before the banquet, at the arena. I offered to take a photo with him and he just...dismissed me. Again in the lobby the next morning."
"That's a bit odd," Chris was thoughtful, "Most competitors who cross paths with you don't try to hide it. Even I was a fanboy. I still remember you wearing that gorgeous flower crown the first time we spoke. You were dashing."

Victor smiled weakly, "We had four a.m. vodka meetups to smooth things out. I don't habitually build relationships via shots."

"And what of champagne?"

Victor groaned, as Chris laughed, "You know, for someone who requires a lengthy preamble before even considering the possibility of trust, you're happy to share it with this young man."

"There's more," Victor descended further into his palms, "I dropped my watch in his room."

Chris was beside himself, "Jesus fucking Christ Victor. This entire situation is mad. You're mad. I'd say we can bump Sochi to the top of the list. Canada has nothing on this."

"I didn't leave it there on purpose," Victor said defensively.

"Well, where is it?"

"I have no idea," Victor sighed, "The hotel never located it and it's not like I can ask Yuuri if he found it. Not that it matters, there'd be no reason for him to keep it."

"Oh Victor, no wonder you're in a such a state. I wished you'd told me all this before."

"I wanted too but like you said, it's mad. This is going to sound insane but as much as it hurt to watch him go, it was like waking up. He wouldn't take anything from me, not willingly, but I could give him..."

"What?"

"Everything," Victor raised his head, the word heavy on his chest, "I wouldn't care what it costs me."

What could Chris possibly say to that? Yuuri had weaved his way into Victor, filling the cracks, stitching together the stripped pieces. It wasn't perfect, largely unrequited in the worse sense, but it was about damn time Victor paid attention to the man behind the facade, the one trapped under the ice.

"I think it's time for another drink," Chris motioned to the door.

"Champagne?"

They shared a mild laugh and Chris patted his back, "Fucking masochist."

Present

Victor smiled to himself. Walking home from Ice Castle with Yuuri, stopping much too often to indulge in long, promising kisses, he'd looked back at the WFSC, at the disparity in him, unable to believe he was now holding Yuuri in his arms. The dreamlike sensations persisted all the way to Utopia, to them undressing each other in the quiet of Yuuri's room, to standing sleepily under Yuuri's shower, the water cascading around them in cooling lines. Yuuri's head rested sluggishly on his back, his lips trailing in slow, tired tracks along his spine.

"Yuuri?"
Victor's fingers were wrinkled from the prolonged bath, so Yuuri's own were probably doubly so since he'd gotten into the shower before Victor. Victor would be lying if the sight of Yuuri tonight wasn't overloading his senses; confident and triumphant on the ice, crinkled and tearful smiles whenever they kissed, peaceful as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair, and the smallest glint of something filthy in his eyes when Victor joined him. They'd bathed together in the hot springs too many times to count and were used to seeing each other in varying states of nudity.

But this intimacy...this was so close to another boundary entirely.

Be it their drowsiness, or understanding the greater significance of the night, or knowing they still had things to discuss, whatever the reason, their restraint was pertinacious. Yuuri's hands did explore and Victor did not stop him. He had missed this. If he went another day without Yuuri's touch, it would be a wasted period in his books.

"Yuuri?" Victor called a little louder. A barely there groan. "Zvezda moya?"

Yuuri stirred, and he draped an arm over Victor's shoulder, "Sleepy."

"Two a.m. skating sessions will do that to you." Victor turned off the shower, and carefully turned so Yuuri only drifted slightly off him. He steered the man out of the shower and both of them into warm towels. This was a close resemblance to Yuuri in his hotel room, from the complete trust of the person guiding him, to the way his hands searched for Victor, determined to find a place to anchor his touch.

"Let me get my clothes," Victor whispered, planting an amused kiss on Yuuri's slightly pouted lips, "Literally less than a minute." Yuuri obliged, shuffling to his room with a perceptible yawn. Victor moved quickly, forgoing a t-shirt as Makka nudged him out the door. His poodle trotted behind him, and went straight to Yuuri's bed as Victor shut the door.

Yuuri was already curled towards the wall, and Makka made the space between his knees and chest his own. Victor looked at the pajamas strewn over Yuuri's chair and to his boyfriend clad only in boxers, hand digging distractedly into Makka's fur. He went to him, pulling at the blanket bunched near his feet, arranging it to Yuuri's waist before crawling in next to him. The bed was ideally made for one; it was excuse enough to get markedly close to Yuuri and line his shoulder with kisses. Yuuri responded with the dozy version of a giggle.

"Thank you Victor."

His lips found the nape of Yuuri's neck next, "Are you comfortable?"

"Unbelievably."

"I'm happy," Victor mumbled against him.

"Victor?"

"Mmm?"

Yuuri's hand moved to his thigh, "I'm sorry."

"I know you are solnyshko." He was rewarded with a contented hum at the new endearment.

"Did my skating make up for it?"

"Partially."
"Partially?" Yuuri huffed through another yawn.

Victor nuzzled him mischievously, "I'll trade you the other half if you tell me about your dreams now."

"That's cheating," Yuuri was indignant but his hand was roguish.

"Haven't I earned a little fun?"

Yuuri smiled, "Hai anata ga motte iru." It wasn't often that Yuuri spoke Japanese in front of him. Victor didn't care (for now) that he couldn't understand Yuuri; his native tongue was beautiful. He was about to ask for more when Yuuri shifted to face him, his eyes searching.

"I've been wondering, and I don't want to forget to ask you. Why did you look so unhappy at the banquet?"

Victor wound a finger around some of Yuuri's stray strands, "What if I told you we had that conversation already?"

"My hotel room?" Yuuri breathed.

"Yes. You're a very perceptive drunk."

Yuuri snorted, "Can you refresh my memory?"

It came as no surprise that Victor could recite their exchange verbatim, "Your technique on the ice is beautiful, did you know that? You have the skill but you lack the confidence. I have the skill but I'm starting to lack the inspiration. Everything is just so-"

"Fucking monotonous now?"

Victor blinked, "How...do you remember our conversation?"

Yuuri was pensive, "No. And yes. I can't explain it. Sometimes, depending on what you say, the words get clearer."

"Failure doesn't define you Yuuri..." Victor tested and Yuuri gasped, bolting upright. Makka yelped at the disturbance.

"What you do next will! You were the one who told me that?!" Yuuri couldn't wait; he smothered Victor's words with a kiss bursting with gratitude, "You have no idea, no idea, how much those words helped me."

Victor thumbed away Yuuri's untroubled tears, "I'm glad." He swallowed back his own emotions, opting instead to enjoy Yuuri's lips and the smile that grew with each soft graze.

They gradually fell asleep, whispering memories of Sochi, each one lifting the burden of a previously mutually exclusive night off their hearts.

Yuuri's room was still steeped in darkness when Makka licked Victor's hand that was dangling off the bed. He peered through half closed eyes at his lively poodle.

"Okay Makka," Victor murmured, and he stumbled out of bed to let his dog out, "We'll be up in a few hours." He rubbed his eyes and returned to Yuuri, wrapping himself around the grumbling man. A few soft kisses quieted him. Victor smiled. He loved Yuuri's little tells, the smaller, more in-depth
brush strokes of his personality that made Victor weak. Every day he spent was Yuuri was like watching a painting come to life, the colors filling him with inspiration.

The slip of his just-too-big glasses whenever his eyes widened; how he randomly walked on tip-toe, almost skipping, when he was excited about something; the nervous taps of his thumb against the pads of his other fingers when we forgot where he put something; the way his eyes shined whenever Victor praised him, or the defiance they bore when he pushed Yuuri hard during practice; the coos he reserved solely for Makka; the shameless bargaining in his movements whenever he came in contact with katsudon; every single note he'd written to Victor...

It was an endless list.

"Vy prekrasny," he whispered running what he knew was a cold foot along Yuuri's bare leg. Yuuri stirred, the hint of a smile on his face. Victor brushed his hair aside and kissed his forehead, inducing a long groan.

"Victor," he whispered, "It's too early."

"I was letting Makka out."

"Mmm. Go back to sleep love."

That was new and if anything, it brought him further out of sleep, "I can't."

Yuuri yawned and cuddled against him, "Okay. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Sochi, the photo, the lobby," the words fell from his mouth, "I'm so sorry. I wish I had known you. I wish I'd said something different."

Yuuri remembered both incidents well, "It wouldn't have mattered. I...I didn't feel like I deserved to be near you, not after my performance."

Victor was sad, "Then I should've changed your mind."

"There was a lot of shit I had bottled up. You didn't know me, and you didn't do anything wrong," brown eyes opened to meet blue ones, "It wasn't your fault Victor."

"I'm a selfish man Yuuri," he didn't sound convinced, "I want the time we could've had."

Yuuri propped himself up on his elbow, "We'll just have to make up for it then. I'm not going anywhere."

"Would you like to know why I was in your hotel room?"

"If you're ready to tell me, then yes."

Victor touched his cheek lightly, then caressed it, staring at Yuuri like he was a mirage, liable to vanish into smoke or fade into the night at any moment. The look in itself was an answer. Blushing, Yuuri averted his eyes, lacing his fingers through Victor's own instead. His gaze said so much, and Yuuri's very sleepy mind was unable to accommodate the force of it.

"I...I didn't know if I would see you again, so, I took the opportunity. I would've regretted it if I didn't. I had no expectations, and I didn't want anything from you. I just..."

Yuuri rested his head on Victor's shoulder, thoroughly red now, "It was one dance..."
"You're an amazing fucking dancer Yuuri," Victor smiled, "I know you remember that night abstractly, but...it was more than a dance to me. It was more than a kiss. If I never saw you again..."

Yuuri waited, giving Victor time to find the words. All of it was already so unbelievable, so pure. He wanted to hear more, and then follow up with another dozen apologies, just in case. A few minutes passed, and Yuuri found himself drifting until a choked sob snapped his head up to Victor's face.

