

Riddles in the Heart

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Riddles in the Heart

by [PitViperOfDoom](#)

Summary

The law is clear: whoever correctly answers three riddles will marry the prince, while all who fail are to be executed. The people live in fear as more challengers try and fail, and the throne grows bloodier with every passing year. But a young prince, nameless and in exile from his home, believes there may be more to this brutal challenge than meets the eye.

Of course, there's only one way to find out: ring the gong, and take the trial.

Notes

I won't say too much, for fear of spoiling anyone who's not in the know, but I offer a tip of the hat to everyone who "gets it."

Either way, I hope you all enjoy!

Act I: The Challenge

The sun was low in the sky, and the streets on the outskirts of the city were quiet. The people who lived here were those that kept their heads down, minded their own business, and did their best not to draw attention to themselves.

This mattered little to the young man racing through the streets, feet aching as they pounded the stones. His breath was short but he was not yet winded, the pressure in his lungs not quite a burning.

He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, and slowed his pace when he saw that his pursuers were beginning to lag behind. Losing them now was no good—if they gave up, they might go back to hunting the others.

The runner's luck ran dry when he spotted an alley and turned the corner, only to find the way blocked by a stone wall. Cursing under his breath, he skidded to a halt and raced back to the open street, but his pursuers had caught him up. A sword flashed in the light of the sunset, and he leaped backward, narrowly missing death but retreating further into the alley.

In a heartbeat, the assassins were upon him. There were four, and then the first was too eager and all but fell upon the runner's sword blade in his reckless charge. Their would-be victim was small and outnumbered, but his blade was quick and his eyes were quicker. What should have been a slaughter was drawn out as the young man dodged and parried. A dagger flew through the air at him, grazing his temple before it struck the opposite wall and clattered to the ground. One of his attackers swung a curved blade at his head, and he ducked beneath the man's arm and slid his own sword between the assassin's ribs. The man drew back with a grunt, swinging once more as he died. His victim was quick, but not quite quick enough, and the blade bit deep into his shoulder.

Crying out, he barely managed to switch his sword to his other hand in time to block the next strike. One of his attackers darted in and scored another dagger across his chest, a wounding blow but no less painful. The runner sprang back again, retreating until his back hit the stone wall that blocked off the alley.

Triumph shone in the dagger wielder's eyes, and he charged with a yell, ready to swing his knife and cut the wounded one's throat. In a burst of speed, the runner twisted out of the way, and what would have been a fatal stab to the heart sank into his side and missed anything vital. He kicked out viciously, and the assassin's leg snapped out from under him. With a cry of pain, the injured young man swung his sword in a blow that nearly beheaded his would-be killer.

When he looked up, blinking against the blood that threatened to run into his eyes, he found his last pursuer poised to finish him off. His head swam dizzily—he had lost a great deal of blood already. He drew in a sharp breath, gripped his sword in one hand, and let a lightning storm of energy fill him from toe to tip.

Power crackled along his skin. A burst of speed took him straight past his final attacker. It was simply a matter of positioning his sword as he moved—at the speed he was going, he ran the assassin through the belly before the latter had the chance to take his head off.

With a grunt, he let the sword slip from his hands. The body slumped limply to the ground alongside the others, and the wounded runner staggered away and nearly tripped over another body. Blood ran into one of his eyes, half-blinding him, and he limped to the mouth of the alley and looked around.

The streets were still empty. The young man took stock of his injuries—a small gash along his hairline, a deeper cut in one shoulder, a cut across his ribs, and a hole where a dagger blade had punctured his side. He needed a quiet place to patch himself up. This alley wouldn't do; if someone happened upon him while he was surrounded by corpses, that could mean trouble. And besides—these four might not have been alone.

He needed to get out.

The young man crept out into the open street, keeping close to the walls of buildings. Gritting his teeth, he limped along as fast as he could until he had left the blood-strewn alley behind. One arm he clamped around his chest, in an attempt to stem the bleeding and keep his wounds from leaving a blood trail.

At last, when he had judged the distance safe, he found another narrow side street and staggered into the shadows. Gingerly he sank down to the ground, biting back noises of pain as each movement pulled at his wounds. He settled himself down in a pile of rags, tucked behind an empty crate in the hopes that it would hide him.

He just needed to rest. Just a moment to rest, and bind his wounds, and then he would go out again and rejoin his companions.

His head still swam with the dizziness of blood loss as he tore strips from his ragged jacket and sought to stem the bleeding. The wounds to his shoulder and side were the deepest; the gash to his chest was long but merely a flesh wound, and the cut on his head was little more than a scratch.

The young man lost track of how long he sat there, catching his breath and tending his wounds as best he could. His throat was parched, his stomach empty, leaving him faint and clouded. Because of that, it was only when a shadow fell over him that he realized he was no longer alone.

He drew back against the wall, reaching for a sword that was no longer there—he'd left it sheathed in a dead man's stomach. Bracing himself, he stared defiantly up at the figure above him. Tall and cloaked, their face hidden in a cowl, the newcomer held up a hand.

"I mean you no harm." A cool voice, quiet and mellow, halted the injured young man's alarm for a moment. Stepping forward, the cloaked figure knelt down so that they—he, by the sound of it—no longer loomed over him. "Who attacked you?"

"Nobody," the young man said shortly, thinking fast. If this man turned out to be a threat, then he could still use his power. He couldn't very well fight, but he could escape. "I'm fine. Please leave me."

"At least let me take you to a healer," the cloaked man said. "You look half dead."

"I've had worse," was the mulish reply. It wasn't untrue; he had come within inches of death just by walking out his front door, all those weeks ago.

"Be that as it may." Were his ears playing tricks on him, or did the man in the cloak sound amused? "I can hardly leave someone lying injured in an alley. Can you even walk?"

"I can walk." The runner sounded almost offended.

"Could have fooled me." The hooded stranger rose back to his feet. "Just come with me."

The runner hesitated, weighing his options. He wished he had a better view of this other man's face, but the hood obscured it. "All right, all right," he said at last, and struggled to sit up. Without

thinking, he reached upward with a silent request.

The cloaked figure hesitated, but after a moment he reached back as well to help him to his feet. His hand was cold, and he let go as soon as the injured one was standing.

Their pace was haltingly slow, hampered by the runner's weakness. He bore it stoically, gritting his teeth against pain and dizziness, but finally he stumbled and nearly fell. His benefactor caught him by the elbow to steady him, and drew back his hand as quickly as he could.

"Nearly there," he said, and walked on again.

"Thank you," the injured one murmured. "Er, where exactly is 'there'?"

"Do you have somewhere more pressing to be than a healer?"

"Er. Sort of." His already uneven steps faltered. "The men who attacked me—I was luring them away from my friends. I need to find them again, and..."

"You're no use to them dead." The hooded man slowed. "We're here."

The injured young man followed him to the front of a small building that smelled strongly of herbs and plants. After a brief knock, the door opened to reveal a tiny old woman whose head barely reached above either man's waist. Her eyes widened at the sight of them. Her knees bent, and she began to lower herself.

"Please don't," the hooded man said flatly.

"Oh—right. Bring him inside." She opened the door wider to admit them. The injured one limped in, but his hooded companion lingered at the door and pressed a small handful of coins into the old woman's hand.

"For your services," he said. "And your silence." With that, he turned away.

"W-wait!" the younger man called out. "I can't possibly—you—" But the other was already gone.

"No use fussing," the old woman advised. "He does this from time to time. Have a seat now."

Reluctantly, her patient sank into the chair she indicated with a grunt of pain. "Didn't ask him to pay for me."

"Can you pay for yourself?"

"W-well, I-I mean," he stammered. "I don't have any money, but..."

She tsk'ed lightly at him. "Well, I suppose you're just going to have to endure this cold, cruel random act of charity."

The young man looked away.

He could feel the old woman's gaze on him as she peeled back his shirt to inspect his injuries.

"Proud one, are we?"

"I don't like being a burden to anyone," he said awkwardly. "Especially if it means complete strangers having to drag me half-dead out of an alley and vanishing before I can properly say thank you."

The old woman paused just long enough to give him an odd look. “You... don’t know who it was who just helped you, do you?”

“Should I?” he asked, bewildered. “I’m a stranger here. I’ve only just arrived.”

“Hm. I suppose not, then. Hold still, dear, this will only take a minute or two.”

It was not quite dawn on the following day when a bell tolled from the highest tower of the palace.

The young runner, fully healed but unarmed, slowed to a halt and looked toward the noise, head cocked to one side curiously. He wasn’t far from the palace hill, but the ringing of the bell was deep and thunderous enough to reach even the edges of the city. The tones were low and sonorous, suspiciously like funeral bells.

His heart sank with dread. Was someone in this kingdom’s royal family ill, or worse? Besides being a great misfortune, that might well be ill news for his own mission, as well. Curious, he glanced around to see how the people in the streets reacted.

Even more curious. Rather than look to the sound of the bell, everyone within his sight simply lowered their heads and walked faster. Murmurs reached his ears, none of them loud enough to be understood.

He frowned thoughtfully. There were... odd rumors, coming from this kingdom. Perhaps this had something to do with them.

A thought struck him then. The ringing bell might arouse his companions’ curiosity as well as his. And if they went to investigate...

Ever hopeful, he changed his course and set out toward the palace. Few others were traveling in this direction; most of the people here seemed eager to keep their heads down and ignore the tolling bell. He quickened his pace to a light trot, ears pricked for trouble. There could be more enemies about, and this time he wouldn’t have a sword to defend himself.

The bell had gone silent by the time he neared the city center. It was an uphill walk; the city itself was clustered around a low hill, at the very top of which stood the palace, which could be seen from anywhere in the surrounding city. Craning his neck to see it, he sped up again. After turning another corner, he dropped his gaze to watch where he was going.

The streets opened up to a massive square at the foot of the palace hill. It was, in a word, beautiful. The stones of the street were intricately carved and well-polished, broken here and there by fine wooden boxes from which ornamental trees grew. A fountain shot water from the mouth of a pale stone fish, surrounded by statues of animals real and imaginary that reared or lay couchant. A stone wall surrounded the foot of the hill, broken only by a gilded gate at the foot of the wide path that led up to the palace proper. A pair of stone lions sat at either side of it, mouths open as if roaring. Not far from the gate stood a single stone arch with a gong hanging from it.

At this point, the square was fairly packed. A large crowd had moved in toward the gate, and it was only getting larger by the second. The stranger found himself shoved roughly a few times as more denizens of the city pushed toward the front. There was an air of excitement about them, but also one of tension and... fear?

A loud, booming voice pitched itself above the hum of the crowd. “Make way!”

At the cry, the stranger’s head whipped around to look, eyes wide. He craned his neck, but his

height had never been his strong point.

“For heaven’s sake, make way!” the voice came again. “Can’t you see this man is blind!”

“Watch it, you’ll trample him!” The second voice was higher-pitched, almost piercing.

Sticking out his elbows, the young man bulled his way through the crowd, following the voices but not daring to answer back. He craned his neck, searching desperately, and finally spotted them—three figures hemmed in by the excited townsfolk. The tallest, a rail-thin man with blond hair and bandages wrapped around his eyes, had stumbled and fallen, and his two younger companions were struggling to shield him from the crowd.

Someone shoved the young man’s back, sending him crashing into the taller of the two protectors, a bespectacled man in a battered breastplate. The man rounded on him, mouth open to shout him off, but their eyes met. The desperation on the armored one’s face gave way to relief.

