

KOFI

and the Rap Battle Summer

*For all the children who gave me feedback
on my first draft. Thank you!*

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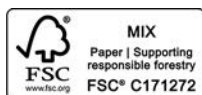
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KOFI

and the Rap Battle Summer

A series of four black musical notes are scattered around the author's name, with one on the left, one on the right, and two below the name.

JEFFREY BOAKYE

Illustrated by Beth Suzanna

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Don't Forget the Chicken

‘Get the remote.’

Kofi and Gloria were the only two bodies in the front room. Well, it wasn't really a proper front room. They didn't live in a house. They lived in a flat on the fifth floor. But they had always called it the front room because that's what Mum and Dad called it.

Gloria was thirteen. She was the older of the two, sitting curled up on the sofa, legs tucked up under her. She was eating a slice of toast that had been buttered all the way to the sides and toasted perfectly, the way that

Kofi liked but could never get right under the grill. He always got sidetracked and looked away for too long, so it would burn. Every time.

Kofi was lying upside down in the big chair, head lolling off the edge, watching the telly upside down. If he knew anything at all about human biology, he knew that the blood had been rushing into his head for the past fifteen minutes and he'd probably get a nosebleed if he got up too quickly. He got nosebleeds a lot.

'Get the remote,' Gloria repeated.

Kofi looked at his sister.

'What did your last slave die of?'

'Not getting me the remote. Go get it.'

The remote sat quietly in the middle of the glass coffee table. It didn't dare say a word. Kofi patted his pockets.

'Hang on, I might have a spare one here somewhere...'

Gloria chucked a cushion at him before he could put his hand in his pocket and pull out his middle finger.

'Fine. But how about I just tell Mum and Dad that you got suspended from school again? I'm sure that'll go down well.'

Kofi slid on to the floor, sprang to his feet and grabbed the remote in one swift, panicky action.

'All right, all right! Just messing.'

She reached for it with one of her *ha-I-told-you-so*

smiles. Kofi couldn't resist. He yanked the remote out of her reach. Gloria's eyes narrowed.

'Give it. Now.'

Kofi held it up high. He wasn't yet twelve but was already starting to get taller than his sister. The next bit happened quickly. She lunged and he sprang back. Then he tripped backwards and kicked her by accident. She punched him on purpose and her side plate fell underneath his left foot. He slipped on it and fell with a crash on to the side of the table. It was one of those ones with a thick glass top that just sits on a base, not screwed in or anything. Time froze as one side of the tabletop lifted up like a see-saw. Gloria's mouth formed a perfect O, then she squeezed her eyes shut waiting for the smash. Kofi had pushed the channel down and volume up buttons by accident and the TV flicked over to ITV. *Gladiators* had just started. Gloria screamed. Kofi yelped. The table went crash. John Fashanu shouted '*Awooga!*' Then Emmanuel walked in.

'What are you two *doing* in here, man?'

Emmanuel was seventeen. He was tall and serious and worked really hard and spent most of his time trying to ignore his annoying little siblings. Today, he'd spent the afternoon working at the second-hand furniture shop and was now buried in his textbooks. He was studying

biology, maths and chemistry – Emmanuel was going to be a doctor. That was the plan.

Gloria opened her eyes slowly with her teeth still clenched. The telly was blaring away while images of muscle-bound men in tiny outfits flashed up one after the other. *Jet. Trojan. Lightning. Shadow.* Shadow was Kofi's favourite. He was the only black gladiator and he had bulging triceps. His complexion was dark, like Dad's, and he would stare people out in the duel, like Mum. He never lost a duel.

'Hey,' began Gloria, looking distractedly at the TV. 'Do you think they call him Shadow because he's black?'

Kofi got up, pinching his nose.

'Oh my god, that must be true—'

'Guys!' Emmanuel interrupted. 'Look at the table!'

His long finger pointed at a huge crack that ran along one side of the glass surface. At the exact same moment, all three heads spun round at the buzz of the intercom and unmistakable click-clack of keys in the ground-floor door. Mum always buzzed ahead so they would open up when she got to their floor. She was home. Three pairs of eyes widened as everyone suddenly remembered what they'd all forgotten. The chicken!

'Don't forget to take the chicken out of the freezer and

defrost it ready for dinner.' Mum's voice played out in their heads.

'*Contenders, ready!*' Another click on the lock. '*Gladiators, ready!*' The jangle of keys through static. '*Three! Two! One! Go!*'

'Kitchen!' shouted Kofi.

The thing about spending your whole life being energetic and excitable is that you get very good at coming up with last-minute plans to get yourself out of trouble. This is why Kofi immediately ran to the kitchen and yanked the frozen chicken pieces out of the freezer, stuck together in one formidable block, before turning on the hot tap full blast and running off to the bathroom.

The thing about spending your whole life being the middle child is that you end up being the cleverest one in your family and correcting the mistakes of your idiot little brother. This is why Gloria immediately flicked on the kettle to get some water on the boil.

The thing about being the eldest is that you know exactly what will and won't make your parents explode with anger or collapse with helplessness because you've grown up seeing them with babies and toddlers running around trashing the place. This is why Emmanuel stood there looking alternately between the cracked table, the crumb-laden side plate and the slab of frozen

chicken pieces, mentally working out how much trouble everyone was going to be in and for how long.

Kofi emerged with a can of deodorant and grabbed a cheap plastic lighter from a drawer next to the cooker.

‘The lift is still broken so we’ve got a couple of minutes. Mrs Weaver is at home so she might catch Mum on the way up.’

The kettle bubbled and Kofi flicked on the lighter.

