

Burn and Breathe

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Burn and Breathe

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Summary

Soulmates are connected through pain, and some bonds have more to share than others. Todoroki Shouto wishes he could reject his soulmate. Midoriya wants nothing more than to protect his own.

For Shouto, it starts with burns marring his skin.

No—not that one. That comes later. He’s with his mother when it happens, but she is not the one who burns him (yet). He sits in her lap, encircled by her arms, eyes glued to the TV, drinking in every word of All-Might’s interview.

And then he startles with a gasp, and curls in on himself with a soft whimper of pain.

“Shouto?” His mother’s arms tighten around him, gathering him up. “Are you all right? What’s wrong?”

He can’t answer, more than “ow, ow, ow,” in a voice that trembles, and he holds out his own arms as the hot sting makes touch unbearable.

There are burns on his arms that weren’t there before, that have nothing to do with his quirk. His hands shake, and tears gather in his eyes, as he looks down and sees inflamed skin, bright red in the shape of hands.

Small hands—too small to be like the burns Father gives him when he isn’t careful. They’re Shouto-sized hands, but it’s the wrong angle for Shouto to have done this to himself. And even if it

wasn't, he can't make fire with both hands anyway.

Moments later, as suddenly as they had appeared, the burns vanish, though the pain remains. He snuffles quietly, and his mother wraps him in a hug and rocks him as she presses a kiss to his hair.

"That's your soulmate, Shouto," she whispers. There is no one else in the room, and Father isn't even at home right now, but she always whispers just to be safe whenever she tells Shouto things that Father doesn't like.

Shouto knows little of soulmates. He's heard Fuyumi talk about it before, but never to explain what they are. She always made it sound like something good, but Mom flinches at the word. And now, the first time she's ever spoken of it, it's to explain why Shouto's arms burn.

"Did they hurt me?" he asks.

"No, no." He feels her shake her head. "Never, Shouto. They'd never hurt you. They love you."

"They do?"

"Mm-hm." Her voice is warm and soft. "They will, when they meet you. That's what soulmates are for. It hurts because something else hurt them."

"Oh." The pain is ebbing now, from white-hot needles to a duller sting. "Um... does that mean they feel it too?"

"Yes. Whenever you're in pain, your soulmate will feel it, too. That's how they know you need help."

Shouto falls silent again, looking at the TV. He thinks about this—about how his parents aren't soulmates, can't possibly be soulmates because if they were then his father would never hurt her the way he does. He thinks about how useless it is for his soulmate to know that he hurts, because no one can help him. Not against Father. And if he feels his soulmate's pain, then what is he supposed to do to help them?

He can't even help Mom.

For Izuku, it starts when he is out with friends. He is nearly five, and running as fast as his legs can carry him as Kacchan and his friends race ahead of him through the woods. Kacchan has always been the faster runner, and Izuku has to work extra hard to keep from getting left behind.

At first he thinks he's tripped, or run into something. It wouldn't be the first time; he gets single-minded about catching up to Kacchan, and it makes him miss things like fallen logs or jutting branches or exposed tree roots.

Either way, pain shoots through his leg like he's been kicked, and he stumbles and falls with a high-pitched cry of pain.

Up ahead, most of the other boys run on heedless, but Kacchan skids to a halt and looks back. "Oh come on, Deku!" he yells. "Hurry up or we'll leave you behind, stupid!"

Izuku's leg hurts, and his hands are scraped from catching his fall, but he raises his head and picks himself back up. No harm done—he's wearing shorts, but he can handle skinned knees.

"Sorry!" He pushes forward, limping a little on his sore leg, and that's when his stomach blossoms

with pain. This time he retches as he falls, and for a terrifying few seconds he can't even breathe. This is nothing like the cuffs and swats he takes from Kacchan sometimes, or from the other boys. This feels like someone's taken a hammer and swung it right into his gut, and he scrapes one of his hands even worse when he hits the ground. His other arm is curled around his stomach.

His throat hurts—an ache and then an acidic burn, and with a pathetic little noise he brings up what little he has in his stomach.

“Ugh!”

“Gross!”

The other boys sound closer now, and Izuku is grateful that they've come back for him this time. Usually they don't.

“Seriously, Deku? We weren't even running that fast and you're already puking? How useless are you?” Kacchan's hand closes around his arm and tugs him to his feet.

“S-sorry.” Izuku coughs, pulling a face at the taste of bile. “Sorry, Kacchan, I don't know what happened, my stomach just hurt all of a sudden.”

“What, are you sick or something?” Kacchan gives him a scornful look.

“N-no, I mean...” Izuku tugs up the hem of his shirt, and looks down just in time to see a massive fist-shaped bruise vanishing from his skin.

“Whoa, what the hell?” one of the others yelps. “Is that a quirk? Did you just heal?”

“N-no.” Izuku snuffles a little, on the verge of tears, and puts his shirt back down. He wheezes, still winded and sore from the invisible blow. “It still hurts. My leg does too, and—I didn't even hit anything, it just started hurting for no reason.” Fear makes his stomach churn again. Is something wrong with him?

Kacchan rolls his eyes. “It's not a quirk, stupid—useless Deku doesn't have one, remember? This is just soulmate stuff.”

Izuku blinks at him, eyes wide and watery. “S-soulmate?”

“Yeah, soulmate! It's stupid—you feel it every time they get hurt.” Bakugou scowls. “I hate it. One time my face started hurting, right here.” He points to the skin just above the corner of his left eye. “I didn't even do anything, it just started bleeding for no reason! My parents freaked out, but then it stopped, so they told me.”

“D-do they feel it too?” With a jolt, Izuku thinks of all the times he's fallen and scraped his knee, or the times Kacchan's hit him or used his quirk on him.

“Yeah, *duh*. Ugh, Deku, you don't know *anything*.”

“I-I just, maybe I can ask my mom—” Izuku breaks off with a whimper of pain, and a new bruise appears on his arm. This one burns as well as aches, though the reddened skin fades quickly.

“Wow, already?” Kacchan says scornfully. “Your soulmate must be just as stupid and clumsy as you are.”

He runs ahead after that, taking his friends with him and leaving Izuku standing alone beneath the

trees, clutching his tender stomach. It's not until they're well out of earshot that Izuku summons the nerve to answer him.

"D-don't talk about them like that."

Shouto forgets what it feels like to not hurt. His father's training hurts from start to finish. When he isn't training, he's aching from training. When he isn't aching from training, he's hiding in his room and flinching at his soulmate's pain.

There's a lot of it. More, Shouto thinks, than there should be, but considering his own situation, he can't be sure.

On the worst days, his father's training and his soulmate's pain line up.

"Stop flinching!" his father snaps. "Do you think a villain would show you mercy? Do you think you can afford to hesitate in the middle of a fight?"

Shouto bites his lip until it bleeds, because it feels like his arm is being twisted behind his back, and there's nothing he can do to make it stop. His father comes at him again, sending his small body skidding back across the mat.

