



Just Smile And Wave

Shauna was about five minutes away when Nalin's freckled face blared across her screen. She knew this was never a good sign.

This was his way of warning Shauna. The warning itself wasn't that scary unless his grandma was brought up. She is the absolute scariest old lady to have ever existed in the Resirean Sea, but she does make the best homemade dino nuggets. Every scary person has a secret sweet charm to them—at least, every person Shauna works her magic on.

"Hey Nalin, I'm swimming to the door as we speak! I was absolutely on time, I swear, but my parents were trying to get me to join the MerHu meeting today. I had to tell them, 'I shan't, I only have availability for one activity today, and that is for my dearest, oldest friend Nalin!' "

Shauna said dramatically. There was silence on the other line.

"Ok, I just told a little fib."

More silence.

Then Nalin finally spoke: "I'm in front of the school right now; how far away are you?"

Shauna swam a little faster and could practically see the deadpan expression on his face.

"Truth be told, I *am* pretty close to the school. This 'dress' you made me isn't helping me in the slightest. It's like swimming in a big mummy wrap," Shauna tugged at her fin.

"I tried; I'm not a seamstress."

Chapter 1

Nalin and Shauna have been friends since the dawn of time, which Shauna argues "started when she opened her eyes." Nalin's mom helped deliver Shauna and introduced the two newborns in the hopes of having an adorable scrapbook to fill with Nalin and a childhood friend. There weren't many kids in the neighborhood where Nalin's mom grew up, and she wanted to make sure her son would have someone to hang out with. Shauna's mom didn't expect her to run home and grab her son right after delivering her baby though.

"I know that now," Shauna said, rolling her eyes.

The pair swam into the middle school building. It was shrouded in... happiness? There were about a dozen framed photos of students and staff smiling lined up on the walls as they passed by. Each depicts a new generation of students with the same teachers, give or take a few. The walls themselves looked to have been hand-painted by the students and had rainbows and unicorns throughout the entire hallway. Shauna took a deep breath and released a contented sigh.

"Just as I suspected: cinnamon! Who let you use the building as a comic con thing? It seems like literally the best principal ever! I bet they bake for their students too," Shauna said, swimming back and forth between the hallways to inhale the aroma.

Shauna and Nalin have a pretty set relationship; she talks, he listens, and gives short, but thoughtful answers. His go-to responses are: "Yeah, that's cool." "Yeah, that's terrible" or

"..yeah." If you were just a random person walking past them, you would swear that their friendship was one-sided. Nalin is more of a reserved and "step back and analyze the situation" kind of guy, while Shauna is more of a "let's dive right in" kind of girl, a match made in heaven—well, a hospital room.

"I have a connection to the principal; he owed me a favor," Nalin stated.

"Hm, that seems like a cool guy. Wait, why does *he* owe *you* a favor?"

Nalin gave her a look that told her, *I have my secrets*. Shauna stopped pestering for an answer and swam side by side with Nalin, nudging his shoulder along the way.

"Goodness, how much longer do we have to swim before we—"

Shauna stopped mid-sentence, flabbergasted. There was just no way.

"Nalin, when did schools start accepting demons? I don't recall hell being on Earth," her face contorted into a look of disgust.

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Zakar, Shauna's lifelong enemy, was there, sitting in the gym, as if he owned the place. His ogre-ish attitude practically stinking up the room as he stalked toward her.

"I should'a known you were gonna get *her*. I don't even have any words besides BLECH," he said, pretending to gag himself.

"I can't believe two of the most immature Mer in the sea are arguing; oh wait, completely predictable. Can't you two be civil for five seconds? I have a comic booth to run, and there simply isn't any time for your incompetence right now." Nalin glared between the two.

Nalin's mom swears he was born with a paintbrush in his hands, but it could be argued that she was really tired after the birth—a whole other story that involves five doctors, two nurses, and half a pound of garlic. Nalin's mom was worried their friendship wouldn't last, but they've always been there for each other no matter what, like Shauna is attempting to do now.

Shauna let out a disapproving sigh and headed to the makeshift booth. Zakar dragged himself behind her. Nalin heaved and swam to the table.

The "booth" consisted of ten copies of Nalin's comic *Aona: A Witch Series*, two sharpies, a misshapen cardboard cutout of Aona, and vintage curtains used as a tablecloth. The best booth Nalin has been able to configure so far!

"Aona, are you mature enough to work the crowd for me?" Nalin faced Shauna.

Shauna nodded her head and slapped her hand across her temple, soldier style, and swam to the small crowd of buzzing fifth graders. Nalin turned to Zakar and nodded in a different direction; the two went off to talk.

Where are those two going? Shauna thought. She shook her head and took the thought out of her head. It's not good to stress over ogres anyway; now is the time to get into character! Shauna spun around and danced her way to the cluster of awkward preteens.

The group stopped talking simultaneously and stared at Shauna. She was wrapped more or less in scraps of a dress with a twisted belt from her shoulder to her hip. Along this belt were three daggers: one with butterflies on it, another with handcuffs, and the last with little sad faces. Nalin wasn't joking about being an amateur. Shauna knew that she looked partially crazy, but she had to sell these comics one way or another.

"Hello, small warriors. Are ya lookin' for someone to teach ya how to save the world in style?" Shauna spoke in a cartoon manner, fully embracing her character.

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The children looked a bit concerned, but played along nonetheless.

"Yeah!!" They all cheered.

Shauna was about to pull out a dagger when there was a strange siren that pierced the air all over. A blaring noise that the children knew all too well. There wasn't an ounce of fear in their faces, but a look of discomfort.

What in the Seven Seas is that? Shauna thought.

Shauna began to herd the children away from the windows out of fear for what could possibly cause such an ear-splitting sound, but it was over as quickly as it had begun. She was left with a look of bewilderment and a feeling she couldn't quite place.

The children shook this strange occurrence off, as if it were a class dismissal bell and returned their attention to Shauna, smiles right back on their faces.

Huh?