



## Inducing Me

My name is Shaun Thompson, but people call me Growls because I growl like a tiger before my rhymes.

*Yeah they call me Growls,*

*I'm like a tiger on the prowl.*

*King of jungles so you better take a bow.*

*King of concrete so you better say it loud.*

You best believe there's more where that came from. Man's got bars for days, like a prison or a vending machine, you feel me?

It's Monday morning so I'm in my form group. Can't lie, I'm one of the top thirty students in my class. But I've figured out how to stand out from the crowd and get Tanisha to notice me. The minute she clocks my rap skills, I know she'll be super on it.

I'm sat next to Shanks, my partner in grime, but the space next to him is empty, because only the cool kids sit at the back. Shanks is legit my OG. Swear down, he's had my back since day. His mum and my mum started chatting outside the gates when we were in primary school. Then Mrs Shanks sometimes took me to their house after school if my mum was working late, shout out receptionist jobs. The first time I went to his yard, I didn't wanna leave. Man had kitchen tiles and matching curtains on some interior-design wave, and his garden was a private one, not even for the whole block. What got me most though was when his mum said we were eating lamb for dinner, I thought it was gonna be in some kinda kebab shape, but this thing was on the bone. She called it lamb shanks for her little lamb, and that's how Shanks got his nickname, Little Lamb. But people at school mocked it when I called him that, so we changed it to Lamb Shanks (Shanks for short).

Me and Shanks, we been tight ever since. It wasn't too long after that when I decided that we should become a rap duo. He weren't super on it at first, but he saw the light. I told Shanks that people would sing our names from mountaintops, where milk flows like honey and goat farmers sing Christmas carols in the midwinter. I was gonna make enough money to get the real cereal, and not the one with the fake bumblebee that doesn't even have a name.

You could say Shanks' MC skills aren't levels with mine,

but he's mad smart. And wise, like one of those talking owls from a cartoon. He taught me that 'banoffee pie' is called that because it's a mix of 'banana' and 'toffee'. And last week he gave me good advice on how to finally make Tanisha my number one.

'If you put Vaseline on your eyelashes, it'll make them look longer,' he said. I guess it would have worked, except I used half a tub and the school sent me home because it looked like I had an eye infection. But none of that matters now. When I'm a famous rapper, I won't have to worry about getting girls to like me. They'll see that I've got loads of bars and money. Man, rappers are so lucky that they can buy anything they want and not worry about their mum saying 'no'.

'Yeah, but being rich and famous would make you lonely because you'd be living in a big house by yourself,' Shanks whispers to me while our form tutor takes the register, and I guess he has got a point. I think that's why they've got all those girls by the pool popping bottles, it means they've always got someone to talk to. Big mansions are always the first ones to get haunted too.

Imagine having all that money though. You could eat food with more than three ingredients all the time, buy clothes that fit you perfectly, and you wouldn't have to worry about turning everything off at the plug to save electricity. Shanks don't get it; I definitely seen him leaving

rooms without turning the light off. And I'm sure his mum doesn't have to count the prices of everything when she's shopping like it's a science test or something. The struggle is real out here, like when my Aunt Tina oils up her waist to put on skinny jeans.

The bell for first period goes and we head to English with Mr Rix. At the back of this class is where we write our sickest bars and practise freestyle battles. Sometimes Shanks spits his bars quieter when there's people about, but that's only because of copyright issues.

Can't lie, writing bars in English is one of my favourite things about this subject. But the best thing about this lesson isn't here yet. I'm waiting for her to arrive, and I'm concentrating hard on the door so I don't miss her.

'Growls, why you frowning like that?' Shanks asks. 'Did a moth get stuck in your ear again?'

'No, I ain't got a moth in my ear.' This guy has a vivid imagination – it was just your average beetle. He asks me if I have a spare pen but I can't respond. Tanisha just walked in and I'm bare distracted. She's parted her hair to the left today, and her eye make-up has those little wings on them. Shanks rolls his eyes but I don't care. Today's the day.

'Fam, you say that every day. The last time she actually talked to you, you got nervous and dropped your chicken bake on her shoe.' Shanks is a liar. He wasn't even there when it happened.

Tanisha and her friends always sit near us at the back. This one time I pulled out a chair for her to sit down, but she just laughed and carried on walking. Swear down, this girl needs to chill. Shanks would've liked Tanisha sitting with us, he's always tryna get people to sit with us. But if it's not Tanisha, then I ain't interested. She's so popular her phone is always going off, but she don't care. She's so cool that sometimes she doesn't even check it, even though it could be an emergency. The only people that ever call *me* are Shanks and sometimes his mum to ask me if Shanks is at my yard. I wish Tanisha would call me though, that would give me life.