When he picks himself up, his nose is bleeding—which must look odd to his father, since Shouto got hit in the chest, and the mat isn't hard enough to bloody his nose like that. Shouto flinches when he feels his father's rough hand grab his jaw and force it upward so the man can have a closer look. He can taste the blood as it runs into his mouth, and feel the heat off the flames that dance around his father's face.

Endeavor spits a curse and releases him roughly. "Ignore it, Shouto."

Shouto's nose has stopped bleeding by the time he wipes it on his arm. "I can't. It always—"

"*I said ignore it!*" His father's voice becomes a roar. "It means nothing. It's a pointless distraction, and it will *not* get in the way of your duty. Do you understand?"

"But—"

His father looms, hands glowing with embers. "*Do you understand?*"

They love you. They will, when they meet you. Shouto scrapes together what little courage he has. "But Mom told me—"

His father's hand cracks across his face, sending him tumbling to the mat again. "Its only use is to train yourself against pain. The life of a hero is a life of pain—ignore it, Shouto."

When Shouto stands, he nearly falls again when he feels another phantom punch, this time to his ribs. His legs buckle, but he holds firm and tries to muffle the wheezing in his breath.

Never, Shouto. They'd never hurt you.

As far as Shouto knows, all his soulmate has ever done is hurt him.

Izuku doesn't tell his mother about his soulmate. He learns how to bury the pain, how to hide the bruises and burns behind his back or under the kitchen table, how to disguise his pained whimpers as coughing or mumbling. The pain stays but the marks don't, and before too long, Izuku can take

an invisible blow without letting it show beyond a tight jaw or a skip in his breath.

But he can't hide it forever. The pain grows with him, the blows harder and more vicious, more numerous and for longer periods of time. And even when he isn't feeling them, a bone-deep ache sets in sometimes, especially at night or in the morning, as if he's just spent the previous day running for miles. His mother catches him limping, but he mumbles something about tripping and she knows about how mean Kacchan gets, so she ices it and fixes his favorite dinner that night. It does help, and Izuku wonders. If his soulmate feels his pain, can he make them feel like theirs is being taken away?

"I bet you get picked on a lot too, huh," he whispers at the ceiling one night, when the ache is too much to sleep through. It gets muffled sometimes, and he imagines that this is when his soulmate is asleep. But if it hurts this much, then they must still be awake.

Maybe they're lying in their room just like him, looking at the ceiling and waiting for the pain to go away.

"I think you get hurt worse than me," Izuku says, and wouldn't it be nice if his soulmate could hear him, and talk back? "I wish I could meet you. I'd be your friend, I promise. Maybe they wouldn't hurt us if there were two of us together."

Silence answers him. These are wishful dreams, happy little ghosts of thoughts and nothing more.

The day comes when he can't hide it any longer. He's setting the table while Mom finishes up lunch, and he can't hide it because the first thing he does when it hits him is drop a plate.

His mother is in the room the second she hears the shatter, and Izuku is already on his knees, curled in on himself and *screaming*.

His face is on fire. It burns and burns, he's going blind, he's drowning in pain, he's *dying*—

Mom snatches him up off the ground, and he can hear her voice calling to him, pitched with fear as she cradles him in her arms and begs him to take his hand away, to show her what's wrong, *please Izuku I'm here, Mommy's here, tell me what happened, tell me what hurts*

She gently pries his hand from his face, and he doesn't see what she sees—blisters forming on his face around his left eye, mottled reddened skin parting and peeling as Izuku screams and screams—and then it's fading and gone, skin smooth and unblemished and freckled again, but Izuku can't stop screaming.

She holds him for a long time, letting him muffle his cries into her sweater, until the food is cold on the stove and Izuku has exhausted himself to fitful weeping and the pain is gone.

Not just muffled, but gone, and Izuku has never wished more for a bruise in his life.

"Izuku," Mom whispers. "Izuku, talk to me. That—that was your soulmate, wasn't it? How long has this been going on? How long have they been hurting?"

"I can't feel them." Izuku clutches at her, wishing for pain, for a bruise or another burn, something, *anything* to tell him that they're still there, that they're still somewhere and they aren't gone. "M-mom, I can't feel anything from them anymore, what if—what if they—?"

Instead of answering, she holds him close and rocks him gently. He pinches himself—not too hard, just enough to feel it. He does it again, and again, several times over the next few hours, wondering if his soulmate will answer.

And as he waits he feels something—not blows and bruises. What he feels is somewhere deep in his chest, a heavy pit in his heart, sadness and anger and the crushing emptiness of being alone. The anger is what confuses him, and clues him in to the idea that these feelings might not be his.

After all, this is just another kind of pain, isn't it?

He can dare to let himself hope.

It's not until a day later that Izuku feels a phantom blow to his shoulder, and he cries again in pure relief. He hugs himself and rocks gently, and thinks about how unfair it is that pain is all they can feel from each other. Izuku wants to share so much more with them, warm blankets and summer days and hot tea and his favorite foods.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm sorry I'm not there. I'll look for you, I promise, I promise. I'll find you and it'll be okay then, I *promise*."

He thinks, *I love you*, but doesn't say it out loud. How can he love someone he's never met?

Izuku does get the chance to communicate one night. He's twelve years old, and it's the worst night of his life.

The pain starts a little after seven in the evening, and within a half hour, Izuku has locked himself in his room on the pretense of doing homework. It's a good thing that he's finished most of his work in class already, because tonight, all he can do is curl up on his bed, bury his head beneath his pillow, and cry as silently as he can as he waits for it to stop.

Within two hours, his bed is littered with crumpled, bloodied tissues, used to staunch his four-second cuts and nosebleeds. His entire body is one mass of pain, and he's thirsty from crying but too scared to venture out of his room for fear of causing Mom more worry.

Within three hours, he's hoping desperately that his mother will go to bed without coming in to check on him tonight.

Within four hours, desperation finally breaks him. Mom is asleep, so Izuku limps and stumbles out of his room, finds what he needs in a drawer in the kitchen, and locks himself in the bathroom.

Endeavor's training has always been Shouto's private hell, but there's one "tutoring session" that will always stand out in his mind.

It's rare for a criminal to slip through Endeavor's fingers, but rare does not mean impossible. Some quick-witted villain gets lucky or clever and escapes the number-two hero's clutches, only to be snapped up by some younger up-and-comer who gets the glory and the live news interview and their picture plastered all over online news and social media. Endeavor comes home in a foul mood.

Four hours in, it is nearing midnight and Shouto is dead on his feet. He hurts so much that he's stopped feeling human. He's had enough. He wants to stop. He considers, just for a moment, lying down on the mat and closing his eyes and never moving again.

