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### Change of Foot

There were seven requirements for a short program. Skaters had two minutes and forty seconds to fit in three jumps, a step sequence that used the entire ice surface, and three types of spins. Of the jumps, they had to have a double or triple Axel, a triple of their choice, and a combination of their choice. Of the spins, they needed one without a change of foot, one with a flying entry, and a combination with a single change of foot. The requirements for the long program, which she was skating the day after tomorrow, were different and much more extensive.

Most women couldn't jump a triple Axel, Makiko included, so she was doing a double. She was opening with that. She didn't like opening with combination jumps—every skater had their superstitions—and she preferred to save her favorite jump, the triple Lutz, for last.

The arena echoed with the opening notes of her chosen music, *Valse "La plus que lente"* by Debussy. She took a deep breath (*in, two, three, out, two, three*) and lifted her head, pushing off with her right skate at the same time, and her Olympic short program began.

Family dinner nights were on Thursdays. This had been the rule for as long as Makiko had been alive. Every Thursday, rain or shine, do or die. Except last Thursday, because her dad had had a

meeting with an important client. And the week before that, because her mom had a surgery she couldn't miss. And the Thursday before that, because of something else Makiko couldn't remember.

Makiko felt like she hadn't seen her parents in weeks.

She pushed spaghetti around in her bowl, wishing it was homemade yakisoba instead of takeout from the Italian place in town. Nobody ever really had time to cook anymore. She supposed she could, but by the time she got home, she barely had enough energy to throw leftovers in the microwave, let alone cook something from scratch.

"How was school today?" her father asked, twirling spaghetti around his fork.

"Fine," Makiko said. She nudged her own pasta and figured they would want to hear something beyond *Fine*. That or they'd take it as an invitation to start teasing her about being a grumpy teenager. "My history project went well. We finally got Jerome to contribute, though we had to threaten him with bodily harm."

"What was the project about?" her mother asked around a sip of wine.

"The War of 1812," Makiko said.

"Underrated war," her dad said jovially.

Makiko said, "Yeah."

"And how was practice?" said her mother.

Makiko's hands and knees throbbed with echoes of eating shit on every attempt at a flying entry into a spin. She was a stronger jumper than spinner, so jumping into a spin should be a no-

brainer, but she couldn't land it. She knew she *could* do it, but every time she tried to balance out an over or under jump, her legs and core wouldn't listen.

"Fine," she said quietly.

"Coach Decker still cracking the whip?" Her father shot her a grin. "I'm kidding. I know you both work hard."

"He's truly a blessing to this family," said her mother.

Makiko's smile felt stale on her face. "There's never a dull moment."

There was never a moment to rest, either, but wasn't that part of it? Wasn't endless exhaustion and aching limbs part of the road to success?

"I'm glad you're having fun," her mother said. "Dave, how was your day today?"

"Oh, terrible," said Makiko's father. "This client I have is kicking my ass."

Makiko ran her finger along the grain of the kitchen table and thought, *I don't think I'm okay.*

Her first element was upon her: her double Axel. It had taken two years and a change of coaches, but she now had the back-counter entrance down pat. With that, she could incorporate the Axel near-seamlessly into her choreography. She twirled on her right foot, two rotations made slightly dizzying by the speed required for the jump, put her left foot down, switched the direction she was facing, and threw her right leg in front of her, simultaneously pushing off from her left. Axels were the only jump in figure skating with a forward takeoff, but skaters still landed skating backwards, so there was an extra half of an in-air rotation. Two and a half of those whirlwind rotations and her right blade

came down, cutting into the ice as she pulled her left leg behind her for her post-jump arabesque. Good rotation, steady landing—that would be a nice chunk of points. She put her left leg down and kept skating.

Amelie Grenier and her coach—Connolly?—were laughing so hard Makiko could hear it over her warmup playlist. She was trying not to look, trying not to stare, though she could tell the other skaters in the room were just as distracted. This was the Autumn Classic competition, not a joke. She eased into a stretch, trying to focus on the 2012 pop playing in her ears. Across the room, Amelie splayed her arms in a weird position and Connolly let out a bark of laughter.

“They just sent the last skater of the section out, so warmup starts soon,” Decker said, materializing at her elbow. “Start getting your gear.”

She did her best in warmup, skates scything on the ice. She practiced what they’d decided on and thought it went well. When warmup was over, she filed off the ice with four other skaters and made her way down the side of the rink to Coach Decker.

“You stayed last night late to work on your twizzles and I can’t see a single difference,” he said by way of greeting. “Also, you’re still fighting your deep edges, which I’ve told you a thousand times, so keep that in mind when you’re scored lower than you should be.”

She leaned against the boards and didn’t say anything. Behind Decker, she caught Amelie watching her, though the other girl glanced away immediately.

