

variations of a theme: goodbyes

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variations of a theme: goodbyes

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Summary

Viktor was eight, and he had a dream.

Or, the various times Viktor had to say goodbye, and the various times he didn't.

Notes

mostly written whilst listening to martin landh's instrumental song, penumbra (which was almost the title but this fit more) based off a headcanon i posted on my tumblr that developed actual plot <http://wylaan.tumblr.com/post/158858698478/so-im-going-at-this-with-an-assumption-that-when>

Viktor was eight, and he had a dream.

At three years old, his mother had taken him out on the ice when the lake behind their house froze over, slowly letting him find his feet below him, refusing to let go of his hands even as his legs slipped and crumpled. When he was smiling and laughing as he skated, she let his hands free and, though he fell over and over he jumped straight back up, with utter determination. When he could manage lap after lap without falling, he was the proudest he'd ever been.

At four years old, he sobbed when the ice became too thin to skate, and stared over the lake morosely as the water started moving. When he stuck his feet in the water it was still cold, but not cold enough.

His mother noticed, and after a quick, excited conversation she signed him up for lessons at one of the many ice rinks that dotted their small town. He didn't like it quite as much as skating on the lake; there it was beautiful and natural and the surface undulated like it had been caught mid-wave, and the bracing cold of the wind against his cheeks made him feel alive, but it was still the ice.

At five years old, he moved through the beginner classes to classes with boys and girls much bigger than he, who petted his hair and let him sit on their laps, and cheered every time he tried a fancy spin. The instructor at the rink started him with ballet lessons, too, saying that he was a natural and that his artistry could be developed.

Viktor didn't know what artistry *was*, but he loved the ice, and grew to love ballet too. Not quite as much, but he could feel how much surer he was on the ice after drilling positions and core balance.

At six years old, he joined in at the rink's local competition, against the older children in his class, and won. They petted his hair again, and told him that one day he could be the best figure skater in the world. His breath caught in his throat at that. When his mother gave him extra helpings at dinner and let him sit in front of the TV to watch the World Championships, he couldn't tear his eyes away, and he thrust himself into the lessons with even greater vigour, moving up the classes again, through instructor after instructor until he was learning under the owner of the rink.

The owner of the rink, Anton, had been a two-time Olympic bronze medallist, years and years ago, and now was about the age of Viktor's grandfather, or maybe even older. His bright eyes shone when Viktor completed a spin, or started mastering new jumps, and he had kind hands that would pick Viktor up after bad falls and let him snuffle through the pain for a while before carrying on.

At seven years old, he was entered into more competitions at the rink. He was up against ten and eleven year olds that had even started mastering double jumps, but with his step sequences far exceeding those of his fellow competitors, he stood at the top of the podium again. The word 'prodigy' was thrown around, and when he asked his mother what it meant

she told him. Although he was annoyed that people seemed to ignore the hard work he'd put into the routines, it still meant that his skating was getting through to people.

On his eighth birthday, he opened brand new skates, with golden blades, and threw himself into his mother's arms, asking whether they could skate on the lake again now that it was frozen over. Although it was a bit more difficult with the swell and fall of the ice, he managed to show her parts of his routine, and even a few jumps.

"Mama!" he called out, as she watched him with a proud smile. He skated up to her and took her hands in his own. "I want to be the best figure skater in the world," he continued earnestly.

She tucked a strand of his hair behind his ear. "I don't doubt that you'll achieve that, Viten'ka."

(When he was nine, an old man who knew Anton, had been coached by Anton himself, came to watch Viktor at a competition. Afterwards Anton led Viktor to the office of the rink, where the man was sitting on one of the leather sofas. He eyed Viktor with a sort of gruff interest and asked him, "What do you want to achieve with your skating, Viktor?"

Viktor blinked at him, unsure how to answer. He loved the ice and he loved skating and he loved when people told him he was good at it, but he didn't think that was what this man wanted to hear.

"I... I want to win."

"Anything else?"

Viktor looked up at Anton, who smiled encouragingly.

"I want to be the best in the world."

Two weeks later, the man was at his house and talking to his mother, and that night she tucked him in with a pensive look on her face. "That man is a world-class coach," she said. "He lives in St Petersburg and, if you wanted, you could train under him to prepare for your junior debut. He says that you have the potential to do great things."

Viktor furrowed his brow. "St Petersburg? That's the other side of the country."

She smiled sadly. "He has the facilities."

"Could you come with me?"

When she shook her head, he scrambled up to throw his arms around her. "Your grandfather and grandmother are getting old. I'm their only child so I need to stay and look after them. But don't hold yourself back for me. I'll be fine. And when you're at the top of the world I'll be right behind you in spirit."

When he was a couple of months shy of his eleventh birthday he left his home town for St Petersburg and didn't look back.)

Viktor was twelve, and was delighted that he might have a friend.

Sure, Georgi Popovich was a bit melodramatic, fancied himself a genius of theatrics, and cried much too easily, but he was Viktor's age, skated, and would share a room with him. Lilia had told Viktor several days before Georgi's arrival that he'd have a new roommate, and Viktor had spent the entire time vibrating with a mixture of excitement and nerves, until Lilia shouted at him during ballet practice. The night before Georgi was due to arrive he dashed around his bedroom, cleaning and tidying everything away to make a good first impression.

He'd make a *fantastic* first impression. Georgi would be his first true friend, and he was sure that they would be best friends for years and years. Finally, when Yakov came in to see why his light was still on at eleven at night, he burrowed his way into the lower bunkbed, shut his eyes tightly, and willed himself to sleep.

