On the Cusp of Dawn

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Summary

[AU where Yuri is a Prince and ranked highest among Omegas, whose life has revolved around his childhood friend, Otabek, who holds the lowest rank among Alphas. Their worlds suddenly comes shattering down after a loss they both isn’t prepared for.

AU where there is a medieval tournament to change your birth-rank in the first half and a game of politics in the second half.]

Why?
Yuri was slumped in a chair beside Otabek’s bed, his brain numb. No matter how hard Yuri tried, he couldn't grasp the reasoning behind Otabek's reckless, foolish decision. Why did he want to lose everything, as if he owed Yuri some debt and this was Otabek’s way to repay him. Did he really think it was okay to sacrifice his life so Yuri could get a better chance to live his. Did he want to return Yuri’s favor for allowing him to be his friend, letting him closer, making him an integral part of his life, the way Yuri never permitted anyone else to be.
He'd been a five year old reckless, angry child when he'd first met Otabek.
Something about this AU -
* Viktor and Yuuri Katsuki will enter in the later part of the story. They will play a major role in Yuri’s journey from there on.
* This AU is a combination of Royalty + ABO (non-traditional) dynamics.
* Here, we’ve three types - Alpha, Beta, Omega. However, each of them is ranked in the sub levels - Level One (lowest) to Level Ten (highest). For example - Otabek is Level one Alpha (lowest rank among Alphas) and Yuri is Level Ten Omega (highest rank among Omegas)
* Male Omegas are rare and prestigious. A Level Ten Male Omega holds higher rank even than a Level Ten Alpha.
* Alphas rule the kingdoms. An Omega needs an Alpha to run his kingdom.
* Ranking Competitions are the competitions held for all the ranks for each group: Alpha/Beta/Omega, separately to upgrade their birth-rank. You may also lose your rank during this. You need to be eighteen to qualify and participate.
*Thank you Jonjo for the beta work. You are amazing! <3

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

The scent hit Otabek like a tidal wave, sharp as spice and sweet as honey, carrying the freshness of citrus which made him lightheaded. He could recognize that scent even in his sleep.

It was the Prince’s scent.

He shook his head, getting a grip over his overwhelmed senses. He straightened his back and his eyes scanned over the gathered crowd of invited nobles. Surprisingly, no one looked bothered by the aroma which was thick in the air surrounding them, or probably they were all well-adept at hiding it, unlike Otabek.

The Alpha Jean-Jacques Leroy, the crown Prince from the South was busy chatting with the King - Nikolai Plisetsky. Watching the arrogant expression plastered all over the Prince’s face, Otabek wondered if he felt anyone else to be worthy of a conversation other than his majesty himself. At his right, Duchess Mila Babicheva was wearing a pleasant smile as she talked to the dark haired Alpha, Georgi Popovich, a wealthy Duke from the North.

As the head of Prince Yuri’s security, Otabek had personally scanned the list of the invitees at least a hundred times. He knew they were well known, well established and more importantly, Alphas of a suitably high rank to be candidates in the process of courting the Prince.

“He’s almost here,” The King muttered after ten minutes of talking to Leroy, tipping his nose higher, excited to take in the scent of his only heir after a whole two years away.

Why it was him who had smelled the approaching Prince first gave rise to a vague thought Otabek didn’t bother indulging.

Prince Yuri Theodore Plisetsky…

Otabek felt his heart stutter in his chest as Yuri’s name was announced. He shook his head again, gathering his thoughts, thinking he should count himself lucky for getting a chance to stand two steps behind the King. After all, he was born to an average family as a level One Alpha, the lowest of the Alpha ranks, which was considered not much better than a Beta.

He still remembered the first time he’d seen the Prince in person. Otabek was seven at that time and the entire kingdom had been gathered to witness the crowning ceremony of their new Prince. It was also the year when they’d lost their previously crowned Prince and Princess, Yuri’s parents, in a tragic accident.

Otabek could only imagine the state of a five year old who had recently lost his parents and had to bear the responsibility of the entire nation on his tiny shoulders as its sole heir.

Prince Yuri was five and a born Omega, a level Ten Omega. The highest ranked male Omega which was rare and regarded as very prestigious, even more so than a level Ten Alpha.

“Why do you stink so much?” had been the Prince’s first ever words to him.

Otabek hadn’t backed off, or even flicked his eyes away. He’d heard about the Prince being a bit open with his use of a language. Otabek wondered if anger was his way of dealing with the ache of his grief. Otabek could understand, he’d lost his mother when he was four and had become withdrawn and more mature - as his father had pointed out many times.
Otabek was pretty much used to such insults from the very early stages of his childhood. He’d gazed at the Prince, waiting to see if the younger boy had anything else to add. The words were rude but his sharp intake of breath and the surprised, dazed look on the Prince’s face had told a different story altogether. At least, he was talking and not just glaring and frowning at everyone who dared to cross the five foot radius of space around him.

Otabek had bowed to the new Prince and offered the flower crown that his sister, Sabrina, had made and a basket full of fresh cherries which he'd collected from their small farm on the cusp of dawn. Carefully, he’d set them down on the overflowing heap of gifts.

The Prince had frowned at the basket for a long moment before raising his hand and shoving a fistful in his mouth. Otabek blinked at him, totally taken aback.

“Mmm-hum…” the Prince had hummed, closing his eyes, as he chomped on the bites of the plump fruits in his mouth. He opened his eyes, fixing his crystal green glare on Otabek. “Bring me more tomorrow,” he’d ordered, taking a few more from the basket.

“Yes, your highness,” Otabek had stuttered, bowing again before he was shoved away by a royal guard to clear the area. He hadn’t missed the way the Prince had shot a burning look at the guard.

It was all surreal and felt like a dream. The cherry exchange became their daily routine when Otabek had woken up at dawn and stopped by the palace every morning with a basket of red cherries in one hand.

On the first day, the guard had tugged the basket from his little hand and through the security of the heavy iron gate, Otabek had returned home without even getting a glimpse of a palace brick.

The next day, the guard’s behavior seemed more polite when he actually let him enter and escorted him to the library where the Prince had been taking his lessons.

The Prince had emptied the basket right there without bothering to listen to his mentor, Sir Yakov. The poor man had looked genuinely horrified about the Prince’s sensitive appetite.

“Get me this everyday,” the Prince had ordered him, again.

His father was totally flabbergasted as a result of this little exchange. He was a loyal soldier of the King’s army who had devoted his life to the safety of his King and his heir and had waited a lifetime for a simple look from the Royals. The daily exchanges had been too much of a surprise to sink in at the start.

Soon, the Prince had grown closer to the young Alpha and demanded treats from their farm regularly, the usual cherries or mangoes or fresh lilies. He’d ordered Otabek to accompany him on his routine trips around the kingdom. The Prince had also asked him to join his lessons so that Otabek could take his brief notes more efficiently. Otabek had been trained in sword fighting, archery and wrestling on the palace grounds along with the Prince so the Royal wouldn’t need a personal bodyguard in future.

The King was definitely aware of the Prince’s demands, but approved them nevertheless. The King looked more contented that his beloved grandson was actually socializing after his parents sudden demise rather than worrying about him getting attached to some low ranked Alpha.

“You're a good influence on him, Otabek,” the King had commented once, placing a warm hand on his shoulder, a kind smile tugging at his lips. That day, he’d rewarded the Altins a fine area of land near the palace as a small token of his thanks for Otabek’s father’s military service and his role in
shaping the Prince’s early years. His father had also been raised to the status of Baron.

Over the years, the royal Omega and the low-ranking Alpha had become inseparable. Otabek had been present everywhere the Prince turned. It was great for them as children, amazing in fact, having a true friend who liked you for what you were and not for your social status or rank. But as they neared the middle of their teen years, their bond became a matter of concern for many.

As Otabek approached his seventeenth birthday, he'd been getting taunted by the Royal servants regarding this. Even Sir Yakov had started reminding the Prince about the gap in their ranks on a regular basis. Of course, they’d blatantly ignored by the Prince.

So, Otabek had taken the matter into his own hands. He’d decided to back off.

“I can't come abroad, your highness.” He'd straight away refused the Prince’s offer to complete their higher education together. 

“But why, Beka?” The Prince had whined. “... and don't call me that.” He'd glared at him, pointing his index finger at his chest. “You don't have to follow the formalities when we're alone.”

Otabek ducked his head, taking a deep breath. This was his chance to fix things. Two years was a huge period of time. It was sufficient to blunt the sharpness of their growing friendship, which had been accused of being something more by many. He was a level one Alpha, the lowest of all. He'd no other option than to wait till he turned eighteen so he could be old enough to participate in the Ranking Competitions and upgrade his birth rank.

“I can't leave my family,” Otabek had lied. “Sabrina needs me here.” He’d hated to use his sister as an excuse. He just hoped the pounding of his heart wasn't reaching the Prince’s ears.

The Prince’s eyes flicked to his chest. Of course, he'd noticed it. They'd known each other for a whole damn decade.

“Have your way then, Sir Altin,” was his last sentence, before the Prince had stomped out of his own chamber, banging the door behind him.

Otabek had slumped into a chair, clutching at his chest, the pounding of his heart turning into an acute ache. He knew he'd done the right thing, but never had he thought that doing the right thing could hurt this bad.

The Prince had set off to travel abroad the next day without uttering another word to him. He'd not replied to any of his letters for next three months.

Otabek kept sending them occasionally though, pretending that it wasn't bothering him to be apart. He’d updated the Prince on the new happenings of the kingdom and about his family and his training schedules. Yakov was still entertaining him, if on the Prince’s insistence, Otabek wasn’t sure.

And, suddenly, after three months, he received a reply.

Dear Otabek,

If you’re counting on me to leave you alone after two years, you’re most welcome to wait and watch, you asshole!!!

Yours truly,
Yuri
The beat of hoofs broke Otabek’s chain of thought.

He sucked in a thick gulp of air, taking in the familiar sweet scent which actually helped to relax his tensed muscles. The first thing he noticed was the waving strands of silky blonde hair, shining like gold in the pleasant gleam of the setting sun. Otabek felt his breath catch in his throat. Prince Yuri was here and Otabek couldn't take his eyes off the lean figure bouncing in the saddle.

Of course, Yuri had always broken the norms of propriety defined specifically for Omegas and today wasn't any different. He'd come home riding on a horse. Otabek knew the closed walls of a carriage restricted the Prince's free spirit, suffocated him.

“Grandfather,” Yuri shouted, dismounting his horse, his face split in a bright grin as he rushed towards the King's outspread arms.

“Yuri,” the King muttered, his voice cracking as the words left his mouth.

They held each other for a long time, wrapping their arms around each other, wanting to compensate for the two long years they had been apart.

Yuri broke away from the King only to envelope his mentor, Sir Yakov, in a bone crushing hug.

“Welcome home, my Prince,” the elder Alpha greeted him, immediately loosening his hold around Yuri, well aware of his surroundings and the social etiquette. “We'd arranged a carriage for your highness' comfort.” He raised his hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Yuri’s ear, his face pinched in clear disapproval. “You shouldn't have bothered to ride.”

“It's such a pleasure to see you too, Sir Yakov,” Yuri teased. And before Yakov could move his attention to the other nobles for introductions, Yuri slipped between the Alphas in the front row and walked straight to Otabek, as if he'd known where he was standing all this time.

Otabek’s heart skipped a beat.

“Beka,” Yuri gasped, watching his face, taking in his features as if seeing him for the first time. He flung his arms around the Alpha’s neck, wrapping him in a tight embrace. “Two years… missed you so much...” he muttered into his shoulder, voice barely a whisper and proceeded to nuzzle into Otabek’s neck like he had done as a child, sucking in a deep breath.

Otabek froze on the spot. God, he wanted to bury his nose in Yuri’s neck and scent him just as much, but he couldn't. He wasn't supposed to. He was so conflicted by his thoughts that he forgot to return his friend even a simple welcoming hug. His hands were still at his sides, curled in tight fists.

Yuri stepped back, probably registering Otabek’s inaction. His hands gripped the Alpha’s arms,
eyebrows creased, confusion evident on his face.

“Welcome back, your highness,” Otabek mumbled the first words that popped in his mind. He didn't want Yuri to misunderstand and get upset. Not when he was seeing him after two years. He'd missed the Prince too. Otabek actually huffed out a breath of relief when Yuri’s lips curved in a fond smile.

“I heard there’s a big feast in my honor,” Yuri chirped, stepping back completely from the Alpha’s personal space. He started walking forward, taking in the familiar interior of the palace, looking thrilled to be back home. “Shall we start the celebrations? I'm starving.”

“Indeed,” the King joined him, looping his arm in Yuri’s. “We've been waiting for you, my dear.” The Plisetskys led the way and all the servants skittered away to check the arrangements.

Soon, there was a round of introductions, where each guest Alpha tried to woo Yuri with their charm and expensive gifts. Some carried exquisite jewelry, others offered rich, embroidered garments or a beautiful statuette. Yuri entertained every single one of them. He smiled his brilliant smile, engaging them in casual conversations and accepting their offerings with his natural grace. It seemed the two years of training abroad was already paying off. Yuri had never been so open and social and Otabek was having a tough time suppressing a growl whenever an Alpha touched Yuri’s gloved hand.

He needed to get away and get his fucking senses back. This wasn't right.

At the dining table, he wasn't expecting his seat to be arranged right beside Yuri’s, especially not in a room full of high-ranking Alphas. And he wasn't the only one who had noticed this odd setting.

“I see your highness is very fond of low rankers,” Alpha Jean-Jacques’ eyes were fixed on Otabek when he'd uttered the words.

Low ranker? Of course, he was no more than that. Otabek squirmed in his chair, arguing with himself if he should vacate his seat. His internal turmoil broke when he noticed Yuri’s grip tighten around the fork in his hand, knuckles turning white.

“No rank is permanent,” Yuri retorted, his voice strong, face calm. Otabek knew it was the quiet before the storm and Yuri’s next words were going to be pure evil. Yuri pinned the Alpha with his sharp glare. “I thought you were a better judge of that, Prince Leroy.”

A low snicker erupted around the table. They all knew that Alpha Jean-Jacques had lost his Level Nine rank in the previous Rating Competition and had been degraded to a Level Seven. The Alpha lowered his eyes.

Yuri didn't stop there. He placed his hand on Otabek’s shoulder, addressing the entire room. “My close friend here… Sir Altin-” he shot Otabek a warm look, “-he's participating in the challenges this year for the first time.” He moved his eyes to Jean-Jacques, staring hard. “I’d advise you to keep a close eye on him or you'll be caught off guard.”

The Alpha tried to reply with an awkward smile and didn't say another word for the entire course of the meal. Otabek didn't miss when the Duchess Mila mouthed her quick Thank you at Yuri for shutting his arrogant mouth.

And Otabek couldn't stop the warmth spreading through his gut thinking about the way Yuri had defended him in front of the crowd of high rankers, the way he’d addressed him with utter respect.
How was he supposed to survive this. How?
Chapter 3

Introducing an Original Character - King Peter Denisovich, a Level ten Alpha.

Otabek held the diary in his hands, eyes hovering over the names from the suitors list. Yuri was turning eighteen in three months and the king was very insistent to find him a good match and a suitable Alpha as his successor to rule and protect their kingdom. So far, the king and Sir Yakov had shortlisted ten Alphas from the various empires and eight of them had already accepted the invitation and obliged the Plisetskys with their presence.

King Peter Denisovich was one of them, a Level Ten Alpha who wasn't born as one of the very few highest rankers but had earned a top spot through a series of challenges. He was the most experienced challenger and was brutal on the field. He was famous for slaughtering his opponents without blinking and was fond of collecting prestigious Omegas like trophies to show off. He'd already mated quite a handful of them and was willing for more.

They had straight away crossed out his name from the list.

The tenth shortlisted Alpha was Viktor Nikiforov.

Viktor was a born Level ten Alpha. Since he'd started participating in the Ranking competitions, from the year he'd turned eighteen, he'd been challenged a record number of times to gain his top rank and had emerged as the ultimate winner in all competitions for a whole decade. He was the only top Ten Alpha who had never lost a single game, he was undefeated.

Viktor was the ruler of the neighboring kingdom who shared a good ally with the Plisetskys. Viktor's father was one of the close friends of King Nikolai and, at some point of time, both the kings had shared a mutual wish to bond their only heirs and unite the two kingdoms.

King Viktor was undoubtedly the most suitable candidate for Yuri, but many years had passed since his father's demise and the young Alpha had now happily mated with the love of his life, an Omega, Yuuri Katsuki. Viktor wasn't willing to mate anyone else after that and had politely refused the invitation from the Plisetskys.

From the remaining eight Alphas, Yuri had gotten along with the Duchess Mila pretty well. The red haired lady seemed kind and open and bonded with Yuri more as a friend than a intended candidate. The Duke Georgi Popovich remained quiet throughout their meeting and even though he hadn't disrespected Yuri, the Alpha seemed disinterested in the overall process. The Alpha Jean-Jacques had been in all his arrogant glory and Yuri had almost challenged him to a duel.

“Otabek.” His father's call broke into Otabek’s thought. He walked to him clutching the diary to his chest, unable to stop the forming knot after reading the names suitable to mate Yuri. “What are you doing here, son?”

Otabek’s eyebrows creased in confusion as they halted in a deserted corridor on way to the chambers.
“Why? What happened, father? Does Prince Yuri require my attention?” Otabek shot the series of questions at his father, fearing he’d missed something regarding the Prince’s security. He knew Yuri was attending to his guests, having a private conversation with them individually in the palace gardens before they all headed off on their journeys home.

“Relax,” his father cut in. “It's nothing related to the Prince or the arrangements,” he ensured Otabek, reading his mind. The elder beta scanned his son’s face. “I inquired because you haven't practiced for your challenges today.”

“Oh,” Otabek’s shoulders slumped, relieved that none of the high profile Alphas were going into a frenzy and trying to cross the boundaries set.

“You can't afford to miss the entire day of routine,” his father continued. “Even his Majesty has approved a few hours to relieve you from your duties. There’s hardly a week left before the Ranking competitions.”

“I'm sorry father,” Otabek apologized, rubbing the back of his neck. He wasn't sure what had gotten into him so that he’d completely forgotten the most important part of his daily schedule. Yuri was here and surrounded by the power hungry Alphas. Otabek wanted him to be absolutely safe and hadn't let the Prince out of his sight even for a minute. “I, uh, I was just trying to check if the arrangements were okay.”

“They're fine. You've been working on them for weeks.” His father took a brief pause, probably thinking before saying his next words. He placed his hand over Otabek’s shoulder, voice more soothing than before. “You need to give him some space.”

Otabek gaped at his father, trying to take in the meaning of his words, before finally realizing he was talking about Yuri and asking him to remain distant.

“I don't - I don't understand,” Otabek struggled for his words. “The Prince has just returned-”

“And we've all seen his reaction to you,” his father retorted. “Son,” he sighed after a moment, features softening, probably noticing the confusion on Otabek’s face. He continued in a calm voice. “The Prince can't make the best decision if he keeps demanding your presence and conversing with you instead of our guests. It could offend them.”

Otabek ducked his head, unable to meet his father's eyes. He hadn’t realized how his interaction with the Prince was being seen by the world. They were always the same. He was meeting the Prince after two years and could hardly remember to bother about the world with Yuri so close. And his father must have sensed his discomfort over Yuri’s courting process.

He felt a hand gently squeeze his shoulder. When he raised his head, his father was looking at him, a gentle look on his face. “I don't want you to get hurt in any way,” he said with a light pat before walking away from him.

Otabek kept staring at his retreating back till he disappeared around the corner of the corridor.

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Yuri deserved someone… better.
The words rang in his ears like a constant chant, a reminder, making his heart sink in his stomach. He wanted to grow distant from Yuri. Yes, he truly did. For two years it had been working very well, but one look at Yuri’s beaming face and his resolve came tumbling down like a house of cards. The separation from his best friend was backfiring on him in the worst possible way, making his duties almost impossible.

He was so engrossed in his self loathing that he wasn't prepared when someone grabbed his arm and tugged him inside one of the vacant chambers. His hand quickly moved to the hilt of his sword, freezing when the familiar citrus smell hit his nostrils.

“Prince Yuri!” he exclaimed as Yuri shoved him further inside.

“Shh…” Yuri pressed a index finger on his lips. “Quiet, or you’re going to alert the guards.”

Otabek rolled his eyes, gently batting his hand away. “I am one of your guards.”

Yuri’s eyebrows creased in irritation. He gripped Otabek’s arm, giving it a tug. “You ain't my guard.” He stepped closer, eyes fixed on Otabek’s. “You’re my… my friend,” he completed after a brief pause, challenging the Alpha with his green glare to say a word against it. “... And when are you going stop referring me by my title, Beka?”

“When you'll stop referring to me without one,” Otabek retaliated, without thinking. Yuri used that nickname for Otabek since they were children. “It doesn't look good for a Prince’s status,” he quickly added, not wanting to hurt Yuri’s feelings, or cross his limits.

"You sound like Sir Yakov,” Yuri scoffed. “Have you been taking lessons on this as well?”

Otabek didn't answer, swiftly freeing his arm out of Yuri’s grip. “What're you even doing here? You're supposed to-”

“Please don't ask me to go back to those Alphas,” Yuri begged, face crumpling in a suffering look. “I've been entertaining them for the entire day and they've done nothing but brag about their Alphanness.”

“They all can’t be that awful,” Otabek tried to argue.

“You’ve no idea. What's this?” Yuri’s eyes moved to the diary in Otabek’s hold and before Otabek could react, he snatched it from his hands, eyes scanning over the bookmarked page.

Yuri’s face flattened when he realized what it was, a hard frown forming on his forehead. “Oh,” he huffed, raising his eyes to meet Otabek's. “Are you seriously trying to find me proposals?”

Otabek blinked at him. He didn’t know what to answer. They were standing close, chest to chest, and Otabek realized Yuri had grown to almost his height. From this close, he could count the lashes of Yuri’s eyelids, his sugary scent overpowering.

“I see you’ve found ten of them… Only ten, huh?” Yuri’s face was serious but the corners of his lips were curving in a mischievous glint. He tugged the pen that was hooked at the diary cover. He twirled it between his fingers, eyes never leaving Otabek’s.

Otabek moved his gaze to the pen and the slender fingers around it, still struggling to react.

“Am I allowed to add a name in your little list?” the Prince’s sudden question caught Otabek off guard.
Yuri’s smile melted into something soft, eyes skittering over the Alpha’s face, searching and intense, the pen raised upright in his hand, ready to scribble the name. For a brief moment, Yuri’s eyes lowered to his lips before quickly meeting his eyes again and Otabek thought he knew exactly who Yuri was referring to, whose name he wished to add to the list.

Otabek swallowed a lump in his throat, drowning into the earnest haze of Yuri’s crystal green eyes, heart hammering in his chest. “I, uh, I don’t-” he stuttered.

“God, don’t panic, Beka,” Yuri finally took a pity on him. “I’m not going to spoil your silly list.” He returned the diary back to him, pressing it to his chest, stepping away. His eyes moved to Otabek’s ears, which he knew must be flushed a deep pink. “Now c’mon, walk me to my chamber,” the Prince hauled him outside the door, still smiling his private smile. “I don’t want one of your troop members to stop me on my way. I’m very tired and no one should disturb me till noon tomorrow.”

“Yes, my Prince,” Otabek followed him obediently, taking in the sight of Yuri’s silky, blonde locks which had grown to reach the small of his back in two years. He didn’t miss the way Yuri shook his head on the mention of his title, causing his hair ripple on his back, just the way Otabek liked it. But he was never going to cross his boundaries and mention anything about it.
Chapter 4

Otabek was loading his saddlebags. He carried only the very basic essentials for his journey to the neighboring capital where the Ranking tournament was held. That involved a limited change of clothing, a blanket and a canvas tarp to survive the chill of night, a water canteen, a little food and his weapons. He didn't want to burden his horse during the two day ride to his destination. He was all set to leave within the next hour.

He’d thought about paying a quick visit to the palace, mostly to see Yuri’s face and lock his scent in his memory so the separation of a whole month would be easier on him. They'd barely gotten any private moments lately as Otabek had been completely relieved of his duties for the last week. The Prince’s schedule was busy too. He'd had to welcome foreign delegates to discuss the dispute relating to the Plisetsky territory.

King Nikolai was old and on constant medication. Some of the neighboring empires were trying to take advantage of the situation. Fortunately, Yuri had returned from abroad and was effectively handling affairs but the Plisetsky kingdom needed their Alpha heir. Yuri was under tremendous pressure to select his Alpha and get mated at the ceremony on the eve of his eighteenth birthday.

The more the situation worsened, the more Otabek focussed on completing the first stage of the Ranking tournament so that he could - No, he didn't want to hype his dreams of actually proposing to the Prince. He couldn't. Yuri was a Level Ten Omega and even if Otabek somehow managed to clear the first stage, that would only involve revaluation of his status from Level One. He could rise to Level Two or at most Level Five. He'd still be nowhere near Yuri’s status and he doubted any royal in their right mind would appreciate that in a mate.

But clearing Stage-One would be his ticket to Stage Two of the tournament where the high ranking Alphas - Level Six to Level Ten - would compete to enhance their rank. Stage Two was scheduled in six months and Otabek was ready to die to reach it, if that was what it needed.

A Level One Alpha getting a Stage Two opportunity wasn't unheard of. But it was rare and tough, especially at your very first attempt in the tournament, but Otabek was determined to prove to everyone he could do it.

“Hey, brother,” Sabrina’s voice cut through his thoughts as she came rushing towards him, panting as if she'd come running a mile, her hand clutching a drawstring pouch.

“Strawberries?” Otabek enthused, snatching the pouch out of her grip. “It's so early. How- When did you even wake up to get these?”

“I know you love them.” Sabrina beamed at him. “I thought they'd be handy during your journey.”

“That's so nice of you, sister,” he wrapped his arm around Sabrina, squeezing her in a half hug and kissed her temple. He was about to take a bite of the tempting fruit when they were interrupted by a sudden noise.

“Are you trying to run away without goodbyes?” Otabek almost dropped the pouch on the ground.

“Yura?” the name escaped his mouth without his permission. He twisted his neck, checking the area to make sure the Prince was accompanied by his guards. He couldn't find one.

The Prince’s smile widened at hearing his childhood nickname, his body visibly relaxed, eyes glinting in surprise. “Thank goodness you're finally calling me that.”
“Have you tricked your guards again?” Otabek demanded, ignoring the delight on Yuri’s face.

“Well, you can't blame me. They're very slow.” Yuri walked towards him, his red tunic looking gorgeous against his pale skin. Otabek wasn't pleased about Yuri’s reckless behavior, but he couldn't take his eyes off the Prince. “They can't beat my horse riding the way you do,” Yuri continued, halting right in front of Otabek. “Plus, I wanted to give you this.” He raised his hand that was wrapped in a piece of cheetah print fabric made of fine silk.

It was a scarf.

Before Otabek could move, Yuri was already unwrapping Otabek’s usual black, cotton scarf from around his neck, replacing it with the one in his hand.

A shiver ran down his spine as Yuri’s fingers, which were rather cold in the early morning chill, brushed against his bare neck. The material felt smooth and tickled his skin. Otabek didn't want to indulge himself in guessing its price. It must have cost at least his monthly wage.

“It's for good luck,” Yuri leaned away a little to admire the view. “Looks good on you,” he added, patting Otabek’s shoulders, dusting off the non existent dirt. “D’you like it?” he asked, eyes searching Otabek’s.

“Y-yes. Thank you so much,” Otabek finally remembered to reply, his eyes tripping over the pink blush that colored Yuri’s cheeks. “This’s beautiful,” he breathed, not sure if he was talking about the scarf anymore.

Yuri leaned forward, wrapping his arms around Otabek. “One month,” he murmured in his ear, hands at his back clutched the fabric of Otabek’s tunic. “Why do you have to leave now?”

Otabek couldn't help the way his heart stuttered in his chest. In two years, Yuri might have grown up to handle critical political issues, but when it came to Otabek, he was still the same. Possessive about his childhood friend as if his world revolved around him, like Otabek actually mattered to him.

“Will you come to watch the games?” Otabek asked, his hands looping around Yuri’s back and settling on his lean hips. He couldn't make himself hope that the Prince would have enough time to witness the tournament.

“I wouldn't miss it for the world.” Yuri buried his face in Otabek’s shoulder, scenting him. “You probably won’t recognize me in the crowd of onlookers. But I’d be there. I promise.” They held each other for a long moment, breathing in each other’s scent, listening to the steady rhythm of their combined heartbeats.

They jumped apart when Sabrina cleared her throat loudly. “Hello, I'm standing right here.”

“Oh… Sabrina?” Yuri huffed, noticing her for the first time. “I didn’t-”

“Yeah, yeah. You didn't notice me,” Sabrina teased. “You hardly do that when my brother’s around, my Prince.”

“Sabrina,” Otabek warned, unable to find the courage to glance up at Yuri.

