

No Less Unthinkable

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No Less Unthinkable

by [rageprufrock](#)

Summary

In which Katsuki Yuuri fights a losing battle with chronic anxiety, the quadruple Salchow, and his own judgment four drinks in — but wins the war.

Before

Chapter Notes

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

*I am who I am.
A coincidence no less unthinkable
than any other.*

— Among the Multitudes, Wislawa Szymborska

Yuuri's first kiss is at the afterparty following his first Junior Grand Prix.

He's weak with relief the competition is over and an hour ago someone said, "Cheer up, Katsuki!" and handed him a drink.

Now, it's an hour and four drinks later, and Yuuri feels the easy lassitude of vodka Red Bull's in his bloodstream, and it just makes sense to start kissing Matsumoto Keiichi, who Yuuri gets clumsy and babbling around. It's messy and too earnest and he has no idea what he's doing, but Keiichi grins and licks into Yuuri's mouth.

Twenty minutes after Yuuri's first kiss, his underpants are around his ankle, and Keiichi's pinning Yuuri's knees up around his ears. Yuuri's hitching out hungry little screams every time Keiichi's balls slap against his ass.

"I never thought you'd have it in you, Katsuki," Keiichi says afterward, lighting a cigarette and rubbing a worn-soft t-shirt in between Yuuri's legs, where he's all soft and sticky and swollen, still throbbing with intermittent little shivery aftershocks. Yuuri feels like he's just skated the perfect free program, shaking head to toe, and he's so embarrassed but he feels so good he can't bring himself to care.

"That was my first kiss," he tells the ceiling, and then Keiichi's blurry face when it appears over him in the hotel bed. Yuuri grins. "And the first time I've ever been drunk."

Keiichi kisses him again. "You're a fun drunk, Katsuki," and Yuuri laughs and wraps his arms around Keiichi to drag him closer.

The next morning Keiichi gives him a long, open mouthed goodbye kiss, and Yuuri's a grinning mess all the way home. He's sore all over, from competition and the way Keiichi made Yuuri ride him for an hour, awkward for ages until he got the rhythm in his thighs.

"Well, you look happy," his mother says, when she picks him up at the rail station.

Yuuri blushes and looks at the toes of his sneakers. "I didn't win."

"But you look happy," his mother insists, sweet, and gives him a squeeze. "How was it? Did you have fun? How was the party?"

Yuuri hugs her back, and he mutters into her hair, because he can't ever tell her the truth, "I think I inherited Dad's drinking genes."

His mother laughs at him all the way home.

That night, Yuuri presses his face into his pillows, face flaming, and swears, *Never again*.

It happens again.

Yuuri makes a respectable showing at Junior Nationals, and huddles in a corner at the post-competition banquet. Keiichi broke his ankle a month after the Prix and Yuuri's coach is nowhere to be found, so he spends the event mutely accepting every passing drink to try and drown his nerves.

He's lost count of how many little servings of fizzy, peach-flavored sake he finds himself in the bathroom trying to stick his head under a faucet.

"Katsuki, right?" he hears someone say.

"Gah," Yuuri says, and bangs his head on the faucet head, the sink, and gets water absolutely everywhere.

Yuuri's new bathroom friend is Ito Akihito, an 18-year-old who ranked 4th at Nationals and skates like he moves only in geometric lines, so his technicals are near-flawless and his component scores always as shitty as Yuuri's. They sneak off to Family Mart for first aid supplies and a half-dozen more of those fizzy peach drinks and end up on Akihito's hotel balcony, staring into the Hitachinaka night.

"You know I've never even been kissed?" Ito says, sounding almost as depressed as Yuuri is drunk, which is a shame because Yuuri is *bombed*.

"What?" Yuuri cries, too loud and too shocked. "No! But you're so cute!"

Akihito is cute: he's got a crooked grin and dimples, and Yuuri thinks his all-black short program costume is totally hot, so obviously it's important Yuuri tells him all of this out loud with his mouth as soon as possible.

"You think so?" Ito says, marveling.

Yuuri puts down his beer, such is the seriousness of this situation. "Yes," he says, and because he feels the wonderful fizz from the peach liquor still just buzzing under his skin and the city's so beautiful, shimmering just beyond the hotel balcony, he grins and says, "Lemme show you," his voice a half-octave lower.

The next morning Yuuri's jaw hurts and his voice is a wreck. They're giggly and a little bashful, but honestly, it was pretty fun, and it turns out Akihito has the kind of dick that just slides right into your throat if you're motivated and feeling exploratory.

"Thank you, Yuuri-kun," Akihito says into Yuuri's ear, when they hug at the hotel lobby waiting for the bus to the station.

Yuuri hugs him back, blushing, and promises he'll text next time he's in Tokyo.

He spends the JR ride home doing some soul searching. He's 17, which the internet and American movies assure him is the sort of age teenagers are having or trying to have almost mind-boggling quantities of sex. Apparently, at three drinks in Yuuri's default setting is gregarious and permissive, which is mortifying considering how shy Yuuri knows he is the rest of the time, stone cold sober and socially awkward. He thinks back on Keiichi and now Akihito and all he feels is a little zing at the memory of them, a little heat on his cheeks and a twinge in his dick, feels his ass twitch, wanting.

Yuuri ends up with his face pressed into his hands curled up like a pillbug on his seat trying to conceal the depths of his depravity.

Year-end's safe: he spends it back in Hasetu at Yutopia and in the safe surroundings of the Ice Castle, with Yuu-chan and Nishigori. Yuu-chan's about a 40 months pregnant and still puttering around on skates, doing big loops on the ice while Nishigori tails her, big hands reached out just in case. He eats Christmas cake and Minako-sensei makes him watch *Love Actually* for the hundredth time, and Yuuri disgraces himself crying at *Love Actually* for the hundredth time.

"Ugh, Yuuri, you're so pure," Minako-sensei complains, dabbing the tears from his face and giving him a cuddle. "What are we going to do with you?"

"I'm fine," Yuuri lies. On screen, Colin Firth jumps into a lake, and Yuuri feels himself go red all over.

Minako-sensei curls an arm around his shoulders, protective. "It just worries me, the idea of you out there in college, all alone."

I'm too broke to drink at college, don't worry, Yuuri doesn't say to her. Instead, he puts his cheek on her shoulder and enjoys how easy it is with Minako-sensei, how happy she makes him, even though she's terrifying.

"Don't worry," he tells her. "I'm being good."

He's good until he moves to Detroit.

Yuuri's used to cold, but he's not used to the huge strangeness of the city, how far away his family are, the new rink that's not Ice Castle. The benches are an inch off from just the right height, and Yuuri's achingly lonely, overwhelmed. His English isn't great, and classes are

horrible. He tapes all his lectures and listens to them while he's doing his training; every essay is like pulling teeth. Celestino is good coach, tough and patient when Yuuri goes into one of his quiet moods, closes all his shutters and doors and hunches his shoulders. But Yuuri's a small town boy, at heart, and everybody everywhere is a stranger in Detroit. He's so homesick he's on the verge of tears for the first three months he's there — banking it up in his throat when he Skypes his family so they won't know what a mess he is.

There are some Japanese students at school, but Yuuri's not just a foreign transfer, he's a tourist in an ordinary student's life. Since he was six he's been skating for hours and hours each day; he doesn't know how to make friends, really, much less friends who don't even skate. But he's here to focus on skating, anyway, so that's fine, that's okay, he's making a lot of progress, until Celestino yells at him about turning into a shut in and forces him to go to a party.

Yuuri's tagging along with one of the other skaters at the rink, a 19-year-old kid named Harry from Washington State who clearly doesn't want to shepherd Yuuri to the party any more than Yuuri wants to be shepherded.

The party's at a frat house, spilling out of the front doors onto the green grass under a deep blue sky, the windows all lit orange. It's something Yuuri only knows from movies, and it's worse in reality. There's hundreds of people, Yuuri thinks, moving into and out of the house, on and off the porch, and it takes Harry grabbing him by the elbow and more or less dragging him up the steps to get him into the heart of the matter, where space compresses into nothing and Yuuri's banked in by bodies on all sides.

"You need a drink," Harry decides, and gets him one, something in a red plastic cup that's white on the inside, filled three-quarters of the way up with something orange that smells like it could strip paint.

Yuuri finds out later that it's something called Jungle Juice, but by then he doesn't care anymore because he's had three more of them and realizes that the party is *amazing*.

The music is amazing; the other kids are amazing; the kiddie pools they've filled up out back, overflowing with gorgeous, half-naked American girls are amazing. They call him *cute* and say his accent is *adorable* and Yuuri gets dragged into the paddle pool and dragged out of his shirt and it's great — he feels great.

"Your chest is *amazing*," one of the girls tells him, and Yuuri says, "Um, oh, I skate," and that somehow turns into him showing them how he can bend himself into almost a perfect circle because Minako-sensei is a maniac and flexibility is key for competition.

Yuuri's not sure how shirtless in the pool with all those girls turned into shirtless upstairs in a room with navy walls sucking a guy's dick but he's thrilled about this progression of events.

He's had another two cups of Jungle Juice, and he feels lightheaded and happy. He's warm for the first time he landed in Detroit. There's a big hand in his hair, cupping the back of his head, hard fingertips digging into the base of his skull, and Yuuri loves it, moans into that, closes his eyes and sucks slow and hungry around the cock in his mouth — heavy on his tongue. It's bigger than Akihito's was, it doesn't go down his throat as easy, but he loves the

way the thick flare of the head bumps against his throat, thrilling, and the strange soft vulnerability of the foreskin. He pulls off when he starts getting dizzy, getting breathless, and he wants to kiss the guy's balls so he does, licking down the thick vein on the underside until he can suck one and then the other into his mouth, mumbling at the salt-clean taste of skin, gasping in hot breaths of sweat.

The boy in his mouth's talking, but Yuuri's not really catching much of it beyond the tone: elated and tender and coaxing, and he likes that, likes the easy tug of hands in his hair and pressing down the back of his neck. There's someone else rubbing his chest, thumbing his nipples, and when Yuuri takes the guy's dick back into his mouth, sucks it greedily down as deep as he can get it, someone closes their palm around his throat — like they can feel the shape of the cock there through the skin and sinew, and Yuuri whines, high and desperate at the thought.

The guy he's sucking off says, "I'm gonna — fuck, *shit*," and pulls out, ignoring the way Yuuri complains about it. When he comes, it's in stripes over Yuuri's swollen mouth, down his chin.

Yuuri tastes it, curious, and thinks this guy doesn't taste like Akihito either: sharper, more sour, with a deep bitterness. He doesn't get to do much more analysis, because the hand that had been in his hair is cupping his cheek now, and Yuuri hears, "Hey, what's your name, sweetheart?" and says, "Yuuri," shy. He gets kissed, slow and easy and good. Yuuri can feel big shoulders under his hands, thick muscles nothing like his own, and he remembers a strong jaw and pretty blue eyes from earlier. He's so happy right now, to feel — finally — some connection, happy to gasp at the way he feels a nip at his lower lip, two more hands stroking down his back.

"Yuuri, this okay?" Blue Eyes asks, and Yuuri nods.

Everything's okay, as long as he doesn't go back to his horrible little room in the horrible little house he's staying in with Celestino, the shitty Skype connection that's his only thread home. This party is wonderful and so is everyone in this room right now, all the hands carrying him to the disheveled bed with its navy sheets, pulling off his jeans and his briefs, stroking up the inside of his thighs.

Blue Eyes lies down next to him, mouths kisses at Yuuri's collarbones, rubs his hand over his belly, and Yuuri sighs into it, melting, until he feels another mouth at the back of his neck, more teeth than lips. That sting's good, too, and Yuuri lets out a little *ah*, rocking back into the hurt — when he does, he feels another body behind him, a little softer than Blue Eyes, but taller, and then a hand wraps around his cock and he's too distracted to do much more comparing.

When Blue Eyes moves away, Yuuri doesn't have time to miss him, a guy with dark hair is kneeling up on the bed, shucking his pants down over his hips and gripping his dick by the base. He doesn't get any closer to Yuuri, though, hesitating, and when Yuuri looks up, the guy is red-faced, biting his lip, as shy as Yuuri feels all the time.

"It's okay," Yuuri tells him, grinning, and reaches over, hooks a finger in the guy's beltloop and drags him in — in, until he can rub the head of his cock over the seam of his mouth,

friendly, and when he hears a shaky, "Ah — Christ," Yuuri grins and purses his lips, sucks him in slowly.

Dark Hair is thicker, shorter than Blue Eyes, and he fucks Yuuri's mouth hard and a little mean, locks his hand on the back of Yuuri's neck. It's consuming, it makes Yuuri's eyes water and his throat hurt, and it blurs out the rest of the room and the world until he feels cold, slick fingers pressing into his ass, rubbing him open.

Yuuri hears someone ask him, "Baby, can I fuck you? Please, just a little," and he's delirious, now, because it's never the same, riding his own fingers — he can't get deep enough — and now, oh, oh, it's so good he could cry.

Yuuri sobs, "Please, please," and hears the sound of foil tearing, the snap of a bottle cap, and finally, *finally* the aching, unyielding press of a dick stretching him open, filling him up. Yuuri rolls his hips back, greedy, and it hurts, it's been ages since he's had anything thicker than three fingers, but it's so good his mouth lolls open, and it's all he can do to lick slowly at the dick pressing at his lower lip, to throb around the weight of the cock in his ass.

When Yuuri comes, it's after Dark Hair's jerked out his load across Yuuri's tongue, and it's with Blue Eyes pressed back up against his chest, pinching one of his nipples and whipping a hand over Yuuri's dick even as Yuuri's trembling from how hard he's getting fucked — balanced just on the razor edge between hurt and something agonizingly good. But then Blue Eyes kisses him, and Yuuri's glad, so glad, and Yuuri wails into his mouth, cock jerking, ass throbbing, and it all melts away into the dizzy, overstimulated bliss of finally, *finally* getting out of his own head.

Yuuri wakes up when Blue Eyes brings him a giant coffee, a bag of donuts, and a clean t-shirt. It's full daylight outside the windows and there's a girl asleep on the other bed in the room. The blankets Yuuri's curled in are disgusting, but Blue Eyes just grins and sits down on the edge of the mattress anyway.

"Um," Yuuri says, fuzzy awareness giving way to mortification.

"I'm Ben," Blue Eyes — Ben says.

Ben feeds him coffee and introduces Yuuri to the wonders of the Boston Creme Donut, which almost makes up for the way Yuuri has to sit on a bunch of paper towels because he's still dripping lube.

"I'm not, um, like this," Yuuri says, struggling to find the right words in his limited vocabulary to explain that when he gets drunk he gets ridiculous and he doesn't know how to turn it off and he's *so sorry* for everything last night.

"That's a shame, it was fun," Ben teases, but leaves him alone after Yuuri goes bright red and sticks to the donuts and coffee.

Ben gives him a ride home so Yuuri doesn't have to do the walk of shame. When they pull up, Celestino's got his face pressed against the living room window like a psychopath, and Yuuri's wearing someone else's t-shirt, so Yuuri's not sure the drive's really eliminated the

walk of shame so much as dragged someone else into it, but he gets Ben's phone number and makes a new friend.

After the Unspeakable Frat Party Incident, Yuuri takes a vow of sobriety.

He ignores Celestino's protests and empties the house of alcohol. He spends an afternoon sitting in the last pew in the boxy church at the edge of campus, having an awkward one-sided conversation with a God he doesn't actually believe in or know that much about. It's mostly intermittent, half-horny, half-horrified flashbacks to the Unspeakable Frat Party Incident. Later that night, he cries snotty, self-recriminating tears over the way he's completely redefined the concept of whiskey dick and how he's a terrible, slutty drunk, and eats an entire box of Oreos.

That summer, after Ben flies off back to Colorado, Yuuri thinks it's going to be a quiet, lonely few months — except he shows up at the rink one morning for practice and meets Phichit.

Phichit is pure effervescence, distilled sunshine, relentless with his social media campaign. He declares that it's dumb to rent a separate apartment and moves into the house with Yuuri and Celestino, and it's the happiest Yuuri's been since he left Japan. Yuuri knows maybe fifteen words of Thai and Phichit knows maybe fourteen words of Japanese, but they practice their English with each other and create a secret language, the kind that laces a friendship into a Gordian Knot: only breakable if cleaved apart.

Yuuri's never been an older brother before, but he feels an awful tenderness for Phichit, who's only three years younger; fifteen seems impossibly little sometimes, for a boy to be all alone in Detroit. So Yuuri helps Phichit with his homework and they train together in the mornings, lets Phichit fuss at him in rapid-fire Thai when Yuuri doesn't properly tend to the sores and bruises on his feet and ankles. Phichit makes Yuuri teach him ballet, and they use the boards in the rink as their barre — practice maintaining perfect extension and effortless balance, every muscle tensed to near-exhaustion, the curve of a wrist, the sharp and beautiful arch of a pointed foot.

Yuuri makes his senior debut at Skate Canada in Kingston.

The city is on the mouth of the Cataraqui and St. Lawrence rivers, and is known for its limestone buildings and monuments to a bunch of people Yuuri has never heard of because it's Canada, according to Phichit, who tags along for some town bronze. Kingston's caught up in an unseasonable heat wave, and the whole city is crawling with skaters, skate enthusiasts, television crews and coaches — they're still in the airport waiting for their luggage when Yuuri first starts feeling like the walls are closing in.

They're booked into the Holiday Inn Kingston Waterfront, a 4 minute walk from the K-Rock Center, and thus the epicenter of every fashion and form of figure skating chicanery and drama. In the lobby there's a Romanian ice dancer Yuuri vaguely recognizes sharpening a stick with a knife, and they share an elevator up to their floor with JJ Leroy, who is wearing massive Beats headphones while *also* singing a song about himself, eyes screwed shut with the intensity of his feelings.

"This is amazing," Phichit gasps, in ecstasies, and whips out his phone.

JJ throws a fist in the air. "*I never give up — even if the night should fall —* "

"Oh, *no*, Phichit, don't," Yuuri starts.

" — *Always do my best — I look in the mirror —* "

Phichit whispers near the phone's mic, "Reporting live, from Skate Canada."

Yuuri puts his face in his hands.

"*The king looks back at me*," JJ roars, the mechanical 'ding' of the elevator cutting through, and Yuuri mutters, "*Finally*," before grabbing his bag and Phichit by the collar to haul them off the lift.

Celestino's forbidden him from last minute practice, but gets him a two-day pass to a local gym and folds Yuuri up like a pretzel for hours. There's nobody in one of the classrooms, so Yuuri sinks into the physical memory of his short program choreography: the strength in his legs and the clench of his fists, how strange it is to touch a barre and hold his wrist so stiffly, when there's strength in perfectly controlled grace.

Celestino chose the music to bolster him, to let Yuuri borrow the triumphal brass and hugeness of "Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside" to buoy himself from doubt. But Yuuri only ever feels like he's playacting at Ramades glory — he feels more like Aida, terrified and hiding her true nature, a prisoner and a stranger in Egypt, already mourning her love.

Yuuri gets steamed chicken cutlets and vegetables for dinner and doesn't eat much of it. His stomach doesn't hurt, exactly, but it feels like some rotting framework has fallen away at the bottom of his diaphragm and revealed a bottomless void. He feels cold from the inside out, a nauseating, continuous roiling in his gut. He doesn't want to be alone, but trying to talk to Phichit is exhausting, too; he has to sleep and he can't, because if he does he'll wake up and it will be tomorrow, and it will be time for his short program.

Celestino only lets Phichit stay in Yuuri's room after extracting a blood oath that Yuuri gets plenty of sleep, and in the end it's only because of Phichit Yuuri sleeps at all.

"Oh, how about this?" Phichit says, and he plugs in Yuuri's phone and props it up on the beside table, so Yuuri can see the little screen and realize he's staring at YouTube playlist of dozens of Viktor Nikiforov's greatest programs and lets out a little huff of laughter.

"See, your embarrassing crush is good for something," Phichit tells him, petting Yuuri's hair, which is *at least* as embarrassing as Yuuri's crush.

Yuuri presses his face into the hotel pillows, his cheek hot against the percale. "It's not a crush," he says.

"Okay, sure," Phichit allows, and Yuuri falls asleep somewhere between Viktor's first World's gold performance and an exhibition he did in Seoul last year. It was a good one: stubborn and unerringly frigid, to a thundering beat.

In the liminal space between the soft haze of just-sleep and the undertow of REM, Yuuri thinks about Aida, enslaved and held hostage in Egypt, her doomed love with Ramades. He thinks about how she must have felt, to see her father march on Egypt, to see her lover condemned. He knows she must have been frightened, so much more frightened than he is right now, when she'd hidden herself away among the cobwebs and *ka* of the crypt to await Ramades, to share in his fate as she must have wanted them to share in all things. What glory is there in war, when this is its conclusion, Yuuri thinks, woozy with his anxiousness and the insistence of sleep, finally come to him, with the sound of Viktor's blades cutting across the ice.

The men's short program competition starts at 6:15, so Yuuri sleeps in, spends most of the mid-morning in the hotel gym, emptied of its other skaters. He does a circuit of all the machines, and walks around until Celestino corrals him in and forces him to choke down lunch: small salad, water, a hard boiled egg, a piece of ham. Yuuri doesn't think he could eat anything else. By 3 p.m. he and Phichit are in the K-Rock, and by 3:01 p.m. Phichit's abandoned him to go take as many selfies with figure skating luminaries as humanly possible. Yuuri picks a corner and curls up in front of it to start flipping through his phone for pictures of Vicchan.

But he's not really thinking about Vicchan, and the horrible haircut his mom got Vicchan, and the more he listens to his music, the angrier he gets — for Aida, for Ramades. That they had only ever tried to do the best they could, and instead they had died in each other's arms in the dark, everything lost.

It's that burn that moves Yuuri when Celestino comes to rouse him at 5 to warm up, that carries him when Patrick Chan heads for the kiss and cry and he heads for the ice.

Viktor Nikiforov said, once, in an interview that when he skates, his head is perfectly clear — the steady tone of a note held for flawless long minutes. When Yuuri skates, his head is a mess, teeming and terrified, that scene with Indiana Jones running from the bolder, being chased by his own failings across the rink.

He has a pretty tooth-rattling fall from a triple lutz in the first part of the program, but he lands his quad perfectly, his head filled with white noise and Verdi, the turbine noise of heaving breaths.

Celestino more or less plucks him off the ice as soon as Yuuri's within arm's length, and Phichit's waiting for him at kiss and cry. He's still mostly numb when his short program result comes out at 78.34 — and he mostly processes that it's good because Phichit starts screaming and Celestino bowls him over with a bear hug more than anything else.

That night Yuuri eats like a bird again, the baffled, ambivalent lack of anguish after the short program melting away into sucking worry by 8 p.m. He chokes down some poached chicken breast and half an avocado, some carrot sticks, and eventually just gives up and lets Phichit tuck him into bed with another YouTube playlist of Viktor Nikiforov's programs to lull him to sleep.

Yuuri doesn't remember what he dreams, but he wakes up reaching for something across the length of his bed — his fingers startling at the cold of the other pillows.

He manages a protein bar for breakfast, which he regrets for the rest of the day while he vacillates between cold numbness and overwhelming nausea. He stretches; he looks at Yutopia's website, its clunky interface and gawky text, a relic he'd created for a project in high school and that his family had made a great to-do over. His sister still updates it dutifully, and Yuuri swipes through photos of the entryway, the guest tatami rooms, the banquet hall, the bath area, scrubbed to sparkling, and the onsen: steaming gently with a single radiant red maple leaf in the water.

"*Dtaai laew* — Yuuri! Are you *crying*?" Phichit wails at him.

Yuuri scrubs at his face and cries, "No."

Celestino tells him to go do a lap around the K-Rock, which he probably means kindly but mostly feels like a punishment, especially since when Yuuri gets out there it's fucking boiling outside and *JJ* is also doing laps — *still singing to himself*.

"Oh, hells to the no," Phichit says, because he'd come with Yuuri out of loyalty. 'Hells to the no' was the first thing Ben ever taught Phichit to say, and the primary reason Phichit believes Yuuri when he argues Ben is a nice person.

They end up in a shop called Tim Hortons, eating maple syrup flavored everything, which can't be good for competition except that Yuuri knows his blood sugar is rock bottom. If he faints and eats ice face first during his FP there's not going to be an ocean trench deep enough for Yuuri to drown himself in.

Yuuri's free skate is to Rossini, "The Thieving Magpie" overture, and Celestino had choreographed it to maximize Yuuri's aptitude for footwork, to pick out the the tiny trills of the music across the ice. His hardest quad is in the first half, his other jumps are all in the second, and Yuuri loves the program, skates it for fun and to feel the thrill of how hard it is, skates it with a grin. The idea of skating it for judges makes him want to revisit all his maple syrup donuts.

At 5:15 Celestino sends out a series of threatening text messages, first in English and then in Italian and then in obviously Google-translated Thai and Japanese, so Yuuri resigns himself to being herded back to the K-Rock to face his doom.

He meets it okay, to the tune of 154.78 for a cumulative of 233.12 — decimals above fourth place to take the bronze.

Afterward, he Skypes his family.

His mother — bleary from staying up all night to watch him compete and red-eyed from crying — shows him the wild hodge podge sleepover of the usual suspects: his father, Minako-sensei, some regulars from the Yutopia onsen, and Nishigori and Yuuko-chan, only recently un-pregnant. There's a giant banner reading YUURI GANNBATTE!!! and on the

table there's the biggest katsudon Yuuri's ever seen, a dozen pieces of katsu scattered across a banquet platter. There's cracked-open and already-emptied beers absolutely everywhere. Vicchan has absolutely no idea why everybody's so excited, but he's excited, too, and he's barking like crazy, contributing to a tsumani of shouting and well-wishes and congratulations so loud it distorts the phone's audio, and Yuuri laughs and waves and waves at all of them, flushed and snotty from crying, too.

This — this moment right now — this is the happiest he's been all competition.

After Skate Canada Yuuri's assaulted by a flurry of Japanese media requests. They all seem to want to talk to a version of Yuuri who doesn't exist: someone confident and comfortable — two words Yuuri would never associate with his skating. Back home in Hasetu, Mari-nee-chan is keeping a running tally of every stupid thing he says in this carpet bomb of media coverage, which is both to be expected and infuriating.

The only question Yuuri's good at answering is, "who is your skating inspiration?" though that's not without its own resultant problems.

Starting a separate tally for your embarrassing public declarations of love for Viktor; Mari-nee-chan texts him.

Yuuri, who's sitting on a verdant lawn at the Law Quadrangle, flops backward onto the grass, groaning. The clear heat of the sun is wonderful through his shirt, through the denim of his jeans, and he squints into the brightness of the day until he brings his cell phone up to block out the sun and type back, *it's not a crush*.

Mari-nee-chan's response is a blurry picture of a Japanese skating magazine, and Yuuri's sweaty, awkward smile next to a pull quote:

"Viktor Nikiforov has truly been the source of my passion. I want to be able to skate on his level, and I promise to do my best to reach this goal. Please believe it."

Go away, Yuuri writes back, for lack of a compelling response.

Mari-nee-chan sends him a picture of Vicchan looking skeptical, which Yuuri guesses he deserves.

The truth is Yuuri doesn't have a crush on Viktor. The whole idea is ridiculous. Yuuri's read every interview, every news article, watched every performance and each of his televised sit-downs — but Viktor's so far from the actionable reality of Yuuri's life the little bruise of longing hurt and shy pleasure Yuuri feels at the sight of Viktor's face is the same secret tenderness he harbors for characters in books, heroes in movies. Viktor isn't any more within Yuuri's reach than Everest or the moon.

Yuuri's only a part time student at UMich Ann Arbor, running back and forth between the campus and his rink in the suburbs 20 minutes outside of Detroit. Yuuri feels constantly late and excessively overextended, like in his effort to do everything he's doing all of it poorly — but his family is so good to him, so patient with him, and the only thing his parents asked was

for him to go to and finish college. It seems like the very, very least he can do in the face of a lifetime of rink fees, coaching costs, expensive costumes and equipment and physical therapy and Yuuri's categorical absence — for Mari-nee-chan being the one who has to shoulder the family business.

He misses Hasetsu. He misses Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei. He misses his mother and father, the easy rhythm and kindness of life at Yutopia. He misses Yu-chan and Nishigori. He misses Vicchan. Yuuri misses home so much it's become a war wound, a longing that simmers underneath so steadily he doesn't even register the hurt any longer.

Or maybe that's just the way scars form, slow and imperfect but miraculous, and Yuuri gets distracted from the line of thought by Phichit, clutching two Starbucks cups topped with mounds of whipped cream, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"You've got that look on your face," Phichit accuses. "Stop it immediately."

Yuuri takes his cup. "I don't have a look."

"It's the last warm day we're having until next May," Phichit informs him. "You better be cheerful for it, Yuuri."

"Okay, okay," Yuuri laughs, and he puts his headphones back to turn back to his homework. Trophee Eric Bompard is in just a month — he has enough to worry about without borrowing trouble.

The Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy is massive, half-subterranean, with blue scaffolding at the top and grass growing around the outside, an echo of the Louvre's glass pyramid at one of its points. This time, it's just Yuuri and Celestino for the Trophee Eric Bompard, since Phichit takes the opportunity to escape Michigan winter and visit his family back home in Thailand. Everything in Paris is very French, and everyone in Paris is extremely French, which means everything is extremely terrifying.

The arena is in the 12th Arrondissement, nearest to the Bercy Metro stop and a 2 minute walk from the Novotel where Yuuri and Celestino are staying. They share a room this time, which means Yuuri's pre-competition moments are just horror movie flashcuts of trying to sleep, trying to eat, trying to work out. Celestino confiscates his cell phone at night because he claims blue light keeps you awake, so Yuuri stares at the ceiling of the hotel room and lets Celestino's snoring serve as the background track to his silent, hours-long nuclear meltdown instead.

He's groggy and not at his best during any of the competition, but wonder of wonders, he ends up placing 4th overall for men's singles, and Celestino calls it a success and drags him off to celebrate.

"Oh, Coach, you know how I get when — " Yuuri starts, blushing already.

Celestino roars laughing, still ebullient, and claps Yuuri on the back.

"You're a young, vigorous man, Yuuri, it's only to be expected," he says with the blissful assurance of a man who doesn't know the full nature of the Unspeakable Frat Party Incident. "Come on — you deserve a drink!"

"Oh, God," Yuuri manages, and gets hauled off to the hotel bar.

Yuuri doesn't exactly have a sweet tooth, but he likes sweet drinks, the fluorescent tropical ones, and Celestino indulges this by getting him a Mai Tai. Yuuri decides he's going to drink it with quiet reserve and in small, moderate sips in a corner and go to bed early, maybe do some sightseeing tomorrow in Paris before their flight later that night. He'll visit a museum, see the Champs-Elysees, maybe he'll even have time for Versailles.

Then Christophe Giacometti shows up double fisting champagne and grinning.

"Katsuki, right?" he asks.

Yuuri chokes, which Giacometti apparently interprets as "yes," and hands Yuuri one of the champagne flutes. Whatever Giacometti's saying is barely audible with the music in the bar, the crowd of drunk skaters yelling at each other, Yuuri's still imperfect grasp of English and Giacometti's accent. Yuuri does catch "stunning," whatever that means; it's not like his program was a surprise.

"Thank you," Yuuri says, because it's polite, and drinks the champagne, because it's also polite, and by the time he finishes that one, he's starting to feel that good lassitude that visits with good drinks: all his muscles unwinding, the stress melting out of his spine.

Chris — he insists Yuuri call him Chris — is intimidatingly handsome, even if his eyebrows are too dark for his nest of butter blond curls, and Yuuri's stumbling over whatever *Chris* is trying to teach him to say in French when a dark-haired man in a suit shows up clutching a trio of drinks.

"*There* you are," the new arrival says, and Chris cheers, "Nils! Finally! Meet *Yuuri*."

Chris had won bronze with Christina Aguilera's "Dirrty," so Yuuri feels tremendous sympathy for Nils, who is evidently Chris's long-suffering manager and also long-suffering boyfriend. Chris is as — as — *you know* off the ice as he is on the ice, and Yuuri watches Chris grope no fewer than a dozen people while Nils sits there, stoic, having a completely benign conversation with Yuuri about new composite materials for skate blades.

"Um — doesn't that...?" Yuuri starts.

Chris had gone to get them all water, which means that now Chris is at the bar touching the bartender's chest and licking his lips.

Nils grimly finishes his scotch and soda. "We have an agreement."

"*Uh*," Yuuri says, and it's just as well that Chris zooms back up to them and says, "The night is young and *we* are young and we are in *Paris* — let's go."

Le Marais is gorgeous, all old buildings in orange lamplight and paved streets, and Yuuri is wide-eyed and flushed at all of it, and all of the *people*: the streets spilling over with music and light even in the cold and dark. He gets a lot of curious looks, in his jeans and beat up tennis shoes and old, dark coat, and Yuuri feels himself go pink at the way Chris is a magnet for attention, dragging Yuuri and Nils down the winding streets caroling out flirty answers to all the flirty things people are yelling at them.

They wind past all the charming little restaurants and bars, until they duck into a club with a bouncer at the door and all its windows blacked out.

The club is — terrifying.

At the door, Yuuri knows enough French and hand signals to understand that there's some kind of cover charge, but it evidently gets waived when one of the bartenders spots Chris and reacts to him the way you do a longed-for child. From the doorway, all Yuuri sees is an ocean of intimidatingly gorgeous men in skintight clothes grinding to ear-bleeding techno, and he can't imagine the face he's making.

"Don't worry," Yuuri hears, and glances left to see Nils smiling at him. "No one's going to do anything to you you don't want, okay?"

Then Chris slinks back over, flushed and grinning, and loops an arm around Yuuri's neck, saying, "The bartender says if we give you to him, I get free drinks for life."

Nils makes sure Chris doesn't sell Yuri to the French, but installs him in a safe, relatively unmolested corner of the bar instead.

"You feel okay here?" Nils asks, and he's surprisingly quiet in the huge noise of the club, with a surprisingly earnest smile on his face. "I'm happy to take you back to the hotel if you want."

Yuuri looks over Nils's shoulder, to where Chris is already in the fray of dancing bodies — shirt off and arms over his head — his torso undulating and his eyes closed, lashes dark on his cheekbones and a flush on his face. There's already a cluster of gleaming-eyed men gathered near him, and Yuuri has a feeling this is going to turn into a riot or an orgy by the end of the night.

"Don't worry about Chris," Nils laughs. "He can take care of himself — but what about you? How are you feeling?"

Yuuri feels — bewildered, a little nervous in a new place, astonished to be where he is, but not *bad*, and not scared, really. Actually, now that he's sitting here and the bartender Chris tried to sell him to has given him a dark and sharp-tasting drink, it feels good to lean against the bar and just look, to think about absolutely everything except for himself and his skating. Yuuri admits that in spite of everything, he's a little sheltered, and he's never seen anything like this place, filled to overflowing with people who are and aren't like him at all.

"I'm okay, really," Yuuri promises, still shy about Nils, who isn't as tongue-twistingly beautiful as Chris, but who is very handsome and very nice on his own. "I just want to sit

here and decompress for a while — you should go dance. With Chris."

Because by now there are at least two different guys with their hands down Chris's leather pants. Which is impressive since they're tight enough Yuuri could tell on the way to the club Chris hadn't bothered to put on any underwear.

Nils grins, and plucks at the top buttons of his white shirt. "Come find me, okay? If you want to leave or if you don't feel good — don't worry about it, just come find me," he says, and with a wink, vanishes into the press of bodies, gone until he reappears, closing his hands around Chris's hips and sinking his teeth into his shoulder.

Yuuri turns so red so fast he thinks he *hears* it, and he whirls away from the crush on the dance floor to look at the other people at the bar. Everybody at the bar's a bit older or a bit quieter, Yuuri thinks, sipping his drink through his straw and resting his chin on the heels of his hands. They're still interesting, though: in suits and ties, or torn up t-shirts, clean-shaven or scruffy, chatting like friends or glancing at each other from underneath fluttering lashes. Yuuri thinks about the lifetime of teasing he endured in Hasetsu, about his constant lack of girlfriends, from Nishigori over his abortive and misdirected crush on Yu-chan — what would anybody back home think of him now, Yuuri wonders, grinning a little.

He feels the light touch of fingers on his arm, and Yuuri turns a little, biting down on the straw from his drink and feels it pressing into his bottom lip.

The man at his shoulder is tall, older, with a handsome, angular face and a little salt-and-pepper scruff, neatly trimmed hair. He's wearing a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up in deference to the heat of the closed-in club, and he has shockingly blue eyes: even in the haze of red light and cigarette smoke, they are very clear.

"Puis-je me permettre de vous accompagner pour un verre?" the man says.

Yuuri blinks, rapid-fire, and shakes his head, nerves ratcheting up as he says, "Um, sorry — I don't — "

"Ah, English is okay?" the man corrects, and asks, "May I sit? Share a glass a wine?" while indicating the empty stool to Yuuri's left.

"Yes, of course," Yuuri tells him, his brain desperately code-switching from the reflexive fluidity of Japanese into the textbook and hard-knock English he'd accrued over the years: from classrooms, from competitions, from friends. He waves at the stool, stuttering, "Please, sit."

He does, and extends his hand as he does. "Marc," he says,

"Yuuri," Yuuri murmurs.

The handshake turns out not really to be a handshake — nothing so polite, so much as Marc pressing their palms together to lay Yuuri's flat, so that he can ghost his mouth over the back of Yuuri's fingers, press his thumb, sharp, into the skin and soft sinew of Yuuri's hand. It makes Yuuri gasp: in surprise, in unexpected pleasure.

Marc looks up at him, smiling, but it's a nice smile, nothing predatory in it at all. Yuuri is a self-admitted coward and keenly attuned to these things, but all he sees in Marc's eyes is an uncomplicated interest, and that's why he doesn't pull his hand away, why he manages a shaky, bashful little smile.

"Um, it's very nice to meet you," he says, each word getting quieter.

Yuuri can't help but to feel a little pang of regret when Marc releases his fingers, so he doesn't pull away from the touch, lets his fingertips linger. In the dark, blue-red light of the club, with the music still booming, Yuuri feels very different and distinct from himself. He's in Paris and he's a stranger even to himself right now. It feels like anything could happen — that anything might.

"Am I correct in assuming this is your first time here?" Marc asks, scrupulously polite.

Yuuri laughs. "Yes — first time in Paris, too."

"First time!" Marc cries. "Traveling? A holiday?"

"Skating," Yuuri says.

The next 10 minutes are a mix of broken English, French interjection, drawings on damp bar napkins, and Yuuri bursting into laughter as Marc gets progressively more ridiculous with his praise. Because Yuuri lacks the vocabulary to explain an axel in any English Marc has the vocabulary to understand, he ends up pushing off the stool and doing the jump, feeling absurd but reasonlessly happy — he finished fourth! At the Trophee Eric Bompard! And now he's here, in this bar talking about skating to someone interesting — to someone *interested*.

"You're fantastic. Champagne, we must have champagne to celebrate," Marc declares, and Yuuri just giggles, his nervous excitement fizzing through him like an uncorked magnum, rushing upward, as he wriggles back onto the barstool.

They have champagne, and Marc toasts to his axels and to Yuuri's first time in Paris.

"May the city enchant you, as you have enchanted me," Marc says to him.

Yuuri ducks his head to hide how red his face is, and makes himself take another sip of the champagne so he can't say anything dumb.

Marc's surprisingly insightful view into the mechanics of figure skating jumps is explained when he explains he works as an engineer, with a background in physics. Over the evening and several more flutes of champagne, Marc's drafting hand joins Yuuri's chibi-style napkin drawings of sit-spins and spread-eagles. It's Marc's architect's lettering that indicates the angles and forces that keep Yuuri suspended mid-air, or bring him crashing brutally down to the ice. It's wonderful, and Yuuri can't help but to stare and stare at it, helplessly charmed.

"Can I keep this?" Yuuri asks, finally unable to resist. He's already touching fingertips to the edge of the napkin, he wants it so badly.

Marc's expression is complicated, something hot and tender all at once, and instead of saying "yes," or "no," he closes his massive hand around Yuuri's wrist and says, "Come home with me — I'll draw you something better."

They're on the way out the door — Marc's helping Yuuri with his coat — when Chris is suddenly there and in Yuuri's face, flushed and absolutely covered in glitter, his mouth swollen from...something, smiling with pure affection.

"*Yuuri*," Chris says, putting a hand around Yuuri's elbow in a move that looks friendly but feels steady, unyielding. "Nils and I are going to a different club, want to come?"

"Oh, no, that's fine, Chris," Yuuri chokes out, and looks over his shoulder to where Marc's got an indulgent look on his face. "I'm — um."

Then Chris is planting a sloppy kiss on Yuuri's face, all drunk happiness, and he clutches Yuuri close in a hug to whisper, "Of course — have fun. Call if you need, okay? I'll make Nils come get you," and stuffs — *stuffs some extremely suspicious packages into Yuuri's coat pocket oh my God.*

"*Goodbye, Chris*," Yuuri yells, fleeing into the night, Marc trailing and gasping with laughter.

Yuuri goes through a hundred and one emotions in the trip from the bar to Marc's apartment, hidden inside a gated townhouse with a little paved courtyard.

The cold keeps him insulated from his thoughts before the cab, and then in the car, Marc takes his hand and presses a kiss to Yuuri's opened palm, and the realization of what he's doing presses down on Yuuri like an avalanche — immobilizing with shock. But then there's a flash of something outside the window that seizes Yuuri's flickering attention, and he turns to see Paris in all of her splendor, the city yawning into Christmas as November fades: candle-colored in the swallowing black of night, as the taxi races down a bridge to the other side of the Seine. Yuuri thinks of being 7 years old, of Hasetu and Yutopia being his whole world, and marvels at how the universe is ever-expanding, unrelenting, feels tumbled through and outward, breathless.

Marc's flat is massive, with cavernous ceilings and gold gilded moulding on the walls, parquet floors that gleam. The windows open inward, 12 feet tall, and outside is the Quai de la Tournelle and the Seine, glittering from the lights of Notre Dame — magnificent and unmoving in its perch on the island.

Yuuri kicks off his shoes in the entryway, because it's disgusting and wrong to wear shoes inside, but Marc reads in it something else entirely. He helps Yuuri out of his coat, pins him slowly against one of those beautifully decorated walls, and takes so long to kiss Yuuri that the slow press of their bodies together and Marc's breath warm against his mouth feels like asking for permission.

Because it's Paris and he's apparently *crazy* now, Yuuri says, "*Please*," and winds his arms around Marc's neck, closing the last millimeters between them.

It's ridiculous for Yuuri to feel as shy as he does, as *new* as he does, but maybe that's just because of the way Marc kisses him: thorough and unhurried, deeply, reaching one of his large hands up to cup Yuuri's face, fingers hot and solid on the side of Yuuri's neck. Marc nips at Yuuri's lower lip, and presses his tongue in when Yuuri gasps at it, his whole body shivering. Yuuri's been kissed before, but not like this, and Yuuri's been touched before, but not like this, either: with easy confidence, guiding him out of the hallway and through the flat, toward the shadowed door of the bedroom and then to the bed, where the orange lights of the outside slant across the bed.

Yuuri feels like he's swimming in honey, champagne in his veins and zinging through the chambers of his heart instead of blood. There's a coal burning in his stomach even though his skin's pricking with the coolness of the room, and he's scared and excited, letting Marc press him into the the duvet and kiss him on the side of his neck, wailing when he gets teeth and a bruising suck as a reward.

He's always rushed through these bits before — from that first time with Keiichi to the Unspeakable Frat Party Incident, always too impatient and wanting and desperate, too, in case his partners realized and thought better of who they were with. But Yuuri feels too good to be worried about that right now, not with Marc whispering his name into his skin, through open-mouthed kisses to Yuuri's wrist, his collarbones, the top of his foot, bruised to hell from competition, still. He feels like they have all the time in the world, that night in Paris must last forever.

They get undressed in stages, taking ages, because every time Marc finds a bruise or the surprising shadow of muscle on Yuuri's body, he murmurs in wonder at it and Yuuri is all embarrassed pleasure, gone boneless under Marc's mouth and his hands, stroking down his arms and down his back, peeling away his t-shirt, thumbing over the zip of his jeans. Yuuri doesn't think much about his body beyond the mechanics of it or the way it betrays him, retaining katsudon and cake, and he knows it's absurd to be shy but he is, and thrillingly pleased to see Marc is so pleased, running his hands down the faint line of tight muscles in Yuuri's core and growling something hot and unknowable in French.

Marc is all new, too, not like the slim skater's builds of Keiichi or Akihito, or the bones and tightly wound bulk of Ben and his friends in the frat house. He's solid, older, with a substantive weight that makes Yuuri kind of lightheaded when it presses him down to the bed, when Marc wraps Yuuri's wrists up in one of his hands and pins them over his head. He's got wiry gray hair, rough, on his chest and down the line of his belly, and it deepens to black around the thick root of his cock, uncut and red, longer and fatter than any of the other ones Yuuri has seen and touched.

Marc bites at his chest, sucks on his nipples, rubs his naked cock over Yuuri's — he laughs at the way Yuuri's body shakes, at the noises Yuuri's making, and he lets go of Yuuri's wrists so he can palm Yuuri's ass instead, squeezing, rubbing his middle finger — teasing — over the tight furl of Yuuri's hole.

"May I?" Marc asks, voice hoarse, and Yuuri says 'yes' without really knowing what he's agreeing to.

When Marc folds him over so that his weight's balanced on his shoulders and presses the flat of his tongue against him, Yuuri gasps, high and needy and shocked.

Yuuri closes his hands over his mouth, squeezes his eyes shut, feels himself go from hard to aching, his nipples tightening and his heart beating wildly out of control. And Marc just tightens his grip on Yuuri's hips to bruising and uses his thumbs to hold him open to searing-hot open-mouthed kisses, the hard press of his tongue, the graze of teeth. Yuuri's wet-eyed and moaning into his hands, rolling his hips desperate to get more, to get deeper, to feel finally full. It feels at once exposing and shockingly intimate, and when Marc slicks a finger inside of him alongside his tongue, Yuuri gives up and lets himself wail, dick drooling and his ass throbbing.

Marc tries to put another finger in him, but it's too much too quickly, and Yuuri pushes him away until Marc falls obligingly to his back, looking curious. His mouth red and wet and it's so filthy Yuuri could immolate, but that would be rude after all of the nice things Marc's done tonight. So he kisses Marc's chin instead, kisses his shoulder and his neck, down the heavy line of his body until he can close his hand around Marc's dick and suck the head into his mouth, lavish, tease under the foreskin with his tongue until Marc's swearing is filling up the room. It's in French, so Yuuri can't understand it, but the sentiment's pretty clear and extremely flattering, so Yuuri hums — pleased — and swallows him all the way down, as deep as he can go.

Marc fists a hand in Yuuri's hair and fucks his mouth for a while, leisurely, and Yuuri feels the hazy zen of skating old routines: body-familiar, just works his tongue and his jaw and lets his eyes drift half-closed. It's easy and it's good; it lets his heartbeat slow down a little, his body relax, overstimulation simmering down again into the itch of uncomplicated pleasure. Marc tastes like sweat and the faint sweetness of skin, and Yuuri gasps when he pulls off the man's dick and presses his face into the joint of his thigh so he can lap at the heavy weight of his balls, lick at the criss-cross of dark and angry-looking veins at the root of his cock.

Yuuri's not tracking time very well, but some of it must pass before Marc's murmuring soft words at him — in English or in French, at this point, Yuuri's not parsing well. He finds himself rolled onto his belly, Marc pressing lingering kisses to the soft skin where his asscheeks meet his thighs, thumb rubbing lazy and just barely inside him.

"Okay?" Marc asks, and Yuuri decides to answer by grabbing at one of the two dozen massive pillows on the bed and tucking it under his hips, shimmying as he goes, and it makes Marc laugh and kiss him wetly in the small of his back.

Yuuri doesn't know if it's just been a while, or if Marc is really so much thicker and longer than anyone else he's been with. The slow press of his cock inside feels like it's pushing all the air out of Yuuri's lungs, squeezing out all of his thoughts, until he feels the heavy weight of hips and thighs against his own and Marc's lacing their fingers together against the linens, murmuring into the shell of Yuuri's ear, "You are all right?"

Yuuri's lashes are damp, clumped together, and all his words are gone. He doesn't know if he hurts or if he feels too much, but he likes it, the way sharp, whining little noises tumble out of him when Marc starts rocking into him in short, shallow thrusts. It's not that he's stroking over that soft spot that makes Yuuri go liquid, but his cock's big enough that the head scrapes

over every inch of him — the good and the strange and the surreal, and when Marc starts fucking him more deeply it feels like his guts are churning, that his body's splitting open for something new.

Yuuri comes twice as he's turning 20 years old in Paris, in bed with a someone twice his age: first with a cock pressed urgently against his prostate while Marc jerks him off with rough, thick fingers, and then again when he's already fucked out and weak with it, legs flung over Marc's shoulders as he sobs and sobs and gets eaten out again, his whole body tensing in nearly painful exhilaration.

He forgives himself for completely passing out, and for not waking until Marc shakes him up the next day.

"What? Who?" Yuuri says, in Japanese.

Marc is wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants and a patina of smugness. He looks completely awake and is holding Yuuri's mobile phone — still ringing.

"Good morning," he says. "I think your friends are worried."

