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To the most magical double-act in the land! Zach and Tamsin.
Keep being each other's biggest champions!



PROLOGUE

Friday, 13th September
4 a.m.

He was behind her. His breath the crackle and spit of sodden wood on a bonfire. Sunna could hear the drag of his leg as it tore through the dead leaves on the ground, and she felt a stab of pride that she had caused that injury.

Yes. He was stronger than her. Her powers had always been feeble when compared to the sheer force of his. Still, the pen she had wielded and plunged into his thigh had worked its own kind of magic.

The flaming branch in her hand lit the path ahead. An orange beacon, cutting through the dark inkiness of the forest. The World Tree wasn't far from here now. She could finally feel it pulling at her – guiding her to its lean silver branches. The tree was hope. Her lifeline to the Runes of Valhalla. But only if she could reac—

A lightning bolt of pain exploded at the base of her skull

leaving the thought unfinished. Sunna's vision went as white as bone as she felt something break at the back of her mind. It was the barrier she had so carefully built to hold Kira in that dark place beyond thought and memory.

No, not now, she thought.

The wall she'd created, so that she could take over the other woman's body, was crumbling.

"For Odin's sake," Sunna cursed, even as a wave of nausea made her sway on her feet. The other woman's desperation to take her body back, to be in control of her own limbs once again, was quickly overwhelming her.

Sunna dropped to her knees and tried to shove the other woman back behind the wall. "I know you did not ask for this, Kira," she hissed with a pained breath. "You did not ask to be a host nor did you know that a goddess slept in your bloodline. But I am awake now and you have to trust me. We are in danger." The fingers of her free hand clenched in the dirt. "We cannot waste time fighting each other."

It was enough.

She felt Kira collapse inwards, her resistance evaporating. Then the other woman disappeared into the internal darkness once more.

For a moment, Sunna was at peace. It reminded her of the dreamless sleep she had enjoyed for centuries. Before the siren that told her Loki was free had sounded in her mind. Before she'd hijacked Kira's body and come to the Tangley Woods. She

got to her feet and began to run once more, not sure how long she could go on. Her grip trembled on the branch, and by its flame she could see that Kira's once perfectly manicured nails were bloody and torn from ripping away at the enchanted vines that Loki had set upon them two days ago. Sunna smiled grimly. She had already escaped him once in this forest. *His magic was stronger, but I escaped,* she reminded herself. *And I can do it again.*

"Sunna," a voice thick like smoke snaked out from the darkness behind her. "Why persist in this tedious game of cat and mouse? A game you've already lost now that I am free." The sound of burning wood crackled in the air. "Tell me where the Runes of Valhalla are. I know Odin told you."

Sunna opened her mouth to reply but the words did not materialize. An immense force was pushing at every part of her being. Then it happened. There was a popping sound and she was expelled from her position of control and Kira took charge of her body once more.

That sneaky mortal tricked me, Sunna realized as she entered the darkness, becoming a jumble of thoughts and fears without an anchor. Kira had never gone back behind the barrier, she'd just been waiting to pounce.

"The name is Kira Bright, not Sunna," the other woman told her pursuer, her steps slowing. "And we need to have a little chat."

Sunna heard the words as if from underwater. She was spinning in the gloom, looking for a way back before it was too late. Before he caught them.

The smoky voice gave a hiss of annoyance. "You may be Kira now, but that was not your name when you put me in the ground. When you stole my daughter's kingdom to keep me prisoner." There was silence as even the drag of his leg through the leaves stilled. "What had I ever done to you, Sunna?"

Kira heard genuine bewilderment in his voice, and a pang of guilt lanced her even though the crime was not hers. She stopped.

"This Sunna person has been dealt with." Kira turned towards the darkness of the forest. "I'm in the driver's seat now. I don't understand what is going on here but I'm sure we can sort out this whole mess and—"

The unseen figure's laughter interrupted her and the dry, desolate sound filled up the forest.

Listen. Kira felt rather than heard Sunna's voice. *You need to stop arguing and start running. He has not forgotten and he will not forgive*.

But why did you imprison him? Kira asked the intruder in her head. *What had he done?*

It is a long story. Sunna had managed to stop spinning in the dark abyss and was now condensing herself into a hot ball of concentration. *But here is the short version – it was not my idea.*

But you didn't stop it, Kira pressed.

No, I did not. Sunna felt a flare of annoyance at Kira's accusing tone. In her day, mortals did not question gods, let alone rebuke them. But then, a lot had changed in the last millennium.

Enough was enough.

