

KING
OF
NOTHING

Also by Nathanael Lessoré
Steady for This

KING OF NOTHING

NATHANAEAL LESSORE

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BOOKS

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Pour ma Kikine



Fights are never like what you see on TV. The hero punches one guy once, and they get knocked out immediately. In real life, there's all this wrestling and trying to floor each other. The other guy's zip scratches your face, and the blows never land like they should. The films are a lie.

The only reason people don't mess with me and the mandem is because they know we'd win any fight. Still, every now and then, someone disrespects us and we have to prove a point.

Like this afternoon, something got said on the playground which we couldn't let slide. Femi said that girls find Kehinde so creepy his nickname should be Friday the 13th. So when Kehinde came in after lunch,

he spat on Femi's journal, kicked his chair and raced to the back of the class before Femi could even react. I don't have nothing against the guy, but when Femi stood up like he was gonna retaliate, he forgot one simple rule. You step to one of us, you're stepping to all of us.

It don't matter who spit on who first. What matters is that if someone starts something I'll be the one to finish it, unless it's a marathon or a salad. And that's what I did. Kehinde didn't even have to move, one quick nod to me and Caleb was enough. I pushed Femi away, and Caleb flung him over a table. Marcus was filming because we like to watch stuff back, otherwise what's the point? When we're all thirty, we're gonna look back at these videos and laugh at the antics.

Nobody can square up to us here, and I prowl these corridors like my kingdom come. When kids see me, they ten toes it, like antelope at a watering hole. If they ain't scared of me, then how they gonna respect me? Quick maths, fam.

The only problem with being top of the food chain is that people are rooting for your downfall. If it ain't Year Eights getting mouthy or Year Tens getting edgy about starting their GCSEs, it's teachers tryna prove a point, show you they're still boss. There are one or two who are calm, but the ones who take out their failed dreams on us are still dotted about. Ain't my fault you wanted to be

an astronaut and got stuck in a South London classroom. Dreams are for Tottenham fans and Martin Luther King. I don't need none of that. I'm king of the school, already living my best life. Nothing else matters.

Right now, though, I'm on my way to detention, with Marcus, while Kehinde and Caleb are off somewhere eating their chicken and chips. They're supposed to be coming with us. They don't care, though. Caleb's parents stopped answering calls from the school time ago, and Kehinde just does what he wants. I rate it, even if we're only here because of what he did to Femi.

We're strolling down the corridor when Marcus's phone rings. He starts fumbling it, panic in his eyes. It's his mum – she's the only one who can strike fear into his heart like this.

'Anton, I beg you don't say anything about detention.' He says it so fast, getting the words out before quickly answering, 'Hi, Mummy.' His voice is so high-pitched I have to bend down and hold my breath from laughing. He waves me away and tries to walk off. 'Yeah, no, I got football today, I won't be home till later.'

'Mummy, I love you, Mummy,' I whisper.

He stops dead in his tracks and turns away to avoid my smirking. 'I'm sorry, Mummy, I forgot.' There's another pause before he responds. 'No, I'm not in trouble at school again. I swear, I just got football today.' Bro, the

way this guy is sweating like a ham roll in the sun, it's not even funny. It only ends when, mid apology, she hangs up. Man doing the whole 'I'm sorry, Mummy. I – hello? Mummy?' and then when we heard the phone cut, he bowed his head like a child, defeated. No respect.

'Did. . . did your mum just hang up on you?' This time I can't hold it in, I start screaming with laughter. 'Bruv, you just got finished. Man said she left you a one-star review like Tripadvisor.' I'm still laughing when we get to the classroom door.

He gives me side-eye. 'Whatever, fam. You don't know what she's like,' he says quietly.

'Nah, I know I ain't never been disrespected like that in my life. How you gonna let her toss you aside like a non-recyclable?' I've met his mum, she's not one to be messed with, but that level of contempt, though, that's how you know she don't treat him like a main event. 'I heard she asked the maternity ward for a refund.'

'What about you?' He frowns. 'I'm not the only one going to this detention. If you weren't shook of your mum, you wouldn't have come. You'd be out with the others.'

'I ain't scared of my mum, and I could never allow her to do me like that. I just don't want the aggro. There's a difference.' Can't lie, my mum would end my world and release a four-track diss EP if she knew I was in detention for fighting.