“Your Hi—”

The shorter man meant to cover the other’s mouth with his hand, but misjudged the distance and ended up awkwardly smacking his chin instead. “S-sorry! Sorry, just—not so loud, Iida.” He struggled past him to where the blind man was struggling to rise with the help of the girl attending him. “F-father!” he called, careful not to shout too loudly. “Father, reach for my hand!” The older man whipped his head around at the sound of his voice, and reached a shaking hand toward him. The younger caught hold of it and helped steady him on his feet.

“I-is that you?” The blind man pulled his son toward him, reaching out with his free hand to touch him. “My boy, we’ve been looking *everywhere*—”

“We can catch up later!” the girl said urgently. “Iida, can you clear a path—owch!” Her head jerked forward when someone elbowed it as they passed.

“We’re not that far from the edge, but the crowd’s getting bigger,” the young man told them, still clinging to his father. “Iida, head back the way I came—”

“Make room for them!” A new voice cut through the air, clear and cold. Except—it wasn’t a new voice at all. It was quite familiar, in fact.

To the young man’s surprise, the crowd did part a little, and he wasted no time in pulling his father into the open space. A familiar hooded figure emerged into view, striding purposefully through the throng until he reached the young man’s side and passed him.

“Follow me,” he said, more quietly. “I can lead you out of this crowd.”

“Thank you,” the young man replied, guiding his father along in his wake. The girl beside him hesitated. “It’s all right, I think. Just follow him.” Iida joined them, and they formed a protective barrier around their blind charge.

Unfortunately, the crowd was a large one, and not everyone got the message. A few men, seeing the opening but not its cause, rushed out and nearly bowled them over.

“Watch out!” Iida warned them. “Can’t you see we’re trying to—”

“Piss off,” one of them snapped contemptuously. “If you’re not here for the beheading, then get out of the damned way or...” His voice trailed off; the cloaked one was back, and the rough man’s face was quickly draining of color.

The hood was still up, but in the jostling crowd it had been pulled back, revealing a young face with mismatched eyes, one so dark that it was nearly black, and one pale blue. A rough scar marred the blue-eyed side of his face, and the hair that framed it was split red and white. At the sight of that face, much of the closest crowd drew back further.

He halted before the speaker, apparently heedless of the fact that the man stood at least half a head taller than him. “You know damned well that the beheading doesn’t happen until the sun is rising, fool.”

“I-I...”

“Are you so eager to see another execution that you would trample over a blind old man for a place at the front?” the scarred man asked coldly. “There’s plenty of time left for you to bully your way forward.”

Cowed, the man and his companions retreated back to the crowd, leaving the little group to escape the rush.

At the edge of the square, the young man kept his hand on his father’s arm as they caught up to their strange helper. “That’s the second time you’ve come to my aid,” he said. “Thank you. If there’s anything I can do to repay you—”

“If it’s help you need,” the other cut him off. “Then help yourselves by leaving this city, and this kingdom. I can see that you’re strangers here, and I can tell you that this isn’t the sort of place you want to be.”

“What do you mean by that?” The words had barely left the young man’s mouth when the other man turned away and vanished back into the crowd.

“Odd fellow,” Iida remarked. “Are you all right, Uraraka? I saw someone strike you in the crowd.”

“I’ve had worse,” she replied.

The young man was about to speak when his father pulled him into a crushing hug that belied his gaunt frame. Relief flooded him as he returned the embrace with all his strength.

“I thought my heart would break, when Iida told me you had run away to draw off our attackers,” his father whispered. “When you didn’t come back by nightfall, I thought we’d lost you.”

“That was foolish of you,” Iida spoke up severely. “That’s the sort of job you leave to myself or Uraraka—you’re far too important, Your Highness.” He dropped his voice to a whisper at the end.

“You’re important, too.” The young prince pulled back to face his two friends. “Both of you. And don’t worry about me—I don’t intend on throwing my life away pointlessly. I took a calculated risk, that’s all.”

“Still.” His father felt his way to his face. “I’m happy to see you’re all right, Iz—”

“Sshh!” the young man hissed. He glanced around quickly, but luckily no one seemed to be within earshot. “We shouldn’t use my name, or yours. We don’t know if those men were alone. And besides, we’re technically in enemy territory here.”

“He’s right,” Iida said, his voice subdued for once. “The men who sacked our city and drove us into exile could have ears everywhere. And...” He shot a quick glance toward the palace on the hill. “King Enji has never been a friend to you, Your Maj—er. Ahem.”

“All right then—Deku,” Uraraka said briskly. “What’s our next move?”

“Keep a low profile, for now,” Deku replied. “The men that attacked us are... well.” His stomach turned. “I didn’t have a choice, but...”

His father squeezed his shoulder gently. “I’d rather have you alive, my boy,” he said.

“I know. Um. Anyway.” Deku shook himself. “Hopefully, the fact that you laid out, Iida, will be an advantage. We’ve been in conflict with Enji’s kingdom for years. If the assassins who tracked us this far are dead, then maybe no one else will think to look for us here. It should give us time to regroup. Find allies.”

“And maybe—maybe, if we’re careful,” his father added. “We might get word back to Aizawa that we still live.” He paused, and his sightless face turned briefly in the direction of the hill. “If it comes to it, I can seek an audience with Enji himself.”

“Is that wise?” Uraraka asked.”

“It’ll be dangerous,” the blind king admitted. “And he won’t help us for free. But if things become truly desperate, I will pay any price for a chance to save our kingdom.”

The bell tolled again.

A cry of anticipation went up among the crowd, and the four foreigners turned simultaneously to see what the fuss was about. The sun was rising over the hill.

“What is going on?” Uraraka muttered.

“A beheading, apparently,” Iida replied distastefully. His voice dropped further in volume. “I hope we don’t have to entreat this kingdom for aid. I don’t trust a place that treats death as entertainment.”

The front gates of the palace were opening. To the side of them, not far from the foot of the wall, was a stone platform. As the crowd watched, a man was led out in chains and marched up to the platform, where he was forced to his knees.

The palace hill was not a high one, and even from the distance Deku could see the man’s face. It was odd—that didn’t look like the face of a man that had committed a crime punishable by death.

“Poor wretch,” Iida muttered. “I wonder what he’s done.”

They were at the edge of the crowd, and the nearest spectator turned his head to look at Iida with a bitter smile. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

Surreptitiously, Uraraka reached out to give Iida a sharp warning nudge.

“Failed the prince’s challenge, is what he’s done,” the man went on, eyes narrowed scornfully. “His own fault, if you ask me. Everyone knows it’s impossible, and the punishment for failure is death.” He turned back to the spectacle. “The prince should be out shortly to watch the execution.”

It took a few minutes—up on the platform, the condemned man knelt and watched the crowd, and the executioner sharpened his ax. Eventually, a cry went up from the crowd.

“Right on schedule,” the spectator said. “There’s His Highness now.”

Deku lifted his head, scanning the scene for any sign of a newcomer. No one else had emerged

from the gates, so he looked to the walls and towers. There—on a balcony on the tower nearest the square, a figure had stepped out into view. Deku shaded his eyes against the glare from the rising sun and squinted. The prince was finely dressed in dark blue, trimmed with silver. The sun shone in Deku's eyes, forcing him to shut them when they stung.

A few scattered cries rang out from the crowd. "Your Highness, have mercy!"

"He's done nothing wrong!"

"He has such a kind face—please, he doesn't deserve this!"

"Have a heart, Prince Shouto!"

"Spare him!"

Deku felt a hand close on his arm—Uraraka's, who only ever gripped things with four digits unless she meant to make them fly. "Deku." Her voice was tight.

Eyes still watering from the glare, he looked to the balcony again, and felt his blood freeze in his veins. The sun had reached a point where its light touched the prince, shining down upon scarlet and white hair and a half-marred face.

"It's him!" Deku cried.

"Who?" his father asked. "What is it? What's going on?"

"The one who helped us out of the crowd," Deku replied. "Who—who helped *me*, last night, after the assassins injured me—that was Prince Shouto!"

Up on the platform, the executioner swung his ax. At the last moment, Deku looked to the prince on the balcony, and saw him avert his head before the blade struck home.

The condemned man slumped headless to the platform. A groan went up from the crowd.

"You all know the law!" A shout went up from somewhere in the square, from a voice that was rough and explosively loud. "Whoever beats the challenge marries the prince! Anyone who fails gets their head cut off! Now get the fuck out!"

"Nothing to see here!" another voice piped up.

"Move along, move along!" added a third.

There really was nothing left to see after that. The prince vanished from the balcony, and gradually the crowd began to disperse. The four foreigners were left standing toward the back, still shaken by what they had witnessed.

"How barbaric," Iida murmured, wisely keeping his voice low.

Uraraka gripped Deku's arm again. "Deku, what did you mean, he helped you yesterday? What happened when we were separated?"

As best he could, Deku related the events of the previous evening. All the while, his eyes never left the now-empty balcony.

"How very odd," Iida remarked. "That he would help a stranger in need, but callously see one of his own subjects killed for... what? That man mentioned a challenge. What do you think that was

about?”

Deku was still watching the tower window where the prince had vanished, barely listening. “Did you see his face?” he said in a hushed voice.

“What about his face—?” Uraraka stopped dead. “Oh god. Deku, no. Don’t even think about it.”

He turned to her. “Uraraka—”

“No, Deku.” She glared back at him. “I don’t care how pretty you think his face is, that is the *opposite* of keeping a low profile.”

“Uraraka, that’s not...” Deku’s voice trailed off as his eyes lowered back to the square. Among the crowd, a familiar figure walked—small, hunched, and seemingly feeble with age. The old woman shuffled past, shaking her head wearily, until she looked up at Deku’s frantic waving. She blinked, and her eyes lit up with recognition.

“You again,” she said, leaning on a stick as she went to join them. “Good to see you up and about, wounds healed.” She paused, casting a brief glance back at the palace hill. “Sorry you had to see that.”

“You dropped me a hint, before,” Deku said, kneeling to see eye to eye with her. “When he brought me to you injured. I didn’t realize at the time that he was the prince.”

“It’s a well-kept secret, among the little people like me,” the old woman replied. “Well. Not little like *me*, but... you get it.”

“Madam,” Iida stepped forward. “We are... simple travelers passing through, with little knowledge of the customs here. Would you mind explaining about... about what we just saw?”

“Ahh.” She nodded sadly. “Some years back, a challenge was issued from the palace. Any who could answer a series of three riddles would win the prince’s hand in marriage, and become ruler of this land alongside him. But any who failed to answer all of them would be sentenced to death.”

“That’s preposterous,” Iida said.

“And yet, the fools keep coming.” The old woman shook her head again. “By the dozens, sometimes. They march into the city, ring the gong three times, and then they fail and are executed at sunrise. That is the law.” A sharpness entered her eyes then. “Some say the prince is a cold one, to pose such a challenge, but I know better. That law comes from His Majesty, not the prince.”

“King Enji,” the blind king said softly. There was something to his tone that the others could not quite name.

She nodded. “He is a strong king. Perhaps too strong—there’s not a soul in this kingdom who doesn’t fear his wrath. And the people may gossip about the ‘cold prince’ but I know where this wretched challenge comes from.”

“His face...” Deku said softly.

The old woman sighed. “Ah. So you saw it, then.”

“How could I not?”

“Saw what?” Uraraka pressed. “What about his face?”

“He looked sad,” Deku said simply. “All alone up there, watching a man die. He looked... trapped.”

“He’s never spoken of why he likes to slip out of the palace and walk among the people,” the healer said. “But he doesn’t need to, I don’t think. Trapped by an oath like that, who wouldn’t want a breath of fresh air from time to time?”

Deku’s eyes fell upon the gong. A mad idea entered his head, and his mouth went dry.

“Three, you said?” he asked. “Three rings of the gong, and three riddles?”