"Victor?" Yuuri moved his bangs, blinking in the darkness, and felt his stomach drop at the tears, "Oh no..."

He threw the blanket off them, sat up and took Victor with him into a tight bordering on suffocating hug. Victor clung to him like he never had before, sinking his nails deep into Yuuri's back, as though unconvinced that Yuuri was real. He fought through the pain, letting Victor ground himself in the trenches he dug.

"Victor, I'm right here." Yuuri's first instinct was to freak the fuck out. Victor had never showed this side of him and the tears that wet the curve of Yuuri's neck made him tremble uncontrollably. But that was effectively eclipsed by a formidable need to see Victor through this. On a scale of one to ten, his protectiveness sat solidly in the thousands, and climbed with each stifled noise Victor imprinted on his skin. He pushed back every single anxious thought in his mind and focused on the emotions that Victor was struggling to verbalize.

It felt like days before Victor spoke, his voice hoarse, "Don't make decisions for me Yuuri."

"Victor..."

"If you need time, or space, or your have something to sort through, tell me. Leave a note. Anything. But don't push me away and expect me to be okay with it. I...I can't..." he was shaking, "I don't ever want to walk away from you again."

"It was stupid. I'm so sorry."

"Please trust me Yuuri," Victor begged. Yuuri's heart broke at that.

"I do. I swear I do."

"You have to know I'm here because I want to be here. I'm in your bed because I need you. Nothing will change that. Don't...don't dismiss me," Victor said softly through sniffles, "I don't need you to protect me Yuuri. I need you to stay close to me."

Yuuri leaned back a bit, wanting to see Victor. His boyfriend's cheeks were wet, and Yuuri went about ridding the area of stray tears, pressing his lips to each spot as he went. When Victor kissed him, the feel of it was brand new, and Yuuri could only imagine what it took for Victor to reveal himself like this, stripped and vulnerable and holding on to him like a lifeline. He never truly considered what it cost Victor to be here. It was more than skating, more than his gold medals, more than money and sponsors and fans and image.

He wondered if he could love Victor more than he did right then.

"Yuuri," Victor said against his lips, "Why did you keep my watch?"

"I honestly don't know. I had every intention of handing it over, but I couldn't. Something kept telling me it was important," Yuuri ran a hand through Victor's unbelievably soft hair, "If only I'd known what it meant."
Victor closed his eyes, "You do now lyubov moya."
I Don't Know Where I Am, I Don't Know Where I've Been...

Chapter Notes

Yuuri Katsuki is life, the universe and everything.

We're at the home stretch! I had to split Chapter 17 into 2 parts because of my schedule (fuck adulthood), but I'm so happy to have gotten this far.

Inspiration for this chapter:
The Killers - Read My Mind
Bright Eyes - First Day Of My Life

Detroit, before the Sochi Grand Prix Finals

"Yuuri? Are you hungry?"

The voice may have been muffled but Yuuri's brain honed in on the word 'hunger'. He plucked out his headphones and looked up from his laptop to Phichit, who held two plates of leftover Chinese from the previous day. They'd both resorted to cheap takeout, having been too busy to cook something more substantial. He smiled gratefully, his stomach very interested in the smells wafting his way.

"Starving actually, thanks," he took the food, inhaling several bites in hurried succession; he hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast. Phichit nodded approvingly, scooting next to him and peering at the video on the screen.

"Your free skate?" Phichit's chewing stifled a knowing laugh, "You're obsessing again, aren't you?"

"I'm just putting together some notes on small improvements I can make before Sochi. I didn't make it this far to give a mediocre performance. I'm still too stiff, and some of the jumps can be cleaner. Not to mention my facial expressions. Celestino said I tend to get too serious when I'm focusing on the skate and forgetting the feel of it, and he's right. I need to balance-" Yuuri stopped short, hearing himself veer towards manic. A sideways glance brought Phichit's I-told-you-so face into view, "Okay. I'm obsessing."

"This is supposed to be your day off. You haven't gotten any rest since you got back," Phichit said pointedly, his reminder one of many in the last couple days; this one was more definite though, and Yuuri couldn't overlook the worry in his tone, "You have to take care of yourself too Yuuri."

"This is my first Grand Prix. I want to make it count," Yuuri said stubbornly, but then he sighed and lowered the screen, pushing the laptop aside, "Maybe you're right." He made a show of taking a few large bites of noodles and dedicating himself to eating the food under Phichit's watchful eye. His friend gave him a satisfied grin at his relenting before returning his attention to his own plate.

"Are you at least excited about Sochi?"

Yuuri broke into a lopsided grin; saying he was would be an understatement. There were a multitude of other emotions attached to his accomplishment, and many of them Yuuri seldom let himself bask
in. If Phichit hadn't asked, he probably wouldn't have given it the attention it deserved. He
concentrated on bringing his grinding nerves to a halt so he could focus on the bubbling pride he'd
ignored since he'd qualified for the GPF. Knowing he would soon be headed to Russia was enough
to make his chest burst in anticipation.

And if it wasn't enough to have earned the opportunity to show his love from skating on such a
prestigious stage, there was the unbelievable bonus of being in the same breathing space as Victor
Nikiforov, his constant source of motivation and inspiration over the last decade. Yuuri hadn't quite
come to terms with that reality. To share the ice with Victor was akin to discovering a new galaxy in
all its brilliant, breathless glory. The impending event would never tire of stealing the air from his
lungs.

Yes, there was much for Yuuri to be excited about, and the suspense of it all sent his thoughts
tumbling down the steps of his mind. With a smirk, he gave Phichit the short version, "I am."

"Are you serious right now with that two word answer?" Phichit swatted his arm accusingly,
"C'mon, give me something to work with. Have you thought about what you'd say to him if you all
got the chance to talk?"

Yuuri went red, and it wasn't the spicy chicken that was responsible for the crimson spreading down
to his neck. He looked around at the dozens of posters he and Phichit had plastered across the walls
of the small room. They were all of Victor, of course. Years upon years of legendary moments,
graceful evolution, high profile photo-shoots and star-studded appearances, held together by colorful
wall tacks. Victor had more elegance in a single thumb than Yuuri's entire body could muster and
that wasn't him over-stressing; it was fact, a global sentiment, the embodiment of Victor's virtuosity.
Yuuri had no clue what would do justice in his presence.

He wandered through his thoughts to the announcement of him earning a spot in the top six. A
montage of his life had looped in glaring flashes before his eyes that night, and he'd sweated straight
through his costume (thank god his jacket hid the worst of it). Celestino had clapped him on the
back, and congratulated him in loud cheers at the kiss and cry, but Yuuri couldn't remember the exact
words. All he'd felt when they confirmed that he was a finalist was a flood of relief so intense, he'd
almost blacked out.

When he'd scooped his cognition off the floor, his next direct thought had been Victor and seeing the
Russian in the flesh. Perhaps if he was lucky, Yuuri would get the opportunity to speak with him,
and that 'if' was dependent on his ability to string together basic sentences and not pass out from
restless shock. If his newer posters were any indication, in-real-life Victor was going to be an
experience, one Yuuri wanted to take full advantage of.

"I don't know," Yuuri admitted, "It's not like I can write a script. Plus, he has the competition to
focus on and he'll probably be surrounded by reporters and fans the entire time anyway."

"Indulge me please," Phichit looked dreamy, "I'm sure it's all going to be amazing." Yuuri smiled at
his friend's enthusiasm and listened as Phichit went off on a fantastic tangent, the scenarios he
imagined Yuuri would find himself a part of in Sochi getting more improbable by the minute. Yuuri
took it all in, easing off worrying about his routines and the pressure he was stacking on himself to
perform at his utmost in the upcoming competition. He reveled in encouraging prospects; flawless
execution of his programs, being presented with a GPF medal, sharing the podium with Victor,
having a drink with him at the banquet, something as simple as a 'Hello Yuuri' would do.

The daydream was interrupted by a chopstick poking into his arm, "Earth to Yuuri?"

"Sorry," Yuuri blinked, "Thinking."
"Aha! I knew it! You do have your own ideas about Sochi," Phichit's expression was utter mischief, "Care to share?"

And Yuuri wanted to laugh, wanted to say the silly things that were on his mind, wanted to be carefree and play into Phichit's shenanigans, but all he could pick from the jumble was, "I can't fuck this up."

Phichit shook his head; he was well aware that Yuuri would make a full circle there and had prepared for it, "You've made it this far Yuuri. You shouldn't worry so much," he smiled, "You're top six, and you have no idea how proud I am of you. You're my inspiration for next year. I can't wait for us to compete together."

Yuuri never handled compliments well, but this one he accepted with grace, "Thanks Phichit."

"Stop being so hard on yourself. You've proven that you're perfectly capable of skating at GPF level and I'll be damned if you can't have a conversation with the infamous Victor Nikiforov."

Yuuri studied one of his favorite posters of Victor. Yuuko had surprised him with it, and its age showed in the slight discoloration and frays around the edges. His long hair flowed behind him and his eyes shone in the arena lights. Smooth, pale skin contrasted perfectly with the black of the costume, the intricate detailing and complex asymmetry aesthetically breathtaking. Yuuri remembered the day Victor unveiled his shorter haircut; his fans had mourned the loss for weeks (including him). He'd always wondered what drove him to leave it behind.

"Do you think he'll be different from who they say he is?" Yuuri pondered aloud.

"Only one way to find out," Phichit winked, "I'll be expecting updates on the hour."

---

**One week before the Grand Prix Finals**

Yuuri sat alone in the locker room, tying his laces through intermittent yawns and watering eyes. Celestino had refused to entertain his bravado of 'Just another hour', ordering him home to rest. "Don't pass go, don't re-watch skating videos or run exercises. Just sleep Yuuri." He overheard Phichit promising his coach to time him a full eight hours. Yuuri would be disgruntled if he wasn't aware of one core problem plaguing him.

He was nervous.

