will I ever be more than I’ve always been?

by aloneintherain

Summary

“I want,” Bakugou says, “you to wake the fuck up. Make teachers look out for their kids. Don’t put up with any kind of violence—this should be a fucking safe space for kids. And the little shit-stains who think they’re above the rules because they’ve got a fancy quirk? You deal with them, too. Quirk usage is illegal. Physical assault is illegal. And yet I saw all that and more when I was here—I did all of that and more when I was here.”

The principal stares at him. “You’re saying you wanted us to give you detention?”

Detention. Like that would have done anything.

“I’m saying,” Bakugou says through gritted teeth, “that you should’ve expelled me.”

Or: how Bakugou became an anti-bullying advocate.

Notes

Partially inspired by anon, who asked, How did Bakugou and Izuku reconcile properly?

This takes place before all other fics in this universe. Part of this fic takes place during the July Attacks—the final attack launched around Musutafu when Class 1-A were third years, mentioned in a few other fics. The rest of the story takes place three years later when they’re pro heroes still working to climb the hero ranks. You probably don’t have to
read the rest of the series for this to make sense, but I would recommend it (or at least “history has its eyes on you”).

There’s no social media snippets in this fic, unfortunately. Because I’m jumping around the timeline, it would have been way too confusing to include them.

The majority of Class 1-A would participate in some kind of advocacy (Momo especially is a famous feminist!), but I wanted to focus on Bakugou for this. Also, there’s a LOT of work that we don’t see, because if I were to sit down and write out the entirety of Bakugou’s and Midoriya’s slowly developing friendship, I would up with, like, 100k, and I’m a very tired uni student who doesn’t have the time or energy for that. Right now I’m typing this up at 7pm at a local library instead of studying.

Because this is a future fic, Bakugou’s characterisation is a little different than usual. He’s growing, and he’s going to continue to grow.

Warnings for brief mentions of blood and continuous references to bullying, both past and present.

See the end of the work for more notes

Age 18

They almost don’t survive the July Attacks.

The day passes in a haze of smoke, and heat, and gut clenching fear. When later asked to recall the events of the day, Bakugou will only be able to talk about individual moments, like the sound of the bombs detonating before the morning bell had rung; like running at villains with Deku by his side; like standing between Moonfish and a huddle of civilians and crouching down low like a threatened animal, smoke swirling around his fists.

Bakugou doesn’t remember sustaining the injury that eventually takes him out of the fight. He had been collecting injuries all day. He’s still not sure how he survived the day with all his teeth in place.

However, for years to come, he will clearly remember sitting in the ER.

The plastic chair is too small to contain all of him, some 6ft of teenage hero, cracked wrist-grenades abandoned by his boots. No one is there to treat him, too busy with the hundreds of injured civilians. He blinks blood out of his eyes, his ears ringing.

The muted TV in the corner of the waiting room plays a live feed of what’s happening throughout the city. Bakugou watches through drooping lids as they pan over half-destroyed buildings, showing his exhausted classmates hauling people out of the rubble.

Time passes. Bakugou forces himself to keep his eyes open. The TV is a continuous stream of destruction. They show cars cleaved in half, and tight-lipped reporters in front of a background of smoke, and then the shot changes—

And there’s Deku. He’s streaked with blood and soot, sweaty bangs plastered to his face, and he’s thrusting a fist into the air in triumph. He’s smiling.
It’s this moment that will stick out in his mind: the moment Deku defeats Shigaraki. The moment the country exhales in relief. The moment Deku takes his first real step as All Might’s successor in the eyes of the world. The moment Bakugou realises that things are changing.

Bakugou is given a hospital room, eventually. A trainee nurse spots him slumped in his seat, his eyes still focussed on the TV, and rushes over. She blushes, and bows, and apologises for not waiting on him hand on foot. Bakugou grunts. He doesn’t have the energy to tell her that he’s fine, and that if they were going to prioritise treating him over saving civilians’ lives then they would be making his entire job redundant. What would be the point in working his ass off as a hero if he let the people he’d just protected die because he wanted special treatment?

A more experienced nurse intercepts them. She doesn’t gush over Bakugou like the trainee does, but she does purse her lips and find him a private room. When he wakes up in two days time, groggy and exhausted, he’ll have a decision to make: what kind of hero does he want to be?

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*Age 21*

Bakugou is on his way back from picking up ingredients for dinner. There’s a park near their apartment building, usually populated by kids. Kirishima often says he likes the atmosphere it gives off. It makes their area feel suburban, even though they live less than fifteen minutes from the city centre.

Today, though, there aren’t little kids running around the playground. Instead, there’s a group of kids surrounding a boy curled up on the ground, protecting his head. The kids are using their quirks. The boy is not.

The sun catches in the boy’s curls, turning it seaweed green, highlighting the bloody scrape along one cheek, and for a moment, all Bakugou can see is Deku, laid out on the grass, quirkless and trembling, his skin still smoking from the force of Bakugou’s explosions.