Uraraka stiffened. “Deku—”

“My son.” The blind man’s hand closed tightly on Deku’s shoulder. “I know what you’re thinking, but you *mustn’t*. I’ve come close to losing you far too many times already.”

“*Riddles*, though,” Deku said. “I think I could do it. And Father—”

“You think *you* could do it? Fuck, that’ll be the fastest we’ve churned out another corpse yet!”

Deku recognized the voice as the one that had addressed the crowd after the beheading. He looked up sharply to see a trio of young men, roughly his own age, striding in. The speaker was rough-looking, with pale hair and angry red eyes. To his left was another young man with bright scarlet hair and a tiny scar over his right eye. To the right, the third had bright yellow hair and an easy smile on his face. All three were dressed in a similar uniform, marked with the crest of the royal family.

The red-haired one stepped forward, hands out in a placating manner. “Listen—what Bakugou’s trying to say is—Kaminari, you say it best.”

“You don’t have a chance in hell,” Kaminari said bluntly. “Dozens have tried. Hundreds, even.”

“Same result every time,” said the redhead.

“Every goddamn one of them’s dead as shit,” Bakugou snarled, glaring at Deku. “You ring that gong, and you can kiss your fat head goodbye.”

“I’m not sure it’s possible to kiss one’s own head,” Iida muttered.

“It’s obvious that something’s wrong here,” Deku said, spreading his hands wide. “This whole challenge sounds... fishy. Doesn’t anyone wonder why things are the way they are?”

“Well...” the redhead began.

“Shut up, Kirishima,” Bakugou snapped. “Look. We *work* in the damn palace and we barely know what the fuck’s going on.”

“Yeah,” Kaminari said. “All we know is that this challenge is pretty much impossible.”

“And it’s lucky we have that reputation at all,” Kirishima added. “We’d be getting challengers in droves, otherwise.”

“Besides,” Bakugou said, with a quick glare at the old healer woman. “You think the prince is a trapped little damsel in need of rescue? Well who the fuck do you think *wrote* the riddles?” He snorted. “Face it, he’s a cold fucking prince. Take it from someone who has to deal with him every day.”

"It's really better if you just go home," Kaminari said.

"No, there's more to this," Deku said stubbornly. "I know there is. A cold prince wouldn't walk among his people, or pull wounded strangers out of alleys." He looked up, eyes narrowing at the gong. "There's more to this, and if I could get to the bottom of it..."

"My boy," the blind man said, with a note of faint panic.

"Deku, *no*." Uraraka caught his arm again, but this time there was desperation in her voice. "You can't. You mustn't. We're all—" She shot a quick glance to the old woman and the trio of palace workers. "We're all in exile, remember? We've only survived this long because we stayed together, so *please*. Please don't do this."

"Let us protect you," Iida added. "That's our job, remember? Don't do this again."

"You have your job, I have mine," Deku said stubbornly.

This time, it was the blind king who caught hold of him, gripping him by the shoulders. "My son, please be reasonable," he said, his voice shaking. "I understand your feelings—truly, I do. But we must also look to our own. We can't solve every kingdom's problems if we can't even..."

"Maybe not," Deku replied. Reaching up, he gripped both of his father's hands. "But Father... if I were the sort of person that kept my head down and minded my own business, you would not have adopted me when you did."

"Son, please—"

"I trusted my instincts, then," Deku said. "So did you. So please... please trust them now."

The bandages over his eyes were dampening. "I can't lose you."

"I'll do everything I can to make sure you don't," Deku promised.

"Your fucking funeral," Bakugou said dryly. "Not that I care, just. Y'know. We're the ones who have to *plan* the damn thing."

Gently, Deku pulled free of his companions. "I have an idea," he said. "I don't know if it's a smart one, or a wise one. But I think it's a good one."

"Are you sure about this?" Uraraka asked, eyes wide with worry.

"No less sure then I've ever been about anything else."

"That's not an answer," Iida said flatly.

Deku grinned at him. "I guess not. Listen, you two—if this does go south, and I fail... protect him, all right?"

Then, turning, he crossed the square to the arch where the gong hung. A mallet hung at its side, and he seized it and hefted it in his hand. Then, with one last glance at his companions, he lifted it up and struck the gong square in the center.

The noise was deafening, but Deku gripped the mallet and struck a second time, and a third time. Then, ears ringing, he lifted his head toward the palace again.

Like rolling thunder, the reverberations seemed to reach every inch of the square. Long before they

began to die down, the familiar figure in dark blue appeared once more at the tower balcony.

The scarred face looked down to where the newest challenger stared up, and Deku imagined he could see recognition light up within it.

Act II: The Riddles

As per tradition, the riddles would be posed at moonrise. It was the king's mercy, Kirishima explained, with only the faintest look of irony when he said it. If a man was to die, then one may as well allow him the chance to enjoy his final day. Not many were blessed with that sort of foresight to their own deaths.

Or, Bakugou said cynically, the king's mercy was in giving some poor stupid idiot up to a full day to get wise and flee the city.

"Not much of a chance of that, I'm afraid," the blind king said softly. He was resigned. Not in despair yet, but Deku suspected that he was getting there. For his own part, Deku felt as if his heart was wound tight and ready to spring loose from his chest.

The old healer had gone home, but the three palace men still lingered. Deku eyed Bakugou for a moment, then caught another by the elbow—Kirishima.

"Could I have a word with you, later?" he asked. "If it's not too much trouble."

Kirishima hesitated, shooting a glance toward his two companions. "Well... I don't know how helpful I can be, but..."

"I just have questions, that's all," Deku said. "I can't force you to answer them."

"Well... all right." Kirishima nodded. "Meet me back here at noon, and I'll see what I can do." With that, he gently shrugged off Deku's hand and hurried to follow the others.

Deku rejoined his own companions, and immediately found himself trapped in Uraraka's tight embrace. "Is there any way I can possibly convince you not to do this?" Her voice was muffled against his chest.

Gently he returned the hug. "It's a little late for that now."

"I hope you know what you're doing, my boy," his father said gravely. "I truly do."

Iida remained silent, fists clenched as he avoided the others' eyes. With a sigh, Deku stepped away from Uraraka.

"Iida—"

"Ever since he took you in," Iida said. "Ever since he adopted you as his heir—I swore. I swore I would protect you with my every breath." When he turned to look at Deku again, his eyes were fierce with anger. "Why do you make it so difficult for me to fulfill that promise?"

"I can't be..." Deku looked around to check for eavesdroppers before continuing. "I can't be a good prince, and do my position justice, if I never take risks. You know that, Iida—"

"Of course I know that!" Iida snapped, then drew back a moment as if ashamed. "A prince who would risk his life for his kingdom is a prince worth following. But that's not what you're doing, Your Highness."

Deku tilted his head to the side. "Am I not?"

"What do you mean...?" Iida's voice trailed off when he saw the smile on Deku's face.

“Uh-oh,” Uraraka muttered.

“What?” the blind king said. “What do you—oh dear, he has that look on his face again, doesn’t he?”

“What are you plotting, Deku?” Uraraka asked. She perked up hopefully. “Do you have some kind of strategy for meeting this challenge?”

“Not really, no.” Deku’s hands curled into fists. “That part’s still up in the air. But... think about it.” He turned to them all, green eyes alight. “We’ve been in conflict with this kingdom for years, haven’t we? Quiet conflict, but quiet doesn’t mean we’re any closer to peace.” He stepped forward as he saw realization dawning in Iida and Uraraka’s eyes, and on his father’s face. “If I win this challenge, we have a chance to end that conflict.”

“The audacity,” his father muttered, lips pursed to keep back a smile. “I never considered peace through marriage, because I knew Enji would never agree to it.”

“But he’d have to, if I got it through his own game,” Deku said with a grin.

“Will he still agree to it when he finds out who we are?” Uraraka pointed out.

“A foul-tempered tyrant he may be,” the blind king said. “But he is still a king, and his oath is sacred. He would have no choice but to agree.”

A sly little smirk played about Deku’s lips. “I’d be willing to negotiate, of course, if he’s that opposed to it. I could offer to substitute a marriage for, oh, I don’t know, a peace treaty, and maybe a few battalions to help us take back a certain city?”

His father’s jaw dropped at this. “Why—you cheeky little—”

“Now hold on,” Iida broke in. “This is all very well and good, but... remember, plans like these are only possible if you complete this challenge. A challenge which, I don’t mind reminding you, is supposedly impossible.”

The smile slipped from Deku’s face, and before him the others’ faces turned somber once more. “Well... yes,” he admitted. “That’s... that’s the one thing I can’t plan for.” The look on his father’s face nearly broke his heart. “But what’s done is done. I took up the challenge, so I have to see it through. And it’s a chance. However slim, it’s still a chance, and remember that we came here with next to nothing.”

It was Uraraka who lifted her head first. “Well,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “It’s riddles, remember? Three riddles. And Deku, you’ve always been clever.” Her eyes shone with a fierce light. “If anyone can beat a challenge like that, it’s you.”

Iida heaved a sigh. “Heaven help me, but I’ve trusted you this long,” he said. “I’ll just have to trust you again.”

“You have preparations,” the blind king said. “Things you wanted to do? People you wanted to talk to?”

“A few,” Deku replied.

“Very well.” His father embraced him once more. “Come and see me, before you go to the palace at moonrise,” he said close to Deku’s ear. “Just in case... I want to hear your voice one last time.”

“I will.”

Kirishima was waiting for him in the square at noon, as promised. He looked nervous as Deku approached.

“I can’t tell you anything about the riddles,” he said. “Not the answers, not even what the questions are. We’ve been sworn to secrecy, and the king... he has ways of finding out if we go against him.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you about that,” Deku assured him. “And besides, like I said—whether or not you answer me is up to you.”

“Okay.” Kirishima uncrossed his arms and put his hands in his pockets. “What did you want to know?”

“Just a few things about the laws in this kingdom...”

“One last question, and then I’ll let you go,” Deku said. “Do you know of a place in this city where it’s... I don’t know, quiet? Peaceful? Not too many people around?”

Kirishima thought for a moment. “Well... there are libraries where it’s quiet, but if you’re looking for the least people... there’s a garden on the east side of the city, just past the clock tower. People don’t go there very often, because it’s close to the graveyard.”

“I see.” Deku gave him a lopsided grin. “Sounds like as good a place as any to contemplate my own mortality. Thank you for your help, Kirishima.”

“You seem nice,” Kirishima called after him as he walked away. “I bet you have people who would miss you, at home. Just... just think about them.”

“I do,” Deku replied over his shoulder. “Every day.”

The city was surprisingly easy to navigate, and he found his way to the garden that Kirishima described. Sure enough, it was silent. Very pretty, but utterly empty. Deku stepped onto a pebbled path, breathed in the flower-scented air, and simply wandered in his thoughts.

At certain points, the decorative plants and trees would part, and Deku could see, some distance away, the graveyard that Kirishima had told him about.

It looked to be getting a bit crowded.

Suppressing a shudder, Deku moved on. Near the center of the garden he found a small fish pond to sit by, with a decent view of the palace. With hopes high, he took a seat and settled in to wait.

He lost track of time, wondering about how his companions were faring, thinking of home, as the sky slowly darkened. It was getting on to early evening when his hopes were finally answered.

“You’re a fool.”

“And you’re a prince,” Deku replied, without turning his head. “If I’d known exactly who was dragging me out of a dirty alley, our first impressions might have gone a bit differently.”

“And if I’d known that you were here to take up the challenge, I would have left you.” Prince Shouto strode around the bench and stood facing Deku, drawn up to his full height. He was dressed like a commoner again, but his hood was down, revealing his distinctive face and hair. Deku

looked up to meet his eyes, and tried not to make it obvious when he caught his breath. Prince Shouto really did have a nice face, scar notwithstanding.