No. No, it was more than that. There was a volatile buzz under his skin, reverberating through his blood and bones, threatening to detonate without notice. The fun from his and Phichit's ongoing conversations, while helpfully distracting, wasn't enough to solve that instability. No matter how many times he ran his programs, or went through his notes, or reminded himself of all the hard work it took to get there, the knowledge that in a few days he would be competing among the top skaters in the world, including the man he'd looked up to for more than a decade, it was stifling his conviction. He avoided it as well as he could, but that was only a temporary mitigation. If he didn't haul his nerves back into control, he wouldn't stand a chance at the GPF.

Skating meant so much to Yuuri and he wanted to continue sharing that passion with the world. He needed to find some way to clear his mind, a tether of any kind so he wasn't dragged below the ice. **Anything** to quell this.

The day it all went to shit had started off very well. It was Phichit's turn to make breakfast and he treated Yuuri to traditional Thai porridge which he knew the older skater had come to love. Yuuri
was well rested, and less tense which translated harmoniously during practice. Celestino, usually ripe with critiques, smiled proudly through his routines. Yuuri willingly ended his day a couple hours earlier and he and Phichit made plans to see a movie, much to his friend's favor.

Then, the universe pressed the detonator.

He phone rang as he slipped into his jeans, and Yuuri brightened immediately when he saw it was his mom calling from Japan. He answered with a heartfelt "Moshi moshi!"

"Yuuri, it's good to hear your voice. How are you?"

Yuuri frowned; it wasn't like his mother to sound anything but cheerful, "I'm doing well. Phichit and I are seeing a movie tonight. Are you okay? You don't sound like yourself." She sighed, one of those long ones that spell only bad news. Yuuri's stomach knotted itself in the worst way.

"It's Vichaan Yuuri."

"What?!" Yuuri choked, the image of his beloved poodle shooting to the forefront of his mind, "What happened? Is he okay?"

"Oh Yuuri, I'm sorry to tell you this before your competition but..."

Yuuri's blood ran cold as she went on, her voice cracking with every few words. The air in the room seemed to siphon out, and he clutched his chest. No. No. Nonononono.

When the phone slipped from his hand, and his knees slipped from his control, his sobs brought Phichit running.

Grand Prix Finals, Sochi, Russia

Yuuri arrived in Sochi in complete and utter disarray. He'd thrown up twice on the plane and no matter how he attempted to calm himself, or the comfort Celestino and Phichit tried to provide, he couldn't drive the voices from his head. It wasn't his family's fault; he asked about Vicchan almost every day. There was no conceivable way for them to lie to him. He battled with the unremitting questions: Why hadn't he been home in five years? Should he have gone back to Hasetsu? Was the Grand Prix even doable in this state? Was this punishment for his selfish dream?

"Yuuri? Yuuri, talk to me," Minako said, studying him worriedly. His eyes were on her but his stare was far and unfocused. He couldn't even remember her coming into his room much less how he'd ended up crying on her shoulder.

'Vicchan, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't get to see you one last time.'

"Yuuri?"

"It's okay." It was a plea and a prayer, not to her, not to himself, but to the void he was now imprisoned in.

"Yuuri, you have to get dressed," she insisted softly, "It's almost time to go."

"What?"

"Your short program. Yuuri, do you know what day it is?"

"Fuck." His tears kept coming, the guilt a constant catalyst. He was skating today? What time was it?
Had he gotten any sleep? What was the sequence of his program again? Should he go home? *I'm so, so sorry.*

Yuuri felt like a monster. He couldn't breathe. There was no coming back from that pit. He fell.

And fell.

And fell...

---

Murphy's Law: Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Yuuri could only watch as his months of preparation charred and disintegrated around him.

His short program was an unmitigated disaster. From the moment Yuuri skated into position, he knew it was over. He was flooded with memories of Vicchan, of his years in Detroit, of how much he missed his sleepy castle town, of the courage he built time and time again as he fought to fulfill his dream, of the things he wanted for himself and the things he would never have.

Compromise after compromise, sacrifice after sacrifice.

All for nothing.

With no sleep, a headache that burned through his skull, and rippling nausea that singed his throat, there was no salvaging his form. He tried to channel the raging emotions into his skating but nothing held for long. He could barely focus on any one thing for more than a few seconds at a time, let alone delivering a program worthy of the GPF.

The bile reached his tongue when they announced his scores. Yuuri swallowed and retreated into himself.

*I'm so sorry everyone. I'm so, so sorry.*

---

There was only modest improvement in his free program. Presentation had always been his forte, and he rebelled against his mind to make it through the step sequence without fault. The technical, however, wasdowngraded or flubbed from extreme fatigue and a stint of binge eating that left him upset and disgusted. All the things he loved about skating, from the first time Yuuko had shown him Victor's performance at the Junior Championships to his years of carving his place on the ice, wasn't enough. The awestruck feeling in his soul was alarmingly dimmed.

It was too late.

Yuuri avoided Celestino and the kiss and cry afterwards, charting the fastest path from the arena. He could feel a pair of eyes following him and rationality endeavored to tell him that those eyes were framed by iconic silver strands but he didn't trust his peripheral vision. He trusted nothing about himself anymore.

_Yuri, about your free performance, the step sequence could use more..._

_I won, so who cares? Quit nagging Victor..._

Victor was addressing the *Russian* Yuri, but Yuuri was still dragged to the bottom of the sea to drown when he heard his name. The curl of Victor's accent around the vowels coupled with the disaster of a competition he'd just trudged though, his beloved Vicchan who he would never see
again, and the avalanche of all things unexpected, tragic, and ultimately fucked up chased him down the slope of his own self-loathing. It felt cruel. Taunting. Like the universe was challenging him to fall apart right there and then.

The Japanese reporter's questions and everything in Yuuri's vicinity faded in volume, until all he could hear was his own heart beating painfully against his rib cage. Tears clung to the edges, not falling but not abating as he stole a prolonged glance at Victor, shame etched on his face. How had everything unraveled like this? It was then, for no reason that Yuuri could decipher, that Victor chose to turn to him.

Those piercing blue eyes belonged in the night sky. Yuuri took an unconscious step back.

"A commemorative photo?" Victor's smile could start a war, "Sure."

Yuuri caught a dip in his expression, a softness that betrayed the playboy. It wasn't pity. It wasn't anything Yuuri was used to receiving from people. He took another step away, unsure of what else to do. He was seeing what he wanted to see and he let it happen, selfishly holding eye contact for another few seconds before leaving the arena in silence.

---

**Sochi Grand Prix Banquet**

Yuuri had no energy to protest when Celestino insisted he attend the banquet. "An hour or two won't hurt Yuuri." If there was strength left in his reserves, he'd have told his coach to handle the formalities but, as it was, he was hollowed out. So, he fidgeted and fumbled as Celestino introduced him to people, which either cornered him into pointless chit-chat or constructive dialogue that he was too tired to contribute to. Yuuri couldn't recall any of their names, nor did he care to. His suit was itchy, his tie was a noose, and he was actively fighting to breathe at an acceptable pace.

He scanned the room to give himself something to do. It was filled with bright lights, spotted with amiable conversation, and there was a distinct flock around Victor. Yuuri lingered on him, noticing the man's too tight grip on his glass, and the smile that never passed his lips. The flash was but a second but Yuuri caught it much too easily for his liking.

Trapped. *Unhappy.*

That made no sense. Victor was the star of the night. Was he okay? Yuuri blinked and it was all gone, replaced by a head-to-toe dazzling World Champion. He sighed; what the fuck was wrong with him? His eyes reached the nearby waiter and the fresh tray of champagne he skillfully balanced. Perfect. If Yuuri was going to survive the next hour, he would do it on his terms. He watched Celestino and a small group of fellow coaches leave the hall for a private discussion, and then descended on the waiter, ignoring the confused look he got when Yuuri asked him to leave the tray with him at the table. He swirled the liquid, once, twice, mouth twisting wryly.

'To the worst two days of my life.'

Yuuri tipped back the first flute in one go. Then another. And a third. And fuck, it was getting hot. And he really didn't need this goddamn jacket. And what the fuck was the point of having feelings anyway? And this ridiculous tie was an infuriating and *heartbreaking* blue. He slipped two fingers into the knot at his neck, tugging at it as he continued to ply himself with alcohol.

Yuuri lost count and awareness at seven flutes. At twelve, he was floating atop the ice. Around sixteen, he was grinning as though he'd won gold.
He walked away from the table, bundling his jacket in his tingling hands, staring openly at Victor's back, at his neatly assembled hair, and the perfect fit of his suit around that world-class ass.

Was Victor still unhappy? Maybe Yuuri should just ask. Maybe he could take his mind off of this night.

He could make Victor smile. No. No. He would make him smile.

Yes.

Yuuri Katsuki would dance with Victor Nikiforov tonight if it was the last thing he did.
...But I Know Where I Want to Go

Chapter Notes

Victor Nikiforov and Yuuri Katsuki are a blessing. To each other. To the world. <3

I'm in tears posting this final chapter. It's been years since I've built up this kind of inspiration and courage. Thank you for reading, there are no words to express my appreciation <3

It's midnight (yay, I'm off my usual 2 a.m. schedule), so apologies for errors. Come say hi on Tumblr: AlexWSpark

Present

And by god, did they dance.

It wasn't the banquet photos or their night at the lounge that proved that. Their dance transcended the physicality of it, went beyond those two exclusive events and the obvious similar glittering lights within them. It snaked through both their lives, reminding them that yes, even when the proverbial splattered across the fan, there was still hope in recognizing and taking that one moment to see.

Granted it took copious intakes of champagne in Yuuri's case, but he digressed at the whims of the universe.

Yuuri stretched languorously along his bed, rolling to the left where Victor had been five minutes ago, the imprint of his body warm and inviting. He burrowed into the blanket, weightless in his half-sleep, his thoughts going back and forth between Sochi, and the here and now. There wasn't a day he didn't miss Vicchan, and while he occasionally experienced that dull ache associated solely with loss, he was no longer tormented by guilt. It was Yuuri's own somber acceptance of the inescapable nature of life, and understanding that some things were simply outside his control. Still, he wished Makka had been able to meet him. The thought of the two poodles huddled lazily together, distinguishable only by size, made Yuuri smile childlike into the pillow. That would definitely have set Victor's heart-mouth alight.

