So, in an imaginary world where the ISU have decided to openly back equality in regards to sexuality, they decide to have a one-time-only competition with same sex pairs to raise money for charity.  
  
Each country is invited to put forward two men for their pair.  
  
But here's the trick: the winning country will be rewarded with some kind of massive incentive (IDK, money, extra spot at Worlds, IDK). So the countries are all kind of desperate to win and decide to send the best.  
  
You know where this is going...  
  
  
America sends Evan and Johnny, which causes a stir. But the biggest stir is caused by Russia's pair.  
  
*Alexei and Evgeni*.

[Here's part one! More of this in the works, but I hope you like it so far, everyone! <3]  
  
  
There is an English expression, Evgeni thinks. *I would not trust him as far as I could throw him.*  
  
It would make him laugh, now, except that he can already feel the bruises down his side. Except that Alexei, for as much as he doesn't appear to be taking the expected pleasure from throwing Evgeni onto the ice, is distinctly uninjured.  
  
Evgeni is already hurting from landing on the ice instead of his skate so many times. Alexei is capable of throwing him, but not well, and Evgeni is capable of landing his jumps - usually. He thinks he is still doing especially well, and it is mostly Alexei's fault, but he has not fallen this many times in years.  
  
Still, he has little doubt that this is the only way to go about it if the federation insists on sending him and Alexei. Alexei is shorter, but Evgeni cannot lift him, and it's worth *something* that Alexei finally admits that Evgeni is much thinner than he is.  
  
"Again," Mishin shouts, and Evgeni studiously ignores Alexei's offered hand as he picks himself up off the ice.  
  
  
"You see this?" Evgeni asks flatly, pulling down the waistband of his pants so that Alexei can observe the purpling bruises scattered across Evgeni's hip. "You should give up this idea of being a pairs skater, Alexei. I think you will kill your partner."  
  
"I'm supposed to be throwing a *woman*," Alexei points out. It is a fair point.  
  
It would be fairer if Alexei hadn't spent all morning cracking jokes about Evgeni's Asissay ensemble, as if his wearing a skirt had foreshadowed *this*.  
  
"Well then," Evgeni says. "I think you will kill me."  
  
Then again, Evgeni thinks, killing him is probably another of Alexei's lifelong dreams. How lucky that he will get to do both at once.  
  
"Zhenya," Alexei begins, but Evgeni has already pulled on his jacket and clomped back to the rink.

[Thank you for the kind words, gentle anons! Lots of backstory/montageyness in this one, but there'll be more interaction between Plush and Lyosh soon. <3 A note - I haven't decided exactly when this takes place, but it's somewhere between the 2002 and 2006 Olympics, so Plush is not an Olympic champion yet.]  
  
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Evgeni has to admit, the jumps feel wonderful after he begins to land them regularly. (After *they* begin to land them, he supposes. It is still difficult to acknowledge that another person has anything to do with *his* success, let alone Alexei.)  
  
But the quads - Evgeni has always been good at them, has always been able to jump high and spin quickly. It is just that he can go so much *higher* when Alexei throws him, so much faster, that it seems easy and impossible all at once. The landings are harder, lower, and less controlled; *instinct* tells Evgeni to land on one foot, but *logic* frequently wins out and brings him down on both legs.  
  
Alexei, for all his faults, is a tireless training partner, and doesn't complain when they have repeat the jumps again and again. He stops quite joking so much after the first week - really, after the first time Evgeni yells at him in practice. All the same, he seems *happy*, and Evgeni doesn't even know why he resents it so much.  
  
Back in his room in the evening, Evgeni drinks two shots of vodka before bed. He is not giving up. He is angry - at Alexei, at the skating officials who decided to ask the two of them instead of *anyone else*, at the ISU for declaring this stupid contest for a chance at a prize that no skating federation could resist. A hefty cash prize and one extra slot at the next Olympics for whichever nation's skaters bring home gold, plus prestige and cash for the silver and bronze medalists.  
  
Evgeni wants another gold medal. Evgeni *always* wants another gold medal, because that is how he keeps himself going. He wins a gold medal and he forgets about it; every time he skates, he skates as though he has never won before, he skates as though his family will still suffer if he doesn't *beat Alexei*.  
  
Now, if Evgeni wins this gold medal, he will be sharing victory with the man who stole the Olympics from him. He is skating his life out for this ridiculous competition, risking injury and exhaustion, gambling his chances for the next Olympics, and he is doing it because he skates for his country and not only for himself.  
  
(He drags himself out of bed and takes another shot before he can fall asleep.)  
  
In the morning, Alexei greets him with a warm and unaffected smile, his eyes crinkling into laugh lines at the corners. Evgeni knows that his own smile is horribly fake, but he is *trying*, so Alexei cannot possibly complain.  
  
Truth be told, the jumps are much easier than some of the other choreography - the lifts, for example. Evgeni may be relatively thinner than Alexei, but this doesn't make him the size of the girls Alexei has been dreaming of tossing around - Evgeni has to balance himself with his hands on Alexei's shoulders when Alexei lifts him up in front, and it is *terrifying*, because if either of them lets go for an instant they are both going to fall and Evgeni is going to accidentally castrate Alexei with his skates. (That is the one bit of silver lining to this horrible dark cloud - Alexei has excellent reason not to drop him on purpose.) Alexei lifting Evgeni above his head is out of the question. They will have to make do with excellence in their other elements, it seems.  
  
The solo jumps and spins are not so difficult; Alexei seems to have an easier time syncing his moments to Evgeni's than Evgeni does to his, which is useful but still annoying.  
  
And some things are easy - like joining hands, like skating wide circles with Alexei's hand on his waist, like learning to match their steps so they move as one - but Evgeni dislikes them more than all the lifts and jumps combined, not least because Alexei doesn't seem to mind at all.

[[I'm sorry updating is going slowly right now, btw! ;\_; some personal stuff came up and I've been having to deal, but it should get better after this week... thank you for your kindness/patience!]]  
  
  
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“Look at them,” Alexei says, slouching against the wall around the rink and resting his chin on one palm. Evgeni follows his gaze to their coaches, who have both insisted on taking part in the training alongside the actual pairs coaches; Tarasova and Mishin are sitting near each other by necessity, but avoiding each other’s eyes and scowling. “They have a harder time getting along than we do.”  
  
He is smiling, so Evgeni cannot tell if he is joking or not. “Is it hard for you to work with me?” Evgeni asks, carefully.  
  
Alexei studies him for a moment; Evgeni can see him watching out of the corner of his eye, but keeps his gaze fixed on the far side of the rink. He expects the answer to be *Of course*.  
  
But Alexei finally says, “Not as hard as I thought it would be,” and Evgeni can hear him smiling. He curls his hands into fists and Alexei doesn’t ask if he feels the same way.  
  
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Evgeni blames the rest of practice for putting him in a good mood. They land nearly everything, although they are doing mostly the spirals today and the spirals are still unsteady; Evgeni isn't sure that can be helped. After all, as long as Alexei holding on to his waist makes his skin crawl, how is he supposed to skate perfectly with Alexei practically on top of him?  
  
Since things are as they are, however - Evgeni blames the spirals for the answer he gives when Alexei leans over to him after practice and asks him if he wants dinner.  
  
"Of course," Evgeni says automatically, in the midst of yanking off his skates. (He is confused. What he *means*, of course, is that he wants to eat. Not that he wants to eat *with Alexei*.)   
  
"Great," Alexei says, clapping him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll pay."  
  
Evgeni freezes, baffled. Alexei's hand slips off of his arm - Alexei is already dressed, already heading for the door, and all Evgeni manages is an alarmed, "-- Wait."  
  
Alexei glances over his shoulder, notices the laces still in Evgeni's hands, and smirks knowingly. "Be out front in fifteen minutes - if you're later than that, I'll go alone. Zhenya, you like pizza, right?"  
  
And then, as if deliberately avoiding an answer, he steps around the door and pulls it shut behind him.  
  
Evgeni pulls his skates off distractedly, glancing at the closed door every few seconds as he strips out of his practice clothes.  
  
Of course, he *isn't* going. He can tolerate Alexei as long as he doesn't have to speak to him or look him in the face often; he'll probably snap if he has to sit across a table from him all evening. Particularly if Alexei ever opens his mouth.  
  
He has made up his mind to leave through the back of the rink and avoid Alexei entirely when it occurs to him to just wait until fifteen minutes have passed; it's probably been ten already. Evgeni pulls on his clothes and slumps back onto the bench to gather his things, gazing intently at the clock on the wall. When he's sure it's been twenty minutes at least, he shrugs his bag onto his shoulder and walks out to the front.  
  
And. Either he's unlucky, or Alexei cannot count, or both.   
  
In any case, Alexei is waiting for him and not even looking at his watch; the keys to his car are dangling from one finger. He's leaning against a pillar with his usual grin, posed as if he expects his picture to be taken at any moment, his arms folded; he raises his eyebrows at Evgeni when he catches sight of him. "Finally."  
  
This is the point at which, according to Evgeni's backup plan, Evgeni will tell him that they are not going to get dinner together, that Evgeni cannot stand even the sight of him, and that Evgeni is going to go eat ~~nothing~~ alone in his room.  
  
Unfortunately, this is also the point at which Alexei turns his back on Evgeni and starts walking away toward his car. Evgeni frowns, feeling considerably put-upon, and starts after him.

[[HOLD ON, GUYS. It's going to get bitchier before it gets better. XD]]  
  
  
  
Alexei unlocks the car and slides into the driver's seat before Evgeni has the chance to stop him and explain, explain that he is *not coming*, but he leaves the passenger door open, so Evgeni leans his head in and begins, "Alexei--"  
  
Alexei gestures at him impatiently. "Get in! I'm hungry, aren't you?"  
  
Evgeni closes his mouth. Alexei gives him a look - a *look* which tells him that Alexei knows he's trying to protest. Chagrined, Evgeni sidles into the passenger seat and pulls the door shut behind him. Alexei barely waits for him to buckle his seatbelt before pulling away from the curb. There really is no escaping it now, Evgeni thinks, settling into his seat with a derisive sniff. "Where are we going?" he asks.  
  
"You do like pizza, don't you?" Alexei asks, keeping his eyes on the road; this gives Evgeni the opportunity to watch him without being watched back. (Alexei is always looking at him. Why is that?)  
  
"Yes," Evgeni says belatedly, noting with some satisfaction that he has still managed to avoid exactly agreeing to this outing. *It's not my fault*, he thinks.  
  
"Good," Alexei says, and pulls onto a side road a little faster than is necessary. "What did you have for breakfast?"  
  
*Why do you want to know?* "Energy bars. And a banana."  
  
"Hm," Alexei says, swerving around a corner. "You know - you have to eat to skate, Zhenya. I didn't think so, but--"  
  
"I eat," Evgeni says defensively. "I don't eat *too much*, but I eat."  
  
"Good," Alexei says again. There's a brief pause; Evgeni stares indignantly at Alexei's profile. Finally, he adds, "If you starve yourself and fall like I did, I'm sure you'll regret it."  
  
"I don't need advice."  
  
"No," Alexei agrees, all too easily, and says nothing for the remainder of the drive. Evgeni sighs and leans his head back and fixes his collar absently; it doesn't occur to him until a few turns later to wonder where Alexei is taking him, exactly, because he doesn't remember this street at all.  
  
Logistically, Evgeni thinks, Alexei has no good reason to take him somewhere and kill him. (Unless he wants to be given a different partner. Evgeni would not blame him for that, since Evgeni certainly does.) All the same, he peers somewhat apprehensively at the street names, trying to guess at their location.  
  
Finally, Alexei pulls over in front of a small but clean-looking restaurant; reassuringly, there is a large neon pizza sign in the window. Evgeni pushes the door open and steps out, stretching, and looks around again for any landmarks.  
  
Alexei strolls around the car to join him. Evgeni momentarily considers telling him *now* that he is not going to dinner with him, but he feels even less like being lost than he does like eating pizza with Alexei. Dejected, he follows Alexei inside.  
  
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"The jumps are getting much better," Alexei says conversationally.  
  
Evgeni is busy pretending to be preoccupied with his glass of water. "Yes," he says, blandly. "A few more weeks, and they should be--"  
  
"But the spirals are miserable." Alexei leans on the table; Evgeni leans back in his chair. "My coach told me that the choreographer says we need to work on our connection before the routine comes together."  
  
Evgeni glances up at him suspiciously. "What connection?" he asks, without thinking.  
  
Alexei laughs. "Exactly."  
  
Evgeni frowns. Mishin hasn't said anything like that to him. And yet - suddenly this meal makes sense. "That is why we are having dinner?"  
  
"Yes." Alexei folds his hands on the table; Evgeni looks at him reluctantly, and of *course* Alexei is smiling again. Alexei is *enjoying* himself. "Because I agree with the choreographer. We need to talk."

"Talk about what?"  
  
Alexei pauses and looks down at his hands for a moment, drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "Zhenya, you're not--"  
  
The waitress chooses this moment to arrive with their order; Evgeni leans back in his chair as she places the pizza down between them, thanks her with a brief smile, and toys with his fork while Alexei slides a slice onto his plate. He doesn't have much of an appetite.  
  
Alexei clears his throat and continues, "You're not comfortable with this, are you?"  
  
"With what," Evgeni asks flatly. He carves a bit off of the pizza and sticks it on his fork, blowing on it until the steam disperses; it smells good, but he isn't hungry.  
"Skating with me," Alexei says. "I didn't think it was a good idea, either, when they first came to me. I told them, *I'll do it if Zhenya agrees*, and then I forgot about it. I knew you wouldn't do it."  
  
Evgeni swallows.  
  
"Why did you say yes, Zhenya?"  
  
"I want another medal," Evgeni says thickly, glancing at Alexei from under his bangs. "And we are the best skaters in Russia. Who else would go?"  
  
"You don't need this medal," Alexei says earnestly. "You're not even a pairs skater."  
  
"I want to advance the sport. For Russia."  
  
Alexei exhales slowly; he looks thoughtful, drumming his fingertips on the back of his hand. "You always want to advance the sport." He sounds oddly resigned.  
  
Evgeni eats in silence for a moment, wondering how this is supposed to make them *connect*, but something is nagging at him - something he doesn't understand.  
  
"Lyosha." He pauses, because the nickname tastes strange to say; he hasn't called Alexei that since they were training partners. Alexei's eyes light up and he lifts his head, resting his chin in the palm of one hand. "Lyosha, why did you say yes?"  
  
"You know I wanted to skate pairs." Alexei takes another bite of his meal, suddenly cheerful again.  
  
"*With me*?" Evgeni demands, bewildered.  
  
Alexei shrugs. "Why not?"  
  
Evgeni can think of a lot of reasons why not. *I don't even like you* is at the top of the list, followed by *you don't even like me* and *you can barely lift me* and finally *you haven't willingly touched me since the last Olympics*.  
  
He's trying not to think about the last Olympics. Not now.  
  
"Anyway." Alexei clears his throat and sets his fork down on his plate with a soft clink, getting Evgeni's attention. "We aren't competing anymore, Zhenya. We have to work *together*. Can you do that?" There's an edge to his voice almost like there used to be - a challenge.  
  
Evgeni never could refuse a challenge from him. "Of course."  
  
"All right." Alexei starts to say something else, but seems to reconsider before the words can leave his mouth. He shakes his head instead, returning to his meal with a smile back on his face. Evgeni stares at him flatly, wondering what exactly he's just agreed to.

[[The plot thickens! :D And oh, Zhenya - Freud would have a few things to say to you...  
My dearest anons! If you have any suggestions for what music Zhenya and Lyosha’s pairs routine ought to be set to, I would love to hear them. :D]]  
  
  
  
The rest of dinner passes almost comfortably, or at least as comfortable as they ever are. Alexei talks more than Evgeni does, and initiates most of the conversation, but the conversation isn't so bad; mostly they discuss the news, miscellaneous politics, rumors about old acquaintances, anything but skating. Evgeni discovers that he is hungry after all, and that it's not completely unappetizing to listen to Alexei talk as he eats. When he isn't thinking about the fact that it's *Alexei*, the voice is… well, pleasant.  
  
By the time the waitress comes to pick up their plates and Alexei pays the check, Evgeni almost regrets purposefully ordering the most expensive item on the menu. (Almost. Not quite. Alexei was practically begging to be taken advantage of.)  
  
It's getting dark by the time they leave the restaurant, but Evgeni finds he is perfectly warm. Alexei walks a few steps ahead and opens Evgeni's door for him, disappearing around to the other side of the car before Evgeni can argue. Evgeni considers shutting it and opening it again just to be contradictory, but - he has agreed to be Alexei's partner, after all, so he gets into the car without protest.  
  
