



“HEY, Chewbacca! How do you say ‘loser’ in Wookiee?”

Don’t look, Theo told himself. Don’t look! No good can come from looking.

He didn’t look. Instead, he focused his attention on Danbury Heights’ gum-chewing Number 8. The guard was dribbling the ball down court and holding up three fingers so his teammates knew which play to run. Number 8 looked so confident. Even the way he chewed his gum was confident, as if he was absolutely sure that the play would work and he was already seeing the two points up on the scoreboard.

Where did a thirteen-year-old get that kind of confidence? Theo wondered jealously. The only thing Theo felt confident about was . . . Nope, he couldn’t think of anything.

“Looks like we finally found Bigfoot!” another Danbury Heights fan yelled. “Hey, Bigfoot, where ya been hiding all these years?”

A few kids liked that and started chanting, “Bigfoot! Bigfoot! Bigfoot!”

Don't look! Theo scolded himself again.

"Stop calling him Bigfoot!" a girl hollered. Grateful, Theo almost looked to see who his defender was. Until she laughed wickedly and said, "He prefers to be called by his proper name: Sasquatch!"

Theo could hear their harsh laughter as clearly as if he were sitting on the bleachers next to them.

But he wasn't on the bleachers, he was moving backward into the paint, keeping his arm bar pressed against the back of Danbury Heights' beefy center, Number 5, who clearly had eaten a spicy burrito before the game. He kept belching, and the smell reminded Theo of the outhouse he'd used at camp.

Mr. Mandrake, the Orangetree Middle School coach, had taught his players to keep an arm bar on the opponent's lower back. But Theo was five inches taller than the boy he was guarding. (In fact, he was taller than everyone else on the court, including the referees.) Unless he dropped to his knees, the lowest Theo could get his arm bar was on the kid's shoulder blades.

The game against Danbury Heights had just started twenty seconds ago and Theo was already sweating. Not from the exercise. So far all he'd done was move down the court. But the effort it took for him not to look over at the bleachers where his tormentors were whooping and yelling insults at him was exhausting. He'd rather run wind sprints. And wind sprints usually made him vomit.

Coach Mandrake had warned him this might happen.

“Theo, listen to me,” he’d said, stroking his little hamster-like goatee as usual. Since that was the only hair on his entire head (except for his eyebrows), he seemed like he was always checking on it to make sure it was still there. “When those boys first see your height, they’re going to be scared. And when kids are scared of something, they make fun of it. Don’t let it get to you.”

Here’s what the coach meant:

Theo had grown six inches over the summer.

Six inches!

By August, he was taller than his dad, and his dad was a cop. When Theo had returned to school in the fall, he’d had to duck to enter the boys’ bathroom. The urinal seemed so far away he felt like a long-distance sniper when using it. Most of the kids (and even the teachers) at school had been cool about his growth spurt, making dumb jokes about “the weather up there” and “have you seen Jack’s beanstalk?” Lame stuff like that. A couple juniors from the high school had asked if he would buy beer for them. Some of his friends had tried to convince him to get them into an R-rated movie starring Seth Rogen and Jonah Hill. He’d said no to both and, thankfully, no one held it against him. It wasn’t like Theo was suddenly popular, but he was getting noticed. A few students he didn’t even know now nodded at him on the way to classes. Truthfully, after three years of invisibility at middle school, it felt kind of good.

“Bigfoot! Bigfoot! Bigfoot!” the chanting continued.

“Don’t let him near the Empire State Building!” a boy shouted.

No one laughed. The chanting stopped.

“’Cuz he’s King Kong!” the boy explained.

Then they laughed, though it sounded kind of forced. Theo figured that if they had to start explaining their jokes, maybe they were running out of giant things to compare him to. He started to make a mental list of what might come next: Statue of Liberty, Godzilla, Jolly Green Giant . . .

Focus on the game, he reminded himself.

He leaned into Number 5. Number 5 pushed back, moving him a few inches. Theo might have been taller, but Burrito Breath outweighed him by twenty pounds. When you distributed Theo’s weight over six feet and four inches, you were left with a long, skinny stick figure of a kid. His legs had grown so suddenly that he felt a little wobbly on them, like he was walking on shaky stilts.

Number 8 chest-passed the ball to the bulky kid, who was growing a fuzzy mustache that looked like foot fungus. Fuzzy Mustache bounce-passed it to a short kid with spiked blond hair. Spiked Hair dribbled between his legs a few times, which caused the gang on the bleachers to yelp and whoop appreciation. Theo realized that most of the yelling was coming from the visitors’ side. This was a home game, but hardly anyone from school was here. The only cheering on the home side came from a few scattered

parents desperately trying to make up for the lack of supporters.

Theo suspected the bleachers were nearly empty because the basketball team was the worst sports team at Orangetree. The football team, the volleyball team, even the lacrosse team had huge trophies in the glass case near the school's entrance. But the basketball team had won nothing in the past four years. Most kids didn't even know the school *had* a basketball team. Theo hadn't known until Coach Mandrake had cornered him on the first day of school and said, "Boy, you did some serious growing over the summer. We're going to have to have us a talk."

They'd talked. And here he was. Panicky. Gawky. His throat so dry it scratched when he swallowed.

Spiked Hair passed the ball to Burrito Breath, Theo's guy. Theo stretched out his long arms and flapped them like bird wings. Up, down, to the left, to the right. Don't let him shoot, Theo chanted in his mind. Don't let the first points of the game be scored off you.

Burrito Breath dribbled left. Theo stayed with him. Burrito Breath dribbled right. Theo waved his arms, blocking any possible shot.

