

Human on the Inside

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Human on the Inside

by [louciferish](#)

Summary

Phichit: Oh boy, we have a lot to talk about.

A Yuri!!! on Ice Superhero AU

Notes

Much gratitude to [Shadhahvar](#) for picking through and pointing out my flaws.

The end approaches. Also some plot.

Outer Dark

Yuuri wakes to warmth, bathed in sunlight and draped in soft white sheets. He sees his phone lying face down on the bedside table and tilts the screen towards himself to check the time. It's later than he normally sleeps, but lethargy lays heavy over his body and he feels no urge to rush out of bed. He notices the alert light is blinking at him insistently. It's probably just Phichit live texting him episodes of Queer Eye again, but he'll need to check it soon. No rest for the weary.

He rolls onto his back and props himself up on his elbows. Victor is still asleep next to him, and has kicked all the covers on his side down to the bottom of the bed. He lays unselfconsciously exposed, curled on his side away from Yuuri with one hand clutching the pillow. It's tempting to touch all the smooth skin laid out before him, to stroke from the shoulder all the way down to the dip at the base of his spine, but he doesn't want to wake him up. It may be a late start for Yuuri's day, but it's still early for Victor.

He slips out from under the sheets carefully and tries to avoid jostling the soft mattress too much as he rises, grabbing his phone on his way out the door. Victor's eyelashes don't even flutter, so he slinks out the door in search of a toilet.

The rooms are so well insulated compared to his place. The bedroom was silent, but from the hallway he can already hear music flowing from the Master bedroom at the end of the hall. Unless Lynx uses numetal as a lullaby, the teenager must already be awake. Yuuri shakes his head to himself, smiling. Of course Victor sleeps later than a teenage boy. Somehow, that makes perfect sense.

Yuuri steps a little quicker to get to the bathroom. He barely knows Lynx, so he's definitely not ready for the kid to see him in his boxers.

He pulls the bathroom door closed behind him, glancing around for the first time in daylight. Much like downstairs, the bathroom could be described as sterile. It's clean, everything gleaming white and perfect - no products on the counter, no medications in the cabinet.

He splashes some water on his face, rinsing the sleep from his eyes. He meets his own eyes in the mirror. He looks a bit sleepy still, but there's no dark circles or bags under his eyes anymore. He straightens, turning side to side. There are the usual scars, like familiar friends, but the bruises are all yellowed and fading aside from... a couple very purple ones on his neck and collar. He flushes. Well, they'll both be under the neckline of his work shirts at least.

He takes care of the much-needed shower and his usual morning business, then grabs his phone while he towels off his hair. Five text messages from Phichit, that he expected, but three missed calls as well? He drops his towel on the floor, opening the texts.

Phichit: Call me back

Phichit: What are you doing that you aren't answering your phone?

Phichit: Oh boy we have a lot to talk about

Phichit: I hope you're busy for the reasons I think

Phichit: Serious though, call me back AS SOON AS YOU GET THIS.

The first texts are from the wee hours of the morning, but the last one is only from an hour ago. Phichit must not have gotten much sleep. He pulls up the call log and presses dial.

Phichit picks up on the first ring and skips the hellos in favor of, "First of all, where are you, *right now?*"

Yuuri looks around, smiling, "The bathroom?"

"You know what I mean!" Phichit isn't going to let him get away with playing coy. "Come on, you owe me more than that after ignoring me all night."

Yuuri shakes his head. He's not sure how Phichit managed to figure this out, but if it turns out he has a new super sense that tells him who got laid, Yuuri would not be surprised. "I'm in Aura's guest bath," he finally mutters. Then he holds the phone away from his ear as Phichit lets out a high-pitched squeal.

Once the squeaking tapers off, he brings the phone back. "Okay, but how the hell did you know?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, you had the good news, which is that," Phichit pauses for a breath and singsongs, "Night Owl and Aura, sitting in a tree, F-U-C-K-"

"Uh-huh." Yuuri interrupts, hiding his smile behind his hand out of reflex. "I know. I was there, I think. Although if he wasn't in the bed in the other room still I might think my fantasy life just got out of hand."

"Okay, first of all, that is adorable. And I hate to rain on the parade here, but there is also some bad news." There's a pause. "I'm just going to say this quickly and get it over with. There are pictures on all the local news sites. Pictures of you and Aura. Kissing."

The line goes silent for a long minute. Yuuri waits it out a while, then tentatively asks, "Is that all?"

"IS THAT ALL?"

He pulls the phone away from his ear again, wincing. Someday maybe Phichit will learn to control the volume of his voice better. "Yeah, I know. It's just... the papers take pictures of Aura a lot? I knew that. I kind of expected they'd catch up to us eventually."

"Eventually?" Phichit sounds more than a little shocky. Yuuri is wishing he could see his face about now. It takes a lot to really surprise his friend. "Exactly how much have you been making out with Aura in public? How did you *not tell me*? How are *you* not freaked out by this?"

Yuuri feels his face flush. He wouldn't call it 'making out'. It's not his fault Aura is surprisingly affectionate, even when they're out on patrols. They haven't exactly been subtle, and he knew that. After all, they're two guys in costumes, one of whom glows, and they may have exchanged a few celebratory cuddles after some fights.

"I got kind of caught up in things," he admits. "And it's not like we've been dramatically hooking up in alleys with the bodies of our enemies all around us." That's mostly true. Some superhero cliches exist for a reason. He looks in the mirror, and the tips of his ears are bright red. "But I did think there was a chance we'd see tabloid headlines about Night Owl and Aura being spotted working together a bunch, even if they didn't catch anything scandalous. We've been patrolling together for over a month."

Yuuri figures the silence on the line is just Phichit processing the idea that he's not only dating Aura, but kissing him in public. He's the first to admit it's a lot to wrap your head around. He still has some trouble with it sometimes.

"Well, it's not exactly what you think," Phichit says at last, his voice calm and serious. "The photo is of you, as in Yuuri Katsuki, not Night Owl. They've even printed your name in the article."

Yuuri leans against the bathroom counter for support as that sinks into his head. His eyes are wide in the mirror. All he can say is, "Oh."

"Right now all they have is your name," Phichit continues, voice wavering with hesitation. "But I read the comments. A few people are noticing... Well, you don't have a mask on, but you are in costume. The photographer obviously didn't realize what they actually caught at the time, or it would already say something about Night Owl, but--"

Yuuri groans, sinking down to rest his forehead against the cool quartz of the countertop. "But it's only a matter of time now that the photo is out."

"Yeah," Phichit admits. "I think you're about to come out in a big way. I'm so sorry. I tried to tell you right away, because I thought maybe we could nip it early. I even called my agent, but since you don't have your own agent, she says you really don't have any protection on your image."

"No, I get it." Yuuri sighs into the phone. "Thank you for telling me. It's just... shit, my family." He closes his eyes tightly as it all comes home to roost. He's going to have to call home soon, or else his parents will find out everything from reporters and the internet, or worse, when an enemy turns up at their door. His empty hand clenches on the counter.

"Yuuri," Phichit says, familiar voice soothing in his ear. "Are you okay right now? Do you need me to come get you?"

Yuuri licks his lips, swallowing the lump in his throat to keep his voice from catching and giving him away. "I'm fine," he says. "Don't worry. I can get home."

"Okay," Phichit says skeptically. "But call me if you need anything, or if you change your mind."

“I will,” Yuuri says. “Thank you for telling me.” As soon as he disconnects the call and can set the phone down, he covers his face with both hands, barely muffling his long groan.

BAM! Something collides with the bathroom door.

“Whatever gross crap you’re doing in there, you’d better stop,” Lynx yells through the closed door. “This is what you have a bedroom for, you asshole! Keep it to your own room.”

Yuuri straightens up and opens the door just wide enough to poke his head out. “Sorry, it’s just me. I’ll get out if you need to use the bathroom.”

Lynx goes pale, wide green eyes fixed his face, and Yuuri suddenly realizes this is his first time talking to the kid without a mask between them. Well, everyone is going to know soon enough anyway. He might as well go all the way.

He swings the door open wide, watching as Lynx’s eyes scan his exposed chest and stomach. Every scar, bruise, and love bite he knows he’s put on display seems to sear into his skin all over again as Lynx examines them.

The little blond looks like he’s been struck. “It’s fine,” he says, quickly turning his face away. His hair isn’t quite long enough to cover his blush. “I have my own bathroom anyway,” he mutters, then turns and faux-casually slinks back into the Master suite.

Yuuri gathers his phone back up and returns to Victor’s bedroom. The other man is still sleeping, and the soft sunlight highlights his unblemished skin and lures Yuuri in. He steps closer to the bed, admiring the elegant line of Victor’s neck. Unlike Yuuri, he can’t be marked by love or violence. Yuuri fingers one of the bruises near his own throat absently. He’ll be wearing Victor’s mark for days, covering it with concealer as it fades, yet Victor’s body has already erased any trace that Yuuri was ever there.

He forces himself to step back. He has to get home, needs to call his family before they learn from someone else, and with the time zone difference it will soon be too late for anyone to be up answering the phone. It’s not the kind of message he wants to leave on voicemail.

