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To everyone looking for a best friend . . .
You are not alone

YEAR 5: WORLD BOOK DAY.

LADY TABITHA PRIMARY SCHOOL

'Who are you supposed to be?' asks Lee Garrison, ripping off his mask. Blond spikes stick out in a comic book explosion around his head.

I blink. For the last fifteen minutes, a steady stream of kids dressed as book characters has been arriving at my tutor room. Thankfully my costume is *still* the best. There's no way Lee doesn't know who I'm supposed to be. I'm rocking a movie-quality superhero costume. The kind that cost two Eids' worth of pocket money *and* an IOU on a third. Totally worth it though, because this year's twenty-pound book token is as good as mine. I get chills every time I think of all the comics I'm going to buy with it.

I fling out my arms, and my cape whips and billows like the sail of a mighty ship. Thanks to some clever stuffing in the costume, I'm looking every bit as muscly as my comic book idol. My voice drops really low, and I do the squinting thing heroes do when they're about to drop a great line. 'I'm *Superman*.'

The other kids nod approvingly. Pitch perfect and on point. After five years of obsessive practice, you'd expect nothing less.

Lee glances round at the gathering crowd, eyes bulging, lips vibrating as spit comes whooshing out of him.

'Ilyas, mate!' he cries dramatically.

Hate when people make my name sound like *Elias*. But I'm done telling them it's *Illy-yaas*, because then I just get called 'silly arse', which is about ten times worse.

'Just no, seriously!' Lee continues, cringing.

The back of my neck starts to prickle, and in about three seconds, I know I'll be blushing, but I don't have a clue what he's on about. Unless I've peed my super-pants? Discreetly I give myself a quick feel. *Houston, we do not need a diaper*.

I stiffen as Lee snakes an arm across my shoulders. 'Look – who am I?' he asks.

'Spider-Man,' I say, without hesitation. 'Just like I'm—'

'Exactly!' he says, cutting me off mid flow. 'And who's Ryan, then?'

My eyes lock with Ryan's. The idiot stole my limited-edition floaty Superman pen in Year 4. Payback time.

I shrug. 'Mary Poppins?'

'I'm Willy Wonka, you idiot!' retorts Ryan.

Course he is, if Willy Wonka got dressed in the dark and ended up in his mother's wardrobe.

'He still doesn't get it!' Alice chuckles. A lipsticked scar zigzags across her forehead, and huge plastic glasses sit at the end of her nose. Unfortunately four other people had the same idea, killing her chances of taking home the book token, or ten points for Gryffindor.

'Know Blade?' Lee asks.

I nod, perking up at the mention of the coolest vampire hunter in comic history.

'OK. Now imagine I came as *him*.'

'That would've been wicked!'

'It'd be fricking *dumb*,' he says with disgust.

Everyone falls silent.

'Look, you *can't* be Superman, mate,' Lee continues. 'Superman ain't no brown boy. You get me?'

'Why didn't you come as Aladdin? Or Mowgli?' asks Alice, tapping her chin with her wand.

'Cos they're not superheroes,' I say in a small voice, palms

growing sweaty. I hope I'm not stinking out my suit. Amma warned me this costume was wipe clean only.

'That's racist,' says my best mate, Daevon. In a red-and-black-striped hoody, with an aluminium foil sword, he's nailed Thresh from District 11.

'Shut up, I'm racist!' Lee snarls, practically foaming at the mouth.

Daevon backs up so fast he nearly sits in the bin.

'Superman is *white*. Facts!' Lee looks around for support.

'You're *all* lame,' says Vidya snarkily, shimmying her shoulders, setting the sequins on her blood-red sari ablaze. 'Dress-up's for babies! I've come as the best person ever: ME! And before you say there's no book about me, *there is*. It's called a *diary*, people. Look it up.'

Vidya's gang of fashionistas have completely ignored the rules for dressing up on World Book Day. These girls are channelling Bollywood big time. They sashay into the corner to give each other makeovers with a jumbo box of make-up.

'Oh my days!' Lee shout-laughs, making everyone jump. 'Only way he's Superman, yeah, is if he flew head first into a big pile of poo!'

'Or flew up a cow's bum!' Ryan adds. He starts making mooing and farting sound effects while flapping the back of his mum's purple coat.

Laughter and squeals of disgust ring out. Even Daevon can't clamp a hand over his mouth fast enough.

'It's Pooperman!' shrieks Alice, pointing her wand at me like a spear.

Humiliation spreads over me like a rash. My lower lip trembles, and I bite down hard. *Boys don't cry* – that's what Dad says. That's what everybody says. Can't let them win. 'I *am* Superman, though. Got myself a tan, innit.'