'Shanks, I ain't playing. I really think today's the day. What's the worst she could say?' I ask.

'That she won't go out with you because you have dry elbows, your ears stick out and sometimes after PE you smell like an onion.'

'OK, that would be kinda next if she said that. Bro, why you shooting down my confidence? You know I bruise easily, so be careful when you handle me.'

'Bruv, I ain't handling you in any way, stop being weird.' Now he's getting defensive. I'm telling you, this is how it always goes.

'It was a simile,' I explain.

'No, it wasn't – if anything it was a metaphor. A simile is when something is like something.'

‘So a simile is like a metaphor. Stop confusing me, bruv, you’re putting me off. I’m supposed to be talking to Tanisha.’

‘Why don’t you just use your bars to get her digits?’

I think he’s right. Spitting bars is one of the most romantic things an MC can do. And when she finally realises how talented I am, she won’t notice that I got four Subway stains on my shirt. OK, this is it. I do the breath test where I breathe into my hand and if it doesn’t make me light-headed, then I’m good to go. This is kinda exciting. I can’t believe I’m doing this. It’s like my mind won’t believe my brain.

Just as I’m about to make my move, Mr Rix starts the lesson. I know he’s a bit of neek, but Mr Rix is a decent teacher. He teaches us big words like ‘derelict’ and ‘invaluable’.

‘Settle down, everybody. Today I want to do a little articulation exercise. As you know, we’ll be looking at autobiographies this term.’ He wants us to write about robots? ‘The literal translation of autobiography is “history of the self”.’ Oh. Cool. I was half right – robots might wanna write about themselves too. ‘So before we start,’ Mr Rix says, ‘I want you each to tell me an interesting fact about yourself that you could mention in your autobiography.’

I look at Shanks. How is this guy gonna say ‘before we start’ and then ask us to do stuff? Fam, that is the start. I don’t go to football and say, ‘Before we start, I’m gonna bang in five goals.’

Ryan, some next guy who always has a dead trim, is the first to stand.

‘Well, I’m not sure if this counts, but my dad was in the circus, and when I was younger he taught me how to ride a unicycle. Sometimes I use it to go to the shop around the corner from my house.’ Well done, this guy knows how to ride half a bike.

Stephanie goes next. She would be pretty decent, but she switched on me once for no reason, just because I accidentally got chewing gum in both our eyebrows. I found it stuck under the desk, but it was watermelon flavour which is nasty. When I flicked it off my finger, some went in my face, and when I tried again with the rest, it went on hers too.

‘So, I can actually speak five different languages,’ she says. What’s the point? You only live in one country.

Everyone’s going around talking about moist things they’ve done, like meeting celebrities or swimming with dolphins or whatever. Dolphins are just bald sharks and celebrities are boring anyway; when I met Idris Elba outside Greggs, he kept running away saying, ‘I’m not Idris Elba, leave me alone, I don’t even look like him.’ Never meet your heroes, that’s all I’m sayin’.

It finally gets to my turn and I don’t know what to say. Maybe I could tell them about the time I met Idris Elba. Or the time I did over seven kick-ups. There’s too much

to choose from. But Tanisha is watching me, and I need to impress her. If I'm gonna do this dead task for Mr Rix, I might as well do some trademark acrobatic lyrics and get that love train rollin'.

'I can MC off the dome,' I say, standing up. I hear a couple people groan, but they groaned at Ludacris when he flew into the sun, and nothing stopped him achieving his dreams. Shanks is looking down at the floor, it's the head angle for optimum audio quality. Tanisha's not even watching me, she's on her phone. If my juicy hot bars don't impress her, I don't know what will. Mr Rix just looks confused.

It's now or never.

*'Yo, spitting bars out here, that's my big plan.*

*See you nod along, you a big fan.*

*Fan-tastic say it twice coz I cancan.*

*Getting hench, I'm a classic version of a roadman.*

*I know man, I know man well.*

*I know well . . . Wait . . . Emmanuel?'*

Damn, I dropped it. But even heart surgeons have bad days at the office, it ain't a big deal. Tanisha weren't even paying attention anyway. Two people start clapping, and Mr Rix looks even more confused than before.

He says, 'Thanks, Shaun, I think we'll leave it there.'

'Wait, sir, I can do better.' It can't end like this. I'm usually on point, but Tanisha was making me nervous. 'Mr Rix, if you drop a beat, I swear, like, I can stay on beat.' Some of



the class are grinning at each other. Mr Rix just says that we don't have time and we should move on. I guess the battle is lost, like the one at Waterloo station.

