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|  | 2,700 words |

Steelbeam vs. Doctor Decay

Doctor Decay walked into the restaurant. I didn’t recognize him because twenty years is long enough to forget a face. Even shook his hand when he got to our table with Laurel, Jeanie’s friend.

“Frank,” he said as we shook, and I think that’s when recognition lit us up like lightning.

It was Jeanie’s idea to have a double date with her girlfriend and her new man at the Italian place next to the university. I said yes because I like Jeanie and I like Laurel and I like dinner.

Doctor Decay – I couldn’t be sure at first – sat with Laurel across from us, pretty as a picture. Suit jacket. White shirt. No tie. Jeanie waved the waiter over and we ordered drinks.

“I love this place,” she said after the waiter left. “It’s Rick’s favorite too.”

Decay’s eyebrow arched at the name. I always knew him by his deeds, and he mine. Now we were intimate, on a first name basis. We sat and talked and drank, him and I Millers, Jeanie and Laurel chardonnays. Exchanged the usual pleasantries, explored the usual small talk topics. Before long there was a lull in the conversation, and so I broke it. I needed to find out more.

“What do you do for work, Frank?”

He drank – was he nervous? – before he spoke. “Odds and ends. Car wash Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Hubbard High janitor Tuesday and Thursday. Here and there, y’know.”

The thought of him near kids made me spike in anger. If this *was* Decay, those kids were in danger.

“Y’know, Frank,” Laurel said. “Rick and Jeanie met recently too. Jeanie, tell the story again.”

Jeanie blushed. Decay looked at the clock.

“You tell her,” Jeanie said. “She already has my version.”

“We were,” I started, trying to focus on the memory rather than Frank, “both at a memorial lunch. Over at the church between Canfield and Schenley.”

“For the Steelbeam Memorial.”

“I always loved him,” Laurel said. She added a few more ice chips to her wine. “I bet he was real handsome under that mask and those goggles.”

Frank blanched. Same thing would happen when I’d give him a solid right hook when we were in costume.

“What was the memorial for?” he asked. He was trying to feel me out. To put two and two together.

“Steelbeam saved a bus full of children from falling into the Mahoning in seventy-two,” Jeanie said. “I was one of those kids.”

Decay smiled something rotten. Was that judgment? For dating someone I saved? I’m seventy-three and she’s sixty-two. We’re grown adults now.

“That had to be scary, Jeanie,” Laurel said, though she heard that story before.

“Rick came up and asked if he could sit with me. We talked about Steelbeam — Rick’s a big fan — and eventually he said he wanted to take me to dinner.”

“Big fan, huh?” Frank said.

“I love Steelbeam too,” Laurel said. “Greatest hero ever. All those muscles. And the way he’d knock out the bad guys.” She gave Frank a love tap, and he pretended to be hurt. “Wonder where he went.”

“Probably got old,” I said, smiling.

“I heard he killed a kid.”

All quiet at the table. Frank smiled. An uppercut from his direction.

“I’m sure that isn’t true,” Jeanie said. “Those are just rumors.”

“Rumors are born from truth,” he said. “I remember there being an investigation or some such, but it got buried. Friends with a corrupt police chief, maybe.”

“That was an accident,” Laurel said, drinking her wine. “He was *saving* that kid.”

Frank shrugged, but his eyes stayed on me. “I’m just sayin’. Sometimes people he helped got in the crossfire. All those muscles and no self-control.”

We let that subject drop and got to talking more. I focused on not sweating. Laurel and Frank met at the Sparkle when he picked up some canned peas she’d dropped. They went for coffee after.

“He asked for my number then and there.” Laurel kissed his cheek. He looked happy.

I didn’t like seeing him happy.

We ordered food when the waiter came back. Frank did his best to avoid my gaze. He was looking at a little plastic toy of Steelbeam by the register, something someone put up for decoration. Hands on its hips, chest out. A sign of victory and justice. There was a mild marketing rush in the nineties that used my visage for toys and lunch boxes or whatever. I never saw a cent. The perils of remaining anonymous.

Frank frowned at it.

I turned to Jeanie. “We’ve got some time. I’m gonna head outside.” She nodded. She was more than happy to have girl time with Laurel. I asked Frank, “Do you like cigars?”

#

We went to the restaurant’s side porch, our only company some empty bocce courts. Frank opted for a cigarette. “I get one a day,” he said as he sparked up. “Keeps me disciplined.”

I chopped the end of my cigar off. “You feel like you need discipline?”