He locates his backpack slumped in a chair in the corner. His clothes from the night before are scattered across the floor like autumn leaves, so he gathers them piece by piece. The underwear he finds last, crumpled into a ball on Victor’s side of the bed.

Once everything is located, he pulls the cargo pants from his costume back on commando, and fishes a clean shirt out of his backpack, along with his spare glasses. It’s a good thing there’s no mirror in this room, since he probably looks like he just arrived from some IT support company to fix Victor’s computer. That sounds like the beginning of a very bad porn.

He hears the mattress springs protest quietly and looks back over his shoulder to find Victor staring blatantly at his butt, his blue eyes slitted and drowsy. “Mmm, good morning,” the other man purrs and stretches, all that lean muscle and soft skin on proud display in the sunlight. “What time’s it?”

“Nearly nine-thirty,” Yuuri says, eyes inexorably drawn to the shadowy hollow of Victor’s hip in contrast with the dust of pale hairs along his upper thigh.

“It’s early,” Victor’s smile widens to an utterly shameless grin. “Why are you wearing clothes? Come back to bed.” He flops onto his back, splaying his legs out shamelessly. Yuuri would fit perfectly, right there.

He hesitates, caught between the edge of the bed and whatever is outside the front door. He’s not sure where his life will go from this moment, and he knows he should tell Victor about the photos, but if everything is falling apart he wants to have this morning, just like this. “Something came up,” he says instead. “I need to go take care of some errands.”

“Stay, and I can fly you home later.” Victor’s hand strokes down his chest, and then trails across his stomach and beyond, elegant fingers tracing the glimmering dust of white hairs below his navel. “I promise I can be nearly as quick as Chris with the right motivation.”

“Sorry, I already called a cab,” Yuuri lies, turning around to zip his bag just to get his eyes on something besides Victor. He knows it’s irrational to be irritated when Victor doesn’t know what’s going on, but he can’t help the spark of annoyance that he won’t just accept that Yuuri is leaving. He just wanted a quiet goodbye, knowing it might be their last for a while.

“Okay,” Victor says, finally picking up on the hint. “Well, if you must leave, then I guess you must. Have a good day?”

Yuuri nods and grabs his bag. As he’s walking out, he thinks he hears Victor make some last teasing remark, but he’s too distracted by his phone as he jogs down the stairs to hear what was said.

He has to wait at the bottom of the driveway for twenty minutes before Phichit pulls up to drive him home, and he feels like the security guard in the gatehouse has been giving him a dirty look the entire time. Yuuri’s never done a walk of shame before, but for once Phichit restrains himself from making any lewd comments, just ruffles his hair and cranks the music to distract him as they drive back to Yuuri’s place. The movement of the car does nothing to settle the roil of his stomach that began the minute he left Victor’s room, and he has to roll down the window for some fresh air, closing his eyes as he faces into the wind.

“Call me if you need *anything*,” Phichit repeats as Yuuri climbs out of the car outside his building. “I mean it. Whatever I can do to help out; you know I will.”

“I know,” Yuuri says, forcing a small smile. “Thanks for picking me up.”

Phichit props his arm up in the window and winks at him. “I hope to be your chauffeur for every drive of shame. You don’t even need to pay me, except in details.”

Yuuri groans, “Good *bye*, Phichit.”

With a wave, his friend drives off, leaving Yuuri standing on the cracked sidewalk with nothing but his backpack and the sound of sirens fading into the distance.

He trudges up the stairs to his floor, but pauses to listen in front of the Nishigoris' apartment. All he hears is the usual clamor of children's music and toys, some indistinct voices, and what sounds like dishes being washed. He lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding and moves along to unlock the door to his apartment.

Everything is normal here, too. The room is cold, the window carelessly left open overnight, but nothing seems to be out of place. He's not certain what else he expected - his room already tossed by paid thugs? According to Phichit, people are only *barely* putting together the puzzle pieces of his identity now. He should have some time to do... whatever it is he needs to be doing now.

He drops his backpack on the sofa. There are neglected dishes stacked on the coffee table, and the laundry bin in his closet is already full again. At some point in all this, he'll have to do the mundane chores required by having a space of his own.

But first, he needs to call home.

He perches on the edge of his bed, grabbing a pillow to hold onto in case he needs something to tear at or squeeze. There's a running theme to his life right now. It involves bandages and ripping things apart. He still has the number for the front desk memorized from practicing it with Mari in the kitchen, to know just in case he got lost.

The phone rings twice, and then Mari picks up. "Moshi moshi," she answers. "Yu-Topia hot springs."

"Hi, Mari," Yuuri says. Despite the circumstances of the call, a smile pulls at his lips. It feels like a long time since he's heard her voice. "It's Yuuri. Is Mama nearby?"

"What?" Mari promptly drops her customer service voice to scold him. "You call home after all this time and just disregard me? Not even the courtesy to ask your big sister how she's been first?"

"Mari, please," he says, exasperated. "It's really important that I speak to Mama. I promise to catch up with you later."

"That's what you always say," Mari grumbles. "She's in the kitchen, so I'll have to go get her, but you owe me some respect next time."

"Thanks, Mari." The line goes quiet, and he waits. The silence only escalates the tense, sour feeling building in his stomach and chilling his skin. By the time he hears shuffling on the other end of the phone, he can feel his hands start to tremble.

"Yuuri," his mother's voice is joyful and excited as ever. "It's so good to hear from you. Mari says you have important news; are you finally going back to school?"

Yuuri winces like someone jabbed directly at an old wound. "Not yet, Mama," he says, as always. "I'm still working on that. This is something new."

His mother says nothing, waiting. Yuuri takes a deep breath to gather himself and squares his shoulders. “Back then I told you I quit school because of what was happening with Yuuko’s pregnancy and such, but... actually there’s something else that made me drop out.”

He buries his hands in his hair, pulling his knees up to his chest for comfort. “I don’t really know how to say this,” he admits. “I’ve kept secrets from you, Mama, and now you’re going to find out whether I’m ready for this or not. I want to tell you myself before someone else can, but I’m not sure how to begin.” His tongue feels too thick for his mouth, and he stops, swallowing. He holds a hand out in front of him and watches as it trembles.

“Yuuri,” Mama interrupts. “Sweetie, we already know.”

Yuuri nearly drops the phone. “WHAT? Do you have a Google alert on my name or something?”

“I have no idea what that is,” she says brightly. “But really, Yuuri, it was one thing when you were a little boy, but then you were sixteen and your bedroom was still covered with photos of another man. Your Papa and I have known that you’re gay for a long, long time now.”

“Mama,” Yuuri groans, collapsing back onto the bed. “No.” The corner of one of the Aura posters still on his closet door catches his eye, and he feels his face catch fire. “I mean, yes,” he admits. “That isn’t really what I was calling to say, but um... I am seeing someone.”

He pulls the phone away from the ear as her high-pitched shriek echoes from the tiny speaker. Someday he’ll wind up stuck in a room with Phichit and his mother at the same time, or worse, Phichit, his mother, and Minako-sensei, and he’ll wind up completely deaf by the end of it.

When she quiets down, he brings the phone back into place. “Yuuri,” she draws his name out, almost cooing. “I’m so happy you found someone! Please tell me about my future son in law.”

“Mama, please. I promise I will, but that wasn’t my important news. I still need to get through that part first.” He closes his eyes. He thought he’d be done with this part of the conversation by now when he practiced it in his head on the way home. He should know better than to expect an easy path when family is involved.

“Okay,” his mother says, as solemnly as she can manage. “Tell me what news you have that is more important than my future son in law.”

He licks his lips and looks up at the ceiling, focusing on a pale brownish stain to try to give himself some emotional distance from the conversation. “I had to quit school when I started working because I was also doing something else with my time.” He pauses to clear the lump from his throat again. “I don’t know what else to do, so I’m just going to say it: Mama, I’m a vigilante. I’m Night Owl.”

He waits. His mother says nothing for a moment. “Oh, was that the news?” she asks “We knew that too.”

Yuuri flops over, presses his face into his pillow, and screams. Next to him, his mother is still talking loudly enough he can hear her clearly without the speakerphone. “All those posters as a kid, and then all those classes? Gymnastics, ballet, judo, akido, kickboxing,” Yuuri can almost hear her rolling her eyes at the list. “Plus the school clubs and other sports. Then, you move to the states, and a few months later this Night Owl shows up. Honestly, Yuuri, people aren’t foolish. If you ever came home to visit, you would know this.”

He rolls over and picks the phone up again, resting his hand over his face. “Yuuko was right. There are no secrets in Hasetsu.”

“None,” his Mama chirps in agreement.

“There are pictures on the internet,” he tells her, trying to sound serious in the face of her unflappability. “In a few hours, it’s likely the whole world will know that I’m a superhero, *and* that I’m dating Aura.”

“Aura?” Mama claps her hands with glee. “Oh, my son in law is so good-looking, and rich too!” She swaps back to gentle scolding quick enough to give him whiplash. “He’s too skinny, though, Yuuri. Bring him home soon so we can feed the boy. I’ll make all your favorites for him.”