‘How is that different?’

‘Because man needs to focus and stay tops out here. I can’t do that if she’s on my case like Sherlock.’ Besides, Mum already thinks Kehinde’s a bad influence, and this’d just give her more ammo. She makes it a big deal whenever he comes over that he never says hello to her, and he’s always raiding her fridge. But she don’t see that Kehinde’s like me, just on a higher volume, and he don’t care about what anybody thinks. When I started secondary and all the kids were mocking the fact my dad was inside, talking about how we can dress in matching orange jumpsuits for Halloween, Kehinde was the only one who had my back. He showed me how to turn that reputation into respect, and if that means occasionally landing in detention, then it’s water off a duck’s back, fam. Like hoisin sauce.

When we walk into the detention classroom, I look to Marcus to tell me this isn’t a joke. Mr Benjamin is sitting at the desk at the front. I don’t actually believe it. This guy’s always coming for me, this the same teacher who once gave me detention for coming to school in my sliders. Well, he offered me plimsols from lost and found, and I threw them in the bin. Kehinde still laughs about that to this day. I would’ve done the same to Crocs and anything Puma. Even now, Mr Benjamin starts on me the second that I walk in.

‘Ah, gentlemen, thank you for gracing us with your presence. Please take a seat.’ This guy’s voice is so slimy. He thinks I don’t get his sarcasm, but I ain’t no send out. I pick up the chair closest to me.

‘Take it where?’ I say innocently.

Marcus is slyly grinning. He knows I’m just getting warmed up like cookie dough. There’s a couple other heads in here with us, two girls in the third row near the window and some donny I don’t know. They know me though, and they’re looking up because they know they’re in for a treat. Still, I wish the others were here to see it.

‘Ah, you think you’re funny, don’t you, Mr Charles? How funny does another detention tomorrow sound?’ Man’s smirking at me like the bossman in Morley’s who charges 20p for sauce. Marcus raises his eyebrow, waiting for me to respond. I can’t speech him about disrespect and let this teacher finesse me immediately after.

‘Not as funny as your shirt,’ I tell him. ‘Why is it so small? Out here looking like a Lego man in a crop top.’

‘OK.’ Mr Benjamin has got a fake grin, trying to play it off like bants, and I would let him off but I spot Marcus’s phone in his hand, subtly recording. Can’t stop now, the crowd wants a show and I ain’t one to let them down. Can’t look weak in front of my loyal subjects, and

I pay back their respect by entertaining them. So I look Mr Benjamin up and down for extra effect.

‘Nah, for real, that shirt could rock a motive, you know. I can see the outlines of your vital organs, that shirt is so tight.’ I pretend to squint at his stomach. ‘Sir, are you digesting a bagel? I can literally see your heartbeat.’

‘Right, that’s enough.’ He’s gone bright red, and I can’t tell if it’s anger, or embarrassment, or that Kendall-sized shirt cutting off the circulation to his face.

‘When you’re done with it, you can donate it to Battersea Dogs Home. There’s small dogs in there that need winter clothes, shout-out chihuahuas.’

‘Right, that’s another detention. You want to try for a fourth?’ Mr Benjamin is so angry his voice is quivering like he’s warming up for an R&B feature. It’s only because Marcus ain’t filming any more that I decide to allow this nobody. How’s he gonna start on me when all I did was turn up to a stupid detention? I could’ve ditched it like Kehinde and Caleb. Now I’m here and I’m catching negative vibes like Henry VIII in a group chat with all his ex-wives.

Me and Marcus take seats at the back of the class, and Mr Benjamin hands us all a blank sheet of paper and a pen. He starts pacing around at the front of the classroom.

‘Detention is a time of reflection, or at least it should be. So I’m asking you to reflect, write down where you

see yourselves in five years.' I roll my eyes as far back as they can go and Marcus snorts. Bruh, I hate that question. I'm in the here and now, fam. Top dog like an alpha wolf. Who cares about stuff that ain't even happened yet? The only future I wanna know is what Mum and Nanna are making me for dinner tonight. If it don't bang, I'm going rogue like a stray eyebrow hair that you can't stop staring at.

