My Name On Your Lips

by feelslikefire

Summary

Yuuri Katsuki has been betrothed to the High King's son, Victor, since he was just a child; furthermore, as an omega, he's forbidden from practicing magic in combat. For years, he's been able to put off the former because the Prince was traveling abroad, and gotten around the latter by practicing with his mentor in secret.

Now Victor Nikiforov has finally returned home, and Yuuri is being summoned to the capital for their wedding. He needs a plan to put off marriage long enough to find a way to break the betrothal, while keeping his practicing from being discovered.

If only the Prince didn't have other ideas.

(Or, the swords-and-sorcery arranged marriage AU. Updates weekly.)

Notes

A few housekeeping items! First, this is an ABO fic, but it is a long plotty affair, so if you are looking for PWP this is not your bag. If you want a long slow-burn fantasy historical romance, well. You're in luck. Tags & characters will be added as the story moves along. That being said, there will NOT be any surprise pregnancy in this fic, just so you know.
There is slightly different genitalia w/r/t ABO biology, but there are notes on the chapters that contain explicit content with more information when you get there, and I have noted when to skip if you wish to avoid reading sex scenes.

Second, this was lovingly beta'd for me, as always, by circ_bamboo, a goddess among writers whom I do not deserve.

Third, I heisted some world-building details for this story from a couple places. A tiny bit from the Dragon Age series by Bioware, and somewhat more than a tiny bit from the hopefully soon-to-be-published novel I proofread for Steph Cranford. Any elements borrowed from it are used with full permission as a transformative work.
Chapter 1

Whatever you do, don’t fall.

Yuuri inhales, counting heartbeats, trying to stretch out the moment. It’s so tempting to open his eyes, but he knows if he does, everything will come crashing down—literally. He exhales slowly, then in again, forming the shape in his mind, the hand-gesture that would summon a light.

He feels—something, in the back of his mind, like breath on the back of his neck, or the near-inaudible sound of a match strike. But the flare of magic doesn’t come, not yet. Yuuri sighs, the mental image slipping from him as he nearly over-balances and falls on his ass.

Yuuri’s been in this position for several minutes now: that is, doing a handstand in ankle-deep water wearing only his small clothes. He shifts his weight ever-so-slightly to relieve the cramp building in his left hand, focusing on his breathing and not on how dizzy having all of his blood rush into his head makes him. Minako told him that if he can summon his magic in this position, he can do it anytime. Yuuri would like to see her do it, except he already knows that she can—balanced on just one hand, even.

Some other faint memory of Minako’s tutelage comes back to him. Slowly, slowly, he extends his left leg, floating it down so that his toes point out to the side, a perfect right angle to the rest of his body.

His eyes are still shut, but he’s keenly aware of everything around him: the blissfully hot water burbling around his wrists; the faint birdsong of the larks in the trees; the soft, barely-there scent of pine. Even the faint bite of the early autumn air is welcome, familiar.

And soon all of it will be lost to him for good.

No, no, he can’t think about that. Not now, not yet. Yuuri draws in another breath and pushes it out, focusing on the water, the wind, the birdsong. After a moment, the peace of his family’s estate settles on him like a warm blanket, soothing his agitation.

Breathe, says Minako’s voice, in his memory. In, out, in, out, let your breath flow like the mountain stream.

Yuuri draws air into his lungs, feeling his chest expand. His eyes are still shut, but he can picture the low light of the lamps hung around his garden, casting a lovely warm glow over everything: the water of the hot springs, the stones, the cherry trees with their low-hanging boughs. Inside his head, he hears Minako: Find your center, then reach for your strength.

Once again he pictures the gesture in his mind’s eyes, the simplest and earliest spell any Spark-touched child learns: one palm face-up and open as if in offering. Yuuri pictures energy flowing out from his chest through his hand, light erupting in mid-air above the open palm.

This time there’s the tell-tale rush of magic along his spine, and he feels the ball of light come into being—right in front of him, where his outstretched hand would reach. Yuuri lets out his breath and opens his eyes, staring upside-down at the round ball of yellow light floating in front of him. It’s the exact shade of the lanterns strung around the garden.

“Ha,” he says out loud, and smiles despite himself.

Mistake. His left leg wobbles out of true just slightly where it floats above him, and before Yuuri can
correct, he’s over-balanced and tumbling face-first into the water. Yuuri squawks as he wipes out, getting a mouthful of spring water for his trouble. By the time he shoves his dripping hair out of his face, the light he summoned is gone, snuffed out by the catastrophic collapse of its maker.

Yuuri sighs, but can’t really bring himself to be too mad. That was the first time he’s managed to summon the light without even the tiniest gesture to coax it to life. He can’t wait to tell Minako about it—

“Messere, it’s dinner time, your mother wants you to come in!” His page’s voice breaks through his thoughts. Damn, he hadn’t realized how late in the evening it was.

“Tell her I’ll be there in five minutes!” he calls back. He sees the faint outline of Minami at the door; Minami bows in Yuuri’s direction, then vanishes. Yuuri sighs. He lingers just a few moments longer, loathe to leave the quiet contemplation of his garden and its section of the wondrous hot springs that his family calls home.

Like a great many noble families in Kieva, the lands that owe fealty to the High King, the Katsukis—Yuuri’s father’s family—originally gained a nominal noble title because of their strong magical aptitude, and a modest level of status because of some service to the Queen a few generations back. Nobility and the expectations that came with it hadn’t stopped Toshiya Katsuki from falling desperately in love with Yuuri’s mother Hiroko, though. A visit to the countryside with a stopover at her inn had been meant only to last a few weeks, turning instead to months, then a year. He’d ultimately decided he didn’t want to make her leave her family’s inn, or its hot springs, and so instead of returning to his castle, he’d simply settled at her inn instead.

They still had the castle; if Yuuri recalls correctly, they have some cousins and maybe other distant relatives who live in it, and Yuuri and his immediate family visit it occasionally. But their home is in Hasetsu. And while most of the nobles Yuuri’s met over the years think Toshiya eccentric for giving up his castle, Hiroko’s gift with the Spark matches her husband’s, and their children’s gift of magic rivals that of anyone in Kieva.

Which was sort of the problem. Yuuri sometimes wishes that the royal family cared more for prestige or nobility of blood than they do for the strength in the Spark; maybe if they did, he wouldn’t be in this situation.

He shakes his head a little, as if shedding years of dark thoughts. Time to get going. He has a long ride in the morning, after all, and he’s put off entirely too much of the preparation till the last minute. He’ll need all of Minami’s help after dinner to have everything ready before midnight.

Finally Yuuri stands, water sluicing off his body. He gestures with one hand, and another ball of light appears, this one smaller. He flicks a finger, and the light bounces, then floats just behind his shoulder, hooked in place relative to his position. It follows Yuuri as he heads back to the stone porch, illuminating the now-dim bench where he’d folded all his clothes. He wraps a fluffy towel around his body, then gathers up his things and pads inside, the faerie light bobbing behind him.

He dresses quickly, trying to keep his mind on the simple act of getting dressed and adjusting his obi, not wanting to dwell more on what the next three days will bring.

At least Minako will be going with him for the trip. She’s been their family’s retainer since Yuuri was just a child, someone the Katsukis trust as much as one of their own blood—if not more, Yuuri thinks with a faint smile. After all, it wasn’t Yuuri or Mari his parents asked to mind the estate when they traveled to the capital for the prince’s coronation celebration.

At the thought of the prince, Yuuri’s expression darkens. He falters, hands stilling where he’s
brushing his wet hair back from his face. Why did the prince have to come back from overseas, Yuuri thinks bitterly. Why couldn’t he just stay gone?

A knock at the door makes him jump. “Messere, can I help you finish getting ready?”

“I’m fine, Minami, I’m almost done,” says Yuuri quickly. He sets the brush aside and retrieves his glasses, then toes into his sandals and heads for the door. Minami is waiting outside, and he beams at Yuuri as he emerges from the room. Despite himself, Yuuri can’t help but smile back.

Minami is six years younger than Yuuri, his face still chubby with baby fat despite how much he trains. He’s one of Minako’s other students, and he lives with the Katsukis, where he acts as something of a servant in exchange for room and board—though that will change soon, Yuuri realizes. Minako is sending her other students away to train with another Master until Yuuri is settled.

“You mother made your favorite dinner tonight,” Minami says cheerfully. “She went a little overboard, actually.”

Yuuri exhales. “She didn’t have to do that,” he says ruefully. He can already smell the scent of dinner wafting from the direction of the kitchen, and can guess at the spread awaiting him there: okonomiyaki, spring rolls, dumplings, yakisoba, and of course his favorite thing in the entire world, katsudon. Affection for his mother makes his chest tight, and he follows quickly after Minami as they head down to the dining room.

“Yuuuuuri!” Yuuri’s mother claps her hands as he comes into the room, beaming at him across a table almost groaning with platters and glasses. She’s wearing her favorite yukata, one Yuuri’s father got for her for their twentieth anniversary. “I hope you’re hungry!”

“Mom… that’s so much food…” Yuuri sighs, grinning ruefully as his mother comes around to pull a chair out from the table for him to sit in.

“Well, we have to celebrate,” says Yuuri’s father, as he comes into the room. He’s wearing one of his nicer yukatas, as well. “Our son is leaving tomorrow to make the family proud, so we want to send you off in style.”

Yuuri’s heart sinks a little at this, but he manages to retain his smile anyway. “Thank you so much,” he says, and bows, hands pressed firmly against the tops of his thighs. “I—I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Still can’t believe the prince wanted you,” says Mari. Yuuri’s sister comes in from the kitchen, bearing a bottle of sake and several glasses. “You must have been a pretty impressive thirteen-year-old.”

“Of course he was,” says Yuuri’s father. “They only let the most talented omegas even come to try.”

Yuuri wrinkles his nose, allowing his mother to usher him into the chair at the head of the table. Being honored for something he had no control over like this makes him feel weird, but his parents’ obvious pride in his selection blunts his bitterness somewhat. “Well, I hope he’s not disappointed in the grown-up version,” is all he says. “But let’s eat, this smells amazing.”

“We’re just waiting for Minako,” says Mari. “She’s running late, actually. You must get it from her.”

As if on cue, there’s a clatter at the front door, and the yowl of a cat as someone trips over her on their way in. Yuuri hears cursing, and can’t help but smile. “Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Minako appears in the doorway to the hall, still wearing her traveling cloak. “I had to go home to get something, did I miss dinner?”
“Of course not,” says Mari, with a small smile. “Come on, Minako. Give me your cloak—“

“Ah, thank you so much,” says Minako. She also hands Mari her traveling bag, and then comes to sit near the head of the table by Yuuri. She plops into the seat, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, cheeks slightly pink, as though she ran all the way from her home.

“Tell me you’re drinking tonight, Yuuri,” says Minako.

Yuuri groans. “I don’t think traveling with a sore head is a great idea,” he says. “And I’m not done packing yet—” But Minako is already pouring him a glass of sake.

Despite his trepidation, dinner is wonderful. Yuuri’s only insulation against Minako (and then his father) incessantly pressing liquor on him is the fact that he eats so much of his mother’s cooking that he’s too stuffed to manage getting drunk. There’s six of them, including Minako and Minami, but Yuuri’s mother made so much food that they still don’t manage to clear it all. Everything is delicious, which Yuuri would expect even if he didn’t know his mother’s talent at all areas of domestic magic; his sister’s healing skills might earn the Katsuki estate the most notoriety locally, but his mother’s cooking is almost as renowned—as is the wonderful night’s sleep all travelers can look forward to while under her roof.

Minako—who has the highest tolerance for alcohol of anyone Yuuri’s ever met, including the Nishigoris—manages to help them plow through three of the Katsukis’ finest sake, doing the lion’s work of the drinking herself. Despite being at least two sheets to the wind, she follows dinner with a modified performance of some of her best magic, which ends with Mari’s and Yuuri’s hair both slightly singed and a life-size paper crane floating delicately above their heads. Yuuri has seen all of Minako’s magic before, but he applauds just as hard as everyone else.

Finally Yuuri excuses himself to go pack, an activity he wants to do even less than he wants to get up before dawn the next morning and start their journey to Ekaterina Palace. To his surprise, Minako follows him to his room, booting Minami out and locking the door.

Yuuri’s mentor sits down on his bed, fixing him with a surprisingly keen stare. “So,” she says. “Last chance, Yuuri.”

Yuuri stares at her. “Last chance for what?”

“If you want to run in the morning, I’ll go with you,” she says bluntly. “No one will know we haven’t headed to the capital until we’re two countries away.”

All the breath leaves Yuuri’s lung in a rush, like a balloon that’s just been punctured. “Minako,” he says weakly. “R-Really?”

“Of course,” says Minako. There’s no trace of slurring in her speech now. If Yuuri hadn’t seen her put away all that sake, he’d never know she’d been drinking at all. “I know how you feel about this. I’ve got everything we need, more than enough of the medicine to last us both till spring. We’ll tell everyone you’re a beta, like me. No one will have to know, and you can do what you want.”

Yuuri sinks down heavily onto the chair next to his desk. He’s dazed, a weakness in his limbs that has nothing to do with his mother’s excellent cooking, or the sake they both drank. So many questions are spinning through his mind that he doesn’t even know where to start. “How long have you been considering this?” he asks, first.

“On and off for about three years,” says Minako. “I kept hoping something would come up that would make it unnecessary, but… here we are.”
Yuuri swallows hard. Hope, hot and bright, flares in his chest; the idea of freedom is one he’s held onto for the long decade he’s spent waiting for this day, despite every reason to give it up.

“But—but what about my parents? Your other students? They’re expecting you back by the winter holidays!”

Minako waves a hand dismissively. “They can stay with Celestino, or find another mentor,” she says. “They’ll be fine. But… your parents would be pretty upset, Yuuri. Mari would understand, but…”

Yuuri nods. The flame in his chest flickers, diminishing. “The Nikiforovs might think they knew all along,” he says slowly. He gets a sudden mental image of armed mage-knights at his parents’ door, of fire consuming the beautiful sloped roof of the inn. He shudders.

Minako is frowning. “The Nikiforovs are not cruel, Yuuri,” she says, trying to sound reasonable.

“They couldn’t overlook treason, though,” says Yuuri dully. “And I’m pretty sure disappearing the prince’s betrothed counts.”

“Probably,” Minako says. Her beautiful face is harder now, steelier than Yuuri’s ever seen it. “Doesn’t matter. If you want to go, we’ll do it.”

“If they catch us, you’ll be put to death,” Yuuri says. Just saying it out loud makes his too-full stomach churn. “Or imprisoned, at the very least.”

“I know,” says Minako. She holds his gaze, expression unwavering.

Yuuri stares back, weighing his options. Of anyone in the entire world, Minako is probably the only one who really understands what Yuuri’s going through. It’s one of the reasons they’re so close, beyond just the fact that he’s her student and she’s his mentor. Mari might have been the one to heal the sword wound in Minako’s stomach, but Yuuri is the one who knows the past she fled from. It’s all too similar to the future he’s staring down right now.

After what seems like forever, Yuuri shakes his head. “I can’t ask that of you,” he says. Minako starts to protest, and Yuuri adds, quickly, “I know you’re offering. But I can’t do that to my family. And I’d never forgive myself if—if you got hurt because of me.”

Minako lets out a long sigh. “I thought you might react like this,” she says. “You care too much about other people, Yuuri.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” says Yuuri. Minako gives him a lopsided smile, and he manages a smile back himself: weak, but real.

“Only sometimes,” she says. “Anyway. I thought you might not want to make a run for it, so I looked for other options. There is one thing you could try.”

Yuuri bites his lower lip. He briefly considers telling Minako to not even say anymore—he’s not sure he can bear having hope dangled in front of him again, only to have to discard it. “Go on,” he says after a moment.

“There’s a Grand Tourney at Ekaterina Palace in the spring,” Minako says. “A competition where entrants compete using combat magic. There’s a whole point system involved, rules, everything, but the winner is granted a boon by the High King. They’re allowed to ask anything within his power to grant.”
Yuuri makes a small, unhappy noise. “You know I won’t be allowed to compete,” he says flatly. “Even if I show them what I’m capable of, omegas are banned from magical combat.”

“That’s why you would enter in disguise,” says Minako. She leans forward, elbows on the tops of her knees, eyes bright. “If you can beat all the other challengers before you reveal who you are, I’m sure the prince would persuade his father to grant you your request.”

Yuuri frowns. “The prince? Why would Victor Nikiforov want to grant me a boon? Especially if the request is to not marry him?”

“Rumor tells it that the prince loves nothing more than to be surprised,” Minako says, and shrugs. “Nothing would be more surprising than discovering his omega fiance is a talented enough mage-knight to best all other comers, would it? And even if those rumors are false, both the prince and his father are said to be fair and just, and would at least listen to such a request.”

Yuuri opens his mouth, then closes it again. He’s finding he almost wants to argue, to find a flaw with this idea, a reason that it won’t work, and there are surely plenty. But the more he thinks about it, the more he wants to try it. And not just because it offers the possibility of an escape hatch—he’s always hated the ridiculous restrictions placed on omegas, forbidding them from the kind of combat magic that Yuuri loves so much. The idea of showing up a bunch of stuck-up mage-knights at their own game, when they all think he couldn’t possibly compete with them… well, it has more than a little appeal.

“That’s my Yuuri,” says Minako, and Yuuri startles a little. She’s grinning at him, a hard, knowing expression. Yuuri feels himself reddening slightly, but he’s not going to pretend Minako doesn’t know what he’s thinking.

Yuuri might come across as a shy, anxious omega, and there’s some truth to that—but it’s also true that he loves to perform, to compete, to win. He’s been Minako’s student in the study of the Spark since he was just seven years old, and he’s inherited her love of the art.

Not that anyone but a handful of people know. Yuuri shouldn’t really be surprised that Minako offered to run away with him, he thinks; she’s been flouting the laws of the land for over a decade now, just by teaching him combat magic like she has—scratch that, just by knowing it herself. After all, before she taught him how to suppress his heats with the right combination of herbs, she’d been using it to suppress her own for over a decade, living as a beta to hide her omega nature. And she’s covered for him every single time he snuck out of the manor during one of his “heats” so that he could practice unharassed on the grounds at her house.

“Alright,” says Yuuri. “But how am I going to disguise myself? It’d be hard to get something like that together at the palace, under the royal family’s nose…”

Minako stands up, crossing the room to the traveling bag she brought with her to Yuuri’s room. She crouches, digging through it, and Yuuri gasps at what she brings out: a set of honest-to-god armor, fashioned of leather and ultra-fine chainmail. All the metal and leather pieces are the same deep blue, like the water of a mountain lake. Piece by piece, she pulls it out and puts it on the bed next to Yuuri for him to examine: leg guards, arm guards, fine leather gloves with silver plates to guard the knuckles, while still leaving the all-important fingertips free. She brings out the helmet last, complete with arching silver horns and a face plate sufficient to head the wearer’s identity.

For the second time in ten minutes, Yuuri is speechless. “Minako,” he manages at last, his voice tight with emotion. “You—you had this made? How…”

But she’s already shaking her head. “It was mine,” she says. Her eyes are bright. “I—quit competing
as a mage-knight before I started teaching you, but I saved the armor. I always hoped to go back, or see one of my students take it on.”

“But you’ve had so many other students,” Yuuri says. He’s picked up one of the arm-guards, marveling at the lightness of the material. He glances up at Minako, and is shocked to see her eyes are wet. He’s never seen her cry, not once in more than fifteen years of being her student.

“You were always my best pupil,” she says roughly. “And I hoped—I wanted to see you find a way out of this trap.” She clenches her hands into fists, staring down at him. Yuuri finds, suddenly, that it’s hard to speak. He stands, and Minako embraces him, throwing her arms tightly around him. Yuuri hugs her back, his own eyes stinging traitorously.

He’d promised himself he wouldn’t cry any more tears because of the prince or the rest of the wretched royal family. But he hadn’t known how far Minako would go for him, either.

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Yuuri ends up getting significantly less sleep that night than he’d hoped for thanks to his endlessly circling thoughts, but he hardly minds, even when the knock comes on his bedroom door two hours before dawn. The High King has sent a carriage and guards to collect Yuuri, and Yuuri and Minako will be meeting them down in the village at the base of the mountain. Mari will ride with them as far as the village, then return home with the horses alone.

They set out for the village just as the sun is starting to peek over the mountainside, Yuuri wrapped in a warm cloak his mother surprises him with at the door. He endures a hug from her, one he can barely stand to accept because he doesn’t want to break down crying yet again, and then he’s waving at his parents as he sets off down the narrow mountain trail, his horse’s bags bulging with all his worldly possessions.

(Minako’s magnificent gift to him rides in her bags, to save him having to make room for it, since in theory she’ll eventually be returning to her own house once Yuuri is fully settled at Ekaterina Palace. The High King requested her to accompany Yuuri as an honor guard, to ensure he arrives with his skin—and virtue—in one piece. Yuuri has plenty to say about that particular section of the royal summons, but he keeps it to himself.)

They arrive at the outskirts of the village by mid-morning. Yuuri accepts one last embrace from his sister, as well as a small bag full of the various poultices and salves she makes for the villagers and other travelers. For the thousandth time, Yuuri finds himself wishing he’d been born a beta like his sister, so that he wouldn’t have to be making these good-byes right now, but it’s much too late for those regrets now.

Besides. Now he has a plan. Or at least, the start of one.

The High King’s men load Yuuri and Minako’s bags into the carriage boot. Before Yuuri can climb into the carriage, however, one of the manservants approaches him and presents him with a long slim box. Yuuri stares at it.

“His majesty the Prince has sent you a token of his regard,” says the servant. “He hopes you will accept it and his hopes for your marriage, and make a speedy journey to join him.”

Yuuri swallows, and it’s hard past the gorge rising in the back of his throat. “Thank you,” he manages, and accepts the box. No doubt the manservant thinks him overcome with emotion at the gift, but in reality Yuuri is fighting to not fling the box to the muddy ground, where it can lay until bandits take it for all he cares.
Instead, he tucks it into his cloak and climbs into the carriage with Minako, focusing hard on his breathing, on his expression.

It’s a three-day journey to Petrograd, with Ekaterina Palace sitting at its center like the crown jewels. Yuuri hadn’t given much thought to the dangers of the trip itself, too preoccupied with what lay at the end of it—travelers at their inn have spoken of dragons in the deep woods of the mountains, but Yuuri’s never seen one. He and Minako spend much of the journey in hushed conversation inside the carriage, discussing how Yuuri will convince the royal family to put off his and the prince’s wedding till after the Grand Tourney in the spring, and how Yuuri will continue to practice and train without Minako’s house as a safe-haven.

“I wish I could convince him to let me go home till spring,” Yuuri says at one point. He slumps disconsolately in his seat in the carriage, his shoes undone, feet tucked up under him. He’s sore and tired from their long trip—the carriage is luxurious, certainly, but no amount of cushioning makes up for some of the rough roads they’ve journeyed over, or for being crammed in a moving box for 10 hours a day.

Minako is frowning at him from her spot on the opposing bench. “There must be empty rooms in a palace that big,” she says. She bites absently at a hangnail, face screwed up in concentration. “We might need an excuse to ask the High King for permission for me to stay longer than expected, though—“

She breaks off as the carriage comes to an abrupt stop, jostling them both. Yuuri nearly falls into the footwell, but Minako is already on her feet, eyes hard. Shouts come from outside the carriage, and then all the hairs on the back of Yuuri’s neck go up as the tell-tale sizzle of magic burns over his skin.

“Bandits,” snarls Minako. She’s out the door before she’s finished saying the word, Yuuri tumbling out after her, still barefoot.

Minako’s in front of him, blocking him somewhat from the turmoil; she’s already drawn the staves that live in her belt-loop, magic humming through the dark oak waiting to explode to life. Yuuri glances to the side, and catches a glimpse of the group attacking them. They’re highwaymen of a rough-looking sort—Yuuri catches a glimpse of one man in an eye patch with a short, ugly sword, locked in combat with the captain of the guards. Another man covered in scars with long matted hair comes at the guards with a long pike, a cruel barb at its tip. There’s at least a dozen of their attackers, including several archers on the ledges overlooking the narrow gorge they’ve been passing through. They were clearly lying in wait for the next carriage luckless enough to pass through.

One of the guards spots Yuuri looking around. “Stay in the carriage!” he shouts.

Not a chance, Yuuri thinks darkly. He spares half a second to wish for his set of staves that match Minako’s, but they’re in the bag with the armor—might as well be on the moon. He crouches, making a smaller target as he flattens himself against the carriage wheel. Yuuri curls the fingers of one hand against his chest, as though cupping an invisible ball; inside the cage of his hand, he’s gathering blue fire, waiting for the right moment to use it.

Three bandits have spotted Yuuri and Minako, and break off from trying to murder guards to swing round towards the carriage. Minako whirls her staves, drawing eye-searing green lines of fire in the air. Yuuri feels the sudden pulse the moment before she throws herself hard to the right and flings the stave in her left hand at the first man.

The bandit shouts, and for just an instant his face is a caricature of surprise—and then the stave hits him and all the magic in it explodes in a burst of green fire. The flames lick up his face, and the
bandit screams, batting at it uselessly and stumbling backwards into the path of his companions.

Yuuri shoots up from the ground like there are springs in his feet, using the moment of distraction to throw his own spell. Instantly, their three attackers are enveloped in a vortex of swirling fire, blue mixing with green. The bandits scream in pain and fury, scattering like mice as they try vainly to get away from the flames now racing greedily over their skin.

Minako grabs her thrown stave, and Yuuri sneaks after her, sticking close to her back. He can’t do any of the really effective spells he knows, because they’ll be too obvious, so instead he drags the fingertips of his right hand up and into the palm of his left, drawing an intricate design on bare skin. In their wake a dagger forms, its outline limned in more blue fire before coalescing, becoming solid. Minako calls a green scythe to life out of the end of one of her staves and uses it to take the head clean off of one of the bandits fighting their guards. Her shout of triumph breaks off in a swear, and Yuuri hears the *thwip* of an arrow lodging itself in the ground—he can see the line of blood along her collarbone where it grazed her.

“Above you!” she hisses. Yuuri ducks behind her, mentally projecting where that arrow came from, and then throws himself out her other side and flings the dagger in his hand. His foot twists underneath him as he lands, but his dagger flies true, whistling through the air as it curves its own course to aim for Yuuri’s target. He hears the gargled scream as it buries itself in the archer’s throat, then the *thwump* of a body falling to earth.

Yuuri tries to straighten and nearly topples over as agony lights up his ankle. “Ah, ffff—”

Minako’s there in an instant, slipping his arm over her shoulders. “It’s okay, Yuuri,” she says in a low voice. “It’s over.”

Yuuri leans on her, glancing around, and sure enough, the guards are standing down. He sees the captain of the guard—Mikhail, he thinks the man’s name is—wiping his sword on one of the bandit’s bodies before sheathing it. Mikhail glances over at them, his eyes widening as he catches sight of Yuuri limping alongside Minako.

“I told you to stay in the carriage!” he exclaims. He hurries over, helping Minako sit Yuuri on the ground. Despite the harshness of his voice, his hands are gentle as he helps Yuuri to sit. “Did they hurt you?”

“No—nngh.” Yuuri winces slightly. “Just twisted my ankle.”

Minako is examining his foot, probing the joint with her fingertips. Yuuri hisses as pain shoots up his leg, and she frowns. “It’s not that bad, but we should wrap it,” she says. “I’m not much of a healer, I’m afraid.”

“Neither am I,” mutters Yuuri. Mari got all the skill in that area. Speaking of—“My sister sent some medicine, though. It’s in my bag.”

Minako gets up, going to the carriage to retrieve Yuuri’s satchel. Mikhail stays by Yuuri, perhaps afraid that the bandits will come back for seconds. Abruptly Yuuri becomes aware of the way Mikhail is looking at him: thoughtful, evaluating. “I saw some magic over by you two,” he says, studying Yuuri’s face. “It was quite effective.”

“Oh, that—that was my mentor,” Yuuri says. He can feel himself flushing, uncomfortable with the scrutiny. Damn. He tried hard to disguise his spells by casting at the same time as Minako, but maybe he hadn’t been careful enough.
“I see,” says Mikhail; it’s hard to tell what he’s thinking. “Did she also throw a knife at one of those archers?”

“Oh, that was… Me, actually,” Yuuri says. He stares at his hands for several seconds, then forces himself to look up. Mikhail sees him looking and gives him a faint smile.

“Quite the throw,” he says.

Yuuri clears his throat. “My family doesn’t keep guards,” he says, and tries to keep his voice mild, apologetic. “So my parents thought it would be good if Minako taught me and my sister some self-defense.”

Minako appears as if summoned by her name, kneeling by Yuuri, the small satchel Mari sent in her hand. If Mikhail has more to say, he keeps it to himself, merely sitting by with his sword at the ready as Minako goes about applying a poultice and wrapping Yuuri’s ankle.

They’re on their way again soon enough; there were a few injuries in Yuuri’s party, but apparently the High King sent a half-dozen of his best men, so despite being taken by surprise they had been more than up to the task of defending against the bandits. After some discussion with Minako, Mikhail sends one of his men on ahead riding at full gallop to bring word to the next town of the attack.

“We’ll meet up with some men from the garrison stationed there,” Mikhail tells them. He’s leaning in the window of the carriage from where he sits on his horse; Yuuri and Minako are both inside, Yuuri’s foot propped up on some pillows. Mikhail glances at him, and adds, “I’m sorry, my lord, but we could not find the dagger you threw at the archer on the hill. His companions must have made off with it.”

“My—oh,” says Yuuri. “Uh, that’s fine, really. There’s—nothing you can do about it, so… thank you.” He manages a shy smile, curling his hands in his robes out of nervousness. Mikhail inclines his head and then withdraws, letting the curtain fall shut.

Yuuri exhales his air in a rush. “You are really bad at that,” Minako says lightly; Yuuri shoots her a dirty look. “What? You’re lucky you’re cute when you’re flustered, it distracts people from how bad a liar you are.”

“Ugh,” says Yuuri, and slumps against the wall.

* * * * *

By the time they arrive at Ekaterina Palace (an extra company of soldiers in tow) Yuuri is no longer concerned about his foot. He’s too busy fretting over Minako. The nick from the arrow on her shoulder has grown puckered and angry, and redness spreads out from it in a terrible halo around her collarbone. Yuuri has used much of his sister’s gift of medicines already, which has helped somewhat to keep the arrow’s bite at bay, but the poultice for poison is long gone, and now Minako worsens steadily.

She’s leaning against him, her breathing labored, eyes glazed over with fever. Every bump in the road makes her whimper and tense up in pain. Yuuri laces their fingers together tightly, wishing desperately he knew something, anything, that would help her.

“We’re almost there,” he tells her softly. She nods, a minute up-down of her head, and turns her face more towards the breeze coming in from the open window.

Luckily, with the captain of the guard with them, they don’t have to stop at the entrance to the
capital. Yuuri hears the crier running ahead, shouting for people to get out of the way of the carriage; the horses do not stop or slow, and Yuuri grits his teeth as they rattle over the flagstone streets of Petrograd.

Finally, the carriage stops. Yuuri hears shouting outside, people talking in urgent voices. He’s reaching for the door when someone opens it from the outside, and a man leans into their carriage. He’s young, handsome, with silver hair and wearing the royal insignia; Yuuri figures he must be one of the High King’s attendants.

“Are you alright?” he demands. His gaze flicks over Yuuri, taking in his bandaged foot and the state of Minako, how shallow her breathing is. “You’re not alright,” he says.

“Please, I’ll be okay, but my mentor—she’s sick, I think the arrow tip was poisoned—“

The man frowns and climbs into the carriage. He lifts his hand, palm-up, and speaks a word, and white vapor issues from his mouth, forming a softly-glowing cloud. He blows across his palm, and the cloud leaves his hand, moving to Minako and enveloping her. Yuuri watches anxiously as dew forms along the angry cut and the infection radiating out from it, the drops shining and brilliant.

Minako groans and sags, letting out a ragged sigh. The dew-drops fade, leaving a clear, delicate lattice settled over the top of the injury. “It’s poison,” says the silver-haired man grimly. “We need to get you both inside. I knew I should have come personally to get you.”

“Uh,” says Yuuri.

“I’m so sorry for not being there for you,” says the silver-haired man, whom Yuuri is starting to think is maybe not an attendant after all. “But come on, your mentor is ill, she needs care.” Without waiting for an answer from Yuuri, the silver-haired man climbs out of the carriage and starts barking orders.

“Come around the other side, and bring a carry-bed, this woman can’t walk! Quickly!”

“Yes, your Majesty,” comes the immediate answer. Under his traveling cloak, Yuuri starts to sweat. He puts aside his impending freak-out as attendants surround their carriage. They coax Minako out the other door, laying her on a platform and heading inside with her. Yuuri tries to climb out and follow, but his ankle folds under him and he nearly falls.

“No, don’t try to walk on it—“ The silver-haired man appears at his elbow, catching Yuuri before he can collapse. “Here, I’ll carry you.”

Oh, no no no no no. Noooo, this is—this was not how this meeting was supposed to go. “I—I’ll be fine—you don’t have to—“ Yuuri glances up into the other man’s face, and finds himself flushing at the intensity of the gaze he finds there.

“I should have been there to protect you,” says Victor Nikiforov, Crown Prince of Kieva, who for some unfathomable reason is bending down to scoop Yuuri up in his arms. “Please, this is the least I can do. We have to see to it that you both get better as quickly as possible.” He starts to head inside, carrying Yuuri as though he weighs nothing at all.

Yuuri puts his face in his hands. So much for meeting his betrothed for the first time.
Chapter 2

Yuuri takes stock of his situation now that he's at Ekaterina Palace, and decides to do the best he can with what he has.

Yuuri lets Victor carry him inside the palace, but by the time they reach the main hall he’s recovered somewhat. “Let me down,” he says, pushing at Victor’s shoulder. “Please, I don’t need you to carry me.”

Victor slows, glancing down at him in surprise. “But you’re hurt,” he says. “It’s fine, Yuuri—”

“Might I remind you we don’t know each other at all and are not on a first-name basis, your highness,” Yuuri snaps, harsher than he means to. Victor’s eyes widen slightly, but he crouches, letting Yuuri get down. Yuuri breathes a spell out as Victor sets him down, and magic burns down his side into his leg. It’s enough that when he puts weight onto the ankle, he can tolerate the jolt of pain.

Victor makes an approving noise, and Yuuri glances at him, flushing self-consciously. “Where did you have your people take Minako?” he asks, barely managing to keep it from coming out a demand.

“I was taking you to her,” Victor says, voice mild.

Yuuri stares at him, mentally going through a catalog of curses he’d like to say out loud, none of which he can quite bring himself to. “If you would please show me where she is,” he manages after a moment. Victor nods, and turns to lead Yuuri down one of the long wings of the front hallway.

The first thing Yuuri notices is the size of the place: the ceilings are high, the hallways go on forever, the windows seem wide and tall enough to permit the entire sky entrance. The second thing he notices is that everything is very, very clean—not that his mother kept anything less than a pristine house, but all Yuuri can think is that the servants must work very hard and be paid very well for everything to be so spotless. Tapestries and massive paintings adorn the walls, depicting everything from Ekaterina Nikiforov herself and what are presumably her many ancestors, to the mythical First Order of Mage-Knights fighting back the horde of dragons.

Elegant crenellations and carvings of various figureheads sit higher on some of the walls in the great hall; Yuuri thinks he spots a troll up in a corner, but maybe that’s his anxiety. They turn down
another hallway, this one lined with a number of niches that have yet more busts tucked into them; one sports a naked woman holding a vase in one hand and a spear in the other. Yuuri distractedly takes stock of the people walking to and fro in the halls—servants, nobles of all color and creed, guards, a few people Yuuri thinks must be mage-knights in the King’s service.

It all passes in and out of his awareness like leaves in a mountain stream, here and then gone. He’s too anxious, too wound up from his long journey, to really absorb any of it right now.

Victor leads him to a room off the main wing that appears to be a healer’s chambers. Minako is already laid out on a bed, two people working over her; one of them seems to be cleaning the wound, and the other is mixing some greenish paste in a bowl.

“So I was right? It is poison?” Yuuri glances up at Victor, unable to keep the apprehension from leaking into his voice.

Victor looks at him, nodding grimly. “I’ve seen it before,” he says in a low voice. “It’s very resistant to most of our herbal remedies. My mother is a powerful healer, though, and she’ll be here soon to help your mentor.”

Yuuri swallows hard. Unconsciously he’s crossed his arms, hugging himself as he stares at Minako’s too-pale face, the shallow rise and fall of her chest. Victor glances at him, and starts to lift his arms, with an expression that says he’d very much like to hug Yuuri, but Yuuri hunches his shoulders and leans away, and Victor lowers his hands again.

“You should let someone have a look at your ankle,” Victor says. His voice is carefully neutral.

“My ankle is fine, your highness,” says Yuuri shortly. He’s pointedly not looking at Victor, or his ankle, or anything that isn’t Minako.

The woman in question stirs on the table, lifting her head to shoot Yuuri a shockingly dirty glare from across the room. “It’s not fine,” she grates out. “You twisted it and if you aren’t careful you won’t be able to walk right anymore, so shut up and let the healers look at it.”

“M-Minako—!” Yuuri feels himself coloring at being admonished in front of other people like this, but before he can form a real response Minako is sinking back down onto the table with a groan, that brief exertion having worn her out. He drops his eyes, staring miserably at his own feet.

Beside him, Victor stirs. “May I please look at your ankle?” he asks. His voice is soft.

Yuuri briefly contemplates the merits of just lobbing a fireball at Victor and running like hell, and then he sighs. “Alright,” he says. Victor offers his arm, and Yuuri takes it, allowing Victor to lead him to another cot.

Yuuri sits on the edge of the bed, feet dangling over the side. Victor crouches in front of him, carefully undoing the bandages wrapping Yuuri’s foot. Yuuri winces in discomfort at the loss of compression around the ankle; almost immediately he can feel his pulse in his foot. Victor glances up at Yuuri’s face, then down to his foot as he probes Yuuri’s ankle with his fingers. Yuuri bites down on a noise, but Victor’s gaze flicks up at him again and Yuuri knows the other man didn’t miss it.

“It’s not that bad,” Victor says after a moment. “Or at least, it should heal well, given the chance, but your mentor is right; you should try to avoid walking on it until it’s healed.”

Yuuri sighs. “What am I supposed to do, then, float?”

“We’ll brace it,” Victor says. He gives Yuuri a small smile. “And we should still have some crutches
from when one of our knights broke his leg, so I will find them for you. But first, let me try
something.” He raises his eyebrows at Yuuri; Yuuri bites his lip and nods.

Victor raises both hands, inhaling and then blowing out air again, summoning more of that delicate
white cloud-stuff with a whistle. Yuuri feels the tingle of magic up his spine, a curiously delicate
invocation considering how powerful the Nikiforov’s Spark is supposed to be. Victor murmurs
something, gesturing with both hands, and the cloud-stuff condenses, forming into a delicate
webbing that then wraps itself around Yuuri’s ankle and foot.

It’s cold. Yuuri gasps at the chill as the foamy substance tightens, and then abruptly the pain in his
foot lessens. It’s not gone—he can still feel a dull ache—but the worst of it has left, enough that
Yuuri thinks he would be able to fall asleep, to move about somewhat.

“Thank you,” he says belatedly. Victor gives him that faint smile again, and then rises.

“Please stay here for a bit,” he says. “I must see to your mentor, and finish making arrangements for
you. I will return with crutches for you, and the brace as well.”

Yuuri sighs. “Alright, fine,” he says, because it’s not as if he can do much else. He has no idea how
to find his way around the castle, he’s filthy from their long journey, and he’s also frankly exhausted.
And he doesn’t think he could bear to leave Minako until he knows she’ll be okay, regardless.

He curls up on the bed, watching Victor go over to the healers and speak with them in low voices.
Didn’t Victor (Prince Nikiforov, he corrects himself—he can’t ask Victor to not call him by his first
name and then not do the same)—didn’t the prince say that his mother was a healer, that she’d be
coming to help Minako? Yuuri is just about to get up and ask this exact question, orders to stay put
be damned, when the door opens and a stately-looking woman in a hunter green gown and silver
crown comes in, trailed by several attendants. Her hair is the same silver as her son’s, shot through
with long streaks of delicate white.

“Mother,” says Victor instantly, turning towards her.

“The Katsukis’ retainer has been poisoned?” The queen sweeps past Victor, going immediately to
Minako’s side. She bends over Minako, the healers crowding around the table, obscuring Minako
from Yuuri’s sight.

Yuuri waits a few moments to see what’s going to happen, and then, because it’s been a long three
days and he’s all out of patience, he starts to ease off the bed so he can creep closer to see what
they’re doing. He makes it all of a few feet before one of the healers notices, and abruptly Victor is at
his side again, his hands on Yuuri’s shoulders gentle but unyielding.

“Yuuuuuri,” he says in a low voice.

“Highness, please, I asked you not to call me that—“

“My dear fiancé, please stop worsening your injury.” Victor doesn’t wait for a response, just picks
Yuuri up.

Yuuri immediately starts to protest, shoving at Victor’s hands, but Victor ignores him. “Mother, I’m
taking my betrothed to his quarters,” he says, and leaves the room.

“Put me down right now,” Yuuri hisses, panic fraying his remaining manners as Victor turns down
the long hallway again.

“No,” says Victor. “You’re hurt, and tired from a long journey, and if you stay in that room you’ll
“fret yourself into a fit over your mentor, and it won’t help her.”

“So what?” Yuuri shoves at Victor’s chest, trying to twist out of his arms, but the prince’s grip around Yuuri’s legs tightens. “Put me down, Victor, I’m not a child, I’m not your pet!”

“You are my mate, and it’s my job to take care of you,” Victor says. The patience in his tone grates almost as much as the words, and it’s finally enough to make Yuuri press his palms flat against Victor’s chest and hiss under his breath. Victor jerks as power surges through Yuuri’s fingers; the air abruptly stinks of sulphur, and Victor stops walking.

“Put. Me. Down,” says Yuuri. Victor stares at him, then wordlessly crouches, lowering Yuuri so that he can put his feet on the ground.

“Will you please let me—“ he begins, but Yuuri is already in his face, teeth gritted, voice shaking.

“Do not ever touch me without asking me,” he snaps. Victor takes a step backwards, and Yuuri advances on him, heedless of the twinge in his ankle, of his ghastly lack of manners, of his less-than-fresh traveling clothes, of the people down the hall staring. “I am not going to be your sweet little omega who needs to be coddled and protected, I am not some—some little trophy from the country you can boss around, your highness!”

He backs Victor into the wall, Victor’s eyes gone wide. Yuuri finds he’s breathing hard and shaking all over, whether from reaction or nerves or pain, he doesn’t know. He catches his breath, and then jerks around, stalking off down the hallway without looking back at his fiancé, trying to act like he knows where he’s going. He hopes it’s enough that no one will bother him.

It works. The people down the end of the hall immediately look elsewhere, returning to whatever they were doing before Yuuri decided to make a scene. Yuuri turns right as the hallway branches, trying to hurry without running. He picks a door halfway down the hall at random, going to it and trying the handle—it opens under his touch, and he lets himself in with hands that are still shaking.

He manages to lock the door after a few fumbling moments; a quick glance around the room confirms that it’s unoccupied, as well as apparently some sort of study, judging from the desk and multitude of bookcases. Yuuri doesn’t care. It could be a supply cupboard for all he cares, so long as it’s empty. He sinks down against the door, cheek against the cool heavy wood, and finally gives in to the tears that have been threatening for what seems like days.

Well, here he is, he thinks morosely. He’s finally met his stupid, handsome fiancé, and Victor Nikiforov is every bit as self-confident and arrogant as Yuuri was afraid he would be.

“I hate you, Victor,” Yuuri whispers, voice choked. “I wish you’d never chosen me.”

* * * * *

Yuuri has no actual plans for what he’s going to do next, now that he’s literally stormed off from his fiancé minutes after meeting him and locked himself in what appears to be some kind of personal library. He knows of no graceful way to extricate himself from this particular mess, and he knows that if Minako were in better spirits that she’d already have dragged him out to scold him, by the hair if necessary.

But he doesn’t know his way around the palace or its grounds, and he has no one here except Minako, who is currently fighting for her life. Yuuri’s throat constricts as he thinks about how deathly pale she looked, and he hunches further in on himself, hugging his knees against his chest. He shouldn’t be hiding in here, he should be with her—
—Except that his stupid fiancé decided to just carry Yuuri off, like some kind of fainting omega in distress. A sour taste hits the back of his throat; Yuuri scowls at his own arms. He anticipated a spoiled brat of a royal son, but he thought maybe Victor might wait a bit before attempting to flatten Yuuri like a siege-engine. Apparently not.

A knock at the door behind him scares him right out of his contemplation. Yuuri jumps almost a foot, scrambling away from the door on hands and knees. He doesn’t even know what he’s going to do—hide under one of the desks, maybe?—but a soft voice comes through the door. “Yuuri, are you still in there? It’s Phichit, do you remember me?”

“Phichit!!” Yuuri almost knocks over a stool that looks to be worth its weight in embroidered silk in his haste to get to the door. He unlocks it and pulls it open, and a slim boy with a warm, friendly face slips inside, shutting the door behind him. Yuuri embraces him immediately, and to his immense gratitude Phichit hugs him back just as hard.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Yuuri mumbles. To his horror, he finds he’s tearing up a little; what is wrong with him today? Phichit pulls back and peers into his face. Yuuri takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. “Also, I can’t believe you think I wouldn’t remember you,” he adds.

Phichit breaks into a smile, one that lights up his whole face, just like Yuuri remembers. “It’s been a few years,” he says demurely.

“Two years! And I write you!”

“I was actually just going to write you to tell you I’d come to Ekaterina Palace to train,” Phichit says. “Then the prince came home, and we heard you’d been sent for, and—“

Yuuri makes a face. “And here I am,” he finishes, glum. Phichit looks at him sympathetically. “But wait, you came here to train? I didn’t think your country was under the High King’s rule?”

“It’s not, but we try to keep a good relationship with them,” said Phichit. “And actually Ciao Ciao—you remember my mentor, Celestino?—he thought it would be good for me to come train here for awhile, so my father offered, and here I am.”

Like all of the countries that made up the kingdom of Kieva, Yuuri’s country is beholden to send one or more of its heirs apparent to serve and train in the High King’s court for at least two years. Two years is the minimum; sometimes it’s longer, depending on the nature of the relationship between the High King and the country in question. Ironically, Yuuri would have been free as a bird from this particular duty if not for the fact that he wound up betrothed to the crown prince of Kieva.

“That makes sense,” says Yuuri. He and Phichit walk a little ways further into the room, sitting down on a soft, over-stuffed couch. “So, you’re a mage-knight, then?”

“Mage-knight in training,” says Phichit. “So technically I’m a page, but there’s training and drills and most of what we used to do in addition to a few other duties. When I told Her Majesty that we knew each other, it was decided I would be your page.”

Yuuri pales a little as he hears this. “The royal family knows about—“

“I just said our mentors were friends, and we’ve spent time together,” Phichit cuts in. “Don’t worry, Yuuri, I didn’t tell them what we were doing.” Yuuri sags, letting out a breath in relief.

Phichit is one of the few people that Yuuri knows from outside Hasetsu, the province his family hails from. He and Phichit trained together several times—Minako would always go to stay with Celestino, the retainer for Phichit’s family, and bring Yuuri with her, under the very blasé excuse of a
“diplomatic errand.” Yuuri’s parents had been under the impression that if Yuuri was learning magic on these trips, it was of a type distinctly non-combat.

To this day, Yuuri wonders if Celestino knew that the boy Minako always brought along was actually an omega, as opposed to a beta like Phichit. Minako never brought it up either way, at least, and it’s true that knowledge about Yuuri’s status as Victor Nikoforov’s chosen mate was not well-known—an intentional move to protect him. But Yuuri still wonders.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Yuuri says softly. Unconsciously he hunches in on himself, as if he could just hide in his traveling cloak.

“I’m not going to tell anyone what you get up to in your spare time, Yuuri,” says Phichit, and pats him reassuringly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, okay? It’ll be alright.”

Yuuri has every reason to believe the contrary, but just hearing this from his friend makes him feel a little better. “Okay,” he says. He hesitates, then takes a deep breath, and adds, “Phichit, I’m—I’m sorry I never told you that I wasn’t—that I’m…”

Phichit raises his hand, cutting off Yuuri’s halting confession. “It’s okay,” he says again. “Really. I understand why you never told me. It’s safer.”

Yuuri flashes a small, grateful smile at him; Phichit takes Yuuri’s hand, giving it a light squeeze. “Thanks, Phichit,” Yuuri says, and returns the squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” says Phichit. “Now come on, let’s get you to your quarters. You smell like sweaty horses.”

“Phichit—!”

“Well, you do,” says Phichit reasonably, and laughs when Yuuri elbows him in the ribs.

* * * * *

Phichit helps Yuuri to his rooms, Yuuri with his arm around Phichit’s shoulders, since his ankle is still protesting being walked on. Someone—probably Victor, Yuuri thinks sourly—arranged to have Yuuri’s things brought to his quarters, and they’re already waiting for him in his bedroom.

Which, for the record, is enormous. Phichit didn’t misspeak when he said “rooms”—Yuuri has an entire suite to himself, and is honestly stunned at how nice the rooms are.

The bedroom is an elegant affair, with more of those high windows that let in lots of natural light. Yuuri’s bed is both huge and cozy—he’s never seen so many pillows in one place in his life. The closet is a walk-in, and so large it could be another room unto itself; half of its cabinets and wardrobes are full of exquisitely fine clothing, while the other half are empty, presumably meant to house whatever Yuuri brought with him. It also features multiple full-length mirrors, lined with gold filigree and dark wood, none of which make Yuuri feel any less self-conscious about seeing that many images of himself reflected back at him.

Off the bedroom is a large study, with two massive bookcases taking up an entire wall of the room, repeating the same pattern as the closet: one half full of books and journals, the other half empty, awaiting whatever Yuuri wants to put there. A large, handsome desk is pushed against another wall, made of the same dark wood that went into the overstuffed coach and the wing-backed chair that are arranged in front of the fireplace. Yuuri would think having his own fireplace ridiculous if he wasn’t absolutely certain that every other room in the palace has one as well.
Yuuri has his own bathroom, also, with a huge sunken tub, a gorgeous tap built to look like the spout of a fountain, and a closet full of nothing but fluffy towels. Another closet boasts an astonishing number of lotions, soaps, and various other cosmetic devices, many of which Yuuri doesn’t even recognize.

He only has a few minutes to gawk, though. Phichit slips off, promising to return shortly, but almost as soon as he leaves a healer and a servant appear—both of whom knock at the door and request entrance before coming inside. Yuuri wonders if Victor warned his staff not to make assumptions with Yuuri’s privacy, and feels a small stab of mixed embarrassment and satisfaction.

The servant is apparently there as an extra pair of hands, and the healer sent to see to Yuuri’s foot. “I was actually going to take a bath,” Yuuri says, apologetic now that he doesn’t have the object of his resentment present to stoke his ire.

“You can leave, really,” Yuuri says. “I’m capable of bathing myself.”

“I simply wish to ensure you have everything you need, and are comfortable,” says the servant.

“Alright, alright, fine,” says Yuuri, and waves his hand. “But at least tell me your name.”

“Alexei,” says the man. He bows; Yuuri smiles at him, and Alexei smiles back.

Alexei draws a bath for Yuuri, adding some warm-smelling salts as the massive tub slowly fills. He helps Yuuri get washed up before climbing into the bath, Yuuri leaning on him for support as he hobbles into the bathroom. By now his ankle aches something terrible, whatever comfort Victor’s magic brought long since worn off. Yuuri is less insecure about nudity than he might be, thanks to his family’s famous hot springs and the amount of visitors they attract, but he still appreciates the way that Alexei skillfully helps him with wash cloths and soap and buckets of water, all without seeming to even notice Yuuri’s nakedness.

By the time Yuuri climbs into the tub, he’s feeling significantly less disgusting than he has since he left his family’s house three days prior. “Thank you very much,” Yuuri says. He lets out an involuntary sigh at the heat of the water. Whatever was in those salts smells wonderful, he thinks.

“I am at your service, my lord,” says Alexei, and bows again. “I will return shortly, but if you have need, pull the rope at the end of the tub, and I or your page will come.”

“Alright,” says Yuuri, making a mental note to do that exactly never. “I appreciate it.” Alexei bows once more and then slips out.

Yuuri sinks low into the tub, shutting his eyes and savoring the warmth of the water. It can’t hold a candle to his family’s hot springs—what can?—but it’s still incredibly relaxing. He shuts his eyes, intending to just relax for a few minutes.
It’s just as well that Alexei comes back when he does, because Yuuri has long since fallen asleep, the water starting to go cool. Alexei helps Yuuri out of bed and into a sleep shirt he produces from somewhere; Yuuri would protest, wanting his own things, but the shirt is so soft and he’s suddenly incredibly tired.

But something still keeps him. He sits on the edge of the bed, glancing at the bright sunlight still slanting through the windows. “What time is it?” he asks.

Alexei arches one elegant eyebrow at him. “Almost two pm,” he says, and Yuuri’s face falls. “Sleep, my lord. Your page or I will come to wake you when it is time for dinner.” His tone is still mild, but Yuuri has the distinct impression he’ll make the bed with Yuuri in it if he has to in order to get him to lay down.

“Alright,” says Yuuri, giving up. He doesn’t know exactly why he’s letting Alexei boss him around when he wouldn’t let Victor do the same; maybe it’s because he still thinks Alexei would leave if Yuuri ordered him to, or maybe it’s because the man is vaguely parental.

Or maybe he’s just that tired. Either way, he has no reason not to sleep other than his own pride, so he crawls under the covers. Alexei closes the shutters and pulls the heavy fabric curtains across them to plunge the room into a comforting darkness. Yuuri is asleep before he’s even slipped out the door.

* * * * *

Someone’s knocking at the door.

Yuuri sits up, abruptly dizzy. It’s dark, and he’s not in his own bed, he’s—where the hell is he? The knock comes again, and Yuuri rubs at his face. “Come in,” he calls, distracted.

The door creaks, and a vaguely familiar figure slips in. “It’s almost dinnertime, my lord,” says a man’s voice—Alexei. He’s a servant, and… Yuuri is in Ekaterina Palace. That’s right. Yuuri squints uselessly in the gloom; without thinking, he lifts a hand and summons a light, a warm ball of flame floating a few inches above his palm.

Alexei pauses halfway across the room, staring at him with interest. “And here I was wondering if there were enough lamps in the room to suit you,” he remarks. “You are better at that than Prince Vitya.”

“Vitya?” Yuuri repeats. He squints at Alexei, who is still blurry, then realizes he’s not wearing his glasses and gropes for them on the nightstand.

“Prince Victor,” Alexei says. He bends over Yuuri’s nightstand and adjusts the lamp, bringing it to life within moments, then moves to another table on the far wall and does the same.

“Oh,” says Yuuri. He watches Alexei move around the room for a moment, lighting the lamps, and then looks at his own faerie light, its color soft and warm. “Wait, I’m better at it than Victor?”

“His highness is very skilled at a great many things, both the Spark and otherwise, but fine control is not his strong suit,” Alexei says, mildly.

Yuuri finds he doesn’t quite know what to say to this. He doesn’t actually think of fine control as being his strong suit, either, but long years of practicing in secret has hammered a number of habits into him, including precision. When being sloppy means having to explain how you destroyed a tool shed on your family’s property and possibly blowing your and your mentor’s cover, accuracy in execution becomes second nature.
“Well, thank you,” says Yuuri, belatedly realizing he’s received a compliment and not bothered to acknowledge it. “Uh—you said it was dinner time?”

“In thirty minutes or so,” says Alexei. “I also am pleased to inform you that Ser Minako’s condition has improved, though not enough to be joining us for dinner.”

“Oh thank God,” Yuuri says. He heaves a long sigh, rubbing at his face in relief. “I was so worried…”

“The Queen’s skill at healing is unrivaled in the kingdom,” says Alexei. “I am confident your mentor will make a full recovery, given time.”

He disappears into Yuuri’s closet, emerging a few moments later with rich fabrics in coordinating colors draped over his arm. “Now. This will be your formal presentation to the High King and his court, so we must see to it that you look the part.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. His stomach drops into the vicinity of the floorboards; the idea of facing the entire court by himself is like ice in his veins. “Um—isn’t Phichit—what about my page?”

“Your page has been at combat training this afternoon, and is no doubt washing and readying himself for dinner right now,” says Alexei calmly. “Now, I assume you brought clothes from home that you wish to wear, but just in case I have several suitable outfits here for you to choose from.”

“Uh—“

Despite his initial dislike of having an attendant, Yuuri finds himself grateful for Alexei’s presence. The man is a pillar of calm, for one thing, and takes all of Yuuri’s stammering and reluctance in stride. Yuuri tries on all of the outfits that Alexei brings out, ranging from a frost-white suit of a vaguely military cut to a hunter green ensemble that has entirely too many pieces, but it isn’t till he sees the dark blue suit that he remembers what his mother sent him with.

It takes a few minutes to dig the kimono out of Yuuri’s bags, but his mother’s expert packing means that when Yuuri carefully lays it out on the bed, not a single wrinkle is visible. Alexei makes an approving noise as he gazes at it, taking in the pattern of artfully swimming koi and fallen cherry blossoms, and the lovely color gradient that starts with soft spring blue at the top and deepens to midnight at the kimono’s hem.

“Put it on,” Alexei says. He helps Yuuri into it, adjusting the obi and the folds until everything hangs just so. Yuuri stares at his reflection in the wall of mirrors. He’s seen the robe before, of course, but he’s never worn it; it was a going-away present from his mother.

When will he even see her again? Yuuri feels a hard lump in the back of his throat, and he has to take a deep breath to loosen it.

“It’s perfect,” says Alexei warmly. He smiles at Yuuri in their reflection, and after a moment Yuuri smiles back. “Now to finish.”

Alexei insists on styling Yuuri’s hair for him, producing a pot of some thick paste and sweeping Yuuri’s bangs back and out of his face with a few dabs of it. He slips a pair of delicate slippers on Yuuri’s feet, then turns him towards the mirror again. Yuuri stares back at his reflection, wondering if he can possibly act as refined and graceful as the boy in the mirror looks.

Somewhere in the building, a bell chimes. Yuuri glances around, his pulse speeding. “Is that—“

“The bell calls us,” says Alexei. “His highness awaits you, my lord.”
Yuuri swallows. Alexei looks at him, and then puts a hand on his shoulder. “They’re not going to eat you, I promise,” he says.

“If you say so,” says Yuuri.

* * * * *

The last thing to do before leaving Yuuri’s quarters is to splint his foot. It takes a few minutes, but Alexei seems to know what he’s doing, and when he’s done Yuuri finds he can walk on the ankle with minimal pain.

“It’s not far,” Alexei tells him reassuringly. “Take my arm if you need to lean on something.”

“Alright,” says Yuuri, because what if I just go hide in the stables seems a poor response.

Alexei is not wrong about the distance, but when people stand respectfully to the side as Alexei and Yuuri pass by, many of them dropping to one knee in a bow, Yuuri finds he has plenty of time to develop a nice, healthy case of anxiety long before they reach the grand ballroom.

The doors are huge oaken affairs, easily three times a man’s height, but they swing open before them at some unseen signal as Yuuri and Alexei approach. Yuuri slows, and might have stopped altogether if not for Alexei’s unexpectedly reassuring presence at his elbow. He takes a deep breath, straightens his spine, and sweeps into the room with his head held as high as he knows how.

Before them yawns a room long and tall enough to rival a cathedral. Glittering chandeliers hang from the ceiling, refracting the fire and lamplight, as well as many suspended faerie lights no doubt conjured just for the occasion. More massive tapestries and paintings adorn the walls, in between the huge windows, and long tables fill the room from end to end, all draped in red table runners and laden with elegant dinnerware. More people than Yuuri has seen in one place in his entire life fill the room, their chatter falling silent as the doors open.

One table sits apart from the others at the far back, bedecked in royal purple beneath its fine silver and porcelain dishware. At this table are the High King, the Queen, and the Prince—and, Yuuri notices in slight disbelief, a large poodle with a purple sash wrapped around its neck.

Yuuri flinches ever-so-slightly as a small man in a red-and-gold uniform steps forward from the doors as Yuuri and Alexei come inside. Alexei lightly touches Yuuri’s elbow, and they halt as the uniformed man unrolls a scroll and raises his voice.

“Presenting His Royal Highness’s betrothed, the future royal consort, journeying through many dangers to us from Hasetsu province, Lord Katsuki Yuuri!”

“Fancy,” whispers a familiar voice from Yuuri’s other side. Yuuri glances quickly over and is floored by the relief he feels at seeing Phichit’s smiling face. Phichit is clad in a formal Chakri outfit of rich red and gold that accents his slim figure and his handsome features. He extends his arm, and Yuuri takes it gratefully.

“This way,” says Phichit, and they head down the long walk together.

As they pass by the other tables, Yuuri gets entirely too good a glimpse of the many people in their fine clothing at the other tables. The worst part is that everyone rose from their seats as Yuuri walked into the room, and to a person everyone present bows as Yuuri passes by.

“Stop murdering my arm, Yuuri,” Phichit whispers out of the side of his mouth. Yuuri hastily loosens the death-grip he has on his friend’s elbow, simultaneously trying to keep his eyes forward.
The walk is—long, strange, and deeply uncomfortable. Yuuri is very glad to be wearing his mother’s heavy formal kimono, glad that it’s long enough to hide the splint on his ankle and the scrapes and bruises on his arms from their fight. He does his best to keep his eyes forward and not focus any attention on the many people they pass, the better to deflect from his anxiety, and it works—right up until they approach the long table at the end, and Yuuri realizes that Prince Victor is standing near the head, watching Yuuri walk towards him.

The Prince is clad in a very handsome traditional Kievan suit, black pants and white shirt beneath a gorgeous long pink overcoat with golden laces. Somehow his poodle sat attentively next to him does nothing to diminish his attractiveness. Victor smiles ever so slightly when he sees Yuuri looking at him, and Yuuri has to drop his eyes, abashed.

He feels himself start to flush, and wishes he knew a spell, a trick, anything to hide his embarrassing reactions, but all he can do is try to act calmer than he feels. Yuuri had anticipated having Minako here, to lend him her strength; at least he has Phichit to lean on, Yuuri thinks miserably.

They reach the end of the long carpet, and Phichit stops, Yuuri stopping a half-second after, still clutching Phichit’s arm. “Your Majesties,” says Phichit, and drops into a deep bow, one knee on the ground. He succeeds in tugging at Yuuri’s arm without making it obvious, enough that Yuuri catches on and copies him, sinking into a deep bow, head lowered.

“Rise,” says a deep voice—the High King. Yuuri gets slowly to his feet, and abruptly finds Victor at his elbow, that same faint smile on his face. Up close he’s even more handsome than he was before, so distracting it makes Yuuri’s teeth itch. Victor extends a black-gloved hand; after a moment Yuuri places his own hand in Victor’s open palm, and lets Victor lead him to the table, Phichit following behind them.

The High King sits at the head of the table, his dark hair and beard only starting to show streaks of grey, with Victor’s clear blue eyes. He’s clad in a deep blue and black version of Victor’s outfit; Yuuri suspects the outfit alone costs more than everything Yuuri owns. Beside him sits the Queen, looking every bit as regal as when Yuuri saw her earlier today; her gown is a lighter shade of the same blue as her husband’s outfit, adorned with silver and white detailing, little sprays of lace and pearls at the hips and bodice and hems. Other pages and what Yuuri assumes to be dignitaries of note are also seated at this table, but he’s too busy trying not to trip on his own feet or accidentally set something on fire out of nerves to pay much attention to anyone but the royal family.

The King gestures, and sits down; with a great shuffling and noise of moving chairs, so does the rest of the ballroom.

“I am glad you are able to join us this evening,” says the King. “My son tells me you were waylaid by bandits on your journey here.”

“I—yes, your Majesty,” Yuuri says. He settles in his seat, careful how he sits down in the kimono, Phichit on his left and Victor on his right. The seat directly across the table from Yuuri sits empty, and Yuuri suffers a pang as he thinks of Minako lying on a sickbed. “My injury was minor, but my mentor was nicked by an arrow with a poisoned tip.”

“You are lucky you reached us when you did,” says the Queen. “A half-day longer and she would have been beyond our help.” Her long hair is bound up in intricate plaits and piled on her head; Yuuri can see the shimmer of silver and gold ribbons woven directly into her hair, complementing the elegant crown she wears.

Yuuri exhales. “I am so grateful for your intervention, your Majesty,” he says, and he doesn’t have to work for the emotion in his voice.
The next part, though, is going to be tough. Yuuri forces himself to turn and meet Victor’s eyes, his fiancé sitting entirely too close to hand, his expression serene. “I—I must apologize, also, for my behavior this morning. I was very ill-mannered when you tried to help me.”

“You had a difficult journey here,” Victor says, and smiles. “I could see how worried you were, and how tired. Think nothing of it.” Across the table, the King and Queen appear as calm as their son, but something about the way the Queen watches Yuuri makes him feel as though she’s scrutinizing him very closely indeed.

He swallows. “You are too kind, your highness,” he says. He keeps his voice soft, demure, the picture of a sweet, compliant mate.

“Enough talk of troubling things,” says the King. “Our son has returned to us, and you have joined us safely. Let us eat, and celebrate this day.” He claps his hands, and almost instantly motion fills the room, servants appearing from half-hidden doors in the wall, carrying enormous platters of food and drink to the tables.

The food is rich and delicious, if unfamiliar, and despite the fact that Yuuri was sure he wouldn’t be able to eat due to nerves, being presented with dinner suddenly finds him ravenous. To his great relief, conversation at the table delves no deeper than the weather and a popular play on offer in Petrograd as of late. Yuuri is equally grateful that Phichit is sitting next to him—more than once, Yuuri finds himself at a loss for something to say, and Phichit nudges him, asking about something easy, like Mari’s health, or whether Yuuri has tried that plate of dumplings yet.

And all the while, his fiancé sits on his other side, just as if his sheer presence isn’t making Yuuri sweat under his fine clothing. Victor burns in Yuuri’s mind like the sole source of heat in a freezing room mid-winter.

