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Hulk

By

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My first punch was flimsy. Before, when I pictured punching someone, I'd expected I'd know just what to do to deliver a force to crack the earth, leave buildings quivering from the sheer impact of divine justice. But when I tried it it was flimsy. I had to re-do it, harder. But, she didn't bleed. She was shocked and stood still. Her only movement was dropping the notebook she was carrying, letting it flip open to a page she'd doodled a crude butterfly on. She gaped at me, and her eyes were wide, a blue so pale it almost matched the whites of her eyes. She went pale, and her complexion, paired with her dark brown hair, made her look sickly and corpse-like, as though I'd killed her.

I hadn't wound up. I think that was my problem. I just punched forward, losing all of the momentum well before knuckle connected with shoulder. That was the other problem. My first true punch was to her shoulder, like we were two dudes just kidding around. That's another reason I had to re-do it, aim for her slack jaw or miniscule nose. I hit her neck instead.

"She touched me first." I said, with the defiance of a stalwart thirteen-year old. My arms were crossed, my lips in a full pout. It was a shame I was seventeen: old enough to know better, but not young enough to escape parental involvement and visits to the principal's office. A principal who'd clearly hoped to get through this day without having an incident big enough that his over-smiling vice principals couldn't handle.

I knew the hot season was upon us by the sweat that migrated from Principal Roy's grey sideburns head down into his beard, which was inexplicably a mix of browns, gingers, and greys, despite his solid-colored hair. His sigh conveyed decades of exhaustion.

"You were mumbling, Rylee. Can you repeat that?"

"I *said* she touched me first." I wanted to keep my eyes to the floor, but I couldn't help it. I loved studying facial reactions to my words. Principal Roy was fascinating, so tired, yet with so much anger on reserve, waiting for just the right student with just the right shit-eating grin and defiant attitude.

"Hannah hit you first?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, she touched me first. Invaded my bubble after I repeatedly told her to leave me alone."

"You told her to leave you alone?"

“Okay, so I more *glared* her to leave me alone. I huffed when she spoke, rolled my eyes, everything. I was sending out the clearest of nonverbal cues. Not my fault she didn’t pick them up.”

Principal Roy put his hands together and leaned his forehead into them a moment before pulling away and replying, “So you huffed at her and punched her when she didn’t immediately leave you alone?”

“I hit her when she butted her fat ass into my conversation.”

“Alright!” Principal Roy snapped. He leaned back in his chair, tugging at his falling dress pants. In all my annoyance, I didn’t envy him for having to wear what he did in this heat, the long pants, the dress shirt. Dress codes weren’t only a pain in the ass for teenage girls, I guess.

“First off, you need to watch that mouth in my office. Next, you need to check this attitude of yours. It’s no wonder the lunch-duty teachers report you sit by yourself these days.” He watched me from the corner of his eye, clearly wanting me to delve more into this last point. Grudgingly, I gave him an answer.

“I realized I’ve only been hanging out with idiots and men.” I bit back from saying that men being idiots was inherent in their gene structure.

“And your grades slipping?”

“I got better things to do than homework.” I tried out my best approximation of what a defiant smirk would look like. “Ever since I stopped studying for tests, I’ve had a lot more fun seeing how naturally lucky I am.”

He let out a heavy sigh. After tapping his fingers on his desk for a few moments, then spoke again.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. You are going to formally apologize to Hannah and spend the next month in detention.”

It almost thrilled me to hear. I’m a kid who gets detention now. Me, ‘a pleasure to have in class’ several years running, now carving into desks and smoking cigarettes with the kids in detention. I couldn’t wait.

“You’re also going to meet with me or one of the guidance counselors once a week.”

“Excuse me?” I almost laughed. I didn’t have problems or anything. I wasn’t ‘disturbed’ or whatever they called kids sent to counselors. I just hated when people stuck their nose where it wasn’t asked to be.

“I’m not sure you understand how serious in-school fighting is.”

I laughed. “Oh, that was *fighting*? Lord, if that’s the worst you have to deal with, sign me up for your job.”

I watched him, waiting for him to break. He didn’t.