"Hey, freak, loved you in *Avatar*!" a bleacher kid yelled. Don't look. Focus on the ball.

"But I preferred the *blue* skin!"

That got some oooooohhs from the crowd, as if they were saying, "Oh no, he didn't go there." Theo was one of

a dozen black kids in the school. There were a lot more Asians and Hispanics than African Americans. The color of his skin had never been an issue at school. Sometimes a kid would say something stupid, not even knowing he or she was being offensive, so Theo didn't take offense. But there had been a few times—in the city, among strangers—when he'd overheard remarks that definitely were meant to be racist.

Theo felt his skin burn. Don't look! Don'tlookdon'tlook don't . . .

He looked.

Saw their smirking faces.

That's all it took. . . .

Burrito Breath faked a pass to the left. Theo quickly slid over to block it. Burrito Breath spun to the right, leaped up, and tossed in an easy scoop shot.

The scoreboard flashed the two points in red.

Burrito Breath turned to Theo and said, "All day long, dude." Then he ran over and high-fived Number 8. Theo heard him laugh and say, "He's nothing. Just tall. No skills."

After that, things got even worse.

Yeah, you heard right.



“THANKS for losing us the game, *Bigfoot*,” Roger McDonald snarled as the Ravens filed out of the gym toward the locker room. He angrily smacked the metal water fountain as he passed it.

“You blew it, Rollins,” Sinjin James agreed. He smacked the water fountain, too. Clearly, they wished that the fountain were Theo’s head.

Theo didn’t say anything. Roger and Sinjin weren’t wrong.

No one else said anything. Theo couldn’t decide which was worse, Roger’s and Sinjin’s angry insults or knowing the rest of the players were all thinking the same thing.

“Team meeting,” Coach Mandrake announced, hurrying past the boys into the locker room. “Right now. Let’s go, boys. Hustle, hustle, hustle.”

Great, Theo thought. Team meeting. More insults. More humiliation.

Theo looked over his shoulder back into the gym. He was at least a head taller than the rest of the team, so his gaze skimmed over the tops of their shiny, sweaty heads.

The Danbury Heights players were high-fiving, hugging their parents, and laughing at something their coach was saying. Theo's teammates marched with heads hung down like handcuffed convicts shuffling back from the sunny exercise yard into their dark cells.

He saw Burrito Breath pointing at him, then whispering to his pal, Number 8. They both laughed. Burrito Breath laughed so hard he started coughing.

Behind them, up in the bleachers, Theo saw the girl who'd called him Sasquatch. She was eating a red Twizzler. She said something to the two guys beside her and they laughed.

Everyone seemed to be laughing.

Everyone except Theo.

And his team.

And Coach Mandrake.

In the locker room, Coach stood while the ten boys on the team took seats on the wooden benches. The overhead lights glistened off his bald head. He stroked his goatee while he waited for everyone's attention.

"First," he said cheerfully, "I want to congratulate you boys on a game well played."

Roger snorted and looked down at the ground.

Coach frowned at Roger. "You got something to say, Roger? Let's hear it?"

Roger shook his head, his eyes still on the ground.

Coach Mandrake continued: "Now, I know today's outcome is not the one we'd all hoped for, but it's only the first

game of the season. We've got plenty more ahead of us."

Weston Zheng, the team comedian, piped up, "At least no one comes to the games, so the rest of the school won't even know we lost."

A couple guys chuckled.

Roger scowled at Weston. "Maybe if we start winning, they'll start coming."

"Yeah, Coach," Sinjin agreed. "I'm tired of being a school joke."

Most the boys started chattering at that. Lots of "yeah"s and "that would be awesome"s and a stray "fat chance." Someone said "deadweight" and a couple kids looked at Theo.

Only Theo and Chris Richards remained silent. Chris was the team's best player, but he didn't talk much. The only time he spoke was to call out plays. During the weeks of practice before today, he'd never made fun of Theo like most the others, but he hadn't offered any encouragement either. All the other guys respected him because he was so good and because he was generous at passing off the ball so they could shoot.

"I agree," Coach Mandrake said. "This is the year we turn things around. We make a name for this team. Fill those bleachers with butts and fill that trophy case with trophies. Then everyone will know our team and they'll know your names!"

Theo could feel a glimmer of hope rising among the other boys. They sat up straighter. Allowed themselves

a smile. Roger and Sinjin fist-bumped.

“So, toward that end, we’re going to make some major changes,” Coach said. He pointed at Theo.

Here it comes, Theo thought. I’m off the team. One-Game Wonder. Except I wasn’t a wonder, more like a blunder.

“I’ve decided we’re going to build our entire offense around Theo.”

The coach’s statement dropped on the players like a bomb. Everyone turned to look at Theo as if they were surprised he was still sitting there. As if his body should have just vaporized in shame.

“What!” Roger hollered. “But, Coach, he sucks!”

Ordinarily, Coach wouldn’t have allowed anyone to rag on a teammate like that. Laps or push-ups or wind sprints would have been the punishment. But this time, he ignored the taunt. Instead, he rubbed his hands enthusiastically like he was a criminal mastermind hatching a brilliant scheme. “Boys, take the weekend to practice your shooting. On Monday we come back with a whole new attitude and a whole new game plan. The rest of the season will rest on Theo’s very tall shoulders.” He smiled at Theo as if Theo should be grateful for this vote of confidence.

What Coach didn’t see were the nine other sweaty faces staring at him as if they’d just found the guy who’d invented homework.