But Endeavor won't let him, even though he's not much use for anything but taking a hit and falling. "Get up!" he snaps. "Do you think an enemy will care if you're tired? Do you think a villain will stop to let you rest?" With one hand, he snags the front of Shouto's shirt, drags him back to his feet, and shakes him so hard that Shouto's teeth rattle. "You must be *stronger*!"

For all those pretty words and shouting, Shouto is not fit to do anything but dodge one blow before the next knocks him to the ground again. He feels the mat against his face and thinks, *That's it. I'm not getting up. He can shout and kick all he wants but I can't.* He feels the thud of his father's footsteps coming closer, shuts his eyes, and waits.

In the next moment his eyes snap open, and he curls in on himself and clutches at his arm with a choked cry of pain. His stomach twists, and he grits his teeth against pain and fear and the sudden sensation of sickening guilt.

“How many times have I told you—” Endeavor seizes him by the upper arm and drags him up again. “Ignore it! Push through and stand up again—” He stops, abruptly, and Shouto glances down and sees why. Blood wells up from his forearm, trickling through the gaps in his fingers. “What the hell,” Endeavor snarls, then grabs Shouto's wrist and wrenches his hand away from the wound.

The underside of his arm is slick with blood, the cuts not yet fading, and Shouto can only stare dumbly down at them as he recognizes the wounds as the shapes of words.

STOP

DONT HURT THEM

Endeavor releases him so fast that Shouto nearly falls again. The sting remains, but the cuts are closing up and fading by now, the words—his soulmate's words, *his soulmate did this to him*—wiped clean from his skin.

The training session ends. Shouto limps to bed and all but falls unconscious the moment his head touches the pillow.

The bathroom door is locked, the sink twisted as far as it will go, and the hiss of water drowns out Izuku's quiet sobs as he washes away the blood.

“I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—”

He washes and doctors the cuts as carefully as he can, using the gentlest disinfectant he can find in the medicine cabinet before wrapping them. From there he hurriedly cleans the blood from the sink, the counter, and the small paring knife he took from the kitchen, and creeps back out of hiding again.

The apartment is quiet. He hasn't woken his mother.

The pain is dampened now, and Izuku wonders if that's because of him, if it stopped because of what he did.

He stops wearing short sleeves after that.

Shouto's first year of high school is nearing. He already knows where he's going; that was decided for him the moment his quirk came in. His father wants him in UA; his father is going to make sure he ends up in UA no matter the cost.

And that's fine. Shouto will swallow his distaste and give him that, because UA is the best school for becoming a hero, and he's going to need all the help he can get. Besides—it won't matter that he lets Endeavor control this, because Shouto is going to deny him everything else.

His goals, as they stand, depend on his denial of two things: his left side, and his soulmate.

A decision like that, he thinks, ought to be harder. But really, it's probably the easiest thing he's ever done.

It's not hard to hate his left side. It reminds him of his father, it reminded *her* of his father—his mother called it ugly and she was right, of course she was right. It was ugly even before she scalded it with boiling water. It looks so much like Endeavor, and Endeavor makes everything ugly.

And as for his soulmate...

Never, Shouto. They'd never hurt you.

He hears those words in his mother's voice and thinks of the look on her face when she threw the kettle at him. He thinks of how it feels to have words carved into his arm. He thinks of the pain, of bruises and burns that have plagued him all his life, on top of the ones that his father deals out.

The bond is pain, and pain is something to be overcome. If he wants to reach his goal, then it is something he must ignore.

He doubts his soulmate will mind. The pain goes both ways, after all. After what Shouto has put them through all their lives, he wouldn't be surprised if they hate him by now. And seeing as how he's going to be a hero, that pain is never going to stop.

If they're smart, then they'll abandon him, too.

The evening after All-Might offers to train him, to help him get into UA, Izuku lies awake in bed and lets tears trickle from the corners of his eyes. His sleeve is rolled back, and if it were brighter, he might be able to see the faded outlines of words on his arm.

He takes a deep breath that shudders in and out, and feels the ache in his soulmate's bones, and the loneliness and anger that fester beneath the surface.

"I'm going to be a hero," he whispers to them. "I'm going to find you. And I'm going to make sure you never, ever have to hurt again."

Shouto gets extremely lucky, on the day of the entrance exam that he doesn't have to take.

He's already finished being tested with the other kids entering on recommendation; it would have been an utter disaster if he hadn't been.

It's so sudden, it's almost comical. The tests are over and he's walking back to the main building to stop by the restroom before he leaves. One of the other students tries to talk to him, but Shouto shrugs him off, too preoccupied by mild aches that he feels through the bond, to say nothing of his mixed feelings about being here. To his relief, he finds himself left alone.

One moment he's walking, and the next he's on the ground. He doesn't scream or cry out. He can't—screaming is hard when he can't breathe, and all he can manage is a breathless wheeze.

Ignore it, he thinks, distantly. *Push through*. The voice in his head sounds eerily like Endeavor, and it does nothing to make standing or moving or breathing any easier. He has felt so much pain over the years from his soulmate, but he has never known agony like this.

The breath rattles as he forces it into his own lungs, and it escapes again as another harsh gasp.

“F-fuck.”

He can't stand because he now knows what it feels like to have his legs shatter beneath him. He can't even crawl, because his entire right arm is in the same state. Only his hand and wrist are visible from beneath his sleeve, and his stomach turns at the sight. The skin is dark purple with internal bleeding, his fingers limp and misshapen. Bile rises in his throat, and he swallows the urge to vomit.

In a matter of seconds, his fingers have reshaped themselves and his skin has returned to its normal color, but he still feels like he's been hit by a bullet train. *Ignore it*, says Endeavor's voice in his head, and Shouto forces himself to his knees even though it feels like his arm and legs might slough off if he tries to move them. He sits up, and ice is already forming on his right arm and leg, cooling the agony. He spreads the frost to his left leg, and the bitter cold kills the pain to numbness.

(Not far from where he sits, Izuku lies limp on the pavement and sobs with relief as phantom chills numb his shattered bones.)

Shouto feels other things, deep down—things that long isolated years and the lessons hammered into his head in his father's voice would choke out if they could. Things like worry, and fear—because however painful it is for him, these injuries are not his. His soulmate is feeling this, right now, and the difference is that their wounds aren't going to vanish in a few seconds.

Something happened to thoroughly shatter them. Did they have an accident? Was it a villain attack? Did whatever or whoever has been hurting them all these years simply go too far?

He wonders, deep down, *What happened? What did that to you? Are you all right?* before the pain abruptly fades to soreness, and Shouto buries those thoughts like his life depends on it.

Izuku's first day of school is a good day.

It's a good day because he wakes up that morning (and his soulmate does too, maybe, if they even live in the same time zone) feeling only mild aches through the bond. But they're dull and manageable, similar to the aches and pains that Izuku has known from All-Might's training.