For his own part, Victor is—well, a gentleman. If he’s offended by how Yuuri yelled at him and stormed off this morning, he gives no sign. He does pay an inordinate amount of attention to Yuuri, asking him if his quarters are to his liking, if he has everything he needs. “This dress you’re wearing —“

“That’s a kimono,” Yuuri says automatically. “Ah, your Highness.”

Victor smiles, corners of his eyes crinkling, and Yuuri’s stomach cramps. This would be so much easier if you weren’t so damn attractive, he thinks irritably.

“This kimono you’re wearing,” Victor says, still smiling. “It looks wonderful on you. Mother, do you think the tailor could create something like it for the wedding?”

The Queen sips her wine, looking consideringly across the table at Yuuri. “I’m sure she could,” she says after a moment. “It might take a bit longer than planned. We’ll have to get started right away.”

Yuuri thinks: Oh, shit. He sits up a little straighter, hands folding automatically in his lap. “Actually, your Majesty. I—I had a request to make, if your grace might consider it.” All pairs of eyes at the table turn towards him, and he clenches his hands tighter in his lap against the urge to sink into the ground.

“Tell me this request,” says the King. He sounds curious, which is better than annoyed, Yuuri supposes.

Yuuri takes a deep breath. He practiced phrasing this over and over with Minako, in the coach before the attack, and it’s only her calm voice in his head that allows him to say what he needs to now.
“Your Majesties were kind enough to allow me to stay with my family and see to their needs while
the Prince was traveling abroad,” he says. “And I am so grateful for that, b-but—but I don’t think I
realized how unprepared it left me until I arrived here today.”

The Queen and King are both watching him now, their expressions unnervingly intent. Yuuri can’t
even bring himself to look over at Victor, not yet. “Go on,” says the Queen, when Yuuri pauses a
moment.

“I—want to be worthy of being the royal consort,” Yuuri says. “But if we proceed with the wedding
a month from now, I’m afraid I won’t b-be prepared. If your graces would allow it, I would ask for
the wedding to be deferred a little while, to give me time to learn more about what is expected of me,
and how to better comport myself as… as the newest member of your family.” His voice wobbles a
little as he gets this out, and he can’t help but drop his eyes into his lap, shyness getting the best of
him.

For several seconds, no one says anything. Yuuri feels himself turning red, anxiety threatening to
close off his throat, and he shuts his eyes, forcing a deep breath in and out. “An interesting request,”
says the King after a moment. “My lady, what do you think?”

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” says the Queen. Yuuri looks up quickly, staring across the table in
surprise. The Queen smiles at him, softening the sternness of her regard. “It is much better to realize
one’s own limitations and act to correct them, than to pretend they do not exist and suffer the
consequences. It speaks very well of you and your dedication that you would ask this of us, dear
boy.”

Yuuri lets the breath he was holding out, managing a weak smile. Only now does he have the nerve
to glance over at Victor, and finds himself rooted to the spot by the intensity of Victor’s stare.
“Whatever you need, you will have,” Victor says. He reaches over and takes Yuuri’s hand, lacing
their fingers together and smiling at him.

“Our majesties are t-too kind,” Yuuri stammers. Why, why is Minako not here to rescue him with a
well-timed story or joke? Even Phichit can’t save him, but then it’s hardly fair to ask him to jump in
the line of fire just because Yuuri’s sweating over lying to the royal family.

Yuuri makes it through the rest of dinner more or less intact, but when Victor asks if he can
accompany Yuuri to his room, Yuuri’s courage finally gives out. “It’s been a long day, your
highness,” he says apologetically. “I—I don’t think I’m fit for company, right now.”

“Of course, whatever you want,” says Victor, his smile never faltering. “But please—we’re to be
married. Call me Victor.” He takes Yuuri’s hand and bows low over it, kissing Yuuri’s knuckles, his
gaze never wavering. Yuuri feels himself flush.

“ Alright, Victor,” he says after a moment, carefully taking back his hand and bowing in return.
“Thank you for your hospitality.”

He starts to turn, hoping to make it to the door before his dignity (or his ankle) gives out, but Victor
straightens and starts to reach for him, then seems to think better of it.

“Before you go,” Victor says; Yuuri pauses, glancing back. “What do you want me to call you?”

Inwardly, Yuuri sighs. He’s been out-maneuvered, and he knows it. “You may call me Yuuri, if you
like,” he says, and tries to not feel anything in response to the way Victor’s face lights up.

“Alright, Yuuri,” Victor says. “Sleep well.”
“Thank you,” says Yuuri. He turns, forcing himself to walk, not run, to the doorway, hoping that either Alexei or Phichit will appear to help him limp back to his bedroom.

He gets his wish, the servant he’s already starting to rely on materializing seemingly out of thin air as Yuuri exits into the hallway. “Quite the eventful dinner you had,” Alexei notes.

“No kidding,” says Yuuri. He doesn’t even bother being surprised that Alexei heard what happened, somehow. He can worry about it later—right now he’s too tired. Alexei extends his arm, and Yuuri takes the proffered elbow gratefully; his ankle is starting to throb again. He’s really going to have to stay off it for a few days, he thinks.

And he’s going to have to do something to keep the crown prince at bay, or else Victor Nikiforov is going to drive him absolutely up the wall.

Chapter End Notes

+ You may notice I've changed some of the names around of people's countries; I did that on purpose, because *jazz hands* world-building reasons. In particular, "Kieva" is derived from a very archaic name for a particular region of Russia; "Nihon" is Japanese for "Japan"; "Chakri" is the surname of the ruling family of Thailand; and "Petrograd" is a different name for St. Petersburg.

+ Victor is wearing a modified version of the outfit on the left in this picture. (Sans the beard, obviously.)

+ I stole/modified some of the titles/honorifics from Dragon Age. In case you find them confusing, here's a guide to how I'm using them:
  - "Ser" is a gender neutral title (think "Sir Ian McKellan" or "Sir Lancelot")
  - "Serrah" is a gender-neutral form of address for someone of equal or lesser status than you
  - "Messere" is a gender-neutral form of address for someone of greater status than you
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Yuuri tries to adjust to life at the palace, and to Victor. Things go fairly well, until they don’t.

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for reading! Just a heads-up - next week’s chapter MIGHT be a day late, because I have two exams next week and one of them is on the day I usually post. Please enjoy!

Yuuri hurries down the hall, fingertips tingling from the spell wrapping him in shadows to hide his passage. His footfalls are silent, darkness rippling over his shoulders as he weaves past the lamps lighting the hallway. He’s late—if he doesn’t hurry Minako might worry, might simply leave, and they’ll have lost another too-rare opportunity to practice.

He turns a corner, and sees the door to the room they picked open just a crack. Yuuri slips inside, glancing around the empty study, and lets out a sigh of relief when he sees his mentor standing near the far wall, staring up at a painting. “I’m here,” he says softly, and shuts the door behind him, taking care to lock it.

Minako turns, hands on her hips. “There you are,” she says. “I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry—“ Yuuri snaps his fingers, and the glamour hiding him drops. “I couldn’t get away from Lady Lilia until dinner was almost over, and then the tailor came to my room for another fitting—“

Minako waves her hand to dismiss the rest of his explanation. “It’s fine, I know you’re doing the best you can,” she says. She snorts. “I suppose this is what we get for asking for you to receive training to be one of the next rulers of the kingdom.”

“Yeah,” says Yuuri, and tries to smile; if it looks as bad as it feels, he probably looks like he’s having a stomach cramp. Their plan to postpone the wedding seemed so clever, back when they were brainstorming in the carriage en route to Ekaterina Palace, but now that Yuuri is actually here—

—Well. He’s seeing first hand exactly how much work goes into becoming the next High King, or the royal consort, and he can’t help but think the royal family won’t take kindly to all their work at training him being thrown to the side if he gets the chance to make his request.

“Yuuri! Are you in there?” Minako’s snapping her fingers in front of his face.

“S-Sorry!”
“We have to keep practicing if you have any chance at all of even qualifying for the Grand Tourney,” Minako says sternly. “I need your concentration, Yuuri. The first competition is in November.”

Yuuri takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry, master,” he says. “Let’s begin.”

“Good,” says Minako. “I want to keep working on the sequence we started last time. I want you to execute it without speaking, or moving your hands.” Yuuri groans.

By the time Minako finally calls a halt, some three-odd hours later, it’s nearing midnight. Yuuri is panting, dripping in sweat, his limbs useless as dead wood. He barely has the energy to hide himself again before he and Minako slip out of the unused study and head back to their respective quarters. Yuuri thinks briefly about wiping off with some wet towels before falling into bed, but is ultimately too tired. He just barely gets through his evening cup of tea that he drinks with his heat-suppressing medicine, shucking his dirty clothes and pulling on a clean shift before all but collapsing.

Honestly, he welcomes the exhaustion. It makes it easier to fall asleep at night. Much better than staying up hours into the night, staring at the ceiling and wondering what will happen to him if their plan fails.

Or what will happen if their plan succeeds.

Most nights, Yuuri’s so tired he’s asleep almost before his head hits the pillow. He’s gotten what he asked for from the royal family in spades—hours and hours of training, of lessons, of being drilled on his manners, his knowledge of geography, his ability to recognize the faintest scent of poison in a drink.

Yuuri is no slouch. While it might be true that his family is not exactly the most notable of houses, he did spend the last ten years with the knowledge he’d one day be called to his role as the prince’s consort and mate, and his parents tried to have him taught as much as they could in preparation of that day. He learned magic from Minako, dance from the Nishigoris, and history and decorum from his own parents and the tutors they arranged for him and Mari.

He’s is floored by the new awareness of all that he needs to know and does not. Often, he finds himself wondering what the royal family would have done, if Yuuri did not ask for this training—did they just expect him to meekly follow Victor’s orders, to bear the prince’s children and have no other purpose? The idea galls Yuuri, a splinter that digs deep into his psyche and spurs him to outstrip every expectation in his lessons, even if he ultimately intends to cast off his role as royal consort.

Which is good, because his days are full. Yuuri considered himself a good dancer, but then he starts lessons with Lady Lilia, a stern woman with dark hair and a presence that could cow an army, and realizes how much more he has to learn. It’s gratifying to watch her scold and snarl at all her other pupils just as much as she does Yuuri—right up until she yanks his leg up into a wider split, or makes him perform a complicated sarabande in front of the rest of the group.

(Skill in dancing is expected of the royal family and also of any who would practice combat magic, since the execution of so many spells requires intricate body movements. Yuuri has heard of mage-knights from other countries whose dances during battle are as different from Keiva as night and day; he wonders if Victor learned anything like that during his time abroad.)

Some days he is alone, and other days he practices with the mage-knights and pages. Even the prince is not exempt from dance practice, although Victor seems less fazed by Lady Lilia than the others. Then again, Yuuri strongly suspects she’s been scolding him his entire life, so perhaps that isn’t a big surprise.
Officially, Minako continues most of Yuuri’s instruction in the magic he’s expected to know, as an omega and as the prince’s consort. Some of it Yuuri expects: spells to call light, or to heal wounds (he’ll never be as good at this as his sister, but he tries). Other areas take him by surprise. The magic Minako does not teach him is taught to him by the Queen herself, and of a sort Yuuri is wholly unfamiliar with.

“You need to know how to walk where your King cannot,” says Her Majesty Elizaveta. She holds Yuuri’s hand, tracing long, elegant fingers along his skin in a strangely soothing manner as she weaves a fine magic netting around his forearm and hand. “You must be his eyes and ears, and see what would strike at him from the shadows. You will be a target yourself, as his mate, and you must be prepared to defend yourself and him.”

“You make it sound like I’m being trained as a spy,” Yuuri says, and then hurriedly adds, “y-your Majesty.”

The Queen pauses in her spell-weaving, raising dark eyes to gaze at him. “I was hoping you’d catch on at some point,” she remarks, and Yuuri flushes.

She returns her attention to the lattice she’s woven around his arm, encasing his arm and hand up to the knuckles, leaving his fingers free. Apparently satisfied, she leans down and blows down the inside of Yuuri’s arm. Instantly, the waiting spell lights up, silver netting burning bright around his arm as it coalesces into something more solid, until Yuuri is staring at a fingerless glove that looks as though it’s made of strands of cloud.

“What is this?” Yuuri asks. He lifts his arm, turning it this way and that, fascinated by the construct.

“It’s meant to protect your skin, but give the appearance of what would happen when various substances are placed against its surface,” says the Queen. She turns to the carved wooden box sitting on the desk beside her, and opens it; inside are two dozen small vials, each filled with a different liquid.

Yuuri’s heart crawls into his throat. “Your Majesty, are those…” He trails off.

“Poison,” she confirms, and gives a small smile. “That’s correct. You must know the smell of each, and what it does. Now. Let’s begin.”

Not everything is as strenuous as dance lessons or exciting as poisons and subterfuge. Yuuri also has lessons about geography and diplomacy with one of the royal family’s retainers, an older man named Ser Stefan with thinning brown hair he pulls back into a ponytail. Yuuri privately thinks that Stefan could find a job talking people to sleep if he’s ever fired from his job as a royal tutor, but no one asked him.

Yuuri learns manners and decorum from Lady Lidochka, hours of instruction about how to sit, how to walk, what fork to eat with. Some of it is review, but enough of it is not to give Yuuri a headache—not to mention an anxiety attack about what would happen if he had to perform this in front of visiting dignitaries. He’d known, intellectually, that manners in Kieva differed from those of Nihon, but not how different, and what his parents had taught him only went so far.

But by far the most taxing and exhausting part of Yuuri’s new life is his actual fiancé—not just his presence, but also his persona. Everyone has an opinion on Victor, and although no one is stupid enough to speak too loud in front of Yuuri, the Queen’s lessons at subtlety and studied obliviousness are quick to pay off.

The first rumors Yuuri hears are the ones that whisper that the reason Victor came home when he did
is not by choice, but because his parents got wind of what were apparently a great many dalliances. A different partner every night, whispers one of the kitchen maids to a butler, giggling as he pretends to pay more attention to her gossip than her décolletage. And his betrothed is so demure, too! How shameful!

Still others can talk of nothing but Victor’s prowess in battle—his knights are all great admirers of his, down to the last man and woman—while yet others insist that he could charm a snake out of its own skin. Lover, fighter, diplomat, friend: all of the rumors about the prince are outlandish, ridiculous. Yuuri has no idea how many of them are even close to true, but they don’t make his life any easier, either.

Because the prince himself is quite the handful, and persistent, to boot. He invites Yuuri out to do a dozen different things every day, and no matter how many times Yuuri turns him down, Victor always just smiles and politely accepts his refusal, then asks him to do something new the next time they see each other.

It’s honestly exhausting, far beyond what even Yuuri might expect from an alpha actively courting his chosen mate. Even Minako comments on it, eyeing Victor with a curled lip as he bows and leaves the room after interrupting their (official, non-combat) magic practice. “You would think his highness might have learned more restraint,” she mutters to Yuuri, before they return to their drills.

Today looks to be no exception. Yuuri is just returning to the castle from the greenhouses for lunch when he spots Victor riding towards him and Phichit on his favorite charger, a nut-brown mare with a glossy black mane.

“Yuuuuuri!” he cries, beaming widely. He hops down from his horse and closes the distance to Yuuri and Phichit. For a moment Yuuri thinks Victor is actually going to try to pick him up again, but the prince manages to restrain himself.

Well, briefly. “Won’t you go riding with me today, Yuuri?” he asks, taking Yuuri’s hand in both of his. Victor’s hands are always warm, Yuuri notices; it would be nice, if he wasn’t so handsy.

“Ah—not today, I’m sorry, Victor,” says Yuuri. “Your mother is expecting me this afternoon.”

“Such a shame,” says Victor, with a heavy sigh. He raises Yuuri’s knuckles to his lips for a long kiss, then drops it gently. “Perhaps soon you will find the courage to let me get to know you, hmm? But I’m lucky that my mate is already so beloved, so I should not complain that you are popular, even if I’d rather have you all to myself.” He glances at Phichit, and adds, “See you at practice, Phichit. Remember our bet!” With that, he leaves.

“Bet?” Yuuri looks at Phichit, eyebrows raised.

Phichit makes a face. “He bet that I wouldn’t be able to beat him at a quad jump to call daggers,” he says, apologetically. Yuuri’s expression darkens, and he turns back towards the castle at a brisk walk, trying very hard to think of other things. “Ah—I’m sorry, Yuuri—“

“No, don’t be, it’s not your fault,” Yuuri says, and sighs. He slows, allowing Phichit to catch up with him.

“He’s just trying to be charming, I think,” says Phichit. His tone of voice says he’s not sure if ‘charming’ is the right word any more than Yuuri is.

“He keeps calling me his mate,” Yuuri says; some bitterness creeps into his voice despite himself. By now, Phichit is well aware of Yuuri’s true feelings on the situation, though they are both careful
never to speak of it unless they’re alone. “We’re not bonded yet. He doesn’t even know me, and here he is acting like I’m his private property.”

“He’s trying to get to know you, though,” Phichit points out, sounding much too reasonable for the mood Yuuri’s in right now. “I know he’s overdoing it, but that’s why he keeps asking you to do things with him.”

“I don’t care what he wants,” Yuuri snaps, before he can stop himself.

Phichit winces a little, but keeps pace with Yuuri anyway. “You know, Yuuri, I was wondering…” Phichit hesitates, then apparently decides to plow ahead anyway. “If you don’t want to be here, to be Victor’s betrothed, why haven’t you said anything? Only Minako and I know, right?”

Yuuri levels another sour look at him. “You know as well as I do that a ‘request’ from the High King isn’t really one you’re allowed to say no to,” he says. “I won the lucky prize of being the most compatible omega when Victor came of age, so here I am.”

“I guess that’s true,” says Phichit, and sighs. “But—“

“Phichit, please.”

“No, come on, you’re making yourself miserable,” Phichit says. Yuuri stops again, glancing at his friend. There’s a familiar expression on Phichit’s face, one that says he’s not letting go of this until he’s said his piece. The damnable thing is that Phichit is so often right when he gets ahold of something like this.

“Just spit it out,” Yuuri says, exasperated.

“You’re here, and you don’t want to try to break off the engagement because making the High King mad is—not great,” Phichit says. “I get it. But you also asked for all this training to become a better leader, and so I don’t get why you would do that if you are just going to keep focusing on how you don’t want to be here. Why not ask Victor to give you a little space, to back off some? I’m sure he’d understand if you explained you were feeling smothered.”

Yuuri looks at him for a long moment, torn between the snappish response that first comes to mind and a different, better answer. Phichit must see something in his face, because his eyes widen. “You do have a reason,” he says. “What are you thinking?”

Yuuri exhales heavily. They’re still outside, alone on the pathway to the garden entrance, and so he tells Phichit as quickly and succinctly as he can. Phichit listens with wide eyes, hands over his mouth; when Yuuri’s done, he throws his arms around Yuuri and hugs him tight. “That’s insane,” he breathes. “I love it. How can I help?”

“You need places to practice,” Yuuri says. Relief pours through him; he’d been wanting and wanting to tell Phichit, but wariness at getting his friend into trouble kept stopping him. “And when the qualifying competitions come around, I might need help entering in disguise.”

“I’ll do everything I can,” Phichit says, and claps Yuuri on the shoulder.

* * * * *

Gaining a deeper level of trust with Phichit puts Yuuri’s heart at ease somewhat, and he finds new strength to make it through the rest of the day. Which is good, because as it turns out, he needs it.

After lunch, when Yuuri heads to the study room where he normally meets Queen Elizaveta for their
lessons, he finds it empty. Maybe she’s running late, is his first thought. It’s quickly shot down when the door flies open behind him and his Royal Pain In the Behind Prince Victor bursts into the room, beaming from ear to ear. “Yuuuuri!” he cries, crossing the room to a frozen Yuuri in three steps. “Guess what!”

“What,” says Yuuri. He tries to affix a smile on his face, a task so Sisyphean he gives up almost immediately.

“I spoke to my mother, and she agreed to give you this afternoon free so you can go riding with me!” Either Victor hasn’t noticed that Yuuri is feeling about as warm as a wet blanket, or he doesn’t particularly care, because without waiting for Yuuri to answer he grabs Yuuri’s hand and starts tugging him towards the door. “Come on, we have to go get some riding clothes for you, you can’t go out in that kimono—”

“It’s a yukata,” says Yuuri, and gives in to his fate.

He tries. He really does. Phichit’s comment about how Victor is just trying to get to know him has lodged in his mind like a particularly annoying splinter; Yuuri might resent Victor with every fiber of his being, but he’s also growing tired of being angry all the time. Maybe he is being a little unreasonable. Just a little.

So he gamely lets Victor outfit him in riding clothes, and even lets Victor hold his hand all the way to the stables. Yuuri does not miss it when Victor glances at their joined hands more than once, his expression almost ridiculously pleased over something so minor. But when Victor leads out his brown mare again, mounts her, and then reaches down to pull Yuuri up on his horse, Yuuri puts his foot down.

“Victor, you know I can ride, right?”

Victor blinks at him. “Of course I know that,” he says. “I only thought it would be pleasant if you rode in front of me, so—”

“You asked me to go riding with you, not carry me around on your saddle for decoration,” Yuuri says, voice tight.

“I am sorry,” Victor says, and to his credit it sounds like he means it. “That was—I overstepped. But Yuuri, please forgive me. I only wanted to be close to you.”

Yuuri sighs, looking away, looking at anything other than at Victor’s stupid earnest face. “I’ll take that roan,” he says, his eyes falling on a smaller mare tossing her head in her stall. “If you would help me get her tack, that would be nice.”

“Of course,” says Victor quickly, climbing off his charger. Yuuri focuses only on leading the horse out and saddling her, and not on how natural and easy Victor is with the horses, how the feisty mare gentles under his touch enough for Yuuri to climb easily on.

They go riding. Yuuri finds that being on horseback is both wonderful and infuriating—he’d always loved to ride with Minako or his sister, racing up and down through the fields and paths of the woodlands near their inn. But it’s a false sense of freedom: no matter how the wind whips his face, how the world rushes by, sooner or later he has to return to earth.

Victor takes Yuuri out into the great sloping woodlands and open lawns behind the palace. It isn’t long before Yuuri urges his roan into a gallop, his smaller mare putting on a burst of speed and pulling ahead of Victor’s charger. They fly neck and neck to and fro across the grounds, Yuuri in
front sometimes, Victor leading the others. By the time they return to the stables some two-odd hours later, both riders are as shiny with sweat as their horses, despite the chill in the early October air.

Yuuri feels better despite himself. He lets Victor lead Yuuri’s mare into the stables with Yuuri still in the saddle, and when Victor holds out a hand to help Yuuri down, he even takes it. Victor beams at him. “You are a wonderful rider,” he says. Yuuri permits himself a small smile as they leave their horses in with the stablehands and start to head back towards the palace.

Maybe it’s the smile that makes Victor slow. “Yuuri, what else are you doing today?”

Yuuri stops. “Um,” he says, and bites his lip, thinking. This close, after they’ve both been sweating, he can smell Victor more strongly than normal, and it’s—not unpleasant. Sort of distracting, actually. “Um, well, nothing, actually. I was going to just read.”

Victor brightens. Yuuri instantly wonders if he’s made a huge mistake. He gets his answer when Victor says, “Would you consider coming to watch me practice with the other knights?”

Yuuri stares at him. Even as he dithers, he swears he can smell Victor even more strongly, musky and appealing. In that tiny moment where he’s hesitating about what to say he can’t help but think that it’s good that city manners dictate everyone uses de-scenting soap so as to be less distracting in public, because Victor’s scent is—

“Allright,” he says, and Victor’s smile warms to outstrip the sun.

* * * *

It takes Yuuri less than twenty minutes to regret this decision.

Magic practice for the mage-knights takes place outside, in a field cleared specifically for this purpose. Yuuri lets himself be led up to one of the viewing areas, a set of raised seats like a theatre with an overhanging shelter and a surprisingly large number of blankets and pillows to sit on. He folds his hands in his lap and wonders why, exactly, he agreed to come down here and torment himself by watching this.

In twos and threes, the knights show up, as do the castle’s pages. Phichit turns up, along with Victor’s page—a straw-haired boy built like a scarecrow, if scarecrows were somehow anger incarnate. Improbably, his name is also Yuri, though spelled differently than Yuuri’s own. Yuuri stares at the men and women assembling on the field, wondering how many of them are alphas, how many are betas. How many of them might be an omega like him, but have successfully hidden it, and don’t have an inconvenient betrothal to a prince to take over their life.

Yuuri distracts himself by trying to remember everyone’s names and dynamic. The tall man with messy blond hair and a smirk standing over there by Victor is Christophe; he and the dark-haired man showing off in the center of the field are both alphas, and two of the most senior knights. That other man’s name is Jean-Jacques, if Yuuri remembers right. The statuesque redhead harassing Victor’s page is also an alpha; her name is Mila, and she’s already a full-fledged mage-knight despite being only eighteen.

There’s a woman with long dark hair arguing with her brother—Sara and Michele, Yuuri thinks, both betas, both pages. A man with a friendly smile and unfortunate facial hair is standing near the siblings—Emil, maybe?—and he’s another alpha, which Yuuri only remembers because he found it very surprising. He’s also a page. A boy with dark hair and an unfriendly demeanor is stretching off to one side; his name is Seung-Gil, Yuuri thinks, and he’s a beta. He remembers Victor’s comment that Seung-Gil makes up for being standoffish by being one of his most graceful knights.
Yuuri’s gaze moves to two other boys, standing together near where Victor is stretching. The taller one is Leo, and the shorter boy with him is Guang-Hong, both betas and pages. The sullen-looking man with his arms crossed is Georgi—he’s a mage-knight beta, and he’s sullen because… because… Because Lady Anya broke off their relationship, that’s right. And the stony-faced boy talking with Yuri is Otabek; it turns out he’s a beta and a mage-knight, but honestly he could have been a unicorn for all Yuuri could read him.

Phichit and Yuri are the only other people Yuuri knows; Phichit is a beta, of course, and Victor’s page Yuri is an alpha—the smallest, angriest alpha Yuuri’s ever met.

The armsmaster appears, an older, crotchety man with an accent like Victor’s father, his unruly white hair pulled back from his face with a length of twine. His name is Yakov, and he seems about as friendly as a great bear woken early from its winter slumber. “Alright, you idiots,” he calls, clapping his hands. “Line up!”

Yuuri lasts about thirty minutes into practice. That’s how long it takes for the knights and pages to finish their warm-ups and separate into sparring drills. The air is thick with magic, tingling up and down Yuuri’s spine, making the hair on the back of his neck stand at attention. His teeth itch; he has to clench his hands against the instinct to call some of that magic to himself, to breathe it in and control it like he so badly wants to.

He watches Jean-Jacques—JJ, Yuuri thinks they call him—do a complicated sequence of jumps, summoning a whirlwind of red fire that all but blows Michele off the field. It’s an incredibly clean execution, and despite his growing agitation Yuuri can’t help but appreciate the performance. The next pair steps up; Yuuri looks on as Mila does a neat pirouette and sends a burst of yellow star fire at her opponent, knocking him flat on his ass. She’s five years younger than Yuuri, and she’s moving like she’s done this every day of her life.

She probably has, Yuuri thinks. And she’s probably never once thought about what it would be like to not be allowed to.

Yuuri stands up quickly, the blanket he was wrapped up in falling from his shoulders. The attendant at the end of the aisle startles, looking at him with wide eyes. “Messere?” he says, tentative.

“Tell the prince I’m not feeling well,” Yuuri says shortly, and flees the practice arena.

He makes it halfway back to his room before he breaks into a run, hoping desperately that the wing containing his quarters will be empty at this time of day. It’s not, not quite, but the servants in the hall avert their eyes as he passes. Yuuri shoves the door closed and locks it with trembling fingers, and then breaks down, the tears coming fast and hard. He’s inches from snatching Victor’s still-unopened gift box sitting on the shelf and dashing it to pieces on the floor, but he goes to collapse on the bed instead, grabbing up a pillow to shove against his face.

The pillow is huge and soft, filled with down feathers. It does an effective job at both giving him something to cling to and muffling his wracking sobs. At several points he screams, biting down on the soft silk to hide the noise. By the time he’s worn himself out, the pillow is singed where he’s been clutching it—a pattern of almost delicate charcoal wending through the fine silk fibers, Yuuri’s magic leaking out of him in his distress.

He falls asleep like that, still in his sweaty riding clothes, clutching the burnt pillow. His last thought is that he’s going to need a good excuse to tell Victor why he can never, ever come watch the mage-knights practice again.
Yuuri wakes several hours later. It’s dark, and his mouth tastes like burnt feathers. Also, he’s hungry. “Ugh,” he says, and sits up.

The afternoon comes back to him in bits and pieces; Yuuri winces as he remembers how he ran the last two hallways to his room. Talk about being undignified. That’ll probably get back to the Queen, he thinks, and groans at the expression of disapproval he knows she’ll make at him.

Yuuri has actually come to quite like Queen Elizaveta, something he did not expect. She’s very different from his own mother—more distant, and obviously more regal, but she never condescends to him or acts as though she expects him to fail. She’s probably harder on him than all his other instructors combined—and that’s saying something, because Lady Lilia can be a nightmare—but Yuuri is finding more and more that he likes it.

She’s a lot like Minako, Yuuri thinks distantly. He wonders why Victor isn’t more like his mother.

His thoughts wander to his own mother. How far away she seems now; Yuuri had never spent more than two weeks away from her in his life, and now he’s been gone five weeks. A wave of homesickness sweeps over him, so intense he can feel his eyes start to water again.

Yuuri swallows hard, shoving the pillow away from him and getting off the bed. He’s missed dinner, he thinks. Also, he reeks. With these two thoughts in mind, he heads to clean himself up, already wondering if the kitchen has what he’ll need.

Thirty minutes later finds him heading down there to find out, clad in the oldest and most worn-in yukata his parents allowed him to bring with him, the one that feels the most like home. He was right about the time—he slept for almost four hours, the evening meal long over and done with. Yuuri’s honestly grateful. He doesn’t particularly want to deal with people at the moment.

The cook is still in the kitchens, and she glances up at him as he walks in. “Well, look who it is,” she says, and chuckles. She’s an older woman named Antonia with warm brown skin and an easy smile, built short and curvy. Yuuri’s not fooled, though; he’s seen the way she’s shouted interlopers right out of her kitchen when someone is misbehaving, and he’s very glad that she’s decided she likes him.

“I was wondering if you would turn up at some point,” Antonia says. “I saved you some dinner, love.”

Yuuri flushes. “Thank you very much,” he says, and bows a little, his eyes on the ground. “B-But, Cook, I was, um.”

“Spit it out,” Antonia says, and to Yuuri’s relief she does not sound annoyed at him.

Yuuri takes a deep breath and does just that. “I wanted to see if I could cook something my mother used to make for me,” he blurts, all in a rush. He keeps staring at his feet for a few moments, then dares to peek at the cook to see her reaction.

Antonia is smiling at him. “If you want to make yourself something, go right ahead, dear,” she says, and pats him on the shoulder. Yuuri shoots her a grateful smile, and then turns his attention to the business of making katsudon.

The cook leaves him alone after a bit, along with a reminder to clean up after himself—either she senses his desire for privacy, or she’s just done for the day. Yuuri hums to himself as he starts the rice, then sets about prepping and breading the pork cutlet, the mixture for the sauce close by in its bowl. By the time the egg and the meat are sizzling in the hot oil, much of Yuuri’s anxiety about the
The day has softened around the edges. He’ll wake tomorrow to the same set of problems, but for right now, the familiar smells of oil and pork and egg are enough to keep his mind focused.

He pulls the pan from over the and leaves it sitting on the iron lattice on the countertop for just a moment, going across the room to try to find some green onion to chop. It’s not exactly necessary, but it won’t taste quite right without it, so Yuuri opens the pantry door and squints at the selection of vegetables there.

It takes him a few moments, but as Yuuri stares into the closet, something seems off. Antonia is meticulous with her organization—she has to be, if she’s going to cook for the High King and his court—but right now the pantry is… Well, a mess. Vegetables and dry goods are all shoved about, as though someone was hastily rummaging through them. Instead of being neatly tied off with the twine Cook likes to use to bundle her roots and herbs, the floor is half-covered in broken-off bits of stems and leaves.

Yuuri wrinkles his nose. He’ll pick up after he’s done eating, he decides; Antonia has enough to do with her time. He crouches, carefully picking through the unruly pile of vegetables until he finds the green onions. The most overpowering scent in the cupboard is… anise? Licorice root, his brain supplies; memories of his mother’s cooking lessons come floating back, along with the tea she used to make to settle his stomach when he was sick. The licorice by itself probably did nothing, but it was sweet enough to hide the taste of the medicine she’d put in the tea, which was the only way she could get Yuuri to drink it.

The sound of a door swinging open jars him out of his reverie. “Ohh, what smells so good?”

Anxiety chills Yuuri’s good mood, making him shrink a little. He gets up quickly, turning to see Victor coming in from the door to the hall, clad in what Yuuri mentally thinks of as his evening clothes—more comfortable, less formal. He’s peering at the hot pan full of Yuuri’s dinner, sniffing appreciatively.

“It’s called katsudon,” says Yuuri. “Fried pork cutlet.” At the sound of Yuuri’s voice, Victor’s head snaps up, eyes widening a little.

“Ahh, Yuuri,” says Victor, after a moment. “You’re awake. I was worried about you.”

Of course you were, Yuuri thinks wearily. Mentally squaring his shoulders, he crosses the room to Victor and his dinner, painfully aware of his threadbare yukata, of the fact that they’re alone. “My mother used to make this for me,” Yuuri says, by way of redirecting the conversation. “When I was sick, or had a bad day.”

Something in Victor’s face changes. “So you were feeling sick,” he says. Yuuri curses himself inwardly for being transparent even when he’s trying not to be. “Alexei told me he saw you all but running to your quarters.”

Yuuri feels himself coloring, and he drops his eyes, reaching for a knife to start cutting up the green onion. He casts about for something to say, some explanation to give as to why he ran earlier that’s not painfully close to the truth—Victor doesn’t get to know how he really feels, not if Yuuri has any say about it. “I should have told you before,” he says, and sighs. “I—actually get really sick to my stomach when I’m around too much magic. Like in combat.”

He hears Victor suck in a sharp breath, and glances up despite himself. “Yuuri, you should have said so,” Victor says. He sounds upset, which Yuuri supposes is the reaction someone who isn’t a complete monster would have. “Why did you agree to come watch me?”
Because you smelled so good it was distracting, Yuuri thinks, and decides against admitting. Out loud, he says, “Because—I, I keep telling you no all the time, and you looked so happy when I said yes.” Fuck, it happened again. Why is it so hard to talk to this man? Yuuri can’t even manage a lie without two embarrassing truths to go with it.

Victor is staring at him now, his eyes too wide, expression complicated, and Yuuri can’t read him at all. He hunches his shoulders a little, going back to cutting the green onion into pieces so finely diced they might cease to exist if he’s not careful.

“I made more than I meant to,” he says awkwardly. He’s still staring at the onion, as though he’s having the conversation with it and not Victor. And then, because he feels inexplicably bad for lying to Victor, he asks, “Do… Do you want some?”

“I would love some,” says Victor. His voice is warm. Yuuri dares to peek at him, and then has to avert his eyes again, unable to handle being looked at like that.

He finds a pair of bowls, splitting first the rice and then the katsudon and egg into equal portions before topping them both with green onion. Victor watches in apparent fascination, but when Yuuri carries the bowls over to the long counter on the far side of the room, he follows, and they sit down on the weathered stools to eat.

Yuuri has only a few moments to wonder if he’s just poisoned the heir to the throne when Victor makes a noise that would be lewd in any other setting. “Yuuri, this is amazing,” he breathes. Yuuri can’t suppress the smile, and tries to hide it in his own bowl instead. “It’s so good! Ah, how do you not eat this every day?!”

“I would, but then I wouldn’t fit into any of my clothes,” Yuuri says. Victor laughs, and the sound is—not unpleasant, Yuuri thinks, and tries to not think about it harder than that.

They eat in peace for several minutes, a comfortable sort of silence during which the knot in Yuuri’s stomach slowly starts to unravel. He’s just beginning to think that maybe Victor isn’t always so frustrating when Victor puts down his bowl, sighs loudly, and says, “You’re going to be such a wonderful mate.”

Yuuri freezes—literally and figuratively. It feels as though someone just dumped cold water on him. Victor glances at him, and his face falls a little. “What did I say?”

“Why can’t you go five minutes without ruining everything?” Yuuri swallows hard, his eyes stinging traitorously. He swipes at his face with the back of his hand, not sure if he’s more appalled at Victor or himself.

Victor winces, lifting his hands and then dropping them, as though unsure what to do with them. “Yuuri, please, what did I say—“

“I didn’t learn to cook just because I thought it might make you happy someday,” says Yuuri. He stands up, shoving the stool under the counter again with more force than strictly necessary. Victor gets up too, reaching for him, but Yuuri shoves his hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

“I’m sorry! Yuuri—”

“Just go away, Victor,” Yuuri snaps, and stalks across the kitchen to where the dirty dishes go. He’ll have to apologize to Antonia tomorrow for not cleaning up better, but right now he has to get out.

“Please tell me what I’m doing wrong,” Victor says. Yuuri can hear the desperation in his voice, but this time it just makes him angrier. “Please, just tell me what you want!”
“I want my life back!” Yuuri whirls on Victor, who shrinks in front of him like Yuuri’s threatening him with a knife. “You took it from me when I was thirteen years old, and nothing I’ve wanted for myself since then mattered, because we all knew I’d just have to give it up whenever you decided I was worth bothering with and it was time to settle down!”

Victor goes white, staring at him wide-eyed. “Yuuri,” he says falteringly. “You… I never knew that you—if you wanted to see me, why didn’t you—“

“Why didn’t I what?” The tears he was fighting off start leaking down his cheeks, but now that he’s finally unstoppered himself, Yuuri can’t hold off. “What could I possibly have said that would have mattered? You’re the prince, and I’m just the omega you decided would pop out the best babies when you decided to get around to it. You never bothered to come see me even once, you never asked me to come visit! Not even a single letter, Victor!”

“I-I was busy!” Victor clenches his hands at his sides, but Yuuri can still see the fine trembling there, hear the tremor in his voice. It sends a spike of ruthless satisfaction through him, to know that he’s not the only one torn up by this. “I, I was abroad, I was at university—“

“Oh, I’ve heard all about what you were doing while you were traveling,” spits Yuuri. Victor blanches like he’s been struck. “How fun that you could do whatever you wanted and know that I would just wait for you, however long it took. You can’t just erase ten years of not caring about me by dancing attention on me now!”

“It wasn’t like that,” Victor says shakily.

Yuuri swallows hard. He feels the sudden, awful urge to hurl the bowl in his hands at Victor, and has to set it down quickly, aghast at himself. “I wouldn’t know what it was like,” he says; he finds he can barely get the words out. “Since I never heard from you. Even though I wanted to.”

To this, Victor says nothing at all. The room goes silent, and it is not the peaceful quiet of a shared meal, but the airlessness that comes after some terrible violence. Yuuri’s head hurts, the solace of cooking his mother’s meal gone.

He starts to go, and Victor makes no attempt to reach out and stop him. Yuuri makes it all the way to the door before he stops. “You should know,” he says into the silence, “that I got tired of waiting for you to want me. So I found someone else who did.”

There’s a sharp hitch of breath, but nothing else. Somehow, that’s worse than the reaction Yuuri expected, but there’s nothing else to say. So he just pushes out the door, leaving Victor alone in the kitchen with all of his misguided intentions and the shreds of Yuuri’s soft feelings towards him.

Yuuri figures that he’s earned it.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Victor gives Yuuri the space he wants, but for some reason now that he has it, he’s no happier than he was. But there’s a tournament to fight in and other problems to fix, before Yuuri can start figuring out what to do about Victor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day after their fight marks the very first time Victor makes no attempt whatsoever to talk to Yuuri. Two more days pass, the silence only broken during dancing lessons, when Yuuri—being the prince’s fiance and therefore his default dance partner—has to ask Victor to adjust his grip during the waltz they’re working through.

“Of course,” says Victor, and flashes a brilliant smile at him. Yuuri is so flustered he immediately steps on Victor’s foot, but luckily Lady Lilia notices their poor form and snaps at them to start over before Yuuri can embarrass himself further.

Yuuri assumed that after a few days, Victor would get up the nerve to speak to him again, to resume his pursuit of Yuuri, but the days continue to pass, and that doesn’t happen. The only times Victor speaks to him is when he must, and then only in passing, during practice or lessons. All other times, Victor might as well be a ghost—he goes out of his way to avoid Yuuri on the grounds outside the palace, and inside the palace itself. One day Yuuri looks up from the text he’s studying and sees Victor hastily doubling back through the set of long doors that open onto the library.

Once it occurs to him to think about it, he worries that Victor will be outraged or resentful at hearing his fiance gave his virginity to another—nevermind the fact that the prince himself seemed to take no great care to preserve himself for marriage. He’s the prince; he can get away with whatever he wants, Yuuri thinks bitterly. But it’s not really Victor Yuuri has to worry about. It’s his parents.

It isn’t until he starts wondering what’ll happen if Victor shares this information with someone else—like his parents—that the panic really sets in. Yuuri has to duck into a side room when this train of thought presents to him, shutting his eyes against the greying at the edge of his vision, his skin crawling with anxiety. Public humiliation would be the least of his worries. But either the Queen is significantly more forgiving about transgressions than Yuuri thinks, or Victor keeps that particular bit of information to himself, because no one says anything.

(Well, that’s not true. Minako has a lot to say when Yuuri admits to her how he blew up at Victor, and most of it is harsh enough to singe the air better than any spell.)

Regardless, the newfound avoidance should gladden his heart, but instead it only makes Yuuri feel vaguely sad and even lonelier than he already did. He finds himself wishing he could take back that last dig, unhappy with the realization that he can be far more petty and cruel than he would like to think.

And that irritates him, so he redoubles his focus on his studies—both the ones the royal family sets for him, and the more private ones he performs with Minako on certain dark evenings in empty
rooms. The first tournament is approaching fast, and although Phichit and Minako have managed to register Yuuri as a traveler from Hellenium participating in the King’s Tournament for the first time, his nervousness has only increased.

One notable exception to Victor’s avoidance of him is the dispute resolution sessions. Twice a week, Yuuri and Victor act as judges to any disputes, either criminal or civil, that the people of Petrograd wish to have settled by the High King directly and not by the local magistrates. Up until recently, the High King and Queen would perform this duty, but apparently Yuuri’s arrival was the catalyst that made them decide it was Victor’s turn—and Yuuri’s, apparently.

Despite the fact that Yuuri is not remotely as familiar with royal and civic affairs as the other members of the court, the Queen insisted that he join Victor at this particular duty almost the first week he arrived. When he protested at how unfit for the act he was, she pinned him with a stare icy enough to freeze over a river and said, “The task will not grow less daunting the longer you put it off. You will learn.”

So he does. Victor and Yuuri sit in the thrones normally reserved for the High King and Queen at the fore of the throne room, listening to each petitioner’s complaint in turn and rendering their judgment upon it. By law, any citizen of Petrograd—or of all of Kieva, really—can bring their complaint to the King, and have it be heard and decided upon more swiftly and with more finality than they might find from the magistrates. Yuuri is surprised at how many people go this route, right up until he sees Victor arbitrate for the first time.

“State your complaint,” says Victor.

The man in front of them bows, then shuffles forward, hands clasped in front of him. “Your Majesty, I come to beseech you to return my land to me that was taken by your Highness’s tax collectors.”

He goes on to describe the situation, telling Victor and Yuuri how he was unable to pay his taxes the previous year because he had forgone work to care for his sick mother, and how in lieu of his taxes, the collectors had seized almost all his land, 8 of his 10 acres. The man gets down on both knees, clutching his hat to his chest, near tears as he begs Victor to have mercy, Messere, I had no choice.

Victor’s decision is swift and decisive, and the knot in Yuuri’s heart loosens a little. “Your complaint is just,” he says. “We will return all of your land. I require only that you make space in your home to host the healer I will be sending to aid your mother. A man should not be forced to choose between caring for his kin and working to live.”

The man really does cry then, bowing so low he scrapes his face against the floor. He hurries out, accompanied by one of the High King’s officials, who will be taking the decree to the King’s tax collectors to facilitate return of the land. Yuuri watches him go, and risks a sidelong glance at his fiance, wondering where this sober, compassionate side of him came from.

Not all of the disputes are so clear-cut, naturally; two petitioners come with equally knotty claims in a land dispute, while a man accused of fairly blatant thievery comes (still wearing his chains and sporting an unimpressed-looking guard) begging for a more merciful sentence from the prince. But in every case, Victor listens, asking for clarification or more information when the situation is murky.

Sometimes he takes longer to deliberate than others, and often he asks Yuuri for his opinion—and listens, more than half the time. Yuuri tries not to let on how scared out of his mind he is every time Victor decides to go with Yuuri’s argument. He can’t shake the sneaking suspicion that he’s going to decide something incredibly stupid, or that will blow up in their petitioner’s face.

“What say you, Yuuri?” Victor glances at him. The pregnant male omega in front of them watches
with bated breath, his hands resting on his swollen stomach.

Yuuri takes a deep breath. “It’s one thing to hold your soldiers to their oaths of fealty, even to the death,” he says slowly. “They made a vow. But if a soldier dies before they find out their mate is pregnant, how are their families supposed to survive without the larger pension? I know the law says soldiers must declare children in their will if their families are to receive a larger compensation, but Victor, this seems unfair. It can take months to discover you’re pregnant, and this man’s mate died protecting the King’s land from bandits.”

Victor listens without interrupting, as serious as he always is during these sessions, but something about the warmth in his face when Yuuri finishes makes him feel like he said the right thing. “I agree,” he says, after Yuuri’s finished talking. “We should not penalize Ser Elian’s family for what he had no way of knowing. Serrah, you will receive the larger pension, as you have asked.”

“Thank you so much, Messere,” says their petitioner, his voice thick. Some of the exhaustion eases from his features, and he leans heavily on the guard who comes forward to accompany him out of the room. Yuuri watches him go, trying not to dwell on how hard his days must be since he lost his mate.

“I don’t understand how you can do this and decide upon a ruling so quickly,” he says to Victor, as they leave the throne room and walk back up the long hallway in the direction of great hall. “It seems so difficult to decide what’s fair.”

“It is difficult,” says Victor. “But that’s why they come to us in the first place. They trust us to treat them fairly, and if we want to be good rulers to our people, we have to respect that trust.”

Yuuri finds he doesn’t know what to say to this. One of Victor’s mage-knights appears before he can think of a response—Christophe, that’s right. He’s one of the knights Yuuri likes the most, flirtatious and charming, almost intimidatingly so at times. “Victor!” Christophe exclaims, looping his arm into the prince’s. “There you are, are you done with Judgment Hour yet?”

“Ah, Chris, already here to get me in trouble again?” Victor laughs at the wounded expression Christophe adopts, but makes no attempt to resist as Chris leads him towards the exit. He glances back at Yuuri, almost instinctively, and calls, “I’m sorry, Yuuri, I’ll see you later!”

“Of course,” says Yuuri faintly. He watches them go, wondering what it was about today’s session that lingers in his mind though the petitioner is probably long gone.

It wasn’t the petitioner so much, really. It was the man Yuuri sees in Victor when they do this, the thoughtfulness and mercy that he shows to these strangers who come asking boons of him, to right wrongs he had nothing to do with. It reminds Yuuri of something—no, some one.

Yuuri turns, walking slowly down the hall, staring absently at the pictures mounted on the wall. He wonders inanely how many of the paintings were here the first time he visited the palace.

Yuuri is small for thirteen, and shy, far shyer than any of his peers. His mother lets her nervous child hide his face in her cloak as they wait for the attendant to come tell them the Prince is ready to see them. Or rather, that he’s ready to see the boy he’s picked as his mate.

“Are you sure he really wants me?” Yuuri asks again, for the third time. His mother pets his hair, tucking a strand behind his ear. He’s certain that there must be a mistake, some kind of error. Yuuri caught a glimpse of the Prince when they first arrived, during the initiation ceremony. Victor is tall, and beautiful, and like no one Yuuri has ever seen—there’s a light in his face, like one of the angels in the stories Minako tells Yuuri and his sister.
Yuuri can’t imagine someone who looks like that wanting anyone like small, chubby, nervous Yuuri Katsuki.

A page appears at the door, speaking softly to Yuuri’s father. “They’re ready,” says Toshiya, and reaches for Yuuri’s other hand, the one not clutching his mother’s. Yuuri tries very hard to find some courage as he walks hand-in-hand with his parents into the throne room.

There’s no one in the room but the King, the Queen, and their son, standing a little closer than his parents, hands clasped in front of him. Victor looks as beautiful as that first glimpse Yuuri saw of him, his long silver hair pulled back from his face, his dress clothes rich blue and gold. Yuuri feels his face turning red, but despite himself, he can’t look away.

Yuuri’s parents stop partway into the room. Yuuri looks pleadingly at his mother, but she gently pushes him towards the young man standing off from his own parents.

“Are you Yuuri?” Victor asks. Yuuri stares at him, feeling a little dizzy, and nods. Victor breaks into a smile, and suddenly Yuuri forgets to be afraid. He smiles back despite himself, and Victor comes forward until he’s just a few steps in front of Yuuri, close enough to touch.

Yuuri stares at him. His chest feels warm; he doesn’t quite understand it, but he sort of wishes Victor would come a little closer, or take Yuuri’s hand, or something. “Do you really want me to be your mate?” Yuuri asks, before he can remember his anxiety in front of strangers.

“I do,” says Victor. A little color comes into those pale cheeks as he says this.

“Oh,” says Yuuri, and covers his mouth with both hands.

Victor tilts his head a little. He opens his mouth, but hesitates, as though unsure what to say. “Do you want to be my mate?” he asks after a moment.

Yuuri’s eyes widen. The answer comes before he even has time to consider it. “Yes, please,” he says, and flushes at how dumb that sounds. “But, u-um, n-not yet. I’m not… ready yet. Is… Is that okay?”

Victor’s smile returns then, brighter and even warmer than the first one. Yuuri’s knees suddenly feel weak, like they’re made of noodles instead of flesh and bone. “That’s okay,” says Victor. He has such a nice voice, Yuuri thinks. “I don’t mind waiting.”

The question was idiotic, of course. Even if Yuuri had said no, the royal family had already informed the Katsukis their son had been chosen; allowing the pair to meet was a mere formality, thought to encourage good feelings between the future mates. But Yuuri finds himself dwelling on how genuinely charmed Victor seemed then, and how he smiled when Yuuri asked if it was okay to wait.

Surely Victor hadn’t been so idiotic as to think Yuuri’s request meant he couldn’t contact his betrothed at all. And even if Yuuri wanted to contact Victor, he’d gone overseas so soon after their betrothal, so far out of reach he might as well have been in another world. How can the same person be so kind and thoughtful towards his citizens every week and yet not have bothered to send his own betrothed one single letter?

“Yuuri?”

Yuuri startles, jerking to attention almost guiltily. He looks over at the source of the voice, and is relieved to see that it’s Alexei. Alexei’s eyebrows go up as Yuuri meets his gaze. “Forgive me for interrupting you, my lord,” he says, voice mild. “But the wing you’re walking towards is closed for renovations.”
“Oh,” says Yuuri. He glances down the hall, in the direction he’d been walking, and sees the red velvet sash strung across the doorway and hammered into place on either side of the door, meant to prevent entrance. “What’s on the other side of the doors?”

“Nothing dangerous or interesting, just a lot to trip over,” says Alexei. “Forgive me if I speak out of turn, my lord, but you must have been quite lost in thought to wander so far out of your way.”

Alexei extends his elbow, and Yuuri sighs before slipping his arm through it. Despite his discomfort with much of the pomp and circumstance of life at the royal palace, Alexei has become almost as much a source of comfort to him as Minako or Phichit. Somehow, he always manages to offer his aid without ever implying Yuuri is incapable of doing something—he supports, rather than stifles, and Yuuri is grateful for it.

“I guess I’ve been thinking a lot lately,” Yuuri admits, as they retrace their steps. “There’s… so much to adjust to.”

“Oh, of course,” Alexei says. “And much to take in. Quite a change from the last ten years at your family’s estate, with not even a word from your betrothed to help guide your way.”

At this, Yuuri glances sharply over, to find Alexei watching him sympathetically. Yuuri opens his mouth to demand Alexei tell him how he knows such a thing, but as they pass into a crowded room full of visiting dignitaries and more than a few mage-knights, and Yuuri has to subside.

He waits until they pass through the room and out into the hallway at the other end before hissing, “How could you possibly know about that?”

“I spent many years watching over our young prince,” says Alexei, “and while I witnessed much foolishness, I also watched him grow into a fine young man.” He pauses, then adds, “Though, he is not without his own regrets.”

Yuuri colors a little. For a few moments he tries to decide which he wants to comment on more: the not-so-subtle implication Alexei is making about Victor, or the fact that he apparently took care of Victor when he was younger. Something occurs to him then, and Yuuri frowns. “Didn’t Victor spend most of the past ten years traveling?”

“Indeed,” says Alexei.

Curiosity wins, no matter how much Yuuri wants to protest the idea of Victor as a ‘fine young man.’ “So what did you do while he was gone?”

“I accompanied him, as did his mentor, Yakov,” says Alexei. “And he was not gone the entire time; he returned home a number of times, something I am sure his parents were grateful for. But a condition of his leaving the country was taking certain retainers with him, myself among them.”

Yuuri’s eyebrows go up. “That—must have gotten tiresome,” he says.

“I enjoyed it, mostly, but I am glad to be back in Petrograd now,” says Alexei. “Though I must say I am glad you have finally arrived. The Prince has done nothing for the past twelve months but talk of you, and how much he looked forward to marrying you at long last.”

Yuuri scowls at the carpeted floor in front of them. Alexei is leading him down the hall to the dining quarters, since the lunch hour approaches. “Nice of him to finally decide to care,” he mutters.

“As I said, not hearing from him must have been frustrating,” says Alexei agreeably. “I am sure you
were very interested to hear why he waited so long to write to you.”

Yuuri’s jaw tightens, and he looks away. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Alexei look over at him, and then direct his gaze forward again. “Ah,” he says. “Forgive me, my lord, I have spoken out of turn. Forget I said anything.”

“Nngh,” says Yuuri.

* * * * *

Yuuri spends most of lunch absorbed in thought, chewing on the morning’s events and Alexei’s words even more than he does his own meal, but the afternoon keeps him too busy to do much dwelling. Victor is absent from dance practice—it’s the one day a week where practice with the mage-knights conflicts with Lady Lilia’s instruction, and Yuuri should be glad, but instead he’s just grumpy.

“I am sure whatever country you go to visit when you daydream is lovely, serrah,” says Lady Lilia, positively dripping with ice. “But I must insist you return to us, however dull you find Ekaterina Palace. Now at least pretend you care about looking elegant, and start from the plié.”

After dance comes his hour with Queen Elizaveta, and after poisons and subterfuge comes Yuuri’s instruction in geography and the politics of the regions he’ll be ruling as Victor’s consort. Yuuri fiddles with his quill as his instructor drones on, wondering vaguely if the High King might have him stay on as a knight or retainer if he actually grants Yuuri’s request to break the betrothal.

Assuming Yuuri actually wins the Grand Tourney. Assuming Yuuri actually qualifies for the Grand Tourney. The first competition is in a month, and Yuuri’s practices with Minako and Phichit have gotten more and more intense, but he still has no idea how he’ll do against opponents in a real sparring scenario.

It isn’t until just before dinner that Yuuri gets a little time to himself. Normally he’d retreat to the library or to his quarters, to read or study or mix more of his medicines in the privacy of his bathroom, but today is different. He can’t concentrate, so further reading will be useless, and he and Minako spent the last thirty minutes of their previous lesson restocking their supply of herbs, so there’s no need to do it now.

Instead, he takes himself out to the beautiful expansive gardens that lie out back of the palace. Soon enough everything will be covered in a thick layer of snow, but for now autumn reigns. The maple and birch trees around Ekaterina Palace are resplendent in their fall glory, great swathes of red-gold and burnt orange among massive pines, and a few late-blooming annuals still bob their heads lightly in the flowerbeds. Yuuri walks for a little while, grateful to lose himself in the winding paths and sweet-smelling breezes of the gardens.

He turns a corner, and slows, frowning. Is that—is someone crying? Yuuri cocks his head, and keeps walking, wondering who’s out here. He turns another corner and sees the person in question, a woman who looks vaguely familiar, someone he’s seen around the palace a few times. She’s curled up on a bench, her face in her hands, shoulders shaking; her dark hair falls in her face, obscuring her features, but he recognizes her anyway.

“Lady Isabella?” Yuuri says tentatively. She sits up quickly, wiping at her face. “I-I’m sorry to bother you, but are you alright?”

She lets out a short, shaky laugh. Sitting now, he can see her beautiful face streaked with tears. “I don’t suppose there’s any point in pretending,” she says. “Ah, how embarrassing…”
Yuuri feels himself softening. “Not at all,” he says. He hesitates, then ventures, “Do you want to talk about it? If you’d rather I leave you alone, I understand—“

“Actually, that… might be nice,” says Isabella. She scoots over, and Yuuri approaches, sitting down on the bench next to her. “Maybe you’d have some advice for me. I don’t suppose you’ve seen something like this during your adjudicating, but…”

“I can try,” Yuuri says, trying to sound more confident than he feels. He personally doesn’t think his advice is worth that much, but he’s not going to back out now that he’s offered.

Isabella manages a watery smile at him. “How well do you know the mage-knights who serve the King?” she asks.

“I know them well enough, I suppose,” says Yuuri. “I know most of them by name and face; we do have a few lessons together.”

Isabella nods. “Do you know Ser Jean-Jacques? From Acadia?”

Yuuri frowns for just a moment. “…You mean JJ?”

“Yes,” says Isabella, looking relieved. “He’s one of the more senior knights—in status, though not so much in time spent here, I guess. He’s expecting to do well at the Grand Tourney this year; he took third last spring.”

“I know him,” says Yuuri. “Though not well.” Personally, he finds JJ rather arrogant and boastful, but he knows the man certainly has his fans, and he’s no slouch when it comes to the Spark.

Isabella sighs. “He’s been courting me since I arrived at the palace last spring,” she says. Her voice quavers a little as she says this.

“You don’t appreciate it?” Yuuri says, but Isabella shakes her head.

“No, he’s wonderful,” Isabella says, and bursts into tears. Yuuri stares at her for a few moments, at a total loss, and then he digs into his yukata to find a handkerchief before offering it to her. She accepts it, wiping at her eyes and taking a few moments to calm down. “I’m so sorry…”

“It’s fine,” says Yuuri, softening a little. “Really, my lady, don’t apologize.”

She flashes a grateful smile at him, and for a moment he can see the beauty that so many of her admirers speak of, despite doing nothing for him personally. “Ah, so… JJ has been courting me almost since the moment I arrived here. I would have already accepted his proposal to become his mate, but….” She trails off, twisting the handkerchief in both hands, clearly at a loss to convey what comes next.

“Something is holding you back,” Yuuri says, and Isabella nods. “Something… embarrassing?”

“No, no, it’s not—a scandal, nothing like that,” says Isabella. She stares at her hands, and then her shoulders slump a little. “I—I love JJ, but he’s a lot to handle. He’s very intense.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri, because no kidding seems a cruel response. “I can see how you would feel that way.”

“There is… something else,” says Isabella. She looks up at Yuuri now, beseechingly. “JJ has confessed to me that there is someone else who has earned his affection.”
Yuuri’s eyebrows go up. “Is he trying to make you jealous?” he asks, a little bemused. “To—to force you to make a decision?”

But Isabella is shaking her head. “No,” she says, “Though I admit I am rather jealous. JJ says—he says that he loves both me and Ser Seung-Gil, and would have us both as his partners, if we would allow it.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. He studies Isabella for several seconds, trying to decide how to respond. An alpha in love with two betas is unusual, if not unheard of. “I take it you aren’t sure how you feel about it.”

Isabella nods, slumping back against the park bench. “I don’t know what to think,” she says, and her words come out shaky, like she’s on the verge of tears again. “I—he’s never given me a reason to doubt his affection for me, he’s never been anything but attentive and courteous and earnest. And he’s always been honest with me, as well. But I—I don’t… is such a thing done?”

Now she’s looking at Yuuri, and the plea in her eyes is all too similar to the eyes of the petitioners who arrive every week to ask for the Prince’s judgment, to ask for a wrong righted, a thorny issue to be sorted. Yuuri has no idea when or why people started to think of him as someone who could fix their problems, but he can’t bring himself to say this to her. “I have heard of such arrangements before,” Yuuri says slowly, “though it’s true they aren’t as common.”

Isabella wrings her hands, leaning closer to Yuuri, her gaze unwavering. “What should I do? How should I respond?”

“I think it depends on a lot of things,” Yuuri says. “Exactly what has he asked of you?”

“Not much, yet,” Isabella admits. “He—when I saw him two nights ago, all he said was that he wanted me to know his true feelings, and that he wished for me to at least consider such an arrangement. He says that he does not wish to live without me, but that he also loves another.” Her voice breaks a little on the last word, and Yuuri reaches over, taking her hand and squeezing gently. She squeezes back, swallowing hard and taking a few deep breaths.

“Does he want you to also be romantically involved with Seung-Gil?” Yuuri asks. “Do you know how Seung-Gil feels?”

Isabella shakes her head. “I don’t know,” she says. “I… didn’t ask.”

“Perhaps he’s waiting to press details until he’s found out if you might be open to the idea at all,” says Yuuri, and Isabella nods. A little tension seeps out of her shoulders.

“You don’t think it’s totally insane,” she says after a moment. “Or—or ridiculous.”

“No, I don’t think so,” says Yuuri. “You don’t have to agree to anything you don’t want to, of course, but honestly, a lot of alphas in his position would do what they wanted and not bother to ask for permission. I think it says a lot about JJ’s integrity that he’s being so forthright with you, and that he wants to know how you feel.”

Something in Isabella seems to ease as Yuuri talks; she nods, glancing over at him. “What do you think I should do?”

Theeeeere it is, thinks Yuuri. The big question. “Well,” he says, “How does the idea of sharing JJ with someone make you feel?”

For a moment, Isabella says nothing. Then she makes a face. “I’m not sure,” she says. “I—I’ve put him off because he’s—well—"
“A lot to handle,” Yuuri supplies, and she nods.

“But I love him, and I don’t want to lose him,” she says, and sighs. “But I also don’t like the idea of seeing him with other people.”

“That’s fair,” says Yuuri. “Although, correct me if I’m wrong, but it doesn’t sound as if JJ wants to be with other people, just… one other person. Whom he also cares for, as he does for you.”

“That’s true,” says Isabella, sounding subdued.

“I think,” says Yuuri slowly, “that you should tell JJ what you’ve told me. He’s been honest with you; the least you can do is be honest with him. I don’t think you have to decide one way or the other yet, that it’s alright to talk to him about it more and see if knowing more helps you decide what to do.”

For a long moment, Isabella says nothing. Then she sighs, a long ragged exhale that speaks volumes. “Thank you,” she says. “For your counsel. It was silly of me to think you might have some perfect solution that would solve everything without trouble.”

Yuuri gives her a wry smile. “If I could produce something like that, I would have no more need of tutoring ever,” he says. “But love is more complicated than a land-claim dispute, my lady.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” says Isabella with a sigh.

Yuuri and Isabella sit together for a little while longer, talking of inconsequentials, until Isabella has calmed down enough to collect herself. She thanks him again and gets up, presumably to head to her quarters to ruminate more on her situation. Yuuri watches her go, wondering how it is that he can produce advice for someone else’s love life, but can’t think of a way to fix his own.

That brings him up short. He doesn’t have a love life, he reminds himself. The time he spent with Takeshi and Yuuko Nishigori hardly counts, except as the one rebellious act he took to claim some semblance of self-determination. He couldn’t have control over his life, but he could claim sovereignty over his own body, if only for a few nights.

Victor’s laughing face flashes in his mind, and Yuuri scowls, standing up quickly. Clearly, he needs to get back to the castle and put his wandering mind to better use.

* * * * *

Yuuri is nervous.

The fall tournament is finally here—the Harvest Tourney, as it’s officially called—and the first act of Yuuri’s great plan is finally coming to fruition. Thanks to Minako and Phichit, Yuuri has been successfully entered as one Ser Eros from Hellenium, suitably far-flung for none of the court to have ever been there or be overly familiar with its mage-knights.

(“Seriously? Eros?” Yuuri asked doubtfully, when Phichit first reported the good news. “What kind of name is that?”)

“It’s mysterious!” Phichit chirped, entirely too proud of himself.

“It’s kind of… sexual,” Yuuri said doubtfully.

“Be glad he didn’t enter you as Katsu Dong,” Minako muttered, and Yuuri nearly choked to death on his tea.)
But somehow, despite all his doubts, Yuuri’s disguise seems to be working. He’s in the antechamber now where the contestants who are to fight next wait, clad in the impressive suit of armor Minako gifted to him all those weeks ago, back in Hasetsu. The armor fits him like a second skin after the modifications Minako arranged for, surprisingly lightweight for how many fine chain-links it has, but Yuuri’s already had a chance to see how well it defends against both weapons and magic alike.

The High King’s tournaments follow more or less the same structure as the ones Minako’s students participated in—each contestant must participate in two back-to-back rounds, each round focusing on something different but against the same opponent. The first round, the Skill and Stamina round, forces the contestants to balance execution and skill against evading being hit or knocked out by their opponent. The matches always run long—after all, the longer you fight, the more points you can earn—but Yuuri’s went on for nearly thirty minutes, lengthy even by the standards of the event.

Yuuri wishes he had managed to cut it a little shorter. The ten minutes he gets to catch his breath and recover are almost up, and he’s definitely not ready.

Almost as he thinks it, the horn to call him back sounds. Yuuri squares his shoulders, rolling his head back and forth and taking a deep breath. He spares a moment to be glad he took an extra dose of scent-suppressant last night and this morning, because he’s already coated in sweat from the rigor of his first fight.

The great gates before him creak as they swing open. Yuuri walks forward, wishing he had a spell to deafen himself from the roar of the crowd, to lessen his nerves at the thousands of eyes trained on him.