Georgi arrived early the next day, just as Viktor was doing a perfect arabesque, and Lilia sighed when he dropped it to rush over to his new friend. "Hi! I'm Viktor! You can call me Vitya, though," he said, smiling brightly at the sombre child before him. Georgi's hair was dark in contrast to the pale, silvery blond of Viktor's, although his eyes were almost the same shade of blue. "Georgi, right?" he urged, when the boy remained silent. He bounced on the balls of his feet, smiling encouragingly. Maybe Georgi was shy?

Georgi nodded. "May I go to my room?" he asked Yakov, turning away. Viktor's face dropped.

Yakov eyed them both, and then eyed Lilia. "You'll be rooming with Vitya. Show him to the room, Vitya?"

Viktor nodded, and did so.

It took a while for Georgi to finally open up, but with careful prodding, Viktor finally found out what exactly he enjoyed, what made him enjoy skating. Strangely, it was the pantomime, the makeup, the outfits, the fairytale of it. So, one night a couple of months after Georgi arrived, Viktor clambered up to the top bunk and prodded him awake.

"What, Viktor?"

Viktor pushed his bottom lip out. Georgi *still* refused to call him 'Vitya'. "I have an idea."

Georgi blinked at him.

"Lilia won't be here tomorrow, and Yakov will be busy talking to choreographers all day. We should sneak into their room and try on Lilia's clothes and makeup."

Georgi's eyes lit up. "Okay," he said, before rolling back over and falling asleep.

The next morning, Lilia left after breakfast, as Viktor very carefully did not look at Georgi, lest he lose his composure and laugh. Yakov patted them both on the head and told them to amuse themselves for the day and that there were a couple of hours of rink time booked for that evening. Finally he left for his study, leaving Georgi and Viktor to quickly tidy up the breakfast things before they looked at each other and shot up the stairs.

“I hope she has a feather boa. I like feather boas,” Georgi said when they reached the landing. Viktor put a finger to his lips before opening the door to their room.

“I want to try walking in high heels,” Viktor said, pulling open the door of the closet.

Georgi’s eyes were sparkling as he looked at the dresses and shoes, and Viktor mentally congratulated himself at the idea. *This* would be the turning point, they would end up best friends for the rest of their lives and tell each other every little secret. Viktor was bouncing with the excitement of everything that would come in his life, with a best friend there to help bear the burden.

He reached and pulled out a red dress. “This would suit you,” he told Georgi decisively. Georgi nodded and pulled off his top, taking the dress from Viktor’s arms and shimmying it on. Viktor helped him zip it up, and clapped his hands together when Georgi spun, letting the skirts flow around him.

“For my Junior debut,” he said seriously. “I will wear a dress on the ice.”

Viktor looked at where the hem pooled on the floor. “It would need to be shorter than that.”

“I’m thinking”—he cupped his hand just below his knees—“this length. Would Yakov agree, do you think?”

Viktor nodded. “If you ask him, I’m sure. What dress should I wear?”

Georgi pursed his lips, before pulling a blue dress out and helping Viktor into it. Viktor waited until he was zipped up before placing his hand on a popped hip, tossing his shoulder-length hair, and prancing a circle around the room. See, he *knew* he was pretty, enough women had cooed and pinched his cheeks when he went to church with Lilia or to the synagogue with Yakov, and he loved that he was. He loved people watching him, even if it was with a little envy.

He finished with a twirl, before gathering up the skirts and skipping back to the closet. “Shoes!” he exclaimed. He handed Georgi strappy, high black shoes and eyes the rows before his attention was caught by purple ankle boots with swirls in silver sparkles along the heel and sides of the shoe. He’d never seen Lilia wear them before, but for the life of him he couldn’t understand *why* because they were beautiful. They slipped on easily, still too large for him, and it took him a few wobbly steps before he got the hang of it again, closing his eyes to focus. He’d seen fashion shows on the TV before, how the models would stalk down the catwalk like they owned it, and was concentrating so hard that he didn’t hear when Georgi gasped. He didn’t realise anything was amiss until he felt frantic prodding at his arm.

Lilia was standing in the doorway, arms crossed and an unreadable expression on her face, and Viktor froze. Lilia was terrifying, had *always* been terrifying, and never before had Viktor intruded into her personal space. She would send him away, he'd be living on the streets and his wish of one day being the best figure skater to ever have lived would be dead before it began.

"Those shoes don't go well with that dress, Vitya," she said, and Viktor blinked.

"Excuse me?"

She walked past him to the closet and looked into it thoughtfully, before pulling out shoes the same blue as the dress. "Try these instead."

Lilia indulged them for a while, taking pictures when Viktor asked for them, and finally told them to ask before going through her closet (at which they both agreed, apologetically and passionately). After, with two steaming bowls of borscht on the sofa in front of some cartoons, Georgi finally turned to Viktor with a smile. "That was fun."

Viktor kicked his legs out. "It was."

"You like being pretty, then?" Georgi asked.

Viktor nodded. "I like the attention." He smiled with particular affection to his new best friend. Georgi smiled back and Viktor's heart flipped with happiness in his chest.

(Which was why it was a shock when Yakov told Viktor that Georgi would no longer be staying with them. Instead he would be living with his older cousin and her wife near enough to the rink that he could still train with Yakov, but it wouldn't be the same. He was inconsolable when Georgi left, although he tried desperately to hide it, and after a hushed conversation with Lilia, Yakov finally sat beside Viktor on his bed and asked what would make him feel better.