Sochi really had been a mess. A depressing, debilitating, wild, adventitious mess. But despite the disproportionate episode, perforated with heartache and failure, infatuation and thrills, there was a sobering (ha!) thought that Yuuri couldn't overlook: perhaps that was also life, bringing people and circumstances together at just the right place and time. It had set the stage, provided the props, and stepped back with an airy wave to him and Victor. If Yuuri had gone to the airport instead of the banquet, would Victor seeing him skate *Aria* have had the same effect? Would Yuuri have been able to practice *Aria* without Victor's words in his heart? If they'd never danced, but the viral video remained, would Victor have still come to Hasetsu? If he had recuperated and made it to the podium, would they both have revealed themselves so willingly or hid behind the walls of competitiveness?

So many what ifs. So many ways to have passed the other without seeing. How could Yuuri not be grateful for the progression that led them to each other?

Hearing Victor's explanation for coming to his hotel room would never cease to be astounding. Regret, the man said. He would've regretted it. More than a dance to Victor, more than a kiss.
Yuuri's hands went to his flushed cheeks. More than that was the boldness of "I want the time we could've had". That especially drove it all home for Yuuri. Imagining what Victor had gone through in those first two months, the courage it took to stand with Yuuri, knowing he might never feel the same way...Yuuri pulled the blanket closer, a hushed whimper escaping him. All those days spent trading looks, all of which were heavily misconstrued and misinterpreted; Yuuri thinking Victor was being his usual flighty self, and Victor probably thinking Yuuri only saw him as a coach and idol.

And he did at first. Though the fog of 'I've felt this man before', those vivid wet-dreams, and the habitual closeness that transpired, Yuuri carved a wide canyon between fantasy and reality. He knew the difference and refused to get overly warm and fuzzy over the Russian just because he was Victor Nikiforov. He wouldn't be that person, fawning over Victor like he was some public commodity. Having him in Hasetsu was blessing enough, and he focused on the one thing that could show his wholehearted thanks, skating. Victor, of course, met him there with vigor; regardless of any other complexities within their relationship, on the ice they were always in sync.

But things changed since that day on the beach and Victor's quietly simple, "I don't want to lie to you, that's all". By then, they both had an impressive collection of Makka notes, but that particular question about Victor's favorite moment shifted their dynamic. Yuuri tried to reason his way out of it, but the exhaustion of those first strenuous practice sessions wasn't enough to blind him. So, he had given deeper thought to Victor's singularity and how his come hither traits barely scratched the surface of who he really way. The media, a large proportion of his fans, the skating populace, the world, they all had it wrong. Beneath that five-time-world-champion persona was a man who adored his poodle like a candy-hyped child, was embarrassingly petty when he really wanted his way, showed unending patience and kindness without Yuuri ever having to ask, bounced around Hasetsu like it was his home...and the nuances, god, the beautiful details of Victor that planted themselves in Yuuri's heart; that contented sparkle when they went to beach and sat right on the surf; the Russian melodies he quietly sang when he was packing away laundry or maintaining his skates; the reverence that engulfed him when he was alone on the ice, unaware that Yuuri watched, breath caught in his throat; every single note he'd written back to Yuuri...

Victor complimented him, in skating, in friendship, and now in love. And therein lay the difference for Yuuri. For a decade, he had loved the legend, had chased that seemingly insurmountable dream, guided by the distant brilliance of a skater who had the world at his feet. For Yuuri's feelings to have changed as surely as the seasons, him relinquishing the hero-worship and that initial infatuation to feel romantically for Victor Nikiforov, not the legend or the painted version of him, just the man, scared him. Holding Victor that morning, listening to him weep, it wasn't something Yuuri took lightly. Victor had given it all to him, no holds barred, and Yuuri would faster break his own arm than fuck with that kind of resolution.

Victor was mad, truly, unabashedly mad. He'd left Russia, moved to Japan, and gave Yuuri his undivided devotion as naturally as breathing. Waking again that morning, with the handsome Russian tangled around him, whispering wonderful things about how beautiful Yuuri was, and how this was now his favorite thing, and would he like some tea to start the day, Yuuri had felt safe. He would never again let anything interfere with that. They were each other's constants. Maybe that's what they were always meant to be.

It was surreal, too good to be true, perfect and terrifying.

But it was. And for Yuuri, that was worth everything.

---

Yuuri staggered into the pajamas he'd discarded on his chair hours before, the fabric cool against his sleep-warmed skin. He unplugged his phone, yawning and stretching arbitrarily while skimming
through his messages from Phichit. His friend had clearly been basking in the news of their run-in with reporters.

*A minor press incident? You call Yuri Plisetsky, the Russian Junior Champion, cursing out a reporter in defense of you and Victor a minor press incident? /*

This. Is. AWESOME! Holy shit, Russian Yuri has no chill! /*

Okay, both you and Victor literally look ready to start a war. I've never seen you look that angry before! /*

Alright, I'm linking you some articles and posts, from proper sources this time. Perspective. /*

Yuuri scrolled amusedly through the links, making a mental note to read them later: *Thanks Phichit. Btw, are the posters still under my old bed?*

Phitchit responded within a minute, *I was wondering when you'd ask. I put them back into the tubes after you left Detroit. /*

I owe you one. How's the move going? /*

I finished packing today. I didn't realize how much I missed home until now. Detroit really stopped being the same without you. /*

We'll make up for it, don't worry. Don't forget to send me your flight details. /*

Whoops, I forgot! Let me screenshot it now. /*

Yuuri slid into his desk chair, propping up his legs with a tired groan. It was after ten a.m. and he and Victor could feasibly get in two, maybe three hours of practice before Yurio's session that afternoon. Yuuri harbored that spirited feeling, being drawn to skating. Much like having Victor in his arms, it felt like coming home. The pull grounded him, soothed his soul, and he knew that once he held fast to that sensation, there was little he wouldn't be able to do on the ice. He had to admit though, he was a bit spent after last night's activities. Unparalleled stamina or no, sleep was an inevitability he would welcome.

Not that he was complaining about the reasons he was tired. He'd woken as though recently possessed, taking in oxygen like a man hauled from the jaws of death. His hands gripped the sheets, clawing at them as though they held secrets that would spill from the blunt drag of his nails. Another dream, this one a memory. Victor on his knees. For him. Yuuri had to say it out loud for the words to really make sense and with that vocalization had come a fierce rush of inspiration. Yuuri laughed, a silly, throaty sound because of course it had taken him this long to see the obvious. Denseness aside and breathing relieved, he had gathered his equipment and left Yu-topia.

He hadn't woken Victor, instead giving it all to fate. As always, Victor had not disappointed.

Yuuri leaned back contentedly, tracing the bumps and bruises that would always line his feet. A night overflowing with eros, a quad flip added to his repertoire, Victor's appearance at Ice Castle to witness his accomplishment, the long, leisurely intervals of rediscovering each other's lips, Victor's absolute faith in him...Yuuri would take it all with him when he skated. He would remember every facet of it. And he would be free.

"You're up." Victor said from the doorway, and Yuuri turned to him, his adoration unmistakable. An adorable pink flush highlighted Victor's cheeks (the times that had happened could now be counted on two hands). Makka bounded towards Yuuri for his customary morning pets, and Yuuri smiled as
Victor followed and deposited two steaming mugs of tea onto his desk. He watched Makka practically hop out of the room again, before leaning down to kiss Yuuri's temple.

"Good morning."

"Good morning." Yuuri reached for the tea but his mind diverts halfway there, and he ended up holding onto Victor's hand instead, "How are you love?"

Victor felt his fingers settle into Yuuri's touch; it wasn't conscious, it just was, "I'm okay now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. But... I hope I didn't overwhelm you. I just wanted you to understand-

Yuuri couldn't believe him, couldn't perceive such thoughtfulness on Victor's part, and it was too extraordinary to counter verbally. Yuuri was on his feet, Victor's gasp evidence of his suddenness. The tea sloshed precariously to the side of the mugs (but thankfully didn't spill), as Yuuri planted trembling hands on Victor's shoulders and pulled him forward, cutting off any further need for him to finish that apology. Victor's mouth parted just so, surprised at Yuuri's motions and force, but the unspoken connotation of it, that deep, devastating emotion that no combination of words could hope to capture melted him. He surged forward, responding with his own kiss that said what he needed it too as much as Yuuri's Eros and quad flip had communicated that morning.

"The only thing you did was remind me how amazing you are," Yuuri said after the stars cleared from his vision, his knuckles ghosting against Victor's jaw. The Russian looked at him like he didn't know where the morning began and the night ended.

"You're something else, you know that?" He kissed the bridge of Yuuri's nose, chuckling as Yuuri squinted at the cuteness, "What would you like to do today?"

"Come back to bed with me koibito."

Victor leaned against his desk as casually as he could (which was noticeably unsteady because who was he fooling when Yuuri's eyes were radiating that level of temptation) and pointed to the still billowing tea, "First things first, drink. Your mother said it would help since we were up so late."

It wasn't exactly a surprise that their attempts to be sneaky went in vain. Yuuri cradled the ceramic, taking a grateful sip, "Does everyone know?"

"Yurio asked me to tell you, and I quote, 'The night is for fucking sleeping piggy. Stop fucking overdoing it.'" They broke into laughter which soon tapered out into another shared look of fondness. When they had fulfilled their quota of tea, Yuuri slid from the chair and pressed himself against Victor with all the subtlety of an ice-skate to the face.

"Thank you."

Victor wrapped his arms around Yuuri's waist, pulling him closer, "For?"

"The tea."

"You're welcome."

Yuuri gave a devious smile, "Now will you come back to bed?"

"At this rate, we'll have to cut practice short today." Responsible Coach Nikiforov? Not for much
"Last night counts," Yuuri's mouth trailed up to the spot right behind Victor's ear, "Ten minutes."

