

Praise for
**ZACHARY YING AND THE
DRAGON EMPEROR**

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takes adventure to a new level!"

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

"*Zachary Ying and the Dragon Emperor* is an edge-of-your-seat
adventure that has you laughing on one page and cheering on the next.
Zach is a gamer turned hero who goes on an epic quest across the globe
only to find his greatest strength within. More, please!"

—JAMES PONTI,
New York Times bestselling author of *City Spies*

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Chinese history class you wished you had at school. Exploring diaspora
and intersectional identity in between magical heists and mythical
creatures, this book is a marvel. I am officially a Xiran Jay Zhao stan!"

—GRACI KIM,
author of *The Last Fallen Star*

"I started reading it and finished it in a day! There are so many
things I adore about the book from the characters to the amazing
and hilarious facts about Chinese history. It had me grinning
all the way! It's a wonderful book, and I will be raving about it
to everyone I know for a long time."

—ANN SEI LIN,
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lingo, and relatable characters. An exciting new addition to the world
of mythology and history-based adventure novels."

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

Also by Xiran Jay Zhao

Iron Widow



ZACHARY AND THE DRAGON EMPEROR YING

XIRAN JAY ZHAO

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS

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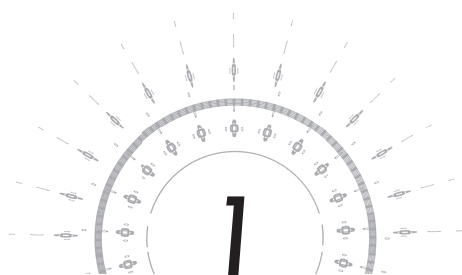
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*To my family,
who didn't take this writing thing seriously at first,
and then not even after my first book deal,
but finally did after this one*



How to Get Superpowers by Reading Wikipedia

ZACK HAD LEARNED TO STOP OPENING THE LUNCHES HIS MOM packed for him in front of his friends. He didn't eat them anymore either. He loved his mom's cooking, but his friends always wrinkled their noses as if the pungent sauces and spices hit them like a physical wave. Of course they made a big deal out of how the one Asian kid in school had the "weirdest" food. Ugh, he hated that this was a stereotype.

"Why care what others say?" His mom had been baffled when he'd begged her to just make him sandwiches. "My cooking is way tastier than slices of meat slapped between bread!"

She wasn't wrong, but she didn't understand the problem. Zack had finally gotten a steady friend group after going to a different middle school than his few friends from elementary; he didn't want to risk getting left out again. Yet no matter how many times he told his mom she didn't need to cook him full-on Chinese meals, she never listened, because "where would you get your nutrition?" And whenever he'd come home with his

lunch uneaten, even with the excuse that he'd been practicing fasting for Ramadan, her scientist side would activate, and she'd unleash yet another lecture about the daily amount of protein and healthy vegetables a twelve-year-old boy needed.

It was easier to just pretend he'd eaten them.

Ignoring the stab of guilt to his heart, Zack hurried down the empty hallway with his lunch box tucked under his arm like he was smuggling something illegal. He stopped in front of a row of color-coordinated trash bins and unzipped the lunch box. The smell of stir-fried green beans and beef slices heaped juicily over rice exploded through the air. It made his mouth water, and he couldn't help but eat a few sauce-soaked pieces with the chopsticks packed to the side, but he stepped back as he remembered the smell might stick to his hair and clothes. Plus, he didn't want someone to catch him eating near literal trash bins in a hallway. The last thing he needed was another reason for the other kids to call him weird.

He popped open the compost bin.

"Whoa, kid. Are you really letting all that food go to waste?"

Zack startled at the voice, so close it was practically in his head. It was deep and gruff like a teacher's, yet when Zack looked around the hallway, there was no one else around.

He set his lunch box on the lid of the paper-waste bin and checked his phone. No sudden notifications or apps that had opened or anything. He dug out the other device in his pockets that could've made a sound—his augmented reality portal-lens from XY Technologies. He slid it on over his eyes. Its clear

interface spanned his vision as a single long lens. Transparent neon widgets for stuff like the time, temperature, and weather popped up along the edges of his view. But he'd gotten no new notifications there, either.

"Hey! Do you play *Mythrealm* on that?"

Zack jumped. This time it was for sure a real person speaking. Though instead of a deep, gruff voice, it was another boy. Another *Asian* boy, coming down the hall with a shy smile. The shiny floor glistened like a path of light beneath him.

Zack couldn't help his shock. This part of town was so white that he'd been the only Asian kid all through sixth grade. He wondered if the boy was just here for summer school, or if he'd stay for the fall.