“What's this?” Luckily, Yuri’s eyes found the strawberries, saving him from further awkward comments from his sister. “... and where's my share?” Yuri complained.

Otabek adored the way the two Omegas interacted with each other. Sabrina was seventeen, hardly
a year younger than Yuri, but she shared an open bond with him. Yuri’s status never came between them. Probably, it was an Omega thing, or they’d bonded over their common goal of teasing Otabek whenever the opportunity presented itself.

“Young share’s safe with me,” Sabrina assured, dangling one more pouch in front of Yuri’s face. When the Prince tried to grab for it, she easily dodged him. “But… let’s see Otabek off first.”

Yuri pouted but pulled Otabek into a hug anyway. “Make me proud, Beka.” He patted his back, gripping Otabek tight, close, as if he couldn’t get enough. “Come back to me soon. I’ll be waiting.”

When Otabek mounted his horse, Yuri was still there. His face was a mixture of sad and happy emotions, one hand carried a pouch of strawberries and the other gripped the worn out scarf that belonged to Otabek like his only thread of life.

In the coming month, this would probably be his last look at Yuri and Otabek wanted to tattoo it in his memory. Forever.

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Otabek listened to the closing melody of the inauguration ceremony. The tune felt heavenly in the quiet surroundings. His eyes fluttered closed, thoughts skittering back to the warmth of home, the green blanket of fresh fields, the open sound of Sabrina’s laughter, the earthy scent of his father, the frown on Yakov’s forehead, the kind smile behind the King’s thick moustache and… to Yuri’s green eyes.

The moment he’d stepped inside the arena two days before, he’d been handed the key of his room which barely occupied a single bed and a wall-mounted cupboard. At least, the bedsheets were clean and that was enough for Otabek to lay down at night after finishing his routines in the practice ground.

They’d been sorted by their ranks - Level One to Five. The draws had been declared by the juries and displayed on the arena’s notice board. The entire arena had been divided to hold the level-centric matches first where all the Alphas would compete against their co-level opponent and try to score maximum points.

Stage One of the tournament involved four sports - Wrestling, Jousting, Archery and Sword Fighting. The selection was decided again by a draw.

Only one Alpha from each level was eligible to challenge the highest scorer of the next level. Generally, the Alpha’s went for a level or two up. These competitions were tiring and chances of beating the highest scorer of the next level were pretty minimal. Losing it involved a major risk of hampering your level-centric scores.

Otabek had different plans altogether. He’d been training with Yuri since he was seven and was fortunate enough to have gotten exposure to the very best guidance and techniques. Something that many high rankers never received. He wasn’t going to rush but consider each match as they came, with complete focus.

The music stopped, bringing him back to reality. The referee called out his name as his match was supposed to open the tournament. It didn't make him nervous. It was good to start early rather than having to control his anxiety watching the other contenders fight.
Otabek looked around. Only Level Four and Five matches were opened for public viewing and the stands were almost empty. All the contenders immediately headed back to their rooms or the practice ground to continue their routines. No one seemed interested in witnessing some unknown, beginner’s game.

It was a wrestling challenge for Otabek.

The points were awarded on the basis of explosive actions and risks. A wrestler needed to win two out of three games in order to win the match except when there was a Fall, where both shoulders of the defensive wrestler was pinned to the ground in total submission for a whole three seconds. Then the match ended on a Clear Fall.

Otabek bowed to his opponent, an young Alpha from the south - Kenjirou Minami.

The blonde Alpha with weird, long, red, textured locks, smiled at him and Otabek twitched his lips in reply. Of course, Kenjirou was nervous. Otabek noticed the beads of sweat that lined up on his forehead. He was lean, at least a head shorter, and the uneasy twitching of his limbs indicated he was a rookie, just like Otabek.

A sharp blow of the whistle from the referee brought him back to reality, clearing his mind of any lingering thoughts. He spread his legs, digging his leather shoes into the soft ground, taking a defensive stance.

Alpha Kenjirou though had different plans. He barged straight at Otabek, his hands spread wide, inviting and defenseless. Wrong move, Otabek remembered all the sharp smacks of Yakov’s hand on the back of his head when he’d made the same mistake repeatedly at the age of ten.

Easily, Otabek dodged his reckless advance, slipping behind his back, turning him around. He hooked his leg into Kenjirou’s, toppling the Alpha backward and pinning him to the ground with all the strength he’d got in his worked up muscles. Kenjirou didn’t even get a chance to blink.

The referee looked taken aback. For a moment, he stood there frozen, clearly not expecting an ultimate move at such an early stage of the game. But then, immediately he rushed to count the beats.

One… Two… Three…

That was it. A Clear Fall.

The match was over.

Alpha Kenjirou looked bewildered, his brown eyes wide, unable to register what had happened to him. He was so baffled that he actually took Otabek’s offered hand to get back up on his feet. Kenjirou glanced at the referee, who only shrugged in response. A dead silence spread around the entire stadium at the sudden outcome of the fight.

“Aaaaaaad the winner of the Level One… Game One… by a Clear Fall is… Alpha Otabek Altin.” Otabek’s heart was hammering in his chest as the referee raised his arm, proclaiming him as the winner of the match.

The match had finished in thirty seconds, creating a new record of the fastest win at Level One, ever.
The Level One matches ran for a week.

At the end of the week, Otabek’s score stood unbeaten, the highest among all the encounters at that level.

When he read his name at the top of the chart on the arena’s notice board, Otabek felt his eyes dampen with overwhelming emotion. He knew he was capable. Of course, he did. But still the shock of the reality was a bit much to take in. That night, he slept peacefully after spending a whole week in restless slumber due to aching muscles and disturbing dreams, his hands clutching the scarf, that Yuri had given him, close to his chest.

Otabek was all set for his Level Two match.

It was a jousting challenge. A game of physical strength, balance and coordination where the two contenders rode their horses towards each other, wielding their lances. They desired a common aim of breaking the lance on the rival’s armour, or unhorsing them.

“Goooood j-ob, Ebony,” Otabek cooed, slowly, making his horse understand his praising tone rather than the words. Horses didn't understand words.

Ebony was his companion for the jousting match and was assigned to him by the tournament’s officials for the course of the games. He massaged Ebony’s neck and the horse immediately leaned into the touch. Otabek smiled, rewarding him with the treat of an apple. “Uh-huh, you liked it, didn't you?”

“Of course, he loved it.” Otabek snapped his head up at a sudden remark.

It was a young man with brown eyes and dark messy hair. He looked familiar. Otabek had seen him on the practice ground during a slot designated for the Level Five Alphas. He vaguely remembered seeing him at the dormitory room that was exactly adjacent to Otabek’s.

“I'm Phichit Chulanont.” The man offered his hand, his lips curved in a smile, open and welcoming.

Otabek returned a firm handshake. “Otabek Altin,” he greeted with a nod.

“I know,” Alpha Phichit beamed at him. “We’re neighbors,” he added with a wink, noting the confusion on Otabek’s face. “I also watched your match. I must say, you were great. It’s really hard to believe that you're only a Level One.”

Otabek felt the tips of his ears burn with the compliment. He’d faced attention for the entire week. Whenever he passed along the dormitory corridors or at the practice ground, he’d felt the constant weight of it. Even though the contenders hadn't considered him a threat, they'd clearly started noticing his presence.

“I, uh- I'm trained,” Otabek stuttered, unable to come up with a suitable justification.

“I can see that,” Phichit’s eyes flicked between Otabek and Ebony. He walked towards the horse
and asked Otabek’s permission to hold his reins.

Otabek allowed him, watching the Alpha with curious eyes. For some reason, it didn't raise his hackles.

“Y’know, Ebony was assigned to me last year for my jousting event.” Phichit carded his fingers through Ebony’s mane, laughing to himself at a memory of something amusing. “I didn't even know his name back then. And he almost kicked me in the face.”

Otabek snorted, shooting a matching grin at the other Alpha. Phichit might have been a Level Five, but he seemed approachable, free from the prejudice that came as a package with being a high ranker. “He's a good horse,” Otabek muttered over his smile, trying to defend his horse, mostly to tease Phichit.

“Not with everyone.” Phichit retorted, flailing his hand at Ebony as if he'd been betrayed. By the horse. And, Otabek felt his smile widen as they continued conversing with ease.

They’d both finished their practice. As they headed for their rooms together, Otabek handed Ebony over to a stable boy, collecting his armor from a bench.

“Have you finished your challenge?” Otabek asked as he struggled to balance his massive helmet in his hands.

“Not yet,” Phichit huffed out a sigh. “Let me.” He grabbed the helmet from Otabek’s hands, ignoring his hesitation, comfortably tucking it under his arm. “My game is scheduled for next week. Waiting can be really excruciating, y’know? You're lucky that you’ve finished yours first.”

“I can understand,” Otabek hummed, losing himself to the memories of the past. A cool breeze of air blew past his ears, ruffling his now free hair that had been dampened by the sweat after the long hours of heavy exercise. “I've been waiting to participate in this tournament for two years now, I wasn't eligible.”

“Whoa,” Phichit looked impressed. He turned towards Otabek, eyes wide. “How can you be ready at such an early age? Are you a royal?”

“No,” Otabek croaked as he tried hard not to lose his footing on the dormitory stairs. “I just serve as the Prince’s guard.”

“Oh,” Phichit muttered, eyebrows still creased, as if he was still trying to wrap his head around the newly acquired information, probably regarding Otabek’s advanced skills and his occupation.

“His highness is very generous,” Otabek couldn't stop himself from praising Yuri. If it wasn't for him, Otabek would have been labouring on a farm for his living. “He allowed me fine training and a mentor.”

“Really?” Phichit squeaked, his eyebrows raised, touching his hairline. “It's Prince Plisetsky, right?” They'd reached their rooms and Otabek had to pause and wait for the Alpha to hand over his helmet. “No wonder my king desires him so much.”

Otabek’s heart skipped a beat. He was so taken aback by the unexpected turn of the conversation that he almost lost his grip around the armor. “Your king?” he managed to get out from his tight
Phichit didn’t seem to notice Otabek’s turmoil and he continued in a casual tone. “Yes. King Peter Denisovich.” He fumbled in his pocket to get his key out. “He wasn't exactly pleased when the Plisetsky kingdom didn't invite him for the Prince’s courting process.”

Otabek remembered the name. The level ten Alpha with a dozen Omegas to show off. He felt a shudder run down his spine at the thought of Yuri being one of them.

“But I can relate to your Prince’s decision. My brother’s an Omega.” Yes, Phichit was saying something and Otabek’s mind was running on a different wavelength altogether. He needed to calm down and listen to Phichit’s voice. “I respect his choice,” Phichit huffed, turning the key to unlock his door. “But again… Politics is a dirty game.”

Indeed, politics was a dirty game. Phichit’s words kept reverberating in Otabek’s mind long after the Alpha had taken his leave.

******

Otabek snapped the flap of his metal helmet closed, fixing his eyes on his opponent through its slits, taking in a deep breath to control his nerves. The armor was heavy. It suffocated him, reducing the supply of fresh air. His clothes stuck to his skin from the sweat that covered his body like an extra layer.

Alpha Seung-gil Lee, the winner of Level two, looked ready as he stared right back at Otabek, challenging him.

Otabek readied himself for the joust, holding his lance upright, contemplating the moves in his mind before the match actually began. He felt Ebony breathing below him, his hooves scraping the ground like a bull ready to charge.

“We're going to do this,” he muttered to Ebony, more to reassure his pounding heart than the horse.

For a moment, everything went eerily quiet. Otabek could literally hear the thumping of his heartbeats in his ears. Then, with a wild wave of a flag, the joust began.

Otabek kicked his heels to Ebony’s flanks, spurring his horse on to advance. The next instant, both the Alphas were at full-tilt, lowering their lances to strike their opponent. Otabek aimed for Seung-gil's body, hoping to hit a decisive blow. Seung-gil, on the other hand, raised his lance, pointing it at Otabek’s helmet.

A loud crash broke the silence.

The tip of Otabek’s lance had made the first contact, crashing into Seung-gil’s armored chest. The impact had made Seung-gil lose his aim, his lance barely brushing Otabek’s arm. Otabek watched him as he wobbled for a brief moment before getting his balance back on his horse.

“O-Kay,” Otabek breathed as he rode to the opposite end. “That was okay. That was good,” he kept chanting, patting Ebony’s neck, before the second pass began.

Seung-gil had lowered his lance, this time aiming for his rival’s chest, same as Otabek had
planned. They both rode with all their might, redoubling their efforts to make the other Alpha lick the dirt. The clouds of dust were barely settling between them. Otabek coughed, his breath coming out in erratic puffs. He blinked and the next instance he was thrown back by a solid blow to his chest that made his heart stop for a moment.

He saw stars in bright daylight. Everything swirled around him as he sucked in thick gulps of air and waited for the cutting ache just below his collarbone to pass. He was hurt, even through the thick layer of his metal armor. He couldn't focus, couldn't think, but his fingers clutched at the reins for his dear life. He couldn't afford to go down, not now. *Not like this.*

When the ringing in his ears finally subsided, he knew Ebony had slowed down, balancing Otabek’s weight on his back, supporting him through the vulnerable moment. Even in his unsettled state, Otabek’s lips twitched into a smile. His heart swelled with silent gratitude. He owed his honor to Ebony.

“C'mon, my friend. Let's finish this,” he roared as they charged for the third pass, lance tilted high in the air, aiming straight for Seung-gil’s helmet. Ebony ran like the wind, in a mighty display of his mute agreement of Otabek’s command.

Otabek watched as the tip of his opponent's lance approached with lightning speed, aiming for the center of his chest. He knew Seung-gil would reach him first. Under the weight of the heavy metal, he tried to twist his body at the very last second in a futile attempt to escape the unavoidable blow. But still, the lance hit his shoulder. Pain pierced down his spine, numbing his brain. He knew he'd been fast and still had a strong grip around his weapon.

The next thing he knew the lance in his hand had shattered to half. He'd hit the target.

Otabek snapped his neck around, shooting a desperate glance over his shoulder even before Ebony could reach the other end. He was met with the sight of Seung-gil laid out flat on the ground, trying to get up under the weight of his armor, his horse skittering out of the field, free and abandoned.

Otabek had unhorsed the Alpha. *He'd done it.* His shoulders slumped as the relief washed over his whole body, making it slack.

Otabek dismounted his horse, removing his helmet with his shaking hands. He flung his arms around Ebony’s neck. “Th-Thank you,” he managed to get out of his dry mouth, voice lower than a whisper. He was trembling as the waves of overwhelming emotion passed through his gut.

“Aaaaaaad the winner of the Level Two… final challenge is… *Alpha Otabek Altin.* ” This time when the judge announced it, he heard a few shout outs from the crowd echoing his name. Phichit’s was the loudest.

Chapter End Notes

Matches are exciting but so hard to write. Send me some love please. I'm exhausted!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

My Beta is back in action and I can post my chapters now. YAY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Otabek’s arrow hit the target with a solid thud, earning a few disappointed gasps from the gathered crowd of contenders. It’d hit the red ring, adding only eight points to his total archery score.

“Damn it!” he hissed under his breath, lowering his bow to the ground, his shoulders slumped in agitation. He’d been leading the game by three points, up until this shot, when his anxiety finally started surrendering to the tension of the high profile Level Three match. Inexperience, someone had wisely said, and he’d completely agree with them. This was all new for him and he was suffering through it. A lot.

A coughing sound broke the chain of Otabek’s thought. It was Christophe Giacometti, his opponent. The tall, hazel eyed Alpha was famous for his oomph and delectable charm and had been the winner of the third level for two consecutive years.

Otabek stepped back from the starting line, moving out of Christophe’s way, decisively avoiding meeting his eyes. He didn’t want to witness the delight on his rival’s face, having missed the bullseye by such a hopeless margin. He only had one shot left and you couldn’t blame him if he shamelessly wished Christophe would miss his aim as well.

Otabek pulled out the binoculars that were hanging around his neck. Christophe was taking his position and Otabek held his breath, taking a careful look at the target.

Another thud broke the silence.

“A ten!” A collective shout and a burst of clapping filled the arena, shattering every ounce of Otabek’s hopes. He screwed his eyes shut behind his binoculars, hoping that no one could see his inner chaos.

He was supposed to shoot next. This was his last chance, the final shot of the Level Three match. He’d no other option than to score at least nine and push the game for a tie breaker or score a perfect ten. Or, lose the match.

He walked towards the starting line, ignoring the smug smirk on Christophe’s face. It was one of the longest running games in Level Three history and his shoulders were aching from the two hours of effort. He planted his feet on the ground, knees relaxed. He notched his bow, drawing his bowstring taut, stretching it straight to the side of his lips, his eyes boring into the target.

‘You’re the best, Beka.’ Yuri’s cheers rang in his ears, his thoughts drifting back to the past.

The Prince had been young, an unceasing source of enthusiasm. He’d loved to place an apple at an impossible distance, moving it farther away each time Otabek’s arrow had pierced the fruit, cutting it in exact halves. It’d been Yuri’s favorite pastime whenever they’d needed a break from Yakov’s extensive training routines. Otabek had adored watching Yuri’s face, flushed and beaming, when
he had boasted about Otabek with utter pride and faith. He didn't want to disappoint Yuri, not after coming this far.

‘Otabek, you're the best archer in this whole damn world.’ Yuri looked delighted when he'd run to Otabek, his voice excited, a clear aroma of happiness surrounding him as he'd spread his skinny arms and hugged Otabek. Not bothering about his dirty clothes or his rank… It all flashed through Otabek’s memory in that brief moment.

He sucked in a deep breath. A bead of sweat slipped from his temple, tracing the path of his chiseled jawline. His shoulders suddenly went limp, the bow dropped to his side. He ducked his head, huffing out slowly to get his breathing right.

“Are you nervous, young man?” He heard Christophe chuckle behind him.

Otabek didn't reply, didn't even spare him a look. He was well aware that it was one of Christophe’s tactics to distract his opponent. He was a rookie, not stupid.

‘You can do this… you can do this… ‘ the words kept ringing in his head, like a chant. He clenched his jaw, wrapping his fingers around the bow. “You can do this,” he muttered out loud, raising the binoculars, again, imprinting the image of the innermost ring on his vision.

Straightening his back, he drew his bow with silence and strength. A sharp, pointed arrow nocked on the string. He took a moment till his mind was calm, free from the lingering memories of the past and worries about the future. This was it. This was the moment to focus. He let out a shuddering breath. His whole being focussed on one thing, the black circle placed right at the center of the target.

With a loud twang, his arrow sprang from the bow, flying through the air, like a streak of lightning, it dug into the target.

“Bullseye!”

The shot sent the crowd into a frenzy of excited applause. Shrieking whistles rang in his ears, making him blink at the target and actually believe that he'd scored a perfect shot.

He dropped to his knees, his bow falling from his grip, settling on the ground with a muffled thud. It took him a moment to realize he'd actually won the match.

******

Phichit arranged a small feast in Otabek’s honor in the arena’s mess.

They weren't allowed to leave the premises and alcohol was strictly prohibited inside. In Phichit’s words, it was a miniature jail, but the man had somehow used his credit from the last three years and managed to organize a treat of rice and chicken for two.

“I'm full,” Otabek leaned back in the chair, looking at their empty plates with a satisfied grin.

It was the first time in the past two and half weeks Otabek had tasted something that wasn't bread and tasteless vegetables. He was carrying limited money and couldn't afford to waste it on fancy food. He was hoping to stay for a long time. Very long.

“I'm heading to my room,” he announced. “I think I'm going to pass out for a while.”
“Good for you,” Phichit remarked, getting up from his seat, huffing out a sigh. “They’ve rescheduled my match for next week and I think I’m going to practice before I forget all my skills.”

“Practice? Now?” Otabek looked at him, his eyebrows cocking up, eyes flicking to Phichit’s blown stomach. Of course, Phichit was full as well. “I’m sure you’ll vomit if you try to practice in this…” he waved his hand in Phichit’s general direction, “…condition.”

Phichit snorted, shaking his head. “Nah, I got good metabolism. Plus, this arena’s huge. I’m sure I’ll digest my chicken by the time I reach there.” He clapped on Otabek’s shoulder. “But you should definitely continue with your sleeping plans. It’s your turn to relax.” Phichit’s eyes hovered over Otabek’s tired face. “You look like shit. You should hit the showers first, or wait… have you visited one of the arena’s hot springs? Let me know if you’re short on money.” He reached for his jacket pocket. “I’m sure I got some extra.”

“No,” Otabek blurted out, making Phichit halt in mid action. “I mean… thank you for your offer, but I, uh, I think a good shower will fix me for now.” He relaxed his shoulders when Phichit shoved his wallet back inside.

Otabek smiled at him, open and genuine. He was really thankful that he’d managed to befriend such a kind hearted Alpha who didn't ooze a scent of jealousy or disgust around him. It'd been a week of getting bombarded with that acrid smell. As he stepped up the ranking ladder, one step after the other, his fellow contestants eyed him with suspicious frowns plastered on their faces and gossiped behind his back. Otabek didn't care. He wasn't here to impress anyone. He was here to impress the... he didn't complete that thought.

After Phichit left, he strolled in the arena for a while. When the sun rose high in the sky and temperature started burning his skin, he finally headed to the dormitory to get his shower. It was deserted. Almost.

“Look, the Almighty underdog returns to his cave.” Otabek snapped his head up at the disdainful comment.

A group of four Alphas were glaring at him, laughing, loud and fearless, clearly trying to push Otabek’s patience and looking for a fight.

‘Don't fight. Ignore,’ his conscience warned him. His level four match was around the corner and he couldn't afford to get stitches and broken bones. So, he ignored them, ducking his head without reacting, slipping past around them. This must have infuriated the Alphas.

“You look in hurry, huh?” The elder Alpha shot his hand forward, blocking Otabek’s way. Takeshi Nishigori, Otabek recognized the Level Four Alpha, who owned a fortune from his ancestral land and was famous for his rebellious nature and apparently, for troubling the younger contestants.

Takeshi stepped ahead, cornering Otabek. “Tell me, what's your trick, rookie?” he hissed in Otabek’s face. The pungent smell of his breath offended Otabek’s nostrils.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Otabek growled, glaring straight into the Alpha’s eyes.

“Yes, you do.” The Alpha pushed him against the wall, pinning him to the hard surface. “A low ranker like you can't be so skilled. Tell me, how are you cheating?”

Otabek glared at him, anger creeping up to blast out of him at such baseless accusations.
“Leave him alone.” A strong voice reverberated in the hallway. They all turned, tracking the source of the sound.

"Lord Christophe?” Takeshi stepped back, releasing his hold on Otabek. “We're… we're just trying a background check on this one. His actions seemed questionable.”

Christophe’s eyes moved to Otabek, who was tugging at his jacket, fixing the wrinkles in it, trying really hard not to pounce on the Alpha attacking him.

Then, Christophe looked at the Alphas. “The tournament officials have done enough background checks for all of us. You don't need to waste your valuable time doing it again.”

“But he's suddenly clearing all his levels out of nowhere… even in the archery-”

“The archery game was nothing but fair,” Christophe cut the Alpha in mid sentence, his voice firm, glare sharp. “His win was very well earned and… deserving.” He shot a glance at Otabek, nodding in acknowledgement. “It was one of the most magnificent displays of archery I've witnessed in years.”

Otabek froze at the unexpected compliment. He couldn't even nod and show his gratitude for the Alpha’s support.

“So, can you please excuse my friend here?” He strolled to Otabek with his usual grace. The other Alphas scattered away, giving him space. He paused at Otabek’s side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

Otabek looked at him, wide eyed. He wasn't sure if the generous gesture was for show to shoo away the other Alphas, or if it was real.

“Care to join me for a lunch?” Christophe asked Otabek, lips curved in a pleasant smile. “I hate eating alone.”

Otabek eyed the Alpha, trying to read through the sharp, hazel eyes in front of him. He couldn't find any traces of mockery.

“Okay,” Otabek agreed before thinking what he was saying. Damn, he forgot that he’d finished his meal not even thirty minutes before. A rather heavy meal. But he didn't take back his words.

For the next few days, Lord Christophe made a point to join Otabek for every other meal and Otabek had no issues with it whatsoever.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter- Yuri’s POV. It’s time to address the last part of the fic summary. Things will go down from there. Be ready!
Yuri’s POVs. Flashback in italics. It’s time to address the last part of the fic summary. Warning: Side Character Death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuri stripped out of his embellished tunic and trousers, stepping into a bathing tub.

The room was filled with the sweet scent of rose petals and perfumed water. It helped him relax his taut muscles. He leaned back on the edge of the tub, lifting his body just enough to allow his servant, Daniel, to collect his long locks and nurture them with the strokes of jasmine oil. Soon, the warmth of the water combined with the gentle ministrations of his servant lulled him into a quiet dreaminess.

It'd been two days since Otabek had left for the tournament and Yuri had already started missing his company.

He’d experienced the feeling before, the same old twist in his chest when he’d left for abroad alone.

_He was angry._

_He knew that Otabek was using an excuse to distance himself. When he'd made his entrance unannounced, Yuri had overheard the servants gossiping about them, pairing them together. It was bound to happen. They were inseparable and Yuri never bothered to hide his liking towards the particular Alpha. But he never thought that it would actually matter to Otabek. After all, they'd been best friends since they were children, if not more._

_He was frustrated with Otabek’s decision about not joining him abroad. If Otabek wanted distance, he’d goddamn get some, Yuri decided and never bothered to reply to his long casual letters._

_He repeatedly read them thoroughly though, making the paper thin and delicate with the overhandling and, if he was being honest, spoiling it with his tears on the occasional lonely nights. Other than this, he busied himself with his academic studies and the packed routine of activities. He hoped the constant feeling of emptiness in his heart - the burning hole - would heal someday._

_He waited for two years, even tried getting engaged to the pretty faces around him, but nobody intrigued him the way Otabek did. Otabek was… special._

_He couldn't label his feelings for Otabek. He didn't want to. He was a Prince, the only heir of the Plisetsky kingdom and... an Omega._

_He knew, one day, he’d have to sacrifice his future for the well being of his kingdom. A Prince didn’t have the liberty of loving someone and getting attached to an Alpha of his choice, certainly not a low ranker, no matter how strongly he wished it._

_When Yuri had first returned he was shocked by the changes and yet the familiarity of Otabek. He..._
saw the familiar dark brown eyes again, looking calm but capable of reading his soul; the cropped hair that made Yuri want to run his fingers through it and feel the texture of the undercut; the musky, earthy scent that urged him to bury his nose in the Alpha’s neck; the chiseled jawline that could cut a diamond and the broad shoulders that had grown even broader than he’d remembered from before.

After the separation of two years, Yuri felt a sudden rush of warmth fill his heart. The hole was healing. Finally.

“You look tireder than usual, my Prince,” Daniel commented behind him, his hands rubbing the scented oil into the tender skin of Yuri’s shoulders.

Yuri hummed in response, submerging into the water, almost drifting into a doze after his long day of meetings with the foreign delegates and the never-ending dispute over territory.

Daniel paused his movements, waiting for the Prince’s attention. “John’s brought news from the capital,” he informed him and Yuri splashed the water out of the tub, everywhere, in his haste to turn around and face his servant.

“What?” Yuri demanded, eyebrows creased in irritation. “I’ve specifically asked John to report me. How can he- What is it? What he’s got to share?”

Daniel was openly smiling. Yuri’s fondness for Otabek wasn’t a secret, at least, not to Daniel who had served him for a decade and witnessed their relationship closely. Yuri hated the way simple news of his favorite Alpha affected him and how obvious it was to others.

“Sir Otabek has reached the capital and I heard he’s cleared the security. He must have proceeded with his practice games by now.”

Indeed, it was good news. Getting clearance to enter the arena was a tough task, as each Alpha was scrutinized to verify his claims to participate in the challenges. Yuri had been there while Otabek was filling the pre-formatted, fifty pages of the tournament questionnaire. It was no less than a book.

“How many levels do you wish to participate in this year?” Yuri looked up, reading the question out loud to Otabek. Some of them were really silly, he agreed. But, it amused him to watch Otabek’s reaction to them. He met Otabek’s eyes, his eyebrow quirked up to tease the Alpha.

Otabek didn’t answer. He snatched the application from Yuri’s hand instead.

“Hey,” Yuri yelped in protest. Otabek ignored him, scribbling his answer on the paper. Yuri shifted behind Otabek’s back and couldn’t help but peek over his shoulder.

‘All the levels, until I lose.’

Something settled inside Yuri on reading it. He blinked at the Alpha, without uttering another word, throwing him fond glances as Otabek proceeded to fill out the next question.

This year, Yuri’s entire being was concentrated on the results of the ranking system and Otabek’s performance in the tournament. If the news was good could he dare, against all odds and social norms, to have a little hope about his own future. Their future.

He was trying hard to complete his work so he’d get a chance to visit the capital for the public performances at the end of the month. Of course, he wouldn’t be able to meet Otabek. The tournament restricted the contenders from interaction with the outer world to avoid influence and
false play. But, Yuri wasn't going to miss the opportunity to witness his friend in action.