Alexei's *partner*. Evgeni has never had a partner, and now--  
  
He doesn't know what to think.  
  
They drive along in silence for a while, having exhausted most of their topics for small talk over dinner, until finally Alexei tilts his head toward Evgeni's and says, "We can fix the spirals tomorrow." His voice is relaxed, confident.  
  
"Mm," Evgeni agrees. He doubts it's going to be as easy as that, but as long as he stays feeling less than homicidal toward his partner, it must at least be *easier*.  
  
Alexei hums most of the way back to the apartment where Evgeni is staying, a few minutes from the rink; Evgeni recognizes the tune, but can't place it. Something Alexei skated to a long time ago. Evgeni is starting to doze off when Alexei finally pulls over to the curb and leans over to pat him on the shoulder, startling him awake.  
  
"Good night," Alexei says. In the moonlight, Evgeni can just see the outline of his smile.  
  
"Good night," he says, feeling suddenly awkward, and turns away to fumble for the handle on the door. "Thank you - for dinner." He gets the door open and slides out of the car.  
  
Behind him, Alexei says, "I'll see you tomorrow," and Evgeni nods over his shoulder before he closes the door.  
  
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Evgeni doesn't sleep well that night.  
  
He runs over the choreography in his head while he's taking his shower, does the steps absentmindedly while watching a bit of the news on TV, and then goes to bed early; his head feels clearer than it has in a long time, and he dozes off easily - nothing’s wrong until he’s fast asleep, until he starts dreaming.  
  
At first, he dreams that they are skating pairs in Salt Lake City; they are both wearing silver, the lights are brilliant, the ice is waiting for them. Alexei lifts him, holds him up by his hands, and then takes him by the waist (and Evgeni is all too familiar with the warmth of his hands); he throws Evgeni into the quad. Four clean circles through the air, so easy, but Evgeni slips off the edge of his blade on the landing. He falls so hard he can't get up.   
  
Alexei skates flawlessly through the rest of their routine, alone, lifting an invisible partner high above his head while the crowd cheers.  
  
When the routine ends, Alexei glides over to him and pulls Evgeni to his feet, smiling benevolently and offering him a gold medal. Evgeni starts awake with his fingers tangled deep in the sheets, and it takes him a minute to realize that he isn't really holding Alexei's hand. He rolls onto his back, squeezes his eyes shut, and breathes out, trying to relax. He doesn't let himself think.  
  
Until he's dozed off again and dreaming of a familiar hotel room - years ago, before the Olympics, *the first time Alexei kisses him*.

*Alexei is shouting, telling Evgeni everything he despises about him, telling Evgeni everything he doesn't deserve to have. Evgeni is too angry to speak, shaking under the weight of it - but when Alexei stops for breath, he snaps, grabs Alexei by the front of his shirt and glares in his face and says with all the venom he can manage, "I* hate *you."  
  
Alexei looks actually shocked for a second. Evgeni recoils slightly, wondering if he should punch him, but before he can make a decision either way Alexei hauls up and shoves Evgeni backwards into the wall. "I hate you too," he snarls, his voice sort of breaking. Evgeni twists to the side, certain that Alexei's going to try to hit him, and Alexei snarls a hand in his collar and pins him to the wall, close enough that Evgeni can't kick him. He draws his free hand back, fingers curled, and Evgeni bites his lip but doesn't let himself flinch.  
  
A beat passes in silence. Alexei drops his hand to his side and starts to turn away. Evgeni eases against the lockers and breathes in, licking his lips - he's about to say something especially cruel, something taunting, because he'd rather Alexei hit him than have the last word. He doesn't get to it, though, because Alexei stops before he's gone more than two steps, twists around and grabs him, bats Evgeni's hands aside when Evgeni shoves at him, gasps and presses his mouth to Evgeni's.   
  
Evgeni forgets to breathe for a moment.  
  
Alexei kisses him roughly for a second, awkward and demanding and uncertain, and then lets him go and takes a step back. Evgeni stares at him blankly, stunned into silence. Alexei looks just as confused as he feels, his eyes wide and his face very red. Evgeni opens his mouth, but can't think of anything to say.  
  
"I hate you," Alexei says again, kind of frantically, like he's trying to convince someone - himself. He presses his mouth to his sleeve, glances sharply at Evgeni, and then turns and*runs*for the door.  
  
Evgeni inhales, trembling--*  
  
and wakes up.   
  
He's breathing hard, panicky. Scrubbing at his eyes, he sits up in bed, trying to shake the memories out of his mind. If Alexei knew he remembered this - *the first time*, Evgeni's eighteenth birthday, another hotel room at another competition -  
  
Does Alexei remember?  
  
Does Alexei remember as well as he does?  
  
Evgeni buries his face in his arms and breathes and breathes deeply, tries to forget all over again. He's exhausted, in the dark, and the way his stomach's twisting into knots is making him nauseous on top of everything else. *Not now. Not now.*   
  
All they have to do is work together, just a little longer.  
  
They just have to be *partners*.  
  
Fuck.  
  
Evgeni gets out of bed and drinks a glass of water, rakes his fingers through his hair, and spends the next half-hour pacing back and forth through his apartment. He thinks about calling Alexei right now and telling him he can't do this, but he doesn't have Alexei's number anyway. He thinks about calling their coordinators. He almost does call Mishin, but Mishin--  
  
Mishin would be ashamed of him, wouldn't he?

He's always wondered if Mishin knew. It's the one thing he never told his coach, because it never meant enough to matter, it never…  
  
And if Mishin did know, what does he think *now*, what does he expect?  
  
Evgeni has made himself thoroughly miserable by the time he manages to drift off out of sheer exhaustion, half-smothered in his pillow, trying not to think about anything at all.  
  
--  
  
He falls in practice the next day.  
  
It's his fault, not Alexei's; his jump falls apart in midair, he comes down *wrong* and skids off the edge of his blade, and runs into the wall as he's sliding backwards and trying to get up. Not *hard*, but hard enough that he doesn't get up for a moment, his palms pressed to the ice to make sure it's stable beneath him.  
  
This is all the time it takes for Alexei to reach him. "Zhenya!" He crouches next to him on the ice; Evgeni shakes himself, hearing his coaches shout from the opposite side of the rink, and starts to haul himself to his feet.  
  
Alexei wraps an entirely unnecessary arm around his waist, guides him to his feet, and steers him gently toward the exit. "Tell me if you're all right," Alexei says, and there's a harsh, anxious edge to his voice.  
  
"I’m fine," Evgeni says heavily. He didn't hit his head, not more than a bump on the wall after his back had absorbed most of the impact. He already was bruised in all the places he just hit on the ice. He feels more numb than anything else.  
  
Alexei pulls him over to a bench and makes him sit down, his arm around Evgeni's shoulders. By this time, the coaches have made it over and are asking if he's all right - "He said he's fine," Alexei says, and Mishin gives him a look that could melt the ice.  
  
"Zhenya," Mishin says, pushing Alexei's hand dismissively out of the way to squeeze Evgeni's shoulder. "What happened?"  
  
"Nothing," Evgeni says, looking down on pretense of brushing ice off of the legs of his sweatpants. "I was thinking too much about the spirals, not about the jump--I lost my focus."  
  
Mishin grunts and draws back, patting him on the shoulder. "Go and do it again. Focus."  
  
Evgeni nods, blinking hard; he's almost too tired to think after barely sleeping the night before, but he's managed not to show it much. He doesn't need to talk about why he couldn't sleep.  
  
Alexei stands up and offers Evgeni his hand; Evgeni takes it grudgingly and lets Alexei pull him to his feet.  
  
Displaying some common sense, for once, Alexei waits until they're out on the ice and out of earshot to ask, "Are you really all right?"  
  
"Of course." Evgeni suppresses a spike of annoyance; why does everyone think a fall is going to ruin him?  
  
"Because you haven't looked me in the eye all day," Alexei continues quietly, frowning, as if he hadn’t heard, "and I thought, after last night--"  
  
"I'm *tired*," Evgeni snaps. "All right? I'm tired, that's all. Come on, let's do it again."

[[... all I can say about this part is oh, *Yags*. <3 And thank you so much for your support, everyone! I’m so glad that this pairing has other stans~~]]  
  
  
  
They glide into position again, and this time Evgeni clenches his hands and forces his mind blank as Alexei's chest brushes against his back, Alexei holds him and their skates move in perfect time, gathering speed. Alexei's hands tense on his waist the moment before he throws him, and Evgeni is high and alone in the air.  
  
*Perfect*, he thinks, a moment before he even touches down.  
  
He holds the landing out for longer than he needs to, relishing the feeling that he couldn't have done it better. Alexei grins at him as he skates over, giving him the thumbs-up, and Evgeni smiles before he can stop himself.  
  
*Don't think about it. Just skate.*  
  
The memories keep lingering in the back of his mind all day, even as they practice the spirals over and over, but somehow they've become easier to ignore. They aren't like they were before, Evgeni thinks. He doesn't know what kind of partners they are, but it's different - the feeling in the air between them, it's softer.  
  
Alexei throws him, higher than he could possibly go alone, and doesn't want him to fall.  
  
At the end of the day, Evgeni's limbs are starting to feel leaden and he and Alexei more or less slump off the ice together, breathing hard, Alexei's hand lingering pointlessly on his shoulder. Mishin pats him on the arm as soon as they step onto the shoulder of the rink, handing him his skate guards; Tarasova pulls Alexei away to talk about something, and Mishin says gruffly, "Today was much better."  
  
"I know," Evgeni says, sucking in a deep breath. He's so tired he can barely smile, and all he can think about is going back to his apartment and falling into bed, but he feels lighter all the same. A good day's work, he thinks; the routine will take shape soon. Alexei was right, after all, they just have to work together.  
  
Mishin *humphs* faintly, and Evgeni looks over, wiping his bangs out of his face. "You're working better with *him*."  
  
"I have to," Evgeni says, and grins at him wearily until a flicker of a smile appears on his coach's face.   
  
--  
  
"You know," Alexei says thoughtfully, "We should have done this a long time ago."  
  
Evgeni looks up from dragging off his skates and raises his eyebrows. Alexei smirks, shaking his head. "We should have done pairs from the start. Just imagine, if we had more time to practice this--"  
  
Evgeni laughs, glancing back down at the laces and rolling his shoulders with a smile. He doesn't realize until the silence in the room becomes uncomfortable that Alexei isn't joking. When Evgeni looks over again, Alexei is staring at the opposite wall, his elbows on his knees, a tight smile on his lips. "What," Evgeni asks, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice, "you really think we'd-"  
  
"We could have been fantastic," Alexei says. "At the last Olympics. Just *think*, Zhenya."  
  
The back of Evgeni's neck prickles uncomfortably as he remembers his dream; he runs his fingers through his hair and looks away, tucking his skates to one side.  
  
Alexei begins, "We could have both--"  
  
"No." Evgeni manages another laugh, but it sounds false even to his ears, tense and strange. "No. I never would have." *Sometimes it feels like we were born fighting.*  
  
"No," Alexei agrees, after a moment. Evgeni doesn't realize he's watching Alexei out of the corner of his eye until Alexei shrugs and swallows hard, getting to his feet. "No, I wouldn't have either. You're right. Zhenya--"  
  
He doesn't go on, so Evgeni prompts, "Yes?"  
  
"We're working together already," Alexei says. "I know. Today, we--the spirals were great, weren't they?"  
  
"… Yes," Evgeni agrees, looking at him oddly.  
  
"Right," Alexei says, and clears his throat. "We don't need it, of course. But it couldn't hurt to - if you want to get dinner again."  
  
Evgeni waits, but Alexei actually appears to be giving him a *choice* this time.  
  
He almost says no. But he thinks about it.  
  
"Fine," he says at last, and gathers up his things so he won't have to see Alexei smile. "But this time, I'll pay."

[[hey guys! I just found out that I have to go out of town for several days, and I might not be able to post. :( I'll try to post if I can snag any internet connection… if I can't, I'll be back with a bunch more in about a week, hopefully shorter! Thank you sfm for all your support! <3333]]  
  
  
  
They have a day off a few weeks later; Evgeni had planned to spend it relaxing anyway, and while dinner with Alexei isn't the most relaxing thing he can think of, somehow it isn't the most unpleasant either. He almost looks forward to it, if only for the meal.  
  
He can't argue that Alexei isn't good company, as the days go on. It's strange. They find more to talk about the more time they spend together, during breaks or for a few minutes after training; the only thing they don't talk about is their days as rivals. They talk about skating, about the next generation, about politics and sports and the choreography for their program; they talk about their rivals, Lysacek and Weir and all the others. Things are just falling into place, Evgeni thinks. They're working together, and that's all that matters.  
  
Evgeni doesn't sleep in on his day off; he can't, he's too used to waking up early for practice. But he lies in bed for a delicious hour or so, flicking through channels on the TV, before finally dragging himself up when the growls of his stomach become too loud to ignore. He spends until about noon reading the paper, watching TV, and thinking absently about choreography.   
  
At about noon, his cell phone rings.  
  
He glances at it. An unfamiliar number, and he doesn't feel energized enough to prank whoever's calling him by mistake, so he lets it ring and ring until it turns off. But a few minutes later, the same number calls back, and after frowning suspiciously at the display, Evgeni cautiously picks up.  
  
"Hello?"  
  
"Zhenya?" a familiar voice croaks.  
  
"… Lyosha?" Evgeni asks, bemused.  
  
"Yes," Alexei agrees. His voice sounds slightly strangled, nasal. "I think I'm--"  
  
"How did you get my number?" Evgeni interrupts.  
  
"From the coordinator at the rink. I tried calling your old number, but you changed phones."  
  
"Years ago," he agrees, and starts to say something else only to be interrupted by an awful hacking cough from the other line. "Lyosha, are you all right?"  
  
"Sick," Alexei mumbles. Evgeni hears him sniff damply. "Look. I'm sorry. If we go another time, I'll pay to make up for it--"  
  
Evgeni blinks at the ceiling. "What?"  
  
"--if we ever have another day off, which I won't count on. Now, sorry, I have to call my coach--"  
  
"*Lyosha*." Mercifully, Alexei shuts up. Evgeni pauses to collect his thoughts, frowning. "… Where are you staying?"  
  
"The apartment building with the lion statues out in front," Alexei says haltingly. "But--"  
  
"I'll buy something and bring it over. Which room?"  
  
"4C," Alexei says, "but--"  
  
"What do you want to eat?"  
  
"Something easy on the stomach. But *Zhenya*--"  
  
"Fine, I'll find something. Soup?"  
  
"That sounds good. But you shouldn't come, not while I'm--"  
  
"Yes," Evgeni says, "I know," and hangs up.  
  
Half an hour later, he rings Alexei's doorbell. It takes Alexei a little while to answer; Evgeni swings the plastic take-out bag from his hand idly while he's waiting, listening to Alexei bump around the room inside. Finally, the door is pulled open, and Evgeni can't help but frown. Alexei looks, to put it nicely, like *death*.  
  
"Zhenya," Alexei says, "Hello," and he's sort of beaming. It doesn't help much, though, because his eyes are bloodshot, his hair is a bedraggled mess, and he's horribly pale; his voice sounds raw. Evgeni stares hard at him for a moment, and then takes him by the arm and steers him wordlessly back through the apartment until he finds the bed.  
  
"Hello," he says finally, once Alexei has at least sat down. "How are you feeling?"  
  
Alexei sniffs, rubbing his head. "It could be worse."  
  
"What does that mean?"  
  
"I feel terrible," Alexei admits, and sort of coughs a laugh.  
  
"Eat this," Evgeni commands, pushing the take-out bag into his lap, and goes to find him something to drink.  
  
"Thank you for coming," Alexei calls after him.  
  
"*Eat*, Lyosha."  
  
Evgeni doesn't like the way his heart jumps whenever Alexei coughs.

Alexei is nestled in the covers by the time he gets back with a glass of water; the take-out container of soup is in his lap, and he's blowing gingerly on a spoonful of broth. Evgeni hasn't seen him look this vulnerable in years, with his ragged t-shirt and boxers and wretched hair… it almost makes him look younger.  
  
He sets the cup down on the beside table with a soft thump, and Alexei glances up at him with a small smile, sucking on his spoon. Evgeni's stomach does a curious little flip. "Is it good?" he asks.  
  
"I feel better already," Alexei says, leaning back on his pillows; Evgeni lingers beside him for a moment, and then goes to lean against the end of the bed, reminding himself not to get too close. Their coaches will be angry enough with one skater sick - Mishin will probably kill him if he finds out that Evgeni has been here at all, even if he doesn't catch Alexei's cold. "Are you going to stay?"  
  
