

Sing for me

Von Siberianchan

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Kapitel 1:	2
Kapitel 2:	13
Kapitel 3:	29

Kapitel 1:

Chapter 01

Dresden, May 1848

It would be all right, he told himself, looking at the building in front of him.

In the bright, clear afternoon air the Semperoper looked smaller than at night when it was alight with the soft glow of chandeliers, glistening against the darkness like a jewel bathed in the sweet air of late spring.

Yuuri drew a deep breath; last night, when he had looked at this place, it had appeared far more intimidating than now. It would be all right. He would do fine here. He could sing – sing well enough for the Scala at the very least and he was used to getting by with very little money, so the payment was no problem. He would probably try to find someone to share a place with, but Dresden was big and probably crawling with poor artists, looking for the same prospect. It would be all right.

His hand searched for the recommendation letter Maestro Celestino Caldini had written for him and with another deep breath, letter in hand, he wandered around the building towards a side entrance, leaving the grand staircase aside.

There was a bustle there, people entering and leaving all the time, and he waited a bit for a someone to slow down – and finally, finally a group of girls – ballet, probably, judging by their lithe physique and slim arms – bustled out, giggling.

Yuuri took a deep breath. "Excuse me!"

The girls stopped right in their tracks, turning to him, pale, thin faces questioning, noses upturned into a fashion that could have been almost coquettish if they hadn't been so young.

Yuuri was keenly aware that he was seized up and down and he swallowed. "I am looking for the director, if you could..."

"Music or dance?" one asked, cutting him off.

"Singing."

"Stage," another one just mumbled, before being grabbed and dragged away.

Yuuri looked after them, at least until one of them turned around, looking back at him questioningly. That was his signal to quickly turn around and scuttle inside.

From inside the Semperoper wasn't much warmer, at least not at the side corridor where he entered; the warmth would have to wait until he reached the main area, be it the great reception hall with its grand stairways and chandeliers or the corridors, rooms and closets of the backstage.

Operas houses by their very nature were a maze and it took three times of running past the same bloody beam before Yuuri finally found a small door that opened and – miracle of miracle – he found himself looking at the auditorium, dark and only illuminated from the stage side.

Yuuri took a glimpse inside.

The stage emitted a soft, yellow candle light that illuminated the gilded carvings and stucco of the ceiling, the walls, the boxes for the noblest audience of this place. Here and there, red velvet gleamed like embers in a fireplace.

On the stage, some more ballet girls were dancing an elegant choreography to a simple piano arrangement of a part of Mozart's "Magic Flute" that Yuuri recognized as

the introducing song of Papageno.

The song ended and the girls rushed off the stage amidst a man yelling, "You done finally, good, go, go, don't have all day!"

Their place on the stage was taken by a man and a woman.

Yuuri patiently waited for the rehearsal to end, enjoying the duet and dialogue in which the two went through the lines of the three ladies as well as the arias of Tamino and the Night Queen.

From down, there came an impatient "Again!" and so, they started again.

The woman was a perfect cast. Her soprano was clear and sweet like spring water, but there was a certain edge to it; she herself was a striking appearance with dark hair and a skin that didn't need the candle light for its dark golden shimmer. Perfect for the Night Queen, able to evoke both gentle, kind starlight and threatening, all-encompassing darkness.

The Tamino was her perfect opposite, flaxen hair tied back to reveal a very slender, long neck and a fair face that was both very sharp and determined yet at the same time amazingly youthful.

His singing was just as sharp and punctuated, pointedly and not at all befitting for someone stricken with love.

They sang through their dialogue before there was a rumble from the chairs. "Stop! Stop! Yuroshka, stop, stop, stop!"

The singers looked down.

Yuuri followed their gaze to a grizzly looking old man in a suit and jacket that definitely had seen better days.

"Tamino's in love! At once! In! Love!", he continued, "Sing with love, love, not like you try to... to... Sara, how would you feel if someone talked about you to your mother like that?"

The woman laughed, very melodically. "Like he's not in love and never has been in love before, but for some reason has to act like he is. Yuri is lucky that he's so pretty and so young. With someone less good-looking I'd be insulted. And with someone older, I would be too busy laughing to hit even one note." She cleared her throat. "On another note, if I showed someone a picture of my daughter and they sang like that I'd both feel insulted on her behalf and worried he might try to grab power from my hands instead of saving her as he was instructed."

"Yes. Yes, exactly. Yuri, sing more like in love! Sing as if you're happy to see her."

"Well, sorry if hitting the notes don't make it sound love-sick and happy, me singing it wrong certainly won't!" The man was a boy, Yuuri suddenly realized. Probably not older than 17, perhaps even younger. And he was singing Tamino.

He had to be amazing to sing such roles at this age, amazing talent, amazing charisma, amazing willpower.

And amazing abilities of perception.

"Oi, Yakov, we got a visitor."

Yuuri felt a collection of eyes falling upon him and briefly wondered whether it was too late to run and get back to Milan. Celestino would probably take him back in, right?

The man stared at him with dark, hard eyes and waved, impatiently, for him to come closer. "You, what do you want?"

Yuuri tightened his grip around Celestino's letter. "I... I heard you are looking for

singers... wait, no... I am one of your new singers..."

The cool dark eyes took him in and Yuuri desperately wished he had at least taken the time to straighten up his suit or comb his hair, do anything to appear somewhat civilized.

"Where you from? What's your name?"

"Y... Yuuri Katsuki. I... I'm coming from Milan. Got schooled at the Scala."

"Doesn't sound Italian to me. You don't *look* Italian."

If the ground beneath his feet decided to open up and swallow him, Yuuri would have been decidedly very, very grateful. "I am Japanese by birth."

"Oh, but from Milan?" the woman on the stage chirped and then continued: "Sono le strade piene di gatti ancora qui?"

Her accent was Veronese, but Yuuri still felt a wave of relief. "Solo se da gatti si intende chi non ha una casa e del lavoro e troppe bocche da sfamare – oh, aspetta, ho pensato che si stava chiedendo su Napoli!"

She laughed. "Oh, finally, finally someone who gets the joke." In a few years, she would make for a wonderful Pamina.

Mr. Feltsman, once again took a close look at him. "Good. Milan. Scala? Why you're here then?"

Yuuri swallowed hard. "Uh... Maestro Cialdini thought I might need a change and..."

A smaller stage had been his exact words, with an expression of sorrow and regret that still made Yuuri sick in his stomach. "He wrote ahead on my behalf and... uh, I also got this..." He handed the letter over.

Mr. Feltsman opened it and read it, brow carefully furrowed, while he gestured for Yuuri to come closer.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty and three."

"Your voice range?"

"Tenor."

"Countertenor?"

"Maestro Cialdini tried, but I was more suited to train towards bass."

Mr. Feltsman took a glance at him. "What were we practising just now?"

"Uh, Mozart's "Magic Flute". The Night Queen is just convincing Tamino to go and rescue her daughter Pamina."

The boy on the stage grumbled something that sounded somewhat like, "Well, everybody knows that."

He nodded. "Good. Yuri, come down, let him sing it. I wanna see how he can do. Just to check. You, up there. Did you warm up already? No, you got five minutes."

Yuuri stared at the man, the woman, the boy, as they all looked at him.

"Well, what you waiting for? An invitation? A personal coach? Brandy?"

Yuuri flinched and then slowly retreated to the stairway that led to the area behind the curtain.

Finding a suitable spot he started warming up, singing octaves up and down, going higher and higher.

There was a throbbing behind his eyes, but he paid it no mind. His throat was doing its work, his voice was clear and powerful and he managed to jump about one and a half octaves without trouble.

Good. That was good.

He took a deep breath.

"Oi. Time's up, the old man's getting impatient."

Yuuri turned around to see the other singer standing behind him. Up close he looked even younger, with skin so fair that he could see veins underneath and hair like spun gold. If he ever smiled, he'd probably look positively angelic, but for some reason, Yuuri doubted that there was ever any other expression than some degree of disdain on his delicate features.

"Uh, yes. Thanks." He headed out, where the woman awaited him with a kind smile. She was extremely pretty, porcelain fine skin and eyes of a dark blue that was almost lilac.

"Sara Crispino," she smiled with a cheerfully mocking curtsy.

"Good! Are the introductions done with? Great, get to work! You, start at the *Dies Bildnis* verse, from top. Sara, you do the ladies again!"

Sara's face fell a bit, but then she took a breath. "As you say."

"Good. Georgi!"

The pianist, sharp-faced and angular, flinched. "YES!"

"You heard that! Third scene! Aria!"

"Yessir!" The man nodded sharply and started hammering on the piano.