He strides out into the arena, hands swinging awkwardly at his sides—Yuuri and Minako decided beforehand that Yuuri would be better served going in without either the staves or a staff allowed him, the better to execute jumps and high kicks without trouble, but right now he’s feeling the lack.

The warrior he’s fighting emerges from the other side of the arena, his straw-blond hair sweaty and sticking to his scalp. Yuuri still can’t quite believe Victor’s lanky page is already seventeen, but as a second-year page he’s entitled to enter the tournament cycle—and as Yuuri’s just seen, Yurio can more than hold his own in the ring. Their scores at the end of the Skill and Stamina round were within 25 points of each other, with Yuuri just barely edging him out before Yurio disarmed him.

They approach each other in the center of the ring, bowing to each other before shaking hands. Yuri smiles at him, brittle and full of teeth. “I don’t know who you are, Ser Eros,” he mutters, “but I’m going to make sure no one else bothers to remember you either, after this round.”

Yuuri says nothing; he fears if he speaks now, he’ll just betray himself. After a few moments of silence, Yuri scowls, turning and stalking away to the spot on the ground where an X has been scored into the dirt. Yuuri returns to his own starting location, and they both drop into an exaggerated boxer’s stance—hands up guarding the face, feet planted just slightly wider than hip-length apart.

The announcer’s voice booms across the arena, magically amplified from where he sits in the royal box alongside the King, Queen, and Prince. “Ser Yuri and Ser Eros, prepare yourselves! A reminder to our onlookers that the Sudden Death round has just one winner—and the quicker you disable your opponent, the more points you will earn. Alright, on your mark—“

Yuuri tenses, then forces himself to exhale, moving the air through his lungs like wind through the trees as he gathers magic to him in preparation of the start. He has just one chance; he has to be ready.

“Get set—GO!”
Yuuri moves before the announcer is done speaking, throwing himself sideways into a handstand and vaulting backwards. At the same time he releases the magic he was charging, a gout of blue fire erupting in the spot he was just standing.

He feels the flare of Yurio’s magic from all the way across the arena, and throws a glance that way in time to see the boy literally erupt into flame. Yuuri rights himself, crouched with one hand on the ground as he stares in disbelief: an enormous fireball has engulfed Yurio, as though someone poured lamp oil over him and then lit a match.

Corona, the spell is called. Yuuri has just enough time to remember that Yurio didn’t cast it at all during their previous match before Yurio yells and throws one leg and one arm out in a twist. Only reflex allows Yuuri to call up an ice shield before the fireball hits. The flames engulf it instantly.

Yuuri hears Minako yelling from somewhere in the stands, but he’s not about be distracted again. He’s already moving even as the shield melts into oblivion, pushing off from the ground with his right foot into a tight triple flip, arms pressed against his chest. As he descends to earth, he triggers the spell, and abruptly blurs into movement.

One second he’s in the circle of singed grass, the next he’s halfway across the arena, magic rippling in his wake, only blurring back into reality at the far end. The faint stink of char burns his eyes as he disrupts the air from moving through it so fast, but the gambit works; Yurio whirls on him, another gout of flame already discharging uselessly at the spot Yuuri just vacated.

He can’t keep dodging into the slipstream, though; that spell is exhausting, and Yuuri’s already near the end of his stamina. He has to neutralize Yurio, fast—but he can’t do that while Corona is active; anything he throws at Yurio will just be eaten by the fire. He needs a gambit to break the fireball—

Yurio is already moving again, throwing himself backwards onto his palms and kicking both legs, drawing fire in the air with his feet. The flames solidify into a host of arrows that immediately multiply and then volley skyward, aimed right at Yuuri.

Yuuri dances sideways, hands flying as he moves, calling another shield, this one wider and sturdier, the ice lattice denser. The fire-arrows hiss as they meet ice, but the shield won’t last, and Yurio is already casting more arrows to send his way.

So Yuuri feints. He keeps moving, pirouetting in the dirt, the spell he’s calling burning at the tips of his fingers as his hands fly. He has just one chance to make this work, to surprise Yurio, or he’s finished, because he can’t keep dodging fireballs.

Yuuri finishes the spell and triggers it, then deliberately breaks his shield, stumbling to the ground as though he’s landed badly and twisted an ankle. Instead of launching another round of fire-arrows, Yurio snarls something and comes running across the field towards Yuuri, just as Yuuri hoped, intent on catching him while he’s down. Yuuri is ‘scrambling’ to get back up when Yurio runs right over the ice mine Yuuri cast, and the waiting spell erupts.

It works. Yurio yelps in shock as energy bursts beneath his feet, surprising him badly enough that the fire dancing over his skin falters and then goes out under the sudden rush of ice. Yurio stumbles, dazed from the violent disruption of his spell.

Yuuri is on him in moments. A dagger of ice forms in his hand, and Yuuri holds the tip to Yurio’s throat—temporary as any spell, but more than real enough to kill. “Yield,” he snarls through gritted teeth. Yurio glares at him, and then exhales, tipping his head back in surrender and calling the white flag into the air above them.
The most peculiar thing happens then. Yuuri’s still busy staring at Yurio, holding the dagger on him, but it’s as though the two of them have suddenly been caught inside a tornado, a wave of sound breaking over them. It takes Yuuri a few breathless seconds to realize that it’s the crowd screaming their approval for him, but he still doesn’t dare look up.

Only when the referee jogs all the way out into the arena to grab Yuuri’s wrist and hold it aloft does Yuuri relax. His heart jumps up into his throat, pounding furiously to remind him how hard he was just working. The referee shouts something—Yuuri catches “Ser Eros” and that’s it, because he’s too busy staring at all the people on their feet, clapping and stomping their boots on the boards of the bleachers.

Up in the royal box, he sees the King and Queen applauding as well. But only the prince is on his feet, a wide grin on his handsome face as he applauds just as enthusiastically as everyone else in the arena. Yuuri feels something hot burn in his chest at the sight, as though he holds a flame in his heart still, but the ache there has nothing whatsoever to do with the Spark.

* * * * *

Ser Eros vanishes before the end of the tournament, and is somehow absent when the scores are announced, but word is sent to where the foreign knight is supposedly staying at an inn in Petrograd that he’s advanced to the winter tournament, along with 31 other contestants. Eros’s official ranking in points is seventh out of the 64 who entered, an impressive debut for an unknown mage-knight.

Every one of Victor’s knights and second-year pages who participated in the tournament advances as well, which Yuuri understands to be a point of pride for the prince. Yuuri’s glad Victor doesn’t stop by to ask if Yuuri wants to come celebrate, no matter how badly he wants to hear what people might have to say about the mysterious contestant who bested Victor’s page.

But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t get to celebrate. Minako and Phichit meet Yuuri in a room of the abandoned wing of the palace, smuggling food and drink to celebrate his victory. Yuuri can’t remember the last time he smiled so much; his face hurts from smiling, not to mention the rest of his body, but he doesn’t care.

“I’m so glad you’ll be fighting, too,” he tells Phichit, clapping him on the back for the third time in ten minutes. “You did great! You got the 500 point bonus in the sudden death round!” Only those who knock their opponents out in thirty seconds or less get the highest score; Yuuri himself only got 400, the score for besting your opponent in less than two minutes.

Phichit laughs, his face a little flushed from the wine Minako smuggled in. “I should just feel lucky I didn’t have to fight you this time,” he says cheerfully. “You know all my best moves; I wouldn’t stand a chance!”

“You both did great,” Minako says, a little too loud. “And Yuuri’s one step closer to winning his freedom!”

Phichit raises his glass, laughing a little too loudly. “To freedom!” Phichit declares.

Oh, well. “To freedom!” Yuuri says, and raises his glass. Minako cheers, then claps her hands and summons a net of glittering little lights, sending them up into the rafters of the ceiling to shimmer like stars.

When Minako and Phichit finally let Yuuri retire for the night, it’s late, much later than any of them meant to stay up. Yuuri has just enough energy left to wrap himself in shadows before heading back to his quarters.
He makes it all the way to his wing, only to find the door he means to take bolted shut. Yuuri curses and briefly considers melting the lock, then decides it isn’t worth the trouble when someone inevitably finds it and thinks there’s been a break-in. Instead, he loops back out into the gardens and keeps going, deciding he’ll just have to come in the normal garden entrance. That way, at least, if he’s caught, he can just say he couldn’t sleep and was out for a late-night stroll in the gardens.

As it happens, he meets no one at all. Yuuri slips into the garden entrance, congratulating himself on a night of close calls, and heads back towards his room. As he passes the wing that leads into the royal chambers, though, he slows. He thinks he can hear voices—that’s the Queen’s voice, he realizes. They’re talking quite loudly; it sounds like an argument.

Thinking that it’s a bad idea to linger and try to overhear, Yuuri starts walking again—only to stop short as he hears his own name said. “Yuuri doesn’t want to be here,” says a voice, sounding very upset. “It’s wrong to make him stay.”

It’s Victor.

Yuuri’s heart stutters in his chest. He has to stop, leaning against the wall; he focuses what energy he has left on wrapping the shadows in the room tighter around himself, so that no one passing through will even bat an eyelash at him, or the small leakage of magic the spell produces.

The King is talking now, and Yuuri can’t quite make out what he’s saying, but from the way his voice is raised it doesn’t sound good. Yuuri presses his ear to the wood, straining to catch a few more words.

“—too compatible to… now!” The Queen is talking again. Yuuri winces a little. “The people adore him, he’s going to be a wonderful consort. The answer is no, Victor.”

“But I don’t want—“

“What you want doesn’t matter!” The King is almost shouting, and Yuuri cringes, hoping no one else is around to hear this. But then again, what if they do? They’re servants; presumably it isn’t the first time they’ve witnessed such a thing. Still. Yuuri hesitates, then gives up, casting one last spell: one of simple silence, to muffle the private argument.

It also prevents him from hearing the rest of it, but Yuuri finds he doesn’t quite care. It’s clear enough what’s transpiring here; Victor has gone to his parents to argue for the end of the betrothal now that he’s realized how unhappy Yuuri is, but his parents are having none of it. Yuuri’s heart sinks at the implications, the sweetness of his success in the tournament turning sour in his stomach. Will the King really be willing to grant Yuuri’s request, even if Yuuri does actually win the Grand Tourney? He doesn’t know. His head hurts, and somehow much of the ache has nothing to do with the exhaustion now weighing on every bone of his body. Yuuri turns to go, but stops as he hears—feels, rather—a door slam, and watches Victor stalk past him out the door, heading to his own chambers. He watches Victor go, suffering a strange urge to call out to him, but he manages to stifle it.

Victor doesn’t even look around, just storms off to his room. Yuuri lets out a small breath as he’s once again left alone in the dark, empty halls.

He should just… go back to his room. Sneaking around the castle late at night has already gotten him much too close to trouble once tonight; pursuing this further is asking for more. But Yuuri can’t quite bring himself to just shrug it off.

Yuuri stands in the hall for another two minutes, staring at the painting of Ekaterina Nikiforov on the
far wall. The painter rendered her both beautiful and intimidating, with aristocratic features and an intimidating stare. But she also has just the faintest smile on her face, as though encouraging the viewer to come closer, a promise of warmth that lies beneath.

It’s Victor’s smile.

Yuuri’s chest tightens, and he jerks his gaze away from the painting, mind made up. He heads to his rooms, moving as swiftly and quietly as he knows how. The exhaustion has not left him, but he’s found a second wind—enough to do what needs to be done.

* * * * *

By the time Yuuri makes it back to the wing that houses the royal family, it’s nearly midnight. He’s almost wondering if Victor might not even be up, which—he should really have thought of that sooner. But no, as he approaches the prince’s quarters, he sees a faint light from underneath the door. At least he won’t be waking Victor from sleep. He spares a moment to be glad that he met no guards on the way here; he prefers to keep this conversation private.

Yuuri adjusts the bowl he’s carrying his left arm, swaddled in a towel from the kitchen to keep its contents warm. Then he knocks softly at Victor’s door with his right hand.

For a moment, there’s no response. Then Victor’s voice calls through the door. “Enter.” Yuuri takes a last deep breath, summoning what courage he has, and then twists the handle and pushes the door open.

Victor is sitting at his desk on the far side of the room; the lamp at his elbow is the source of the light Yuuri saw from under the door. Unlike Yuuri’s quarters, he entrance to the prince’s quarters apparently lets onto his study instead of his bedroom, an uncertainty that didn’t actually occur to Yuuri until this moment. He stares at Victor, and Victor stares back at him, blinking in surprise. “Yuuri,” he says, and stands up. “Is something wrong?”

“I… Not exactly,” says Yuuri. Victor is watching him with wide eyes, his expression somewhere between concern and uncertainty. Yuuri feels himself start to flush as he considers what reasons someone might jump to for why Yuuri would visit his betrothed’s quarters alone so late at night.

“Um, this—this is for you,” he stammers, to forestall those thoughts, and pulls the towel from the bowl in his arms. He sees Victor’s nostrils flare as the scent of fried pork cutlet and eggs fills the room.


He takes a deep breath, and crosses the room, holding out his hands to accept the bowl in Yuuri’s arms. “Thank you,” Victor says, voice warm. “But I admit I don’t understand why.”

Yuuri sighs. “I couldn’t sleep,” he says awkwardly. “So I, um, went out for a walk in the gardens, and… on my way back, I—couldn’t help overhearing the argument you were having with your parents.”

Victor’s face changes, a complicated sort of expression working across his face. “I see,” he says; it’s impossible to say what he’s thinking. “I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

“Don’t be,” Yuuri says quickly. “I didn’t mean to overhear, it was just—bad timing. But…” He stares at Victor, wondering what to say to cross the gulf that yawns between them—wondering if such a thing is even possible, anymore.
“You didn’t have to do that,” he says finally.

It’s Victor’s turn to sigh. He takes the bowl from Yuuri’s arms and walks it to his desk, gently setting it down; he appears to be consulting the katsudon for the best response.

“Maybe I didn’t have to, but it was the right thing to do,” he says, turning back to Yuuri at last. “Certainly the least of what I ought to do for—for sending no word or letter to you for ten years, and then assuming we could pick up where we left off.”

Yuuri’s stomach turns over. Without the bowl in his arms, he’s left with only the towel he used to cover it to fidget with, unsure of what to say or do. Victor’s gazing at him intently; Yuuri thinks he’s never seen anything so blue in all his life.

Why didn’t you write me, he wonders. Why didn’t you want me? Why didn’t you care? But he can’t bring himself to ask any of those things; he doesn’t want to find a new reason to be hurt all over again. He’s so tired of fighting, in more ways than one. And it was so much easier to resent Victor when he wasn’t standing in front of Yuuri looking so handsome and sad.

“I’m sorry,” he says abruptly. “For—what I said to you. I was angry, and… it made me cruel.”

Victor’s expression softens just a touch. “I’m sorry too,” he says. “For giving you cause to be angry.”

Yuuri swallows hard, not knowing what to do with that. It’s too big and not enough at the same time, and he can’t handle it right now. “So now what?” he says, instead. “Your parents said no. What do we do now?”

Victor takes a deep breath. “What we do now depends on what you will allow,” he says. Yuuri’s eyebrows go up, and Victor gives him a lop-sided smile. “I cannot give you what you actually want, and I can’t wipe away the years, but… if you will let me, I will try to do better. I would like to court you, if I may, and get to know you, and show you all the care and attention that you deserve.”

Yuuri feels his face turning red. A young boy inside him is crying out, aching at finally hearing those longed-for words spoken out loud, but it’s been so long he’s not sure he can deal with actually hearing them. “I don’t want you to force yourself to do this,” he hears himself say. His voice is shaking. “I don’t want anyone’s pity, Victor—“

Victor crosses the room, so quickly that Yuuri breaks off, startled, and he stops a few paces away. “It’s not pity,” he says, firmly. “I promise. Give me the chance, and I will show you that I mean what I say.”

Yuuri takes a deep breath. “Alright,” he says. “You—you have my permission.”

Victor smiles at him then, the expression warming the room more effectively than the fire burning in the grate. Yuuri’s chest is too tight, and his face hurts, but he finds that he can’t look away.

He notes, with the part of his mind that’s still barely functioning, that he can definitely smell Victor from this close. It makes Yuuri doubly glad he bathed and took more of his medicine after the tournament, or else he would surely reek. Victor extends his hand, palm up. After a moment, Yuuri gives Victor his own, and watches as Victor bends low over Yuuri’s hand, kissing his knuckles.

“Thank you,” Victor murmurs. He stands, but keeps hold of Yuuri’s hand, his grip gentle enough that Yuuri could easily pull away if he wanted. “If that’s so, then… would you consider sitting with me while I eat the katsudon you brought me, Yuuri? It smells so good.”
Yuuri smiles despite himself. “You’d better eat it,” he says. “It took me twenty minutes just to find the right seasoning to make it for you.”

“Then I promise to eat it, and declare it the best I’ve ever had,” says Victor, his eyes dancing. Yuuri groans, and Victor laughs.

Yuuri sits with Victor until he’s finished eating, and despite the fragile connection that hangs in the air between them now, he nearly falls asleep with his arm on Victor’s desk. When Victor offers to walk Yuuri back to his room, Yuuri automatically tries to decline.

“What if someone sees?” he points out.

Victor raises his eyebrows very slightly. “If word gets back to my parents that you and I were seen together late at night, I somehow doubt they’ll be sad at apparent evidence of us getting along,” he says.

To this, Yuuri can think of no good argument, and he’s too exhausted to protest something he somehow doesn’t actually mind if Victor doesn’t. So he lets Victor walk him back to his room—lets Victor kiss his hand again at the door, and wish him good night.

It takes him only minutes to fall into an exhausted sleep. The last thing that floats through his mind before slipping away is just how annoyed Minako will be at him when she finds out.

Chapter End Notes

+ "Hellenium" is referring to this world's version of Greece, in case that wasn't apparent.
+ I definitely came up with an entire spreadsheet for the tournament's rules and regulations, but I didn't want to bore anyone to tears with the minute details. If you do care to hear, I'm happy to babble at you in the comments, since I don't think an actual breakdown of every rule will make it into the final draft.

ETA: The explanation about the tournament rules can be found here!
+ During the draft, before he was Ser Eros of Hellenium, Yuuri was entered as Ser Katsu Dong of Newark, a hilarious suggestion courtesy of sink_or_swim.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's finally allowed Victor to court him, and... Victor is showing that he's determined to do just that. But it's not just Victor Yuuri has to worry about.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes exactly nine hours for Yuuri to wonder if he’s made a mistake by granting Victor his blessing to be courted. That’s how long it takes for a knock to come at the door, waking Yuuri from a dead sleep. “Come in,” he calls, yawning and starting to sit up.

Alexei appears, backing carefully into the room with a silver tray in his hands as another servant opens and shuts the door for him. “Good morning, my lord,” he says. “His highness sends you his regards, and hopes this breakfast finds you well-rested.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. It takes him a few seconds of flogging his brain before he can come up with a response. “Wait, what?”

“The prince ordered that you be allowed to sleep late,” says Alexei. He approaches the bed, setting the tray on Yuuri’s bedside table. “He says that it came to his attention that you could not sleep last night, and he wanted you to have enough rest, so he arranged to have a late breakfast sent to your room.”

Oh, shit, thinks Yuuri. “How late is it?” he asks. He glances at the windows in alarm, but as usual the shutters and heavy window dressing are drawn, so he has no idea what time it is.

“Half past ten,” says Alexei calmly.

Yuuri pales a little. “Thank you, Alexei, that will be all,” he says. All he says to anyone who isn’t his betrothed, that is.

“Did you even consider that people might think we were doing something inappropriate when you did that?” he hisses at Victor, some ninety minutes later when they’re sitting down for a politics review session.

Victor blinks at him, seemingly taken aback. “Ah,” he says. “I—no, I didn’t. I’m sorry, Yuuri, I only wanted you to have enough rest—“

Yuuri sighs. The nervousness in Victor’s voice tells him all he needs to know about how accidental that was. “I appreciate that you were thinking of me, but please be more careful next time,” he says in a low voice. “You may be able to do more or less what you want as the prince, but I don’t have that luxury.”

“Alright,” Victor says softly. Yuuri lasts about thirty seconds before giving in, reaching over to give Victor’s fingers a gentle squeeze. The swift, glad smile Yuuri gets in return for this is too much to look at directly; Yuuri keeps his eyes firmly fixed on their instructor coming through the door, instead.
But after that, it’s like a dam has broken. Victor approaches him now differently than he did before, and Yuuri is by turns exasperated, bewildered, touched, and stupidly charmed. Gone are the aggressively traditional gestures, the subtly insulting assumptions of what Yuuri does and doesn’t want. Yuuri’s deep resentment of Victor is not gone—he’s held it too close for too long for that—but like a huge snowbank slowly melting in the spring sun, it starts to ebb under the warmth of Victor’s very real attempts.

Instead of assuming that Yuuri’s time is at Victor’s disposal, Victor asks him when he’ll be free—and more than that, he actually listens. Two days after their late-night reconciliation, Victor comes to him at lunch, quietly asking if Yuuri might have some time that afternoon. Yuuri doesn’t know how he feels about the crestfallen expression Victor gets when Yuuri has to let him down, but he can’t deny it’s somehow satisfying when Victor spends the rest of lunch with him anyway.

Victor asks him how his morning went. He listens attentively as Yuuri tells him about how hard it is to stay awake during Serrah Stefan’s stultifying history lessons, especially when they’re right after a particularly demanding dance class with Lady Lilia. “Serrah Stefan is a good man, but he’s never had a knack for making his lessons interesting,” Victor says wryly.

Yuuri smiles at this. “Victor,” he says after a moment, and looks up to meet Victor’s attentive gaze. “I’m… free tomorrow afternoon. The Queen has other affairs to attend to, and I have nothing else planned.”

The way Victor looks at him feels like a breath of fresh air in a stifling room. “Well,” Victor says. “If you would be willing to spend that time with me, I would be honored.”

“What did you have in mind?” Yuuri says carefully. He can’t quite squash the idea that if he gives Victor too much credit, his fiancé will find a way to piss him off again, and despite himself, Yuuri is very tired of being angry at him.

Perhaps a walk in the garden?” Victor reaches over, wrapping his hand gently around Yuuri’s. “I would love the opportunity just to talk with you, Yuuri.”

“That would be nice,” Yuuri says; Victor beams at him. Damn, Yuuri thinks, and tries not to redden. Victor is as good as his word, appearing after lunch the next day with a long, elegant coat for Yuuri and a hopeful expression on his face.

“I see a reason for the coat?” Yuuri asks, more amused than anything. “It gets cold in Nihon, Victor, I brought cold weather clothing with me.”

“Ah, I know that,” Victor says. His expression turns sheepish. “I—it’s a gift. I saw it and thought you would like it, so…”

Yuuri lets out a sigh. “It’s lovely,” he says, because it is: made of dark grey wool with sky-blue velvet lining and an attractive cut, almost military. “Ah, please don’t look so sad, I’ll wear it.”

Somehow, the coat smells like Victor, too. Yuuri tries not to notice. Instead he lets Victor lead him out into the gardens, and tells himself sternly that if Victor asks him something in good faith, Yuuri won’t just cut him off. They walk for three hours, sitting now and then on one of the benches scattered around the grounds; Yuuri finds that somehow he’s doing far more talking than anticipated, Victor asking him a seemingly endless parade of questions.

What do you like to do with your time? Have you ever traveled? Do you want to? What’s your favorite play? Your favorite kind of music? Do you like tea? Coffee? Wine? So many questions he
can’t possibly keep track.

Once he’s on solid footing, though, Victor is too charming and gregarious to force Yuuri to keep up the conversation himself. In the back of his mind, Yuuri has to admit that all the rumors about the prince’s legendary charisma were true. It’s far too easy to let Victor pull him in, to find himself just as invested in what Victor has to tell him as Victor seems to be in him.

The prince isn’t all talk and no action, either. When the weekend comes, Yuuri awakens to Alexei at his door with a message that when Yuuri is ready and has time, Victor would like to show him something.

The “something” turns out to be an enormous library, tucked away in one of the wings of the palace Yuuri has spent relatively little time in. It’s the size of a ballroom, two floors connected by sweeping staircases, filled with nothing but enormous bookshelves and tables and huge cozy chairs, all warmed by a massive fireplace against one wall. On the tables are globes, and maps, an intricate-looking abacus, a large model of the solar system with moving parts—a seemingly endless parade of devices.

“This has been my refuge since I was a boy,” Victor tells him in a soft voice. “I used to love to come here to get away from my duties and find some peace and quiet. If you ever want somewhere different to hide than your quarters, please feel free to come here. No one will disturb you, save the servants who see to keeping it clean.” He takes Yuuri’s hand in both of his; Yuuri is distracted once again by how warm Victor’s hands are, and how good he smells from this close up. Yuuri finds he’s almost sad for the interruption when Victor leads him to the librarian who oversees the room, a kind-looking older woman named Erika.

The days continue onward like that. Once it’s a full formal dinner of nothing but food Yuuri would expect on his mother’s table at home—katsudon and yakisoba and a half-dozen other things—a surprise Victor arranged after a particularly grueling day full of visiting dignitaries and a truly depressing judgment hour. Another day, it’s an artful bouquet of flowers delivered to Yuuri’s room. Yuuri thinks they must be from the greenhouses, because he has no idea where else you’d find such beautiful blooms this late in fall.

What Yuuri finds he likes a little more are the times when Victor seeks Yuuri out in one of the studies or that massive library and just asks if it’s alright to sit near him while they work on lessons or political paperwork. At first Yuuri is wary of having Victor so near, but when it turns out that Victor is actually capable of sitting and working quietly, Yuuri starts to find that he doesn’t mind it. It’s rather pleasant, actually, to have someone else’s company in the quiet of the great hall or his preferred study. He doesn’t know whether to chalk it up to simply feeling less isolated, or the fact that he’s started to feel a kind of kinship with Victor—

—after all, Victor may be the only other person Yuuri is close with who actually understands what it’s like to be stuck in an arranged marriage.

Yuuri has this thought one afternoon while staring out the window, theoretically memorizing all the rulers, heirs apparent, and most important advisors of the countries the High King rules over. He’s immediately so embarrassed by his own train of thought that he has to stand. At the sound of his chair pulling out, Victor looks over at him.

“Are you done already?” he asks. “Yuuuuuri, you can’t show me up like that, it makes me look bad.”

“I’m not done, I just need a break,” Yuuri says, a statement which has the virtue of being true, if not for the reasons Victor probably thinks. Yuuri stretches, glancing around the room and wondering if he can get away with sneaking down to the kitchens for a snack, when his eyes fall on a chess board
tucked away on the far side of the room.

Something occurs to him. “Victor,” he says. “Have you ever played Go?”

Victor pauses, putting a marker in his book and glancing over at Yuuri again. “Have I played what?”

“Come with me, please,” says Yuuri, before he can second-guess himself. It’s mid-afternoon, and they’ve been studying for almost two hours; they can both use a break, he reasons. Victor raises an eyebrow, but Yuuri doesn’t miss the pleased smile that flits across his face as he gets up to follow Yuuri from the study.

They return to Yuuri’s quarters, which would probably be inappropriate at a different hour. Yuuri would be more concerned about giving Victor the wrong impression if not for the ground they’d already covered, but even so, he decides to call for Alexei to bring them tea. That done, Victor follows him into the study, where Yuuri goes to the closet and gets out a wooden game board and the cloth bag full of black and white pieces, like shining pebbles.

“What is this?” Victor stares at the board as Yuuri sets it on the table.

“It’s a game,” Yuuri says. “It’s very popular where I’m from. It’s call Go.” He explains the rules as simply as possible, then glances at Victor, doubt making him hesitate. “Ah—I’m sorry for presuming, you probably have other things you should be doing…”

“Not at all,” says Victor immediately. He sits down in the chair across from Yuuri and sits up very straight; it puts Yuuri in mind of how Victor’s poodle begs for scraps in the kitchen. All he’s missing is the wagging tail. Yuuri breaks into a grin at the mental image, and then flushes as Victor cocks an eyebrow at him.

“Alright,” Yuuri says, to deflect any questions, and sits down as well.

It turns out that Victor is very good at strategy games, but Yuuri has spent his life dueling his mother at this game and already knows most of the best gambits. In other words, Victor is out of his league, but a fast learner. Yuuri is so absorbed in their first game that he almost jumps out of his skin when the knock at the door comes a short while after they first sit down.

“Sorry to disturb you,” says Alexei, as he enters with another tray in his hands. Maccachin follows him into the room, wriggling excitedly past Alexei’s legs and coming over to nuzzle Victor’s hip.

“Here is the tea and some scones for you as well.”

At the sight of Yuuri’s servant, Victor visibly brightens. “Thank you, Alexei,” he says warmly. He leans over, peering at the tray. “Ah, you brought my favorite!”

“Lemon ginger for the prince, and red bean for Messere Yuuri,” says Alexei, placing the tray on the other table, just high enough to be out of canine reach. “And Maccachin here to chaperone the two of you, of course.”

Antonia really didn’t have to do that for me,” Yuuri says, softer. “That was very kind.”

“We’re not going to do anything, Alexei,” says Victor. He’s grinning at Alexei now.

Alexei arches one greying brow, staring at Victor for a beat. “Maccachin,” he says in a faux-whisper, “you have my permission to bite him, if need be.” Maccachin barks and wags his tail.

“You wound me,” says Victor. Alexei snorts and lets himself out.
They play for another two hours. Yuuri beats Victor three times, and Victor finally wins their last game, at which point he whoops and throws his hands in the air. “Finally!” he exclaims.

Yuuri laughs. “I guess you can be taught after all,” he says. Victor grins over the board at him, his expression sly. Yuuri feels himself flush, the heat creeping through his face and into his neck, and he has to look away, flustered.

“I should go get ready for dinner, Yuuri,” says Victor, standing up. “Thank you for sharing this with me; it was wonderful.”

He comes around the table as Yuuri stands too, and Yuuri waits for the by-now expected kiss of his hand. Instead, Victor leans in, brushing some hair out of Yuuri’s face and dropping an oh-so-light kiss against Yuuri’s cheek.

Yuuri freezes, taken completely by surprise. Victor pulls back, just enough to stare into Yuuri’s eyes from up close. For that one brief moment, Yuuri is painfully aware of a dozen things at once: the warm, slightly drugging scent of Victor’s musk; the arctic blue of Victor’s eyes; the barest drag of Victor’s fingertips in the hair by Yuuri’s ear—the fact that they are completely alone in this room together.

A shiver goes down Yuuri’s spine, and he exhales. Victor smiles at him. “I look forward to learning more about you, Yuuri,” he murmurs. There’s just enough smoke in his voice to go right to Yuuri’s stomach.

Then Victor straightens, his charming veneer settling back over that shocking heat. He bows, and then lets himself out as though nothing interesting happened at all, Maccachin trotting at his heels.

The door clicks shut. Yuuri takes a deep breath, then lets it out; his heart races in his chest as though he just ran the length of the practice field from end to end. He has to stand there by the table with his hand on his chest for several minutes, just trying to remember how to breathe, before he’s recovered enough to remember he has to go change for dinner too.

* * * * *

Courting crown prince or not, Yuuri still has a tournament series he plans to win. Just making it to the second tourney isn’t enough, so he and Minako and Phichit decide to try to meet even more often, since the Midwinter Tourney will be yet more difficult to make it through than the Harvest Tourney. The extra practices result in more than a few incidents where they almost get caught.

But he knows he’ll never stand a chance of beating all these seasoned mage-knights if he doesn’t put in the extra time, so Yuuri starts practicing even when he can’t meet Minako or Phichit. Practicing alone is riskier, because it takes a lot of energy to safeguard their practice spaces from detention, but coordinating nights where all three of them can meet is hard.

At this point they’ve identified a number of useful rooms that are almost always empty at night, due to Ekaterina Palace having vastly more space than people to live in it, despite the apprenticed pages and knights. Getting to and from said rooms, and using them unnoticed—that’s a slightly different story. In addition to all the servants the palace holds, the High King has guards that patrol outside its walls to ensure no trespassers make it into the palace, and that all of its occupants are safe.

Safe from what, Yuuri wonders. He doubts any burglars really want to encounter trained and armed mage-knights roaming the hall late at night, but what does he know.

Tonight he’s supposed to meet both Phichit and Minako in one of the rooms in the wing Alexei
warned him away from, the one that’s under construction. Phichit is the first to have to cancel—he’s exhausted from the regular practice he attended earlier that afternoon. Apparently Yakov put all the mage-knights through the wringer today, for some reason. Understandable, if disappointing; practice is always better when Phichit is there to join in.

Minako leans over during dinner and mutters, “Can’t come tonight, I’ve got a surprise meeting with Yakov and Lady Lilia about preparation for the winter tournament.”

Yuuri has to smother his indignation so as not to attract attention. He settles for stabbing his knife rather viciously into the duck breast they’re eating. “Alright,” he whispers back. “Let me know about night after tomorrow.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” she says into his ear, and then louder, “Ser Otabek, if you don’t leave me some of that lamb, I’ll mention to Ser Yakov that you really wanted to do some extra laps tomorrow.”

“Ah! S-Sorry, Ser Minako—“

Yuuri knows it’s unavoidable that sometimes they just won’t be able to meet, but the idea of spending his evening alone in his room makes him die inside a little bit. So after dinner, he drinks the tea with his heat-suppressing medicine in it, changes into his training clothes, and slips out the private exit from his quarters into the servant’s hallways, muttering the word to wrap the shadows around him as he goes.

He makes his way to the closed-off wing without any trouble, and decides to just prop the door closed and cast a spell of silencing. It’s not perfect—those who are sensitive to the Spark might well be able to sense him casting magic if they pass too close by the room—but since he’s in a wing closed for renovations, Yuuri doubts anyone will bother him. At least this way if he knocks over a bookcase or sends a table flying, the noise won’t bring the guards running.

Yuuri practices for almost two hours, running through the routines Minako put him to the last time they met—she’s drilling him on speed and reaction time, since he has to make up for what he lacks in strength. After that, he decides to practice what he and Minako hope will be his trump card: executing spells without gestures.

He deliberately chose not to use this trick in the first tournament, both because he’s not yet quite perfected it enough to be reliably in combat, and because he hopes to surprise his opponent when he most needs it. But since he first started practicing, he’s become fairly proficient at it, and can now reliably call a faerie light or blue fire and even summon a blade without so much as twitching a finger or saying a word. Yuuri’s next goal is to lift a physical object and hold it in the air. The part he’s not good at yet is calling the magic when he has someone trying to attack him, but he’s been practicing that too, with Phichit and Minako, and he hopes that soon, he’ll be able to succeed there as well.

He has to, if he wants his ticket out.

Yuuri decides to practice lifting a wooden stool that’s lying on the floor, tipped over on its side and long abandoned. He sets it in the middle of the room, then backs away from it, taking a slow, deep breath as he tries to center himself. Yuuri’s good enough now that he usually doesn’t need to close his eyes to concentrate enough to touch the Spark, but since this is a technique he hasn’t really mastered yet, he decides to use every trick he has.

He shuts his eyes, standing up straight and letting his hands rest against his sides, near his hips. He keeps both feet planted on the ground, and he lets the quiet of the room settle around him for a moment. Yuuri pictures the whole room: a dusty, abandoned library with empty bookshelves that
lean crookedly against the walls and each other, every surface coated in dust. Cracked windows let in a spill of moonlight across the floor, illuminating him and the stool he’s trying to move.

Yuuri reaches for the part of the Spark that lives inside him, the twist of magic that pervades every fiber of his being. He pictures it as a gout of open blue flame, pictures how it twists in on itself, licking at the air, at his hand, at whatever he calls it to be. Almost immediately he feels the familiar tingle on the back of his neck, tickling down his spine, but instead of whispering and then leaving, Yuuri holds that feeling—focuses on it until he can feel sensation up and down his entire body.

Only then does he reach his focus forward, sending the magic he’s called to wrap around the stool. He pictures the blue fire wending across the floor, then shooting up the legs of the stool, licking over it eagerly, but not to consume. Yuuri is in control. He takes a deep breath, and then pictures all of that crackling energy just hoisting the stool into the air, as if it were nothing.

Every time he’s done this before, this is where it goes wrong—something slips, or is misdirected, and the object just topples over instead of lifting. This time, though, the stool wobbles for a moment, and then—he can hardly believe it—the stool ascends, the object’s movement as real in his mind’s eye as in the physical world. Yuuri catches his breath as he feels the stool lift to chest-height and float there, suspended in mid-air as though it were the easiest thing in the world. He opens his eyes—

—and sees someone staring at him from across the room.

Yuuri yelps in shock. Without thinking, he takes all the energy holding the stool suspended and flings it across the room. The stool goes flying, and Yuuri has a split-second of realization that he’s probably about to kill a servant when a blast of orange erupts where the stranger was standing, knocking the stool off course. Yuuri sucks in a breath in shock, his heart hammering in his throat.

The stool clatters to the ground, hitting at just the right angle that one of its legs breaks off. Yuuri exhales, and looks up at the stranger.

It’s not a stranger at all, he realizes. It’s his opponent from the tournament, Yuri Plisetsky—Yurio, Victor apparently calls him now, to avoid confusion with his fiance. Yurio is crouched on the other side of the room in a defensive posture, color high in his cheeks, eyes wide. “I’m—I’m so sorry,” Yuuri blurts. “You startled me, and—”

“No, you have to show me how you did that,” Yurio says impatiently, which, wait, what? “You didn’t use any gestures, you were just standing there!”

“Oh, Yuuri remembers to breathe, putting his hand to his chest as though in pain. “Oh, that,” he says stupidly. Yurio glares at him.

“Stop acting like it’s no big deal,” he snaps. “Either tell me, or I’m going to turn you in!”

“Oh, okay,” says Yuuri, holding out his hands placatingly. “I can show you. But please, don’t… don’t tell the prince.” He stares at Yurio, who regards him for several moments with obvious suspicion.
Then he snorts, crossing his arms and glancing away. “I wasn’t going to tell anyone,” he says sourly. “I’m not a snitch. But I’m holding you to your promise anyway.”

Yuuri swallows. “Thank you,” he says, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

“You have to be more careful, though,” says Yurio. “I was just out for a walk, but I could feel you from two rooms away. Anyone with any Spark sensitivity is going to be able to tell you’re here.”

Yuuri sighs, rubbing at his face. He doesn’t bother to ask why Yurio was out walking near a wing that’s supposed to be abandoned; for all he knows, lots of people do, and it’s pure luck he hasn’t been caught till now. “I know,” he says tiredly. “My mentor usually has a spell to muffle the leakage, but—I didn’t want to skip practice tonight.”

Yurio glowers at him, and then seems to consider. “Think you can cast it if you have a boost?” he asks.

Yuuri raises an eyebrow at him, then shrugs. “We could try,” he says. It takes them three attempts—the spell is complicated, and Yuuri already couldn’t manage it alone at the beginning of the evening, much less after two hours of practice—but with Yurio’s added strength, they succeed.

They practice for another hour, which is testing the limits of Yuuri’s stamina, but Yurio is an avid student, and Yuuri finds it easier to keep going with someone else here to help him push through the creeping exhaustion. By the time they’re done, Yurio has managed to wordlessly call a weak but credible faerie light into being. It only lasts a few moments, but the look of delight on Yurio’s face sends a pulse of satisfaction through Yuuri.

“We should go, it’s late,” Yuuri says. Yurio scowls, then shrugs his assent. “Ah, shoot. I don’t have the guards’ routes memorized after midnight.”

“Take the servant walk through the gardens,” says Yurio. “There’s a door into the wing your quarters are in, and it’ll avoid most of the guard routes.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. “Thank you.”

Yurio’s lip curls, and he looks away. Yuuri almost starts to go, then stops. “Hey,” he says. “You don’t have to, but—if you want to keep practicing, I’ll tell my mentor. You can join us if you can get away.”

Yurio looks over at him, considering. “Alright,” he says. “I will.”

They steal away into the dark, going together as far as where the abandoned wing meets the rest of the palace before breaking off in different directions. Yuuri lets himself out, following the route that Yurio suggested to him; once the snow falls, he won’t be able to come this way without leaving tell-tale footprints behind, but for now he can move through the darkness with his wrap of shadows undetected.

Next time, he’ll have to be more careful. And he’ll have to hope that if Yurio figures out that it was Yuuri who beat him in the tournament, it won’t make him change his mind about keeping Yuuri’s secret.

* * * * *

The knock comes first thing on a morning at almost the end of November, when Yuuri is minutes from heading down to the gatehouse. He and Victor are heading into town for the day, something he’s unreasonably excited for. Yuuri doesn’t even glance up at the knock, calling “Enter” as he
finishes tucking a few things into his bag for the day. He knows Victor thinks it’s unnecessary for him to bring a daybag, but there are some things Yuuri dislikes having to leave at home.

He hears the door softly open and shut, and he glances up, expecting Alexei or Victor—and nearly drops his bag at the sight of someone completely different standing by his door.

“Ser Jean-Jacques,” Yuuri says, trying not to squeak. “Ah—is something wrong?”

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Messere,” says Jean-Jacques. “I only hoped to bend your ear for a few minutes, if you have time. I wanted to catch you before you started your day.”

“I see,” says Yuuri. He flashes on Isabella in the garden, sobbing into Yuuri’s handkerchief, and wonders if he already knows what this conversation is going to be about. At least then it made some sense why she was asking Yuuri for his opinion, since he’d all but tripped over her; Yuuri has no idea why JJ has come to him, of all people. Maybe Isabella told him that she confided in Yuuri.

“Let’s go into my study. I only have a little while, as his highness and I are going into Petrograd for the day, but I can talk for a few minutes, Serrah.”

JJ’s eyes widen. (Even though he’s never been given formal permission, Yuuri finds it impossible to think of the man as anything other than JJ.) “Oh! I’m so sorry, I can bother you another time—”

“No, that’s fine,” says Yuuri. JJ isn’t his alpha, but Yuuri doesn’t need the sensitivity to his scent that would come with that relationship to tell that JJ is anxious.(As soon as he realizes his slip, Yuuri squashes that particular possessive with a viciousness usually reserved for cockroaches and spiders; he doesn’t have an alpha, thank you very much.) “Come, I’m free for a little while. You can tell me what troubles you.”

They retreat to Yuuri’s study, Yuuri in the cozy wing-backed chair, JJ dragging over the chair for the desk. Yuuri listens patiently as JJ relates the same situation to him that Isabella spoke of a week or two ago. The situation has progressed somewhat, apparently.

“Lady Isabella has finally agreed to at least try the arrangement that I suggested to her, and I could not be more overjoyed,” JJ says. His usual brash demeanor is absent now; he has his hands laced together in his lap, his brow furrowed as he relates his new trouble to Yuuri in a low voice. “And while Ser Seung-Gil has been receptive to my advances, also, he has of late revealed to me one of the reasons for his reticence, and I—don’t know what to do.”

Really? JJ, man of a thousand boasts and endless confidence, not knowing what to do? This I have to hear, Yuuri thinks. “Serrah, I assure you that nothing you tell me will leave this room,” says Yuuri. “I will not betray your trust.”

JJ glances at him, relief softening his features; for just a moment, Yuuri remembers that he’s actually older than JJ, no matter his confidence. “Thank you, my lord, I could not be more grateful,” he says. Then he lets out a long sigh, his gaze dropping to their feet, clearly struggling with whatever it is he’s trying to get out next.

“See Seung-Gil has confided in me that he is not—not a beta, as he has led everyone to believe, but an omega,” says JJ finally. Yuuri stiffens in shock despite himself, but JJ is too busy being downcast to notice. “He uses his knowledge of herbal medicine to disguise his scent, and suppress his heats.”

“Does this discovery bother you?” Yuuri asks. He keeps his voice carefully neutral, but JJ’s head jerks up all the same, immediately indignant.

“If you ask if I care that he flouted the laws against omegas practicing in combat, of course not,” JJ
“You’ve seen his ability in battle! The laws are ridiculous!”

“Be at ease, Serrah,” Yuuri says mildly. “We are of one mind on this subject, I was merely inquiring after the source of your distress.”

JJ breaks off, jaw snapping shut. “Ah, of course you think that,” he says. “You’re—a very discerning man, I should have known. I…”

He sighs. “I wish to honor my relationship to both of them,” he says. “I would bond with both Lady Isabella and Ser Seung-Gil, if they would have me, but how can I do this when Seung-Gil must hide his true nature? The bond would ruin his disguise and reveal him as an omega. No matter how temporary his scent change, the damage would be done.”

Yuuri tries to come up with a reply that doesn’t center around his increasing awareness that no matter what poor judgment Victor shows sometimes, it’s apparently nothing next to some of his knights. “Serrah,” he says, trying to be as tactful as possible, “I admire your dedication to showing your commitment to both Ser Seung-Gil and Lady Isabella; I am sure they are overjoyed to have someone so valiant who loves them. But, if you are all agreed on this course of action, is a long engagement truly such a hardship? I am sure we can find the time and privacy you need, as long as we do not rush.”

JJ gives him another one of those indignant looks, as though Yuuri’s just insulted his honor, his family, and his manhood in one fell swoop. “Taking things slow is easy advice, coming from someone who found love so early in life,” he says. “I do not wish to wait to begin my life with my partners!”

Yuuri stares at him; after a moment, he arches one eyebrow, and JJ deflates a bit. “I—forgive me, my lord—”

“You are a passionate person, and I understand that you wish to honor your heart,” Yuuri says, choosing not to push the insult further. “But please consider that entering into such an arrangement will be difficult and strange for all involved, no matter how good your intentions or how true your feelings. A relationship between two people is challenge enough; a relationship involving three will take even more work. Putting in the time and effort will be necessary no matter how long it takes you to bond.”

JJ keeps quiet as Yuuri talks, hunching his shoulders a little in what appears to be embarrassment. “So you would counsel that I—wait,” he says.

Something in his voice makes Yuuri pause. Instead of a knight pining over his torn heart, JJ now looks a bit like Yurio did the other day when Cook caught him sneaking cookies from her kitchen. “You’ve already formally announced your intention to bond with both of them,” Yuuri says out loud, and sighs when JJ winces in acknowledgment.

“The King has congratulated us on our good fortune,” JJ says. Yuuri can tell he’s trying to avoid sounding sheepish.

He’s just trying to think of something to say when there’s another knock at his chambers door. “Serrah, come to me again later, and we will continue this conversation then. I will find a way to help you,” Yuuri says in a low voice. Then, louder, he calls, “Come in!”

He’s relieved to see that this time it’s Alexei. “His highness awaits you, my lord,” says Alexei. He gazes at JJ, raising one eyebrow ever-so-slightly.
“Thank you for your time,” JJ says, maybe a little too quickly. He rises from his seat, bowing to Yuuri, and then with a nod at Alexei he hurries out of Yuuri’s quarters.

“Let’s hurry,” says Yuuri, choosing to not comment on what just happened for the moment. Alexei inclines his head, and soon enough Yuuri is heading down to meet his fiancé.

It’s nice that people come to him for advice, he supposes. The only downside is that now he’s accepted the plea, he has to come up with some kind of answer. Won’t that be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

If you noticed that it says "5 of 11" now instead of "5 of 10," you're not crazy - everything earmarked for this chapter got so stupid long that I had to chop it in half. I would apologize but I'm not particularly sorry. Also, surprise! I posted early for once!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Yuuri and Victor spend the day together in Petrograd.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my lovely koscheis, who has listened to me brainstorm and babble endlessly while writing this fic. Thank you darling! ♥ A thousand hearts go also to my patient beta, who still hasn't thrown me in the lake for my many crimes against era-appropriate architecture and dress. Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” says Victor, as their carriage starts to roll away from the gatehouse, headed towards Petrograd, “may I ask what Ser Jean-Jacques wanted when he came to your chambers this morning?”

Yuuri lets out a put-upon sigh. Victor sits across from him in the carriage, his hands folded in his lap, looking as though he’s trying for ‘composed’ and mostly managing it. Mostly. “Why am I not surprised that you already heard about that,” Yuuri says. “Did Alexei say something?”

Victor looks a bit embarrassed, which Yuuri finds somehow charming—not that he’s going to let Victor know. “One of the servants mentioned it, yes,” he says. “I—”

“Does it bother you that much when I talk to other people?” Yuuri cocks his head as he asks this, studying Victor closely.

Victor doesn’t flush the way Yuuri does (which is frustrating—a man that fair should turn bright red) but by now Yuuri can still spot the tell-tale way his cheeks get pink, which they do now. “I was only curious,” he says.

Yuuri raises an eyebrow at him. Victor breaks their gaze first, glancing away with a small scowl. Yuuri knows he shouldn’t tease but he really can’t resist; he’s still not over the way Victor flustered him so badly after their Go session the other day. “Is his highness jealous?” Yuuri draws himself up, over-acting just a little. “I don’t appreciate the implication that I would be unfaithful after agreeing not two weeks ago to let you court me.”

Victor must miss the fact that he’s teasing, because his head whips around like he’s been struck, eyes flying open. “That’s not what I meant! I didn’t—”

Oh, this is too much fun. “You were jealous because one of your knights, an unmated alpha, came to see me in my private quarters,” Yuuri says. “Did you think me unable to refuse his advances? Does Ser Jean-Jacques seem my type to you?”

Victor winces. “I didn’t think that, Yuuri, I swear,” he says, his mortification now so apparent as to be painful. “Please, I’m so sorry—“
Yuuri bites his lip, trying and failing to suppress his smile. Victor breaks off as he notices, and lets out a groan. “Are you actually mad at me?” he asks after a moment.

“No,” Yuuri admits, relenting. In truth, he finds it somehow endearing that Victor is so transparent. He supposes after so many years of feeling ignored, he can’t help but revel a little when Victor gets jealous.

“Come here and sit by me,” he says, scooting over. “Since I know you will fuss until I tell you more. But I don’t want anyone to overhear.” It may be true that there are only servants and guards to overhear on their ride into town, but Yuuri has become intimately aware of how the walls in this palace seem to have ears, and he can handle the rumors about him and Victor—they’re betrothed, after all—but he doesn’t want to make trouble for anyone else.

Victor stares at him, then crosses the carriage to sit next to him. He settles in gingerly, as though afraid of making Yuuri change his mind if he’s too rough. Yuuri is very aware, as he’s sure Victor must also be, of their hips and shoulders pressing against each other through their clothes, of Victor’s warmth so close by.

Yuuri turns his head slightly, angling so that his mouth is close to Victor’s ear. “If I share this with you, you must promise me not to use it against your knight,” he murmurs. “He came to me for advice and I swore to him I would not betray his confidence. Promise me, Victor.”

Victor’s hand moves down, taking Yuuri’s and lacing their fingers together. “You have my word,” he says in a low voice. Yuuri squeezes his hand, and Victor squeezes back.

In a low voice, Yuuri relays everything that he knows about JJ and Isabella’s situation—except Seung-Gil’s status as an omega. Victor listens intently, never letting go of Yuuri’s hand; by the time the story is done, Yuuri finds himself leaning into Victor, and Victor’s other arm has crept around Yuuri’s waist, holding him gently against Victor’s side.

“A three-way bond is not unheard of,” says Victor slowly. “But if they bond, Ser Seung-Gil will be revealed as an omega. Quite a difficult situation to be in.”

Yuuri stiffens, glancing up at Victor in shock. “How did you know that?” he demands. He feels a little ill.

“I’ve known for three years,” says Victor, “so please be at ease, it was nothing you said.” Yuuri relaxes just a hair, but he keeps staring at Victor until he continues.

“Seung-Gil’s family is quite well-known to us,” Victor says. “One of my other knights spent a great deal of time at his family’s court, and returned to me to inform me that the royal family had no suitable heirs to send for service as a knight. Yet when he came of age, Seung-Gil came to the palace and presented himself for service as a beta.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. He goes quiet for a few moments; abruptly he realizes he’s tilted slowly sideways and now has his cheek on Victor’s shoulder. He straightens a little. “I don’t understand; if you’ve known this whole time…”

“If I hadn’t heard from one of my knights, I would never have guessed that Seung-Gil was other than what he said,” Victor says. “He’s shown no interest in courtship until now, and I know you only saw the one practice, but please trust me when I say he’s an excellent knight. I decided to say nothing of his deception unless I was given reason; I didn’t want to put my father in the position of having to punish Seung-Gil and his family.”
“Oh,” says Yuuri again. “If it were to become known…”

“Then he would be cast out, yes,” says Victor, and sighs. “There’s been some talk, more than once, about doing away with the laws regarding omegas and combat magic, but the fact that Seung-Gil has been deceiving the High King for over three years now would not be looked on kindly. He would be punished for the deception, if nothing else.”

Yuuri says nothing. Victor’s words turn his stomach in more ways than one. As of late, Yuuri’s found himself wondering if he should reconsider his decision to refuse to marry Victor unless given no other recourse. It’s been intermingling with equal concern about whether his decision to enter into the tournament cycle was dangerous foolishness. But every time he thinks about acquiescing to the laws about combat magic, every part of him cries out in revolt.

“Don’t look so sad,” Victor says, breaking into Yuuri’s worrying thought spiral. Yuuri glances up, finding blue eyes trained on him from just inches away. “I’ll help you find a way to aid them, I promise. We’ll just have to be subtle about it, that’s all.”

Victor smiles at him, and Yuuri feels his heart stutter in his chest. “Okay,” he says softly. But it’s not Seung-Gil or JJ or Isabella he’s thinking about at all, now; it’s Victor’s arm around his waist, Victor’s other hand in his, Victor’s face so close by that Yuuri can feel Victor’s soft breath against his cheek. Victor’s eyes flick down to Yuuri’s mouth, then up to his eyes again.

“I was jealous when I heard JJ came to see you,” Victor murmurs softly. “I can’t help it. I know I all but lost my right to be jealous of you, but when I see you now… and when everyone else must see how incredible you are, and what a fool I was…”

Yuuri has no idea what to say. This close, it feels as though Victor is stealing all the air from his lungs, all the thoughts from his mind, leaving only this awareness of him and his proximity. “Victor,” he whispers. His face burns, and he can’t think.

Victor’s eyes darken, and he tilts his head, considering. Then leans forward and kisses Yuuri, the softness of his mouth no insulation against the scalding heat of his kiss. Yuuri shivers even as he finds himself kissing back; dizzily he’s aware of Victor’s hand cradling his face. The arm still around his waist tightens, pulling him closer, and Yuuri finds he wants to respond in kind—wants to wrap his arms around Victor and pull him closer, kiss him until they both drown.

Instead he pulls back, gasping against Victor’s mouth. He stays close, though, resting his forehead against Victor’s, and Victor stays leaning into him, stroking Yuuri’s hair out of his face. “Forgive me,” Victor murmurs. “I… I find it hard to control myself around you, sometimes.”

“I’ll think about it,” Yuuri says, trying for ‘fussy’ and mostly just sounding winded. Victor laughs, a quiet huff of air, and Yuuri suffers a pang of want all the way down his neck and spine, like a physical craving.

He’s saved by the carriage jostling them as it slows, although he would have been pitched into the footwell if not for Victor’s arm around him. “Careful,” says Victor. His eyes are dancing. Yuuri elbows him in the stomach.

* * * * *

They picked a fine day to go into the city—the air is cold with the threat of oncoming winter, but the sun is out, and the streets are dry and filled with bustling people. Yuuri finds himself grateful that Victor is here with him, though; Petrograd is larger than any city he’s ever seen, and he suspects he’d get overwhelmed and just hide in a public house all afternoon if he weren’t accompanied by
someone who knows it well.

Despite the intensity of what passed between them in the carriage, Victor is the picture of gentlemanly courtesy as they leave their entourage and proceed into the cobbled streets on foot.

Petrograd is like no city Yuuri has ever seen; the brief journey through it en route to the palace a few months ago really didn’t paint any sort of picture for him. It’s made of as many dirty, narrow streets as it is lovely boutiques with gorgeous dresses mounted on dress forms in their windows, as many animals wandering the cobblestones as there are nobles in elegant frocks and suits, out buying spices or silks or jewelry. (Yuuri thinks he sees a peacock at one point, and is so captivated that he actually loses Victor in the crowd for a few minutes.)

Yuuri and Victor wander through the enormous open-air market, Yuuri clutching Victor’s arm more tightly than he’d like to admit at the array of things to see. Vendors shout their wares from their stalls, offering samples or cajoling words to every passer-by; Victor pauses at one selling fine fabrics, and purchases a length of sky blue silk that whispers over his skin when Yuuri passes it through his fingers.

“Who’s that for?” Yuuri asks.

By way of response, Victor gives him a small, mysterious smile and says nothing. Yuuri huffs and pretends to be annoyed, but is quickly mollified when Victor buys them some nutty caramel pieces at the next stall over.

After spending a brief time wandering around town, the first thing Victor does is take him shopping more seriously—not for himself, to Yuuri’s surprise, but for his family. “It will take some time to have everything packaged and sent to your family’s estate for winter holidays, so we should shop now,” says Victor.

Yuuri looks at him. “Is there some reason I won’t be able to take them with me to visit them?” he asks, carefully. He has an idea of what the answer might be, but he wants to see what Victor will say.

“I was hoping you might consider staying here with me for the holidays and attending the Winter Ball with me,” Victor says. “If—if you’re willing.”

Yuuri’s eyebrows go up. “Do I have a choice?”

Victor doesn’t even hesitate. “If you wished to go see your family, I would not let my parents stop you,” he says firmly.

Yuuri softens. In reality, he already planned to stay; traveling home would lose him precious practice time, as would being fussed over by his family while he was visiting, as much as he wants to see them. But hearing Victor say that does not leave him unaffected, either.

“Then we’d better find some good presents to send to them,” he says, and Victor’s face lights up.

Having access to the kind of money Victor apparently has is weirdly embarrassing for Yuuri. His family is obviously not poor, but they live a relatively modest life, and the prices he sees in the windows of some of these shops is outrageous. Victor notices, and tugs him aside in the second shop they visit, a store full of exquisitely-crafted furnishings made from woods Yuuri couldn’t even name. “Yuuri, what’s wrong?”

Yuuri flushes. “It’s just—everything is so expensive,” he says. He has to fight to keep from averting his eyes, embarrassed at looking so plebeian in front of his handsome, clueless fiancé.
Victor’s brow furrows. “I was going to buy these presents for you,” he says. “But if you would rather I not…” The uncertainty in his voice eases some of Yuuri’s nerves.

He sighs. “It’s fine,” he says after a moment, and thinks he even means it. “It’s just new. I don’t know how to feel about it.”

Victor nods, and gently takes one of Yuuri’s hands again. “We won’t pick anything you don’t want to send them,” he says. “I promise. Just tell me what you like, and we’ll do that.”

“Okay,” Yuuri says, and despite himself, he’s relieved.

Once he gets into it, and stops thinking too hard about the cost, Yuuri finds he enjoys the shopping. They pick out several bottles of fine wine and liquor and a gorgeous cherrywood hutch for the house, and then a fine Kievan suit for Yuuri’s father, as well as a pair of beautiful dresses for Yuuri’s mother and sister. Victor will send attendants to the onsen for measurements and then have the outfits tailored before sending everything together by the holidays.

Yuuri finds himself lingering in the dress shop, admiring the huge selection of fine gowns on display. He wonders what Victor expects him to wear to the Winter Ball; a suit like the one they got for Yuuri’s father, perhaps? That wouldn’t be so bad, he supposes, but these dresses are so lovely…

“See you something you like?”

Yuuri startles guiltily as Victor appears next to him. He rips his gaze away from the dress he was staring at, a long gorgeous ball gown with a mermaid tail and delicate blue sequins. “U-um,” Yuuri says intelligently, and looks back at the dress. “I was just wondering what—if there’s something I’m supposed to wear to the Winter Ball.”

“Anything you like,” Victor says. “A suit, or a kimono, or a ballgown, if you want. I warn you that it needs to be something you can dance in, though.”

Yuuri glances over his shoulder at him in surprise. “A gown? Really?”

“Certainly,” says Victor, voice warm. And before Yuuri can stop him, he slides both his arms around Yuuri’s waist from behind, a gentle hug that Yuuri doesn’t quite want to disengage from. “You would look stunning in any of these dresses, Yuuri.”

It’s on the tip of his tongue to tell Victor to back off, to not presume to hold him so familiarly in public, but even as his mouth forms the words, Yuuri realizes he’s being unfair. More than that, he’s projecting: At some point he took hold of the idea that Victor has pursued him against his will, but that isn’t true at all, is it? Victor stopped when Yuuri told him to—he even went so far as to try to break off their engagement out of respect for Yuuri’s wishes—and only with Yuuri’s explicit permission did he resume his courtship.

And he’s been more attentive than Yuuri would ever have dreamed he might to everything Yuuri’s asked of him. Yuuri knows without a doubt that if Yuuri wanted to, Victor would take him home right now, without complaint. All he has to do is say the word.

So Yuuri relaxes as Victor holds him, allows himself to lean back against the man he’s slowly coming to care for more than he ever thought he might. There’s something dangerous here, but he won’t confront it now—not with Victor’s warm arms around his waist.

“We should match,” Yuuri says finally. “If I’m—going to be your partner for the ball.”

Victor makes a noise of approval against his cheek, squeezing his arms around Yuuri’s waist for just
a moment. “You should pick your dress first, and then I’ll find a suit to complement you,” he murmurs. “We’ll have to tell Lady Lilia what cut, so she can find a similar dress for you to practice dancing in.”

Yuuri groans softly. “What am I getting myself into?” he says out loud, and Victor laughs.

* * * * *

They spend the entire rest of the day in Petrograd, and the day is—far more fun than Yuuri could have imagined, even with his burgeoning desire for Victor.

Victor lets him pick what they do. Which is to say, Victor has a list of ideas, and he asks Yuuri which sounds the most appealing, and then they do that. They eat a late lunch at a public house with a large store front of windows that look out into the city’s main street, managing to find a table that somewhat shields them from view so they can enjoy the chatter around them without drawing too much attention to themselves. They split a sinfully rich piece of chocolate cake for dessert, which Yuuri likes almost as much as he likes watching Victor eating it and trying not to show how much he’s enjoying it.

“I didn’t realize you had such a sweet tooth,” Yuuri murmurs, his expression sly.

Naturally Victor doesn’t miss a beat. “I like you, don’t I?” he says cheerfully. Yuuri thinks about kicking him under the table, but settles for flicking a crumb at him instead.

Most of the talk in the public house is about the play that’s in at the theatre right now, the upcoming Winter Ball at the palace and who will be attending, and speculation about when the first winter storm will hit—all perfectly normal but acceptable gossip. But more than one person mentions what look like scorch marks from dragon fire at the walls near the edge of town, and Yuuri is glad to see the frown on Victor’s face as they leave, because he doesn’t want to be the only one concerned by that idea.

“Are there really dragons in Kieva?” he asks, as they turn down the street.

“There used to be, but my grandfather drove them out before he became King,” Victor says. He exhales. “We’ll have to investigate. It could just be vandals trying to scare people, but we can’t ignore the chance that a dragon may have come back.”

From the cafe, they go to one of Petrograd’s parks. The park is almost as lovely as the huge gardens of Ekaterina Palace, but filled with more people and many more sculptures and decorations. When Victor stops at a flower vendor to purchase a late-autumn bouquet of chrysanthemums for Yuuri, Yuuri laughs and lets him put one of the flowers in his hair.

The whole thing is stupidly romantic and sweet, and more enjoyable than a day with Victor has any right to be. Maybe it’s being out of the palace, or maybe it’s just because he needed a day off, but either way, Yuuri finds himself somehow able to just turn off all his worries about the future and let Victor charm him like he so clearly wants to. He doesn’t remember the last time he had so much fun, and felt so unconcerned about his life.

Naturally, reality intrudes on his vacation day with Victor, but not in the way Yuuri might expect.

They’re walking back towards Petrograd’s city center from the park when someone calls out to them from across the street. “Messere Katsuki! Your Highness!” Yuuri pauses, turning in surprise as the pregnant omega petitioner whose request they adjudicated a few weeks ago hurries across the road towards them. He’s wearing a long blue robe that billows over his swollen stomach, underneath a
worn but warm-looking traveling cloak.

He gets across the street and starts to drop awkwardly into a bow, his stomach making it hard. “D- Don’t do that!” Yuuri exclaims, reaching forward to stop him as he nearly falls over. “Please, you’re pregnant, it’s not necessary.”

“We’re pleased to see you looking well,” says Victor. He and Yuuri help the man to his feet. “Serrah —”

“Serrah Josef,” Yuuri cuts in smoothly, not wanting to advertise Victor’s atrocious memory for people’s names. “How fare you?”

“I miss Ser Elian every day, but your mercy and compassion has greatly improved my life,” says Josef. He rests his hand on his stomach, a complicated expression on his face. “It saddens me that he will never meet our child, but at least I have the comfort of knowing we will not starve. I wanted to thank you, again, for your kindness.”

“Of course,” says Yuuri, rather helplessly. He’s saved from having to comment on how ridiculous it is to be thanked for having basic human decency when someone else calls to them from down the street. The three of them turn to see a woman waving her hand, hurrying down the road to meet them.

“Ah, this is Ser Elian’s sister, Vanya,” says Josef.

“Your Highnesses,” says Vanya immediately, and drops into a bow so deep it seems she’s trying to make up for what Josef couldn’t manage. “Thank you so much for your kindness to my brother’s family. We couldn’t possibly make it without the extra pension.”

“Please, no thanks are necessary,” says Victor. “Will you be living with Serrah Josef to help raise the child?”

“I will be, yes,” says Vanya. “I was going to enlist, but Josef needs my help more than ever.”

“There are other important jobs beyond fighting,” Victor says. “If you find yourself in need of a better one, come to the palace and ask to speak to Serrah Alexei. Say that the prince sent you.”

Vanya’s eyes go wide at this, somewhere between stunned and excited. “I will do this,” she says shakily. “Thank you so much, your Highness!”

After a few more rounds of thank-you’s and good-byes, Yuuri and Victor manage to at last excuse themselves and continue on their way. Yuuri waits until they get a little farther towards the capital square before glancing over at Victor. “Serrah Alexei?” he repeats. “As in, Alexei our scarcely competent servant?”

Victor laughs. “Yes, him,” he says. “He’s not that scary, is he?”

