**prince & prince**

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**prince & prince**

by Authoress

**Summary**

Note to self: don't accidentally fall in love with a prince who's in an arranged marriage keeping your kingdoms from declaring war against each other. Especially when you're spying on him as his manservant.

**Notes**

HAPPY BIRTHDAY VALENTINE, YOU BIG SOFTIE!!!! i hope you enjoy this...monster...i created.

*fingerguns* there is so much more to come with this fic. hello bnha fandom! b-bet you can't tell which characters are royalty from the names of the countries.....hahahaha...............

See the end of the work for more notes.
Midoriya is twelve years old and very, very itchy.

His uniform is choking him, his underarms itch, and overall he is having an absolutely miserable time at Amity Ball. *Go to Amity Ball, Izuku,* he taunts himself. *You’ll have a good time, Izuku. You might even get to see All Might, Izuku.* Well, he hasn’t seen All Might since he got here four hours ago, and now he’s lost sight of his mother in the mess of colorful dresses and dress uniforms.

He dodges a man in a dark blue uniform, gold-hilted saber at his side. He hops around a couple in purple nearly tripping over the woman’s dragging dress. And then he barely avoids colliding with an Endeavoran dressed all in gold, medals hanging proudly from his chest. All Midoriya wants at this point is the comforting wine red of his mother’s skirts, and the feeling of being enfolded in his countrymen rather than the countrymen of literally every other kingdom.

The ballroom is entirely too massive in the typical, over-the-top opulence of Endeavor. Every inch of floor space is covered in the boots and heels of the ladies and gentleman representing their respective kingdoms. Somehow, waiters dressed in black suits manage to effortlessly weave between the conversation circles while Midoriya can barely squeeze through them at a snail’s pace.

He eventually gives up on finding his mom, probably swallowed by the Royal Librarians from the other kingdoms and makes his way to the table of hors d’oeuvres. He picks up a biscuit, dodging the waiter insisting that everyone use tongs and a little china plate. Midoriya just wants to chew on his cookie and sit in a corner, bemoaning every decision that got him to this point in life, suffocating in formal attire and completely lost.

Actually, he’s barely holding back tears. All he wanted was to see the current All Might, legendary hero of his hometown and leader of their kingdom, maybe hear him speak, maybe even speak to him. But that’s hard to do when he’s hopelessly separated from his mother and the royalty are closely guarded anyway.

Midoriya’s throat tightens. He’s choking on frustrated, scared tears, or maybe that’s just his collar slowly killing him, but either way he needs air. Midoriya pushes open one of the ornate ballroom doors and steps into blissfully cool and clean air.

He finds himself in some kind of garden, a pretty little fountain bubbling away amongst flowers and expertly trimmed bushes. The shadowy greens illuminated only by moonlight are soft on Midoriya’s eyes, a far cry from the blinding light and shining gold and jewels of the ballroom. He doesn’t know how the Endeavorans do it. He prefers the simple luxuries of Yuuei’s far more humble palace.

This garden, at least, is a true jewel amongst the excess of Endeavor. Midoriya smiles and touches the blossom of a white flower that was blooming. *Silly thing,* Midoriya thinks. *You should be blooming during the day.*

He can breathe easier out here, and now that he is free from the crowd, his mind is at ease. He approaches the wooden gazebo at the center of the garden, surrounded by bushes of the strange white flower. He’ll just take a short breather out here in the peace of the garden before delving back into the ball and searching for his mother.
He registers that there is someone else sitting at the gazebo in stages. The first stage is opening his mouth to apologize for intruding. The second is taking in the fact that this person is wearing white and is therefore royalty and slamming his mouth shut. The third and final stage is noticing that not only is this royalty a kid like him, but he also has bright white hair, milky like the moon and just as beautiful. He opens his mouth again to let out a sputtering, dying animal noise.

The boy looks at him, revealing the other side of his hair as scorching red, apparent even in the dark.

Midoriya does what any sensible person would do, and sinks to his knees, bowing and squeaking. “S-sorry, Your Highness! I didn’t know you were here! I’m very sorry for intruding!”

A pause. Midoriya doesn’t dare lift his head up from the ground.

“Who are you?”

And then he’s swinging his head up in a panic to meet the eyes of the boy. “Midoriya Izuku of Yuuei, at your service!”

Another pause, and a slow blink. “Did my father send you?”

_Father. Father?_ Midoriya pales. _Wait, who is he? Shit, shit, shit…why didn’t I pay more attention to Mom’s lessons on the royalty. Oh, right, because I never thought I’d have to face them one-on-one like this! No, that’s not important, what’s important is who is he? Is he from Riot? Urabiti, maybe? No good, I have absolutely no idea how close he is to the crown either…_

Finally, Midoriya says, “Your father, Your Highness?”

“Hm, I guess not,” he says. At least Midoriya must be close to his title; he doesn’t seem offended or surprised by being called ‘Your Highness.’

Of course, he doesn’t seem especially interested in continuing the conversation either, looking away from Midoriya and back to the white flower in his hands. He brushes the petals with a tenderness that makes Midoriya duck his head down again, embarrassed to be looking at him.

“What are you doing?” the boy asks.

Midoriya, having no idea how to extricate himself from this situation, cowards in his bowed position. “I, uh, Your Highness, I…wanted to take a break from the festivities? But since I’m bothering you, I will return. Sir.”

“You’re not bothering me,” he says.

Well, what the hell was Midoriya supposed to do now? He had planned to make his escape with that, and now he was stuck in this excruciatingly painful conversation. _Please let me go_, Midoriya begs silently.

“Is…is there anything I can do for Your Highness…?” Midoriya offers, close to tears of pure suffering at the awkwardness between them.

“You can just call me Todoroki,” he says. “Saying ‘Your Highness’ must be tiring.”

Midoriya comes out of his bow and backpedals across the ground so quickly that the boy flinches in surprise. “Todoroki?” Midoriya croaks. “As in _Prince_ Todoroki of Endeavor? As in you’re in line for the throne?” He then slaps a hand over his mouth, realizing that he just confessed not
knowing who Prince Todoroki, son of King Todoroki, the head of the royal family of Endeavor was. The hosts of this year's Amity Ball.

“You didn’t know who I was?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya is dead. He’s dead meat, a dead man, dead before he even had the chance to see All Might in person.

“Interesting,” Todoroki says, leaning his head on the table in the center of the gazebo, still looking at Midoriya. “I’ve never met someone who didn’t know my name before.”

“I—I know who you are!” Midoriya protests. “I just…didn’t know your face, Your Royal Highness. My sincerest apologies.”

“You don’t have to talk so formally,” Todoroki says.

“Yes, I do. Your Highness.”

“Why? There’s no one here but us.”

“But—but you’re royalty!”

“So?”

Midoriya gapes. What was all that about Endeavorans being obsessed with hierarchy, again? Weren’t they supposed to be militant about respect and politeness and deference to those of a higher status? Midoriya squints. “Are you really a Prince?” he asks, suddenly suspicious.

Todoroki huffs at that, almost a laugh. “Yes, I am. But you’re the same age as me, aren’t you? Why should you have to refer to me like people refer to my father?”

“That’s just how it is, Your Highness,” Midoriya says, standing and brushing some of the dirt off his uniform.

“Sit with me,” Todoroki demands suddenly. “You’re interesting.”

Dumbfounded, Midoriya sits across from him.

“My father told me I wasn’t to speak with anyone but foreign dignitaries and other members of royalty,” Todoroki says. “They’re all boring, though. They only want to get close to me to climb in power.”

“You can’t talk to other kids your age, Your Highness?” Midoriya asks.

“If you call me ‘Your Highness’ one more time, I’m going to cry,” Todoroki says. Midoriya is alarmed to find that he has no idea if Todoroki is bluffing or not, given his completely blank expression and flat voice.

“…Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya compromises.

“Better,” Todoroki says. “No, I’m not to interact with lowborn people, even though everyone invited here is supposed to represent the finest of their country. We must uphold the clearly cut social hierarchy.”

“Then…I should go?” Midoriya suggests.
“On the contrary,” Todoroki says. “You should stay so that I can report to my father about the absolutely fascinating conversation I had with a lowborn boy from Yuuei. He’ll be thrilled.”

Midoriya has the distinct sense that he’s somehow stumbled into a family feud of proportions he doesn’t want to contemplate, especially given that one of the parties involved is the king of the country Yuuei had just made tentative peace with two years ago.

“Sorry,” Todoroki says. “I shouldn’t involve you in my own petty family issues. You’re free to go if you’d like.”

Midoriya should go. He should find his mother and latch onto her and not let go until they were safely back in Yuuei. But… “What will you do, then?”

“Return to the gathering, I suppose,” Todoroki says, frowning.

“That doesn’t sound like much fun,” Midoriya says, leaning back against seat and shifting to make himself more comfortable.

“No, it doesn’t,” Todoroki agrees. He exhales, and there’s the slightest trace of relief in his eyes. “So. Is it true that your All Might chooses his successor rather than carry on a royal bloodline?”

“Yes!” Midoriya says, brightening. Any chance to talk about All Might was golden in his eyes. “We haven’t had any assassination attempts since we started picking an ‘All Might’ to lead us rather than a king. Our current All Might, Toshinori-sama, is the hero of my hometown, actually. He once saved one hundred people from a fire without ever breaking his smile.”

“That so? Is that why he was chosen to be the next All Might?” Todoroki asks.

“Among other things, yes,” Midoriya says. “He’s known for his kindness and strength, and wisdom in times of trouble. People always looked to him, so I guess it was only natural that he be selected as the next ruler. Well, it’s usually someone employed by the royal family.”

“But no one else in his family has a Quirk, am I right?” Todoroki asks. “And yet, All Might has arguably the most powerful Quirk of any of the royal families. How can that be passed on?”

Midoriya’s smile falters. “That’s a royal secret,” he says. “No one knows except All Might. Otherwise, the Quirk could fall into the wrong hands.”

Todoroki twirls the flower between his thumb and forefinger. “I always found Yuuei to be the most attractive and interesting of the five kingdoms,” he confesses. “Your people are humble, which usually earns the scorn of the other royals, but you’re undeniably powerful.” He puts the flower down. “It would have been better if I was born in Yuuei,” he murmurs.

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya asks.

“It’s nothing,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya swallows. “You’re the first royal I’ve ever met,” he says. “I must confess—you’re nothing like I ever imagined you would be. Especially Endeavor royalty! I thought you would all be huge and frightening.” Midoriya hunches his shoulders. “So…thank you. For not being scary. I don’t know anything about your family life, but I think Todoroki-sama is a kind person.”

Todoroki looks at him like he’s grown two heads. Midoriya yelps. “Was that too personal? Did I cross a line? I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”
“No one’s ever thanked me for being kind,” Todoroki says. “No one’s ever called me kind before, either.”

“I think you are,” Midoriya says. “You’re smart, too! And regal!”

“Now you’re just flattering me.”

“I’m not!”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

They both pause, glaring at each other, before Midoriya gives in to a fit of near-hysterical giggles. Here he was, a commoner who simply got himself lost, giggling with a prince. Todoroki huffs again, amused. Then, almost shyly, he says, “Can I show you something?”

Midoriya nods.

Todoroki lifts his hand, pulling off his glove finger by finger. He tucks the glove into his pocket and touches the table with a single finger. From that finger, a thin layer of ice spiderwebs out from that point of contact with the table. The ice thickens and hardens, running off the table into fat icicles and frosting over.

Midoriya’s breath catches in his throat, and when he exhales, it is a visible puff of air. “Todoroki-sama…” he whispers. “This is…?”

“My Quirk,” he says softly. “Yes.”

“It’s incredible,” Midoriya says. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s not all,” he says, and holds out his left hand. From the tips of his fingers, a flame lights, billowing over his skin until it completely engulfs his hand.

Midoriya’s eyes are wide. “Ice and fire?”

Todoroki nods. “I inherited the perfect combination of my mother and father’s Quirks. You can touch it if you want to.”


Midoriya, impossibly, does. He reaches out a trembling hand of his own, feeling the heat of Todoroki’s tamed flames before he even touches them. He hesitates. Meets Todoroki’s eyes. There’s nothing malicious in them, just the same openness, the same vulnerability he’d shown since revealing his Quirk to Midoriya. Midoriya touches his outstretched palm.

The warmth spreads over Midoriya’s skin too, engulfing his hand. He gasps, but it’s not painful, just comfortably warm, like heating his hands in front of a hearth. Todoroki’s palm is soft against his and Midoriya runs his fingers over Todoroki’s skin without thinking, Todoroki visibly shivers, and Midoriya jerks away.

Before he can completely pull away though, Todoroki catches his hand. “No, no, it’s okay,” he
“I was just surprised.”

“I shouldn’t be touching you like this,” Midoriya says. “You’re royalty.” His cheeks burn, like the fire has transferred its heat to his face rather than his hand.

“It feels nice, though,” Todoroki says. “No one’s ever…”

No one’s ever treated me like this. He doesn’t need to say it for Midoriya to understand what he’s saying. Midoriya swallows. Sucking in a breath, he intertwines their fingers. The flames whip and flare before settling down, divided evenly between their hands. Midoriya offers Todoroki a shaky smile. Todoroki gives him a shaky almost-smile back.

Todoroki says, “Izuku—”

“Prince Todoroki-sama! Prince Todoroki-sama!” The call cuts Todoroki off mid-sentence and he winces, flames flickering out and ice melting away.

“That’d be me,” Todoroki says, slowly extricating his hand from Midoriya’s.

“Izuku! Izuku!” Midoriya’s mother’s voice.

“And that’s me,” Midoriya says. They get up from the gazebo, going their separate ways.

“Izuku,” Todoroki says. “I will see you later, yes?”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Midoriya says, bowing, but he’s smiling.

Predictably, his mother chews him out for getting lost in a foreign place and not coming to look for him. He’s irresponsible and unappreciative and she’s been worried sick. She pulls him into a tight hug and tells him to stick by her side for the rest of the evening. Midoriya thinks that’s probably for the best too. He decides to wait and tell her about the Prince of Endeavor later.

All Might is everything Midoriya had expected and more. His voice carries the love and pride he feels for his country and its people when he gives his speech for the evening. All Might is larger than the life but just big enough to be Midoriya’s dream. He resolves to work his way closer to All Might if it breaks every bone in his body.

Midoriya looks for the prince when King Todoroki Enji speaks, but he’s too short to see over the crowd. His parting with Prince Todoroki is the last time he sees him. Even when he tells his mother about meeting the prince, she doesn’t believe him. Still, Midoriya is convinced that Prince Todoroki wasn’t a dream.

That year, Midoriya gets a job as All Might’s personal page and Todoroki gets a tea kettle full of boiling water poured over the left side of his face.
connected by design

Chapter Notes

did i say 5k? i meant 7k chapters. thank you for the reception thus far, and i hope this chapter gives you a better feel for what this fic will be like going forward!

Midoriya takes the corner too fast and slides across the carpet. It ripples under his feet as if the thick red threads were the fur on the back of an angry cat. It’s only years of practice racing around the palace that keeps Midoriya on his feet, channeling his tumble into forward motion, propelling himself around the corner at top speed. He dodges servants and pages left and right. Around the cart, through the couple chatting, ahead of the handmaid carrying laundry…

“Excuse me!”

“Coming through!”

“Make way!”

Midoriya throws out warnings in between his panting. By now, most of the palace hears the sound of pounding feet and pulls to the side, but there are still a few unfamiliar with the reckless antics of All Might’s aide. Midoriya took great pride in his position and funneled all his energy into not letting All Might down for ten years of his life. Especially in this kind of situation.

He throws the doors to All Might’s study open without knocking, hands falling to his knees. He bends over, wheezing and coughing, but he has arrived. “I’m here!” Midoriya calls. His chest heaves.

All Might turns from the window he was staring out of, arms folded behind his back. “Midoriya, my boy,” he says, seemingly surprised. “Why are you so out of breath?”

Midoriya looks up, and then his eyes nearly bug out of his head. “All Might, sir!” he squeaks. “You’re not in perfect form! If I had known, I never would have barged in like that!”

All Might waves a skinny hand. “Never mind that,” he says. “I cleared all the servants from this wing already. Just close the doors and sit down. Goodness, you look like you just ran a marathon.”

“The messenger said it was urgent!” Midoriya cries. He closes the doors to the study quickly.

“Yes, well, not so urgent that you have to give yourself heatstroke running across the palace,” All Might says. He gestures for Midoriya to take a seat, and Midoriya collapses in it. He pours himself a glass of water from the pitcher no doubt delivered fresh right before the servants left. Condensation beads on the outside of the crystal.

Midoriya sucks down the water like a dying man. His eyes fall on the other glass on All Might’s massive desk, filled a third of the way with brandy. Brandy? Midoriya drinks slower and eyes All Might. He puts down the glass. “Sir,” he says, “what’s going on?”
All Might sighs and walks over to the desk. He lifts up an envelope, carefully opened, and waves it back and forth. “Do you know whose crest this is?” he asks.

Midoriya takes the letter from him and examines the seal. It doesn’t take him long to figure out who it belongs to. Only one family in history ever put a phoenix on their crest. “The Todoroki dynasty,” Midoriya says. “This letter came from Endeavor.”

“Indeed,” All Might says. He takes a long sip of his brandy.

“Is that…is that particularly troubling, sir?” Midoriya asks. “Yuuei has been at peace with Endeavor for twelve years now. There’s been no stirring of hostility on the border.”

“You’re correct,” All Might says. “It’s not war that troubles me—at least not yet.” He puts the brandy down. “Do you know what happened five days ago, in Endeavor?”

Midoriya shakes his head.

“There was massive celebration,” All Might says. “A feast that lasted three days before and after. Excess of wealth and extravagance, even by Endeavor’s standards. It was a national holiday for six whole days.” He exhales. “The Crown Prince came of age five days ago.”

“The Crown Prince? That is, Todoroki Shouto?” Midoriya asks. He’d studied the royal families and politics extensively as All Might’s aide. Although he had never seen an image of the Crown Prince, he was sure that he shared the unusual red and white coloration of the Todoroki children. An image rises to the surface of his mind, blurred red and white, the touch of fire, the crackle of ice.

Midoriya frowns. “Why is the Crown Prince’s birthday cause for alarm?”

“This isn’t public knowledge,” All Might says, “but ten years ago, on the night of that year’s Amity Ball, I brokered an alliance with King Todoroki Enji.” Midoriya nods, eyebrows furrowed at the change in subject. He was there; he remembers seeing All Might and King Todoroki Enji talking. “I arranged a marriage,” All Might says.


“I thought it would be an opportunity for peace,” All Might says. “Unite our nations under the institution of marriage. It would strengthen our bonds and heal old wounds.”

*Unite their nations? That couldn’t mean...* “All Might, sir,” Midoriya says slowly, “who did you arrange the marriage between?”

“I arranged it between a child of Todoroki’s choice and my future successor,” All Might says.

Midoriya immediately chokes on his own spit. He thumps his chest, wheezing. Through the tears pricking at his eyes, he manages to get out, “A Todoroki and the next *All Might*? With all respect, sir, *what were you thinking*?”

“I was thinking about the future,” All Might says. “A future where Endeavor could be a powerful ally and not a pacified enemy. Think, Midoriya. Endeavor shares a border with all five countries. It almost entirely surrounds us. Tactically, it only makes sense to try and befriend our border nation.”

“Yes, but promising the ruler of our country to such an unpredictable family?” Midoriya argues. “There’s no precedent—nothing like this has ever been attempted before, not between two royal families.” Then, realizing he was in fact arguing with his king, Midoriya bows. “Of course, I am...
but a humble commoner! I can’t possibly know all the wisdoms of your decision!”

“No, no,” All Might says, dismissing his groveling. “Everything you said factored into my decision. Even as I proposed it to Todoroki, I had my doubts. But I thought the risk was worth the potential payoff. To be honest, I didn’t believe he’d accept. But to my surprise, he told me he had been turning over how to propose an arranged marriage between our countries himself!” All Might’s fists clench and unclench. “I was too naïve, perhaps.”

“What am I missing?” Midoriya asks.

“I waited for Todoroki to send me a letter declaring that his chosen child had come of age and was ready for marriage. I waited and waited. And finally…”

Midoriya’s eyes go wide, several pieces clicking into place. “The Crown Prince…?” he asks.

All Might nods.

“That can’t be right,” Midoriya says. “Even to achieve peace, King Todoroki would never bargain away the Crown Prince. He’s—well, the rumor mill says he’s been personally grooming the Crown Prince into a ruler to surpass any of his forefathers. They say his Quirk is the most powerful in their family in centuries. He’s far too precious to be married to the age-old enemy of Endeavor, especially the next All Might. That would…that would imply a merging of countries.”

“My thoughts exactly,” All Might says grimly. “There’s something wrong with this picture, but I can’t put my finger on what it is. And I can’t refuse the marriage offer since he is the Crown Prince and I proposed the idea in the first place. Todoroki said it was only fitting to match royalty with equal royalty but…but it’s too much. Something is wrong.”

“What will you do?” Midoriya asks. “You can’t accept the offer and you can’t reject it. You’ve been trapped in a corner and kept in the dark while you’re at it.”

“I have a plan,” All Might says. He slides into his chair and leans over the desk. “But it requires bravery, daring, and espionage. It’s not the most honorable plan I’ve ever made, but in the face of underhanded tactics, I too must resort to underhanded tactics.”

“If it’s in the best interest of Yuuei and protecting her people, it is honorable,” Midoriya says, leaning forward. “I will help you in any way I can.”

“Excellent,” All Might says, clapping his hands together. “I was hoping you would say that.”

Eh?

“You will be the cornerstone of this plan.”

Wait—

“I need you to spy on the Crown Prince and divine the nature of the Todoroki’s plot.”

WHAT.

Midoriya babbles. His mouth and his brain momentarily break their connection and he makes a series of unintelligible sputtering noises, his mouth flapping open and closed, attempting and failing to form syllables.

All Might places his hand on Midoriya’s shoulder. “You will do well.”
“Me?” Midoriya finally squeaks out. “Entrust me with your plan?”

“Well I certainly can’t spy on young Shouto,” All Might says. “Even if I could in this form, I can’t be away from the country for long if Todoroki intends to try something. And given that this is Endeavor we’re dealing with, I can’t rule out the possibility that there are some of mine in league with him. You are the only one I can put my full faith in.”

“All Might…” Midoriya says.

All Might squeezes his shoulder. “You’ve been with me since you were a child. You’ve shown selfless devotion to me and my cause. This is the pinnacle of your service to me, a job that I can only trust you to do. I’m sorry to put such pressure on you, and I can’t say I won’t miss having my aide at my side, but…duty calls. And it’s calling for you, Midoriya Izuku.”

Midoriya squeezes his hands into fists. The corners of his eyes burn. “I’ll do it,” he says. “If you need me, I am of service to you. I always will be.” He looks up, smiling even though it wobbles. “Um. Not that I fully understand how I’m supposed to spy on the Crown Prince.”

“That’s been arranged,” All Might says, leaning back into his chair. “You will be joining an envoy carrying birthday gifts to the Crown Prince. Among those, there will be gold, jewels, paintings, wines and fruits from our fertile country, dancers, and…a manservant.”

Midoriya’s heart sinks. “I’m not a dancer, am I?” he asks.

“I talked you up quite a bit in my last letter,” All Might says. “You’ve serviced me as a page, so serving a Crown Prince shouldn’t be much different. He has his own servants, too, so you will be one of many. Never fear.”

Never fear? How could Midoriya not fear? He would be under the tyranny of the Todoroki dynasty, with no Yuuein around him for weeks. His only contact would be with All Might through secret letters. He was going to be lonely, frightened, and at the mercy of the Crown Prince of the richest royal family. If he was particularly unlucky, the Crown Prince might not think highly of him and hurt or even kill him if he stepped out of line!

“He won’t lay a hand on you,” All Might says, as if reading Midoriya’s mind. “I made sure to stress how important you were to me. To harm a gift from his future father-in-law would be a direct insult to Yuuei itself. Not even the King himself would risk that.”

“I know I said I would, but…” Midoriya says. “But I don’t know if I can.”

“You can,” All Might says. “I swear I will not abandon you in Endeavor. As soon as you can uncover enough information, I will get you back.”

“Okay,” Midoriya says, only faintly able to hear himself speaking. “Okay, I can do this. It’s not forever. He won’t hurt me. It’ll be like being a page for a while again.”

“Exactly,” All Might says. “But what is of the utmost importance is that you do not tell anyone. You can tell your mother that you will be away on a secret mission, but do not tell her where. This information must be kept between as few people as possible.”


“Over the next two weeks, I will brief you on the details of your mission and focus your studies on an in-depth analysis of the Todoroki royal family and Endeavor’s Royal Palace. You should know it inside out.”
Midoriya nods. He’s not sure he can handle much more information than this at once. Already his mind is drifting off into space, barely keeping a grasp on the reality around him. He can only nod to All Might and panic on the inside.

“Off with you, then,” All Might says. “Get some rest. Think it over. I know it’s a lot to spring on you at once, but remember—the fate of Yuuei may very well rest in your hands.”

The fate of Yuuei may very well rest in your hands.

What a thing to leave Midoriya with. No pressure, Izuku, it’s just the future of your homeland. Better not fuck it up. Midoriya’s mare shakes her head beneath him and he flinches, nearly toppling off of her.

“Steady there,” Tokoyami, the bird keeper, says, pulling up alongside him. “We haven’t even hit the forests yet. It’s a long journey from here, little one.” Tokoyami is the only other one of the envoy who knows Midoriya’s true identity and is in on the plan. It’s his job to manage Midoriya’s messenger raven.

Or really, Deku’s messenger raven. Midoriya isn’t truly ‘Midoriya’ anymore—he’s the manservant Deku, and he thinks it’s appropriate that he feel some kind of nerves going to serve the prince of another country.

“Sorry,” he says. “I haven’t been out of the country in quite a while.”

“As far as foreign countries go, Endeavor is quite lovely,” Tokoyami says. “You could have done worse. I’ve heard horrible stories about the cold of Ingenium and the heat of Riot.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable, Tokoyami-san,” Midoriya says. “Have you traveled far?”

“Only to Endeavor and Urabiti,” Tokoyami says. “But I keep in contact with many of the other keepers. We’re always trading training tips and breeder recommendations. Ingenium breeds the best hunting hawks, but Yuuei has the smartest crows. I heard the northern parts of Urabiti are trying to train eagles as scouts.”

“Eagles!” Midoriya exclaims.

“It’s quite unheard of,” Tokoyami says. His voice drops. “As is this marriage.”

Midoriya taps his mare’s flanks and he and Tokoyami pull away from the main caravans and the other riders flanking the envoy. “You think there’s something amiss as well?” Midoriya asks, voice low.

“There must be,” Tokoyami says. “Endeavorans are a proud and war-mongering people, the Todoroki family more than any other. There’s no way a flimsy treaty would appease the King when Yuuei took land they believe to be rightfully theirs.”

Midoriya swallows.

“I trust All Might,” Tokoyami says with a sigh, “but I wonder what kind of naïve idea he got in his
head that we could make Endeavor respect us with politics. They understand only one thing—war. That's why our countries will never ally. Yuuei believes in peace and Endeavor believes in war.”

“Maybe the Crown Prince will be different,” Midoriya suggests.

“Maybe,” Tokoyami says, glancing at him. “For your sake, I hope so. But from what I know of the Todoroki dynasty, no matter what child is born into that family, the ideals of the family line will be stomped into them, by force if necessary. The Crown Prince would have to be extraordinarily strong to resist the will of his blood.”

“If that’s true, then what are they playing at?” Midoriya wonders aloud. He chews at his fingernails. “Why the sham marriage?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Tokoyami says. “But whatever they have up their sleeve, it is certainly sinister.”

Midoriya sticks close to Tokoyami throughout their journey. He has a way of warding off the others of their envoy. Perhaps it’s his hat, wide-brimmed and studded with two raven feathers, that hides his eyes and his intentions. Perhaps it’s the deepness of his voice, or the flatness of his expression. Or perhaps it’s because he keeps close company with the animals rather than the people of the group.

In any case, Midoriya finds he can let his guard down around the ever observant Tokoyami. He’s quiet and not entirely friendly, but what he has to say is always intelligent and relevant. Midoriya plants his sleeping bag next to Tokoyami’s every night. And every night, Tokoyami watches over him until he falls asleep.

A week into their journey, Tokoyami introduces Midoriya to the raven who will be ferrying letters between him and All Might. “This is Dark Shadow,” Tokoyami says. “He’s the smartest and the strongest of all my birds. He consistently outsmarts the hawks and never fails to bring his letters. You’re lucky to be in his care.”

Dark Shadow caws and nibbles affectionately at the finger Tokoyami offers him. When Midoriya tries it, he gets a sharp peck that makes him yip. It bleeds.

“Give him time,” Tokoyami says.

As part of his preparation, Midoriya socializes with Dark Shadow. Dark Shadow must know Midoriya’s face and trust him in order to pull off the secret letters. It takes another two weeks, almost to the end of their journey, for Dark shadow to form a bond with Midoriya, but he eventually tolerates Midoriya enough to allow him to run a finger down his back.

“You’re good with him,” Tokoyami says. “Not too loud, never angry, respectful. He can tell. It’ll make him warm up to you faster.”

“I just don’t want him to peck me again,” Midoriya says.

For the first time since he’d met him, Tokoyami smiles. “He knows that, too. He can smell your fear. But you’re determined to interact with him anyway. He respects you, too.”

Midoriya runs a finger down Dark Shadow’s back again and he warbles.

“What should I expect, in the palace?” Midoriya asks Tokoyami three days before they arrive at the capital.
“Sensory overload,” Tokoyami says. “Extravagance. Violence. Intimacy. Endeavorans love to touch, feel, taste, smell, and experience as much as they can while they’re alive and wealthy. They’ll clean you up nicely and get you fat if you’re not careful to work out. Make sure to arrange for time to self-train.”

“I don’t want to go,” Midoriya confesses. “I know All Might needs me, but…”

“It’s a lot to ask of someone,” Tokoyami agrees. “He doesn’t have much choice, though. He trusts you. You’re the only one who can do it.”

Midoriya bites his lip. “Do you…do you know anything about Prince Todoroki’s habits? Or his manner?”

Tokoyami sighs. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know much. Everything about the Crown Prince is shrouded in mystery. For instance, as the youngest child in the family, why should he be the Crown Prince? Why did King Todoroki take it upon himself to train his son instead of leaving it to teachers? Why is he kept sheltered in the palace?”

“Are you talking about Shouto-sama?” One of the dancers—Tooru, Midoriya thinks her name is—says, approaching them.

“Do you know anything about him, Tooru-san?” Midoriya asks.

“To me I,” Tooru says. “Oh, only the best palace gossip!”

Midoriya makes room for her around their fire. She flops down next to Midoriya, taking his hands in her own. “You’re very fortunate, Deku-kun!” she exclaims.

“I-I am?” Midoriya says.

“Shouto-sama is supposed to be incredibly handsome,” Tooru says. “More than any of his brothers or sisters, truly the gem of the Todoroki family! All of my friends in Endeavor say that he has a kingly air about him, that he’s strong enough to swing a broadsword, and that he has one eye that’s bluer than Yuuei’s seas.” She sighs dreamily. “To dance for him will be the greatest honor of my life.”

“Do you know how he treats his servants?” Midoriya asks, a little desperate.

“Aha!” Tooru says. “That’s right, I forgot that you will wait on him. Hmm…I don’t know any specifics, but I do know he doesn’t like to be touched. A dancer tried to dance on him and he had to get up and leave. Such a shame.”

If he doesn’t like to be touched, then hopefully he won’t touch me, Midoriya thinks. Maybe this won’t be so awful after all.

“Oh, there is one other thing,” Tooru says. “He doesn’t smile.” She slumps a little. “I don’t know why. None of my friends do, either. They say that for one so beautiful, he sure is a cold prince.”

A cold prince.

Midoriya feels a shiver travel down his spine. On his other side, Tokoyami shifts.


Tooru goes on to correct him, to say how none of her acquaintances have ever been hurt by the
Crown Prince, or by any of his siblings, really, but Midoriya doesn’t hear her. He thinks of this faceless entity—a proud man, just come of age, unsmiling with a cold, cold blue eye piercing through Midoriya’s chest. A cold prince. He would be serving the cold prince of Endeavor, who more than likely had a plot to attack or otherwise harm Yuuei. Midoriya’s stomach churns unpleasantly and he takes his leave earlier than usual.

And then, they’re in the capital.

Tokoyami wasn’t wrong. Even the merchant markets and city shops are decked out with colors and banners, the royal crest and great, draping fabrics. The citizens wear brightly patterned clothing and adorn themselves with jewelry. The men wear earrings that pull on their earlobes, the women wear furs, and even the children have rings with fat stones clasped to them around their fingers. Compared to the humbleness of Midoriya’s hometown and even the modest wealth of All Might’s palace, this opulence is a culture shock.

Midoriya clings to the reins of his horse and manages a weak smile and even weaker wave to the people who surround their envoy, cheering on the newcomers bringing gifts to their beloved prince. At least the smell of spiced meats in the market promise good food for Midoriya, if nothing else. His mouth waters.

“What a mad banquet of brightness,” Tokoyami says beside him.

Midoriya jerks out of his culture shocked haze. “What?” he says.

“These people,” Tokoyami says, nodding at the crowd. “They’re blinded by wealth and material possessions. True, they greet us with smiles and cheers, but how are we to know if this is a façade or not? Especially the two of us, who oppose their royal family, can be turned on in a moment. Do not lose sight of your mission, Deku.”

Midoriya understands. In front of them, Tooru has already been absorbed by the culture of Endeavor. Her eyes shine and her smile rivals the smiles of their hosts. She does not see Endeavor for what it is—a beautiful outer shell hiding a cruel and rotten core. She sees only the beauty and wealth of the capital, and so is swallowed by it and loses herself. Midoriya must not let his guard down.

“It doesn’t hurt to play the game, though,” Tokoyami says, waving to the passersby. “It takes suspicion off of you.”

So Midoriya smiles. He waves. He even blows a kiss to a group of girls who turn away, giggling. Midoriya can appreciate the difference of this place compared to Yuuei, as long as he keeps it all in perspective. As kind as these people are, they are not Yuuein. They do not live like he does.

The palace is the fat diamond on the crown of the capital city. It is white and blinding when the sun is high in the sky, and Midoriya has to squint just to look at it. All the frames of the doors and windows are covered in gold leaf. The windows are tall enough and wide enough to allow an army through. And the palace gardens are immaculate.

Midoriya remembers, rather jarringly, the tranquility of the little garden on the night of the Amity Ball. It’s too far back in his memory to recall the exact images, but he still has the impressions of the place—quiet, peaceful, and dark. Nothing like the beacon at the center of the city. Midoriya wonders if that garden still exists.

They’re waved through the gates (impossibly massive, gilded bronze) and into a courtyard shaded by those massive drapes, casting an orange-red glow over the courtyard. The ground beneath them
is speckled marble, and all around the envoy, men and women in heavy eyeliner and delicate silks whisper to each other standing beside columns and curled together in hammocks. And amongst the pale stone—green bushes, palm trees, and a leopard chained to a stake, blinking lazily at the new arrivals.

Midoriya feels faint.

“Steady,” Tokoyami murmurs, placing a hand at the small of his back. “This is where you need to be most alert.”

The whispers go quiet, and a woman in golden armor and a flowing purple cloak latched at her shoulder approaches them, flanked by four other men in full armor, swords at their sides. Tokoyami doesn’t need to say it; Midoriya knows—she is important.

“Greetings, travelers,” she says. “I am Yaoyorozu, captain of Crown Prince Todoroki Shouto’s personal guard. As servants to his Royal Highness, you will answer to me instead of the King’s Royal Guard. Please do not hesitate to let me know if we can somehow provide you with greater comfort during your time here. After all, you are our honored guests.”

Midoriya is a little surprised, but he tries not to let it show. He expected to be herded into servant’s barracks, tossed a scrap of bread, and left alone until the prince chose to call upon them. The last thing he expected was treatment as honored guests.

He’s not the only one surprised. Some of the less subtle dancers and caravan guards whisper amongst each other. Yaoyorozu notices this and smiles.

“Here in Endeavor, we pride ourselves in our hospitality,” she says. “You are a part of our family now, and will be treated with the same dignity we treat every Endeavoran with.” She waves forward some of the gathered men and women in silks.

“Come,” she says. “We will have you cleaned, clothed, fed, and shown to your chambers, all of you. Our people will take care of your horses and your wagons.”

“And so it begins,” Tokoyami says, and dismounts.

Midoriya follows suit, feeling much smaller once he gets off his horse. They’re shepherded down a few hallways into an equally as large room, this one with a massive bath in the center and a heavy layer of steam in the air. This time, everyone in the room is naked.

Midoriya resists the urge to cover his eyes, but he doesn’t fight off the urge to flinch. The dancers giggle at the blatant nudity. Yaoyorozu and her guards look unperturbed, even in their heavy armor. A few women respond to the beckoning of Yaoyorozu’s hand and bow to the assembled.

“These ladies will take care of your bathing,” Yaoyorozu says. “Leave it to them. We will be awaiting you in the banding room.”

Midoriya mouths ‘banding?’ at Tokoyami, but is quickly distracted by the very naked women coming closer and helping the members of their party undress. Determined to stay as far away from that as possible, Midoriya quickly sets to undressing himself. He can’t quite resist the urge to cover himself and dart for the water, turning red from the giggles of Endeavorans in the bath. The water, at least, is perfect—hot enough to sting, but only for a moment before it sinks into his muscles. After weeks of riding, the heat is welcome, loosening him up.

Midoriya isn’t completely able to escape the women, though. They insist on washing Midoriya themselves, scrubbing sharp-smelling soap into his hair and rubbing oils into his skin. The
scrubbing is soothing in a way, though, and these women must have experience with foreigners, because they make sure to massage his scalp to distract him from rubbing oil over his (completely bare) body.

They trim his nails and clean his teeth, too. That part is kind of funny to Midoriya. They’re very insistent about cleanliness, but Midoriya imagines that’s understandable, given that he was to be presented to the next king of Endeavor. They don’t give back their riding clothes, either—instead, they provide each member of the traveling party with a pale chiton that is pinned at one shoulder for the men and at both shoulders for the women. The pin is a gold-plated phoenix, the Todoroki crest.

The chiton is a little uncomfortable to Midoriya, much more used to tight-fitting clothes instead of this loose fabric hanging from his body. The only thing holding the garment together is a pin and a belt at the waist. It hangs low on Midoriya’s chest, too, revealing a dark nipple. He pulls at it, fretting.

“Stop that,” Tokoyami says. “When in Rome…”

Midoriya stops pulling at the fabric and lets it hang. His head hangs low, too. To the side, the dancers twirl in their clothing, moving sensually and complimenting the flow of the chiton. Midoriya glares enviously at the ease with which they take to this new lifestyle.

“This way,” one of the naked women says, gesturing to a smaller room.

This room—the banding room—is the only dark place Midoriya has seen thus far in Endeavor. The room is lit by the flickering of torches, but there’s a weightiness to the room that has him standing straighter. It seems to live up to its name—wall to wall, the room is covered in gold bands. Some are simple circles, others curl at the ends. Some have designs, others, gemstones embedded in them. Midoriya peers at them curiously.

“I can see this is your first time in Endeavor for many of you,” Yaoyorozu speaks up. “Please bear with me, as this is one custom unique to Endeavor that cannot be parted with.” She holds up one of the curling bands. “Each one of you who is to act as a servant of some kind must wear a band around your upper arm as a sign of your status.”

Yaoyorozu gestures to her ear, which has a ruby stud in its cartilage. “We wear jewelry as a sign of status,” she explains. “Soldiers have studs. Servants have bands. Nobility wear necklaces, bracelets—well, you’ll be able to tell the nobility fairly easily.”

She beckons Tooru forward. Uneasily, Tooru steps closer to her. Yaoyorozu offers her a gentle smile. “You’re a dancer, aren’t you?” she asks. “I can see it in the way you carry yourself, light and beautiful.”

Tooru nods, cheeks red.

Yaoyorozu holds out the curling band. “Dancers are the only ones who get to wear these bands. Will you allow me to put it on you?”

Tooru nods again. Yaoyorozu slides it up her arm until it fits snugly around the upper part of her arm. “Oh!” Tooru exclaims. “It’s light!” She flexes her arm and moves it in a circle.

“Easily adjustable, too,” Yaoyorozu says. “Feel free to move it around to your comfort at any time, but do not take it off while you are here.”

The rest of the dancers swarm around Tooru, murmurs sounding excited rather than hostile at the
idea of being 'banded.' Midoriya, the only non-dancer servant, is less enthralled. A physical mark of his status…wouldn’t that make him an easier target for attacks or servant bullying?

“Would the manservant named Deku step forward?” Yaoyorozu asks.

Midoriya pales, but does as bidden, taking a shaky step forward. Yaoyorozu turns that soft smile on him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she says. “All Might has spoken of you highly to our King. I hope our home lives up to your standards.”

Midoriya bows deeply. “It is an honor to be welcomed here as a guest,” he says. “And it will be an honor to serve His Royal Highness.”


Midoriya doesn’t know what to make of that.

“You answer directly to His Royal Highness,” Yaoyorozu says, picking out a different band. “Of course, you can always come to me with questions, and I will orient you on His Royal Highness’s preferences.” She holds out the selected band, this one a simple gold band with half a ruby and half a diamond embedded in a diamond shape in the center of the band. It’s a beautiful piece of art.

“This design is specific to The Crown Prince and no one else,” she says. “Whenever someone sees this band, they will know you are his property. No one but the Crown Prince will ever be allowed to lay a hand on you.” She slides the band up Midoriya’s arm. It fits comfortably around his bicep without squeezing it too much. Midoriya swallows and looks up at Yaoyorozu.

“You’re safe here,” she says, as if reaching into his mind and picking out all his fears. “I watched you, coming in. I can tell you’re uncomfortable in this environment. But I assure you, no harm will befall you while under our care.”

“Thank you,” Midoriya says, and means it.

“Come,” Yaoyorozu says. “I will show you all to your quarters.”

The dancers are shown to their quarters first. They share one massive room filled with cushions and drapes and mattresses, more like an orgy than a bedroom. But the dancers thrived when put together, and took to the comforts of group living with joy. They were given directions to the kitchen if hungry and to the restroom if necessary, a guard stationed outside their door if they were in need of assistance. Despite his initial misgivings about Endeavor, Midoriya can’t even see the soldier stationed outside their door as a threat.

The next to go are the caravan guards and other assembled members of the envoy party, including Tokoyami. Midoriya can’t resist, and he wraps Tokoyami in a tight hug. “Promise me you’ll say goodbye before you head back home,” he says.

“I promise,” Tokoyami says. “And keep an eye out for Dark Shadow.”

Then it’s just Midoriya and Yaoyorozu.

“Um,” Midoriya says, peering around. Did they forget to leave a room open for him?

“Oh no,” Yaoyorozu says. “You won’t be bunking here; you’ll be with the Crown Prince.”

“With the prince?” Midoriya squeaks.
Yaoyorozu laughs. “Not in his bedchambers, no. Not unless he asks you. And you’re allowed to say no to that, too. Even the Crown Prince must respect boundaries.”

Midoriya doesn’t allow himself to process the implications of that.

“You’ll be in an adjoining bedchamber, close to His Royal Highness in the case that he needs you in the middle of the night,” she explains. “I’ll let him tell you most of his preferences, but I can brief you on the basics on the way to meet him.”

“I’m meeting him now?” Midoriya squeaks again. Oh boy, he’s really not prepared for this; he’d imagined he’d get at least a couple hours to compose himself alone in his room before being presented to his new master. He’s a wreck right now, still in disbelief that he was actually in Endeavor, and he probably looked like the mousiest, jumpiest, least suitable manservant for Prince Todoroki.

“You’re nervous,” Yaoyorozu surmises.

No shit! “A bit,” Midoriya confesses. He fiddles with his fingers. “I’ve always served All Might, so I want to make sure I’m able to cater to Prince Todoroki’s needs in a way he sees fit.” At least he can lie his way around his nerves.

Yaoyorozu smiles, distance in her eyes. “I was childhood friends with the Crown Prince,” she says. “One of the few who were allowed to befriend him, because of my noble background.” She looks at Midoriya. “You want to know something? I volunteered to become the captain of his personal guard. Had to fight my way to the top, too. Prince Todoroki is beloved, and for good reason. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

“So…so he is a kind person?” Midoriya asks.

Yaoyorozu shrugs one shoulder. “You’ll understand when you get to know him.”

Midoriya doesn’t really like that answer, but Yaoyorozu has already turned away, leading him on to meet the Crown Prince himself. Midoriya hurries to follow her, twisting his wrists uncertainly. Yaoyorozu keeps at a fast clip, and Midoriya has to run every few steps to keep up with her legs.

“He’s never had a personal manservant, you know,” Yaoyorozu says.

It’s only Midoriya’s fierce desire to stop sputtering at every single thing out of Yaoyorozu’s mouth that keeps him from making any kind of noise of violent disbelief and despair. “He hasn’t?” Midoriya manages in a halfway-decent sounding voice.

“He has a set of servants, of course,” she says. “But none are specific to him. He doesn’t take very well to friends or intimacy. The fact that I was able to become friends with him was pure luck that we’re of compatible personalities and circumstances of birth. He specifically requested that he not have a personal manservant. Not that your All Might could have known that, of course.”

“Am I an insult then?” Midoriya asks, eyes wide.

“No at all,” Yaoyorozu says. “It’s rather peculiar that Prince Todoroki refuses contact with so many people. It’s given him quite the reputation.”

The cold prince. Midoriya nods. “I’ve heard them.”

“This is just my personal supposition,” Yaoyorozu says, “but I think being forced to rely on and be in close quarters with another human will be good for him, especially now that he is of marrying
“That’s right, she wouldn’t know of the marriage, Midoriya thinks. He would have to keep extra quiet about that.

“You’re really not like him at all,” she continues. “You’re expressive and touchy and easily frightened. I meant it when I said he’s not going to know what to do with you.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” Midoriya says weakly.

Yaoyorozu grins. “It’s comforting to me,” she says. “I know he’ll be challenged in his social skills, which should be an important lesson. Amusing, too. Don’t get too upset if you irritate him just by existing.”

“I…I have to live with him, Yaoyorozu-san…” Midoriya says. “Couldn’t you inspire a little more confidence in me?”

She laughs and thumps him on the back. The air whooshes from Midoriya’s chest and he coughs. “I like you, Deku,” Yaoyorozu says. “If you weren’t the Crown Prince’s, I probably would have requested you as my page.”

That comforts Midoriya, despite everything. He had a strong liking for Yaoyorozu, too—she was strong and blunt, but also very charismatic and hospitable. “Will I get to see you again as well, Yaoyorozu-san?” Midoriya asks.

“Of course,” she says. “I’ll make sure to steal you away from Prince Todoroki every now and then.”

Midoriya smiles at her and she groans. “Ugh, you’re disgustingly cute. You’re a man, aren’t you? What are you doing looking so pretty? How fortunate for him that we don’t believe in saving ourselves for marriage.”

“What?” Midoriya says.

“Never mind that,” Yaoyorozu says. “Let me brief you on a few rules before we enter the Crown Prince’s welcoming chamber.” Midoriya lets it slide and nods. “I’m sure you know the basics: kneel before him, kiss his hand if he asks you to approach, always refer to him as ‘Your Royal Highness’ or whatever he requests you call him, he can be picky…don’t question him.”

Midoriya really wishes he had his notepad and pen with him.

“Don’t touch him without express permission,” Yaoyorozu goes on. “Avoid mentioning the King, if possible. Never mention his mother. Ask questions if you need to; he’s not the type who will snap your neck for not knowing something, and he’d rather answer your question and you get it right than you keep quiet and get it wrong.”

The final hall they walk down has massive portraits of each of the Todoroki kings, every successive son more terrifying than the last. And at the end of the hall, a blank space for the portrait of the next King, the Crown Prince who stood behind the twin doors standing eight times as tall as Midoriya. He swallows.

Yaoyorozu pauses. “I feel like I should prepare you for what you’re about to see,” she says. “Although he often wear a veil over it while entertaining, His Royal Highness will not be wearing one today. He has a scar over the left side of his face. I don’t need to tell you not to stare or flinch or comment on it, do I?”
Midoriya gulps. “No, ma’am.”

“Very well,” she says. “Let’s meet the prince.”

Midoriya is not prepared for the room on the other side of those doors. As the guards push open the doors, Midoriya is assaulted by light and color. The room is an open chamber with a long red carpet leading to the throne, but what really stands out are the stained glass windows as tall as the doors pouring light of every color into the room. Across the grey marble, rainbow tessellations crisscross in brilliant shows of artisanship. The entire room is as bright as a church, practically swathed in holy light.

And at the center of all the color, at the end of the room, a throne carved from stone stands magnificent above all the assembled nobility and servants milling about the room. The ceiling above the throne has been removed to allow sunlight to pour over the throne, bathing the throne’s occupant in even more light, drawing all the attention of the room to him.

“Presenting to His Royal Highness, Steward of the Coastal Lands, the Crown Prince of Endeavor, Todoroki Shouto: the Honorable Captain of The Crown Prince’s Guard, The Lady Yaoyorozu Momo,” one of the guards announces, voice booming across the vast space and drawing the eyes of the assembled to Yaoyorozu and Midoriya. “…And guest,” the guard adds.

Midoriya trembles as they approach the throne. He can see it in his hands and feel it in his legs. Yaoyorozu walks with her head held high, a prime example of nobility, but Midoriya is no one. He’s a boy from a village in a country thousands of miles away from the capital of Endeavor. In the brightness of the room, however, there is nowhere for him to hide. When they reach the foot of the steps leading to the throne, Midoriya falls to his knees in the deepest bow of his life.

“I present Deku, of Yuuei,” Yaoyorozu says, taking a knee herself. “He is a gift from All Might, All Might’s very own page, to be the manservant of the Crown Prince of Endeavor.”

Midoriya doesn’t dare move, doesn’t dare breathe. He can’t see Prince Todoroki’s reaction from his position groveling on the ground. Every second that passes is a dagger in his back, an assurance that he’s somehow fucked up, that somehow the prince is offended by Midoriya’s very existence. Don’t get too upset if you irritate him just by existing.

“Rise, Yaoyorozu, Deku,” the Crown Prince says.

Midoriya looks up.

Sitting atop a mass of furs, dressed in black from neck to wrists to ankles, Prince Todoroki Shouto stares directly at Midoriya. He leans back in the throne, radiating power and comfort in a place of power, propping his face up with a hand to his cheek and an index finger resting on his temple. Midoriya sees his scar. He sees the bright blue eye. He sees the perfectly division of shocking white and even more shocking red. He sees the unsmiling twist of the Crown Prince’s mouth.

He’s staring back into the eyes of the boy he met ten years ago in this very same palace.
i’m headed straight for the castle

Chapter Notes

i’d like to dedicate this chapter to kai, who threatened to break off his arm for this chapter, and my sister, who asked me every single day if i was done writing "her" chapter yet. not a LOT of tododeku interaction, but there will be TONS next chapter. next chapter should come quick too, bc it was originally supposed to be one chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todoroki-sama is Todoroki Shouto, Midoriya thinks faintly. The boy he had met by chance ten years ago now sits before him, not just in line for the throne, but in line for the throne. He remembers the ghost of a smile on a tiny face.

Then Yaoyorozu shifts next to him and he realizes that he’s holding a staring contest with Crown Prince Todoroki Shouto, which could easily be misinterpreted as staring at his scar, the single thing Yaoyorozu had warned him not to do. He realizes he’s looking for recognition in the prince’s eyes, some sign that he recalled the tiny Yuuein boy whose hand he had grasped in the garden outside the noise of the party all those years ago. But he gets nothing. The prince’s expression doesn’t change, nor does he blink. He regards Midoriya with the same frosty look he had worn from the moment Midoriya truly took him in.

“Is there a problem?” Todoroki Shouto asks.

Midoriya’s eyes dart from Todoroki, to Yaoyorozu giving him a look, back to Todoroki, and then to the floor as he sinks back into a bow. “No, Your Royal Highness,” Midoriya says.

“Are you certain?” Todoroki asks. His voice is much deeper than Midoriya remembers but still oddly flat and factual. That much hasn’t changed. “Since we’ll be in each other’s company for quite some time, I’d rather hear out your misgivings sooner rather than later.”

Midoriya’s face burns where he has it pressed against the marble. Not even a minute into meeting Prince Todoroki and he’d offended him. Even more foolish, he had expected the prince to remember him. Of course he wouldn’t remember Midoriya. How stupid of him to think he would ever register as someone important to Prince Todoroki. The prince clearly had no issue shaming Midoriya in front of the crowd, either. But if it was because of his scar, then he probably got this kind of reaction a lot. No wonder he’s sick of it.

“Tales of accomplishments and graces always seem to forget to mention the left side of my face,” he says. “If it horrifies you, take comfort in the fact that you’re not the first to feel that way, nor the last.”

Midoriya doesn’t raise his head, but he does raise his voice. “I pray that Your Royal Highness will spare me his wrath for even considering the idea of contradicting him, as I am but a lowly servant of the royal family.”

“Go on,” Todoroki says.
“The rumor of your scarification has not gone unheard by these ears,” Midoriya says. “But in fact, it was a different rumor’s truth that gave me pause.” Midoriya raises his head, meets Todoroki’s eyes. “It was the rumor of your left eye, a color I was told that was a richer blue than the fabled seas of Yuuei. I must say, the rumors were not exaggerated in the slightest. I humbly apologize if my impolite staring and blatant rudeness were of any discomfort to Your Royal Highness.”

At Midoriya’s side, the tension leaves Yaoyorozu’s body. The corner of her mouth quirks. The assembled nobility murmur amongst themselves.

Prince Todoroki’s index finger slides down his jaw, curling his hand into a fist. He leans forward just a little and crosses one leg over the other. His eyes narrow, but the harsh twist of his mouth smooths just a little. “Interesting,” he says. “Approach, Deku of Yuuei.”

Midoriya rises from bow, dropping his eyes submissively and still keeping his body low in deference to the prince as he approaches. Prince Todoroki offers his left hand. His fingers—both right and left—are unadorned aside from a fat black stone on his left ring finger. Midoriya’s eyes fix to it. It’s not quite black—maybe a dark blue, he can’t tell—but inside the stone are almost starburst-like imperfections of white-blue.

Snowflakes, Midoriya realizes as he kneels before the prince. They look like snowflakes.

He takes the prince’s hand, rough under his light touch, and kisses the ring. Todoroki doesn’t flinch, not exactly. But his fingers flicker under Midoriya’s touch, the first real reaction he’s given Midoriya. Midoriya’s still afraid to look up at Todoroki and keeps his eyes cast down when Todoroki draws his hand back.

“Why do you look away from me, Deku?” Todoroki asks. “We are companions now; two parts of the sacred bond of master and servant. There is no need for you to defer so.”

Midoriya raises his eyes, shy. “I live to serve,” Midoriya says. “To bestow me with the title of ‘companion’ is an honor I cannot accept.”

Todoroki uncrosses his legs. “But you do not simply serve, do you, silvertongue?”

Midoriya’s mouth falls open and color rises to his cheeks. So Todoroki caught his cover for what it was. “Your Royal Highness——”

“Relax,” Todoroki says. “Cleverness and wit are admirable in a servant, at least by my tastes. My father is the one who prefers dull servants, ones with no intelligence to defy his will or betray him.”

“There is wisdom in avoiding betrayal,” Midoriya sputters, caught off guard that Prince Todoroki spoke with such open criticism about his father. In the process though, he insults Todoroki’s tastes. Midoriya’s mind races and he starts to sweat.

Todoroki raises an eyebrow. “True,” he says. A smile, thin and dangerous, crosses his lips. “Do you intend to betray me, Deku of Yuuei?”

Midoriya remembers, very suddenly, that he is not a servant. He is a page and an aide and not nearly as accustomed to playing the political mind games that Todoroki could play, that the social climbers could play. And even more than that, he was a spy. By the very nature of his task, he was to betray Prince Todoroki.

“No, Your Royal Highness,” Midoriya lies.

“Then I have nothing to worry about,” Todoroki says simply.
Midoriya is glad he’s not standing, because his knees would surely give out.

“Rise,” Todoroki commands. Midoriya doesn’t sigh at his bad luck, because that would be in poor taste. He’s proud that his legs barely shake when he stands. “I embrace you as one of my household,” Todoroki says.

Wait, what?

Todoroki rises from his throne, and the rest of the hall straightens up along with him. He’s taller than Midoriya, quite significantly. His left hand settles at Midoriya’s bicep, covering the band that marked him as a servant. It’s warm, much warmer than Midoriya had expected. Fire power, he remembers. He’s distracted enough that he misses the moment Prince Todoroki brushes back his bangs and kisses his forehead.

The kiss is short, chaste, and cold. When he draws away, Midoriya resists the urge to touch the skin Todoroki kissed to check for frost.

And then Todoroki’s eyes are gone from him. “Momo,” Todoroki calls, “See Deku to his bedchambers and get him settled.”

Behind Midoriya, Yaoyorozu says, “As you wish, Todoroki-sama.” Her fingers touch his elbow.

Midoriya bows once more, deeply. “I will take my leave of you now, Your Royal Highness.”

“Dismissed,” Todoroki says.

Yaoyorozu shows him out. Midoriya offers her a wobbly smile. She nods encouragingly. They pass out of the welcoming hall, and Midoriya breathes an audible sigh of relief.

Yaoyorozu slaps him on the back. He stumbles forward, coughing, and looks up at her with wide eyes. She offers him a half-smile. “You’re lucky you’re a quick thinker,” she says. “And even luckier that the Crown Prince has a certain fondness for people like that. What did I tell you about the staring, huh?”

Midoriya almost blurts out the truth. That he had known Todoroki Shouto once, long ago. But it’s pointless. He sighs and his shoulders slump. “I really wasn’t staring at his scar, though,” he mumbles.

“Uh-huh,” Yaoyorozu says, leading him up winding stairs.

Come to think of it, Midoriya didn’t remember seeing any kind of scar on Todoroki’s face at the Amity Ball. “Where…where did that scar come from?” Midoriya asks. It was a frankly terrifying wound. The skin was warped and puckered, red and wrinkled, marring an otherwise stunning face. Midoriya imagines Tooru wasn’t wrong—he had truly been beautiful, once.

Yaoyorozu frowns. “We don’t talk about the incident,” she says.

Midoriya raises an eyebrow. Surprising, he was sure a scar like that had an incredible battle story attached to it. “Why not?” he asks.

Yaoyorozu’s eyes narrow. “I suppose you would find out one way or another,” she sighs. “Alright. It’s not a battle wound, if that’s what you were thinking. The Queen did that to him, dumped a kettle of boiling water over his face. There’s a reason no one ever sees the Queen anymore.”

Midoriya trips on the step and nearly tumbles to the ground. “Are you…are you serious?”

“Beats me,” Yaoyorozu says. “It doesn’t make any sense. Todoroki-sama is the prize son, too—has been since his birth. He has the strongest Quirk and demeanor fitting a king."

Midoriya can agree with that. He’d seen the power of that Quirk when Todoroki was still young. With training, Midoriya couldn’t imagine how much stronger Todoroki would become. And sitting on that throne…well, it wouldn’t be hard to imagine him commanding an army or ordering a country to their knees. He had the air of royalty.

“If he gets close to you, maybe he’ll tell you,” Yaoyorozu suggests. “Then at least one person will solve that mystery.”

“Maybe,” Midoriya says dubiously. Yaoyorozu seemed to have this idea that he and the prince would become buddy-buddy best pals. Even before meeting Todoroki, Midoriya had doubted that was possible. Now, having met the prince, he knows the distance between their statuses is just too much. There was no way for someone like Midoriya, lowborn and trained to serve, to rise above his station and look Todoroki in the eyes as an equal.

They reach the top of the stairs and Midoriya pats his side, leaning against the wall. “Does Prince Todoroki have to live in the tallest room of the tallest tower?” he pants. “I’m really not looking forward to ferrying food up and down these stairs for him.”

Yaoyorozu shrugs. “He’s the Crown Prince,” she says simply. “He must be able to survey his future kingdom as he so desires. It would be an insult to put him any lower.” She eyes him. “Does All Might not live on the top floor of your palace?”

“Okay, fair, but our ‘palace’ is a three-story mansion, not…you know…” He gestures to the entirety of the Endeavoran palace. “It’s a lot more humble.”

“Well, in our culture, excess is a sign of wealth, and wealth is a sign of power and to be respected. If this palace weren’t above and beyond the other capital cities, it would be a shame on our royal family. The King is especially ostentatious.” Yaoyorozu keeps walking, her hand straying to the hilt of her sword.

Midoriya gulps and trots to catch up. “That’s something else I wanted to ask,” he starts. “Both His Royal Highness and Yaoyorozu-san are pretty…open about their disdain for the King. Isn’t that treason?”

“I serve the Crown Prince, not his father,” Yaoyorozu says simply.

Midoriya wisely keeps his mouth shut instead of prying further. Clearly, there was some kind of power game going on between father and son. And Midoriya, preferring his head attached to his shoulders, was not going to get involved with any kind of family feud on foreign soil.

“These are Todoroki-sama’s bedchambers,” Yaoyorozu says, gesturing to a solid wood door with intricate carvings of phoenixes and a battle scene, accented in gold.

“I couldn’t tell,” Midoriya says drily. Yaoyorozu grins.

“This is you,” she says, pointing to another door further down the hall. Midoriya’s door is the same heavy, shined wood. It’s not nearly as ornate, but it still has the angry looking phoenix carved into the wood.

Midoriya swallows. “Home sweet home,” he says.
Yaoyorozu must sense his unease because she squeezes his shoulder. “It’s not so bad,” she says. “I promise you’ll be well kept.” She opens the door.

Midoriya wants to have some kind of complaint. He would be happier if he was kept in a dungeon so that he could at least have one thing to mope about here in Endeavor. But, like everything thus far, his bedchambers were wonderful.

His room is located at the corner of the palace, but instead of forming a sharp edge, his room curves in an arc, and the semicircle was entirely covered in windows. Midoriya steps into the room, jaw dropping in awe. The windows stretch from floor to ceiling and even taking up part of the ceiling, filling the room with natural light.

“How—” Midoriya sputters.

“This glass was imported from Ingenium, the finest pieces in the Five Kingdoms,” Yaoyorozu says proudly. “Todoroki-sama’s is even more amazing.”

Lamps with delicate metalwork are attached to the walls closest to the door, to provide light when night fell. Midoriya’s ‘bed’ isn’t so much a bed as it is a massive bed cushion with more pillows and blankets than Midoriya could count, big enough for five people instead of one tiny servant. It is pressed right against the windows too, giving a view over the gardens and training fields and stables of the Todoroki dynasty and from there, forests of jade. In one corner of the room, a wardrobe much taller than Midoriya. In the other, a desk and comfortable looking chair.

“Not bad as far as prison cells go, huh?” Yaoyorozu says, smiling.

“This is…incredible,” Midoriya admits. “Nothing like Yuuei. Not even close.” He spies a door off to the right, less ornate. “What’s that?” he asks.

“That’s the door to His Royal Highness’s chambers,” Yaoyorozu says. “You will be expected to rise at any hour if he needs you, and attend to his morning and evening needs.”

“Right,” Midoriya says. He couldn’t escape the prince even in his own bedchambers.

“Todoroki-sama’s servants will bring you your meals and anything else you need,” Yaoyorozu says. “Just ring this bell.” She points to a bell and woven cord that could be pulled to ring it.

Midoriya frowns. “But…I’m a servant, too,” he says.

“You’re a guest,” Yaoyorozu says. “And more importantly, even though you report to me, you also report directly to the prince. Because you’re his only personal manservant, you have a higher status than his other servants, as reflected in your arm band.”

Midoriya touches the warm gold. “Yours has that curling design where it clasps the ruby and diamond,” she says. “The others will have completely straight bands. It’s a small difference—most foreign nobility and even Endeavoran nobility won’t notice. But those here will.”

“Won’t they hate me for it?” Midoriya murmurs.

“Not if you don’t act like a stuck-up brat,” Yaoyorozu says. “Although I’m not too worried about you doing something as stupid as that. We’re all here to serve the prince, so they’ll accept you as one of their own.”

“Your loyalty is frightening,” Midoriya says.
Yaoyorozu gives him a fierce grin that he can’t decipher. “Spend a few days shadowing him,” she says cryptically. “Then you’ll understand our loyalty.”

“Right,” Midoriya says. “When do I start with that?”

“You’ll be in training for a week or so with our Master of Servants, Ojiro-san,” Yaoyorozu says. “When he declares you fit for duty to our standards, you’ll be put into Todoroki-sama’s service. You start tomorrow, bright and early.”

Midoriya nods. “Alright,” he says.

“Dinner will be brought to you later since you don’t know the way to the kitchen or the mess,” Yaoyorozu says. “If you have a question, Shouji is on guard duty. Anything else before I go?”

Midoriya shakes his head. “I think I’ll rest now, if that’s okay,” he says.

“Of course,” Yaoyorozu says. “I’ll be in touch.”

She closes the door behind her, and Midoriya finally, finally lets himself collapse. He crashes onto the bed cushion, amused to see the pillows jump at his intrusion. The cushion is plush and smells like lavender, a far cry from the hard bed and fabric smells of Midoriya’s tiny room back in Yuuei. Endeavor is…different. If he’s honest with himself, would rather be in his tiny, familiar home than the extravagance of Endeavor, as hospitable as they were.

He falls into an uneasy sleep in his new room, too overwhelmed by the day to do anything but rest. The fact that this morning he had packed up camp and ridden into the city alongside Tokoyami is impossible. That morning feels as if it had happened weeks ago. He drifts off thinking about the camaraderie of his band of Yuueins and a dark stone on thin, pale fingers.

He’s woken by a knock at his door, jumping to attention. “Coming!” he calls, wiping a line of drool from his chin. He stands and straightens out his chiton. Or…tries to. The thing is basically a large, draping sheet over his body. A small girl with short black hair and no shoes holds out a tray of food for him. She smiles softly and dips her head. “Dinner prepared for Deku-san,” she says sweetly.

It looks delicious. Warm bread and soup with chunks of meat, potato, and vegetables with two fuzzy peaches on the side. There’s a pitcher of water and a smaller, capped glass bottle of what Midoriya assumes must be wine. His eyes flicker to her arm. She wears the same split jewel band that he does, but like Yaoyorozu said, it is completely straight with no curling at the gemstone.

Midoriya offers her a smile and bows his head back at her, taking the silver tray. “Thank you… um,” he says, biting his lip when he realizes he doesn’t know what to call her.

“Sami,” she says.

“Thank you, Sami-san,” Midoriya says.

“I’m on duty right now, so if you need anything else, don’t hesitate to ring for me,” she says and backs away, her own gown swaying and flowing lightly as she walks away.

Midoriya exhales slowly, hoping that his manners were suitable. The last thing he wants to do is make enemies of the people whose mercy he was at. He places the tray on his desk, picking up a peach and biting into it while he takes stock of his desk materials. Pen and ink, plenty of candles and matches, fresh parchment to write on and ribbons to tie his letters shut. He has everything necessary to complete is correspondence with All Might. He takes another bite of the peach. It’s
sweet enough to make tears prick at the corner of his eyes.

He eats the rest of his food, reflecting on what might await him tomorrow at the hand of the Master of the Servants. Hopefully nothing too unpleasant, although nothing in Endeavor had struck him as unpleasant aside from the Crown Prince himself, who terrified him. He’s not quite sure what Tokoyami or All Might had believed was so sinister about this place.

Tokoyami. Midoriya’s heart pangs for his friend. He had been so uncomfortable in the excess of Endeavor. Midoriya hopes that Tokoyami is okay alone in his room, but of course he would. He’d done this before. It was Midoriya who was lonely and uncomfortable. He scoops up the last of the soup broth with the bread.

He supposes Tokoyami was somewhat right about Endeavor. There was something going on under the surface, beneath all the glitz and glamor. He’s not sure what it is yet, only that it’s there, slow-moving and dangerous, putting Midoriya on edge.

The wine makes him feel fuzzy in his fingers and toes. Instead of staying up longer and contemplating his situation, Midoriya decides to go back to sleep. He would need to be fully rested for tomorrow. He could deal with Endeavor’s complexity in the morning.

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Midoriya wakes up with the sunrise. He yawns. Might as well get used to early mornings—he would need to wake up earlier and go to bed later than the Crown Prince in order to meet his needs. Midoriya had always been a bit of an early riser, anyway. He stretches and pads to the wardrobe, flinching at the cool stone under his bare feet.

To his dismay, most of his wardrobe consists of the drape-y fabric, loose and airy and completely embarrassing. He longs for his tunic and vest, his riding pants. Maybe he could convince Tokoyami to sneak him a couple pairs…

Sighing, he pulls on a green one made of heavier fabric that rose from his chest into a rippling halter top. The gold choker is studded with emeralds and diamonds, as is the hefty belt. Midoriya feels like a pet on display, but at least his chest is fully covered now. It was odd, Midoriya thought, that Endeavor tended towards looser, lighter clothing, but Prince Todoroki wore tight clothing that covered almost all of his skin. He really did seem to be out of place, especially considering that he was intended to be king one day.

Midoriya washes his face in the bucket of clean water provided, scrubbing at his teeth with a rough brush hooked on the side of it. He splashes his face one more time, and is startled by a knock at the door. Midoriya opens the door to reveal a very powerful looking man in a robe rimmed with a heavy fur collar, his hands on his hips. Midoriya yips and takes a step back, intimidated.

“Deku-san,” the man says, and his voice is much softer and kinder than his build. “I’m Ojiro Mashirao, Master of Servants. I’m here to bring you to your training.”

“Sir,” Midoriya says, bowing lowly.

Ojiro laughs. “No need for that level of formality, I serve the Crown Prince just like you. Are you ready?”
Midoriya nods. “You’re here to fetch me personally?” Midoriya asks.

“Just for today,” Ojiro says, winking. He leads Midoriya back down the hall and the winding staircase. There were very few rooms off of Midoriya’s hallway, so he figures it must be Todoroki’s personal section of the palace. One part memorized, a bajillion to go.

Midoriya thinks he recognizes the section of the palace they walk through, passing through open courtyards full of palm trees and hammocks, large fountains in the center with people taking a dip in the cool waters. Midoriya hears the murmur of voices, and Ojiro leads him into a room with the same kind of skylights from Midoriya’s room, turning the occupants of the room gold.

He recognizes them—most of them are the dancers and servants from Yuuei, with a few nervous new faces that Midoriya imagines must be new hires into the service of the royal family. They sit on woven mats, gossiping amongst themselves and looking just as comfortable in the revealing Endeavoran wear as they had yesterday. Standing at the fringes of the room are several more servants, these ones standing much more still and composed than Midoriya’s excited gaggle of companions. Experienced servants, then.

He spies Sami and offers a small wave, which she returns with a smile and a bow. Then Tooru spies **him** and claps her hands together.

“Deku!” she calls. The familiarity is welcomed and Midoriya smiles. He bows to Ojiro and thanks him for bringing him in, then moves to sit on a mat beside Tooru.

“It’s him?” Tooru breathes, eyes wide and shining as she stares at Ojiro.

It takes Midoriya a moment to realize what she’s asking. “Oh—oh. No, that’s Ojiro-san,” he replies.

Tooru’s cheeks go pink. “He’s quite good-looking,” she says. “I wouldn’t mind dancing for him, if His Royal Highness is otherwise occupied.”


“So you did meet him,” Tooru says, eyes wide. “What was he like?”

Midoriya finds himself at the center of attention from several beautiful dancers who had overheard their conversation. They press close, leaning against each other and even touching his shoulder with familiarity that has Midoriya shivering.

He’s saved from answering by Ojiro, who claps his hands twice and brings the attention of the room back to him. Obediently, the dancers and servants slide back onto their mats, sitting on their knees, hands folded neatly in their laps.

Ojiro surveys their posture and nods. “Good,” he says. “You seem to be a well-trained group, which makes for an easier time for me. I am Ojiro Mashirao, Master of Servants. I will be overseeing your training in a variety of areas along with my most competent servants.” He smiles. “This isn’t meant to be a full retraining, as you are all clearly well-groomed. Think of it as a brushing up of your technique mixed with honing your talents to suit Endeavor and His Royal Highness in particular.”

Ojiro claps his hands again. “Right, well no time to waste. Today, we’ll work on addressing nobility, and the correct obeisances that are used with each.”
“This is going to be so fun,” Tooru says.

It was surprisingly relaxing. Midoriya felt a certain sense of power in knowing how exactly he was to perform his duties and show respect. Knowledge was power, and the better he was at being a manservant, the safer he would be in this new land. They reviewed titles and the pronouns used with each, as well as going over the full titles of the royal family, their relatives, and other important nobility that frequented the palace.

They learned obeisances, something Midoriya had not known existed. His surprise was reflected in the rest of the Yuueins. In Yuuei, deference was shown by how deeply one bowed. The differences in bows told of their status relative to who they were greeting, the most informal a nod, as All Might would bestow upon other nobility, to the most formal bow of complete submission, as a servant might fall to their knees, nose to the ground and palms pressed flat if they were in the presence of royalty.

Endeavor was much the same, adding the difference of eyes closed versus open, but they also had a series of obeisances that had to be performed when approaching the throne or being introduced to royalty, Endeavoran or not. When approaching the King, they were to approach with a series of bows to the floor. When approaching the princes and princesses, a series of bows from their waist. And when approaching the Crown Prince specifically, they were to curtsy and take a knee as they approached.

The work was tough. Ojiro insisted that their obeisances be fluid and automatic, looking delicate while the servants controlled themselves with the utmost grace. For the dancers, this was a walk in the park. They danced on poles daily, able to hold themselves up with just their arm and abdominal strength, so they only had to perfect their form. For Midoriya and the other servants, it was tougher on their bodies. Midoriya was by no means weak, but he didn’t practice all day like the dancers did.

Sweat dripped from his brow to the mat and his arms shook as he held them out in a less than perfect curtsy. Beside him, Tooru was a statue, perfect and graceful, taking to the submissive posture like it was second nature.


Tooru flushes lightly under his praise and the gentle press of his hand on her hair. Midoriya had caught him glancing at her during the exercises, and he’s pleased for Tooru that the interest was mutual.

“And what are you looking at, Deku?” Ojiro says, turning to Midoriya. Midoriya flinches, upsetting his posture, and he goes tumbling over. Ojiro sighs. “I know you’re not like the dancers, but you must master at least the obeisance to the Crown Prince.”

“I will,” Midoriya says. “I will.”

Ojiro nods. “You’re a hard worker,” he says. “I appreciate that.” He puts a hand on Midoriya’s head, too, and Midoriya feels it, a little, what the dancers must feel. The longing to be praised, and to serve under a master much more powerful than them, who could command them and they would obey effortlessly.

Tooru watches him move on, eyes shining. Well. Midoriya wasn’t quite a servant in the first place. He shakes the thought from his head. He stands up and gets back into position. He watches Sami demonstrate the proper posture for another servant and copies her, falling just a little bit better into place.
After that, strangely enough, it’s bath time.

Okay, maybe not exactly bath time, but they’re allowed to wash the sweat off their bodies before they learn how to properly wash a master. The dancers fling off their clothes and dive into the water, laughing and splashing and climbing on each other. Midoriya and the other servants move slower, more aware of their bodies. Midoriya clutches a towel in front of him until the last moment, quickly submerging himself in the water before anyone can look at him. It doesn’t exactly work—Tooru and her friends snicker at his modesty and blow kisses at him. Midoriya does his best to ignore them.

Learning to wash is in a word, strange. They work in teams of five—one experienced servant acts as the ‘master,’ ordering commands, another experienced servant demonstrates the proper technique and response, and then the three rookies practice.

Midoriya learns on his own, Sami demonstrating on Yuuto, a spirited man with a sense of humor who takes great pleasure in having Midoriya wash him. Midoriya appreciates his ease with the whole situation—perhaps Ojiro could sense his tension and put him with two easygoing servants, or maybe he just got lucky. Sami tells him the temperatures Prince Todoroki likes his water (constant switching between burning hot and freezing cold), how he likes to be washed (rough scrubbing, don’t be afraid to rub his skin red), and that he put the ointment on his scar himself, so Midoriya has no need to washing anywhere near there. And thankfully, the prince has no interest in Midoriya washing his junk, so he’ll do that himself.

After bathing lessons, it’s time for lunch. And then, Midoriya can’t avoid the curious eyes and ears of his training companions any longer.

“So…” Tooru drawls over cuts of turkey and fresh grapes. She grins. “Tell us what he’s like!”

Midoriya sighs as the Yuueins crowd around him, shoulders bumping and cheeks brushing. “You guys,” Midoriya says, smiling despite himself. “I wasn’t even there that long.”

“Tell!” Tooru insists, prodding at him with a spoon.

“Okay, okay!” Midoriya says. He hums. “What was he like? Well…he definitely lives up to the name of ‘the cold prince.’”

“He was mean?” One of the small male servants squeaks.

“No, not exactly,” Midoriya says. “He’s very reserved…but clever. I made a mistake and he caught it immediately. He doesn’t take any shit either.”

“He sounds strong,” one of them sighs.

“Yeah,” Midoriya agrees. “He had a really powerful aura. I…” He scratches his nose, cheeks burning. “I’m not completely used to submission like you guys are, but I sank to my knees so fast in his presence. I was trembling the entire time.”

“He was gorgeous, wasn’t he?” Tooru says. “Someone that powerful just has to be gorgeous.”

Midoriya almost decides to tell them about the scar. He almost says, he would be if it weren’t for this one flaw. He’s not sure why he doesn’t. Maybe out of respect for the prince, but Midoriya doesn’t think that’s what it is. He just has this image of the prince sitting slumped easily in his throne, his posture commanding the room and that one, icy eye piercing Midoriya to his core.

“Yeah,” Midoriya says. “He’s more than I ever expected.”
“I knew it!” Tooru says, pumping her fist. “I can’t wait to dance for him. I want to make him blush.” She drops her voice to say the last part, blushing herself at her daring. There’s a murmur of agreement amongst the dancers, and Midoriya is eased from the focus of conversation.

He tries to imagine Prince Todoroki, stone-faced and resting his cheek against his hand while the dancers twisted and whirled around him. The image is so absurd and ill-fitting that Midoriya snorts. He can’t imagine Todoroki doing anything fun, let alone allow a bunch of scantily clad men and women to move him. He would be a statue carved of ice, standing still against the onslaught of their curves and movements.

(It’s not true that he’s a stone, though. Midoriya remembers a little boy with eyes bright as he held Midoriya’s hand, overjoyed to share his incredible gift with someone else—someone who might have been a friend, in another life.)

But as much as Midoriya thinks Todoroki wouldn’t appreciate dancing, his own personal beliefs don’t excuse him from the next exercise—dance practice. Midoriya feels the life drain from his body while Tooru clings to his shoulder, shaking him excitedly. He’s never danced a day in his life. How can he be expected to move like they do? Isn’t that what they were here for?

“Yes, but you never know when a member of nobility might take a liking to you,” Ojiro points out. “The dancers may not be to their liking, but you might. What’ll you do if His Royal Highness wants to see you dance? Say no?”

Midoriya thinks he might just die on the spot if Todoroki asks him to dance for him, but he doesn’t share that information with Ojiro.

“Come on, Deku!” Tooru says. “It’ll be fun!”

“For you maybe,” Midoriya grumbles. That makes Tooru laugh and she pulls Midoriya towards her friends.

The dancers, of course, own the room. They’re graceful and beautiful, and strangely quiet when they dance, as opposed to their noisy exclamations and conversation when together. They looked focused on their work, but not unhappy. Midoriya can see the smiles on their faces as they execute jumps and spins and all sorts of amazing moves that make Midoriya’s jaw drop.

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“Come on,” Tooru says, softer. “Don’t worry, that’s not what you have to learn. You just need to learn how to move your body.”

It’s probably the most Midoriya has had other people’s hands on him. Tooru and the other dancers guide him with touch and pressure, showing him how to move his hips and sweep his arms gracefully, so that his dancing looks sensual. It’ll never be the effortless smooth of the others, but if the Crown Prince wanted a show, he wouldn’t be calling on Midoriya in the first place.

“If he calls on you, it’s because he’s attracted to you,” Tooru says.

Midoriya sputters, but Tooru shakes her head. “No, don’t argue with me. I know what I’m talking about. Even though he’s engaged, he’s allowed to look at and sleep with whoever he wants. He may not ask you to bed, but if he calls on you, he wants to see your body.” She puts her hands on Midoriya’s shoulders and grins. “So you’ve gotta show him what you’ve got.”

“I have to what,” Midoriya says.

She slaps him on his shoulder. “You’re a good-looking guy, Deku,” she says. “You’d appeal to almost anyone’s tastes with your cute face and bulky muscles. You just need to flaunt your best
traits—put emphasis on them.” She touches his cheek. “And control your facial expressions while you do. You can turn someone on just by looking at them, if you do it right."

“This is—the Crown Prince—” Midoriya wheezes.

Tooru puts her hands on her hips. “What? I’m just saying it how it is. He’s not actually made of ice, you know. He has desires like the rest of us.”

“Please stop talking,” Midoriya says. You’ll understand when you see him, he doesn’t say. He doubted that prince could feel more than a handful of emotions, and desire was not one of them.

Still, Midoriya tries his best to follow Tooru’s directions. Midoriya thought Ojiro might get one of the more experienced servants to take her place, but from the satisfied way Ojiro scans her form, Midoriya realizes she just might be the most talented dancer in the room.

After a while, it does get fun. The room they’re in is full of mirrors, and Midoriya watches his body transition from awkward hip thrusts to a smooth full body roll, and he nearly stumbles. Did his body really move like that? Apparently it did. He dances with Tooru. He dances with the others. Some of the experienced servants play songs on instruments in the center of the room to provide a beat. Midoriya laughs. It’s fun.

It’s also the last new lesson of the day. They go over what they’d learned and then are escorted back to their rooms to clean up and have some free time. It’s like school, but without any of the strictness. Midoriya uses his free time to learn part of the palace. He stays close to his bedchambers, but it’s obvious that the palace is organized by function, just telling from the people moving about the palace. Midoriya had spent most of his day in the servant and soldiers area in the northeast wing of the palace. He’s been greeted by the the Crown Prince in the southwest wing, and food was coming from the northwest wing. That left the southeast corner for storage and training arenas, probably leading out to the stables and such. He felt better with his bearings about him.

Midoriya also met Shouji, the terrifyingly tall and strong guard of Prince Todoroki’s hallway. He wore a piece of cloth over his mouth and nose, so Midoriya didn’t get to see his face, but like Ojiro, he looked more intimidating than he actually was.

A servant Midoriya didn’t know the name of brought him his dinner again and he collapsed in his bed, flipping through a book on the countryside of Endeavor to get a better feeling of the area. Later, he would go bathe the soreness out of his muscles in the prince’s personal bath, but for now he curled comfortably against the cushions.

Midoriya spent a week and a half with that routine. He built strong bonds with both the Yuuein servants and the Endeavoran servants who traded out day by day. It was clever, actually—while getting the new people used to life in Endeavor, they also got the old and new servants used to each other. The smile on Ojiro’s face said it was all his doing. Midoriya felt a fresh wave of appreciation for the Master of Servants.

It was nice to stretch his muscles and move, too. As rewarding as it had been to work for All Might, Midoriya had gone a little soft in his personal training. He burnt off whatever excess fat might have clung to his body and he felt fresh and alive. All the Yuueins shone with health, a testament to the caliber of servants All Might had sent to the prince. Ojiro noticed that, too.

With the rush of training and practice and staying with the dancers in their orgy-like bedchambers until late at night, Midoriya forgot to be homesick. He forgot to worry about the sinister happenings under Endeavor’s surface. And more than anything, he forgot about the chill of fear.
There’s a knock at his door, ten days after his first night in Endeavor. Midoriya hops up, trotting to the door. He opens it to reveal Shouji.

“Shouji-san,” Midoriya greets, closing his eyes and bowing his head.

“Deku,” Shouji greets with a nod. “Ojiro-san has completed your training, is that right?”

“That’s right,” Midoriya says. “I was cleared to serve this afternoon.”

“Good,” Shouji says. “His Royal Highness has need of you tomorrow.”

Midoriya’s stomach drops to his feet. He tries to keep his voice neutral. “Oh?”

“You are to dress him in the morning and then accompany him as he makes the rounds of the palace and performs his princely duties,” Shouji says.


Shouji takes his leave after that, and Midoriya collapses onto the bed, much like he did his first night in Endeavor. His heart thuds painfully. The training—that had been fun, low stress. But now he would be under the scrutinizing gaze of Prince Todoroki, who he had already offended once. Who knew how many mistakes he would tolerate before he booted Midoriya out on the street?

Or worse.

Midoriya doesn’t let himself think about worse.

He clutches his stomach, trying to calm its anxious churning. He doesn’t finish his dinner. Instead, he goes to bed early and twists and turns, dreaming about being trapped in the cold, cold claws of Todoroki Shouto.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: todoroki shouto is not at all what he seems
we were something more

Chapter Notes

whew, it's done! i'm sorry to say but this will be the last update for a while. i'm leaving
the country in 9 days with limited access to wifi, and i have to work on my other
longfic since i've been babying this one.

ART:

HINA DREW ME A COLORFUL PRINCE TODOROKI

EZOO GAVE ME THESE THREE GREAT COMICS (im literally wheezing plea
look at those FURS. look at that FACE.

A BOY ON HIS THRONE

please let me know if i've missed your art somewhere;; i would love to see it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Midoriya wakes up with a heavy stone in the pit of his stomach. During the night, he had cocooned
himself in blankets. He makes a commendable effort to forget that the rest of the world existed,
tucking his head into the blankets and ignoring the peeking of dawn over the treetops and bleeding
across his stone floor.

However, he can’t hide forever. It’s his duty to bring Prince Todoroki his breakfast and dress him
and bend over backwards for whatever the prince wanted. Midoriya isn’t bitter, exactly, just…
anxious. The prince sure had made some kind of impression on him.

Midoriya gets out of bed, slipping out of his baggy nightclothes and into a new chiton. He tries not
to trudge too obviously when he leaves his room. A guard he’s not familiar with stands outside
Todoroki’s door nods at Midoriya as he passes by. Midoriya bows his head in return and makes the
long trek down to the kitchens.

The kitchen staff are up even earlier than Midoriya. Servants and kitchen workers buzz in and out
and around, darting around Midoriya as if he weren’t even there. It’s hot and jovial in the kitchen,
the low murmur of happy conversation still carrying the sleepy edge to it. Midoriya slinks through
the kitchens, looking for someone who could possibly direct him to the prince’s breakfast.

As it turns out, he doesn’t have to. “Oi!” A potbellied man calls out to him, waving a ladle. “You
better not be snooping around here for scraps, you little sneak.” He’s clean-shaven with rosy
cheeks, from a good nature or the heat of the kitchen, Midoriya doesn’t know. He wears an earring
like Yaoyorozu and Shouji.

Midoriya bows deeply. “Sorry for disturbing your work, sir,” he says. “I’m His Royal Highness’s
manservant and it’s my first day in his service. I was looking for his tray, to be brought up to his
bedchambers.” Midoriya looks up and offers what he hopes is a contrite expression.
The cook—who must be the head chef—breaks into a smile. “Oh!” he says. “Well, no need for that skulking around my kitchen, young man! Just let us know what His Royal Highness needs and we’ll see to it.” He pulls Midoriya into a bodily hug, accidentally squeezing the air from Midoriya’s lungs. “Welcome to the family!”

Midoriya wheezes a little, but smiles weakly. “Thank you, Chef-san,” he says.

Chef makes a shooing motion. “Bah, none of those honorifics,” he says. “You’re family. Just call me Chef.” He point across the kitchen with his ladle. “His Royal Highness’s breakfast is under that cover.”

Midoriya bows again and moves across the kitchen. He’s met by curious glances. None of them read as hostile though—Yaoyorozu was right. Simply treating the others with respect was all he needed to do to earn their amity. A few glance at his band. The kitchen workers have gold bands with four gold circles breaking up the straight line. The servants moving around them have all different kinds of gemstones embedded in their bands, or flat gold diamond shapes facing out. Midoriya figures they must be palace servants to see to guests.

Midoriya picks up the tray and a pitcher of fresh water for Todoroki and carefully picks his way out of the kitchen. He’s grateful for Ojiro’s training—he would not have been prepared for the balancing act of carrying a tray upstairs if not for his instruction. As it is, the tray is heavy and navigating a winding staircase when he’s not the only one on it is tricky enough. By the time he reaches the top, Midoriya is sweating a little.

The guard is kind enough to open Midoriya’s door for him, and he bows deeper than usual in gratitude. As soon as the door closes though, the warm friendliness of the kitchen fades from his chest, leaving only chilly anxiety twisting his gut. He places the tray and pitcher on his desk and walks to the mirror in front of the water bucket. He straightens out his clothing, splashing a little water on his face to cool off.

There’s nothing left to do about this, Izuku, Midoriya tells himself. You just have to go in there, be respectful, and only spoke when spoken to. You don’t have to be his friend. You don’t have to make nice. You just need to be there when he needs you and a shadow when he doesn’t.

You wanted to be friends with him, once, a different part of him whispers.

Midoriya brushes the thought away. He never believed he could be friends with a prince, even at twelve. Prince Todoroki was as mythical as Urabiti’s unicorn, and the encounter with him was little more than a fuzzy memory that felt like a dream.

He picks up the tray and raises his fist over their connecting door. He hesitates. Takes a breath. Knocks lightly, and calls through the wood, “Your Royal Highness? I brought your breakfast.” He doesn’t get a response, but he was supposed to wake the prince anyway. He opens the door and grabs the water pitcher, nudging the door wider with his shoulder.

Midoriya steps into Prince Todoroki’s bedchambers. They’re easily four times the size of his, almost comically large with an entire corner of the room dedicated to a dressing screen and three massive hickory wardrobes. He has a broad desk with a tactical map of the Five Kingdoms across a section of it, and another, cleaner map of the Five Kingdoms hanging on his wall. It looks hand painted. There are several woven tapestries hanging on the rest of the bare space of his walls, depicting battle scenes and what Midoriya assumes are important life events to Todoroki—his birth, his first hunt, his first battle.

As his throne was, his floor is covered in skins of lions, bears, and other big game that Midoriya
knew to run through Endeavor’s territory, and even some that didn’t, like the great wolves of Ingenium. There were a few heads of boar and bucks hung high on his walls too. And a four-poster bed larger than Midoriya’s, complete with privacy curtains drawn up, presses against the far wall. The bed has blankets like Midoriya’s mixed with the woven pelts of smaller animals. Also, the bed is empty, blankets pulled back neatly.

Midoriya has a flash of panic, thinking the Crown Prince had been kidnapped or run away under his watch. He would be killed. He would definitely be executed for losing the prince; what kind of manservant was he? Woozy, Midoriya puts the tray on a small table to the side of the door and takes another step into the room. His eyes light on the couch stretching along the prince’s wall of windows, like Midoriya’s, and then on the shirtless form of Prince Todoroki in a cushioned chair, legs kicked up onto the couch and head leaning back, eyes closed.

Midoriya holds down a squeak of surprise. Todoroki is so still he blends in with the scenery of his bedchambers. His face is impassive, his mouth curved in that same, emotionless almost-frown. The bare column of his neck and chest down to his hips gives a new sense of vulnerability to the prince that has Midoriya averting his eyes even though the prince isn’t looking at him.

He can’t look away for too long, though. He has to wake him, without touching him if at all possible. Midoriya glances back up. Without the panic clouding his brain, he sees that the prince isn’t as vulnerable as he first looked. His legs are crossed easily, and the peacefulness of his closed eyes and expression doesn’t betray vulnerability, it reveals confidence. Todoroki could sit in his room, eyes closed and skin bared, and not be afraid. The morning sun is white and gold on his torso. Midoriya can (bitterly) admit that Todoroki has a stronger build than him.

He opens his mouth to rouse the prince, but the prince’s eyes open of their own accord. The prince stares straight up at the ceiling for a moment, then turns his head to look at Midoriya. The intensity of having the prince’s full attention doesn’t feel any less overwhelming than the first (the second) time they had met.

Midoriya’s legs shake. He remembers what Yaoyorozu had said: He has the strongest Quirk and demeanor fitting a king. Midoriya feels it—it’s not the same air that dukes and duchesses and lords and ladies gave off, nor did the princes and princesses not bound for the throne. This was an air of ultimate power. The alphas of the kingdoms, the kings and queens, the crown princes and princesses—it was an air only they could give off. Midoriya sinks to his knees like water being poured from a glass, melting against the floor in submission.

“Your Royal Highness,” Midoriya says, and it comes out barely above a whisper.

“Deku,” Todoroki greets. Midoriya doesn’t dare rise from his position.

A long sigh. “Your submission is appreciated, but you won’t be able to assist me much from the floor,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya flinches, cheeks burning as he sits back on his knees. Todoroki’s head is still leaning against the back of the chair, like he had leaned on the table to eye Midoriya in the garden that night. He had a way of making Midoriya feel small and unimportant but his only focus at the same time. Midoriya briefly imagines spending a whole day with the prince and feels a little faint.

Todoroki rises like a panther, liquid muscle and grace. He carries himself high, shoulders back and chin tilted up. It should come off as haughty, but with his clear-eyed expression, it simply suits him like a second skin. He pads across the room to the tray Midoriya brought. Midoriya rises to his feet once Todoroki passes him, keeping his head tilted down and hands clasped in front of him.
Todoroki lifts the lid and examines the food. “Chef’s trying to fatten me up as usual,” he sighs. “What kind of person can eat this much in the morning?” he glances back at Midoriya, who stiffens. “You haven’t eaten yet.” Not a question. “Feel free to take my leftovers. And tell Chef next time to make your food before mine—I don’t have time to waste waiting for you to eat once I’m awake.”

Midoriya bows. “Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

Todoroki tosses an apple up, then snatches it out of the air to take a bite of it, teeth flashing white and straight. He swallows and say, “Enough with the ‘Your Royal Highness,’ too. You’ll call me Todoroki-sama like the rest of my staff.”

Midoriya smiles. Maybe he hadn’t changed completely. “Yes, Todoroki-sama,” he says.

“Simple clothing today,” Todoroki continues. “We’ll be doing a round of the palace and then seeing to the concerns of the common people.”

Midoriya takes a step towards the wardrobe, then pauses. “We?” he asks.

Todoroki nods, not looking at Midoriya. “You’re shadowing me.”

Midoriya isn’t sure it’s his business to be privy to Todoroki’s ‘princely duties,’ but it’s definitely not his business to be questioning Todoroki, so he moves to the wardrobe. He expected an excess of clothing, but Todoroki has little in the way of outfits, split into formal attire, daily attire, and riding and battle gear. It’s easy enough for Midoriya to identify the light, long-sleeved fabric of what must be an informal coat. Midoriya pulls the coat, undershirt, pants, and boots from the wardrobe.

He holds it out to Todoroki, but Todoroki makes a displeased noise in the back of his throat. “No red,” he says. “I only wear white.”

