

# Sing for me

Von Siberianchan

## Kapitel 3:

### Chapter 03

He went to the boarding house, the usual half-hour walk to the Bundschuhstraße seemingly endless tonight, and arrived when the sky was just beginning to take on that transparent, unreal grey that announced the upcoming burst of colour that was the sunrise, sneaking in without anybody noticing.

When he undressed – carefully as to not rise his room mates – and slipped under his blanket, the sky was already tinted in rosy golden tones.

Yuuri couldn't care less. As soon as his head touched the pillow, his eyelids, already heavy from the exhaustion and a woken-through night, lowered and he fell into a dreamless, light sleep.

He managed to sleep through the rustle and bustle of four men waking up, getting dressed and talking to each other about last night and what they had planned for this day.

It lasted only a few hours; when he woke up, the sun had fully risen, but was still standing fairly low.

His stomach was a tight, painful knot with a hollow centre; it was enough to almost make him vomit. In addition, his throat was raw and every little swallow he did set it on fire.

Very likely he sounded like a horseshoe run over a washing board. Even if Mr. Feltsman had not already sent him home to for the next few days, he most certainly would have done so now.

So, there he was, with a few days off. What was he to do with this time?

Most definitely not getting breakfast now. Mrs Haubener would kill him if he asked for her to warm up the kitchen again and honestly, Yuuri had better uses for his little money in mind than to go to an inn. Maybe he'd stop at a bakery. Or maybe just try and risk his life to get some hot tea from Mrs. Haubener or one of her helpers. (Tea wasn't as troublesome as a whole breakfast.)

Or maybe, he decided as he got dressed, he'd skip that as well. It wouldn't be the first time he went hungry for a day or so, even though the last time was a very, very distant memory and it had been a rather short period of poverty before Celestino was appointed head director of the Scala and could feed them properly again.

The mass was empty, sans a few couples who met there, sitting at a table and talking in a low murmur.

Yuuri discovered Georgi, who seemed to be in deep conversation with a dark-haired girl that looked like she was from the ballet corps.

Head lowered, he quickly ushered past them, but it was too late – Georgi looked up, noticed him and waved.

Oh no...

Yuuri wanted to hurry away, but he already had excused himself from his girl and was getting up and walking towards him.

So, Yuuri stayed.

Georgi came up to him. "Hey. You ok?"

Of course. Yuuri's throat clenched up a bit and he coughed slightly. "I... I think I'm fine. I guess. Mr. Feltsman told me to take a few days off."

"Do so. He'll get mad if you show your face at the opera house when he ordered you to rest." Georgi lifted a hand to place it on Yuuri's shoulder, but then had the good sense to leave it be. "I... well, I was worried when you didn't come back last night. Johannes too. You were out?"

"Not really." Yuuri shook his head. "Hid in one of the practise rooms, actually."

"Ah, I see."

"Sorry."

Now the hand did land on Yuuri's shoulder. "It's alright. You don't look too good, though."

As if Yuuri didn't know that. "Just need some fresh air." He swallowed. "Thanks for worrying."

Georgi smiled. "Get well, I, uh..."

"No more plans on making your ex-fianceé regret her life choices?" Yuuri asked.

Georgi shrugged. "Maybe. A little. But Maria is just so sweet and kind and..."

Yuuri felt a chuckle bubble up in his throat. "Then get back to her. I hear girls don't take kindly to being left waiting."

Georgi laughed. "Heard that too – so... you're here tonight?"

"Probably. Got to let Johannes know I'm still alive." With a last smile and a wave he was out and on the street.

It was a bright, warm day in middle of May, the air scented with bright, fresh green and flowers and the promise of maybe a shower later the day, with thick, fluffy clouds building up on the horizon.

A soft breeze ushered through the streets, messing up his hair a bit and carrying the scents of the nearby Elbe, and Yuuri found himself following that breeze there.

The riverbanks were a favourite spot of many a town dweller to enjoy some fresh air and greenery and watch the ships and boats and ferries pass.

But today was a Friday, not an actual workday for most people. The only folks Yuuri saw here today were either of the Bohemién profession or one of the odd Mohammedans – or possibly both, who knew?

The banks were blissfully deserted and he let himself fall down here, smelling the water, rich and full and without that strangely dulling, somewhat mouldy bite the sea held.

Yuuri found it slightly lacking, thanks to that, but it was better than what he had had in Milan. Before coming there, Celestino and him had spent a few years – some of them in wealth, some in decent circumstances, half of one in poverty – in Naples, near the sea, the scent of which had never truly left Yuuri. Maybe one day, again.

Right now, the Elbe was enough for him, sitting there, looking at the water and the boats passing by.

It was cathartic, imagining the water taking on any and all of his worries and carrying them away as it moved and ran and hurried towards the sea.

So, where to go from here? Him freezing up under duress wasn't new. In fact, Yuuri strongly suspected it to be the reason why Celestino had sent him away in the first place.

He could go back, of course. Celestino would be sad, maybe disappointed, but he would welcome Yuuri back with open arms nonetheless, no matter what.

Yuuri didn't want to go back. Yuuri didn't want to look him in the eye and say, "I messed up. I've failed. I'm sorry."

Didn't change the fact that he wanted to go home, wherever that might be, whether Milan or Naples or just anywhere.

A few boats floated by, men on deck working the ropes and oars. Yuuri could hear their calls even up here the river banks.

Noon came and went and he watched the sun go around, people wander by in a peaceful afternoon stroll, with nobody paying him attention.

Just as well.

"Ah, there you are."

And his alone time was over.

Yuuri sighed and turned around.

Yuri Plisetsky stood next to him, looking down at him.

Something didn't look quite right about him, although Yuuri had no idea what it was.

In any case, his presence most definitely wasn't anything he desired.