Yuuri recognized the melody, humming a few notes before starting with Tamino's verse. "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön – Wie noch kein Auge je geseh'n. Ich fühl' es, wie dies Götterbild – Mein Herz mit neuer Regung füllt. Diess Etwas kann ich zwar nicht nennen!

Doch fühl' ichs hier wie Feuer brennen. Soll die Empfindung Liebe seyn?" His voice did its job, good.

Sara listened intently as he went through the verse until the very end.

"Was würde ich! - Sie voll Entzücken. And diesen heißen Busen drücken, Und ewig wäre sie dann mein."

There was a moment of silence, only a quarter of a pause, in which he looked to her. She offered him an encouraging smile before she started the spoken verses of the three ladies.

"Rüste dich mit Muth und Standhaftigkeit, schöner Jüngling! - Die Fürstin hat mir aufgetragen, dir zu sagen, daß der Weg zu deinem künftigen Glücke nunmehr gebahnt sey!"

Her declamation was full of pathos, very different from the cheerful chirping from before – well, she was acting, so that was normal, he mused, just as she finished, "Hat dieser Jüngling, sprach sie, auch so viel Muth und Tapferkeit als er zärtlich ist, o so ist meine Tochter ganz gewiss gerettet."

He jolted, widening his eyes. "Gerettet? Oh ewige Dunkelheit! Was hör' ich! - Das Original?"

They played through the entire dialogue in which the ladies gave Tamino a briefing about how the abduction of Pamina had gone along, firing him up for the quest, before Sara finished, announcing the Queen with a loud, dramatic "Sie kommt! Sie kommt! Sie kommt!"

And in the next moment her voice seemed to switch, straight back to what it had been when Yuuri had listened in first.

Clear, and cutting-edge sharp she recited the verses in which the Queen introduced herself as a mourning, worried mother, before starting her aria. "Zum Leiden bin ich auserkohren; Denn meine Tochter fehlet mir, Durch sie ging all mein Glück verloren - Ein Bösewicht entfloh mit ihr!"

"Yes, yes, yes, Sara!" Yakov yelled and the piano died. "We know that bit, and we know you're in your position for a reason, yes!"

His gaze fell on Yuuri. "You, though... what parts have you performed so far?"

The excitement of the performance was wearing off. Yuuri swallowed. "No main roles. In Milan, I was mostly understudy... I... I sang the "Magic Flute" before. One of the three boys. And the first Armored Man... occasionally one of the slaves."

"Hm." Mr. Feltsman looked at him, sharply. "Let's be clear, if I said so you wouldn't find one moment of work here, I don't care whether you already got a contract promised and I care even less what your maestro has to say about you, because he showers you a bit too much with praise, considering your thin resume."

An almost deafening wave of nausea was rising in him. Suddenly the floorboards were very far away.

But well, it wasn't like he hadn't expected this. He should have known. It wasn't news, after all.

"Anyway, we need some new voices, and you're not half-bad. You have a place in Dresden?"

What? Yuuri stared at him.

"You deaf? Not good – no?"

Yuuri shook his head, quickly.

"Good. So, you got lodgings here?"

"Nothing permanent. A room in an inn," he admitted.

"Ah. Georgi, make sure he finds a place at your dormitories after we're done here," Yakov ordered.

The man behind the piano saluted, long-fingered hand against a temple with cropped, brown hair. "Yessir!"

"Good. You!" He turned to Yuuri again.

Yuuri stiffened. "Yessir!"

"Cut it out, that's only funny when Georgi does it. Be back at eleven, we'll be done here then."

"Yes." Yuuri swallowed the "Sir."

He waved his hand in the air. "Rehearsal for the chorus is at eight in the morning. Be on time. In two months we'll hold try-outs for Lortzing's "Wildschütz", so prepare yourself if you want a part in that."

Yuuri was about to nod again when he heard a soft "Tse" from behind the curtain.

The other singer stood there, looking at him with something like cool, hard contempt in his clear, bright green eyes.

What was wrong now?

Sara smiled. "It will be a bit confusing with two Yuris, right?" she chirped.

"Why?", the other drawled, but his eyes grew colder by another few degrees. "Not like he'll be getting any big parts anytime soon."

"Yuri, Sara, less gossiping, more singing! Yuri, you've heard how you should sing when you're in love?! More like this, will ya!"

There was some more grumbling from the boy who now rejoined Sara on the stage.

Yuuri slipped from the stage and away.

Eleven. That was in two and a half hours.

Enough time to take a look at this new town, this new place he would live from now on. Enough time to see whether it might in time even become a home.

In the end, he returned long before the pianist – Georgi, he remembered – was done. Since there was nothing else to do, he spent the time wandering the maze of corridors and crossroads and beams and lifts and cranes and doors, getting lost a few

times, all the while mapping it out. After the thirteenth time, he had it mapped out somewhat – the dressing rooms for the ballet corps, male and female, strictly separated and probably chaperoned – the costume storerooms – the props room, next to it – the dressing room for the chorus, only one, so men and women probably changed in shifts.

The dressing rooms for the solo singers and the more prestigious the person, the more space between the doors and the fewer people had to share one room.

There were only four doors with only one name on them and one door was labeled "Yuri Plisetsky". That was probably the young one from before.

Didn't seem to friendly a fellow. That might not be good – life as a chorus singer or an understudy was hard enough without having any of the soloists hating you. Although in Milan it had rarely ever been the men who had started drama, that honour had usually belonged to the primadonna and the head ballerina. God help you if they for some reason both decided to hate you. Yuuri had watched a few young women leave the Scala because of that. But the leading ladies weren't the leading ladies for nothing, so the rest of the theater usually had suffered in silence and waited for the drama to blow over.

Yuuri could only pray that this boy wasn't interested in behaving like a primadonna, only because the actual one seemed a nice enough woman.

At least nice enough to consider him a landsman. Maybe it had been a while since she had had contact with an actual Italian and was now taking what she could get?

He listened to snippets of conversations floating around him, bits in German that he almost understood.

This language was confusing. Some words were actually familiar to his ears without him having to try too hard, but then they messed it up with too hard words, too many edges, too complicated verbs.

And still, Yuuri had managed to learn the language, at least well enough for everyday purposes. Celestino had insisted on him learning German years ago, considering how much German music and especially opera had grown in importance over the last few years.

Or maybe he had planned all along to send him away. It wasn't like Yuuri would be missed at the Scala. He couldn't even begrudge Celestino his decision to send Yuuri so far away. Quite a few of the German countries had a long and celebrated theater tradition and Dresden especially was proud to call itself a patron city of musical theater as well. Maybe Yuuri would find a spot for himself here. And in any case, he would not look more foreign here than he had in Milan.

He would feel glances and stares following him here as well and he would hear people whisper and laugh. Being a foreigner at least meant that there were things one would always and under any circumstances understand.

It had been quite too much very soon and thus he had quickly wandered to the inn in a rather cheap and maybe somewhat dirty district on the other side of the river Elbe. There he had paid his rent for the room he had slept in last night and grabbed his few belongings before leaving, hearing the landlord mutter something about his bad manners.

Head bowed down, almost tucked in between his shoulder blades, he had arrived back at the opera and had slipped back in and wandered the maze, before returning to the curtains behind the main stage.

Rehearsals were still going on, but apparently, the parts for Tamino were through for today – on stage a bass singer as bass a singer could be and a soprano, probably in her

thirties, went through the dialogue between Sarastro and Pamina.

They were good, Sarastro deep and filling and awe-inspiring – a wise and kind leader and protective father figure for the girl he had taken.

Pamina's sweet, flexible soprano wept her sorrow and her worries for her mother, occasionally broken by hopes for a better future with a lover she had yet to meet but was already enthralled with.

"Shit piece," he heard someone mutter beside him and as he turned, saw the tenor. Yuri Plisetsky.

Yuuri flinched. "Oh... sorry... I didn't know you were here..."

"This opera is shit," Yuri mumbled, as if he hadn't heard him.

Yuuri blinked at him. "It's a masterpiece."

"Doesn't mean it's not full of shit."

"You're singing the male lead."

The boy shrugged. "We all need bread, right?" he slowly blinked at Yuuri, his bright eyes hard and cold with something almost like fury. "Don't look at me like that. You tell me you love singing so much or whatever?"

Taken aback, Yuuri stood in silence, while he listened as Sarastro and Pamina came to an end.

"Yeah, yeah, all right! Elise, you get the lyrics into that thick skull of yours by tomorrow! It's not even like Pamina has that much text to begin with!" Mr. Feltsman bellowed.

Maybe where he was concerned, that constituted as a praise. The soprano was positively glowing when she left the stage. She shot Yuuri a vaguely curious look, but then she very likely decided that a new face was beneath her attention and wandered off.