“Okay, Mama,” Yuuri says, blushing. “I’ll ask him, but these photos are still serious. I’m worried about you guys. If my enemies find out who I am, they could come looking for you. I need you to find somewhere safe you can hide for a little while.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Mama says dismissively. “Hasetsu has a mech suit for protection now.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“Mari and Minako have been piloting it,” she continues, oblivious to his confusion. “You’d know that if you called home more often.” There’s a commotion on her end of the line, then a muffled crash. “Are you done for now, Yuuri? I’ve left your Papa alone with the guests too long, and I think he had some drinks.”

“Sure,” Yuuri says, feeling utterly exhausted. “If you’re really sure that you’re not worried about safety?”

“I told you, we’re fine,” she assures him. “You tell my beautiful son in law that we all said hello, okay?”

“Yes, Mama,” Yuuri says reflexively. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

He ends the call, jams his face the pillow on top of his face, and yells into it until he runs out of breath.

Yuuri is still worried about his family, but they certainly seem to think they’re safe enough, and there’s nothing he can do to force them into hiding from the other side of the world. Closer to home, he doesn’t have many people to worry over. Phichit and Victor can look after

themselves, so that only leaves Yuuko and Takeshi at risk. He pulls the pillow off his head and stares back up at his friend the ceiling water stain. To plan a next step, he's going to need to know what, exactly, the world is seeing.

He pulls up the most recent Google alert he has set for Aura's name on his phone. The top story proclaims, "AURA'S TRYST WITH SECRET LOVER". Classy. He opens the article.

There's only one photo, buried halfway through the article amidst the usual fluff about Aura's past rumored relationships and a bunch of advertisements for bandages and diapers. Phichit tried to warn him, and he was right, the picture is not what Yuuri thought it would be.

The photo isn't just a kiss, it's unmistakably their *first* kiss. They're on the fire escape, right outside his apartment. Aura is glowly softly as he leans into Yuuri's space, while Yuuri's dark clothes leave him mostly concealed, fading into the night aside from the pale half-moon of his face and his hands on Victor's waist. Underneath the picture, the article continues, *Superhero Aura captured on camera with new boytoy Yuuri Katsuki. Originally from Japan, Katsuki seems to have moved to the US to study-*. He closes the window. Reading more is just likely to upset him.

The press and the world at large will soon have anything they can get on Yuuri Katsuki: his family, his background, and obviously his address as well given that his apartment building is right there in the picture. And then, they'll realize that he's Night Owl, and that they have *Night Owl's* home address.

Like lightning it strikes him that Yuuko is going to have to leave. He lived with Yuuko and Takeshi for over a year, moved here with them, and now they're still neighbors. They're quite literally the closest targets to him that an enemy could locate, and if they stay here they'll certainly be in danger of harassment, or worse.

He hops up from the bed and goes out to knock on Yuuko's door, but it's Takeshi who sticks his head into the hallway, still half-dressed in his mechanic's jumpsuit and a white t-shirt. He blinks in surprise when he sees Yuuri.

"Hey," Yuuri shifts his weight nervously. "Um, is Yuuko home?" He was really hoping for Yuuko. It would be a lot easier to deal with this situation if he had the one person who already knows all his secrets here for support.

"No, she just left for her shift at the hospital a little while ago." Takeshi leans in the doorframe. "What's up?"

Well, here goes three years of carefully kept secrets, right down the trash chute. "Can I come in for a minute?"

Takeshi moves back out of the way and allows Yuuri to brush past him. He can't handle having this whole conversation again. Instead, he holds up a finger as he pulls out his phone, bringing up the news article again. There's still no sign that it's updated with new information yet. He scrolls down to the photo and then hands over the phone.

Takeshi looks at the photo, then tries to offer the phone back. “Congratulations?” he says, sounding confused. “But we already went over this a couple weeks ago. I didn’t need physical evidence.”

“I wouldn’t normally say this,” Yuuri says, gripping the kitchen counter just to have something to do with his hands. “But you should read the comments on the article.”

The other man shrugs and takes the phone back, then starts scrolling through. A crease begins to form in his forehead, and the frown only deepens the longer he reads. “I don’t get it,” he admits after a moment. “Some of these people think you’re secretly Night Owl, apparently just because you’re wearing black clothes?”

Yuuri covers his face with his hands. Yuuko was wrong. His friend is an idiot. “I *am* secretly Night Owl,” he says unequivocally. “They’re right. I don’t know how anyone got close enough to get this photo, but I guess there’s a lot you can do with zoom and some Photoshop skills these days.”

When Yuuri looks back up at him, Takeshi’s gone white as a sheet, his eyes blown wide. “Wait, you’re *what*?”

“Yeah, surprise, I guess,” he says weakly, reaching over to take his phone back before it gets dropped *again*. “I didn’t expect you to find out this way. I definitely didn’t expect the entire planet to find out this way, but there’s no putting it back in the box now.”

“Oh my god,” Takeshi sort of falls sideways, leaning up against the fridge. “Holy shit,” he breathes.

He’s a lot more shaken than Yuuri expected him to be. This was supposed to be the easier conversation, but now Yuuri is getting nervous again too.

Yuuri takes a shaky breath and puts his hand on Takeshi’s shoulder. “I know this whole situation is my fault. If I wasn’t so stubborn about this stupid idea, or if I’d told you earlier... But I’ll find you guys somewhere safe to go until everything calms down, okay? I’m going to protect you. Why don’t you go call Yuuko and start getting the girls ready while I find a place.”

Takeshi just nods, still looking pretty unsteady, but after a second he trudges toward the nursery, so presumably he’s handling things.

Yuuri pulls up Phichit’s contact on his phone again and hits dial. Phichit picks up right away, and Yuuri explains what he told Takeshi. “Can they lay low with you for a few days, please Phichit?”

The line is uncharacteristically silent, then finally Phichit says, “I’m sorry, Yuuri, but no. I wish I could help, but you know my place isn’t that big. You’re welcome to come here if you need to get out, but two adults and three babies? Where would I put them all?”

Yuuri sighs, rubbing at an incipient headache. “I know, I know, but they can’t stay here; it’s too dangerous. I don’t know who else to call.”

“I’m flattered you thought of me,” Phichit says, amusement creeping into his voice. “But don’t you have a boyfriend who lives in a giant mansion now? I bet Aura has a ton of extra space in his house for the kids to run around in. It’s probably already childproofed for Lynx.”

“I don’t want to impose,” Yuuri begins, but Phichit cuts him off.

“That man clearly wants you to impose all over him, *please*.” Yuuri can almost hear him rolling his eyes. “Call your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my-,” but Phichit has already hung up.

Yuuri pulls up Victor’s information in his phone, still grumbling to himself about Phichit. He pauses with his thumb hovering over the dial button. He hates to ask for help. Maybe the Nishisoris will be fine if he just finds them a decent hotel. He could scrape together the money for a night or two if he pawned a couple things. He doesn’t really need to own a TV.

Then he watches as Takeshi scurries out of the nursery, already weighed down with two bright purple suitcases and a Hello Kitty diaper bag, his phone jammed awkwardly between his shoulder and his ear. The logical part of his brain pushes back against his instincts, reminding him that there is probably nowhere in the world that could be safer than Aura’s house. Phichit’s advice *makes sense*, no matter how Yuuri feels about it.

He presses dial. It takes a couple rings, but then Victor picks up, chirping, “Yuuri, do you miss me already?”

He closes his eyes and starts, again, at the beginning.

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“You’re *sure* this is where Aura wanted to meet us?” Takeshi asks for the third time in twenty minutes.

Yuuri leans forward, resting his forehead against the warm plastic dashboard of the minivan. “Yes, I’m sure,” he reiterates. “We just need to be patient. He’ll be here.” He doesn’t really blame Takeshi for being impatient, though. They had to drive nearly an hour outside the city limits just to get here, and now they’ve been waiting for a while. Yuuko is trying to entertain the girls in their car seats, but it’s hard to make toddlers stay still for so long, and the fussing is getting louder.

They’re pulled onto the side of the road by an empty field, and Yuuri is about to suggest they all just get out and walk around for a bit when he hears the hum of a car approaching. He cranes his neck back to look and his mouth drops open as the bright pink Cadillac comes hurtling at them.

“Hang on a minute,” he tells Takeshi, and hops out of the passenger’s seat, walking through the field to get to the street and the car currently pulling to a stop behind them.

“I thought we were meeting you out here to be stealthy,” Yuuri says, blatantly eying the pink car.

Victor’s wide smile doesn’t falter as he combs his windswept hair back from his face. “When the other option is a flying man who glows, this is very subtle,” he says.

“Point taken,” Yuuri admits, climbing into the car with him. “We need to get going to wherever it is you’re taking us, though. The girls got woken in the middle of their nap, so it’s getting dangerous in that car. Takeshi’s still really freaked out by the whole thing, too.”

Victor throws an arm around Yuuri’s shoulders as he pulls out onto the street, and the minivan follows close behind. “I hope they weren’t too set on staying at the mansion,” Victor says. “But I promise this is safer. The mansion is just too obvious of a target for the press.”