The rest of the lesson is calm. I start thinking about my autobiography, like, if Sherlock Homes can write one about his houses, I could do one that's way less boring. It would have to be a side hustle to my rap career, but imagine all the P that I would make.

When the lesson finishes and we start packing our books away, I see Shanks look past me, and his mouth is hanging open. I turn to see what he's looking at. OMG it's Tanisha, she's actually coming over. She must have noticed that I've started doing press-ups. Every now and then, I try to work out almost twice a week, coz it's important to exercise your triceratops, your lorax and your Lithuania. When you put the work in and come out looking like a snack, man can't be surprised when people wanna gobble-gobble. Shanks sits nearby, pretending to put stuff in his bag so that he doesn't interrupt us. True wingman out here.

'I liked your rap. Please tell me you were being ironic.' When she speaks it's like drill music to my ears. My days, she's so pretty.

'Ha. Ironic. I don't even know the meaning of the word,' I reply, which is true because I really don't. She's not saying anything. She just pulls out her phone and starts playing with her hair like she's waiting for me to say something. 'Yo,

is your head itchy? Because my mum's got this shampoo for dry or itchy scalps.' I know that because it's written on the bottle and I memorised it.

'What are you saying? That I got a dry scalp?' She stops playing with her hair and folds her arms.

'No, you were just touching your hair and I thought maybe it was itching. Like, don't worry or nothing, it's medicinal.' She picks up her handbag and dashes her phone inside, then she gives me a proper screw face and storms out. Like, legit what just happened? It was going so well. I look over at Shanks, who saw the whole thing, bare hurt.

'Shanks, I was just trying to help.'

'I know,' he sighs.

'Bruv, it was medicinal.'

'I know.'

I spend the rest of the day wishing I'll bump into Tanisha, so I can tell her that her hair ain't dry and that. It's beautiful, soft, and damp like when Shanks' mum cooks banana bread. But it's 3.30 p.m. and I'm losing hope. The bell's gone, and Shanks had to rush off. His mum took him bowling and it's not even his birthday.

Oh my days, I see her. She's almost on her way out the gates, and I have to run to catch up with her and her friends. One of them says something as I approach, and they all start laughing. Tanisha tells them to go wait for her at the bus

stop, and they walk off, linking their arms and rolling their eyes. I don't care that they laughed. Adrian, my big brother from the same mother, taught me that sticks and stones can break my bones but words can only leave emotional scars that others can't see. Tanisha is so pretty, even when she's angry. When her frown is intense and her mouth gets all pouty, it makes me tingle like Miles Morales' spider-sense.

'What do you want? Come to tell me more about my bad hair?'

'No, I come to tell you that your hair's really nice and your face is nice and I'm really sorry. I didn't want to upset you before.' I'm shaking a little bit, but that's just coz my street-dance training is on high alert, not because I'm nervous.

She rolls her eyes. 'Give me your phone.' Tanisha holds out her hand. I give it to her. She quickly taps numbers in and shoves the phone back at me. 'Don't make me regret that,' she says.

Hah, 'regret'. I don't fully know the meaning of that word either. She goes off towards the bus stop to join her friends. I run home to call Shanks and tell him what just happened. Don't ever doubt me, bruv, I got game. I got so many girls' numbers that if you line them up back-to-back it would be well confusing, even for a mathsmagician.



## 2

# They Call Me the Athlete Coz of My Athlete's Foot

We're doing PE off-site in Catford at one of those sports tracks with all the lines that you see on the Olympics. It's like a big stretched-out circle with grass in the middle. Mr Youssef has got us running 4,000 meters, which is pretty useless because in the real world you can just get the bus. I'm sweating like a Krispy Kreme and my thigh gap keeps rubbing together. Tanisha and her friends are way ahead, so me and Shanks are running behind everyone else so we can talk in private.

'What you gonna message her?' Shanks is grilling me like a baked potato while he runs alongside me.

'Chill, bruh. They don't call me Cassava for nothing.' I guess that's half-true.

'Growls, cassava's a root. I think you mean Casanova.'

'I think I mean supernova, because that's what I am.'

'Whatever. It's just that the last date you went on didn't really work out that well. Remember Nadia?' Why's he got to bring that up? Nadia was peak. We went on one date and she never spoke to me again.

'That's because you sneezed on her.'

'I sneezed *near* her.'

'OK fine, but you got some on her and your nose was bleeding.'

'My nose was only bleeding because that stupid football hit me in the face.'