Sunna's fiery ball of intent was now white hot, and she hurled herself forwards, pushing Kira out. Retaking control. "You left us no choice, Loki," Sunna said, glad to have a voice once more. The gold, lightning-shaped pendant around her neck slapped against her skin as she scurried ahead, and despite everything, Sunna could feel its memories. Kira had bought the pendant, never knowing that the lightning bolt was the symbol on Sunna's rune. The link between host and god had been there even when Sunna had been in a deep sleep.

"There is always a choice." Loki's voice was quiet. It was close.

The goddess felt a surge of relief as she glimpsed a flash of silver bark through the forest of thick trunks. "You wanted to destroy us – all of the day guardians. We couldn't let you."

"Destroy?" Loki echoed. "All I wanted was honesty. Balance."

"We had balance." Sunna shouted the words over her shoulder but didn't stop running.

"We had tyranny," Loki replied. "And because of what you, Odin, and the rest of the day guardians did, my family was torn apart. My son Vali was driven mad. Fenris was banished, Jörmungandr was thrown into the sea, and my daughter, Hel—" He broke off, unable to finish.

Sunna felt the forest fill up with the ancient, awful truth of his words. It filled every nook and crevice. "Odin could have killed you but he didn't, remember that." Her words sounded pathetic. Uncertain. And even though Kira had been pushed

right back into the darkness, Sunna could feel the strength of the other woman's disapproval.

"I remember everything, I assure you," Loki breathed. "But you remember this: sparing me was Odin's greatest mistake." The crackling voice was right behind her now, a tickle in her ear, and Sunna knew she was caught even though she hadn't heard any movement.

"The Runes of Valhalla will be found," Loki promised. "I will take their power, and I will find the rest of the day guardians who wronged me. This realm that you call home will be mine. It will belong to the chaos."

Sunna could feel Kira's terror pinching at the back of her mind, and all she could think to say was *sorry.*

Then she was engulfed by the smoke.



PART I

TIME LOCKED



CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL IN THE COBWEB LEGGINGS

Friday, 13th September
12:15 p.m.

The Internet lied. Red pants aren't lucky. Fact.

Buzz trudged into the dining hall, scanning the sea of faces for Samraj. His best friend was nowhere to be seen. With a little sigh, he grabbed a tray, a plate, some macaroni cheese, and then the empty table in the corner. It only had two seats, but then he and Sam would need privacy if they were going to come up with a plan to fix the mess he'd created.

And it was a mess:

Late for school this morning = detention.

Detention = no football practice this afternoon.

No football practice = being a sub for the semi-finals of the Crowmarsh youth cup tomorrow.

"Why'd I think today would be any different?" Buzz muttered to himself, annoyed that he'd believed he could make this Friday the thirteenth any less unlucky than usual.

Obviously he hadn't meant to be late for school. But how was he supposed to know that colouring underwear with your sister's hair dye (Ruby Kiss) and blasting it with a hair-dryer (a Sonic 500) would be so time-consuming?

Buzz scanned the dining hall again. Sam was still nowhere to be seen, but he spotted his sister (and her bright red mass of tight curls) talking to a tall, Black girl with hundreds of long, thin braids twisted up in a bun. She was definitely a new kid. There weren't many Black kids in their Cotswold school and Buzz knew all of them. Tia was pointing over at him and the girl was nodding enthusiastically.

What's Tia up to now? Buzz wondered, peering at his sister. Then he understood.

The girl with the braids was striding over to him, lunch tray gripped tightly in her hands.

She was dressed like no one he'd ever seen. Her top half was swathed in a brightly coloured patchwork shirt that was miles too big for her, and she wore leggings with a purple cobweb print. Students fell quiet as she walked by. It was as if they needed all their concentration to take in her outfit. The braids piled high on top of the girl's head were held in place by

a fluorescent purple pencil with a fuzzy star at its end, and she wore an enormous watch on her wrist.

Buzz groaned inwardly. His sister had a thing for collecting and protecting misfits, and now she was sending one his way. He dived into his backpack to find his mobile. *Where R U?* he'd text Sam. *You need to find me in the dining hall. NOW!* But his phone wasn't there.

Strange. He was sure he'd had it this morning.

"Hi. Do you mind if I join you?" a voice with a warm American twang said.

Buzz lifted his head to see the girl in the cobweb leggings gazing down at him. Her brown eyes looked hopeful behind her wing-tipped tortoiseshell glasses.

"Um—" he replied.