“In my defense, I didn’t come here with that intention,” Deku admitted. “I... actually didn’t know about that challenge until the beheading.”

The prince’s lip curled disdainfully. “So you decided you’d have me on a whim, then?”

Deku winced. “I wouldn’t say that,” he replied. “I thought about it very carefully, I promise.”

“Leave,” Shouto said flatly. “Go home while you still have your life.”

“It’s funny,” Deku said. “People keep telling me that, without bothering to ask if I still have a home to go to.”

The prince was silent.

“I like your eyes.” Deku wasn’t sure why he said that. It was certainly true; in the dimming daylight, the prince’s eyes shone dark on one side and pale on the other.

Prince Shouto bristled at this. On the ground by his right foot, a sheen of ice spread across the stone.

“Sorry.” Deku tried not to fidget. “So... are you always this nonchalant about people being blunt with you, or did the alley incident just make me special?”

“You think I can’t recognize an equal when I see one?”

It was Deku’s turn to stiffen.

With a quiet huff, Prince Shouto lowered himself to sit with him, as far away as the bench permitted. “I suspected. And then when I saw you by the gong, and how you held yourself and met my eyes, I was sure.” He scowled. “It’s frustrating. I can tell you’re a prince, but I have no idea who you are or where you’re from.”

Deku grinned. “I’ll tell you after I win your challenge.”

“Then I suppose I’ll never find out.”

Deku quieted for a moment. “Bakugou... said you’re the one who writes the riddles. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“You must be clever, then, to make them so difficult.” Deku tilted his head. “You don’t strike me as a cheater.”

“I don’t have a choice.” Prince Shouto glared at him. “Do you know what usually happens when people hear about an impossible challenge that punishes failure with death? They stay away. They keep their sons and daughters close in their own kingdoms, instead of letting them run off to their deaths.”

“That... makes a lot of sense,” Deku said.

“And, if I make them horribly difficult, I stay... myself.” Prince Shouto’s face darkened. “I’ve already got a fine pair of shackles, and I don’t need or want another.”

“Are you sure?” Deku asked cautiously. “I would think that a good match might give you a chance at... at freedom.”

“Then you’re an even bigger fool than I thought.”

“Am I?” Deku gave him a skeptical look.

The prince eyed him coldly. “These ‘suitors’ like you come from far and wide, men and women who don’t know a damned thing about me except that I have half a pretty face and a throne in my future. I know very well what you’re after, and thank you, but I’ll take my chances with the man who I can at least count on outliving.”

Deku winced. “And yet you’ve been trying to convince me to leave, so I don’t die.”

He was watching Prince Shouto’s face as he said this, and saw, for a brief instant, the pain laid bare. “The throne I’m going to inherit is already a bloody one. The more deaths I can keep off my conscience, the better.”

“But... what if, just once, you were wrong?” Deku asked. Prince Shouto didn’t answer. “What if someone came along who wasn’t looking for wealth or power or a trophy husband? What if someone came along who could love you?”

“And what if the moon fell from the sky and crushed the palace beneath it?” The prince’s voice dripped with contempt. “If we’re going to talk about impossible things, then why limit ourselves?”

“No need to make fun. I was being serious.”

“Clearly not as serious as I am,” Prince Shouto retorted. “Fairy tales aren’t real, and if they were, my life wouldn’t be one of them.”

“Are you sure?” Deku asked. “Plenty of fairy tales begin with misfortune.”

His companion didn’t even dignify that with an answer.

Deku suppressed the urge to sigh. “Are you always this open with challengers?”

“No. But it’s not as if it matters.” Prince Shouto rose from the bench. There was more ice on the ground by his right foot, but he put his left near it, and it melted to water and steam. “You’ll flee the city, or you’ll be dead by morning. Either way, it’s not as if I’m ever going to see you again.” He looked to the sky. “It’ll be night in just a few hours. It’s not too late, you know—I could still help you and your friends escape the city.” He met Deku’s eyes in the gathering dusk. “Last chance.”

“I have to refuse,” Deku said. “I’m sorry, Prince Shouto. But... you’re not the only prince who’s been driven to desperate measures.”

Those lovely eyes narrowed into slits. “My mercy ends here—you’ll meet the same challenge that all the others have.”

Deku smiled at him. “Then may the best man win.”

“I’m fucking sick to death of this shit.”

The palace halls echoed with Bakugou’s heavy footfalls, offset by Kirishima and Kaminari’s comparatively lighter steps.

“So you’ve said,” Kirishima muttered, tugging at his palace uniform to straighten it. “Hey Kaminari, how are the wedding arrangements coming along?”

Kaminari shrugged. “I mean there’s not much to it, they’re just sort of continuing off of yesterday’s planning. And the funeral arrangements?”

“Basically recycling the leftovers from this morning,” Kirishima replied. “Maybe on the next one we’ll actually have time to draw straws on who gets to do which.”

“How many this year?” Kaminari asked.

“Five, so far,” Kirishima answered. “Not quite one per month. It’s an improvement. I heard they came in droves, the first year the challenge was issued.”

“People know better now,” Kaminari said darkly.

Bakugou glared at a palace guard standing at attention as they passed, keeping silent until they were out of earshot of him. “I swear, one of these days I’m gonna blow this place to hell myself.”

“Good luck with that,” Kaminari sighed. “The king is powerful, but he’s clever most of all. And he has plenty of guards at his disposal.”

“His royal wealth makes them loyal,” Kirishima added. “If we were paid that high, maybe we’d be loyal too.”

“The hell I would,” Bakugou snarled.

“Besides,” Kaminari said. “He pays us exactly what he needs to: by letting us live, and even work for him, even though we’re refugees from King Toshinori’s realm—”

Kirishima covered his friend’s mouth with his hand. “Watch what you say—you know King Enji hates hearing that name.”

Bakugou sneered. “Only because he’s pissed that someone else invaded our kingdom and sacked the royal city before he got the chance.” He shrugged, resisting the urge to spit on the floor. “Once our king has his shit together and it’s safe to go home again, then we’re out.”

“I hope so,” Kirishima said wistfully. “It would have been nice to be able to meet the prince.”

Kaminari looked at him, startled. “Wait, then King To—uh, you-know-who actually chose an heir before the invasion started? I thought he was just a rumor.”

“Nope.” Kirishima grinned. “And that’s not all—Bakugou says he used to know him, when they were kids.”

“Really?” Kaminari turned his wide eyes to their friend. “What was he like?”

“He was a stupid crybaby,” Bakugou said through clenched teeth. “Useless, too. I have no fucking idea what our king saw in him.”

“You sound a little biased, there,” Kaminari chuckled. His laughter trailed off, and he sighed. “This is making me homesick.”

“It might not be so bad here, if someone actually won,” Kirishima said. “What about this new challenger? What do you think of him?”

Bakugou stiffened, but didn't answer.

"A little ragged, but sometimes they're like that," Kaminari replied with a shrug. "King Enji never said the challenge was only for the high-born, so sometimes common people come to try their luck."

"He seemed pretty sharp," Kirishima remarked. "He was asking questions earlier—nothing about the actual challenge, just... about this kingdom, and its laws, and a little about the king. I don't know, I got the feeling that he was on to something I wasn't."

"Well, then maybe he'll get the first riddle right," Kaminari said. "Some do."

"Or worse, he'll answer the first two but not the third," Kirishima groaned. "I really hate getting my hopes up like that."

"Well, brace yourself," Kaminari advised, as the trio approached the main entrance to the palace. "Because it's moonrise now, and it's time to take him to the throne room."

Bakugou growled softly to himself, hands sparking as he held back his own power. "If he's really smart, then he won't be standing out there when we open those doors."

The doors were flung open, and a familiar diminutive figure stood there, plainly dressed and still scruffy from the road. At the sight of them, he put on a bright smile. "I'm not late, am I?"

Bakugou surprised the others by grabbing the newest challenger by the scruff of the neck and yanking him in.

"I'd like a fucking word," he hissed under his breath.

"Uh, Bakugou?" Kirishima said uncertainly.

The smile was still fixed on the challenger's face. "It's fine," he said. "Won't take a minute."

Scowling, Bakugou dragged the young man to a secluded alcove, out of sight and earshot from any prying guards. Shoving him into the space, he rounded on him furiously.

"Deku, what the *fuck* do you think you're playing at?"

At this, Deku's shoulders slumped slightly, and his smile turned nervous. "H-hello, Kacchan," he said quietly. "It's, um. Been a while. S-so you got out of the city before—"

"Deku," Bakugou growled warningly. "What the *fuck*."

"Please don't say anything," Deku gritted out, eyes wide. He poked his head out of the alcove, checked for eavesdroppers, and ducked back in again. "It'll come out eventually, but until then, you need to pretend you don't know me."

"I thought you were supposed to be the fucking prince," Bakugou whispered furiously. "What the fuck are you doing here when you should be out leading armies with the king—" He broke off, red eyes wide. "Fuck. That blind man—the feeble one—you called him *father*. Are you telling me—?"

"He was injured in our escape," Deku told him. "He nearly died, but—that's why we're here. We're hoping All For One won't think to look for us in hostile territory."

"Okay, whatever, I don't give a shit," Bakugou bared his teeth. "What the hell are you doing taking this fucking suicide challenge?"

“Taking a gamble,” Deku answered. “It’s a dangerous one, and—there’s no time, I can’t explain everything.” His green eyes locked with Bakugou’s. “I know we haven’t gotten along for years, but I need you to trust me on this.”

“Like I have a choice,” Bakugou spat.

“The other two—they’re from our kingdom, too?”

Bakugou’s glare sharpened. “Yeah. And our position is really fucking treacherous right now, so you’d better not get them killed, Deku.”

“Listen to me,” Deku said. “This will go one of two ways. Either I pass or I fail. If I fail, you have a chance to leave here. My father will be waiting for me with two of the Guard—can you tell them what happened to me?”

“Like I’ll need to,” Bakugou spat.

“If you can, go with them,” Deku went on, heedless. “My father could use someone with your strength, Kacchan. And if I pass—”

“Which is a pretty gigantic goddamn ‘if’.”

“If I pass,” Deku repeated, “then I’m going to have to reveal myself. And for what comes after that…” He pursed his lips worriedly. “Depending on how it goes, it might be best if you aren’t in the room for that.”

“Fine. Good. Whatever. Anything else?” Bakugou glared at him, disgruntled. “We can’t stall any longer.”

“That’s all,” Deku told him. “Thank you, Kacchan.”

“Don’t fucking call me that,” Bakugou snapped. “We don’t know each other, remember?” He stepped out of the alcove and let his voice rise again. “Get moving. The king and prince don’t like being kept waiting.”

“Understood,” Deku replied. “Sorry to trouble you.”

Under his breath, Bakugou added, “If we survive this, you owe me, Deku.”

Bakugou, Kirishima, and Kaminari said little as they led Deku to the throne room. For his part, Deku kept silent as he watched their backs. Seeing them here left him with mixed feelings; on the one hand, he was happy that at least some of his countrymen had escaped the invasion and were out of reach of All For One’s forces. On the other, Bakugou had made it clear that they were still on dangerous ground.

It must have killed Bakugou to be civil to an enemy this long.

The doors to the throne room were thrown open, and the trio strode in with Deku in tow, stopping to bow deeply.

“Presenting His Majesty, King Enji,” Kirishima called out. “And His Highness, Crown Prince Shouto, heir to the throne.”

Deku followed in their example and bent in a low bow as he entered. When he rose again, he found himself looking at the throne, and the king that sat upon it.

