

One



Not Again

“Here we go again,” Evan said and watched Vince, the resident bully, swagger toward yet another freshman. A sly grin spread across Vince’s face, and with practiced precision, he upended the boy’s lunch tray. Meatloaf landed on top of the boy’s head, mashed potatoes flung into his hair, and milk splashed down the front of his shirt.

“Oh, *so* sorry. Let me help you with that,” Vince said, using his fingertip to swipe a dollop of potato from the boy’s nose and flick it on his face.

The poor kid stood there, frozen. Evan wasn’t certain whether the little guy would scream or cry ... but he did neither. Instead, he slouched, hung his head and slunk away. Evan knew just how he felt.

Vince stalked through the white cafeteria and eventually halted beside another group of students. He lifted their table and slammed it back down. A few of his buddies joined him, and with nothing but a simple glare, the students obediently stood and scurried away. All that remained on the table were their untouched lunches, left for Vince and his cronies to enjoy. The scene reminded Evan of a flock of vultures feasting on spoiled fish. Every single day, Vince and his parasites chose a different table to torment.

It had to stop.

Evan bit his lower lip, and out of nowhere, a fried potato nugget skimmed past two tables, nailing its intended target—big guy, wearing drooping jeans and leather jacket. Yes, direct hit! Vince lifted his stubby hand and rubbed the back of his neck. Evan chuckled. But the entertainment didn't end there. All of a sudden, a bunch of cooked veggies flew through the air and pelted the bully's head. Vince brushed his fingers through his shaggy hair and peas landed on the table. He jumped out of his seat and scanned the perimeter of his lunch table.

“All right, who did it?” Vince bellowed.

The guy sitting to his right asked, “Did what?”

“Who keeps hitting me with peas?”

Vince's buddy shrugged and continued to eat his lunch. But that didn't seem to satisfy Vince. Any second now, steam would most likely blow out of his nose, and the bulging vessel on his forehead would burst. Vince ranted for a while and shook a few kids. Finally, the red on his face lightened to pink. He was about to sit when a plastic bowl slid along the bench, and Vince's large bottom landed right into chocolate pudding. He howled loud enough for all to hear. Evan tried to look as surprised as the rest of the cafeteria, but in all honesty, it was difficult to refrain from smirking.

From nowhere, a book popped Evan on the head.

“Have you ever stopped to think that just because you *can*, doesn't mean you *should*?” Evan didn't have to turn to know that his older sister Claire stood behind him.

“Oh, come on. I'm only human, and that guy deserves it,” said Evan.

“Little punk, you promised you wouldn't use your powers in front of other people—even if no one around here can see magic, they can still see its effects.”

“Big deal, so I flung a little tater tot at Vince. It's not like I'm flying around the school—it's not like I've been able to fly since leaving Sagaas.”

“I didn't realize you liked to fly so much.”

“Are you kidding? What good is it to have powers if I’m not able to use them? And the best part about using my powers on a guy like Vince is that he has no idea I’m the one pelting him with food.”

Vince continued to rant and stomp his feet, and Evan smiled.

“Evan, you look like the Cheshire cat.” Strands from his sister’s blond hair flung into his face as she sat beside him.

“Aw, Claire, you’re no fun anymore. At least, not since we left Sagaas.”

“I don’t see how anyone could be the same after having an experience like that ... you should know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say that you were sort of a brat before going to Sagaas, and I was happy to see how you grew up a little while we were there. But now, well, you’re a whiny baby most of the time.”

“Whatever, Claire. I am not.”

“Look, I understand how difficult it is to return to our boring lives. But it’s time for you to accept the fact we’re here, going to high school, and it doesn’t look like we’re heading for an adventure any time soon.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to go on an adventure ... but I wouldn’t mind visiting Sagaas again. I feel weak in our world. You have to admit, you were more powerful in Sagaas.”