He knew Otabek would captivate the entire arena by his display of flawless skills. Yuri had yet to meet an Alpha who matched Otabek’s caliber at such an early age, even when he’d been abroad and surrounded by high rankers. He knew Otabek would be an underdog in the tournament and was going to catch many off guard. Yuri couldn't miss the opportunity to share his friend's moment of glory.

“Call John at once,” Yuri ordered, emerging from the tub, dripping water onto the marbled floor. “I want to hear all the details… right away.” Yuri marched through the door that connected to his personal chamber. Daniel hurried after him, struggling to wrap a turkish robe around Yuri’s lean, wet figure, covering him up in soft fabric.

The lingering sleep in Yuri’s eyes was long gone.

*****

“Grandfather,” Yuri chirped as he entered the King’s chamber. “You’re back.”

King Plisetsky raised his head from the documents he’d been reading. “Yurochka,” he beamed at the Prince, capping his pen, placing it down on his desk as Yuri flung his arms around the older Alpha, greeting him with a warm hug.

The king had returned home from his trip to the Nikiforov kingdom. Yuri didn’t understand his grandfather's dire need to visit their neighbors. The king’s health had been deteriorating with each passing day and Yuri didn’t want to let him travel alone in his delicate condition. But, Yuri couldn’t spare time from the matters that had to be addressed from the palace and had asked Sir Yakov to join the King in his place.

“Are you feeling well?” Yuri asked, eyes carefully scanning the wrinkles on the King’s tired face. It had only been three days but somehow the King managed to look drained and paler than before. “Why in heaven’s name did you travel?” Yuri snapped in irritation, worry evident in his voice.

“I had my reasons,” the King smiled, pulling Yuri closer, cupping his face and placing a tender kiss on his forehead. “I’m feeling better now that I’ve seen your face.”

Yuri rolled his eyes, and encouraged the King to get up out of the chair, urging him towards his bed. “You need to rest.” Yuri helped the King to settle on the comfy mattress.

“Wait - wait,” the King protested. “I don’t want to go to bed this early. I’m not old,” he joked with a wink, completely refusing Yuri’s attempts to shove him down on the bed. “Can we talk for a while?” The king’s voice was so low that Yuri heard him only because he was not even an arm’s length away. He watched Yuri, the gleam in his eyes felt almost pleading.

“O-kay,” Yuri huffed, tossing his hands in the air, surrendering to his grandfather’s wishes. “But only for a while,” he warned him. “And then… you’re on strict rest for at least for two days.”

“As you command, my Prince,” the King muttered in between his smile and Yuri shook his head, unable to suppress his own grin.
Yuri lay down on the bed, resting his head on his grandfather’s lap, tucking his legs up close to his chest. The King’s fingers found their way into Yuri’s hair, carding them through his long tresses as he untangled the knots in them. It’d been years since they’d shared such a peaceful moment together.

It felt nice.

“How was your day, Yuri?”

The Omega sighed, huffing out a long-suffering breath. “Horrible.”

The King laughed, moving his hands down, gently patting Yuri’s cheek. “Did our guests trouble you?”

“A lot,” Yuri complained. “I’ve never seen such power hungry people in my life.”

“You’re too naive for this world, Son,” the King sighed. “The world can be cruel sometimes.”

Yuri jutted his chin up, trying to catch the look on the Alpha’s face. The King looked lost, his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. He kept talking as if he was having a moment with himself.

“You have to be careful, Yuri. Take wise decisions. They’ll affect not only you but decide the fate of our kingdom. Just keep your friends close… because they are the ones who’ll help you through this tough phase.”

“I got you.” Yuri gripped the Alpha’s hand, pulling it closer to rest below his head. He leaned into the warm touch. “You’ll guide me, right?”

“Yes, of Course. Of course,” the King confirmed with a soft hum, stroking Yuri’s back with his free hand. “But soon you’ll find your mate and will travel to your Alpha’s kingdom.”

A shudder ran through Yuri’s body at the thought of leaving his grandfather. He knew that was how the society worked. After the alliance of the two kingdoms, an Omega had to move on with his Alpha, he’d known this all his life. But, what if his intended mate belonged to the same kingdom, Yuri couldn’t help but wonder.

The gentle pats of his grandfather’s hand lulled Yuri into the daze of unavoidable slumber again. He snapped out of it when he heard a solid thud somewhere above him.

“Grandfather!” Yuri croaked, watching in horror as the king writhed on the bed, his face was pinched in excruciating pain, eyes blown wide, hand clutching his chest. “Wh- What’s happening to you?” Yuri demanded, sitting upright on the bed, alert and scared.

The next moment, he was pulling the King into his arms, hands tugging at his shoulders, patting his cheeks, desperate to get the king out of his aching unconsciousness.

“Please tell me what- Help- Someone help!”

It was too late when the guards rushed inside the chamber at hearing Yuri’s panicked cries and hurried away to seek a medical help.

Yuri sagged on the bed, stock still and shaken, watching the King’s limp body. He could neither hear his grandfather’s heartbeat, nor could he smell his familiar lavender scent anymore.
Hellooooo readers! I should warn you that you are in for a bumpy ride of angst! POVs will alternate between Yuri and Otabek. Let me know what you think.
Chapter 8

The all too familiar trumpet blast filled the air, signalling the beginning of the Level Four final.

It was Otabek’s third week in the tournament. He was hoping for an archery encounter again, so he could give his sore muscles a rest from the other more physically demanding games. But, since when was he that fortunate, it was, of course, sword fighting.

“Michele… Michele… Michele…” The entire arena was reverberating with non-stop chants of his opponent's name. The tournament had been opened to public spectators and the pavilions were overflowing with the local crowd.

Duke Michele Crispino was a defending winner of the fourth level and was a localite. No wonder he was the favorite with the crowd. On the other hand, this was Otabek’s first Ranking tournament and the success he'd earned this year was getting doubted more than receiving appreciation.

Otabek sucked in a deep breath, in a futile attempt to catch a trace of the specific citrus and honey that had undertones of sandalwood… Yuri’s scent. He scanned the crowd, desperately hoping to get a visual of the lithe figure with silky blonde hair but he couldn’t see him.

Yuri wasn't there, the thought struck him like lightning, fast and devastating. He swallowed a lump threatening to form in his throat.

‘Yuri-’

A challenging roar from his opponent brought him back to reality. Yes, he was standing right in the middle of a field and needed to focus on his rival, who was at that moment, charging straight at him with a glistening sword in his hand.

‘Maybe the Prince was occupied.’

Steel clanged against steel. Otabek blocked the first strike from his opponent, his wrists vibrating as he tried to push the blade away from him.

‘Maybe something out of routine had happened in the kingdom.’

He blocked the second swipe, backing off slightly.

‘But Yuri-’

The third impact hit his armor hard. He toppled backwards, losing his balance. The breath was knocked out of him as his back hit the ground.

‘But… Yuri promised.’

He blinked, panting heavily. His sword was still clutched in his hand. He looked up at the other sword, pointed right at his chest.

“That was much easier than I was anticipating,” Alpha Michele chuckled, throwing a smug glare down at Otabek. The crowd was going crazy, erupting into a cacophony of cheering. They all jeered at Otabek.

Otabek knew he must have lost at least ten points. And, it wasn't even a minute in.
“C’mon, Otabek! You can do it!” He recognized Phichit’s voice.

“Pick the sword up and stop goddamn daydreaming!” Christophe bellowed from somewhere near him.

Otabek shook his head, gathering himself as, with a hand signal, the referee held the other Alpha back from lunging at Otabek again. Otabek fixed his helmet on his head that had been dislodged from the impact. He raised his sword, fingers opening and closing on the grip of his shield with nervous energy.

‘Focus’, Otabek pushed down the gloomy rushes of wariness, ‘It’s just five minutes. Five excruciating minutes that will decide your fate!’

“On guard! Ready? Play!” The words were barely out of the referee’s mouth and Michele marched at him again.

Otabek parried his blow, locking the blade for a brief moment, before shoving it back with massive force.

The Alpha stumbled back a step, flinching in surprise at the sudden response. Otabek watched as Michele flared his nostrils and pounced back at him. Their swords clashed together, again and again, as they both danced around to avoid the next attack.

Michele was taller, well built but Otabek moved fast, using his speed against his opponent’s size. He dodged the next strike, patiently waited till Michele’s sword missed his shoulder and swiped downward. Instantly, he lunged forward, trapping the sword on the ground, kicking at his opponent’s wrist, disarming him. His own blade hissed through the air, pointing straight at Michele’s neck.

The Alpha glared at the tip of Otabek’s sword, then, at Otabek, panting and fuming. Otabek met his eyes, without breaking the look till Michele lowered his gaze down at his abandoned sword.

The game continued after a brief pause, only to be interrupted again as Otabek’s several sparring moves knocked Michele hard to the ground.

Otabek couldn’t hold back after that, his adrenalin was surging up, pumping his blood through his veins. He wasn't sure about the reason, if it was the rush of disappointment from Yuri’s absence or his frustration over him being so foolish and hoping for something… more.

Everything turned blurred as he advanced, his sword cut through the air, his senses numbed, what remained was the feeling of the blade in his hand and the struggling figure of his rival in front of his eyes.

He stopped dead, hearing the shrieking sound of a whistle that indicated the end of the match.

Otabek startled back to his senses, looking around. He didn't even know when he'd shoved his opponent to the edge of the ground. He lowered his sword, immediately stepping back. He tried to offer a hand to Michele, in a friendly gesture of fair game. The angry Alpha batted it away with a swipe of his hand. Otabek winced at the rude rejection, his hand freezing in the mid air, unable to react for a moment.

The Alpha marched to the center of the field where the referee was waiting for them to announce the result. Otabek followed him, his heart was pounding in his chest when he took his position at the referee’s side, head hanging low as he waited for the declaration of his fate.
As the words filtered through the surrounding crowd, they were stunned into silence. There were a few cheers of his names, other than that, everything felt dreary.

He hadn't waited for his friends to join him, he wasn't sure if he could put on a face of fake happiness or even manage a smile. He headed to the dormitory, almost running, without bothering to notice the lingering glares thrown at him. The moment he reached his room, he tossed his sword in one corner, wondering why his glorious victory didn't feel as soothing as it should have done.
Otabek slid down the terrace wall, pulling his legs up close to his chest, hands circling around his knees. He jutted his chin up, watching as the dawn spread across the edges of the sky. The pleasant play of pinks and blues soothed his agitated mind.

He was up early—had been awake the entire night, to be more precise. The tightness of his chest had eased with the warm splashes from the shower and after putting in some serious thought, Otabek was finally in a mindset to evaluate the situation fairly.

Things back home weren't easy, he was aware. Yuri had some unwelcome guests to attend. The King was visiting the neighboring state to strengthen their allegiance. Yakov was accompanying the King as his advisor along with Otabek’s father and Sabrina was too young to travel alone to the capital. To summarize, not a single person from his close circle was in a position to witness his performance.

He wished they were there, to encourage him, to support him when he was in the finest form of his life. He wanted their experienced advice, their push when he was freaking out right in the middle of the ground, the confidence that they all had in his abilities, which he barely had in himself. But Otabek was also aware that he wasn't fortunate enough to get everything he wished for. So, he decided to take a deep breath and accept this evident fact of his life.

“Heyy… Rookiee.” A loud slur of words broke into his chain of thought.

Otabek whipped his head around, noticing the familiar, stocky figure of the Alpha who was swaying on his feet. He advanced in Otabek’s direction.

“Alpha Takeshi?” Otabek stepped forward, hand reaching out to give support to his wobbling body.

“Fuck off.” Takeshi jerked away, walking past Otabek, looking to settle somewhere. He slumped down on the concrete, leaning against the hard wall behind him.

His face was swollen, eyes red. Takeshi was having a hard time keeping them open and focused on Otabek.

Otabek blinked down at him. “Are you drunk?”

“Are you?” Takeshi countered, rolling onto his side displaying his back to Otabek.

Otabek rolled his eyes. The Alpha was definitely under the influence of strong alcohol. Shortly, a steady sound of snoring filled the air.

Otabek huffed out a heavy sigh. He wondered how the Alpha had managed to get his hands on the alcohol which was supposed to be banned from the premises. But then, Takeshi was a popular
Alpha and being rich had its own perks. Otabek couldn't do much to help him. At the most he could be generous and not report him to the tournament officers. He ignored him.

Unfortunately, Takeshi had broken Otabek out of his trance. After three weeks of lurking around the arena, he had located this secluded area on the dormitory terrace. It was mostly used to dump junk, ranging from worn out mattresses to broken furniture waiting to be cleared out. But the terrace was the highest spot around and had a nice view of the entire arena.

Otabek loved to lay down on one of the abandoned mattresses and admire the twinkling stars against the backdrop of a night sky. During the day, he sometimes carried his treasured novel along to read.

The novel was a gift from Yuri, his eighteenth birthday gift. Otabek always pretended to hate the typically cheesy love sagas which Yuri, for some reason, preferred reading. He'd never admit that he carried the book everywhere and had read it at least five times.

Otabek walked back to his room, planning to give the novel a sixth run. He spread out on the bed with the book in hand, pulling his blanket up to his chest, seeking warmth. His eyes hovered over the familiar lines. Soon they became heavy and before realizing it, he had drifted off into the haze of quiet slumber.

Otabek startled awake to a loud banging on the door.

It took him a moment to take in his surroundings. He ran a hand over his sleep-crumpled face, taking his time to adjust to the chaos outside.

“What’re you doing?” Phichit stormed inside as Otabek unlocked the door. His voice was uncharacteristically high pitched, face pinched in panic.

“What’s wrong?”

“Goddamn it, Otabek. You scared me.”

“Why? What happened?”

“There’s fire,” Phichit shrieked. “Didn’t you hear the alarm? We need to vacate this building.”

“What?” Otabek’s voice came out as a muffled croak.


Otabek got his senses back with a jerk. First, he dived for his book and then, he grabbed his bag from the floor. He didn't care if he lost some old items of clothing. The next moment, they were both barging out of the room.

They almost collided with the hurrying Alphas on the staircase. Otabek recognized them. They were the group who had tried to corner him the other day. They all shared the top floor of the building and were running downstairs together in their night tunics, looking disheveled and scared.

Except - Takeshi was missing.

“Fuck.” Otabek stopped dead, watching the retreating back of an Alpha who hurried away around the corner. “Phichit...” he called for his friend. “Can you just go ahead? I need to check on someone.”
“What?! Are you crazy?” Phichit exclaimed. He whipped around, gaping at Otabek as if he'd grown horns. “The rescue team will be here soon and… and… everyone must be outside by now.”

“No.” Otabek dumped his stuff in Phichit’s hands. “He may not be aware of what’s going on. I need to-” He wasn't sure if he should disclose Takeshi’s drunken state. “I’ll be quick. Just… take care of those.” His eyes lingered on the book for a brief moment before he twirled around on his heels and headed straight for the terrace.

“Otabek. Wait-”

He didn't stop to listen to Phichit’s pleas and concerned warnings. He ran.

*****

Currents of hot air burned his skin as he turned around the last corner to the terrace. The source of fire was somewhere on the terrace, he realized.

‘What are you doing?’ he gulped, revisiting his decision to enter the mouth of death. But- No, he couldn't turn back when he knew someone out there might be moments away from losing their life.

He kicked at the door, shrinking back when fierce flames found the way out to spread in the freed air. Otabek barely managed to jump aside, just avoiding the leaping fire from kissing his skin.

He scanned the area. It was difficult to see through the clouds of smoke and dust as his eyes tried to adjust to the burning view in front of him. The source was at the back and fire hadn't reached the junk of cotton and wood that was piled up on the right-hand side of the terrace.

He heard a whine, definitely coming from the spot where he remembered leaving Takeshi a few hours before. He leapt in the direction of the sound, knocking the furniture out of his way with a strong kick from his leather boot. The fire hadn't spread to its full extent yet, but Otabek knew the whole building would turn to ash if the rescue team didn't get there in the next few minutes. Maybe then, they’d manage to save the building, but not Takeshi.

It'd be too late for that.

Fortunately, when Otabek found the elder Alpha where he’d left him, he was conscious. He must have sensed the danger around him and was trying to haul his body up on his staggering feet.

“Good lord,” Otabek marched towards him. Takeshi’s eyes were red, from the heat or the alcohol, Otabek didn't have time to decide. “C’mon, get up.” He moved behind him and pulled his slack body up, looping his arms around Takeshi’s torso. Otabek was panting, trying to plant his feet firmly.

“Rookieee… You- you came back,” Takeshi stuttered, turning his head around to get a better look at Otabek’s face. The movement made Otabek lose his grip.

“Don’t move… God, you're heavy.” Otabek struggled to maintain their balance as his feet kept slipping under the combined weight of their bodies. Eventually, he manhandled the Alpha into a standing position and hooked Takeshi’s arm over his shoulder. The act made him dizzy as he fought for breath.

“You're gonna... save me.”
“Shut up!” Otabek commanded, straining his neck around to look for a way out as he struggled to support Takeshi’s weight. To his surprise, Takeshi cut off his ramble.

The door through which he'd entered the terrace was now enveloped in blazing flames. The fire was spreading rapidly, closing off all their ways out.

“Shit...” Otabek dragged his feet, pulling Takeshi along, planning an escape from another exit. Takeshi was in no position to walk, certainly in no position to climb down the steps on his own. Otabek crouched down, circling his arms around the Alpha’s legs. He gathered all his strength to lift the Alpha onto his shoulder, in a desperate attempt to carry him.

The next moment, they both landed on the floor. Otabek saw stars as his head hit the hard floor. As he wrestled to get back on his feet, he wailed in pain when his fingers made contact with a hot surface.

He'd apparently tried to grab a metal pipe which had been heated by the fire. He didn't get time to sink into the agonizing ache because he realized that the fire had reached them.

He skittered backwards, an unconscious effort to get away from the danger. The fire had begun to eat into anything in its path, leaving nothing unscathed. He heard Takeshi grumbling somewhere near him.

“C’mom, move.” He hauled Takeshi away with him. Otabek leaned against the half wall surrounding the terrace, taking in thick gulps of hot air that burned through his lungs. His eyes were stinging from the smoke and ash, blurring his vision as tears pooled in them, his hand trembled with the pain. He blinked, focussing his eyes on his surroundings, still looking for hope.

“We're going to die,” Takeshi gasped. The thought of losing his life must have overcome the haze of alcohol. Otabek didn't spare him a look. “No, we're not,” he declared, to Takeshi, perhaps more to himself, to soothe the hammering of his heart in his chest. Was this it?

He was fucking nineteen. He wanted to join the King’s army as a loyal knight. He wanted to arrange Sabrina’s marriage. He wanted to build a farmhouse for his father so he could retire from his duties and enjoy his old age. He wanted to read books… lots of books, and- and taste Pirozhki which Yuri was so fond of. He wanted to travel the world with Yuri… his Prince. He wanted to-

His head felt light, breathing ragged as he struggled to suck in air.

“Otabek,” he heard the distant sound of his name.

It was Phichit. Otabek jerked around, leaning over the terrace wall to get a look down at the gathered crowd. They were shouting something which didn't exactly reach his ears, but he caught sight of uniformed officers who were huddled in front of the onlookers.

The rescue team had arrived.

O-Kay. This wasn't it. Not yet. A wild wave of adrenaline surged through his veins.

“They're here,” he alerted Takeshi whose eyes were fixated on the searing heat in front of him, fear evident in his wide glare.

“We're going to… die,” Takeshi muttered again, his eyes unwavering, bulging as if he was seeing some ghost.
“Hey, hey,” Otabek slapped his cheeks in a desperate attempt to catch his attention. The Alpha was panicking. Shortage of oxygen must have started fogging his mind too.

Otabek was feeling giddy and disoriented. He shook his head, at least one of them needed to be focused if they wished to… live.

“C’mon, look at me,” he demanded, waiting patiently till Takeshi’s eyes made contact with his. “You’re going to be alright, okay? D’you hear me?”

Takeshi didn’t answer. He gaped at Otabek for a long moment before nodding his head in affirmation.

“Good.” Otabek clapped him on his arm, shoulders slumping in relief. “We're going to make it,” he reiterated, voice calm but firm.

He looked over the wall again. The rescue team had started to position the safety net. His heart sank in his stomach.

They’d have to jump, he realized.

Otabek had never been afraid of heights, but jumping from the four-story building was a different story altogether. He looked at Takeshi who had turned as white as chalk.

“Otabek?!” He heard someone call again. The rescue team looked prepared as they signaled for him to jump. His vision was blurring, lack of oxygen had started showing its effect. They needed to hurry.

“Are you alright?” Takeshi asked, shaking him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah… yeah,” Otabek blurted out, not sure what he was saying… what he was doing, trying hard not to lose consciousness. “I’m fine. You go first.”

Otabek helped Takeshi climb the wall, supporting his legs as the Alpha strived to stand straight.

“You're gonna make it,” he encouraged, his fingers digging into the hard stone of the wall as he started to lose focus. He sucked in a heavy breath which only succeeded in filling his lungs with foul air. He barely noticed when Takeshi leapt for the safety net.

The Alpha landed right in the center of the net with a muffled thud.

“He’s safe… he’s safe,” Otabek chanted. Dumbstruck, he kept watching the crowd as they helped Takeshi off the net.

“It’s your turn!” Someone yelled.

Yes, it was his his turn. He wobbled on the spot. His brain refused to coordinate his limbs. He shivered as the hot air brushed his bare skin, the loose ends of his tunic were flapping with the wind. Oh, he was standing on the wall. The highest spot of the arena. His eyes took a last look at the red, angry sky before flicking them downwards.

“Otabek… Jump…” Someone was shouting.

He moved, flinging his body off the wall.

The next moment, everything went dark.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Otabek… Otabek… Otabek… ”

The entire arena was reverberating with enthusiastic cheers and shouts of his name. Otabek fiddled with the loose threads of his hand-bandage, tucking it in properly before stepping foot on the field for his final challenge.

It wasn't even four days since the same gathered crowd was condemning his very name. Being a low ranker, they hadn't spared him a second glance and openly called him a deceiver.

But things had been different after the fire.

Otabek had woken up to the dull walls of the medical facility with the worst headache of his life, his blistered hand covered in bandages and… a view of fresh daisies and roses.

He couldn't figure who in this arena would invest their money and efforts to please his sour body by sending him these beautiful tokens. Or was it the effect of heavy medicines that was perplexing his mind, he couldn't be sure.

As the day had passed and the facility doors opened for visitors, his room had started flooding with well wishers. Otabek had been dumbfounded by the sheer number of tournament contenders, even staff, who had turned up to his room. They all had seemed genuinely concerned about his health and hardly stopped praising him for his brave act.

Otabek had turned from a trickster to a hero over the span of a single night and was struggling to cope with the sudden attention he was getting bombarded with.

He'd been taken aback when the Chief of staff visited his ward and asked if he wished to postpone his Level Five match from the designated schedule. Otabek knew they were more worried about bad publicity after the incident rather than caring about his fitness. But Otabek wasn't willing to spend a minute longer than necessary in this isolated place and was way too eager to return home. He'd refused the offer.

As he proceeded to put on his guard his hand prickled with dull pain. His wound was yet to heal. It wasn't much, certainly nothing that he couldn't bear for the next thirty minutes.

His last thirty minutes in the tournament.

It was a wrestling encounter. Otabek smiled at the coincidence, it was him who'd opened the tournament with a wrestling duel and now, he'd be the one to end it with the same challenge. He hoped it was a good omen.

The tournament officials hadn't managed to identify the cause of fire that had almost cost two lives. One of them was Takeshi, a local Alpha who had been a popular contender throughout the tournament. The officials were getting questioned and as a distraction, they were trying to promote sagas of Otabek’s heroism.

As he walked the final yards on the arena ground, the crowds grew louder. Even when it was tough to recognize faces from such distance, Otabek nodded in their direction, a silent gesture to display
his gratitude for their support. The crowd went into a frenzy in response.

*Otabek our hero... Otabek our champion...* the shouts reached another octave and Otabek’s chest felt tight with the overwhelming pressure of their expectations.

He shook hands with his opponent, the gesture had become second nature before the start of every match. Lord Dominic Wilson, his opponent and the Prince from the west region, was yet to lose a challenge, the same as Otabek. The Alpha, in his late twenties, had the advantage of experience and at least a hundred pounds over Otabek and looked the absolute winner on paper.

“This title is mine,” Dominic hissed in Otabek’s face with a tight squeeze at his hand. His injured hand. Otabek clenched his jaw, waiting for the ache to pass. His face was stoic, not showing any signs of hurt, eyes boring into his rival’s dark blue gaze, challenging him with a mute - *We shall see.*

They stepped apart when the whistle shrieked.

They walked to the center of the ground as the referee took his place nearby. The other referee stood at the edge of the ground. One more jury member, a Judge, moved at the scoring table. It was the final challenge of the tournament and the scores were open for public viewing. Everything was open like bright sunlight.

With another sharp blow of a whistle, the ultimate challenge began.

Otabek dug his legs in the soft soil of the ground, crouching down, taking a defensive stance. His opponent too stepped ahead, roaring, eyes carefully scanning Otabek’s moves, legs moving in swift motion in total contrast to his heavy physique. And, somewhere deep down Otabek realized, he’d have to spill his blood if he wished to win this match.

Their hands locked against each other shoulders, battling for dominance. Dominic shoved his body onto Otabek’s, pushing him backwards using his full weight. Otabek’s boots skidded against the ground as he struggled to hold the spot. Dominic was strong, stronger than anyone Otabek had battled so far.

Suddenly, the Alpha let go off his hold, twirling his body to grip Otabek from behind and into a headlock. Before realizing it, Otabek was pushed on the ground.

His face scraped against the hard surface as Dominic tackled him down with his immense strength, shoving his head into the ground. The hand that covered Otabek’s face managed to save him from possible suffocation. He could feel the sour taste of dirt in his mouth that was laced with the coppery tang of blood. He couldn’t breathe. Each passing moment felt like years as he squirmed beneath his opponent.

The piercing whistle never sounded so enticing. Still, it took quite a few moments for Dominic to release him, taking advantage of Otabek’s vulnerable position, causing as much damage as he could.

Otabek didn’t have to check the scoreboard to know how many points he’d lost.

**0-6**, the score board blinked back at him, mocking him.

Otabek went on the back foot, taking a completely defensive stance in a hope to gather his strength before he lost more points. He dodged Dominic’s attempts to overpower him. Luckily, the first round ended without further damage.
When Otabek flopped down on the bench, drained and aching, someone held a water canteen to his mouth, others wiped sweat beads from his forehead. Otabek’s eyes skittered over the familiar faces around him. He wanted to thank them, appreciate their encouraging words, the gentle pats on his back, their experienced suggestions about the moves, but his mind was running on a different wavelength altogether.

He’d lost the first round. The thought burned into his chest.

A low whimper escaped his throat when someone applied a healing paste to his battered face. It felt like numerous bee stings. He knew he must be bleeding, but he didn't care.

Round two started with the loud blow of a trumpet.

This time, they both took defensive stances. Of course, Dominic wasn't attempting to attack. A few moments into the second round and Otabek realized, Dominic probably was contented with passing the time rather than risking his lead. He was playing smart.

So, it was left to Otabek if he wished to take charge.

He grabbed for Dominic’s arms. The Alpha easily blocked his advance and Otabek fought to come up with an effective counter attack. Otabek was leaner, he was shorter and his rival's torso was on a full display in front of his eyes, seemingly a reachable target. Quickly, Otabek stepped in, turning at his side, pushing his back against the Alpha’s front, hand gripped around his shoulder. He heaved Dominic up with a final twist of his hip, throwing him over it with all the strength that was left in him. The Alpha’s feet lifted into the air. The next moment, Dominic was on the ground.

_a hip throw._

Before Otabek could regain his own balance, he snapped his head at the scoreboard.

_3-6_, the Judge painted the numbers against the black surface.

The crowd erupted into a combined roar, bouncing and dancing in the stands, celebrating a simple move like some festivity.

Dominic gathered himself from a sudden strike, glaring and fuming at Otabek, ready to go, but the blow of the whistle indicated the end of the second round.

In the break, not only Otabek, but every single person around him was running high on adrenaline. They grabbed his shoulders, shouted instructions at his face. This time, he noticed, it was Phichit who wiped his face with soft cotton, being gentle, careful not to hurt his bruises.

“Th- thank you,” Otabek croaked his words out.

“Thank us after you win this _shit_ ,” and, God, this was the first time when he'd heard Phichit cursing.

The third and final round would be the death of him, Otabek realized the moment he stepped into the field again.

Dominic came charging at him like a wild bull, desperate to continue from where he'd left. The Alpha grabbed him around his neck, thick fingers digging into the tender lines of his throat, choking him. A harsh tug and he lifted Otabek into the air making his legs dangle like a lifeless
puppet. He banged Otabek onto the ground.