Evgeni shrugs, looking away; he stares at the drapes covering Alexei's window without actually seeing them. "I could stay."  
  
"Then I'll try to stay awake," Alexei says, straightening up a little and swallowing another spoonful of soup.  
  
"No." Evgeni frowns at him. "You should sleep. Sleep, after you've finished that - I'll stay anyway."  
  
"Really?" Alexei asks, looking incredulous and vaguely hopeful. "You don't have anything better to do?"  
  
"We were going to go to dinner," Evgeni reminds him. "I - didn't plan anything else."  
  
"Oh," Alexei says. He grins around his spoon, and Evgeni almost asks him what's so funny, but - for some reason, he feels like laughing, too.  
  
There's something ridiculous about this. About them. About all the years they spent fighting and hating each other, competing more viciously than Evgeni thinks he will ever compete again, only to wind up… here, in this moment, Evgeni sitting down on the end of Alexei's bed and watching him smile. This one moment, and the moment after that, and the moments that pass after Alexei falls asleep and Evgeni keeps meaning to get up and do something but all he wants to do is watch Alexei breathe.  
  
Alexei is dreaming something with a smile on his face, and all Evgeni can do is sit and wish he knew what it is. Alexei looks older than he used to; there are soft laugh lines at the corners of his eyes, although maybe that's just because he's having a nice dream. Evgeni doesn't know where he's going with this train of thought, except that he looked so different the last time they competed with each other. So many things have changed since then - though maybe it isn't Alexei that's changed, maybe it's just *them*.  
  
He's finally starting to doze off himself, bored and comfortable, when Alexei starts coughing, hard, a painful hacking sound. Evgeni rouses himself and gets up, walking up to Alexei's end of the bed and sliding an arm around his shoulders, starting to prop him up on the pillows. For a moment, he hopes that Alexei is still asleep, but then Alexei's head lolls against his chest and he opens his eyes and blinks sleepily up at Evgeni.  
  
"Sorry," Evgeni says, pulling his arm away and awkwardly resting Alexei on the pillows. "Are you feeling better?"  
  
"A little," Alexei agrees; his face is faintly red. "How long have I been asleep?"  
  
"A few hours." Evgeni offers him his glass of water, and Alexei drinks gratefully; there is a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead, but that's good, it means his fever has probably broken.   
  
"I can't believe you stayed," Alexei says, once he's finished drinking; he glances up at Evgeni, looking exhausted but oddly content. "You don't have to, you know--"  
  
"Someone has to keep an eye on you," Evgeni interrupts, and takes his glass to refill it from the sink in the kitchen; he calls over his shoulder, "If you die, I can't skate!"  
  
"You'd find another partner," Alexei calls after him, and Evgeni snickers.  
  
"It's too late now!"

"You know, a *real* pairs skater could throw you better than I can," Alexei says, when he returns with the glass. "So don't worry, if I die--"  
  
"It's too late, Lyosha," Evgeni says, reaching over and rumpling his hair with a quick smile. "You have to live - for our medal."  
  
"Besides," Alexei says seriously, mirth in his eyes, "it's only an interesting story because it's Alexei Yagudin *and* Evgeni Plushenko. No one would care if it was only one of us--"  
  
"Maybe no one would care if it was *you*," Evgeni retorts. Alexei laughs at him, laughs until Evgeni has to crack a grin; he pushes Alexei over sideways, because it's much too easy to do, and goes to sprawl across the end of the bed.  
He spends the rest of the day there, reading the magazines and newspapers that Alexei has scattered across his apartment, watching Alexei sleep or fetching things for him, talking with him about anything that crosses their minds whenever Alexei is awake and content, staring out the window and tapping out the rhythm of their choreography on the sill. Alexei convinces him to go home in the evening, promises he'll be fine, he'll call in the morning. Evgeni makes him promise several times, until he makes Alexei laugh, and then goes.   
  
It doesn't feel right to leave; it doesn't feel right in his empty apartment, either, but by the time he gets home it's too late to do anything but sleep anyway. He places his phone on the bedside table and gazes at it for a while, feeling absurd, before finally drifting off.  
  
He dreams about skating again - something about Salt Lake City, about the way the light reflected off the ice. In the dream, he doesn't just fall, his blades shatter when he comes down, splinter across the ice like crushed glass. He lies among the fragments and listens to the screams of the crowd until someone - maybe Alexei, maybe Mishin - comes and carries him away, and then the babbling commentators turn into the shriek of his alarm.  
  
With a groan, he reaches over and slaps it off, starting to haul himself up; a glance at the display of his phone, however, and he stops dead. *1 missed call*. Probably Mishin, because who else would be calling before he was even awake? He flips the phone open without actually looking at the name of the caller and presses call, glancing at the clock as he settles back on the pillows. He has plenty of time.  
  
Two rings, and the phone picks up. "Hello, Zhenya?" Alexei says brightly.  
  
Evgeni pulls the phone away from his ear and frowns at the display for a moment. Yes, it's the same number from yesterday, so the question that remains to be asked is - "… Did you call me?"  
  
"Mm," Alexei hums, apparently in agreement. "Sorry. Were you still asleep?"  
  
"Why were you awake?" Evgeni demands - and then remembers to ask, "How are you feeling?"  
  
"I'm all right," Alexei says. "Better. Well enough to practice, I think - we'll see. I woke up early, since you made me sleep all yesterday--"  
  
"Yes, and that's why you're better," Evgeni says, intensely relieved in spite of himself. "Idiot."  
  
"If you say so. … Are you still in bed?" Alexei asks, and - he sounds amused, but there's something else in the way he says it, something lower, something… interested. Evgeni shifts up on the pillows, an odd thrill running down his spine.  
  
"Yes," he says. His voice comes out a little softer than he means it to. It sounds… strange, so he adds, "So?"  
  
Alexei pauses for a moment longer than he should, but before the silence can stretch on too far, he says, "So - get up." And he laughs, but it sounds forced, and Evgeni doesn't join him. "… I'll see you at practice."  
  
"Right," Evgeni agrees, trying to shake off the feeling that something has almost happened. "Well, until then--"  
  
"Zhenya," Alexei says abruptly, and Evgeni tenses up a little, waiting. But he only adds, "Thank you for yesterday," and then, "Goodbye."  
  
"Goodbye," Evgeni says, and hangs up, and puts down the phone.  
  
He spends a minute or two sitting in bed, deliberately not thinking, before he remembers he has to get up and rolls out from under the covers in search of pants.

Alexei is already at practice when he gets there, and Evgeni spends an extra moment looking at him before he goes to put on his skates. Alexei is still paler than usual, and he keeps sniffing, but he does *look* better. Evgeni tells himself not to worry.  
  
"Good morning," Alexei says, brushing his fingers across Evgeni's arm in passing. "You're not sick, are you?"  
  
"I'm fine." Evgeni tightens the laces on his skates and looks up at him, craning his neck slightly as Alexei steps behind him. "And you--"  
  
Alexei drops his hand onto his shoulder, squeezes gently. "I'm fine." Evgeni lets his shoulders slump, trying to focus on tying up his skates. "I've skated when I was much sicker than this. So have you."  
  
"I just don't want you to *fall*," Evgeni drawls. "You have to lift me, remember?"  
  
"I won't drop you," Alexei says reassuringly - *teasingly* - and nudges him lightly before he walks away. Evgeni shakes his head to clear it and leans over, finishes tying on the boots, and gets up to go after him.  
  
--  
  
True to his word, Alexei doesn't drop him. He does fall twice on the synchronized jumps, but that's all. Even the spirals are all right; the lifts have been getting better every week, and today is no exception. All in all, it doesn't feel half as impossible as it used to. Evgeni's in a good mood at the end of their last practice, only slightly dulled by how exceptionally exhausted Alexei is looking; his partner steps off the ice like he's on the verge of collapse, sweat dripping down the side of his face, still stubbornly smiling.  
  
Evgeni almost asks him how he's doing, but realizes a moment before he can say it that he's already said the same thing twice and holds his tongue. Alexei more or less falls onto the bench next to him once they've finished talking to their coaches.  
  
"See?" he asks, after sort of catching his breath. "I never drop you."  
  
That's true. They've fallen over trying to enter lifts, but Alexei has managed not to drop Evgeni from them so far. Evgeni shrugs, conceding the point. "You look terrible," he adds. "If you can skate like this--"  
  
"Exactly," Alexei says, slinging an arm around his shoulder and hugging Evgeni against his side. "Zhenya, we're going to be champions."  
  
Evgeni swats his hand away, feigning irritation. He wonders if Alexei can tell. "Don't start. You have to learn not to kick me in the face on the spins first, remember?"  
  
"I will," Alexei says, "I *promise*."  
  
Evgeni ducks his head to hide a grin.  
  
But he can't help but notice that Alexei still looks exhausted - wretched, really - by the time they're heading out of the rink, so he sidles up to him in the hall and asks, without really thinking, "Can you drive yourself home?"  
  
Alexei gives him an odd look, wiping sweat off his forehead. "Of course I can. Why?"  
  
Evgeni flushes slightly, looking away. "Nothing, you - looked tired. And you're still sick."  
  
Alexei gazes at him for a moment, arms folded, considering. Evgeni doesn't like the way he looks at him - it's intense, and close, like he's looking straight through him. "Are you *worried* about me?" Alexei says, as though he can't quite believe what he's saying.  
  
"You didn't know?" Evgeni says defensively, looking down and raking his fingers through his hair.  
  
"No, I mean--" There's an odd, *dawning* sort of look on Alexei's face. "You're not just worried about your partner, you're worried about *me*."  
  
"You *are* my partner. Of course I--" Evgeni looks up, his face curiously hot, and Alexei has stepped closer. "What's your point?" he demands, taking a step back. Against the wall. He feels trapped in this space, the few yards that separate them.  
  
Alexei hesitates, looking him in the eye. Evgeni's afraid to look away. "I--" he begins.  
  
"Zhenya!" Mishin calls, from somewhere down the hall. Alexei jumps, and Evgeni twists frantically in the direction of his coach's voice.   
  
"Nothing," Alexei says quickly, "nothing. I'll see you, Zhenya."  
  
"Right - Lyosha," Evgeni mumbles, and escapes down the hall.

Evgeni dreams of the first time he beat Alexei at Worlds.   
  
He remembers. Laughing in Alexei's face with the medal still around his neck - *you took yours off? What poor sport, Lyosha*- and kissing him because he couldn't imagine a worse thing to do to him, just then, and asking him if he *wanted* it, and Alexei shoving him back against the wall with raw fury in his eyes; the disgust with which Alexei looked at him, the loathing, the envy and the spite, and somehow that all came together with the two of them up against a wall in Evgeni's hotel room. Alexei breathing *I hate you, you're second best, I'm going to beat you next time, I hope you like winning I hope you like the only taste of it you'll ever get* against Evgeni's skin, holding his hands captive above his head and kissing the whole long line of his throat while Evgeni laughs and *laughs* and *but who won this time, Alexei, who won this time?* and couldn't get enough of the way Alexei snarled his name, hateful, and fit their hips together and kissed him just to shut him up.  
  
First thing in the morning, Evgeni takes a cold shower and tries very hard not to think.  
  
Which is easy, because he doesn't know how to begin thinking about it. Or even properly what *it* is. He's been perfectly content to be *friends* with Alexei, to leave every aspect of the past behind them and try not to think too much about the Olympics. He's managed to forget about hating Alexei, but he can't seem to forget--  
  
that his hands still know the way Alexei's skin feels when it's slick with sweat  
  
the way his eyes look when they're close enough to be nothing but color  
  
and every single time, every single time Alexei kissed him, he still remembers, like it's branded on his mind, he knows what it would feel like if Alexei kissed him again.  
  
And he remembers. After Alexei retired, they had stopped, and Evgeni had gotten ready to never talk to him again. Remembers thinking how much he hated Alexei, and how he didn't think he could ever hate anyone *so much* ever again, how it felt empty and fragile no matter how he thought about it. Alexei had gone and left him. Alexei had taken his medal and *left him* to fight the empty air, because no one else was ever going to be so worth fighting.  
  
He's feeling ill after all, but he goes to practice anyway, because this ache is a familiar one.

[[by request, and because it fit into the story unexpectedly well - some Yags POV! Oh, Yags. Y so obsessive?]]  
  
  
  
Alexei is getting worried.  
  
Not for himself. No, true to his word he's feeling better within a few days; the cough goes away and he can feel his strength return, despite a few bruising falls in practice. He isn't worried about his skating. The routine is coming together and they're choosing music, starting to think about their exhibition program. The lifts are working out, although he's far more afraid of dropping Evgeni than he lets on, and his jumps are better than they used to be. Evgeni used to stand back and sneer when he fell in practice; now he helps him up, and sometimes he even brushes the ice from Alexei's back. Usually he calls him an idiot, but that's because he cares. Alexei hopes so, anyway.  
  
It's Evgeni that he worries about. He can't tell if they're getting along most of the time; Evgeni will be friendly and bright-eyed one day, and they'll practice until Alexei is ready to fall over from exhaustion (which he doesn't mind at all), and the next day he'll look exhausted and upset and barely look Alexei in the face.  
  
It doesn't make sense. Evgeni doesn't snap at him much anymore, or yell, or scowl whenever Alexei has to touch him; sometimes on bad days he'll grumble about Alexei's inability to throw him properly, grumble about this competition in general, or react bizarrely to everything Alexei says, but it's different. All in all, they're partners now, or something like it.  
  
So there must be something else weighing on Evgeni's mind. Alexei worries that he isn't sleeping enough, because he always looks a little bit tired, and on bad days he'll come into practice yawning and doze off during their breaks. (With Evgeni asleep, Alexei finds himself at a loss for what to do. Most of the time he winds up stretching or pretending to read, all while watching Evgeni's chest rise and fall and noticing the dark lines under Evgeni's eyes.) He's sure that Evgeni doesn't eat enough, but that's normal for him. More than anything, Alexei's sure that something is bothering him, something personal that he won't even begin to talk to Alexei about.  
  
It doesn't help Alexei's nerves, either, that he can't stop thinking about him even when he isn't worried. He keeps catching Evgeni looking at him, and he doesn't know why - he knows why he'd like Evgeni to be staring at him, but Evgeni keeps glaring at him whenever their eyes meet.  
  
It's not just that there's something between them. It's that there's a *lot* between them, and most of it is old rivalry and memories and *shit*. And Alexei wants there to be something else underneath it all, he wants it so much he can practically taste it, but every time Evgeni seems to be opening up to him… the next moment he's closed.  
  
The worst part is that he doesn't have time to think about it, not really. They're choosing the music for their programs, pulling the idea for the free skate together, and he's afraid to push things too far now. He can't stand the thought of Evgeni walking out on him.  
  
So he tries not to think too much, at least not to daydream, and to focus his mind on the skating. It doesn't stop him from dreaming about him every night, waking up in the morning and having to put Evgeni out of his mind long enough to get out of bed.  
  
Once, a few days after Evgeni tends to him while he's sick, it's too much - Alexei doesn't even know why, but he wants to hear his voice again, and calls him before he even gets up. The phone picks up on the third ring, and Evgeni's tired voice says, "Hello?"  
  
"Good morning," Alexei says.  
  
He hears a soft rustle of sheets, and the image of Evgeni sprawled out in bed to talk to him rises unbidden in his mind.*Damn it*. "Good morning," Evgeni says wearily. "You're up early again."

"Yes, well," Alexei says, and hesitates for a half a second, looking at the clock. It isn't that early, but the idea that he's just woken Evgeni up sends a spike of regret through him. "… I thought I'd catch you before you got up."  
  
"Mm. You caught me." Evgeni yawns and sighs into the microphone. "If I'm tired in practice today, it's *your* fault." But he doesn't sound annoyed. No more than he always does, anyway.  
  
"I only woke you up a few minutes early," Alexei says, faintly amused. "Don't complain. Anyway, Zhenya, I--" And he realizes he has called Evgeni for no particular reason, just because he was half-asleep and needed to hear his voice again, and he's pretty sure Evgeni doesn't want to hear that. "I, uh - wanted to thank you."  
  
Evgeni doesn't say anything for a moment. Alexei wonders if he's fallen asleep, but finally Evgeni mumbles, "Thank me for what?"  
  
"For taking care of me the other day. I know I thanked you already--" Which is why it really isn't the best excuse he could have thought of. Damn it. "--but that, that was really…" He trails off. "You didn't have to do that. I didn't think you would."  
  