Bakugou drops his groceries. Vegetables spill over the sidewalk. He’s yelling before he registers exactly what’s happening, his legs moving on their own.

“Hey, get the fuck away from him!”

The kids look up, see Bakugou charging at them, and bolt in the opposite direction. Bakugou wants to chase after them and teach the little scumbags a lesson, but the boy is closer. He sees Bakugou and screams, scrambling back on all fours.

Bakugou stops, extinguishing the explosions popping against his palms.

“Hey,” Bakugou says in the tone he reserves for spooked civilians, “it’s okay. They’re gone.”

The boy peeks up at Bakugou from beneath his lashes. “I don’t have any money.”

“I don’t want your shitty lunch money.” The kid looks even more worried now, like the only two
things someone might want of him is money or pain. Bakugou scrubs a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling out of his depth. “I’m not going to hurt you. I wanted to beat up those other brats, sure, but not you.”

“Why?”

“They were hurting you. It pissed me off.”

The kid looks down at the patchy grass. He’s no longer braced to bolt if Bakugou gets too close, but he still won’t look him in the eye.

“They were just playing a bit rough,” the kid mumbles. “Quirks are like that.”

“You and I both know that’s not true. Hey, look at me.” The kid does, eyebrows pinching together as he looks Bakugou over. “Are you okay?”

The kid nods, and says, before Bakugou has a chance to call him on his bullshit, “Are you the Explosion Hero, Detonation? Is that why you jumped in to save me?”

“I intervened because those kids were picking on someone that wasn’t fighting back. It’s disgusting.”

“No, you’re a hero. That must be it. No adult has ever … ”

The kid says it so innocently, with a tilt of his head and a wry smile, but it sends a jolt of ice through Bakugou’s stomach. Because this kid is laying in the dirt, blood smeared up one side of his face, smiling and vacant-eyed, and it’s so familiar. Tremors work their way up the kid’s arms, and his skin is bruised and scorched, and he’s struggling to pick himself up because he knows that no one else is coming to help him—and he looks like Deku.

When Bakugou thinks back to his childhood, to the summers spent at the local park, Deku sprawled out beneath him and a pack of cheering, faceless boys behind him, he can’t remember anyone ever intervening.

“You need to get those injuries treated,” Bakugou says.

He escorts the kid home. He learns that his name is Isao. He learns that a doctor diagnosed him as quirkless three years ago. He learns that this isn’t the first time Isao has come home looking like this.

Isao’s mother ushers them both inside. She doesn’t look surprised to see the marks on her son, but she does look surprised to see Bakugou there, and to hear that he intervened on her son’s behalf.

She cleans Isao up before focussing on Bakugou. She looks stressed. She looks like she’s used to being stressed.

Did Inko look like this when he beat up her son? She always had been a crier. Deku got that from her. Did Deku’s injuries make her cry? He had always been stupidly selfless; he probably hid it from her whenever he could.

“Thank you,” she says, reaching for his hand. Bakugou lets her hold it. Her hands are small and dry against his.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bakugou says.

“Thank you,” she says again. Her voice shakes with the force of her words.
Bakugou wishes she wouldn’t do that. He likes the glory of heroism, but having civilians come over to personally thank him always feels awkward. And unnecessary.

“You’re welcome,” Bakugou says stiffly.

He takes the next morning off and goes with her to report the bullying to the local elementary school. The principal falls over herself when she recognises Bakugou, and even as she promises to reprimand the kids at fault, to do everything in her power to make sure it never happens again, Bakugou still leaves with a hollow pit in his stomach. It doesn’t feel like enough. He hates feeling useless.

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Age 18

Time behaves strangely during fights. Sometimes, his instincts take over until he’s nothing but a moving body and the flash-bang of his explosions. The July Attacks require everything from him. His body is all muscle movement. Time surges around him in fits and starts.

Bakugou has been running on adrenaline for hours. The city is screaming around him. Clouds of smoke roll over the horizon like a wave, blanketing the city in ash. Everything registers in his periphery, unimportant compared to the here and the now, the villains immediately in front of him, the frenzied civilians behind him, and Deku, somewhere to the right and above, tearing through the air, bouncing off of skyscrapers like a rogue ping-pong ball.

And then everything slows, and Bakugou takes in the entire street.

There’s a family to his left. Moonfish knifed through the daughter’s leg, leaving her crumpled on the pavement, her face bone-white with shock. Her parents are pawing at her nearly severed leg. They’re in shock, too.

Moonfish has his eyes set on them. His head jerks to the side to see the son frozen a few metres away, eyes focussed on the upturned meat of his sister’s leg.

Deku is air-borne, chasing after a winged Nomu that’s latched onto a limp hero.

And then Bakugou sees Shigaraki running in the opposite direction, just out of range of his explosions.

The girl with the bloody leg isn’t crying, but her parents are. The father takes in great gulps of air, and the mother wails, her hands sliding uselessly through the pooling blood.

Moonfish is there. Watching them.