"A friend," Viktor said. "A best friend."

'A best friend' came in the form of a tiny poodle puppy that was presented to him at the end of his lessons one day. Viktor held the squirming bundle of fluff in his arms and fell in love with the way he wiggled against his chest to lick his chin, the way he looked up at his new owner with love in his dark eyes, the way he'd yap excitedly whenever Viktor was near and curl up beside him at night.)

Viktor was eighteen and fancied himself in love.

Valentin was twenty-two and had dark eyes that appeared to know every secret the world had to offer. His hair was like spun gold (Valentin found that amusing, that Viktor, top of the figure skating world, had silver hair whilst he, unable to continue in seniors after his first season due to injury, had gold). Viktor found himself daydreaming a lot more those days,

gazing out of windows towards the sky and out across the sea when he walked Makkachin along the beach. He lamented about how dark his life had been before Valentin, and how full of wonder and surprise it was now. He thought of how Valentin would kiss him before dropping him back off at his apartment, how he'd wrap his jacket around Viktor's shoulders if he so much as shivered, how he would look at Viktor from across a restaurant table as if he was the only person in existence.

Viktor was eighteen, and fancied himself in love, so when chaste kisses turned into something more, he allowed it to happen. When Valentin whispered in his ear, *'You love me, hmm? So let's do this,'* whilst undoing the button of his jeans, Viktor squashed down the feeling of panic, and smiled, and let it happen.

It hurt, and Viktor had to bite his arm to stop from yelling at him to stop, and Valentin yanked his hair much too hard, but when Valentin kissed the bruises he'd left on his ribs and hips, and said that Viktor was perfect and beautiful, warmth still bubbled up in his chest. The next time Valentin started kissing him hungrily he let it happen even quicker, so it'd be over quicker, and squeezed his eyes tight against the tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks.

(He finished off the podium for the first time in his life at that year's World Championship, feeling drained and lifeless even before he stepped onto the ice. Yakov had tutted at him, looked so disappointed that Viktor had almost cried then and there, in front of the cameras, in front of everyone. It was strange, how often he felt like crying these days. He never cried usually, even when he left home for the first time, even when Makkachin had to be taken in for surgery, even when Georgi had come to the rink and entirely ignored him in lieu of the few girls who skated at the rink. But something about how drained he felt these days made him so much more prone to crying.

His phone went off and when he checked it it was Valentin. He was almost accustomed to the sickening swoop in his stomach. He looked up at the rink, where the medal ceremony was going on. He'd never watched it from this end before, and hated the feeling.

The text he sent to Valentin was simple, to the point. *'Let's break up'*, and he felt a weight he never even realised was there lift off his shoulders.)

Viktor was twenty-three and bored.

His life was an endless cycle of training, competing and mandatory rest periods. There was brief respite in walking Makkachin but even that became routine. His calls to even his mother dried up, and any time that he was in the apartment he would wander around aimlessly, tidying and cleaning things that did not need to be tidied and cleaned. He watched routine after routine on YouTube, wondering whether anyone else could feel the same black hole that sucked away inspiration bit by bit.

Still, he had to be doing something right, because he won gold after gold and people looked at him as if he'd put the stars in the sky. He was tempted, sometimes, in the middle of a jump

or a step sequence, to drop the quality and poise, let his skating be as messy as his mind and thoughts felt. He did it sometimes during practice, and would bite back almost hysterical laughter as Yakov shouted and raved. "I'm the top skater in the world, Yakov," he would retort, with a grin that felt wild, like it would run away from him, "so if the top skater in the world skates like this, it can only be right." He wasn't even sure what he was saying, just that it gave Yakov that precise colour between red and purple that meant he would blow any second.

Rather than continue listening, he spun to skate away. He was too restless, too agitated, and his breath was coming in short bursts. He pushed, dragged everything from within himself, and threw his body into a quadruple axel, crumpling on the landing but managing to stay on his feet by placing both hands on the ice. When that didn't shake off his nervous energy he tried a quadruple loop-quadruple lutz combination, and landed it with a feeling of disgust.

Whenever he fell, he felt a rush that he could almost imagine was what *living* would feel like.

(The next day, his back ached from having collapsed on the sofa overnight from sheer exhaustion, and his knees were tight and burning from the jumps he'd forced himself to carry out. He didn't move for hours, until Makkachin was barking loud enough that his neighbours would likely complain, and even then he could barely drag himself to a bench in the park to let Makkachin off the lead.

Makkachin only ventured away for a few minutes before jumping up beside Viktor and licking his cheek, whining until Viktor could finally put an arm around him. He thought about skating, about competing, about reinventing himself yet again, dug as deep into his mind as he could, but there was nothing.)

Viktor was twenty-six, and he couldn't look away.

He'd noticed Yuuri Katsuki for the first time a couple of years before, mostly as he was never socialising with the other skaters, so seeing someone he didn't recognise on the ice was a shock. When he gave Yakov a questioning look, Yakov shrugged. "Yuuri Katsuki. Japanese. This is his first time qualifying for the Grand Prix circuit. Don't worry about him yet. He's good, but I think he's too green to qualify for the final."

Yakov was proven right, he got fifth place whereas Viktor got gold, and third place in his second qualifier, which wasn't against Viktor but Viktor still got another gold to add to the collection.