With a twinge of guilt, he lets himself be grateful for this sign that his soulmate is still all right. He still feels terrible for what he must have put them through during the entrance exam; he hopes with all his heart that he didn't frighten them too much, or catch them in the middle of something important.

I have to get my power under control, he thinks. *I can't do that to them again.*

For now, he sets those thoughts aside and takes a deep breath as he approaches his classroom door. This is it—his next step to becoming a hero.

Wait for me. I'm going to get stronger, just for you. So strong that people will think twice before they ever hurt us again.

Walking in, Izuku is met with a shouting match between Bakugou and the boy he met at the entrance exam—Iida, as he learns shortly. The girl he befriended is there, as well, and he allows himself a sigh of relief at that. It'll be good to have a friendly face here.

He makes a quick scan of the room after Aizawa-sensei's arrival, to see if he recognizes anyone else. But no, there are no more familiar faces in the room. Not that this is very surprising; he already knows that he and Bakugou are the only ones from their middle school to get in. As arrogant as Bakugou is, he wasn't wrong when he said that none of their former classmates had what it took to get into a school like UA.

As he takes a step toward his seat, a flash of bright, eye-catching colors grabs his attention. There's another boy sitting near the back, ignoring or pretending to ignore everyone around him, and his hair—bright red on one side, snow-white on the other—is impossible to miss. The boy seems to sense him staring, and just barely bothers to glance toward him.

Izuku's steps falter when the left side of his new classmate's face turns toward him. There's a mark on that side, a patch of darkened, reddened skin. It looks a bit like a birthmark, and in this day and age people are born with all sorts of strange physical features.

(And yet Izuku finds his hand rising as if of its own accord, straying to the left side of his own face —)

Something tugs at the back of his mind, but before it can grow into a proper thought, his new homeroom teacher calls the class to order, and Izuku hurries the rest of the way to his seat.

Izuku sweats and struggles his way through the quirk apprehension test, keenly aware of how everyone else in his class is pulling ahead of him, regardless of the months he's spent training. Even Hagakure, whose quirk has nothing to do with physical fitness, is still managing to do better.

The temptation to use his own new quirk is strong, but he brushes it aside. He can hardly complete the tests if he breaks his arm or his legs again, and he has a soulmate to think about. He can't do that to them again.

Still, his desperation wins out—he can't risk getting expelled on his first day, not like this—and Aizawa-sensei barely stops him from shattering his arm. Izuku shakes and curses himself.

Think of your soulmate. Don't stop thinking of them. Don't stop thinking about how to cause them the least pain.

When the idea comes to him, he hopes they can forgive him for one finger.

Shouto takes a mild interest in his classmates, and only out of common sense. These people are going to be his rivals and allies for the next three years, and beyond that when they become heroes in their own right. It's only practical to get a feel for their abilities, and to scope out the competition.

Yaoyorozu stands out. Besides being admitted on recommendation like himself, she's competent and sharply intelligent. Iida's background and lineage are nearly as impressive as Shouto's. Bakugou stands out the most in terms of power, though his temper and attitude raise Shouto's hackles.

The others run together a little. He probably wouldn't have noticed Midoriya at all if not for Bakugou's ranting, and Midoriya's blatant staring at his scar. Out of all their classmates, Midoriya stands out the least. He shies away from the others, says little once class starts, and hangs close to their classmate Uraraka as if she's a lifeline. Shouto doesn't see competition when he looks at him; he sees a timid, anxious boy who couldn't have looked more out of place if he tried.

Sparing Midoriya a few glances during the quirk apprehension tests don't do much to change his

opinion. The only things that set him apart from the others are the fact that he wears long sleeves under his gym clothes, and how depressingly average he is. If anyone's getting expelled today, it's probably going to be Midoriya. Shouto has to wonder if the other boy even has a quirk at all.

Aizawa-sensei makes Midoriya's turn at the pitching test into a bit of a spectacle, and Shouto's only watching at this point because everyone's eyes are on Midoriya, everyone is waiting on bated breath to see what he'll do. Shouto sees the thoughtful look on Midoriya's face turn grim and determined, before his classmate winds up and pitches the ball. At the last moment, Shouto could swear he sees Midoriya's finger glow.

The ball goes rocketing into the distance, even further than Bakugou's attempt did, and Shouto sees none of it because he's too busy biting back a yell as his right index finger lights up with pain. He looks down, and his finger is entirely dark purple with bruising.

What the *hell*, did someone take a damn sledgehammer to his soulmate's finger, or—?

“Oh *hell*, look at his hand,” Shouto hears Kirishima say, and shoves his hand behind his back before glaring at him—but Kirishima isn't looking at him.

Confused, he follows his classmate's gaze back to Midoriya. Through watering eyes, Shouto sees Midoriya's right hand—and the dark purple bruising on his finger, a perfect match of Shouto's own.

No.

Midoriya's face is creased with pain, but he forces his teeth into a grin, lifts his injured hand, and curls it into a fist. Shouto's vision goes blurry with tears—even with the injury fading, the pain shoots sharply through his hand, and he brings his other arm to his face to muffle a hiss of pain.

There's no way.

But there is. Because Shouto suffers through the rest of the tests with the sensation of a broken finger, and it doesn't go away until after Aizawa shoos Midoriya off to Recovery Girl's office. Midoriya barely looks at him for the rest of the day—and for good reason, because Shouto barely looks at him either.

He *can't* look at him.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He hasn't wondered who his soulmate is since he was small. He hasn't been looking. He never planned to look. He never wanted to know.

But apparently the universe doesn't care about that, because Shouto has found him anyway.

A moment comes to pass, of course, as Shouto sits in class and allows himself a brief glance at the back of Midoriya's head, in which he considers pulling his classmate aside and telling him. But it's only one moment. Shocking as this may be, his plans have no reason to change. His goals are the same, and that means that the path to them is the same.

Ignore it. Push through.

When uncertainty plagues him, he remembers the hand-shaped burns on his arms when he was five years old. He thinks of words carved into his arm, spilling blood between his fingers until it dripped and stained the training mat beneath him. He thinks of Endeavor's training, of all the pain that the two of them have traded over the years, and no wonder Midoriya is timid and quiet. No wonder he shies away from strangers.

And his quirk, apparently, injures him whenever he tries to use it. In the back of Shouto's mind, he wishes that Aizawa-sensei's logical ruse had been truthful. If Midoriya has a quirk like that, then Shouto has plenty to dread for the next three years.

Ignore it, he tells himself. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't matter.

Izuku feels eyes on the back of his head. He turns, and to his alarm finds Todoroki glaring at him like Izuku's done something to offend him. Bewildered, Izuku can only stare back with wide-eyed confusion as his mouth goes dry with fear. He saw Todoroki use his quirk today, and it's a powerful one. And Izuku may have a power of his own, but it's one that he can barely use, and when classmates with powerful quirks take notice of him, it never ends well.

He can't help shrinking a little under the weight of Todoroki's glare, until his classmate finally looks away.