The breath was knocked out of him when his back hit the hard surface. He let out a cry, his back arched with throbbing pain, feeling his bones crushed inside him. Dominic never let go of him, fingers still locked around his skin, cutting his air supply. He gaped like a fish out of water, trying to suck a few gulps of air. His vision started blurring as he writhed against the rock solid hold.

Unsurprisingly, it was indeed a forbidden hold.

The referee’s shouts of protest felt far away, coming from underwater. A few moments more and Otabek was ready to pass out where he lay, white and cold.

*One... two...*

Dominic backed off right before the count of three.

Otabek felt as if his life suddenly poured back into his lungs. He coughed, huffed, crawling on the field on all four in his attempt to get away from the man who wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if things came to that.

Otabek had heard of such incidents when the matter got so out of hand that it was no longer about winning a title. It was a matter of their pride, their detrimental Alpha ego. People had fought hard and dirty, claiming lifelong injuries, broken limbs even... death.

When enough blood rushed to his brain and he found the strength to raise his head, his eyes automatically searched for the scoreboard.

3-6, it remained unchanged.

The crowd was jeering at the jurors, condemning their unfair decision. Dominic deserved a penalty, at least a point if not more. Otabek looked at the ground-referee who was shouting his warnings at his opponent. The judge at the score table remained stoic without twitching a single muscle in his face, tactfully avoiding Otabek’s gaze.

Otabek huffed out a sad laugh, not blaming the jury but his own fate.

Alpha Dominic was still getting yelled at by the referee, his eyes following Otabek, a smug smirk plastered around his face, stained teeth glinting through the gaps of his lips. As their eyes met, he glared, shooting daggers in Otabek’s direction. He spat on the ground, all set to crush Otabek between the tips of his two fingers as if Otabek was some filthy insect, lower than it.

The match had almost reached an end, hardly three minutes left.

The first two minutes passed in a blur of motion where both the Alphas parried each other’s attack without giving any openings to their opponent.

The trumpet blow indicated the last minute of the final encounter.

*Fifty nine... Fifty eight... Fifty seven...* the arena echoed with the sound of the count down. The clock was ticking.

This was the end. After four weeks of hardship, years and years of rigorous training, one weak match and Otabek was going to lose everything.

“We lose the match mentally first, before we lose it physically, Beka.” Yuri’s words rang in his
ears, when the Prince had winked at him, suggestively and so very seductively, making him lose his grip around his opponent. It'd been during their training days when they'd had a silly argument the day before and Yuri had placed his bet on Otabek’s opponent only to get a reaction out of him.

Otabek wasn't going to lose it mentally first. No.

*Forty… Thirty nine... Thirty eight...*

He grabbed for Dominic’s legs. The Alpha kicked him away.

*Thirty... Twenty nine... Twenty eight...*

He locked his hand around Dominic’s wrist and tried to pull him to the ground into a submission. The Alpha easily escaped.

*Twenty... Nineteen... Eighteen...*

He stepped ahead, in an attempt to try one more hip throw, Dominic blocked him right away.

*Ten... Nine... Eight...*

Otabek locked his forearm against Dominic’s collar, ducking under his arm. In a blink, he slipped behind the Alpha’s back, his arms wrapped around Dominic’s front in a bone crushing hold. The Alpha squirmed, trying to get free. Otabek arched his back, lifting the Alpha’s weight by collecting every ounce of his strength and willpower. He dropped backwards, throwing Dominic above his head as they both fell to the ground with a loud thud. The trumpet blew indicating the end of the match. The end of the tournament.

Otabek lay on the ground, panting, clutching his fingers in a tight fist. He was so taken aback that he forgot to slip away from under the Alpha’s heavy body or have the courage to glance at the scoreboard.

It was Dominic who came to his senses first. He rushed towards the referee, shouting, literally shaking with fury, demanding a review. That was the moment when Otabek jerked his head towards the scores.

7-6, the numbers imprinted on his vision.

Fuck. He was leading. By one point.

Otabek watched as the jury huddled together near the scoreboard, looking in deep discussion. Otabek’s heart started hammering in his chest, each moment felt like an eternity, his hands sweating. He watched as the referee moved to the board and erased Otabek’s score.

No. They were changing his score. He was barely leading by one point and they were changing his score. Otabek had no strength in his limbs to fight a tiebreaker. Every single pore of his body was stinging with an acute ache. He hoped they wouldn't hamper his score more.

8-6, they declared the final score.

Fuck. They’d added an extra point to his final score.

Otabek dropped down on the ground, facing the sky, bright and open. Suddenly feeling empty,
free, as tears started streaming down from the corner of his eyes, melting into the soft soil of the arena.

The result sent the crowd into wild delirium. They celebrated his victory like their own.

Soon, Otabek was surrounded by his friends, who grabbed him in bone crushing hugs. “Otabek! You won… you won.” Phichit jumped on him. Alpha Christophe followed next.

“Aaaaaaaad the winner of the Level Five… ultimate challenge is… Alpha Otabek Altin.” As the words rolled into the air, Otabek started crying hysterically.

*****

He made his way through the crowd, accepting their good wishes, shaking hands with them. His eyes were fixed on the exit as he walked towards it as if some thread was pulling him.

It'd been a month, an excruciatingly long month, since he'd smelled the scent of home. But, behind the closed doors of the facility, he hoped someone was waiting for him.

He scanned the area. The air felt fresh and jovial as the families reunited after a long wait. Phichit introduced him to his parents who congratulated him on his Level Five ranking. They showered him with their blessings. Alpha Takeshi and his triplet girls invited him over for dinner. Lady Takeshi gifted him an embroidered shawl as a small token for saving her husband’s life. Alpha Christophe said his farewell with a promise to meet in the coming winter. Everyone around him greeted him with kind words and offered him flower bouquets.

He frowned when he couldn't find any familiar faces. This wasn't possible. His heart started racing as his mind flooded with unpleasant thoughts.

“Sir Altin.” He turned around at hearing his name.

He was met with the sight of a uniformed officer, a guard of the Plisetsky kingdom. “John?” he muttered, eyebrows creased in question.

“Congratulations on your win.” John bowed his greetings at Otabek.

“I, uh, thank you.” Otabek didn't know how to start. How anyone was supposed to ask why no one cared enough to witness his win. Even though the contenders weren't allowed visitors, tournament officials had spared nothing to promote their event. He was sure, the Plisetsky kingdom must have heard the news of his winning streak.

“I brought a letter for you,” John broke his chain of dejected thought. “It's from your father.”

Otabek eyed the letter. A letter. His father had sent him a letter? A wave of panic passed through his gut. His hand shook as he unfolded the envelope.

There were no greetings. No signature. It directly addressed the point, letters unclear, probably scribbled in hurry.

*It is my solemn duty to inform you of the sad demise of the King. Make haste and return to the castle on receipt of this missive.*
Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter - Yuri's POV.
Chapter 11

His world felt like silence in the graveyard.

Sat upon his throne, Yuri never listened to the words coming from his advisor, Yakov, or paid attention to the pitying looks of the gathered nobles. His eyes were fixed on the feathery material of the flowing white curtains, fingertips tracing the carved surface of his throne as he pathetically tried to seek the warmth of his memories of his grandfather in it.

King Plisetsky’s death had shattered the protective wall around him. Before he could come out of his mourning period, he’d been thrown into the middle of a storm over territorial politics.

Yuri was young, but as he started hearing from other kingdoms, he wasn't so naive as to not understand the sharp edge of threat hidden beneath the soft words of condolence. He knew the Plisetsky kingdom was under potential attack from those who wouldn’t blink an eye at starting a war to expand their own territory.

The Plisetsky kingdom had lost their Alpha. So had Yuri. His brain barely remembered how to work his limbs, buried under the aching emotion of grief. But still, he was there, sitting on the golden throne, his heart cold, but thudding for his people, for his country.

“Your Majesty?”

Yuri visibly flinched from the daze of his gloomy thoughts, staring blankly at Yakov’s face.

*Your Majesty*… The words felt foreign. He was yet to become familiar with his new rank which had belonged to his Grandfather not even two weeks ago. Every time it was thrown at him, it’d cut deep, right through his heart.

“I think,” Yakov addressed the assembly, his gaze fixated on Yuri, kind and considering. “... we will adjourn the gathering for now.”

Yuri couldn’t thank the man enough who’d stood by him during this tough time, an unwavering and selfless source of support. He tried to twitch his lips, in a mute gesture of gratitude, but even that felt like lifting a ton of stones.

He’d cried his heart out for three days, surrounded by the lonely walls of his lavish chambers, hysterically sobbing his Grandfather’s name. After that, the tears dried in his eyes, his senses numb. He attended the rituals and his duties as the newly crowned King, but inside, he felt as if it was *him* who had died.

He barely registered the bows from the dispersing nobles where every single one of them had something to say. Their words never reached Yuri’s ears.

“You should take some rest, my King.” Yakov suggested, eyes scanning Yuri’s, his face pinched in worry.

Without a word, Yuri rose from the throne, dragging his feet as he returned to his chamber.

*****
The news of Otabek’s Level three victory rushed past his ears like the foggy clouds of a dream.

As he leaned his head on the top of his hardwood desk, a pen hanging loosely between his fingers, papers flying in the breeze from an open window, he barely had strength to open his eyes. But, his fingers moved, searching the familiar cotton material which rested on his lap. Yuri couldn’t help but to seek solace from Otabek’s worn out scarf, desperately hoping that it would fill the throbbing hole in his heart.

It didn’t.

*****

One more week passed in a blur of motion when Yakov and Lady Lilia handled the major formalities and bothered him only for urgent matters.

Yuri needed to choose his mate, the thought itself twisted his gut.

He’d been avoiding it for half a year now, when the King had initiated the courting process looking for a suitable Alpha for his beloved grandchild. Yuri couldn’t help it. His heart stuttered only for one...

Alpha Otabek Altin.

As far back as he could remember he’d only had eyes for this brown eyed Alpha whose sharp gaze never failed to take his breath away. Yuri might have been famous for his rude, stubborn behaviour but Otabek had the skills to look right through into his soul and tame him like a lost kitten.

He wanted to wait. He wanted to hope. Otabek was more than a cheap, degraded low-ranker for whom society didn’t spare a second look. Otabek was far more than a supposed friend to an adamant Prince, or a salaried royal-guard and Yuri was ready to wait for him for eternity. His rank didn’t matter to Yuri, but he knew, it mattered to Otabek. Yuri knew, a few months more and Otabek would be able to prove it that it didn't matter what rank you were born with, you could still conquer the world.

The King’s sudden demise had turned his world upside down.

With the threat of the annexation of his kingdom banging at his very door, Yuri didn’t have the liberty to hope anymore. Not when he didn't know if Otabek would reciprocate his feelings.

He was succumbing to the building pressure of expectations but he had to carry the burden and decide the fate of his entire kingdom. It was demanding he sacrifice his love. But he wasn’t ready. Not yet.

Yuri had barely left his chamber, except for making his presence known for daily assemblies, drafting his signature on the important missives. He knew everyone was waiting. If he made this one decision the looming clouds of war would fade like they were never there.

It all ended when Yakov came barging into his room at the stroke of midnight, his hair ruffled, eyes swollen with unfinished sleep. He was carrying a letter in his hand. Yuri’s eyes settled on a
blood colored cross, the symbol of the Denisovich kingdom.

Yakov marched right to his desk. “Sorry to disturb you at this odd hour, your Highness.” He offered the letter to Yuri. “Y-You should have a look at this.”

Yuri’s hand trembled as he unfolded the letter. Deep down he realized, it wasn't good news.

To His Highness, King Yuri of the Plisetsky kingdom,

Please accept my condolences on the passing of King Plisetsky. In this troubled time, I want to offer a treaty to enter into an alliance between our kingdoms. The Denisovich kingdom has always looked at the Plisetskys as our equals and to strengthen the bond I include a contract for our betrothal.

As a Level Ten Alpha, I seek an Omega with an equal ranking as my mate. I am certain you are looking for the same, hence I would like to bring to you a few of the benefits of this arrangement. As your potential Alpha, I offer you my protection and safety. As the highest ranking Alpha, I am proficient in combat skills and the politics of war and am therefore the rightful heir to the Plisetsky throne.

I would like to highlight the fact that I was highly displeased by your decision not to invite me to the courting event and I shall not be insulted again.

If you do not accept my suit, I shall be forced to mass my troops along the border and suggest the Plisetsky kingdom should prepare for war.

Peter Denisovich

Yuri felt his legs give out beneath him. He dropped down onto his chair, one hand digging at the cushion of the head rest, the other clutching the correspondence.

“My King…” He heard the shuffling of Yakov’s boots, approaching him. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine… I’m… fine.” Yuri’s eyes skittered around his chamber, searching for nothing. Slowly, he took in the meaning behind the notice and his heart started pounding so loudly that he could hear its beat in his ears.

It was a declaration of war, open and rude. King Peter Denisovich wanted to take revenge for the offence against him and that had made Yuri’s blood freeze in his veins.

It was a trap and there was no way out of it.

“We need to reply promptly, or the Denisovitches will-”

“No…” Yuri gasped. He looked up at Yakov, eyes pleading, asking for help. “We cannot afford a war.”

Yakov didn’t reply, kept gaping at Yuri’s face. His forehead was glinting with beads of sweat, a dull tremble evident in his voice. This man was his mentor, considered one of the most solid pillars of the Plisetsky kingdom for two generations. He’d fought alongside his grandfather, shoulder to shoulder, and won many battles for him. Seeing him shattered like this, broke every resolve in Yuri.
“Send them my acceptance,” he muttered, voice lower than a whisper.

“Yuri?” Yakov was so surprised that he forgot to address his rank.

“Yes. Ask them to proceed with the alliance agreement.” Yuri’s words were blunt, cold, not having a trace of emotion. It was taking a lot to hold the inner tremors from cracking his voice. He wanted it to be over.

“Your Majesty,” Yakov seemed to recover from his turmoil. He walked up to Yuri, standing next to his chair. “King Peter might possess the greatest prowess. But there was a reason we - me and King Plisetsky - were against this proposal.”

Yuri snapped his head up to look at the man. “They have declared a fucking war,” he snapped. “We have no other options left.”

“Yes, we have.”

Yuri’s eyebrows creased. Yakov’s words weren’t making any sense to him.

“We can take the traditional path to courting,” Words started coming from Yakov’s mouth in a ceaseless flow as he paced the length of the chamber. His eyes fixed somewhere outside the window, shining with a glint of hope. “If we declare a public courting event for you, King Peter won’t be able to disrupt it. He can’t take the risk of upsetting other willing Alphas.” He turned around, facing the stunned Omega. “We need to host a mating challenge.”

**A mating challenge**, a traditional way of courting an Omega. The concept was familiar to Yuri. He had heard sagas of high ranking Omegas who had declared this challenge to find a powerful mate. It was a matter of prestige, a mighty show of an Alpha’s prowess when they fought against each other to win the challenge. A powerful Omega, like Yuri, definitely had a better chance of finding his match by this method.

The mating challenge was a valid diplomatic move to lessen the threat from Peter and engage the support of the alphas from other kingdoms. The outcome might not be what Yuri wanted but it was a better option than simply conceding to Peter’s demands.

Yakov was still looking at Yuri, his expression vulnerable, stretched somewhere between expectant and concerned.

Yuri’s throat was tight with a forming lump. If it wasn’t going to be Otabek, he didn’t care who it would be.

He couldn’t help but nod his affirmation.

He was ready to sacrifice his love.
Chapter 12

Yuri shuddered as the chill breeze of morning brushed past him, making his skin break out into goosebumps. He was sitting in one of the spacious galleries situated at the center of the amphitheater from where had a good view of the central arena.

It’d been just one week and Yakov had managed to invite every powerful Alpha from all corners of the world. He wanted to exhibit the true worth of his King, so that no supposed power crazed Alpha, like Peter, would dare to intimidate them with hollow threats of war. Yuri was a Level Ten male Omega, rare and hence highly prized. The Plisetskys were stunned by the sheer number of Alphas who had turned up to attend the mating challenge. The response was astonishing.

Yuri watched the flowing flags of guests, looking radiant with umteen colors and symbols that represented their kingdoms. The Alphas were competent, the mighty high rankers, winners of several ranking challenges and possessors of boundless land and wealth. Yuri’s heart sunk in his stomach as he took in the packed tiers of seats surrounding the field.

They had all turned up to witness a show of his misery. Yuri couldn't do anything but sit on the cushioned chair, like a lifeless puppet, and watch as the Alphas fought, one after the other, a never ending chain of vicious encounters. Each game started with a common choice of weapons by the two participants and ended when one of them surrendered or got mortally injured.

With a nod Yuri motioned the commencement of the next challenge.

The two Alphas took a bow to the Omega, admiration and want evident in their lingering gazes. Yuri glared right back at them, eyebrows creased in an open display of disapproval. He wasn’t some object to devour or drool over. The Alphas scrambled to lower their eyes, never raising their heads to meet Yuri’s gaze again.

The blow of a trumpet started the brutal game of power.

A few moments in, one wild blow, and the ground was splattered with blood. Yuri screwed his eyes shut, turning away from the gruesome visuals, trying to suppress the bile in his throat. He hadn't signed up for this cruelty. A thought continued to gnaw his insides that it was all for him.

He rose from his seat, whipping around. He started marching through the deserted corridors.

“Your Majesty?” When Yakov tried to follow him, Yuri stopped him with a raise of his hand.

“I will be available in my chamber,” he declared without looking back, his stomach still churning with the memory of the gore. “Call me when we’re finished with this shit ,” he spat through gritted teeth.

No one said a word and escorted him back within the walls of his lonely chamber.

*****

The news of Otabek’s Fourth Level win came as drops of rain on the parched land.
Yuri felt a knot loosen inside his tight chest. He had known Otabek would go a long way. He was better than the self-proclaimed top rankers who had turned up for his challenge and had been telling boastful stories about their superiority.

Yuri wished Otabek was there with him.

He wished Otabek was there to offer him comfort, a soothing pat or a bone crushing hug, or to share loving memories of his grandfather. They would have talked for hours till Yuri poured his heart out to him, draining the ache of his unbearable grief as he took in Otabek’s earthy scent.

He wished Otabek was there to participate in the mating challenge, to show the world that how he already belonged to Otabek. He wished Otabek had already finished his tournament, or - he'd never left to attend it.

Yuri cursed, chastising himself for the selfish thought. Otabek didn't have to suffer along with him. His friend deserved better. Much better.

He wished he wasn't the King of a prominent kingdom or a prestigious Level Ten ranker. He wished he was a commoner who only had to worry about two meals a day and not the nation’s future.

He wished he could abandon his responsibilities and flee, follow his heart.

But he knew he could only wish.

*****

Four days into the challenges and Yuri preferred to lock himself away in his chamber. The challenges continued without his presence, pitying the mourning Omega while they continued slaughtering each other as if they were pieces of meat. Every passing day ended with the announcement of a new champion, a potential new mate who would be challenged the very next day and made to lick the dirt.

Until the fifth day.

On the fifth day, King Peter Denisovich entered the challenges.

The Alpha fought like a demon, butchering his opponent without mercy. He’d been offended by the Plisetsky’s decision to instate the traditional mating challenge and was adamant to prove his point.

Yuri didn’t care. He stopped visiting the arena and avoided contact with the visiting Alphas. He went into his shell in his dull, depressing but familiar surroundings where he felt safe for a while.

His health started deteriorating as he lost his desire for food. Having already lost a few pounds, he was getting weaker with each passing day. He felt the dismal aura surrounding him as he gave up on all his routines, crawling out of his bed only to push a few spoons of rice into his stomach. He occasionally vomited even that with a bile that rose in his throat.

“You’ll fall ill if you continue doing this, my King.” Yakov was shaking when he paced the length of his room.
“I-” Yuri winced as a healer stuffed sour medicine down his throat. He huffed out a muffled laugh in between a series of coughs, eyes glassy with tears. He wiped them away and went for a lighter tone to calm the agitated man. “I won’t. I Promise,” his voice was low, coming out only with serious effort.

Yakov literally dragged Yuri out of the stale air of his chamber and made him walk around the palace garden. The man never forced him to attend the challenges though and Yuri was thankful for that.

“I heard your majesty isn’t keeping well.”

Yuri twirled around when the sudden remark interrupted his evening walk.

It was a tall man with robust figure and rich clothes. His pale eyes tripped over Yuri, scanning him from head to toe.

Yuri felt a shiver creep up his spine as the man - definitely an Alpha - stared at him. An old scar, that ran up his cheek, barely missing his eye, added more to his eerie persona. The wounds on his forearm were fresh, still covered in bandages.

He was one of the Alpha challengers, Yuri realized and his initial nervousness changed into irritation. No one was allowed outside the guest quarters arranged for the visitors. Certainly not in the King’s private garden.

“Peter Denisovich,” the Alpha bowed, introducing himself.

Yuri’s felt a vein throbbing in his forehead at the mention of that name, fingers curled into tight fists.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed, clenching his jaw, not bothering to hide his temper.

“I was concerned about your health.” Peter took a step forward, but paused at Yuri’s death glare. “I have heard many stories about you,” he continued, eyes lowering to Yuri’s lips. “I must say… they don’t do justice to your ethereal beauty.”

A growl escaped Yuri’s throat, making the Alpha jerk his eyes up. Peter might have been a Level Ten Alpha, but being a Level Ten Omega, Yuri was his equal, or more.

“What do you want?”

“You,” Peter answered him like a challenge, staring right into Yuri’s burning glare. “After all the offenses you have thrown at me, I have never wanted someone so much as I desire you.”

Yuri stiffened. His blood boiled in his veins. But he controlled his instincts, refraining from kicking the Alpha in his gut. He knew Peter was probably waiting for him to make such a mistake, provoking him.

“You're living in a false bubble of hope, Your Majesty,” Yuri replied, voice sharp and unwavering. “As per my knowledge the challenges aren't yet finished. You are not the winner and… certainly not my mate.”

Peter laughed, throwing his head back, eyes crinkled in amusement as he shook his head. “It's just a matter of days and then… you'll be mine.”

The anger was bursting inside him, ready to erupt at any moment but Yuri restrained it, sucking in
“Let me tell you one thing,” Yuri stated in a cold tone, corner of his lips twitching in a evil smirk. “It doesn't matter what the outcome of the challenge is… I will not surrender to you.” Yuri stepped forward, daring him to understand his next words, “... ever.”

The smile on Peter’s face vanished at that. He stared at Yuri for a long moment, evaluating the authenticity of his warning. His face twisted with a sudden wave of emotion, surprise, uncertainty, anger, when he finally realized that Yuri wasn't bluffing.

Without a word, he turned around and marched out of the garden.

*****

The next day, Peter almost killed two Alphas in the challenges. They wailed at his feet, drenched in their own blood and begged for his mercy. He didn't take pity on them.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

You may have noticed my new Username. I’m PencilTrash now ^-^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one could end Peter's bloodthirsty spree.

He was so evil that the other Alphas stopped challenging him. There was still two days of the mating event left to conclude, but slowly everyone started withdrawing their names, fearing for their lives.

“I, uh…” Yakov’s voice trembled as he stillled beside Yuri’s bed, head hanging low, shoulders slumped. “I'm sorry, my King.”

When he raised his head, Yuri didn't miss the dark circles around Yakov’s eyes, prominent lines and wrinkles. The man looked ten years older than he had the week before, tired and defeated. Yuri knew the man was suffering along with him. All the efforts and strategies made to keep Yuri safe, away from the dirty game of politics, were in vain.

Peter Denisovich was winning.

“Please don't apologize,” Yuri was laying on his bed, frail from the stress and his delicate appetite. He lifted his hand, gesturing the man to step forward. Yakov covered his shaking hand in his steady grip. “It's not your fault,” Yuri’s voice came hoarse, rough from lack of use. “You have played every card in your hand. And I'm grateful for that.”

“That’s not it. This isn't right.” Yakov muttered, kept talking to himself. “I won't let it happen. I promised King Plisetsky to protect you. I can't-”

Yuri gave his hand a gentle squeeze, forcing a smile from his chapped lips. He watched as a traitorous tear escaped Yakov’s eye and rolled down his pale cheek.

It twisted his heart seeing someone so strong, collapse like this.

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The next day shattered every last ounce of hope. King Peter defeated one of the last challengers and everyone was waiting for the formality of declaring him the winner.

It was midday and Yuri hadn't heard from Yakov. He hadn't even seen him since their brief conversation the previous morning. He was informed that the advisor had had to leave the Plisetsky territory while he was resting. But it was very uncharacteristic of Yakov to have left Yuri behind, to be inattentive when he was in such a feeble condition. Yuri knew it must have been something extremely important that had made him go. But Yakov’s absence didn't help the rising
feeling of panic in his chest.

Yuri let out a heavy sigh. He watched his reflection in the mirror as Daniel prepared him for the upcoming feast. His reflection felt foreign. For a moment, he didn’t recognize the weak, pale boy in front of him.

He had seen it in Yakov’s eyes, a grave concern regarding Yuri’s health, but he didn't know it had become this dire. He rubbed his fingertips over the hollow of his cheeks which had become so raw that a simple touch made them look blotchy. Ignoring the burn, he slumped in a chair and allowed Daniel to work his fingers through the long strands of his hair and tie it into comfortable braids. Even the familiar weight of hair felt unbearable when his head was hammering from inside.

With no one daring to challenge Peter, the end of the competition was nigh.

Yuri silently observed as his room was filled with embroidered tunics, robes and exorbitant jewellery. His page dressed him in rich attire, enhancing his elegant features to match his title as the most desirable. His carriage was ready at the palace gates with his favorite horses in harness.

It was time. Being an Omega, Yuri was the one who would have to travel to his Alpha’s kingdom.

He was turning eighteen in a week. It was a major milestone in an Omega’s life. For the first time, Yuri would be celebrating it in a foreign country, surrounded by a crowd of unfamiliar faces and where he’d be desperate for the warmth and safety of home.

A week after his birthday, his Alpha was supposed to arrange their mating ceremony. Yuri shuddered at the thought.

Two weeks. That was all he’d got to coax his mind into accepting his destiny. And then-

Yuri sucked in a deep breath, freezing at the unsettling notion. He knew he wouldn’t be completely alone. He was allowed an entourage of servants from the Plisetsky kingdom to accompany him. But soon, his mate, his Alpha, would be responsible for him. An Alpha, and someone he barely knew.

Someone like Peter Denisovich.

*It will be alright… it will be alright*, Yuri chanted through his ragged breath, eyes fixed on the vast sky stretching out towards infinity. He prayed Peter would lose. He prayed that fate would allow him a decent chance to live through this twisted situation. He prayed hard.

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Viktor Nikiforov…

Yuri had visited the Nikiforov kingdom with his grandfather when he was eight years old, but he only had a blurred memory of Viktor. Yuri had never met a born Level Ten Alpha before and being a curious and competitive child, he'd wanted to find out what all the fuss was about.

Yuri had thrown an open challenge to the young Alpha for a riding contest in his kingdom, in his palace. That had turned into the biggest mistake of his life. In an attempt to surpass Viktor, he'd fallen from his horse.
“It's because my foolish horse betrayed me,” Yuri had boasted when Viktor had carried him to the medical facility on his horse. “Otherwise I'd have won the contest.”

"Of course you would have,” Viktor had beamed at him. At least he'd shown him the courtesy of looking concerned, but his perfect heart shaped grin had made Yuri want to punch him in the face.

Throughout his stay, Yuri had roamed around with a broken arm and a sling around his neck. He'd been banned from taking part in any further activities for the entire month.

Yuri didn't bother to visit the Nikiforov kingdom after that. I'd been a decade since his visit but his grandfather had a soft spot for the Nikiforov family and kept Yuri updated on the Alpha’s progress.

Yuri’s stern opinion of Viktor had changed when the Plisetsky Kingdom had gotten an opportunity to host the Ranking tournament.

Viktor had been one of the top contenders that year. As the crowned Prince, Yuri had had to attend the final challenge and he couldn't deny the fact that he'd never witnessed someone fight with such agility and strength. As Viktor thrashed his opponent, Yuri realized why he was renowned as the Alpha of Alphas, the apex champion. He was born with the highest rank and had become the unbeaten winner of the tournament, once again.

And here he was, entering Yuri’s mating challenge on the cusp of dawn as if it was one of those tournaments where he had flaunted his power and not a mating challenge where he'd be responsible for Yuri’s damn life.

Viktor didn't seek out Yuri to pay his respects as the other Alphas did. The other Alphas hadn't taken their eyes off the orphaned Omega whenever he'd stepped foot inside the arena. A few like Peter had even tried to cross their boundaries, but certainly Viktor didn't look interested. Yuri couldn’t understand why he was entering the challenge when he'd already declined their courting invite. If it was a part of Yakov’s strategy to protect Yuri’s dignity or his sheer luck, Yuri didn't care enough to give it a second thought.