"Who doesn't play *Mythrealm*?" Zack composed himself and pressed his voice low, as he always did when talking to someone new, because otherwise the first impression they got was that he looked and sounded like a girl. Even short hair and baggy clothes didn't help when he was so scrawny. Still, he smiled a little. He loved being able to make friends through *Mythrealm*. It'd been a long time coming. The game—and XY Technologies' portal-lenses in general—had blown up about three years ago, but that had also been when he and his mom had to move out of New York because she could no longer afford it, so she couldn't afford to get him a portal-lens then either. *Mythrealm* did have a phone app version, but the controls were much more cumbersome, so nobody wanted to play with the kid who had to use their phone exclusively. Only after

Zack's mom had surprised him with a portal-lens on his birthday last year had he finally been able to play for real, make friends through it, and even earn a little money from trades on the secondary market—which was how he could afford to buy school lunches every day instead of eating what his mom had packed. "I'm even on the school team," Zack added. "That's why I'm here. Get some classes outta the way in summer, and there's more time to prep for tournaments in the fall."

"That's awesome! Wanna add each other?" the boy said while opening the *Mythrealm* app on his phone. His accent sounded like Zack's mom's, which meant he was probably also from mainland China, speaking Mandarin Chinese as a first language.

Zack's excitement slowed into caution, as it always did when he met another kid from China. There was a chance that politics would get between them, considering that Zack's mom had to flee with him from the Chinese government when he was just a baby. Most Westerners thought of Chinese people as all having the same background and same beliefs, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Zack was often frustrated that English labeled them all as "Chinese," while in Mandarin there was a clear difference between *Huárén*, someone of Chinese descent, and *Dàlùrén*, someone from mainland China. *Huárén* had been migrating all over the world for centuries, maybe millennia. Back in New York, his mom's Chinese friends had been mostly from Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries—those who were *Huárén* but not

Dàlùrén, and thus were more likely to be as against the mainland Chinese government as she was.

It wasn't that Zack had to stay away from all fellow mainlanders. After all, his mom had friends from there, too. But he first had to figure out if the boy was gung-ho about the Chinese government—the way some kids here believed the American government was all good and powerful without questioning it—before getting too close to him. It was an awkward question to ask right away, though, so Zack just flashed a hopefully natural-looking smile and opened his own *Mythrealm* profile on his portal-lens, which was connected to his phone app.

"So you're Zachary Ying, right?" The boy held up the friend-ing QR code on his phone screen. "I'm Simon Li."

"How'd you know my name?" Zack frowned as he pointed a finger beneath the code, which made his portal-lens scan it. A thin neon square closed around the code and flashed, then Simon's profile popped up in Zack's view. He tapped the floating friend-request button.

"A teacher told me!"

Zack blinked fast. He didn't know how to feel about that. He could guess what had happened—Simon must've dropped into summer school for some August classes, and a teacher must've told him to find Zack, as if they should automatically be friends just because they were both Chinese. It was another sharp reminder that when people looked at Zack, Chinese was all they saw. *Ha-ha, of course the two Asian kids found each other*, he could already imagine the other kids saying.

A familiar exhaustion weighed down on Zack. He was tired of being singled out because of how he looked, which had gotten so much worse after moving to Maine. Back in New York, people were so diverse that his race was hardly a huge deal, but here, it was like he walked with a glaring sign saying FOREIGNER. He didn't get it. He was as American as any other kid in his classes. He couldn't even speak Mandarin besides a few basic phrases. Why couldn't people see past his face?

"So is your family name the same Ying as the First Emperor's?" Simon turned his phone back toward himself. His thick bangs seriously needed trimming; they were so long that they basically hid his eyes.

"The what?" Zack took off his portal-lens and smoothed out his own hair, which his mom always complained was too messy.

"The First Emperor of China. Everyone calls him by his title, Qin Shi Huang, but his real name was Ying Zheng. Is your Ying the same as his Ying? I mean, there are a couple of different family names that are read as Ying, but his is really rare. 'Cause, you know, most of his kids were killed when his dynasty fell. But if your Ying is his Ying, you're probably from a surviving lineage!"

"What are you talking about?" Zack's own last name didn't sound like a real word anymore.

Well, it never sounded like a real word. He had no idea if it meant anything. Besides, he hated it. He'd been teased all his life about how it made his name sound like a verb. *Zachary-ing*. Past definitions included "running out of breath faster than

anyone else in gym,” “acting like a girl when you’re a boy,” and, of course, “bringing weird food to school.”