He isn't sure what he's done to make Todoroki angry with him. He certainly didn't come here intending to make enemies. It's bad enough that Kacchan is in his class, it's bad enough that he still has his soulmate's pain to worry about. He doesn't need Todoroki out to get him, too.

He'll just have to stay away, then. Keep out of Todoroki's way, keep from offending him. And... maybe apologize, if he ever figures out exactly what Todoroki has against him.

But for now, he has to focus on himself, and on One For All.

The next day, Izuku's arm blazes like a beacon of pain when it shatters, blowing a hole clear through every ceiling and floor above him. It's only a training simulation, but he can't lose to Kacchan—not again.

"*Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,*" he whispers, inches from Kacchan's face, but he isn't talking to Kacchan at all.

(A few buildings away, Shouto slips away from the group before the impact hits, and leans heavily against the wall to hiss and curse and retch with pain. He tries not to sob with relief when Midoriya finally passes out. He doesn't try hard enough.)

"Luckily for you, I want to be a hero, so I'd like to avoid any unnecessary cru—*fucking goddamn it.*" Shouto's interrogation comes to a pause when his left thumb and middle finger spontaneously break, and it takes him a moment to get back on track. It's not just the pain, but the anxiety that comes with it. He can't properly interrogate these men if half his mind is busy wondering what the hell Midoriya thinks he's doing.

He's not worried about Midoriya. He's *not*. He's no more worried than he would be for any other classmate.

He's not particularly relieved to see Midoriya still in one piece when he rushes to All-Might's rescue armed with knowledge from the cannon-fodder villains.

He's *not*.

(Later, after reinforcements have arrived, Izuku lies crumpled on the ground and tries not to move his broken legs. His eyes water as he whispers shaky apologies.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, my boy,” All-Might assures him. “If you hadn’t—”

“I know,” Izuku murmurs. “And I wasn’t—I-I was talking to, um...” His voice trails off.

All-Might gives him a look of deep understanding. “...Ah. I see.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, my boy. To you and your soulmate both.”

Izuku’s eyes are drawn to All-Might’s side, where he knows the scar lies hidden beneath his shirt. He wonders if All-Might has a soulmate, too. What happened to them, the day he received that awful wound? Did they worry about him? Were they angry with him for causing them so much pain?

“I’ll get stronger,” he whispers, too softly for All-Might to hear. “I’ll get stronger, I *will*, just please... please be patient with me.”)

Shouto is ready to throttle his classmate.

Classmate, he repeats in his head, mentally carving it into his mind as he’s done since the first day of school. Midoriya is his classmate and nothing else.

And if this keeps up, Shouto might scream.

That’s the trouble, he thinks, of having a sou—of having a connection with someone in possession of a destructive quirk and a ridiculously high pain threshold. Because Midoriya must have one, if he punishes himself this much and manages to stay sane.

Thank God for Recovery Girl. If not for her, Shouto probably would have punched him after the stunt he pulled during battle training—and he would have had to use his left hand to do it.

“Um. Hey. T-Todoroki?”

“*What.*”

Shouto is in a foul mood. Midoriya sacrificed a finger during training again, and Shouto’s handwriting has been terrible all day. So he snaps at the sound of Midoriya’s voice, not caring, *not caring* that this is the first time he’s ever spoken to his soulmate

Classmate. They are classmates and that is all.

Midoriya actually jumps, and for a moment Shouto thinks, hopes, that Midoriya will lose his nerve and walk away. But no, his classmate holds his ground, stammering. “I-I-I was just—sorry, I was just... w-wondering...”

Shouto gives him a flat stare, waiting for him to either spit it out or give up and leave.

Midoriya meets his eyes briefly, then seems to brace himself. “Did I do something to you?”

“No,” Shouto answers, and thinks of bumps and bruises and fractured bones over the years, of words carved into his flesh, of the overwhelming agony of shattering bones.

His classmate dithers for a few seconds, as if waiting for Shouto to say more, but Shouto has nothing more to say. “O-oh. Okay, um, good. I was j-just—okay... never mind then...” Midoriya’s voice trails off as Shouto walks away.

It doesn’t mean anything. It can’t mean anything.

He hates that he has to keep reminding himself of that. Shouldn't it be easier to disavow someone who has done little else but hurt him?

Two weeks later, Shouto throws down the gauntlet only moments before the Sports Festival begins, and Midoriya looks a lot less timid as he rises to his challenge.

Todoroki is holding back.

The realization comes to Izuku when he's propped up by Hatsume, Uraraka, and Tokoyami, face to face with Todoroki during the cavalry battle. Todoroki is holding back, and it goes beyond his refusal to use his left side.

The battle is fierce already, so he doubts that his teammates—or Todoroki's for that matter—can tell. Even when Izuku goes after him with One For All, it feels like Todoroki is pulling punches. It feels like even in the middle of a fight, even after Kaminari's lightning nearly took them down, Todoroki balks at hurting him with his own hands.

This is important, a tiny part of him whispers, nudging him in the back of his mind. *This means something. This means everything.* But in the din of the cavalry battle, with Kacchan's explosions growing louder and nearer and Izuku's own pulse pounding in his ears, he can't hear little voices like that.

Balking aside, Todoroki's flames nearly catch on the end of Izuku's sleeve—he wears long sleeves beneath his gym shirt, to hid scars and blooming bruises—and Izuku fights against the urge to pull back, to keep those marks covered. His teammates depend on him. He can't afford to shy away.

In the end, Todoroki's hesitance and Tokoyami's quick thinking push their group forward into the third event, and now Izuku has sparring matches to look forward to.

Sorry, he thinks, to a person he has never seen or met. *I'll try not to hurt you. I'll do my best.*

And then Todoroki is there, still glaring at him with eyes that Izuku cannot read. "I need to talk to you," he says. "In private." Izuku follows, and tries not to swallow his own tongue. Disregarding his apparent reluctance to take Izuku on directly, Todoroki has been looking at him like he wants to punch him since the first week of school, and part of him wonders if his classmate is finally giving in to the temptation.

But instead, Todoroki takes him to an empty hallway close by the entrance and tells him a story.

It isn't a happy one. Todoroki breathes anger as he speaks. He asks questions that Izuku isn't comfortable answering. And then he talks of pain.

He talks of a jealous, ambitious father and of a mother who cries in his memories. He talks of quirk marriages and plans for power, glory by proxy at a vicious cost.

He talks of boiling water, and Izuku finds himself unconsciously mirroring Todoroki, one hand rising to the left side of his face.

(The little voice in the back of his head is louder now.)

Izuku's heart is pounding when Todoroki falls silent. He can't speak. He can barely think. It's difficult enough just to breathe. He tries to tear his eyes from the scar on his classmate's face, but he can't look away anymore. What can he say, to something like that?

Todoroki watches his face for a moment more, stone-blank and thoughtful, considering him. He moves finally, stepping away from the wall he's been leaning against.