“Hannah’s parents are furious. If you don’t handle this apology right, you might have more serious punishment facing you.”

My eyes glinted. “Promise?”

Principal Roy sighed. A long, heavy sigh. “Go home, Rylee. Take the weekend to think. You’ll be meeting with Ms. Leighton-Parker on Monday during lunch.”

I shrugged and stood up, trying to hide my shaking. I was almost giddy with excitement, and it took me the rest of the day to get down from my high.

Rumors of what had happened swirled through the air like perfumes of ambiguous odors. When you stand in the middle of them all, they smell horrible, but your nose is almost happy to be stimulated. The most interesting ones came from the teachers and parents who were just a

little too involved in our high school, to the point where I couldn't be convinced they were leading happy lives at home. Rumors were typical of teenagers, but adults were supposed to be above all that.

From what I overheard, I was now 'aggressive,' 'demonic,' and 'a wild animal.' I was sure I was plenty of other words they were not yet bold enough to say, at least not to my face.

As for me and my apparent victim's dynamic, it shifted a bit. Before, Hannah and I were on two separate planets, never crossing orbits. Now, I'd taken to calling Hannah 'Aryana.' I'd thought of it walking home, picturing her sickly-pale face and her blue eyes. So, she became Aryana to me. Aryana Grande. Aryana Huffington. It was prettier sounding, and I loved explaining its meaning to anyone who asked.

She, on the other hand, had taken to charging away down the halls when she saw me, messenger bag hitting her loudly thigh. In the one class we shared, she scribbled anxiously in her notes whenever I caught her looking my way.

Malik McDowell came up to me in that same class the Tuesday after I'd punched Hannah, with some of his nameless friends. He'd never spoken to me before, except to comment on my 'stank face' in the hall once. He leaned on my desk like we were the best of friends, about to share an important secret.

"Yo, Ry, did you really clothesline Hannah?"

I looked to her desk and noted Malik had waited until Hannah was in the bathroom to ask.

"No, I broke her kneecaps. Need a demonstration?"

I didn't always like to be so hostile. Mostly, I kept quietly to myself, but I'd been having a bad day. I'd lost my science notebook, hit my head on the entrance doors, and found out I was

facing suspension. I was pissed. I liked the doodles I'd started in my science notebook. They were more like blueprints for castles and skyscrapers I could construct one day.

Malik was undeterred. "Damn. You all mousy, though. I don't see you fighting nobody."

"Then don't believe it, I don't care."

"You really think you hot shit now, huh?" He shook his head. "Man, whatever, Oreo."

I sighed. "You wound me, Malik. You really do."

I sat alone at lunch again. On Monday, I'd scarfed my food down in a few minutes, then gone straight to the purgatory that was a trip to the guidance counselor's. Tuesday, I had to endure all the eyes, the people exaggeratedly ducking their heads as they came near me, like I'd pop them right then and there for no reason. I guess that was my M.O. according to them.

I didn't expect Des to sit down across from me. Destiny Lee had her own brush with infamy, when she'd dyed her hair a pale purple and wanted only to be called "Des," pronounced "Dez." She didn't let it bother her in a way I admired and wanted to emulate. We'd worked on group projects together in the past and had a distant mutual respect for each other. Now was the only time either of us had breached that distance.

She'd started talking, but I marveled at her appearance like I always did. She had more piercings in her ears since last spring and her chest seemed flatter than I remembered. Did I one-up her on the coolness scale now that I had the bigger breasts? Did I even care? I guess I must if I was thinking about it.

"Ry? Rylee?"

"Sorry." I said, "what were you saying?"

"I was asking if this stuff with Hannah Bradley is true. Kiyana is swearing you hit her."

"A broken clock is right twice a day."

She blinked at me. “So, she is right?”

“Twice a day.”

Des rolled her eyes. “Why did you hit Hannah? And why are you calling her names now? You never seemed like a bully to me.”

I nearly choked on my milk, “A *bully*? Good god, I didn’t give her a swirly or nothing.”

“You hit her! How is that not—”

“What does it matter to you exactly?”