'You kicked that ball into your own face.'

'Bruv, you know I wasn't wearing the right shoes. And who pumps a football up that much? The thing was rock solid.' Swear down, that football was a weapon of match destruction. I still don't get why Nadia was so upset.

'Come on, you were trying to impress her and it flopped.'

You know what? This guy is stressing me out. Why we talking about Nadia when I'm trying to think of what to message Tanisha? 'Bro, you don't know what's in my heart,' I tell him. 'And why you bringing up old wounds right now? You know I got postal dramatic stress disorder.' We carry on running in silence for a bit.

'Aite, I'm sorry, I won't bring her up any more.' Shanks tries to put his arm around me, but I run sideways a little bit so he can't reach. I'm not ready to be touched. Mr Youssef

notices us way behind everyone else so he shouts at us to pick up the pace. He doesn't know that me and Shanks are already supreme athletes and we don't wanna make those other pedestrians in our class look bad.

'What do you think I should do with Tanisha then?' I have to ask him because no one else in our year knows me the way he does, or ever really talks to us on a level. I would go to Adrian, but last time I asked him to help me find a girl, he just held up a mirror. Shanks isn't on that wave like I am, but I don't mind because I'm my best self when I'm with him, he's the perfect hypeman. You know what, he really *is* the perfect hypeman, and that gives me an idea.

'Shanks?'

'Yeah, fam.'

'What if I link Tanisha and you come with?' Why didn't I think of it before? With Shanks there, he can talk me up, and we always have fun together. Maybe Tanisha will see that and get gassed and she'll join in the bants. He thinks about it for a sec and says that I'm less likely to injure myself if he comes with. We're in.

Mr Youssef tells us to hurry up again, we've fallen way behind now. Shanks is such a neek, he starts running faster and faster, but I'm at optimal capacity. When you're a Scorpio like me, we have explosive speed but less stamina. Shanks has already started overtaking people. He's killing it.

By the time I get to my last lap, everyone else is finished and they're all lying there out of breath. You see me, yeah, I was smart and I conserved all my energy till the end. I kick my legs into overdrive and I'm proper sprinting now. Literally, I'm running so fast I must be a blur. I think Mr Youssef is calling at me to hurry. I can't hear him though, because that old man on the lawnmower is overtaking me.

When I cross the finish line, most people have already gone to the changing rooms. Shanks is waiting for me, even though he finished third out of everyone, which is kinda sick when you think that we were behind for so long. He says he had time to sit down and catch his breath while I was on my final lap.

'So you saw my final lap?' I ask him. 'Be real, how insanely fast was I going?'

'I think I saw a butterfly land on you.'

Me and Shanks are in the changing rooms at school. We didn't change in Catford, because we ran out of time. Apparently someone made us late and we had to get back. It's calm because we don't really like using the changing rooms when they're too packed anyway. Man get too rowdy, and I have to suck my belly in when I'm changing T-shirts. I type a message to Tanisha asking her to go cinema, and spend the rest of the day avoiding her in case she doesn't reply.

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Why she airing me like a cupboard? We're in geography class the next day, and I can see her see me. I guess the vibe ain't right, geography is dead, fam. Our teacher won't even teach us real geography stuff, like where to find the lost city of Atlanta, or where the wild things are. Maybe she's not talking to me coz people were mocking it when I said that a stalactite is when two stalacs are best friends.

Shanks notices that I keep checking my phone and looking over, so I just lock and keep it in my pocket.

*Swear down, Tanisha owes me an apology,  
We found ourselves in geography, it's not for me,  
You can ghost but I'm a gangsta living and I been studying  
G-ology.*

Those bars were tighter than two stalacs, a bit like me and Shanks when we share a milkshake.

The bell goes and I wanna go chat to her, but my heart is beating too fast like drum and bass, and for some reason my legs won't move; maybe I been sitting down for too long and I got peas and noodles in my legs.

Shanks tries to encourage me, but the moment's gone.

Or is it?

As we're walking out, I can see a pen on the table where she was sitting. She's one of those people who writes stuff down in class. I tell Shanks not to wait for me before next lesson.

OK, there's Tanisha and I have her pen. I don't need to be



nervous, what if the inventor of paracetamol was nervous? He would have never invented Paris. This is a pressurised situation, a bit like when you go to the optician and they test your spelling. I'm telling you it's a hoax, the words they make you spell are always made up.