"Shit," Yuuri says, also in Japanese, and then swaps into English to say, "Um, good morning," and awkwardly go on to say, "How are you?" like a moron.

Marc doesn't seem to think Yuuri's a moron, or at least he must think Yuuri's a cute moron, because he leans in to kiss him, slow and exceedingly indulging.

Yuuri's still a little dizzy with it by the time he finally turns back to his phone. He has one missed call and a follow-up text, both from a number he doesn't know, and he unlocks it to read, *Just checking in. Let me know where you are so Chris and I can pick you up. -Nils.*

It's just past 11 a.m., and Yuuri rolls onto his side — he's got a twinge in his back that could be from the competition or from last night, but the hollow ache in his ass...yeah — and texts back, *Thank you for checking in, Nils. I am fine. I will text you the address in a little bit. Thank you very much. I hope you and Chris had a nice night.*

He gets a response less than a minute later:

Chris got three marriage proposals and we were banned from a bar. Let me know when you're ready to go. -Nils

Marc feeds him croissants, fresh from the *boulangerie* down the street, and tiny cups of espresso for breakfast. He kisses Yuuri open-mouthed and unashamed on the street in front of his building until Nils pulls up in a carbon-black Audi wearing sunglasses and the grim-faced resignation of someone in a relationship with Chris. Who is in the backseat, asleep, in a pair of pants that were not the pants Yuuri last saw him in.

"Did you have fun?" Nils asks, over the sound of Chris snoring as they wind their way back toward the 12th, paused at an intersection in the sluggish mid-morning traffic.

Yuuri blushes and squirms in his seat, which Nils interprets on his own.

"Good," Nils says, and cracks a smile as the light goes green.

They beat Phichit back to Detroit, so Yuuri's quietly trying to do his homework when the house is filled suddenly with laughing and loud noises again. There's a thunder of feet up the stairs, and Phichit bursts into Yuuri's bedroom holding a giant bag of gifts — tossing them aside so he can tackle Yuuri into a full-bodied hug. Yuuri hugs him right back. Just seeing Phichit on Facebook isn't the same at all.

"I heard! I read! Congratulations!" Phichit cries, shoving random things from Thailand into Yuuri's arms. "How was Paris? Was it fun? Did you like it?"

"Thank you," Yuuri laughs, flushed with happiness, and because he means it, he says, "Paris was amazing — I loved it."

Yuuri doesn't qualify for the Grand Prix Final in Beijing, so he and Phichit watch it at home, plotting out Phichit's senior debut. They get a little LED Christmas tree from Walgreens and start wearing two pairs of socks inside their weatherproof boots to slog to and from the car to the rink to class and home again. Phichit reads all the Harry Potter books as part of his language study and when Celestino gets back from a week in Italy visiting family he finds Yuuri and Phichit bombed on alcoholic butterbeer, and makes them do 50 laps in the snow the next morning when they're still hung over.

On December 22, Celestino chivvies Yuuri onto a flight for Japanese Nationals, and when they stagger off of the shinkansen in Nagano, it's to a welcome-wagon of Yuuri's family. The Nishigoris lead the charge, with Nishigori and Yu-chan each wearing a baby on their chest and the third triplet in a carriage. Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-chan are both there, brandishing a WELCOME HOME, KATSUKI YUURI sign, and his mother and father are next to them, holding a bento and a bouquet of flowers respectively, Vicchan pulling desperately on his lead and going bananas barking at Yuuri in idiot joy.

Yuuri forgives himself for completely dissolving into tears because Celestino starts crying, too, and the whole crew of them are an embarrassment to everybody else in the train terminal.

That night, they take over the banquet room of a ryokan and Yuuri eats his mom's katsudon and listens to his dad and Nishigori talking over each other describing the utter pandemonium of Yutopia's common room during Yuuri's performances at Skate Canada and Trophée Eric Bompard. Vicchan exhausts himself with ecstatic happiness, and curls up in Yuuri's lap. Yuuri meets Axel and Lutz and Loop, who drool, cry and bully him, respectively — proving they're Nishigoris through and through.

Minako-sensei asks him if he's got a girlfriend. When Yuuri turns ghost white, she arches her eyebrows like she *knows* and punches him in the shoulder.

"You tell me when you — *meet someone*," she threatens him. "*Or else*."

Yuuri flinches in instinctive terror. "*Um*."

Mari-nee-chan hooks an arm around his shoulders and pokes Yuuri in the cheek. "This one?" she hoots. "Don't be ridiculous Minako-sensei — I bet he's never even had a *conversation* with a crush."

Yuuri nods solemnly until Minako-sensei narrows her all-seeing gaze at him and he stills like a prey animal that's been spotted by an apex predator.

The Nishigoris have family in Nagano, and they head out early to tuck the babies away to bed. Yuuri's mother and father are renting a room from the ryokan owner, but Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei have a room in Yuuri's hotel.

"Don't stay up too late, and don't disturb Yuuri's rest!" their mom says.

"Of course," Mari-nee-chan says, saccharine-sweet.

Minako-sensei, pretending to be a real adult, laughs politely. "Don't worry, Hiroko-san, I've got these two well in hand," she says, in a way that might be more convincing if she didn't volunteer to distract the hotel security while Mari-nee-chan and Yuuri sneak Vicchan up into his room.

They push the beds together and sleep in a pile. Vicchan gets both pillows and Mari-nee-chan snores in Yuuri's ear, the television in the room is showing unending reruns of Cardcaptor Sakura, the sound turned low. At half-past midnight, Minako-sensei comes in looking a little tipsy and a lot kissed and shoves at Yuuri until he makes room for her under the covers.

"Hey, punk," she whispers at him, not all that quiet. Good thing Mari-nee-chan sleeps like a log. "What the hell was that? Do you actually have a girlfriend?"

Yuuri tries to hide himself under the dog, which lasts all of 10 seconds until Minako-sensei starts pinching him wherever she can reach.

"Don't make me lay you out for stretches, Katsuki," she hisses. "Spill."

"I — don't have a girlfriend," Yuuri mutters. Oh, God, his face is 100 degrees. If his brain boils in his skull and he can't compete in the SP tomorrow Celestino is going to kill him.

She pinches him again. "Boyfriend?" she asks, with the same impatience.

"*Argh*," Yuuri says, trying to duck away from her evil pinching hands. "*No*."

Minako-sensei's quiet for a moment, and much more softly, she asks, "Is it bad?"

It plunges Yuuri into the memory of been 6 and hiding in her dance studio from the other kids in town — not because they were mean to him, but because he didn't understand them, and they were overwhelming to him. Minkao-sensei's not exactly nice, but that's always been the least important thing she is to him: safety, comfort, someone who's happy to be quiet with him, who doesn't laugh at him and never lets him off the hook. Yuuri squeezes his eyes closed and doesn't know how to explain to her all the things that have happened — everything he's done.

"Hey, Yuuri," she whispers, and now she's running her hand through his hair, soothing him like he's a little boy again. "You know there's nothing you can do that would make me think less of you. You don't need to tell me everything — I just want to know: are you happy? Do I need to beat anybody up?"

Yuuri shakes his head. "I'm happy," he says to her, but he can hear himself crying a little again, he's such a baby. "You don't need to beat anybody up."

Minako-sensei pulls him in until she can wrap her arms around him, run her hands up and down his back the way she would when he was much younger, after a bad day.

"Good," she tells him. "Go to sleep — I'll go to practice with you in the morning."

Yuuri's crammed in between two starfishing women and a restless dog. It's too hot and he's going to have the Cardcaptors theme song stuck in his head for the rest of his life. It's the best he's slept in months.

The next day, Minako-sensei watches him run through his routine with Celestino a few times before she steps in. Minako-sensei is pretty hopeless when it comes to skating, but she transformed Yuuri's childhood bumbling into something balletic, and she puts him through his paces with the music and just the shape and poise of his body. She adjusts the curve of his arm two degrees, the slight tilt of his head, reminds him he should ignore or apply as needed depending on balance issues on the ice. Yuuri can feel himself being polished — the barely-there rough edges of the routine being milled away to the effortless, perfect gloss of a prima ballerina, floating weightless through her choreography.

His entire wonderful, terrible family is in the audience for the short and free programs, in matching outfits with an obnoxiously large banner. He gets hugs from Axel, Lutz, and Loop before he goes on the ice, and skates into the spotlight feeling blessed, touched through with possibility.

When they bring Yuuri up on the podium to receive his silver medal for the Japan Championships, he can hear Minako-sensei's panther scream over the entire roar of the crowd.

Yuuri's back in Detroit in time to spend New Year's Eve at a party with Ben, which goes pretty much the way Yuuri thought it would go.

The night starts with Jell-O shots and ends with Yuuri bent over a pool table listening to the eight ball clack in the pocket while he gets worked over, pushing back on Ben's dick and clawing at his thigh. They miss midnight entirely.

Celestino dispatches Yuuri to the Asia Winter Games in Kazakhstan, and he meets a cluster of adorable baby skaters and their chaperones, all at the event to observe. There're about a half-dozen boys being called 'Beka,' but only one of them is too solemn-faced for his age and gives Yuuri a thumbs up after he comes off the ice. Yuuri racks up another bronze, and it's a

good event — even if the horrifying event mascot is going to follow him into the depths of his nightmares.

The last events of the season are largely geographically restricted or junior-level competitions, but Celestino's bulldog personality packs Yuuri off for the Gardena Spring Trophy in Italy for their inaugural senior competition. Val Gardena turns out to be a valley in Northern Italy, cold and mountainous, and Yuuri finds a lot of weird wood carvings for sale which are *amazing*. He finds and acquires all the worst ones greedily. It's only the first year of senior rounds for the competition, so Yuuri credits a spartan field for why he gets gold. He packs his woodcut presents in with the medal and mails it all back home.

Yuuri's not sure if it's his grades or the way he gets back to Detroit and cries while watching "The Cutting Edge" that makes up Celestino's mind to let him off the hook for the last dredges of the season, but it works. The Ann Arbor campus shrug off the frost and snow of winter as Yuuri claws through his coursework; he tries not to think about the terrifying conversations Celestino keeps having on the phone with choreographers.

Celestino lays out Yuuri's new programs mid-March. It would feel like an extravagant luxury to have five months before he premieres it at the Japan Open in October, but five months is nothing, really, to perfect three quads, learn ankle-busting footwork, and to somehow not fall on his ass doing it to Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 in E flat and Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

Phichit, that traitor, tapes Yuuri in early run-throughs and sends the video to Minako-sensei.

"*But why*," Yuuri cries.

Shameless, Phichit scrolls through seemingly infinite photos to find one that really highlights how great Yuuri looks faceplanting into the boards. "Because I wanted her to give me some tips for polishing my component score and she said she'd do it if I creep taped you so she could make you cry."

Yuuri waits three days on pins and needles to get the call. When it comes, it's pretty spectacular — a Skype session that starts with her getting him on his knees in front of his laptop webcam, confessing all manner of sins about letting his dancing lapse, and ends with her forcing him to take the computer with him to the rink. He gets a lot of weird looks, and the little kids in the intro class in the corner learn a lot of Japanese profanity. Yuuri hears a little redheaded girl yelling, "*Kisama!*" when she slips and lands on her ass wearing leggings covered in Disney Princess faces, so that happens.

Celestino helps him tweak the choreography, shifting all three of his quads into the second half to leverage his stamina and offset the relative lack of difficulty in his program. That leaves all the footwork in the first half, which is at once good and bad.

He spends a lot of time on the ice, long hours in early morning and late at night, when the rink's pretty deserted and he can work through his program with just his headphones and on his own recognizance. He knows it's dumb not to want to look graceless in front of his coach, but Yuuri likes learning things on his own, in his own time. He listens to the concerto so much it stops sounding like real music, but the Gershwin's the real problem.

"That piece has sex appeal, Yuuri," Minako-sensei had yelled at him, tinny through the computer speakers and completely ignoring the way Yuuri had motioned for her to stop saying "sex" so loudly while Disney Princess Leggings was so eagerly listening. "It's a good program, but you're skating it like a dateless wonder!"

Yuuri's choreography cuts in between frictionless spins and soft arms for the woodwinds and picking across the ice in lightning fast footwork for the piano — when Gershwin's brass and percussion sweep in, he jumps. It's reactive and beautiful, and when he can make it all the way through, it'll be a fantastic routine. Right now, it's responsible for all of the bruising down the right side of his body and the way Minako-sensei keeps sending him YouTube videos of couples twined around each other dancing — their bodies in perfect resonance, everything too intimate. His protests that he's performing in singles, not pair, fall on deaf ears — according to Minako-sensei, that just means he's got to work even harder to snare the audience all by his lonesome. Even when Yuuri nails the technical, his SP feels absolutely bloodless, disconnected.

His FP is equally if not more difficult, but Mozart's clean and beautiful and mannered, and precision makes for a beautiful skate. The Rhapsody is messy and aching human, two things Yuuri's aware he exemplifies, but has no way to communicate on the ice beyond taking spectacular spills and bursting into tears on the podium.

"Yuuri, I'm going to spare you the indignity of asking which shitty teenaged boy you gave it up to outside of my immediate supervision," Minako-sensei lectures him one night.

The summer sweetness of May is creeping into the green of Yuuri's neighborhood, so of course Yuuri is sitting on the back deck of the little house he shares with Phichit and Celestino listening to his ballet teacher yell at him from Japan on FaceTime.

"*Minako-sensei*," Yuuri gasps.

She holds up a hand to stop him. It's holding a tumbler of whiskey. "*Don't*," she warns him. "*Anyway* — the point is, you are a beautiful, charming boy, stop acting like you're the ugly duckling and *show off* a little on the ice, you little shit."

In ordinary life, Yuuri walks into things because he spends most of his days looking down at his feet. He gets too shy to talk to strangers; he always has to give his Starbucks order twice because he's too quiet the first time. Yuuri is always biting back something he almost says out loud, hesitating at the last minute. Mari-nee-chan's teased him about it his whole life, but that doesn't make it less true: Yuuri knows he's a little soft, kind of a crybaby, that he needs to get a thicker skin. It's so strange to know that he can handle falling a hundred times, a bone-shaking impact with the ice, but that he can be entirely dismantled by an uncharitable look.

Yuuri twists his hands together in his lap. "I just — it's not really me, is it?"

"What's you?" Minako-sensei demands. "And what's not you? Aren't *you* the only person who gets to decide that? Before Yuuri learned to dance, there was no Yuuri who danced, and before you learned to skate, that wasn't you, either. You're whoever you decide to be — decide to be *wanted*."

Yuuri stares at Minako-sensei's scowling, wonderful face. "Minako-sensei."

She jams her finger into the video frame again, threatening. "I want an update in two weeks, Katsuki. You better seduce the shit out of me," she says, and hangs up.

Yuuri knows exactly no one he can ask about how to become seductive. He literally can't think of anything more horrible than asking Celestino, and Phichit spent yesterday buying gold, silver and bronze hamsters, so he's right out. Desperation has him asking Ben, who texts *lol* and *r u kidding me ur a drunken sex bandit u got this, dude*.

He spends a lot of time at the rink; he watches a lot of YouTube videos. He ignores a lot of Ben's text messages, because even if he can't really deny that comment as open slander, he doesn't have to like it. Two days later, though, he gets, *yuuri come on you know your hot as fuck when you stop being weird about yourself don't be mad* and it follows him all the way through the day, through his class and lunch with Phichit and his warm up routines and onto the ice.

Yuuri doesn't think he's weird about himself — he's just realistic. He's one of the dime a dozen JSF skaters, and reaching beyond that is always going to be more grind than glory. He's average looking, average height, ordinary in every way, compared to other senior level skaters on the circuit. He probably cries more than he should.

"It's good, Yuuri!" Celestino cheers him, at the close of his music, looking earnest and excited about it. "Clean — steady."

Yuuri draws a circle in the ice with his toe pick. "Minako-sensei says I should — um — " and he knows he mumbles the rest of it in an impossibly small voice " — be seductive."

Celestino looks thoughtful, skating big looping circles around the rink.

"Maybe," he says finally, his voice booming in the mostly-empty space. "But if you're not comfortable being seductive, that's just going to make it harder for you."

Yuuri fists both his hands in fervent agreement. "Right?" he yells.

"What about comfortable?" Celestino laughs, pulling up to a stop in front of him, eyes twinkling. "How about you aim for being completely *comfortable* on the ice — with yourself, with your program?"

Yuuri doesn't even know what that means, and he admits as much.

"You know when you practice, you ignore everything around you?" Celestino asks him.

"Phichit tells me you spent two hours once doing your footwork on the front porch with your headphones in, and half the neighborhood stopped to stare at you and you had absolutely no idea."

Yuuri remembers doing footwork on the porch; he doesn't remember an audience. It had been raining that day, a little in the morning, and he kept skidding on the grass in the yard, so he'd limited himself to the porch and had gone through the routine until it was muscle memory, so

he could work on the technique and execution, next, instead of just desperately trying to remember his choreography.

"Competing's not practicing, though," Yuuri protests in a little voice. "I — I've looked at my tape before. I make faces."

"People like your faces," Celestino tells him, but it comes out kindly. He claps a giant paw on Yuuri's shoulder and says, "Think about it — try it out. I'm sure nobody actually watches the Japan Open anyway, right?"

"*Coach*," Yuuri wails.

Phichit's senior debut is in Germany at the Nebelhorn Trophy, right at the beginning of Yuuri's fall semester classes. He can't get away, but he's glued to his phone, to Twitter, to Phichit's Instagram and to the live feed of the competitions. He likes every single picture and retweets every single post to his 302 Twitter followers. Phichit seems to see a lot more of Oberstdorf and the nightlife than Yuuri usually gets around to when he's traveling for competition — but then Phichit doesn't appear to get drunk and have sex with strangers.

Phichit's FP is set to "Defying Gravity" from *Wicked*, and Yuuri gasps out loud when Phichit touches down on his quad in the first half, but cheers himself hoarse when Phichit lands each of his triples clean and confidently and closes with an absolutely perfect sit-spin. Technical blocks him from the podium by less than a full point, but when Yuuri sees Phichit in the milling background of international skaters, he looks ebullient, and all of his Instagram posts are bubbling over with an explosion of joyful emojis, so Yuuri trusts the little voice in his heart that says it's okay to be unreservedly happy and proud.

Yuuri knows he's being ridiculous, but he makes Ben drive him to the airport the day Phichit and Celestino come back from Germany. He meets them in the arrivals terminal with a giant bouquet of yellow roses, a ton of CONGRATULATIONS balloons, and a tackling hug for Phichit as soon as he spots him through the barriers.

Ben drives a Hummer — of course he does — so there's plenty of room for Celestino, the flowers, the balloons, Phichit, and Yuuri to pile in for the drive home, even if Celestino and Yuuri are crammed together all the way in the back next to Phichit's luggage.

"Is this the guy gave you the drive of shame home a while back?" Celestino asks.

Yuuri barely manages not to scream. "What! No!"

In the front seat, Phichit and Ben are both singing passionately along with the greatest hits of the *Wicked* soundtrack, which at least covers the profound horribleness of the conversation happening in the backseat.

Celestino ignores him and asks, "Are you guys dating?"

Ben once asked Yuuri to bring him ninja stars from Japan.

"N-no way," Yuuri says. "I've never even had a boyfriend!"

The look he gets in response from Celestino is, frankly, a little insulting, but it kills the conversation, for which Yuuri is incandescent with gratitude.

That summer feels like a blissful little pocket out of time. They train; they go to late night movies; they sigh over the tape from Viktor Nikiforov's latest sure-to-be-record-breaking program. The rink gets closed for 48 hours for repairs, and he and Phichit take the opportunity to develop a routine to Dancing Queen in the house kitchen; Phichit only promises not to post video of it if Yuuri helps him work on his quad toe.

"Are you excited about the Japan Open?" Phichit asks, hands on his hips, shaking his moneymaker while the windows rattle with ABBA.

Yuuri throws his hands up in the air and twirls. "*Absolutely not.*"

The Japan Open doesn't work like most competitions — no short program, just the free, and this year it's in Saitama. It's autumn, when the foliage is the most beautiful and tourists into Hasetsu are the most plentiful, so none of his family or the Nishigoris can get away. Yuuri had meant it when he told them it was fine, but when he gets to the airport and there's no one he knows there, he doesn't mean it at all.

Yuuri hooks into his music and heads straight for the practice rink, both because it's the best and only thing he can do right now. There's a pretty heavy representation of people there working out the last-minute kinks in their routine, and there's not a ton of open ice to work through his full program — Yuuri figures he'll blame that for the way he gets distracted by the fact that Matsumoto Keiichi and Ito Akihito are chatting with each other and skates into the boards.

"*Yuuri!*" Keiichi says, scrambling over. "Holy shit. Are you okay?"

Akihito's digging a handkerchief out of his pocket which — oh, okay, because Yuuri's nose is bleeding. Great. "Here, here — take this."

"I'm fine," Yuuri says. It comes out like *Imb fi-be*, and when he feels around on the ice, he finds his glasses, luckily still intact. "How's your ankle, Keiichi-kun?"

"Better than your nose," Keiichi mutters, and pulls Akihito's handkerchief away to inspect the damage. "Damn, Yuuri — should we get the medic for you?"

This is embarrassing enough without getting medical professionals involved, and Yuuri's pretty sure his nose isn't broken, so he just shakes his head and lets them help him to his feet. It's not until he's back upright that he realizes that, actually, worse than the bloody nose is the fact that *Matsumoto Keiichi* and *Ito Akihito* are both staring at him.

"Ha — ha ha ha ha," Yuuri says.

Keiichi and Akihito exchange a Look.

When Yuuri hears Celestino start yelling, it's the first time he's ever been happy to be on the receiving end of it, and Keiichi and Akihito make themselves scarce. Yuuri ends up getting dragged to the medic anyway, which is probably for the best, and a better option than trying to navigate a conversational minefield with two people he — well, you know.

The medic pronounces him unharmed but dumb, and sends him off with a plastic cold pack and a strong warning not to skate, rapid-fire, into any more unmoving surfaces.

"I would make you do 50 suicides as punishment but it would be counterproductive for your skate tomorrow," Celestino growls, punching the cold pack so it starts activating and then pressing it not-so-tenderly to Yuuri's face.

"Ow — sorry — *ow*," Yuuri whimpers.

"Don't worry, I'm adding that 50 to your running tally when we get back to Detroit," Celestino promises. "What's wrong with you? Is your head in the right place?"

Yuuri would take a hundred headers into the boards over explaining what happened, so he just makes apologetic noises until Celestino gives up and tells Yuuri to hit the ice and work on his jumps.

Yuuri can't say, *but I turned into a drunken sex bandit with two separate people out there*, so he just says, "Yes, Coach," and goes to work on his jumps, scrupulously ignoring both Keiichi and Akihito.

Celestino makes him call Minako-sensei later that night because Yuuri's nose is now an extremely attractive purple color, and "that's not the look we're going for, Katsuki."

"How how how do you do this shit to yourself?" Minako-sensei wails, her voice warping in horror over FaceTime. "I *knew* I should have canceled my class and come up."

"It's fine! Really!" Yuuri protests. "But Coach said you might know how to cover it up."

Minako-sensei guides him on a journey of discovery into the cosmetics aisle of the drug store. Yuuri's wearing a hoodie pulled up to hide his face, but he's pretty sure the high school girls hanging around the makeup aisle are judging the crap out of him.

He ends up on a three-way video call with Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-chan in his hotel room, for no reason Yuuri can see other than so that they can both make fun of him while he tries to use concealer.

"Ugh — your poor face," Mari-nee-chan says. "I'll have to warn Mom and Dad."

"While you're at it, let's cover that zit on your chin, too," is Minako-sensei's contribution.

Later, after Minako-sensei's confirmed Yuuri knows how to hide his hideous bruising, she rings off and it's just Yuuri and his sister on the call, Vicchan sleeping noisily at Mari-nee-chan's side in the video feed, his chest rising and falling.

"How are Mom and Dad? And Yutopia?" Yuuri asks, because it feels so dumb to be so close to home and still so far away that he can't go to visit — that his parents can't come to his competition. It's always been like this, the tough knocks of owning a business; there were never any weekends or lazy evenings, always work work work at the onsen, something falling apart or new guests arriving, a problem with a booking or the landscaping needing work. Yuuri knows he hasn't been a very good son to his parents, that he's always been at the rink or at his classes, and it eats at him a lot. The last good thing he did for his family was making that Yutopia website.

"Hmmm — they're the same as ever," Mari-nee-chan tells him, and rolling onto her stomach, she levels him that thousand-yard stare. She's done it since they were little; Yuuri's no good at lying to her. "Stop feeling guilty."

Yuuri winces. "Sorry," he says, because he doesn't know what else to say.

"Everybody is responsible for their own future, you know," Mari-nee-chan tells him, with that same flat, unaffected tone she's cultivated since she was in high school, when her voice rasped into its lower register and lost its little-girl high notes. "Otosan wanted to inherit the onsen, Mama married him knowing she'd end up running it with him. I know it doesn't make sense to you, because you're not meant for this, but they're happy."

She knocks on the laptop monitor and it makes Yuuri startle.

"*I'm* happy here," she says, grinning once she knows she has his attention. "Okay?"

Yuuri nods, and can feel his eyes getting hot. It's what he's been scared about for years, that his parents spent so much money on his lessons, that everybody was so patient with him, spent so much time over him. And he was no use to the business at all, left Mari-nee-chan stuck with all the work. Yuuri's been too afraid to ask, afraid if he broaches the topic she'll say, "Yuuri, we need you at home," only now she's smiling at him, her face familiar and wonderful and genuinely happy, and Yuuri feels a sense of relief so huge it makes him feel a little dizzy.

"You know I have big plans for this place," she goes on, looking here and there in her room, the one she'd decorated with posters for boy bands and photographs of their onsen. "When Mama and Otosan retire, you'd better believe things are gonna be different around here."

Yuuri laughs, and rubs away at his tears with the heel of his hand. "Oh yeah?"

"I mean first things first, we've gotta get an online reservation system," Mari-nee-chan tells him, and they talk for another hour about redesigning the main floor, refurbishing the banquet rooms, installing wifi throughout the onsen, offering pick-up service from the nearest train station. It sounds wonderful — it sounds like Mari-nee-chan has a lot of plans, that she has a whole fantastic life that Yuuri feels a little sad to be missing, but grateful to be able to see from a distance.

"Oh — shit, it's late," she says finally, when her voice is going hoarse from talking. "Sorry, Yuuri, I should let you get to sleep — "

"No!" he says, and off her look, he blushes and asks, "Um, would it be okay if we just left the video chat up? And go to sleep — I know it's weird."

She shrugs, moving the laptop over to the pillow next to her and pulling up the covers.

"Whatever, you're weird so it works," she mutters, and mumbly with sleep, she says, "Night, Yuuri — do a good job tomorrow, okay? We'll be watching."

Yuuri watches her fall asleep and watches Vicchan sleeping next to her for along time, eyes getting heavier in the darkness of his hotel room.

"I promise," he says to his computer, and drifts away.

The next day, Yuuri lands every jump, perfect, and his step routine flows out of him effortlessly. He blubbers all over the ice when they give him his silver medal, and in the post-competition press conference, Morooka Hisashi asks, "Katsuki-san, how does it feel to be one of Japan's top male figure skaters?"

"Unbelievable," Phichit laughs at him when Yuuri gets back to Detroit. "I can't believe you just *stared* at him like a moron — Yuuri you're too much."

Yuuri groans and hides his face in a pillow.

Skate America's less than a month after the Open, marking the first time Yuuri and Phichit are competing in the same event. They spend October training, and it injects into Yuuri a strange tension to hear Celestino saying, "Phichit, you should study how Yuuri does this — there's a reason his component scores are so high," when Yuuri is only ever desperately trying not to embarrass himself.

Yuuri has a test scheduled just hours before their flight to California, and goes from handing in his blue book directly to the airport where Phichit is meticulously Snapchatting tiny, involved narratives in the Hudson News.

"Hello hello, everybody!" Phichit's telling his phone, Snapchat, the universe. "Here with the amazing *Yuuri Katsuki* — "

"Oh, God," Yuuri mutters, trying to buy a Twix.

" — and we are getting ready to kick ass at Skate America," Phichit goes on, swinging the phone around so Yuuri can see himself in frame, too: disheveled, pale and just the right angle to show off his double chin and bewildered expression. "Yuuri: your thoughts?"

"My thought is Coach is going to kill us when he realizes we're buying candy," Yuuri says, to Phichit and the phone camera.

Phichit, who has the metabolism of a nuclear fusion reaction, just laughs and shamelessly throws two bags of Peanut M&Ms on the counter to check out. "Okay, Snapchat — it'll be our secret from Ciao Ciao, then!"

Ciao Ciao finds out because Ciao Ciao, like everyone else in the figure skating universe, follows Phichit on Snapchat, and confiscates their candy as soon as they get to their gate. Because it takes a certain amount of sadism to successfully navigate a career in sports coaching and iron will to crush young dreams, Celestino sits next to them on the flight and gorges himself on the candy while doing last checks on their paperwork, ignoring the way Phichit whines all the way until they land in California.

Skate America *feels* crazier than the other competitions Yuuri's experienced.

The crowds are bigger and the number of press in attendance is absolutely insane. The great luminaries of figure skating are all present, and Yuuri spends their registration period starry eyed and overwhelmed, watching emigrating nations of competitors from around the States and fly-ins from around the world congregating to fight with event organizers about anything and everything. Different countries have different levels of baseline intensity when it comes to figure skating, but the U.S. skating community is huge, populous, ultra-competitive and highly regionally segmented — Skate America is their yearly Hunger Games. Yuuri hears at least four people making jokes (probably) about pulling a Tonya Harding. Celestino looks like he's in heaven.

The men's competitions are on days one and two, and Yuuri marvels that no matter how often he does this, in how many different semi-anonymous rinks and with however many heaving anonymous crowds watching, it never gets easier. Phichit's draw is all the way toward the end of the day, while Yuuri's is first thing in the morning — better that way, Yuuri thinks, letting Celestino give him one last hug, and pushes out onto the ice.

Yuuri doesn't think he'll ever be able to hit Minako-sensei's mark for seduction, but he reaches and reaches for Celestino and the way he had said "comfortable" back in the safety of Detroit. Yuuri imagines he's on the porch of their little house, that the only person watching is Phichit studiously taking notes about Yuuri's ankles. He doesn't let himself think about winning; he tells himself his best is all he can do.

And when that first, fluttering clarinet soars into something sweet and sharp, Yuuri exhales and gives himself into the music.

He forgets about whatever faces he's making; he lets go of his probably fruitless grasp for technical perfection. He lets his arms and his hips and his shoulders do the talking, dances through his step routine, coquettish, and starts building up steam when the French Horns sweep in. Yuuri skates into his first jump as the percussion builds, and lands his quad-toe combo to the thunder of cymbals. It hits him like a shock of adrenaline to the system — the way a sugar cube melts on your tongue, and the rest of his short program is the bliss of moving so desperately you forget to think.

Celestino is shouting in overexcited Italian, grabbing Yuuri up in a bear hug and bouncing him up and down before Yuuri even has a chance to cover his skate blades. The crowd noise is — mind-boggling, a wall of sound that distorts itself into an inhuman noise: a physical press of voices versus individual words.

"Was that okay?" Yuuri yells, over the other yelling.

"Was that okay!" Celestino yells back, and instead of answering, he picks Yuuri up and twirls him around some more.

The judges mark a 71.02 for Yuuri's SP, and Celestino erupts off of the bench like a lunatic and starts punching the air. Yuuri just smiles, dazed, because a flock of sweet-faced little boys and girls working the event bring him some flowers someone tossed and giant, squishy stuffed piece of salmon sushi. He waves his flowers. He waves his sushi. He gives the camera and everyone in the audience a deep, bewildered bow, and lets Celestino hustle him off for his cool down.

He ends up giving Phichit the salmon sushi for good luck, and he stands with Celestino in agonies as Phichit's called to the ice, later that night.

Phichit's skating is joyful, as wonderful and funny and happy as he is. He makes up for a relatively weak technical slate with explosive energy; he mouths the lyrics along with the music. The crowd adores him, and doesn't care that he touches down on his triple lutz; they cheer his beautiful camel spin, and — because he's ridiculous — his twizzle.

He won't make the top, but he's won the undying love of everybody in the stadium, Yuuri thinks, laughing and running down to kiss and cry. Phichit is incandescent, and honestly, his middling score is an afterthought to the carnival of shenanigans he gets up to hamming it up for the camera.

Celestino buys them something called double doubles from In-N-Out for dinner.

"What do you think, Yuuri?" he asks, eager. "Amazing, right?"

"It's very nice," Yuuri says, because he's too polite to tell Celestino he'd rather have katsudon instead.

The second day doesn't go as well as the first.

Phichit and Yuuri draw near enough together they all head over to the rink as a team, but whatever mojo Phichit had day one has waned a bit for his free skate. He downgrades his only quad to a triple toe after he falls on a triple flip earlier in the program; he's a little off cue with his music, but he finishes clean, and Yuuri cheers his heart out.

When it's his turn, Yuuri nearly wipes out on his last jump, the same one that's been plaguing him all season, but the rest of the program is solid: as delicate and meticulous as Mozart always is, and he feels *happy* when he skates off the ice — at least until his scores come up.

His technicals are — fine; it's the component score that sinks him. Yuuri stares at the number with a sickening inevitability. He *knew*. He *always* knew. It's why he's so careful. It's why he can't take Minako-sensei's advice, it's why Celestino had said "comfortable" instead. He twists his hands around the flowers in his lap so hard a stray thorn bites into his palm. The ice isn't the dance studio; it isn't even the sunny little kitchen in the suburbs of Detroit. Yuuri has always been exactly who he is, no more or less, but it's so much to remember when he's trying to focus on his program, too much: little, accidental truths leak through. They drag him down.

Yuuri looks down at his lap, eyes hot, throat hurting. He comes in fifth, behind JJ, who fell during his free skate. He's almost glad he doesn't make the podium, that he can just gather up his things and go back to the hotel.

Celestino puts a good face on it, but Yuuri hears him later that night, complaining to someone at the bar about the "fucking fascist judging." But really, fifth place at Skate America is fine, it's where Yuuri probably belongs, really, and he spends the rest of the day reading all the commentary and coverage around the competition — he accidentally reads a little of the speculation on why he got his low component score:

While Katsuki's background in dance shines in his choreography and performance, it's the rawness of his expression and movement that leave him vulnerable to the judges in the component scoring, one article wrote. They use the words overly emotional.

He feels like he's exploding out of his skin, and decides not to read any more.

Ontario's only about 35 miles outside of L.A. This turns out to be the perfect combination of factors for a bunch of pressure-crazed figure skaters to go completely nuts. When one of them asks if Yuuri wants to come along into the city, he goes.

Clubbing in Los Angeles is a wholly different experience than Paris, where there had always been Chris and Nils just at hand. Yuuri doesn't know any of the people he went out with, plus he realizes about half an hour in that he's apparently *devastated* by his FP score, so Yuuri says, "Fuck it," and decides to get quietly, comprehensively obliterated.

He starts with vodka, because figure skating is a heavily Russian sport and it was the mother's milk of his drinking career. He moves onto gin, because it's the preferred ruin of Celestino and cheaper than the vodka. After that, Yuuri loses track of what he's drinking and how he's acquiring it, but who cares, anyway, because it's so *hot* in this club and when someone starts plucking at his button-up shirt it becomes the greatest idea in human history just to whip it off.

At some point in the night a boy with pink hair appears in Yuuri's field of vision smirking and holding a test tube rack of multicolored shots.

"For me?" Yuuri gushes. Everyone in this club is *so nice*.

"Only if you show us your moves, hot stuff," Pink Hair teases.

Yuuri grabs the first test tube he can reach — filled to the brim with something *red*.

"Oh, I'm very good," he says, and tosses it back. "Just watch."

After the red one Yuuri drinks the blue one, which tastes like perfume, so obviously he drinks the gray one to chase it away. He doesn't get around to the green one before someone grabs him by the beltloops of his jeans and drags him onto the dance floor.

It's not music so much as just a baseline beat, with birdlike electronic tones woven throughout. The light's flickering in and out so quickly Yuuri feels like he's blinking slowly,

the whole world going light and dark, and in the anonymous, overheated press of bodies on the floor, Yuuri doesn't have to keep his wrist soft — but not too soft — his hip cocked — but not too cocked — his leg extended — but not like that. He can do whatever; that last gray one unlocked some hidden door. The music revs, and Yuuri leans into the hands stroking up his t-shirt, damp through with sweat, throws his arms around someone, anyone, to anchor himself, and he melts away into the beat.

There's a certain friction to this kind of thing, an itch that turns into a burn, and Yuuri knows he's six drinks past making anything approaching a good decision, but it still feels good when someone cups his face and kisses him.

It feels good to be touched, to be wanted for however excessively himself he is. Yuuri feels like he's starving, whines into the kiss, twines himself tight with some stranger and lets himself get steered closer and closer to the edge of the dance floor. He's not a complete idiot, he knows where this — and he — is going, but he's past embarrassment and wild with wanting, something that coils tightly with both lust and loneliness, and instead of feeling sick when he gets shoved into a bathroom stall, he just feels glad that this, at least, can be easy.

"I'm Jack," the guy says, as Yuuri's dropping to his knees — it hurts, not just from the cold, probably filthy floor, but from his programs, the training, the one hundred thousand falls he's taken since he started skating.

"Yuuri," he says, and goes for his belt.

Yuuri has to text Phichit to get the hotel to send him a cab. The ride back is silent, with a slowly deepening sense of hurt that settles into Yuuri's belly. His jaw hurts. He can still taste salt and skin and the sharp tang of bitterness in his mouth, and he has no idea if that's Jack or his losses. Both possibilities turn his stomach.

Phichit meets him at the hotel room with a sympathetic smile and a bottle of water.

"Drank too much?" he asks.

"Yeah," Yuuri croaks.

Phichit pets his hair later that night, sweet. "Don't listen to those people, Yuuri," he whispers. "You were wonderful — you always are. Nobody skates like you do."

Yuuri just swallows around the bruise in his throat, squeezes his eyes shut tightly and nods. He can't explain it to Phichit; he doesn't *want* to explain it to Phichit.

"It's okay," Yuuri manages, and when he says, "It's just — I'll try harder next time," he means it — he'll try harder. He'll be different.

"Of course!" Phichit agrees, all good-hearted happiness, blissfully unaware.

Yuuri's only remaining 2011-2012 events are the NRW Trophy and Nationals in Japan. He takes the month after Skate America to rework his routine; he ducks a lot of questions from Minako-sensei and quietly takes Celestino's awkwardly provided advice. He skates with his spine straighter, shoulders squared.

"It's still nice," Phichit says. "But um — not the same."

"That's okay," Yuuri tells him, and doesn't say, *that's the point*.

Yuuri spends another birthday on the road, turns 21 alone in a hotel room in Germany. Celestino promises that they'll do something special once they're done with the competition, and Yuuri makes agreeable noises, but the idea of a grocery store sheet cake with his skating coach and none of his friends is more lonely than comforting, but it's a rude thing to think and a ruder thing to say.

He takes the gold at NRW, and he sends it to his mother.

"Oh, Yuuri, you should keep one," his mother says, when he calls her that night after sneaking out of the banquet. He's skipping the afterparty entirely — just the thump of music through a closed door is enough to give him an instant, wincing memory of Los Angeles. Somewhere in his backlog of hastily opened mail in Detroit is a clean STD test, for which he's grateful, since it proves that regret's the only thing he carried home from that debacle, at least.

"What would I do with it?" Yuuri laughs. "No, keep it. Use it to level a table."

"*Yuuri*," his mother scolds, but her mouth is twitching as she does it.

That year's Japan Nationals are in Osaka, just a two-hour flight from Saga, which means Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei are waiting for him at the airport — with a 10-foot banner reading GO GO GO KATSUKI YUURI PRIDE OF HASETSU, with a screen printing of himself *running through sakura petals*.

They both have absolutely horrible smiles on their faces.

"*Where did you even get that picture?*" Yuuri gasps, mortified, and then even more mortified when he remembers he's in Japan and doesn't even have the veil of a foreign language to shield him from the eavesdropping and laughter of passers-by.

"The local chamber of commerce built a creepy image gallery of you online," Minako-sensei says, shameless. "You attract a lot of weird fans, Katsuki."

Mari-nee-chan smirks. "She means perverts."

Nationals are spread out over three days starting December 22, but Yuuri had purposefully flown in a week early — to acclimate to the time difference, get some practice in, and because Minako-sensei said if he didn't she'd come to Detroit and make him do Fouettes until he throws up.

Yuuri's first night turns out to be his delayed birthday party, attended long-distance by the Nishigori family, his parents, and Vicchan via the magic of video conferencing. Mari-nee-chan produces a tiny cake, decorated with piped skates, and Minako-sensei gives him a scarf she says she made herself. Yuuri believes her, because it's profoundly hideous and thoroughly misshapen. He wears it nonstop the next day, gone exploring with Minako-sense and Mari-nee-chan. They walk around eating everything in sight: crackling hot kushikatsu, takoyaki, okonomiyaki for lunch. Yuuri makes starry, lovelorn eyes at the idea of horumon for dinner, and they pile into a ramshackle little restaurant,

"Enjoy this while you can," his sister says later that night, when they're all sacked out together on futons in the ryokan room they'd rented. "Minako-senpai says she found a studio space for tomorrow and she's getting you back for ducking her calls so much."

Yuuri hears himself whimper in response.

But training with Minako-sensei has always been the kind of hard Yuuri likes, the kind he understands, that feels safe. She helps him with stretches, checks his flexibility. Yuuri volunteers to go buy them drinks and snacks so that she can watch the video of his performance at NRW, at Skate America. He was there, he knows how they went, but he doesn't want to be in the room for it. It's easy to dance for Minako-sensei — it's hard to know already what she'll say when she sees how he performed.

Only when he comes back with onigiri and peach sodas, Minako-sensei just waves him over and cups his face in her hands, the way she's done since he was just a little boy and used to run crying to her studio for comfort.

"It's been really hard for you, huh, Yuuri?" she asks him. There's no pity in her voice, just a humbling tenderness — a lifetime of her love and care.

Yuuri can't look at her face; it'll just make him cry, and she makes fun of him for it enough already. He whispers, "It's not that bad."

She's quiet for a long time before she sighs, just a little exhalation, and she says, "Come here," and he goes, lets himself press his face into her shoulder and hold on tight. He's too needy, right now, to be embarrassed, and he's been embarrassing himself in front of Minako-sensei since he was a little kid, anyway.

"Yuuri is wonderful, exactly the way Yuuri is," she says, into his hair and pressing a kiss to his temple. "But tell me who you want to be, and I'll help you be him, okay?"

He nods, and she lets him hold on a little longer.

It feels strangely like unfolding an origami crane — trying to press away the wings and tail and its neck, to unmake a mark. He doesn't have Phichit's sunshine-sweet happiness, JJ's masculine dynamism, he's no Viktor Nikiforov — so gifted he defies categorization. Yuuri will always be Yuuri on ice.

Yuuri wins gold by a half-point margin at the Nationals, and for a minute, standing on the podium and being blinded by an ocean of flashbulbs and cell phone cameras, he almost

forgets how awful it was to get here.

Yuuri just misses the cutoff for the Four Continents Championship, which Celestino takes with the grim pragmatism of someone who's been stuck working with Yuuri for years already. They map out his 2012-2013 season, which looks more challenging than ever now that Yuuri's earned a little competition currency, and for the first time, Celestino asks if Yuuri has any thoughts about his program music.

Yuuri doesn't mind his coaches picking his competition music; when he was little, just beginning to put together programs and compete, his mother and sister and father volunteered ideas. Yuuri's skated to SMAP hits and Utada Hikaru and sato kagura. Yuuri finds lyrics in competition music distracting — even if they're in another language, he's so used to trying to pick out the words he understands that it's distracting. He likes music that's a little sad, that takes him on a journey. He hates Mahler.

"You know my friend Emily writes music," Ben tells him. "Maybe she could write something for you to use — something that fits you better?"

They're at the rink waiting for Phichit to wrap up practice before they head out for dinner; Ben's sister and mom are in town, and Yuuri's already been warned they're charmingly obsessed with figure skating.

"Would that be okay?" Yuuri asks. "That — I don't think I could pay her much."

Ben laughs, loops an arm around Yuuri's shoulders. "Why don't I just email her and ask? Can't hurt, right?"

They end up at the Cheesecake Factory in Novi — according to Ben's sister Karen it's an unspoken suburban mom rule — in a massive booth, eating Thai lettuce wraps and entrees there's no possible way to finish in a single sitting. Phichit is absurd and completely charming the way he always is, and because he's good with people and not an awkward disaster like Yuuri, he brought Ben's mom and Karen fun pieces of figure skating swag. It's nothing fancy, just extra lanyards from Skate America, a program from a regional competition, a COMPETITOR pass from something or another. They're in raptures, and they spend most of dinner asking Yuuri and Phichit questions with the fervent interest of true believers.

"Sorry about my family," Ben mutters, when Phichit takes them off to go pick out their cheesecake slices. "They're — intense."

Yuuri thinks about Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei and the Nishigoris.

"They're nice. It's nice of them to invite us," Yuuri assures him.

Ben gives him a funny look, shy and happy at once, and at least one of those passing emotions looks really strange on his face. "Well, hanging around with a top figure skater is like Mom and fuckin' Karen's dream come true so."

"So ignore whatever awful stuff he's saying about us and tell us more about *you*," Ben's mother follows up easily, swatting her son on the back of the head and squeezing back into the booth, pink-cheeked and starry. "How'd you two meet? Where do you train?"

Yuuri would gnaw off his legs before telling Ben's mother how they met, so he says, "Oh, um, at the library," and ignores the way Karen is smirking at them like she knows that Yuuri doesn't even know where the undergraduate library *is*.

"Yuuri's only a part time student because he trains so much," Ben fills in.

His mother makes a cooing noise. "Gosh, that's got to be so hard — and in English! Ben said you grew up in Japan?"

This turns into a conversation about Hasetsu, about Kyushu and how long it's been since Yuuri's been home. He hates this conversation — not because of Hasetsu or Kyushu or because he doesn't miss home, but because he can't stand the pity. People hear that he left home at 18, that he hasn't seen his family's onsen except through photographs and computer and telephone screens since then, that he sees his family — if he's lucky — once a year for a few days. He doesn't need anybody's reminder that it's sad; he knows it's sad. He's sad about it.

"Yuuri's a top pick for the Grand Prix Finals next year," Ben says, when Yuuri knows his voice is getting that scratchy quality, that faint *something* that telegraphs distress.

Karen shoves at Ben. "We know, asshole — we've been skating fans longer than you."

"Karen, language," Ben's mother says, and adds, "But that's amazing, all the same — what about you, Phichit? We saw you at Skate America!"

Phichit laughs and elbows Yuuri, teasing. "Oh, I'm not bad, but I'm not Yuuri."

"*Phichit*," Yuuri hisses.

Because Ben's family is relentlessly American, at the very end of dinner, Karen and his mother both give Yuuri a hug and get a photo with him, as if Yuuri is some kind of celebrity. Then Phichit gets in on it and the whole thing deteriorates into a full scale photoshoot in the Cheesecake Factory parking lot.

Ben drops his family off, and when he pulls up to the house, he waits until Phichit's out of the car before he grabs Yuuri's hand — unbuckling his seatbelt.

"Do you have practice tomorrow?" he asks quietly. "Can — is it okay if I stay over?"

Yuuri stares, at Ben's blue eyes and familiar face, the nervous jagged line of his mouth. Ben's graduating with his business degree this year, headed directly into a three-year analyst program in New York; he'd told Yuuri which bank, but Yuuri couldn't, for the life of him, remember its name right now. In all the time Yuuri's known him, that they've made time for each other, Ben has been Yuuri's friend at college who doesn't laugh when Yuuri cries at

movies, who's surprisingly sweet but knows nothing about Japan, who's safe to be with when Yuuri feels hot and wanting and gets a little tipsy and greedy.

He doesn't have practice, but that's not the reason Ben can't stay over. Yuuri stares too long, he must hesitate too long, trying to think of something polite to say, and he feels more than sees it when Ben sinks into quiet realization: the fingers on Yuuri's hands go slack, they pull away.

"You know what, um. Never mind, just — forget I said anything," Ben says.

Yuuri wants to say something kind here, or something so mean that Ben will leave angry instead of hurt, but he's never been able to find the right words for the right moment. He does the only thing he can do right now, and gets out of Ben's car.

"Good night," he whispers. "Drive safe."

"Yup," Ben says, and hits the gas.

The next time Yuuri sees him it's at a random Starbucks on campus: Ben's wearing a PROPERTY OF UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN hoodie and Vans, dark circles under his eyes. His iPod headphones are in, he's hanging around the end of the counter waiting for his drink, looking distracted and tired.

"Oh — did you want to go say hi?" Phichit asks.

Yuuri swallows around the stone in his throat. "No, lets — he looks busy. Let's not bother him."

On a flight, later that night, en route to Shanghai for the Cup of China, Yuuri stares out the window and feels the clawing, horrible realization that he's not the only one who can be hurt — that he has his own jagged edges, too.

The Cup of China and the Rostelecom Cup blur together into a terrible three weeks of brutal practices and unrelenting travel. Yuuri feels sick, distracted — on edge the whole time. It's not the normal pre-competition nerves, it feels like something cosmic, like this entire season is cursed.

