

Chapter One: The Worst Monday Ever

Max glared at his science project for probably the 20th time that evening, sub-consciously grumbling “stupid plant,” over and over again under his breath. It didn’t make any sense. Plants just don’t grow 4 feet in 2 weeks.

Certainly his research had suggested that the plant he sang to should do better than the plant he did not sing to, but how could a little extra carbon dioxide act as a plant steroid? He stared at his empty piece of paper, trying to will an explanation onto the blank sheet. Mistress Abbot was going to fail him. That was all there was too it.

“Stupid plant,” he muttered again. “Not only did I waste a lot of time taking care of you, but now I’m not even going to be rewarded for it.”

In an attempt to distract himself, Max turned his attentions to the plant he had not sung to, the control plant. Now there was a plant that knew how to behave. Maybe if he trimmed the other plant down... But no, Mistress Abbot would notice, and that would look even more suspicious.

Two weeks ago Max had gone to the local garden store, owned by his best friend Penelope’s parents, and carefully selected two plants of as close to identical size and shape as possible. Penelope’s mother, Mrs. Fringe, told Max how to properly care for the plants and helped him take a picture to record the starting conditions.

Max had placed Plant A, the control, on the windowsill in his father’s study. His father was the only one who spent any time in there, and he was always quiet when he was actually at home. No risk of any unaccounted for singing around Plant A. Plant B had been placed in Max’s room and he sang to it twice a day for 5 minutes each time. At first, everything had seemed normal. Plant B was slightly greener, maybe a bit more happy than Plant A, assuming plants could feel happy, but otherwise, things were right on track. Max was certain he was going to get an ‘A.’

Until last week. Max noticed that Plant B was slightly larger than Plant A, but he passed it off as a normal growth spurt. After all, people went through growth spurts, so why not plants? By Friday, Plant B had increased 2 feet in height, and now, Sunday night, the night before the project was due, the stupid plant had grown 4 whole feet, bringing it to a total height of 4 feet and 5 inches.

Max let out a huge sigh as he ran his hands through his unruly, dusty blond hair. There was no way around it. He would just have to suck it up, pretend like a 4-foot growth spurt was normal for a plant receiving extra doses of carbon dioxide (or maybe the plant really liked his songs), and complete the project. Maybe Mistress Abbot wouldn't notice anything. Maybe this was what was supposed to happen only none of the books wrote about it so that the teachers could tell if the students really did the experiment. Max had almost convinced himself of this line of thought when he looked over to discover that the plant had grown another 4 inches. "Stupid Plant!"

Max tossed and turned the whole night, falling in and out of nightmares that grew more and more bizarre, finally ending with Plant B giving the science presentation himself while Plant A made notes in the grade book. When he finally awoke, Max was horrified to discover that he had overslept and had only 15 minutes to get to school. He didn't want to think what Mistress Abbot would do to him if he were late on top of the plant disaster.

Throwing on the first shirt and pair of jeans he could find, Max grabbed his school bag, shoved as much of Plant B in as he could (thankfully it was a bendy plant), grabbed Plant A, and, sloshing dirt as he ran, dashed out the door and off to school. Max slid through the doors, panting from his morning sprint, just as the bell was going off. He hurriedly threw the plants into his locker and bolted to math.

For the umpteenth time that semester, Max wondered who in their right mind had decided that math first thing on a Monday morning was a good idea? It was hard enough to make it back to school after the weekend, but knowing you were walking into 50 minutes of denominators and multiplication tables made it all the harder.