Yuuri found that he could live with that very well.

"Yuri! Your scene with Johannes! Then we're done for today!"

The boy sighed, "Ugh, finally!" and then left towards the stage.

Yuuri listened to the piano smattering the melody and then the bass started delivering what were the Priest's lines. "Wo willst du kühner Fremdling, hin? Was suchst du hier im Heiligthum?"

Maybe this production had merged Sarastro and this priest into one. Or maybe the singer for Sarastro played the priest's part for now.

This time, Yuri had no trouble delivering the expected feelings. Tamino's distrust against the supposed villain was palpable and he didn't shake it off after he supposedly had started to believe his word.

"Stop! Yuri! Tamino is *not* sarcastic here!"

Yuri on the stage took an audible, deep breath.

Yuuri just waited for him to start screaming. If he had screamed he would not have been surprised at all.

However, the boy did not scream.

Yuuri heard him breathe out and then, with an utterly fake tone of resignation sigh:

"Yeah, true, he believes every single word strangers he doesn't know tell him and is extremely easily swayed to their cause. He probably wouldn't know sarcasm if it stood in front of him yelling his face off as he deserves for his idiocy."

From down below, a soft, long-suffering groan rose to them, then ended sharply and Mr. Feltsman said, "Again. From the top."

They started again and this time, Yuri acted on the conversion of Tamino, portraying him with the wonder and elation of watching a sunrise after a night's vigil. His voice

was already mostly formed but still had retained that glass clear, aerial quality Yuuri was used to hear from chorus boys before they grew up.

"All right, good! Who's on stage tonight? Both of you? Good, see you then."

"See you!" the bass greeted before leaving for the curtain.

He took a quick glance at Yuuri. "New face?"

Yuuri quickly nodded. "Yes... uh... Georgi was supposed to show me the dorms."

"Chorus then? Well, welcome to Dresden."

"Thank you. ... Yuuri. Yuuri Katsuki."

The bass smiled through his thick, red beard and offered him a hand. "Johannes Erhard. And just in case you don't know yet – we're all stage folk here. We have each other's back no matter what. You got that?"

Yuuri didn't, but it was nice to hear it anyway. "Yes. Thank you."

"Oi, Johannes, if you have time to be a papa to any new nose around here, you have time for your wife too!" Yuri hissed. "Get home!"

Johannes Erhard laughed. "If your wealth of experience and wisdom accumulated in your long, long life says so, my dear boy – I will! See you tonight!"

And he wandered off as well.

Yuri sighed. "He's no good on stage if he's not well-rested and he knows it." He glanced to Yuuri again. "So. You know what's up after the "Magic Flute"?"

"Not yet." Yuuri had the distinct feeling this might change in the next few moments.

""Wildschütz". Comedy. Light-hearted. Yakov mentioned it before. You should try out for it. Easy to sing, you might even get a small spot."

"And what if not?"

"Then you're where you were before. Don't stare like that. Yakov likes the chorus stacked well enough that one or two singers absent won't be noticed. And in any case, no understudy ever suffered from a stint in the chorus."

Well, Mr. Feltsman surely had interesting ideas regarding how to manage his singers.

"And why would you want me to try out?" Yuuri asked. "There an understudy you wish a stint in the chorus upon?"

Yuri snorted. "The what? Does this look like Paris to you?"

"A few hours ago it most definitely didn't sound too French," Yuuri admitted. "So, why then?"

"I like to see how far people can get." His eyes were still sharp but the edge had come off a bit. "You gonna show me how far you can get, understood?"

This boy, Yuuri concluded, was a bit weird. But then again, he was singing lead tenor roles before he was even remotely in the area of turning twenty, so maybe being a bit weird was just another aspect of being gifted.

On the stage, the pianist, Georgi, was just closing the lid to the piano keys and stretching this back through, without doubt feeling rather sore after many hours of work.

He turned around and nodded to them. "Oh, you're here already? Great. See you tonight, Yuri!"

"Yeah, whatever," Yuri mumbled and then wandered off.

Georgi huffed a laugh. "Oh, to be young and innocent again, eh?" He gave Yuuri a wink that was entirely obscure in its meaning to him.

"Ah well. Come along, will you!"

Yuuri did and was lead into the spring-warm midday sun and through streets and alleyways, filled with laughter and screaming and talking and the rumbling of horse pulled carts.

An ever-flowing stream of German surrounded them, and a weird one as that, the usually hard and sharp edges of the language blurred and slurred and everything spoken in a high-pitched, almost painful sing-song.

Yuuri prayed he'd get used to it and quickly. Preferably before his ears started to bleed.

"So", Georgi turned to him, "don't mind me, but how did you get to Italy from Japan? Aren't they kind of closed-off?"

Thank goodness, he spoke Italian, although his accent was almost as thick as the porridge Yuuri had had for breakfast today.

"Si." Yuuri nodded. "Maestro Cialdini picked me up in Singapore and brought me with him to Milano when I was small."

"How old were you?"

"I don't know. Maybe three or four."

Georgi's face twisted into something that seemed to be understanding and he nodded. "So, you remember anything from there?"

Yuuri shook his head. "No."

Again, Georgi's face twisted, now into something like pity.

Yuuri looked ahead, just so he wouldn't have to look at it. "That's the Church of Our Lady over there?" he asked, nodding to one tall, time-darkened dome of sandstone.

"It is." Thankfully, Georgi picked up on the change of topic. "In case you ever lose your way in the city, head towards there and once you're on the Neumarkt, you should be able to find your way back to the opera."

Another corner, they stopped to let some carriages and carts pass and then crossed the street.

The dormitory turned out to be a broad, five-story building with a bright blue facade and a thin, tired-looking widow for an owner who made a humble living out of renting out beds and offering food for theater folks from behind a small desk with a thick, large book on it that looked very well-thumbed.

She looked at Yuuri closely, going so far as drawing up her oil lamp close to his face, despite the fact that bright midday light shone through the window and lightened up the birch wood panels on the wall and the bright, yellow tiles on the floor. "Where do you work?"

Did he work at the Semperoper yet? He had just introduced himself, he had no fixed position yet, he...

"Mrs. Haubener," Georgi sighed, "Really?"

"There's a way how things are done", the woman snapped. "So, speak, lad."

"Uh... Semperoper."

"Orchestra? Chorus? Don't look like ballet, do you."

"Chorus."

"Good, they at least behave." She nodded. "You pay your rent weekly. Breakfast is at six. Supper at 8. Your rent is 12 Groschen. This includes seven meals, your choice whether it's breakfast or supper. Let me know in advance. Everything else you book on top."

Yuuri glanced to Georgi, but the man nodded and Yuuri decided to trust his judgement. "Good."

"Good. You got money to pay for the week? If not, you can start paying next week, but put two Groschen on top of it for six weeks, then we're good."

"I..." Yuuri's throat was tight. "I can pay."

"Good." She nodded, curtly, then held her hand out.

Yuuri quickly reached for his purse and counted up twelve Groschen into her palm.

"Good." Mrs. Haubener smiled as she pocketed the money and opened a book. "Your name?"

"Katsuki, Yuuri."

She raised an eyebrow and he spelled it out for her. "Sorry for that."

"Funny name." She made a note behind the name and closed the book again. "Before Georgi shows you to your room – you can come and go at your own leisure, there's always someone opening up the doors. But you won't bring women to your room. You will not come towards the girls' rooms. If you have a female visitor, you can receive them in the mess hall. No smoking in the room. If you violate any of these rules or if I hear too many complaints from the other tenants or if you can't pay your rent, I will kick you out at once, understood?"

Yuuri hurried to nod, although his head was still picking apart the last sentence, just in case he had missed anything on first hearing.

"Good. Georgi, you know where there's a free bed, you take care of him."

"Will do and thank you!"

"You up for dinner tonight?"

"Gladly. Sign him up for one too, my treat for the new guy."

Mrs. Haubener raised an eyebrow. "Well, you didn't spend all your meals for the week, so, fine." She looked at Yuuri. "You want breakfast tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Good." With a wave, they were dismissed and Georgi, grinning, headed for the stairway.

Yuuri followed him.

On each floor, there were two closed doors, left and right.

"Left are the women's rooms and Mrs. Haubener is serious, by the way, don't ever go there. I had a girl who lived there and we were planning to get married – I stayed here because it is cheaper than to rent a full apartment and we wanted to save for a house. We were only allowed to meet in the mess and only with a chaperone, so we usually went out or met at the Opera."

"Oh." That *were* quite strict rules if even engaged couples had to obey them. "Uh... you were planning, you said?"