‘Kofi, what are you—’

He didn’t give Gloria a chance to finish.

‘Stand back.’

Holding the lighter at arm’s length, he aimed it and the deodorant at the floor and sprayed it fully into the little lighter’s wobbling yellow flame.

WHOOOSH!

A rush of fire roared forward, making Emmanuel shield his eyes.

‘The fire alarm!’ he protested.

‘Don’t worry!’ called Kofi over the flames. ‘I took the batteries out yesterday to put in my Game Boy!’

‘Stop! That’s enough!’

Gloria waved an arm at her brother and knelt forward to see. Miraculously, Kofi’s plan had kind of, sort of worked. The chicken pieces were starting to separate and almost all of the visible frost on top was gone.

‘Sink.’

She hoisted the slab upwards and tossed it into the sink before emptying the kettle of water on top.

‘Kofi, give it some more fire. Emmanuel, go lock the door.’

Neither boy argued. Emmanuel returned to find Gloria rummaging around in a side cupboard looking for a tablecloth. She found one and threw it to Emmanuel, who draped it gracefully over the coffee table.

‘All right, everyone, look natural!’ he hissed.

The trio flung themselves on to the sofas just as the rattling of keys in a lock could be heard.

The door opened. Everyone kept their eyes on the screen.

‘Yo.’

They looked up. The man standing in the front-room doorway had dreadlocks, a big grin, and was definitely not Mum. Neither was the young woman standing next to him, who was wearing, Emmanuel noticed, a very short skirt.

Emmanuel jumped to his feet.

‘Uncle Delroy?’



The Return of Uncle Delroy

Uncle Delroy was Mum's brother. He was older than her but seemed younger and had the exact same flash of mischief in his smile that Kofi wore most days. The one that made some teachers hesitate whenever they saw him coming.

Emmanuel could remember his uncle from when he was young. He had fond, hazy memories of being scooped up and swung around, and one time being allowed to sit next to him in the passenger seat of a flashy car. Mum had often talked about 'Uncle D' but

Gloria and Kofi had only seen him a few times. Still grinning, he let a heavy duffel bag drop to the floor with a thud and outspread his muscular arms.

‘Manny! Look how *lanky* you got, man! Come here!’

Before Emmanuel had the chance to answer, Uncle D grabbed him in a big, swaying bear hug.

‘Jeanette, this is my little nephew Emmanuel. But you can call him Manny,’ he continued, slapping his nephew hard on the shoulder. The woman beamed a broad smile that suddenly made Emmanuel very interested in his own feet.

‘*Little?*’ She raised a hand to head height as if measuring him up.

Gloria and Kofi raised their eyebrows at each other. Uncle D turned his attention their way.

‘And you two must be Gloria and Kofi, yeah? I haven’t seen you in *time!*’

‘Is that real gold?’ Kofi was pointing at the bracelets and thick gold links around Uncle D’s neck. Gloria gave him a look.

‘Sorry, we can’t turn his stupid switch off.’

Jeanette laughed long and loud and snorted through her nose. Gloria instantly decided that she liked her.

‘I’m Jeanette,’ she said. ‘Your uncle’s girlfriend.’

I haven't missed *Gladiators*, have I? I watch it every week.'

She threw her head down and up, flicking her long hair forward and back, before sticking out her chest and posing with both hands high on her hips. Kofi thought Emmanuel's eyes might pop out of his head.

'Jet!' Jeanette announced, mimicking the brown-haired gladiator. 'Mind if I?'

She plopped down on to the three-seater sofa in between the two bewildered children, picking up the remote and putting the volume up. Uncle D fell into one of the single-seaters like a man who had just completed a long journey. He sniffed the air.

'You been barbecuing flowers in here?' he asked no one in particular.

'Um, yeah. I mean, no,' sputtered Emmanuel. 'Uncle, Mum didn't say you were coming tonight.'

'Nah, I didn't tell her,' Uncle D casually replied.

'Delroy!'

Two voices spoke at the same time: Jeanette, who couldn't believe Delroy had turned up unannounced, and Mum, who had just appeared at the door. The two women looked at each other and did that thing when two people completely size each other up in a fraction of a second. An instant later, Mum smiled warmly. She

naturally liked people and Kofi could tell that she didn't have her guard up. But he felt himself sit up straighter anyway. Mum didn't mess about.

'What are you doing here?' she said softly, not so much an accusation, gliding forward to embrace her brother. Then, looking at each of her children in turn: 'And what happened to the table?'

Then she sniffed the air.

Years of experience told Gloria and Emmanuel what to do next. They both pointed straight at Kofi.

'He did it.'

Delroy whistled and laughed.

'You lot are cold.'

*

Kofi spent the next half hour getting in the way, trying to watch *Gladiators*, being told what to do, and counting how many times Emmanuel stole a glance at Jeanette. He was on sixteen by the time Mum asked him and Gloria to set the table for dinner. Gloria leaned in like a conspirator as they took plates and cutlery out of the cupboard and drawers.

'OK, so it sounds like Uncle D got evicted from his flat after getting in trouble with his landlord.

Something about an argument over heating and repairs or something. He was sticking up for everyone and it went a bit far. He and Jeanette are going to stay with us until they can get back on their feet. He's got a big job coming up so he can pay a bit of rent. Dad doesn't know any of this yet, but I think Uncle D helped them out back in the day. Turns out he's had a key for years.'

Kofi briefly turned his attention away from the direction of the telly.

'D'you think he'll let me borrow one of his gold chains?'

Gloria looked at her brother, sighed, and walked off with a clattering stack of plates.