Des sighed. “Because I think you’re cool. You keep to yourself and your head down. Why make waves? Hannah doesn’t have many friends and seems nice enough, so why pick on her?”

“She’s really nice when she keeps her mouth shut.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re not talking about being nice to her, or being her friend. You’re talking about pitying her. I should be nice to her ‘cause no one else is, right? You think she wants your pity?”

“I’m sure she just wants a break. You’re not the only one mean to her.”

I leaned back in my chair. I didn’t want Des to know quite yet how much of a bitch I was, or how much I didn’t care about Hannah’s feelings, but Des was making it real hard not to let it out.

“I’m not gonna hit her again if that’s what you’re asking. By now she’s finally got the message to stay away from me.” I put my arms behind my head and grinned. “I haven’t felt this free in years. The silence is golden.”

Des shook her head and stood up, assumedly to go back to her cool, outcast-apparently-by-choice friends. “You’re going through something.”

I shrugged. “Ain’t we all?”

Poor Des. Seeing the good in people when there wasn't anything there.

I was back with Principal Roy. I'd charmed Ms. Leighton-Parker into believing I couldn't be a problem child. I'd helped her pick out a great orthodontist in the area for her daughter and complimented her knitting patterns, so how could I possibly be troubled? She'd promised to advocate for me, smoothing out the wrinkle that was Hannah's up-in-arms parents. She told Roy I'd had a brief spurt of anger and was back on track. Roy was unconvinced.

"You still have some behavioral problems. Teachers are reporting a lack of participation in their classes."

"I'm writing my novel. Can't stop the muse when it strikes."

Principal Roy sighed. Our relationship was getting better. He'd handed me a puzzle toy he normally used with students with attention problems. I played with the rainbow-colored puzzle, trying to mess it up as much as I could, almost solving it, then messing it up again.

"Participation is one thing," Roy said, "You've been skipping your art and art history classes. Mr. DiStefano is concerned about you."

I could have broken my chair in half. I twisted the puzzle instead. When it didn't snap, I put it back on the desk with a sigh.

"I don't care about his concern."

Principal Roy sighed. "Rylee, I don't understand." He shook his head, "You should have heard the way he would rave about you earlier in the year. Your intelligence, your wit—I have never heard him so enthralled in a student's potential."

He sighed again. I began to think he could communicate better with them than with words. “I was excited to meet you one-on-one, and was expecting it to be as a graduation speaker, not like this.”

“I’ve never been one for speeches. This conversation feels a lot more real.” I put on a dopey voice, the one I used for my impressions of fake deep men on the internet. “I hate small talk, I want to know your flaws, your dreams, what you think of galaxies.”

“Rylee.” His tone proved I was testing his patience. I wondered if he had kids. I didn’t see any pictures, but maybe he did. Maybe that’s where he got so good at dealing with bullshit like mine.

“Would you like to know something Mr. DiStefano once said about you?”

I blinked. “No.”

He sighed again. “He said you radiate an inner light, something that could change the world. The way his eyes shone...he believed in you, Rylee. You were his star student.”

I paused. My shoulders sank, I could feel the weight on them. “He believed in me?”

He nodded.

I turned to him. I laid my hands on the armrests of the chair and pushed myself to my feet. I walked toward the door, pausing by his bookshelf. It was wider than it was tall, a little like Roy himself, but tall enough that I could put my hand out straight out in front of me and touch it. I did so.

“You know, these talks are really teaching me about myself.” I eyed the silver baubles that decorated the top of the bookshelf. They seemed fancy and precious, and odd for someone like Roy, all meaty fingers and gruff sighs, to have.

“Are they? I’m glad to hear it. What have you learned?”

I looked at my hand for a bit. I leaned in closer to examine each miniscule wrinkle and the tiny hairs that protruded from it. I put my other hand on the bookshelf too, and looked at them there together. When I was satisfied with my examination, with as much force as I could muster, I pushed the bookshelf onto the ground. I heard cracking, shattering, thumping, and tearing, separate and all at once. Roy nearly flew out of his chair.