Georgi swallowed audibly. "She..." He looked at Yuuri, quite misty-eyed. "She changed her mind. In the end, she found it more lucrative to marry one of the sponsors of the lead ballerina."

"Oh... well..." Yuuri tried very hard to find the right words, failed and thus, didn't say anything.

Georgi drew a deep breath. "Oh well. She will regret her decision in time, you will see. She will beg me to take her back. I am not entirely sure yet whether to forgive her then or spurn her."

This left Yuuri speechless for entirely different reasons. While they went up another floor, he left Georgi to his ramblings until he finally opened the door to reveal a corridor with yet more doors, three on each side.

Georgi wandered down the corridor and opened the middle door on the left. "Ah, I was right – there's room here." He waved Yuuri to come closer.

The room had six beds, one of them empty and obviously unoccupied. Next to each there was a small night stand, at the foot end of each bed a cask for clothes and other personal belongings.

The others were all showing various signs of general occupation.

"Three of them are in the orchestra – bit wild, those folks, take care when they offer you something – anything they call home made. The other two are singers, like you." Georgi slapped his back. "I'm sure you'll get along."

Yuuri nodded, slowly. "Yes... thank you."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm one floor up, middle room to the left."

Again, Yuuri mumbled, "Thank you", and then he was left alone to unpack what he had with him. Not that it was much, three pairs of trousers, two shirts, one good shirt, four sets of underwear. One well-thumbed edition of Boccaccio's "Decamerone", which Yuuri carefully placed on his nightstand, running a finger over the back of the book. Celestino had used this very book to teach him reading, maybe a year or two after he had started giving Yuuri music lessons.

The memory brought a wave of homesickness that made Yuuri nauseous enough to sit down on the bed. Why had he ever thought this might actually be a good idea? It wasn't, it so definitely wasn't and he...

He took the book in his hands, feeling the familiar weight, the blue linen, once coarse, now softened by uncounted times of touching, the paper having lost the stiff freshness long ago, bending to his touch as he opened the book.

There was a sheet of paper inside.

Yuuri blinked, then picked it up and unfolded it.

Celestino's neat, flowing cursive stared at him in Italian and Yuuri smiled a bit. It *was* like him to write him a note.

My dear, little Yuuricino,

By now you have hopefully settled in in Dresden. Don't be too discouraged by Yakov Feltsman. He is gruff, but a good sort and he appreciates hard work. You are one of the hardest workers I have experienced in my life and you have more talent than you yourself believe. I do hope that Dresden will do you good and help you realize what you can do. With lots of love and all the best wishes,

Celestino Cialdini

Yuuri dropped the note, taking in a deep breath.

Celestino had wanted him to go here and Yuuri had not protested. Celestino wanted him to be here. Now Yuuri was here. Celestino wanted him to succeed here.

Hopefully, he would.

With lots of love and all the best wishes, he had written.

That was some comfort at least. Celestino hadn't sent him away because he didn't care for him. Celestino wanted him to grow and change and succeed.

So, Yuuri would try his best.

So Yuuri would now consider Dresden the place to grow and change and succeed.

So Yuuri would now consider Dresden his home.

It would be all right.

Kapitel 2:

Chapter 02

It was anything but all right, no matter how hard Yuuri tried.

He had wandered Dresden a bit more, but it had been a short stint. Acutely aware that people stared at him, his features, his smaller stature and his distinctly not-Western complexion, he had managed only two or three streets before the stares had driven him back into the dormitory.

By the time of his return the place had started to crawl with people coming from their morning work or already heading out for the evening performances, the foyer was overrun with dancers and musicians and artists talking amiably or curtly to each other. Nobody had paid Yuuri any attention, thank goodness.

He had met up with Georgi for supper, listening to him chattering on and on about which chorus boy had done this and that and which ballet girl he was intending to woo this year, so he could marry her, so his former betrothed would see how well he'd be doing without her and then she'd regret everything and try to reconcile with him.

He didn't say much, partly because Georgi certainly revelled in having someone who listened to his ramblings.

Partly it was because Georgi was talking fast and with that thick accent of his, so Yuuri had to focus all his attention on understanding what he was saying.

Probably the biggest reason was that Georgi was, in fact, a little bit scary with the way he talked and Yuuri most certainly did not want to encourage him.

It was bedtime for him soon after – Mrs. Haubener handed him a blanket, sheets and a pillow, all clean and smelling faintly of lavender and all smooth and tinted the softest shade of yellow with long years of use.

So, in the empty room, he made his bed and laid down, closing his eyes, trying to catch some sleep.

It proved to be a tough exercise.

Dresden was a loud city night and day, full of the rumble of the carts, the clapping of hooves, the chatter and laughter of people and the shatter of glass.

Even after pressing the pillow over his ears, the sounds still intruded on him and followed him into his dreams.

Morning came too early and as he rose, he saw five other tousled heads rising, blinking, looking around and then stumbling out of their beds to get dressed.

The other men blinked at him. "New face, eh?" one commented. "Where you work?"

"Chorus," Yuuri mumbled and then hurried down, before they could stare at him any more or ask questions or generally try to talk to him.

Downstairs a maid servant handed out trays with bread and butter and cheese and porridge and strong, black tea and made a mark behind his name on a list.

He ate in silence, taking notice of the fact that Georgi wasn't coming down and scanning the many, square tables of the room that was serving as mess hall. Everyone down here looked just as tired as Yuuri felt and the tea did only so much to alleviate his troubles. Also, down here in the mess hall with them all groggy from what likely had been far too short a night, the gender segregation was almost nonexistent, men and women eating in peace at the same table, sometimes in bleary silence, sometimes

with a side of friendly banter or bickering, before they got up, carried their dishes back and then left, possibly for whatever line of work they were keeping themselves fed and housed with.

Yuuri cleared his plate in silence before doing the same.

The Semperoper was waiting.

Life was waiting.

Work, however, wasn't waiting, so he better hurry, because really, there were a lot of things he would rather face than an angry Yakov Feltsman right at his first day there. Being thrown off a cliff most definitely or being run over by a horse cart most definitely would have been a far more delightful prospect.

With his life being the way it was, it was likely he would be very late nonetheless, due to some circumstances he could not foresee, or he would be laughably early, waiting in the corridors - or worse, in front of the building - because nobody would let him in just yet.

Well, being too early was better anyways. He could spend the time bracing himself for the day to come, for strange new faces, for questions, for unknown material, for finding himself a position in the chorus, for Mr. Feltsman.

Miraculously, the door was already open and he could go inside to follow long, yellow-dark corridors towards the stage.

Each step took him closer and he still didn't feel too ready to face what lay ahead and...

But there it was, the stage, the auditorium, and there was Mr. Feltsman, already sitting in one of the chairs close to the orchestra pit.

Of course. Of course the one case Yuuri would have considered the worst – directly after being late – had to happen. Being the first to arrive was almost as bad as being dead last and only because being the last meant more eyes to stare at him.

He took a deep breath and came out into sight. "Good morning."

Mr. Feltsman looked up. "Ah. You here. Good. Warm up." He waved and then turned back to the newspaper he was reading.

Yuuri started with some breathing exercises, widening his lungs, then loosened his lips and tongue by making hissing, chortling sounds and blowing raspberries before finally getting to his vocal cords, moving his voice up and down in even, uninterrupted glides, before singing scores and then slowly moving on to simply three-tone melodies.

When he was done, Mr. Feltsman had put his newspaper aside and was watching him intently.

Yuuri tried his hardest to hold his gaze, but at the end he had to avert his eyes.

"Tenor, right?"

"Uh, yes. Last time I checked... just now..."

Mr. Feltsman raised an eyebrow and it occurred to Yuuri too late that he might not appreciate cheek. Well. Too late. But maybe it wasn't too late to slink away to a corner and die, in a potentially less painful way than what Mr. Feltsman might do to him.

But Mr. Feltsman did nothing that might have pointed towards the impending, painful termination of Yuuri's life.

Instead, he reached to the seat next to himself and grabbed a small folio. "There!" He lifted his arm and threw the thing for Yuuri to run after and catch it.

When he opened it, he found sheets of music.

"You got around fifteen minutes before most of the others arrive. Go through it and see what you already know. Practise the rest with me afterwards."

Yuuri leafed through the songs. "I... I think I'm good..." he admitted. "I mean, I know them from Maestro Caldini..."

"You sing any of them on stage?" Mr. Feltsman asked. Then he corrected himself: "Sang."

"Some of them," Yuuri admitted. "*Nabucco* I never performed because I was considered too young, but I practised and studied it."

"With whom?"