He sat down on his plush chair, drained by a burning fever. His eyes heavy with unfinished sleep, but he tried to listen to his guards as they provided him the regular updates from the arena.

The encounter between Viktor and Peter continued till the sun rose high in the sky.

Yuri couldn't will himself to lift his weak body and march to the arena. Not even to witness Peter's body lying in the wet sand of the field, broken to its core, drenched in his own blood, or to see the burning shame on his arrogant face.

As Viktor struck the last blow to Peter's pride, the unrestrained cheers of the local crowd reached Yuri’s private chamber.

He asked Daniel to open his window as the room started to shadow from the gathering clouds. A cold breeze carried the scent of rain.

Yuri loved rain. Actually, Otabek loved rain.

It was a beautiful sight when his otherwise poised friend stuck his head out, leaning over the hard marble of the balcony and curved his lips into a smile as the droplets danced over his face. Yuri loved the way Otabek became flustered whenever he had caught him off guard and cherished seeing his ink dark locks stuck to his forehead, the shining beads of rain slipping from his thick eyebrows, following the path of his chiseled jawline. It was a mesmerizing sight, sensual yet
innocent.

“King Peter is a devil,” Yuri was pulled back to reality by Daniel’s sudden comment. The man continued to struggle to light the lamps against the force of the wind. “I'm glad that King Viktor considered participating.” He looked at Yuri, wary that he might have crossed a line.

Yuri didn't utter a word, but nodded. With a sigh, he clutched his woollen shawl tight around his shoulders, curling his body as he sought warmth in it. He flinched as a loud clap of thunder broke through the noise of the storm.

It started pouring.

Yuri tried to find comfort in the memories of his past, in the heavy shower of rain, in the dripping trees, but a feeling of uncertainty enveloped him as thick clouds shrouded his surroundings in gloomy darkness. As he stilled in his chair, Yuri didn't realize the time, lost and cold, his senses numb.

There was a commotion outside his chambers. Before he could question it, a guard came knocking on the door.

“Your Majesty.” He was panting when he bowed to Yuri.

This was it, Yuri realized. A summons for him to present himself in all his fancy clothes and attend the feast to celebrate his Alpha’s victory. He hadn’t even bothered to confirm who the winner was. It didn't matter.

“Inform Sir Yakov that I'll join him shortly,” he ordered as Daniel hurried to tie a bracelet around his wrist. Yuri squinted at the guard who was still squirming on the spot. “What is it?” he demanded.

“My King, the tournament isn't over yet.”

Yuri frowned. He couldn't believe there was still someone who had guts to challenge the great Viktor Nikiforov. They must be out of their minds, Yuri thought, or have a death wish.

“It's Sir Altin.”

Otabek...

Yuri froze at the words. He struggled to breathe as a wave of panic passed through him.

“What?!”

“Sir Altin has challenged King Viktor for the ultimate challenge.”

Yuri took a moment, breathing hard. He gripped at the corner of his desk, his legs giving out under him. He tried to wrap his mind around the fact that Otabek had indeed returned home.

A month of rigorous challenges, brutal encounters, certainly a few broken bones, a hard two days ride back home, and Otabek was there.

He didn't care if it was a thoughtful gesture to save a troubled friend from an unwanted relationship. What mattered to Yuri was Otabek had returned… for him.

Even though Otabek knew he didn't stand a chance of defeating someone like Viktor in his current state. He was still willing to stand against the apex Alpha, and claim his right to participate in the
The ultimate challenge. Yuri’s heart sank to his stomach.

A low ranker didn't have the liberty to confront a level Ten Alpha. The only way was through an ultimate challenge. A challenge where a loser’s valued possessions were at stake. History had witnessed many such incidents and the winners had claimed extensive, innovative rewards such as the loser’s crown, his land, his gold. People had lost their rank, their freedom, even their lives.

“No,” Yuri gasped. “He shouldn’t-” he choked on his words. “It's… it's not right.”

He snatched his hand from Daniel’s grip, making the bracelet break, its studs clattering to the floor. Immediately, he rushed out of his chamber. His shawl, barely clinging to his shoulder, flying in the wild wind. It brushed against one of the uncovered lamps hung along the passageway and caught fire.

“Your Majesty… Wait!”

Yuri didn't stop. He ran like his life depended on it, the burning shawl trailing behind him, inches from his tender skin. He didn't even realize when someone snatched it away from him.

He ran like a mad man, through the pouring rain. His fine clothes stuck to his skin, making his movements difficult. He stumbled over his trembling feet, scraping his knees against the hard ground, never bothering that his feet were bare. He was drenched and covered in mud.

The excited shouts from the crowd grew deafening. He knew he'd entered the arena, entered the challenge ground. He didn't stop at the panicked calls of the Plisetsky guards. He needed to find Otabek. He needed to stop him.

First, his eyes caught sight of long strands of silver hair, shining against the dark backdrop, matching the glint from a silver blade.

Viktor…

Yuri’s eyes skittered away from the tall man, covered in mud… blood, who moved like ghost on the field of combat. At his feet, there was a shorter figure, slumped on the ground, on his knees, straining to catch a hold of his fallen sword. The Plisetsky symbol of a roaring tiger evident on his uniform.

Yuri felt his heart was going to explode at the first sight of his friend in a month. His hand flexed, trying to reach out but before he could move, a strong grip held his arms.

“You?” It was Yakov’s voice but Yuri could see nothing but Otabek struggling to keep his body upright, looking drained and lost, covered in blood.

“He doesn’t have to do this,” Yuri fought to get free.

Yakov didn't let go. “You're not supposed to be here. Jesus Christ, what have you done to yourself.”

“Stop this fucking… Look at him-” Yuri froze as Otabek coughed, spitting out blood, clutching at his stomach, head hung low as he waited for the pain to subside.

Yuri couldn't take it. He couldn't watch Otabek suffer. Not for him.
“Beka!” he cried, gathering every ounce of strength left in his body.

Otabek snapped his head up. He'd heard his plea, over the pouring rain, and equally thundering crowd, Otabek had heard him.

Their eyes locked. Yuri watched as Otabek’s face stiffened in shock for a brief moment before it melted into something soft. His lips curved into a light smile. Otabek was smiling.

The next moment, a shield struck the back of his skull. Otabek toppled forward with the impact, falling against the ground with a muffled thud, head first.

“Beka!” Yuri cried again, twisting against the hold around him, eyes fixed on Otabek’s body that was lying on the ground, still and cold.

He heard a trumpet blow, announcing the end of the challenge, before his vision whited out.

And then -

Nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Hellooo!
The last scene of this chapter is the one I wrote first for this story and then built up the entire outline around it.
I'd like to highlight that the romantic relationships are still Otayuri and Vikuuri.
I’m floored by your response on my last chapter. A huge thank you to everyone who has Kudo’d and commented on this story. It’s really great motivation <3
I made art for Chapter 3...
Yuri woke up to the sound of birds chirping.

Through the slits of his heavy eyelids, piercing light cut through his vision. He groaned, which came out as an animalistic gurgle as if the veins in his throat were swollen. Everything was bright and white and foggy and he wanted nothing but to squeeze his eyes closed again.

Otabek...

He snapped his eyes open, taking in the interior of the room, a room decorated with vivid shades of red that was never to Yuri’s taste. A room which was certainly not his chamber. Lightning fast, the memories reached his dizzy brain.

He wasn’t home. This wasn’t home. His heart started thundering in his chest.

He shot up from the bed, losing his balance as the room swirled around him. When he searched the place for some kind of support, his hand dashed against a vase. It shattered into pieces on the marble floor, into a mess of crushed daisies and broken glass. Yuri shook his head, tried to get his vision to clear. He was weak, but there wasn’t time. He needed to search for something. A corner to escape into. A weapon to protect himself. Anything.

“Your Highness, you're awake,” Someone shouted at his side, shocked. Before Yuri could catch sight of his face, the man rushed out, calling someone’s name.

Yuri’s eyes skittered over the opulent surroundings. The carved hardwood furniture, landscape paintings adorning the walls, thick curtains. All of it was alien to him. His head started ringing, eyes burned with dried tears. His primal instincts were to scream, to find a place of safety. Run.

Fight.

The door flung open with a thud and Yuri leapt for the knife that was peeking out from the fruit basket on the side table. With a blade in his hand, held closed to his chest, it took him a few moments to recognize the approaching figure.

Alpha Viktor Nikiforov…

Yuri remembered that face. Beautiful like a sculpture carved on an ancient shrine, and covered in spots of blood… Otabek’s blood.

Yuri felt his veins explode in this brain. Flashes of Otabek, collapsing on the ground like a lifeless puppet, rushed to the front of his mind. It’d been the fatal strike of Viktor’s shield that had done for Otabek. The culprit was standing right in front him and Yuri lost his mind. He saw red.

“I’m going to kill you!” He lunged at Viktor, knife held out, ready to strike. “What did you do to him?” he screamed, blindly aiming for the Alpha’s chest.

Just an inch from its target and Viktor stopped the knife in time, his bare hand wrapped around the serrated blade, cutting through the tender flesh of his palm. A stream of blood rolled down his wrist, staining the silk material of his tunic sleeve to his elbow.

Yuri snatched his eyes from the wound, the smell of blood made his stomach turn. He didn’t care. He didn't fucking care.

Yuri glared into the crystal blue eyes, determined to cross all limits. The crease of Viktor’s eyebrows, a tight clench of his jaw, made it evident that he was in pain. If the Alpha truly wanted it, a simple swipe of his hand would have been enough to put Yuri back into a deep, dark slumber.
But he didn’t budge. Neither did he let go of the blade nor shove Yuri away.

“What did you do to him? Damn it tell me,” Yuri hissed in Viktor’s face, tried to push the knife a little more and punish the man who’d not only hurt Otabek but might have done more damage. Not only physical, but much more. “Did you take his land, his rank… _k-kill him_?” his voice trembled as he uttered those words.

Viktor gave him a moment to catch his breath.

“He’s alive,” Viktor’s voice was calm, firm, urging Yuri to come back to his senses, from blind fury and listen.

Yuri didn’t indulge in thoughts of how Viktor knew exactly _who_ Yuri was referring to. He looked serene, not his demon self who had beaten the Alphas half dead. He was leaning down, matching Yuri’s height, one hand hovering over his shoulder but not quite touching, the other hand still wrapped around a blade.

Yuri felt his shoulders slump, his grip loosened on the hilt as the dread horror of losing Otabek, forever, slowly cleared from his mind.

Viktor must have sensed the subtle changes in Yuri’s stance as he too relaxed against his hold, nodding.

“He’s here.”

The next moment, the knife slipped from Yuri’s grip and clattered to the floor. Yuri took shaking steps backwards, eyes tripping over Viktor’s face, desperate to catch the meaning behind his words.

Nothing was making sense. Why was Otabek here? Why was _he_ here in the first place? The last time he remembered anything, he was lying on the battleground focused on the sight of the fallen Otabek, an open sky above, screams from Yakov loud in his ear. It all felt like a dream.

He froze as his back hit a wall.

“Viktor?!”

A loud shriek broke into the silence. A man came rushing in.

“You are...You’re bleeding,” his voice cracked, looking on a verge of having a panic attack. He snatched the stole from around his arm, tearing the rich material in half without a second thought. “Viktor...” he whimpered, fingers quaking as he tried to tie a knot around Viktor’s injured palm.

“Yuuri… it's alright.”

Yuri’s hackles raised at the sudden mention of his name. But after a brief moment of shock, he realized, Viktor’s tender words were not for him but directed at the black haired man who was hyperventilating over the cut on Viktor’s hand. His omega. Lord Yuuri Katsuki.

Yuri slid down the wall, his legs giving out beneath him. If this was a dream then he wanted to wake up. Constant hammering in his head became unbearable. He banged it against the wall, screwing his eyes shut. He needed to see Otabek. Right now. He needed to make sure that he was alive.

“Otabek…” he cried, clutching his throbbing head in his both hands, sucking in heavy breaths as
the ache reached its peak.

That must have caught the couple's attention. The other Omega - Yuuri - Katsuki - rushed to help him. Yuri wanted to bat his hands, cringe away from him. But he was too weak to deny the soothing touch.

“Please...” Yuri packed his pride into a small bundle and begged. He looked at Katsuki, clasping the material of his lavender-blue kimono like a lifeline. “Take me to Otabek… please. ”

“Y-yes,” Katsuki hoisted his body up, helping him to stand on his staggering feet.

Yuri didn't miss the way he glanced at Viktor for confirmation. He didn't pay attention to their silent communication. All that mattered to him was that they were taking him to Otabek.

Otabek was alive. He was here.

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The walk through the long corridors of the palace was excruciatingly slow. Yuri struggled on his weak legs but still refused to take help.

At his side, Katsuki looked concerned, alert in case he passed out in the middle of the march. That irritated Yuri more. Viktor preferred following them and Yuri was thankful he didn't have to witness the Alpha’s face. Yuri wanted to maul it. His heart raced rapidly with every passing minute and he didn't think he'd be patient enough to wait any longer to see Otabek.

Luckily, Katsuki directed him to a private chamber. Yuri halted for a moment as an acrid stench of medicines burned his sensitive nostrils, making his stomach churn in protest. But, Yuri wasn't going to stop. Not when the earthy scent of Otabek had hit him like a tidal wave, over and above all the bitter smells around him.

He rushed forward. He didn't need anyone to lead the way. Not anymore. His legs automatically followed the pull of the overwhelming scent. Weariness, despair, hurt, Yuri couldn't decide if he was feeling Otabek or getting a taste of his own despondent state.

He halted at the room’s entrance. It was dimly lit but there wasn't a chance that he wouldn't recognize the dull silhouette of the man lying on the bed.

“Beka…” he gasped, barging forward next to the bed. He bent down. His shadow towered over Otabek, careful and protective, hiding him from all the prying eyes.

Yuri’s eyes tripped over the bandages all over his body, more than Yuri wanted to accept. He swallowed a thick lump in his throat at the sight of his friend, looking more broken and vulnerable than he ever remembered. He gripped Otabek’s shoulders, tugging it gently, making a desperate attempt to bring him back to consciousness.

“C’m on, open your eyes.” He slumped at the edge of the bed, leaning closer to Otabek. “Look at me. Just give me one sign that… that you're okay. Just one. Please, look at me.”

“The healer has given him some medicine.” Viktor’s voice pulled him from possible panic. “He'll be out for a few more hours.”
That didn't calm Yuri. If anything, Viktor’s voice, Viktor’s *everything* blasted the choked anger within him. Otabek was lying in front of him, cold as corpse, and he wanted to destroy the world. He wanted to scream.

He whipped around, striding straight to Viktor.

“Who do you think you are, huh?” He squared his shoulders, poking his index finger at Viktor’s chest. “Who gave you permission to bring us here as if we were some part of your fancy luggage?”

A prominent twitch of Viktor jaw indicated that the Alpha, as well, was on the threshold of impatience.

“What d’you expect?” Viktor spat, meeting Yuri’s eyes. “To abandon you amongst that whole bunch of Alphas who may not think twice before using you as leverage against me?”

Yuri growled at him.

“Right,” Viktor huffed. “You should probably have a word with Sir Yakov, who suggested this in the first place.”

“Yakov?”

“Yes, Yakov.” Viktor enunciated. “Go and ask him how he was worried about your safety and literally begged me to bring you home.”

Yuri froze at that. What had his life have become. One month. It had taken one month to turn his world upside down and now he was reliant on the mercy of some strange Alpha who was suddenly responsible for protecting his dignity. It broke him to the core.

But this wasn't only about him.


A brief flicker in Viktor’s eyes suggested something was certainly wrong.

“Look.” Viktor let out a frustrated sigh. Even took a step back. “It was his decision.” He pointed at Otabek. “He'd asked for the Ultimate Challenge. And... and.. ” he struggled for words. “He was determined to win you and certainly looked ready to kill me.”

“What did you ask of him?” Yuri asked again, stopping Viktor’s ramble, his voice still calm.

“You should ask him. Not me,” Viktor protested, trying to turn away from Yuri.

Yuri gripped his arm, halting his retreat. “I'm asking you.”

Viktor didn't look much pleased as he glared between Yuri’s hand and his face. He growled. His Alpha instincts crawling near the surface of his skin.

“Viktor, no.” Katsuki tried to calm him down with an assuring hand over his shoulder.

Yuri didn't let go. Not until he got his answers. He glared back at Viktor. Waiting.

“He lost his freedom.”

Yuri’s hand dropped to his side.
“He'd nothing to offer,” Viktor continued. “He doesn’t own land or property or a high rank… nothing. He betted his goddamn freedom.”

“He's not your fucking slave,” Yuri gritted through clenched teeth, his whole body shaking.

“I didn't ask for this!” Viktor yelled back, veins of his neck taut. “I didn't ask for him… for you. So stop behaving like you're the only victim of this.”

Without another word he turned around and barged out of the chamber, leaving the two Omegas, stunned and speechless.

He banged the door shut so hard it unhinged from its bolt.
Why?

Yuri was slumped in a chair beside Otabek’s bed, his brain numb. No matter how hard Yuri tried, he couldn't grasp the reasoning behind Otabek's reckless, foolish decision.

Why did he want to lose everything, as if he owed Yuri some debt and this was Otabek’s way to repay him. Did he really think it was okay to sacrifice his life so Yuri could get a better chance to live his. Did he want to return Yuri’s favor for allowing him to be his friend, letting him closer, making him an integral part of his life, the way Yuri never permitted anyone else to be.

He’d been a five year old reckless, angry child when he'd first met Otabek.

For a whole month the entire palace had suffered the wrath of Yuri’s fury. He'd been grieving over the sudden death of his parents. He'd searched for the reassuring embraces of his father, touch starved. His mother’s warmth was nowhere to be found. His grandfather had recited stories about stars and life after death and then cried his heart out in a gloomy corner of his own chamber, alone, so it wouldn't stir panic in Yuri.

Yuri had hated death, more than his naive mind could comprehend what hate meant. It was easy for the people who were gone in a blink of eye, forever, but it was tough for the people who were left behind to mourn. It was unfair. Life was unfair. No wonder Yuri’s grief had taken the form of unsettling anger.

It was Otabek’s scent that had captured his attention over the choking stench of misery that had spread in thick layers around him. It'd felt grounding, carrying an aroma of fresh cherries and first rain.

It'd felt soothing. Yuri never realized when he'd started liking it and when he'd become obsessed with it. Otabek was his pacifier. His shoulder to cry on, his escape route from Yakov’s challenging sessions, his unwavering support when Yuri had doubted his own abilities. Otabek was the reason for the smile that lingered around his lips once in a while. And Yuri had found himself getting lost in the warmth that spread into the pit of his stomach whenever Otabek was around.

It hadn't been the same with Otabek though, Yuri could feel it. Every time he'd tried to step forward, to take their friendship to something... more, Otabek had taken two steps backwards. Otabek loved Yuri, he knew that. Adored him as a friend, Yuri knew that as well. But Otabek seemed hesitant as if he'd wanted to prove something first to Yuri and to the world.

Otabek always carried the burden of his low rank. Ever present, heavy on his shoulders. Yuri’s affection felt like it was an obligation to him. Right from their training as children to the decision of studying abroad together. Otabek never seemed to understand that Yuri’s entire world revolved around him. Or if he did understand it, he conveniently kept ignoring it.

Otabek never crossed his limits, and no matter how hard Yuri tried, he never let Yuri cross his. Did his love, their supposed friendship came down to this? A liability. Did Otabek want to be rid of it by offering his dignity, crushing his self respect by becoming a slave as if it wouldn't matter to Yuri?

Why?

His eyes prickled with the forming mist of tears. He wanted to cry. He rested his hand on the bed,
his shaking fingers curling around Otabek’s. Otabek was still unconscious and Yuri didn't dare touch him any further than brushing his thumb in circles over his cold palm. A futile attempt to get some reaction. It didn't matter how desperate he was to wrap Otabek in a bone crushing hug and shake him vigorously till he poured some sense into him.

“He'll be alright.”

A voice cut into his thoughts. Yes, Katsuki was still there, Yuri barely realized. He was leaning against a wall, arms crossed over his chest, his brown eyes fixed on Yuri. His entire stance carried undertones of elegance, composure, his gaze unwavering but kind at the same time, warm. He was everything that an Omega should be. Everything that Yuri wasn't.

“Viktor would never take advantage of him.”

Yuri clenched his jaw, tightening his grip around Otabek’s hand. He didn't care about the norms of society. Viktor or not, Yuri wasn't going to let anyone harm Otabek anymore.

“Why did he fucking do it?” Yuri hissed. “It's clear that he hates me.” His eyes flitted to the broken door for a brief moment before locking with Katsuki’s again.

“No.” Katsuki hurried to correct him, steps uncertain as he walked closer to the bed. “Viktor doesn't hate you.”

“Really?” Yuri scoffed. “Then why?”

Wariness flicked into Katsuki’s gaze, clearly having second thoughts. He opened his mouth though.

“It was for King Plisetsky.”

Yuri snapped his head up, heart skipping a beat, eyes widened. He wasn't expecting his deceased grandfather’s name to be thrown at him so abruptly.

“What are you talking about, Omega?”

“King Plisetsky visited us last month.” Katsuki’s tone was calm as he halted in front of Yuri.

Yuri glared up at him, heart pounding in his chest as he remembered the events of the past month, when his grandfather was still alive. How it'd worried him that the King had had travel plans in his delicate condition.

‘I've my reasons,’ his grandfather had explained with a smile and refused to provide any further details. Yuri wished he'd insisted more determinedly so he'd have been prepared to face this day.

“He has been a father figure to Viktor,” Katsuki continued, features soft as he spoke about the elder Alpha with utter respect. “It was tough for Viktor to deny his courting invitation. But-”

Yuri watched him shift his weight from one leg to the other. His hands moved in a nervous twitch.

“Viktor gave him his word to look after the Plisetsky kingdom and… you.”

“Right,” Yuri let out an exasperated huff. “By winning me in a mating challenge.”

“No,” Katsuki gasped. “It wasn't only that. I've been… ” Words started tumbling out of his mouth in mess of low mutters and rambling. So quietly that Yuri had to strain to hear. “I've been researching mating rituals for the past month and talking with the elders. Believe me, it wasn't easy to convince Viktor to agree to this.”
“You?” A wave of shock mixed with frustration crept through Yuri’s brain. His free hand curled into fist. “You made your Alpha agree to take another omega. How could you?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?” Yuri barked, moving in his seat to face Katsuki square on. “Enlighten me.”

“Viktor isn’t going to mate with you.”

Yuri froze. The world around him stilled at those words. He gaped at Katsuki, hoping against all the odds that the man wasn't just playing with his emotions. That it wasn't some tactic to manipulate him.

“Viktor will be your guardian Alpha,” Katsuki said those words carefully, his eyes never leaving Yuri’s, insisting. “The way your grandfather was to you. Till you find your mate.”

Yuri was too stunned to utter a word. He kept blinking at Katsuki. But his shoulders slumped after a moment, his entire body went slack as if someone had just lifted a ton of weight off his chest.

It wasn't new to Yuri. His advanced training had taught him well how to twist the primeval sets of rigid norms to fit the situation. There wasn't any doubt that Katsuki must be one of those high ranking Omegas who were allowed such thorough training. Yuri should have found this solution himself, but he wasn't in any state to look for anything. He'd accepted whatever had come his way.

“H-how…” Yuri couldn't even frame his question. He didn't know what he wanted to ask.

Katsuki understood though. He looked more composed, the lines of uncertainty vanishing from his face.

“If both - Alpha and Omega - are reluctant then the mating bond can't be sealed.” Katsuki explained. “Especially if they're already attached to someone else.”

Suddenly, it all became clear as sunlight. It wasn’t a secret how close Viktor was to his Omega and there wasn't a chance that he’d choose another partner. But then, Katsuki didn’t seem to be referring to his own relationship with Viktor. His eyes flicked to Yuri’s hand that was still possessively wrapped around Otabek’s before he moved them to his face and nodded. A silent understanding.

And for the first time in what felt like ages, Yuri’s heart trembled with hope.

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Yuri watched as the twilight faded into darkness. The palace was soon lit in the pleasant yellow of the torches and a breeze from the open windows dulled the bitter smell of medicines. He was still perched in the chair beside Otabek’s bed, his muscles aching from being at an awkward angle for so long, eyelids drooping with the want of sleep.

He growled at the healer, who had been attending to Otabek's injuries and had asked Yuri to leave the room. There was no chance Yuri was ready to leave Otabek's side. Finally, the man took pity on him and offered him a cushion to rest his sore body. It felt nice. Yuri's brain was so hazy and tired that he didn't realize when he'd leaned on the edge of the bed, arms folded in a pillow under his head. Soon, he surrendered to the inevitable daze of slumber. He vaguely dreamed about fields
of sunflowers, heavy iron gates shackled in rusted metal chains and a pack of wolves chasing their prey.

A low whimper startled him awake.

“Otabek?” Yuri shot up from the chair so fast that it toppled behind him with a thud. He watched blinking, feeling disoriented as Otabek made an unconscious attempt to shift. “Healer!” Yuri shouted. “Damn it! Where the hell did you go?” His voice was hoarse from the lingering traces of sleep, unable to comprehend whom to call for help. He almost turned to barge outside. That was the moment when a hand clasped around his wrist, abruptly halting his movement.

“Yu-Yura...” Otabek’s fingers were shaking, but felt warm on his cold skin.

“I’m here. I’m right here.” Yuri scooted closer to Otabek, gripping his fingers in his both hands. He gave them a subtle tug, fearing that Otabek would pass out on him again. If Otabek was calling him Yuri without his title, he was certainly not in his full senses. That scared Yuri.

Otabek blinked his way back to consciousness, his skittering dark eyes softened as they settled on Yuri’s face. Suddenly, his thick brows scrunched with what looked vaguely like worry.

“Are you... you’re crying.” Otabek lifted his quivering body, on one elbow digging into the mattress for support. He raised his hand, trying and failing to reach out to Yuri’s wet cheeks.

Otabek might have been almost dead a day or two before, but here he was, worrying about Yuri because he’d been crying in his sleep. Something flipped in Yuri’s heart.

"Beka..." A sob wrenched from his throat. He couldn’t withhold it, not anymore. He barged forward, throwing his arms around Otabek, wrapping him in an urgent embrace. He buried his nose in the crook of Otabek's neck, breathing in his rich scent. He was quaking, so was Otabek.

“I thought... I thought I’d lost you too,” Yuri broke down into hiccuping tremors. His fingers dug into Otabek’s tunic, pulling him closer in a desperate attempt to feel him. He was alive. He was safe. He tried to reassure his agitated mind.

Otabek’s arms wrapped around him, his breath shuddering, exhaling against Yuri’s neck.

“Your- your grandfather...”

Yuri clung to him, screwing his eyes shut to hold back the floods of tears as painful memories resurfaced again. It didn’t work. Tears started flowing freely down his cheeks.

“I tried to stop him, Beka,” he sobbed out a wet, aching breath into the fabric of Otabek’s tunic. “I asked him not to travel but... but he was so excited on his return. He was happy, Beka.” His breath caught in his throat. “We... we were smiling and he was teasing me. He was playing with my hair the way he always loved to and then he was gone. He was gone and I could do nothing to save him. I watched him die.”

Otabek held him tight as his body quaked with uncontrollable shudders. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Yura.” He swayed, bringing their bodies together, fingers moving in soothing circles on Yuri’s back.

Yuri was a mess. He was wrecked as he cried his eyes out, only Otabek’s strong hold keeping him
sane. His tender mind couldn't withstand the tremors of his agony. Eventually, he passed out.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuri woke up to the warm sun streaming into the room and the feel of a cozy blanket surrounding him. He couldn't remember how he'd ended up on a bed in the medical facility while the ghost of Otabek’s touch, his citrus-earthly scent, still lingered around him. He rubbed his palm over his face, wiping away the lazy traces of sleep, eyes reluctant to open. His other hand blindly searched the mattress, seeking the familiar touch. There was nothing there.

He snapped his eyes open, mind flooding with terrible thoughts, dreading that the night before was nothing but an illusion. He relaxed as he caught sight of Otabek.

Yuri flopped back on his pillow, lips curving as he folded his arms behind his head and watched Otabek struggle with the straps of his surcoat. He enjoyed the view, eyes silently taking in the beautiful form of his favorite Alpha.

Otabek still had the neatly trimmed undercut, but his long locks had grown to fit into a man bun. He was looking broader, his skin tanned, muscles bulging after a month of hardship. He was scarred in places with battle wounds, solid evidence of what he'd gone through in the past few weeks. A purple patch on his cheek, the still fresh evidence of bruising. Otabek reached for his shoulder, fingers fiddling with the buttons of his uniform. He hissed in pain.

“Wait,” Yuri jumped to his feet, the blanket abandoned on the floor. “Let me help you.” He strode over to the small mirror where Otabek was getting dressed.

