

## IN THE SHADOWS

“Who can tell me what causes a *shadow*?” Mrs.

Perkins said, jabbing her index finger at the image of the sun projected on the screen.

Jamal squinted from the back of the class. His teacher wore a hideous floral-print dress the color of goopy pink stomach medicine that matched the slight sunburn on her normally milky-white arms. Her perfectly round face was accented by a pair of perfectly round glasses with thick lenses that made her look like an owl. Or at least, that was what Jamal had always thought.

Her huge green eyes scanned the class expectantly.

Jamal thrust his hand up. *I know the answer*, he thought.

*Pick me!* He loved science class the most. Science felt like a never-ending puzzle he could try to solve. Even better, the more he learned, the more exciting it got.

But Mrs. Perkins’s oversized eyes looked right over him—and her gaze landed on his brother. His *twin* brother. Identical twin, to be exact. Malik was technically older than Jamal, having been born a full five minutes earlier.

And he never let Jamal forget it.

“*Malik*,” Mrs. Perkins said, calling on Jamal’s brother instead. Like Jamal didn’t even exist. Like he was invisible.

“Right, a shadow is caused by an object blocking the rays of the sun,” Malik said, oblivious to his brother’s sullen expression. “The bigger the object, the bigger the shadow.”

“Correct, as always.” Mrs. Perkins beamed at Malik, which made her eyes appear even larger. “No wonder you’re the top student in my class. Heck, the whole school.”

“You know it, Mrs. P,” Malik said with a cocky grin and a wink. “Straight As all the way.”

If Jamal called a teacher by a casual nickname like that, he’d probably be reprimanded, maybe even sent to the principal’s office. But not Malik. He was both the smartest *and* the most popular kid at Princess River Middle School, which meant he could get away with anything. If Jamal ever got noticed—a rare occurrence—it was never for something good. There was, for instance, the horrific gym wedgie incident of last year, a memory that made Jamal squirm. It involved a big kid named Colton, who always picked on Jamal and who had, appar-ently, recently perfected his wedgie-giving skills. Suffice it to say, Jamal hadn’t worn tighty-whities to school since.

But aside from that nightmare, most of the time it was like he didn’t exist.

While Mrs. Perkins blathered on about the sun’s rays, Jamal studied his brother’s face—high cheekbones, freckled brown skin, mop of curly black hair that made him a few inches taller. It was like staring at his own reflection. How could they be the same in so many ways—

birthday, age, appearance, parents—yet so different at the same time?

Maybe Jamal *wasn't* invisible. Maybe he was a shadow—there, but unnoticed—and his brother, Malik, was the large object blocking the rays of the sun.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

There was a tentative rap on the door.

Jamal jerked his eyes away from his brother. “Come on in,” Mrs. Perkins said in a singsong voice.

The door swung open to reveal a girl whom Jamal had never seen before. She had brown skin a touch lighter than Jamal’s and wore punk skater clothes—skinny jeans torn at the knees, paired with a fluorescent logo shirt and scuffed black-and-white Vans. He could tell that she was a *real* skater from her scabby knees and skinned elbows.

Her hair was shaved into a short Mohawk and dyed bright purple.

This girl stood out.

Jamal couldn’t stop staring at her.

“Uh, I think this is my class. I’m Riley . . . DeSeroux. I just transferred to Princess River.” She thrust out a crum-pled class schedule, casting her gaze down to her feet.

“Welcome to science class, Ms. DeSeroux,” Mrs.

Perkins said, studying the paper through her oversized glasses. “Go ahead and take a seat.”

Riley slid into the empty seat next to Jamal. It was empty for a reason. Nobody wanted to sit next to Jamal.

Except the new girl.

*She’ll wise up soon*, he thought glumly. It’s not that he didn’t want to make a new friend. Well, a friend . . . *period*.

Jamal didn’t really have any friends. The closest thing was Malik, but brothers didn’t count. They had to hang out with you, at least sometimes. After all, he and Malik shared a small bedroom and a set of parental units. But these days, they didn’t spend much time together. Malik was too busy with his fan club, as Jamal thought of his brother’s popular friends, who all seemed to worship the ground he walked on.

Jamal glanced at Riley again. He knew it was bad to stare at the sun, but he couldn’t help it. She practically glowed. But that could have been her bright shirt.

He considered whispering something like “Hey, wel-come to Princess River.” Or maybe “Want me to show you around campus?”

But it sounded silly even in his head. Still, he tried to muster up the courage. He cleared his throat.

“Hey, Riley—” he started.