With Celestino, Yuuri wanted to say, but that would have meant Mr. Feltsman thought of him as some sort of genius, deserving of such intense tutelage. Which he was not. He wasn't bad per se or he would not even sing in chorus or even a small solo role. But he most definitely wasn't what Mr. Feltsman would expect. And Celestino had practised these songs with him in private, for their own mutual amusement, so he had been lenient with him and...

"Nobody. Alone."

"Ah." Mr. Feltsman crossed his arms. "So, *Va, pensiero* too?"

Yuuri nodded. "Yes."

"Good." He leaned back in his chair, looking up to Yuuri expectantly. "Well. Let's hear."

"What... no..."

Mr. Feltsman let out something like a growl. "You say no to me?" he asked, face twisting up. "You say no to me?! To me? You?!" He had risen from his chair, staring at him.

Yuuri's stomach churned.

"So! You sing now or not?!"

The nausea was getting worse by the second and still, Mr. Feltsman was staring at him.

So, finally, he nodded.

"Ah, fine. You need piano?"

Yuuri shook his head. "I... I gonna do myself." Why was his German leaving him, right now when it would have been really important to appear at least somewhat confident.

"As you will, but hurry up."

He stepped closer to the piano that was half-hidden behind the curtain, sheets of music in hand, and then he was out of Mr. Feltsman's line of sight.

This was good.

Yuuri actually managed to calm down his breathing, deepen the draws of air he took and settle his nerves, just a little bit.

It was enough so his fingers didn't tremble when they touched the piano keys, playing the first few beats that lead into the song, before his voice set in. "*Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate; va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli, ove olezzano tepide e molli l'aure dolci del suolo natal!*"

Somewhere along the singing he dared to come back out on stage, doing his best not to think about Mr. Feltsman sitting down there in his chair, looking at him with was most definitely was utter disapproval.

Instead, he focused on the song. "*O mia patria sì bella e perduta! O membranza sì cara e fatal!*" He would not allow himself to think too much about Milan anymore. He was here now. He was here.

It ended with "*che ne infonda al patire virtù.*" and Yuuri let out a deep breath of relief after a second.

"Good." Mr. Feltsman nodded. "The rest of the songs in the repertoire? You know

these too?"

"Uh, yes." Should he sing these too? Knowing would have been nice.

"Good."

There was not much more time. Yuuri already heard footsteps, many, many of them, and they all were light. Chorus singers were young, most of the time, hoping to rise through the ranks in time, becoming someone's understudy and maybe even lead singer themselves at some point. Those who didn't flourish when they grew older could either stay or try and find some other employment, maybe as a private music teacher or as a performer in a smaller theatre. Most stayed small, with small names, small incomes, small lives.

Yuuri had never dared to dream of anything big.

But here they were, the other singers, looking at him, some smiling, some gaping, all as if the Prima Donna herself had declared it proper and reasonable to practise with them.

"Oh. Morning," he mumbled, trying to smile at them.

They smiled.

"That sounded great!", some of them commented, "From what I've heard!", before they took their designated places.

Yuuri relied on Mr. Feltsman's cues to join the tenor singers.

They positioned themselves, the other tenor singers happily taking Yuuri in their middle, because "it makes you flub less as a new starter", as one boy cheerfully explained.

Practise went on and it was... it was all right.

Yuuri found he liked the voices surrounded him and that he could sing along quite nicely with them.

Practise went along quite nicely, in fact, after they had warmed up and Yuuri actually found himself having fun singing with others, hearing their voices, singing with them, melting with them into the same song, following Mr. Feltsman's instructions and corrections after each piece.

It wasn't until eight o'clock that any of them heard another set of steps and then an annoyed, "Oi, Yakov, you wanna keep them for the whole day?!" from a young tenor voice that, in Yuuri's that Yuuri would always connect with flaxen hair and eyes too sharp, too smart and entirely too brash for their age.

Only then the spell was broken. Only then Yuuri woke up again, realizing that he was on stage, surrounded by dozens and dozens of people.

He looked around. Next to the curtain Yuri Plisetsky leaned against a beam, arms folded across his chest, a dour look on his face. "We wanna start, y'know?"

"Yeah, yeah. Good! Chorus, dismissed! The schedules for next week's evening performances hang on the board, check them up!" Mr. Feltsman waved at them and they broke formation.

"You sing really well," a young man said, next to him, smiling.

"Uh. Thanks." Yuuri managed to pull up the corners of his mouth. "Mr. Feltsman is pretty demanding, right?"

"Yes, but that's what makes us good." The man grinned. "I am Johannes."

"Yuuri." They shook hands while heading off the stage.

"Katsuki!"

Yuuri flinched and turned around. "Yes?!"

"One of the tenors has called in sick, so you're filling in for him tomorrow in the chorus. For the rest you'll check the board."

Yuuri's stomach once again dropped. That was... unexpected. He nodded, slowly, before following the others off the stage, along the corridors to the group changing room. They didn't have to change today, but Yuuri had already seen yesterday that the board with the schedules and announcements was next to the door of the changing room.

His name was somewhere in the middle of the tenor part of the list. Behind it were dates and the names of operas or singspiele.

Yuuri was scheduled for five evenings. That meant three different performances.

"As I said," Johannes grinned, "demanding job here, but that's what makes you good."

Yuuri nodded. "It's not worse than the Scala."

"Oh right, you're from Milan." Johannes looked him up and down. "You don't look Italian, mind you."

Yuuri raised an eyebrow.

"I guess you hear that a lot?"

"And I am familiar with the concept of looking glasses and able to apply this knowledge in my everyday life, yes." But still, Yuuri found himself smiling as he said this.

Johannes grinned. "Yeah, okay, admittedly, the only person in this whole opera who looks Italian is La Crispino, so, I guess we're in the same boat here."

Yuuri laughed. "Yes, seems like it."

They moved aside so the others could have a glance on the board as well.

"So, you've got time today, what you gonna do?" Johannes asked.

"Don't know. Maybe I'll take another look at the town, yesterday I didn't see so much. And practising. You?"

"I am on stage tonight, so I guess I'll rest at home. My sister always complains I'm too exhausted."

Yuuri nodded and smiled. "Good, then."

"See you tomorrow." Johannes turned, waving, and then he wandered off.

Yuuri looked after him for a bit before turning his attention back to the board.

For a few more moments he studied it and then turned away, making a mental note to bring a pen and paper with him tomorrow, so he could write it down properly.

It was still so early in the day. Performances did not start until five or six and would go on until as late as 11. Thankfully, chorus singers were generally not required to partake in any social after-functions, so Yuuri would hopefully not have to worry about lacking sleep.

"So?"

He turned around to find Yuri Plisetsky standing behind him, staring.

"Uh. Hello. Again," Yuuri mumbled, trying not to sound too disturbed about the fact that the boy was here, in front of the changing room, instead of the stage where he was supposed to be practising.

"Yakov's busy with Sara and Mila," Yuri mumbled. "Sara's understudy."

Yuuri nodded.

"So." The boy folded his arms in front of his chest. "You gonna try out for the *Wildschütz*?"

"I don't know yet," Yuuri admitted. "This *is* my first day here and it seems the opera already has its pick on solo singers, so..."

"So, you're afraid?" Yuri's eyes darted up and down on him.

"What?" Yuuri blinked.

Now his eyes narrowed. "You afraid you gonna suck?"

"No, not... not really, I..." Yuuri found himself looking for words. "I mean, I simply don't think I'm gonna do too well, so, maybe I should focus on improving in general... I could do better next time?"

"Ah." Yuri took a deep breath. "So you don't wanna suck, so you don't try at all? Okay, we can shorten this period of anxiety." He took a step closer to Yuuri and Yuuri found himself walking backwards. He hit the wall. "If you think so, you suck, end of story. We don't need suckers here, we need folks who are good and who can sing."

The boy stood now directly in front of him, staring him in the eye. Yuuri wasn't sure whether he had ever seen so much disgust directed at him.

"Get out then, we don't need you!" And with that, he turned around and stomped off. Yuuri stood and stared after him.

What the hell had that been about?

What...

He stood there and then he realized he was shaking his head. That was really weird. He didn't know Yuri and the boy didn't seem like having taken a liking to him. Pretty much the opposite, at least compared to the other people Yuuri had at least attempted to engage so far.

Maybe it was his youth.

Or maybe he was simply a brat (which, admittedly, was a side effect of him still being so young. It would get lesser with age then. At least, Yuuri hoped so).

But still.

He found it strangely hard to turn around and go down the corridor to the door. His feet were heavy, slowed down.

He paused, close to the door.

So, basically, this child called him a coward because he was hesitant about a tryout.

Yuuri shook his head. Well, if that was a reason to call him a coward, then fine, really, that was fine.

But still. The boy had declared him unfit to sing because of this. And maybe that was the case to some degree. Someone too afraid for a tryout was certainly not fit for a solo spot at the center stage.