“I never want anyone to *fucking* believe in me again.” I faced him, unmoving.

As I saw Principal Roy’s face redden, and his shoulders shake, preparing to produce a booming voice to reprimand me, I hoped my punishment would be so bad, I never had to set foot in this hellscape of a school again.

Unfortunately, an in-school suspension and the promise of Saturday detention did not equal an expulsion. When I came back after my ‘day off’ the school felt like it was buzzing. Now, apparently, I’d punched Mr. Roy, Hannah, all four of the guidance counselors, and drop-kicked the school nurse when she tried to have me institutionalized. Man, I wish.

I skipped lunch and sat in the library through the lunch period and my self-appointed study hall I took instead of art and art history. The librarians didn’t give enough of a shit to listen to anyone above or below them, so they were as friendly to me as they always were.

The next period was an actual study hall for most people, and it was coming time to start writing research papers, so many students headed to the library. Des walked in. When she locked eyes with me, she practically ran over. I wanted to hide my head in the nearest book.

Unfortunately, that was a book on marble statues of Greek figures, a subject that made me very much want to vomit these days.

Des sat down across from me. “Are you okay?”

I could have laughed. “Yeah, how are you?”

Des shook her head. “I mean...did you really get an ISS?”

I nodded. “I had a tantrum, but I learned my lesson staring at a wall for six hours.”

“The rumors are crazy, Ry. People are saying—”

“I know. No, I did not have a wrestling match with the senior staff, or the nurse. I just broke something of Roy’s when I was mad.”

Des looked down at the desk. She was much more worried today, I could tell from how she furrowed her eyebrows.

“Why did you really hit Hannah?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did she do something to you?” Des played with her nails. “I realized after we talked the other day, I went right ahead and blamed you, but the way you responded...not saying she deserved anything, but did she do something to you?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, right where my headache was starting to form, “Yeah. Aryana Huffington put her fat hand on me.”

Des blinked. “Like, aggressively? Sexually?”

I looked around the room before speaking, thinking for a few moments. “My hair.”

“Damn, really?”

I sighed heavily, trying to push as much feeling out of my system as I could, “I was telling Kiyana I wanted to shave my head. Hannah butt into my conversation and told me my hair was so gorgeous and I shouldn’t change it.” With each breath, I tried to get the shaking in my hands to stop. “She was in my small group earlier...all day she was in my face, voice in my ear, and then she had to go and...”

“So, she touched your hair?” Des rolled her eyes at the familiar annoyance. For a moment, I think she sympathized with me, but I couldn’t let myself off the hook that easily.

I bit my lip, shoulders shaking slightly. “I don’t remember. She might as well have.”

Des blinked and looked at me. “Rylee, holy fuck. Everyone’s painting you as this demon bully of the school, and Hannah might not even have done anything?”

“It doesn’t matter if she touched it or not. She told me what I should do with my head! It wasn’t her business.”

Our conversation was starting to get heated. I waited for Des to storm off like she had before, but she didn’t. She bit her lip, considering the next thing to say.

I stood up, gathering my things. “I’m gonna go outside. Study there.”

“It’s getting kinda cold.”

I shrugged. “Come with if you want, but I don’t wanna be in here anymore.” That wasn’t true. I didn’t want her to be there. She was being too sympathetic, too understanding, so she needed to leave me alone and take a hint.

She followed me anyway. When we were seated outside, I stared at the wall by the door we’d come out of. God, I wanted to smoke, lounging on the wall, like I used to watch some seniors do. Six more months and I could buy my own cigarettes. To my disappointment, no one in detention had any, much less the ability to teach me how to light one.

I must have been a smoker in a past life. I pictured breathing the smoke in and gently singeing my lungs, I could feel it. It was a sensation I don’t think one could fabricate. It was a sensation I missed.

I adjusted myself in my seat, looking back up at Des. She was clearly still thinking about what I’d told her.

“Maybe you could get your punishment lightened, or at least clear your name a bit. Tell someone about the hair thing, Ms. Douglas or something. A black teacher should get it.”

“Ms. Douglas doesn’t know me from a paper bag. I’ve never had her.”