The bell rang, cutting him off. The class bolted up and crowded around Malik, rushing into the hall. Jamal was left alone, plodding toward the door. Even Riley sped away, leaving him in her dust. He watched her back as she disappeared into the crowded hallway packed with rowdy students.

It was for the better anyway. Even if Jamal had been able to introduce himself, Riley would have forgotten he existed as soon as she met Malik. That's what always happened. It wasn't worth trying to talk to her. He had always felt invisible, but after Mrs. Perkins's lecture, he realized he was more like a shadow. His outline was there, but nobody paid attention to him, especially not when he was standing next to his brother.

That was how it had always been.

"And that's how it'll always be," he muttered with a sigh. He trudged toward his locker and saw Malik nearby, surrounded by his fan club. Envy rose in Jamal's heart.

It burned but also felt somehow comforting: he was so used to feeling this way. He opened his locker and rooted around for the books he'd need for the next few classes, listening to Malik's friends laugh at his jokes.

Suddenly, a voice startled him.

"So, what superpower do you wish you had?"

Jamal jerked his gaze away from his brother to find Riley standing right next to him. She swung her backpack, bulging with fresh books, over her shoulder.

"Would you rather have invisibility powers," she continued with a smirk, "or be able to fly?"

Jamal glanced behind him, convinced that she must be talking to somebody else. But nobody was there. It was just the two of them. And her eyes were fixed on *him*.

"Uh, what?" Jamal said, confused both by the fact that she was actually talking to him and by her strange question.

"You know, the old superhero conundrum," she said, pointing to his shirt. The one with his favorite comic book hero on it. He glanced down at it, and his cheeks burned.

"Oh, right," he said, mentally searching for something cool to say. Though the truth was he didn't even have to think about it. He already knew the answer. "Obviously, I want to be able to fly."

She frowned. "Oh, and why's that?"

"That way everybody would notice me."

Riley gave him a strange look. "You know, invisibility is the stronger superpower. Most people choose that one."

"Not in my world," Jamal said, slamming his locker shut with a deep sigh. "I already have invisibility powers.

And trust me, they're not *super*."

He hurried off down the hall to his next class, leaving her standing in his shadow.

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“Fine, we’ll take . . . *Jamal*,” Colton said with disgust, like he’d just been told he had to kiss a slimy frog, not pick a basketball teammate in gym class. Colton had moved to New Orleans from Texas a couple of years back and reminded Jamal of a stereotypical cowboy—tall and always tan, with shaggy blond hair and a square jaw.

If he’d been cast in an old Western movie, he would have been the villain, for sure. “Not like we have a choice.”

Gym class was turning out to be even worse than science class. Despite his best efforts to stand tall and look strong, Jamal got picked last. Of course, his brother got picked first for the opposing team. He was the best player at Princess River Middle, and everyone knew it.

They were identical twins. They should have been *equal* y good at basketball, but for some reason, Jamal lacked the athletic coordination and skill that came so easily to his brother.

It just wasn’t fair.

Even so, he ran up and down the court. He hustled for every pass, but it felt like his hands were made of lead. His fingers couldn’t grip the ball. His dribble was terrible. All his shots were air balls. Meanwhile, Malik blocked shots at one end and swished the ball through the net like the opening was five feet across. He simply couldn’t miss. He made it look effortless.

Worse yet, Riley had a pass to get out of gym class, so she sat in the bleachers, scribbling in a black-and-white composition notebook. Jamal kept catching her glancing over at his horrific performance on the court. He already felt a little bit guilty for blowing her off in the hall earlier, but this just made it worse. He desperately wanted to talk to her and impress her. More than anything, he wished he could have an actual friend. One who wasn’t related to him. But if she hadn’t already thought he was a loser, he decided, then she certainly would now.

*What else could possibly go wrong today?*

That’s when the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the game, and he looked at the scoreboard. His team had lost 58 to 23. Jamal hadn’t even managed to score one point, while his brother had scored the most points on the winning team.

Jamal watched Malik’s teammates cheer for his brother. “You schooled them!”

They surrounded Malik and paraded triumphantly toward the locker room. Jamal’s teammates were silent, glaring at him.

“We only lost because of you,” Colton muttered. “You missed every shot. Your brother ran all over you.”

Another kid from his team bumped him. Jamal stumbled into the bleachers. His shin thumped the edge. Pain shot through his leg. "H-hey, I'm sorry," he stammered.

"I'll do better next time—"

"The way you played defense," Colton spat, towering over Jamal, "you may as well have been *invisible*."

"I swear . . . I tried my best," Jamal said. "Just gimme another chance—"

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