'Superman can't tan, you fool!' Lee shouts. 'His super-strength comes from the sun, and a tan would block it.'

'Dickhead!' A wand punctures my suit faster than I can react. The strained squeal of ripping fabric fills my ears as it's tugged back and forth. My impressive right pec sags, a cloud of stuffing tumbling to the ground taking my heart with it.

'Ew! It's Pooperman's booby!' cries a Gangsta Granny, booting the fluff away. Throwing her lilac cardigan over her head, she runs around like she's scored a goal at Wembley.

The laughs are coming thick and fast now. Any last hopes of manning up are drowned by a sea of tears. Ms Lipscombe enters the classroom – cheeks flushed, apologizing because her train got cancelled. She finally senses something's up, but it's too late.

The good kids tell her what Lee said; tell her that it was Ryan who damaged my suit with Alice's wand. She banishes the lot of them to the Learning Centre, but the damage has been done. Not even Amma's needle and thread can fix this.

Everyone listens in subdued silence as Ms Lipscombe, having placed a box of tissues on my desk at the back of the room, goes off on a major rant.

'I am *thoroughly* disappointed in you, 5ML!' she tells us, shaking off her suede coat. Blonde corkscrew curls bounce angrily on red-and-white-striped shoulders. 'I expected so much more from this form. We're a team. The A-Team! You must look out for each other.'

Twenty-two pairs of solemn eyes follow her every gesture, occasionally swivelling round to gawp at me sobbing. Realizing that Dad will be angry with me for blubbing, I cry even harder.

'Who are we to tell someone they can't be Harry Potter or Katniss Everdeen just because they're a different skin colour or gender?' she demands.

'Miss, what's *agenda*?' asks Vidya, her eyelids caked in gold and green.

I tune them out. The part of me that has loved Superman from as early as I can remember just died. And unlike issue number seventy-five – *The Death of Superman* – there's no coming back from this. When I get home tonight, this costume is going in a large box along with the rest of my Superman merch. Come Saturday, I'll be dropping it off at Cancer Research.

If I can't be Superman, I'm going to be someone better. I'm making my own superhero, and he's going to be AMAZING. He'll have light brown skin, love lamb biryani, and pray at the mosque every Friday. He's going to be British *and* Pakistani. His name will be . . . PakCore.

But for now, I'm just going to sit at the back of the classroom in my torn Superman suit and cry.

THE ADVENTURES OF PAKCORE CREATED BY ILYAS MIAN
I AM PAKCORE, DESTROYER OF THUGS!
ARTWORK BY AMRIT BIRDI
MWAH-HA-HA-HA
SOUNDS LIKE TROUBLE TO ME
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO, BUT YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH IT!
POW!

MWAH-HA-HA-HA. WE KNOW YOUR WEAKNESS PAKCORE AND YOU WILL BE DEFEATED.
LIVING SHADOWS, ATTACK!
WHY ISN'T MY SUPERPOWER WORKING?
HELP!
TO BE CONTINUED . . .

YEAR 11: LAST DAY OF AUTUMN HALF-TERM HOLIDAY, SOUTH LONDON

CHAPTER 1

A squillion coloured diamonds.
Winking, melting, morphing.
Spinning, faster and faster and –
I'm flying! I'm flying!

Snapping open my eyes, I gasp for air. A wasp is buzzing in the centre of my brain, and my tongue is foaming. I'm crammed inside a wooden box with three other boys, our knees bunched tightly around our ears. The night air is thick with smoke and stinks like a heated swamp. To my right, a portal frames a collapsed see-saw and a swingless swing set.

How did I get here?

The wasp shifts from my brain to my pocket, buzzing furiously against my thigh before I realize it's actually my phone. I'm about to answer it when a trainer kicks my left hip and then my right thigh as Imran straightens his long legs, tilting his head back. He's directly opposite me, one hand holding a steaming vape mod, the other a joint. In the moonlight, his face is all angles and edges. His fade is fire; his topknot perfection. Right there and then, I make the massive decision to reboot my PakCore comic book series. This time using Imran's handsome face.

I'm excitedly designing the cover for issue number one in my head when a halo of fog comes sailing out of Imran's lungs. His palm nudges the delicate creation into the world as he blows a fist of vapour at it. Punching through the middle, the fist opens, coiling wispy fingers round the smoke ring. The ghosts entwine,

sprout tendrils and glide forward as one.

My mouth hangs open as the vapour jellyfish swims passed the window, moonbeams plating it in silver.