“Sure, but there are rules we must follow. First, we can’t let anyone know about us traveling to Sagaas. Second, we shouldn’t use our powers in front of other people, unless it’s a *real* emergency, and dumping peas on Vince’s head is not an emergency. There are better ways of handling people like that. Plus, what would Dunkle say?”

“First of all, Claire, certain situations call for magical intervention. Second, I can’t worry about Dunkle. Apparently, he has better things to do than talk to me; I haven’t heard from him in months. I can’t believe he left and didn’t bother letting

us know where he was going,” Evan said and looked down. “Who needs him anyway?”

“I’m sure he’s busy protecting the Serpent’s Ring, and he’ll probably contact you soon,” Claire said with a funny smirk.

For a brief instant, Evan wondered about what Dunkle *would* say if he knew Evan had publicly used his power of telekinesis to move something with his mind. But what did Dunkle know about bullying? After all, he was an imp from another realm, and no one in his right mind would pick on an imp.

Just then the bell rang, reminding Evan it was time to hurry to fifth period. And in Evan’s case, that would be English class.

“See ya later, Sis,” said Evan, reaching for his books and jacket.

“Promise me you won’t do anything stupid,” Claire demanded.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he hollered over his shoulder and paraded past Vince.

Ninth grade English was located down the hall from the cafeteria, and Evan was able to hear Vince yell and slam furniture all the way to his classroom. Truth be told, it was music to Evan’s ears.

Evan walked through the open door and looked across the sea of desks. Windows filled the entire opposite wall and he gazed through them. Clouds filled the sky, and an endless assortment of brightly colored leaves zipped by. It would most likely rain by the time school was out. Coach would be forced to cancel soccer practice, which was a good thing, since Evan didn’t feel like chasing a ball over wet grass.

He moseyed to his desk—fourth row back and next to one of the windows. There was something refreshing about being able to allow his mind to drift outside. It was far more interesting than listening to an hour-long speech about how to use a comma more efficiently. He glanced at the board and cringed. Two of the most dreaded words in the English language glared at him: Pop Quiz.

His teacher, Mrs. Michaels, slid her glasses down her thin nose and grinned from ear to ear—sadistic woman. She rattled off her instructions before the tardy bell even rang. “Clear your desk, except for a No. 2 pencil. As soon as I hand you a scantron and quiz, you may bubble in your answers. Remember, there is absolutely no talking.”

The class fell silent, except for the shifting and swishing of papers. The sound reminded Evan of being submerged underwater, and he stopped listening to Mrs. Michaels’ remaining instructions altogether. He imagined a beautiful mermaid swimming with dolphins and turtles—her lavender hair flowing with the water. *His* mermaid, Lazonia.

“Mr. Jones, I suspect you are somewhere else. I suggest you return to Earth and focus on your quiz.” Evan looked up and realized his teacher was hovering near him.

“Of course,” he said.

A quiz landed on his desk, and he scribbled his name on the paper. He started to answer the first question, when he heard a gurgling voice whisper, “Evan.”

He almost fell out of his chair. It was Dunkle!

“What are you doing here?” Evan asked.

Mrs. Michaels couldn’t see the imp and was the one who answered. “Mr. Jones, what do you mean, what am I doing here?”

“I didn’t mean ... I was just ... sorry,” Evan stammered and pretended to return his attention to the quiz. Of course, that was impossible since an invisible imp was tugging his arm—an imp who smelled like rotten cheese. Which could only mean one thing: Dunkle was upset.

“Please, Evan, I need to speak with you, right now!” Dunkle urged.

Evan glanced next to him. A girl with dark hair and too much black eyeliner had stopped taking the quiz. She sniffed and scrunched up her face. She glared at

Evan and mouthed the word, “Gross.” Apparently, his classmates couldn’t see Dunkle, but they could obviously smell him.

Evan didn’t know what to do, so he shrugged his shoulders. More and more students lifted their heads and looked at one another; some used their quizzes to fan the stench, while others pinched their noses. Great, now Evan would be blamed for Dunkle and how bad he smelled when he was upset.