This morning was especially taxing. The teacher, Master Rubus, was droning on and on in his monotonous voice about the hypotenuse and the Pythagorean theorem. Max felt a slight nudge against his foot and looking up from his half-dazed state discovered his neighbor, Joseph, passing him a note. Max could not count the number of times he and Joseph had gotten into trouble in math class, but still, he reached his hand over as inconspicuously as possible, and, grabbing the note, opened it up to find scrawled more like hypnotics and the PythaBoring Theorem. Max stifled a laugh as he went to hide the piece of paper in his book. Just at that

moment, Janice Fink, one of his least favorite classmates, raised her hand. “Master Rubus,” she squealed, an evil smile tickling the corners of her lips, “Max and Joseph are passing notes again.” Master Rubus stared at Max and Max felt his cheeks glowing tomato red with guilt. “Master Heights, perhaps you would like to bring that scrap of paper up to me so that I may share it with the rest of the class? After all, it is impolite not to share the joke.”

Max scraped his chair across the floor, emitting a loud squeak as he slowly stood up, paper in hand. Not meeting Master Rubus’ eyes, he handed over the scrap cupped within his palm and shot a glare towards Fink. Master Rubus unfolded the paper and proceeded to read it aloud. It didn’t seem as funny coming from their stuffy math teacher’s mouth.

When Master Rubus had finished, he told Max to return to his seat, and informed both him and Joseph that they were each to compose a 500-word essay on the value of the Pythagorean theorem and why it was far from boring.

By the time the bell rang signaling the end of first period, Max was already wishing the day were over. Extra assignments first thing Monday morning were never a good omen. And he had yet to even broach science class.

Collecting his things, he skulked out of the classroom, wanting no more encounters with Master Rubus. Just as his foot reached the threshold of math freedom, he heard a little cough, and the voice of Master Rubus. ‘Eh Um, Master Heights, a word please.’”

Trying to keep the fear from his face, Max shuffled his way slowly back into the classroom and over to Master Rubus’ desk. “Now, Master Heights, just because you are excelling in this class, you do not have the right to take learning away from those who do not share your natural gift for the arts of mathematics. You would do well to remember this. Next time, your punishment will be much harsher. Now off you go. I hear the bell ringing for second period. We don’t want to be late, now, do we?”

Max mumbled a quick apology, and rushed out of the room, skidding to a halt in front of his next class. Unfortunately, the floor had been waxed over the weekend, so instead of landing feet firmly planted in the ground, he found himself flat on his face, books spewed across the floor. As if this day could get any worse!

As Max was picking up the last of his books, he looked up to see Madame Boucher watching him with piercing eyes. “You are late, Monsieur Heights, and playing the fool. Tsk. Tsk. Please hurry and take your seat. Otherwise I shall be forced to give you an ‘F’ on our pop quiz.” ‘Pop Quiz?! On a Monday?’ Max thought, struggling to remember what he had studied that weekend. French was, by far, his worst subject. For the life of him he could never remember how to properly conjugate anything, or when the past participle was appropriate, let alone what the past participle was. He eagerly awaited the day when he entered the 9th grade so that he could once and for all be done with French. Too bad he still had a few more years to go.

The pop quiz turned out to be far more brutal than he had thought possible. Instead of the normal directions to translate this word into French or conjugate that verb, Madame Boucher read out a full passage and then asked them to translate the whole thing into French. The rest of the lesson was spent completing exercises in their workbook while Madame Boucher read through their quizzes. Every so often a sharp crack would break through the pencil scratching and page turning as Madame Boucher ‘tsked’ whatever student had had the audacity to falsely translate ‘she sells sea shells by the seashore’ or ‘his brother’s closest friend is an elevator operator.’ At one point, she had come to one so offensive that she tsked for a full 5 minutes. Max was certain that this one was his.

By the end of class, Max’s worst fears were proven to be true. Madame Boucher called him to her desk as the other student’s were filing out. “Monsieur Heights, I am quite concerned. You did not manage to translate even one sentence correctly. I fear you are not taking this course seriously. What would you do if one day you found yourself abroad, surrounded by person’s who spoke only French? How would you communicate your needs? But I will never find myself in that situation, you are saying to yourself. Tsk, tsk, tsk,” she continued, her stylish black bob swaying from side to side as she shook her head with each ‘tsk,’ “That is just what happened to me, Monsieur Heights. And do you know what I did? I practiced hard. And now hear, my English is perfect. So you know what I am going to do for you? You may think this is a punishment, but it is a favor. A special treat. I believe you have potential, Monsieur Heights, and I plan to help you greet it, head on.”