“Think we *all* could use a little,” he said. “Life’s tough. Discipline helps it make sense.”

“Why’s that? Why’s life tough?” I lit the cigar.

He sucked in smoke and glared at me. “I don’t understand the question.”

“You said life’s tough. *Is* it tough?”

“I’d say so.”

“For who?”

“Everyone, I guess.”

“Even you?”

“Everyone includes me.”

We smoked in silence for a moment. This was one of our little battles, played all over again in a different arena.

I needed to be sure he was Decay.

“Laurel’s a good woman,” I said.

“I’d say so,” Frank said, smiling a little.

“You be sure to treat her right.”

His cigarette was starting to burn out.

We looked at each other.

*Really* looked. Could almost see him inside and out.

“You don’t belong here,” I said, keeping my voice down. “I know who you are.” I was taking a gamble, accusing him like this.

Frank didn’t say anything at first, but I could tell he wanted to. To deny it, maybe.

“You think I like seeing a ghost from my past?” There it was: admission. “But here we are.” Puff puff. His cigarette fell to the ground and he stamped it out.

“When did you get out? Thought I put you away for a long time after—”

“Few years ago,” he interrupted. “Good behavior. People can change, *Rick*.”

He uses my name like a weapon. We know who we are now, in the flesh. Names and all.

“That where you picked up your little discipline habit? In jail?”

“I did my time,” he said, deflecting.

I countered. “There’s never enough time for you.”

“That was twenty years ago, Rick. We were goddamn children.”

“We were at *war* with each other, Decay.”

“Don’t call me that. That’s how you view it.” He reached into his pocket. Another cigarette. Discipline broken. “Almost didn’t recognize you without the yellow-and-white.” He lit up. “Costume got a little tight on you?”

“A little. Got old.”

“You got *retired*. And instead of enjoying that retirement, you’re picking things up like you never stopped. *I’m* not doing that anymore. Burned my stupid costume. I’m trying to do right, or at least trying not to do wrong.”

I snorted. “That’ll be the day.”

He inhaled. “Y’know, that’s how you always saw this city. As shadows in corners. Never really just *looking* at it, seeing past all that. I did some volunteer work for a support group while I was there. Met a lot of guys you jailed. You broke their bodies because they were doing something just downright stupid, something that just talkin’ to ‘em would’ve fixed. I met a guy that can’t even use his wrists right because of you.”

“They were *breaking* the *law*.”

“And you mutilated some of them, *Steelbeam*. Punishment doesn’t quite fit the crime, huh. And that kid… what did you do to—”

I didn’t let him finish. “What about you? You see this place as heaven on earth now? You tried destroying it more than one occasion. You stole from museums, robbed banks. There was that stint with the mayor and some secret mob treasure in the eighties, remember that?”

He shook his head. “When you view the world as villains and heroes, you’ll jump at anything. What are you even fighting against now? The mobsters are gone. People like me aren’t around anymore. Why can’t you just stop? Let me live my fucking life.”

Before I could respond, Laurel came outside. I was worried she’d heard us, but she said the food was at the table.

“Boys have fun out there?”

We said we did. We came back in and we ate, mostly in silence as the girls spoke. I kept watching Decay to make a move, to do something. One twitch of the eye, one muscle spasm in the mouth to just see what he’s thinking. What he’s planning.

“What do you think, Rick?”

Jeanie was looking at me, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

“Think about what?”

“This city, silly. Isn’t it a good place to grow old?”

“Oh yeah.” I sipped a fresh beer. “Fine, fine place.” There’s a beat. “Got a lot of problems, though.”

“Oh, every place does. I don’t know, this place has something… different.”

“It’s got a lot of crime.”

“Not as much as it used to,” Laurel said.

Frank said, “Careful, Jeanie. I think you’re dating the real Steelbeam.”

That got a chuckle from everyone but me.

“Maybe Steelbeam had it right,” I said, but Frank snorted. “What do you think, then?” My tone was sharper. *Harder*.

He gulped. I think he remembered that voice. A fist from me usually followed it.

“I think that places deserve second chances just as much as people. Yeah, it’s got a pretty crappy past. Doesn’t mean the future has the look the same.”

He *would* think that.

“I think this city has had too *many* second chances,” I said. “With our history, there ain’t much to come back from. Streets still look the same. Kids leave the second they get their mitts on a car. Not much of a future when everyone left is old as dirt.”

“Rick, that’s awful cynical of you,” Jeanie said. “Lighten up.”