'Yo, Tanisha.' Why are her friends always laughing? My leg was numb when I stood up, but I styled it out by pretending to tie my shoelace. Bare people tie their shoes lying down on the floor, it ain't that deep. 'I got your pen, I thought you might need it.' I climb back onto my feet like I normally stand because balance game strong now. She tells her friends that she'll link up with them later.

'That's not my pen,' she says, and then she sighs.

'So did you get my message?' I ask. The trick is not to look desperate.

'I did, but you know what it's like. I've been so busy, getting my nails done and my eyebrows threaded and making content and that.'

'Yeah, I seen how many followers you got on IG, you must be really busy trying to keep up with them. I'm busy too though, hustling and being a G on road and that.'

'You think I got a lot of followers?' She smiles and looks at the floor. 'Because I wasn't sure if it's enough. I wanna be an influencer.' OMG she's responding to me like we're equals. I can't gas her up too much.

'Are you kidding? You've got bare followers, you're gonna

go far in life.' I can't help it, she's life goals. 'One day I'm gonna have as many as you, and have this huge squad, and they'll respect my gangsta vibe because I'll have enough money to buy them all ice cream. Every. Single. One of them.' Tanisha's pulled out her phone and is literally on the gram right now, admiring her own selfies. I rate that. 'I just need to get on your level of socials,' I tell her. Me and Shanks only have fifty followers when we combine. Most of mine are family members, but Imma unfollow them when I make it big. Too much dead weight. Most people at school don't follow us back, which I get because me and Shanks are before our time like jetlag or an analogue watch.

Tanisha looks up and nods slowly. 'OK, let's go out, one time, and just see how it goes. I don't know what I'm thinking,' she says. We quickly make plans to meet at Peckham cinema on Saturday, and then I literally run away before she can change her mind. As I'm sprinting down the corridor, I can tell that my road energy sealed the deal (I don't know why seals are so good at deals) and the first thing I do is find Shanks.

'We're in,' I tell him.

'We're in what?'

I tell him about my chat with Tanisha, and how I was so gangsta that she just crumbled at the knees and asked me out.

Back at mine, I'm trying on different outfits to wear for my date on Saturday. Shanks came over after school because

he likes being my stylist. Mum is in the kitchen on the phone looking stressed. Shanks gives her a quick wave, but my trick is to avoid direct contact when she's on one. I hear her moaning about the cost of living and having to cut back, which is peak because we already been making cutbacks. Our toothpaste got one of those clips you put on food packets to keep them fresh – we use it to squeeze all the last drops out. And last time I asked her for one-fiddy for trainers, she gave me 50p for materials to start building my own pair.

Adrian is here too, I can hear music from his room. He's a little bit hench, like a semi-pro badminton player or an under-sixteens footballer. When we pass him in the corridor, he's wearing a loose tank top and sliders, looking like an uncle in a car park on a hot day.

Me and Shanks spend the rest of the afternoon in my room trying on clothes for my date with Tanisha. I got this one T-shirt with bare holes that I can pretend are on purpose, but one of the holes is right over my nipple and I don't want babies to get the wrong idea. My other favourite T-shirt is a plain blue one, but it's got a grease stain on the chest that never comes off. I can wear it if I keep my arms folded the whole time, but that means I can't do normal things like tie my laces, or high-five people on escalators, or pick lavender or whatever. In the end, we do what we always do, which is that Shanks will lend me a top and I have to give it back later.

# 3

## Man's Proper Date (Not the Cockroach Fruit)

When we rock up to the cinema on Saturday, Tanisha's already outside. Look at her, standing there, all confident like she just won the Oscar for best album. Shanks is rubbing my shoulders like I'm a boxer in a bathrobe, telling me that I got this and it's gonna be the best date. He's paying for my ticket, but he didn't mention money for snacks so I brought some from home. The only thing we had in our fridge was yogurt, strawberry on some five-a-day wave, and I hijacked a pot and three spoons from the drawer. I have to hurry back after the film so my mum doesn't notice the spoons are missing.

As we get closer to Tanisha, she smiles when she recognises me, but she stops smiling and looks confused when she spots Shanks.

‘Oh, I thought it was just gonna be the two of us,’ she says. Boy, she does not look happy to see him.

‘Nah, the thing is yeah, I ain’t the kinda guy to leave my friends behind. When you’re an MC duo like we are –’ me and Shanks quickly do our signature back-to-back pose – ‘we ain’t bout to leave each other out of a cinema trip.’ Now that she knows I’m a good friend, she probably fancies me even more. She pulls a bit of a face and walks off into the cinema.

When we catch up with her at the counter, Tanisha turns to me.

‘Well?’

‘Well, what?’ I ask.