Maybe it is. At the practices before the Cup of China, two of the competitors have a tooth-rattling collision that leads to a concussion and a withdrawal. One of the women skaters slices her hand open in competition when she tries to switch feet doing a Biellmann, and the day before Rostelecom, one of the Canadian pairs has a gruesome accident when the man's Achilles gets sliced by his partner's blade as she's coming down from a lift.

Yuuri skates his programs, set to classical music that Celestino chose for him, and he lands all his jumps — clean if not confident. He goes politely to the post-competition banquets, he makes small talk in three languages about the horrible injuries this season, so frightening, so horrible for the skaters. He runs into Chris and Nils at Rostelecom, and hides with them while

having his alcohol consumption carefully monitored by Nils, who cuts him off after three glasses of wine.

"Go to bed, Yuuri," Nils says to him kindly. "Go celebrate your medal and get some rest — you look like you need it."

He mails his bronze home to Hasetu, where it is arranged in pride of place in some kind of figure skating shrine his parents have set up in the tatami room. Mari-nee-chan sends him a picture of Vicchan wearing it, which winds up as the background of Yuuri's phone for months and months after. Yuuri asks a guy who knows a guy who knows a girl to ask her friend at the Oberlin Conservatory to compose some music for him, and then he has to apologize to her — at *length* — when he ends up not using it.

Yuuri defends his gold at the Nationals in Sapporo and cries *again*.

It comes as a genuine shock; Yuuri feels like he's sleepwalked this entire year, but when he closes his FP and listens to the pandemonium of applause, he stares into the rafters and *knows* and that breaks something wide open in his chest.

"Every year you tell JSF your goal is not to cry and *every year*," Minako-sensei shouts at him, but she's bawling, too, her KATSUKI YUURI FIGHTING banner crumbled from her excitement and dotted with tears.

Yuuri answers the same half-dozen questions awkwardly the way he does every time a reporter asks him anything. He gets to talk about how grateful he is for the opportunity to represent Hasetu — he's sure the local chamber loves that, and will add that quote to the terrifying gallery — and how he's happy for his win, but still has room to grow. He bows deeply to the audience, thanks them for their belief in him.

"You said before Viktor Nikiforov is your goal, is that still the case, Katsuki-san?" Morooka Hisashi asks.

"O-of course!" Yuuri says, probably too eagerly from the gentle roll of laughter in the press room. "Vikitor Nikiforov is still the greatest skater competing today — we should all look up to him and strive to reach his level of excellence."

Just two months later, Yuuri's back in Japan for the Four Continents Championships, held in Osaka this year. It's not much of a homecoming, though: Minako-sensei can't make the competition, and the onsen has a minor plumbing disaster that keeps the rest of his family away, too. The triplets are more mobile than ever, and Nishigori and Yu-chan have been promoted to general managers of the Ice Palace. Everybody calls and texts and emails, but in the crowd, in the practices and the snatched empty hours in between, it's just Yuuri and Celestino and all of Yuuri's barely concealed doubt.

In the end, he's more or less happy with his fourth-place finish. It's enough to keep Celestino satisfied and Yuuri off the hook for the press scrum afterward.

The end of spring and the hot stretch of summer are times that Yuuri associates inextricably with Phichit. They're both done with competition for the season, and Celestino takes a month to go back to Italy, so they're almost all alone in the little soap bubble of their absurd lives. Their schedules relax from 5 a.m. wake ups and 6 a.m. rink times to the shocking luxury of sleeping until 8:30 and going to classes, which don't include burly Italian men in HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH t-shirts screaming at you when you break your ass on ice and trying to balance on knives for 10 hours a day.

Usually Yuuri loves this interval, like the shuddery exhale after so many desperate breaths: he can sleep and he can *eat* and he can skate, for nothing but the love of it — except this summer feels different, pensive, almost oppressive with heat. He doesn't sleep, he eats too much, he skates like something's chasing him. The people at his rink keep asking if he got dumped.

Yuuri's always put in long hours — he knows he's not gifted, that his skating is 90 percent skill and 10 percent luck, that every hour he puts in will grind out just that fraction better performance, shave away a rough edge from the landing of a jump. Yuuri's not afraid to be hurt; his body's been a map of bruises for as long as he can remember, something that holds him back, holds him in, a tool he's not afraid to push to its limit.

He feels — it must be frustration, it must be the sharp teeth of hubris, wanting more than he should think is his right. Yuuri's discipline training is more than just practice, it's knowing how much he can want before not having it will hurt him where it won't leave a mark. Yuuri's had broken bones and sprained ankles, grade two concussions and sliced his hand open with his skate before. He's lost as a little kid and then in the junior circuit, lost at the senior competition level. He'll keep hurting and losing as long as he competes. All of these things are true, but all of these are calculated suffering, these are all within Yuuri's capacity to bear.

But he's *so close*, so close that it must be some lizard brain instinct to push, to give that last burst of adrenaline and effort, clawing through Yuuri's decade of careful restriction, the high walls he built around his own misguided yearning.

"You're working hard," Phichit says to him one night. His voice is careful; when you speak across languages, sometimes tone is all you have to soften a hard question. "But you don't seem happy about it."

Yuuri stares down at his the Ace bandage he's winding around his ankle. He thinks about lying, about changing the subject.

"I — want to win," he says instead, he admits it out loud. It's worse than any of Yuuri's other confessions, it's hard to say, even here and even just to Phichit.

Who crawls up on the bed with Yuuri. "That's normal, Yuuri. We all want to win."

Yuuri looks away from his foot to the walls of his room, plastered with posters and articles about Viktor Nikiforov. His room back in Hasesu looks pretty much the same, with older posters, suspended in time until he can go back home and debate if it's worth it to hide the evidence of the obvious.

"I've never...really let myself want to win before," Yuuri says finally. "I mean, gold. I've always told myself, 'work hard, do a good job, you can't control the rest.'"

Phichit puts his head on Yuuri's shoulder, tucked in close, and Yuuri thinks he'd do anything for Phichit — even talk about this out loud.

"That only takes you so far," Phichit says quietly.

Yuuri nods, his throat tight. "But it makes everything harder."

"Trying to ignore it is hard, too, Yuuri," Phichit murmurs.

That night, Phichit makes him Kai Jiew Moo Saap, a deep-fried omelet with fish sauce and pork and a little soy. Phichit's mother makes it with chives, so Phichit makes it with chives, too. He lets Yuuri pile on sauce prik and they eat it in front of the television, watching *The Mighty Ducks* because Yuuri takes comfort in how accessibly cute Charlie Conway is.

"It's not gonna be okay to win fourth or fifth anymore, Yuuri," Phichit says, after dinner and when the movie is bleeding into its sequel. "Everyone can see you're too good for that now — you should be on the podium every time."

Yuuri curls himself up like a pillbug, puts his head in his knees. "I'm just a regular skater," he tells his jeans, he tells Phichit, he tells himself.

"Yuuri," Phichit says apologetically, "you're the two-time Japanese national champion."

"Oh look," Yuuri says loudly, pointing at the TV. "It's Team Iceland."

Phichit is probably Yuuri's best friend, and also as sweet as the palm sugar he sneaks into the country after every visit home, so he lets it go. Part of Celestino's job as a coach is to tell the parents of promising young skaters that their kid's not so special, and to stop wasting money on lessons that won't ever lead to the professional circuit.

"Kid, I think you know how this conversation is going to go," Celestino says, a day after he'd dragged back into Detroit with an entire suitcase filled with his mother's homemade dried pasta, none which Yuuri is allowed to eat during training.

He's trapped Yuuri in the benches at his practice rink. Outside, the sky's going pink, blushing as she lays down for the night, and the cluster of shrieking little kids on children's skates is making their way off the ice and headed homeward with their families. Somewhere on the other side of the world, the sun's just rising over Kyushu and his mother and father and sister are getting out of bed to get breakfast started at the onsen, Vicchan curled up in the kitchen near the radiant coolness of the drink fridge.

The whole world hushed in waiting, Yuuri thinks suddenly, the words emerging fully formed into his head.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Yuuri admits, finally, he stops looping his laces around his ankles and looks at Celestino's knees. They're bad knees, doomed him to retirement a few years earlier than he would have liked, after an admirable career raising the

profile of figure skating in Italy and for Italy on the global stage. Yuuri thinks that if his body failed him, that if he had to stop skating and remake himself, start from scratch, he'd collapse inward like a dying star — even if he doesn't have the courage to say it, he's invested everything, it threads through his whole life, every choice he's made since he was 10 years old, too young to know what he was getting himself into.

"I want you to show some spine, Katsuki," Celestino barks at him. "You have talent, and you work harder than any student I've ever had — I just can't tell if you have the drive."

Yuuri squeezes his eyes shut. "I don't know why it matters. I skate, I practice."

"Lots of people skate and a lot of people practice," Celestino retorts. "Those little kids who spend most of their time doing circles and trying not to fall on their asses skate and they practice — I'm asking if you have the will to push yourself higher, or if you're comfortable here, like this."

There's no good answer to this, everything Yuuri could say is too complicated. He's comfortable in his body, but he's not comfortable with himself, with what he wants or doesn't want. Everything is always a question that he never seems to fully answer, that can be revisited all the time. It's exhausting. It's why he likes getting pushed out of his own head, why the dizzy blur of alcohol and being too full with someone else to have any room for himself feels so, so good.

"I don't want to stop," Yuuri says, and confessing, he says, "And I don't want to lose."

It's silly that it's a big thing, that anything could be a big thing in the so-commonplace trappings of the daily grind of his practice routine. Outside it's high summer, the cloak of thick heat pressed close to the asphalt and cars, everything saturated with the tired slowness of July. But this feels like a small revelation, the spark that might start a fire.

"Good," Celestino says to him, something like approval in his tone, and presses a hand to Yuuri's shoulder, squeezing. "Finish lacing up — I'll see you on the ice."

When Yuuri looks up, Celestino is smiling.

Celestino chooses absolutely sadistic choreography for Yuuri's programs this year. The footwork is cataclysmic. The pace is a disaster. Just looking at the jumps makes Yuuri's hip feel dislocated from repeated falls.

He takes the year off from classes. His advisor agrees given the tenor and tempo of his competition calendar this year — Celestino had been similarly sadistic in this respect — that trying to balance the two would be detrimental to both.

"You're really ramping it up this year, huh?" Mrs. Clarendon says, checking over his paperwork and sneaking a crooked grin up to him. "We're all rooting for you, Yuuri."

He gapes a little. "Y-you guys watch?"

"Maybe some of us keep the live streams up in the advisory office," Mrs. Clarendon laughs. "We know you'll do us proud."

Yuuri is doing exactly nobody proud with his new programs, every single day he spends at the rink is a messy catastrophe, disconnected elements he's trying to master and no flow at all. Celestino makes encouraging noises and says encouraging things, but Yuuri spends a lot of time icing his shoulder, his knees, his ass, and watching his own tape, which is the most uncomfortable of all. Without the music to cover, he hears every scrape and shriek of his skate and the ice, like ballet without its scoring.

"These things are always ugly when they start," Celestino says, booming with laughter and goodwill that he would not be feeling if he, like Yuuri, was adding bruises on top of bruises. Ben used to say Yuuri made him look like a domestic abuser; Ben hasn't said anything in response to any of the five tentative text messages Yuuri's sent him over the past couple of months. "Like newborns: hideous, awkward. You'll grow!"

Yuuri takes another Advil and curls up on his less-injured side on the couch.

Celestino says their aim is a showing at the Grand Prix Final next year, which means 2013-2014 is a season to build his reputation, his skills, and his wins to be seeded for next year. It's tough work, targeted, and it sets Yuuri on a training regimen that has Phichit leaving him pitying offerings of stolen-away Ferrero Roche, Tiger Balm and sugar-free popsicles. There's a shabby little homestyle Japanese restaurant, not too far from the practice rink, and Yuuri finds himself looking at it with the longing of a sailor for the sea every time he's hauled to and from practice on a diet of steamed broccoli and turkey breast and painkillers.

"When you win at the Finlandia Trophy, I'll let you eat whatever you want," Celestino says.

"*Really?*" Yuuri asks, from where he's folded over the boards, trying to catch his breath. He knows why he needs three quad combos in his free program but he hates that he needs three quad combos in his free program. He's never managed to land his quad toe in full run-through; he can just about nail it with 90 percent regularity if he's practicing it in isolation.

Celestino skates past him and swats him on the ass. "I mean it depends on if you get gold or not," he temporizes.

Yuuri's been forced to give younger skaters advice before — a profoundly terrible idea that Yuuri cannot fathom — and he's explained progress in skating like the slow ache of developing a scar. You remember the sharp pain of the cut, but the rest of it is invisible, sore, maddeningly slow. Yuuri remembers the first few major wipeouts, the categorical failure, but in the following weeks and months, he must improve by increments, until it's only weeks until the Finlandia and he's mastered his footwork, memorized his choreography — until Celestino's yelling shifts from telling him to stop falling down to telling him he's not forceful enough going into the bridge of his music.

"Your jumps are still a little wobbly, especially the two in the second half," Celestino says. "That's unavoidable, I guess, but that, and artistry, should be your focus for the next two weeks — we'll stop practice for a few days before we fly out."

Yuuri falls twice at Finlandia, but his technical and component scores are still high enough he wins the silver, and after the banquet, one of the Canadian skaters — *not* JJ — asks if he wants to go to a room party to celebrate.

"Um, okay," Yuuri says, because he's not on deck again until the Cup of China, and that's an entire month away.

The room party's pretty much exactly what post-competition room parties always are: a suite with zones for varying levels of depravity. There's a corner of out-of-place sweetness in the front by the television, where some faces Yuuri doesn't know very well are gathered eating grapes and talking about skating. There's the clutch of people blasting techno dancing by the balcony. There's the heavy petting on the sofas, which makes Yuuri blush, and then there's the shadowy bedroom from which noises are emerging that require no further explanation.

Yuuri starts out with the new kids, a few of whom just made their senior debut, including a familiar-looking boy with dark hair who introduces himself as Otabek. Yuuri only remembers a little of his short program, but what he remembers is impressive.

"You're very good," Yuuri says to him, earnest.

Otabek's face twitches, which Yuuri realizes is his version of a blush. "Ah."

"Oh my God, Otabek's going to have an emotion," one of the Russian girls says, and hands Yuuri a drink. "Here, here, you're too sober for this room."

It's a murky and hazardous smelling, but Yuuri didn't get this far in professional figure skating by being a wimp about his drinking: it goes down like an actively burning oil rig, and the Russian girl screams laughing while Yuuri coughs.

But it also flames out his residual shyness, and when the Russian poisoner gets up and says, "Yuuri, let's dance — your moves are always the best," he just goes with it, lets her drag him into the fray of bodies by the picture window and falling into the baseline. This is always fun, it's skating without the pressure or the risk of falling, just twirling and chasing the beat, and it gets better when he feels hands drop to his hips so Yuuri has someone to rub up against — to get a little friction going.

Yuuri feels someone's mouth at his ear, fingers tugging at his button-down, tucked into his trousers.

"*Yuu-ri*," he hears, and finally places the hands, the voice: Santiago Garcia, world-ranked, famous for his bullfighter program, retiring next year — today's gold medalist. "You were amazing today."

Yuuri laughs, because the horrible drink Russian Girl had forced on him is kicking in, and twists around in Santiago's hands to grin up at him. "You're only saying that because you won gold after all."

Santiago's gorgeous the way all Spanish men are gorgeous: dark-haired and olive skinned and he always looks like he's just about to take you dancing. It's a good look.

"Next year, it'll be yours," Santiago laughs, and leans in closer, pulls Yuuri a little more tightly against him. "I didn't think I'd see you here."

"It's my first time doing Finlandia," Yuuri says stupidly, and it takes a second to realize that's probably not what Santiago meant at all.

Yuuri feels a hand slide down the back seam of his trousers, Santiago's thumb hot and heavy through the fabric — until he's pressed into the cleft of Yuuri's ass, teasing.

"How do you feel about other types of new experiences?" Santiago asks.

They skip the petting couch entirely.

It's a nice hotel, and the bedroom is lavishly oversized, with a king-sized bed and crisp white sheets that look ghostly in the ambient light of the city, the moon huge white disc in the sky. Yuuri's just woozy enough from his drinks to think all of it's beautiful, that it's so nice to press his cheek into the sheets, to let Santiago kiss his way down Yuuri's spine — careful around the purple-brown of his bruises — and to lick his way inside.

It's intense, this is always intense, and Yuuri can only ever handle a little of it: it's too close, it's too intimate, and Yuuri's scared of what he'll say or do if he lets it go on too long. It's always easiest and best to move it along, and he drags Santiago up by his hair, saying, "Now — now," and it's relief when Santiago rolls on a condom and presses into him, a little too rough and a lot too greedy.

Yuuri lets out hurt, wanting little noises, palms his dick and braces himself on one forearm, curls his fingers into the sheets. He can still hear the music blasting outside, the sound of voices, it all turns into white noise — an underline to Yuuri's own gasping breaths, the slap of skin on skin, Santiago growling into his ear. It's more a flood of sensation than pleasure: Santiago's too beautiful not to be selfish, and Yuuri doesn't mind enough to correct him; that'll have to be somebody else's job somewhere down the line. Right now, he just wants to forget that he has another competition in a month, that the sharp burn in his ass is the least of his physical discomfort.

He doesn't realize he's going to come until he does: his body clutching tight and a gasp punched out of him, shock and the shivery overstimulation of Santiago still fucking him in shallow little jerks, the bedsprings silent underneath them.

In the morning, Celestino takes one look at Yuuri's face and sighs.

"Please tell me you're using protection," he says.

Yuuri makes a bunch of noises, none of which are words, but must get the point across.

Celestino spends the next month making sure Yuuri's too exhausted and sore from practice to do anything else that might lead to similar results. He also says if Yuuri gets on the podium

for Cup of China, he'll buy Yuuri a katsudon himself.

"You said that about Finlandia," Yuuri says bitterly.

Celestino makes an innocent face. "I was going to take you after the banquet, but, well."

Phichit laughs himself absolutely sick.

Beijing is a horrible city: gluttonously enormous, PRC Communist chic and an environmental apocalypse. The day they land, classes had been canceled in the city due to unsafe air conditions, and Yuuri's flimsy little cotton face mask does exactly nothing up against the sickening haze that's settled over the city like a dust cloud. They travel by cab directly to their hotel, and Celestino grounds him until he rustles up some higher quality filter masks. It leaves Yuuri bored and anxious, scrolling through his email and text message history, Phichit's Instagram. There's a note from his parents talking about some improvements to the onsen they've undertaken and a note that they're having a viewing party for his Cup of China performance; there's a text from Minako-sensei telling him good luck; there's a photograph of Phichit back in Detroit, looking sad in the kitchen of their house, captioned, "ABBA dance parties just aren't the same without Yuuri Katsuki! Good luck, Yuuri!!!!!!!!!!!!!! #gogoyuuri #goforgold #cupofchina #figureskating #glideordie"

Yuuri doesn't actually manage to get out to the rink until late in the day, at which point the ice is unsettled by an earlier accident: another collision — this one much worse than the last, with stitches, concussions and openly bleeding wounds all discussed and dissected at length. Leo de la Iglesia has the whole thing on tape, which is gruesome but also completely irresistible — a pretty good summary of Leo in general, who is making his senior debut far from home.

"It's not that bad, two of my best friends are here! I — would it be okay if I introduced them?" Leo asks, looking so hopeful there's no way Yuuri can say 'no' or wonder why on earth Leo's friends would want to meet him. "They'd *kill me* if I didn't at least ask you."

Which is how Yuuri ends up meeting Ji Guanghong.

"Katsuki Yuuri!" Guanghong says, when they're introduced; he's short, slim, and almost consumed by the amount of red and yellow that comprises the China team jackets. "From Phichit's Instagram!"

Someone smacks the kid upside the back of the head and mutters, "And also, two-time Japanese National Champion," which is how Yuuri meets Lee Seung-gil.

Seung-gil and Guanghong have been dispatched by their coaches to the event to get a feel for the level of competition and to get a little polish. Yuuri asks if they have any videos of their skating; they do, and they're charmingly mortified to show him, offering up their mobile phones and making all kinds of pre-emptive excuses about how they're still working out the kinks of their program or had a bad ankle at the time of taping. They're both talented skaters, and Yuuri watches them run through their programs with hops standing in for their jumps. Seung-gil's style is cold perfectionism, but he's skating to Rachmaninoff so Yuuri has no clue if that's to match the music or vice versa. Guanghong, on the other hand, sheds his shyness in

competition, and if he doesn't have Phichit's bottomless joy, then he's refreshingly bold. They both make Yuuri feel old, watching them; only in figure skating: Yuuri's just 22.

"You're so calm, Katsuki," Guanhong mourns, later when they're gathered in a restaurant eating... Yuuri has no idea what they're eating, but Guanhong promised it wouldn't make anybody sick and isn't bull penis, Seung-gil's only two specifications. Leo had looked sad that bull penis was off the table.

It's such a ridiculous statement Yuuri doesn't even react to it beyond staring.

"You are!" Guanhong insists. His English has the British ex-pat polish of the child of rich Chinese parents: sent away for school as soon as he could walk — or skate, in this case. "Before competitions, I'm so nervous I could throw up the whole time."

Yuuri remembers his senior debut, the way he'd shut down in nerves, sat staring at walls and flicking through the Yutopia website all those years ago. He's still nervous, it's still there, just under the skin, but all the things that had made all of his anxiety worse have dulled their edges over the years. The flying doesn't phase him anymore, he doesn't mind hotels. The strange anonymity of living on the road for half a year is as familiar as Michigan is to him, now, as every day as the Ann Arbor campus or how Hasetu had been as a child.

"I...guess you get used to it," Yuuri says, after thinking a long time. "Everything that's so scary now you get used to."

Leo pokes Guanhong in the side, grinning. "Just think: after your senior debut, you're gonna be competing with people like *Yuuri*."

Guanhong looks sick. "*Leo*."

"I'm sure you'll put me in my place," Yuuri laughs, and somehow the conversation turns onto the topic of dogs, and he spends the next two hours either showing pictures of Vicchan to Seung-gil or looking at pictures of Seung-gil's husky, Yong-sama.

"Yong-sama, as in...?" Yuuri asks delicately.

"My mother loves 'Winter Sonata,'" Seung-gil grinds out, pained.

"Mine, too," Yuuri commiserates, and then they have to explain kdramas to Leo.

Leo doesn't medal at the Cup of China, but he wasn't expected to — he manages a respectable score and ranked 4th among all the male singles skaters for his SP. At the banquet, he's lightheaded with relief that everything's over, and Yuuri laughs and brings him glass after glass of champagne.

"You're just — ugh, too nice, Yuuri," Leo mumbles, somewhere between the third and fourth glass. "You don't have to babysit me, you can go mingle."

"I'd rather babysit you," Yuuri says honestly, because he's spent most of his night disentangling himself from conversations that are going nowhere, about nothing, with nobody he knows or wants to talk to.

Leo huffs. "You can't blame them for wanting to talk to the bronze medalist."

"Watch me," Yuuri mutters, and tries to hide behind a plant.

It's only a blink of days between the Cup of China and Trophée Eric Bompard, and as they're touching down at CDG, Celestino warns him, "And don't get any ideas. I already texted Nils and swore I would gut him and Giacometti if they kidnap you again."

There's no such thing as privacy in a community as small and incestuous as figure skating, but it's still traumatizing and awful to realize your coach knows who to call to keep you from getting laid in France.

"Our passions have been thwarted cruelly, Yuuri," Chris mourns when they run into each other in the hotel lobby.

He's wearing jeans that are more provocative tears than denim and a fishnet shirt, perfect for showing off the chain that goes between his pierced nipples and gleaming naval ring. Nils is trailing him with that same grim expression of forbearance on his face, and Yuuri would fall for it except he'd been in that club. He's seen just underneath, so he smiles at Nils, too, and waves hello.

"Good luck, Chris," he says peaceably. "Hi, Nils."

"Hi, Yuuri. Good luck," Nils says, grabs Chris by his jacket collar and drags him down the hall.

Yuuri's always been serious about skating, even when he struggled to articulate it, when he let the current of everyone's care and his own accidental success carry him forward. He can't say it, the way people seem to need him to say it, but Yuuri *means* it, he feels it; he echoes it in everything he does. Yuuri's never understood why someone needs his words when he wakes up at 5 a.m. to go to the rink, when spends two hours a day at the gym for strength and flexibility training, when he's lived so far away from home for so long in the comet's tail of his dreams.

He doesn't know how to explain that this isn't fun, that there are rewards, but that skating isn't *rewarding*. From a distance, it's captivating: it looks frictionless. Inside, in the trenches, Yuuri sees more clearly and knows its suffering more intimately. On his best days, when he feels untethered from gravity, it's dizzying euphoria, so good it's impossible to live inside the moment, and Yuuri will spend weeks and months afterward trying to chase that ecstatic high, to touch it just once more.

Yuuri knows people who do things because they've always done things, their bodies and their brains programmed like automatons after decades have grooved into them a clockwork movement. He doesn't think he's like them; skating to him isn't a reflex, something that comes easily. He chooses it, every day, rolls out of his bed after too little sleep and with too-aching muscles and gets on the ice.

Yuuri's ankle twinges, ominous, just before he goes on to skate his FP at the Trophee Eric Bompard, and it fails him on his last jump, a triple-toe, double-axel combo that has him hitting the ice hard enough to knock the wind out of him. He gets back up, and manages to finish pushed by pure adrenaline, but he's walking wounded coming off the rink, and they skip the kiss and cry and go straight for the medics.

He limps up to the podium for his silver, later, feeling sheepish about the way Chris has to squire him up the steps like the gentleman he absolutely isn't. And because Chris is ridiculous and embarrassing, he sweeps Yuuri up princess style to help him off the podium — to the deafening screams of every human in the stadium.

YUURI ARE YOU GONNA MARRY CHRIS, Phichit texts him.

omg yuuri, Leo texts him.

你太厉害了, Guanghong sends, which Yuuri can't read and doesn't want to get translated.

Minako-sensei just sends him an SMS with 140 exclamation points.

That he just misses the qualification for the GPF turns out to be an unwanted but acceptable reality. It's a bad sprain and not a break, but all the same he needs rest and rehab, and Yuuri ends up pulling out of the Nationals.

"I'm really sorry," Yuuri says to his cell phone.

His mother's set up their creaky old family laptop on a similarly creaky window ledge in the onsen's kitchen. He can see the steam off of the industrial rice cooker in the corner, the deep frier hissing and spitting off to the side. One of the kitchen helpers is scrupulously trying not to look like he's eavesdropping, and his mother's picking through string beans in the sink with Vicchan winding around her ankles crazily at the sound of Yuuri's voice.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course your health is more important," she lectures. "And this will be good for you — it's been so long since you've had a proper break."

A ramped-down training schedule and an hour of physical therapy twice a week isn't much of a break, but it keeps Yuuri out of airports and off of airplanes for months. He spends a lot of time at the rink with Phichit, helping him work through some new and increasingly difficult elements in his programs, and Celestino makes a number of extremely scary phone calls to choreographers for Yuuri's upcoming season.

"I heard the words 'quadruple axel' during that phone call," Yuuri accuses.

Celestino grunts. "Eh."

"No one's ever landed a quad axel in competition," Yuuri reminds him. "*I* can barely land a quad toe in competition."

"You get any more confident your head's not gonna fit through any doors, you know that, Katsuki?" Celestino grumbles, and gives him a shove back toward the locker rooms of the

rink. "Stop dragging ass. Your physio called me to say you have her sign-off for regular training again.

What's strange about the choreography isn't that it's impossibly hard, or that Celestino seems to be deriving a sadistic amount of pleasure from inflicting it on Yuuri, or that it contains a quad salchow triple loop combo — it's how Yuuri doesn't flinch from it.

He knows it's hard, that a younger version of himself would be hitting that so-familiar anxiety spiral that used to take him out of commission for weeks. But from here, with the benefit of years, mostly what he sees is a program that could get him to the Grand Prix Final — to the Worlds.

For the first time in a long time, Yuuri spends his birthday in Detroit on home turf. Phichit makes him katsudon and Celestino buys him a cake; his parents send him a video of Vicchan going *bananas* at the onsen wearing a party hat and a little bowtie in his honor. Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei mail him a care package: a rainbow of Pocky flavors, Japan formulation medicine, a Yutopia Onsen t-shirt and a skating magazine that had interviewed Yuuri seemingly ages ago, with a Post-It stuck to the front and a note in Minako-sensei's handwriting:

This finally came out!! It's sold out everywhere in Hasetzu, and we are all very proud of you. Mari-chan said we had to send you the Pocky, but if you eat all of them I will see you at your Prix assignments and I will know. You are very cute in this interview; please use it to finally get a boyfriend. - Minako.

Yuuri only eats *most* of the Pocky. He surrenders all the green tea ones to Phichit, who takes a photo of the two of them surrounded by empty food wrappers and prosecco bottles and posts it to Instagram.

"Did you wish for anything when you blew out your candles?" Phichit asks, putting a tiara on Yuuri that has a 23 poking out of the top festooned in glitter and bobbing stars.

"I wished you would stop buying me dumb hats and posting pictures of me wearing them on Instagram," Yuuri says.

Shameless, Phichit says, "That's cool, we'll just do a Snap story."

Yuuri reads the *Skate Quarterly* article later that night when he's in an epsom salt bath trying to soak out the black-purple bruising that the quad salchow is trying to tattoo onto his ass. He only remembers a little of the interview at all, the tiny Japanese woman who'd arranged the meeting through the JSF just before the Cup of China, set it for after the event in a Hakka style tea cafe in the city's inner loop while Yuuri was still bleary from the post-competition come down.

Katsuki has, over the years, developed a ferociously loyal following based on the artistry of his skating and his unfailingly humble personality. Unlike a lot of flamboyant personalities in the figure skating world, Katsuki's social media accounts are mostly abandoned, and during our interview he admits he hasn't checked his Twitter mentions in at least four months.

"I get so nervous about this kind of thing," Katsuki laughs. He still has a baby face, though he's turning 23 this year — making him among the older segment of skaters on the world stage. "I'm not very good at communicating, so I always just try to make myself understood through my skating, though I'm not always successful."

Katsuki admits he's not dating, and that he's taken the year off of school in order to train and focus on his skating.

"My coach and I talked about it, how at a certain point you have to commit all of your attention to trying to achieve something," Katsuki says. "I hope to live up to his faith in me — I hope you can all have faith in me, too."

Yuuri gets assigned Skate America (he hates Skate America) and the NHK Trophy for the 2014-2015 season.

"At least Skate America's in Chicago this year?" Phichit consoles him, because Phichit doesn't have to do Skate America. "And the NHK! Maybe your family can come to that!"

"Ugh," Yuuri says, and pulls the covers over his head.

It's a strange season for Yuuri, long before any competitive skating begins. Celestino sends him off to do a couple of exhibitions to see the programs in closer-to-competition conditions and to mercilessly nitpick Yuuri's every move afterward. There're people in the stands who have posters with his face on them, awkward handwriting spelling out his name in English and in Japanese. When he gets off the ice, there are reporters waiting for him and people wanting autographs. He sees a lot of pictures of himself blushing and looking bewildered on the internet — mostly because Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-chan send them to him with notes begging him to stop looking like a moron.

It also feels — anticipatory, that snap in the air just before autumn descends, and Yuuri wakes up in the mornings feeling like everything's going to happen, that something's about to change. It fizzes through his chest and into the tips of his fingers and toes, and when he looks before he leaps, now, it's in anticipation.

"The whole family is coming for the NHK for sure," his mother tells him, a month before Skate America. "Your father already arranged it with some people from the other shops in town to have them look after the onsen, and our tickets are booked!"

Yuuri can't imagine it, the idea of his mother and father and sister all there — he knows there are skaters whose families travel with them all the time, from little kids who still need their parents to JJ, who is evidently just a taller version of a little kid who needs his parents always. But Yuuri's always known, since it was very young, that his parents loved him but didn't necessarily have the time for him — he hates being alone but is good at pretending to be good at it because there was never any other choice.

"A-are you sure?" Yuuri asks, hushed, feeling something start to squeeze in his chest; his face feels hot, and he's so happy and sad at once, that his family is coming — that this is the first time in a long time his family's all come.

"Absolutely," his mother promises. "We're only sorry we couldn't come to more."

It makes all of his practice going into Skate America feel more urgent. His parents have seen him skate, of course, from when he was six years old wobbling across the ice to Nationals of year's past, but this feels bigger. He puts in a lot of hours at the rink and gets to know the night manager really well — mostly because Eric hates Yuuri for keeping him there so late.

"If you don't win Skate America I'm going to kill you," Eric tells him, when Yuuri wakes him up on night to tell him he's done and it's okay to lock up.

Yuuri flushes up to his hair. "I-I'll do my best."

Eric scrubs a hand over his face and mutters, "*Jesus Christ*."

The 2014 Skate America competition is held at the Sears Center, technically in Hoffman Estates, Illinois. It's a five hour drive on I-94W, and Yuuri spends most of it rammed up in the backseat with Phichit scrolling through Viktor Nikiforov's Instagram account in mute anxiety. He's back almost 40 weeks before Phichit takes his phone away lest he favorite a picture and shame Phichit by-proxy.

"I wouldn't, you already explained why it's bad," Yuuri says. In the front seat, Celestino is having elaborate road rage in Italian at every other driver on the highway.

Phichit sniffs. "Yuuri, you are not one of Viktor Nikiforov's 6 million fans, okay — "

"But I am," Yuuri mumbles.

" — you are his *peer* and a *competitor* and you are going to see him at the Grand Prix Final this year," Phichit plows on. "And what are you going to do when you see him at the banquet and he recognizes you as the creepy weirdo liking his pictures from a million years ago."

The idea of meeting Viktor Nikiforov in person is — frankly — panic-inducing, so Yuuri doesn't entertain it for very long. The idea of being his *peer* and a *competitor* just feels surreal, too absurd to fit within Yuuri's world. He knows it's silly, but Yuuri will always feel like that little boy sitting in the back at Ice Castle Hasetu, watching Viktor win the Junior Grand Prix.

"Viktor would never — " Yuuri starts and doesn't know where to go with that sentence. Remember me? Notice me at the banquet? Care? All of those sit funny on his tongue and at the bottom of his stomach.

In the front seat, Celestino bellows, "*Vaffanculo a chi t'è morto!*" at a passing Subaru.

"Oh, wait wait, here we go," Phichit says, and flicks his camera to "video."

Phichit posts the video of Celestino shrieking, "*Ti metto un remo in culo e ti sventolo per l'aria!*" — among other greatest hits — at 2:04 p.m. By 2:15, it already has 632 likes and thousands of views, and Celestino threatens to leave Phichit at a truckstop.

The only nice thing about Skate America is that Leo is there.

"Is this Phichit?" Leo gushes, and he and Phichit fall upon each other like long lost friends, with an easy intimacy that makes Yuuri at once warm and jealous. "You're amazing! I must have watched your 'Defying Gravity' program a hundred times — and your Snap stories are banging."

Phichit nods solemnly, taking the praise as his due. "Want to be in one?"

Leo's clearly on home turf, more relaxed that Yuuri saw him at the Cup of China and familiar with everybody. Everywhere they walk, people wave and yell, "Leo!" and a baffling number of times, follow it up with, "Oh my God! That's Yuuri Katsuki!"

Yuuri has absolutely no idea what Phichit and Leo's Snap story is about, but by the time Celestino is done registering them and they head off to their hotel, everybody's yelling, "*Dattebayo!*" or "Hey it's dat boi!" at Yuuri as he walks by. When Yuuri finally has a chance to check his phone in the privacy of his room, Phichit and Leo's Snap story has already gone viral, which would be fine except it's mostly them beatboxing to shaky close-up video of Yuuri's ass bouncing around as he jogs to catch up with Celestino.

"Great," Yuuri tells the ceiling of his hotel room, changes into even *more* revealing pants, and forces himself to get up and go practice, where Leo is extra American and completely shameless about what he's helped Phichit do.

"You think it's funny now, wait until he's videotaping your butt," Yuuri complains.

"I would feel *honored* if Phichit decided to Snapchat my ass," Leo says, with alarming sincerity that makes Yuuri sigh and push off from the boards to go through his footwork.

Skate America always feels *more* and *louder* than any other Grand Prix events Yuuri's competed in, and this year is no different. The crowds are big, the volume is enormous, the crush of cameras and attendees is mind-boggling. Yuuri puts in his headphones and tries to focus, hides from everybody holding a microphone, threatens to brick Phichit's phone if he posts that picture of Yuuri doing downward dog in the hallway.

Yuuri's short program flows out of him to Echorus by Philip Glass, as delicate and yearning as the strings — it's a personal best, and Celestino meets him at the kiss and cry ready with both. Phichit's entire Twitter is just a series of context-free pictures of Yuuri and Celestino staring at the scoreboard, Yuuri and Celestino clutching each other as the numbers start coming in, and finally Yuuri's red, tear-soaked face.

"If your free program is anything like your short, we're toast," Leo teases, bringing Yuuri a fistful of tissues clearly stolen from some other competitor.

His free program isn't anything like the short, with its flowing lines long extensions — it's set to Danse macabre in G Minor by Camille Saint-Saens: an urgent, quick-stepping piece that includes so many spins Yuuri's always dizzy by the time he closes it out. He lets himself lie on the ice for a second, until his head clears a little. Sitting in kiss and cry with Celestino, he's

actually completely numb as he watches his numbers come in: a personal best that puts him at No. 1 for the FP.

Yuuri mostly doesn't cry when they give him his gold medal, no matter what Leo says from his perch on the bronze step.

Yuuri falls asleep in the car on the way back to Detroit, and when he gets up the next day he doesn't bother to make plans to go to the post office. The NHK Trophy is a little over a month away, and he puts the medal in a little velvet pouch and tucks it into his massive traveling suitcase, already half-packed for his flight to Japan. Yuuri can't remember the last time he could give one of these to his parents in person, feels a zing of foolish happiness at it.

Nobody in Hasetsu answers their phones on the day of the NHK Trophy.

Yuuri can't find them in the audience, at the hotel they booked. The train ride is less than three hours, and even if his parents are bad about keeping their mobile phones on or the ringer loud enough so they can hear over the noise, Mari-nee-chan isn't. Yuuri keeps trying to main line at the onsen, but it's always either busy or rings out to the voice mail; Yuuri leaves a half-dozen messages before Celestino puts a hand on his shoulder and says, kind but firm, "Yuuri — it's time."

"You'll tell me, as soon as you hear something?" Yuuri asks.

"As soon as I hear something," Celestino promises, and takes his phone. "You know it's probably nothing — maybe they're stuck in traffic or something."

Yuuri's short program is tighter, less dreamy than his best performances. He counts out his beats and his elements, and if he doesn't have room in his head for other concerns while he's skating, his body remembers all of his worry. His score still puts him in first place, and all Yuuri feels is a sickening hurt that his family aren't there to see it. He keeps scanning the audience, keeps looking around the milling crowds of people with guest and visitors passes for his mother or father, for Mari-nee-chan.

Yuuri manages to hide from every reporter that tries to trap him on the way out of the venue other than Morooka, who jams a microphone in his face.

"Katsuki-kun — you're a top prospect for the Grand Prix Finals this year — how do you feel after that short program?" he demands.

"I — just want to focus on the free program tomorrow," he manages, bows deeply, and mumbles, "Sorry, right now isn't..." before he flees for his hotel.

His phone starts ringing in the hotel lobby, and Yuuri drops it he's in such a rush to answer.

Mari-nee-chan used to say the only reason she didn't hate how Yuuri was spoiled was because he never seemed to want or ask for anything.

He was so quiet as a child, and such a coward — her little brother who cried every time she walked him to his elementary school classroom and tried to leave him there without her for a *month*. Even his dancing, his skating, all of that came because their parents were so desperate to find something Yuuri liked, when mostly Yuuri seemed to like his family. They'd all gone to see Minako-sensei's class perform at the local matsuri night, and Yuuri had looked starry-eyed in his little *jinbei*, clutching his mother's hand and squeezing. It was the first time he'd wanted anything, and his sister had volunteered to walk him to dance classes after school, eventually to his skating classes after that.

Vicchan was the first time he'd ever *asked* for anything other than another bowl of katsudon, and when he and Mari-nee-chan got home from school one day to see a squirming, barking mass of sweet brown curls, Yuuri had screamed in joy.

"He's at the veterinary hospital right now," his sister tells him. "It — it was some guy delivering beer to the ramen shop down on the main street, but he was driving too fast."

Yuuri can't feel his legs. His hands and feet are very cold.

"Is he going to be okay?" he asks.

"The doctor is doing everything she can, and Mama and Otosan are there with him," Mari-nee-chan says. There's the tell-tale pause of her taking a drag off her cigarette, but that could mean anything: she smokes when she's upset, when she's happy, when she's bored. Her tone is scrupulously neutral right now. "Yuuri — we're so sorry we missed you today."

Yuuri feels a hand on his back, and when he looks up, it's to see Chris standing there with a frown on his face. He mouths, 'okay?' and Yuuri just turns to look back at his feet, at the hideous carpet of the hotel.

"I — is his leg broken?" Yuuri asks stupidly.

Vicchan is so little, even fully grown. He's a toy poodle, and too smart for everybody in the house, likes to get into everybody's business. If his leg's broken he'll be unbearable, whining nonstop, and it'll be like that time he cut his paw and had to wear the cone and made Yuuri feel like a *monster* because he didn't want Vicchan chewing on his stitches.

He hears Mari-nee-chan huff; he can imagine her snuffing out her cigarette under the toe of her sneaker. "Don't — Yuuri, we're with him, okay? You just focus on your free program tomorrow."

"But — "

"I know," she cuts him off. "I gotta go, okay, Yuuri? I'm going to go drive our parents home and then go back to the hospital to sit with Vicchan okay?"

Yuuri nods into the phone, and even though she can't see him, she must know him enough to know it.

"We're really proud of you, okay?" she says, softer than before. "You were wonderful today, and you'll be wonderful tomorrow, and then you can come right home."

He listens to the dead air of a disconnected call for a long beat before Chris's hand on his back turns into a hand stroking down his arm, pulling the phone out of his fingers.

Chris calls Nils, who finds Celestino, and they deliver Yuuri upstairs to his hotel room. He takes a shower and crawls directly into bed in a t-shirt and his briefs, and smothers himself in a pillow. He thinks aggressively about nothing, and when that fails him, he pulls up that stupid Viktor Nikiforov YouTube playlist and sets it on the pillow next to his head and listens to the sound of Viktor's skates scraping across the ice for hours, until the night bleeds into the day.

"Did you sleep at all, Yuuri?" Celestino asks, bringing him a bottle of water and an Advil the next morning.

"It's fine," Yuuri lies, and stares at his phone. His mother texted him an update at just past 7 a.m., a picture of Vicchan's sleeping face with a note appended: *he's resting peacefully but cheering you on! mama*

Yuuri decides to let himself have one short, frantic meltdown before his free program. He locks himself in an out-of-the-way bathroom stall in the Namiyaya Dome and waits for the crying to start, but all he feels is a tight ache in his throat and a burn in his eyes. Mostly he keeps realizing he's holding his breath, that his heart's having palpitations in his chest, but that it's all trapped inside, that he can't shake it loose. He looks at his phone, at the picture of Vicchan with bandages around his tiny front paw, the big white sheet covering his body — even so Yuuri can tell they've shaved so much of his curly brown hair. It hurts to see, it *hurts*, and it just builds and builds and has nowhere to go but deeper into the pit in Yuuri's belly.

He skates his free program feeling like Hans Christen Andersen's little mermaid, that every step is agony. It's the longest 6 minutes of his life, and he finishes with such weight on him he slips out of pose down onto his hands and knees on the ice while the noise in the dome becomes so cosmic and huge his hearing retreats to just the thud of own heartbeat, the quiet gasps inside his head.

Later, Yuuri will see video of himself on the podium at the NHK Trophy, hear Morooka-san speculate that for someone who just won his second gold medal of the year on his 23rd birthday, going into the Grand Prix Final, Yuuri doesn't look happy. The Yuuri in the video is wane, colorless, and he smiles and waves and doesn't mean any of it. He gets off the steps as quickly possible, goes directly to Celestino, who's big enough that when he wraps his arm around Yuuri, Yuuri vanishes into his coach's big brown coat.

His father calls him about an hour after the award ceremony.

"They made him as comfortable as he could be," Otsan says, with a gruffness Yuuri never hears from his father, hasn't heard since his grandmother died when he was still very young. "We all sat with him, and we wrapped him in one of your old sweatshirts so he would be comfortable. The doctor said it was the best we could do for him."

He ignores Mari-nee-chan when she asks if he wants to come home for a while before the GPF. He lets all of Minako-sensei's calls go to voicemail. He cries all the way home to Detroit, curled up in the window seat with his face in his knees.

Yuuri doesn't want to talk about it. To his family, to Celestino, to Phichit. When Nils texts him, he just writes back, "Tell Chris good luck from me." He puts all of his social media apps on the fourth screen of his iPhone so he doesn't have to look at their accusing red numbers when he's trying to figure out the day's temperature or his schedule for the afternoon. Minako-sensei keeps calling him, and when he does answer, it sticks to one-word replies; he honestly doesn't know what to say to her.

He spends daybreak to sunset at the rink or at the gym, running laps on campus if they're closed or Phichit and Celestino are at home waiting to have an intervention. It's not just Vicchan, but Vicchan feels like all of it underlined: everything Yuuri neglected and everything he stands to lose. The least he can do — the very very least he can do — is to be practicing, if he didn't go home for five years, if he wasn't looking after Vicchan, if he couldn't even be there, if his shitty old sweatshirt was the best he could do.

Yuuri knows he's overdoing it, that this burn in his muscles and this persistent hurt in his body isn't good for him, but when he slows down all of it starts crowding into his head, and he has to go, get out of here.

Three days before they fly out for Sochi and the Grand Prix, Celestino takes his skates away.

Everybody at his practice rink is a lot more frightened of Celestino than they are of Yuuri, which he guesses is fair, but that means he has dozens of hours each day and nothing to do with them beyond trying to fight off the specter of an impending crash. Yuuri has been trapped inside the anxious mess of his own head and his own body for his entire life — he knows what's going to happen, sooner or later.

At night, when he can't sleep, Phichit sits up with him and watches dumb movies and YouTube videos. In the daytime, Yuuri sleepwalks through the hours; Celestino won't give him back his skates, and Phichit hid all of his shoes, so Yuuri wanders around the house eating out boredom. He sits on the back porch and stares into the woods like a creep. He prints their boarding passes for the flight, and he packs his bags.

On the internet, there's a lot of speculation about what happened with Yuuri at the end of the NHK Trophy, how he dropped out of the gala exhibition so last minute. *It must have been some kind of emergency, Yuuri isn't exactly a diva*, someone writes. Someone else adds, *I hope whatever it is he's okay for the GPF! My friends and I are having a live viewing party.*

"I took away your skates, I'll take away your phone, too," Celestino says.

Yuuri climbs back into bed, sans phone, no skates. Twenty-four hours until Russia.

Sochi feels like the stale air after the Olympics — all the massive pavilions and dorms emptied out, and the city still crawling with feral dogs who run up to all the visitors, spoiled

from being spoiled during the winter games. One with a curly little tail and charcoal-tipped ears comes up to him just outside their hotel, and Yuuri feels a lurch of nausea so bad he bolts for his room, drops off his things, and goes straight to the rink with his headphones on.

Yuuri knows this isn't sustainable, that he's living in smaller and smaller pieces of himself. He's exhausted even though he feels like all he's done in the last few days is sleep, and his body feels heavy, sluggish. His shoulder keeps slamming into door frames and passers-by; Yuuri's apologized to more strangers in the past hour than he has in the past month. He feels like something stretched nearly to the breaking point, but if he can just maintain that tension, if he can just keep it together through Saturday, then he'll be okay — it'll be okay.

His parents send him a photograph of the little shrine they've set up in the tatami room for Vicchan, and a note for him to try his hardest, that they'll be watching. He guesses they're trying to help, but it makes him feel even further away, and he wakes up Wednesday morning bleary-eyed and sore and he wants not to be here: in Sochi, at the Grand Prix Final, skating. He wants to be anywhere else.

It shows in his practice skate. It shows in how his neck hurts from sleeping on it wrong and from the way he's been staring at his feet since he landed in Russia.

"Yuuri, I know this isn't fair, but you need to get yourself together," Celestino tells him late on Wednesday night.

Yuuri feels his shoulder getting tighter, his body trying to fold in on itself.

"I know," he whispers.

Celestino doesn't talk for a long time, and when he finally does, it's to say, "You've worked so hard for this for so long, Yuuri. Don't waste it."

He knows, he *knows*. It's sickening to know, too, that every moment and lost hour and bruise and sacrifice he's made — that his family has made — since he was a little kid was in a very real way leading toward this opportunity, 9 minutes of skate time over two consecutive days. It feels like learning to land a jump, the freewheeling fear of the leap and the desperate pitch for balance when he comes down.

Hold on, Yuuri tells himself, *just hold on*.

If his short program's a mess, it's his free skate that really redefines catastrophe. His timing's off from the opening of the music, and he never manages to synch back up to it — he ends up simplifying his footwork to try and hit his jumps at the right bar, and touches down on his triple axel and downgrades the quad he doesn't wipe out on. He collapses into Celestino's arms at kiss and cry, presses his face into his coach's shoulder and squeezes his eyes shut; he doesn't need the official scoring to know he's in last place.

"Yuuri, don't look at the news — let's just go back," Celestino says.