“You're awake.” Otabek jerked his head around, flinching back in hesitation when Yuri approached. “Your Highness… no… that's okay. I can-”

Yuri ignored Otabek’s protest. Your Highness, Yuri huffed to himself, seemed like Otabek was back to his usual self.

“Let me.” Yuri waited, his eyes boring into Otabek till he withdrew his hand and allowed Yuri to proceed.

Yuri grabbed the strings of the surcoat, tugging it harshly, more than necessary. He was angry. Frustrated at how easy it was for Otabek to switch from an intense companion into a complete stranger. He didn't say a word though, looping the strings in tight knots, focusing on the steady rhythm of Otabek’s heartbeat against his hand.

Otabek broke the silence. “Are you feeling okay?”

Yuri continued his work, hooking the buttons of the shoulder strap, only bothering to nod his affirmation in response. “Are you?”

“Yes,” Otabek muttered, turning his face away to allow Yuri proper access. The sweet fragrance from his fresh shower hit Yuri’s nose. Yuri flicked his eyes to the long lines of Otabek neck, his perfect strong jaw. It was intoxicating and Yuri wanted nothing more than to bury his nose against the clean skin and scent him again.

One month. He'd waited for a whole damn month to get a glimpse of Otabek’s grumpy face and now that it was right in front of him he wasn't able to get enough of it.
An awkward silence spread between them. Neither of them ready to address their vulnerable moment or mention the fact that they had ended up sharing the same bed. But then, Yuri’s eyes caught the gleaming metal around Otabek’s neck.

“What’s this?” Yuri pulled the golden chain, tugging it out from under his undershirt. He couldn’t remember any neck jewellery belonging to Otabek.

It was a locket, the tournament’s official dove symbol etched on its surface. Otabek Altin - his name carved into it, looking prominent and proud.

“You won.” Yuri gasped, eyes skittering between the shining gold and Otabek, watching the small smile tugging at his lips. Yuri clutched Otabek’s arms, taking a step back to watch his face, eyes wide. His voice cracked. “You-you won the tournament.”

Otabek confirmed it with a nod.

“Holy god,” Yuri exclaimed. “You... I… I’m so proud of you, Beka. Oh my God, you’re a Level Five now and I didn't even know. I’m such a fool. I was so engrossed in my own fucking life that I didn’t-”

“Hey, hey,” Otabek grabbed his hand, stopping him from going down the self loathing route. He gave it a gentle squeeze, urging Yuri to give him his attention. “It was you who helped me survive.”

Yuri blinked at him, swallowing a lump in his throat.

“Your words... your memories... they kept motivating me.” Otabek scanned his face, eyes glassy with forming tears. “You kept me grounded.”

Yuri’s chest felt so tight that he couldn't even breathe. “Shh... stop.” He moved his fingers to Otabek’s lips, halting the flow of his praises. “I don't want to cry again.”

Otabek huffed out an amused laugh, his breath tickled against Yuri’s raised fingers. He snatched his hand away but wrapped Otabek in a one-handed half hug.

“You deserve this. So fucking much,” His words muffled in Otabek’s shoulder. “I'm so happy for you. And-” Quickly, he moved back, eyes tripping over Beka’s face, filled with zeal and pride and traitorous tears. “We need to register you for the Senior Level. God, there's only six months left to practice. But I'm sure you can-”

“I'm not participating in the Senior Level.”

Otabek’s words felt like the splash of freezing cold water thrown in his face.

“What?!” Yuri yelled, stunned and confused, mortified, desperately hoping that what he’d heard was a mistake.

“I don't think I’m in a position to consider it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Yuri moved closer, hands gripping his shoulders, digging in painfully, but Yuri’s mind was broken. “We've been planning this for years. Your Senior Level tournament. It's your dream... Our dream. How-” He choked on his words, eyes fixed on Otabek’s, pleading. “You can't give up. Not after coming this far.”

Otabek snatched his gaze away, clearly unable to hold Yuri’s, mouth opening and closing like he
was struggling for his words. He let out a sigh, watching the dull carpet on the floor.

“Things have… changed.”

Yuri couldn't watch him like this, lost, defeated.

“Look at me.” Yuri cupped Otabek’s face in his palms, turning it to look at him. He was shaking. “Nothing’s changed, okay? I'll… I'll talk to Viktor-”

“Don't.” Otabek snapped and Yuri’s hands dropped to his side with the sheer force of the word. He took a staggering step back. Otabek was breathing hard, his tone had lost its tenderness and had almost turned cold.

Throughout their friendship, Otabek had rarely used this tone on him. Yuri could count the times on his fingertips. Of one hand. It was the tone Otabek used when he was at the very edge of his patience. It was the tone that indicated that Otabek wasn't going to change his mind no matter what. It had the distinct sound of - *Enough!*

“I owe him my service. It was an honor pact.”

“You're not his slave.” Yuri grated out.

Otabek let out an agitated cry. "*Yes, I am.*"

It shook Yuri to his core. Listening to it from a stranger’s mouth was one thing, but hearing it from Otabek felt wrong on so many levels. A final nail dug into his hopes. He was frozen to the spot.

Otabek must have seen something on Yuri’s face, because he stepped closer.

“It's alright,” he murmured, his voice soothing in Yuri’s ears. “It's nothing. Just-” He raised his palm, spreading it in front of Yuri. “Promise me you won't get involved in this mess and let me carry out my duties.”

Yuri eyed his hand for a long, hard moment and glared up at Otabek.

He let out a dry huff. “I'm sure it was your *duty* when you took my mating challenge and lost your freedom.”

“*Yura…* ” Otabek winced, taken aback, his dark eyes impossibly wide. Before he could speak further, Yuri stopped him with a raise of his hand.

“You're in this mess because of me,” Yuri hissed, enunciating every word. “So to hell with your fucking promises and to hell with your duties. I'll do as I wish.”

With that, Yuri whipped around, marching out without sparing a look back.

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Yuri stared at the pale image of his own reflection, mind bursting with frustrated thoughts about Otabek’s adamant decision. He barely registered Daniel’s hand fixing his golden silk robe that reflected a pleasant glow over his tired skin.

After coming back to his chamber, he'd submerged himself in the icy cold water of a bathing tub. He hoped the shocking temperature would sooth the lava burning inside him. It didn't help. He was
still fuming and wanted nothing but to grab ahold of Viktor. He didn't care if the Alpha was angry enough to slash his throat. He needed to talk to Viktor. Fix this.

“His Royal Highness Katsuki wishes to grace you with his presence.”

The request from a guard broke into his thoughts. He nodded his permission and continued watching as Daniel combed the golden strands of his hair.

He heard the rhythmic taps of leather boots entering his chamber, but he didn't twitch a muscle. He watched Katsuki’s reflection in the mirror as he walked to Yuri’s dressing chair and stood right behind him. He took the comb from Daniel’s hand and smiled his welcoming smile to Yuri’s reflection.

Yuri didn't budge.

“I heard the update about Sir Altin’s health from the healer.” Katsuki carded his fingers through Yuri’s hair, spreading it nicely on his back.

His touch felt gentler than the occasional tugs of Daniel’s broad hands, as if he’d had years and years of experience. Long silky strands of silver flashed before Yuri’s eyes and he wondered if Katsuki had mastered his skills on Viktor’s hair.

“He’s the best healer in the seven nations. I assure you Otabek is in good hands.”

Yuri didn't respond.

Katsuki creased his eyebrows and focussed on the job in hand. Yuri’s silence didn't seem to bother him a bit. He twirled and twisted the locks with swift movements of his fingers, lips curving in a fond smile.

“Viktor is a nice man.”

“You already said that,” Yuri snapped back.

Katsuki let out an amused laugh. "I'm glad you're listening."

Yuri rolled his eyes. It was so easy to bombard this man with his burning frustration knowing he would take it all with nothing but a smile on his face. That made it even harder. If there was anyone who'd help him to get out of this twisted situation, Yuri knew, it was him.

“I need to talk to Viktor,” Yuri said it finally, watching Katsuki with expectant eyes.

“Of course,” Katsuki assured, tying his half braids carefully with a feather shaped studded clip. “Viktor will be free for a meeting after his training routine.”

Yuri’s dull eyes twinkled with hope. But he watched as Katsuki’s fingers still lingered in the tail of his finished braid, eyes unfocused, conflicted by the duel between his thoughts.

Yuri frowned. “What's bothering you, Omega?”

Katsuki winced out of his trance. “Uh, it's nothing...”

“Say it,” Yuri fumed.

“I just... I have a favor to ask.”
Yuri tilted his head, watching Katsuki curiously. “From me?” He turned around, getting up from the dressing chair.

“Yes,” Katsuki agreed. “I know you must be upset with Viktor and probably hating him for his decision, but… but please give him a chance to explain.”

Yuri knew Katsuki must be worried about the altercation from that morning. It had been foolish actually and nothing but a spontaneous reaction to what Yuri had suffered through the past few weeks. His fear over Otabek’s safety had pushed him to the edge. It made him even angrier that Otabek was capable of pulling the worst out of him. Without even trying. He hated it.

“Viktor can be stubborn sometimes, y’know? A born Level Ten who's never tasted defeat in his life.”

Yuri flinched at the words. For a moment, he thought Katsuki was describing him and not Viktor. He’d never imagined that he could relate to Viktor at this level, or at any level for that matter.

“Can you give him that? A chance?” Katsuki asked, his eyes so bright and naive that Yuri didn't have the heart to refuse him. At least he owed him this much for saving him from the trap of a mating bond.

“Okay,” he accepted with a shrug and watched Katsuki let out a sigh in relief.

“O-Kay then,” Katsuki enthused. “Now get dressed and join me to watch the training.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” Yuri retorted.

Katsuki smiled at him. “I won't force you if you're not ready. But-” He pursed his lips, forehead wrinkling with lines of worry. “People are waiting to hear news of your well being. It's been three days and you've not made a public appearance and there are some speculations floating around about the Nikiforov-Plisetsky alliance. But I think Viktor can hold that front for a few more days. If you're not ready.”

Three days? It'd been three days? Yuri had lost track of time. No wonder speculations were going around, especially how it'd ended in Yuri passing out cold right in the middle of the tournament ground. The stands had been packed with the nobles from all over the world. Yuri wondered if there were some despicable rulers - like Peter Denisovich - who were hoping the alliance would fail.

“I'll do it,” Yuri blurted out before he changed his mind.

Katsuki gave him a gentle pat on his shoulder. The touch was warm and felt exceptionally calming. Yuri didn't understand how it was that Katsuki’s strong Omega vibes were soothing him, when he was still fuming from inside out.

“What's your rank?” Yuri asked. He could smell the richness of lavender and honey in his natural scent and his aura was bright yellow, like rays of sunlight. Definitely a high ranker.

“I'm a Level Nine now.”

Now?

Katsuki continued as if he'd read Yuri’s unspoken question.

“I was a born Level One. I struggled my entire life, got easily kicked out in my initial ranking
tournaments and then…” His eyes crinkled fondly at the edges, wide grin spread across his lips. “I met Viktor.”

Yuri blinked at him, listening to his memories as he dreamily talked about how his Alpha had helped him to fight back, gave him courage to face the world, accepted him for what he was and… fell in love in the process.

And Yuri couldn't help but find more reasons to relate to these complete strangers.

He felt connected.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I've outlined 5 more chapters. So total 21 chapters. Yay!
As Yuri stepped onto the practice ground, he felt the weight of a hundred or more sets of eyes accessing him. Decisively, he kept his gaze on Katsuki’s back, his body oddly stiff as he walked to the centre of the field. He tried to ignore the heavy murmurs of his name. Some sounded amused, many not so welcoming as they all judged him, from head to toe, for suddenly inflicting himself on their routine lives.

The Nikiforovs loved their Alpha. Viktor, the sole living undisputed Alpha, was their pride. Viktor was an unrestrained source of vigour and power and Katsuki balanced him. Grounded him. If they cherished Viktor, they treasured Katsuki. When Viktor was busy marking the Nikiforov’s presence all over the world, Katsuki single handedly kept their people in check, nurturing their needs like a true ruler. Katsuki was the thread who kept them connected to Viktor.

No wonder they hated Yuri for coming between their beloved couple. For being an unsolicited second Omega.

“C’mon Theodore,” Viktor boasted as he challenged one of his most competent knights during their wrestling bout. “I hope you aren’t going lenient on me.”

Theodore struggled to block Viktor’s next blow. “I wish, my King.” He surrendered as Viktor slipped behind him and trapped him in a brutal headlock. “But your skills are impeccable. No one has a chance withstanding them.”

They broke apart on a playful laugh and Viktor’s head automatically turned in Katsuki’s direction as if he’d sensed his presence in the air flowing around him. His expression melted into something soft that Yuri never imagined he was capable of. Conveniently, he missed acknowledging Yuri’s presence and continued with his aggressive training. He thrashed two more of his mighty knights, gaining encouraging applause and cheers from the gathered crowd of his skilled troops.

Yuri rolled his eyes, not trying to be subtle about it. Show off. He decided to ignore Viktor in return and moved his gaze to the third guard in the second row as if he’d always known he was standing there.

Otabek.

He clenched his jaw. Otabek was standing guard like a loyal servant amongst the other Plisetsky guards who’d accompanied Yuri as a part of the settlement. Seeing him like this flipped something inside Yuri’s gut. He wanted to break something with his bare hands. He stood there stockstill, boring his glare into Otabek’s stubborn figure. He could physically feel the tension in the set of Otabek’s shoulders and Yuri knew, he too was fighting to ignore Yuri’s presence.

“You guys have become way too predictable.” Viktor’s comment earned loud chuckles from his knights. Idiots. Viktor turned around. “Maybe I need a fresh challenge to test my skills.”

He walked towards the edge of the ground, scanning through the standby guards instead. A finger pressed to his chin in a perfect show of deep thinking.

“You…” He pointed to someone, eyes bright with a smug glint, and all heads turned in that
direction. “Step forward and join me on the field.”

Yuri’s heart skipped a beat when he saw it was Otabek who had moved on Viktor’s command.

No…

A firm grip on his shoulder distracted him. He snapped his eyes to his side only to find Katsuki nodding in mute assurance. Yuri froze on the spot but his heart started thundering in his chest with each step Otabek marched towards the center of the field… towards Viktor.

*This is only practice. This isn’t a real fight. There isn’t going to be bloodshed involved.* He tried to soothe his panicking mind as the recent memories of the exact same scene started to resurface. He didn't even notice when Katsuki guided him to settle on the nearby stone bleachers.

“I hope you're well rested, Sir Altin.” Viktor’s gaze was scrutinizing and could easily be mistaken as genuine concern.

*Leave him fucking alone, Viktor,* Yuri wanted to scream.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Otabek accepted with a bow.

Viktor’s cold smirk pulled a shudder from Yuri, his skin breaking out in goosebumps. This was it. Viktor was still in his wrestling attire. A silk blue loincloth was fastened around his narrow hips, reaching his knees. His pale chest was bare, gleaming with a sheen of sweat. He didn't even bother to wear his armor as he drew his sword and presented his shield.

“Shall we continue from where we left off?”

Otabek gave him a hard stare, uncertain, surely accessing the motive behind Viktor’s sugar coated words. But he nodded in affirmation, readying his sword. Who was he to deny the King’s wish.

It was Viktor who charged first.

“Don’t hesitate.” When Otabek blocked the attack with his shield, Viktor struck again, doubling the speed and force. “Because… I certainly won’t.”

Otabek pulled away at the last moment, skidding back a few steps before he regained his balance.

Viktor didn’t give him a chance. He spun around in full circle, landing a perfect kick right to Otabek’s chest.

Yuri tightened his fingers at the hard edge of the bleachers. He helplessly watched as Otabek fell flat on his back and let out a suppressed, pained grunt. He was hurt or the impact might have triggered his unhealed wounds.

“Oh… did I hurt you?” Viktor asked, adjusting his grip on his weapon. The asshole had a smug smile on his face.

Otabek took a moment and shook his head. He pulled himself to his feet, huffing out ragged breaths. His wrist was pressed against the right shoulder where Yuri remembered seeing a particularly nasty scar from a sword. Probably from Viktor’s.

They readied themselves for the next attack. This time, it was Otabek who moved first.

“Very good!” Viktor shouted, excited but alert. His feet did a quick dance to dodge Otabek’s advance. “I knew you were better than that,” he challenged.
Otabek glared at him, swiping his sword through the air, not giving Viktor any space to respond.

“I want to see the Alpha who thrashed my arse on the Plisetsky ground.”

Otabek’s several sparring moves forced Viktor to take a defensive stance. His shield vibrated as he blocked Otabek’s hard blows, one after another.

Otabek was moving with such vigour as if his brain had been numbed to registering any ache from his broken body. Yuri knew he was getting pushed to his limits. Viktor’s words must be cutting deeper than any physical injury he possessed.

It was dangerous for Otabek… for Viktor.

“Show me what you're made of, Alpha.”

Viktor kept provoking him.

“I want to see the Alpha who lost his mind when I challenged him for his beloved Ome-”

Viktor’s words were left incomplete as Otabek’s sword parried his shield and claimed the delicate skin of Viktor’s arm. His un-armoured arm.

Fuck.

Yuri heard several clanks of metal as many around him drew their swords.

Fortunately, Otabek snapped back to his senses, stopping dead on the spot. His eyes glued to the thin red line that had started spreading across Viktor’s pale skin.

Viktor looked down, brushing his fingers against the fresh wound. He raised his hand to eye level, staring at the red on the tips of his fingers.

He jerked his head up at Otabek. His glare was cold, verging on the edge of evil.

His blade moved lightning fast, tossing Otabek’s shield with one solid strike. Viktor’s next blow, broke Otabek’s sword in two halves. Otabek hardly got a chance to flinch, his unarmed hands hanging loose at his side.

And then, Viktor’s sword moved again.

“No...” Yuri gasped, bolting upright from his seat.

Viktor’s sword didn't touch Otabek though. Hanging from its sharp blade was a shining gold chain, skillfully unhooked from Otabek’s neck.

It was his Junior Level medal.

Viktor paused, studying the metal carefully. His healer took his cue and rushed forward. He started treating Viktor’s wound.

Yuri was trapped in a duel between his concern for Otabek and his decision not to attract undue attention. At least, he was close enough to interrupt, if things came to that.

“You won the Junior Level.”

Otabek was way too stunned to react to Viktor. It wasn't exactly a question. Just an amused
statement.

“You look young though.”

“It was…” Finally, Otabek found his words. “It was my first tournament.”

“Impressive,” Viktor hummed, tossing the medal back in Otabek’s direction with a light flick of his sword.

Otabek fumbled to catch it, still too surprised for his limbs to work smoothly.

“Join me at the registrar’s office tomorrow.” Viktor continued after reading the confusion written on Otabek’s face. “You can register for the senior level with me.”

Yuri’s world froze at those words.

Otabek opened his mouth to say something, but words never made their way out.

“... and join me for my training sessions. Your sword is way too light.” Viktor flicked his gaze to the broken blade on the ground, softening his rigid expression. “I'm sure a strong Alpha like you can easily carry a few pounds more. Theodore -” He called for his knight. “I think I owe Sir Altin a sword,” he tried for a lighter tone. “Guide him to my sword collection and let him select whatever he wishes.”

Yuri didn't miss the unimpressed glance Theodore threw at Otabek, but he didn't dare to say a word against his King’s command.

Otabek bowed his head, coming out of whatever trance he was in. “It's my honor, your majesty.”

“Do you have any further questions?”

Otabek squirmed on the spot, hesitating. “... What are my duties for the King?”

Viktor threw his hands up in frustration. Clearly, it wasn't a topic to his liking. “God, are we seriously doing this?”

Otabek didn't answer. He stood there, waiting.

“What duties were you following for the Plisetskys?” Viktor asked instead.

“I, uh,” Otabek’s gaze skittered over his surroundings and settled on Yuri. Their eyes locked for a very brief moment and Yuri’s heart fluttered at the contact. It was difficult to look away, especially after the way their last conversation had ended. He wanted to apologize, but before he could react, Otabek snatched his gaze away towards Viktor. “I served as the Prince’s Chief Guard.”

Viktor didn't reply immediately. For the first time that day, he turned around and followed the exact path of Otabek’s eyes, towards Yuri.

“I think I'm good if you can continue with that.” He faced Otabek. “From here on, I appoint you as Chief Guard to the Plisetskys in my kingdom.” He leaned in a little, placing a steady hand on Otabek’s shoulder, lowering his voice, but not enough for Yuri to ignore. “Handling that wild kitten is way beyond my capabilities. I could use some help.”

With that, he left the ground, making a beeline straight to Katsuki, face split in the brilliant smile which was reserved only for his mate.
Hello everyone! I was supposed to add two more scenes in this chapter but RL is a bit mess now. I’ve decided to switch my job and things are unpredictable for me. The good news is, I may find more time to write, but not right now. I hope you like this short update. Wish me luck!
Feel free to send me your questions and let me know what you think about this plot. I'll try to include them in my future chapters.
Yuri was pissed. At Viktor.

It felt like an eternity since Viktor had asked him to join him for a walk and Yuri was certain that they’d already trekked at least a mile if not more. Viktor hadn't uttered a single word. He’d kept looking over his shoulder at regular intervals, checking that Yuri hadn't vanished into thin air.

Yuri could have. It would have been easy to slip off behind Viktor’s back. The real purpose of this meeting had already been taken care of by the King without him even asking for it. Yuri wasn't exactly feeling motivated for any conversation after his attempt at stabbing Viktor and their not-so-decent spat. It was awkward.

Yuri was relieved when Viktor asked the guards to wait. Viktor kept marching on up a narrow path, shooting a careful “Watch your step” at Yuri.

A gasp escaped Yuri’s mouth when they reached the mesmerising sight of a wooden footbridge over a stream. The water was like sparkling tinsel, clear and fast flowing, springing over the limestone rocks on its way down into a deep pool. Chords of light speared down through the trees highlighting the crests of each small wave in gold. The aroma of the forest was thick in the air seeping through every pore of Yuri’s skin. He breathed in the clean air marvelling at the beauty of the place. The bridge ended near steps which led up to a beautiful ancient shrine.

“I visit this place often,” Viktor’s relaxed voice pulled Yuri’s attention back. The Alpha perched on the bottom step, not bothering about dirt getting on his rich clothes, watching the play of the stream over pebbles. “I feel peaceful here.”

Yuri couldn't disagree. He felt his own tension dissipate.

Viktor picked up a stone and skimmed it across the pool. As soon as it touched the surface of the water, ripples grew larger so did the small smile tugging at Viktor lips. “This is where I met my Yuuri .”

Yuri glanced at Viktor. He was calm and the rude demeanor Yuri had witnessed so far was gone. Yuri wasn't expecting any candid confessions, but wondered if this was the real Viktor. He couldn't be sure though, the topic of Katsuki always pulled a few of Viktor's heart strings. The dreamy glow on Viktor’s face was so… ridiculous.

There was a brief pause before Viktor turned to face him, his gaze suddenly serious. “He must have shared the details of our, uh-” his finger moved between them, uncertain. “… bond. ”

Yuri nodded. He pulled out his scarf and spread it on the hard stone. Whatever it was he’d be sitting on, he wasn't ready to ruin his favorite robe. He moved to take his place on the steps, settling at a comfortable distance beside Viktor.

“And… you are okay with this?”
“Yes. Sure,” Yuri ducked his head and shrugged, putting on a show of nonchalance. He started plucking at the ends of his tunic strings. Barking insults at Viktor’s face seemed effortless, a civil talk apparently wasn’t.

“Right,” Viktor huffed, visibly relieved at Yuri’s acceptance. “We need to complete the formalities with the elders before your birthday feast in two days.”

Shit. Yuri’s heart skipped a beat.

The eighteenth year of a Royal Omega’s existence was celebrated with huge festivities. Elders and nobles from the neighboring kingdoms honored the new era of the Omega’s life with blessings and exorbitant offerings. Sometimes, it lasted as long as three days and the host Alpha bore the responsibility of maintaining harmony amongst the invited guests.

It was considered an auspicious occasion for an Omega to proclaim a mate and seal the bond with their chosen one.

“You don't have to do this,” Yuri snapped, all his self control vanishing in a moment. He gritted his teeth. “I don't want to be a fucking burden.”

Viktor almost twisted his neck in his haste to look at Yuri. His eyes wide, he was seemingly offended. "I'm amazed," he taunted, far away from being amazed. "You haven't changed a bit in a decade, have you? Still too stubborn to accept genuine help."

"So are you,” Yuri retorted, his face pinched. “Still too controlling to not offer help.”

Yuri expected a burning reply, but Viktor broke into a loud chuckle, head thrown back, a full body laugh. It reminded Yuri of the young Alpha from all those years before.

They'd been young when they'd last met and Viktor had panicked looking at Yuri’s twisted bones from falling off his horse. He'd barged towards the healer carrying Yuri in his arms, sweating and shouting frantic commands.

Yuri had almost kneed him in the face.

Somehow, Viktor had blamed himself for coaxing the little Omega into a challenge and being the reason for his injury. On the first night, he'd passed out on the medical facility chair. On subsequent days, he'd visited Yuri at least four times, personally making sure that he'd been in good care. Yuri’s day had started with Viktor’s ridiculous beaming smile for almost month. It was cringingly affectionate.

Seeing Viktor after a whole decade, thrashing people left and right, had made Yuri certain that the soft hearted young Alpha was only an illusion.

Yuri didn't say a word. He kept scowling at him.

It was Viktor who returned from the high of his mirth. “I apologize.” He pursed his lips and sighed, taking control of his sudden outburst. “I know we didn’t get off to a good start,” he confessed, smiling to himself at the memory. “But Plisetskys have been family to me… always.”

Yuri’s frown flattened and he gaped at Viktor, searching for hints of lies in his reassuring eyes.

“You aren't a burden, Yuri. Never will be.”

Yuri snapped out of his uncertainty at the mention of his name. For whatever might be the reason,
Viktor had never addressed him by it. Until today.

“I’m your guardian Alpha,” Viktor’s gaze was fixed on Yuri as he spoke, calm but determined. “... and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

Yuri was so taken aback that he couldn't utter his usual “I don't want favours” or “fuck off” or something similar along those lines. He kept blinking at Viktor as if he’d grown horns on his head.

“We can also arrange for your Mating Ceremony if you have someone in mind.”

Yuri’s heart started thundering at the unexpected question. Viktor’s gaze was disturbingly curious, lips curved in a stupid smile. Yuri opened and closed his mouth, unable to decide what to reply.

Viktor saved him from the dilemma. “Or… Maybe we can wait till you make up your mind. Is that alright?”

Yuri had never agreed with someone so quickly. Rigorously nodding his head.

Viktor kept babbling about the weather and the feast arrangements and about how captivating Katsuki would look presenting their case in front of the elders.

For a change, Yuri actually listened to him.

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On his return to the palace, Yuri headed straight for the Armoury. He knew Otabek was getting a new sword there and he didn't want to miss the opportunity to steal some alone time with him. The conversation with Viktor had been surprisingly positive and now, it was time to sort out long due matters with Otabek.

The guards didn't stop him when he entered Viktor’s sword chamber. It was huge, loaded with a rare collection of blades. Yuri raised his hand and brushed fingers over one of the crossguards. He traced the embedded jewel and its leather-bound hilt, running his hand over the carved markings. Each weapon told stories of honor and courage and Yuri got lost in the glint of the edges as sunlight reflected off them.

“This one is made from a fine mix of seven metals.”

The thick voice wasn't from Otabek, Yuri realized. He peeked in that direction, still hidden, and found the knight - Theodore - standing in the middle of the chamber. He was a head taller than Otabek, his stance intimidating and towering over him. Something felt wrong. Anyone could have mistaken his sweet talk as genuine guidance, but his next words made his motive pretty clear.

“I bet you haven't seen such a magnificent piece before in your lifetime, let alone laid hands on it.”

The lines in Yuri’s brow deepened at the rude comment.

Otabek met Theodore’s dark eyes for a brief moment, before lowering his gaze to inspect the next sword. He ignored him. Instead, he moved to draw a katana from the display, testing its weight in his both hands.

“Oh, this one here,” Theodore continued his act, voice mocking. “It's a gift to King Viktor... from
Without a word, Otabek placed the sword back on the stand.

“What happened, Sir Altin?” Theodore pressed, venom evident in the way he addressed Otabek. “Is there nothing to your liking?”

“I, uh,” Otabek stepped back from the stand. “I think we should do this later.” He tried to turn away, but was halted by the strong hold on his shoulder.

“Are you busy?” Theodore didn't let go, making Otabek spin to face him. “All because you got appointed as a Chief of Guard on your first working day?” He glared at Otabek, eyes narrowing with hatred. He was jealous that Viktor had trusted him with such a huge responsibility, so quickly.

Otabek stared square back at him, hard. He gripped Theodore’s wrist and easily removed his hand. Theodore’s eyes widened, surprised at his strength. Otabek whipped around, looking done with the man, heading for the door instead.