‘Well, what film are we watching?’ Oh. I didn’t even look at the films, I was too busy stealing spoons and yogurt from my own yard. I ask the woman behind the counter what’s the next film to start. There’s a superhero film on in ten minutes, or a kids’ film called *Princess Power II* that’s starting now. I tell the woman that we want to watch the action film, and she looks down at the three of us and asks if we’re here with an adult.

‘I can call my mum,’ Shanks says and he pulls out his phone. ‘I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.’

‘Do *not* call your mum,’ Tanisha says, barging past us. She tells the woman that we’ll just go and see the kids’ film, muttering something about ‘It’s bad enough he’s here,

allow having his mum with us.' She kinda has a point, like, who goes on a date and brings their best friend's mum? Shanks needs to get it under control; his mum ain't even a vibe, she keeps fudge in her handbag.

We order the tickets and Tanisha asks me if I'm getting snacks.

'Don't worry, I got you,' I tell her, and pat my rucksack with the yogurt inside.

'Oh thank God, I was wondering what you had in there,' she says as we follow her to the screen. When we sit down, I try to wait for Shanks to go first so that me and Tanisha can sit next to each other and hold hands maybe. But she sat down quickly and Shanks didn't clock my plan, so now it's a bit awkward because he's in the middle. Tanisha's bare tutting every time she looks at him, and I'm starting to think she don't rate him that much. I nudge him with my leg to swap places, and he tries to shuffle underneath me while I go over the top. I can feel people looking at us, but I'm doing my best to ignore them. I'm kinda sitting on Shanks' lap and we carry on shuffling, accidentally kicking the people in front of us and knocking over my rucksack, until I land in the seat next to Tanisha. I'm a little out of breath, but it's cool, I don't think she noticed.

The film starts and all the parents shush their kids. Hopefully they don't wile out, so me and Tanisha can enjoy our perfect date. The film is kinda sick though. Princess

Buttercup is trapped in a tower like 5G and her kingdom is under attack from Krumpus, some wasteman wizard who wouldn't last a day in the ends without his powers. Yo, the princess is calm though, she's rolling with some next homies who are these forest creatures and they ain't having it. Me and Shanks are invested, boy.

When there's a singing break for Princess Buttercup to wish for true love's kiss, no cap it's a sly tune, I pull out the yogurt pot and spoons to hand out. Shanks is licking his lips as I open it.

'Stay bless,' he says as we start digging in, but Tanisha's arms are folded. I hold it out for her, but she doesn't even move.

'Are you actually serious?' she hisses. She's giving the yogurt a dirty look like it's some kinda moist apricot flavour or something. As if I would bring an apricot yogurt to the cinema.

'Man brought one yogurt pot, not even on a joke ting.' She's shaking her head. 'Don't you have anything normal, like sweets or Maltesers?' she asks. What am I, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory? This girl is moving bare ungrateful.

'Bruv, if you don't want my snacks, you should have got some for yourself,' I tell her.

'I was going to order snacks but you told me not to.' She's whispering proper loud. 'I don't want to be eating yogurt with you while I'm in a cinema surrounded by kids.'

I don't get why she's so embarrassed about eating yogurt with little children around, I'm sure they won't judge her.

As the film carries on, the Krumpus is actually moving suspect. Man like Princess Buttercup better come through.

I kinda wanna make a move on Tanisha, but I'm tryna be subtle. I yawn really loudly and bring my arm up to put around her shoulder, but it turns into a real yawn and I forget what I was tryna do with it. Now I can't fake another one because she's gonna think I'm proper bored, which I'm not because this film is next level. I can sense that she's on it though, my time will come.

Halfway through the film, I'm on the edge of my seat, because I spilled my yogurt and I'm trying not to sit in it. Princess Buttercup has finally mastered her rainbow magic and she's going hard. Man does not want to return to her tower, boy, she's ready for a scrap. She acts all kind and innocent, but deep down we know she's bare ratchet.

Tanisha don't look like she's enjoying herself. Man's got her phone out, texting. I catch Shanks looking at me and he widens his eyes and starts mouthing something. I don't know what he's trying to say, but he keeps nodding towards her. I finally get it. I lean over to whisper to Tanisha.

'Yo, Tanisha?' She looks up. 'Can you put your phone away? We tryna watch the film and the light from your screen is bare distracting.' She's huffing and she rolls her eyes, but she puts her phone in her pocket and folds her arms.



The film finishes and me and Shanks are hyped. That princess was on one. When it turned out that her real power was true love, and all them woodland creatures stood up against the Krumpus, it was curtains. Ain't nobody can touch rainbow magic in the right hands, you ain't finessing that. Princess Buttercup is thug goals out here.