Deku is there, too, but he’s not close enough to save the family. He’s over a 100ft in the air, too far away to even register that the family is there.

He has a choice, he realises. This moment—it’s a choice.
Shigaraki scuttles down the street, his back to Bakugou, clutching at a cellphone. If Bakugou can get to him, if he can personally bring down the man in the centre of this whole attack, drag his plans out of him through sheer force of will, then he’ll have won. He can see it now—the other heroes’ faces as they realise a student bested them; his classmates watching him from a distance; Shigaraki’s face bloodied from his explosions, struggling as he’s cuffed and lead away. Shigaraki is the biggest catch. Taking him down would be the biggest achievement.

Except—it wouldn’t be a victory.

Bakugou wrenches his eyes away from Shigaraki, and runs, boots pounding against the asphalt. He doesn’t stop until he’s in front of the family, braced like a wall between them and Moonfish, head ducked low, a feral snarl on his lips.

*Try and touch them,* his eyes say. *Try and hurt them again while I’m here—I dare you.*

Deku is strong enough to handle Shigaraki. Bakugou trusts him to find the bastard later on and take him down.

It doesn’t feel like a life-changing decision at the time—it was instinct more than conscious thought that had moved him—but Bakugou will look back on that moment, and feel … something. It’s something like pride. It’s something like shame for that split second he saw Shigaraki and Moonfish and the trembling family, and considered abandoning them in order to peruse the bigger prey. It’s something like a realisation.

It was like his body had already made the decision to put himself between a psychopath and those weaker than him, leaving the bigger victories to Deku. It had felt good, it had felt right, to plant himself in front of someone weaker and refuse to be moved.

This feeling, this compulsion—is this what has been fuelling Deku for years? Is this what Deku was feeling when they were four years old, and he had stood, trembling and snot-nosed, between some weak kid and Bakugou?

The thought will stay with him for days. It’ll linger in the back of his mind when Bakugou wakes up in his hospital room two days later. Drugged and vaguely nauseated, he lays on his back, staring up at the tessellating ceiling, and thinking about the family’s reaction after he’d taken out Moonfish. The mother reached out for him with bloodied hands. The son fell into his arms, clutching at his costume. The father looked like he’d be sick with the force of his relief.

It was uncomfortable. They were sweaty and panicked, and they smeared blood all down his arms, and the short moment between Moonfish’s defeat and the family’s delivery to the closest paramedic, all he could think about was that split moment that he stared at Shigaraki’s retreating back and imagined chasing after him.

The thought had made him sick. It still does, days later.

But—Bakugou hadn’t done that. He had choked on that one moment of indecision, and then turned and fought against Moonfish like a man possessed. He’d been ready to leave everything to take Shigaraki down, and then, moments later, he’d been prepared to die in front of the family of strangers. Two very different types of heroes. Which one is the real one?

What type of hero does he want to be?

He remembers the family hugging each other after Moonfish was knocked out, alive because of him. A hero that never loses. A hero that’s always there. That’s the kind of hero he wants to be. Even if it’s not the kind of hero he’s been for the past eighteen years of his life.
As a pro hero, Bakugou is expected to do all kinds of crap that doesn’t directly involve punching villains the face. There’s more PR bullshit involved with being a hero than he had expected. Most of the time, it bugs the shit out of him, but maybe he can use it to his advantage.

The next time the usual lady from management comes to his office to talk to him, Bakugou doesn’t scowl at her like he usually does. This time, he interrupts Miss Management before she can organise another unimportant meet and greet.

“What about talks?” Bakugou says.

Miss Management looks up from her tablet. “Talks? Like Q and As?”

Bakugou shakes his head. “Talks at schools. Or even PSAs. Advocating.”

Other heroes are often roped into doing PSAs about looking both ways before crossing the street, or eating your veggies, or staying behind police barriers when villain fights break out. Those jobs always go to straight-laced heroes like Ingenium or Creati, or the eternally smiling, dependable heroes like Uravity, Red Riot, or Deku. Not to heroes like Bakugou.

“Advocacy,” Miss Management repeats. He glares at her for sounding so disbelieving, but she’s too busy pulling out her phone and writing up emails to notice. “That’s perfect. Finally, we can show off your dependable side—don’t look at me like that, I know you have a dependable side buried beneath all that animosity. The kids’ network are running a series of PSAs about safe quirk usage. I can get you booked in for Tuesday—”

“No. Bullying.” She looks up from her tablet. Bakugou looks her in the eye, arms crossed over his chest. “I want to talk to kids about bullying.”

The next time Bakugou wakes up, it takes him a moment to recognise the hospital room he’s in. The first thing he does after getting his bearings is guzzle down the water left by his bedside. The next thing he does is vomit onto the floor.
A nurse sighs in the doorway, like she’s deeply disappointed in his entire existence. Bakugou tries to flip her off, but his hands are bandaged too thickly to use his fingers. It was a wonder he was able to hold the water bottle.