"It was nothing," Evgeni tries. "Just--"  
  
"It wasn't nothing," Alexei says earnestly, going with the flow of the conversation. Such as it is. "I want to make it up to you." Which sounds less innocent to his ears than it probably does to Evgeni's.  
  
"By waking me up early?" Evgeni demands, and all right, now he does sound a bit annoyed. Alexei blanches.  
  
"I'm sorry. I, uh - couldn't sleep, and I thought of it just now--"  
  
"You couldn't sleep?" He hears Evgeni shift again, and there's a curious undertone to his voice.  
  
"No, I mean, I've been--" *Shit*. "I've been dreaming, that's all."  
  
"Dreaming about what?" Evgeni asks.  
  
Alexei's mind goes blank for a moment as he searches for anything to say, anything but the truth. "… Nothing interesting," he says at last, and laughs. It sounds false, even to his ears. "Anyway--"  
  
"No, no, tell me." Evgeni sounds like he's smiling. Of course, making Alexei flustered would make him happy. "I'm curious, Lyosha."  
  
"Nothing, it was just--" Alexei thinks frantically. *Anything but the truth*. "Just, you know - some girl."  
  
"Oh?" Now he's sure Evgeni is smirking, and Alexei would probably be able to focus a lot easier if he couldn't imagine Evgeni smirking up at him just like that-- "A beautiful girl?"  
  
"Yes, very beautiful." *Well, you look beautiful in a skirt, Zhenya*. "… Blonde."  
  
"Oh, *blonde*," Evgeni purrs. "So, Lyosha, were you on a date with her?"  
  
"… Yes, sort of," Alexei says desperately. He needs to change the subject "Anyway--"  
  
"Do you know this girl - in real life?" Evgeni says curiously. Alexei draws a nervous breath. Evgeni doesn't know, he can’t. He's just asking questions to be an ass, Alexei is sure, so he might as well tell half the truth.  
  
"Yes, I do," he says finally. "I've - spent some time with her before, actually."  
  
"You have a girlfriend, Lyosha? You never told me that." There's a strange note in Evgeni's voice. He sounds almost displeased. "All this time, and you never even mentioned it, but you're dreaming of her?"  
  
"She's not my girlfriend," Alexei says quickly. "Actually, she doesn't like me. We've only been on one date, but she made it clear, so--"  
  
"Just one date?" Evgeni crows. "And you gave up? Lyosha! A guy like you--"  
  
"I don't know how to ask," Alexei admits. He pauses. *If you only knew*. "Maybe you can tell me, Zhenya. If you had gone on a date with someone and you weren't sure if you liked them, how should they ask?"  
  
"You expect me to understand what some girl would want?" Evgeni asks laughingly. "Just ask, Lyosha. Who could refuse that?"  
  
*I'm sure you could*. "Right," Alexei says weakly. "Thank you, Zhenya. I - I have to get up."  
  
"Fine, go and get up." Evgeni laughs in his ear. "I'll see you at practice, Lyosha." He hangs up without waiting for a reply.

"Good morning, Zhenya."  
  
Evgeni looks up and half-smiles at him, a smug edge to his expression. "Good morning, Lyosha. Again."  
  
Alexei settles onto the bench next to him to pull on his skates. "I'm sorry I woke you up. Are you--"  
  
"Fine," Evgeni says dismissively. "But - you said you wanted to make it up to me?"  
  
"Yes," Alexei agrees, although really he hadn't even thought about it. Still, it wasn't as though he minded. "Whatever you want."  
  
"Fine," Evgeni repeats. "You can pay for dinner again."  
  
It takes Alexei a moment to realize what he means. And a moment longer to keep himself from grinning like an idiot. "All right. When?"  
  
Evgeni shrugs, tying his skates. "Tonight?"  
  
"That's fine." It's hard to stay nonchalant, but Alexei manages it, rolling his shoulders and looking down as he pulls on his second skate. "Where do you want to eat?"  
  
"I'll think of something," Evgeni says, and stands up; Alexei glances up at him automatically and accidentally catches Evgeni's eye. Evgeni hesitates for a moment, but then smirks at him. "… You can tell me all about your girl. Maybe I can give you some advice."  
  
If he didn't know better, Alexei would swear Evgeni was doing this on purpose. But then, Evgeni has always had an instinct for tormenting him.  
  
Still, as soon as Evgeni has gone out ahead to talk to his coach, Alexei can't help it - he grins until his face hurts.  
  
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Alexei is more than a little bit distracted, but even so, it's a good day. They work with the music for the first time, and although it's not quite right, Alexei can feel the pieces fitting together. The choreographer has deliberately avoided given them anything romantic to work with; the routines are to be large and dramatic, suitable for the two Russian kings of figure skating. They're skating to a medley of the Russian Dance and the Arab Dance from the Nutcracker for the short program, something Evgeni was particularly pleased with, and Toccata and Fugue for the long program.   
  
Some violinist that Evgeni knows is going to arrange the pieces for them; Alexei doesn't quite recognize the name, but Evgeni seems to know him very well. He calls him on his cell phone in the middle of practice to ask something about the music and winds up talking for ten minutes, laughing harder than he’s ever laughed at one of Alexei’s jokes.  
  
Alexei feels vaguely ill with jealousy, but reminds himself that tonight he is buying Evgeni dinner. It doesn't really help. The one thing that does help is to take the ice with him again and to see Evgeni's smile after they land the triple flip side-by-side. By the time they skate into the lift, Alexei's mood has raised considerably, and it *works*. It’s still not as high or as strong as they'd like to be, but it works. They can really do this. The death spiral, too, is beginning to seem doable.  
  
These aren't programs that Alexei would have skated by himself - nor, he thinks, that Evgeni would have - but that's the whole point, anyway. It wouldn't work for either of them, but it's *them*. It's intense, it's dark and bright all at once, rough and elegant by turns. Alexei thinks he could learn to love it.  
  
He already loves one part of it, after all.  
  
And although it isn't meant to be romantic, Alexei can't help but think that there is something seductive in the way they come together, hip to hip, for the spiral in the midst of the swell of the music in the Arab Dance. They're supposed to be more athletic than emotional, but *seductive* is in the very way Evgeni moves on the ice. Alexei remembers when Evgeni started skating like that.  
  
That was the season before they fell apart.

[[lol, plz to be ignoring my anon!fail. :( Anyway, iiit's time for some sad backstory! But don't worry too much, guys, because the date is still to come!]]  
  
  
  
Alexei remembers that night.  
  
He remembers forgetting Evgeni for a moment, looking up with *gold, gold, gold* on his chest, and a light, perfect feeling in his heart. For that moment, there was no one above him, and it didn't matter who was still behind him - beside him, a step below. This was it. He had *won*.  
  
The night passed in a perfect high; Alexei remembers crying, hugging his coach, kissing a lot of cheeks (and a few mouthes, accidentally) and kissing his medal even more. He remembers seeing Evgeni in flashes - stone-faced backstage, smiling tightly at the cameras whenever another journalist caught him; sitting beside Mishin with his face in his hands, holding his medal up and staring at it as though he was trying to make himself accept it; leaning against the wall and looking at nothing at all.  
  
Evgeni vanished as soon as he could, along with Mishin, and Alexei didn't have time to go and find him that night. It had become almost a ritual for them; they'd meet somewhere, as if by accident, in a locker room or a shower or someone's hotel room, trade insults and threats and fuck and sometimes stay in bed until morning, but between the press and the splendor Alexei let himself forget about it.  
  
He went up to Evgeni's hotel room as soon as he had a moment the next day. No one answered when he knocked on the door, so he waited around for a few minutes and then left, came back in the evening. Evgeni didn't answer that time, either, but he could hear the shower running and lingered outside in the hall. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had better things to do (he was the Olympic champion, he’d never be able to do enough interviews to satisfy the press) but he couldn't shake off a faint sense of guilt, either. Sure, he hadn’t come looking for him as soon as he usually did, but Evgeni would have to understand.  
  
When the water switched off, he rapped on the door again and called, "Zhenya?"  
  
All noise from the hotel room suddenly stopped, and there was a long, tense silence.  
  
"Go away, Lyosha," Evgeni said finally, almost too quietly for Alexei to hear.  
  
Alexei leaned against the opposite wall and frowned at his door. "No."  
  
"*Leave me alone*."  
  
"Zhenya--" He pushed off the wall and reached forward, jiggling the doorknob. "Come on, open the door."  
  
There was another pregnant silence. Alexei folded his arms and stares impassively at the door, immovable; surely, even if Evgeni couldn't see him, he knew that he wasn't going to leave.  
  
Apparently he did, because finally Evgeni pulled the door open halfway and looked out at him.  
  
His hair was wet and flat, stuck to the sides of his head, which made him look even more wretched than he might have otherwise; his eyes weren't red (they were blue, beautiful blue), which was a relief, because Alexei couldn't stomach the idea of Evgeni *crying* over this competition. They were a bit bloodshot, though. He probably hadn't slept.  
  
"Go," Evgeni said. "Away." He didn't even sound angry - not angry at Alexei, anyway. He sounded exhausted.

Alexei considered it, and then he put his hand on the door and pushed past Evgeni into the room. Evgeni didn't stop him. "What do you want?" Evgeni asked, shutting the door and leaning against it.  
  
Alexei didn't answer, because he didn't know what to say. Evgeni had never asked before. They'd never spoken about it before, and now here Evgeni was, just looking at him, just *staring*. He spread his hands and shrugged, looking around the hotel room and trying to shake the feeling that something had changed. The silence stretched on, became uncomfortable, became impossible. Alexei turned toward him again and met his eyes with an effort, and for a moment the weight of Evgeni's gaze was too much to move against.  
  
So he looked away a fraction of an inch, stepped in close and pulled Evgeni against him, stroked his hands through Evgeni's hair and kissed him.  
  
It tasted like victory, the bitter furious way that Evgeni barely kissed him back and dug his nails into the back of Alexei's neck.  
  
It didn't feel like competition, even though Evgeni fought him all the way to the bed, held him down in the sheets for a trembling moment before Alexei got his hands on his waist and shoved him over.  
  
And after, although Evgeni seemed to think they were still fighting, Alexei didn't think he could have been happier just lie with his chest against Evgeni's back, his chin on his shoulder, and chart Evgeni's skin with his fingertips.  
  
He could have gotten used to this, to kissing Evgeni without feeling like he was going to battle, to falling asleep with nothing between them except for the things he couldn't say.  
  
But eventually Evgeni got tired of lying there being touched and rolled over to face him, staring at him with that angry, defeated look still in his eyes. Maybe it wasn't over for him.   
  
Alexei smiled at him. He couldn't help it.  
  
“I didn’t think you were coming,” Evgeni admitted, and there was something besides envy in his face.  
  
“You’re an idiot,” Alexei informed him, idly toying with the ends of Evgeni’s hair. It was hard to tell in the low light - there was just one lamp by the bedside, casting a glow across Evgeni’s back - but it looked like his face was red.  
  
"I'm going to kill you next season," Evgeni said. Without much conviction, though that might have been because he looked too tired to lace up his skates, let alone murder Alexei in cold blood. (Hopefully.)  
  
And Alexei really should have left it at that, let Evgeni think, for just a little longer…  
  
But what he said was, "Zhenya, I'm going to *retire*."

And the way Evgeni looked at him then - Alexei remembers that better than anything. His eyes were wide, blank and disbelieving, as if he hadn't even considered, it had never occurred to him that this might be the end. He looked as though Alexei had wrenched the foundation out from under him, and all he could do was stare, baffled and betrayed and suddenly alone.  
  
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"Are you ready, Lyosha?" Evgeni asks, shouldering his bag and getting off the bench.  
  
Alexei nods, hands behind his head. "Have you thought of a place?"  
  
Evgeni slides into his jacket, a few drops of sweat still on his forehead after the strain of practice. It's late, and they've been working all day; the thought of sitting down to eat is heavenly. "I heard there's a Japanese restaurant close to here. Do you like sushi?"  
  
Alexei shrugs, swinging his bag idly from his hand and waiting for Evgeni in the doorway. "Sure."  
  
Evgeni smirks at him, and Alexei's not sure he had a choice in the matter anyway. "Good. I'll drive."  
  
Evgeni has a nicer car than he does. That doesn't seem fair, but Alexei settles into the squashy passenger seat anyway, without protest. He still can't quite believe where he is, without having even asked Evgeni out himself. It feels too easy, like he's missed a step, but after all he is paying for dinner.  
  
"Who is that violinist, anyway?" Alexei asks, because it's weighing on his mind far more than it should.  
  
"Mm, Edvin?" They're on first-name terms. Alexei frowns to himself and tells himself that he's being stupid. It doesn't help. "He's a friend of mine. He arranged the music for my free skate last season, that's how we met." Evgeni glances at him with an absent smile, comfortably ignoring the road as he drives. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of him, Lyosha. He's brilliant."  
  
"*Brilliant*," Alexei repeats, and then bites his tongue. "… Really."  
  
"Yes. He's - well, you'll hear it for yourself." Evgeni hums something under his breath as he turns a corner, squinting through the windshield. "Keep an eye out for sushi, Lyosha."  
  
*Right. Sushi. Unlike Edvin,*I'm*going on a date with him.  
  
Not that he calls it a date.*  
  
"You're quiet today," Evgeni observes, slowing to a stop at the light and peering around at the neon signs outside the various stores nearby.  
  
"Am I?" Alexei asks, sort of defensively. Of course he is.  
  
"Mm," Evgeni says, looking over at him with a grin. "Thinking about your girlfriend, Lyosha?"  
  
"Um," Alexei says. *Yes. Kind of. If you wore a dress again.*  
  
"Ha," Evgeni says. "You're more romantic than I thought. Ah, there!"  
  
Alexei hasn't really been looking, so he's baffled for a moment, until the car grinds to a halt against the curb and he looks up to a gleaming, newfangled sushi restaurant. It looks expensive. The thought really makes him happier than it should.  
  
They go inside, and a friendly Japanese girl with no apparent accent leads them to a booth in the corner. Evgeni slides into his side of the booth with a sigh, slouching against the wall; he rests his chin in his palm as he reaches for his menu, flashing Alexei a quick smile across the top of it.  
  
"So, tell me about this girl," Evgeni says, perusing the menu. “Is she rich? A skater?” He glances around the restaurant and leans closer, grinning. “Or maybe a waitress?”  
  
Alexei takes a deep breath. *There is no girl, you idiot.* "She's… it's complicated, Zhenya." He looks down at his menu without managing to read any of the words written on it, working the fingers of one hand through his hair. "We work together, me and… this girl, and if I ruin our friendship as it is - well, I don't want everything to fall apart."  
  
"You work together?" Evgeni asks curiously. Alexei can’t think of a good reason for him to be this interested.  
  
"… Yes," he agrees hesitantly, wondering how deep he can dig himself. "That's why I'm worried."  
  
"Have you told her how much you like her?" Evgeni asks.  
  
"Not exactly." Alexei pauses, glancing at him. "No, not at all. I don't think she knows."  
  
"So *tell her*, Lyosha. She won't be angry at you for that." Evgeni looks oddly annoyed with what he’s saying, but he reaches over anyway and pats Alexei on the arm. "If you're dreaming about her, it must be important to you."  
  
"It is," Alexei says faintly.

Evgeni nods decisively, settling back in his chair and looking over the menu. He's smiling vaguely, but it looks put on, and there's a disgruntled kind of tension in his shoulders. Alexei stares at him, trying to understand. The way Evgeni's acting now doesn't exactly fit in to how Alexei thinks he should be feeling.  
  
And after all these years, he still doesn't think Alexei can tell when something's wrong.  
  
"Hey," Alexei says, reaching over and patting him on the arm. Evgeni jumps a little, looking up like a startled bird; Alexei hunts around for something to say, his eyes finally landing on the menu. He smiles. "Zhenya, don't hold back like you did last time, okay? I can pay, you don't have to order something cheap."  
  
Evgeni frowns. "But last time, I ordered the most expensi--"  
  
He cuts himself off with a snap when he realizes what he's saying, too late, and just stares back at Alexei for a moment, his face turning red. Alexei grins at him, squeezing his arm lightly.  
  
"Lyosha," Evgeni begins, and then hesitates awkwardly. Alexei can admit to himself that he would have paid a lot more than the bill just to see Evgeni blush like this. "Lyosh, I - … sorry. I'll, I should pay you back"  
  
"No," Alexei says firmly, sort of taking this as opportunity not to remove his hand from Evgeni's arm. As long as Evgeni is blushing too much to notice. (Alexei is fairly sure he's a terrible person, and it's a good thing that Evgeni can't see the inside of his head.) "It was good, wasn't it?"  
  