*Rainbow magic un-mess-withable,  
Cinderella vibez can't mess with a ball,  
Tanisha on her phone like she gon mess with call,  
Why deny my cinema vibe, with yogurt so edible?  
No need for red ink for it to be ink-redible.*

Tanisha missed all of it. She went toilet twenty minutes before the end and we're waiting for her outside.

'Bruv, the way all she had to do was believe in herself to unlock her magic, I'm telling you that's us with the rapping,' I say.

Shanks looks away.

'I lie?' I look at my watch and back at the door of the cinema. The last people have left and there's still no sign of Tanisha. Shanks can read my mind like the back of a shampoo bottle, and he offers to buy me an ice cream. I take one more look at my phone and at the cinema, bare longingly and that. I can't get too invested in the feels, that ain't gangsta. It's calm, Shanks said he'll pay the 20p for extra sprinkles.



## Rapping My Gift to You

Tanisha messaged when she got home yesterday. Apparently she had an emergency dentist appointment, so at least she had a good reason. Shout-out dentists, those guys deserve a crown.

I need to forget Tanisha though, because today's the day that things change for me and Shanks. We're going to enter Raptology, step one to becoming famous rappers. The Akinyemi Foundation has this rap battle event for thirteen to sixteen-year-olds every summer, and this is the first year we can legally enter. I went last year and it was sick. You basically do three rounds of head-to-head, winners go through and losers go home. Or I guess the losers can stay if they're enjoying themselves, there's refreshments and that, and it might be too early for them to go home

coz this is a daytime thing. I been following all the past winners on IG, and I think I saw one of them say that he got a week of studio time at the end when he won. I can already imagine Tanisha's face when she sees us dropping our fresh MC Squared tracks like Hansel and Gretel.

The competition's on 31st July so we've still got a couple months to practise. Shanks thinks it's a good idea to film ourselves doing a freestyle so we can see what we look like and come up with ways to improve. Obviously I think we're already wavey enough, but I guess it can't hurt to perfect our perfection.

He comes over after lunch, and we're in my room setting up his phone. I'm letting Shanks do our online entry because he's better at all that admin. True story, I used to think that 'admin' was short for 'adminton'. He's taking bare long though, so I tell him to skip all that useless information stuff and just put our names in. He enters our details on the site, and now I'm proper gassed, I just wanna get started on the freestyles. We shouldn't be interrupted; Adrian has football training on Sundays, and Mum's in the kitchen plotting my downfall or whatever she does in her spare time. She lost her job as a receptionist in a GP surgery a few months ago after they had to cut back on staff. I wanted her to get a job in TK Maxx and get a discount, but now she's started working nights as a cleaner, and it's peak for me and Adrian because she's always in a bad mood.

My room is just a single bed with a desk and a TV for my PlayStation, one of them old ones that has a mega back and a 12-inch frame around it. Adrian's room is way bigger, he could swing a cat if he wanted to, like if we had a cat, or a sausage dog or a small kangaroo. He wouldn't, because nobody wants that kind of heat from the are-yes-PC-yay. I used to have more things in my room, but Mum's been selling a whole load of our stuff online. Yesterday I went to sit in my desk chair and caught air because I didn't realise it weren't there no more. Next she'll be coming for my bed and I'll have to sleep on the floor like a snake.

The walls in here are peeling and there's ceiling stains, but I can Photoshop those out for the video. Don't tell Shanks, but as I'm setting up the phone, I see that Tanisha's online, so I make an executive decision to go live with this ting. When she sees the hustle, she's gonna be calling me non-stop to go on another date. We can go somewhere fancy, like Nando's or Pizza Express, where they give you extra ketchup for free and the napkins don't come out a dispenser.

'Come on, bro, are we ready? You're taking your time,' Shanks says. He's biting his nails and says he just wants to start so we can get it over with. I rate his enthusiasm, still. I quickly make a pile of cooking books that I stole from the kitchen so I can prop the phone up, hands-free, you

feel me? Once it's recording, I pull my hood up and take a step back so we're both in the video.

'Yo, I'm Growls, I'm here with my G, Shanks, and together we are MC Squared,' I tell the camera.

'What? No. Cut.' Shanks doesn't like that. 'We didn't discuss names. Don't say that.'

'Aite, cool, fam, let's just continue.' He doesn't realise we're live on the internet and I wanna get past this quickly.

'No, Growls, you always do this. Do you know how it makes me feel when you make a decision for both of us without consulting me? If I'm gonna do this with you, I need to feel valued. Otherwise you know me, you know I have no problems stepping away.'

