

MOMOTARO

XANDER AND THE
LOST ISLAND OF MONSTERS

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The pale old man stands in the middle of the rainy street and watches the boy through the school windows. The classroom faces the road, but it's hard to get a clear view inside. That's fine. He doesn't want the boy to notice him. Not yet.

The boy is in front of the class, one hand fidgeting with papers, the other dipping into his pocket to jingle imaginary coins, then combing through his hair. The whiteboard behind him seems to engulf him, each word on it at least the length of the boy's arm. The old man's used-to-be heart drops in sympathy. He's supposed to be twelve, this boy, but he's no bigger than a seven-year-old.

That's him, all right, the man thinks. Blue eyes, straight black hair. Like his father and his grandfather. But this boy is frightfully weak. The pale man shakes his head. Can the boy handle this?

The old man limps toward the school, hoping for a better view. A monster-size pickup truck passes through him. Neither the pale man nor the driver notices.

The man presses his transparent face to the windowpane. That's better. Now he can see *and* hear. But none of the students see

him—the rain sluices through the old man’s face, making it look like a puddle gathered on the glass.

The boy is back at his desk now, supposedly paying attention to the lecture. Which he most definitely isn’t. He’s drawing. Like he always does. The pale man shimmers in the rain like a waving piece of plastic wrap.

That teacher sounds like a robot. Why, the old man almost drops off just listening , and *he’s* already dead. So the old man can’t blame (What is his English name? So hard for him to remember . . .) Xander for being bored. Xander Musashi Miyamoto. The boy’s named after Musashi Miyamoto, one of the greatest samurai and artists who ever lived. The old man calls the boy Musashi in his head. Always has, ever since Xander was born.

We have no choice. He is the one. He must rise. The pale man exhales a breath that would have sounded like a sigh, had he any lungs.

He goes back to sit on the bench again, waiting for his grandson to notice him.

CHAPTER ONE



I shuffle through my notes once, twice, three times, feeling sweat starting to trickle down my sides and from my palms. I'm standing in front of twenty-five of my fellow sixth graders, in the middle of giving my report, "Snow in Ecuador: How Climate Change Affects the Rain Forests," which is a really great title, if I do say so myself.

But I've lost my place. Not just a little bit. Completely. I can't remember the last thing I said or what I'm supposed to say next. It doesn't help that I basically copied and pasted my entire report out of Wikipedia and some random guy's blog without reading any of it. I meant to go over it this morning, but I forgot because my friend Peyton got a new app on his phone and we were playing it right up until the bell rang. The worst part is, the app—*Xoru, Master*

of Magic—wasn't even very good. What a waste of time. Whoops. This project is for extra credit, which I desperately, desperately need in social studies, and I'm about to blow it.

I cough and clear my throat. Rain beats in a steady *thumthumthum* against the windows. The whole class shifts around, impatient, starting to whisper. *Clickclickclick*. Someone's taking cell phone photos. I look up, and, sure enough, it's Lovey, the most misnamed person on the face of the planet. The forbidden phone peeks up over the top of her textbook. She didn't even bother to turn off the sound. Sheesh. She looks straight at me and giggles. Fantastic.

Mr. Stedman doesn't seem to notice. He lets out a sigh. "Xander, please continue or sit down. We have a lesson to do."

I feel like I'm standing in front of the class in my underwear. I look down at my legs, just to make sure. Yup, pants are on. I put my hand in my pocket and rock back and forth in my Converse, stare at the white toe caps. *Come on*.

Finally, inspiration hits.

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth the subject of climate change." I sweep my hand around like I'm Abraham Lincoln. The whole class jerks upright, suddenly awake. Peyton flashes me a thumbs-up from his seat in the back. "They kept talking. Nothing much happened. We still drive cars and make smog and now there's, like, a ton of snow in Ecuador. So, basically, that's it. Let's all stop climate change. Together. Stop using plastic, people. Wake up!"

The class applauds, and I take a little bow and run back to my seat with a grin plastered across my face. There. I've done it. Score. I mean, I might not have gotten full points, but that was good for at least five, right?

Mr. Stedman rolls his eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Miyamoto." He shakes his head so I can be sure he doesn't mean it. "Everyone, turn to page one hundred and fifty in your textbooks."