Inside the venue, the announcer is congratulating Viktor Nikiforov for his fifth Grand Prix Final win. In the hallway, where Yuuri's sitting, he's scrolling through a hundred articles on the internet about his wholesale collapse already — like they'd had them pre-written and ready to go.

"Katsuki Fell to Last Place; Is This Season His Last?" Yuuri reads out loud, mostly to himself, barely audible over the noise in the hall, all the other crying and celebrating skaters, the coaches and assistants and photographers.

"*Yuuri*," Celestino pleads, and Yuuri says, "Okay, okay."

He goes to the bathroom, because it's too loud in the hall, and calls home on autopilot. He doesn't actually realize he's dialed out until his mother answers, sounding scratchy and tired, saying, "Yuuri?"

Yuuri closes a fist over his knee, squeezing. His bad ankle is hurting again. "Ah — Mom, were you sleeping? Sorry."

"Nn," his mother disagrees. "We were just cleaning up here — we stayed up."

His stomach hurts, too. "Oh, you were watching on TV?"

"Yuuri!" his mother scolds. "It was the Grand Prix Final! We had a public viewing, of course."

"*A public viewing*," Yuuri chokes, and the nervous laughter comes out instinctively, from a lifetime of trying to smile through how much he'd rather cry, and he says, "Please, I'm so embarrassed," and tries not to feel how much he means it.

"Oh, Yuuri, don't be. We're all so proud of you," his mother says.

That's it, that does it, everything barely holding him upright falling suddenly, crushingly away. Yuuri feels with a rushing immediacy everything he's held at bay. The way mute loneliness can calcify into something that almost feels like acceptance. The unrelenting grind of pressure in the midst of the privilege of skating. The way his friends have grown up and gone away from him while Yuuri lives half lives out of suitcases and on the road, in anonymous cities and too often in the anonymous beds of people he'll never call again. He tries not to think about Vicchan, about his poor little body and broken leg and how he'd probably been scared and hurt, how Yuuri hadn't even been able to keep him company at the very end — after all the years Vicchan was his most loyal friend. Yuuri thinks how if it was worth it to win, to surprise himself each time he pushed out onto the ice, then how *dismantling* it is to fail, to hide himself away in a bathroom in Sochi and listen to his mother say she's proud, because there's nothing else she can say, because she *has* to be — no matter how little he deserves it.

"Sorry," he whispers. "I messed up."

"*Yuuri*," he hears, tinny from the phone.

He should make sure he's ended the call, Yuuri guesses; his mother hates it when he cries, and Yuuri hates it when he cries in front of her because of how upset she gets. It's all he can do to press his hands into his mouth, to muffle the worst of the noises he's making. His glasses are fogging up, his chest feels like a sucking wound, and Yuuri doesn't know if he's crying or if it's just something being purged out of him — gutting.

And then Yuri Plisetski kicks the bathroom door and tears him a new asshole.

There's not a lot about the next few months that Yuuri would ever revisit.

It starts with the post-GPF banquet, which Celestino forces him to attend despite Yuuri's bitter protests and increasingly pathetic pleading. He hid in a corner, as far away from the gilded circle of winners as possible. Of course the first time Yuuri is in the same geographic region as Viktor Nikiforov, it would be like this: Yuuri, on his sixth glass of champagne already reaching for his seventh; Viktor, laughing charmingly at everyone's jokes, basking in the flow of his gold, and flanked by Yuri Plisetski, who'd threatened Yuuri's life in the men's restroom not six hours ago. *Fantastic*.

Yuuri had started the morning directly after that one with a block of unrecoverable memories and his head in the toilet, making the pilgrimage from vomiting food solids (?) to mostly champagne (?) to bile. It's the worst hangover he's ever had, and Yuuri feels sorry for himself for a long time lying with his cheek pressed against the cool tile of the bathroom floor. Then he remembers it's the worst hangover he's ever had because mostly he stops drinking after four or five in favor of having sex with agreeable semi-strangers, which makes his mood significantly worse.

Celestino had poured a liter of water into him and handed him a bag of convenience store Russian pastry.

"If you throw up on me during the flight, I'm taking it out of you in suicides," he told Yuuri with something approaching affection, which was nice until Yuuri had get the cab to pull over so he could gag messily all over the side of the highway.

In the cold light of a three-day hangover, Yuuri's life in Detroit looks even shittier and bleaker than it had going into the Grand Prix Final. He does his laundry and watches his clothes in the drier, because when he'd gone online every news alert was about his disastrous performance at the GPF, which had started off with reasonable reporting and devolved into wild conspiracy theories on the figure skating message boards. People send a lot of care packages to his practice rink — beautiful cards and intensely personal letters — and Yuuri doesn't know if it makes him feel better or worse; it makes him feel a little less alone, but also more keenly aware of how many people he's disappointed.

"Yuuri, you're the most negative human I've ever met," Phichit accuses.

"You met Yakov Feltsman last year," Yuuri accuses.

"*And yet*," Phichit retorts — but quietly, because they're hiding in the pantry eating some of Yuuri's care package cookies that Celestino had taken away from them.

The figure skating season doesn't leave a lot of room for catastrophic meltdowns or painful personal issues, and Yuuri's committed for the Japanese Nationals at the end of December. And anyway, Yuuri feels better when he's skating, even if it's garbage time. Yuuri doesn't actually need to look at Celestino's face to know he's not coming back from Russia, that he left something in Sochi and his skating now is paying the price.

Yuuri remembers being very young, too young to know his age, really, and going to Ice Castle Hasetzu for the first time. This was before his grandfather had passed away, and his parents had more time then, before they'd officially inherited the daily operations of the onsen. It was a Saturday, and while Mari-nee-chan was skating beautiful loops around the ice, Yuuri remembers being able to skate but not being able to stop, to turn, to change directions. He feels this all over again — that he's skating but that he can't pull himself out of this, whatever it is.

He spends the week before Nationals telling his family not to go to Nagano for the competition, and he's right to do it because it's a grindingly shitty performance. He touches down on his quad-toe and tumbles in his free skate; his short program has lost its flowing lines.

He comes in 11th, the whole crowd murmuring in shock, and hears a voice in his head say, *Okay, that's it.*

At the end of it, Yuuri mostly feels tired, hollowed out.

He did all his crying after the Grand Prix Final, in a jag that combined guilt with grief, and his disgrace at Nationals only feels like an underline to an already-awful season. It's surprisingly easy to lie in bed at night, to stare at the dark corners of his room and admit that he has no idea what he's doing or where he's going, that for the first time in a lifetime he's directionless. He doesn't have a ballet class to go to or a rink appointment. He can lie here all day long, all week long, because he didn't make the Four Continents or the Worlds.

It's still hard to tell Phichit, who looks halfway between angry and sad and who just wraps Yuuri up in a hug and whispers, "You'll be back soon. I know it."

Yuuri keeps thinking he's doing the worst part, but everything feels like the worst part. It's terrible contacting the JSF to say he's stepping back "for a while." It's terrible having to write back to Morooka-san's emails saying that he's taking some time to reevaluate and rest. It's terrible to sit down with Celestino, who's been with Yuuri since he was 17, and say that it's not working.

"You've really thought this through?" Celestino asks him.

Yuuri nods. "Yeah — I'm — " he keeps talking in stops and starts, because he doesn't know how to say everything he feels, and doesn't know if he should say any of it at all.

Celestino is Christmas morning polenta breakfasts and fantastically foul Italian swearing at football matches he watches at absurd hours on satellite TV. His collection of hair care products in the bathroom numbers the stars, and when Yuuri was particularly good in

practice, Celestino would make his grandmother's pasta al a norma. He gives amazing hugs and is the second-best yeller among the international professional skating circuit, and Yuuri loves him, adores him — knows Celestino and Phichit will be great.

"I'm going to be rooting for you and Phichit," he says finally, and when he smiles at that, he can at least mean that honestly. "I have high hopes."

Celestino says, "God damn it, Yuuri," and drags him in for a hug — lingering, and says, gruff and shot through with something like tenderness, "You stay here while you finish up classes, okay? I promised I'd look after you."

"Okay," Yuuri says and hides his face in Celestino's shoulder. "Yes."

It's hard to train himself out of waking up at 5 a.m. for rink time, and harder still to watch Phichit and Celestino pile into his SUV from the upstairs window. The rest of his time he works on his last three credit hours for his sports management degree: an independent study his advisor arranged for him about the economics of developing sporting franchises. Honestly he wishes he knew some of this stuff about sponsorships while they were still relevant in his day to day life.

Yuuri still skates, but he does it in secret.

He doesn't want to disrupt or distract from Phichit's rink time, so he goes to a different skating center, a little shabbier with less accommodating hours, but it's within jogging distance of the house and nobody there seems to recognize him. Yuuri goes during the early afternoon, when the crowds are at their thinnest.

At first, he skates his own programs, but they mostly leave a bad taste in his mouth: he either screws up and they remind him of the Grand Prix, or he skates them to perfection and he beats himself up over why now, why here, why not in Sochi.

He picks Viktor's free skate because it's beautiful and looks impossible. Yuuri's seen it hundreds of times now, from five different angles via five different YouTube uploads. Viktor's performance is flawless, every jump is perfection, there's not a single moment where he's not in complete control. It's a profoundly intimidating thing to see, and some small, foolish part of Yuuri's brain clutches at that challenge and says *yes*.

Graduating doesn't feel like much of an accomplishment; it's quiet, mostly paperwork, the whimper after the bang.

"I'm just going to stop by Kii University to make sure everything transferred properly, and then I'm headed home," Yuuri tells his mom.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come?" she asks. Her voice sounds strange and staticky on the speakerphone, set away on a high shelf as Yuuri packs up his room, marvels at how he managed to accumulate all this stuff.

"It's fine, there won't be a ceremony," Yuuri says, trying to decide if he still needs all these dictionaries and phrasebooks. He has them in French, German, Russian and Chinese. "Is it okay? The dates for coming back?"

His mother makes a tscking sound. "*Yuuri* — this is your *home*. You can come back anytime you like. Don't be ridiculous."

Yuuri thinks back to his old bedroom and his tiny single bed, his walls covered in Viktor Nikiforov posters, and he can't help but crack a smile. He'd finally nailed the quad-toe loop this morning; his ass still hurts from the the uphill climb there.

"Okay, okay," Yuuri tells her. "Want me to bring anything from Detroit?"

"Just you," she says, tender and entirely earnest.

It's so strange, the idea of distance. Yuuri's lived away from his family for so long he's used to it, that he looks at their absence like a given, an unchangeable hurt. But it surges back to him, as new and immediate as his first nights of awful homesickness. Yuuri is ashamed that this is how and why he's going home, but tangled in there is also a desperate gratitude, that there's a place left he can just go away to when he's what he's trying to get away from.

Yuuri scrubs at his face. "All right," he says, and scrapes out, "Thank you," because he means it, and he can't help himself — no matter how he can hear his mother's expression, run through with worry, through the cell phone line.

Despite Yuuris' best arguments about car services, taxis, Uber, Lyft, *hitchhiking*, Celestino and Phichit insist on driving him to the airport at the crack of dawn. It's just past 4:30 a.m. when they pile into Celestino's SUV, and the trip to Detroit International is quiet. Yuuri and Phichit squeeze together in the backseat, arms linked.

"You're the best roommate I've ever had," Phichit tells him at curbside drop off, when March is roaring around them like a lion, and Celestino's stone-faced and dragging Yuuri's massive suitcase out of the back of the car.

Yuuri hugs him and mutters, "I'm the only roommate you've ever had," into his ear.

"It's still true," Phichit says, a little pitchy now, and squeezes Yuuri a little too tight, and it makes something go wild in Yuuri's chest. This is Phichit, who thinks everybody is going to be his best friend on Instagram and never looks both ways before he crosses the street — how can Yuuri just leave him? Phichit doesn't even know how to buy winter weight clothes.

"Don't disappear on me, okay? You have to come back."

"I won't disappear on you," Yuuri promises, because he doesn't know what to say about the rest of it, and lets Celestino cut in, folds himself into his coach's huge arms in their huge puffy coat.

Celestino doesn't say anything. He's done this so long he must have seen students come and go in better and much worse circumstances than this, and he has the solemn wisdom of

someone older, whose kindness is certain and unshakeable, and Yuuri is — not for the first time — immeasurably grateful he'd been delivered into Celestino's care.

"Thank you," Yuuri manages, finally, trying to smile. "For everything."

"It was pleasure," Celestino tells him, and as Yuuri turns to go, he feels the familiar shape of Celestino's hand on his arm and turns. "Yuuri?"

He blinks, so surprised it knocks him out of his sadness. "Ah — yes?"

Celestino grins. "*We'll see you again soon*," he says, every word weighty, and gives Yuuri a playful shove toward the revolving door. "Now go — you'll miss your flight."

In the 50 minutes it takes Yuuri to drop off his luggage, acquire his boarding pass, travel through security, and stop in the men's restroom before checking his mobile phone, Phichit has posted a 25-part Snap story festooned with sobbing emojis to mark Yuuri's departure. Yuuri's reluctantly impressed, both by the variety of things with which Phichit has decided to use to convey the depth of his abandonment (a close-up shot of Yuuri's ass as he walks into the terminal; a picture of the coffee cup Yuuri had left in Celestino's SUV from their quick stop at Starbucks on the way to the airport) and the fact that Phichit's somehow scammed Celestino into letting him blast 'My Heart Will Go On' in the car on their way back to the house.

Yuuri takes two Benedryl and sleeps like the dead during the Chicago to Narita leg of his flight. He wakes up and mechanically eats everything the flight attendants give him: gross overheated meals, peanuts, a potato-salad sandwich, a cup of ramen. At some point he staggers to the bathroom — woozy, his feet are swollen, his hair is greasy — and stares at his own crazy-eyed face for 45 seconds before he snaps out of it enough to go back to his seat.

He lands in Tokyo and staggers off toward the Shinkansen and the JR toward Wakayama. It's profoundly poor planning to go from 16 hours of flying to a 6 hour train but Yuuri decided to dance on knife shoes for a living before he started shaving so he sees no reason not to go as he means to continue.

Yuuri shuts down like a robot with dead batteries about two feet outside the Wakayama JR station, and ends up in a hotel for the night. He's keenly aware he looks and smells homeless, and thus has no business being in the lobby of the Hotel Granvia Wakayama, which is sleek and beautiful and hosting a wedding right now, but he's about to lose consciousness while standing upright so needs must.

He crashes out again as soon as he gets into his hotel room, curling up in the bed in his t-shirt and briefs, all his worldly belongings scattered around him. Because he's traveled forward in time from the U.S. to Japan, he wakes up in the middle of the night, suddenly 100 percent alert. The inside of his mouth is disgusting, and he brushes his teeth twice: once in the shower, once after, just for good measure.

Hotels feel like liminal spaces, out of time and place. Yuuri understands why rock stars trash guest rooms, because he sits on his pristine bed and feels like there can be no possible consequences, here, that this room and this hall in this building must be little pockets outside

of the stream of reality. He pulls open the curtains and looks out at Wakayama City, glittering in the night, and when his eyes start to blur, Yuuri lies down and tries to sleep some more. He's not sure if he accomplishes it — drifts in and out of different half-states of consciousness — but he rolls over at some point toward the window and realizes pink is starting to leach into the sky.

Yuuri eats breakfast at the hotel and wanders around until the Kii University registrar's office opens. He spends the day doing paperwork, and at the end of it, he gets a couple of photocopied documents and a polite "congratulations" from the registrar staff; his diploma will be in the mail.

The trip from Wakayama to Hasetu is *also* 6 hours, but it coincides — mercifully — with Yuuri's brutal mid-afternoon jetlag crash. He almost misses his transfer onto the Tokaido-Sanyo Shinkansen, but manages to flail his way off of the train with his suitcase just in time. It's a masterwork of grace and control, completely fitting for someone whose professional career balanced on artistry.

The countryside is at once immediately familiar and alien outside the windows, and Yuuri's not sure how much of it is long absence and how much is the fact his brain thinks it's yesterday. He blindly eats a train bento and plays Bejeweled until his eyes start to cross and he has to shift around in the train seat as his ass starts going numb. They cross into Kyushu as Yuuri is thinking about how strange it is that most of his bruises have gone, that when he showered this morning he saw milky, unmarked skin, and only old scars. Billions of people must live like this every day, but Yuuri barely remembers the landscape of his body without his figure skating written all over it.

It feels strange this doesn't feel stranger, or maybe Yuuri's still numbly unaccepting of his circumstances, which is silly on its own: he's been off the circuit since Nationals, he doesn't have a coach, he has six messages from the JSF on his phone he hasn't listened to because he's 100 percent sure they will make him cry.

Yuuri's father — when Yuuri was being his most pathetic and least deserving of comfort — used to sweep him into a cuddle and say, "All you can ever do is the best you can do." In Yuuri's worst moments, it's what he holds fast. It's what he has to believe.

Ever since the Grand Prix Final, Yuuri has lived with a veil between himself and everyone and everything else. It's given him room to breath and space to maneuver, but it's cold here, too, and very alone. To press beyond that is to open the door to all of his unhappiness, everything that drove him here, but Yuuri knows that it's unavoidable, that sooner or later, the choice will be taken out of his hands.

Yuuri blinks, sudden, and sees the looming outline of Hasetu Castle in the distance, familiar and immediate, the town's highest peak.

"Oh," Yuuri says, and it takes him a beat to realize it's out loud.

Because then the familiar sights come fast and furious: the roofline there, the street he can just see below, the office block, the chamber of commerce building, the clutter of little shops

and restaurants on the main street. For all that Yuuri presses his face to the window and seems to know all of it, there are surprises, too: an old playground has vanished, Ice Castle Hasetsu has a different-colored roof, the train has an elevated station, now, to pull into.

He's just enjoying the idea that *Hasetsu* has a rail escalator when he looks up and has a full on heart attack: the walls — every flat surface in this fucking station — is covered in that poster of Yuuri running through flower petals.

He's still recovering from that when he hears Minako-sensei shouting his name.

It's amazing what the human mind can file away as unnecessary, Yuuri thinks with beatific calm, later, getting stripped out of his clothes in the entryway of Yutopia. How could he have forgotten for even a moment the elemental chaos that is Minako-sensei on a mission? Of *course* Hasetsu Station was wallpapered in posters of himself, of *course* she's pinching his spare tire in front of his mother and father, less than 2 minutes after delivering him home. It's only fitting, and it was either blind stupidity or hubris to imagine that any situation that included Minako-sensei's participation wouldn't automatically lead to some sort of embarrassment on Yuuri's part. Had she not been so vital in other such moments in his life? Such as telling him, "All boys get boners, Yuuri, stop worrying about it," during dance class, and remarking, "Honestly, sometimes I can't tell if your crush is on Yu-chan or Nishigori." Classic.

He thinks all of these thoughts kneeling in front of Vicchan's little altar in their private tatami room, because Vicchan was always the keeper of his secrets and heartbreaks. Vicchan knows better than almost anybody Yuuri's complicated love and fear of Minako-sensei, and Yuuri prays that Vicchan is happy wherever he is, and that there are humans who make fun of other humans for his amusement there, too.

Sorry I couldn't see you one last time, Vicchan, Yuuri thinks. He can't tell if the hurt is more loss or regret, and Yuuri guesses it doesn't really matter anyway — the dead must be beyond caring.

Behind him, he hears the soft sound of the door opening, and his sister is standing there in the onsen uniform when he turns.

"Yuuri — welcome back," she says, smiling a little. Her roots are growing in and she's got more earrings than ever, and Yuuri thinks she looks beautiful.

"Mari-nee-chan — it's been a while," he says, not hesitating, but formal, a little quiet. They were never thick as thieves, as children, but they were close, and he feels the inscrutable guilt of having wronged her, having been silent so long and now so suddenly here. "Sorry to visit when things are busy."

She nods a little, and reaching for a her ever-present packet of cigarettes and saying, "Hey, how long are you staying in Hasetsu?"

Yuuri blinks.

"Will you help out with the onsen?" Mari-nee-chan goes on, her voice flatly uninflected.

He flinches, thinks back of that midnight conversation long ago, when they'd left the video on and Yuuri had pretended they were little again, sharing a futon at their grandparents' home.

"Um — where's this coming from?" he manages.

She slants a look at him, meaningful and unknowable.

"You went to college, even though you had to study for an extra year. What will you do now?" she asks, oh-so-reasonably, lighting her cigarette and taking a drag. And it's with a practiced lightness she says, "If you're going to keep skating, I'll support you," before letting it trail off into the silence of Yuuri's indecision.

Mari-nee-chan and Minako had probably collaborated over this, met for (too many) drinks and plotted out their individual and shared plans of attack. It's unfair. Yuuri's never been good at this kind of thing, too simple and too soft to outmaneuver them even when he's managed to outthink them.

"I think...I need more time to think it over," he says, finally, because it's true and the only thing he can say.

Yuuri can't imagine a life without skating, but right now he can't imagine how to go back, either. It's hard to explain to people outside of the carefully cultivated ecosystem of professional figure skating, and hard — still — for Yuuri to allow himself to acknowledge, but last season was catastrophic implosion, complete immolation. Everyone said in their messages that it wasn't so bad, that he'd be back next year, but Yuuri's lost all his standing in the international rankings, would have to claw his way back up at 23 against people like Yuri Plisetsky — against people like Viktor Nikiforov.

"Hmm, okay," she allows, and calling over her shoulder, she says, "Well, go soak in the hot spring and relax."

The onsen is a familiar, immediate comfort with the detached appreciation of five years. Yuuri remembers the cloudy water, the stones that circle the pool, but he thinks about how he knows this place mostly from memories of knowing this place: the comfort he used to take as a child, retreating here, is also like a photographic negative. Yuuri's spent so long treating all the things he's missed as a talisman, only now he's here and there's no magic — there's only him, like always, trapped inside the framework of his body and history.

Suddenly the water and the steam and the high wooden fence around the onsen are oppressive, and it chases him out of Yutopia and down the familiar length of Hasesu's street and byways, over the bridge and toward Ice Castle Hastesu where it perches on the hill.

Before Phichit moved to Detroit, Yuuri had a rinkmate who had a bad, *bad* fall, one that left him motionless on the ice and Yuuri rocked with full-body shock. He'd called 911 — fumbling, terrified, dialing 119 by accident, first — and one of the American girls who shared rink time with them had driven him after the ambulance. Yuuri had called Celestino, because he didn't trust himself to call anybody's parents; his English was still so new to him, and in a

panic his words have always melted away as quickly as his calm. And then he'd sat, frozen in anxiety, in the hospital hallway waiting for news until Sarah had hugged him, and he'd shoved her away in shock. Yuuri remembers thinking that Yu-chan never did this, needle and push and grab him.

When he shores up at the rink, she's still as beautiful as she's always been, as kind and immediately familiar as the town and the onsen. But like Hasesu, there are details that betray the passage of time: she wears her hair up, there are tired bruises under her eyes, a bandaged cut on her hand. Her face is rounder, her eyes are softer.

"It's been a while, Yuko-san," he tries.

It must sound as wrong to her as it does in his mouth because she scolds, "Yuri-kun? Oh, come on — " she rushes to the counter, and smiling like this, she looks just like she did when they were little " — call me Yu-chan!"

Yuuri thinks he gasps an apology, automatic, but it's not important compared to how Yu-chan is telling him if he wants to skate, he can go ahead.

"I can?" he asks.

"You just want to skate alone for now, right?" she asks, still grinning, and when she adds, "I'll protect you," the warmth that suffuses him from head to toe is the same as when they were little. It's deeper and better than the onsen: it lingers, it's real.

He puts on his skates, puts his things away in the locker area, and he stands in the entryway to the rink for nearly a minute, blank with indecision before turning back to the front, where he can hear the sound of Yu-chan's pen scraping at paperwork at the desk. She's hunched over in the bad overhead lighting, and she's posted the familiar "CLOSED" sign at the door, all the exterior lights off for the day so they're suspended here in a little bubble of illumination: a secret, somewhere no one can see — *safe*.

"Um — are you busy?" Yuuri asks stupidly. "Right now?"

Yu-chan looks up, eyebrows raised.

The rink has its own hum, from the machines keeping the ice solid and the high ceilings that trap all the building noises, echo in the window blustering against its roofline and walls. Yuuri makes Yu-chan stand near the gate, hands her his glasses so that the details of the world blur away. Maybe that's another reason Yuuri's always liked skating: on the ice, he can't see any of the sharp edges.

"I wanted to show this to you, so I've been practicing it since the competitions ended," he says, his shyness returning. He's practiced this for months in monastic solitude, plugged into the music and alone with himself. It seems right that Yu-chan would be the first person he'd show — she's seen him from the beginning. "Please watch."

She smiles, she nods at him, and it helps him push out to the center of the rink. He lets himself close his eyes on the image of her — waiting patiently the way Yu-chan's always

been patient with him — and skates.

Yuuri tells Yu-chan the truth, that he was depressed, that he got bored of feeling depressed, that he wanted to remember how simple and happy it was when he was younger, first learning how to fly across the ice. But it's not the whole of it, it has nuances he doesn't think he can say: that Yuuri thinks his anxiety feeds into his sadness, that the truth that's always been too big to admit is that he loves skating enough that it can dismantle him, that he's scared it will — that is has — and that he'd still want to go back to it, over and over again.

He's on the cusp of admitting it when Axel, Lutz and Loop make their appearance, and then the rink is overfull of screaming children and Nishigori's unnecessary bulk and the delicate shared loneliness of five minutes ago is gone, vanished, as impossible now to imagine as it had been real just moments before.

"How long are you back in town for?" Nishigori asks later, giving Yuuri a ride back home in a bright yellow minivan — three car seats lined up in the back. Yuuri can't believe this is the same guy who once peed YUURI IS A BABY into the first snowfall of the year.

Yuuri sighs. "I — don't know," he admits. "I didn't really plan any of this."

"Shit can come at you fast," Nishigori agrees. "But you're tough. You'll handle it."

Yuuri slants him a look. "You used to make me cry once a week."

"That never stopped you from showing up at the rink and staring at Yu-chan like an idiot sheep, did it?" Nishigori laughs. "You have this dumb idea you have to be tough some big macho way — you've always been such a stubborn pain in the ass, Yuuri."

"Thank you, I guess," Yuuri mutters, flushing.

He can't believe he's having revelatory conversations with *Nishigori*, who'd once made Yuuri help him go shopping for Yu-chan's birthday present because, "Yuuri, you're pretty girly — what would Yu-chan want?"

"Look at it this way," Nishigori counsels, pulling up to the onsen, orange lit against the night. "You shit the bed at some skating competitions, that sucks. When Yu-chan and I fucked up, she ended up pregnant with triplets and we had to get married at 18."

Yuuri laughs. That had been — a week.

"But that turned out all right," he teases. The only time he's ever seen Nishigori cry was the month Yu-chan refused to speak with him in high school.

Nishigori grins back. "And so will you," he says, giving Yuuri a shove with his massive paw. "Now get outta my car — I gotta go back and wrangle all my happy accidents."

Nishigori's as useless at wrangling his happy accidents as he was with contraceptives in high school, Yuuri thinks with calcifying horror a few days later, watching a YouTube video titled

"[Katsuki Yuuri] Tried to Skate Viktor's FS Program [Stay Close to Me]."

"Oh my God," Yuuri whispers to himself, and then whispers it a few more times for good measure when he doesn't wake up with cold sweats from a night terror. He's still here, sitting on the floor of his room with walls plastered in Viktor Nikiforov posters, watching a video of himself skating to a Viktor Nikiforov FS, his shirt flipping up on the jumps so everybody can see how ghost-white and jiggly he is. He can sort of hear Nishigori apologizing in the far distance, but mostly what he hears is a cosmic scream of mortification. "*Oh my God.*"

Phichit had taught Yuuri exactly two lessons regarding social media:

1. Do not read YouTube comments
2. Do not upload any nudes to iCloud

So Yuuri decides to take a leaf from No. 1, turns off his phone, and crawls into bed to sleep, and hopefully to die in his sleep, so he never has to venture into civilization and face the epic humiliation of this latest episode in the farce of his life again.

Sadly, Yuuri wakes up the next day — late in the afternoon, his body still sluggish and off-kilter from traveling through time.

There's a moment of pure disconnected calm, when his brain is only half-online and he's staring at his ceiling. Inside that instance, everything is quiet and all he really hears is the sound wind outside his window, feels the good weight of his blankets, the sleepy slowness of his body. It only lasts a beat, but it's sustaining, it's clarifying, and then the world comes back into focus: the cold air in his room, his mother's voice outside his bedroom door, telling him to go shovel snow.

He debates turning on his phone to check how the day's weather is going to play out, but thinks, "ah, no," and leaves it in the tangle of his sheets as a problem for later. Most of Yuuri's life, frankly, is a problem for later right now. He'll make the bed later. He'll make some decisions later.

Yuuri puts on pants and socks and sneakers and throws a coat, unearths a snow shovel from the lean-to off the back of the kitchen, filled with the sweet smell of rice, and his mother shoos him away saying, "*After* you shovel!"

Years later, someone writing a book will ask Yuuri what he was thinking that morning, with all of Hasetsu blanketed in snow and his entire world balanced on a knife edge. Did he feel it in the cold crack of the air? Did he wake up knowing something was about to happen? Did he have a sense — could he have ever anticipated — was there a sign?

The truth is, when Yuuri opens the door clutching a snow shovel and woozy from sleep, listening to barking coming from outside, the only thing he's thinking is, *Why did my parents let some asshole bring their dog to the onsen?*

waldorph: How mad are you about the amount of research you've done
me: UNBELIEVABLY

After

*I might have been myself minus amazement,
that is
someone completely different.*

— Among the Multitudes, Wislawa Szymborska

Yuuri registers the rest of the day mostly in vignettes, the way someone's life flashes through their mind as they're about to die in a hideous accident.

Yuuri's immediate fight-and-flight panic had topped itself out sometime after Viktor Nikiforov — *Viktor Nikiforov* — had emerged, fully naked, dripping, flushed with heat, from the onsen and declared he was going to be Yuuri's coach. The post-terror crash leaves Yuuri in a wash of sedating chemicals, and he numbly listens to Viktor talk about how much he's looking forward to training Yuuri, numbly watches Viktor eat two portions of the set lunch the onsen makes for day-guests, numbly watches Viktor just...decide to nap on the tatami mats, cuddled up with his dog. It probably helps that he's too overclocked to respond when Minako-sensei tells him Russia blames Yuuri, personally, for luring Viktor with his (unwanted) viral YouTube video to coach, thus abandoning his own career for the season. There are not a lot of appropriate reactions for this series of improbable events, Yuuri allows, and forgives himself for how his summary response to these present circumstances is an episode of detachment so profound he's shocked he isn't watching everything play out in an astral projection form, hovering in a corner of the onsen's main room.

"Hey, are you okay?" Minako-sensei asks.

She's sitting next to him, close enough that he can feel the heat from her body, but they're both just — staring. At Viktor. Who makes a little noise in his sleep and rolls over onto his side, pressing his face into Makkachin's curly apricot fur.

Yuuri shrugs. He's currently having so *many* different feelings none of them are rising distinctly enough to the surface for him to identify it as distinct from the roiling mass of others. This is what having a stroke probably feels like, Yuuri thinks glumly.

"Are you — happy? Sad?" Minako-sensei tries. "He picked you, after all."

Yuuri clutches at his chest, reflexive, and holds up a hand. "Don't — don't *say* that."

Smug now, Minako-sensei pokes him in the side. "It's true, though."

"He probably had a psychotic break," Yuuri mutters.

Viktor — *Viktor* — sneezes himself awake from where he's sprawled out on the mats, and Yuuri and Minako-sensei both gasp like idiots.

"He's awake," Yuuri whispers, like a moron. Everything Yuuri says from here until Viktor recovers his sanity and goes back to Russia should probably automatically be suffixed with "like a moron."

Viktor's inability to belt his top properly has it sliding off one pale, muscled shoulder; Yuuri feels his IQ drop 10 points and his heart rate double, a situation made significantly worse when Viktor yawns and mumbles, "I'm *starving*."

Inside of Yuuri's head, he just hears one long, unbroken pterodactyl scream.

Outside he asks, "Oh — uh — um, what would you like to eat?"

Evidently Viktor — *Viktor* — wants to know what *Yuuri* likes to eat, and he asks while staring deeply, brazenly into Yuuri's eyes. It feels like a knockout punch on top of everything else, and Yuuri makes some atonal noises that he hopes come out as, "*Excuse me*," and bolts for the kitchen to make some katsudon.

Yuuri burns three pork filets before his mother threatens to put him on toilet duty for wasting food and takes over.

"Isn't it nice Vicchan came all this way to help you train?" she asks, cracking an egg over the shallow pan of tonkatsu, sauce and onion, all bubbling away.

"Sure, okay," Yuuri says, and if his voice is overwhelmed, his mother doesn't comment.

"Go dish up some rice and make up the rest of the tray, Yuuri, make yourself useful," she chides, and Yuuri does it on automatic, muscle memory from busy nights and weekends and deep winter days, back when Yutopia was rarely ever as empty as it is now.

Viktor — *Viktor* — *loves* katsudon, and Yuuri can't help the little burst of happiness he feels, watching Viktor gush over his mother's cooking, over how they like something together, and —

"Yuuri gains weight easily," Minako-sensei says, smiling at him with a little glint in her eye that sets Yuuri instantly on edge. "So he was only allowed to eat it when he won a competition — right?"

Yuuri hates her, takes back every nice thing he's ever said or thought about her.

"So have you eaten katsudon recently?" Viktor asks, all sugar-sweet with interest.

Yuuri can feel a mechanism in his brain go offline at that, just give up and shut down, and he smiles ("like a moron") and says, "Yes, yes! I eat it often!" because one thing about coming home that hasn't felt like a mix of happiness and disappointment is eating his parents' cooking again.

Viktor's smile just gets brighter.

"Why?" he asks. "You haven't won anything."

Boom.

The first thing Yuuri learns about Viktor Nikiforov, the person and not the perfect image in all of his posters, is that Viktor Nikiforov is kind of an asshole.

Yuuri's not sure if he's surprised by it, exactly, because most overachievers with mission-driven personalities are assholes. But Viktor, at least, has been with Yuuri for so long: with flowing, beautiful hair at the Junior Grand Prix, in carefully hoarded magazine cutouts, in posters Yuuri had to send away for, that he arranged meticulously on his walls. It was imagined intimacy, Yuuri guesses, the way he's had one-sided conversations at his vision of Viktor for most of his life, poured his insecurities and hurts and fears and hopes out to him — it's hard to see Viktor in real life, as beautiful as he's ever been on Yuuri's television screen, and to realize Viktor is a *stranger*.

Everything about Viktor is foreign, truly foreign. He feels taller in person, his blond hair has a silvery sheen. He's broader. He eats a shocking amount. All that outsized charm — cut down into pull quotes in news articles or clips in interviews — is loud loud loud in reality. To Viktor, everything is *amazing*. Everything is *wow*. Viktor likes everything and everyone the way little kids and dogs do, and he is *terrifyingly* interested in Yuuri, who is probably the least interesting person on Earth.

He says things like, "Yuuri, tell me everything about you," while stroking a hand down Yuuri's forearm and tipping his chin up, murmuring, "Let's build some trust in our relationship."

Which — okay, yes, that is something that coaches do. For example, when Yuuri had started working with Celestino, they had sat on opposite sides of a table at a restaurant near other people, and nobody had touched anybody else's faces. This is how Yuuri ends up putting six panicked feet between them, his heart going arrhythmic and his voice cracking like it's puberty all over again, glasses askew and squeaking out, "It's fine, everything's fine," while thinking, *I'm still scared to be close to him*.

It's not just the — *aggressive* touching, it's everything, all of it. It's the impossible confluence of impossible things, impossibly timed. It's Viktor hectoring Yuuri at his closed bedroom door, teasing him about sleeping together, and Yuuri frantically trying to pull down all of his posters of Viktor without damaging any of them at the same time. These are not real things that happen to real people. Probably, outside of this fever dream, Yuuri has a brain tumor and his entire family's crying over his hospital bed.

Yuuri lies awake that night and lectures himself about imaging what Viktor looks like, if he's sleeping in the onsen's tatty olive robes or if he just strips down. Inappropriate hard ons are really the last chaos factor Yuuri needs to be adding into this already-volatile mix, especially since now he knows what Viktor's dick looks like and that he must trim meticulously. This tortures him for half an hour before he realizes that the way his heart's racing isn't just poorly concealed lust — that happiness, somehow, has crept in when Yuuri wasn't being careful, and

now that it's here it rushes through him, jubilant, and it's all he can do to press his hands over his mouth to trap in the shout.

Yuuri has hot, confusing dreams, and gets hollered awake at 7 a.m.

Like the day before, Yuuri has a second disconnected moment of sensation: the coolness of his room, the faint rattle of his windows, the washed-soft texture of his sheets.

Different than yesterday, when reality filters in it's Viktor knocking on his door and calling his cell phone while yelling, "Get up, get up, time for sweet piggies to get up!" all at the same time.

Asshole, Yuuri thinks, rolling out of bed. *He's an asshole*.

Viktor uses Russian spellcraft to acquire a bike from somewhere, and he races through Hasetu on it yelling cheerful slander in four languages back at Yuuri, who's wheezing to death jogging trying to keep up. Yuuri hates himself for every poster he bought of Viktor, for his years-long *tendre*, for how long he'd spent last night trying not to think about Viktor's dick. Yuuri promises he'll think about Viktor's dick as rudely as he wants as often as he wants as soon as they get to Ice Castle Hasetu and he can lie down and die for a little while.

Viktor probably also uses Russian spellcraft to swindle Yu-chan and Nishigori, but Yuuri's panting too hard to use his words, and by the time he gets his second wind Viktor's on the ice.

Skating, Viktor is impossible and distilled happiness. His extensions are the satisfaction of a long sigh, and the way his body moves ignores technical perfection for something better. Every time Viktor reaches out a hand, Yuuri has to resist the urge to reach back. Yuuri could never hate Viktor on the ice. He can only lean against the boards and stare, feeling lightheaded, feeling blessed, struggling to believe that this is really happening, even with the solid comfort of Nishigori at his side and the framework of his childhood rink, hemming Viktor in.

And — when Yuuri dares — he thinks that Viktor is here because of *him*, that something in that grainy, shaky video of Yuuri moved him. It's too much. It's too big. It makes Yuuri hope for formless, greedy things: that wanting that always dogged his heels when he'd been younger, that he'd mastered as he'd aged, that is clawing at him again. Yuuri's worked so hard to know the parameters of what he can have, but Viktor feels like a tsunami, and to the sea no border can sustain.

Then Viktor sings out, "Little piggies can't enter the rink until they drop some body fat!" skating back and beaming over at him.

Nishigori snorts. "This guy, huh."

Yuuri puts his head into his folded arms.

Viktor won't let him skate, but has two hours of his own practice to put in, so Yuuri makes the triplets swear a blood oath on Evgeni Plushenko's handsomeness not to post anything on the

internet about Viktor or Viktor being in Hasetzu and goes to Minako-sensei's studio. It's quiet, a weekday before after-school classes begin, and so they have the room to themselves: it's like being young all over again, Minako-sensei in a mix of millions of pairs of leggings and t-shirts and wrap-arounds, all smiles as she twirls him.

"You know — I've been thinking about this," she muses.

At the barre, stretching, Yuuri says, "Oh God."

Minako-sensei ignores him. "Maybe he just wanted an excuse to take a break."

Yuuri's stupid heart lurches at that.

"Please don't say that," he says, and admits, "That's what I suspect, too, but — "

"You decided to keep skating, didn't you?" she interrupts him, derailing his worry the way she always does, and Yuuri slants a look over to her, wary. "You need to take advantage of Viktor!"

Word choice, Yuuri thinks faintly.

She does a turn a La Secondes and cheers, "*Okay!* Let's get you slimmed down!"

Yuuri is preemptively hungry and sore, and he's barely said, "O-okay," before Minako's dragging him down to the floor to press him into all kind of uncomfortable shapes.

'Uncomfortable' is the key defining trait for the next few days, which have Yuuri vacillating from the grim physical exhaustion of a training ramp-up to the emotional whiplash of realizing the asshole making him run up these fucking steps is *Viktor Nikiforov*. There's also an entirely different and somehow more pathetic state of being that gets engaged when someone else's dog feels bad for you, which seems to be the case most of the time Makkachin is hanging around, showing Yuuri doleful eyes, licking his sweaty face in a bid to comfort him.

"It's always a little sad when you go into full training mode again," Mari-nee-chan says, one night when Yuuri is hiding in the kitchen because Viktor had offered to massage his legs and *no*.

Yuuri looks up from his poached chicken breast and spinach. "Ha?"

She grins and pokes him in the cheek. "You're always so cute with a little cushion for the pushin'," she teases, and laughs herself breathless at Yuuri's choking noises.

It's open season for messing with him though, between his father offering to sneak him carbs and Minako-sensei whipping him through brutal dance conditioning and Viktor interrupting his agility training by asking if he has a crush on Minako-sensei.

Even as a very young child, the idea of a crush on Minako-sensei was such a terrifying prospect Yuuri's instinctive desire was to run and hide from it, which was a challenge since his favorite hiding place was in Minako-sensei's storage closet. As he's gotten older, and seen

her plow through the eligible men of both Hasetzu and the professional figure skating circuit, Yuuri knows having a crush on Minako-sensei is like a fish falling head over tail fins for a man standing in the water with a bunch of dynamite.

"Then do you have a girlfriend?" Viktor asks, grinning.

"No," Yuuri says, mumbling.

It's a dumb enough question his parents don't even ask, but Viktor just lights up at it as if it's wonderful Yuuri — who hadn't been able to cope with his childhood crush on either Satoshi from Pokemon *or* Viktor Nikiforov — 'doesn't have a girlfriend.'

"Any *ex*-girlfriends?" Viktor presses, leaning in far enough Yuuri has lean back, his balance shifting too-quickly and his voice cracking as he says, "No comment!" because *what is happening*. The guy who fixes the onsen HVAC system knows Yuuri doesn't like girls by now — it's the one thing in Yuuri's complicated mess of a life that has been easier than anticipated.

They're sitting near the pergola at the foot of Hasetzu Castle, snow melted away into a hot and ferociously verdant spring — all of the town down the steep hill, the sun streaming. It's a beautiful day with an eddying breeze, and Viktor looks infuriatingly gorgeous with the wind playing through his hair, in a gray shirt and hoodie, track pants that would look forgettable on anybody who didn't have his five Grand Prix gold winning ass. This is worse than the Unspeakable Frat Party Incident — at least that had only been one night. Yuuri's had this terrified erection for a *week* now.

"Well, then let's talk about me," Viktor enthuses, shifting from bubbly to disheartened instantaneously — and honestly, how dare he, Yuuri fumes — as he adds, "My first girlfriend — "

Which is about how far Yuuri lets it get before he shrieks, "*Stop!*" in a tone half an octave above his normal register and Viktor finally subsides into blessed quiet.

The awkwardness downshifts into something a little glum, with Viktor pouting into the overlook and Yuuri staring blankly into the abyss of the unfeeling universe, torn between feeling guilty about making Viktor unhappy and wondering why any of this is happening to him.

Then Viktor proves that he is like every other man in Yuuri's life when he gets completely derailed from his mood by a single mention of "ninjas."

"О боже!" Viktor gasps, and dashes for Makkachin while shoving his cell phone at Yuuri. "A picture! I need a picture! しやしん!"

Yuuri takes a picture. Predictably, it turns out perfectly, and Viktor posts it — no filters needed — to Instagram, meticulously thumb-typing "#ninja."

"This is amazing, amazing," Viktor says, jamming the phone into his pocket and grabbing for Yuuri's hand instead. "Can we go inside? Can we see?"

Like this, standing here in the sun against the backdrop of deep green leaves in the spring wind, Viktor is a snapshot of undiluted happiness. His eyes crinkled into a smile, shining, and he's so wide-open with ridiculous hope. His hand is warm and rough and Yuuri feels like he's accidentally swallowed a star, that it's exploding in a blaze of light in his stomach. This moment — Yuuri's hand in Viktor's, the city at their feet, all the implications and possibilities of everything — is as much an impossible object as any other paradoxes, except Yuuri feels, startled and unprepared, the first flutter of something more than just surprise deep in his belly, that shivers through him in warning. Yuuri has felt like this before, and he wants to remind himself to know what his limitations are, what is allowed and what isn't, but he can't focus on it, not with Viktor smiling at him like that, tugging on his wrist, so gorgeous it's impossible to do anything but smile back — to follow.

In the next week, Hasetsu becomes a strange place. Its sleepy population is suddenly overrun with tourists and the media presence seems to increase logarithmically. Morooka-san sends Yuuri no fewer than six emails, all subject lined "!!!!!!!" and none of which Yuuri bothers to open. Yutopia's completely, relentlessly booked out, and his mother ends up appealing to the local main street for any stray idle bodies and hands to come over and help: clean, cook, hell — provide crowd control. An encampment of satellite uplink trucks settle in front of the onsen and Ice Castle Hasetsu. Half the girls and a pretty surprising number of teenage boys from all over Saga Prefecture arrive, sweaty and thirsty, and demand an opportunity to learn how to skate at the rink.

Viktor accepts all of this as a natural consequence of his presence anywhere, but Yuuri can see the way Viktor in a crowd is different than Viktor in the private family rooms at Hasetsu, beyond the reach of reporters and gawkers.

Like Minako-sensei's always reminded him, Viktor is unfailingly polite and generous to his fans, always smiling and patient. He knows how to make small talk in a staggering number of languages, and he has a patience threshold of upward of 50 selfies before he starts making noises about needing to go. It's genuinely impressive to watch.

In private, Viktor is emotionally louche and charmingly petulant, like your spoiled baby cousin who's so adorable you can't resist her. He always wants to watch what's cooking in the kitchen, never learns portion sizing when it comes to the application and use of wasabi, is *immediately* addicted to no fewer than three dramas — none of which he can understand — and strangely shy around Yuuri. Viktor smiles, more and more, but more softly and more tiredly than the ones he shows outsiders. It takes maybe three days before Yuuri overhears his mother saying "our Vic-chan," at which point something in his chest tightens like a fist and he has to go jog three kilometers to get everything back in working order, heaving and hating every step.

When he limps back to the onsen, through the back pathway, he runs into Mari-nee-chan, stealing away for a smoke break, and she waves him over.

"Yo," she says, patting the stone step next to her.

Yuuri wheezes in response, collapsing next to her. She's his sister, so he doesn't feel bad at all about leaning all his weight against her, sweat and all; she smells like cleaning chemicals and

menthol lights and tempura batter.

"So you look — miserable," she goes on.

"Do I look thinner?" Yuuri asks.

She pinches his hip and doesn't answer either way. According to their mom, when Yuuri went through his first-ever growth spurt his sister once came home crying — pretty drunk on combini beer — because her chubby little brother wasn't so cute anymore.

"Do you actually want this?" she says instead, taking a long drag and looking upward, into the places where the sodium-orange of the streetlights and the pale yellow of the onsen floodlights don't blur the sky. "I know you, you hate inconveniencing anybody. It's like pulling teeth for you to admit you want something or don't want something until you blow up — so? Do you want this? Do you want me to make Nikiforov leave?"

Yuuri doesn't think he knows the answer to her question at all — if he wants Viktor to stay, or Viktor to go. It still feels so absurd he would even be here that to wish him gone feels equally silly. But that butterfly that wandered into his chest is still there, flapping its wings to make itself known in little fits and starts, when Viktor smiles a real smile, when he helps Mama grill fish, when he lets Axel, Lutz, and Loop follow him around with their cameras on chubby little legs. Viktor, escaped from the lens of Yuuri's imagination, is a ridiculous man and a jerk, and that is somehow better — infinitely better — than the paper cut out Yuuri's worshiped for so long.

He says, "Nah — I think it's okay."

Mari-nee-chan ashes her cigarette on a stone tanuki that stands watch over the back door and sighs, "Whatever — just try not to get him pregnant."

Their mother finds them, shouting at each other like little kids, in a full-on shoving match 10 minutes later. And just like when they were little, she threatens them with a ladle to make them stop. Viktor films the entire thing, starry-eyed.

"I'm an only child," he gushes, pink-cheeked with glee. "To think! Even sweet Yuuri — "

Mari-nee-chan gags. "*Sweet Yuuri*," she mutters.

" — would have such cute fights with his beautiful sister — "

Yuuri digs an elbow into Mari-nee-chan's side. "*Beautiful sister*."

" — it's so wonderful, isn't it, Yuuri's Mama?" Viktor concludes, turning to their mom.

She waves her ladle at him, which is an even more troubling indication he's already part of the family than the whole "our Vic-chan" situation from earlier.

"Do not encourage them, Vic-chan," she scolds, and now widening the arc of the ladle, she waves at Yuuri and Mari-nee-chan, too, as she adds, "Now everybody get inside — dinner's getting cold!"

Dinner's not at all cold. It's perfect and raucous and everybody talks all over each other. Yuuri doesn't even care that he's eating the world's biggest chawan mushi instead of tempura like everybody else at the table, so long as his dad keeps telling the story the time the taiko drums got loose, while Yuuri tries desperately to translate into English for Viktor in between laughter.

Yuuri's pretty sure the last quarter-kilo drops off of him because he finds an unopened package of ancient koala chocolates squirreled away in a back corner of his room, eats them in desperation, and pays for it by shitting out everything he doesn't puke up 12 hours later.

