

The thought almost immediately struck Eric as his hands had just opened the door. Eric said a curse word under his breath as Logan's hands immediately grabbed the front of his sweater. The next thing he felt was being slammed up against the wall.

Eric felt dumb for literally walking into this. He was so angry with himself for not paying more attention he surrendered even before it had begun. "Listen Logan," he said, rolling his eyes. "I only have, like, four dollars in my pocket, okay? Just take it and..."

Logan slammed him up against the wall again.

"We'll get to that in a minute," Logan said with another slam against the building.

Logan's two friends Mason and Tyler were right behind him with big grins on their faces. They were football players, like Logan, but they were also like Logan's dogs. They followed him around everywhere. They were with him at the mall when it looked like Logan was going to beat up Jonah but Logan got sidelined by Jonah's headache. Eric had never really seen them do anything, other than add to the intimidation factor, but Eric also felt that kind of made them cowards. They had always let Logan take the fall by himself if Logan got a detention.

"What do you want, Logan?" Eric asked, totally resolved to just get through the situation as fast as possible.

"I want you to Stop. Talking. To Me. Like. You're Something. Special." Logan said, punctuating each word or phrase with a slam to the wall. The last one knocked Eric's head against the wall.

"I'm not special, Logan," Eric said.

"You can say that..." Logan started, but then all of a sudden Logan wasn't in front of him.

Eric looked up and Logan was suspended, up on the tips of his toes, pushed against the metal pole that held the closest basketball hoop.

The thing that held him tightly by the throat was the devil. Or, at least, *a* devil.

It was red, all over. All it was wearing was a long black coat and black board shorts and no shoes. Its feet were cloven - split in two. It had four toes on both feet, but two on either side of the split.

Its head was bald, it didn't have horns, but its eyes were dark black. And its red skin made its white teeth look dangerous.

Mason and Tyler registered what was going on in a flash and started backing up like they were going to turn and run. Just then, a spiked tail flew out from the back slit of the black coat and whipped just below their ankles, sending them both down on their butts.

"Sit down, boys," the Red Devil said to them without looking. The tail seemed to shrink to a lesser size, but still stayed bobbing and weaving between the split at the back of the coat. The devil was still closely looking in Logan Oswald's face. It seemed like the tail might have had mind of its own. "You might learn something," the devil added, finally turning his attention their way, and then back to Logan.

Eric, who had hated being slammed into the wall, was now pressing his back against it so hard it seemed like he wanted to back up through it.

“So, Logan.” The Red Devil spat his name like he really hated having to even say it. “You’re the big guy on campus, huh? Large and in charge around here?”

Logan looked completely panicked. He was clutching at the devil’s hand that was wrapped around his throat, it looked like he was trying to say something, but it wouldn’t come out.

“Cat got your tongue, big guy?” The Red Devil asked him. He hadn’t stopped grinning.

Mason and Tyler were trying to back up as much as possible, almost trying to crab walk away while the thing was distracted. The tail whipped out and brought them back down again.

“I said sit down!” The devil said sternly. He turned to them. “What? Are you dumb *and* deaf?!” Then he turned back to Logan “Jeez, Logan, you can sure pick ‘em. Are these two idiots any good for anything? Then again, I guess you idiots travel in packs, huh?”

Somewhere within the terror of what was happening, Eric wanted to laugh at that.

The devil released his grip on Logan and Logan slumped to the ground. The devil turned to Eric and Eric’s breath caught in his chest as the thing approached him.

“So what’s your problem with the E-man over here, huh, Logan?” The Red Devil smoothed Eric’s sweater out and dusted off his shoulders. “A fine, smart, young man. Good grades. Quite a catch.” With that, the devil chucked his fist lightly across Eric’s chin.

Eric’s brain was trying to calculate how this thing would know anything about him.

Logan was up and trying to run. There was a noise. *Zzzzip*.

The devil appeared in front of Logan and grabbed him by the front of his coat. “You jealous, Logan? Is that the problem? You think all the hot girls are going to figure out what a moron you are and go after the E-man? You’re such a loser, Logan.”

“Let’s hear it boys,” the Red Devil said to Mason and Tyler. He began to sing softly “Logan’s a loser, Logan’s a loser,” over and over again, making a little melody out of it. The tail whipped in front of the two boys on the ground and the spike began to bob up and down, like it was conducting a symphony. “Don’t let me down, boys. Let me hear it.”

The boys began mumbling along.

“Louder!” The Red Devil demanded, and whip-cracked the spike of his tail on the cement path just in front of them, the point cracked the cement. The boys complied.

“See, Logan,” the Red Devil said. “Even your morons think you’re a moron.”

“My dad’s gonna...” Logan started.

The sound came again, *Zzzzip*, and Logan was pinned back up against the pole of the basketball hoop again. The boys stopped their half-hearted chorus.