At the end of her speech, Madame Boucher piled a book full of exercises into Max's arms, telling him to complete pages 1-25 by the end of the week or there would be severe consequences. Max felt a growing sense of panic welling up inside. Never had a week started this horribly. As the bell rang, Max groaned. Never before had he been late for class three times in a row.

Thankfully, Mistress Catena did not seem to notice Max as he slipped in and silently took his seat. The lights were dimmed and they were watching a slide show highlighting the movements of the stars. As he quietly removed his notebook, Penelope nudged his arm. "Where you been? I haven't seen you all day."

"Don't ask. Today has been awful. Worse than awful. I never should have gotten out of bed."

"That bad, huh?"

"You have no idea."

Mistress Catena cleared her throat, a sign that she wanted quiet, and the two ceased their conversation and settled into taking notes. When the bell rang, Max breathed a sigh of relief. He had actually escaped without an extra assignment or detention or any punishments. Maybe the day was turning around. Or maybe not.

When he got to the hall, Max noticed that Penelope had not followed him out. In fact, no one had. Looking through the door, he saw his classmates lined up, handing in an assignment. 'Oh no!' he thought, suddenly remembering the essay on the metabolic makeup of the sun that was due today. He could see his essay clearly in his mind, sitting in the output tray of his printer, having never made it into his notebook. 'Stupid plant,' he thought, 'this is all your fault.' Had he not been so worried about the project, he would have gotten a full night's sleep, woken on time, remembered his assignment arrived at school on time and, who knows, he maybe could have even remembered some of his French.

Solemnly returning to the classroom, Max waited in line to explain to Mistress Catena how he had completed the assignment, but left it in his printer. He knew Mistress Catena would probably not believe him, but he still had to try. Sure enough, Mistress Catena responded by telling Max that "an assignment not in this classroom is an assignment that is incomplete." She then ordered Max to hand it in before the start of school the next day, no exceptions.

Waiting outside for Max, Penelope strolled up to his side. “Wow, this really isn’t your day, is it?”

“If there were an award for ‘worst day ever,’ I think this day would take it, hands down.”

“You’ve got my vote.”

The two separated as each made their way to their next class, Penelope to P.E. and Max to Drama. Max did not mind drama. He enjoyed helping to create the sets and props. It was improvisation that he had a problem with. Last Friday Master Greco had gleefully informed the class that they would be continuing the unit on improvisation for the rest of the semester “for expecting the unexpected is what separates the dramaturge from the amateur.”

By the time lunch arrived, Max was in such a foul mood that he slammed his things on the table, slumped his head into his arms and barely spoke to anyone. As lunch was nearing its end, Max began to panic once again about his science project. Science was next period, and he still had not figured out how he was going to explain the outcome of his experiment. Leaving the lunchroom, he spotted the unmistakably tight, bouncing black curls that could only belong to Penelope. Rushing over to get her opinion, he saw that she was standing with a group of girls.

“Penelope,” he called, panic seeping out with each breath, “I need to talk to you.”

“What’s up Max? Has your day gotten worse? Did Master Greco assign for you to write an entire play or something?”

“Hey Max,” Brianna Masterson, a petite red-haired girl called out, “I heard what Fink did in Math this morning. You want me to put gum in her hair?”

Max shook his head. Few people liked Fink and so they were always looking for an excuse to play pranks on her. “Nah, she’ll get what she deserves in the end,” Max replied. Lowering his voice he leaned towards Penelope, “It’s urgent. I actually need to show you something.”

Penelope looked longingly at the teller of the story Max had interrupted, “Jenna was just about to get to the good part.”

“Please Penelope,” he pleaded.

“Oh alright, but only because its you. I’ll catch you guys later,” she added, waving to the group of girls.