After ten minutes of me not writing anything, Mr Benjamin narrows his eyes, and so I write down that in five years' time I see myself as taller. I almost put down 'definitely not a teacher', but my Uncle Fred is a teacher, and it doesn't feel fair to him. And a lot of the teachers in this school are harmless, it's only Mr Benjamin who makes me feel like I'd rather lick a cheese grater than be in his lessons. So instead I write that I always had dreams of being a gardener: roses, palm trees, dem ting there. Aloe vera. Now I'm just listing plants even though I've never picked up a shovel in my life.

When I look over, I see Marcus has written serious answers. Talking about how he wants to go to uni, graduate in graphic design, become an animator and that. Like what is he thinking? This guy watches too much anime, it's putting ideas in his head. When he catches me looking, Marcus covers his paper with his elbow like we're in an exam.

'Maybe you could draw a series about a guy called Marcus whose mum doesn't parr him off whenever she calls,' I say, grinning.

'Allow me,' he says, and shifts to cover up even more of his answers.

When Mr Benjamin comes over to pick up our papers, he pauses as he reads mine. Then he scowls and folds it up into his pocket. My eyes follow him back to his desk. I know what he's gonna say before he says it. Please don't call my mum. Don't do it, you wasteman, don't call her, don't do me like that.

'I'm sure your mother will be very interested to know how productive you've been today.' He sneers. I knew he'd say it. Still, it proper makes me tense up. I can't show him that though.

'Do you, innit.' I kiss my teeth at him and get up, throw my things in my bag and walk out of the classroom.

When I get home, I hang out downstairs by the bins outside my block for a while. I don't wanna go inside just yet. I know Mum'll be stressing.

When I can't stay out any longer, I take a deep breath and finally head up. The lights in the lift flicker like it's haunted, but we're used to it by now. The lift is out of action every few weeks, and then we have to walk up four flights of stairs. The lady next door with the pushchair

always asks me for help, which I do sometimes. Other times I'm not feeling it, so I wait for her to go inside without me. It's character-building.

When I get to my front door I take a deep breath, take my keys out and head inside. I can hear Mum playing Celine Dion, that's the white side of her family escaping from her soul. What will the neighbours think? I'll have to play loud drill music later to even things out.

Once I'm in yard, I'm sneaking down the hallway when her head pops round the kitchen door. Swear this woman's got a sixth sense. She's got those yellow cleaning gloves on and she's wearing the joke apron I got her for Christmas. It says, 'Fry me to the moon', and it's got a picture of an egg on the moon. It was funny at the time. Not so much now when her face looks like that.

'Anything you want to tell me?' she asks.

I know that she knows that I got in trouble again, it's almost like she wants me to lie to her.

'No, I'm good. Why? What's up?' My acting is *EastEnders* levels of terrible.

'You really want to play this game?' she huffs.

'What game?' I can't stop it at this point. Even if I wanted to, something in me tells me to see it through. Mum pulls her gloves off and puts her hands on her hips. Battle stations ready. I guess we're doing this.

'Anton, I can't keep having this conversation over and

over again. Mr Benjamin called and told me exactly what happened.’ Of course he did. That guy would snake out his own mother for a tin of beans. ‘Detention. Again. For fighting. And why do I have to hear it from a teacher? You’ve got a phone, why didn’t you just ring and tell me?’ Yo, she is spewing, spitting embers like Pompeii, fam. I just have to grit my teeth and wait for it to be done with. ‘When are you going to start taking responsibility for yourself? Did I raise you to be disrespectful?’

‘No, Mum.’ I tell her what she wants to hear.

‘And did I raise you to be a liar?’ Her voice is getting higher.

‘No, Mum.’

‘And surprise, surprise, I then have to find out your friend Kehinde was involved.’ I automatically roll my eyes, I can’t help it, she always goes there. ‘You can roll your eyes all you want, Anton, that boy drags you around by the skin of your nose.’ This is when I get defensive, when she acts like I’m his sheepdog or something, like I’m not my own person.

‘Kehinde wasn’t even in the classroom with Mr Benjamin when I got in trouble.’ Now *my* voice is getting high-pitched.

‘Great. So he gets you in trouble and doesn’t even turn up to face the consequences. That’s the type of person you want to be around, is it?’