Midoriya bows and returns the red jacket to the wardrobe, pulling out the white one instead. Privately, he thinks Todoroki would be positively eye-catching in that bloodred color. Todoroki finishes his apple and turns towards Midoriya, holding his arms above his head. Midoriya pulls the undershirt over his head, giving it a good tug on each sleeve to pull Todoroki’s hands through. There’s a lace at the front, dipping just under Todoroki’s collarbone. Midoriya does up the lace as quickly as he can, feeling on edge being so deep in Todoroki’s personal space. He can feel Todoroki’s breath brushing his hair, watching his face the entire time. When Midoriya steps back, it is a relief.

He slides the coat over Todoroki’s arms and shoulders, tugging at the lapels. Todoroki tilts his head back, giving Midoriya access to the buttons at his neck—much more reasonable than the laces that had been on his black formal wear when he had greeted Midoriya. Midoriya’s fingers brush the skin of Todoroki’s throat. A shiver travels down his spine.

The buttons run all the way down the coat and at the wrists. Like the formal wear, his casual clothing is intended to cover up as much of his skin as possible. *Maybe it’s a royalty thing,* Midoriya wonders as he snaps the buttons at the cuff. He hadn’t seen the King or Queen, or any of the princes or princesses aside from Todoroki. Perhaps it was some kind of honorable duty of the royal family to refrain from showing skin, at least in the public eye. Todoroki hadn’t had any scruples about lounging shirtless in his room.

“I’ll put on the pants myself,” Todoroki says, yanking Midoriya from his train of thought. Midoriya steps away, politely averting his eyes while Todoroki changed. He doesn’t make use of
the dressing screen, preferring instead to bare himself to Midoriya.

_Maybe he’s just shameless_, Midoriya thinks. He was so infuriatingly casual about nudity, as were the rest of the Endeavorans. Midoriya feels much better when all of Todoroki’s skin is safely tucked away under his clothing.

When Todoroki turns towards Midoriya again, Midoriya thinks he might take it all back. Todoroki could manage to look intimidating half-naked, but in full princely garb, he was absolutely terrifying. The white of the jacket brings out the red half of his hair, the marring of his scar, the blue of his left eye. Midoriya resists the urge to sink to his knees again, and instead averts his eyes once more. Todoroki sits in the chair by the table, extending a bare foot.

Alright, so he wasn’t completely put together yet. Midoriya is amused—at least a little bit—that he gets to see Prince Todoroki before he’s in full prince mode. Sitting there, looking out the window with bare feet, he looks…silly. Midoriya appreciates it. He kneels in front of Todoroki, pulling stockings onto his feet.

Todoroki doesn’t give him any more time for musings. “You’re uncomfortable with this arrangement,” he says.

Midoriya’s jaw drops. “N-not at all, Todoroki-sama,” he sputters. “It is the greatest honor of my life to—"

“Save your excuses and flowery words, silvertongue,” Todoroki cuts him off. “I value plain speech and honesty above wordy submission. I prefer to only use clever words in duels against people who piss me off.”

Midoriya’s eyes go wide. _The Crown Prince said ‘piss,’_ he thinks.

“So I’ll ask you again,” Todoroki says. “You are uncomfortable with this arrangement.”

Midoriya bites his lip, fitting Todoroki’s boot over his foot. “This is…not what I’m used to,” Midoriya admits. “Yuuei is nothing like Endeavor.”

“That’s fine,” Todoroki says. “I don’t intend to put either of us in an awkward position, not any more than must be tolerated for appearances sake.”

“Are you uncomfortable too, Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya asks.


Midoriya’s cheeks burn, thoroughly chastised. _Become the prince’s companion? Yeah right, Yaoyorozu-san. He wants me as far away from him as humanly possible._

Todoroki just confirms Midoriya’s suspicions. “Since this an arrangement neither of us signed up for, I will keep our contact to a minimum,” he says. “I will call upon you for dressing and meals when needed, as well as any other small errands I may require of you when I’m in my bedchambers. You will occasionally accompany me around the palace or on trips outside the palace to keep up the appearance of interaction.”

He sighs and tilts his head back. “You are, of course, free to use and explore this palace as you wish. Chef is soft, so no doubt you’ll be able to find food whenever you’re hungry. I don’t know what manservants do in their free time, but we have libraries and stables and gardens. Your band should grant you access to all those places. I assume this is an agreeable enough proposal?”
“Yes, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says. He feels as if he had been slapped. He finishes lacing up Todoroki’s boots.

“Good,” Todoroki says. He points in the direction of a smaller chest of drawers, placed on top of a table. “Bring me my medallion and some rings. And my gloves.”

Midoriya rises and moves to the chest, pulling open the drawers only to reveal a multitude of necklaces, medallions, earrings, bracelets, rings, and all manner of jewelry. There’s gold and silver and platinum and every kind of gemstone set in the jewelry.

It’s a test, Midoriya realizes. I’ll be expected to pick out jewelry to flatter him, all on my own.

Well, Midoriya never backed down from a challenge. He pulls out a golden medallion with a carving of a phoenix as its centerpiece, large flat plates of gold forming a chain. He also pulls out a few simple gold rings, remembering how little the prince liked to be dressed up in comparison to his countrymen. Midoriya’s eyes catch on a fat pearl ring before he can close the drawers, though. The gold curls around the pearl like Midoriya’s band curled around his split stones. He picks that one out too.

Next to the chest, he finds an even smaller set of drawers, which reveal different color gloves. He plucks the white ones out. Midoriya returns to Todoroki. He slides the medallion over Todoroki’s neck and kneels again. Todoroki extends a hand. Midoriya pulls his gloves over his hands. He fits the small, gold rings over Todoroki’s left fingers. Then he pushes the fat pearl onto Todoroki’s right hand.

At first, he thinks he’s gotten away with it. Todoroki stands and walks over to his mirror, tugging here and there at his attire and adjusting the medallion. But then he twists the pearl ring on his finger and pauses. He looks at Midoriya, not for the first time that day, but it’s the first time he really sees Midoriya. Midoriya stands his ground and holds Todoroki’s gaze.

The corner of Todoroki’s mouth quirks. “Now you’re playing the game,” he says.

It turns out the ‘rounds’ Todoroki had to make were just snooping in everyone’s business throughout the palace. It makes sense, in a way. Without royal oversight, it would be easy for corruption to set in. Laziness would consume the workers. Then insubordination. Then an outright coup. It sounded extreme, but Midoriya had seen it happen amongst All Might’s military ranks when the generals didn’t keep a tight enough leash on the soldiers. There was rot wherever one went—the only way to deal with it was to identify the troublemakers swiftly and cull them from the herd.

Midoriya imagines it wouldn’t be too far-fetched to imagine that happening to a royal family. Thus, there he was, a pace behind Todoroki and the recipient of an equal number of bows and obeisances by the palace inhabitants as Todoroki was.

Midoriya thinks he would know Todoroki was a prince even if he had never seen his face before or heard his name. Todoroki walks with his chin held high, surveying the pale, sandy stone of the palace with measured ease. He walks lightly, but with a purpose. Midoriya imagines he’s quite the dancer; quite the fighter.
And well, point to Todoroki—he surely stood out in white. Against the deep colors of fabric and bronzed skin of the Endeavorans, Todoroki is a ghost or an angel, frightening in his mystic and holy dress and aura. He flows like a blessing or a curse across the stone. Midoriya really is nothing but a hound trailing his master, all but invisible to the rest of the world.

Not that Midoriya cares. Their survey of the baths had been dull and full of the exact kind of tricky, palace-y wordplay Todoroki had claimed to hate. The Masters of the Bath were full of flattery and demands hidden as complaints about the quality of the baths. Riot bath salts are all the rage now, but unfortunately, we ran out a few weeks ago. The bath tiles are starting to fade, perhaps His Royal Highness would consider a renovation? Oh, and some of the phoenix-mouth spouts have lost their water pressure…

Midoriya knows their kind well. Plenty of palace workers had tried to make off with All Might’s goodwill in the same way. The baths are quite obviously doing well, clean and functioning to a tee. The masters simply want to update the style to suit whatever trend is going around. Surely Todoroki would fix them with a frosty stare and tell them to go stuff themselves.

“I’m ashamed that the quality of our baths has fallen down on my watch,” Todoroki says, frowning thoughtfully. “If I could have you submit an official request for your improvements, we can order new tiles and spouts and get our construction teams to put it in as soon as possible.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem at all!” One of the masters cries out. “Please, do not take any blame upon yourself, Your Royal Highness. We should have come to you sooner.”

But you just said it was a problem… Midoriya thinks, glancing at Todoroki. Todoroki does not acknowledge him.

“We need to improve our relations with Riot anyway, so if you could organize a trade of bath salts from Endeavor for those of Riot, I’ll have your people accompany our ambassador’s next visit,” Todoroki says. “Is that to your satisfaction?”

The masters fall to their knees gracefully. “More than we could have ever hoped for,” another one says. “Your kindness is unparalleled, Your Royal Highness.”

Midoriya stares at Todoroki as they leave. He doesn’t understand—the man with a tongue as sharp as talons was curbed by some palace workers’ obtuse attempts at wheedling bath improvements out of him? It doesn’t make sense. Todoroki should have put his foot down. Now they would see him as soft and an easy target. Not an enviable position for a future king.

Their visit to the kitchens doesn’t improve Midoriya’s opinion of the prince, either. He chastises Chef for feeding him too much, but the chastisement is met with a booming laugh and an overly-friendly arm thrown around Todoroki’s shoulders. Todoroki, who Midoriya had been expressly told to touch as little as possible. Todoroki, amazingly, doesn’t seem upset by the physical contact at all. He responds to Chef with dry remarks that continually get laughs out of him. He tastes their soup and compliments it warmly. He shoots small smiles at the kitchen workers, making them blush and furiously return to scrubbing dishes.

Midoriya doesn’t get it.

“Ojiro,” Todoroki greets the Master of Servants at their next stop. Ojiro is reclined in a hammock in one of the courtyards, but he immediately hops to his feet when he sees Todoroki. “How is the new blood?”

“Working well,” Ojiro reports. He smiles. “Only one invaluable artifact has been broken under my
“Not one of my mother’s, I hope,” Todoroki says.

“Not to worry, Your Royal Highness,” Ojiro says, puffing up his chest. “I made sure to send the greenest of green to your father’s section of the palace.”

Todoroki smiles again. It’s mischievous, matching the brightness in his eyes and the self-satisfied grin on Ojiro’s face. Todoroki dips his head, his version of clapping Ojiro on the back. “You’re the best of us, Ojiro Mashirao,” Todoroki says. “But onto more important matters.” His demeanor doesn’t change, but he crosses his hands behind his back and lowers his voice so that Midoriya has to lean in to hear. “What of Yuuei’s gifts?”

Midoriya blinks rapidly. What about Yuuei’s gifts?

“No spies that I can discern,” Ojiro says. “They’ve all been quite obedient, but I have guards keeping a close eye on the servants. The dancers have been fairly well-behaved, nothing more than the usual flirtations with the guards. I have them switching out so that the dancers can’t sink their claws into any one of ours.”

“And you?” Todoroki asks, raising an eyebrow.

Ojiro blinks. “Your Highness?”

Todoroki does reach out to touch him this time, clasping a hand over his shoulder. He leans in close to Ojiro. “Don’t let passion and desire overwhelm your rationality, yes?”

Ojiro flushes a most interesting shade of pink. Midoriya remembers the exchange of glances between Ojiro and Tooru during training. Of course. The guard change was smart, but if one of the dancers was a rat, their best course of action was to play dumb and get into the bed of the Master of Servants. Midoriya wonders briefly if Tooru is like him, but surely All Might would have told him if there was more than one spy?

“Yes sir,” Ojiro says, looking at his feet.

“Let me know if the situation changes,” Todoroki says, and walks on. Midoriya follows, a sense of unease curling in his stomach. All Might would tell him, right?

There’s something else bugging him. Something unusual about the prince that Midoriya hadn’t seen before. When they move outside to talk to the stablemaster, Todoroki takes on the persona of an outdoorsman. He talks about how the elk have been running, about the latest in hunting technique, examines a few of the horses, and reviews their stock of tack. He doesn’t flirt or play with his words—he’s straightforward and serious, lending an ear to the concerns of the stablemaster, nodding as appropriate.

It’s starting to sink in, as Todoroki listens to the problem with their latest shipment of feed. Todoroki was not just one persona, one face to be put on to all. Todoroki was a series of personalities and approaches, tweaked for whichever person he would be encountering. Flowery with the Masters of the Bath, down-to-earth with the kitchen staff, conspiring and amicable with Ojiro, princely with the stablemaster.

Your loyalty is frightening, Midoriya had said to Yaoyorozu. He couldn’t understand why so many people would pledge themselves to the prince, even at the expense of quietly defying the king. He thinks he understands now. This, now this, was a prince.
He’s some kind of mix between friendly and intimidating in the armory. He swings one of the knights’ broadswords like it’s nothing, muscles bunching and stretching visibly, even beneath his long sleeves. He tosses it between his hands, commenting on the great make of the sword but also noting how the knight had been lax on sharpening it.

“You want to cleave your enemy’s head in two with a single blow?” Todoroki says, slicing the sword down with one hand. “It’s much easier to do with a blade and not a rock, and this is much more rock than blade.”

The knight’s companions snigger and elbow him in the side. For a second, Midoriya thinks Todoroki had made a faux pas, insulting the knight just a little too much and breeding contempt, but when the knight moves to take the sword back, Todoroki doesn’t let go of it.

“I saw you in the field, during the last riot,” he says. “You were hesitant to pull your sword against your own people. That is something I respect. But remember that while you may be loath to take a life, your honor alone will not protect you in battle. Have heart, soldier. You’re a good man.” He lets go of the sword, and the knight nearly drops it. Midoriya understands. It’s hard to be the focus of the prince’s attention for too long. The knight watches Todoroki leave with something like awe in his eyes.

And then finally, they’re off to see Yaoyorozu. She greets Todoroki with a hug that he accepts, even if she’s fully armored. “I keep telling you to visit more often,” she huffs. “Don’t leave your Captain to rot.”

Spying Midoriya at Todoroki’s side, she claps him on the shoulder. It feel like being hit with a brick. “How’re you doing?” she asks. “I hope His Royal Highness isn’t being unreasonable to the newest member of his household.”

“Momo,” Todoroki says, sounding strained.

She offers him a wry smile. “I used to be able to wrestle you to the ground, Prince,” she says.

“As you never fail to remind me,” Todoroki says, looking a moment away from rolling his eyes. He smiles, soft. It’s the first genuine smile Midoriya has seen. “I do miss you,” Todoroki says.

“I’m sure you have much more interesting tasks awaiting you,” she says, putting her hands on her hips.

“Oh yes,” Todoroki says. “I am thrilled to be accompanied by Miyamoto and inevitably be bored to death by classism. At least Deku doesn’t talk, just stares at me like he’s dying to say something.”

Midoriya sputters, eyes nearly popping out of his head. He had noticed? Of course he had noticed. Someone who could put on a thousand different faces was vigilant beyond belief. Midoriya was so, so stupid.

“I’ll be hearing about that later,” Todoroki says, glancing at Midoriya over his shoulder.


“Momo,” Todoroki says, a warning.

“Fine, fine,” she sighs. “You have need of me, don’t you?”

“Have you found anything?” Todoroki asks, expression going dark and all trace of almost-happiness fading.
Yaoyorozu’s shoulders slump. She shakes her head. Todoroki closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry,” Yaoyorozu says. “I was hoping for answers, too. But wherever it’s happening, it’s not in your guard.”

“What about my father’s guard?” Todoroki asks.

“You know my sway there is limited,” Yaoyorozu says. She sighs. “From what I’ve recovered, no, it’s not stemming from the King’s Guard either. But I can’t have eyes in all places there. And I can’t be caught snooping around in the King’s business—”

“I know, I know,” Todoroki says. “Just—keep trying. I have my hands full with the new blood in my household; I don’t have time to look anywhere else.”

Yaoyorozu reaches out, squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll keep looking,” she says. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

Todoroki exhales and nods. “Is there anything else to report?”

“A few new faces in your guard,” she says. “I’ll make sure they’re around the palace so you can familiarize yourself with them. Don’t let Miyamoto-san talk your ear off.”

“I will endeavor not to,” Todoroki says. He kisses the tops of his fingers and presses them to Yaoyorozu’s forehead. Midoriya looks away.

“A sign of intimacy and deep brotherhood, Ojiro had said.

“Visit more often,” Yaoyorozu says softly. “And take care of Deku; I like him.”

“As you wish,” Todoroki says, drawing away from her. He doesn’t acknowledge Midoriya’s presence or her fondness for him, and Midoriya doesn’t expect him to.

And then it’s time for what Midoriya knew was the single most infuriating and painful task of royalty—hearing out the complaints and concerns of the common people. Midoriya had sat at All Might’s side many a time and had watched even the always-smiling leader of Yuuei’s face struggle to keep a broad smile.

It wasn’t that they didn’t care, it was just that there were so many issues from the theft of a prize sheep to the stirring of rebellion that they all had to be heard. It also gave the people a direct line of communication with their leader, which was important for trust and assuring that the people stayed happy and un-rebellious. There was nothing the royal guard hated more than cutting down the people they came from.

It’s telling to Midoriya that King Enji passed this duty onto his son instead of doing it himself.

On his throne of dark stone and furs, bathed in light, Prince Todoroki might as well have been holy. His clothing catches all the the light raining down on him and blinds the Endeavorans that approach his throne one by one, making obeisances like all the servants of the palace did.

Well, Midoriya thinks. It probably doesn’t hurt to intimidate your people into respecting and fearing you.

Hearing about the fires in the villages and the shortage of rice because of a drought was usually droll, but in this case, the exercise was made unbearably painful by the addition of Miyamoto Masa, the most entitled and snobbish member of nobility Midoriya had ever had the misfortune of coming across.
Miyamoto was short, round, and resembled a shrew. He wore heavy purple robes with gold stitching and multiple rings on every finger. He was seated in a plush chair a level down from Todoroki’s throne and above the soft pillow Midoriya knelt on at Todoroki’s right. Miyamoto didn’t acknowledge Midoriya’s existence at all except when he first approached to ogle at the fact that he would not be seated at Todoroki’s right hand. He had a tendency to lean in close to Todoroki, as if trying to tell him a secret, but he didn’t lower his voice in the slightest when he disdained the villagers. Todoroki made no movement to lean in towards him, nor any acknowledgement of his comments besides a long, slow blink.

“You must watch out, Your Royal Highness,” Miyamoto says, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. “These peasants will surely try to use your kindness to steal from your wealth for their own devious purposes.”

“You’ll forgive me for failing to find deviousness in trying to feed one’s family,” Todoroki says. To the mother kneeling before him, who had told him of the drought, he says, “Portion enough rice to feed her village for a month from the royal stores. That should be long enough for you to get back on your feet.”

Teary-eyed, the woman cannot reply, but prostrates herself in front of Todoroki, shaking. Midoriya can relate to that.

“You have a pure faith in human beings,” Miyamoto says. “Pure, but naïve. Of course, you’re not old enough to know of how the common filth will sell your rice to less fortunate villages or loners for alcohol and herbs to smoke. I have seen it done many times.”

At Todoroki’s right side, Midoriya bristles, visibly hunching his shoulders and shifting in protest of Miyamoto’s words. Todoroki’s eyes flick to him, then to the next visitor.

Miyamoto continues to slander the common people and undermine Todoroki’s decisions. Gold to rebuild a rotting bridge? Clearly just a ploy to get more gambling fodder. Miyamoto knew. A kidnapping? Oh, as if the men didn’t sell their daughters to be whores on the daily. Miyamoto had seen it happen before. *More* food for the poor? Sounds like laziness to Miyamoto. All those fields and no one seemed to be working them, given the begging they saw before them. Perhaps a regent to assist Todoroki-sama in his decisions, as he was too kind to see through their deceptions…

“You will refer to me as His Royal Highness,” Todoroki says. His voice cuts like ice.

He had managed to keep a straight face the entire time Miyamoto spoke. In fact, Midoriya had not even detected Todoroki’s anger with the tight leash he kept his emotions under. But those words strike like a blow against Miyamoto, although he is far too stupid to realize how gravely he has angered the prince. Midoriya grits his teeth as Miyamoto begs his pardons and says that he had perhaps been too hopeful that His Royal Highness may have been looking for an aide.

The next man to come forward comes on behalf of another, smaller village. They rely on others for their farm tools, he says, but lately the surrounding villages have been charging unfair prices. He asks for a small amount of iron to help provide them with tools to give to the suffering village.

Miyamoto turns bright red and perhaps egged on by Todoroki’s slap on the wrist, explodes.

“Preposterous!” he says, standing from his chair. “You dare insult His Royal Highness with this tall tale! How dare you lie to your Prince, who will one day be your King! Go ahead, admit it: you only want the iron to forge weapons and rebel against the crown. He should have you hauled off to the stocks for such treachery!”
The man pales. “No, Your Royal Highness, I would never—”

Todoroki raises two fingers from the stone of the armrest of his throne, silencing the man. “No one is getting hauled anywhere,” he says.

Miyamoto looks bewildered, glancing between the villager and the prince. “Your Royal Highness!” he cries. “You can’t actually believe this scoundrel!”

“Twice the amount of iron you asked for,” Todoroki says. “My Captain will personally accompany you. She is my mouth and ears—tell her which villages are acting unjustly and she will see it righted.”

“Th-thank you, Your Royal Highness; you are too kind,” the man says, bowing and scraping.

Miyamoto turns on Todoroki in disbelief. “You can’t—you can’t just—”

“I can’t what?” Todoroki asks, finally laying eyes on Miyamoto.

The weight of a royal gaze on him gives Miyamoto second thoughts. He mops at the back of his neck. “Your Royal Highness,” he starts. “As much as I respect your power and authority here, you are giving the peasantry too much leeway. They will just use you—”

“And you are not using me?” Todoroki says. “Look me in the eyes and tell me that you are not using my status to climb up the social ladder and get closer to my father’s ear.”

Miyamoto pales. Todoroki doesn’t give him time to respond.

“You have spent this entire afternoon undermining my authority here, insulting my intelligence, and puffing yourself up like a fat turkey ready for the slaughterhouse,” Todoroki says.

“Now, Your Royal Highness, you go too far,” Miyamoto says, turning red again. “I am not afraid to let the King know of these proceedings—”

“These proceedings? You say that like this responsibility has any meaning to him,” Todoroki says. “My father does not care to listen to the concerns of Endeavor. That is why he passed this duty onto me.” Todoroki’s fingers curl around the front of the armrest. “But I care,” he says. “I care, and by insulting my people, you insult my crown.”

“I am—nobility—” Miyamoto says, chest heaving.

“You’re a noble pain in my ass,” Todoroki says. He looks away, finished with Miyamoto. “Get out of my sight. Your presence is not needed in my court now or ever again.”

Miyamoto sputters, glares, and then stomps away like a petulant child. Midoriya stares at Todoroki, steam rising from his fingers.

“That’s enough for today,” Todoroki says to the guards after a moment. “See to it that any travelers have lodging in the palace. I am not well at this time.”

He stands from the throne and storms down the walk from the hall, disregarding Midoriya’s presence. Midoriya scrambles to catch up with him. Even keeping pace with him is difficult. At the door to his bedchambers, Shouji stumbles aside, well aware from his aura that the prince is on the warpath. Midoriya should leave him alone (probably), but he sucks in a breath and follows Todoroki into his room.
The door closes and Todoroki turns on him. “Yes?” he says. “You have something to say, say it.”

“May I speak freely?” Midoriya asks.

“That’s what I said, wasn’t it?” Todoroki snaps.

Midoriya doesn’t think twice. “You shouldn’t have done that to Miyamoto-san,” he says.

Todoroki exhales, a long, slow thing, and sits on his bed, putting his face in his hands. It’s an unusual, emotional position for him to take. Midoriya feels uncomfortable standing higher than him, but he needs to get his point across.

“I thought you of all people would have supported my temper tantrum,” Todoroki sighs. He peeks up at Midoriya. “You were just as angry as I was, possibly more. Why? You have no loyalty to me.”

He’s not wrong, but… “You are royalty, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says firmly. “No one has any right to speak to you that way. It would have been intolerable for any member of your household.”

“True,” Todoroki says. “Momo would have pulled her sword on him long before you started grinding your teeth.” Midoriya would have to agree with that.

“But you still don’t approve of my dismissal,” Todoroki says. “Explain.”

“I saw you today,” Midoriya says. “I saw how delicately you handled each kind of person, even within the same class. You should know how proud Miyamoto is. To dismiss him and tear into him like that will be a slight not easily forgotten. It will breed resentment towards you, which will be a problem when you become king.”

“When I become king,” Todoroki repeats.

“But you still don’t approve of my dismissal,” Todoroki says. “Explain.”

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“When I become king,” Todoroki repeats.

“Like it or not, Todoroki-sama, men like Miyamoto are your bannermen,” Midoriya says. “Nobility are the foundation of your support, your generals, the men keeping an eye on your country when you cannot be everywhere. You need them to be on your side.”

“There would be no men like Miyamoto, if this country were under my rule,” Todoroki says.

“There are always men like Miyamoto,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki looks at him, seeing him again. Midoriya can hold his gaze for a few seconds before he has to look away, sinking to his knees and bowing his head. “I have spoken out of turn,” he says. “Forgive me.”

“I allowed it,” Todoroki says, still staring at Midoriya. “Why do you give me good advice?”

Midoriya looks up at him, wide-eyed.

“No, perhaps…” Todoroki frowns. “Perhaps, how do you give good advice? You were a page in Yuuei.”

Caught up in the moment, Midoriya almost, almost says he was All Might’s aide. He suddenly becomes very aware of his position, the danger he was in, even though he did not realize it at first. As a spy, and as Midoriya Izuku. If his real position were discovered, it would put him in great suspicion in the prince’s eyes, foster the idea that there was a conspiracy against Endeavor. And if All Might was right and King Enji had some terrible plan to hurt Yuuei, Midoriya would definitely
be killed.

But there was additional danger in Midoriya’s past relationship with Todoroki Shouto. The Todoroki from then knew him as Midoriya Izuku. The Todoroki now knew him as Deku. If Todoroki were to realize that Izuku and Deku were one and the same, once again it would become obvious that Midoriya was hiding something to go under a different name. Idea, conspiracy, death. Above all else, Todoroki must not realize Midoriya’s true identity. Whatever they were when they were twelve, they were something entirely different at twenty-two. Midoriya could not count on a past almost-friendship to keep him alive.

“I spent a long time at All Might’s side,” Midoriya says. “A long time.” He clasps his hands. “He was—well, is—my biggest hero. I’ve been working for him since I was young. I paid close attention to him, and learned a little bit in the process.”

“Hm,” Todoroki says, a painfully neutral answer. “You’re observant, for sure.”

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya asks.

“I lost my temper,” Todoroki admits. “I shouldn’t have dismissed Miyamoto like that; you’re right.”

“You’ve certainly got the mind to trip him up and have him embarrass himself,” Midoriya says. Todoroki is staring at him again. “Am I…did I say something wrong?”

Todoroki snorts, a puff of air into his hands. “You’re full of surprises, Deku,” he says. Midoriya yips in surprise.

Todoroki leans back against his hands. “Go on,” he says. “You wanted to say something to me earlier, when we were making the rounds. Have at it.”

“The way you spoke to everyone,” Midoriya says. “Yes, it was tailored to each group of people, but if you don’t mind me saying so…I think you were being too soft with them.”

“Oh?” Todoroki says.

“I know Miyamoto said the villagers were trying to trick you…” Midoriya frowns. “But the Masters of the Bath were definitely trying to trick you.”

“Yes,” Todoroki says.

“Why?” Midoriya says. “Shouldn’t you be firmer with them? Miyamoto made some good points; if you’re a carpet, people will walk all over you.”

“They won’t,” Todoroki says.

“How could you know that?” Midoriya cries.

“Because,” Todoroki says, his blue eye burning into Midoriya, “it’s a symbiotic relationship.”

“…Buh?” Midoriya blurs.

Todoroki sits up. “The masters are well aware of the trends in interior design throughout the Five Kingdoms. That’s what they want.” He holds out one hand. “I need information. And what better place to glean information than when people’s guard is down in a bath?” He holds out his other hand. “Put them together and you have a symbiotic relationship.”
“So…they spy for you in exchange for bath renovation and salts?” Midoriya says. He wrinkles his nose. “Doesn’t seem very even to me.”

“They’re a frivolous type,” Todoroki says. “You said it yourself—play to the kind of person you’re dealing with. Staying with the trends is more important to them than gold or loyalty to the crown.”

“Okay,” Midoriya says. “But the kitchens—”

“I visit Chef, compliment his cooking, flirt with the workers,” Todoroki says. “In return, my household is fed well. Food is a powerful motivator when it comes to loyalty. And if the workers are fond of me, then there is less of a chance a third party will get to them and poison my food.”

“And the stablemaster…the knights…Ojiro-san…” Midoriya says weakly.

“The stablemaster and knights are easy,” Todoroki says. “Show competence and respect, and you will earn respect in return. Ojiro has my ear—an enviable place—and my amity. Because of that, he will look for spies among newcomers to the palace and to my household. He is a very valuable man to have on my side.”

Midoriya slumps to the side, falling out of his kneeling position. “You don’t do anything without thinking eight steps ahead,” he says. “Even your friendships—they have a purpose.”

“Why do you think they call me ‘the cold prince’?” Todoroki says.

“It is cold,” Midoriya says.

“It’s how you avoid being assassinated,” Todoroki says.

“Why?” Midoriya asks. “There haven’t been any assassination attempts for years. No major rebellions either, anywhere. Why bother?”

Todoroki’s face goes dark. “You wouldn’t understand,” he says.

Midoriya wants to protest, wants to ask more, wants to understand this prince, but Todoroki is already standing up, moving towards his wardrobe. “Tend to me,” he orders. “I will have no further need of you tonight.”

Midoriya stifles a sigh and rises, moving to Todoroki’s side. He removes the jewelry and gloves from Todoroki. He unbuttons the coat and pulls it off, leaving the undershirt on at Todoroki’s command. He pulls off the boots and stockings, but once again is dismissed when it comes to the pants. Midoriya walks into his room through the adjoining door, feeling like a ghost. Once more, he collapses face first into the bed.

He had been so close, so close to understanding how Todoroki ticked. He was paranoid—that was for sure. Highly intelligent, clever, and an excellent strategist. His playing field was nothing but the grounds of the palace and he already had control of the board. There were certainly some problems between father and son. And that mysterious business Todoroki had been discussing with Yaoyorozu…

Midoriya sits up. He had best write this down and send it to All Might before it got jumbled up in whatever inevitably exhausting events would occur tomorrow. He stands up and walks over to his desk, lighting a candle and pulling out a piece of parchment intended for raven delivery.

T.Y.—
M.I.

They had decided before Midoriya left that keeping the messages short and as vague as possible was for the best. Midoriya used All Might’s given name—Toshinori Yagi—rather than obvious initials like A.M. Midoriya was obviously M.I. to throw the trail off of him in Endeavor if the message was ever compromised. And the Todorokis were listed by title rather than name. In a way, Midoriya was sad. He would have liked to exchange longer letters with All Might to hear news about his mother or the palace in his absence, but there was no way around it. At least he would get some mail. He could deliver the message to Dark Shadow tomorrow, before Tokoyami left. All Might must be dying for some news.

Midoriya decides to keep a diary of events, partially to occupy his time, partially to share with his mother, and partially just to prove to himself that he really was in Endeavor, and really was in the service of Endeavor’s next king. It sure would be a story for his family in the future. Maybe All Might would want to hear about his exploits, too. Midoriya hoped so.

He wrote until the sun set and the moon rose, burning his candle down. He also drew himself a small map of the palace to review all the locations he had been, carving them into his brain. He was so invested in his work that he didn’t register the first few creaks.

He noticed them after a while, the sounds of rustling and bed creaks, faint enough that they could only be coming from the prince’s room. Immediately, Midoriya’s cheeks burn. He stands, politely moving to his bed and away from the sound of whatever lovemaking might be going on behind that door. Midoriya had never really taken Todoroki to be the type—hell, hadn’t even considered the possibility. This would be an…unpleasant arrangement.

Midoriya hears what is definitely a snarl of some kind and turns his back, planting a pillow over his ear and trying to ignore the images swimming in his head. If Todoroki could growl like that, it meant he had some poor man or woman pinned beneath him, all glorious skin and incredible muscles holding them down. The thought is terrifying. Well, maybe they were into that kind of stuff.

There’s another snarl, and the sound of shattering glass, but the creaks don’t stop. Midoriya closes his eyes and prays to every deity he can think of to let the prince come, please just let him come and let this be over with. Midoriya is forced to reevaluate just how much he’ll be able to tolerate living in Endeavor. Maybe…if he had the room just across the hallway…

There’s some aborted half-words behind the door, Todoroki’s voice. Midoriya’s eyes pop open. Was Todoroki’s guest doing him?

“No!” Todoroki roars, loud and clear. “Get away from me!”

Midoriya bursts from his bed, snatching the letter opener on his desk and throwing open the door, clutching the tiny knife in his hand and holding it back, ready to strike at the intruder. He catches the flash of eyes and raises the knife defensively.

But the only one in Todoroki’s room is Todoroki.

His chest heaves up and down and his eyes dart to and around Midoriya like a caged animal. His water glass lies smashed on the floor in front of his bedside table. His nightshirt sticks to him like skin, soaked through with sweat. The candlelight plays tricks on Midoriya, turns Todoroki from
man to beast and back in a flicker of the flame.

Midoriya lowers the knife. He moves forward slowly, towards the broken glass.

Todoroki’s head snaps in his direction. “No,” he says. Loud. Firm.

“I’ll just clean up the gl—”

“Go,” Todoroki commands, the word rumbling through his chest.

Midoriya turns and walks right back through the door.

He sits back down on his bed, but he doesn’t feel comforted that it wasn’t a lover that had made Todoroki make all that noise. He lies back down, heart racing. He thinks about seeing Todoroki on the throne the first time, or when he snapped at Miyamoto, or when Midoriya had offended him. Todoroki made him feel small. He made him feel ashamed. He cowed him.

But that was the first time Midoriya had genuinely been frightened of Todoroki.

He presses his hand to his chest and urges his heart to slow down. So, the prince had night terrors. That wasn’t surprising. He had seen battle—nothing major since the peace had held for fourteen years, but he had surely killed and been injured before. Night terrors were nothing to be ashamed of. If Midoriya was lucky, they would only be the occasional disturbance.

They weren’t.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: midoriya is not what he seems, either.
the rhythm of the rain

Chapter Notes

it's short. i'm sorry. but it's here! the next chapter is going to be action-packed, i promise!

(whistles innocently im a lazy editor)

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Midoriya leans back, smiling at his friend. “Just happy to see a sane Yuuein face.”

At Todoroki’s dismissal after his morning duties, Midoriya had flown down the stairs to see off the remainder of his countrymen before they headed back to Yuuei. It had barely been three weeks, but although the Endeavorans were as wonderful hosts as they proclaimed, the unspoken distance between men was palpable. And there were plenty of soldiers who thought nothing of making their disdain for Yuuei known. There was no way a single act of goodwill could erase years and years of hostilities between the countries.

Midoriya was happy they were leaving. Not because he didn’t like Tokoyami, or because he wanted them gone, but they were safer in Yuuei than in Endeavor. The longer they stayed, the more they risked harassment at the hands of the less hospitable soldiers and staff.

“Tooru not keeping you company?” Tokoyami raises an eyebrow.

“No,” Midoriya grumbles. “She’s lovestruck. Figures.”

“Ah,” Tokoyami says. “Yes, love is dangerous indeed. One of the few forces that can overthrow loyalty and honor. Make sure to steer clear of it, Deku.”

“No need to worry,” Midoriya says, smiling. His voice drops. “Attraction is powerful but my loyalty to All Might stands above all else.”


“There’s not that much of a difference,” Midoriya mutters. This conversation is getting embarrassing.

“You have no control over who you fall in love with,” Tokoyami sighs. “It’s a game of luck, and the fact that you’re surrounded by a barely pacified country means your luck is terrible. When it strikes, and it will strike, try to remember that you are here for a greater purpose than self-fulfillment. We’re counting on you.”
“You talk like I’m already compromised,” Midoriya groans. “How do I know you aren’t compromised?”

“I am,” Tokoyami says. “I have been for a while now.”

Midoriya eyes bulge out of his head. “What?”

Tokoyami smiles. “Surprised? That’s alright. He’s compromised, too. That’s why All Might allowed it. There’s no assuring that the one you love will love you back. That’s all I’m warning you about.”

Midoriya offers a small, bemused smile back. “I shouldn’t underestimate you, should I.”

“Come on,” Tokoyami says. “Let’s go see Dark Shadow. You have something for him, don’t you?”

Midoriya follows Tokoyami to the front of the palace and up another set of winding stairs to the Royal Aviary. It’s obvious why the aviary is at the top of the tower as they climb. Besides providing an easily accessible space for birds, they’re also loud. The long, throaty ha, ha, haaa of the ravens echoes down the staircase, mingling with the nervous cooing of doves and messenger pigeons. The hunting hawks and owls are silent.

Tokoyami walks around the wide room of wire cages and wooden bird stands as if he was born to be there. “The cages are for the doves and pigeons,” Tokoyami explains. “They’re too dumb to let roam free and usually too pampered to find food on their own. Also, hawks and owls get hungry, even the most highly trained ones.”

He gestures to the hawks, alert but wearing hoods. The owls are asleep. “Don’t worry about those guys. The falconers take care of them and let them out to hunt when necessary. They won’t bother you.”

“Where are all the ravens?” Midoriya asks. There were only three cawing occasionally and shifting above the wire cages. None of them were big enough to be Dark Shadow.

“They’re smart enough to roam free,” Tokoyami says. “I take it you remember the whistle.”

Midoriya does. He nods.

“Good,” Tokoyami says. “Lean out the window and whistle for Dark Shadow.”

“But,” Midoriya says. “But will he be able to hear me?”

“Try it and you’ll find out,” Tokoyami says.

Midoriya leans out the window cautiously, lifting his fingers to his mouth. He whistles, three short blasts and a long rising note. It wasn’t a traditional call, which is why only Dark Shadow would respond to it. Midoriya waits, but no ravens show their faces. The ones in the aviary go quiet.

Behind him, Midoriya hears a fluttering of feathers. He turns just in time to see Dark Shadow soar in through a back window and land on Tokoyami’s shoulder. He caws once at Midoriya, as if to criticize his whistling abilities.

“Dark Shadow,” Tokoyami chides fondly, like a parent to a spoiled child. “You’re supposed to go to Deku. I’m not going to be here, you know.” The raven nibbles his ear affectionately.
“Gross,” Midoriya says. “Can you take your love fest somewhere else?”

“He’s in your care now,” Tokoyami says. “Please treat my friend with kindness.” He holds out his arm and Dark Shadow scuttles down it to his forearm. Midoriya stretches out his own forearm. Dark Shadow tilts his head, eyeing Midoriya’s arm and stretches one leg to his arm, then the other. He’s very careful not to dig his nails into Midoriya’s skin.

“There,” Tokoyami says. “He accepts you.”

“I’ll look after him,” Midoriya says. “I swear I will.”

“Thank you,” Tokoyami says. “Now go on, give him your letter.”

Midoriya pulls the tiny scrap of parchment from his pocket. It’s already rolled up, sealed with a dot of wax, and tied tight. Midoriya slides the parchment into the compartment attached to Dark Shadow’s leg, latching it closed.

“He’s smart,” Tokoyami says. “Tell him where to take it.”

“Yuuei,” Midoriya says. “Take this message to Yuuei. Take it to All Might.”

Dark Shadow doesn’t say another word. He pushes off Midoriya’s arm, rising in the air for a few wingbeats, then sailing through a window. Midoriya and Tokoyami watch him fly southwest, straight for Yuuei. Straight home.

“He’ll be fast,” Midoriya says.

“Yes,” Tokoyami says. “By the time I get home, you’ll have received All Might’s reply to your letter and be preparing to send your next one back home.”

“I wish I could go home with you,” Midoriya admits.

“Is he really so bad?” Tokoyami asks. “You haven’t come crying to me yet, so I assumed you were fine.”

“No, that’s not it,” Midoriya says. “I just miss home. The culture, the people, my position. Being a manservant is a little more difficult than I had imagined. And Endeavor is a lot.”

“Thinking of giving up?” Tokoyami asks.

“Not at all!” Midoriya laughs. “It’s not that hard, just…he’s not All Might. And I’m not an aide.”

“Hmm,” Tokoyami says. “I got the impression he might be a tough one when we met.”

“You met him?” Midoriya asks.

“Yes,” Tokoyami says. “Only briefly. He came to thank us personally and give a speech about how he hopes our countries will continue to better their relations.”

Midoriya winces. “That’s, uh…”

“My thoughts exactly,” Tokoyami says. “He was polite. He was grateful. But he didn’t try to sugarcoat the bad blood between our countries. I respect him for that.”

Tokoyami narrows his eyes. “There’s something else. After he said that, he dropped the play-nice-play-friendly princely exterior and that fake smile. He looked each of us in the eye and seriously
thanked us for coming into hostile territory and risking our lives for the sake of peace. He said he respects us and All Might for trusting Endeavor enough to send birthday gifts.”

Midoriya smiles, ghostly. “That sounds like him alright.”

“He is not like King Enji,” Tokoyami says. “King Enji is war-mongering. If there’s a plan against Yuuei, I doubt it’s being led by the Crown Prince.”

“I would agree,” Midoriya says. “He doesn’t exactly see eye to eye with his father. Neither does his guard, for that matter. But he still has his own agenda. And there are some really suspicious goings-on.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Tokoyami says. “In a way…no, actually, I am certain of this. Todoroki Shouto is much more dangerous than Todoroki Enji. King Enji doesn’t bother to hide his malice for our people, but the Crown Prince…it’s anyone’s guess. Be careful, Deku.”

“I’ll try,” Midoriya says, sighing. “He sees through me like I’m glass, though.”

“Keep us updated,” Tokoyami says. “We’re—”

“—counting on me,” Midoriya says. “Got it.”

Tokoyami half-smiles.

As they’re walking back down the stairs, Tokoyami pauses. “Is there anything else I can do for you? I still have your clothes from—”

“My riding clothes,” Midoriya gasps. “Tokoyami, you’re a saint.”

With a trunk full of certified genuine Yuuein clothing safely relocated to Midoriya’s room with Shouji’s help, it’s time for Midoriya to see off the Yuuein party. Yaoyorozu is there with a patrol of her men to see them off in Todoroki’s stead. Tooru and the dancers are also there, Ojiro mysteriously (or not so mysteriously) joining them. Tooru waves a handkerchief with the initials O.M. sown onto it.

Midoriya gives Tokoyami one final parting hug that Tokoyami returns.

“You’ll be back before you know it,” Tokoyami says. “And then you better regale us all with your tales from Endeavor.”

“It’s a party,” Midoriya says, blinking too quickly.

“Keep an eye out for Dark Shadow,” Tokoyami says again, swinging up onto his horse.

Midoriya steps back, but Tokoyami’s eyes are gone from him. He scans the crowd until his eyes settle on one of the taller men towards the back. “Shouji,” he says softly. He lifts his fingers to his lips and then presses them to his heart, a subtle sign of affection in Yuuei.

Oh, Midoriya thinks.

They leave with as much ceremony as they arrived, the Endeavorans never passing up an opportunity to start a celebration. The streets are packed again, all down the way from the palace. Midoriya stands waving until the envoy is gone from view and the sendoff party begins to dissipate. His last chance to get back home—gone.

He tries not to think about that too much.
Midoriya could endure. He’d proved that beyond the shadow of a doubt, rising from village nobody to All Might’s aide, coming to Endeavor and surviving, fitting in as well as he could with the native Endeavorans. As far as he was concerned, he could live through any situation, save for one that involved excessive physical abuse.

That did not mean that living with Todoroki’s terrors came easy.

It wasn’t every night, but it was often. The first time, Todoroki had already been awake by the time Midoriya rushed in, savage in appearance and voice. The second night it happens, he burns a hole in his sheets and Midoriya rushes down to the maids for a new set of sheets. The third night, black ash scorching the stone of his bedroom. On the fourth night, there is no fire, but Todoroki sits up in bed, covering his blue eye and burning a hole in Midoriya with his black eye.

Not ice. Never ice.

Midoriya never saw Todoroki asleep, either. No matter how quickly he rushed to the prince’s side, Todoroki was always awake and panting by the time Midoriya reached him. Not that he wanted Midoriya’s intrusion anyway. He dismissed Midoriya with monosyllabic words or sharp gestures.

“Deku,” Todoroki says after two weeks of the occurrences. “You don’t need to come to my aid at night. There is no real danger. Shouji will come to me if there is.” It’s as polite a dismissal as Midoriya is going to get.

He had noticed that too, of course. Shouji never rushed in to check on his prince. It surprised Midoriya—given the level of loyalty Todoroki’s guard felt towards him, Midoriya would have expected Shouji, Yaoyorozu, and a whole company of men coming to his side at the very first quickened breath. But Shouji never said a damn word. Never shifted in front of Todoroki’s door, almost like…almost like this had been going on for a long time now. Months. Years, maybe. Just what kind of hell had Todoroki seen?

Midoriya wracks his brain, but he can’t recall any more than brief peasant revolts and the occasional pissing contest with Yuuei or Riot as far as combat went with Endeavor. They were especially close allies to Ingenium, so obviously no skirmishes with them, and not even the bloodthirsty Endeavorans were stupid enough to challenge Urabiti’s mountains. There had been no bloody battles in the ten years since they’d met, or really at all in the Five Kingdoms since Yuuei and Endeavor made their peace.

Unless something had happened before the peace. But no, that was impossible—Todoroki was too young for battle and no one in his family had been lost in the feud between their kingdoms. A close friend, perhaps? Maybe Todoroki had witnessed an especially brutal slaughter. Or maybe—

*Never mention the queen*, Yaoyorozu had said.

Midoriya was fairly sure that the queen was still alive, but there was something suspicious about the way no one spoke to her, no one saw her, nothing. That kind of thing was well beyond Midoriya’s meddling, though. He wasn’t close to Todoroki, not by a long shot. He would probably get barbequed if he tried to bring it up, even to help.

Dammit, Midoriya wanted to help.
He’s not your pet project, a voice resembling Tokoyami’s says at the back of Midoriya’s mind. He’s your target.

So Midoriya couldn’t help but get invested when someone seemed to be in trouble. Whatever. All Might had told him it was both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness, wanting to help people. He couldn’t stand by and watch if someone was hurting or in danger, to the point his body seemed to move on his own. It was going to kill him one day. Yeah, yeah, everyone told him that.

But this situation wasn’t anything like fighting off bullies or rescuing someone from harm. This was a prince, technically Midoriya’s lord and master for now, and it was technically his job to serve. So his meddling wasn’t that out of line, or so he convinced himself. Todoroki probably didn’t want his help anyway, but it couldn’t hurt to offer it.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says at the three-week mark, while dressing him. “About your night terrors…”

“Oh, that again?” Todoroki says, sounding less irritated than Midoriya had expected. “I told you, don’t worry about it. I’m not in danger.”

Midoriya bites his lip. Maybe not, but they certainly weren’t doing him any favors. “They sound awful, though…”

“My apologies,” Todoroki says, in the tone of voice that suggests this will be the last time they speak about it. “Night terrors are an unfortunate but unavoidable part of my life. If they disturb you, I will arrange for you to be moved across the hall.”

“I—no, I—” Midoriya says, heart pounding. Todoroki wasn’t being receptive to this conversation. Pushing it would be out of line. He would toe the line of insubordination. Todoroki always hated when Midoriya couldn’t string his thoughts together, anyway.

But.

“Forgive this servant,” Midoriya says softly. “It is not my intention to question or doubt your capability of dealing with a personal issue on your own. I beg Todoroki-sama’s pardon but I…I worry.”

Todoroki doesn’t say anything, just looks at him. Midoriya feels as if he might burst.

Todoroki raises an eyebrow, the universal sign for and? What are you getting at?

“I—I worry about how the night terrors may be affecting you,” Midoriya sputters. “Perhaps hindering you in some way, taking away peaceful sleep or…or even just peace of mind.”

“Do I appear to be hindered?” Todoroki asks.

“Not at all, Todoroki-sama!” Midoriya cries. “Forgive me—!”

“You’ve been speaking out of turn quite a bit this morning,” Todoroki observes.

Oh no, here it comes, Midoriya thinks. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“I pray that this is not a new trend of yours,” Todoroki says. “You behave well. It displeases me when you question me. Not an admirable trait in my household.”

Midoriya bows his head, bows his entire body. “Yes, Todoroki-sama,” he says.
Todoroki sighs. “That being said,” he says, “I understand that your concern comes from the heart. I recognize that it is compassion or perhaps sympathy that moves you to feel that way, to deign to speak to me in such a way.”

Midoriya opens his eyes. Todoroki doesn’t touch Midoriya, but the look he gives him is the equivalent of a hair ruffle or a gentle touch on the shoulder.

“I understand,” Todoroki says, “but I don’t want it. At the base of those emotions is pity. You see me as a victim, as someone weak to my affliction. I cannot have that.”

*It’s not pity,* Midoriya doesn’t say.

“As I said before: I have it under control,” Todoroki says.

*Sure doesn’t sound like it when you wake up screaming,* Midoriya doesn’t say.

“We haven’t known each other long,” Todoroki says. “I cannot judge your character accurately at this time. I believe you to be very intelligent and observant, a thoughtful and careful man. Ojirō tells me you have the affection of several of his, so I do not doubt your personality is a kind one. However, I do not need your worry or your help.”

*But if you would just accept a little help, we could eradicate the problem,* Midoriya doesn’t say.

“Yes, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya does say.

But Todoroki can’t read or control his thoughts, so Midoriya doesn’t see anything wrong with stewing in his thoughts while Todoroki goes and does…whatever. There was some expansion of the palace going on, and Todoroki’s opinion was needed continually. It was his to inherit, after all. He would be out all day and since Midoriya wasn’t needed, he would be spending yet another day alone. Bored. Bored, and trapped with his frustration at the Crown Prince.

Yeah, well, All Might had taught him a trick to defeat boredom.

Midoriya goes on a hunt for Yaoyorozu. The hunt doesn’t take long though, because Midoriya runs into Shouji in the hallway, and Shouji has an uncanny knack for always knowing where his Captain is. He points Midoriya in the direction of the inner sanctum of the palace. She had business with some of her men. Midoriya wades through the stream of people moving about the palace, still feeling out of place.

(It felt like he’d been here for ages but a month and a half was nothing. And he could be here for years.)

*Great job, Izuku,* Midoriya thinks. *Way to make yourself feel even worse today.*

At least Yaoyorozu is easy to spot. She’s tall and glistening in gold at the edge of a courtyard, accompanied or accompanying two young soldiers. Her hands are on her hips and she isn’t smiling. Midoriya feels it would be wise to hang back, at least for the moment.

The two soldiers are arguing, getting in each other’s faces with little regard for their superior standing right next to them. Yaoyorozu rolls her eyes. Midoriya can’t make out their garbled words, but he can easily hear Yaoyorozu when she speaks.

“Allright, alright!” she snaps. “Settle this with a duel like the rest of my men and stop bothering my officers with your petty problems. Either kill each other or fuck each other; I really don’t care. Both result in less of a headache for me and satisfaction for you.”
The soldiers—no, they were probably part of the Prince’s Guard, still green—sputter at Yaoyorozu and at each other. Midoriya feels it’s about time he lent Yaoyorozu a hand. She had her eyes closed and was moving her lips in a quiet prayer. *Please, O great deity, send me an angel to deliver me from this hell.*

“Yaoyorozu-san?” Midoriya calls, stepping from the shadows. “Is this a bad time?”

Yaoyorozu’s eyes snap towards him. “Deku!” she says, too happily. “Not at all; we were just finishing up here.” She marches up to Midoriya and ushers him out of the courtyard quickly, hands at his back.

“I owe you one,” she says once they’re free of her subordinates. “I thought I could avoid another one of those messes by delegating it to my officers, but it ended up blowing up in my face anyway.”

“Another one?” Midoriya asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Too many alpha males in my guard,” she snorts. “Not enough women if you ask me—we’re much more even keel, no offense intended.”

“None taken,” Midoriya says.

“They come from well-to-do and noble families,” she says. “Always been the best, bred for success, don’t know how to accept ‘no’ unless it’s from a superior. They fight, they figure out their hierarchy, and the ones that barking like little dogs either cut each other down or climb into each other’s beds. It’s how it goes.”

“Rough job,” Midoriya says, grinning.

“Shut it, manservant,” Yaoyorozu says, also grinning. “Not all of us have cushy jobs looking after the lowest-maintenance prince in the Five Kingdoms.”

Right. Todoroki.

Midoriya’s face must do something, because both of Yaoyorozu’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, I know that look,” she says. “That’s the look that says you have some choice words for our lovely mutual royal acquaintance. Don’t worry—it’s not just you. As much as we love him, he’s got an attitude problem for sure. What’d he do this time?”

“It’s quite difficult to *look after* someone when you’ve been told not to *look after* them,” Midoriya says bitterly.

Yaoyorozu nods sympathetically. “He’s always been a lone wolf. Sorry, I know that doesn’t help much, but again—it’s not just you.”

“It’s okay,” Midoriya says. “I didn’t flag you down to complain about Todoroki-sama.”

“Not that I would blame you,” Yaoyorozu says with the confidence of a noblewoman whose head wouldn’t be on the chopping block if she ever questioned Todoroki. Midoriya didn’t have that kind of immunity.

“What do you need?” Yaoyorozu asks.

“It’s an odd request, but…somewhere to train?” Midoriya asks. “An open area where I can work up a sweat and clock out for a little while. Working out, that kind of thing.”
Yaoyorozu whistles. “Wouldn’t have pegged you as the type,” she says.

“Not many do,” Midoriya says with a smile.

She leads him down another hallway and out of the inner sanctum of the palace. On the outside of the palace there’s less traffic, although still staff and hightborn men and women strolling along the covered walkway. Ivy curls lazily around thick marble and granite columns. The sunlight warms Midoriya’s toes—he had gone barefoot today.

“Ah!” Midoriya says. “The gardens!”

He hadn’t known they’d be here, but in a way it makes sense. The delicate flora of the gardens did not belong in the busy courtyards of the palace. Out here it was quieter and safer—more private both for the plants and for the garden visitors who might take a walk through the flowers or vine covered walkways.

“The real treasure of Endeavor’s palace,” Yaoyorozu says. “I hope this atmosphere will do?”

“I’ve wanted to see the gardens ever since I heard about them,” Midoriya confesses. Not entirely a lie—he really had been fascinated with the gardens after the Amity Ball, even done a report on them. During the day, the gardens were even more stunning than his night time visit as a child.

Yaoyorozu shows him to a clearing in one of the smaller gardens, yellow gravel under their feet and surrounded in a long oval by waist-high bushes. They were just beyond the low brick wall separating the gardens from the walkway. A little embarrassing to train while passersby could ogle at him, but Midoriya didn’t mind that much. Once he got in the zone, he couldn’t see a single thing around him.

“This is perfect,” he tells Yaoyorozu.

“I’ll leave you to it,” she says, winking at him.

As expected, Midoriya attracts the eyes of several people, but they’re only passing glances. He breathes deeply, slowly, and starts to stretch his body. He focuses only on the movements of his body, the slight aching pain as he pulls on his muscles and the warm pleasure burn when he releases the stretch. The sun is warm on his head and shoulders, but not uncomfortably so. He will need to lose the shirt eventually, but not yet.

Midoriya practices punches and kicks mostly, the kind of aggressive, leading moves he would use on an opponent. Without a partner, he couldn’t practice everything. Oh, he did miss sparring, but just being able to use his muscles like this was enough for now. Ojiro seemed to be well-built and up to the task—perhaps Midoriya would ask him to be his sparring partner later.

The routine of practice sets Midoriya’s mind onto one track and keeps it there, adjusting his strikes and holding his posture, monitoring his breathing. With all of his focus on his body, Midoriya’s mind gets a rest from the mess that was Endeavor. That was Todoroki. Midoriya uppercuts sloppily and he sets about fixing the move instead of dwelling on that.

He breaks from boxing to do push-ups and sit-ups and crunches, everything he can remember that All Might demanded of him until he’s formed some nice wet spots in the loose shirt he’d scrounged from his old belongings. God bless Tokoyami.

He pulls off his shirt and discards it. Midoriya really feels one with the garden now, absorbing the sunlight into his skin like a flower reaching for the sky. He takes a deep, grateful breath and sinks back into practice.
People are, of course, looking more now. With his arms constantly moving, Midoriya’s band is visible but not identifiable, flashing brilliant gold in the light. It must be very unusual for servants to hone their bodies with the kind of reaction he’s getting. And certainly, some of the highborn and most of the staff knew who he was. His curly hair and too-green eyes were a dead giveaway. He feels heat rise to his cheeks, not just from the sun exposure.

He also wasn’t blind, not to himself or any others. Although he would never admit it out loud, Midoriya knew he wasn’t actually bad-looking or anything. He had always looked a bit plain aside from his eyes, but once All Might beat him into shape, he uh, beat Midoriya into shape. Midoriya could count on one hand the number of men his age that were in better shape than him.

That didn’t really make the whispers and giggles any better though, really, were all Endeavorans this shameless? He was a manservant, not a piece of meat to be ogled at. Of course, with his band being hard to identify and all, it meant people couldn’t see who he belonged to. Surely they would give him distance if they knew he was the Crown Prince’s, after all, it was only he who had right to —

“Deku?”

The voice is curious, very surprised, and not the least bit angry. Todoroki is holding a rolled up piece of parchment and stopped in the middle of the walkway to peer at Midoriya. Midoriya immediately drops his stance to address the prince. He only despair a little bit.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya greets, bowing at the waist. “I thought you were occupied with the palace expansion.” Did that sound accusing? It sounded accusing. Oh well.

“I was needed elsewhere,” Todoroki says, possibly too caught off guard to call Midoriya on his tone.

He’s wearing white again, stretching from wrist to neck. The sunlight turns his creamy skin as white as his clothing. He’s blinding and regal and Midoriya is standing in front of him, only a pair of pants and undergarments away from being naked. Great.

Midoriya is very aware that although Endeavoran clothing tended to be revealing, it was still actually clothing and did its job of making Midoriya look proper for the prince. Without a shirt, sweating and baring tanned skin turned gold in the light, Midoriya resembled one of the workers extending the palace and lifting stone than the manservant to royalty.

Todoroki, for all his poise and elegance, has noticed this, too. Visibly. His eyes rake over Midoriya’s body, taking in all the sweat and exposed skin without blinking. His expression is neutral, but his eyes are a bit wider than usual, and that’s all Midoriya has to see to know he’s fucked up.

“I apologize for appearing to you in such a way,” Midoriya says, bowing his head again. “I did not know you would be passing by the gardens today, Todoroki-sama.” Todoroki’s chastisement from the morning is still fresh in his mind.

“No, it’s…fine,” Todoroki says. “What you do in your free time is yours to do.”

His voice says ‘you can do whatever you want, but…this was not a variable calculated for,’ Midoriya isn’t sure whether to feel more embarrassed, offended, or amused. In a way, he feels all three.

“Thank you, Todoroki-sama,” he says.
“How long have you been here?” Todoroki asks quietly.

“Not long,” Midoriya says. “I asked Yaoyorozu to show me to somewhere I could practice freely, and she led me here.”

“It is a rather pleasant day for a bit of sparring, although you seem to be lacking a partner,” Todoroki says.

“I’m used to working on my own,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki gives him a once over again, this time quicker, clearing his throat. “So it appears,” he says.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says, feeling a smile creep at the corners of his mouth. “Did you perhaps not expect this?”

Todoroki narrows his eyes at Midoriya, but amazingly, he can’t hold Midoriya’s gaze, glancing somewhere over his shoulder. “The manservants and handmaidens provided for my siblings have always been soft of voice and body, trained for years to be servile and delicate. Clearly not the case with you, I see.”

Midoriya is definitely smiling now, almost a teasing grin. “Unfortunately,” Midoriya says, “I am not Endeavor-born and trained. I’m terribly sorry to disappoint you, Todoroki-sama.”

“As if I have a use for someone like that,” Todoroki says. “But, here I am, saddled with a Yuuein resembling a gladiator rather than a manservant, despite my disdain for such a servant.”

“I confess, I am just as baffled as His Royal Highness,” Midoriya says. “How are your manservants supposed to protect their masters if they’re as fragile as parchment?”

“What do you think the Prince’s Guard is for?” Todoroki challenges.

“Most assassinations take place when one is off-guard in the confines of their own bedchamber,” Midoriya says. “And most manservants do not sleep in their own beds.”

“Are you propositioning me?” Todoroki asks. “Quite bold for one so out of place.”

Midoriya’s cheeks burn, but he doesn’t give ground. “How could I?” Midoriya says. “The Crown Prince has made his disdain of meaty barbarians very clear.”

“And yet, he may prove to be the manservant I never knew I needed,” Todoroki says. He folds his arms across his chest and leans against one of the columns. “It’s been so long since I’ve bickered even with Momo.”

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya says, eyes wide.

“You’re rough around the edges, aren’t you?” Todoroki says, a small smile on his face. “You play the part of respectful and obedient, but your true nature is much more playful than that, isn’t it? You don’t look or act as a manservant should.”

“I…” Midoriya says.

“Even this morning, you were insubordinate to me,” he says. “Just what is this gift All Might has given me?”

Midoriya swallows and clasps his hands behind his back.
Fortunately, I like a challenge,” Todoroki says.

“Are you going to shape me into an appropriate manservant?” Midoriya asks.

“No,” Todoroki says. “I’m going to shape you into my manservant. As far as raw materials go, you’re not the worst I’ve come across.”

“Thank you?” Midoriya says. Was that a compliment?

Todoroki pushes off the column. He beckons Midoriya towards him and Midoriya comes close, shoulders hunched in an attempt to make himself smaller. In the light, Todoroki’s scar is near invisible. Midoriya can almost imagine the beautiful and untouchable prince Tooru and the other dancers had spoken of.

“I accept you as mine,” Todoroki says, lighting his fingers on the gems of Midoriya’s band. He draws away without brushing against Midoriya’s skin. “As you were, Deku.”

“Yes, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says. He watches Todoroki until he fades from view.

Dear All Might, Midoriya thinks. Today I learned that the Crown Prince is actually crazy. Please send Tokoyami back to pick me up. Thanks, Midoriya Izuku.

Todoroki was an odd one, that was for sure. He could think Midoriya was weird as much as he wanted, the sentiment was returned in full. He wouldn’t accept help when it came to his night terrors, but he didn’t mind a bit of verbal sparring with one far below his rank. What kind of royal headache gave a tongue-lashing to his manservant for caring about of him and then praised them for teasing him? Weird. Weird, weird, weird.

“You’re a noble pain in my ass,” Midoriya mutters. Tokoyami didn’t have anything to worry about with Midoriya getting compromised when it took all his mental energy just to deal with living under Todoroki’s rule.

Well, Midoriya thinks, smiling. It probably could be worse.

-----------------------------------------

Two days later, Midoriya finally gets his letter back.

Since he couldn’t risk one of the pages taking a peek at All Might’s letter on the way to delivering it to ‘Deku,’ Midoriya had to go to the aviary every day after two weeks had passed since he sent out Dark Shadow. He would whistle for the raven, wait around a few minutes, and head back down when he didn’t show. Midoriya didn’t mind the walk. It became a part of his morning routine.

But this morning when he whistled, Dark Shadow came sailing in almost immediately, landing on the stone of the open window carved into the rock. He caws at Midoriya nibbles at the fingertips offered to him. Midoriya breathes a sigh of relief. Dark Shadow was trained to peck the fingers off of anyone but the message’s recipient.

Midoriya unlatches the compartment and pulls out the tiny scroll. Dark Shadow nudges his hand and Midoriya strokes the raven’s feathers while he reads the letter.
M.I.—

Sounds good, keep an eye out. All quiet here. Your mother is doing well.

T.Y.

Midoriya exhales. He was probably safe, then. If King Enji had suspected something, either Midoriya or Yuuei would be in trouble. There was still the chance something bad was coming back with the wagons from Endeavor, but All Might would already know that. They couldn’t let their guard down, even if things were quiet on both sides. After all, Midoriya at least had news that there was something amiss in Endeavor. And he had his own Mystery of the Crown Prince’s Nightmares to solve.

Midoriya shreds the paper and gives Dark Shadow one more good scratch. “Go on,” he says. “Rest up for a few days. I’ll be needing your help again soon.”

Dark Shadow must know the word ‘rest’ because he flutters out the window as soon as Midoriya finishes speaking. Midoriya shakes his head.

When he reaches the foot of the staircase, he’s stopped immediately by a page.

“His Royal Highness Todoroki Shouto requests your presence in the armory,” he says, then runs off to deliver his next message.

“The armory?” Midoriya says, then cringes.

Crap! He thinks. What if he was just lying when acted all pleased with my teasing? What if he’s actually furious, like murderously mad? When he said ‘shape me into his ideal manservant’ did he mean…shit! He did mean that he wants to chop me into little pieces! His ideal manservant is no manservant! I’ve seen him swing that sword, oh, I am so dead!

Should he run? No, someone would see him. When Todoroki went to look for him, they would tell him where Midoriya went and they’d send the hounds after him. He’d be caught in a few days and then surely tortured. At the same time, killing him was a very poor diplomatic move. His letters wouldn’t come and eventually All Might would send someone to investigate. When they asked how he knew, All Might would be forced to reveal Midoriya had been a spy, and then Yuuei and Endeavor would be back to war. That’s not what Todoroki wanted…

Unless…it was. Did he already know that Midoriya was a spy? Was this whole ‘I hate my father’ act just an act? Was he really in cahoots with the king to start war again? In any case, it was clear Midoriya’s cover was blown. He had to think up some way to talk Todoroki down from war on the way to the armory. Delaying would only look suspicious. He had to make sure Todoroki knew Midoriya meant him no harm and was not conspiring against him.

The armory is packed when Midoriya arrives. Knights and squires shove royal pages out of the way and reach for bows and arrows, knives and swords, then leave out the back, presumably to the stables. Were they gearing up for war already? Endeavorans were so frightening…

“Deku,” Todoroki calls. “I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

“I sincerely apologize, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says, bowing. “If I had known I was needed this morning, I would have left my morning duties until later.”

“My fault,” Todoroki says. “I didn’t tell you that you would be needed here.”
This is it, Midoriya thinks. *My execution.*

“I need you to be resized for riding leathers,” Todoroki says. “It’s a rush job, unfortunately. I’ll put you in something nicer next time.”

“Next time…?” Midoriya chokes out. *Riding leathers?*

“My ever-inconvenient father has called for a hunt the day after next,” Todoroki sighs. “Unfortunately, bowing out is not an option, and you will have to accompany me as my assistant.”

“We’re going for a hunt?” Midoriya asks weakly.

“Yes,” Todoroki says. “Stop asking stupid questions.”

So sorry, *Todoroki-sama, I just thought you were going to kill me*, Midoriya thinks bitterly. Aloud, he says, “But I never told you my size in the first place.”

Todoroki’s smile is sly. “I sized you up a while ago, around the time we first met. But after seeing you in the gardens, I realize I had my sizing all wrong. You’re more than you appear in the loose-fitting nonsense our people are made to wear. I thought you were dainty.”

“The chiton was never really my style anyway,” Midoriya says. He’s still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that Todoroki sized him up.

“Perhaps,” Todoroki says, “but you have the face for it. You’ll do well when I entertain nobility. A pretty distraction from politics. Come, have Kouzuki give you a proper sizing.”

*Oh well,* Midoriya thinks, stepping forward. *Just another thing to lose sleep over, I guess.* His mind keeps turning the phrase ‘pretty distraction’ over and over. Todoroki hadn’t even flinched when he said it either, damn him.

“I haven’t been on a hunt in a while,” Midoriya says. “And I’ve never even met His Majesty. A trip outside the palace sounds exciting.”

Todoroki frowns. “But with my father there, who knows what will happen.”

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: learn to fear todoroki enji. learn to fear endeavor.
do you know your enemy?

Chapter Notes

did you know your enemy?

this chapter is 14,500 words long. i hope that satisfies y’all for a while. if you still want more, check out my new bnha multichap fic, Project Metis! it’s a pacific rim au with a focus on kaiju/human hybrids

MORE ART

MORE AWESOME EZOO COMICS

WEEPS JUST LOOK AT THIS COMIC BY YUU ;___;

kawaii-rookie did a spicy tododeku ;3

karmakashi did a really cool aesthetic board for p&p

CATTCHI SLEW ME WITH THESE DEKUS

OKAY SHIERU NEEDS TO CHILL THESE TODODEKUS MADE ME SCREAM IRL

hetaliabunny made me some really cute babs backing on the palace of versailles!

bulbaderp drew the scene of deku rushing in to help todoroki!

AND OFC.....THE LAST BUT CERRTAINLY NOT LAST.......SADIE’S AWESOME PAINTING (that killed both of us) again, please let me know if i’ve missed your art! i try to get all of it but i’m only human!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todoroki had said a hunt, didn’t he? He definitely said a hunt.

So why the hell was Midoriya in this kind of position?

The litter sways back and forth between the four men carrying it on long wooden poles. The curtains and the litter are crusted in jewels and gold leaf. Midoriya is sinking into a myriad of soft pillows, slowly suffocating in velvet and feathers. If this is how he was destined to go, he would have much preferred execution at Todoroki’s hand. At least that would be swift and honorable, not this—this ridiculous arrangement.

He is still, inexplicably, dressed in a chiton.

There’s the sound of knuckles rapping against the outside of the litter. Midoriya tries to time himself with the swaying but fails, nearly tumbling through the curtains and onto Yaoyorozu’s horse.

“Woah there,” she says. “How’s my favorite servant doing?”
“Help me, Yaoyorozu-san,” Midoriya begs. “Get me out of this draping, sorry excuse for a dress and pillowy hell. Put me in riding leathers. *Put me on a horse. Please, save me.***

“No can do,” Yaoyorozu says. She’s grinning, the traitor. “You must bear the weight of your position, royal manservant. Only the best for the future king’s personal assistant.”

“What am I even doing here,” Midoriya sighs, stumbling to the side a little and accidentally shifting his chiton to give Yaoyorozu an eyeful down his front. “F***,” he swears softly.

Yaoyorozu laughs. “If I had known putting you in a mass of cushions and having men carry you around was all it took to get you to loosen up, I would have done it earlier,” she says. “But to answer your question, you’ll be assisting Todoroki-sama, obviously.”

“How,” Midoriya says. “I’m in sheets. This is a *hunt*. The only place I should be going dressed like this is a *brothel*.”

“Well, the prince may need to blow off some steam after the hunt or celebrate his victory in some way…” At Midoriya’s expression, she waves a hand. “Kidding, kidding. Jesus, you’re as bad as he is when it comes to teasing.”

“It must be nice to be a noble and never have to worry about your body being taken advantage of,” Midoriya mutters.

“It’s just a formality,” Yaoyorozu explains. “It would be no good for a servant to be riding along with my men and royalty, as an equal. And the royalty can’t be carried because that’s a sign of weakness. In order to show wealth and power, you’re—”

“Waved around like a trinket?” Midoriya sighs. “I guess I can bear it if I’ll get to be in real clothes soon enough. I miss Yuuei.”

“I promise nothing weird on the hunt,” Yaoyorozu says. “It’s as normal as in Yuuei, just tracking and chasing. You’re only there with equipment Todoroki-sama might need, nothing more.”

Good. That was just like Yuuein hunts. He had a similar role under All Might. Midoriya would feel much better once he got into something practical and onto a horse. “I’m really not made for the plush life,” he admits to Yaoyorozu.

“Your perceptiveness is terrifying, Yaoyorozu-san,” Midoriya says.

She sticks her chin out. “I’m not Captain for no reason, young Deku,” she says.

“So it seems,” he says, smiling helplessly.

“Better stop talking to you, His Royal Highness might get jealous,” Yaoyorozu says.
“Of who?” Midoriya asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I think you know the answer to that question,” Yaoyorozu says.

Midoriya makes a face at her and lets the curtain fall back over him. He flops back against the pillows, trying to get comfortable, but there was no way Midoriya had the breeding to be comfortable in complete softness. Instead, he focuses on the hunt ahead.

Oh, it would be good to ride a horse again, even if it wasn’t his horse. Endeavor’s horses were supposed to be of a higher quality than Yuuei’s, so he has no doubt that his mount will be a swift and strong beauty. He wants to feel the unity between horse and rider again, the sensation of moving as one, the focus of guiding his mount. Really, all he wants is a good horse and an open stretch of land so he can run free. But since personal freedom was in short supply, he’d have to settle for the chase of the hunt.

They’d have the hawks out scouting for their prey already and the dogs, strong and fast and howling, as they chased down the target animal. Come to think of it, Midoriya didn’t even know what they were hunting. Bucks were probably too common. Boar too dangerous. Leopards, perhaps, but those were smart. Midoriya would be safe at the back in any case, but the thought of Todoroki getting shredded or trampled or speared on horns or tusks wasn’t a pleasant image.

The men carrying him come to a halt. Midoriya can hear the sounds of shouted orders, the snorts of horses, and hammers on pegs. He peeks outside the curtains to see a base camp hastily being put together. Fires are lit. Hunting gear, checked and assembled. The dogs, secured. Several unmarked tents rise, followed by two larger tents emblazoned with the phoenix crest. Midoriya is carried to the smaller of those tents.

The litter sinks as the men take a knee, and then another servant is parting the curtains and offering Midoriya a hand as he steps out. Amongst the busy assembly of the camp, Midoriya is a scantily clad eyesore and the poster boy for soft and useless. He bears the stares of the soldiers, some lewd, most scornful.

“Figures the Crown Prince had to bring along some entertainment.”

“Hey, even frosty princelings need relief. Hope his cock doesn’t freeze the tongue off that one, he’s pretty.”

“Doesn’t mean I want him to rub his status in our faces.”

“I don’t blame His Royal Highness. I’d like to do him, too.”

“Eh, I like them thinner. I could get my fingers in those curls, though…”

The tent flap doesn’t shield Midoriya from their voices, but it does shield him from their gazes. His hands curl around his arms. He fights off the trembling. This place was not Yuuei. He’d forgotten that.

Across the tent from him, Todoroki, in sensible hunting clothing, clicks his tongue. “You look ridiculous,” he says.

I don’t need you to tell me that. “Apparently it’s tradition to look ridiculous while hunting if you’re not royalty,” Midoriya says. His voice doesn’t shake that much. “Am I supposed to distract the hog while you spear it?”

“Get changed,” Todoroki says. “Your clothes are over there.” He gestures to a hammock that had
been set up over a rug, a fucking rug, on top of the dirt and leaves of the forest. Midoriya feels his gut curl.

“And it’s not a boar,” Todoroki adds. “We’re hunting king deer.”

Oh. Midoriya knew about those. They were only found to the north of Yuuei, so they rarely traveled all the way to the border just to hunt. Midoriya himself had never been on a king deer hunt. He picks up his clothing, thankfully as unrevealing as Todoroki’s was dailly. He reaches up to unclasp the chiton when he realizes Todoroki is still standing there.

“Why the hesitation?” Todoroki asks. Of course he noticed Midoriya’s pause. “Your prince ordered you to change clothing.”

Midoriya’s hands fall to his belt, just a thick strand of golden rope, and undoes it. He lets it fall to the floor. Without turning around or daring to look in Todoroki’s direction, he unclasps the chiton at the shoulder, letting it drop from his body and leaving him completely bare.

He will not look at Todoroki.

He reaches for his pants first, determined to cover himself up quickly. The trembling is pronounced in his hands. He’s stepping into them when Todoroki speaks up.

“Do their words bother you?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya hesitates again before pulling his pants up. “No, Todoroki-sama,” he says quietly.

“Don’t lie to me,” Todoroki says.

“Yes, Todoroki-sama.”

“I’d like to stick my cock in him,” Todoroki says. “Such a pretty face, just begging to be ruined. He’s definitely a virgin. Not the best fuck, but it’d be worth it to say I did a prince. Lucky he’s not a commoner, with eyes like that.”

Midoriya turns around to stare at Todoroki. Todoroki isn’t even looking at him, his eyes are fixed on a map of the forest and he’s marking it up. “If only he wasn’t royalty, if only he wasn’t the property of royalty,” Todoroki says. “You’re not the first one of us to be talked about in such a way. Turns out having half your face burned off kills an erection pretty quickly, though.”

“I didn’t know,” Midoriya says.

“They’re disgusting,” Todoroki says. “A fine mixture of sewage, rotting flesh, and lack of discipline. I would kill them all with my own hands if I didn’t know it would please my father.”

“But…those are his men, aren’t they?” Midoriya asks.

Todoroki dips the quill in ink. “The fact that they spit that shit within my hearing isn’t a coincidence. I wouldn’t be surprised if my father was paying them to declare their fantasies of fucking me raw to the whole world. He doesn’t care who I kill as long as I become a killing machine.”

Todoroki looks up at Midoriya. “They will target you, because you’re pretty and unattainable. They will target you because you’re mine. It will not just be their sick dreams of bedding you, but also their speculations on our bedroom activities, since everyone believes we’re fucking. Even Yaoyorozu. They think you were sent from Yuuei to suit my unique tastes. Why else would the
cold prince accept such an effeminate man into his service but to fuck him? Or to be fucked by him?"

Midoriya flinches.

“Don’t,” Todoroki says. “Harden yourself to it. They look at you and see a prince’s whore. You aren’t that soft. You’re made of something stronger, silvertongue. I’ve seen it in you. You will not fail me and fall prey to their taunts.”

Midoriya holds Todoroki’s gaze, then slides his eyes away and to the floor. Todoroki sighs, but Midoriya can’t help it. He wants to be brave. He wants to be whatever Todoroki apparently sees in him to make him believe Midoriya can bear this. But this is not Yuuei. Midoriya has never faced a challenge of this caliber in his life.

“If they act—” Midoriya says.

“They will not act,” Todoroki says. “To do so would be suicide on their part. They serve the king, but I am a prince. To defy my will and my claim and lay a hand on one of my household will bring about their death by my hand.”

Todoroki moves around the table and towards Midoriya. “Cry once,” Todoroki says. “Lock all your fear and shame and hurt into those tears and cleanse your body of the feeling.”

He steps close to Midoriya, touching his hand again. This time, he lets his fingers brush Midoriya’s skin. “I accepted you,” he murmurs. “I will protect you, so stop doubting me and cry your last.”

Midoriya squeezes his eyes shut, a few stray tears burning his eyes and dribbling down his cheeks. He wipes them away with the palm of his hand and takes a deep breath. Centering himself and crushing the curling, cringing in his gut, Midoriya opens his eyes and stares into Todoroki’s eyes.

Todoroki smiles crookedly. “Good,” he says. “Get changed.”

By the time Midoriya has finished changing into his hunting clothing, the hunting hawks are sounding their cries, having located a herd of king deer. Todoroki disappears from the tent as Midoriya is knotting up his boots. He stands and examines himself in the mirror provided. He looks much better in this kind of clothing—snug and utilitarian, stretching cleanly over his chest and back. He’s pleased to find it fits him in a way that doesn’t disguise his musculature or give any indication that he had been dressed like a court pet minutes ago.

Todoroki lifts the tent flap in the mirror’s reflection. Midoriya can see him nod thoughtfully. “Much better,” he says. “It was a good idea to forgo ornamentation.”

Todoroki leads him out of the tent and to their horses, his guard already on horseback. Out of the corner of his eye, Midoriya spots the men from earlier closer to the king’s tent. He keeps his head held high and ignores the eyes burning into his back. He swings himself onto the back of his horse as if he was born on horseback, ignoring the servant standing by to help. For that, he gets a few wolf whistles, but he refuses to dignify them with a glance.

“You carry yourself well,” Todoroki murmurs after he mounts his own horse. “They won’t forget that.”

Midoriya nods, relieved. In the company of the prince, the catcalls peter out. Midoriya feels untouchable and giddy even though all Todoroki is doing is leading his horse around the camp slowly, a predator in his own right. Midoriya smiles. No boar or leopard would dare challenge Todoroki when he commands the very air with the flick of a wrist or a single uttered word.
“Shouto,” Todoroki Enji, King of Endeavor calls out.

Todoroki turns to face the king. Midoriya mirrors him.

If Todoroki Shouto looks exactly like a Crown Prince should, then Todoroki Enji looks exactly how a king should look. He wields the reins of his massive black stallion with one hand, surveying the camp with slow, concentrated eyes, as if he owned everything he laid eyes on. Which he did. While Shouto’s aura was that of poise, control, and calculation, Enji’s aura was that of overwhelming power and domination, a pressure that settled between Midoriya’s shoulders and forced him to duck his head even though he could not bow on horseback.

So. This was Todoroki’s opponent.

King Enji himself was intimidatingly large but by no means fat. He had the strength that came from warmongering and restless violence, resting in thick tendons and bulky muscle that would let him swing a battle axe like a toothpick. On the battlefield, Midoriya had no doubt that King Enji was a one-man army.

In preparation for the hunt, he was not swallowed in flames as usually described by those who had seen him, but Midoriya smells burning nevertheless.

“Shouto, are you ready?” King Enji asks.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Todoroki says. “Whenever you signal, the hounds shall be released and the game will begin.”

“Make no mistake,” King Enji says. “I’m hunting the largest buck in this herd and will bring it down myself.”

“What a coincidence,” Todoroki says breezily. “I, too, will be aiming for the largest buck.”

“You may be my heir,” King Enji says, “but know your place, boy.”

“If I was satisfied with simply being an heir, the title of Crown Prince wouldn’t suit me,” Todoroki says. “My place is usurping yours.”

Between any other two father-son pairs, the exchange might have been light-hearted and teasing, but the air between the king and the prince is strained. For the lightness of his voice, Todoroki doesn’t smile. His features are twisted into a barely held in snarl and his hands are tight on the reins of his horse. King Enji keeps his face neutral, but then splits into a grin at Todoroki’s words.

“You may try, boy,” he says.

King Enji raises a gloved fist. Horns sound, low and ominous, rattling the forest. The dogs are released from their cages and tear across the forest floor, spit flying. The king wastes no time in galloping after them, his men following behind. Todoroki’s men shuffle in place, awaiting his lead.

Todoroki lets out a long breath. “Onwards,” he says, and urges his horse after them.

Midoriya and the rest of Todoroki’s company follow. As he had expected, Midoriya’s mount is sure-footed and smart. She leaps low logs and dodges obstacles while still following his lead. The overhanging canopy dapples the men and their horses, but Todoroki’s unusual hair stands out like a beacon, calling his men to him. He’s comfortable on his horse and drives him fast, gaining on the king’s party.
The calling of the hawks grows closer and the barks of the dogs grow more frenzied. The herd of deer is already running by the time the hunting party comes upon them, but with fresh and well-trained horses, the herd has no chance of outrunning them. King Enji shouts orders to separate the buck leading the herd from the rest of the deer. Todoroki doesn’t hesitate, blasting past the tail end of the king’s men and aiming to flank the herd. Midoriya follows him.

It’s typical of King Enji to have his men do the hard, dangerous work of separating the prey, but Todoroki has none of his reservations. He sets his sights on the party ahead of him and pursues. Midoriya sees the buck.

He’s certainly a king among king deer. His antlers crisscross and branch out in an impossibly complex grid of curves ending in sharp points. His horns loop in and out, together and apart, so stunningly beautiful that Midoriya unconsciously slows his horse to observe the animal. The buck is panting hard, breath cloudy around his nostrils, and he’s not afraid to butt at the men on their horses. One of the king’s men avoids the swing, but the other does not. He is knocked off his horse and the horse spooks, jolting away from the buck.

Midoriya sees the opening. He can feel that Todoroki sees the opening, too. Todoroki, bow already in hand, draws an arrow from his quiver and sets in, letting the arrow fly in a heartbeat. It pierces the buck through the throat, right through the space the soldier had vacated. The animal cries out but keeps moving despite its fatal wound. Todoroki clicks his tongue and lets another arrow loose, this one straight into the foreleg of the buck. It stumbles, then falls.

The other of the king’s men pulls his horse up short and spins around, eyes flashing. “You insolent whelp!” he snarls. “That is the prey of the King!”

Todoroki notches another arrow and sends it flying into the man’s thigh two beats later. The man howls, clutching at the shaft of the arrow. Midoriya’s eyes widen. Todoroki hadn’t flinched. His expression didn’t change. The man spits curses at Todoroki that make Midoriya uncomfortable.

“If you leave for camp now, it might not get infected,” Todoroki says helpfully. “Think twice, perhaps, before you insult your future king.”

The man stumbles off, still glaring at Todoroki with burning fire in his eyes. Midoriya doesn’t say it. That man would become an enemy of the Crown Prince’s.

Todoroki doesn’t really seem to care. He hops off his horse and throws the reins to Midoriya, the rest of his men approaching as well.

Midoriya fumbles with the reins, not really sure what was going on until Todoroki drew his knife from its scabbard on his belt.

“Todoroki-sama, don’t,” Midoriya urges him. “It could still impale you at that close a distance.”

“He won’t,” Todoroki says. Midoriya wishes Todoroki were close enough to kick in the back. This was a job for the servants of the prince, not the prince himself when he could get skewered like a hog on a spit.

The buck’s chest is still heaving, although weakly. He’s bleeding from the two wounds, dark blood clotting in his hair. Spittle foams at the corners of his mouth. As Todoroki approaches, he watches him. Todoroki stops short of touching the fallen buck.

He bows.

It’s not a deep bow, but it’s polite. He acknowledges the struggle and the majesty of the animal. When he finally reaches to light his hand on the buck’s leg. Its breaths grow ragged.
“Thank you for your sacrifice,” Todoroki says, and slits the buck’s throat. Midoriya lets out a
breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

Todoroki turns back to Midoriya and his own men. “We need men to bring him back to camp,”
Todoroki says. A couple of his men nod and head in the direction of their camp to fetch servants.

Midoriya shakes his head and smiles fondly at Todoroki. What the hell had he been so worried
about, again? Todoroki always knew what he was doing. Midoriya hands both Todoroki’s reins
and his reins to the prince’s men. He hops off his horse.

Todoroki raises an eyebrow as he approaches. “Yes?” he says.

“A fine hunt,” Midoriya says. “And an even finer kill. I understand now. You’re an honorable man
to do the dirty work yourself.” Todoroki’s gloves are soaked in blood and his arms are spattered
with it. Midoriya pulls out his handkerchief and cleans away some of the blood that had landed on
Todoroki’s chin, making sure not to actually touch the prince with his hands.

“Do I finally have your respect?” Todoroki asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You were looking for it?” Midoriya replies, raising his own eyebrow. Todoroki gives him a look
and Midoriya shakes his head again, still smiling. “You’ve had it for quite a while now. But now I
finally know what kind of man you are, Todoroki-sama.”

“Oh? And what kind is that?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya opens his mouth to answer when three arrows shoot past him—one past his side, one past
his shoulder, and one right by his ear, the sound of wind rushing past him deafening. Midoriya
cries out, struck by the one past his ear and grazed at his side. He sinks to his knees, clutching at
his head and side. He can hear his blood rushing in his ears and tears prick at his eyes. The pain
throbs, sharp and constantly present, adrenaline-induced panic distracting him from anything else
but the twin burning sensations.

Through blurry eyes, he sees Todoroki whip his head in the direction of where the arrows had been
fired from. He hears shouting over the sound of his own heartbeat with an awful lot of resemblance
to Todoroki’s voice and the sound of thundering hooves. He blinks away tears and makes out the
shapes of the king’s men on horseback, surrounding them, and three shiny new arrows in the body
of the buck.

The adrenaline kicks in as a painkiller and helps him to ignore his wounds. He draws his hands
away, aware the prince may need him. His left hand comes away relatively clean, only a few
patches of blood, but his right hand is covered in blood. He feels a little dizzy, mind making the
connection between the fresh, violent red on his hands and blood coming from his body. He looks
up and sees Todoroki several paces away and in front of him, fists curled.

“Your Royal Highness, the buck appeared to be moving—” one of the men says, sounding
exasperated.

“I wonder how that’s possible,” Todoroki growls, low like rolling thunder, “given that I slit his
throat only minutes ago.”

The man shrugs, so dismissive of Todoroki that Midoriya wants to stand up and shout at him, too.
“I’m only telling you what I saw. Besides, if it came to choosing between the Crown Prince’s
safety and a servant’s, it’s obvious which is more important.” His tone is smug. He thinks he has
the prince in a corner.
Todoroki’s posture relaxes. “I understand that your mind is a puny, overworked instrument as it stands, but try to coax a little more brainpower out of it so that you may comprehend my words: Deku is a part of my household. My household is a part of me. My guard and my servants are my arms and legs, my eyes and ears when I cannot be everywhere at once. Each one is a vital part to me. When you loosed your arrows on my manservant so carelessly, it is as if you fired on the Crown Prince himself.”

Todoroki twirls the knife in his hand and shoots it out, pressing the blade right against the man’s crotch. “I do not need your protection, you mangy son of a bitch,” he says slowly. “If I wanted an undisciplined mongrel mercenary to protect me, you would be in my guard. Next time you lay a hand on my people, you’ll lose something very valuable to you.”

“You stole a kill from His Majesty,” the man sneers, although he shoots a telltale glance at Todoroki’s knife. “You’ll pay dearly.”

Todoroki withdraws the knife, point made. He snorts. “It’s not my problem if my father is an incompetent hunter. The loss is on his head, not mine.”

The soldier sputters, turning red. Todoroki doesn’t allow him to get a word in. “If you can’t string your words together coherently, you don’t deserve to speak at all. Perhaps I should have cut out your tongue instead.” His eyes move over the man’s shoulder. “Your Majesty,” he greets, dipping his head.

King Enji is all flames. The heat from the fire running up and down his body makes Midoriya break out in a sweat, even meters from him. His Quirk only accentuates the terrific pressure he exerts over his men, and the blinding colors of his flames make him difficult to look at. Todoroki, on the other hand, has no problem meeting his eyes, chin held high, but then again he was also a child of fire.

“What’s with this atmosphere?” King Enji asks. “My favorite son has killed a magnificent buck. This is a time for celebration.”

“Your men harmed one of my own,” Todoroki says, factual and even, none of the fury he had unleashed on the soldier. He doesn’t accuse.

“Inexcusable,” King Enji says, frowning. “Name who it was and he will be executed on the spot.”

“No need,” Todoroki says. “I made my point.” Todoroki turns away, clicking his tongue and reaching for the reins of his horse. His expression is still stormy. “I’ll be seeing to my manservant’s wounds now, please excuse me.”

“And the buck?” King Enji says. “Do you not want to march into camp victorious?”

“It’s dead,” Todoroki says. “As my man may be if he’s not treated. Who cares who slew the animal? Take credit, if you want.”

Midoriya takes that as his cue to climb back onto his horse as well. Todoroki’s are too dismissive, even for the heir to the throne. Midoriya sneaks a glance back at the king, but he’s already accepted his son’s departure and is setting about ordering his men to prepare the buck for transport. As far as villains went, King Enji didn’t appear to be a very potent one if he won’t even get upset at his son’s rudeness. Midoriya looks back at Todoroki, but his eyes are narrowed and his lip curled, still furious.

They don’t return to Todoroki’s tent, but instead head towards one of the the unmarked tents. The
adrenaline is fading and now the dull throb of pain has returned. Midoriya’s ear is crusty with dried blood and still wet along his neck—that had been cut as well.

“Recovery Girl will take care of you,” Todoroki says, distracted. “I have other matters to attend to.” He says the word ‘matters’ in the same tone he had said ‘undisciplined mongrel mercenary.’

“Oh dear,” Recovery Girl says in a scratchy voice. She’s an aging nurse with doughy, wrinkled skin, but her smile is comforting. “That’s a nasty arrow wound. Stray shots are so clumsy.”

She tends to his cuts, cleaning them with fresh water and some stinging alcohol that makes Midoriya’s eyes burn. Once he’s been washed and cleaned to her satisfaction, she puts some smelly ointment on top of the cuts and covers them with gauze.

“To keep from scarring so badly,” she says. “You lost a good chunk of your ear, though.”

“Now we match,” Midoriya says numbly. The throbbing has become less intense. She dismisses him back to Todoroki’s tent.

He pushes through the tent flap. Todoroki’s eyes jump to him immediately. He’s sitting down in a plush chair in that position again, one leg crossed over the other and an arm propping up his face. His eyes fall to the bright white bandages on the side of Midoriya’s face. He uncrosses his legs and rises calmly from his chair and in one swift motion, knocks the metal water jug and and glasses from the table. They clatter to the ground painfully, the glass shattering, and Midoriya flinches.

Todoroki’s hands slam against the table and he hunches his shoulders. “Damn it,” he hisses, hair falling into his face.

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya calls in a soft voice.

Todoroki barks out a laugh. “After I promised to protect you, too,” he says.

“I don’t understand,” Midoriya says. “Why are you so upset? It was an accident. They were just trying to protect you. In their place, I also would have—”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Todoroki snaps, “because you’re not a greedy, blood-hungry bastard like they are.”

“But—” Midoriya says.

“Do you honestly believe that was an accident?” Todoroki says sharply. “They just happened to mistake the buck as living and you just happened to be in the way?”

“I…what?” Midoriya says.

“How can you be so blind,” Todoroki seethes. “You’re a target.”

“But I’m just…why me?” Midoriya asks, shrinking back.

“I don’t know!” Todoroki shouts. “I don’t know why you, I don’t know why he would dare; you are clearly mine to deal with, so why would he ever—” Todoroki breaks off, sinking his teeth into his bottom lip.

“The soldiers—” Midoriya starts.

“The soldiers are pawns,” Todoroki snarls. “Think! Use your goddamn brain! It was my father who arranged this!”
“The King?” Midoriya says. “But he wasn’t there. He couldn’t have known you would kill the buck. How could he have….” Midoriya starts thinking.

“He read me,” Todoroki says. “He knows I hate him. He knows I would do anything to beat him. Of course I would overtake his hunting party. Of course I would take the prey for myself. And of course my faithful manservant would be at my heels.”

“So his plan was to…hurt me? To what purpose?” Midoriya asks.

“To hurt…Deku, your innocence is a novelty, but not appreciated at this time,” Todoroki sighs. “Those soldiers weren’t trying to hurt you; they were trying to kill you. They missed.”

Midoriya’s heart lodges itself firmly in his throat. A headshot, a shot through the shoulder or the spine, and a shot through the stomach. If each arrow hadn’t been off by a few inches, Midoriya would be dead. All his friendly-soft, admiring thoughts about Endeavor dry up like a well in the scorching heat of Riot’s desert. This place was a poison. This place was dangerous.

“The fact that he flaunted how little he cares about my people and property is the most disturbing part about all of this,” Todoroki says. “This is my territory, how dare he challenge my authority like this.”

“He’s the king,” Midoriya says softly. He can’t hear himself talk; it’s like there’s a wall of water separating his consciousness from the words coming out of his mouth. “He can do whatever he wants. Even kill me.”