That said, he takes the win, throws on his sneakers, and bolts for the rink.

He weaves through the crowd gathered together on the steps, ignoring it when a couple of them shout out, "Yuuri!" and "Katsuki!" because honestly the last thing he feels like doing is giving an interview about Viktor right now, and collapses, blissful, against the double glass doors of the Ice Castle Hasetu.

"*Finally*," he gasps, half-delirious with joy, and then the Russian kid who yelled at him after the GPF kicks him into the rink lobby.

After 24 hours with him, Yuuri knows the following about Yuri Plisetski:

1. He is the tiniest boy figure skater Yuuri has ever seen;
2. He is *extremely* aware of that fact and *profoundly* angry about it;
3. He likes cats, a lot;
4. He eats like a trash compactor;
5. He is unbelievably mean;
6. He's *adorable*.

After all the shouting and death threats at rink, they do eventually make their way back to the onsen, where Yuuri keeps prowling the rooms and the hot springs like a feral cat marking his new territory. Yuuri knows it's probably an indication of long-term, repeated head trauma, but honestly it's the cutest thing he's ever seen, and after Yurio — so nicknamed by Mari-nee-chan — goes off to soak "alone! without perverts looking at me!" Yuuri tells Viktor as much.

"*Right?*" Viktor cries, laughing. "He's *ridiculous*."

"Does he know?" Yuuri asks, over his own giggles.

In a corner of Viktor's room — now fully overflowing with furniture Viktor had partially air-mailed from Russia, partially overnighted from Tokyo — Yurio's duffle bag is upended and every single article of clothing the kid owns is covered in feline animal prints. Yuuri blames living with Phichit for the way he desperately wants to take a photo.

Viktor just starts picking through Yurio's stuff with the fond familiarity of a parent, folding t-shirts and dusting off sweaters.

"Yurio is choosing to have an aggressively difficult adolescence," Viktor says diplomatically. "Plus, he's panicked once he hits his growth spurt his skating will go off."

Yuuri remembers skating through puberty. He doesn't envy Yurio for it.

"He's very good," Yuuri says after a beat, and off Viktor's look, he blushes. "I — ah, watched a news report about him, about both of you."

Viktor shrugs. "He doesn't practice enough."

That's an intimidating thought, training and growing up in the shadow of Viktor Nikiforov, versus simply idolizing him from a distance, and Yuuri feels an immediate tenderness for Yurio completely at odds with Yurio's horrible personality. Yuuri remembers being 15 and a wreck; he can't imagine how much worse things would have gone for him to be 15 and a wreck within proximity of Viktor, who can smile as he says things to cut through you like a hot knife. Yuuri would have run screaming into the wilderness, never to return.

"Yurio seems like he's a very driven personality," Yuuri says carefully. At some point, he'll stop being so bowled over by Viktor — *Viktor* — that he has trouble disagreeing with him, but that day is not today.

Viktor starts stacking up Yurio's shirts in a neat pile on the dresser, frowning down at them with a surprisingly solemn face.

"He is very driven. He's also very talented, but he's so greedy it makes him angry and sloppy," he says, and when he looks back up at Yuuri, there's a crooked grin on his mouth that makes Yuuri hot all over. "He's not like you, Yuuri — he hasn't really put in the work. Not yet, anyway."

Yuuri makes a noise like "*ha ha ha ha!*" and scrambles out of the room before he can do anything stupid — or more stupid, anyway, than getting into an ISU unsanctioned exhibition versus a child for Viktor's attention.

The next morning Yuuri stumbles out of bed at dawn like always, helps Mama and Mari-nee-chan prep breakfast, and eats in the kitchen before he goes off for his morning run. By 7 a.m., he's at the rink with keys for the side entrance, and by 7:30 he's on the ice, working on a quad-toe because he's useless at them and Yuuri just really enjoys being covered in bruises. He gets a break at 8:30, when Nishigori arrives to unlock the front door and open up shop, and Yuuri gives him the two plastic-wrapped pieces of milk bread he'd bought on his way to the rink, because nobody at the Nishigori house ever manages to eat a proper breakfast.

"Should have married you," Nishigori mumbles by way of thanks.

Yuuri thinks about Sawamura Kagome, who'd dared to put a love letter in Nishigori's shoe locker in school, and how Yu-chan forced Yuuri to help steal and then burn it in a trash can. "Sure," he allows. It's better Nishigori doesn't know these things.

It's well past 9 a.m. before Yuuri looks up to see Yurio making a hideous racket on his way into the rink, tailed by Yu-chan, the triple jumps, and Viktor, who carols out brightly, "You

have until 10 a.m. before I kick you both out so I can choreograph in peace!"

"Good morning," Yuuri says, pulling up to the boards where Viktor is standing as if he's magnetically drawn. He's blushing, he knows it. "Sleep well?"

Viktor cocks his head and smiles. "I had *very* nice dreams," he purrs.

"*Gross*," Yurio hisses, skating past behind Yuuri.

Viktor tracks Yurio as he goes for a beat before flicking his gaze back to Yuuri, to Yuuri's probably flaming face, and asks, "See what I mean about not practicing enough?"

"He's very 15," Yuuri prevaricates, even though he's used to getting up this early for training because it was the only way he had enough hours for it when he was 15 and still going to school for most of the day. "You should be nicer to him."

Viktor huffs out a laugh. "Yurio does not respond when people are nice to him."

"So you're teasing him for his own good?" Yuuri asks, grinning.

This time, Viktor *winks* at him instead of answering, and calls out over Yuuri's shoulder, "Oh, *Yurio*, that free leg of your is looking *awfully* weak." When he pushes out onto the ice, he runs his fingertips across Yuuri's hip as he goes.

Yuuri forgives himself for spending the rest of the day hiding from both of them.

Vicchan — Yuuri's Vicchan — had come from a breeder a few villages away in Saga, and had arrived at Yutopia bright-eyed and darling and filled with nothing but surety that humans, all humans, were friends.

Yurio, Yuuri has come to realize, is an alleycat. The Katsukis can lure him nearer with food and a warm place to sleep, but any overt signs of affection will result in a shriek and immediate withdrawal, usually to the storage closet off of Viktor's room Yurio has claimed for his own. It's only big enough to fit a futon, a low table, and Yurio's duffle, but for being so emotionally high maintenance he's shockingly easygoing about everything else.

Over the week Viktor is choreographing their routines, Yuuri has a lot of unstructured time. There's only so much conditioning he can do each day without causing himself injury, so after his morning workout and skate, he divides his time between helping out at Yutopia or at the rink — depending on which is in a greater state of shorthanded chaos at any given point in time.

And the whole week Yurio shadows him, suspicious, stomping around in his leopard print jacket and ripped jeans, an extremely loud and aggressively rude white-blond shadow who likes to randomly grab Yuuri by the elbow and point at things as if that's a complete question.

It leads to a lot of halfway conversations, and makes Yuuri's burgeoning fondness for Yurio worse and worse as the days go on.

"Ah — yeah, there are a lot of different vending machines in Japan. See, you can even buy clean clothes in this one."

"You have to sort the trash: this is burnable, this is recyclables. You can't just put it all together."

"*Oh*. Um. That's a — love hotel. Just. Google it."

Yurio does so immediately, with a teenager's categorical disregard for the data fees on his Russian mobile phone service. Yuuri can tell when the results come up because Yurio pulls the most horrified, petulantly revolted face Yuuri has ever seen, and it takes every one of his 23 years of accrued forbearance not to laugh in Yurio's face.

"That. Is. Disgusting," Yurio declares, viciously darkening the phone screen and jamming it into his pocket before favoring Yuuri with a sneer. "I'm sure it'll be *perfect* for you and *Viktor*."

The idea of having sex with Viktor is only just beginning to lose the abstraction of a celebrity fantasy and enter into the realm of "jerking off to someone I know in real life," which is a strange transitional phase Yuuri tries not to think about. Either way, Yurio might kick really hard and make fantastically scowling faces, but he's still about as big and intimidating as a soaking wet kitten, so Yuuri just smiles and says:

"It's good for you to remember, too, if you meet someone special and don't want to try and work around Viktor's schedule at Yutopia!"

Yurio actually *hisses*, goes red to his hairline, and runs away.

Every time Yuuri forgets that Viktor is a giant prick, the universe reminds him.

For example, right now, standing in Ice Castle Hasetsu flanked by Yu-chan and Yurio, watching Viktor demonstrate his choreographed short programs.

The programs are intense. Beautiful, with sky high technicals built in, and not a single moment of breathing space. Yuuri's grateful, not for the first time, for his stamina — he'll need it to skate this. Viktor's choreographed to his own skill level, and Yuuri can't help but to feel a warring pleasure and agitation to watch him skate.

Because on the one hand, while he suspects that if anybody *held his hand* Yurio might explode, that doesn't make *Yuuri* any better prepared to skate a routine called "Eros."

From the ice, Viktor winks, and Yuuri hears Yu-chan suck in an audible gasp. Yuuri doesn't blame her; he'd be in extremis, too, if he weren't so terrified of having to skate this thing, of making a fool of himself, of Viktor realizing that it's Yurio, of course, who is the bright young thing, and flying back home to St. Petersburg. Yuuri won't say anything brave or unknowable like, "he can handle rejection," even in the quiet of his own head; Yuuri's never been so scared of how much he wants something — he has no idea what having this taken away from him would do.

The music goes silent, and Viktor finishes with a flourish, cocking his hip.

"Well?" he asks, all invitation. "How was that?"

Yuuri hears himself making mouth noises for way too long before he manages to bark out, "It was very 'eros!'" like a gibbering idiot. Fantastic.

Viktor beams. "Right?" he cheers, before his expression gets thoughtful and Yuuri gets that sinking feeling in his stomach. "So — about the program composition, which quads can you land?"

"The toe loop," he says, because that's pretty consistent, and then mumbles, "I can land the Salchow in practice, but never in competition."

Viktor's face doesn't move: still patiently scheming, like he knows that's all it takes to kick Yuuri into panicked overdrive.

"But I can do it if I try!" Yuuri promises. "So..."

So what? So please don't give up on me already? So please don't be disappointed in me? So please don't think you wasted your time? So please don't give me the soft pedal, the polite goodbye, pack your things and leave?

Viktor doesn't do or say any of it, just smiles and says, "Okay then: you can practice the basics, and I'll take Yurio through his choreography first."

Yuuri stares. "What?"

"I'm not going to teach you anything you can't do right now," Viktor lectures. "How many times have you messed up during a competition?"

Yuuri knows he's making that face, the one Celestino used to tell Yuuri not to make at him, but he can't stop himself; it's a reflex reaction to questions that feel impossibly mean and impossible to answer.

"You have the skill to win," Viktor goes on, in that same tone with a more solemn look. He asks, and it's not unkind the way he does, "Why can't you make it happen?"

"That's — !" Yuuri rushes to say, and stumbles a little. He hates to admit this, but he hates, also, that he feels embarrassed to tell the truth. There's no point in false modesty or pride. "That's...probably because I lack confidence."

Yuuri wants to say that of course he does, how could he not, after his 2014-2015 season, after his unglamorous lifetime of grinding away. He's not Viktor, a fully formed prodigy, and Yuuri isn't Yurio, either, has none of his spectacular raw potential. Yuuri is only Yuuri, and can only ever be. It's what makes the idea of skating to "Eros" so awful, too. Yuuri knows longing and fear and uncertainty and shattering happiness — but Yuuri doesn't know how to be wanted, what that would even feel like.

But then Viktor's voice cuts in, closer than it was before.

"Right. My job is to make you feel confident in yourself," he says, and — and closes the distance between them, pressing his thumb Yuuri's lower lip, trembling and bitten red. Viktor pressing in and in and in until Yuuri has to look over the top of his glasses to meet Viktor's eyes, skin hot, proximity warm, Viktor's breath on Yuuri's mouth as he murmurs, "No one in the whole wide world knows your true *eros*, Yuuri — it may an alluring side of you that *you* aren't even aware of."

Viktor dips his head a little, just enough so that the tips of their noses brush, that Yuuri's heart throbs in his chest, at this sustained anticipation before a kiss, and Viktor asks, sweet and sweetly pleading, "Can you show me what it is soon?"

Yuuri is almost comically grateful for the way Yurio starts bellowing at them.

"At least Viktor is here. You can just skate to seduce him," Nishigori suggests later, in the bench room and helping him stretch out.

Yuuri doesn't even bother to blush at the suggestion, it's too ridiculous, and his expression plainly telegraphs it, if Nishigori's laugh is any indication.

"Don't be like that — get a few drinks in you and you're set," he says.

Yuuri closes his eyes, pained. "Nishigori, please," he says, and has a brief, waking nightmare about all the possible ramifications of getting drunk in Viktor's presence.

"Anyway, why worry about something before it happens?" Nishigori says, so reasonable it makes Yuuri's teeth hurt. He claps a hand on Yuuri's back and drags him in for side-squeeze, the Nishigori special. "Focus on training. Take every step as it comes."

Yuuri lowers his head, nods, because that's right — that's right. That he can do.

The Nishigoris come over for dinner that night, and with everyone piled in, the family room is a mess. The triplets alternate between crawling all over Yurio or crawling all over Viktor — Yuuri's old news, last year's love — and Mama and Otosan keep bringing more and more food to the table, until it's creaking under the weight of all the bowls and dishes. Yuuri's dad says, "Oh, Viktor-san, how about some sake?" and Viktor of course says, "*Wow! Amazing!*" which means Yuuri gets to watch Yu-chan drink both of them under the table while Minako-sensei uses her broken English and Yurio uses his broken Japanese to try and have a fight about if he's flexible enough and whether he should do ballet training. Mari-nee-chan photo documents the entire progression of Viktor and Yuuri's dad getting drunker and drunker until Otosan hits go mode, busts out the karaoke machine, and throws down with Nishigori.

It's a wonderful night, absolutely ridiculous, and when Yuuri finally goes to bed after making sure everyone gets home okay and helping to put all the dishes in to soak, it's to sink immediately, blissfully to sleep — happiness suffusing every atom.

Since transforming himself into a grand seducer is a challenge so outside of Yuuri's context his brain refuses to process it, he focuses on the more practical, immediate things instead. The triple jumps — abetted by Minako-sensei and enabled by Nishigori and Yu-chan, who

are turning out to be shockingly permissive parents — colluded with Viktor to schedule the Hot Springs on Ice exhibition for May 1, just four weeks away. That's no time at all to learn, master and polish a program, especially when Yuuri still can't land one of the key components without falling on his ass.

Yuuri starts *dreaming* about the short program music, matching beats to footwork, and he sticks to his early start time and keeps doing his long hours.

His body hurts, but his body hurts the way it always did when he was training for a season, and Yuuri's memory flits in and out of the way Ben used to hiss over Yuuri's bruises, mutter, "Come *on*, man, Jesus Christ," and help Yuuri re-tape his ankles. Yuuri skates in Hasetu and thinks about Detroit, the one patch of ice in the rink he and Phichit both swore was cursed, and it makes him think about their kitchen in their house, ABBA dance parties and the way the night would look, darkly blue beyond their string of twinkle lights, from the back porch as the heat of the day misted away. Back then, what feels like an entire lifetime ago, those moments had felt eternal, ceaseless, and it's only now Yuuri can look at it and see how summer sweet it had all been, so complicated and good and awful and singular. It is, like so many other things Yuuri has struggled with, a part of him, a brick in his foundation — unglamorous, imperative.

Maybe it's because he's older, now, but Yuuri can see his days through two lenses, now, the reality filter version of a doctor correcting his vision. He can see how tired he is, how confused and foolish he feels, how his lifelong infatuation with Viktor is starting to grow teeth and claws, transform from the shape of a fairytale into something much wilder — something that might actually live in the forest. But Yuuri can also see this from somewhere far away and recognize how happy he is, too, to be driven to such emotional extremes, to find new and uglier bruises every day; to be near enough to be hurt by Viktor being cavalier, by Yuuri's own desperate hope. Even that, one day, will be something to treasure — something improbably amazing that happened, that Yuuri barely realized at the time.

Yuuri trains; he worries; he takes Yurio to shrines and waterfalls at Viktor's request, and doesn't call him an asshole for it. He watches everybody around him eat katsudon and copes with his broccoli and steamed tilapia and tries not to die of compounding mortification every time Viktor makes encouraging noises about the sensuality of fucking runny egg. He steals Makkachin for walks, all the places Vicchan loved, and sometimes in the unexpected pockets of garbage time mid-afternoon, Yuuri just sits with his parents and tells them about Detroit, all the boring details he never thought anybody would care about: his grocery store, how he fit everything into his room, the American relationship with a football team that hasn't won in 100 years.

"You're taking this competition pretty seriously, huh?" his father says.

"Well, if I lose, he's going back to Russia to coach Yurio," Yuuri mumbles.

Otosan snorts, and Yuuri looks up, frowning.

"Otosan?" he asks.

"You can go right ahead and lose that exhibition, Yuuri — there's no way Vic-chan is going back to Russia," his father tells him, takes another sip of his tea and starts gathering up the newspaper to go.

It's so exactly what Yuuri wants to hear he doesn't dare believe it, turns to look down at his hands, pressed flat on the table and says nothing at all.

"It's fine," his father says, quiet, just for them, and puts his hand on the back of Yuuri's head: soothing, the way he would when Yuuri was just a boy. "You don't have to believe it — I'll know it for both of us, okay?"

That night, Viktor calls Yuuri into his room to talk about JSF qualifiers and Yuuri's free program, and Yuuri barely hears any of it. He's too distracted by the sound of Yurio snoring like a freight train in the closet, by Makkachin trying to fit himself into Yuuri's lap, by the warmth of Viktor's proximity — the cadence in his voice.

"*Yuuri*," Viktor scolds, five fruitless minutes into this, frowning.

"Sorry," Yuuri squeaks, looking away, looking at his hands twisted in his lap. "Sorry."

Viktor lets the silence settle for a beat before asking, "Are you tired? Is there something wrong? Usually you aren't the one who doesn't listen."

Thus summoned, Yurio lets out a particularly attractive snort.

Yuuri's grin is reflexive, and he has to cover his mouth to hide it.

"So?" Viktor presses, but friendlier now, his consonants softened.

It's still hard, even so, for Yuuri to muster his courage and ask, "Why did you come? To Japan?"

Viktor makes a lot of jokes when he doesn't want to answer something seriously, brushes you off or makes a searing comment. It's almost impossible to get a straight answer out of him, and Yuuri spent half an hour earlier today at the rink plotting Viktor's death enduring his Socratic teaching methods. But when Viktor is serious, he is exceedingly solemn, insightful and spare — cutting to the heart of the issue. Viktor sees clearly even when sometimes Yuuri doesn't think there's anything to see at all.

"I've been skating my whole life," Viktor says. "For 20 years, everything I've done has revolved around skating. I have no close family anymore, and even poor Makkachin mostly grew up at Yakov's house while I was traveling around. I woke up that morning with thousands of people telling me to go look at your video — "

"Oh, God," Yuuri moans.

" — and I didn't get around to it until I was almost out the door," Viktor goes on, something wry and happy in his voice now. "I sat down on the sofa and pulled it up on my phone, and Makkachin immediately jumped in my lap — "

Makkachin, currently in Yuuri's lap, makes a long-suffering noise.

" — and I must have watched the video a dozen times," Viktor says.

Yuuri feels his eyes round, curls his fingers into Makkachin's sweet apricot coat.

"There were all sorts of technical issues, and it is genuinely difficult to take that program seriously skated in a rink with a giant cartoon animal in the ice," Viktor says, starting out critical the way he always does during practice, and getting softer word by word, "but none of it really mattered. I kept watching you — I couldn't stop watching you. I didn't know why."

"Oh," Yuuri breathes, breath thready, throat tight.

"I skipped practice that day. I looked up everything I could find about you," Viktor sighs as he leans back, covering his eyes. "You wouldn't believe how ferociously Yakov yelled."

Yakov is the first best yeller in all of international figure skating, so Yuuri would.

Viktor slits open his fingers, peeking out from in between and grinning.

When he speaks again, he sounds the way Viktor does sometimes, surprisingly shy, soft-edged in a way that makes Yuuri feel overfull with wanting, to wrap his arms around Viktor, because Yuuri has started to suspect that — however impossibly — between the two of them, it's Viktor who's the lonelier person.

"What's that thing they keep saying in the *doramas*?" Viktor says. "Ah: the truth is, I came because you bewitched me, Yuuri Katsuki, so — " and his smile is too honest and much too worn when he shows it " — are you going to take responsibility?"

In a movie, in a book, this would be when something happens to break the tension, to delay. But this is Yuuri's reality, and so he just stares, shocked silent, into Viktor's face and wishes he knew what to say. It should be sad, or awkward, feeling the moment unwind itself, but mostly it's quiet, undemanding, and Yuuri can't wrap his mind around it, how Viktor can have such unreachable high standards on the ice, and be so forgivingly patient off of it — to smile, so genuinely, and let it go.

Yuuri wanders around the rest of the day like he's witnessed a miracle, disbelieving and feeling fundamentally changed.

It lasts until a day later, when Yurio — who has the English vocabulary of a 4th grader but the attitude and access to profanity of a 16-year-old delinquent — yells at him:

"Oi, Katsudon! Stop walking around with your head up your ass! Viktor's 400 boxes of costumes just got here!"

After a lifetime of being moved by Viktor, of being inspired and intimidated by him, it really shouldn't surprise Yuuri that the answer to his problems lies with Viktor, too, tucked away among the 400 boxes, and folded among sheets of crinkling tissue paper.

Like any other young man living in a hot spring with the extraordinarily intense and handsy object of his lifelong crush, Yuuri elects to spend the night letting his old ballet teacher yell at him about popping his ass out for balance like a buxom woman. It's no more or less stupid than anything else Minako-sensei's been party to, insofar as Yuuri's skating goes, and she assures him this is at least a half-step less idiotic than the time she had to teach him how to use concealer over Skype.

"So how's it going with Viktor," she grunts, smacking him across the stomach with a flyswatter she keeps at the studio to demoralize and abuse her advanced students.

Yuuri tucks his stomach in more tightly, presses his shoulders back. "Um, you know," he says, and he can hear how reedy and unconvincing he sounds, and it's not all just from being out of breath, either.

"He still encouraging you to be a slutty pork cutlet?" she asks, oh-so-innocently.

"*Minako-sensei*," Yuuri wails.

She hits him again, this time right across the ass. "A lady wouldn't raise her voice."

"You yell at me all the time," he protests, but resets to the beginning of his program as the music loops. It's the grace and polish of ballet, but he imagines his body occupying a different space, a different weight. He thinks about the grand seducer and how he comes into town, and how Yuuri will be the one who's smart, who'll hold out the longest.

"I'm your teacher, not a lady," Minako-sensei says, dismissive, and watches him with hawk eyes as he runs through his SP, asking if he can do this, will that throw off his balance, is it okay if.

It's not fast, there's no moment of realization. It's incremental improvement, scraping away at his awkwardness and flaws in by infuriatingly tiny degrees in the unglamorous space of Minako's studio. It's where Yuuri disappears to in the last few days before the Hot Springs on Ice exhibition, while Viktor works with Yuri in the afternoons. Yuuri learned long, long ago that talent is only ever the spark, but work is the thing that can coax a fire into full blaze. To love something is only ever half the answer: are you willing to suffer for and because of it, are you too stubborn to walk away?

The last night before the exhibition, Viktor forbids them both from practicing, and enforces this by forcing Yuuri and Yuri to watch *Majo no Jouken* with him. There are no Russian subtitles, so by the time the lovers meet, Viktor and Yuri already have an entirely speculative parallel plot underway, which is too good for Yuuri to ruin with translation.

Viktor mostly seems to be making ever more outlandish statements to see if he can actually goad Yuri into exploding, which Yuuri would find cruel if it weren't so funny.

"Look at them," Viktor says, all exaggerated innocence, "it must be love at first sight."

"He's in *middle school*," Yuri howls. "And there's *no such thing*."

"He's in high school," Yuuri feels compelled to correct.

Viktor slants him a fantastically naughty look and teases, "Oh? You don't believe in love at first sight, Yurio," with an emphasis on the 'o,' because Viktor is fearless.

Yurio says something that sounds *foul* in Russian, which only makes Viktor laugh, sparkling and unrepentant, and on the screen, Hideaki Takizawa's character hands Nanako Matsushima's her engagement ring — the world pulsing in shocked, mutual recognition around them.

Sometime before they make it to the third episode, Yuuri's mother comes in to find this debacle in progress and hits all of them with dishtowels until they come down and help with dinner prep — it's hundreds and thousands of little individual components and dishes. Yuuri has the muscle memory, and Yurio has nimble fingers, but Viktor has, in these last weeks, established himself as profoundly useless in food production and is thus banished to wash dishes.

"But Yuuri's Mama," Viktor wails at her, even though she can't understand his English and all Viktor has of Japanese are a handful of jdorama exclamations, "my beautiful hands will wrinkle, and all of my fans will be crushed."

Yuuri's mother hands him a pair of neon green rubber gloves.

"Ah," Viktor says, stymied.

Yurio tells Yuuri's mother, in stilted, but entirely earnest Japanese, "*Amazing*."

Long after guest service and family dinner and Yurio and Viktor have pretended to go to bed so they can find Russian bootleg versions of *Majo no Jouken*, Yuuri sneaks out for Minako-sensei's studio again.

"So you just left them watching underaged teacher-student romance," Minako-sensei says flatly, adjusting the tilt of Yuuri's hip.

Stumbling, Yuuri feels himself flush to the roots of his hair. "*That's* what that's about?"

Minako-sensei gives him a disbelieving look. "It's *obvious in the first episode* — this is why you don't have a boyfriend, Katsuki."

It's an all-nighter, and Yuuri only calls it quits because Minako-sensei falls asleep on a yoga ball and then falls off of it. By the time he stumbles home, it's long past 4 a.m., the first pink fingers of dawn curling through the sky — and sitting patiently in the doorway of the onsen is Viktor, in a t-shirt and sleeping pants.

"Um," Yuuri says, staring down at him.

This Viktor is rumpled, pillow marks still on his face, his hair wildly out of order. He looks nothing like the gorgeous idol in all of Yuuri's posters, and has lost the sleek athleticism of Yurio and Yuuri's coach, hectoring them across the ice. This is just Viktor as a man, sitting in a doorway on too little sleep, yawning his way through his hellos.

"I definitely told you no practicing," Viktor says.

"I wasn't skating," Yuuri rushes to say, and the day and night catch up with him, everything getting a little more blurry at the edges, his head heavy on his neck.

Viktor pushes himself to his feet, and he takes Yuuri's hand, starts drawing him inside as he asks, "Oh? Then should I worry about other things then? You and Minako-sensei having a secret affair?"

Yuuri lets himself be led, over the threshold, through a side hall, up the private staircase. He's too tired to be embarrassed by the joke, too surprised, still, to see how Viktor navigates the onsen's private spaces — so easily traversing the distance between an honored guest and someone pressed into labor, a member of the family.

"You know that's not — it's not like that with Minako-sensei," Yuuri manages finally, too fuzzy and tired to say it right, to articulate himself.

"I know, Yuuri," Viktor tells him, something terribly sweet in the way he says it, and they are somehow suddenly at Yuuri's bedroom door. "Go — get some sleep."

Yuuri dreams he's sitting in the hot spring, but that the water grows limbs and forms a face, and he blinks to find himself in Viktor's arms, their bodies pressed tightly together, inseparable. In the dream, Yuuri asks, "You won't go, will you? You'll stay here, with me, no matter how the exhibition goes?" and Viktor doesn't need to say anything, just kisses surety into Yuuri's unresisting mouth.

He wakes up longing, his mouth still hot, and Yuuri touches his bottom lip and stares at his ceiling for long, long moments — willing the dream to stay on his skin.

Yuuri doesn't know why he's even surprised, but the Hot Springs on Ice competition is complete pandemonium. Every single person in Hasetu is either attending or working the event, between the impromptu festival that's sprung up, and all the roads are lined with media vans and tourist vehicles, making traffic a nightmare. Every restaurant in the town represented with a little cart selling snacks and every shop flogging tourist items. The Chamber of Commerce — Yuuri's enemy — is giving out commemorative posters and telling everyone to post about it on social media with the tag #hotspringsonice.

"Please don't," Yuuri begs Sugawara-san, who went to school with Yuuri and now owns the Family Mart on the main street.

Sugawara-san ignores Yuuri completely, snaps a selfie with him mid-protest, and says, "Good luck, Katsuki-san!" and gives him a kiss on the cheek and a high-octane thumbs up. "I'll be cheering for you!"

Yurio, watching all of this with his customary expression of baffled, teenaged disgust, asks, "Is there *anyone* in this town who you aren't *weird* with?"

"I'm not weird with anybody," Yuuri protests, but it's right then that Minako comes up to him holding a bottle of mousse, black eyeliner, and a tube of lipstick, warning him, "Just stay still and it'll be over soon, Katsuki," so Yuuri's point loses whatever notional authority it ever aspired to have.

The charmingly small town insanity surrounding the exhibition is strangely soothing. Of course it is horrible and anxiety-inducing that there are evidently hundreds of people who have rushed out to see whether Yuuri can pick himself up after falling down so badly last year — but there are also people like Sugawara-san and Yuuri's mother and father and sister, the triple jumps in the front row and Nishigori and Yu-chan. His parents' HVAC handyman is there, too, and he waves — stoic — when he spots Yuuri headed back into the locker rooms. It's nothing like Skate America or the Grand Prix and their thousands of anonymous spectators. This feels, if not safe, then at least a safe place to fall.

It's also nothing like Skate America or the Grand Prix because it's only Yuuri and Yurio, and the back rooms for Ice Castle Hasetzu are quiet and showing their age — nothing like the packed and bleached-clean spaces he's so used to hosting his pre-competition meltdowns. Yuuri and Yurio warm up and stay loose the way rinkmates do: in designated spheres, and Viktor — who had taken longer to get dressed than either Yuuri or Yurio, which is ridiculous — leans up against an uninspired cement wall and watches them with an inscrutable look on his face.

Yuuri wonders who Viktor is rooting for, if he cares for one outcome over the other. Does Viktor miss Russia? His coaches and rinkmates or his apartment? Yuuri saw it once, in a magazine article about "The King of Figure Skating — At Home!" It's a nice apartment, with a big modern kitchen and no hustle and ebb of guests, darting in and out and asking for more towels or a clean yukata or for Viktor to sign an autograph.

Yuuri wants to ask, but it's the same stone in his throat that trapped his hope in the kitchen, when his father had promised to believe for both of them.

"Oh my God — Katsudon!" Yurio yells at him, and Yuuri feels his spine tighten to attention and he barks out: "Yes?"

Yurio narrows his eyes in a scowl. "Are you going to *cry*?"

"No," Yuuri snaps back, because he probably isn't.

And before Yurio can yell back and escalate the situation, Viktor drops a pair of massive headphones on Yurio and tells Yuuri, "Back to warm up," in a way that is unyielding but pleasant, like a kindergarten teacher with his misbehaving charges.

Yurio's performance of Agape is beautiful and impressively polished.

In Viktor's old juniors costume — studded with sequins and shimmery netting — Yurio makes Yuuri think of a constellation, roaming across the ice. Whatever truth Yurio had discovered in the waterfall that day, he tells it in his skating, and Yuuri stares and stares in wonder as one minute ticks into two, and that's when the cracks begin to show. Yurio is bird-

boned and short, more skin than muscle, and the technical wear of the short program leaks through in how desperately he holds onto control in those last 60 seconds. Toward the end of his routine, the construction of a star in motion falls away to something all too human, and Yuuri can see Yurio fraying, his exhaustion, how hard he's fighting for every measure — it makes Yuuri feel toward him a renewed tenderness, that same pity and love he'd felt thinking of Yurio training in Viktor's shadow.

He finishes and he looks spent, drained of everything, and it's only Yuuri's dread and eagerness for his own program that keeps him from sweeping Yurio into a probably unwanted hug. Yurio will be amazing in his senior debut, of that Yuuri has no doubt, and that leaves only the looming question of his own performance making the corners of his vision go black in a rush of panic.

Viktor's presence in Hasetu has been like a touch of magical realism sweeping into the framework of Yuuri's relentlessly mundane life: so impossible Yuuri is only ever dragged along with the current and disbelieving of it. It's by tiny degrees that Yuuri's body and brain have started to believe that Viktor is *actually here*, and every tiny, stupid clinging thread of hope that binds Yuuri to him is desperate not to lose that connection now.

He can't lose. *I can't lose*, Yuuri thinks. *I want to win*.

For once, Yuuri's more frightened of what will happen if he loses than if he wants to win — the specter of failure after all of his best efforts is a haunting possibility; the idea of losing Viktor hurts like an open wound. It's the worse of two fears, and so of course his anxiety latches on. If he loses, Viktor will go away, vanish like so much foam after the Little Mermaid, and Yuuri will have lost his opportunity for something purely fantastical in his life — he'll be at sea, he'll —

"Yuuri," Viktor interrupts, and Yuuri hears himself choke on a gasp. "It's your turn."

It's probably not healthy, the way Yuuri's lungs seize, but it stops his racing heart dead in his chest, at least, and Yuuri has to press his hands over his mouth to contain his hyperventilating, eyes wide and widely staring into Viktor's open, soft-eyed look. He's so handsome, but even better, there's something so *kind* in his expression, and Yuuri thinks about his father and how he'll believe enough for both of them that Viktor would never leave him — and Yuuri lets himself borrow a little of that, clutch it close like something small and stolen and dear.

"Um — I'm going to become a super tasty katsudon," he hears himself say, bewilderingly stupid. "So please watch me — "

Yuuri's always been only himself on the ice, and that's truer now than ever, so he doesn't stop himself from winding his arms around Viktor's neck and dragging him close.

" — Promise!" he whispers, shameless suddenly, stripped of all the social niceties that make him scared to reach, to touch, to try.

There's a beat of hesitation from Viktor, an infinity-long pause before Yuuri feels all the wonderful muscles in his body go yielding, and Viktor says, "Of course — I love katsudon,"

with the assurance of someone talking about the sun rising. He shouldn't take it for granted, but he does, and it gives Yuuri the courage to push out onto the ice.

Skating, Yuuri has to think about 100 different things at the same time: his program, the technicals, the practical realities of nailing the elements, the performance quality, making sure he's engaging the audience, the judges, not taking a header into the boards. His program is, in some ways, more difficult than Yurio's because of how the jumps are scheduled for the second half, and Yuuri's elected to compound this difficulty by performing the entire program as someone else. Yuuri spent a lot of time trying to puzzle out the seducer in Viktor's story, tried on the mantle of his swagger, and in hindsight it's so clear to him that it was never — and can never — be Yuuri. But Yuuri can communicate his paramour, the object of his desire. She's too wise to be immediately fooled, but too hopeful not to give in, and Yuuri moves the way she would, thrilled to be outside of the pragmatic boundaries she's drawn herself, precipitously close to a fall — too exhilarated for the consequences to register.

He finishes, gasping, and the approving roar of the crowd is a jubilant, buoying thing, floating him over to the gate where Viktor is waiting for him with open arms.

And when Viktor transitions from ebullient pride to immediate, savage critique, Yuuri stands there and takes it, because these sharp edges and imperfections, these human and unavoidable discomforts, they're what makes this real, removes it from the plane of hypothetical problems and plunges it wildly, irresistibly to earth.

Yurio's gone by the time Viktor and Yuuri manage to break away from the town-wide celebrations. Yuuri's woozy from the adrenaline rush of declaration, of finally saying out loud he wants to win the Grand Prix Final, and so when he sees Yurio's farewell text message — I'LL DESTROY YOU AT THE GPF KATSUDON!!!!!! — all it does is make Yuuri smile.

Celestino was always Yuuri's coach, first, guardian and friend second; he had felt like an uncle, someone close and whose praise could make Yuuri warm through. Training with Viktor is nothing like training with Celestino.

Viktor is complicated. Where Celestino watched from the sidelines with suggestions and corrections, Viktor skates side by side with Yuuri — when he takes Yuuri through his choreography, it's by skating through it at his right. Celestino was a competitive skater, once, many decades ago, but in every way that matters, Viktor is still a competitive skater now, and he's better at doing than teaching. He can demonstrate something to Yuuri a dozen times, but Viktor's explanations sometimes boil down to "stop fucking up," and "I don't know that's just how you do it." Viktor is demanding and sweet and savage by turns. He doesn't know, yet, the navigational secrets to avoiding Yuuri's long-open wounds and deep, tender bruises; to be fair, oftentimes, neither does Yuuri.

They bump along, finding each other's rough edges and sharp corners.

Viktor seems as elated by Yuuri's work ethic as he is confused by Yuuri's doubt. He praises Yuuri's musicality and performance, and spends a lot of time sighing as Yuuri fails to land his

quad lutz and ends up sliding face-down across the ice.

The rink is booked from 5:30 p.m. for the after school beginners course that Yu-chan teaches, which is just as well, since there's exactly 1 inch of Yuuri's body that doesn't feel like hamburger from today's practice. While Yuuri is wincing and trying to change into street clothes without having any fabric rub up against his new bruises, Viktor spends time absorbing the delirious, worshipful attention of 12 6-year-old girls who are dissolving into ever higher and higher pitched screaming as Viktor says things like, "*Oh ho ho ho!*" and "*Who should I choose to be my bride one day?*"

Yuuri spends dinner smelling Mari-nee-chan's rice like a creep, and eventually he gets kicked out to the onsen to try to soak out the day's damage.

This would be easier if Viktor didn't decide to come keep him company.

Yuuri grew up at an onsen so it's not the nudity that gets to him — it's *Viktor* that gets to him. Viktor has beautiful arms and legs, trim, tight muscle wound around his good bones, and Yuuri can look at the way the heat of the springs makes Viktor flush a vibrant, living pink all over his pale skin, at the water that wells in his collarbones, and wants all kinds of things he's too shy to say or feel.

"Maybe we should nix having three quads in your free program," Viktor says. He is also stretching himself out on the cobbled platform into the onsen, gorgeous and dressed in the curtains of steam from the spring.

"What!" Yuuri cries, turning to catch Viktor's face and already regretting it when he gets a graphic, exceedingly graphic view of Viktor's cock — which is as flushed and gorgeous as the rest of him. Upsetting. Yuuri makes zero effort at a graceful recovery, he just presses his hands to his cheeks and creaks out, "If I want to win the Grand Prix Final, I need those."

From behind his head, Viktor lets out a series of sighing noises, the satisfying ache of a good stretch, and only long experience suffering this kind of provocation keeps Yuuri from trying to drown himself in the onsen.

"Why?" Viktor asks, too reasonable-sounding for a man doing a naked split. "Even if there's only one quad, you can still win with a perfect score on the program components."

It's no good, Yuuri thinks, and presses his face into his folded arms, because he doesn't know how to say that's not how he wants to win: with so much calculation and so little capability. *This isn't good enough.*

"Yuuri, do you know why I decided to become your coach?" Viktor asks, his voice suddenly closer, just overhead.

Yuuri looks up when he feels Viktor's hands — and they're becoming familiar now, how amazing, how impossible — closing around his own, drawing Yuuri up and holding his gaze. Viktor is close enough that Yuuri can feel the heat of his body, and it makes him look up to where the damp, silver-blond strands of Viktor's hair are in his eyes. Viktor is smiling a little

at him, speaking in that low, telephone whisper voice that makes Yuuri weak through with shivers.

"I was drawn to you because of the music — the way you skate like your body is creating music," Viktor tells him, with easy confidence, stroking his thumbs up the back of Yuuri's hands.

Yuuri knows he's blushing wildly, that his heart's racing, that Viktor has been too *much* since the beginning, but now he's also too *close*. It feels like something unfurling behind his rib cage, something like giddy pride and fizzy with happiness, immune to all of Yuuri's best efforts not to want too much, to hope too badly. Right now, with Viktor perched smiling and gorgeous and so *sure* over him, Yuuri can only and with absolute certainty believe.

"I wanted to create a high-difficulty program to maximize that," Viktor goes on, and rougher, lower, with the sharp edge of something possessing, says, "Only I can do that."

Yuuri thinks he says something, or maybe he just gasps, and it all gets swallowed up in the sound of water sloshing as Viktor drags him out of the onsen and starts putting his hands all over Yuuri, cheerfully declaring:

"That's the gut feeling I had. And the short program validated it!"

That night, Mari-nee-chan comes to his room, digs all his carefully hidden posters of Viktor out from underneath his mattress, and threatens to burn them.

"What! Why!" Yuuri hisses, trying to keep his voice down because it's late and oh God what if their parents or Viktor come in and see this disaster in progress?

She wields her lighter. "What — *why*? Are you *kidding me*?" she snarls back, clutching at a limited-edition print of Viktor from Junior World's that is *impossible to find anymore* and Yuuri feels a wave of distress just looking at the way the page is crinkling.

"Don't *tear it*," Yuuri pleads.

"You and Viktor are never allowed in the onsen together unsupervised again — ever," she tells him definitively. "Yoshikawa-san couldn't even look me in the face as he was leaving. There were *children* present."

It takes a heap of promises Yuuri has no intention of keeping, more kicking and elbows than adults should utilize and at least one pillow, but he manages to get Mari-nee-chan away from his posters and out of his room. The posters go back under the mattress, all of the folds lovingly pressed out, and Yuuri gets to spend the night staring at his ceiling thinking about his call with Celestino this afternoon, how he'd promised to redeem himself at the next Grand Prix Final — the hugeness of that in the quiet of his room.

Celestino had said, "That's what I wanted to hear at last year's Grand Prix!" and Yuuri rolls that over in his head, staring at the streetlight filtering into his window through the curtains. Yuuri knew, even then, that he wasn't the only one hurt after his GPF loss, that Celestino had

worried and waited, too, and Yuuri feels a terrible gratitude for how kind Celestino could be, even when Yuuri didn't deserve it.

It makes Yuuri think he has to work harder, that he has to take risks, and it leads him down a spiraling thought exercise on producing his own free program, finding his own music, developing his own choreography. It keeps him up. It has him calling Phichit.

Who has decamped Detroit for Bangkok and taken Celestino with him.

"Oh my God — how's he handling it?" Yuuri asks, once they dispatch with the shop talk of compositions and whether or not that girl from Oberlin still hates him.

Phichit cracks up. "He is *melting*."

Yuuri has to cover his mouth. "Oh no. The hair?"

"Bun, bobby pins, dozens of them, every day," Phichit tells him, still laughing.

"H-he also hates spicy food, right?" Yuuri asks, and now he's laughing in earnest, trying to muffle himself without any real success, because Celestino is all booming laughter and back slaps but he's shockingly fragile outside of his comfort zone, a temperature range of 5 degrees Celcius that had him hibernating like an angry bear during Detroit winters and sheltering in shopping malls during summer.

Phichit is openly collapsed against the boards at the rink now, gasping out, "Last week I got him to eat a bug — 100 burpees — *totally worth it*."

Because it's Phichit, he's lived entire lifetimes in the months since Yuuri left Detroit, there's a lot to do and say, and that's leaving aside the black box prison interrogation on Viktor Yuuri is subjected to via Skype.

"So? What's he like? In person," Phichit asks, though all Yuuri can see is the weave of Phichit's t-shirt, since the phone conversation has now followed Phichit off of the ice and into the locker room. It's like sharing a house again, when Yuuri and Phichit's meandering conversations usually meant that in a physical sense.

"Silly," Yuuri says, immediate, and off Phichit's silence, goes on, "He's serious, too, about training, but he's ridiculous, as a person. He has twenty white shirts that look exactly the same."

The t-shirt weave is replaced, suddenly, with Phichit's utterly shit-eating grin.

"And what are you doing, looking at through Viktor's closet?" he asks, too sweet.

"*Nothing*," Yuuri protests, yelping, and ends up rolling himself in his blankets to try and dampen the noise of himself. "It's *nothing* — he's just..."

Abandoning his own career for a year during a critical juncture, moving his entire life from St. Petersburg to Hasetu, dedicating himself to Yuuri's training in a humbling way, touching Yuuri — a lot.

Phichit's grin has gone from shit-eating to utterly manic. "Oh. My. God. *Yuuri*."

The call doesn't improve after that; Phichit knows Yuuri too well, has put him to bed with too many Viktor Nikiforov YouTube playlists for pretense. If anything, it's the sensation of finally confessing after holding too many secrets under the tongue.

"Do you really think he's interested — in me?" Yuuri asks Phichit, even though Phichit's not here and hasn't ever met Viktor. Phichit has 120,000 followers on Snapchat and 1.5 million on Instagram. He designed their Dancing Queen bridge twizzles, and long ago, Yuuri once bought him condoms because Phichit panicked about which kind to get. Theirs is the kind of friendship that defies logic and borders.

Phichit's in his family home now, a trek that took him 30 minutes door to door from the rink to his vestibule and around to say hi to all the Chulanonts before Phichit had cloistered himself in his room.

"He flew to Japan to train you," Phichit tells him flatly. "He's a man."

Yuuri stares into the phone, into Phichit's flat expression. "And?"

"And if he wasn't following his heart then he was being led by the dick," Phichit concludes savagely. "The only question as far as I'm concerned is if you care about him."

"It's Viktor Nikiforov," Yuuri says, because there's no other possible response. It's Viktor. Yuuri will take Viktor in any capacity he can have him: coach, friend — his heart stutters — *more*.

"And I worship the ground Kim Yun Na walks on but if she dropped into my life I wouldn't marry her," Phichit says. "Just because you like his skating, or the idea of him, doesn't mean you like *him*."

They don't come to any conclusions. Deep into the third hour of this, Phichit's mother bursts into the room, wrests the phone out of his hand, yells, "Go to sleep, Katsuki!" in English, and ends the call.

Found Oberlin's email, I'll fwd it to you later, Phichit texts, almost immediately.

And into the darkness under his covers, Yuuri smiles and writes back, <3

Yuuri watches the typing indicator go on for long enough he figures Phichit just have accidentally keyed in a letter, and goes to bed. Yuuri dreams that he's in Thailand, that Phichit is showing him Bangkok while ABBA blasts in the background, and every time he wonders where Viktor is, he appears at Yuuri's elbow, smiling.

The next morning, Yuuri turns on his phone to check the weather and finds that last text message from Phichit instead:

when you left detroit i was so upset and i couldn't say anything to make you more upset. but every time i see a picture of you now it's on viktors instagram or some fan's twitter, you seem focused and happy and healthy and ugh it's so great and even your skin looks good omg. so

you better stay happy and amazing and win a bunch or i'll come over there and kick your ass and steal your coach!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This would probably be more touching if he hadn't added a follow up message:

btw when are you gonna fuck viktor i got a bet going with chris

As the last of spring melts away into the clear heat of summer, everything feels full and tender and trembling to the touch, on the cusp of bursting open. Yuuri feels like a fig, bursting at the seams from everything new and baffling that's filled up his days, everything he'd never dared to imagine now taking up space during the long daylight hours and deep, quiet nights. His morning runs smell like the ocean, like night-blooming flowers shuttering themselves against the sun, his evenings are hectic dinners to make and new guests to welcome and teenaged girls to fend off, when they show up at the onsen without a reservation or any reservations about offering to wait (naked) up in Viktor's room. And then there's the ice, the plunge of artificial coolness at the rink, and how Yuuri can feel it help slow his pulse, the noise of his urgency and worry, to hem in — a little — the greediness that's growing in his stomach.

It's too much, already, to want to win, too much to be so brazen. To want more, to want something he can't ever earn, is too *too* much, surely, Yuuri thinks, each time he finds himself looking at the beautiful lines of Viktor's profile, the slant of his smile. It doesn't matter what Phichit says, how many times Minako-sensei digs her elbow into his side; Yuuri is braver now than he used to be — but maybe he'll never be brave enough for this.

But when he wasn't looking, Yuuri has gotten used to all sorts of things that once felt impossible. He lands a quad lutz in practice; he makes Viktor breakfast; one night, when he's formlessly upset, he curls up next to Viktor in front of the television watching *Kamisama Mou Sukoshi Dake* instead of going to skate pointless hours at the rink overnight. The borders of him are changing, the water wearing him away the way Yuuri had known it would from the beginning, the way he'd been scared of since the first.

"Yuuri," Viktor says, in a bedroom whisper, eyes glued to the screen, "did you — "

"No," Yuuri cuts him off, before Viktor can ask if he'd ever sold himself for concert tickets. Yuuri's never even been to a concert.

Viktor pouts, like he's so offended, but regroups to ask, "*Yuuri*, when *you* were 16 — "

"I *also* did not — *go home* with any musicians," Yuuri snaps, and shifts his weight against the cushions and Viktor's side, trying to find a comfortable spot for his knee.

"Ah, *chotto matte kudasai*," Viktor says, in perfectly horrible Japanese, and drags Yuuri's leg over his lap, rearranging the cushion underneath and closing his huge, warm hands around the narrow where his knee hurts the most. Viktor asks, "Better?"

On screen, Kaneshiro Takeshi is inviting a teenage girl to literally get into his van, and Makkachin, evidently feeling left out, makes a series of utterly pathetic noises before

worming his way under Yuuri's arm and crawling into his lap like a complete baby. Yuuri looks around the room, at the way Mari-nee-chan is napping with a book on her face, and his mother is spellbound at the television, hemming a pair of Viktor's trousers, and thinks, *yes — everything is better now that you're here.*

Out loud, he says, "Tighter," like a spoiled child, but Viktor only grins and indulges him, rubbing his thumbs into the aching muscle and tendon there, and Yuuri feels a whole-body tremor, all his tension seeping away.