The third thing he does, after being cleaned up and checked over by a doctor, is demand to know what happened. The nurse sits by his bed, and indulges him. It’s not the trainee nurse from early—it’s the older one. Her lips are pursed through the entire explanation, and Bakugou’s glad, almost. It makes it easier to hear the list of causalities. No one he’s close to has died, and none of his classmates were even permanently injured, but the destruction and death is still vast. The villains’ have won, in a way. Bakugou hates imperfect victories.

Kirishima is okay. The nurse tells him that he came by the hospital to see him. They almost didn’t let him in because he’s not family, but Bakugou’s parents saw Kirishima, bruised and bandaged from his own fight but not bedridden, pleading with the woman at the service desk, and frog-marched him through security to see Bakugou.

Bakugou had been unconscious, but it must have been reassuring to see he was alive and not permanently injured. Bakugou would be jealous—he wants to see for his own eyes that Kirishima is alright—but if Kirishima is visiting him rather than the other way around, then that means Kirishima is less injured than he is. Thank god.

Still, Kirishima isn’t well enough to keep up a bedside vigil, so he was sent home to rest. Bakugou is sure—and so is the nurse, judging by the way she rubs at her temples—that Kirishima will be back as soon as he can.

When the nurse leaves, a restless itch settles beneath Bakugou’s skin. After the heat of battle, the quietness leaves him feeling like he’s forgetting something. Like he’s left something unfinished.

And then his mind circles back to the fights. To Shigaraki, and Moonfish, and the family blubbering all over him with relief.

To Deku.

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**Age 21**

The first talk doesn’t go well according to Miss Management. He had, apparently, “come on too strong.” The school should’ve expected foul language when they arranged for him to come. This is one of the reasons Bakugou has so much respect for UA; they never coddled their kids.

The second and third talks go a little better, in that none of the teachers glare at him as he steps away from the lectern, but he still feels like he’s talking to a brick wall. He stares out at the auditorium full of blank faces, and wants to shake each of them. He wants to launch into the crowd, and grab the boys leant back in the seats, smirking and laughing, and shake them until they understand.

But he can’t do that. He bows, thanks the teachers for their time, scribbles out autographs, and
leaves, feeling hollow.

The afternoon after his third talk at a local high school, Bakugou changes into civilian clothes and takes the train to Deku’s apartment.

Deku is on nightshift for once, so he’s home when Bakugou arrives mid-afternoon without warning. To his credit, he only looks mildly surprised when he sees Bakugou. He invites Bakugou in, and goes into the kitchen to fetch coffee while Bakugou sits on the couch. Barkugou, their dumb dog, paws at his feet, tail wagging incessantly, like it recognises him as its namesake. They’ve only had the puppy for a few weeks, and Bakugou is still annoyed that Todoroki and Deku named the thing after him.

It’s not the dog’s fault, though. Bakugou finally gives in and pulls the dog onto his lap.

Deku returns with two mugs, handing him one. He sits down on the opposite end of the couch from Bakugou, and they talk about work, and Barkugou, and their ex-classmates. It’s awkward, at first. It always is until they shove away that initial fake-politeness and get down to the bones of what they need to say.

Bakugou finally puts down his mug and starts talking about his speeches at local schools; and his plans to advocate for quirkless kids in the future; and about Isao and his seaweed-green hair littered with twigs, and his bloody face, and his mother, who had smiled with such exhaustion, like she was used to seeing her son injured by snot-nosed little punks.

Deku gets quiet. Eerily quiet. He stares down at his cooling coffee. Bakugou leans back against the couch, hand running idly through Barkgou’s fur, and waits.

“Kacchan,” Deku finally says, “What you’re doing, it makes me happy, but … I think I want to be the one to speak out for quirkless kids.”

Bakugou doesn’t know what it’s like to be quirkless. This is Deku’s territory. He won’t argue with him, won’t talk over the top of him, but—

“You can’t tell people you were quirkless. That’s too dangerous.”

Deku scowls. For all the years the nerd spent trying to shed the title of quirkless, it’s a badge he wants to pull out again, to wave to the world, and a part of that annoys Bakugou—the same part of him he’s fought for years to overcome—but he understands it, too. Deku wants other quirkless people to know they’re not alone. That they’re not worthless.

Deku received One for All and rose from the bottom of the scrap heap to the near-top of the hero ranks. But he isn’t the only quirkless person in Japan. There are other people out there that didn’t inherit a god-like quirk. People that will never have a quirk. People that will never be able to dodge the constant barrage of abuse that comes with being quirkless.

“I know,” Deku says, “but I did spent 15 years as a quirkless kid. That counts for something.”

“Don’t be stupid and impulsive,” Bakugou says.
Deku smiles sunnily at him. “Me? Impulsive? It’s like you don’t know me, Kacchan.”

“I’m going to kill you before any of the villains get the chance.”

A few days later, Deku sits down with a reputable interviewer. He’s wearing a new suit—a proper tailored suit with a blazer and buffed oxford shoes, rather than his hero costume—and someone has tied his tie for him so that it lays flat.