“You don’t know who the First Emperor of China is?” Simon recoiled. “Wow, what is going on in American schools? He, like, invented China! That’s a big deal, even for world history! By 221 BCE, he had conquered the Seven Warring States and declared himself—”

Oh God. This was too much. *Ha-ha, of course the two Chinese kids are nerding out about ancient Chinese history together*, Zack imagined other kids saying again.

“Listen, uh”—he cut Simon off—“speaking of history, I actually have that class right now. And I told the teacher I’d only be at the bathroom for a little while. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Oh. Okay.” Simon whipped his bangs out of his eyes, which caught the gleam of his phone screen. “You should search up the First Emperor of China, though. He’s pretty cool. I’ll send you a link!”

“All right. Thanks.” Zack snatched his lunch box off the paper-waste bin lid.

“Wait, were you gonna throw that food out?” Simon pointed.

“What?” Zack laughed a little too stiffly. He slapped the compost bin shut. “Of course not. I was throwing . . . something else out.”

“Kid, you care way too much about what other people think.”

Zack jolted, then looked around as cold sweat broke under his shirt and jeans. That voice definitely didn’t come from his phone or portal-lens.

“What’s wrong?” Simon’s gaze turned weirdly piercing.

“Um. Nothing. Just . . . bye.” Zack shuffled away.

When he passed the bathroom, he briefly thought of flushing his lunch down a toilet, but he couldn’t stomach the idea of doing *that* to his mom’s cooking. At least compost went somewhere valuable. Or so he told himself.

Maybe the voice was his conscience.

But since when were consciences so loud?

Once Zack got back to history class, he sat down with his friends to continue their project on Alexander the Great.

“Welcome back. Had fun?” quipped Aiden from across the small round table, twirling his tablet pen with a lazy grin. He was the captain of their *Mythrealm* team, and Zack’s heart had an embarrassing tendency to beat faster around him. Not only was Aiden absurdly tall, his short blond hair was always impeccably styled.

“I got held up by this random new Chinese kid, actually,” Zack muttered, averting his gaze from Aiden’s pale blue eyes. “You guys heard anything about him?”

“Why are you asking us? You’re the one who’s also Chinese,” said Trevor, another member of their *Mythrealm* team. He had shaggy brown hair and wore the same weatherworn hoodie year-round. Or maybe it was two twin hoodies that he switched around. Theories differed.

“That doesn’t mean I know anything about him!” Zack spluttered. “That’s why I’m asking!”

Trevor's hands shot up in defense. "Sorry. Don't sue me."

Zack tensed back a sigh, not wanting to seem so sensitive that he'd get offended at a single comment. After checking to make sure Ms. Fairweather was busy helping another group, he scrolled on his phone under the table. Simon had already sent him a message on *Mythrealm* and a link to an article about the First Emperor of China. "This kid's kind of intense. He said a whole bunch of stuff about some emperor and made me add him on *Myth*—*whoa*."

"What?" Trevor peeked over at Zack's phone, which was open to Simon's *Mythrealm* profile. It showcased six favorite virtual myth creatures in Simon's collection, visible to friends only. All of them were maxed rank and extremely rare.

Trevor's jaw dropped as well. "Is that an Exalted level ten hydra?" he exclaimed, drawing looks from a nearby table. "And an *Exalted level ten Chinese dragon*?"

Zack shot a nervous glance at Ms. Fairweather, ready to pocket his phone. Luckily, she didn't seem to have heard.

"Are you serious?" Aiden snatched the phone from Zack. "Dude, I've been needing an Exalted version of that! How much is it worth now?"

Trevor did a quick search on his own phone, then looked up with a mind-blown expression. "About two thousand dollars on *Mythrealm Exchange*."

"No way that kid could've caught all these on his own." Aiden's wide eyes reflected the glow of Zack's phone. "His family must be rich!"

“Well, duh, he’s an international student.” Trevor shrugged in almost a defeated way. “They’re all rich.”

“Zack isn’t rich,” Aiden said. “His mom works at Target.”

Heat scorched Zack’s ears, but he tried to keep his tone unbothered. “I’m not an international student. And my mom works at UMaine, too.”

“Well, my sister says these crazy rich Asians are all over UCLA, wearing Supreme and driving BMWs and Porsches.” Trevor huffed. “More like University of Caucasians Lost among Asians.”

Aiden choked out a laugh. “You are so not allowed to say that.”

“We’re friends with Zack! We get a pass, right?” Trevor nudged an elbow at Zack, grinning.

“Uh—” Zack didn’t know how to answer that. He just reached to take his phone back.

“Dude, you need to actually become this kid’s friend.” Aiden waved the phone in a way that prevented Zack from getting it. “You gotta borrow this dragon for me.”

Zack drew his hand back as casually as possible so he wouldn’t seem desperate for his phone. Aiden would prank him by keeping it longer if he sensed it.

