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To my children, Zach and Tamsin. You are the authors of your own story. Every chapter will be different. There will be twists and turns. Ups and downs. Even rug-pulling moments. Always remember though that you are both the heroes of the piece. I am so excited about the adventures ahead of you.



PROLOGUE

The slender trees of the rainforest shook.

A breeze, at least, Natasha thought. But she quickly realised she was not going to be that lucky – there would be no wind to cut through the suffocating blanket of humidity, no gust of air to cool the sweat that trickled down her face and stung her eyes. She was grateful she had managed to cane-row her hair up into a bun so air could get to her neck. Nothing even resembling a breeze existed in this place. Even when the storm had taken place, all those months ago, the wind had found it hard to pierce the dense canopy of trees.

If not the wind, what?

Natasha paused, her fingers still on the plump papaya she was about to pluck from the tree. It was a dull thudding making the trees shake. Maybe one of her team was trying to cut down a tree.

Someone nearby began to whistle. It was a sharp and high-pitched noise in the rainforest. A jumble of discordant notes that matched no melody she knew.

Natasha mimicked the whistling for a moment in greeting. "Is that you, Arianna?" she called out. "I'm almost done."

There was no response except more whistling and the slow, steady thud. The sounds were getting closer, and the rest of rainforest seemed to go silent in anticipation.

Natasha shrugged. *Maybe she didn't hear me.* Her fellow botanist had a way of disappearing into her own thoughts, which wasn't surprising considering the situation in which they had all found themselves. Sometimes, it was easier to disappear into one's memories than to think about the fact that you might never get home.

Natasha plucked another papaya from the tree. There were two more on the stem, but she didn't want to strip the tree completely. She carefully placed the fruit into the satchel that was open by her feet. She smiled. It wasn't exactly a feast, but she knew the rest of her expedition party would be pleased. Papaya was always a treat.

"What gives you the right?" a low voice hissed from behind her.

Natasha whipped around. She faced a small man leaning on a walking stick. His skin was so wrinkled it almost looked like tree bark, and it had a strange greenish hue. His clothes hung in rags off his body, and his hair was white and matted, with vines and twigs knotted in the strands.

"The right? I'm sorry, I don't understand—" Natasha began.

"This forest is not yours to pillage." The man hobbled forwards, his walking stick thudding on the ground. He glared

up at her. "You are a stranger. You don't belong here."

"You're right." Natasha held up her hands. "I don't belong here." From nowhere, she could feel the threat of tears, and she blinked hard. "We have been lost in this rainforest for more weeks than I can bear to count. My expedition party all want to get home, but we have no way of contacting the outside world."

The old man peered up at her with eyes as green as leaves from the *Pithecellobium dulce*.

"Home," he murmured. "Tell me about your home."

The old man's voice was wistful, hungry almost.

Natasha took a step backwards. She suddenly realised she should be scared. She had seen no one other than those in her expedition party for almost six months. None of the isolated groups that lived deep in the Amazon, no other sign of human life, but now this old man had just emerged from the trees and spoken perfect English.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "Where have you come from?"

"You first," the old man insisted. "Tell me about your life. The one away from here."

Natasha swallowed hard. Something about this man felt mythical. Mystical. She found herself telling him about home. It felt good, and once she started, she couldn't stop. Her longing to see her family again was like a tap she couldn't turn off, and the words poured from her. She told him about her home in the small town of Crowmarsh, so different to the London borough where she had grown up. She told him how everyone knew

one another and not much happened. She spoke about her house on the edge of Tangley Woods. She explained that her husband was a professor of mythology at the university in the nearby city of dreaming spires, but didn't say how far away he had seemed before she left for the expedition. She explained that her daughter, Tia, was fierce and clever, and would toss her curls in the most flippant way when they had an argument but most importantly, she was loving.

"Then there's my son, Zach," Natasha said. "But we all call him Buzz." Her throat was burning now, her longing for her family almost overwhelming her. "He is as kind as he is stubborn. He's just like his dad, although he'd deny it. He is loyal and brave, and I miss him so much that sometimes I can't breathe. He's my best friend."

"Your home sounds like a very special place." The old man's voice was full of yearning. "It's important to have people to take care of."

Natasha nodded. "So, what about you?"

"I cannot remember my home," the old man said. "I have lived alone in this rainforest for a long time. The rainforest is my home. The rainforest is my family."

"But there must be someone missing you," Natasha persisted.

"Missing me?" the old man questioned. "Now, that would be quite something. To have someone who cared for me. To have a friend. A companion. To have a purpose." He leant heavily on

his stick. "Tell me, Natasha, what would you do to go home?"