Deku doesn’t do that thing he usually does in front of the press, where he flails his hands and laughs like he’s back at school, sitting in the cafeteria room sandwiched between Iida and Uraraka, grinning that megawatt grin, treating the media like they’re old friends—a technique he perfected after years of intense media scrutiny.

This time, Deku is oddly somber as he sits down. He thanks the interviewer for her time, and then, with minimal prompting, starts talking about being quirkless in a quirk-dominated society.

Bakugou watches the entire interview when it airs, coiled tightly around a throw pillow, plucking at the beadwork. Kirishima sits beside him, watching patiently.

Deku talks until his voice is hoarse. He talks about the hope and then crushing realisation when his fourth and fifth birthday came and went without a quirk manifesting; he talks about how everyone in the neighbourhood spoke in hushed tones around him for years; how they all offered condolences to his mother, like she had birthed a terminally ill child, rather than a quirkless one; how it didn’t take long for the other kids to ostracise him; how his classmates’ sly remarks grew worse and worse, until it festered into outright violence; how teachers had ignored or even encouraged everyone’s poor behaviour. He talks about isolation, and loneliness, and feeling like you were broken, like your body was defective, because the world told you that if you didn’t have a quirk, you were incomplete.

“Deku,” he says, clearing his throat, “is another way to read Izuku. It means worthless. It was my childhood nickname.”

Kirishima watches Bakugou throughout the interview. Kirishima knows about his and Deku’s toxic childhood. He knew, even before this interview, that Deku had meant something terrible before Uraraka had rebranded it. He had known that Bakugou had arrived at UA with a fistful of smoke and that spiteful nickname twisted on his lips.

Kirishima knows everything, but he’s so gentle. He reaches out, uncurls Bakugou’s hand from where it’s strangling the pillow in a death grip, and links their fingers together. He doesn’t say anything. He just sits there with Bakugou, and it’s enough.

Deku does a lot of fast talking towards the end of the interview about quirks developing in adolescence—infinitely rare, but not unheard of. He says something about his quirk waiting until his body was big enough to not be completely ripped to shreds by its own power before manifesting, a neat explanation for the way Deku had famously broken all of his bones during their first sports festival.

Deku doesn’t mention any names in the interview. And not once—despite it being common knowledge that they had grown up together—does Deku or the interviewer mention Bakugou. He
must have told her not to, beforehand.

Bakugou kind of hates him for that.

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**Age 18**

Bakugou pushes himself out of bed, taking his IV and its stand with him (because all UA students have had that lecture from Recovery Girl), and hobbles into the hall.

They’re treating Deku in the same hospital. The nurse had told him that much. He’s even in a nearby room; they’re probably keeping the heroes close by for security reasons.

Bakugou opens the door with his wrists and elbows, since his hands are swathed in bandages, and almost wrenches his IV out trying to squeeze through the gap. The fact that he finds a door heavy tells him how exhausted he really is.

Deku’s room is a mirror of his. He’s asleep on the single bed. Bakugou drags himself over to the beside chair, and sits quietly, watching the rise and fall of Deku’s chest. His face is puffy, swelling up like ripened fruit. His arms are in casts. Judging from the lump beneath the blankets, his right leg is broken, too.

Bakugou isn’t sure exactly what he’s doing there. He’s half-convinced it’s the drugs and left over battle-instinct that made him find Deku; after fighting near him for hours, it makes sense that he’d seek him out.

But there’s something about this moment that gives him pause. The hum of the machines keeping Deku breathing. The gauzy curtains over the propped window doing little to block out the light, dust motes floating in a wide sunbeam. The absence of rage within him when he looks at Deku, replaced by this new, strange feeling. The newfound respect he has for him. It stops Bakugou from getting up and storming out.

Deku’s eyes crack open. He squints at Bakugou.

“Kacchan … ?”

Bakugou pushes his hands together. His palms are so overworked that he can barely feel the sting as he aggregates his injuries.

“Deku.” Bakugou blows out a breath. “Midoriya. I have something to say. I think it’s probably overdue.”
Bakugou’s next talk is at his former middle school. His former classmates are adults, and half the teachers have probably moved on, but—

But it feels right, going back. Making amends here of all places.

Bakugou wonders if their former teachers and classmates from middle school watched Deku’s interview and knew he was talking about them. He wonders if they see Deku’s smiling face everywhere, on t-shirts and billboards and the news every other night, and realise how fucking successful that small, seemingly useless kid in their class became. More successful than any of those lowlifes, anyway.

Bakugou is in his hero suit, minus the grenade gauntlets and some body armour. The principal meets him at the front door. They shake hands. The principal introduces himself, and Bakugou immediately forgets his name.

“We’re very proud to have a high ranked hero come from our middle school,” says the principal. “You’re the star of our alumni—”

“Two,” Bakugou says.

“Pardon?”

“Two heroes came from this shitty school. And Deku is ranked higher than me.” For the moment, anyway.