*When you look at me, Makiko thought, lowering her gaze to the floor, what do you see?*

Her next element was a spin combination with a change of foot: spin on one foot, then switch to her other foot and spin again. The first one she had to do, a cannonball sit spin on her right, always felt ungainly: squatting on one foot with her leg straight out and her forehead pressed to her knee. She watched the sideboards blur green and blue around her, using a Canadian flag in the audience to count rotations. After her fifth rotation, she rose, switching to her left foot for her other spin, a layback. Uncomfortable as they were—the skater had to bend over backwards almost halfway and then stay like that for several rotations—she loved laybacks. She arched backwards, remembering to make “pretty hands,” as Coach Connolly aptly called them, and once again used the Canadian flag to count out rotations. *One, two, three, four, five, and . . . six.*

Her step sequence was right after the spins. Time for some fancy footwork. She had four Choctaws scattered throughout, at her suggestion. Only two of them counted toward her score, but she was so in love with how the sweeping transition from foot to foot felt that she’d pushed to work the extra two in. Left foot out behind for the first arc as she skated on her right, then a seamless switch to skate on her left and push her right out in front. She liked to make hers into grand, graceful arcs, with deep edges and graceful, airlike movements. Choctaws were easily her favorite part of the step sequence—though who was she kidding? Every moment was her favorite until the next came along.

Now was not the time to get emotional, flying across the ice at the Olympics, but sometimes she just really, really loved skating.

She’d never been this nervous to step out onto the ice. *It’s no big deal.* It was no big deal except it was her first practice with her new coaches and sort-of teammate. It was no big deal except it was kind of a huge deal. What if she messed up? What if they watched her skate and realized they didn’t

want to coach her? What if she had to go back to Decker? She thought of the Autumn Classic, of watching Amelie with the coaches Makiko was now under contract with. She'd performed her free skate, got her scores, went backstage, and called her parents. It was one of those moments that was imprinted on her brain: locked in a bathroom stall, crouching because her legs wouldn't hold her, lungs still burning even though it had been several minutes since her skate, hands shaking, hearing her own voice say: *I want a new coach*. And a new coach she had gotten: she was now a member of the Rhodes Club and a resident of Montreal instead of Philadelphia.

Amelie was already out there, skating in deep, arcing curves across the ice. She always had beautiful edgework. Makiko felt like a potato on skates whenever Decker compared the two of them. She clutched her skate covers in her hand. *Come on. One step*. She always felt more at home on ice than solid ground. Why wouldn't she want to have that feeling again?

Amelie skated up to her, halting with a spray of ice. "Hi," she said, rosy-cheeked from the exercise and cold. "I just wanted to say I'm really looking forward to being on the same team as you. I mean—we aren't on the same team, but like—I feel like it'll feel like that, since we'll be training together. I assume. You don't have to train with me if you don't want to. I was just—" She took a deep breath, putting her hands on her hips, and said, smiling, "I'm really excited to skate with you."

Makiko blinked. "I am too."

Amelie's smile grew wider. "Awesome! I'll show you the warmup Coach Connolly likes me to do. Come on!"

She skated away. With a deep breath, Makiko stepped onto the ice and started her first practice at her new skating home.

Her combination: a triple flip followed by a triple loop. She always felt like she had too much speed coming into this combo, but she needed all the momentum she could get for the loop, since landing the flip ate a decent amount. Backwards entry, skating on the inside edge of her left skate with her right leg lifted behind her. She drove her right toe pick into the ice, twisting her body into the three required rotations. Her landing was a bit wobbly, and she nearly panicked. Muscle memory had her back, though, made her keep her left leg crossed over her right as she pushed off into the loop.

Another three rotations and she was down safely and smoothly on the ice. She fought panic out of her chest. Even if she had fallen, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. She was only eighteen; this would not be her last Olympics. With Decker, it might have been. Hindsight told her she'd have been burnt out by twenty. But with her current coaches—and Amelie being a fantastic friend, cheesy as it sounded—things looked a lot brighter.

She skated on.

Coach Wei had suggested a new entry into her triple toe loop, and Makiko could not for the *life* of her get it. She knew the fancy footwork and 360 turn would add to her grade of execution and boost the points for the jump, but something about it was totally throwing off her sense of direction. She had the sequence down pat, but the moment she tried to add a jump, she wound up on her ass after the jump or too disoriented to even start it. Practice had technically ended an hour ago, the rink now empty, but she knew that if they didn't see marked improvement by tomorrow, she would be in deep shit.

*Left, right, step, 360, flip foot, strike*—too tilted in the air, barely managing to get a skate down. Falling again. Glad she was wearing gloves; wishing she was wearing butt pads.

She pushed herself to her feet, aching.

“Makiko?”

Coach Wei and Coach Connolly—Coaches Deux, as Amelie called them—stood in the doorway to the rink. Judging by the bags slung over their shoulders, they were getting ready to leave the facility.

“Practice is over,” Coach Wei said after a moment. “What’re you doing still working?”

Makiko could tell immediately from his tone that she was doing something wrong. She just didn’t know what. Was he pissed she still hadn’t gotten it?

*Answer, Makiko.* Coach Decker always got frustrated if she didn’t answer him. “I’m working on that new entry you showed me.”

“Still?” Coach Connolly said, sounding shocked.

“Yeah,” Makiko said. “I mean—yes.”