"Go away," he mumbled.

Yuri Plisetsky snorted. "Hey, it's not like I wanna spend my free time running around this stupid city, looking for your stupid ass!" He sounded decidedly miffed and Yuuri felt a spike of annoyance at it.

"Well, here I am, you found me, congratulations, you can go now."

Yuri Plisetsky came one small step closer to him. "Eh," he mumbled, arms crossed, staring at the water. "Well, as I said, the realms of how much you can suck are still left to be explored, at least. It's still all open."

"So, me not being able to sing isn't the biggest failure you can imagine?" Yuuri snorted.

"You could switch to falsetto all of a sudden."

"Thank you, I like my throat intact and my ears not bleeding."

"Good. You in falsetto would suck and you'd look awful in a dress."

Yuuri looked the boy up and down in all his slenderness and sharp, clear angles.

"Unlike you?"

True enough, Yuri turned a nasty shade of violet, although he did seem to shrug it off with genuine ease.

"You'll probably grow out of it in two or three years anyway."

"Can't wait for it. Dresses are annoying. How do women do it?"

Yuuri shrugged. "Ask a woman, how would I know?"

There was a moment of silence before Yuri Plisetsky asked, "What sort of girl roles did you have?"

"Mostly chorus when I was younger, the usual." Yuuri shrugged. "When my voice changed, I got an alto on occasion, for a verse or so, but about three years ago Celestino and the costume department finally agreed that I didn't make for a convincing woman any more and arrivederci, hoop skirts and wigs."

"Hoop skirts," Yuri muttered with clear disgust.

"So, you still sing girl roles despite being an established soloist?"

"Sometimes," Yuri nodded. "If there's demand and need." He made a face. "Or if a rich

and influential patron wishes to be delighted," Yuuri muttered without much thought. It had the effect of Yuri giving him a sidelong glance and he shrugged. "Keeping the illusion of pretty little Miss Songbird intact."

"Nobles are weird," Yuri sighed, "Not that this is in anyway news. They were ok though?"

They had been, maybe because Celestino had insisted of always coming along. Still, the implication needled him. "I doubt you went through the trouble of finding me just to chat about girl roles. What's the matter? Want..." He struggled for a moment with the German language, before giving up and switching to Italian. "If you just want to laugh at me, kindly piss off."

Yuri blinked at him, then answered in Italian as well. "You don't look like you usually use such speech." In Italian he had a thick accent, that sounded not at all German. It reminded Yuri more of how Georgi spoke German.

"I wish I could say the same about you, but well. So, what do you want?"

Yuri now started digging through his pockets and all of a sudden the sense of wrongness was gone.

Yuuri had never before seen the boy with anything but varying degrees of scowling as his default expression. The very idea of Yuri Plisetsky expressing something like friendly interest in someone else was - Yuuri did not want to find it disturbing, but that was what it was.

"There was a message for you. I was ordered to bring it to you." He handed Yuuri an envelope.

He took it. No address, no name, nothing. "Why would you think this is for me?"

"Because that idiot told me so," Yuri grumbled. "Blergh. You'll be back tomorrow?"

Yuuri thought about it for a bit. He still didn't want to face Mr. Feltsman or any of the other singers.

But then again, he had never gotten much rest in Milan.

"If you fall, you get back up and go on. If you stop for too long, you won't start again at all," Celestino had always said. Celestino also wouldn't have been happy with him having a day off.

Yuuri should have protested against Mr. Feltsman giving him the day off, he really should.

"Yes, I will," he nodded.

"Good. See you then." Yuri turned around and wandered off, posture stiff and shoulders high, some fair strands of his hair fluttering, having gotten loose from the band in his neck.

And it still rubbed him wrong, somehow, but well.

He turned the envelope in his hands and then, finally, opened it.

It was only a short note in a very precise, clear handwriting, with only one large, flowing loop on the last letter that underlined the whole note.

*Your voice is admirable*

What? Just, what?!

Yuuri blinked, then looked up to where Yuri Plisetsky was still wandering along the riverbanks.

Head running with various incantations of "What the hell?!" Yuuri got up and followed him, steps large and brisk.

He quickly caught up to him. "Wait, hey!"

Yuri Plisetsky halted and turned around, one eyebrow raised. "Huh? What?"

Yuuri swallowed, then held out the note to him. "I don't think you've written this?"

The boy crinkled his nose in dismay. "What, no, why?"

As expected. Yuuri let out a deep breath. "This is cruel, mean and... and..." Focus, Yuuri, focus. "Whoever wrote this should better look for someone else to pick on."

Yuri blinked up on him, then looked at the note. "Urgh," he muttered and Yuuri was very sure to hear him mumble something about, "Told him it was a bad idea." Then he sighed. "Fine."

Fine? Just fine? No complaining, no insulting, nothing? Just "fine"? Yuuri wondered if everything was all right with the boy.

"See you tomorrow then." With that, Yuri Plisetsky once again turned and took his leave.

Well, that still left him the whole afternoon to get through and he probably could not sit on the riverbank forever.

So, what to do now?

Going back to the boarding house would have been silly. At that time, there would be nobody Yuuri actually knew too well. Today's evening performance was a small concerto, so Georgi was on duty tonight. He would not be there and Yuuri still hadn't made any closer friends here.

So, maybe another stroll during the city.

He put on his hat, pulling the rim deep into his face, walking for a bit along the river until he reached one of the many large, richly carved sand stone bridges that connected the northern half of the city with the southern old town.

He wandered up into the north half of the city, sauntering along the Elbe here now as well, admiring the Canaletto view he had so often seen on water colour paintings or in sketches and how the full, round dome of the Church of Our Lady rose behind the August bridge and contrasted with the slender, high-pointed spire of the Royal Court Church that looked on to the river like a ship sailing upstream, only missing its sail. Behind the Court Church the Castle Dresden rose, and to the right the church was flanked by the theatre building.