The principal stares at him for a moment, and then seems to realise who Bakugou is talking about. Bakugou would have doubted that any of the staff remembered a nervous, quirkless kid like Deku at all, but they probably keep an updated list of past students somewhere, and Bakugou and Deku are both so outrageously, disgustingly famous that they would have all had to have lived at the bottom of the ocean not to know who they are. It probably says what middle school they went to on each of their goddamn Wikipedia pages.

Bakugou wonders if the principal had seen the interview, too. He must have. No wonder he doesn’t want to draw attention to the fact that a rising hero originated from this shitty school when said hero had a terrible school life before entering UA.

The principal smiles. “Right, of course. He was so quiet, and you were so boisterous, I forgot—”

“Quiet?” Bakugou repeats.

The principal plasters on that rubbery smile again, the same smile all the two-bit reporters and politicians and PR reps wear. “We’re honoured to have you here. Would you like me to accompany you to the gymnasium?”

“You don’t want to acknowledge it, huh?” The principal’s smile doesn’t waver. Bakugou clucks his tongue, and reaches for his phone, swiping it open and pulling up Twitter, angling the screen so the principal can see. “I’m here to give a speech about bullying—something you apparently know fuck all about. How many kids have you ignored over the years? How many kids were chewed up and spit out right under your nose? I wonder what the public would think about that. Sounds like a safety issue to me.”

“Sir—” The principal makes an aborted motion to grab Bakugou’s phone, but stops himself.
Smart. Bakugou doesn’t think he could stop himself from blowing the fucker’s face off if he actually touched him with his sweaty hands.

“Do you know how popular Deku is?” Bakugou says it because it needs to be said, because Deku isn’t here to say it himself, even though Deku deserves to say it, to spit it out beneath clenched teeth, to make this bastard in a cheap suit squirm after the shit he went through as a kid. Deku isn’t that kind of person, though. Bakugou will have to be that person for him. “What do you think would happen if the media found out exactly how this middle school treated a rising hero? They already know Deku was spat on as a kid, should we give them an address so they can come down here and interrogate you yourselves?”

“If this whole thing was an attempt to blackmail the school,” the principal starts, and Bakugou laughs in his face.

“Blackmail? What the fuck would I possibly want from you?”

The principal glances to the side like he wants to run from this conversation. “I don’t know, but I won’t stand for it.”

Bakugou grabs his lapels and hauls him closer, until the principal is standing on his tip-toes, staring up into Bakugou’s red eyes. He stops breathing.

“I want,” Bakugou says, “you to wake the fuck up. Make teachers look out for their kids. Don’t put up with any kind of violence—this should be a fucking safe space for kids. And the little shittains who think they’re above the rules because they’ve got a fancy quirk? You deal with them, too. Quirk usage is illegal. Physical assault is illegal. And yet I saw all that and more when I was here—I did all of that and more when I was here.”

Bakugou isn’t sure who he’s angrier at—the principal sweating profusely in front of him, the scores of teachers who saw kids lay their filthy hands on Deku and never lifted a finger to help him, their nameless former classmates who graduated and went on to work nine-to-five jobs and live in the suburbs, who never spared a thought for the quirkless kid they spent years ridiculing, or the entire fucking system for setting up quirkless kids to fail. Or himself.

The principal stares at him. “You’re saying you wanted us to give you detention?”

Detention. Like that would have done anything.

“I’m saying,” Bakugou says through gritted teeth, “that you should’ve expelled me.”

The principal says something else, but Bakugou is done with this conversation. He drops the principal and stalks off to find the gymnasium on his own, shaking with anger.

He finds the gymnasium, but before he goes inside, he ducks into a unisex bathroom, and calls Kirishima. He’s on his lunch break, just back from an early morning patrol, and talks Bakugou patiently through breathing exercises, and then chatters mindlessly for a while until Bakugou feels less like he’s going to snap in half.

It feels weird being back here. The graffiti in the bathroom is new, but the mottled blue tiles are
exactly how he remembers. It’s like he’s travelled almost ten years into the past.

“Katsuki,” Kirishima says, “it’s okay for you to be struggling with this. I know you didn’t have a hard time the way Midoriya did, but you still weren’t in a good head space when you were a kid —”

“I have to go.” Bakugou’s voice echoes in the small, watery bathroom.

Kirishima pauses, and then says, “I’m proud of you.”

Bakugou closes his eyes. “I’m not doing this so people can be proud—”

“I know. That’s why I’m proud. This is a very you thing to do.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You’re a hero, babe.”

“I have to go,” Bakugou says again, but this time, his voice is less gruff, and the knot in his chest isn’t so stifling. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Knock ‘em dead.”

The gymnasium looks different. The basketball hoops folded up against the far wall are new. The wood panels aren’t scuffed like he remembers; the floor has been buffed recently, shining under his boots. The curtains over the stage are pulled back.

A teacher leads him backstage. He doesn’t recognise her. She seems fairly decent—steady hands, a strong smile, none of the hero awe that the student council member beside her is displaying. But then again, plenty of people seem competent on the outside when they’re actually twisted up on the inside.