He seemed to suffer from nerves when the pressure was on, because his exhibition skate was stunning. It was then that Viktor saw the little homages in his skate to Viktor's own skating, a quality to his spins and step sequences in particular. They came from deep within himself and poured out onto the ice with a rawness that Viktor could feel to his bones. Where Viktor would have added a flourish, Yuuri did, where Viktor would have retreated to himself, Yuuri

did. When Yuuri jumped, Viktor thought he might spread wings and fly. It was like seeing a mirror of himself years in the past when he skated for the pure joy of skating.

He ran through his step sequence again and again the day after, and at Yakov's mildly amused look skated up to where he was watching. "Did you watch Yuuri Katsuki's exhibition skate for the NHK cup yesterday?"

"I told you not to worry about him. He didn't even qualify for the final."

He sighed. Yakov just didn't *get* it. "He will, though. Maybe next year."

Yakov shook his head. "I doubt it. He has too many problems with his nerves."

"He skated beautifully."

"He did." Yakov watched him quietly for a moment. "The landing on your triple axel after the spread eagle is a little sloppy. Tighten it up."

Viktor nodded, but only half listened. He could hear Yakov's annoyed huff from the other side of the rink as he thought about Yuuri's dark eyes rather than the jump, and immediately sprawled onto the ice.

Viktor was forgetful, and so he hardly remembered the burst of passion he'd felt when watching Yuuri skate two years later when Yuuri qualified for the finals after a second place at Skate America and a gold at the Trophée de France. He skated just before Viktor, and nailed his short programme. Viktor smiled at him when he came off the ice, and was marginally startled when he gaped and almost tripped over his skates. He scored fairly well, just over 85 points, although Viktor thought about how he wasn't in the slightest tired by the end and how if he put quads in the second half he could probably get to late 90s, even break the 100 mark.

"Defend your title, Vitya. Make your country proud."

Viktor nodded at Yakov, but wondered just how much he'd have to carve out of himself to make his country proud, if they weren't already proud of what he'd achieved.

He set a new world record, smiled and bowed on command, and hugged Yakov, but hardly felt any of it.

There was a day between the short and the free skate, and Viktor distracted himself by going out with Chris. He adored Chris, who had a perfect mixture of awe for Viktor's skating and fond condescension for his personality. He drank enough that his head felt lighter and the laughs came easier, but not enough that he wouldn't be able to drag himself out of bed the next day, and Chris came back into his hotel room so they could talk until early morning.

Chris was a good friend, the perfect friend, who lived in another country and didn't mind if he didn't text back and always welcomed him with open arms. Even if Viktor could never bring himself to talk about anything but the lightest topics, Chris was the best friend he'd ever had other than Makkachin.

“I’m looking forward to Yuuri Katsuki’s skate,” he announced, at just gone midnight. Chris shifted, and swung his legs over Viktor’s lap.

“He’s a nice person,” Chris said.

“You’ve talked to him?”

Chris nodded. “I won gold against him at Skate America, remember? He has a lot of potential, I think. Very nervous about competing, though.”

There was a swirl of jealousy in the pit of his stomach. “You’ve talked to him?”

Chris eyed him.

“I already asked you that, didn’t I?”

“You’re such a pathetic excuse for a Russian,” Chris sighed, yanking the drink out of his hand and placing it where Viktor couldn’t reach it.

“Hm. Oui. C’est une bonne idée.”

The stark difference in Yuuri’s skating the next day was heartbreaking. Viktor couldn’t understand what had happened, why he kept falling and why all the artistry had fled from his skating, but it must have been something terrible. His own routine went perfectly, and the celebrations after passed in fits and starts and terrifying black spots. He noticed Yuuri staring after, suddenly softer with his hair falling into his eyes and blue-rimmed glasses. He smiled again, remembering with fondness how he’d started and tripped over the last time Viktor had done it.

He was a fan, that was evident from his style, so, with the hope of teasing a smile from him, he asked whether Yuuri wanted a commemorative photo.

It didn’t work, and when Yuuri left, Viktor couldn’t stop staring at the doorway he’d left through.

“I’m Russian,” Viktor’s protégé said with a snarl as Viktor snatched the champagne out of his hand.

Yuri would probably lash out at him if Viktor called him his protégé out loud, so he was waiting for the perfect moment to do it. Hopefully a moment that would particularly embarrass him. Maybe even in front of some cameras.

“And?” he replied, taking a sip from the glass Yuri had managed to sneak from a server.

He made a loud, angry noise as Viktor smiled patiently, shaking his head whilst fondly thinking, *‘Ah, youth’*. Another thing he hoped to say in front of cameras where it would embarrass him.

“We’re *in* Russia. So I can drink!”

“This champagne is too good to waste on youngsters that don’t understand the delicacy,” he said. Yakov slapped Viktor’s arm with the back of his hand.

“Don’t tease him. I had to pull strings to let him come to the banquet in the first place.”

If Viktor had had a younger brother, he would have liked him to be like Yuri.

He brought the flute up to his lips, and froze when he saw Yuuri enter the room, a dejected look on his downcast face, and his coach’s arm firmly around his shoulders. Viktor watched as he managed to escape from the clutches of his coach and settled himself by the refreshment table, and blinked as he knocked back three glasses of champagne without a breath in between. Impressive.

“Are you *listening* to me?” the smaller, angrier Yu(u)ri raged.

Ah, youth, he thought again. Although he hadn’t been quite so angry at fourteen, too enamoured with the ice to do anything but live, think, and breathe skating.

“Of *course*, Yura,” he said, even as his eyes strayed back to Yuuri. What he wouldn’t give for that suit to be fitted better, for his hair to be slicked back like it was when he skated to emphasise his dark eyes.

“No, you’re not. You’re staring at that loser.”