“Ugh, you weakling. These boys are no true friends.”

Zack sucked in a sharp breath. What *was* that voice? How was it speaking right in his head?

“Zack?” Aiden leaned closer. “Did you hear me?”

“Oh, um . . .” Zack hesitated. Whenever Aiden said “borrow,”

he never meant the part where you gave the thing back. A few months ago, when walking near a pond with *Mythrealm* open on his portal-lens, Zack had captured a super-rare level 5 boto, a shape-shifting dolphin from South American myth. The next day, Aiden had “borrowed” it. He still had it. “Come on,” Zack said. “He’s never gonna let me borrow a two-thousand-dollar creature.”

“If his parents are letting a twelve-year-old—is he also twelve?—have that, that amount of money is obviously nothing to his family. Besides, it’s not like we could lose it.”

“You already have a level ten Chinese dragon, Aiden. It does the same thing.”

Exalted *Mythrealm* creatures were only different aesthetically, having a fancier design that spawns with a one-in-ten-thousand chance.

“But it’s not *Exalted*. Look, I’m running my Water-type roster for the next regionals. If you don’t get this for me, my Chinese dragon will be my only creature that’s plain.”

“No one’s gonna expect you to have an Exalted one,” Zack pleaded. Unlike Western dragons, Chinese dragons controlled water, not fire, and were by far the most powerful Water-type creature in *Mythrealm*—and thus rarer than rare.

“But imagine their faces if I do show up with it! It would make our rep forever.” Aiden stared into Zack’s soul with his striking blue eyes, making Zack’s skin grow uncomfortably warm. “Come on, dude. Be a team player.”

Zack bit his lips together. It didn’t look like Aiden was going

to back down, and he didn't want Aiden to hold a grudge against him. He couldn't lose his friends and go back to being the weird kid eating alone at lunch. "Fine. I'll talk to him."

A dazzling smile broke across Aiden's face. He pointed at Trevor with his chin, then bumped Zack on the shoulder. "We'll come with you. Give you some moral support." He placed Zack's phone back in front of him. "Tell him to meet us after school."

"Um. Okay."

When Aiden said "us," Zack didn't know he meant them, Trevor, plus three other boys on their team also taking summer classes.

"Zack!" Simon laughed nervously in the looming shadows of Zack and his five teammates. They were at the school's back entrance, right near the turf and running track. "Did you read that link I sent you?"

"Not yet. Sorry." Zack scratched the back of his head. He didn't like how it looked, them crowding around Simon, but saying something like *Don't worry; we're not here to beat you up!* seemed like it'd make everything worse.

"So, Simon." Aiden slipped on his portal-lens. "Zack tells me you have an Exalted level ten Chinese dragon." He strode toward the running track as he spoke, and everyone followed, equipping themselves with their own portal-lenses. *Myth-realm* players never wasted time standing around outside. They were always on the move, collecting the virtual creatures and in-game items that spawned everywhere.

"I—I didn't tell him that. Not deliberately." Zack adjusted his portal-lens to hide his guilty glance at Simon. "I just showed them your profile. Because of how impressive it is."

"Yeah, it really is impressive." Aiden peered sideways at Simon. "Listen, I don't know how the tournament circuit works in China, but over here, we have a regional one in two weeks. I'm running my Water roster. I would really appreciate it if you would let me borrow your dragon."

"Oh, uh—" Simon clutched the straps of his schoolbag.

"Come on. You'd be doing me a huge favor."

"Um . . ." Simon stopped walking, shoes scuffing the red-paved track. "That dragon is pretty important to me. I don't know if I'd feel comfortable lending it out."

Aiden halted as well, spinning toward Simon with his hands in his jean pockets. "Relax, we'll give it back right after."

Simon glanced up at the group. He was taller than Zack, but shorter than Zack's five teammates, so they seemed to be bearing down on him. Just when he looked about to stutter out something else, he suddenly squeezed his eyes shut as if hit with a wave of pain. A strong wind blew over, rustling everyone's hair and skimming a raindrop across Zack's portal-lens. Zack flinched, but the material of the lens was so water-resistant that moisture slid right off, and no water mark lingered.

When Simon opened his eyes again, there was something completely different about him.

"I'm not giving you my dragon," he snapped with shocking

force. He raised his chin and straightened his back. His stare turned as sharp as knife edges under his thick bangs.

Aiden bristled. Zack exchanged bewildered looks with the others, relieved to find he wasn't the only one who had noticed Simon's change. As the wind blew Simon's hair out of his eyes, he looked strangely familiar, yet Zack couldn't figure out from where.