Page 150 again? We've been on this page for a week. I flip open the book and start making a list in my head. *Things I'd Rather Be Doing*, in order of preference:

1. Playing computer games
2. Drawing
3. Drawing pictures of computer games
4. Getting a cavity drilled
5. Walking down the street with no pants on
6. Watching that wedding dress show with my grandma

And then I tick off the minutes, like this. Like I'm a freaking prisoner in a medieval dungeon cell serving a two-million-year sentence, scratching the years into the wall with my bare fingernail:



Five minutes of class, done! Ten, done! And I'll keep going on and on and on, until I have twelve sets—it's a block day, which means

that some classes are double periods. Today Mr. Stedman has the social studies block.

And then the bell rings, and the torture starts all over again.

For some reason, social studies seems twice as long as, say, my computer class, the one class I actually enjoy. Why is that? Why do things you love seem to take a shorter time? Seems like the opposite should be true.

Mr. Stedman has started his lecture, but it's the day before spring break, and, therefore, nobody's paying a bit of attention. Everyone's dreaming about sunshine and ice cream and warm beaches and Easter candy. But does Mr. Stedman care? Heck no. And we're all just staring at him, counting the black hairs coming out of his zombie-white forehead (he doesn't have that many hairs—they look like my number countdown, kind of) and dodging the spit flying off his lips (never sit in the front row of Mr. Stedman's class).

“Blah blah blah global warming. Blah blah blah fire at the South Pole. Blah blah blah tropical hurricane in Maine. Blah blah blah super hurricane-blizzard in New York.”

I feel my brain quiver in my skull, probably wishing it could break out and run free. I yawn and stare out the window at the road. Rain's pouring down in sheets, and I hope it lets up before school ends.

The best thing about social studies is where the classroom is located—the windows look out onto the street. Sometimes a car goes by, but that's about it. Today just one old man sits at the bus stop. More boringness. What else is new? This place where we live, Oak

Grove, is a one-horse town, way out in the boonies of San Diego, so horribly far away from the actual city of San Diego that nobody even calls this San Diego anymore. They call it “backcountry.” Or the mountains, where people go when they want to see some snow and pretend they have a real winter, even though they live in Southern California. It’s so small that grades K–8 are all at the same lower school, and the entire sixth grade is in this classroom with me.

The old man outside doesn’t seem to mind the rain. Which is good, because it’s raining big, fat drops, more like a waterfall. It’s supposed to rain for the next three days, on and on. So much for sunshine and warm beaches.

It hasn’t rained like this in years. Not since . . . well, maybe back when I was just a little kid. When I’d tried to run away from home.

Most four-year-olds wouldn’t be ambitious enough to take off down a mountain road, looking for their mom. Especially not on a day when cartoons got interrupted with the loud squeal of an emergency signal. “Flash flood warning in the mountains,” a bored robotic female voice had said. “Severe weather threat until five o’clock.” I had shrugged and turned off the TV, not knowing what a flash flood was. Just that it was raining a lot, which was no big deal to me. My grandmother had talked about how it was the wettest day the county had seen in two decades, during an already wet El Niño rainstorm year, when everything in California stayed green through the summer instead of turning into brown tinder.

But I was a super-sneaky four-year-old, the kind who’d climb

the cupboards to steal a cookie while my grandma was in the bathroom. The kind who could blame the cookie theft on the dog and get away with it. The kind who knew which floorboards squeaked like wounded rats when you stepped on them. The kind who knew to turn the doorknob forty-five degrees to the left, then pull it hard so it opened smooth and quick. My grandma hadn't known I was gone for hours.

Mom had left us only about a month earlier, and it felt like two years. All Dad said was, "She had to go on a trip." But when your mom takes a hundred percent of her clothes with her *and* removes her entire Precious Moments figurine collection from the glass curio cabinet, you can kind of figure out what the truth is. Even if you are only a little kid.

The day I ran away, the ditch by the street had filled with roaring water, and the sidewalk was nothing but a muddy bank. I watched the water carry sticks and bits of trash downhill. *This way, Xander,* the ditch river seemed to say. *Follow me and you'll find your mother.* So I starting slogging through the mud, my shoes making a *squinch-squinch* sound.