Pitch black and set off with accents of gold and green-aged copper roofs, the churches and the castle stood in stark contrast to the bright, creamy yellow of the Royal Theatre; the building had been finished only seven years prior, the sand stone hadn't had the time yet to darken with years and weather.

The silhouette set the sky ablaze in glassy clear, bright blue that just went on and on and on in what had to be layers and layers of the same, transparently vibrant hue, all laid over another.

Such a lovely day.

And here he was, apparently not even able to enjoy it.

Inwardly, Yuuri groaned. As if thinking like that had ever helped him or had ever changed anything – hell, thinking like that had not even changed the fact that he thought like that.

The green of the Königsufer meadow was almost biting in his eyes and it was a relief when he reached the Albrecht bridge and could turn back towards the time-blackened sand stone buildings that gave Dresden its character.

The dark, for today empty and abandoned square of the Neustadt Market place was almost balm for his eyes in its somberness. Maybe minus the rather tacky, fire-gilt statue of a horse rearing, rider on his back looking eastward. Yuuri saw it, looked up to it and immediately decided to have never seen anything so utterly ugly in his entire life. Well, maybe Angelique Farbenieu's smallest, yappiest and rattiest dog was about as ugly, but only by a hair and by virtue of sharp teeth.

Germans, he decided, had let French tastes influence them way too much. Of course, the only genuinely French thing he had ever seen had been Angelique Farbenieu and her admittedly angelic singing, but that was very much enough to sate his curiosity for anything French for life.

But well. Celestino had told him to take a look at the Golden Rider if he found the time. He could now consider this done. Good. What else was there to do for him?

"Hey? Yuuri!"

Apparently, it was the day for him to run into theatre acquaintances, despite him not even being there.

Turning around, he saw Johannes waving at him, flanked by two women. He was smiling. "Hey, good to see you out!"

"Yes, it was such a nice day and staying stuck inside would probably have driven me crazy."

One of the women - still a girl, really- glanced to him. "Johannes, who is this young man? Someone from the theatre?"

"Oh yes, I am so sorry. This is Yuuri Kahtzucki. Fellow tenor in the chorus."

Yuuri had long since given up on correcting the way people pronounced his name. It didn't change a thing and hell, how would Yuuri himself know? Celestino knew some Japanese, along with Chinese, Russian, French, Spanish and Greek, and had tried his best to keep Yuuri's knowledge of his mother tongue alive, but Yuuri still hoped to never get into a situation where his lack of fluency might be revealed.

He smiled politely at the two women.

"This is my sister Johanna," Johannes said, gesturing at the girl. She hinted at a curtsy and likewise, Yuuri hinted at a bow. "You see how much thought our parents put into naming us?"

"I am truly impressed." Curses upon curses for his Italian accent. It had always raised far too many questions.

Miss Johanna smiled.

"And this," Johannes continued, pointing to the older woman, "is Mrs. Eleonora Awesfeld, a great patron of the stage and the performing arts."

Mrs. Awesfeld, tall, thin and dark haired, smiled kindly, exuding an air of subdued elegance. "Oh, I do remember having seen you perform in the chorus." She did not curtsy. Yuuri in turn bowed a bit deeper than for Miss Johanna. "Johannes said you're from Milan?" Yuuri prayed to be spared a comment on his looks at least once. "How do you like it here in Dresden?" she asked, "I imagine you must be cold here considering the Italian climate."

Oh, good. He could deal with that. Yuuri nodded. "It is a bit colder than what I know. But the days are getting warmer, so it is all good. And Dresden is a lovely city." The golden statue blinked in the sun. "For the most part."

Mrs. Awesfeld chuckled. "Oh yes, our great and gracious Prince Elector and King of Poland. We all love him."

"My dear, you are not even from Dresden," Johannes chided kindly, "you don't understand how important this piece of ugliness is to us."

"And hopefully I never will," Mrs. Awesfeld sighed.

"You must miss home awfully lot, Mr. Kahtzucki?" Johanna inquired. "I imagine Dresden is quite different from Milan?"

She looked a lot like her brother, with the same heart-shaped face and long nose and round eyes and the same grey eyes and dirty blonde hair that was taken back in two neat braids.

However, her gaze was decidedly more unsettling than the way Johannes had looked at him when they had first met.

"It is, yes. I guess, every city in every country is different," Yuuri answered after a moment's pause. "But thankfully, music is pretty universal. As long as there's an opera house I will always feel at home somewhere."

Mrs. Awesfeld looked at Johannes with something like playful resentment. "My, my. We were told his new colleague was gifted with a wonderful voice, but you also seem to have a bit of a poet's touch, huh?"

"Well, Italians have a way with words," Miss Johanna interjected. "But yes, Johannes did praise your voice up and above. Say, Mr. Kahtzucki, do you plan on any solo roles? We would be looking forward to this."

A trickle of ice ran down Yuuri's throat and collected in his stomach. He noticed how Johannes looked at him and then shifted his weight from one leg on another.

Yuuri swallowed. "Presently not, no."

"But why? Since my brother praises your voice so highly, you surely are good enough to try out. Johannes does it pretty often."

Something in Yuuri's stomach turned hard and cold. He could feel the smile freeze on his lips. His fingers started trembling and he quickly folded his hands behind his back. Also, he straightened his shoulders. Celestino had always recognized these quirks as signs that something was amiss, but thankfully, Johannes was not privy to such embarrassing knowledge.

"And I have yet to land anything, so I am not sure why this would be of any importance," Johannes replied quite hastily.