"Yes," Evgeni mumbles, averting his eyes. "Still--"  
  
"Still, I deserved it. I dragged you out with me." Evgeni looks up and opens his mouth, probably to deny this; Alexei smiles at him and he falters a little. "You didn't even walk out on me - so we're even. And you took care of me while I was sick," he adds, and why does that make Evgeni blush harder? "So I owed you this one."  
  
"And don't forget you woke me up," Evgeni says, half-smiling, a fraction of the tension easing out of his eyes. He glances down at his menu again. "All right, Lyosha."  
  
Alexei grins, reluctantly letting go of Evgeni's arm and settling back on his side of the booth. "And don't hold back, I mean it." He flips his menu over, searching for the drinks. "You like wine, don't you?"  
  
"Yes," Evgeni answers automatically, and then eyes him over their glasses of water. His face is still tinged pink, and Alexei is happier than he should be. "I have to drive."  
  
"Can't you handle one glass?" Alexei goads him. He knows it doesn't take much for Evgeni to feel challenged.  
  
Evgeni huffs faintly. "Of course. We just aren't getting a bottle."  
  
"Fine," Alexei says.  
  
Their waitress chooses that moment to return, a big smile on her lips. "Hey, guys!" she chirps, and Evgeni looks up. "Can I take your order?"  
  
Evgeni clears his throat and makes his order; Alexei glances down at the prices on the menu while he's speaking. Good. At least Evgeni isn't ordering the cheapest things on the menu.  
  
Alexei orders next, and sends the waitress off with a request for two glasses of red wine. Evgeni shoots him a reproachful look as soon as she's gone. "Now you're choosing for me?"  
  
Alexei shrugs. "It looked good."  
  
Evgeni snorts, but a reluctant smile is tugging at the corners of his mouth. Impulsively, Alexei rests his elbows on the table and leans toward him. "Do you have a girlfriend, Zhenya?"  
  
Evgeni cocks an eyebrow at him. "Not right now. Why?"  
  
"You seem to know so much about them, that's all."  
  
Evgeni shakes his head, downing another quick sip of water like he would something alcoholic before he continues. "No. I haven't met anyone who even seemed like she might be the right person in a long time." He drops his chin into his hand, smirking bitterly. "I'm almost jealous of you and your blonde girl, Lyosha."

[[muah, sorry these have been taking so long, everyone! <3 Why does real life have to get in the way of writing fanfic? But on the plus side, EDVIN.]]  
  
  
  
"Zhenya, are you lonely?" He asks it without thinking.  
  
Evgeni lifts his eyes suddenly, something startled and frail flashing across his face before he catches himself; his face goes blank and he looks down. "Sometimes," he says, with fake nonchalance. "But I have friends. I have Mishin. I don't need a girlfriend right now, anyway."  
  
*That's not what I had in mind anyway*. "I think I do," Alexei says.  
  
And for a moment, Evgeni just looks at him, odd and curious.   
  
Their waitress comes back with the wine at that moment, setting the glasses between them; Evgeni flashes her a quick smile and immediately takes a drink. "You do?" he asks Alexei, the smile lingering. "Well, go on and tell her, then."  
  
"I'm going to try," Alexei decides. He lifts his glass.  
  
"That's my boy," Evgeni says, and chimes his glass lightly against Alexei's.   
  
But it's easier said than done, Alexei realizes, when he really starts thinking about it. He doesn't know how to say - *I know I used to hate you but I loved you at the same time and now I think I might just love you and I'm sorry I never told you but in my defense you would have killed me*, well, that's the truth but he's still fairly sure that Evgeni would kill him for saying so. Even if he didn't kill him, where would that leave them?  
  
And for that matter, where are they now, and did Evgeni really ask him out to dinner just to talk about Alexei's dream girl? It's not as if Evgeni needs Alexei to buy him dinner. It feels like payback for all the times that Alexei might have helped him when Evgeni *did* have nothing.  
  
He wonders if that still matters to Evgeni. Does Evgeni remember as well as he does all the things Alexei did or didn't do to make his life a little harder? Does he care as much?  
  
It's all on the tip of his tongue, but he can't, he can't quite. Evgeni is smiling at him, talking idly as he drinks his wine and nibbles at his sushi, and this is the best they've ever been together. Maybe he'll tell him after the championship, Alexei thinks, when there's no chance of ruining their teamwork. He's worried enough that Evgeni will be furious; if he costs them (and Russia) the medal they're chasing, Evgeni will never forgive him.  
  
In the meantime, he tries to be content with the wine.  
  
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Evgeni drops him off in front of his apartment at a quarter past nine, and Alexei is abruptly thankful for Evgeni's insistence that they didn't drink much, because he needs all his inhibitions intact when Evgeni turns to him in the moonlight shadows of the car and says goodnight. For a moment, Alexei *wants* so much that he can't even speak.  
  
(He wants to kiss him. He wants Evgeni to walk him to his door and kiss *him*. He wants to wake up next to him again. He wants Evgeni to know. And part of him just wants to hold Evgeni's hand, just for a while.)  
  
But he manages, "Goodnight," before the silence becomes improbable, and Evgeni's eyes wrinkle at the corners when he smiles.

Whoever this girl is, Evgeni thinks, she cannot *possibly* be worth the amount of time that Alexei seems to spend moping about her. Evgeni doesn't understand it. Alexei was perfectly, obnoxiously happy when they started training together; now, after he and Alexei have settled (learned to ignore) their differences, Alexei's apparently fallen in love with some impossible woman. Evgeni presses him about it a few times, asking where and when they met and how long they've known each other, but Alexei won't say.  
  
"You'd know who she is," he says, with a rueful little smile, and Evgeni replies exasperatedly*that's the point*. Alexei just shakes his head and smiles.  
  
Evgeni tries not to dwell on it. It bothers him more than it should.  
  
The day Edvin arrives, it's a cold, bright morning outside and Evgeni is on the ice before anyone else turns up at the rink, skating idly in circles and thinking about the rhythm of the music. His breath fogs out when he exhales, and his fingers are prickling with cold even through his gloves, but it feels good all the same. The coffee is taking effect and he's sharply awake, though not quite awake enough to keep his thoughts from wandering.  
  
He hasn't stopped dreaming, but he's gotten so used to it that he's sleeping better all the same. Often he dreams about the past, and which is probably just a consequence of seeing Alexei again; other times he dreams of skating, falling or winning or watching Alexei dance between his jumps. Still, Alexei's presence in his dreams bothers him. After all, Alexei's dreaming about some girl, not about his partner - Evgeni envies him for that.  
  
It's all in the past, and he *wants* to forget about it. Sometimes he wishes he could forgive Alexei for everything, just to put it out of his mind. If Alexei still cares about all that, he doesn't show it; it makes Evgeni feel like an idiot.  
  
He's doing another lazy lap around the edge of the rink when he hears someone come in and twists around to look, just in time to see Edvin wave from the doorway. Evgeni lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and grins, skating toward the edge of the ice.  
  
Edvin has his violin under one arm already and tucks it under his chin, playing a few notes in time with Evgeni's movements as he comes to join him; Evgeni spins around obligingly when he trills the violin, and then steps off the ice, fumbling for his skate guards. "Good morning, Zhenya," Edvin calls, as dreamy-eyed and sunny as ever, tucking his violin to one side again and coming over for a quick, one-armed hug.  
  
"Good morning," Evgeni says easily, leaning over and kissing him on the cheek. "How are you, Edvin?"  
  
"Fine, I'm fine." Edvin sinks onto a bench nearby, and Evgeni joins him, close enough that their knees touch. Edvin runs his fingers idly across the neck of his violin and gives Evgeni his usual gentle smile. "How are you? How is… your partner?"  
  
"Actually, I'm all right," Evgeni says, deciding that the details can wait until later. Besides, it's mostly the truth. "Lyosha is … that is, we're doing fine. It's still strange to work with him, but I don't - hate it." He shrugs, wondering why he can't seem to put the truth into words. "He's a good partner."  
  
"Good!" Edvin says, sounding faintly surprised but pleased. "Good, I expected to have to work with you fighting each other."

"I wouldn't have put you between us back then," Evgeni says, with a quick smile, and Edvin chuckles. "The routine will be much better once we have music, of course, but honestly - it's good. Between the two of us, well… I can't think of anyone who ever managed to challenge both of us."  
  
"You should have skated pairs to begin with," Edvin says, and Evgeni manages to laugh with him, although it strikes a little too close to what Alexei said before. Edvin, at least, knows it's a laughing matter.  
  
The others arrive just then, Tarasova with Alexei and Mishin trundling along behind them. Edvin places his hand on Evgeni's shoulder and stands up; Evgeni glances around to see Alexei walking toward them with his skates in hand, an odd look on his face. "Good morning, Zhenya," he says, glancing at Edvin. "Is this--?"  
  
"Edvin Marton, our violinist," Evgeni says, wrapping his arm around Edvin's waist. "Edvin, Lyosha Yagudin."  
  
"Hello," Edvin says warmly, offering Alexei his hand. Evgeni watches as they shake hands, wondering what's going through his friend's mind; Evgeni has told him a few unpleasant things about Alexei, though nothing particularly damning. (Well, accusing Alexei of practicing voodoo was very damning, but Evgeni *was* a bit drunk when that came up. Edvin probably hadn't taken him seriously.) "Zhenya's told me all about you, Lyosha."  
  
Alexei, who's been looking slightly perturbed in spite of his smile, perks up at those words. "Really," he says, glancing over at Evgeni. "What did you--"  
  
Evgeni clears his throat loudly enough to cut him off, looking away. "Well, Edvin, I told him that you're brilliant - so don't disappoint me."  
  
Edvin splutters a little and shoves him. Evgeni elbows him playfully in the gut (hard enough to make him double over, but Edvin never seems to mind) and gets up, giving Alexei room to sit down and put on his skates. "Did you sleep well, Lyosha?" Evgeni asks casually.  
  
"Mm. No dreams," Alexei says, looking down as he ties up the laces.  
  
"No dreams?" Edvin asks, softly curious. "Do dreams bother you?"  
  
"Lyosha's been dreaming about a beautiful blonde girl lately," Evgeni informs him, unable to resist a smirk.  
  
Edvin makes a knowing little *ahhh* sound and Evgeni could swear that Alexei is turning red, but he doesn't have a chance to look closely; Alexei turns away as soon as he stands up in his skates, and Evgeni heads out onto the ice after him. Edvin trots after them, humming a bit of the*Russian Dance*.  
  
With the strains of the violin ringing in his ears as Alexei takes his hands and they begin to gather speed for the first jump of the day, Evgeni realizes that it almost feels strange to have Edvin here. As much as he likes Edvin's company, he's gotten used to spending the mornings with Alexei alone. (Which is ridiculous. He needs to see other people or he'll start thinking that Alexei is normal.) Maybe that's why Alexei is so quiet while they rehearse that morning, although Evgeni can't help but think that something else is off, too. Alexei’s been in a strange mood for weeks.  
  
Evgeni can’t deny that it bothers him - and why shouldn’t it, Alexei is his partner, after all. But even so, he manages to put it all out of his mind when Edvin starts to play; from the sidelines of the rink comes a slow, beautiful approximation of the music and gradually their skating begins to fall into rhythm with the strokes of the violin. For a while, all that matters is that the music doesn’t stop and Alexei doesn’t let go.

Tarasova pulls Alexei away to talk about something as soon as they take a break - and Evgeni pretends not to notice the longing look Alexei tosses over his shoulder as he's being towed off - but Mishin is busy with the choreographer and so Evgeni and Edvin are left to talk, perched in chairs next to the barrier around the rink.   
  
"It's a beautiful program," Edvin says, smiling absently while Evgeni gulps down water. "If I didn't know better, Zhenya, I'd say you'd been doing this for years."  
  
"Thanks," Evgeni says, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. Edvin's flattering him; it's obvious to anyone with eyes that they haven't been doing this for very long. They can't be doing much worse than the other teams, however, and Evgeni imagines that most of the other teams aren't attempting quads. (Cowards.) "Actually, Lyosha's better at it than I expected. He hasn't dropped me yet."  
  
"That is good," Edvin muses. Evgeni glances at him. "From everything you've told me about him, I expected the worst. I kept thinking you'd call me from the hospital."  
  
Evgeni snorts. "I still can't believe I'm letting him throw me," he says, combing his fingers through his hair. "But really, if I'm being fair, he's not as bad as he used to be. We're almost friends, I suppose."  
  
"Almost friends?" Edvin asks, amused. "How can you be almost friends?"  
  
"I--" Evgeni shrugs, averting his eyes. "Fine, we're just friends. But not good friends."  
  
"Of course. Bad friends." Evgeni pinches the bridge of his nose and laughs. "Zhen… you're tense." Edvin knows, of course. Edvin always knows. Evgeni shrugs again, but Edvin doesn't let him just brush it off; he reaches over and places a hand on Evgeni's shoulder, massaging it gently. Evgeni can't help it, he melts, bowing his head with a contented sigh. *Violinist's hands*, he thinks, as Edvin shifts closer and begins kneading some of the tension out of his back.  
  
"Thank you," Evgeni mumbles, his head drooping a little as Edvin massages his neck. "It's good to have you here, Edvin."  
  
"Mm." Edvin hums a few bars of their music thoughtfully, still rubbing Evgeni's back. "So, Zhenya, do you like him?"  
  
Evgeni blinks his eyes open, throwing Edvin a reproachful look. "What?"  
  
"You're friends. Does that mean you like him?"  
  
"That's why I said we're *almost* friends. I don't know if I like him."  
  
Edvin *hmms* again. Evgeni raises his eyebrows at him. "Well, what do you like about him, then?"  
  
There's a brief silence. Evgeni ducks his head, thinking about it. "He works hard," he admits. "He doesn't get tired. He cares about the program, and like I said, he's good enough not to drop me." He hesitates, and Edvin seems to know there's more that he hasn't said; he just nods and waits for him to continue, watching him, idly stroking Evgeni's back. "… Most of the time, I like talking to him. He's - … warmer than he used to be. He's good company. I think he *wants* to be friends, at least."  
  
"It sounds like you like him well enough," Edvin murmurs. "He wants to?"  
  
"Mm. He's taken me out to eat a few times." Evgeni rests his forehead on his knees; his voice comes out a bit muffled. "He even paid for dinner, not that he needed to."  
  
"*Oh,*" Edvin says. His voice sounds strange, sort of concerned and knowing and confused all at once.  
  
Evgeni raises his head. "What?"  
  
"Nothing, look - here's Lyosha now." Edvin's hands slip off his back and Evgeni straightens up, stretching his arms above his head as he looks over.   
  
Alexei walks up beside him, giving Edvin an odd look as he does; he hovers next to Evgeni despite the fact that the nearest empty chair is next to Edvin. "Hello," Evgeni says mildly, looking up at him. He can't shake the feeling that he's in the middle of something.  
  
"Hello," Alexei says, sparing him a quick smile. "Edvin - how do you like our program so far?"  
  
"I was just telling Zhenya that it's beautiful," Edvin says, grinning and giving the seat beside him an inviting pat. Alexei reluctantly goes and sits down. "You skate so wonderfully together already."  
  
There's that strange tone in Edvin's voice again, Evgeni notices. Whatever it is, it makes Alexei smile.

"Thank you," Alexei says, looking at Edvin with newfound warmth. "I couldn't ask for a better partner."  
  
"Yes you could," Evgeni says flatly.   
  
Alexei raises his eyebrows and smiles over at him. "No. I couldn't."  
  
Edvin clears his throat. "Well, excuse me - I think one of my strings is a little flat, I'd better re-tune it before we start up again." And before Evgeni can argue or offer to go with him, he gets to his feet and wanders off around the edge of the rink, his violin case under his arm.   
  
While Evgeni's still staring incredulously at his retreating back, Alexei sidles into Edvin's empty seat and rests his forearm on Evgeni's shoulder. "See? I'm not the only one who thinks we should have skated pairs--"  
  
"Oh, shut up," Evgeni huffs, leaning back in his chair but not exactly dislodging Alexei's arm. "We skate well together *now*. I would have killed you back then."  
  
… He has a vague feeling that he's just admitted something, but he's not entirely sure what.  
  
"So you wouldn't kill me now?" Alexei asks.  
  
Oh. That.   
  
Evgeni can see Alexei grinning out of the corner of his eye, but if he turns to look they're going to be much too... close. "If I wouldn't let you die of the common cold, what makes you think I'd kill you?"  
  
"I take it that's a *no*," Alexei says, leaning heavily on his shoulder. Evgeni can't decide if he wants more to punch him or to  
  
… to something else.  
  
(… And he's not following this train of thought any further.)  
  