Victor felt a warm hand sneaking along his inner thigh. Jesus, if this was how Yuuri chose to manipulate him going forward, he wouldn't survive, "Make it fifteen."

Yuri Plisetsky, the Ice Tiger of Russia, the Russian Fairy, the Russian Punk, and now immortalized meme of the month.

Yuuri sat in the rink as Victor and Yurio refined Agape, reading through the posts Phichit had recommended he digest. Be it Yurio's impeccable reputation and skill, or his volcanic temper, the media backed right off of Victor and Yuuri. The ones who rashly chose to continue their campaign of bullshit were effectively decimated on social media by Yurio and Victor's fans. Yurio's following in particular were a garrison of inflexibility and viciousness, and their fortress of positivity towards Yurio's actions shocked Yuuri. He sheepishly realized how far down the rabbit hole he had gone, overlooking all the good things that had been, and were now being said. Irrationality of that kind should be a crime, really. Yuuri shook his head, further surprised to discover fans begging both Russians for more information on him, lamenting Yuuri's lack of presence online and whether he had any plans to share more with them and the wider skating community.

Perspective achieved, thanks for these Phichit. I'm an idiot. /Y

Yuuko sauntered to him, dropping into the seat on his right, "You look happy."

"About time, don't you think?" She beamed at him in response, "Did the triplets give Yurio the Agape recordings?"

"Yup! Yesterday, and then Yurio let them skate circles around him but you didn't hear it from me," Yuuko glanced at the Russian duo, "It's going to be an interesting season, isn't it?"

Yuuri smiled, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

After Yuuko returned to the front of Ice Castle, and as round three of Agape came to a finish, Yuuri's thumb hovered over his long deactivated Instagram app. Maybe it was time to consider Phichit's "You need to lighten up" advice. Both Russians skated over and Yuuri handed them their water and guards, pocketing his phone in the process; he'd give himself another few hours to make a decision.

"Let's do another couple of- oh god no," Yurio extended a stern arm to hold Victor back when he leaned over the barrier in a clear attempt to kiss Yuuri, "Vitya, at least fucking pretend you're a professional coach," Yuuri winked at his sulking boyfriend and Yurio rolled his eyes, "You're both ridiculous. Speaking of, has the coverage died down?"

"Most of it," Yuuri said, "The rest is being taken care of by Yuri Angels." He grinned wide and teasing, and Yurio let out a stream of Russian expletives under his breath.

"I'm just glad they got the fucking point," Yurio muttered, narrowing his eyes at Victor using him as an elbow rest while he guarded his skates, "What's interesting is that my inbox is full of questions about you piggy."

"Mine too," Victor watched Yuuri shrug, his red cheeks betraying the indifference, "It's your choice Yuuri. I know you like your privacy."

It was true. Victor, and Yurio come to think of it, were respectful of Yuuri's self-isolation. Yuuri
knew Victor had countless pictures of Hasetsu, many of them including him, and not once did he breach that unspoken boundary that Yuuri decisively stuck behind. For Yuuri, the stress of managing online interactions had been much too daunting. It made him wonder about the Grand Prix banquet.

"How come no pictures made it out of last year's banquet?"

The flush he'd gained from practice rapidly drained from Yurio's face. The younger Russian glared at Victor, "We're not supposed to be talking about this. Ever." Yuuri's fixed them both with a confused look but Victor waved it off with a breezy laugh.

"He's only upset because you beat both him and Chris in the dance off," Victor rubbed the back of his head having collected a harsh slap from his Russian colleague, "Given the crowd usually in attendance, media is strictly for eyes only. Leaks are taken very seriously. Also, certain skaters may or may not have used their influence to ensure those confidentiality rules were fully intact that time around."

Yuuri wasn't quite over those banquet photos, so when he said "Thank you" it came from a place of deep indebtedness. He would not have survived that embarrassment at that point in his life.

"Never. Again." Yurio was grinding his teeth, talking to no one in particular. He put on his guards, his curses thick and audible as he stalked off to the bathroom. Victor took the moment to complete his initial mission of pecking Yuuri on the lips.

"I really mean it. Thank you," Yuuri said, "and tell Christophe thanks from me because I'm assuming he was part of this group of 'certain skaters'?"

"He'll much prefer that coming straight from you. He checked in this morning about the press conference. I owe him a lot too actually," Victor walked around to Yuuri and picked up his phone, "Chris found your friend Phichit's account a few months ago. I...well, I looked for you after Sochi and came up empty." He showed Yuuri a screenshot of him on the ice in Detroit, back turned to the camera, light streaming around him. It was one of Yuuri's personal favorites; Phichit's photography skills were as fierce as his skating.

"I'm surprised you never messaged him," Yuuri teased.

"I almost did," Victor confessed, "Multiple times."

"I can't wait for you to meet Phichit. I apologize in advance, though."

"I have the exact same sentiments about Chris," Victor suddenly looked a little rueful, "By the way Yuuri. Um. I'm sure you know the stories. About me. The one about Chris and I, it isn't true. Not that all of the others are, but just in case you thought...um..."

Yuuri had never seen Victor gesticulate this aimlessly before. He blinked and recovered in record time when he realized what Victor was trying to tell him, "You don't have to do that Victor."

"I don't want you to think--"

Yuuri tried to silence him with a kiss, "It really isn't any of my business love."

"It is."

"Victor--"

"No, Yuuri. It is." And it was the firmness in his tone that gave Yuuri pause, "I have some things I'd
like to tell you, about me, about my life. Not now, but sometime, if you want. I don't want to lie to you."

"That isn't lying," Yuuri reasoned, "But, I don't mind taking you up on the offer. I have a lot to tell you too." He brushed Victor's hair for his eyes, the strands straight and damp, "Mom asked me to run a couple errands for her, so I'll need to stop by Yu-topia. I'll meet you and Yurio at the beach later, okay?"

They didn't move until Yurio yelled at them to haul ass, mumbling things along the lines of 'You see each other every fucking day' and 'Is this how it's going to be all season?'.

The sky peaked out at Victor and Yurio, sunlight creeping through the slowly dispersing crowd of grey. Yurio took a deep breath, crossing his legs on the sand with a relaxed sigh. He'd be back in Russia soon, and the ability to unwind like this would be few and far between. He soaked in the leisure, the solace of this beautiful castle town called Hasetsu, memorizing the details so he could relay them perfectly to his grandfather. Maybe one day he'd be able to bring him here.

"Are you sure I can just take one of your old costumes?"

"They're not doing any good packed away," Victor said, his fingers drawing random shapes in the sand, "Yuuri already made his selection, and it's only fair since I choreographed both routines. Whatever adjustments you need to make, you can do when you're back home."

"Home..." Yuurio repeated the word like he was discovering it for the first time, "Vitya, all these years you've been in St. Petersburg. You've never left the city for more than a week at a time. Yet..."

"Yet I moved away from the only place I've really ever known, at the height of my career, with no warning and no identifiable plan?" The gentle sway of the ocean, that slow, tranquilizing furl of the waves made Victor smile, "It's funny, I never paid much attention to the seagulls cries in St. Petersburg. Since I came to Hasetsu though, I think about them all the time. I think about a lot of things in my life. It can be so easy to forget, to miss the little things."

Yurio was quiet, so Victor continued, "Russia is who I am. Hasetsu is who I've wanted to be. Do you understand?"

He contemplated Victor's candid explanation; the man really had changed. Yurio regarded his longtime rink-mate, the lull leading him to a confession of his own, "I finished Aria with Yakov and Lilia."

Victor let out a slow breath, his smile unwavering, "I know."

"What?" Yurio was incredulous, "What the fuck do you mean you know?"

"You didn't notice that in our sessions you incorporated moves that weren't mine?" Victor was now unconsciously tracing Yuuri's free skate into the sand, "It wasn't as obvious today, and with further practice you will be able to separate the two, if that's what you want, but I'm not so out of touch that I don't know the difference between my and someone else's choreography."

"I didn't realize," Yurio huffed, more for himself than Victor, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I owed you Yura. I should not have left St. Petersberg without finishing your routine."

"But even if you did, you would've left afterwards anyway." Victor looked over at Yurio, an apology forming in his mind but the younger skater's expression wasn't irate or mocking. In his own
way, Yurio understood.

"Yes."

"Once he qualifies for the GPF, I'll consider us even."

Victor studied the tracks he'd left in the sand; Yuuri blazing across the ice and setting his heart on fire was rivaled only by the way he kissed and touched and brightened Victor's world with his starlight, "Then I can assure you, we're even by default."

"Thank you Vitya."

"Hmm?"

"You reminded me of something," Yurio said, "I had it half wrong. Guess that's why I only got half a routine. I had to earn it."

Victor dusted his hand on his pants with a low chuckle, "Yakov would be proud."

"This is between you and I. Breathe a fucking word..."

Victor doubled over laughing and Yurio readjusted his scowl into something less ominous as Yuuri walked towards them, Makka happily rushing around him. Yuuri, however, was not so easily fooled.

"Everything okay here?"

Victor was now in stitches and Yurio appeared to be considering his alibis; Yuuri shook his head, "You can kill Victor for whatever he's done after dinner. Deal?"

Victor assumed a wounded slant, hand over his heart in feigned disbelief, "Three days and you're taking his side?"

Yurio grinned, "I knew you had redeeming qualities piggy."

Yuuri sat between them, and they watched Makka soak himself, his barks nothing but pure happiness. Yuuri nodded to himself and gave his phone to Victor; it was unlocked and showing his now empty Instagram account.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Yuuri grabbed Yurio's arm and pulled the young man to him, "This is a good place to start, right?" Victor laced his fingers through Yuuri's own and extended his right arm out.

"Smile!"