Mrs. Awesfeld laughed. "Well, well, you are still very young. Your voice will develop a bit more with age and practise. Rarely a singer gets a solo part in their twenties. With some notable exceptions, of course, and Johannes, really, you do need to introduce me to Mr. Plisetsky!"

"He barely speaks to the chorus singers, though," Johannes pointed out. "That will make this endeavour somewhat difficult for now."

"Aw," she sighed, "that's just too bad."

Miss Johanna tugged at Johannes' sleeve. "I fear we have to take our leave now. Mr. Kahtzucki, it was a pleasure."

Somehow, Yuuri sincerely doubted that, at least on her behalf.

He bowed, then clasped hands with Johannes.

"You'll be back tomorrow?"

"Yes." Yuuri nodded.

"You ok, though?"

"I think so. Gotta be." He wasn't, not really, but that was beside the point. Yuuri sighed. "Thank you."

"Anytime. Sorry about Johanna, she never quite mastered the subtle art of tact."

Yuuri smiled. "It's okay. Are you on stage tonight?"

"Yeah. We're just out for a bite, before I have to head back to the theatre." Johannes leaned in closer. "Eleonora tries to make it to every of my performance nights and Johanna is always so insulted if she gets left out." He rolled his eyes. "Women."

"Now that's a set of worries I'd like to have." Yuuri managed a chuckle, while the knot tightened. "See you tomorrow."

Tomorrow came too early for his taste. Waking up, Yuuri felt again the cold, hard knot in his stomach. Just that, by now it seemed to have risen up right under his throat and

Yuuri very much did not like the feeling of it. Could he sing like that?

Probably not, but he still had to show his face, so up and dressed he got, walked downstairs, grabbed a mug of strong, black tea (which did not count as a meal, so none of his precious meal marks were spent on this) and, after downing it in a few big gulps, headed out.

The heat was a blessing, searing down his throat in a way that would have sent Celestino into mad, raging fits and lectures about how he was supposed to take care of his voice.

But it melted the ice in his throat and warmed and softened the hard knot in his stomach a bit and it helped him to notice the sweetness of the air and how cloudless the sky was as he stepped out quicker, faster.

The half-hour walk towards the theatre was over far too quickly.

For a moment, Yuuri closed his eyes, took a deep breath – his throat struggled against it, but finally, finally gave in to this request – and then again, again, again, until he finally could trust himself again to breathe properly.

Only then he approached the door of the side entry and entered the warm, softly dark corridors that made up the back scenery of the theatre.

Upon entering, his throat tightened again and again Yuuri paused, breathing in and out, in and out, in and out.

No need to fret, no need to worry. It would be alright.

Still, his feet dragged a bit as he headed towards the backstage area.

Coming closer, he already heard the voices of his fellow singers and it gave him another moment of pause.

Then he heard steps behind him, someone calling “Morning, Yuuri!” and then they passed him without even so much as a throwaway glance.

Oh. So maybe it would be ok?

Maybe he would be spared too many stares and comments then?

With a deep sigh, he went up the stairs and headed out for the stage. “Uh. Morning.”

Most of the other singers were already there, only three or four faces still missing. Some of them looked up as he came out, but aside of a few nods and short calls of “Morning!”, nothing happened.

All of a sudden, breathing got a lot easier and he nodded in reply.

Down in his chair they saw Mr. Feltsman looking up to them, clearly impatient for them to get ready to start warming up and then to begin with their practise.

The last few missing members of their troupe sauntered in, they greeted each other and then lined up, all the while Mr. Feltsman called, “All right, all right, everyone, tea party is over, let's get to work! We start with the *Magic Flute* and then go through the chorus pieces of the *Tannhäuser*. Since this is so blessedly short, we'll start going through the chorus verses for the *Wildschütz* afterwards. Premiere is in four weeks, don't you dare not being properly familiar with the score by then.”

Yuuri's stomach once again started to flutter, but still, no glances, no meaningful grin in his direction, nothing. Great. He wasn't familiar with Wagner, really great.

Nobody seemed to notice if his voice was a bit wobbly at the “Es lebe Sarastro, Sarastro soll leben!”

It definitely made it easier and the wobbliness of his voice was gone when they went through “Oh Isis und Osiris schenket der Weisheit Geist dem neuen Paar!”

And at the very least, nobody acted different around him than usual, so he also could conclude that either the sender of that stupid note wasn't among his chorus mates or if he was, that he or she considered it enough. In that case, Yuuri heartily agreed with



whomever it was.

When they went through the *Tannhäuser* pieces, he was silent, listening closely. The chorus didn't have much to do in this opera, only two four-liners. Would be easy to memorise.

Rehearsing something new tended to take its sweet time as well as their full attention.

They didn't even notice how the time went by or how other people came up behind the curtains, patiently waiting for their turn to practise and rehearse.

And maybe, just potentially, they did take a little too long to finish up, yes.

Still, Yuuri couldn't help but finding it incredibly rude when a voice started yelling behind them. "How long you gonna waste other people's time, eh?!"

Johannes sighed. "Plisetsky is as charming as ever, eh?"

"Don't tell me you'd expect anything less from him," Yuuri replied, equally dry. "You should try to introduce him to your Eleonora. Maybe we'd even get to witness him display something resembling well-mannered behaviour."

"Yeah or he'd shock her into a heart attack." Their formation was beginning to break loose, a process clearly catalysed by the rather annoyed looks Plisetsky had for them. Yuuri decided that it probably was for the best for him to just duck and usher past him before the boy got yet another idea about how to pick on him.

Oh sweet Mother Mary, he was scared of a not yet fully grown brat. How much lower could he sink? Then again, he mused, he could always resort to rich and influential patrons with a taste for oriental faces and bodies inhabited by a Western mind and soul to rise up here. Yes, that would probably be the lowest level to sink to.