“Well, still tell somebody.” She bit her lip, “Maybe someone could explain to Hannah why that’s not cool.”

“Tell somebody and everything will be fixed? Okay, got it.”

“You still have to deal with the consequences of what you did, but at least you won’t be a monster to everybody.”

I don’t know what kept me from telling Des that was exactly how I wanted it to be. This is how I wanted everything to go. Everyone here hates me, I graduate, I go to some school far away from here and stay smart enough to get into more trouble, but not get caught. I’d cut my hair like Des and get piercings, drink until I wasn’t a lightweight anymore, until no force could have power over me. I’d be more prepared for the world. A monster now, but someone who survives and thrives later.

“What makes you think the school would do anything?” I picked at my nails, “Anything other than send out a vague email about the situation.”

“Make enough of a fuss about it, then! Talk about it so much that the school will have to do more!”

I could see righteous and determined indignation in Des. A cause she could get behind. Just make enough of a fuss and they’ll have to listen. It had me nearly ripping the table we were sitting at off its base.

“Nothing will happen. The people at the top are comfy there, and that’s where they’re going to stay. They won’t do shit about Hannah, okay? And I know that, I’ve *known* that. If I

trusted this fucked-up school system, then I would have talked to someone about how she pisses me off. I would have reported every piece of bullshit I've ever heard, and I'm *sure* DiStefano would be the hell out of here for laying one hand near me, much less two!"

"Laying a hand on...?"

Fuck. I hadn't meant to say anything, but now it was done. We hadn't been talking about him, but now I'd said his name and it was all over. Des had poked a hole in the dam and the flood was spilling out of me. The part of my brain that wanted to be cool, silent, aloof, anything like that, was shut off. How could I have let her get to me like that?

"Yes. Hannah and DiStefano are the same to me, taking up space that is supposed to belong to me." I grabbed at my arms. "Everything here is supposed to belong to me, but they can look and touch every piece of me like I'm a damn—" I shook my head.

"Whoa, Rylee, what are you...you're not talking about...?"

I didn't hear a word she said. I looked up at the school, then a little higher.

"But it's always gonna be my fault, isn't it? I punched Aryana, so I'm the aggressive demon that doesn't deserve to live. Because my shoulders were so *fucking* distracting in the eighty-degree heat, DiStefano told me to stay after—because I didn't follow a dress code, a code of conduct. I deserve everything that's going to happen to me. That's just how it is!"

"What happened with DiStefano?"

"I'm not saying another word about it, Des." I wanted to spit her name at her. I wanted to call her Destiny so she'd hate me. So she'd stop looking at me.

"Oh my god." She said it under her breath.

She shouldn't have been surprised. Antony DiStefano made lots of weird comments, and weird comments to students. Art was filled with nakedness and sexuality, and he certainly

commented on it. I should know, I spent all last year defending him to others about that. He had been different to me, different than other leering men. It was all a big joke to him, a parody of how men act. He wasn't like that.

I shook my head. Remembering before was spending too much brainpower thinking about him.

“Report it, Rylee!”

“No point.” I said, “they’ll think I’m making it up.”

“They’ll investigate him at least, they’ll have to.”

“I don’t want him investigated, I want him murdered! I want him to feel even half of what I—” I stopped myself. “I don’t even want to talk about it. They’ll ask me what happened, how bad it was, how—everyone will ask.”

“It doesn’t matter how bad it was.” Des ran a hand through her short hair. “Jesus, I knew something was up but...this is bad.”

“Well, don’t say anything.” I sighed. “It’s my decision when or if I say a word.”

Des bit her lip, then nodded. “Okay, Rylee. But...” she looked down at her phone. “Shit. Study Hall’s almost done. Come find me after school, okay? We don’t have to talk about it, but I want to support you.”

I felt like I was going to throw up, but I nodded. “Okay, fine.” I wanted to meet up with Des, spend time with her. It was an odd way to become friends, but she was the first person in a while willing to let me have what was mine. I hated her for knowing as much as she did, but as she walked away, looking behind her as I stood up, I wanted to collapse in her arms.