"That's a no," Evgeni agrees reluctantly, rubbing his head. Somewhere across the room, Edvin begins to play. Alexei stays leaning on him, and Evgeni finds that it's actually sort of comfortable, if… strange.  
  
"Zhen," Alexei says softly, and Evgeni jumps a little because his voice is practically right in his ear. If he focuses, he can just feel the kiss of Alexei's breath on his skin. "Do you think you'd ever do this again?"  
  
"Do what?" Evgeni asks blankly, distracted. He can't quite think.  
  
"Skate pairs with me."  
  
Evgeni turns his head without thinking and almost knocks his head against Alexei's; Alexei leans back a little, but stays very close, his eyes open and soft and intent. Evgeni finds it hard to breathe.  
  
"Maybe," he manages to say, after a moment of staring and trying not to stumble over his own tongue. He's vaguely aware that his face is turning red, although he's too distracted to care. "Don't you think we should finish this competition first, before we start talking about another one? After all, we can still lose--"  
  
"I don't mean competition," Alexei says, with a little flicker of a smile. "I mean shows, or - or even just for fun. Just skating, not competing. What do you say?"  
  
The answer in his mind is yes. Evgeni bites his tongue and tries to look away from Alexei's eyes - not quite managing it - because he can feel his face flushing red. Of course, looking away doesn't keep Alexei from seeing it. (And it doesn't keep Evgeni from seeing Alexei's smirk.) "… Let's win gold first. Then we can talk about other things."  
  
Alexei shrugs, still watching him, still smiling. Evgeni looks down at his knees and swallows nervously, an unfamiliar feeling flitting about in the pit of his stomach. His cheeks are*burning*, and he doesn't know why. He doesn't want to think about why. And why isn't Alexei teasing him?  
  
He's saved a moment later when Mishin calls, "Zhenya! Lyosha!" from the ice and Alexei hops to his feet, ruffling Evgeni's hair as he walks to the edge of the rink.  
  
Edvin wanders up beside him, his violin under his arm, and pats him on the shoulder. "That looked friendly," he observes, his eyebrows raised. "You must like him after all, Zhen."  
  
If Edvin weren't carrying a million-dollar violin, Evgeni would kick him.

They work tirelessly the rest of the day, weaving their program together, going over the steps again and again to different strokes of the violin. It's exhausting work, but satisfying. By the time they call it quits, Evgeni has almost managed to forget about how odd Edvin and Alexei are being.  
  
Until they step off the ice, at least.  
  
Edvin pulls Alexei aside while Evgeni is taking off his skates, and while Evgeni is wrestling with the laces, he can see the two of them talking intently about something. Alexei looks first alarmed, and then anxious, then embarrassed - he's *blushing*, and Evgeni feels a bizarre rush of jealousy, despite the fact that there's nothing to be jealous *of*. Edvin pats Alexei on the arm, looking… well, dreamy, but that's normal for Edvin; he starts to talk again and Alexei is nodding, wringing his hands. Evgeni finally yanks off his skates, stuffs his feet into his shoes and walks over to join them, but by then they've turned to some other subject. (Unless they really were speaking that intensely about the music all this time, which Evgeni doubts.)  
  
"I can't wait to keep working on the music tomorrow," Alexei says brightly, a large fake smile on his face. Alexei has never been a very good liar.  
  
"Good," Edvin says, smiling reassuringly at Evgeni. "Just remember what we talked about, Lyosha. … About the rhythm."  
  
"Right," Alexei says, shooting Edvin a grateful look. "I will. Well, good night, Edvin. Thank you."  
  
Evgeni wants to knock their heads together. Failing that, he decides, he's going to get Edvin alone and interrogate him about this.  
  
Unfortunately, Edvin seems to know what he's thinking, as usual. "*Well*," Edvin says, with finality. "Until tomorrow, Zhenka!" He steps closer with a theatric sweep of his arms; Evgeni leans in and hugs him and, pretending that nothing's off, kisses him on both cheeks. "Think about the song, okay?"  
  
"Of course," Evgeni says, drawing back and clapping him on the shoulder. "Good night, Edvin."  
  
"Good night!" Edvin calls, and slips away towards the door. As soon as he's gone, Evgeni turns around and gives Alexei a long, suspicious look.  
  
Alexei is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, looking vaguely annoyed. "What?" Evgeni demands.  
  
"Nothing," Alexei says quickly, the irritation fading from his face. "I - didn't realize you two were such good friends."  
  
"Well, we are," Evgeni says, defensive and frustrated. "What were you talking about?"  
  
"Nothing important," Alexei says, with a shrug that looks a little too deliberate. "Just my rhythm on one of the steps, that's all. Edvin said I wasn't feeling it right, whatever that means. But I think I understand now." He smiles at Evgeni - practically beams at him - but falters slightly when all Evgeni does is stare coldly back at him. "Anyway, it's late, isn't it? Good night, Zhenya."  
  
"Good night," Evgeni says flatly, and turns to leave first.

Whatever Edvin and Alexei are up to, they're orchestrating it well. For the next few days, while Edvin accompanies them as they work on the choreography, they never let Evgeni get Edvin alone for more than a few minutes - let alone long enough for Evgeni to take his Stradivarius hostage and demand to know what's going on.   
  
The most he manages to hear is snatches of conversation - *"Don't bother being subtle, Lyosha," Edvin says. "He won't understand that."* - and they notice him and shut up long before he can hear any more than that.  
  
He wonders if he's mishearing them, the few times he hears *he*. Maybe they're saying *she*and Edvin is giving Lyosha advice about his godforsaken *blonde girl* and Lyosha's just too embarrassed to admit it.   
  
Or maybe they're plotting to kill him.  
  
Every option he can think of sounds a little too stupid to be true.  
  
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The first chance Evgeni gets to talk to Edvin alone is when Edvin’s leaving; Tarasova proves herself useful by grabbing Alexei’s attention just as Edvin is getting into his car, and Evgeni seizes his chance. More specifically, he seizes Edvin’s arm and holds it in a grip of steel.   
  
Edvin just looks at him affectionately, like he knows, he knows... something.  
  
"What are you up to?" Evgeni demands, more loudly than he means to, digging his fingers into Edvin's arm hard enough to hurt a little.  
  
Edvin gives him a very gentle look, unperturbed. "Don't worry, Zhenechka." He gives him a disarmingly warm smile and turns away, dislodging Evgeni's hand with a shrug. "I'll see you again soon."  
  
"I hate you," Evgeni informs him, and can't quite ignore the stab of guilt that follows. "… All right, not really. But I can't stand you--"  
  
"Trust me, Zhenya." Edvin pauses, looks over his shoulder and *winks*. "Don't worry."   
  
Evgeni has a feeling that he really *shouldn’t*, but he does trust Edvin. He always has. And to be entirely fair, Edvin hasn’t killed him yet.  
  
“Fine,” he says finally, and Edvin slides into his car. “But Edvin, if I don’t know what’s going on by the next time I see you--”  
  
“I hope you know by then,” Edvin smiles, “but I suppose we’ll have to see.”  
  
Evgeni lingers on the curb after he drives away, wondering.  
  
Maybe Alexei will talk if Evgeni holds his *skates* hostage.

[[H’okay, things are going to hit the breaking point soon~ fasten your seatbelts, everyone! As usual... it'll be bitchier before it gets better.]]  
  
  
  
  
"Hey," Alexei says, when Evgeni arrives for practice the next morning. The ease with which he slouches onto the bench next to Evgeni seems oddly stilted, as if he's trying very deliberately to be casual. "Good morning. I - … how are you, Zhenya?"  
  
"Fine," Evgeni says warily, looking sideways at him. It's a lie - he's too annoyed and confused to be *fine* - but Alexei is in no position to question it. "How are you?"  
  
"I'm good," Alexei exclaims. He's smiling, but he looks tense enough to break. Evgeni feels uncomfortable just looking at him. "Great, actually. Um - Zhenya."  
  
"Yes, Lyosha?"  
  
Alexei doesn't say anything for a moment. "… There's this documentary. About skating." And he hesitates so long that Evgeni almost asks him if that's *it*; finally, he exhales and shrugs, looking away. "It looks interesting, that's all. I was wondering if - it's going to be on TV on Friday night. If you want to come over and watch it, I have a bottle of wine…"  
  
Evgeni stares at him flatly for a moment; he nearly asks *what was so hard about that?*"Trying to get me drunk again, Lyosh?"  
  
"If all it takes is half a bottle," Alexei says, a hint of a challenge in his voice. Evgeni can't stand to let it slide.  
  
So he *hmphs*, shrugs, and tugs his gloves on. "Fine. Friday."  
  
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At the very least, Alexei seems to be less depressive than he was before he spoke to Edvin; if anything, for the next few days he seems very focused and intent on the training. (And very intent on Evgeni. It's a bit disconcerting, but it's preferable to his moping.) He spends most of his time talking to Evgeni when they aren't on the ice, just making conversation. Evgeni is surprised that he doesn't particularly mind it. Alexei never seems to ask for a response; most of the time he doesn't even talk about anything important. He just talks about the weather, about various restaurants, about their skating, about Edvin's music, about other sports, about anything. Evgeni listens to everything and tries to remember if Alexei has ever been like this before. If Alexei has ever *tried*.  
  
Sometimes… sometimes, Alexei runs out of things to say and just sits beside him, his hands clasped together, his shoulder pressed lightly against Evgeni's, and it's oddly perfect; they watch the ice get resurfaced or their coaches squabble or the rain and snow falling outside and nothing needs to be said.  
  
It's times like those that make Evgeni think that Edvin is right - that for all of the years they spent hating each other, they've somehow become friends after all.   
  
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Friday night comes after a particularly difficult day at practice. Although their last rehearsal of the short program is nearly flawless, by the time they leave the rink Evgeni can't think of anything that sounds better than having a drink (or two) and watching a film for the rest of the evening; they walk over to Alexei's apartment together, and Alexei orders a pizza while Evgeni drops his things in a corner and makes himself comfortable on the couch.

"What kind did you order?" Evgeni calls, while Alexei is in the kitchen getting the wine. He shifts against the back of the couch, rolling his shoulders and trying to relax his stiff muscles.  
  
"Your favorite," Alexei calls back.  
  
Evgeni pauses, frowning in his general direction in spite of the fact that Alexei can't see it. "How would you know what my favorite kind of pizza is?"  
  
There's a brief silence. "… A lucky guess?" Alexei says eventually.  
  
Evgeni is positive that only Edvin and a few of Evgeni's old girlfriends would know that, unless he's let it slip at some point. *Why would Edvin tell Alexei that, anyway?* "How do you know it's a lucky one?"  
  
"… I mean, we'll see when it gets here."  
  
Evgeni frowns in the general direction of Alexei's voice for a while, then shakes his head and starts rooting around for the remote. Before he can find it, Alexei comes out of the kitchen and joins him on the couch, offering Evgeni a tall glass of white wine; Evgeni takes it, toasts him, and drinks deeply. He can't help but sigh, feeling the warmth of the alcohol spread down his throat.  
  
After a moment, he notices that Alexei is staring at him. He raises his eyebrows, and Alexei has the decency to blush. "Tired?"  
  
"Mm," Evgeni agrees, blinking slowly. He's tired enough to sleep already.  
  
Alexei watches him for a moment longer, and then reaches down and sets his glass carefully on the floor, getting to his feet; "Here," he murmurs, and steps around the back of the couch and drops his hands onto Evgeni's shoulders.  
  
"What are you--" Evgeni breaks off when Alexei presses his thumbs gently to either side of his spine and circles them in where he's most tense, massaging his shoulders. He has good, strong hands, and Evgeni almost groans aloud, slumping his shoulders involuntarily under Alexei's touch. "*Oh*."  
  
"I saw Edvin do this when he was visiting," Alexei says casually, somewhere far above Evgeni's head. "You looked like you were enjoying it then."  
  
"Nnh," Evgeni says (in)coherently, his remaining brain cells focused on *not* spilling his wine on the floor.  
  
"How's that?" Alexei asks, and his voice is soothing - more soothing than it has any right to be - but low and interested, too, in a way that makes Evgeni's skin prickle.  
  
"… Good." Evgeni rolls his shoulders with a sigh, leaning forward so that Alexei can reach his back. "Mm - that's good."Alexei obliges him, pressing the heels of his palms into the small of Evgeni's back; his fingers are warm and dextrous, massaging the tension out of Evgeni's muscles. It feels *fantastic*.  
  
Evgeni considers the possibility that, until now, he hasn't devoted *nearly* enough thought to the brilliance of Alexei’s hands.  
  
He blames that thought on his next sip of wine.

Either way, Evgeni melts. Alexei knows him - better than Evgeni ever thinks he does or remembers he does. Alexei knows how to use his hands. Evgeni gives up thinking entirely; in particular, he gives up the idea of being uncomfortable that Alexei has him in this position, because he can't *not* be comfortable with Alexei doing that. It's all he can do not to pass out where he's sitting.  
  
He's not entirely sure how much time passes, but after awhile Alexei stops and walks back around the couch, leaving Evgeni bent over himself and blissfully relaxed. Alexei flops onto the couch beside him and grabs the remote, flicking on the TV. Evgeni slowly straightens up, remembering what he came over for to begin with; he's feeling warm all over, and can't help a contented sigh. "Mm."  
  
Alexei looks over and smiles coyly, flipping through channels. "Better?"  
  
"Yes, thank you." He brings his wine glass to his lips and has a long drink while Alexei finds the right channel, tosses the remote aside, and settles back. "So it's a documentary about skating? Are we in it?"  
  
"I hope so," Alexei smiles.  
  
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For as much as Alexei is a bastard, Evgeni thinks - somewhat fuzzily - there is something to be said for his taste in drinks. Admittedly, they empty the bottle a bit sooner than planned, before an hour of the program has passed, but that's only because they keep racing each other to finish their glasses. Alexei divides the last of the wine very carefully between their two glasses when they reach the bottom of the bottle, and they toast each other one more time.  
  
Halfway through the film, Evgeni returns from the bathroom to find that Alexei has draped his arm across the back of the couch; he doesn't actually notice it until he sits down, at which point Alexei casually lets his arm *slip* so it cradles Evgeni's shoulders. It could almost be an accident, except for the way that Alexei's fingertips stroke the curve of his arm.  
  
Evgeni lets him get away with it. He tries not to think about why. (The wine. The wine is to blame for *everything*. In fact, the wine is somehow to blame for the fact that he wound up at Alexei's apartment to begin with. It's also the wine's fault that this particular train of thought makes sense to him.)  
  
The wine also makes everything a little bit funnier; the documentary turns out to be some sort of history of skating, and when only a few minutes of it are devoted to the two of them, Evgeni just finds it oddly hilarious. (Maybe it's the sheer idiocy of not including more about the two of them - the sheer idiocy of not making them the stars, for that matter. Or maybe it's how ridiculous he and Alexei are, too ridiculous for anyone else to understand.)He buries his face in Alexei's shoulder, laughing, and when he draws back Alexei's face is red but he's grinning.   
  
They both find excuses not to watch the TV when its focus turns to the last Olympics. Alexei quickly starts talking about their program and fretting about the death spiral, a very familiar subject by this point. Evgeni is tired of the film, anyway; he lets himself be distracted.   
  
… By Alexei's words. Definitely not by his mouth.  
  
He doesn't pay much attention to the documentary after that. Alexei's arm around his shoulders weighs him down a little, so his head keeps tipping toward Alexei's shoulder. Evgeni is *tired*, and the wine isn't helping much, making him feel warmer and softer at the edges. He blinks a lot, trying to keep his eyes open and focused on the TV. When that doesn't work, he digs his nails into his palm, but even that dull pain doesn't really help.   
  
He finds it impossible to stay focused on what the commentators are saying, and it doesn't help that he's barely following the dialogue from once sentence to another. Before long, his head is drooping again. He closes his eyes for just a few blissful seconds - at least, he means it to be seconds, but the weight of a good day's training presses down on his eyelids and he winds up yawning weakly and leaning over against Alexei's side without opening his eyes. And then his head finds Alexei's shoulder and Alexei's fingers curl around his upper arm gently and he feels… easy, relaxed, *warm*, and he's asleep before he can ponder anything else.

When Evgeni wakes up, it's pitch black and he's more horizontal than he remembers being.   
  
There's a blanket draped across his back, gently tucked in around his shoulders, but Alexei is gone. And his head hurts. A bit of groping around determines that he's still on the couch; a glance at the glowing clock on the table by the couch determines that it's about four AM. He's still in his clothes, and his teeth taste unpleasant since he never brushed his teeth, and they're supposed to be at practice in a matter of hours. Hours that he would usually spend asleep, but still. Evgeni sits up, rubbing his head in an attempt to clear it - he still feels a bit on the fuzzy side - and peers around the room for landmarks.  
  