“Surely you like living here,” Laurel said. “Can’t all be bad.”

It *was* bad. It *was* bad because I once put on a costume and beat bad guys to a pulp. Mob types. Supervillains. Doctor Decay in his stupid purple outfit. I did it because someone had to. Cops were corrupt so the people — me — had to save it from itself. I did it for years, and it broke my body. My knees ache every time it rains now. My eye twitches from too many punches to the face. I can only look at a rack of weights now instead of lift ‘em. I’m old and I’m fat. My goddamn suit doesn’t fit me anymore. I lost what I had. Doctor Decay lost everything too, but he’s happy with his lot. The man rampaged across this city so many times and now he *likes* living here? And both Laurel *and* Jeanie like him? I wanted to reach across and—

*“*I can take the check.”

My vision cleared. A second ago I had a full plate in front of me. Now it sat mostly eaten in a Styrofoam container. My beer was down to its last dregs. The others looked the same. The waiter returned and handed Jeanie her debit card.

We had talked more and laughed and ate. And all of that passed by me because Frank filled my mind like a wasting disease. I lost track of time.

“This was fun, wasn’t it?” Jeanie asked after she signed the receipt.

Laurel said, “Jeanie, we have to do this again. I think the boys really hit it off.”

“Sure did,” Frank said. He helped Laurel put on her coat. He reached out a hand to me. “Good to meet you, Rick. Would love to smoke with you again.”

I wanted to break that hand, finger by finger. To show everyone who he was. To ask him where the hostages were, where the bombs were located, like I did so many years ago.

Instead, we left the restaurant. We got in our cars. I saved nothing that night.

#

I dropped Jeanie off at her apartment. She wanted me to come in, but I said I was tired. She said she’d call me in the morning.

I stopped at a gas station because I didn’t have any beer at home. All I could think about was Frank, and how he got away again. Only twice in our years long war had he escaped justice, and tonight made three. His hideout used to be an old, abandoned blast furnace, but now it was Laurel’s bed, most likely.

As I grabbed a case of Miller, I saw a blond kid down the snack aisle. He was holding something, black and metallic. He played with it in his hands for a moment — I couldn’t get a good read on what it was — before slipping it away in his jacket.

I felt something in me rouse, like I was a bear waking from hibernation. Was it a gun? Was it a knife? Didn’t matter. He was going to rob this place.

I took the beer to the counter and fiddled with my wallet, all while stealing glances at the TV screen with live security footage by the smokes. The blond boy was coming up behind me, his hands in his pockets.

I immediately turned and grabbed the punk by the throat, crashing him into a shelf full of chips.

“What is that?” I asked, reaching into his pockets. “What do you have?”

I pulled out a plastic… thing? I didn’t know what it was.

“Fuck are you doing, man?!” the kid said when I let him go, still examining the foreign object. “That’s a vape, you idiot! I need a refill!”

The man behind the counter was screaming at me, telling me to leave, that he was calling the cops. I left the beer behind. I left the gas station behind.

I drove past suburban houses surrounded by dead trees. Past too-old bars with too-old regulars. Past buildings no one has set foot in for years. Past detritus and people walking by it all, living amongst it.

This city is a skeleton, baring its bone for the world to see.

I used to save this place from harm on a weekly basis. Frank was right about one thing: there *is* danger around every corner, shadows waiting to hurt people. He’s wrong about this place being… decent. I’ve seen it for what it was. What it still is.

Just as I see Frank for what he is, what he’s always been.

Frank will never change.

This *city* will never change.

I got to my apartment. Walked to the closet. There was a cardboard box under some old coats and shirts I let gather. When I opened it, sweat smell from another time hit me, and I felt transported. I am fifteen years younger.

Inside is a suit. Yellow and silver — Frank called it ‘white’. The thing is ill-fitted due to too much beer and too many burgers and too much time.

The mask still fits, though.

It was a simple thing made from thick cloth I got from some cheap department store long ago. Modeled after the ones in the pulp comics. Simple holes for the eyes. For the mouth.

I put it on. It covered my whole head. I fished out the welder’s goggles. I put those on too.

In the bathroom mirror, light buzzing above me, I saw someone stopping a bank robbery with just his fists. I see someone knocking Doctor Decay’s lights out, someone shaking the police chief’s hand. Handsome mug on the front page. I saw someone saving this city from itself.

I was Steelbeam.

When I shut the light off, the tinted welder’s goggles hid me in darkness. I stayed there for too long. Mask still on.

Remembering.