He had heard stories of King Enji's mastery of fire, but it was one thing to hear of it and another entirely to see a man dressed in royal finery and wreathed in flames. They wrapped around his shoulders, trailed from his arms, and even obscured parts of his face. Embers blazed in his crown like living jewels. Shadows danced across the walls, and it took Deku's eyes a moment to adjust to the flickering light. When he did, he looked upon King Enji's face, straining to see past the flames that masked it.

It was the face of a hard man. A cruel man. Deku felt his heart sink as he looked briefly into the king's baleful eyes, but he kept his back straight and forced himself to show no fear.

Prince Shouto stood to the side, hands locked behind his back. His plain cloak and drab city clothes were nowhere to be seen; now he stood in blue and silver once more, chin held high with cold pride.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness," Kaminari said. "We present to you this day's challenger... er..." He looked to Deku, sheepish. "Do you have a name?"

Deku took a deep breath, fighting to calm his beating heart. "Do I need one?" he asked, with a steadiness that he did not feel. "Everyone tells me I'll be dead by sunrise either way."

"Heh." It was not a laugh, but a quiet grunt of cold amusement. King Enji's voice was deep and harsh. Deku looked at his bright face again, and saw the king sizing him up with contempt in his eyes. "And why does a ragged stray like you think he has a place in my throne room?"

"I am here to take the trial," Deku replied. "I heard your challenge, and I am answering it. If I have a place here, it is by your invitation, Your Majesty."

The king's eyes narrowed. He was silent for a moment, still sizing up Deku from his perch on the throne. "Your impudence is familiar to me, boy," he said. "I will enjoy seeing you beheaded." He raised a hand and waved dismissively. "Shouto."

The prince stepped forward, hands dropping to his sides. In one he held a rolled-up scroll.

"Another lamb you have led to the slaughter, Shouto," King Enji said. "A clever little boy like you, willing to die for a chance at your hand. High praise, wouldn't you agree?"

A line of hard tension ran across the prince's shoulders.. "If this is praise, then I prefer insults."

"Where is your gratitude, Shouto? Does this challenge not show how loved you are?" The king's face was unreadable. "Dozens, even hundreds, all dying for you."

The prince's eyes burned. "Love is a lie," he said coldly. "You taught me that well enough, Father."

"Indeed. Forget fire and ice, Shouto. Your cleverness is your deadliest weapon." King Enji sat back. "Watch now as your riddles claim another life."

Deku felt his hands curling into fists. "Your Majesty, by your own law, is it not the king who has the sole right to pass a death sentence?" he said, before he could stop himself. "I'm not sure that the riddles are the deadliest thing in this room."

"It won't make much difference to you, when my executioner removes your head." The king's voice had taken on a dangerous tone.

It was a battle just to keep his face blank. "It doesn't have to be this way," Deku said quietly.

“It is law,” the king replied.

“It is *your* law, Your Majesty,” Deku answered. He turned his eyes to the prince once more. “What do you think of it, Prince Shouto?”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” Prince Shouto told him. “All I have to do is wait. I walk through hell until it passes. That is all.”

“But it doesn’t have to be that way,” Deku repeated. “I can end it. I promise, I’ll try to end it.”

“You will *not*.” Even from the distance, Deku could feel the air turn cold, and something sparked from the prince’s left side. His eyes burned with something very close to fear. “I will not be shackled by anyone—least of all you.”

“I mean you no harm,” said Deku. “I’d like to help, if I can.” He smiled, unwavering in the face of the cold prince and the burning king. “Things will get better. Just have faith, and they’ll get better.”

“Funny,” Prince Shouto replied. “My mother said the same thing to me, when I was a child. Did you ever hear about what happened to her?”

Deku’s mouth went dry. “No, Your Highness.”

“It doesn’t matter,” the prince said flatly. “Anything you heard would only have been lies anyway. Barely a year after she told me that, her husband’s cruelty had driven her out of her mind. In her madness, she burned my face.”

No amount of forced calm could keep back Deku’s soft gasp of horror. The prince’s eyes pierced him, so cold that it burned Deku’s to look at them.

“I will not allow anyone to take away my mind the way my father destroyed hers,” Prince Shouto said, as ice spread from along his right sleeve like swirling embroidery.

“Shouto.” The king’s menacing voice curled through the air. “You would do well to hope that he dies in the morning. Otherwise I will be *very* upset.”

Fear flickered in the prince’s eyes, and Deku felt his blood boil.

“Enough time has been wasted,” Prince Shouto said, bracing himself. He met Deku’s eyes once more. “Your affairs are in order, I hope.”

Deku spread his hands, willing them not to shake with his held-back fury. “Ask away, Prince.”

Prince Shouto took a breath, and began.

“A fleeting phantom born at night,

When all the light has gone—

Blind men follow in its wake,

Until it dies at dawn.”

An answer came almost immediately. “The mo—no.” Deku pressed his lips together, before speaking once more under his breath. “No, no, it’s not the moon. That was the first thing that popped into my head, and it’s never the first thing that pops into your head. First rule of riddles, that. Besides, blind men couldn’t very well follow the moon, now could they?” He frowned, tilting his head to one side. “Riddles are steeped in metaphor, though. Not a literal night, then. Night, darkness, dark times, difficult times. And dawn is when the difficult times end, so what... what arrives in difficult times, and leaves when they are over? Hardship? Despair? No, no, those aren’t fleeting and they aren’t phantoms. Born at night, dies at dawn... what do difficult times bring... blind men...”

He thought of his father, embracing him at the bottom of the hill, wishing him luck, trusting him, believing in him, because after all this time, after the pain of losing his sight and having his city sacked, he still had...

Deku’s eyes lit up, bright and wide. “Hope,” he said. “The answer is hope. It is born when times are dark, but when the darkness passes and there is no more need of it, it leaves.” He smiled at the prince. “And I wouldn’t say that only blind men follow it, but... maybe you would.” He waited on bated breath.

The prince stared back at him, shocked. The king was frowning.

“Well fuck me,” Bakugou said in a hushed voice.

“Told you he’d get the first one,” Kaminari said.

The scroll still hung unused in the prince’s hand as he spoke again. “Very well. The second riddle, then—

“A prisoner runs cold and hot,

As bold as flame, and yet is not.”

This time, Deku’s first thought was the very man who stood before him. A prisoner certainly, and his power was both cold and hot. Once more he held back that answer and thought of the words.

“Tricky one,” he muttered. “Very tricky. Shorter riddles are always harder—they give fewer clues. Cold and hot, cold and hot...”

“How long will we have to listen to your prattle?” the king snapped. “Stalling will not save you. If you do not know the answer, then—”

“I beg your patience, Your Majesty,” Deku gritted out, blood boiling once more at the tyrant’s voice. “This is part of my process.”

Wait.

Blood boiling.

It was certainly true. The blood in his veins felt warm now, heated by his anger. And earlier that morning, had it not frozen when he recognized the prince in the tower as his rescuer?

Hot and cold.

Bold as flame—fire was red, was it not? The king certainly gave him a decent frame of reference.

And a prisoner—was blood not imprisoned in his veins?

Swallowing against the dryness in his mouth, Deku took the gamble. “The answer is blood, my prince,” he said.

King Enji was leaning forward now. The prince was stepping back. He looked overwhelmed—afraid, even. It hurt Deku to see his fellow prince look at him with such fear.

“I told you I was afraid of this,” Kirishima muttered.

“I’m impressed,” Prince Shouto said. For the first time, he sounded more shaken than anything else. “Truly, I am. Very few have gotten this far.”

“He will go no further, Shouto,” the king growled. “Remember your own words—hope is for blind men. This one will die like all the others.”

“Don’t worry, Father,” the prince said, without even looking back at him. “My hope died when you took Mother away.”

This time, he did unroll the scroll in his hand. Deku wondered at that—the third riddle was the only one he did not know by heart.

“A coward heart bleeds poison,

So trust not your foolish eyes—

As cold as ice but burns like flame,

And all it touches dies.”

There was no muttering this time. This time, Deku simply stared at the prince, speechless and pale with growing horror.

Silence stretched in the throne room, moment by moment, until King Enji let out a low chuckle.

“And to think I was nearly worried,” he said, rising from his throne. His mantle of flame threw the shadows on the walls into a frenzy. “Is your mind finally blank, little stranger?” He raised his voice. “Guards!” The throne room doors opened once more, and armored footsteps echoed in the halls.

Behind him, Deku heard Bakugou curse, and it jarred him out of his daze. “Wait!” He stepped forward, blinking against the stinging in his eyes. “Wait. I apologize, I was just... shocked. That’s all. I understand now.” He looked to the prince as his vision began to blur. “I understand why so many have failed. They really were blinded, weren’t they? By wealth, or power, or... or beauty.” Prince Shouto stared at him, incredulous. “So many of them... they were only focused on what *they* wanted, weren’t they? They never tried to see things through your eyes, even though you were the one who made these riddles. Prince Shouto...” He blinked away the haze of tears. “Is... is that really how you see yourself?”

The scroll slipped from the prince's nerveless hand, and clattered to the throne room floor. It rolled open, displaying the three riddles inked out in a skillful script. Beneath each of them was written the answer.

HOPE.

BLOOD.

TODOROKI SHOUTO.

Silence stretched beyond that. Then—

“Holy *shit*,” Bakugou muttered.

A slow smile spread across Deku's face. With a swift motion he wiped his eyes and hid his crushing relief. That was the unknown factor, passed with flying colors. It was now that his ideas could begin.

The king stormed down from his throne, flames leaping higher in his fury. Shouto was quick to recover from his shock and draw back, well out of his father's way.

“No,” King Enji snarled. “Impossible. I would burn this city to the ground myself before I let some ragged tramp off the streets near my throne.” He loomed over Deku, forcing him to step back to keep from being burned.”

“You are a king, Your Majesty,” Deku reminded him in a low voice. “Your oath is sacred.”

Deku could hear crackling—either flames, or the king's knuckles popping. “No! It is too soon, damn you!”

“Too soon?” Deku kept his head down and fought to keep his tone meek. “Too soon for what, Your Majesty?”

“Too soon for his trap to ensnare its intended prey,” the prince spoke up, stepping forward once more. His facade of icy composure was wearing thin. “There were rumors that his greatest enemy had a secret heir—”

The king aimed an offhand cuff at his son, forcing him back. “I would have taken everything from him,” he said, seething. “First his child. And then, in his despair, I would have taken his kingdom as well. And now I've had *both* chances taken from me!”

Deku's blood, as it said in the riddle, ran cold. There was only one enemy that Enji could be speaking of.

A trap for me, he realized. All along, this has been a trap for me.

He was still on dangerous ground, it seemed.

A quick glance over his shoulder told him that Bakugou, Kirishima, and Kaminari were nowhere to be seen. There were guards by the door, but they were well out of reach. Prince Shouto was hiding fear and uncertainty behind a cold facade. He could not be assured of any allies here.

But perhaps...

“You don't need to worry,” he said, looking to the prince. Prince Shouto blinked at him, looking every bit as wary as a cornered dog. “It's marriage you're afraid of, isn't it? I'm not... really

looking to get married either, to be honest. Not for wealth or thrones or anything.”

“What?” The prince’s coldness gave way, and he gaped openly. “Then why the hell did you take the challenge in the first place?”

“A number of reasons,” Deku replied. “But most of all, I saw your face at the execution this morning. You looked so unhappy. I thought I might try breaking the cycle.”

Before him, the King calmed once more, though Deku knew very well that he was still tense and displeased. “Well. In that case, these things can be fixed, I suppose.” His eyes narrowed. “Name your price.”

It was Deku’s turn to gape. “I... beg your pardon?”

“It is a simple solution,” King Enji went on dismissively. “Tell me a number, and I will buy your silence for that price. Someone will be executed in your place, and this night never happened.”