“He is a little,” Yuuri says. “But mostly just because I don’t think I’ve ever seen him flustered even once. It’s like nothing fazes him.”

“He’s always been like that,” says Victor, “as long as I can remember, at least.” He glances at Yuuri, then adds, “I was hoping to make you feel more at ease by asking him to look after you. I could think of no one I trusted more with the job.”

Yuuri doesn’t quite know what to say to that, so he doesn’t comment on it. “He said he’s watched over you for most of your life,” he says, instead.
“That’s true,” says Victor. They paused for a moment as a carriage passes by in the street, and then continue. “Him and Ser Yakov, my mentor, and also Lady Lilia—she used to be married to Yakov, you know. My… parents and I were not close, when I was younger. I knew that they loved me, but they were always busy with the business of ruling the kingdom.”

This idea, the thought of a young Victor so distant from his parents when Yuuri himself always felt so loved by his own, does something dreadful to Yuuri’s heart. Something occurs to him in its wake, and he latches onto it immediately. “Is that why you went abroad so young?”

“Yes, partly,” says Victor. He extends his elbow, and Yuuri slips his own hand into it again. “And it’s also why I insisted that you be allowed to stay with your family during our engagement, for as long as you wished to.”

That brings Yuuri up short. He stops, and Victor stops also, looking over at him. “I didn’t—was that even in question? My parents never said anything about having to—what, come live with you? At the palace?”

“My parents wanted you to come live at the palace as soon as our betrothal was set,” Victor says. “They wanted to ensure that you would be prepared for your role as the royal consort. That’s one reason they were so pleased when you asked for instruction upon your arrival here.”

“But you told them not to send for me?” Yuuri doesn’t know what to do with this information. It fits poorly with his mental image of Victor from when he was young, the same young man who seemed so pleased with Yuuri at their first meeting, only to turn around and ignore him for ten years.

Victor lets out a sigh. “I didn’t want to force that on you so soon,” he says in a low voice. “I saw how close you seemed with your parents, and… I didn’t want to rob you of that, until you were older.” Victor looks away as he says this, as though unwilling to meet Yuuri’s eyes.

Yuuri says nothing; after a few moments, Victor tugs gently on his arm, and they continue walking down the street, neither of them speaking. Yuuri can tell that Victor is growing uncomfortable beside him, but Yuuri is having trouble even figuring out how he feels, much less what he should say.

Finally, they reach another small park, this one barely the size of a city block, with just some trees and an open lawn. Victor leads them down the path that cuts through the park, seemingly heading for a bench halfway down. As they reach it, he takes a deep breath and turns to Yuuri—but Yuuri speaks first.

“Victor, if you cared so much about making me happy, why did you never write to me?” Yuuri takes hold of Victor’s hand as he asks this, as though physically holding him will prevent Victor from skirting around giving him an answer. “I waited for a letter from you for years.”

Victor winces. But instead of pulling away, he just sits down on the bench, fingers still twined with Yuuri’s. After a moment, Yuuri sits down too. “It’s very stupid and you’ll be very cross with me,” Victor says. He sounds resigned.

“I’ll be even more cross with you if you don’t tell me,” says Yuuri. Victor’s eyes flicker up to meet Yuuri’s gaze; whatever he sees there makes him sigh.

“Alright,” he says. “You’re right, I owe you an answer, I’ve just—I’ve been putting it off. Well—did your parents ever tell you anything about how it was I picked you as my mate?”

“Uhhh—” Yuuri feels himself flushing a little, which is ridiculously unfair; he’s not the one answering questions about ten-year-old misbehavior. “Nnnno. Well, I did, but all they said was
Yuuri distinctly recalls his mother lovingly sitting down next to him on the bed and telling him that Victor just saw what she already knew, that Yuuri was special, beautiful, the most wonderful boy in the whole kingdom. But he’s not about to repeat *that* to Victor. Not right now, anyway.

Victor nods, the small smile on his face saying that he can guess at least a little of what Yuuri’s parents might have said. But then the smile fades. “I don’t know if you recall, but the way it worked was that all the omegas of the right age group were summoned to the palace with their parents, and asked to demonstrate their aptitude in the Spark. It’s very important any children the consort bears be as strong in the Spark as possible.”

Victor grimaces as he says this last, and Yuuri spares a moment to be glad that Victor finds that aspect as distasteful as Yuuri always has. That part, at least, he already knew. He still doesn’t know what this has to do with why Victor didn’t write, but he’s curious, so he keeps quiet for now.

“Anyway,” says Victor, “perhaps ten omegas showed the most talent, including you. So then your parents were asked to turn over an article of clothing you had worn several times, the longer the better. Unwashed.”

Yuuri raises his eyebrows. “Oh! My undershirt. That’s where it went?”

Victor nods. He lowers his voice as he continues, “I was led into a room with all these pieces of clothing, and asked to pick which one I thought smelled the best. And—and it was weird, and gross, and I had no idea what to do, until I smelled your shirt.”

Yuuri can feel the heat in his face worsening. There’s an answering glow of embarrassment in Victor’s face now, and he’s dropped his eyes, staring intently at his and Yuuri’s twined fingers lying on Victor’s thigh. “What happened?” Yuuri asks after a moment.

Victor groans. “Your shirt smelled amazing,” he admits. “I—went a little mad. I locked myself in the room and—and wound up pleasuring myself while I smelled your shirt. It was like I’d lost my mind.”

Heat floods Yuuri’s face and throat. The mental image of 17-year-old Victor appears unbidden in his mind, curled up on the ground and moaning with his face shoved against Yuuri’s threadbare undershirt. Once upon a time, tests of compatibility were both common and expected of anyone of even semi-noble blood who wished to find a mate. And while it’s true that there are still people who find their mate on the street by happenstance of luck—Yuuri’s heard of people finding each other through scent in the middle of crowded fairs even in Hasetsu—those days are mostly gone, as JJ’s courtship of Isabella and Seung-Gil shows... which makes the idea of Victor enduring such a thing to pick his mate that much worse.

Yuuri dares a quick glance at Victor’s face, and is somehow gratified to see him as scarlet as Yuuri’s ever seen him, his shoulders hunched and his head bowed. “*That’s* how you picked me?” Yuuri hears himself ask, in an entirely too normal-sounding voice.

“Yes,” Victor whispers. “It was so humiliating. And then—I finally saw you, and you were, you were perfect. It was like something lit up in my head, just looking at you, talking to you. But you were just a kid, still—and I couldn’t bear the idea of telling you how I’d picked you out.”

“I thought—I thought that if I wrote to you, it was inevitable that you’d ask me, and I didn’t want you to know, because I was certain you’d find me disgusting if I told you. I was disgusted by it! So... I never wrote.”
Yuuri lets out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding. “For ten years?” he demands. “Victor!”

“I know!” Victor puts his face in his other hand. “I—I put it off for too long, and then if I’d written you what would you have said? You’d ask why I hadn’t written, where I had been. It was childish and cowardly of me, so I … tried not to think about it.”

“You’re an idiot,” Yuuri says. “I can’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry,” Victor says wretchedly. “I’m so sorry.”

Yuuri sighs. He doesn’t even know how to feel about what Victor’s just told him—annoyed? Relieved that it wasn’t something worse? Pleased at the idea of Victor having such a gut-level response to him? Yuuri wrinkles his nose, then just shakes his head. “I thought you’d changed your mind about me,” he says quietly. “That you—I don’t know, went abroad and met someone more interesting, or just liked the idea of me waiting for you at home while you ran around enjoying yourself.”

Victor makes a pained noise, his hand tightening around Yuuri’s. “I never changed my mind,” he says. “I never forgot you, or stopped thinking about you. But…"

He sighs. “I can’t honestly say I wasn’t happy thinking that I had someone as special as you waiting for me, no matter how far away I was or what new thing I wanted to try. But it was selfish of me to keep you in my pocket like that.”

“It was selfish,” Yuuri says. “I’m still angry at you.”

“I know,” Victor says quietly. “I have a lot to make up for.”

“You do,” Yuuri says.

He scoots a little closer, and Victor looks up at him quickly. The nervousness and sadness Yuuri sees in Victor’s face softens the indignation still so present in his heart. “You can start by taking me to dinner,” Yuuri says, and watches hope bloom in Victor’s face again. “And then to that play we heard people talking about at lunch.”

“Whatever you want,” Victor says, and kisses Yuuri’s hand. “Anything at all.”

“I’ll let you know,” Yuuri says, and Victor smiles.

* * * * *

Victor makes good on Yuuri’s request—he’s even more attentive than he was the rest of the day, if that’s even possible.

They have dinner at another public house not far from the theatre, followed by retiring to the private box held for the royal family to view the play Yuuri wanted to see. It’s a charming story about fraternal twins who disguise their identities in a foreign city and somehow find love. In the dark of the theatre, no one can see how Yuuri nestles against Victor for more than half the production, Victor’s arm tucked around his waist and Yuuri’s head against Victor’s shoulder.

He’s still upset with Victor, of course. But Yuuri’s had plenty of time the past few months to think about Victor’s long absence, and it wasn’t as if he expected Victor to tell him that he spent 10 years stuck in a dragon’s lair, or something. Victor is an idiot in many ways, but he’s also been working hard to be good to Yuuri—
—and Victor isn’t the only one who’s weak to his fiancé’s nigh-intoxicating smell. The knowledge that he could affect Victor so easily and strongly is… not unpleasant.

Yuuri outright falls asleep on the way home, which would be embarrassing if not for the long day and the amount of wine they both had. He only awakens when the carriage jostles to a halt, to discover a traveling cloak tucked around him like an extra blanket, several pillows under cushioning his back and head. Victor smiles at him as Yuuri sits up, blinking owlishly in the dark.

“I’ll tell my parents you’re not up for their card game,” Victor says. “I wore you out, it seems.”

“No, it’s fine,” says Yuuri sleepily, sitting up with a yawn. “I just have no head for wine. It’s not even that late, is it?”

“Almost nine o’clock,” says Victor. “Are you sure? It’s fine if you want to retire.”

“No, I’ll come,” says Yuuri. He rather enjoys the various card and board games the King and Queen are fans of, no matter how shy being around the entire royal family at once still tends to make him. Maccachin usually joins them, though, as does Alexei and sometimes Minako or Yakov, so it isn’t too stressful.

Later, Yuuri will wonder what would have happened if he retired for the night, and shudder to himself. But he and Victor disembark from their carriage and make their way to the King’s private parlor, in the royal quarters wing. The King and Queen are already seated at the table when Victor and Yuuri arrive, mid-round with Yakov and Minako.

“Ah, there you are!” says the King, brightening immediately. He’s got a half-empty glass of wine at his elbow, his regal demeanor softer here; in this more relaxed setting it’s easy for Yuuri to see how alike Victor and his father are in some ways. “We’re almost done—we’ll deal you in during the next round. Ah, let’s bring out the mulled wine, shall we?”

“If you insist,” says Victor, grinning. Servants pull over two more chairs, and they’re just settling in when the servant passes by with the tray full of mugs.

Something catches Yuuri’s attention, the faintest scent in the back of his nostrils. The hair on the back of his neck stands up, and he reacts without bothering to think twice. “Wait,” he says suddenly. “Victor, don’t drink that.”

Victor stares at him, the silver chalice halfway to his lips. Down the table, the King arches one elegant eyebrow at Yuuri. “You object to mulled wine?”

“I smell licorice, and parsnips,” says Yuuri, painfully aware of how every eye in the room is now trained on him. “And—and recently when I was in the kitchen, Cook’s pantry had been disturbed, and I smelled licorice there also.”

“Victor, don’t drink that.”

Victoria stops at him, the silver chalice halfway to his lips. Down the table, the King arches one elegant eyebrow at Yuuri. “You object to mulled wine?”

“I think Victor’s drink has been poisoned,” Yuuri blurs, and the entire table falls silent.

Victor sets his chalice down, leaning back from it as though it’s about to erupt in his face. The King’s expression goes from cheery to dangerous like a curtain being drawn. “Poison?” he repeats, voice oh so quiet in the silence.

“I smell licorice, and parsnips,” says Yuuri, painfully aware of how every eye in the room is now trained on him. “And—and recently when I was in the kitchen, Cook’s pantry had been disturbed, and I smelled licorice there also.”

“What’s so disturbing about licorice? Or parsnips?” Victor asks, his voice weirdly flat. He’s looking not at Yuuri, but at his mother, whose face has turned grim.

“Anise is useful to hide the taste of something very bitter,” Elizaveta says. “Like medicine. Or poison. As for parsnips…” She’s already standing, coming around to her son’s chair and leaning
over his chalice. She summons a brief gout of flame with a gesture, burning in the air over the chalice, and instantly the flame turns green and foul-smelling.

Everyone quails back from the table at the sudden stink; Eiizaveta’s face turns even darker. “Hemlock,” she says. Victor exhales a long breath.

The next few minutes are very chaotic.

The King’s guards go storming down to the kitchen to demand who had made the mulled wine, who had access to it, who had been in or out of the kitchen this evening, and probably a dozen other things the poor terrified kitchen staff have no answer to. Yuuri stays with Victor, his fatigue from earlier having vanished like a dream; he and Victor sit in a pair of chairs pushed to one side of the room as people rush about in the chaos. The Queen hovers briefly, clearly concerned for her son, but after the third time of reassuring her that he’s fine, Mother, really, she finally goes sweeping off to do some investigations of her own.

They find no answers that night, of course. Whoever poisoned the wine put hemlock only in Victor’s glass, somehow, a task they managed somewhere between the wine being mulled in a huge pot in the kitchen and being taken up to the royal quarters. The only person ever in the kitchen alone at any given time was the cook, Antonia, but to Yuuri’s immense relief, neither the King nor the Queen seem to think she is the culprit.

“If Antonia had wanted us dead, she would have been able to kill us all without us ever being the wiser,” says the Queen dismissively, when one of the guards brings it up as a possibility. “She would never be so incompetent as to hide her attempt so poorly.”

The only thing that’s ultimately decided is that the attempted poisoner was likely a mage-knight—no one else would have been able to hide themselves in the crowded kitchen, or so the Queen and Mikhail, guard-captain, seem to think. Yuuri thinks of the times he’s spent ghosting around the palace grounds, undetected, and feels slightly ill.

“We should go to bed,” Victor says eventually, some unknown time later—he hasn’t heard the bell for midnight, but it’s been hours, at least. Yuuri looks over at him, and is startled by how wan he looks. “They’re not going to find anything else. It’s late, and you’re tired.”

“You’re one to talk,” Yuuri says. “You look ready to keel over.” He surprises himself by taking Victor’s hand in both of his own and squeezing it.

Victor must be too tired to hide his reaction, staring at his hand in Yuuri’s with an embarrassingly sweet expression, and then he meets Yuuri’s gaze again. “I can’t argue when you’re right,” he says, and smiles lop-sidedly. “I suppose I should just be glad you’ve decided you liked me well enough to not just let me drink that wine.”

“Victor!” Yuuri’s stomach does an awful flip-flop at those words, as though Victor had summoned the event just by saying it.

“Sorry! I was just joking—“

“Don’t joke about that,” Yuuri snaps. The worst part is that on some level, Victor isn’t totally wrong there was a point in time when it was conceivable that Yuuri might consider letting an assassin do their work, and simply look the other way. But now just hearing it said makes his insides curl up like he’s the one who’s been poisoned, withering in horror at the very thought.

Victor looks at him, then stands up, pulling Yuuri to his feet as well. “Forgive me, Yuuri,” he says
quietly. “You saved my life, and I’m grateful.” Without giving Yuuri time to respond to what he’s said, Victor tugs him in close, wrapping his arms around Yuuri’s waist and pressing his face to Yuuri’s hair. For a moment, Yuuri freezes, but then he softens, putting his arms around Victor’s neck in kind and holding him tight.

Someone surely sees them like that, but no one has the poor sense to say anything. And Yuuri is just glad that, when he finally makes it to his bed, he’s too tired to contemplate the day he’s had—

—or how scary the idea of losing Victor has apparently become to him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh lord, there were a few typos that made it into this when I first posted it - I apologize for that, it was late-ish and I'd had some wine - they should be fixed now!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Yuuri and Victor attend the Winter Ball. Information is learned, secret meetings are had, and a very good time is had by all.

Chapter Notes

READ ME!

This chapter contains material that gives the fic its "E" for explicit rating. (It is the first of two such chapters.) The explicit section is also not short—about 2500 words—so please be aware when reading. Secondly, a content note: Like most male omegas in this universe, in addition to a penis, Yuuri has a vagina. If you want more details, please see the end of chapter notes.

For anyone who wishes or needs to skip the explicit section, you are safe to read to right about when clothes start coming off. Then skip to the last few paragraphs.

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trouble with so many mirrors, Yuuri thinks, is that it gives you so many new angles to see yourself, and—that’s not necessarily a good thing.

He turns this way and that, examining himself with a critical eye. The gown he’s wearing looks as though it’s too delicate to even consider dancing in, but the Queen reassured him it had been treated for durability to last through the night. Yuuri rotates slowly in the dress, admiring how it swishes around his slim form, somehow making him look taller and more slender. It’s made of delicate sky-blue silk, with spring flowers appearing to bloom all along the asymmetrical hem and at the gathered waist; Yuuri wonders if he can get away with wearing it again after the ball, because it seems a shame to wear it only once.

Yuuri reaches up, adjusting his hair where it’s pinned back, artfully swept out of his face. Between that and the fact he’s not wearing his glasses, his eyes look huge and dark in his face, accented by the shadow he’s smudged lightly on his lids. There’s a faint pink on his lips, too, matching the barest glittering flecks of stardust Yuuri’s conjured to dust his hair and skin.

The end result is that the boy in the mirror is almost unrecognizable: elegant, almost beautiful. Like someone who belongs in the royal palace. Yuuri wrinkles his nose, which is not as blurred in his reflection as it would normally be sans glasses. He’s cast an enchantment to enhance his vision for one night, so he can go without his glasses—both because he’ll be dancing and because it’s a special, formal occasion. He would do it more often, but this particular spell gives him a pounding headache.
in the morning.

The only thing that seems not quite right is the stretch of bare skin at his throat and collar; the wide neck of the gown leaves it bare. That’s okay, though. Yuuri did that intentionally.

Finding that every detail he can think of has been attended to, Yuuri takes a deep breath and finally heads back out of his closet into the bedroom, where Alexei is waiting for him. Alexei does a full circle around him, examining the fit of the gown, tugging it here and there to ensure that it lies right. “My lord, you look stunning,” he says. “No one will be able to tear their eyes away.”

“So long as I don’t suffocate while trying to dance in it, I’m happy,” says Yuuri with a wry smile.

“Have you considered perhaps wearing a necklace, though?” Alexei gestures at Yuuri’s bare throat.

“I actually have something in mind,” Yuuri says. “Thank you, though. Can you please go tell Victor I’d like to see him before we go down?”

Alexei’s eyebrows go up, but he simply bows and slips out of the room. Yuuri waits till the sound of his footsteps has receded, then goes to his shelf, where a box has been sitting undisturbed for nearly four months. Yuuri takes it down from the shelf, biting his lip at the layer of dust on the lid.

It’s Victor’s welcome gift to him, intentionally ignored since his arrival. Yuuri’s opened it just once, two weeks ago, when he was casting about for what to wear with his gown to the ball.

A lot has changed since then. Yuuri stares at the closed lid, thinking not of its contents but of his reaction the first time he saw it.

Before, Yuuri would do everything in his power to avoid thinking about Victor. Now the man is never far from his thoughts, even when he’s practicing in the dead of night for his chance to win the tournament. His answer when Minako asks him are you sure you want to do this? hasn’t changed, still yes, of course, but he no longer has the same certainty beneath it he once did. If Minako notices how he can’t quite meet her eyes anymore when she asks, she has yet to say anything—but Yuuri knows his mentor isn’t stupid. Neither is Phichit, or even Yurio, both of whom have asked him similar questions after Yuuri has been late to practice due to the attention of a certain sweet-tongued prince.

A knock comes at the door, jarring him out of his introspection. “Come in,” Yuuri calls, turning to look as his door opens and Victor comes inside. Victor stops just inside the door, eyes widening at the sight of Yuuri in his gown. Yuuri flushes as Victor stares at him, but he’s grateful for the fact that Victor seems to be literally speechless for a few seconds, since it gives Yuuri time to drink in the sight of Victor in his handsome suit.

It’s a beautiful dove-grey affair, of a cut that serves to accent just how tall and well-built Victor is. The topstitching around the lapels is the blue of Yuuri’s dress, and the piping around the pockets and along the outer seams of the trousers is a darker shade, complementing both the dove-grey of the suit and the other shades of blue. At his throat is a blue cravat, the color bringing out Victor’s eyes, which Yuuri thinks is unfair, considering they didn’t really need the help to start with. Victor’s always had the most stunning eyes of any person Yuuri’s ever met.

“Yuuri,” Victor says, breathing out the name like a personal prayer. The heat in Yuuri’s face worsens, like the rush of strong drink going to his head. Victor shuts the door carefully behind him, then approaches Yuuri—slowly, like he’s afraid Yuuri might bolt, or like he’s deliberately holding himself back.
“You look magnificent,” Victor murmurs. “I don’t know how I’m expected to pay attention to anyone else tonight, with you in the room.”

Yuuri smiles at that. “You’re one to talk,” he says. “Here’s hoping we don’t give people a different reason to stare at us when we dance.”

Victor laughs, and it breaks a little of the tension in the room, gives Yuuri the courage to close the last of the distance between them. “I’m almost ready to go,” says Yuuri. “I wanted your help with something, though.”

He takes off the lid and holds out the box, and Victor’s eyes go wide with recognition. Yuuri nearly drops the box, his anxiety making him shy. “I—I was hoping you’d help me put this on,” he says, faltering.

Inside the box is a lovely necklace, tiny flowers strung on three fine silver chains, each a slightly different length. The flowers are delicate, opalescent things, glittering blue and white in the light as Victor reaches out to pull the necklace from its box and hold it up.

“I got this for you in Gallia,” he says, voice hushed. “I—had no idea if you would like it, but I hoped you would. But when I never saw you wear it… I thought you’d thrown it away.”

Yuuri shakes his head. “I didn’t even open it until a few weeks ago,” he admits. “But I thought it would look good with the dress.” He dares to look at Victor, whose expression is so hot and complicated that Yuuri fears he could get drunk just from gazing at him.

Victor nods. He holds up the necklace, and Yuuri straightens, arching his neck a little. Victor leans in, fingers working carefully at the back of Yuuri’s neck for a moment, and then pulls back with a smile.

“Does it look alright?” Yuuri wishes he could take back the question as soon as it’s out of his mouth, but Victor’s smile brightens.

“It looks beautiful on you,” he says. “Now let’s go, we are going to be late.”

Yuuri nods, trying to stifle the stab of disappointment that he didn’t even earn a kiss on the cheek. But he must not be hiding it very well, because Victor stops them halfway to the door, taking one of Yuuri’s hands. “Please don’t misunderstand,” he says. “If we don’t leave now, I will lose what little self-control remains to me whenever I’m in your presence, and I’ve no desire to get us yelled at for missing the ball.”

Yuuri laughs despite himself, slipping his arm into Victor’s when his partner extends his elbow. “It’s lucky you’re too charming to stay mad at, then,” he says, because at some point being around Victor has started to cause truly idiotic things to just fall out of his mouth. Victor smiles at him from close up, warm and intimate, and then thankfully he manages to shepherd them out the door before Yuuri goes both blind and stupid.

Victor’s right, of course. They have a lot to do tonight—more than just dancing.

Unlike most other nights, every single room in the palace will be full this evening. The King and Queen have invited most of the aristocracy of Kieva to come to the ball, ostensibly to celebrate the winter holiday. In reality, though, Yuuri and Victor know that this is Yuuri’s unofficial presentation to the nobility; as such, there’s more than a little pressure to make a good impression.

Normally, this on top of everything else would make Yuuri so nervous that he might not even be able to leave his room out of anxiety. But he knows there’s no way he could beg off, and if for some
reason he did, Victor would probably try to escape the ball, too, out of some misguided notion of chivalry—and the last thing Yuuri wants to do is make trouble of that particular kind.

So Yuuri takes Victor’s arm, and takes comfort in the heat of his fiance’s gaze, the warmth of his skin through his suit, and the increasingly strong scent of Victor’s alpha pheromones as they head downstairs. He deliberately does not think about how much being able to smell that particular scent soothes his nerves, how calm he feels whenever Victor’s this close by. They have work to do tonight.

Ekaterina Palace has been draped in finery, both spellcraft and not—wreaths on all the doors, mysterious lights that float near the high ceilings to illuminate dark hallways, delicate patterns of ice on the windows. The hallways are full of not only their out-of-town visitors, but nobility and other attendees who are coming in from Petrograd who will have to return to their own beds or to a hotel room later tonight, as well as a swarm of extra servants to help accommodate all the extra people. But to a man and woman, every single person back out of the way as Victor and Yuuri come sweeping down the hall.

Yuuri can feel their eyes on the pair of them, can hear the flurry of conversation about how handsome the prince and his betrothed are in their fine clothes, and suffers a ridiculous urge to preen. Instead, he tightens his grip on Victor’s arm, and leans over, intending to whisper in his ear. Victor slows, obligingly leaning down. “Don’t forget what I asked of you,” Yuuri murmurs.

“I won’t,” Victor says, just barely audible. “Just tell me you’re going out for some air, and I’ll take care of everything.”

Yuuri smiles at him, permitting himself a moment to savor holding Victor’s gaze from just inches away despite the fact they are very much not alone. Then he turns his attention back to their walk.

The first hour is taken up with the formal announcements—a cryer whose magically enhanced voice reads the full, formal name of every major attendee. There isn’t time to announce every single person who attends the ball, but all of the foreign dignitaries and local nobles of note get the treatment. Victor and Yuuri take their turn, waiting until the right moment to walk into the huge ballroom, following the massive red carpet that splits the room in half.

“His Royal Highness Prince Victor Ivanovich Nikiforov, and his intended consort, Ser Yuuri Katsuki of Hasetsu, Nihon!”

They wait a beat, and then Victor tugs lightly at his arm to move them forward. Yuuri and Victor proceed slowly across the huge, open ballroom, Yuuri clinging to Victor’s arm a little harder than he’d like to admit. The walk seems to take forever; only Victor’s reassuring smell and warmth keep him from breaking out into a horrible sweat or simply keeling over from anxiety.

By the time they’re across the floor, Yuuri is just glad that dinner was a few hours ago, because he couldn’t possibly hope to keep anything down now. After their formal presentation, he and Victor separate to go mingle and socialize. Yuuri enjoys socializing about as much as he enjoys gargling paint, but even if it weren’t an unavoidable part of his duties tonight, he has an ulterior motive to make nice with all their guests.

They still haven’t found out who put poison in Victor’s drink. And since the King forbade anyone from speaking of it, naturally the entire palace now knows about the assassination attempt. (Yuuri saw that coming; he knows very well by now that everyone will gossip regardless of what threat is leveled at them.) In the process of attempting to suss out who has the best motivation and means to try to assassinate the heir to the Kievan throne, Yuuri has discovered a great deal more about the plotting, machinations, and general drama involved in the ruling of such a large country.
He’s discovered that what perfume one noblewoman wears is a deadly insult to another noblewoman, causing the entire silk trade to be disrupted while they dig and snipe at each other. He’s also learned that the reason the capital’s preferred source of expensive imported wine was suddenly shut down was because the owner ran away to Gallia with one of his young servant boys.

It’s honestly been exhausting; he has no idea how any of the royal family tolerates it. But he’s still so upset at the idea of Victor nearly dying in front of him that he hasn’t been able to set the investigation aside, either.

So this many people under one roof is too good an opportunity for information to pass up—especially since Yuuri has discovered that, much like Victor used to, a great many people still seem to have a rather idiotic idea of what he’s like. Lady Marjolaine asks him if he’s taken to cross-stitching yet, and how he likes having such a dashing warrior for an alpha, while Lord Adams and his husband loudly declare that Yuuri will surely be so fertile that he’ll be pregnant in no time—an assessment apparently based on smell alone.

Once, Yuuri would either have gone red with frustration or simply shut down in this kind of situation from anxiety and self-consciousness. He’s not less self-conscious or less anxious now, exactly, but having something else to focus on helps, so he’s able to smile and nod and simply deflect the obnoxious questions with a delicate bat of his eyelashes. (He makes a mental note to thank Minako for the suggestion of the eyeshadow—as well as teaching him how to actually put the stuff on.)

Yuuri also very quickly discovers how willing to blather on people are if he simply responds the right way or asks just the right question. Not for the first time, he finds himself thankful that his parents chose to let him grow up somewhere a bit more peaceful and less focused on social cache and power struggles.

He slips off into the crowd, wanting to confirm some rumors he’s heard, as well as do some more reconnaissance of his own. Yuuri’s gotten to know the mage-knights somewhat better, as much because he’s coming to genuinely like most of them as because he needs as much information on potential opponents as possible. Right now, though, they’re not opponents at all. All of them seem glad to see Yuuri when approaches them, and (to Yuuri’s moderate embarrassment) more than one immediately tells Yuuri how much happier Victor seems lately, and how he ‘glows’ whenever someone mentions Yuuri.

Most of the knights are in good cheer—which is to say, partly drunk and in high spirits—which make the handful that aren’t stand out. Yuuri lingers near Emil, the mage-knight alpha from Bohemia, until his friend Mickey slips off, making his way towards one of the servants circulating with wine. Emil has always been a cheerful sort, Yuuri remembers, but right now he looks downright depressed.

“Ser Emil,” Yuuri says, and Emil glances up, straightening in sudden embarrassment. “What troubles you, Serrah?”

“Ah…” Emil sighs, rubbing at the back of his neck a little. “It’s—nothing to worry about, messere, just some distressing news from home.”

That’s right, Yuuri thinks; he heard rumors he heard about the unrest in Bohemia—what was it, some kind of political scandal between the ruling house and the parliament? He can’t quite remember. “That sounds hard,” he says sympathetically. “Being away from your family during trouble is difficult.”

“It is,” says Emil, softening a little. “But Victor—I mean, his highness has been good to me. So has the Queen. I just wish there was more I could do.”
“I understand,” says Yuuri, and when he smiles at Emil, Emil manages to smile back. “It seems you aren’t the only one having troubles, however.” Yuuri glances away to his right, at Ser Otabek, who looks about as serious as a gravedigger. Of course, Otabek always looks serious, but Yuuri thinks he’s never seen the man look quite so…

“He’s anxious,” Emil comments, confirming Yuuri’s thoughts. To his surprise, though, Emil smiles. “He’s trying to work up the nerve to go ask Yurio for a dance.”

Yuuri blinks. “Yurio?” he repeats. “Really?”

“Yeah,” says Emil, who looks more like his normal cheerful self as he watches Otabek fidget with his suit. “I heard him admitting to Phichit earlier tonight that he was going to try.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri, and tries to suppress a smile. He can’t help but look around until he spots the boy in question; Yurio is looking positively angelic in the white-and-grey suit he’s in, accented with red at throat and sleeves. “Well, best of luck to him. And to you, Serrah. I hope your troubles clear soon, but if they don’t, perhaps the prince or I can help you somehow.”

Emil gives Yuuri a wobbly sort of smile at that. “That’s very kind of you, messere,” he says, and bows. “I’ll remember it.”

Yuuri slips off then, stealing another glass of champagne for himself as he continues to swan around. There’s one conversation he still needs to have that he hasn’t yet, but he’s starting to hit his fill of small-talk.

As more and more people head to the dance floor, Yuuri half-expects Victor to materialize out of nowhere and sweep him off for a dance, but it turns out someone beats him to it. It’s Minako who interrupts Yuuri’s mingling, grabbing his hands and dragging him out into the dancing area. She’s in a handsome navy suit and looks more dashing than half the nobles here.

“That’s enough of that for one night,” she says as they hit the floor. “Time to show off with your teacher a little bit!”

It’s lucky that by now Yuuri has had a few glasses of champagne, because otherwise nerves might have gotten the best of him. Despite the fact he’s very recently performed in a much higher-stakes capacity in the tournament cycle, dancing in a lovely ballgown in front of a crowd of nobles is somehow infinitely worse.

But Minako has always been the person Yuuri trusts the most, relies on the most, and so when they dance it feels natural as breathing. Minako leads, sweeping Yuuri around the room as the musicians start to play a sprightly two-step, his dress fanning out as they spin. She even dips him at the very end, making him clutch her shoulders with a squeal as she grins at him from above him.

“If I didn’t know better I’d say you’re enjoying this,” she says in a low voice, as the piece finishes and they straighten.

“If I am it’s no thanks to you trying to twirl me into the hors d’oeuvres over there!”

“Please, I knew you’d be fine,” Minako says dismissively. “Well, good for you. You should enjoy yourself once in awhile.”

Before Yuuri gets a chance to respond to this somewhat ridiculous piece of advice, Phichit appears, eyes as bright as the myriad blue sequins that adorn his elegant white costume. “Can I cut in?” he asks.
“Alright, but I’m leading,” Yuuri says, and Phichit laughs. The next piece comes on, a smart, uptempo waltz, and Yuuri takes Phichit’s hands as they waltz back towards the center of the room.

“How is it you can get away with wearing so much white?” Yuuri asks him breathlessly, as he brings Phichit down from a lift. “I’d spill on it immediately!”

“I’m graceful!” Phichit says brightly. Yuuri gives him a dirty look. They twirl away again, the skirt of Yuuri’s gown flaring out around him in a fan; Yuuri’s grateful as always for sweat and scent suppressants, and for the lightness of the dress he chose.

After that, it’s one person after another stealing him for a dance. Yuuri is both surprised and flattered, but he can’t remember the last time he let himself indulge in this sort of thing, and though he tries not to go crazy, when Christophe brings him a glass of champagne and offers his arm, he decides to simply let himself have fun.

But not too much fun. After dancing with Phichit, Christophe, and Mila (who is wearing a fine scarlet-and-grey suit and is in extremely high demand from partners), not to mention several other people he doesn’t even know except in passing, Yuuri slips away to the edge of the dance floor and finds Ser Seung-Gil. Seung-Gil is standing by the drinks station, watching the people mill around, wearing a shockingly colorful dress shirt with his grey suit. He looks surprised when Yuuri walks up to him and offers his hand.

“Will you honor me with a dance, Serrah?” Yuuri says.

Seung-Gil blinks, but takes Yuuri’s hand after a moment, and lets Yuuri lead him back to the dance floor. A new piece of music starts, and Yuuri and Seung-Gil step off. Yuuri waits until they’re midway through the song, when Seung-Gil is twirling him inward for a beat. That’s when Yuuri turns his head towards Seung-Gil’s ear and whispers, “Meet me by the fountain in the eastern courtyard at eleven-thirty. Bring JJ and Isabella.”

Seung-Gil looks at him sharply, but the moment ends and he twirls Yuuri back out again, till their arms are outstretched, connected only by their hands. “Very well,” says Seung-Gil, and that’s all the acknowledgment he gives.

Yuuri leaves it at that. There’s no more time to talk about it, not when they’re in the middle of the dance-floor, and what will be will be.

When this song ends, though, a familiar voice in his ear cuts through all thoughts of plans and secret meetings. “May I ask my fiance for a dance?” Victor murmurs at his shoulder.

Yuuri turns, and Victor is right there, stealing his breath and smiling at him with enough heat in his gaze to warm the entire room. “You may,” Yuuri says faintly. He doesn’t even notice when Seung-Gil bows and slips off; all he has eyes for is Victor.

Victor holds out his hand, and Yuuri takes it, letting Victor lead him to the center of the dance floor. Maybe it’s the champagne he’s been drinking, but Yuuri could swear that someone has lit more of those delicate floating faerie lights, and that a dozen-odd of them seem to be following Victor around, giving him a preternatural beauty that Yuuri can’t tear his eyes away from.

Later, Yuuri is never entirely sure how long they even dance for, or what exactly happens. All he can remember is how giddy he feels as Victor moves with him so gracefully from point to point—how warm Victor’s hand is on his hip, how blue his eyes are, how magnetic his smile is. The rest of the room and its hundreds of people fall away, and all that’s left is the music moving through them and the call-and-response of their dance.
It’s magic—as real and yet unexplainable as the Spark that sings always just under Yuuri’s skin.

Victor anticipates his every move, matching him and meeting him where Yuuri goes, there to catch him, dip him, lift him in the air. Yuuri finds himself pulling Victor along too, wanting to see how far this inexplicable joy will take them, and Victor follows him willingly, like Yuuri is the only thing that matters in the whole world. When one song finishes at a dramatic climax, Yuuri finds Victor dipping him low in the middle of the dance floor, his arms around Yuuri’s shoulders and hips, his face tantalizingly close.

“You’re incredible, Yuuri,” he whispers. And before Yuuri can say anything in response, Victor is kissing him, his lips warm and sweeter than any wine. Yuuri can no more keep himself from kissing back than he can stop the need for air.

Victor pulls him up again, and they break away, a little breathless. Yuuri’s face goes pink as he hears applause from around them, the noise finally breaking through the little bubble he’s existed inside of for the past—how long has it been? Yuuri glances around, and nearly jumps out of his skin in shock when his eyes fall on the clock on the far wall and he sees it’s nearly 11:30 already.

“I have to go,” he breathes. Victor’s face falls, and Yuuri belatedly realizes he forgot to say the line. “Ah—I meant, I’m going out for some air, Victor.”

Victor’s eyes widen in sudden comprehension, and he nods. “I’ll see you a bit later, then,” he says, and walks him to the edge of the dance space.

Yuuri makes a quick exit—it’s a bit more obvious than he would have liked, but he meant to be lingering near the edge of the room by now, not still dancing with Victor till the last second! The lack of poise is downright embarrassing.

He shakes his head, trying to put the question out of his mind. He has something he’s promised to do now, after all.

* * * * *

Yuuri gets stopped only twice on his way out of the great hall. That’s not bad, considering that he is the prince’s intended and has somehow managed to become more popular than he was anticipating since his arrival several months prior. He makes polite noises about needing some air, though, and slips gratefully out into one of the side hallways.

“Finally,” he mutters. Yuuri takes a few moments to check that no one is immediately nearby, and then exhales the spell he’s been holding for ten minutes. Shadows engulf him, leaving no trace of him or the lovely gown he wears. There’s enough ambient magic in the air from the preparations that he doesn’t need to bother with a Spark-dampening spell as well; no one will be able to detect him in the morass of other magic.

Yuuri walks as swiftly as he can through the palace, taking the servant’s entrances whenever he can manage it. Security has been tighter ever since the assassination attempt, and frankly it’s probably only a matter of time until someone catches him sneaking around. But for tonight, his luck holds.

He slips outside into the eastern gardens, padding soft as a dream across the flagstones. Up ahead he hears low voices, and is unsurprised to see JJ, Seung-Gil, and Isabella already in the courtyard—Yuuri’s a few minutes late, after all. Yuuri drops the spell, and has to suppress a smile as the three of them jump.

“My apologies for startling you,” Yuuri says, and watches JJ visibly relax out of the fighting stance
he instinctively dropped into. His outfit for the ball is a bright red military jacket over black pants with a gold sash at the waist; he looks very regal in it, Yuuri thinks.

He also can’t help but notice the fact that JJ placed himself in front of Seung-Gil and Isabella, who are sitting side-by-side on a bench—typical alpha. Seung-Gil scored almost as high in the Harvest Tourney as JJ did, so he hardly needs protecting.

“I am glad you could get away,” says Isabella. She summons a shaky smile. “We are all curious to know what you asked us here about.”

“I believe I have a solution to your dilemma,” says Yuuri. The three lovers glance at each other, eyes widening; Yuuri is glad to see that Seung-Gil and Isabella seem reasonably comfortable around each other, judging from how closely they sit on the bench.

“What have you discovered?” asks Seung-Gil. He shoots a glance at JJ, and Isabella puts a comforting hand on his arm, which appears to settle him a bit.

“I have contacted some friends of mine, good people who will be discreet as needed,” says Yuuri. “You can go to stay with them while you bond, and afterwards, and you won’t be disturbed—and I can swear to you that they will not breathe a word of your affairs to anyone else. But they won’t have space for you till after the Winter Tourney, so you’ll have to wait till then.”

Yuuri felt a little bad writing to Yuuko and Takeshi to ask this favor of them, but their delighted response eased his mind a little. Of course we’ll help, Yuuko wrote back. Just let us know when they’re coming, and we’ll arrange everything. The Nishigoris own another inn on the other side of Hasetsu, this one with a practice area they frequently let locals use to practice magic in for a small fee. And Yuuri happens to know for a fact that they’ve let out their space to couples who want privacy to cement their bond before.

“JJ,” Yuuri continues, and JJ straightens a little. “As far as I have been able to determine, Arcadia is distant enough that most of what the court knows about it comes from what you’ve told us. After the ball, you need to announce that in your country, bonding is a thing done only in private, and that you and your mates will retire to a remote location in order to bond.”

JJ, Seung-Gil, and Isabella exchange glances, eyes wide. “Will that work?” Seung-Gil says. He sounds wary, but then, Yuuri can’t blame him. He’s the one with the most to lose if this goes wrong.

“It will,” Yuuri says, trying to inject confidence into his voice. “When you make this declaration, do it publicly, and ask for permission from Victor and I. I can ensure that no one will argue with you about it or interfere with your departure.”

At this, the trio relaxes. Isabella breaks into a pleased smile and throws her arms around Seung-Gil, who looks vaguely surprised for a moment before hugging her back. JJ, of course, pulls each of them to their feet and kisses them warmly right there in front of Yuuri. Yuuri spends a few moments politely studying his shoes, giving them time to get their joy out of their system.

“My lord, you have done us a great favor,” JJ says earnestly, coming back to Yuuri and dropping to one knee in front of him. “I can’t thank you enough for your help. I swear on my honor as a knight of Kieva, you will not regret this!”

“You’re very welcome,” Yuuri says, feeling himself turning a little red at the display. “Ah—Serrah, you can stand, that’s not necessary—”

“Thank you so much,” says Isabella, coming over to Yuuri as well. Her face is shining with relief,
and Yuuri finds a moment to be grateful that she seems much happier about the situation now than she did initially.

“We are indebted to you,” says Seung-Gil. To Yuuri’s shock, he too kneels in front of Yuuri, as though swearing fealty. “We won’t forget your help.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri intelligently. “I’m—very glad. Now, uh, we should really be heading back, before someone misses us…”

By the time Yuuri and the other three go their separate ways, it’s past midnight. Yuuri makes his way back in the direction of the main hall, following the sounds of people being drunk and high-spirited. Yuuri is just wondering whether he ought to call it a night when Victor seems to materialize at his side out of thin air.

“Victor!” Yuuri clutches the railing of the hall, willing his heart to stop stampeding in his chest.

“Yuuuuuuuri,” Victor all but croons. After a moment he seems to notice what he’s done, and his face falls a bit. “Ah, I’m sorry to startle you—“

“It’s okay,” Yuuri says, and takes a deep breath. “It’s fine.” Victor gives him a hopeful look, like a puppy desperate for a scratch behind the ears, and Yuuri sighs, a smile tugging at his lips despite himself. “I just wasn’t sure when to expect to see you.”

“Well, I couldn’t distract the guards forever.” Victor extends his arm, and Yuuri takes it, letting Victor lead him further down the hall, still in the general direction of the ballroom, where the dancing and drinking sounds like it’s still in full swing. “I tried to keep them as long as I could, though. Was it enough time? Was your meeting successful?”

“I think so,” says Yuuri. A servant approaches them with a tray of drinks, and she bows, managing a deep dip without so much as spilling a drop of the champagne. Victor snags two glasses from it, passing one to Yuuri and tipping his head at the servant before they move on.

“Tell me what happened,” Victor says, when the servant has passed. They walk slowly, sipping their champagne as Yuuri gives him a brief recap of what transpired. As they near the end of the hall, Victor slows, dropping into a wide couch tucked into an alcove off the hall they’re walking down, and Yuuri settles in next to him.

“You’re really not upset that I’m helping them do this?” Yuuri fiddles with his nearly-empty glass, glancing up at Victor. At some point Victor put his arm around Yuuri’s shoulders, but despite the semi-public space, Yuuri finds he doesn’t mind.

At the question, Victor shakes his head. “Not at all,” he says. “Seung-Gil and JJ are both valiant men, and I would trust both of them at my back in any fight. And Lady Isabella is a good woman. I’m happy that you’re able to help them.”

“I’m helping them break the law, technically,” Yuuri says. He’s not sure why, but the champagne is going to his head a bit more than earlier in the evening. Maybe it’s the late hour, or the amount of time since dinner.

Or maybe it’s Victor, he thinks. Victor seems to have that effect on him more and more, as of late.

“You seem to care a great deal more about this law than I do,” Victor says. As though he’s aware of what Yuuri is thinking, he’s lowered his voice, his head tilted invitingly towards Yuuri’s.

“Probably because you don’t have to worry about what’ll happen if you break one,” Yuuri says,
sharper than he really means to.

Victor blinks at the edge to his voice. Then his expression clears. “You’re right,” he says, and sighs. “But I do have to worry about punishing people who are dear to me, whatever I may truly want. I can’t cast aside laws or rules as I wish, not if I want the people to take me seriously someday.”

Yuuri feels a swell of affection in his heart that he doesn’t quite know what to do with, so he says nothing. He lets out a sigh of his own, settling against Victor’s shoulder. This conversation is getting more serious than he’s capable of at this time of night, he thinks; it’s late, and he’s tired, and Victor is …very comfortable.

He goes to take another drink, only to find his champagne glass is somehow empty. Victor laughs at the moue of disappointment Yuuri makes, which earns him an elbow to the ribs. “Here now,” Victor says, plucking the glass from Yuuri’s fingers and setting it aside. “Do you want me to bring you more?”

Yuuri lets out a huff of exasperation. “No,” he says. “Yes. Maybe.” Victor raises an eyebrow at him, and Yuuri hunches his shoulders. “Stop looking at me like that!”

“I have more wine in my quarters, if you wished to join me,” Victor says in a low voice.

Yuuri pauses. He glances at Victor, and tries not to blush at the heat in his gaze. Suddenly he’s very, very aware of how close they’re sitting, and how warm Victor’s body is against his, even through their clothes.

He should say no. The invitation is blatant, and—and he should be more careful than this. But as he starts to lose himself in Victor’s eyes again, a part of him wonders: isn’t this what he was hoping for? Has he been waiting, hoping for Victor to ask, because he’s pinned himself into a place where he doesn’t feel he can want this without calling himself a liar? Has he been drinking just enough wine to relax and say yes to the thing he most wants to do?

Yuuri doesn’t know. He just knows that there may be reasons to go back to his own bed tonight, but right now he doesn’t care about any of them.

“I don’t think it’s wine you’re after,” Yuuri says, carefully. Victor opens his mouth, but Yuuri presses his fingertips to Victor’s lips to silence him. “But since you offered, I’ll take both.”

Victor’s eyes darken; he kisses the pads of Yuuri’s fingertips, soft and just a little bit dirty, and Yuuri shivers. “As you wish,” he murmurs.

* * * * *

The trip to Victor’s quarters is mercifully brief, and uninterrupted by guards, guests, or servants. Yuuri doesn’t miss the way Victor fumbles when unlocking the door. He’s grateful—it’s good to not be the only one suffering nerves.

Yuuri half-expects Victor to push him up against the nearest hard surface once the door is unlocked, but he clearly isn’t giving Victor enough credit. Victor does pull Yuuri in for a slow, spine-tingling kiss, but after that he simply leads Yuuri over to an overstuffed couch by the wall that houses the fireplace. Yuuri sits down, and Victor crouches in front of him, taking both of Yuuri’s hands in his and kissing each of his knuckles in turn.

“You want more champagne?” Victor asks him. “Or would you prefer red wine?” Yuuri has to take a moment to catch his breath; the way Victor is looking up at him with that dark heat in his eyes makes Yuuri’s skin go hot and tight all over under his fine gown.
Yuuri takes a slow breath and lets it out. “Surprise me,” he says.

A smile flickers over Victor’s face, there and then gone. “I will try my hardest,” he says. Then he goes to get their drinks, leaving Yuuri to curl up on the couch and pretend that the heat flushing through him is the fault of the crackling fire and the wine he’s already consumed.

Minako’s face flashes in his mind, followed in short order by Phichit and even Yurio. All the long evenings spent in furtive practice, all the scheming and hard work he’s put into entering the tournament cycle, his dreams of winning his freedom—it all burns through his mind like a brushfire. Yuuri shivers, hugging himself a little.

Notions of modesty flit through his head but are just as easily dismissed. He doesn’t remember the last time he wanted something so badly. Or the last time someone else made him feel so wanted, so desired. Yuuri shuts his eyes, and decides that for tonight—just for one night—he’ll let himself have this.

Victor returns with a pair of wine glasses and a bottle of some unfamiliar sparkling wine—not champagne, but similar, with some sweet taste underneath; elderflower, Yuuri thinks. More pleasing than the wine is the way Victor toes off his shoes and settles onto the couch next to Yuuri. He wastes no time, pouring them each a glass of wine and then arranging them so that Yuuri can lay against his chest, Victor’s arm around his shoulders, Yuuri draped across Victor’s lap.

For awhile, they do little more than kiss—which is to say, Victor slowly melts what lingering reluctance at being here in his arms Yuuri has, each soft touch making Yuuri yearn for him more than the last. Victor’s kisses are slow, warm, interrupted with the occasional sip of wine or a whisper of something ridiculous into Yuuri’s ear: how beautiful Yuuri was while they were dancing, how no one could take their eyes off him, how everyone in the room was jealous of Victor for having Yuuri as his betrothed. It’s enough to make Yuuri squirm, already wet in his smallclothes even without the tickle of Victor’s lips against his ears and neck.

“I am grateful every single day for you,” Victor says. He reaches over to the table where the wine bottle sits, setting his empty glass down. He wraps both arms around Yuuri, kissing his eyelids, his mouth, the spot where his jaw meets his throat; Yuuri groans. “Grateful that you gave me a second chance.”

“I’ll be grateful when you stop teasing me,” Yuuri says hoarsely. “Victor, please—“

Victor smiles at him, his eyes a little glassy. He slides the fingers of one hand through Yuuri’s hair, making Yuuri shiver. “I’m not trying to tease you,” he says, and Yuuri is gratified to hear an answering roughness in his voice. “I just want to enjoy this, I don’t want to rush it.”

By way of answer, Yuuri reaches down, pressing his hand firmly against the tell-tale bulge in Victor’s pants. Victor’s breath hitches, color flaring in his cheeks. “I’m ready,” Yuuri says. “Now help me out of this gown.”

Victor groans and sits up a little straighter on the couch. He starts to reach for Yuuri—and then falters, his hands going instead to take Yuuri’s in both of his. “Are you sure?” he asks. “I know we’ve been drinking, and—“ He trails off.

“I’m not that drunk, Victor, I promise,” Yuuri says, and then pauses. Something’s not right here, he thinks. Victor has pursued him so relentlessly, been so charming and affectionate, and now, when Yuuri’s declared his readiness to be naked in his arms—now Victor gets cold feet?

“Victor,” he says after a moment, “is something wrong? You invited me to your rooms. Is this not
what you wanted?”

Immediately, Victor blanches. “No! It’s not—I want you here! I want you, that’s not what I meant…”

Yuuri reaches out, gently cupping Victor’s face in an echo of how Victor has touched him so many times. Victor sags a little, leaning into his touch, and Yuuri is shocked at the nervousness he sees in Victor’s face. “Tell me what’s bothering you,” Yuuri says softly.

Victor sighs. He lifts a hand, covering Yuuri’s with his own. “I’ve never done this before,” he whispers. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

For a moment, all Yuuri can do is stare.

Then: “What?” he hisses. “You—but what about all those stories? E-Everyone said you, that you had e-escorts over—when you were in Lutetia—“

“I did hire people to come over, yes,” says Victor. He’s watching Yuuri with open anxiety now, as though he half-expects Yuuri to vault from the couch and go storming out of the room. “But we never did anything. Or, well—I would ask questions, and we would talk about… this kind of thing, but that’s it.”

Yuuri doesn’t know what to do with this information. He’s too addled by desire; the idea of Victor being more inexperienced than him simply doesn’t slot with what Yuuri thought he knew. “But why?” he says, asking the question closest to the surface. “I don’t understand.”

“I just wanted to wait for you,” Victor says unhappily, and shrinks a little further into the couch.

Yuuri shuts his eyes, then opens them. After everything Yuuri went through, Victor was the one waiting for him, and—okay, he can’t think about this right now. He wants more information, but more than that, he wants Victor to stop looking so sad, so scared that he’s disappointed Yuuri yet again.

“Victor, it’s okay,” he says very gently. He lifts Victor’s hand, lifting it to kiss Victor’s knuckles, as though returning one of the innumerable times Victor’s kissed Yuuri’s hand. “We can talk about it later, alright? Or—we can stop for now, if you want.”

Victor groans. “Do you want to stop?” he asks. He reaches up to touch Yuuri’s face again, cradling his cheek, as though he can’t quite help himself.

This is ridiculous. “Victor, I wanted to do this with you the minute you showed up in my room tonight,” Yuuri says. Victor’s eyes widen, and to Yuuri’s relief his smile reappears.

Victor sits up, pulling Yuuri closer to him again, Yuuri’s beautiful gown spilling over the side of the couch as Yuuri straddles Victor’s lap. “I’ve been dreaming about having you like this since I laid eyes on you again,” Victor says. “The last thing I want to do is stop. I just—ugh, I just want to be good to you, Yuuri.”

“So be good to me,” Yuuri says in a low voice, and Victor’s eyes darken. Yuuri leans forward, and Victor meets him, kissing Yuuri hard as Yuuri wraps his arms around Victor’s shoulders. They kiss until they’re both breathless, Victor’s arms locked tight around Yuuri’s waist. Yuuri can feel Victor’s hardness again, pressing maddeningly against Yuuri through their clothes.

“You’ve done this before, right?” Victor says, in between kisses. Yuuri groans as Victor kisses messily over his throat, teeth scraping against his jaw. “Tell me what to do. Whatever you want is
Yuuri exhales heavily, staring at Victor from too close up. He thinks about telling Victor what ‘before’ means—a few fumbling nights with the Nishigoris, a guest in their marriage bed—and decides that, too, can wait. “Alright,” he says.

Under Yuuri’s direction, Victor’s confidence rallies. He carries Yuuri to the bed, where he begins the process of undressing him—divesting him first of the delicate jewelry he’s wearing, then peeling off his lovely gown with the utmost of care until Yuuri’s in just his smallclothes.

Victor crawls up the bed, kissing over Yuuri’s chest, his hands sliding up Yuuri’s trembling flank. “Stop,” Yuuri says, and Victor stills immediately. “You have to get naked too.”

“As you wish,” Victor says, and kneels up. Yuuri watches, mesmerized, as Victor slowly peels off his dress clothes, somehow managing to make the process into a show of the filthiest sort. Yuuri clutches at the bedclothes to keep from reaching for him, his breath hitching as he takes in the sight of Victor’s bare chest, the planes of his arms and stomach. He’s thought about Victor with his clothes off before, in the dark of night and privacy of his own bedchambers, but up close is something else.

Finally Victor is naked save for his smallclothes too. Yuuri sits up, pulse quickening as Victor crawls up the bed towards him, and he loses the last of his patience, reaching for Victor and pulling him in for another searing kiss. They tumble down together on the bed, Yuuri pulling Victor on top of him and slinging a leg up around Victor’s hips, grinding himself against Victor and making them both groan.

“Yuuri,” Victor whispers between kisses, “I want to touch you—can I touch you?”

The heat in his voice sends another shudder of want through Yuuri. He bites Victor’s lip, making Victor moan against his mouth. “Please touch me,” Yuuri says finally. “But I want to touch you too.”

Victor pulls back just enough to stare at him with wide, glassy eyes, and then his face lights up with a brilliant smile. “Please, Yuuri,” he says; the gravel in his voice goes right to Yuuri’s sex, and he moans.

They spend a few minutes just rolling around on the bed, taking turns kissing and palming down each other’s bodies. Yuuri tries to be patient, wanting Victor to touch him, to explore, to give him the opportunity to do what he wants—but with Victor naked on top of him, his alpha pheromones are that much stronger, and it’s driving him crazy with want. He keeps getting up, shoving Victor onto his back so that Yuuri can take a turn kissing down his throat to his chest, stroking down Victor’s ridiculously well-muscled abdomen.

“Yuuuuuuri,” Victor croons, tugging at Yuuri’s arms. Yuuri pauses and looks up to see Victor grinning at him, his expression almost drunk. Fuck, he’s so gorgeous like this, Yuuri thinks dizzily; for a moment he’s distracted by the faint flush up in Victor’s throat and face, and then Victor says, “I can smell your cunt, Yuuri.”

Yuuri’s stomach clenches, and he feels a fresh rush of slick between his thighs. There must be something in his face, because Victor’s gaze darkens, turning wicked. “You smell so good,” Victor says. Again he tugs at Yuuri’s arm, and this time Yuuri lets him pull him up Victor’s chest to settle at Victor’s side, where Victor can kiss him, hungry and full of need.

How is he supposed to resist this man? Yuuri wonders. Everything about him is intoxicating, from the rough edge in his voice, to the press of his fingers against Yuuri’s shoulders, the lingering taste of the elderflower wine on his lips. It makes Yuuri desperate, wanting, greedy for more.
It makes him dangerous.

“If you like the smell of me that much, you should see how I taste,” Yuuri says throatily. Victor stiffens against him; Yuuri watches in satisfaction as the realization burns through him, spots of color appearing in Victor’s cheeks like he’s gone feverish.

“Yuuri,” Victor breathes, an invocation. Yuuri strokes a piece of Victor’s hair out of his face and smiles at him.

Victor tugs Yuuri’s smallclothes off and settles between his spread thighs, Yuuri’s legs slightly bent at the knees, enough for Victor to slide one of his arms underneath Yuuri’s thigh. Victor exhales, stroking a finger along Yuuri’s hard, reddened little cock, tracing all the way down to the pink spread of his wet cunt. Yuuri groans, flexing slightly against the bed, and Victor chuckles, low and filthy.

“You smell even better from here,” says Victor.

“Stop teasing me, Victor,” Yuuri says. A petulant note has crept into his voice, but he’s finding it hard to care.

Victor bites his lip, glancing up at Yuuri’s face. Abruptly Yuuri remembers that Victor has never done this before, and he kicks himself mentally. “It’s okay, Victor,” he says, and Victor relaxes a fraction. “Just—just touch me, please. Um… use your fingertips.”

Victor’s gaze flicks from Yuuri’s face down to his sex, and then he leans in. Yuuri feels the faintest touch of two fingers stroking over him, smearing slick around, and he can’t stifle the needy noise he makes.

It’s apparently all the encouragement Victor needs, though, because he keeps going, teasing his fingers over Yuuri’s cunt and cock, then wrapping a hand around Yuuri’s length and stroking him. Yuuri gasps out loud as Victor leans down and licks at his cunt. “Ah!! V-Victor!”

“I like the way you taste,” Victor says. His voice is hoarse with desire.

Yuuri swallows. “Please don’t stop,” he says.

Soon Yuuri is squirming and trembling against the bed, clutching at a pillow in desperation as Victor licks him open under Yuuri’s shaky instructions. Victor might be a virgin, but either he’s spent entirely too much time ‘studying’ this or he’s just entirely too fast a learner. What he lacks in experience he’s more than making up for in effort.

Victor goes from exploratory little licks to long, filthy stripes up Yuuri’s sex, one hand working his cock, fingers of the other slowly pressing into Yuuri’s cunt alongside Victor’s tongue. Yuuri rocks his hips against Victor’s hands and mouth, gasping, pleasure shuddering up his spine. The noises Victor is making are somehow even hotter, moaning against Yuuri’s soaking cunt as Yuuri whines and tries to fuck himself against those wicked fingers inside him. He’s so close, he just needs a little more—

“Victor,” he pants, “please—I’m close, I’m almost there, I-I—“

In response, Victor presses a third finger into Yuuri’s cunt, thrusting them harder against Yuuri’s desperate rocking. The added pressure is all Yuuri needs, and within a few more moments his pleasure finally hits—his hips jerk of their own accord, spurting over his own stomach as he clenches around Victor’s hand.

Yuuri sags to the bed, panting hard, his head spinning as he tries to catch his breath. Victor pulls
back, wiping at his mouth before licking his fingers, staring at Yuuri the whole time. Just the eye contact makes Yuuri shudder. “You’re so amazing,” Victor says in a low voice, crawling up his body to gather Yuuri into his arms. He kisses Yuuri, and Yuuri moans against his mouth; the taste of his own come is strange and more than a little hot.

Yuuri indulges in the kiss for several long moments, luxuriating in this warmth, in Victor’s arms around him, their mingled scents lighting up something primal and sweet in the back of his head. But he can still feel Victor’s erection against his thigh. Without stopping to think twice, he reaches down, wrapping his hand around Victor’s cock and squeezing. Victor shudders against him, breaking away from the kiss to moan against Yuuri’s neck.

“I want to make you feel good too,” Yuuri murmurs. Victor pulls back to stare into his eyes, a dazed sort of smile on his face.

“Please,” he says, voice low. “Yuuri, please.” Despite his own recent orgasm, the hunger in his voice still makes Yuuri shiver.

This time it’s Yuuri who slides down to settle between Victor’s thighs, Victor shivering beneath him on the bed at every whisper-light touch. Yuuri really doesn’t have much to compare Victor to, but he doesn’t need to be an expert to think Victor looks amazing. His pubic hair is a silver several shades darker than the hair on his head, his thick erection jutting out at Yuuri as though in invitation. Yuuri draws his fingertips lightly down Victor’s hip-bone, eliciting a shaky moan that also serves to make Victor’s cock bob lewdly over his stomach.

“Now who’s teasing?” Yuuri looks up to see Victor propped up on his elbows, and the pink flush in his throat is now spreading down his chest.

“You tease me all the time, it’s only fair,” says Yuuri. He palms Victor’s cock, smearing his thumb against the pre-come glistening at the tip, and Victor makes another ragged noise.

“Yuuuuuriiiiii…!”

“So needy,” says Yuuri, but he’s smiling. He nuzzles Victor’s cock, exhaling softly against its length; Victor makes a noise in the back of his throat and lifts his hips slightly, as if trying to get more pressure on his dick. Yuuri wraps his hand more firmly around the base of Victor’s cock, and then licks up the bottom, flattening his tongue against the thick vein there.

“Oh, fuck,” Victor gasps out. Yuuri thinks about the fact that Victor’s never had someone do this for him before, and decides that he likes that idea a lot. Not that he’s remotely an expert himself, but he likes the thought of being the one, the only one, to draw noises out of Victor like this.

He stops teasing Victor after that, though. Yuuri wraps his mouth around the head, experimentally licking at the fat glans where it presses against his tongue, and is rewarded with another hot, shattered noise from Victor. Yuuri lets his eyes slide half-shut, trying to take more of Victor into his mouth; he feels Victor’s fingers threading through his hair, tugging a little, and Yuuri moans by way of response.

Yuuri can’t take Victor very deep without gagging, having to pull back and catch his breath. But Victor doesn’t seem to mind at all, judging from his noises and the way his fingers tighten in Yuuri’s hair. It’s only a few minutes before Victor’s hips are lifting of their own accord, his breathing gone fast and shallow. “Yuuri,” Victor pants, “I’m a-almost there, I’m—"

Yuuri pulls back, but only a little, stroking Victor’s cock and suckling hard at the glans at the same time, until Victor bucks his hips against Yuuri’s hand and lets go with a cry. Victor’s come fills
Yuuri’s mouth, hot and salty, and Yuuri’s skin goes hot and tight with want at the taste of it on his tongue.

Victor sags back to the bed, panting, one arm thrown across his face. Yuuri takes a few moments to wipe his mouth and chin, then crawls up the bed, leaning over Victor to grab the glass of water on the nightstand.

“Oh,” mumbles Victor. “Yuuri. That was. You’re amazing.” He peeks out from under his arm, smiling up at Yuuri with an expression so sweet and happy that Yuuri feels his heart stutter hard in his chest.

“So are you,” Yuuri says after a moment. He flops down on the bed next to Victor and snuggles in against him. Immediately, Victor wraps around him, sliding his fingers through Yuuri’s hair and rubbing his face against Yuuri’s, like an overly affectionate cat.

“Please stay here tonight,” Victor whispers. “Please? I can’t bear the idea of waking up without you.”

At this rate Yuuri thinks his heart is going to just burst from Victor being—Victor. Still, the offer is tempting. “Well,” Yuuri says, deliberately slow; Victor’s eyes widen, rapt with hope. Yuuri lets out a sigh. “Oh, alright.”

Victor beams at him. Before Yuuri can come up with anything intelligent to say, Victor pulls him closer and kisses him again, and it’s so easy to just melt against him and kiss back, to give in to this warmth. Yuuri wraps his arms around Victor in kind, tucking one of his knees between Victor’s legs and hooking his foot around the back of Victor’s calf.

“Victor,” Yuuri says, when they finally break away and are settling in under the soft linens of Victor’s bed. Victor looks at him. Yuuri smiles, hoping it doesn’t look as bashful as it feels. “I—really enjoyed myself tonight.”

Victor’s expression softens into something so tender that Yuuri almost can’t bear to look at him. “I’m so glad,” he says simply, and kisses him.

There’s more Yuuri wants to talk about—he wants to know how, exactly, Victor got those rumors attached to him, and why he thought it was a good idea, and he wants too to tell Victor about the Nishigoris, because he thinks Victor would want to know. But for now, he lets it go. Yuuri falls asleep with his face tucked against Victor’s shoulder, feeling safe and happy and—he thinks it only in the last moments before sleep—loved.

The fact that he’s completely forgotten to drink his heat-suppression tea does not even occur to him.

Chapter End Notes

For those who wish to know, the genitalia in this verse works as follows:

+ Cis omegas (men and women) all have the reproductive organs necessary for bearing children (i.e. Vagina, uterus, ovaries); cis male omegas also typically have a penis, scrotum, and prostate.
+ Cis betas have what we would call cis genitalia in our world: women have a vagina et al, men have a penis et al.
+ Cis alphas (men and women) have the reproductive organs necessary to impregnate someone else (i.e. Testes, penis, etc). Cis alpha women also typically have a vagina, uterus, etc.
+ It is possible for alpha women to successfully bear children, but alphas typically have more trouble with it than betas and omegas do, due to hormone levels. Similarly, it is possible for omega men to impregnate a partner, but typically have more trouble with it than betas and alphas do, due to hormone levels.
+ There is a wide range of genitalia for each dynamic, and trans individuals do exist; I have not made an exhaustive list of possibilities here.
+ This mechanic made the most sense to me as an author (and as someone who knows way too much about human biology). The rest comes down to my personal preference, as well as those of my closest fandom friends.