Aiden recovered and said, "Why? Are you actually coming to the regionals with the dragon or something?"

"It doesn't matter," Simon said. "You're not getting the dragon, and that's that."

Chills shivered across Zack's shoulders. He was awed by Simon's audacity, the confidence he was summoning despite being surrounded by six other boys. Where had it come from? More and more raindrops plummeted from the sky, streaking across Simon's portal-lens, yet he didn't even blink.

A scowl scrunched up Aiden's face, then he relaxed his expression and leaned down slightly. "Are you staying here past the summer? Wouldn't you want to join our team?"

Zack had never heard someone "chuckle" in real life, but Simon made a sound pretty close to how villains did it in movies. "Team? This game isn't even played in teams. You call yourself a team because you pool your resources and knowledge. I have more of that than all of you combined. Why would I downgrade?"

"Wow!" Aiden lurched back. "Didn't think you'd be such an arrogant little jerk."

Simon laughed again. "It's just a silly game. Don't take it so seriously."

Lightning flashed across the school grounds, glinting in Simon's eyes. Aiden's fists clenched. Panic burst through Zack's chest.

He darted in front of Simon just as the shove from Aiden came. Aiden's palm smashed into Zack's collarbone, jarring him against Simon. Simon stumbled a step back, steadying Zack by his shoulders.

"Dude, stop!" Zack said to Aiden, surprising himself with how firm he sounded. Fear instinctively recoiled into him, but a few murmurs of agreement from his other teammates gave him the courage to go on. "If he doesn't want to give us the dragon, he doesn't have to. This is going too far. You're making the team look bad."

"No, *you're* making the team look bad." A wild intensity bloomed in Aiden's eyes. "You've always made it look bad. I never wanted you on it!"

Before Zack could process the shock of hearing that, thunder crashed and rumbled in the distance. Aiden snatched Zack by the arm.

"Give me that dragon!" Aiden shouted at Simon while shaking Zack. His grip was so painful that Zack gasped, terrified that his bones might actually break. "Transfer it to my account right now, or I'll hurt him!"

Variations of "Whoa, man!" erupted from their teammates. Trevor made a grab for Aiden's elbow.

“Stay out of this!” Aiden smacked Trevor with his free arm.

Trevor went sailing out of the track. He landed in the inner turf with a thud and a scream of pain.

Zack was so stunned he couldn’t breathe. The cries of his three other teammates reached him distantly, as if through a tunnel. They ran to help Trevor while casting horrified glances over their shoulders. Another flash of lightning blanched their faces. It was now raining so thickly that the tips of Zack’s hair plastered to his scalp. He didn’t understand what was going on. No matter how much of a jerk Aiden could be, he would never do *this*.

This wasn’t him.

“You have ten seconds!” Aiden yelled at Simon, fingers crushing Zack’s arm. A yelp shot out of Zack’s throat.

Simon said nothing. He stared intently at Zack, as if expecting something to happen.

“Dragon! Now!” Aiden kept demanding.

“Zack,” Simon said, deathly calm, “in 221 BCE, the First Emperor of China unified the Seven Warring States and founded the Qin dynasty, the first imperial dynasty of—”

Aiden twisted Zack’s arm. Zack screamed. How could Simon be rambling about Chinese history right now? “*What are you—*”

Zack choked on his words upon catching sight of Aiden’s face in his periphery.

Aiden's eyes were glowing completely fluorescent green, and a *Mythrealm* tag hovered beside his face.

TAOTIE (TA-OW-TYEH)

Dark Type

Origin: Chinese

A malevolent creature of greed with the body of a goat, the fangs of a tiger, the hands of a human, and eyes under its armpits. It will eat whatever it sees, even if it means stuffing itself to death.

No matter how Zack moved his head, the tag's indicator ring encircled Aiden's rain-splattered face. Not only that, but an energy meter trailed above the tag. And Zack's own energy meter appeared at his bottom right. Just like the interface during a *Mythrealm* battle.

Simon went on in a rush of words. "The Qin dynasty set up a government system that'd be used for the next two thousand years. The First Emperor built the Great Wall and the Terra-Cotta Army, and—"

With an almost animalistic howl, Aiden switched his grip from Zack's arm to Zack's neck, lifting him into the air. Zack screamed again while kicking uselessly against Aiden's legs. What were the others doing? Were they just standing on the turf and gawking? Zack tried to pry at Aiden's grasp, but his strength was pathetic compared to Aiden's. It had always been.

If only Zack were stronger. If only.

Simon let out an exasperated sigh. “Zack, *click the link I sent you!*” he yelled over Zack’s shrieking while taking out his phone.

A new message from him popped up on Zack’s portal-lens.