"I wasn't going to say anything," he says. "I still don't want to. But in the interest of fairness, I don't have much choice."

Izuku blinks, and confusion muddies his mental waters further. "W-what—what are you talking about, Todoroki?"

For a moment, his classmate fixes him with a stare like cold steel. He lifts his right hand, and Izuku feels the temperature in the hallway drop. Ice forms in Todoroki's palm, shaping itself into a wicked-looking point.

Before Izuku can blink, Todoroki draws the ice shard across the thickest part of his palm.

"Todoroki, what are you—*ah, ow!*" Pain jolts him through the bond, cutting off further words.

Sharp, stinging pain in the palm of his hand.

The warm trickle of blood makes him look down, just in time to see the bleeding scratch on his palm as it slowly closes again. Izuku stares at it, frozen and dumb with shock, before looking back to Todoroki again.

Todoroki's hand is at his side, but his palm points outward, so that Izuku can see the identical scratch in his own flesh.

Izuku's mouth opens, but neither words nor noise emerge. He feels empty and blank.

"I've known since school started," Todoroki says coldly. "It was hard to miss, when I saw you break your finger on the very first day of school." He pauses as if waiting for Izuku to respond, but Izuku doesn't—can't. "Just to be clear, this doesn't change anything. It doesn't mean anything and it never has. I'm only telling you because if I face you with an unfair advantage of any kind, then I wouldn't be able to beat you properly." He raises his eyes again, and they bore into Izuku's. "And I *will* beat you. Regardless of your connection to All-Might. Or..." He stops again. "Or to me." When Izuku doesn't answer, he turns away. "That's all I wanted to say. Sorry for taking your time."

And Izuku wants to answer, as Todoroki—*his soulmate*—walks away. He wants to say something so desperately that he wonders if Todoroki can feel how much it hurts. Over the past ten years he's imagined what he would say to his soulmate if he ever met them, and the day has come and his chance is in front of him, but Izuku's mind is blank.

And then Todoroki is gone, and Izuku is left to slide down the wall until he's hunched and kneeling in the dim hallway, tears streaming silently down his face.

"You have an excellent quirk," Endeavor tells him before he goes out to face his soulmate, and it's technically a compliment but Izuku feels his insides twist in revulsion. "In fact, in terms of power level, yours may even rival All-Might's."

He gestures with his hands as he speaks, and Izuku can't take his eyes off of Endeavor's hands. It's surreal, to finally see the hands that have caused his soulmate so much pain over the years.

"Never thought of it that way." His own voice sounds far away to him as he moves stiffly past Endeavor. The hero's hands move in the corner of his vision, and Izuku averts his head suddenly

enough that it could be called a flinch, if you wanted to get picky about it.

“My Shouto has a duty to surpass All-Might,” Endeavor continues before he can escape, and Izuku’s hands clench into fists so tight that the knuckles ache and his nails bite into his palms. *Can Todoroki feel that? Is he wondering why?* “Your match against him will be an excellent test bed. So don’t disgrace yourself or him by holding back.”

Hurt him, is what Endeavor is telling him. *Make him bleed just as I have.*

Lots of people have hurt Izuku before. Kacchan. Kacchan’s other friends when they were little. His classmates, over the years. His teachers before he came to UA. The villains that attacked the USJ. They have struck him, beaten him, made him bleed, ground his self-worth into the dust, and made him feel helpless, and what of it? Kacchan was his friend. Their classmates were dumb and arrogant and ordinary. Their teachers were petty. Villains are villains and hurting people is what they do.

The man standing behind him, the Flame Hero, the second-strongest in the country, has never hurt him—not really. Endeavor has never raised a hand to him, and now—in the first conversation they have ever shared—Endeavor is paying him a compliment and giving him advice.

And yet it is this man that makes Izuku realize that maybe he can hate after all. There’s no other word he can use to describe the heated rush in his veins, as if molten iron has replaced his blood. He looks over his shoulder to where the Flame Hero still stands, and the unshed tears in his eyes are scalding.

“Your Shouto,” he says quietly. His words are barely above a whisper, but in the empty hallway he may as well be shouting them.

Endeavor glances back at him. “What?”

“He’s not yours,” His body is still and his voice is steady, but his heart trembles with bottled rage. “He’ll *never* be yours.”

He meets Endeavor’s eyes with hatred blazing in his own, and walks on.

Midoriya isn’t holding back—not against himself *or* Shouto, and for them, there’s little difference.

Shouto is glad. Relieved, even. He was afraid that his blunt revelation to Midoriya had ended up sabotaging him anyway, but his sou—his classmate is coming for him hard, and Shouto can only push through the pain—both his own, and Midoriya’s.

He has never been more thankful for his quirk than he is now. Shouto flings up ice and spreads it over his hands and arms, hiding the bruises that darken them every time Midoriya uses his quirk. Endeavor is in the audience, and Shouto can’t risk him finding out. He can’t risk Present Mic seeing and shouting it out for the entire stadium, and everyone watching across the country, to hear.

And speaking of hearing...

Back at the entrance, after Shouto said his piece and walked away, Midoriya had been silent. But now his words lash at Shouto from across the field, clear and ringing off the ice.

“Stop holding back!”

Shouto’s teeth grind until his head aches. “I’m not!” Ice ripples across the ground toward

Midoriya, but his—his opponent dodges.

“Yes, you are!” There’s blood running down Midoriya’s face, down Shouto’s face, and at this point Shouto can’t even remember whose wound is causing it. “You said so yourself—you’re stronger than me!”

Shouto shivers in the cold. He can see pale clouds when he breathes out.

“You’re stronger than this! You could have ended this already if you just used your left side!”

“I won’t!”

“Why not?” Midoriya cries out, hoarse with pain. “Is it—” A blast of ice cuts him off, and Shouto yells with pain as Midoriya sacrifices another finger to block it. In the next moment Midoriya is bursting through the cloud of frost, and Shouto whips to the side to avoid a blow. “Is it because of what your mother said?”

Amid the frigid cold, Shouto’s blood boils. He doesn’t answer with words; he lets ice do the talking for him. He feels the pain of impact, and it distracts him from his anger and his left side and his memories of Mom crying.

Midoriya emerges from the attack, battered but still on his feet. He couldn’t have been hit that hard, because he still has enough breath to yell. “She was wrong, Todoroki! What she said to you was wrong!”

“Shut up!” Temper blinds him, and the next blast goes wide.

“It’s not ugly!”

“I said—” Another wave of ice *“—shut up—”* His right arm is beginning to go numb with cold, so he barely feels another of Midoriya’s fingers break *“—about my mother!”*

The worst thing—the worst thing—is that flying ice shards and wind pressure have destroyed the sleeves on Midoriya’s right arm and torn through the ones on his left, both the gym uniform and the long-sleeved shirt beneath it. The left is the arm on which words were carved, and Shouto understands now, why Midoriya has kept it covered.