'Aite, fam, I'm sorry, can we just spit bars now, I wanna get on with it,' I tell him. I'm getting nervous. People are watching and he has no idea. But he's not done whining.

'I just think it wouldn't hurt to consider me, and how I feel, every once in a while. Can you do that? Can you do that for me, Growls?' My days, this guy is so annoying. I tell him I'm sorry again and he finally accepts. We continue with the video. He still hasn't noticed the red dot on the screen next to the camera that means people are watching us.

OK, the way this goes is that we take it in turns to beatbox while the other spits bars. We alternate every few lines so that each of us gets time on the mic. Shanks' style is a bit

straightforward like Wretch (they share that Caribbean vibe), while my bars are twisty and turny like snakes on a roundabout. Shanks goes first while I drop a beat.

*'Yo, Sshhhh, Sshhhanks up here shushing you like we in the library,*

*Finish other rappers like I'm carefree, I fight scary, my eyes glare,*

*Knock down your front door and barge in coz you can't bare me.'*

*'Yo, Growls taking over, take you downtown like downtown abbey,*

*My English skills isn't shabby, feds couldn't nab me,*

*Imporium Armani, Ferrari, night's starry,*

*Supermarket try bar me, for dropping a jam jari, your bars plain like safari.'*

Shanks is still beatboxing but he's tapping his watch because my bars are taking too long. We change over again. Fam, this is fire; we are so easily gonna win that competition.

*'Shanks is back spitting litty,*

*I dominate this rap game just a little bitty,*

*My bars are gritty, I roll shifty,*

*Lyrics like a Benz moving nifty, driving past you,*

*Eyes red like that hamster when it bit me.'*

*'Yo, Growls is back again,' I jump in.*

*'I appear as I choose, hard like the beak of a goose,*

*My spirit shape is circle, energy eternal, never run out of duck-duck-juice.'*

Mum opens the door and Shanks stops beatboxing so she can come in and collect my laundry. I take this opportunity to quickly look over at the phone. Right now there's 108 people watching us. I hope Tanisha's one of them.

On her way out the door, Mum pauses and turns around. She's holding my underwear in her hand. My heart stops. Before I can react, she marches over like a toy soldier.

'Boy, I told you to wipe your bum properly,' she says, holding up my pants. 'You're not five years old any more.' Mum, no, not like this! The red light is still live on the phone. 'I don't got the time to be wasting on the poopoo of some grown child. Now come put the shopping away.' My stomach is doing a million backflips. There's sweat on my brow, and my head. I reach for the phone before she can do any more damage. 'Boy, leave that phone alone. You don't need it to put shopping away.' Damn.

I leave the phone with Shanks and go help in the kitchen. I'm trying to put the shopping away as fast as I can. The entire time, I'm nervous, I keep dropping stuff. I'm playing the image over and over in my head of her holding my pants and shouting those words. What has she done? I'm gonna have to leave the country and change my identity. It's OK for Shanks, his bars were a bit off, but at least his entire life didn't get finessed dirty for the whole world to see.

I finally get back to the room, feeling light-headed and a bit sick. Maybe it's not that bad, I'm sure I can rescue the situation. But when I open the door, Shanks is sitting on the bed, topless, and smelling his fingers. What the actual fresh hell is this?

'Bruv!' I run over to the phone and quickly close the app. The last thing I saw was over 400 viewers. My eyes are stinging and my mouth has gone dry. I turn to Shanks. 'What were you just doing?' My voice is quivering. This guy doesn't know we were live the whole time.

'You were taking long. I was just practising my dance moves to K-pop.'

'But why were you smelling your fingers, fam?' I fall onto the bed, my head in my hands.

'I got sweaty, so I took my shirt off and then I put my fingers in my armpit to check if they smelled like deodorant. I wanted to see if it really is twenty-four-hour protection.' Oh God no, this is a disaster. 'Growls, what's going on? Why you looking at me like that?'

I'm sitting on the bed, I can't move, my life is over. I need to tell him, but I can't believe this is real. I take a deep breath and count to ten twice. And then I do it, I tell Shanks that we were videoing live. We were streaming to the world. He starts to laugh, but it dies out when he sees I'm not JK-ing. He's gone quiet and his mouth is hanging open in shock. He jumps up and looks like he's gonna



punch me. This is bad. He starts shouting like, 'What are we gonna do?' and I start shouting like, 'I don't know!' and he's clawing his face and now he's gently banging his head against the wall. It's too intense in here.