Yuuri hums in acknowledgement, then startles when he feels Victor’s hand drop to rest on his knee. “You said Takeshi is freaked out,” Victor asks tentatively, his eyes fixed on the road. “But how are you feeling?”

Yuuri reaches over and turns up the volume on the radio, then tilts his head to face out the window. It’s probably more of an answer than he wanted to give.

They ride in silence for maybe ten more minutes as the car winds down increasingly bumpy back roads. If Victor weren’t a superhero, Yuuri might be worrying he was being taken to a remote area to be murdered about now. Obviously the concern is still not far from his mind. They pull off down a long dirt road, slowing to a crawl as they approach a house sitting alone at the end of the lane.

The house is small and old, a single story thing that squats like a green and brown toad behind a chain link fence, nearly blending into the woods that stretch out behind it. Yuuri catches his own eye in the rearview mirror and realizes his confused frown is glaringly obvious. Where on earth is Aura taking them?

Then, as they pull to a stop in front of the gate, a familiar brown poodle comes rushing around the side of the house, flinging herself at the fence in excitement. Yuuri immediately begins to relax. Wherever they are, it must be safe if Makkachin is already here.

He hops out of the Cadillac and rushes over to the minivan to help unload the girls and the luggage. Yuuri ends up carrying Lutz, along with a diaper bag and a suitcase. Takeshi takes full advantage of having someone around with super strength, and before Victor can even offer to help his arms are weighed down with a pile of the girls’ bags. Yuuri has to open the gate for him, because Victor can’t see the latch over the mountain of pink and purple toys and enough clothing for a few weeks.

The front door is unlocked, which is a little concerning, but Yuuri opens the door for Victor once more and follows him inside, where he immediately drops the bags he’s carrying and nearly drops the baby.

The living room is small and cramped, with outdated wood paneled walls. The furniture is old and well-worn, but looks comfortably overstuffed. One wall of the room is entirely

dominated by a massive bookcase, and Yuuri spots titles in both Russian and English, as well as a few more in what looks to be French.

What really catches his eye, though, is the cluster of framed photos above the TV. He carries Lutz over for a closer look, captivated.

Most of the photos are of Victor, but they're all pictures Yuuri's never seen before. The largest is a shot of Victor at about thirteen, bright-eyed but serious, his famous silver hair barely brushing the shoulders of his navy suit. Then there's another of him, older, in one of his old costumes. He seems to be modeling it in this exact living room, and framed with it is a newspaper clipping describing a daring rescue of a family from a burning car.

Then there are family photos. One of the pictures, worn and tattered around the edges, must be Victor with his parents. He's about eight or so in the picture, with a heart-shaped smile and deep dimples. His mother looks elegant and blonde; his father is jovial and bearded. Yuuri looks to the next picture. It's Victor again, about fourteen perhaps, and he's standing with yet another older couple: a different tall, elegant woman with a slightly haughty air about her, and a much shorter man with a deeply receding hairline.

Yuuri's thoughts are interrupted when the baby squirms in his arms, twisting in an attempt to get down and go to her mom. He turns to ask Victor where they are, and the older man from the last photo walks into the room.

"So this is them, eh?" The man doesn't look impressed. "I don't know why I let you do this," he grumbles at Victor, stepping over the piles of baby things that were inconsiderately dumped onto the faded green rug. "I thought I told you I was through taking in strays when you brought that kitten home."

Victor meets Yuuri's gaze over the older man's head, then rolls his eyes like a teenager. "Everyone, meet Yakov, my guardian."

"*Former* guardian," Yakov interrupts, kicking the luggage Victor had dropped over closer to the wall. "You're an adult now, and that means I'm supposed to be rid of you."

Then he looks over at Yuuko and Takeshi, standing awkwardly in the middle of the living room with their squirming toddlers, and his face softens. "Those kids must be hungry, hm? Kids are always hungry. Come on, let's get you settled in." Yuuko still looks a little shaken by everything. Before she can get a word in edgewise, the old man has scooped Lutz right out of Yuuri's arms and taken off for the kitchen. The rest of the Nishigori family trails after him.

Yuuri starts to follow, but Victor pulls him back with a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay, Yuuri?" He asks quietly. "You were really quiet in the car."

"Yeah," he says, craning for a glimpse into the kitchen. Yuuko's looking back at him, as if she senses something herself. "Can we go somewhere more private to talk?"

Victor's smile is mischievous, and it wrinkles the corners of his eyes in a way the smiles in his posters never did. "Sure. I've got just the spot."

Yuuri follows him down the hallway and around the corner, through an open bedroom door, then freezes.

There's a twin bed pushed up against the wall, and a large dog bed lying on the floor beside it. On the other side of the room is a vanity. The surface is cluttered, half-used makeup containers vying for space with trophies, ribbons, and what Yuuri strongly suspects is the *key to the city*.

Stuffed around the edges of the mirror frame are clippings from newspapers, tattered ticket stubs, and Polaroid photos: Lynx doing a handstand on a balance beam; a selfie of Victor and Twister in civilian clothing with flower crowns; a group shot of the entire Little Friends team posed on the steps in front of the mansion like a class picture.

"Is this," Yuuri's voice breaks, and he has to swallow, then spits out the rest of the question too quickly. "Is this your childhood bedroom?"

"Since I was thirteen," Victor smirks. "I moved here to live with Yakov and Lilia after they won custody. Yakov was my father's friend, and my godfather. You might even remember the case?" Yuuri nods, still scanning the room. There are clothes strewn in a chair that he remembers seeing Victor wear just a few days ago, when he came over to Yuuri's house to get lunch together.

"Of course," Victor continues, blithely oblivious to Yuuri's shifting attention. "You were a fan, right? You'll probably want to check out the closet, then."

Yuuri's eyes widen when he glances over at the open closet door. His eyes catch on a tuft of white feathers, and he knows *immediately* what he's looking at. He doesn't stop to ask permission, just crosses the small room in two strides and starts to examine the closet up close.

Every one of Aura's old costumes is hanging in this closet, in some cases multiple copies of the same design. There's the white mesh one that caught his eye across the room, which is maybe ten years old, but also newer costumes, like the gold and silver bodysuit he was still wearing just a few years ago.

Behind the white one, he can even see the sleeve of the first costume Aura ever wore, a silver and blue number with a design like feathers, and his fingers itch to touch. But even as he reaches toward it, his attention is caught by others he's *never* seen. Prototypes! He licks his lips.

"You can touch if you want," Victor says, startling him from his fascination. "Some of them might even fit you, if you wanted to-"

"No no no," Yuuri spins around, waving his hands frantically. "That's okay. I couldn't possibly." His eyes refocus again, on a poster hanging unframed on the wall above the bed. It's an old Justice Friends poster, the first one ever printed after the team formed a few years ago. Front and center is Aura, in his old gold and silver bodysuit, arms crossed in front of his chest. To his right is Twister, in the black and red mesh suit that was his signature until just recently. And on Aura's left, posed with one knee on the ground, is Night Owl.

Victor sees him looking, and follows his line of sight. “You were so mean to me that day,” he says, shaking his head. “I was so excited to finally meet you, but then you completely blanked me when I tried to say something. I thought you hated me for a while.”

“Hated you?” Yuuri stares. “I was basically dying of nerves. You and Chris already knew each other so well, and you both talked so fast. I got really overwhelmed. All I remember that day is wanting to get it all over with so I could go home before you figured out I didn’t really belong on the team.”

Victor shoots him a confused look, then sits down on the end of his bed. “You didn’t belong on the team? Yuuri, you basically were the team. For a long time it had just been me out there, fighting on my own, and then Chris showed up, but we were still just two different people who happened to have the same hobby.” Victor shakes his head. “There was no *team* until you came along.”

“I don’t even get invited to most of the team stuff,” Yuuri mutters.

“You never wanted to come,” Victor protests, rubbing his forehead. “We tried to invite you to everything when we first started, but you always seemed like you just couldn’t wait to leave. I just figured you had more important things to do.”

Yuuri wants to reach out to Victor badly, but he can’t, not now. He clenches his hands to stop himself from touching. “I just... the more I saw you guys in action, the worse it made me feel sometimes. You were so powerful, and I was basically just this kid who never grew out of playing superhero games on the beach with Yuuko.”

He pauses for a deep breath before continuing. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot today. Since this morning, I keep being reminded of the effect my choices have had on the people I care about most.” He folds his hands tightly and looks away. “I think once everything settles down and my family is safe again, we should end this.”

“This?” Victor asks, a strangled sound. Yuuri can’t look.

“This thing between us,” Yuuri says. “But also my place on the team and my career as a vigilante. I’m going to quit. It’s stupid for me to keep pretending. I’m never going to be a real superhero, and all I’ve done is put my family and friends at risk by trying. All I’ve proved in these years is that I’m a failure.”

“Nobody thinks you’re a failure,” Victor says. The quiver in his voice pulls at Yuuri, and he can’t look away anymore. There are tears brightening Victor’s eyes but the sight only makes Yuuri’s heart sink further.

“I know,” he admits, subdued.