"It's just that I'm here for a test-run day. I might be starting at this school next term." The purple star in the girl's hair bobbed about violently as she spoke. "And your sister, Tia, saw that I didn't have anyone to eat lunch with, so she said I should come over here because we'll be in the same year and—"

"But why can't she have lunch with you?" Buzz interrupted. He knew it sounded rude, but his sister wasn't exactly being fair here.

"She had to go to Chess Club." The brown eyes behind the glasses were looking less hopeful now. "And I've kinda lost track of the person who was supposed to be showing me around, so . . . so can I sit with you?"

"Oh, right," Buzz began. "The thing is, I'm sort of waiting for some—"

"Mate, we've got a problem." Sam collapsed into the seat opposite Buzz, taking the free chair. "A big problem."

"You heard about my detention, then?" Buzz asked. "We've got to think of something, and quick. Coach is going to be *so* mad that I'm missing practice after school. What if he doesn't let me play tomorrow?" Buzz suddenly remembered the girl and looked up. But she'd gone. Buzz felt a flash of guilt. Mum always said that being kind didn't cost a thing. He could have been a bit nicer. Mum would have wanted him to be a bit nicer.

If she was here.

"Coach Saunders is the least of your worries right now," Sam said, distracting him. His friend whipped out his phone. "Look at this text you sent me. About twenty minutes ago." Buzz stared at the screen. His stomach twisted into knots as he read the words:

I, Zach "Buzzkill" Buzzard do solemnly declare that I am a total epic loser and I miss my mummy ☹.

"I didn't send that," he spluttered.

"Well, obviously you didn't." Sam rolled his eyes. "But someone sent this message from your phone and not just to me. I did some asking around, and pretty much everyone in your phonebook got the text."

"Theo," Buzz growled. He scanned the hall and spotted him.

The other boy was holding court at a table in the middle of the lunchroom, as usual.

Sam nodded. "He'll be trying to mess with your head before the match tomorrow. Everyone knows you're a better player than him."

"Right, come on. We're getting my phone back."

"Hold up, Buzz. You're a better player, but Theo's bigger." Sam made a steeple of his fingers. "Just leave this to Tia. When she finds out what happened she's going to *end* him. It's well out of order that he's brought your mum into this."

A prickle of heat crept up Buzz's neck. Theo's text message was embarrassing enough, but having his sister fight his battles would be far worse.

"I don't need Tia's help." Buzz pushed his chair back with a harsh scrape of metal.

"Of course you don't." Sam held up his hands. "I'm just saying that Tia is really good at getting stuff sorted."

"SAM! This is my stuff to sort." Buzz stalked across the dining hall, with Sam trailing reluctantly behind him. "How'd you get my phone?" he demanded, as he reached Theo's table.

A smirk crossed the other boy's annoyingly zit-free face. "Maybe you lost it. Just like you lost the plot with that English essay you read this morning," Theo replied. "Mrs Robertson looked like she was in actual pain."

"Yeah, right, because you're a master of the English language?" Sam shot back, slipping just a little bit further

behind Buzz as he did so. "I mean, when's the last time you even finished an essay?"

Theo shrugged. "Nobody expects me to be good at essays. I've got other talents." He nodded his head over to Buzz. "But Buzzkill here is the son of a famous professor – his dad is always on TV." Theo shook his head mournfully. "If I was Buzzkill's dad, I'd be majorly embarrassed by his performance today."

Buzz could hear and feel the grind of his teeth. Theo was right. The Prof would have been embarrassed by his son's presentation, especially because the topic for the essay had been his specialty, mythology.

Looking back, Buzz probably should have just owned up to the fact that he hadn't written the blasted thing. Couldn't be bothered to write it, because mythology was such a momentous waste of time – or "Buzz kryptonite," as his mum used to call it. Instead, he'd tried to make up the essay as he went along, his main argument being that if the ancient Greeks were clever enough to invent the catapult, they could have just given Theseus a map and saved everyone – including that Minotaur – a lot of inconvenience.

His English teacher hadn't been impressed, and Buzz had made sure he was the first one out of the classroom so he didn't get the *lecture*.

Buzz shook the memory off and slammed his hand down on the table, making the lunch trays rattle. "I want my phone back."

"Manners, manners," Theo reprimanded. "Just because

your mum isn't around doesn't mean you shouldn't say please." "DON'T." The command reverberated around the dining hall. "Don't talk about my mum." His voice cracked on the last word and Buzz hated himself for it.

Everyone was completely quiet now. Watching.

Theo leaned back in his chair. "Or what?" He held Buzz's gaze, his mouth a thin, pink line.