Deku lost his temper then. “If you do that, Your Majesty, then I will march through your city streets, throwing your gold to the people and shouting the riddles’ answers at the top of my voice, while naming you an oathbreaker. I have not insulted your sense of honor, so please do not insult mine.”

The king’s eyes flashed. His mantle of fire blazed toward the ceiling. “Impudent *wretch*—”

“Wait!” Prince Shouto stepped in once more. “Wait, Father, he’s right. The oath...” He took a deep breath. “The oath is sacred. The challenge has been won, and—”

“Hang the challenge,” King Enji snarled, and Shouto flinched back when his father rounded on him. “It was to be a *trap*, you idiot boy.” He stepped forward, and the prince stepped back. “Your riddles were supposed to be unbeatable, and some *vagabond* walked in and—”

There was something about the sight that pushed Deku beyond boiling blood and fists that dug nails into his palms. He saw the prince’s eyes, and the king’s cruelty, and threw caution to the wind.

“Before you punish him, King Enji, your trap worked.” The words were out before he could think to stop them. The king froze in his tracks, and slowly turned back to him. Deku stepped forward. “I imagine the rumors you heard were just that—rumors. My father only named me his heir recently, and told no one when he did. He never got the chance.” He spread his hands wide. “Well, I am here, King Enji. And I have beaten your challenge anyway.”

He waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

“I would rather die,” King Enji said quietly. With each word, his voice grew to thunder. “I would rather die a thousand terrible deaths than see my kingdom in the hands of any child of that bastard!”

“I have played your game,” Deku went on. “I have won by terms you set. I can even offer you an alternative. Will you not even listen? My father says you are an honorable man. Please—if you listen to my terms, we might both benefit from this.”

King Enji’s eyes blazed with hatred.

“We swore an oath,” the prince reminded him. “Our oath is sacred.”

“My throne is sacred,” the king snarled, rounding on him again.

“Fine then,” Deku said, seeing the king still undecided. “Will another chance convince you? One more chance for you to win, and if I still beat you, then you accept my terms.” He stepped forward, praying that his legs would not shake. “You like riddles, don’t you, Your Majesty? Then I have one for you. Not three, just one.” He met the king’s eyes. “You’ve only had rumors to go on that I even existed. You know nothing about me. No one does—not even my own countrymen. So here is my riddle: tell me my name by sunrise, and you may execute me as planned. If not, then you listen to my terms, you set your son free from this oath, and you end this murderous game.”

“Done,” the king said immediately, and made a swift motion with his arm.

Gauntleted hands closed on Deku’s arms, forcing them back to painful angles. King Enji’s guards had moved in and seized him.

“We have a long night ahead of us, I imagine,” the king said. “Or perhaps a short one. My torturers are quite inventive.”

Fear threatened to consume Deku’s heart, but in an instant, cold fury had overtaken it. He met the king’s eyes, unblinking. “Treachery when we’ve barely started, Enji? My father was wrong about you. You wouldn’t know honor if it jumped up and bit you.”

“I look forward to learning your name, boy.” He motioned once more to the guards. “Take him away.” He turned on his heel. “Go with them, Shouto—and if he tries any magic, make him swallow it.”

For a moment, the prince hesitated. Then, ducking his head, he moved to join the guards. “Yes, Father.”

The walk down to the dungeons was much longer than the initial walk to the throne room. Deku wasn’t sure if this was due to distance, or the fact that he fought tooth and nail at every step. He kept his power locked inside—no use using it here, so close to the king and his own power over fire.

Throughout the journey, he kept his eyes open for Bakugou and his friends. But they were nowhere to be seen—Deku could only hope that they had fled the palace already.

The palace grew colder, the lower they went. Fine polished floors became rough stone, and Deku realized that his window for escape was rapidly closing. If he was going to make a move, then he needed to do it soon. There were seven guards in all, and he could escape them easily, but the prince...

Would the prince stop him?

“You’ll make it easier for yourself if you give him what he wants,” Shouto said suddenly. “You can at least have a peaceful night.”

“I might still have that anyway,” Deku said, his tone deceptively light. “I have a very high pain tolerance, you know. I’m told it scares people.”

Shouto watched him, eyes unreadable. “Are you mad?”

“Absolutely, ask anyone,” Deku replied. “And thank god for that, otherwise I’d never get anything done.” He dug his heels into the stone as he looked at Shouto again. “What about you, Shouto? How mad are you?”

The other prince was silent.

His answer came when they arrived at a crossing of corridors, and Prince Shouto spoke at last.

“Might want to lift your feet,” he said.

“Your Highness?” one of the guards said quizzically.

Shouto locked eyes with Deku. “I said, lift your feet.”

Deku did that, and more. Power crackled through his body, and he launched himself upward right as Shouto’s foot slid swiftly along the stone floor. Ice burst forth, rising up to trap the legs of the nearest guards. Deku landed harmlessly, slipping on the ice but not encased in it.

“Your Highness, stop!” one of them called out. “Your father will punish you—” He stopped talking when the ice reached his neck.

In the narrow hallway, not all of the guards had been ensnared. One of them gathered his wits and raised a crossbow. The string twanged, and more followed.

Using the trapped guards as springboards and stepping stones, Deku launched himself at the other prince. With power lending him strength and speed, he caught Shouto around the waist and sent them both hurtling free of the cluster of guards. He felt cold air against his back, heard an ominous creaking, and looked back to see a thick wall of ice blocking the entire corridor. Skidding to a halt, he released Shouto and caught his breath.

“Sorry about the rough handling,” he said, and found the other prince watching him again.

“My father told me about the power of King Toshinori,” he said. “You really are his son.” He blinked, and for a moment he looked almost awkward. “...You don’t look it.”

“I’m adopted,” Deku answered. “Where to now?”

Shouto caught him by the elbow and pulled him along. “This way. Hurry.” Deku rushed to follow, only to slow when he realized that the other prince was leading him further down rather than back up the way they had come. Shouto, noticing this, matched his pace. “You can’t get out through the main entrances, but there’s another way out of the palace. I don’t think he’s found it yet, or he would have sealed it off to keep me from going out into the city.”

“A hidden exit?” Deku sped up again. “I was wondering how you got from the square to the palace so quickly this morning.”

“It’s not far. That’s... part of why I waited so long to stop the guards.” Shouto touched his shoulder. “Here.”

It was a small storage chamber close to the dungeons, mostly unused from the looks of it. Deku nearly sneezed from the dust as Shouto led him inside and shut the door. A tall cabinet stood against one wall, and the prince threw it open with one hand and pulled a key from around his neck with the other. Moments later, the back of the cabinet swung open like a door, revealing the mouth of a tunnel and a flight of stairs leading down into the dark.

Prince Shouto plucked a torch from a wall sconce and, with a look of distaste, lit it with his left hand before passing it to Deku. “This tunnel leads out to the square,” he said. “It won’t be safe, because he’ll have the guards out looking for you the moment he realizes what I’ve done, but at least you’ll be out of the palace.”

“Thank you,” Deku said softly.

“Survive.” The prince locked eyes with him. “You survive until morning, do you understand me? I don’t know what will happen then, but... but I’d like to find out.”

“What about you?” Deku’s heart clenched. “Will he—will you—?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shouto said coldly.

“Of course it matters—”

“*Go.*”

Deku moved to obey, but paused one last time and turned back. His free hand found the back of Shouto’s head and gently drew him close, until their foreheads were touching. Deku could feel the other prince’s power against his skin—cold on one side, and warm on the other. “You’re not a coward.”

Shouto went still. “What?”

“You’re not a coward, Shouto.” Deku shut his eyes, willing him to listen. “You’re a survivor, and that’s not the same thing. You’ve lived your whole life with him, and you haven’t let him turn you cruel. You haven’t let him steal your kindness. Despite everything he’s tried to do, you’re still you. That makes you *strong*, Shouto.” He pulled back, just far enough to raise his head and press his lips to the prince’s forehead. “Good luck. I won’t waste this chance you’ve given me.”

Without another word, he turned and plunged into the dark.

Act III: None Shall Sleep

Chapter Notes

I did not expect to get art for this story, but I did, and I am [laughing my ass off](#) you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The tunnel led out of an old shed at the edge of the square. Deku nudged the door carefully ajar, checked for guards, and finally slipped back out into the open. Tossing the torch into the fountain, he scanned the square until at last he spotted the familiar figures of his companions, clustered together and watching the palace gates.

He tried not to run too quickly, not wanting to look suspicious or draw attention to himself, and finally managed to sidle close enough to sprint the rest of the way under the cover of darkness.

“I have some good news, and some bad news,” he said, nearly startling the life out of Uraraka.

“Deku! W-what—how did you—where did—?”

His father caught hold of him, looking dazed with relief. “You’re alive. My son—does that mean...?”

“What happened?” Iida asked.

“The good news is, I answered all the riddles,” Deku went on, watching the palace on the hill for any sign of activity. “The bad news is, King Enji found out who I am, and... he isn’t happy about it.”

“Well we knew he wouldn’t be,” Iida pointed out. “But if you passed the trial anyway, then his happiness doesn’t enter into it.”

“Normally that would be true, but it turns out we may have underestimated his hatred for us.” Deku clenched his teeth. “I think he would have killed me on the spot, but I bought time by extending the game.” He saw them opening their mouths, surging forward to question him, and shook his head furiously while grasping his father’s arm to forestall interruptions. “I don’t have much time. The king has to guess my name by sunrise. So until then—you know nothing of me. We’ve never met.” At the top of the hill, guards were emerging from the palace. “I have to go.”

“Your Highness—” Iida warned.

“He tried to torture the answer out of me the moment I named my challenge,” Deku hissed back. “And he would have, if Shouto hadn’t helped me escape. If they find out you know me, he’ll try to do the same to you.” He looked around once more, checking for approaching guards. “I’m sorry. It’s all gone wrong—just stay ahead of them until sunrise.”

“We’ll split up,” Uraraka said. “Iida, stay with the king. Let’s go, Deku.”

Deku blinked, startled. “Wait—but it’d be better if—”

“No buts,” she snapped. “Clearly you need a bodyguard, so let’s go.”

“I’ll protect your father with my life,” Iida said fiercely.

“We’ll see you again at sunrise,” the king added, releasing his son reluctantly. “Good luck.”

As guards began to rush down the hill, the nameless prince and his single guard fled the square.

“The challenger has fled! By order of the king, no one in this city shall sleep until the challenger’s name is known! Anyone who brings forth his name or the young man himself shall be rewarded! Anyone caught sheltering the fugitive will share his death sentence! Any home, shop, or building suspected of hiding him will be put to the torch with its owners inside! The king has spoken!”

Uraraka had not let go of his wrist for several hours. They had stopped perhaps twice, never for longer than a few minutes—enough to drink a few mouthfuls of water, and then move on again.

The king’s guards were out in force, combing every inch of the city for them. At any given moment, it seemed that the two of them were barely a step ahead of capture. Hungry, weary, and longing for sleep, the pair kept their feet moving and sought a proper hiding place. Thankfully none of the townsfolk were after them, but after the king’s grim threat, they could not be counted on for aid.

At last, when their path took them close enough, Deku remembered the secluded garden where he had spoken with Prince Shouto earlier that evening. The thick flowering plants provided ample cover, as long as they kept off the path, and from there they had a straight shot to the graveyard nearby. The two of them crept in among the tombstones, many of them clustered and crowded together, and paused to breathe.

Here, at least, the guards did not dare to walk.

“Well, at least this is nothing new for us,” Uraraka remarked under her breath. “On the run from people trying to kill us. If nothing else, we’ve had plenty of practice. Right?”