And Viktor seems to know Yuuri so well already it's always a surprise when he doesn't — like so casually remarking that Yuuri's never dated, that he's always been alone. After everything, it's jarring whenever Viktor suddenly doesn't understand, like an idea that exists in Russian that can't be conveyed in English, or a melancholy that lives only in Japanese. Yuuri knows he shouldn't be so embarrassed, that it's unfair to hold it against Viktor, but it's hard: Yuuri has always liked Viktor too much, thought too much of him.

It's childish to hide from Viktor, and unforgivably unprofessional to try to hide from training — not to mention pointless, since Viktor lives down the hall — but Yuuri does it anyway because he's an idiot. It lasts for all of a day before the guilt wells up in the back of his throat, but before he can get dressed and make his apologies, Viktor's ambushed him and dragged him out onto the beach.

The moment is solemn and close, tense. And Yuuri wants so badly to press into the solid, easy warmth of Viktor that he has to fold his knees up to his chest, clutch his legs close so he doesn't take any further unacceptable liberties.

"Yuuri," Viktor asks, so patient it makes Yuuri's throat hurt, "what do you want me to be to you? A father figure?"

Absolutely not, Yuuri thinks. "No."

"A brother? A friend?" Viktor goes on.

Yuuri looks into the middle distance, the gray light on the gray sea, the little boat bobbing in the waves. Yuuri will take Viktor any way he can have him: as a friend, as a brother — but that's not what he wants. That's not what Yuuri wants at all. He hums, to keep all of the selfish things he wants to say inside.

But Viktor says, "Your boyfriend, then?" and while Yuuri's blood is roaring in his ears, adds, "Okay, I'll work hard at it, then."

"No! *No no no*," Yuuri cries, on his feet, panic running through him, and embarrassing truths start tumbling outward, reckless: "Viktor should be Viktor, and no one else — I've always looked up to you."

Viktor just sits there, one arm around Makkachin, still patient, still open.

"I ignored you because I was embarrassed," Yuuri manages, looking at his shoes in the wet sand, at his fists curled tight at his hips. "I didn't want you to see — " *how inexperienced I*

am? that no one has loved me? that maybe worst of all, I don't know how to love someone back? " — my shortcomings.

Yuuri's such a disaster, such a mess. Even if he cut himself open, let all of his secrets spill outward, they would be a jumble, nothing clear cut or honest or simple at all. Yuuri feels like a spool of thread unraveled and tangled, frantic.

"But I'll make it up to you with my skating," Yuuri promises, rushing, trying to paper over the past 24 hours. This is a promise to work, and out of everything, the only thing Yuuri has an aptitude for is work.

"Okay," Viktor allows, and extends a hand, open-palmed.

He's smiling, and Yuuri can tell he means it, that this is Viktor forgiving him.

"I won't let you off easy, then," Viktor warns him. "That's my way of showing my love."

Yuuri wants to say, *please don't*, and *please don't give up on me*, but he just nods, fits his hand into Viktor's, and they stay there on the shoreline long after the length of a handshake has come and gone, hands still linked. This is a promise like any other transaction, but it has softer edges and sharper teeth, Yuuri despairs, and he stands there listening to the water, staring into Viktor's face until the sun burns through the morning haze and the clouds part the day into brilliant, blinding light.

Oberlin Girl is nicer about Yuuri's abortive free program composition than Yuuri probably deserves, and they work out a payment plan and timelines, which turn out to be the easy part. The hard part is everything else: figuring out why the last piece didn't work, how on earth to tell the entire story of his skating career — should he even ask for that again, given how it's turned out so far?

"Should we build off the last composition?" she asks. "Was it not structured enough? Are you looking for a different key, a different mood?"

Yuuri doesn't know anything about music, what a chord is, the tempo. All he can do is confess, shamelessly, spill out the history of his skating, hope she understands him — leave it in her hands. It doesn't hurt as sharply anymore to revisit the history of his mistakes, the years and miles he's put in. Maybe Yuuri is stronger, or maybe all the scar tissue's lost its sensitivity, but he tells her — in fits and starts and silences that are as telling as anything else — about where he's been and where he wants to go, how hard it's been, how lonely. He tells her about Viktor. The email window's comfortingly anonymizing, and Yuuri feels like he's sending his secrets into the sea, that the waves will roll them underneath where they'll live, safe, where the light filters in.

"How do you feel now?" she asks, somewhere in the snowfall of correspondence. "I can't imagine how hard it's been for you. Is it good that Viktor is there?"

Yuuri sits on the question all day long, through training with Viktor and practice with Minako-sensei, and through dinner with his family, until long after Viktor has picked up

Makkachin like a sleepy toddler and carried the dog off to bed.

"I feel calm, mostly," Yuuri tells the email window, in the blue-light of the laptop screen. "I feel like I know I can survive, that even if I fall down I can get back up. I used to worry about being perfect, and I was so afraid to want to win because what if I was disappointed. But I was disappointed anyway, I failed anyway, but I'm here, anyway."

Around him, the wooden bones of their house are creaking in a summer storm, and Yuuri can hear the rain tap against the roof. There's the faint noise of guests, down on the lower floors, the noises his old desk chair makes. His elbow hurts from a juddering drop, earlier today. Yuuri can hear his breathing, feels the infinite inside the darkness behind his eyes.

"I don't know how long Viktor will be here with me," he writes, and it doesn't hurt to write it because it's only the truth. "And this may be my final year as a competitive skater. I want to give it everything I have. I don't want to have any regrets."

He hesitates, here, finally, and types, "Does that help?"

Across oceans, through time zones, she writes back the next day, "Yes," and when she sends over her composition, a week later, Yuuri listens to it in the midnight quiet of his room and presses his face into his hands, his breath hitching.

He knew, of course, that to tell her everything, to ask her to write it back to him in her own language, would be exposing. But this is more than the shivery fearfulness of standing at the center of a roomful of expectant people. This feels deep, intimate, all those secrets Yuuri gave to the sea rushing to the surface, water streaming. Worst of all, it feels like the touch of a hand on his skin, forgiving. Yuuri listens to the melody build up speed, the tripping sound of notes in misalignment desperate to catch up, the swell of percussion and the high song of strings pouring in, everything a wind at the back of the piano — patiently, every so kindly, knowing exactly when and what to give.

It leaves Yuuri feeling so desperately *known*, so impossibly *fortunate*; it leaves Yuuri bent over his computer, crying into his hands, so hurt and happy it's hard to say.

It probably means something that Yuuri doesn't hesitate to play the music for Viktor, that he rushes through the family quarters in the dark, steps on Makkachin, climbs right into Viktor's bed — *oh my God*, he'll think later — and fumbles around until Viktor is wearing his earbuds, sleepily rubbing his eyes as Yuuri says, "Listen!" and hits play.

Yuuri draws first at the Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu Championship because of course he does. What would a year of grinding competition on the national and international stage be without Yuuri (a) needing to requalify through the block rounds for the first time since he was a teenager and (b) drawing first — again. Fortunately, Yuuri doesn't have to nurse this embarrassment with dignity or privacy, since within minutes of the draw Phichit is texting him a picture of someone's tweet: a picture of Yuuri with his face in his hands on the dais, with a caption, "Poor Katsuki-san. Not again."

It's been a long time since Yuuri has participated in this particular competition, so he has no benchmark on if the cacophony of media is now standard, or a response to Viktor's presence. This means that no sooner is Yuuri free of his disgrace at the draw, than he is trapped in a media scrum watching Viktor hold court with a *staggering* number of lies, all told with perfect confidence.

"You — I *told you* about last year's Nationals," Yuuri hisses at him, once they've escaped the crush of reporters, and he realizes with a shock that he's yelling at Viktor and he doesn't even feel bad about it.

Evidently, neither does Viktor, who just bats his lashes. "Yuuri — you tell me *so many* things each day you know it's hard for me to remember all of it," he says, mournful in his whining.

"Also," Yuuri says, "did you retweet that picture of me drawing first?"

"In my defense," Viktor says, absolutely shameless, "Phichit did it first."

The regionals aren't by any means small, but they feel smaller than the competitions that, absurdly, Yuuri is most used to. This isn't Skate Canada, with its horrible Canadians (JJ) or Skate America, with its horrible everybody (sometimes JJ). There's no big city outside, twinkling, and no Chris and Nils to play designated chaperone and driver for any bad decisions that Yuuri should make. Okayama is about 4 hours from Hasetu by a combination of shinkansen and local rail, and Yuuri had ripped a nail hauling his luggage into a rack on the way over here. He's wearing a Totoro bandage because it's what Nishigori had jammed into his wallet, and Minako-sensei had settled a laser-sharp stare on Viktor checking them all into their hotel — deliberate in handing Viktor his own room key and saying too precisely, "*Yuuri needs his rest.*"

There are a lot of people at public practice, which means Yuuri spends it with his headphones in ignoring all of them and having wordless, semaphore conversations with Viktor across the ice.

A head tilt to the left means, "Not sure — maybe try something else?" A tip to the right is easy, happy approval. A frown means, "Stop that, you'll hurt yourself," when Yuuri goes for the jump instead of the downgrade, the hop in practice run throughs. If Viktor is waving his Makkachin tissue holder, it means "Come here, come here," and Yuuri is drawn over like magnetic north.

"There is a kid *staring at you*," Viktor tells him importantly, instead of anything about Yuuri's skating or Yuuri's performance of if Yuuri's free leg is sloppy.

Yuuri stares at him for a long beat. "What?"

Viktor, subtle as a tornado, jerks his head toward some random corner of the rink. "Over there — one of them's staring at you."

Before coming to the competition, Yuuri had been meticulous in checking that neither Keiichi or Akihito would be present, so Yuuri feels absolutely certain it doesn't matter who is staring at him, or why, because he definitely hasn't slept with anyone here.

"It's probably nothing," he says, helps himself to a tissue, and gets back to work.

"Your weird self-esteem issues are showing, Yuuri!" Viktor yells at him, which deserves exactly as little response as Yuuri gives it, going back to working through a transition he hasn't quite mastered.

Viktor's focus is a carefully curated thing, Yuuri knows, from years of watching him compete, but without the looming challenge of a program to skate, all of that energy transforms into something else entirely. Viktor wanders around performing an unrelenting charm offensive, giving every reporter a soundbite, signing autographs, taking selfies with fans — and everybody is a Viktor Nikiforov fan. He flits into and out of the rink side, bringing Yuuri snacks, a drink, a warm towel — where the hell did Viktor get a warm towel? — some gossip that's floating around about two of the judges and their passionate love affair. If Celestino tried to create an oasis of calm for Yuuri, Viktor is clearly trying to confuse his anxiety into submission with too much sensory input and too much egregious, over-the-top flirting to let Yuuri's nerves take root.

Mostly it works to redirect Yuuri's irritation, and it leaves him snippy and impatient with Viktor in a way that Viktor apparently finds thrilling. If you had told Yuuri, at the beginning of the 2014-2015 season, that he'd be at the Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu Championship throwing a towel at Viktor Nikiforov's face to make him stop telling Yuuri to cheer up, he would have laughed himself sick.

Later that night, in his hotel room listening to Minako-sensei on the phone with a parent, trying to explain — gently — their daughter would never become a professional dancer, Yuuri gets a ping from Phichit.

you're a meme, Phichit texts, and appends a link.

It's a looping, grainy image of Yuri hurling a towel into Viktor's face, starting from when he winds up for the toss and closing off as Viktor flails backward from the boards.

Oh God?? Yuuri texts back.

so I'm guessing no jitters making you cry this time around huh lol, Phichit writes.

Yuuri scowls at his phone. *you're making me cry*.

good luck tomorrow!!!! Phichit says, instead of anything useful.

Yuuri knows he can be self-contained, hyper-focused, but he's trying to train himself to use this as an advantage versus an opportunity to spiral into nervous doubt. He's not sure how much his relative lack of panic at the event is his own discipline paying off or Viktor filling up all the once-empty spaces with his ridiculous behavior. Nobody else looks like they're wandering around the venue trying to find their coach 15 minutes before the warm up period for the short program; that's an honor Viktor and his — admittedly dashing — new suit have reserved for Yuuri.

At the gate, with all the other skaters already floating around the ice, Yuuri feels the nerves that Viktor had been working to dull flare up all over again — feels himself going immediately, tellingly silent. He pulls the guards off his skates, and registers Viktor saying something irrepressibly upbeat even as Yuuri skates away, but none of it sinks in; it's hard to parse out a second language when he's this deep in his own head. Yuuri feels all the physiological indicators of tension and tries to ignore all the mental ones as he takes in the shape of the rink, gets used to the ice, keeps his gaze averted from the small clusters of spectators.

At the end of warm up, Yuuri's still stiff, still hates that he drew first — again — still too quiet, he knows, and when he skates up to the boards, Viktor is waiting for him with his Makkachin tissue box cover and a prickly look on his face.

He has exactly two seconds to feel wronged that *Viktor*, who is in his nice suit, *Viktor*, who has won five consecutive World Championships, *Viktor*, who barged into Yuuri's entirely manageable misery and got him all turned around somehow has the audacity to look upset by *any of this* — and then Viktor instructs, "Yuuri, turn around."

Yuuri stares at him. "What?"

"Turn around!" Viktor says again, more brusque this time, and it seems to trigger some instinctive obedience in Yuuri seeded by coaches past.

He spins until he's showing Viktor his back, and asks, "Um, like this?" thinking *what the actual hell* for the half beat before Viktor wraps him into a hug from behind — hands clasping, face pressed into the back of Yuuri's neck.

Yuuri's heart goes into an immediate flatline, medical death, and he's shocked back into agonizing, terrible, explosive life when he feels the soft touch of Viktor's eyelashes, fluttering against his burning hot skin, and Viktor's voice whispering:

"Seduce me with all all you have."

There are so many people staring, so many camera flashbulbs going off, but Yuuri knows they're not staring at *him*, they're staring at Viktor, at where Viktor's hands are warm through his gloves, warm through the thin fabric of Yuuri's costume. And it's ridiculous, of course, but in moments of extremis, it is sometimes these smallest things that make all the difference.

"If your performance can charm me, you can enthrall the entire audience," Viktor goes on, in that same low tone, clear like a physical press of sound against Yuuri's spine, but too quiet for bystanders. It feels as intimate as anything else Yuuri's ever known: a secret in a glass house, the whole world staring to puzzle it out. "That's what I always say in practice, right?"

Yuuri whispers, "Y-yes," but he doesn't pull away, stays there safe in the circle of Viktor's arms as long as he can, until it's time to skate and he pulls away, spinning around as he goes to center ice so he can hold Viktor's gaze.

The venue for the block rounds is too small for a proper kiss and cry, so Yuuri's still meekly taking his post-program critique from Viktor by the rink gate when they announce his score — a personal best and, if it counted officially, among the world's top 10 scores on record.

Yuuri gets to quietly, shyly enjoy this for all of 15 seconds before Viktor drags him about not getting over 100 and shoves the Makkachin tissue box in his face and tells him to downgrade his jumps for the free program.

"I swear Viktor has a personality disorder," Yuuri tells his hotel ceiling later.

In the dark, the next bed over, Minako-sensei is quiet for a long time before she says, "Holy shit — Yuuri."

He sighs. "What?"

"You know how you used to think Viktor was flawless, the man of your dreams, and I used to explain all those feelings you couldn't cope with were an embarrassing crush?" Minako-sensei asks him.

Yuuri drags the covers over his head because he just *knows* he doesn't want to hear this.

"This is worse now," she tells him. "Your crush has metastasized."

"*Good night, Minako-sensei,*" Yuuri yells at her through the blankets.

Day two of the block competitions is no better or worse than day one.

Nishigori had confiscated Yuuri's cell phone because he was fatalistically looking at the approximately 1 million photographs of Viktor's — *motivational tactic* yesterday, so all Yuuri has to do before his turn at the free program is to wander around aimlessly imagining worst case scenarios. It's also extremely helpful that everybody else participating in this block round is a child, and being within a mile of them makes Yuuri feel like he should just crawl into a grave already.

And then there's Minami Kenjiro, who is maybe four years old and seems to be a living corpus of Yuuri's dark, humiliating past. Yuuri has a vivid flashback to Minami's costume from the short program and instinctively looks for a corner to hide in.

"You're being mean to him," Viktor tells him, low and with rare disapproval.

Viktor's not anything like an authority figure with frowns or criticism — he saves all of his sharpness for skating. The rest of the time, Viktor is like your best friend with no sense of self preservation, always wildly encouraging and completely oblivious to boundaries and immediately invested in every stupid idea. Which makes this feel worse on top of already feeling bad.

Yuuri looks away, away from Viktor's disappointed eyes and where Minami is perched in wait, nearly vibrating out of his teenaged skin. "I'm not — I'm trying to stay focused."

He is. It's true, but not the truth.

Yuuri doesn't know anything about Minami, really. He's young and sweet and has decided to aggressively repeat the sartorial missteps of Yuuri's youth. And every time he catches Yuuri's eye, Minami is so overfull with something too much like wonder and worship for Yuuri ever to be comfortable — to see such an utterly misguided ideal of himself reflected back in Minami's expression.

Minami gasps every time Yuuri is near him, and is completely nonreactive to the objectively superior skater that's Viktor Nikiforov, standing usually right next to Yuuri and smirking during these encounters. Minami keeps sitting exactly six feet away, as if he's done extensive research and determined that's close enough to creep on Yuuri's conversations but enough distance to pretend it's an accident. Minami is starry with admiration for Yuuri, and Yuuri doesn't deserve any of it.

He knows it's unfair, that he's being unfair to Minami, but it's such an awful, constant, unrelenting reminder of where he is and why he's here. Minami should be saving up his wet-eyed looks for someone who deserves them, should be trailing Viktor like a lovestruck puppy — instead he's aggressively embarrassing himself over *Yuuri*, who'd collapsed so comprehensively during the last season he's competing in block rounds after having spent years getting seeded into Nationals. It's embarrassing. And Yuuri might hate saying he wants to win, but he's not afraid to admit he hates losing, and that's how he'd ended up here.

Minami had said, "Don't make fun of me for looking up to you for so long and trying to catch up to you!" and all Yuuri had felt was a sickening shame and swelling anger: at himself, with himself, and every time he sees Minami, it sweeps through him like a hungry tide, dragging him down the sand.

But more than his self pity and chronic hurt, Yuuri suspects that Viktor is right, that to protect himself from his past at the expense of others is unworthy, that it'll have him turning away, always. Who knows what he'll miss. Who knows *who* he'll miss. And in the past months, Yuuri thinks the one lesson that he's learning the most — learning over and over — is that he's underestimated his own courage, how much he can endure.

So when Yuuri cups his hands around his mouth and yells, "*Minami! Good luck!*" he does it for Minami, he does it for himself — he does it because he can, and he should, and should burn a reminder in his heart not to cheapen it, the way Minami looks at him, to live up to everything Minami thinks Yuuri is.

Less than an hour after that stirring moment of self-realization, Yuuri takes a header into the boards skating his free program, which Yuuri thinks is a pretty accurate distillation of the process of clawing his way back into international figure skating overall.

"Don't be mad," Viktor whines.

They're waiting for their respective trains to split off, hiding in a nearby cafe: Viktor, Nishigori and Minako-sensei for Hasetzu, Yuuri for Tokyo on the summons of the JSF.

Across from them, Nishigori and Minako-sensei are both pretending to be absorbed by their mobile phones. Yuuri says pretending because Minako-sensei's phone isn't even on. She was on 2% battery before they'd headed for the train station.

Yuuri stares pointedly out the shop window. "I'm not mad," he lies.

"This is cashmere," Viktor says, running a hand down his coat. "Getting blood out of it would have been a nightmare, Yuuri. I wouldn't want it weighing on your conscience."

"Getting blood on you would never weigh on my conscience," Yuuri mutters under his breath, and Nishigori coughs extremely loudly.

Viktor, ever shameless, loops an arm around Yuuri's shoulders and presses in close — warm and smelling infuriatingly good. Yuuri would like to say that his body doesn't curve back into Viktor's, but it would be a lie, and when Viktor says, "You were amazing," it's into the shell of Yuuri's ear, close and earnest and sending a shiver of happiness down Yuuri's spine sharper and brighter than when Yuuri had been announced the winner of the block rounds.

Yuuri should be better than this, but. "Yeah?"

"Spectacular," Viktor adds, smiling.

Behind her dead phone, Minako-sensei says, "Oh my God."

"Why do the JSF want you?" Viktor asks, ignoring her in a way Yuuri wishes he could learn how to ignore her, and pouting, he adds, "I wanted to celebrate."

Yuuri pinks, and his heart tugs with wild speculation, but it's easy to turn his face, press his nose into Viktor's cheek — rough with pale blond stubble — where he smells like the fresh clean of his cologne and skin.

"It's a meeting," he murmurs, and Yuuri realizes that Viktor never says he's too quiet, never tells him to speak up. "There's a standard press conference."

"Press conference!" Viktor says, pulling away all shock. "Do you even have a suit?"

Yuuri's suit is five years old, hastily purchased at a Men's Warehouse when he realized he'd outgrown the one his mother had carefully packed when he'd moved to the U.S. It has the JSF standard patch on the breast, sewn on. He owns two ties, bought two for \$20 at the same shop, and Yuuri had let the woman at the register pick two colors at random. They live in a garment bag in the rolling case he takes to every skating event, as much a utility as his skate guards and Ace bandages.

"Okay, lovebirds, detach," Nishigori says, getting to his feet and waving his phone. "Time for the Hasetzu crew to roll — Yuuri, good luck with the JSF."

"Ah, travel safe," Yuuri says, and he finds himself holding onto Viktor's coat too long, even as Viktor rises and hefts his travel bag, smiles back down to Yuuri.

"You, too," Viktor answers, and there's such a softness in his eyes that Yuuri thinks that if they weren't here in a bustling cafe, that if they were somewhere secret, just the two of them, Viktor might lean over and kiss him — put Yuuri out of his longing misery. "Tell us when the presser is, we'll definitely watch."

"Please don't," Yuuri says, but he's smiling, and it stays with him all the way to Tokyo, all the way to the JSF offices.

Yuuri doesn't know what he expected, but it's not the half-dozen representatives in the main conference room at the main JSF offices. There's expensive tea, lots of people exchanging business cards, sponsors present, and everybody speaks to Yuuri with a sort of bewildering eagerness. They tell him how grateful they are, how thrilled they are with his hard work, how excited they are to see how he performs this season.

He only manages to escape the meeting after agreeing to follow-ups with the sponsorship department and interviews arranged by the publicity team. The JSF sends him to his hotel with a driver, who lets Yuuri know he'll be back midday tomorrow to take him to the hotel for the press conference.

"They're acting like I'm going to run away," Yuuri sighs to Mari-nee-chan, when he calls home to let them know he's arrived in Tokyo, safe and sound.

"You do that a lot, they left you like 20 messages here," she tells him, unsympathetic. "How's your face doing?"

Yuuri wanders into the bathroom of his hotel room — a palatial space on the 32nd floor of the Mandarin Oriental — and checks his nose: it's tender, and just a little red.

"Not that bad," he says, and glances down at his toiletries bag. "I've still got that concealer, too, if it bruises overnight."

Mari-nee-chan makes a noise of humming agreement, and Yuuri thinks this might actually be a totally benign call before he hears the sound of her sharpening her claws through the phone line and she asks:

"So you and Viktor seemed pretty cozy on the rink today."

Yuuri goes to curl up on the bed. "Please, no."

Ignoring him completely, she says, "So? How do you feel about him?"

"Me?" Yuuri asks, reflexive and stopped short. He uncurls enough to be able to stare at the sliding doors to the balcony, to the incandescent orange sunset over the Tokyo skyline, clouds frothing in the distance. "It doesn't really matter what I feel, does it?"

Mari-nee-chan makes a tscking noise, impatient with him the way she always gets impatient with him when she thinks he's being useless.

"Don't be a moron," she lectures. "The only person's feelings who matter are yours."

Yuuri can't help but to smile at that. "I think Viktor's feelings might matter."

"Viktor's feelings are entirely clear," Mari-nee-chan tells him, softer and more kindly than before. "Which makes it even more important for you to figure out how you feel."

"I never know how I feel," Yuuri says.

"You *always* know how you feel," she retorts. "You just like making everybody around you try to read your mind to figure out how you're feeling instead of being an adult and saying anything about it — and it is *incredibly annoying*."

Yuuri glares off into the sunset, flaming red now in the sky. "I'm going to hang up."

"Oh?" Mari-nee-chan asks, sugar sweet. "You don't me to go walk the phone to *Viktor*?"

Yuuri's face goes hot. "No," he lies, and mutters, "Just — give him the phone."

"Figure yourself out," she tells him, and Yuuri hears the sound her walking around, fabric rustling, and people talking quietly in the distance before Viktor's voice saying, "Oh? *Oh!* Is that *Yuuri*?" and he sounds so instantly happy that it makes Yuuri feel foolishly, guiltily shy to have been the spark.

"*Yuuri*?" Viktor carols, over the phone. "Did you get to Tokyo okay? How was the JSF? Were they mean to you? *Yuuri*. On the train, they got me an *ekiben* — "

Yuuri's smile is automatic, instinctive, and he rolls over to lie on his stomach in the massive hotel bed and listens to Viktor talk about the train ride and something called Straight Tea and how Yuuri should be more open to sponsorships and everything and nothing until the surface of his phone is sun-hot from battery death and the sky's a soft, velvet blue, spangled in stars.

Yuuri falls asleep that night thinking how nobody ever tells you, in story books and fables, that recovering from a mistake is more than having the courage to break through a moment of hesitation. He wakes up every single day knowing he has to be brave, and at the end of every day of practice, Yuuri lets Viktor drag him sideways into a hug, to murmur at Yuuri's temple, "Good job, today," because it's what sustains him. It chases him into dreams, wakes up with him in the morning, and Yuuri blames it for his absurd public declaration of love at the press conference, later that day, and the look of catatonic, shocked resignation on the faces of the JSF directors, lined up in the back of the hall.

WOW YUURI, Phichit texts him, when Yuuri's back on the train from Tokyo home.

Yuuri pulls his knees up to his chest, hides his face in his knees with the hood of his jacket pulled up over his head, creating a dark, secret room inside the bullet train. *was it bad?? was it embarrassing???*

so embarrassing, but also gr8, Phichit writes back. *you feel ok?*

Yuuri's typing, *what if I run away*, when his phone starts ringing in his hand: incoming call from Viktor.

He thinks about letting it ring into his voicemail, about letting the space and silence of the train soak in until he feels less at sea. But for the first time, Yuuri wants — more than the silence, more than the stillness — to talk, the warm familiarity of Viktor's voice.

"Hello?" he says, whisper soft into the phone.

"I saw your press conference," Viktor declares.

"Oh, no," Yuuri whimpers.

But Viktor, for his sharp tongue on the ice, can be surprisingly kind, and instead of telling Yuuri he's an embarrassment, that Viktor's going back to Russia where people don't lose their tiny minds in front of the entire sporting media, he says:

"We are getting you a new tie."

Yuuri doesn't manage to finish his message back to Phichit until much later, when he's already back home and half asleep in his own bed — his body sore and worn through, warm from the onsen. He lies there, weighed down by his blankets, and the corner of his mouth is hot from where Viktor had met him at Yutopia's backdoor with a hug and a kiss there, tender, a whispered, "Welcome home."

scared, Yuuri keys into his phone screen, ghost bright. *happier than scared*.

good but also, Phichit writes back, in the way only a really good friend can, *go the the fuck to sleep already you two are so gross*

The next morning, because it's tradition and because Yuuri had looked really pathetic about it, his mom makes him katsudon for breakfast. Yuuri thinks that whatever he feels for Viktor is either deepening or changing, because he eats it — shameless — completely ignoring Viktor's look of disapproval from across the table.

"Enjoy this while you can," Viktor tells him that afternoon, when they've been press-ganged into helping clean the men's baths. Viktor, with his milky pale skin and fine features and beautiful muscles, is dressed in tatty jeans and a fraying Backstreet Boys t-shirt, scrubbing down rocks on his hands and knees — a headband holding back his silvery-blond hair.

"I will," Yuuri tells him, fearless and effervescently happy, because he'd won the shoving match and is in possession of the hose. Also, because he is in possession of a photograph depicting Viktor with a headband wearing a fraying Backstreet Boys t-shirt, scrubbing down an onsen in some backwater corner of Japan.

Yuuri has two months until the Cup of China, and a great deal to do. There are his quads to polish into automatic ease for the competition, and when he performs them in Beijing, he would prefer not to go head first into the boards. He can feel, still, rough edges in his FP, the strain of exhaustion toward the end of the program. There's his own instinctive hesitation, his often disorienting doubt to overcome, and Yuuri knows that this may be the hardest

"You seem happy," Viktor says, suddenly serious, suddenly smiling.

"I had *rice* this morning," Yuuri retorts; his heart is light, fluttering.

Woeful with exaggerated weariness, Viktor collapses onto his side on the water-slicked paving stones, and he moans, "What happened to cute little Yuuri? Who was so starstruck and so impressed by me he would *never* mouth off at me?"

"You starved him to death," Yuuri laughs. "Now you're just stuck with the skinny, mean version."

Viktor ends up wrapping his arms around Yuuri's legs, trying to drag him down, and later, Yuuri will claim he had no choice but to turn the hose on him.

September burnishes into the gold and marvelous red of autumn in full fire, all the trees in Hasetsu feathered scarlet and sublime yellows. Tourists pour into the town, and every room in the onsen is booked to capacity. Yuuri's mornings and nights are bookended by the busy, friendly work of guests coming and going, giving people five minute history lessons on Hasetsu in English, Korean, and Chinese. He trains morning to night, and the unbearable exhaustion by increments and degrees softens into a more tolerable weariness, the familiar ache of long abuse — the hurt and discomfort he's known since he began skating competitively, more than a decade ago now.

They get lots of phone calls from the JSF, just checking in. They get lots of interview requests, most of which Yuuri declines. Morooka-san, who Yuuri has known way too long, ignores his declines of comment and just stays on the phone until he bullies Yuuri into mumbling some things about his hopes, dreams, and yes, he really, really meant it when he said love was his theme for this year's skate.

"Katsuki-kun," Morooka-san says, after a long, telling silence.

Yuuri, who's taking this call while hiding in the supply closet just outside the women's onsen entrance because otherwise, Viktor would steal the phone and torture Morooka-sensei with his appalling Japanese and newly learned catchphrases from watching *Gokusen*, asks, "Yes?"

"I — just..." Morooka-san seems lost for words before finally sighing and saying, "Just — good luck, all right! And you owe me an exclusive, eventually!"

"Every time I talk to you it's an exclusive," Yuuri says fatalistically. "You're the only reporter rude enough to ignore me when I say I don't want to talk and just keep asking questions until you break me."

"Like I said: good luck!" Morooka-san insists, and ends the call.

They get lots of calls and packages from random companies, strangely enough. Nichirei and Mizuno are JSF-wide sponsors, so Yuuri's used to getting occasional boxes from them with polite notes from publicists asking him to use their water bottles or wear this jacket or try on

these shoes. But now, he's getting boxes from brands he's never heard of filled with makeup, skincare, shoes — and then there's the day when The Box arrives.

Because Yuuri's life is terrible, he's gotten into the habit of stacking all his sponsor boxes in a corner of the family tatami room and opening them at random when they're all lying around after dinner watching shitty television, Yuuri's dad earnestly trying to explain the plot of samurai movies to Viktor in a mix of semaphore and limited English.

"*An-drew-Chris-tian*," Mari-nee-chan sounds out, reading the lettering on one of the boxes. She holds it up. "Okay if I open it?"

Yuuri, who is eating a banana — which he will remember later, mortified — says, "Sure," around a mouthful, and watches his sister open the package, remove a bunch of tissue paper, and hold up a pair of completely see-through mesh boy shorts with a strategic cut out over the butt cheeks.

His sister's face goes *incandescent* with happiness. "Oh — "

Yuuri chokes on his banana.

" — my — "

Viktor says, "Hm?" and looks away from Yuuri's father and the television, and Yuuri decides a choking death is fine as long as he can redirect his limited capacity to lunging toward his sister.

" — *God*," she concludes, whispery with delight, before Yuuri flattens her in a side tackle that sends her screaming, the box flying, and a *confetti* of multicolored men's panties raining down around the room. One pair, which just looks like a pink rubber band that's bigger on one side than the other, lands in his mother's lap, on her knitting.

Later, when Yuuri's grimly burning the underwear, pair after pair, in a little metal pail on the back patio, Viktor comes outside to bring him a hoodie and sit next to him, sliding an arm around Yuuri's shoulders "for warmth."

"I know I'm being silly," Yuuri mutters, poking at the embers of lycra with his mother's long frying chopsticks. She's going to kill him when she realizes where they've gone.

Viktor makes a contemplative sound: a noise with enough edges and consonants that it could be a word, a phrase, in Russian, and Yuuri adds it to the hundred other mysterious things about Viktor he would like to know. All part of the hidden volumes of him, an unexplored library, so many things still undecipherable. It makes Yuuri hungry to understand Viktor's mundane secrets, to speak him fluently, to be able to read Viktor instinctively — like highway signs and paperback books.

"Then I'm being silly, too," Viktor tells him, earnestly quiet, tucking his chin into the notch of Yuuri's neck and shoulder, their cheeks pressed close. "Because I don't want other people seeing you in those — or even thinking about you in those."

Yuuri goes warm all over, his skin pink in the firelight and from Viktor's proximity, and he slants his eyes to the side, to see Viktor's ash blond lashes and the beautiful line of his nose and mouth.

"Yeah?" Yuuri asks, brimming over with something. It's stupid to feel suddenly shy, but Viktor has always triggered a hundred thousand foolish things in Yuuri.

Viktor sighs, long-suffering. "Ever since you found your *eros*, it's been *really hard* for me, Yuuri," he complains like a child. "No underwear sponsors — coach's orders."

"Oh, well if it's coach's orders," Yuuri says seriously, mouth twitching.

He lets Viktor feed the remaining samples into the fire, and they ooo and ahh over the way the sparks fly upward, flames licking into the night sky.

Yuuri spends a lot of the groggy, interstitial time between turning off his bedside lamp and darkening the screen of his mobile phone wondering how he feels about Viktor, how Viktor feels about Yuuri. Everyone asks Yuuri what he's going to do, as if he has any idea; as if he hasn't existed in a state of rapid and worsening confusion since Viktor's messy arrival into his life. Yuuri had spent all of his childhood and most of his adolescence so overwrought with shapeless *feeling* for Viktor — mixed hero worship and longing and jealousy and a little kid's greediness — that he'd once burst into tears of frustration watching a skating documentary about Viktor and all the little Russian kids in the program who got to skate with him. For almost all of Yuuri's life, Viktor was no more a person than the Queen of England was a person, just an idea with lots of pictures attached; Viktor's arrival had felt — and still does, sometimes — like a meteor punching through the atmosphere, cataclysmic. Yuuri has trouble sorting out how he feels about uncomplicated things, about the JSF keeps asking if he wants laser eye surgery, about moving to Tokyo, about seeing pictures of Ben when they emerge on his Facebook feed — alone in a room full of people every time. Viktor's the most difficult and complex decision Yuuri's ever made, without concrete options or even a defined question. Viktor keeps Yuuri up nights thinking about where this is going, and even then Yuuri's too scared to think in absolutes: what if they kiss? what if they fuck? what if they fall in love? All of these are too huge and frightening — Viktor meant too much to Yuuri even when Viktor, as a person, didn't really mean anything to Yuuri at all. And now that Viktor is here, eating all of Yuuri's mother's katsudon and charming all of Hasetsu's under-six skaters, telling Yuuri he can win gold, to heap onto Viktor more hopes and more meaning could leave Yuuri bereft, gutted.

In the taxi, from Beijing International Airport to their hotel off of Xizhimen Outer Road, Viktor is already on the phone, arguing with someone in French. Yuuri can only understand isolated words, learned from years on the circuit: "unacceptable" (from Nils), "fuck" (from Chris) and his own name. Outside of the car, Beijing is the same heaving concrete monster it ever was, and Yuuri stares into the blur of buildings and elevated highways with a sense of weightless anticipation — like a stone astonished to be tumbled in fast water — utterly unconcerned. Trusting Viktor has turned into muscle memory now, a circuit in the electrical signals of Yuuri's brain.

Maybe the humbling truth is that love and longing creep in quietly, when you're distracted by the dizzy flash of lust or the grating dread of fear. And while Yuuri had been busy with his self-doubt, his loneliness, his astonishment, what he feels for Viktor — and is still afraid to say — had come in like the green curl of a vine, growing raggedly, stubbornly stronger, putting down roots.

No matter what Viktor says, Yuuri is not *slinking around* during public practice.

"You're actively hiding," Viktor accuses.

"I am not," Yuuri says, hiding in the locker room.

"You realize the futility of this," Viktor goes on, arching an eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest in a way Yuuri hates himself for finding attractive. Actually, given some of the comments Viktor made today about Yuuri's free leg going into jumps, Yuuri hates himself for finding *anything* about Viktor attractive.

"If I *was* hiding, which I am not, then yes it would be silly," Yuuri says, with all of his gathered and fraying dignity.

But this is his first Grand Prix event since his catastrophic collapse, and there are so many people here who last saw him on the worst days of his life, who have probably read all of the stories and speculation, who have an infinite number of questions. And that's discounting the wave of abject loathing that Yuuri had felt from the Russian delegation earlier that morning when they'd shored up to the rink for registration. A woman in a Team Russia jacket had stopped him, given him an assessing look up and down that made Yuuri feel positively naked, and said, "I get it," before leaving without another word. Yuuri feels pulled taut like a rubber band. He wants to see Celestino and Phichit and Chris and Nils and those cute kids from the last time he competed in the Cup of China. He doesn't want to see Celestino and Phichit and Chris and Nils and those cute kids — he doesn't want to answer any of the inevitable questions, field any of their pitying, empathetic looks. He just wants to pretend everything is fine, to survive his short and free programs.

"It *would* be silly," Viktor agrees, "especially since it's going to be pointless."

It's completely pointless. After he's changed and headed for the ice, the reporters find him within 5 minutes, and in the midst of that stuttering debacle, half the international figure skating community stops by to yell, "Yuuri! It's been so long!"

They only get away because the muckrakers see Russia's Yakov Feltsman stomping past — Viktor wafting behind, presumably to try and goad the poor man into full blown cardiac arrest — and stampede after him to ask a bunch of questions about how team Russia is doing without Viktor.

Practice is fine — mostly perfunctory: getting to know the space of the rink, clocking where the judges are, doing a basic run through of his choreography for space. The ice is good, the acoustics are appalling, and when Yuuri stands at center ice for a long beat, he can close his eyes and imagine the stands and the cameras tomorrow, Viktor in another absurd bespoke

suit. It makes a shock run through him, a bolt that shivers down his spine: Yuuri is still scared — Yuuri knows he will probably always be scared — but he's also excited, anticipatory. He wants to do this. He's worked so hard to be back here.

"Are you ready?" Viktor asks, bouncing on the balls of his feet and starry-eyed when Yuuri meets him at the rink gate. "I'm *starving*. I want hot pot, with *weird stuff* in it."

November in Beijing is aggressively unlikeable: blustery winds and faint smog even on clear days; halfway to the restaurant, it starts to rain. Every cab in the city is immediately slammed, the subways are metal casing for human sausage, and Viktor says that none of the approximately 603 other hot pot restaurants they pass can measure up to the particular one he has in mind — all the way across the city bounded by the 3rd Ring Road.

please tell me you are already in beijing and want to eat hot pot, Yuuri texts Phichit, when he and Viktor are stopped at a crosswalk, damp and ravenous. *please come and keep me from putting viktor in the the hot pot*.

Phichit doesn't write back until Yuuri and Viktor finally make it to the *right* hot pot restaurant, being led — dripping — to a booth.

omg yes yes yes where are you guys?? Phichit says. we got held up at customs because i think they thought ciao ciao was some kind of terrorist.

Yuuri gets a business card from a server and photographs it for Phichit. Viktor's got a hold of a young, overwhelmed looking waiter and is gleefully ordering half the menu by pointing at things and saying, "yes!" like a toddler. Yuuri manages to draw the line at bull penis — what *is it* about being in Beijing and bull penis? — but that's already after plates of congealed duck blood and drunken shrimp are already on their way.

The hot pot, split in a yin yang of milky white broth and a more violent looking red one, arrives almost immediately, as do millions of little dishes of raw meats and vegetables: a platter of woody mushrooms, buckets of greens, sprouts, four kinds of tofu products, lacy curls of shaved-thin beef and lamb — a half-dozen other things Yuuri doesn't recognize or can't identify. The waiter brings them chrysanthemum tea in a clear glass pot, so that Yuuri can admire the flowers staining the water a pale green-yellow, the steam sweet like a garden in late summer.

Viktor is torturing Yuuri by eating the wriggly, horrifying duck blood and the wriggly, *still alive* drunken shrimp by the time Phichit finally shows up.

"Wow, wow!" Phichit croons, dropping into the booth across from Yuuri and already digging for his phone. "Wow!"

"I — what?" Yuuri asks, helpless.

"It's Viktor! It's really him!" Phichit says, shameless, his thumb already flying across the phone screen as he adds, "I'm going to invite Ciao Ciao — I'm sure you want to see him."

Yuuri doesn't bother to hide his wince, because it's Viktor and Phichit and if any people in the world know the awkward reality of him, it's Viktor and Phichit. "Um."

"Done!" Phichit says, cheerful, and now that the phone's free, he instructs, "Viktor, let me get a picture of you and this cute Japanese boy."

Viktor points his chopsticks at Phichit, even though Yuuri has explained to him about hundred times how incredibly rude that is. "I like you," Viktor declares, and snags Yuuri into a hug, shouting at a passing waiter, "Server! Please bring us a lot of *bai jiu*!"

"What's *bai jiu*?" Yuuri asks as Phichit takes a photo.

"Snack?" Phichit guesses.

It's not snacks.

Baijiu is old tires, liquified, mixed with lighter fluid and sadness. Viktor, being Russian, of course treats it like mother's milk, and he's halfway to riotously drunk when Celestino arrives, divvying his judgmental looks between Yuuri and Viktor evenly, which Yuuri thinks is *extremely unfair* since between them, only Viktor is whining about how it's too hot in the restaurant and continuously peeling off clothing.

"He's usually not like this," Yuuri says.

Celestino looks pointedly to where Viktor is slowly, ever so slowly and drunkenly trying and failing to pluck a piece of tofu out of the still-bubbling hot pot. He's doing this with shirt off and his belt looped around his neck, unbuckled.

"Okay," Celestino says.

Viktor, meanwhile, gives up on the tofu, abandons the chopsticks in the hot pot, and declares, "It. Is. Hot," and starts fighting his pants for freedom.

Yuuri tries very hard to keep a straight face. "I swear he's actually a good coach."

Celestino just narrows his eyes. His ponytail somehow gets more threatening.

Yuuri would like to say that he has no idea how the night derailed so badly, but he can actually pinpoint the exact moment, because Phichit had marked it by saying, "Ciao Ciao, loosen up, you should have a drink, too."

It ends with Yuuri having to walk Leo de la Iglesia and Ji Guanghong — both visibly traumatized since they'd arrived just in time for Celestino to lose the drinking contest and Viktor to win his long war against his trousers — to the street to help them hail a cab and secure promises they won't post tonight's debacle on social media through a mix of coercion, threats and undignified begging.

Yuuri doesn't realize the cosmic error in overlooking Phichit's presence — foolishly, he'd assumed that wrangling a 200 pound blackout drunk Italian man would keep Phichit too busy

for Instagram, *foolishly* — until the next morning, when they roll up to the arena and the men's single skater from Uzbekistan high fives him and says, "*Nice*."

In the 10 hours since Phichit had posted the photo of his own peekaboo face with Viktor aggressively topless and aggressively draped all over an aggressively frazzled-looking Yuuri in the background, it had racked up God knows how many likes and God knows how many shrieking comments in God knows how many languages.

"...*P-Phichit*," he manages, feeling his soul leaving his body.

"I'm sorry! I couldn't resist!" Phichit says, sounding exactly as sorry as Viktor had sounded this morning about last night: which is to say not at all. Leo and Guanghai, who have been following Yuuri around all morning hoping for a Viktor Nikiforov sighting, are similarly unmoved, which is cold comfort as Yuuri descends into a panic spiral about how every reporter here and the JSF and *Minako-sensei* are going to think he was just fooling around the night before the SP and —

"*Yuuri*," comes Chris's voice, too close to Yuuri's ear, accompanied by Chris's hand, too-cupping-Yuuri's-ass-cheek-through-his-leggings, "why didn't you invite me?"

Even the muscles in Yuuri's *eyelids* go tense. "*Chris*."

Because Chris is probably one of the worst people in professional figure skating — which is a difficult accomplishment — he gives Yuuri's ass a speculative little squeeze before his palm slides lower, stroking the inside of Yuuri's thigh as he says, "Looks like you got into shape — guess your master's giving you *very* thorough training."

Yuuri has no idea what kind of face he's pulling, because there's no way a look can fully convey everything he's thinking.

"Oh my God," he hears Leo squeak in English, over top of Guanghai's, "天哪."

Yuuri can't even be properly mad at Chris, because once someone's boyfriend been your ride home from a semi-anonymous one night stand in France, all traditional boundaries of appropriate behavior are no longer relevant. That being said, *still*.

"Where's Nils?" Yuuri asks, narrowing his eyes.

"Oh *me-ow*," Chris purrs.

Yuuri whips around to Phichit, who's already reaching for his phone, and points a finger at him. "Don't even think about it," he says.

Phichit's still complaining about how *mean* Yuuri is to him and how Yuuri doesn't *appreciate* all the work Phichit does to improve Yuuri's social media profile when Viktor finally completes whatever transaction he's made with Russian Hangover Satan looking sleek and polished and annoyingly handsome.

"Chris," Viktor says, surprisingly cool and pulling to a stop in front of them.

They must have a whole conversation here, but Yuuri doesn't really hear much of it because he's suffering an out-of-body experience, standing there with someone's hand still tucked in the crease where his ass and his thigh meet, watching *Chris Giacometti* sass *Viktor Nikiforov* while *playing with his tie*. Sometimes Yuuri wonders if all of this isn't some kind of fever dream, if he isn't going to wake up tomorrow in his room at the onsen or the little house in Detroit — it feels more realistic than the alternative.

"The sin of keeping Viktor to yourself is grave, you know, Yuuri," Chris says to him later, when Viktor's magpie eye is drawn away across the hall to a woman from Team USA and one of the Russian ice dancers. "The whole world is hoping for his return."

Well they can't have him, Yuuri doesn't say, manages to swallow back.

The hot ferociousness of it surprises him, both because Yuuri didn't know he could get so angry so fast, and because last night when he'd put Viktor to bed he'd spent a little while debating whether or not he could get away with smothering him to death with a pillow. But maybe most of all because it's something else that gives him away, that makes it hard pretend much longer that he doesn't know how he feels.

Phichit's short program is phenomenal. Yuuri stands in front of a TV in the prep area with his fingers pressed over his mouth, dying by degrees every time Phichit lays up for a jump, goes into a step sequence, riles up the crowd. The choreography is beautiful, and Yuuri remembers listening to Phichit talk for long hours about how one day he would perform to "Shall We Skate?," but only when he was good enough — only when he could live up to the music and what it meant to him — and Yuuri feels something hot and joyful in his chest that's love and pride in explosive combination.

Viktor makes Yuuri crazy. He shows up and upturns Yuuri's orderly, melancholy little life; he makes Yuuri hopeful for absolutely ridiculous things; he's invasive; he's impulsive; he makes Yuuri's heart gun it in his chest, rattling against the cage of his ribs.

It's only Viktor who could make Yuuri crazy enough to lace their fingers together — the crowd roaring white noise in the background, the overhead announcing him in three languages, everything so precariously balanced on this moment — and say with a fire and a courage Yuuri would never believe of himself, "*Don't ever take your eyes off me.*"

Yuuri doesn't feel like himself on the ice, or at least not the comfortable shell he's always known, the same raggedy bones and sore muscles. He sinks into the music, feels like he's playing the part of someone else: someone confident, who walks with his head up and his shoulders pressed back, who would have passionate love affairs and discarded lovers in his wake. He nails his triple axel; his quadruple Salchow is clean, and Yuuri steams into the second half of his program with the dizzying thought that it doesn't matter if he's ever that person, if he's ever confident or walks with his shoulders pressed back, if he can love them and leave them. Quad toe loop, triple toe loop. The person Viktor wants, without artifice, having seen him at his worst, for all of his flaws, is just Yuuri — the same one who misses

carbs like a war widow and cries all the time. It's all Yuuri can ever be, and who Viktor has never asked him to stop being.

He hits his mark, the music stops, and Yuuri feels his body burning up, his fever at 105 degrees — everything soft-edged like a city through the heat of a desert. The crowd's scream bears him off the ice like the soft curl of a wave, and when he shores up at kiss and cry, it's to the ecstatic blur of Viktor's smile, the familiar press of his touch, and the wonderful shape of a stuffed onigiri, tucked into his arms.

"You were amazing — that was perfect," Viktor gushes, clutching Yuuri's hands, dragging him down onto the bench, handing him his water bottle, offering him a tissue. "You were spellbinding. Captivating."

"Thank you, you too," Yuuri says stupidly, still trying to get his bearings, all the adrenaline wearing suddenly away and leaving him exhausted.