“She was hurting too, but that doesn’t make her right!” Midoriya gets close enough to slam his mangled fist into Shouto’s stomach. “It’s not ugly! It’s not his! No part of you is!”

Shouto retches with pain. “Don’t—talk about what you don’t understand—”

“I do understand,” Midoriya hisses through clenched teeth. “I know what you felt because I felt it too. Remember?” His eyes are wet, fighting a battle with tears and losing, and Midoriya is close enough, now. Shouto can look at his arm and see the pale scars of carved words—*STOP* and *DONT HURT THEM* permanently etched into his skin. “And that’s—that’s how I know how strong you are. That’s how I know that you can do this.”

“Not without following my father,” Shouto grits out. “If I use his power—”

“It’s not his power, Todoroki!” His soul—his classmate’s cry drives itself into him. Watery green eyes, set in a battered, bloodied face, catch his gaze and hold it. “It’s not his. *You’re* not his.” He lifts his left hand and touches his face, the same place where the edge of Shouto’s scar is. “It’s not ugly. It’s just a part of you.”

And that

that means something.

The stadium lights up with red and gold and orange.

Izuku wakes up in Recovery Girl's temporary office, exhausted and thoroughly beaten.

He stares at the ceiling, only half-hearing her scold him for recklessness. All-Might is there too, but Izuku can't muster the energy to feel cowed or guilty. It's hard to manage feeling anything when every part of him is exhausted.

He does manage relief, though. His pain is a dull ache rather than the excruciating fire that usually comes with shattered bones. The less he hurts, the less Todoroki hurts.

Eventually, the scolding runs its course and Izuku is allowed to sit up. He returns reluctantly to the present when Recovery Girl's hand closes gently around his wrist—the left one, healed and bandaged. Gently she turns it over so his forearm is visible, and he only looks at her then.

“Did you do this?” she asks softly, fingertip tracing along the scars.

Izuku tugs his arm out of her grip. “It's a long story.” All-Might looks like he wants to question him further, but Izuku turns his head away. He and All-Might may share secrets, but this one is between him and his soulmate.

Izuku doesn't return to his place in the stands. He doesn't feel quite ready to face his classmates, or anyone for that matter, so he finds a sparser section of the stands and parks himself at the back where he can still watch. His arms are still uncovered, but with a fresh gym shirt draped over his shoulders, he doesn't feel as exposed as he could be. Besides—everyone is too busy watching the tournament to pay him any mind.

He braces himself through Todoroki's match with Iida, but his fears come to nothing in the end. To his relief, the fight ends without either of them doing each other injury. It's a short fight. Todoroki doesn't even need his fire to win it.

(Is that why he didn't use it? Because he didn't need it, or because he still doesn't want to?)

The penultimate round of the tournament ends, and Izuku is thoroughly glad that he picked this lonely spot instead of returning to sit with his classmates. His stomach sours with dread.

The final match is between Todoroki and Kacchan.

Izuku grinds his teeth until his jaw aches. It's only fair that Todoroki face Kacchan, after Izuku faced Endeavor. He wonders if Todoroki will recognize the way Kacchan's blows land, the way his quirk punches at the same time as it burns.

He sets his back against the wall behind him, and braces himself for the fight to start.

“Ah, there you are, my boy.”

He jumps at the sound of All-Might's voice, jarring his injured arm. He winces. *Sorry, Todoroki.* It's harder to brush off pain now that the person sharing it is someone he knows.

“Didn't mean to startle you.” All-Might pats his uninjured shoulder. “I saw that you hadn't gone back to your classmates, so I went looking for you. If you don't mind me asking, what are you

doing all alone up here?”

Izuku feels his throat close. “Uh... I’m fine up here,” he says. “Really. Th-thanks for worrying, but you can go back if you want.”

“No, it’s all right. I may as well keep you company.” All-Might stands beside him, leaning his thin frame against the wall.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back?” Izuku asks, burying his alarm as deep as it will go.

“And um, I don’t know, sit down or—”

All-Might quirks an eyebrow at him. “I might say the same of you, young Midoriya.” An amused smile plays about his mouth. “You worry about your own self.”

And Izuku does, because the final match is about to start and he knows for a fact that Kacchan won’t make it easy for him to hide it.

As Present Mic introduces the final contestants, Izuku presses back against the wall and braces himself.

It starts the way Izuku expects. Kacchan makes the first move, pulling no punches. When Izuku flinches, it’s easy for anyone watching to write it off as him spooking at the noise, rather than feeling the impact as if he’s the one down in the ring instead of Todoroki.

He tries not to move, for fear of jostling his injured arm and causing Todoroki more pain. Todoroki can’t afford distractions, and Izuku will not cause him to lose. He’s done enough to hurt his soulmate already, hasn’t he?

Another explosion rocks the stadium, and Izuku cringes and breathes in sharply, feeling a bruise the size of a dinner plate forming on his ribs. All-Might’s hand settles on his shoulder again.

“It’ll be all right,” his mentor assures him. “Midnight and Cementoss will put a stop to it if it gets too rough.”

But there’s a high threshold for “too rough,” as Izuku knows firsthand. For a moment he considers leaving, finding an empty waiting room, and riding this out by himself.

No. He can’t leave, not now. That’s his soulmate out there.

The ache of impact turns to burns flashing across his arms, and Izuku hides the temporary wounds behind the overshirt draped over his shoulders. Tears prick in his eyes, but he keeps watching. Todoroki won’t use his fire again, and Kacchan—

Kacchan is losing his temper.

It finally happens. Izuku feels the blow land before he sees it, and the force of it whips his head to the side and sends him slamming back against the wall with a muffled cry that the spectators nearly drown out. His head swims, and the pain of getting hit in the face pushes the tears to spill over.

All-Might’s hand is on his shoulder again, steadying him before he can fall. “Midoriya—my boy are you all... right...?” His voice trails off, and Izuku tastes the blood running from his nose.

“Ow,” he whispers.

His mentor stares at him, then turns to look out at the field, and then back to Izuku. Comprehension lights up in his eyes, and his grip on Izuku's shoulder tightens. Izuku pushes forward to keep watching his soulmate fight.

It's not long before Izuku can see which way the match will end. Ice alone can't stand up to Kacchan's power and viciousness, and Izuku can see and feel Todoroki flagging. The cold is making his bones ache even as the explosions burn.

Don't give up, Izuku thinks. He thinks he also screams it out loud, trying in vain to pitch his voice above the roar of the crowd.

The match ends with the ring torn to pieces and Kacchan yelling his fury in Todoroki's face. Izuku leans back against the wall again, breathing through the pain that thunders through the bond. All-Might hovers over him, his gaunt face solemn and understanding.

The bleeding has long stopped, but the tears keep coming. There's no lying or excusing his way out of this one. "It's Todoroki," he whispers.