Other notes:
+ Gallia refers to the equivalent of France; Letitia is actually the Roman name for Paris; Bohemia refers to the equivalent of the Czech Republic.
+ Yes, the final chapter count went up to 12. Another chapter metastasized to such a length I had to cut it in half.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Winter Tournament approaches, and with it comes the increasingly thorny dilemma of Yuuri continuing to keep his secret from Victor.

Chapter Notes

Hi there! Just some up-front notes that I cleverly forgot to add last week.

First, some people were asking about Yuuri’s dress, and I wanted to tell you I got the inspiration for it here—it’s the blue one in the fourth panel. (Also reference: the third and fourth dress in this photoset, although Yuuri’s dress doesn’t have nearly that much tulle involved.)

Second, I keep forgetting to mention that I have a Twitter! I’m MUCH more active on Twitter than on tumblr, and you can find me here! Fair warning that it’s NSFW at times and I can’t follow everyone back without drowning in a sea of my own tears, but I love talking to folks in fandom. Come say hi!

“Yuuuuuuuri.”

Yuuri jumps. He looks up from his paperwork about tax liens and land forfeiture to see Minako standing in front of him, arms crossed. That, combined with the look on her face, is body language that Yuuri’s more used to seeing in the context of having set something valuable on fire. He shifts in his seat a little. “Y-Yes?”

“Where were you last night?”

Yuuri winces. “I got caught up in something—“

“Got caught up in Victor’s pants, you mean,” says Phichit. He pokes his head around Minako’s shoulder, the twinkle of mischief in his eye making Minako’s glower that much worse.

“We were working on political affairs,” Yuuri says. He hears the defensive note creeping into his voice, feels the way his face is going red, and has to fight to keep himself from shrinking into the chair like a scolded child.

Minako’s eyebrows go up. “You were supposed to excuse yourself from that by eight,” she says.

“I was busy!” Yuuri exclaims. “I’m sorry, I just—I didn’t—“

“The Midwinter Tourney is in less than two weeks,” says Minako. There’s something in her voice that Yuuri can’t quite identify, and that actually unnerves him worse than her outright anger would. “Yuuri. If you’ve changed your mind—“
“I haven’t changed my mind!” Yuuri stands up too quickly, jostling the table he’s been studying at, sending papers and books sliding off the table in a rush. All three of them wince at the clatter, and for several seconds they wait, listening to see if a servant or passer-by will poke their head into the solitary study.

When no one comes, Yuuri lets out a breath. “Look,” he says. “Fine, you’re—I’m not sure how I feel about Victor anymore. But unless one of you are here to tell me it’s legal for omegas to practice combat magic now, then our plan hasn’t changed.”

Minako and Phichit exchange a look. “Does this mean you aren’t planning to ask to break off the engagement if you win?” Phichit asks, after a moment.

Yuuri grimaces. “I don’t know if the King would grant that anyway,” he says. “Victor already asked for it once.”

“What?” “Wait, what?”

Briefly, Yuuri tells them about his spat in the kitchens with Victor (how long ago that seems, now) and the ensuing fight he overheard Victor having with his parents about their engagement. By the end of it, Minako is frowning at Yuuri for a whole new reason. “Why didn’t you tell us any of this sooner?” she demands. “I didn’t know Victor tried to break things off on your behalf!”

Yuuri shrugs, uncomfortable. “It’s not like we get a lot of time to talk in private, is it?” he says irritably. “And when we practice, I’m focusing on that! Not—not Victor, and whatever new embarrassing thing has happened because of him.”

“You know, you didn’t have to be embarrassed about deciding that you liked him,” Phichit says, in an entirely-too-reasonable voice. “You could have just said so.”

Yuuri deflates a little. He puts his hands on the table, staring down at the paperwork still scattered across his work area. “What am I supposed to say?” he says. “How am I supposed to be okay with marrying him if it means giving up something I’ve spent my whole life pursuing? How—how can I love him if being honest with him might mean he has to end the relationship, or arrest me?”

Neither Phichit nor Minako says anything for several moments. Yuuri takes a deep breath, and straightens. The sparkle in Phichit’s eye is gone, replaced by a seriousness Yuuri wishes wasn’t there.

Minako finally speaks, her voice grim. “So what happens if you do win, then?”

“I don’t know,” Yuuri says. “Maybe they wouldn’t want me as consort anymore, maybe—they’ll arrest me.”

“Or they might actually listen to you,” Phichit says. “It’ll be a lot harder to ignore that omegas are capable, if you’re right there in front of thousands of spectators.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Yuuri says. “But I have to do it. I don’t think I could live with myself if I just gave up without even trying.”

Minako nods, her expression clearing just a little. “I’m glad,” she says, simply.

“So just to be clear,” Phichit says, “you’re still competing, right?”

Yuuri raises an eyebrow at him, but nods.
“Okay, good,” says Phichit. “Because otherwise Yurio would probably murder you.”

Minako cackles, and Yuuri has to just shake his head and smile. Phichit’s not wrong, exactly; it’s just that over-the-top displeasure happens to be Yurio’s response to a great many things. Yuuri was not even slightly surprised that Yurio went apoplectic upon realizing that Yuuri was the same person who beat him during the Harvest Tourney. He’s surprised that it took Yurio three practices to make the connection, but then, more of their time in practice is spent on drilling particular moves than outright sparring, to avoid attracting attention.

Voices in the hallway outside the room make them break off, Yuuri leaning over to retrieve his fallen paperwork. “Don’t miss tonight,” Minako says in a low voice, and then she leaves the room, Phichit lingering for perhaps five seconds before he too leaves.

Yuuri sinks back into his chair, letting out a long sigh. He feels drained, conflicted, despite what he said to Minako and Phichit about his determination to compete.

The reality is that the more time he spends with Victor, the more awful giving him up sounds. But every time Yuuri tries to picture himself coming clean with his fiancé, the myriad ways it could go wrong make him clam up in anxiety: his heart races, his mouth dries up, and his chest gets tight, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

Even if he doesn’t ask to break the engagement—and Yuuri can admit he no longer wants to, finally—asking for the laws forbidding omegas from combat magic could still backfire. He and Minako could both be arrested, Victor could get in trouble if he chooses to pretend he doesn’t know and lets Yuuri compete, Victor could forbid him from competing, and a dozen other different versions of those possibilities.

More than once, the anxiety attacks have happened when Yuuri is quite literally in Victor’s arms, and what makes Yuuri that much more frustrated is that while Victor seems to accept his half-baked excuses, whenever Victor thinks Yuuri’s not looking, that fine line of worry reappears between his brows again. Yuuri inevitably ends up curled against Victor’s chest, his face tucked against Victor’s neck as he tries to focus only on his air, and on his alpha’s smell in his nose, Victor’s warm arms around him.

The lizard part of his brain always responds well to that—the implicit promise of his alpha’s presence that he’s safe, that he doesn’t have to be afraid—but the thinking, reasoning part of him knows that if Victor really knew what was making Yuuri so upset, things might go very differently for him.

Sleeping with Victor at the Winter Ball was definitely a mistake. Not because Yuuri regrets it, exactly, but because now that he’s done it once, Yuuri is finding it’s nearly impossible to resist doing it again.

Victor hasn’t been helping, either. He smells too good, smiles too sweetly, asks for more of Yuuri’s time with the widest, most earnest blue eyes the world (or at least Yuuri) has ever seen. Yuuri feels increasingly helpless in the face of his worsening attraction to Victor, and only the awareness that Victor seems just as smitten eases his mind at all.

Because Victor has made it clear that he adores Yuuri, and it’s—harder and harder to resist. He shows up with flowers at least once a week; he always has time for a game of Go or a walk in the gardens regardless of weather; and he seems to have made it his mission in life to track down anything Yuuri shows even the vaguest interest in and acquire it for him, like a proud cat bringing a dead mouse back as a trophy.

(Once, two weeks after the Winter Ball, he shows up with a gorgeous green gown that was clearly
tailor-made. Yuuri stares at it when Victor brings it out, showing off the gold thread that adorns its throat and the darting at the waist. He’s aware of his lover watching him with a hopeful look on his face.


“You said you liked the dress Lady Elanora was wearing at the ball,” Victor says. “So I had her dress-maker create one specially for you.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. He tries and fails not to smile as Victor comes over, wrapping his arms around Yuuri’s waist and nuzzling his hair. Yuuri tilts his face up, and Victor kisses him obligingly. “When am I going to wear it, though?” Yuuri murmurs, soft against Victor’s mouth.

“We’ll have to come up with something,” Victor says. Yuuri can see the corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles. “I promise not to let you down.”

All of that would be fine, or at least manageable, if that was all there was to worry about. But more and more evenings now end with Yuuri naked in Victor’s arms, the two of them wrapped around each other in bed. Victor is eager to make up for having waited for Yuuri for ten years by being the most dedicated sort of student, at least when it comes to what makes Yuuri gasp and shudder in pleasure.

He’s a quick learner, too. The bastard.

They should really be more discreet, Yuuri thinks, but he can’t blame it all on Victor either. That’s the problem. For every night Victor asks him to come enjoy an evening glass of wine with him, there are plenty others when Victor walks Yuuri to his door, ready to kiss him goodnight and walk away. All too often, Yuuri invents a reason to have Victor come in and ‘talk’ for a little while—when in reality, only the servants are really talking, and not about anything Yuuri particularly wants them to. Only the fact that Yuuri is still drinking his heat-suppressing tea has saved him from triggering a heat, he thinks.

(He’s only slipped up that one time, the night of the Winter Ball. Well—okay, twice, if you count last week, but Yuuri drank the missed dose the very next morning so he thinks it shouldn’t count. Victor’s just terribly distracting, that’s all.)

If he’s honest with himself, the main reason Yuuri hasn’t told Victor his secret is because he’s afraid: afraid of being forced to pick between Victor and his best talent at the Spark, the first and fiercest joy he knew in life. Yuuri knows there are other realms of magic, but none to which he’s taken so well, or devoted so much time and energy. But the more time he and Victor spend together, and the easier it is to talk to Victor, to let his guard down around Victor, the harder it is for Yuuri to hold this last secret back.

He’s told Victor most everything else he was keeping to himself, the last of his reserve and resentment fading away in the new intimacy they’ve found. Usually this happens at night, after their passion has worn them out, Yuuri draped half-on top of Victor with the covers dragged up to keep them from getting cold. Their quiet conversations after love-making are when Yuuri tells Victor about his childhood, about the excitement that turned to resentment in the years of not hearing from his betrothed, and about the point at eighteen when Yuuri decided to take matters into his own hands.

Victor is—‘ecstatic’ is too strong, but visibly relieved. “I was so scared,” Victor murmurs to him; Yuuri is astonished to see that his hands are shaking, his eyes wet a little bit. “I thought you had found someone else you loved.”
“No, no,” Yuuri says. “Nothing like that. Just a few nights with them when I stayed at their inn. Takeshi and Yuuko are—well, they’re good friends, but there’s nothing romantic there, I promise.”

He sits up slightly, propping himself on one elbow as he reaches to brush some of the hair out of Victor’s face. Victor smiles at him, disheveled and sweet. “There’s no one but you,” Yuuri says quietly. “That was why I was so mad at you.”

Victor catches Yuuri’s hand, cradling it to his face and kissing his palm. “I know,” he says. “So stupid of me. And I can’t imagine what you must have thought of me, at all those rumors when you first arrived…”

“Nothing good,” Yuuri admits. The expression in Victor’s eyes is so tender that it makes Yuuri feel weak, makes him ache deep inside where nothing can reach. “But why, exactly, did you think letting there be those rumors was a good idea, again? You never told me.”

Victor’s face shifts, a sheepish smile appearing. “It was Christophe’s idea,” he says. “He—he was of the opinion that you… wouldn’t be very impressed with me still being a virgin. The alpha’s supposed to be the experienced one, right?”

Yuuri sighs. “How can you be so incredible in some ways and so stupid in others?” he says.

Victor adopts an injured expression, sagging against the bed and pressing the back of his hand to his forehead. “My Yuuri is so cruel,” he whines, and to Yuuri’s consternation he starts to writhe back and forth in bed as though he’s being tortured. “How he wounds me!”

“Victor, stop, for goodness sake—“

“I can’t live with this cruelty!” Victor cries. “Ah, Yuuri, I’m fainting!”

“What is wrong with you!” Yuuri exclaims, starting to laugh. He shrieks as Victor suddenly rolls them in bed, and then it’s Yuuri’s turn to writhe around helplessly as Victor starts tickling his ribs. “VICTOR, NO!”

The torture ends only when Yuuri manages to flip them again, climbing on top of Victor to silence him with a kiss. They end up wearing themselves out again a much different way, Yuuri taking Victor inside him in what he’s quickly learning is one of his favorite positions: Victor holding him close with his arms wrapped around Yuuri’s waist as Yuuri straddles his hips to ride him.

That was three nights ago. Now, with Phichit and Minako’s questions still ringing in his ears, Yuuri wonders how the hell he’s supposed to find a way out of this mess.

“YUURI!”

Yuuri sits bolt upright, head jerking around at the voice. It’s Yurio who’s calling his name, standing in the doorway like impatience incarnate. “Come right now,” he says, when he sees he’s finally gotten Yuuri’s attention. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Alarm banishes the worrisome cobwebs in his mind, and Yuuri jumps to his feet, leaving his papers in disarray on the table to be dealt with later. He hurries to the door, and Yurio turns, stalking down the hallway ahead of Yuuri as he leads the way.

“There’s been a murder,” Yurio says. “And it looks like it may be related to the assassin.”

Yuuri’s steps falter, eyes widening. Then he picks up the pace again, hurrying alongside Yurio as they head down the hall, exiting at one of the doors that leads out to the gardens. Yuuri does not
even stop long enough to get his winter cloak, rushing outside with Yurio to see what has happened.

Yuuri regrets not having his cloak almost immediately: Ekaterina Palace is wrapped in her winter finery, a deep blanket of snow and ice swaddling every inch of the palace and its grounds. The only saving grace at the moment is the lack of wind, but Yuuri doesn’t trust that to stay as it is.

Yurio leads him out onto the grounds, near where the gardens give way to the open fields. There’s a small cluster of people already gathered there, servants and a few guards, but none of the royal family appear to be there yet.

“Where’s Victor?” Yuuri asks, as they draw near. He finds himself glad that Victor persuaded him that telling Yurio and Alexei about their investigations, despite being against it initially.

“Alexei went to get him, Messere,” says Yurio. Apparently he’s remembered his manners now that they’re approaching others, though Yuuri sort of forgot to care in the shock of hearing the news.

“I see,” says Yuuri distractedly. The spectators pull away as Yuuri and Yurio approach, enough that Yuuri can see what they’ve been clustered around.

The scene that greets his eyes is a grim one. A huge red stain mars the perfection of the snow, spreading out unevenly from a body sprawled half-in and half-out of a snowbank, as though he fell there in his dying throes. The limbs splay out from the body at unnatural angles that no living person would ever find comfortable.

Yuuri approaches slowly, crouching near the body to peer at it. The man’s left side is obscured in the snow, but his face is visible, as is the cause of death: his throat is slit, and a dagger juts from his chest, more blood staining the front of his clothes. In his mouth is a bit of something inexplicably green. After closer examination, Yuuri’s stomach lurches, and he understands why the others knew immediately this was related to the assassin: it’s a sprig of hemlock, tucked between his lips.

Wait—there’s something else on the front of his shirt. The blood here is so thick that it was hard to see at first. Yuuri reaches forward, gingerly prying at what appears to be a bit of sack cloth stuck to the man’s shirt. It comes away with a small amount of effort, revealing that it’s not cloth but a letter-sized piece of paper.

“Oh my God,” Yuuri breathes. “It’s a note.”

On the blood-stained paper is written one word: *Traitor.*

A man approaches them—Ser Otabek, Yuuri abruptly realizes, clad in a heavy cloak that obscures his identity till he’s close enough for his face to be visible. “Hello, my lord,” he says. “My apologies for such grim news. Yurio and I were heading out to the far practice field when we found this man here. I went to scout the grounds to find who did this, but so far I’ve found nothing.”

Yuuri’s familiar with the practice field Otabek’s talking about; the mage-knights often head out there to practice their more complicated magic, away from any structures that might inconveniently catch on fire. Yuuri himself was there recently, just last week, for a late-night practice with Yurio and Minako. More interesting to him than the destination is the fact that Otabek and Yurio were out here alone, but now’s hardly the time to comment on that.

Yuuri gets up, grateful to have a reason to pull away from the macabre spectacle at his feet. “Does anyone know who he is?” he asks. “I don’t recognize him.”

He’s greeted with a half-dozen shakes of the head. “No, Messere,” says one of the guards, a woman twice Yuuri’s age with a scar across her face. “He’s not one of ours. Though I don’t know why
“Someone would kill the assassin and not take credit for it.”

“We don’t know for sure he’s the assassin yet,” Yuuri says, still staring at the body. A shout comes from behind, and he turns to see Victor hurrying across the grounds towards him. Further back are the King and Queen, making their way through the snow accompanied by an entourage of guards and several mage-knights.

“Yuuri, are you hurt?” Victor demands, as soon as he’s close enough to make himself heard.

“No, I wasn’t here when it happened,” Yuuri says. In other circumstances he might have been annoyed or even amused that those were the first words out of Victor’s mouth, but he’s a little too shaken for it right now. “Do you recognize him?”

Victor spends another long moment staring into Yuuri’s face, as though reassuring himself that Yuuri is truly as well as he says. Only then does he turn, crouching by the dead body in the snow to peer more closely at his face. “No,” he says at last. “I don’t know him.”

“Look at the note,” Yuuri says in a low voice. Victor reaches out, brushing the edges of his fingers against the bloody slip of paper, and his face darkens.

“Someone wanted us to find him like this,” Victor says grimly.

“That’s what I thought too,” says Yuuri.

Victor stands, and they both turn as the King and Queen arrive at the scene. Yuuri tugs Victor back out of the way, the mage-knights and guards encircling the scene, facing outward. Yuuri hardly thinks it likely that whoever did this will come back for more, especially with so many people present, but he hardly blames them.

The King takes his turn crouching next to the body, but instead of just poking at the note on his chest, he does something more. Yuuri watches as he conjures a ball of light, then breathes into it, like he’s seen Victor do countless times. The summoned magic leaves the King’s hand to settle on the dead body, sinking into him and the snow around him.

For a few moments, the whole scene is limned in red fire, as though the King has set snow and corpse ablaze. Then, abruptly, the flames coalesce into the air above the body again, before reforming into something else: two figures, human. Their features are too nebulous to make out, but their body language speaks volumes.

Yuuri watches in fascination as the figures start to move: one stalking after the other, arguing indistinctly, followed by shoving back and forth. Yuuri startles as the second figure shoves the other and shouts, *How could you? You monster!* moments before jumping on him. The two of them scuffle, and Yuuri stiffens as the second figure produces a knife and slashes at the other man’s throat. The first figure topples to the ground, mortally wounded, the second figure standing over him in what appears to be great distress. Finally, the second figure crouches, producing a small scrap of something that Yuuri guesses to be the letter. He shoving his dagger into the murdered man’s chest to pin the letter into place, and then stalks off.

The King watches it all with a stony expression, the Queen standing right behind him with her arms crossed over her chest. When the two figures finally dissipate, he lets out a long sigh and stands.

“The person who did this was under a spell of concealment,” he says. “My conjure could not produce his true face.”

“How could you? You monster!” Yuuri asks. The King and Queen
glance at each other, then at Yuuri.

The King nods. “I think it likely, yes,” he says. “But we have to find out more before we know for sure. If someone free of guilt has killed this man, and known him to be the assassin, he or she should have come to us to announce their discovery. I want to know why they haven’t.”

“It’s also possible that this is meant to throw us off the trail of the true perpetrator,” says Victor, and his parents nod grimly. “Regardless, we need to know more.”

“Neither of you are allowed to walk the palace alone after nightfall,” says the Queen, sternly. “We will post more guards to patrol the grounds, as well. Until we find who is responsible for this, we cannot assume anyone’s safety.”

Yuuri’s heart sinks at that—getting around undetected at night is already enough of a challenge. But he can’t argue, and wouldn’t even if he could, probably. He feels Victor’s hand creep into his, and laces their fingers together automatically.

“Let’s go back inside,” says Victor softly. “The guards will deal with the body.”

“Alright,” says Yuuri. He shivers hard as a gust of wind blows ice straight through him, and Victor looks at him, expression sharpening.

“Yuuri,” he says. “You’re not even wearing a cloak, what were you thinking?”

“Yurio said a body had been found, I didn’t want to wait,” Yuuri says defensively—or starts to. Another gust of wind hits, and a shiver cuts him off mid-retort. Victor’s already taking off his own cloak and wrapping it around Yuuri’s shoulders before he can collect himself, and Yuuri is too grateful for the sudden warmth to bother arguing.

“Let’s go inside,” Victor says again. When he starts to walk towards the palace, Yuuri goes too—but he reaches for Victor’s hand again as they walk, sticking close to his side.

* * * * *

Whatever other issues Yuuri is having, the Midwinter Tourney is rapidly approaching, Shouldering all other concerns out of the way. He, Minako, Phichit, and Yurio try to fit as many practices in as humanly possible, falling into bed bone-tired at 11 or later more often than not. Literally the only thing that saves Yuuri during the last few days before the competition is that Victor is actually away from the palace with his knights—they’re doing a last-minute training camp right before the tourney.

Victor, being the prince, is of course not participating in the tournament himself, since the ultimate prize of the tournament cycle is a boon from the High King. But he’s a formidable opponent, and insists on putting himself through the same training his knights are undergoing. Yuuri spends the night in Victor’s quarters the evening before Victor and all his knights leave to train, and the two of them spend their time wearing themselves out in a very different way.

“Are you sure you don’t want to try watching the tournament with me, Yuuri?” Victor asks, once they’re basking in the afterglow. Yuuri is already half-asleep against his shoulder, and it takes him a moment to realize Victor’s asked him a question. “My mother might be able to make something for you to ease your sickness, if it comes. And I would love to have you there.”

“Ah… no,” Yuuri says, and then curses inwardly at his sex-addled brain. Victor is looking at him with that hopeful expression on his face that does such damage to Yuuri’s heart, and he needs something to say. So he blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind. “I actually really don’t like watching you practice.”
Victor’s eyebrows furrow. “What?”

Oh, fuck, Yuuri thinks. He sighs. “It makes me jealous.” he says, the truth even more bitter on his tongue than he thought it might taste. “I always wanted to do combat magic when I was younger, but as soon as I presented as an omega, I was forbidden from practicing it anymore.”

“Oh,” says Victor, and his expression softens into something sad. “Oh, Yuuri, I didn’t realize. I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay,” says Yuuri, because to say anything more would be dangerous folly. He’s already said too much. He kisses Victor to forestall any further discussion, and thankfully Victor lets the subject drop, content to wrap Yuuri up in his arms and settle into bed with him.

That was four days ago. Now Victor and his knights have returned, and with them have come all the other competitors who qualified for the Midwinter Tourney, as well as a host of spectators from Petrograd and outlying areas. But with the human participants and spectators comes much less welcome guests: dark, gathering storm clouds, carrying the promise of a blizzard.

Yuuri half-expects the tournament to be cancelled, or at least postponed, until the weather clears. The news that it will be held as scheduled surprises him, but he supposes that’s part of the challenge of the second stage of the tourney cycle: even the elements can turn against you.

And turn against him they have. To be fair, no one else is any better off, but it’s day two of the tournament, and the heavens have unleashed their wrath upon the poor souls stupid enough to want to compete out-of-doors at this time of year. The wind is howling like a vengeful spirit, dashing ice and snow against the walls of Ekaterina Palace, rendering the meager shelter of the best seats in the arena almost moot.

At least the two matches aren’t held back-to-back, Yuuri thinks grimly. He fought his first complete match yesterday against a foreign mage-knight, a woman from Gallia who very nearly speared Yuuri on her summoned lance. Yuuri ultimately lost their sudden death round, but he made up for it with the points he scored during the Style & Stamina round. The competition’s first major injury happened yesterday, as well—Michele Crispino wiped out mid-cast of a spell on a huge sheet of ice that had formed under him, thanks to one of his competitor’s spells, and has been forced to withdraw from the tournament due to a broken leg.

He’s lucky all he got was a broken leg, in Yuuri’s opinion. He’s luckier still that the Queen is such a skilled healer—according to Phichit’s account, Ser Michele is resting comfortably in the healer’s wing, and given two weeks or so to heal should be back to normal with no long-term issues.

The horn calling him sounds, cutting through his nervous ruminations. Yuuri shivers, and it has nothing to do with the wind. He’s got just one fight left, against his second opponent this tournament: Ser Jean-Jacques.

Why did it have to be JJ, Yuuri thinks to himself. Then he squares his shoulders and heads into the arena.

Snow whirls around him, muffling the sounds of the crowd up in the stands. Yuuri is honestly surprised so many people are still watching, though he does see dozens of localized flame-spells dispersed throughout the stands, with people huddling close to them for warmth. Others cluster under umbrellas, bundled in so many layers they look like fashionable bears. But the stands are not that much emptier than they were in the fall tournament, when the weather was cold but clear, and no snow lay on the ground.
JJ approaches the other end of the arena, rolling his shoulders out. His armor looks heavier than many Yuuri has seen, made of brilliant green plated scales. A muffled cheer goes up from the crowd, and JJ turns, raising his hands to accept his accolades. Yuuri smiles grimly to himself.

The announcer’s voice rings out, harder to hear now in the storm, but still understandable. “Presenting Ser Jean-Jacques of Acadia, and Ser Eros of Hellenium! They are here to face off in their Sudden Death match!”

Yuuri and JJ move to their starting positions and drop into their fighting stances. There’s at least a foot of snow on the ground beneath them, and the arena floor is treacherous with snowbanks and hidden sheets of ice. Yuuri’s fingertips and toes are already half-frozen from the cold, but inside his armor, his chest is tingling with adrenaline and the anticipation of the fight.

“Ready… Set…”

Sorry, JJ, Yuuri thinks to himself. You’ll have to prove your worth to Seung-Gil and Isabella some other way. He goes almost perfect still, calling magic to his hands, to his chest. If he wants to win this fight, he can’t let JJ pin him down—he has to get the drop on the other man.

“GO!”

Yuuri throws his hands out in front of him with a hoarse yell, and magic bursts forth, darting across the arena to JJ faster than thought. Ice erupts on JJ’s armor, like a glacier forming in fast-forward, and JJ staggers as he’s frozen solid, interrupting whatever spell he was going to cast.

Now’s his chance—he might even get the less-than-thirty-second bonus! Yuuri breaks into a run, sprinting towards JJ as fast as the treacherous ground will let him. He jerks his right hand, barking the word to call his dagger, and is just ten feet from his opponent when there’s a mighty CRACK! and JJ twists free of his prison of ice.

Yuuri darts forward, but JJ throws himself backwards into a somersault, shedding the last of the prison of ice. As he finishes, he drops seamlessly into a low lunge and plants his hands on the ground before kicking up. He flies through the air in a graceful arc and slams his heel into the snowy ground. Yuuri feels the strength of the spell like a pulse of heat a split-second before the wind hits him full in the face.

The windstorm JJ calls increases almost immediately to a gale, sending Yuuri staggering backwards before it literally picks him up and flings him across the arena like a rag doll. Yuuri cries out in fear—the ground lunges up to meet him—instinct moves his hands, a frantic half-twist gesture that slows his fall at the last possible instant before he crashes to the ground.

His breath whooshes out of him, leaving Yuuri winded and scrambling uselessly to his feet in a daze. At the other end of the arena, JJ’s getting to his feet again, twisting gracefully in the driving snow as more magic crackles at his hands. With the part of his brain that isn’t dazed from the fall, Yuuri realizes JJ’s about to call another spell.

Yuuri tries to side-step, to melt into the slipstream, intending to cut across the arena again. But fatigue from his first fight and dizziness from his fall make him slow. In the instant before Yuuri can cut open time’s fabric, JJ slams his hands together with a shout. Immediately, lightning cracks through the air around them. Yuuri screams as a bolt strikes the ground just feet from him, sympathetic energy crackling through his skin and armor.

I have to stop him, Yuuri thinks wildly. The wind storm and the lightning will take him out if he doesn’t kill the spells, and fast. Yuuri takes a deep breath and pushes off into the flip—just enough
power this time to execute a flip, arms held tight to his chest. Gale winds howl in his ears, snow driving directly into his eyes, but this time as Yuuri lands he manages to execute the spell.

Lightning crashes down in the spot where Yuuri was a split-second ago, but now he’s halfway across the arena. He has just one shot at this, so he has to make it count. Yuuri aims his trajectory at a spot just behind JJ—a route that takes him directly through the other mage-knight.

Yuuri blows through his opponent like running through a waterfall at full speed. The experience is awful, sending a shock through his whole body, his mouth tasting of ice and fire. Yuuri staggers as he comes out of the slipstream, nearly falling over. He turns to discover that although his trick broke JJ’s concentration enough to kill the lightning and the wind, it’s also put Yuuri much further away than he’d planned. Instead of coming out just feet from JJ, he’s emerged another third of the way down the arena from him.

Fuck, he’s exhausted. The slipstream spell has winded him, badly, and going that extra distance just now didn’t help. Yuuri has to stand in place for a moment, just panting, even as he lifts a hand to summon more magic for whatever spell he can call next. His fatigue is no surprise, considering that their skill and stamina round went on for an insane 48 minutes. JJ isn’t much better off than Yuuri. He looks as though simply standing upright is a challenge at the moment, his chest heaving with every breath he takes.

And though JJ’s windstorm has subsided, the blizzard they’re fighting in has not. Cold air cuts at Yuuri’s partially-exposed face like tiny knives; the snow is falling more heavily now, making it hard to see, to hear the voices in the stands. Yuuri shivers, keeping his eyes on his opponent as they both catch their breath.

JJ recovers first. He twists on one foot, arms crossed over his chest, his expression grim—gone is the usual cocky smile, which Yuuri knows means JJ’s at his limit too. Before Yuuri can react or move out of the way, JJ throws his arms out, white-purple magic flaring in a circle in front of his chest. Yuuri recognizes the spell an instant too late to react—

— and suddenly finds himself pinned into place, crackling electricity encircling his arms, trapping them against his sides. Yuuri cries out, shuddering as the noose tightens around him, holding him fast. Across the arena, JJ starts towards him, and to Yuuri’s dismay he summons a shining sword, eyes lit with a deadly determination.

Even through the muffling effect of the blowing snow, Yuuri can hear the crowd—shouting, maybe cheering JJ on, he thinks. Yuuri struggles, but the harder he fights against the electric cage, the tighter the magic encircles him. The only way to break the spell is to break JJ’s concentration, and the only way to do that is to play his last trump card.

Yuuri grits his teeth. JJ is perhaps ten meters away now—he’s out of time. With all the energy and concentration left to him, Yuuri clears his mind, reaching past the storm and his own fear to the island of clarity deep inside him. JJ’s coming closer—he’s lifting his sword, stepping into Yuuri’s space—Yuuri feels the magic flare up his spine, not JJ’s but his own, and JJ is right there, the sword at Yuuri’s throat—

“Yield,” JJ says. His face is lit up with a savage joy—and then his whole body jerks as the huge chunk of ice Yuuri lifted strikes the back of his head. JJ’s eyes roll for a moment, and then he simply collapses like a doll whose strings have been cut.

Immediately, the electricity imprisoning him vanishes. Yuuri nearly falls over himself, managing to stay upright only by an act of sheer will. He hears a strange roaring sound around him; it takes several seconds to register that it’s the noise of the crowd, risen to a deafening volume. He looks
around, and sees that every person in the arena is on their feet, shouting and applauding.

For him. They’re applauding for *him*.

Yuuri draws a shaky breath. The announcer’s magically amplified voice washes over him, but all Yuuri can feel is regret—he wanted to save gesture-less magic for the Grand Tourney, his ace in the hole that no one knew was coming. Doubtless now the other competitors will hear, and be wary, though at least they won’t know the extent of what he can or can’t do.

He manages to collect himself enough to wave, to accept his applause, and to help JJ to his feet when he wakes up a minute or so later (though he’ll be stuck in the healer’s tent for awhile, making sure no lasting harm has come to him). But when the attendant comes to the competitor’s quarters to try to bring the knight that everyone is talking about up to the royal box to meet the prince and his parents, Sir Eros is already gone.

* * * * *

Gossip about Ser Eros and his amazing achievement flies fast and thick after the Midwinter Tourney—combat magic with no gestures! Who knew such a thing was even possible?—but Yuuri does his best to keep his head down and just focus on the affairs of the future royal consort. He can’t help but smile a little bit when Victor sighs repeatedly about not having gotten the chance to meet the mysterious foreign knight, however.

“I’m so curious about him,” Victor says one night. “Or her! Where are they from? Who did they study with?”

He sighs. Yuuri glances up at him with a smile, draped across his lover’s lap, and Victor returns it, playing idly with Yuuri’s hair. They’ve been working on the draft of a policy brief for two hours now, and Yuuri can tell that Victor is looking for something new to focus on—not that Yuuri can blame him, exactly.

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance to meet whomever they are at the Grand Tourney,” Yuuri says mildly. “Maybe they’re just very private.”

“I suppose,” says Victor, clearly impatient. “But why do they insist on sneaking off after their victory?”

“It’s a mystery,” says Yuuri. It’s on his tongue to cry, *he’s right in front of you, Victor! He has been all along!* but he can’t—not yet. So instead he sits up, stealing Victor’s attention with a kiss. It turns out that Victor is all too willing to be distracted, so they spend no more time that night discussing mysterious mage-knights or policy briefs.

But the sweeter sort of time spent together does little to quiet Yuuri’s increasing frustration with keeping this particular secret. Where once he would not have trusted Victor any further than he could throw him, now Yuuri cannot shake the feeling that he is doing Victor a grave disservice by keeping this secret from him.

He gets confirmation for this feeling from the last source he would have imagined. One night, a few weeks after the Midwinter Tournament, Yuuri and Yurio are practicing together just the two of them in a room in the wing of the palace closed for construction.

Yuuri is trying to help Yurio improve his control—a great goal in theory, but one much more difficult to achieve in practice. Yurio has a dedication to practice that Yuuri has to respect, but he’s too impatient for results. Right now Yurio’s trying to summon a flame and keep it burning in front of
him for ten whole seconds, and results have ranged from “completely nonexistent” to “burnt hair and
eyebrows.”

Yuuri supposes they should be glad they haven’t set anything on fire yet—well, aside from Yuuri’s
outer shirt. Luckily he’d taken it off already when that happened, having worked up a sweat during
their warm-up routine.

“Ugh,” says Yurio, when his fireball poofs out of existence after just two seconds. “How did you
ever manage to master this?”

“I’ve been practicing it for almost four years,” Yuuri says. “You’re not going to be able to master it
in time for this year’s spring tournament, Yurio, I’m sorry. But you’re still already going faster than I
did when I first started studying.”

Yurio scowls at him by way of response, apparently not caring for Yuuri’s attempt at consolation.
“Whatever,” he says, surly. He stares fixedly at the sooty spot on the floor, all that remains of Yuuri’s
outer shirt. Then, as though on cue, he glances back over at Yuuri, blue eyes intent.

“Hey,” he says. “When are you gonna tell Victor you’re Ser Eros?”

Yuuri stares at him. “I, um,” he says intelligently. Yurio’s eyebrows go up. “I was—I was going to
reveal myself at the Grand Tourney—“

“Yeah, your whole plan to ask for a boon if you win,” Yurio says impatiently. “That’s stupid. What
if you don’t win? Are you just gonna slink off and never say anything?”

Yuuri’s indignation at hearing his plan called stupid dies on his tongue at the follow-up question. He
sighs, glancing away, suddenly unable to meet the intensity of Yurio’s gaze. “I don’t know,” he says.
“What if I tell Victor and he has me thrown in jail? Or forbids me from competing?”

“Are you kidding me?” Yurio demands. “Victor? We’re talking about the same man, right? The
crown prince who’s so disgustingly in love with you he can’t go two sentences without mentioning
your name?”

Yuuri can feel his face going red, but he doesn’t turn around again. “It’s not like I think he doesn’t
care for me,” he says. He crouches, poking uselessly at the pile of soot on the ground; inwardly, he’s
thinking of what Victor said about Seung-Gil and his fate. “But he’s the prince. He has to do the
right thing, obey the laws.”

“He doesn’t have to do anything,” Yurio says. He comes and crouches across from Yuuri, and now
Yuuri can tell he’s definitely being glared at. “He just chooses to obey the laws because he’s a good
man. Have you somehow forgotten everything he’s done in those adjudication sessions the two of
you do every week? I really thought you were less of an idiot than this.”

Yuuri’s face goes hot. Only now does he lift his gaze, leveling a murderous look at Yurio, who
appears unfazed. “It’s easy for you to tell me I should risk my life and my relationship when you
don’t have anything like this on the line,” he says curtly.

“I’m not the one who told you to sign up for this tournament in secret,” Yurio says. “You did that on
your own with your mentor’s help. I’m just saying that Victor is a good man who deserves better
than being lied to by you. You’re not giving him enough credit.”

“That’s enough,” Yuuri snaps, and stands up. “We’re done for the night.” He turns away, grabbing
up his cloak from where it’s been draped on a chair on one side of the room. Behind him he swears
he can feel Yurio watching him, Yurio’s gaze hot on the back of Yuuri’s neck.
“Hey,” says Yurio. Yuuri almost just leaves, but something in Yurio’s voice makes him stop. He hesitates a moment before turning around. Yurio is watching him with an inscrutable look on his face.

Yurio stares at him for a few moments, then scowls. “I think you can win the tournament,” he says. “But you should still tell Victor yourself.”

“Thanks for the suggestion,” Yuuri says, and leaves.

He’s less careful than he should be, heading back to his quarters. Yuuri makes it halfway there before he’s stopped by a guard standing watch at the entrance of one of the great halls, and only then does he realize he didn’t even remember to call a cloak of shadows before leaving the practice room.

Only the fact that he’s the prince’s intended saves him; once the guard recognizes him, he bows low, gesturing Yuuri through the door. Yuuri forces himself to walk the rest of the way at a more stately pace, not wanting to draw further attention to himself. He shuts the door and locks it once he makes it back, and then flings himself onto the bed, face-down in the covers.

Stupid, he thinks angrily. So stupid. He wants to be angry at Yurio, but deep down he knows the person he’s actually angry at is himself. On some level, Yuuri knows that he should take Yurio’s advice and speak his heart to Victor—that no matter what comes, Victor will be grateful for the act of trust.

But he’s spent so much of his life hiding this part of himself that the idea of opening up to Victor makes him go cold with fear, turns his blood to ice in his veins. Now that he contemplates it, though, Yuuri realizes that even the nature of that fear itself has changed.

Once, he was afraid that Victor would forbid him from practicing, that he and Minako would be imprisoned or executed for their crime. Now, the idea that makes him curl up on the bed with misery is the thought of Victor ending their engagement, the thought that he might not want Yuuri anymore after such a deception.

It takes him a long, long time to get to sleep that night, and when he does, his mind is full of uneasy dreams. But Yuuri has no idea how soon the question will be taken out of his hands—or how dire the situation will be that forces it.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's indecision about whether or not to tell Victor his secret is overridden when the situation is taken out of his hands.

Chapter Notes

The lovely and talented Rune did not one but two gorgeous fan arts for this fic!! They drew Yuuri and Victor in their outfits at the Winter Ball, and you should go check them out! Yuuri is here and Victor is here. Please go tell Rune how stunning their art is!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The week after Yuuri’s thought-provoking practice with Yurio is a difficult one. Yuuri can’t seem to shake the question Yurio put to him: When are you going to tell Victor? And the more he contemplates it, the harder it is to justify continuing to keep this secret from Victor, no matter how anxious the idea of confessing makes him.

Although by now Yuuri’s stopped pretending that he’s going to ask Victor to break off the engagement, his alternative plan doesn’t make him that much less nervous. Instead, as both Phichit and Minako have suggested, he now thinks he’ll ask the King to strike down the laws forbidding omegas from combat magic—if he’s given the chance, anyway.

(“You should just ask him outright, even if you lose,” Minako says at one point. “You’re his son’s betrothed and future heir, I think you have some weight here.”

“That’s assuming Victor still wants me after finding out I’ve been keeping it from him,” says Yuuri. He’s gloomy that day, exhausted from a rather heart-breaking adjudication round and a grueling practice session.

“Please,” says Minako, and rolls her eyes. “That man adores you.”

Yuuri worried at one point that his change of heart would upset her, but she’s seemed more relieved than anything since he confessed his change of plan to her. When he asked her about it, she merely cocked an eyebrow at him and said I just want you to be happy, Yuuri.)

More and more, Yuuri finds he can’t shake the mental image of betrayal on Victor’s face, hurt that Yuuri would keep something so important from him for so long. Yuuri has a dozen justifications that he tells himself over and over—he can’t risk not being allowed to compete, he can’t put Minako at risk until it’s too hard to hide what Yuuri’s done from the public, it’ll be easier to force the issue if he shows himself in front of the whole arena, and so on—but none of them quite seem to have the weight they used to. Not when Yuuri finds himself contemplating the idea of Victor deciding he can’t trust Yuuri, that he doesn’t want a fiance who would lie to him after all the hard work Victor put in.
Victor can tell something is wrong, Yuuri knows, but he’s apparently decided to give Yuuri time to work it out before forcing a conversation. Yuuri is at once grateful and frustrated—grateful because Victor’s worked so hard to be respectful and give Yuuri space, and frustrated because it would be so much easier to just confess if Victor asked him directly.

But as winter melts away and the first whispers of spring start to arrive, Yuuri finds that he and Victor have less and less time alone together. To Yuuri’s great discomfort, he discovers that the High King uses the festivities around the Grand Tourney to do a huge amount of political maneuvering. In addition to the Tourney, there’s also the Spring Fete (a party similar to the Winter Ball, during which the winner of the tourney will face off against the prince in a formal duel), as well as some kind of parade and arts bazaar held in Petrograd’s town square. The festivities bring visitors from far and wide. Thus, Petrograd and Ekaterina Palace will be playing host to a larger number of foreign dignitaries than usual as the Grand Tourney draws close.

Which means that if Yuuri actually succeeds in his plan, he’ll be outing himself as an omega flouting the laws of the land in front of a great many more people than he thought.

It also means that Victor and Yuuri are insanely busy, busier even than they were, because the King and Queen want the couple next in line to be fully involved in all the arrangements this year. Many nights, the two of them are so tired that the best they can manage is to drag themselves back to Yuuri or Victor’s quarters and just collapse into the same bed together with only the barest attempt at discretion. But some nights even that is beyond them—Victor goes into Petrograd more and more frequently to help with arrangements or meet with some merchant or noble. Those nights he ends up either staying at some noble’s manor for the night or coming back in the wee hours of the morning, leaving Yuuri to curl up alone in a bed that feels increasingly empty without Victor in it.

It’s on one such night, alone in his quarters with Victor gone into Petrograd again, that Yuuri finds sleep eluding him. He’s sore and tired from practice with Phichit and Minako, not to mention a day spent poring over endless paperwork, but nothing he does seems to matter—he still can’t fall asleep. Finally, at some dead hour of the morning, frustration wins out over exhaustion. He gets up and goes to his writing desk, pouring out the turmoil in his heart onto page after page of parchment.

Victor, there’s something I have to tell you—

Victor, there’s something you don’t know about me—

Victor, it turns out Ser Eros is actually me, and I’ve been lying to you for months. Also, I’ve been breaking the law that forbids omegas from combat magic since I was eleven and presented my dynamic—

Nothing sounds right. Yuuri crumples up the parchment and throws it into the fire, then curls up disconsolately on the blankets still piled on the thick carpet in front of it. He shoves his face into the plush weave, fancying he can still smell his and Victor’s mingled scent from when they made love here two nights ago.

The thought of his alpha—his Victor, his mate—brings a lump to the back of his throat. Yuuri wraps the blankets around him and curls up on his side, shoving his face against his arm to hide the choked-off sob that escapes. He weeps until he’s utterly worn out, too tired to even get up and crawl back into bed.

Yuuri spends the night there, on the floor in front of the fireplace. His dreams are dark and full of foreboding, and perhaps it’s the heat of the fire so close by, but anxious thoughts of Victor and vicious flame fill his mind’s eye.
It isn’t until much later that he thinks to wonder if those dreams were something more.

* * * * *

Yuuri wakes too early, sitting up with a grimace; sleeping on the floor is no kindness, especially compared to the luxurious comfort of his bed. He drags himself over to open the window-covers, squinting mistrustfully at the spring sunlight.

It has to be, what, eight? Nine at the latest? Why is he awake so early? It’s a rest day for him, and he shouldn’t have any duties until closer to noon, so what woke him?

Yuuri glances back at the now-dead fireplace. Something sour sits in the back of his throat, the faint taste of dread. The vestiges of his bad dreams linger in his mind, whispering foul rumors. They were just dreams, but—

—but he can’t help the feeling that something is wrong.

There’s nothing for it. Yuuri dresses without bathing, making a half-hearted attempt to fix his hair into something presentable before hurrying out of his quarters towards the royal wing. Victor should be back from the city by now. He has to lay eyes on Victor, has to see Victor’s face to reassure himself that nothing is wrong, and that his bad dreams were just dreams. He’ll tell Victor the truth, and beg for his forgiveness (and with luck, his help), and then this awful dread in his heart can finally leave him.

But when Yuuri gets down to the main hall, what he finds is chaos. There are guards and servants rushing around, and even as he comes into the room a number of mage-knights go running by him at full speed—Yuuri catches a glimpse of Michele Crispino adjusting a strap on his armor in mid-run, his face a pasty white.

“What’s going on?” Yuuri says. One of the servants glances his way, then at the guard by her side, clearly waffling about what to do.

Yuuri glares at her. “Tell me what is happening, right now,” he says, voice tight and dangerous.

The servant girl all but quails under his gaze, before stammering, “Th-there’s a dragon attacking the city walls, my lord! The mage-knights have gone to defend Petrograd, and the prince is already there!”

Yuuri stares. The servant girl says something else, but the roaring in his ears drowns out all else. The awful, nebulous dream he was having when he woke comes back to him: full of Victor’s face, a sense of terrible danger, and everything cloaked in flames and burning heat.

Dragonfire, Yuuri thinks. Then he turns and bolts in the direction of the stables.

He catches the mage-knights in the midst of saddling up—a number of them have already taken off at a gallop, and only a few remain, finishing setting their tack and climbing onto their mounts. Yuuri glances at the empty stables, then hurries towards the last remaining knights, Ser Christophe and Ser Georgi.

“My Lord Katsuki, you can’t come with us,” says Ser Christophe, glancing over at Yuuri with a frown. “This is too dangerous.”

“The prince would never forgive us for putting you in harm’s way,” adds Ser Georgi—or rather, he starts to, right up until Yuuri makes a sharp, choppy gesture with his hand and sends Georgi flying out of his saddle into a heap on the ground. “HEY!”
Yuuri doesn’t even bother to argue. He’s already vaulting into the vacated saddle, nudging the horse’s sides with his feet to urge it into a gallop. “My lord!” yells Georgi from behind him, but Yuuri has no time or attention for him.

The only thing in his mind is the need to get to Victor.

* * * * *

Yuuri all but runs his horse into the ground in his haste to get to Petrograd. He catches up with the other mage-knights just as they leave the huge wall surrounding the palace, and while a few of them seem uneasy at the sight of him riding along, one look at Yuuri’s expression seems to shut them up, for no one tries to turn him back.

By the time they reach the outskirts of the city, his mount is shiny with sweat, but for once in his life Yuuri doesn’t care. He can hear screams from the city, and a plume of black smoke drifts skyward from a spot on the great wall that encircles the outskirts of town. The knights are heading in that direction, and Yuuri urges his horse faster, needing to get to Victor before—before—

Noises of pitched battle meet their ears from up ahead, beyond the curve of the hill hiding the western edge of the city. There’s a deafening roar, a noise that could only come from the lungs of some massive creature. Yuuri’s horse rears, along with those of several of the other knights—war-horses they might be, but no horse alive was bred to face off against a dragon. Yuuri narrowly manages to dismount, swatting Giorgi’s horse on its flank to send it away before he breaks into a run, the knights hurrying along next to him.

Alongside Yuuri, Christophe summons a shining sword to his hand, while a vicious-looking spear burns to life in Mila’s. Yuuri’s palms itch to summon his daggers, but the only reason he doesn’t is because he’s saving his magic for a more powerful spell.

The fear in his heart cuts through all of his anxiety and indecision, laying bare a stark reality he can’t possibly live with: a world where Victor isn’t there, where Yuuri has his freedom at last because the man he loves is dead on the ground.

The dragon roars again, deafeningly loud from this close up. Yuuri and the knights round the bend at top speed, and are faced with a scene straight from a nightmare: the city wall half-destroyed on the plain, as though something enormous smashed into it at a great speed, with fires at seemingly random spots around the ground, trees and scrub and dead grass burning steadily. In the center of the destruction is the dragon: enormous, covered in poisonously blue-green scales, with a thick tail and a long, serpentine neck. Its mouth is as wide as a wagon, and each of its many teeth is the length of Yuuri’s arm.

And below the beast, ridiculously small by comparison and looking far too vulnerable, is Victor. He’s wearing shining silver armor, the one that Yuuri knows has the Kievan royal crest emblazoned on the chest, though they’re too far away to see it. In one hand he’s summoned a glittering shield, and in the other a bright sword blazes, pulsing with such power that Yuuri can feel it even at this distance.

Victor raises his sword, shouting something unintelligible; magic arcs from the tip of the blade and erupts in the dragon’s face, sending a huge burst energy arcing up its snout. The dragon screams in fury and rears on its hind legs, spreading its enormous wings. So large is the dragon and so wide is its wingspan that it blots out the sun, engulfing the land below it—and Victor—in its shadow.

The dragon opens its mouth wide, black tongue lolling out. Yuuri sees the flicker of its breath deep in its throat in the instant before the fire bursts forth, and his heart stops. He screams without
—And stares in shock as Victor flickers and vanishes from the spot moments before the flames engulf it, singeing the ground where he was just standing. Victor reappears a few seconds later, flickering back into reality at a spot some fifty meters away. His shield is gone, and the hand holding it is already crackling with another half-formed spell.

Abruptly, Yuuri realizes why there are so many little fires all around the plain. Relief floods him, making him weak for a few moments. Yuuri recovers quickly though, jolted by the belated discovery that none of Victor’s knights were stricken with the same paralysis as him—they’re halfway down the hill, ready to join the charge.

The dragon screeches in frustration at having missed its target; it jumps into the air, flapping its wings a few times to give it extra lift before landing closer to Victor. Yuuri is almost knocked off his feet from the shockwave when the beast hits ground again. Down below he sees Christophe topple over, though he gets to his feet immediately.

Yuuri doesn’t know what to do. But if he wants to help Victor, he has to get closer. He starts to make his way down the hill, but a hand on his arm stops him. He jumps, whirling, and comes face-to-face with Sara Crispino, her expression grim beneath her armor. She must have just arrived to the scene, Yuuri thinks distractedly, or lingered behind to watch the prince’s betrothed to see to it he stays out of danger.

“My lord, you can’t go any closer,” she says, which Yuuri does not want to hear.

“Victor needs help—“

“—and he has it,” Sara cuts in. “But if you were to put yourself in danger, it might be a fatal distraction. You must stay out of harm’s way, Messere!”

At this, Yuuri falters. Sara’s right; he’s not wearing his armor, and no one here save Phichit knows that he can defend himself, that he’s as formidable a knight as any of them. More importantly, Victor doesn’t know that, because Yuuri hasn’t fucking told him. So if he were to see Yuuri running down the hill to him, what else would he think but that his fiance is in mortal danger? What if he makes a mistake, because of his fear for Yuuri?

Yuuri looks back down towards the battle, his stomach lurching. Sara squeezes his arm. “Take heart, my lord,” she says in a low voice. “The prince is a formidable opponent, and with his knights at his side, he will not be easily slain.”

Yuuri has nothing useful to say to this, no matter how reassuring the comment is meant to be. He swallows, his mouth suddenly and painfully dry.

All he can do now is watch.

The mage-knights have come within the dragon’s perimeter now, and they’re spreading out, flanking the beast from as many sides as possible. Victor is flitting back and forth in front of the dragon, trying to draw its attention—and succeeding, judging from the way the dragon’s head weaves back and forth, following his movement like a snake following the zig-zagging of its prey.

Victor shouts something, whipping his sword in front of him again to send another burst of energy at the dragon. Instantly, the two knights at the dragon’s rear dart forward, heading for the beast’s back right leg. They attack it at the same time, Mila smashing her spear just above its scaly ankle as Otabek blasts its foot with a gout of crackling green energy. The dragon’s leg gives out under it, its
back end dropping over as it loses its balance, and the beast screams in fury.

Otabek and Mila spring out of the way again, just in time to avoid being crushed by the dragon as it hits the ground. But the dragon swings its huge tail in an arc as it tries to get up, and Otabek isn’t quite fast enough to avoid it. He gets hit broadside with it and goes flying, crashing to earth some fifteen meters away. Nearby, Yurio screams and goes running over to him, but Mila dances sideways, trying to distract the beast to keep it from going after Otabek while he’s down.

It works. The dragon hauls itself to its feet again and stalks after Mila, shaking the earth with every step. It lunges for her, swift as a viper, snapping its massive jaws on the air where she stood but moments prior. Mila backflips gracefully and then flings her hands out and forward. A huge chunk of rock unearths itself and hurtles into the dragon’s face, smashing right between its eyes.

The dragon screams, staggers sideways, and starts to topple over. Yuuri sucks in a breath, Sara’s hand tightening on his arm as the two of them stare. For a moment, it looks as though the dragon will go down, and several of the mage-knights come closer—

Only for the dragon to lurch back to its feet, turning far faster than a beast of that size should be able to manage and whipping its tail in a deadly arc. The tail cuts down four mage-knights faster than they can dodge, sending Phichit, Guang-hong, Leo, and Mila flying. Christophe is at the edge of its reach and only narrowly manages to dodge the tail—which, Yuuri sees with a stab of horror, leaves Victor cut off from the others as the dragon finishes its turn.

The dragon rears again, using its tail to compensate for the loss of strength in its right leg. Its massive wings flare out again, and then they start to beat, sending a rush of whirling air and debris at Victor like a Spark-summoned hurricane. Victor is sent tumbling across the plains, landing hard on his side, seemingly stunned. The dragon draws its head back on its long neck, mouth opening wide, smoke issuing forth in warning of what’s to come.

Yuuri sees it, sees Victor’s death coming in the instant before it strikes. He screams, shoving Sara away from him as he breaks into a run, calling the magic for the slipstream, already knowing he can’t get there in time, that Victor’s too far away. Flames erupt from the dragon’s mouth—

And Ser Emil bursts out of the slipstream directly in front of Victor, dragging magic with him in a bright barrier as he arrives, just as dragon fire engulfs them both. Yuuri’s scream of panic is lost in the noise of battle as he runs headlong down the hill—he can’t see what’s happened, now the beast itself is obscuring his view.

The dragon lands, planting its front feet on the ground with an earth-rattling boom, and immediately shrieks in rage as it’s attacked on three sides by mage-knights. A hail of Yurio’s fire-arrows cuts a swathe through its right wing at the same time as Christophe slashes at its left foot, while Phichit, Leo and Guang-hong send blasts of energy at its back flank. Off to the side, where the dragon’s breath just engulfed Victor and Emil, Yuuri sees someone dashing over to the unmoving figure on the ground—Michele, he realizes.

The dragon screams in frustration, trying to turn and attack the nearest assailant—and that’s when Yuuri sees the blur of someone flitting in and out of the slipstream, a ghostly presence that doesn’t quite solidify enough for him to identify.

Only once the mystery knight is on the dragon’s back do they fully come out of the slipstream. Yuuri’s heart thumps painfully in his chest at the sight of Victor’s silver hair, flashing in the sun almost as bright as his armor. Victor doesn’t even break stride as he emerges, swinging a hand above him as he calls his sword to life once more and darts up the back of the dragon’s neck.
The dragon shrieks and swings its head from side to side, trying to buck Victor off. But Victor vaults skillfully up its neck, twice touching a hand to its scales for balance. As he reaches the apex of the neck, Victor crouches for just a moment, his sword held out, burning brighter by the second as he funnels power into it.

Then he strikes: vaulting into the air and driving his sword down beneath him as he lands, directly into the dragon’s skull. All the magic channeled into the blade erupts at once, sending a shockwave of energy through the dragon’s head and neck.

Yuuri staggers as the dragon falls heavily to the ground, its head wobbling back and forth almost drunkenly. Victor vanishes into the slipstream, re-appearing some ten meters from the dragon’s side before hurrying further away, all the mage-knights spreading out as well. Yuuri watches, mesmerized, as the beast slowly keels over, its huge tail striking the ground in a death throe before it finally stills.

Yuuri’s breath leaves his lungs in a rush; for several seconds, he’s dizzy, so weak with relief he can barely function. Then reality kicks in again, and he’s running down the hill, shouting Victor’s name. “Victor! VICTOR!”

At the sound of Yuuri’s voice, Victor startles, turning around quickly. “Yuuri!” he exclaims, and breaks into a run. They meet in the middle, Yuuri all but flinging himself into Victor’s arms, wrapping his own tightly around Victor’s shoulders.

“Yuuri, you’re shaking,” says Victor. He tries to pull back, presumably to look at Yuuri’s face, but Yuuri just clings to him tighter.

“I thought it killed you,” Yuuri says, his voice tight with emotion. “It—when it breathed fire—I saw it, you and Emil both—“

Victor makes a noise, and he engulfs Yuuri in a rib-bruising hug, all but lifting him in the air. “Emil saved me,” he says, soft and right into Yuuri’s ear. “He called a barrier in the nick of time, though it wasn’t totally effective.”

“Are you hurt?” Yuuri demands. He finally pulls back, heedless of his aching head and pounding heart, hands on Victor’s shoulders as he starts to inspect his mate for injuries. He probes at a spot where Victor’s armor has a chink in it, where the cuirass meets the pauldron, and Victor hisses. “You are!”

“Not badly,” says Victor. To Yuuri’s surprise and also dismay, he’s smiling.

“What are you smiling about? This isn’t—this isn’t funny—!”

“I don’t think it’s funny at all,” Victor says instantly, and pulls Yuuri in close again, stealing a kiss. Yuuri grants it, the fine trembling that’s taken hold of him even worse now. “I just can’t help but be happy that my beautiful fiance witnessed me doing something as heroic as slaying a dragon.”

Yuuri’s breath leaves his lung in a whoosh. “You’re ridiculous,” he gets out; he beats a closed hand against Victor’s chest. “I can’t—you—how dare you!”

“Don’t be mad at me, Yuuri,” says Victor, who continues to sound very much not sorry at all. He hasn’t let go of Yuuri either, something Yuuri’s very grateful for.

“Why did you come try to fight it yourself?” Yuuri cries. “You could have been killed! You almost were!”
At this, Victor’s mirth fades a little, and he soberes. “It was coming through the wall,” he says. “I couldn’t wait. There’s a church on the other side, and it was full of people there for morning services.”

Yuuri swallows hard. “I’m sorry I worried you,” Victor says. His voice is very soft, private. He catches Yuuri’s face in his hand, leaning in until their foreheads brush.

An ache in his chest threatens to swallow Yuuri up; he has to close his eyes against it, the nearness of what almost happened. “Please don’t scare me like that,” Yuuri whispers. “I thought I was going to lose you.” His voice breaks a little at the end, the tears that have been threatening to spill finally trickling down his cheeks.

Victor kisses his face, brushing away the tears with his thumb. “I won’t leave you, my darling,” he says. “I promise.”

Yuuri takes a deep, shuddery breath, unable to answer for a moment. He opens his eyes, blinking through his wet lashes; Victor’s smiling at him, his tender expression un tarnished by the smears of ash on his cheek. Something lifts in Yuuri’s heart, his previous indecision suddenly idiotic in the face of this.

“Victor, there’s something I have to tell you,” he says shakily. “I’ve been wanting to, but—but I was scared.”

Victor’s brow furrows. “Is it the thing that’s been bothering you for awhile now?” he asks, and Yuuri nods. “Oh, good—I was worried about you, Yuuri. You—”

“Your highness! Victor!”

Christophe’s voice breaks into their moment; abruptly Yuuri remembers that they aren’t exactly in the privacy of their bedchambers. Yuuri and Victor look over to see Christophe hurrying up to them, his expression grim.

“Ser Emil is gravely injured,” says Chris. Victor goes pale. Then he and Yuuri are hurrying down the hill after Chris, heading for the small clump of knights on the plain, surrounding an ominously still figure.

Yuuri’s heart, which had finally started to slow down, now climbs back up into his throat. He spares a moment to feel guilty that he allowed his crushing fear for Victor to eclipse his awareness of Emil’s brave rescue. The knights pull back as he and Victor come close, leaving Ser Michele on the ground, cradling Emil.

Emil looks ghastly. His face is deathly pale, angry raw burns on his hands and one shoulder where his armor was destroyed. He’s bleeding from a spot on his side, under one of his faulds that has broken in half. But his face brightens as Victor crouches next to him.

“Your majesty,” he croaks. “I’m so glad you’re safe—”

“So thanks to you, Ser,” says Victor. “Now hush, let me see to your injuries.” He’s already calling magic to his hands, moving them slowly just above Emil’s burns, leaving them encased in what looks like shimmering white netting.

But Emil sits up instead, coughing as he reaches for Victor, grabbing hold of his forearm. “Please forgive me, your highness,” he says; Yuuri winces at the roughness to his voice. It sounds as if he got a lungful of the dragon’s smoke as well as its flames. “I should not—I should not have let him in, but I did not know his intentions, Messere, I swear to you. I was so glad when he failed.”
Failed?

Victor’s hands slow, glancing up from Emil’s injuries to his face. Around them, the other knights exchange uneasy glances, as though they’ve suddenly become privy to a conversation none of them actually wants to hear. “What are you talking about?” Victor asks. His voice is low, urgent.

“I regretted it so much. I killed him for his treachery, my lord,” Emil says. He gives Victor a brittle smile.

“Emil, who? Who are you talking about?”

“The poisoner, your highness,” Emil says, and grits his teeth.

Yuuri feels his heart thump hard in his chest. Everyone goes completely silent. “Emil,” Victor breathes. Yuuri can hear the shock in his voice.

But before he can say anything else, Emil’s strength finally fails him. He collapses backwards into Michele’s arms, completely unconscious. “Emil!” Victor shouts, but the man is out cold.

Everything is very chaotic after that.

* * * * *

For awhile it looks as though Emil might not make it long enough to explain himself to anyone at all, but Victor’s healing magic has improved since he’s been back under his mother’s tutelage. After a tense thirty minutes of touch-and-go, Victor’s spells buttressed by energy summoned for him by Yuuri and Michele, Emil is finally breathing steadily again, has even managed to open his eyes. But he’s only barely conscious, certainly not well enough to hold a conversation.

Emil is taken back to Ekaterina Palace by carriage, with Victor, Michele, and Otabek riding along—Otabek is only slightly worse for the wear from the fight, but Yurio insists. Michele, meanwhile, is a bit of a wreck; Yuuri is unsurprised to hear that he and Emil are lovers. No doubt Victor wants to know if Michele knew about Emil’s secret, though from the shattered expression on the man’s face, Yuuri guesses not.

Some of the other knights stay behind to oversee the disposal of the dragon’s body, and see to it that the chaos around the half-destroyed wall doesn’t grow too much worse in the wake of the fight. Yuuri overhears Christophe and Mila talking in low voices about what it was, exactly, that caused the dragon to rouse itself and attack the city, and Yuuri finds he’s very curious indeed to know if there’s an answer.

Someone rounds up the horses that scattered in fear from the dragon—Yuuri thinks it’s a minor miracle that they weren’t lost or stolen, but apparently they were trained well enough to not wander too far from their riders. Yuuri rides Victor’s horse back with Georgi’s horse tailing close behind, since Victor went back with the carriage.

Phichit and Yurio ride close by him, as though concerned he’s going to do something stupid, or invite trouble. Like what, Yuuri wonders. Chase down bandits? Summon a baby dragon? But he’s grateful for the company all the same.

(“I half-expected you to come wading into battle yourself, Yuuri,” says Phichit. They’re riding three abreast, Yurio on one side and Phichit on the other.

“I almost did,” Yuuri says. “But Sara stopped me. She pointed out that Victor might make a stupid mistake if he saw me in danger—“
“Yeah, because you still haven’t told him you can fight,” Yurio says loudly. Yuuri shoots him a dirty glare, but the efficacy is shot somewhat by the way Phichit laughs at him.

“I’ll thank you for remembering your tongues, good knights,” Yuuri says tightly. There must be something in his voice, because neither Phichit nor Yurio says another word to him about it.)

Yuuri doesn’t say that the only thing that kept him from spitting it out back at the fight was Emil nearly keeling over dead. But his own situation has to wait in light of the scandal they’ve just uncovered.

As scary as it was watching Victor so narrowly evade death, almost more upsetting still is the idea that Emil was somehow complicit in the assassination attempt—a man Victor has trained with for the past year, someone he knows and trusted. Yuuri can only imagine how heartsick Victor must be, and it weighs heavily on Yuuri, too.

They make it to the stables, where guards and a stony-looking Alexei are waiting for them. The three of them alight from their mounts as Alexei makes a beeline for Yuuri.

“My lord, I am glad to see you are well,” says Alexei. His expression is bland, but his tone of voice puts Yuuri in mind of how Minako sounded the time he nearly burned his mother’s kitchen down. “Next time you desire to ride headlong into danger, however, I humbly suggest you at least take some protection with you.”

“I was with the mage-knights,” Yuuri says.