---

One month later

Yuuri flicked through the app, reviewing a few past exercises that were still giving him grief. His nose wrinkled excitedly whenever he made it through without error, and his frowns were sharp and petulant when he botched a translation, or misspelled basic terms he swore were committed to memory a week ago. In those cases, he usually restarted the exercise from scratch, sounding the words softly (in much the same way he did with Japanese, all the way down Victor's flushed chest. He wondered what would be Victor's reaction when he one day did it in Russian). When the automated voice started to annoy him, he went to the source.
He recorded a voice note, and sent it to Yurio, following up with a message: *Is that right? /Y*

*Partially. Listen. /Yr*

Yuuri replayed the note he received several times, increasing the volume and adjusting his headphones for maximum impact, smiling at the amusement in Yurio’s tone. Comfortable with the feel of the phrase, he sent a second voice note. It was still shaky, but he managed to do it without resorting to his notes.

*Better. /Yr*

Yuuri breathed out, relieved, and continued, keeping a close eye out for Victor returning from his errand.

It happened little by little much to everyone's entertainment. At first, both and Yuuri and Victor were completely oblivious to some of the finer spots of attention; Hiroko fussing over Victor's shirt, slyly mentioning that Yuuri had one in that *exact* color; Yuuko smirking at Yuuri, asking if he wouldn't be more comfortable with at least one fold in the legs of his sweats seeing as either he'd shrunk or his pants had miraculously extended.

They eventually realized that their clothes were irretrievably mixed up because, on most days, they tended to grab whatever was in their vicinity, no longer giving thought to which room they woke up in. They sometimes caught the telltale scent of each other's favorite soap on a t-shirt they found themselves wearing, and Yuuri sometimes noticed the brand-name tags on his active wear. Neither of them said a word, secretly delighting in the sight of each other. They went so far as to start deliberately stealing things from each other's closet, just to render the other speechless at very inappropriate moments.

Photographs of Yuuri in Victor's Russia track jacket and vice versa made its way onto their respective Instagram accounts. Needless to say, they were inundated with notifications over several days. Everyday clothing was one thing, but that particular outfit was a realm of distraction all its own. They grudgingly promised to keep it for those slow nights they spent luxuriating in the feel of each other, which of course was a rule they constantly broke.

Since Yuuri's quad flip, there was never a night they spent apart and with that came learning to maneuver around each other's sleep quirks; Yuuri was convinced Victor's snoring would be the death of him (he compromised with earplugs), and Victor had to wonder if Yuuri was secretly a personified firestorm that manifested every few nights without fail. They were empty gripes, jibes they threw at each other during those silly disagreements, and each morning saw them intertwined with each other, complaints forgotten.

One night, after a particularly robust day of practice, Yuuri sat exhausted on Victor's bed, bracketed by his boyfriend's legs. Purposeful fingers kneaded away his tension, and Yuuri relished in the sleep that was to come. He ached, the good kind of pain that came with fine-tuning his routines. Yuuri drew a knee to his chin in an attempt to stay upright, eyes fluttering.

"You should take the day off tomorrow."

Yuuri smiled; Victor *always* knew, "I have no problem with that."

Victor nipped at the back of his neck, his breath hot and ticklish. He moved off the bed to get the lights, while Yuuri sunk into the pillows. Victor settled next to him, taking Yuuri's glasses and placing them safely to the side.
"I forgot again," Yuuri yawned.


"Something on your mind?" Yuuri enquired because that wasn't an ordinary goodnight kiss.

"I wanted to ask, how would you like us to act during competition?"

Yuuri winced, mostly because of the reminder of their fight, "I don't want us to 'act' Victor."

"Yuuri," he said gently, "It's okay. I understand if you're uncomfortable with public displays in that context. I'm perfectly capable of being professional for a few hours a day."

"Is that what you want?"

Yuuri was developing quite the audaciousness knack, "No, it isn't. But I'm not saying it isn't something to consider."

Yuuri leveled him with that gaze, the one that often got Victor naked and on his back before he had time to take a proper breath, "I want you to never take your eyes off of me. So, use your discretion."

"I don't have much of that when it comes to you, especially when you look at me like that."

There was something in that predatory curve of his lips that left Yuuri helpless but tonight it was more show than seduction. His expression softened out, and Victor drew Yuuri to him, kissing his eyelids.

"I couldn't take my eyes off you if I tried."

The next day brought the message Yuuri had been waiting for:

Adjustments are done! See you in a bit! /M

Yuuri's eagerness bubbled over. His Eros costume was finally ready, having been tweaked to conform seamlessly to his height and build. He went down to the dining room and showed Victor the message, virtually bouncing with anticipation.

"I've been dreaming about putting the damn thing on for weeks."

'Oh, you have no idea,' Victor thought.

They were halfway through lunch when Hiroko, Minako and the Nishigoris entered, bringing an abundance of liveliness with them. The triplets had their phones at the ready, and Yuuko was pink-faced in her zeal. Axel, Lutz and Loop crowded Victor in a semi-circle, consulting with him on their latest Instagram posts. He smiled dotingly at them. Yuuri loved that after all this time, Victor still looked somewhat surprised by how easily Yuuri's family had accepted him.

"And I thought I was excited," Yuuri said to the group.

"We couldn't help it, especially Yuuko," Takeshi grinned.

"Can we see it now? Please, please, please?" Axel, Lutz, and Loop begged in unison. Yuuri laughed.

"What do you think coach? Are sneak peeks allowed?"
Victor dramatized consideration of the request, index finger tapping against his lips. The triplets were beside themselves, "PLEASE VICTOR! All the skating otaku will love it!"

He chuckled, "I see no reason why not." Yuuri took the garment bag from Minako and proceeded to his room, Victor following very closely behind him.

It was exactly as Yuuri remembered it; that smooth, sultry black blending into the meshing down the right half of his body, and up the back of his left leg; the embellishments were bold across the wide belt and shoulder, and gave a sharp gleam in the light; the short frills at his waist, lined in a passionate red, flowed endlessly with his figure. Yuuri was taken apart as he slipped into the outfit, holding his breath in awe. This would always be Victor's costume, but right then, he felt as though he and he alone was Eros' guardian.

The zipper sat low on his back, diagonal in the space it would traverse to complete the ensemble. Victor's fingers were around it, and Yuuri caught the glint in his eyes as they stood in front of the mirror.

"I'm a little jealous Yuuri," his voice was brazenly wanton, "that the world will see you like this. I want you. All to myself."

"They'll all be watching me, but it won't matter. I know exactly who I'm skating for."

"Yuuri..." and Victor's mouth was on his back, all tongue and teeth and oh, that was going to bruise splendidly. He brought the zip up, his lips grazing the shell of Yuuri's ear, "That's for wearing my jacket last week when you were practicing Eros."

If it was one thing Yuuri craved taking advantage of, it was his ability to wreck Victor. The man could flirt his way out of murder, but he hadn't been prepared for Yuuri's brand of eros. If it wasn't for the audience waiting on them downstairs, Yuuri wouldn't yield so easily to Victor's teasing.

"Later," Yuuri said. Victor's eyes twinkled with the promise.

In a show of spontaneity as effervescent as the sunshine that broke through the early morning rains, they took the train to Fukuoka to enjoy the rest of their day off. The pristine fit of his Eros costume endured throughout the hour and half travel time, and though Yuuri was now casually dressed and showing Victor the various pursuits the city had to offer, tingles danced across his skin in reminder of it. When Yuuri had expended his knowledge of Fukuoka, he followed Victor's movements as the Russian snapped picture after picture through the window. There was a beautiful flow about him that always left Yuuri with a tide of realization that, yes, Victor was right there with him.

He wanted to memorize his kaleidoscope of a boyfriend, treating everyday like it was their first and last.

"You're staring." Victor's fingers sailed across his cheek.

"You would be too if you had my view."

Yuuri might as well have hung the moon in the sky with the way Victor lit up, "Trust me, mine is better."

Yuuri smiled; he'd let him have this one, "Any word on my free skate costume?"

Victor glanced over his email, just in case, "Not yet, but don't worry, it shouldn't be too long again."
It had been years since Yuuri made the trip to Fukuoka, and having Victor hanging off of his every word, tripping over his questions as he absorbed the bustle of their new adventure, captivated Yuuri all over again. Victor seldom offered free days, but he did know where Yuuri's limit lay. Yuuri would never willingly give up practice, and Victor was the antithesis for his stubbornness. Their rapport was a boon that extended beyond skating, and Yuuri was grateful for it as he settled into the afternoon, hand in hand with the enthused Russian who proceeded to direct Yuuri around Fukuoka of his own accord. Yuuri knew he couldn't understand most of the signs, nor did he know the layout of the city, but it didn't matter. For the meantime, Yuuri was content to freely roam at Victor's whim.

"Can we go to the park your mentioned?" Victor said, "I really want to see the castle ruins."

"Sure, we can take a bus to get there."

Victor brushed his lips against the back of Yuuri's hand, "We should've done this sooner."

"All work and no play, except I love my work," Yuuri grinned, "C'mon."

It was a short bus ride to Ohori Park, and they spent the remainder of the afternoon exploring, making the stop to Fukuoka Castle (Yuuri had to relay it's history to Victor, and he consciously found ways to mention 'ninja' in every other sentence, just to hear him squeal delightedly), and a quick detour to the scenic Japanese garden before its closing time. Victor, impulsive buyer that he was, gathered much too many souvenirs from the surrounding shops. Yuuri chuckled, quietly thankful that they were all portable items, or else they would've been encumbered by the weight of Victor's shopping spree.

The afternoon soon gave way to softer hues, heralding how quickly the time had passed. They walked along the edge of the lake, enjoying the greenery that snaked through their route, and the backdrop of the city in the distance. Victor sighed happily.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I wish we had time to see more."

"Next time I'll take you to Fukuoka Tower. The view of the city is pretty amazing from there," Yuuri said, "There's also a fireworks festival at the beginning of August. We can come back then, if you want."

Victor squeezed his hand, "It's a date."

They were famished by the time Yuuri tracked down a well-reviewed noodlebar. Victor listened to Yuuri's recommendations and when his indecisiveness got the better of him, he solved it by ordering a bit of everything. Realistically, it was too much food for two people, but neither of them seemed to catch on to that reality, too caught up in the fun they had and were having.

