

Blurb: In a world where half the population wields fire and the other half can shape the darkness, Evan Keeper can't do either. But he bears a family secret, a monster sealed within his body. Mostly it naps, but sometimes it wakes up and tries to kill him. When Evan finally leaves his hometown to go to college, his powers awaken. In college, Evan meets a girl named Kyra with an unusual ability and a boy named Ali who has ties to a shadowy organization. The three freshmen soon find their fates are intertwined, and they must face off against the world together. Their goal: get through college without getting sucker punched by destiny.

Prologue: Evan Makes His Case

"College?" asked the guidance counselor, raising his eyebrows. "I think a vocational school would be better for someone with your, uh, skillset."

"You mean because I can't flame," said Evan Keeper.

Evan was a lanky five-foot eleven, although he looked much smaller sitting in that old, sagging chair. He wore blue jeans and his favorite sweatshirt, which had a university logo emblazoned on the front. Evan's hair was an uneven shade of brown that could look dirty blonde or nearly black, depending on the lighting.

"Er, yes, because you can't flame," replied the guidance counselor. "What are you going to do at," he looked down at Evan's sweatshirt, "Logi University for four years while everyone else takes flame classes? Major in history? Your grades suggest that's not going to work out well for you."

"I was hoping to find out why I can't flame. Nobody can tell me."

"Believe me, young man, I sympathize. I didn't know your, er, situation was even biologically possible. If there's anything the school could do to help... but we've done what we can."

"But there is something else you could do," replied Evan, sitting forward. "Let me apply to college."

The guidance counselor sighed, sat back, and studied Evan.

Evan made a half-hearted attempt to neaten his hair. The last time his hair had been well-arranged was on picture day in 5th grade. His mother had combed it for him. She died two months later, and his father became too busy running the temple to bother about Evan's hair.

"You really want to go? You're supposed to use these years to gain employable skills, you know. That's what vocational school is for. You could learn math. Law. Business. Medicine. Plenty of good flame users go to vocational school and get jobs soon afterward."

"I know. But I want to go to college. University. Where all the best flame users go to learn and train. The professors there might know why I can't flame. Maybe they can study me. They might teach something that could cure me. I can't be the only one on the planet who's like this."

"That's not a bad point. Well, I didn't want to mention this, but there is another reason that the school is hesitant to let you enter college. Your outbreaks are rather violent."

"I know. I'm sorry. I think my father has given me some, uh, better medicine. I haven't had an episode for years."

"This is true. There is however the risk that your episodes will return and worsen. And if you're in close quarters with powerful, untrained flammers, you may get seriously hurt. Or worse."

"I know. But I have to find out why I can't flame. I'll regret it forever if I don't. Haven't you ever felt that way about something? Or about someone?"

The guidance counselor thought back many years, back to a time when he still wore his wedding ring, and back even further.

He sighed.

"I suppose you have a point, Evan. Sometimes young people have to dive in, consequences be damned. All right. Fill out the paperwork and drop it off at the office. I'll approve your application."

"Really? You mean it? Yes!" said Evan, jumping to his feet. His sharp jaw and cheekbones framed his dimpled smile. "Thank you so much. You won't regret this, I promise."

"I wish you the best, Evan," said the guidance counselor gently. He noticed Evan's eyes, one green and one blue, were glittering with tears. "I did have one last question for you, I suppose, before I let you go."

"Yes?" asked Evan, wiping his eyes with his sweatshirt sleeve as casually as possible.

"I've read the reports of your episodes. I've never seen a convincing explanation for them, and a lot of the information in your file has been redacted. You're not possessed by anything supernatural, are you?"

"Like a monster or something?" said Evan with a nervous laugh. "What? No way. Monsters aren't real." But he didn't make eye contact with the guidance counselor.

"I didn't say monster. Fine. I've done all I can. Good luck, Evan. May Logi the flame god grant you light when you want it--"

"And darkness when you need it," replied Evan, completing the salutation. "Wait till dad hears about this," Evan said half to himself as he left and shut the door behind him.

"I didn't say monster," the guidance counselor said to himself. "No I did not. Poor kid. I've got to remind Agnes to stop visiting that temple of theirs."

He shivered and reached for his coffee. He had poured it hot before Evan came in, but it was now cold.

He produced a small red flame from his index finger and held it to the coffee's surface until the liquid began to steam.