“Certainly,” says Alexei. “All of whom were definitely engaged in watching out for your safety, and not in fighting a dragon.”

Yuuri raises his eyebrows, but Alexei says nothing more about it, merely holds out a cloak for Yuuri. Yurio and Phichit are studiously avoiding making eye contact, intent on unsaddling their horses and getting inside, so they’re no help. Yuuri sighs and decides being cross about the subject isn’t worth it.

“How is Ser Emil?” he asks, as he holds still to let Alexei fasten the cloak at his throat.

“He lives, but his Highness and the Queen are busy tending to him,” says Alexei. “Her Majesty thinks that Emil may yet be able to tell us what happened, so long as they can help him through his injuries.”

“I see,” says Yuuri. So Alexei, at least, has already heard the news; Yuuri only hopes that the rumor will not spread quicker than their ability to deal with the situation. He sighs. “I want to be there if he awakens enough to answer questions.”

“Of course, my lord,” says Alexei. “His highness has already instructed as much. For now, though, perhaps you would like to rest, and recover? I understand you fled the castle before even getting to eat.” Or bathe, he does not say, although now that Yuuri thinks of it he smells about as ripe as one of the horses here in the stables.

So Yuuri lets Alexei usher him in, flanked by a half-dozen guards. Yuuri is less than charmed when said guards accompany him and Alexei all the way to his quarters.

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“How is Ser Emil?” he asks, as Alexei shuts the door behind them, leaving at least the guards in the hall.

“It is until we learn if anyone else was an accomplice to Ser Emil,” says Alexei grimly. Yuuri has nothing to say to this. “I will draw you a bath and then bring you a tray of food from the kitchens,
my lord. Please, for the prince’s sake if not for your own, do not leave your quarters unaccompanied.”

Yuuri can think of about twelve things to say to this suggestion, up to and including *make me* and *what do you take me for, a child?*, but he finds he’s rather exhausted from the morning he’s had. So he sinks into the bath Alexei draws him, and eats everything he’s brought up from the kitchens (a large sandwich and some of Chef’s amazing leek soup), and then he actually falls asleep on the couch by the fireplace.

It turns out to be a good thing that he rests when he does, because when a knock comes at the door to wake him an hour or so later, it’s Queen Elizaveta herself. She’s accompanied by two of her personal guards and wearing a very grim expression indeed. “He’s awake,” she says shortly. “Victor is with him, as is the King. Come quickly.”

Yuuri and the Queen hurry through the palace towards the healer’s rooms; Yuuri thinks he’s never seen so many armed guards looking so visible. When they reach the healer’s hall, the door is shut and barred, more guards stationed outside. The Queen gestures, the massive wooden arm across the door floating up and to the side, and then the door opens inward.

As they enter, the healers file out, leaving Yuuri and the royal family in privacy with their charge. Emil is sitting upright on a cot, looking wan but considerably less near death than the last time Yuuri saw him. He’s in just a simple white shift, and his burnt arm is bandaged and laying across his chest in a sling. The head of his cot is flanked on both sides by tables covered in myriad bowls full of herb pastes and ointments. Victor is sitting in a chair pulled up next to the bed with an empty chair beside him, the King standing on the other side of the bed.

“You’re here,” says Victor, looking visibly relieved. “Good. I wanted you to be here for this.”

On another day, Yuuri might try for more propriety, might merely have sat in the chair next to Victor and demurely folded his hands. But today he watched Victor narrowly cheat death, and he’s about to listen to a man discuss a plot to murder Victor. So Yuuri forgoes the chair entirely, coming over to stand next to Victor and wrap an arm around his shoulders. Victor glances at him with a pleased expression on his face before he slides his arm around Yuuri’s waist and squeezes gently.

Queen Elizaveta comes to stand by her husband, leaving the chair next to Victor empty. “Alright, Ser Emil,” says the King, gazing steadily at the man stretched out in bed before them. “Your heroism today saved my son’s life, so it weighs heavily on our hearts to know that you were involved in an attempt to take it some months ago. Now is the chance to explain yourself. So speak.”

Emil sighs, sitting up a little straighter with a grimace. “I don’t know where to start,” he says tiredly. “Your Majesties are too kind. I would have died for you today, my prince. It was what I deserved.”

Here Emil looks at Victor, and the sadness in his eyes twists at something in Yuuri’s heart. “Please, Ser Emil,” he says, before he even realizes he’s going to say something. “We would hear what has happened, and what reasons you have for them.”

Emil nods, and takes a deep breath. The story he launches into is a long one—starting well before he even came to the High King’s court to train as a mage-knight. He tells them about the cloaked stranger who came to him at an inn, back in Bohemia, a man who threatened to expose a bastard heir to the throne, a scandal that would devastate the royal family’s tenuous rule—possibly even provoking a new civil war.

“My country is still healing from a decade of conflict,” Emil says unhappily. He’s staring at the covers on his lap, fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. “Lord Plushenko told me that if I wanted to
avoid starting a new war, I would do as he said.”

What Plushenko wanted, it seemed, was unfettered access to Ekaterina Palace. Emil swears up and down that he didn’t know that the agent Plushenko sent was there to try to kill Victor. Yuuri is expecting not to enjoy this story much; he has to fight not to set something on fire as he listens to the narration of a nearly-fatal attempt on Victor’s life. But when Emil relays the part where Yuuri actually surprised the assassin in the middle of searching through the pantry for licorice, a shiver goes down Yuuri’s spine at the idea of the would-be killer so close to hand, when Yuuri had no idea.

Apparently Yuuri’s not the only one disturbed by it. “How would you know about that?” Victor demands.

“He said something about it when I confronted him on the grounds,” Emil says. “‘I should have done away with the prince and his pretty fiance that night they interrupted me in the kitchens, but Plushenko wanted it quiet,’ he said.”

“You confronted him,” repeats Queen Elizaveta, re-directing the conversation before it goes off-topic. “Tell us about that.”

Emil sighs. “When I realized what I’d—almost helped to do, I couldn’t live with it. I resolved to put a stop to it the next time Plushenko’s man came around. I met him at the far gate, the one that lets onto the woods, and I told him I wasn’t going to help him commit treason.”

Yuuri sees the King and Queen exchange a glance; he has no idea what the significance is. “Why didn’t you come to us then?” asks the King. His brow furrows as he frowns.

Emil’s shoulders slump. For several seconds, he doesn’t answer. “Ser Michele had just asked me to be his mate,” he says finally. “I—I foolishly hoped that I could simply bury the affair. I convinced myself that Lord Plushenko was lying, that he couldn’t follow through on his threat. But a few days ago, I saw one of his men leaving a public house in Petrograd, and I knew it wasn’t over.”

“You think the dragon’s attack on the city is Plushenko’s doing, then?” Victor asks. He rubs at his face with the hand not attached to the arm around Yuuri’s waist. He sounds tired; Yuuri can hardly blame him.

At the question, Emil nods. “I don’t know how he found out your Highness would be in Petrograd, but I’m sure he planned it that way,” he says. “It’s well-known in the city how Kieva’s prince feels honor-bound to serve his people. I’m sure he was counting on Victor rushing to the defense of Petrograd.”

“Regardless of whether that’s true, Victor survived his fight today because of you,” says the King. He gestures, and Victor stands, re-settling his arm around Yuuri as he does so. “We’ll be leaving you now, Ser Emil.”

With that, he turns, and Yuuri, Victor, and the Queen all follow him out of the room. The healers file back in as the royal family leaves, and with a gesture the King seals the door again. They head down the hall to another private study, guards flanking the entrance.

Within moments of entering the privacy of the study, frustration makes Yuuri burst out, “Do you even know this man Plushenko? Why does he want you dead so badly that he’d risk harassing a dragon to achieve it?”

Victor glances at him, but the Queen answers before Victor gets the chance. “Victor’s death would throw all of Kieva into chaos,” she says. Her voice is as stony as her expression, her arms crossed
over her chest. “Without an heir apparent to the throne of the High King, jurisdiction over his lands would come into dispute. It would be a prime opportunity for a usurper to make a power grab anywhere in Kieva.”

“Which means that regardless of what we decide about Ser Emil, we can’t afford to ignore the situation that caused this,” says the King. He sighs. “Strictly speaking, the punishment for treason against the crown is death. But if we execute Emil, it will almost certainly spark a war with Bohemia.”

“We can’t show weakness after such an insult to the crown,” says the Queen. “If it weren’t for Yuuri, Victor would have died of hemlock poisoning.” Her voice is cold, colder than the depths of the winter they just emerged from, and Yuuri shivers. Not for the first time, he reflects that the real power behind the throne isn’t the High King, but his Queen.

“Ser Emil is one of my knights, and I’m not going to watch him be put to death,” says Victor loudly. He paces across the room, to the window and back, his agitation painfully apparent. “You weren’t there today, you didn’t see what he did—“

“Who knows what else this Plushenko could be ready to throw at you?” the Queen demands. “He allowed an assassin entrance to our home! He aided in treason against you, Victor!”

“If Emil really wanted Victor dead, all he’d have had to do is not jump in front of the dragon’s breath today,” says Yuuri. All three members of the royal family turn to look at him. “And if Plushenko meant his threat, Emil certainly didn’t help prevent that scandal he was worried about.”

“So you think we should trust him,” says the King. He’s studying Yuuri intently; Yuuri has to fight not to visibly squirm.

He takes a deep breath. Despite himself, despite the thought of Victor coming so close to death on two separate occasions, the idea of putting Emil to death for being put between a rock and a hard place makes him sick at heart. He can relate all too well to that kind of conflict.

“I think he’s young, and frightened, and was caught in a terrible situation,” Yuuri says slowly. “And—your Highness, please forgive me, but I think putting him to death is a waste of an opportunity to cement Bohemia’s loyalty to the High King.”

The Queen fixes him with a Look, but to Yuuri’s infinite relief, Victor comes to his rescue. “Yuuri’s right,” he says. “It’d be different if Emil hadn’t already saved my life, but he has—and what’s more, I have contacts in Bohemia who might be able to help us expose Plushenko and neutralize the threat he poses. If what Emil said and half the rumors I’ve heard are true—the bastard heir, and financial scandals in Parliament—he’d have an easy time starting more trouble.”

“You did spend almost two years there,” notes the King. He sounds thoughtful, as opposed to irritated, and Yuuri quietly lets out the breath he was holding. “How quickly can we send some of our people there? We have to move quickly if we want to keep this revelation from reaching Plushenko’s ears.”

It’s Victor’s turn to frown. “I don’t know if my contacts would trust strangers asking for them in my name,” he says slowly. “I think I might have to go myself.”

“That’s out of the question,” says the Queen sharply. “This man has already made at least two attempts on your life, if not more, I won’t have you walking into his territory and making it easier for him!”
“And we need you here,” adds the King. “The preparations for the Grand Tourney and the spring fete are only going to get more complex.”

But Victor has a look on his face that Yuuri has become all too familiar with. “If this threat is not neutralized, a new civil war might break out in Bohemia, and things are tenuous enough with its neighbors that the fighting could spill over,” he says.

They argue for almost another hour after that, but in the end Victor cannot be dissuaded. The King and Queen ultimately concede that preventing civil war in part of Kiev is too important to trust to someone less skillful than their son. Yuuri and Victor also manage to persuade the Queen that instead of punishing Ser Emil, he should be kept on as a knight in service to the High King for an additional two years—friends close and enemies closer, as Victor says.

After that, preparations happen quickly. So quickly that only two hours before nightfall, Yuuri finds himself outside by the stables once more, his heart in his throat as he prepares to bid Victor farewell.

“Christophe is coming, and two of the royal guard, but no more than that,” Victor says softly. “We have to travel light. I will be swift; Christophe will never forgive me if I prevent him from participating in the Grand Tourney.”

The mention of the tournament makes Yuuri’s stomach turn over. It’s only been a few hours since Victor decided to go, and yet he and Victor never had a moment alone together to so much as breathe, much less have an important conversation.

Please don’t go, he thinks helplessly. Not now. “I wish you weren’t going,” Yuuri says instead. He swallows against the lump in the back of his throat, and Victor’s face softens.

Victor tucks a finger under Yuuri’s chin, tilting his face up and kissing him, slow and full of tenderness. Yuuri leans against his chest, kissing back as he tries to soak up Victor’s warmth, his presence, everything about him.

“I’m sorry for leaving you,” Victor murmurs. “I know we didn’t get a chance to talk yet. But I promise, when I come back, there will be nothing that will stay me from your side.”

Yuuri summons a smile he doesn’t truly feel. “I’m going to hold you to that,” he says, and is rewarded for his effort when Victor beams. It’s enough to let him take a deep breath, to dig down for the strength he needs.

“I love you,” he says, and watches Victor’s eyes go wide. “Please come back soon.”

Victor takes Yuuri’s hand, kissing his knuckles, every inch of him the prince Yuuri believed him to be when he first set eyes on Victor all those years ago. “I love you, Yuuri,” Victor says. “Nothing on Earth will keep me from returning to you.”

He holds Yuuri’s gaze for a moment longer, and Yuuri feels something pass between them, a connection like summoning a spell in tandem, a pulse of strong emotion. Then it’s gone. Victor steps back, turning and walking quickly to his horse, Ser Christophe and the two royal guards already mounted and waiting.

Within minutes, they’ve vanished from his sight. And now all Yuuri can do is wait and hope.

Chapter End Notes
In case you were wondering what all those bits and bobs of the knights' armor are, you can find a good reference right here courtesy of Wikipedia. (Note: the armor the mage-knights wear does not look exactly like that, but now you at least know what each of the pieces I'm referring to are. I will be providing references for Yuuri's armor in particular when school isn't chewing on my leg.)
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

As the Grand Tourney draws closer and Victor still hasn't returned, Yuuri finds that his absent mate is only one of his problems. Finally, the day arrives, but Yuuri has no idea exactly how much the final tournament will bring him.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for being patient! Taxes are done, house is clean, homework is... never-ending, sigh, but at least under control now. Here is Chapter 10, as promised (the longest chapter yet!). Thanks as always go to my patient and hard-working beta who works 2389472387 hours a week and still manages to edit my massive chapters. If you feel like coming to say hi, I can be found here on Twitter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“My lord?”

Yuuri looks up quickly from the paperwork he’s reading over, his heart skipping a beat. “Yes?” he asks, trying for ‘polite’ instead of ‘desperate.’

Alexei smiles at him, his face kind. “The Queen has asked for your presence reviewing the accommodations of the Vespuccians,” he says. “She’ll be dining in her chambers, and hopes you will join her.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. Dealing with the frankly ridiculous number of guards the Vespuccians have insisted on bringing is not at all what he hoped for. He feels his face fall, and tries to smooth his expression into something more serene. “Certainly, I’ll be along presently. I just need to finish reading this contract.”

“Of course, my lord,” says Alexei, and bows himself from the room. Yuuri watches him go, then slumps in his chair, putting his face in his hands. He hears Maccachin lift his head and whine from where he sits on the floor by Yuuri’s feet, but Yuuri doesn’t look up.

Every time. Every single time someone comes to him with a request or a bit of news, his heart leaps into his throat, believing that this time it will be news of Victor’s return. Yuuri wants to slap himself, wishes he knew how to turn off that part of his mind—it’d be such a relief to go back to resenting Victor, or at least being indifferent to him, if just for a little while. Missing him like this is painful, distracting, anxiety-inducing. It’s like someone cut some essential piece of him out, a physical pain in his chest when he thinks too hard about his absent mate.

Victor has written to him a few times—okay, twice. His letters are sweet, but vague, which Yuuri understands; if they had been intercepted at all, including sensitive information would have been disastrous. When he mentions the negotiations or espionage work at all, it’s only in the vaguest of terms: discussions are going well, I have high hopes, and so on. Mostly he writes only of how he
misses Yuuri and how he looks forward to being back in his arms soon, how he dreams of Yuuri every night and how Yuuri is the first thing in his mind when he awakens in the morning.

It’s ridiculous, sentimental claptrap. Yuuri cries every time he reads them.

Yuuri shakes his head, trying to find the spot on the page where he was before. He can’t sit here and moon over Victor, again. He has too much to do.

With Victor gone, all of the preparation and organizing and negotiating work that he and Yuuri were doing now falls solely to Yuuri. There are advisors and diplomats in Ekaterina Palace, of course—Yuuri would have long ago gone insane with their help, to say nothing of how Alexei’s ability to divine just what Yuuri needs and when—but there are far too many things that only a member of the royal family can do.

(Yuuri is only mildly surprised that he seems to now fall into this category every time now. He and Victor still aren’t married, but the advisors—and the King and Queen, for that matter—don’t particularly seem to care. Yuuri’s opinion is asked for on everything from which decorations are to go up on the exterior of the palace, to what types of food should be offered during the Spring Fete, to much more serious matters, such as how to respond to the demands of the various delegations from Kieva’s constituents and allies. The only reason Yuuri is okay with fielding these kinds of questions is the fact that he knows the Queen and King also have a voice in choosing.)

As if all the diplomacy and organizing work wasn’t enough by itself, Yuuri still has other things on his mind, too—his regular practice sessions with Minako and Phichit and Yurio are getting more grueling, for one thing. But beyond that, something seems to be wrong with him, and he has no idea what.

All too often now, Yuuri wakes in the middle of the night like he’s ill with consumption—heart pounding, mouth dry, overheated and sweating so much he has to throw off all the covers and open the windows. More and more he finds himself pacing in those dead hours of night, simultaneously shivering and burning up as he all but treads ruts into his carpet from his back-and-forth across the room. And every time, Yuuri finds himself aching for Victor, a craving so intense it’s like physical withdrawal—he needs Victor’s warmth, needs the touch of his mate’s hands on his body.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he says to Phichit and Minako later that same day, after they’ve gone through an hour or so of practice. These days Yuuri is spending as much time practicing and perfecting his strategy as he does any specific attack. Now that his competitors know he’s capable of gestureless magic—‘silent’ casting, he’s heard the rumors call it—Yuuri knows he has to have other techniques in store to keep from being overrun.

But Yuuri had to stop much sooner than he wants to, exhausted after another night of interrupted sleep. Phichit and Minako exchange a worried glance; Yuuri is so tired he can’t even care what it might have meant.

“It sounds like heat sickness,” Minako says finally, which is not what Yuuri was expecting to hear.

“What?” he says, sharp. “No. That doesn’t make any sense—“

“She’s right,” Phichit says uncomfortably. “I mean—I’ve never had a heat, so I don’t know for sure, but that’s how it sounds to me too.”

Yuuri glowers at them both. The fact that he has not had a heat since he was 11 and therefore has no good barometer for how it might feel does not in any way comfort him. “I take my heat-suppressant every night,” he says defensively.
Minako’s frown does not fade. “I know,” she says. “I don’t know why it wouldn’t be working, but it still sounds like you’re going to go into heat soon.”

“Didn’t you say you’ve missed your medicine a couple times?” Phichit asks hesitantly.

“Only three times!” Yuuri says. Minako raises an eyebrow at him, and Yuuri flushes. “Maybe… five times,” he admits after a moment. “Since the Winter Ball.”

“Well that can’t have helped, Yuuri, but I don’t know if it’s enough by itself,” Minako says, and sighs. “I don’t know a lot about heats or bonding, I always just wanted to avoid them.”

“I don’t know either,” says Yuuri slowly. Something’s occurred to him. “But I know someone who might.”

Yuuri goes to visit Seung-Gil the very next day, after his morning duties are over, when he knows the mage-knights have a break before their afternoon practice. Seung-Gil, JJ, and Isabella have only recently returned from the Nishigoris—they were gone for almost a month, themselves, excused from their duties at JJ’s request to go somewhere to bond in private, just as Yuuri proposed.

And by all accounts, they were successful. Yuuri met with them on their first morning back, just to hear how it went. JJ spent the first five minutes complaining about how all his companions had the nerve to fight a dragon without him, right up until Isabella coughs and politely reminds him that the prince and Ser Emil nearly died in the battle. Seung-Gil’s expression does not change, exactly, but all the same Yuuri can tell the split-second moment when something passes between the three of them; he sees a flicker of amusement in Seung-Gil’s eyes, and then the three of them exchange a look.

“I take it things went well,” Yuuri said at the time, and the matching smiles on their faces was almost all the answer he needed.

Now, though, it’s Seung-Gil’s feedback specifically that he wants. Seung-Gil meets Yuuri in Yuuri’s quarters the day after Yuuri’s discussion with Minako and Phichit, where they can have some privacy. Yuuri has some trepidations about sharing this kind of information outside of his nearest and dearest, but Seung-Gil is the only other omega he feels comfortable talking to, who might have an inkling of what it’s like to come off the medicine.

Seung-Gil listens, brow furrowed, as Yuuri explains what’s been happening. “I wondered if you were taking heat-suppressants as well,” Seung-Gil says, when he’s done. “It seemed odd to me that you hadn’t gone into heat at all despite you and your mate being so compatible.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri, slightly uncomfortable. He wonders how many other people have made the same observation, then decides to set that aside for now. “What of the night-fevers? Did you experience anything like that?”

Seung-Gil nods. “Yes,” he says. “Right before we left, I went off the heat-suppressants, to give myself time to adjust before we made it to the inn. I spent many nights traveling with exactly what you’ve described.”

“How quickly did you go into heat, once you arrived?” Yuuri asks, fascinated despite himself.

“Almost immediately,” Seung-Gil says. “It was very disconcerting, and intense. I will not lie to you and say that everything was easy, but I think you will find it worth it. Our bonds do not erase disagreements or troubles, but it is a reminder of our dedication to each other.”

Yuuri sighs. The prospect of bonding with Victor is something he tries not to think about too much; it lies on the other side of a great many frightening events, and he can’t think that far ahead. “Victor’s
not even here, though,” he points out. “And I’m still taking my medicine.”


“No, it’s fine,” says Yuuri. “Thank you for your time, Serrah, it’s been most helpful.”

Seung-Gil bows, and Yuuri takes his leave, lost in thought. It still doesn’t make sense, but he can’t argue with Seung-Gil telling him that his night fevers are most likely an indication of an upcoming heat, not when it agrees with what Minako and Phichit already suggested.

Once upon a time, the idea of going through heat was abhorrent—unpleasant at best, a violation of self at worst. His parents never tried to scare him with stories of how you lose your mind during your heat (though Mari did, a few times), but since an omega’s heat has always been the justification for why omegas are barred from combat magic, Yuuri has resented it all the same.

His first heat—his only heat—was spent locked in his bedroom, with food and drink brought to him at the door by his mother. He spent much of it soaking in the privacy of his section of hot springs, or wrapped up in his bed covers, clumsily touching himself and aching for things he didn’t fully understand. Yuuri cried himself to sleep those nights, the feverish want that wracked his body making it next to impossible to find rest.

Yuuri’s heat lasted a week, at the end of which he emerged exhausted, embarrassed, and resolute in his desire to never deal with it again unless he absolutely had to. Yuuri was more grateful than words could express when that exact option was offered to him by Minako after he whined at her about how awful the experience had been. “I hate them too, Yuuri,” she’d told him. “But I haven’t had one in twenty years, and you don’t have to, either, if you don’t want to.”

The medicine Minako showed him has always worked perfectly—never once has he ever experienced a break-through, or any kind of ill side-effects, like Minako has every once in a blue moon. Yuuri doesn’t quite understand why he seems to be having trouble now—he hasn’t missed his medicine since before Victor left, but if anything his symptoms are getting worse, not better. The only other thing he can think of that might be affecting it is how close he’s grown to Victor.

Yuuri’s chest tightens at the thought of his mate. His mate—once upon a time, he swore he’d never use that word for anyone, even if he did end up having to marry Victor. Now, when every day Victor is gone is like another day without sunlight, Yuuri can think of few other words that match the shape Victor’s taken in his heart and mind.

He pauses, realizing with some chagrin that he’s walked almost all the way to Victor’s rooms without realizing it. Yuuri sighs, rubbing at his face with his hand. For what feels like the hundredth time, he wishes Victor was here—not just because Yuuri’s anxiety over not having told him his secret grows worth with every day the Grand Tourney draws closer, but because he wants Victor here to lean on, to talk through things out loud, to just be there to listen when Yuuri is sad or tired or frustrated.

It’s so hard without him here. Yuuri thinks the prospect of an unexplained, unexpected heat wouldn’t be half as intimidating with Victor here to reassure him. Yuuri knows, without the shadow of a doubt, that his lover would have something comforting to say. He would devise a dozen different ways they might deal with Yuuri’s impending heat, and then call off the rest of their duties that day to spend the evening pampering Yuuri until his anxiety eased.

God, he wants that so much. Yuuri has to stop in the corridor, shutting his eyes and focusing on his breathing as the sting of Victor’s absence hits him all over again. His eyes burn; there’s a lump in the back of his throat that’s hard to breathe past. Finally, after too long, he’s able to take a deep breath
Yuuri casts about, trying to find something useful to set his mind to as a distraction from his sorrowful thoughts. But nothing sticks; nothing seems adequate to the task. He won’t be able to meet Yurio and Phichit for practice until much later in the day, and his pile of paperwork has already proven inadequate to keep his mind from wandering.

He starts walking, heading towards the only available person who will have something to distract him, who has the strength of personality to keep him focused—and, incidentally, the only other person who might have input for him about why his medicine doesn’t seem to be working anymore.

Yuuri reaches Queen Elizaveta’s chambers in less than five minutes. He does his best to ignore the guards stationed outside her door, drawing himself up and taking a deep breath before knocking three times. “Enter,” calls the Queen, and Yuuri slips inside.

“Your Majesty,” he says, and dips into a bow.

“Yuuri, there’s no need for that,” she says, waving a hand to dismiss the gesture. “Please, come have a seat and tell me what brings you to me.”

She’s sitting at her long table, the heavy mahogany one that takes up a third of the room. The Queen is dressed in a regal maroon-and-gold gown today, her long silver hair bound back from her face in a braid that dangles over her shoulder. She’s always so effortlessly elegant, Yuuri thinks wistfully, never seeming to show signs of worry or care, no matter how much strain she must be under.

Yuuri spares a moment to be grateful the King isn’t also here. The Queen’s quarters are actually one part of the royal chambers—a large door sits at one end of the room, which leads into their bedchambers; the King’s study is on the far side of the bedchamber. An enormous dressing room and parlor adjoins the bedchambers, but Yuuri’s only been in there once or twice, when the Queen wanted to see him in gowns she’d had ordered for specific diplomatic occasions.

“I… beg forgiveness for disturbing you, your Majesty,” Yuuri says. He comes around to the chair across from Elizaveta, sitting down when she gestures at him to do so.

The Queen gazes at him steadily; she may not have Victor’s piercing blue eyes, but she’s more than capable of pinning him with just the strength of her gaze. “You’re troubled,” she says, and her expression softens. “Tell me what burdens you, Yuuri, if it’s something beyond Victor being gone from your side. I know his absence pains you.”

Yuuri sags a little. “It’s that, but something more,” he says. “I—your Majesty, there’s something wrong with me and I don’t know what it is.”

The Queen’s brow furrows. “Something wrong with you?” she repeats.

Yuuri tries not to cringe. Quickly, he relates to the Queen what he’s already shared with Minako and the others: his night-fevers, the racing thoughts and sleepless nights. “I know it seems as though I should be having a heat soon,” he says, inwardly steeling himself, “but—I—“

“Your heat-suppressant medicine does not appear to be working correctly anymore,” the Queen says shrewdly.

Yuuri stares. “How did you know—“

“Even if I had never smelled the tea you take in your quarters at night, I would have guessed that you must be on heat-suppressants in order to not have gone into heat already, when you and my son are
Yuuri turns red, dropping his eyes in embarrassment. “Yes, your Majesty,” he mumbles.

“These night-sweats…” The Queen hums to herself for a moment. Yuuri glances up at her again. “Have you ever missed a dose of your medicine? Or started to feel ill from taking it—sick to your stomach?”

“The medicine’s never made me sick that I know if, but I—yes, I’ve missed a few doses. Four or five, since the Winter Ball,” Yuuri says. Inwardly, he’s cringing. It galls him to admit he might have bungled this all by himself. He can’t help but add, “But I haven’t missed any doses since before Victor left, and the night-fevers started after that.”

“Missing doses won’t have helped and may have made you more vulnerable,” says the Queen, brow furrowed. Yuuri wants to ask what she means by ‘vulnerable,’ but before he can, she asks another question. “These night-fevers… are they better or worse the nights you spend in Victor’s bed?”

Yuuri’s heart promptly drops into his stomach with a sickening lurch. “You know about that?” he says weakly.

The Queen’s expression is much kinder this time. “Only because Alexei alerted me that you were not in your quarters one night last week when he expected to find you there,” she says. “I thought the next logical place for you to be was in Victor’s rooms, and when I checked, there you were.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri, helplessly. He thinks of the many times he’s been absent from his quarters, or returned to them late for practice, and wonders how close he’s come to ruin on any number of such occasions. Then he remembers the Queen’s actual question. “Um,” he says, as he tries to think.

It’s true that more than once, while Victor’s been gone, Yuuri’s spent the night in Victor’s quarters instead of his own, wrapped up in bedlinens that smell less and less like his alpha with each passing night. He’s taken to pulling shirts out of Victor’s closet in order to catch his smell, wearing them to bed and pretending it’s Victor’s arms around him and not just his underclothes.

Now that he thinks about it, the night-fevers never come to him when he sleeps in Victor’s bed. But Yuuri never noticed before, because those are the nights he dreams of Victor.

“No,” Yuuri says slowly. “I—no. But I… I do have very vivid dreams instead.”

He half-expects the Queen to laugh, or scoff at him for such a comment. But instead, she leans forward. “Tell me of these dreams,” she says.

The dreams are something Yuuri has told no one of, not even Minako or Phichit, out of embarrassment at how emotional they seem. They only come to him in Victor’s bed, wrapped in his clothes and bedlinens, and when they come they are shockingly vivid—Yuuri can describe the rooms he’s dreamt of Victor sleeping in perfectly, down to the presence of Christophe and the two royal guards.

As comforting in some ways as it is to have those dreams—he worries less about Victor’s safety than he might, no matter how stupid it sounds that a dream should reassure him—they’re also painful. For every minute he dreams of Victor’s face, Yuuri’s longing for him worsens, intensifying tenfold, as though he were feeling Victor’s loneliness on top of his own. More than once, he’s awakened in Victor’s bed with tears on his face.

“I wondered why you never seemed as concerned about Victor’s safety as you were lonesome at his
absence,” the Queen remarks, and Yuuri feels his flush threatening to return.

“I know it’s silly,” he begins, but the Queen holds up a hand.

“I did not say that I thought them silly, or anything of the sort,” she says. “Are these the only times you’ve had any strange dreams concerning Victor?”

Yuuri opens his mouth to tell her no, then hesitates. “There was one other time,” he says hesitantly. “The—the morning the dragon attacked Petrograd, I dreamed of Victor in danger. My sleep was full of darkness and fire, and I didn’t know why.”

The Queen lets out a breath. “Victor must return to you, and soon,” she says. The grimness in her voice makes Yuuri’s stomach tighten.

“Why? What’s wrong? Is—have I done something—“

“Not on purpose,” says the Queen. “How much do you know about mating bonds, Yuuri? I know you gave good counsel Ser Jean-Jacques and his mates when they were troubled.”

“Uhhhh….” Yuuri wonders exactly how much the Queen knows about that, and decides he’s not going to ask. “I know they become easier when two or more people spend a lot of time together, and are intimate,” he says. “And that they are especially prone to happening during a couple’s first heat, if one of the pair is an omega.”

The Queen nods. “That’s correct,” she says. “However, for some people who are especially compatible with their partner—or partners—a bond can happen more spontaneously. Spontaneous bonds almost only ever happen between alphas and omegas, but it usually takes a heat to seal the bond.”

Yuuri nods, unsure why she’s telling him this despite the weight in his stomach that says he might already know. He’s proven right by the next thing she says.

“I think you and Victor are already at least partly bonded,” says the Queen. “It’s why you see his face in dreams, why him being in danger fills you with dread even when you are not at his side.”

Yuuri stares at her, bewildered. “But we didn’t—we haven’t—“

“You missed a few doses of your medicine, which opened you to a bond starting. You have lain together many times, and have spent precious few nights apart since before the last snow fell, until Victor left for Bohemia,” says the Queen. “Being half-bonded is precarious and difficult. It is a natural instinct to go into heat, so as to seal the bond between you.”

For a few moments, Yuuri doesn’t even know how to react. He swallows. “What happens if I go into heat and Victor isn’t here?” he asks weakly.

“Nothing good,” says the Queen. Her frown deepens; she folds her hands in her lap. “You might sicken beyond my ability to help; Victor might also be stricken, though you would be much worse off, I think.”

Yuuri takes a deep breath. “Is there any way to avoid it? To send word to Victor to come back sooner?” Yuuri’s tried so hard to be responsible, to not try to pressure Victor into coming home sooner, but what the Queen’s telling him is filling him with a black and vicious dread.

“Perhaps,” says the Queen, but her expression is still dark. “His arrangements are nearly complete, but if he leaves before he finishes rooting out Plushenko’s people, all his work could be for naught. If
we told him of what you are enduring, he would surely leave before the work was done, so we should not risk it.” She straightens. “In the meantime, there are other things we can do. You must double the amount of your medicine you are taking, and sleep in Victor’s bed as often as you can bear to, since it seems to ease your fevers. I will see if I can find some other remedy to help stave off your heat and buy more time, as well.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Yuuri says. “Thank you for your help.”

The Queen’s expression softens then, gazing at Yuuri with almost maternal fondness. “I am happy to give it,” she says. “I know you had misgivings about Victor when you first arrived here, but the two of you have worked hard to foster your love. I can think of no one I would rather have for a second son.”

Yuuri’s stomach twists. In that moment he feels worse about his deception than he has almost the entire time Victor’s been gone, and he ducks his head, trying to master himself. “I am so honored to be given the chance to become part of your family, my Queen,” he says.

I only hope that you don’t change your mind about me, he thinks to himself, and he’s glad when she excuses him from her quarters.

* * * * *

Time passes.

The Grand Tourney draws closer and closer, and still Victor has not returned. Yuuri does just as the Queen directed him to: drink twice as much of his medicine every night, sleep in his mate’s bed, and report to her regularly about the state of his fevers. The regimen seems to help, somewhat; Yuuri still wakes in the middle of the night with his heart in his throat, drenching the sheets with his sweat, but those nights are fewer.

The way he misses Victor has altered—not that Victor’s lack was ever not painful, but now there’s a physical edge to it, like a craving for a meat or spice Yuuri can’t seem to find. It makes his teeth itch, makes him feel disquiet in his own skin. He’s by turns exhausted and manic, driven to distraction and too wound up to sleep. Yuuri can feel the frayed edge inside him where Victor should slot into place, and now no amount of medicine or scenting his lover’s clothes seems to soothe the increasingly raw nerve.

Even his mother’s katsudon recipe offers him no respite. It tastes as good as ever when he makes it, but it no longer satisfies—nothing does, it seems. Yuuri has an embarrassing evening of eating two entire bowls before crying for an hour in the bath, feeling ill the entire time.

The only other high point of that time is the discovery—by Ser Michele and his sister, Sara, no less—of the dragon’s lair, and what might have caused it to attack Petrograd’s walls. Michele and Sara come directly to Yuuri the same day as their discovery.

“We found a cave some five leagues outside the city walls, containing a nest and some half-dozen eggs, my lord,” says Sara. She took the reveal of Emil’s unwilling deceit as hard as her brother, and has been just as ceaseless in her work to prove Emil’s claims. “The eggs were each as large as a man. My brother found this to one side of the nest.”

Michele lays a broken urn of what appears to be filled with wilted ferns inside of it before him, his expression tight and complicated. Yuuri recognizes the fronds immediately. “Dragonbane,” he says, stunned.
“Yes, Messere,” says Michele. “In such a small dose it would have done nothing but madden the beast, enough to wake it from its winter slumber.”

“An angry, nesting mother driven to protect her eggs,” Sara says. “And it would have smelled a human in her lair.”

“So it seems,” says Yuuri, and sighs. “You’ve both done well. I’ll bring this to their Majesties’ attention.” Completely aside from the possibility of proving Emil’s belief that the dragon attack was Plushenko’s doing, something will have to be decided about the half-dozen baby dragons waiting to hatch so close to the capital.

Finally, a week before the Tourney, two riders come in hard from the west gate—Christophe and one of the guards, arriving with news that Victor will be returning shortly. Something on Yuuri’s face must show his frustration, because Christophe is quick to dismount and kneel in front of Yuuri, head bowed.

“Take heart, my lord,” Christophe says, lifting his eyes. “His Highness lingered only to escort a new knight home, and to handle last-minute details. He sent me along before him to tell you of his swift return—he will arrive within five days.”

“He sent you along ahead because you would never stop complaining about it if you weren’t able to participate in the spring tourney,” Yuuri says lightly. A smile flickers over Christophe’s face, like the flash of spring sun between clouds.

“My lord knows me well,” Christophe says, and rises. “Here, this is from your betrothed.” And saying so, he draws out a box from his traveling cloak and passes it to Yuuri, who opens it with fingers he’s pretending aren’t trembling.

Inside is a beautiful hairpin, a long wooden pick on which is appended an elegant pink flower rendered in fine glass. Dewdrops dangle from it in tiny strings of pearls and diamond, and the edges of the petals and stems are lined in delicate gold filigree. Yuuri swallows.

“Thank you, Serrah,” Yuuri says. He’s proud of himself for managing to sound calm, instead of bursting into tears or hitting something, like he rather wants to.

Five days. He can last five more days, can’t he?

But despite the medicine, despite the thin comfort of Victor’s sheets, despite the promise of Victor’s imminent return, something starts that Yuuri can no longer delay. He can feel the change that’s coming over him with each day that passes, like a simmer beneath the skin.

His heat is coming. All he can do is hope that Victor arrives before it starts.

The date of Victor’s arrival comes and goes, with no prince to show for it. The disappointment Yuuri feels is a brutal, animate thing, like a knife driven into his chest wall. By now he’s almost sure that he would know if something had happened to Victor, but that knowledge does little to dull the ache inside him.

Yuuri finds no rest at all that night—not in his own bed, and not in Victor’s. At some dead hour of the morning, perhaps two bells after the stroke of midnight, past the point of exhaustion and tears, Yuuri finally gives up trying to find sleep. Instead, he goes to find an empty room to practice in.

Combat magic is about the only thing that Yuuri has been able to concentrate on in Victor’s absence. Whether it’s the physicality of it, the impending competition, or just the fact it’s the thing he’s spent more time practicing in his life than anything else, Yuuri sinks gratefully into the repetition of the
drills he’s been working through with Minako and Phichit and Yurio. He calls each and every spell he plans to use, from the magic barrier to the slipstream, from his daggers to the silent summoning of various items—books, stools, even the table against the far wall.

“Yuuuuuuri.”

Minako’s voice from the side of the room startles Yuuri badly. He tumbles out of the handstand he was in, the five books he was holding in the hair sans gestures tumbling to the ground with him. From his new, exciting position on the floor, Yuuri looks over at Minako in time to catch the grimace she makes at all the noise Yuuri just made.

“What are you doing up?” Yuuri hisses, as he tries to drag himself to his feet. “It’s hours till dawn yet!”

“You’re one to talk,” Minako says. She comes over and helps him up. But instead of letting his hand go, she holds it in both of hers, watching him with a troubled expression.

“Are you sure it’s safe for you to compete?” she says at last. “I’ve never seen you like this, Yuuri.”

Yuuri shakes off her hand, looking away with a scowl. “Victor isn’t here,” he says. Minako’s watching him, but he can’t meet her eyes. “And—and if I don’t fight in the tournament now, like this, aren’t I just admitting that the laws preventing omegas from competing are right?”

Minako stiffens at that, enough that Yuuri glances over again and sees the dismay on her face. “That’s not fair at all,” she says. “Yuuri, you’re being too hard on yourself—”

“No, I’m not! If I quit now, I will feel like a failure for the rest of my life, Minako!”

Minako lets out a long breath, her air leaving her lungs in a rush. Yuuri takes a deep breath and pushes onward, needing to say this, needing to get it out in the open instead of trapped inside his head. “Besides. If I win, then no one will ever be able to argue that omegas are unsafe to fight because of their heats. If I can win above every alpha and beta mage-knight strong enough to fight in the court of the High King, then they have to strike down the law.”

“That’s assuming these idiots are capable of listening to reason,” Minako mutters, but there’s a steely look to her eyes that Yuuri likes, that he recognizes from any number of times during training. It’s a look that says Minako believes in him, that she has faith in his strength and his grit and his skill. Faith in him because he’s her student, and because she knows him better than almost anyone. Including Victor.

“I’ll be okay, Minako,” Yuuri says. He tries to inject confidence into his voice, tries to sound more sure than he feels. “I promise.”

“Just do me a favor and don’t go into heat in the middle of the arena,” Minako says. They both laugh. Yuuri tries not to notice that Minako’s sounds as forced as his.

* * * * *

Yuuri shuts his eyes, then opens them.

He stands alone in the antechamber of the arena, waiting for the last horn to sound, the one that calls him to his final fight—and the final act of his entire plan.

Perhaps another twelve minutes are left before the round will start; it’s the one minor concession the Grand Tourney makes to its grueling length and structure, giving contestants fifteen minutes between
each round instead of ten. Yuuri doesn’t know if he likes the extra time or not; it gives him a little
ger longer to rest, but it’s that much more opportunity for anxious, circling thoughts to drive him half-
mad, as well.

Yuuri rolls his head on his neck, then rotates each shoulder one at a time, slow and careful. He
grimaces as what feels like every vertebrae in his spine cracks, a pulled muscle twinging somewhere
in his lower flank. He reaches both hands above his head, lacing his fingers together, then lowers his
linked hands slowly, arms still outstretched, trying to loosen the kinks in his spine. Nothing exists
right now except his body and the hum of the Spark in his mind. He can’t let himself stray, or think
of other things, not if he wants to win.

As he bends over, Yuuri’s eyes fall on his boots—like the rest of him, they’re splattered in the thick
mud that coats the arena grounds now. In the two days since his late-night talk with Minako, a spring
storm blew through Petrograd, bringing torrential rains and winds with it. The storm had the grace to
depart before the start of the tourney, but left the grounds of Ekaterina Palace—and the arena—a
muddy wreck, forcing contestants to fight on earth that’s little better than sludge.

The one virtue of the mud is that since Yuuri is absolutely coated in the stuff, the chances of his
opponents smelling his heat-sick scent during their fight is much less. His heat isn’t here, not yet. But
trying to stave it off for this long has stoked a fire inside him, one that’s eating through him now like
a fever, an itch just under his skin that no amount of water or cold mud will soothe.

Yuuri hears someone laughing high up in the stands, bright and happy. Unbidden, his mind flies to
his mate—Victor is home at last, or so Yuuri hears, but he arrived in the middle of the morning, after
all eight of the remaining contestants were already at the arena, receiving their three combat
assignments for the day. Victor would have looked everywhere for Yuuri, and Yuuri had no good
excuse for why he wasn’t immediately to be found, but he knows it doesn’t matter anymore, either.
After today, there’ll be no secrets left.

Yuuri wonders vaguely if Victor found the note Yuuri left for him, the one he pinned to his mate’s
pillow. It said, simply:

Victor - I’m safe, but please don’t look for me until after the Tourney is over. I promise I’ll explain
everything. I wanted to tell you before, but I didn’t know how, and then there wasn’t time. Yours,
always, Yuuri.

Will Victor guess the truth? Yuuri honestly doesn’t know. He knows Victor missed Yuuri’s first
opponent—Yurio again, a pair of fights somehow both vicious and fun. Yuuri caught a glimpse of
Victor up in the royal box when he emerged to fight his second opponent of the day, Christophe, so
he must have arrived some time mid-morning.

Yuuri thinks he’ll be seeing double for the rest of the day from the energy blasts Christophe sent at
him. But he still managed to win their Sudden Death round, even if Christophe outclassed him
during their Skill & Stamina session. He’s honestly lost track of points by now; he has no idea who’s
in the lead, or how close anyone is in rank. Yuuri’s already decided that, even if he doesn’t take first,
he’s going to reveal Ser Eros’s true identity; surely making it to the finals will count for something.

The blare of the horn startles Yuuri out of his daze, calling him to fight. Yuuri straightens, takes a
deep breath, and then walks forward as the gates to the arena swing open for the last time.

Yuuri glances absently around the stands as he comes in; every time he’s entered the ring, it seems
like the number of people in the crowd has swelled. Now every seat is full, people crowding the
aisles and the barriers, waving standards and yelling the names of their chosen knight. Yuuri’s never
seen so many people in his entire life, not even during day-trips into Petrograd.
It’s not just spectators, either; fully five royal houses from around Kieva and Kieva’s allies are here to witness the Grand Tourney, including the Vespuccians. A special area has been cordoned off for their guests to sit in, with the Vespuccians flanked on all sides by an unsettlingly large number of their own guards mixed in with the Kievan guards. Yuuri is rather thankful he wasn’t around this morning to witness the mess that conversation must have been, though he expects the Queen was irate at his absence.

Far up in the stands, he spies Victor in the royal box. From this distance, Yuuri can’t make out his lover’s face, but just seeing him sends a pulse of longing through him. It’s followed almost immediately by an answering wave of longing, and Yuuri sees Victor stir and glance around.

I’m sorry, my love, Yuuri thinks. Please forgive me for deceiving you for so long. Then he turns his attention towards his foe, the last person standing between him and the end of this charade.

Mila stands at the other end of the arena, wearing armor that looks heavy enough to rival JJ’s. Even if he hadn’t seen her fight first-hand during the confrontation with the dragon, Yuuri would have been wary of her strength—he’s heard from Phichit and Yurio what a formidable opponent she is.

(“She wiped the floor with me,” Phichit said not two hours ago, colossally disappointed after his own match with Mila. He, Yuuri, and Yurio were comparing notes in a private corner in a bid to preserve Yuuri’s identity for a few more hours. “She’s faster than you think, so be careful!”

“She’ll drop a boulder on your head if you give her half a chance,” Yurio added. He was leaning against the wall, glaring daggers at the broken vambrace on his left arm, the one that had failed him during his battle with JJ. “You better beat her, or I’ll be mad at you.”

“I’ll do my best,” Yuuri said, trying not to let on how nervous they were making him.)

The announcer’s voice rings out then, magically enhanced as always, but for some reason Yuuri can’t make him out. Moments later he figures out why, when a sudden wave of heat and nausea rolls through him, like he’s just walked in front of an open oven. It takes all the strength he has not to stagger or fall over, focusing very hard on just breathing in and out.

Yuuri fixes his gaze on Mila, glad that no one can see his face, or guess at how he’s feeling—not with the helmet and its face-guard still in place. He reaches for the Spark inside him, the concentration taking all of his energy, whiteing everything else out: the announcer, the noise of the crowd, the treacherously unsure footing of the muddy ground beneath him.

Minako’s question from the other night floats to the top of his mind: Are you sure it’s safe for you to try this? And when the next wave of nausea comes, for a split-second Yuuri really does wonder if he’s an idiot for being out here. His mate is right there; he doesn’t have to fight, or reveal himself, or anything else.

He can throw the match, go back inside the antechamber, shed the armor and sneak away with no one the wiser. He can find Victor, and let his mate take him somewhere safe so he can surrender to this terrible heat inside him. He could just let go.

But even as it occurs to him, the announcer finishes speaking, and something inside Yuuri just—gels, his will solidifying. The wave of heat hits him again, but Yuuri shifts his feet and spreads his hands, calling blue fire to burn inside his mind, eating through the nausea that wants to sap his strength and steal his breath.

I didn’t come this far to give up now, Yuuri thinks, and grits his teeth. And I didn’t come here to lose.
“READY—SET—”

He’ll leave this ring victorious, or when they drag him out of it unconscious.

“GO!”

Yuuri throws his arms out, palms up, summoning a dozen of his daggers immediately. He vaults forward into a flip and sends the daggers flying at Mila, a move that he already knows will meet her barrier—which is why he’s calling his next spell even before he lands, with a high heel-strike kick that sends a vicious blast of snow and ice funneling down the arena hard on the heels of the daggers.

He hears her shout of alarm as he comes down, righting himself swiftly. Yuuri looks up just in time to see Mila dancing out of the way of the miniature blizzard, trying to evade it even as it swirls and comes after her. Triumph swells in his chest just long enough to make him slow; Mila backflips, somehow finding purchase in the muck, and throws her hand towards Yuuri in a sharp, choppy gesture he recognizes two seconds too late.

Energy rips through the arena, erupting from the ether in four wide streaks. Yuuri shouts and tries to dodge, but one of the blasts hits him dead-on and sends him flying halfway down the arena. He lands hard on his shoulder, pain jolting down his back. For a few precious seconds, all he can do is lay there as his head swims, the heat in his skin not helping in the least. Yuuri tries to scramble to his feet, but the muck clings to him, sucking at his feet and hands and making it hard to find purchase.

He feels another ripple of magic and looks over to see Mila vaulting into the air and bringing her hands down hard against the earth—and then the ground just splits in two, a chasm ripping open in the arena, heading straight for Yuuri. It widens as it races towards him, caving in the very earth between them.

Yuuri thinks: Oh, fuck.

Then instinct kicks in, and Yuuri vaults upwards as though he’s been set on fire, clapping his hands together hard to summon the next spell. Instead of landing, however, he keeps going: the air beneath his feet solidifies, crystalline steps forming in mid-air, and Yuuri runs directly up into the air above the newly-formed chasm, escaping the sucking mud that immediately rushes in to fill the hole.

Yuuri takes a running jump from the top step, using his momentum to fling himself directly into a triple twist, arms pulled tight against his chest. The moment seems to stretch out in time, everything seeming to take much longer than it actually does, during which he sees and feels everything: the muck-filled chasm yawning beneath him, the crowd on their feet shouting at him, the waves of heat still burning in his skin.

He thinks: I have to end this, fast, before she ends me.

Yuuri catches a split-second glimpse of Mila, circling wide around the chasm she’s just created, calling the same energy-spear to her hand that she used the day they fought the dragon. Then Yuuri vanishes into the slip-stream, ripping through the fabric of reality and emerging at the end of the arena not corrupted by a new mire—

—only to vanish again split-seconds later, vacating the spot just in time for Mila to fling her spear directly through the air he just occupied. In and out, in and out, Yuuri darts up and down the arena, pausing in each spot for bare seconds only, just long enough to call more magic and vanish again. Mila tracks his progress, trying in vain to hit him. She throws spell after spell at the spot where he emerges only to miss as he cuts back into the slipstream: spear, energy blast, an entire chunk of rock she unearths from the ground, all passing through nothingness as Yuuri vanishes.
He hears the crowd screaming only for the few beats he’s present in reality, and if he were paying more attention he might notice how hysterical they sound, how ear-splittingly loud their screams are.

They have good reason. Yuuri was inspired by Victor’s power and control during the fight with the dragon, and thought that he might yet be able to surprise his opponents if he could copy that move, use it for himself somehow. But as Minako told him over and over again during practice, Yuuri shouldn’t expect to be able to pull this move off—only the crown prince himself has ever managed to extend the slipstream spell, to move in and out of it at will for more than a few scant seconds.

And yet, here he is. Yuuri’s fatigue builds rapidly as he phases in and out, but even as he cuts back into reality, he looks over and sees the way Mila’s panting, how red and flushed her face is as she tries to catch him. Yuuri vanishes one last time, cutting out of reality and zipping halfway down the arena. He emerges once more at the ‘clean’ end, far from the scored earth, and keeps his hands in close.

Yuuri staggers, telegraphing the movement so that Mila can’t possibly miss it from where she stands at the far end of the arena. He leans over, panting, giving every impression of being exhausted after the trick he just pulled.

His misdirection works—too well. In the moment after he staggers, Mila’s already moving, a graceful pirouette that ends in another forward flip. The earth beneath Yuuri ruptures again, and he tries to jump out of the way, but the spell is different this time. The ground shakes and humps beneath him, a large jag of rock erupting under his feet. Yuuri is thrown yet again, tumbling to earth with a loud *ooof*!

Even as he lands, the muck grabs at his hands and legs like a living thing, trapping him in the mud. Mila’s running across the arena towards him now, sprinting all-out. Yuuri tries to haul himself upright, tracking her progress, his breathing ragged. He has just one chance to make this work.

Mila hoists her hand in the air, summoning another spear. Yuuri draws a sharp breath—

—and seconds before she reaches him, his spell triggers, a sheet of ice encasing her almost instantly. Mila is frozen in place, her arm raised high. Only her face is unobscured, staring wide-eyed at Yuuri from just a few meters away.

There’s the briefest of silences, and then the entire stadium seems to erupt. The crowd is screaming, clapping, stomping their feet—out of the corner of his eye, Yuuri catches a glimpse of what look like miniature fireworks bursting far too close to the stands—but none of it seems to quite matter. Yuuri’s focus narrows to the effort it takes him to haul himself up out of the sucking mud, and then, without any contemplation of it at all, he takes his helmet off.

He shakes his hair out, sucking in a few deep breaths—he’s so dizzy, winded from the fight, and the coolness against his face is sweet relief. Then Yuuri drops his helmet into the mud, walking over to Mila and chopping the air in front his chest in an abortive gesture. The ice encasing her vanishes, and she staggers, nearly falling over. Only Yuuri grabbing her forearm saves her from it.

“Well fought,” Yuuri says quietly. Mila is staring at him like she’s seen a ghost.

“My lord,” she says. “You—but—“

“It’s Lord Katsuki!” someone nearby in the stands cries. “It’s the prince’s betrothed!” Yuuri turns, staring up at the wall of people. Even as he looks, more people start shouting, pointing at him with shock evident on their faces.
“Steady, my lord,” says Mila in a low voice. Yuuri glances quickly over at her, grateful beyond words for apparent decision to stand by him.

But instead of getting better, the shouting seems to be getting worse. The news spreads like wildfires through the stands—and with a surge of terror like ice in his veins, Yuuri sees the Vespuccian Viscount on his feet, shouting and gesticulating at Yuuri.

“This is a disgrace!” he screams. Yuuri thinks he’s never seen anyone so red in the face. “This omega has flouted the laws of our lands! Arrest that criminal! SEIZE HIM!” And lo and behold, the twenty-odd Vespuccian guards flanking the Viscount’s box are now attempting to make their way down to the arena grounds, weapons drawn.

At his side, Mila summons her spear again, even as Yuuri starts to back away. He looks frantically up at the royal box, searching for Victor, for the Queen, anyone, but there’s a teeming mass of humanity between them and he can’t even spot Victor’s face now. Everyone’s shouting, and people are spilling onto the arena—Vespuccian guards, but others also. Including—

“Don’t you lay a hand on him!” JJ shouts. He vaults over the side of the stadium, from the box where the other mage-knights were watching the proceedings. He runs over to Mila and Yuuri, followed almost immediately by Yurio, and then to Yuuri’s shocked amazement the entire box of knights empties, all of them hurrying down the arena grounds towards him. He catches sight of Yurio and Phichit, Seung-Gil and Sara and Michele and Christophe, expressions grim and determined. Swords and spears and daggers spring to life in mud-spattered hands.

Yuuri doesn’t know what to say, what to do. He’s dizzy and weak from exhaustion, with heat-sickness burning through him like a high fever, and he thought this reveal might go poorly, but not—not this.

The Vespuccian guards have been joined by some other soldiers, people Yuuri doesn’t recognize—he has no idea if they’re just spectators, or a regiment from some other country, or something else. The mage-knights spread out around Yuuri in a loose semi-circle, their backs to Yuuri.

“That man is a criminal,” says one of the Vespuccian guards, gesturing with a halberd past Christophe’s shoulder. “You should be arresting him, not defending him.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” snaps Yurio. The daggers in his hands burn with yellow fire, and he takes a menacing step towards the Vespuccian guards. “This isn’t your home, soldier.”

Mila starts to step forward, mouth open to say something, but one of the other guards spooks and swings his sword. Mila blocks the blow with her spear, and abruptly all hell breaks loose.

“Yuuri!” shouts Phichit. He ducks to block a sword blow, then sends the guard staggering backwards with a blast of energy. “Run! Get out of here, go somewhere safe!”

Yuuri hesitates for only a moment. He casts one last, desperate glance up towards the royal box, but chaos is breaking out in the stands now—people are panicking, desperate to get away from the sudden outbreak of fighting, and the royal family is nowhere to be seen. Yuuri turns and flees, running towards the exit at the far end of the arena as though his life depends on it.

There’s another group of guards—not Kievan—trying to close off that exit, and for a moment Yuuri’s heart tries to crawl up into his throat. Then familiar green fire erupts in their midst, and the guards stagger away screaming, beating at their arms and armor. “Yuuri!” shouts Minako. Yuuri looks up to see her vaulting from the edge of the stands.
“Minako!” he cries. She lands hard in the mud next to him, but recovers almost instantly, breaking into a run alongside him.

“You have to get out of here,” she snaps. “Quickly! The stables!”

They meet another group of guards, Minako all but blasting them out of their way; Yuuri can hear the clamor from the arena behind them as more and more people spill out of it onto the grounds. But the land between them and the stables is pure chaos, and even as they struggle to head towards the palace, Yuuri looks back to see more of those Vespuccian guardsmen spilling out of the arena, weapons drawn.

“We’re not going to make it that far,” he says to Minako. It’s all he can do not to give in to the panic clawing at his throat. Where is his mate, his Victor? He sucks in a deep, shaky breath, trying to ignore the sting of tears at the corners of his eyes.

Minako glances at him, then looks ahead of them, her face set. “There,” she says. She grabs Yuuri and runs with him, shoving past another pair of soldiers. Up ahead Yuuri spots what she’s aiming for: the arena holding area, where the competitors prepared before heading inside to fight.

There’s several royal guardsmen standing by, grimly guarding the door against the seething mass of humanity. As Minako and Yuuri approach, though, one of them recognizes Yuuri. “My lord!” he exclaims.

“Do you have horses here?” Minako demands.

“Only one left, my lady,” says the other guard. “His Majesty and the royal family were taken on the others back to the palace for their safety, along with their retinue.” The first guard vanishes inside even as his companion speaks; Yuuri hears a horse’s whinny from inside.

“Alright, Yuuri,” says Minako. “You have to go.”

“But—“

“You have to get out of here,” Minako snaps. “Just go! You won’t make it to the place, so head into the woods, find somewhere safe to hide! We’ll come find you when this is over!”

The first guard re-appears, leading a chestnut mare out that’s already saddled. Minako helps Yuuri into the seat, then leads him towards the side of the arena. Before Yuuri can even think of something to say, she’s slapped the horse on its rump. The animal takes off with a jolt, and Yuuri has to scramble to keep from falling.

He flees on horseback into the enormous stand of woods that borders Ekaterina Palace and its massive arena. Yuuri rides until the last faint sounds of fighting and chaos have faded. Even then he doesn’t stop, urging his horse deeper into the wilderness until he finds the river Arden.

Finally, some two odd hours after his flight, across the river, Yuuri finds a rocky bit of land with a small cave cut into the limestone boulders. The cave is small, going back perhaps six or seven meters from the mouth: enough space to rest in, but not so large or cavernous that Yuuri worries it contains lurking predators. It’s an ideal place to wait out the night—or would be, if he had literally any food, or a clear idea of where he is, or when it might be safe to try returning to the palace.

Yuuri does the best he can. He sheds his armor and washes himself clean of his muddy coating in the river, shivering at the cold bite of the water. He digs through the horse’s saddlebag, grateful to find it has some blankets and some small bits of kindling, as well as a flask. Yuuri takes the horse’s saddle and bridle off, attempting to coax the animal into the cave with him but ultimately giving up when it
balks at the low entrance. He refills the empty flask in the river, then retreats to the cave as night comes on.

He’ll wait here, he decides. He has little other choice.

* * * * *

When Yuuri awakens some four hours later, he doesn’t at first know what’s wrong. It’s dark, and he’s cold, and he’s sore from laying on the hard floor.

Then he remembers that it’s cold and dark because he’s not at home, he’s out in the wilderness, and it’s hard because he’s lying on the floor of a cave. He doesn’t even know at first what woke him, but a few seconds of waiting brings the answer: the heat and nausea has returned, and now he has no medicine to fight it off. Yuuri groans softly; the contrast of his feverish body and the cold night air is not pleasant.

A flash of light illuminates the mouth of the cave, followed almost instantly by a deafening clap of thunder, making him jump. Yuuri crawls to the mouth of the cave, peering out into what appears to be another spring storm. The ground outside the cave runs downhill, towards the river, so at least he’ll stay dry, but to his dismay his horse is nowhere in sight. Scared off by the storm, perhaps, or by the smell of predators in the woods.

So… he’s alone. No mate, no friends, not even a horse for company to wait out the night.

A lump forms in the back of his throat. Yuuri crawls back into the cave, fumbling for his blanket and tugging it closer to himself. He curls up in the meager bedroll he’s made, tucking his knees up against his chest as he tries to find a bit of warmth. He would summon a fire, but he didn’t think to gather any wood before he lay down earlier, and now everything will be soaked from the storm; the kindling he has won’t burn long enough to make a difference.

Yuuri wraps his arms around his knees, the tears he fought off earlier coming now, bitter and overwhelming. The longing for Victor he’s been fighting for so long rolls over him now in a wave, the fire inside him burning hotter and hotter even as he shivers against the cold stone floor. Every inch of his body aches, and his head is swimming despite the fact that he’s lying down. Yuuri cries until he’s weak from it, his chest hurting with every breath he draws, until finally he’s exhausted himself again.

He doesn’t know if this is his heat, or the sickness Queen Elizaveta warned him about, but either way, he needs Victor. He needs his alpha, and Victor isn’t here.

Yuuri shuts his eyes, wraps the blanket tighter around his shoulder, and burns.

Chapter End Notes

+ "Vespuccia" is a thinly-veiled reference to the United States, which you may have guessed--the name (which is too clever to not share the origins of) was suggested to me by my lovely friend Melly, and is a reference to Amerigo Vespucci, the explorer who first made a map of North America and then promptly named the continent after him.

+ The river Arden is a reference to Shakespeare's As You Like It, which is set in a fictional version of the forest of Arden. My English lit nerd is showing.
Please don't hate meeeeeee
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Things that have been put off for too long finally come to pass.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Please be advised that this chapter is EXTREMELY EXPLICIT in more than one area, so maybe don't read it till you're somewhere you're comfortable. Also, for my readers who aren't a fan of this type of thing, this chapter features heat-sex.

For those of you who don't want to read the sex for whatever reason, I'm going to make a comment containing the cues for you to skip, if you want to do it that way. Since those cues might be spoilery, I'm not going to post them here in the front-of-chapter note. (I'll link to the comment here once I've typed it up & it's posted.) ETA: That comment can be found here.

As always, a million kisses to my endlessly patient beta. Please know she finished beta-ing this for me, and is going to drive 4.5 hours to see me for my birthday party, then turn around and drive home in 48 hours. BEST BETA EVER. ♥

Finally, a house-keeping note for the last chapter: it will probably not be posted exactly on time. I'm going to go through the fic with a fine-tooth comb to be absolutely certain I have gotten everything just how I want it before I post the very last chapter, and I'm giving myself a little wiggle room to make sure I get it right... and I have a huge exam next week, sigh. So anyway, it will probably only be a few days 'late,' but if you haven't already subscribed you might want to just so you can get the notification when the very last chapter goes up.

Thank you so much for reading!!!

That night is long and dark.

Later, Yuuri will look back on it and have trouble remembering exactly how he got through it, or exactly how long he spent in the cave, but that’s also because what came after was so remarkable as to blur the shape of things around it. Mostly what he remembers is this:

The rain outside seems to go on forever and ever. With no fire lit, the darkness is complete—the world illuminated only by the occasional flashes of lightning, followed near or far by thunder crashing through the darkness. In his feverish delirium, Yuuri finds himself thinking the thunder is the voice of some fell beast—some creature from the dawn of time, stalking through the deep woods in search of prey or revenge.

He shivers, trying hard to wrap the meager blanket around himself more tightly. It’s getting colder and colder in the cave—or maybe that’s just him. Yuuri reaches up to touch his own face and finds it
burning hot under his fingertips. *You might sicken beyond my ability to help*, says Elizaveta in the back of his mind.

Yuuri wonders if he’s going to die here. Or perhaps he’ll go mad, instead. Then he’ll be the creature wandering the woods, screaming his frustration at the dark trees.

Eventually, even the chill and the thunderstorm can’t keep him awake, and Yuuri starts to pass in and out of consciousness, his mind disconnecting from his body. His breathing grows more shallow; his fingers clench and unclench of their own accord, gripping the blanket feebly as he moves in fits and starts. He rolls onto his stomach, shoving his face against the sad excuse for a pillow. Now and then he moans a few syllables that might be “Victor” and might just be nonsense. Painful cramps roll through him, making his muscles spasm; he rolls from side to side in agony, tears he’s barely aware of leaking down his face.

And in the darkness, he slips into dreams—fever-dreams, vivid and overwhelming.

Yuuri dreams of Victor. His mate is *furious*—never has Yuuri seen him so angry in life. He’s shouting at anyone who dares come close to him, practically shaking with it. On some level Yuuri knows that the rage is because of him, because—because Yuuri is missing? Yes, that, but also something else, something Yuuri almost grasps, only for it to slip away, too nebulous and strange for him to comprehend.

Even in the depths of his frustration and despair, Yuuri knows Victor would never normally act like this; something must be wrong with him. Worry cramps Yuuri’s insides, making him shiver and moan against the rough blankets.

Faces come and go in the dream; only Victor stays constant, real. The mage-knights come, one by one, telling Victor things Yuuri can’t understand; they might as well be speaking in tongues for all the sense they make.

Then Minako comes, and she looks wrong, somehow. Yuuri realizes that her face is bloody, and her arm hangs awkwardly at her side. Victor and Minako talk, but Yuuri grasps only a few words here and there, his own name amongst them.

Whatever Minako has to tell Victor, it makes up his mind. Yuuri gets a sense of desperation, but also resoluteness. He catches a glimpse of Victor speaking to his mother, of the Queen pressing some things into Victor’s hands, and then Victor is running—Victor is out in the rain, on his horse, heading towards the massive wall of trees that stand watch to the north of Ekaterina Palace.