I guess I was thinking that Mom would magically drive up in her green car, her red-gold hair shining in the sunless afternoon, and take me back home. I didn't know then how long a walk it was down the mountain, and I was shivering because I hadn't remembered a jacket. (Even though I was Sherlock Holmes sneaky, I was still only four.)

I wanted Mom back for a lot of reasons, but the main one was so

she could sing me my bedtime song. She was the only one who knew the words to my favorite, “All I Ask of You,” from *Phantom of the Opera*. (Hey, it’s not my fault—she got me hooked on it by singing it to me when I was a baby. I haven’t listened to that soundtrack in years.) My dad only sang me “Twinkle, Twinkle,” and my grandma only knew songs from the 1940s. I wanted my regular bedtime song. When you’re a tiny kid, that kind of thing is as important as looking for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.

I had followed the ditch river for what seemed like hours. The rain was falling so hard I could barely see. The runoff stream grew wider and wider and rose until it filled the whole road and stole away bigger things, like trash can lids and a bike tire and branches.

Finally, I reached a driveway at the bottom of a hill, my short legs feeling like overcooked noodles. The ankle-deep water stole one of my shoes. As I watched it get swept away, I got a little scared for the first time. I climbed to the mailbox and sat on a boulder next to it, feeling as soggy as a book dropped into a bathtub, and started waiting.

I’d just sit right there until Mom came by. No matter how long it took. Like the story of that dog in Japan who hung out at the train station waiting for his dead master that they made into a really sad movie I’ll never watch, because I hate sad movies.

A woman with short blond hair, in T-shirt and jeans, had walked down the hillside, I guess to get the mail. She jumped about a mile into the air when she spotted me. “I thought you were a rock!” She

bent to peer into my face. Her eyes were the shade of new grass, with smile lines fanning out around the edges. “Aren’t you the Miyamoto boy from next door? What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my mom,” I said.

“Your mother?” The woman bit her lip, and I knew that she knew my mother was gone. “I’m Mrs. Phasis. Why don’t you come on inside, and we’ll call your grandmother?” The woman held her out her hand. She seemed nice enough, but she wasn’t my mother, so I said no.

“No?” Mrs. Phasis looked as if she couldn’t believe I’d defied her.

“No,” I repeated.

“Okay, then.” She picked me up like a sack of rice.

“Nooooo!” I screamed, and I kicked her and scratched her arms, but she didn’t drop me. She just hurried into the warm house. Then she plunked me down in front of the TV and wrapped a fluffy blanket around my shoulders to stop my shivering. “Wait here, okay? Peyton, be nice to this little boy.” The lady disappeared.

“Hi.”

A boy about my size was perched on the floor, a big purple bowl in front of him. His golden hair stood up from his scalp in a crescent—sort of a natural Mohawk—and his eyes were a bright blue in the cloudy light. He cocked his head at me as he looked me up and down. Then he grinned and dipped his face into the bowl, his pointy nose and pointy chin disappearing behind the purple.

At first I didn't understand what he was doing. Then he straightened up, cheeks bulging, white kernels of popcorn sticking out of his mouth. "Want some?"

"Yes, please." If Peyton shoved his face into a bowl like that nowadays, I'd be too grossed out to share, but we were only four back then.

He pushed the bowl toward me, and I grabbed a handful. We watched the rest of the show in easy silence. It was some program about the jungle, and I felt calmer than I had in a long time. And then my grandmother showed up to haul me back home, apologizing profusely to Mrs. Phasis.

So something good came out of that experience. That was the day I met Peyton. It was probably also the last day we were the same height.

I'm still sorry I tried to kick his mom. But how was I supposed to know she was helping me?

And, no, my mom hasn't come back. We haven't heard from her in eight years. Not a phone call or a letter or an e-mail or a carrier pigeon. I never tried to look for her again.

I glare at the clouds outside my classroom. Rain, rain, go away, I think at them. Come again some other day, when I don't have to walk home from school.

CHAPTER 2



I open my notebook stealthily, because Mr. Stedman is known for freaking out if he thinks you're not worshipping him. Especially me. Just because I once forgot to take a test, because I was watching big pieces of hail hit a parked car outside and wondering if the windshield would break and how fast the ice would have to be falling for that to happen.