The ‘loser’ knocked back another two flutes of champagne before nervously looking up. He didn’t seem to notice that Viktor was trying to catch his eye (by staring, intently and none too subtly). Yuri whistled.

“Okay,” he said, handing Viktor another flute of champagne—where did he even *find* it whilst talking to Viktor?—and lifting his chin haughtily. “Maybe only losers drink.”

“Exactly,” Viktor said, before downing the drink. Yuri let out an amused, and rather unattractive, snort, despite himself. Viktor grinned at him, only barely managing to refrain from ruffling his hair. He didn’t much feel like having teeth marks in his hand like the *last* time he did it.

He finally looked away from Yuuri and his own small party, Yuri crossing his arms and rocking on the balls of his feet and Yakov eyeing him with a sort of begrudging affection, and sponsors took it as a cue to converge, congratulating him on his new world record, his gold, his many undeniable talents and skills and ‘*what’s the plan after Europeans and Worlds?*’

Viktor smiled the same way he always did with everyone who asked that, fake but practiced enough that it didn’t seem so. The season had hardly started, he’d just cast aside his entire *being* from the previous year to become the man who longed for his love to stay with him, and already people were asking him to die and be reborn. When he looked into the greed in their eyes he hated them with a fire that surprised him. “We’ll see. I’ll announce my plans

after the World Championships. If I qualify, of course!” he said good-naturedly, and they laughed, like he knew they would, even as Viktor considered it.

That would be a surprise, wouldn't it? Not qualifying. The laughs said it all, no one would expect such a thing from the king of the ice.

“No,” Yakov hissed in his ear, and Viktor raised an eyebrow. “Don't give me that innocent look; I basically raised you. I know what you're thinking, and you won't dare.”

And Viktor knew he wouldn't. What would the king of the ice be without his ice? It was why he held onto his career with such strength and vengeance. *This*, the ice, the adulation, casting himself aside to reinvent anew, was all he had.

He'd lost track of Yuuri, and Yuri, in fact, in that time, and a sudden surge of clapping and hollering made him start and look towards the other side of the banquet room, to where a crowd was forming around some activity in the middle. Yakov listened, his face turning that puce that Viktor prided himself on being the only one to achieve, and with a hurried excuse he went to situate himself next to Chris, grasping his arm in delight when he saw Yuuri and Yuri dancing.

“What's... what's going on?” he asked.

“Yuuri just challenged your little Russian kitten to a dance off,” Chris said, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “I thought he was shy!”

Viktor surreptitiously took out his phone and edged closer to the activity. Yuri's parents would *love* this, especially his mother, although she would complain about how angry he looked throughout the entire performance. He took several videos before Yuuri caught sight of him and his lips quirked into a smirk which... *oh*.

He watched, entranced, as Yuuri walked up to him, swiping a bottle of champagne with surprising dexterity from a stammering server, and almost choked when Yuuri grabbed his tie. His pupils were wide, hair mussed over his forehead and terrible suit and tie askew, his cheeks a dusky pink, and Viktor had never seen anyone more beautiful.

“Don't take your eyes off me, Viktor,” he said, his accent changing Viktor's name to something infinitely better.

Viktor swallowed, and nodded. “Never,” he vowed.

It was probably too soon to sell his heart and soul, but the smile he got as Yuuri spun away, upending the bottle (impressively getting most of it into his mouth, but some still soaked his shirt and Viktor felt hot all over in a way he never had before), made it worth everything. He had no real attachment to them, anyway.

“Warm up over, Plisetsky! Now the real dance off begins,” he announced, and Yuri furiously yanked off his tie. “You can judge, Viktor,” he said, looking over his shoulder and giving him a sultry wink. Viktor tore his eyes from where the champagne had soaked his shirt, and made a squeaking sound of assent, ignoring Chris laughing behind him.

Yuuri was the clear winner, much to Yuri's anger, and Viktor started towards Yuuri to say... what? Something suave and seductive, about collecting a reward or celebrating his outright victory, but Yakov caught his shoulder, shaking his head. Chris, whose coach had already retired for the night, sent Viktor a wink before sauntering to Yuuri to put an arm around his hips and whisper something in his ear. Viktor broke his gaze away for a second to glare at Yakov before looking straight back at Yuuri. "*Now* look what you've done."

Yakov made a movement in his periphery—maybe putting a hand to his forehead?—and said, "I'm looking *out* for you..." his voice faded as Yuuri took off his jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt, and Yakov gave him an alarmed look at the strangled noise he made.

"And *Chris* is there!" he said. "I should be there. He obviously likes *me* more than Chris, right, Yakov?" he was probably a little *too* whiny, but Chris was *next* to him. "It's such a waste to leave that champagne on his skin, right? Do you think he'd let me—"

"Stop right there," Yakov said.

Chris pointed to the other side of the room and Yuuri nodded, before catching Viktor staring at him. As they passed him, he stopped to hand Viktor his clothes. Viktor clutched onto them automatically. "Hold these for me?" he asked, and Viktor nodded. "You can judge this one too," he leant closer, and for a heart-stopping moment Viktor thought he was going to kiss him, but instead he dropped back with a smile and followed Chris.

"Yakov."

"No."

"Yakov, I think I'm in love with him."

"No, you're not."

"Okay, maybe not, but I am *so* attracted to him." Yakov sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "When did that pole get there?"