Everything that passed Victor's lips brought forth a hearty "Vkusno", much to Yuuri's pleasure. The discovery of the night, however, wasn't the delicious range of dishes surrounding them but the fact that Yuuri could drink him under the table. It started innocently, the usual servings of sake passing between them, but as Yuuri kept pouring, and Victor followed suit, their competitiveness spurred an impromptu drinking game. Victor should've known he was in over his head (because Sochi) but Yuuri's wicked grin egged him on. He forfeited when he found his hand high on Yuuri's thigh, a signal of how low his impulse control had dropped. He would need that in check for the journey to Hasetsu. Plus, watching Yuuri celebrate his victory with another drink, his eyes ablaze and sentences swirling around Japanese and English made losing the challenge worth it.

Yuuri still had the presence of mind to direct them to the bus stop, and then through the train station. He wasn't grab-a-world-champion-and-romance-him-on-the-dance-floor drunk, but there was an
insistence about him, and his bright smile and flushed cheeks were charming in perpetuum. Victor lived for this, seeing Yuuri so happy.

They entered the empty train car, and Victor took a seat opposite the entrance, looking bemused when Yuuri didn't sit with him. The younger skater studied him, and it wasn't so black and white that Victor could immediately perceive it's meaning. Yuuri gripped the handrail next to the seat with his right hand, leaning off of it as he extended a leg behind him as though to twirl. There was memory and mischief in his eyes.

"Vitya, would you like to know something new about me?"

Victor held his breath. He was afraid to answer lest he disturb Yuuri out of his trance.

"I took pole-dancing classes in Detroit. I hated taking ballet without Minako around, but since I had no choice, I decided to do something new, something just for me. I wanted to feel strong. Sexy."

Victor was so fucking grateful he hadn't played beyond his strengths with the sake because if he had missed that provocative look on Yuuri's face because of inebriation, he might as well have resigned from life.

"It's a pity these trains don't have the straight rails," Yuuri ran a hand along the curved handrail, "I would've loved to show you my skills." When Yuuri stepped towards him, hands on the top of his thighs, his lips right there for the taking, Victor stopped breathing entirely.

"Thanks for the time off Vitya. I had a great time today," Yuuri whispered, "but it isn't over. I can still feel your mouth on my back, you know. One hickey isn't enough." The wherewithal for speech was lost on Victor, and Yuuri treated him to the kiss he'd wanted to give since trying on the costume.

"You're speechless."

Victor nodded.

"You're gorgeous." And Victor groaned against the second kiss, equal parts gentle and dirty.

"The things you do to me in my dreams Vitya, it should be illegal. And your mouth, fuck, nothing compares. Nothing. What would you give to get on your knees for me right now? What I would give..."

"Y-Yuuri..."

"It's all for you. Only for you. I hope you know that. I hope it's enough."

Victor snapped out of his stupor, his words a rush, "More than Yuuri. It's more than I deserve," Yuuri shook his head but Victor stopped him with a blinding kiss, "Dance with me."

Time stopped, or so it felt, as Yuuri obliged him, and their laughter echoed euphorically through the train car.

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Yuuri had been right, the night wasn't over and Victor wouldn't survive. Not now. Not Ever.

As they spent more time together, Yuuri was able to convey very specific things with his lips; soft thank yous, annoyed nos, grumpy mornings, shy reminders, simple agreements...

Pure eros.
The former he could grasp. The latter would kill him, he was sure of it.

Yuuri undid him like only he could, with that coy smile and those destructive eyes, smooth as mahogany, powerful as a tidal wave. Yuuri was spread wide around Victor's kneeling form, his calves hooked over the Russian's thighs, and god, Victor was praising their athletic flexibility as he pushed Yuuri further up the mattress. Though he was the one who had Yuuri pinned, crowding him into deep, delicious and messy kisses as they rolled their hips in irresistibly sedated tandem, they both knew who was really a mess for it tonight. Yuuri confirmed as such earlier when he sucked Victor into a state of ruin, making sure to hold eye contact as he wiped that drip of cum from the edge of his mouth, and licked his lips like he'd just had the best meal of his existence.

Jesus, what had he done to deserve Yuuri?

Yuuri's room was blisteringly hot, and they were dripping sweat as he circled Victor's entrance, his freshly lubed fingers cool to the touch. Victor arched himself into the contact, latching hard to the junction of Yuuri's neck with a fretful groan. Yuuri had been intentionally picking him apart since they got home, mapping a series of licks and love bites from collarbone to inner thigh, until he was writhing, straining, aching for it. Now, naked, bodies pressed together, cocks all too sensitive with each electric graze, every sensation sending sparks catapulting down their spines, it was torture. And Victor fucking loved it.

"You're impatient tonight."

"You're driving me fucking crazy," Victor moaned against him, struggling for more friction between them but Yuuri merely hummed, lips curled into a devilish grin, "Yuuuuuri..."

Yuuri fought through the haze, awareness still at a viable percentage that he could drag this out just long enough for Victor to reward him with those obscene sounds tied up in his throat. His dick twitched restlessly against Victor's and Yuuri silently counted down from ten, as he pressed against the puckered skin. His finger slipped past that first resistance, slow, sloooow, and Victor's mewls were tangled with Yuuri's tongue as the shock of the cold lube melded with his burning body. Victor supported himself on one arm, reaching between them to Yuuri's dick, smiling through the moans when Yuuri shivered under his touch, the pad of his thumb circling his tip, smearing precum and lube as he created a tight ring along the shaft. Yuuri bit his lip, eyes long dark with lust, and added a second finger in one fluid motion. Victor's forehead dropped to Yuuri's chest.


"Teasing bastard."

"This is for wearing my jacket last week during dinner with everyone," Yuuri growled, and the sound reverberated across him, through Victor and down to both their cocks, "I couldn't fucking think Vitya."

"You deserved it after that stunt you pulled...at the- oh god..." his hand twisted into the sheets, and he whined uncontrollably when Yuuri brushed past his prostate, grinding back with shameless need against the intrusion.

"I didn't say that I didn't," and Yuuri's strokes went right where Victor craved, over and over and over, provoking a string of unintelligible Russian as he set an unrelenting pace. He scratched his way down Victor's back, and they rutted hard against each other until his mind shorted and he split his lip, his whimpers prolonged with the steady rhythm and Victor falling apart over him. God, the man was too beautiful for words.
Their kisses were rough enough to bruise, as was Victor finding purchase in his shoulders, and Yuuri gripping the meat of Victor's ass. The fuse was crackling down, and they chased the ignition, the pleasure building and tightening and cutting through them both.

Close, so, so close. Victor crushed their mouths together as the explosion radiated outwards, shattering, shuddering, the sounds of their orgasms caught between swollen lips and spilling over both their chests. They rode the high together, the warmth that bound them an intoxicating drug. Boneless, they lay splayed and shaking, and with a hoarse whisper, Yuuri carefully slipped his fingers from Victor.

"This makes us even again, doesn't it?"

"I think it does," Yuuri breathed, hands combing through Victor's hair.

Victor nibbled at his collarbone, "I wonder how long it will last."

"Knowing us, not very."

"You're perfect," Victor murmured, "The way you touch me, how you move inside me, I don't know what comes over you but it's fucking perfect."

Color rose along his neck, but it was a habitual response to Victor's praise in bed. Yuuri wasn't as bashful towards their intimacy anymore. No, he felt alive, "It's the same when you do it for me Vitya. I can't get enough of you. Just thinking about it..."

Victor shifted just enough that he could kiss Yuuri again, sweet and slow, "Let's get cleaned up lapochka. I'll make some tea before we go to bed."

Yuuri brought their lips together with a sigh, responding in Japanese. Victor followed with Russian.

They both knew what each other's words translated to in English.

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Two months later

The days passed in a blur of glowing routine, a pattern they welcomed as the season grew closer. They went through each routine in painstaking detail, leaving nothing to chance in presentation or technical. It was a long and taxing process that saw difficult days and tired nights, but Yuuri persisted, trusting Victor to never take his eyes off of him. Victor focused on the way Yuuri currently skated, seeming to step into another world altogether, like his very soul would be swallowed by the ice if he didn't give it his all. As his coach, Victor couldn't be more proud of his progress. As his lover, it reminded him of exactly why he'd fallen for Yuuri all those months ago.

Yuuri was landing the quad flip consistently in practice though he hadn't decided on incorporating it into competition. Somehow, after that night in Ice Castle, it felt too personal and the romantic part of him wanted to keep it for himself. His ambitious side made no refute, at least not yet, so Yuuri gave himself time to deliberate. Victor left the judgement to him, confident in whatever he chose to do. He had faith in Yuuri. He'd had that faith since Aria.

"Oh shit," Yuuri muttered as they approached Yu-topia, "I forgot my gloves."

They slowed, and Victor was about to turn with him but Yuuri shook his head, "It's okay. I'll go with Makka."

Victor nodded and kissed him on the cheek, watching as they trekked back to Ice Castle. Not so long
ago, those monosyllabic lines would've caused him unease, maybe even upset him. Now, Victor understood. The time was drawing near, and though Yuuri's determination continued to mount, some days saw him subdued and distant. They tended to work around each other until Yuuri was ready to talk. Victor always made sure his poodle was on Yuuri-duty during those times, until Yuuri came to him and he could could wrap him in his arms and shower him with all the good he deserved.

Once they were out of sight, Victor hurried into Yu-topia to find Hiroko. Like Yuuri, Victor wanted to keep surprising him, to always see him smiling (and he could only imagine how enjoyable this particular shocker would be with Yuuri's jacket on). He smirked, fumbling with his phone as he split his attention between accessing the app and navigating around obstacles in his path.

"Where's Yuuri?" Hiroko asked when Victor appeared next to her. She peered around him, just in case.

"He went back to Ice Castle for his gloves."