A coherent thought floats to the surface of Yuuri’s mind: Victor is looking for me, he thinks. The flare of hope in his chest is punctured almost immediately by the realization that there’s no way Victor will be able to find him. Not in the darkness, with the rain washing away all trace of his flight.

Victor, Yuuri thinks miserably. He hears someone say Victor’s name, and realizes it’s his own voice. “Victor,” he says again, out loud; it turns into a sob.

He passes into darkness then, and knows nothing more.

* * * * *

Something wakes him.

Yuuri rolls onto his side, and immediately regrets it. His whole body hurts—for a few moments he thinks he’s actually going to vomit, and then the nausea recedes a little bit.
Outside, it’s still dark, still raining, though Yuuri thinks it might be slightly less heavy than it was. So what was it that woke him?

He thought—he could have sworn he heard someone calling his name. Yuuri listens intently, even holding his breath, but thirty seconds pass and no sound comes to his ears but the rain.

Disappointment brings a sour taste to the back of his tongue, yet again. Yuuri curls up, his misery lancing through him more painfully than any blow or spell that landed during combat. He was so sure that Victor was nearby, that his mate had found him. He thought he heard Victor’s voice saying his name.

Yuuri shuts his eyes, trying to curl back into the bedroll, and at that moment he really does hear something out in the woods. He sits up, which brings on a wave of vertigo so bad he nearly passes out. Yuuri takes a few shaky breaths, fighting through the dizziness as he strains to listen.

It’s Victor’s voice.

“VICTOR!” Yuuri yells, and tries to scramble to his feet. But his legs fail him immediately, and only the fact that he wasn’t standing to begin with saves him from dashing his face against the stone floor of the cave. “Victor!” he calls again, his voice breaking in desperation.

“YUURI!” Victor’s voice again, louder this time—closer.

“VICTOR, I’M HERE!” Unable to walk, Yuuri scrambles on hands and knees instead, crawling towards the mouth of the cave. His body aches, weakness making his limbs shake, but Yuuri is frantic now, lit with a new desperation.

He makes it to the mouth of the cave and pauses to yell again. “Victor! VICTOR!” Again he hears Victor’s voice, louder still, but in the dark and the rain Yuuri can’t see a fucking thing. He tries to get up, clutching at the stone of the cave entrance as he attempts to pull himself to his feet, but in the dark he misjudges his footing and his foot slips.

Yuuri shrieks as the wet mud and gravel beneath his feet give way, and he slides down the incline from the cave’s mouth, scrambling for purchase in the dark. He catches up against the base of a large tree halfway down the small hill, a gnarled root digging right into his hip. Yuuri groans and tries to stand up again, but this time his legs won’t cooperate at all, and he collapses back to earth, tears stinging his eyes.

“VICTOR!” he cries, and wipes clumsily at his face, smearing more wet dirt across his cheeks.

But this time, the answer is much, much closer. “YUURI!” Victor yells, and Yuuri turns his head to see a dark figure coming towards him through the trees and the rain. His chest lurches, so hard it’s painful—the figure comes closer, and now Yuuri can see the wet gleam of silver hair.

“Victor!” Yuuri thinks his heart is going to burst right out of his chest. He tries once more to get to his feet, but Victor darts the last brief length up the incline and suddenly his lover’s arms are around him.

“Yuuri,” Victor breathes, right in his ear. “My Yuuri, I’m here, I found you, it’s okay—“

“Victor,” Yuuri chokes out. He wraps his arms around Victor’s neck and gasps for breath, but his lungs don’t want to work, and his whole body feels strange. “Victor, I’m sorry,” Yuuri says, or tries to, but his words come out wrong, somehow.

Victor pulls back, staring into Yuuri’s face with a worried expression. “You’re sick,” he says. “My
mother was right. Come here, darling…”

Yuuri tries again to speak, to tell Victor what happened, what went wrong, but what little strength he had left was all spent in his clumsy spill out of the cave. Victor stands, scooping Yuuri up in his arms like he weighs nothing at all. Yuuri stupidly finds himself thinking of the very first time he saw Victor again, when his mate picked him up from the carriage and carried him inside the palace.

“Victor,” he mumbles, and presses his face to Victor’s hair. Victor smells so good, he thinks. Maybe he can actually rest now. Victor’s here, so it’s okay, isn’t it?

Victor says something in his ear, but Yuuri can’t make sense of it. “Yuuri! YUURI!”

* * * * *

When Yuuri wakes up next, he’s in the cave again. There’s a fire lit in the center of the cave, warm yellow light illuminating the darkness, bringing with it some welcome heat. Yuuri’s naked, but clean again somehow, and wrapped in a thick, warm cloak. He’s in Victor’s lap, his mate’s arms wrapped tight around him.

“Drink this, Yuuri,” Victor whispers. His voice sounds strange—tight, choked-off. Yuuri doesn’t quite know why he sounds like that, but he does as Victor bids anyway, sipping at the tin mug Victor’s holding to his lips. The liquid inside is bitter, and Yuuri coughs, choking a little. “Please, darling, you have to drink all of it. Please…”

Yuuri would do anything at all, if Victor asked him to. He lifts his head, trying to drink the rest of it. Quite a bit dribbles down his chin, but most of it he manages to swallow. Victor sets the cup aside and wraps his arms—and the cloak—more tightly around Yuuri, pressing his face to Yuuri’s hair. “Victor,” Yuuri says weakly.

“Shhh, Yuuri,” Victor whispers in a voice that shakes too much, and kisses Yuuri’s face. “You should rest. Y-You need to recover.”

Yuuri makes a wet noise, trying to turn his head a little more—Victor is probably right, but he wants so badly for Victor to kiss him. Victor seems to know what he wants somehow, though, because he tilts Yuuri’s face up and presses their lips together.

Yuuri melts immediately. Warmth washes through him, relief as true and powerful as spring after a long dark winter. He presses himself against Victor’s chest, kissing back, and for a few long minutes that’s all they do.

That’s about how long it takes for Yuuri to notice that Victor is crying.

He pulls back from kissing his mate, brow furrowing. “Victor,” he says, and is surprised to hear how weak and slurred his own voice sounds. “W… What’s wrong?”

Victor gives him a watery smile, stroking his knuckles along Yuuri’s cheek. “Don’t worry, darling,” he says. “Just rest. I’ll take care of you now, so—all you have to do is get better, okay?”

For a moment, Yuuri wavers, torn between his own exhaustion and wanting to reassure his mate. He knows something is wrong, guesses that Victor is worried about him, but past that his mind simply can’t process. He’s been struggling for so long, and he’s so tired. The idea of letting Victor handle everything is all too appealing, so finally Yuuri just nods.

He does lean in and nuzzle Victor’s face, savoring his scent, the sweetness of having him so close, the security of him being here. Victor kisses Yuuri’s cheeks and then his nose. Yuuri shuts his eyes,
and Victor kisses his eyelids, cradling Yuuri’s head in one hand.

Yuuri falls asleep again like that, cradled against Victor’s chest, his face tucked against his mate’s neck. Maybe it’s whatever was in the tea Victor had him drink, or maybe it’s just the relief of finally being reunited, but either way, this time his sleep is restful instead of fever-sick.

He awakens a few more times after that, though he has no idea of how long it’s been. The first time, Victor is wrapped around him in the bedrolls; Yuuri nuzzles against him sleepily, staying awake only long enough to re-adjust himself to slot better against Victor’s body and accept a kiss before dropping off again.

The second time he wakes, Victor is crouched by the fire, tending to what looks like a few skewers of meat. It’s the smell of the cooking meat that woke Yuuri—or more accurately, woke his stomach, which cramps and rumbles audibly as the scent wafts over to him where he lays in the rumpled bedroll.

Victor looks over at him, and Yuuri registers that he looks calmer than he did before, his expression less frayed. “You’re awake,” he says. “Do you think you can eat?”

Yuuri starts to answer why wouldn’t I, then pauses as his stomach cramps in a fresh wave of pain. “I think so,” he says instead, and tries to cautiously sit up.

Victor is at his side in moments, an arm around his shoulders. “Steady,” he says. “You threw up last time you sat up too fast.”

He did? Yuuri has no memory of this whatsoever. Which is probably no bad thing. But he manages to sit up without expelling his stomach contents, and when Victor brings him some bread and a skewer of what turns out to be rabbit, Yuuri finds he’s able to get some of it down.

Eating is hard, even though the food tastes good; mostly Yuuri just wants to go back to sleep. It helps that Victor sits by him, is touching him the entire time—an arm around his shoulder, or a hand at Yuuri’s elbow. Yuuri has the curious feeling that Victor hovering like this should offend him—or, no. Maybe it would have offended him, once, for some reason. He just can’t seem to think of why.

Right now, Victor’s warmth and touch is doing much more for him than the food. Yuuri keeps pausing while eating to just turn and gaze at his mate, drunk on the sight of Victor so close again. Victor smiles at him each time, kissing the corner of his mouth before gently encouraging him to keep eating.

“Just a little more, Yuuri,” he says.

“Okay,” says Yuuri obediently, and goes back to eating.

Finally, exhaustion wins out. Yuuri slumps against Victor again, letting his eyes slide shut. “Why am I so tired?” he says out loud.

Victor gently wraps his arms around Yuuri’s waist, pulling Yuuri into his lap. Yuuri makes a happy noise, burying his face in Victor’s neck again and snuggling into his lover’s chest. “You’ve been sick, darling,” Victor murmurs into his hair. “But I’m here now, and I’m going to take care of you. Everything will be okay.”

Yuuri sighs. It sounds so nice, so reassuring. Somewhere in his foggy mind, there’s a nagging idea that he should be afraid—that Victor should be mad at him, or that something is wrong. But Victor’s arms are warm, and his scent is thick and reassuring in Yuuri’s nostrils. The animal drive in the back of his brain is waking up, telling him that everything is as it should be.
His alpha is here at last. His mate has come to protect him, to claim him, and he doesn’t have to fight or be alone anymore. He can let go.

Yuuri slips off to sleep again, the touch of Victor’s skin healing him as surely as the medicine and the food. He sleeps for longer this time, oblivious to the rain that continues to fall outside. With his nascent bond no longer starved of its other half, Yuuri eases slowly out of sickness and into a different kind of fever—one that Victor’s presence will only stoke, instead of soothe.

* * * * *

When Yuuri awakens next, it’s dark again.

He turns his head slightly, looking around the cave as he tries to orient himself. Outside, the rain has tapered off somewhat, but it’s what’s inside the cave that Yuuri cares about.

The entire cave reeks. Not of meat, or rain-damp, but of sex and pheromones and heat. Yuuri sits up slowly, and as he does so he feels want roll through him in a thick wave. He’s still naked, but his whole body is hot in a way that has nothing to do with the fire still burning in the center of the cave.

Victor is crouched by the fire, hands dangling over his knees, staring into the flames as though searching for the meaning of life. As though suddenly aware of Yuuri watching him, Victor looks over at him. “You’re awake,” he says, and summons a smile.

Strange, Yuuri thinks; Victor looks uncomfortable. But more importantly, he smells like exactly what Yuuri needs. He stinks of alpha pheromones and sweat, his scent undampened by a recent bath.

Yuuri wants to bury his face in Victor’s thighs and drink him in, wants Victor to pin him down and split him open.

Which makes it all the more frustrating that he’s all the way over there, instead of here in bed with Yuuri.

“Victor,” Yuuri says, and has to swallow a whine. “Won’t you come here, please?”

Victor doesn’t move. He’s watching Yuuri with a guarded expression, one Yuuri can’t interpret. But when his alpha doesn’t immediately get up and come over to him, when Yuuri knows Victor can smell him, it makes something sour turn over in Yuuri’s stomach.

“Victor,” Yuuri says again; a plaintive note creeps into his voice this time. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, darling,” Victor says. He tries to smile again, but it doesn’t make it to his eyes. Still he stays where he is, crouched by the fire. Now Yuuri knows something is wrong.

There’s only one conclusion to be drawn in his feverish brain, but Yuuri doesn’t understand it. He’s in heat, and his Victor, his alpha, is right here… but Victor doesn’t want to mate him. Doesn’t want to seal their bond.

“You don’t want me anymore.” Yuuri’s voice breaks as he gets the words out. Victor stiffens as though struck.

“What?” Victor stands, but he still stays by the fire. He clenches his hands by his sides, like he’s trying to stop himself from reaching for Yuuri. “Yuuri, no—“

“You’re mad at me,” Yuuri says, and starts to cry. He can barely even get the words out, feels his eyes brimming with tears as he crumples into the bedroll. The rejection cuts through him like a knife, stealing his breath and turning his desire to despair. “P-Please, Victor, I-I-I’m s-sorry, please don’t
—don’t throw me away—“

He can’t live with this idea, he can’t. Yuuri is too heat-sick to even really remember what he’s apologizing for. He knows only that he wronged his mate somehow, hurt Victor so badly that now his beloved won’t touch him when he should most want to be joined. “I’m sorry, Victor, please—!”

Victor is on him in the next instant, across the cave so fast that it leaves Yuuri breathless. Yuuri’s gasp is swallowed by Victor’s mouth on his. Victor crushes Yuuri against his chest, arms wrapping around him, one of Victor’s hands cradling the back of Yuuri’s head.

They kiss like death itself is stalking them at the entrance to the cave, and the only salvation is in the other’s arms. Yuuri arches into Victor’s chest, sliding his arms around Victor’s neck and kissing him back until they have to break away for air.

“You undo me,” Victor says. He’s gone hoarse, and he presses his forehead to Yuuri’s, his fingertips digging into Yuuri’s shoulder. “I should be protecting you, I—I should be letting you rest, not giving in to this temptation yet—”

“I don’t need rest,” Yuuri says, interrupting. “I need you. Please, Victor.”

He still doesn’t understand why Victor was holding back, but with Victor’s arms around him the fear is less, the touch of his mate soothing his anxiety. Something must still show in Yuuri’s face, though, because before Yuuri can even form the words to ask, Victor is kissing him again and bearing him down onto the bedroll.

“I would never throw you away, Yuuri,” Victor says, between kisses. His voice is lower now, with a rough edge that sends a twist of lust through Yuuri’s stomach. “I’m not mad at you, I was only scared you were still too weak to make it through a heat. I can’t bear the thought of hurting you.”

Yuuri exhales his breath in a rush. “Please don’t make me wait any more,” he says. Victor pulls back very slightly, regarding him from up close with dark eyes. “I’m not—it’s been so hard waiting for you, I couldn’t even sleep, please, I need you.” Whatever conversation they need to have, whatever complications lay behind them and ahead of them, it’s all far away now—the growing fever in his skin is eating away all other thoughts.

By way of answer, Victor turns Yuuri’s head slightly, baring the long line of flesh that slants from Yuuri’s ear to his collarbone. Yuuri shudders as Victor leans down, scraping teeth over his throat; his cunt throbs in response, and Yuuri squirms, feeling himself getting wet. He moans, a ragged noise that turns into a cry as his mate bites down hard, right over the pulse point.

Yuuri melts beneath Victor, eyes fluttering shut. All the strain and tension leave his body in one breath as Victor marks him, claims him. “No more waiting,” Victor whispers against his throat. “I won’t let anything take you away from me again, Yuuri.”

“Victor,” Yuuri sighs. He wraps his arms around Victor’s shoulders, cradling the back of Victor’s head in one hand, sliding his fingers through Victor’s soft hair.

Victor is as good as his word. He wastes no time leaving mark after mark on Yuuri’s bare skin, just the way Yuuri likes, but far more numerous than he ever has before. Victor litters him with bite marks, sinking his teeth into the soft flesh of Yuuri’s stomach, his thigh, his ass. Other places he worries bruises to life, sucking hard at the skin and pinning Yuuri down as he squirms and begs.

Gone is the nervous virgin who begged Yuuri to direct him their first time together in bed. Their many, many nights of love-making have given Victor the confidence to know exactly how Yuuri
likes to be touched, what makes him gasp and moan in pleasure. But there’s a possessiveness to him now that Yuuri has seen but seldom, and a raw aggression to answer the ravenous need singing through Yuuri’s whole body.

The fact that Victor is still wearing clothes is Yuuri’s own fault, but he can’t help himself—every time Victor tries to sit up, Yuuri just has to chase him, sitting up to kiss him and pull him back to the bedroll, thighs spread in wanton invitation. Victor growls against Yuuri’s mouth the third time he does it, and shoves Yuuri down with one hand. Yuuri moans, watching his lover with wide eyes as Victor straddles Yuuri’s thighs, pinning them open with his knees.

He reaches down with his other hand, stroking his fingers teasingly over Yuuri’s wet, aching sex. So far Victor has only teased him, biting and sucking bruises to life on the insides of Yuuri’s thighs, but now he strokes Yuuri’s reddened cock a few times before moving further down, caressing the slick folds of his cunt.

“Victor, pleeeeease…” Yuuri moans.

“So wet and needy,” Victor says. He glances up at Yuuri’s face, and Yuuri feels his pulse quicken at the blatant hunger there. With his face lit only by the flickering firelight, Yuuri pinned beneath him on the bedroll, Victor looks like he’s planning to eat Yuuri alive.

He presses two fingers into Yuuri’s cunt, sinking in to the second knuckle and curling them slightly. Yuuri whines, bucking up against Victor’s hand in frustration. Victor gratifies him almost immediately by adding a third finger and thrusting his hand against Yuuri’s rocking hips. It’s not enough, not what he really wants, but he tries to fuck himself on Victor’s fingers anyway. And within less than a minute of Victor crooking his fingers just right and fucking them hard into Yuuri’s sex—Victor’s teeth at his throat, whispering filth into his skin—Yuuri comes, hard enough to arch his back up off the floor.

“That’s it, darling,” Victor says, running a soothing hand along Yuuri’s hip. “So good for me.” The warmth in his voice makes Yuuri’s eyes flutter shut, and he sighs in satisfaction. There’s a rustling of fabric, Victor pulling up off of where he was settled on Yuuri’s open thighs. When Yuuri opens his eyes a few moments later, Victor is stripping off the last of his clothes and tossing them to the side. His thick cock juts from between his thighs as he kneels up, red and leaking slightly from the tip. It’s mouth-watering.

The smell of his alpha, his arousal and his sweat and his skin, hits Yuuri like a hand across the face. Yuuri finds himself sitting up, reaching for Victor, digging nails into the backs of Victor’s shoulders. Victor grins at him, eyes hot with the same need Yuuri’s drowning in.

“I need you to fuck me, Victor,” Yuuri says. It comes out peevish, and Victor laughs as he bears Yuuri down onto his back again, folding his legs back and up to hook Yuuri’s knees over Victor’s shoulders. “Stop laughing at me!”

“I’m not laughing at—” Yuuri grabs Victor and pulls him down for a rough kiss, swallowing the rest of his sentence. Victor groans into his mouth. There’s a fumble of hands between their bodies as both of them reach down for Victor’s cock, trying to guide it to Yuuri’s slick cunt, and then Victor plunges into him in one thrust, burying himself to the hilt.

It’s heaven. Yuuri shudders with pleasure, wrapping his arms around Victor as his lover grinds down into him, making them both groan. The satisfaction of being filled lights Yuuri up, stealing his words, stealing everything but the base need for Victor to fuck him, hard. Now.

“So hot,” Victor gets out, his voice hoarse. He pulls back, then thrusts hard back in, drawing a shaky
cry out of Yuuri. Then Victor is fucking him, folding him in half as he finally gives Yuuri the thing he’s been craving for what feels like years.

Yuuri clings to Victor, raking nails down his back, his noises getting louder and more ecstatic as Victor fucks him into the pile of blankets. He comes again, and then *again*, the third time so forceful that his throat closes off, his noises reduced to high, sucker-punched little cries as Victor fucks him right through it. Victor growls against his neck, and to Yuuri’s intense gratification Victor grabs Yuuri’s hair and yanks his head back to bare his neck again.

He sinks teeth into Yuuri’s throat and buries his cock to the hilt, shuddering as he comes, spilling hot inside Yuuri. Yuuri groans, pulling Victor tight against him, savoring the feeling of being filled up with Victor’s come.

Yuuri tugs Victor up from his throat, and then Victor is kissing him. It’s messy and hot, as much teeth as tongue, both of them desperate for the other. Yuuri lets out a frustrated cry as Victor breaks away from him and pulls out, easing Yuuri’s legs off his shoulders.

“Shhh, darling, it’s okay.” Victor says soothingly. He strokes a hand along Yuuri’s flank and quickly settles between his thighs. Yuuri gasps as Victor buries his face there; Yuuri shoves his feet against the floor, hips jerking a little as Victor eats greedily at his sex, tongue fucking into the folds of Yuuri’s cunt.

“V-Victor—a-ahhh, ff-hh-AHHH—” Yuuri shudders as Victor eats him open, making Yuuri’s toes curl, overstimulated and still wanting.

Victor pulls back finally, letting out a low noise of satisfaction. “You taste so good right now, Yuuri,” he says, and his voice is dark, filthy.

Victor sits up, and Yuuri can see his cock is hard again, but Victor is already reaching for him. He rolls Yuuri onto his stomach and pulls his ass up, getting Yuuri on his knees as he positions himself behind Yuuri’s thighs. Yuuri groans as Victor sinks into him again, stuffing him full. Victor drapes himself down on top of Yuuri’s back, nuzzling at Yuuri’s neck.

“You taste like I just fucked you,” Victor breathes in his ear. “It’s delicious.”

Then he rolls his hips, driving his cock into Yuuri again, grinding against the sweet spot inside him. Yuuri groans, losing himself in the feel of it, of taking Victor into him so deep.

He loses track after that, his heat swallowing him whole as Victor fucks him over and over and over. Even when they pause, Victor doesn’t let go of him for a second; they lay wrapped around each other in the messy bedroll, the whole cave and all its contents stinking of their sex. When Victor doesn’t have his cock buried in Yuuri’s cunt, he’s got his fingers there, gently pushing his come back inside Yuuri while he talks filth into his ear.

They go like that for hours. Finally, at some nameless hour of the morning, they stop, utterly winded. Yuuri’s heat has not finished by a long shot, but it’s abated somewhat for the time being. Victor wraps around Yuuri, his touch impossibly gentle as he gathers Yuuri against his chest and kisses his face.

“Tell me you’re mine,” Yuuri whispers. He pushes Victor’s sweaty hair out of his face, staring up at him. “That you don’t want anyone but me.”

“I’m yours, Yuuri,” Victor says immediately. He kisses the pads of Yuuri’s fingers, then his nose, then his mouth. “You’re the only thing I want, and I’ll never let you go.”
“Okay,” Yuuri says, and lets out a soft sigh. “I’m yours, too, Victor.”

Victor smiles at him. His eyes are impossibly blue, the color of Yuuri’s Spark, the same as the magic that lives inside him. “Good,” Victor says simply. “I’m so glad.”

* * * * *

They sleep, and though it is not as restful or deep as they truly need, it is enough. Yuuri wakes more than once, searching quickly for his mate and breathing a sigh of relief to find Victor still wrapped around him. Finally he sinks into deeper sleep, face shoved against Victor’s shoulder, and is dead to the world for several hours.

When he wakes again, it’s to the quiet of soft morning light. The rain has finally ceased, and spring sunlight is filtering through the trees to greet them at the mouth of the cave. The fire has long since gone out, though its embers still smolder from the night before. Yuuri takes a slow breath, listening to the birds sing from somewhere off in the trees.

He lays there for a few long minutes, just soaking in the solitude. It occurs to him that it’s been weeks—months, maybe—since he’s felt any sort of peace like this and been able to appreciate it. Even as he sits up, however, the feverish need in his bones reminds him of its continuing presence.

“Victor,” he says. He turns, pressing closer to his mate, who’s still dead to the world. Yuuri shakes Victor’s shoulders gently, and he comes awake with a start.

“What’s wrong?” Victor blinks a few times to banish the sleep from his eyes, sitting up on an elbow. “Yuuri, are you—”

“I’m fine,” says Yuuri gently. He kisses Victor to forestall more questions on that front, and for a few moments the two of them just kiss, indulging in each other. Yuuri pulls away first, trying to ignore the way Victor’s mouth stokes the hot ember of want in his guts.

“Do you need me?” Victor asks, voice soft. He nuzzles against Yuuri’s, studying his expression from close up.

Yuuri smiles. “Soon,” he says, “but, not yet. I—I just—” He takes a deep breath to abort the closed-off stammering, not wanting to give in to that anxiety. “Are you angry with me? For—for what I did.”

Victor raises an eyebrow. “You want to talk about this now?” Yuuri’s stomach lurches in fear at that response, and Victor must feel it, or see it in his face, because he amends hastily, “That’s fine, Yuuri, shh, come here. It’s alright.”

“You’re angry,” Yuuri says, but lets Victor pull him into his arms anyway.

“I love you, and that hasn’t changed,” Victor says against his hair. Yuuri shuts his eyes. They embrace for a moment, Victor petting Yuuri’s hair and kissing his temple before he finally pulls back enough to look each other in the eyes again. Only the connection singing silently between them gives Yuuri the strength not to break down again—the certainty that Victor means what he says.

Victor takes a moment to respond, and finally he lets out a sigh. “Of course I’m upset, some,” he says. “I wish you had trusted me sooner, but… I understand why you did what you did.”

“I wanted to tell you sooner,” Yuuri says, trying to talk past the painful knot in his chest. “But I was—I was so scared.”
“This is what you wanted to tell me when we fought the dragon,” Victor says. “And what you were so anxious about for so long.”

“Yes,” says Yuuri, and Victor nods a little. “I’ve never told anyone, Victor. Not even my parents knew, only Minako, because she was training me. Phichit and Yurio found out on their own.”

“So you’ve been… what, training in secret?” Yuuri nods, biting his lip. Victor shakes his head in apparent amazement. If Victor has strong feelings about the collusion of two of his pages with his fiance, he’s choosing not to comment on it. “Right under our noses. Yuuri, you could have been—”

“Caught, killed, arrested, imprisoned—yes, I know,” Yuuri says, interrupting, and Victor’s eyebrows go up. “Why do you think I was so afraid to tell you?”

“But you were so sick,” Victor says, and his brow furrows as he sits up, cradling Yuuri’s face in his hand again. “My mother—she told me how you were suffering, that our unfinished bond had sickened you while I was away. You could have died—“

Yuuri exhales shakily, and Victor breaks off. “I had to,” Yuuri says in a low voice. “I had to prove that I could. That omegas can fight.”

“I wish you had told me,” says Victor. He gathers Yuuri up against him, carding fingers through his hair, and Yuuri presses himself to Victor’s chest. “That you were going to try this, and that you were so sick.”

“Your mother was afraid that you would come home from Bohemia too soon if we told you, so she said I should refrain,” says Yuuri. Victor makes a noise of frustration in the back of his throat, but Yuuri figures _that_, at least, can wait till later. “And if I had told you sooner, what would have happened? Would I have even been allowed to compete?”

“We could have tried another way to force the issue,” Victor says. “We could have asked my father —“

“I didn’t want another way, Victor, I wanted to compete. And besides, would he have listened, if I hadn’t—done what I did?”

Victor doesn’t answer immediately, which is answer enough in itself. “I don’t know,” he says finally. He buries his face in Yuuri’s hair, holding Yuuri tight against him, as though afraid the discussion will somehow take Yuuri from him. “You still shouldn’t have fought when you were so ill—“

“I beat Mila, and Chris, and Yurio,” Yuuri says. He lets some steel creep into his voice, more than a little irritated at Victor’s seeming refusal to acknowledge his accomplishment.

Victor winces. “You did,” he says. “And you were amazing. You even did that incredible trick with the slipstream.”

“I’ve trained my whole life, Victor,” says Yuuri.

Victor kisses him by way of apology, hard enough to steal Yuuri’s breath and half-melt his spine. “Yuuuuuuuuri,” Victor says against his mouth. “It’s not that I didn’t see how strong you are. But you’re in heat, and sick, and by the time I found you I thought you were going to die in my arms. How did you feel when you saw me fighting that dragon?”

“Oh,” says Yuuri, and feels himself flush. Victor kisses his neck, and Yuuri shivers again, his train of thought abruptly derailing.
“And speaking of heat, it smells like you’re going to start again soon,” Victor says. One of his hands creeps up the back of Yuuri’s neck, gripping his hair again; Yuuri catches his breath, feels himself getting wet.

Victor lays him back in the bedrolls, covering Yuuri with his own body, hedging him in with his arms on either side of Yuuri’s head. “If there’s still daylight after this wave, I want to try to take you back to the palace,” Victor says in a low voice. “We’re going to run out of food if we stay here, and the chaos from the tourney will only be worse if you and I stay missing for much longer.”

Yuuri lets his eyes slide half-shut, getting a little lost in the rich velvet of his mate’s voice, to the point where he’s having a bit of trouble following what the words even mean. It takes him a second to realize Victor is waiting for his response. “Okay,” he says quickly.

In reality, he’d be happy to stay out here in the woods for awhile yet, so long as he still has Victor with him to take care of him through the rest of his heat. But with the part of his brain not yet sunk back into base lust, he recognizes that Victor is probably right.

There’s no more conversation after that, not for awhile. Their sex is less frantic this time, with Victor more intent on wringing as many orgasms out of Yuuri as he possibly can—he’s fully in rut now, to match Yuuri’s heat, and Yuuri is grateful to not be the only one in need. Victor is ravenous for him, adding to his collection of bruises and marks, pinning Yuuri down against the bedroll to fuck him hard and deep.

Even during his (vanishingly small) recovery times, Victor doesn’t let Yuuri rest. His new obsession with eating his own come out of Yuuri’s cunt hasn’t abated, and Yuuri’s high, desperate cries fill the cave and the stretch of woods outside it as Victor works him over. Finally, they’re spent—or at least, Yuuri is. He dozes for a time, while Victor busies himself with cleaning up and collecting their things.

The next thing he knows, Victor is shaking him gently awake. “Come on, darling, we should go,” he says. He helps Yuuri up and into some clean clothes, one of Yuuri’s simpler yukatas from his quarters under a light traveling cloak, and then they head outside into the cool morning air.

“How come your horse stayed when mine ran off?” Yuuri asks, only slightly put out. Victor’s charger noses at their hands in greeting as they approach; Victor takes a moment to stroke his horse’s face, murmuring softly to it. He already packed all their things and tucked them into the saddlebags, his charger already saddled and wearing its bridle.

“Mine’s a war horse who’s known me for ten years,” says Victor. “He stays when I tell him to, and I’ve been checking on him. But let’s get going; we don’t want to be halfway there when your heat returns.”

Yuuri finds it hard to disagree. Victor puts him on the horse, on top of an extra folded blanket for padding. Then he climbs up behind, wrapping an arm around Yuuri’s waist to hold him securely against Victor’s chest. Yuuri leans back against him ever so slightly, his eyes hooding; he may have once spurned Victor’s offer to go riding together on the same horse, but right now he’s grateful for it. His heat is temporarily abated, but being any sort of physical distance from Victor right now is a trial, one he doesn’t think he has the energy for at the moment.

With the storm gone, they make decent time, though the forest floor is muddy and treacherous in parts. They follow the course of the river, wending their way south and back east towards Ekaterina Palace. Yuuri tries to ignore how sore he is, but even with the extra padding, the jostling of the horse between his thighs is not fun.
They’ve made it almost all the way out of the woods when trouble finds them.

Yuuri’s almost dozed off again, letting himself lean against his mate’s chest, but he comes awake as the charger beneath them slows, jolting him ever so slightly. He sits up, and once glance tells him what they stopped for: bandits up ahead. There’s easily a dozen of them, a cutthroat-looking bunch all, and heavily armed. They’ve set up camp by the riverbank, and a thin plume of blue smoke wafts skywards from their small fire. So far, though, no one is looking in their direction.

“Let’s try to circle around,” Victor says in a low voice, right into Yuuri’s ear. He nudges his horse to turn away, picking its way almost daintily among the roots and mud, but it’s too late.

“Oy there, travelers,” calls a voice, and seconds later a man emerges from the brush off to Victor’s right. He’s wearing an unpleasant sort of smile and carrying a vicious-looking blade in one hand; a jagged scar runs from his right ear down to his chin. “Don’t tell me you’re going to pass right by us and not stop in to say hello!”

“That’s awfully rude of you,” says another voice. Yuuri suppresses a grimace as a second bandit emerges, this time from the direction of their camp.

More men appear, slowly moving to encircle Victor and Yuuri on their horse, all of them brandishing swords or spears or bows and arrows. Yuuri doesn’t know if it’s his heat making him more sensitive, or just that bandits in general don’t believe that strongly in personal hygiene, but he swears he can smell every one of them—a mixture of alphas and betas, combining for a thoroughly unpleasant stink in the back of his nose.

“Let us pass,” says Victor in a loud voice. “We have no quarrel with you.”

“No, but you’ve got something awfully nice there, don’t you,” says Scarface. He approaches the horse, watching Yuuri with an expression that makes Yuuri’s stomach turn over. “What’s this lovely thing that smells so good, eh?”

“Leave him here with us,” says a third bandit, one with dirty black hair and an eyepatch. “We’ll take good care of him.” Eyepatch comes closer on their left side, reaching out a hand; Yuuri hears Victor’s sharp inhale just before he shifts, and the horse canters sideways, putting Yuuri’s leg out of the man’s reach.

“Keep your hands off my mate,” Victor growls. Yuuri can feel the aggression radiating off Victor, like heat wafting from an open oven.

“Not very responsible, to take him out somewhere when he’s in heat,” says Scarface. “Poor thing needs someone to treat him better.” He comes closer, his longsword out, and reaches for Yuuri’s leg with his other hand.

Yuuri sucks in a breath. He reacts without thought, holding perfectly still as the bandit reaches for him—but the Spark inside him flares, bright and hot, and the dagger he summons buries itself in Scarface’s throat before he’s even properly called the spell. Scarface staggers, clutching at his throat with a wet gurgle, and then drops.

For about thirty seconds, everything goes completely insane.

“Yuuri, stay on the horse!” Victor hisses in his ear. Without waiting for a response, Victor vaults from the horse’s back, summoning a burning sword to his hand as he lays into the nearest three bandits. The charger rears with Yuuri on it as the bandits try to swarm him, and for a few seconds it’s all Yuuri can do to not be thrown off.
Down comes the horse, kicking at the bandit nearest its front hooves. Yuuri catches a glimpse of Victor flitting in and out of the slipstream, cutting through the screaming bandits like a reaper, his face lit with savage fury. Then someone is trying to pull Yuuri off the horse, and he screams too, flinging an open hand in the man’s face to set him on fire.

The bandit staggers backwards, shrieking as he bats at the flames licking over him. Yuuri swings the horse around, ripping himself free of Eyepatch as he attempts to haul Yuuri off his mount. He twists around in the saddle, calling a sheet of ice, and suddenly Eyepatch is frozen solid.

He takes down one more with a pair of summoned daggers, then turns around to find that the other eight bandits are dead on the ground—several of them in multiple pieces. Victor stands over the slain bandits, splattered in blood, breathing hard. He starts a circle of the perimeter, his summoned sword still held at the ready, clearly checking to make sure no foes are lurking in the underbrush.

Yuuri spends about five seconds just listening to his racing heart, grateful that the bandits are dead and his lover is safe. Then exhaustion and need reassert themselves, a cramp in his stomach that warns how soon his heat will return in full force.

“Victor,” he says.

Victor breaks off, turning and striding over to him. “Are you hurt?” he demands. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Yuuri says, which is close enough. “But I want to go home now.”

Victor stares at him for a moment. He takes a deep breath, then lets it out slow. “Okay, darling,” he says. “I’m glad.”

He climbs on the horse again behind Yuuri, and before Yuuri can stop him Victor is kissing him, deep and needful. Yuuri folds in his arms, kissing back until a thrill of want goes through him that makes him break off with a groan. He opens his eyes to see Victor staring at him, his face flushed. Even smeared with blood, Victor’s still so gorgeous it makes Yuuri’s chest ache.

“We need to go,” says Yuuri shakily. “Before—I’m—“

“Right,” says Victor, and grabs for the reins.

They leave the bandits where they lie. Yuuri doesn’t so much as glance back, just focuses on his breathing, and on the warmth of his mate’s body against him. He spent so long denying his own need that to try to suppress it again now makes his stomach turn, but neither does he want to drag Victor off the horse in the middle of a muddy field.

Victor spurs the charger into a gallop as they leave the edge of the forest, and they all but fly across the open plain. Following the river out of the woods took them far enough west that Petrograd proper now lies between them and the palace; it would be better to go around it, but Yuuri’s heat is rapidly returning.

“We have to go through the city,” Victor says in Yuuri’s ear. They’re heading for the north-west gate of Petrograd, Victor’s horse still moving at an admirable clip.

Yuuri grimaces. “They’re going to smell me,” he says, dismal. “And see me.”

“I know, but it’ll be faster,” says Victor. “But perhaps we can fix it at least a little.” His voice is soft, warm, completely at odds with the urgency that he’s had in urging the horse faster. He slows the charger just long enough to help rearrange Yuuri, settling him side-saddle so he can hide his flushed face against Victor’s throat, Victor’s arm securely around his waist.
Then he spurs the horse into a gallop again. “Make way!” he shouts, and suddenly the clatter of hooves on flagstones reaches Yuuri’s ears.

They tear through the city at speed, Victor somehow guiding the horse through the crowded streets while slowing only minimally. Yuuri has to glance up now and then from his mate’s throat in order to avoid getting motion-sick, but every time he makes eye contact with a stunned pedestrian, he wants to crawl into a hole and never come out. He hears shouting, commotion, but it seems no one quite dares to stop or question the prince, or even block the street in front of him.

By the time they leave Petrograd and are approaching the palace, Yuuri’s heat has come back in full bloom. He’s shivering, panting, unable to keep from making wet little noises against Victor’s skin, twisting his fingers in Victor’s shirt. He can barely summon the self-control to keep from undoing Victor’s pants right here on the horse, so desperate is he for his mate.

“Just a little longer, Yuuri,” says Victor in his ear. His voice is tight, strained.

Finally, they arrive. Voices are shouting Victor and Yuuri’s names as they come tearing through the side gate, towards the wing that houses the royal family, but Yuuri is so far gone he doesn’t even look up from Victor’s chest.

“Your highness!” says a voice, from quite close by, as Victor reins in his sweating, blowing horse. It’s a guard; he and another guard approach the horse, one of them taking the charger’s reins as Victor dismounts. “The King wants—”

“Get out of my way!” Victor shoves the guard away who was trying to help Yuuri down, face tight with fury. “Don’t fucking touch him!”

“Yes your highness,” says the guard in a rush, and backs hurriedly away.

Victor helps Yuuri down from the horse himself, gathering Yuuri into his arms. Yuuri wraps his own arms around Victor’s neck, hiding against his alpha. Other people are still nearby, and it’s making him anxious, especially when he’s so wet and full of need, so desperate for Victor to take him again. All other conscious thought has been eaten away in the burn of his heat, his yearning for his mate—if anything, it’s worse than it was at its onset, the craving licking through his mind and body like wildfire.

“Victorrrrr,” he whines, face pressed to Victor’s neck.

“I know, darling,” Victor murmurs.

Victor carries him into the palace, sweeping past guards, past advisors and servants and God knows who else. Yuuri smells another alpha before he hears Yurio’s voice. “Your highness! Is Yuuri okay—”

Victor whirls immediately; the stink of his anger fills the air, as tangible as a lit match. “Get away from him,” he snarls. Yurio is already backing away when actual flames erupt at Victor’s feet, licking along the carpet towards Yurio.

Yurio lets out a shout of dismay, but Victor is already turning away again, stalking down the hallway with Yuuri in his arms. No one else dares to approach them. Victor bursts into his quarters, kicking the heavy door shut behind them, and Yuuri is already leaning up to seal his mouth against Victor’s, kissing him hard and desperate.

Victor carries him to the bed, kissing him back just as hard, already grabbing at Yuuri’s clothes. A few seconds later, and Victor’s managed to tear Yuuri’s yukata open; Yuuri moans, spreading his
legs as Victor lays him out on the bed. Victor swears as he yanks his own pants open, crawling onto
the bed on top of Yuuri, and then he’s burying his cock in Yuuri’s wet cunt with a groan.

“We’re safe now,” Victor says in Yuuri’s ear. His voice is full of gravel, a hand buried in Yuuri’s
hair as he starts to fuck Yuuri, thrusting into him steadily. “No one is going to see you or touch you
or—”

“Victor,” Yuuri gasps, and kisses his mate again.

Later, when things are calm, Yuuri will hear all of the details about what happened during and after
his flight into the woods. He’ll hear about the Queen’s terrible rage—how she sent the Vespuccians
fleeing for their lives from Ekaterina Palace and its environs, how no one even dared to look her in
the eyes as she sorted through the madness from the tourney.

He’ll hear about how the mage-knights tried their hardest to contain the chaos, protecting and
escorting as many citizens to safety as they could. Several were injured in the melee, but every last
one of them stayed until the fighting had stopped and they could survey the damage. Yuuri will hear
about how Minako was with them, how she laid waste to half a regiment of Vespuccian guards by
herself in defense of some fleeing citizens.

He’ll hear about Victor’s wrath at the fallout—his fury at being forced to leave the arena instead of
being allowed to go to his mate’s side. The royal guards were adamant in escorting the family to the
safety of the palace, and no amount of shouting or threats persuaded them otherwise, apparently.
Yuuri will hear how Victor’s version of sickness from their half-finished bond was an incandescent
rage—how he screamed at everyone who kept him from Yuuri, including his own mother; how he
set one end of the stables on fire in his frustration; and how, once Minako told him of Yuuri’s flight
into the woods, he would hear of nothing but going after his love himself—alone.

Later, Yuuri will have time to hear everything, sort through explanations, be mortified at his and
Victor’s behavior. There will be apologies (to everyone from the guards Victor threatened with
violence, to the poor omega servant who tried to bring them food and instead found Yuuri snarling in
jealousy at her as he chased her out of the room), discussions of how to handle relations with
Vespuccia, arguments about the bandits at the borders of the woods and sundry other things. Later,
Yuuri will ready himself for the King’s judgment at his behavior, and hear who won the Grand
Tourney, in the end.

But all of that comes later. Now, Yuuri surrenders to the heat burning through him, and sinks into the
relief of knowing he’s finally safe with Victor—that no one will ever come between them again, for
any reason.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's heat finally ends, which means it's time to face the music.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry for the delay; I struggled with this chapter a little, because endings are hard, and as you may have noticed by the number up above, I ultimately decided to post this chapter and then conclude with an epilogue—mainly for reasons of pacing and tone. (Also because otherwise it would have been a thousand years long.) I will get that up as quickly as I can. Thank you again for your patience; my last final is in 10 days, so it's been hectic couple weeks as I draw near the end of the semester.

As always, my beta has the patience and wisdom of a saint, and this story could not exist without her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Counting the time spent in the cave in the woods, Yuuri’s heat lasts for an unheard-of ten days. During that time, he doesn’t set foot outside of Victor’s quarters, and neither does Victor leave his side. They spend most of it clad only in light robes, or taking long, leisurely baths in Victor’s enormous tub.

(“I got this built when I found out about your family’s hot springs,” Victor says to Yuuri, one afternoon in that long stretch of days. They’re soaking in the hot water, Yuuri settled in Victor’s lap with his back against Victor’s chest. “I know it’s not as good, but I hoped you would enjoy it.”

Yuuri smiles, turning his head to kiss Victor’s chin, eyes half-shut in contentment. “I like it a lot,” Yuuri says. “But sometime you’re actually going to have to come visit my family’s home with me, Victor.”

“I’d like that,” Victor says, and leans his head down to kiss Yuuri’s mouth.)

They don’t spend the entire time having sex, although naturally a significant chunk of it is spent that way. They doze, wrapped around each other in bed or before the fire, or else Victor insists on massaging Yuuri’s sore muscles with sweet-smelling oils. Their bedlinens quickly become saturated with their heat-scent, but instead of being unpleasant, Yuuri luxuriates in it, in how the entire room positively stinks of him and Victor’s intimacy.

Gone is the illness caused by a half-formed bond, replaced with a connection that resonates between them, golden and strong as a length of silk rope. Yuuri can feel Victor in his mind, a warm and reassuring presence. Now, when Yuuri reaches for his Spark, his blue flames have a twist of silver-white mixed in, Victor’s magic mingling with his own.

Speaking of his Spark, Yuuri is finding that the most interesting thing about his heat is the fact that
his magic is easily twice as strong and volatile during it than at other times. More than once, he and Victor accidentally singe a blanket or rug, their Spark flaring as their desire overflows. Yuuri wonders if they were to go back to that cave in the woods, if they might find scorch marks on the floor—in the dark, in the rapture of being reunited, he thinks they might easily have missed such a thing.

But it’s not all passion and indulgence. After the first disastrous incident with the omega maid, the staff is careful to send only a select few staff members, all of them betas, all of them people Yuuri and Victor know and trust enough to not feel threatened by. (Victor’s behavior towards the guards who greeted them upon arrival nixed any lingering thoughts of possibly sending alpha servants.) The sole exception to the “only betas” rule is the Queen herself. Yuuri still doesn’t love the presence of another omega in their chambers, but the Queen smells enough like Victor to assuage his irritation. And even being in rut is not enough to cause Victor to snarl at his own mother, now that his mate is safe.

Elizaveta comes every few days to check on them and to bring Victor some interesting herbs. The first time she brings them, Yuuri catches the rather baleful look she gives Victor as she hands them over. “What are those?” Yuuri asks curiously, as Victor (naked except for a loose pair of trousers) mashes the leaves into a fine powder.

“I’m going to make some tea with it for you,” says Victor. “It’ll keep you from getting pregnant.”

Yuuri stares at him, stricken. Victor glances over at him and gives him a small, rueful smile. “I know, my love,” he says, abandoning the mortar and pestle to come wrap his arms around Yuuri. “I know it sounds terrible right now. But until you tell me you’re ready for children when you’re not in heat, I won’t inflict it on you while you are.”

He’s right, Yuuri knows he’s right, has just enough presence of mind to be thankful that his mate is looking out for him this way, but—but—!

“Don’t you want children?” Yuuri asks, unable to help himself. “Isn’t that why you picked me in the first place, because—“

“I picked you from a group of omegas who all had a strong Spark, yes,” says Victor. He kisses Yuuri’s temple, stroking fingers through Yuuri’s hair. “And when we do decide we’re ready for children, I will love every minute of it. But Yuuri, you just worked so hard to show me your strength in combat—you wanted it badly enough to practice in secret your whole life. Don’t you want to do it more now you’ve shown everyone your skill?”

“I… yes,” says Yuuri. He sighs, laying his head against Victor’s shoulder, trying to ignore the (new and rather loud) part of him that cries out to be pregnant with Victor’s child. “Do you really think they’re going to let me?”

“You will if I have any say in the matter,” Victor says darkly. “You won the Grand Tourney, and you broke the record for total points scored in the process. By rights, you earned the title and the boon from my father.”

“You don’t think your knights will resent me?” Yuuri asks. “I thought that maybe—“

“You won despite a disadvantage of having to practice in secret, without the benefit of regular sparring, like they had,” says Victor. “And even beyond the love I have for you, they love you as well, Yuuri. You saw how they defended you.”

Yuuri can’t argue with that, no matter how bad his anxiety gets sometimes. But the reason Yuuri has
the time to worry whether the mage-knights resent him is because he has the luxury of knowing that, despite all his worst imaginings, his long-held secret hasn’t driven Victor from his side.

He knows Victor is still frustrated at the way Yuuri hid the combat magic from him, mainly due to the suffering Yuuri endured because of it. They’ve talked about it several more times since returning to the palace, mostly curled up together in bed after another round of sex. But instead of causing a rift between them, the revelation has instead felled the last barrier Yuuri still kept. Now he feels laid bare, vulnerable to Victor in a way he could never have imagined before—but in a good way. It’s so much easier for Yuuri to be at ease, to embrace the future he once resented so deeply.

And the fact that he gets to share that future with Victor now seems an unbelievable gift. His mate is kind, compassionate, so tender it brings Yuuri to tears on multiple occasions during his heat. Yuuri almost can’t believe that this man picked him, marvels at what ten years of foolishness and frustration might have cost him.

“Don’t cry, Yuuri,” Victor murmurs on one such occasion, near the end of his heat. They’ve just had sex (for the seventh time that day), and Yuuri is cuddled up against Victor’s chest, sniffing against his collarbone in a fashion both dignified and rather wet. “I know the katsudon that chef sent us wasn’t as good as yours, but you can make more as soon as your heat is over.”

Yuuri chokes on a laugh, shoving Victor’s shoulder lightly. Victor smiles at him from close up, the corners of his eyes crinkling; it’s enough to make Yuuri’s chest ache. “You’re ridiculous,” Yuuri says, and wipes at his eyes with his thumb.

“I love you, too,” says Victor softly. Yuuri has no choice but to kiss him.

* * * * *

Finally, almost a fortnight after the day of the Grand Tourney—when everything went so miserably, disastrously awry—Yuuri awakens in Victor’s bed with nothing in the back of his mind but a pleasant drowsiness. He lies still for awhile, reveling in the quiet and the warmth of Victor’s arms. Almost immediately, however, he notices the smell. Or, well, ‘stink’ would be a better word. It’s not totally unpleasant—it smells like him and Victor, plus sweat and… other bodily fluids—but it’s so strong that it makes him want to cringe. “Cleaning the sheets is going to be awful,” he says out loud.

At the sound of Yuuri’s voice, Victor stirs, rolling over slightly. He presses a soft kiss to Yuuri’s forehead, sliding an arm around his waist. Then he pauses. “Ah,” he says, and he sounds vaguely disappointed, “your heat is over.”

“It is,” says Yuuri. He has to squash the urge to apologize. Instead, he kisses Victor’s jaw, sliding a hand along Victor’s bare flank to palm the graceful curve of his hip-bone.

“I liked having you all to myself,” Victor says, rather mournfully. “Now we have to be responsible again.”

“I have to go talk to your father,” Yuuri says, and shivers. On her last visit, the Queen brought word that the King required Yuuri’s presence as soon as he was well enough to leave Victor’s chambers.

By way of response, Victor gathers Yuuri into his arms, cradling the back of his head protectively. “Don’t worry,” he murmurs into Yuuri’s hair. “I won’t let anything happen to you, I swear.”

“I broke Kieva’s laws and caused a huge fiasco when you had diplomatic visitors,” says Yuuri.

“We’re bonded now,” says Victor firmly. “You’re my mate, and no one is going to hurt you, or
threaten you, or imprison you.”

“He could force us to break it,” Yuuri says. The words come out in a quaver despite his best attempts to sound calm.

“Unless my father wishes to have no son at all, he won’t be foolish enough to do such a thing,” says Victor. Yuuri’s heart skips a beat at that. He takes a deep breath, shutting his eyes and letting Victor’s warmth wash over him, buoying him with feelings of love and protectiveness.

“Alright,” Yuuri says, finally. It’s not, but they have to face the world anyway. The two of them drag themselves out of bed and go to bathe and dress. One of the servants brought over several items of Yuuri’s clothing over a week ago, so he doesn’t have to leave Victor’s quarters for that, at least.

Finally, they’re ready to go out into the palace. They both pause in front of the door, holding hands; neither of them say anything for several moments.

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” Victor says finally. Yuuri looks over to find Victor watching him, a rueful smile on his handsome face.

“Same here,” says Yuuri, and sighs. He steps forward first, pressing a hand to the door and leading Victor out into the hall.

Yuuri doesn’t go to see the King immediately, since he’s in the middle of a policy session with several of his advisors and some dignitaries that are still visiting. The Spring Fete and its associated revelry has just ended, Yuuri’s heat having outlasted them, and the political situation was messy enough that all of the negotiations—negotiations that should have finished a week ago—are just now wrapping up.

So instead, Yuuri goes to see Minako, who is recovering well in her quarters. Yuuri’s only heard a very basic version of what happened the day of the Grand Tourney, delivered secondhand from the Queen and the handful of servants who came to Victor’s rooms. He’s anxious to catch up, re-orient himself in the world; he can think of no one he trusts more to help him with that than his mentor.

“Yuuri!” Minako looks up brightens immediately as he pokes his head in the room. “You’re finally recovered! Come in and talk to me!” She’s curled up on the couch, her left arm in a sling.

“Hi, Minako,” Yuuri says. He comes in and shuts the door behind him, trying to not be so self-conscious as he comes over to sit down on the couch by her. “Um… I don’t know where to start—”

“You could start with saying thank you, you ungrateful brat,” says Minako. Yuuri stares at her in shock, feeling his face grow hot. Minako only manages to keep a straight face for a few beats before throwing her head back and cackling.

“Sorry,” she says after she recovers her breath, sounding not very sorry at all. “I couldn’t help it. I know you didn’t mean to, but I’ve never seen anyone cause so much trouble in my entire life, and I couldn’t resist.”

Yuuri groans and puts his face in his hands. Minako reaches over with her good arm to pat him reassuringly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry,” she says. “It’ll be alright.”

“At least tell me what happened,” says Yuuri, because now he really needs to know.

The telling takes the better part of thirty minutes, though that’s at least as much due to Minako’s flair for the dramatic as anything else. After the royal family and Yuuri both fled the arena, the mage-knights and a regiment of the royal guard—as well as Minako and Yakov—did their best to try to
contain and manage the chaos. By the time the chaos was over with, the arena was half-destroyed, the spectators had fled to the palace or Petrograd, and the Viscount and his entourage had realized the mess they’d made and fled to an inn on the outskirts of the capital city. The royal army is still sorting out the full extent of the damage, but to Yuuri’s great relief, so far no one appears to have actually been killed.

Injured, on the other hand, is a different story. Minako isn’t the only one who was hurt, but she might be the person he feels the worst about. The vision Yuuri had of her when he was sick and feverish in the cave was apparently accurate. Minako sustained a stab wound and a messily broken arm during the melee, but thanks to the Queen and a quick healing spell of her own the day of the fight, she sustained no lasting injury and is well on her way to recovery already. Yuuri is grateful; he can’t help but feel responsible for what happened that day.

“I’m still amazed the Prince didn’t kill anyone,” says Minako. “I’ve never seen him so angry—alpha bond-sickness got to him quite badly.”

“I heard, a little,” Yuuri says. He suffers the strong urge to apologize for Victor, but the petty, self-satisfied part of him that likes thinking of Victor in a rage because of him prevents it.

Minako shakes her head. “It was bad enough that the guards dragged him and his parents back to the palace,” she says. “But apparently when he heard the Vespuccians were attacking civilians, he blew a hole in the western wall of the banquet room.”

Yuuri stares. “I’d heard he set one end of the stables on fire,” he says faintly, “but not about the wall.”

“Oh, Yakov said that the stables was when the Queen wouldn’t let him get back on a horse and head out into the chaos to look for you,” says Minako, and Yuuri winces. “But now at least we know where he gets it from.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Minako gives him a Look. “The Queen is the reason the fighting stopped,” she says. “And the reason we got a formal apology from Vespuccia, instead of the declaration of hostilities everyone expected. I expect they’ll do quite a bit more groveling, yet.”

“Oh,” says Yuuri. This, he wishes he could have seen. “What happened?”

He listens, stunned, as Minako relates how the Queen rode out from the palace on her white horse, flanked by guards, unfazed by the teeming mass of humanity. He gets a shiver as Minako tells him how all around her and before her as she rode, the people simply parted, their fighting ceasing.

“I saw her,” says Minako. Her expression and voice turn almost somber, as though recalling something that scared her more than she cares to admit. “She had some kind of spell, I think. But it was like—like being in the presence of an angel, or a miracle, like she was giving off this white light. I was afraid for my life, even though she never lifted a hand. She looked like—I don’t know. Some kind of goddess, ready to pass sentence on us.”

Minako scowls as soon as the words leave her mouth, looking away. “I can’t describe it right without sounding dumb,” she says, but Yuuri shakes his head.

“Holy Dread,” he says softly.

Minako looks at him, eyes widening. “That’s what that was?”
“It must have been,” says Yuuri, and he and Minako both shiver. The power to summon crushing fear and reverence was one of the legendary skills of Ekaterina Nikiforova, a skill that let her fell entire cities while spilling nary a drop of blood. Yuuri wonders if the King taught his Queen how to use that skill, or if Elizaveta is just that powerful a mage, to be able to learn the family’s ancient spell. Either way, it must have been impressive.

“Why did she leave the field in the first place?” he wonders out loud. “Why not just do that to start with?”

“That one, I can answer,” Minako says. “I asked her myself, later, and she said that if she hadn’t gone with her husband and Victor, they would have refused to go, and she couldn’t calm the battle with them distracting her.”

Yuuri laughs at that. “I guess that makes sense,” he says. “But wait, back up—why were the Vespuccians attacking civilians? I know the Viscount ordered them to try to arrest me, but—”

“He had no right to do that,” Minako says hotly. “He was just a sore loser since one of the finalists was Vespuccian and you beat him out in points.” Yuuri gives her a small, grateful smile, and she exhales a little bit. “Anyway, I think some civilians actually started attacking the Vespuccian guards, and from there it just went nuts.”

At the idea of Kievan civilians going toe-to-toe with the heavily-armed Vespuccian guards, Yuuri groans. “Why were they attacking the Vespuccians?” he asks weakly. He can’t quite shake the idea that despite the number of why questions he’s asked already, what he really wants to ask is how could I have caused this chaos? It doesn’t seem quite real to him, that he was able to single-handedly set off such madness. Or maybe he just doesn’t want it to be real.

Minako raises an eyebrow at him, like this last question of his is particularly dense. “You really can’t guess?”

Yuuri lets out a long breath. Before he can formulate another response, though, there’s a knock at the door. “Enter,” says Minako. She and Yuuri both turn their heads to see a servant poke his head inside.

“Forgive the interruption, Messeres,” says the servant. He comes inside enough to make a deep bow. “But the High King summons Lord Katsuki to his chambers.”

“Ah,” says Yuuri, and tries to pretend his stomach didn’t just cramp as though he’s been chugging hemlock-laced tea. “I’ll see you later, Minako.”

“Of course,” says Minako. She gives him a reassuring sort of smile. Yuuri only barely manages to return it, his version much more watery. Then he gets up and allows the servant to escort him to the High King’s chambers.

Instead of going to the King’s personal quarters, the servant leads Yuuri to a private study. In theory, this might have been less intimidating than facing the King’s judgment in, say, the throne room. In reality, when the door shuts behind him, leaving Yuuri and the King alone together, Yuuri strongly considers attempting to come up with a spell that will let him sink through the floor on the spot.

The study is large and ornately decorated, like much of the rest of the palace. Rich tapestries and two massive paintings hang on the walls, scattered amidst a half-dozen large bookcases, stuffed with scrolls and books and two different gorgeously-rendered globes. Behind the desk in the center of the room sits the High King, and Yuuri thinks to himself that his Majesty has never looked more regal or intimidating than he does right now, clad in a relatively simple black-and-blue suit.
“Come here, Yuuri,” says the King, not unkindly. Yuuri swallows, and forces himself to approach the desk at which the King sits. The King gestures at the seat across from him, and Yuuri sinks into it, folding his hands in his lap.

“Your Majesty,” he says.

“It seems you’ve made a full recovery,” says the King. “I’m glad to see you up and about again. We were quite worried about you.”

“Oh… thank you, Your Majesty,” Yuuri says, stammering a little. “His highness took excellent care of me.”

“So I heard,” says the King dryly, and Yuuri flushes scarlet. “I understand my wife did quite a bit of work to aid you as well.”

“She did, Your Majesty,” says Yuuri. “I have the utmost gratitude for both Her Highness and the prince.”

“Of course,” says the King, and straightens. He gazes at Yuuri for several long moments, his expression unreadable; Yuuri has to drop his own eyes after just a few seconds. Victor has his father’s eyes, but the King has had the time to perfect a gaze so penetrating and intense that Yuuri thinks he might simply liquefy and become nothing more than a stain on the expensive carpet if this keeps up for too long.

“I’ve called you here because we need to discuss the consequences of your actions at the Grand Tourney,” says the King finally.

Yuuri’s stomach—already pre-emptively twisted into a complicated knot—now proceeds to try to crawl into his throat. He takes a deep breath. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he says, and is proud when the words come out stronger than he’s feeling.

“You have not only flouted the laws of our country, but did so repeatedly and deliberately, in secret, over a long period of time,” says the King. He steeples his fingers in front of him, still gazing steadily at Yuuri over his fingertips. “Furthermore, your actions created a great deal of chaos and destruction when our political allies were visiting. I wish to hear what explanation you have for your behavior.”

It’s like being scolded by his parents, Yuuri thinks distantly. Only instead of his mother’s disappointed expression, there’s the threat of imprisonment. Yuuri doubts Victor would let someone behead him, but banishment seems possible enough.

Yuuri lifts his head, meeting those icy blue eyes with an effort. He came this far; he can explain himself, can repeat what he’s said to Minako and Yurio and Phichit so many times.

“You have not only flouted the laws of our country, but did so repeatedly and deliberately, in secret, over a long period of time,” says the King. He steeples his fingers in front of him, still gazing steadily at Yuuri over his fingertips. “Furthermore, your actions created a great deal of chaos and destruction when our political allies were visiting. I wish to hear what explanation you have for your behavior.”

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“Your Majesty is a fair and just ruler, beloved by his people,” says Yuuri. “But the laws that forbid an entire class of your people from the honor of fighting to protect their homes is neither just nor fair. I did what I did out of belief that if I proved that omegas can fight, that Your Majesty would have the wisdom to recognize that the laws forbidding us are unnecessary and wrong.”

“And of course you chose to do it in such a way as to create maximum visibility and chaos,” says the King. The corner of his mouth twitches in what might have been a smile, under other circumstances; Yuuri can feel himself breaking out in a sweat. “You’ve left no possibility of sweeping the event under the rug. To say nothing of how you’ve complicated our relationship with Vespuccia.”

Yuuri clasps his hands together tightly, trying to control his breathing. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he says, just a touch shaky. “But—But your son tells me that I scored seventy-five points more than the
nearest competitor. And I know I am not yet part of your family, but your tutors have trained me well enough to know that Vespuccia has been looking for a reason to provoke war with Kieva, and that their behavior was in violation of multiple bylaws and treaties.”

The King raises an eyebrow, a flicker of approval passing over his face. “You’ve been paying attention,” he says. “Good.” He folds his hands on the table and lets out a sigh.

“Youuri, what I’m going to tell you now cannot leave this room,” he says. “If you’re going to marry my son this summer, then you are part of our family, and our dynasty must present a cohesive front to any observers.”

Yuuri’s eyes widen, his heart skipping a beat. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he says. “I understand.”

“The fact of the matter is, if I don’t pardon you and bless your marriage to my son, Victor and my wife might well have me murdered in my sleep,” says the King. “To say nothing of the discord it could cause in my kingdom.”

Yuuri all but swallows his tongue at this pronouncement, before hastily recovering. “Your Majesty—I’m so sorry, but the Queen? And I don’t know what you mean by discord—”

“The Queen was very impressed with your cleverness in hiding your secret from all of us, and so skillfully defeating all comers when you’d had no formal sparring practice,” says the King. “As was I, I must admit. But I suppose you wouldn’t know about the rest of it. All day, every day, ever since the tournament, we have had petitioner after petitioner coming to beseech us for mercy on your behalf. The city hasn’t stopped clamoring for us to pardon you ever since Victor rode through with you a week and a half ago. It’s gotten quite tiresome.”

At this, Yuuri is speechless. Unbidden, he recalls a conversation he wasn’t ever supposed to have heard, from what seems like forever ago—the argument Victor had with his parents, back when he was trying to respect Yuuri’s wishes to break off their engagement.

The people adore him, he’s going to be a wonderful consort—

“Oh,” he says, unable to keep from sounding bewildered. “I—I’m so honored, Your Majesty,” he adds quickly, feeling himself turning beet red.

“You had best be,” says the King, which makes Yuuri want to dive under the table, but he doesn’t sound too angry, just… exasperated, maybe. “I don’t enjoy having my hand forced in such a way, but I can still appreciate the work you’ve done. It would indeed be a shame to banish you from Victor’s side… not that I think he would suffer such a thing, regardless.”

“But tell me something.” At this, the King leans forward slightly, fixing Yuuri with another of those intense stares. “As you said, you won the Grand Tourney, far and away. So what is the boon you would ask of me?”

Yuuri swallows. “I would ask Your Highness to lift the ban on omegas practicing combat magic,” he says, and is proud that he keeps his voice from wavering. “We are just as capable of fighting as any other dynamic, and we shouldn’t be forbidden from defending ourselves or our loved ones and homes.”

The King nods, ever so slightly. “And was that your plan from the start, then?”

Yuuri hesitates. To admit his original plan in front of the King now seems terribly ill-advised, but something about the way the King is looking at him makes Yuuri think that the King already guesses his answer.
“No, Your Majesty,” he says. He has to fight to keep from dropping his gaze to his hands. “Originally, if I won, I had thought—to ask if you would break my betrothal to your son. But that was before Victor and I reconciled, and I can’t even bear to think about such a request, now.”

Again the King nods, and this time Yuuri thinks he can see approval in his future father-in-law’s eyes. “I am glad to hear you are not too proud to reconsider an opinion when required,” he says. “As I am glad to see that you are strong and loyal enough to do what is necessary.”

Yuuri exhales his air in a rush. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he says.

“I will grant your request,” says the King. “I grant you also my pardon for your actions, and my blessing to wed my son. However.” His voice turns stern again. “As my future son, I require that going forward you confer with our family—at the very least, with Victor—before attempting something similarly risky and diplomatically unwise.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” says Yuuri. He’s too busy being stunned at hearing that the King will actually grant him what he wants to feel the scolding that much, but he tries to appear suitably solemn.

The corner of the King’s mouth quirks before his expression smoothes back to something more severe. “Ancillary to your boon, I will also appoint to you a task, as befitting someone who has shown himself so eager to advance the cause of omegas in combat magic.”

“Your Majesty…?”

“You will oversee the recruitment and training of a new cohort of mage-knights,” says the King. Though his voice is stern, there’s a warmth to his face now that Yuuri can feel in his very bones. “All of them will be omegas. They will answer to you, and I expect you to train with them, and with our existing host of mage-knights. I also expect you to see to it that a portion of the new knights compete in our tournament cycle in the next three years.”