Simon Li: READ IT.

Wheezing, Zack double-tapped the air where the transparent notification appeared. It opened to his chat history with Simon. He aligned his finger with the link and tapped again. A webpage flew open on his portal interface.

Qin Shi Huang, birth name Ying Zheng, was the first emperor of a unified China. He was born in 259 BCE—

As he skimmed the summary, something happened to him. His senses retreated into himself, as if plunging into water. Aiden and the whole chaos of the situation faded to darkness. A shadowy figure in heavy black robes appeared in Zack’s mind.

“Finally! Be my mortal host, boy, and I will do everything in my power to grant you your greatest desire,” the figure said in the same low, gruff voice Zack had heard earlier. *“So, tell me: What is the one thing you wish most direly for?”*

Aiden may have faded out of Zack’s awareness, but Zack’s heart still thrashed with panic. “I want to be stronger,” he blurted. “Make me stronger!”

The figure burst into echoing laughter, then rushed at Zack

like howling wind. "That's what I like to hear!"

Before Zack could scream again, reality blew back into his senses. But everything was dimmer, duller. Aiden was still clutching him by the neck, yet Zack's arms hung limp at his sides. He couldn't move them.

Zack heard a growl rip out of his own throat, even though he'd had no intention of making a noise like that. A string of words that sounded vaguely Chinese, but not any dialect Zack recognized, rasped from his mouth. In his utter confusion, he caught how his energy meter dropped a huge chunk.

Then everything slowed down.

Literally.

In vivid detail, Zack saw the deepening grooves of Aiden's contorting expression, the lashing of his tongue, and the individual flecks of spittle flying out of his mouth.

As if controlled by someone else, Zack's arms shot up at normal speed and wrenched Aiden's fingers from his neck. When Zack dropped to the ground, the rainwater under his soles splashed out from the red track in slow motion, like two watery crowns. He tried to turn and run, but his body still wouldn't respond. It cleared a distance from Aiden with several backward steps, then the flow of time coursed back to normal like a restarted train. Aiden looked disoriented for a second, grasping at the air where Zack used to be. Then he snarled and charged toward Zack.

Zack's arms swung out and slammed downward.

At once a storm descended.

A downpour of water struck the track like a million tiny bullets, wave after wave after wave, so loud he could barely hear Aiden's hollering and so thick he could barely see their teammates freaking out on the turf. Everyone else was drenched within seconds, yet Zack remained dry. The rain swerved around him like a wet, ghostly aura. He felt his fists clench and curl upward, as if lifting two heavy dumbbells. The ground water swirled up like a twister around him.

Zack's mind went blank except for one thing: *Unlike Western dragons, Chinese dragons controlled water, not fire.*

To his rising horror, a network of black lines darkened across his arms. Like veins, except straighter and more angular. Despite not getting wet, a coldness seeped into his bones. His energy meter drained steadily. His hands drew inward with a massive effort he only faintly felt, then made the motion of throwing a baseball.

The frothy twister of water around him hurtled toward Aiden as a single shooting stream. It splattered on and on into Aiden's chest, making him stagger and stumble.

Zack's body stepped forward calmly. Bolts of lightning shot down around him as he walked, each coming with an earth-shaking clap of thunder, charring craters into the track. The air practically hummed, charged with the smell of burning rubber. His every hair rose on its end.

What the heck is happening?

All Zack wanted to do was scream and run and hide, yet his body refused to obey. His black-lined fingers splayed to

the sides. The rainstorm gathered into orbs of churning water beneath his palms.

His hands slammed the orbs together and thrust the combined water forward. It caught Aiden's head and trapped it, swirling around it like a sphere of liquid glass. Flailing, Aiden tripped over his own feet and fell. He rolled over the wet track and onto the turf, but the water wouldn't let his head go. His energy meter dropped rapidly.

Fresh terror surged through Zack.

Stop! he tried to yell, but the sound wouldn't come out anywhere. His black-lined hands extended before him like claws, moving in circles that matched the water sphere's motion. Aiden grasped for his throat, hands splashing into the water, but it was useless. His energy meter drained to its last quarter.

Zack had a bad feeling about what would happen if the meter hit zero.

Stop! Stop it! He struggled for control over his body.

"Back off, kid!" came both out of his mouth and in his head.

The voice in his head was the same one that had been haunting him all day.

Zack was sure, then. He was being possessed. The voice was using his body to kill Aiden.

Be my mortal host, it had said.

Oh God, what had Zack agreed to?

He'd made a terrible mistake. This wasn't what he wanted!

Stop! Stop! Stop! he mentally shrieked over and over.

His hands and the water sphere faltered a little.

