

AN AUDIENCE FOR EINSTEIN

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In all of his fifteen years, nothing mattered more to him than this.

The poolside bleachers were filled to capacity, the students intense in their crisp red and white uniforms, the faculty men serious in their school sweaters and sturdy black bowlers. They clapped and cheered as he lined up with the rest of the swim team qualifiers for the final race. He faced the end lane, having barely earned a berth.

"I didn't sleep very well last night," he said over the din to the taller, more muscular teen next to him. "Did you?"

The teen scoffed, stretched up on his tiptoes as if to emphasize the physical difference between them, and then rolled his shoulders to loosen up. "I slept like a baby. That comes from having confidence. Something you must not possess."

Another school cheer went up from the tightly packed crowd, echoing in the cavernous, tiled room. One of the swimmers dipped his foot in the smooth water, sending ripples on their way to the other side.

The smaller boy waved his arms about to limber up. "It's not that, it's just that it all comes down to this, our last and most important race of the season. School champion." He looked at the mass of spectators on either side of the pool with scarcely concealed trepidation.

The teen regarded him with a brief sneer. "That's right. And frankly, I'm shocked you actually made it this far, Marlowe."

"Well I did, didn't I?"

"Doesn't matter. Everyone's certain you're going to lose, you know. You're just a brainy underclassman, not a true athlete like me." He flexed his prominent biceps to make his point. "Go back to your books, bookworm. You're no threat."

Percival drew himself up, his expression dark. "We'll see about that, my good man."

The teen sneered again as he twisted from side to side. "I suppose we will."

A group of teenage girls clapped in unison, and then one of them held up a paper sign with the tall teen's name scrawled on it.

The teen waved to them. They squealed and waved back, bouncing up and down.

"See that, Marlowe? How can I possibly lose with them cheering me on?"

Percival stared wistfully at the auburn-haired girl with the sign as he now twisted. "I could win it."

The teen scoffed. "Not likely. This is for all the glory. I'm not

going to let it get away. The rewards will be great and many, if you know what I mean.” He nodded at the girls then glanced at Percival with scorn. “But then again, I don’t think that you do.”

The swimming coach stepped forward, satisfied with the team’s preparation.

“Ready, lads.”

The young swimmers meticulously assumed their starting positions as the crowd quieted down.

“May the best man win,” Percival offered.

“Yes,” said the teen. “And that will be me.”

The coach raised a silver whistle, a stopwatch in his other hand.

“Steady now, gentlemen.”

The swimmers leaned forward, muscles tensed.

The sound of the whistle launched them.

Percival flopped into the water, a terrible start. All he saw were the feet of the other swimmers as they sped away.

He dug in, his arms flying and legs kicking furiously. They all reached the other side and turned around at nearly the same time. His lungs aching, he swam with an intensity he never had before, determined to prove everyone wrong.

He drew even with the leader, the tall teen next to him. The teen looked startled to see him, and in that instant lost his rhythm and faltered.

Percival took advantage of the teen’s mistake and took the lead.

The teen swam frantically to close the distance in the last few feet, but Percival lunged forward and touched the wall first.

The coach stood in front of Percival’s lane, staring at the stopwatch with surprise and delight. He raised his hand to silence the excited chatter in the room, everyone now on their feet. The only sound was that of the swimmers’ labored breathing.

“The winner, with a new school record, Percival Marlowe!”

Percival’s arms shot up out of the water as the bleachers erupted in a roar of approval.

The tall teen turned his back to him as the other swimmers huddled to whisper in amazement.

They all climbed out and grabbed their towels to dry off for the award ceremony. Percival acknowledged the congratulations from several of his teammates—solid pats on his back and playful shoves—then stepped up to the top of the three-level award stand for the first time. He bent down to allow his coach to slip a medal dangling on a red and white ribbon over his head. A fresh chorus of cheers went up from the crowd. As he shook his coach’s hand, he saw the group of girls applauding for him now.

He straightened up, boldly raised his right arm to point at the girl who still held the sign with the vanquished teen’s name on it. Aware they weren’t the chosen one, the girls around her leaned away. With an innocent look, the auburn-haired girl grasped the sign in the middle with both hands, then grinned and tore it half.

On the second tier, the tall teen scowled and lowered his head.

Percival raised two fists in the air as he listened to the crowd chant his name, absorbing their adulation. Then he held out the

medal for them to see, looked closely at it himself, and even took a whiff of it. The pungent yet not unpleasant smell—unlike anything he had ever smelled before—made him take another sniff before letting the medal drop back down to his chest.

Raising his arms again, he wondered how, in all of life ahead of him, he would ever equal or surpass this moment and could only conclude that would be impossible. This was—and would forever be—his one best, defining achievement, the time when his life truly began, forever and ever and ever . . .