In all honesty, Viktor couldn't have said what happened when Yuuri was pole dancing. All he knew was that he wanted to murder Chris for being able to touch Yuuri, and that Yuuri was beautiful. He watched the way his thighs flexed and imagined them wrapped around his head with a dry mouth, watched the definition of his abs and wondered what it would be like to splay his hand across them with a pounding heart, watched the graceful curve of his neck and envisioned kissing and biting it with a warmth pooling in his chest. All he knew was that he *wanted* Yuuri, like he'd never wanted anything before.

He announced Yuuri as the winner and received a kiss on the cheek for his troubles. Chris laughed good-naturedly, swinging an arm around Viktor as Yuuri took his clothes from Viktor and struggled to put them back on. "You're biased," he said with a grin. "I was obviously the more talented dancer."

Viktor frowned at him, and Yuuri started dancing again, much to the entire crowd's delight. "You danced?" he asked seriously. Chris stared at him. "I remember you holding Yuuri up but —"

"—but you were too busy staring at Yuuri when I did my solo?"

"He's amazing."

"Go dance with him, then," Chris said, butting Viktor with his hip. "He's obviously an admirer of yours."

"Do you think?" He shot a quick look around for Yakov, who must have given up and retreated to his room, and caught sight of Yuri with his camera pointed at Yuuri.

"Go dance with him before someone else does!" Chris shoved him forwards and he stumbled a few steps, watching for a moment before he started mirroring the moves Yuuri was doing. It wasn't any type of dance that he recognised, or at least a mash up of multiple styles, but was strangely pleasing to look at. Or maybe he was staring too hard at where his shirt clung to him.

At a spin, Yuuri saw that Viktor was mirroring his moves and his face lit up excitedly. "You can't judge *this* dance off," he said.

"Then just dance with me," he replied, and Yuuri smiled slowly, changing to a paso doble with a graceful turn.

Yuuri was bright and so achingly *alive* that Viktor felt alive just by being in his presence. Whenever they touched it was like a bolt of lightning striking him all over, static energy passing over his skin and magnetism powerful between them. No matter what happened now, *this* moment, Yuuri dipping him with a hand warm on his thigh, Yuuri leading him in a dance meant for lovers, would stand out like nothing else. This kaleidoscopic memory he would hold onto jealously until the moment of his death. This *feeling*, not quite love but close enough to kid himself, would warm him for the rest of his days.

No, Viktor wasn't quite in love, but he could get there.

After the dance, Yuuri having lost his trousers at some point again, he leapt on him with bright eyes, talking in quick Japanese with his arms tight around Viktor's neck and his hips, oh, his *hips*, grinding against Viktor's shamelessly. Finally, he said, in accented, slurred English that Viktor thought was the most beautiful sound in the world, "be my coach, Viktor!"

Maybe he was falling. It would be worth it, to spend every day with Yuuri until they were irreversibly in love. They were already orbiting each other, mirroring each other with ease. There was a palpable connection, and Viktor wanted it to strengthen.

"Yuuri," he sighed out, with a half laugh, and he managed to extract his arms from Yuuri's hold enough to cup his cheeks and just *stare*. "Maybe I will," he continued.

“Hmm?” Yuuri hummed, tilting his head. “I’m all sticky,” he continued before Viktor could respond, glaring down at his body. He looked back up when Viktor brushed a thumb along his cheek.

“Shall we get you back to your room?” he said, unable to keep the aching fondness out of his voice. Yuuri’s tongue darted out to lick his lips and Viktor’s eyes fixed on the motion.

“Okay,” he said dispassionately. “I think the champagne’s run out anyway. You’ll come too, right?”

“If you want me to,” Viktor answered. If Yuuri had wanted him to give him his custom pink Cadillac at that moment, he would have done it with no question, probably. Yuuri’s hands settled on his hips and he leant his head onto Viktor’s shoulder with a sigh.

“I admire you so much, Viktor,” he said slowly, drawing out the words.

Something in Viktor warmed at the words, and he wondered for a minute if he was blushing. “I admire you too, Yuuri.”

“You’re so beautiful.”

Viktor stopped breathing, and stared down at the dark hair where Yuuri was still nestled up to him. He’d been called beautiful a thousand times, by the press, by the public, even by lovers. It had been shouted across social media and whispered against his skin, and every time he smiled. Every time, he either repeated the sentiment or thanked them. He knew, on an objective level, that he *was* beautiful, but when Yuuri said it he could almost believe it. It almost felt like Yuuri was saying it to *him*, rather than to the image he projected. He buried his face in Yuuri’s dark hair, tightened his arms around his body, only able to whisper his name.

“I think you’ve probably had enough of tonight, Yuuri,” Viktor heard from outside the bubble that had swiftly become his whole world. Both Viktor and Yuuri looked up in the direction of the voice, where Yuuri’s coach was awkwardly holding his trousers and eyeing Yuuri as if he wasn’t entirely sure at whom he was looking.

“I can take him back to his room,” Viktor said, and Celestino’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “I won’t...!” he trailed off, taking a breath. “I won’t try anything on him, don’t worry. I know he’s drunk. I just want to spend more time with him,” he said, hoping Celestino would trust him enough.

Celestino eyed him carefully, before nodding and handing him Yuuri’s trousers and a key card. “Floor three, room twenty.” Yuuri beamed up at Viktor and followed him, curling up into his side as soon as Viktor got them onto the elevator. Viktor fixed his gaze ahead, because it was hard enough with Yuuri’s warmth against him and his hands settled at Viktor’s hip, agony when Yuuri pressed his lips to Viktor’s neck.

“*Yuuri*,” he insisted. “I promised Celestino, and you’re not making it easy.”