But this little brat apparently thought he could chase him out of the chorus. Before Yuuri had even made a place for himself here. The very idea left a sour taste in his mouth.

Again, he shook his head while his feet started walking again, turning, going back, to the stage.

Yuri Plisetsky was still standing there, behind the curtain, looking out on the stage.

"So," Yuuri sighed in something that probably was defeat, but for some reason did come out quite un-defeated, "You got the scores and a libretto for the *Wildschütz* or what?!"

Considering small parts rarely ever had any solo numbers of a length to speak of, practising the big and important roles was inevitable when preparing for a try-out. The "*Wildschütz*" had only one big tenor part and that one had quite a few solo verses, so, more than enough material to take his pick from. The thing itself was a light-hearted opera buffa, so at least nobody would expect any gravitas in his presence. Gravitas very likely would have killed that sort of performance anyways.

In that way, Yuri Plisetsky was right. Yuuri would have no trouble with a role like the Baron Kronental.

Leafing through the libretto for a suitable piece to sing, he had had chuckled quite a

few times; light-hearted as it was, the humor was just outright *vicious* at times, with one young bride happily poking fun at the age of her middle-aged groom right in the beginning.

The story continued with circumstances threatening the wedding, dressup, crossdressing, going into hiding, mistaken identities, and utterly strange love situations.

And Yuuri had thought Italian opera could go over the top. Leave it to the Germans to blow it up even more. Also, leave it to the Germans to attempt and make allusions of incestuous adultery funny.

It resolved in some happily married love matches in the end; none of them incestuous or adulterous, so far.

There were smaller practise rooms in the back of the building and Yuuri made it his habit to go and find himself a free one after morning rehearsal and practise there for two hours or so.

The music was fun and energetic and easy enough to play if the lead melody was all one was trying for anyways.

Singing was a bit more tricky with these energetic, fun things that sounded so nice and easy, but were anything but.

Yuuri got into the routine of starting with a scene between the Baron and his brother-in-law, the Count of Eberbach, discussing how the unmarried Baron had snuck in under the disguise of a stable boy and had already started flirting with the Counts wife – who was also his sister. He sang the Baron's parts, only humming along whenever the Count had a line.

Once this was finished, he moved on to one of the first longer verses of the Baron in which he declared himself smitten with a supposedly poor young woman. "Ja, ich muss die Holde sehen, Und sie sprechen ganz allein; Weiss nicht, wie mir ist geschehen, Wunderbar nimmt sie mich ein. Möglich, dass dies Mädchen eben Krönet meiner Wünsche Streben Und mir dann versüsst des herben Lebens Pein!"

Yuuri almost pitied the poor fellow for this, but it was just too much fun to sing, his voice rising and falling along the lines. At this point, he always heard himself how the passion of an instant infatuation replaced the light, flighty way he had performed until then.

When one day he had finished his warm-up and straight up went to these verses of infatuation, the passion was already there.

That was good. He could recall emotion when needed. This was very, very, very good. He then would move on to the second longer verse the Baron had, one he sang together with the Count, expressing their shared disbelief that their equally shared, poor, low-born sweetheart was engaged to a middle aged, homely school teacher. "Nein, es ist kaum zu glauben, Dass dieses Monstrum hier Imstande wär', zu rauben Der Mädchen schönste Zier! Und diese Rosenwangen, Sie sollten vor Verlangen Für diesen Alten glühn? Erdrosseln möcht' ich ihn!"

The disbelief and anger were no problem either. Good. Yes, that *was* really fun to sing and Yuuri found himself looking forward to these few hours every day, in the morning, during rehearsal and when performing.

Occasionally, when he was almost done with singing through the baron's parts and his voice was warm and flexible and easy, the notes coursing through him and leaving him in a sweet flow.

His days slipped into an easy, familiar routine of rehearsal, practise and on most evenings, performances, during which he wrote a short letter, informing Celestino

Cialdini of his safe arrival in Dresden and at the Opera, his good health and, after a moment of hesitation, the upcoming tryouts. These sort of things were what Celestino loved to hear, so Yuuri gladly provided.

He would usually chat with Georgi (at least on days the man wasn't obsessing over his former fiancée) as well as with Johannes and some other men from the chorus, sometimes after performances they would try and find some place for dinner in a group.

It most definitely helped Yuuri improve his grasp on German, to sit and listen to them exchanging stories and throwing good natured jabs at each other, even though he would never make sense of this mash up of accents they featured.

"Yuuri, you know any fun stories from the Scala?" Johannes one day asked, cheerfully chewing on a bit of potato dipped in curd. Their favourite dinner at the inn Seidelhof was wonderfully cheap and filling – hence its status.

The atmosphere was good – the performance of "Faust" tonight had gone off without a hitch. The solo singers had performed flawlessly, nobody in the ballet had had even the slightest misstep, everyone in the chorus had been on note. Which was how things should be, but rarely ever were. It was opera, there was always something happening causing minor drama and they had to work around it.

Which made for good stories they liked to share and pass around in a good mood.

And the mood was good. Mr. Feltsman had praised them. At least Yuuri had the feeling that his "like that tomorrow, folks" was a praise, considering the reactions of the other singers.

"Uh..." Yuuri quickly stuffed a piece of potato into his mouth to chew on and regretted it immediately since steamed potatoes had a tendency to be hot when coming fresh from the kitchen.

He desperately tried to roll the bite in his mouth without actually touching it with his tongue, grabbing for his beer to ease the pain a bit.

The hurt and the subsequent cooling made the beer actually almost drinkable.

"Urgh." Yuuri swallowed. "Now that's a story, a singer who dies of a hot potato and awful alcohol."

Johannes laughed. "I tell you, you will get used to beer."

"I do hope not before I can afford proper wine again." Still, the beer was cold and his mouth was still hurting a bit, so Yuuri took another sip. "Anyway, it's funnier when it happens to the director of the opera and involves some meatballs, spitting and the primadonna in her brand new, yellow dress. For a moment I thought she'd join the ranks of the ghosts haunting the Ducale."

There was a round of laughter and finally someone said: "You got many of them there?"

"Ghosts?" Yuuri rolled his eyes. "Every department has their own stories. Sometimes up to ten or so. It's become a competition of sort, whether ballet or singers or stagehands are better at creeping each other out."

"You got so many ghosts, send them over here!" A boy, Thomas laughed. "We got only one and he's been here for only a few years!"

Considering all the technology a stage demanded, the endless corridors, the ever present bustle of people, it wasn't hard to mistake a gust of wind for a moan or the creaking of floorboards for steps. And of course, when people left out sweetmeats to appease a ghost or two they would disappear.

Celestino had always made a show of laughing at these superstitions and secretly sprayed Holy Water on corridors and in rooms that were considered particularly

haunted.

"One ghost? In how many years?" Yuuri inquired.

"Yes and a quiet one at that," Johannes grumbled. "Worst we've noticed was some rustling of curtains during a dress rehearsal. Send some of yours over, Yuuri, it would liven things up a bit."

Yuuri chuckled. "Maybe I can write Celestino to repeat the meatball incident, then we'd have one fresh and full of energy."

One of the other men snorted. "I would love to bear witness!"

"Yeah, with La Crispino it's kinda hard to do," Johannes sighed. "She always wears so dark colours."

"Let's face it, she would laugh at it and spit something on your shirt in revenge."

"So she's always so nice?" Yuuri asked.

"Yep." Johannes shrugged. "Dunno how she got to her position with being so nice and all, but I'm certainly not complaining. What was the yellow dress primadonna like?"

Yuuri spiked another piece of potato on his fork. "Her name is Angelique Farbenieu."

"Oh shit."

"Yes. She was at the Ducale when I was ten or so and she always complained about me being there." Yuuri puffed out his chest, throwing his head back. "Stage is not a place for children!" he then called in a thick, false french accent.

Around the table there was a round of eyeroll and occasional laughter.

Yuuri shrugged and then made an effort to speak casually, which was quite a feat considering the stilted nature of German. "She was less mean to me when I offered to walk her poodle for her. Even paid me, quite well too. And the dog was good. But to the rest of the folks, no. She was not nice."

"Rarely a primadonna is," one man commented, "And La Crispino... I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to have seen enough of this world and return to heaven."

"Or Verona," Yuuri countered. "Which is close enough."

There was some laughter at the table and Johannes asked "Aw, why, you already miss the Italian beauties?"

Yuuri smiled at the jab. "More like the wine. And the absence of this awful beer."