I shouldn't have said anything. I get out a feeble, 'You don't know what you're talking about,' but we both know she just bodied me with my own words. Let's just skip to the part where she gives me my punishment; hopefully she's too busy with work to follow through with it anyway. Mum's been working on this big project, some women's shelter or charity or summin, I dunno.

After a tense stand-off, her hands drop by her sides. 'No internet for a week.'

My jaw clenches and my hands ball into fists. *Don't answer back, don't answer back . . .* Last time I tried to argue, she upped it to two weeks, and changed the Wi-Fi password to 'AntonLuvsMummyWummy123'. She proper mocked it, the numbers were so unnecessary. She blocks my data allowance too. My phone is on a rolling contract, so she just calls them up and caps the internet. Swear down, she might be small, but my mum can be an evil genius sometimes. 'And you're taking your grandmother to the hospital tomorrow.'

'Allow me, tomorrow's Saturday, I got plans.' I'm meant to be meeting the boys for a park sesh, we're going Telegraph Hill. Besides, I've taken Nanna to the hospital loads recently. She keeps needing appointments because she's complaining that she gets dizzy very easily and has stomach issues. The stomach issues I can vouch for – you can tell when Nanna's been in the toilet

because she leaves remnants of her soul in there. She don't need a doctor, she needs a priest to exorcise the bathroom demons when she's done.

'You're taking her, and that's final. Now go and wash up before tea.' Wash up? Does she think I'm a scullery maid? I didn't know I was living in *Downton Abbey*. Mum goes back to cleaning the kitchen so I slink off to my room, avoiding the bathroom on the way. Before I even get there, my phone buzzes.

Kehinde

Yo, fam. You chillin tomorrow? Parklife

I start typing out my response.

Me

Got summin with my nan but finna to ditch her and just come out

Before I can hit send, though, I see the internet bars disappear. She's changed the password already. I bite my bottom lip in frustration and stomp into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me as hard as I can. The noise echoes through the flat. From the kitchen I hear Mum's voice call out, 'That's one month no internet.'



On the bus with Nanna the next day, my phone keeps pinging with messages from Kehinde.

Why you text messaging like an old man?

Mum capped my data and changed the wifi pword on some human rights vio

Don't even get me started

Lol you send out

When you coming park?

Not sure yet

Taking my nan to hospital

Bun that dusty yoot

She's grown, she can
take care of herself

Come park

I'll see you in a bit

This guy has no chill. He is sort of right though – she don't need me with her the whole time. But even if this is long, I do rate Nanna. When my dad went inside, Mum started uni less than a month later, so Nanna was looking after me most nights, and she moved in properly when Mum went into her second year. It's been the three of us ever since.

I lock my phone and stuff it in my pocket. It carries on vibrating, so I pull it out to see what else he has to say. But just then Nanna taps my hand excitedly. 'I love these little excursions. You know, when I was a girl, and my grandpa would take me to church, he'd always hold my hand for the entire journey. I wore my favourite white dress. It had little purple flowers that I'd sewn on myself.'

'Cool.' I usually love hearing her stories, but right now they're just a reminder that I'm stuck here while the mandem are waiting for me in the park.

'It *was* cool,' Nanna says, as she glances at my phone. 'Stop pretending like you've got friends,' she says. Then something hits my senses, a stench that only Nanna's cabbage stomach could achieve. Pungent, evil, like fermented sins. Her eyes gleam when she clocks I've smelt it. Before I can call her out on it, she loudly says, 'And stop farting like that in public, there's other people on this bus.' She's loud enough for everyone around us to hear. Then she leans over and mutters, 'You can put that away now, you cheeky bum.'

I'm cringing so hard. She did not just do that. Tucking my nose and mouth into my T-shirt, I dare someone to look at me. I slide my phone into my pocket and sink low into my chair.

'Sorry, did I embarrass you, sweetie? Farting is perfectly natural. A little toot here and there never hurt anyone.' Tell that to the inside of my nose. Breathing in her ancient particles like we just opened a pharaoh's tomb. She's bare enjoying herself now. Checking her nails like she's so proud, while I'm dying on the inside. Swear down, if she wasn't my nan I would've yeeted her out the window.