Victor bows his head, scrubbing at his eyes with the sleeve of his sweater, and Yuuri reaches out to stroke his hair. Victor leans into it at first, then abruptly pulls away.

“I was going to ask you to stay here too,” Victor says, the lilt in his voice somewhere between a sob and a laugh. “But I guess you don’t want to do that. Your family can stay as

long as they need to,” his voice drops to a near-whisper. “It’s a good place for family.”

“It seems like a good home,” Yuuri says, forcing half a smile. “But I couldn’t stay here anyway. It’s not safe, being in the same place as them. I’ve got somewhere else to be.”

“I’ll protect them with everything I have,” Victor says quietly.

“I know you will. I appreciate what you’re doing. I just... can’t be here.” He shifts his weight from his toes to his heels. His body is screaming at him that it’s time to leave. “I’ll stay in touch, though. And I’ll let you know when it seems like it’s safe for them to come home.”

“Sure,” Victor agrees, but he doesn’t look up from the floor. Yuuri waits a moment, then reaches out again, pressing a finger to the whorl of silvery hair at the top of his head. Then he walks out to the living room.

Yuuko takes one look at the expression on his face and flings herself into his arms, hugging him tightly. “Oh, Yuuri,” she whispers. “I wish you could just... I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri agrees, gently tugging the end of her ponytail. “I don’t either.”

Yuuko steps back, pressing the van keys into his hand. “Takeshi’s being weird,” she says, her voice hushed with the rest of the family in the next room. “It’s not like him to be so nervous. You know how calm he usually is under pressure. I’m really worried about him.”

“I know you’ll figure it out,” Yuuri says, giving her hand a parting squeeze. “Let me know if you need anything else. Victor says you can stay as long as you like and, well, *you* know where I’ll be staying if you have to reach me.”

“Drive safe,” Yuuko says. Her smile is just as cheery as usual, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

-

He’s never noticed how quiet his apartment can get without the ambient noise of three babies coming at him through the walls. With Yuuko’s family packed off to Victor’s house, the only sound in the room is the quiet hum of Yuuri’s little electric heater.

He snags a duffel bag off the top shelf of the closet, hesitates, then grabs a suitcase as well and tosses both bags onto the bed. It’s hard to imagine he’ll need to stay with Phichit more than a week before the press moves on from this story, but he can’t be sure. It’s hard to imagine any of this happening at all.

He gets his family postcards and photos from the fridge first, because they can’t be replaced. As he’s zipping them into the small pocket on his duffel, the corner of a poster catches his eye, still taped to the closet door. He slides the door out from hiding and gives it a closer look.

The Aura in his posters feels like a different man than the one he left behind in that little house. The man in the posters is all smiles and dignity. He lives in an immaculate mansion

with expensive, minimalist furniture, wears designer clothes, and throws classy parties for all his many admirers.

He is not the same as Victor, who still sleeps in a twin bed, in the home he shares with his aging guardian, covers every surface he can reach with mementos of his family and friends, has outfits in his closet that are older than Lynx, and lets his big goofy dog track mud all over his room.

After spending over half his life loving Aura from a distance, Yuuri suddenly realizes he's over it. He was chasing something he saw in these posters, but it was never real to begin with. He carefully pulls the tape from each corner and takes down the posters, folds them in half, and carries them to the kitchen trash.

His phone buzzes in his back pocket, and he puts the posters down on the counter to fish it out. Yuuko is calling him back already. He can feel his pulse accelerate as he picks up the call.

"Yuu-chan," he struggles to keep the concern out of his voice. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, we're fine," Yuuko says, but her tone is strangely curt. "Takeshi and I have been having a little talk about feelings and *privacy*, and I think he has something to tell you."

"Okay," Yuuri says slowly. The line goes quiet, just the shuffling sound of the phone being passed and resettled.

"Hello," Takeshi sounds subdued. Yuuko is angry. What the hell is going on over there?
"Yuuri, I have to apologize."

Yuuri's hands feel cold and numb, and his face bloodless. "Okay, what are you apologizing for?"

"I took the photo," Takeshi blurts out. "I didn't mean to see anything. I just wanted a quick smoke." Yuuri hears Yuuko make a strangled noise in the background. Takeshi must have failed to mention that part of the story when he told her the first time. Yuuri thinks, distantly, that he'll really get it for that one. "I thought you guys might like to have a picture, and we'd all get a laugh over it later. Then, a couple days ago, I saw this ad on the local news site, saying the press would pay up to \$5,000 for exclusive photos of celebrities." His voice falters.

"\$5,000 is a lot of diapers and milk," Yuuri says faintly, leaning on the kitchen counter for support. He knows he should probably feel betrayed, but hell, that's a lot of money for him. It's a *ton* for Takeshi, who needs to feed, clothe, and entertain three babies for at least sixteen more years.

"I didn't know," the other man begins, but Yuuri cuts him off.

"Of course you didn't. I kept it from you for so long. This is what I get, for lying--"

“No!” Takeshi shuts him down, loudly and firmly. “You did what you needed to do. You could have told me, but you didn’t. I should have asked before I sold the photo, but I was afraid you might say no, and it seemed like such a *little* thing at the time...”

“It’s fine,” Yuuri sighs. This all started with him, whether Takeshi wants to admit it or not. “What’s done is done already, like I said before. All we can do is go forward.”

“I should give you the money,” Takeshi mutters.

“If you do that, all I’m going to do is go down to the bank and put it in a savings account for the babies, and you know it.” Yuuri stalks into the living room, gathering up the dirty dishes from the table to dump in the sink. He can’t leave behind a dirty house. “Just... apologize to Victor too, okay? That’s all I want.” He closes his eyes to hold back tears, though he knows the sadness is already breaking his voice. “Tell him I’m sorry, too.”

Something bumps up against Yuuri’s ankle, and he opens his eyes. Takeshi says something else, but Yuuri can’t hear what it was. He drops the phone, and then all he sees is black and white.

Earth Inferno

Chapter Notes

Thank you to [Daffy](#) for the extra set of eyes on this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

At first, Yuuri is unsure what stirred him from his nap. His brain feels wrapped in cotton, like he was sleeping very deeply, and he struggles to rouse himself to identify what woke him up. The only noise he can make out is the hushed hum of his electric heater and a soft beeping, faint and far away. It sounds sort of like his phone, but he hasn't taken his phone off silent in years. He forces himself awake more, confused. Where is that noise coming from?

He turns his face to nuzzle into the pillow, but instead his cheek presses against a cold, unyielding surface. His eyes fly open.

Where the hell is he?

The room is dark and nothing seems familiar. He can see a couple of blinking lights in the distance, but they're blurry. Everything is blurry. His head is still fuzzy, but... He touches his face. It also might help if he were wearing his glasses.

He fumbles around in the dark, patting down all of his pockets and then feeling the floor around him in slowly widening circles. His heart beats faster. He was wearing them at the apartment, damn it. His fingers brush on the familiar metal frame, and he lets out the breath he'd been holding. They must have just fallen off his face when he was dumped here.

He pushes the glasses up into place on his nose, and looks around again. The first thing he sees that he's surrounded on all sides by tall metal bars. He's been put in some sort of *cage*.

He pushes himself up from the floor and staggers to his feet. His mind and body both groan in protest at the sudden change. His balance is off, and he has to catch himself on one of the bars. The cage is barely big enough for him to lie down flat across it in any direction. Good thing he's never been claustrophobic. He scans the walls and catches on what he thinks is the outline of a door, so gathers himself and pushes off from the bars he's leaned up against, flinging himself at the door with all the force he can muster.

As he hits the door, something on the other side spins to face him. It's a small creature, about half his height but stocky and solid-looking. It stands on two legs, but has a face like a bulldog with an overbite, and its covered from the tips of its little horns to the claws on its feet with bright yellow fur. When Yuuri's shoulder slams into the bars, it lets out a piercing shriek of nonsense and pokes a stick through the gap, touching the tip of it against his stomach.

He flies backwards, slamming into the back wall of the cage. The weapon had barely touched him, but his stomach is screaming bright red pain at him. He scrambles to pull up his shirt and check the damage, but finds no blood at all, not even an incipient bruise. He tugs his shirt back into place, eyeing the creature at the door warily. It stares back at him with flinty red eyes.

What he was thinking of as a cage he now realizes is a cell. If the creature at the door is his prison guard, throwing himself at it a second time isn't going to get him anywhere. He leans back on the bars and slides down to the floor, and pulls his knees to his chest. He needs to get his bearings better if he's going to get out of this.

Yuuri closes his eyes and breathes deeply, then starts counting backwards as his therapist taught him. This time, there's no one to interrupt. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - deep breath - 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - exhale. He repeats the pattern a few times and can feel his mind clearing, some of the tension bleeding from his body. He needs to be able to observe the situation clearly without panicking right now. He can worry later, and he will.

When he opens his eyes once again, he has the distance he needs from the situation to think with more clarity. He starts to search the walls beyond the bars of his cell.