His singing was secure these days, he could rely on his voice and he wasn't alone here. Two weeks passed and then the third, and Yuuri had to admit that it was far less horrible than he had at first feared. The Crispino was as kind and sweet to him as to anyone else, Yuuri made an effort to not cause trouble for any other singer and Yuri Plisetsky very pointedly did not even look in his direction, which Yuuri wasn't too sad about.

So when Mr. Feltsman ended their practise for the day with "Good then – those who want to try out for the "Wildschütz" stay!" Yuuri didn't at first realize what this meant. He stayed, after all he wanted to try out and Georgi behind his piano looked pretty cheerful about that, packing away one stack of sheet music to replace it with another. It sank in only after a moment, when some of the solo singers strolled in and sat down in the red cushioned chairs.

One of them was Yuri Plisetsky and in stark contrast to the days before his eyes now followed every step Yuuri took.

It was more than slightly unnerving.

Mr. Feltsman greeted them with a curt nod before sitting down himself. "Good, welcome to the tryout for the male roles for Lortzing's *Wildschütz*, yaddayadda, you all are warmed up, so we can start with the bass. Anyone trying out for Baculus?"

No reaction whatsoever.

Yuuri glanced around, but none of the faces around him he could associate with the admittedly quite small bass section of the chorus.

"Nobody, eh? So, Pancratius neither?" Mr. Feltsman sighed. "Katsuki, you said you were trained to sing baritone?"

Yuuri flinched. "Yes..."

"Bass?"

Yuuri almost didn't dare to shake his head as he was stared down not only by Mr. Feltsman but by the other chorus members and by the solo singers down in their chairs as well.

He swallowed and then mumbled: "No. Baritone yes, but most definitely not bass."

Mr. Feltsman sighed. "Fine then. Johannes!"

Mr. Erhard, one of the bass singers here and the Sarastro in the current staging of the "Magic Flute" if Yuuri remembered correctly, sighed deeply. "Fine, Yakov, but you explain this to my wife. Or better, Yuri does."

"What?!" Yuri Plisetsky turned his head around, eyebrows raised until they almost disappeared under the strands that were insistently falling over his brows. "Why would I do that?!"

Mr. Erhard shrugged. "She adores you. You have the highest chance of not getting dismembered with a frying pan and a scrubbing board."

Mr. Feltsman sighed and The Crispino laughed. "I'll bring some wine to calm her nerves, Yakov and Johannes hold her down and me, Elise and Yuri deliver the news?"

Mr. Erhard sighed. "That might actually work. Thank you."

"We have a tryout here. Plan your tea parties some other time," Mr. Feltsman rumbled, before adding, "But count me in." He looked back onto the stage. "Good, no bass, what a great start, next time we have vacant spots in the chorus, remind me to hire more bass singers! Next role. Baritone. Count Eberbach! Baritone!"

Yuuri tried to slink away.

"Katsuki, I said Baritone, are you capable of singing Baritone or not?!"

Yuuri flinched, once again. He was, he was very much capable of singing baritone; Celestino had been immensely proud when he had realized how versatile his protégé's voice was and had put great effort into training him to utilize it to its full effect.

"If... from the first act, the thirteenth scene," he mumbled. "But I haven't prepared anything, I mean..."

"Either you prepared something you can sing," Mr. Feltsman snapped, "or not. Decide now. Sing or shut up."

Yuuri swallowed. "The *Diese Holde* verse," he finally said. The verse the count sang expressing his desire for a supposedly common girl, just before the baron voiced a similar desire.

Mr. Feltsman made a short gesture and Georgi started playing and –

It was so far. The emptiness was filling Yuuri's ears, blocking everything, numbing the piano, numbing the mumbling that was arising around him.

His whole body had went cold.

He could not even open his mouth, he knew the words, he knew he had to set in, now Georgi was already on the second line, he...

Yakov sighed. "Stop. Next."

The world around Yuuri shifted, the auditorium angled and he saw the stage curtain moving to him.

Boxes and beams and levers and his line of view lowered and Johannes looked at him. His mouth moved, but it took Yuuri a while until he could make out the words.

"You don't look too good – are you ok?"

"I..." Why was his voice so hoarse? He hadn't even sung...

He hadn't even sung.

Yuuri heard voices from the stage. Talking. Mr. Feltsman gave critique pointers. Someone else started singing.

"You should have insisted on not singing Baritone, if you weren't prepared for that," Johannes said.

Yes, he should have, he should have, he should have, he should have - and he hadn't.

"It wasn't right of him to ask you to sing a baritone part," Johannes continued.

But Yuuri had agreed and had given a music direction to Georgi, so...

"I'm sorry..."

"No, don't apologize..." Johannes sighed. "It's... maybe you can sing again when you're calmer?"

They both knew that this was not going to happen. Yakov Feltsman made no exceptions.

He glanced to the stage. "I am up now. You stay here, yes?"

Yuuri nodded.

More singing, more and more and always the same few pieces, solo verses and arias of the baron, music he had studied and worked on and prepared himself for.

What was he even doing here? Why had he thought that he could do this?! This wasn't even the first time, he couldn't even claim that this had never happened before, because oh, it had, it had happened, way too often, and Yuuri knew, and still he had tried.

Just... why?

He heard steps coming closer, very light, carefully set and measured.

"Well," Yuri Plisetsky said, "at least we have yet to explore all the ways you can suck. Can't say much about that if you don't even sing."

Yuuri didn't look up.

"What the hell was that about?!"

He flinched and a small, distant corner of his mind noted that this was in fact the first time that Yuri Plisetsky had indeed yelled at him. Or that he had heard the boy yell at all. Quite some self-control, considering the ever-simmering anger that lingered in every move of his, in every glance he cast around, in every slight tilt of his head.

He had definitely better self control than Yuuri.

His eyes were burning, his cheeks hot and then he heard Yuri Plisetsky yelling again.

"What the hell, are you crying now?! What?"

And he wanted to stop, he really, he didn't want to cry at all, but it wouldn't stop, the tears would not stop and...

"What the hell are you even doing here?! What was that, I have heard you practising that shit, you should have been fine one way or another, why did you..."

"Yuri."

Oh. Mr. Feltsman. Great someone else to yell at him. Yuuri's hands started to move again, digging for a handkerchief, keeping his head down.

"Elise is here, you four can get started now, go through your parts. If Claus, Thomas and Maria are early, you can practise the dialogue between Papageno and Tamino."

The boy huffed, but Yuuri heard him walking away in carefully measured, light steps. Which wasn't much of a relief, considering how Mr. Feltsman was staring down on him

now.

"You come into my office with me."

Oh, that was it, he would be now officially told to please leave and find another employment. Maybe another line of work entirely. Probably in less polite terms, this was Yakov Feltsman he was talking about.

The man led him through the maze of the backstage to the more organized hallways in the back of the building.

His office door was small and unassuming and only a small nameplate denoted its occupant and his relative importance to the house. "Director for musical performance affairs" did sound grave indeed.

The interior, in contrast, was spartan and lived-through, the desk big and stable, but without ornament and white paint slowly chipping off of it. Same went for the cushionless chairs and the shelves containing thick ledgers and books.

He let Yuuri in. "Take a seat."

Yuuri did so.

Mr. Feltsman went around the desk and sat down, folding his hands on the desk. "Johannes made sure the other chorus singers took the exit on the other side from the stage. Remember to thank him for that."

Yuuri nodded.

"That happened before?"

"Y..." Damnit. "Yes." He finally managed to look up. "I'm sorry..."

To his surprise, Mr. Feltsman didn't look angry or even disgusted. His face, in fact, was about as kind and gentle as it could get, stern as it was. "I see. What did Cialdini say about it?"

"That I had no reason for this, that I just needed more confidence, but..." Yuuri shrugged, there was nothing to add, but he wanted to, at least for himself.

Mr. Feltsman nodded. "Speak of the devil, you've got mail." He reached into one of his drawer and pulled out an envelope, handing it to Yuuri.

The handwriting that said "To Yuuri Katsuki, at the Semperoper in Dresden" was unmistakably Celestino's.

Something in Yuuri's stomach lurched, far more than it should have at a letter from his guardian.

"He sent it here since he couldn't figure your address. You should write it to him, can't take your letters forever, I'm not a mail man."

Yuuri swallowed.

"Take today and tomorrow off. I'll have someone fill in for you tonight."

"What..."

"You're a mess," Mr. Feltsman stated. "And I doubt you'll be fine by tonight. And while the chorus tonight is big enough for one missing voice to not be noticed, one singer freezing up on stage is not so easy to hide. Or crying. Don' get me started on the crying. Could go on for days. Also, it makes the other singers nervous. Do yourself the favour. Get some sleep. Come back the day after tomorrow. There'll be other auditions this year."

So he was not being fired.