Do you want to know what my brain looks like? A browser with twenty-five different pages open at once. I flip back and forth between them and open even more before I'm done reading what I meant to read. And then I forget what it was I was looking for.

My teachers have tried to get Dad to medicate me. Every year since first grade, and I'm in sixth now. My report cards say stuff like

Unfocused. Daydreams. Draws on his math papers. It makes me feel like I'm broken somehow. A computer with a virus in it. And you know what? Knowing that my teachers think I'm broken does not make me want to come to school more.

I don't think I'm broken. I just prefer to do my own thing instead of the lame things the teachers want me to do.

Dad says that's just how I am, a freaking creative genius (well, he doesn't actually use the word *freaking*, which he would call "a non-academic term"), and they all can just deal with it. "I know medication benefits many children," Dad always tells them, "but Xander doesn't need it. It is not medically necessary. He behaves appropriately at home. The difficulties arise only in certain classes, and so he does not meet the criteria for diagnosis."

Earlier this year, when Mr. Stedman pressed the issue, sending home note after note and making Dad come in multiple times, my father finally got angry during a conference. He stood up to his full height, and his eyes turned into polar ice caps. "You want these kids to grow up into unthinking cubicle monkeys. But that's not going to happen to Xander, I can tell you that much," Dad had said. "You bring this up one more time, and you'll be very sorry."

I was sort of impressed. I'd never seen Dad threaten anyone. The worst thing he ever did was write a slightly annoyed letter to the newspaper for misspelling something. *You folks really need to invest in a copy editor*, he wrote. I wondered how Dad would make

Mr. Stedman sorry. Probably sit him down and lecture him *so hard*. Maybe even wag his finger at him.

For a second I wondered what my mother would have done about Mr. Stedman, if she were here. She had a real temper—Dad said it came with the red hair and the Irishness. I remember her curls flying all around her head, like a flaming halo of doom, when she got mad. Mom got angry about a lot of stuff—one of my last memories of her is Mom yelling at Dad about how he made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “You put the peanut butter on *after* the jelly, not before! Otherwise, the peanut butter sticks on the knife and gets in the jelly jar!”

It seemed like a really funny thing to get so worked up about. I asked Dad about it once, and he said she wasn’t mad, just passionate. “Passionate about peanut butter and jelly?” I asked. “It’s only a sandwich!”

“Passionate about everything.” Dad got a big smile on his face. “Besides, it wasn’t the sandwich she was angry about.” He shook his head and looked gloomy. I changed the subject.

That makes me think that my mother would have given Mr. Stedman more than a lecture. She probably would have given him a solid right hook to the jaw.

Anyway, the threat worked. Mr. Stedman’s nostrils flared as he sputtered and combed his fingers through his balding hair. Dad’s glare bored holes into my teacher until Mr. Stedman finally looked away.

This whole school pretty much hates my family now. Especially Mr. Stedman.

I strategically place my thick textbook in front of my notebook and start drawing while I stare at Mr. Stedman like he's the most fascinating thing I've ever seen. If I don't draw, I will literally fall asleep, because Mr. Stedman's voice is like Ambien. And if that happened, he would truly go nuts.

I consider what to draw. Self-portrait? Too boring. Just straight black hair in a style that's almost a bowl cut, because Grandma, Obāchan, cuts it for me. (Dad keeps promising to take me to a real barber, but I'm not holding my breath.) Gray-blue eyes. Skin I can never find the right crayon color for anyway, even in Crayola's "Multicultural" collection. It's a shade with too many pink undertones to be yellow and too much yellow to be pink.

A mix. A blend. A mutt. That's me.

"Yesterday, a volcano in Hawaii froze," Mr. Stedman says.

I pause. Huh. Now *that's* interesting. Idly, I draw sharks ice-skating on frozen lava covering the ocean. Weird climate things have been happening for the past two years. Pretty much every day, some news anchor interrupts my grandma's *Wheel of Fortune* show to tell us about snakes fleeing a rain forest, or enormous tuna jumping out of hot ocean water, or people in Florida having to buy ski jackets for a sudden blizzard.