Beside her, Deku stumbled mid-step and sank to the ground. He crouched in the shelter of a tall headstone, trembling.

Uraraka knelt by him. “I think we can afford to catch our breath. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Deku rasped. “Just fine. Sorry. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be all right. I’m sorry. I...” His voice cracked, and he shifted until his side was pressed up against the stone, knees drawn up. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Uraraka, I’m so sorry—”

“Deku?” Uraraka shifted closer, feeling her way to Deku’s shoulder in the scant light of the moon. His head was down, his face hidden as he ran his shaking hands through his tangled curls, but she could hear him crying quietly. “Deku, talk to me.”

“This wasn’t what I wanted,” Deku whispered. “I didn’t—I didn’t mean for this to happen, I swear—”

Her soft sigh barely reached his ears before she drew him into a hug. “I know. I know you didn’t.”

“You heard what they said. You heard—Uraraka, he’s going to *kill people*.”

“Look at where we are, Deku,” she reminded him. “He already has.”

“But—all those people, who took the challenge, they *knew* the risks,” Deku went on, breath hitching with quiet sobs. “They knew—they could die. But—but now this whole city, all these people—because of *me*—”

Uraraka’s arms tightened around him. “It’s not just you,” she said. “You’re not the one threatening them. Deku—” she pulled back, hands on his shoulders, careful not to use her power by accident. “Deku, the only way you’ve caused any of this is by playing fair, and expecting the king to do the same. And he didn’t.”

“I should’ve known,” Deku whispered. “But—I was stupid. I’m only alive now because others helped me. Others took risks for me, and—” He shuddered again, tears falling freely from his eyes. “I thought I could help the prince. But I think I just made everything worse for him.”

“You said he helped you escape,” Uraraka said. “Do you think we can count on him to help us again?”

Deku tensed immediately, eyes wide. “I can’t—Uraraka, no, I don’t even know how his father’s punished him for helping me escape, I *can’t*—I can’t ask any more of him.”

“Come sunrise, we’ll need *something*,” Uraraka said softly. “If King Enji didn’t accept his first loss, then something tells me he won’t bend to a second.” She looked to where the palace stood silhouetted against the night sky. “If he’s this mad, I wouldn’t put it past him to execute every soul in this city if he doesn’t get his way.”

Deku shuddered again.

“We won’t let him.” Uraraka squeezed his shoulder. “Breathe, Deku. Use that mind of yours.”

Slowly, Deku took a deep breath and let it out again. It shook both ways. “I’m trying. I can’t stop thinking about Prince Shouto, and that command from before—none shall sleep. How many people are awake and afraid for their lives right now?”

“They’re why we need to win this,” Uraraka said fiercely. “If we give up, then they may be spared tonight, but all of this will only continue. More people will die. You know that, right?”

Shakily, Deku nodded. “Do you think Father and Iida are all right?”

“Definitely. There’s not a soul alive who can catch Iida.”

“If King Enji finds Father...”

“Then he’ll hardly recognize him,” Uraraka reminded him. “His Majesty doesn’t look himself these days, remember? We can’t give up, Deku. Whether or not King Enji likes it, the more we best him, the greater claim we have.” She patted him. “You keep using that head of yours, and let me know if you think of something. For now, let’s find somewhere more defensible.”

“R-right.” Shakily, Deku rose to his feet again. “Thank you, Uraraka.”

Her teeth flashed in the dark as she grinned. “Anytime, Deku.”

In the heavy silence of the shadowed graveyard, a whisper-shout cut through the night. “*There you are!*”

Uraraka cursed under her breath, and she seized Deku's arm in a tight grip and readied herself to flee. "Run!"

"Wait!" Deku dug his heels in, twisting around in the direction of the voice. He squinted in the darkness, straining to see. With his eyes long adjusted to the night, it was easy to pick out the figures approaching. Three of them, and no more. "Wait, Uraraka."

"But—"

"I hope you're fucking proud of yourself, Deku," Bakugou snarled as he stormed into view. Kirishima and Kaminari still flanked him. All of them looked harried, and had abandoned their palace uniforms for more inconspicuous clothing. "This goddamn manhunt has trashed half the city!"

Deku winced. "This isn't what I thought would happen, Kacchan."

"What, you thought the man who's hated our king for years would hand over his throne?" Bakugou snarled.

"Our king?" Uraraka echoed. "You mean these three...?"

"I didn't want his damned throne!" Deku snapped, still fighting to keep his voice low. "I thought that once he knew that, he could be reasoned with."

"Well, lesson learned," Kaminari said dryly.

"I have to ask, though," Deku went on. "You three—did you know about the trap?"

Kaminari's face darkened. "I didn't. If I had, and if I'd known that you were..." His voice trailed off. "I'd never have led you into that throne room, Your Highness."

Kirishima punched Bakugou in the shoulder, none too gently. "I can't believe *you* knew he was our prince the whole time."

"Shut the fuck up, Kirishima, I didn't know about the goddamn trap, either!" Bakugou seethed. "So, Deku, do you have any more clever plans? Because you're going to fucking need one."

"We're with you if you do," Kaminari said. "It's the only chance we've had to escape since we first got here."

"We're not escaping," Deku said.

"Fucking typical Deku," Bakugou growled. "Then you'd better start thinking, Deku, because time's running out."

"For King Enji, yes," Uraraka said. "If we stay ahead of the guards for just another hour or two, it'll be dawn."

"To hell with King Enji! I'm talking about *our* king!" Bakugou's voice cracked. "What's your brilliant idea for that, Deku?"

Deku went still. "...What?"

"You didn't hear?" Kirishima's voice shook. "Some guard had spotted you with two others—an old blind man and a guard with glasses."

“They were caught, not too long ago,” Kaminari added. “Last we heard, King Enji was holding them in the courtyard. He’s... he’s going to try to torture your name out of them.”

For a moment, Deku swayed on his feet. Then he moved like lightning, power crackling along his limbs, lending him speed as he turned toward the palace and *lunged*—

“Deku, no!” Uraraka caught him around the waist with both arms. “Just wait! Bakugou is right! We need a plan!”

“Let go!” Deku twisted in her arms. “Iida—my *father*—”

“They’re still alive!” Kirishima said. “They’re still alive, and the prince—Prince Shouto—he’s doing what he can for them. But...”

“I have to go to them!” Deku pleaded. “Uraraka, let me go!”

“I feel the same way!” Uraraka cried out. “But you can’t just rush in blindly! That’s what got us into this! *Think*, Deku! How can we win this?”

Deku went still. He was shaking again, tears gathering in his eyes as he stared up at the palace with raw pain on his face. “I... the guards... the king is strong, and I can’t fight him alone...”

“You’re not alone,” Uraraka gritted out, not letting go of him. She turned to glare at King Enji’s former servants. “You three—are you still loyal to our king?”

“Do you think we’d be here if we weren’t?” Bakugou snapped.

“We had to drag Bakugou off before he tried a rescue himself,” Kirishima said. “We thought it would be better to find you and see if you had anything.”

“The people here live in fear,” Deku spoke up suddenly. “Do they know where the blame lies? Would they fight back, given the chance?”

“From what I’ve heard, they’re mostly like you,” Kaminari replied. “They comfort themselves, thinking the king can be reasoned with. He’s harsh but honorable—that’s what they think. That’s what they tell themselves.”

“Then we have to let them know they’re wrong.” Deku’s teeth clenched. He had gone still in Uraraka’s arms, as tense as a coiled spring. “Uraraka. You were right. He has me on the run because I’ve been playing fair, and acting as if he will, too. I need to stop playing fair.”

“Oh!” Kirishima cried suddenly. “Speaking of not playing fair, the prince—the other prince, I mean, Prince Shouto—he said to give something to you.”

“When the fuck did you talk to him?” Bakugou demanded.

“Well...”

“Kirishima got caught when he sneaked back into the palace to see what was going on,” Kaminari answered for him. “Luckily the prince was the one who caught him.”

“He didn’t catch me,” Kirishima said stubbornly. “I went looking for him on purpose.” He looked to Deku. “He said to give this to you, if I happened to find you.”

Reaching over, Kirishima passed him a scroll. It had been removed from its roller, creased and rumpled from being shoved roughly into his pocket. By the light of the moon, Deku unrolled it and

held it up for the others to see.

It was familiar to him, as battered as it was. It was written in skillful script and stamped with the royal seal—all three of the prince's riddles, and their answers. And on the bottom corner, hastily scrawled in a much less careful hand, was a note, signed with the prince's name:

Shout them in the streets.

Deku's eyes widened. "Oh," he whispered. "Oh, you clever boy."

The blind king knelt in the grass, chest heaving with every harsh breath. With his hands tied tightly behind his back, he could not feel for his companion, or do much of anything. With his head still pounding from a sharp blow, it was a miracle in itself that he was still upright. "Iida?" he rasped.

"Still here, Your Majesty." The young guard's voice was steady—deceptively so. Blood ran from his forehead, and one eye was nearly swollen shut. "Enji's left—probably giving us a moment to—" One of their guards struck him, cutting him off.

"That's *King* Enji to you," the man snapped. "His is the only majesty you need to be worrying about."

"He's no king of mine," Iida growled.

Somewhere behind them, a side door into the palace opened and shut, and light, swift footsteps made heads turn toward their source. Iida drew in a sharp breath, and the guards' armor rattled as they stood swiftly to attention.

"Your Highness," one of them said stiffly. "We are under orders from your father to prevent anyone from—"

"If you want to prevent me, then I welcome you to step forward and try. Otherwise, hold your tongue." Prince Shouto's voice was as cold as it was familiar to the two prisoners. Ignoring the sentries, he knelt down by the blind man and held a cup to his lips. "Here—drink this."

Carefully the king sipped from the cup, and cool water soothed his parched throat. The cup shook in Prince Shouto's hand as he took it away again. "Thank you, young prince," the blind man said. "And thank you for earlier, as well." When there was no answer, he continued. "It was you, wasn't it? In that crowd?"

"Yes," Prince Shouto replied, moving away. He offered the cup to Iida as well, who drank from it gratefully. "...I didn't recognize you, King Toshinori."

"Perfectly all right," Toshinori assured him. "You weren't meant to."

"Thank you," Iida murmured. "And thank you... for..." His voice trailed off, and he eyed the guards warily.

"It's all right," the prince replied flatly. "My father already knows I let your prince escape." He took the cup away and moved back to Toshinori. Reaching out, he placed his right hand against the darkening bruise on the blind man's forehead, soothing the pain with his power. As he did so, the edge of his sleeve slipped back a few inches from his wrist.

"Your arm," Iida said quietly. "It's bandaged. Did he...?"

“That’s not important.” Prince Shouto covered the bandaging with his sleeve again. “He’s beginning to panic. It’ll be dawn soon, and he’ll lose this game again if neither of you talk.”

Iida grinned fiercely.

“That only means he’ll be more desperate,” Prince Shouto went on. He could not look either of them in the eye. “Whether you speak or not... I don’t know if you will survive the morning.” His knuckles were white with tension. “I’m sorry.”

“From what I’ve been hearing,” Toshinori said gently. “It doesn’t seem as if you’ve had much of a say in all this, young prince. What have you to be sorry for?”

“I’m sorry you got caught up in all this,” Prince Shouto replied. “And I’m sorry I can’t do more for you. I... can’t repeat what I did, earlier. If I could, I swear to you I would.”

“That’s treasonous talk, Your Highness,” one of the guards snapped. Iida kicked out at him, and received another clout to the ear for his trouble.

“I suppose even a king like Enji has men loyal to him,” Toshinori said grimly.

Prince Shouto gave the guards a scornful glare. “Their loyalty is bought and paid for.”