Viktor's quiet for a minute before he asks, "Yuuri, did it feel amazing?"

Yuuri doesn't know the answer to that. In the moment, as he's skating, there's always too much on his mind to feel pure thrill. Even interstitial moments of joy, of accidental perfection, he's too busy maintaining it to savor any — and after, in the immediate comedown, mostly Yuuri feels absent from his body, as if all the pieces of himself flew away during that final sit spin, and are only now beginning to slowly gather together.

"I was hoping people felt amazing watching," Yuuri says finally, because that's true, at least, and he stares fruitlessly at the massive fuzz of the scoreboard: just a suggestion of colors and lights and geometric shapes.

The numbers must come in because the screaming gets multiples louder, and Viktor gasps and clutches Yuuri around the shoulders, whispering, "Of *course* they'd feel amazing watching that performance, Yuuri — Yuuri, you're the *best student*," which is touching, but useless, and continues to be useless for another 2 minutes until Yuuri finally figures out his score: 106.84 — personal best, current first place.

Yuuri is incandescent with happiness, disbelieving and giddy, and it lasts through the press scrum, through catching up with Phichit, through finding Minako-sensei in the crush of attendees, until he's left abruptly alone in his hotel room for the come down, the cold reality. Yuuri sits on the edge of the bed, stares out the window into the the nighttime haze of Beijing and says, "*Fuck*," in English, shivers running through him to know that right now, right here, *absolutely everybody is gunning for him*.

He tries to sleep, but mostly Yuuri has cascading panic attacks that start at around 10 p.m., peak sometime after 1 a.m., and rally at exactly 2:14 a.m. He knows because he's staring at the ominous red face of the digital clock. They melt away into familiar, ordinary shakes by the time dawn starts breaking through Beijing's early morning smog.

"Nope," Viktor says, when he sees Yuuri, and bundles him back into bed immediately. "We can skip the public practice — get some sleep."

"Did you even set an alarm?" Yuuri asks.

Viktor flops down over him, pillowing his face on Yuuri's shoulder and pressing a hand over Yuuri's face, whispering, "*Shh*."

It's a nice effort, if pointless. Viktor is an asshole and falls asleep almost immediately, leaving Yuuri to stare at Viktor's tiny, but real, bald patch. During this period Yuuri makes the realization that the confluence of yearning and fear is almost worse than just feeling one or the other. On the one hand, Viktor smells amazing and the weight and heat of his body make Yuuri's throat dry and his cock twitch; on the other hand, he's so nervous he could throw up. This goes on for almost three hours before Yuuri can't stand the taunting of the clock anymore, whispers, "Viktor," then yells, "*Viktor*," and finally just shoves Viktor off of the bed to wake him up.

Yuuri knows all the intellectual reasons it's pointless to get this anxious, that the tension is no good for his focus, his flow or his performance — but every successive skater and every successive roar of approval from the crowd only makes him sicker. He goes to hide in the bathroom for a while. He gets on his knees in front of a toilet, wondering if he should try to throw up, but then Viktor comes knocking on the stall door sounding so sharp it sends Yuuri scrambling back up. He lets Viktor hide him away from the press, murmur tender nonsense into his ear during stretches, and all of it is nice, but he feels all of Viktor's care from a remove; Viktor's no good at hiding his nervousness, either. And maybe Yuuri's paranoid nightmares are only a reflection of the well-hidden truth, maybe Viktor regrets this — maybe he's wondering how to let Yuuri down easily.

Yuuri wishes they were back at home, in Hasetu, on the rink at the Ice Castle. There, Viktor's faith feels unshakeable, effortless; he ignores it when Yuuri hesitates or complains, just pushes him savagely, with staggering surety, is high-handed and demanding and meets all of Yuuri's doubt with categorical dismissal. At home, Yuuri knows he can indulge in a panic spiral, to give into his oftentimes irrational fear, safe with the knowledge that sooner or later, Viktor is going to pin him to the boards and frown at him, say, "*Yuuri*, stop it," and order him to run through his entire program again, because he's being ridiculous for someone so talented.

And Yuuri thinks that here, too, Viktor must still feel the same, believe the same, but the trappings are different: it's louder here, more crowded, and if Viktor's never felt compelled to discretion, he's not welcome on the ice — can't skate up to Yuuri and take his hand, drag him around being silly. There's always *someone* watching: waiting for Yuuri to fall apart or Viktor to foul up playing as coach.

Yuuri knows he's not helping, that he should have tried harder to sleep, or listened to Viktor about the jumps during warm-up, but he can't help it: it seems wasteful, it seems ridiculous that he wouldn't do absolutely everything he can, to push it as far as he can, before he gets on the ice. And he's no good at silencing the insistent voice in his head telling him all of this, no matter how much it makes Viktor's calmly serene smile calcify and sharpen to tight, angry angles. Yuuri is trying as hard as he can to trust: himself, his instincts, in the people around him.

They'd started off in the stew room, waiting with everyone else and progressed into a disused hall before Viktor's mouth had jagged itself into a tense line and he'd pulled Yuuri down into the parking lot.

It's freezing and dark and Yuuri knows that Viktor's trying to insulate him, but the distance is only making it worse: it's dim-lit and damp, and Yuuri feels the cold seeping into his fingers and the tip of his nose — all of it worsened by the almost physical press of Viktor's worry. Yuuri wants Viktor to laugh away his worry, to wave it aside how he does at home, to try and distract him by being awful and handsy. Except Viktor is yelling instead, saying, "Don't listen," and slapping his hands over Yuuri's ears in a panic as the rumble overhead goes nuclear: blue eyes wide and tense in a way that makes Yuuri even colder.

Yuuri wants to say, *just be like you always are*, but he's not sure how, or if Viktor will understand, and he can only stare so long — startled — into Viktor's grim expression before he has to push away, needs the space. It's always so claustrophobic inside his head during these moments; now everything around him feels like it's closing in, too, and Yuuri can't ignore the root of this sick feeling in his stomach, the hurt fear that Viktor is going to leave.

"Yuuri," Viktor says suddenly, into the echo of the car park, into the vague, telephone whisper hum of shouts and thunderous clapping upstairs, "if you don't make the podium — I'll take responsibility by quitting as your coach."

When Yuuri was really little, their whole family had been in a car accident driving home from their grandparents' house. It had been dark and the roads were slick from an unrelenting summer storm, and another car at an intersection had hydroplaned into them. He'd only been five, and he doesn't remember the trip to his grandparents, but Yuuri remembers the concussive sudden stop, the way his bones had juddered inside of his body, how everything had been very loud and then immediately silent.

Here, too, it's the same: the sudden stop, the disorienting jerk, a roar of blood in his ears and then the world falls bafflingly mute. Yuuri just keeps staring into Viktor's face, everything written so plainly across it, and he can't believe that right now, right here, is when Viktor would try this of all horrible plans, and Yuuri doesn't even realize he's crying until his vision blurs, his eyes as sore as his throat.

"W-why would you say something like that?" Yuuri croaks. He can't see Viktor anymore, he was already a blur without the glasses, now he's just a wash of desaturated colors. "Like you're trying to test me?"

Viktor's such an obvious only child, and he breaks immediately. "*Ah* — Yuuri, I'm so sorry," he gasps, in immediate panic. It would be funny in almost any other circumstance, except right now Yuuri's heart is a collapsing star in his chest. "I wasn't being serious — "

"I'm used to being blamed for my own failure, but this time, my mistakes would reflect on you, too," Yuuri babbles, everything he can't say rising furiously, desperately upward, seeing an escape. "I've been wondering if you secretly want to quit."

Viktor's voice is all forced calm, and comes from closer than before when he says, "Of course I don't — "

"*I know that*," Yuuri yells at him, and he's shocked to realize he means it.

Of course Viktor doesn't want to quit. Before Viktor shored up in Hasetu, he was legendary, rich, gorgeous and completely alone. He spent all his time traveling or practicing or torturing his rinkmates and coach. He had a dog he never saw, an apartment that was professionally cleaned once a week, and nobody to take him to hot pot and endure him gleefully eating duck blood or squire him around ninja castles. Viktor's life was fantastic and fashionable and utterly empty.

"I'm — not good with people crying in front of me," Viktor admits. "I don't know what I should do — should I kiss you?"

Yuuri can only sustain these moments of clear-eyed confidence for short bursts, the life and death of a sound coming from a long distance away, but he feels them intensely.

Yuuri knows this: Viktor is happy now — happy coaching Yuuri, happy *with* Yuuri. He would never leave until Yuuri made him.

And all of it only makes Yuuri angrier.

"No!" Yuuri yells at him, which is probably insane, because Yuuri has wanted Viktor to kiss him since Yuuri has wanted *anyone* to kiss him, but this is what Beijing does to people: leave them in sobbing meltdown in underground parking lots, say semi-incoherent things like: "Just — have more faith than I do that I'll win! You don't have to say *anything*, just stand by me!"

Yuuri's pitchy and he sounds crazy, and the last tones of his voice echo around all the luxury vehicles parked around them in the gloomy dark. When it fades entirely, then all he can hear is his own desperate gasping, his own ugly crying, and a weighty silence from where Viktor is standing that just makes Yuuri sob harder. He hates that he had to say it; why couldn't Viktor have just *known*? And now Yuuri feels hollowed out and like an idiot and cold all over — his back is a mess of tension, he's going to be a disaster on the ice, and there's going to be entire internet comment sections about how swollen and red-faced he is and —

"Damn it," Viktor chokes out, and Yuuri's only just looking up when he gets crushed into Viktor's chest.

He says, "*Ah*," out of sheer surprise, and it's muffled against the thick cashmere of Viktor's coat, the lapel with all its meticulous hand stitching. "Viktor?"

"I'm sorry," Viktor says, into Yuuri's hair, rough and run through with hurt. "I'm sorry — I'm — everybody always wanted me to *do something*. Jump again, practice more, talk to them, take a picture, but you — "

Yuuri fists his hands in the back of Viktor's coat, and he thinks, *oh, I love him*, because how else can Yuuri explain how hearing this makes him hurt? That even now, Yuuri feels a fierce and misplaced protectiveness over Viktor? *Oh, no*, he thinks.

" — you don't ever want anything from me," Viktor grinds out. "And I feel like I'm not doing enough." He presses a kiss into Yuuri's temple, his arms squeeze more tightly, and Yuuri just

goes blissful and hypoxic, drags in desperate little gasps of Viktor's skin and his cologne and the smell of his family's laundry detergent on Viktor's pressed shirt. They fit; they belong. "I'm so sorry — forgive me, Yuuri. I'm so sorry."

Yuuri's lip is trembling again, the tears rushing back, and he can't tell if he's happy or if he's just crying out the last of his shocked hurt, at how scared he is, but he doesn't care if Viktor sees or he ruins Viktor's beautiful coat. He just chokes out, "Never say that again; don't — don't try to trick me, okay?"

"I promise," Viktor tells him, and he sounds so earnest it makes Yuuri weak in the knees.

"Just don't leave me," Yuuri whispers, hitched out of him in between shivery little cries. "Just stay with me, okay?"

"Okay," Viktor swears. "Yes — okay."

They spend the last few minutes before it's Yuuri's turn on the ice in the bathroom, Viktor soaking his handkerchief in icy water to press against Yuuri's swollen eyes and cheeks, and Yuuri digging out his little tube of concealer.

Viktor arches an eyebrow at him. "Hiding love bites, Yuuri?" he teases.

Yuuri's too tired to be embarrassed by how embarrassing his life is. "I skated into the boards once before Nationals and my sister and Minako-sensei made me go to the drug store and buy this," he admits.

Viktor makes an expression that means he's helplessly charmed.

"Shut up," Yuuri mumbles, and he does the best he can to cover up how red he is, before the runners come looking for him and Viktor.

Yuuri feels quiet, bruised, in the tender aftermath of a fight, and Viktor's too careful: he keeps a hand on Yuuri at all times, helps him with his coat and his skates, but he doesn't say anything — on his best behavior. He's nothing like the Viktor Yuuri loves at all, and that's ridiculous, too. Viktor should always be himself.

It's why he drops the tissue, and why he presses his finger right there — *right there* — in Viktor's tiny, sweet little bald patch, and holds it for a beat before he skates to center ice.

His music, his program, they all feel freer, loose — everything that had been stoppered up at his throat let out. Yuuri feels a lassitude on the ice that's rare and wonderful, and the crowd, the pressure, the expectations all feel far away. He knows his program inside out, his arms and his legs and his core know it, and he leans on muscle memory and lives in the interior spaces of his thoughts for it — wondering at how far he's come, how far Viktor has to go, and if he should change his final quad to a flip from a toe loop.

Why not, Yuuri thinks. Today seems like the kind of day for that kind of thing.

He's too tired to stick the landing, but the pain of the fall barely registers before he's up and closing out his program, the last strains of music playing out and the crowd noise finally filtering in. Yuuri looks for Viktor — Yuuri always looks for Viktor — finds him running toward the gate, his face unreadable, and Yuuri yells, "Viktor! I did great, right?" as he skates over, the audience getting louder and louder.

Yuuri has fallen down on the ice hundreds of ways, thousands of times — it always hurts, no give on the surface — but it doesn't hurt at all when Viktor tackles him to the rink. His mouth is hot and fierce and sudden over Yuuri's, and everywhere they touch is so, so warm that Yuuri's dizzy with it, his mouth buzzing with it, and when Viktor says, "It was the only way I could think to surprise you more than you surprised me," Yuuri thinks, *Oh, he loves me, too.*

Phichit marks winning gold at the Cup of China with a meet-up of all his Instagram and Snapchat followers that swells up to *hundreds* and overflows the hotel bar and lobby, turning the whole night into barely controlled chaos upon which Phichit apparently thrives. His Snap story the next morning is 203 clips long, most of them just Phichit duckfacing with random Chinese skating fans, but also a video of Yuuri and Phichit doing their Dancing Queen routine, Chris and Viktor slow dancing to an Andy Lau ballad, and Celestino surrounded by a crowd of deranged figure skaters all shouting, "*Shots shots shots.*"

Sometime after the dancing but before the last Snapchat of Phichit shouting — bright red, wet-eyed, entirely drunk — "Thank you for all of your support!" Yuuri finds Viktor looking pleasantly buzzed and pink with happiness, in a corner booth at the hotel bar.

"Hi," Yuuri says, breathless from dancing, from laughing.

Viktor just grins, crooked, and holds out a hand, "Come over here," he says, and Yuuri goes, drawn by red strings, and crawls right into Viktor's lap.

Viktor's body is familiar and wonderful, hot through his shirt and rumpled trousers. He's still handsy and invasive, and when Viktor's palm slides around Yuuri's waist, drags him in closer, honestly, Yuuri's only choice is to tilt his head so that their mouths can fit together again. Since that first kiss on the ice, though the medal ceremony and the sundries after, all Yuuri has wanted to do is kiss Viktor again: to be close, to breathe him in, to taste his stupid \$50 Chanel lip balm and clutch at his overpriced Tom Ford tie.

Viktor tastes like top shelf whiskey and skin, and the music's so loud Yuuri doesn't care that he's making absolutely shameless noises. He loses track of time for a little while, safe here, licking into Viktor's mouth with his fingers in Viktor's hair, and it's perfect, it's wonderful, it's better than executing a perfect skate or winning gold.

And now that Yuuri's let himself think it, *all* he can think is how much he wants Viktor. He's amazed he's thought about anything *but* how much he wants Viktor: the lean and beautiful lines of him, his throat, the silvery rough whiskers he gets at the end of the day. Yuuri wants to feel those scrape across the inside of his thighs, to feel Viktor bite down on his collarbones, to pin Viktor down and selfishly, greedily *take*.

"Oh, *my*," Viktor says, voice raspy, lips moving against Yuuri's. "You've gotten quite fierce, Yuuri — you'll make me blush."

Yuuri bites his chin. "Why are you such a *terrible* person," he mumbles.

"But I'm *your* terrible person," Viktor coos, shameless, and Yuuri hates how he feels a thrill at that, decides that the only way out is through and dives back in for another kiss.

Yuuri manages to get Viktor all the way out of the hotel bar, through the pandemonium of the lobby — Celestino is losing an arm-wrestling match to Guanghong's coach — and into the elevator — the scene in here is disgraceful and high-friction — and onto their floor before Viktor says, "Ah — Yuuri, *wait*."

"It's fine," Yuuri says, about nothing, probably to no one, and he doesn't care because the skin of Viktor's throat tastes amazing and they're 2 inches from his hotel room door.

And then Viktor's cupping his jaw, turning Yuuri's face upward to — *oh, yes* — kiss him again, thorough and slow and sweet on the mouth, lingering, before he pulls away.

Viktor is flushed and his mouth is red and swollen, his blue eyes glassy and hot, his shirt collar two-buttons-too-many opened. His hair is a mess. He looks so good he makes Yuuri want to beg.

"Hi," Viktor says, inane and tender, pressing a thumb to Yuuri's lower lip.

Yuuri kisses it, the whorl of Viktor's fingerprint. "Hi," he whispers.

"You know I'm not going anywhere, right?" Viktor asks, still so sweet, eyes crinkling into a smile, and it must be a reflex, a learned response for Yuuri to hum happily, to press in more closely. Viktor smiles, and Yuuri wants to be nearer to it.

"You promised," Yuuri says. "You'll stay with me."

Viktor laughs a little, all low and rumbling, and it makes Yuuri shiver. "Yeah," he agrees, darts in for another kiss — quick, hot, close-mouthed — and draws away. "So — you don't need to rush yourself, okay?"

"What?" Yuuri asks.

Viktor pushes himself away like it's hard, like it's work, but he's still grinning, a little wild around the eyes. "You were amazing today," he says, more softly, their earlier urgency drained away, and this time, when Viktor kisses him again, it's easy and undemanding — a kiss good night. Viktor murmurs, "Get some sleep, all right? I'll come find you in the morning," and dashes off for the elevator.

"*What?*" Yuuri asks again, into the empty hallway, watching the elevator indicator floors travel down and away.

Ultimately, he's rescued from a sleepless night debating whether or not to go burst into Viktor's room demanding satisfaction only by a combination of post-banquet, post-competition shenanigans including but not limited to: Guanghong getting locked out of his own room by one of the Chinese ice dancers; Leo's staggeringly poor decision making; Phichit showing up at 2 a.m. claiming Celestino's drunk snoring deserves its own line in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and Yuuri being a complete sucker.

"A few hours ago I thought I'd be spending the night with Viktor," Yuuri says sadly.

Phichit, who is *sleeping with his gold medal*, just makes a mumbly, happy noise. "This is fine, too, right?" he asks. "You can have sex with Viktor whenever. Not many chances to spend the night with my *Cup of China gold medal*."

"You're so bad," Yuuri gasps, trying to muffle his laughter even though Guanghong has given zero indication he's listening to any of their conversation. "Go to sleep."

Phichit opens one eye, smirking. "Is he still staring?" he whispers.

It's a double room, and Yuuri and Phichit end up sharing the bed nearest to the window, while Leo is passed out in the one nearest to the bathroom, a trash can strategically located on his side of the mattress. Guanghong — subtle as a dump truck — has been sitting cross-legged on his side of the bed gazing dreamily at him for *an hour*.

"Yep," Yuuri whispers back.

"*Sickening*," Phichit declares.

Yuuri falls asleep smiling.

The 203rd clip in Phichit's Snap story is from sometime after that: a picture of Yuuri tangled in his bedsheets, flushed and soft-lipped, his bangs sweeping into his face. His t-shirt's rucked up and he's only wearing a pair of glossy purple briefs otherwise. Phichit has, helpfully, written OMG DISHY on the picture.

"Yuuri, how dare you," Viktor complains, the whole plane ride home. "After I was so honorable and tucked you into bed with such chivalry and restraint."

"Well maybe if you hadn't my room wouldn't have been invaded by drunk figure skaters and Phichit's 2 million Snapchat followers wouldn't have seen my underwear," Yuuri mutters, and tries to sink deeper into the nest of his coat and his facemask and his scarf, blushing so hard he's amazed there's still blood in the rest of his body.

November starts with Skate Canada and closes with the NHK Trophy, with the Cup of China and Rostelecom in between, so the turnaround from his silver medal in Beijing to probable disaster in Moscow is about two weeks. Landing back in Fukuoka just marks the beginning of a whirlwind. Viktor mandates a day for recovery: no skating, no conditioning, sleeping in as late as he likes. Yuuri wakes up at noon and eats his mother's katsudon, takes a long, long

walk with Makkachin and Viktor to the seaside and back, talking about nothing, talking about St. Petersburg, talking about how probably it's not a good idea to scandalize the local fishermen, so they should keep all the petting over the clothes.

"Are you excited to go back home?" Yuuri asks, when they're taking the back roads back home, Makkachin trotting patiently at their side.

Viktor looks thoughtful, and he probably doesn't realize he's squeezing Yuuri's hand as he says, "Moscow was never really home." He slants a look over at Yuuri. "What about you — excited about Rostelecom?"

Yuuri glares at him. "It'll be nice to see Yurio," he says primly, because Viktor knows exactly how Yuuri feels about competitions and also is an asshole.

"So cruel, Yuuri," Viktor says, swinging their linked hands now.

Up ahead, Makkachin's caught wind of home, Yutopia's lights bright in the deep blue night, and he bolts for the onsen, leaving Yuuri and Viktor in his wake. There's the sense of happy bustle at the inn, still booked full of people, and still wide awake with people dashing into and out of the onsen, into and out of private and public meal rooms. It feels nothing like the dusty, quiet place Yuuri left behind for Detroit, and it makes something in his chest swell up to see it like this — fully alive.

"What's cruel?" Yuuri asks, tugging Viktor off the main path into a hidden walkway, shaded over from moonlight and streetlights by the massive stretch of a tree.

"Just for you to play with poor Yurio's emotions like this," Viktor sighs, all sad disapproval. "You know that feral kitty can't process his crush on you like a normal human being."

Yuuri's mouth twitches, and he shoves Viktor through the propped-open kitchen door. "Keep it up and I'm telling Yurio you said that."

"Well, if you do, just be sure to choreograph a sufficiently mournful program in memoriam for me: taken from the world too young, by a rabid cat," Viktor shoots back, and Yuuri bursts out giggling, "*Viktor*," which is when Yuuri's dad finds them and says, "Honestly where have you been! Dinner's ready! Come on, come on! It's sukiyaki!"

Tomorrow, Yuuri's alarm is set for 5 a.m., and it's going to be a long, terrible day, as will many days after it. There won't be time for this, pinning Viktor in a shadowy corner of the onsen hallway so Yuuri can kiss him, savoring, before they go in for a raucous family dinner, subject to Mari-nee-chan's conspiracy theories about Chris Giacometti and his mother and Viktor's recaps of their doramas and his father's epicurean critiques of the sukiyaki while Yuuri just focuses on stealing as much rice out of other people's bowls as possible. Tomorrow, it's going to get exhausting and difficult again, but —

"Let's go!" Viktor urges, dragging Yuuri along, his mouth still gleaming. "Let's go before your father eats all the negi!"

— but for right now, all Yuuri feels is happiness: uncomplicated, effortless.

Yuuri's known that figure skaters are crazy since he was a child, at his first regional skating competition and terrified, clinging literally to Minako-sensei's skirts and Mari-nee-chan's hand all the way up until they pushed him out onto the ice. Figure skaters, as a breed, are the same kind of people who become professional ballerinas: terrifying athletes who want to look ethereally beautiful while executing impossible physical feats.

Never is this clearer than at Russian-hosted events, which seem to attract a nexus of people that Yuuri doesn't know, doesn't like, or is actively scared of.

From the minute they land in Moscow, everything is immediately overwhelming.

Even though Viktor had planned their travel for the most awkward arrival times possible, they're still mobbed at Sheremetyevo's arrivals, hundreds of hysterical skating fanatics bearing signs and flowers and gifts. There is *so much crying* over Viktor. Everybody had joked about it before Beijing, but if any country hates Yuuri for stealing Viktor from the competitive circuit it is definitely Russia.

"Yuuri," Viktor says to him, *sotto voce*, "get ready to run on my mark."

Yuuri, who is dragging the largest hardshell rolling suitcase Samsonite produces, says, "Wait — what?"

Viktor just grabs him by the wrist and yells, "*Now!*"

Yuuri's pretty sure the reason they make it out of the airport and to pickup is that his suitcase kneecaps a lot of women who are already extremely angry with him, but other than screaming without dignity, there's not a lot he can do about the situation. They burst through the glass doors into the cold, and out of a row of taxis, modest sedans, charmingly boxy little hatchbacks and buses, Viktor makes a beeline to what must be the single most inappropriate vehicle for November in Moscow: a cherry red two-seat convertible, low to the ground, engine already purring.

"*Are you kidding me?*" Yuuri yells, when they get close enough that the man at the wheel gets out and tosses the keys at Viktor.

Viktor snatches them out of midair, chirping, "Спасибо!" and handing off his traveling bag and Yuuri's rolling case, shouting, "In the car, Yuuri!"

"Why is this your car? Why don't you have a car *with a roof?*" Yuuri shouts, feeling crazy. Feeling crazy that nobody else thinks this is crazy, because the man from the car is just mechanically jamming their luggage into the trunk and shutting it like all of this is *normal*: the fans spilling out of the double doors, having to run from any kind of crazed person at all at the airport, the *convertible in Russian winter*.

Yuuri jams himself inside the car like so much luggage, barely managing to pull the door shut before Viktor grins, flicks on a pair of sunglasses, and says:

"Let's roll."

Yuuri has just enough time to buckle his seatbelt and gasp, "You're the *worst*," before Viktor drops a lead foot on the gas and they're burning literal rubber, tires shrieking.

Against all odds, they arrive alive, uninjured, and Yuuri's never ejected himself from a car faster than he does in the underground parking of the hotel, his blood pressure so high he's seeing halos of color around all the physical objects in his field of vision. Viktor sighs, "*So dramatic*," which is outrageous considering the harrowing ordeal Yuuri has just survived, and as soon as Yuuri's internal organs rearrange themselves in their correct torso placement, he's going to give Viktor a piece of his mind.

Even safely out of the car, Yuuri's still trapped in a hotel full of Russian media, Russian figure skaters, that weird brother and sister skating pair from Italy, and Lee Seung-gil — who Yuuri is convinced is part robot. Worst of all, he can't find Yurio anywhere.

"He'll turn up," Viktor says, utterly unconcerned and ignoring back-to-back incoming calls that are lighting up his phone. Apparently when you abandon all the complex trappings of your life, your skating federation, and your legal and sponsorship obligations, people get extremely excited when you're sighted on Russian soil again. "You know he can't keep himself away from you."

"He just looked so sad at Skate Canada," Yuuri says, hanging up his costumes.

"He was at Skate Canada — everybody's sad at Skate Canada," Viktor dismisses.

Yuuri frowns. "JJ was happy at Skate Canada."

"I have no idea who that is," Viktor chirps, so careless it has to be calculated, and Yuuri can't help his reflexive smile at that. "I'm going to get coffee — want anything?"

"Six cakes," Yuuri tells him.

"Got it: small nonfat latte," Viktor says, drops a kiss on Yuuri's cheek, and bounces out the door.

They'd left Hasetzu at an inhuman hour of morning to make their flight, and Yuuri knows if he stays in the room, he'll just crawl under the covers and fall asleep. All the travel and time zones have a tendency to leave him disoriented for competition and throw off his rhythm, so he grabs the room key and his phone and goes to wander around until his brain accepts that it needs to be awake for another four hours.

The hotel is nice the way all mid-high-end hotels are nice: heavy carpet, beige walls, ambient lighting. Because this is Moscow, and Russians can't help themselves, the lobby is a little flashier than some of the other places Yuuri has stayed: effusive with marble and gold and an explosion of crystal everywhere. It's also still heaving with reporters and skaters, camped on dark maroon velvet settees. Yuuri tries calling Viktor's room, but there's no answer, which means he's either still searching for coffee or looking for opportunities to casually ask JJ who he is in front of as many people as possible.

In the end, just as Viktor predicted, Yurio finds Yuuri, not the other way around.

Yuuri's just standing innocently in an elevator — one that's not filled with weird brother-sister dynamics and cute Czech skaters — when Yurio stomps inside. His hair is longer, he's still got his hood pulled up and a ridiculous backpack that with a buckle across the chest, and evidently no one's told him that he's cute when he scowls yet.

"Why are you sneaking around?" he snarls, looking like if one of those chubby angels from church ceilings got really into the Sex Pistols, Yuuri thinks.

"Yurio! Long time no see!" Yuuri says, and thinks, *so cute*. He wonders if he could get away with giving Yurio a hug, or if Yurio would blow his eardrums out screaming. "Good luck to both of us at the Rostelecom, I guess."

"You'll suffer a miserable defeat here in Moscow," Yurio swears at him, and Yuuri doesn't bother to cover his smile, because he's pretty sure Yurio's bangs are hanging so aggressively over his face to hide a massive zit and everything about him is *adorable*. "I'm going to have Viktor stay in Russia."

"Viktor misses you a lot," Yuuri reports cheerfully. "What's your room number — we'll come visit you."

Yurio hisses, "Oh my *God*," and bolts from the elevator as soon as he's on his floor, shouting after himself, "*And don't follow me, Katsudon!*"

The depth and complexity of Yuuri's anxiety is a marvelous, awful thing.

Any resolution or affirmation can get immediately integrated and discarded, some new corner of dread opening up for exploration. He survived the Cup of China, but what happens if he doesn't make the Grand Prix Final? Does Viktor regret agreeing to coach Yuuri? And then the recrimination kicks in, and Yuuri feels disloyal, ungrateful for doubting Viktor, when Viktor's been so imperfectly perfect a fit, so funny and beautiful and savagely kind. When Viktor is the kind of person who brings Yuuri a nonfat latte and a single, perfect, marvelous Russian tea cookie, and ask, "Did you miss me?" with all evidence of earnestness when he'd been gone less than an hour. It's this kind of sweetness that is almost intolerable, overwhelming, and it triggers some Goldberg contraption that makes it impossible, absolutely impossible, not to kiss him.

"I saw Yurio," Yuuri says, pulling away. "His hair's longer."

"Oh?" Viktor says, only half-listening, trying to coax his way into another kiss.

"I think he's using it to hide a pimple," Yuuri says.

This time, Viktor is *much* more interested, "*Oh*," he purrs, and doesn't give Yuuri an opportunity ask what horrible thing he's planning to do before Yuuri's being thoroughly kissed again.

The horrible thing turns out to be making friends with a squad of starry-eyed Yuri's Angels who have camped out in the the hotel. The morning of the short program, Yuuri finds him telling a rapt audience of them adorable stories of an even tinier, somehow even angrier Yurio: falling on his face during practice, clipping up his hair with Mila Babicheva's butterfly barrettes, the one time Evgeni Plushenko had said, "nice skate," and how Yurio had *blushed*. "Also, all of you ladies should be nice to him, he's nursing a *skin blemish* and you know how fragile he is about his beauty," Viktor tells them. He closes out the session by taking a group selfie with all of them wearing proudly his honorary cat ear headband.

"When Yurio tries to kill you, I'm not going to help you," Yuuri tells him, trying desperately not to laugh and doing a terrible job of it.

At six-minute warmups for Yuuri's block, Yurio just skates around in furious loops — stopping to level a single, warning finger at Viktor every time he's near enough for eye contact.

A different version of Yuuri arrives for every competition.

Some days Yuuri is inexplicably confident; sometimes Yuuri is certain of failure. Most days, the Yuuri at public practice, at warm ups, is scared to think of anything more than the 30 seconds immediately ahead of him. But this new Yuuri, the one armed with the memory of Viktor's certainty, all of his promises and good intentions, wants to win, and it's as terrible and thrilling as the ride from the airport had been: too fast, too many sharp turns, too much possibility for disaster — but how incredible.

All around them, the entire stadium is chanting Viktor's name like a talisman, the way Yuuri used to when he couldn't sleep, and Yuuri looks at Viktor's ridiculous smile and listens to him laugh and thinks, *I want to win for him*.

Today, Yuuri's some entirely new object, unknown to himself, because he reaches over while the whole world is watching and jerks Viktor toward him by the tie, murmurs, "The performance has already begun, Viktor."

Viktor's close and breathing fast, and he says, "You're right."

"Don't worry," this Yuuri promises, breathy, "I'll show my love to all of Russia."

Whatever succubus showed up in Yuuri's body for the performance vanishes long before they call out his score — 109.97 — and any vestigial traces are gone, too, by the time Viktor gets down on one knee and decides to kiss Yuuri's skate. Yuuri's so happy and overwhelmed and embarrassed, and it all bubbles out of him when he yells, "*Davai!*" at Yurio, when Viktor pops up, cheering, "*Gambatte!*"

Because it's Yurio, he takes it pretty much the way he takes any act of overt affection: by scowling in profound horror, skating off to center ice with so much fury it can barely be contained in his tiny body, and murdering his short program.

Yuuri feels on the cusp of something, balanced at the peak of a roller coaster, so of course it's the NHK all over again, it's the GPF all over again when his phone rings and it's Mari-nee-chan, saying Makkachin might not make it.

Yuuri waits for the meltdown, but it doesn't come. He feels cold and composed, and nothing but tenderness, claspings Viktor into a hug at the airport, secreting a kiss in his hair, and sending him back to Hasetzu. He doesn't want to say, *don't be like me, don't regret it*, and Yuuri wonders if it's some newly discovered strength or the nerveless wear of a callus, but he doesn't feel panicked; he feels pensive. He feels like he did when he just landed in Detroit, terribly alone, all soft underbelly and nowhere safe to expose it, and he curls around in self-contained unhappiness.

He sleeps fitfully, and wakes up too early the next morning. He heads for the venue with the Russian contingent, which leaves him sitting next to Lilia Baranovsky in the SUV, which is terrifying. All day, Yurio seems determined to hover in mean little circles around Yuuri, on his absolute worst behavior toward absolutely everybody other than Yuuri, who he assiduously ignores. Yuuri recognizes it for what it is: the only kindness Yurio knows how to show; he also knows better than to say "thank you."

The public skate is fine, and since Viktor isn't there to boss him around, Yuuri listens to his advice for once and skips practicing his jumps. He listens to his music; he watches Yakov watch him with a flat, unreadable expression that probably (?) indicates disapproval, but is frankly unknowable. He wants to call Viktor; he doesn't call Viktor.

He stretches, he keeps warm, he watches Yurio skate for his life. He finds himself somehow, impossibly, standing at center ice, and it feels more alone than ever before in Yuuri's memory: the hurt of absence after seasons of plenty. How can a person do this? Arrive and send such shockwaves that Yuuri feels like he's been blown apart and put back together again, recombined? He's newly made from all of his old, fragile components. He misses Viktor the way people miss sunshine, but he doesn't *need* him any more than the old Yuuri did, the one who had never known summer anyway.

His music starts. Yuuri skates.

It's not a disaster like he fears; it doesn't soar like when Viktor is here. It's wonderful, sometimes, and a little disappointing, too. It is, more than he could have anticipated when he was confessing all those secrets into an email window, when he heard this music for the first time, very much a distillation of himself: imperfect, but maybe a little lovely, too.

Yuuri scrapes into the Grand Prix Final by the skin of his teeth.

He probably has some kind of post-competition stroke, having lost the ability to make sound judgments or process fear, and hugs Yakov Feltsman. According to Yurio he hugs *everyone*, which Yurio promises him was *embarrassing, disgraceful*, makes Yuuri the *dumbest figure skater of all time* — but he feeds Yuuri his grandfather's katsudon piroshki, anyway, and Yuuri can't feel the sting of any of Yurio's complaints when he's being fed illicit carbs.

His last night in Moscow is lonely. He misses two calls from Viktor, both while Yuuri had been trapped at the banquet, Yuri slapping every alcoholic drink out of his hands with a scandalized look on his face and a hiss of, "Are you *kidding me*?" By the time he's back in his room, it's too late to call home, so he just rereads Viktor's text saying Makkachin is on the mend, and scrolls back through all of their old conversations. The next morning he's four hours early for his flight and a wreck all the way back to Fukuoka, so tense there's a sharp twinge of nerve pain developing in his arm.

Yuuri feels himself going deeper and deeper inside his own head as the flight drags on, as the plane lands and as he's dragging himself through customs. By the time he hits the walkway toward the baggage claim, Yuuri feels like he's folded in on himself, a piece of paper crushed to such a tiny space it's impossible to go any further.

He hears Makkachin, first.

Yuuri freezes for a second, staring into his dark, happy eyes and looking at his paws on the glass until there's the blur of movement and Yuuri thinks, *oh, Viktor*, and he's running. Yuuri must look crazy and rude, shoving past all the other tired people on his flight, but all he can do is stare at Viktor through the glass of the walkway partition, how pale and drawn he looks. Yuuri feels like the skin stretched over the mouth of a drum, so thin and tight he'll snap, and he can't put words to it, the way he feels like a cup overflowing to throw himself into Viktor's chest, to press his face into his shoulder — drag in long, desperate breaths of him.

There's a big family dinner in one of the banquet rooms, closed to guests and overflowing with Katsukis and Katsuki-adjacents. There's an embarrassment of food and triplets crawling all over every person, flat surface and dog present. Yuuri's not alone for one second of the whole night: always pulled into conversation with Minako-sensei or Nishigori or Yu-chan, helping one of the triplets with her chopsticks or cuddling Makkachin in his lap like a child. And all night, Viktor is pressed up against him, the lean weight of his body at Yuuri's side, or a hand on his knee, an arm around his shoulders, sliding down to his waist; or fingers laced into Yuuri's, their linked hands in the well of Yuuri's lap, Viktor's free thumb stroking easy circles around Yuuri's ankle. He still feels so fragile — from Rostelecom, from the flight, maybe from realizing that he *can* do this alone, that he's so happy he doesn't have to — and it's one of those rare evenings Yuuri loves the noise, the possessive, tactile way his family closes in around him. He laughs a lot; he blushes a lot; he hides his face in Viktor's shoulder a lot, when Minako-sensei and Nishigori gang up to tease him together.

Yuuri is utterly safe here, entirely loved; he never wants this night to end, and he must be obvious about it, because even as his limbs get heavier and his head gets heavier, no one says, "Yuuri, go to bed." Viktor just dots lingering kisses into his hair, wraps a haori around him, and Yuuri thinks he must fall asleep in the middle of something Yu-chan's says, all he hears is the familiar shape of her words, indistinct and soft around the edges.

He wakes up in the quiet darkness of the banquet hall, Viktor's scarf folded under his head and coat draped over him. He's sore, from skating and travel and sleeping on the tatami mat floors, and he muffles all his complaining noises as he rolls to his hands and knees, pushes up

to his feet. The room has the still coldness of long, lonely hours, and all around him, the inn has the feeling of deep, still night.

He'd dreamed about the airport, the smell of Viktor's coat and the reassuring strength of his arms around Yuuri. Through the lens of memory, he'd said it better, been more articulate, but he'd asked the same question he had — nervous and probably too loud — in real life, "Will you take responsibility for me? Until I retire?" and even now, padding down these dark halls, Yuuri's not entirely sure he's awake, that this isn't a dream, too.

The hallways are dimly lit but deserted, and Yuuri can't remember the last time he'd walked through Yutopia without running into Makkachin or one of the cleaners, his mother or father, Mari-nee-chan, Viktor looking for Yuuri. It's the quiet of a house filled up as a home, every room sheltering, and Yuuri paces the corridor and feels the walls humming with sleep.

Up the creaking stairs, Yuuri stops short in the upstairs hall, fingertips on the knob of the door marked PRIVATE, and looks left, to the banquet room door two steps away.

Yuuri feels suspended in amber, moving slowly, like sorrow and hurt and disappointment can't touch him here, where everything's so gilded with starlight, and it makes him hot with possibility and foolishness.

The banquet room where Viktor's slept all these months has a lock, but Viktor never locks it, and the door slides easily open, giving. Yuuri feels curiously free or hesitation. The moon is huge and incandescent outside Viktor's window, and sleeping in a silvery shaft of light, Viktor has blond hair in his face, blankets pushed halfway down his chest, breathing loud through his nose. He's wonderfully real, and even though Yuuri's only standing a few feet away, he's towed under by a sudden wave of longing, like he can't bear to miss Viktor any longer.

He climbs on from the foot of the bed, crawls toward Viktor on hands and knees. Yuuri feels shy, the way probably everyone feels shy doing things like this, but something about tonight — something about Viktor — makes Yuuri do stupid, fearless things. This is like trying a quad flip at the end of his program, declaring his love at the JSF press conference, running into Viktor's arms in an airport and begging him to stay.

Yuuri doesn't say anything, make any noise, he just reaches for Viktor's hand where it's loose and open on top of the comforter. He presses his thumb into the veins of Viktor's wrist, milk blue under his pale, pale skin, wraps his palm around: Yuuri can feel his pulse, steady and sleeping. Viktor only looks untouchable. Yuuri runs his hand up the length of Viktor's arm, along the lean muscle and over the bone of his elbow, until he skims underneath the soft jersey fabric of Viktor's t-shirt.

Viktor wakes up slow, he always does, and Yuuri sees his lashes flutter, first, before his eyes slit open and he whispers, "Yuuri?"

Yuuri's smile is automatic. "Hi," he whispers.

"You okay?" Viktor asks, all the waking tension melting away again, his hand coming up to cup Yuuri's elbow, like touching him is instinctive.

"Yeah," Yuuri tells him, and it's unimaginably hard to wrap his mind around how *easy* it is to just lean in, to kiss the high angle of Viktor's cheekbone, to touch his mouth to the corner of Viktor's beautiful eye. "Sorry I woke you up."

Viktor lets out a noise like one of those big, lazy cats, and he loops his arms around Yuuri's waist, drags him down, until Yuuri lands heavy on top of him and their faces are close in the dark. "*Wow*, Yuuri is so forward today."

"I'm always pretty forward with you," Yuuri mumbles into Viktor's mouth, and so he can feel it when Viktor smiles and says:

"One of my favorite things about you."

Viktor uses weird organic toothpaste he buys in bulk whenever he's in the U.S. for Skate America, and he tastes like powdery mints, the clean sweetness of skin. Viktor kisses patiently, deep and searching, and Yuuri loves the way Viktor cups his face, loves how Viktor is only ever indulging sweetness, the endless, effortless capacity to give. Yuuri never feels greedy or needful here, curled up shivering and hungry in Viktor's arms — they're like the desert meeting the flood, two extremes in desperate need of the other.

Yuuri gets lost in it, until his lips are buzzing, and he forces himself away, to draw back. Viktor's mouth is red, his eyes still sleepy, and before he can say something sweetly unnecessary like, "Yuuri, it's fine, we can take our time," Yuuri grabs his wrist and whispers, "Come on — come with me."

Viktor hesitates, comes fully awake. Even if Yuuri isn't too shy to *do* this, but he's too shy to *say* it, so he hopes his expression is telling, that he looks as certain as he feels, that Viktor can read this in his body the way he's read all of Yuuri's other secrets.

"Are you sure?" Viktor asks, quietly hopeful; his hand twists to grip Yuuri's wrist.

"Yes, so come on," Yuuri whispers, because Makkachin, sprawled out on the other side of Viktor's bed, is starting to wake up. He pulls at Viktor's hand again.

This time, Viktor lets himself be levered out of his blankets, pads barefoot onto the floor and trails Yuuri out of the room. He laces their fingers together in the hallway, looks gratifyingly overwhelmed when Yuuri draws him behind the staff door, into the long hall where his room sits at the end. This makes Yuuri feel young and ridiculous, as young and ridiculous as he hasn't been in a long time, but he's never drawn anyone down the length of this corridor before, toward the scuffed door to his room.

Viktor's quiet as he steps inside, quiet when Yuuri shuts and locks his door, still quietly standing when Yuuri turns back around to him: sleep-wrinkled and uncertain and wanting. Viktor is nothing like what Yuuri had ever expected, but just exactly perfect, and standing there with his naked ankles and hair wildly out of order, he is irresistible: he draws Yuuri longingly toward him like the moon with the tide.

"Um — can I kiss you?" Yuuri asks, suddenly feeling as if he should ask permission for everything, anything; this feels brand new in a way he hasn't been in a long time.

Viktor says, "Always," sounding breathless, and Yuuri closes the space between them so he can clutch at the hem of Viktor's t-shirt for balance and tip his face up, to fit his mouth over Viktor's. He still tastes like toothpaste and skin, and Yuuri thinks so strange and wonderful it is that Viktor's kiss is *familiar*, that the weight of Viktor's hands — skimming down Yuuri's sides, his thumbs pressing hard into the hollows of Yuuri's hips — makes him shiver because he still loves it so, not because it's the first time.

Yuuri takes a step backward, drags Viktor by his t-shirt, and it takes them a stumble and a beat to find the edge of his bed, still neatly made. Because Yuuri's been *so* good, he forgives himself for dragging Viktor down on top of him: messy and greedy and rough. Viktor's heavier than he looks — all muscle and bad personality — and Yuuri gets a little lightheaded at how that feels, pressing him down head to toe as Viktor whispers, "Impatient," and trails a kiss from Yuuri's mouth to his jaw and down to his throat.

"I've had a crush on you since I was 12," Yuuri complains, and runs his hands up the tight plane of Viktor's belly and chest, the parabolic curves of his shoulder blades.

"Fine, you win," Viktor allows, and then he allows Yuuri to pull his shirt off.

Drunk Yuuri has, despite the best efforts of Sober Yuuri, kissed a lot of people. But Yuuri's never been wide awake for this part, without alcohol to help soften the way he feels so clumsy and embarrassed and so needy: to taste the skin over Viktor's collarbones, to trace the line of Viktor's spine, to slide his hands under the elastic of his sweatpants and scratch through the rough, dark blond hair at the base of his dick.

Viktor lets out a series of muffled cyrillic noises, and Yuuri can't help grinning, reflexive. He can feel Viktor's cock hot and getting harder against his hand, and it only feels right to close his fist around it and *squeeze*. Viktor's whole life is a case study on perfect control; breaking him wide open is going to be amazing.

Viktor gasps, "Yuuri — "

Yuuri loves the feel of Viktor in his hand, wonders what Viktor will feel like on his tongue, whether he'll fit down Yuuri's throat like he was made for it, or if Yuuri will choke and gasp and gag, too desperate for moderation. Viktor's been swearing nonstop, his voice rasping from Russian to French to English to Japanese, and he says, finally, "Yuuri, please," and makes Yuuri let go of his cock so he can peel Yuuri out of his clothes: the tattered hoodie, the t-shirt, the jeans still rolled up at the ankles. Viktor stops long enough to scrape his teeth over Yuuri's nipple — "*Ah!*" Yuuri wails — and then he asks, mouthing down the line of Yuuri's belly, "Is this okay?"

Yuuri wants to hit him, shake him until sex falls out, but he settles for reaching to pull at Viktor's sweatpants, trying to drag them down the the curve of his ass, gasping, "Yes, come on, hurry," and rolling his hips into the negative space between them. It's shameless; he'll be embarrassed later. Right now — he's too crazy with want to care.

Viktor asks, "Can I — " and Yuuri cuts him off with a fist in Viktor's beautiful hair, and jerks him up so they're eye to eye and Yuuri can growl:

"*Stop asking permission.*"

Viktor stares at him; his eyes are all pupil. "Yeah?" he breathes.

"Yes," Yuuri promises, and he says as Viktor presses closer, says into the hot tease of Viktor's mouth, "Yes to *everything*."

Yuuri's never had sex with anybody he loved; he's barely had sex with anybody he's cared about outside of that moment, and it's strange to see how it changes everything.

It doesn't erase how clumsy it can still be, learning the shape of someone else, all elbows and knees, tearing each other out of your clothes — but there's a lot more laughing. When Yuuri gets Viktor in the eye by accident, when Viktor whines pathetically until Yuuri sits up, when Yuuri cups Viktor's face in his hands and kisses him tenderly over the eyelid, feeling his lashes flutter.

It's still urgent, because Yuuri wants more than anything to know what it will feel like to have Viktor, to possess him entirely. It makes him a little grasping and slutty, whispering, "Viktor, please," watching the gleaming silver of Viktor's hair in the moonlight as he kisses his way down Yuuri's chest, the thin skin of his belly, sucks a bruise into the join where Yuuri's thigh meets his pelvis. It makes Yuuri gasp, makes him choke back a wail, and he has to clasp his palms over his mouth when Viktor closes a fist around the base of Yuuri's dick and sucks him in: hot and wet, pressing the tip of his tongue along the slit.

Viktor hums around him, and pulls off with a gasp, running an open-mouthed kiss down the length of Yuuri's dick, cups his free hand along the back of Yuuri's left knee and pins it to his chest.

"*Ah, Viktor!*" Yuuri says, pitchy and high and fragmentary — into the palm of his own hand — because he *loves* this, he falls apart for it, and before he can say anything warning Viktor's curling a knuckle into the soft skin behind Yuuri's balls and pressing the flat, hot muscle of his tongue over Yuuri's hole.

Yuuri has to turn his head into his pillow, still hears himself yelling, his whole body shivering. His spine bends into a permanent arch, wanting, and Yuuri hooks his right leg over Viktor's shoulder, dragging him closer. He can feel his lashes heavy and damp with tears, eyes hot when Viktor presses his thumb into the little gap of him, licks at the pink furl of skin there: getting him hot and wet and giving.

