The Eclipse of My Own Sun

I had always propelled myself above and beyond all limitations. Rising through the ranks, I considered myself…immortal. Perhaps it was vain confidence, but even the sturdiest of fortresses implodes from unseen cracks. The enemy within is often greater than the enemy without.

My early childhood was filled with inspiring memories of individual excellence. I was academically gifted, succeeding in many areas most would consider challenging. My parents named me “Light” and as the name suggests, I was bright. There was an aura about me, a quiet certainty that I would rise above anything placed before me. But even the sun casts shadows, and mine were growing longer. I remember my first day at Solstice Academy, a cocky fresher or so I seemed, eager to take all the AP courses. I’d like to believe it was confidence rather than arrogance, but life is rarely that simple. Things are never purely black or white.

“That’s quite ambitious. Are you sure you want to take on that much?” the counselor asked, her smile failing to conceal the doubt in her eyes.

“I’m rather confident in my cognitive abilities” I responded. The counselor didn’t outright refuse me, but the faint scoff under her breath said more than her words ever could.

“We want you to succeed,” she added carefully. “So we’ll be keeping a close eye on your progress. If it seems the workload is too much, we’ll move you into classes that are more…suitable.”

The next day, I walked into my first class, English 10-1 AP, with the same aura of certainty I always carried. As I scanned the room, I slowly realized the most peculiar coincidence; I was the only Black student there. No one stared, no one whispered, the silence was deafening. After introductions and various comments on the uniqueness of my first name, attendance was taken and the lecture began in full swing. When the teacher posed the first question, I raised my hand without hesitation. My answer came easily, precise and confident. She nodded, impressed. “Very

articulate," she said with a smile. I smiled back, taking it as praise. But as the class continued, my observant eye couldn't help but notice that no one else was described that way. I was certain my vocabulary was no different from that of my peers. We weren't enrolled in an Advanced Placement course for nothing. So why were their answers simply correct or incorrect and mine was *articulate*? The word echoed longer than it should have. At first it felt like recognition, then it felt like surprise. As if clarity from me required special mention. Something small shifted in that moment. My voice, which had always felt natural and unrestrained, suddenly felt measured. I found myself wondering not whether I was right, but how I sounded while being right. And for the first time, my light did not simply shine. It performed.

It is said that once is happenstance, twice is coincidence and three times is enemy action. In the weeks that followed, I began noticing patterns where I had only seen coincidence. During group discussions, when ideas were exchanged like currency, mine were often met with a pause, a slight hesitation before

agreement. Evaluation not disagreement, as though my words required a second weighing. Doubt crept in and I started to preface my sentences with disclaimers. “I might be wrong, but…” I had never been wrong about myself before. Was my conviction unfounded? Was it all hubris? Was my light just a mirage?

By midterm season, the confidence I once carried effortlessly had grown conditional. I studied not from curiosity, but from caution. I revised not to refine brilliance, but to avoid error. Excellence became less about reaching higher and more about not falling below expectation; an expectation that felt lower than it should have been. I began watching myself the way I felt others were watching me. I began to measure my thoughts. Measure my words. Measure my actions. Measure my ambitions.

I dropped one of my AP courses, telling myself it was strategic, that narrowing my focus would guarantee excellence rather than risk imperfection. I framed it as wisdom, as discipline, as growth. But it was in truth, fear disguised as logic. I had grown tired of being monitored, of feeling as though every quiz

confirmed or threatened my place. So I reduced the variables, I minimized the risk. Soon after, I stopped applying for leadership positions. I convinced myself it wasn't necessary; I didn't need titles to validate my worth. I said I preferred influence without attention. In truth, I was exhausted from being visible. From being the exception. From representing more than myself. I began choosing *safer* goals; ambitions that required less scrutiny. I called it maturity. I called it balance. I called it understanding my limits. But each decision, however rational it sounded, felt like dimming a switch no one had asked me to touch. My light was no longer challenged by others; it was being carefully lowered by my own hand. I was becoming the very eclipse of my own sun.

At my lowest point, whether by fate or fortune, intervention arrived. Something interrupted the narrative I had begun to believe. I attended a seminar for Black youth more out of obligation than expectation. I told myself it would be predictable, maybe inspirational. To my surprise, it was rather…unsettling.

The speaker did not talk about overcoming impossibility. He talked about refusing invisibility. He spoke about rooms that shrink you and systems that mistake your excellence for exception. He did not say to work harder than the rest. He said to question who decides what's best. After the seminar, I lingered. Not because I had questions about university applications or career pathways. I had one question.

"How do you know if you've started shrinking?"

He studied me for a moment, perhaps deciding the perfect manner to enlighten my ignorant self. "You don't," he said gently. "Other people usually do."

I did not recognize the shrinking because it had disguised itself as wisdom. What I called realism was, in truth, internalized limitation: the quiet inheritance of a system that plants doubt so gently you mistake it for maturity. No one had to remove me from advanced rooms; I began stepping back on my own. That is the most efficient by-product of systemic inequality. Not exclusion,

but self-restriction. And because the dimming feels logical, it rarely alarms the one experiencing it. It takes interruption. It takes visibility. It takes rooms where Black excellence is not an anomaly but a norm. Programs that connect youth to mentors who have navigated the same narrowing corridors recalibrate perception. They remind you that shrinking was learned, and what is learned can be unlearned. That seminar was not a miracle. It was a model. A room filled with Black professionals, educators, and students who had chosen not only to succeed but also to return. What if this was not occasional? What if it was institutional? What if mentorship was not an accident of fortune, but a requirement of every school that claimed to cultivate excellence?

Imagine if every school that offered advanced placement courses also offered structured mentorship programs pairing Black students with professionals in fields they aspire to enter. Not as a one-time seminar, but as an ongoing partnership; a

system designed to counter the system that taught them to shrink. The most dangerous by-product of systemic racism is internalized limitation. Its antidote is just as systemic: deliberate mentorship, visible leadership, and communities that refuse to let their youth shrink.

"There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living." - Nelson Mandela.