“What, am I making it *hard*?” Yuuri said, laughing when Viktor covered his face with his hands. At least they were alone in the elevator. He turned to press his forehead against Yuuri’s, tried not to notice when his eyes darkened and how he shifted his hips forward because it would drive him crazy.

“We’re not doing this tonight,” he said.

“Another night, then?”

“Probably the next time I see you when we’re both sober.”

Yuuri laughed. “Deal.” Viktor pressed a kiss to his forehead as the elevator door opened, and kept hold of his arm as he stumbled down the corridor.

“When will that be?” Viktor mused out loud, finding the door to Yuuri’s room and opening it for him. He walked past, immediately dropping down onto the bed. “Tomorrow?” Viktor flipped the light on, leaning back against the closed door as Yuuri shot him a flirtatious smile over his shoulder. “Or will it be at the World Championships?”

Yuuri pulled a face. “What makes you think I’ll even qualify for that?”

“You qualified for the Grand Prix final. That’s more prestigious.”

Yuuri looked up at the ceiling and let out a long sigh.

“Your short programme was good. What happened?” When Yuuri didn’t reply he stepped forwards to sit on the edge of the bed beside him. “Yuuri?”

“Got a call. From... from my sister. Yesterday. My dog died yesterday during the night. Aneurysm. I haven’t seen him since I left Japan four... five years ago.”

No wonder, then. Yuuri shut his eyes, swaying a little before his arms gave out and he fell back. Viktor could see tears at the corners of his eyes, although they didn’t fall. “Then it’s amazing that you skated anyway. I know how important pets are. Since I was twelve, Makkachin—my poodle—has been my closest companion.” He brushed the back of Yuuri’s hand with his fingers. “You’re so strong, Yuuri.”

“I want to be stronger,” he vowed, in a quiet voice.

“Meet me at the World Championships,” Viktor replied. “Beat me, because I know you can.” Yuuri stared at him, and Viktor swallowed against the lump in his throat. “And when we’re there, let’s go out on a date.”

“A... date.”

“Whatever you like. Here, I’ll leave you my number, and you can call me tomorrow, or when you get back to the US or whatever.” He leapt off the bed to the small pad and pen beside the telephone and wrote down his number. “Okay?”

“Hmm. Okay,” Yuuri slurred, and when Viktor turned back, his eyes were shut and he was breathing evenly.

“Okay,” Viktor repeated, brushing back his fringe to press another kiss to his forehead, before removing his glasses and putting them on the bedside table, and pulling one of the comforters over his body.

(He waited with not much patience for a phone call that never came, and watched the Japanese Nationals and Four Continents with a sinking heart. He could attribute some of the attraction he’d felt to the alcohol, but not how *alive* he’d felt, and how empty he felt now in comparison. He’d assumed that everyone felt that longing for something *more*, but maybe not, because he had felt like he had everything he needed when he danced with Yuuri, and when Yuuri had been beside him.

And so, it was easy to leave Russia and St Petersburg when Yuuri skated his routine, because he’d proved to Viktor again that he *deserved* gold, as well as given Viktor an excuse to leave competing, but not leave the ice. He said goodbye to Yakov, hugged him hard and tight at the airport, ignoring his raging, because Viktor knew underneath all the blustering that Yakov loved him like a son, and Viktor *knew* that this was the best thing he could do for himself.)

Viktor was twenty-seven, hopelessly in love, and his heart was mending as fast as Yuuri had broken it.

Although he’d never regain the same passion for competing he’d had as a child, Yuuri’s (and Yurio’s) passion and dedication had titillated him enough that another season, to truly bid such a massive part of his life farewell, was what he wanted. He wanted to share the podium with Yuuri, wanted to push him until the world couldn’t deny his incredible beauty and strength, until *Yuuri* couldn’t deny his incredible beauty and strength.

Now, Yuuri’s eyes were soft as he gazed out of the window over Barcelona. Their bare legs were tangled together under the sheets and he shivered lightly at Viktor’s touch whenever his wandering hands passed over a sensitive area.

“We’ll live in St Petersburg, then?” Yuuri finally said, continuing the conversation they’d half-finished before Yuuri had cursed under his breath and kissed Viktor instead.

“I need Yakov, really, if I’m going to be competing,” Viktor said. Yuuri tilted his head back as Viktor ran a thumb over the silvery stretch marks that decorated the insides of his thighs. “Are you going to pin me to the bed again?” he asked in delight.

“No,” Yuuri muttered. Viktor gently nudged Yuuri’s temple with his forehead. “We still have to get ready for the banquet.” His voice was regretful, and he twined their right hands together so that the rings gave a muted *chink* in the serenity of the room. “As much as I hate to tell you to put clothes back on after I took so much care in removing them.”

“There’s always after the banquet,” Viktor appeased, punctuating it with a kiss under his ear. “And tomorrow morning.” A gentle nip to the jut of his collarbone. “And on the plane ride back home,” he joked, loving the sound of the breathless laugh Yuuri gave, and leaving an open-mouthed kiss at the point of his pelvis.

“Vitya,” he said, a slight warning in his voice, although his hand still went to Viktor’s head to tug lightly at the strands. Viktor looked up at him, the length of his body that was so graceful and beautiful on and off the ice, his dark eyes that were watching Viktor with so much affection, his lips slightly redder than usual from the amount of times they’d been kissed in the past hour. Speaking of...

He surged up to kiss him, settling into the cradle of his arms and legs and carding his fingers through his hair. Any inch of space between them was detestable, and from the desperate, tight squeeze of Yuuri’s arms around his back he felt the same.