“No, he can’t,” Todoroki says, looking at Midoriya. “Deku, do you hear me? No, he can’t. He can’t touch you or any of my household. That’s why it was staged as an accident, because he can’t. He knows I would challenge him. He doesn’t want that.”

“How can you be so sure of yourself?” Midoriya whispers. “How can you be so sure of everything? You’re not even king, how can you…”

Todoroki’s eyes soften. “I’ve been harsh with you. I’ll send you back to the palace. With Momo, on horseback. She will look after you.”

Todoroki looks to the shattered glass and the metal water pitcher, spilling cold water across the floor. Midoriya follows his gaze. There’s a thin layer of frost over the pitcher, webbing its way over the water closest to the pitcher, freezing it. Todoroki’s Quirk.

“I’m sorry,” Todoroki says. “You don’t deserve this. You didn’t ask to get thrown into a game of politics and get used like a chess piece.”

Todoroki apologizes, but he doesn’t say it won’t happen again. Because it will happen again. And again, and again. Midoriya wasn’t a gift; he was a weak spot. Someone that King Enji could take advantage over because he didn’t know how to defend himself like Yaoyorozu or Shouji or Ojiro. Midoriya realizes, suddenly, why Todoroki never took any personal servants. Perhaps it was his preference but also…they would be in danger if they got close to him.

Todoroki calls for Yaoyorozu and she steps into the tent, leaning in close to Todoroki while he tells her an abbreviated recollection of the events. Her brows pinch together. She leads Midoriya from the tent and back to his horse. He gets to keep his riding clothes. She helps him onto his horse and he doesn’t even protest. Midoriya is so, so tired.

As they ride away from the sounds of camp, he hears the cheers of men as the buck is brought back into camp. There will be strips of venison carved up and served until the men’s bellies burst,
beer and wine flowing endlessly, warm bonfires and brotherhood and storytelling.

And here Midoriya was, close to tears for the second time today and riding away from it all to save his own life. This is what his life would be now. Running and watching his back and seeing Todoroki torn up as he matches and counters his father in the game of kings.

Midoriya thinks of Todoroki sitting in front of the largest fire next to his father, idly swirling a glass of wine, unsmiling. He thinks of King Enji being offered the largest and juiciest cuts of meat and Todoroki being offered whatever’s left. He thinks Todoroki will forgo the meat altogether, except Todoroki isn’t Midoriya. He won’t refuse to participate out of spite—he’ll be right in the thick of it, fighting with his father for the best meat, allowing the men to entertain him and keeping up in conversation and maintaining air of self-satisfaction at his kill.

*I’m not the only one lying to everyone*, Midoriya thinks.

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The next morning, after a full night’s rest and a bit of crying out his anxiety, Midoriya feels better. It’s to the point that he’s able to think over all the events from yesterday with greater clarity. He’s not sure if Todoroki is a genius or just delusional, accusing his father of being the mastermind behind the whole arrow-to-the-neck scheme. Midoriya thinks on it over his morning soup, slurping thoughtfully and spacing out in the mess hall.

Tooru finds him, because she has quite the nose for gossip.

“Oh, Deku!” she gasps. “Your ear! What happened?”

As per usual, Tooru brings along no less than five of her friends, a mixture of dancers, servants, and curious kitchen staff. Midoriya touches the bandage delicately, attempting to pacify them with a smile.

“It’s nothing,” he says. “I got grazed by a stray arrow—”

“A stray arrow?” Tooru says. “You must have been so close to the hunt! I head Todoroki-sama took down the king deer all by himself.”

Midoriya smiles. “Yeah, he did. I got to see it.”

The collective group agrees that that’s about the coolest thing that’s happened all week. They want to know how big the buck was, how Todoroki took it down, was it true he managed to pierce it through the eye and kill it in one shot?

“No, no,” Midoriya says laughing. “He shot it through the neck and then brought it down with an arrow to its leg. He got off his horse and killed it himself.”

“Huh, that’s pretty rare,” one of the girls says. “Usually it’s the servant who kills the thing for good and gets their hands dirty. Nobility don’t like getting blood all over their fancy uniforms.”

“I’m glad he killed it,” Midoriya says, looking at his hands. “It seems cowardly to have someone else finish it off.”
“But your ear,” Tooru says. “Does it hurt?”


“How bad is it?” Tooru asks.

“Lost a chunk of my earlobe,” Midoriya says. “I’m sure that will lead to a lot of unfortunate nicknames in the future.”

The assembled giggle amongst themselves, confirming Midoriya’s suspicions. Tooru sighs fondly. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah,” Midoriya says. “Me too.”

Sha pats him on the back. “Those soldiers should really be more careful, huh! It would suck if you got really hurt from their mistake.”

“Mistake,” Midoriya says hollowly. “You’re right. Maybe His Royal Highness will school them in archery. He was amazing.”

“Tooru!” One of her friends calls. “Food!”

Tooru leaves him alone in favor of breakfast. With just a few words, she has brought Midoriya back to square one. How could he have forgotten? The king’s men would be extremely skilled at archery, especially on horseback. Only the best would be brought to the hunt, as a reward for their skills. At least that was how it worked in Yuuei, but considering how cutthroat Endeavor was, Midoriya didn’t doubt the reward of hunting was given to only the most skilled.

So was the soldier trying to hit the buck? Or Midoriya? Either way, he had missed. That seemed impossible. It wasn’t like Midoriya was running in a serpentine pattern or anything. He had just been standing there.

It didn’t make sense to sit around brooding. Midoriya hands off his bowl to the kitchen workers and makes his way back to Todoroki’s bedchambers.

It’s that other guard at Todoroki’s door, not Shouji this time. He doesn’t give Midoriya a second glance when Midoriya knocks at the prince’s door. He heard Todoroki come in early this morning, having camped overnight after the hunt and he hadn’t moved since, probably sleeping. There’s a sigh through the door and then, “Yes, come in.”

Midoriya pushes open the door and closes it quickly when he sees Todoroki flopped on his belly across the bed, shirtless (again) and pants untied. His head is turned just enough to peek up at Midoriya, cheek squished into the sheets.

“Oh, it’s just you,” he says. “I had a whole lecture prepared for Momo about how I refuse to do real work today and she can’t make me.”

“I had a thought about the arrow incident,” Midoriya blurts out.

Todoroki regards him for a long moment. “You have no understanding of secrecy, do you?” he says.

“What?” Midoriya squeaks.

Todoroki lazily points to the door. “For example, if the guard stationed outside is a spy for my
father, you’ve just revealed that you don’t think it’s an accident and therefore bumped yourself up the list of targets to eliminate.”

“\textit{What}?” Midoriya says. “I thought he was a part of your personal guard!”

“Yes,” Todoroki says patiently. “But no man is immune to the greed for gold.” He pauses. “Except possibly Momo, but then again, she is greater than any man could ever hope to be.” He squints at Midoriya. “And you.”

“Me,” Midoriya says, deadpan. He puts his hands on his hips. “I can \textit{totally} be swayed by money.”

Todoroki smiles. “You flirt with me so fearlessly.”

Midoriya feels his stomach drop to his feet. “Wh—no, I’m not—I, uh, you’re very attractive but—”

Todoroki’s smile turns into a grin, and Midoriya realizes he’s being played. He pouts harder. “Ha ha, very funny. Trick the servant into struggling between insubordination and insulting his superior’s looks. I think I’ll have to talk to Yaoyorozu-san about laying off the jokes. It’s rubbing off in all the wrong places.”

“I do enjoy bantering with you,” Todoroki admits. “It’s refreshing.”

“I came here on \textit{business},” Midoriya says, despairing.

“Very well,” Todoroki says. “I will find it in my princely heart to hear out the concerns of my people.”

“How kind of you,” Midoriya says. He sits on the floor at the edge of Todoroki’s bed so that they’re eye-level. “Tooru reminded me, actually, but the king’s men should be skilled archers. If their aim was to kill me, how did they miss?”

“Mm,” Todoroki says. “A good catch. I suspect it was because of my presence. They expected you to be alone on the ground, killing the buck. It would be a clean shot. Suspicious, but clean. It seems my tendencies to stray from tradition have finally come in handy.”

Midoriya’s shoulders slump. “So it really wasn’t an accident.”

“Not a chance,” Todoroki says. “All that remains is figuring out the motive. Although, given that this is my father, it shouldn’t be very difficult to figure that one out. I’ll ask him outright, if I must.”

“Outright!” Midoriya exclaims. “In court?”

“Of course,” Todoroki says. “Court is stuffed full of the King’s supporters who see me as a belligerent child. It’s a fun game to them; watch the King beat his own son back into place. I can defy him as much as I want and be dismissed by both the nobility and my father. It’s my hope that I can at least erode \textit{some} of his support by calling him out.”

“You play to win,” Midoriya says softly.

“There’s no other choice,” Todoroki says, frowning. “We’ve had twelve years of peace. I will not allow even the King to bring about war.”

Midoriya looks at his hands. Even slumped across a bed, half-naked, Todoroki is brilliant. “I am not worthy to be in your service,” he says.

Todoroki snorts. “I never asked for you to be in my service, Deku,” he says. “But since you’re here
and I’m here, we might as well be partners, yes?”

“It is an honor,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki grunts. “I dislike your submissive attitude,” he says. “It doesn’t suit you and it’s annoying.”

“You’re so picky,” Midoriya sighs, rolling his eyes. “Only a few days ago you were telling me not to question you.”

“I am a prince,” Todoroki says. “We’re known to be fickle at best. And don’t question me. I won’t stand for it. But the verbal sparring, I like.”

“No to submission and questioning, yes to being a smartass, got it,” Midoriya says, earning him an eye roll from Todoroki.


Midoriya nods and stands up. He’s smiling as he leaves Todoroki, chest lighter. There was something about Todoroki’s mathematical efficiency and precise calculations of his father’s plans—knowing he had such a powerful ally and commander made Midoriya feel safer. Seeing Todoroki back to a calm and collected state after his overflow of emotion yesterday balances Midoriya’s world, too.

Somehow, his life has ended up revolving around Todoroki. Perhaps that was just what happened when one served royalty. They were truly enrapturing. All Might, and now, Todoroki Shouto.

The hunting party brings back venison leftover from last night’s meal for the royal servants to eat for lunch. They’re not the choicest pieces by far, but when they’re hot and salted, Midoriya feels as if he’s eating like the King himself. He eats meat, biscuits, and candied fruits until he feels fit to burst. And after that, it’s time to nap.

When Midoriya wakes, the sun is low in the sky, approaching sunset in a few hours. He remembers All Might and Dark Shadow and sits at his desk to write a letter to All Might. He mentions the hunt as briefly as possible, making sure to emphasize that the wound was minor but intentional, and also voicing Todoroki’s suspicions that King Enji was up to something, most likely related to starting a war. He rolls up the strip of paper. Tomorrow morning, he would send Dark Shadow out.

Midoriya wants to bother Todoroki. It’s a new feeling, wanting to be in the Crown Prince’s presence after fearing him for so long. He feels like he did when he first came into All Might’s service, a kid on the verge of hearing a secret. Todoroki’s quest frightens him, but it’s also exciting, waging a secret war against the king of Yuuei’s sworn enemy at the side of the king’s son. It’s like something out of one of his mother’s novels, but it’s his life.

Nevertheless, Midoriya will leave the prince alone. Todoroki has enough to deal with as it is and after such an exhausting couple of days, he probably needs the sleep and peace that comes from not being needed all the damn time. He’ll bother the prince for his meal and that’s it. Even if Todoroki wanted to sleep the day away, Midoriya wasn’t going to let him waste away.

Jesus. He was starting to sound like Chef. Or Yaoyorozu.

Dinner was a simple affair, some kind of soup similar to what Midoriya had had for breakfast. Actually now that he thinks about it, Chef had asked some probing questions about the meal this morning…
“I was a guinea pig?” Midoriya squawks.

Chef laughs heartily. “Don’t look so down, my young friend—you’re input was very valuable! Now your prince will eat well.”

Midoriya sighs and smiles. “I guess so,” he says. He looks over the tray. “Is there any wine tonight?”

“Not from our cellars, no,” Chef says. “His Royal Highness will drink some celebratory champagne tonight for his successful hunt. He is expecting it, or so I am told.”

Midoriya nods. Whatever, it was probably a gift from some noble trying to get on Todoroki’s good side. They sure did like to drag out the hunt in Endeavor.

He thanks Chef and leaves the kitchen, heading towards the staircase to Todoroki’s bedchambers. He makes it up one flight of stairs, two flights of stairs—

“Manservant,” a voice calls out from down the hallway on the third floor.

Midoriya stops and peers down the hallway. Even though the torches are lit, the walls are without windows and dark. Several meters down the hallway, he can see the glint of fire off armor. Soldiers.

“You deaf, boy?” the second one calls. “Come when you’re called!”

Midoriya swallows thickly and turns down the hallway, dinner tray rattling. Upon closer inspection, he sees a red stone glittering in each of the soldiers’ ears. No good—both Todoroki and King Enji used red stones for their men. They’re wearing the emblem of the phoenix on their shoulders too, but again, Midoriya can’t tell. He doesn’t recognize them.

They make it pretty clear who they serve by knocking the tray from Midoriya’s hands.

Midoriya sinks immediately to try and collect the tray and clean up the mess and drops right into a kick aimed at his ribs. He goes toppling over, not flying like the guards probably expected. He feels grimly satisfied that he’s stronger than they had expected, but the satisfaction is quickly knocked from him. The second and third kick knock the breath from his lungs.

Midoriya curls into a ball, trying to shield his still healing side, but a kick to the back of his head has him gasping and seeing stars, uncurling. One finds his wounded side immediately and steps on it, crushing him under the weight of his boot. He makes a pathetic mewl of pain, crying out when the man digs his heel into the cut.

No, Midoriya was wrong—he does recognize these men. The one who shot him and the one Todoroki shot. So, he was to be their revenge in place of hurting the prince.

“P-pretty pathetic,” he wheezes, “to pick on…someone who can’t…fight back.”

The kicking stops and is replaced by a hand wrapped around his throat. Midoriya is gasping for breath again and chokes when the last of his air is forced out as he’s lifted and slammed against a wall. He claws at the man’s arm, but it’s fingernails against metal. He kicks out weakly against the hold and the guard laughs.

“You should have just died,” he says. “Now, we have to get our hands dirty.”

The second man pulls a knife from his belt. He twirls it, much like Todoroki had twirled it
yesterday (god, that was only yesterday) and presses it underneath Midoriya’s eye, slashing a line across his cheek. Midoriya tears up involuntarily, but the pain is nothing compared to the suffocation. He’s going black around the corners of his eyes.

“Should I cut out your eye to match your prince?” The guard suggests. “Or maybe your insolent tongue?”

“Slash him up a bit more,” the first guard suggests. “I’d like to leave him an unrecognizable, bloodied mess, but then the prince won’t be able to identify the body as his pretty little bird.”

Midoriya shoves at the arm choking him and manages to suck in a little more air. His reward for struggling is the smashing of his head against the wall. He goes dizzy and nausea swims in his stomach.

“He’s got some bit to him, doesn’t he?” The first guard laughs. “I guess that’s what the prince really likes, a little bit of a Yuuein animal to suck his cock.”

“If he’s an animal then I’ll just have to gut him,” the second guard says. “That’s the only proper treatment for misbehaving pets.”

“Do it quickly,” the first one says. “This is a public place, someone could—”

“I do hate it when he’s right,” Yaoyorozu sighs, stepping down the hallway.

The knife that was moving towards Midoriya’s stomach halts. The guards hesitate at her voice and Midoriya’s neck is loosened just enough for him to suck in more air and cough. He blinks away tears that start to fall freely because Yaoyorozu is here, he’s saved. She looks glorious in her armor, arms crossed and posed comfortably, a woman who knows she has the upper hand.

“Release him,” she says. “Maybe you won’t be killed for your crimes.”

“You don’t scare me, woman,” the first guard spits, not letting go of Midoriya. “You don’t command us, so why don’t you fuck off and mind your own business.”

“Anything involving His Royal Highness is my business,” she says. “And now, I may be wrong, but I’m pretty sure that’s his personal manservant you have beaten black and blue there. I think I’ll stay right where I am.”

The second guard presses the knife against Midoriya’s stomach. “Do what you please,” he says. “We’re under orders—”

“From someone ranking higher than the Crown Prince?” she says. “Hmm, I wonder who that could be.”

“How dare you insinuate something like that,” the guard hisses.

“It doesn’t matter,” the first one grunts. “Kill the whelp and we’ll be done with it.”

The knife presses harder at Midoriya’s stomach and he squeezes his eyes shut, but the blade never pierces his skin. In fact, the blade falls away completely. Midoriya dares to open an eye.

“Why do you pick on a scapegoat,” Todoroki Shouto says, “when the one you really want to kill is standing right in front of you?”

He is impossibly ferocious.
Todoroki’s entire left side is covered in flame, licking from his bare feet to his shoulders and up his neck to his cheek and hair. The flames flicker and flare as if in a tempest, but instead of dying, they only grow in height and heat, reflecting their master’s fury. The entire hallway is illuminated, so brightly Midoriya cannot see Yaoyorozu.

Todoroki is leaning against the wall, chest heaving. His lips are parted and he’s covered in sweat, but his blue eye is so bright it almost glows, piercing through the armor of the guards and freezing their very souls. The guard’s grip on Midoriya loosens and then drops away altogether. Midoriya falls to the floor, mouth parted in awe at the raw power of Todoroki’s Quirk.

“What’s wrong?” Todoroki snarls. “I’ll give you one free shot.”

The guards look at each other, then back at Todoroki.


He flicks his right wrist and ice shoots across the floor, rising from the ground in front of the guards and piercing both of them through the chest with a great spike of blue ice, crushing metal armor as if it was nothing beneath its force. It happens in the blink of an eye. The men go limp, impaled on the ice spikes. Blood drips down the blue ice, turning it pink.

Midoriya gapes, unable to tear his gaze away from the lifeless soldiers who had only moments ago been about to kill him.

Todoroki lowers his arm and collapses fully against the wall, panting. His flames flicker and then extinguish themselves and Yaoyorozu rushes to his side. “Todoroki-sama, you’re—”


And then Yaoyorozu is at Midoriya’s side, helping him up gently and treating his now bleeding side with care. Midoriya slumps against her. “Where to?” Yaoyorozu asks.

“My bedchambers,” Todoroki says. “Nowhere else is fucking safe in this godforsaken palace.”

Yaoyorozu hesitates. “And you?”

“Now, Momo!” Todoroki roars.

Yaoyorozu bows and leads Midoriya up the steps. From a quick self-assessment, Midoriya can tell that he’s mostly fine. His side is the worst off, completely out of commission and preventing him from walking on his own, but the rest of the kicks only left bruises. His cheek stings, but the slice hadn’t been deep. He could have been so much worse off if Yaoyorozu hadn’t shown up at that time.

He doesn’t dare thank her, though. Not when she’s this tense and her mouth is twisted downwards like all she can think about is the prince she left behind.

Shouji is at the door now, just as tense as Yaoyorozu. “No one gets in,” she says. “Todoroki-sama’s orders.” Shouji nods.

Yaoyorozu pushes open the door and presses Midoriya down into Todoroki’s bed. She unclasps his chiton at the shoulders but Midoriya stops her with a hand over hers.

“I’m okay,” he says. “Go to him.”
Yaoyorozu nods tersely. She practically sprints out the door. Once it closes behind her and Midoriya knows he is at least, for the moment, safe, he lets out a shaky breath. He pulls down his chiton to reveal the mess of his right side. He hisses just looking at it. He’s bleeding all over his clothes and Todoroki’s bed, but there’s nothing to do about it. Biting his lip, he presses the cloth of the chiton against his wound, applying pressure. The contact makes his eyes prick with pained tears again.

He manages to push himself up using one hand. He looks around for the water pitcher he knows Todoroki always keeps in his room. Ah, there it is. Across the room, but Midoriya can make it. He stumbles to his feet, leaning heavily against the bedpost and then throwing himself into the chair by the water pitcher. This was going to make a mess, but whatever. Desperate times, and all that.

He lifts his hand off the wound and tips some of the icy, fucking freezing water on the wound. He swears with language his mother would faint to hear coming from her only son. He presses the cloth back over the wound, but at least the cold water has numbed some of his nerve endings there. He dips the hand towel lying beside the pitcher into the water and wipes at the cut below his eye. He’s still cleaning it when he hears Todoroki and Yaoyorozu arguing outside the door.

“—thought you said he was trustworthy!” Todoroki snaps, shoving open the door.

“And I’m telling you, it wasn’t him!” Yaoyorozu snaps back. “You paranoid, insufferable princeling!”

Todoroki’s eyes go to the bed, widen, and then after a quick sweep of the room, lock onto Midoriya. He moves towards Midoriya with purpose, looking a little less incapacitated but still sweating.

“What the fuck are you doing out of bed,” Todoroki snarls. “Are you incapable of listening to orders for more than two fucking seconds? Are you really that incompetent? Or is that just how they train them in Yuuei?”

Yaoyorozu pushes past him. “Ignore him,” Yaoyorozu says. “That’s his version of ‘are you alright I was worried about you.’”

“You told me you laid him down,” Todoroki growls. “Why the fuck is he over—”

“Get in bed, Shouto,” Yaoyorozu snarls back at him. “You’re wounded, you fucking pigheaded imbecile.”

It’s the first time Midoriya has heard someone not the king call Todoroki by his first name. His eyes go wide, terrified for Yaoyorozu’s life.

Amazingly, it works.

Todoroki stomps over to his bed. “Don’t tell me what to do,” he growls. “I’m your superior.”

“I’m older than you, and smarter than you, and not poisoned, so I am the one calling the shots,” Yaoyorozu snaps. To Midoriya she says, “I’m going to lift you up now, Deku.”

“Poisoned?” Midoriya squeaks as Yaoyorozu literally lifts him up into her arms and carries him back to Todoroki’s bed. They lay side by side, two invalids with a very angry looking Captain of the Guard leaning over them.

“Yes, poisoned,” Yaoyorozu says.
“I’m fine,” Todoroki mutters.

“The champagne,” Midoriya says, sighing and putting the pieces together. “They poisoned the champagne because they knew you would come after me.”

“Brilliant deduction,” Todoroki says dryly. “Yes, I was poisoned, but if they wanted to slow me down, they should have used a lethal dose. The amount they gave me is child’s play to deal with.”

“You nearly passed out,” Yaoyorozu says. “Using your Quirk while poisoned was a stupid idea.” She opens the door and Midoriya catches a glimpse of Sami. Yaoyorozu says a few quick words to her, she nods, and then she’s gone.

“Should have killed them on the spot the moment they defied me,” Todoroki says. “Next time, I won’t bother believing in the inherent goodness of humanity.”

“If you do that, you’ll be no different than the King,” Yaoyorozu says.

That shuts him up for a while.

Sami comes back with alcohol, gauze, and some warm towels. Yaoyorozu wipes the sweat from Todoroki’s body and places one of the towels on his forehead. Todoroki doesn’t even grumble at the babying. Midoriya gets a new dose of alcohol to his side and the cut beneath his eye, then gauze over both of the wounds. Yaoyorozu dips one of the towels in the cold water pitcher and presses it against the worst of Midoriya’s bruises. He thanks her quietly.

“A pallet,” Todoroki says quietly. “For this room. He’s not leaving my side.”

Yaoyorozu bows and leaves the room. Midoriya closes his eyes. The cool towel works its magic against his back and he feels better knowing his cuts have been cleaned and bandaged. Nothing to be done now put rest up. He doubts he’ll be able to get up and perform his regular duties, but if he interpreted Todoroki’s words correctly, he wasn’t going to be leaving this room for quite a while. Midoriya turns his head to look at Todoroki and nearly yips in surprise when Todoroki is already looking at him.

“Are you alright?” Midoriya asks, voice barely above a whisper.

“Are you?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya thinks it over and nods. “You and Yaoyorozu-san saved my life,” he says. “If you had been a few minutes later, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I didn’t save you,” Todoroki says bitterly. “I’m the one who put you in this position in the first place.”

Midoriya shrugs. “That’s the price of being your ally, I guess.”

Todoroki stares at him. Midoriya bites his lip.

“Where are your bruises?” Todoroki asks, propping himself up.

“Todoroki-sama…” Midoriya protests. “You’re poisoned, you should rest—”


Midoriya does his best to point out the bruises without leaning on his bad side. Todoroki lays a hand on top of the towel, now growing lukewarm. In a matter of moments it’s icy cool and he
moves onto the next injured spot, resting his hand against Midoriya’s skin where there’s no towel.


“Half of my Quirk is ice,” Todoroki reminds him. There’s a beat of silence. Midoriya remembers blue ice above him, blood dripping. Violence, and healing. Quirks could be both a gift and a weapon.

Midoriya clears his throat. “So…poison doesn’t affect you?” he asks.

“Not as much as other people, no,” Todoroki says. “I have an immunity built up from my father’s training.”


“Intense doesn’t even begin to describe it,” Todoroki says.

Despite images of the ice rising from the ground to pierce through the men’s ribs flashing through his mind, Midoriya sinks into Todoroki’s touch. It feels like he’s sucking the pain right out of Midoriya’s body, even though he knows it’s only numbing the injuries. He lets out a long sigh.

“You’re shaking,” Todoroki observes.

“Just cold,” Midoriya lies.

“How can we trust each other if you keep lying to me?” Todoroki asks.

“How can we trust each other if you won’t let me help you?” Midoriya retorts.

“That’s different,” Todoroki says. “This is my fault. They wanted to hurt me, and instead they hurt you.”

“They told me it would be better if I had died,” Midoriya says numbly. “So I guess your theory about them trying to kill me was right.”

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “You’re really not okay, are you?”

Midoriya curls into himself. “No one’s tried to kill me before,” Midoriya says. “Not even once. But now, it’s happened twice in two days.”

Todoroki removes his hand from Midoriya and he doesn’t have to look to know Todoroki is curling it into a fist, fighting to keep his Quirk in check. “Is it something I did?” Midoriya says, half-laughing. “Have I committed some kind of sin? I was just trying to do my job and yet I deserve to die?”

“No,” Todoroki says. “You’re innocent.”

“I miss Yuuei,” Midoriya whispers. “I want to go back. I’m not like you, Todoroki-sama. I don’t know how to survive this game of politics and war.”

Todoroki pauses for a long moment. “If you wish to return,” he says slowly, “I will arrange for you to be taken back to Yuuei.”

Midoriya smiles, despite the trembling of his lips. “I hoped you were the kind of person to say that,” he says. “But I have a duty to you now. My life is not my own. I have to stay with you, and… and I want to.”
“You want to go home but you want to stay with me,” Todoroki says. “Difficult manservant.”

“Picky prince,” Midoriya says and manages to laugh a little.

“It’s selfish of me to say this,” Todoroki says. “But I’m glad you will not go. I find myself trusting you more and more every day. It’s an unusual, unnatural feeling for me. I cannot ignore it.”

He presses a hand to Midoriya again and Midoriya shivers. “I’m sorry.” Todoroki says. “I thought by distancing myself from you I could protect you. But it seems our fates are already too inseparably intertwined. I will keep you close to me from now on.”


“The people already talk,” Todoroki says. “Nothing will change.”

His voice drops. “Besides, we have some talking of our own to do.”

Midoriya looks at him and makes a questioning noise.

“It’s about time I called my father out,” Todoroki says. “Whether the attack on you was his doing or an independent move, it cannot be ignored. He has forced my hand by involving you.”

Before Midoriya can react to Todoroki’s words, Yaoyorozu enters with Shouji, carrying a pallet for Midoriya and placing it on the other side of Todoroki’s bed. It’s little more than a mattress filled with straw, but Midoriya is so achy and tired that he would sleep on the cold stone floor if it meant he would be safely unconscious. Yaoyorozu disappears into Midoriya’s bed chambers and returns with blankets and pillows, tossing them onto the bed.

“That will do for tonight,” Todoroki says. “We will get a real bed tomorrow. See if anyone will dare to try to get at Deku when they have to go through me first.”

Shouji is the one to lift Midoriya up this time, as easy as if he were a child. Midoriya longs for the cold of Todoroki’s Quirk. He leans into the pillows, turning to face the door and relieving his right side of pressure. Yaoyorozu has taken a seat at the edge of Todoroki’s bed, only somewhat welcome if his scowl is anything to go by.

“Todoroki-sama,” she says, reverting back to a respectful tone. “Don’t.”

Todoroki’s scowl flattens into a neutral expression. Yaoyorozu is already sighing by the time he speaks. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about, Momo,” he says.

“Don’t confront His Majesty,” she says. “It’s what he wants. The only reason he’s provoked you this much is because he wants a reaction from you. There are easier ways to start a war with Yuuei than killing All Might’s favorite page. You don’t know what his plan is.”

“That’s exactly why I’ll be calling in to court tomorrow,” Todoroki says. “I will bring Deku with me.”

“I wish your opponent was someone else,” Yaoyorozu says quietly. “You’re blind when it comes to him.”

“The court will see evidence of his treachery,” Todoroki says.

“The court will see a spoiled brat and a ruined toy,” Yaoyorozu snaps. “He will offer to buy you a new servant and the nobility will laugh.”
“You underestimate me,” Todoroki says.

“You overestimate yourself!” Yaoyorozu says. “Dammit, Shouto, can’t you see how he’s playing you? Don’t react. Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

“You will address me as Todoroki-sama,” Todoroki says coldly. “We aren’t children anymore.”

“Right,” Yaoyorozu says. “Sorry. Next time, I’ll keep my advice to myself.”

She stands up from the bed and storms out of the room, Shouji shadowing her after bowing to Todoroki. Todoroki grinds his teeth and flips onto his side, facing away from Midoriya. Midoriya opens his mouth to call out to the prince, but hesitates.

As much as Todoroki hated being wrong, Yaoyorozu was right. When he let his emotions get the better of him, Todoroki was careless. He didn’t think each move all the way through. And there was no one better at riling him up than his father. Court tomorrow would be a nightmare. Midoriya lets the tension leave his limbs and watches Todoroki’s back until he falls asleep.

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“Presenting His Royal Highness, Steward of the Coastal Lands, the Crown Prince of Endeavor, Todoroki Shouto, and his esteemed manservant, Deku of Yuuei.”

Todoroki is in all black, a reaper on the warpath as he walks across the red carpet into his father’s court, fur cloak dragging behind him. He is magnificent and untouchable and carries himself like a king, but Midoriya can’t help but notice how Todoroki is a tiny dark point in the mass of light that is the court chamber.

The entire room is framed with windows, high enough that the common rabble couldn’t see in, but low enough to let light flood in at all times of day. The floor is white marble and studded with thick white columns that bear gold leaf at the tops and bottoms, spreading along the crown molding. At the center of the light chamber, King Enji sits atop a throne several sizes larger than Todoroki’s, the same blood color of the carpet and golden. He is engulfed in flames. Beneath his throne, his four councilors sit in ornate chairs of their own and along the carpet, noble men and women watch Todoroki’s approach.

Todoroki belongs here, scans the room like he already owns it, but at his back Midoriya is both foreign and lowborn. He feels it even more than he had felt it when he was introduced to Todoroki. If Todoroki was a tiny dog, then Midoriya was an ant, just a speck to be discarded and not worth a single gem in the earring of a lady.

“Your Majesty,” Todoroki says, taking a knee and bowing his head. Midoriya flattens himself to the floor, as prostrate as he can manage.

“Shouto, my son,” King Enji says. “What a delight to have you in my court today.”

Midoriya doesn’t need to speak, so he doesn’t bother to lift his head until Todoroki starts speaking and stays kneeling as Todoroki stands.

“I’m here on urgent business, father,” Todoroki says. “I won’t beat around the point: my servant has been attacked.”
“So I’ve heard,” the King says, sipping from a glass of wine.

“You misunderstand me,” Todoroki says coolly. “He has been attacked multiple times. I want to know why.”

King Enji gestures broadly. “Why do men want to fuck? If you’ve come to me for answers, I must direct you to human nature itself. Men are bloodthirsty. There needn’t be sense to an attack.”

“And if they were the same men?” Todoroki asks. “I could excuse one attack perhaps, take a man’s prize arm for daring to lay a hand on my household, but two attacks by the same men do not constitute an accident.”

“I assume we are speaking about the two men from my hunting party?” the King says, raising an eyebrow. “One who you shot for defending my claim to the prey and the other who you threatened after he accidentally shot your manservant in an attempt to protect you?”

Midoriya winces. The nobility are muttering amongst themselves and the councilors are frowning. One shakes his head. Midoriya can practically hear him think over-dramatic boys. Todoroki does not waver.

“The first man insulted my honor,” Todoroki says. “I could have called for a duel and cut him down where he stood, thus dampening the mood of our hunting celebration, or I could let him off with a warning and shoot him in the leg. Clearly, in order to preserve the cheery atmosphere of the hunt you so desired, I did not call for a duel.” He smiles thinly. “And if you remember correctly, father, we just happened to call the same prey. Perhaps you are feeling sore about the loss?”

“Disobedient as ever,” King Enji tuts. “I hope you will one day learn to respect your elders.”

Midoriya grits his teeth. The King didn’t deny that Todoroki’s shot was just, but Todoroki hasn’t swayed any of the room to his side. As he predicted, the King has passed off Todoroki’s clear and well-formed argument as an attempt to catch his father up on his words.

“And maybe you will one day train your men in the art of the hunt,” Todoroki says. “I believe the second man was supposed to be one of your best archers. Quite incredible, actually, that he managed to not only identify a buck with a slit throat as moving, but also to hit my manservant who was nowhere near the buck and miss his target so spectacularly. On the drink, were they? Quite dangerous before a hunt.”

The King spreads his arms. “I endeavor to keep my men happy and healthy. It’s practically tradition to drink before a hunt or a battle. What did you want me to do, deny them it? The important fact is that you’re safe. You seem to be very fond of that manservant but he’s only a servant, and a Yuuein at that. You can always buy a new one, of a much finer pedigree and training.”

Several of the nobility glance at Midoriya. Their eyes are hungry. They want him to lash out, to get angry at the King for speaking about him so flippantly in his presence. Midoriya doesn’t move. He fixes his eyes on the back of Todoroki’s head and tries his hardest to send Todoroki the message don’t react don’t react don’t react. Midoriya knew he was nothing but garbage to the King. He already knew that.

“It’s not the manservant I’m concerned about,” Todoroki says. “It’s the fact that your men defied my authority and harmed a member of my household so openly. Once, in our own palace, a place that is a privilege to be welcomed to, not a right. How can I know that the Lady Yaoyorozu is safe when your men run around like unchained dogs, attacking who they please?”
It takes all of Midoriya’s willpower to resist grinning triumphantly.

The King actually takes pause, turning over Todoroki’s words. He strokes his chin. “Hmm,” he says. “You make an excellent point, Shouto. Bring me these men and I will have them made an example of in front of the rest of my men so you may rest easy that your men and the Lady Yaoyorozu are safe.”

Midoriya’s stomach drops. Move, countermove.

Todoroki stiffens. “They have been executed already,” he says quietly. “After the attack last night, I saw no reason to keep such disobedient dogs alive.”

The court falls quiet. Midoriya closes his eyes.

“Shouto…” King Enji says in the exact tone of a disapproving parent reprimanding his child for sneaking sweets. “I thought we talked about this the last time you killed some of my men.”

Midoriya’s eyes widen. That wasn’t…that wasn’t the first time?

“They poisoned me,” Todoroki seethes. “They sent me a poisoned bottle of champagne and then attacked my manservant when he was away from me—”

“I want to believe you, my son,” King Enji says. “But the fact of the matter is that this all sounds like an incredible tale. Do you have witnesses?”


“…Outside of your household,” the King sighs. “I don’t want bribes to get in the way of the truth.”

Midoriya wants to scream. It isn’t fair. The King knows Todoroki refuses to surround himself with anyone but the people he trusts most intimately. Of course there wouldn’t be any other witnesses! And how could he speak of bribes when he…when he…

“You brought your manservant along,” King Enji says, leaning forward as if noticing Midoriya for the first time. “How about we hear him speak? Approach, Deku of Yuuei.”

Oh no.

Midoriya swallows and stands, using the crutch Yaoyorozu had provided for him to support himself. His mind is fuzzy with fear as he keeps his head respectfully ducked, moving past Todoroki. He sees Todoroki mouth ‘no.’

“He’s not a part of this,” Todoroki says quickly. “I brought him only as proof of injury done, not to be interrogated.”

“Nonsense,” the King says. “I don’t want to interrogate him, I just want to ask him a few questions to try and clarify the situation.” To Midoriya, he says, “Come.”

Midoriya shakes as he approaches. The pressure King Enji exerts is overpowering. He stumbles once but does not fall, and he hears the distinctive sound of Todoroki taking a step towards him. Don’t, Midoriya wants to tell him. You’re showing weakness. You mustn’t let them know you care.

God, he cares.

“No,” King Enji says. “Let him do this on his own. He doesn’t need your help.”
The steps up to the King’s throne are a challenge but Midoriya makes it up them, seating himself at King Enji’s feet, the heat of his flames making Midoriya break out into a sweat. He bows his head, pressing his forehead to the ground, then leaning forward to kiss the toe of the king’s boot.

“Your Majesty,” Midoriya greets. “It is an incredible honor to be of service to you.”

The King laughs. “A well-behaved Yuuein!” he exclaims. “So, they do exist! Or perhaps my son has beat you into submission?”

Midoriya looks up, eyes wide. He waits, and the King nods, a gesture to answer. “No, Your Majesty,” he says, voice wavering. “Todoroki-sama has treated me with nothing but kindness since I came into his service. I am indebted to him.”

King Enji raises an eyebrow. “He has you address him so informally,” he murmurs. “And you are new to his service, too…”

Midoriya’s mind races. He can practically feel Todoroki gritting his teeth as even more of him is exposed, made vulnerable.

Midoriya bows his head. “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but in fact this was also done as an act of kindness.”

“Oh?” The King says.

“Todoroki-sama allowed me to call him as such in order to make me feel more welcomed into his household,” Midoriya lies. “I was…terribly homesick when I arrived. I am grateful to Todoroki-sama for making such an exception for a lowly foreigner such as myself.”

I’m sorry, Todoroki-sama, Midoriya thinks. I can’t talk my way out of any sticky situation like you can. I can’t always stay strong. But if I must show weakness, the weakness will be my own.

“Deku of Yuuei,” King Enji says. “Raise your head.”

Midoriya does as bidden.

The King reaches forward, cupping Midoriya’s cheek. Midoriya fights down the urge to flinch. The King’s hands are rough and almost sting when he brushes a thumb across Midoriya’s cheek, running his fingers through the back of Midoriya’s hair. The gentle touch makes all the hairs on the back of Midoriya’s neck stand up and prickle down his spine.

“Such a pretty specimen,” King Enji says, thumb lingering over Midoriya’s lips. “I would be hard-pressed to find a man to match your beauty in all the Five Kingdoms.” Lowly, so only Midoriya can hear, he says, “Perhaps it was for the best that they failed to kill you.”

Midoriya’s breath catches in his throat.

Louder, The King says, “Please, tell the court how my men died. Did Shouto give them a chance to explain themselves, or even a chance at combat?” He moves his hand to rest atop Midoriya’s hair.

“I—I—” Midoriya says, voice shaking so, so much worse.

“It’s okay,” King Enji says. “I’m sure the experience was terrifying. You’ve never seen men killed before, have you?”

He had. “N-No, Your Majesty,” Midoriya whispers. What was he doing?
“How did they die?” King Enji asks.

“His Quirk,” Midoriya says, eyes fluttering closed. “Ice…” He can’t…when the King is touching him, he can’t be strong.

The King lifts his eyes to Todoroki. “You used your Quirk on them?” His voice is too mild to be safe.

“They had their chance,” Todoroki snarls. “They provoked me, poisoned me, and shit on the authority of my Captain.”

“So you killed them in cold blood,” King Enji says. He sighs and pats Midoriya’s head, each touch making Midoriya tense further and further. “You frightened the same servant you have such a fondness for to the point of being unable to recall the event in words.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Todoroki snaps. “I gave them the chance to draw against me, and they refused.”

“Why would they?” King Enji says, getting louder. “We all know your Quirk dominates all weapons. What would the use be? You gave them a choice between dying and dying, Shouto.” He sighs again. “Your Quirk is a great gift.”

“Oh, not this again,” Todoroki says. “If you didn’t want to give a child overwhelming power then you should have ended the Todoroki dynasty with yourself.”

Wrong thing to say. “I expected you to be responsible with its use,” King Enji says, leaning back in his throne. “I see I have not trained you as well as I thought I had.”

Midoriya looks back at Todoroki just in time to see all the blood rush from his face, leaving him pale and…and…

Frightened?

“No,” Todoroki says, shaking his head. “I’m done with that. I told you; I’ve had enough.” He takes an uncertain step back.

“I hate to force you to do anything,” King Enji says. “But I think the council will agree that you need more specialty training, away from the…distractions…of the palace.”

Midoriya feels his face heat up when he understands the implication, casting him as guilty even though it wasn’t true, they weren’t sleeping together, it wasn’t anything like that—

“He sleeps in your room now, doesn’t he?” King Enji says, the final nail in the coffin. “You never did that with your other servants.”

“It’s not,” Todoroki says weakly. “It’s not like that. I was—” He bites his tongue. *I was afraid for him? I would kill anyone who came for him? I would defy you again and again to protect him?* There’s no way out.

“Shouto, for the punishment of your stories and your unjust killings and your distraction, we will restart your out-of-palace training,” King Enji says. “Council? Are we in agreement?”

“No,” Todoroki whispers.

“Aye,” says the first councilman.
“Please,” Todoroki says. Todoroki doesn’t say please.

“Aye,” says the second councilman.

“Don’t.”

“Aye,” says the third councilman.

Todoroki hangs his head.

“Aye,” the final councilman says, and it is done.

“It’s not your fault that my son is such a slut,” King Enji says low to Midoriya. “I hope at least for your sake he’s a good fuck.”

Midoriya’s control snaps. He whips around, fixes the King of Endeavor with every ounce of his desire to kill him as he can. His eyes burn, but if it’s from anger or tears, Midoriya can’t tell. He bites down on his lip to keep from snarling and clenches his fists in his chiton.

“Ohoho,” King Enji says, grinning. “So there is some fire under that spineless exterior.” He waves Midoriya off. “Go on. Go to your prince if you love him so.”

Midoriya does. He stumbles down the steps, a pariah exiled from the King’s company.

Midoriya has never been so glad to be an outcast.

He follows Todoroki out of the court chambers, silently through the hallways and out of the inner sanctum of the palace to the edge of the gardens where they can be alone. Todoroki turns on Midoriya as soon as they’re out of hearing range. Midoriya flinches, expecting Todoroki to lash out.

“Are you okay?” Todoroki asks, reaching out to touch him but hesitating before he does.


Todoroki exhales, almost a laugh. “That’s to be expected.”

“Jesus,” Midoriya says. “I knew—you said he was awful but I never quite grasped—”


“Something like that created something like you,” Midoriya says, aghast. “That’s not—that shouldn’t be possible.”

“I like to think I take after my mother,” Todoroki says.

The worst part, though, is that Midoriya sees the resemblance. The quick thinking, the extensive planning, the intimidating presence, the brutality—all that was Enji. But Todoroki had none of his cruelty, and in missing just that small part of the King, Todoroki was a completely different, better person.

“He touched you,” Todoroki says. “I can’t believe he would actually…” Todoroki shakes his head. His hands do that weird half-reaching thing, like he wants to wipe away the feeling of his father’s touch against Midoriya’s skin.

Midoriya presses his cheek into Todoroki’s open hand. Todoroki lets out a shaky breath. He
doesn’t stroke Midoriya but presses his hand firmer against Midoriya’s face. His touch is strong, familiar. Midoriya closes his eyes and focuses on the now, trying to settle the hair still standing up along his skin.

“He did it,” Midoriya says. “He paid them to kill me. He told me.”

“I thought so,” Todoroki says. “You froze up so badly.”

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says, eyes snapping open. “I tried, I promise I tried—”

“Shhh,” Todoroki says, cupping Midoriya’s face with both hands and pressing their foreheads together. “I know. You were so brave.”

Midoriya wants to sink against him and wail. Of being shot at, attacked, and being in the presence of the King of Endeavor, Midoriya would have rather that the arrows didn’t miss and the guards had opened his stomach across the floor.

“And you,” Midoriya says. “What is he going to do to you?”

Todoroki stiffens. “I don’t know,” he says quietly. “But that’s not for you to worry about. You have to heal. You have to recover. Don’t worry about me.”

“How can I not?” Midoriya whispers.


Midoriya nods, but he knows it’s just another lie to pile on top of all the lies he’s ever told this noble prince. As if he could stop worrying about Todoroki. No, he was in too deep now.

That night, he shreds the letter he had been planning to send to All Might. Instead, he pulls out a new piece of parchment and pen, and starts to write:

T.Y.—

Everything is not as fine as previously believed.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: that's the thing about trust
Sorry for the long wait...should be updating faster now. A lot faster if I have my way.

Art!!!!

"Deku of Yuuei...raise your head" by artisttothebone

Deku and Todoroki sketches by gaylien76!!

Okay.....Dappertunns arts really made me lose my shit...Please look at them. I'm still dying.

Everything Shieru touches is gold.

Tododeku first meeting...SUPER CUTE by Rainbowderpyarts!

Cute doodles of the boys by Tododorki-Shoubro

Yuu is incredible okay....Here's the scene of Todoroki saving Deku

Like...the cleanest prince Todoroki I've ever seen by Tsuyer

This made me gasp and then laugh by Kidovna

Lovely sketch of the boys from the end of last chap by Error-404-fuck-not-found

Kicks my own ass by Nappotuna

Sadie killing me as usual...

Hina did an animation?? Life is unreal.

Hina also drew this amazing sleeping Todoroki I forgot to link

Even more adorable Ezoo comics holy heckin gosh and my personal favorite

Two beautiful pieces by Squidiest-of-squads (Sorry I can't find ur twitter)

cold prince? Nah, cool prince

(I am definitely missing two arts. I can't find their source. Please link me if I've left out your art!!)

Midoriya is having a bad day.

No, that's not quite right. It's more like a bad series of days, really. Two weeks, to be specific.
He’s not sure if it’s his scowl or his movements that draw curious looks from the palace soldiers, both the Prince’s and the King’s guard. They slouch against walls and glance up from benches, armor and leathers in various states of assembly. The room is expansive and quiet aside from the scuffs of feet against the dirt, the gentle clanking of metal on metal, and the low murmur of conversation against the men.

In front of Midoriya, Yaoyorozu maintains a poker face, fists raised and dressed only in the light underleathers of her armor. She lifts her leg and strikes out at him in slow motion. Midoriya sidesteps, equally slow. He counters with a spin and an instep, swinging at Yaoyorozu, who blocks him. They’ve been at this dance for at least two hours now, but the other men still find their careful movements amusing.

Midoriya’s side doesn’t shout at him as much as groan. The slice across his side has scabbed over nicely and the bruising is looking green-yellow instead of black-purple. The bandage on his ear is gone completely, leaving a pink notch of freshly healed skin. The cut under his eye has almost healed, too—scarring just a little despite Recovery Girl’s ointment. Midoriya said it made him look tough and Yaoyorozu gave him a noogie.

It feels good to stretch the muscles and skin after being bedridden for five days and kept under careful watch for another week and a half. Midoriya would have been up and moving around much sooner than that, but a single raised eyebrow from Todoroki had scolded him back into bed. He had been miserable without anything to do and Todoroki’s increasingly agitated mood as company. Todoroki had practically worn holes in the stone floor of his bedchambers with all the pacing he did.

And then he was off on a horse with his father at his side and a small company of men loyal to the king, not a single member of his household accompanying him.

“That’s just how it is,” Yaoyorozu had said, tired and unhappy, reading the tension in Midoriya’s shoulders. “Father-son training is an exclusive activity.”

Hence Item One of Midoriya’s Current Irritations: no one knew where Todoroki was or what he was doing. Maybe he was being tortured to death? Beaten black and blue? Forced to fight until he couldn’t lift his sword? Poisoned?

“He did say his father poisoned him, right?” Midoriya says, breaking the silence between them.


Item Two of Midoriya’s Current Irritations: Yaoyorozu didn’t share his concerns and made every attempt to ensure that he didn’t worry about Item One.

“How can you just let this be?” Midoriya demands, dropping his fists. “You’re more protective of him than I am.”

Yaoyorozu takes the chance to slow-motion sock him in the jaw. “You see, this is why those guards tore you a new one,” she says. “You let your guard down too easily.”

Midoriya scowls and redirects the punch so that he has her forearm in a hold that could easily snap her arm in two if he put force behind it. “No, the guards tore me a new one because that was a better alternative than execution,” Midoriya says.

“Pretty sure they were going to kill you.”

“Oh, so what? I incapacitate them and they go running back to you-know-who, tails between their
legs, with stories of a savage manservant. I’d be executed before Todoroki-sama could open his smart mouth, and they’d make it his fault somehow.”

“Such a martyr.”

Midoriya takes a deep, frustrated breath through his nose. It’s not Yaoyorozu he’s mad at. And Yaoyorozu isn’t chewing him out for fun, either. He can see the strain in the creases on her forehead, the flintiness of her eyes. She’s as agitated as he is. It’s really the king that they’d like to be taking a piece out of right now, and absent of that chance, they take out their stress on each other.

There was, of course, an underlying concern. Item Three of Midoriya’s (and Yaoyorozu’s) Irritations: why wouldn’t Todoroki tell them anything?

No amount of pestering could persuade an answer from Todoroki. He would shake his head, snap at them, or even outright ignore their queries. Midoriya wouldn’t have been bothered if it was just him, but Todoroki turned his back of Yaoyorozu, his childhood friend, as well.

And this wasn’t an isolated incident. These father-son training camps away from the palace had been going on as long as Yaoyorozu could remember. But despite her years of persistence, she still had no insight into what went on beyond the walls of the capital city. Every time she asked, all she got was ‘it’s none of your business,’ ‘stop asking,’ or ‘I don’t know.’

The only clues they had were the fear Midoriya had seen in Todoroki’s eyes when the punishment was determined, the pacing, and the dead look on his face as he rode out with his father’s company. Something terrible was happening to their prince and they couldn’t help him.

Useless, Midoriya says with an uppercut.

Untrustworthy, Yaoyorozu says with a dodge, then worthless with another kick.

Futile, Midoriya says with a block and then, aloud, he says, “I’m still worrying.”

Yaoyorozu drops her fists. “He’s back in three days. Once we get him alone, we’ll interrogate him until he gives. Okay?”

“Okay,” Midoriya says. He’d think Yaoyorozu was throwing him a bone, but she’s clenching and unclenching her fists.

“Come on,” she says. “Enough of this. Let’s get water and bathe.”

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When the trumpets sound to announce the return of the training party, Midoriya and Yaoyorozu are already standing just inside the palace gates, dressed in defiant white.

Midoriya has managed to scrounge up a uniform with sleeves, although it’s still unfittiingly flowy compared to the sea of red and black uniforms worn by the rest of the male nobility out to witness the king’s return. Yaoyorozu wears a masculine suit in pure white, the ceremonial saber at her side glinting fiercely in the light. She stands with her legs placed apart and her hands behind her back. Her long, thick hair has been wrestled into a tight bun on top of her hair. To Midoriya, she looks
like a giant or a hero, something awesome and immovable as a mountain. All amongst the king’s men, there are dots of white supporting the prince.

Midoriya isn’t sure, exactly, what he’s going to see when the party comes into view. If it’s anything like the return of the hunting party, Todoroki will be wearing a crisp smile that cut into anyone who made eye contact with him, barely restrained fury simmering under a porcelain mask.

He thinks that’s what he’ll see, or even some of that fury leaking through, spilling like lava whenever he looks at his father, but Yaoyorozu makes him think twice. She’s unsmiling, but her lips are pressed tightly together, thin and pale. Her eyes dart across the incoming horses, searching for a single figure with urgency.

Midoriya feels cold claw at his gut.

He joins Yaoyorozu in the search, but he doesn’t spy the telltale red-white split of hair glowing from within the ranks of the party. For a second, something greater than fear opens a hole in his chest. King Enji wouldn’t have...killed him, would he? Even with the insubordination and the hatred, Todoroki Shouto was still the favorite child, the heir. The king would never threaten his bloodline like that.

Midoriya turns to Yaoyorozu to confirm this fact. He’s just in time to see her eyebrows pull together and her lips part to suck in a breath. Puzzled, Midoriya follows her gaze.

“Oh,” he says, in the ghost of a voice.

Todoroki Shouto is among the returning party, at least in body. He exists, his hands are on the reins of his horse, but that’s where the resemblance to the Crown Prince ends. His riding uniform is crumpled and dirty, stained only a little with ash and dirt, but enough to be disgraceful. He hunches forward, bangs falling into his face so that Yaoyorozu and Midoriya can barely see his eyes. From they can see, he has grey bags that drag under eyes glazed over from exhaustion.

Midoriya tries to swallow and finds he can’t. His skin is crawling and his mind revolts at the sight. This is not his prince. His prince is proud and clean and strong even if he were bleeding out from a fatal wound. This—this creature looks like a Todoroki, is dressed like a Todoroki, and accompanied by a Todoroki, but it is not a Todoroki. The prince would never allow himself to fall this far. It’s as if the very soul of Todoroki Shouto has fled.

“I hate him,” Yaoyorozu spits, vitriol dripping like poison.

For a long second, Midoriya thinks she means Todoroki and he nearly lets out a snarl. But her eyes aren’t following Todoroki—they’re fixed on the king.

“He does this on purpose, every time,” she whispers fiercely. “Parade his broken son in front of his councilors and the nobility, ‘see—even my headstrong brat can be muzzled.’ They get a good laugh out of it, I’m sure.” She’s shaking. “They don’t even think about what it must have cost to break him down like this.”

Midoriya doesn’t have any words to comfort her.

“I don’t want to see this,” Yaoyorozu says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and facing forward, chin raised.

Look, she says. I’m still proud to be his. You may have broken him but you haven’t beaten him. We will not leave his side.
All around them, the men and women in white keep their heads held high, proud of their prince. But, Midoriya notices, none of them look at him. It’s probably out of respect; avoiding laying eyes on their superior when he’s fallen so far, but to Midoriya it feels lonely. Othering. So he keeps his eyes on Todoroki, taking in the slump of his shoulders, the looseness of his fingers on the reins, and the flat, uncaring shape of his mouth.

King Enji gives a return speech. He directs attention towards Todoroki every few words, ensuring that no person in the gathering misses the sorry state of his heir. In an act of mercy, he does not ask Todoroki to speak. Midoriya wonders if Todoroki even could, or if he was too far gone for that.

Midoriya doesn’t see Todoroki again until after his attendants and servants have swamped him and taken him back to his chambers, bypassing Midoriya entirely. Midoriya isn’t hurt—they’re clearly familiar with this routine (god, they had seen this before), and he hadn’t been able to perform any of his duties until recently anyway. Midoriya turns up at Todoroki’s door with Yaoyorozu and Shouji instead.

Shouji offers a polite knock at the door, but Yaoyorozu passes the formality up completely. She opens the door quietly and ushers the three of them into the room before any nosy servants could poke around in Todoroki’s business.

Todoroki lies flat on his back on his bed, changed from his riding leathers to a loose shirt and pants, hands folded over his abdomen. He looks better than he did riding in, but still a shell of his former self. His gaze is distant and he doesn’t acknowledge his guests. Yaoyorozu sinks to her knees at the side of his bed while Shouji guards the door. Midoriya is caught in the in-between as Yaoyorozu takes Todoroki’s hand.

“Oh, Shouto,” she whispers.

Todoroki closes his eyes.

Yaoyorozu bites her lip. “Was it…was it the same as before?”

Todoroki doesn’t respond. He takes a deep breath in and exhales through his nose.

Midoriya finds his voice. “Did he hurt you?” The question comes out raspier than he had intended. His throat is dry.

Todoroki opens his eyes again. He says nothing. They don’t get anything out of him with further questions or comments. Midoriya migrates to the wall, arms crossed tightly across his chest. Yaoyorozu gives Todoroki’s hand a final squeeze, then stands.

“Is this…” Midoriya has to ask. “Is this how it is every time?”

Yaoyorozu’s twisted mouth answers for her.


“I don’t know,” Yaoyorozu says. “He won’t tell me. Says he doesn’t remember. I can’t get a read off of him—can’t tell if he really doesn’t remember or if he’s just sparing us. It’s fucked up.”

It is fucked up. Fucked up and frightening. Midoriya can’t stop staring at Todoroki staring at the ceiling, hands innocently folded like a child’s.

“You’ll look after him, won’t you?” Yaoyorozu says. “I can’t be here with him, but you can.”
“That’s my job,” Midoriya says, offering a half-smile. “I’ll do what I can.”

“He might talk to you,” Yaoyorozu says, unable to hide her sadness. Midoriya’s heart pangs for her, even though he can’t imagine Todoroki will open up about something like this to him, even given their entwined destinies. This was too much for a childhood friend. This was too much for a manservant confidante.

She and Shouji leave Midoriya alone with Todoroki, which is to say that they leave the two men in complete silence. Midoriya doesn’t know how to breach the subject of Todoroki’s training in a way that will encourage him to open up. Even though Todoroki is fragile right now, Midoriya imagines he wouldn’t want to be treated as such.

So, Midoriya treats him like Normal Todoroki.

He doesn’t dare to sit or lie on Todoroki’s bed, but he curls up on his own bed, crossing his arms behind his head and talking about everything that Todoroki had missed. He talks about his visits to Recovery Girl and the smelly ointment and candies she had given him. He talks in detail about cleaning puss from his wounds and about the scabbing because he knew Todoroki would normally give him a look for going into such gross detail. He talks about sparring with Yaoyorozu, and the meals he ate with Tooru, and chats with Ojiro, and—

Todoroki murmurs something.

Midoriya shuts up immediately and turns on his side. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Todoroki takes another breath. “I said, it’s fine.” His voice is as quiet as a church, lips barely moving.

Midoriya takes a long moment to figure out what Todoroki is talking about. “You?” he asks. “You’re…fine?”

Todoroki hums. Naturally, Midoriya doesn’t believe him for a second.

“What, this situation is fine or you’re fine?” Midoriya asks, an edge to his voice. “Because—hate to say it—but I’m going to go with none off the above.”

“Deku,” Todoroki says roughly.

“Did you miss the part where you up and left without taking any of us with you or telling us where or what you were doing? I certainly didn’t.” Midoriya is—he’s mad, he’s really mad and he knows it’s technically King Enji’s fault, but Todoroki could have told them something.

“You’re mad at me,” Todoroki says.

No shit, princeling! Midoriya wants to scream, but he doesn’t. This isn’t about him; it’s never been about him since he left Yuuei with a mission in his heart. His life is forfeit to the Todorokis and every single messed up detail of their lives. He belongs to his prince, now.

“That doesn’t matter,” Midoriya says, sitting up. “What’s more important is what they did to you. You’re not fine.”

“I’m fine,” Todoroki repeats.

“I saw you,” Midoriya says. “You would never let your father humiliate you like that if you were okay.”
“It is…a necessary evil,” Todoroki says, voice strained.

The entire scene of the room is miserable. Todoroki isn’t fighting back, not the way Midoriya had come to expect from him. He’s barely defending himself, tiring from conversation rather than getting worked up by Midoriya’s tone and the half-insults he slings at him. He still hasn’t moved from the bed and Midoriya feels as horrible and off-balance as Todoroki looks.

Midoriya climbs out of bed. There’s a pitcher of tea, iced, on Todoroki’s serving table. He pours a glass of the pinkish liquid for Todoroki and brings it to him. In a moment of daring, Midoriya sits at the foot of Todoroki’s bed, hovering over him. Todoroki’s hands wrap around the glass but he doesn’t move.

“Come on,” Midoriya murmurs.

At his prompting, Todoroki sits up. He sips from the glass but his eyes never leave Midoriya’s.

“I’m glad you’ll still look at me,” Midoriya says. “If you lost an argument with me and couldn’t meet my eyes afterwards, I’d really think you were gone.”

“I’ve disappointed you,” Todoroki says flatly.

Midoriya barely smiles and shakes his head. “I think part of me knew this was going to happen, or something this bad. You were—” He won’t say scared. “You knew something terrible was happening to you, and you didn’t run. That’s the prince I know.”

“Hmm,” Todoroki says. The tea brings a little life to his eyes, but he’s still miles from Todoroki Shouto yet. “It’ll only last a couple days.”


“I don’t remember,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya takes a breath.

“I don’t—” Todoroki frowns, furrowing his brows. “It doesn’t—”


“Less faith would suit you better,” Todoroki says, and Midoriya laughs.

“One of us has to be the impressionable idiot, right?” Midoriya says.

“They all underestimate you,” Todoroki says, “even Yaoyorozu. You’re not an idiot, Deku.”

“I guess that leaves you then, huh?” he teases.

It’s maybe too soon, but the corner of Todoroki’s mouth twitches in a pleasing way. He takes another sip of his tea and Midoriya looks at his hands. They’re just hands, pale and angular and strong. Midoriya thinks of their shape, wrapping around the glass, and of them engulfed in flames or studded with ice. Something unfurls in his chest, protective and as engulfing as Todoroki’s flames. He was right not to treat Todoroki with delicacy.
It goes like this: something changes between them, and Midoriya isn’t sure who to blame.

He’s in the gardens doing sit-ups when Todoroki appears. The Prince was right—after a couple days of isolation, he’s returned to his regular, pristine self. Today, his dress uniform has long tails on it and flutters when he walks. He’s wearing a single long earring in his left ear, a pretty little trinket made of soft gold and glittering rubies. Between sit-ups, Midoriya notices Todoroki is a) eyeing the palace servants with a particular brand of disdain, b) carrying a book, and c) appearing to be heading straight towards him.

That doesn’t make sense, unless Todoroki wants something from him, but if he did, he would have sent a page to fetch Midoriya. Unless it was secret or personal. Midoriya sits up, debating standing to bow to his prince, but Todoroki isn’t looking at him. Instead, Todoroki seats himself at the edge of the lawn Midoriya is doing sit-ups on, very pointedly not-looking at him.

O-kay.

Midoriya goes back to doing sit-ups, keeping an eye on Todoroki. Todoroki reads his book, one leg crossed over the other, a prince right out of a painting. Midoriya contemplates summoning a palace artist to paint Todoroki as he shifts to pushups. Nah, Todoroki would gut him for doing so. Such a shame though—Todoroki in this light almost didn’t look like an apex predator and instead just like a beautiful gem of royalty.

Midoriya leaves Todoroki alone for the next hour as he cycles through strength-building exercises. No one was stopping Todoroki from reading near Midoriya but it was still pretty…weird. He started running laps around the nearby gardens. Todoroki didn’t stir from his reading.

“Okay,” Midoriya says, jogging to a stop in front of Todoroki after his fifth lap. “You have got to tell me what you’re doing here. It’s driving me crazy.”

Todoroki closes his book primly on a tasseled bookmark. “I do not ‘have to’ tell you anything,” Todoroki says. He looks Midoriya up and down pointedly.

Midoriya, soaked with sweat and almost definitely a little smelly, grins. “You’re embarrassed,” he says.

Todoroki’s gaze could wither flowers. “Pray tell,” he says, “how did you come to such a conclusion?”

“You won’t look at me,” Midoriya says.

“I just did,” Todoroki says. “And unfortunately for your ego, I don’t find you the most interesting thing in these gardens.”

“But you still sat next to me.”

“Did not.”

Midoriya presses his lips together to keep from laughing. He raises an eyebrow and glances to either side at the gardens stretching as far as the eye can see along the outside of the palace. “Yeah, you kind of did,” he says.

Todoroki switches crossed legs and sighs, which is about as big an expression of flusteredness as he’s capable of expressing. “This is my spot,” he says. “Drop it.”
Midoriya, still leaning over Todoroki, holds his hands up defensively. “Alright,” he says. “I won’t pester you anymore. I know the real reason, anyway.”

Todoroki’s eyes burn into his back as he steps away and stretches his shoulders, popping them pleasantly. Midoriya waits, smiling. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen…

Todoroki sighs, this time louder and crosser. “What ‘reason’?” he snaps.

Midoriya turns on his heel, opening his mouth, but Todoroki beats him to it.

“It’s because I’m comfortable around you,” Todoroki says, leaning forward on his knees and eyes bright. His hands cover up a smug smile. “You bring a sense of peace and ease to my heart; you lower my defenses and allow me to relax in your presence.”

Midoriya trips over his own tongue. He really did that to Todoroki?

Midoriya is very aware of the warmth in his cheeks and his ears and crawling up his neck. Todoroki had tricked him! He made Midoriya feel like he had the upper hand and then he—!


“You should never have challenged me to a battle of wits in the first place,” Todoroki says, chin raised and sly smile in place.

Midoriya shrugs helplessly. “You’re right; I just can’t help it…hey, at what point did you—”

“I was telling the truth, if that is what you’re wondering,” Todoroki says. “To be even more honest with you, you remind me of a friend I used to have. I didn’t know him very long, but he was like you: skittish at times, brave at others. He even had a mess of curls like you. I suppose he went back to his home country after the Amity Ball.”

Midoriya freezes. His blood stops flowing. His muscles ice over. His brain is a record player, skipping over and over, repeating Amity Ball Amity Ball Amity Ball ad infinitum. He’s caught; surely he’s caught?

“What was his name?” Midoriya asks. Has to know.

“Midoriya Izuku,” Todoroki says with perfect clarity. “Even if his face has become blurred in my mind over time, I will do him the service of remembering his name.”

He’s not caught. Somehow, he’s not caught. Midoriya feel as weak as a newborn and just as vulnerable. “How can you remember that far back? You’re messing with me, remembering the name of a person you barely knew.”

“We’re too close to be lying to each other, don’t you think?” Todoroki says.

Midoriya’s chest seizes for a whole new reason.

Todoroki stands up, leaves the garden.

“It wasn’t just me, then,” Midoriya says quickly.

Todoroki tilts his head back, listening.

“Something between us has changed,” Midoriya says. “I’m not imagining it.”
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Todoroki says. Midoriya can see the curl of his lips. “What bond could be more intimate than a master and his servant?”

Midoriya returns the smile even though Todoroki doesn’t turn to look at him.

It goes like this: Todoroki starts to accompany Midoriya to his daily strength training. On sunny days, Todoroki brings a book and reads while Midoriya works until every inch of his skin beads with sweat. On cloudy days, Todoroki scratches at parchment with a pen at the same pace Midoriya jogs around the gardens. And on rainy days, Midoriya lies on one of the rugs on Todoroki’s floor and listens to him read out passages of his letters of inquiry to other nobility and royalty. There was going to be a ball soon, although Midoriya wasn’t clear on the nature of it, and Todoroki was asking after unmarried sons…

“Are you even listening?” Todoroki asks on his second pass of the length of the room. Midoriya thinks that if they were friends, Todoroki would have nudged him with his boot.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” Midoriya says. He likes seeing Todoroki like this—serious, scholarly, and royalty to his core. It feels good to lie at his feet voluntarily. “You’re composing a letter to the Kirishimas. Their son, the Crown Prince, is unmarried isn’t he? You should invite him.”

“Of course I’m going to invite the Crown Prince of Riot,” Todoroki says, rolling his eyes. “What I was asking you is, does this prose sound too condescending?”

“You always sound too condescending,” Midoriya says instantly.

What is wrong with him? When did they get close enough for him to be so flippant with Todoroki? They weren’t equals; Todoroki could still wash his hands of Midoriya in a heartbeat. But it didn’t feel wrong to prod at Todoroki like this. It didn’t feel dangerous; it felt like home.

“I don’t know why I keep you around here,” Todoroki says. “Not even the slightest inkling of respect for your superiors.” He’s not mad though.

_Why do you let me?_ Midoriya wants to ask him. _Why don’t you beat me into line?_ But he thinks he knows the answer already.

When you put your life on the line for someone who put their life on the line for you, it gets pretty hard to think of them as anything but a brother.

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Things had gotten so good between them ever since Todoroki came back and came back to himself that Midoriya almost forgot about the bad parts.

He is wrenched from his dreaming so violently that he sits upright. Midoriya focuses all senses on whatever the hell it was that had just woken him, but Todoroki’s bedchambers are silent. His hand slides to the knife he keeps under his pillow, just in case, but the moonlight and low light of the dying torches in the room reveal no danger to him or Todoroki.

Todoroki. The night terrors.
Midoriya lets go of the knife. How could he have forgotten? Todoroki’s chronic night terrors wouldn’t suddenly stop haunting him. In fact, Midoriya would imagine that after the father-son training camp, they would be even worse. Who’s to say all of Todoroki’s nightmares aren’t about those camps, anyway? It’s not like he entrusted Midoriya with any information about them.

Well, Midoriya hadn’t tried prying recently, either.

Midoriya gets out of bed. Todoroki is silent now, but Midoriya is certain that his distress is what woke him. He had gotten down the skill of sleeping through Todoroki’s night terrors—if this one was bad enough to wake him, Todoroki definitely needed to be woken up.

Still, the callous dismissal of his caring sticks with Midoriya. Surely they were past that now? Midoriya didn’t pity Todoroki; he just wanted to help. Surely it wouldn’t come across as concern for Todoroki as a victim, but as a…companion.

(Midoriya couldn’t say friend.)

Midoriya rises, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He pads to the side of Todoroki's bed and leans over him. Todoroki has one hand fisting in his sheets and the other wrapped over his stomach, hunching his shoulders and curling him up, just a little. His eyebrows are scrunched tightly and he’s grimacing.


He doesn’t want to touch Todoroki. The prince wasn’t much for touch on a regular, conscious, in-control basis. He definitely wouldn’t be receptive to touch when he’s unconscious and vulnerable. Midoriya’s running out of options, though. A low rumbling growl comes from Todoroki's chest and Midoriya breaks.

“Todoroki—” he starts, reaching out to shake Todoroki's shoulder. His fingers brush the fabric of Todoroki's nightshirt and his eyes snap open.

“Wh—” Midoriya gets one syllable out, then no more. Todoroki's left hand shoots out and grabs him by the throat.

Midoriya chokes on his words. Todoroki's grip is tight and unflinching. He doesn’t squeeze Midoriya but he suffocates him with a steel grip, and even more than that, he burns. Midoriya grits his teeth against the feeling of his skin heating up and slowly approaching searing-off temperatures. Along Todoroki’s arm, little licks of flame ignite and flitter out.

But the most striking part of it all is that Todoroki's eyes are glazed over, cold and unseeing. He’s still trapped in the dream.

“I don’t know what you’re seeing,” Midoriya rasps. “But it’s me. Todoroki-sama? It’s your servant, Deku.”

Nothing. Not even the flicker of acknowledgement. Todoroki’s touch is starting to become unbearable.

“You are Todoroki Shouto,” Midoriya says. “You are safe in your bedchambers. What you’re seeing isn’t real. The night terrors have you.”

Still nothing.

“You would never hurt one of your own,” Midoriya tries. “I am Deku of Yuuei, one of your
household. You promised to protect me. You’re hurting me now. Todoroki Shouto. Todoroki Shouto, wake up!”

Todoroki drops Midoriya as if it was he who was burned. Todoroki sits bolt upright as Midoriya braces himself against the bed, coughing a little and dabbing his fingers across the delicate, burning skin of his neck. Todoroki pulls away from Midoriya, backing himself into the headboard and shaking his head.

“No,” he whispers. “No, I’m not him, I would never—”

“It’s okay,” Midoriya says. “I’m okay.”

“This is not okay,” Todoroki spits. “I attacked you. I attacked you with this hand.” He grasps his left wrist and shakes his hand, as if wringing it of its fire abilities.

“It’s really not that bad,” Midoriya says. “I don’t think I was even burned that—”

“It’s not that,” Todoroki says. “I swore I would—I’m not him, I will never hurt anyone with this fire power. And now I’ve hurt you.”

Midoriya is quiet. “You didn’t know,” he says finally. “You were trapped in a dream—”

“I was trapped in a dream and I defaulted to his power,” Todoroki says. “Some heir I am. I swore I would be better than him? What’s another lie, then? I’m just like him.”

“But that isn’t—that’s you, not him,” Midoriya says. “This is your fire.”

“You couldn’t understand,” Todoroki snarls. “He is my fire. This half of me is—it’s evil.”

“Make me understand, then,” Midoriya says. “Because from where I’m sitting, I only see you, not your father.”

Todoroki smiles, brittle. “How fortunate for you,” he says. “I see him every time I’m forced to look at my reflection.”

Todoroki brushes his bangs back and points at the scar marring the left side of his face. “This is the story of how I got this scar.

“My father does not believe in peace, especially peace with Yuuei. His father hated Yuuei, and his father before him. War between your country and mine has become a family tradition of ours. Todoroki Enji has been obsessed with the war and with his bloodline ever since he was a young general in my grandfather’s army. But what caught his attention and angered him more than anything else was All Might’s Quirk.

“How could such an undeserving kingdom have such a powerful Quirk? The strongest Quirk in all the Five Kingdoms—that is what One For All is known as. As if my father could accept that. Everything he does, he does to defeat Yuuei. And everything he does to defeat Yuuei is to defeat All Might’s Quirk.

“He married my mother for her ice Quirk. She’s related to the old royalty of Ingenium, not the new family that rules now. As you know, marriage between royalty means Quirks merge. So my father blended their Quirks over and over until he developed the perfect combination of ice and fire.”

“You,” Midoriya says. “That’s why you’re the Crown Prince and not your siblings; you’re the strongest.”
“My Quirk is perfect,” Todoroki says, his smile biting. “I’m the perfect heir to defeat One For All.”

Midoriya swallows. “And your scar?”

“My mother is not my father,” Todoroki says. “She sees him for the evil man that he is. She hates him, but she could never come to hate her children, except me. Because my left side is my father, and my father is evil.”

“So she poured a kettle of boiling water on the evil,” Midoriya says numbly.

“So she did,” Todoroki says. “And so my father locked her away in her own section of the palace, never to come down for scarring his perfect son.” Todoroki reaches over to his bedside table and shows Midoriya the black stone ring with the snowflakes inside. “This is all I have of her now, her last gift to me.”

Midoriya’s eyes move from the ring, to the scar, to Todoroki’s eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You asked,” Todoroki points out, still smiling.

“I didn’t know it was so…” Personal? Painful? Horrible? “I’m sorry.”

“I want you to understand,” Todoroki says softly, smile dropping from his face. “You need to understand why I will never draw my fire power on another person.”

Midoriya remembers how big the flames had been around Todoroki when he saved Midoriya. He had used his ice Quirk to kill those men. Midoriya understands.

Todoroki reaches for Midoriya’s neck again, but this time he moves his entire body towards him. “Chin up,” he orders.

Midoriya sits still on Todoroki’s bed as Todoroki kneels over him, examining the burn he’s left on Midoriya’s skin with light touches. It tickles when Todoroki’s fingers skate his chin or his jaw or down his neck. And when he applies his right hand to the burn, it is cool relief that Midoriya can’t resist leaning into.

“What’s the damage?” he asks.

“Red handprint,” Todoroki says, pursing his lips. “It’ll fade in a day. Or three. It’s like a sunburn.”

“You’re touching me a lot,” Midoriya says. “Really gently, too. I thought you were opposed to touch.”

Todoroki almost draws his hand away. Instead, he says, “There is no warmth to me. If others touched me freely, they would surely freeze to death.”

“I don’t think that’s completely true,” Midoriya says.

“No?” Todoroki raises an eyebrow.

Midoriya takes Todoroki’s free hand—ignoring the breath he sucks in—and presses it to the burn on his neck. “Not all cold,” he says.

Todoroki snatches his hand away. “That’s not funny,” he snaps.
“No, but it is true,” Midoriya says seriously. “You’re not as cold or as evil as you believe yourself to be.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Todoroki says. “I hurt—”

“So make it up to me,” Midoriya says. “Be my sparring partner.”

That’s clearly not the response Todoroki was expecting. He opens his mouth to protest, finds no way to do so, and hums. “Very well,” he says.

“And you better not go easy on me,” Midoriya warns. “That doesn’t count.”

“Yes, yes,” Todoroki says, waving a hand. “Get out of my bed, pesky manservant. And take good care of that burn.”

“As you wish, sweet prince,” Midoriya says, bowing dramatically. It’s silly, but it gets a half-smile out of Todoroki.

*I won’t let you call yourself evil, Midoriya thinks. Just you watch me.*
Midoriya makes himself trouble before most of the palace has even cracked open their eyes.

“Careful!” Chiyo, one of the cooks cries out.

Midoriya leans back, hands wheeling in the air as he struggles to balance, just barely missing getting clocked across the face by a hot pan of biscuits. He straightens up, and Chiyo deposits the tray safely on a counter before whipping around and shoving her finger in his face, snarling.

“Dumbass!” she says. “Do you want another scar on that pretty face of yours? No? Then why the blistering hell are you prancing around my kitchen like a newborn whelp?”

Midoriya cowers under her flinty gaze. “I’m, uh, in a good mood?” he offers. The excuse sounds weak, even to him.

“No room for good moods when there’s breakfast for hundreds to be made, Deku!” Chiyo snaps. She gives her apron tie a firm tug and turns on her heel, heading back to the ovens.

Chef claps Midoriya on the shoulder, hard enough to make him stumble forward a step. “Don’t mind her,” he says. “That’s her brand of caring for you.”

“I know,” Midoriya says. “She always gives me the scraps when I come begging for extras.”

“Still,” Chef says, “what’s got you so keyed up this morning? You’ve got some spring in your step.”

“I got what I wanted,” Midoriya says, throwing Chef a thumbs up.

“Oh? And what’s that?” Chef asks.

Midoriya presses his lips together and shakes his head, failing to hold down a smile.

“How mysterious,” Chef says, laughing. “This better not get you into more trouble, at least not in my kitchen.”

“Nope!” Midoriya says. “But I will tell you that I could use a big breakfast. For both me and His Royal Highness.”

Chef shakes his head, smiling. “When it comes to you two, I worry the whole kingdom will collapse,” he teases.
“Hey!” Midoriya says. “We’re not that bad…always.”

“Take care of my prince,” Chef says, handing Midoriya a platter and a new jug of water.

Midoriya salutes him.

The first thing Todoroki does when Midoriya marches into his room and throws open the curtains is blink a single blue eye open. He blinks once, takes in Midoriya’s low humming and connects the dots slowly but surely, as Midoriya knew he would.

“Oh no,” Todoroki rasps. “I take it back.”

“Princes don’t go back on their words,” Midoriya reminds him. “I’m afraid you’re stuck.”

“Why are you so happy about this?” Todoroki says. He pulls his sheets over his head. “I don’t even want to look at you, your blatant happiness disgusts me.”

“I haven’t had a sparring partner in so long,” Midoriya says. “It’s just not as fun going through the motions without someone to practice on.”

“Momo—”

“—is busy,” Midoriya finishes for him. Todoroki pops his head back out to glare at Midoriya for stealing his words. A tuft of red hair sticks straight up and Midoriya feels as if he’s been stabbed. In a way.

“I’m sure someone else could stand in for me,” Todoroki mutters. “I’m busy too, you know.”

“You hate paperwork more than All Might does,” Midoriya says. “Which is to say, a lot.” He’s a little nervous about revealing such a personal detail, but they were telling the truth to each other now, weren’t they? And if Midoriya couldn’t give Todoroki the full truth, he could at least give him this.

“Hmm,” Todoroki says, which isn’t a no.

“I’m good,” Midoriya says. He’d been trained to protect All Might on the off chance his personal and professionally trained guard couldn’t, but even though it was minor training, he pursued it with vigor. ‘With vigor’ is how Midoriya did pretty much anything relating to All Might. As a result, he was actually pretty good at hand-to-hand.

“You’re a training nut, is what you are,” Todoroki sighs, flipping the sheet off him. More tufts of hair stick up. Midoriya brings Todoroki his breakfast so he doesn’t have to look at him.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Todoroki complains, buttering his biscuit with a scowl. “You’ll be smiling the whole time. It’s annoying.”

“Are you sure you aren’t—” Midoriya takes a bite of his own biscuit, “—scared?”

Todoroki’s eyes jump to his. Chiyo was intimidating and fierce on her best days, but she could never capture the divine power of royalty’s fury like Todoroki could. Midoriya got chills holding his gaze.

“Would you care to repeat that?” Todoroki says quietly.

Midoriya’s heart is pounding, but he says it anyway. “I asked if you were scared to fight me.”
Todoroki holds his gaze for a long moment, then turns back to his breakfast. He says nothing while he eats, but Midoriya wasn’t born yesterday. He’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. He eats his food too, but doesn’t taste a thing.

“Deku,” Todoroki says, wiping the corners of his mouth with a cloth. “Have you ever seen me in battle?”

“Not hand-to-hand,” Midoriya says. He had seen Todoroki swing a sword and wield a bow, though, and remembering how calm and confident Todoroki had been with two wildly different weapons makes his stomach churn, not entirely unpleasantly.

“Then I’ll forgive you, my poor, heedless manservant,” Todoroki says. “No knowing man would ever make that claim having seen me in battle.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is?” Midoriya asks, leaning towards Todoroki.

“That’s the fact of the matter, yes,” Todoroki says. His eyes glitter and a smile curls the edges of his lips. “You’re not as good as you think.”

“One could say that sounds like a challenge,” Midoriya says.

“One could say the same of you,” Todoroki retorts. Todoroki tilts his chin up and Midoriya mimics him, grinning helplessly.

Midoriya doesn’t understand what it was in Prince Todoroki that provoked this playful, teasing side of him. He could chastise himself, tell himself to act more serious, implore himself to remember his mission and that Todoroki was not a friend, should not even be a companion, but then Todoroki smiled at him or teased back and Midoriya couldn’t think.

Every survival instinct he had turned on its head when Todoroki was thrown into the equation. For god’s sake, he had sat at the foot of Todoroki’s bed this morning without thinking of how improper it was. Instead of blending in, he had to be noticed; instead of keeping out of Todoroki’s business, he had to be knee-deep in it. Midoriya had known the Crown Prince would have charisma, of course, because every leader had to, but he hadn’t expected Todoroki to be so striking. He didn’t know what to do with everything he felt for Todoroki.

And sometimes, Todoroki looked at him like he couldn’t quite figure out what to do with Midoriya, either.

“I’ll meet you in the gardens, then,” Midoriya says. “Before the sun is high in the sky.” He picks up Todoroki’s tray as a distraction.

“Don’t be late,” Todoroki says, leaning back in his bed.

Yeah, as if Midoriya could be.

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If nothing else, it’s nice to see Todoroki as he is, without the clutter of formality. Even in the mornings, Todoroki is quick to compose himself and demands to be attended to so he may assume his intimidating and regal persona as swiftly as possible. But now, in the gardens, the sun barely
high enough to cast light over the greenery, Todoroki looks...human.

He’s wearing a loose-fitting shirt with the tie undone at the top and loose-fitting pants, the tie also undone. His hair is still sticking up a little strangely and he doesn’t have any jewelry or makeup on like he might when moving around the palace. If it weren’t for the color of his hair, his missing band, and the sharpness of his eyes, Midoriya might have mistaken him for a striking palace servant.

Todoroki is unbearably handsome.

Midoriya isn’t sure how comfortable he is with the realization. On some level, he’d always been aware that Todoroki was good-looking. He lived up to the rumors for sure, and Midoriya had certainly been struck by his beauty on occasions when Todoroki commanded attention, but Midoriya had never realized that Todoroki was just generally handsome all around.

Or maybe he was just Midoriya’s type. How unsettling.

Todoroki scratches at his collarbone, an uncharacteristically absent-minded action for him. His eyes are bright. Oh dear, Midoriya thinks.

Then Todoroki catches him staring and snatches his hand away, scowling. “Quit staring and stretch, you fool.” He turns his back on Midoriya and lifts his arm to stretch, pressing his shoulder blades together and—yeah, Midoriya is going to stretch.

Midoriya works out all the sleepiness from his muscles, warming them up and stretching until he feels loose. The inevitability of a sparring match gets his blood pumping and he can ignore Todoroki. Midoriya feels good. The air is just cool enough that it won’t be unbearable once they start really getting into it. He thought ahead and brought a pitcher of ice water, the metal already sweating. Todoroki will be a fine partner to practice against, even if Midoriya is a little nervous. He knows the prince isn’t a pushover.

Said prince is also looking at him. Not in the way Midoriya had been looking at him (too open, too honest), but in surreptitious, assessing glances. He’s probably looking for weak spots in Midoriya’s build and having trouble, if his scowl is to be believed. He’d already seen Midoriya shirtless—there was no other reason to stare at Midoriya other than threat assessment.

“Ready?” Todoroki asks.

“Whenever you are,” Midoriya says.

They start by circling each other, fists up and held loose, ready to strike or block at will. As expected, Todoroki’s defense is tight and near impenetrable. He looks over Midoriya’s stance as Midoriya looks over his, adjusting himself slightly based on whatever he found. Midoriya tracks his movements out the corner of his eye, but his gaze never leaves Todoroki’s eyes. He could always see it in his opponent’s eyes before they struck.

Todoroki seems content to give the first move to Midoriya, so Midoriya throws a feint, just to see how Todoroki reacts. Todoroki hardly blinks. Not going to be that easy, huh? Midoriya prods at a softer spot in Todoroki’s defense, then throws a feint, then throws a real punch at Todoroki’s jaw. Predictably, Todoroki blocks and responds to the second feint, but he’s quick enough to block Midoriya’s second shot. Midoriya hops back before Todoroki can counter.

Now, it’s Todoroki’s turn. He’s faster than Midoriya and more efficient. None of his punches are feints, but they’re so well-planned Midoriya isn’t sure he’d be able to get away with not blocking
any of them. Todoroki was right—he is good. Midoriya doesn’t begrudge him his skill. He’s happy to have anyone to spar with, but nothing is better than having a competent partner.

“I told you,” Todoroki says. “You’re smiling.”

“Something wrong?” Midoriya says. “This is a nice warm-up.”

“Oh, I’ll show you a warm-up,” Todoroki says.

“Please do,” Midoriya says. “I’m falling asleep over here.”

Midoriya doesn’t see anything in Todoroki’s eyes. There’s no flash of intention or shift of his pupils. He strikes so quickly at Midoriya’s side that Midoriya almost doesn’t catch him. Midoriya swears, then swears again when Todoroki draws close to him and throws a blow at his face. Midoriya blocks that one too with an unsteady laugh, and then Todoroki knocks his legs out from under him and Midoriya falls on his ass.

“If you wanted to go to sleep,” Todoroki says with a smirk, “you should’ve said so.”

Oh, it is so on.

Midoriya accepts his hand and stands up, making sure to pull hard on Todoroki so that he has to take a step forward. Todoroki huffs in annoyance, but the petty action helps Midoriya to realize something: why the hell was he holding back against Todoroki, again? Yes, he was a prince and could decide to smite Midoriya if Midoriya landed a punch, but this was also Todoroki. He wasn’t actually a dick, he just talked like one. Midoriya had barely moved him when tugging on him. Todoroki could handle him full power.

So Midoriya goes all out.

He throws blows and kicks and twists his body whenever he moves, making an infuriatingly small target. Midoriya turns Todoroki’s strategy on him, forcing him to go on defense until Midoriya shows weakness. Midoriya’s blows all land against hard muscle and bone and never the soft of a belly or the solar plexus, but he doesn’t need an opening there. He just needs Todoroki to be distracted long enough to…there! Midoriya sweeps Todoroki’s feet from under him in the exact mirror of Midoriya’s own tumble.

All Midoriya has to do is quirk an eyebrow and then Todoroki is up and on the offensive.

Midoriya falls into a rhythm. It’s not so routine that it becomes boring, but his mind and body become accustomed to the speed of Todoroki's blows and the little quirks that give him away. His eyes may betray nothing, but his mouth is another story, incredibly expressive. This also means that Midoriya must stare at his lips, which earned him a good sock in the gut when he thought too hard about it.

They’re evenly matched, more or less. Todoroki’s attacks are meant to bulldoze his enemy into submission with a few choice punches, an excellent strategy for hiding the lack of power he has behind each punch. Midoriya, on the other hand, has the force to make each of his blows count and enough creativity to invent ways to get around Todoroki’s attacks.

“Hmm,” Todoroki says when they’re back to circling. “You’re not bad.”

“Thank you,” Midoriya says. “You look good with some sweat on your brow.”

Todoroki snorts. They’re both dripping, hair wet at the temples and plastered against their skin.
Todoroki's previously untamed hairs have settled down and some of his longer bangs stick to his forehead and cover his eyes. It makes him look wild. The heat of the rising sun turns Todoroki's skin pink and Midoriya's ruddy. Todoroki's lips are parted to pant.

“Want to take a break?” Midoriya asks. “You seem pretty out of it.”

“Not on your life,” Todoroki says. “I can see how sloppy your defenses are getting. I’ve got you in a corner.”

“Then try me,” Midoriya taunts.

But the truth is that they’re both exhausted. To make up for the physical exertion, they start to yell insults at each other in between bouts of punching and blocking. Organized sparring turns to scrabbling and cursing, then Todoroki gets Midoriya in a headlock and Midoriya wraps his arms around Todoroki’s middle and knocks them over into a heap in the grass. Midoriya rolls off Todoroki and collapses on his back beside him in the grass, breathing heavily.

“You…play dirty,” Todoroki gasps.

“Really?” Midoriya replies. “Because you…fucking…started it.”

“Oh yeah?” Todoroki says. “How?”

“Stupid…condescending…princeling!” Midoriya says.

“That’s how royalty are supposed to act,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya props himself up on one arm. “I should dump that entire pitcher of water on you,” he says.

“Very well,” Todoroki says, putting an arm over his eyes. “Bathe me here in the gardens, in front of everyone.”

“What—no, I’m not actually going to,” Midoriya sputters.

“Why not?” Todoroki says.

“Because—” Todoroki is grinning. “Oh, you ass,” Midoriya says, but he’s laughing too. He shoves Todoroki with his knee.

Midoriya sits up so he can pour each of them a glass. He makes sure to splash just a little of the still-cold water onto Todoroki when handing him his glass. Todoroki yips in surprise and pours all of his water onto Midoriya. Midoriya says a choice swear and dumps his entire glass over Todoroki's head. Their hands are on each other in a moment, ready to wrestle.

It takes Midoriya a moment to register how fearless his touch is. His hands are around Todoroki's wrists, ready to...ready to what? Pin him to the ground? Wrestle like boys? It was as if Todoroki's casual clothes made him a new person, a different person. Someone who Midoriya could spar with and never fear touching his skin. Someone who could look at Midoriya the way Todoroki is now, eyes bright and a smile that shows teeth. Someone that Midoriya could...

Midoriya pulls away from him carefully. Todoroki tilts his head to the side at the rejection, but remembers himself and sobers up, sitting forward. He accepts the new glass of water Midoriya pours him and brushes hair out of his face. It’s long enough now to curl below his neck and flop in front of his eyes.
“We’ll have to get your hair cut soon,” Midoriya says.

“Indeed,” Todoroki agrees. “But that can wait until after I’ve bathed.”

Midoriya opens his mouth to reply, but a page appears at Todoroki’s side, bowing. “Your Royal Highness,” the page says. “Yaoyorozu-san requires your presence in the armory.”

“She can damn well wait until after I’ve bathed,” Todoroki says, annoyed.

The page hesitates, still bowed. “The Lady Yaoyorozu-san insists—”

“Fine, fine,” Todoroki says, sighing and waving a hand. “She’ll let me rest when I’m dead, I understand. I won’t have peace until I hear her out anyway.” He turns to Midoriya. “Bathe before me, I’ll send for you when my bath is prepped. With luck I won’t be long.”

Todoroki stands, rolling his shoulders. Midoriya watches Todoroki absently, but catches the way the page glances between them quickly. Oh no. Midoriya knows what that means. He glares at the page who blushes, caught. The page offers a deep bow to Todoroki and a shallower one to Midoriya and excuses himself.

“The rumor mill will be buzzing tonight,” Midoriya growls.

“Leave him,” Todoroki says. “It doesn’t matter. Do you regret this?”

Midoriya meets his eyes. Todoroki isn’t talking about the sparring session.

“No,” Midoriya says. “Never.”

The corner of Todoroki’s mouth turns up. “Then it’s fine,” he says.

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Midoriya lets out a breath that drains all the air from his body. He lets his body slump further into the bath and inhales pure steam. Todoroki was right, as usual. Nothing beat a hot bath.

“Deku!” Tooru calls, and Midoriya flinches. Well. A bath in solitude would be preferable, but…

It’s not that Midoriya has some hidden grudge against Tooru, it’s just that she’s…touchy. And naked. And female. A naked female, wading through the waters of the bath to talk to him about whatever ungodly thing she must now that they’re both naked and in a bath. Midoriya is very grateful that he’s not facing her.

“Oh, Deku’s here?” Sami asks.

Alright, so Midoriya had to deal with two naked girls. This was fine.

“Tooru, Sami,” Midoriya groans. “Can’t you guys bathe, I don’t know, not here?”

“Aww,” Tooru says, coming along beside him and nudging him with her shoulder. “Don’t you like us?”

Midoriya is very, very careful to keep his eyes straight ahead and not down. “In case you aren’t
“Aware,” Midoriya says, “you’re naked. I am trying to respect your dignity.”


Midoriya sputters at that and turns on her, accidentally getting an eyeful. He smacks his hands over his eyes and sinks into the water until he’s completely submerged, away from weird claims and naked girls and why the hell did Tooru assume he’s into men? When he pops back up, he faces away from both the girls pointedly.

“Don’t be like that, Deku!” Tooru protests. “I want to have a bath with my friend!”

“You broke him,” Sami observes. “He’ll never trust women again.”

“This is the natural state of being,” Tooru says. “What’s wrong with being naked? Ooo, unless—does he not let you look at other people naked? That’s so strict! But also kind of sexy…”

“What,” Midoriya says. “What on earth are you even talking about?”


“Why would Todoroki-sama care who I see naked?” Midoriya asks, near hysterical.


Midoriya wishes he could look at them just to get across how confused he is.

“You’re sleeping with him,” Sami clarifies. “It’s obvious.”

For the second time in under five minutes, Midoriya shoves himself underwater. If he just stays under long enough, he’ll drown and therefore will never have to face the fact that it’s a palace-wide rumor that they’re fucking. That even his closest friends believe it. That Todoroki orders him around in bed. What the fuck?

Midoriya emerges from the water to glare at them, staring at their faces and no lower. “We aren’t sleeping together,” Midoriya says.

“And I didn’t strip for an Ingenium courtier last night,” Tooru says dismissively. Midoriya chokes. “I get that you’re embarrassed, but you’ll just make him mad denying it.”

“We’re not!” Midoriya exclaims.

“You share the same room,” Sami says, holding out fingers. “You don’t call him by his title. You sparred with him today. You’re his first manservant.”

“How do you even know about the sparring?” Midoriya despairs. Sami grins at him.

“I promise you,” Midoriya says, sighing. His eyes drop to the water. “I know what it looks like, but we’re really not.”

Tooru and Sami exchange glances.

“I’m sorry,” Tooru says. “I didn’t realize that’s what it’s like. It was insensitive of me to assume.”