With a deep breath, wedged between Johannes and a bass singer named Thomas, head lowered, Yuuri wandered off the stage.

"Oi, Katsuki!"

Dammit.

Slowly, very slowly, Yuuri turned around. "Yes? What's it?"

Plisetsky stood behind him and held out an envelope. "There."

What?

Yuuri looked to the envelope, then back to Plisetsky's face. "What?"

"Gah, take it already!" The envelope was pushed into Yuuri's hands and Plisetsky turned away. "And get it over with!"

Him heading out onto the stage probably meant that he would be left alone.

Well, not quite. Johannes glanced at the envelope in Yuuri's hand. "Love letter?"

Yuuri, again, looked at the envelope, then raised an eyebrow towards Johannes. "I think that quite unlikely, but thank you for your confidence in me."

"I mean, could be. The boy could have a sister or something – if he got more than one, introduce me, will you?"

"You already have both a hopefully wealthy patron and a younger sister, no need to stack up on these."

"I agree on the sister part." Johannes shrugged. "Patrons, though, you can never have too many of these."

Yuuri chuckled, tucking the envelope away. "Well, I'll see what this thing is, and then I try and find out whether Plisetsky has a sister for you. And if she's just as delightful as he is."

"Thank you." Johannes grinned. "Gotta go now. Johanna's been threatening me not to be late for lunch or she'll chew me out."

Well, yesterday she certainly had seemed chew-happy, Yuuri mused. Better Johannes

didn't test his luck then.

Yuuri waved him goodbye and then turned around to find a suitable spot for him to read whatever prank note he had gotten now.

Really, as bratty as Plisetsky was, Yuuri had thought him above partaking in any way in such childish stupidities.

A suitable spot was found on the gallery above the entrance hall, behind the high balustrades that overlooked the main door. Crouching there, no one would spot him from below and up here, nobody would mind one of the singers hiding out, reading a letter. It wasn't a too uncommon sight anyway, many a chorus girl or ballet dancer had spent their off time here and usually, when Yuuri had stumbled across them, they had been smiling, or, if they shared the letter's contents with a friend, giggling.

Yuuri very much preferred to be left alone with this, in no small part because he didn't trust himself not to hiss and cuss audibly and there was no need to let anyone hear that.

The envelope was of the same quality than the last one. So probably the same prankster?

Yuuri snipped it open.

Another short note and again in that swooping writing

*Do not presume I am anything but sincere. Your voice is truly wonderful. With your permission I will take the liberty to listen to your singing more frequently.*

Didn't sound like he was actually asking, more like announcing it, and Yuuri found that he very much not cared for that, prank or not. Honestly, if it was a prank, it had to rank among the five most tasteless Yuuri had ever experienced or witnessed.

For a while he sat there, still as a statue, barely breathing. This thing warranted a reaction, although Yuuri had not the faintest idea which one. Both a harsh call out and an attempt to play along could be read as an invitation to go on and have it escalate and one thing Yuuri was *very* sure about was that he would not take that well.

Maybe displaying slight, bemused disinterest then? That was the likeliest way to get the prankster to stop. Of course, there was the off chance that bemused disinterest would fan the prank flames even more and again, this was very much not an agreeable prospect to Yuuri.

He sighed and then looked up when there was a rustle at the end of the corridor.

But nobody was there. Or maybe there was, but since Yuuri couldn't see anyone, he was probably supposed not to act on that.

So, Yuuri turned his attention back to the note, fiddling with his legs so he could reach into the pocket of his trousers, fishing for a stub of a pencil.

The thing was short and gnawed on and in dire need of a sharpener, but it was enough for a short answer.

Yuuri turned the note around, staring at the blank paper. He still could see traces of the ink through the paper.

He flattened it over his knee and then put the first stroke on paper.

The pencil necessitated him to write in large and somewhat clumsy letters, but then again, it was a short note, not a passionate love letter over ten pages.

*Maybe you should consider spending your free time listening to our soloists. It most certainly would be less of a waste than continuing this joke.*

Yes, that would suffice. He put the note back into the envelope, carefully closing it, before heading back behind the stage.

The soloists were still practising their parts for the *Wildschütz*. Day after tomorrow, Yuuri knew, they would start rehearsing it together, probably for a week or two before

dress rehearsals would start.

Yuri Plisetsky was sitting this one out, having no part in this play. Instead he was crouching on the floor, leafing through what looked like musical scores for another play, fingers tapping a meter on his knee.

Yuuri waited for him to look up from his papers and notice him before coming closer.

Plisetsky raised an eyebrow. "Oh. You."

"Yeah, hello again." Yuuri dug out the envelope. "Really, it's getting annoying. Whoever writes these has too much time on their hands."

Plisetsky blinked at him. "What?"

"As I said, it is annoying. It wasn't even funny yesterday, so tell whoever is behind that to stop, if you wouldn't mind."

Plisetsky shook his head, but he took the envelope without a fuss and put it away.

"Fine. See you tomorrow." He waved, a clear sign that Yuuri was to leave.

And so he did, wandering off, again to a small, empty room in the back of the building to practise some more in private, just to be sure.

After this, the whole day was waiting for him. Tomorrow again practise and in the evening performance, but today, he had a free afternoon.

Yuuri hadn't really hoped for the prank to be over just because he had said so. This decision wasn't his to make, after all.

So, after an afternoon of pondering, meeting up with Georgi, supper and a nights sleep that was uncharacteristically long and peaceful, he went to morning practise, greeted Johannes and was kindly informed that he was invited for lunch by his patron, along with Johannes himself and Miss Johanna.

He sang through all his parts and wasn't even surprised when Yuri Plisetsky placed himself right into his path.