“How long have you been working on it?” Coach Wei asked. “How long did you wait after practice before getting started?”

Talk about an unusual question. “I’ve been practicing for around an hour. I—” She’d definitely done something wrong. She swallowed. “I figured . . . I mean, you want me to be good at it, so I thought you’d want to see improvement before tomorrow’s practice.”

Coaches Deux exchanged a glance. Coach Connolly put her bags down and started across the floor to the boards, Coach Wei following suit a moment later. “C’mere a minute, honey,” Coach Connolly said.

Makiko skated over, the ache in her joints and stiffness of her legs making her move slower than she'd have liked.

"You're not in trouble," Coach Connolly said when she reached them. "I just want to make that clear."

"But in the future," Coach Wei said, "when we finish practice, we'd like you to go home. When we say practice is done, that means it's done. It doesn't mean stay here and work late on something."

"We put a time limit on practice for a reason," Coach Connolly said. "We have to make sure we keep our bodies healthy and that we not over-exhaust ourselves or burn ourselves out. If we never stopped practicing, we'd run ourselves into the ground. I understand the temptation to tackle something that isn't working out for you, but it's better if you take it on tomorrow with a fresh pair of eyes and a good night's sleep. Staying late to work on something often affects the element negatively, not positively."

"Coach Decker said that the more I practice something, the better I'll get," Makiko said.

"He was your coach since you were a little kid, right?" Coach Wei interrupted, looking at Makiko.

"Since I was ten," Makiko confirmed.

"So you don't know any differently," Coach Wei said. "But we don't really subscribe to that approach. Let's try to cut it out of your routine, okay? No staying late anymore."

"But I won't improve," Makiko protested faintly.

“Amelie never stays late, and she’s always improving,” Coach Wei said. “Come on, Makiko, let’s get off the ice.”

“Amelie doesn’t need to stay late,” Makiko said. “She’s a better skater.”

Coaches Deux were silent, Coach Wei’s face etched in a frown, Coach Connolly staring across the rink with a storm brewing in her eyes. Makiko moved an uneasy six inches away from the boards. Expressions like that never boded well for her.

“I know you’re seventeen, and that most seventeen-year-olds don’t have a very high opinion of themselves,” Coach Connolly said after a minute, pinning her with a stare, “but you are a fantastic skater, and you do not need to stay late. Please get off the ice.”

She couldn’t argue with them. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d argued with Decker. Too much pushback on anything just set him off. She didn’t want to risk these coaches being the same. “Okay,” she said quietly.

She’d just have to hope they didn’t get too angry when she failed miserably tomorrow.

This next element was where her Lutz was supposed to go. She was supposed to jump her Lutz, then a spin, then some more choreo, and end on a spin. That was how she’d been skating this program all season. She’d wanted to have her Lutz be her final checkbox, the last big thing before the program ended, but Coaches Deux had put their respective feet down. It didn’t match the flow of the music. Makiko disagreed, but hadn’t wanted to argue.

That was seven months ago. She hadn’t been nearly as comfortable arguing with them back then as she was now. And they had been teaching her about changing her program on the fly in case

she screwed up a jump. That knowledge was only really meant to be utilized in her free skate, as she had more time and a longer list of requirements to fulfill, but the principle was the same.

She didn't think about it twice. Instead of skating the back crossovers that led into her Lutz, Makiko skated the brackets that led into her second spin, a flying-entry camel—a spin where the skater leaped into a spinning T formed by their body. And once that was done, she threw in a few odds and ends of choreography and plunged into the spin that was supposed to end her program, another layback spin into a Biellmann, pulling her lifted foot up behind her and over her head to form a tulip. Piano and cello thrummed around her, timed perfectly to her rotations.

She would never have even thought about pulling this with Decker.

It was a good thing she knew this piece like the back of her hand, had even before suggesting it be her program music. She knew exactly how much time she had left. She skated the choreography, speed pushing the hair off her face, the edges of her skirt tickling her legs. She still had enough energy for the Lutz. When it came to jumping Lutzes, she never ran out of energy.

She picked up speed, crossovers mixed with some on-the-fly choreography. She had to time this *just* right or Coaches—and the judges—would have her head.

The gear-up, hurtling toward the corner of the rink. With seven seconds left in the piece, she bent her left ankle outward and slammed her right toe pick into the ice, launching herself into the air, perfectly timed with the swell of piano and cello. Three lightning-fast rotations and she was back down again, a millimeter-wide strip of metal hitting the ice with over five hundred pounds of force. She sank deep into her right knee, ignoring the brief squeak of pain from it, sweeping her leg behind her into her post-jump arabesque. Allowing herself a smile, even though it didn't fit the music at all.

She curbed her momentum with two arcing strokes of her skates and, at the exact moment the last note sang in the air, stopped.

The arena lit up with applause. Coaches Deux were jumping up and down, which was a much more enthusiastic reaction than she'd been expecting; beside them, Amelie was throwing flowers onto the ice, mouth open in cheers that blended with the crowd's.

*One Olympic skate down*, Makiko thought, breathing hard, elated, light-headed from adrenaline, *and one to go*.