The first thing he observes is that he's in a huge room like a warehouse. The floors are solid like something between steel and concrete, and the walls look like they're made of the same material. The ceiling is high, cathedral style, but the walls are curved up to it rather than sheer or pointed. There are no other cells like his in sight, so it's not a prison, but across the room he can see an enormous machine taking up most of one wall. The console is covered in buttons, screens, and various blinking lights in a variety of colors, but there's no text or video on the screens that he recognizes, and no one is working at the panels, so he's forced to move on without knowing what the thing's function could be.

As he turns his attention to the next section of the room, he freezes and feels his breath catch in his chest. Part of his mind tries frantically to shove the other part back and reclaim that distance he had a moment ago, but that's difficult to do.

He's staring right into the heart of a massive, black and white-striped blob creature, as tall as it is wide, perched on some type of glowing metal platform.

The creature turns itself at exactly the speed you'd expect from a being with that much bulk. What is seemingly its face is dominated by a giant flattened beak. The combination triggers something in the back of his mind, clicking the pieces flush with one another. He saw this thing over a month ago - like a zebra mated with a platypus, right? Except a month ago it had only been on his TV, not in a room with him. Given that the camera *adds* ten pounds, he's guessing the ones fighting the Justice Friends had actually been much, much smaller than this.

As Yuuri stares at it, it seems to stare back, although as far as he can tell it has no eyes. Then it opens its beak, revealing three rows of needle-like teeth nearly as tall as Yuuri.

"Jittugajikooo!" The creature screams, the sound echoing back in the cathedral-like room so loudly that he clasps his hands over his ears. Whatever that word meant, it sounded pissed.

Well, shit.

He tilts his head back, knocking it on one of the bars with a somewhat hollow clunk. He's been kidnapped by aliens. He is almost certainly on a spaceship right now, and hopefully he is *not* currently hurtling through space at light speed, because NASA has had their budget cut too many times and he is *screwed* if they make it to space. Goodbye forever, Earth.

He wasn't even in that last fight, though. What could these aliens possibly want with him? How did they even find him?

He groans out loud, and the little guard creature looks back over its shoulder at him. With that face, he can't tell if it's curious or annoyed. "Hey," he asks it. "Does your species by any chance watch American tabloid news? TMZ?"

The alien doesn't answer, but he didn't really expect a response. Apparently alien lifeforms enjoy celebrity gossip. That... kind of makes sense as an audience for those articles, actually.

He tries not to think about it too hard. There are too many questions to unpack, and his head's still a little woozy from whatever they knocked him out with when they took him from the apartment.

Ugh, the apartment. He'd been in the middle of packing up when they'd taken him, on the phone with Takeshi. He pats down each of his pockets again, but there's no sign of the phone. He must have dropped it when he was captured.

His apartment will probably show signs of a struggle. With his luggage out, it will at least be noticeable that he left suddenly in the middle of doing something else. If Yuuko stopped by, she'd see the dirty dishes on the table and the phone on the floor and *immediately* realize something was fishy, even without other signals.

Except Yuuko and Takeshi aren't at the apartment building, and aren't going to suddenly pop in and check on him. As far as Yuuko knows, he's staying with Phichit.

He buries his hands in his hair, digging his fingertips into his scalp. Think, Yuuri. What will Phichit do when he doesn't show up?

Knowing Phichit, he'll probably assume Yuuri changed his mind and decided to stay with Victor after all. Given that what actually happened is that he *broke up* with Victor? He drops his head forward, knocking it hard on his kneecaps.

The threads of his life are scattered everywhere. He'd been non-committal with Phichit until the last possible moment, and then he'd ruined things with Victor. Takeshi probably won't want to talk to him anytime soon, and Yuuko is angry and no doubt preoccupied with her family's safety. The threads are all knotted together, and Yuuri's really the only one who can find each of the ends right now. How long will it take someone else to unravel it all?

How many days could he be stuck on this ship alone, with no one even noticing he's gone?

He feels the hot rush of despair through his limbs and tries to tamp it down as quickly as it comes. Being upset isn't going to get him anywhere, and in a strange environment like this, it could even be deadly. Above all, he needs to keep a level head as best he can, and he can implode once it's all over.

In the worst case scenario where he still gets out, he has to wait for his boss to notice when he doesn't show up for work. That should only take... three more days. He can totally handle that. Some people spend most of their lives in prison. Three days is nothing, right? He can just wait it out. Someone will come.

He can't consider the other option right now.

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No one is coming. Yuuri muffles his groan with his arm, because his little guard buddy looks at him funny every time he so much as breathes loudly. He's decided to call the guard Yuki, because it feels kind of mean to keep thinking of it as 'the alien guard thing', even if it did hit him with that stick when he tried to run.

He even tried talking to Yuki again for a little while, but either it doesn't understand him, or it doesn't care about the plot of old Dragon Ball episodes.

He's stretched out the cold floor on his stomach, his head pillowed on his folded arms. He knows this is the third time he's woken up, but he has no idea how much time he's spent asleep with no phone and no windows. Each time he wakes up, his senses seem to be upside down, his head still fuzzy with sleep.

His stomach is gnawing at him every time he wakes up too, and his captors still haven't fed him. He tried pantomiming eating for Yuki, but got only a blank stare. Maybe he should be grateful for that. Who knows what Yuki's species eats. They did bring him water, so at least it will be a little while before he starves to death.

He rolls onto his back, staring up at the dark, distant ceiling of the ship. It never occurred to him that prison would be so boring. Every time he wakes up, the giant zebra blob is still exactly where it was, and Yuki is still where *it* was, and nothing has changed at all except that Yuuri is a little more sick of being here.

What do prisoners on Earth do to pass the time? He thinks back to the crime shows and escape movies that are so popular on television in America. A lot of the prisoners in those seem to spend their time outside exercising. There's no exercise yard for him, but maybe if he doesn't die of starvation, he'll try doing some push ups. Maybe, by the time he gets out of here, he'll be super buff.

The floor vibrates faintly beneath him, and he props himself up on his elbows to check how Yuki is reacting. The guard isn't so much as looking around for a source. Maybe Yuuri is already hallucinating from the hunger.

The ground trembles again, and he can see Yuki swaying back and forth with the force of it now. Good, it's not a hallucination, but then what *is* that? Could it be the engines starting up?

Yuuri scrambles to his feet and looks around the room again for anything out of place. The giant zebra blob is sort of undulating up and down now, and that's definitely different. *Something* seems to be happening. In the distance, he hears a faint popping, and then the distinctive sound of metal screaming as it folds in on itself.

There must be doors or halls somewhere near the edges of the room, because a flood of Yuki's brethren suddenly come streaming in from every corner, silent aside from the clatter of so many heavy footfalls. There must be at least a hundred of them, and apparently they come in a variety of colors and fur styles, although their size and expressions are uniform.

All of them hustle directly to the far wall across from Yuuri's cell, gathering around the area in a rippling semi-circle of quiet attention. The wall they're so intent on looks the same as the others to Yuuri, but they obviously know something he doesn't. He checks in on Yuki briefly, but it makes no move to leave his side and join the others. Yuuri pops up onto his tiptoes, craning to get a better view.

Now that he's looking closer, the wall does seem to be a lighter color in that patch. Was it like that before?

With a loud screech and a pained groan, the wall starts to curve inward. The creatures all shift in anticipation. The wall caves in on itself like a rotten melon, and Moxie shoots out of the hole, right into the waiting crowd.

In her wake comes the *entire rest of the team*. Twister is right behind her, only recognizable as a bright blue blur as he launches himself into the guards. Then Sparkler jumps through the hole, sparks flying from his fingertips and bursting over the enemy's heads.

For once, Michele and Sara are focused on fighting the enemy instead of one another. The mediating influence of Arc between them seems to be making a difference. Lynx and Otabek come into the room as a unit, a whirlwind of claws and teeth, and JJ soars in over their heads with a showy handspring. Creeping in behind the others is Shrieking Violet. He seems to be doing his best to direct the action based on his senses, but Yuuri can't hear what commands he's issuing over the cries of pain and rage coming from the fight.

Aura enters last, shooting like a comet from the busted wall, straight up to the pinnacle of the ceiling. The light that surrounds him is a flame engulfing his form, and although it sears the image into Yuuri's eyes, he can't look away.

"Yuuri!" Victor calls out. He's looking wildly around the room - looking for *him*.

"Victor," he screams, his voice breaking the syllables apart. He jumps up, waving his arms overhead. Tears overwhelm him after so long suppressed. It may have taken a while, but everyone did come for him. Now that Aura is here, it feels like his heart soars right up into the air beside him.

He dashes for the front of the cell again, kicking hard at where he thinks the door latch will be, but Yuki turns on him, stick at the ready. He's forced to abort, hopping back away from the bars to avoid being struck by the baton again. Apparently all that time spent reciting old cartoon plots meant nothing to Yuki.

“Hey assholes, maybe we could get some *help* over here?” Lynx screams from across the room.