“Yeah,” Sami says. “If it’s like that, then it must be really tough for you. Here, we’ll take care of you as penance.”
Somehow, Midoriya feels like he’s stumbled into another misunderstanding, but he’s glad they believe him about the whole sleeping together thing. The thought of people looking at them together and seeing them in the bedroom, together—Midoriya can’t think about it. First of all, Todoroki would never let his guard down enough to, uh, nevermind, Midoriya is definitely not thinking about this.

Fortunately, the girls are there for him. Tooru rubs soap into Midoriya hair and scratches at his scalp. She’s rough with his hair, forcing out sweat and dirt and tangles with her washing, but Midoriya feels as limp as a kitten in its mother’s mouth. He lets her shake his head around because the motions of her hands on his head are so relaxing. Sami scrubs down the rest of his body with a brush that leaves his skin stinging. She pays careful attention to the dirt caked under his nails. Midoriya takes back everything mean he’s ever thought about the girls.

“It would be really cool to sleep with the prince, though,” Tooru says, apparently not done beating the topic to death.

“I thought you only wanted to dance for him?” Midoriya says.

Tooru shrugs. “A girl can dream. He’d be so strong, but also gentle, and handsome…”

“Gross,” Sami says.

Midoriya snorts. “More like bossy. He’s been catered to all his life; it’d be more like a battlefield over who gets to feel good.”

“Ooo,” Tooru says. “A man’s bitterness is strong!”

“It’s not bitterness,” Midoriya says, smiling. “It’s just that every time I’ve seen him in bed, he’s been grumpy or tired and grumpy or injured and grumpy. He doesn’t do beds very well. It’s hard to imagine him doing anything but complain.”

“That’s precisely why he needs someone to come in and show him how good it can be!” Tooru exclaims.

“I hear he’s still a virgin,” Sami says.

Tooru makes a face at that. “No way. Even the stuffiest of royalty have a round in the bedroom once they come of age. He’s no exception.”

“Except maybe the youngest prince of Ingenium,” Sami points out. “He’s taken a vow of chastity.”


Deku pours water over his head with a bowl. “I think,” Midoriya says, “that you’re talking about my boss having sex and just the thought is making me uncomfortable. I have to live with this guy, okay? We share a bedroom. I can’t pee without him knowing, I hope to god he doesn’t have any suitors.”

“Boring,” Tooru says.

“Boring,” Sami agrees.

“Deku-san!” A page calls into the bath. “His Royal Highness requests your presence in his private bath!”
“Thank god,” Midoriya says, climbing out of the water as fast as he can. Tooru and Sami exchange glances again.

“Oh no you don’t,” Midoriya says. “This is completely platonic and obligatory bathing between a master and servant. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Okay,” Tooru says.

“Okay,” Sami agrees.

Midoriya rolls his eyes at them and grabs a towel to wrap around his waist. He’s not quite fast enough to miss Sami whisper to Tooru, “Well, if they ever do sleep together, I think the prince will be very satisfied.”

Yeah, Midoriya is never talking to them again.

When Midoriya walks into Todoroki’s private bath, he is astounded by how quiet the bath is. There’s no sound of splashing as bathers move about, nor the low murmur of conversation. The only sound is the running of water from phoenix-head spouts into a massive pool of clear water obscured by steam. The entire bath is tiled in blue and white mosaic with a many-sided pyramid of glass as the roof. With the sun only just beginning to slip down the horizon, the room is filled with light. The page shows Midoriya in and closes the door behind him.

Todoroki is already seated in an elegant wooden chair, a white robe draped over him while he waits. He rises when Midoriya enters but does not turn around.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says and bows, even though Todoroki can’t see him.

“Come, Deku,” Todoroki says. “I’ve been irritated by Momo and I wish to be cleaned of all dirt and sweat and false friendships that are clinging to my skin.”

Midoriya exhales softly and approaches. “I’m sure she only had your best interests at heart.”

“Indeed,” Todoroki says. “But as a friend, she should have told me what I wanted to hear, not what I needed to hear.” He slips the robe over his shoulders and holds an arm out with it in hand.

There’s nothing unusual about this. It’s how Midoriya always bathes him. He’ll take the robe and then clean Todoroki and leave him while he soaks. They’ve done it a hundred times.

But Midoriya hears Tooru and Sami’s voices in his head talking about sex and Todoroki and how Todoroki is in bed. It’s suddenly impossible to look at broad shoulders and the defined planes of back and shoulder muscles that lead to less innocent places.

Head up, Izuku, Midoriya tells himself. Head up.

“Deku,” Todoroki says, more insistently. “I do not like to be kept waiting.”

“Sorry!” Deku squeaks. He rushes forward to take the robe and slinks to the corner of the room where there’s a bucket of soaps and oils and brushes. He empties it onto a table behind Todoroki and fills the bucket with warm bath water. Then, avoiding looking at Todoroki, he assumes his
Todoroki leans into the touch of his hands like a cat. Midoriya knows he has a strong grip and strong fingers, and he also knows the prince doesn’t like to be babied. He scratches deep into Todoroki's scalp, cleaning all the dirt from his head with newly cleaned fingers and nails. Unlike Midoriya, however, Todoroki doesn’t allow his head to be shaken like a rag doll. He remains almost perfectly still through the treatment, eyes closed.

Midoriya wonders if Todoroki would be so still if Midoriya tangled his hands in his hair under different circumstances.

Midoriya can’t help it! Against his will, he’s got sex on the mind. Specifically, how he hasn’t slept with anyone since Yuuei and bathing is actually a lot more intimate than he remembers. Also, if Todoroki put up with rough washing, would he like his hair pulled, too?

He shouldn’t do it. Oh god. He really shouldn’t do it. But he’s going to.

Midoriya’s first tug is gentle. Todoroki doesn’t react, so he tugs harder. He gets a low rumble for his efforts, but it’s so ambiguous it could either be pleasure or discomfort. And then harder, hard enough to actually move Todoroki's head. And once more.

“Deku,” Todoroki says, “what are you doing?”

“Sorry!” Deku squeaks, hands flying off Todoroki’s head. “It’s, uh, this kind of, um, new technique for…bathing! That Tooru and Sami taught me. It felt nice, and so, I thought that, on you I might…”

Todoroki's brow furrows. “You like having your hair pulled?”

Midoriya is going to die. He might as well die. This is the most embarrassing moment of his life. The day he fake-confessed he had a kink to Todoroki.

“…It’s not bad,” Todoroki decides. “Carry on.”

Midoriya tugs at his hair a few times to keep up the charade, dying on the inside. Then he switches soaps and rids himself of the horrible moment forever.

Oh, wait, no he doesn’t, because he has to rub the soap all over Todoroki’s body. Todoroki leans forward so Midoriya can reach the length of his back. Midoriya is about to get intimately reacquainted with the strength of Todoroki's body and the way his muscles feel beneath his hands. It’s also the only time Todoroki ever yields to him, bowing forward. Midoriya gets close to him; close enough to hook his chin over Todoroki’s shoulder, close enough to kiss his neck.

Stop it, Izuku.

There’s curiosity, there’s musing, and then there’s straight up fantasizing. And one of those is not allowed. Midoriya’s heart pounds as he draws away. He pours more soap into his hand as a distraction. It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter. Todoroki is man just like him, and even if he’s handsome, he can never be thought of in that way.
The word ‘kiss’ burns in the back of Midoriya’s mind.

He finishes rubbing the soap into Todoroki’s skin, avoiding moving in front of him this time and using his thigh as a shield from…even more intimate areas. He wouldn’t be able to get away with that in a minute, but he needed to compose himself. Todoroki watches him—of course he would notice a deviation in Midoriya’s pattern—and Midoriya thinks the word kiss over and over again.

If he scrubs extra hard with the brush, Todoroki doesn’t comment on it. He’s the only thing that makes sense in Midoriya’s mess of thoughts, the only rock in the middle of a raging sea. Midoriya clings to Todoroki’s nonchalance to try and force some semblance of calm into his mind.

Midoriya pours the bucket of water over Todoroki’s head slowly, watching the water wash away suds and soothe reddened skin. Todoroki’s hair goes flat against his head and reaches his hand up to brush his bangs back, eyes closed and lips parted.

Do you even know? Midoriya wants to ask. Have you given up on yourself because of your scar, or do you truly not realize how beautiful you are?

Midoriya burns hotter than his neck had when Todoroki grabbed him. The feeling resonates through his body, dripping through his veins like lava and tingling in his fingers and toes. The hairs on arms and legs rise and his skin shivers. Midoriya’s half-hard just from bathing Todoroki and he doesn’t bother trying to hide that fact from himself.

Before Todoroki can open his eyes and look at him weird, though, Midoriya reaches for the scented oil. He unscrews the lid and dips a soft sponge in, then spreads the oil across Todoroki’s skin. he moves with slow, gently swirling strokes, painting Todoroki’s skin in oil.

Midoriya should have seen the signs earlier. It’s his own fault that he didn’t realize it until the girls brought it up for him.

Midoriya runs the sponge up the long column of Todoroki’s neck. Todoroki tilts his chin up obediently. Midoriya wonders if he would do the same if Midoriya were peppering kisses up the same path. Midoriya rubs the sponge down his back. If he traced the line of Todoroki’s spine with his fingers, would Todoroki shiver? And when he runs the sponge down Todoroki’s abdomen, the muscles clench. Would he do the same if Midoriya bit at the skin there, or by his hip?

He moves in front of Todoroki and kneels in front of him to run the sponge up Todoroki’s legs and down his inner thighs. Todoroki is hard, not that Midoriya is surprised. The body reacts to touch, whether sexual or not. They moved past this months ago.

But this time, when Todoroki’s knees twitch outwards just a tad and his eyes never leave Midoriya kneeling before him, Midoriya has a life-changing thought. Todoroki can’t miss the way Midoriya’s eyes flick to his length and away, giving himself away.

If you asked me, I would, Midoriya thinks.

But Todoroki doesn’t ask and Midoriya finishes rubbing the oil on him and leans back. Todoroki rises from his chair and enters the bath without another word to him.
Alright, so he’s attracted to Todoroki Shouto. It’s not the end of the world.

It’s better, actually, that Midoriya has finally acknowledged his attraction to Todoroki. It explains all the looking-but-not-looking, the watching him, the draw to Todoroki. Sure, some of it was princely charisma, but there was basic sexual attraction in the mix as well. It wasn’t a crime.

Except, it was a crime, because Todoroki was his prince, his mission, a member of royalty, and going to be the King of Endeavor when his father passed on the title. He was so far into ‘forbidden’ territory that Midoriya might as well have committed a crime against the state by just thinking ‘Todoroki’ and ‘sleep with’ in the same sentence.

Midoriya deals with this crisis in the most mature way possible. He hides from Todoroki.

Of course, he brings him his meals and tends to him when called, but he avoids being in Todoroki’s presence more than strictly necessary. Every time Midoriya considers staying and keeping the prince company, he remembers that he looked at the prince’s dick in front of said prince and scares himself away.

_It’s for the best_, Midoriya thinks. _We could never be permitted to be friends in the first place._

But there’s no hiding from Todoroki when he calls on Midoriya after his duties have been fulfilled. Midoriya schools himself into most rational and calm state of mind he can manage. He can say it was curiosity that made him look at the prince in such a lewd way. Or blame it on the girls. Or say his eyes wandered and it meant nothing. It meant nothing, it meant nothing, it meant nothing.

Midoriya opens the door dividing their rooms and prepares to face the consequences of his actions. “Yes, Todoroki-sama?”

“Come in,” Todoroki says. Midoriya does, skulking into Todoroki’s line of sight. He knew when he was in trouble.

“I’ll ask you this once,” Todoroki says. “I expect you to answer it with complete honesty.”

Midoriya swallows.

Todoroki sighs. “Do you trust me?”

Midoriya blinks, and when no other words follow, he realizes that was the question. “Wh—yes,” Midoriya sputters. “Yes, of course.”

Todoroki sighs again. “Your voice makes me want to believe you. You sound so honest. But you reject me and you avoid me whenever I move to entrust more of myself to you. It is not easy to give up part of myself, you know. It is an honor to receive that.”

Midoriya is completely lost. “I’m not…being punished?”

Todoroki frowns. “For what?”

Oh, shit. Midoriya forgot that he can’t lie, not really. He averts his eyes.

“There,” Todoroki says. “You’re doing it again. And yet you say you trust me.”

“I do!” Midoriya snaps, looking up at him again. “I’ve done something improper! I feel ashamed!”

“What,” Todoroki says, “could possibly—”

Todoroki blinks. “Are you referring to the rumors?”

Midoriya nods.

Todoroki waves a hand. “That doesn’t matter to me. What will never be, will never be. No use worrying what others gossip about. They know nothing—we know the truth. Don’t let it bother you.”

And just like that, Midoriya feels better. Of course Todoroki wouldn’t be worried about something like rumors or someone thinking of him in a sexual way. He wasn’t interested in Midoriya and never would be. That was as clear of a rejection as Midoriya was going to get without asking outright. His heart calms.

“I’ll ask you again,” Todoroki says. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Midoriya says.

“Good,” Todoroki says. “Now come here. Put this ointment on my scar.”

“Wh—why so suddenly…?” Midoriya asks, rising slowly. “You don’t let anyone touch your ointment.”

“I am attempting to trust you back,” Todoroki says quietly. “I want to trust you. My instinct is to trust you. But small steps are the only way I know how.”

Midoriya smiles. “You’re doing a fine job,” he says.

“Shut it,” Todoroki says. He makes room on the bed.

Midoriya slides onto the bed next to him, still unsure if it was really okay for him to sit so close to Todoroki. He picks up the little metal tin of Todoroki’s scar ointment, raised flame patterns running alongside the outside. He unscrews the top and dips a finger into the jelly-like substance.

Then, very carefully, he leans into Todoroki’s space and rubs the ointment onto his scar. The skin of the scar is strange—bumpy and smooth, completely asymmetrical. Midoriya feels like he might be hurting Todoroki and he glances at Todoroki’s eyes uncertainly.

“Most of my feeling is dead there,” Todoroki says. “I can barely feel your finger.”

That makes Midoriya feel a little better. He rubs the rest of the ointment in gently. Todoroki closes his blue eye to let Midoriya rub the ointment in close. It’s the most vulnerable Todoroki has ever made himself to Midoriya. His shoulders are tensed, but he makes visible efforts to relax and let Midoriya take care of him.

“That’s all of it,” Midoriya says. “You can open your eye now.”

Todoroki’s eyelid flutters. He lifts a hand as if to rub it, then lays it back down. He clicks his tongue. “So annoying,” he says.

“It doesn’t hurt?” Midoriya asks.

“Itches,” Todoroki says. “I can never get at it, though. The ointment helps. Also keeps the skin healthy.”
“It’s really not that bad,” Midoriya says.

“It is,” Todoroki says. “You’ve become desensitized.”

Midoriya doesn’t argue further. He wipes the excess ointment on his shirt and screws the lid back on the tin. “If that’s all you need of me, I’ll be going,” he says.

“Yes, for now,” Todoroki says. He sighs, this time with an agitated edge. “I will warn you, though: tomorrow, I have something to confess to you, something I will need your assistance with in the future. It’s the biggest secret I know.”

Midoriya swallows.

“Also, we’re entertaining tomorrow,” Todoroki says, pulling his comforter over him. “Sleep well.”

“Entertaining?” Midoriya squawks. “Entertaining who?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” Todoroki says nonchalantly. “If you want to start a war with Yuuei, you best make friends with Urabiti.”

Chapter End Notes

sry for blueballing y'all

up next: trust and...a princess?!?!??
that's the thing about trust

Chapter Notes

....and here's my second Super Chapter, nearly 12,000 words in entirety!

IMPORTANT: in this chapter, i introduce a disabled character. in the haikyuu fandom, i attempted to include a disabled character and ended up using that disability in part for angst even if that was not the main goal. i upset a reader and promised to do better next time, so this is my promise being fulfilled. that being said, there IS an ableist comment in this chapter as fair warning. if i have any readers with disabilities, please let me know if i portray this disabled character in a way you see unfit and i will do my best to fix it!

AIGHT LET'S GET THIS PARTY STARTED:

hina gets her own section out of sheer VOLUME + QUALITY: this piece made me cry, whatever; LITERALLY THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMO I'VE EVER SEEN JUST LOOK AT IT OKAY; forehead kiss scene daily doodles; the ointment rubbing scene ft. spicy todoroki; A REALLY SPICY Todoroki; UPCOMING SCENES LMAO; SCREAMS OKAY THIS IS MY ULTIMATE FAVORITE Todoroki; worn down baby ;( ; power couple; young beebs .......am i done? maybe? idk!!!! HINA IS TOO GOOD TO ME PLS SUPPORT HER GUYS!!!!

animu-tm drew a prince todo and That Scene from the hunt!

keijisthighs drew me some lovely colored todeks!! AND A WILD URARAKA APPEARS??

AASVDSGG OKAY A LARGE SERIES OF COLORFUL DRAWS BY FRUITSANDPEACHES + ME MCFREAKIGN LOSIN IT!!!

BATHING TODO BY ARTISTTOTHEBONE

REALLY LOVELY art of the bathing scene by artofkazukid

THE ONE TODEK I LOSE IT EVER TIME I SEE BY IOLIT3

BEAUTIFUL toadoroki sitting high on his throne by lindigo

EZOO CALLED ME OUT LMAO

THE FUNNIEST COMIC IVE EVER SEEN BY LORDTASHING

as usual.....im just one man......pls tell me if i've missed your art, don't be afraid to let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Needless to say, Midoriya doesn’t sleep well that night.

This is what he wanted, right? What All Might wanted? Congratulations, Izuku, the prince trusts you. You have his ear and you will get to hear only the biggest secret Todoroki has. You’ll divine secrets about him and his country that you would never be able to gain without tricking him into believing you were on his side. Through deceit and lies, you’ve gotten Todoroki Shouto to truly trust you.

Yeah. It sits less well in Midoriya’s stomach than he thought it would.

It’s easy to agree to a plan when the person you’re deceiving is nothing but a name plastered over a blurry face. Lying to save his ass, Midoriya could do. Lying to one friend at the expense of another? Maybe he’s not the guy.

And it’s with that perfect timing that another letter arrives from All Might. Dark Shadow preens his feathers energetically and all but ignores Midoriya as he pulls the tiny letter from his raven. It reads:

M.I—

Bad news: trespassers on our land. Broke off from peaceful envoy going to U. Apprehended but keeping quiet. News on your end? Seems it’s starting.

T.Y.

Midoriya’s stomach sinks to his feet. All Might wrote in general, borderline confusing terms, but Midoriya got the gist of it. King Enji had sent a group of ambassadors to what has to be Urabiti, some spies among them. They got across the Yuuein border under guise of using the road through the mountains and released the spies when they successfully crossed the border. All Might didn’t say where they were captured, but Midoriya would bet his left eye that it was to Yuuei’s capital. Not assassins, but…scouts for assassins?

All Might was caught in a bind. He couldn’t let them go, because they’d surely run back to Endeavor with their information of the capital city and possibly of All Might himself. But All Might couldn’t keep them either, because if the Yuuein people knew Endeavor was sending spies into their country, it would be war all over again. King Enji had handed All Might a time bomb. Sooner or later, someone was going to let the secret out. In fact, it might have even been their purpose to get caught. King Enji was capable of anything, and now he was giving All Might an ultimatum: your move, Yuuei.

Seems it’s starting.

Midoriya’s glad he ate already because his appetite is long gone, replaced by a sense of general queasiness about this whole situation. He wonders if Todoroki will let him recuperate in his room all day, but no, they’re “entertaining,” whatever that involved. Midoriya’s spooked by All Might’s message and Todoroki’s promise of a secret. The fact that both Todoroki and All Might mentioned Urabiti can’t be a coincidence. Midoriya’s just one puzzle piece away from putting together the picture. Or, at least part of the picture, because there was the mystery of Todoroki’s secret, what he had Yaoyorozu looking into, and whatever the hell happened to him outside the palace grounds and why he couldn’t remember any of it.
Midoriya returns to Todoroki’s—his—their—room and crashes face first onto his bed. It would’ve hurt more if it wasn’t disgustingly plush and padded, but it’s dense enough that Midoriya can let out a long, deep groan and not disturb Todoroki scowling into the mirror.

“Head up, Deku,” Todoroki says. “I can’t have you moping like that today of all days.”

Midoriya props his chin up on a pillow and fixes his most miserable expression on the stone wall. “How necessary am I, exactly, to today’s proceedings?”

“Irreplaceable,” Todoroki says.

“Somehow I doubt that,” Midoriya mutters.

“No, you cannot wiggle out of this, even if you faint, cough up blood, or lose a limb,” Todoroki says. “You will smile, bow, or prostrate yourself if necessary, and you will do it with all the grace Ojiro has instructed you in.”

“Who’s coming here, again?” Midoriya asks. “A deity?”


“‘What?’” Midoriya says. “‘What’? What do you mean by ‘what’?”

He sits up so that he can throw his arms in the air. “You think you could’ve given me some heads up, like, oh I don’t know, the most powerful and beautiful woman in the Five Kingdoms will be paying us a visit, be on your best behavior? You couldn’t’ve told me?”

“I did tell you,” Todoroki says. “Just now.”

Midoriya makes a strangled noise. He wants to strangle Todoroki. “You could have told me sooner!”

“I don’t see how that’s any concern of yours,” Todoroki says. “In the grand scheme of things, she’s just another high-level royal diplomat you must cater to. All you need to know is how deeply to bow to her.”

“I’ve had a crush on her basically my entire life,” Midoriya presses. “Almost every boy I know has! She’s—she’s more than just a member of royalty, she’s an ideal.”

“Oh, splendid,” Todoroki says. “So now I have to worry about my manservant drooling all over a pretty girl. Just delightful.”

“What’s your problem?” Midoriya growls. “I thought you’d gotten over treating me like a dog. I think it’s perfectly rational to ask for some kind of prior notice. And now you’re acting like I’m some kind of troublesome burden.”

“You’re acting like a moonstruck brat,” Todoroki says. “I asked for a personal servant, not an adolescent boy with a crush. There are more important things in this world than girls.”

“You never asked for me in the first place,” Midoriya snaps. “And don’t you dare act like you don’t think more of us. You trust me.”

He speaks the last part with a sneer and Todoroki slams his palm against the wood of his table. “Out,” Todoroki snarls. “Get out of my sight.”
“Gladly,” Midoriya snarls back, and slams the door on his way out.

Midoriya’s down the staircase and halfway across the central courtyard when he realizes he’s in the wrong. It’s not a nice feeling, the vicious churning in his stomach switching directions and itch under his skin disappearing into cold tingling. He stops marching across the sand and slows to a trudge. Collapsing by a fountain, Midoriya puts his face into his hands and groans.

He pulls at the strands of his bangs falling into his face and rubs his face. Stupid, stupid—he’d taken out his agitation on Todoroki. Somewhere along the line of becoming close with Todoroki, Midoriya had forgotten that he actually ought to respect Todoroki a bit more. Of course, Todoroki was right. He had a secret to impart on Midoriya—possibly about Urabiti, possibly about Uraraka—which is why he had been so disturbed in front of the mirror. Midoriya had detected Todoroki’s restlessness and ignored it in favor of his own issues.

He’s right, Midoriya thinks. This isn’t about me. It’s about him. We’re both just a pawn in the game of kings and countries, but Todoroki is a pawn playing to win.

Midoriya should be supporting him, not taunting him because he chose not to disclose information about Midoriya’s idol crush to him. Not that he would have even known about Midoriya’s crush in the first place—Todoroki was weird. He probably had a crush on like, a philosopher or something as a child.

Midoriya’s brain supplies the image of his tiny hand clasped in Todoroki’s and how happy he had looked that night at the Amity Ball, blush on his cheeks and a tentative smile. Not helpful, Midoriya tells it, scrubbing the image from his head.

God, Midoriya was embarrassing. Making Todoroki angry enough to kick him out over a girl. He leans back against the mosaic tiles of the fountain and trails one hand in the water. He’ll have to think of a way to apologize properly to Todoroki, make amends for being such a, ugh, such a moonstruck brat. Midoriya smiles. Todoroki was such a pretentious little—

“Ah, Deku!” Yaoyorozu’s voice startles Midoriya out of his musings.

“Yaoyorozu-san!” he says, struggling to sit up. He props himself up his his wet hand, but slippery skin meets slippery tile and instead of sitting up, Midoriya falls ass-backwards into the fountain. By the time he’s landed in the shin-deep water, soaked head-to-toe, he’s too shocked to do anything but stare wide-eyed at Yaoyorozu.

Yaoyorozu tries, but she can’t stifle the snort of laughter that escapes. She smacks a hand over her mouth, but her eyes give her mirth away. It’s Ojiro, her companion, who actually winces in sympathy for Midoriya.

“Oh, my god,” Yaoyorozu says. “Oh god—I’m so sorry, I just—” She’s still giggling.

Ojiro sighs. “What Yaoyorozu-san is trying to say is that she was wondering why you aren’t with His Royal Highness, preparing for Princess Uraraka-sama’s arrival.”

Oh, so they knew? Midoriya feels a bit more justified in his outburst. He stands up, sopping wet, and offers an apologetic smile. “I guess it’s no use saying I was ready?”

Yaoyorozu starts cackling anew and Ojiro shoves her with his shoulder. Dressed in full, sparkling armor, Yaoyorozu hardly budges.

“You’re not nearly there,” Ojiro says. “Personal servants have to be dressed up as nicely as their
masters. Todoroki-sama wouldn’t be caught dead with you in casual clothes.”

*Oh no.* “Does that mean…?”

“Your favorite,” Yaoyorozu says, grinning. “The fanciest, most sparkling new chiton that money can buy. And the Todoroki family can buy a lot.”

Midoriya groans and sits back down in the fountain.

Ojiro sputters. “Deku! You can’t! You have to get ready!”

“Impossible,” Midoriya says, laying back down in the water. “There’s no way I can apologize to him and then get into something that humiliating. I can’t be stripped of every shred of dignity I have left.”

“What do you—stop laughing, Yaoyorozu—what do you mean you have to apologize?” Ojiro asks.

Shit. Right. These were Todoroki's diehard loyalists. Even Yaoyorozu looks like she’s calmed down enough to hear Midoriya talk. He sighs. “We’re…fighting,” Midoriya admits.

“Trouble in paradise?” Yaoyorozu asks.

Midoriya spits water at her. To Ojiro, he says, “I said some dumb things to him and got him angry. I know I’m wrong, but I don’t think he was particularly fair to me, either.”

“Well, he is a prince,” Ojiro says, smiling. “He kind of has the right to be right. Even to you.”

“Wait, nope, Deku doesn’t like those rumors,” Yaoyorozu breaks in. “Right, Deku?”

“We’re not sleeping together,” Midoriya says on command. It might as well be his catchphrase.

Ojiro throws his hands up. “I’m just playing the peacekeeper here! Todoroki isn’t used to being wrong. Might as well say he’s right before you start a war over it.”

At the words ‘start a war,’ Midoriya swallows.

“Yeah, well I say go for it,” Yaoyorozu says. “He’s a punk. Someone’s got to put him in his place, might as well be Deku.”

“Wow,” Midoriya says. “You two are the least helpful. No, don’t worry about it, I’ll just walk up the stairs soaking wet and apologize to the Crown Prince when you can see my nipples through this robe. I’m sure he’ll be pleased.”

Wrong thing to say, judging by the way Ojiro raises an eyebrow and Yaoyorozu visibly bites back a comment. Midoriya feels he’s justified in flipping them both off before he trudges up the stairs to do just that.

At least being wet gives him an advantage. He knocks on their door. “It’s me,” he says in his most contrite voice, which just sounds like a smaller version of his usual voice.

“Come in,” Todoroki says, voice smooth as ice. He then says, “Gods above—what the hell happened to you?”

“Yaoyorozu-san and a fountain,” Midoriya says.

“She pushed you?” Todoroki’s voice is quiet.
Midoriya considers Yaoyorozu’s lack of sympathy for his plight. “More or less,” he says.

Todoroki considers him for a long moment while Midoriya drips a puddle onto his floor. With his hair wet and flattened, Midoriya imagines he is the picture of misery. Todoroki’s eyes drop from Midoriya’s for a millisecond, but Midoriya doesn’t miss it. He looks down at his chest to see the robe slipping off his shoulder and, yep, revealing his chest and a nipple, hard from the cold. When he looks back up at Todoroki, Todoroki looks away.

“Did you deserve it?” he asks.

_Um, what was that?_ “Probably,” Midoriya admits, still turning over Todoroki looking at him in his head. Was he offended? Disturbed? Todoroki had been _naked_ in Midoriya’s presence time and time again, surely he wasn’t _scandalized_.

“Well?” Todoroki says, still not looking at him and fiddling with the gold circlet on his head. “Are you going to just stand there or make yourself presentable?”

Midoriya thinks he would like to stand there until he figures out why Todoroki won’t look at him and instead pretends to mess with his ornamentation, but he knows Todoroki will just make a mess of himself. “Don’t fiddle with your circlet,” Midoriya says. “Look, it’s already out of place.”

“Don’t tell me what—” Todoroki cuts off when Midoriya approaches him. He gives Midoriya a cursory look up and down, silently chastising him for approaching when he was unclean. Midoriya ignores the look and adjusts his circlet, flattening a tuft of hair that had come free. Todoroki’s eyes never leave his face.

When Midoriya looks at him, Todoroki’s lips are parted slightly and he’s still giving Midoriya an odd look. It occurs to Midoriya that they’re about the same height, Todoroki only a tad taller than him. He looks Todoroki dead in the eyes and raises an eyebrow. Todoroki runs his tongue over his lips, drawing Midoriya’s eyes down and, _okay_, that’s definitely not allowed. Midoriya steps away from Todoroki.

He points at Todoroki. “Don’t mess with it.”

Todoroki scowls at him in reply.

Midoriya spends the entire bath, quick as it is, scrubbing away his sinful thoughts and repeating over and over to himself _I am not into the prince, I am not into the prince, I am definitely not into Prince Todoroki Shouto because that is not allowed and he would kill me if he found out._

When Midoriya returns to their bedchambers, cleaner and calmer, Todoroki is looking poised and proper, and he is not looking at the _thing_ laid out on his bed. The _thing_ that is definitely for Midoriya.

The chiton is not anything like Midoriya is used to. He’d become accustomed and almost fond of the sturdier ones. He had free range of movement and they were soft, wearable all day long without getting too hot or chafing like his uniform back home. But this chiton was a beast unto itself.

It’s completely white and flows from the left shoulder downwards in an elegant cascade of fabric to Midoriya’s ankles. There’s a slit for his left leg that must run from right below his hip on down. It’s tied with a gold-threaded cord around the middle and the area above the waist is delicately shredded and held together with long strings of quartz and rubies. In other words, Midoriya was more or less naked from the waist up, with only some pretty jewels to preserve his modesty.
“No,” Midoriya says. “No, you can’t…are you really that mad at me?”

Todoroki frowns. “What?”

“Please don’t make me wear that,” Midoriya says. “I’ll apologize. I was going to anyway. Just…I am a man, you know.”

Todoroki’s mouth makes some complicated shapes. “It’s…not my choice,” he says. “Father sent this in for you to wear. I wanted you in dress uniform.”

“Oh,” Midoriya says. Then, again, “Oh. Why? To humiliate me?”

“He’s not that shallow,” Todoroki says, sighing. “Probably to make you look like a negligible threat, especially since I am dressed so formally.” Todoroki is in his white dress uniform. He doesn’t have his cloak of furs on yet, but without his veil to cover his scar, he looks menacing and powerful, rings on each of his gloved fingers and two heavy, plated medallions over his jacket, golden buttons running up his chest. In comparison, Midoriya will…

“A threat to who?” Midoriya asks.

“Her Royal Highness,” Todoroki mutters. “Did you think the rumor that I’ve taken a lover ends at these walls?”

Another piece clicks into place. Midoriya’s jaw drops. “You’re—this is a marriage interview!”

But that didn’t make sense. Todoroki was promised to Yuuei, not Urabiti. There was no other explanation, though. Why would King Enji lie about marrying Todoroki off to Yuuei? Unless it was to make them drop their guard, weaken themselves to Endeavor…no, that didn’t make sense, either. The Yuuein public still resented Endeavor and didn’t know about the marriage. That was why it had to be kept so quiet—there would surely be protests if the people knew their old enemy would be married to the next All Might. So then why…


Midoriya looks up at him. “Huh?” he says.

“You’re thinking too hard about it,” Todoroki says. Sighs. “I’ll explain after, so just…put that on.”

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya blurts out.

“What’s done is done,” Todoroki says.

“Please,” Midoriya says. “Don’t dismiss me this time. I’m being sincere.”

“You’re always sincere,” Todoroki says, but he doesn’t tell Midoriya to stop.

“I had some…some things on my mind this morning,” Midoriya says. “I took out my frustration on you. I shouldn’t have done that, and I realize just by sparing me punishment, you’ve done me a great favor despite my rudeness. But even more than disrespecting you as a superior, I disrespected you as…as a friend.”

Todoroki blinks at the word ‘friend’ and Midoriya loses his cool.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he says. “That’s not—I shouldn’t have—”

“Are we?” Todoroki asks.
“What?” Midoriya says.

“Friends?” Todoroki asks. “Is that what we are?”

Midoriya cannot tell for the life of him if he’s deeply disrespected Todoroki again or if Todoroki genuinely wants to know. Midoriya lowers his gaze. “I think of you fondly,” he says, quiet. “Perhaps too fondly, for a servant.”

“It’s not your fault alone,” Todoroki says, equally as quiet. “I fostered that behavior; let it grow. I thought it was acceptable—no. I wanted you to think of me fondly. As a companion. I value you.”

“I do think of you as a companion,” Midoriya admits. “I know it’s wrong.”

What the hell was going on? How did apologizing become a confession?

Todoroki pinches the bridge of his nose. “To think that we’re having this conversation when she’s arriving today…when we need to be at our strongest…”

“Th-That’s why!” Midoriya breaks in. “That’s why I wanted to tell you I’m sorry! Because I know you’re always thinking of the big picture and planning ahead and I got caught up in myself. I’m sorry for inconveniencing you.”

“I am at fault as well,” Todoroki says. “I believed you were a pawn in my game when I’ve already made you my rook. You’re not just a throwaway piece; you’re one of my aces.”

Midoriya swallows. “I always did prefer bishops.”

“Not a chance,” Todoroki says, snorting. “You’re straight and true. The bishops are my spies, able to slide around my opponent’s pieces. My guard are my knights, able to jump around pieces that blockade my path. It is your job to clear the way for the king who cannot move much himself.

“All I need now,” Todoroki says, “is a queen.”

“So you really do intend to marry her,” Midoriya says. He’s thrown. Was Todoroki perhaps angry at Midoriya speaking so intimately of the woman he sought to marry?

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Todoroki warns. “Put on that awful thing and I’ll tell you what I meant to tell you earlier.”

Midoriya, puzzled, strips where he’s standing while Todoroki continues to not-look at him. Midoriya’s still in a state of shock. It wasn’t that he didn’t pick Todoroki as the type who preferred women, it was that he had picked Todoroki as the type who didn’t pick anyone. Surely he would preserve his line and have children if necessary, but he didn’t seem to be the type to go wild over sex. The thought that he preferred Princess Uraraka was surprising in that it wasn’t a surprising choice at all for a man of his status.

“The secret I carry with me is that I’m to be married to the successor of All Might, the next ruler of Yuuei,” Todoroki says.

He’s quiet, and it’s in that moment of quiet that Midoriya realizes he’s supposed to have some kind of reaction. Shock, preferably. Panicking, he affects confusion. “But I thought…Urabiti…”

“Strange, isn’t it?” Todoroki says in the tone of voice of someone who had it all figured out. “My father promises me to Yuuei, his mortal enemy. And then he turns around and makes friendly with Yuuei’s only other bordering country, Urabiti, to the point of asking the King’s only and very
eligible daughter to come to a party hosted by his heir and apparently eligible son. In any other case, it would look like the setup to a courtship.”

“But not in this case?” Midoriya asks.

“Oh, he intends me to marry Uraraka for sure,” Todoroki says. “To solidify an alliance with the largest country in the Five Kingdoms is no small gain for Endeavor. It’s so desirable that he’d risk ostracizing our allies in Ingenium who intend to present the younger prince as a potential match for the Princess.”

Midoriya thinks. What could King Enji gain from two marriage proposals? If he crossed out the possibility that the King was trying to lower Yuuei’s guard, then it left one stray end and the hope for unity of kingdoms between Endeavor and Urabiti.

“He would have control of the west,” Midoriya says. “He could surround Yuuei and attack it with that alliance, gain complete control of the south as well, but in that case, why offer to marry his heir to Yuuei? He could have offered your other siblings. It had to be an offer All Might couldn’t refuse…but why so insistent?”

“You’re getting there,” Todoroki says.

“All of this adds up except for the desperation of marriage between Endeavor and Yuuei,” Midoriya says. “Even if you did marry the next All Might, that removes the potential of combining Urabiti and Endeavor with the purpose of attacking Yuuei. It just seems like a foolish move altogether, unless…”

Midoriya’s blood runs cold.

“Unless,” he says, “King Enji doesn’t intend to declare war on Yuuei—not exactly.”

“It’s simple,” Todoroki says grimly. “Marry me away to the next All Might and unite our country. It would take two, maybe five years until tensions calm down. In the meantime, he distracts Ingenium with promises of marrying Fuyumi to one of their sons to strengthen their alliance. Ingenium wouldn’t be able to resist. And Riot won’t touch Uraraka because she’s too far away—they have no gain.”

“So Uraraka remains unmarried…” Midoriya says. “Until…?”

“Until some accident happens to befall my spouse,” Todoroki says lightly. “It will be a great tragedy. Ruled accidental. Our kingdoms will mourn. And then, once the two have been united under my leadership, I marry Princess Uraraka and take the entire west and south for the Todoroki dynasty.”

Midoriya slides his chiton into place mechanically. He can’t speak. He can’t look at Todoroki. It’s too perfect. It’s the perfect, most bloodless plan for taking over the Five Kingdoms Midoriya has ever heard. And it’s all but foolproof—Yuuei was desperate for peace and Urabiti would never turn away a presentation from as powerful a kingdom as Endeavor.

“So Endeavor ends up with his son on three thrones and family ties to another,” Midoriya says softly.

“It’s not impossible that something tragic could befall Ingenium’s royal family at that point either,” Todoroki says. “One small accident before they can produce an heir and Iida Tenya is king with Fuyumi as queen at his side. Riot won’t stand a chance.”
“My god,” Midoriya says. “He really is going for world domination, isn’t he?”

“Not if I can help it,” Todoroki says. He stands and moves towards his jewelry boxes. He pulls a series of thin, looping necklaces and gestures for Midoriya to come to him. Midoriya does, in a daze. Todoroki puts necklaces around his neck and then selects a broad, gold-plated choker and clips it around Midoriya’s throat.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Todoroki says, working bangles and ruby-studded bracelets onto Midoriya’s wrists. “I shouldn’t have told you this late but I needed to know I could trust you. You must know before we meet Uraraka, because she is the key to unraveling my father’s plan. She is my queen.”

“How?” Midoriya says. “How can you possibly compete with a plan like that?”

“Because my father sees me and her as pawns, not young kings with their own chessboards,” Todoroki says. “Tonight, when I am supposed to be courting her, I must convince her to join our side. She must not marry me, under any circumstances. If I can convince her to propose to Iida Tenya, we may yet have hope.”

Midoriya’s head is spinning. He sits down on the chair. He thinks about how Todoroki has theorized all this just from the knowledge that his father intended conflicting marriage proposals. Not even All Might had a clue what was going on. God, Midoriya had to tell All Might…

“This is…not what I expected, when you implied your father was our opponent,” Midoriya says. “I expected more of the shooting-at-me-with-arrows kind of senseless violence, not clever moves made behind closed doors.”

“This is how royalty do battle,” Todoroki says. “Although I admit, I too, expected violence from my father. This kind of cloak-and-dagger secrecy doesn’t seem characteristic of him at all. It makes me believe that I’m missing a move he’s made. I don’t believe we have all the information just yet.”

“What do you need me to do?” Midoriya asks. “I’m ready to help.”

Todoroki’s lips curl up at the edges. “I need you to make nice with Uraraka’s Twin Swords, and if I fail, make nice with her. You’re more of a conversationalist than I am, and you’re approachable. Furthermore, my father’s people will be watching my interactions with her. They will not be watching a fumbling manservant present himself to the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen. Do you think you can play the part of the fool?”

Midoriya smiles. “I’m dressed for it, aren’t I?”

“You look…dashing,” Todoroki tries, smile growing on his face.

Midoriya plucks at the line of rubies across his chest. “What is the purpose of these if they don’t cover anything up?”

“You’re handsome,” Todoroki says. “That’s their purpose—to make it obvious.”

Midoriya hadn’t known Todoroki thought of him as handsome.

“Most people call me pretty,” Midoriya says.

“Most people haven’t been knocked on their ass by you,” Todoroki replies.

Midoriya barks out a laugh. His smile shrinks, just a little. “Do you end up happy?” Midoriya asks.
“In what sense?” Todoroki says.

“In this grand game of chess,” Midoriya says. “Is there an ending where you find love and peace and freedom from your father’s shadow?”

Todoroki’s smile is dark. “I was born to be used, Deku,” he says. “People like me play until we are dead.”

You deserve more, Midoriya thinks as Todoroki removes Midoriya’s circlet from its case. Someone as selfless as you deserves something you can keep and never have to let go of. Something that can make you truly happy.

Midoriya’s part to play in this game is small. He’s just a rook, not the king who calls the shots or queen who can change the game completely. It’s his job to carry out Todoroki’s plan, knowing now that Yuuei’s fate is safe in his hands. But Midoriya thinks he can play another role, too, a smaller one.

Todoroki lowers the gold circlet of leaves onto Midoriya’s head. “There,” he says. “Now you look like a proper piece of property.”

Midoriya smiles and Todoroki half-smiles back.

Midoriya will make it his duty to ensure that Todoroki finds happiness at the end of the game.

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Midoriya is so focused on King Enji’s plan and Todoroki’s counter plan that he forgets he doesn’t actually know what his role is.

“Shit,” Midoriya mutters under his breath. He’s kneeling on a pillow down a step and off to the side of Todoroki’s throne. Todoroki doesn’t hear Midoriya, nor does he respond to Midoriya’s pathetic attempts at telepathy. He’s fully immersed in his role as the solemn Crown Prince of Endeavor.

Yaoyorozu, seated to the right of Todoroki and just past Midoriya, however, does hear him. “What’s up?” she asks, lips barely moving. In front of them, performers from Urabiti are putting on a ceremonial dance accompanied by a band and a woman singing their anthem.

“What are the Twin Swords?” Midoriya asks low.

Yaoyorozu exhales. “Oh,” she murmurs. “You’ll know them when you see them.”

It’s such an unhelpful answer that Midoriya wants to turn and glare at her, but he purses his lips and fixes his eyes intently on the performers, making themselves into a wave to represent Urabiti’s seas, then climbing into a series of pyramids to represent her mountains. Midoriya wonders idly if Tooru could do that.

“Nice dress, by the way,” Yaoyorozu says.

“Not to be treasonous,” Midoriya says, “but I’m going to kill him.”

“Not if I beat you to it,” Yaoyorozu says.
Midoriya wonders if Yaoyorozu knows. Todoroki hadn’t said anything to Midoriya regarding the secret since they left their bedchambers—Midoriya assumed that no amount of affection Todoroki held for him would stop him from killing Midoriya if he told anyone. Midoriya manages to shoot a sidelong glance at Yaoyorozu. Todoroki would have told her, wouldn’t he? She was his most trusted knight.

The thought that maybe Todoroki only told Midoriya the plan sits like a sin in his chest. With this amount of trust and secrecy between them, what would life be like for them now? Would they speak to each other low and draw out plans by candlelight, long after everyone had gone to bed? Would their sparring sessions include whispers spoken into each other’s ears as they tussled? Would Todoroki ride them out into the forest away from prying eyes and ears?

Secret-keeping sounded unbearably romantic. Midoriya forced himself to remember that he was not Todoroki’s queen; he was a rook, valuable, but expendable when it came down to the wire. They would not be having whispered gatherings with parchments and pens and ink between them, but Midoriya would be privy to Todoroki’s letters written to Uraraka, deciding their next plan of attack. And Midoriya was fine with that. Perhaps he would even be able to proofread them.

The horns sound to signal the approach of an honorable guest. The master of ceremonies stands in front of the grand doors and clears his throat. “Presenting Her Royal Highness, Stewardess of the High Mountains, The Lowlands, and The Coastal Lands, the Crown Princess of Urabiti, Princess Uraraka Ochako and her Twin Swords, Lady Asui Tsuyu and Lady Jirou Kyouka.”

The doors swing wide and the trumpets sound again, continuing to play as knights with purple sashes march forward in unison. Each of them wears a golden unicorn crest sown into the sash, the crest of the Uraraka family. Their armor glints as if freshly polished despite the distance they had to travel to reach Endeavor’s capital. Midoriya cranes his neck to see the Princess when her knights step to the side.

He is blown away.

Princess Uraraka sits atop a throne that appears to be molded from the wings of birds, all covered in gold leaf. And at each corner of the throne, carved rearing unicorns make up its legs, also plated in gold. Uraraka herself sits atop white pillows with golden trim and tassels, comfortably sprawled. Her dress is long, to the point of trailing off the edge of the throne and red as freshly spilled blood. At her right shoulder, the dress stretches out into a red wing, homage to the phoenix, the Todoroki’s crest. Like Todoroki, she wears gold jewelry and a golden circlet in hair that curls right below her chin. She beams as she approaches.

And the most incredible detail of all is that she floats. Midoriya had forgotten about Quirks altogether, forgotten that they existed outside All Might’s incredible strength and Todoroki’s dual-wield of ice and fire. He had forgotten that the Uraraka family could negate gravity. And to see it displayed so cleanly, in such a flashy way, gave Uraraka an aura of utter power and control.

At her sides, she is flanked by two women in black padded armor with a purple cloak pinned at their shoulders with a golden unicorn pin. Midoriya sees the dark metal of katana at their sides and immediately identifies them as the Twin Swords. Their movements are as clean and efficient as Uraraka’s floating. Midoriya knows instinctually that they have been trained to use those swords. He would not survive an encounter with either of those women.

Uraraka is a gem. She draws all the eyes and the light of the room, her jewelry and throne glinting warmly in the late afternoon light and the winking flames of candles. Her posture is both welcoming and authoritative, like Midoriya could tell her all his problems and expect her to smile gently and nod along as he talks. Midoriya watches grown men avert their eyes as she scans the
room, too awed by her presence to keep eye contact. Midoriya doesn’t think less of them. He wouldn’t be able to, either.

The Twin Swords take a knee at the foot of the Todoroki’s throne, bowing their heads. Midoriya watches their hands fall to their weapons. Even with eyes closed, the protective encirclement they made around the Princess was unbreakable. They would strike before someone could get within a meter of her. The dichotomy of Uraraka’s regal but delicate beauty and the strength of her guardswomen throws Midoriya a bit and he’s not the only one. Yaoyorozu is rubbing her chin and eyeing them.

Uraraka lowers her throne to the ground and smiles at King Enji. “Forgive me for not standing to greet you, Your Majesty,” she says, voice sweet as candied fruit. “It is an honor to be welcomed into your kingdom.” She bows to each of the royal family members, from the King to the Crown Prince, to each one of the red and white haired princes and princesses that sat to either side of King Enji.

Midoriya might be a little in love.

“We are more than pleased that you accepted our invitation,” King Enji says. “Urabiti is a valued ally of Endeavor, and we hope to improve the relations between the Todoroki and Uraraka family even more.”

“How could I turn down a party held in my honor?” Uraraka says, laughing lightly into her palm. “And what a magnificent party it appears to be!”

“Please, make yourself at home,” King Enji says. “My family is your family.”

“It’s a shame Her Majesty couldn’t make it this evening,” Uraraka says, just as sweetly as before, effectively killing any thought Midoriya had that she was some unknowing, innocent princess. “I did look forward to meeting her.”

The room goes deathly quiet.

King Enji doesn’t break character. He holds out his hands. “And she regrets not being able to meet you, Ochako. It is quite unfortunate how illness inhibits us from doing the things we desire.”

Todoroki goes pale. As in, Midoriya watches as all the blood drains from his face and his lips part in shock. Midoriya catches gasps in the audience and watches the Twin Swords tense. He dares to look at Yaoyorozu, whose eyes are wide as saucers. Midoriya has missed something vital. He looks back at Uraraka sitting in her throne, posture light but eyes as hard as diamonds.

No.

No, but…it was just a rumor that Princess Uraraka couldn’t walk, wasn’t it?

Wasn’t it?

Midoriya’s own eyes widen as he takes in the gravity of the king’s comment. No hesitation, no mercy in striking back the moment Uraraka showed her claws. To make a comment on her disability in such a cruel and public way…Midoriya’s eyes fall back to the Twin Swords, clearly resisting every instinct that ordered they strike the King of Endeavor down.

“I find that those afflicted by illness tend to have a unique perspective on life,” Uraraka says, still smiling. “They see things that even those closest to them cannot. There’s something about being underestimated that gives one the edge in life.”
“A very unique perspective indeed, Ochako,” King Enji says. “I knew it would not be a mistake to invite you here.” The last part is a question or a challenge, Midoriya can’t tell.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Uraraka says.

“Please, call me Enji,” King Enji says. “We are all friends here.”

“Todoroki-sama,” Uraraka replies.

King Enji turns to the rest of the hall. “Go!” he says. “Be merry! This is a party after all.”

The noise gradually picks up back in the hall, but Midoriya remains shell-shocked even as Uraraka rises up the steps to take her place on Todoroki’s left side. The Twin Swords move to the right to join Todoroki’s entourage.

Uraraka lets out a long sigh and turns to Todoroki. “Phew!” she says. “I’ve never liked doing greetings.”

Todoroki releases his vise-like grip on his throne. “Ochako-san,” Todoroki says, “let me express, from the bottom of my heart, how sincerely sor—”

Uraraka waves him off before he can finish. “No, no, that’s okay. I probably deserved that. I purposely provoked him over your mother. I’m sorry about that by the way. I didn’t mean to use her; I just want him to take me seriously.”

“You didn’t deserve that,” Todoroki sputters.

Midoriya realizes two things then. One, Uraraka may be the only person able to reduce Todoroki to sputtering in this world, and two, that dreadful conversation had been a pissing contest between Uraraka and King Enji.

“Take me seriously, because I know you’ve falsely hospitalized your wife,” says Uraraka.

“You’re just a little girl who can’t walk, let alone play in the big world of politics,” King Enji says back.

“You’ll regret overlooking me,” Uraraka says.

“Try me,” King Enji challenges.

“So this is a queen,” Midoriya thinks.

“‘Sup,” says one of the Twin Swords. Her earrings are impressively long and she has two red triangles painted under her eyes. “I’m Jirou.”

Midoriya is still too in-shock to move, so Yaoyorozu offers a hand which Jirou eyes, considers, and then shakes. “Yaoyorozu,” Yaoyorozu says.

Jirou eyes Midoriya. “Does he talk, or?”

Yaoyorozu prods at Midoriya who blinks and shakes his head, then glares at her. “Deku,” Yaoyorozu says. “Why don’t you be a good host and say hello to these lovely people?”

“Sorry,” Midoriya says dryly. “I was too busy having my brains blown out by the fact that he would dare to insult Her Royal Highness like that. My apologies, Jirou-san and—”
"I’m Asui Tsuyu," the second of the Twin Swords breaks in. “Please call me Tsuyu. I always speak my mind. And I have to say, although your prince seems to be a satisfactory one, your king needs to be deposed. Immediately.”

“Satisfactory?” Yaoyorozu says. Midoriya gapes at the word ‘deposed.’

“Yeah, man, Todoroki’s a dick,” Jirou agrees, crossing her arms behind her head.

“Please refrain from speaking about our royalty like that,” Yaoyorozu all but begs, flustered. “We’ll all be executed.”

“Good luck trying,” Tsuyu says. “We won’t lose in battle.”

“Yeah, but we will,” Midoriya says, gesturing between himself and Yaoyorozu.

“Hm, fine,” Jirou says. “Tsuyu?”

“Very well,” Tsuyu says.

There’s a long beat of silence. Clearly, Uraraka’s guards aren’t big talkers. They’re still glancing around, mapping escape routes or determining threats or whatever it was that personal guards of their caliber did. But Todoroki still needed to befriend these people, so the burden of conversation fell to Yaoyorozu and Midoriya.

“So…” Yaoyorozu ventures. “How did you learn to use your swords?”

Jirou rests a hand over her katana. “This baby? Been trained with her my whole life. I got a teacher when I was about eleven or so, handpicked for my skill with the wooden training swords. Of course, my parents were thrilled that I was selected for an elite training program run by the army but also a little scared. Man, they sure did give my teacher a talking to; it was real embarrassing, let me tell you…”

Okay, so maybe Midoriya misjudged their talkativeness. Or maybe Yaoyorozu just hit the right topic with Jirou. Yaoyorozu nods, getting deeper into conversation with Jirou, leaving Midoriya and Tsuyu on their own.

“Deku,” Tsuyu says.

Midoriya jumps. “Yes, Asui—ah, Tsuyu-san?”

“I would like to speak to you in private,” she says. “Jirou will talk her ear off.” Midoriya nods his acquiescence, mystified.

Midoriya leads Tsuyu to a balcony along the outside of the ballroom. It’s a tight fit, a corner meant for lovers rather than two servants to royalty holding a clandestine meeting. Midoriya draws the curtain behind them, sealing them off from the rest of the party.

Tsuyu regards Midoriya for a moment. She doesn’t blink at all. It unnerves Midoriya.

“What does your prince want with my princess?” Tsuyu asks.

_Diving right in, aren’t we_, Midoriya thinks.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Midoriya says. “This party was organized by His Majesty.”

“I think it’s fairly obvious why Todoroki-sama wants to make nice with Ochako-sama,” Tsuyu
Midoriya tilts his head to the side. “You speak about His Royal Highness very informally. I’m a little disturbed.”

Tsuyu does blink, once, very slowly. “I see,” she says. “You’re not as empty-headed as you look.”

“You’ll forgive me for not trusting you immediately,” Midoriya says.

“Alright,” Tsuyu says. “I like your spine.” She reaches behind her katana and pulls out a thin scroll of parchment. “Your prince wrote to Ochako-sama some time ago about this party. He said he wanted to speak with her in private about an arrangement. I trust you can identify your own prince’s handwriting?”

Midoriya takes the parchment from her and scans the page. It’s definitely Todoroki’s sloping script. The letter is written in such a way it could be taken as a thinly veiled attempt at secrecy about a marriage interview, but the tone of the letter is business-like. Urgent. Some might take it as Todoroki’s inability to write a love letter, which was clearly what he hoped it would appear as to someone other than the recipient.

Clearly, Uraraka had deciphered the letter to mean some kind of other arrangement and shared that knowledge with the Twin Swords. But they were not Midoriya’s targets. Even if Tsuyu asked him outright, he couldn’t tell her about Todoroki or King Enji’s plan. That was not his place.

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says, meaning it. “You’re right. He does have intentions with Her Royal Highness. I can’t tell you what they are. I can promise you that he means her no harm.”

Tsuyu draws her sword so quickly that Midoriya doesn’t even track the movement. The tip of the black blade rests lightly at the pulse point in his neck. Every pump of blood through his veins presses his skin that much closer to cutting.

“I can’t accept that,” Tsuyu says. “You will tell me, or you will fall.”

Midoriya understands this. He thinks in Tsuyu’s position, he would probably do the same for Todoroki. The revelation is as shocking to him as it is reaffirming. His pulse is steady and his voice doesn’t shake. “I will not betray the one I am sworn to, even upon threat of death. You may take my word, or nothing.”

Tsuyu holds the blade steady. She’s still unblinking. After a moment, she withdraws the sword. “You pass,” she says. “I believe you. No man who would stare death in the eyes for another can be evil.”

Midoriya rubs the tender skin of his throat and offers a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

Tsuyu exhales. “This is the last time I doubt Her Royal Highness, I swear it.”

“Oh?” Midoriya says.

Tsuyu smiles. “She told me to approach the manservant, as soon as we came into view of you at the greeting ceremony. Jirou was to approach his knight. She saw something in you, I am sure.”

“You?” Midoriya squeaks. “No, I’m—” He takes a breath. “I’m nothing. I only serve Todoroki-sama.”
“Perhaps,” Tsuyu says. “But then why confide in you at all?” She disappears behind the curtain without another word.

Midoriya takes a moment to catch his breath. Approaching Uraraka’s guards was proving to be more difficult than expected. Midoriya hopes that Yaoyorozu’s encounter went smoother than his.

More interesting than Tsuyu herself though was the fact that Uraraka had assigned them to approach him and Yaoyorozu, too. Did Uraraka have her own agenda? She certainly wasn’t going to roll over for Todoroki. When Midoriya had thought about Todoroki and Uraraka forming an alliance, he had thought it would be an easy agreement. But now, Midoriya wondered if Uraraka would submit to being Todoroki’s queen after all.

Midoriya pushes past the curtain and rejoins the party. She immediately spies Yaoyorozu and Jirou, having relocated to a column in the corner of the ballroom. They each have a chalice of wine in hand and are leaning in towards each other. Jirou has her free hand resting on Yaoyorozu’s arm as she tells a joke. Yaoyorozu laughs, and they’re a both a little more pink in the cheeks than wine called for.

Well. Yaoyorozu certainly had had an easier time of it. Midoriya’s only a little bitter.

Midoriya spies his target back where he started, swirling his own wine and face pinched into a scowl. Midoriya approaches him, making the appropriate obeisances for the sake of appearance. He takes his place on his pillow, folding his knees beneath him and spreading the long chiton over his legs.

“Marriage proposal gone sour?” Midoriya prompts.

Todoroki only grunts in reply.

Midoriya resists the urge to whistle. “That bad, huh.”

“‘I won’t be used by the Todoroki dynasty, past or present,’ were her exact words, I believe,” Todoroki mutters.

Midoriya smothers a smile. Seeing Todoroki like this, sulking after not getting his way, was deeply satisfying. For someone who planned his life out down to the hour and make allowances for all kinds of obstacles, it was nice to see Todoroki lose once in a while. He’s stumped, bummed out about it, and drinking to cover up his disappointment. It’s infuriatingly human and plucks at all the right parts of Midoriya’s heartstrings.

Of course, Todoroki couldn’t actually afford to lose this one, so Midoriya clears his throat. “I could talk to her, maybe. If you’d like.” He spies Tsuyu casually making her way towards Uraraka by the refreshments table, most likely to report back about her findings. “Tsuyu-san and I had a, uh. Good conversation.” Midoriya frowns. He did get a sword pointed at his throat.

“On a first name basis already? Why don’t you get married and move to Urabiti?” Todoroki says, scowling harder. “Take my father with you, while you’re at it. Then all my problems will be contained to one country.”

Clearly he wasn’t in a mood to be reasoned with. Midoriya dips his head. “I’ll talk to her for you,” he says. “See if I can’t convince her to hear you out.”

Todoroki flicks his wrist. “Do as you please.”

Midoriya rises. He’s never spoken to a princess before, but he was the only one in his knowledge
who knew just how important Todoroki’s quest was. Even if it he came back empty-handed from
forging an alliance with Uraraka, he could at least warn her. Yes. Midoriya could do that. Tsuyu
spies him first, and draws Uraraka’s attention to Midoriya.

Well, fuck. Midoriya had forgotten that just looking upon Princess Uraraka made him feel weak in
the knees. How was he supposed to survive holding a conversation with her?

Uraraka parts her lips in an ‘O’ and claps her hands together when she sees Midoriya. They make
eye contact for a millisecond before Midoriya falls into a deep bow, pressing himself to the floor.

“Oh dear,” Uraraka says. “No need for all that!”

Midoriya lifts his head, but he still has to look just to the side of Uraraka, face burning. “Forgive
this servant,” Midoriya says. “I wished to speak to you.”

“I’m glad you did,” Uraraka says. “Tsuyu-chan was just telling me all about you. She said you
were incredibly loyal and she thinks you’re cute.”

Midoriya stares at Tsuyu, eyes wide.

Tsuyu sighs. “You tease me too much, milady.” To Midoriya, she says, “I said you were more than
just a pretty face.”

“Oh, fine,” Uraraka says. “I’m the one who thinks you’re rather cute. Shouto-san should count his
blessings that he has such an adorable manservant looking after him.”

“With respect,” Tsuyu says, “I think you’ve killed him.”

“I’m n-not worthy…” Midoriya squeaks, head swimming.

“I just call ‘em how I see ‘em,” Uraraka says, smiling.

Midoriya can’t believe his ears. Uraraka’s aura of a terrifying princess is gone, replaced by jovial
familiarity that she bestows upon her own servant and another’s servant equally. Midoriya doesn’t
understand at all. How could she be so casual with him?

“I apologize,” Uraraka says, noticing Midoriya’s slack jaw. “I tend to get on better with lowborn
people than nobility. They tend to be more honest and fun to be around. People like Todoroki-sama
are just cruel and manipulative. I don’t want to talk with them.”

“And my prince?” Midoriya asks.

Uraraka makes a face. “He’s got the makings of a king, that’s for sure,” she mutters. It doesn’t
sound like a compliment.

“Please,” Midoriya says, bending in half. “Please hear me out about him, I beg you.”

He hears Uraraka sigh. “Tsuyu-chan?”

“He passed,” Tsuyu says. “You can trust him. It’s up to you.”


Midoriya opens his mouth, but Uraraka cuts him off.

“On the condition that you dance with me.” She smiles.
Midoriya doesn’t quite believe that this is happening. He looks to his hands, dark against creamy pale skin, and still doesn’t believe it. Uraraka’s nails are clean and trimmed, and her skin is soft against his callouses.

She picked a slow song, one where they don’t have to move much, just sway back and forth with the occasional twirl. Midoriya can’t bring himself to look away from her eyes, lovely and bright. She smiles with color high in her cheeks. Midoriya is blessed to be given this dance.

“Are you sure this is alright?” Midoriya asks. “I’m…I mean, my armband identifies me as lowborn, Uraraka-sama.”

She pouts, but there’s no way Midoriya will acquiesce to calling her ‘Ochako.’

“It’s fine,” she says finally. “If anyone asks, I will tell them that Shouto-san ordered you to keep me entertained. I’m sure he will come to an equivalent conclusion if someone asks him.” She grins past Midoriya. “The look on his face is most entertaining right now.”

“My lifespan is shortening by the minute,” Midoriya says.

“Now, now,” Uraraka says. “A master you’re this loyal to wouldn’t treat you that badly.”

There’s an unspoken question in her words. Midoriya doesn’t answer it, but he does implore Uraraka to listen with his eyes.

“Todoroki-sama is like you,” Midoriya says. “He’s not in the most ideal position right now.”

“Oh, and I suppose he’s being used as a tool to further some kind of gross game between kingdoms?” she says.

“You know he is.”

Uraraka sighs. “Yes, I know he is. I would have sympathy for him if only he didn’t turn around and put someone else in the exact same position.”

Midoriya cracks a smile. “Do you mean me or yourself?”

Uraraka smiles back. “You’re too good for someone like him,” she says.

“With respect,” Midoriya says, “I don’t think you know either of us as well as you think you do.”

“Oh?” Uraraka says.

“I’m a servant from Yuuei, serving an Endeavoran prince,” Midoriya says. “I’m sure I seem loyal and subservient, well-behaved, but that isn’t true.” He smiles. “Even today, I got into a fight with him when he was right. I’m sarcastic and disrespectful and rebellious…really, the worst kind of servant to have. I’m amazed he puts up with me.

“But Todoroki-sama, he isn’t what he seems, either. I know—I was like you, meeting him for the first time in a less than ideal position. I was a gift sent to appease Endeavor and prevent war by playing nice with the Todorokis. When I first met Todoroki-sama, I thought him frightening, and
cold, and manipulative. But I know him now. I know his reasons for what he does.

“He doesn’t play the game to further his gain. He doesn’t even play the game for himself. It’s for the good of his kingdom and his people and for the sake of peace that he does battle. That he faces such a fearsome opponent. He doesn’t want the Five Kingdoms to fall back into war. That’s why he needs you, Uraraka-sama. He needs an ally, and he sees you as the smartest, most strategic choice. He doesn’t want to use you—he wants to ask for help.


“You love him,” Uraraka says softly.

Midoriya misses a step and trips, nearly sending both of them toppling onto the floor. It’s only the power of Uraraka’s Quirk that keeps them from stumbling.

“Whew!” Uraraka says, laughing. “That was a close one!”

“S-s-sorry!” Midoriya says, still turning over you love him you love him you love him. He didn’t, he couldn’t, not Todoroki, anyone but Todoroki—

“That’s my fault,” Uraraka says. “Sorry for saying that in such a weird way. I just meant that your love for him is apparent in how you speak about him. Even if you were born in Yuuei, your loyalty to him is incredibly strong.”

Oh, of course. Yes, of course Midoriya loved Todoroki. It was the infuriating, selfless love of a leader and a master, but yes, he loved Todoroki. He would not die for someone he did not love. Midoriya loved All Might, did he not? His love for Todoroki was more surprising, never planned, but it was a part of him nonetheless.

Uraraka misinterprets his silence. “Unless…um, I never gave the rumors credit, but—”

“No!” Midoriya yells. Then, taking a breath, he says, “No. We don’t sleep together. He is…a brother. I’m sorry, I know it’s wrong for me to speak about my superior in such a way, but we have a kinship stronger than that of simply master and servant. I’m telling you this because if you believe in me, you must believe in him, too.”

The music slows to a stop. Midoriya does not let go of her hands.

Uraraka sighs. “Alright, Deku. You’ve worked your magic. I can’t say no to passion like that. I’ll give him a chance. But if he’s a dick, I can only put up with so much.”

“He is a dick,” Midoriya says, grinning.

Uraraka rolls her eyes and leans in to peck Midoriya on the cheek. Midoriya tenses, then, in a daze, he reaches a hand up to touch his cheek.

“Thank you for the dance,” Uraraka says. “You really are as lovely as I thought you would be.”

“Deku.”

Todoroki’s voice is the mildest variety of pissed-off Midoriya has ever heard. The only reason Todoroki is restraining himself from ripping Midoriya’s spine out is because there is a lady present. Midoriya turns to see Todoroki looking magnificent and flinty-eyed, making a swift beeline towards them.
“Deku, we will have words,” Todoroki says. “Ochako-san, I—”

“I hope they will be kind words,” Uraraka says, lacing her fingers together, “given that your servant so kindly acquiesced to a dance with me.”

Todoroki stops. Closes his mouth. Looks at Deku. Then Uraraka. Then Deku again.

“As you will also do,” Uraraka says. “We will have a lovely dance together and you will try to smile and I will laugh at something you say, and then everyone who is watching us will assume that this pseudo marriage interview is going quite well. And then, when we go for a walk in the gardens to clear our heads and talk, you will tell me all about the proposal you wrote me about.”

Midoriya wants to beam. There she is. There’s the queen.

Todoroki raises his eyebrows. “I…see no reason to refuse. If I may?” He offers an arm to her.

She takes his arm and together they make their way back out onto the floor, but not before Todoroki can toss Midoriya a bewildered, wide-eyed gaze Midoriya has no idea how to interpret.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Yaoyorozu says, appearing behind him.

“What do you mean?” Midoriya says, turning to look at her.

Yaoyorozu gestures at Todoroki. “His plans were falling apart,” she says. “He was sinking into depression. The princess snubbed him. And now look at them: they’re dancing together. All because you intervened.”

“Oh no,” Midoriya says. “It just happened to be a fortunate series of coincidences.”

“Maybe so,” Yaoyorozu says. “But even if it was, you’ve turned him from depressed at his luck to furious at you to amazed. By throwing you into the equation, his plans are back on track with the help of the target party.”

Midoriya can’t deny that. “I did put in a good word for him,” he says.

“I wonder if the king knows what All Might gave Todoroki-sama when he gave him you,” Yaoyorozu says.

“If he did, he probably would have tried a lot harder to kill me,” Midoriya says.

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Todoroki and Uraraka dance with each other through three songs. All the while, Uraraka shines brighter than she had all evening. Even the ice prince cracks a smile and—was that a blush high on his cheeks? Was it possible? Conversation shifts to royalty and courting and the possibility that this party was a marriage interview gone right. Princess Uraraka was of the right breeding, they said. Royalty and a Crown Princess, even. Endeavor would truly benefit from a marriage like that. Surely the King would approve.

Oh, look, they were even going for a walk in the gardens. They stood so close together, heads turned in towards one another when they talked, surely, surely this was young love? A stroll under the moonlight between two eligible men and women could mean only one thing, after all.
Todoroki Enji looks smugger than usual, not that Midoriya is there to see it. He’s standing on the balcony overlooking the garden, arms hooked over the edge of the railing and peering after the couple. He probably would’ve been pulled away for spying on the young lovers if only he weren’t so beautiful and tragic-looking, earning a few whispers of his own.

Who is that? Oh, the Crown Prince’s manservant. You’ve heard about it too, haven’t you? How he and the Prince…together…Oh no, he must be heartbroken. It would’ve never worked, he must know that. Still, the heart wants what it wants. Shh, let’s leave him to mourn.

Midoriya’s no more annoyed by the rumors than usual. Tonight is a victory for Todoroki and for peace, not that any of these people would ever know. Down in the garden, two kings become a king and queen and hatch their own twin plan to take back control. It’s a good night.

Tsuyu appears at his side near-silently. “Never fear,” she says. “Ochako-sama couldn’t be less interested in him, even if she’ll become his ally.”

Midoriya exhales. “I’m not sleeping with him.” It’s like he has to say this to every person he meets.

“No,” Tsuyu says, “but you have feelings for him.”

“I don’t have feelings for him.”

“Everyone does,” Tsuyu says, “when they care as much as we do.”

Midoriya turns to her. “Then you…Uraraka-sama?”

Tsuyu nods. “It’s foolish. It could never work out. But the heart wants what it wants.” Her words echo the whisperers from before. Midoriya shivers.

“I’m glad you don’t have feelings for him,” she says. “You will break your heart less if your love ends at serving him. Fantasize if you want. But don’t deceive yourself into thinking it will work out.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Midoriya asks.

“Because someone asked me to die for her, once,” Tsuyu says. “I imagine I looked much like you did, back then.”

Midoriya huffs a laugh. “You know, you’re the second friend to warn me about love. Don’t worry about me. I know where to draw the line. We’ve…we’ve talked about it. I won’t fall for him.”

“Good,” Tsuyu says. She pauses, then says, “Someone should warn Kyouka-chan.”

Midoriya grins. “I don’t think there’s any danger there. Yaoyorozu-san’s as smitten as I’ve seen her. I think a romantic pursuit will be good for her.”

“Long distance is rough,” Tsuyu says.

“Haven’t you heard?” Midoriya says. “We’re allies now. And allies pay each other visits.”

“Then you should come, too,” Tsuyu says.

Midoriya had forgotten he was allowed to leave Todoroki’s side. “Sure,” he says, smiling. “If you’ll have me.” Unknowingly, Midoriya realizes he and Yaoyorozu had accomplished the task Todoroki set out for them.
In the garden, Todoroki sits on a bench beside Uraraka’s throne. He stands up and leans in towards her, pressing his lips to her cheek in a drawn out, chaste kiss. He then takes her hand and she rises, following his lead and returning to the party.

“He’s sealed their pact,” Tsuyu says. “Let’s go.”

They don’t get a chance to meet up with Todoroki and Uraraka together. The couple is swamped by nobility asking subtle questions about their night and trying to get a read off how their courting went. Todoroki and Uraraka reply with gentle misdirection, frustrating their interrogators but nevertheless leaving the hope of a marriage alive.

The party closes with one last dance between Todoroki and Uraraka, and then they’re bowing to each other and retiring to their personal bedchambers for the night with the rest of the party slowly dying down, servants filtering in to clean up after the guests. Yaoyorozu also kisses Jirou on the cheek, but instead of parting ways, Jirou pulls Yaoyorozu after her.

Midoriya parts with Tsuyu, shaking hands as seems appropriate between friends. He has a certain fondness for the unblinking woman and her straightforwardness. He wasn’t lying when he said he’d like to visit her in Urabiti. He brings this up with Todoroki as soon as they’re free to return to their bedchambers.


Midoriya doesn’t think that’s quite fair. “Well, because they’re our allies now. Haven’t you had a nice night?”

“I’ve had a long night,” Todoroki says. He peers at Midoriya. “I’ve had a confusing night.”

Midoriya holds his hands up. “She took a liking to me, that’s all. I vouched for you when we were dancing, but the rest was her idea.”

“Oh, I know,” Todoroki says. “She made sure to drill into my head how wonderful you are and how a conniving weasel of prince doesn’t deserve someone as gentle and pure as you. Has she even met you?”

Midoriya grins. “I tried to tell her—”

“I have no idea what you told her,” Todoroki says. “I don’t know how on earth you managed to change her mind so quickly. I don’t know how you got her to hear me out. But you were able to do what I couldn’t.” He looks away. “So thank you.”

“Take it as an apology for fighting with you today,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki huffs a laugh. “That was today? It feels like years ago.” He laughs again. “To think I was going to march over to you and tell you off…”

Midoriya’s grin widens. “You were so angry.”

“I was,” Todoroki admits. “I couldn’t believe that you would take my sarcastic invitation to talk with her as permission to dance. I was going to ream you out.”

“It worked out, though?” Midoriya asks. “You got everything you needed?”

“Yes, thanks to you,” Todoroki says. “We will stay penpals and share information about the possibility of my father’s plans, as well as plans of our own. She is willing to present herself to Iida
Tenya. She will not agree to marry me, thank god.”

“Not your type?” Midoriya’s face hurts from smiling.

“She did a fairly poor job courting me,” Todoroki sniffs. “It’s in bad taste to insult your suitor and constantly compare him to his manservant.”

“Or maybe you just did a bad job from the very beginning,” Midoriya teases. “Can’t say I’d pick you out as the type to be good at courting.”

“No?” Todoroki says.

“Nah,” Midoriya says. “You’re too serious and internally-focused. You don’t have the temperament to entertain and flirt with girls. Your intelligence is attractive but you’re also terrifying when you use it.”

“You think it’s attractive?” Todoroki says, raising an eyebrow.

Midoriya sticks out his tongue at Todoroki to disguise the panicked beating of his heart.

“Oh, very mature,” Todoroki says. “At least I know I’ll be better than you.”

“Hey!” Midoriya cries. “Who says I’m bad at courting?”

Todoroki looks Midoriya up and down slowly, the corner of his mouth turned up. It’s supposed to be insulting. Midoriya knows it’s supposed to be insulting, but his skin is on fire for a reason entirely separate from humiliation.

“You really don’t think so,” Midoriya says.

“Try me,” Todoroki challenges.

Midoriya hears Tsuyu’s voice in his head, don’t fall.

It’s okay. It’s okay, I’m not falling. I’m just showing him something.

What are you showing him?

But Midoriya doesn’t answer. He stops walking, faces Todoroki’s tilted chin and lidded eyes, smugly believing himself to be on top.

Todoroki should know not to underestimate Midoriya.

“I don’t think Uraraka-sama’s completely wrong,” Midoriya says, crossing his arms. Todoroki’s eyes follow his arms’ movement, just for a moment. Good. “You don’t like her bossing you around.”

“Correct,” Todoroki says.

“But it’s not that you don’t like it,” Midoriya says, tilting his head. “It’s that it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, really,” Todoroki says. He mirrors Midoriya’s crossed arms.

“You’re used to being in control all the time,” Midoriya says. “Everything is how you declare it to be, and nothing is out of place. That’s why when she rips control from you, it leaves you feeling
helpless.”

Midoriya smiles, slow and knowing. “But being helpless isn’t a bad thing to you, is it?”

He takes a step into Todoroki's space. Todoroki takes a hesitant half-step back, still keeping his head held high.

“I was not helpless,” Todoroki says.

“You were,” Midoriya insists, getting further into Todoroki's space. Todoroki steps back.

“It’s okay, though,” Midoriya says. “I don’t think you dislike it. Losing control and being helpless.” Another step forward, another step back.

“Deku,” Todoroki warns. He’s looking ruffled now, cornered and uncomfortable with the attention on him.

“I’ve got what Uraraka-sama doesn’t have,” Midoriya says. “I have the ability to wield that stolen control against you.”

Another step forward, and Todoroki's back hits the wall. He seizes up, ready to bolt, but Midoriya doesn’t let him. He presses his hands to the wall on either side of Todoroki's head and leans in so that their foreheads brush (just like before, just like when Todoroki comforted him back then). Their noses touch once and Todoroki's breath rushes against Midoriya’s lips.

“It’s okay,” Midoriya murmurs. “You don’t have to be afraid. I can take care of you. Just give into me.”

Todoroki isn’t that much taller than him, and it’s especially apparent in how he makes himself smaller beneath Midoriya. Midoriya can see and feel every movement of his body, every startled breath in and out. Midoriya feels it when Todoroki's body loosens up, when he melts against the wall and lowers his proud chin.

“There you go,” Midoriya murmurs. “Just like that.”

Midoriya tilts his head to the side a little, leaning forward, and Todoroki responds in kind, turning the other way so they can—

Don’t fall.

Midoriya jerks back, hands falling away from Todoroki. He takes two quick steps back and they stare at each other with wide eyes. Midoriya can pick out the red in Todoroki's cheeks, even with only the torchlight to see by. He knows he must not look much better. It wasn’t something he could make up.

To Todoroki-sama, I almost—

“A-anyway,” Midoriya says. “That’s how I would court someone. Sorry, I…have a lot of empathy. It's easy for me to tell how to…seduce someone.” He hates himself more with every word out of his mouth, but it has to be this way. It can’t be anything else.

Todoroki straightens himself up, shakes himself out. “Yes, I…” he starts to say, then trails off.

“Godspeed to your future lovers,” he says. He turns to lead the way back to their bedchambers.

Midoriya wants to kick himself. Why did he have to make things weird between them just to prove
a point? Yes, he knew he was attracted to Todoroki, but why did he have to make a scene of it?

He needed to stop this. Yes, he would like to sleep with Todoroki. No, he would not, because it would accomplish nothing but make things more complicated between them. They didn’t need that. They needed clear cut lines and trust, not a mix of lust and sex and friendship and lines being crossed.

I won’t fall, Midoriya had promised. And he meant it. He would not and could not fall for Todoroki Shouto. He would relieve his sexual tension some other way, not by fake-courting the prince because he was desperate for release and the prince happened to be his closest friend.

That night, Midoriya gives Todoroki his privacy and retreats to his own room to write a letter. After all, besides the disastrous courting challenge of that evening, it had been an eventful and exciting day, full of positive developments.

T.Y—

U secure, don’t worry. Dealt with recently. Definitely E’s work. S aware of all going’s on, cleared of suspicion. Conflicting proposals between U and Y that lead to annihilation of us all. Proposal definitely a trap. S working on it. Stay safe.

It’s starting here, too.

M.I.

Chapter End Notes

psssst it was my birthday yesterday so leave me a comment maybe :3?
show me where my armor ends

Chapter Notes

LONG TIME NO SEE, Y’ALL!! THIS FIC ISN’T DEAD! i got a sudden burst of inspiration and wrote 9,500 words in two days. oops? anyway, there should be a more regular update schedule for this fic now. i’m currently working on a lot of different projects, but i’ll try to get at least one chapter out a month, hopefully two. and thank you everyone for 3000+ kudos! holy crap!

[ART WILL BE ADDED NEXT CHAPTER IM LAZY SORRY]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Midoriya sits up, stretches, and doesn’t immediately remember how he came on to his prince the night before. Of course, once he does remember, guilt pumps like sludge through his veins and he sneaks a glance at Todoroki.

Todoroki isn’t asleep as Midoriya had suspected, but awake with a candle lit on his bedside table, reading a letter in the low light of dawn. He was so still, Midoriya hadn’t even noticed him as he woke up. Midoriya’s heart thuds.

“I didn’t know you wore glasses,” he says.

Todoroki looks up at him over thin, golden frames. “Yes, well,” he says. “You try reading the chicken scratch Eijirou-san calls handwriting without some kind of aid.”

“They suit you,” Midoriya says, offering a small smile.

“They make me look old,” Todoroki argues.

“You don’t look anything like the King,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki sucks in a breath, which means Midoriya’s hit the nail on the dead. He glances back down at the parchment once more, then folds it neatly and pulls his glasses off, placing them on top of the letter. “Speaking of my father,” Todoroki says, “we have yet another delightful meeting in court today.”

“He’s called upon you?” Midoriya asks, dread seeping into his voice. Hadn’t Todoroki done what he wanted? Why was he being summoned again?

“No, I’ve called a meeting with him,” Todoroki says. He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I would prefer you not come with me.”

“I’m not opposed to staying behind,” Midoriya mutters.

Todoroki’s lips turn up at that. “If he ever hoped to use you against me…ha,” Todoroki says. “He’s misjudged how deeply you hate him. Almost as much as me, perhaps.”
Midoriya doesn’t say *I could never betray you*. The letter to All Might sits under a stack of papers in Midoriya’s bedchambers, disguised until Midoriya had a chance to take it to Dark Shadow.

“No, you must come with me,” Todoroki says. “You’re as disobedient as I am, and so, you must make amends for your misbehavior as I do.”

“Make amends?” Midoriya says.

“We’re going to ask for a favor,” Todoroki says. “And while it would be in my father’s best interests to grant me this favor, he enjoys meddling with my plans. Be sure to look your most contrite.”

…Whatever *that* meant.

Todoroki scowls. “I wear red today. So do you.”

The one color Todoroki had ensured Midoriya was never to wear. The colors of his father. Oh dear, they really were playing by his rules today. Midoriya blinks. “What favor could possibly be this important?”

At first, Midoriya doesn’t know how to interpret the way Todoroki’s eyes flick away from his and how he straightens up. He doesn’t know how to interpret it because he hasn’t seen this look on Todoroki yet—hesitation. Hesitation to tell Midoriya, in other words, mistrust. Midoriya’s heart sinks. Todoroki’s hesitation lasts only a few seconds, but Midoriya feels dread hollow out his stomach.

“I want Ochako-san to stay another three days,” Todoroki says. “I need to get her up to speed on everything we know so far and our future plans. I was only able to give her a brief overview last night, and she’s supposed to leave today. I need more time to…what?”

Midoriya swallows. “I’ve lost your trust,” he says.

Todoroki’s eyes snap back to him. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You hesitated,” Midoriya says. “Just then, you hesitated.”

“That’s not why I—”

“It’s because of last night, isn’t it?” Midoriya says. “What I did, on the way back.”

Todoroki sighs. “It’s not important.”

“I beg to differ,” Midoriya says, voice rising. “Seeing as you couldn’t even look at me a minute ago.”


“Then please enlighten me,” Midoriya whispers. “Because right now I feel as if I have done a great harm to you.”

Todoroki closes his eyes. “No, that’s not it. You’ve actually helped me quite a lot.” He opens his eyes. “No one has ever...tried to seduce me before. I’ve been the object of lewd comments and fantasies, but never truly courted in any sense of the word. But if you were a spy sent to seduce me, I would have been...wholly unprepared to resist you.”
In other words, not only was Midoriya the first to come on to Todoroki in such a way, he was also completely successful. The word ‘spy’ is ringing in Midoriya’s head too, so all he can do is stare at Todoroki with his eyes as wide as saucers.

“I hesitated because that possibility crossed my mind at that exact moment,” Todoroki says, shaking his head. “I apologize if I startled you.”

“No, I guess I…” Midoriya trails off and buries his face in his hands. “Oh god, I am so embarrassed. Why did I do that?”

“It’s understandable,” Todoroki says, somehow managing to sound completely calm after he just admitted that Midoriya had done a terrific job seducing him. “I’ve kept you on such a tight leash; I’m sure you haven’t had time to relax and release tension. If you need a break, please let me know.”

“Todoroki-sama, please be more aware of your position,” Midoriya groans. “You are a prince, I can’t just—even with the excuse you’ve given me, it’s not appropriate—”

“I do not particularly care if your inclinations are towards men,” Todoroki says. “I meant your status,” Midoriya says, exhaling. “It is improper for me to attempt to court you, even as a…joke.”

“Is it not the job of the manservant to prepare his master for any circumstance that may befall him, even to the point of feigning seduction as a way to ready him?” Todoroki asks, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s—” Midoriya pauses. “Well.”

“So stop fretting over silly things,” Todoroki says. “Didn’t we have this conversation before? I know you meant nothing by it.”

*So I’d like to believe… “It won’t happen again.”*  
Todoroki's face is carefully neutral. “If you need to find a partner—”

“No,” Midoriya cuts him off. “No, this cause requires my full attention. There’s no time for flirtations and flings.”

“Oh thank god,” Todoroki says. “I don’t particularly fancy having to compete for your attention.”

The thought makes Midoriya smile. As if anyone but Todoroki could command his full attention. He doesn’t realize just how charismatic he is.

“Shall we then?” Midoriya asks.

“We shall,” Todoroki says. “Unfortunately.”

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Red is…not Todoroki’s color.

Midoriya doesn’t mean to say it doesn’t look stunning on him—of course, whatever Todoroki
wears suits him like a second skin. The rich, wine-red of his uniform makes Todoroki impossible to look away from. He wears a black and silver cloak of fox furs over his shoulders and gold leaf ornamentation. He looks ready for war, or maybe as if the blood of his enemies has already soaked through his clothing.

It’s more that wearing his father’s color changes Todoroki fundamentally. His typical, neutral expression is replaced by a hard scowl. Where black made him invincible and white untouchable, red seems to swallow Todoroki whole, making him seem smaller. He keeps his gaze low and pained. He reminds Midoriya of himself, dressed up in pretty clothing that doesn’t suit him. Todoroki radiates discomfort.

Midoriya’s in red silk too, the fabric sliding against his body in a not entirely pleasant fashion. He longs for his simple white chiton with the golden rope tie around his waist. This garb feels posh and stiff, forcing him to abide by the movement of the material. Their walk to the throne room is a silent one.

And then, Midoriya sees firsthand how far Todoroki will go to get what he wants.

Before he even steps into the court chamber, Todoroki bows, Midoriya a beat behind him and deeper. Todoroki clasps one hand over the other and keeps his eyes low as he approaches the throne. Midoriya’s eyes never leave Todoroki’s back, although he doesn’t recognize this humbled, respectful animal. Todoroki gets on one knee and bows his head.

“Father dearest,” he says, voice soft.

Midoriya sinks to the floor behind Todoroki, but he can hear the crackle of King Enji’s flames, flickering with interest. The king has taken note of Todoroki’s out of character filial affection.

“Rise, Shouto,” King Enji says. “There is no need for such prostration from my beloved youngest.”

“Indeed,” Todoroki says, standing. Midoriya rises to his knees and sees that King Enji is stroking his beard, eyes sharp as he looks Todoroki over. He has the slightest smile on his face.

So much for keeping our motives hidden, Midoriya thinks.

“What is the occasion that brings my favorite son to call on me?” King Enji asks. “It’s quite unlike you to be so…passive in your summons.”

Todoroki gets straight to the point. “I have a request I would like to make.”

“Oh?” King Enji says. “How unfortunate that you only appear to ask for my ear when accusing me or asking me for something. As a parent, I feel like to play so many of your games is irresponsible.”

Todoroki doesn’t take the bait, exactly. His voice is steel when he says, “I dislike being in debt to anyone, even you, father. I would not make such a request if I did not believe it was in both of our best interests.”

“Delightful!” King Enji says. “Let’s hear it, then.”

“I ask that you postpone Princess Ochako’s departure,” Todoroki says. “I do not feel that I have had sufficient time with her.”

His words have the desired effect. The courtiers and nobles that were always present in the chamber exchange glances and murmurs. Todoroki keeps his eyes on his father, hands still clasped
together, the very picture of a son making a sincere request that a girl of his fancy stay longer at the palace.

“Interesting,” King Enji says, which is not a ‘yes.’ “Very interesting.”

“The time we spent in the garden last night was pleasant, but not nearly enough for me to become fully acquainted with her and her household,” Todoroki says.

“Her household?” King Enji repeats. “Do you mean to court the princess?”

Todoroki lowers his eyes. “I mean to do whatever my father deems in the best interest of this kingdom.”

Midoriya grits his teeth at the long pause that ensues. King Enji is enjoying this too much.

“I’m proud of you, Shouto,” he says. “I see you’ve grown tired of rolling with the lower classes,”—Midoriya doesn’t move—“and moved on to those of a purer bloodline. You’ve also thrown away your preference for males, thankfully—I’ll be needing an heir from you rather than your siblings, as I’m sure you’ve guessed.”

Todoroki bows his head. “It is as you wish.”

“Fine, I will grant you this request,” King Enji says. “Princess Ochako may stay another three days or until she tires of you. But this will come at a price, my son.”

“I expected no less,” Todoroki says tightly.

“This conversation,” King Enji says, “this is what I look for from our relationship. I would like to spend some time alone together, fostering this relationship, seeing as you’re finally seeing the error of your ways and becoming obedient. You will accompany me to extra special training sessions, just the two of us. And you will not protest.”

Midoriya’s blood runs cold.

“Yes, father,” Todoroki says without a trace of emotion.

“Let us embrace and make up for past harms,” King Enji says. “As a father and son should.”

Todoroki lifts his head and climbs the steps to the king’s throne, sinking down to one knee again and kissing the top of the hand offered to him. King Enji places his other hand atop Todoroki’s head in what could be construed as affection but coming from him reads as suffocating and controlling. Alone on the main floor of the court chamber, Midoriya feels helpless.

Then it’s over. King Enji dismisses them and they leave without rushing, keeping up the façade until the massive doors close behind them and they’re safe from prying eyes. The scowl is back on Todoroki's face.

“Todoroki-sama—” Midoriya starts.

“Don’t,” Todoroki says. “It was worth it. We need more time. If I have to buy it with my body, I will.”

Midoriya doesn’t press the issue. The memory of Todoroki half-dead astride a horse still haunts him, but Todoroki knew better then Midoriya if he could handle that treatment. Instead he asks, “What do we do now?”
“Now, we use what little time we bought,” Todoroki says. “We fill in Ochako-san on everything we know. We get her to speak to Iida Tenya, see if we can get him on our side as well. I will ask her to send a message to Eijirou-san as well, but I doubt he will be inclined to enter the conflict, nor is he of much strategic importance as he’s rejected my father’s invitation. It’s safer if Ochako-san communicates with them than if I try to.”

That’s true. Midoriya hides a wry smile at the thought of running into Todoroki in the aviary when they’re both sending ravens bearing secret messages. He’d prefer to be the only one sending and receiving secret ravens.

Todoroki leads Midoriya to yet another part of the palace that Midoriya has not been to. They walk through an arched doorway and into a room filled with light. Like Todoroki’s private bath, the ceiling of the sun room is made entirely of glass panels, these ones arranged in a dome shape. On the ground, blankets and pillows and cushions were spread across the ground to create the ultimate space to splay out and soak in the sun while lying in complete comfort.

And that’s exactly what the women in the room were doing. Uraraka is propped up in a nest of pillows, eyes closed and head tilted to the side, the sunlight spilling across her turning her cream skin white and her brown hair a rich tawny. Yaoyorozu, for once, is wearing leathers instead of her golden armor and examining the hilt of her longsword and explaining something to Jirou, who listens intently, one hand resting on Yaoyorozu’s thigh. Off to the other side of Uraraka, Tsuyu strums a delicate tune on a lyre.

Uraraka’s eyes open when Todoroki and Midoriya walk through the door. Todoroki dips his head and Midoriya goes all the way down to his knees, feeling unworthy to look upon Uraraka’s splendor.

“Young Royal Highness,” Todoroki greets.

“Deku, please,” Uraraka says, ignoring Todoroki completely. “I told you you needn’t bow so deeply to me.”

Midoriya rises, still unable to meet her eyes. “I must respectfully decline your request,” he says.

“Boo,” Uraraka says. “Fine, fine. I suppose if it pleases you to act so subservient, I can’t refuse you.”

“I will never understand women,” Todoroki mutters under his breath, sore about being snubbed.

It occurs to Midoriya that given their statuses, he may very well be in a room with the most powerful women in the Five Kingdoms. At the very least, three of the best fighters and another woman who would decide history when she took to the throne. Midoriya suddenly feels very, very small.

“They’re…terrifying,” Midoriya agrees.

Todoroki clears his throat. “I’ve bought us more time to talk,” he says.

“Oh, goody,” Uraraka says dryly.

“I do wish you would at least put on an air of liking me,” Todoroki mutters.

“You’re insufferable,” Uraraka informs him cheerfully. “But if it’s to save the people from a man as scheming and poisonous as your father, I’ll stand to work with you.”
“We should find somewhere to speak privately,” Todoroki says.

Uraraka holds her hands out. “Why not here? Kyouka, Yaoyorozu, if you wouldn’t mind?”

Jirou bows her head and then stands, Yaoyorozu following her lead. Yaoyorozu pats Todoroki on the shoulder in as much of a ‘go get ‘em, tiger’ gesture as she possibly can. They station themselves by the archway, still discussing swords but also keeping an eye out for prying eyes and ears.

“Sit down,” Uraraka says, more of a command than a request. “I prefer when my allies get on my level.”

Midoriya takes the lead this time, settling onto a cushion with a sheepskin blanket splayed across it. It’s softer than his pallet in Todoroki’s chambers and after the stress of meeting with the king, sleepiness comes over him. Todoroki exhales and pokes Midoriya with the toe of his boot until Midoriya moves over to make room for him. Todoroki takes off his boots and casts them aside, sitting up straight to face Uraraka. She tilts her chin up to hold his gaze.

“You’ll listen to me,” Todoroki says.

“I will,” Uraraka says.

They talk. Midoriya tries to keep up, but it’s all information he’s already privy to. The low rumble of Todoroki’s voice and the soft pluck of the lyre under warm, golden sunlight lull him to dozing, half-aware of the conversation going over his head. He curls into a ball, hair tickling Todoroki’s thigh. He shouldn’t be so close, probably, but he’s too sleepy to care about proper protocol around royalty. He lets the quiet exchange of voices carry him away to sleep.

When he wakes, it is to the soft brush of the back of a hand against his cheek. It’s a gentleness reminisce of a mother or a lover, not something Midoriya has been familiar with in over half a year. Todoroki-sama? Right, Midoriya had fallen asleep next to him. He presses into the touch, chest light. The hand pauses, but then goes back to its stroking. When he opens his eyes finally, he is greeted with the soft countenance of Princess Uraraka.

It’s enough to make him start, eyes wide. She withdraws her hand and laughs into it, cheeks pink. “Sorry,” she says. “You looked so peaceful, I couldn’t help myself.”


Her lips quirk. “You didn’t seem to mind until you saw it was me,” she says. “Who were you dreaming so fondly of, if the rumors have no merit?”

Midoriya opens his mouth to protest, then closes it. “A friend,” he says finally, because it’s not a lie.

“Some friend,” Uraraka says, but she smiles and accepts it. Or maybe she knows exactly what he means and is taking pity on him.