The girls waved back and returned to whatever story could not wait another second. "So, what is it you wanted to show me? Not all the extra homework assignments you racked up today, I hope?"

"You know how our science projects are due today?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I think something may have gone very wrong with mine. As the daughter of the local greenhouse owner, I'd like your opinion."

"As wrong as your astronomy project you forgot," she teased.

"Much worse."

"What could have gone wrong? Did your plant grow a mouth and sing back? After all, you did get it from my mom's greenhouse? I always suspected my parents were secretly mad scientists masquerading as gardeners."

"Penelope, this is serious. I need you to open my locker and tell me how bad it is. And be truthful."

Penelope walked up to the locker and pulled the door open. Less than half a second later, she slammed it closed, the metal reverberating with the force, and leaned her body against it to keep whatever was inside from getting out, blowing out a long, slow whistle as she did so.

"How bad is it? Do you think she'll fail me?"

"Um, Max, I think Mistress Abbot might notice that you went a little overboard on the fertilizer."

"It wasn't fertilizer, Pen, I swear. All I did was sing to it. It won't stop growing. When I got it, it was only 5 inches tall. Now look at it." Desperation seeped out with each word.

"Ok, let's think about this logically. Maybe it's a special species of plant that grows really fast. I know my mom has some weird things in her greenhouse."

"Penelope, they're both the same species and your mom helped me pick them out. She wouldn't have sold me a plant that didn't know how to behave properly. Besides, the only one that grew was the one I sang to."

"Ok" she said, pausing to think, "maybe...no, I don't know what to tell you Max. I'm sorry. But look on the bright side. If Mistress Abbot fails you, you can always go work for my mom. It's not just anyone that can make a plant grow five feet in 20 minutes."

Looking up at the clock overhead, Max felt another wave of panic wash over him. "Come on, we're going to be late for class. You know how Mistress Abbot gets. And besides, it only grew one foot in 20 minutes," he grumbled.

It took all of his energy not to throw up as he gathered his things and slowly walked down the hall. Several people stopped to stare, but then, who could blame them? The plant was as tall as Max, if not taller.

When Max finally reached the science lab, everyone fell silent. "Wow, Max, looks like your plant's a fan of your singing. Care to entertain us," Fink called out.

A few students chuckled at Fink's attempt at humor. The rest of the class displayed a mixture of emotions. Some looked worried, like maybe their experiments weren't good enough, especially the other students who had chosen to sing to a plant. Others looked smug, as though they knew that this was not what was supposed to happen. And still some looked just plain dumbfounded.

Max made his way to his normal table at the back of the classroom. Penelope, who came in right behind him, followed him to the back and took a seat, whispering encouragements. "So long as you can explain what you did and back up your results with some sort of a conclusion, she can't fail you. I mean it's science. The whole thing is based on people discovering new things, explaining the unexplained."

"It's the unexplained part I'm worried about," Max whispered back. "I don't think Mistress Abbot is into the weird."

Before Penelope could respond, the tippity-tap of Mistress Abbot's kitten heels could be heard reverberating down the hall. Max never could understand the shoe choice. Mistress Abbot was a bulbous woman with extremely thick legs. When left to sprout out of overly tight, daintily heeled shoes, her legs looked even more cumbersome. Max had a secret fantasy about Mistress Abbot's heels breaking one day under the strain of her massive carriage, causing her to fall flat on her face. Certainly this was not a nice fantasy, and Max would not even begin to daydream about

such a thing if anyone else were involved, with the possible exception of Fink, but Mistress Abbot was so awful, you couldn't help but wish her ill will.

As the ominous sound of those heels clacking against the linoleum floor came to a halt in front of the classroom door, several students looked back at Max as though they were hoping he would pass out or suffer from a nervous breakdown. Max sank lower in his chair, only to realize that this drew even more attention to his ridiculously overgrown plant, which he had placed on the floor beside his seat. His heart racing a hundred miles a minute, Max held his breath as Mistress Abbot entered.