Luckily it's our stop next. When we get off the bus at

London Bridge, Guy's Hospital is right there, but it still takes us ten minutes to do a two-minute journey because of Nanna's hobbling. Some people are screw facing as they overtake us on the pavement. Even though I feel their pain, I do find myself screwing them back. For real though, this woman's so slow she's got all the urgency of a dead leaf falling from a tree. I've seen houseplants grow at a faster pace than she walks.

Once we finally get to the hospital, I navigate us to the waiting room, and time slows down even more. My phone is buzzing away in my pocket, all messages from Kehinde, but I'm so agitated from waiting that I can't even be bothered to reply. The room is packed out – it looks like there's only one doctor for all these people – and the man next to me keeps coughing and spluttering like an old lawnmower. I cover my mouth with my sleeve, and look over at Nanna. She's sitting uncomfortably, bare leaning forward. She don't care too much though; she's happily fixated on a TV in the corner that's playing one of her awful shows. Ironically, it looks like it's set in a hospital. And it is dreadful. When the episode ends, and another starts, I kiss my teeth loudly and throw my head back.

'Nanna, you don't need me here, do you?' I try to say it gently. She frowns but doesn't take her eyes off the screen. 'If you give me your phone, I can schedule an

Uber to come pick you up in an hour.'

'Why on earth would I pay all that money for a taxi when I have a Freedom Pass?' She turns her attention to me, raising her eyebrow. 'Wait. You're not trying to ditch your poor old grandmother, are you?'

'No. Well, yeah. My boys are at the park and we might have a kickabout,' I tell her. 'I would invite you, but you ain't a baller like that. You're too much of a liability on corner kicks. If I cross it in, I know you're not an aerial threat.'

'Huh,' she huffs. 'I'll have you know I was the under-sixteens captain back in my day. I was known for my headers. I could leap higher and had a stronger neck than you and any of your gang ever could. In my prime you wouldn't have stood a chance.'

'So can I go?' I grab my hoodie from the chair beside me.

'No.' She goes back to looking at the TV. 'I need you to take me home after. You know the bus schedules confuse me.'

I slump back into my seat and scroll through old videos. There's one where Marcus keeps fake coughing to cover up the sound of his fart, but the cough is always a split second too late.

After a million years we're finally called in to see the doctor. Doctor Alice has got bags under her eyes, she looks like she ain't slept in three months and her hair is

all ratty with sweat. But when she sees Nanna, she has a huge smile on her face.

'My favourite patient! How was the journey in? Everything OK?'

No, I want to say. It was about as OK as having a stone in your shoe. And then having your shoe robbed at gunpoint.

The doctor gets her to lie down and starts gently pressing different parts of Nanna's stomach, saying stuff like, 'Yes, that does look sore, there's still some swelling.' Nanna giggles at the more tickly part, and they both laugh softly. Doctor Alice says it's likely a digestive issue, maybe a bug, which would explain the nausea. Nanna's farts explain my nausea. 'I'm a little concerned your body hasn't fought it off by now, but that's not completely uncommon for someone your age.' Cool, if it's not uncommon then we can dip now, go live our lives. Me in the park, Nanna in front of the TV getting the answers wrong to *Countdown*. She has a pen and paper while she watches, there's no excuse.

'Ah, I'm getting old.' Nanna sighs and then grins. 'Seventy-nine, and I don't look a day above twenty.' Lol, yeah right. I'm just picturing Nanna putting 'twenty years old' in a dating profile and then hobbling off to a minigolf date with her teeth in her pocket. Doctor Alice bare plays along with her though.

'You're still a spring chicken, and once we figure out the source of the pain, you'll be as spry as ever. I'm going to book you an MRI, looking for any abnormalities we might've missed, just to be safe. Depending on availability, it might be a few weeks away, but I'll redo a prescription for those stronger painkillers in the meantime.' Doctors be doctoring. I could do with some of those painkillers too, for the journey back.

I try to ignore my phone urgently buzzing away in my pocket. It's bad enough that I'm sitting here in some dingy hospital. Allow coming back in a few weeks, Mum can do the MRI trip. We thank the doctor and head back out into the waiting room. I try to not make eye contact with the sick people we're passing, the hospital corridors more clinical than an Mbappe penalty.

In the lift, I check my phone. Three missed calls and seven text messages. The most recent ones are from Kehinde.

Yo, wasteman, you still on granny daycare duty?