"There's no or what." Sam put a hand on Buzz's shoulder. His voice became a bit louder. "You really shouldn't have sent that message about his mum. Now, just give the phone back,"

Buzz could feel Sam's hand trembling. It had taken a lot of bravery for his friend to say that.

There were some murmurs of agreement from others in dining hall.

"Yeah Theo. Don't bring his mum into it," a girl named Ava said.

"Seriously, that ain't right," a boy called Ezra from Year 8 added. Theo frowned, his eyes flashing with annoyance. Then he shrugged.

"Fine. You can have your phone back, Buzzkill."

Buzz held out his hand.

"But you'll have to go on a little quest to get it," Theo continued. "Just like they do in those make-believe myths your dad loves so much." He rubbed his hands together. "I'll even draw you a map if you like. You'll need it to guide you to the . . ." He paused for effect. "The Toilet of Doom."

"Oh, gross," Sam whispered. "He means the one that doesn't flush on the second floor."

"Theo Eddows! A map will not be necessary," a dangerously quiet voice said from beside them. Mrs Robertson stood there, having appeared like some kind of ninja English teacher. Her face was granite. "It sounds like you know exactly where Buzz's phone is, so please go there and retrieve it." She pursed her lips. "After you bring it to my classroom, you can make your way to the headteacher's office."

A few snickers of laughter erupted in the dining hall.

All eyes were on Theo.

"But Miss," he protested. "It wasn't me."

The English teacher gave a hoot of laughter. "Now *that* really is make-believe. Go. I won't tell you again."

Theo shoved back his chair and stomped out of the dining hall, but not before throwing Buzz a look that said he'd make him pay.

Mrs Robertson turned to Buzz. "And you follow me. I didn't get a chance to have a word with you earlier."

Sam patted Buzz's shoulder. "I'll catch you later."

Buzz slinked out of the lunch hall, head down so he didn't have to meet anyone's eyes. They were probably all feeling sorry for him.

He could feel the weight of someone's gaze on him and he forced himself to glance up. It was the girl in the cobweb leggings. She was sitting alone, her lunch untouched, and she

was close enough that she must have overheard the whole argument with Theo. The girl was staring right at him, but her eyes seemed dark and cloudy, as if she was deep in thought.

Buzz looked away, but the image of the girl remained stubbornly in his head as he walked into Mrs Robertson's classroom. The English teacher urged Buzz to take a seat and then sat behind her desk. Now that they were out of the dining hall, the granite in her face had softened.

"Listen, I know things are tough for you at the moment, Buzz," she began, "and Theo's prank was very cruel." She gazed at him steadily. "But don't judge him too harshly. You both have missing people in your lives. It's a lot to deal with. And then there's all that coverage about the mysterious disappearance of that weatherwoman. And all that fog that was following her. Such a strange story."

Buzz frowned. Theo's brother had gone missing more than a year ago now. People said he'd got mixed up in the wrong crowd. *But that's nothing like what's happened to Mum,* he thought. And the whole thing with that weatherwoman, Kira Bright, was different again. A case that had left everyone puzzled. *Why was Mrs Robertson even trying to compare them?* He realized that his English teacher's lips were still moving and he forced himself to concentrate on what she was saying.

"You're a smart kid Buzz," his teacher said. "And that's why I'm giving you this second chance." She wagged a finger at him. "You're too quick to give up on things you don't understand,

and you don't like asking for help. I want you to work on that." Mrs Robertson drummed her slender fingers on the surface of her desk. "So, do we have a deal?"

"Not sure, Miss," Buzz replied honestly, wondering what he'd missed.

His teacher's blue eyes filled with disappointment. It was an expression so similar to the one his father wore whenever they spent time together that it made Buzz's throat close up. Mrs Robertson's fingers stilled on the desk. "You've got the weekend to write the essay on Theseus and the Minotaur again. You're far better than what you produced today and I want you to prove it."

Buzz crossed his arms, wondering when Mrs Robertson and his father had become the same person with the same speech. *Maybe they get their material off the same website: www.areallylonglecture.com.*

"If you get stuck, just ask your father," Mrs Robertson continued, and Buzz noticed that she had a star-struck expression on her face. "He's an expert in this area, after all. You're really very lucky to have access to such a famous and well-respected professor of mythology."

Buzz snorted to himself. *If by "access" you mean never at home, then yeah, my father is just awesome.* He felt a nerve twitch along his jaw. There was no way, never in a month of Sundays, that Buzz would ask for or accept the Prof's help.