Yuuri had to suppress an eye roll and turned to Johannes. "Would you wait a bit ahead? I won't take long."

Johannes glanced to Plisetsky. "Alright. But really, hurry, will you?"

"I will."

Johannes then headed off and Yuuri turned to Plisetsky. "So?"

The boy glared at him before holding out an envelope.

Yuuri sighed. "Really, whoever this is, this person has too much time at hands."

Plisetsky rolled his eyes and mumbled something that sounded like, "You don't say".

Louder, he said: "Now take it and for God's sake, take care of it, do I look like a pigeon that you give me letters to deliver or what?!"

"Well, it's not like I started it," Yuuri commented.

"Ugh. Whatever. Just keep me out of this shit." Plisetsky turned around and headed back to the stage.

Yuuri looked down at the envelope and then tucked it away for later, walking out to meet up with Johannes.

Their engagement to lunch meant for Johannes to lead them to one of the houses surrounding the Neumarkt, the ones with the creamy, pale yellow paint and the high roofs.

Yuuri looked it up and down. "Your Eleonora is well-to-do," he commented while they looked out for Miss Johanna. Yuuri prayed she'd hurry; despite the summer-like quality of the last few days, today it was quite chilly and low hanging, greyish-white clouds were already announcing rain, very likely the spraying, drizzling sort that came

with a generally damp air that crept into the bone and would leave a chill there for hours after one had entered a warm, dry room. Bone-deep chills were definitely something Yuuri could do without.

"Oh, she is," Johannes admitted, smiling. "And look who's coming in last." He nodded to his sister who was heading up to them in what looked like a rather brisk step. Her cheeks were aflame and as she came closer, her eyes looked rather red.

Johannes' face shifted from light amusement to worry.

Yuuri looked around. "Oh... That facade over there... it kinda looks nice," he mumbled. "You don't mind if I take a closer look for a second?"

The look Johannes gave him was almost disconcerting in its gratitude and Yuuri hurried to get across the street where he could admire the most boring pale orange stucco house front that had ever existed, all the while having Johannes in his line of sight.

He walked the last few steps to his sister, placing a hand on her shoulder, and Yuuri could hear them talking to each other, Miss Johanna accompanying her words with sharp nods and shakes of her head.

Finally he hugged her and Yuuri quickly turned away, focusing on the house front again. Yes, very pretty. The colour was applied so evenly. Really nice. Very soothing for his eyes with its lack of stucco or other ornamentation. Very nice to look at, really nice.

Johannes by now had let go of his sister and put a grim smile on his face. Yuuri took it as a cue to come back.

As he was back in front of the yellow house, Johannes said: "We'll figure something out. If necessary we'll sue."

Miss Johanna laughed, short and sharp and brittle as glass. "And from what money?"

He sighed and then repeated, "We'll figure something out." But he sounded rather defeated and mumbled, "We should get in", before pressing the bell button.

A soft, bright ringing came through the door and a few moments later they heard footsteps.

A maid in a blue-and-white striped linen dress opened the door to them and did a short curtsy. "Mr. Ebert, Miss Ebert, Mr..."

"Katsuki," Yuuri helped her out, dearly hoping that Johannes would take note of how Yuuri pronounced his own name.

The girl nodded. "The mistress awaits you in the parlour. Lunch will be served in a moment."

They shrugged off their coats and hanged them by themselves before Johannes took the lead and led them into a well-lit, richly coloured sitting room full of figurines and framed photographs. On the wall Yuuri saw a large picture, showing a slightly younger Mrs. Eleonora and a not really young gentleman sitting side by side on a park bench, surrounded by greenery.

In the middle of the room, draped in dark red and russet striped silk, Mrs. Eleonora waited for them, raising to her feet as they entered.

Johannes hurried towards her and kissed her hand.

She smiled as Miss Johanna, cheeks still red-flecked, did a small curtsy and Yuuri kissed her hand as well. "How sweet of you all to come."

"We have to thank you for your invitation," Johannes smiled, "it's always nice to know that some patrons are aware how precious a day-to-day meal can be."

"Well, you two had practise this morning, you are bound to be hungry and... Johanna, dear, where were you engaged this morning?"

Miss Johanna straightened her shoulders. "The Rottenbergs."

"Ah." Mrs. Eleonora clucked her tongue. "Well, they at least feed you a proper breakfast." She turned to Yuuri. "You take care of your nourishment as well, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, I... the boarding house I live at grants you seven meals a week."

"Good."

Of course, Yuuri's breakfast-free stomach decided that this was the perfect moment to rumble a bit.

Yuuri sighed. "Well, I had some tea this morning?"

Johannes rolled his eyes. "How can you even sing on an empty stomach this early in the morning?"

Yuuri shrugged. "Practised, well-perfected habits, I guess."

Johanna stared at him. "My dear brother, your friends are all, all of them, extremely weird."

Mrs. Eleonora chuckled. "Well, let's just hope the lunch is enough to fill you all up, considering its humble nature."

Johannes did a small, slightly mocking bow. "Lead the way."

Mrs. Eleonora led them only one door away into a small dining room, with somewhat smaller windows and definitely less clutter.

Yuuri stopped and looked at another painting showing the same couple as in the parlour, both in different clothes and now simply sitting next to and slightly glancing at each other.

"My late husband," Mrs Eleonora commented. "He never quite got the hang of photography. Always believed it would take a piece of his soul and he would prefer to meet The Lord as complete as possible."

Yuuri considered the situation and found it appropriate for a joke. "Well, if that's true, I do hope photography takes the sinful parts of our souls," he commented. "Less time in purgatory, which is always preferable in my book."

Mrs. Eleonora gave him a blank look, before nodding. "Oh, right, you're from Italy." Her smile was a bit strained and it occurred too late to Yuuri that the Catholic Mass he attended at Sunday did most definitely not host the majority of Dresden's Christian population. It also occurred to him – also too late – that some people might take slight umbrage with confessional differences.