“Do you think you hold special privileges over us?” Theodore’s lips curled in an evil smirk, clearly willing to push the other Alpha over the edge. Otabek paid him no mind. He continued walking. And that must have infuriated Theodore even more. He raised his voice, shouting insults at Otabek’s retreating back, looking for a low blow. “D’you think you can earn them by bedding the Plisetsky Prince?”

The room became enveloped in an eerie silence.

Yuri barely noticed Otabek going completely still, before his own vision turned red. A burning fury.

Yuri was already between the two Alphas without realizing he'd barged in half way across the chamber, body shaking with uncontrolled anger.

Theodore winced and shrank back at Yuri’s sudden appearance. “M-my Prince. I-I didn’t-” He was trembling like a dry leaf. Yuri wasn't sure what Theodore had witnessed on Yuri’s face, but the Alpha dropped to his knees, reaching out to hold onto his legs, begging. “Please forgive me, Your Highness. I won't- I won't-”

“Leave,” Yuri barked, snatching himself free with a harsh tug, stepping back.

Theodore jerked his head up, fear evident in his eyes.

“Don't show me your face… ever again,” Yuri commanded, digging his nails in the flesh of his palms to keep himself from barging for the Alpha’s throat. “Or I'll make sure you won't have a head on your arrogant shoulders.”

Theodore scrambled up onto his feet, not daring to face the infuriated Omega’s wrath. He muttered a series of quick apologies, before fleeing the room as fast as he could.

Yuri knew people weren't welcoming. He'd heard them gossip as he strolled along the corridors of the Nikiforov palace. But he never would have guessed how his three day absence was getting interpreted when he'd sulked behind the walls of the medical facility, not leaving Otabek’s side. He'd never bothered to hide his affection for Otabek. Back home, people never questioned their attachment. They'd seen them together for the span of their entire life.

But Yuri forgot, this wasn't home. Dependant on the mercy of two strangers, he'd have to suffer,
and so would Otabek.

“Otabek?” Yuri flinched back to his senses, taking careful steps across the room towards the Alpha.

Otabek had curled his hands into fists, knuckles white, tips of his ears burning red. He visibly winced at Yuri’s approach. Yuri wanted to kill Theodore for making Otabek so vulnerable.

Never in his life had he thought he'd struggle to get his words out in front of Otabek. “I… I'm sorry you had to face-”

“No,” Otabek stopped him, his voice low, cracking with inner tremors. “It's not your fault. It's nothing… really.”

Otabek still wasn't moving. His gaze kept slipping back to the floor, unable to hold Yuri’s. Seeing him like this, twisted something in Yuri’s chest.

“Beka…” Yuri stepped closer, hand raised to reach out.

“I need to report to my duties.” Yuri’s hand dropped at the sudden statement.

Clearly, Otabek wasn't ready for a conversation yet. Yuri wanted to assume it was due to the prying ears of the other guards. He hadn’t realized they weren't alone. He’d never had to worry about it before, but apparently, things were different now.

He swallowed the thick lump in his throat and allowed Otabek to go.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, I'm going through brain surgery and I'm writing this story to distract myself from my tough RL. Wish me luck and send me some love. I love you all <3

Yuri wasn't prepared when Katsuki dragged him out of his chamber before sunrise. They were traveling to the registrar office to confirm Yuri’s bond with Victor and it was also the day for the Senior Level registration. Viktor wanted to initiate their bonding formalities before the place got flooded with other Alphas, all high rankers. He wasn't ready to risk Yuri’s safety in a foreign place, especially when he was still not mated.

Yuri’s chest was tight with an uneasy ache. He didn't care about the Alpha crowd. Of course, he was nervous about the formalities. But what disturbed him more was the growing distance between him and Otabek.

Otabek was right there in front of his eyes. All the time. He was discussing the security arrangements of the feast for the next day or training with Viktor on the field or now, leading Yuri’s carriage on his horse along with other royal guards. Yuri could feel the disconnect in their usual conversation where Otabek still avoided talking about the incident. He'd grown quiet, more than usual. When he'd helped Yuri into the carriage, Yuri’d not let go of his hand for prolonged period, locking his eyes with Otabek’s in mute concern, plea. Otabek had calmed him with a gentle squeeze, and a light pat, swiftly freeing his hand from Yuri’s grip. Yuri had openly and shamelessly whined at the loss of the comforting contact.

“You look upset.”

Yuri was snapped out of his gloomy thoughts by Katsuki’s interruption.

“No I'm not,” he retorted, avoiding meeting his eyes. He would have preferred being alone rather than sharing a carriage with the older Omega and bear his concerned glances. It didn't help his current agony and added more to his boiling frustration.

Wasn’t it enough without Viktor riding alongside their carriage throughout the journey, having mute conversations with Katsuki. Their looks shared the fond affection of a newly mated couple who tended to forget the world around them. But, what irritated Yuri were the worried glances they both kept throwing his way, too frequently for Yuri’s liking.

He wasn't going to break, Yuri wanted to yell at them. He kept his lips sealed though, focussing on the black stallion and its rider who seemed more invested in the surrounding beauty than sparing a look for Yuri.

“Are you worried about the bonding formalities?” Katsuki wasn't ready to let go.

Yuri didn't respond. He glared at him.

“I know it will take a while, but trust me, I know what I'm doing.”
“I trust you, okay?” Yuri blurted out, just to get him off his back. He hated the way Katsuki’s lips spread in a pleased grin. “Just… just leave me in peace.”

He turned his head, straining his neck to look outside the carriage's window. Finally, he caught a glimpse of Otabek’s armor as he hauled his horse around to talk to Viktor.

“It’s about him, isn’t it?”

Yuri jerked back, moving away from the window. He wasn't sure if he was more annoyed with Katsuki for being so intrusive or surprised that he knew exactly what was bothering Yuri.

“I’m not going to talk about it with you… or with anyone else.”

“You didn't deny it though,” Katsuki teased.

“Back off, Omega,” Yuri folded his arms over his chest, eyes closed in a pretense of completing his unfinished sleep. He didn't miss the way Katsuki chuckled at him.

_Damn him._

He didn't open his eyes for the rest of his journey, dozing off to the dull lull of the rocking carriage.

******

“Shall we?”

Yuri eyed the offered hand before looping his arm in Katsuki’s without a further word. His body was sore from the prolonged journey, but his mind was refreshed from a good sleep. He thought he was ready to face the shit that was in store for him.

The sun had barely risen above the horizon, but the place was humming with the hustle of the gathered horde. The sharp scents around him made him think he’d suffocate. As they headed towards the elder’s office for their first round of bonding evaluation, the familiarity of the Omega’s touch helped to calm Yuri’s nerves.

Viktor wasn't allowed to attend this meeting. It was specifically arranged to discuss the Omega’s thoughts without the burden of his Alpha’s wishes.

As the two Omegas headed towards the meeting room, Viktor hugged Katsuki, nuzzling into the crook of his neck letting out shuddering breaths. Viktor was shivering in panic while Katsuki circled a soothing hand over his back clutching him with a tight grip around his hip. And, that was when Yuri realized that Viktor was equally nervous as he was. It wasn't only about Yuri’s bond anymore, if things didn't go as per Katsuki’s plan, they would both have to suffer along with him.

Reluctantly, they broke apart and parted after a deep, searing kiss. They parted and Viktor decided to utilize the time with his tournament registration.

Otabek accompanied him.

Yuri turned around, watching the retreating backs of the two Alphas. Their shoulders almost bumped as they walked together towards the registration counter.
Viktor was looking tall and confident, intimidating. The overwhelming persona of an apex champion. And Otabek…

It was the registration for the Senior Level, where many - like Viktor - were ready to tear him in half in the blink of an eye. No matter how optimistic Yuri wished to be, seeing Otabek on the mating ground, cold and barely breathing, had broken something inside him. He couldn't deny the fact that Otabek was a rookie. A solid combination of skills and agility, still raw and so very inexperienced.

“Viktor is a good mentor.”

When Yuri glanced down, he saw Katsuki’s fingers laced with his. He met the gaze from his brown eyes which looked warm amber reflecting the light of dawn.

“I'm not trying to be biased about my Alpha or anything.” Katsuki let out a soft huff, his cheeks dusted with a pink blush. “Viktor trained me for my tournaments.” He gave a gentle squeeze to Yuri’s fingers, flashing him a reassuring smile. “Otabek will do fine with his guidance.”

Yuri nodded, but he wasn't thoroughly convinced. No matter how good a mentor Viktor was, Otabek was still his competition. Katsuki had tremendous faith in Viktor’s capabilities though. And, Yuri wanted to believe him.

******

King Plisetsky had been searching for a suitable candidate for a year. He'd planned Yuri’s lavish mating ceremony on the eve of his eighteenth birthday. It'd have been simple decorum to traditionally transfer Yuri’s authority to his intended mate, from one Alpha to the other, through a small ritual. It would’ve been hardly a matter of a few months.

What King Plisetsky hadn't planned was the possibility of his sudden death and his last will to be stamped as partial.

The elders wanted Viktor either to accept Yuri as his mate or to surrender his claim.

Yuri watched as Katsuki had multiple rounds of heated parley with the elders. His hands were damp with sweat, eyes skittering between the speakers. If he wasn't so tense, he'd have agreed with Viktor's opinion. Katsuki was indeed captivating as he pressed his argument and surprised the entire panel of senior jurors with ancient clauses of bonds and mating alternatives.

Yuri let out a shuddering sigh of relief when the chief juror signed their treaty agreement and gave them a date to complete the formalities with Viktor.

Katsuki turned to look at him, requesting a few more minutes to wrap things up, his eyes pleading. But Yuri was done with this. He shot up from his chair, eager to escape the stale air of the room. He regretted his decision the moment he stepped outside. The place was overflowing and his ears buzzed with the commotion. He scanned the surrounding group of his guards, but couldn't find any trace of Otabek or Viktor.

“What a pleasure to see you again, Prince Plisetsky.”

Yuri stiffened on the spot. There was no way he could have forgotten that rough, hoarse tone. He
clenched his jaw, fighting hard not to explode right in the middle of the hallway.

Peter…

The Alpha’s pale eyes were fixed on Yuri, lips curled in a cunning smirk.

“...and where’s King Viktor by the way?” His eyes skittered away for a brief moment before returning to Yuri. His smile widened, stretching the ugly scar on his cheek. “It’s not good manners to leave your Omega unattended like this.” He took a step forward. Just a step, but it was enough to raise Yuri’s hackles. His fingers found the hilt of his dagger. One more move and he was ready to dig it through Peter’s heart. He hated him to his core.

“Oh…” Peter glanced at Yuri’s grip on the dagger, freezing, suddenly changing the flow of his conversation. “Well well... I'm not here to upset you, my Prince.” He raised his hands in mock gesture of surrender. “I'm only here to congratulate you on your new mate. I can't possibly-”

“Do we have a problem here?”

Before Peter got a chance to complete his sentence, Viktor was square in his face, swiftly moving in front of Yuri, an unwavering wall between them. He was at least a few inches taller than Peter. His sudden advance made him look broader than his lean body usually allowed.

“King Viktor,” Peter took a staggering step back. “I was just inquiring about you to your Omega.” His face split in a fake grin. “I heard there's a big feast in your kingdom tomorrow.” He glanced at Yuri over Viktor’s shoulder. “I'd personally like to convey my blessings.”

Viktor eyed him for a long moment. “That’s so noble of you, King Peter.” He matched Peter’s smile, demanding his full attention. “Doors of my kingdom are open to everyone as long as-” He paused, glaring at Peter, hard and piercing. “As long as they keep their eyes off of my Omegas.”

“Of course. No one would dare,” Peter agreed under the sugary mask of modesty. “It's great to see your new Omega has come all this way to support your Senior registration.”

“They are both here.” Somehow, Viktor was still able to retain his facade of politeness.

Yuri was openly growling at Peter. If it wasn’t for Viktor standing between them, Yuri would’ve clawed his eyes out.

“...seems like you're alone this time.” Viktor prompted.

“I'm certainly not lucky enough to be accompanied by my Omegas, but my dear cousin has come to support me.” Peter scanned the area, beaming when his eyes caught someone approaching. “There he is.”

It was a young man with brown eyes and dark messy hair. His smile was wide, a full set of teeth glinting in contrast to his tanned complexion. His overall persona was pleasant, no way near as creepy as Peter's vibes. But he was Peter’s blood after all. There was no way Yuri was ready to get tricked by his deceiving appearance. In fact, he hated him even more. He conveniently ignored him, feeling relieved when he noticed Otabek making his way towards him.

The tight knot in his chest loosened instantly. Otabek had entered the Senior Level challenge and Yuri wanted nothing but to snatch him away from everyone and bombard with his overflowing questions. But, before he could open his mouth, Peter’s cousin interrupted him.

“Otabek?!” he seemed delighted, with the enthusiasm of a five year old.
“Phichit?” Otabek responded with an equal eagerness. The next moment, they were in each other’s tight embrace like long lost companions. And, Yuri didn't like it.

He clenched his fingers into fists. This wasn't right. Nothing remotely related to that asshole Peter should dare touch Otabek not even his shadow, especially not some goddamn Phichit.

Yuri was going to fix it.
I can't thank you enough for your wonderful, amazing messages. Every single one of them made my day bright with hope. Love you<3

Patience wasn't Yuri’s best virtue. But he tried. Tried really hard.

He allowed Otabek and Phichit to finish their reunion greetings. Even bare the intimate, way too much for Yuri’s liking manhandling by the strange Alpha. He didn't bat an eye the entire time Alpha Phichit was touching Otabek. But no matter how hard Yuri denied it, something possessive and primal, had started trickling under his nerves.

It was always Otabek for Yuri. Always. And Yuri never shared.

The moment Phichit turned his back, Yuri literally dragged Otabek into a nearby vacated room and backed him up against the wall.

“Yura-” A surprised yelp escaped Otabek’s throat as Yuri pressed the cold tip of his nose onto Otabek’s pulse point.

Yuri was going out of his mind. Otabek was his . He breathed in thick gulps of Otabek’s minty, musky scent, trying, hoping to get grip over his haywire mind. This was insane. For a moment, he even panicked over Otabek’s reaction to this sudden possessiveness. He wasn't even thinking. To his relief, Otabek immediately went slack against his steel grip. He melted into Yuri’s hold as if he belonged there.

“Please let me-” Yuri whimpered in Otabek’s ear. “Just let me hold you, please .”

Otabek gripped him tighter, pulling him in. He carded his fingers through Yuri’s soft locks, holding him with such tenderness as if Yuri was the most fragile thing. They swayed on the spot, clutching at each other, for what definitely felt like no less than eternity.

It was of course Otabek who came to his senses first.

“What's wrong?” Yuri didn't miss the surprise in Otabek’s tone. He tried to press a calming hand on Yuri's chest. Maybe look in Yuri’s eyes to understand what was bothering him. He sounded utterly clueless.

Yuri tucked himself further in. Pulling the lapels of Otabek’s jacket into a threateningly tearing grip. “I - I didn't like the way that bastard touched you.”

Words were never Yuri’s friend, Yuri always knew this. But at least he could have shown some courtesy towards a man who seemed dear to Otabek. It was a mistake.

“Bastard?” Otabek finally managed to create distance between them. He held Yuri at arms length,
blinking at him. “Phichit?” His eyebrows were deeply furrowed. Clearly missing the point.

“Yes. Phichit.” Yuri let out a snarl. “Stay away from him.”

“Why?” Otabek’s replies were still coming in broken syllables. “I-I don't understand. Phichit… Phichit is a friend.”

“He's Peter’s cousin.” Yuri barked. “You don't even know-” His voice cracked. He swallowed.

Otabek wasn't aware of Peter’s dire motives. Otabek wasn't around when Peter had threatened him with his creepy eyes. His lingering, lustful vibes. Even now when Yuri was safe in Viktor’s protection. Yuri was certain, one chance, one mistake, and Peter would do anything to have him. He'd made it a matter of his prestige, ego, which Yuri had crushed ruthlessly on more than one occasion. Again and again. And he just knew, deep down, Peter was still waiting for one final shot.

He sucked in a deep breath. “Look.” He pressed a hand on Otabek’s crumpled shirt, smoothing it. His tone was still sharp, almost commanding. “I don't trust them, okay? I'm sure they have hidden motives to gain your confidence. And I'll not let them use you like this. So just- stay away from them.”

Otabek’s gaze went through an array of mixed emotions- confused, shocked, hurt, a lot of hurt, and finally, he went cold.

“Is this my order, your highness?”

Yuri felt a tight vein thudding against his temple. He lost it right there. He grabbed Otabek by his tunic, looking square in his adamant eyes.

“Don’t.” He warned. “Don't play your fucking *slave game* with me, Beka. Do it with fucking Viktor.” His eyes narrowed, dangerously. Tongue stuttered. “I'm- I'm not making sense right now. And- and I don't even know what I'll do if you keep pushing me away like this. I swear to god, I'll do something crazy. I'm warning you, *Beka* .”

He watched as Otabek’s eyes became wide with surprise. He certainly wasn't expecting such an open, raw outburst of emotion from Yuri which took him off guard. But he settled after a while. After a long while.

Yuri wasn't ready to address the reasoning behind his own behavior. Not yet. He didn't know what was happening to him. What had possessed him in the heat of moment. Why had all his self control had been tossed out of the window by one intrusive touch on Otabek.

He leaned in, scent marking Otabek for one last time before dragging him back to the overcrowded hallway with a harsh tug to his sleeve. The entire day, he didn't let Otabek out of his sight, hissing at every single individual who dared to come nearer than a few inches to Otabek. He didn't even spare Viktor.

*****

Getting up at dawn on his big day felt like nothing special.

Eighteen… it was just a number. He was the same as he'd been a day before. Trapped at the mercy
of fate, where his breath combusted in his chest. Utterly unable to decide which tiny desire he wanted fulfilled in his goddamn life.

The only difference that morning was the thrum of the undercurrent that constantly buzzed in his brain. That weird streak of possessiveness more alive and never fading. It blocked his capability to think straight. With effort, he willed himself to stay away from thoughts of Otabek.

Yuri let several hands scrub his delicate skin with perfumed oils, enveloping him in ethereal scents that made him dizzy after an entire month of gut churning stress. He even passed out for several moments, letting himself go loose to the the sensation as aching knots in his body and heart relaxed one after the other.

When he woke up to the abundant aromas of lavenders and jasmines and several other subtle fragrances, he felt rejuvenated, better than he had for ages.

A few hands skilfully braided his errant locks, weaving them with natural flowers that that accentuated the shine of his golden hair. Servants decorated his elegant frame in the softness of smooth silk and fine wool that left thick imprints in its wake. Yuri’s skin had turned the color of ice, pale, frail, always cold. The snug clothes offered him the much needed warmth and comfort. He even tried to pull the loose ends of his embroidered stole, wrapping them close to his freezing body.

He leaned over the edge of his balcony, daring to spare a look outside.

The Nikiforov kingdom was ready, buzzing with seamless energy to celebrate the new chapter of their Omega’s life. The surroundings were vibrating, radiant with umteen colors of crimson and gold, vivid colours of the Nikiforov flag. And after stepping foot in this foreign kingdom, for the first time, Yuri felt welcome.

“Feeling cold, huh?”

His trance was broken by Katsuki’s fond remark. He turned around facing his beaming face. Yuri wondered how anyone was physically capable of maintaining such a deep aura of affection around him. All the time.

Katsuki took a step forward, fixing the folds of Yuri’s stole with meticulous care. With a finger he tucked a loose strand behind Yuri’s ear, fixed his flower crown in a couple of places. Finally, when he looked satisfied with his own work, he stepped back and smiled.

“Come here. Sit.” He guided Yuri to his dressing chair. He took an ornate jewellery box from his servant and pulled out a pendent of radiant diamond that reflected prisms of morning sunlight. “This...” He started. “This belonged to the Nikiforov family.” He tied the hooks around Yuri’s slender neck. “And now...” He met Yuri’s eyes in the mirror, watching him intently. “This is yours.”

Yuri’s fingers automatically moved to trace the stone, testing its weight. Eyes wide in shock. God, it was overwhelming, even for Yuri who didn't bother about propriety and etiquette and certainly didn't give a damn about some family gift. He struggled for words.

“Are you ready yet?” Viktor's comment came whizzing at him, startling him. He failed to meet Viktor’s eyes, staring at somewhere on the carpet below his feet. His fingers still nervously clutching at the diamond.

He was hyper aware of the silent conversation flowing between the mated couple, but he refused to
look up. He wasn't worthy of such kindness and love. Honor. He was an orphaned Omega who was supposed to drift along without any specific direction. He was supposed to be tossed around in the middle of a political war by some cruel power crazed Alpha, who would have used him for his precious status, and status only, and flaunt him like a trophy all around the world.

He noticed as Viktor’s boots shuffled closer and stopped right under his nose.

“I know how tough it is for you to accept this.” Viktor’s soothing voice relaxed the tension between his stiff shoulders. Yuri still wasn't looking at him. “You're very brave to stand your ground. To continue believing against all odds.” Viktor took a brief pause, carefully choosing his next words. “I know your grandfather would have been proud of you for the actions and sacrifice you made to save your people.”

Yuri snapped his eyes up, meeting Viktor’s steady gaze. With the mention of his grandfather’s name, he barely held back the burning stinging in his eyes, his lips trembled. He bit them hard. He wasn't going to cry. No. He swallowed the ache in his throat. Took a moment to push down the lingering traces of weakness and let out a strong huff of determination.

“Tha- thank you for standing by my side. For- for supporting me unconditionally,” Yuri voice stuttered, but he said it with utter sincerity and gratitude. Confessing it to Viktor felt easier than he'd thought it would. Natural like breathing.

Viktor’s shocked face was worth every effort. He watched as the Alpha’s crystal-blue eyes crinkled at the edges, glassy with emotion. He suddenly barged forward, earning an undignified squawk from Yuri and wrapped him in a hug. “Always,” he murmured in his shoulder. “I'm always here for you.”

Yuri hugged him back.

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As the sun rose high in the sky, the celebrations grew wild. Yuri was bombarded with attention and affection and it actually scared him.

Viktor and Katsuki never left his sight even for a moment. They stuck by his shoulders like two solid pillars of support, strong and unaltering. And after the initial wave of anxiety settled in his stomach, Yuri finally breathed.

He smiled, graciously accepting the elders blessings. As his guardian Alpha, Viktor performed all the rituals with Yuri, placing a reassuring hand at the small of his back, guiding him securely between the floods of invited guests.

The celebration was huge. Everyone wanted to witness the alliance between the two born, undisputed Level Ten rankers. It was an opportunity of a lifetime.

Of course, that increased the burden on their guards tenfold. They were having a tough time controlling the over enthused masses.

So was Otabek.

Otabek didn't let Yuri go beyond an arm’s distance from him, allowing only Viktor some space to
Stand between them to perform the rituals.

For one wild moment Yuri felt that it was actually Otabek who was performing the rituals with him, in lieu of Viktor. And Yuri was having a battle to stay away from the thought. The feeling broke chill into his pores. It felt real. Almost.

Otabek was on the tip of his toes, always aware of every tiny flick of Yuri’s muscles. He flinched every time Yuri moved, even sneezed. Otabek was freaking out. Yuri knew it. As the day progressed, excruciatingly slowly, Otabek’s condition worsened with each passing hour.

Yuri scoffed when Otabek almost broke Theodore’s wrist when he tried to touch Yuri to guide him to a different room. Yuri literally heard the crack of bones when Otabek winced back, muttering hurried apologies.

Of course, Otabek was a good guard. One of their best. But today seemed to be different for him as well. Yuri would like to blame it on the unfamiliarity of the foreign kingdom, but then again, Yuri was actually happy that he wasn't the only one who was suffering.

Otabek was equally struggling for his control, just as Yuri was struggling to find his own.

Yuri was secretly enjoying it. It was more entertaining than listening to the never ending, boring speeches from the elders and the nobles he'd never known.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, omg, you all are getting curious about otayuri. Just wanted to clarify that heat/rut won’t be part of this non traditional abo fic. They’re in love since childhood. And I don't want them to do it for biology. I'm really excited to share what I've planned for them in the next chapter ^-^
I'm kind of very satisfied with this chapter. It runs throughout the span of their lives and highlights many unanswered aspects. I hope you enjoy the ride ^-^.

Yuri’s legs were jelly. He'd been standing throughout the day, accepting exorbitant offerings and blessings and he wanted nothing more than to flee to the comfort of his chamber and sleep for a thousand years.

Finally, Katsuki took pity on him and whisked him away for a few moments of peace. *Bless him.* Apparently, the eighteenth year of a Royal Omega’s life was a bigger deal than Yuri was ever prepared for. Or it was a *Viktor* thing. Larger than life- some grand, apex shit. Yuri would never forgive him for this.

Yuri flopped down on a cushioned chair, relaxing his sore muscles. Katsuki settled beside him, their shoulders brushing. It was comforting. Neither one spoke for several moments, enjoying the comfortable silence that held in the air between them.

Yuri spread his arm, tilting his head back to watch the night sky above him. The moon was full, a ball of milky silver, washing the earth with its pale, white light. A few stars twinkled above him, one brighter than all the others.

Thoughts of his grandfather came rushing in, but his heart didn’t ache this time. He was smiling. He missed him, but he knew he was up there somewhere, smiling back at him, still looking after him.

“You should smile more.”

Yuri immediately straightened up and wiped the smile off his face at Katsuki’s comment.

“Have you failed to notice all those crazy people? I can’t… anymore.”

Katsuki chuckled brightly. “I know. Just two more days, it'll be over before you realize.”

“Two more days?!” Yuri exclaimed in horror, gaping at Katsuki with his mouth half open. He was surely going to kill Viktor for torturing him like this. Slowly.

“It's important.” Katsuki’s gaze turned deadly serious. He straightened in his seat, twisting to face Yuri. “You're a part of the Nikiforov family now and everyone must start to accept the fact.”

There was a distinct pinch between Yuri’s brows. He’d never had to bother about family hierarchy and status. He'd always been top on the ladder. But clearly, it was important for Katsuki.
“I don't want to worry you any more than necessary but my people weren't very forthcoming in their welcome to you.”

Yuri let out a dry scoff. “Can you blame them?”

“Still,” Katsuki pressed. “They aren't generally this difficult. I don't know-”

Yuri rolled his eyes, cutting Katsuki off in mid-sentence. He tried to shrug it off casually. “They're thinking I'm coming between their beloved, magical couple.”

“Are you?”

Yuri opened and closed his mouth like a fish. His tongue caught in his mouth, unable to process the shock of the sudden, direct question.

“Fucking hell,” his temper suddenly raised. “Are you- are you out of your mind? Why would I try something so demeaning? What d’you-“

“Relax,” Katsuki pressed a steady hand on his thundering heart, shoving him back. Yuri was almost ready to barge at Katsuki, half risen to his feet. “I was only teasing you. But you do realize that you're free to choose your mate anytime, right?”

“Huh?” Yuri’s brain still wasn't working.

Katsuki let out a sigh. He gazed into Yuri’s eyes, deep, as if he was searching his soul. “I can see it in your eyes… the way they follow him all the time. Everywhere.”

Yuri’s heart was still hammering in his chest, loud and erratic. He could hear its beat in his ears.

“It's getting worse, right?” It wasn't even a question. Katsuki hummed to himself, deep in his thoughts. His lips twitched in a fond smile. “I can relate. It was the same for me… but for Viktor.”

Yuri blinked at him, still not speaking a word.

“How long have you known him?” After a brief pause Katsuki added. “... Otabek?”

Otabek…

The name rang in his ears. With his little secret was put in the spotlight, Yuri felt exposed. He ducked his head, feeling the burning in his cheeks.

“Since I was five,” he muttered, voice barely a whisper.

“Oh. That's a long time.” Katsuki was still lost in thought and Yuri was grateful at not being the direct target of his attention. But that didn't last long. “It's not really my place to decide but if he is your Viktor... Don't let him go.”

A violin playing a beautiful melody broke into their conversation, startling Yuri out of his skin. It was time for his first official dance with his Alpha Viktor. But Yuri was still gaping at Katsuki when he offered him a hand to stand.

Like a ghost, Yuri followed him to the dance floor. His mind was a flood of thoughts.

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The first traditional dance carried the scent of chaos. Yuri’s inner chaos. He felt like a fool for taking a whole day to finally realize the main reason behind his crazy jealousy over Otabek was indeed Viktor.

When Viktor approached Yuri for their first traditional dance, Otabek was all together in a different zone, still charged up, overprotective. Viktor eyed Otabek’s fingers around Yuri’s shoulder, knuckles white. Yuri followed Viktor’s gaze. For a moment, he wondered if Otabek was even aware of what he was implying by his actions.

“I'm still his Alpha,” Viktor finally snapped at Otabek, slightly irritated. And Otabek flinched away from Yuri, as if Viktor’s blunt declaration had burnt the touch into his skin. His ears flushed a deep red, the heat spreading all the way down his neck.