"Kid, shut up!" the voice snapped.

Zack refused. *Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!*

"No, you are going to—"

Stop! Stop—

"Stop!" The word finally broke free from his mouth.

Zack swore his breath came out like black mist for a moment before the world sharpened. His senses crashed back to their full depths. The sphere of water collapsed, leaving Aiden choking for air. His energy meter stopped draining, almost depleted.

Zack's legs buckled. His knees hit the wet track, his previously dry jeans soaking instantly. The storm weighed down his hair and drenched his skin like a shower. The black lines faded from his skin, and so did the bone-biting coldness.

Messages appeared on his portal-lens, having no sender's name.

: NO.

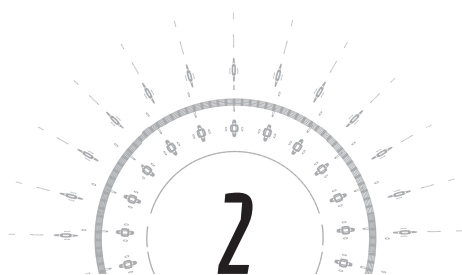
: WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

The rain leveled off to a drizzle. Dark green smoke curled out of Aiden's mouth. It briefly took a monstrous shape before unraveling in the air. His energy meter vanished.

Zack's breath came in short, hyperventilating spurts. He braced against the track, vision swinging, nausea tiding in his belly.

Another message came. But this time it bore a name.

Qin Shi Huang: YOU TRULY DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE, BOY.



How Not to Win a Battle Using Soup

ZACK RAN HOME.

He thought he heard Simon calling after him, but he didn't turn back. He didn't want to stay there for another second.

His sneakers scuffed and pounded over wet sidewalks. He scrunched up his schoolbag's shoulder strap so the bag wouldn't keep thumping against his hip. Suburban houses flew past him. For once, he didn't drag this trip out to harvest as many *Mythrealm* items as he could before they stopped spawning after dark. He didn't care about any of that anymore.

When the strange messages wouldn't stop coming, he deleted the *Mythrealm* app from his phone and portal-lens. He considered throwing his portal-lens into the street altogether, but one thought about how long his mom had saved up to buy it for him, and he couldn't bear it. He shoved it into his schoolbag instead.

He made it to the side door of the basement suite he and

his mom lived in. His hands shook so hard it took him several tries to tap in the right pass code for the smart lock. Once he shoved his way in, he ditched his bag on a chair near the kitchen table like it was a ticking bomb, then bounded for his room and slammed the door behind him.

He sank to the carpet, back hitting his bed frame. A dreary slant of light cut through the narrow window that peeked aboveground. For a small eternity, he sat with his face in his trembling hands, struggling for air. His teeth chattered, and his soaked clothes clung to him like frost. He wiggled out of them, but the wet coldness remained so uncomfortable that he had to go take a hot shower.

The moment he turned on the showerhead, the sight of the jetting water stopped him dead. The memory of himself gathering rain into orbs of water while striding between striking bolts of lightning flashed back to him. A prickle raced up his scalp. He stared at the water as it gradually steamed up, then stepped into the shower stall and cautiously moved his hands around.

Nothing happened. Nothing stirred in him in response to the water beating down on his body, except a sharp pain when it turned too hot. Hissing, he wrenched the temperature down. He didn't feel anything that suggested he could . . . control the water.

Had everything been a dream? A hallucination?

Simon and his teammates could tell him. Maybe some of them had even caught a video with their phones.

But that wasn't *Zack* controlling the water. Not *him* trying to drown Aiden.

Oh God, what if they thought it was? What if they reported him as a superpowered murderer?

Zack scrambled out of the shower, grabbed a towel, and hurried back to his room to dig his phone out of his damp pants. His wet feet soaked the carpet further.

No new posts from his teammates. No internet mob flooding his notifications. A relieved sigh heaved out of him, and he sat down on his bed, toweling himself.

But he tensed back up, because his teammates were *too* silent.

What happened after he left? Was Trevor okay? Was Aiden? Why hadn't he stayed to make sure?

Zack berated himself for running away without figuring things out. Yet when he opened his messenger app, his thumbs hovered uselessly. He couldn't muster the courage to text any of them.

Wimp, he thought, curling up beneath his covers.

demonic possession

spiritual possession

first emperor of china

Huddling in his bed, Zack paused on the search results of that last term. There was a bunch of news about how there'd been a recent earthquake near the emperor's massive, mercury-filled mausoleum. Too freaked out to continue, Zack closed the page without tapping anything. Listening to the info Simon

had blabbed out and reading the link he'd sent was how Zack had lost control of his body.