Mrs. Eleonora found her countenance. "Well, sinful or not," she said, "we all should strive to keep ourselves as whole and complete as possible, so we may be judged appropriately. Please, have a seat."

Johannes had the role of holding Mrs. Eleonora's chair, so Yuuri did the same for Miss Johanna.

She sat down, nodding a short thank to him, and then both he and Johannes took their seats.

Lunch came, a simple, but plentiful affair of a clear vegetable soup with spring onions, carrots and potatoes, accompanied by slices of a dark, soft bread and hunks of cheese and cold meats.

As she had said, simple – Protestant, Yuuri was tempted to call it – but very satisfying, filling fare.

"Johanna, how are your students doing?" Mrs. Eleonora asked and Miss Johanna's head jerked up from her barely touched soup. "Oh. Uh, the younger Miss Ebert has progressed from Mozart to Bach and is a joy to teach. I think, though, that Mozart suits her temperament better."

"Which will delight her father, without a doubt," Johannes drawled, smiling, drawing

attention on himself. "I remember when we performed the *Coffee Cantata* and he was singing the father Schlendrian. Yuuri, if you can, ask Plisetsky about it. He was Liesgen back then."

"Oh, you're on good terms with our most celebrated star tenor then?" Mrs. Eleonora asked, clearly delighted.

Yuuri's face grew warm again. "Well, I wouldn't go as far as that, but he occasionally deigns to talk to me and he manages to remain somewhat civil most of the time."

"Which essentially means that you're on good terms with him," Johannes commented.

Yuuri noticed how Miss Johanna let out a deep breath and now finally took a bite of the cold Kasseler roast.

"Who knows, maybe he's just looking for someone new to annoy. I guess he's been through the whole theatre staff by now."

Mrs. Eleonora raised an eyebrow. "Well, there is certainly not a shortage of people who'd be glad to be annoyed by him, if he wants that – and enough of them would be throwing quite substantial sums at him for the privilege."

"If I get a chance to talk to him without running danger of being chewed out, I will certainly inform him of this fact," Yuuri mumbled, focusing on the soft, chewy texture of the Kasseler.

The remainder of lunch was a somewhat silent affair, with them all focusing on the very good soup and the soft, hearty bread.

Yuuri knew that it would probably be better if he left after lunch. Johannes was sending long, worried glances to his sister, who again had gotten quite pale and then a short glance to their gracious hostess.

So, whatever was troubling Miss Johanna, they probably wanted to talk to Mrs. Eleonora about it. Yuuri most definitely didn't want to eavesdrop in on that. These were private problems and probably of a delicate nature as well.

Stuff of delicate nature had occasionally happened in Milan too and if it came to Celestino's attention – which had always happened, because what good was a scandal if nobody talked about it? –, he had cursed up four circles of hell before seeing what he could do. Germans, or at least Saxonians, seemed to be a tad bit different in that regard.

Dessert was apple sauce with cinnamon, raisins and bits of almonds. Really good, yes, something like that he would really like to have at the boarding house on occasion, maybe for a holiday.

"I do hate to leave so early," he finally said.

Johannes looked up to him and again Yuuri was supremely uncomfortable with the level of gratitude he displayed there.

He swallowed, hopefully unnoticed.

Mrs. Eleonora raised an eyebrow. "You are otherwise engaged, my dear?"

"Kind of," Yuuri stammered, "I, I..."

"Oh dear, I should not have presumed! I am so sorry to have interrupted your plans!"

"No, really, it is nothing," Yuuri tried to calm her, which only caused Mrs. Eleonora to furrow her brow a bit more.

"He is always quite eager to cram as much practise into a day as possible," Johannes chuckled. "One of these days Feltsman will have to ban him from staying at the theatre outside of practise hours or performances."

Mrs. Eleonora clucked her tongue. "Eager to please then?"

"I guess so?"

There was a moment of silence hanging in the air in which Mrs. Eleonora apparently

tried to stare holes into his very body, all the while smiling. "So, something's good been saved through all those years of papism," she finally conceded. "Very well. It has been a pleasure, my dear, please consider yourself my guest in the future as well."

Yuuri managed to smile. "With pleasure." He went around the table to kiss her hand and then repeated the action with Miss Johanna before leaving.

Through the closed door he heard Mrs. Eleonora commenting, "He is a bit of an odd duck, huh?", and hurried to slip into his coat and hat.

The envelope rustled against his fingers as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat, when the maid led him out where to the promised rain had finally started.

So, what was his prankster saying now?

He hurried to get out of the drizzle and to somewhere dry and warm, which was how he found his way into a small library, taking off his hat as he entered.

The scent of paper and linen and leather reached out to him, wrapping itself around his arms and his back, gently tugging him in deeper, and Yuuri hung up his coat and followed.

A dark-clad woman behind a counter looked up and gave him a short, sharp once-over before turning her attention back to the book in front of her.

Which was just fine by Yuuri and he wandered into the back of the store, behind the shelves. Above his head a lamp illuminated the small, dark corridors that firmly placed Yuuri in the Histories section. Several biographies of Alexander the Great, Caesar and other Great Men Of Old, followed by chronicles of several German ruling houses and countries. A door stopper was a detailed report of the Russian Empress Catherine the 2nd.

Yuuri made a mental note to come back at some point when he was able to spend more time to browse the shelves, take out one, leaf through it, but it back or take it with him to one of the well-lit reading areas.

As it was, he had only a few hours left before he was to show up again at the theatre and get ready for this evening's performance. Much of these few hours might very likely go to him trying to find back his balance which would be shaken by whatever the note contained. Thus, he only took a short glance through the history section before finding himself a small desk.