Midoriya looks around, but Todoroki is gone, as are Jirou and Yaoyorozu. Tsuyu is still there, arms crossed and eyes closed. Midoriya has no doubt that she would be awake with her sword out, however, if the princess showed any sign of distress.

“Where…?” he asks.

“Yaoyorozu and Kyouka have left for the armory,” Uraraka says. “Shouto-san has retired back to
his room after we concluded our discussion. He didn’t want to disturb you when you were sleeping so peacefully.”

“How did your conversation go?” Midoriya asks. “You’ll still help us, won’t you?”

“Yes,” Uraraka says. She sighs. “I made a promise with myself, when I was younger, that I would never let myself be used by another. And yet, here I am, playing into a man’s scheming.”

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says. “I wish it didn’t have to be this way, sincerely.”

Uraraka brushes a strand of hair back from her face. “Well, it’s no use complaining now. Especially when all of us are victims of a greater scheme. We have to make the most of who we’re bound to, I suppose. Tomorrow and the next day Shouto-san and I will come up with a plan of attack now that I know everything. I must get in contact with Iida Tenya before next month.”

“Next month…” Midoriya says. Then, it clicks. “Princess Fuyumi-sama’s courting ball!”

“Yes,” Uraraka says. “He will be invited to attend as a suitor, Shouto-san told me. I must convince him not to propose to her and preferably, to me instead. His Majesty will be pushing for her and Tenya-san to get engaged. It won’t be easy.”

“You’re of a higher status than her, though,” Midoriya says. “Marriage to you would be a greater honor.”

“If only it were that easy,” Uraraka sighs. “But the Iida dynasty has been closely tied to the Todoroki dynasty for decades. They’re long overdue for a marriage between the them and the two second in line for the throne make the most sense to marry together. I’ll be asking Tenya-san to upset an alliance that outlives him.”

“Good thing you’re so charming,” Midoriya says. “I’m sure you can do it.”

“You’re too kind,” Uraraka says. “But I suppose I must.”

She hesitates for a moment, but then speaks again. “He’s not immovable, you know.”

“Uraraka-sama?” Midoriya says.

“I just mean that he has feelings, too,” she says. “It’s not impossible that he…you…”

“It is impossible,” Midoriya says quietly. “Even if I felt that way about him, in the end, our blood is not equivalent. There’s no reason to expend heartache on something that would never work.”

*It could never work, so please…*


“If you want to help me,” Midoriya says, “then help him.”

Uraraka nods.

For the next two days, Uraraka and Todoroki are inseparable. They’re the talk of the palace; turns out that party held in her honor really was a marriage interview gone right. If the royals played their cards right, Endeavor would merge with the largest of the Five Kingdoms. And a wedding between a Crown Prince and Crown Princess would be the event of the year! Even the poorer folk might be able to make a couple gold if they’re hired on as staff for the wedding…
And on his throne, flames amassed about his person, Todoroki Enji strokes his chin and wonders what angle, exactly, his son is playing against him.

Midoriya, understandably, does not see much of Todoroki. Yaoyorozu is also noticeably absent, glued to Jirou’s side, as lovesick as the rumors claimed Todoroki and Uraraka to be. Midoriya didn’t begrudge any of them their happiness. He spent his time in Tsuyu’s company, learning some useful knife tricks and how to play the lyre.

He supposes he got dealt a kind hand by fate as well as the others—Tsuyu clicked with him and they were fast friends. He liked how she didn’t beat around the bush, but instead of being a machine, she had strong emotions and loyalty for her friends and princess. There were many times that Tsuyu would fall asleep against Midoriya’s shoulder while he plucked at her lyre in some semblance of a song. That trust was the centerpiece of their friendship.

Midoriya did not look forward to the day of their departure. Apparently, he was not alone in his sentiments. Many of the palace workers came to the welcoming courtyard to see the Urabitians off, waving flags or banners of purple.

Tsuyu pulled Midoriya into a tight hug and promised to write. “There’ll always be an open room for you,” she said, smiling.

“I’ll see you soon,” Midoriya promised.

Yaoyorozu bowed and kissed the top of Jirou’s hand, but Jirou was having none of that and pulled her in for a real kiss. As Yaoyorozu was still technically his superior, Midoriya carefully averted his eyes from the display of affection.

Todoroki held Uraraka’s hand as she floated down the courtyard in a simpler chair than the throne from that night. He didn’t let go until he absolutely had to, and then he got on one knee and kissed her hand. When he rose again, she beckoned him close so she could place a kiss on his forehead. It wasn’t the engagement rings everyone had hoped for, but it was close to a marriage proposal as the palace-goers were going to get.

“Don’t forget to write,” Todoroki said.

“Oh? Finally met your match?” Midoriya asks.

“Well, at the very least,” Todoroki says, turning away. "That kiss was for you, by the way."

Midoriya laughs. "She always has to get the last laugh, doesn't she?"

"Indeed," Todoroki agrees. "It's something I'll have to learn to live with, I suppose."

Midoriya allows one last, wistful glance before he follows Todoroki out.
“However,” Todoroki says, his smile curling into something new. Something mischievous. “Now that the women are gone, the boys can get into trouble.”

Midoriya feels his heart flutter. Oh no, he thinks, rubbing at his chest. No, no, no.

Of course, ‘trouble’ to Todoroki never quite meant what ‘trouble’ meant to other people.

“Catch,” Todoroki says, tossing Midoriya a sword with one hand. The weight catches him by surprise and he sweats, grappling at the scabbard with both hands.

“Gods above,” Midoriya says. “What am I supposed to do with this massive chunk of metal?”

“Use it?” Todoroki suggests, raising an eyebrow. He moves to the sword rack at the back of the room to select his own.

They’re in the armory, morning light just beginning to filter in through the bars of the armory windows. Aside from the sword rack loaded up with dulled weapons used for training there are dummies to hack at, targets riddled with holes, and then, of course, doors leading to storage of wartime supplies—enough swords and quivers to arm the soldiers of Endeavor’s capital three times over.

Todoroki had thrown Midoriya a shortsword, lighter and shorter than the longswords and broadswords of the Royal Guard and the Prince’s Guard. Midoriya unsheathes the sword and gives it a few practice swings. Not bad, but still much heavier than what he was used to.

“You don’t have any rapiers?” Midoriya asks. Yuuein soldiers were thrown for their footwork and skill with lighter swords, not the clunky, heavy weapons of Endeavor. As such, Midoriya only had training with rapiers—and minimal training at that. As with his hand-to-hand, he had only been taught enough that he could protect All Might in the case of a surprise attack.

“Do you plan on using a rapier against the broadswords of my father’s men?” Todoroki asks. “If you believe you’d survive, I applaud you—I doubt even I would make it out alive.”

It’s an infuriatingly good point. “I’ve never used a shortsword at all, though,” Midoriya mutters.

“That’s what practice is for,” Todoroki says. He pulls a much heavier longsword from the rack and tosses it from hand to hand. Figured he’s be ambidextrous.

“You know, according to Urabitian myths, those who are proficient with both their hands are supposed to be messengers of evil,” Midoriya says.

“Sounds like the Urabitians are jealous,” Todoroki says, not the least bit fazed. He points his sword at Midoriya. “If you can counter me at least a little bit with that shortsword, you’ll be prepared to face Endeavoran forces.”

“Are you planning on shedding blood sometime soon?” Midoriya asks.

“Can’t be too safe,” Todoroki says. “I’ve neglected in your training. Can’t have a valued companion getting cut down, can I? We cut it too close last time.”
Midoriya raises a hand to touch the scar beneath his eye. *When he put it that way…*

Todoroki leads the way out of the armory and into the training ring outside. It’s a little circle of dirt and sawdust lined with logs that make a sparring ring for two or three men to train in at a time. Midoriya steps over the log and scuffs his foot in the dirt. So *this* is why Todoroki had him dress in his Yuuein clothes. Sparring in the dress of a manservant would be unadvisable.

Midoriya sets the scabbard to the side and twists the sword in his right hand. He makes a few jabs, then two quick slices. It’s taxing on his muscles to say the least, but he has enough strength to wield it. Todoroki’s eyes are on him. When Midoriya looks up, Todoroki nods.

“That’s the right one,” he says. “Do you think you can hold your own against me?”

Midoriya blinks. “Do I think I can hold my own against someone who has been trained to use the weapon he’s holding since he was old enough to manage? With a novel weapon of my own? Not a chance.”

“You’ll do fine,” Todoroki says. To Midoriya’s growing concern, he seems serious about fighting him.

“Can’t we use wooden swords?” Midoriya begs. “This is kind of, uh, a lot.”

“What? Don’t trust me?” Todoroki’s blue eye burns a hole through Midoriya and his smile is sharp.

“I trust your ability to cleave me in half,” Midoriya says. He feels a strong sense of empathy with a deer faced with a leopard.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Todoroki says. “I would need a broadsword for that.” He twirls the longsword—twice as heavy as Midoriya’s and a foot longer—in a few arcs and slices it through the air so quickly it whistles. He finishes with the point of the sword angled at Midoriya’s throat, under his chin. Midoriya sucks in a breath. The sword tip does not wobble.

Todoroki tilts Midoriya’s chin up with the sword tip. He holds Midoriya’s gaze. His smile is languid and his form is graceful. Midoriya hadn’t known it was possible to get turned on by having someone point a sword at his throat, and yet here he was, warmth pooling in his gut.

Todoroki lets him go. “The point is dulled,” he says. “Unless you fall from great height on this sword, the worst you’ll get are some nasty bruises.”

The prince, he’s—he’s happy. No, it’s more than that. He’s excited. Did he really love swordfighting so much? Midoriya drags his blade along Todoroki’s, scraping metal on metal.

“Alright,” he says. “You’ve got my interest. Start me out slow—I’m rusty.”

They start with slow motion movements, tapping their swords against each other and withdrawing. Todoroki likes to move when he spars, forcing Midoriya to circle rather than the back-and-forth he’d used to. But he still has the footwork of a Yuuein, and keeps up with Todoroki’s movements easily. Then the blows come a little faster. Todoroki’s still not putting any force behind the blows but they ring out nonetheless. It’s starting to feel a little more like a dance and less like sparring. Midoriya feels his muscles shift and respond to the pressure Todoroki puts on him. Even nearly a year out of serious practice, the muscle memory is there.

And then Todoroki lunges forward, swinging across at Midoriya. Midoriya throws up his sword in a block, but under the full strength of his prince, the blow sings through his blade and into his
gloves, making his sword wobble. He stumbles a little, eyes wide. Todoroki pulls back after that, grinning in earnest now.

“Not the same as Yuuei, is it?” he asks.

“You’re so much stronger,” Midoriya says, half laughing. “Five, maybe seven blows like that and you’d have me on my knees.”

“Let’s keep it light then,” Todoroki says. They fall back into the dance, a little bit quicker this time.

“How did your talk go?” Midoriya asks, parrying and lunging at Todoroki.

“Well enough,” Todoroki says, blocking him with one hand. “We have a plan, at least.”

“And?”

“We’re going to triangulate our efforts to convince Iida Tenya to join our cause,” Todoroki says. “Uraraka will be sending a raven to him on the way back to Urabiti explaining that she’s come into some sensitive information that she feels she can trust only him with. Depending on how he responds, they will exchange letters about our plan to overthrow my father’s plans.”

Midoriya frowns. “Isn’t that a bit manipulative?”

Todoroki disarms him. “Focus, Deku. We don’t have time to play nice. Fuyumi’s ball is in two months. We cannot fail to get Tenya-san on our side.”

Midoriya shakes out his hand and picks up his shortsword. “So Her Highness’s ball is the ultimate goal, after all. You must come clean to His Highness when he arrives. Trust is the foundation of any functioning partnership.”

“I intend to,” Todoroki says, engaging Midoriya again. “You know, you’re not half-bad. I like your footwork.”

Midoriya smiles and forces Todoroki back a step. “I’m not used to putting strength behind my blows. You could overpower me at any moment.”

“Not when it’s this fun,” Todoroki says.

“Is this all we can do?” Midoriya asks. He doesn’t mean the swordfighting.

“This is the only part of his plan I am sure of at this time,” Todoroki says. “If I can prevent the marriage of Urabiti’s throne to Endeavor and prevent Ingenium from gaining blood ties with Endeavor, then we’ve halted his conquest of the Five Kingdoms. Only Yuuei is left under threat.”

Todoroki's pause nearly costs him his sword. “I’m sorry, that must be upsetting to hear.”

“It’s alright,” Midoriya says. “I don’t think Yuuei will go down as easily as he thinks it will. If we told All Might—”

“We can’t,” Todoroki says stiffly. “He’ll be expecting it. That’s why I haven’t said a word.”

Midoriya frowns. “With All Might’s support, we might have a chance. If the engagement was called off—”

“Then he would just find a way to go to war with Yuuei that’s less subtle,” Todoroki sighs. “At least with this plan we have time. If he has to resort to Plan B, you will most likely end up dead.”
“Me?” Midoriya’s heart thuds.

“Yes,” Todoroki says. “He’d pin the death of one of my siblings on you, maybe even mother, since she’s inconvenient. Then he’d paint Yuuei as liars and assassins and gain the support of neutral Urabiti—especially with the offer of marriage to me if they support Endeavor—and Yuuei would be fighting on two fronts. Even your military wouldn’t survive.”

He’s right. Midoriya’s face hardens. “So it’s just on us, then.”

“It’s alright,” Todoroki says. “We can beat him. I just wish I knew how he intended on taking out All Might’s heir when I’m there to prevent their downfall. He must know I would protect them.”

The thought that Todoroki would risk his life to protect the heir to Midoriya’s fatherland is… extremely comforting. All this time, Todoroki hadn’t been anti-Yuuei, but he also hadn’t declared love for the country. Even if it was just to thwart his father’s plans, Midoriya feels a sense of comfort settle inside him that Todoroki was definitely, definitely on his side.

It’s a moment of weakness. Todoroki disarms him again and this time, knocks his feet out from under him. Midoriya groans and sits up on his knees. Todoroki’s sword is back to tilting his chin up. All of Midoriya’s focus rests on the cool metal pressed to this skin of his throat.

“What do you forfeit, sir?” Todoroki asks, smiling.

“Do you forfeit is against my honor,” Midoriya sniffs. “You’ll have to kill me.”

“Unacceptable,” Todoroki says. His voice drops. “Submit to me.”

The command resonates through Midoriya’s body, turning his insides to putty. His eyelids flutter closed for a moment as the words sink through his body. Then he meets Todoroki’s proud eyes.

“Only for you,” he swears.

Todoroki lowers the sword, pleased by Midoriya’s response. “Rise then, my manservant. We have much work to do. We can practice more later.”

Midoriya is struck my inspiration. Trusting that Todoroki had been telling the dull edge of the sword, Midoriya wraps both hands around the length of the blade and pulls hard, sending a surprised Todoroki tumbling into the dirt beside him. Midoriya jumps to his feet.

Casting a feral grin back at Todoroki, he bows and says, “You should never trust your enemy, Your Royal Highness.” Then he bolts for the safety of the armory.

“You little—” Ojiro says as Midoriya flies past him.
Midoriya pauses just long enough to jog backwards, grinning. “Gotta go, Ojiro-san—I’m a wanted man.”

“Deku!” Todoroki shouts, turning the corner.

Midoriya salutes Ojiro and turns back around to sprint up the steps to Todoroki’s chambers. He hears when Todoroki takes to the stairs—the thundering of footfalls behind him—but he’s fitter than Todoroki and outruns him. Shouji’s eyes widen when Midoriya races up the stairs, but he dutifully stands to the side so that Midoriya can burst into the room. He stands facing the door and preparing to fight.

As expected, Todoroki isn’t twenty seconds behind him and throws the door open. He’s on Midoriya in a second, the two of them throwing punches and sticking out legs to try to trip each other up. They’re evenly matched, a by-product of their sparring sessions. There’s nothing they can pull on each other that they’ve never seen before.

“Deku, when I get my hands on you—” Todoroki threatens.

“You never said I had to play fair,” Midoriya points out, eyes bright.

Todoroki feints a kick and when Midoriya moves to block, he shoves against Midoriya’s chest hard, pushing him back onto Todoroki’s bed. Midoriya kicks his legs back and rolls backwards, nearly smacking Todoroki in the face. Todoroki is after him in a heartbeat and they lock hands, standing up on their knees and pushing against each other.

Midoriya can’t help the smile on his face. His forehead presses against Todoroki’s as they wrestle. He sees Todoroki pursing his lips together in a feeble attempt to stay mad. Finally, Midoriya gives out and allows Todoroki to push him onto his back, pinning his hands above his head. Their chests heave with the effort of tussling.

“What now, fearless victor?” Midoriya asks, panting. “You’ve captured the hooligan.”

“I should put you in your place,” Todoroki tuts. “To think you’d play such an uncouth trick on your prince after all the kindness he’s shown you.”

“Maybe I thought the prince wouldn’t fall for such an obvious ploy,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki squeezes his hands. “Oi,” he says. “Consider the position you’re in, you ruffian.”

The action has the desired effect—Midoriya goes still under Todoroki. Now that the blood isn’t pounding in his ears, he realizes what a compromising position this is. Todoroki leaning over him, pinning him down, poised to…to do something.

Todoroki leans in. “Let’s try this again,” he says. “Submit to me, Deku.”

Midoriya thinks of servitude. He thinks of serving Todoroki, submitting to him, in an entirely different way. That day in the baths, he had thought, if you asked me, I would. And now that Todoroki was asking him again, Midoriya finds his resolve is even stronger than it had been then.

“I am yours,” Midoriya says softly.

“Really?” Todoroki says, raising an eyebrow. “How do I know you won’t knee me in the gut if I let you go?”

“Because for as rebellious and unfit for servitude as I may be, you know I am yours,” Midoriya
says. “I will always serve you, Todoroki-sama.”

“Use my full name when making a declaration like that,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya sucks in a breath. “I will always serve you, Todoroki Shouto-sama.”

He really, really needs Todoroki to get off him before he has to explain why he’s hard just from professing his loyalty to his prince.

Todoroki leans back, letting Midoriya go. “I doubt I will ever truly have you,” Todoroki says. He doesn’t seem too upset by it, though.

“Why?” Midoriya asks, sitting up. “You doubt my loyalty?”

“Not at all,” Todoroki says. “The look in your eyes says that you are devoted to me. You will stand by me and even die for me if I asked it of you. But you will do it all as your own, individual person, not as my servant Deku.”

Midoriya blinks. “Is there a difference?”

“Take Momo for example,” Todoroki says. “Momo, she is truly my servant. She is loyal like you, but her commitment runs down to the soul. She has become an extension of me, giving up her independence and her choice to serve me and do as I command. But you…” Todoroki flicks Midoriya in the forehead. “Your eyes have always said that I will never own you like I do her. Your eyes have always said, ‘this is my choice.’ Even when you act as my manservant, you reserve the right within yourself to quit whenever I ask too much of you. That is why I cannot believe your words.”

“I will serve you,” Midoriya insists. “I won’t leave you. I promise.”

Todoroki looks at him for a long time, face expressionless. “Sometimes I wish—” He breaks off.

“What?” Midoriya asks.

“Sometimes I wish you were…my equal,” Todoroki confesses. “I can confide in you. I trust you. If only we had been born in different circumstances, perhaps we could have been…”

“I understand,” Midoriya says quietly. The same had crossed his mind before. Their rapport was not something to be taken lightly. Between them, a bond that could truly only be called friendship had formed, even though it was not allowed. If Midoriya had been born nobility, that friendship could have been fostered into something strong and unbreakable.

**And then, Midoriya could have —**

“We’ll make do with the hands we’ve been dealt,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki sighs and falls forward, pulling a squeaking Midoriya down with him, one arm draped over his chest. Midoriya wriggles, but Todoroki is heavy and not interested in moving away from his manservant.

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya says.

“Shush,” Todoroki says. “I want to sleep. You’ve worn me out. For once in your life, sit still and go to sleep.”

Midoriya settles back into the pillows as much as he can. This bed is far, far softer than his and it
smells like Todoroki, the faintest traces of mint and a wood fire. It will be absolutely impossible to
fall asleep in the bed of his prince, Midoriya thinks. He doesn’t count on the exhaustion of fighting
and running and playing taking its toll on him, and before he knows it, he’s snoring softly with
Todoroki beside him.

“—ku. Deku. Oh dear, he’s really gone, isn’t he?”

“Deku!”

Midoriya snaps to attention when Chiyo shouts straight into his ear. “Yes, ma’am!” he says, sitting
straight up. “Chiyo-san, what’s wrong?”

She waves a ladle in his face. “You drifted off when Chef was talking to you. Pay attention to him
or your ass is going hungry for the night.”

“I’m actually not that hungry—”

“Attention, manservant!” she snaps, and turns back to her cooking, braid nearly whipping him
across the face.

“Sorry, Chef,” Midoriya says. “What was it you were saying?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Chef says. “Just that His Royal Highness has been looking livelier and
livelier these days. I heard you led him on quite the chase around the palace today.”

Midoriya scratches the back of his head. “Ah…yes. It was a bit of an impulsive decision, but I was
feeling…spirited. I’m fortunate that he didn’t choose to punish me.”

No, Midoriya had taken that task upon himself. When he woke up from his unexpected nap, he
found himself not just curled but latched onto Todoroki, face pressed into his neck and an arm
wrapped around his middle. He had been cuddling Todoroki like it was no big deal, like Todoroki
didn’t hate being touched. Like someone of Midoriya’s status could be permitted to get so close to
a member of royalty without their permission. It had taken careful extrication to remove himself
from Todoroki without waking the prince.

And then, he had had nothing but time in which to torture himself over the events of the morning as
Todoroki napped throughout most of the day.

I doubt I will ever truly have you.

How could Midoriya have been so stupid? Declarations like I will always serve you and Only for
you were empty promises. Somewhere in the middle of sparring, Midoriya had forgotten where his
loyalties truly lay. He was a Yuuein spy; born of Yuuei, sworn to Yuuei, spying for Yuuei. In the
end, he would always have to betray Todoroki. And somehow, Todoroki knew it.

I doubt I will ever truly have you.

Of course he would never have Midoriya. Midoriya was operating with a motive separate from
helping Todoroki thwart King Enji’s plans. At the moment, their goals coincided, but as soon as
they diverged, Midoriya would leave him. It had been that way from the beginning. He had known that going in. It hadn’t bothered him.

But that was before Todoroki truly came into play. Before he dug his way into Midoriya’s heart and made his home there. If Midoriya had betrayed Todoroki by luring him in with promises of friendship and trust, then he had also betrayed himself, for he wanted those same things from Todoroki. He hadn’t meant to become someone important to Todoroki, nor for Todoroki to become someone important to him, but now that it had happened, they were both royally screwed.

He should pull away. He should distance himself from Todoroki before they became irreplaceable to each other and their parting would hurt even more. He should put an end to this, only interact with Todoroki in order to secure the safety of the Five Kingdoms. But Todoroki would know. And he would not allow it.

“...It’s funny, you know,” Chef is saying. “Before you came, His Royal Highness never really had anyone. Yaoyorozu-san, perhaps, but she was often busy as captain of his guard. He didn’t smile much outside of his polite interactions with the people of this palace when he needed to.

“But now, he’s shining brighter. He yells at you, he chases you around the palace, he acts more like a human being and less like a machine. He’s even found a potential suitor in Her Royal Highness Uraraka-sama. I truly believe that none of this would have been possible without you.”

Chef’s confession only makes the pit in Midoriya’s stomach grow larger. He ducks his head. “I’m not as great as you say,” he protests. “I mostly get under foot and annoy him.”

Midoriya is prodded in the back by a tray. He turns around and Chiyo shoves a tray of two bowls of stew and a couple rolls of bread into his hands.

“Chef is right,” she says. “You’re dumb as a doornail sometimes, but you’ve done right by our prince. We won’t forget that.”

Midoriya swallows.

Chiyo makes a shooing motion. “Go on, get. I don’t want to see me stew going cold because you’re so moved by our words. And he sure as hell won’t appreciate it.”

Midoriya swallows.

Midoriya leaves after bowing to both of them.

Todoroki is right where Midoriya left him: doing paperwork at his desk. He’s picturesque in the candlelight, quill in hand as he writes letters and lists of tasks in preparation for Fuyumi’s ball. When Midoriya walks through the door, his eyes flicker up to him and then back to his work. Midoriya sets the stew and roll on the edge of the desk and then retires to his own bed to have his dinner.

Todoroki lasts another ten minutes before he lets out a long sigh and presses his forehead to the wood of his desk. “Please tell me the stew is poisoned,” he mumbles.

Midoriya frowns at his empty bowl. “Well, I certainly hope not.”

“I do,” Todoroki grumbles. “This paperwork is downright hellish. If I get poisoned then I’ll even the king himself won’t be able to force anymore of these menial tasks down my throat. My god, don’t we have people for this?”

He looks up, then cranes his neck to stare at Midoriya. “You’re people.”
Midoriya raises an eyebrow. “You want to task me with the job of organizing your sister’s suitor ball? The very one you’re trying to clandestinely sabotage?”

“At this point you could hardly call changing the color of tablecloths and flowers ‘sabotage,’” Todoroki says.

“In any case, don’t you think it’d be obvious that the letters were written in another’s handwriting?” Midoriya says. “You have a very distinct penmanship.”

“It would have my seal, though,” Todoroki says.

“It would look like I forged the documents,” Midoriya says, rolling his eyes. “I’d be hung.”

“I would put forth testimony in your defense,” Todoroki grumbles. “Aren’t you supposed to look after me?”

“I am,” Midoriya says. “Eat your stew.”

“Yes, nanny,” Todoroki mutters, thinking Midoriya can’t hear him.

Midoriya doesn’t mean to smile. He definitely doesn’t mean to laugh, but a sound escapes him nonetheless.

Todoroki stares at him. “You’re laughing?”

“I can’t help it,” Midoriya says, choking down his laughter but unable to stop the smile that splits his face. “I love your petulant, childish side. It humanizes you nicely.”

Todoroki chucks a ball of parchment at his head.

“Oh, real mature,” Midoriya says, still smiling.

“I don’t remember asking for your input,” Todoroki says. He keeps brushing hair out of his eyes so that he can scowl at Midoriya. It’s gotten rather long by now—Todoroki had been too busy lately to get a haircut and by now it’s running past his shoulders. He scowls harder when the stray hairs refuse to stay back.

“Here,” Midoriya says. He climbs off his bed and onto Todoroki’s, patting the space in front of him. “I’ll take care of it.”

Todoroki narrows his eyes, but rises from his desk and crawls onto the bed, presenting his back to Midoriya. Midoriya yanks a tassel from one of his blankets and puts it in his mouth. Then, he reaches forward to pull Todoroki’s hair back. When his fingers light on Todoroki’s skin, Todoroki shifts in place.

“Sorry,” Midoriya says immediately. “Is this okay?”


Midoriya presses his fingers down harder this time, letting Todoroki know exactly what he’s doing. He combs his fingers through Todoroki’s hair, gathering the strands in his hands and curling his fingers around the bunch. Todoroki’s bangs still flop in his face, but it’s a marked improvement over the mess from before. He gives a few final combs through Todoroki’s hair and then ties the gathered hair together with the tassel.

“It’s not ideal,” Midoriya says. “But it’ll do for now.”
Todoroki turns to him. “Well? How do I look?”

Midoriya swallows around the tightness in his throat. There’s nothing to stop Todoroki’s eyes from burning into his now. *You look like a king*, Midoriya thinks. *You look fit to rule.*

“It suits you,” he says instead.

“Of course it does,” Todoroki says. He gives his head a flick, and his ponytail whips back and forth.

“Now you can work without it in your face,” Midoriya says.

“Work? Not a chance in hell,” Todoroki says, flopping on his back.

“Todoroki-sama…” Midoriya sighs.

“No, none of that,” Todoroki says. “I am done for the night and will hear no more protests.”

Midoriya shakes his head but doesn’t protest. “Shall I put out the lights, then?”

Todoroki thinks it over. “The main ones, yes. But leave the candle tray by my bedside—and don’t leave. I’m not done with you just yet.”

Midoriya does as he is bid. When he returns to Todoroki’s side, Todoroki has his arms crossed under his head and there’s a Midoriya-sized space at his side. Midoriya takes up his position and waits for Todoroki to speak.

“Tell me about Yuuei,” Todoroki says.


“I have enough practical knowledge for three princes,” Todoroki says. “No, I want to hear about your Yuuei.”

“Alright,” Midoriya says. And he tells him.

Midoriya starts out by telling him about the village where he grew up. They’re farmers and loggers, mainly, a little community in the dip between forested hills. Midoriya knows everyone by name and they trade with each other rather than pay for goods and services, saving their money for the big cities. The current All Might came from their ranks, becoming a local hero between the surrounding villages and finally selected by the previous All Might to become her successor. All of that was before he was born, though.

His mother worked for the Royal Archives as a librarian and they were one of the few families who didn’t farm or log. Midoriya’s father was out of the picture, so he didn’t bother telling Todoroki about him. He also leaves out the part about the Amity Ball and instead jumps straight into how his mother managed to get him a job as a page when he was twelve and how he gradually worked up the ranks until he was eventually selected to come to Endeavor as a gift to the Crown Prince.

The entire time, Todoroki watches him. Midoriya is only peripherally aware of Todoroki’s observation, too invested in his story. He knows he’s smiling, but it’s been a long time since he’s had the luxury to think of him and he misses it. Telling Todoroki about his mother’s pie and festival nights with the surrounding villages is bittersweet.
“You miss them,” Todoroki murmurs.

Midoriya stares at his hands. “I do,” he says.

Todoroki is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “When all of this is over, you should return home to Yuuei.”

Midoriya could laugh. He wants to laugh. It’s perfect—it’s so perfect that Todoroki is giving him the out he needs without him having to ask for it. As soon as they save the Five Kingdoms, Midoriya has a free pass to return to Yuuei, where he belongs. He won’t have to fess up to Todoroki about being a spy; he won’t need All Might to come rescue him. He can just walk out and leave Todoroki behind. This was Todoroki’s answer to *I doubt I will ever have you*.

Yeah, right.

Midoriya meets Todoroki’s eyes. Todoroki doesn’t look sad, even, at the prospect of losing Midoriya. He looks resigned, like he knows he will never be what Midoriya talks about with such a soft smile on his face.

Midoriya doesn’t know much. He doesn’t know how this plan will end. He doesn’t know if getting close to Todoroki was a bad idea, or if continuing to do so would rip them apart. He doesn’t know if All Might would disapprove of his actions. He really doesn’t know anything, except that he does not want to be the one that puts that look on Todoroki’s face.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Midoriya whispers.

*I’m sorry, All Might. I don’t have any other answer.*

“I don’t particularly care if you believe me or not,” he says. “I’m with you to the end, Todoroki-sama, as long as you’ll have me. I’ll give you everything I have to give, until it is enough. Until you can see that I mean it.”

Todoroki closes his eyes. “I will look forward to it, then.”

*Don’t fall,* Tsuyu had said.

*I’m sorry, Tsuyu,* Midoriya thinks. *I’m tired of pretending like I haven’t already fallen.*

Midoriya tells Todoroki stories of his childhood, of explorations into the forests, of ghosts in All Might’s mansion, of dreaming that one day, he would be able to change the world like All Might had. He spills out every dream and hope and story he has to share, long after Todoroki has fallen asleep.

He falls in those slow moments, as much as any other. He fell when Todoroki sat at his desk, argumentative and grumpy. He fell when he walked at Todoroki's side, when Todoroki carried himself like a true king-to-be. He fell when they exchanged blows under the sun and plans under the moon, together, always together. He fell whenever Todoroki looked at him, whenever Todoroki spoke to him, because he had never had this before. Friends, yes. Friends that trusted him as deep as a scar, that relied on him like they relied on their feet to walk, no.

When he falls, Midoriya falls *hard.*
next chapter: fuyumi’s ball! IIDA!! dancing?!?!?
*poses* guess who's back for the second time in the same week! this fic is really speaking to me for some reason, so i've been feeling super compelled to work on it. and as such, i wrote 25,000 words in like...five days LMAO. i won't say i'm going on hiatus after this, but i do have about three fics i have to work on before this one, so you won't be seeing anything until mid-january most likely. it's a whopper though!

AND MERRY CHRISTMAS I NEARLY FORGOT DHBSDBSHSJ

DOUBLE ART LINKS!!!

HINA APPRECIATION SECTION: hina is basically my official p&p illustrator so please, PLEASE give her some love (because i certainly love her to death!) Ponytail Prince on his throne (kill me), Very Prominent Ponytail Prince, animation of the chase scene from chapter 10 (so adorable), A Comic About Sword Spying With Literally The Most Beautiful Todo I've Ever, Archer Prince Todo Painting (not technically p&p but i made it my phone bg ok it's amazing), Painted comic of todoroki and midoriya's first meeting (can't believe it's real), a few traditional todorokis

And apparently i forgot to add Ura+The Twin Swords Painting that hina drew as well as a collection of an uraraka portrait, endeavor scenery (me, screaming), and a nervous bby deku, A Lot Of Doodles And A Very Sad Comic, Gorgeous Yaomomo, And finally hina's take on the midoriya seduction scene with another. fucking. cute. comic of them.

My friend gerri does absolutely amazing cosplay of prince todoroki so HERE PLEASE LOOK

I love masgotcha's style and they did some lovely Older!Tododekus

Squiridiestquad diD A Forehead Kiss AAAAA

Toby's Art Is So Cute Please Look At These Kids

From Chapter 10: Nortess Illustrated The Sword Fighting Scene!!

Animu-TM drew me a lovely Colored Deku

Okay This Is Hands-Down The Most Beautiful URA I've Ever Laid Eyes On Just Wow

Absolutely Wonderful And Flowy Ura by rainbowderpyarts! And Also The Seduction Scene By Midoriya
“Deku, if you don’t focus, you’re never going to get it,” Tooru says, offering him a patient smile.

“It’s hard to focus when—”

“I know,” she says. “I’ve seen what he looks like when he comes back from those training trips. I understand why you’re worried. But you can’t do anything for him right now. So focus.”

Midoriya sighs. “Are you sure this is necessary? I mean Ojiro-san already taught me—”

Tooru interrupts him again. “Mashirao-san taught you how to dance for courtiers and nobility, not for royalty and certainly not for a ball like this.”

“Oh, ‘Mashirao-san’ is it?” Midoriya says, grinning.

Tooru punches him in the shoulder. “This isn’t about me, you snot. It’s about you and him.”
Midoriya thinks, not for the first time, that maybe this is a bad idea. It had been a spur of the moment decision for him, and while he couldn’t bring himself to regret his choice, he wasn’t in exactly the most comfortable of positions now.

All because of Todoroki’s ceaseless complaining.

When they were a month out from Fuyumi’s ball, Midoriya walked in on Todoroki having a spirited argument with Ojiro, of all people. Ojiro’s arms were crossed tightly, his only defense against an irate, pacing, Todoroki.

“T’m telling you; it’s tradition,” Ojiro said in the tone of voice of someone who had made this same argument for the past thirty minutes and was now tiring of repeating himself.

“It’s a pain in my ass, is what it is,” Todoroki snapped. “I don’t want them.”

“You have to,” Ojiro said. “There’s no room for argument. His Majesty would be most displeased if you are the only one without dancers.”

“What’s this about dancers?” Midoriya said, biting into an apple. He climbed onto Todoroki’s bed and crossed his legs. Ojiro gave him a bit of a bug-eyed stare and too late Midoriya remembered that he probably wasn’t supposed to be so casual about climbing into the prince’s bed. Oh well.

“Ojiro has it in his head that I need to put aside my personal preference for the sake of tradition,” Todoroki said.

“Seems reasonable,” Midoriya said.

Ojiro mouthed a ‘thank you’ and opened his mouth to add something, but Todoroki cut him off.

“The tradition is to have a harem of dancers crawling all over me in a display of the riches of Endeavor, purely as an intimidation tactic meant to make the visiting countries feel poorer than they are,” Todoroki said. “And I had made my discomfort for any of my household to touch me very clear, or so I thought.”

“Oh,” Midoriya said. “That’s a little different, then.”

“His Majesty will have a cow if you don’t go through with this,” Ojiro said. “Can’t you bear it for a single night?”

“Suffer an indignity for the sake of my father’s amusement?” Todoroki said. “I’d rather die.”

He probably wasn’t joking.

“You’ll look out of place and strange in front of our foreign guests,” Ojiro warned.

“What’s one more rumor?” Todoroki countered. “I don’t care if they think me incapable of desire.”

“His Majesty will use this against you—“

“Then I will make a show of directing my dancers to a guest of my choosing, as a gift.”

“Listen, I will handpick them; they will be instructed not to lay a finger on you.”

“No.”

“I’ll do it,” Midoriya said, feeling his stomach sink as he spoke.
Ojiro and Todoroki looked at him.

Midoriya shrugged his shoulders. “Ojiro-san and Tooru can give me a tune-up in dancing. Todoroki-sama, if it’s just me, do you think you could stand watching a dance? It can’t possibly be unheard of to favor one dancer, or even a manservant.”

“It isn’t,” Ojiro said slowly. “It would imply…a certain arrangement.”

“Nothing we haven’t heard before,” Todoroki said. He gave Midoriya a thoughtful once-over.

“What?” Midoriya said. “Don’t think I’m up for the challenge?”

“Don’t embarrass me,” Todoroki said, half-smiling, and that was as close to acquiescence as they were going to get.

“It’s not easy,” Ojiro warned. “And you’ll have to touch Todoroki-sama. I don’t think you’ll be able to get away with a non-tactile performance.”

Midoriya almost said something along the lines of ‘that’s no problem, we’re used to it.’ Had he spoken those words allowed, he’s not quite sure Todoroki wouldn’t char him alive for implying something. Or maybe he would just groan and press his forehead against the post of his bed. Midoriya wasn’t sure there was much he could do to incur Todoroki’s wrath at this point. The thought was unsettling.

“We’ve sparred before,” he said instead. “I won’t flinch if I have to touch him—and I don’t think he will flinch if I touch him either.” He looked at Todoroki. “It means nothing, right?”

Todoroki smiled at him.

“Just make sure it looks like something,” Ojiro muttered. “I’ll have no qualms with this arrangement as long as you let Tooru teach you what you need to know. You’ll be the one solely in charge of making Todoroki-sama look good; I hope you’re prepared for that.”

Midoriya wondered if he was a little bitter he didn’t get to show off the dancers promised to Todoroki. “Aye, aye,” Midoriya replied, saluting Ojiro. And that was that.

Clearly, he didn’t think it through enough.

Of course, Midoriya had received training in dance when Ojiro first took the servants in. It had just been the basics—how to swing his body and move in time to the music from arms to fingertips. It had to have been close to a year since he first arrived at the palace and he hadn’t needed to use his skills since that first training, so he was understandably rusty.

Tooru had no trouble getting him up to speed. She was assigned his personal tutor as the most skilled of the palace dancers. Midoriya was a quick study and more than that, he actually enjoyed learning to dance. His reflection in the mirror was most pleasing when he pulled off a certain move. He jumped at Tooru’s challenges and picked up on the extra skills she taught him without trouble.

“Good,” Tooru had said. “You can dance for a performance. Now you learn how to dance for a ball.”

Midoriya had been expecting ballroom. That was not the case.

Of course, the nobility and royalty would dance ballroom when the time came. They would keep an appropriate distance and maintain the dignity of the upper classes. But the ballroom floor was
not the only place people danced.

In Endeavor, wealth was the most prized commodity. It was apparent in their dress, in their food, in their architecture. Any way that Endeavorans could show that they had the best money could buy would be flaunted at the opportune moment. That wealth extended to people, as well. Endeavorans had to have the most lauded hospitality, the most obsequious servants, the most enamoring dancers. And that meant that Endeavoran dancers had to entertain on a personal level as well as the more detached performances.

Only the best would be selected for the members of royalty attending the ball. And naturally, Endeavoran royalty also had to have the best of the best.

“What the hell does ‘personal’ dancing even mean?” Midoriya mutters.

Tooru hears him. She lowers her arms from a particularly striking pose. “Mashirao-san didn’t tell you?”

“He told me I have to touch Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says. “I imagine that means a sensual performance, but I haven’t quite figured how I’m supposed to manage that when he’s up the steps on his throne.”

“Oh, they’ll be on the same level as the dancers,” Tooru says. “It’s one of the only times it happens. But we invite them to a taste of our world and by accepting, they lower themselves to our level.”

“That doesn’t sound very proper,” Midoriya says.

“No, not at all,” Tooru agrees cheerfully. “Deku…you didn’t know? You don’t know the importance of this dance?”

Midoriya shakes his head.

“Hmm…well, if you ask someone noble they would never admit to it, but.” She twirls as she talks, each sweep of her arm or step across the room fluid and flawless. “The dancer takes control of their master, for just a night.”

She sinks into an effortless split. “We lead them, take them on an adventure. Show them just a taste of what they want, but can’t have. You will control Todoroki-sama, not the other way around.”

“Don’t think he’d like that very much,” Midoriya mutters, the words submit to me playing on repeat at the edge of his consciousness. Midoriya couldn’t make him do anything he didn’t want to do, and he definitely didn’t want to be danced in front of.

(Another memory plays out before him, though. A shadowed hallway, the press of their bodies, Todoroki’s shallow breathing and his back against a wall, tilting his head in kind to Midoriya’s so he could—

Todoroki had said Midoriya’s seduction worked, hadn’t he?)

“Just give in to me,” Midoriya murmurs. “Yeah, right. Like I could say that to him again, ever.”

“What was that?” Tooru asks.

“Nothing,” Midoriya says. “Just trying to imagine Todoroki-sama let anyone have their way with him and failing completely.”
Tooru smiles. “It won’t be as hard as you think it’ll be. Every man wants to forfeit control, on one level or another. You just need to pluck the right chord.” She quirks her lips. “Deku, are you by chance attracted to girls?”


“Take a seat,” Tooru says, standing up and pointing to a chair off the side of a column.

Dumbfounded, Midoriya does as instructed.

“I’ll show you,” Tooru says. “I’ll show you that it’s not impossible.” She nods to the musicians in the corner of the room who dutifully play a song different from the one Midoriya and Tooru had been dancing to before. This one is deeper, slinking into Midoriya’s core and making him want to move.

Tooru moves for him. She is slow and deliberate, none of the agility and energy she put into her usual dancing. This song sinks into her body and moves her, hips swaying and carrying the motion through her arms and down to her legs. She reminds Midoriya of running water or sunlight filtering in through the leaves of a tree. Her feet are light and never in one place for too long. This is the type of show she would put on for a noble who asked for her specifically.

Midoriya feels the exact moment the dance changes.

Tooru sinks to the floor so quickly that Midoriya’s heart jumps but then her eyes lock on his and he doesn’t have time to worry. Her movements as she rises again are the same through the core of her body, but now she applies her hands, running through her hair and tugging at it, sliding them over her breasts and down her curves, ending at her thighs. She spreads her fingers and lingers in all the places Midoriya’s mind would linger if he had been thinking of her like that. Dirty. But with the way she’s moving, it’s impossible not to think of her in a dirty way.

Her eyes never leave his. He can’t always keep eye contact, dropping down to the way she makes love through dancing, and then back up when he catches himself. He can’t feel his cheeks from how hot they burn.

And then, she’s moving towards him.

Midoriya wants to protest, wants to make some kind of noise like no please I’m literally on the edge of—but he holds it in. Tooru walks past him anyway, her fingers dragging along the curve of his jaw. Then she’s behind him, sliding her hands down his chest and pressing against his back, her lips at his ear, brushing the shell of it. She runs her hands up him again, this time sliding them into his hair and tugging, forcing Midoriya to look up at her so she can just barely brush her lips against his.

Then he’s free again and she’s walking back around front. And then she—she lifts one leg over his—and then she—straddles him—in his lap—and she moves her hips against his, holding his chin as he lets out the most pathetic noise he’s ever made in his life.

“Well,” Tooru says brightly, hopping off his lap. “It goes something like that.”

“Buh?” Midoriya says.

“I’ll wait for your brain to come back online,” she says, doing a horrendous job hiding a smirk.

“That’s what you want me to do?” Midoriya asks hollowly. “You want me—that?”
“Got your dick hard, didn’t it?” She’s definitely smirking now.

“Yes, I would think so,” Midoriya sputters. “I don’t think there’s a man on this planet who wouldn’t react to that.”

“Wouldn’t you like to do that to Todoroki-sama?” Tooru asks.

Caught off guard, Midoriya answers with complete honesty. “Yes,” he rasps.

Then comes to his senses. “Wait, no. No, no, no; a million times no. You want me to do that to him? To the Crown Prince of Endeavor? If Todoroki-sama doesn’t kill me, His Majesty definitely will.”

“Bah,” Tooru says. “Don’t be a spoilsport. It’s the name of the game. Someone will be in His Majesty’s lap, too.”

“Oh my god,” Midoriya says. “You really want me to do it. You really want me to—to give him a lap dance.”

Tooru looks at him very, very hard. “You really haven’t slept with him, have you?”

Midoriya throws his hands up in the air. “No! And I can’t believe it took me having a mild anxiety attack over even contemplating sitting in his lap for you to realize this!”

“You’ve been pining this whole time,” she says.

“That’s,” Midoriya says. “No, it’s not—it’s not like that. It’s…” He trails off. What? It’s not what it looks like? Of course it is. He’s in love with Todoroki. And will continue to pine against the advisement of pretty much anyone who came into contact with him, including Todoroki himself.

“Why did you volunteer for this,” Tooru asks, “if it’s only going to hurt you?”

Midoriya cards his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know. He seemed distressed that someone else might get in his space and I thought—we’re comfortable with each other, so I thought I could ease some of the burden by taking up this role.” He looks at Tooru. “It’s fine. I’m fine with it.”

She looks like she wants to protest, so Midoriya goes on. “I’m not so pathetic that I need you to take pity on me. I recognize that this is a fruitless endeavor. I never wanted to…with him. But he’s impossible not to love. I will continue to serve him and be whatever he needs. My feelings don’t matter.”

“Alright,” Tooru says. “I’ll trust your judgement. And…” She smiles. “Well, it’s cheating. But I think you can get him to fall just a little in love with you. At least for a night, he won’t be able to take his eyes off of you.”

Midoriya imagines touching Todoroki like Tooru touched him. He knows what Todoroki’s skin feels like, what his hair feels like; he knows what it means to touch Todoroki Shouto. But he doesn’t know what Todoroki’s cheeks feel like when they’re hot to the touch. He knows a flushed Todoroki, but he doesn’t know a flushed Todoroki in front of hundreds. He knows what it means to seduce Todoroki, but not what it means to be allowed to seduce Todoroki.

He thinks, if he plays his cards right, he might get to know what Todoroki’s lips feel like against his.

…Well, what the hell. He was in too deep to back out now.

Tooru beams at him for a moment before slipping back into teacher mode. “Remember, you are not just a dancer—you are to become the living embodiment of sex. Every motion, every facial expression, everything you do should be dripping in sex appeal. It’s your job to play to your master’s fantasy—whether or not he knows it.”

“Oh, shit,” Midoriya says. “Speaking of fantasies, do we even know if Todoroki likes men?”

“Hmm…that’s tricky,” Tooru says. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him show interest in another human being that wasn’t purely business. Oh, that princess, maybe?”

“That was definitely business,” Midoriya says. He groans and presses his face into his hands. “How am I supposed to do any of this, Tooru? I don’t know if I’m even his type and even then, I don’t have sex appeal.”

“Everyone has sex appeal,” Tooru says. “There’s just a barrier of inhibition and embarrassment that holds them back.” She puts a hand on his shoulder. “I promise you can do this.”

“How?” Midoriya cries.

“Suggestion,” Tooru says. “It’s all about suggestion. You’re not actually going to fuck him; you’re going to suggest that you could, and that if you did, he would be very satisfied.”


Tooru runs a finger along Midoriya’s nape, barely a tickle of touch. It sends a wave of goosebumps across his skin.

“How is your training with that dancer going?” Todoroki asks, a week before the ball.

Midoriya responds with a groan and buries his face in his pillow.

“That bad, huh,” Todoroki says. “Why did you volunteer for the position, if you weren’t up for it?”

“I am,” Midoriya says. “It’s just…unorthodox. And…she’s a terrifyingly hands-on teacher.” Midoriya decides to spare Todoroki the details of how he had come very close to having sex with her on no less than five occasions and that even though she was nothing but a very good friend to him, his sexual frustration at being repeatedly shut down was the worst it had been since he left Yuuei.

“Is it difficult?” Todoroki asks.


“You don’t have to do it.”

“At this point, yes, I do,” Midoriya sighs. “It’d be a rush job to get another dancer ready and I
already know what to do.” He glances at Todoroki, slouched over his desk with his own last-minute plans. “Why does it sound like you’re trying to talk me out of it?”

“You’re uncomfortable,” Todoroki says. “And this is not part of your usual tasks. I wanted to make sure you’re not in over your head.”

*I’d be more worried about yourself, with what Tooru has me practicing.* “I’m fine.”

“Don’t embarrass me,” Todoroki says. “I won’t be pleased if you’re the worst dancer in the room because of your stubborn will to see this through.”

Well, that was insulting. “Do you have an aversion to me touching you?” he asks.

“Not particularly.”

“Then you needn’t be worrying about my skills,” Midoriya says. “I guarantee it will be a satisfactory performance.”

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“You’re nervous? Why?” Todoroki doesn’t look at Midoriya when he addresses him, too busy pouring over his jewelry in search of the perfect ring—all silver, this time. His mother’s keepsake is already on his hand and he twists it absent-mindedly.

“Not sure,” Midoriya says, brushing his hands down his clothes. “I guess because we have a new variable in the equation?” He’s wearing a modest silver chiton this time, one that went all the way to the floor with a full sleeve on his left arm and a bare right arm, tied at the waist with a silver sash. Todoroki has him wearing a stringy diamond choker tight around his neck and diamonds in his ears. He’s supposed to be silver and subtly beautiful to suit Ingenium’s more humble tastes.

“Tenya-san?” Todoroki says. “Don’t worry; Ochako-san has made the first move, remember? He’ll be expecting us. And I have a plan to deal with him. Thanks to my sister, we will have freedom to move about the ball and converse with others, as all the focus will be on her.”

“Well, yes, he’s a potential problem…” Midoriya trails off.

Todoroki pauses in his search. Turns to Midoriya. “Could it be that *Fuyumi* is the reason you’re nervous?”

Midoriya can’t meet his eyes. How, exactly, do you tell your prince that after meeting both him and his father, he’s not sure he’ll survive being in a room with yet another Todoroki? She would probably see right through him, see that he’s a spy, see that he’s lusting after her little brother—oh god, what if she had sisterly instincts? Midoriya was walking into a death trap.

He clears his throat. ‘I’m sure Her Highness—”

“Fuyumi is nothing like me,” Todoroki says, hiding a smile behind his hand. “If that’s what you were concerned about.”

Midoriya takes a moment to get his heartbeat back under control at that tiny, endearing gesture. Since when were they close enough to read each other so easily? Then he realizes that in a way, he
had insulted Todoroki. “Oh! No, that’s not—”

“You’re an open book, Deku,” Todoroki says, amused. He hooks a finger under Midoriya’s choker and pulls gently. Midoriya moves toward him easily. “Remember to leave that attitude behind, my devoted subject.”

“I am devoted,” Midoriya mutters. He makes the mistake of looking at Todoroki’s lips.

“See? That’s the kind of attitude that’s going to get you in trouble with Fuyumi,” Todoroki says. He releases Midoriya’s choker and goes for his earring instead, pinching Midoriya’s ear lobe between thumb and forefinger. “She won’t take lightly to insubordination towards her little brother.”

So she did have sisterly instincts… “All I’m saying is that I think one Todoroki-sama is all we need in the world,” Midoriya says. He’s a little light-headed from Todoroki’s handling of him. “What… what are you doing, by the way?”

“Deciding,” Todoroki says. “I’ll go with diamonds. It’ll make you look like an accessory, but I want him to underestimate you anyway.” He turns back to his collection of rings and picks out a couple studded with diamonds.

“You’re such a…a prince,” Midoriya says. His ears burn.

“Indeed,” Todoroki says. “Shall we?”

They pick up Yaoyorozu on the way to the Great Hall where the ball will be held. She gives Todoroki a cursory glance over. “Her Highness is getting married, not dying,” she says.

Todoroki is dressed in the same outfit he was wearing when Midoriya first met him—black from head to toe and laced tightly at the wrists and neck. He was showing as little skin as possible, only in his face, really. And from the silver circlet on the crown of his head, fell a black veil disguising his scarring. He really did look set for a funeral—and amongst the partygoers, he would stand out as intimidating. Probably what he wanted.

“I have a mission, Momo,” he says. “If I wanted to mingle with the guests and not scare the shit out of the Iida’s youngest, I would be dressed for a party.”

“Is that why you wore that to greet me?” Midoriya asks. “To intimidate me?”

“Hush, Deku,” Todoroki says. “Nobody likes a peanut gallery.” Which was his way of saying yes, shut up.

“You’ll get the job done,” Yaoyorozu says. “Hope you don’t scare him off completely.”

“Not to worry,” Todoroki says. “I have a plan.”

It’s the second time he’s said this, and now Midoriya starts to worry in earnest, mostly for the sake of this poor prince.

Midoriya hadn’t needed to enter the Great Hall since his arrival, so he only knew of its location and not what the place itself looked like. When Yaoyorozu pushes open the doors to the room, though, Midoriya can’t keep in a gasp.

The room is golden. Literally, the entire room is covered in gold leaf, from the columns to the crown molding, to the frames of the glass doors that lead out to the gardens. The walls are covered
with paintings of Endeavor’s countryside—the endless grasslands to the north, the blue mountains to the east, the coasts of the south, and the thick, green forests of central Endeavor that they were most well-known for. The ceiling is painted with scenes from Endeavor’s founding—battles on horseback, spears and swords flying, ending in the treaty between the Five Kings that formed the Five Kingdoms at the center of the vaulted ceiling. And massive, golden chandeliers set ablaze all across the room and reflecting of the polished stone floor.

“It is quite a sight,” Yaoyorozu says, misinterpreting Midoriya’s gasp.

But Midoriya isn’t in shock because of the beauty of the Great Hall, but rather because this is the place the Amity Ball was held ten years ago. He remembers these paintings. He remembers these chandeliers. He remembers the gardens—the white gazebo—Todoroki’s hand in his—

“We’ve stared long enough, don’t you think?” Todoroki says. Midoriya flinches.

“Wow, jealous of a room, are we?” Yaoyorozu teases.

“If Deku stared at me like he just stared at this room, I would have tossed him out of my service months ago,” Todoroki grunts. He hails one of the servants. “Is Fuyumi here yet?”

“Not yet, Your Royal Highness,” the servant says, bowing.

“Well, father isn’t here yet either, so I suppose it’s at least one win,” Todoroki says, turning back to his companions.

Midoriya is still peering around the room. Tables are set up for light food and desserts and the center of the Great Hall is cleared for a ballroom floor. Towards the back of the room are three thrones—one set forward, one on the same level as the first set behind it, and another elevated next to the second. Midoriya does not identify a cushion for him to kneel next to Todoroki’s throne on the floor and is alarmed. His sandals were comfortable, but not comfortable enough to stand the whole night.

“Ah, Deku,” Todoroki says. “We won’t be sitting much tonight. I’ll be mingling until I can get Tenya-san alone and then I will put into action my plan.”

There it is again, his ‘plan.’ “I’m starting to get a little worried about this ‘plan,’” Midoriya says. Todoroki opens his mouth to reply, but before he can get a word out, there’s a tentative “Shouto?” from behind them.


The woman who can only be Fuyumi dashes towards Todoroki, arms held out wide, and embraces him in a hug that has him taking two steps back. “Shouto, it’s been ages,” she says, smile wobbling.

“Welcome home, Fuyumi,” Todoroki says. And he smiles.

Midoriya sinks down onto one knee, head bowed. Yaoyorozu bows deeply from her waist.


Yaoyorozu rises, also smiling. “What can I say? Chef is out to fatten me up.”

Fuyumi grins. “You’ll never find a wife like that.”
“Ha! About that…”

_Ah. So she knew Yaoyorozu was a lesbian._ Midoriya is still trying to puzzle out the relationship between the three of them. He peeks upwards. Fuyumi is in a red dress reminisce of Uraraka’s. However, while Uraraka’s was sleek and predatory, Fuyumi is wearing a ball gown that screams _dance with me._ It’s puffy and studded with diamonds, slimming up past her waist only to end with a neckpiece of feathers emanating up from her chest. Her white hair—with streaks of red, Midoriya notes—is pulled up into a bun with a phoenix comb as an accessory, matching the phoenix amulet around her neck. She looks like a tried and true Todoroki.

“May I introduce my manservant, Deku,” Todoroki says. “I don’t believe you two are acquainted.”

“It is an honor,” Midoriya says, not daring to look up. If she’s as strict as Todoroki says she is, it’s in his best interests to be as respectful as possible.

“Oh dear!” Fuyumi says. “Where are my manners? It’s a pleasure to meet you, Deku. From what I’ve heard, you’ve done a wonderful job looking after my brother.”

_…Uh?_

Midoriya rises, offering Fuyumi a smile and meeting her eyes, attempting to decipher any ulterior motives. No, she appears to be sincere. No warning signs from Yaoyorozu or Todoroki either. What the hell?

“If I can be of service to you, please let me know,” Midoriya says, dipping his head.

Fuyumi shakes her head, still smiling. “Just taking care of Shouto is enough. Thank you.”

_She looks like a Todoroki, carries herself like a Todoroki, but could it be that she’s just a genuinely kind person?_

Fuyumi turns to talk to Todoroki about her home and the ride to the capital and Todoroki turns his full attention on her. Midoriya senses that they are not welcome, and in the next moment Yaoyorozu has a hand at his back, leading him to the refreshments.

Midoriya picks up something with pineapple on it absentmindedly, still shooting glances back at the Todoroki siblings, smiling and holding conversation like a _normal_ pair of siblings.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Yaoyorozu says.

“Her Highness is…unexpected,” Midoriya says. “Unexpected in, she’s exactly what I would imagine a princess to be like. And yet she’s related to _them._”

“Her Highness is a blessing, that’s for sure,” Yaoyorozu says. “Amongst all the craziness of Todoroki-sama and His Majesty and then their older siblings more or less estranged, Todoroki Fuyumi is a breath of fresh air.”

“Estranged?” Midoriya asks, sticking a fork in his mouth.

Yaoyorozu nods. “None of Todoroki-sama’s siblings are allowed to live in the palace—they can only come to visit. ‘They’re not worthy,’ or whatever bullshit _he_ likes to come up with. They live with cousins of the royal family in their manors. Ever since Todoroki-sama showed competence with his Quirk, the other siblings stopped coming for visits. Not like their parents noticed. Her Highness is the only one who kept coming.”
“Why?” Midoriya asks.

“Dunno,” Yaoyorozu says. “Probably just her personality. She’s the oldest and from what I understand she’s always been a caretaker. Still pretty funny that the one Todoroki-sama stole the throne from is the one he’s closest to.”

Ah. So that’s why Todoroki had assumed that Fuyumi would be the one married off to Iida Tenya; she was next in line for succession, as Iida himself was. They were a perfect match. Midoriya winces internally. Todoroki was going to have to find a damn good excuse to get Iida out of the marriage.

“Do you think she wants to get married to Iida?” Midoriya blurts out.

Yaoyorozu frowns. “I think she’s used to being a pawn. She’ll marry whoever His Majesty tells her to, even if Todoroki-sama asked her not to. She doesn’t realize how important her role is, and even if she did, I don’t think it would really be fair of us to ask her to marry someone else.”

Yeah. Iida was probably one of her best choices, if not her best choice overall. Todoroki had said something along the lines of ‘that bastard Kirishima won’t do his duty and show up to get married,’ so if Iida married Uraraka then…Fuyumi would have to marry beneath her. Midoriya’s heart goes out to her. Todoroki was sabotaging her life a second time, even if the first time wasn’t his fault.

“I don’t like the game of thrones,” Midoriya says.

“Hear, hear,” Yaoyorozu agrees. “Let’s get started on this wine, what say you?”

Midoriya can think of a lot worse things to do than get tipsy.

He’s on his second glass when Todoroki finally returns to them. His mood is buoyed, quite obviously. Midoriya had never really factored in such a thing as familial love when it came to Todoroki despite him having many siblings because…Todoroki. He didn’t really do lovey-dovey, and especially not with his family.

“I thought you said Her Highness wouldn’t take insubordination lightly,” Midoriya grumbles.

“She won’t,” Todoroki says. “She’d probably puff up her cheeks, stomp her feet, and maybe say ‘I’m disappointed in you.’”

“You and I need to have a chat about what the phrase ‘not lightly’ means.”

“You’ve clearly never seen Fuyumi disappointed in you,” Todoroki says. “One scolding and you’ll never do a bad thing again in your life.” Midoriya’s attempts to pick a fight fall on deaf ears. Todoroki is disgustingly happy to see his sister again. His neutral expression is almost smiling.

“How’s she doing?” Yaoyorozu asks.

“Well,” Todoroki says. “She’s teaching at a school for the nobility and has a vegetable garden on the side. She seems content. I have a feeling that her suitor will be moving to Endeavor rather than the other way around.”

Yaoyorozu bites her lip. “Did you tell her—”

“No,” Todoroki says. “The less she knows, the happier she will be. I want to keep this operation as quiet as possible.”
Yaoyorozu hands him a fresh glass of wine. “Then drink up. God knows you’ll need it.”

Midoriya is…buzzed by the time the suitors start making their appearances. Todoroki and King Enji—bathed in flames as usual—are seated in their respective thrones, Todoroki falling into his usual posture, one leg crossed over the other and leaning into his curled hand with his forefinger resting against his temple. Midoriya stands at his side, hands clasped in front of him. Yaoyorozu is absent, most likely in search of Ingenium’s people. King Enji is accompanied by his own Captain, a sinewy, weasel-faced man with a deep scar across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek. Not like King Enji needed servants when all the servants in the palace were expected to answer to him.

Todoroki assures Midoriya that he won’t be standing still for too long, just for the presentations of the suitors. As soon as they had made their greeting to Fuyumi and the rest of the royal family, Todoroki and Midoriya would be free to meddle with Iida. Fuyumi’s handmaidens knelt on cushions at her side, rising to accept the gifts from Fuyumi’s suitors, as was tradition, Todoroki tells Midoriya.

Todoroki’s actually a lot more talkative than Midoriya had expected him to be. Although he doesn’t shift from his relaxed position on the throne, he lists each of the suitors as they approach Fuyumi’s throne: their names, their bloodlines, their countries, what they specialize in, and what gifts they come bearing. He even explains the presence of female suitors, taking a gamble that Todoroki would be marrying a woman himself and therefore a same-sex arrangement with Fuyumi would be possible. Midoriya wonders if it’s Fuyumi herself who’s making Todoroki more talkative and then remembers that Todoroki has had one more glass of wine than him and everything makes sense. He hails for another wine and Midoriya plucks it off the server’s tray before Todoroki can get his hands on it.

Todoroki frowns. “That’s mine.”

“Is there a reason you’re trying to drink yourself to death before meeting His Highness?” Midoriya asks, swirling the glass.

“Yes,” Todoroki says, holding out a hand. Midoriya hands it over reluctantly.

He takes a healthy sip of the wine. “I am lowering my inhibitions.”

“If I may voice a concern,” Midoriya says.

“By all means,” Todoroki says, flicking his other hand. “You will whether I want you to or not.”

“You…are trying to convince him to come to our side, are you not?” Midoriya says. “How, exactly, does acting like a drunkard assist in those efforts?”

“I have a plan,” Todoroki says. “But in order to carry it out, I need to be less…stiff.”

“Is he the type you chat up like one of the boys?” Midoriya asks.

“Not exactly,” Todoroki says. Then tenses on his throne. Midoriya follows his gaze to the red carpet extending in front of Fuyumi.
Ah. That could only be Iida Tenya.

The way he carried himself, head held high and shoulders relaxed, strolling into a new palace like he owned the place was a demeanor befitting only royalty. And with the Kirishima son’s rejection of the invitation to the ball, only one other royal in line for the throne would be present.

Iida Tenya wears simple, clean clothing—a white, long-sleeved blouse tied at the wrists with silver thread and over that, a silver vest buttoned with dark, shining metal clasps in the shape of wolf heads. He has a cravat at his neck and silvery chain necklaces hanging against his chest. Over his heart, he has a pin of a phoenix with a few stray red-orange feathers attached to it. Like Fuyumi, he wears his family name and symbols with pride, but that pin speaks of a desire to merge houses. Midoriya had seen a few pins or combs of the like, but none of such intricate metalwork.

“Iida Tenya,” Todoroki murmurs. “Second son of the royal Iida bloodline, of Ingenium. They specialize in metal and metalwork—the finest blades and armor come from Ingenium.”

“And what about the…the uh…” Midoriya says. “The wolves?”

At least he thinks they’re wolves. Not that he’s ever seen wolves that big. Iida is flanked by two of them, grey-black with intelligent eyes and heads that come up to his shoulder. They follow behind Iida and stop when he stops without any hand motion, entirely obedient.

“Dire wolves,” Todoroki says. “The Iida family crest. I had heard they trained them as companions and protectors of royalty, but I’ve never seen…” He leans forward, eyes bright.

Iida halts several paces away from Fuyumi. Midoriya can’t see her expression, but he’s sure she’s just as bug-eyed as he is. Iida’s facial expression shows nothing; he is neutral and sturdy, unemotional. He pauses only to remove the broadsword that had been slung around his back and hand it off to one of his attendants.

Not even Todoroki-sama uses a broadsword as his weapon of choice, Midoriya thinks.

This time, the wolves stay still when Iida walks forward and kneels in front of Fuyumi. “My Lady,” he says. “Todoroki Fuyumi-san. It is an honor to be in your presence. I have nothing but gratitude in my heart for extending an invitation to me so that I might attend this ball and see you in person. I pray that you will allow me the honor of having a dance with you tonight.”

“Oh course,” Fuyumi says, voice soft. “I thank you for coming, Tenya-san.”

She extends her hand and Iida presses a kiss to her fingers before standing. “As a gift, I have brought you my greatest treasure.” He beckons a man forward, holding an enclosed basket. Midoriya hears a yip from the holes in the basket and his eyes widen.

Apparently, Fuyumi feels the same. “A puppy…? No, a wolf pup!” she exclaims.

“He is young enough to imprint on a new master,” Iida says. “He is from the litter of Straya and Regis, my own personal dire wolves.” He gestures at the two wolves behind him, whose ears perk up at the sound of their names. “Once fully grown and trained, he will be able to protect you as well as your personal guard, perhaps better. There is no creature more loyal than a wolf.”

Fuyumi gestures for the basket and opens the lid so that she can reach in and stroke the pup. Midoriya can only catch the slightest glimpse of a tiny, wriggling animal in the basket.

“Tenya-san…” Fuyumi says. “I don’t know what to say. He’s beautiful.”
“I wish only for your safety and continued health,” Iida says, bowing his head. “No thanks are necessary. And speaking of your protection, I have also provided new armor and weaponry for your guard, all hand-crafted at our mountain forge.”

“Thank you,” Fuyumi says. “Sincerely, I…I can’t thank you enough.”

Iida reaches down to take her hand again and press one final kiss to the back of it. “It is my pleasure,” he says, and then he is dismissed, onto the next suitor, his wolves following him out of the room. Midoriya resists the urge to let out a low whistle.

“A wolf named Regis…” Todoroki says, lips curling upwards. “This will be easier than I thought.”

“Oh, will it?” Midoriya says, incredulous. “Really? You are aware that His Highness just annihilated the competition, aren’t you? He left Her Highness speechless.”

“Fuyumi likes dogs; that was a good play,” Todoroki says. “But you’re missing the most important part of that exchange.”

“The name of his wolf?” Midoriya says, still kind of in shock that there were people that owned trained wolves to begin with. “I don’t see how that’s even remotely relevant.”

“He’s a king-to-be,” Todoroki says. “He intends to seat himself on a throne, and I have a feeling that it doesn’t matter if that throne is Ingenium’s or Endeavor’s. Hmm, this will be interesting if he has assassination plans for me.”

“And that makes your plan…easier.”

“If he’s looking for a throne, Uraraka is offering him one,” Todoroki says. “One without any bloodshed. No matter how much he may want to kill me or his elder brother, a bloodless marriage is much easier.”

Midoriya rakes a hand through his hair. “You’re telling me this prince is as thirsty for power as His Majesty?”

“It’s not impossible,” Todoroki says. “I’m very, very interested in how this night will go. Go tell Yaoyorozu that I want her on her most vigilant. And relay that message to the rest of my people. If there’s so much as a joke about assassination, I want to hear about it.”

Great, Midoriya thinks as he leaves Todoroki’s side. The number of schemers just keeps increasing.

He finds Yaoyorozu talking with a couple women in armor made of the same dark metal that made up the clasps on Iida’s vest. Ingenium soldiers. Probably his personal guard. Yaoyorozu doesn’t appear to be having any trouble with them, hands on her hips and smiling. She catches sight of him out of the corner of her eye and after a couple minutes more of conversation, she excuses herself from the two.

“What’s up?” she asks. “Did you see those dire wolves? Apparently there’s an entire army of them back in Ingenium.”

Intimidation tactics? Midoriya shudders. “Todoroki-sama wants you to stay on your guard. Turns out the prince might end up being a schemer as well. Todoroki-sama thinks he’s after a throne at any cost. Let our people know, too.”

“Will do,” she says. “These people are crazy strong. Real uptight, too. After spending so much
time with Kyouka, I can’t say that I enjoy it. For the sake of His Royal Highness, I suppose anything can be endured.”

“If we get through this night with everyone intact and un-poisoned, I’ll consider it a success,” Midoriya sighs. “You can never know what the royals have up their sleeves.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Yaoyorozu says, raising her glass. Midoriya tries not to worry too hard about the amount of alcohol his superiors are drinking…

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…And fails miserably.

The first dance of the night has started, and naturally Iida takes the lead, bowing deeply to ask Fuyumi to dance. He’s taller than her and sweeps her into a swift waltz that nearly takes her off her feet. Midoriya would have worried, but Iida’s grasp of her waist is sturdy and Fuyumi beams as she’s swept in circles without any apparent strain on Iida at all. Todoroki’s eyes never leave them as he drains yet another glass of wine.

The dance slows to a simple back-and-forth and Iida leans in to converse with Fuyumi. Her cheeks are a lovely blush. Around the dancefloor, the other suitors mutter amongst themselves. Clearly, Iida has made an impression on both the princess and her guests.

“Fuyumi is too green for this,” Todoroki grunts. “She’s falling for the first man to court her.”

“I don’t—hey! Alright, enough, you,” Midoriya says, intercepting Todoroki's sneaking attempt to grab another glass. He down the wine in one go, wincing.

Todoroki scowls. “Meddling manservant. That was mine.”

“I’m saving you from yourself,” Midoriya says. “You’ll thank me in the morning when you’re not throwing up into a pot or calling for painkillers from the apothecary.”

“I’m not that much of a lightweight,” Todoroki mutters. “Drunkenness serves a purpose.”

“Which, until you let me in on said purpose, I will endeavor to prevent,” Midoriya says. “You were the one who didn’t want to be embarrassed at this ball.”

“I didn’t want you to embarrass me. I can’t control you. I am completely in control of myself.” He braces himself with a hand heavy on Midoriya’s shoulder.

“Right,” Midoriya deadpans, plucking Todoroki's hand off of him.

Todoroki looks from him to his hand. “Thanks.”

Midoriya turns his eyes back to the dancefloor, where the music has almost ended. Iida dips Fuyumi and she laughs. He swears he sees the hint of a smile across Iida’s lips.

“Maybe you’re wrong about him,” Midoriya says. “Maybe he just genuinely likes her.”

“He’s never met her before,” Todoroki scoffs. “You think you can fall for someone you’ve never met?”
Midoriya blinks, but Todoroki isn’t laughing. He tilts his head to the side. “You’re quite the romantic, after all.”

Todoroki shoots him a frosty look. “I’m going to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. How I feel is inconsequential.”

“But you’d rather be with someone you know,” Midoriya presses.

“Wouldn’t everyone?” Todoroki says.

Midoriya turns that nugget of information over in his head. Out of nowhere, he remembers his conversation with Tooru from several weeks ago. “He or she?” he asks.

“What?” Todoroki looks at him.

“Your ideal spouse.” Midoriya doesn’t know what he’s saying. Todoroki hates pointless small talk, hates talking about himself. But Midoriya has to know.

“You’re drunk,” Todoroki observes, curious.

“I’m tipsy,” Midoriya corrects. “And only because I had to down that last glass of wine. Don’t think I don’t see you avoiding the question.”


Midoriya huffs. “Whatever. Despite what you think about His Highness, I think they make an excellent pair. Her Highness needs a man who will respect her and treat her right, and His Highness has been nothing but dedicated and proper towards her. Look at how happy they are.”

“Oh yes,” Todoroki says. “Tenya-san is a veritable role model of chivalry amongst these vultures seeking to prey on my sister. And Fuyumi is a good, obedient daughter. They’re very similar. And that’s why it’s an abysmal match.”

“Didn’t you just imply that you’d rather be with someone you get along with?” Midoriya asks.

“Haven’t you heard that opposites attract, Deku?” Todoroki says. “They couldn’t possibly make each other happy.”

“Then explain us,” Midoriya says. “We couldn’t be more different and we fight like cats and dogs.”

Todoroki grins. “Oh? I wasn’t under the impression that our arguments were considered fights to you.”

“Really,” Midoriya says. “If not fighting, what is it?”

“Flirting,” Todoroki says. “You really bring out the worst in me.”

Midoriya’s mind whites out. “Flirting?” he croaks. “I don’t—”

“Oh, you so do,” Todoroki says. “I don’t mind.”

“Todoroki-sama, I don’t—”

Todoroki grabs him by the chin. “Deku. I adore you.”
It’s over. Midoriya has reached the end of his rope. There’s no way he can be awake and alive at this time in his life. He must be dreaming; there’s no way this is real. *Deku, I adore you.*

“I adore you,” Todoroki says, “but I don’t have time to play with you tonight. I have a different target in mind.”

He lets Midoriya go. Midoriya allows himself a moment to scream, very loudly, inside his head before he composes himself. “I sincerely hope that doesn’t mean you’re planning on flirting with someone else at this ball.”

Todoroki smiles. “Just watch,” he says. And makes a beeline for Iida who has moved off the dancefloor to allow someone else the chance to dance with Fuyumi. Midoriya has a very, very bad feeling about all of this. He follows.

“Iida Tenya-san,” Todoroki says. Iida turns around. “I don’t believe we’ve been properly acquainted.” He holds out a hand.

Iida offers a small bow and takes Todoroki’s hand, giving it a good shake. “Todoroki Shouto-san. We were introduced at my first Amity Ball four years ago but I don’t believe I’ve had the opportunity to speak to you at length. Uraraka-san has spoken highly of you.”

Todoroki smiles. “Has she? I’m flattered. If you wouldn’t mind accompanying me…?”

“Of course,” Iida says. “My dance is done, for now.”

They migrate to a more secluded area of the Great Hall, behind a gold leaf encrusted pillar. Todoroki leans back against the column, crossing his arms and still wearing that strange, knowing smile. Knowing Iida is watching him, he allows his gaze to flicker up and down Iida’s body. Midoriya catches the way Iida stiffens at Todoroki’s too-familiar gaze.

*Watch yourself,* Midoriya thinks at him.

But Todoroki, despite his intoxication, maintains an air of ease and control. He doesn’t stumble over his feet or words in the slightest. “I wish Ochako-san had told me more about you,” Todoroki says.

“What do you mean?” Iida asks.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Todoroki says. “Just a bit disappointed that my sister will have all your attention tonight.”

“Not…all my attention,” Iida says, clearing his throat. “Uraraka-san persuaded me that there is something amiss in the Five Kingdoms.”

“Indeed,” Todoroki says. “How much has she told you?”

“Just that this threat involves Ingenium and Urabiti despite the main conflict being between Yuuei and Endeavor,” Iida says. “And that if I am to marry Fuyumi-san, Ingenium will surely fall to the Todoroki dynasty.”

Uraraka sure knew how to paint a dramatic picture. She’d done well to at least pique his curiosity. But she probably hadn’t prepared him for Todoroki.

“All true,” Todoroki says. “And yet, you’re doing an extremely commendable job of making my sister fall for you.”
“With all due respect,” Iida says, “if we were to take every single threat to the crown seriously without question, our military would be spread so thin we’d never be able to defend ourselves.”

Todoroki’s grin shows his teeth. “Interesting,” he says. “I’m glad you didn’t accept the bait without question. That makes you so much more interesting of an opponent.”

“Opponent?” Iida says, blinking in surprise.

“Tenya-san,” Todoroki says smoothly, “do you intend to rule as king?”

“That is,” Iida sputters, “a very serious accusation—”

“I’m right on the mark, though, aren’t I?” Todoroki says. “You’ll do what it takes to take the throne.”

Iida’s eyes flash and his hand goes to his belt, where he has what looks like a shortsword sheathed. “And that’s an insult to my honor. Do you intend to duel me at a party, Todoroki-san?”

“Do you?” Todoroki counters, still grinning.

“What Todoroki-sama means,” Midoriya says, stepping between them with his hands up, “is that if your goal is to become king, working with us will have the advantage of resulting in a bloodless rise to kingship.”

Iida looks at Midoriya, blinking rapidly. “And you are?”

Midoriya takes a knee, bowing his head. “Deku, personal manservant to Todoroki-sama, at your service.”

“Well, you’re more of my aide at this point,” Todoroki says, because he has no sense of self-preservation.

Iida’s eyes are wide. “Your aide is a commoner?”

“Ignore him,” Midoriya says, ignoring the choking sound Iida makes at his dismissal of his prince. “He’s just trying to get a rise out of you to test your intentions.” Midoriya offers what he hopes is an encouraging smile. “You must understand, both of our lives have been put on the line for this cause. Both of us have been used as tools. We had reason to believe you might be conspiring to kill Todoroki-sama and other royalty—”

“You what?” Iida says.

“—So we can’t ever be too careful,” Midoriya finishes. “Please understand, Your Highness. Our cause is a righteous one. But in order for us to bear our throats to you, we have to know that you’re willing to do the same.” Midoriya frowns. “Which is kind of selfish, considering you listening to us is a favor. Unfortunately, that’s just the kind of person Todoroki-sama is.”

Iida takes a moment to process Midoriya’s words. He eyes Midoriya with interest. “You must be the manservant Uraraka-san spoke of,” he says. “She said that I should come to you if I have an issue with Todoroki-san.”

“A sad but common occurrence,” Midoriya says, smiling.

“I’m still here, you know,” Todoroki grouses.

“Alright,” Iida says, sighing. Midoriya steps aside so that he can address Todoroki. “Yes, I do vie
for the throne. But not out of greed for power, like you believe. I will trust my brother and father to lead Ingenium honorably—I have great respect for them. But I, too, believe I can contribute as a leader. I would…like to have that opportunity someday.”

“And you wouldn’t go to extremes to reach that goal?” Todoroki asks.

“No!” Iida says. “If I hurt someone to reach the throne…I could never live with myself.”

“And your desire to get married to my sister?” Todoroki says.

“It is only proper that I get married to someone of my rank or higher,” Iida says. “I could not turn down such an invitation. Fuyumi-san and Uraraka-san are the two highest class available women. It would be dishonorable to marry lower. And since you, too, are available, I simply assumed you and Uraraka-san were to be wed, in time.”

“Your Highness,” Midoriya says slowly. “Could it be that instead of scheming to steal a throne, you’re just a genuinely kind and rule-following person who happens to aspire to lead?”

“Apparently,” Todoroki says. “Well, I have good news for you. Ochako-san and I do not intend to marry, whatever the rumors may say. In fact, if all goes well, we would like you to marry her.”

“P-Pardon?” Iida says.

Todoroki slings an arm around Iida’s shoulders. “Let me explain,” he says.

Midoriya had a feeling something was off ever since Todoroki had run his eyes over Iida like he was sizing up a prize. He had a very, very bad feeling that all of this was a part of Todoroki’s plan to deal with Iida. His suspicions grow as Todoroki talks to Iida, leaning into his space, touching him, smiling with half-lidded eyes. If Midoriya didn’t know any better, he’d say Todoroki was trying to seduce Iida.

—Iida has acquired a wine glass, one that he’s rapidly draining. Midoriya guesses it has something to do with Todoroki’s hand, which had slid from Iida’s shoulders to around his waist. Had this been anyone else, Midoriya would have assumed they were trying their damnedest to hit on Iida. Which is what Iida probably assumed. Poor thing.

Todoroki prods him in the chest and then brushes his bangs out of his eyes. Iida’s eyes follow the movement—oh dear, Todoroki’s hooked him alright. Both of their cheeks are flushed, with alcohol or lust, Midoriya can’t say.

“Are you willing to help me?” Todoroki asks, releasing Iida.

“I—yes, if what you’re saying is true,” Iida says, noticeably flustered. “His Majesty cannot be allowed to gain control of four kingdoms; I won’t allow it.”

“Good,” Todoroki purrs, backing him into a column. He places his hands on either side of Iida’s head and leans in so that their foreheads touch. “Tenya-san, I need you.”

No, that couldn’t be—but it was. It was the same exact tactic Midoriya had used against Todoroki two months ago after Uraraka’s party. All the puzzle pieces click into place. The drinking to ‘lower inhibitions,’ the flirting, the touching, the backing into a column—Todoroki really was trying to seduce him. And it was working.

Iida sputters. “Todoroki-san, I really don’t think this is appro—”
“Shouto,” Todoroki says. “We’re partners now, aren’t we? Call me Shouto.”

“Shouto-san,” Iida whispers, eyelids fluttering. He remembers himself after a moment. “Anyway, I’m supposed to be promised to Uraraka-san and this is Fuyumi-san’s party, so—”

“I don’t see either of them here right now,” Todoroki says.

Iida glances to the side, where a few guests and servants are casting curious glances of their own. “People are watching,” he mumbles.

“People are always watching,” Todoroki says, and leans in to kiss Iida.

_I’m not getting paid enough for this_, Midoriya thinks before realizing, right, he wasn’t getting paid at all for this. A crying shame, that was.

There’s…a lot of hand movement. For all his protests, Iida doesn’t seem to have any problem kissing Todoroki back. Iida’s hands go to cup Todoroki’s jaw, but he also reaches up to run his fingers through Todoroki’s hair and pull him closer. Todoroki runs his hands up and down Iida’s back and if there’s an ass grab, Midoriya is going to pretend he didn’t see it. In any case, their passionate make out session has attracted the attention of more than a few people and Midoriya figures it’s probably time they found their way out of the Great Hall.

Apparently his telepathic plea for Yaoyorozu works to some degree, because she shows up not five minutes later when Todoroki and Iida are both thoroughly ruffled.

“Um,” she says. “What—”

“Uh, he’s on our side now?” Midoriya offers.

“A little but more than just ‘on our side,’ I would say,” Yaoyorozu says, still watching them go at it. “Should we…?”

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “Let’s clean his mess up.”

The two princes are easier to part than Midoriya would have guessed. Yaoyorozu takes Todoroki and Midoriya takes Iida, slinging an arm around their waists to help them stumble to Todoroki’s room while nodding at onlookers and passing this interaction off as yet another ‘royalty got too shitfaced and lost it’ situation. If Fuyumi was looking for a second dance, Midoriya hates to break it to her, but it wasn’t going to happen.

“You know what?” Iida says as Midoriya helps him stumble up the stairs. “I like you, Deku.”

“…Thank you, Your Highness,” Midoriya says.

“You were right about Shouto,” Iida goes on. “He’s not a half-bad guy. I respect you for being a man of your word, and for serving such a decent man such as Shouto. Trying to save the Five Kingdoms and all that. I’d marry him myself if I wasn’t engaged to Uraraka-san.”

“I don’t think you’re quite there yet, Your Highness,” Midoriya says.

“Am I not? Oh dear,” Iida says. “I think the wine is starting to get to me.”

“Starting?” Midoriya says, biting back a laugh.

“Don’t be rude, Deku,” Todoroki calls back. “That’s my new brother-in-arms you’re insulting. I’ll have you…I don’t know.” He turns to look at Yaoyorozu, puzzled. “How do I punish Deku,
“You don’t,” Yaoyorozu says. “You let him get away with absolutely everything.”


Iida shrugs and Midoriya nearly drops him. “Deku appears to be a stand-up sort of fellow; don’t figure there’s much you’d have to discipline him for.”

“Oh alright then,” Todoroki says. “Deku, you’re off the hook. Until I can figure out how to get you to obey me.”

Yaoyorozu snorts. “Good luck.”

The guard at the top of the stairs opens the door to Todoroki’s bedchambers and doesn’t raise an eyebrow when he sees that Iida will be joining him. Midoriya realizes the implications too late, forgetting that Iida probably had his own room to sleep in at the palace.

“Shit,” Midoriya swears. “Where should I bring His Highness?”

“This’ll do,” Todoroki says, rolling into bed and patting the space beside him.

Yaoyorozu looks like she wants to protest, but Iida beats her to it. “I’m flattered by the offer,” he says. “But in Ingenium we save ourselves for marriage.”

Todoroki rolls his eyes. “I’m far too inebriated to consider taking anyone’s virginity. Sleep, Tenya.”

Midoriya obediently dumps Iida into bed with Todoroki and they curl together like two cats in a basket. Iida drapes an arm around Todoroki’s waist and spoons him, making a small noise of contentment.

Yaoyorozu salutes Midoriya. “They’re all yours,” she says. “I’m going to go do damage control with Her Highness.”

“Alright,” Midoriya says, and turns back to the two princes, happily snuggling.

That is, until Iida hears Midoriya’s voice. “Where did Deku go?” he asks. “I liked him.”

“He is rather agreeable, as far as manservants go,” Todoroki agrees, yawning.

“Please,” Midoriya says, pouring two glasses of water. “Just a minute ago you were complaining about how I never listen to you.”

“Oh, you’re difficult, alright,” Todoroki says. “But you never fail to surprise and amaze me.”

Midoriya swallows. That’s far more honesty than he ever wanted. He brings them the glasses of water. “Here,” he says. “Drink this. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

Iida drains his immediately. “Did you know,” he says, barely taking a breath after drinking, “that Shouto is an incredible kisser? Quite skilled.”

“Really?” Midoriya says, grinning. “I’m surprised. I doubt he’s had much experience.”

“That sounded like an insult,” Todoroki grumbles.
“Believe it or not, it’s true,” Iida says. He hands Midoriya his glass.

“Are you sure it isn’t your own inexperience at kissing?” Midoriya teases. He walks around the other side of the bed and takes Todoroki's glass.

Before he can move away, however, Todoroki grabs him by the wrist and pulls him close. His eyes burn. “If you keep doubting my skills, I’ll just have to prove to you that I know how to kiss,” Todoroki says. “Understand?”

His mouth is so, so close to Midoriya’s. If Midoriya were a weaker man (a braver man), he would have demanded that Todoroki demonstrate for him right then and there. But getting a kiss from a drunk Todoroki felt like cheating and knowing that Todoroki would only kiss him if he was drunk was too upsetting for Midoriya to contemplate.

“I think you’ve proven your skills to Iida, and that was the point, wasn’t it?” Midoriya says. “I’m not your target, remember?”

Todoroki lets him go, but he doesn’t break eye contact.

“I’ll leave you two to it, then,” Midoriya says, moving back over to Iida’s side before he does something stupid like punch Todoroki in the face. “Don’t have sex.”

“What about you?” Iida asks, peeking up at Midoriya.

“What about me?” Midoriya says.

“What will you go?” Iida’s glasses are askew.

Sighing, Midoriya pulls his glasses off and sets them on the side table. “I’ll be sleeping on the pallet next to you if you need anything.”

Iida frowns. “Well that’s stupid. Just sleep with us.” And then, without warning, he grabs Midoriya by the arm and hauls him into the bed, slotting him right between Iida and Todoroki.

Midoriya freezes up, naturally. He’s suddenly that much closer to Todoroki’s face, so close their bangs brush and he can feel Todoroki’s exhalations. Then there are arms moving around his waist and Iida is cuddling up beside him, tucking his head in the crook between Midoriya’s neck and shoulder.

“Your Highness?” Midoriya squeaks.

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

Midoriya closes his eyes and counts to five. “This is really…not ideal.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it?” Todoroki says, scooting closer so that his legs tangle with Midoriya’s and he places his chin on the crown of Midoriya’s head. “Tenya isn’t protesting.”

No, actually, Iida was breathing softly against Midoriya’s cheek, close to sleep. And for whatever bizarre reason drunk Todoroki had, he didn’t mind snuggling with a prince he had just met that day and his manservant.

Midoriya is suddenly far too tired to process all of this.
“I am going to sleep,” he says. “I would like it to be known—for the record—that none of this was my idea and I was coerced into cuddling.”

“Yes, yes,” Todoroki says, voice rumbling through Midoriya. “We’ll deal with the consequences in the morning.” Midoriya feels Todoroki shift against him. “It was a brilliant plan, wasn’t it?”

Midoriya huffs into Todoroki’s neck. “It was something,” he says. “You’ll reap what you sew tomorrow.”

He thinks being cocooned by two princes would intimidate him too much to even contemplate sleeping, but they’re warm and soft to the touch and he can hear Todoroki’s steady heartbeat and the soft exhalations from Iida, and he falls asleep faster than he expected.

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Midoriya wakes up sweating. Not just sweating, but covered in hot, sweating skin. Out of instinct, he kicks and pushes at whoever is holding him. He hears two different grunts coming from his bed companions. The arms around his waist tighten. Midoriya sneezes at the red-white hair tickling his nose. Stupid Todoroki with his long hair getting in Midoriya’s face while they cuddled. Stupid Iida with his penchant for wrapping himself like an octopus around his bed partners.

It takes a moment to sink into his drowsy, half-asleep mind, but when it does Midoriya sits bolt upright. Iida groans and shifts his grasp to Midoriya’s waist. Todoroki curls tighter, his legs tangling with Midoriya’s.

Midoriya takes a deep breath. Okay, he could do this. He could totally deal with two overly snuggly, hungover princes. As soon as he was freed from their grasp. It’s around that time that he notices Yaoyorozu in soft clothing, leaning against the door that led to Midoriya’s old room.

Midoriya opens his mouth only to find he has nothing to say. Yaoyorozu raises an eyebrow.

“It wasn’t my idea?” Midoriya offers, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the royalty.

“Deku of Yuuei,” Yaoyorozu says. “You are a homewrecker.”

He deserved that. “Iida-sama said—”

“‘Iida-sama’?” Yaoyorozu says. “Not calling him by his title?”

Midoriya curses himself.

“Let me ask you one thing,” Yaoyorozu says. “Did you sleep with one…or both…of them?”

“No,” Midoriya says. “His Highness…requested my presence.”

“In the bed.”

“In the bed.”

Yaoyorozu rubs her forehead. “You know what this looks like, don’t you?”

“Exactly what it’s supposed to look like,” Todoroki mumbles, propping himself up on an elbow.
Midoriya jumps away from him as if electrocuted.

“Todoroki-sama, I’m sorry, I—” he starts.

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “Calm. I know you didn’t do anything. Even drunk, I think I can protect my virtue well enough on my own.”

Midoriya breathes a sigh of relief.

“Besides,” Todoroki says, brushing his hair from his face. “It’s probably even better that you were thrown into the mix. Double the scandal.”

“You wanted this?” Yaoyorozu asks. “Not to cast my doubts but in what world is faking a threesome beneficial to your position?”

Todoroki counts off his fingers. “One, it ruins my chances with Ochako-san since I was the one who seduced Tenya. Two, it ruins Tenya’s chances with Fuyumi because he chose to sleep with her brother instead of her. Three, although we will both deny the rumors, if I throw Deku into the mix and say we all slept together, then I will have a scandal that upsets the Iida family’s vanilla tastes as well as their demands of only laying with those of pure bloodlines.”

“So, blackmail,” Midoriya says. “You arranged this to get blackmail.”

“Momo, when Tenya’s attendants wander around the palace, confused as to where their prince could have gone, you will lead them to my room where I will be laying with Tenya so there can be no accusations that I am lying to smear his good name.” Todoroki dismisses her with a flick of his wrist.

Yaoyorozu takes a breath and stands up straight. “You the boss,” she says. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

She leaves and then it’s just Todoroki, Midoriya, and a snoring Iida.

“You slept soundly,” Todoroki says, propping his chin up with a fist. “I wouldn’t have expected you to feel so at home sleeping with royals. Have you been sneaking into others’ beds when my back was turned?”

He’s amused. Even more amused at the blush that spreads across Midoriya’s cheeks and the way his hands fist in the sheets.

Midoriya tilts his chin away from Todoroki. “You’re shameless.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” Todoroki. “Especially when the two overlap.”

“You played on both of our good natures.”

“You knew what kind of man I was,” Todoroki says. “Have I upset you?”

You threatened to kiss me, Midoriya thinks. But it wouldn’t be fair to hold that against him. He had no idea that Midoriya harbored feelings for him. Todoroki wasn’t cruel enough to mock Midoriya.

“But maybe you’re just bitter that I’ve been paying more attention to Tenya than you?” Todoroki offers innocently.

Midoriya smacks him in the face with his own pillow. “You self-absorbed prat,” he says, smiling. “My every waking thought doesn’t involve you, you know. I am my own person outside of your
Todoroki catches the pillow when Midoriya makes to hit him again. “I know,” Todoroki says. “That’s what makes you so valuable. Even if I know you secretly pine for an affair with me.”

Midoriya snatches the pillow and smacks him again a few times, Todoroki laughing lightly at the abuse. He kicks at Midoriya and Midoriya kicks back, starting to tussle in the bed. Their movement disturbs Iida, who releases Midoriya and props himself up on an elbow, bleary-eyed.


“Morning, Tenya,” Todoroki says, splaying across the bed like a model. “I gather you slept well?”

Iida scrunches up his face, looking from Todoroki to Midoriya and back, not processing what he’s seeing. Then he realizes what it is, exactly, that he’s looking at, and all the color drains from his face. “Oh no,” he says faintly.

“What was that about Ingenium nobility saving themselves for marriage?” Todoroki asks, raising an eyebrow.

Iida’s hands fly to cover his mouth. He’s wide-eyed. “No,” he says, disbelieving. “I couldn’t’ve…I didn’t…”

“Relax, Your Highness,” Midoriya says, holding his hands out in a placating gesture. “Your virtue is intact. Todoroki-sama is an ass.”

Todoroki nose scrunches up in a pleasing way as he represses his laughter. Midoriya resists the urge to smack him in the face again.

Iida doesn’t look mollified. “Then what did we…”

“Just sleeping together,” Midoriya says. “Literally…sleeping together. I tried to protest but, ah, you were quite insistent that I join you two.”

Iida buries his face in a pillow and moans. He looks pathetic; missing his cravat and vest and just in a blouse and pants, his hair a mess. Midoriya doesn’t know how much of a comfort it will be, but he pats Iida on the back. “There, there,” he says. “It’s not the end of the line. Drunken shenanigans are not unheard of among princes. This isn’t damning behavior.”