Evan waited for his teacher to focus her dark, beady eyes on another student, before muttering, “Not now, Dunkle. Meet me at my house—after school.”

“I have a most urgent matter to discuss with you.”

“Can it wait?”

“Trust me when I tell you that it cannot wait,” said Dunkle, his eyes widened and his fingers gripped the bottom of his brown vest.

“Wait for me in the hall,” Evan whispered. He bubbled the remaining spots on his scantron, hoping he answered at least a few correctly. He leapt from his chair and rushed toward his teacher.

“What are you doing away from your desk?” she inquired.

“Can I have a pass to the bathroom?” he asked, handing her the quiz.

Mrs. Michaels glanced behind him at the rest of the class and watched as her students vigorously fanned the air. She looked back at Evan and raised an eyebrow. “I think that might be a good idea.”

“Thanks,” he grumbled and scurried out of the room.

The imp paced the hallway, wringing his hands.

“Dunkle, what’s going on?” Evan questioned.

“Terrible news, just terrible!” Dunkle announced. “It is good to see you again, however.”

“It’s good to see you too. How’s the Serpent’s Ring? Is it safe?”

“Yes, yes. Barfel and I found a perfect location in which to keep it hidden.”

“Barfel—how is that whacky, little imp?” Evan exclaimed.

Just then, a girl turned the corner and walked toward Evan. She continued past him and into another classroom.

“Dunkle, follow me. I can’t talk to you here.”

“But, why? Humans cannot see me.”

“I realize that, but I probably look crazy talking to myself. Come on,” said Evan, dragging Dunkle into the bathroom.

“Curious place to have a proper discussion about the Trickster’s Totem,” said Dunkle. He then leapt onto the edge of a sink and stared into the mirror. He looked down at the blue-and-black-ringed pattern on his skin and back toward his reflection. He ran his bony fingers through his blue mohawk and spun around to gaze upon his wings. Claire had created those wings for him on their last visit to Sagaas ... Evan had to admit that Claire’s ability to transfigure things was pretty awesome.

All of a sudden, the bathroom door slammed into the wall, and Evan jumped, clutching his racing heart. It was a second imp who had made such a racket, and he was nudging Claire into the men’s bathroom. This particular imp had red and orange swirls on his skin and a red mohawk. Barfel!

Claire rushed toward Dunkle. “What are you doing here? Is everything all right? Do we need to return to Sagaas?”

“Slow down there, Sis,” said Evan. “Give the imp a chance to speak.”

“Claire, it is good to see you,” said Dunkle. “I sent you a message, but was uncertain as to whether or not you would have the divining locket in your possession. I sent Barfel to collect you, just in case.”

“It was kind of difficult to explain how my divining locket suddenly lit up like that in Economics. Not to mention having the entire room smell like cedar. I’m surprised nobody knew Barfel was there,” said Claire, lifting Dunkle from the sink and squeezing him.

“Wait a minute,” said Evan. “Barfel didn’t stink up your classroom?”

“No, he must have been happy to see me,” said Claire.

“Happy, I was! Happy, I was!” cheered Barfel.

“So, Dunkle, I suppose since you stink like rotten cheese that means you aren’t happy to see me?” Evan questioned.

“Don’t give Dunkle a hard time,” said Claire. “I’ve missed this little guy.”

“Missed me? We have spoken every day since we last saw each other,” replied Dunkle.

“Every day?” asked Evan. “You guys have been speaking every day for three months?”

Claire placed Dunkle on the gray tile floor. She chewed her lip and shoved her hands into her jean pockets. “Well, what good is it to have an ‘all seeing’ locket, if I’m not going to use it?”

“You haven’t bothered to mention that you’ve been in contact with Dunkle,” said Evan.

“Evan, I am here now and am in desperate need of your help,” said Dunkle. “Another relic has been stolen.”