“We have to get to the banquet,” he told Yuuri, only pulling away the millimetre necessary the time it took to say the words.

Yuuri hummed, playing his fingers down Viktor’s spine and smiling when he shivered at the touch. “If *anyone* can be late, it’s you.”

“Yakov would kill me.”

“I can protect you.”

Viktor laughed, certainly not doubting the truth of *that*, and Yuuri flipped them over, pressing burning kisses to his throat. “We haven’t left the bed for over two hours.”

“So? We just got *engaged*.”

“Excellent point.” He let Yuuri work at him a little longer, feeling himself melt at the onslaught of sensation. “You’re right, of course. I’m a living legend. Certainly they’ll wait for me to start the banquet,” he lamented, and Yuuri laughed against his chest.

(They arrived only thirty minutes late, which no one but Yurio and Yakov found suspicious. Viktor got silver at Russian Nationals, and didn’t have to force a smile quite so hard on the podium, although he missed Yuuri with an intensity that would never cease to surprise him. Yuuri got gold at the Japanese Nationals, and another gold at the Four Continents, as Viktor reclaimed his title as European gold medallist, and again at Worlds, with Yuuri at his right hand side and Chris at his left. Both Yuuri and Viktor were chosen for their respective countries’ Olympic teams, and both withdrew from the Grand Prix to focus their attentions. It was well-planned, as Yuuri broke his own record for the free skate and won gold against Viktor. Viktor had never felt so alive as when he looked at Yuuri from his place as second on the podium, and took his hand to press a kiss to the ring that would forever, now, remain on his finger. Yuuri’s eyes hardly strayed from him, and when he pulled Viktor in for a searing kiss on the podium Viktor figured it would be one of the most iconic pictures of any Olympics, they would live on forever at the top of the world.

“Come on, you two,” Phichit said, batting at their arms with a laugh from his place as bronze medallist. “You can be sappy later. First, we need selfies!” It was so endearingly Phichit that Viktor didn’t begrudge him for pulling them apart, although he couldn’t help kissing Yuuri’s cheek as Phichit took the picture.

When they were back in St Petersburg, Viktor added their gold and silver medals to the collection. “I think it’s time I retire,” he said to Yuuri.

Yuuri looked at him from where he was curled up on the sofa with Makkachin, and gently pulled away to join Viktor, pressing their foreheads together. “Thank you for agreeing to continue in the first place. I know it was hard.”

Viktor pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. “I needed it, I think. I needed a chance to love competing again for the time it took me to properly say goodbye. It had become so unbearably empty before you. Now I can retire without any regrets.”

Yuuri eyed the impressive collection of medals. “So we can get married, now.”

Viktor bit down on his lower lip, and thought about how, right now, he was at the top of the world in a way he’d never been before. “There’s something else I need to do before we can. And I’ll need you with me for it.” Yuuri furrowed his brow, looking at him questioningly, before nodding.

“Anything.”

Yuuri didn’t ask any questions as Viktor booked the plane tickets to Khabarovsk, not even complaining when they were both first class. He packed quietly, and went with Viktor to drop Makkachin off at Yakov’s, kept a comforting hold of his hand as he dozed off on his shoulder on the plane. Viktor woke him with a kiss as they landed, feeling his chest fill with warmth when Yuuri smiled and sighed out his name. He followed a step behind Viktor as he navigated the half-familiar streets, the memories slightly faded with time, but he found the ice rink where he learnt with a sensation like he was punched in the gut. Yuuri watched him as Viktor’s hand tightened around his, rubbing a soothing thumb over his knuckles as they went down through the streets he’d run through a thousand times when he was a child in his haste to get to the rink. Finally, he saw the lake, frozen over in its undulations, and stopped in front of a small house.

Yakov had told him she still lived here a few months prior, and Viktor had tried to push down on the shame and guilt of having not spoken to her for probably over five years, and hardly even thought of her. He squeezed Yuuri’s hand tightly. “Wait here for a moment?” Yuuri nodded, not taking his eyes off him as he made his way down the cobbled path and twisted his ring around for courage before knocking at the door.

She answered in a few seconds with a greeting, and her eyes, the exact same as Viktor’s, went wide.

“Viten’ka,” she breathed out, her hand clutching at the doorframe.

She was still as beautiful as she had been in his memories, and startlingly young. She'd been barely seventeen when she'd had him, after all.

"Mama," he answered, making an aborted movement forward, but not sure whether he *could* hug her. It had been so long, twenty years, since they'd seen each other last. Tears sprung to her eyes, and she chose for him, pulling him into her arms with a strength that surprised him. "I only just got to the top of the world," he said in explanation.

"I know," she replied. "I noticed. I'm glad you finally found what you needed." She pulled away to cup his cheek and brush away a few errant tears. "Come on," she continued with a laugh. "Don't leave your fiancé standing in the cold."

It was easier than he thought it would be, settling back into what had been his first home, he and his mother taking Yuuri to the lake where he'd first learnt to skate and to the rink to see Anton, still alive, though fully retired. When they were contentedly curled up in Viktor's old single bed the night before they were due to leave, Yuuri tracing patterns on his skin, Yuuri said softly, "I'm glad you let me in, Vitya."

"I knew she'd be able to tell that I wasn't happy," Viktor said in reply. "So I stopped contacting her and ignored her calls until she gave up. She'd given me so much so I could get to where I was, and I didn't want her to think that it had been a mistake."

"Was it?" he asked.

"No," Viktor replied honestly. "It couldn't have been, if it led me to you.")

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