Climate change. I guess maybe it is a problem. But it's all happening far away. Too far away for me to worry about.

On my left, Clarissa taps my arm. She grins, showing two rows of braces with hot pink rubber bands. She points to my notebook. “You should put that into the game,” she whispers.

I shrug quick, feeling my face go all hot. My hands start sweating. She tucks her long, curly black hair behind her ear and wiggles her eyebrows at me. I’ve known Clarissa since kindergarten. We’ve watched each other pick our noses. I don’t know why I’m so nervous around her now. Once, I called her a Hobbit—I meant it as a compliment, because Hobbits are the coolest creatures ever and she’s the only girl still shorter than I am—but she socked my arm so hard it left a purple bruise for two whole weeks.

The game she’s talking about is what we’re working on in computer class. We play this game called *CraftWorlds*, where you can build your own, well, worlds. Anything you can make with pixels. Since you actually have to know some coding to change the game, the teacher’s letting us use it in class.

Not to brag, but I’m the king of the computer class. It’s the one place where I pretty much rule over all the other kids. The characters I program look better, jump higher, and can do more than anyone else’s. I’m famous for it around here.

Clarissa smiles at me again and I smile back, and Mr. Stedman shoots a glare at me. What, it’s illegal to smile now? *Mind police*. Mr. Stedman sticks a pencil behind his ear, near the ring of hair around his bald spot. “Find two articles about global warming and summarize them.” He writes the assignment on the whiteboard like we’re

morons. Summarizing is the most boringest thing in the free world. Why do I have to tell you exactly what I read? *I* know what I read; *you* know what I read. I want to tell you what I *think* about it.

I look down at my notebook.

I blink.

My sharks aren't there anymore. In their place there's a drawing of an ape and a human mixed together, except it has a long lizard tail studded with spikes, like a dinosaur's, waving in a muscular curve. His skin is hairy but wet-looking, in shades of red and purple and iridescent green.

I suck in a quick breath and look at my black-ink pen, then back down at the colorful drawing. What the heck?

I put my fingertips on the drawing. I could be wrong, but it kind of feels like the ink is rising up from the paper. . . .

I yank back my hand and shake my head to clear it.

The creature's eyes stare back at mine. They're like a shark's—no white, no iris, just all black pupil.

I have the urge to set the notebook on fire. Or bury it someplace. I'm frozen. I can't take my eyes off it.

The creature's smiling at me with serrated yellow teeth, and I know there's all kinds of gross bacteria on them, like a Komodo dragon who poisons his prey. A pink-red tongue forks into three snakes at the end. The tiny snakes hiss their displeasure. *SSSSssssss*.

Hissing?

It's a drawing. It can't make noise.

But I *hear* it, the same way I can hear Mom calling, “Xander,” sometimes as I’m waking from a deep sleep.

The hair on my neck stands straight up, and my stomach drops like I’m falling into a pitch-black and cold endless pit. Then my stomach feels like I’ve been hit by a really hard ball. I gasp, trying to get air into my lungs.

“Are you okay?” Clarissa whispers.

I nod once and shut my notebook fast.

Suddenly Mr. Stedman’s forearms, covered in wiry black hair, appear by my face. *SMACK!* He hits the desk with his metal ruler so hard the fillings in my teeth rattle. “Xander! This is not art class.”

I shrug, trying to hide how much he startled me. “Of course it’s not art class. This school doesn’t *have* an art class.”

Clarissa giggles softly. Mr. Stedman’s nostrils flare. He yanks my notebook away, turns to a blank page, and puts it back on my desk. He narrows his eyes. “You’re on thin ice, Mr. Miyamoto.”

“Like sharks by the frozen volcano?” I ask before I can help myself. Whoops.

This time both Clarissa and Peyton, who’s sitting a few rows back, snort.

Mr. Stedman bares his teeth like he’s in some teen werewolf show. I sigh and nod. “Sorry.” I manage to sound like I really mean it. And I do. I know he’s going to spend the rest of class time watching me, and I hate that.

He stalks to his desk. “Get into your groups. I don’t want to hear too much noise or this exercise will be over.”

The good news is, five more minutes have passed. I make more hash marks. Only thirty more to go and we’re on spring break. Freedom. I can’t wait.