'See that?' Imran says smugly. 'Man's got tricks for days!'

Daevon raises his phone and takes a snap. 'Nice one,' he says, stroking his cornrows.

'Fire!' Noah agrees, then starts giggling like a crazy person, his face going as red as his hair.

This is my mandem. Noah and Daevon couldn't be more different. Noah's skinny as a rake and meaner than a switchblade, while my boy Daevon loves his mum's Caribbean cooking and is the closest thing I have to a best friend. We're sitting inside a wooden castle in the local kiddies playground. Nobody comes here any more. The equipment is mashed up, dicks and swears are scrawled over every available space, and used needles hide in the tall grass. The council condemned the place a while back, but it takes more than a sign and a locked gate to keep us out.

Imran's eyes settle on me. My heart beats just a little bit faster, my Adam's apple swelling in my throat.

'What you reckon, Ilyas?' says Imran. 'Epic or nah?' His pupils are spreading like crop circles.

'Killed it,' I agree.

The mesmerizing smoke creature flickers once, then winks out forever. The awe I felt is replaced by an unexpected sadness.

'Look, look, look!' Noah says, gesturing with his chin, eyes as bright as headlights. 'Lickle Ilyas is crying like a *gyal*.'

'I ain't crying!' I protest. Only I am. And I have no clue *why*, just as I have no memory of climbing inside this Claustrophobia Tank with these three.

'Relax. His eyes are just going pee-pee,' mocks Imran, voice deep as a rumble of thunder.

My mates crack up, and the joint tumbles from Imran's

long fingers. Noah and Daevon dive for it at the same time, knocking heads and laughing like fools.

'You brung my tag?' Imran asks me, popping a couple of pieces of gum in his mouth. The square wings of his jaw ripple as he chews.

'Yeah, course,' I say, hurriedly whipping out a scroll of paper.

Drawing is my superpower. Back in nursery, when kids were still sketching stick figures floating about randomly on a page, I was drawing Dad setting up his store front, laying out exotic fruit and veg in eye-catching displays. I didn't know their names (not then, anyway), but I discovered that if I closed my eyes, I could make each and every one of them appear in 4K clarity. My teacher was gushing when Amma came to pick me up.

'Oh Ilyas loves his drawing,' Amma cooed. 'My other children always wanted toys. But give this one pencils and paint, and he's happy as Larry!'

Imran unfurls my scroll now, giving me butterflies. After studying gang tags, tribal art and Urdu calligraphy, I experimented for days, looking for the perfect blend. Of course my mates will never appreciate any of this, but for me drawing is sacred. Go hard or go home.

Imran traces out the D and the M for DedManz, the name of our gang. He frowns, squinting at the brown-skinned character with the killer cheekbones. Yep, you guessed it: Imran immortalized in street art.

'Rahh . . .' whispers Noah.

'Sick!' says Daevon, steam trailing from his lips like dragon breath.

Silence from Imran.

The butterflies in my stomach mutate into killer bees. He's our fearless leader, captain of both the basketball and football teams, so cool even teachers suck up to him. Basically, his opinion is the only one that counts.

Thick eyelashes – the ones that drive girls crazy – flick up, and Imran's intense eyes bore into mine. Now his fist comes sailing towards me. Just in time, I make one of my own, and we fist bump. 'One hunna,' he says. 'I'mma make you famous, bruv.' He tucks something in my pocket.

Pulling out the fifty-pound note, I blink in disbelief. 'What's this?'

'Man's gotta take care of his mans, innit? You did good.'

Suddenly my dream of owning a sixth-scale figure of Star Lord with Baby Groot seems a little less impossible.

'He's only gonna spend it on something gay, like comics or toys.' Noah rolls his eyes.

'As opposed to premium porn sites?' says Daevon.

'Everyone knows how to get that shit for free. I need that dollar to buy quality ganja.'

'Got you covered, bro,' says Imran. 'DedManz gonna rule these ends. Money, drugs, women.'

'We gonna have like an initiation?' Daevon asks, clearly impressed.

'What you on about?' I say, snatching glances at my vibrating phone. Ten missed calls from Amma. *Oops*. Unfortunately calling my mum back in front of these guys would be like whipping out a bunch of My Little Ponies and braiding their manes. Amma will have to wait.

'Every gang has one,' Daevon explains, passing the joint to me, which I palm off to Noah. 'To show solidarity and that? Like the Triads have to drink a bowl of their own blood. Sons of Malcolm X bust a cap in some loser's ass. Hell's Angels piss on each other . . .'

'Acid attack!' Noah says, clapping his hands with psychotic glee.