It's a proper motive out here, Caleb brought his speakers and we just seen some galdem preeing us

Bell me

Alright, he's probably lying about the galdem, this is Kehinde. But what if he's not? Girls and music. You know what, bun this. Park sesh is calling. I can't help ignoring Nanna all the way to the bus stop. She's still chattering along, talking about why Morrisons sometimes have better deals on certain days, stuff that is so insignificant to my entire life. OK, this is it, Anton, her bus is approaching. I ignore her squinting at the route number above the driver.

'Hey, Nanna, this is you. Imma get the 343 to go chill with the mandem.' The more casual I sound, the less she can moan.

If she's disappointed, she does a good job of not showing it. Hopefully I can trust her not to G me up to Mum that I didn't take her home.

'OK, poppet.' She bites her lip. 'And where do I get off?'

'Southampton Way. Press the bell when you see the Morley's. And try not to rob any banks or start a riot or anything,' I tell her.

'No promises.' She half chuckles and nervously shuffles forward as her bus pulls up. Then she quickly turns to me and reaches into her bag, pulling out her purse.

'Oh, I almost forgot.' She takes out a ten-pound note and shoves it into my hand. I stare at it for a couple seconds and then quickly put it in my pocket. As a stranger helps her on, I whip out my phone to text Kehinde.

OMW, don't ever say
I dont come thru

There they are, sitting on the wall just outside the football cage, dressed all in black like it's our uniform outside of school. They were easy to find, I just had to follow the loud music playing from Caleb's speakers. His hair is growing out again; he's been begging his sister's friend to do his braids because she's the only one he trusts. Kehinde keeps his short and clean, man's not changed his style in years. It's funny, coz Kehinde has a twin, Taiwo, who lives with their mum now and has a giant afro. We've learned not to ask Kehinde about his family, he pretty much acts like they don't exist.

'Yo, there he is.' Kehinde grins up at me as I stroll over. I'm looking around and there's not a single girl in sight. I knew it. I had hope that he wasn't lying, but deep down I knew the truth. Oh well. I shake it off as he reaches out for our signature fist-bump. See, this is the side of him that Mum never gets to see. 'You finally ditched your nan, huh.' He nods in appreciation.

'Yeah, don't even get me started,' I reply. 'That was so long, man, she's so frustrating.' The £10 note in my pocket burns with guilt, but the feeling doesn't last long. In my defence, a chicken drumstick could cross the road faster than her, *and* I proved that she could do the journey without me. No regrets.

'Is she alright though?' Marcus asks, barely looking up from his phone.

Kehinde snorts. 'Why, you want her number? She's too old for you.'

'Yeah, she's aite, still,' I reply to Marcus. I take a seat, careful not to step on Caleb's new trainers. 'Man with the fresh creps.' I nod down at them.

'Dun know.' He beams with pride. A parent couldn't love their baby as much as Caleb loves his shoe collection.

'What if I did this?' Kehinde pretends like he's about to pour his Ribena on them, and Caleb instinctively jumps up out the way. He's half laughing, but you can still see the fear on his face. Kehinde laughs and I join in.

'Nah, you play too much.' Caleb admires his babies, making sure they're still spotless. 'You can't mess with a man's trainers like that. What's it called when you're allowed to hang people for really bad crimes?'

'Capital punishment,' I tell him. Man pays attention in history. Low key, the teacher catches me sometimes and I have to look away. But yeah, history is kinda lit;

the Romans were on a wild one, still. Shout-out *Gladiator*.

‘P,’ Marcus says. We all turn to him expectantly. He shrugs, confused that we’re confused. ‘The capital of punishment is a capital P,’ he explains.

There’s a couple seconds before we start screaming with laughter. Kehinde snorts and coughs up his drink at the stupidity. Caleb takes a big leap back to avoid the splatter.

‘You’re bare dumb, bruv.’ Kehinde’s still choking. ‘Man said “P”.’

We’re all mocking Marcus, who pulls his hat down in embarrassment.

‘Whatever, fam, it wasn’t that funny.’ He goes back to his phone.

‘Funny with a capital F?’ I ask, and we all start laughing again. This is almost as bad as the time he tried to spell ‘onion’ with a U. We carry on kicking it for a bit, Kehinde DJing off Caleb’s phone, ignoring the people shooting us looks for playing music so loud.