“But it is,” Iida says. “How am I supposed to present myself to Uraraka-san knowing that I have shared my bed with not one but two other men?”

“She knows us,” Midoriya says. “I’m sure it will be fi—”

Iida moans again. “My name has been dishonored…”

“Oh, honestly,” Midoriya huffs, losing his patience. “Face the facts. You cuddled with a pair of men. Nowhere in the rules of proper princely behavior does it say there can’t be platonic cuddling among friends.”


“Something I’m sure Todoroki-sama is very sorry for,” Midoriya says, elbowing Todoroki.

“I haven’t kissed in some time,” Todoroki says. “I found it enjoyable.”
“In any case,” Midoriya says, glaring at Todoroki, “Todoroki-sama isn’t bothered by it, so neither should you. You’re a prince, aren’t you? Own up to one night stands with your head held high. If you’re cowed under the shame of it, people are going to walk all over you.”

Iida peeks out from the pillow. “You are...harsh, for a servant.”

“I have a long leash,” Midoriya admits. “But sometimes you royal types need to be set straight.”

Iida sits up and rubs at his eyes. He nods. “Yes, you are right, Deku. I let my emotions take control of me. I need to face this incident with dignity and grace.”

There’s a knock at the door. The three turn their heads towards the sound.

“Oh,” Todoroki says. “That should be Tenya’s attendants with breakfast and a change of clothes.”

Iida, for all his brave words, yips and dives under the covers and…straight into Midoriya’s lap. “I’m not here,” he whispers and closes his eyes, pretending to be asleep.

Todoroki calls in the servants. They look around the room, puzzled, until Midoriya sighs and points to his lap. Their eyes widen in understanding and they leave the room quicker than they came in, leaving behind a clean white blouse and a hot bowl of some kind of soup.

“If they weren’t going to talk then, now…” Todoroki trails off.

Under the covers, Iida groans. Unsure of how to comfort him, Midoriya takes to patting his head. Iida submits to the touch easier than Midoriya expected.

Todoroki rolls out of bed. “Tenya, you will accompany me today in a tour around the palace. We will return to the gardens for a lunch with all the suitors and then the Great Hall for dinner with the same company. I will be occupied after dinner with the showcase of Endeavor’s finest performers, but I will provide you with a dancer from my household.”

“Todoroki-sama, you’ve traumatized this man,” Midoriya protests. “Can’t you give him a break?”

“Thank you, Deku,” Iida says. “Your kindness is noted and appreciated. However,” he sits up, “Shouto-san is right. We have matters we must discuss and I have questions to ask. It would not do well for our enemies to overhear our conversations.”

He smiles at Midoriya. “I will bear the weight of rumors gladly if it means I am able to protect my kingdom.”

Midoriya smiles back and shakes his head. “I can’t believe Todoroki-sama led me to believe you were a plotter. Iida-sama, you’re perhaps the most pure-hearted royal I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet.”

“I-Iida-sama?” Iida sputters.

“Is that okay?” Midoriya says, biting his lip. “I can’t help but feel we’re something like friends now.”

Iida tilts his head to the side and nods after a moment. “Upon further reflection, I find I must concur with your observation. It gives me great joy to know that you consider me a ‘friend,’ Deku.” He holds out his hand. Midoriya takes it and shakes.

“Now that you’re done reveling in your budding romance, can you both get dressed?” Todoroki
grunts. “I need all my pawns on deck.”

“Aye, aye,” Midoriya sighs, while Iida says, “Pardon me? Pawns?”

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While the whispers around the palace had been bad after Todoroki ‘courted’ Uraraka, they were nothing next to the new rumors the rumor mill came up with. Todoroki Shouto and Iida Tenya—sharing a bed! And not just between two royals; they also got that manservant of Todoroki’s involved! Word was it that they actually rolled over for the manservant like dogs. Oh, Todoroki’s arrangement with the Princess of Urabiti was surely ruined now. And Princess Fuyumi! Todoroki had stolen Iida from right under her nose. Look, even today they were inseparable, wandering about the palace, hand-in-hand. Or so the rumors said.

Tooru, of course, was delighted by the rumors. Nothing exciting among the dancers besides the usual relationship drama, she said, and it was about time she got privy to some real drama. Especially if it involved royalty. Did Midoriya really sleep with them? How did he keep up with two lovers, especially when they had been so...feral...at the ball? Were they rough? Did they really roll over for him?

“Tooru,” Midoriya groans. “I told you, none of that is true. I was pulled into cuddling with them and that’s all.”

“But was it intense cuddling?” Tooru asks, dogged.

Midoriya rolls his eyes. “If by intense you mean I was nearly smothered by two sweating masses of flesh, then yes.”

“Manflesh,” Tooru whispers.

“Never say that again,” Midoriya says. “I’m serious; I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Spoilsport,” Tooru says, pouting.

Midoriya’s not too pleased that the rumors are dragging him into it, but he supposes being walked in with Iida’s head in his lap—Iida’s choice or not—was going to incite people to talk. And like Todoroki had predicted, the scandal of a lowborn and a royal sleeping together was much greater than two royals blowing off steam.

Fortunately, he hadn’t been around the princes to exacerbate the rumors. Todoroki had excused him into Ojiro’s care to put the finishing touches on his performance before the festivities tonight. Unlike Tooru and the other dancers, Midoriya would not be participating in the exhibition, but he needed all the practice he could get, especially when imagining doing this in front of Todoroki had him breaking out in a sweat.

“Can I really do this, Tooru?” Midoriya asks.

“Naturally,” Tooru says. “You love him, don’t you?”

“Shut up,” Midoriya hisses.
“It’s got to be frustrating, seeing him fawn all over Ingenium’s prince,” Tooru says.

“Well, actually, I haven’t seen them at all today—”

“Just—channel your desire for him into your dancing,” Tooru says, putting her hands on her hips.

“Ugh,” Midoriya says.

“This isn’t about him, remember?” Tooru says. “This is about you. If you take the lead, he will follow. I promise. From one dancer to another.”

Midoriya wants to, but it’s hard to pout when Tooru is smiling so encouragingly. “Fine,” he says, rolling his eyes fondly. “I’ll take your word for it. I don’t think our dancing is really comparable, though.”

“You bet your sweet ass it isn’t,” Tooru says. “Now come on, I want to make sure you can pop your hips like the best of us.”

“Tooru, I don’t see how that’s—”

“Trust me, Deku. It is.”

----------------------------------

Breathe. It’s okay. You can do this.

Midoriya is out in the hallway, waiting his turn to be put on display. The swordfighters, the orchestra, and the group dancers have already performed. There’s only one more hand-to-hand duel taking place to get the blood flowing in the crowd. Once they finished, Midoriya and the ‘personal’ dancers would debut to the royalty and the nobility that provided an expensive enough gift to earn a seat of their own. Tooru, who would partake in both dance exhibitions, is covered and sweat and bouncing about the dancers with an electric energy.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Midoriya admits. “Aren’t you tired?”


Midoriya smiles. That was a fitting arrangement. Iida had no idea the gift that had been given to him. Todoroki probably didn’t realize what he was doing, gifting Tooru to Iida, either. Or perhaps he did. Most likely, Todoroki had just ordered Ojiro to give his best dancer to Iida. Compared to Midoriya’s mediocre skills, it would certainly look like Todoroki favored Iida.

All according to plan, right? Midoriya thinks.

“Nervous?” Tooru asks.

Midoriya nods. ‘I think ‘nervous’ describes my state of mind for the past couple days overall.”

“You want to know my number one secret to getting through a performance?” Tooru says.

“Love what you’re doing?” Midoriya offers wryly.
Tooru smiles. “Remember that you’re the only one who knows what’s going on. None of these dances are going to be exactly the same. If you make a mistake, just roll with it. No one watching will know you’ve deviated from routine. And if you come up with something on the spot, work it into your routine. Dance is always a work in progress.”

She smacks Midoriya’s cheeks gently. “You can’t go wrong,” she says. “So don’t worry too hard, alright?”

“I’ll try,” Midoriya says.

Cheering from the Great Hall means that the wrestling match has come to an end. All the dancers shuffle into position behind a series palm frond bearers that hide the dancers from view until the last minute. Midoriya tugs at his outfit one last time and then lets it be.

Breathe. You are in control. Make him yours.

And then the doors are opening and it’s time.

Midoriya takes a step forward and steps into a new persona. Tonight, he is not Midoriya Izuku, spy of Yuuei and aide to All Might. He is not Deku, manservant to Prince Todoroki Shouto. He’s just Izuku, just a dancer with the job of seducing the most beautiful man in the room.

The palm frond bearers lift the fronds to reveal the dancers, who each take up their positions kneeling in front of their masters for the night. Midoriya knows what Todoroki must see—he took one look at his reflection before leaving and blushed. He’s wearing…basically nothing. Around his waist is a jeweled belt with thin chains hanging from it, also studded with jewels that fall against his thighs. And beneath the belt, two long, heavy sashes of fabric to cover behind him and in front of him, strung together with a thicker, rope-like gold chain. One out of place movement, and he flashes the entire crowd.

Around his wrists and ankles he wears thick gold cuffs each with a few fatter chain links dangling from them; not enough to restrict movement, but enough to give the impression of exoticism. Midoriya has bands around his forearms, his upper arms, even one around his thigh. And then, at his neck, a golden choker with fat rubies embedded in it and dangling earrings brushing against the tops of his shoulders.

He looks like some kind of pleasure slave from a time long gone. He knows that was the intention of the costume. What he doesn’t know, however, is how Todoroki will react to being presented something so immoral. Surely he is disgusted.

No, no, Midoriya can’t think about that right now. They can have a good laugh about this later, in the safety of their bedchambers, but for now, he is Izuku. And he will do him damnedest to bring Todoroki to his knees.

The music starts. It starts out slow and sensual—wonderful rhythm to move his body too. Midoriya rises slowly, letting his arms do most of the work, twisting around him and rolling his shoulders, painting a picture with his movements. He doesn’t look at Todoroki yet. He throws his head back, bearing neck and choker, and sees that the rest of the dancers are moving in time with him. The crowd is stunned into silence.

The music changes, and Midoriya snaps his head forward, meeting Todoroki’s eyes.

It’s quick and charged, violins dueling with saxophones and the rest of the orchestra following their lead. Midoriya doesn’t have time to stop and think. He doesn’t have time to contemplate
Todoroki's wide eyes or analyze what he finds there—but he doesn’t think it's disgust.

Instead, he throws himself into his dancing as if he were one of Tooru’s, as if he were born to move for his prince. His hips rock to the beat and his hands are all over his body. One second he’s wrapped around himself, head thrown back; the next, he’s sliding his fingers over tan, sweat-slick skin to the rolling of his hips. Like Tooru showed him, he doesn’t stay in one place—he moves his feet and struts across the dancefloor, each stomp of his foot a proclamation of ownership. Over the stone or over Todoroki he’s not quite sure; it all kind of blurs together once he gets into the motion of it.

His hands fist in his hair and pull hard. *Like you want to do to me.* Presses his fingers hard into his ass and drags down. *Like you want to do to me.* Swipes his tongue over his lips. *Like you want to do to me.* All the while, he holds Todoroki's gaze, refusing to look away from his prince’s face as he turns his body into a weapon of sex appeal.

The music changes again, and it’s time for Midoriya to approach his partner.

He stalks up to Todoroki, mirroring the dancers on either side of him. Todoroki tilts his chin up, swallows. Midoriya catches the bobbing of his Adam’s apple—wants to latch his teeth onto it. He drags fingers lazily over the armrest of Todoroki’s throne, over Todoroki’s hand, over his arm, across the back of the throne. Todoroki doesn’t flinch once.

_Are you really so unaffected?_

Midoriya loops his arms around the throne, pressing fingers against Todoroki’s chest and running upwards to his shoulders, to the bare skin of his neck. He grinds up against the back of the throne and gasps. Todoroki can’t see him, but Midoriya feels the stiffening of Todoroki’s body at his noise.

_Oh, so maybe you aren’t as unaffected as you’d like to believe._

Then he’s back in front again, dancing at the foot of the throne like he was on the floor, but now he can see Todoroki’s expression, read exactly what it was he saw when they first made eye contact. Midoriya grinds up against the air in front of Todoroki, and he looks.

_Looks at the muscle pulled tight in Todoroki’s jaw. Looks at the hands gripping at his armrest for dear life. Looks at the rigidity of Todoroki’s posture, almost painfully straight. Looks in Todoroki’s eyes and sees nothing but fire._

_Fire?_

_Todoroki’s eyes were always ice. Cold and uninviting, enough to put off anyone who came to him as a friend and frighten those who came as foes. Occasionally, when around Yaoyorozu or Midoriya, that ice melted just a little and Midoriya could detect a hint of warmth in his prince. There was a reason Todoroki was known as ‘the cold prince.’_

Midoriya had never imagined he could hold this much fire.

Midoriya hoists himself up with either hand braced against the armrests, and he lowers himself into Todoroki’s lap. Todoroki’s eyes snap from Midoriya’s eyes to—lower—and Midoriya understands that fire.

_Desire.* Todoroki wasn’t unaffected—he was so affected that it was taking all his self-control not to lay hands on Midoriya this instant. Forget changing Todoroki’s focus: he had every single scrap of Todoroki’s attention. Forget seduction: Midoriya had Todoroki on the brink of throwing himself at
Experimentally, Midoriya moves against him.

The sound Todoroki makes in his throat isn’t human, more of the growl of a wild animal whose patience is being tested. His knuckles turn white.

That’s cute, Midoriya thinks. You still believe you’re in control.

He rocks his hips against Todoroki’s again, but this time he grabs Todoroki’s jaw in one hand and fists his hand in his hair with the other. Then, gently pulling, he bares Todoroki’s throat and scrapes his teeth against the shape of his Adam’s apple before letting him go and leaning back, out of reach. A smart move—Todoroki’s eyes are wild.

The next time Midoriya moves against him, he cups Todoroki’s jaw and brushes their lips together in the faintest sensation of a kiss. Just a suggestion of a kiss. And then he’s off Todoroki’s lap and moving back, back, back onto the dancefloor with the rest of his brothers and sisters and they all sink back onto one knee, heads bowed, as the music comes to an end.

Midoriya doesn’t even dignify Todoroki with a glance back when they leave the room—he lets him burn.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: he dreams of fire

(could you tell my favorite ot3 of all time is todoiideku??)
Midoriya has the good sense to change out of his dancer costume before he heads back to their bedchambers. He’s not sure what Todoroki’s mood will be coming back into the room after being teased like that, so he’s in a sensible long-sleeved button-up shirt and loose trousers. He flops backwards onto his bed.

He did it. He really managed to dance for Todoroki.

And not only that, he managed to properly *seduce* Todoroki. Tooru had given his shoulder a squeeze afterwards, beaming. No words were necessary to express her congratulations. However Todoroki felt about him as a person or as a servant, he was attracted to Midoriya. At the very least, he found Midoriya aesthetically pleasing. You couldn’t fake *that* kind of reaction.

*Ha,* Midoriya thinks. *Well, now we know he’s attracted to men.*
He’s half-asleep, worn out from the stress and the physical exertion, by the time Todoroki comes back to their room. He throws open the door, making Midoriya jump to attention. Midoriya meets his eyes, but Todoroki doesn’t launch himself at Midoriya out of anger or lust like Midoriya had expected. Instead, he walks calmly over to the water pitcher and pours himself a glass, then downs it in one gulp. He lifts the pitcher up as if to pour himself a second glass, then thinks better of it.

_Thirsty much?_ Midoriya thinks, before berating himself for the thought. _No, Izuku. Bad, Izuku. He could still slay you where you stand for pulling off something as suicidal as grinding on him._

“It was Tooru’s idea?” Todoroki asks, and Midoriya’s stomach drops.

All the blood rushes from his face. “It was—she was instructed to—it’s not her fault,” Midoriya sputters. “I volunteered for this position, remember?”

“So it was your idea?” Todoroki asks, raising an eyebrow. He’s bracing himself against his desk, not looking at Midoriya. His voice is even, but Midoriya has no doubt that Todoroki could be concealing the rage of the gods under that neutral exterior.

Midoriya picks his words very carefully. “You ordered me to perform to the best of my ability, and under the supervision of the best dancer in your household, I learned how to dance in a way that would be the most pleasing show.”

“I ordered you not to embarrass me,” Todoroki corrects. “Silvertongue. I know you heard me.”

Midoriya doesn’t smile, because that would be inappropriate and dangerous. But he can’t keep the edge out of his voice when he asks, “Are you embarrassed, Your Royal Highness?”

Todoroki exhales and turns around to look at Midoriya. “Careful,” he says. “You’re not on the dancefloor anymore.” His eyes pass over Midoriya’s chest in a way that Midoriya might have considered disappointed, if the prince had been anyone else.

“If I’ve upset you…” Midoriya starts, but Todoroki waves him off.

“No, no, you did as you were told,” he says. “I’m not mad. Frustrated, yes. Angry, no.”
Midoriya raises his eyebrows.

Todoroki glowers. “Frustrated with my situation.”

Midoriya raises his eyebrows higher.

“God,” Todoroki sighs, “you’re as bad as Momo. Stop being crude and consider what your ‘show’ looked like to an outsider.”

“I’d imagine it looked either like a servant attempting to curry favor or a very blatant proclamation of our sex life,” Midoriya says. “I hope you don’t mind me topping.”

Todoroki doesn’t take the bait. “Unfortunate,” he says, “but true. Except we have no sex life to speak of.”

“And?” Midoriya prompts.

“My father’s eyes were on us the whole time,” Todoroki says. “I’m sure he’s incredibly displeased that not only did Iida get a superior dancer, but myself as well. Not many men can move like you did.”

Midoriya wrinkles his nose. “The thought of him looking at me in any way other than disdain is… uncomfortable.”

“Indeed,” Todoroki says. “However, if he was looking at you, that means he was looking at me and therefore saw my… physical reaction—would you stop it?”

Midoriya can’t help it. He’s grinning hard. Todoroki throws a decorative pillow at his head. It only makes Midoriya grin harder.

Todoroki huffs. “Did you honestly believe I was made of ice? Did you think me immune to touch and the movements of an arguably attractive, viable partner?”
“You think I’m attractive,” Midoriya says. Todoroki throws a larger pillow next, and Midoriya
laughs.

“Arguably attractive,” Todoroki says, “and getting less so by the second. Stop being so smug.”

“Come on,” Midoriya says. “What’s a platonic lap dance between friends?”

“I hate you,” Todoroki says. “I’m calling Momo in immediately. I’ll see you shipped back to
Yuuei within the hour. I wouldn’t wish you on even my father.”

“But you ’specially requested’ me, Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says. “How can you part with the
only manservant who can do that for you?”

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “Are you propositioning me?”

Any words that Midoriya might have said get caught in his throat as it locks up. He can feel the
blood drain from his face for the second time since reuniting with Todoroki. He opens his mouth.
Closes it.

Yes, Midoriya admits to himself. I am propositioning you.

It’d be so easy to say it right now. You know I am attracted to you. And so, it seems, my feelings of
love and loyalty to you are in line with that attraction. Todoroki has one eyebrow raised, but his
eyes are glittering. As much as he complains, he’s amused by the conversation. Midoriya can
imagine how it goes down.

I adore you, too.

Oh? Then serve me in every capacity you are able.

Yes, sir.

Midoriya would not hesitate, if Todoroki asked it of him. Not that Todoroki needed to know that,
specifically. Just a simple I feel for you as more than my prince would suffice. He could get it off his chest. Perhaps Todoroki really would discard him, but maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe they would finish what Midoriya started.

“You get caught up in your own games on occasion, silvertongue,” Todoroki says, the moment passing. “And I am fast enough to catch up with you.”

“Yes, well,” Midoriya huffs. The ringing in his ears clears. “Are you going to change out of that stuffy getup or not?”

Todoroki’s eyebrow ticks higher. “Unless you really were…?”

“It was a joke! A joke!” Midoriya cries, courage gone. “Who would want to sleep with such a cruel prince?”

“You, apparently,” Todoroki says. “If you listen to rumors.” He pulls off his coat and ornamentation one by one.

“Only fools listen to rumors,” Midoriya mutters. His cheeks burn slightly.

“Which, brings me back to the point I was trying to make,” Todoroki says. “My father is not a fool. He may have made lewd comments to rile us both up, but he does not believe we sleep together.”

“Good for him,” Midoriya grumbles.

“You’re missing the point, Deku,” Todoroki says. “We revealed weakness with that show. Or rather, I did. How you feel about me, lust or love, is of no concern to my father. How I feel, however, can be used as a tool against me.” Todoroki sighs. “If he believes he can use you to get to me, he will.”

“Well,” Midoriya says. “I am short a bit of ear because of an arrow he set fly.”

“It’s different,” Todoroki says. “Then, I cared because you were useful. Now, he knows I care because I am attracted to you.”
You really are fearless, Midoriya thinks, his heart skipping a beat.

“Unfortunately,” Todoroki says, as if that weren’t a hell of a thing to drop on somebody, “I’m inexperienced in playing the game of sex and sensuality. It’s something I’m coming more and more to regret. If I had been, I would’ve been able to appear unaffected by your advances. Perhaps.”

“Do you never rest?” Midoriya asks.

“The head of state can never let his guard down.”

“Then it’s fortunate you are just a prince, and not the head of state,” Midoriya says. Todoroki opens his mouth to protest, but Midoriya doesn’t let him. “Even princes seeking to overthrow tyranny need rest. Come to bed.”

In only loose-fitting shirt and pants, the ties of the front of the shirt undone, Todoroki looks less like the image of an icon whose portrait would be painted and hung up on the walls of the palace and more like a man. He could be any man in the world, he could be…attainable. He could be Midoriya’s equal.

It’s thoughts like those that are going to get Midoriya into trouble, but the atmosphere between them is weird already. They’ve been speaking in half-truths and dancing around what neither of them want to say or address in their relationship, defaulting to teasing and jokes to avoid the inevitable realization that the dance had triggered some kind of shift in between them. It wasn’t one-sided anymore, and they both knew it.

“That’s a rather blunt come-hither, don’t you think?” Todoroki says.

Midoriya rolls his eyes. “Just come here.” He slides into Todoroki’s bed and pats the space in front of him on top of the sheets.

“Presumptuous as ever,” Todoroki mutters, but it speaks to his trust of Midoriya that he does as bidden and climbs onto the bed without a fuss.
Midoriya waves a silver, fine-toothed comb he had pulled from the bedside table in a circular gesture to get Todoroki to turn around. Todoroki makes a noise of understanding and twists around, leaning back on his hands. Midoriya gently pulls his hair back so that it’s splayed down his back. Like this, Midoriya can see the length of his hair. Since when had it gotten so long?

He can remember when he first came to the palace—Todoroki had kept his hair short and professional, not this long mane he wore now. Was it stress? Lack of self-care? Midoriya feels guilt if that’s the case. It’s his job to look after the prince’s wellbeing. He hacks at a particularly tough knot and hums when he can finally drag the comb through.

“Should I cut it?” Todoroki asks.

“Hmm?” Midoriya says, distracted by his next set of tangles.

“My hair,” Todoroki says. “It’s too long, isn’t it? Upkeep is a pain.”

Midoriya chews on the inside of his cheek and runs a hand through the strands he’s combed. They’re silky and bright under his fingers, alternating a brilliant red and soft white. “It’s lovely though, isn’t it?” he wonders aloud.

Todoroki huffs a laugh. “I’m not particularly going for a ‘lovely’ image, Deku.”

Midoriya colors. “It wouldn’t hurt to have one!” he protests. He tugs at Todoroki’s hair and Todoroki tilts his head back, laughing softly.

“Alright, alright,” he says. He meets Midoriya’s eyes upside down, smiling. “If you’re this fond of it, I’ll keep it. I can’t deny you anything.”

“Except peace of mind, apparently,” Midoriya replies. He considers flicking Todoroki in the forehead and deems it too flirtatious.

Todoroki wraps a finger in his hair. “I think it reminds him too much of my mother,” Todoroki says. “But he won’t give me the satisfaction of complaining about it.”
“Oi, none of that,” Midoriya says, tugging again. “You’re resting.”

“I am resting,” Todoroki repeats mechanically, and flops backwards into Midoriya’s lap. “Sing for me.”

“What am I, a bard?” Midoriya scoffs.

“And doing a right terrible job of it,” Todoroki says.

“Last time I sang, I made the village children cry,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki smiles. “That’s a lie.”

“It might as well be the truth,” Midoriya says. “Ask for something more reasonable, Your Royal Highness.”

“Isn’t it the job of the servant to tend to the needs of his prince?” Todoroki huffs. “You’re the one who’s supposed to care for me, make sure I’m comfortable and able to rest. I don’t see why—”

Midoriya rolls his eyes and starts to pat Todoroki’s head, ignoring the rest of his rant. Newly combed, his hair is like satin under Midoriya’s fingertips. He gives Todoroki’s scalp an experimental scratch, remembering the baths.

Todoroki hums. “Clever manservant,” he mutters and finally shuts up.

“If this is all I had to do to get you to stop ranting, I wouldn’t’ve suffered as much in the past,” Midoriya teases. Todoroki doesn’t replies, just sniffs and rolls onto his side so Midoriya can get at more of his scalp.

Midoriya’s not all that surprised that Todoroki is asleep not even ten minutes later. It was baffling to think that waking up and going their separate ways—Todoroki with Iida and Midoriya with Tooru—was only today. Todoroki had had his hands full of politics and Midoriya with the stress of performance. Even though he put up a tough front, Todoroki was only human. A human that was going to have to wake up and do it all over again tomorrow, and as such deserved a long rest to
prepare.

Midoriya watches Todoroki’s even breathing until he feels the weariness of the day settle onto his eyelids and he leans back, falling asleep in his prince’s bed for the second time in two days.

As with most things, everything seems fine until it doesn’t. The smallest incident can be indicative of a titanic shifting of perspective—the movement of continents indicated with the slightest shaking of the earth. In such ways, there are always signs that something is going wrong before it actually does.

Midoriya has always been good at reading these signs. He was born with an analytical mind, calculating his actions and the actions of others into predictions and projections. He has the mind of a chess player, rivaled only perhaps by Todoroki, but unlike Todoroki, he is not blinded by emotions.

Midoriya notices when things start to go wrong.

It doesn’t seem wrong at first.

Midoriya is caught off guard when Todoroki, head held high, turns the corner and immediately jumps back and flattens himself against the wall, knocking into Midoriya and making him flinch.
“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya squeaks, bordering on hysterical.

Todoroki slaps a hand over his mouth, eyes wild. “Shut up,” he hisses. “He’ll hear you.”

Midoriya furrows his eyebrows and pushes Todoroki's hand away. “Your father?”

Todoroki scoffs. “I wish.”

…And then Midoriya’s eyebrows go to the ceiling. Someone Todoroki preferred King Enji too? Impossible.

Midoriya peeks around the corner, Todoroki following suit and swearing softly. Midoriya frowns. He doesn’t see anyone that resembles a witch or demon from fairytales, nor a dragon in disguise. No twisting horns or feet studded in claws. It looked like a gathering of all of Fuyumi’s suitors, chatting amicably amongst themselves.

“Forgive me,” Midoriya whispers. “But who?”

“You’re joking me, right,” Todoroki deadpans. “How can you miss him?”

Midoriya scans the room again, but unless Todoroki has gained the ability to see something Midoriya cannot, there is nothing amiss about the courtyard. The only thing that could possibly catch his eye is a persistent winking of too many diamonds on one of the suitors, catching the light and nearly blinding him and oh my god that’s exactly what Todoroki meant, wasn’t it.

“Your mortal enemy…is a shiny noble,” Midoriya deadpans right back.

“Not just any noble,” Todoroki hisses. “That’s Aoyama Yuuga, the current ruler of the Principality of Lustre. Pureblood prince and pureblood pain my ass.”

“Oh!” Midoriya says. “I know that nation! They refused to join the Five Kingdoms because they’re sitting on a whole host of diamond and quartz mines. They produce almost the entirety of jewelry
sold in the Five Kingdoms. He’s a suitor for Her Highness?”

Todoroki pulls Midoriya back. “Over my dead body,” he spits.

Midoriya’s eyes widen. “Don’t tell me he’s part of the plot to overthrow the Five Kingdoms…”

Interestingly enough, Todoroki suddenly can’t meet his eyes. He looks off to the side, rolls his shoulders back, and clears his throat. “That hasn’t been proven.”

Midoriya crosses his arms. “Okay.”

“He very well could be in on it. My father was the one who invited him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And for the record, Fuyumi doesn’t like him, either.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Listen, Deku,” Todoroki groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I can’t have him marry into my family. How will I look at him when he can’t stop…twinkling?”

“Never did I think I’d see the day where Todoroki-sama discriminated against someone because of their appearance,” Midoriya says, fighting down a smile.

“If you like him so much why don’t you marry him,” Todoroki mutters.

“Oh dear,” Fuyumi says, clasping her hands together. “Have I interrupted a spat, Shouto?”

Todoroki launches himself past Midoriya and slaps a hand over Fuyumi’s mouth. “Quiet!” he snaps. “Or do you want to be caught in his diamond-studded clutches?”
“What seems to be the problem?” Iida asks, appearing from behind Fuyumi. “Fuyumi-san? Shou —*mmf!*”

Fuyumi slaps a hand over his mouth. In unison, the three hiss, “*Shh!*”

Todoroki leans back against the wall, arms crossed. “I’ve managed to avoid him this entire *disaster* of a suitor ball, and now I have to chance a courtyard with him in it. Perfect.”

“Who are you speaking of?” Iida says, looking a little dazed after having Fuyumi’s hand on his mouth. It was probably against his Ingenium sensibilities.

“Aoyama Yuuga,” Fuyumi says. She bites her lip. “He’s not a bad guy, just…”

“Just…” Todoroki says.

“Just…” Iida says.

“…A lot,” Fuyumi decides. “You know him, of course.”

“Ah, yes,” Iida says, pushing his glasses further up his face. “Not the…easiest man to have a conversation with, not even concerning the trade agreements between our nations, and the frankly *abysmal* tariffs on platinum and rubies, I mean, *really*—”

“Anyone would have trouble keeping up with that,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki, Fuyumi, and Iida look at him curiously.

“The taxes on pearls coming from Urabiti are half the reason I’d like to see Shouto marry the Uraraka’s girl,” Fuyumi admits, fingerling her pearl necklace.

“That’s short-sighted of you, Fuyumi,” Todoroki says. “Do you know how much we pay to import
food from Yuuei since our relations are shot? And Riot is trying to turn the spice trade back in their favor once more.”

“Aristocrats,” Midoriya spits. “You’re all a bunch of filthy aristocrats.”

Iida opens his mouth to protest and Midoriya points at him. “No! I don’t blame this poor prince for not wanting to talk about trade agreements. Can’t you save that talk for the leadership summits between kingdoms and talk about, oh, I don’t know—anything else?”

Fuyumi and Todoroki exchange glances. Midoriya, to his immense regret, is not able to catch what kind of look was exchanged.

“You’re right, Deku,” Fuyumi sighs. “I guess having an overload of political talk probably put him off.”

“If you overlook his horrifying fashion taste, I’m sure he could be a valuable ally,” Todoroki says, nodding.

“If only we had someone who lead the charge on this,” Fuyumi says, shaking her head. “Someone who wouldn’t default to such boring conversation.”

“Someone who isn’t a filthy aristocrat,” Todoroki agrees. “Too bad I can’t think of anyone like that.”

“I hate you both,” Midoriya says. “No, really.” He looks at Fuyumi, hiding laughter behind her hand. “Your Highness, you are a tried and true Todoroki. Truly, one of the family. And you—” He turns to Todoroki, eyebrows raised innocently. “You’re dead to me. Your charm won’t win me back this time. I’m going home with Iida-sama.”

Iida turns crimson. Midoriya thinks better of the implications of their relationship. “Actually, you know what? Fine. Fine, I will go talk to that poor, defamed prince. I’m going to become his friend and I am never speaking to any of you again.”

He turns on his heel, Todoroki calling a final “Gods be with you, Deku,” before Midoriya turns the corner and makes a beeline for Aoyama.
Wealth is easy to indicate. Fine fabrics stand out above cheap fabrics. Fine jewelry stands out above fake jewelry. It’s very easy to display status by wearing both fine clothes and ornamentation. However, Midoriya has never seen someone combine both in such an…elaborate result.

Aoyama is dressed head to toe in white, which would have been blinding on its own, but the effect is compounded by the amount of precious stones sewn onto his clothing. The cuffs of his sleeves, the fringe of his obnoxiously long cravat, the buttons on his shirt—all sparkling, iridescent quartz and the occasional diamond stud. He wears bangles and heavy necklaces of platinum and diamond that catches the light and digs into Midoriya’s eyes.

Possibly the most irritating aspect of his getup were the pearls and opals sewn into curling designs on the back of a little cape he wore that fell to just below his shoulders. Peals lining the seams of his clothing. Mother of pearl on the tips of his boots. Opal lining every edge of the boots as if it were going out of style. The girl that he’s trapped in conversation is dazed, as if stunned by the amount of light Aoyama has managed to reflect.

And to top off the entirety of his ridiculous dress is the pair of winged, rose-tinted glasses that are far too large for his face and a rose he waves around like a prop. Midoriya thinks there’s some joke to be made about how confident he is when he looks like a walking quartz mine and rose-tinted glasses, but he’s too distracted by the fact that the Todorokis may have been right to make said joke.

Like a leopard zeroing in on the weak deer of the herd, Aoyama spots Midoriya’s approach. Midoriya isn’t quite sure whether it’s the fact that he’s the first person to approach Aoyama with the intent of seeking conversation with him or that Aoyama knows who he is, but Aoyama excuses himself from the dazed girl and meets Midoriya halfway.

“Deku!” he calls, in a heavily accented voice. “The Yuuein among the Endeavoran sharks! What a pleasure it is to meet you!” And then, in defiance of all Five Kingdoms customs, Aoyama kisses Midoriya on both cheeks and embraces him.

Amazed, Midoriya can only embrace him back and offer a startled, “Y-Your Grace?”

“Oh no, no, no, none of that stuffy formality!” Aoyama says, waving his rose that was—you guessed it—covered in tiny little jewels at the edges of the petals. “We are friends, are we not?”

am just a lowly servant.”

“But it is the servant who is the voice of the master,” Aoyama points out. “He sent you to talk to me, did he not?”

“…In a way,” Midoriya says. It’s fascinating. He honestly has no idea if Aoyama is faking the accent or if that’s how he normally speaks.

“What does dearest Shouto want with his friend in the north?” Aoyama asks. “Ask anything of me.”

“He, uh,” Midoriya says, “wants to know what your intentions are with his sister?”

Aoyama’s eyes get a certain sparkle in them. “Well!” he says. “Just between you and me…how much do you know about the trade agreements between Endeavor and Lustre?”

“I have a feeling I’m about to find out,” Midoriya says, heart sinking. Aristocrats.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spies Iida and Todoroki with a very squashed Fuyumi between them, creeping across the courtyard in what only oblivious, dumbass royals would consider ‘sneaky.’ Midoriya shoots them a glance and Fuyumi offers him a thumbs-up. Some of the suitors are starting to stare.

Midoriya takes a large, purposeful step to the left, directing Aoyama’s attention away from the ridiculousness going on in the corner of the room. Even Midoriya’s sudden movement does not deter Aoyama from his train of thought, which has been redirected from the Todorokis and trade to how Aoyama’s outfit came about, somehow. Midoriya thinks he will probably never call Todoroki narcissistic in his life again.

The Iida-Todoroki sneak-train has made it halfway across the room, and, noticing Midoriya’s deflection of Aoyama’s gaze, make a break for an exit on the other side of the courtyard. Midoriya can see the smiles on their faces at getting away with this—the prats—when they run headlong into a group of servants carrying heavy-looking water jugs on their head.

Iida sidesteps the collision with inhuman speed—of course, the Iida bloodline’s Quirk—but Fuyumi is not as lucky. She catapults into two of the servants and falls to the floor. The servants
curse and try to regain balance, but the one of the clay jugs tips and falls, sending a significant amount of water falling straight for Fuyumi.

Midoriya sees it happen as if in slow motion. Todoroki's right hand shoots out and the water falling freezes instantly, turning a tide of water into heavy chunks of ice falling straight for Fuyumi’s unprotected body. Midoriya’s breath catches, but Iida is faster. His body blurs, and then the ice and jug shatter against the floor, empty of Fuyumi.

The room goes deathly still.

Midoriya sucks in a breath, but Iida is kneeling to the side of the servants, Fuyumi in his arms and unharmed. There are ice and clay shards scattered across the ground. Todoroki's arm is still outstretched, his lips parted.

And then, action. The servant who dropped the jug drops to the floor gathering the shards and apologizing profusely while the other servants lay down their loads and rush to Fuyumi’s side, asking if she needs help. The suitors, too, move in. Todoroki is still stricken.

“What's this?” Aoyama says, turning around, but Midoriya can’t answer him.

“Stay back!” Iida commands, voice echoing through the courtyard. “The Princess is unharmed but she needs space. Please stand back. Sirs,” he turns to the servants, “be careful of sharp edges. Use a broom to sweep up the remains, not your hands.”

“Please excuse me,” Midoriya says, voice strained, and runs to Todoroki's side.

Everyone rushes to carry out Iida’s orders. Iida is comforting Fuyumi, who is shaking her head and smiling, at worst a bit shaken. Iida sets her down with a few more comforting words, and then turns his eyes to Todoroki.

Midoriya isn’t going to be fast enough.

“Are you out of your mind,” Iida hisses to Todoroki, still looking at his hand with wide eyes. “If that ice had hit her head, she could’ve been knocked unconscious! Some of those shards were sharp enough to pierce skin! You put her in immense danger!”
“Please, Tenya—” Fuyumi says. “He didn’t mean—”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Todoroki says. “I thought I was—”

“Damn straight you weren’t thinking,” Iida says. He clasps Todoroki on the arm. “If I wasn’t here she could’ve been injured. Our Quirks…they’re incredible, but they’re dangerous. You have to be careful with them.”

“I know that,” Todoroki snaps.

“Iida-sama,” Midoriya says, stepping between them. “It was a mistake.”

“A costly one,” Iida says.

“I’d say you’re all a little at fault for not paying attention to your surroundings,” Midoriya says. “No one got hurt. Let’s leave it at that. People are staring.”

Iida sighs. “Alright. I can agree to that. I just…Fuyumi-san is a precious person.”

“Really, I’m okay,” Fuyumi says, joining Midoriya in separating them. “It was an accident.”

“If was an accident.

They leave it at that. Fuyumi is taken to the infirmary to be looked over anyway, and Iida rejoins the crowd of suitors while Todoroki slinks out, Midoriya at his side.

Despite a shaky start to the morning, the ball’s farewells pass without incident. Fuyumi’s suitors bid her goodbye with kisses on her hand and in Iida’s case, a hug from her that catches him off-guard. Midoriya almost feels bad that they’re breaking up the potential for marriage between the two of them, but Todoroki catches Iida’s eye. Iida gives him a nod, which means he remembers his side of the bargain. He gives Midoriya a nod too, which is too startling for Midoriya to return.
Of course, Midoriya is also assaulted by Aoyama’s affection—another two kisses to his cheeks, grasping his hands and promising to write, thanking him profusely for listening, and then congratulating Todoroki on having such a devoted and kind manservant.

“ Took me up on the marriage offer, I see,” Todoroki says under his breath. Midoriya stomps on his foot.

Midoriya doesn’t miss the distracted frown on Todoroki’s mouth, or how out of focus his eyes are before anyone talks to him. It was an accident. Midoriya keeps those words in his head throughout the entire farewell ceremony and all the way back to their bedchambers to change into less formal attire.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it,” Todoroki says. “You were looking at me like that again and I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We have to talk about it,” Midoriya says.

“No, we really don’t,” Todoroki snaps. “I’d like to stop being reminded that I could have seriously injured my sister, thank you.”

“In a situation like that,” Midoriya says, “wouldn’t it have made more sense to evaporate the water and let the clay jug shatter on its own?”

A muscle twitches in Todoroki’s jaw. “Do you ever take ‘no’ for an answer?”

“No when you’re hiding something from me,” Midoriya presses.

“Yes, fine,” Todoroki says. “I meant to use my fire, not my ice. But it’s become so habitual to only use my ice that by the time I realized I had activated the wrong quirk, it was too late to change my course of action and I froze the water.”

“Todoroki-sama…” Midoriya says. “Are you really so out of practice?”
“I haven’t used it intentionally since my mother burned my face,” Todoroki says. “I have no need of such a poisonous gift.”

“And yet, you clearly intended to use it.”

Todoroki’s eyes on him are as cold as the day they first met. “Do not patronize me, Deku. The chance that I would have incinerated the entire courtyard is as high as the chance of me evaporating the water.”

“So you’ve gotten so out of practice you can’t even use it,” Midoriya says. “How does that help anything?”

“I don’t need it,” Todoroki spits. “Anything from him is unnecessary.”

“It’s a part of you,” Midoriya presses. “It could be a strength.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Todoroki snaps. “I don’t need it! I don’t need his power!”

“It’s your own power!” Midoriya snarls, smashing his fist against the wall.

There’s a beat of silence and then, “Okay, ow.”

Todoroki takes a breath. “It’s—”

“It’s your power,” Midoriya says, rubbing his hand. “I don’t see Todoroki Enji in your head, making your decisions. Todoroki Enji doesn’t decide when you use your fire, where you use your fire, how you use your fire. It’s Todoroki Shouto. It’s your power.”

Todoroki visibly swallows. “Anything that came from him cannot be trusted.”

“I trust it,” Midoriya says, stepping forward. He takes Todoroki’s left hand, presses it to his throat.
“I trust this. I trust you.”

“I can’t,” Todoroki says softly. “I can’t, knowing it’s from him.”

“Then I’ll help you,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki's eyes flick to his, uncertain.

Midoriya smiles. “C’mon. You, me, and that old quarry just outside the capital. Yaoyorozu-san said you used it for practicing with your ice, why not your fire, too?”

“You’ll get hurt,” Todoroki says. “Someone will get hurt.” But he’s not saying no.

“You don’t have to trust your power,” Midoriya says. “You don’t even have to trust you. Just trust me, who trusts you.”

Todoroki sighs. “I don’t want to. But I also know you, and I know you won’t shut up about it until I at least humor you. So I will. With one percent of my power. Once. That’s all, hear me?”

“Alright,” Midoriya says. “I can accept that.”

Todoroki eyes him like he can’t completely believe that. “And tomorrow,” he says. “I’ve had enough of Quirk usage today.”

Midoriya nods.

Todoroki sighs again and ruffles Midoriya’s hair with his fire hand. “One day I will learn to deny you.”

Midoriya counts it as a win.
Todoroki insists on circling the quarry twice to make sure that there are no people lurking around it. Midoriya thinks that’s fair. It’s the type of place children would like to explore and teenagers would come to for secret meetings. Todoroki also has them tie up their horses a five minute walk away from the quarry. It put them at greater risk of being stolen, but Todoroki wasn’t taking chances with his Quirk.

“I’m not so sure you should even be down here,” Todoroki mutters. “If I lose it, you’ll get charred as easily as the horses would have.”

“You said so yourself,” Midoriya says. “One percent. That’s all.”

If Midoriya is honest with himself, he wasn’t worried until he saw how antsy Todoroki was getting. He slept restlessly, dressed in a mess, and he was overcorrecting his horse to the point that she started getting frustrated with him. Even the extra loop around the quarry was a way for Todoroki to put off using his fire power. As he stands in the center of the pit, a lone figure with Midoriya over fifty meters away, Midoriya can imagine him engulfed in flames that block out the light of the sun.

…Midoriya trusted him, but maybe he should be a bit farther back.

“Are you ready?” Todoroki calls.

“Ready!” Midoriya replies.

Todoroki exhales and closes his eyes. He holds up his left arm, fingers poised to snap. There’s a long moment of silence, then Todoroki furrows his brows and snaps his fingers. Midoriya braces himself for an explosion of fire and—
A tiny flame alights at the tip of Todoroki’s finger. Midoriya squints at it. Todoroki also squints at it. The flame doesn’t even flicker.

“Is that it?” Midoriya calls.

Todoroki nods. He can’t tear his eyes from the flame. “It doesn’t make any sense,” he calls. “It was so out of control when I saved you that night.”

Midoriya dares to walk closer. “You were poisoned, though,” he says. “And enraged. You’re calm and unpoisoned now. Do you want to try more?”

Todoroki snuffs out the flame. “No.”

Midoriya sighs. “You didn’t explode. You’re completely in control. This power—it’s yours to control.”

Todoroki looks at his hand. He purses his lips together and closes his fist. When he opens it again, there is a curling flame in midair, rippling contentedly. Not out of control. Steady.

“Try to manipulate it,” Midoriya suggests. “It doesn’t have to be more than that, just—try to shape it. Like you might with ice.”

Todoroki’s eyes flick to the left. The flame sways to the left. Todoroki’s eyes flick to the right. The flame sways to the right. He exhales softly and the flame swirls around his palm in a lazy circle.

“It’s…” Midoriya says.

“Completely under my control, yeah,” Todoroki says. “This isn’t…I didn’t expect this.”

He closes his eyes. In his hand, the fire flickers. It lets out small flares, then, as smooth as water, the flames shape themselves into the Todoroki crest, a phoenix with its wings outspread. Todoroki opens his eyes.
“Whoa,” Midoriya says.

“Stand back,” Todoroki says. “I’m going to try something.”

Midoriya jogs backwards, and as he does, the flame morphs into a full-blown fire, the phoenix growing in size until it stretches the width of the quarry. It flaps its wings and parts its beak in a silent screech. As Todoroki and Midoriya watch on, the fiery phoenix takes to the wing and soars around the quarry, occasionally making as if to screech or extending its talons to snatch at thin air. The fire is so streamlined, it looks as if it could be a real creature.

“Todoroki-sama…” Midoriya says. “This is…”

Todoroki shakes his head and the fire melts into nothing, the illusory phoenix gone. “This shouldn’t be possible,” he agrees. “I don’t…even as a child I didn’t have mastery like this. This is complete control, even more than I have of my ice.”

Midoriya frowns. “Could it be that your fire Quirk is more dominant than your ice Quirk?”

Todoroki smiles grimly. “Wouldn’t that be something? Not quite the perfect son he imagined, after all.”

“But…?” Midoriya says. “Or you just have natural mastery over fire rather than ice?” Midoriya suggests.

“I’d prefer that not be the case,” Todoroki says. “If my body has to play favorites with Quirks, I would rather be in Fuyumi’s shoes.”

Midoriya smiles. “I guess I can’t talk you into using it anymore, can I?”

“No need,” Todoroki says. “As you can clearly see, I have no trouble using it.” He pauses. “But…I wouldn’t have known that without your meddling. So thank you, for that.”

“I’m the one who’s supposed to look after you, aren’t I?” Midoriya says. “You can count on me.”
“So it seems,” Todoroki says, returning the smile.

Still, Midoriya can’t get the incident out of his head all day. Apparently, neither can Todoroki, given how he snaps his fingers on, off, on, off, playing with his fire. With the cleanup after the ball the only event taking place in the palace, it’s an unusually quiet day, too. Midoriya slips out to self-train while Todoroki reads, still snapping his fingers.

By the time they’re both bathed and fed, ready to sleep, Midoriya has put the events of the morning out of his head. There was no way for them to get their answers after all—in all likelihood Todoroki really did just gel better with fire than ice, much to his dismay. Even so, he’s thrown enough by the discovery that Todoroki actually knows how to use fire that he doesn’t immediately pick up on Todoroki’s weird mood.

When Todoroki starts fiddling with the placements of paintings and tapestries around the room, Midoriya notices.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says, “What are you doing?”

Todoroki doesn’t immediately reply. Instead, he lights the bedside candle with a snap and lets the flame run around his finger. Midoriya watches. It does not burn him.

“I always wondered why the boiling water burned me, but not this,” Todoroki murmurs.

“Water?” Midoriya suggests.

“You would think the ice would compensate for that,” Todoroki says. “I supposed some things are never as you expect them to be.”

“This is not what you want to be talking about,” Midoriya says.

“No, it is not,” Todoroki agrees. “You asked me, once, about my nightmares.”

And he had been immediately shut down. Yes, Midoriya remembers. He may have learned to sleep through most of Todoroki’s night terrors by now, but he never forgot them. “Yes?” Midoriya says.
“It’s not,” Todoroki moves his finger through the candle, “something that I—it doesn’t happen. But I think it does.”

Midoriya furrows his brows. “The night terrors? They definitely happen.”

“No,” Todoroki says. “The contents of the terrors. It’s not about training with my father or being burned by my mother. I don’t—I don’t really understand.”

Midoriya’s eyes widen. “You’ve never told anyone about them, have you?”

“It wasn’t worth troubling my guard with,” Todoroki says. “Not even Momo. They just happen. I told them not to worry about it, after it started happening.”

“Can I ask…what you dream of?” Midoriya says.

Todoroki snuffs out the candle. “Fire.”

Midoriya waits for more, but Todoroki doesn’t say anything else.

“There has to be more,” Midoriya says.

“There isn’t,” Todoroki says. “It’s just fire in every direction, so bright I can’t tell if it’s night or day. I don’t know what’s burning. I’m just standing in the middle of it all, the only thing living, and I feel crushing guilt.”

“Is it your fire?” Midoriya asks.

“No,” Todoroki says. “It’s not mine. It could never be mine.” He frowns. “Or it could be mine, and that’s how I know it never will be. I would never allow that to happen.”

“No, I don’t use fire because I hate my father,” Todoroki says. “But the dreams are why I’m afraid to use them.”

Midoriya exhales. “Well, you should rest easy now. You’re right—you can control your fire, there’s no way it could be you.”

“It unsettles me nonetheless,” Todoroki says. “I am not comforted by my control.”

Midoriya frowns. “If you can’t take comfort in that control, then I don’t know what you can take comfort in.” He pauses. Blinks. “Unless…you’re telling me this so I can comfort you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Todoroki says too quickly.

Midoriya’s eyes widen. “That’s why you’ve been so weird?”

“I don’t need your help,” Todoroki sniffs.

“Of course not,” Midoriya says. “But I’ll give it to you, whether or not you ask for it.”

He climbs into Todoroki’s bed once more, this time, absolutely certain of what he’s doing.

“What do you think you’re doing,” Todoroki deadpans. “Have those two nights gotten to your head?”

“Just enough, I think,” Midoriya says. “What happened to trusting me?”

Todoroki approaches him like a feral animal, proud and tempted, but wary of a human. He slides under the sheets, keeping a wide berth between them. Midoriya rolls his eyes and scoots closer. The moment his hand touches Todoroki, Todoroki bristles.

“Hush,” Midoriya says.
“I didn’t say anything,” Todoroki mutters.

“And to think you were so snuggly those two nights,” Midoriya says.

“A mistake, I can assure you.”

Midoriya curls up against Todoroki’s back, looping an arm over his middle. Todoroki is still tense, every muscle in his body pulled taut at the thought of being cuddled. Midoriya waits. He waits until the sensation of his arm against Todoroki fades from Todoroki’s immediate thoughts, until the heat of two people under the sheets warms the bed, until their breathing synchronizes.

And then, Todoroki eases himself back against Midoriya. Midoriya knows he’s warm—he’s always run hot—and Todoroki is a half-frozen, half-burning creature. Midoriya’s heat is welcome.

Todoroki sighs. “I’m uncomfortable.”

“Are you?” Midoriya says, eyes still closed. “If you really are, I will leave.”

Todoroki goes quiet, then relaxes further, connecting their bodies at more points than Midoriya can’t count in a sleepy state.

“Your breath tickles the back of my neck.”

Midoriya laughs, exhaling from his nose. “Your hair tickles my nose.”

“May I ask why you are the big spoon? I’m taller than you.” Todoroki seems more inclines to complain than to go to sleep.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Midoriya says. “I’m protecting you.”

“Hmph,” Todoroki says. “I’m stronger than you.”
Midoriya gives Todoroki a slight squeeze and is rewarded with the tiniest catch of his breath. “I beg to differ,” Midoriya mumbles. “But by all means, keep complaining until you convince me you aren’t completely comfortable and close to falling asleep.”


“Ridiculous prince,” Midoriya replies. “You can sleep now. The nightmares won’t come for you.”

“Must you really be right about everything?” Todoroki sighs.

“If I’m wrong, you can kick me out tomorrow.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Todoroki says, and lets all his muscles go lax.

Todoroki falls asleep to Midoriya’s heartbeat against his back. Midoriya falls asleep to the fantasy of pushing Todoroki’s hair to the side and kissing his nape. During the night, they do not stir.

Chapter End Notes

NOT TO KILL THE MOOD, BUT THIS GIF IS VERY IMPORTANT
next chapter: GUESS WHO FUCKING KISSES!!!!!!!
AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!! GET HYPE
an empire for two

Chapter Notes

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TODOROKI SHOUTO!!! THIS CHAPTER IS DONE AS OF 11:32 PM SO I TECHNICALLY MADE IT!!!!!

PLEASE NOTE THE RATING CHANGE. IT HAPPENS THIS CHAPTER.

(just please support hina i love her so much okay she's my official illustrator)

HINA ART SHRINE CORNER (SHE'S MADE SO MUCH I DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND): we talked about long hair shouto and let me tell you, SKETCH COMIC+GIF OF THE ENTIRE AOYAMA SCENE, KISSING MOMOJIROU + EXTRAS, an uraraka sketch i never linked;, THE GREATEST FUYUMI + PUP I'VE EVER SEEN, tfw ur prince threatens to kiss you, A KISS BEFORE ITS TIME, breathtaking long-hair shouto, MY CURRENT LAPTOP BACKGROUND, THE IIDA-TODOROKI SNEAK TRAIN, WEDDING GOD SHOUTO, WEDDING TDDKS, is that it?

michelle did a WONDERFUL IIDA and MY FAVE TDIIDK TBH (current skype icon)

FUCKIN AINSIL MADE A SPICY DEKU COMIC and ofc, unforgettably, a consumed with lust shouto

TOBY MADE A GLASSES PRINCE

patch made a CUTE, RELATABLE PRINCE and a LOVELY, COLORED PRINCE

lou did a GREAT royal boy

ANOTHER GLASSES PRINCE FROM OUYASMI!!!

spacejamtwo got a SWEET DEKU CUTE CHIBIS from mintae_chii!

i deleted all the tumblr art i was linking so lmfao that will be for TOMORROW ryan

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Midoriya doesn’t consider himself a superstitious person, in general. He does not believe in good luck charms or that if he breaks a comb misfortune will come his way. Midoriya is by no means a saint, but he likes to think that if he does good acts, good things will happen to him in turn. This belief has been tested with his luck in Endeavor, but he ended up saddled with Todoroki, so it can’t be all that bad. He does not believe that things happen for any particular reason, and that coincidence abounds.
That being said, Midoriya thinks that it must be fate that he collided with Princess Fuyumi on this day.

And by collided, he of course means, *collided*.

Midoriya has the time to think *shit* before he’s plowing into Fuyumi, in a rush herself, no brakes on either of them. Midoriya pinwheels his arms backwards, but their legs get tangled and they both end up on their asses, groaning.

The handmaiden accompanying Fuyumi goes bug-eyed. “M-Milady!” she sputters.

Fuyumi, ever the good sport, waves a hand. “Don’t worry, don’t worry; I’m fine. It was an accident.”

Midoriya is quicker. He scrambles to his knees and bows his head. “Please forgive me, Your Highness. I should not have been running in the halls.”

“Oh, hush, Deku,” Fuyumi says. “I know it wasn’t your fault. I’m sure my backbreaker of a brother has you running errands all around the castle for him day and night. Can’t be helped that he’s impatient.”

Midoriya, recognizing an out when he sees one, doesn’t say that he had been running back from the aviary to make sure his absence wasn’t noticed. “Yes, Your Highness.”

The handmaiden moves to help Fuyumi to her feet, but she’s holding a large stack of bound volumes and fumbles. Midoriya moves to help and gets a dirty look for his efforts.

“Thank you, both of you,” Fuyumi says, brushing of her skirts, pale blue today. “My, I won’t let my excitement get the best of me next time.”

Midoriya eyes her and the still-overburdened handmaiden. “Princess, if I may be so bold… excitement?”

Fuyumi looks at him, uncomprehending, and then her eyebrows rise and her mouth makes a perfect ‘o.’

“Deku!” she exclaims. “You’re not from Endeavor!”

Midoriya blinks. “Um…yes.”

“Sorry, sorry; that was obvious,” Fuyumi says, waving her hands. “What I meant was that you don’t know about the event coming up. It’s the Founder’s Festival! We’re celebrating the week Endeavor was founded.”

Midoriya does a quick tally of months and days and finds yes, next week was the week of the Founder’s Festival. Week. Gods above. Endeavorans really were insufferable. But that explained the chaos around the palace lately. Todoroki hadn’t talked about it, so Midoriya hadn’t asked. He had assumed it was something to do with the king and kept his head down in case the king needed a ritual sacrifice or some such awfulness.

But to know it was something as important as a kingdom founding—Midoriya frowns. “Why hasn’t Todoroki-sama brought this up with me?”

“Oh, it’s tradition for the royals to take no part in planning,” Fuyumi says. “It’s our ancestors who founded this land, after all—why are you making that face?”
Midoriya feels his eye twitch. *Endeavorans*. On the Yuuein day of founding—*day*—known as All Night, their All Might would join the townspeople in setting up along with the rest of their household in order to connect the royalty with the common people. After all, a kingdom was built on the backs of the average person. It was a twenty-four hour celebration of joy and camaraderie, not—whatever *this* was.

“…Cultural differences,” Midoriya explains as politely as possible.

“I’ve always wanted to be in Yuuei for All Night,” Fuyumi sighs. “Sounds like a much more reasonable celebration.”

“I would have to concur,” Midoriya admits. The handmaiden blushes at his boldness.

Fuyumi taps her chin. “However, you’re in Endeavor, so—it really would be best for you to learn the customs of the Founding Festival.”

“No more dancing, I hope?” Midoriya asks.

“No more from you, showstopper,” Fuyumi says. She reaches out to pinch his cheek. “I like my brother alive and breathing, thank you very much.” Midoriya smiles and submits to the treatment.

“How about you come with me?” Fuyumi suggests. “I could get you up to speed on our traditions.”

“Milady…” the handmaiden protests. “Your dresses—”

Fuyumi waves a hand. “Never mind that. This won’t take but a minute. Would you be a dear and fetch the tailor? By the time he’s here, I’ll be done with Deku.”

The handmaiden’s still scowling at Deku, bridling at the idea of leaving her princess with such an uncouth servant. Midoriya smiles at her, in the least menacing way possible. She scowls harder, but bows to Fuyumi and trots away.

“Come,” Fuyumi says, and Midoriya does.

Fuyumi’s room in the palace—like all the siblings’—is temporary. However, that didn’t mean it was anything but spectacular. She’s at the corner of the palace, a desirable edge with two floor to ceiling walls of glass windows. The inside of the room is colored in the same baby blue as her skirts and glass where metal should have been—in the lamps, the pitcher of water, the plates. The furs on her bed are white rabbit fur to compliment the soft blues, giving the entire room a feeling of lightness and bright that sets Midoriya’s heart at ease, in contrast to the masculine dominance of Todoroki’s furnishings.

Fuyumi flits over to the bookshelf, pulling down a few volumes tied with strings and dumping them unceremoniously on Midoriya. They’re as heavy as they look. Midoriya grunts. Then she’s off to a chair in front of the windows, a second chair accompanying it and a table between them. She pats the tabletop enthusiastically.

Midoriya dumps the books on the table. “Why—”

“Shh, you’ll see,” Fuyumi says. “Skeptical Yuuein.”

Oh, so there was a reason for this clandestine meeting. He had forgotten she was a Todoroki, for a second. He sits down across from her gingerly.

“How much do you know about the Founder’s Festival, Deku?” she asks.
“Admittedly, not much,” he says. “Only that it’s a great celebration of all kinds that lasts for seven days and seven nights with only a few hours of rest between each day.”

Fuyumi nods. “No rest, if we can get away with it. It’s the week that the most amount of money changes hands as well, considering all the buying and selling of goods and services.” She opens one of the books, thumbing through the thick pages until she finds the one she’s looking for. She places the book in front of Midoriya.

It’s a painting. Small, but brightly colored with keen attention to details. The painting is of a town center, a circle of men and women in commoner’s clothing, all dancing. Above them, lines of flowers and streamers are hung, raining flower petals upon the dancers. What’s most striking, though, is the attention paid to the rosiness of the dancers’ cheeks, the brightness of their smiles, lips parted in laughter. Around them, children bang on instruments and scrappy dogs run between their legs. The background is all striking, warm colors, creating the atmosphere of—a celebration.

“This is beautiful,” Midoriya says, voice soft. “Is this the Founder’s Festival?”


Midoriya flips through the pages, taking care to handle them gently. Scenes of festivity great him on every page. Slowly, colors leak into the town itself—the outside of shops are repainted, tapestries are strung up, wares and fruits of all kinds are set up outside houses and shops. And the people, dressed in plain browns and blacks and greens, take up a bright, patterned sash about their waists that catches the eye. Midoriya sees scenes of meat cooking, of children with face paint, of games, of swordfights and archery, always singing and dancing.

And then, he flips to a page that is dark as ink, lit only by the painted bonfire in the center of the image, dark figures moving in pairs around the massive blaze. There’s a band of musicians off the side, and everyone not dancing is holding a candle, creating a sea of tiny stars in the dark.

“Oh,” Midoriya says. His fingers brush the page.

“After dark is for the adults,” Fuyumi says. “During the day, there are events for families and children, lots of food and games. But once the sun sets, the drinking and dancing begins. Night is for the parents and young couples after the children have gone to bed. It’s romantic, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Midoriya agrees. There’s a certain quality of mystery and freedom to the dark, the light of the candles reflecting the light of the stars and the bonfire illuminating earth like the moon lit the sky. It seemed to be a magical time, where anything could happen.

“Naturally, royalty can’t do anything fun like that,” Fuyumi says. She sighs and flops back against the chair. “I’ll be accompanying my dearest father on a tour around the country for a week. Each town we visit is to put on a celebratory parade or exhibition of some kind and serve us the best wine and cuts of meat. They’ll pay us tribute for the founding and for being so kind as to allow them a week to celebrate.”

Midoriya wrinkles his nose before he can stop himself. Fuyumi laughs. “I know, right? It’s ridiculous, considering the taxes they pay already. And I get such stomachaches from eating so much…honestly, Shouto has it better than I do.”

“Todoroki-sama?” Midoriya asks.
“He stays home,” Fuyumi says. “He’s in charge of looking after the palace while everyone, even a majority of our households go out to party. It’s been that way ever since he was born. He’s never been able to enjoy the festival.”

“I’m sure Yaoyorozu-san will stay,” Midoriya says.

“Probably,” Fuyumi says. “She’s nearly loyal to a fault, bless her.”

“Of course, I’ll be there as well,” Midoriya says. “Still sounds pretty lonely.”

“It must be,” Fuyumi says. “I’m sure he’ll encourage you to go out an experience the festival, at least for the cultural immersion.”

“I’m not going to leave him,” Midoriya snorts. “That would just be cruel.”

Fuyumi sighs. “If only there was a way for him to become a commoner for a night…”

“I don’t think he’s capable of dropping the princely persona, even if he could.”

Fuyumi clears her throat. “If only there was a way for him to become a commoner for a night…”

Midoriya looks up. She’s staring wistfully through the window, but there’s the curl of a smile to her lips. Todorokis.

“Your Highness,” Midoriya says slowly, “are you suggesting I…kidnap…my prince?”

“Shouto always did have a penchant for going to sleep early on these nights,” Fuyumi says, still not looking at him. “Perhaps he calls it a day just after the sun sets, stressed from the day’s events. I’m sure it would come as no surprise.”

“Should he…suddenly become unwell and retire early,” Midoriya says, “one would suppose that he might be able to do as he pleased that night, even leave the palace walls.”

“Exactly!” Fuyumi says.

“…If, of course, he wasn’t a Todoroki posterchild, from the way he carries himself to the odd-colored eyes and half-and-half hair.”

Fuyumi slumps. “Oh, I forgot about that.”

“It’s a great idea, Your Highness,” Midoriya says, smiling. “But even if his appearance weren’t a problem, I don’t know how you would expect me to convince him to leave. Surely he would find this celebration to be frivolous at best.”

“He’s twenty-three!” Fuyumi says, throwing her hands in the air. “He’s never had fun in his life! He didn’t even have a childhood!”

Midoriya winces.

“I want him to live a little,” Fuyumi says. She bites her lip. “Look—I know. I know something is going on with him, and with you, and with Momo, and probably a lot more people. I know he’s not telling me the details of whatever it is.”

Midoriya doesn’t dare breathe.

“It’s okay,” Fuyumi says. “I’m not—I’m guilty of being jealous of him, like his brothers. I turned
my back on him for a time, too. I know he can’t trust me like he can trust you.”

“He loves you,” Midoriya blurts out. *He should* trust you, *not me*.

Fuyumi smiles. “I’m glad to hear that. And I love him, too. I want to do all I can to protect him, and to make up for treating him even a little badly. But there’s only so much I can do. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“It told you, I can’t—”

Fuyumi gives him a look. “Deku, please. Do not be so dense as to not realize that my brother adores you.”

*Deku, I adore you.*

Midoriya swallows. “I—I know that. He is…first in my heart as well.”

“Obviously,” Fuyumi says, and Midoriya’s ears burn.

“He calls you ‘silvertongue,’” Fuyumi says. “So use your cleverness to get him out. I don’t think you realize how easy it will be. It’s almost concerning how much you have him wrapped around your finger.”

“Your Highness, please—”

“Please,” Fuyumi says, serious. She reaches across the table to clasp his hands. “Before he’s married away. Before he becomes a king. Before he can’t anymore, let him have fun, for once in his life.”

Midoriya swallows again. “I…might know someone who can help.”

When Fuyumi smiles, it reaches her eyes, crinkling the edges and splitting her face. Her eyes are as bright and blue as the open sky, twin replicas of Todoroki’s blue eye without the darkness he carried within him. Midoriya’s heart skips a beat. He understands what Iida saw, now. It was hard not to fall a little in love with Todoroki Fuyumi.

“Deku, you’re blushing,” Fuyumi says.

“A beautiful woman is holding my hands and smiling at me,” Midoriya croaks. “Who wouldn’t be?”

“Are you sure it isn’t my resemblance to His Royal Highness?” Fuyumi asks, smile taking on a much less innocent shine.

“Goodbye, Fuyumi-sama,” Midoriya excuses himself quickly, bolting from the room without even offering to put the books back or realizing that he had addressed her by her name and not her title.

Well, in his experience, Todoroki children tended to be more forgiving than their father.

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“Explain to me again,” Todoroki says, “how sneaking out in the middle of the night to a festival
defies my father.”

“Well, obviously,” Tooru says from the stool she’s sitting on. “He told you not to, so? Bam, defiance.”

Todoroki’s eyes slide to Midoriya. He quirks one eyebrow.

Midoriya squirms. “Well, it’s just a thought I had, but—isn’t this a perfect opportunity for His Majesty to enact some kind of devastating plan? You’re not around to stop him. And he’s not around to stop you from spying on his—his nefarious plans.”

“Even if I were to give that theory credit,” Todoroki says, “why do I, specifically, have to go?”

“W-Well,” Midoriya says. “If I went I’d be a target all on my own. I can handle myself well enough against three or so men, but if there’s more and if they have swords, I’ll be a pincushion by the time you recover me.”

“I’m sure Momo—”

“Whichever! My point is that you’re boring! Enjoy your youth!”

Tooru turns a very interesting shade of pink and returns to her task at hand, which was stirring a bucket full of some off-putting black liquid.

Well. They had gotten him into the baths at least. That much was a success. They were three days into the Founder’s Festival, but from Tooru’s reports, the celebration was still going strong. Midoriya doesn’t really care how crazy it is. He’s equal parts stressed about deceiving Todoroki and excited for the festival itself.

“So,” Todoroki says, “You set me up.”

Midoriya crosses his arms. “That’s a cold way to put it. It was a request I couldn’t refuse.”

“Tooru, he could have you killed—”

“血脉凪’s heart.”

Tooru turns a very interesting shade of pink and returns to her task at hand, which was stirring a bucket full of some off-putting black liquid.

Damn him. Why did Midoriya think he could deceive him, again? Man was as sharp as a knife. “I’m sworn to secrecy,” he sniffs.

“I don’t know why Fuyumi is butting into my business,” Todoroki says, “but I intend to find out.”

Midoriya deflates. “She’s just worried about you, okay? She wants you to have fun.”

“I don’t have time for fun,” Todoroki says.
“Yeah, because it’s so time-consuming to babysit an empty palace,” Midoriya says. “Give yourself a break.”

“And you want me to…wander around the capital,” Todoroki says. “Freely. Looking like I do.”

“I want you to enjoy yourself,” Midoriya says. “And you won’t look like yourself.”

Todoroki frowns and opens his mouth at the same time Tooru marches up to him, hands coated in black, thick liquid, and pats him on the head. Todoroki bristles.

“Don’t worry,” Tooru says. “When we’re done with you, you’ll look as everyday as the farmer down the street.”

Todoroki blinks. “I suppose…I am in your hands.”

Midoriya joins her, sticking his hands in the black liquid and then turning to work it through Todoroki’s hair. White becomes grey, red becomes dull, and gradually, Todoroki’s bi-colored hair goes from shining red and white to an ugly, matte black.

“This is a crime against humanity,” Tooru complains, dipping the ends of Todoroki’s hair in the dye. “You were so beautiful.”

Todoroki cracks one eye open and glances at the floor. “You’re getting it everywhere.”

Tooru waves a blackened hand. “It’ll wash out easily. Don’t let anyone dunk you in a well or it’s game over.”

“Hmm,” Todoroki says. “I won’t worry about it dyeing a permanent color, then.” He leans like a cat back into Midoriya’s hands, scrubbing all the way to his scalp. Midoriya runs a hand through his bangs, slicking them back against his head. Todoroki opens his eyes and meets Midoriya’s gaze. Midoriya is reminded of looking into Fuyumi’s eyes like this, not even a week earlier. This time, he’s met with dark and light, heterochromia with none of the freedom of Fuyumi’s fearless eyes.

His heartbeat is steady and strong, sure of itself.

“We can’t do anything about your eyes,” Midoriya murmurs.

“In the dark, no one will notice,” Todoroki murmurs back. “The scar, however—”

“On it,” Tooru says. “I have something, it’s like face paint, but it will conceal your scar, at least a little.”

“Please wash your hands first,” Todoroki says.

Tooru huffs and stands up, muttering something rude about Todoroki that Midoriya relates to immensely. Midoriya double-checks their work for missed spots, but Todoroki’s hair is a flat, dull black. Midoriya twists his lips. It really is a shame.

Tooru returns with clean hands and a jar of some skin-color paste that she dabs a finger in. “Close your eyes,” she says.

Todoroki obeys. The paint doesn’t exactly match Todoroki’s skin color—he’s too fair to be Yuuein—but it makes his scar look like smudgy, dirty skin rather than a horrible burn. Tooru is especially delicate around his eye, not putting any of the paint too close or on his eyelid.
“It’ll have to do,” she says when it’s done. “You’re not much a looker now, but it’d be trouble if you were too much of a pretty boy anyway.”

“This is mildly uncomfortable,” Todoroki says. “Now, how do you plan on getting around the issue of our clearly-not-peasant clothing?”

Midoriya swears. “Shit, didn’t think of that. I guess we can use some of my riding clothes? Although those are distinctly Yuuein…”

“Boys, boys,” Tooru says. “Do I look like I was born yesterday?” She gestures to the small chest Todoroki is sitting on. “Open up.”

Midoriya opens the chest to reveal…very average clothes. Long-sleeve blouses with vests over top of them, darker pants, and boots with some dirt caked on them. There’s even a belt for a sword. Midoriya holds up one of the shirts and nods.

“This will fit,” he says. “Great job, Tooru.”

Tooru puffs up her chest.

“Hm, the vests are a little flashy,” Todoroki says, holding up a blue vest with gold clasps.

“Of course,” Tooru says. “You’re both hard-working employees of the Todoroki royal family. Thank god they let you take some time to celebrate the greatness of your kingdom. It will also make the gold and sword you carry not seem out of place.”

“Clever,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya peels off his light shirt and discards it off to the side, eyes on the green vest in the chest. Finally, some Endeavoran clothing that didn’t make him look like a pretty little trinket to be hanging off Todoroki’s arm—

“My virgin eyes!” Tooru squeaks.

“Please,” Midoriya snorts. “Not fooling me, with the way you moved on my lap.”

Tooru pouts. “Fine. I’ll give His Royal Highness some privacy since he’s not a jerk like you, Deku.” She stomps out, over dramatic.

Midoriya slips on the blouse. It’s scratchier than the gentle fabrics of Midoriya’s chitons and undershirts, but it feels genuine. He slips on the vest and does up the buttons easily before moving on to the pants and boots. All the items fit well. Midoriya supposes he shouldn’t be surprised, given what an eyeful Tooru had seen of him, but even the boots are a snug, comfortable fit. He’s in the middle of tying the laces up when he hears a grunt from Todoroki.

Midoriya glances over his shoulder and has to do a double-take. Todoroki is…struggling.

With the clasps on his vest, to be specific. He has them done up out of order and is scowling at his hands as he tries to undo and redo all of them, failing quite spectacularly.

“Wow,” Midoriya says. “Who knew this would be the obstacle that broke you?”

“I’ve got it,” Todoroki grunts. “Just—shut up.”

Midoriya hops to his feet and reaches for the clasps. “Here, let me—”
Todoroki slaps his hands away. “Fuck off.”

Midoriya bites down a smile and deftly undoes all of the buttons, knocking Todoroki’s hands out of the way. Todoroki scowls at him.

Then, he does up all the clasps slowly, correctly. He doesn’t stop when he reaches Todoroki’s neck, but continues to button up the collar until Todoroki’s neck is stiff and he’s practically being choked by it.


Midoriya undoes the top buttons and Todoroki shakes his head, squinting at Midoriya. Very gently, Midoriya bumps his fist on top of Todoroki’s head.

“It’s okay to ask for help, you know,” he says.

“I think I can handle clothing on my own, thank you very much,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya smiles. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Cheeky manservant.”

“Insufferable princeling.”

Midoriya’s smile hurts his cheeks. There’s a pressure in his chest, expanding his ribs and threatening to burst through his heart. His heartbeat is steady, but still, he feels it. That unknowable devotion, that unnamable emotion.

*I love you, Todoroki-sama.*

“Come on,” Midoriya says. “We have the entire night ahead of us.”

“Wow, okay,” Tooru says when they emerge from the baths. “I take what I said about you not being a looker back.”

It’s true. The unfortunate byproduct of his breeding meant that even face-painted and hair-dyed and dressed in the clothes of commoners, Todoroki still carries himself like a prince. That inherent pride and self-confidence, when mixed with his pleasing build and two-tone eyes, meant that even as one of the masses, he was going to attract attention.

“Oh, you’re hot too, Deku,” Tooru adds.

“Thanks,” Midoriya says dryly.

“Take the exit through the dancers’ studio,” Tooru says. “I made sure it was clear.”

“Thank you,” Midoriya says, this time sincerely.

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They don’t bring anything with them aside from a pouch’s worth of gold and a sword that Todoroki sheathes in his belt. Midoriya feels left out in the weapons department, but Todoroki
selected a shortsword from the armory, so Midoriya thinks it’s safe to assume the sword will be his in a conflict.

Not that he’s expecting anything of the sort. It had been a flimsy lie at best to get Todoroki to agree to his demands, but now that Todoroki was following him of his own will, Midoriya allows himself to get excited. The moment he hits fresh, cool night air, he holds his arms out and twirls in a circle.

“Freedom!” Midoriya says, sighing.

Todoroki watches him. “You make it sound as if I locked you up in the palace for days on end.”

Midoriya grins. “Nah, just excited to go to a festival. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to just have fun and enjoy myself.”

“I see,” Todoroki says. “I must be terribly overworking.” He peers at his reflection in the glass of a window. “Dear god. Is this really what I look like?”

Midoriya grins harder. “Didn’t know you were quite that vain.”

Todoroki runs a hand through his hair and it comes back charcoal-colored. “I look…common.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Midoriya says. “You don’t realize how purebred you sound and how noble your demeanor is. It’s going to be a pain to convince people that you’re not just an asshole.”

“You probably can’t refer to me by name, either,” Todoroki says. “That would be a dead giveaway.”

“Not a problem,” Midoriya says. “I’ll make up a story for you.”

Todoroki raises an eyebrow.

“Your name is…Toudou-san,” Midoriya says.

“Toudou-san,” Todoroki repeats.

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “You’re Toudou-san, the swordsmith. You’ve served the Todoroki family for generations. You’re an apprentice under your father, the royal swordsmith. You made the sword you carry with you and it has sentimental value, hence why a strong man like you only carries a shortsword.”

“Caught that, did you,” Todoroki says.

“Of course,” Midoriya says. “You’re very grateful to the Todorokis for allowing you a night off. It is your hope to bring more attention to your father’s work, should anyone in the towns be needing the skills of a swordsmith. And you are just overjoyed to be accompanying your dearest, most handsome—”

Todoroki rolls his eyes.

“—charming, amazing at dancing, friend…” Midoriya trails off. “And now, you make up a story for me.”

“You’re hopeless. Actually hopeless.”

“What?” Todoroki says. “No one knows your name or your face. I’ll only confuse myself, calling you by a different name.”


“Don’t call me that,” Todoroki says.

Oh yeah, this was going to be the best festival ever.

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Midoriya had seen paintings of it, so he thought he was prepared. He was not.

The moment they hit the main street running through the capital city, every shop is lit up with candles and lanterns strung on lines between poles that run as far as Midoriya can see. The street is already crowded with people, laughing and talking to make a low rumble of noise filling the street. There’s the occasional dog bark—and somewhere in the distance Midoriya can hear a fiddle and a singing voice—amongst the sizzling of meat over fires.

The street glows.

Midoriya takes a moment just to smell the aroma of cooking food—meats, spices, bread, the briefest whiff of some dessert that he was absolutely going to get his hands on—and the freshness of the night air, making every smell crisper.

“This is amazing,” Midoriya whispers.

“It’s just a festival,” Todoroki says, flanking him. “Food, entertainment, people.”

Midoriya punches him in the arm. “It’s so much more exciting than that!”

A man leaning against a wall overheard their conversation and laughs. “First time in the big city, lad?”

Midoriya colors and nods his head. “I’ve never seen any festival as elaborate as this in my life.”

The man grins and puffs on his pipe. “Well, don’t let your partner get you down, then. Live life the fullest—that’s what the Founder’s Festival is all about.”

“Yessir,” Midoriya says, bowing automatically. He doesn’t realize how out of place the movement is until the man raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, you’re palace folk?” he says.


“Well, it may not be much, but lemme give you a little hint,” the man says. He pats his stomach. “You’re missing a sash, both of you.”

Midoriya’s hand goes to his middle. He remembers the patterned sashes from the paintings. “Oh!”
he exclaims. “You’re right! Where can we go get them?”

“Most of us make them by hand, but seeing as you’re some funny palace folk, go down the street and a friend of mine will fix you up,” the man says. “The one with the phoenix kite over her door, see it?”

“Yes!” Midoriya says. “Thank you so much!” He turns to Todoroki. “Let’s go Todo—er, Toudousan.”

“I told you not to call me that,” Todoroki mutters, but he nods to the man and follows anyway.

Midoriya is distracted by the tapestries and kites hanging over the shops, admiring the craft of the Endeavoran people. He doesn’t see Todoroki side-eyeing him.

“You’re charming,” Todoroki says, after a moment.

“What?” Midoriya says.

“I always knew it, on one level or another,” Todoroki says. “But you have quite the innocent charm to you. You stole that old man’s heart.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Midoriya says. “I’m just polite.”


“What are you saying?” Midoriya asks, exasperated. “Do you want me to go back to the meek manservant I was before we knew each other?”


“I’m more comfortable like this,” Midoriya says. “I am more myself like this.”

“I know,” Todoroki says. Then, “I’m sorry.”

This is getting weird. Midoriya squeezes his shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re apologizing for, but don’t worry about it. Any situation I got into is my own doing. I’m happy, To—Sho—ugh, this is hard.”

Todoroki looks at him. “Did you just call me by my given name?”

Midoriya can’t read the emotion he finds there. “Um, technically, no,” he says. “Let’s go get sashes!” And then runs, like the coward he is.

The woman selling sashes is a middle-aged woman with crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes and a warm smile to match. She frets over how such a nice-looking boy can go without a matching sash. Todoroki joins in the middle of their conversation, hovering over Midoriya in a way that could be taken as threatening or just uncomfortable, and acceptable only because of their familiarity.

Those are some fierce eyes on you, boy,” she says to Todoroki.

Todoroki, to his credit, does not freak out at being addressed so informally. He blinks. “A… swordsmith…must be fierce.”

Midoriya resists the urge to facepalm. It’s hard.
“What he means,” Midoriya says, “is that he was born with that face. It’s not his fault he’s so intimidating.”

“Oh, but you can’t hate someone with an air of such loyalty,” she says.

Midoriya’s heart stops until he realizes she said ‘loyalty’ and not ‘royalty,’ then it stops again when he realizes she’s talking about Todoroki, not him.

“Interesting,” Todoroki says. “You think I am loyal to him?”

“Loyal, protective, in love, you pick,” the woman says, waving a hand. “I’m here to sell you a sash at an unfair price since you’re from the palace.”

Todoroki, seeming to have taken a liking to her, nods. “What did you have in mind?”

Midoriya wishes they’d go back to the part about in love and Todoroki and him.

But instead, the shopkeeper selects twin gold sashes, the fabric shimmering under the lantern light. Their only difference is the designs of phoenixes and lions.

“A bit daring, having lions as patterns,” Todoroki says. “I think the Todorokis wouldn’t be pleased to see the crest of their rivals on a sash.”

“Only the king wants a war,” she says, fearless. “The rest of us are quite content with peace.”

“I can drink to that,” Todoroki says.

“Let’s see…you’re a bit of a phoenix yourself, aren’t you?” she says to Todoroki. “And your brave little friend is a lion. So how about this—” She hands Todoroki the lion sash and Midoriya the phoenix sash.

“There,” she says. “Now you’ll carry a piece of each other wherever you go.”

“That’s…rather romantic,” Midoriya says, strained.

“It’s a rather romantic night,” she says, shrugging.

Midoriya can’t really say anything to counter that. Todoroki doesn’t seem upset, just dumps a couple gold coins in her hand, nods, and ties the sash around his waist. Midoriya follows his lead.

The rest of the night is spent wandering from one shop or stall to another with the ease of knowing they had hours to themselves. Midoriya takes back what he said about the Founder’s Festival—this celebration was on par with Yuuei’s All Night, if not exceeding it. He learns a bit, too.

The first thing he learns is that, given free reign, Todoroki is a bottomless pit. It wasn’t that Todoroki ate a lot back at the palace—in fact, he was inclined to complain that Chef overfed him more often than not. But now, outside the palace and exposed to the sights and smells of every family cooking up their best dishes, he revealed his food-loving nature.

Midoriya would be walking alongside Todoroki one second, then alone the next. He’d have to stop, backtrack, and every time he found Todoroki, he had his nose in a hog on a spit, or some kind of vegetables on a stick, or a plate of some kind of dish seasoned with spices that made Midoriya sneeze. And he put all that food away in his stomach like it was no issue.

At one point, Todoroki likes the dish served so much that he offers to buy it all—meat, shop, and all the butchery tools within it. Midoriya drags him away rather quickly, laughing loudly about
how his friend never really did know when he was taking a joke too far.


“You try doing what I do and not be hungry every second of the day,” Todoroki says, gnawing on the leg bone of some poor bird. “My father rations me.”

“For once, I understand,” Midoriya says. “You’d eat the castle out of house and home.”

Todoroki grunts.

He also reaffirms what he already knew—Todoroki has a presence about him. He attracts the looks and calls of the people around him, even without his unique coloring. A girl wants to put a flower necklace around his neck. A man around his age challenges him to an archery contest, which Midoriya has to drag him away from when he absolutely annihilates the competition. Another man wants him to try a beer. A young woman wants to get a kiss on the cheek.

Midoriya might’ve dragged him away from that one, too.

“What’s the fuss?” Todoroki asks, laughing. “It’s just a kiss.”


But what stands out to Midoriya the most isn’t how the people receive Todoroki—it’s how Todoroki receives his people. He’s gentle, agreeable, never condescending. He holds his head high and meets the eyes of anyone who passes him, but his face is neutral, benevolent. The people respond to that air of authority, without knowing it. Instinctually, they know he is a prince.

A little boy runs across the street, but pauses to bow to Todoroki.

“Is the dye washing out?” Todoroki wonders.

No, Midoriya says. It’s just that you’re royalty. And there’s nothing we can do to disguise that.

“Oh!” Midoriya says. “Desserts!”

He doesn’t mean to, honestly. He’s just comfortable with Todoroki at his side. His feelings aside, Todoroki is probably his closest friend. He doesn’t mean to—his hand just slips into Todoroki’s, pulling him towards the pastry shop.

He looks over the selection the stall offers and points at a glazed one with candied fruits. Midoriya tugs at Todoroki’s hand. “Can I have—ah!”

He drops Todoroki’s hand, eyes widening. “O-Oh, that’s, I—”

“Which one?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya stares blankly at him.

Todoroki nods at the pastries. “Which one did you want?”

“Um,” Midoriya says. He points at the glazed one. “That one.”

“We’ll take two,” Todoroki says, handing over the gold.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Midoriya sputters. “I can pay—”
“Hush,” Todoroki says. He peels off part of the pastry and presses it to Midoriya’s lips. “Eat.”

Confused, Midoriya parts his lips and takes the morsel from Todoroki’s fingers, the pads of his fingers brushing Midoriya’s lips. Todoroki peels off part of the same pastry and takes a bite. Midoriya opens his mouth to protest and gets a piece of pastry with blueberries pushed into his mouth for his troubles.

“If you want to play this part,” Todoroki says, “play it convincingly.”

Midoriya swallows the pastry and pouts. “I wasn’t trying to get you to buy me it by playing at lovers—”

“And yet, we seem to have quite the image to uphold,” Todoroki says. “That girl asked for a kiss to provoke you.”

“O-Oh,” Midoriya says. Well, he played right into her hands. “You’re not…?”

“People don’t look too long, if you’re spoken for,” Todoroki says. “It’s not a bad image to have.”

“So you’ll just—just act like my lover?” Midoriya says. “It isn’t demeaning to you?”


Midoriya finds the rest of the pastry hard to swallow around the lump in his throat.

The night looks…a bit different, after that. For one, Midoriya knows what Todoroki’s hand in his feels like. As expected, it’s calloused and rough from swordplay, which matches Midoriya’s uneven hands. They brush and connect in different ways, each touch a conversation between their histories, hello how are you just how did you get to be so bumpy?

Todoroki also has a tendency to absent-mindedly squeeze Midoriya’s hand which does not send a jolt through Midoriya’s entire body every time he does it.

As with all parties, they drink. Having had all the food their bellies can stomach, they move on to wine and champagne. The townspeople don’t have the fanciest alcohol in Endeavor, but they crack open bottles and share with people on the street freely, enough that Midoriya is feeling decidedly tipsy by the time they reach the square and the color in Todoroki’s cheeks says he feels the same.

And there it is. The bonfire of Midoriya’s dreams. Almost as tall as the buildings that surround it and boxed off with massive logs, the bonfire outshines the lamps around the square. The source of the music is there as well, a vocalist singing in another language while a rather sizeable band of musicians play a song that has Midoriya bouncing on the balls of his feet in time.

Todoroki bobs his head a little to the tune. Midoriya grins. The wine has gone to his head enough that he doesn’t feel as nervous talking to Todoroki when their hands are linked.

Midoriya drops Todoroki’s hand, and Todoroki looks at him sharply.

Midoriya bows to him. “May I have this dance?”

Todoroki blinks. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with such a dance in a public place.”

Midoriya lifts his head, smiling. “Not a dance, sir. A dance.”

Todoroki looks to the people spinning around the bonfire, in couples or groups. He returns Midoriya’s bow. “Yes, my good sir, if you can keep up.”
He offers a hand, but Midoriya is quicker. He grabs Todoroki's hand and his waist and turns him in a circle, taking control and leading Todoroki into a fast-paced dance to match the speed of the dancers around the bonfire. They strut towards the center and fall into the circle.

Todoroki, despite his intoxication, can keep up with Midoriya’s lead without issue. He’s probably been ballroom dancing since he was old enough to understand holding a girl by the waist, which is probably why he’s scowling at Midoriya taking the lead. The spinning and quick steps abate his irritation only momentarily.

“I am your prince,” Todoroki says.

In response, Midoriya dips him.

When righted, Todoroki is flushed and wide-eyed. “Do not do that again.”

“Whatever you say, Toudou-san,” Midoriya says, grinning, spinning him once, and then dipping him again.

Todoroki forcibly takes the lead after that, his hair coming free from his ponytail in an adorable mess that just endears him more to Midoriya. He laughs and lets Todoroki lead.

The thing about dancing is—once they get into it, into real partner dancing, the rest of the world fades away. Time goes wonky. It’s just Midoriya and Todoroki and the sweat on both of their brows, the press of their hands together and the warmth of a hand on his waist. They dance apart; they dance together. they’re always touching, some part of them brushing the other in constant reassurance. Are you here? I am here. I will not leave you.

The dance reminds Midoriya of himself, of his servile devotion, and of Todoroki, and his vow to protect Midoriya.

You and I, Midoriya thinks. Was there a time I ever needed something more than you and I?

The bystanders appear with their candles a couple songs in. Above the city, the moon is full and luminous. What can be seen of the stars is reflected in the flames of the candles, dotting the crowd. When Midoriya twirls, star and candle blur together so that he might as well be dancing in the sky or the embers of the fire. He could dance forever.

He thinks it may not end—that they may be stuck in a faery circle, forever spirited away—until it does end. It ends with his arms looped around Todoroki's neck, and Todoroki's hands on his waist. He’s delirious from the drinking and the dancing. He’s thinking of never-ending circles and the serpent that eats its own tail and how that is them, connected from neck to waist. He’s thinking Todoroki's grip on him in unbreakable, as unbreakable as his arms around his neck.

He tries to tell Todoroki that, but he’s out of breath and sweat drips into his eyes. Todoroki beats him to it, anyway.

“Well?” Todoroki says, a little puffy himself. “Did I keep up?”

Midoriya throws back his head and laughs. The sound is too loud—maybe, he’s not sure—but he’s untouchable in Todoroki's arms, in this embrace; yes, it is an embrace. He doesn’t care if the people around them look at him funny. He’s safe. He’s home.

It’s the wine, Midoriya tries to tell Todoroki. It must be the wine. I want to kiss you.

It has to be the spirits. He’s wanted before, but never like this. This is desire like no other time
before. This is a physical need, this is the unstoppable pull of the waterfall, the unchangeable reality of the seasons. He will never not want to kiss Todoroki. He will never not desire that connection, that union.

But now, now he needs it.

_No, Izuku_ , he tells himself. _You can’t. He doesn’t_—

He looks at Todoroki, but Todoroki is looking at his mouth.

Midoriya’s heart swoops. It swan-dives to his toes then shoots back up, an arrow through his own heart with every quickening heartbeat. He feels the frantic energy of every young adult in the throes of infatuation, all at once. _Todoroki is looking at his mouth._

_You can’t fake that,_ Midoriya thinks.

It starts as one stray call from the crowd, a joke, probably, or a dare, but then a few other people pick it up until it’s not quite a chant, but close to it. There are no cruel intentions behind the calls, only the warm empathy of the gathered souls who have been in love and call it how they see it.

“Kiss!” they call. “Kiss!”

And in that moment, Midoriya chooses.

“Can I?” he asks, voice barely a breath over a whisper.

Todoroki holds his gaze. “You shouldn’t—just because they’re goading you on—just because they want—”

“I want it,” Midoriya says.

Midoriya hears the breath he sucks in, hears the shaky breath he lets out.

“Then, by all means,” Todoroki rasps.

They met, two tentative souls reaching for each other, and it is how they meet again. Midoriya presses his lips soft to Todoroki’s, light as a brush of feathers. Then again, hard enough to feel the shape of Todoroki’s lips and how they are the softest part of him. Then again, this time hard enough to feel their souls collide, sealing their mouths together and grasping at his skull to get closer, closer, closer.

When they part, Midoriya’s eyes trace the color in Todoroki’s cheeks, his parted lips, his eyes wide as saucers. And he hears it, the voice inside of him, purring, satisfied:

_Mine._

“I can never deny you anything, now, or ever,” Todoroki whispers.

Midoriya kisses him again.

He feels it rising in him when he presses his mouth to Todoroki’s again, something fearless and yearning, driving him to press harder, tangle his fingers further, pull Todoroki against him, against him, gods above, he needs Todoroki against him. He can’t decide what to do with his hands—should they cup Todoroki’s skull, should they trace his jaw, should they scratch and pull at his shoulders, insisting on closer still?
He feels it when he tilts his head just so, when he hears Todoroki's inhale through his nose, when he runs the tip of his tongue over Todoroki's lips and Todoroki's hands on him dig in like claws. He feels it when his right hip goes hot and his left hip grows cold.

Midoriya breaks from Todoroki. “Wh-Whoa,” he says. “Your Quirk—”

“You make me lose control,” Todoroki says into his neck, kissing the tender skin he finds there. “You always—make me—”

_I did that. I do that._ Midoriya shudders. He registers, distantly, that the people around them are cheering. Right, they had an audience.

“We should get out of here,” Midoriya murmurs. “People—”

“But the palace is so far,” Todoroki says, soft, right into his ear.

Midoriya shudders again. “You would have me here, on the cobblestones, or in the hay?”

“I would have you right here, in front of everyone, if it meant I could have you now,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya rapidly reacquaints himself with the phrase ‘too turned on to speak.’

Unfortunately, words are needed to get through to his prince. “Urgh, you are so—ugh.”

“Yes?” Todoroki says.

“The palace,” Midoriya blurts out. “We need—there. Something. Do something there.”


“I want,” Midoriya says, and words failing him, he drags a hand over the paint on Todoroki’s face, smearing it. “I want you. You. Not this.”

Todoroki pauses. Considers.

“I suppose the hay would be scratchy, anyway,” he says, and they make for the palace.

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They make for the palace—they run. Their running isn’t quite running, though; it’s more like dancing.

They can’t be parted for more than a few seconds at a time. They’re always touching—hand to hands, hand to nape, hand to hair, mouth to hair, mouth to neck, jaw, mouth. They’re learning each other all over again as they run because this is it. This is requited.