"Show me," she said and Victor scrolled through his notes to the Japanese phrases he'd put together. It was the collective effort of his language app, and Yuuri's family. Hiroko beamed at him.

"You're improving."

"Speaking it is a bit easier than writing," Victor said, "The app is helping me track the basics."

"You're doing fine. Just keep up with the courses, and whatever trouble you're having, you know where to find us." Victor gave her a quick hug as his ringtone sounded and he excused himself to answer the call.

"Victor darling," Chris sang, "Your tailor is a god. Thank you for the referral. I very nearly died when I realized I'd forgotten to pack a suit."

"It's the least I could do. But I have to ask..."

"I forgot half the things I needed before I flew out. That man will be the death of me," Chris chuckled, "How's the Japanese coming along?"

"A bit more difficult than when I was learning French but its not impossible."

"You're such a sap."

Victor scoffed, "You're one to talk. I know how much Alexander charges for short-notice suits."

"It was worth every penny," Chris cooed, "Aside from that, do you have any recommendations for jewelry in St. Petersburg?"

"I'll send you my personal contact," Victor smirked, "Should I be prepping a tux as well?"

"Oh, teasing me are you? I'll remember that when you introduce me to Yuuri."

Victor grinned as he sent Chris the information. Like his tailor, his jeweler was a right genius in custom-made creations. Victor had several pieces tailored for special occasions, including the Sochi watch. It was one of kind, in more ways now than just expert craftsmanship. Victor smiled at that, and was re-opening the language app when an absolutely mad thought crossed his mind.

'I wonder what Yuuri's ring size is?'

He blinked, unmoving for a few seconds. That...was a hell of a question. To ask himself. At three in
the afternoon.

He indulged his insanity for a couple minutes before shelving it with a smile.

Another day.

The ocean was their refuge, easing the stress from their bones as efficiently as Hiroko's special blend of teas. Victor had ordered another day off through Yuuri's thousand protests, and then watched, amused and relieved, as he slept in until two p.m. He'd grumbled his thanks against Victor's lips, and spent another hour in bed with Makka relaxed against him.

It was late evening when Yuuri hugged Victor from behind and suggested a walk on the beach. They arrived under a sky of brilliant reds and molten golds bleeding into each other, and slipped off their shoes so they could stroll on the surf. The colors danced across Victor's sea-breezed hair, and highlighted the lighter brown of Yuuri's eyes, sights they admired without hesitation. Makka ran a few paces in front of them, splashing water wildly as he went. Yuuri sent a few photos of the scene to Yurio; the young Russian's pride prevented an outright request, but Yuuri knew how much he appreciated Hasetsu's ocean.

"Victor, do you miss Russia?"

Victor kissed the back of Yuuri's hand, "Sometimes. There was a time I never thought I'd leave St. Petersburg. I'm really happy that I did though."

Yuuri was quiet, his gaze on the sky, searching. Victor nudged him gently.

"Something on your mind?"

"I'll tell you another time," Yuuri said, "Don't worry."

"Sure?"

"Mn hmm," Yuuri wrapped an arm around his waist, "I'd like to see St. Petersburg one day, and all the things you told me about in the notes."

"I'd be happy to give you the tour," Victor said playfully, "We could take a weekend detour to the hotel in Sochi. Room three-three-five."

Yuuri giggled, "I never thought I'd feel anything but depressed about Sochi. It's good to be proven wrong."

"I'd love to have you pull me into that room again," he noticed Yuuri's confused glance and realized he'd never told him that part, "You kissed me in Sochi. Grabbed me by the shirt like your life depended on it. I kissed you back, obviously, but you initiated it."

Yuuri stared up at him, dazed, "I. Did. What?"

"You cannot tell me you're surprised," Victor dissolved into a bright laugh, "You were the drunk one remember?"

Yuuri shook his head, Victor's laugh contagious, "What even was Sochi?"

"I ask myself that question everyday."

"Why didn't you stay with me?"
"I did, for a while. I sat in the chair while you fell asleep," Victor watched Yuuri's expression, that all too familiar flicker, "Oh Yuuri, you look at me like that now but if I'd gone along with where you were taking me, it wouldn't have been right or fair to you. I could never have hurt you like that."

"And where exactly was I taking you?"

They paused as Victor leaned into his lips to answer the question. Yuuri was as flushed as the sky when they pulled apart.

They walked a bit further, squealing when Makka bolted towards them and shook water in every direction. They ran after him, throwing their shoes on the sand as they indulged the poodle's merrymaking. When they were soaked and out of breath, Victor brushed back Yuuri's hair, thumbing away the stray droplets from his eyebrows.

"I always meant to ask you..." Victor said slowly, surprised at the words on his tongue. Yuuri's smile relaxed him enough to finish the question, "Did you see me skate Aria at Worlds?"

Yuuri remembered that night, lying in the middle of Ice Castle, hearing Victor's voice from the veil of Sochi: *Maybe one day you'll show it on the ice...*

"I didn't." Yuuri watched Victor's face fall. He tried to cover it, but the disappointment was almost tangible. Yuuri tiptoed and kissed him, their lips wet and salty, "I didn't because that was the night I skated Aria."

"What?"

"Yuuko recorded me. It was supposed to be a memento of sorts, to remind me of why I loved skating. She never planned on posting it but the triplets ended up finding the video and the rest is history."

"You..." Victor couldn't believe it, "You skated with me?"

"I like to think that I did."

Victor laughed, a strange, choked, teary laugh as he embraced Yuuri, lifting him off the sand in the process. Yuuri wrapped his arms around Victor's neck as they kissed, Victor's tears cool against their lips.

"I'll tell you the story later," he whispered.

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Victor was giddy as he ended the call. He motioned to Yuuri, who was warming down for the day.

"Your mom said there's a package for you back home, and my email confirms it."

Yuuri immediately brightened through his exhaustion, "My second costume?!!" He grabbed his guards and rushed off to the locker room for his belongings, "Let's go!"

They'd run through ideas with Victor's costume designer. Given the personal overtones of his free skate, Yuuri wanted to project as such in his outfit; the strength it took to overcome his fears, the charm that lingered under the surface, and that splash of uniqueness that would set him apart from his competitors. They went through several iterations before settling on the one Yuuri now held in his hands. It was styled into a jacket, indigo contrasting against the mesh of the waist that curved lengthwise to the back. An intricate vine pattern of rhinestones covered the back, blending into the smaller, luminescent crystals that went all the way over the shoulders and down to the crease of the
jacket. It shimmered with every move he made.

"Thanks for your help with this," Yuuri said, the costume more beautiful than he could've imagined, "It's incredible."

"This was all you," Victor said, "All I did was ask for the back to be a little shorter so you could use that ass of yours to your advantage."

Yuuri rolled his eyes, "You're an impossible flirt."

"Did you see yourself in the Eros costume or do we need to go through the pictures again?" Victor smirked, then became thoughtful, "Wait a minute, you haven't given your free skate music a title. Any thoughts?"

Yuuri looked down at the costume, his eyes sparkling, "I know exactly what to call it..."

**Epilogue**

**Fukuoka Airport, Domestic Terminal**

Yuuri's eyes were closed, music blaring through his headphones, and the pad of thumb, previously in time with the music, now tapped in nervous beats against his knee. This was it, the beginning of the season. Soon he would be on the ice at The Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship. When placements were announced, and the triplets had woken him up at some ungodly hour to give him the information, he'd reacted calmly. He had three sets of competitions to make his way through, two of which would see him competing against Phichit and Yurio, but he needed to secure a win in this first competition to move forward. As he celebrated his placement in the GP series, the start of the season had felt like a concept. Now, sitting in the airport, hearing the flight information from the speakers and the rumble of airplanes from the tarmac, Yuuri couldn't help his nerves.

So, he settled into the boarding area, shut out the extra input around him, and focused on the time he'd spent preparing for this season, those demanding days on the ice with Victor, the way his heart had reconnected with Hasetsu, the support of his family and friends, and the love he felt every time he woke up in Victor's arms. He let that feeling of freedom spread through him, working to reverse the gears of worry. He didn't open his eyes until a soothing aroma caught his nostrils.

"Black, one sugar," Victor said as he took out his headphones. Yuuri wrapped a hand around the sleeve of the cup, and took a deep breath.

"Thanks."

"What are listening to?"

Yuuri looked at his phone, "It's Phichit's playlist of music that skaters used at the Grand Prix over the last few years."

Victor smiled, "Do you want something to eat now?"

His concern was very sweet, "On the plane." Victor nodded, and sat with him, taking the right side of Yuuri's headphones.

"I want to listen too."

Yuuri drifted onto his shoulder and, even with the coffee in his system, Victor's calming presence
was enough to draw him to sleep. He heard Victor whisper against his hair, some of the Russian
registering in his mind.

"You'll be fine, my love."

It wasn't a switch Victor could turn on and off, but the words further mitigated his anxiousness.
Doubt skittered around the edges, he was only human after all, but Victor was right there filling the
gaps, his company bursting through the uncertainty, much like the fireworks they'd seen in Fukuoka
not so long ago. His archive of good things was now splitting the seams, glaring at the bad, daring it
to fuck with him. A small smile crossed Yuuri's lips. He wouldn't forget. Not this time.

It was another forty five minutes before their boarding call was announced. Victor placed a gentle
kiss on Yuuri's forehead to wake him.

"Time to go," he said, handing him the headphone, "Do you want the window seat?"

"If you don't mind."

Yuuri yawned all the way to their assigned seats. Victor watched him fidget with his seat-belt,
alternating between staring out the window, picking at the in-flight magazine, brushing long gone lint
from his sweater, and scrolling through his phone. He really did hate flying.

Victor tapped him on the shoulder and when Yuuri turned, jumping slightly at his touch, Victor
kissed him until he felt the tension fall away. Yuuri sighed and touched his cheek lightly, breathing in
the lingering aftershave. His head lulled again, and Victor leaned towards him so he could get
comfortable.

"You know something," he heard Victor say, his voice soft in retrospect, "you were right. Trains are
easier."

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