The kid next to her, some committee member from the student council, stares up at Bakugou. His eyes are huge. Jesus Christ, had Bakugou ever been that young?

“I’m—I’m—” says the kid, but the teacher says, a touch too sharply, “Takeda.”

Takeda bows his head. Bakugou stares at the teacher dead in the eye until she shuts her mouth. I see you, Bakugou thinks. Do you think I don’t fucking see?

“You are?” Bakugou prompts. Takeda looks to his frowning teacher instead of answering, so Bakugou says, “I went to this middle school. Did they tell you that?”

Takeda’s eyes snap to his face. “No.”

“Yeah. It was really shitty, looking back. Is it any better?”

Takeda shuffles in place. “… Yes, sir.”

“You don’t have to lie to me, kid. I’m sure most middle schools are the same. Guess that’s why
I’m here, trying to change that.”

Takeda chews on his lips, and Bakugou waits patiently. He learned this technique from Aizawa—if you wait, they’ll come to you. He always used it on villains. Now, he’s using it on kids, just like Aizawa did.

Fucking hell, if he’s not careful, he’s going to wind up teaching these brats, and that would be a disaster. Who would want Bakugou as a teacher?

“I’m a fan,” Takeda says finally. “I really like your wrist-bands. I want to build hero gadgets when I’m older, but I know that that’s kind of boring …”

“That’s not boring,” Bakugou says. “I know people who work in support. They’re piss-your-pants terrifying. More terrifying than the actual heroes. And my grenades have saved my life and my friends’ lives more times than I can count.”

Takeda doesn’t say anything, but he looks up at Bakugou without any shyness. If the kid didn’t have scales creeping up his face and a working set of gills on his neck, he would think that Takeda’s quirk put actual stars in his eyes. The thought reminds him of Deku, eternally starry eyed, and Bakugou wants to punch something; everything here reminds him of Deku, and he hates it.

After that, the teacher ushers him on stage, and Bakugou lets himself be herded in front of a hoard of puberty-ridden students. The sooner he says what needs to said, the sooner he can get Deku out of his head.

He stands behind the lectern, staring out at rows of chairs filling the gymnasium, and wets his lips, and starts.

He says, “I was a student here a few years ago. I was top of my year, and I wouldn’t let anyone even look at me wrong, because I thought I was on top of the world. I was a stupid piece of shit.”

The crowd shuffles in their seats. A teacher standing in the wings grimaces, but Bakugou ignores her. If they can’t handle his swearing or the ugly truth, then they shouldn’t have invited him.

He tugs the microphone off the stand, and walks around the lectern, one hand stuffed in his pocket. This talk feels different than the last.

Bakugou says, “I thought I was the best of the best, so I treated everyone around me like shit, and it ended up backfiring in my face. I’m here to tell you to treat the kids around you with respect, but I know that you’re probably all selfish teenagers who won’t give a fuck if you’re pushing some kid around, or if you’re telling other people to go kill themselves—that is, you won’t give a fuck until it comes back to bite you in the ass. And I’m telling you right now, it will bite you in the ass.”

He says, “I’m not trying to trick you into playing nice and eating your fucking veggies. I’m telling you all this so that you’ll get your heads out of your asses. I’m giving you the wake up call I wish someone had beaten into my skull when I was a kid.”

He says, “I spent ten years hurting Deku, and the both of us have to live with that for the rest of our lives, no matter how many times I apologise and try to make up for what I did. You might think you’re above everyone else now because you have money, or a powerful quirk, or whatever the fuck else, but one day you’re going to wake up and realise that everyone isn’t beneath you. They’re going to catch up. And you’re going to be too busy lauding it up and making other people feel small that you can’t see your own weaknesses.”
He says, “I’m not trying to threaten you into being obedient students. I’m trying to help. Take my advice.”

His lecture doesn’t last the entire hour. It barely lasts forty minutes. He sits down at the edge of the stage, arms braced on his knees, and lets the kids ask him questions. Some of them aren’t even about this topic, and he shuts them down.

Lots of them are about Deku.

“I thought you and Deku were friends,” says one student, a girl who barely looks old enough to be in middle school.

“We are,” Bakugou says evenly. “We weren’t when we were your age. I was a shit-head to him when I was younger. But I think we’re friends now.”

“How did he forgive you for what you did to him?” She probably wouldn’t even reach his shoulders, but her gaze chills him right through.

“I don’t know,” Bakugou says, and even after all he’s said today, this visceral honesty leaves him feeling stripped bare in a way he normally only feels during therapy sessions. “I don’t know if I deserve that forgiveness, but he gave it to me without hesitating, because that’s the kind of person he is.”

“What kind of person is he?”

“Are you kidding me? Deku is fucking Deku.” The disbelief in his tone gets a laugh from the kids. Bakugou wasn’t exaggerating about their fame. They all know how sunny and forgiving Deku is.