*I'm still his Alpha,* Viktor’s words imprinted in Yuri’s mind. The authority, the realism, broke shivers down his spine. It'd always been his grandfather. His Alpha. His blood. But Viktor…

After a gap of a decade, Yuri had known Viktor barely a few weeks. Viktor being his Alpha, guardian or otherwise, was the evident fact of his life - sudden, dominant, almost intimidating. And the worst part was that he couldn't even blame Viktor for being full of zeal for life. It was a trait of his indisputably charming personality.

But clearly, it was a major transition for Yuri whose world had revolved around Otabek all his life. He had eyes for only one Alpha and Yuri wasn't surprised anymore when a strong wave of possessiveness pricked the back of his neck.

He’d wanted to belong to Otabek his entire life.

For days, years, the thought of losing Otabek had snatched the sleep from his eyes. During the two years abroad, no matter how hard he’d tried to deny it, Yuri had spent every single day remembering every tiny wrinkle on Otabek’s forehead, the smoothness of his shiny skin, his sharp jawline, his taut muscles the result of his tough life and pure hardship. It was torture. And Yuri enjoyed it like a challenge. There wasn't a chance that Yuri would ever forget Otabek, but then he’d made his own personal mission to drown himself in the memories of Otabek’s scent. It had been two agonizing years of separation, but Yuri had survived it.

He was ready to wait for eternity if that was what was needed to be with Otabek, but he always feared that he would succumb to the weight of his duties. To top his misery, he'd come threateningly close to doing it. He’d blown away his life, his love with his own hands as if it'd meant nothing.

Without giving Otabek any chance to reciprocate his feelings.

It was only now that he realized, in one decisive moment, that Otabek had literally left everything behind and come for him. He hadn’t cared about his pride, his freedom. He became a fucking slave. For Yuri. It wasn't pity or a thoughtful gesture to save a troubled friend from an unwanted relationship.

It was love.

Yuri wasn't going to hold back now. Not anymore. Not after seeing how deeply Viktor’s presence as Yuri’s Alpha was affecting Otabek. Not after almost losing him. Forever.

Yuri quietly watched as Otabek staggered back several steps. That moment, Yuri thought he could
count the cracks in Otabek’s heart, as it got crushed piece by piece by Viktor’s words. Brutally.

He watched the dull silhouette of Otabek’s shadow, disappearing into the depths of the background of the jazzy dance floor. He watched him patiently. Giving himself time to decide the course of his goddamn life.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?” Yuri’s lips twitched in a smile as Viktor bowed before him, asking for his permission.

“Yes. You may,” Yuri agreed in the similar over polite tone. Formalities were hilarious sometimes.

They linked their hands as the air filled with the ethereal melody of flute and violin, the beat of drums thudding in sync. Viktor was surprisingly graceful for his sturdy Alpha status and Yuri, as elegant as ever. Their feet danced together, leaving the surrounding crowd awestruck.

Viktor swirled Yuri off his feet, like he weighed nothing. Yuri growled, making sure to stamp on his pristine boots. Viktor chuckled loudly. Fucking stupid Alphas.

Yuri’s eyes followed the dark outline of Otabek’s head which was lowered to the floor in some unspeakable shame.

“Is he still growling at me?”

Yuri tilted his head, squinting at Viktor.

“Your Rookie Alpha?... Alpha Otabek,” Viktor elaborated.

Yuri looked over Viktor’s shoulder, meeting Otabek’s eyes for the first time after Viktor’s rather rude comment. The look in that Otabek’s dark brown eyes still looked broken. Yuri’s heart squeezed in his chest. “Yes, he is,” he hummed.

“God.” He got distracted by Viktor’s dramatic gasp. “I'm not going to make it to my Senior Level this year, am I?”

Yuri gave him a deadpan look. He was perfectly aware that this was Viktor just being his extra self. He wasn't even worried. He was smiling. Asshole.

“Are you trying to tell me that the great and mighty Alpha Viktor is scared of a rookie?” Yuri pretended to think. “Actually... you should be.”

Viktor threw his head back, laughing with his full body.

“Oh, mentoring Otabek is surely going to be entertaining.”

Yuri’s gaze turned wary on Viktor’s candid confession. Viktora must have seen it in his eyes. Because immediately, he stepped forward and squeezed his shoulder.

“Yuri, I won't run away from my mentoring responsibilities. Trust me.”

Yuri couldn't do much but nod at him.

******
The dance ended with thundering applause. The night had turned dark, but not a single person had left.

Even before Yuri could adjust his eyes to the surroundings, Otabek was right beside him, safely moving him away, making him a path through the masses. Yuri tried to read his eyes, searching for answers to all his silent questions. Begging for signs of what Otabek had locked away so tightly in the pit of his gut. Something. Anything?

Otabek didn't look at him. His eyes hovered over the crowd checking for any minute change, gaze untrusting, alert for threats or attacks. He was doing his job but Yuri wanted to grab his face with both hands and make him look at him.

With a final push, Otabek moved Yuri into the private chamber for an assembly with the elders. Yuri knew they'd reached the final phase of the ceremony.

“Prince Yuri,” the chief elder announced. “We all welcome you to this new era in your life.” To his surprise, they all had kind smiles on their faces. “We hope you understand and appreciate the strength of an Omega of your calibre and treat it with utter respect.”

Without a word, Yuri nodded in complete understanding. Their faces relaxed with relief.

“Well.” They glanced at Viktor, asking for his permission. “This brings us to the final stage of the today's ceremony.”

“You may proceed with the final ritual of the day,” Viktor prompted without wasting his breath.

Yuri knew where this was heading. Only two days before, Viktor had openly suggested this option. But choosing a mate hadn't exactly been on Yuri’s to do list. In fact, the thought had freaked him out.

The last two days came as a breath of fresh air that poured life into his choked lungs. It unlocked his mind, clearing out lingering traces of apprehension. And now, there was hope. The powerful feeling of knowing something which he'd been uncertain of his entire life.

The chief elder turned to face Yuri, his voice firm but soothing. “We wanted to ask you if you're ready to choose your mate on this auspicious occasion?”

His breath caught in his throat. Yuri swallowed. He looked into Viktor’s eyes, trying to convey his decision, asking.

Viktor’s brows scrunched on his forehead, immediately noticing that something had changed in a heartbeat. He stepped forward, moving in front of the entire room.

“Please continue, Yuri,” he encouraged. His silk voice carried the tenderness which was usually reserved only for Katsuki.

Yuri’s lips curved in a half smile, heart filled with respect. He regretted the fact that he'd doubted Viktor’s intentions for so long. He was wrong. And foolish.

He looked around. He was thankful for the fact that the conversion had been arranged within the closed walls of a private chamber. That way at least he'd a chance to bury his soul if the things didn't go as per his plan - No - he wasn't going to think about that. No. He was already feeling dizzy.

He sucked in a deep breath and stared directly at Otabek.
“Sir Altin,” Yuri called. He tried to keep his voice steady but it trembled pathetically. He wasn't even ashamed of it.

The entire room split apart, clearing a path between the two of them. They all seemed shocked, probably expecting Viktor to take charge of the conversation.

“Please step forward,” Yuri requested further as Otabek covered the distance between them like a ghost. His feet dragged along the floor, as if they were carrying a ton of weight.

Yuri could hear the pounding of each of Otabek’s heart beats, louder than all others. Distinct, but so very familiar that they felt like his own. This. This was the one major truth of Yuri’s life which he'd overlooked for so many years. A lifetime.

The moment he'd first laid his eyes upon Otabek, he'd felt the instant buzzing of the bond between them. Otabek’s sweet cherry scent had intrigued his senses. His nervous heartbeat had been music to his ears, louder than anyone around him. Strong and calming at the same time. Yuri had only been five at that time.

Only five.

He'd always wondered why he could smell Otabek’s clean earthy scent from miles and miles away. Why he could hear every single flip in his heartbeat when Yuri teased and openly flirted with him. He'd always been aware when Otabek was excited, or grumpy... scared.

Throughout his life, he was distinctly aware of Otabek’s presence. They had been inseparable since they were children. The bond was so deep, concealed in the roots of his blood, so familiar that Yuri hadn’t even noticed it.

The tragedy of his life was that it wasn't only Yuri who had sensed these changes.

Otabek had heard his broken cry of ‘Beka!’ over the noise of the pouring rain, and the equally loud, thundering crowd. That day, Otabek had heard him right in the middle of the combat where he'd almost died for Yuri.

Yuri screwed his eyes shut, pushing the rising bile down his throat. His world spun around him, ready to hit the floor.

Warmth, peaceful and pacifying, enveloped him as if it was a thick blanket. Yuri reached out for it blindly, trying to fold himself into it.

“Yura, are you alright?” Came Otabek’s frantic words. Of course, it was him.

Yuri didn't respond immediately, holding on to Otabek for dear life with his both hands. When he had settled enough to open his eyes, he searched Otabek’s deep dark gaze. His long eyelashes were wet, moist with the mist of the forming tears. They were still holding each other, not bothering about the room full of elders or their scrutinizing gazes.

“Do you- do you trust me, Beka?”

“Of course I do.” Otabek clutched Yuri’s arms tighter, supporting his entire weight in his strong hold. “Anything…” he begged. “Just say it… and I'll do it.”

Yuri knew, if he asked, Otabek would serve his head on a silver platter without batting an eye. But this was about tender feelings and heart. Yuri’s pathetic, desperate heart.
He steadied his wobbly body, gathering his balance. “Let's do this then,” he said decisively, more to himself than anyone else. He tried to step away, but Otabek didn't let go and Yuri hardly even stopped him.

His eyes scanned the gathered crowd of elders, looking intrigued now by Yuri’s sudden decision. Then, he gazed at Katsuki and Viktor. They mattered to him. They encouraged him with urgent nods, urging him to keep going.

He turned to face Otabek, started speaking in a single breath. He wasn't sure if he was even breathing.

“I, Prince Yuri of the Plisetsky kingdom, the sole omega heir to the throne, would ask you to be my rightful mate.”

He watched as Otabek’s breath caught in his throat.

Yuri swallowed. “In no way are you obliged to comply with my wishes and are free to reject my proposal.” It took every ounce of Yuri’s being to get those last words out of his mouth and said out loud. “But if you… accept,” Yuri’s heart stuttered in his chest, a tinge of hope flickering like a dying flame, fighting to continue to stay alight. “I swear on my blood and life that, as your mate, I'll remain loyal to you until death.”

Yuri’s world froze after that. He didn't move, kept blinking at Otabek, waiting.

Otabek didn't reply. He wasn't even blinking as if he was in inner trauma. Yuri panicked for a moment, regretting the fact he’d even considered saying it. He couldn't watch him like this.

And then, a tear rolled down Otabek’s cheek.

Beka, Yuri wanted to call, but veins of his throat were stuck. All that came out was the gut wrenching sob.

“I tried...” Otabek’s voice sounded like it was coming from underwater. Or maybe it was just the ringing in Yuri’s ears, still present, messing with his mind. “I wanted to prove my worth before-” He stopped.

His face was still stoic, other than a deep crease between his brows and a constant stream of tears that continued flowing uselessly without his permission. Words, had always been tough for Otabek. It was a lot to ask of him and he was struggling.

“I, uh, I failed -”

“It doesn’t matter,” Yuri’s voice broke out of him. He didn't let Otabek complete the sentence. He was right back in his space. “It never mattered.” Yuri cupped his face, his gaze soft, a striking contrast to his personality. Otabek had always managed to pull such raw reactions from Yuri that they made him an emotional mess of sentiments. “It's always been you, throughout my life Beka. Always you.”

Otabek’s eyes widened. He blinked at Yuri.

“I - I seriously don't know how you can think that your place in my life will vary based on the ranks you gained in a competition?”

Yuri didn't recognize the next sound that came out of Otabek’s throat. It was broken. Lost. He wasn't even able to form an apology.
“I’ve been so involved in myself that I risked a chance of losing you forever. I never wanted to, but I risked it. And- and I can never forgive myself for it.”

“Is this your way of saying that you accept my proposal?” Yuri was asking him but addressed the group of elders.

Otabek stood there stock still. It took him an excruciatingly long time to comprehend Yuri’s words.

“Yes, I do,” Otabek muttered, eyes drinking in Yuri’s emeralds like they were the center of his universe.

Something settled inside Yuri.

He leaned in, watching Otabek till the very last moment, checking if all of it was real. His eyelids dropped as the Alpha’s pure scent hit him from this close, he let loose everything. He kept leaning in till his lips brushed against something soft and tender.

The jolt of their first intimate touch burst all his hazy senses open. Otabek wasn't any better. They savored each other’s tastes, getting drunk on the other’s scents as their lips moved, first exploring and then flooding with desire. They shamelessly ignored suggestive cheers from Viktor and Katsuki and the awkward coughs from the elders.

Eventually, Otabek gathered enough control to break apart. Of course, it was always him.

“We're so glad,” The chief elder interrupted urgently, figuring that they would start again, “... that you both have found your mate. Our blessings will be with you always.” They both bowed before the elders. “Now you may proceed to complete your mating ceremony.”

When they raised their heads they both had matching deep red blushes on their cheeks.

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is explicit. Only one explicit chapter. Enjoy it while you can *smiles*
They barely made their way inside the walls of Yuri’s private chamber, tugging at each other's clothes. Yuri was excited and Otabek’s cheeks were burning red.

“Look at me, Beka,” Yuri pleaded. Yuri ran a hand over Otabek’s sculpted abdomen, marvelling at the beauty of his perfect body. He was riding on a wave of anticipation, urging Otabek to respond. Otabek looked at him with half lidded eyes. He was drunk on Yuri’s pure omega scent.

"Yura … “

Otabek’s voice came out as broken sob.

“I'm here, Beka,” Yuri encouraged. "Talk to me.” He didn't let go of him, clinging onto Otabek with both hands.

“I don't deserve…”

That was it. Yuri wasn't going to buy Otabek’s I don't deserve shit.

Yuri didn't let him complete the sentence, pulling him into a searing kiss. Peppering Otabek with sweet touches. Their lips slotted together like broken puzzle pieces. Otabek melted into him, sealing his lips with his mate’s.

They devoured each other's mouths, latching on to each other like there was no tomorrow.

Finally, they had to break apart to catch their breaths.

When Otabek opened his eyes, he was still high on Yuri’s scent. His brain was dead, incapable of thinking.

“Oh no… Fucking Katsuki!”

Otabek barely managed to process Yuri’s sudden outburst, before his eyes caught the scene front of him.
“I’m going to kill him.” There wasn’t any real venom behind those words. Yuri was embarrassed. It was mortifying, he tried to hide his deep red flush to save his dignity. Because, sitting proudly on a table in the middle of his chamber was a bowl of lube, radiating all sorts of herbal, ethereal perfumes that tickled Yuri’s nostrils. He inhaled, closing his eyes, savoring the scent.

He came to his senses with a start. His gaze hovered over Otabek’s trim body, his pert butt. God, his mind was going haywire.

“Beka, you have no idea what you do to me,” Yuri gazed at him, his expression fond.

Otabek was the center of his world. Gravity that engulfed him from inside out. He traced Otabek’s swollen lip with his thumb. Yuri smiled, proud that it was him that had caused it.

It’s had been so many years since they’d first met and they had seen each other half naked, if not fully naked. During his growing years, Yuri had made no attempt to hide his attraction towards his best friend. He ogled Otabek, blushing in the process, abashed. There wasn't any subtlety in his actions. The entire kingdom was aware of he is growing obsession with Otabek. They mused behind his back. They gossiped.

Yuri didn't care.

He saw right through Otabek, asking for silent permission.

Otabek swallowed, staring right into his soul. And then, he nodded hurriedly like he too wanted it as much as Yuri did.

Yuri pulled him into a heated kiss, locking their lips one more time. He writhed under Otabek’s tender touches, making delicious sounds of pleasure.

And that might have been what threw Otabek over the edge because he crumpled Yuri’s tunic with desperate tugs. He pulled at Yuri’s drawstrings, yanking them free with a single jerk. Yuri shivered with anticipation, curling deeper into Otabek’s touch.

Otabek explored every part of Yuri, inch by inch, as if he was something precious, to be cared for and preserved. He touched his burning hot skin, wrenching muffled moans from him.

“Beka, please. I'm ready. I- I can't anymore.”

*****

Otabek slowly drove Yuri to his first orgasm, sucking on his neck and scenting him by dragging his nose over the long lines of Yuri’s shoulder blade. He probably should've known Otabek would be a romantic.

Yuri watched Otabek and his glorious muscles flex as he moved to sit back on his knees. His big hands took hold of Yuri’s legs behind the knees, pushed them up so Yuri’s pelvis was angled just how he wanted it. Otabek began to thrust, deep and fast. Otabek's cock felt so good driving in and out of him, already sloppy and wet with his slick.

Yuri groaned, watching Otabek above him through hooded eyes.
"You like that?" Otabek asked him, barely out of breath.

Yuri huffed, and was determined to see Otabek get as wrecked as him. "Go a little faster, Beka. I'm not going to break."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, do it."

Otabek picked up the pace, each smooth thrust slamming in hard. Yuri's still hard and sensitive cock bounced with the movement, and he wasn't ashamed that he made a lot of noise, groaning and crying out. Otabek's cock was huge and it dragged right over his prostate with every thrust.

Something was building in Yuri, not the regular pre-burn of orgasm, but something sharper and more intense. He realised what it was a moment too late, and gasped, "Oh, fuuuck," as the most intense feeling shook him to his core.

Yuri’s groan was, loud and guttural. He arched his back shooting his load between them. His breathing was erratic, fluttering like a bird.

"Please don't stop Beka. God yes. Keep going..."

Otabek got straight back into it, slamming his cock into Yuri's spot over and over, angled just right. Yuri's body was singing from all the orgasms. Otabek kept thrusting.

Yuri's body shook and trembled as he clenched down, released, and shot his pleasure between them once again.

Otabek froze above him.

"Are you alright? Talk to me, Yura".

"Yeah, knot me. I'm ready."

Otabek obliged.

Yuri whined for it eagerly. Otabek's pace faltered as he started to come, he pushed his cock in deep, gasping loudly. Yuri felt the knot swell inside him and he whimpered and reached up for Otabek.

The alpha let go of Yuri's legs and moved in on top of him, pressing close. Yuri wrapped himself around Otabek while Otabek pressed his knot as deep as it would go. Yuri cried out, but his body was already responding, clenching and locking down on Otabek's cock. They were knotted up tight together, and Otabek pressed a kiss to Yuri's mouth.

Yuri let Otabek kiss him, as he felt the knot inside him swell and move. His body moved with it, milking Otabek's cock of its release as he came.

Otabek broke the kiss and gasped against Yuri's neck, "God... you're so tight."

Yuri cradled the big alpha against him. "Feel good?"
"Yeah," he husked. "God, Yuri, you feel amazing."

"Mm-huh." Yuri smiled, turning his head to give Otabek more room to kiss his neck.

Otabek held himself up on his arms, taking his own weight. He rocked his hips gently, moving his knot inside Yuri, and Yuri moaned softly in response. He was so stuffed full of Otabek right now, he could feel every movement.

"Love your big knot," he murmured, eyes drifting shut.

"Think it loves you too," Otabek murmured back at him.

"Eh?... Then, get me on top."

"Now?" Otabek questioned.

"Yes, now. Roll us over."

Otabek held Yuri close and rolled them on the bed, so Yuri was on top and straddling Otabek. The huge knot tugged on his insides when he moved, and Yuri hitched a breath. Carefully, he settled over Otabek and spread his knees, sinking lower so it was more comfortable. He was clenching down hard, unwilling to release Otabek's cock so soon.

Yuri rested his hands on Otabek's chest, settling in. "Okay?" he asked.

Otabek groaned in reply, reaching up to hold Yuri's hips. "Yeah, this is good." He closed his eyes and breathed in deep, his chest expanding.

Yuri slid his fingertips over Otabek's skin, brushed over his pink nipples. Otabek huffed in surprise, looking up at Yuri from under dark eyelashes.

Seriously, Otabek had really nice eyelashes.

Yuri moved his hands back over Otabek's nipples, his touch light and teasing, causing Otabek to shiver a little.

"You like that?" Yuri grinned lazily.

"Bit sensitive..."

"Oh yeah?" Yuri circled his hands around Otabek's pecs, massaging the hard planes of muscle. "Want me to touch 'em some more?"

He waited until Otabek gave him permission, a soft, "Okay," then he tweaked both Otabek's nipples with his thumbs and forefingers, making him gasp in surprise.

"You like it?" Yuri rubbed at Otabek's nipples gently, then pinched them again. "They've gone all hard for me," he pointed out, and stopped short of saying, guess they love me too.

“Yeah feels amazing.”
Yuri was exhausted, keeping himself upright above Otabek.

Yuri stilled on top of him. He was impaled on Otabek's cock and unable to move, and his thighs were beginning to tremble from holding himself up so long. Otabek rocked his hips some more, nudging his cock deep inside Yuri and dragging over his spot. Yuri opened his mouth but all that came out was a gasp.

Otabek moved too, his hands cupping Yuri's ass and taking most of his weight. Yuri reached out to grasp at the wall as he leaned over Otabek, relieving the ache in his thighs.

Otabek lifted him a bit higher, and at first Yuri's body didn't want to let go of Otabek's cock, but then slowly it slipped free with a wet pop.

Yuri gasped.

"Can I do it again?" Otabek pleaded, and Yuri's prompt reply was- "Hell yeah".

Otabek pushed back in straight away, pushed in so deep Yuri cried out, his palms flat on the wall to hold himself up. Otabek held Yuri's ass in place and pistoned his hips, slamming his cock into Yuri's again and again.

Yuri couldn't even speak, all he could do was brace himself as Otabek fucked him. Everything felt different at this angle, Otabek's cock felt huge inside him, and it rubbed on his spot with every drag. The over stimulated gland was only too eager to comply, and Yuri felt the burning tingle flare quickly.

"Ahh!" His eyes screwed shut as the orgasm ripped through him. He clenched and released, and he ejaculated all over Otabek's abs.

"Fuck," Yuri gasped, as his hand slipped and his head tipped forward, banging lightly into the wall. "Ow..."

"You okay?" Otabek paused to check on him.

"Otabek, don't stop!"

"But you banged your head?"

"I'll live," Yuri declared, all glowing and invincible post orgasm. "Don't stop!"

"Okay. Just..." Otabek reached a hand around Yuri's back, supporting him as he moved and flipped them. Yuri huffed as his back hit the mattress, Otabek on top and still inside him.

"Let's do it this way so you don't injure yourself." Otabek smiled at him as he leaned in, and Yuri didn't argue, he just hooked his legs around Otabek's hips and pressed the heels of his feet into Otabek's ass to urge him on.

Otabek pumped his hips, making love to Yuri with deep powerful thrusts. Yuri clung on tight, moans pouring from his mouth. The alpha huffed and grunted close to his ear, heating Yuri's skin with his breath.
Yuri felt so claimed by Otabek, speared on such a perfect cock, it was like his body was all too eager to come. The burn spread through him, lighting him up. Yuri's legs opened wider as he tensed, straining up to meet Otabek's thrusts.

"Oh, God," Yuri groaned, coming hard again. He shot his load between them, making them both wet.

"Love watching you come," Otabek husked, still pounding into him. "Wanna knot you again."

Yuri whimpered eagerly. "Knot me," he groaned.

Otabek sped up. "You're so… tight " he groaned, mouth hanging open as his pace faltered.

Yuri felt the knot swell, filling him up as Otabek pushed deep inside him. Yuri gasped, and his body clenched down greedily on Otabek's cock, clamping the knot securely inside him.

Yuri gazed up at Otabek, at the expression on his face as he came. He looked so blissed out, his long eyelashes sweeping down as he closed his eyes. His dark locks, his overgrown undercut flopped messily over his forehead.

Otabek was so beautiful.

******

After their first intimate night together, Yuri watched Otabek as he slept. He didn't disturb him.

There was a knock on the door, it was Theodore announcing it was almost dawn. He informed Yuri that King Viktor had asked for an immediate meeting with him, regarding the formalities. Yuri dressed quickly making sure not to wake Otabek.

No one knew that Otabek had stayed the night with Yuri. Only those in the meeting with the elders knew of the arrangement and they were sworn to secrecy until Viktor signed the accord. So when there was a knock on the door, Yuri went to the door himself, stopping whoever it was from coming in.

It was Theodore announcing it was almost dawn, he informed Yuri that King Viktor had asked for an immediate meeting with him. Yuri dressed quickly making sure not to wake Otabek.

The air was chilly as Yuri followed Theodore to the Shrine with two castle guards. Yuri was already regretting his decision to do this without Otabek; especially when he wasn't allowed his own personal security troops and was only accompanied by two guards. Of course, Viktor would be there and that was more than enough for him. In fact, he was curious to hear what Viktor had to share in this holy place that he'd fallen in love with at a first sight.

A pained cry suddenly broke through the eerie silence of the waning darkness.

It was Viktor.

A moment later, Yuri felt a heavy blow to his neck, his vision blurred and he passed out.

******
Yuri’s world was swirling around him. Everything was hazy between the thin line of consciousness and unconsciousness. He strained in his eyes and tried to adjust to the surroundings. Slowly, his world started making sense.

He could hear Viktor’s angry spat with someone. And he reached out for him blindly. “Viktor…” The argument stopped immediately.

“Yuri?” Viktor was taken aback for a moment, before he snapped to his senses. “I'm with you. I'm here.” The soothing touch that Yuri was expecting never came.

His eyes shot open only to find Viktor sprawled on the floor. Immobilized.

Yuri let out a whimper, spooked by his guardian Alpha’s condition. With wide eyes, he gaped at Viktor and the tip of the arrow protruding from his left shoulder.

“Viktor!” Yuri screamed. “No no no no,” he started freaking out, wrenching his eyes away from Viktor’s aqua blue tunic that was soaked in blood. So much blood. “Please don't die on me. Tell me what I should do. Dammit guide me, Viktor.”

He bent down and managed to wrap Viktor’s uninjured arm over his shoulder as gently as he could. Even in his pathetic state, Viktor tried to move, tried to cover Yuri with his uncooperative body, offering him protection.

“I'm going to get you out of here.”

“Don't,” Yuri warned. “Don't promise shit that you can't deliver. Let's first get you out of here.” He was so worried about Viktor that he didn't think beyond that.

*****

When Yuri regained consciousness, he was disoriented. He strained his eyes and tried to focus. He felt Viktor’s presence around him but he wasn't moving.

“Viktor…” he blindly reached out.

The soothing touch he was expecting never came. He snapped his eyes open only to find Viktor sprawled on the floor.

“Stay with me” Yuri begged. “I am going to get you out of here.” He clutched at Viktor and tried to pull him up.

“Leave me here, Yuri and… run” The blood ran cold in his veins. Yuri was snapped out of his trance by Viktor’s command.

And that was when he saw Peter. No.

“I was hoping you would notice me eventually, my prince.” Peter’s voice reverberated through the quiet.

“Traitors…” Victor grunted through gritted teeth. He was angry. He was swinging between consciousness and unconsciousness, pale as sheet. But he was pissed.

“Don't be so rude, King Viktor. Especially when you are so close to dying.”
“Vik- Viktor.” Yuri desperately tried to hold onto his last thread of hope. Viktor held him close, but couldn't move. He was struggling.

“That’s enough talking,” Peter commanded. “And now I am going to have what I truly deserve.” With that, he snatched Yuri away from Viktor with brutal force. His guardian Alpha stumbled forward and fell in a lifeless heap.

“Well well well… I can see you two intended mates have grown quite close to each other.” Peter’s voice was laced with venom and jealousy. His lips curled into an evil smirk. “Too bad you've different mates.”

Peter eyed Yuri, scrutinizing him from head to toe, catching his deepest secret causing goosebumps to break out down his spine.

Even Viktor was caught off guard by this blatant declaration. They stared at each other, shocked. How the hell did Peter know all this all this? Theodore! He should have been with Viktor. With his king. It was clear as sunlight that the Theodore-Peter alliance wasn't new. They must have been planning this for months. Years even, from the familiarity they moved around each other.

*****

Two more arrows whizzed past his ear and he knew his two Plisetsky guards were no longer alive, drenched in blood, fallen cold on the ground. They didn't even get a chance to open their mouths. To shout. Yuri ran for Viktor like a madman. He barely made it to the last step of Shrine. And his blood turned cold in his veins at the chilling sight in front of him. Viktor descended several steps, staggering on his feet. The long shaft of an arrow protruded from his glistening wound. “Viktor!” Yuri cried.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

There is major change in the last chapter. Viktor is yet to complete the formalities. And elders have sworn to keep it secret.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for helping me with this chapter<<33

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End Notes

* Comments/Kudos motivate me to write more ^-^
* I am on tumblr - PencilTrash. I usually post next chapter excerpt/update on my blog.
* If you're into Otayuri Royalty, check my Royalty, humor 8k one shot here - Falling For You.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!