In the midst of Yuuri’s excitement, the rest of the team has been surrounded by a large swarm of guards carrying those high-impact batons. An alien with bright teal fur styled into a fauxhawk has dragged Shrieking Violet down to his knees and has the end of its stick aimed at his head. Georgi’s mascara is running down his cheeks, but that’s neither unusual nor surprising. Considering that Yuki’s baton felt like it ripped Yuuri’s stomach open when it brushed his torso earlier, he can only guess what damage it could do to the empath’s brain.

Aura’s light dims back to manageable levels as he gradually descends from the ceiling, his attention now focused on the guards keeping the Justice Friends at bay. A few of the creatures break off from the larger group and advance on Aura, waving their sticks and apparently herding him toward Chief Zebra Blob.

Aura turns his back on Yuuri’s cell, facing down the alien menace, and tilts his head at it speculatively. “Oh, you look kind of familiar,” he says, sounding cheerful despite the predicament they’re in. “But didn’t you used to be smaller and more,” he gestures around his feet in a circle, “Numerous?”

“ARYNLITEGERATEP,” the creature shrieks in return, quivering all over like a fancy jello mold. “Kusfluckio tudlbi!!!”

“Okay,” Victor chirps. The silence that follows is ringing, as they all wait to see what happens next. Then, he adds, “I have no idea what this thing is saying to me.”

It screams with wordless rage.

“Um,” Georgi clears his throat delicately from across the room. When the guard doesn’t move to whack him with the baton for speaking, he continues. “It’s really angry, and also sad.” His voice gets choked with emotion, but that’s typical. “I think it’s probably angry that we blew up the other ship.”

The zebra blob wails again, and Shrieking Violet nods very delicately.

“I’m sorry we had to kill all your friends,” Aura says. He does not sound very sorry. “To be fair, you sort of started it by attacking the Earth like that.” The alien is vibrating again. Yuuri’s not very good at reading body language even in his own species, but that doesn’t seem like a good sign.

“I think we can work out a deal, though,” Aura continues blithely, “If you release all my friends, we’ll let you leave without blowing up this ship too.”

Across the room, Yuuri can see several members of the team simultaneously slapping themselves in the face or shaking their heads in dismay. The blob simply opens its beak, licking its tongue across its fangs, and hisses in response.

A bulldog-alien with deep burgundy fur hanging low over its eyes scurries away from the rest of the group, over to the control panel of the mysterious machine at the front of the room. It

opens a compartment and pulls something down before jogging over to Aura.

As it stretches its arms up in offering, Yuuri can see that it has two sturdy-looking metal bracelets. “Put on,” the creature croaks. Its voice is like an engine turning over. “No powerrrrssss. Frrrrriendssss frrrree.” Well, something around here sort of speaks English. Yuki’s species must be the ones that read the news.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Georgi says, barely loud enough for his voice to carry. “It feels... really excited in a gross way.” He makes a face, and then side-eyes Twister, just in case everyone didn’t already know what he meant. Chris winks back at him.

Aura is quiet, which is a relief. Quiet means he might actually be thinking this through, and not just rashly going with the first solution he’s offered.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says finally, sounding dead serious as he reaches out to take the bracelets from the creature. “Night Owl has never needed powers to be a hero. Neither do I.”

“Don’t-,” Yuuri calls out, but Victor is already slipping on the first bracelet, and then the other.

The effects kick in the moment the second bracelet slips onto his hand. They shrink down, molding to his wrists, and Aura drops to the ground, the glow around him vanishing. His beautiful silver hair dulls to a pale ash blonde. As soon as his toes touch the floor, the three guards behind him close in with their batons as Yuuri looks on helplessly, tightly gripping the bars of his cell.

The first baton descends, but Victor ducks under it, striking out with the heel of his hand to hit the guard in its snub nose. It staggers back, and he spins, dancing out of the opening he created.

“HELL YEAH,” Lynx yells, throwing an arm around Otabek’s shoulder as he punches the air.

“Victor, davai!” Moxie screams, cupping her arms around her mouth. The others all start yelling as well.

“Davai!”

“Forza!”

“Allons-y, Victor!”

Victor grins and waves at the group cheekily. He darts back in and kicks out at one of the guards, but misses. He doesn’t seem accustomed to having such small opponents. Another little alien screams stabs at him with a baton. Victor dodges again, spinning around his opponent and then kicking it on the butt. It stumbles, but doesn’t fall.

His spin puts the red alien from earlier at his back. With no weapon, it launches itself bodily at his legs before Yuuri can even scream a warning. Victor topples to his knees. He scrambles to get free, but the creature is clamped onto his calves, vice-like.

The other two guards are quickly closing in, teeth bared and sticks in hand.

“Get up, old man,” Lynx yells. “Aren’t you supposed to be good at this?”

“Watch out!” Otabek is uncharacteristically loud as the guards creep in closer, but Victor is still trying to vain to shove the red one’s weight off his legs. Like the Earth dogs it resembles, it hangs on determinedly.

Yuuri checks in on Yuki again. It’s still in place by the door, but its attention seems focused on the fight across the room. Yuuri lightly taps his fingernail against the metal bars, but Yuki’s ears don’t even twitch. It’s probably not distracted enough for him to try the door again, so he looks around, trying one more time to find another opening. The bars are too close together for him to have any hope of fitting through. The floor is solid and unyielding, so he won’t be tunnelling out somehow. Desperately, he looks up.

He’s an idiot.

There’s no *roof* on his cell. He noticed it earlier, when he was lying on his back, but with the combination of Yuki and his own distraction, he never really considered this option. The walls of his cell stretch much higher than his own head, but don’t reach anywhere near the ceiling.

He knows he can get up. He’s not going to think, now, about how to get down.

He makes a running leap at the back corner of the cage and grabs hold of two of the bars, pulling his legs up so his feet are braced against the bars. It holds. He starts launching himself upward, using the corner to lever a good distance with each hop.

In just a few jumps, he’s straddling the bar that hems the top of the cell. The ground looks a lot further away, now that he’s actually up here.

He glances over to check on Victor just as the first baton touches his arm. Victor jerks back, twisting away. His eyes are wide and terrified as he clutches at his arm, reminding Yuuri of that night in the alley, the first time he saw Aura’s light go out.

Yuuri jumps.

He hits the floor hard and tucks into a roll, then springs back to his feet, sprinting across the hall to Victor. The two guards standing side by side over his prone form haven’t yet noticed Yuuri’s approach. He drops into a slide and uses his body as a battering ram to sweep their legs from underneath them. As they tumble backward, he lurches back to his feet and punches the red one as hard as he can.

It feels like he cracked a knuckle on the thing’s face, but loosens its grip. Victor kicks himself free and staggers to his feet. His powers may be dulled, but his eyes are the same bright blue as ever. “I was supposed to be rescuing you,” he says with a shaky smile.

“We can rescue each other,” Yuuri says. He starts to reach out for him, then notices the guards staggering to their feet. Instead, he steps in front of Victor, putting his arms out to

protect him.

“I’m not completely helpless, you know,” the other man murmurs, his breath tickling the back of Yuuri’s ear as he presses in close. “But I’m not ashamed to admit I like this a little.”

“*Trying* to focus here,” Yuuri scolds. The enemy is approaching again, along with a few spares that have broken off from the larger group. They start to surround Yuuri and Victor and slowly close in.

There’s a moment where everyone is just waiting. The aliens’ arms are too stubby to reach Yuuri with their batons unless they move within range of getting hit themselves, so they stop just out of reach, and both groups are waiting on the other to move first. Then Chief Zebra Blob opens its beak wide and *screams*, and all of the creatures converge on Yuuri at once.

The thing is, Yuuri has been *watching* these guys fighting with Aura and the others. They’re tough and sturdy, with a low center of gravity, but they’re slow, and the only real damage he’s seen them do was with the batons. This time, instead of aiming to knock the aliens out of commission themselves, Yuuri decides to disarm them.

He snaps out a front kick that sends the first baton flying through the air, and the guard he disarmed just freezes in place. Satisfied, he spins, chopping the baton out of the hand of another one that was getting too close to Victor. He snatches this stick from the air and passes it over to Victor, who promptly pokes another creature in the thigh, knocking it off its feet.

Yuuri hadn’t been thinking ahead when he joined the fight, but with the playing field leveled slightly it dawns on him that he and Victor might actually be able to *win this*.

Yuuri looks up while confiscating a second baton from a creature with short, brown fur just in time to see JJ stretch his arm out with remarkable stealth and pluck one of the batons *directly* from a guard’s hand. In seconds, the whole team erupts, launching themselves at the larger force of aliens still surrounding them.

Yuuri has a baton in each hand now. Victor is still behind him, staying close and warding the guards away from him with his own stick, forcing them to come at Yuuri head on. Once the others have started fighting, the aliens dissolve into chaos, swarming everywhere. More of the main group are breaking off from the crowd, running at Victor and Yuuri, and then a tea kettle-like whistle from the Blob Boss summons even more of the things, pouring in the doors on either end of the room.

Yuuri’s face feels sore. He realizes he’s been smiling wider than Victor for several minutes now. The fight is only becoming more and more impossible as the the enemy surrounds them, but as his spins and kicks and strikes out with his new weapons, knowing Victor is watching his back, he’s *having fun*.