"Good afternoon class," her voice droned out in an affected accent, over-enunciating each word, "I trust you have all completed your projects with much fanfare and success?"

At this she glanced around the room, taking in the projects smattered across the tables. After a tantalizing long time, her eyes came to fall upon Max. He gulped and felt his hands grow sweaty while the blood drained from his face. "Well, who shall go first," Mistress Abbott questioned, her eyes never once leaving Max. "How about . . ." here she pretended to scan the room, one eye remaining fixed on Max as a smirk tickled the left side of her lips, "Master Heights. If you will please come to the front and bring your experiment with you."

Gathering his things, Max felt a sudden calm wash over him. He had been dreading this moment for so long, now that it was here he had no worry left in him. As he walked to the front of the classroom, he reminded herself that he had done nothing wrong; he just had to explain the experiment and, so long as he explained it well, she certainly couldn't fail him.

Max began to present his project, starting with the hypothesis and laying out the method. As he flowed into the results, he couldn't help but notice Mistress Abbot taking extensive notes. Uncertain if this was a good or a bad thing, Max fought to ignore it. Finally, he concluded his presentation, stating that an increased amount of carbon dioxide had contributed to Plant B's increased stature.

"Master Heights, if I may," Mistress Abbot began, cutting into Max's closing words. "How much fertilizer did you give Plant B, exactly?" she sneered, pencil raised over her pad as though she couldn't dare to miss jotting down even one word.

Keeping his cool, Max responded, “None. I kept all conditions equal for both plants, except for the singing, of course. I have clearly laid out in my report the amount of water given to each plant and the composition of the potting soil. No additional fertilizer was added.”

“I see,” she paused, chewing on Max’s words, “perhaps, then, you would care to demonstrate your singing abilities.”

“Um, I don’t think I follow.” Max stammered, beginning to grow nervous. He had never been one for performing in front of people, let alone singing in front of them. He could feel the panic welling up inside, threatening to break out.

“Master Heights, I think it should be perfectly clear,” Mistress Abbot continued, her words drowning in sweetly feigned innocence. “We need to see how wide you open your mouth and how breathily you sing so we may determine the veracity of your statement. I cannot help but notice that the other plants in the classroom lack your own plants...vitality. Certainly all of you must have conducted the experiment in a similar fashion? The only unique condition would be the way each person sings. So, sing Master Heights.”

Max tried to open his mouth, but it refused to move. All he could do was stand there, gawking at Mistress Abbot like a brainless twit. “What’s wrong Master Heights? Did you get potting soil in your ears? Much as I am sure the rest of the class is looking forward to the aria you are about to seamlessly perform for us, I am not asking. Your grade depends on it.”

Attempting to block out the other students, especially the gleeful glow radiating off of Fink, Max forced himself to focus. So what if his voice sounded like a newly weaned lamb baying for its mother. None of that mattered. He was not going to fail just because he was embarrassed. He would not let Mistress Abbot, and more importantly, his stupid plant, have the satisfaction. Taking a deep breath, Max began to whisper a song of random gibberish. What he sang, he had no idea.

The strangest thing happened as Max finished his song. The other plant, Plant A, and the plants of the other students’ in the classroom appeared to stretch ever so slightly, and a sound akin to a sigh of longing could be heard throughout the room. A second later, everything was still, and it was as if Max had merely imagined the reaction from the plants. Blessedly, Plant B had not grown anymore.

“Thank you, Master Heights. That was . . . quite lovely,” Mistress Abbot sneered sarcastically, and then turned her attention to the overly manicured Stephanie Bellows, sitting in the front row with her click of popular girls, “You may take your seat. Miss Bellows, would you care to go next?”

Max slunk back to his seat and breathed a sigh of relief. Sure, he did not yet know his grade, but he knew that Mistress Abbot would have been far worse had he received a failing mark. Beside him Penelope, pierced Max with a look of worry and fear as she whispered, “we need to talk.”