While he gathers his senses, Evgeni decides that he'll find his things, slip out, and call Alexei first thing in the morning as soon as he's showered and washed his face and prepared himself to convince Mishin that he has *not* been drinking.  
  
It sounds like a perfect plan. And it is, more or less; he finds his shoes and other belongings with a minimum of stubbed toes and is tiptoeing his way to the door when a light switches on somewhere in the depths of the apartment. Evgeni freezes like a burglar caught in the act and turns around to see Alexei standing in the doorway of his bedroom, rubbing his eyes. "Zhenya?" he asks, wearily.  
  
"Sorry," Evgeni says, straightening up and turning his back to the door, resting his hand on the knob. "I was just… going home."  
  
"Why?" Alexei asks, yawning and walking over to him. "It's late."  
  
"I don't have any spare clothes," Evgeni says lamely.  
  
Alexei gives him a look, though his annoyance seems subdued, almost languid. "And of course you couldn't possibly borrow something of mine?"  
  
"I--" Evgeni thinks he might be blushing. He feels ridiculous enough. "You were asleep."  
  
"*Zhenya*," Alexei says - or rather, sighs, stepping closer to him as he does so. His eyes are heavy with sleep, but he's looking intently at Evgeni, looking through him. "I'm awake now. Why don't you just stay?"  
  
"I'd sleep better in my own bed," Evgeni mumbles. He's just making excuses for himself now, and he knows it.  
  
"If you don't like the couch," Alexei says petulantly, "you're always welcome in the *bed*."  
  
Evgeni looks up abruptly, startled.  
  
For several long moments, Alexei doesn't seem to realize that he's said anything out of place. Then, Evgeni watches realization - with a faint tinge of horror - dawn on his face.   
  
"I," Alexei begins, but can't seem to make anything else come out. "I, I mean--"  
  
"*Fuck*," Evgeni says, and tries to step back. His back connects with the door; an odd kind of panic seizes in his chest. "Fuck, Lyosha, that's what this is, you still - you want--"  
  
Alexei's mouth falls open slightly, and the fear in his eyes must mirror Evgeni's. "No. *No*, Zhenya, that's not what I mean, I mean I--" Evgeni starts to turn away, grabbing for the doorknob, but Alexei catches Evgeni's hand in his and steps in closer - close enough that Evgeni shivers, pressing his back against the door. "*Wait*, Zhenka, please."  
  
Evgeni waits. His own breathing sounds harsh to his ears, and he can't look at Alexei. Not now. Why *now?*  
  
"It's not what you think," Alexei says faintly. He seems to falter, then, as though he doesn't know exactly what to say next. "I didn't want to ruin everything. I just--" And he hesitates, his fingers stiff, digging into the back of Evgeni's hand. "… Listen, you understand, don't you? I don't have to say--"  
  
Evgeni doesn't, but before he can say *no* Alexei lifts his free hand to Evgeni's cheek and his touch is softer than Evgeni expects, and Alexei leans in until the space between them is gone.   
  
There’s a moment, a breath - and then Alexei kisses him.  
  
Something *breaks* in Evgeni's chest then, something frantic and frail and terrified, and he knows and he doesn’t. It’s familiar and strange and wrong and beautiful and he can’t breathe - Alexei’s mouth on his - and it feels like he’s eighteen again, and he can’t, he *can’t*  
  
He shoves Alexei off of him, pushes him away against the nearest wall and grabs his bag off the floor, wrenches the door open and doesn't stop running until he reaches the street outside.

Evgeni realizes when he's halfway across the street that he left his coat behind, but he doesn't dare go back for it. By the time he reaches his own door, he's miserable and shaking with cold; his fingers are numb and trembling as he tries to fit the key into the lock. When it opens at last, he collapses inside and shoves it closed behind him, sliding down to sit against the door.  
  
He slumps there in the dark, staring at a point on the floor without really seeing it, until his breathing has evened out. Then he drags himself off the floor and switches on a light, throwing his things in a corner. He does it all robotically, in a daze; he brushes his teeth, avoiding his own eyes in the mirror, changes into his pajamas and crawls into bed.  
  
Once there, he buries his face in a pillow and tries to suffocate himself to sleep. It doesn't work. He can see Alexei's face too clearly in his mind - the surprise, the fear, the guilt in his eyes just before Evgeni turned away.  
  
And just as clearly, the way Alexei had looked at him just before he kissed him, like he'd been waiting to do this for years, the last of his self-restraint finally gone.  
  
And the way Alexei kissed him - *kissed him*, Evgeni doesn't want to think about it, but he can't help it - the way Alexei kissed him wasn't like it used to be, all those years ago. Evgeni traces his fingers across his lips and stares up at the ceiling in the dark, baffled and shaken. It had felt less like an act of violence and more like possession. Like Alexei had kissed him just because, because he'd wanted to, not because he wanted to shut him up or win whatever battle it was that they were fighting - kissed him just because, because he*wanted him*.  
  
Evgeni rolls over and tells himself he isn't lonely now. That doesn't work, either.  
  
The next time he looks at the clock, it's five AM, and he's still wide awake.  
  
And he wonders, is Alexei?  
  
It takes Evgeni half an hour to persuade himself to call; eventually, he decides that he has to, because how else are they going to face each other at practice tomorrow, not knowing - and their coaches will know something is wrong, Mishin will *know*. All the same, once he's gotten up and switched on the light, he stares at the phone for a long while before he dials Alexei's number. He doesn't know what he's going to say. The phone rings and rings and rings against his ear and Evgeni feels nauseous.   
  
Click.  
  
*Hello, you've reached Lyosha Yagudin. Please leave a number and your name…*  
  
Evgeni clenches his hand around the phone, listening to the voicemail incredulously. As soon as it beeps, asking him to leave a message, he snaps the phone shut and calls again.  
  
It seems to take forever to ring, and Alexei doesn't pick up. His cheerful voicemail begins to play again and Evgeni gives a sharp little sob of frustration, slapping the phone closed and throwing it on the floor.  
  
He stares at it for a long moment, waiting for it to light up when Alexei calls him back.  
  
Alexei doesn't.  
  
--  
  
Evgeni's trying to force himself to sleep again - never mind what time it is, now, it's the principle of the thing, he is not going to stay up all night thinking about Alexei - when his phone beeps quietly and before he can think rationally he's fallen out of bed scrambling for it.  
  
It's a text. '*I'm sorry*'.  
  
Evgeni isn't sure how long he spends gazing at the screen, trying to think of anything, anything to reply with that isn't completely inadequate.  
  
*Just forget about it*. Or *This isn't how it was supposed to go*. Or *I wish I hadn’t tried to leave*. Or *What are we supposed to do now?*  
  
Finally he settles for '*Its okay, I will see you tomorrow*' and tries not to think about how little that is, how insincere. It doesn't work, anyway, just like nothing else does. He doesn't sleep.  
  
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The next day, Alexei doesn't show up to practice.  
  
Evgeni sits there with Mishin and buries his face in his hands while Tarasova dials Alexei's number over and over again.

Alexei never picks up, but after about half a dozen calls from his coach he does text her: "'Sorry, I am taking a day off'," Tarasova reads from her phone, her lips pursed in a mixture of worry and annoyance. "That boy! What does he think he's doing?"  
  
Mishin mumbles something about that being "just like him", but his heart doesn't seem to be in it today. While Tarasova is trying to call him one last time, Mishin turns to Evgeni, fixing him with a serious look. "Zhenya, do you know what's going on?"  
  
Evgeni has never really been able to lie to his coach, just embellish the truth. "We - … we had a, an argument yesterday." Mishin's frown intensifies. "I didn't think it was this bad! Alexei and I, we do argue sometimes, I didn't think--"  
  
Mishin sighs, massaging his temples, and gives Evgeni the *I-am-disappointed-in-your-performance-today* look. Evgeni shrinks a little. "Can't you go find him, Zhenya? We don't have time for this."  
  
… And really, with Alexei missing, it's not as if he has anything else to do. "… I'll try." Tarasova snaps her phone shut; Evgeni hauls himself up out of his chair, catching her eye. "I'm going to look for him," he says reluctantly. He almost adds *it's my fault he isn't here*, but that's more honest than he needs to be, isn't it?  
  
Tarasova gives him an odd look, and almost starts to say something, but Evgeni flees the rink before he can be made to explain himself again.  
  
--  
  
He calls Alexei again on his way out the door. It takes exactly six rings before it goes to voicemail.  
  
*Hello, you've reached Lyosha Yagudin…*  
  
Beep.  
  
"Alexei Konstantinovich, answer your fucking phone."  
  
He supposes he could apologize, or ask Alexei to come back, or something more diplomatic - but he'll be damned if he's going to apologize to Alexei's *voicemail*. It's Alexei's own fault if he won't pick up. It isn't like Evgeni told him to leave.  
  
Evgeni can't decide if he's offended or furious or upset or worried or a little (a lot) of each. Alexei *would* do this to him now.  
  
The first place he tries is Alexei's apartment. He hammers on the door for five minutes, waits for a while, shouts through the door that he just wants to talk, and then presses his ear to the door and listens until he's mostly sure that there's no one inside. Either Alexei is ignoring him thoroughly or he's gone off somewhere else.

Next, Evgeni goes in search of Alexei's car. It isn't there. *Wonderful* - Alexei's probably gone back to St Petersburg. Or on a road trip. Either way, Evgeni is going to strangle him for not leaving so much as a fucking sign.  
  
And he's more or less out of ideas. He'd expected Alexei to have the decency to be there if Evgeni came looking for him. But after he's spent so long lingering outside Alexei's apartment, waiting and checking his phone and feeling put-upon, that he's afraid one of Alexei’s neighbors will have him arrested, he has to move on to his last resort.   
  
He takes a deep breath, tells himself to stop being so angry, and calls Edvin.  
  
The phone rings forever - if Edvin doesn't pick up, Evgeni is going to scream - but finally,*click*, and a familiarly soothing voice meets his ears. "Hello, Edvin Marton."  
  
"Edvin, I need you to tell me--"  
  
"... This is Zhenya?"  
  
"Yes, of course. *Tell me what's wrong with him.*"  
  
"What's wrong with who, Zhenya."  
  
"With *Lyosha*."  
  
"What's *wrong* with him?"  
  
"Last night, he--" Evgeni lowers his voice, glances around, and mumbles against the phone. "Last night, he invited me over - I fell asleep, and when I woke up he *kissed* me."  
  
There's an expectant silence. Evgeni waits tensely for an explanation.   
  
"… Yes," Edvin says finally. "And then?"  
  
"And then *what*?"  
  
"What did you do?"  
  
Evgeni frowns at the phone. "I left, of course. What did you think...?"  
  
There's another brief pause. "Oh," Edvin says at last, in a tone of great exasperation. "Oh,*Zhenya*."  
  
"What?" Evgeni demands. "Edvin, *what?* He didn't come to practice today, he won't answer his phone, and he isn't anywhere, and I need to find him because he’s an idiot and we don't have *time* for this, and you *know* about this, so *God help me* Edvin if you don't just tell me--"  
  
"I'm not going to tell you," Edvin says firmly. "But listen, Zhenya. *He* will. Go and look for him--"  
  
"*I am looking for him*," Evgeni snarls.  
  
"--and when you find him, make him tell you everything. All right? You would know better than I do where he's gone to--"  
  
"If I knew where to look, I would have found him already," Evgeni snaps. "*Edvin*--"  
  
"Go on, Zhenechka." Edvin sounds vaguely despairing. "Think about it. I don't know where he is, either, so nothing I can tell you will help. And save yelling at me for later, okay?"  
  
Evgeni grips the phone so hard that he's truly afraid he's going to break it, breathes furiously for a moment without knowing what to say, and then snaps it shut and stuffs it into his pocket. Fine. If Edvin won’t help him, he’ll just track Alexei down himself.  
  
And then kill both of them.

Tracking Alexei down is easier said than done. To put it mildly, Moscow isn't the sort of place you want to lose someone in.  
  
Evgeni spends about an hour walking around, peering in windows, dialing Alexei's number every few minutes in the bland hope that he'll eventually get tired of listening to it ring and pick up. He goes to every bar in the area, to the sushi restaurant where they had dinner before (and now that dinner is strange to think about, and the way Alexei kept looking at him - he can't even think about it, not until he *knows* what's going on).  
  
He doesn't give up immediately after that, but that's mostly just because he doesn't want to admit to himself that he's completely run out of ideas. Assuming that Alexei hasn't actually left the city - or the general area - Evgeni had really been sure that he'd find him getting smashed in a bar somewhere. It wouldn't be the first time Alexei had decided to drown his sorrows in alcohol. But apparently Alexei has chosen today to change his habits.  
  
Finally, when about three hours have passed since the start of his search, Evgeni sits down heavily on a bench on the sidewalk and wracks his brain for anything, anything he could have missed; he dials Alexei's number three more times, absently, while he's thinking.*Think*, Edvin had said. Where hasn't he looked?  
  
It's the faint, oft-ignored grumblings of his stomach that finally make him think of his last stop. The pizza restaurant. The place Alexei took him out on that first night, when Alexei challenged Evgeni to be his partner.  
  
There's only one problem: Alexei was driving, and Evgeni has no idea where the restaurant is.  
  
Still, he can't not try now that he's thought of it. He trudges back to his apartment, gets his car, and drives out into the streets, squinting around for landmarks or familiar cars as he goes. He remembers approximately the direction Alexei took him in, and some streets look familiar, but for the most part he is quickly lost.  
  
He considers texting Alexei something along the lines of *I hope you're going to regret it if I get lost and murdered in an alley somewhere because you wouldn't pick up the phone*, but he doesn't quite dare take his eyes off the road for that long. And Alexei probably wouldn't read it until it was too late, anyway.  
  
He almost gives up after the first half-hour. But by this point, he isn't sure he could find his way back anyway, and there it is after three more streets: he never would have thought he'd be so happy to see a neon pizza sign.  
  
As he pulls up next to the curb out front, he spots Alexei's car a few spaces ahead and lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.  
  
Alexei isn't gone. He's just an idiot.  
  
Unfortunately for Evgeni's nerves, reality kicks in as he's getting out of the car. He’s been so caught up in *finding* Alexei that he hasn’t been thinking about what he has to deal with now that he's found him. A part of him wants to turn around, now that he's determined that Alexei is alive and hasn't left Moscow, but he can't bring himself to. Somehow that would be a thousand times worse than facing Alexei now.

Evgeni edges in the door to the restaurant and peers across the room, staring around for a moment until he spots what he's pretty sure is Alexei, far back in a dark corner of the restaurant. When the waitress comes, he explains he's come to join his friend over there. (He decides not to explain that he has plans to kill him for wandering off - some details are best kept to himself.)  
  
"Oh, good," the waitress says, looking deeply put-upon. "We wondered if he was waiting for someone."  
  
Evgeni isn't sure what she means until he approaches Alexei's table and realizes that it's conspicuously empty - Alexei hasn't ordered anything. And he's probably been here for a few hours at least. Alexei is writing something on his napkin, his head bowed over the table, one hand tangled up in his hair.  
  
Evgeni places his hand on the back of the chair opposite him and draws a deep, stabilizing breath. "*Here* you are," he says, loudly. He means it to sound angry, because he is, he's furious, but a note of relief creeps into his voice before he can stop it.   
  
Alexei jumps like a startled animal and looks up at him like he's seeing a ghost. His mouth works silently for a moment, and then he crumples up his napkin and stuffs it into his pocket. "Zhenya?"  
  
"Where the fuck have you been?" Evgeni hisses, lowering his voice so the people at the next table over can't hear. "Do you have any idea how worried I - your coach was? I've - we've been calling you all day."  
  
"I'm sorry," Alexei says. He doesn't look sincere. He looks about as tired as Evgeni feels. "I needed a day off. To think."  
  
"Fine," Evgeni says, and pulls out a chair, sinking decisively into it. "Think. I will wait. Are you hungry?"  
  
Alexei looks at him for a long moment as though he's trying to figure him out; Evgeni crosses his arms and stares impassively back. He doesn't think it shows that he's--  
  
"You're shaking," Alexei says. He sounds confused and concerned, as though he still can't work out what to do with Evgeni here.  
  
Evgeni clenches his hands into fists. Of course he is, he's nervous; this might as well be the Olympics again for how scared he is, but the fact is that he's here and he doesn't intend to leave. "It doesn't matter," he says, his tone purposefully light. "Are you hungry, Lyosha? I'll get us something."  
  