Caleb requests a song, he’s loving Ghetts, who he says is a distant cousin or summin. Kehinde pretends to queue it, I can see the screen. Three songs later, Caleb’s still pestering for his track. Kehinde’s ignoring him though. He’s got his eye on the yoots playing football in the cage, and after watching for a while he goes over with Caleb.

'Yo, it's us two versus the rest.' Kehinde just walks in and picks up the ball, bare confident. Lol this guy don't even care that they were in the middle of a game. As soon as they start, these two are unstoppable. They're skilling everyone up, the ball glued to their feet. Caleb gets a couple of goals in and me and Marcus make noise, proper hyping him up. Some of the other kids are confident enough to try to tackle him, but he barges them out the way pretty easily. Nanna would've never stood a chance.

Kehinde does a lot less running, he ain't on that vibe, he's just an antagonist. When Caleb flattens one guy against the wall of the cage who calls for a foul, Kehinde tells the kid to, 'Hit the gym, bruv.'

Only when Caleb's pretty much floored or scared the other team away, Kehinde bursts forward and smashes the ball into an open net. 'That's five-nil,' he calls out, high-fiving Caleb.

'Actually it's only three-nil.' one of the kids on the other team corrects him. Big mistake.

'What did you just say to me?' Here we go.

'It's three-nil,' the kid repeats.

'Are you calling me a liar?'

Me and Marcus stand up, ready to jump in. We recognise that look in Kehinde's eyes, when his bottom jaw clenches like that. Caleb is already having trouble

holding him back. The kid has a death wish though. Anyone else would drop it and apologise.

'I'm not saying you're a liar, I don't know you well enough. I'm just saying you're misinformed.' Too late, the damage is done. He shouldn't have answered back. Kehinde sidesteps Caleb and fake lunges.

'Caleb, I beg you put hands on this yoot. You don't wanna see what happens if I catch him,' Kehinde says.

Caleb does as he says, holding Kehinde off with one hand and clawing at the guy's T-shirt with the other. The kid manages to tear free. T-shirt torn, and shaking with adrenaline, he sprints for the fence and leaps over like a gazelle. You can see it in his face, his life just flashed in front of his eyes, bare trembling like he's about to cry.

'Come back and say that again if you're brave,' Kehinde shouts after him.

'I'm not that brave,' the kid squeals back, making us chuckle. All the others just stand there, staring awkwardly. Soft yoots, they didn't even try to stop their friend getting haved up. No loyalty, fam, that's the difference between us and them. Kehinde's always got our backs, and we're in his corner.

We go back to the bench with our speaker, and Kehinde eventually joins us, sitting down in a huff. He got called out and still didn't lay a glove. The opportunity's

in the wind now, boy. He's tenacious though, I rate that. No nonsense, fam. Tap water, no ice.

We spend the rest of the afternoon chilling off, playing music and watching Kehinde's favourite podcast on his phone. This one's about power and money, and how the trick is to always stay free and back yourself, no matter what, because no one else will. The hosts show us all their lambos and mansions, so they must be doing something right. After a while, they start listing things girls do on a first date that's unattractive, like when they talk about themselves or try to correct you on stuff. Kehinde's nodding along and agreeing, even though we all know he's swerving reality. He's never been on an actual date.

It's only when it gets to around 7.30 p.m. and Kehinde starts getting hungry that everyone starts thinking about making a move. Mum hasn't messaged me yet, which means Nanna hasn't sold me out for ditching her at the bus stop, so I'm not too worried. We walk down the hill towards the main road, and split off to head home.

Mum's still working when I get back, even though it's a Saturday. She's got all these sheets laid out in front of her talking about some place called St Luke's. This is how boring her job is, she's a 'project manager'. Two words that combine into something even more dull, like 'Architectural Digest' or 'Clapham Common' or 'Dairy Free'. St Luke's must be her latest project, that run-down

community centre that she's turning into a women's refuge or summin. She asks my opinion on it, tryna bring me in while I sort myself some Ribena in the kitchen. I just give her air-time, hammer-time, time-square, bruv, there ain't no multiverse crossover where I care about something like that. I do want new Jordans though, so I might show a little interest tomorrow.