Midoriya jogs ahead only to double back and cup Todoroki's face. Todoroki runs ahead only to stop dead until Midoriya catches him and then kiss him sweetly for a minute before going on. Midoriya isn’t—he’s not sure it ever was like this, with his other lovers. Never this feeling of pure euphoria, of the twining of souls, of needing to touch Todoroki, of feeling certain that their every heartbeat was in time.
Todoroki hangs on him once they make it to the palace. He wraps his arms around Midoriya’s neck and presses kisses to his neck, the underside of his jaw, the tops of his shoulders, his very first few vertebrae. He’s so distracting that Midoriya nearly collides with a corner a few times. Stairs are impossible.

He disengages Todoroki once they climb to his section of the palace to force him into the baths, long enough for him to scrub the paint off his face and for Midoriya to scrub the dye from his hair. With every rinse of water, it lightens—black to grey to white and red, shining through. Todoroki calms with the treatment, but there’s an undercurrent of electricity between them, as heavy as the threat of violence.

In a way, it is violent. Passion and violence are two sides of the same coin.

Midoriya knows well the fire in Todoroki’s eyes. He has seen it when he perched on his lap, taunting him. *Did you feel this way when I danced for you?* Midoriya wants to ask, but that is not how this game is played. He knows his role. He is just the paper atop the inferno, made to be consumed.

He lets Todoroki back him into his bedchambers. For every step Todoroki takes towards him, Midoriya steps back. He is walked across the room, to the edge of the bed, the precipice of Todoroki’s domain. Todoroki steps in close, their foreheads brushing. He leans forward to kiss Midoriya, to snag his bottom lip with his teeth—

—I didn’t teach him that, Midoriya thinks, heart fluttering—

--And with one, solid shove, Todoroki pushes Midoriya back onto the bed. Midoriya falls back. He feels the bed dip when Todoroki climbs over him, blocking out the light of the candles left out. Hovering over him, Todoroki becomes all Midoriya can see.

*My world*, Midoriya thinks, fleetingly. *You are everything.*

Todoroki’s hair is long and dangles down, long enough to tickle Midoriya’s cheeks and drip tiny drops of cold water onto his skin. It feels like a taunt, a ghost-touch, not-quite-Todoroki.

Todoroki does not make him wait long. He is gentle, but he collects Midoriya’s wrists and presses them above his head, into the softness of the pillows. And then, he leans in to kiss Midoriya.

This one is slow, hot as an iron, and patient. This one says, *you are mine until the sun rises.*

He holds the kiss long enough to suck in a breath and exhale, then parts only so he can nip at Midoriya’s lip again, pulling it into his mouth and sucking at it. When he lets it go, Midoriya feels the *pop* from his lip all the way to his bones. Todoroki presses his hands harder into the bed and kisses him *harder*, playing Midoriya like an instrument, and Midoriya arches against him.

And then—nothing. He blinks. What?

Todoroki is leaning back, hand over his mouth, looking at Midoriya with wide eyes.

“*Shit,*” Midoriya says. “Was that—did I go too far? Is this not what you wanted?” He thought he had been reading the signs right—Todoroki’s insistence—the pressure of his presence—the feeling of his hand against Midoriya’s wrists—

“I want this,” Todoroki assures him, and Midoriya breathes a sigh of relief.

Midoriya doesn’t have any idea what he’s talking about. He shakes his head.

“I have—in all my years, I—” Todoroki removes his hand from his mouth. “Sex is distracting. The feelings that come with it, even more so. I have kept myself restrained for as many years as I have been alive to avoid that distraction. Before you, there was no one. You are my first.”

*His first.* Oh. Midoriya hadn’t known.

*Then this was—*

Midoriya sits up slowly, until he is more level with Todoroki. He cups Todoroki’s cheek, leans forward, presses a butterfly of a kiss against Todoroki’s lips, then another, longer one.

“Do not be afraid,” he says. “I’ll show you.”

Just as carefully, he pushes Todoroki onto his back and climbs on top of him. Todoroki’s eyes follow him the entire time. Midoriya adjusts his position and then, pointedly, slots his hips against Todoroki's, straddling his thighs, and ruts against him.

Todoroki reacts with a hiss, body curling into itself instinctually. Midoriya places a hand flat against his chest, pushing him down and grounding both of them.

“Todoroki,” he says. “Does it feel good?”

Todoroki closes his eyes and nods.

“Todoroki,” Midoriya says. “Speak to me.”

“Yes, Deku,” Todoroki snaps. “It feels—” He breaks off to suck in a shuddering breath as Midoriya starts to rock his hips against Todoroki’s grinding against him in a way not unlike the dance at Fuyumi’s ball.

“Is this what you wanted me to do, back then?” Midoriya asks, voice barely above a whisper. “Did you want me to rut against you like an animal in front of all those people?”

“No,” Todoroki groans. “No, that’s—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Midoriya says.

“Yes,” Todoroki sobs. “I wanted to fuck you right there on that throne, with everyone watching us, jealous because they couldn’t have—*hnn*…”

Midoriya stops moving. He brushes Todoroki’s bangs out of his face. “Good. I want you to be clear with me. No will always mean no. I don’t know what you were taught, but sex is a conversation. We move, our bodies speak, to each other and to us. Your body will tell you what is good and what is not. If it’s not good, you will tell me no. Do not lie to me.”

Todoroki holds his gaze. “I won’t,” he whispers.

“I’m going to tell you what I’m going to do,” Midoriya says. “I’m going to strip you. Your vest, your shirt, your boots, and then I’m going to untie your trousers. Then I’m going to strip myself down to nothing. And then, once I’m ready, I’m going to fuck myself on you and you are going to watch me. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

“Yes,” Todoroki chokes out.
Midoriya leans forward to kiss Todoroki while he undoes his vest. This time, though, he laps at Todoroki's mouth until Todoroki understands and parts his lips so Midoriya can seal their mouths completely, his tongue twining with Todoroki's and pressing into him, warm and rough. When Midoriya pulls away, there’s a line of saliva connecting their mouths and Todoroki's vest has been removed.

He slides his hands up Todoroki's stomach, the skin shuddering beneath his touch, pulling up his shirt as he moves. Midoriya leans in to tweak a nipple with his teeth and Todoroki makes an aborted noise in his throat, hips jolting against Midoriya’s and making Midoriya hiss at the sudden contact.

*Slow. Slow, Izuku.*

He peels the shirt off of Todoroki, looking very naked already and still a bit too wide-eyed for Midoriya’s taste. He unties Todoroki's boots and tosses them across the room.

“Do you remember what I said next, Todoroki?” Midoriya asks, casual.

“Yes.”

“Really?” he says. “I don’t. Care to remind me?”

Todoroki closes his eyes. “You said you would strip down to nothing,” he rasps.

“I also believe I said something about watching me,” Midoriya says. “Open your eyes.”

Todoroki does.

Midoriya takes Todoroki’s hand, presses it to his face. “This is yours,” he says. To his hair. “And this.” To chest. “And this.” To his hips. “This.” To his crotch, straining against his pants. “This.”

Todoroki sucks in a breath.

“I am yours,” Midoriya says. “You can touch me.”

As he undoes his buttons, Todoroki does. He starts with Midoriya’s hips, tracing the shape of his hip bones. Then when Midoriya removes his vest, Todoroki's fingers dance across his collarbones. And when he removes his shirt, they run down the length of his chest, then back up again, sending goosebumps along Midoriya’s skin. They leave him when he unties his own boots. And then, when Midoriya pulls off his pants and bares himself to Todoroki, Todoroki lets his eyes do to work.

Midoriya sits back down on Todoroki's legs, shuddering. He was really doing this. He was really presenting himself as naked and vulnerable to his prince, and his prince was—was—

“Is this what you wanted?” Midoriya asks. “Or did you perhaps prefer the female physique?”

“You,” Todoroki says, unflinching. “I wanted you, and only you.”

Midoriya’s cock betrays him, twitching at the declaration.

Todoroki's eyes go half-lidded. “Women were never—it was always men, but—you—” Todoroki meets Midoriya’s eyes. “I never wanted anyone like I wanted you. Like I want you.”

Midoriya closes his eyes. Allows the words to wash over him. *Todoroki wants you. He’s wanted you for a while. It’s mutual.*
“Thank you,” Midoriya says, and rolls off of him.

Todoroki’s eyes follow him as he walks across the room—stagers, really—to grab the jar of lotion on the side table beside Todoroki's scar ointment. Then Midoriya returns to him, retaking his position and undoing Todoroki’s pants.

Midoriya’s first thought is, *I want to put my mouth on that.*

But not yet. That would come. But first was this.

Midoriya coats his fingers in the lotion and then takes Todoroki’s cock in hand and pumps him in long, steady strokes. The cold makes Todoroki jump at first, and then the touch has him squirming. Midoriya thumbs the head and Todoroki cries out, a sound Midoriya can only describe as beautiful.

Like this, Todoroki can’t look at him, his head thrown back and hands fisting the sheets because he’s forgotten he can dig his fingers into Midoriya’s skin. That is also fine. Midoriya coats his other fingers in lotion and works himself open gradually. While Todoroki twitches and writhes under Midoriya’s touch, Midoriya fucks himself on his own fingers.

He stops touching Todoroki when the shuddering becomes pronounced. Todoroki whines like a pup, eyes opening to look at Midoriya. And then he stops, abruptly.

Midoriya knows what he looks like. Leaned over, hand reaching behind him, his cock leaking precum onto Todoroki’s belly, pronounced panting. He’s probably looking a bit fucked out himself. Todoroki reaches out a hand to brush Midoriya’s bangs from his face.

“Are you ready?” Midoriya asks.

“Yes,” Todoroki whispers.

Midoriya finishes fingering himself open. He rubs more lotion over Todoroki’s cock and then lifts himself over Todoroki so that the tip of his cock is barely touching his entrance. And then, slowly, he lowers himself onto Todoroki’s cock.

Todoroki’s hands fly to Midoriya’s hips, trembling so bad he can hardly get a grip. Midoriya’s hardly over his head, wincing at the stretching, and Todoroki is coming apart, tiny half-noises in his throat. His eyes are squeezed shut.

Well, that just wouldn’t do.

“Shouto,” Midoriya says, and Todoroki’s eyes pop open.

“Shouto, do you want this?” Midoriya asks.

“Yes,” Todoroki says.

“Then beg for it,” Midoriya says. “Beg to fuck me, Prince Todoroki Shouto.”

Todoroki holds his gaze. His lips part, tremble, then close. Midoriya sees the struggle. *Royalty do not beg.*

*But you aren’t royalty now, Shouto. You’re my lover, nothing more, and nothing less.*

“Please,” Todoroki sobs. “Please let me fuck you. Please—I want to—I want to be inside you, I want—” He breaks off again to howl as Midoriya slides onto him with ease.
“You’re inside me,” Midoriya pants. “We are one, Shouto.”


“I know,” Midoriya says. “I know, lover. Watch me. Watch me please my prince.”

Todoroki fixes his eyes on Midoriya, and Midoriya rides him.

He’s strong in the legs—he always knew it would come in handy one day. He bounces on Todoroki’s cock like he was born to and Todoroki, already on edge from his earlier handling, comes within a few slides in and out, his entire body curling up and into Midoriya, pulling him into Todoroki’s lap. The aftershocks wrack his body until he’s a trembling mess, Midoriya still on him.

Midoriya fumbles for himself, far gone himself for performing for Todoroki, for hearing the words that came out of his mouth and Todoroki’s mouth. He strokes himself to the memory of Todoroki saying only you and please. He comes with his face buried in Todoroki’s neck and the prince’s given name on his tongue.

The tension leaves Midoriya’s body and he collapses against Todoroki, who likewise, collapses against the bed. Midoriya pulls himself off Todoroki and sits up, making to clean him up.

“No,” Todoroki says, pulling Midoriya back against him, onto his chest.

“But,” Midoriya says. “You—we’re both dirty.”

“Sleep,” Todoroki insists. “Tomorrow, we worry about that.” He cracks one eye open. “And do that again. Possibly more than once.”

Midoriya smiles. “It is as you wish, Your Royal Highness.”

“Shouto,” Todoroki says quietly. “I’ve been…I should have been Shouto to you, for a while now.”

“Shouto,” Midoriya says, and falls asleep whispering the name he’s finally permitted to say.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: after the storm
baby, this is your kingdom

Chapter Notes

ART FROM TUMBLR

i can't betray my prince if he doesn't find out i'm a spy BY, OF COURSE, HINA

SUPER SPICY DEKU LIKE HOT DAMN by bowiesnippleanteennae

BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN WANDERING AROUND TOWN by tsuyer

LONG HAÏRED BEAUTY by andrea borealis

SWEET, SWEET SONION by carinos-draws

REALLY, REALLY FUCKING CRAZY AWESOME PRINCE IZUKU FROM MICKUMACKU

NORTESS WITH A SPOT-FUCKING-ON DANCING-ON-TODOROKI SCENE

special shoutout to raexie for getting IIDA, FUYUMI, AND Todoroki being drunk and spicy SPOT ON AS WELL AS JUST. LIKE. 800 BEAUTIFUL VEILED AND LONG-HAIRED TODOS

AN IIDA WHO SLAYED MY ASS PERSONALLY AND A STUNNING FUYUMI BY STRANGERSPOOKY

SAM: lovely atmospheric shouto on his throne, baby tortured by nightmares, A WANTED MAN, todo with INCREDIBLE clothes, POMPOUS BABY

TARI: handsome princeling, TARI DOESNT LIKE THIS BUT I FUCKING LOVE IT, lovely profiles of the boys, TODO WITH A BRAID, trying out buns omg, MORE POMPOUS BABY, birthday boyo

deku bab by bowiesnipppleanteennae!!

A FUYUMI WHO KICKED MY ASS AND REVIVED ME, SAVED MY LIFE BY RAINBOWDERPYARTS

boy with da MUSCLES by ohbnha

really, REALLY incredible traditional todoroki by s-souto

ANOTHER P&P PLAYLIST BY EMUHLEE

CUTIE BABY SHOUTO by oreirri

DISNEY PRINCESS Todoroki Shouto AND HIS SHITTY DAD by kawaii-rookie

DANICNG BOY IZUKU by exeron

TODOROKI WINNING IIDA AND IZUKU'S HEART by hetaliabunnyarts!!
When Midoriya wakes, it is to the hiss of curtains being pulled aside and the piercing light of late morning assaulting his eyelids. He throws an arm over his eyes and groans, feeling too satiated and warm and heavy to do more than complain about the rude awakening. However, vocal protests do not make the painful light disappear, so he shuffles further under the covers, attempting to bury his head beneath animal pelts and a comforter.


Midoriya stops struggling. He opens his eyes, blinks a couple times, and looks at Yaoyorozu. She’s leaning against the wall across from the bed, bemused smile on her face and brows furrowed, like she can’t quite believe she’s here again.

The scene is familiar. Midoriya had woken up like this before, squashed between two hungover princes, sweating and uncomfortable. Yaoyorozu had been there, too, an eyebrow raised and the word ‘homewrecker’ on her tongue. Even as she had asked the question, she already knew the answer. No, Midoriya did not sleep with the princes.

This time, she looks different.

“Yes, this is different.

Midoriya feels it in his heart, the fullness of what they’ve done. Every palace whisper, every murmur behind closed doors, every talked-up rumor, is rumor no longer. He has slept with Prince Todoroki Shouto, he has kissed him, he has heard the prince beg for him, he has called him by his given name. He was his first time.

Even now, Shouto lies belly down on the bed, an arm slung heavy over Midoriya’s waist. Midoriya can see the slightest movement in his bare shoulders as he breathes, still sleeping. Even now, Midoriya knows that they are both only covered by the blankets and nothing else, bare as the day they were born. He knows that Yaoyorozu knows this, too. Even now, Midoriya feels the slow-moving ache through his body, the weightiness of sex, and the warmth of another’s body against his skin.

“I guess we teased you too much before,” Yaoyorozu says, half-laughing, an olive branch.

“Yes, this is different.

Yaoyorozu-san,” Midoriya says. “I’m not sorry.”

It’s an olive branch, but Midoriya can’t accept it.

This means something. Midoriya didn’t want to think about it before, because he was filled with love and the near-holy revelation of requited attraction but the look on Yaoyorozu’s face says that Todoroki is not like any prince a manservant would happen to sleep with. With someone else, maybe this would mean nothing. But Todoroki does not give himself over the the physical or the emotional. This means something. And everyone in the room knows it.
Still, Midoriya won’t regret it. He doesn’t regret any step that led him to dip Todoroki in front of a bonfire, or kiss him while running in the dark, or to fall back against his bed. That heaviness in his heart is not a weight—it’s conviction. Midoriya will always love Todoroki. If devotion is the invisible chain of servitude, then Midoriya will wear his shackles with pride. He is Todoroki’s, and Todoroki is his.

“I know,” Yaoyorozu says. “I have known since the moment you opened your eyes.”

Midoriya wants to say, *I love him.* He wants to say, *I will never leave him.* He wants to say, *I would never hurt him.* But Yaoyorozu isn’t an idiot. And Midoriya has always been awful at lying, anyway.

“It means something, doesn’t it?” Midoriya says.

Yaoyorozu takes a breath. “It can’t mean anything.”

Midoriya wants to say, *I’m sorry,* but he’s not.

Beside him, Todoroki stirs. His arm slides from Midoriya’s waist to join its brother under his chin. He props his head up and yawns like a leopard. He cracks his blue eye open to peer at Midoriya. “Who’re you talking to?” he asks, voice thick with sleep.

“At your service,” Yaoyorozu says, bowing even though Todoroki isn’t looking at her.

“Oh, it’s just you,” Todoroki says, pressing his cheek to his arm and looking at Midoriya. Midoriya cocks an eyebrow and Todoroki half-smiles at him. “How did you find out?”

“You should choose your partners in crime more carefully,” Yaoyorozu says. “Tooru has a big mouth.”

“Of course she does,” Todoroki says, sighing.

“Fortunately, Ojiro’s loyalty to your crown is greater than his loyalty to his lover,” Yaoyorozu says, “so he told Shouji to keep an eye out for you coming back from the festival. And Shouji, being the good soldier that he is, told his captain about the incident.” Yaoyorozu crosses her arms. “Somewhere along the line, the implication that you two would be sleeping together was passed along.”

“Can’t imagine how that would have implored you to pester us,” Todoroki mutters. “Those rumors have been going around since day one.”

“It probably had something to do with the fact that Shouji saw you mouthing at Deku’s neck like a kitten hungry for its mother’s milk,” Yaoyorozu says. “With little care being paid to who saw you.”

Midoriya groans. Todoroki scowls. “I didn’t do that,” he says. His eyes flick to Deku’s. “Did I?”

Midoriya, who can still remember the butterfly kisses pressed to his nape, says nothing. Instead, he groans again and presses his face into his hands.

“Hmm,” Todoroki says, not sounding the least bit sorry.

“In any case,” Yaoyorozu says, “I’m not here to nag at you for your frankly concerning exhibitionist tendencies—”
“Oh, you aren’t?” Todoroki says. “Thank the gods, I was worried.”

“—but I am here to tell you to get out of bed and dressed,” Yaoyorozu continues, ignoring him. “The King has come home early, and he’ll want a full report of the palace’s status since he’s been gone.”

“He can accept a written report at a later date,” Todoroki says. “You and I both know he won’t read it. I don’t want to leave my bed today.”

Midoriya tries admirably not to think about the implications of that statement, and ends up blushing anyway.

“You and I both know he’ll want to see you in person,” Yaoyorozu says. “Can’t be letting his favorite son play on his own without checking in on him.”

“Then he can wait until tomorrow,” Todoroki says.

“The King—”

“I will be king,” Todoroki says. “Have you forgotten that? I do not have to wag like a dog for him.”

“Sh—Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says. “You should listen to Yaoyorozu-san. Your father, he can hurt you if you—”

Todoroki presses a palm flat to Midoriya’s chest and shoves him back down against the bed. Then, rising from his stomach, Todoroki sits up and shoves the comforter off of him. Midoriya squeaks on behalf of Yaoyorozu, but Todoroki doesn’t give him time to think. He climbs on top of Midoriya, interlacing their fingers and pressing Midoriya’s hands against the bed, pinning him down. His hair spills over his shoulders and down his back, but this time it’s brilliant red and white against bare skin, lit up with morning light. There’s nothing to disguise how glorious Todoroki looks, eyes half-lidded and roaming lazily over Midoriya’s body like he owned him.

You do, Midoriya thinks, heart leaping into his throat.

“Get out, Momo,” Todoroki says, voice unhurried and casual. “If I wish to ignore my father’s summons, I will ignore them. If I wish to be left alone, I will be left alone. And if I wish to be my manservant all morning, I will bed my manservant all morning.” He tilts his head, and then, softer, “Or all afternoon.”

“You’re killing said manservant,” Yaoyorozu grunts.

Midoriya, dazed by the possibility of staying in bed all day with Todoroki, can’t form the words necessary to have an opinion.

“And anyway, you’re not king yet,” Yaoyorozu says. “He still has the power to smite you where you stand.”

“He won’t,” Todoroki says.

“Yeah, you’re right, he won’t,” Yaoyorozu says. “And for the record, this? This attitude? Is exactly why I never wanted you to find a lover. I knew you would be insufferable.” She tilts her head. “Come on, Deku, I know you still have your head screwed on. Talk this imbecile into making the smart decision.”
Midoriya blinks and comes to. Gods above but it was hard to focus on abstract concepts like responsibility and obligation when Todoroki was very present above him. He wiggles a hand experimentally and finds that Todoroki is not inclined to allow him any kind of movement. Midoriya is a butterfly pinned to a board, wings spread for his prince to see.

“Yaoyorozu-san is right,” Midoriya says, although he can’t fake cheerful encouragement. His voice drags, revealing his own weakness to the tilt of Todoroki’s chin and the shadow of his thighs around Midoriya’s. “The less reason you give him to harass you, the better. It would just be for a li—"

Todoroki is not hurried, but Midoriya cuts off anyway. Todoroki leans down to press his lips to Midoriya’s, breathing in deeply through his nose and exhaling, pulling away from Midoriya just far enough to meet his eyes. When he speaks, his lips nudge Midoriya’s.

“I am your prince,” Todoroki murmurs. “You will obey me.”

He flops on his back, letting Midoriya free. “Come,” he commands.

And with an order like that, Midoriya isn’t the man to be found disobeying. He props himself on one elbow so that he can look down on Todoroki, who cracks one eye open and closes it again when Midoriya brushes his bangs from his face. Midoriya presses a kiss to his forehead and then to his mouth, Todoroki lazy and pliable beneath him, letting Midoriya take the lead.

Midoriya doesn’t see Yaoyorozu roll her eyes, but he hears it in her voice. “Fine, make him wait if you must. It turns out you both are insufferable. Just don’t make it too long.”

Midoriya pulls away to acknowledge her, but Todoroki nips at his bottom lip, pulling him back, and waves off Yaoyorozu with a flick of his wrist. Midoriya smiles into the kiss. Insufferable. That was a good word for Todoroki. Midoriya would also present ‘needy’ or ‘self-centered’ or ‘infatuated’ as possible contenders.

Still, there are worse things than spending the morning in bed with your lover.

Todoroki, true to his word, beds Midoriya again. He ruts like a dog in heat—perhaps a little too excitable and agitated to get on with the fucking already, but his hands on Midoriya’s hips don’t bruise. His inexperience shows when he clenches and unclenches his fist as Midoriya fingers himself. This time, he curls his body over Midoriya and drives his hips against Midoriya while Midoriya clings to the headboard and lets Todoroki unleash his power on him.

(There’s a light in Todoroki’s eyes, the same one as when he held Midoriya’s hands over his head, that says he’s not quite done with Midoriya, not yet, even when they both come. Midoriya can’t worry about it though; he’s never felt more safe than when Todoroki’s body is above his.)

When Todoroki finishes, he rolls off Midoriya and flops lengthwise across the bed, ass out in the open and stomach over Midoriya’s feet. Midoriya can’t help it—he’s reminded of a big predator lounging in the sun just outside the den, pressed close to his chosen mate, master of all he surveys. Midoriya reaches forward to cop a feel, half just because he can, and half to remind Todoroki of his place.

Todoroki growls softly and eyes Midoriya. “Watch yourself, manservant,” he says.

“I’d like to kiss down the length of your spine,” Midoriya admits.

“So do it,” Todoroki says. “No one is stopping you.”
Midoriya smiles. *You really don’t mind, do you.* “For a prince who’s supposed to be a phoenix, you rather resemble a lion.”

“Must be your Yuuein blood and breeding, rubbing off on me,” Todoroki rumbles. “I should stay away before I become a scoundrel like you.”

Midoriya leans forward and crosses his arms over Todoroki’s shoulders and back. He presses his mouth to Todoroki's ear. “Given that you were just inside me,” he murmurs, “you may find that a bit of a difficult task.”

Todoroki doesn’t reply, but Midoriya feels the goosebumps prickle over his the tops of his shoulders.

“Anyway,” Midoriya says, stretching his arms over his head. “I feel absolutely revolting. Let’s bathe.”

“No,” Todoroki says, closing his eyes.

“You can’t actually avoid your father forever,” Midoriya says. “And also, you have cum crusted all over your lower body.”


Todoroki sits up just so he can smack a hand over Midoriya’s mouth. “You,” he hisses. “You are… just…”

Midoriya wiggles his eyebrows.

“Silvertongue,” Todoroki sighs. “I should never have entrusted you with that name.” He removes his hand.

“’I can never deny you anything,’ was it?” Midoriya purrs.

“You know it is true,” Todoroki says. “I don’t need to say it twice.”

“I know,” Midoriya says. He cups Todoroki’s cheek.

Todoroki’s eyes are soft on his. He scans Midoriya’s face with the occasional flick of his eyes, observing him as he had most likely been holding back on, as Midoriya had. Had Midoriya been anyone else, he would’ve said *I love you.* Instead, he kisses Todoroki’s temple and says, “I will not break your trust.”

“But you will force me to take a bath,” Todoroki says.

“Yes,” Midoriya says, laughing. “That is true. But I’ll be there, too. It’s not all bad, lover.”

Todoroki makes an uncertain noise, but allows himself to be dragged from bed.

Any uncertainty fades once they arrive in the bath and Midoriya gets to scrubbing at Todoroki’s skin. Todoroki’s skin is pink and raw when Midoriya is done with it, but Todoroki is limp as a ragdoll under his ministrations, leaning into Midoriya’s touch and making a pest of himself. Midoriya scrubs himself down too—no point in them going to separate baths if Todoroki was
going to cling like a mussel to him—leaving Todoroki's hair untouched.

This time, when Midoriya sink in between Todoroki's legs, he makes sure to be very obvious when he drags his eyes from Todoroki's face to his crotch, and then back.

“If you asked me, I would,” Midoriya says, a shiver rippling down his spine with the power of being able to say it, now.

“I know you would,” Todoroki says. “You live to serve me.”

Midoriya kisses the inside of his thigh. Todoroki sucks in a breath.

“I thought you were in a rush to greet my father,” Todoroki says, voice a tad higher than normal.

“Not in that much of a rush,” Midoriya says, and then he keeps his promise of putting his mouth on it.

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The best part about sex with Todoroki was that it mellowed him out to a level Midoriya found most pleasing. Who knew that all it took to calm Todoroki down during one of his rants was to give him a blowjob? The thought isn’t as sexually pleasing as it is comforting to Midoriya that he has a foolproof way to essentially fuck Todoroki into resting. Which—gods above. He really had taken to servanthood well.

He scrubs his hands through Todoroki's hair, both of them chest-deep in the steaming bath water, frying Midoriya’s raw skin. Todoroki is stone, chin leaning on the edge of the bath and all but falling asleep to Midoriya’s ministrations. Midoriya lifts a cup and pours water down the back of Todoroki's head, then down his bangs, one hand covering his eyes. Todoroki shakes his head like a dog, flicking his bangs out of his eyes and glances back at Midoriya.

Like this, with his hair wet and plastered to his head and submerged in water, Todoroki doesn’t look as ferocious. This softer, vulnerable side of Todoroki is part of him, too, Midoriya thinks. Not just the lion with teeth bared. He thinks of Todoroki saying, I will never own you. He thinks of Tooru saying, you will control Todoroki-sama.

“Tilt your head to the side,” Midoriya says. Todoroki, having no reason not to do so, does.

Midoriya leans forward and kisses the skin on the side of his neck. With the heat, the water, and the rawness of his skin, it’s not obvious when the kissing becomes the trace of a tongue and then sucking, the roll of skin over teeth. Todoroki flinches once when Midoriya applies too much teeth, and Midoriya pulls back.

Todoroki blinks and feels for the side of his neck. “What was that?”

“A reminder,” Midoriya says. “Come on, let’s get dressed.”

Todoroki goes for black today and Midoriya can’t hide the smile at the symbolism. He thinks he’ll wear black, too—sure, it wasn’t against custom for royalty to sleep with others before or after marriage, but the practice of saving oneself for marriage was not uncommon in Urabiti and Ingenium. In some people’s eyes, the two of them were sinners and tarnished forever, not that
Midoriya could call their lovemaking that morning anything other than breathtaking with the light spilling in on them from the window.

(He much preferred a Todoroki he could see while fucking.)

But Todoroki goes for one with an open collar and Midoriya makes a noise in his throat. Todoroki turns to him, eyebrow raised.

“Maybe not that one today,” Midoriya suggests.

“Why not?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya taps the side of his neck. Todoroki's hand moves to his neck, eyebrows furrowed. He walks over to the mirror and tilts his head to the side, eyeing the side of his neck. When he sees the red-purple mark on his neck, all the air leaves his lungs.

There’s a moment of silence, and then: “Deku.”

Oops.

“Yes?” Midoriya says.

“Deku, I expect you to show me how to make this kind of mark this evening,” Todoroki says. “No —this afternoon. I don’t have the patience for it.”

“The patience for what?” Midoriya says, tilting his head to the side.

Todoroki's eyes on him burn. “Patience for seeing you bare and covered in evidence of my mouth on you,” he says.

Ah, so Midoriya was wrong. He really was a phoenix, after all. No other creature could burn as hot as Todoroki's eyes on him did in that moment.

Todoroki selects a cloak the color of wine and holds it out for Midoriya to pin over his shoulders. Midoriya quirks an eyebrow. “Red?”

Todoroki smiles. “I don’t think I am so afraid of it, now,” he says. “I have this belief that I am untouchable.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Midoriya says.

“Or perhaps just the edge I needed,” Todoroki says. “We’ll speak to Ojiro before my father summons me. I want to make sure everything is in place and that we aren’t missing workers. The shorter our meeting, the happier I’ll be.”

Unfortunately, they never even make it to Ojiro’s office. As if simply discussing him had summoned him into existence, King Enji is marching down the palace halls at the same time Todoroki emerges from staircase.

“Shouto,” King Enji says. “Good; I am saved the trouble of having to hunt you down and drag you to court.”

“I suppose Ojiro can wait,” Todoroki mutters. “Yes, father; I am at your service.”

King Enji looks him up and down. “You wear red,” he notes. “Could this be a change of heart? It is just dreadful seeing you in monochrome.”
“I believe mother gifted this to me,” Todoroki says, fingering the material. “It would be a shame to let her kindness go to waste.”

“I see,” King Enji says. “You will relay me a report of the palace during my absence. I am sure you made time to keep an eye on royal matters, in between fucking your dog?”

Straight for the jugular, then.

Todoroki twirls a strand of hair around his finger and eyes his nails. “I was under the impression you didn’t care who I bedded. Haven’t you heard the rumors? It’s not like it was our first time.” Todoroki has a smug quirk to the corner of his mouth—he isn’t lying. This morning was their second and third time.

“By all means,” King Enji says. “As long as you’re the one sticking it in him, I don’t care who you put your cock in. From the looks of him, you’ll be a good lay for your spouse. The more children you have, the happier I will be.”

The words strike the wrong chord in Midoriya’s mind, and he feels his expression twitch. *Your spouse.*

“I thought I had made my preference for men clear,” Todoroki says. “Or were you simply choosing not to listen to what you don’t want to hear?”

“You’ll marry who I tell you to marry,” King Enji says.

“You may try,” Todoroki says.

*Careful,* Midoriya thinks. *Careful.*

“Oh dear,” King Enji says. “Just a few days on your own and you’ve become this unruly. It is fortunate that we are to spend time bonding in the coming week.”

“Must it really be so long?” Todoroki says, voice light. “And you won’t even let me bring my manservant along. How will I ever focus without him, now that I’ve had a taste of what it’s like?”

“I understand,” King Enji says. “You have been remiss in your duties because a bitch turned you on. Do you even have a paper report together?”

“If you recall, dear father,” Todoroki says, “you returned three days early. And you expect me to have my household in order?”

“I expected you not to have it out of order in the first place,” King Enji says. He sighs. “If I were truly to do my duty as a father, I would slay the offending bitch where he stands.”

Midoriya’s fingers go cold.

“If you lay a hand on him,” Todoroki says smoothly, “I will raze every man you call your own to ash and turn this palace into a castle of ice.” He smiles, flat and cold. “You would do well not to insult the kingdom of Yuuei by idly threatening All Might’s gift.”

“And what a shame it would be, if they were to be incited to hostility,” King Enji says. He steps forward and grabs Todoroki by the throat, pressing his thumb down hard into the mark Midoriya had left on his neck. “You are not as clever as you think you are, Shouto. Ever step you take, I am three ahead of you. Every plan you make, I have five counterplans. Every ally you make, I have twelve men in the shadows, waiting to take them down. Do not threaten me, boy. Your pet will not
live to see you do it again. And I do hate how teary-eyed you get when I break your toys.”

“He is not a toy,” Todoroki growls through the grip on his neck. “He is my rook.”

King Enji holds him for a moment longer, then lets him go. He smiles, at Todoroki, then at Midoriya.

“Perhaps I worry for nothing, then,” he says. “If you can’t even pick your pawns right, you have no place challenging a king. I want that report in before nightfall.”

He leaves, taking his entourage of guards and attendants with him. Todoroki and Midoriya don’t take their eyes off him until he’s gone from sight. It’s like if they dare to look away they’ll be scorched to the bone in an instant.

“That’s the first time he’s openly threatened me,” Midoriya says.

“This is probably a stupid question, but,” Todoroki says, sighing. “Are you okay?”

Midoriya flexes his hand. “I can’t feel my fingers or toes,” he admits. “I’m also freezing, and I’m not sure if it’s you or the fear coursing through my veins.”

Todoroki takes his hands, raising them to his mouth and breathing on them, rubbing Midoriya’s fingers between his palms. Midoriya watches, mesmerized. His left hand, naturally, warms Midoriya’s fingers faster than his right.

“You could, uh, just use your Quirk,” Midoriya says.

“And lose the intimacy of warming my lover’s hands? Not a chance,” Todoroki says, smiling.

“Oh,” Midoriya says. “That’s—wow. It sounds different when you say it to me.”

“Can’t take what you dish out?” Todoroki asks.

“Thinking of myself as your lover will probably be difficult for me for the next week or so. Maybe forever. And hey, speaking of this week, what he said—”

“No,” Todoroki says. “We’re worrying about you right now. I will endure whatever he has in mind. I always do.”

“I, uh, sure hope I survive to see you return,” Midoriya says, in the voice of someone who can’t help but joke about his own impending death.

“You will,” Todoroki says. “He’s not ready to start war with Yuuei just yet.”


Todoroki rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean. All Might would not start a war for your sake, correct?”

*I’m not even supposed to be here, Midoriya thinks. Of course he won’t start a war over me.*

“No,” he says aloud. “I don’t think I’m precious enough to anyone to start a war over.”

“Precious enough to start a civil war, perhaps,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya smiles wryly. “You and I both knew that *that* war began long before I came into your
“Shall I take you with me to assemble the busy work?” Todoroki asks. “I could leave you in Ojiro’s care, if you would rather relax.”

“And let me fall into Tooru’s hands?” Midoriya laughs. “She’ll smell the sex on me from a room away.”

“She is a rather alarming young woman,” Todoroki admits.

“I’ll camp out in the kitchen, I think,” Midoriya says. “Chiyo won’t bite, but I’m sure Chef will fall for a sob story and let me eat out my anxiety.”

“As long as I’m not the villain in your story,” Todoroki says. “Can’t have you sullying my good name.” He presses the back of his hand to Midoriya’s cheek, just under his scar.

I love you, Midoriya thinks, a little bit louder.

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “You are precious.”

Deku, I adore you. What Midoriya wouldn’t give for him to say it again.

Instead, Todoroki says, “There is no force on this earth that will stop me from protecting you. They will come. They always do. But you are my flesh and blood.” He smiles, a more secretive smile this time. “We are bound, down to the soul, are we not?”

“I told you you were a romantic,” Midoriya says, half-smiling.

“Hush, you,” Todoroki says, ruffling his hair. He’s having trouble not touching Midoriya. Not that Midoriya is complaining.

They go their separate ways and as he predicted, Midoriya is able to weave a tale of how he got sneered at by one of the king’s men and Todoroki wasn’t there to defend his honor to Chef. In a way, it’s true, except Todoroki would always be there to defend him. Chef feeds him pastries with cream in the middle when Chiyo isn’t looking. Midoriya nibbles at them and a tangerine intermittently while Chef catches him up on the kitchen drama. Unlike Tooru and the dancers, he knows better than to pry Midoriya for gossip.

Midoriya devotes half his attention to nodding as Chef talks and laughing at the right moments while the other half of his attention is turned inwards, mulling over the King’s words. Todoroki had brushed it off easily, as it would only inconvenience the King to kill off Midoriya. Todoroki would surely unleash his wrath on the palace if the King acted violently, not that Midoriya would be alive to see it. And it’s not that Midoriya doesn’t trust Todoroki’s intuition, it’s that he trusts the look in the King’s eyes that says Midoriya has been upgraded from ‘eyesore’ to ‘pest,’ and it would take only one more upgrade to ‘actual problem’ before even Todoroki could no longer ward off Midoriya’s execution.

And, for whatever reason—Midoriya refused to attribute it to sleeping together—Todoroki now felt more comfortable than ever provoking his father. And using Midoriya to provoke his father, at that. Midoriya was, understandably, just the slightest bit concerned about his fate.

But if Midoriya was honest with himself, there was more to that conversation than the threat to his safety. It was a selfish part of him, a hungry, possessive part of him, but it existed nonetheless. And without Todoroki to perceive a problem and prod at him, Midoriya allowed himself to be despaired by reality.
Todoroki, being a crown prince, naturally, was to be married off to royalty. And Midoriya was the furthest thing from royalty there was.

It’s not that he had especially aspired to marry Todoroki—actually, the thought had never occurred to him. But the truth of the matter was that ever since he was born, Todoroki had been promised to someone else. No matter how much of a romantic he was, Todoroki would suffer the fate of an arranged marriage, and in his case, the burden of bearing offspring. Todoroki would be married to a lovely woman and they would have a lovely family and there was no place for Midoriya in that future.

Kind of depressing, realizing that the love consummated only the night before had no path on which to travel. Midoriya was, and always would be, nothing more than a crutch, a stand-in, temporary. Mutual attraction, in the end, meant nothing when the one whom you were attracted to was a prince.

Perhaps it would have been better to never have acted on his attraction, to make the other choice that night. But Midoriya doesn’t regret kissing Todoroki. The lion in his heart snarls contentedly over the memory of last night. Mine.

Even if it is for a short time, Midoriya thinks, I want you to be mine.

“You are troubled,” Chef says.

Midoriya smiles and shakes his head. “Nothing more than the musings of a dreamer.”

“No better kingdom to have a dream in than Endeavor,” Chef says. “You could do far worse.”

Midoriya thinks of long hair and pale, thin fingers dragging it back. He thinks of clever, always moving eyes. He thinks of a mouth of minute motions that spoke volumes. He thinks of a voice saying please, please, please.

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “I could do far worse.”

He may, however, have underestimated just how excited Todoroki was about leaving marks on his body.

“You know,” Midoriya says, “you don’t have to do it all tonight. We can do this tomorrow, or the next day as well.”

Todoroki doesn’t look up from where he’s attached to the side of Midoriya’s neck, sucking at his skin. Midoriya is shirtless and not particularly opposed to having his prince in only a nightshirt and light pants splayed across his body. Todoroki has moved from below his collarbone up his neck, leaving a trail of bites and marks that Midoriya doesn’t even want to contemplate. His only hope is that Todoroki is inexperienced enough to leave them lightly, but from the satisfied noises Todoroki has made, they’re probably dark as bruises.

Todoroki moves up again to suck against the skin at the edge of Midoriya’s jaw and neck, right below his ear. Midoriya can hear the sounds of mouth on skin, Todoroki’s labored breathing, and feel the gratifying pain-pleasure of another mark being created. Goosebumps break out over his
skin. And then Todoroki nips at his earlobe, dragging it down with his teeth, and Midoriya squirms beneath him.

“Hmm,” Todoroki purrs. “Doesn’t seem you’re too upset.”

Midoriya, be bothered by the man he’d been lusting after for months, molesting his ear? The chances were very low.

“I’m just saying,” Midoriya says. “Aren’t you a bit…overzealous?”

“I’m going to make a ring around your neck,” Todoroki says. “Lean forward.”

Midoriya doesn’t know what to make of that, but obliges. “If you do that, it’ll look like you collared me.”

Todoroki smiles against his skin. “That would be something, wouldn’t it?”

“If you put me on a leash, I’m leaving your service,” Midoriya says.

“Only in the bedroom,” Todoroki says. “Unless you would rather collar me.”

Midoriya doesn’t say anything for so long that Todoroki actually leans back from where he’s working on his ring. “I was joking,” he says. But Midoriya’s eyes aren’t wide with horror. “Oh? You’re into that?”

“You?” Midoriya rasps. “You. You would let me put a collar on you.”

Todoroki blinks. “I don’t see why not.”

Midoriya grabs fistfuls of his hair. “I—you—that is, literally the worst thing you could suggest—”

“Do you not want to see me collared and lying at your feet?” Todoroki asks.

Midoriya’s hips twitch, and Todoroki’s smile turns sly. “You filthy mongrel,” he says. “You’ve imagined me serving you, haven’t you? How good it would feel to have me serve you. Turns the tables on the cocky prince, make him bow down for once. Maybe even with your cock in my m—”

“Wow!” Midoriya exclaims. “I can’t believe I can’t hear what you’re saying over all the kiss marks you’re leaving on me! Amazing! His Royal Highness is finally silenced!”

Todoroki, still grinning, resumes his process of marking up Midoriya.

Midoriya waits a few minutes to slow his racing mind before he speaks. “I can’t believe you would let me do that,” he says quietly. “I can’t even—it’s treason for me to ever seriously consider you as anything less than my prince. In servitude? I can imagine Yaoyorozu-san driving her sword through my stomach.”

“That’s exactly why it would have to be you,” Todoroki says. “You’re not the first to fantasize about using me like that. But you’re the only one with enough respect for me to feel shame. You’re the only one I could trust in a position of power over me.”

“I don’t think…” Midoriya shivers. “I don’t think I want that, with you. I’m not comfortable with that much power over you. I’d rather us be equals.”

“Really?” Todoroki asks. “You don’t want any control over me?” He drags his teeth over the bob of Midoriya’s Adam’s apple.
“I…didn’t say no control,” Midoriya admits at length.

“Interesting.” Todoroki says. “Now, what do you think these marks would look like over your thighs?”

“My what,” Midoriya says.

“Your skin is lighter there,” Todoroki says, untying Midoriya’s pants. “I wouldn’t have to work as hard to leave marks. And it’s like laying claim. This is mine.”

“Are you…are you sure I’m your first lover?” Midoriya asks weakly. “You are…very creative.”


He pulls off Midoriya’s pants and _wow_ Midoriya still wasn’t used to being bared to his prince, or used to the image of said prince diving between his legs, even if it was to sink his teeth into the soft skin of Midoriya’s inner thigh and not wrapping his mouth around Midoriya’s cock. Which was not something Midoriya had fantasized about over and over. Absolutely not.

(Although flushed, with his hair in his face, and his eyes on Midoriya’s face, Midoriya imagines he must make a beautiful picture.)

Todoroki bites a little too hard and Midoriya cries out. When he opens his eyes again, Todoroki’s are boring into his.

“You will make that noise again,” he says. “And if you squirm and cry for me, I will fuck you until you scream.”

It’s not Todoroki sucking him off, but Midoriya doesn’t feel anything remotely close to disappointment.

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Midoriya wakes up alone, which confuses him only until he finds the note Todoroki left in his too-elegant, near-illegible script on his pillow. They were entertaining today, which most likely meant that Todoroki would sit and listen to the problems of the common folk and Midoriya would occasionally fetch him water or a fruit platter. Possibly, a noble would join them. He was to wear the outfit Todoroki laid out for him at the edge of the bed.

Well, whatever. He probably picked something with the noble in question in mind. Midoriya peeks at it, afraid that it might be another hideous chiton, but it appears to only be a flowy sleeveless shirt and an equally flowy pair of pants, both in white, and a pair of sandals. Too feminine for Midoriya’s tastes, but most Endeavoran clothing was. He doesn’t have a problem slipping on the clothing, at first.

He hadn’t realized that the shorts were quite so…short. Distressingly, they didn’t seem to cover his legs where the lowest of Todoroki’s bite marks along the insides of his thighs were. Once Midoriya was kneeling at Todoroki’s side, it wouldn’t be an issue, but the walk there would be disastrous. Perhaps if he was quick—and then he looked in the mirror.
Midoriya flinched. He had to do a double-take because no, there was no way he had allowed Todoroki to mark him up so. There’s a scattering of dark red marks along his chest and dotted around his collarbone, then the deliberate, almost purple line of marks up his neck. And finally, the darkest of all the kiss marks, the ring around his neck. It looked like a necklace, or a collar, or even just an embarrassing, horrible decision made by a stupid manservant who forgot he existed outside his prince’s bedroom.

Did Todoroki forget the marks he had left? Couldn’t he have given Midoriya a chiton that covered him up? But no, Midoriya wasn’t sure he owned any chitons that would cover up the mess Todoroki had made of him. He pulls at the shirt, despairing over the fact that almost every single one of the marks Todoroki had left was visible. As compensation for his lack of cover, Midoriya snags a golden scarf to throw over his shoulders and shield his marred front from view, at least a little. Damn Todoroki.

Midoriya leaves the room in a rush, forgetting to bid good morning to Shouji and scurrying down the stairs to the prince’s throne room. Naturally, he has to run into everyone he knows on the way.

Chiyo is first. She’s carrying a platter of rolls down the hall, spies Midoriya, and opens her mouth to call out his name. She doesn’t even form a full syllable before she catches sight of his neck and closes her mouth, eyebrows rising to the top of her forehead. She bows to Midoriya as he passes, nodding to herself, and Midoriya ducks his head and runs…

…Straight into Tooru. She laughs at his blunder, patting him on the shoulder. He apologizes while bouncing on his heels, eager to get away.

“It’s no trouble, De…ku,” she says, eyes widening when she sees his legs. They open even wider when she sees his front. Midoriya feebly tries to cover himself.

“Deku,” she says.

“Not right now,” Midoriya hisses. “I am late.” It’s rude, but he pushes past her.

And finally, Yaoyorozu.

“Nice,” she comments immediately, looking him up and down. “A bit showy, don’t you think?”

“Wasn’t my idea,” Midoriya grinds out. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Don’t let the King see you like that,” Yaoyorozu warns. “Rumor has it he’s out to get you.”

Yeah, no shit.

“Wow,” Yaoyorozu says. “You’re actually furious, aren’t you?”

“I am going to very graciously ask His Royal Highness why I’m dressed in absolutely nothing,” Midoriya says. “And then, when he fails to give me a satisfactory answer, I’m going to wring his neck.”

“I’m down, as long as you don’t kill him,” Yaoyorozu says.

Midoriya doesn’t answer that.

He knows he has attitude when he walks into the throne room, scarf trailing behind him. He outpaces Yaoyorozu easily. And he also knows that all the whispers are about him and the obnoxious amount of marks all over his body. When he approaches the throne, bowing and
performing obeisances as he must, Todoroki quirks an eyebrow at him.

Midoriya doesn’t spit ‘we will have words’ like he wants to. He takes the high road and kneels on his pillow, ignoring the ogling of the very prim looking lady on Todoroki’s left. He throws the golden scarf off his shoulders and wears his marks with a chin held high. Yes, fine, he looks like the palace slut. Except there was only one person allowed to touch him like that. So he was Todoroki Shouto’s slut.

Midoriya didn’t need to hear the whispers to know what they were saying. The rumors were true. Todoroki really did fuck his manservant. And that poor boy, he must have such a rough master. And to display him like that! How exhibitionist, did he have no shame? Not as cold a prince as everyone believed, if he could mess a boy up that bad. Amazing that he could even walk…

Midoriya isn’t angry about the rumors. People talk; it’s what they do. What he’s angry about, what roils in his stomach, is how calm, collected, and smug Todoroki is about all of it. He has no problem showing Midoriya off like a trinket. Behold, I have taken this man and we have engaged in many sinful acts. Let me flaunt our bedroom life for all to see.

He lets the anger burn him up as guest after guest is invited into Todoroki's throne room. They bow to Todoroki, but god forbid their eyes stray to either the strict woman at his left or even worse, the flinty-eyed manservant covered in bruises and scowling. And looking at Todoroki is of course, also impossible. The common people end up nearly too cowed to speak with the trinity of severity above them. Entertaining is unusually short, as the common people find that they have nowhere to direct their eyes and a suffocating atmosphere permeates the room.

“Deku, go on ahead of me,” Todoroki says. “I would like to speak with the Lady Mizuru a moment longer.”

Gladly, Midoriya thinks, but only bows. Lady Mizuru gives Midoriya a disapproving look when Todoroki's back is turned and Midoriya returns her scowl with a sneer of his own. She is affronted, but Midoriya melts into the crowd before she can complain to Todoroki.

By the time Todoroki returns to his bedchambers, Midoriya is changed back into a sensible shirt and pants, and pacing the room.

Todoroki has the gall to look disappointed. “Pity,” he says. “You looked quite nice in the white outfit.”

“Is it amusing to you?” Midoriya asks, voice level.

“Is what amusing to me?” Todoroki asks, peeling off his jewelry in front of the mirror.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Midoriya says. “Treating people like pets or playthings to show off to your friends?”

Todoroki pauses in his disrobing, brow furrowing. “I don’t—”

“You made me walk across the palace grounds, baring the marks of our love-making like it was show-and-tell,” Midoriya seethes. “Look at me, the crown prince who finally got laid. Look at how proficient I am at sexing up my manservant, and never doubt my capability again.”

Todoroki frowns. “That’s not…that wasn’t my intention at all. Are you—” He pauses to actually look at Midoriya. “Are you mad at me?”

“Incensed?” Midoriya says, raising his eyebrows. “Furious? Livid? You choose, since you like to
make decisions for other people.”

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “I wouldn’t—no. I wouldn’t do that to you. That’s not why I—”

“Explain,” Midoriya snaps. “Quickly.”

Todoroki takes a breath. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Sincerely. I thought I made my feelings clear to you. And perhaps I made assumptions on your part.”

Disarmed, Midoriya blinks. “Feelings? What?”

“I—perhaps foolishly—believed you felt the same way about me as I do you,” Todoroki says. “I did not mean to show you off as a prize. I meant to stake a claim, and refute all other claims.”

“Claims,” Midoriya repeats.

“Rumors fly about you and Tenya-san and Ochako-san,” Todoroki says. “I only intended to set them straight about who I favor.”

Suddenly, Midoriya knows what’s coming. He sees it, the legendary tidal wave that swallowed the Yuuein coast, looming above him. He sees it, but he is not fast enough to stop it from crashing down and laying waste to all Midoriya has ever known. Like the people caught up in its wake, he can only think, this can’t be happening.

“No,” Midoriya says. “Don’t say it. You can’t—”

“Deku, I love you,” Todoroki says. “I’m not—I’m not only using you for your body. I feel for you, stronger than I have for any other person I have met. I’m not good at naming emotions but this one…it can only be love.”

“No,” Midoriya says. “You can’t feel that. It’s not allowed.”

“I understand now,” Todoroki says. “You don’t feel the same way. I misjudged you.”

No, Midoriya wants to say, wants to cry, wants to scream. No, that’s not fair; I just gave up on you, I just—

“I love you,” Midoriya chokes out. “Shouto, don’t be stupid. I love you, of course I love you.” His hands are in his hair again, fisting at the strands. “I was—for both of our sakes, I wasn’t going to act—”

“You love me,” Todoroki says softly, voice full of wonder.

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “How could I not?”

Todoroki’s eyes are wide, but then he frowns. “If you feel the same way, then why—”

“Shouto, we can’t,” Midoriya says desperately. “You heard your father. I’m—I’m common. It doesn’t matter that I’m not who your father is choosing to marry you off to. It’s not a decision of royal versus royal. I can’t even stand on the same stage as you, let alone dare to dream about being allowed to love you.”

“But you do,” Todoroki says. “You do love me. And I love you.”

Midoriya can’t breathe. The air gets trapped in his throat, sliding down painfully and squeezing into his lungs. It’s not enough air, but he can’t calm down when Todoroki keeps saying I love you
like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

Midoriya tries again. “You will be married to a princess,” he says.

“That means nothing,” Todoroki says. “I will marry her, yes. But we will be together in name only. I will sleep with her to produce heirs, but then, you and I—”

“It can’t,” Midoriya says. “That can’t work.”

“Why not?” Todoroki asks.

“Because it’s miserable!” Midoriya cries. “I can have you, but I will never truly have you! Look me in the eyes and tell me you will be happy, living that lie.”

Todoroki looks him in the eyes. He cannot speak.

“It won’t work,” Midoriya says. “It isn’t possible.”

“Deku,” Todoroki says. “I love you. This is not a fleeting infatuation, or the puppy love of children. I have evaluated my feelings rationally and put them to the side for as long as I was able. I will love you, and no other, for as long as I live.”

Midoriya closes his eyes. “You can’t. You can’t say that.”

Todoroki moves towards him, taking Midoriya’s elbows in his hands and pressing their foreheads together. “I can,” he says. “I can, and I will. I love you, Deku of Yuuei.”

Midoriya takes a shuddering breath.

“Will you ignore it?” Todoroki asks, voice soft. “Will you ignore the chemistry between us? Will you ignore what draws you to me, as I am drawn to you? Will you ignore how our souls are two halves of the same whole?”

“No,” Midoriya says. “I can’t. If I could have, I would have buried my feelings long ago.”

He cups the back of Todoroki’s skull, leaning into his body as Todoroki wraps his arms around him. Midoriya lets out a half-laugh. “This is not how I imagined confessing to you,” he says.

“So you did plan on telling me,” Todoroki says.

“No,” Midoriya says. “I was content to die with my feelings crushed beneath my own foot.”

“Then isn’t this preferable?” Todoroki asks. “This is requited.”

“This is forbidden,” Midoriya reminds him. “And for one as composed as yourself, I’m surprised you’re being so quick about this.”

“I never intended to take anyone,” Todoroki admits. “I never thought I would fall. Perhaps that is how it should be, me never marrying, with you by my side. I could renounce my claim to the throne.”

Midoriya snorts, and Todoroki’s back shakes with laughter.

“You’re right,” he says. “I’m not that irresponsible.”

Midoriya bites his lip. “I don’t want to part from you.”
“Then don’t,” Todoroki says. “I will never ask you to leave.”

Midoriya leans back. He takes a breath. “I need to…process all of this. I’m going to retire to my study.”

“Very well,” Todoroki says. “I have other business to attend to.”

“And don’t think you’ve escaped from me just yet,” Midoriya warns. “I’m still cross about the revealing clothing.”

Todoroki tilts his head to the side and Midoriya rolls his eyes. He’d figure out some way to get back at Todoroki. Eventually.

Midoriya moves to his desk, pulling out a pen and a new sheet of parchment. He addresses the letter and then lets out a long sigh. He recalls the warnings left by Tokoyami and Tsuyu, the prophecies of Uraraka and the woman in the sash shop. Don’t fall in love; you are already in love.

Midoriya smiles to himself. What kind of idiot falls in love with the very man he was sent to spy on? What kind of idiot gets said man to fall in love with him in return? Surely Todoroki realizes how fruitless this endeavor is. There is no outcome in which they come out happy. The way the world works, a prince and a pauper can never make a life together.

And yet he fell, anyway. And it takes a very special kind of idiot to pursue such a hopeless course of action.

Midoriya dips the pen into the inkwell and tries to find the words to tell All Might he may never want to return to Yuuei, after all.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: the last happy chapter for the rest of the fic. enjoy it, y'all.
Midoriya stands outside the Yuuein palace and watches it burn.

It takes him a long moment before he is startled. There’s something about an ancient stone structure, covered in decades’ worth of ivy growth that seems untouchable. Houses burned, villages burned, even cities burned, but stone palaces would stand the test of time. Midoriya’s first thought is but that isn’t possible, and then, All Might!

He starts towards the blaze, dodging bonfires of bushes and guard towers and flinching as bits of ash and cinders rain down on him. He runs up the path to the entrance of the palace mansion, but the doors are blown wide open to reveal nothing but fire so hot Midoriya feels the skin melting off his face. It’s like looking into the belly of a dragon the moment before it rains hellfire down upon him.

“All Might!” he calls, but his mentor and king doesn’t answer.

He hears a fluttering over the roar of the flames and Dark Shadow lands on his shoulders. His nails dig in deep enough to sting. Midoriya is in nothing but the simple chiton he wore his first day in Endeavor, the heat searing and the raven cutting into his skin.

“Is All Might okay?” Midoriya asks. “Dark Shadow! Did he get my message in time?”

Dark Shadow clacks his beak.

Midoriya reaches for the compartment on his leg where he knows All Might’s last letter to him is, but then Dark Shadow attacks him, driving his beak over and over into Midoriya’s hand until it’s a bloody pulp. Even though he cries out and it hurts like burning, Midoriya pulls the message from Dark Shadow’s leg, staining it with his blood. As he holds the tiny scroll in his hands, he recognizes All Might’s script but his eyes blur and he can’t make out the words. They melt together, like the metal lanterns melt on the outside of the palace walls and the sentences run into each other in a jumbled mess that he can’t make sense of.

Midoriya’s hands tremble. “I can’t read it,” he says. “The most important letter he’s ever sent me, and I can’t read it—”

“Men never see the end of the world until it is upon them,” Dark Shadow says in Tokoyami’s voice.

“What?” Midoriya says, tears blurring his vision. “What did you say?”
“This is the end,” Dark Shadow says. “Everything has been destroyed. The worst possible outcome is nigh. All that you worked towards is but dust in the wind.”

“No,” Midoriya says. “I would never let that happen. All Might, Shouto, Uraraka-sama, Iida-sama, Yaoyorozu-san—there’s no way all of us could have failed. He’s just one man.”

“Men never see the end of the world until it is upon them,” Dark Shadow repeats.

Midoriya grabs the bird by the throat. “That’s impossible,” he says. “We would have seen the signs. Everything can’t be destroyed without warning. We would never let the world go up in flames. So why am I seeing this?”

Dark Shadow clacks his beak.

Midoriya shakes him. “Tell me!”

Tokoyami’s voice comes from the raven’s parted beak again. “Because men are foolish and blind. They only see the good omens and turn a blind eye to the bad. The warnings are there, but men are blinded by the light of hope. Despair, Izuku. Despair, or everything will fall.”

“What warnings?” Midoriya asks. “What happened? What did the King do?”

“Watch for the signs,” Dark Shadow caws. “Watch for the signs! Watch for the signs! Watch for the signs!”

His cawing increases in volume and shrillness until he is screaming like an animal being eaten alive. Midoriya lets him go to shield his ears from the screams, but Dark Shadow takes to the air, beating his wings in front of Midoriya’s face and screaming the signs, the signs, watch for the signs!

Midoriya smacks Dark Shadow away from him, but the tips of his wings and his tail feathers have caught fire, lighting him on fire from the outside in as his screams get more frenzied. He doesn’t stop wailing or beating his wings even as he is consumed by fire and Midoriya thinks of a phoenix, burned to death by its own flames.

Midoriya opens his eyes. His heart is beating fast, the tail end of the dream slipping from his mind. He drags a hand over his face and glances down at Todoroki, attached to him and drooling on his shoulder, a strand of hair in his mouth. Midoriya would have liked to stand up and wash his face, calm down from the nightmare, but Todoroki is peaceful and warm. Moving would invite Todoroki’s wrath in the form of sleepy pouting, clinging, and growling. Midoriya had tried to get up to pee two nights ago, to no avail.

Still, he won’t complain. The nightmare can’t sink its claws into Midoriya as easily when he’s protected by a big, puffy guard dog. Midoriya remembers the lick of fire and is not afraid. The only fire he knew was Todoroki’s, and it was Todoroki who said he would raze the land for Midoriya’s sake. Because Midoriya loved, and was loved in return.

Midoriya closes his eyes and wiggles further under the comforter. He can’t remember exactly what he dreamed about, but it didn’t matter. With Todoroki on his side, he could take on anything. Together, there was no way they could lose. He had nothing to fear from a shadowy dream biting at the edges of his mind.

And thinking nothing more of it, Midoriya falls back asleep.
It’s not the end of the world for Todoroki to be sent away to the training camps. Midoriya had seen him go to a few here and there, and although Todoroki came back battered and broken, it was never for long. Todoroki had proved that he could bend to the point of snapping and recover time and time again. This next training camp would be just another beating he would have to weather. He would tuck his chin in and bear it.

Midoriya knows this, but King Enji’s weasel-faced Captain, Jurou, has been paying visits to Todoroki on a regular basis. Each time, he carries a message from the King about something else Todoroki must bring or prepare for, reminding Todoroki how many days until their departure. Todoroki doesn’t get even a week of respite after being in charge of the palace during the King’s absence. And to Midoriya, the constant reminder sounds like a countdown to something new and horrible.

“But how do you know he’s not going to do something awful to you?” Midoriya asks, pacing the length of their bedchambers while Todoroki cradles a cup of tea in his hands and watches Midoriya move. “I know he can’t kill you, but there are plenty of ways to break you in without killing you.”

“Fortunately, whatever he does, I won’t remember,” Todoroki says, blowing on his tea.

“That’s not funny,” Midoriya says. “That confrontation the other day—I think you really set him off.”

“Good,” Todoroki says. “Finally, I get under his skin the way he gets under mine.”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” Midoriya says.

“You’re overreacting and planning for a situation that isn’t worth contemplating,” Todoroki says. “I know him. Yes, I believe he can do more to me and that he may try this time, but unlike you, I trust my resolve.”

“I trust you,” Midoriya says immediately.

Todoroki eyes him, sipping his tea.

“Please just—read the signs,” Midoriya says, and stops pacing. The words fall strangely against his ears, tickling his brain like the ghost of a memory, a name he just couldn’t grasp.

“In any case,” Todoroki says. “I’m not letting you stay here while I’m gone.”

Midoriya blinks. “What?”

“While I’m not worried about myself,” Todoroki says, “I don’t trust my father and his errant dogs to keep their hands off you. From now on, when I’m not here, you won’t be either.”

“Wha—where will I go?” Midoriya asks.

“Field trip with Momo,” Todoroki says, setting his teacup down. “Or rather, reconnaissance in the countryside for a few days, then returning a day before me. What’s wrong? I thought you would jump at the chance to get outside.”

“If we’re delayed and you come home before us…”

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“If we’re delayed and you come home before us…”

“Keeping me from worrying?” Midoriya says. “Or trying to get rid of me?”

Todoroki crooks a finger, summoning Midoriya to his side. He motions for Midoriya to lean down so he can speak into his ear.

“You underestimate how frustrating the thought of having to leave you is,” Todoroki says. “I intend to see you in all your free time. Here. Preferably naked.”

“Going to fuck me so hard the memory plays on the back of your eyelids?” Midoriya says.

“Well, I do have a year’s worth of time to make up,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya tilts his head to kiss Todoroki.

“I love you,” Midoriya says.

“I know,” Todoroki says, smiling. “I will see you this evening. Have fun fending off Tooru.”

“Pardon?” Midoriya says.

Midoriya takes it all back. He hates Todoroki. With all his heart. Of course, it’s Shouji who is the worst off, caught between Midoriya and Tooru, arms crossed over her chest. With five days left until Todoroki was to be sent off, Midoriya faces death.

Midoriya is wearing a long-sleeved shirt with a collar, but even mostly covered up, there are still dark bruises under his jaw, a reminder that Tooru had seen him at his worst and never gotten an explanation. Not a fact she was likely to forget.

“So, Deku,” Tooru says, voice sweet. “I guess I don’t mean much to you as a friend, hm?”

“This is a new development,” Midoriya says weakly, trying to placate her. “I would’ve told you, eventually.”

“And to think I took you under my wing and taught you to dance,” Tooru says. “This is what I get for showing my charitable side. Not even a mention to your good friend Tooru that oh, hey, by the way, I slept with Todoroki-sama.”

“In my defense,” Midoriya says, “I didn’t know how open he wanted to be about this.”

“Deku, it’s gossip,” Tooru says. “You don’t ask permission. You just tell me.”

“Oh, and I have a bone to pick with you, anyway,” Midoriya says, frowning. “You told Ojiro-san, who tipped off Shouji, who told Yaoyorozu-san.”

“Oh, boo,” Tooru says. “At least I didn’t keep a forbidden love secret from my best friend.”

“Actually,” Midoriya says, turning to Shouji. “I have a bit of a bone to pick with you, too.”
“Oh no,” Shouji says. “I’m quite content to stay out of it.”

“You’re both awful, is what I’m getting at,” Midoriya says. “That entire outing was supposed to be secret.”

“But now that everyone knows…” Tooru says. “Details! Give me the details!”

Midoriya sighs. “You know, I came here to get commoner’s clothing—”

“No way!” Tooru says. She flops over the top of the chests of clothing palace performers used. The demonstration was mostly for show, as Shouji could probably lift a chest with her on it with one arm. “Details!” she whines.


Tooru sits up and counts off her fingers. “Whether he’s good, whether he’s bad, does he have any kinks, who tops who, how many times you’ve done it, what his sex drive is like—”

“Oh, god,” Midoriya chokes. “There is no way I am telling you any of that.”

“C’mon,” Tooru whines. “I tried to pry Shouji for information but he won’t make a peep.”

Midoriya, who had forgotten that guards stationed outside bedchambers were a thing, pales. He turns to Shouji.

“If I’m allowed to have an opinion here,” Shouji says, “I would really rather not hear everything a second time.”

Midoriya’s face is on fire.


“Oh my god,” Midoriya says. “How about I tell you about how we got together? And then about his confession? Would that be satisfactory?”


Midoriya tells her about the night of the Founder’s Festival as they pick out clothes for him to wear out on his trip with Yaoyorozu. This much, he doesn’t mind talking about. He paints a picture of the glowing streets with his words, ending in the crown jewel of the bonfire. He talks about dancing with Todoroki, of dipping him, and then of kissing him as the crowd cheered them on. Tooru’s eyes glow.

He glazes over the details of their sexual escapades to Tooru’s disappointment, but Midoriya isn’t quite sure he has the capacity to deal with putting into words what he and Todoroki did with anyone but Todoroki. It felt sacred, almost, to be the only person who knew of Todoroki when he was like that. It wasn’t something he should share with even his close friends.

Except Shouji, who already had heard them fucking. God. Midoriya wasn’t going to forget that.

He tells Tooru about how angry he had been with Todoroki for showing him off like that and how he had turned on him in their bedchambers, and how that had led to Todoroki confessing affection for him. He uses those words, ‘confessing affection,’ because to tell anyone that Todoroki loved him felt like a dam bursting, like admitting to treason. Especially because Todoroki didn’t just love
him, he would love only Midoriya for as long as he lived. Yes, those words had kept Midoriya up at night.

As they pack up Midoriya’s clothes in a trunk, passed along to Shouji to carry, Tooru tells him how amazing it is to be favored by a prince. To think that Todoroki didn’t just lust after his body, but cared for him as a person, too! Oh, but they had always been so close, closer than brothers, this was inevitable, wasn’t it? In any case, congratulations, Deku!

It’s not that big a deal, Midoriya tells her. They sleep together now. Their affection is returned. Other than that, nothing has changed. They still bicker and tease each other. They still have differences of opinions and fight. They still worry over each other. It’s not that big a deal. It’s not that big a change. There’s not a lot of significance to it.

Except, there is.

Midoriya spends the rest of his day bouncing around the castle. To the kitchens, to go over the rations list with Chiyo. To the stables, to ensure that Midoriya’s favorite horse was ready to ride in a week or so. To the armory, to get fitted with a bow and shortsword. Midoriya manages not to think too much about Todoroki until a page comes for him with a message.

His Royal Highness says he wants to try something different tonight, the page says, blushing.

Except it isn’t simple sexual release and a close friendship. It’s teasing and courting and Todoroki playing with Midoriya to make up for the time he should have been courting Midoriya if they had been born equals. It’s the assurance of love and affection between the two of them and love, real love, the kind Midoriya had been looking for in his previous partners and found instead in a prince with odd eyes and a sharp tongue. It’s the fact that Todoroki continues to surprise Midoriya with the depth of his devotion until Midoriya starts to realize that maybe their love isn’t as unbalanced as he had believed it to be months before.

Something different, Todoroki had said. That can only mean that he’s trying to satisfy that something Midoriya had seen in his eyes.

In this case, it means Midoriya surrendering to him completely.

The rope that binds Midoriya’s hands to the headboard is soft and red as sin. His wrists are crossed over one another and an experimental tug reveals that he won’t be moving them any time soon. He glances down his body—naked, as Todoroki liked him to be, it seemed—to where Todoroki is looking him over. Todoroki reaches out a finger to run it down the length of Midoriya’s body, from pec to hip. The fire in his eyes is a tame smolder, contented to have Midoriya to himself for the duration of the night.

Todoroki gathers his hair into a messy ponytail and pulls it behind his head. He means business. Midoriya shifts in place.

“You said you wanted to try something different,” Midoriya says.

Todoroki nods. “It came upon me suddenly.”

Midoriya fingers the rope. “Tying me up? You do enjoy restraining me.”

“Oh no,” Todoroki says. “The bondage is necessary, but not the point. I don’t want you to interrupt.” His eyes slide up Midoriya’s chest to his face. “And you do look so pretty, posing like this for me. Do you really trust me so?”
“Like no other,” Midoriya swears. “Although, a man has to wonder what the point is, if not bondage.”

Todoroki doesn’t respond. He’s fully dressed in a blouse with a tie at the front that Midoriya thinks of undoing with his teeth. He lights a few more candles in the room with a flame that jumps from his finger and takes a sip of water. A droplet runs down his chin and over the edge of his jaw. He’s taking his time.

When Todoroki returns to Midoriya’s side he cups Midoriya’s cheek with his left hand. Midoriya doesn’t understand at first, but then the touch changes from warm to unnaturally hot and Midoriya’s eyes widen.


He takes a seat at Midoriya’s bedside and presses the flat of his palm to Midoriya’s chest. Midoriya sucks in a breath at the heat, not hot enough to burn, but enough to sting. Todoroki drags his hand down, leaving a searing line down his front to just above his crotch. When he lifts his hand, there’s a red handprint. The skin is sensitive and feels cool against the air.

Midoriya takes a breath. This is…not what he expected.

With a single finger, Todoroki draws patterns across Midoriya’s chest, leaving behind lines of hot skin turning cold that whites out Midoriya’s mind. He can only focus in on movement of that finger, tracing the line of his collarbone or circling a nipple, teasing him with pain-pleasure. He’s hard in a matter of minutes, not that Todoroki pays any attention to that. He’s more interested in the shuddering rise and fall of Midoriya’s chest when he brushes fingers against his ribs, counting each one.

“I’ll die before you get to fuck me,” Midoriya says.

“No, you won’t,” Todoroki says. “You’ll do exactly as I tell you.”

He wraps his hand around Midoriya’s cock, squeezing the base, and Midoriya arches his back with a gasp.

“Shh,” Todoroki says. “You’re not to come until I tell you.”

He releases Midoriya and strokes the inside of his thigh, this time with his right hand. Only the tips of his fingers brush Midoriya’s skin, but the touch is ice and Midoriya writhes at cold against his delicate inner thigh. Todoroki moves in close to his cock but doesn’t touch it, alternating hot and cold touches, light as feathers from his stomach down to below his crotch.

Midoriya does not consider himself a proud person. He considers himself a person with a healthy dose of shame, but there’s something about sex and teasing that strips a person of their dignity and rationality when they’re far enough gone, until they’re nothing more than a bundle of nerves and the desire to reach the tipping point as fast as possible. Midoriya is that primal creature right now.

The thought sorry Shouji might cross his mind once, but it does nothing to abate the whines Midoriya makes, biting hard at his lip until it leaves an indent. His breath is ragged and he knows how cheap and slutty he sounds, crying out whenever Todoroki presses a full palm to his skin, but the alternate extremes are frying his nerves until he can hardly feel the pleasure building. He becomes one with the pressure beating around his ears and pounding between his legs.

When Todoroki runs a freezing finger up the length of Midoriya’s shaft, he sobs.
“Don’t come,” Todoroki says. “I want to see how obedient you can be.”

Midoriya tears up but holds himself back. He grits his teeth as Todoroki draws circles around him with a freezing finger, a warm hand pressed against his thigh. He doesn’t allow himself to give into the urge to let go, holding onto Todoroki’s order.

Holding onto words doesn’t really help though when Todoroki switches hands, wrapping his warm hand around Midoriya’s cock and starts to pump him.

“Shouto—” Midoriya chokes out. “Shouto, it’s too much, I can’t—”

He comes over Todoroki’s hand with a cry and a violent shudder that wracks his entire body. Todoroki strokes him through the shuddering, until Midoriya is over-sensitive and writhing. Then, Todoroki releases him, clicking his tongue and looking over his dirtied hand.

“Now look at the mess you’ve made,” he says.

He holds his fingers up to Midoriya’s lips. “Clean it up,” he says.

Midoriya accepts the fingers in his mouth without hesitation. He wraps his lips around them and laps at Todoroki’s fingers. He repents with suggestion, flicking his tongue over his fingers and sucking hard on them. Todoroki’s eyelashes flutter and his eyes are on Midoriya’s lips. It’s working.

When Todoroki pulls his cleaned fingers from Midoriya’s mouth, Midoriya asks, “Am I going to be punished?”

Todoroki quirks an eyebrow and reaches for the rope tying up Midoriya’s hands. “Punish you?” Todoroki says. “Why would I have to punish one so eager to serve?”

He releases Midoriya and Midoriya sits up hands in his lap. “I disobeyed,” Midoriya says.

“Put your hands behind your back,” Todoroki says. Midoriya obeys immediately.

Todoroki smiles. “See? Obedient.” But he ties the rope around Midoriya’s hands again, this time bound behind his back.

Todoroki climbs onto the bed and undoes his belt. “You serve me well,” he says. “I’m sure you can think of some way to make it up to me.”

Midoriya swallows thickly, eyes bright. “I think I can,” he says.

But the thing is, Midoriya can’t get it out of his head that Todoroki went that far just for him. If it had been just the temperature play, Midoriya would have called Todoroki a sadist for wanting to see him squirm and left it at that. Midoriya wasn’t complaining about the teasing after all. But Todoroki had had this half-smile on his face after Midoriya came, almost tender in nature, that stuck with Midoriya. When his partner looked more satisfied after satisfying Midoriya than being satiated himself, Midoriya tended to pay attention.

With four days until Todoroki would be taken away, Midoriya was worrying about their newfound
sex life.

How to bring it up though? Sorry, couldn’t help but notice you seem to get off on taking care of me. Midoriya knows the exact look he’ll get for saying that, and it will freeze his dick off faster than Todoroki’s ice Quirk. He has to be careful.

And so, Midoriya, master of subtlety, blurts out the question while pretending to read in their bed the next night.

“Did you like it? Uh, last night, with the, uh, temperature play?”

Todoroki, reading a letter, actually puts it down to stare at Midoriya. “Yes,” he says slowly. “What are you getting at? Did I cross a boundary?”

“No!” Midoriya says. “No, not at all. I meant, did you enjoy what you were doing?”

“Deku,” Todoroki says, “if I’ve done something to hurt you—”

“Did you enjoy pleasing me,” Midoriya says quickly. “Did you enjoy it in a sexual way.”

The air between them goes quiet. Midoriya holds his breath. Todoroki holds his gaze, but his expression betrays nothing. Having perfected the art of outlasting awkward silences, Todoroki doesn’t say a word. Midoriya breaks first.

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says. “That’s—I was making assumptions, I just thought—”

“I don’t know,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya blinks. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I haven’t exactly had the chance to find out,” Todoroki says, quirking an eyebrow. “All of our lovemaking has been directed towards pleasing me.”

“You make it sound like I’m not pleased by that arrangement,” Midoriya huffs.

“Aren’t you?” Todoroki says.

“Of course I’m happy,” Midoriya says. “If it’s with you, it can’t be bad.”

Todoroki smiles. “It isn’t ideal though, is it? You’re the one who wants control over me.”

“I don’t dislike giving in to you,” Midoriya says.

“And I don’t dislike seeing you fall over yourself to obey,” Todoroki says. “But who’s to know if that is the ideal arrangement?”

Midoriya pauses. “Do you want to try it, then?”

Todoroki is quiet for a moment. Then, he gets up from his desk and moves to the side of the bed, standing over Midoriya. Midoriya sits up to meet him.

And Todoroki sinks to his knees.

Midoriya feels the temperature in the room jump. His heart rate picks up. On his knees, in a servile position to Midoriya, Todoroki still retains the steel in his eyes that marks him as a prince. His chin juts out and his hair is done up in a strict ponytail. Even lowered to the position of a servant, he is
too proud to be anything but royalty.

“I am your prince,” Todoroki says. “Do not forget that.”

“I won’t,” Midoriya says. Hesitantly, he reaches for the ties on his pants.

Todoroki smacks his hands away. “I thought this was about me pleasing you.”

So Midoriya’s hands go to his hair instead, undoing the ponytail and letting the strands fall down like a halo around his head. He wraps his fingers through the fine strands and tugs gently.

“You’ve thought about this before,” Todoroki says. “In the baths.”

Caught, Midoriya almost flinches away. Instead, he mutters, “Maybe.”


Midoriya watches Todoroki’s mouth form the words. He wants to know what it feels like, too.

The answer is: better than he had imagined. Todoroki is tentative, but not shy. He pays attention to the signs of Midoriya’s body and to what Todoroki himself liked. He doesn’t flinch away from the length or swallowing Midoriya down. Everything about Todoroki is so focused, like being in the center of a small hurricane, and subject to the torrents of pleasure that the hurricane rained down upon him.

Midoriya is careful not to shove Todoroki’s head against him, even though he wants to desperately. His fingers tremble and clench in Todoroki’s hair, pulling at it but not deterring Todoroki in the slightest. Midoriya can’t keep his eyes off the red and the white silky strands wrapped tightly between his fingers. He can’t keep his eyes off Todoroki’s mouth wrapped around him.

Todoroki’s eyelids are lowered and his lashes are long enough to brush the tops of his cheekbones. When he looks up at Midoriya, the intensity of his gaze softens until Midoriya can’t even breathe. When Todoroki has a flush to his cheeks and his eyes are soft and pliant as his mouth, Midoriya can’t hold back the shudders that wrack his body as he comes.

After the fact, he offers to take care of Todoroki in return, but Todoroki waves him off.

“Not necessary,” he says. “I am…satisfied.”

“You swallowed,” Midoriya says.

“So do you,” Todoroki accuses.

“Not my first time, I didn’t,” Midoriya says. “You’re…”

“I’m what?” Todoroki loosens the ties at the top of his shirt, not looking at Midoriya. His cheeks are still flushed and his movements are jerky.

Midoriya tilts his head. “Which part didn’t you like?”

“What nonsense are you spouting now?” Todoroki says. “I told you, I’m satisfied.”

No, he’s not. Even without his year of being in close contact with Todoroki, Midoriya would’ve been able to tell that Todoroki was not okay. He’s too sharp; the Todoroki Midoriya knows is dangerously sleek and fluid in his words and movements. This Todoroki is raw with—something.
“We need to talk about it,” Midoriya says, twisting on the bed. “If you don’t want—”


So blowing Midoriya made him…what? Flustered? Agitated? He didn’t want the favor returned, and he’d already done Midoriya, so what more did he want?

More, Midoriya's brain supplies. He wants more than that.

Midoriya’s mouth makes a small ‘o’ shape. “Shouto,” Midoriya says. “We mentioned, before, about me wanting to take control, and about you being ambivalent towards that fact. Could it be that perhaps…”

Todoroki's shoulders stiffen.

“Could it be that you want me to take control?” Midoriya asks. “That you want to reverse the roles of master and servant?”

“I just served you, didn’t I?” Todoroki mutters.

“Yes,” Midoriya says. “But it wasn’t enough. You want me to order you, to be rougher with you. You want to be helpless beneath me.”

He can see that Todoroki's lips are parted, that his breathing is more labored than before. He clears his throat. “It isn’t right, is it? I was born to rule. To want that is…improper.”

Midoriya slides towards him, takes his hand. “To want that is part of you,” he says. “It’s a desire, no more and no less. It doesn’t mean you are unfit to rule.”

Todoroki's eyes fall to his. “I want…” He hesitates. “I want you to do me,” he says. “I want to be at your mercy. Because I trust you like no other.”

Midoriya breathes in through his nose and nods. “We can do that,” he says, rubbing his thumb over Todoroki's knuckles. “We are both equals in this relationship. There is no shame in changing positions.”

“I want you to have me on my throne,” Todoroki whispers.

Midoriya's heart lodges itself in his throat. “W-what?”

“On my throne,” Todoroki says. “Fuck me on my throne, Deku. Defile my royal blood until we truly are equals.”

“Shouto, that’s—”

“I will not take another,” Shouto whispers. “It is only you. I want to remember it whenever I sit up there. I want to remember that you and I are both men, and that’s all. Our statuses don’t matter, they don’t fucking—” He takes a breath. “I will not take another,” he repeats. “So do this, for me.”

Midoriya swallows. “Okay,” he says. “I'll see to it that the throne room is cleared out tomorrow. No one will disturb us. If they ask, we'll say we are…playing chess.”

“Chess,” Todoroki says.

“It’s a game that requires a lot of focus,” Midoriya says. “His Royal Highness would be most
displeased if he were interrupted in the middle of a... chess game.”

“I see,” Todoroki says. “Well, I’ll leave the logistics to you.”

He runs a hand through his hair and closes his eyes, exhaling. Midoriya watches him squeeze some of the tension out of his neck and then climb into bed, turning on his side and sighing again as he sinks into the mattress.

It shouldn’t be possible for such a noble creature to lower his proud head and bow to another. The idea is impossible, and yet, those were the contents of Todoroki’s fantasies. And Midoriya, who could hardly find it in himself to tease and play with his partners, let alone take the reins in the relationship and dominate them? He thinks of begging, of hair tangled around fingers, and of nails digging into his shoulders as he strokes up and down Todoroki’s arm.

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Midoriya expects someone to stop them on their way to the throne room the next day. He imagined that the great cosmos would have to intervene to keep the balance, to keep order. A sudden summons from the king, a fitting Midoriya had forgotten about, or an attack on the palace walls—Midoriya waited for any one of these to happen, but they are only greeted with the typical bows and acknowledgements from the palace servants and guards as they pass by.

Todoroki is silent. He’s focused again, all his attention fixed on a point ahead of him, readying himself to face what was to follow. Midoriya smiles. Hopeless, this one was. Even after Midoriya had told him to loosen up, he’s still stiff as a wooden plank.

With three days until Todoroki’s training away, Midoriya is not worrying about how well off his prince will be, but rather how to ease him into mutually unfamiliar sexual territory.

Am I a bad servant? Midoriya thinks. Even if he tells me not to worry, I probably should.

But no, this was a kind of service, too. In all likelihood, Todoroki didn’t have the capacity to ease his mind of all difficulties, but Midoriya was acting as a distraction. In this moment, at least, Todoroki wasn’t consumed by his role as heir, but his role as a partner. Only time would tell if this distraction was for good or for bad.

“You’re staring again,” Todoroki says.

“You’re tense,” Midoriya says. “Am I really so scary?”

Todoroki grunts. Midoriya steps in front of him to open the door to the throne room. Todoroki steps through, not looking at Midoriya. Midoriya closes the door behind them and sends a small prayer to the gods that their message to not be disturbed had been received. When he turns, Todoroki is standing still, staring at his throne. Stiff. Well, that just wouldn’t do.

Midoriya sneaks up behind him and snatches the crown he’s wearing off his head. It’s a light one, little more than a golden circlet that just happened to have the spires of a crown melded into the metalwork.

Todoroki flinches when Midoriya snatches the crown, then narrows his eyes as Midoriya skips backwards, crown in hand. “You little—”
Holding his gaze, Midoriya slips the crown onto his head. Todoroki's eyes widen.

He trots up the stairs to the throne and collapses in it, splaying his body over the shape of it, legs crossed over one armrest and elbows propping him up against the other. Midoriya grins at Todoroki, staring at him with very round eyes.

Catching himself, Todoroki shakes his head. “Someone’s after my throne, it appears.”

“No, the throne,” Midoriya says, “so much as the man occupying it.” He takes the crown off and twirls it around a finger. He tilts his head to the side. “Well? Are you going to reclaim your honor?”

Todoroki approaches him, moving to stand over him. He holds out a hand and Midoriya hands over the crown, still grinning. Todoroki replaces it on his head and beckons for Midoriya to get out. Midoriya obeys.

Todoroki sinks into the throw of furs and occupies the entire throne with a hand wrapped over both armrests. He sits up straight and looks up at Midoriya, chest puffed out. “This is the difference between you and I,” he says.

“I rather liked my way,” Midoriya says. He unties the laces at his wrists and pulls his shirt over his head, tossing it to the side.

Todoroki follows his motions with darting eyes. He shrinks back into his throne a little. “It’s not the royal way,” he says.

“That’s no fun,” Midoriya says. “Can’t we find a compromise?” He slides onto the throne, onto Todoroki, knees on either side of Todoroki’s legs and holding himself over his prince, bracing his arms against the back of the throne, towering over Todoroki.

“This is familiar,” Midoriya murmurs.

“What do you—”

“Shh,” Midoriya says. He cups Todoroki's cheek with one hand and brushes his thumb over Todoroki's lips. He leans in to kiss Todoroki, holding the kiss for a long moment. When he leans back, Todoroki's eyes are half-lidded and he has collapsed back against the throne.

“Let me remind you of something,” Midoriya says. He pulls the crown from Todoroki's head again and tosses it on top of his discarded shirt. “We're trusting me, now. It’s okay. Here, you’re not a prince. You’re just Shouto.”

He kisses Todoroki again, tilting Todoroki's head to slide their mouths together. He feels Todoroki suck a breath in through his nose and Midoriya pulls away again. “Okay?”

Todoroki's eyelashes flutter. “Okay,” he says.

Midoriya slides into his lap fully, bringing back memories of the dance, when Todoroki had been holding himself back against Midoriya’s tempting, because he had been holding himself back then, unable to show any indication of reciprocating the gestures.

But, as Midoriya ruts against him this time, Todoroki has none of his previous hesitation. His hands fly to Midoriya's hips and dig in, pulling Midoriya closer with every move he makes against Todoroki. His lips are already parted when Midoriya meets him, sharing open-mouthed kisses punctuated by the occasional panting. Todoroki's hips jerk up to meet Midoriya's as he starts to get
And then Midoriya pulls away completely, hopping off the throne altogether.

“Wow,” he says, “If you knew how good you looked in this moment.”

Todoroki is flushed and panting, strands of hair falling in his face and slid halfway down the throne. Midoriya thinks of the man who walked with his head held high and back straight, lying before him, ruined and needy, and any thoughts of dragging the teasing out disappear from his mind.

He leans over Todoroki, presses their foreheads together. “I’m going to fuck you, Todoroki Shouto,” Midoriya says. “I’m going to be the first and only to be inside you.” He brushes a strand out of Todoroki’s hair out of his face. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” Todoroki breathes.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I can’t—”

Midoriya reaches down and palms Todoroki through his pants. Todoroki lets out a half-sob, half-whine and arches his back fruitlessly. “I think you forget who’s in control here,” Midoriya says. “Tell me what you want, Shouto.”

Todoroki squeezes his eyes shut. “Use me,” he whispers. “Take my body and use it to satisfy you. Fuck—” he breaks off, “—fuck me so hard that they can hear me sob your name.”

“You’re so hard,” Midoriya says softly. “You really want me inside you.”

“Yes,” Todoroki says.

“Good boy,” Midoriya says. “You’re such a good boy for me, aren’t you Shouto?” He presses three of his fingers to Todoroki’s mouth. “You know what to do, don’t you?”

Todoroki takes his fingers into his mouth delicately, as a prince might sample a dessert. It’s inexperienced and innocent—the press of his tongue against Midoriya’s fingers, the hint of teeth, and then sucking at them. His eyes rise to meet Midoriya’s and Midoriya lets out a stifled groan. With his free hand he picks apart the tie on Todoroki’s pants, then his own.

Todoroki helps to remove his lower layer, breath stuttering when his bare skin touches the stone of the throne. Even with the furs, the throne was dark and cold. He’s hard and dribbling, unable to look down at himself. Midoriya reaches into the pouch he had slid into the pocket of his pants and undoes it. He pulls his hand from Todoroki’s mouth with a pop and sticks his fingers into the pouch, filled with the same lubricant they kept close to the bed.

“This…may be unpleasant, your first time,” Midoriya warns him.

He’s gentle, sliding his fingers into Todoroki, but even so, Todoroki balks at the contact. He tenses and Midoriya soothes him with a hand through his hair, kissing the side of his neck and his cheeks and his mouth to distract him. Todoroki squirms for a few moments longer, then goes still, relaxed. Midoriya worries he might have been uncomfortable, but when he looks at Todoroki, he sees that Todoroki’s mouth is hanging half open and he’s flushed to the tips of the ears.

“You like this,” Midoriya says softly. “You really do want me to fuck you.”
Todoroki casts his eyes to the side, then lets out a soft cry when Midoriya adds another finger.


By the time he’s finished preparing him, Todoroki is shaking and rocking his hips back and forth to the timing of Midoriya's fingers. Midoriya pulls his fingers out and Todoroki groans softly, looking at Midoriya with wide eyes.

“Are you going to…?” he asks.

Midoriya's heart swells. “Yes, lover,” he whispers. “Yes, you’re ready.”

Todoroki watches Midoriya with rapt attention as he slides his pants down past his hips and bares himself. As if by instinct, Midoriya reaches out to press a hand over Todoroki's heart. It’s rapid fire.

“Will it hurt?” Todoroki asks.

“Not if I go slow,” Midoriya says. “Oh, lover. It’s going to feel so good.”

Midoriya nudges apart Todoroki's legs and slides between them. He lifts Todoroki's hips slightly, angling himself, and wraps Todoroki's legs around his hips. Todoroki reaches out to grasp at his shoulders and around his neck. Midoriya is slow when he pushes in and Todoroki's breath catches. He reads the signs of Todoroki's body: when to slow down, when he’s doing fine, and the scrabbling of Todoroki's fingers against his bare shoulders when he wants more.

And then, once he’s all the way in, he starts to move. Slowly, at first, getting Todoroki used to the motion, and then faster, as Todoroki’s breath picks up and the spasming of fingers on his shoulder becomes nails digging in hard.

Todoroki's breaths go ragged as Midoriya fucks him, but he doesn’t cry out more than a few times; only when Midoriya angles himself right and hits the right spot and Todoroki’s entire body seizes up and he lets out a breathy noise that imprints itself into Midoriya's mind. Todoroki clings to him, panting into his neck, but when Midoriya turns to look at him, Todoroki's eyes are open and he’s looking at the glass ceiling above him, light streaming down on them as they make love.

Midoriya wants to take in every detail of this Todoroki—this proud creature turned humble, giving himself over freely to Midoriya, as if it was nothing. The cold prince, the untouchable prince, baring himself Midoriya and letting Midoriya take him like this, like no other man would. Midoriya wants to take in every detail, but he’s going to come just from the way Todoroki is reacting to his body. As is Todoroki, if his more frantic breaths are anything to go by.

Midoriya reaches down to pump Todoroki in time to his rutting and this time Todoroki half-shouts, the cry turning into muffled words that he whispers into Midoriya's neck and Midoriya picks up the pace, rocking into Todoroki hard enough for his shoulders to hit the back of the throne. Todoroki comes first, his body tightening around Midoriya, and then it only take Midoriya a few more thrusts until he’s coming too, barely catching himself with a hand on the armrest of the throne.

Todoroki's chest heaves. Midoriya's chest heaves. They hold eye contact as they catch their breath and then Todoroki leans forward to kiss him chastely, lips lingering against Midoriya's.

Midoriya smiles. “Do you think they heard us?”

“I think…” Todoroki starts. “I think I would give up a kingdom for you.”
“You don’t have to,” Midoriya says. “I’m with you.”

Todoroki lets his head fall back, and he smiles languidly at Midoriya.

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“Hmm,” Todoroki says. “I’m getting scruffy.”

Midoriya looks up from where he’s popping grapes into his mouth like candy and reading the report Yaoyorozu had given him. “What was that?” he asks around a mouthful of grapes.

“Swallow before you speak,” Todoroki chides. “I said, I’m getting scruffy.”

Come to think of it, he had been a little scratchy last time they kissed. Midoriya didn’t really mind. “You could grow it out.”

“And be the spitting image of my father? With my round face? Not a chance.” Todoroki scowls in the mirror and runs a hand over his chin. “Besides…only half will grow in with color, anyway.”

Midoriya's eyes bug out. He hadn’t thought about it, really, but Todoroki was bi-colored after all. The thought of him with a half-and-half beard...

Midoriya does an awful job covering up his wheeze. “No…please, you have to…”

Todoroki throws a comb at him. “You’re terrible.”

“But it would be so f—”

“Here,” Todoroki says, handing him a straight-edge razor. “You do it.”

Midoriya stops laughing. He accepts the razor and tilts his head. “You sure? I could end up nicking you, or…” Todoroki sits beside him on the bed, carrying with him a jar of cream and a bowl of water with a towel on his arm. He tilts his head back, baring his neck.

“Okay,” Midoriya says, swallowing.

He dabs some of the cream on his hands and rubs it along the underside of his jaw, along the lines of his face, and then just above, covering and the scruff and even dabbing a little over his lip. He washes his hands in the bowl and then picks up the razor.

Midoriya leans in, scraping the keen edge of the blade gently across Todoroki's skin. Todoroki tilts his head accordingly to help Midoriya reach all of his skin. The sound of the razor on skin is rhythmic and almost comforting. Todoroki closes his eyes.

He doesn’t mean to, but once he does, the thought grips Midoriya his hold on the razor wobbles. Midoriya, for all his playing at love and affection and being good for Todoroki, is a spy. He’s not there to harm Todoroki, but if he was…

Midoriya imagines gripping the handle of the razor tight and twisting the blade, in one fluid motion slicing through Todoroki's throat, cutting off any yell for help and spattering Midoriya with his blood. Todoroki would crumple before him, pumping blood from the wound in his neck while his body spasmed once or twice in a pitiful show of death throes. Midoriya would get away with it,
too. He’d be on a horse and a day’s ride to the border by the time anyone noticed. The blood would be sticky and congealed. And Todoroki’s eyes would be gone, far off and still, snapped open in a picture of shock and betrayal…

Midoriya lowers his hand. “I can’t.”