“Daddy’s not here, Logan,” the Red Devil said. “Is that what this is about? Big, tough guy on campus trying to get daddy’s attention? Poor wittle Wogan.”

The devil slammed him up against the pole, just as hard as Logan slammed Eric into the wall. “I think you’re going to have to change tactics, Logan old boy.” They were face to face. “I think you want to be a good boy, don’t you Logan?” They were almost nose to nose. “Say it,” he said in hiss.

Logan struggled to get away for a moment and the devil slammed him into the pole. When Logan's head connected, there was a resounding gong from the hollow pole. "Say it!" The Red Devil demanded.

"I want to be a good boy," Logan muttered. It was hard for Eric or Mason and Tyler to hear what he'd said.

"Louder!" the devil demanded again. Logan complied by yelling it. The other three boys heard it that time.

"Good boy," the devil said, and mussed Logan's hair.

There was the zipping sound again and the devil turned and bent over, putting his hands on his knees in front of the two boys sitting on the ground so he could look in their eyes. "Don't we all just want to be good boys, morons?" The devil asked.

The boys looked at each other, unsure if they were supposed to answer or just sit there quietly.

"Sure we do!" The devil announced throwing his arms out to his sides like he was trying to convince a whole audience of people.

Logan, again, tried to make a break for it. The tail whipped out and wrapped around his neck. Logan struggled with it as the tail led him over in front of Eric.

"Anything you want to add, E-man? I could start another rousing chorus of 'Logan's a Loser'. You'd like that, wouldn't you, morons?" He asked the two boys, who just looked at each other once again.

Eric, who had always wanted Logan Oswald to be publicly humiliated in the worst possible ways for almost three years now, could only just stand and look at the kid now. Logan looked scared, as they all did, but there was something new, something defeated. He wondered if this was the look Logan wanted to see on other kids' faces that he bullied. Was this what Eric looked like to Logan?

Whatever the case, and however badly Eric had wished for something to happen to Logan, this was too weird. Too mean. Too much.

Eric shook his head and looked down at the ground.

"You sure, E-Man? You got nothin'? Alrighty." And with that, the tail picked Logan up and slammed him down on the ground on his rear.

Just then, Mr. Jackson, the guidance counselor and Principal Sawyer came bursting out of the doors of the west wing headed straight in their direction. Principal Sawyer was struggling to get his left arm in his winter coat. They had probably seen the action from inside and were hurrying over to see what it was about.

"Well, boys, gotta go," the Red Devil said. "And Logan," he added. Logan turned his head in the devil's direction. "Don't make me come back, man. You won't like it."

There was another *Zzzzip* and the devil was gone. It was just the two boys sitting on the ground, Eric next to the wall, and Logan on the grass in front of him. Eric instinctively reached out a hand to help Logan off the ground, and Logan accepted it.

The rest of the afternoon, the boys didn't attend classes. Parents were called in, as well as the police. Interviews were conducted with the four boys together, and then separately. When

suspicious questions were raised as to what the four boys were doing, since Eric didn't really run with Logan's crowd, Logan had answered that he was on his way to his locker with Mason and Tyler. Mason and Tyler concurred. Eric said he was just on his way to lunch.

All of them avoided the beginning of the story as much as possible, making it sound like they had all ended up in a bad spot by coincidence. The general theme of the story was that some guy in a devil costume bullied Logan while the other three were too scared to do much of anything. It was generally understood by the authorities and the parents that whoever the guy was probably intervened on Eric's behalf.

Jonah's left eye burned with a pain that shot straight into his mid-brain. He pushed the heel of his hand into his right eye and opened his left. He was lying on his back and was staring at the all-too-familiar ceiling of the warehouse office. He was in his nest.

He sat straight up and looked around. He had no memory of coming back to the warehouse. The last thing he remembered was being doubled over in pain in the alley. He wasn't sure how he would have gotten back here. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was one o'clock. He had lost almost four hours.

He stood up and began to pace the room, trying to put the pieces together while rubbing his eye. The pain was subsiding, but he still didn't try to open it. He saw that the tablet was on the control panel, which didn't make sense either, since, when he had left, it had been in his coat, which was still zipped. He checked his pockets and made sure he still had the money in one pocket and felt for the green gem under his sweater.

He went into the bathroom and took a long drink of water from the tap. His water bottle was safely in his backpack, and the backpack wasn't in the office, so that must mean it was still behind the little door outside.

When he finally came up for air, he looked into the bathroom mirror. He slowly moved his hand away from his face and then slowly opened his eye. When he did, he saw for an instant that the iris of his right eye was black, not blue. It startled him to the point that he fell backwards against the bathroom wall. He blinked his eyes rapidly and rubbed them. When he looked in the mirror again, his eyes were blue and brown, just as they had always been. He looked in the mirror more closely at his blue eye and squeezed it shut, then opened it again. The pain was now down to a dull throb and his eye was fine. He chalked up seeing the black eye as some hallucination brought on by the pain.