We move around to do our group work. Peyton throws four newspapers on the table. “You look through two; I’ll look through two.” He sits in his chair backward, the way teachers always tell you not to do. But Peyton’s Peyton, so nobody corrects him. His blond-brown hair sticks up in the middle, and he smooths it down, which only works for a second before it springs back up again in a feathery plume.

Peyton’s taller than most people’s dads, though he’s not thirteen yet. He plays a ton of sports, and his size is an advantage for him, which is why somebody on the other team always demands to see Peyton’s birth certificate. Last year I went to his Little League play-off game, and a loudmouthed mother from the opposing team shouted, “No way that kid’s only eleven. Lookit them long arms and legs! Chicken legs!” (I thought that was pretty funny, but Peyton didn’t.) Also, under his pointy nose, Peyton has a mouthful of naturally straight white teeth. Oh, and he has a great voice as well. In class he isn’t too loud or too quiet, he stays on task, and he makes girls and teachers laugh instead of annoying them. He’s pretty much the mayor of Oak Grove Lower School.

It's a good thing I met Peyton when we were only four. Because if we'd met in sixth grade, I'm not sure the Number One Jock and the Number One Nerd would be such good friends.

Allow me to demonstrate how well Peyton and I know each other.

Phone rings. One of us answers. "Dude."

"Dude."

"7-Eleven. Ten minutes."

"Yup."

Hang up.

Boom. Done. That's all we need.

And most of the time, it doesn't matter that I'm smaller than Peyton. If I can't do something physical, my friend will do it for me.

Like the time, back when we were seven, I thought it'd be fun to design a parachute out of bedsheets and clothesline and jump off the garage roof onto a pile of garbage bags stuffed with leaves and pine needles. If I'd been just a few inches taller, I could have climbed the wooden fence next to the building and pulled myself onto the roof.

I could imagine how cool it would have been to leap from those gray asphalt shingles, the parachute billowing behind me. "What-cha think?" I asked Peyton. Before I even got the words out of my mouth, Peyton had the parachute strapped to his back and was scrambling up the fence.

My grandmother had emerged from the house just in time to see Peyton launching himself off the roof, his arms spread and his eyes

closed, like he had every confidence in the world that those flimsy garbage bags would cushion his leap. And there I was, yelling, “Higher, Peyton!” and being more than a little bit jealous of what he could do.

My eardrums still hurt from the sound of Obāchan’s scream.

Oh, and by the way, the bags *mostly* held. Peyton only got one little fracture in his ankle and had to wear a small cast for six weeks.

It was a while before Peyton’s parents let him come over again.

Now, in Mr. Stedman’s class, Peyton goes off to get the scissors. Clarissa and Lovey move their desks near ours. They are besties. I wish Lovey would sit somewhere else. Like in the middle of the frozen volcano about two thousand miles away from me.

Lovey’s supposedly the prettiest middle-schooler in town, because she more or less looks like Barbie. But I’ve known her since second grade, and she’s got the worst personality ever. That makes anybody ugly. I wouldn’t want to run into her in a dark alley.

Plus, Lovey wears so much makeup—in frosted pale colors, over sunburned skin—that she doesn’t even look like a girl to me anymore. She looks like a baboon wearing clown makeup. I don’t know why Clarissa bothers being friends with her.

Clarissa smiles up at me. “Hey, do you have time after school to help me with my modding in Scratch? I can’t get my DreamShine characters to look like they’re dancing.”

Scratch is an animation program. Is she asking because she likes me, or because her code won’t work? Is the computer lab open today?

How do I get the characters to dance? I frown, thinking about all this stuff.

“DreamShine . . .” I say out loud, picturing the code, what those characters would look like.

Clarissa’s smile fades. “DreamShine is a band.”

“I know who DreamShine is. That boy group.” I blush again. Clarissa and Lovey both giggle. *Masculinity, minus 1,000 points.* “The most annoying band in the history of time, that is.”

“DreamShine?” Peyton puts some scissors down on the table. “I like that one song. ‘Blame It on the Heart.’” With that, he breaks into an accomplished falsetto, notes trilling up and down. “*Blame it on my heart/it’s not so smart/and when you sleep it’s an art . . .*” The girls smile up at him. “*And then you rip a big fart.*” This whole side of the classroom laughs. He shuts his mouth and spins around. “Darn. Forgot the glue.”