The palace doors were flung open again, and the king himself came storming out, flames darting about his shoulders in his fury. His face was fixed in a furious snarl. “Get away from there,” he snapped, and Prince Shouto hesitated a moment too long before backing away.

“You’ve lost,” he said simply. “You know these two won’t talk.”

“Don’t underestimate me, boy,” the king snapped. “There is still time. Perhaps having one tortured will loosen the other’s tongue?”

Iida surged forward on his knees, until a guard stopped him with a spear point to his throat. Defiantly, Iida pressed his chin against the blade. “You might as well kill me,” he dared them, as a drop of blood trickled down his neck. “I’d rather die than give you what you want.”

“You say that now.” Enji’s eyes gleamed with malice. “Perhaps you’ll sing a different tune when you’re missing a few fingers.”

“Enji, stop this!” Toshinori cried out, turning his sightless face toward the other king. “This is madness and you know it! Besides—the boy knows nothing. He is only a guard, nothing more—do you think I would trust my heir’s identity with a mere footsoldier?”

“Your Majesty—” Iida warned.

“Let him go, Enji,” Toshinori said. “Torturing him will gain you nothing. My son’s true name is known only to me.”

King Enji turned to him slowly. Hatred hardened his features to cold stone. “So,” he said quietly. “I have you in my custody, and you offer your life to me willingly?”

“My life, yes,” Toshinori replied. “Nothing more than that. It’s me you hate, isn’t it? Well, I am here before you, blind and helpless. You have me at your mercy. Kill me, if that satisfies you, but I will never let you have anything else.”

Enji struck him across the face. Toshinori’s head snapped to one side, and blood trickled from his

mouth, but he made no sound. “I once dreamed of defeating you,” Enji snarled. “Such a pathetic dream that turned out to be.”

“*Coward,*” Iida spat.

“You have nothing left,” Enji went on, ignoring him. “Your kingdom is lost to marauders. You’re blind, crippled—a wasted skeleton, a shell of your former self. Why do you defy me still?”

“I am fighting the only way I can, for reasons you will never understand.” Toshinori replied, as the bandages dampened over his eyes. “It is nothing less than love for my son. I have watched him grow, from the day I met him as a child to the day I named him my heir, and I will happily die for his sake. For hope for his future. His happiness.” The smile he gave was a bloody one. “That’s the beauty of it, Enji. Our sons will be so much more than either of us ever were.”

Prince Shouto stared at him, wide-eyed. King Enji’s eyes blazed with fury.

“You heard him.” For once, Enji’s voice was quiet, trembling with fury as he addressed one of the guards standing over Iida. “He’s of no use to us. Kill him.”

“Enji, no!” Toshinori roared.

The words had scarcely left his mouth when the cries from beyond the walls finally reached them. The guards froze in alarm, poised to strike Iida down. The king whipped around, rigid with shock.

A single scream rose above the others, and before the shocked eyes of all those in the courtyard, a lone thrashing figure rose up above the top of the wall. It was one of King Enji’s guards, shrieking as he fell the wrong way, higher and higher until he was too small to see. Another guard, stationed on the wall itself, toppled backward into the courtyard with three arrows protruding from his chest.

On the other side of the wall gates was an ominous explosion, followed by several more. The gates shook with each one, until they finally slammed inward.

Kirishima barreled in like a juggernaut, carried forward by the force of his own charge. He skidded to a halt, chest heaving, as an arrow glanced off his skin as harmlessly as if it were stone. Not far behind him strode the still-nameless prince, with Uraraka by his side. With them were Bakugou and Kaminari, and what looked to be only the front of a crowd of armed city folk.

“It’s getting on to dawn, Your Majesty.” The prince’s voice rang out clear above the cries of the crowd. “Have you found my name?”

The king’s flames crackled like thunder in his fury. “What is this?” he demanded.

“Your citizenry, King Enji,” the prince replied. “They wanted to see how the game ended.” At the look of rage on Enji’s face, the prince smiled. “Are you surprised, Your Majesty? I did tell you what I intended to do. Shout the answers to the riddles in the streets, remember? Name you an oathbreaker to your own people.” He held up the scroll in one hand, and inclined his head to Prince Shouto. “It didn’t hurt to have the authority of the Crown Prince himself behind me.”

The king bared his teeth. “You think I can’t put down a simple revolt? Have the perpetrators executed?”

“If you’d like to execute an entire city, you can certainly try,” the prince retorted. “I was almost amazed, Your Majesty. It’s as if your subjects were waiting for an excuse to turn on you.”

“Little *brat*—”

“Loyalty costs so little, King Enji,” the nameless prince taunted him. “A kind word. A helping hand. A promise kept.” His teeth showed sharp and white as he spoke. “To think a cheap king like you tried to buy *me*.”

Before the king could form a reply, day broke.

The sun rose above the horizon, touching the edges of buildings and turning the sky from inky blue to purple and orange. The wall might have hidden it otherwise, but with the gates open, no one could deny that dawn had come. A cheer rang out from the small army at the gates, and the guards at King Enji’s back faltered.

“My name is Izuku.” The prince’s smile shone brighter than the rising sun. “I am King Toshinori’s hand-chosen heir, and I have beaten you twice now in a single night. You’ve lost, Your Majesty.”

Enji’s grip tightened on his sword, and he rounded upon the blind king that knelt at his feet.

No one saw Prince Shouto move. No one saw him snatch a sword from one of the shocked guards—not until he stood between his father and the blind king, blades ringing as they clashed.

“Even you would betray me, Shouto?” Enji snarled. “You might be spared execution for being my son, but there are far worse things than death!”

“I am *done* with waiting,” his son hissed back, eyes burning with cold anger. “I am done with surviving. This ends now.” His eyes turned to Prince Izuku. “There will be more guards coming from inside,” he said. “Can you handle them?”

“I’m in your debt,” Izuku replied.

“No.” Shouto’s left side lit up with flames, while ice spread across the ground from his right. “I’m still repaying mine.”

A battle broke out in the courtyard, as guards raced from the palace and angry citizens poured in to meet them, led by Prince Izuku and the three former palace servants. Uraraka charged the guards holding Iida and her king alone. One she sent screaming into the sky, the other she wounded before she cut Iida’s bonds and pressed a dropped sword into his hands. Izuku joined them, and together they formed a shield around King Toshinori, protecting the blind man from harm.

In the midst of it all, the rebels gave their king and prince a wide berth. Fire danced and leapt, ice creaked and groaned and shattered, and blades clashed viciously.

And when the dust and the blood finally settled, the courtyard was strewn with dead. A few citizens, but far more guards, lay lifeless on the grass.

King Enji knelt among them, wounded and unarmed, with the point of his son’s sword pressed to his throat.

His hateful eyes locked with Shouto’s. “Go ahead, boy. Kill me.”

“I should.” Shouto’s voice was cold. “For what you did to my mother, I have the right. But I won’t. I’m not like you, Father. I don’t need to kill to get my way.” He raised his head and looked around, eyes alighting on one of his father’s own dead guards.

“Prince Shouto?” Iida stepped forward. “He may be a difficult prisoner. If I can assist you in any way—”

“That man there,” he said, nodding toward the dead guard. “He’s carrying shackles that block magic. I have a feeling we’ll need them.”

By the time the sun had fully risen above the horizon, the former king had been dragged down to his own dungeons, and the dead had been carried out of the courtyard for burial. The moment his father was secure, Shouto ran immediately to a secluded tower of the palace, unlocked a door for the very last time, and freed his mother from her long imprisonment. When she was told what had passed, she collapsed in tears of relief and remorse, as her own long ordeal was finally over, as well. The prince wept as well, and years-old hurts finally began the long journey toward healing.

It took quite some time for Prince Izuku to stop crying from relief, or for his blind father to release him from his joyful embrace. When the tears had finally run their course, the queen was freed and cared for, and the wounded were in the care of the smiling old healer woman from the city, Prince Shouto quietly drew him aside.

“It’s done, isn’t it?” Izuku said, before Shouto could speak. “The challenge. All the death and fear.”

“Of course it’s done,” Shouto replied. “You won it, after all.” He hesitated, looking toward the sunrise. “My father broke his oath,” he said. “But I will not. You told me before, that you didn’t need the reward that was offered, but... if you would ask it of me...” He bit his lip, and turned to look at Izuku’s face. “What *is* it you ask of me?”

“I had plans,” Izuku replied. “I took the challenge because I hoped to end the conflict between our kingdoms, and to gain a strong ally—my kingdom needs friends, these days. But I also meant what I said before.” He met Shouto’s eyes. “I saw you in the tower, on the morning of the execution. I saw how sad you were. How trapped you were. You looked like you needed help.”

“I did,” Shouto admitted. “As for the rest, I’d say that any bad blood between our countries ended with my father’s reign.” His eyes glinted with fierce determination. “And if it’s aid you need, then you shall have it. Your enemies are mine.”

“Thank you,” Izuku said, with a soft sigh of relief. “And...” He stepped closer, and clasped the other prince’s hands warmly. “I don’t want to bully or manipulate you into anything. I don’t want you to see me a certain way because you were forced, or because you think you have to. But, since neither of us are interested in marriage, then... perhaps I might have a chance to court you properly?” The other prince’s scarred face flushed crimson, and he went on hastily. “L-like I said—only if you want to! But if you do, then... I’d like to win you over the right way.”

Shouto’s eyes softened as he looked at his fellow prince. Slowly, he lifted one of Izuku’s hands and pressed it gently to his lips. “You say that as if you haven’t won me over already.”

A soft smile came unbidden to Izuku’s face. “Humor me?”

Shouto lowered their hands and returned the grin. “No more riddles?”

“Not for a while,” Izuku replied. “It’s your decision to make, Prince Shouto. As it should have been from the beginning.”

The next kiss came to the corner of Izuku’s mouth, soft and feather-light. “I like the sound of that, Izuku.”

“I’ve got one for you,” Izuku whispered in his ear, many months later when battles were won, invaders routed, cities freed, and old wounds and scars slowly healing.

“Ask away,” Shouto murmured back, and Izuku recited the rhyme as soft and lilting as a song.

“This thing all things overpowers

Freezes, burns, creates, devours,

Breaks what heals and heals what breaks,

In equal measure it gives and takes,

Molds the world and conquers man,

Tell me what it is, if you can.”

And Shouto thought for a moment, his lovely eyes far away and bright. When he answered, it was not immediately with a word, but a kiss. Izuku melted against his side, so close that you could hardly tell where one ended and the other began. Shouto did not speak again until all the thoughts had fled from Izuku’s mind.

“Love,” he whispered, so close that Izuku could taste the word. “The answer is love.”

Izuku smiled into the kiss. “Isn’t it always?”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all have enjoyed this BNHA remix of Giacomo Puccini's final opera, Turandot.

...Yup! That was the joke! It's an opera, guys! It's an Italian romantic opera!

Specifically, the opera where [this little tune](#) is from. If you don't recognize the story, you might recognize its most famous aria.

Now obviously, EXTREME liberties were taken, on account of all the misogyny, Orientalism, and severe protagonist-centered morality in the source material, as well as the fact that Puccini never actually finished the darned thing before he died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1924. A few of you asked me if I made the riddles myself, and the answer to that is, sort of! I came up with the rhyme scheme, took elements from the original phrasing in the opera, and sort of re-wrote them. Besides that, I took an absolute shitbag of liberties with pretty much everything, and I hope Puccini's not rolling in his grave too much. Or, yaknow, maybe he was really into Orientalism and misogyny, in which case roll away, Giacomo!

In any case, I had the time of my LIFE writing this, and I hope you guys have enjoyed reading it at least as much as I've enjoyed making it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!