“But Your Majesty, three years of training is not nearly enough to compete against knights who have trained all their lives,” says Yuuri. He blurts it out without thinking, and then stops when he sees the way the King’s arched his eyebrow.

For a few moments, he just sits there, giving Yuuri a Look that makes him want to sink into the floor. Then he says, lightly, “I will also make it a point to lift the threat of punishment for all those who have been practicing in secret, or hiding their nature in order to do so.”

Yuuri nods, a lump forming in his throat. He did it. He actually did it. The King has granted his request, and—and now he can practice alongside Victor, alongside the other knights. And so can every other omega who’s suffered in silence like him.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he says after a few moments. He can barely get the words out past the lump in his throat; his voice is choked and trembling. “Thank you for this honor.”

“I grant it gladly,” says the King, and this time voice is as warm as his smile. “There is just one more thing, Yuuri.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” says Yuuri, trying to compose himself. There’s so much to be done…

“You should get in the habit of calling myself and the Queen something other than ‘Your Majesty,’” he says. “In private, of course, and once you feel more comfortable with the idea. But you’re going to be my son. I would be very pleased to have you call me ‘father,’ or Ivan, if you’d rather.”

Yuuri sucks in a breath, then simply bows his head over his clasped hands. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he
says, when he looks up again. “I will try.”

“Very good,” says the King.

* * * * *

Everything is a bit of a blur after that.

Yuuri manages to remain dignified while he’s leaving the King’s quarters, and he manages to keep a calm demeanor while he makes his way down to the chambers where Victor is reviewing the diplomatic situation with some of their advisors. But as soon as he gets into the study area, as soon as he catches sight of Victor, something comes over him.

It’s a surge of joy, or rapture, more sweet and intoxicating than any wine. “Victor,” Yuuri says, and feels the word steal his breath.

“Youuri!” Victor leaps from his chair, carelessly sending a pile of papers spilling off the desk. One look at Yuuri, and Victor’s face lights up. “He said yes?”

“He said yes!” Yuuri cries, unable to help himself. Victor meets him halfway as Yuuri runs across the room, all but throwing himself into Victor’s arms. Victor sweeps him off his feet, arms tight around Yuuri’s waist as he swings him around.

“I knew he wouldn’t be able to tell you no,” Victor says, into Yuuri’s hair. He sets Yuuri down again but doesn’t let go of him, rocking from side to side with him as Yuuri hugs him ferociously.

“He’s going to give me a whole regiment of omega mage-knights,” says Yuuri. He tears up a little as he gets this out, clutching Victor, his arms around his mate’s shoulders. “He’s lifting the ban, and he’s—he’s l-lifting the punishment for hiding like I was hiding, too!”

It’s incredibly uncivilized and poor-mannered of him to be so emotional and clingy in front of the staff and their advisors, but Yuuri can’t help himself. He’s giddy, drunk; a huge weight has lifted from his shoulders, and he feels so light he thinks he could just float away if Victor lets him go. Perhaps there’s some lingering effects from their bonding and Yuuri’s heat, or perhaps it’s just having this burden he’s labored under for so long finally taken away.

Victor seems to be feeling it too, because he seems as uncaring for the other people in the room as Yuuri is. “Good,” he breathes, and covers Yuuri’s face with kisses. “Good, I’m so glad, Yuuri. I’m so glad.”

There’s a cough from behind them; Yuuri blanches, and the two of them look over to see Ser Yakov and Lady Lilia in the doorway, staring at the two of them as though they’ve just set yet another part of the palace on fire.

“Yakov!” cries Victor; if he’s intimidated at all by the steel in his mentor’s gaze, he doesn’t let on. “Did you hear the good news?”

“His Majesty has sent to inform me that I’ll be taking on a number of green recruits, if that’s what you’re referring to,” says Yakov darkly. “As if I didn’t already have my hands full with you and the other miscreants masquerading as knights.”

“We’re going to ask Ser Minako if she’ll join as a permanent instructor,” says Lady Lilia. Yuuri’s heart vaults into his throat at the realization that Minako might be in trouble because of him, but Victor squeezes his shoulder reassuringly. After a moment he remembers the King’s already said he’ll pardon those who’ve had to hide their activities on this subject. “Since it seems she already has
much experience in the coaching of trouble-making omegas.”

“Use a little more respect when you speak of my fiancé and his accomplishments,” says Victor. He’s still smiling, but there’s an edge to his voice that wasn’t there before.

By way of response, Yakov smiles; Lilia bows deeply. “I would expect nothing less of any consort of yours, Vitya,” says Yakov. “You would have gotten bored of him within a month, otherwise.”

At this, Victor laughs. “True enough,” he says. “I look forward to meeting all your new charges, Ser Yakov, Lady Lilia.”

* * * * *

They may have missed the Spring Fete, but there’s still so much to do.

The Queen decides that there’s going to be an official pronouncement of the King’s decree to the people of Petrograd. Mostly, the Queen thinks it prudent to show the citizens that their new, beloved royal consort has not been spirited away into a dungeon as punishment for his crimes, as well as because Victor very much wants to show off his beautiful, talented mate—to use his own words, which he repeats to anyone who will listen, much to Yuuri’s embarrassment.

The decree will be accompanied by formal announcement of Yuuri as winner of the Grand Tourney, as well as the recruitment of omegas for mage-knight. Before that happens, though, there are a few more pressing matters that have to be attended to.

“Vespuccia has already sent a delegation with a formal apology for their previous Viscount’s behavior,” the Queen says to Yuuri and Victor. It’s later the same day that Yuuri had his conversation with the King, and they’re closeted away in a private room in the royal wing.

“Previous?” Yuuri glances from Victor to his mother, eyebrows raised. “That was a fast deposing; did they even make it back to Vespuccia?”

“He wasn’t deposed,” says the Queen. Her expression is as serene as ever, but there’s something lethal just beneath her smile. “It seems he met with an unfortunate accident en route back to Vespuccia—they were ambushed by bandits, and he was killed in the fighting when his horse fell on him and broke his back. Quite tragic.”

Yuuri suppresses a shiver. He’s too scared to ask, but he wonders afterwards whether it really was an accident that the Viscount met with, or whether the Queen took matters into her own hands, to punish the man who caused such harm for her people and her future son-in-law. Or perhaps it was the Vespuccians themselves—more than a few of them were clearly bloodthirsty enough to take the law into their own hands.

“Regardless,” says Victor, drawing Yuuri’s attention back to the moment. “Their delegation is still ensconced at an inn in Petrograd, and we need to sort out what stance we wish to take with them going forward.”

Yuuri frowns. “We aren’t really thinking of going to war against Vespuccia, are we?” he says, glancing between Elizaveta and Victor. “They’ve already apologized, and the leader in question is dead.”

“No, and we can’t afford a war with them right now, anyway,” says the Queen.

“Should Father be here for this?” Victor looks over at the door, as if expecting the King to walk in at the mention of his name.
“He’s busy crafting the necessary writs to deal with the complications caused by the upcoming lift on omegas in combat magic,” says the Queen. “Besides, he trusts the two of you are capable of handling it.”

“Meaning, ‘it’s your mess, you clean it up’,” Victor mutters. The Queen gives a very small smile.

It takes another hour and a half of discussion, but their tentative approach is finally set—Vespuccia will be banned from the tournament cycle for the following three years; they will have to send an official delegation to Petrograd to make the formal apology public; and they will have to send at least one of their most important heirs to be a knight in the High King’s court. Yuuri and Victor slip away, hand-in-hand, heading back towards Yuuri’s rooms, which he hasn’t set foot in in almost a fortnight.

“We’ll have to do something about having separate quarters,” Victor says, voicing what Yuuri is already thinking. “I suppose it’ll do for now, but I don’t want to be on the other side of the palace from you. That is, if that’s alright with you,” he adds hastily.

Yuuri smiles at him, gently squeezing Victor’s hand. “I’d like that, too,” he says. On another day, he might have teased Victor a little more for his eagerness, but at the moment he’s still too happy from being reunited and from the King’s unbelievably generous pronouncement to make fun.

Victor beams at him, lifting Yuuri’s hand to kiss over his knuckles. “I’ll speak to my parents when we get time,” he says. “Once these diplomatic negotiations are over, anyway. I’m surprised that the discussion about Vespuccia didn’t take longer. Perhaps my mother took pity on us.”

“Or she just didn’t want to deal with her newly mated son any longer than she had to,” Yuuri says. Victor’s grin takes on a touch of embarrassment, but he can’t argue either.

Yuuri knows Victor has felt the tug all day, just like him, the itch inside his mind telling him that he needs to be in closer proximity to Victor whenever they aren’t in the same room together. This time, he’s not bothered by it; newly bonded mates are notorious for being almost unbearably codependent. JJ, Isabela, and Seung-Gil were hardly seen separate from each other for almost the first full month of their return from the Nishigoris. Yuuri expects he and Victor will be no different, especially in light of their long separation beforehand, and the dire circumstances of Yuuri’s first heat with Victor.

That reminds him of something, though. “Victor,” says Yuuri, and his lover glances over. “You never really told me what happened while you were in Bohemia.”

Victor brightens. “Oh! I guess I didn’t, did I? We didn’t get the chance to catch up! It was very exciting. There was a lot of cloak-and-dagger—”

“‘Hurry up and wait,’” Victor says in a low voice, when they break away. “‘I tried not to be seen very much; I didn’t want Ser Plushenko to know I was in the country, so I had to disguise myself when I went out. But we were successful. We exposed the embezzling members of the Parliament without too much damage, and I neutralized the threat of the bastard heir by bringing him back here to Kieva to train as a knight. His name is Nikolai, and he was very receptive to the
opportunity."

“Oh!” Yuuri blinks up at Victor in surprise. “Was he any good at combat magic?”

“Very,” says Victor. “I think he’ll be pleased at the pronouncement, though. He takes tea every night before bed that smells just like yours.”

At this, Yuuri laughs. “I never realized how many of us there were,” he says. “I always thought it was only me.”

“That’s probably how a great many other omegas have felt,” Victor says softly. Yuuri kisses him by way of response.

They slowly turn and continue their progress towards Yuuri’s quarters, Victor still with his arm around Yuuri’s waist, Yuuri leaning against his side. “I should probably start drinking my tea again tonight,” Yuuri says, contemplative.

“Probably,” says Victor. He sounds a bit wistful; Yuuri glances up at him, and Victor gives him a smile. “I know it started out pretty rocky, but I loved your heat, Yuuri.”

“I did too,” Yuuri admits after a moment. “But let’s not start it in a cave next time, okay?”

“Oh, Victor says immediately.

“If we’re not careful we’re going to have way too many kids,” Yuuri says. The idea doesn’t fill him with dread the way it once would have; for one thing, he has no doubt whatsoever that Victor would be a wonderful father. But he’s grateful he’s no longer craving being pregnant with Victor’s child anymore, either, like he was during his heat.

As if he’s thinking of the same thing, Victor gives him a hopeful look. “We won’t have to worry about kids as long as we keep a supply of those herbs my mother gave me,” he says, and Yuuri groans.

“Victor!”

“But Yuuuuuuri…”

“I can’t believe I actually want to marry you,” Yuuri says with a sigh.

Victor breaks off his theatrical whining, gazing down at Yuuri with an expression so tender it almost makes Yuuri blush. He takes Yuuri’s hand, grazing his lips over the backs of Yuuri’s knuckles as he has so many times before.

“Neither can I,” he says. “And I’m grateful every day.”

* * * * *

“Tell me again why we didn’t simply have this announcement posted,” Yuuri says, as they head out one of the side exits via the gardens. “It’s too hot to be wearing this much velvet.” He’s lucky it’s not yet midsummer, he supposes.

He knows the answer to his question, of course, but his anxiety has decided to resurface today in full force, and at the moment he’d like nothing better than to be hiding in a study with Victor somewhere.

Royal guards are posted all along the path from the gardens to a newly-constructed stage, located in one of the open fields near the palace. A massive crowd surrounds the stage—mostly made of nobles
and the bourgeoisie, the people whom this pronouncement will most impact, but Yuuri is heartened to see just how many average citizens have made the trek, also.

“Well, Mother wants to make sure everyone knows you haven’t been stuck in a dungeon somewhere,” says Victor, and smiles at him reassuringly. “And I wanted to show you off. I want everyone to see the man who won the Grand Tourney, and know they have yet another reason to love you more than they do.” Yuuri rolls his eyes at this ridiculousness, but when Victor holds out a hand for Yuuri to take as they approach the stage, Yuuri takes it without hesitation.

He’s wearing the green dress Victor got for him some months ago; he’d intended to wear it sooner, but Victor has had the tendency to buy Yuuri so many things that had actually hasn’t had the opportunity to try everything his lover gives to him. And he wanted something regal-looking for today, something to give him a weight and serenity he isn’t finding inside himself. When he’d mentioned this to Victor, Victor’s response had of course been to call the dress-maker to the palace to institute a few last-minute improvements on the gown.

The dress was always lovely—a deep hunter green, fitted at the waist but long and flowing at the wrists, with an open throat and a full gown. The tailor accented the gold threading in the fabric with gold embroidery at the hems. Now, it’s stunning. Yuuri rather thinks it would look more fitting on the Queen than on him, but that doesn’t stop him wanting to wear it.

Victor is wearing the formal garb of a future king of Kieva, with a long military-style grey coat with gold braiding over high black boots. And while he looks stunningly handsome in it, as always, what Yuuri notices most is the way he looks back at Yuuri, and how blue his eyes are. He and Yuuri walk up towards the stage hand-in-hand.

Minako, Yurio, Phichit, and Christophe are all waiting at the stage, along with a phalanx of royal guards. They’re all dressed in formal finery as well; Yuuri is gratified to see Minako sweating under her elegant suit, though somehow Phichit and Yurio look completely unaffected.

Then he makes the mistake of looking out at the sea of faces, all turned upwards to watch him. Yuuri freezes. His tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth, which has abruptly gone completely dry. Every single hair on his body stands up at once.

Lucky for him, he has a fiancé who can tell when he’s about to have a full-blown panic attack. Victor squeezes his shoulder, and with it comes a pulse of love and reassurance through their bond. Then he steps forward, gesturing to his throat to call a spell before opening his mouth to speak.

“People of Kieva!” he cries. His magically amplified voice lifts above the murmur of the crowd, which almost instantly quiets. “By now everyone here has heard of the great wonder that transpired over a fortnight ago, at the Grand Tourney. The Tourney was won by a man calling himself Ser Eros, but who was actually our own Lord Yuuri Katsuki—my fiancé, and an omega.” Here Victor pauses, glancing at Yuuri with a smile brighter than the late May sunshine overhead.

It’s Yuuri’s cue to step forward. He takes Victor’s hand and lets Victor pull him closer to the edge of the stage, privately summoning the same resolve he used when he prepared for his final fight in the arena of the tourney. Victor gestures at Yuuri’s throat like he did his own, and Yuuri feels the pulse of resonance there.

“The High King has shown both his wisdom and his grace in listening to my plea,” says Yuuri, listening to way his voice now carries above the crowd. “Not only has he pardoned me for my deception, but he has recognized that omegas are just as capable of using combat magic as any other dynamic. As of this moment, the ban forbidding them from practicing it is lifted in all the lands of Kieva. In addition, the King has also lifted all punishment levied against those who have had to hide
their nature, or who have been practicing combat magic in secret.”

Yuuri pauses for just a moment, glancing around at the intent faces before him. He opens his mouth to continue, but before he can, there’s sudden movement off to his left—someone is moving too fast across the stage, just a blur of shadow. Yuuri twists, summoning magic to his hands even as the guards try to intercept and the mage-knights call their weapons.

“Halt!” shouts one of the guards at one end of the stage—or starts to, only to be cut off with a wet gurgle as the shadow coalesces and buries a knife in his throat. The man emerging from the shadows keeps moving, darting past another set of guards. Christophe and Minako lunge at him, but the stranger throws his hand in the air, and suddenly all movement and speech cease.

“There,” says the stranger, and exhales raggedly. With the part of his mind not currently panicking, Yuuri takes in the man’s appearance: unkempt blond hair, shabby clothes that look like they’ve seen too many days of travel, bruises under his eyes. “Now everyone will get to watch when I show them what a fucking nuisance you’ve been, your highness. You may have ruined my work in Bohemia, but you won’t get to enjoy it.”

It’s Ser Plushenko, Yuuri realizes abruptly. No wonder he looks so ill and run-down. Plushenko derails this observation by drawing a knife from his belt and advancing across the stage towards Victor. The spell holding them prevents Victor from moving his head, or his hands, or anything else, which means no one can cast magic—

—no one except Yuuri, that is.

He doesn’t even stop to think. One moment, Plushenko is advancing on Yuuri’s mate; the next, a half-dozen daggers bury themselves in Plushenko’s chest, piercing him clean through. He staggers, dropping to his knees, staring blankly at Victor, then simply topples over.

Moments later, the spell breaks, and everything on the stage erupts into chaos. Yuuri looks over at the people in the crowd, his heart sinking as panic starts to ripple outwards like a stone thrown into a still pool. But before the chaos can really take hold, a breeze picks up, gusting lightly over the sea of panicky humans. As it touches each person’s face, they calm, settling somehow, their fear easing down.

Yuuri feels it, feels the cool touch on his face, like the gentle hand of a trusted friend. He lets out a breath, and turns to look at Victor. It is not at all a surprise to see the faint glow of magic at his fingertips, or the look of concentration on his face. Yuuri spares a moment to wonder if he’s been practicing this spell with his mother, or if it’s of his own devising, and then decides he doesn’t care.

Victor looks over at him, a faint (if slightly shaky) smile appearing. “This is the second time you’ve saved my life, Yuuri,” he says. “What would I do without you?”

“Let’s not find out,” says Yuuri, coming closer. Victor tilts his face slightly, and Yuuri leans up to meet him in a kiss. He feels Victor’s spell come to its natural close, leaving a sense of calmness behind, if not actual peace.

For a moment, the courtyard is almost quiet, only some faint murmuring disturbing the peace. The would-be assassin is dead on the stage, and the guards and some of the crowd are looking rather tense, but for now, Victor’s spell holds, and Yuuri doesn’t want to break it yet. He doesn’t want to think what he—or the crowd—would be doing if not for the aid of magical gentling. Then, to Yuuri’s confusion, Victor steps back from him.

“You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” says Victor. “And I am so glad I will have you
with me to help guide our people.”

“Victor—”

Before Yuuri can say anything else, Victor is sinking to his knees, Yuuri’s hand still held in both of his. “I love you,” says Victor. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you. Yuuri, please, I know we agreed to wait, but I don’t want to wait anymore. Will you marry me?”

Yuuri stares at him, feeling his face turn red, as the crowd around them goes totally silent. “Victor, I promised to marry you when I was thirteen,” he says shakily.

He’s ready to say more, but the imploring look on Victor’s face stops him. He can feel the way Victor aches for him, resonating loud and clear through their bond, and Yuuri just—melts. “God, yes,” he says, and lets out a wet laugh. “I love you too, Victor. Let’s get married.”

Victor breaks into the most ecstatic smile that Yuuri’s ever seen. Before Yuuri can say another word, Victor is standing up and sweeping Yuuri into his arms, kissing him hard in front of their knights and the entire crowd of people. Yuuri hesitates for only a moment before throwing his arms around Victor in kind, letting his lover tilt him back as they embrace.

I want this, he thinks wildly. I want it, and I don’t care who knows it.

Yuuri is too busy kissing Victor to see it, but someone—probably Christophe, he guesses—starts applauding, and then suddenly the air is full of cheers and cries and applause. Yuuri can feel tears starting as Victor stands them up, and when he opens his eyes it’s to see his mate’s beaming face just inches from his own.

Across the field, a flock of birds erupts from a spire at the edge of the palace, startled by the loud noises from the square. As Victor turns them around to face the cheering crowd, waving with one hand while his other arm stays wrapped around Yuuri’s waist, Yuuri’s eyes are drawn to the birds. The way they soar, the graceful arc of their flight into the bright rays of the morning sun—unfettered by fear or rain or injury.

Distantly, he thinks that the sight would once have made him jealous. He would have seen their freedom and felt only the sting of his own restraints, the trap he felt he was in. Now their flight elicits nothing but the joy of recognition.

For the first time in his life, Yuuri realizes, he’s exactly where he wants to be. And nothing and no one will take it away from him.

Chapter End Notes

+ The dress Yuuri is wearing in this chapter was modeled on the famous painting by John Singer Sargent, "Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth," but you may also think it looks familiar from a certain Pixar movie---Merida's mom's dress was also modeled on that painting. You can see them side by side right here.

+ Some people had asked about whether Yuuri would wind up pregnant from his situation; as you can see here, the answer is no, at least not right now, for reasons I hope are clear in the story.
+ If there is a scene you were hoping to see in this fic that you haven't yet, chances are good it will turn up in the epilogue. HAVE FAITH, DEAR READERS, THE AUTHOR IS A SAP.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

After nearly eleven years of engagement, and much anxiety and trouble, the crown prince marries his fiancé.

Chapter Notes

THIS IS IT, the final chapter/epilogue! It got... quite long. Thank you so much for your patience! I was dying in finals, and then as soon as I finished finals I promptly got viciously ill, AND I wanted to get it right, so it took awhile. A few important notes!

First, in case you haven't seen it, please enjoy some beautiful fan art I have received!! I am SO DELIGHTED AND HONORED!!

By Rune: Yuuri in his Winter Ball gown, Victor in his Winter Ball outfit, Yuuri in the green gown he wore in Ch 12.

By Minahomine/Tunamix: Yuuri & Victor during their reunion scene in Ch 11.

By prosotankutu on Twitter: Victor slaying the dragon.

Next, as always, a HUGE ROUND OF APPLAUSE to my wonderful and talented beta, without whom this story would not exist. Thanks also to my darling friend Melly, whom I have bounced many ideas off of and whose eye for fashion informed a great many of the outfits in this story, particularly this chapter.

Finally, I am going to publish this story as a zine. The lovely Rune who did the art up above has offered to illustrate it, and I am planning some bonus content for it! Please watch my Twitter for more info!! I will also make a tumblr post when I have the information.

Thank you so much for reading and for those of you who have commented, I deeply appreciate it!! (I spent like 30 minutes coding all the links so let me know if everything works!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whatever you do, don’t let them fall.

Yuuri takes a slow, deep breath. His eyes are shut, his mind empty save for what he’s allowed into it. He tries to focus only on the old floorboards beneath his hands, on the air dragging into his lungs, on his feet balanced in the air above him. After a couple of heartbeats, he mentally reaches out and prods the closest of the six objects he’s holding aloft. They’re spread out in a loose halo around him, of varying sizes and held at varying heights.
There’s a quill pen, a ratty-looking slipper, a horseshoe, a small footstool, a leather-bound book, and—most difficult to lift, but easiest to concentrate on—a chest piece from a suit of heavy armor. And in the center of them all, floating directly above Yuuri’s bare, elevated feet, is a warm yellow faerie light. Yuuri can see them all in his mind’s eye, clear as day in the image he’s conjured.

He’s been levitating the objects for a good twenty-five minutes now, holding the handstand for almost the last ten of those. With all the blood that’s rushed to his head, he’s starting to get a bit dizzy, but he’s rather pleased with himself; this is the longest he’s ever levitated anything continuously.

But he can feel himself starting to tire. Once upon a time, he would have kept pushing, would have held it until the last possible second, until he and everything else came crashing down. But he doesn’t have to do that anymore.

Instead, Yuuri focuses on each object in turn, carefully drifting it downwards till it settles on the floor. Only once the chest piece has landed safely and the faerie light has gone out does he descend himself, slowly lowering one foot and then the other to the ground. Yuuri sags, letting out a soft groan as he relaxes and all his muscles protest at once.

“Impressive,” says Minako’s voice. Yuuri sits up too quickly, so fast he almost makes himself dizzy. Minako is leaning against the door frame, arms crossed over her chest, a small smile on her face.

“How long have you been there?” Yuuri asks, after his heart has decided to stop madly bashing itself against his rib cage.

“Just a few minutes,” says Minako. “Don’t feel bad, I cloaked myself to come find you, and you were concentrating, anyway.”

Yuuri sighs, and starts to climb slowly to his feet. “You scared me,” he says.

“Good to know I still can,” says Minako.

“What is that even supposed to mean?”

Instead of answering, Minako pushes off the door frame and crosses the dusty room to Yuuri, helping him to his feet. “It’s almost time to start getting ready, Yuuri.”

“I know,” says Yuuri. He gives her a rueful smile. “I didn’t think I was running late yet, though.”

“You’re not,” says Minako. “I just thought I’d come find you and have a word with you, first.”

Yuuri looks at her in some surprise. Minako hasn’t changed into her suit yet, either—she has plenty of time for that, unlike Yuuri, whose preparations will take quite awhile—but she has a strange look on her face. It takes Yuuri a few moments to realize that his mentor looks like she might start crying.

“Minako,” he begins, and stops when she shakes her head.

“Just—look,” she says. “I wanted to tell you this in private, that’s all. I—I’m going to keep living as a beta, Yuuri. And I wanted to say thank you for helping me realize it.”

Yuuri blinks. For some reason, this is not the conversation he was expecting to have. “What do you mean?” he asks.

Minako lets out a long breath. “Well,” she says. “Now that the ban is lifted, I realized that—if I really wanted to, I could come out as an omega, and just stay on the medicine, but… then I realized that I
didn’t want to. I don’t want heats; I don’t want kids, or a mate, or any of it. And I know I could do that as an omega, now, but—that doesn’t feel like who I am. I just want to keep living the way I have been. So. I’m a beta.”

Yuuri nods slowly at this. “I’m glad,” he says, because he is. He may not completely understand where Minako’s head is at, but this clearly means a lot to her, and Yuuri wants her to have whatever it is she needs to be happy. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Don’t be stupid,” says Minako, and claps him on the shoulder, a little more forceful than strictly necessary. Yuuri almost falls over. “Of course I was going to tell you. It’s not as if anyone else gets to know.”

“U-Um, of course,” says Yuuri. “So… You aren’t telling anyone else?”

“Nope,” says Minako. Yuuri tries not to let on exactly how flattering he finds this, mainly because he doesn’t want Minako to clap him on the back again; he doesn’t need to find out if he can get into his kimono with a dislocated shoulder.

“How long have you been awake?” she asks, changing the subject as Yuuri pulls his slippers on again.

“A couple hours,” he admits. “I couldn’t sleep, too nervous.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Minako remarks to the air, and Yuuri rolls his eyes.

The sun is starting to rise as they make their way back to the wing of the palace that houses Yuuri’s quarters. Already the halls are bustling with servants and staff, busy making last-minute preparations for the festivities that day. Guests won’t start arriving for another few hours—those who weren’t already staying in the palace, that is—but Yuuri still has plenty to do.

After all, he’s getting married today.

He and Victor aren’t allowed to see each other till the ceremony. By mutual assent, they decided not to spend last night together—mainly because it would have been too frustrating to rip themselves away from each other when they needed to. Yuuri thinks it might be the last time they sleep apart from each other for quite awhile; it’s certainly the first time they’ve done it since Yuuri’s heat.

The Grand Tourney was almost two months ago. Now it’s late June, with summer in full bloom. If Yuuri’d had his way, he and Victor would have gotten married the day Victor proposed to him on the stage outside the palace, but they can’t really get away with an elopement at this point in the game. (To say nothing of how quickly the Queen would have made them both regret it.) But the only reason they’ve managed to put together the wedding in just two months is because of the amount of preparation Elizaveta was apparently already doing in the background ever since Yuuri first set foot in the palace, way back at the beginning of autumn.

Whatever his misgivings, Yuuri is grateful. He might once have recoiled at the very idea of marrying Victor at all, much less in front of an enormous crowd. But now not even the prospect of standing up in front of a legion of guests can dampen the joy he feels at the idea of being Victor’s husband.

Minako leaves him to fend for himself at the door to his quarters, off to go get ready herself and see to a few other duties. Alexei and a small phalanx of servants are waiting for him inside, and although Yuuri still doesn’t love the idea of assisted bathing, today is an exception.

In more ways than one. Once he’s eaten and finished washing up, as he starts to climb into his underthings in preparation of putting on his kimono, there’s a knock at the door. “Who is it?” Yuuri
The door opens, and his sister Mari’s head peeks inside. “Can I come help?” she asks, a mischievous grin on her face.

“Mari!” Yuuri nearly trips over his own feet in excitement. “Of course you can, please come inside! Is Mom here too?”

“She and Dad are still getting ready,” says Mari, coming in and shutting the door behind her. “I think she’s going to try to put off seeing you till the ceremony, though. You know she’s going to start crying as soon as she lays eyes on you.”

Yuuri sighs. His family arrived a little over a week ago. They wanted plenty of time to visit with him, see his new home, pay their respects to the Nikiforovs, the whole nine yards. Yuuri thought he’d never seen Victor so excited, or so eager to play the good host—he clearly wanted to make a good impression on Yuuri’s parents, perhaps to make up for all the years they had to watch their son be so resentful of his absent fiancé.

To Yuuri’s relief—and probably Victor’s too—Yuuri’s parents take to Victor immediately. They spent the first afternoon asking Victor to regale them with all the most exciting things the two of them have been up to since Yuuri arrived at Ekaterina Palace. For their own part, Victor’s parents have been gracious and welcoming, although Yuuri thinks Elizaveta doesn’t entirely know how to talk to Yuuri’s own mother. They’re very different people, after all.

But the first time Yuuri showed the two of them his wedding kimono, the expression of pride and happiness on their faces were nearly identical. It’s enough to make Yuuri think that maybe it won’t be so terribly difficult or strange, this balancing of his old life with his new one.

Mari and Alexei do the bulk of the work helping Yuuri get into his kimono. Normally he wouldn’t need the help, but the kimono is a formal one, specially commissioned for the royal wedding, and it takes multiple people to get him into it. The pattern is Nihon in style—red-orange tufted phoenixes and flowers embroidered on a pale cream-and-gold background, with a fine red hem and white underlayer. The sleeves are long and full, reaching almost to the ground, and the train is some six meters long, the pattern fading gracefully out to pure cream as it approaches the end of the fabric.

It’s stunning; Yuuri can’t believe he gets to wear something so beautiful, but then, it’s his wedding. Mari and Alexei help him do his hair, sweeping it back from his face similarly to how he wore it at the Winter Ball. Mari spills tiny, delicate dew-drops into his hair, shining like starlight, and then helps him with his makeup: lovely red lips, demurely smoky eyes, the faintest hint of rouge in his cheeks. She helps him with the spell to enhance his vision for the day, and Yuuri hopes that with her expertise he won’t suffer that awful headache again.

Finally, Mari and Alexei stand back to survey their work. Yuuri stands in the center of the room, feeling very exotic and made-up. “How do I look?” he asks, trying not to fidget.

By way of response, Alexei sinks down onto one knee in a deep bow. “You look magnificent, my lord,” he says, and even Yuuri in all his anxiety can’t ignore the warmth in his voice.

Mari makes a strange noise; Yuuri looks over at her quickly, and is shocked to see messy tears spilling down her cheeks. “Mari—” he begins, but she shakes her head, coming over to him and throwing her arms around his shoulders.

“His Highness had better appreciate you, Yuuri,” she says. Her voice is rough with emotion. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to that man.”
Yuuri laughs, gently returning her hug. Thanks to the magic they used, everything should stay neatly in place (short of Yuuri actually attempting to spar while wearing it), but he doesn’t want to take any chances. “We should get going,” he says, because if he lets himself think too hard about what’s coming, he’s going to either have another panic attack or start crying himself.

“Right,” says Mari. She wipes the back of her hand across her face and flashes a proud smile at him. “I’ll see you down there, Yuuri.” With that, she leaves.

Alexei is the one to accompany Yuuri to the site of the ceremony, with a pair of servants trailing behind them to hold the train of his dress. The wedding is being held in the huge chapel that makes up the lion’s share of the northern wing of the palace. Yuuri tries not to think about the crowd of people who will have collected there by now. Instead, he does his best (as he has all morning, and all the week before) to focus on his breathing, and on his connection to his mate shining strong and true in his mind’s eye.

Because Yuuri and Victor’s wedding is both a private event and a political one, a great number of guests have arrived who have no personal connection to either of the grooms. Some of the invitees are political in nature—the rulers of several of Kieva’s allies are here to witness the ceremony, as well as some of the more important nobles from Petrograd.

That isn’t to say they have no personal guests. The Nishigoris have come, as have a number of Victor’s friends from overseas. Most of Yuuri and Victor’s extended family is here, also, which is a different kind of stress. According to his mother, Yuuri has some cousins here he’s never even met, brought along by his parents’ siblings from far-flung parts of Nihon. Other guests are friends of Victor’s from his days of traveling abroad, or personal friends of the King and Queen, or of Yuuri’s parents. Yuuri wonders vaguely if he’s going to have to mingle, or if he’ll be too busy with other things to worry about it.

Alexei leads him to the sitting room just down the hall from the chapel, where Yuuri will wait until the ceremony is about to start before heading to the chapel. Yuuri thankfully has only to wait a few minutes before Minako appears; there was some question as to who should walk Yuuri down the aisle, but in the end, Minako was the obvious choice. Even Yuuri’s mother insisted.

(“She raised you as much as I did, Yuuri,” Yuuri’s mother said when Yuuri tried to raise a weak protest. “She’s been the one here watching over you for us.”)

The woman in question comes bearing Yuuri’s bouquet, an elegant spray of orchids that tumble out of Yuuri’s hands some two feet in length. She’s clad in another of her stunning suits, a handsome dark olive ensemble with black vest and white shirt, her hair swept up and back from her face in a dazzling updo that’s held in place with a pair of pearl clamshells. It helps show off the matching pearl earrings that dangle elegantly by her jaw.

Yuuri can’t help but stare admiringly at the whole ensemble. “You look amazing with your hair back like that,” he says. “Maybe I’ll grow mine out long like yours.”

Minako smirks by way of response. “Victor would probably die of joy,” she says. She extends her arm, and Yuuri takes it, the two of them heading out. They pause briefly at the entrance to the chapel, listening for just a moment before heading inside.

The chapel is one of the biggest rooms in the palace, with stately marble pillars along each wall that rise up to meet the high, arching ceiling. On the ceiling is painted a colorful fresco depicting the legendary first order of mage-knights assaulting the dragon horde, with angelic figures and heavenly light burning in the painted sky above them, their colors made brighter by the massive windows facing east and west.
But the decorators have been hard at work in here for the past week, preparing for the wedding. So now in addition to its regular glories, small sprays of flowers are tied to the last seat in every aisle, lining the walk up to the altar. Overhead, ribbons and more flowers hang in graceful arches, tied to the balustrades of the second level that wraps around the edges of the room. All of it is illuminated by the faint glow of the innumerable summoned faerie-lights that hang delicately in mid-air.

The final, most important decoration are the golden paper cranes placed all around the room, amidst the aisles and the flowers and the dais at the front of the chapel. 1,001 cranes in total, the cranes were all made carefully by Yuuri and Victor putting all of their hopes for their marriage into every crease and fold.

As Yuuri and Minako enter the room, the sweet strains of violins and cellos waft down from the level above. The entire audience rises as one, turning towards the aisle and inclining their heads in respect. Yuuri’s heart speeds in his chest as he glances around, taking in the sea of faces—some familiar, some totally new. It’s very quickly too much, and he directs his gaze back up towards the front of the room, where the mage-knights flank the dais in their ceremonial best. Christophe, Georgi, Mila, Yurio, and Otabek are on one side, with Phichit, JJ, Seung-Gil, Michele, Emil, and Sara on the other.

Over the dais has been erected a white thatched wooden arch, now bedecked with ribbons and flowers and delicate strings of diamonds. Before the arch stands a podium, where a heavy book is already open to the appropriate spot, with a dozen sheafs of loose-leaf paper tucked in its thick pages. The wedding officiant—one of the priests—waits towards the back of the space, clad in the heavy ceremonial robes of his calling.

And in front of the arch, standing alone on the dais, is Victor. As soon as their eyes meet, Yuuri forgets everything and everyone else in the room, almost forgets to even breathe.

His mate—his fiance, soon to be his husband—is stunning. Victor is wearing a high-collared, long-sleeved tunic, the bottom hem of which reaches halfway down his calves; he’s wearing it over dark pants and highly-polished black boots. The tunic is made of some heavy, cream-colored fabric, on which is embroidered a complicated flower pattern in glossy felted black thread. Gold braiding lines the edges, with more braiding at the chest where the tunic buttons. At Victor’s waist is a thick red sash, and in his fine silver hair are streaks of gleaming gold.

Victor looks as kingly and handsome as Yuuri has ever seen him, every inch the dashing prince Yuuri fell so deeply in love with when they were young. And he’s staring at Yuuri as though he’s seen a ghost: mouth slightly open, eyes wide and a little glassy, spots of color high on his cheekbones. Yuuri swallows.

“Just keep walking, Yuuri,” Minako whispers.

And he does. He puts one foot in front of the other, proceeding slowly up the aisle, and it’s honestly a miracle he doesn’t trip on his kimono or a step, because all he can see is Victor.

They make it to the front most row of seats, where Yuuri’s and Victor’s parents are all seated, in the space normally reserved for the royal family and their chosen guests during services. Minako and Yuuri walk up the three steps that lead to the dais, Minako bowing low to Victor before letting go of Yuuri’s arm. She takes Yuuri’s bouquet from him and walks over to join the others on Yuuri’s side of the dais.

“You look amazing,” Victor whispers to him, as they take up their spots in front of the podium. He reaches out to take Yuuri’s hands, squeezing them in his own.
“So do you,” says Yuuri, in the softest voice he can manage. Victor is staring at him like he’s the only star in the sky; the look on his face makes Yuuri dizzy, almost drunk.

The officiant comes forward to stand at the podium. He raises a hand, gesturing briefly at his throat, and then starts to speak in the strong, clear voice. “Your majesties, your highnesses, your graces, my lords and ladies,” he says, “friends and family, loved ones and guests, welcome one and all. I thank you for coming here today, to witness this long-awaited and blessed union.”

He continues from there, talking about a great many things that Yuuri and Victor and their parents all discussed beforehand—the sanctity of family, the divine blessing bestowed upon the royal family and this union, the honor and respect Victor and Yuuri will have for each other and all of their subjects, so on and so forth. But Yuuri loses the plot for awhile, able to concentrate only on Victor’s face, and on the fact that in a very short time they’ll be married. Married. He’s going to be Victor’s husband. They’re going to live together forever and ever, and no one can force him to give Victor up, and they’ll be able to practice magic together, and—

“Yuuri, the cups,” Victor whispers. Yuuri gives a guilty jerk as he comes out of his daze. Phichit and Yurio have gone to the back of the stage to retrieve a bottle of sake and a set of three gorgeous porcelain cups, which they bring forward to where Victor and Yuuri are standing.

Victor and Yuuri’s parents are standing up from their spots in the royal box, approaching the dais in all their finery: Victor’s father in a giant gold crown and a black-and-white version of Victor’s suit, his mother in her own crown and a dress weighted down with jeweled embroidery, and Yuuri’s parents in matching blue-and-red formal kimonos. Phichit places the porcelain cups on a tray, and Yurio pours out three measures of sake, which the officiant then blesses and reads a small invocation over.

The san-san-kudo was one of the things Yuuri most wanted in their wedding. Yuuri, Victor, and each of their parents take three drinks from each of the three cups after the officiant has blessed them. Each triad represents something important: the three couples taking part, representing the newly joined families; the three sins—hatred, passion, and ignorance—to avoid in a happy marriage; and finally the love, wisdom, and happiness Victor and Yuuri hope to grow in their own relationship from their wedding onward. When done, Yuuri and Victor and their parents bow their heads in thanks, and then the parents return to their seats.

“Bring forth the crowns,” says the officiant. Christophe and Minako are the ones to step forward this time. They go to the box at the back of the room, retrieving a pair of matching crowns, elegant creations set with gleaming stones and wrought with shining gold.

Christophe and Minako come to stand behind Victor and Yuuri, holding the crowns above their friends’ heads while Victor and Yuuri stand in place, but not yet crowned. The officiant gestures, and within moments a bright golden ribbon appears, connecting the two crowns above Yuuri and Victor’s heads.

“Bring out the rings,” says the officiant, and one of the other triplets comes hurrying out, self-important and red-faced in excitement to be carrying her burden.

She presents Victor with the open box, and Victor smiles at her as he accepts one of them; Yuuri’s heart aches in his chest, and he tries not to think about how wonderful it’ll be to see Victor holding one of their own babies. Next she offers Yuuri the box, and he takes the remaining ring, and then she hurries away, back to her place at her mother’s side.

The officiant opens the book to its final place. Yuuri’s heart skips painfully in his chest: Oh, he thinks, here it comes. The officiant is asking them to recite wedding vows after him, and Yuuri is
honestly afraid his voice will shake too much to even be understandable. But Victor is holding his hand, Victor is staring at him with all the love and joy in his eyes that the world has ever held, and Victor—Victor is matching him word-for-word, saying—

“Today I take thee to be my husband. To share the good times and hard times side by side. I humbly give you my hand and my heart, as a sanctuary of warmth and peace, and pledge my faith and love to you.” Victor’s hand on Yuuri’s tightens as they pause, letting the officiant recite the second half of their vows.

“Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of incorruptible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring, I thee wed.”

Yuuri makes it to *my love for you is eternal* before his voice breaks, emotion making his words delicate as glass. Victor slows, waiting for him to recover, and Yuuri can feel the warmth of his support in their bond. They finish as one, Yuuri’s eyes hot with tears. He takes Victor’s hand and slides the ring onto his finger, and then Victor does the same for him, and Yuuri’s heart feels like it’s going to burst.

“Victor Nikiforov, Yuuri Katsuki, I now pronounce you married,” says the officiant. “Now may you be crowned in glory, rulers of your hearts and home, and long may your love grow strong together.”

On cue, Christophe and Minako lower the crowns onto Yuuri and Victor’s heads, the golden ribbon between them gleaming bright.

“You may now kiss your groom,” says the officiant. The words aren’t even out of his mouth before Victor is pulling Yuuri in and kissing him, Yuuri gripping Victor’s shoulders hard as he kisses back. It’s like an explosion has gone off in Yuuri’s head, one of Yurio’s fire spells dancing behind his eyes. He hears shouting, applause, cheering, but it’s all secondary to the way his heart is pounding in his throat, to the press of Victor’s arms around him and the heat of Victor’s mouth against his.

He pulls back finally, his chest aching. Victor beams at him from close up, brighter than any spell. They turn towards the people in the audience, who are all on their feet, cheering and applauding. Yuuri catches a glimpse of his mother’s tear-stained face; a few seats away, the Queen wears an identical wrecked expression, her normally regal demeanor softened by tears.

“Come on, husband of mine,” says Victor in Yuuri’s ear. Yuuri turns to him, his smile threatening to split open his face. “We have a party to get to.” He offers his elbow, and Yuuri takes it, and together they descend the steps towards the aisle.

The moment Yuuri’s slippered foot takes the last step is when the cranes take flight.

Every single construct comes to life at once, erupting into the air as they transform from paper birds into golden doves. They flit skyward, towards the ceiling, filling the air with tinkling birdsong and the flap of magical wings. Once, twice, three times they circle, darting through the dangling ribbons and flowers and dancing amongst the faerie lights, before turning and escaping out through one of the open windows into the summer sky.

* * * * *

The reception technically starts immediately after the wedding ceremony ends. All the guests are meant to migrate to the great hall of the palace, decorated in kind where tables bedecked with flowers and pearls. Dinner will be served when all the guests have relocated and seated themselves, and the newly-weds appear to herald the start of festivities.
In reality, it’s a somewhat messier start than that. Yuuri has no idea how long it takes the guests to gather themselves and get settled in the reception hall, because Victor literally picks Yuuri up and carries him off to their room, Yuuri’s glorious train dragging behind them in the hall.

(“Victor, the train!” Yuuri exclaims.

It’s a weak protest, squashed easily when Victor kisses him. Yuuri would have an easier time convincing Victor he was upset if he wasn’t clinging to Victor’s shoulders and kissing him back just as eagerly. He can feel Victor’s desire for him burning through their bond, like a flame in the back of his skull, and it’s burning under Yuuri’s skin too.

“Don’t worry, darling, it’ll be taken care of,” Victor says against his mouth; he pauses a moment to shove the door open with his hip before carrying Yuuri inside. “But I can’t wait till tonight to have my husband in my bed. I need you, Yuuri.”

“Victor—!”

There’s not much more said after that that doesn’t consist of shaky moans and gasps buried in Victor’s neck. Victor fucks him with Yuuri still in the kimono, the heavy fabric pushed up to his hips, his legs wrapped around Victor’s waist. It’s quick and searingly hot, leaving Yuuri dazed and panting for breath when they’re done. Victor flops over on top of him, in much the same state.

“We have to get down to the reception,” Yuuri whispers. He drags his fingers through Victor’s hair, admiring the streaks of gold, now a bit darker from their sweat. Their crowns lie abandoned on the bedsheets, tumbling from their heads in their rush to make love.

“They can wait,” Victor murmurs.

“They’re already waiting, and I want to dance with my husband.”

Victor’s pout loses its strength at this last, his expression softening. Yuuri smiles at him, and then they waste a bit more time kissing, basking in the glow of the day and of each other.

Maybe being a few minutes late isn’t the worst thing in the world, Yuuri thinks.)

All told, they are about twenty minutes longer getting down to the reception than they should be, but for once Yuuri’s finding it hard to care. When they arrive, most of their guests are seated already, although a fair number have gotten up to mingle. Almost everyone has a glass of wine or sake. Everyone applauds when Victor and Yuuri enter the room; Yuuri is glad that the gown he’s changed into for the reception has a high neck that wraps around his collar and throat, because it hides the new mark Victor left by his clavicle.

This dress is form-fitting and regal, with a net of elegant beading that wraps around the throat and drapes over the gown all the way to the hips. The whole dress is deep purple, sinking to a gauzy mermaid tail as the skirt passes the hips. Victor, meanwhile, has changed into a more modern, fitted suit of deep black with a gilt blue-and-gold rose pattern embroidered on it. He’s wearing a simple black shirt beneath the suit top with a pair of plain black leather shoes.

Yuuri and Victor talked for a long time about how exactly they wanted the dinner following the ceremony to go. It’s formal, inasmuch as everything Yuuri and Victor do is formal by virtue of being the royal family, but the idea of another overly structured state dinner made Yuuri wilt like a flower denied the sun. So they ultimately settled on something more relaxed.

The two of them flit from table to table while dinner is served, greeting all of their guests and accepting congratulations and well-wishes. Victor’s parents are doing something similar, making sure
to mingle with all their political guests—many of whom brought alarmingly extravagant wedding gifts for the new couple.

(“Do we really need a silver-plated drawing table?” Yuuri says to Victor in a low voice, as Sir Something-or-other wanders off to go have another glass of wine. “It seems a little….”)

“Ridiculous,” Victor says agreeably. “Yes, of course. But they can’t be seen as anything less than generous to the prince and his consort on their wedding day, so we’ll just have to endure it, I’m afraid.”

They make it to the table that houses most of Yuuri’s friends from back in Hasetsu; Yuuri feels the moment when Victor’s smile goes a bit stiff, but he knows his mate—his *husband*—well enough to not worry that Victor is about to make a scene. Still, Yuuri thinks it’s good they’re further out from Yuuri’s heat. No one needs Victor still acting the territorial alpha, especially towards their guests.

“Yuuri!” cries Yuuko Nishigori, and throws herself on Yuuri, embracing him in a tight hug. “You looked so beautiful! Your wedding kimono was gorgeous… and so is this dress, wow.”

“You always did like to wear dresses,” notes Takeshi. “At least you look great in them.”

“Thanks,” says Yuuri. “Where are the trip—”

“What’s wrong with him wearing a dress?” Victor is still smiling, but his voice sounds strange now. Yuuri turns, catching Victor’s hand and squeezing; Victor glances at him, easing down very slightly, but his forced smile doesn’t wane.

Takeshi blinks. “Nothing’s wrong with it,” he says, sounding bemused. “I just don’t think they’re very practical sometimes, that’s all. Uh, your highness.” He adds this as his wife elbows him rather forcefully in the ribs; Yuuri can’t help but smile.

“Yuuri can wear whatever he wants,” says Yuuko; beside him, Yuuri feels Victor relax infinitesimally. “Especially on his wedding day. Thank you so much for inviting us and letting us bring the triplets, it’s such an honor to be here.”

“Thank you for coming,” says Yuuri, and pointedly does not look at Victor, though privately he’s wondering at his husband’s overreaction to an off-hand comment from an omega. After a moment, Victor manages to make a few polite noises of agreement. They make small talk with the Nishigoris and a few other people at the table, and then they excuse themselves and drift away.

“You could have been a little nicer to my friends,” Yuuri says in a low voice.

“I’m sorry,” Victor says, and to his credit he actually sounds like he means it. “I—I’m just jealous, Yuuri, I know it was rude of me. Their children are adorable?” He gives Yuuri a wide-eyed, apologetic look, and Yuuri just sighs.

He draws Victor over to a side of the room, away from the nearest tables, so they can have a modicum of privacy. “Please try a little harder next time,” he says in a low voice. “Promise me.”

Victor bites his lip, gathering Yuuri’s hands in both of his. “I promise,” he says. “I’m sorry, Yuuri.”

“Thank you,” says Yuuri, and kisses him.

It turns out his mate being ridiculous and jealous isn’t the only thing Yuuri has to worry about, though. After visiting about half the tables in the room, Minako corrals Yuuri and Victor over to a table reserved explicitly for them, plates piled high with rich food. “Eat something,” she hisses, and
her expression is so menacing that not even Victor is willing to argue.

Yuuri manages to eat a slice of strawberry trifle and part of a meat pie before there’s a commotion on the other side of the hall. He looks over to see Christophe standing up on a chair, waving his hands to get the attention of the crowd. Christophe gestures at his throat, and then his honey-warm tones float out to them across the room.

“I think his Highness thought that if he and his lovely groom came late to their own reception, they might get out of embarrassing wedding toasts,” says Christophe; there’s a ripple of laughter in response.

Chris is wearing a playful expression that belies the amount of shit Yuuri knows he’s planning to give both him and Victor. After all, they talked about this beforehand. Christophe is Victor’s lead attendant, like Minako is for Yuuri, and both of them will be giving speeches and leading toasts to the newlyweds during the reception.

What Yuuri is not expecting is the way Christophe’s expression smoothes, turning almost serious. “I’ve known his Highness since before he was betrothed to Yuuri,” he says. “I remember the first time he told me about meeting his fiancé—how besotted he was then, how thrilled to have found a mate he adored instantly. And I was happy for him then, because Victor has always been the kind of man who loves his country and his people, who would put his duty as prince before his own personal happiness every time. So if he was excited to meet his fiancé, I wanted it to work out for him—because if anyone deserves to be happy, it’s Victor.

“But I admit that over the years, I worried. Not just because His Highness was perhaps not always as much of a role model as we might have hoped for—“ Chris’s expression does not change, but there’s another ripple of laughter from the crowd, and Victor grins ruefully. “But also because I thought that no one could possibly live up to the idea that Victor was building up. He’d talk about Yuuri like Yuuri was this impossible, wonderful prince, his beautiful omega that was perfect in every way. And I thought that there was no way Victor wasn’t going to be let down when he and Yuuri finally got married.”

Christophe pauses, shifting his eyes to gaze directly at Yuuri; Yuuri’s heart attempts a daring dive through his stomach into his navel. “Then I met Yuuri.

“I saw the way Yuuri and Victor are, together. And I realized that while Yuuri isn’t perfect, he’s perfect for Victor. I saw that they bring out the best in each other, and that what the two of them together have makes them richer than any amount of gold or jewels in the world.”

Shouts and cheering fill the room, interrupting whatever Christophe was going to say next. He pauses, grinning, as the wedding guests applaud his speech; Yuuri leans into Victor, his cheeks burning, and has to resist the urge to hide his face against his mate’s shoulder.

Christophe waits till the cheering has died down a little bit before he picks up his glass of wine and raises it high. As one, so does everyone else in the room. “So now I say to his Highness, my oldest and truest friend—be grateful, because what you have is rare. And be proud, because you both deserve all the happiness in the world. To your happiness, and to a long and fruitful marriage!”

The wedding guests all shout in approval, and then everyone drinks. But even as Victor slides his arm around Yuuri’s waist to give him a one-armed hug, Yuuri stiffens in alarm as the room fills with shouting.

“Bitter!” comes the cry. “Bitter! The wine is bitter!”
“Oh, you heard them,” says Christophe. The mischievous grin is back in full force. “What should we do? The grooms will have to kiss until the wine is sweet.”

“What—” begins Yuuri, but Victor is already turning and dipping Yuuri right there in front of everyone, kissing him hard. Yuuri throws his arms around Victor’s shoulders in desperation, but after a few moments he gives in, kissing back as the room fills with raucous cheers and applause.

Victor stands him up, but the cries of bitter, bitter! come again almost immediately, and he laughs. “Guess we have to keep working at it,” he says to Yuuri, and kisses him again. Yuuri kisses back, his face flaming as they kiss for far longer than feels appropriate or necessary, until finally cheering and laughter fills the room and they break away, panting.

The musicians have finished setting up now, off to the side, and at some unseen cue they now start to play—a lively waltz, with a violin running light over the top of it, inviting all who listen to it to tap their feet. Guests immediately start getting up from their tables and streaming towards the open area off to the side of the room, set aside specifically for this purpose.

“Come on, darling,” says Victor. His smile is brilliant, infectious; Yuuri stares at him, dazedly wondering how he ever got lucky enough to be with this man. “Let’s go dance with our guests.”

And that’s exactly what they do. Yuuri never does get to eat much more of his dinner, but that’s okay; he’s much too busy drinking glass after glass of sparkling wine and being pulled into dances with friend after friend and guest after guest. Lords and ladies leave their fancy doublets and expensive shoes at the table, and Yuuri finds himself dancing barefoot with more than one person, including his own entirely too drunk and red-in-the-face father.

They break periodically for more speeches, most of which get more inebriated as the night goes on. Yuuri can’t stop himself from tearing up when Seung-Gil gets up and gives a short, matter-of-fact speech about how Yuuri not only helped him find love with two wonderful mates but let him live freely as himself without fear of punishment. He cries harder when Minako gets up and gives a rough, rather drunken speech during which she describes Yuuri as the son she never had, and the one person on Earth she’d give her life for in a heartbeat.

Several of the other mage-knights give speeches aside from Seung-Gil, including JJ and Phichit and Emil. By the time Emil gets up, he’s had enough to drink that he stumbles over his words trying to express his gratitude for Yuuri and Victor’s mercy and compassion, as well as his hopes for their marriage.

He’s long since recovered from the burns he endured fighting the dragon. With Victor’s work in Bohemia completed and Lord Plushenko dead, he looks happier now than Yuuri thinks he’s ever seen the man. Emil spends most of the evening dancing with Michele, laughing and drunk as any of the other guests. At one point Yuuri finds himself wondering where Michele’s sister Sara has gotten to, only to spot her off in a corner locked in an embrace with Mila, both of them dressed very elegantly in summer dresses.

It’s enough to make him look around for Yurio and Otabek, but before he can find either of them, Victor is grabbing his hand and pulling him back towards the floor. “I want to dance with my husband,” he says breathlessly. “Yuuri! Come on!”

And they do. Later—tomorrow, after everyone’s nursed their hangovers and had plenty of rich food for a late breakfast, they’ll do the exhibition duel they put off, between the winner of the Grand Tourney and the crown prince. But tonight is for celebrating: for dancing, and wine, and laughing with all their friends and loved ones.
Most of all, it’s to celebrate his marriage to the man he loves more than he once ever would have thought possible. Yuuri thinks that if he lives for another seventy years, never in all his life will he get tired of the way Victor’s face lights up when he laughs, or the smell of his hair, or the press of his lips against Yuuri’s.

And for once, not even his impressive anxiety can prevent him from believing that Victor feels exactly the same way about him.

* * * * *

The wedding party goes on until the wee hours of the morning. But Yuuri slips off with Victor around midnight, no longer able to resist the pull of their marriage bed. And while he finds out later that their guests all finally retired around perhaps two am, the newlyweds stay up till past the third stroke of the bell, giving vent to their passion until exhaustion and drink finally drags them into sleep.

Yuuri wakes in the morning with a hangover and a dozen new love-bites, sprinkled all over his body. It takes him a moment to figure out what exactly woke him, and then he realizes it was Victor climbing back into bed with him—presumably after visiting the bathroom. The only reason Yuuri’s escaped a similar urge is because he stumbled out of bed to do the same thing an hour or two ago.

Despite his aches and pains and dry mouth, the one thing Yuuri does not feel is an ounce of regret. Not when all he has to do is lift his head a little to see his husband’s body stretched out long beside him, his pale skin decorated with the marks Yuuri left on him and interspersed with the smattering of freckles he’s started to get from the summer sun.

“Good morning, husband,” whispers Victor in his ear. His voice is still husky with sleep and—judging from the hardness at Yuuri’s hip—arousal.

Yuuri turns towards him, a smile warming his mouth as he kisses Victor’s lips in greeting. “Good morning, husband,” he murmurs in between kisses. Yuuri squeaks as Victor grabs at his hips before rolling over on top of him, deepening their kiss as they wake up in more ways than one.

They spend a little while on things best kept in their marriage bed, until they’re both winded and shiny with sweat. Yuuri lets Victor coax him into a shared bath, luxuriating in Victor’s hands on his body while they wash up, and taking great pleasure in returning the favor—he’s gotten over some of his shyness at this point, and Victor visibly lights up when Yuuri is physically affectionate. It’s almost noon before they finally make it downstairs to join their wedding guests in the extended late breakfast laid out in the great hall.

Loud, raucous cheering erupts as Yuuri and Victor come in the doors; Yuuri tries not to blush at the smirk Phichit sends his way.

“Thanks for finally joining us,” says Christophe, and wiggles his eyebrows at them.

“We had to make sure our marriage was consummated,” says Victor without missing a beat. Yuuri turns bright red, but Victor looks utterly unrepentant as Christophe barks out a laugh.

The breakfast spread is sumptuous—never has Yuuri seen so many different ways to prepare eggs and pork—but Yuuri and Victor deliberately eat a little lighter. They have a performance to give in just a short while, after all.

‘A short while’ turns out to be closer to three hours; it takes some time for everyone to finish their meals and make their way down to the arena. Eight weeks have passed since the spring storm that turned the arena grounds into little better than a muddy pit, when Yuuri was forced to flee in terror to
Now the sun shines high in the sky, and the arena is full of not just wedding guests, but any others who wished to see the duel between the winner of the Grand Tourney and the crown prince of Kieva. Not all who originally came to see the tourney are able to return, of course, but the arena seats are nevertheless full to capacity as Yuuri makes his way into the antechamber area. Victor will enter via the opposite side, just as his opponents in the various tournaments did.

There’s just a few minutes’ wait—just long enough for Yuuri to start getting truly nervous—and then the horn sounds, calling him and Victor in. The doors before him swing wide, and Yuuri takes a deep breath before striding in, head held high.

Victor is walking in across from him, looking as confident and strong as Yuuri’s ever seen him. Neither Yuuri nor Victor are in armor today, however; they’re wearing matching summer-weight suits, made of elegant dark grey, form-fitting but otherwise surprisingly plain. It’s the only indication their spectators have that the duel they’re about to witness might not go how they expect.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer’s magically-amplified voice rings out over the huge crowd. “For your entertainment, behold: His Royal Higness Prince Victor Nikiforov, and his husband, the Royal Consort Prince Yuuri Katsuki!”

As the announcer continues his ramble, Yuuri bows in Victor’s direction, and hides a grin as his husband returns the gesture. They both drop into their fighting stances, hands held out, waiting for the signal to begin. “—and they will fight for you, on my mark: three… two… one… GO!”

Immediately, Yuuri launches himself from the earth, doing a graceful backflip to put him further out of reach. Victor’s already casting his spell, and at his sweeping gesture a flight of shining silver arrows launch themselves across the arena towards Yuuri.

Yuuri is ready. He lands in another crouch, lifting both hands to execute the spell he was calling during his backflip, and as the silver arrows descend they encounter Yuuri’s shimmering blue barrier.

But instead of vanishing, or destroying the barrier, the arrows seem to pass right through—and as they do they change, dissolving into bright flecks of light. Yuuri pushes off one foot and spins on the other, doing a tight twist as he pulls Victor’s magic to himself. In mere moments the sparks coalesce around him, glittering against his dark suit like stars in heaven’s mantle, his raiment now more elegant than any tailor’s thread and needle could achieve.

Yuuri sweeps directly into the next spell, throwing a hand skyward to launch his Spark into the air. The ball of magic energy bursts immediately, branching into blue jags of lightning that streak across the arena at Victor. Even as Yuuri finishes his gesture, Victor is dancing backwards in a complicated step sequence, hands flying in front of him. He twists, a graceful pirouette—and blue turns to gold as Yuuri’s lightning melts into shining ribbons.

Victor turns, gestures, body arching like a bowstring. The ribbons sweep around him with each movement, limning his suit in gleaming gold. In moments his drab suit rivals the elegance of what he wore during their wedding and reception.

Yuuri is already running across the floor at Victor, sprinting as fast as his legs will carry him. He catches a glimpse of Victor’s grinning face even as Yuuri swings his arm up hard and calls a sword to hand. He raises it high as he reaches Victor—

—and Victor meets it with his own, blazing silver crashing against blue. Yuuri can’t keep from breaking into a smile to match Victor’s as they lean into each other, their swords hissing at the
pressure. Then they step back at the same time, starting to circle each other before Victor darts in with a side lunge that Yuuri parries easily.

From there, they duel—except that it’s less of a duel than a dialogue, a dance of give-and-take. For every time Yuuri swings his sword, Victor is there to meet him. The two of them move in near-perfect unison, one moving to parry or deflect the other’s blow almost before the attack comes. They match each other until Yuuri steps backwards instead of forward, his sword shattering apart in his hands.

Yuuri is already calling his next spell, the fragments of his sword vanishing into the ball of energy burning in his palm. He plants one foot behind him and twists, using his momentum to send a burst of blue fire right at his mate even as he steps off with his other foot to vanish into the slipstream. Only repeated practice keeps him from panicking at this particular spell; if it goes wrong, he’ll hurt Victor badly.

But Victor doesn’t even flinch. He swings his sword up, throwing it into the air where it vanishes the moment it leaves his hand, and with his other he steps into Yuuri’s spell. The blue fire hits him, envelopes him, and then once again it changes. As it rolls over him, blue turns bright silver, and as Victor pivots to face the direction Yuuri vanished in he brings both his hands down in front of him.

The magic funnels down his arms and out from his open palms, hitting the ground and expanding outwards like wildfire. But instead of flame, a shining flat surface appears—smooth and even as the floor of any great hall.

Yuuri sees all of this only in his mind’s eye, because he’s already gone into the ether. He sees it more vividly because he’s connected to Victor and because they practiced this so many times in secret, but he catches only glimpses of his lover and the shining silver floor he’s called as he flits in and out of the slipstream, darting around the arena. He knows that the magic starfire on his suit is dragging behind him like a comet’s tail, elongating further with every rip in and out of the ether, leaving phantom starlight in his wake.

He catches glimpses of Victor running across the floor, headed for a spot on the far side of the arena—the same spot Yuuri is aiming for now. Yuuri sucks in one last breath as he twists and vanishes into the slipstream for the last time, tensing as he prepares himself for the next move. He erupts out of the slipstream, high in the air, twisting on the horizontal axis as he emerges—

—And as he falls to earth, Victor is right there, catching Yuuri in his arms. The crowd erupts in disbelieving cheers as Victor swings Yuuri safely down, Yuuri alighting as elegantly as any dancer in a ballroom.

Yuuri’s trembling with reaction, disbelief and immense pride warring for space at the fact they executed that one so flawlessly. Victor’s grin tells Yuuri that he hasn’t missed it, his eyes fond as he dips Yuuri with a hand at the small of Yuuri’s back.

After that point, they don’t even pretend to be dueling any longer. They dance together across the magically-created floor, moving to music called out of the ether, sweet and achingly lovely. Victor lifts Yuuri as he arches in a graceful arabesque, and the point of his toe draws a line of blue fire in the air; the fire melts, streaks with silver as it falls to the dance floor. Everywhere the fire hits erupts into blue-and-silver wildflowers, following in Yuuri and Victor’s footsteps.

Every gesture, every step, every arched limb or elegant twirl calls magic into life. Blue and silver cranes launch from the dance floor in their wake; roses and daylilies and tulips bloom where their feet have touched. Their magic-limned suits leave shining trails in their wake as they move, gliding elegantly across the floor together.
Yuuri takes Victor’s hand and twirls him, and as Victor gestures stairs appear before them. Hand-in-hand they walk up, and now they dance in mid-air, light gleaming with every step as the air solidifies just long enough to hold their weight.

Yuuri has long since stopped paying attention to anything that isn’t Victor, Victor and the magic they’re calling with every step and breath and heartbeat. Nothing exists for him but Victor’s smile, Victor’s hand at his hip, Victor matching him step for step.

The music slows, one last note drawn out high and pure, like the end of a prayer. Yuuri and Victor slow in kind, hand in hand, gazing at each other. Distantly Yuuri registers the deafening applause of the crowd, is aware of the fact that they’re now some five meters above ground, descending slowly with the aid of one last spell. But none of that particularly matters.

“Do you think they liked it, Yuuri?” Victor sounds as breathless as Yuuri feels. He grins at Yuuri, and Yuuri finds himself grinning back.

“I hope so,” he says. “But even if they don’t, I’m happy.”

Victor’s expression softens. He raises Yuuri’s hand to his lips like he’s done so many times before, gently kissing his knuckles. “So am I, Yuuri,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

+ The san-san-kudo is a traditional Japanese wedding ceremony. The tradition of crowns in the wedding & “longest kiss” tradition (where the guests shout that the wine is “bitter” until the new couple’s kiss “sweetens” it) are a pair of Russian wedding traditions.

+ Yuuri’s wedding kimono’s fabric pattern looks like this, while the cut of his wedding kimono looks like the dress on the left.

+ Victor’s wedding outfit looks very much like the man on the right in this picture.

+ Yuuri’s outfit at the reception looks more or less like this Marchesa gown.

+ Victor’s outfit at the reception looks much like this suit, except the flowers on his are blue, not red.

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