I figured I should just set up a cot in Principal Roy's office to make our lives easier. I could at least start storing books there, though I'm not sure where since the bookshelf incident. At least the room was more spacious, and the carpet wasn't the worst color I'd ever seen.

Roy looked at me differently. It was the end of the school day, and just before I was meant to meet up with Des, he'd quietly asked me to come into his office. I hadn't known he could be quiet.

He looked at me now like I was the puzzle he'd given me during our last meeting. Well, he looked at me like the puzzle was covered in dog shit, but someone told him he had to solve it anyway.

"Rylee." He spoke more softly than I'd imagined him doing. "A student has reported something about you."

I rolled my eyes. "Look, I know I'm the resident monster demon bad girl of the school, but no, I'm not the one who keyed 'KILL' on the boys' bathroom stall." That occurrence had been a legendary one since my freshman year, a regular Jack the Ripper case. Maybe the school decided they finally had the perfect patsy, and the conspiracy would be solved.

"You're not in trouble, Rylee."

I blinked. "Oh." This was a change of pace.

"A student reported that you might have experienced an...incident with one of the teachers."

I felt my eyes go wide. No, hell no. No fucking way.

"Is this true? Did you say you had this...experience with Mr. DiStefano?"

My eyes were so wide they were getting dry. I felt like I was shaking. "Who the hell reported it? Des?"

“Des?”

“Des Lee.”

“Ah, Miss Lee, no. Another student, apparently she heard the two of you talking earlier today while she was outside.”

My breath caught in my throat and I swallowed. I swore no one had been outside, but we hadn't exactly kept our voices down.

“Rylee. Due to this report, and due to you being a minor, there are several steps that I'm going to have to take. I've already called child services.”

I felt my eyes go wide and it felt like the moisture had been sucked out of them completely. “You already...but I didn't even confirm or deny anything! I didn't ask you to do that.”

Principal Roy's voice rose slightly again, almost like he was back to disciplining me, but there was still that unshakeable note of quiet. I couldn't tell if he was looking at my chin or my nose, but he definitely was incapable of looking me in the eye.

“There are steps I am required by law to take. I'm sorry I can't get your input on what you want, but this is just how these things go. I have to take any allegation seriously and follow procedure.”

I gripped the chair tighter. I felt heavy, like it was going to break under me. Like the floor would become gelatinous and swallow me up feet first. I wouldn't want it to, but damn maybe the floor needed to follow its procedure too.

I wet my lips with my tongue. There was a racing background noise in my mind, but one question came right to the forefront.

“Who reported this?”

Roy raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know if that’s the primary concern, Rylee. Wouldn’t you like to hear more about the next steps of this process?”

I ignored him. I knew I was ignoring part of what he said, and the thrill of ignoring my principal was just what I needed to keep speaking.

“Did the student want to be confidential or something? Who the hell was it?”

“Language, Rylee.” He said it gently. I hated that Roy was becoming gentle *and* quiet. I bit my lip.

He continued, “No, it’s not confidential. She said she wouldn’t mind you knowing.” Roy put his hands together, interlocking his fingers. “Normally, I wouldn’t tell you, but maybe you could learn something from all this.”

Roy’s expression shifted. He looked pleased with himself, as though he’d forgotten the situation we were talking about in the first place. “Hannah Bradley reported it.”

“Aryana Bradley reported this?”

Roy huffed a bit. “Yes, *Hannah* said it was the right thing to do, in spite of what you’ve done to her.”

I sat back. I couldn’t believe it. After everything, when Hannah finally had something to lord over me, she’d chosen to try and help me. Expose a secret I’d already resolved to die with. I looked out the window where Des and I had been talking and I pictured Hannah in the bushes, sketchbook clutched to her chest, peering over the hedge to hear our conversation. Then, I pictured her chest heaving, fully concealed behind the bushes again, steeling up the nerve to report what she’d heard. She’d have nodded once, then stood up, finally fixing her posture and striding confidently to Roy’s office. I pictured the determination on her face, a light in her eyes.

God, I wanted to punch her again.