The searches about possession hadn't been any help either. They'd been all about psychiatrists trying to debunk it or Christian-centric possession stories. He was pretty sure his case had nothing to do with those. No, he'd been possessed by . . . the First Emperor of China?

He wanted to laugh off that idea. It was ridiculous. That kind of stuff only happened in movies.

But he couldn't deny what had gone down on that track. In that storm. The storm that his body had controlled.

Tell me: What is the one thing you wish most direly for?

Make me stronger.

Had he accidentally made a *deal* with the emperor? A monkey's-paw wish, the kind that came true in the worst possible way? He'd read a short story about that in English last year. But how could something like that happen in real life?

Zack scrolled mindlessly on his phone, watching videos of people doing silly things and telling silly stories, laughing occasionally like a robot without really feeling any better inside. Only when the newest promo video from XY Technologies popped up did he really pay attention. It was a teaser for the latest generation of portal-lenses, X6, releasing later this year. But it wasn't the new functions and incredible specs that snagged Zack's mind, but the person talking about them over a chill, futuristic-sounding beat: Xuan Jihong, aka Jason Xuan, founder of XY Technologies.

He was everything Zack wanted to be. Looking at him talking about revolutionary display pixels and unprecedented battery life, with his movie star looks, sharp suit, and glinting, expensive watch, Zack felt worse about doing nothing but cowering in his bed. Jason had also lost his father when he was a baby, though he'd had it even tougher than Zack, having grown up in rural China. But he had studied so hard and won so many coding competitions in his teens that he'd received a full-ride scholarship to MIT. There, he developed his idea of portal-lenses into reality, then founded XY Technologies to create features and games for them. By age twenty-four, he was a millionaire. Now, ten years later, he was a billionaire leading the tech and gaming worlds, so prolific that he was instrumental in convincing the Chinese government to drop some of their strict video gaming restrictions.

In every interview with him that Zack had watched, Jason gave credit to his mom for devoting her life to raising him and teaching him both discipline and innovation. Just like Zack's mom, who'd been a biochemical engineer back in China but had to work mostly retail jobs in America while raising him alone. Yet, for the longest time, she'd never made him feel like they were struggling. He'd been so much happier when he'd been little, when he hadn't realized his mom had been lying on those nights when she would make him dinner but not eat anything herself because she had "already eaten." Other kids had been simpler back then too, not noticing or caring that Zack's clothes and shoes were never new, or that he watched

free documentaries on YouTube instead of the newest Netflix shows, or that he and his mom never went on any vacations or ate at any fancy restaurants. When she had free time and the sun was shining, she would pack some food and take him for a picnic in Central Park, and that had been enough for him.

A wave of hot shame rolled through Zack as he remembered how he had pleaded and begged for a portal-lens before his ninth birthday, then how his mom had burst into tears the night before it, saying how sorry she was that she couldn't get it for him without worrying if they could make rent, and that she wasn't even sure they could afford to stay in New York. That had been the night Zack had realized he couldn't be like other kids anymore, that he had to get straight As and stay out of trouble and never add more to his mom's worries.

This was why Zack never told his mom about his issues making new friends every time they moved, first from New York to Maine when he was in third grade and then to a different neighborhood after he graduated elementary school. He didn't want her to regret any decision to make her own life easier. She was able to get a part-time position in the labs at UMaine, the first step to picking up her science career again, and they were much less strapped for money. Even though the basement suite they now lived in was still a basement suite, it was roomier than their apartment in New York and quieter than their first home in Maine.

After hearing Jason Xuan's story in fourth grade through a YouTube documentary, Zack had learned to code. He'd been

making more and more complex games, though he wasn't brave enough to put them online yet. He didn't dare dream of having a rise like Jason's, but he at least wanted to go to MIT too, and make enough money to give his mom the life she deserved. No more cramped apartments in shady neighborhoods, no more basement suites, no more picking up shifts in stores where customers yelled at her for things she had no control over.

Zack was so lost in his dreams for the future that the clatter of the front door almost startled his soul out of his body. He lurched up under his covers. He'd hardly noticed that the rainy daylight had waned from his window.

"Zack?" his mom called out.

"Yeah?" He rushed to flip on his light switch.

But it was too late. She would've noticed the darkness of their suite as soon as she'd walked in, hence the concern. She knocked on his door. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, was just taking a nap!"

"You stay up late playing video games again?"

"No! I—I was just really tired today. We studied a lot of . . . history."

Before this day, Zack never got why comic book characters who got superpowers always had to hide them. Now he knew. He understood. He *related*. How was he supposed to *begin* explaining what'd happened without sounding out of his mind?

"Ah, okay." His mom's slipped footsteps shuffled away from his door.