Alexei nods slowly, looking down at his menu; after a moment of reading it listlessly, he pushes it over to Evgeni's side of the table. "Whatever you want, I'll have some. Zhenya, when you say you'll wait--"  
  
"I mean I'll wait until you tell me," Evgeni says, without looking at him. The trick to having the nerve to speak, so far, seems to be avoiding eye contact. "… Whatever you want to tell me. Listen, Lyosha - last night was stupid, we were both tired, things were…" He means to say I'm *sorry*, but he trails off instead. "And we don't have time for this, we have to… So, if you want. I will listen now."  
  
"Oh," Alexei says. He looks a bit flustered, actually. Good. Evgeni is flustered too, so they're even. "You've - have you been talking to Edvin?"  
  
Evgeni makes a derisive noise which, he believes, adequately sums up his opinion of Edvin at the moment. "Yes. He didn't tell me anything *useful*, if you're wondering."  
  
"Oh," Alexei says again. "… Zhenya, it's going to be a while. I left today because I want to say this *right*."  
  
"That's fine," Evgeni says, staring down at the menu again. "I won't distract you."  
  
"You always distract me," Alexei says automatically, and then snaps his mouth shut, looking embarrassed. Evgeni blinks a little and looks at him over the top of the menu, raising his eyebrows. Alexei drops his face into the palm of his hand, his cheeks tinged red. "… Never mind. It'll be fine."  
  
"Right," Evgeni agrees, and coughs, and stares down at the tablecloth.  
  
Because he's feeling particularly generous, he chooses a few items off the menu as soon as the waitress comes over, intending to pay the check later. He makes a mental note to tip the staff especially well, assuming they get out of the restaurant before they're *thrown* out.  
  
And then Evgeni waits.

Their meal comes. Evgeni is starving by this point, so he's able to occupy quite a lot of time by making himself eat slowly; Alexei picks over the food, mostly nibbling and cutting his pizza into smaller and smaller pieces. Evgeni almost decides to get Alexei a glass of wine or two to loosen his tongue, but - on second thought, after yesterday, he decides he'd rather they both stayed sober.  
  
Waiting turns out to be less interesting than he'd expected. Evgeni doodles animals on his napkin for a while, until he runs out of room and has to resort to half-heartedly shading in the fur on his cat- and dog-shaped scribbles. Every time he looks up, Alexei is either frowning thoughtfully at the tablecloth or gazing out the window. After an hour and a half, Evgeni is starting to feel vaguely despairing, and wondering if this was such a brilliant idea to begin with.  
  
But on the other hand, if they don't do this now, Alexei will probably be a coward and decide not to say anything - and Evgeni will have to put up with Alexei moping and staring at him for the rest of their practices. He's fairly sure he couldn't bear that.   
  
But finally, just as Evgeni is beginning to seriously consider getting at least *himself* drunk for this, Alexei sighs decisively and nods to himself. He's still gazing out the street outside (which is *dark* by now, for God's sake), but he says, "All right."  
  
"Oh, good," Evgeni says flatly. "I think the restaurant's closing soon. I hope this isn't going to take as long as it took you to *think*, Lyosha."  
  
"I thought you said you were going to *listen*," Alexei says, a flicker of a smile on his lips. "Zhenya, bear with me - for once in your life."  
  
Evgeni grumbles a little, but scoots his chair around the edge of the table so he's closer to Alexei, leaning in so Alexei can keep his voice down. In all honesty, he really does want to know what Alexei has to say; the apprehension is making his head hurt.  
  
Alexei clears his throat. "There is no blonde girl."  
  
… Of all the things he'd expected Alexei to say, that one wasn't high on the list. Evgeni blinks slowly at him, trying to work out what that has to do with - anything. "What?"  
  
Alexei drops his eyes for a second, shaking his head. "Actually - that's not quite right." He looks up again, looks right *at* Evgeni, a crooked, anxious smile on his lips. "There is. But the blonde girl - the person I've been talking about. It's you."  
  
Evgeni opens his mouth and finds he has no idea *what* to say to that. Except, "Oh." And, a moment later, when his mind has caught up with the conversation, "Wait, you mean--"   
  
Alexei spreads his hands, feigning nonchalance. "That's it. That's. I've dreaming about you. I've been trying to tell you. I like you." It sounds very simple that way, except it *isn't*. Alexei doesn't seem to have anything else to add. There's a brief silence while they stare at each other.  
  
Evgeni finally manages, "Since when…?"  
  
Alexei snorts self-deprecatingly, looking down at the tablecloth. "I don't know. Since I've liked anyone. Since we were kids, since we met - since always."  
  
"I - but." But that doesn't even make sense. "Since we *met?* So you bullied me because you*liked* me, is that it?"  
  
"No," Alexei says. He has the decency to look vaguely ashamed. "No, that's not why. But I*did*. I just never - I didn't know until after I retired and I realized I missed you. I missed the competition, too, but mostly I missed *you*. I tried, with other people - with women. And I can't do it."  
  
"So you're gay," Evgeni tries. "That doesn't mean you have to like *me*--"  
  
"I'm not gay, Zhenya." Alexei gives him a long, steady look. "And - look even if I was, I don't know, it wouldn't matter. All I want is *you*."  
  
Evgeni leans back in his chair a little.

It's not that he didn't expect something… *something* along these lines. Alexei did kiss him, after all, he'd expected - but this is different. He'd expected something like the Alexei he used to know, the Alexei he used to fight, the Alexei who used to kiss him when he tried to leave. He'd been expecting something less like a confession and more like a confrontation, not like *this*, with Alexei watching him and trying to smile in the face of Evgeni's less-than-enthusiastic reaction.  
  
He always did expect Evgeni to like him more than Evgeni actually did.  
  
The silence between them has gone on too long. Evgeni clears his throat, running his fingers through his hair. "When you say you want - me. You mean…"  
  
Alexei hesitates, still looking at him, searching his face. "… Zhenya. I'm not asking you to sleep with me." *Again*, he doesn't need to say.  
  
Evgeni eyes him with more disbelief than he realizes he feels. "Then what are you asking? Or saying, whatever it is you're doing."  
  
"Will you go out with me?" Alexei asks.   
  
It's simple and soft, the way he says it, and Evgeni can't quite breathe in the silence that follows.  
  
Evgeni opens his mouth. Closes it. Closes his eyes for a moment and tries to process that. "You mean--" He shakes his head in a vain effort clear it and looks around the restaurant. "… You mean like this."  
  
"Well, no," Alexei says. "I was thinking I'd wear a suit."  
  
"Oh," Evgeni says. That doesn’t really help. "… I'm not going to wear a dress, Lyosha, if that's what you're after."  
  
"Fine," Alexei says, with a little bit of a laugh; he reaches across the table and takes Evgeni's hand, which is curiously intimate for such a small gesture, running his thumb across Evgeni's knuckles. "Just once, Zhenya, to try it."  
  
"Wearing a dress? I've already--"  
  
"I mean dating me. You idiot," Alexei adds, affectionately. Evgeni is too stuck on *dating me*to think of a retort. Then Alexei continues, sobering a little, "Just once, and if you don't want to go again I promise I'll forget about it. I'll still be your partner, we'll skate together either way, so…"  
  
"I - all right," Evgeni says, abruptly, before he can think about it. "All right, just once." Just once, and then… a part of Evgeni's mind is fixed on the dim hope that after that, he can just forget about this whole thing. "When?"  
  
"A few days," Alexei suggests, seemingly reluctant to let go of his hand. Evgeni squeezes his hand gently, for stability, and can't decide if he regrets it or not when Alexei smiles at him. "Our coaches will kill us otherwise. After today, I'll be lucky if Tatiana doesn't put me on a leash."  
  
"You're not going to tell them," Evgeni says, feeling a new rush of horror at the thought of Mishin knowing he's *on a date* with Alexei.  
  
"No," Alexei says hastily, "no, I don't think anyone else needs to - well, Edvin will want to know."  
  
"Edvin," Evgeni realizes suddenly. He drops Alexei's hand with a scowl. "*Edvin*. So this is what you two were… I should have known, he *would*--"  
  
"I didn't ask him for advice!" Alexei says defensively. "He came up to me in practice that first day and started talking about how great you were, how he'd been friends with you for a long time and he always noticed when someone was looking at you. And then he kept pestering me until I admitted it." He's blushing a little. "He said as soon as he heard all that about the blonde girl, he knew. He told me, 'I won't tell you to leave Zhenya alone, but stop lying to him'. And then he said he'd help."  
  
Evgeni frowns at him for a moment longer, but he can't really blame Alexei for Edvin being… well, *Edvin*. Edvin's always been a romantic. "Fine," he mutters, making a mental note to have a *word* with his friend later. "How about next Friday?"  
  
"Fine," Alexei says, looking relieved. "I'll make a reservation."  
  
Evgeni nods, looking down and fiddling with his fork; there's something tense and afraid caught in his chest, a lump in his throat. It isn't that he's angry at Alexei, or even particularly upset. He’s just *lost*, and he has no real idea how he’s supposed to react. He could handle Alexei being hateful or aggressive or lewd; he *expects* that.  
  
And maybe he's wrong.   
  
Maybe he's been wrong for a long time.

[[haaaay bbs! So, some (un)fortunate news: I’m about to go off on my summer vacation and I’m going to have limited time to write for a while. :( I’ll still update - frequently, I hope! - but just so you know, it might be less often than usual. Thanks for sticking with me, you guys! I had no idea this fic was going to get so long when I started it. XD 40 parts! And if my plans work out, there’s plenty more to come.]]  
  
  
  
  
Alexei drives him home, suggesting that they come back for Evgeni's car tomorrow; Evgeni agrees, too tired to think of another way. Alexei switches on the radio as they drive, probably so that they don't have to talk. He winds up singing along with some trashy pop song before too long, while Evgeni rests his eyes and listens. Alexei has a handsome voice when he sings, all low and dark and rough around the edges.  
  
*Alexei's voice. Alexei's hands.  
  
What else do you like about him, Zhenya?*  
  
He doesn't realize he's fallen asleep until he's startled awake by Alexei's hand on his shoulder what feels like a moment later; it takes him a second to realize that the car has stopped and they're already back. "Sorry," Alexei says; Evgeni doesn't know what for. "I thought about carrying you up to your apartment, but…"  
  
Evgeni laughs mutedly, trying not to stare at Alexei's face, awash in moonlight from the window. "It's all right. I… didn't sleep well." He didn't mean to admit that.  
  
"Sorry," Alexei says again, more softly this time.  
  
Evgeni shakes his head, reaching over and patting Alexei awkwardly on the arm. "No, it's…" He doesn't know what to say, so he just shrugs. "Thank you for the ride - good night, Lyosha."  
  
"Good night," Alexei says, and leans forward - Evgeni thinks he stops breathing for a second, expecting - and kisses Evgeni on the cheek.  
  
A small, traitorous voice in the back of his voice suggests that Alexei could kiss him, right now, and Evgeni wouldn't stop him; but this is all right, too, how Alexei lingers for a moment, cheek to cheek, so still that Evgeni can feel the soft tickle of his breath. Then he draws away far enough for Evgeni to see him smile and reaches across him to open the door.   
  
"You're coming back to practice tomorrow?" Evgeni asks, quietly.  
  
"Yeah," Alexei says, leaving the door open and resting his hand on Evgeni's shoulder. He smiles. "I'm sure we're not too far behind schedule."  
  
"If your coach doesn't kill you, Mishin will," Evgeni warns him, slowly sidling out of the car; he leans in the doorway for a moment, half on the sidewalk, squashing down the ridiculous desire to ask Alexei up to his room. "Well - good night."  
  
"Good night again," Alexei says, and his smile is the last thing Evgeni sees before he shuts the door and starts up to his apartment.  
  
A quiet echo of Alexei's singing is stuck in his head all the way up to his room.  
  
He's tired enough to make it out of his clothes and into bed without pause for thought, and he's asleep nearly as soon as he falls onto the pillows, but his train of thought carries on into his dreams.  
  
*Alexei.*  
  
The first time Alexei punched him.  
  
The first time Alexei saw him do his Biellman spin and laughed at him for it, and Evgeni bit his tongue and didn't stop.  
  
The first time Alexei lost to him.  
  
The first time Alexei kissed him, and Evgeni always thought, *this is what rivals do. It's just one more way we fight.*  
  
*I could never hate anyone as much as I hate you, Lyosha.*  
  
He turns over, the moonlight from the window shining on his face.  
  
*I could never love anyone as much as I hate you.  
  
I could never miss anyone as much.  
  
I could never want anyone as much.  
  
Lyosha, I could never have you, could I?*  
  
--  
  
At around midnight, Evgeni wakes up and stares at the ceiling and comes to the conclusion that he's lying to himself.  
  
He falls asleep soon after that, but the thought isn't gone in the morning.

[[uuughhh, terrible news. :( I just found out that one of the places I’m staying for a while won’t have internet after all, so I don’t know when I’ll be able to post again. Hopefully I’ll be able to post before I get back, but if not, I’m really sorry guys. ;\_;]]  
  
  
  
Edvin calls the next day just as he's getting out of bed. Evgeni glares at the phone for a minute before he answers it.  
  
"Good morning, Zhenya," Edvin says cheerfully.  
  
"I hate you," Evgeni says half-heartedly, hunting around for his shirt. "I can't believe you--"  
  
"Oh, stop it," Edvin laughs. It's no fun abusing Edvin when he takes it all in stride, Evgeni thinks. "How was your date with Lyosha?"  
  
Evgeni frowns. "I haven't been on one yet."  
  
"Oh? What were you doing last night?"  
  
"We just - had dinner. And talked." Edvin makes a faint *hmmm* noise and Evgeni scowls. "It wasn't a *date*."  
  
"Okay, Zhenya. How many times have you had dinner with him?"  
  
"… Three? One day he was sick, and one night we just watched TV - *they weren't dates*, Edvin. They were - we were - *I* was just being friendly." And if they *were* on dates, nobody informed Evgeni.  
  
"You're a terrible liar, Zhenya."  
  
"Oh, shut up, Edvin." The worst part is, Evgeni knows it. But he's not about to tell Edvin that. "I'm just going out with him on Friday to get him out of my hair. He said he'd leave me alone after that."  
  
"Zhenya…" Edvin sounds somewhere between amused and annoyed. "Do you know what he told me last night?"  
  
"No." … All right, so Evgeni is a little curious. "What?"  
  
"He said you fell asleep on the way home." Edvin pauses, maybe for emphasis or maybe just to annoy Evgeni. "He said you looked beautiful."  
  
"What--" Evgeni stops in the middle of yanking his pants on, baffled. "He said what?"  
  
"He said he wished he could kiss you, Zhenya."  
  
"I--" His face is *burning*. "Edvin, stop - why would he *tell you* that?"  
  
Edvin hums contentedly. Evgeni can almost see him smiling. "I don't know, Zhenya, you should ask him."  
  
"… I don't believe you,” Evgeni mumbles, scrubbing a hand across his face.  
  
"What?"  
  
"You made that up."  
  
"Zhenya…" Edvin sighs into his ear. "I'm your friend, aren't I?"  
  
"Maybe," Evgeni mumbles.   
  
"Yes, I am. So I want you to be happy. So why would I lie to you?"  
  
Evgeni opens his mouth and finds that he has no retort for that. He looks down and tries to focus on pulling on his socks, but it takes him several tries to get them on his feet. His throat has gone dry.  
  
"… Zhenya." Edvin's voice is gentle again. "I'm not lying to you. And I wouldn't be trying to interfere if I didn't think it would make you happy. I got him to stop lying to you - I hope I can get you to stop lying to him."  
  
"I'm not lying to him."  
  
"Of course, you'll have to stop lying to yourself first."  
  
That hits a little too close to home. "Fuck you. Why can't you just let me deal with it?"  
  
"I'm going to," Edvin says wearily. "You have to, anyway. But right now I'm trying to give you advice."  
  
“Fine. Give me advice.”  
  
“I don’t think I’m wrong. But even if I’m wrong, Zhenya, I think you should try - and think about it, really think. You can do that, can’t you?”  
  
“Of course I can do that,” Evgeni mutters, feeling vaguely insulted. “Is that all?”  
  
“If you do like him after all, tell him.”  
  
“Fine,” Evgeni says coolly, not really paying attention to what he’s agreeing to. “Anything else?”  
  
“... That’s all, Zhenka. Call me if you need anything. I’ll see you in a few weeks for rehearsals, all right?”  
  
“All right. Fine.”  
  
“Good luck.”  
  
“I don’t need--”  
  
Edvin hangs up. Evgeni huffs, tossing the phone onto the bed and going to get his coat.  
  
This time, he catches himself trying not to think about Alexei.