Mr. Stedman glances up at Peyton but says nothing about the musical interlude. That, ladies and gentleman, is my friend Peyton. He could wear a pink tutu to school and not lose any masculinity points.

“You know what, Xander? You don’t need to help me. I probably just made a typo in the code.” Clarissa turns pink and opens her newspaper.

Oh. She thinks I don’t want to help her. Just because I was frowning? I’m so dumb. “No, I’ll help you. Meet after school?”

Clarissa shrugs. “I think the computer lab’s probably not open

today. We can do it after spring break.” She sounds a lot less enthusiastic now. She gets up and crosses the classroom to sharpen her pencil.

Oh well. I inhale a huge breath. I will dazzle her with my mad modding skills after break. Then we’ll be friends again. I open up a newspaper and scan the headlines. *Earthquake in Kansas Topples Houses.*

Strange, but (a) do earthquakes count as climate change? and (b) who cares about earthquakes? We have them all the time here. Let other places experience our joy, too.

I look through the newspaper, praying Lovey will keep quiet. She’s one of those people who finds out what bugs you the most, then pokes at it over and over. Just because she’s bored as well as mean.

“Hey, Xander.” Lovey wrinkles her perfect little nose at me. “I thought Asians were supposed to be smart. Why are you so dumb? You totally failed that report.”

This isn’t the first time she’s said this. I’m the only half-Asian—or any-Asian—in the whole school. Plus, I’m not in GATE—that’s *Gifted and Talented Education*—a program that you get into by scoring high on an intelligence test. The GATE kids have a special math teacher and go to some kind of fun enrichment class a few times a week, leaving the rest of us behind to stew in social studies purgatory. Peyton’s in the program. So is Clarissa. And Lovey.

She’s not the type of person to let you forget.

Dad says it’s not Lovey’s fault; it’s her parents’. “Parents can

infect their children with their own backward thinking,” Dad once said. “You should feel sorry for her.”

I glare at Lovey, and I don’t feel sorry at all. I feel like I want to punch her right in her clown face. “How many Asians do you even know?”

Lovey leans forward, her head cocked to one side, squinting at me like I’m a pile of roadside trash. “You know you’re ugly, right? You’re like the bad parts of white people and Asian people mixed together. And I’ve never seen such an ugly color of blue eyes before. Like dirty water.”

My cheeks go hot, but I keep my cool. I raise an eyebrow at her. “Have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re not exactly supermodel material yourself.”

She opens and closes her mouth like a brainless fish.

I doodle in my notebook, my pen pressing down hard into the paper as I draw cubes. Yes, my family has blue eyes—it goes back a long way, my dad says. We have some ancestors from Russia who migrated to Japan and became the Ainu. Besides, my mom is—was—as Irish as they come, with blue eyes and red hair. Of course that’s what color my eyes are.

Peyton puts down the glue. “Find any articles yet?”

“Hi, Peyton,” Lovey sings, and I swear she bats her eyes at him. Her mascara’s so thick it falls on her cheeks in little clumps. “I saw your baseball game last week. You did awesome.”

“Stalker,” I mutter. Now I know she’s the dumbest person in

town. If you're in love with Batman, you don't go around harassing Robin.

"Thanks." Peyton glances at me. He knows what Lovey's like. I doodle another cube, probably looking as upset as I feel. He sits down. "You should go somewhere else, Lovey. You're not in our group."

"Mr. Stedman said to sit here." Lovey smiles at Peyton. "We won't bother you."

Peyton angles his head at me and I shrug. If I make a scene, Stedman will bug me even more. "It's fine," I mumble. Clarissa returns, and she and Lovey are actually quiet for a change as they cut out their articles.

I look out the window. The old man at the bus stop stands up and walks across the street, toward the school. Even from here his skin looks pale, papery. Must not get much sun in the old folks' home. I wonder how he escaped. Maybe he hitchhiked all the way up here. Should I call the cops or something?

He comes up to the classroom window and looks straight at me.

Our eyes meet. I have this strange feeling that I know him, or should know him.