Yuuri sat very still, while his brain was racking over this new bit of information. He was not being fired. He was, in fact treated with an almost worrying amount of kindness.

"I am really sorry for the inconvenience," he mumbled.

Mr. Feltsman waved. "Just go and get some rest."

Yuuri swallowed hard and then got up. "Thank you. And... and I am sorry."

"I know." Mr. Feltsman nodded. "We'll see how to work on this. See you."

This was a dismissal and Yuuri thought it might be better if he did as he was told now. With soft steps he left the office and closed the door behind him.

With soft steps he wandered the hallways.

With soft steps he found himself backstage, listening to the soloists going through their parts before leaving again, looking for one of the empty rooms.

Mr. Feltsman had told him to go and sleep and get some rest, but going back to Mrs. Haubener's house would mean that he'd inevitably run into one of the other singers. Yuuri wasn't so sure he could stand this right now, not now, not like this.

So there he waited.

For a while he sat there, on the floor, next to the piano, holding Celestino's letter in his hands.

He didn't really want to read it. He already could tell what it said, but as long as he didn't read it, he didn't have to face it.

There he sat, staring at the wall or at the ceiling. Or the piano, listening to the bustle outside that went on and on for some time.

The piano was warm in his back, a strong, firm support to lean against, to wait and sit and wait and hold the envelope.

It went quiet at some point, both outside the room and inside Yuuri's chest.

They would start preparing the stage for this evening's performance.

In an hour or so, he assumed by looking out of the window, the soloists would come and get dressed into their costumes. In another hour the chorus singers would arrive and do the same. At the same time, the ballet dancers would arrive. They would all get ready, warm up and go over some key lines a last time.

And then the audience would be let in, first those on the cheap front seats, dressed in their best for a nice evening out. Not at all fine clothes, but respectable, dark linen dresses with high necklines and a hint of lace here or there. Clothes very similar, but the fabric just a little more expensive than what a respectable woman of the upper middle class would wear during the day.

Of course, a woman wearing a dark, modest dress as her best was most definitely not upper middle class. Just as the men wearing what for others was a daytime suit for an opera date were at best low-tier clerks and more likely lowish-tier craftsmen or maybe factory workers.

They sat just in front of the stage, with a poor view on what was happening above their heads, cheapest seats for the largest, but poorest component of their audience. Behind them, with a gap separating the seating group, was the smaller, fortunate group of well-to-do shop owners, traders, the occasional teacher, maybe even the odd knight and count.

At last only the highest-paying patrons of the opera would take seat, the richest bourgeois of Dresden, some courtiers and their ladies from the royal court, on very special occasions the king and his immediate family, although Yuuri had heard that this last prominent audience member would only appear on opening nights for a new staging and only for a few select favourite pieces at that.

Yuuri had never seen the curtains to the royal box drawn back.

He would not see it today either, considering how Mr. Feltsman had insisted on not seeing him here for the next few days.

Here, there would be silence, only utter silence.

So, maybe now it was safe to open the letter now, now nobody would hear him, just in case he would cry or make another too-loud noise he didn't want anyone to hear.

He stared at the envelope.

Celestino's handwriting greeted him, smiling almost, and it made his stomach churn. Slowly, he tore open the envelope at the side and reached in.

It was only a short note, thank goodness. What it was, was enough to clench up his throat.

Yuuriccino,

I am glad to hear you are well and that you are trying out. This alone makes me proud.

With love,

Celestino Cialdini

Maybe Celestino hadn't expected him to succeed, but was simply giving him praise for effort. He would not be disappointed by his failure. He was expecting it to happen, plain and simple.

Or maybe he had been hoping for Yuuri to get a part. Maybe he was looking forward to finally say, "See, I knew you could be something if you just stopped being scared all the time", and now he would not get to say these words and be annoyed by it.

He had meant well with his note. Yuuri knew that. He could see it in the swing of his writing, a little loopy like the smile he had on his face when Yuuri had managed to do something right for a change.

He had meant to encourage him or let him know that it was alright if he didn't get a solo part but that didn't change the fact that right now, Yuuri was desperately fighting to draw breath again.

Just why? Why was he like this? Why couldn't he be different, why, why, why...

A strangled, choked-up noise filled the room and it took Yuuri a moment to realize that it was his own voice, coming out in a low whimper, that soon turned into a series of hard, wrecked sobs.

At least he could keep it low. At least, after some time, he stopped, breath harsh and lungs burning.

It would be best to wait until the performance had ended and the performers had left the building. Then, when only the stagehands were left, he could slip out and go back home, get to bed, get some sleep.

He already knew he'd feel like starving the next day – he had had breakfast today, but that was about it. But right now, he was too empty to feel hungry, even though his stomach was painfully cramping. Crying tended to take it out of him, especially when it went without tears.

He had messed up. He had messed up big time and anyone else but Mr. Feltsman would have very likely fired him. Hell, he had thought Mr. Feltsman would fire him.

Still, here he was.

Yuuri took a deep breath. There would be other auditions. He would mess them up as well, very likely, but there would be other auditions.

For now it was over.

He ran a hand over the claviature before pressing down, letting the tones rise and linger in the air, then another few, weaving a melody, humming along.

His voice wasn't even remotely warmed up, but still, he sang that damn piece that he had failed to perform before, just so he could say he had done it today, at least to himself.

"Diese Holde dort zu sehen Und zu sprechen sie allein, Mich im Tanz mit ihr zu drehen, Soll mir eine Wonne sein. Eurer Wohlfahrt nur zu leben, Ist mein Trachten, mein Bestreben, Wird stets meine Sorge sein!"

The lines of the Count came out a bit wobbly, his voice not sung smooth enough for

him to hold the baritone all the way through, but it was still a decent performance, nothing to earn him a solo spot, strained as his voice was.

He continued tinkering out the melody until he reached the thing he had actually wanted to sing. "Ja, ich muss die Holde sehen Und sie sprechen ganz allein...", he went on.

Singing in Baritone had been a grossly insufficient warm-up and he felt it. Even in tenor, his singing voice struggled and strained against his throat. Hitting the notes was a challenge like this, but miracle of miracles he did it, singing the blasted thing all the way through, although he didn't even remotely feel like someone experiencing love – or at least some form of infatuation – and having his whole life brightened by it. But still. Singing. No mistakes. That was worth something. His fingers tapered over the piano for a bit, playing bits and pieces of the "Wildschütz", before ending up on yet another piece sung by the baron, confessing his love to the supposed commoner who caused him so much emotional suffering. "Von meiner heissen Lieb' allein Red' ich zu deinem Herzen. Wirst du noch ferner grausam sein, Erwachen alle Schmerzen Auf's neu in mir! Nicht trag' ich mehr dies Leben; preisgegeben Fühl' ich mich der Verzweiflung wieder; Ein tötend Gift oder Blei, einerlei, Gift oder Blei, was es auch sei, Soll mir willkommen sein, Zu enden meine Pein."

The fact that the young woman he so desperately implored to marry him was his actual intended, and not some low-born and already engaged girl, didn't change the fact that he was most definitely not a role Yuuri would ever like to sing.

His fingers still flitted over the piano when he was done with the part, moving up and down and he didn't even notice that he had switched the major key, until his fingers made the familiar melody materialize in the room.

"Va, pensiero," his voice started to mumble, a whisper at first, "sull'ali dorate; va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli," and slowly, it found its step into the melody, "ove olezzano tepide e molli l'aure dolci del suolo natal! Del Giordano le rive saluta..."

It was a wrecked, broken attempt at the song, but it still helped a bit

At the very least, Yuuri sighed, he would be able to relate better to such mournful songs, if he ever got a chance to sing them again.

"Del Giordano le rive saluta, di Sionne le torri atterrate..." His voice was harsher than usual when he sang this choir piece, rougher. Or maybe *he* just felt rougher. "O mia patria sì bella e perduta! O membranza sì cara e fatal!" It certainly didn't fit with the mournful, resigned longing the Jews expressed for their long lost home.

He wanted to go home. He just... he just wanted to run and go back and be somewhere where he could be okay, where he might fit in without always sticking out, where people would not stare at him for his eyes and his face and his skin and...

"Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati, perché muta dal salice pendi?" The words came out in a strangled sob. "Le memorie nel petto raccendi, ci favella del tempo che fu!"

He was so weak. No wonder he couldn't perform properly, no wonder he was a failure, no wonder Celestino had sent him away. He couldn't even sing properly.

"O simile di Solima ai fati traggi un suono di crudo lamento, o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto che ne infonda al patire virtù."

The last few verses were choked out and Yuuri sank down to the floor, curling up next to the piano.

It wasn't until the small hours of the morning that he got up and moved and snuck out.

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 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 find 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.