The girl sits down, and someone else gets up. A shifty-eyed boy with his shirt hanging out of his pants. Bakugou thinks, I got you, you little shit-stain, but he doesn’t let anything show on his face.

“How did you decide to be better?”

“I was an oblivious little fucker when I entered UA, and I had to go through a lot of crap before I got a proper wake up call, and then it was even longer before I actually managed to work through all my issues and apologise. Working to be a good person isn’t a single decision. It’s about trying to be better every single day.”

The questions keep coming, and then the bell for lunch rings through the gymnasium. Some of the kids stick around even while their classmates file off for lunch. Bakugou signs autographs, and takes a few begrudging photos, and privately talks to the nervous kids who come up to him with more questions about what to do if you’re being bullying, or how to be better, or what exactly he had meant when he had said, It’s time to make a choice; it’s time to decide what kind of person you’re going to be.

Bakugou talks to them in a quiet, almost gentle voice, until the teachers have to move them on. He leaves the school feeling light-headed. Had he really just done that?

He doesn’t know if he made any real difference, if any of the kids will really take his words to heart, but he tried. He’s never believed in that congratulatory bullshit about the effort being as important as the outcome, but—

But maybe someone going through something awful will hear him and feel bolstered. Maybe other heroes will step forward and help after hearing about his efforts. He doesn’t check the group chat regularly, but Kirishima says the others have been making noise about joining him in speaking out about bullying.
And maybe this will make Deku feel better. Even a little bit.

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**Age 18**

“There was a moment,” Bakugou says without stuttering, even though his tongue feels too big for his mouth, “when we were out there. I saw Shigaraki. You were busy, but I saw him. I don’t think that stupid fuck even realised I was there.”

“Kacchan,” Deku says hoarsely.

Bakugou barrels on, because if he doesn’t get this out now, he might never say it. “There was this family, and Moonfish was nearby, staring at them like he wanted to fucking eat them. But they were down the street, not directly in front of me, and Shigaraki was in my line of sight. I could’ve ignored them. I could’ve taken him out. No one would have even questioned it.”

The hospital is a soft buzz of noise outside of Deku’s room. Someone will come looking for him when they find his bed empty. Where will they think Bakugou has gone? Will they think he’s ditched the hospital altogether, or will they think to check Deku’s room?

“But I didn’t,” Bakugou finishes. “I turned around and stopped Moonfish instead.”

Deku blinks at him. The IVs must be feeding them a shitload of drugs. Deku’s eyes are glassy, and Bakugou suddenly rethinks this entire plan. Can he even understand what Bakugou is saying?

But then Deku smiles—that stupid smile where his eyes crinkle up and his teeth show—and says, “I knew it.”

“What?”

“You’re a hero, Kacchan.”

“I know. You want to see my license?”

Deku shakes his head, and Bakugou almost doesn’t want to hear what he knows is coming next. “That’s not what I mean. You’re a hero. The real kind. The kind that makes people feel safe.”

“Because I’m there,” Bakugou says, mostly under his breathe, and it’s definitely the drugs making him say that childish shit. But Deku hears, and smiles again, that same too-bright smile that makes his puffy, bruised up face look like squashed fruit.

“I’m sorry,” Bakugou blurs.

The smile fades. “What for?”

“Everything.” His heart is pounding in his chest. The words bubble up his throat before he’s even thought about stopping them. “For treating you way I did when we were kids. For letting everyone else treat you like shit, too—for encouraging them. For going after after you when we got to UA. For everything I said, and did, and the way I kept stomped on your dream, even though I wasn’t worth shit—”
Deku’s hand rests on his. Bandaged fingers jut out from beneath his plaster cast. Bakugou’s hands, wrapped thickly in gauze, don’t register Deku’s touch. His nerves are too wrecked.

“I already forgave you,” Midoriya says.

“Fuck off.”

“But the apology was definitely nice. Kind of needed, too, in it’s own way. Though you didn’t pick a very good time for this, Kacchan. We almost died. The whole city almost died.”

“That’s why this is the right time.” Bakugou wets his cracked lips, and says, once more, “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Midoriya says.

Bakugou almost tells him about what he saw on the TV. The way the entire country is grieving and celebrating in turn, how they’re already drawing parallels between Deku, the determined seventeen year old who took down Shigaraki, and All Might. Bakugou almost tells him that he’ll surpass him and become the next Number One, regardless of what the news is saying.

A nurse’s plastic shoes squeak on the vinyl floor, probably coming to check on them. Bakugou is so tired. This will have to wait for another day.

Bakugou isn’t stupid; he knows they’re going to have to have more conversations like his one. The rift between them will take years to mend, and they’ve only just started.

But they’ve got their whole lives ahead of them to do it. Graduation might be fast approaching, but the hero industry is small. Their circle of mutual of friends is even smaller. And the thing between them, this cocktail of respect and rivalry and shared history, has welded them together.

This apology is only just beginning, Bakugou knows. They have a long way to go. But they’ll get there in the end.

End Notes

My tumblr.

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