We stare each other for a second. Then he winks. A ridiculous, dramatic, slow wink, like a stage actor making sure the last row can see it.

I slide down in my seat and look at my desk again. Where have I seen that man before?

Oh. He must look familiar because he's Asian, like my grandmother and father. That's why. You don't see many Asians around here.

"That old guy must be from out of town," I say to Peyton.

"What guy?" Peyton pastes his article onto his paper.

I look out the window. The old man is gone. "Huh. Nobody, I guess."

And now, suddenly, the sun is out. Not only has the rain stopped, but there's not a cloud in the sky. I grin. Maybe it's an omen that spring break is going to be awesome.

"Have you actually done any work?" Peyton takes the notebook out of my hand. His eyes go Frisbee-wide. He looks up at Lovey and snorts. "Dude. Ha. Good likeness." He shuts the notebook, shaking his head with a wide grin. He whispers, "You better hide it, though. You'll be in a load of trouble if Stedman sees it."

What is he talking about? The cubes? The beastly man? I flip open to my drawing.

It's Mean Girl Number One, Lovey. As a baboon. Wearing clown makeup and a clown suit, her nostrils huge, her hairy knuckles dragging on the ground.

Not only did I make her look horribly—and awesomely—ugly, she is also doing something not so polite. If you've seen apes or monkeys at the zoo, you might have experienced this: sometimes they poop and then throw it. They hurl it at the people gawking at them through the glass, and even though it just hits the window, everybody

screams and ducks as it slides down in front of their faces. It's completely disgusting—and completely hilarious.

That's what Lovey was doing in my picture. Pooping into her hand. Getting ready to throw it.

I make a weird squeaking noise and slap my hand over my mouth. It is the grossest, most spectacular caricature I've ever seen. The only thing is, I have no memory of drawing it.

How did it get into my notebook?

I'm about to put it away, but I just have to admire it for another minute. It's really, really good. County-fair blue-ribbon quality. She looks alive. You can almost *smell* the stench.

I gaze at the drawing for another minute, this strange sort of excitement building inside of me. I feel like I did last year, when I asked my father for a Nintendo 3DS for my birthday and he said they were too expensive, but then he handed me this perfectly shaped box and I tore away a little corner of the wrapping paper and I recognized it.

Yesss! I want to yell. I want to wave the drawing around the classroom, shout about it to the town, publish it in the local newspaper. *Look at how great this is!* I grin and swallow the giggles that want to come out. I've never, ever felt this way about a drawing I've made before.

Then I make a fatal error. A laugh escapes from my gut. If you can call it a laugh. It's more like an elephant trumpet. Deafening, echoing around the room, reaching every single ear. I can't control

it. My hand falls away from my face, and I bend over, laughing my head off.

Peyton and Clarissa start laughing at my laugh. That makes me laugh even harder—so hard that tears come out and splash on the page. The colors don't smear. Peyton's guffawing so much he turns bright red and can't breathe; he just slaps the table over and over with his palm.

"What's so funny?" Lovey yanks the notebook from my hands.

"No!" I leap forward to get it back. My stomach lands on Clarissa's desk, on top of the glue. I hit my chin on the edge of Lovey's desk and bite my tongue. "Ow," I say, tasting blood.

"Xander!" Clarissa shrieks. "My project!"

Lovey's face turns bright pink. She juts out her chin, and her hair fans out as if she's been electrocuted. She hops up and down, her mouth moving and a string of drool coming out, too mad to talk anymore.

Just like a baboon.

I'm lying stomach-down on Clarissa's desk, and Mr. Stedman's leaping across the room, and quite possibly I'm bleeding to death, but still I can't stop laughing. I point at Lovey and just let it out. That excited feeling stays with me. Finally, I am conquering Lovey.

Then Lovey gets her voice back. "WHAAAAAT IS THIS? I'LL KILL YOU!" I've never heard a girl bellow like that before. She sounds like Peyton's dad.

I try to get up and away. Too late. She flings the notebook down, grabs me by the shoulders, and twists me off the desk. I fall on my back, the newspaper sticking to my chest. She's over me, raising her fist, and I close my eyes, waiting for the punch.

And still I can't stop giggling.