At that moment, one of the creatures drops its baton to the floor, lets out a growling screech, and charges at Yuuri head-on. When it’s nearly on him, Yuuri drops to his knees. Right before they collide, he jabs out hard with both batons.

The tips of the sticks touch one another as they meet flesh. There's a bright spark and a hiss, and then the alien goes *flying*.

It soars through the air and lands with a crunch on the blinking console of the machine. There's a dog whistle whine, then the electronics on the panel start blinking red. Then the whole room goes dark, and they're steeped in silence.

The flash of light that follows is blinding, and Yuuri dives to the floor at the soundless explosion, throwing his arms up to protect his head.

As the red shadows and spots begin to fade from the backs of his eyelids, he looks up cautiously, blinking to clear the splotches still marring his vision, and turns, expecting to see Victor still crouched behind him.

Instead, Victor is standing, and Victor is *brilliant*. His glow is illuminating the room, casting long shadows from the bodies of those still frozen, huddled on the floor around them.

He puts his hands to his wrists and rips the bracelets that had restrained him in twain, then crumbles the remains like a wad of paper and tosses it over his shoulder, where it bounces off the head of one of the aliens.

"That was fun," he says, amusement coursing through his voice. "Now let's never do it again."

He turns toward Yuuri, and the smile on his face as he holds out his hand may be brighter than the light which surrounds him. Yuuri can't help but smile back as he links their hands and allows Victor to pull him back to his feet.

They turn back to back once more, and Yuuri finds himself staring straight at a familiar yellow pug nose - Yuki. The little creature takes one look at him, turns, and runs for the door as fast as its stubby legs can go.

That opens the floodgates, and as more of Yuki's brethren stagger to their feet, they start streaming right back *out* of the room, fleeing into the bowels of the ship. With a loud laugh and a yell of encouragement, Twister leaps up and speeds after the deserters. JJ, Sparkler, and a couple of the others also take off in pursuit as Lynx and Otabek throw themselves into a cluster of disoriented enemy fighters.

Aura spins as he launches himself into the air. He throws his arms out, and Yuuri ducks for cover. Beams of light begin to stream from his hands, engulfing the few aliens still in the fight and sending them scrambling from the room. Soon only echoed whimpers and the smell of singed fur lingers.

He lands back at Yuuri's side with a little hop and a soft smile, then reaches out to cup his face between his hands. "Yuuri," he says quietly, searching his face. "I was so worried about you."

Yuuri's hands are trembling as he reaches up to brush a few strands of silver from Victor's eyes. "You came for me," he says. "I can't believe it. Why would you give up your powers to

save me?”

“I knew we could make it through,” Victor murmurs, tilting his head down to rest his forehead against Yuuri’s. “Although admittedly, I may have had too much confidence in my own ability to win a fight without powers.”

“Good thing I was here to save your ass,” Yuuri says, a smile pulling again at the corners of his mouth.

“My hero,” Victor chuckles, but his eyes are dead serious.

Yuuri feels himself flushing, his tongue thick and clumsy as he stutters, “Well, uh, I kind of had a lot of time to think about things here, and I was thinking, well-”

“OH MY GOD,” Lynx throws one of the batons, which clatters to the floor just short of where they’re standing. “Could you guys go be disgusting somewhere else? Some of us are trying to *save the world* here.”

They break apart as Lynx hops up into Otabek and Mila’s linked arms. His eyes meet Yuuri’s across the room. “Don’t you dare tell anyone I did this,” he says.

Before Yuuri can ask him what that means, the other two heave Lynx into the air, throwing him straight at the giant zebra-platypus blob that he’d completely forgotten was still here. Lynx’s claws extend as he descends toward the creature’s quivering gelatinous body, and Yuuri averts his eyes. He can’t block out splattering sound that follows.

It’s over.

He can still hear some distant sounds of fighting as the rest of the team vanquishes the last few bulldog creatures deeper inside the ship, but with the big boss gone most of the smaller aliens either surrender or make a break for the escape hatch. They’ll be cleaning up the ones that got away for a while probably, but the worst is behind them.

Next to him, Victor is examining his own hands, as if looking for some trace of change. His skin is as flawless and smooth as ever, and Yuuri reaches out, twining their fingers together. Victor looks up through his bangs with a smile that doesn’t touch his eyes.

“Earlier,” he says, searching Yuuri’s face. “You were going to tell me something? Unless you’ve changed your mind.” He grimaces and shrugs, looking away. “Sometimes adrenaline makes people say funny things.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri admits. He should be afraid right now, but after all the crap he’s been through lately, he’s just emotionally and physically exhausted. Even his overactive mind can barely muster more than a mild case of nerves. “Like I said, I had a lot of time to think it through while I was stuck here, and about what I said to you before, well, I think...” He trails off at the look of consternation Victor turns on him. “What?”

“‘A lot of time’,” Victor repeats. “What the hell did they do to you here? You were only gone for three or four hours.”

“What?” Yuuri pulls his hand back. “But I fell asleep three times!”

“You must have been really tired,” Victor says. “You don’t sleep enough.”

“I was *starving*,” Yuuri is starting to sound hysterical even to his own ears.

“Well, it’s after six now,” Victor says, smothering a laugh. “When did you last eat?”

Yuuri can’t stop staring at him. “Last night,” he finally whispers in dismay. “When we got dinner after patrol. I mean, if that’s... are you *sure* it was only three hours?”

“Takeshi thought something was wrong when your line went dead without saying goodbye. I went straight over to your apartment,” Victor bites his lip, eyes going unfocused over Yuuri’s head. “The window was open. Your stuff was scattered everywhere, and your phone was on the floor,” he shrugs. “It just took us a little while to gather the team, figure out where the ship was parked, and then get out here to get you.”

Yuuri feels like he’s staring into the abyss. “I took three naps,” he whispers with an edge of horror.

Before he can say anything else, the floor of the ship starts to shake. He loses his balance a little, bumping into Victor, who slings an arm around his waist to keep him steady. Twister zips back into the room.

“Come on,” he calls, grinning wider when he sees how entwined they are. “Sparkler got the controls up and running. He’s going to fly us back into the city.”

“Phichit can fly a spaceship?” Yuuri asks, baffled, but he doesn’t resist when Victor takes his hand again and pulls him out of the main room and into one of the branching hallways, following the sound of Twister’s voice.

“Phichit can drive anything,” Victor laughs, floating along ahead of him. “What, you thought he made the team because he shoots pretty lights from his fingertips?”

Before Yuuri can admit that yes, that is exactly what he thought, Victor is tugging him into an expansive control room, dominated by an enormous window. The ship is already hovering well above the field where it had been parked, and in the distance Yuuri can see the lights flickering on across the city as the sun sets, a blue and gold blaze behind the shadowed buildings.

“It’s beautiful,” Yuuri says, his eyes fixed on the city as the ship rises slowly into the air. “The lights are like stars.”

“Mmm, it reminds me of the party that night,” Victor says from behind him as his arm settles around Yuuri’s waist, his mouth pressed close to the shell of his ear, making him shiver. “Flying you home for the first time.”

Yuuri turns in his grip, looping his arms around Victor’s neck and pulling his head down to touch their heads together once more, silver and black mingling and blurring at the edges of

his vision. “You’re very forward,” he breathes. “For someone I just broke up with this morning.”

“But you had so much time to think things over,” Victor protests, and Yuuri huffs at his sly, teasing tone.

“What are you guys waiting for,” JJ yells from behind them. “Just kiss already!”

Both of them dissolve, shaking with laughter, but obligingly press their lips together in a chaste kiss. There’s a lot of hooting and clapping, and Yuuri starts laughing against Victor’s mouth. Then he hears, “It’s... JJ style!” and any pretense at solemnity collapses completely.

As soon as he steps back from Victor, Georgi envelops him in a hug, pinning his arms to his sides as he weeps happily into Yuuri’s shirt. Mila comes over to ruffle his hair and pry Georgi off of him; and then someone grabs his butt, and he whirls to see Chris halfway across the room, winking at him lavishly.

“Okay, everyone,” Phichit calls from the pilot’s seat, practically bouncing with excitement. “Let’s get this baby home so we can *celebrate*.”

Victor entwines their fingers once more as the others cheer. Yuuri’s face is starting to hurt from smiling so much again, but he can’t make himself stop. Phichit’s right, after something like today they all need to get home and celebrate, together.

He can’t shake the sneaking feeling that someone is watching him, though. He glances around, but everyone is occupied chatting or looking out the window. At last he spots Lynx standing a couple feet away and glaring like Yuuri just insulted his outfit. “What’s wrong,” Yuuri asks, reaching up to push his glasses up his nose. “Do I have dirt on my face or something?”

“You’d better not get wasted and start dancing with everyone this time,” the teenager grumbles, blushing as he quickly looks away. “I’m still trying to bleach the images from my brain from last time.”

There’s a record scratch in Yuuri’s mind as he freezes. “Wait, *what?*”

It’s a long, humiliating flight back to headquarters.

Chapter End Notes

That's nearly the show, folks! All that's left is a little epilogue to wrap everything up, and I'm already well into it, so expect to see it in a week at the latest.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!