Understanding turns to dismay. "My boy, you should have said something."

Izuku shakes his head.

All-Might heaves a sigh. "I assume he knows as well, by now?"

"I just found out today," Izuku answers in a voice that breaks. "But Todoroki, he—all this time, I've been hurting myself, and breaking myself, and... and he never said anything." His vision goes blurry. "He told me so I'd know before we fought. So it'd be fair."

"Midoriya—"

"Recovery Girl's right." Izuku tries to take a breath, but it shudders and trembles on the way out. "I have to fix this. I can't—I can't keep hurting myself. I can't keep hurting him."

"You'll learn." All-Might's hand moves to gently ruffle his hair. "I know you will."

Shouto isn't expecting All-Might to pull him into a hug during the medal ceremony, but he does, and Shouto's not entirely sure how to react.

Before his teacher pulls back, his whisper reaches Shouto's ear. "If you can, talk to young Midoriya before you go."

Shouto takes that as a suggestion, and heads for the exit. He's not eager to go home, but he's eager to be out of here. He doesn't want to look at Bakugou, or Tokoyami, or any of his classmates, and if all goes well then he can get out of here before—

"T-Todoroki?"

He considers, for a moment, feigning deafness and walking on. It's not as if Midoriya's in any shape to stop him.

In the length of time he takes to consider it, Midoriya catches up to him. "I-I just wanted to talk to you, before you go. If that's okay?"

It's only fair, Shouto decides. He was the one who pulled Midoriya aside first.

They find somewhere quiet, away from the departing spectators and student exits where their classmates might catch them. Midoriya doesn't speak at first. There's blood on his face, and Shouto remembers the hits he took from Bakugou.

(They were familiar, and the thought makes him sick.)

"Well?" he says, when Midoriya takes too long to speak. "Was there something you wanted to say, or not?"

He's not sure what he expected from Midoriya. But then his soul—*classmate, goddamn it, classmate*—takes a deep breath to speak, and it shudders and catches on the way in.

Shouto has seen Midoriya cry before, from a safe distance after the cavalry battle. But now it's up close and personal, with no buffer of space or people to separate them. It's too close, too quiet, too *visceral*, and Shouto doesn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry," Midoriya chokes out, before Shouto can untangle his own reaction. "I'm sorry for everything, I'm sorry—"

"Midoriya." Shouto can feel the edge of faint panic creeping in.

"*I hurt you.*" Tears flow freely down Midoriya's battered face. "W-when I was a kid, I couldn't—I was little, and I couldn't use my quirk, and I couldn't fight back. I couldn't stop them. I wasn't strong enough. I-I'm sorry you had to feel that, on top of everything else, and—" Breath hisses sharply into Midoriya's lungs. "Um. When—when we were twelve."

Shouto's gut twists, and then Midoriya makes a small noise that twists harder.

"I'm sorry. I-I just—you were in pain. And I could feel it, and it w-wouldn't stop, and—and I got scared. I didn't know what else to do. I just wanted it to stop, and I'm sorry." Midoriya shakes as he presses the palm of his left hand to his face in an effort to stem the tears, but they won't stop. "I'm sorry I keep hurting you and I'm sorry you were alone. I was alone too but it wasn't like it was for you, and—and I'm gonna do better from here, and get stronger, so nobody hurts me and I don't have to hurt myself. Or you."

He should say something to this. There must be *something* he can say. But his mouth is sandpaper-dry, his tongue like lead, his mind empty of words. All he can think of is the resentment that he's allowed to build over the years and fester in recent weeks, and the sight of Midoriya guilt-ridden and crying leaves him sick with shame.

"I'll try." Midoriya draws his arm across his face again. The tears still run, but the shaking and sobbing have quieted and stopped. "I-I don't know if I can, yet, but I'll try, I promise. I don't want to hurt you anymore. I didn't ever want to hurt you." He won't meet Shouto's eyes again. "A-anyway, that's all I wanted to say. Sorry for taking your time, I just—"

"It went both ways, didn't it?" The words barely pass through Shouto's mind before they're out. Midoriya blinks at him with red-rimmed eyes, and Shouto tries to swallow against the dry ache in his throat. "I hurt you, too. You said so yourself. It... it couldn't have been easy for you. Having to feel all of that." He can't help looking to Midoriya's left arm as he says this.

Midoriya follows his eyes to the faint words scarred into his skin. His mouth twists, and he moves his arm behind his back.

Shouto's hands curl into fists. His chest feels odd—it's not quite pain, but it's not pleasant either. "You should know—you did."

“Huh?”

The ache in his throat grows thicker. This memory is not one that he relishes. “You—you stopped it. He was angry that day, and he wasn’t letting up, but then you—well. He saw that, and he stopped.”

“Oh,” Midoriya says softly. The tears have stopped, but he still avoids Shouto’s eyes. “G-good. I mean... I’m glad I could do something.” His left hand makes a fist. “I think—that was the worst part. You know? I could feel how much you were hurting, but I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t make it better, and—I couldn’t even just be there for you. That’s part of why I wanted so bad to be a hero. I wanted to find you, and find out what was hurting you, and make it stop.” A bitter little laugh escapes him. “Guess I didn’t see this coming.”

Shouto gapes at him. “You... wanted to be a hero... because of me?”

“S-sort of?” There isn’t much joy in the smile Midoriya gives him. “I just thought... it felt like you needed help.”

And for the first time in years, the quiet voices in his head that nudge his actions don’t sound like his father at all.

Whenever you’re in pain, your soulmate will feel it, too. That’s how they know you need help.

His eyes burn. “I...”

And then Midoriya moves far more quickly than a battered teenager with one arm in a sling has any right to. For the second time that day, Shouto finds himself with arms around him. One slung around his neck, the other wrapped gingerly around his back. He goes still with shock.

“Sorry,” Midoriya says into his shoulder. “I just... wanted to do this, too. For a long time.”

Never, Shouto. They’d never hurt you. They love you.

He has to be careful, returning the hug. He’s caused Midoriya enough pain over the years.

Shouto hasn’t been touched like this for a long time.

He wishes now that he could have done this sooner, so that the first time he touched his soulmate could be a hug instead of a punch.

Part of him doesn’t want to let go.

“You said before that it doesn’t mean anything,” Midoriya says, and shame twists inside of Shouto. “I don’t know if you’ve changed your mind, but it does mean something to me.” At last he pulls back, and there’s something soft about him as he fidgets sheepishly and steps away. “I’ll, um. Let you go now. But I’m really happy I found you. Or you found me. Either one.”

Shouto manages, through some miracle, to say “Me, too,” before Midoriya moves out of hearing range. His soulmate looks back, and Shouto can’t remember the last time anyone smiled at him like that.

“See you around?” Midoriya says.

“Thank you,” slips out, and Shouto lets it.

That’s what soulmates are for.

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