'Shut up, man!' I say with disgust. 'You wanna end up in prison?'

'Pussy!' he spits.

'Ilyas has a point,' Imran says, taking a toke on his vape. 'All that running from the feds? Nah, bruv. Think smarter.'

'We could steal stuff?' Daevon suggests. 'Latest iPhone?'

Easy for Daevon. His dad is loaded so he could just go out and buy one.

'Nah.' Imran closes his eyes and exhales. Smoke swirls between us like a dancing *jinn*. His fist snaps round it, snuffing out its life. 'Got it.'

We exchange glances.

'If you idiots want to be proper DedManz, it has to be for life. Bros before hoes. Understand?'

We nod under his fierce glare.

'So if you want in,' he continues, 'gotta prove your worth. You're gonna get some girl bare-arse naked and film the skank making a fool of herself.'

'What if she don't want to?' Noah asks.

Imran shrugs coolly. 'Up to you, innit?'

My stomach ties itself in knots. I know what he means. Imran's eyes are on me in a heartbeat.

'You up for it?'

'Nah, man,' I say quickly. 'I'm out. Naked girls are haram.'

'Don't count if she's a thot,' he says, grinning.

The word hangs in the air like a bad smell. *That Hoe Over There*. Noah goes into another fit of giggles, then bucks his hips, moaning like a porn star. *Idiot*.

'Your boy ain't doing it,' Daevon tells Imran, and for a moment I think he's sticking up for me like he used to when we were small. Then I catch the eye-roll, and my last hope dies.

'Course he is.' Imran grins. An ambulance rushes by in the night, the emergency lights temporarily bathing him in red. 'Me and Ilyas gonna go mosque after and smooth things over with

God.' He takes a long drag, then holds the joint out to me. Three pairs of eyes study me intently. Melting under their gaze, I accept the joint and take a toke.

I trip up my street. One minute, I'm walking along, minding my own business; the next, I'm stuck in someone's hedge. My phone buzzes in my pocket. Crap – I *completely* forgot about Amma.

'*Assalaamu alaykum*, Amma,' I say, all casual, like she hasn't been blowing up my phone.

'Ilyas! Oh thank God. I've been calling you for over an hour. Where are you? Why haven't you been answering your phone?'

'I told you. Hanging with mates.'

Disappointed silence.

'Come home, please, *beyta*.' Amma sounds scared. It makes me want to slap myself.

'On it,' I say, hanging up.

When I finally rock up, I see golden light spilling into our street, and Amma standing in the doorway with her shawl over her head, hugging herself in the chill night air. Nervous puffs of fog escape her lips. Catching sight of me, she comes flying out.

'You had me worried sick! I don't want you hanging around with those—'

'Sorry, Amma,' I say, dodging the hug and the lecture as I vanish up the stairs. 'We had two-ninety-nine burger meals, and I gotta puke.'

Can't let her touch me. Can't let her get a whiff of the weed clinging to me like sweat. It will break her heart. No way am I doing that to her.

Locking myself in the bathroom, I crash on to the toilet seat, holding my pulsating head. Snot swings from the tip of my nose like a wrecking ball. How I hate Imran and Noah and . . .

Daevon? My homie, my hype man, my brother from another mother?

There was a time I would have done anything for the big guy, but now it's like he's gone Skrull – replaced by a shape-shifting alien. Cos the mate I knew, the boy with the heart of gold, would not be down with humiliating a girl for some dumb initiation challenge. And since when did taking drugs become a thing?

I wipe away my snot. Zigzags of it streak my cheek as the shakes kick in. The bathroom tiles begin to pulsate, and my eyes tear up. Even though I don't want it to, my mind forces me back to the moment Imran and Noah entered my life . . .

'Stop hanging round the house like a flipping girl!' Dad would say with disgust, watching me colouring in my Spider-Man picture. 'Go play football with the other lads!'

So I traded art for freezing my nuts off in a game of street football. Wouldn't have been so bad if I could play for shit. All I got were kicked shins and grazed knees. But the really humiliating part was getting shouted at by Noah and Imran every time I missed the ball. They made me feel like a factory reject.

Coming home, Dad would ask how many goals I scored. I'd lie, and he'd smile.

Tonight, those lads Dad wished I was more like have got me doing drugs and want me to humiliate a girl.

Wiping my eyes, I wonder what life might have been like if I'd turned out as smart as my brother Amir – killing it at Harvard in business management, sponsored by a Fortune 500 company. Or like my sister Shaista – girl boss and vlogging genius.

But I'm just Ilyas Mian: the girly-boy who draws stupid comics that nobody will ever read.