Todoroki takes Midoriya's hand, lifts it to his chin. “You can,” he says. “I know what you saw. But I know you. You will never betray me.”

Midoriya's heart thuds. Every beat says, I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t.

Midoriya takes a breath and slides the razor along Todoroki’s chin, shaving away both cream and hair with steady strokes. He’s extra careful when he gets to beneath Todoroki’s cheeks and over his lip. He leans in close to Todoroki, close enough to feel his even exhales through his nose. When he’s done, he takes a towel, dips it in the water bowl, and wipes the excess cream off of Todoroki's face.

“Better?” Midoriya asks, quiet.

“You tell me,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya reaches up to Todoroki, fingers lighting on the angles of his face. He skims just the pads of his fingers over Todoroki's newly shaved skin. It’s as smooth and soft as the shape of Todoroki's face. He’s done a good job cleaning up his prince. Midoriya's fingers fan out across Todoroki's jaw and his thumbs press against Todoroki's bottom lip. Midoriya leans in and kisses him over his thumbs, light but lingering.

When he retreats, he meets Todoroki's eyes. “Is it wise to trust me so much? I’m still foreign.”

“You’re in love with me,” Todoroki says.

Midoriya's heart beats harder. I am, I am, I am.

“I trust your love,” Todoroki says. “I won’t even bother entertaining the thought that you’re lying to me. I can’t fathom it. And because I love you and am loved in return, I will put everything on the line for you.”

He presses their foreheads together. “It would be an honor to be betrayed by you, Deku.”

Midoriya shudders. The reaction is too close to the surface, too close to the truth, but the words are spilling out before he can stop them. “I think,” he says, “I think if I were to betray you, part of me would die as well. I think even if I were a villain…this love is stronger than my betrayal. We are one, Todoroki Shouto.”

“We are one,” Todoroki repeats.

It’s not a lie, Midoriya thinks. There is no future I can envision that does not have me at your side. Even if…if it takes switching loyalties…

Midoriya smiles. The idea that springs to his mind is a forbidden one. It’s not one that All Might would approve, nor would anyone who had their heads screwed on right. But it was one Todoroki would like.

“Shouto,” Midoriya asks, “do you have any hair ties with gemstones? A red and a green?”
Todoroki cocks his head to the side but stands, fishing around in his boxes before returning with two cords, one with a jade stone and one with a garnet stone attached to the cord. Midoriya takes them and nods. “These will do.”

“What will they do, pray tell?”

Midoriya motions for him to turn around. He starts from the top of Todoroki’s head, working his way down, braiding a thin cord of red hair behind his ear. “Do you know of Yuuein marriage traditions?”

“Not particularly,” Todoroki says. “It’s commonplace for Endeavorans to gift their chosen spouse with enough gifts to bankrupt them; I would imagine Yuueins present each other with gifts as well.”

“In a way,” Midoriya says. “Although not anything like you rich folk here.”

He brushes a strand of hair to the side. “In Yuuei, when one wants to propose, they travel to a mine, usually of gemstones, to find their gift. Most mine owners only require a small fee for people to find their gemstones. You look for a small stone—just a pebble—that reminds you of your significant other. Once you’ve found it, you clean the stone and tumble it until smooth.”

“And you give them a pebble.”

Midoriya smacks him on the shoulder. “I’m not done, dammit. Then, you take the stone to a jeweler and get it attached to a hair tie. Finally, the gift is presented to your significant other. If they return your feelings, they will go out and repeat the process, then present you with a hair tie of your own. If not, they will present you with only a stone. Naturally, the waiting process is a nerve-wracking one.”

“That’s more effort than I was expecting,” Todoroki says. “So every married person has a special hair tie?”

“Occasionally an earring, if their hair isn’t long enough,” Midoriya says. He finishes the braid. “But the most important custom is that after exchanging ties, the partners will sit together and braid their hair in the same place before tying the end with that hair tie.”

Todoroki goes still. Midoriya wraps the tie tightly around the braid until it’s just the gold of the cord and the jade stone winking at him.

“That’s a promise,” Midoriya says. “It’s impossible, but it’s a promise.”

Todoroki fingers the braid. “It will fall out, eventually,” he says.

“Then, this is—” Todoroki says. “This is…”

“A promise,” Midoriya says. “It’s impossible, but it’s a promise.”


“That’s right,” Midoriya says. “But we aren’t in Yuuei now, are we? This is my Endeavoran twist on a Yuuein tradition. If you come—” He catches himself. If you come to Yuuei, we can do it for real. Midoriya's smile goes brittle. There’s an unreality, if he’s ever heard of one.
“If I come…” Todoroki says.

Midoriya ties the end of his braid. “I was going to say, ‘if you come to Yuuei.’ But that’s foolishness on my part.”

Todoroki is quiet for a moment. “When all of this is over,” he says, “I would like to come to know Yuuei.”

“I would like you to, too,” Midoriya says.

“Then it’s settled,” Todoroki says. “We’ll take a break, spend a few months, maybe half a year in Yuuei. Perhaps we may even be on truly good terms, not this temporary ceasefire.”

As if, Midoriya thinks. You have a kingdom to rule over. You won’t have time for me. Instead, he says, “I’d like that.” Even if it’s just a week, he’d like to show Todoroki how beautiful his kingdom was.

Todoroki fingers the cord. “I like it,” he says. “It will remind me of you, when father has me doing god knows what.”

Midoriya's heart sinks. With two days left until Todoroki would be taken from him, Midoriya had forgotten that the training camps even existed.

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They’re in the gardens the next day, when Yaoyorozu finds them. Todoroki, tired of being cooped up in his bedchambers and shackled with work from his father, had insisted on a brief walk around his mother’s gardens, Midoriya naturally in tow. They’re chatting about nothing in particular, hunting tactics specifically, when Yaoyorozu cuts across the gardens in full, clanking armor, to get to Todoroki.

She’s out of breath and wild-eyed when she reaches them.

“Momo,” Todoroki says, blinking. “What’s wrong?”

She allows for a few more pants. “It’s about the training camp,” she says.

Todoroki narrows his eyes. “If father wants—”

“No, Shouto, you idiot—” Yaoyorozu breaks off to pant and Midoriya's eyes widen at the name drop. “The training camp—the matter you had me look into—I have a lead.”

Todoroki's eyes shoot towards their surroundings, scanning for threats. He takes Yaoyorozu by the arm and pulls her further along, Midoriya having to jog to keep up with them. When they’re far enough into the gardens that Midoriya can’t see anyone else, Todoroki leans in close to her. “Tell me.”

Yaoyorozu’s eyes dart to Midoriya and he flinches, as if hit. “I don’t know—”

“Dammit, Momo!” Todoroki says. “You know he’s safe. Stop stalling and tell me.”

“Alright,” Yaoyorozu says. “One of my spies on the outside just happened to come along a certain
village.”

With one day until Todoroki's departure, Yaoyorozu reshapes the world in which Todoroki and Midoriya are living.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: the plot thickens (FINALLY)
The steady drumbeat of hooves against the ground. The slightest corrections made with the reins. The rhythmic rocking of the horse’s body beneath him as she gallops, dodging rocks and fallen branches with ease. The sensation of muscles held tight for too long and the sound of his heartbeat about his ears. This is all Midoriya has known for the past couple hours.

Ahead of him, Yaoyorozu rides true, taking the lead and pointing them in the direction of their destination. Her hair is tied back tight and streams behind her; she does not spare Midoriya even a passing glance backwards. That’s fine by him. Grim silence is all he can manage as well.

Nothing about this mission is ideal—they’re riding too fast and packed too light. They’ve only got the most basic provision for soldiers, three days’ worth of food and water, and just enough silver to get them by without being robbed. Even then, the packs weigh heavy on their horses. Midoriya's mare is starting to sweat hard and they’re nowhere near the village. Worse, they’re riding off the beaten track, having to work their way around cliffs and wading through streams. Although the path is shorter, it’s more treacherous and slows them down.

Time, Midoriya thinks. We need more time.

He can hear his horse’s breaths getting labored and finally, Yaoyorozu slows to a trot, letting Midoriya pull alongside her.

“How far?” he asks.

Yaoyorozu gnaws at her thumb through a glove. “If we push, we can make it just before nightfall. But it’s going to take a toll on our horses.”

“No good,” Midoriya says. “That’ll look too suspicious.”

Yaoyorozu sinks her teeth into her finger. “If I had known even a day earlier—”

“There’s no use worrying about that now,” Midoriya says. “The situation’s not ideal, but even if we get there just after nightfall, we’ll lower our chances of being ambushed and it won’t look suspicious when we ask for an inn. We won’t be as recognizable, either.”

“Recognizable,” Yaoyorozu echoes. “Oh gods, I’m recognizable. How will we ask around if—”

“You stick to the outskirts, I’ll ask around the village center,” Midoriya says. “I’ve already fabricated a story about passing through to visit family. It’ll look less suspicious if the husband is asking around for food and trawling the bar. You’ll fit in better asking the farmers and textile workers. It’s okay. We won’t look out of place.”
“We have horses,” Yaoyorozu says. “Can’t get much more suspicious than that.”

And their clothes were too clean, too expensive. Midoriya had meant to ease Yaoyorozu’s mind but of course she wasn’t stupid. They were going to stick out like sore thumbs with their too-formal speech and too-fancy clothes. The best they could hope for was to dirty their clothes a little and have Midoriya do most of the talking. And if the king had the village under his thumb…

Midoriya wasn’t so important that he couldn’t be slaughtered on the spot, especially given King Enji’s inclinations towards him with recent developments in the sleeping-with-your-son arena.

No, forget Midoriya's life—if they were caught in the east when they were supposed to be in the north, all the red flags in the king’s mind would rise. Todoroki would be stripped of his guard, and by extension, his eyes and ears around Endeavor, the appendages that did his bidding while he acted as mastermind in the game of chess that was the covert coup d'état. To lose his guard would be like leashing Todoroki, something the king would take great pleasure in doing.

They couldn’t get caught.

Midoriya bites his thumb. “Do you know how many men?”

Yaoyorozu shakes her head. “The report said only a handful of soldiers, but even the ones my men saw were being extremely careful. No phoenix insignias, no banners, nothing. It was their armor and speech that gave them away, but they weren’t patrolling or stationed anywhere. He’s being unusually crafty.”

“You’d think the king would have nothing to hide,” Midoriya mutters.

“When you raise a son as crafty as you, I suppose it’s only natural to take such precautions,” Yaoyorozu says. “Still, there is every possibility that he knows about my men and set this up to draw us in and catch Todoroki in the act. You are prepared, right?”

Midoriya nods tightly. The timing was too convenient. Yaoyorozu finding the lead only a day before Todoroki was to go away to his special training camp? It smelled like King Enji. It smelled like a play he would make, bored of Todoroki’s compliance, to see how Todoroki would act if given a hint to the secret of the training camps. King Enji could be toying them, like a tiger with a dormouse. And if so, he and Yaoyorozu were riding breakneck straight into a trap.

“Deku,” Yaoyorozu says, and her tone makes Midoriya turn. Her eyes are downcast and she’s chewing on her lip. When she looks up, Midoriya already knows what she’s going to say before she says it. “In the event that this is a trap, in the event that we will be captured—”

“I know,” Midoriya says. “I knew what the stakes were when I agreed to accompany you.”

“No, listen,” Yaoyorozu says. “I can’t ask you to do that. Even if you are part of his household, you are Yuuein. This isn’t your fight. You can run—”

“Forgive me for saying so, Yaoyorozu-san, but you insult me,” Midoriya says. “I have been wholly his for months now. Any doubts I had have fled me. I will die for him, without hesitation.”

“I am sorry,” she says.

“What for?” Midoriya asks.

“This love of yours,” she says. “From a tree that bloomed so beautifully, it appears it only bears poison fruit. That you would be so hurt and punished just because you love him—”
“Stop,” Midoriya says. “It’s not your fault, nor his. It’s not even the king’s fault. It’s my own doing; I knew it was an impossible match and yet I still pursued him and courted him and I’m the reason he may be made to suffer. It’s only right that I do what I can to make amends for my harms.”

“Deku…”

“Don’t pity me. I should’ve known better. This is the price I pay, and I’m satisfied with it.”

He’s not lying. From the day he was taken into All Might’s service, he was constantly reminded that there would be attempts on All Might’s life and that he could be part of the collateral. As he got older, he was expected to be part of the collateral. When all the soldiers failed, it was Midoriya who was supposed to be the final barrier between an assassin and the life of his king. Even if he couldn’t do much against a sword or a hoard of men, he was to buy enough time for All Might to escape, for the greater good.

Midoriya’s mother hated that part of his work and met with him often for lunch, checking in on his health and All Might’s health and there haven’t been any attempts on his life recently, right? As a librarian, she was far from any action that might be taken to harm either her son or her king.

But Midoriya never minded the danger. It wasn’t that he particularly desired to die or that he didn’t fear death—Midoriya had woken up in a cold sweat after dreaming of being tortured for information. He could handle pain well but the fear of emptiness and a permanent end, and the kind of pain it would take to kill him kept the fear of death alive and kicking in Midoriya’s heart. It was more that his love for All Might outweighed his fear, and as such he could stomach standing up and taking the killing blow. For his mentor and idol, anything. That same selfless love was what he felt riding into the jaws of death for Todoroki. If it would protect his prince, Midoriya would slice his throat wide open before he gave away a whisper of their plans.

“Don’t do anything…uncharacteristically stupid, or characteristically brave, alright?”

Except he wasn’t in love with All Might. And All Might wasn’t in love with him.

Todoroki knew. Yaoyorozu never said “this could be a trap.” She never said “this may be the last time you see your two best friends.” But Todoroki knew.

“Deku will accompany you,” Todoroki said, as soon as Yaoyorozu told them about the sighting in the village. “You must leave at once.” But even then, he cast his eyes to the side, mouth turned down.

He knew when they saddled up their horses, checking the stirrups of Midoriya’s mare and the contents of the packs on his own, the stablehands hovering at the edges of the stall. All his movements had a restless energy about them, something Midoriya would call nerves if Todoroki had the capability to be nervous. He frowned, arms crossed, as the mare was led out of the stable and as Midoriya mounted her.

And then, he was at Midoriya’s side. “Hey,” he said, shifting in place. “Fight like an Endeavoran, remember.”

Midoriya had frowned. “Thought you said there’d be no fighting? Simple sight-seeing trip, that’s all.” He cast a glance back at the stablehands.

“Just put your back into the swing,” Todoroki said, rolling his eyes. “Enemies won’t go easy on you like I did.”
“Oh, that was you going easy? I thought I saw a bit more perspiration than one might when ‘going easy.’”

“And curb that tongue of yours. I tolerate talking back but they won’t.”

“And here I thought you liked that tongue of mine.”

“You,” Todoroki scolded, hand warm on Midoriya’s thigh. The stablehands were definitely looking at them then, but Midoriya didn’t care. He smiled and placed a hand on top of Todoroki’s.

“Hey,” he said. “It’ll be okay, yeah?”

“Don’t do anything…uncharacteristically stupid, or characteristically brave, alright?” Todoroki said, small smile falling away. “The most important thing is that you return safe.” He turned to Yaoyorozu. “Take care of my silvertongue, won’t you, Momo?”

“With my life,” Yaoyorozu swore.

“And you,” Todoroki said, patting Midoriya’s thigh. “That’s my best friend you’re riding out with. She can take care of herself, but she doesn’t have me watching her back. Cover her for me.”

“I don’t need a palace servant keeping my back warm,” Yaoyorozu said, walking her horse over to them.

“Cruel, Yaoyorozu-san,” Midoriya said, clutching his chest. “You’ve seen me swing a blade.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I’ve seen you swing a blade half the length of mine and my men’s. You’ll do well as bait, manservant.”

Midoriya grinned. “Sounds like we’ll have to do some sparring in our free time. I’d like the chance to make you eat your words.”

“Oh, just try me,” Yaoyorozu said, returning the smile.

“Alright, this sounds like banter for the road,” Todoroki said, stepping back. “Get out of here.” Yaoyorozu saluted him, followed by Midoriya. She headed out of the palace grounds, but Midoriya paused.

“We’ll come back,” Midoriya said. “We’ll definitely come back.”

Todoroki nodded, but his accompanying smile didn’t reach his eyes.

And then Midoriya had pressed the fingers of his right hand to his lips and then over his heart, locking eyes with Todoroki. It wasn’t the kiss goodbye that they should’ve had, but Todoroki understood. He made the responding gesture, drawing a circle over his heart twice. Midoriya kept his smile bright, beaming back at Todoroki and catching up to Yaoyorozu, laughing and chatting as they headed north until they were well outside the outskirts of the city and their faces hardened, turning east and driving their mounts hard.

Midoriya had to keep up the façade of ‘everything is okay’ because the other choice was unthinkable. He had to convince Todoroki that there would be no knife for him to fall on, and if there was, only Midoriya should fall, because if Midoriya showed even an ounce of hesitation, and inkling of fear, a certainty of danger, then Todoroki would do what he had to in order to jump on that knife before it reached Midoriya’s heart. Requited love was a two-way street, after all.
I’m sorry, Midoriya thinks. I’m sorry, I did this to you. It’s my fault that your flawless plan has fractured at the edges.

If he’d just stuck to the original fucking plan, Todoroki would be able to see the playing field clearly. He could move his pawns easily, even if that meant sacrificing them. He would have been able to see the winning strategy through his father’s web of deception. But now he’s placed value on a rook that should’ve meant nothing. His field of vision is blurred by caring and by love. He’s not just protecting himself, the king, he’s also trying to keep his prize rook out of danger. And it was hard enough just protecting the one.

Midoriya was a sore thumb, a moving target, and Todoroki’s weakest point. All King Enji had to do was put some pressure on Midoriya, squeeze him by the neck enough for him to choke, and Todoroki would yield. He would come to Midoriya’s side the moment Midoriya showed a sign of distress or injury. Of course, Midoriya hadn’t told Yaoyorozu this, nor did he believe Todoroki would admit to it out loud, or maybe even to himself. But Midoriya has seen Todoroki’s eyes when they make love, and when they wake up tangled in each other, and when he thinks Midoriya isn’t looking.

Midoriya knows Todoroki would give up a kingdom for him, because Midoriya is willing to give up a kingdom for Todoroki.

It’s my fault, so I’ll fix it, Midoriya thinks.

They’d left under the guise of some out-of-palace training, just the two of them. They were a day ahead of the party heading to the training grounds, and the party would take two days to reach the village, as they had more guards and brought all the comforts of home in wagons and on horseback. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu had two days to figure out the secret of the training sessions and Todoroki’s memory loss. It was far too risky for them to stay around while the king and the rest of his men were present. The probability of being caught was also much higher.

I’ll fix it, Midoriya thinks. I’ll save you, so just hold on.

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Midoriya and Yaoyorozu approach the edge of the village an hour after night has fallen. Their horses are already slowed from riding in the dark, having to pick through the undergrowth by moonlight. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu slow to a stop and dismount. Midoriya motions for Yaoyorozu to wait and creeps to the edge of the tree line, concealed by darkness.

The village is lit up by lanterns hanging outside shops and candles and fireplaces inside. There aren’t many people in the streets, but Midoriya hears laughter between a couple young men and the hushed voice of a mother scolding her child. He keeps to the shadows as he sneaks into the town. He walks up one street and down another, but there’s no sign of a guard waiting to ambush them. Of course, that would be too straightforward of the king, but everyone Midoriya passes appears to be normal village folk, none with the muscular builds of soldiers. Midoriya retreats back into the forest after checking to make sure no one sees him leave.

“What’s it look like?” Yaoyorozu asks when he returns.

“Clear,” Midoriya says. “Clear enough that I want to make sure this is the right village.”
“It’s the one,” Yaoyorozu assures him. “I followed the trail and landmarks my men left me. There’s really no guard? Not even a night watchman?”

Midoriya shakes his head. “You know that doesn’t mean anything, though.”

“No,” Yaoyorozu agrees. “You know our cover, right?”

Midoriya nods.


They pull lanterns from their packs and light them. They’re sweaty from the ride, but not nearly dirty enough. Midoriya pours some of his water skin into the dirt and then picks up the mud and rubs it over both of their clothes. He loosens the ties on their clothing and kicks mud over their boots. As an extra touch, he rubs just a smear of dirt under Yaoyorozu’s eye and a bit to his chin. It wasn’t the best job he’d ever done, but they at least looked the part, tired from riding all day and a bit more on the bedraggled side despite their nicer clothing. Midoriya takes a swig of his water skin, offers Yaoyorozu a hopeful smile, and leads the way out of the forest.

This time, they do attract the attention of the villagers. A little village like this probably didn’t attract many visitors, and mainly from adjacent towns. Riders had to be exceedingly rare, aside from their palace guests. They get looks and second glances, but none of the looks show hostility or expectation like Midoriya might have expected from a village under King Enji’s control. The stares are curious and fleeting, taking a moment to assess the attire and the horses, then moving along with their night.

Midoriya breathes a sigh of relief. Not an immediate ambush, then. Or maybe their disguises were working? Certainly no one was screaming for the soldiers.

Their first stop of the night is the stables at the outskirts of the village. The inn would have a stable for the horses, as would wealthier private residences, but the first was a dead giveaway and the second was a possible choice for the soldiers’ horses. It was unusual but not unheard of for visitors to shack their horses up in the village stables. Midoriya hands off the reins to Yaoyorozu and knocks on the stablemaster’s door.

A wiry middle-aged man with a long goatee opens the door. He looks from Midoriya to Yaoyorozu and the horses she’s patting. “Yes?” he says.

Midoriya offers up his best sheepish smile. “I’m terribly sorry for the intrusion this late. My wife and I just got into town and we were wondering if you housed visitors’ as well as residents’?”

The stablemaster tugs on his goatee. “Well… I suppose we have a couple stalls free, but the inn in town has a stable as well, and I’m sure they’ll sell you stalls for a cheaper price than I will.”

“Ah, yes, we noticed but…” Midoriya tugs at the hair on the back of his neck. “My mare can get flighty if she’s in the center of town. People and noises, y’know? We thought it might be worth a shot to see if you had a quieter stall for her. It’s been a long day of riding and—” Midoriya glances back at Yaoyorozu and the horses. “We won’t be staying long and I wanted her to rest up. If it’s too much hassle for you though, I understand.”

“No, no,” he says. “I’ve got a young one myself who gets like that. You can take the two stalls at the back—should be quiet. Pay me before you leave.”

“Thank you,” Midoriya says, very nearly bowing out of habit and instead turning it into a slight dip of the head.
He takes his mare and they lead the horses into the stable. There’re two stable boys sleeping in the hay along the aisle, snuggled up together. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu walk carefully past them—the less people who saw them, the better off they would be. Once they have the horses settled, they remove their riding equipment and give their horses a quick brush down, setting their tack aside in the tack room adjacent to the stable in the back, covering it with hay. Royal saddles and bridles shouldn’t be immediately noticeable upon first glance, but careful inspection would make the make obvious. Then Midoriya and Yaoyorozu pull their packs together and set off for town.

The inn is easy to locate as it neighbors the bar in the village, giving weary travelers the chance to unwind after a long day. Midoriya is sorely tempted to join the mass of people gathered around the entrance, music coming from inside, but they stood out enough without going out of their way to draw attention to themselves. Besides, while a quick scan of the crowd in the street did not reveal any soldierly types, there was still the possibility that they lingered inside. Midoriya would bet that the king’s men spent their evenings intoxicated if not on watch.

He and Yaoyorozu approach from the other end of the street, not chancing a walk past the bar. Again, they draw glances from a couple men smoking in a doorway and some girls in patchy, patterned dresses, but their eyes are on them and away, same as any passing visitors. Midoriya pays for a room for two nights and shepherds Yaoyorozu up the stairs. The inn is quiet, relatively insulated from the noise on the street. Once they’re shut and locked into their room, they can breathe easy again.

“Our disguises are working,” Midoriya says.

“You don’t know that,” Yaoyorozu says. “Not yet. Tomorrow will be the real tell.”

“Yeah?” Midoriya says.

“If we’re not arrested or killed in our sleep, we’ve at least passed as not immediate threats,” Yaoyorozu says. “Tomorrow they’ll question us—suspicious or not. That’s just how it is in these little villages; I’ve seen it many times when I’ve traveled. It’s what they make of this questioning that determines what their final verdict is.” She sheds her heavier coat and pulls back the covers on the bed. “So I guess what I’m saying is, don’t fuck up.”


“You want to take first watch? You look pretty alert.”

Midoriya nods. “I want to scan the streets, see if I see anyone like the soldiers your men were talking about. I’ll wake you when I start to nod off.”

Yaoyorozu nods and pulls off her boots, falling into bed in her riding clothes. Midoriya can’t even judge her. He’s bone-tired physically, but mentally wired. He’s reminded of when he first met Todoroki, all jittery nerves and stumbled sentences. Except back then, there wasn’t much on the line and little chance of discovery. This time, he had Todoroki and Yaoyorozu’s safety riding on their ability to safely infiltrate the village, with a single moment of recognition marking them as enemies.

Midoriya tries not to dwell too much on that fact as he watches, the dimness of the room obscuring him from view. He watches the usual drunken antics: flirting, fighting, stumbling. Young men laugh and hang off each other, watching girls pass by. The girls blow kisses at the men and hold hands as they pass. A group of older men lean against the walls of the neighboring buildings and lean in to light each other’s pipes. Midoriya nearly misses identifying the soldiers.
They blend in well with the villagers. They wear much more common clothing, less of a stand out
Yaoyorozu’s and Midoriya’s. They mingle with other men and whistle at girls, laughing when
they’re ignored. They aren’t even carrying the nice swords Midoriya was expecting. Those swords
have to be locally made—they’re not nearly as clean and sharp as the swords the Kings’ Guard
carry. He can only tell that they’re different from the other villagers by their builds—made for
fighting—and the crispness of their voices, even slurring. Against the choppy accent of the
villagers, it’s obvious that those men aren’t from around the area. Midoriya counts five, and
they’re just the ones he can see wandering in the streets.

His heart sinks.

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Midoriya is woken the next morning by Yaoyorozu’s hand shaking his shoulder and not a knife to
his throat, so he counts that as a win.

“Come on,” Yaoyorozu says. “We’ve made it past the first checkpoint; let’s finish the job.”

Midoriya sits up, scrubbing his hand across his face. “Nothing unusual? That was a long shift you
took.”

“I’m used to stakeouts, manservant,” Yaoyorozu says, the corner of her mouth turning up. “Might
as well let the softie get his rest.”

“I’ll show you softie,” Midoriya mutters, stifling a yawn.

“Nothing to report,” Yaoyorozu says. “The streets were empty by the time you woke me and I saw
nothing but a couple of cats stir until just before dawn.”

“Well,” Midoriya says, clapping his hands together. “It’s time for the next part of our plan, then.”

Yaoyorozu jerks her thumb over her shoulder. “Saw some carts of fruit being towed to the north, if
you want to head that way. I’m not sure where textiles and tack are sold, but my guess is back
towards the stables. I’ll poke around the fringes if you take the center.”

Midoriya nods. “Sounds good. I’ll see if I can get a little bit of everything and listen around.
What’re your thoughts on the bar tonight?”

Yaoyorozu scrunches up her face. Midoriya laughs and nods. “Yeah, me too. If some of your men
were with us, I’d say send them, but…frankly, you and I are too noticeable. Watch your back,
okay?”

“If I’m honest,” Yaoyorozu says. “I’m not entirely comfortable with splitting up. Seems like we’re
just making ourselves easier to pick off. And, as much as I tease you, the reality is that you haven’t
had the extensive combat training I have. If they come for you…”

“Don’t,” Midoriya says, holding up a hand. “It’s not worth contemplating. If we start thinking like
that, we’ll freeze up and be unable to move. Let’s just look around and report back as soon as we
get a lead.”

Yaoyorozu points a knowing finger at him. “That applies to you, too. Don’t be a hero. You see
something worth checking out, you fall back before someone notices you paying attention. We can do our snooping after night falls.”

“Got it,” Midoriya says. “I’ll see you back here before the sun sets.”

They get dressed and make their way out of the inn, Midoriya only pausing to tug Yaoyorozu’s shirt out a bit and ruffle her hair, making her look less like a perfect soldier even though she carried herself with too straight a back to be common. Midoriya blends in easier, his curls already an unkempt mess and a more natural slope to his shoulders. He offers the innkeeper a nod and a half-smile, then stands on his tip-toes to give Yaoyorozu a kiss on the cheek before they head their separate ways.

The main street of the village is filled with people now that the sun is up. Most are carrying something—bales of hay or sacks of grain propped up on the shoulders of men or water buckets clutched in the hands of women. There’s the occasional cart of vegetables or rice or fabric that passes by Midoriya. A little boy chases a speckled chicken across the road with outstretched hands. And even though this is a mission, even though this is a dangerous place to be, Midoriya feels comfortable. This reminds him of home and the town where he grew up. Their streets were cobbled and the architecture is different from Endeavor, but the feel of everyday people in clothing with holes or rips, never completely clean, is familiar. Midoriya finds himself smiling and even offering up a soft whistle as he heads towards the more congested center of the village, where the market would be.

This, too, is not at all unlike Yuuei. Vendors yell over each other in an attempt to sell their products. The square at the center of the village is filled with customers carrying bags or carting wagons behind them, bickering with their neighbors over the price of the products. Midoriya passes over the soft berries that would be crushed in a sack and instead goes for the harder fruits: plums that aren’t too soft, nectarines, and a pear. Midoriya tosses the pear in his hand and smiles. He’d give anything for an orange or a kiwi, like they had in the more tropical climate of his homeland, but he hadn’t seen pears for a while.

“Don’t play with it unless you’re gonna buy it,” the vendor snaps at him.

“How much?” Midoriya asks.

“Five coppers,” she grunts.

Midoriya puts the pear back, nearly dropping it with his speed. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he mutters. “I wouldn’t spend more than three coppers on a single pear.”

“Yeah, well these ain’t the rich lands where you’re from, stranger,” she says. “Here, you pay for the good stuff.”

Stunned, Midoriya nearly forgets to pay for the rest of the fruit. His heart pounds as he pulls out a silver and a couple coppers for the fruit, then dips his head and vanishes from the vendor’s sight.

No, he can’t freak out like that. He and Yaoyorozu already knew they looked like strangers. It wasn’t surprising that people would know. Taking off like that would only make him seem more suspicious. Midoriya takes a few grounding breaths and heads towards a vegetable stand, this time taking the time to ask about the cost of the leeks and the rhubarb before throwing it into his bag.

Midoriya keeps an eye out for anything that could count as a lead, but the village market is wonderfully normal. The soldiers aren’t out and about—nursing headaches from the previous night
or more likely paying for their meals to be cooked rather than buying the ingredients themselves. Midoriya supposes some great conspiracy with the king wouldn’t be hidden in plain sight, but the surroundings really do have nothing but a plain, villager feel to them that makes Midoriya want to question if this really is the place.

He makes his way past the bass and catfish seller, heroically avoiding making a face at the thought of freshwater fish and instead eyeing up the meat the butcher has strung up. He and Yaoyorozu didn’t have the means to cook up any meat dishes, but it never hurt to ask if they had any prepared meats.

“Excuse me,” Midoriya asks. “Do you have any dried venison?”

The girl working behind the counter, shoulder-length hair pulled back by a bandana glances over her shoulder and offers Midoriya a smile. “Dried, salted, and ready to go. We even have some peppered strips if you have a pretty penny to spend—out-of-towner.”

Midoriya wilts. “It’s really that obvious, huh?”

“Ha!” she says, slamming a rather frightening knife down on the slab of pink meat she’s working on and cleaving away a section of the flesh in one go. “Knew it from the moment you opened your mouth. ‘Round here, we just say, ‘Oi! Gimme one of the three-pounders, cunt!’—and that’s how it goes. Politeness ain’t really our style.”

“Ah,” Midoriya says. “No, I suppose that does make us rather different.”

“Anyway, it’s good to have visitors,” she says, hacking away at a bone. “Y’all tend to spend rather liberally and it’s good for our wallets.” She gestures with the bloodied knife to the corner of her stall. “Dried slabs are over there, by the way.”

“You get visitors often, then?” Midoriya asks, moving over to the cooked meats and scanning them.

“Not as often as we’d like,” she replies. “Still, the ones that come through have some shiny silvers with them and it keeps us living cozier than our neighbors. The bandits around here though? The worst. D’you walk it here?”

“Ah, no,” Midoriya says. “My family owns a couple horses.”

She whistles. “Oh, so you do have some money. Good—I’m gonna overcharge you, then. No hard feelings, newcomer.” She winks at him. “And don’t even think about going over to Jika’s stall. Everyone knows he lets rats crawl all over his food.”

Midoriya makes a face. “No, thanks.” He holds up a couple long strips of venison and a couple of rabbit. “I’ll take these.”

“Two silvers,” she says, then laughs at the face Midoriya makes. “That’s business, cutie. I took off the extra three coppers ‘cause I like ya.”

“Alright,” Midoriya says. He hands over the silvers from his pouch.

The butcher girl wipes her hands off on her smock and takes the coins from him. “So, while you’re here, mind telling me where you’re from, rich boy?”

“West of the capital,” Midoriya says, going over the cover story in his mind. “My wife and I are on our way to visit family in the northeast—her family—and we’re just stopping in for a couple
“You don’t know how disappointed I am to hear that you’re married,” the girl says. “Cutie like you, I could have a lot of fun with down at the bar.”

“Who’s to say with a few too many drinks you couldn’t?” Midoriya says.

She throws back her head to laugh. “Oh, don’t even. You’re a good boy; I can tell. Don’t tempt a maiden’s heart like that.” She tosses his silvers into the air. “So how does a western good boy like you meet what I assume to be a fine lady in the northeast? Woulda thought a little richie would be looking to marry someone with more wealth than a village girl. Capital girls not to your liking?”

“We met in the capital, actually,” Midoriya says. “She was working as a barmaid and I was some fool thinking I could strike big in that city of gold.” He smiles wistfully. “I guess in some ways I did.”

“Ew,” the girl says, pelting him with bits of gristle. “I didn’t ask for a romance now, did I?”

Midoriya blocks the assault, laughing. “You asked for a story!” He lowers his arms. “But come on—tell the truth. A talkative girl like yourself hasn’t found anyone to call her own yet? No passing city boys catch your eye?”

She makes a face. “Yeah, right. They’re all rude drunkards who pass by here. Not worth the money for a one night stand, let alone the type of guy I’d go back with. You’re the only decent one so far, cutie.”

“That’s a shame,” Midoriya says, sighing. “I’ve got a couple of buddies—soldier types—from the capital who go patrol around little villages like this. I can vouch for them; they’re good guys. I would’ve thought at least one passed through here.”

“Boy do I wish,” the butcher girl says. “I’m only working at my pop’s shop though—not like I’m down at the bar every night mingling with the newcomers. If you’re looking to catch up with one of your soldier pals, you’re better off asking our jack of all trades running around the village. He knows everything.”

“Oh?” Midoriya says. “Well, it’s not like it’s that big of a deal…I don’t know if they’ve been on patrol recently or anything…”

“Why not give it a shot?” the girl says. “You need feed for your horses, right?” Midoriya nods. “If I remember correctly, he’s working down by the river, packaging grain and feed. Tell him Orise sent you and you might even get a deal.”

“I—thank you,” Midoriya says. “It’s been great talking with you, Orise.”

She salutes him with two fingers. “I’m sure I’ll see you around, cutie.”

Midoriya grabs the meat and heads out of the market, to the east where the river ran. He makes a concentrated effort not to run. What luck! He runs into a friendly, chatty villager on his first pass of the town and even has the location of a man who could give him the lead he needs. Orise’s opinion of the soldiers also gives Midoriya hope—if she finds them distasteful, then maybe this village wasn’t as far under King Enji’s thumb as they had believed. All he had to do was keep up this role as a friend of a soldier and figure out where said soldier may have gone, and then he’d have a lead.

A lead. Midoriya slows, the crowd beginning to thin as he approaches the edge of the village. This
counted as a lead, didn’t it? Shouldn’t he wait for Yaoyorozu? But the lead wasn’t anything concrete. There was no way to question this man after dark, no, even if they did it would be tens of times more suspicious. He only had this chance to get a location out of this local know-it-all.

Of course, Midoriya recognized that this could be his downfall. He knew nothing about this man; it was very possible that he was in league with the king and any strange questions could provoke apprehension and set the man on guard at best, and incite him to attack at worst. He could be the bait of the trap, intended for Midoriya to find. But Midoriya couldn’t think of any better way to find out the secret of this village. Sneaking around and poking his nose into other people’s business would only make him seem stranger. At least here, he could act his way to victory.

And, if all else failed, he and Yaoyorozu could beat the answers out of him tomorrow.

Midoriya smiles grimly at the thought. It was a nice one, but impossible. Their mission was stealth —any beating of the king’s allies would have to wait until they were in the middle of a civil war and not on the verge of one.

The beaten dirt road tapers into a path lined with creeping grasses, little more than a trail to the edge of the river. Midoriya spies a building which had to be the packaging house, judging from the carts of grain and bundles of hay lying in and around carts in front and against the side of the building. Midoriya knocks on the door and then cracks it open, taking a look inside. There’s no one that he can see, light streaming in from a high window, highlighting dust motes in the air and piles of sacks and cords to tie up hay and grains.

Shrugging, Midoriya closes the door and walks around the side of the house, towards the river. “Hello?” he calls. “Anyone around?”

He hears the sound of splashing, and then a deep voice returns his call. “Down here! Riverbank!”

Midoriya walks to the edge of the river, edge dropping off about eight feet into a muddy riverbank and a flowing stream. He peeks over the edge and spies a man with his pants rolled up to the knee, rinsing off the outsides of some boots. His ankles are obscured by water and he has a sock draped over either shoulder. But most noticeable is his mane of dark, wild hair standing straight up in even more of a tangled mess than Midoriya’s curls.

“Hello?” Midoriya calls.

The man looks back and Midoriya faces a flat expression and deep circles under his eyes. The man is intimidating, to say the least, and Midoriya almost stutters out an apology and flees, but is stopped by the man smiling.

“Pardon me,” he says. “I’m just washing off my boots, I’ll be up in a moment.”

Midoriya nods and backs away. He looks around and spies a cart of grain in the process of being bagged. This had to be the guy, then. The jack of all trades, huh? He looked like he could do with a comb and a week’s worth of sleep.

“Ah, would you mind giving me a hand?” the man calls from behind Midoriya.

“Sure!” Midoriya calls, making his way to a more gently sloping part of the riverbank where the man was making his way upwards. The man places his boots and socks at the edge and holds out a hand. Midoriya leans forward, taking his hand. With his free hand, the man grasps Midoriya’s shoulder and Midoriya helps haul him upwards. The man gives both his hand and shoulder a brief squeeze before releasing him.
“Sorry ‘bout that,” he says. “Lost a boot in the mud and then…well you know how it goes.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t tumble in,” Midoriya says. He peers around. “No one else home?”

The man shakes his head, walking towards the stool he’d been packaging grain on and pulls up another one for Midoriya. “Nope, the master went into town for lunch. It’s just me.” He glances behind him. “What’d Orise tell you to get you to come all the way out here?”

“Ah,” Midoriya says, surprised. “You knew she sent me?”

The man smiles at him. “I know everything that goes on in this village. But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Midoriya laughs and scratches the back of his neck. “Orise may have mentioned it.”

The man gestures at the stool. “Have a seat. I don’t know what I can do for some palace folk, but I’ll do my best.”

Midoriya, for all his preparation and acting, is not prepared for the accusation and fumbles. “P-palace folk?”

The man raises an eyebrow, then looks Midoriya up and down. “You’re not from ‘round here.”

“Oh, my clothes,” Midoriya says, heart still racing. “I used to live in the capital, so my wife and I must have some unusual clothing, huh?” He laughs, too loud against his ears.

“Hmm,” the man says. He picks at a cord around his wrist, releasing part of it with a stone ring attached to it and starts spinning it mindlessly. “I suppose you sought me out because there’s something I can help you out with…?”

Midoriya sits down. “Ah, yes. Orise said you had horse feed?”

The man lets out a long exhale. “And she probably told you I would cut you a deal, too. Damn her. You won’t be offended if I charge you the standard price? Men have gotta make a living ‘round here.”

“That’s fine,” Midoriya says.

“Good man,” he says, standing up with a clap to Midoriya’s shoulder. He walks over to a stack of bags, still spinning the ring. It makes a pleasing swishing sound through the air.

“How many?” he asks.

“Two,” Midoriya says. “I’ll need two tomorrow too, but I don’t have any means to carry them.”

“I’ll help you,” the man says. “You’re in the village stable, aren’t you?”

“…Yes,” Midoriya says, bemused. “You really do know everything, don’t you?”

“That’s why they keep me around,” the man says, timbre of his voice changing for a moment. “Knowing Orise though, there’s more to this visit. You could’ve just bought feed from the stablemaster, couldn’t you?”

Midoriya crosses his legs and grins. “Why don’t you tell me?”

The man grins back at him. “Oh, now I understand. If you see Orise again, tell her I’m not so
desperate I need to rely on outsiders to get a good lay.”

“A good—what?” Midoriya sputters.

“Flirting will get you somewhere with her, so good thinking,” the man says, hauling two feed bags over his shoulder. “Unfortunately, I’m immune to the charms of boys trying to get a deal off me.” He pauses. “Although you are rather endearing.”

“I’m married,” Midoriya sputters.

“I don’t see a ring,” the man points out. “And you’re a schemer either way.” He drops the bags at Midoriya’s feet, then goes to pick up another two. “Anyway, tell me what you need to know. I’ll see what I can do.”

Midoriya clasps his hands in front of him. Here goes nothing. “Oh, it’s nothing much. Just came up in conversation with Orise, so don’t feel bad if you don’t know. I have a few soldier buddies from the capital that do patrol in this area and I was wondering if they might’ve passed through here. I’m on my way to see my wife’s family, but it would be nice to catch up if they were along the way.”

“Hmm, soldiers?” the man says. “I assume you mean ones from the palace.”

“Yes,” Midoriya says.

“Well,” the man says, hauling the feed onto his shoulder. “Can’t say we’ve had any pass through recently, hate to break it to you. Our bar is pretty popular, so we’re typically a pit stop for those patrolling. Got a physical description?”

Midoriya thinks of Jurou, King Enji’s Captain of the Guard. “Wiry and thin, middle-aged, dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, facial scarring? Not much of a smiler.”

“Oh, him,” the man says. “Yeah, he’s passed through here, although not recently.” He dumps the third and fourth sacks of feed at Midoriya’s feet.

“Any idea of his favorite haunts?” Midoriya asks. “Might run into someone who’s seen him. It’s been a while since we’ve gotten to catch up.”

“Yeah, no can do,” the man says, squeezing Midoriya’s shoulder again. “Sorry, he keeps to himself. Most of the soldiers go out drinking but he tends to stick to the inn. Not a particularly friendly guy.”

“Oh…well, thank you anyway,” Midoriya says. “I suppose I’ll have to hit the bar if I want to find out the patrol circuits, and I could use a pint myself, you know?”

“Don’t I know it,” the man says. “Still—I don’t think it’s very common for soldiers to socialize with the common folk, even in the capital. How’d you meet this friend of yours?”

Midoriya watches the ring spin round and round as he replies. “It’s nothing too special, really. I’m a blacksmith and I fixed up a sword of his a couple times. Had to ask him about the sharpness and the make, so we got to talking, and…”

What the hell is he saying? None of this is according to their cover. Yes, Midoriya was masquerading as a blacksmith, which would explain his and Yaoyorozu’s familiarity with blades and combat, should it come down to that, but there was nothing in their story about a soldier friend from the capital. If someone cross-checked his story with Yaoyorozu’s, they wouldn’t be the same.
Shit, and he’d already fabricated this story to two people. He needed to find an excuse to leave this guy’s company, and quick—

“That’s enough,” the man says, voice the same steady, soothing quality it had been as soon as he started chatting with Midoriya. He places his hand on Midoriya’s shoulder. “Sleep.” He squeezes Midoriya’s shoulder, and Midoriya’s vision fades to black.

----------------------------------------

When Midoriya wakes, it is to complete darkness.

He’s confused for a moment, blinking sleepily at the darkness. Hadn’t he been in town? He didn’t remember heading back to the inn. He shifts his arms and finds that he can’t raise them to wipe at his bleary eyes. He’s bound tightly, arms behind his back and wrists crossed. Still confused, Midoriya tugs at his wrists, trying to free them, not understanding why he was in the dark and why he was tied up.

Then, it hits him.

Midoriya’s blood runs cold. “Oh no,” he says aloud.

That man—he’d done something to Midoriya. Magic? He hadn’t hurt Midoriya at all, but the moment he touched his shoulder, Midoriya had passed out. Had Midoriya done something to rouse his suspicion? But he’d played his story so well…

No. There were bigger issues than a ‘why.’ For one, their worst fears had been realized. Yes, the village was a trap. That man, the grain packager, was the spring snapping shut around Midoriya’s neck. Of course the one who knew everything about the village would be in on the training sessions. He was probably paid to do this to anyone who came asking questions. And Midoriya had stumbled, foolish and fumbling, straight into the jaws of the beast.

Dammit. If he’d just stuck to the plan and met up with Yaoyorozu, he’d still be free. But no, he had to be the hero like Yaoyorozu had told him not to be and tried to figure out the mystery himself. The only good news was that Yaoyorozu wasn’t here with him, which meant she was free. Unless she was lying nearby, unconscious.

“Fuck,” Midoriya says, forcing himself up into a sitting position. His ankles are bound, too, but he’s not gagged, which probably means that there’s no way screaming is going to help him. Midoriya can’t see around him, but he’s probably in a shed of some kind, seeing as the floor beneath him is dirt and he can sit up fully without bumping his head like he might’ve in a box. Most likely, he was somewhere on the outskirts of town, since he can’t hear anything but crickets. Speaking of crickets, it had to be night if they were kicking up a fuss. That would explain the total darkness, no light even under a door.

Midoriya tries to get to his feet, but his ankles are bound so tightly together that he just ends up falling on his shoulder and writhing. One kick out lands solid against a wall and he gives up the pursuit of standing in favor of wiggling across the ground towards the wall. He inches his body awkwardly across the length of the wall before coming to a corner. The corner gives way to a wooden door and Midoriya can feel the slightest wisp of breeze from underneath the door. Definitely a shed, then. And his racket hadn’t provoked any sound or movement in the room, so it
was safe to assume he was alone.

Gods, he hoped Yaoyorouzu had the good sense to get away. If Midoriya was compromised then Yaoyorouzu was also done for, but she could get a head start, make for the palace to warn Todoroki and then gather supplies to flee the kingdom. They were traitors to the crown, after all. Yaoyorouzu could escape execution and flee west, cross the Urabitian mountains and make it to the capital. Jirou and Uraraka would take her in for sure, as soon as she explained.

There would only have to be one death. Midoriya swallows. He knew the king’s men. They were cruel, vulgar, thrived on inflicting pain, but they were imperfect. If Midoriya could anger one of them while being interrogated, really pluck at the right strings to thrust them into a blind rage, maybe one of them would behead him, or drive their sword through his stomach. He simply had to hold on until then. If he could keep quiet and provoke them to murder, Todoroki’s plans would stay safe.

Todoroki. Oh, Todoroki.

Midoriya squeezes his eyes shut, clenching his jaw tight enough that he can hear his teeth grind. No, he couldn’t think of Todoroki. Midoriya had to become steel—unflinching in the face of danger, accepting his death. He would be kept here until King Enji arrived, and then, he would be executed.

Until King Enji came. Until Shouto—no, no, Shouto would be here, he would see—

Was the king cruel enough to execute his son’s lover in front of him? What a stupid question. And Todoroki—beautiful, loyal, loving Todoroki—he would give it up to save Midoriya. He would reveal his plans, only to see Midoriya slain after showing his hand, because the king was looking for a reason to kill Midoriya and break his son’s will.

Midoriya could not wait to be fetched. He’s sure his belongings have all been removed, including the little knives he had been keeping on his person if suicide became the only option. There had to be some way to kill himself before the soldiers came for him. Or perhaps as soon as they came for him. He needed a plan of action.

Midoriya presses his back to the corner of the room, legs bunched and tensed, prepared for the door to open. But of course, it was the middle of the night and no one was going to come for him for at least another day or two. Instead, he wears himself out, running through hundreds of scenarios for the moment that door does open: anything from throwing himself on a sword to writhing uncontrollably and frothing at the mouth until someone pulled a knife on him.

He’s alone for what might’ve been three or seven hours, and then he hears footsteps. Midoriya tenses anew from where he’d slumped. There’s the light of a torch peeking in beneath the door. No one speaks, but Midoriya hears the scrape of a key in a lock, and then the jangle of a chain.

The door swings open and Midoriya braces his feet against the ground, prepared to jump up at his keeper the moment he came into view. Instead, a body is thrown into the shed, dropping like a sack of rice. This body is bound like Midoriya, but she has long hair falling in her face and a blindfold and a gag in her mouth that she resists with snarls through the cloth.

All the hope in Midoriya’s chest is extinguished the moment he sees Yaoyorouzu writhe against her bindings like he had when he first came to.

He hears footsteps again, and then his keeper comes into view, carrying the torch. Midoriya doesn’t look, he leaps straight at him, knocking him over with a yelp. The torch clatters to the
ground and Midoriya falls on the man, identifying a bare arm and sinking his teeth into the flesh as hard as he can.

The scream his keeper lets out isn’t exactly as manly as he expected, although the beating he receives across the face is enough to snap his head back and make him see stars. He’s kicked in the stomach and falls backwards, retching and breathing heavily.

Stumbling to her feet, Orise swears. “Son of a fuckin’ bitch! He *bit* me!” She clutches her wrist and examines the bite. Midoriya curls his lip, sneering. She has bitemark punctures in her arm, deep enough to draw blood. She holds up her arm to the light of the second torch her companion carries. “He *bit* me!” she repeats.

“Obviously,” the man from earlier says. “What did you expect a cornered animal to do?”

“So these are your true colors, huh?” Orise says, addressing Midoriya. “Not much of a cutie when you’ve got a nasty mouth on ya.”

Midoriya keeps his lips sealed.

“Don’t bother, Orise,” the man says. “They’re professionals. You won’t be able to sweet talk anything out of them.”

Yaoyorozu has gone still. Midoriya’s eyes flicker to her.

“That’s right,” the man says. “You both realize what a delicate position you’re in right now. If you understand, boy, move backwards and cooperate with us.”

“I could scream,” Midoriya says.

“You could,” the man agrees, but says nothing else. Gives away nothing about their location.

Given that Yaoyorozu is blindfolded and gagged, there’s a reason they don’t want either of them to know where they are. That could mean that they’re in a place where they could find help. It could even mean that they’re in the center of the place where the training sessions are held. But if they left Midoriya ungagged, it means that they really aren’t concerned about Midoriya shouting. The reason Yaoyorozu is gagged is probably because they didn’t want trouble transporting her.

Midoriya narrows his eyes, but moves backwards as ordered.

“That’s a good boy,” the man says. “Orise, shut the door.”

Orise closes the door behind them and the man sets the torches on the ground on either side of him and sits down, one knee propped up. Orise stands behind him, guarding the door.

*So they knew it was me from the very beginning,* Midoriya thinks. *They set the trap from the moment I entered the market.*

The man undoes the cord around his wrist and the tiny stone ring drops in front of him, dangling from his arm. Midoriya flinches.

“Ah, so you’re brighter than you look,” the man says. “You’ve already figured out what this does. Don’t worry about it, though—you’re already under my control until I choose to release you. I’m not here for you. Orise?”

She nods and moves around him, grabbing Midoriya by his bonds and dragging him backwards, to
the very back of the shed. Midoriya twists and turns, but he doesn’t see the cloth gag until it’s too late. He lets out a muffled shout, which is then smothered by the dirty cloth in his mouth. Orise ties it tightly and then moves towards Yaoyorozu.

Suddenly, Midoriya understands. He shouts against the gag, but his cries are meaningless and muffled. Orise pulls Yaoyorozu upright and removes her blindfold. Yaoyorozu, who understands the danger of the overall situation but not the immediate danger, blinks and looks around, shoulders tensed.

“Here,” the man says, snapping his fingers. “If you keep an eye on the ring, I won’t have to hurt you.”

Midoriya screams against the gag.

Yaoyorozu glances back at him and the man snaps his fingers again. “This way, honey. You have a lot of bones that can be easily broken and Orise is the daughter of the butcher.”

Yaoyorozu turns back around and Midoriya watches, helpless, as she focuses in on the ring, spinning with its gentle swishing.

“That’s it,” the man says. “Calm yourself. If you can focus on this one task, you’ll be okay. It’s okay to be confused. Let it roll over you. You’re going to be okay. Just focus.”

The tension leaves Yaoyorozu’s shoulders and she begins to slump forward. Midoriya feels his own muscles beginning to relax as he watches and he snaps his eyes closed, holding and releasing tension in his muscles to keep himself conscious and resist the lull of the man’s hypnotic voice. He cries out occasionally, trying to distract Yaoyorozu from the trance, but he’s no match for the steady tempo of the man’s monotone.

“Sleep.” Midoriya opens his eyes in time to see Yaoyorozu slump to the side. Orise drags her to the side of the shed, then pulls Midoriya forward by his feet. He kicks weakly, a pit opening in his stomach as he draws closer to the man with wild hair and sleepy eyes. Orise removes the gag.

Immediately, Midoriya shouts, “Yao—wake up! You have to wake up!”

His heart pounds, but he doesn’t chance a glance at the man or Orise to see if they’ve caught his slip of the tongue. He covers the mistake with enough yelling to wake a village, but Yaoyorozu does not stir. He pauses to pant.

“Are you done?” the man says. “She’s not going to wake up.”

“What did you do to her?” Midoriya snaps, whipping his head around to face the man.

The man shrugs one shoulder. “Same thing I did to you, ‘cept yours was lighter. She’ll be awake by mid-morning.”

“Magic?” Midoriya mutters.

“I’m glad that you’re feeling more talkative,” the man says. “It makes me think I won’t have to hurt you to get the information I need.”

Midoriya snaps his jaw shut.

“Don’t be like that,” the man says. “You saw Orise’s skill with a meat cleaver.”
A drop of sweat trickles down Midoriya’s temple but he holds his gaze, lip curled.

“I won’t ask much,” the man says. “I’ll get straight to the point. Who sent you? Why did they send you? How much do you about what goes on in this village? Are there more of you?” He twirls the ring lazily. “When will they notice you are missing? Who are you allied with? Have you set any traps in this village?”

There’s a long moment of silence where the only sound is the popping of the torches and the swish of the ring through the air.

“You won’t talk to me?” the man asks. “Even when we were having such a lovely conversation down by the riverbank. I could always ask your friend, you know. But there’s something in your eyes that makes me think I’ll get more out of probing you.”

Midoriya holds his ground.

The man huffs, laughing. “Good call on my bluff. I’m not going to hurt you. I don’t need to. Orise.”

Midoriya tenses, then flinches when Orise grabs him by the forearms, holding him in place. Then the man stands and moves towards Midoriya, reaching a hand out. Midoriya understands. He writhes, trying to escape, but the hand claps him on the shoulder and squeezes.

The man removes his hand. “You will answer my questions,” he says, voice smooth as a stream.

Then he squeezes Midoriya’s shoulder again and Midoriya goes limp.

His head hangs forward and his vision goes unfocused. His head is filled with fog, feeling around like he’s blindfolded and wandering with arms outstretched. He doesn’t know what to do and his body feels as vast as the plains of Yuuei, spread so thin he can’t even think of asking his limbs to move. He’s weightless and infinite—existing in a suspended state until he hears the warm sound of a voice guiding him to the surface.

“Who sent you?” the man asks.

“Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya mumbles.

“Who are you, and how do you serve His Royal Highness?”

“I am…” Midoriya fumbles. What’s the answer? Surely there is one answer. One answer he is absolutely not to give. But what is it?

“I am Midoriya Izuku,” Midoriya says. “I am known as Deku. I am Todoroki-sama’s manservant.”

The man chortles. “Really? Sending a manservant to do his bidding? I didn’t know the prince was so short on allies. Very well. Who is your companion?”

“Yaoyorozu Momo. Captain of the Prince’s Guard.”

“Oh, that’s more like it. No wonder she had her wits about her. Why did he send you?”

“To find out the secret of the training sessions.”

“Well, I suppose that’s obvious. How did he find us?”

“Yaoyorozu’s men…saw the king’s soldiers here.”
“How much do you know about what happens in this village?”

“How much do you know about what happens in this village?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

“Are there more of you?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Have you set any traps in the village?”

“No.”

“No.”

“When will they notice you are missing?”

“When Todoroki-sama returns.”

“When Todoroki-sama returns.”

“Hmm,” the man says. “Sees you two are probably the most useless and incompetent reconnaissance team in the world. Really, getting caught on the first day in the village? I can’t imagine what kind of a fool His Royal Highness is if he has two imbeciles like you as his right and left hand.”

Midoriya snaps his teeth together. “Todoroki-sama isn’t a fool.”

“Really? Then why didn’t he send proper spies?”

“Really? Then why didn’t he send proper spies?”

Midoriya grits his teeth. Think vague thoughts. “No choice.”

“No choice.”

“Hmm,” the man says. “I’d ask for clarification but I don’t really care. We’re secure, and that’s all that matters. Orise, we’re done here.”

He stands again, reaching for Midoriya’s shoulder.

“Must be real nice,” Midoriya says. “Betraying your future king for a taste of being favored by the current one.”

The man hesitates.

“How much does he pay you?” Midoriya asks. “I’m sure it’s a hefty sum. You’re probably swimming in riches; why bother to act like a commoner? With magic tricks like this you must be quite the affectionate favorite of His Ma—”

Midoriya doesn’t get to finish, because he’s socked across the face. He’s too shocked to do anything but stare at the man, fist clenched so tightly his knuckles turn white.

“What the fuck would you know about what I do,” the man spits. “You’ve lived your whole life up in that cushy palace, feeding fruits to your cushy prince; a pampered pet that sits and shits on command. What could you possibly know about—”

“Shinsou!” Orise snaps.

Shinsou snaps his head towards Orise. “What did I tell you about using my name?” he roars.

Orise shrinks back. “Sorry, I thought you were going to—”

“Do you want to die, too?” Shinsou yells.
Quiet falls over the shed. Shinsou’s chest heaves. Midoriya’s eyes are wide as dinner plates.

“I’m sorry,” Orise says softly. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you weren’t,” Shinsou says. “Gag the boy. We’ll hand them over in two days and this whole nightmare will be over.”

Midoriya’s head spins.

Nothing about his situation has changed. He’s still trapped, he’s revealed everything to this magic man against his will, and he’s still going to be sent to the king to be interrogated and executed. He’s not closer to freedom or death. He knows the name of this man, something so secret that sharing it is at the cost of one’s life, although the name ‘Shinsou’ means nothing to Midoriya.

Nothing has changed about his situation, true, but suddenly Midoriya thinks he might have a way out.

“They’ll kill me,” Midoriya says as Orise approaches him. “This isn’t teenage rebellion—this is an act of war. He’s been looking to kill me and her for a while now. This is the excuse he needs. He’ll kill us.”

Orise shoves the gag in Midoriya’s mouth, and his chance passes. He keeps his eyes on Shinsou, who holds his gaze but expression never wavers. Midoriya pleads with his eyes, promises that he’s telling the truth.

Shinsou’s lip twitches. “Better you than me.” He squeezes Midoriya’s shoulder. “Sleep.”

And Midoriya fades into oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: well, it's about shinsou. need i say more?
When Midoriya wakes, it is to peeking of light beneath the shed door and Yaoyorozu’s wide eyes on him.

Yaoyorozu, Midoriya tries to say, but is thwarted by the cloth gag. He coughs around it, the dirty taste cloying on his tongue. His mouth is dry, he has to piss, he hasn’t eaten in over a day, and he and Yaoyorozu are going to die. One day left, he thinks, and even the voice inside his head is dull with resignation.

Yaoyorozu’s eyes ask, what happened? But Midoriya doesn’t have an answer for her.

False friendliness, magic, binding, confessions, the weight of impending death on his shoulders—suddenly the heft of Midoriya’s fate and the past twenty-four hours comes crashing down on him. Midoriya closes his eyes to Yaoyorozu’s questioning ones and lets his body slump.

Yaoyorozu shifts in place and makes some aborted noises against her gag but Midoriya does not stir. He’s not going to cry—that’s a different kind of defeated. The Midoriya of a year and a half ago, the Midoriya of Yuuei would’ve cried. He would’ve sobbed over his uselessness, his helplessness, and his fear. But Midoriya was now the Midoriya of Endeavor, and he faced his end with solemn resignation and an almost ancient tiredness that settled into his bones.

Then, Yaoyorozu kicks him.

Midoriya’s eyes jolt open. He frowns at Yaoyorozu and then, when she has his gaze, she kicks him again, harder.

“Whur—soff—” Midoriya chokes around the gag, scowling. When she goes to kick him again, he kicks her back, instigating and impromptu and childish war of trying to kick the shit out of each other’s shins. Yaoyorozu’s position is better and she gets a few good blows to his side while Midoriya is left flailing uselessly against her riding boots.

“Fie?” Midoriya spits, baffled.

Yaoyorozu rolls her eyes as dramatically as possible. She closes her eyes and sniffs, making sobbing sounds as she curls into the fetal position. She is, quite deliberately, mocking Midoriya’s
attempts to prepare himself for death.

Midoriya feels foolish.

Yaoyorozu shakes her head and then beckons him closer to her with a nod. Midoriya complies, shifting closer in the dirt. When they're nose to nose, Yaoyorozu draws a circle in the air with her nose a few times until Midoriya gets it and turns around. For a moment there's nothing but the weight of Yaoyorozu leaning against him and then he feels a slight tugging at his gag. Midoriya’s eyes widen. She’s going to undo it with her teeth.

Tearing at a knot through a gag of her own is no easy feat though, and it takes Yaoyorozu time to work the knot free. When the rag goes loose around Midoriya’s face he spits it out, shaking his head. He flips over, eyes bright.

“Yaoyorozu-san!” Midoriya exclaims. “How did you think to—”

Yaoyorozu makes a noise that has to be “me” through her gag before showing her back to Midoriya. Well, message received. Midoriya bites at the knot and undoes it much quicker this time. Yaoyorozu spits out her gag with a groan.

“I don’t want to know where that came from,” Yaoyorozu says. “That butcher girl—”

“I didn’t even think—” Midoriya says. “Yaoyorozu-san, you’re amazing!”

“Yeah, well,” she grumbles. “The royal pain made us go through all kinds of absurd training. I’m not going to enjoy telling him he was right.”

Midoriya’s mouth makes some complicated shapes.

“It’s far too early to be giving up, manservant,” Yaoyorozu says, eyeing him. “The fight’s not over until there’s a sword in your gut.”

“Maybe,” Midoriya says, smiling sadly. “But it’s over for Todoroki-sama and his plans.”

Yaoyorozu rolls her eyes again. “And I’m telling you, it’s not over until—”

“Until one of us tells them everything?” Midoriya asks, still smiling.

Yaoyorozu goes quiet. She opens her mouth, closes it, then shakes her head. “No,” she says. “I know you, you wouldn’t—there’s not a scratch on you—”

“The magic man,” Midoriya says, voice cracking. “He—I didn’t have any choice—he just—when he started talking I couldn’t control my tongue and I—I told him everything, Yaoyorozu-san.”

Yaoyorozu closes her eyes. “What did you say. Exactly.”

Midoriya swallows. “Our names, who sent us, our purpose, how we found out, that we are alone.”

She takes a breath. “Yeah, that would be everything.”

“I’m sorry,” Midoriya says. “I’m so…so sorry.”

“It’s understandable,” Yaoyorozu says. “It’s not okay, because nothing about this situation is okay, but not even Todoroki-sama foresaw a magic man on the king’s side. Not even I was prepared to handle that. So it’s understandable. Don’t bother beating yourself up about it; now we need to focus on escape.”
“Even if we do,” Midoriya says, “it’s over, isn’t it?”

Yaoyorozu’s smile cuts. “Did you foresee a happy ending, Deku?”

“No,” Midoriya says, thinking back to All Might’s mission and the promise of marrying Todoroki away. “I knew even before I came here that there wouldn’t be a happy ending. If he makes it out, even without us, it’ll be worth it.”

“Honestly, I could use the vacation,” Yaoyorozu says. “The Urabitian mountains are supposed to be stunning and Jirou has too many creative ideas of how we could make the most of my visit.”

“Too much detail.”

“That backbreaker can do it without us,” Yaoyorozu says. “Plenty of people can swing a sword around and yell at soldiers.”

“Plenty of people can wash and dress princes,” Midoriya adds.

“Damn prince,” Yaoyorozu says. “I’m starting to think he just wanted to get rid of us.”

Midoriya smiles. “But you can’t help loving him.”

“No,” Yaoyorozu agrees. “You can’t.”

They’re quiet for a moment.

“Do we have anything going right for us?” Yaoyorozu asks.

Midoriya blinks, and then wants to smack himself. “Stupid!”

“What?”

“It’s not much,” Midoriya says, “but I got the magic man’s name.”

“Okay…” Yaoyorozu is unimpressed.

“No, you don’t understand,” Midoriya says. “When Orise said it he lost it. Started screaming at her, asking if she wanted to die…if she wanted to die too.”

Yaoyorozu raises her eyebrows. “Someone’s life is on the line? For the sake of a name? Just who is this guy?”

“Shinsou,” Midoriya says. “Ring any bells?”

Yaoyorozu scowls and shakes her head. “No, but that doesn’t mean anything. He could be a famous foreigner.”

“Maybe,” Midoriya says. “I don’t know. There’s something about his exchange with Orise that’s eating at me still. Up until he snapped at her, I thought we had no chance. But the moment that happened, I felt like I could reason with him.”

“Hmm,” Yaoyorozu says. “He yelled at the butcher girl, but he wasn’t angry, was he?”

Midoriya opens his mouth and closes it. “No, actually,” he says. “I’d say more like scared.”

“Then he cares about her,” Yaoyorozu deduces. “Romantically?”
Midoriya remembers Shinsou’s jab about Orise sending Midoriya to him to sleep with. “No, it’s platonic.”

“Sibling?”

“They look nothing alike.”

“Friend?”

“Perhaps.”

“Partner in crime?”

“Most likely,” Midoriya says. “Although I really wonder about that, given her name means nothing while his has weight enough to get her killed. He’s immune? Must be the magic. She’s definitely not magical. Disposable ally he’s come to value? But they had such rapport…”

Midoriya chews his lip. He can’t decide if Shinsou’s human side makes him easier or harder to deal with. If he was straight evil like the King’s Guard, then reasoning with him would be impossible. The only course of action would be to get themselves killed before they revealed anything else. But Shinsou wasn’t evil. The physical strain in his voice when he yelled at Orise—she really was in dire straits if it got out that they knew his name. And that possibility terrified Shinsou.

So he didn’t have enough sway over the king to the point that he could save Orise. Midoriya would call that a pretty shitty deal for an alliance, except Shinsou didn’t seem exactly pleased by the arrangement. The moment Midoriya insinuated he had the king’s ear, Shinsou decked him.

Midoriya prods the inside of his sore cheek with his tongue.

“Guess we could threaten the girl,” Yaoyorozu mutters. “I don’t like playing dirty, but we could threaten to rat her out.”

“No-win situation,” Midoriya says. “We rat her out, she dies. They let us go and someone’s bound to find out. She dies. They’ve probably already informed His Majesty of our capture. Todoroki…”

“We could promise not to,” Yaoyorozu mutters.

“He’s too smart for that,” Midoriya says. “I feel like—gods, there’s just something I’m missing—”

The sound of a key in a padlock kills the conversation between them. They watch as the door shakes once, then swings open. Midoriya wonders if they should’ve tried to bite their binds free and make a run for it.

Orise pokes her head in, scowling as soon as her eyes adjust to the dim light. “Ya just can’t behave, can ya?”

“You were the ones who assumed we were incompetent,” Midoriya spits.

Orise’s lip twitches. “Oh, whatever. Gimme your legs, it’s pee break.”

She unties Midoriya first, which is probably for the best, given Yaoyorozu looks about ready to pounce once her legs are free. Midoriya decides to take the bait. “Okay,” he says. “Why are you risking untyling us?”

“What, were you planning on running?” Orise snorts. “We have your names and your plans. Your
prince is in deep horseshit with or without you to take the fall for him.”

“You have no proof,” Yaoyorozu snarls. “If we’re back at the palace—”

“With what horses?” Orise asks. That shuts up Yaoyorozu.

Midoriya doesn’t say anything as Orise blindfolds him and leads him out the door. It doesn’t really matter—Midoriya couldn’t place the patch of forest he saw through the door and they’d already established that screaming would do nothing. He does his business quietly and sits tight as Orise ties his legs up again and does the same process with Yaoyorozu.

Midoriya expects that’s it, but once they’re safely bound again, Orise pulls out a sack from beside the door. He raises an eyebrow. “Feeding us, too? This is some high-class hostage service.”

“We ain’t animals,” Orise says. Interesting. “Besides, it’s your own food. Like hell I can afford to feed you on my own copper.”

“What? Catching traitors to the crown doesn’t pay well?” Midoriya asks.

Orise purses her lips and doesn’t say anything. Alright, so she had Shinsou’s coaching. She wasn’t going to let any information slip this time.

“Eat,” she says, shoving bread into Midoriya’s face. “Since you’ve already done me the favor of removing your gags.”

Midoriya eats the bread and slices of fruit and hunk of dried meat that she feeds him. Following his lead, Yaoyorozu does the same. Orise uncaps a waterskin and tips it back towards Yaoyorozu’s mouth. Yaoyorozu takes a single gulp then sputters, coughing.

“That’s alcohol!” she says.

“Yes,” Orise agrees. “It’s also the only drink you’ll be getting, so down what you can.”

Yaoyorozu makes a face, but she must be as thirsty as Midoriya because she takes several large swigs. Midoriya follows, also choking at the taste and how strong it is. He downs a few large gulps of his own before spitting it up. “You’re poisoning us!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Orise says. “Just tryin’ to keep you drunk and unable to function.”

“Another one of Shinsou’s tricks?” Midoriya says.

All the emotion washes from Orise’s face. “If you say his name again, I’ll cut up your mouth so messy that so much as opening it for a sip of wine will leave you weeping.”

Midoriya, wisely, doesn’t say anything after that.

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Orise comes in three times more after that to take them out to relieve themselves. Each time, she brings the wine. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu refuse the first time, but by the second and third they’re so parched that they accept the offers even on empty stomachs. Shinsou’s plan to keep them from functioning works—the alcohol content is so high that Midoriya spends most of the day watching
the ceiling spin or asleep. Yaoyorozu tries to talk business with him a few times, but they’re both unfocused and slur their words. It’s a mess.

But nevertheless, Midoriya can’t get the thought out of his head that he’s missing something crucial. It’s clear they have a valuable bargaining chip in their hands, but with his hands tied like this (literally), he can’t make the connections that will lead him to the answer where they get out alive or Todoroki isn’t destroyed. Despite Yaoyorozu’s hopefulness, Midoriya knows that getting both those things is a pipe dream. Was there some clue in the village? And why the hell would anyone care so much about a goddamn name?

Midoriya’s mouth moves as he recites the list of royals and minor nobility that All Might had him memorize, then the list of invitees to the various balls and functions Todoroki had dictated to him when he was too lazy to write. No matches. It’s possible that Shinsou could belong to some long-lost clan of sorcerers that had been erased by history, but if no one knew him, then there would be no reason to keep the name so hush-hush.

Why would Midoriya want to disguise a name? Well, he thinks wryly, perhaps if he’s pretending to be someone he’s not. Perhaps Shinsou, like Midoriya, was an enemy of the king and using a pseudonym to sneak around. Doubtful, however, given that he and Orise were so eager to kick the shit out of them and keep them helpless.

But the fear. They weren’t his allies, either. Not by their own will.


What am I missing? Midoriya thinks, watching an ant crawl across the ground. Just one more clue. Please, just one more clue. He looks to Yaoyorozu, but she’s asleep, drooling slightly. She’d taken more of the drink than Midoriya had. The lack of light under the door indicates Midoriya’s time is up. He has until the next time Orise visits, maybe not even that. Tomorrow, he has to have the magic words on his tongue or his throat will be slit and he’ll die face down in the dirt. Or they’ll… Todoroki…

Please, I need the answer, Midoriya begs whatever higher power is out there. I have to save Shouto. I can’t let him suffer like that. I can’t let him fail. Even if it takes my own life to make it so, please let me find a solution to save him…

Midoriya’s head spins and he falls asleep to the memory of Todoroki’s chest against his back, leaning in to murmur the names of the guests against his ear. His lips move with the ghost of his prince and lover until his consciousness leaves him.

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Midoriya and Yaoyorozu are woken simultaneously by the door to their shed being thrown open. Midoriya squints at the shadow, heart pounding, until it reveals itself as Shinsou. It’s not Orise or the king’s guard that Midoriya expected, and he doesn’t know how to feel about their chances.

Yaoyorozu glances at him desperately but Midoriya has nothing. Hour and hours of trying to find the way out and he’d fallen asleep after exhausting every possibility. Yaoyorozu must see it in his eyes because she sucks in a breath and moves her lips to say something, but nothing comes out.
She’s at a loss, too.

“If you have any sympathy in your heart,” Midoriya says, voice raspy, “you’ll kill us before the king has a chance to.”

Yaoyorozu closes her eyes.

“I’d prefer not to be killed, thanks,” Shinsou says. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Please,” Midoriya begs. “You—you know what he’s like. He’ll do it in front of the prince, he’ll make him watch his comrades get cut down—he’ll do it just to break Todoroki-sama.”

“If your prince wasn’t prepared to be sent your heads on a platter or witness your public execution, then like I said before, he’s a fool,” Shinsou says. “Not only that, but he’s a fool without the stomach to be royalty. Sacrifices have to be made, isn’t that what the game’s all about? What makes you think you’re not just tools that have worn out their usefulness?”

_I love you, Deku of Yuuei._ Midoriya’s eyelashes flutter. “Because I have come to know him in a way you could not possibly understand,” he says. “I would not be willing to die for someone who could look on with an emotionless façade as his companions are slaughtered. If he could not feel something as fundamental as love, would he really be worth fighting for at all?”

Shinsou’s lip twitches in the same way it had that night. He clicks his tongue and leans forward to flick Midoriya, _hard_, in the forehead. “You’re beyond stupid, Midoriya. Still living in the dream world where ‘the power of love’ wins every time. Wake up. Love doesn’t solve anything; it’s just more places you can be stabbed. If that’s really what your idiot prince thinks, it won’t be long until he’s beaten into the kind of successor His Majesty wants.”

It takes all of Midoriya’s willpower not to flinch when Shinsou speaks his name. There’s no way to hide the way his shoulders tighten or his nostrils flare, though. Yaoyorozu doesn’t catch it. Her brow furrows at the name drop, but she doesn’t even glance at Midoriya. Shinsou sees it, though. His eyes flick from Midoriya to Yaoyorozu and back, but there is no hitch of surprise in his voice at the reaction.

“Anyway, thanks for the free information,” he says. “Knowing that your prince is a weakling might get me somewhere. Now, I have something to hold against you. Orise, you know what to do.” Yaoyorozu protests, but the blood drains from Midoriya’s hands, leaving them cold and clammy, as Shinsou makes unblinking eye contact with him.

Orise comes in after him and tightens their bonds and reties their legs. The gags are back again, but this time they’re sealed with hot glue—no chance of removal. She doesn’t bother to blindfold them; simply hauls Yaoyorozu over her shoulder and walks her outside. Midoriya hears a _thump_ and then it’s his turn. When he makes it into the light, he sees that there’s a covered wagon pulled alongside the shed. Before he has a better chance to look around, he’s tossed in like a sack of turnips with Yaoyorozu and the curtain is drawn. Shinsou whistles to the horses and then they start bumping along to their death.

Midoriya takes the smacking of his cheek against the wooden floor of the wagon without complaint. Each smack is a reminder of all the stupid things he’d said that were going to outlive him. ‘Midoriya’—gods, if only he’d known his birth name would bring him such misery. He might’ve told Todoroki, even at the expense of…well, everything. Shinsou hadn’t commented on it that night, but Midoriya should’ve known it was a fatal mistake. Shinsou was even sharper than him, picking at every single loose thread until his enemies were completely unwound.
They pass the chattering of the villagers, greetings thrown to Orise and ‘Hitoshi,’ which Midoriya assumed was his pseudonym. Even with the knowledge of both his fake and real name, Midoriya doesn’t feel any real sense of victory. Both he and Shinsou held each other’s cards in their hands, but they were by no means on equal ground. Even if Midoriya could free himself, they both had hostages held against each other. Unstoppable force meets immovable object. Midoriya grinds his teeth against the rope.

The chattering of the villagers and the particularly rough cobblestone gives way to dirt again, and Midoriya doesn’t have to guess very hard to figure out that they’re being taken to the training grounds. His heart sinks. Perhaps, if he doesn’t look Todoroki in the eye, it won’t hurt as bad.

The wagon pulls to a stop. Midoriya listens for the telltale whicker of horses or the clank of metal on metal, but he hears nothing. Not even the laughter or bubble of voices of the king’s guard. There’s a magpie warbling somewhere in the distance and the slightest rustle of wind through trees, but other than that, silence. There’s no one else here.

Yaoyorozu kicks him gently, and Midoriya nods, even though he can’t see her. She realizes it, too.

There’s nothing for a moment, and then the flaps of the wagon are thrown back and Shinsou stands with his arms crossed. Beside him, Orise wrings her hands and casts the occasional glance at Shinsou.

“Hitoshi,” she says. “I dunno if this is the smartest idea…”

“Don’t talk,” Shinsou says.

“Kay,” Orise says, meek.

Shinsou holds up one finger. “Option one. I turn you over to His Majesty, he executes you in front of your prince, I get a better deal than what I have now.”

He holds up a second finger. “Option two. I don’t turn you over to His Majesty, and you sit here quietly for the rest of the day, watching. You don’t move, you don’t make noise, you don’t eat, you don’t drink, you don’t piss. You just sit and watch, and tonight I send you on your merry way.”

Midoriya’s eyes are wide as saucers.

“Option three,” Shinsou says. “You violate any of those rules and I make a grand display about how I was saving the best for last and make sure you both die painfully and loudly, to the point your prince is sobbing for you to be put out of your misery.”

Midoriya gulps.

“You are free to choose any of these options,” Shinsou says. “None of these harm me, but as an addition to option two, if I find that any delicate information has gotten to the wrong person, know that I have the power and information to make option three look like passing in your sleep. Am I clear?”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu nod.

“Fine,” Shinsou says. “Orise, set them upright so they can see.”

Orise climbs into the wagon and props up Midoriya and Yaoyorozu, setting them facing the canvas of the wagon, where two sets of eyeholes were neatly cut out of the canvas. If Midoriya leaned forward, he could see through to the vast clearing with ease. They were situated at the top
of a slope overlooking a field that stretched for miles, although most of it was dirt and the
vegetation that did manage to grow looked either withered and brown, or—or black, or—or it was
the bright green of young growth, as if the entire field had been covered in—

The puzzle comes together with frightening ease.

“Yeah, thought you might figure it out,” Shinsou says. “You’re a moron, Deku, but you’ve got a
head on your shoulders. Don’t look so perplexed, Yaoyorozu. It’ll come to you in a minute. They’ll
be here in a few hours. I’m tired of talking to you though, so bye.”

He closes the flap and Midoriya exchanges glances with Yaoyorozu, trying to communicate
through pure adrenaline the impact of this find. She shakes her head. It takes Midoriya at least half
an hour before he can calm his racing thoughts. He’s not done thinking it through by the time he
can make out the sound of voices other than Shinsou and Orise.

Midoriya presses his face to the canvas and his heart nearly stops as he sees the king, and then
again when he sees Todoroki. He lets out a shuddering sigh. He’d really, really believed he would
never see him again. Fortunately, Todoroki looks well, scowl firmly in place and dressed in all
black, the thick fur ruff of his cloak making him look bigger than he actually was.

“My dear friend!” King Enji’s voice booms across the clearing and both Midoriya and Yaoyorozu
flinch. “It’s been too long. You appear to be well. No trouble, I hope?”

“It’s a pleasure as always, Your Majesty,” Shinsou says neutrally. “My family is well, thanks to
your kindness.”

“Please, you are the one helping me by hosting these training sessions for my errant son,” King
Enji says. “I heard you had some travelers pass through. That’s rather rare; I hope they didn’t
bother you much.”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu hold their breaths. Todoroki blinks slowly, expressionless.

“Stupid pair of newlyweds,” Shinsou says. “Ran out of supplies halfway through their journey and
needed to stock up. Completely unaware of bandits. We made sure to drain their wallets.”

The king laughs, but when he looks at Shinsou, his eyes are hard. “Glad to hear they were of
service to you. You would let me know if they were any trouble, wouldn’t you? I always see to it
that my friends are well-treated and my enemies, well…”

Shinsou offers a brittle smile. “I hardly think two clueless lovebirds constitute the status of enemy
of the crown.”

“I kid, I kid,” King Enji says, still smiling.

Todoroki clears his throat. “Father, who is this?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” King Enji says. “Orise, if you would?”

He hops off his horse, prompting Todoroki to do the same. Orise bows deeply, performing a few
small obeisances before she takes their reins. Todoroki looks at her for a moment too long, brow
furrowing, but moves on.

“Shouto,” King Enji says, “this is Shinsou, a magic man who can bring out your full potential.”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu watch helplessly as Shinsou takes Todoroki’s hand in both of his and
squeezes it, bowing deeply.

“A magic man?” Todoroki asks. “You’re a royal, then?”

“Not in my wildest dreams, Your Royal Highness,” Shinsou says, keeping his head bowed but squeezing Todoroki’s hand again. “Yours are the true gifts. Mine are…an illusion.”

“Interesting.” Todoroki says, glancing at his hand. “What kind of an illusion?”

Midoriya could cry from how sharp Todoroki is.

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” King Enji says. “Now, my friend, you know I can’t have you showing your tricks to outsiders. As always, I must check your wagon for any troublemakers who might’ve snuck in.”

Midoriya’s blood runs cold.

Shinsou nods. “As always, check my wagon.”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu exchange wide-eyed glances. Was this his plan? Keep them quiet for a few hours before he sold them out to His Majesty in the end? Oh, what a clever play it was. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu had taken the bait so willingly. All that time they could’ve used trying to escape—wasted on a sliver of the secret dangled in front of them.

Should they struggle? Should they fight? Midoriya jerks in his restraints, but Orise wasn’t messing around. If he had had a few hours, maybe, but with precious seconds counting down? Midoriya looks at Yaoyorozu helplessly and she looks back at him with eyes hard as steel. Midoriya understood that gaze. Whatever you know, shout it the moment they give you a chance.

“I am nothing if not a man you can trust,” Shinsou adds, conversationally.

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu freeze. It was spoken loud enough that they could hear it clearly, but—but too late, some of the king’s men were coming around the side, it was going to be over, there was nothing they could do—

The king’s men lift up the flaps to the wagon and peer inside. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu meet their gazes, half frozen with confusion, half fiercely determined to face the end with pride. The men look at them expressionlessly, peering around them to check for anyone else. They were expected, then.

A pause and then: “Nothing here,” one of them calls out, and they both drop the flaps and walk back to the entourage.

What, Midoriya thinks. Yaoyorozu’s expression says the same thing: What the fuck just happened?

There was no way Shinsou had enough affluence to get to the king’s guard. Even if they were a pack of dogs with no morals or dignity, they were aggressively loyal to the king. No matter what the king paid Shinsou, there was no way he could pay them to overlook Todoroki’s two greatest allies, caught red-handed in a place they didn’t belong. They were exactly what he was looking for.

“What’d I tell you?” Shinsou says. “I don’t overlook anything.”

“That’s why I like you,” King Enji says. “You’re reliable. Loyal. May that always be the case.”
“It is as you wish,” Shinsou says, bowing again. “Now, Your Royal Highness, if I may ask something of you, in order to prepare you for your full potential?”

Todoroki glances at his father. “I don’t believe I have the right to refuse.”

“That’s the spirit,” Shinsou says, smiling and squeezing his shoulder. “Now, if you would, please watch the ring, and allow your vision to go out of focus…”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu watch helplessly as Todoroki falls under Shinsou’s hypnosis.

“There are a few rules,” Shinsou says. “When I say, ‘let’s begin,’ these things will become true: you will obey any order Todoroki Enji and only Todoroki Enji gives you. You will not hold back for any reason. And, when I say ‘it’s over,’ you will remember nothing of this place, nor of me, nor of anything that has happened to you today or what will happen while you are under my spell. When I say ‘it’s over,’ you will fall asleep for four hours, during which none of your senses function.”

Shinsou glances back at King Enji. “Anything else?”

“Perfect as always,” King Enji purrs. “Put him under.”

Shinsou turns back to Todoroki. “Let’s begin,” he says.

Todoroki snaps back up, shaking his head. “What did you—”

“Shouto,” King Enji says. “Shut up.”

Todoroki’s jaw clicks shut and his eyes widen when he finds that he can’t open his mouth.

“Every time you make that face,” King Enji says. “It fills me with so much joy, you realizing you’re helpless under my control. Now, become my doll and do as I command.”

Todoroki might’ve been silenced, but the flash in his eyes is purebred Shouto-anger. He strikes at his father like a snake, but King Enji deflects it, as he surely had deflected Todoroki’s past strikes.

“Stop fighting,” King Enji says.

Todoroki goes limp. His eyes dart like that of a trapped animal, trying to figure out how to break the spell cast on him. Midoriya is reminded of fox hunting—of seeing their beautiful flame-colored coats streaked with spittle and dirt and then blood, as they desperately chewed their own leg off to survive. Midoriya doesn’t know what Todoroki’s metaphorical leg is in this situation, but frost starts to cover one arm.

“Move only as I command,” King Enji says, and the frost dissipates.

A fox caught in a trap without any teeth.

“Where were we?” King Enji says. “Ah, that’s right. I brought the Royal Alchemist along this time. We will be training you in how to use various flammable and explosive substances to increase the power and deadliness of your fire attacks. By the end, I want you to have turned this clearing to ash. Start by showing me the full brunt of your current strength, as far and wide as you can manage across this field.”

Todoroki’s left hand curls into a fist and the flames that grow from his arm shoot tens of meters into the air and then, like a tidal wave of death, burst outwards, completely engulfing Midoriya’s vision, blinding him instantly. The heat pulsing off of the wave burns his cheeks and Midoriya
feels a new kind of fear settle in his stomach.

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Midoriya and Yaoyorozu are subjected to hours of watching the tireless “training” of Todoroki Shouto. “Training”—if that is what one could call beating the strength out of one’s son until their clothing was in tatters and they couldn’t stand, let alone produce a flame capable of annihilating the clearing again. No rest breaks, no food, barely any water, and relentless orders to set fire to this, blast that, refine the flame here, shape it in this way, see, if you guide it like this, you can encircle your enemies and watch them burn alive!

When King Enji commands, “Rest,” Todoroki collapses on the ground, dead asleep. The king’s guard haul him off roughly to the horses. Midoriya supposes they will sleep in town, the townspeople paid hefty hush money not to talk about it. But no—King Enji wasn’t that careless. The flames had never been high enough to reach over the treetops and the blasts were short enough that there wasn’t much smoke. This entire arrangement was hidden from the townspeople as well. Only Shinsou and Orise must know.

Shinsou doesn’t say anything aside from parting farewells to King Enji and his men, climbing onto the wagon and slowly tottering back to the sheds where Midoriya and Yaoyorozu had been kept. Once they arrive, Shinsou and Orise take their sweet time tying up their horses and hauling Midoriya and Yaoyorozu back into the shed. Orise closes the door behind them and Shinsou lights a couple lanterns. He motions to Orise and they pull off both Midoriya and Yaoyorozu’s gags. There’s a moment of silence and then:

“What, in the actual fuck—”

“You just left him to that bastard—”

“How—you—you can just—transfer? Control? Like that? But—”

“—he could’ve killed Todoroki-sama, do you understand what you’ve—”

“This whole time, he was gaining control because of this batshit insane—”

“—abuse—”

“And he doesn’t remember anything? That’s impossible, that’s—”

“—how dare you, to your future king—”

“And the soldiers didn’t see us, did you—”

“—for the sake of money, you would go as far as that—”

Shinsou hurls a brick at the far wall, shattering it with a colossal crash. Midoriya and Yaoyorozu go silent.

“Now that I have your attention,” Shinsou says dryly. “Shut up and listen up.”

“Are you going to tell us everything, then?” Midoriya blurts.
“I have never hated anyone as much as I hate you,” Shinsou says. “Let me make this clear: you’re not our allies. I don’t want or need your help, I’m not your pal, don’t send me any letters because I will burn them. Tell your pretty boy if you want, but that won’t change what happens around here. If you sell me out, even through sleeptalking, I will make sure your prince hears your tortured moans in the back of his head for the rest of his life. I have no attachment to any of you and if I was wiser I would kill all of you.”

“So…why?” Midoriya asks after a moment. “Why tell us anything at all?”


He drags a hand through his hair and sighs. “I meant what I said to your prince. Your people call me a ‘magic man,’ but none of what I do is magic. It’s the art of illusion and suggestion; highly valued and passed around by my people.

“My people are from a land outside the Five Kingdoms. Our art is intended for kindness and healing—helping the struggling to pass in peace, lightening the burdens of the grieving or hurt, correcting illnesses of the heart that cause people to harm themselves or others or waste away. We shared this art with other clans in exchange for food and shelter as we passed through. But of course, some war-mongering genius realized we could be manipulated into using the art for evil.

“I was sold into slavery at a young age. Oh, you think that’s harsh? Do you think my parents cruel? Idiots. Better I be used by those who didn’t know of my gift in the Five Kingdoms than to become a bargaining chip or responsible for the slaughter of thousands. Before they even pulled me from my sobbing mother’s arms, both her and my father were responsible for the genocide of a neighboring clan. I had played with their children. We traded berries in the summer and helped each other collect wood in winter. My parents orchestrated the deaths of their friends even as they cried and begged to be spared.

“But even by that time, I was a prodigy with the art and I didn’t conceal it as well as I could’ve. The rumors of magic people were not unheard of in Urabiti. If it weren’t for Father I would’ve fallen into the same fate as my parents. But fortunately, Father, the director of an orphanage that rescued child slaves, bought us all up before anyone realized. I was rescued with my companions after only a few years. I was brought to Endeavor, my clan identity erased, and began a new life.

“Father himself adopted me. I was headstrong and difficult and didn’t speak the language well. He taught me Endeavoran customs while also allowing me to practice my art and learning about my clan from me. He told me that he never wanted that part of me to truly die. He’s gone now, but I’m doing the best I can in his place. I have runners across the kingdoms, my brothers and sisters from that slavery ring, bringing children to me every month or so. I am certain my parents are long dead, and I have no desire to return to that bloodstained land. This is where I belong. This is what I was meant to be doing.”

“But you’re…” Midoriya starts. “Haven’t you ended up with the same fate as them after all?”

“That’s why I’m telling you your prince is stupid,” Shinsou says. “He’s too young and too naïve. Valuing things like companions is only going to get them killed. If he wants to win, he has to be able to charm anyone and sacrifice everything in his deck to bring down that thing.”

“It’s the orphanage, isn’t it?” Yaoyorozu says quietly. “He’s threatening all your kids if you don’t comply.” She looks up. “And Orise, you’re—”

“Yeah,” Orise says. “I’m his sister. From back then.”
“They’re all my brothers and sisters,” Shinsou seethes. “Every one of them is precious family. He had—he came in with a list, a list of all the names of everyone who had been adopted, from the babies who wouldn’t even know my face to my runners, who I grew up with. He knew about them and he knew about me, he was ready.”

“If you hypnotize Todoroki-sama,” Midoriya says, “he won’t kill your family. That’s the arrangement.”

“No,” Shinsou says. “I could’ve survived that. No, he came in and spoke to all of us, showing us his grand list, saying he wanted to sponsor our orphanage. He’d give us the money the adults had barely been able to scrape together, enough to feed and bathe and clothe everyone five times over. And everyone we had ever known. All for the low, low price of me helping him out every now and then with a special project to protect the kingdom.” Shinsou closes his eyes. “They were tugging on my pants and shirt, telling me the new paints they could get, or a doll with two eyes, or socks without holes, or maybe even the nice canvas to make a sail for their boat—”

“He killed your director,” Yaoyorozu says. “You must know that.”

“I do,” Shinsou says. “Because he made sure to tell us how he had met Father before, how Father had praised us so highly, convinced him that we were invaluable, and that I, especially, was so dear to him. He said the last words Father said to him before he ‘left’ were that he was proud to call me his son. And so touched, was His Majesty, by this display of parental affection, that he felt moved to take over the role of guardian and patron of the orphanage after he heard of Father’s passing.”

Midoriya can’t find a single word to say to that.

“Tell me, again, that you are prepared to deal with that thing,” Shinsou says. “Say it to my face.”

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu can’t.

“I don’t care how much he trusts you,” Shinsou says. “Sending you here was beyond stupid. When you return to him, tell him to give up. Whatever you are to him, that thing knows, and he already has plans for you.”

“If you knew all that,” Midoriya says quietly, “then why did you spare us in the first place?”

“Because I don’t want you coming here and making problems for me,” Shinsou says. “Go home, keep your problems at home. When this blows up in your face and you end up dead and your prince ends up a hand puppet of that thing, I don’t want any part of it. Don’t talk to me again, don’t write, and don’t show up again.”

He stands up and opens the door. “Your horses are tied up behind the shed. Swing far west, about half an hour’s ride, so you’re well outside their perimeter and the perimeter of this village. Don’t travel during the day. And for god’s sake, don’t try to rescue your prince. I’m looking at you, shortie.”

“No, I didn’t even th—” Midoriya says.

“Sure you didn’t,” Shinsou says. “I’ll make it real simple: in that state, your prince is highly susceptible to influence, even if he’s only supposed to listen to him. He knows that, and has him under lock and key when not training. Second of all, it’s not going to wear off unless I say the words, and like I said, compromise me, you die painfully, etc. Go home, moron.”

“Thank you,” Yaoyorozu says, half a question. She bows. “We’ll take good care of this information.”
“Uh-huh,” Shinsou says.

Yaoyorozu bows to Orise too, then heads out. Midoriya hastily bows to Shinsou and Orise and follows her. He hesitates at the door and glance over his shoulder.

“That spell…” Midoriya says. “Is it potent enough to have Todoroki-sama kill a man?”

“Strong enough to kill a kingdom,” Shinsou says. “So you might want to run while you can, little one.”

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: yeah, like i WASN’T going to put shindoku in this fic

(the actual chapter was supposed to be longer but i looked at my notes and basically said what in motherfuck this pacing is terrible and pushed it back. because of that, next chapter will be Large unless i keep moving shit back.)

End Notes

harass me on social media!! i would love to talk about bnha with you!!

  tumblr: kiribakus
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