It was quiet and almost empty here today. No students, no bored young ladies, only two elderly women were sitting side by side, leafing through a book together, occasionally giggling like two young school girls.

Perfect.

Yuuri carefully placed the envelope in front of him.

Then proceeded to stare at it.

Then reached and pulled it closer.

And then let go of it again.

Then he pulled it closer. Sweet Mother Mary, this was stupid. Truth be told, as annoying as pranks were in general, it was kind of nice to hear that someone liked your voice. It wasn't true, of course, and this was what galled Yuuri so much, but the words themselves were honey, sweet and gentle and balm on his raw pride.

Truth be told, he didn't really want this to stop.

But he also had been tired of this joke right after the first note. After all, there was probably not one single human being in this beautiful and occasionally very enervating world who actually actively liked being made fun of.

Would he now receive a continuation of the joke or an end of it? If he was completely honest, Yuuri wanted neither and he wanted both.

Damn it. (Confession next Sunday would include a lot of "I swore and used the name of our Lord in vain". As usual. He suspected the priest was getting bored of him.)

With a sigh, he snipped the envelope open.

This note was a bit longer than the other two, he noticed, running over eight loopy lines. The scrawl, however, did not improve on this.

*I am sorry to have offended you. Please know that I do not mean ill and am indeed honest in my proclamations.*

*Allow me to listen to you tonight at the performance and then apologize in person to you.*

*I am usually listening from the empty attic room to the left of the stage. None of the stage hands goes there any more.*

Ah. So apparently it was a thing for each and every damn theatre in the world to have both ghosts as well as cursed and forbidden rooms.

Yuuri sighed. Figured.

*I would be most grateful if you joined me after the performance there.*

*Please do not think ill of me.*

V.

Well, right now Yuri didn't know what to think one way or another, which was just as well, probably.

He folded the paper and carefully tucked it back into its envelope. This did, indeed, sound honest. Now what was he to make of it in that case? Show up, probably, and see who had written it. Get laughed at, potentially.

Or maybe not? What if not?

Urgh, there he went again. Rubbing his temple, Yuuri pocketed the note again. His mind started to frazzle a bit; that was not good. Better he took a walk or something to calm himself down before he worked himself up into a frenzy that would leave him with a blank mind, unable to think of anything than what had taken him in.

Slowly as to not disturb the women, he got up and wandered back through the corridors to the entrance, grabbed his coat and walked out.

It was still drizzling, now accompanied by a sharp gust of wind. It was welcome, the cold cutting through his thoughts and the droplets on his hands and his face causing him to long for the warmth and security of the theatre.

Good. Good, he was getting there, very good.

Also, the weather was really disgusting.

Reaching the theatre and slipping through the side entrance into the dark, warm coils of its innards was even more of a relief than it usually was, thanks to the weather.

His head was clearer too and while the thought of the note did pop up far more often than he would have liked, being here pulled his focus back to the performance tonight.

He watched the ballet go through a choreography for tonight before leaving the backstage area in favour of an empty practise room. Procuring one this time of the day was not an easy task; several singers and orchestra members had gotten the same idea and from behind each door Yuuri could hear voices and instruments, single or pairs and groups, and subsequently he walked on.

He could have joined one of the groups, of course, but then again, that would have involved the potential of them asking what was up with him and how his day was going, and no. Not to mention the potential that his prankster – it still felt like a prank, no matter how sincere the note appeared to be – would be in the room and ask questions and receive answers that they could use as fodder for their next move.



He wandered to the end of the corridor, listening to the noises from the last door. Talking, very low voices, too low for him to hear exactly what they were saying. One of them, though, sounded very much like Yuri Plisetsky and his mumble came out in sharp, hacked off intervals. Then, while the other voice remained low, Plisetsky's rose until he finally hissed something like, "Ack cheer force me!" before ripping open the door, almost slamming into Yuuri.

Yuuri quickly took a step back. "Sorry... uh... you... you were practising?"

Plisetsky blinked at him, eyes wide, face uncharacteristically open. "What... oh... yeah. Yeah, I am. Very much. Very practising. Don't wanna be disturbed." He quickly pulled the door closed.

"Oh. Sorry." Yuuri nodded. So, no room for him here. He better found something to occupy himself with for the next two hours, before preparations for tonight's performance would begin.

He turned to leave.

"Oi, uh... you know, I will not deliver any more notes, we clear on that?" Plisetsky stared up to him, eyes now as harsh and hard as Yuuri knew them.

He nodded. "You said so."

"Good, so... you take care of this... thing then?" There was something in his voice that didn't quite match his glass-hard stare.

"I guess so..."

"Ah. Good, that's good." The boy nodded, quickly, then cleared his throat. "Good."

Yuuri took a deep breath. Better get some things cleared up. Before that, though, he cleared his throat. "So... just... just tell me, is this a prank or am I supposed to take it seriously?"

"What..." Plisetsky raised an eyebrow. "You're not asking this seriously, right?"

Yuuri furrowed his brow. "Actually, yes, I do."

Plisetsky's other eyebrow rose. "Oh for fucks..."

Interesting to see someone so young use such foul language, but Yuuri wanted to survive tonight badly enough to keep this thought to himself.

"Well. No. No prank, no joke. Just go and see and for God's sake, leave me alone with this shit, it's annoying!"

Yuuri snorted. "Well, *you* brought those notes to me, so, you could have stayed out of it right from the start, right?"

Plisetsky looked at him like he wanted to claw his eyes out and Yuuri took a step back. Then the boy sighed. "Whatever. Just go there and – yeah, whatever. See you later."

With that he turned around and slipped back through the door.

"See you later, I guess," Yuuri mumbled, weakly and turned away.