Viktor's a polyglot, with a polyglot's inventive tongue, and he works Yuuri over until Yuuri's heaving for breath, sobbing, the head of his dick dipping sticky wet across Yuuri's belly — taut and muscles twitching. Yuuri can feel the sharp sting of his nipples going tight, all the air punching out of his stomach. He wants to touch Viktor; he doesn't want to wake up his family; he wants to say, *now, now please*, and all that comes out are teary little noises, whining.

When Viktor pulls away, finally, when he comes up the length of Yuuri's trembling body until they're eye to eye again, his mouth is wet and Yuuri feels — swollen, tender, soaking. The front of Viktor's knee presses against his ass and Yuuri jolts, gasping, winds his arms around

Viktor's shoulders and claws into his hair. Yuuri feels like that static electricity display from every children's museum: every time Viktor touches him he buzzes, lighting sparking through him.

Viktor presses a kiss into Yuuri's cheek, his throat, scrapes his teeth over Yuuri's left nipple, and into his chest he says, "Yuuri — can you wait here a minute?"

Yuuri's too polite to say anything but, "Um, why?" but his arms are too rude to do anything but clasp at Viktor more tightly, jealous.

"I need to get some things — if you want to do those things," Viktor says, grinning up at him, eyes flashing from underneath his lashes.

"Oh," Yuuri says, drawn back from the breathless edge of earlier and glad of it. "Um."

He presses a hand to Viktor's shoulder, pushes and pushes until Viktor gets the message, rolls over onto his back and lies there politely in Yuuri's twin-sized bed, looking curious and interested. Viktor is always so curious and interested in Yuuri, more than anybody else has ever been, and Yuuri can feel Viktor's eyes tracking him as he climbs off the bed — God, his knees are weak, he almost falls, he has to clutch at the blankets for balance — and reaches over for his travel bag.

Hidden in with the muscle cream and Ace bandages, underneath the Neosporin and cooling spray, Yuuri has a little ANA travel zip-up. He snags it, shakes off the t-shirt and shorts it drags along, and scrambles back into bed, inelegant and unsexy and shivery, because it's cold away from the furnace of Viktor's touch.

Viktor closes his hands around Yuuri's waist as soon as he's within reach, just watches Yuuri settle across his hips — and sitting here like this, Yuuri's balls and his cock press against Viktor's, the scratch of wiry blond hair, and it a little awkward and wonderfully intimate and there's still a spark there, too, patiently waiting — before he says, "Yuuri, I never would have guessed."

It is completely ridiculous to blush about this right now, so course Yuuri blushes, fumbling supplies left and right as he unzips the pouch: lube and condoms scattering across the bed and Viktor's chest. "Don't be a jerk," he mutters, and when he reaches for the lube, Viktor grabs his hand, presses a surprisingly chaste kiss to his curled fingers.

"And here I thought I'd be your first," Viktor sighs.

Yuuri's heart sinks, something in his stomach turns. "I-is it okay?" he asks, because he'd never thought — if he'd known — if Viktor —

Viktor must see it, so obvious on Yuuri's face, because he pulls Yuuri down by his hand, until their noses are touching and Yuuri can't look away: Viktor's blue eyes are all pupil, swallowing dark, all of his unfathomable focus settled on Yuuri. Viktor cups Yuuri's cheeks, touches their foreheads to one another, and this close, he knows Viktor by proximity and not sight, by the smell of his skin and sweat, the good strength of him in between Yuuri's trembling thighs.

"Yuuri," Viktor whispers, so close Yuuri can feel Viktor's mouth on his skin, shaping the words, "there is nothing in the world that could make me not want you."

Yuuri didn't know he was worried, but he must have been, because relief gusts through him like a gale force wind. The tension that had been binding his spine vanishes, and he exhales in a rush, his whole body going soft. Yuuri leans in for a kiss, says, "Don't care," when Viktor whispers, "Ah — Yuuri, wait," and he pours out all of his relief and embarrassment and love there, breathes it into his mouth.

There's an alchemical reaction here, transforming yearning into hunger. Partway through the kiss, Yuuri feels his dick throbbing, the friction between them going from hot to volcanic. Viktor's hands scrape down Yuuri's side, claw into the muscle and curve of his ass, and Yuuri moans and moans and rides the burn of it, rubbing their cocks together and fisting his hands in his sheets, listening to their panting and the creak of the bed, beneath them.

It's Viktor who breaks away, who shoves Yuuri off of him finally, gasping, "*Christ*," like he's already on the edge, groping around the disaster of bed linens looking for the bottle of slick. Yuuri loves that, the way Viktor sounds wrecked and looks wrecked, like someone's knocked the wind out of him, and he rolls lazily onto his belly, tucks a pillow under his hips, just watches Viktor fumble with the lube until he manages the cap — eyes fixed on the line of Yuuri's back, gilded in moonlight.

"Is this how you want me?" Yuuri asks, pink-cheeked and a little shy again.

"I want you to please stop torturing me," Viktor asks him, with every appearance of earnestness, and before Yuuri can protest that he's not *doing* anything, Viktor kisses him and there're cold, slippery fingertips tracing down his body.

Yuuri hums, all feline satisfaction, when he finally feels the press of Viktor's fingertips at his opening: careful and patient, just running the pad of his middle finger over the soft bud of muscle, stroking over Yuuri like he'd done with his tongue. It feels good — it feels sweet. It feels like Viktor loves him. Yuuri soaks in it for a while, that soft-edged feeling, before he cants his hips backward, inviting, and Viktor presses a slick finger inside — just enough it leaves Yuuri wanting more.

Viktor drops a kiss into Yuuri's hair, murmuring, "Okay?" and Yuuri hides his face in his folded arms and nods, whispers, "Yeah — more."

Viktor fucks him slowly, one finger turning into two, and when he pours another cold line of slick down the crack of Yuuri's ass, he soothes Yuuri's complaints with a sucking kiss to his shoulder and the sharp sting and stretch of a third finger. Yuuri's all the way hard again, his whole body flushed and desperate; he can feel the hot press of Viktor's cock against his ass, and it makes Yuuri roll his hips back, hopeful, press down as far as he can to the base of Viktor's long fingers, to let a gasp break out of his throat at the way it hurts, but in exactly the right way.

Yuuri reaches around, clutches at the gorgeous turn of Viktor's hip and drags his nails down until he can touch the hot, soft skin of his dick, drag his thumb up to feel the wetness at the tip and listen to Viktor's heartfelt groan of, "*Yuuri*."

"Inside," Yuuri says, breathy. "I'm ready, now, come inside."

Viktor kisses his shoulder, the back of Yuuri's neck, before he draws his fingers away, careful. Yuuri twists to watch the tight muscles of Viktor's belly as he bends over to roll on a condom, pinch the tip, his hair wild and a sheen of sweat on his body — it makes every muscle in Yuuri's body clutch, makes him feel even emptier and looser and slicker, like he won't be complete until Viktor's filling him up.

Viktor telegraphs himself with a hand on Yuuri's hip, pulls until Yuuri's lying on his side, one thigh flung over Viktor's, and Yuuri whispers, "Please, please," even though he feels the blunt press of Viktor's cockhead against him, pushing into him.

"You okay?" Viktor asks in a whisper, barely inside, one arm looped under Yuuri's waist and pressed low on his belly for balance, and Yuuri just nods, open-mouthed, says, "Don't stop — don't stop."

Viktor's hot and satisfyingly thick, a harder stretch than his three fingers. Yuuri lets out a sharp little gasp when Viktor wraps his hand around Yuuri's cock, strokes him lazily in time as Viktor rocks into him, deeper and deeper. With other people, this part has always been a little awkward, before they figure out their rhythm. But Viktor's not a nice stranger, he's Yuuri's best friend, he's someone Yuuri loves: Yuuri can turn his face into Viktor's shoulder and wind his arm around Viktor's back to draw him closer, pull him deeper, help Yuuri not to feel so alone. He makes a punched-out gasp when Viktor scrapes over his prostate, that sizzling hot burn so good it makes Yuuri shiver inside out, and he hears Viktor say, "Gorgeous," before he does it again and again, harder and harder, until Yuuri can feel the hot press of Viktor's balls thigh against his ass — Viktor so deep and tight in him Yuuri should be able to taste him in the back of the throat.

Yuuri is babbling now, hot, hiccuping little whispers that are barely words, one hand gripping the back of Viktor's thigh, the other clawing at the window sill, a grasp for balance. It's good, it's *so* good: lazy, radiant heat spreading from between his legs and flushing up through his chest, making Yuuri's head spin. He tries to meet Viktor at every thrust, wants him deeper and harder and faster — a little rougher. Viktor keeps mouthing at his neck and murmuring, "Yuuri — *Yuuri*," like he's scared Yuuri will hurt himself, even though his own body is moving more sharply, a little greedier.

It's been a while, and Yuuri is starting to ache, soreness a sharp tang on the back of every lapping rush of pleasure, and maybe he's been skating too long, his whole body only studied in mixed signals, but it makes him crazier. He whispers, "Viktor, I need — can we — " and Viktor scrapes his teeth over the back of Yuuri's neck and says, "Hold on," before he drags them up, drags himself up onto his knees and Yuuri into his lap.

Gravity helps, gives Yuuri that last little *drag* that gives him that final, wonderful stretch, tucks the head of Viktor's cock just there, just right, and he can feel himself dripping — so close he's shaking — lets his head fall backward onto Viktor's shoulder, his body tense like a bow. He whispers, "Like this, I wanna come like this," and Viktor's answer is to brace his forehead against the curve of Yuuri's neck, to clasp his forearm low across Yuuri's belly, to whisper, "Hold on tight."

Yuuri doesn't know what pushes him over, in the end: Viktor's fist whipping over his cock, the sound of Viktor gasping, "I want to feel you, come on, Yuuri, let me feel you," or the way Viktor holds Yuuri's hips in place — makes him take it, the savage way Viktor uses his body in that last stretch. Yuuri thinks, *ah, I'm going to hurt tomorrow*, and he dissolves, going mute as the orgasm shakes through him, shooting on his belly and dripping down Viktor's fingers.

Viktor sounds stricken, sounds suffering, and he says, "Yuuri, can I — ? Is it okay — ?" and Yuuri says through his own shivers, "Yeah, yeah, do it," and pushes away, balances himself on two shaky hands leaning forward, until his elbows give out and he can press his face into the pillows. Yuuri knows what he must look like this way: the vulnerable arch of his back, Viktor's cock splitting his ass, hole pink and slick and swollen, and he looks over his shoulder — his face flushed, his mouth bitten red, and his eyes wet and gleaming — and he says, "Come on, I want to feel you, too."

In the morning, Yuuri will have faint, purpling bruises on his hips, from where Viktor digs his finger into the soft skin there to hold him steady. He'll have scratches down his sides, something that feels like a pulled muscle on his back, a bite on his shoulder that's already turning dull brown like a particularly brutal fall. He'll feel like someone's gutted him, like he's been cored, a tenderness that feels *deep*, intimate, that he can feel when he presses his hand low on his belly, as if Viktor's still there. All day, whenever Yuuri has a still moment, he can't help but to think of how Viktor had rolled him onto his back, after he'd pulled out, how he'd pushes Yuuri's knees up and kissed him, wet and sweetly apologetic, into the fucked out ruin of his hole, while Yuuri had cried and shivered — too used up to come again and too greedy to tell him to stop.

That night, Viktor ties off the condom and hides it underneath a layer of tissues in Yuuri's trashcan — which are in turn hiding a bunch of combinini onigiri wrappers.

"I'm too happy to get mad at you about those right now," Viktor mutters, crawling back into bed and reaching for a t-shirt for some half-assed clean up.

"I needed to carb up for that," Yuuri says, and doesn't move a muscle, lies there useless and completely spoiled, makes Viktor do all the heavy lifting — get them finally under the covers. "Oh — set the cell phone alarm."

Viktor snorts into Yuuri's shoulder. "You can go train on your own. I have old man hips."

"I'm not going anywhere or doing anything tomorrow," Yuuri mumbles, through a yawn, "but you have to go back to your own room before everybody else wakes up tomorrow."

Viktor's quiet for a long time. Then he says, "First, you despoil me in a twin sized bed. Now this. Will the indignity never end."

Yuuri feels that thrumming energy, that same thing he felt the first night Viktor had come here. He curls up on his side, so that he can press his face into the beautiful line of Viktor's throat, so that Viktor can pull the covers up over both of them, all of his inarticulate complaining just a reassuring hum in Yuuri's ear. Yuuri's happy. He's so happy he doesn't know what to do with himself, so he squeezes his eyes shut and exhales it, lets it out — lets it escape into the darkness, too big to be contained in his body.

It's not until the *next* night that Yuuri remembers jamming all his carefully hoarded, limited edition, mint condition Viktor Nikiforov posters in between his mattress and his box spring and has a meltdown. They're almost all ruined: wrinkled and crinkled from relentless friction; there's a giant crease down Viktor's face in one of them. Yuuri's inconsolable; he doesn't care that Viktor's right there, trying desperately not to laugh.

"I'll get you new ones," Viktor offers.

"It's not the same," Yuuri cries, scrubbing at his cheek with the cuff of his shirt.

Viktor, that pervert, crowds into him, says, "Let me make it up to you," and Yuuri only manages two increasingly wavering "no, thank you"s before he's got his pants around his ankles and Viktor's got his face buried between his ass cheeks.

Later, husky, Yuuri says, "I'm still mad," but it's not all that convincing when he says it on his knees, right before he dips his head to suck Viktor's cock back down his throat.

Yuuri had landed back in Hasetu after the Rostelecom on November 23, and they fly out for Barcelona and the Grand Prix Finale in less than three weeks — there's no time for a honeymoon period, no time to sleep in late or kiss Viktor awake. The day after the day after, they're back to 5 a.m. rink times, though now, at least, Viktor comes to wake him up at 4:30 with a lingering kiss, by brushing Yuuri's bangs out of his face and murmuring, "Come on, sweetheart, time to get up." On his 24th birthday, he sleeps in until 6 — pure luxury.

This period of training is critical, and Yuuri feels his usual anxiety, but there's also the nagging questions of what happens after, where do they go from here? He runs through his choreography and worries about where they will live. Will Japan give Viktor a visa? The JSF hates Viktor almost as much as the Figure Skating Federation of Russia hates Viktor so it's unlikely they'll help. Yuuri does his conditioning and frets about what Chris had said, about keeping Viktor away from competition when he's still at his peak of performance. Will Viktor hate him for it, eventually? Or worse, will Viktor hate himself? Yuuri wipes out a lot doing jumps, feels himself tender and sore all over for lots of different reasons now, and looks into Viktor's face as he says, "You okay?" and thinks, *oh God, what am I going to do?*

"I can't believe this is what you're thinking about right now," Nishigori mutters, folding Yuuri into and out of all sorts of painful and strange and sometimes wonderful stretches.

Viktor had offered and been sent away on account that the last time he'd 'helped' they'd been caught desecrating the locker rooms, and were on official notice by order of Yu-chan, who was being surprisingly prissy about this for a girl who'd brutally deflowered Nishigori on their second date.

Yuuri stares glumly at the ceiling tiles of the locker bench room. "What else would I be thinking about?" he asks.

Nishigori's face appears overhead, scowling. "*The Grand Prix Final.*"

"This has to do with the Grand Prix Final," Yuuri says feebly.

Nishigori rolls his eyes and presses Yuuri forward, palms flat and nose touching the exercise mat, and Yuuri feels like some imaginary string running from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet pulls satisfyingly taut.

"Viktor is an adult, which means he's perfectly capable of making his own decisions," Nishigori lectures. He sounds so much like a real father in this moment Yuuri suffers a flash of terrifying cognitive dissonance. "And from what I can tell, he's decided you're stuck with him."

Yuuri covers his face with his hands.

"*And also*," Nishigori goes on, relentless, "Viktor has stupid money and he only does stupid things with it."

Peeking between his fingers, Yuuri says, "That's not fair."

"He has \$7,000 Porsche sunglasses, he's a fucking idiot," Nishigori retorts. "I'm sure he can buy his way into Japanese citizenship."

Yuuri glares at him. "If I ever said something like that about Yu-chan you'd be furious."

"Yuuko doesn't own a Fendi shoebox she overnighted to Japan because she had a crush on a boy," Nishigori tells him, unflappable, and slaps Yuuri on the ass. "Turn over, I gotta do your other side."

Every person Yuuri knows is the worst person.

Two weeks is too little time to make dramatic changes, so they obsess over the minute ones instead. Yuuri's short and free programs are already at the upper edge of technical difficulty, the challenge for him is in perfect execution in a performance environment. So he suffers through strength training and interval drills, speed skating up and down the rink to do a triple at each end. When he's at peak performance, he can do 15 jumps in just over a minute, and when he's lying on the ice afterward, gasping for air, he can feel something like dizzy bliss in his bones.

In practice, when it's 6:13 a.m. and the only person watching is Viktor, with no crowd and no judges, safe in the quiet of Ice Castle Hasetu, Yuuri can skate flawlessly: his mind is clear. It's everything else that starts to erode his scores: the traveling, the hotel, the registration, the competitors, the knowledge that thousands of people are watching him — and now, that thousands of people are watching him to see if he was worth it, worth losing Viktor Nikiforov.

This worry won't leave him, doesn't feel like the nervy, anxious chatter of self-doubt that characterizes his other bursts of professional and personal instability. Yuuri doesn't enjoy moments of anodyne clarity, a pause where some more confident version of himself sweeps in to say things Yuuri would be mortified to admit under his own, ordinary power. This isn't his worry he's not qualified to compete on an international level, that he'll never have the

fortitude to push through another season, that he can't nail this landing, remember this step sequence — will collapse in the face of a crowd. This is something else that runs deeper and more nagging, it's the same quietly confident stranger's voice that appears sometimes in Yuuri's head, that says that Viktor must miss competition, that he hadn't retired after consideration and an appropriately brilliant sendoff. He'd come evidently on a whim, and if Yuuri can believe that Viktor doesn't want to stop coaching him, he can believe, too, that Viktor might not be ready to stop skating. And the trouble is that Yuuri's selfish childhood crush grew and flourished and deepened into a love that's left him wide open, vulnerable; the Yuuri that loves Viktor wants him to be happy — it's why he can't get this fear to go away.

Barcelona in winter feels like a cold mirror of summer: streaming sunshine and crystal clear blue skies, with a briskness that blusters in off the water's edge. They land the night before the opening ceremony, two before the first senior singles event, and Yuuri's glad for it. He hates going backward in time, traveling west is always so much worse than heading forward. He lies down on the bed once they get to their hotel, just to get his bearings, and wakes up hours later when the city's already dark, a half-dozen calls and 20 texts from Phichit lighting up his phone.

Yuuri puts on his glasses, squints at the sunbeam of his phone screen, at the pictures of Yurio and JJ and Phichit and Chris and Viktor at the pool and puts it away. He'll never be rational about last year, about how it all ended; the best he can do is not to think about it — not to feel sick with embarrassment or a sudden pang of loss.

He presses his face back into the warm indent of the pillow, turns to stare into the dusk of the room, empty, and thinks that he's been so many places and never seen them. That time in Beijing, when Viktor had dragged him across the city, it was the most he'd ever seen of the capital: it's sprawling highways and looming buildings, the occasional cluster of old *hutong* streets. Yuuri lived in Michigan for years, and mostly he saw the Ann Arbor campus and the Detroit Skating Club and the same three shopping centers and strip malls; it's the same for his competitions: always haunting the training facilities and the hotel gym, hiding in his room until someone drags him to the banquet and the bar — until someone takes him home.

He turns toward the window, at where the whole city is lit up beneath, Sagrada Familia and its eternal attendant cranes like a cluster of fireflies down below.

I want to see Barcelona, Yuuri thinks, something sweetly aching in his chest. *I want to see it with Viktor.*

"I take it back," Yuuri says out loud, five minutes later, when Viktor and Chris burst into the room — dripping, wrapped in drenched hotel towels, almost naked, *freezing* — and climb their drunk asses on top of him in the bed.

Later — after Nils had collected Chris out of their room, after Viktor had been banished into the shower — Yuuri feels reckless, hot and distracted, something bubbling up underneath the skin.

He knows what this is, probably, but it doesn't change how he feels about it; right now, Yuuri wants reassurance, he wants that rough honesty, the surety of being wanted. He skims off his

t-shirt, wriggles out of his sweatpants, shoves all the covers away and peels down his briefs, kicking them off his ankle when he hears the water in the bathroom go off. He doesn't want to have confidence, he wants to give himself over to Viktor's hands, drag him — still flushed from the hot shower — into their bed, to be the harbor and the anchor. Yuuri's allowed, after all, to be nothing but himself with Viktor: so he's selfish, he's spoiled, he says, "Please, I need it, I need you."

Yuuri ends up arranged on his side, staring out their window, Viktor rubbing his thumb in cruel little circles under the head of his dick, Yuuri's thighs slicked and Viktor fucking in between them, whispering, "Ah — tighten up for me, sweetheart," like he doesn't know what that does to Yuuri's heart rate, like that isn't going to kill him before the competitions can even begin.

"I want to take you on vacation, after the season ends," Viktor says, close to Yuuri's ear, panting and unhurried — every roll of his hips pressing the slick head of his cock against the base of Yuuri's balls, pulled up tight. It's such a good tease it's infuriating. "Somewhere we can be as loud as we want."

Yuuri doesn't bother to bite back the high, needy little gasp that gusts out of him, rubs his ass back as obligingly as he can into the hard cradle of Viktor's hips. "W-we can be loud right now," he manages.

"I'm insulted if you think this is the best I can do," Viktor says, and smooths his free hand up to thumb over Yuuri's nipples.

Yuuri makes a mess of both of them, and makes Viktor lie back — all flushed red — sucks him off as sloppy as possible, spit soaked and still slick from lube, precum drooling down to Yuuri's fist, tight at the base of his dick. Yuuri's jaw hurts, that good ache, and every time he looks up through his lashes, to Viktor's face, he looks as desperate and unhinged and in love as Yuuri always feels.

When Viktor's close, he doesn't lapse into Russian or swear; his muscles tense, he grabs Yuuri's hair — it's always a sharp pull, and Yuuri never knew he would love it how he loves it — and he gasps, "*Yuuri*," like a warning.

Yuuri pins him down by the hips, sucks him through it, takes Viktor as deep as he can, licks him clean — tender and careful, watching Viktor's thighs twitch, rubbing his belly in a soothing, slow circle.

"You okay?" Yuuri asks, mostly earnestly, but also because Viktor has that sort of glazed look that always makes Yuuri feel like he's just landed some impossible jump, and he is secretly, horribly, unrepentantly competitive.

Viktor grabs him by the wrist and drags him up, until Viktor can cup Yuuri's face in both hands, looking wondering and wonderful, and say, "You're a menace," with something exactly like affection in his voice, before kissing him — warm and wet and welcoming.

How could Yuuri make someone like this happy, he thinks, dizzy with it. *How can I make someone like this unhappy?* Yuuri should do something, should say something; he'll do it

tomorrow. He'll tell Viktor soon. He closes his hand around Viktor's wrist instead, to feel the rhythm of Viktor's heartbeat, to hold himself steady and press more deeply into the kiss. *Let me have this for now*, Yuuri tells himself.

Public practice the next day is a complete zoo.

Yuuri spends the time in between working on his jumps marveling at the way Viktor and the press have a symbiotic and completely terrifying relationship: reporters and cameras following Viktor around like an electron cloud. And then of course there was Yurio, who was practicing — pointedly — at the opposite end of the rink, which was probably on purpose considering Yurio's *I HATE YOU* text from the middle of the night.

("Oh," Yuuri had said, frowning at his phone screen. They were both lying in bed, a little off-kilter from time zones, half-heartedly trying to sleep; Viktor was watching Russian dash cam videos, Yuuri was checking Instagram so he could pretend he wasn't watching Russian dash cam videos over Viktor's shoulder. "Chris is...out dancing with Yurio.")

"Ah, the folly of youth," Viktor had said, so casual it might have been convincing if he hadn't already been dialing Yurio's number, which rang and rang unanswered.

"Here," Yuuri had said kindly, and handed Viktor his phone, already dialing Nils.)

Yuuri feels not unfocused, but calm. The desperation that drives him to long hours — long past productive hours — isn't here today, hasn't followed him to Spain, and an hour before they get cleared off the rink for the first round of junior competitions, he looks around the rink and thinks, for the first time ever, that it's fine if he stops here.

"Yuri, what do you want to do now? Viktor asks, as everybody but Yurio starts wandering off of the ice. He sounds studious and serious, like someone else and someone else's coach entirely. "I recommend a good night's rest to prep for the short program tomorrow."

"Don't be such a model coach *now*," Yuuri says, snapping on his skate guards. "This is my first time in Barcelona — so take me sightseeing."

The way Viktor raises his eyebrows sets off a flutter under Yuuri's breastbone, something childishly pleased, something ridiculous. This must be what teenagers feel like on first dates, holding hands, all discovery and shy happiness; Yuuri spent most of his teenaged years falling on his ass in various rinks — either alone, or getting yelled at by old Japanese guys and then middle-aged Italian ones.

Now, Yuuri gets yelled at by Viktor, who doesn't actually yell at all, and definitely not right now. Right now, Viktor just smiles, and says, "All right then, leave it to me."

Barcelona is gorgeous, expansive, with the huge avenues of Paris and an entirely Catalan charm. They go to Sagrada Familia, and Yuuri takes a hundred pictures with his iPhone trying to capture the particular fall of light, the shapes of the church, its marvelously shifting facade — none of them communicate the reality of it, but when he looks at the picture of him and Viktor crushed together, the spires rising up in the background, it's perfect anyway. Just

around the corner, Viktor shuffles them into a dark little restaurant with a jamon set up in the window, the walls plastered in little log rounds. They try the seafood paella — it's very nice, but Yuuri still thinks the seafood in Hasetu is better — and Viktor drinks an entire glass boot of beer, which Yuuri blames for the exuberance of his commitment to an afternoon shopping spree.

The long stretch of Passeig de Gràcia between Plaça de Catalunya and Diagonal is one minimalist luxury store after another. Yuuri's walked past these places before, looked at their semi-empty shelves and the airy displays of a single handbag, a single shapeless coat, a single shoe — less must be more. Yuuri's always known, instinctively, he shouldn't go in. Viktor wears \$7,000 sunglasses, so of course he goes in.

Viktor starts at Stella McCartney and progresses to Stuart Weitzman. They go across the street to check out the line for Casa Milà, and decide it's too long to wait; Viktor buys a €200 scarf at the gift shop for Yuuri's mother instead. They stop in Cartier because Viktor needs new cufflinks, and as he's picking through his options, one of the store attendants gives Yuuri a look of undisguised longing that is one part physical attraction, nine parts, 'I wish I, too, had a Russian sugar daddy.' Yuuri gives him a look that says, 'Are you serious do I look like I wear cufflinks? All I've bought today is a coffee.' Viktor claims he has some kind of sponsorship obligation to go into Hermès, where he buys two different belts in exactly the same color before they end up in the Gucci store for an hour because Viktor wants to find shoes to match his new belts.

With anyone else, Yuuri would hate this: wandering into high-end store after high-end store, sitting with all of Viktor's rapidly accumulating bags, feeling out of place and attracting all kinds of curious looks. These are all of Yuuri's worst nightmares, combined into one and mixed up in a language he doesn't speak.

But — it's fun with Viktor. It feels like Yuuri's getting away with something, trailing Viktor's cashmere coattails into Ermenegildo Zegna and being offered champagne and espresso sitting tucked among Viktor's prized possessions. Viktor is beautiful and showy and is physically incapable of not peacocking, and Yuuri doesn't blame them for staring — when Yuuri is with Viktor, they stare at Yuuri, too, confused by Viktor's strange shadow. But those gazes are speculative, interested, and it's instinctive to preen a little.

Viktor tries to buy him a diamond tennis bracelet, three aggressively gaudy watches, underwear ("Viktor, *no*.") and a new suit. They get coffee, late in the afternoon, they lose one of their shopping bags, they get quiet as dark blue melts into the sky overhead, and down past Casa Batlló with its underwater lines and Plaça de Catalunya, lit up with votive candles and flowers, a rainbow of chalk drawings, the fountains bubbling away slowly. There's a couple, freezing, getting wedding photographs taken against the statues, tossing on coats and scarves as the the lighting gets changed, clutching at one another for warmth. The groom keeps his bride's hands tucked into his own pockets, rubs their noses together, and it's only a glimpse as they pass — Viktor doesn't even notice — but Yuuri feels something sharp and sharply changed in himself.

When he was a little boy, Yuuri had liked fairytales as much as any other child. The monsters were always scary, and the Black Forest and everything inside of it would give him

nightmares. But even very young, he had loved the happy endings, when his mother would poke a finger into his dimple and say, "And they got married, and lived happily ever after." Yuuri didn't know it then, wouldn't know it for many, many years, but more than the prince, more than the great sweeping romance, Yuuri wants *certainty*. He wants to know that at the end of the story, after monsters and the forest and long after a kiss, it will still be happily ever after, that it's something he can depend on.

Viktor buys four BARCELONA t-shirts, a mug, some mulled wine — the whole time, Yuuri's scanning the streetsides. They've crossed down to Las Ramblas, its wide walkways heaving with stalls selling Christmas ornaments and presents, churros and hot chocolate, a hundred thousand pieces of costume jewelry: sterling silver earrings and necklaces. It's not what Yuuri wants though — not exactly — not until he spots the store and its window display: beautiful, classic, timeless.

He ignores the patient, silent question that Viktor isn't asking, gets the shop assistant to show and sell him the rings based mostly on a combination of English, semaphore and bowing too much, which he knows makes Westerners uncomfortable. He tells himself it's a lucky charm for the competition, a 'thank you' gift to Viktor, that it doesn't have to mean anything more. But in truth, there's a reason Yuuri's too shy to look Viktor in the eyes as he grabs the rings and Viktor — drags them out of the store.

Viktor must know, too, because in the shock of cold outside, he says, "Here, I know where we should go," all softness, and leads the way into Barri Gòtic, until they're standing in the shadow of the Barcelona Cathedral. They duck past the carolers, the last lingering tourists, climb up to the closed gates and the warm yellow lights. Yuuri's traveled through fear and into focused need: he's more scared of not doing this than of how embarrassing this will be. This must be how people make wrenching decisions, how you survive a plane crash, how you make it through the Black Forest to your happily ever after.

For Yuuri, it's just taking advantage of Viktor's docile quiet, taking his hand.

It's funny, he's surprised he's managing this at all, peeling away Viktor's glove and putting on the ring, gleaming. It's a little tight on Viktor's long fingers; it makes Yuuri's chest hurt to stare at it.

"Thank you, for everything," he hears himself say. "I — I couldn't think of something better — but, um, I'll try my best tomorrow, so tell me something for good luck."

Viktor's answer is as soft as his expression, and he takes Yuuri's hand, palms the other ring. He says, "Of course — " Viktor's hands are warm, and the ring is cool, hooking onto Yuuri's fingertip, the metal sliding along his skin; Yuuri can't look away " — I'll say: tomorrow, skate like you do just for me, because you love it."

It's more than just a ring. Yuuri thinks how all his life he never thought of what a remarkable thing it is, to say *yes* to the entirety of a person, to pledge with only your best intentions and accumulated hope, the recklessness of lust and the patient wisdom of love, that you'll be theirs forever. It means more than any of its component parts, is bigger than the whole of everything; the universe is infinite in both directions — the outer edges of space and the inner limits between atoms — and how terrifying and wonderful is it to know that people do this

every day. Make these promises that are impossible to keep, and barely possible to know, that people hurtle themselves toward this with desperate hope.

Yuuri doesn't care whose watching, where they are — these things are sealed with a kiss. He looks up, into Viktor's beautiful face, at his wonderful eyes, and Yuuri goes to his tiptoes, fists a hand in the lapel of Viktor's coat.

Viktor tastes like chocolate and red wine, he tastes familiar, someplace Yuuri knows, somewhere Yuuri can always find.

They make out until Yuuri gets paranoid a child will see them, at which point it becomes clear that *several* children have already seen them, as have the singers, numerous tourists, a couple of cops and a woman schilling a wand that makes giant bubbles.

"Oh, no," Yuuri moans, and starts dragging Viktor away from the scene of their crimes.

"Do you think anyone recognized us?" Viktor asks, not out of concern, but hope. "Do you think they took a picture? It would be rude not to tag us, right?"

Yuuri says, "Give me back the ring," and Viktor jams his right hand into his pocket, looking finally scandalized, and they bicker — shivery with happiness, touching too much, arms linked — all the way to the restaurant near the hotel where they're meeting Phichit and Chris for dinner.

It turns into meeting Phichit, Chris, Yurio, Otabek, Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-chan for dinner, which naturally turns into complete, revelatory chaos because he should have always known that just because he couldn't *remember* the debacle of last year's Grand Prix Final banquet doesn't mean that it didn't *happen*.

Champagne is my enemy, Yuuri thinks, feeling his whole body go cold in horror.

"I — *what?*" he squeaks.

"It was disgusting as hell," Yurio snarls. "You dragged me into a fucking dance off."

Yuuri can't feel his arms or legs. "D-dance off. With Yurio."

"I did mine on the pole," Chris volunteers, smiling beatifically because he's a *jerk*, he's the *worst*, Yuuri's absolutely telling Nils about the place with the thing. "Half naked."

Yuuri feels like his head is caving in. For once, he makes an active attempt to access his memories of last year, but after the kiss and cry, the sobbing jag in the bathroom and Yurio kicking in the door, mostly Yuuri remembers Celestino and the oppressive elegance of the banquet hall — the vague suggestion of champagne and nothing else. There's a black spot that starts vaguely around the fourth flute and goes on until the next morning and oh my God, Yuuri realizes, he's turned into his father. He doesn't know if it's better to be a slutty drunk or publicly embarrassing drunk — thankfully it looks like he doesn't have to choose, because Viktor says, "Oh, I still have videos from last year," and they make it clear Yuuri is a slutty

publicly embarrassing drunk. Even better, Chris *also* has video, and Yuuri almost explodes in mortification trying to destroy everybody's smartphones at once.

And when it rains, it pours, so of course in the midst of this complete debacle, Chris notices the rings and Phichit loses his tiny mind and yells at the rest of the restaurant:

"Everybody! My best friend just got married!"

There are no words in the human language to convey Yurio's expression. Or probably Yuuri's expression. Viktor, though, Viktor is *smug*, and he somehow exacerbates this already merrily burning dumpster fire by saying:

"Oh, these are just engagement rings — we're not getting married until Yuuri wins a gold medal, isn't that right?"

The only reason Yuuri doesn't make Viktor sleep alone in his own bed that night is because it is probably some kind of engagement tradition to consummate the agreement, and it's afterward, when Yuuri's buzzing with endorphins and the sticky lassitude of being fingered for an hour that he says, "Ah!"

Viktor, face-down diagonally across Yuuri's stomach, looks up. "Ah?"

Yuuri pushes himself up on his elbows to stare down at him. "Tonight, the restaurant — Yurio and Otabek were there first, right?"

"I think so," Viktor says slowly. "Why?"

"Wow," Yuuri says, to himself, to the ceiling, laying back down.

"What?" Viktor asks.

"Nothing," Yuuri lies, "just that I'm surprised he managed to shake his angels."

Because Otabek might have a stern face, but he has a quiet goodness that radiates, and he'd clapped very politely in the face of Phichit's — everything. Otabek seems like a very nice boy, and even if that is probably exactly the opposite of what Yurio will think he wants, Yuuri thinks it'll work out nicely — so long as Viktor doesn't get wind of it.

Yurio is going to owe me, Yuuri thinks, and says, "I can't believe I did that at last year's banquet. I can't believe no one *told me*."

Viktor is predictably and immediately distracted. It's become extremely clear in the last several hours that Yuuri's unspeakable actions at the 2015 GPF banquet are Viktor's favorite, favorite thing to talk about in the known universe.

"Yuuri," Viktor tells him, too earnest for how naked and covered in semen they both are, "don't ever be ashamed — you were *majestic*."

Yuuri mostly experiences the Grand Prix Final as a framework around which he goes through crushing lows and blistering highs.

He does his short program, and will always remember the way he felt, standing on the ice with the world watching, feeling the press of Viktor's mouth on his ring — it'll be the last thing death claws from him. He touches down on his final quad, and it barely registers beyond the way he'd ended up on his knees on the ice, tears hot on his face because Yuuri knows he could have done better, that he could have been perfect.

He watches Yurio break records, hearts, and he watches Viktor watch Yurio and thinks he probably shouldn't put this off any longer. He waits until they're alone, in the shared quiet of their hotel room; he twists his ring around his finger. Maybe he bought them as insurance, some kind of desperate grab for balance before he had to take this leap. It doesn't matter why he did it, he just hopes it works, that Viktor will understand him, that he'll see that this is hard for Yuuri, too.

Yuuri doesn't know if he's done, if he has another year of competitive skating in him. He's so young in years and already middle-aged for the sport; his ability comes from the willingness to grind, not natural talent. He's not Viktor, he's no Yurio. He wants Viktor however he can have him, but only if he's happy — and that's why they should end this here, stop this now, before Viktor looks back on his career and realizes he left in the middle of an unfinished masterpiece. Yuuri can cope with loneliness and fear and physical pain, he's done it for years, but he wouldn't survive if Viktor resented him, blamed Yuuri for his wasted potential.

It doesn't solve anything. They don't come to any conclusions. All Yuuri knows now is that he can make Viktor cry, which is actually awful. They go to sleep on separate beds, and Yuuri tries to be respectful of that until 1 a.m., when he gives up and crawls over to the other one, perches himself carefully along the edge — but at least it's close enough to reach, near enough he can feel the warmth of Viktor's proximity.

They wake up the morning of the free program twined together, all the linens kicked away in sleep and Viktor's fingers in Yuuri's hair. *Thank God*, Yuuri thinks, his face and his eyes hot, his throat hurting, and he holds on for a long time, listening to Viktor murmur hushed apologies to him, say, "We'll figure it out, Yuuri."

Yuuri skates his free program on limbic memory, fueled entirely by a hunger to prove something — to everyone watching, to himself, to Viktor, too.

Yuuri isn't a mistake that Viktor made, a romantic whim that derailed him for a year. Coming back here, to the GPF where everything fell so spectacularly apart, that isn't a mistake, either; Yuuri belongs here now, he belonged here then. Maybe he'll belong here again. He stretches his program, taking chances, making changes on the fly. He turns a triple loop into a triple flip, he upgrades a triple flip to a quad Salchow. Every fear he felt before feels small now: Yuuri can't hesitate, he can't doubt, he has to try — leave everything on the ice. He borrows from Viktor for his final jump, launches off on the inside edge, feels the pick on the ice, the whip of four revolutions, and when he lands, it's that impossible perfect moment, something outside of himself, beyond himself, and Yuuri hears the last notes of his song play out as he reaches a hand to Viktor, weak with exhaustion, his fingers trembling, and *hopes*.

There is absolutely no way to ramp up to another season of competitive skating while coaching someone else effectively. There aren't enough hours in the day. And the logistical impossibilities of everything make the idea even more ridiculous. No matter how much the Russian federation hates Viktor, he's the jewel in their crown, and Yuuri belongs to Japan — he's just broken Viktor's free skating world record; they'll never let him go. Will they live in St. Petersburg? Can Viktor stay in Hasetsu? There are a thousand questions, none with easy answers, and normally, this sort of panic spiral is Yuuri's comfort zone, where his anxiety lives and flourishes.

Today, Viktor is looping the 2016 Grand Prix silver medal around Yuuri's neck, making promises that may be impossible to keep, but that he means, and it's enough, it was always going to be enough. Yuuri knows already that it will be hard, that they're being selfish and unrealistic, but he can't worry about it, there's no space for it — this dream that he and Viktor share is too big for one person to bear alone, too big to leave room for doubt or loneliness or any of other Yuuri's formerly constant companions.

He cups his hands around Viktor's well-loved face, leans in until their foreheads touch, and he hears Viktor let out a shuddering breath, too, all shaking relief. Yuuri doesn't care that they're sitting on the ground, that somewhere in this building Yurio is gagging, that his entire family is probably seeing this on a live internet feed via a public viewing.

"Stay with me," Viktor says, into their little corner of the universe, just for Yuuri, his voice a rasp of need. "Just stay with me — okay?"

Yuuri promises, "I do, I will," and it feels like he's escaped gravity, like he's suddenly weightless and entirely free.

Epilogue: (And the Ever After)

Chapter Notes

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

Viktor insists that with the slutty binge drinking cat out of bag there's no reason for Yuuri to piously refrain from getting blitzed anymore, and steers Yuuri too-hopefully toward the party suite post-banquet.

"I know exactly what you're doing," Yuuri accuses.

"I don't know what you mean, I only want you to be happy," Viktor says, without even the thinnest patina of anything other than filthy, prurient interest. He hands Yuuri a paper hotel cup of liquor. "Bottoms up!"

Yuuri remembers Team Russia rapidly enveloping him with their varying opinions on types and brands of vodka, and cheerfully trying all of them. Phichit drops by, and Mari-nee-chan and Minako confiscate his cell phone immediately to indemnify all participants from future, randomized appearances on Phichit's social media doing anything or anyone illegal or unfortunate. He's unconscious three vodka's in — weak. At some point, Yurio and Otabek show up — *adorable* — and Chris and Nils emerge from the suite's bedroom — *Nils, you're supposed to be the good one*, Yuuri thinks with genuine despair — and somehow, suddenly, the room is filled with so many people that Yuuri loves he feels a little overwhelmed by it. In the moment, Yuuri's entirely confident that the best way to manage through this rapid-onset of emotion is by the liberal, heavy-handed application of yet more alcohol.

This has numerous positive side effects.

It makes Yuuri less nervous around strangers, because there are no more strangers in this room: every single person here is his friend. And Chris! Yuuri has decided to forgive Chris for the place with the thing and his constant sexual congress with shared rink space, because Chris is probably the most open-hearted, genuinely kind skater on the entire circuit. He takes nervy Japanese boys under his wing and arranges for them to be picked up in black Audis the next day. There are people who have Nobel Peace Prizes with less impressive accomplishments. He's also a wonderful dancer, drags Yuuri off of the couch and away from his nest of clicking vodka bottles and twirls him around — all perfect chemistry and just flirty enough, and Yuuri can't help how the giggles burst out of him, feels loose and loose-limbed in Chris's arms, all the room blurring around them.

Viktor cuts in at some point, and Yuuri laughs at the way Chris flings himself away to Nils, laughs at how Viktor drags Yuuri jealously closer. He chirps, "*Viktor*," shamelessly happy, and he loops his arms around Viktor's neck. Viktor is a very different dancer than Chris: all tenderness, a hand on Yuuri's hip and another splayed out between his shoulder blades. The greatest hits of Taylor Swift are blasting all around them, and the weird Italians are trying to teach Yurio how to do a shot without using his hands, but just between Viktor and Yuuri, in that one perfect moment, it's as still as a church, the lens of the universe narrowed to only them.

Honestly, Yuuri has no idea what eventually drags Viktor from his side to Yurio, only that it's a perfect opportunity for him to go to Otabek where he's sitting — either stone cold sober or so drunk he can't move — on a spindly vanity chair two sizes too small for him, and say, "*Shh*," and haul him into the corridor by the back of his t-shirt. It's a pretty hazardous journey from the party suite to their room down the hall, but it feels like an important tribulation that he and Otabek share together. It speaks well of Otabek's fortitude, Yuuri thinks crazily, when he finally manages to get the door to his hotel room open and shove Otabek inside.

"Otabek," Yuuri tells him seriously.

"I would prefer Nikiforov not kill me," Otabek tells Yuuri seriously.

"Viktor is harmless," Yuuri lies, and leaves Otabek standing in the entryway to the room looking almost concerned about his safety, which would probably be an expression of undisguised terror on anyone else. "No, I wanted to — here, come over here."

"No, thank you," Otabek says.

They are both too drunk for anything other than the most formal of English conversations.

"*Ungrateful*," Yuuri accuses, but he's pretty sure it comes out in Japanese, so he has no clue if Otabek picks up on how *ungrateful* he's being. But these are the sacrifices you make when you care about someone, he guesses, and rifles around his suitcase until he finds his little ANA bag with a cheer.

Yuuri stomps over, renewed with determination. "Give me your hand, Otabek."

"If I'm murdered, Kazakhstan will go into a period of national mourning," Otabek says.

So ungrateful, Yuuri fumes, and snatches Otabek's hand into his own so he can put the ANA bag into his palm and unzip it in demonstration.

"*Here*," Yuuri declares, and Otabek makes a noise that sounds like fervent prayer in a language Yuuri doesn't speak as he stares into its contents. "You're *welcome*."

Otabek isn't starry eyed with gratitude. He doesn't thank Yuuri for his foresight and tacit support of his suit. He just looks a little sweaty and a lot nervous.

"Can I please leave now?" he asks.

"Yes," Yuuri decides, and grabs Otabek by the face, dragging him down so they're eye to crazy eyes, and he says, "Just remember: use a lot of lube, okay? Use too much lube."

Otabek lets out a wheezing noise, like a deflating balloon.

"He's so small, *so* small," Yuuri concludes, closing his eyes — suddenly overcome and feeling a little weepy. "Good luck, Otabek."

For a big guy, Otabek is surprisingly fast, is what Yuuri learns, watching him tear out of the hotel room and down the hall.

Later, Drunk Viktor shows up, which is *perfect* because Drunk Yuuri has Plans and Ideas and has drawn a diagram and a to-do list using Viktor's \$56 Tom Ford eyeliner in the bathroom mirror.

"Let's start with the third one," Drunk Viktor croons. The third one is pretty disgusting, Drunk Yuuri thinks approvingly, and it just feels like the right way to keep this night going.

"Okay," Drunk Yuuri tells him, stripping Viktor out of his tie and walking backward toward the bed, "but I gave away all of our lube so you're going to have to get me wet with just your mouth."

Drunk Viktor can look as blissfully in love as regular Viktor can, and he kisses Yuuri's wrists and his throat and the thin skin over Yuuri's fluttering heart and says, "We were made for each other," before he bends Yuuri over the side of the bed and sinks his teeth into Yuuri's ass.

The day after the Grand Prix Final, Yuuri and Viktor miss hotel checkout, their flight, all six times people knock on their door, and no fewer than 200 calls from everyone Yuuri's ever met leaving him congratulations. They also disgrace the hotel bed, the carpet in front of the balcony, flood the bathroom and break a lamp. Yuuri's not sure if the crack in the mirror is from them, too, but it's probably from them.

Unlike the year before, Yuuri remembers every second of it.

"Your smile is too bright for my hangover, Yuuri," Viktor whines, in the backseat of the private car driving them to the airport the next day. "Have mercy."

"You're a terrible Russian," Yuuri scolds, but he lets Viktor put his head in Yuuri's lap.

Objectively, Yuuri's future is no easier or clearer than it's ever been. Japan Nationals are in less than two weeks, and among the hundreds of missed calls on Yuuri's phone surely there are at least a dozen from the JSF. He still doesn't know where they will go, to St. Petersburg where Viktor should train or to Hasetu where Yuuri suspects their hearts both live. Everything they promised each other is still on the borderline between improbably and impossibly difficult, but Yuuri knows it will be worth it, every fight they're going to have and disappointment they'll have to accept — Yuuri believes.

Viktor peers out under one pale hand, squinting. "How are you not hung over?"

Yuuri smiles down to him, to Viktor's haggard expression, dark bruises under his eyes. He looks like eight miles of bad road, but Viktor is Yuuri's cracked concrete, his familiar way home. "The same reason I didn't lose my overpriced sunglasses to Nils in a poker game: I stopped drinking before you."

"He's a *shark*, a *ringer*," Viktor hisses, and lets out a wounded noise, pressing his face into Yuuri's stomach and wailing, "Yuuri — it's so bright."

"Okay, okay," Yuuri says, too shot through with tenderness to tease him — not today, not when the sun is streaming gold and glorious through the windows of the car, when the water

is shimmering on the shore — there will be the rest of their lives for that, Yuuri decides, and presses his hand over Viktor's eyes, enclosing.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes you go into a story with deliberation and a clear vision of what it will be. And then sometimes you start with every intention of writing a sex farce and realize, 10 pages in, that it's grown feelings and is stubbornly evolving itself into something else entirely. In its original conception, this story was titled "Bottoms Up" and was constructed around the central joke that literally everyone in the international figure skating community had taken a bite of Katsudon Yuuri — except for Viktor, who inexplicably thinks Yuuri is pure as the driven snow. As you can see, the end result diverged from this somewhat.

The process of writing this story felt almost exactly like the process of writing *Presque Vu*, only worse because *No Less Unthinkable* is more than twice the length of *Presque Vu* and required an entire research corps to support its existence. Please do not spend too much time thinking about how I apparently created this story's file in my computer on Dec. 18 and finished it on Feb. 7; this document is 173 single-spaced pages in my word processor. The day I closed my 15 opened tabs ranging from the 2009-2010 figure skating season Wikipedia page to the JSF regional competition page to the launch date for fucking Snapchat, I actually cried a little with happiness.

Many thanks for the patience, good humor, and tolerance of at least a dozen people, including the world's worst WhatsApp group (about which I compared asking a simple question seeking a one word answer to tossing a golden apple of unnecessary nuance into a room full of academics) and my pervert friends, who forced me to watch their weird ice skating anime in the first place.

And finally, it is not an exaggeration to say that this story would not exist without the tireless technical advisory of Waldorph, who gritted her teeth and took me through my paces on figure skating, despite my constantly complaining about how I don't like figure skating.

Happy Valentine's Day, you nerds, and happy reading.

— Pru (2/14/2017)

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