
ONE



I Can See Monsters

My name is Nizhoni Begay, and I can see monsters.

In fact, I'm looking at one right now.

The monster is a pale man with thin blond hair, slightly bulging eyes, and unusually red lips. He's tall and skinny, and he has on a black suit and tie. (Monsters wear human skin more often than fairy tales would lead you to think. Scales and horns and claws are strictly for beginners. Trust me, I'm an expert on these things.)

This monster is sitting in the second row of the packed bleachers of my seventh-grade coed basketball game, looking completely normal. Normal except for the fact that he's wearing a suit when everyone else is wearing a T-shirt that says GO, ISOTOPES! OR GO, BEAVERS! depending on which team they're rooting for. Normal except there's a circle of empty space around him despite the gym being filled to capacity, like nobody wants to get close to him. Maybe they feel there's something creepy about him, too, but they aren't sure what it is.

I watch as a lady in a bright purple tracksuit moves in front of him, waving a red-and-black pom-pom dangerously near his

face. Pretty sure if she keeps that up, she's a goner. Monsters don't take kindly to people invading their personal space.

Okay, I made that up. I don't actually know how monsters feel about personal space, or whether they eat ladies in purple tracksuits, and I'm not so much an expert as much as a reluctant amateur. I mean, I've only been able to sense monsters for a few months. It started as a strange feeling while watching a lady massaging the avocados at the farmers' market, and there was the definite bad vibe from the old dude with the scaly feet and Jesus sandals at the Taco Bell. And just like in those instances, every instinct I have is shouting at me that this guy in the bleachers is *not* normal.

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise. A chill—like the time my little brother, Mac, dumped a snowball down my shirt—shudders down my spine. Out of habit, I touch the turquoise pendant I have taped to my chest underneath my shirt. I'm not supposed to wear it during basketball games, but knowing it's there helps me feel brave.

“Nizhoni!”

The way this school year has been going, trying to be brave has become almost a full-time thing. When I left my big public school and transferred to ICCS (short for Intertribal Community Charter School and pronounced *icks*), I really thought things would change for me. And by *change*, I mean I'd have lots of friends and be popular. After all, every student at ICCS is Native American, just like me. But I've been at ICCS for two years now and nothing is different. I'm still not popular, and I'm definitely not cool. I'm just—

“Nizhoni Begay!”

Coach! I whip my head around, because of course I'm not listening (Hello! Monster!), and she is right there in my face. So close, in fact, that drops of spittle fly out of her mouth and hit my cheek every time she shouts my name. I surreptitiously wipe off the spit, trying not to look completely grossed out, even though it's pretty gross.

Coach is no monster, but she has issues with personal space, too—she's always in mine. She's also a little short for basketball—but no one would ever tell her that, because she makes up for being height-challenged by being really loud. Coach is Hopi, so it's not her fault she's so short. Besides, she's scary in other ways. I'm not worried she will eat my eyeballs for hors d'oeuvres or anything. (Eyeball hors d'oeuvres are very popular with monsters. I read that somewhere, FYI.)

Coach snaps her fingers inches from my nose. "Are you even listening?"

I nod. Total lie. Besides, it's time-out. Nobody listens during time-out.

"There's five seconds left in the game!" she yells. "Your focus should be on me"—she points at herself with two fingers—"and your teammates." She gestures at the group of seventh-grade boys and girls now huddling around me. "We need you to pay attention."

"Sure thing, Coach," I chirp obediently, but honestly, all I can think about now are eyeballs stacked like meatballs on a toothpick for easy snacking.

Coach is talking again. "Okay. Davery is going to pass the ball in. Who wants to take the last shot?"

"I'll do it!" I say, raising my hand.

The rest of my team groans in disbelief.

“Put your hand down, Nizhoni,” Coach snaps. “You’re standing right beside me.”

“Oh, right.” I lower it. “But I can take the last shot.”

Coach looks at me. The whole team looks at me. I stand a little straighter to seem extra tall. I, in fact, am not height-challenged. I have a good inch and a half on Coach.

“I’ll take the last shot,” I repeat. Firmly.

“Are you sure, Nizhoni?” Davery whispers. He’s my best friend—okay, my *only* friend—and always has my back, but right now he looks a little worried. His brown eyes are narrowed in concern behind his glasses and his lips press together thoughtfully. He runs a nervous hand over his short-cropped curly hair.

“Easy as pie,” I insist. “You pass the ball to me. I’ll be at the top of the key, and—*swish!*—Isotopes win!” I bust out my most confident smile.

Davery just crinkles his brow.

“Does anyone *else* want to take the last shot?” Coach asks, looking pointedly at the rest of the team. Everyone looks down or away or anywhere else but at Coach, because no one wants that kind of pressure. “Anyone?” she asks again, desperate.

I clear my throat loudly.

“Okay,” Coach says, resigned. “Davery passes the ball to Nizhoni. Nizhoni, you take the shot. Be ready!”

Movement in the bleachers catches my eye. It’s the monster.

I watch as he makes his way past the other spectators. He’s pushy, knocking into people’s knees without even saying

Excuse me. Rude! But then, monsters aren't known for their good manners. Some folks give him a dirty look as he shoves his way through, but most just move aside, rub their arms like they're cold, and mutter unhappily to the person next to them.

I lose sight of him as the crowd rises to their feet.

I twist my neck this way and that, straining to see where he disappeared to in the midst of screaming fans, but he's gone. Lost in a sea of black and red.

Coach claps just as the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of time-out.

Everyone on the team extends an arm into the middle of the circle, touches hands, and yells, "Isotopes!": a rallying cry for what must be the worst mascot in the history of mascots—expect maybe for this one team I heard of called the Fighting Pickles. But really, who even knows what an isotope is? Davery once tried to explain it to me—something to do with the history of nuclear technology and atomic bombs in New Mexico, blah, blah—but I fell asleep halfway through.

Coach is yelling. We hurry to take our spots. Davery is at midcourt with the ball in his hands. I run to the top of the key and get ready for the inbound pass.

I try to visualize the winning shot I'm about to make, like Coach tells us to. I can see it all—the crowd chanting my name, my teammates hoisting me on their shoulders and leading me around the gym in victory, just like a champion in a sports movie. Everyone will know me. I'll be a superstar! Fame! Glory!

I take another quick peek at the crowd, double-checking for the monster in the suit. Nothing, nothing . . . No, wait . . .

There he is! Bottom row, courtside, twenty feet away. His eyes are red and he's staring right at me!

Four things happen all at once.

1. I scream.
2. The ref blows the whistle.
3. Davery shouts my name.
4. And I turn toward him just in time for the basketball to hit me—*smack!*—right between the eyes.