"Well, I'd—" She broke off. "Wait. How'd you know my name? I didn't tell you."

"I know lots of things," the old man said. "I know the way through this rainforest. I know the way to safety and the way to those who can help you get home."

"You do?" Natasha curled her hands into fists to stop them from shaking. "Tell me, please. We've been lost for so long. We'd almost given up hope." She looked over her shoulder to peer through the undergrowth. "My camp's not far from here. You can come and tell the others. They'll be so grateful for any help you can give us."

"No." The word exploded from the old man's mouth and ricocheted around the rainforest. "This deal is between the two of us. I do not wish to meet the others."

"Okay." Natasha held up her hands again. "But I cannot leave them behind. She lifted her chin. "I will not leave them behind."

"I am not asking you to." The old man tapped his walking stick on the ground with another *thud, thud, thud*. "Just know that the deal is between the two of us. If you want to leave the rainforest, you must understand that."

Natasha nodded. "Yes, I understand."

"So tell me, Natasha. What would you give to go home?"

"Anything," she whispered. "I would give anything."

The old man's eyes gleamed with delight. "That's the right

answer." He lifted up his gnarled walking stick so that it lay flat across his palms.

Natasha could see that it had a carving of a compass etched into the wood. She felt dizzy looking at the swirl of lines. It was like the points of the compass were moving, slowly turning until they were a blur.

"Tsk, tsk." The old man whipped the stick away and held it behind his back. "It is rude to stare, Natasha."

"Sorry," Natasha said.

He held out the walking stick once more. "Take this. It will guide you to a settlement many days from here. There, you will be able to contact those you love. You will be able to get home." He nodded his head. "Take it and the deal is done."

Natasha hesitated, but only for a second. Her hand closed around the walking stick. It was warm and rough in her hand. "Am I really supposed to believe this thing is going to work?" she asked. "How will it show me anything?"

The old man laughed. "This is not a test of belief, Natasha. I have never been the type that needs the faith of your kind to survive. Just know that I am El Tunchi, and this walking stick will get you home. It is yours, for now. Your eyes will show you what your heart already knows soon enough."

Natasha nodded. She did not really understand all that El Tunchi said, but she could tell that this strange man was not lying. And he was right. She did know that he could show her a way home.

"How will I ever be able to thank you?" she asked. Her voice caught on the last word as tears stung her eyes once more.

"No thank-you is necessary. We have a deal, Natasha," El Tunchi said. "And when the time comes, you will pay the debt. You'll give me that which is most precious."

The old man smiled, and for the first time, Natasha noticed how small and sharp his teeth looked.

"Debt?" Natasha's stomach twisted at the word. "What do you mean?"

"You'll find out," El Tunchi said. "Now go." He shooed her away with hands that were long and skeletal. "Your family are waiting for you in this place called Crowmarsh. Enjoy them, Natasha. We'll meet again."

El Tunchi turned and walked back into the depths of the forest. But whereas before the old man had shuffled, Natasha noticed that he now bounded through the undergrowth. Like a man who had never needed his walking stick. He walked as if he were full of joy.

"What have I done?" Natasha whispered into the rainforest. The sound of wildlife had now come back. The eerie silence was leaving with El Tunchi. The crickets chirruped their furious reply, and the stick hummed with a power that made Natasha's hand sting.



PART I

STRANGERS



CHAPTER ONE

SERIAL LOSER

Six months later . . .

"Sam, are you sure this is a good idea?" Buzz set his bike on the ground and sat down on the park bench. He scooted right over to the edge so he didn't squash the massive duffle bag that rested between him and his friend. "I mean, this whole thing sounds really dodgy."

"Mate, trust me, it's fine," Sam replied. "This is how things are done once you get to this stage of the game." He patted his bag. "I don't expect you to understand. This is a very different world for you."

I wish. Buzz had to work hard to swallow down a sigh. *But it's the same old world. That's the problem.* The thought wormed itself into Buzz's head, bringing with it a familiar sense of emptiness. The memories of his time in the underworld and

the other magical realms he'd seen while searching for the mythical Runes of Valhalla refused to let him go. They seemed to be getting sharper rather than duller with every month that passed, and they mocked the ordinariness of his life every time he got ready for school or went to football practice or even thought about the Easter holidays, which loomed.

"The thing is, it's about having the right priorities. Making the right choices. Don't you think?" Sam's question reached Buzz as if it were travelling across a vast ocean.

"Um?" Buzz blinked at his friend, trying to work out how much he'd missed.

"You weren't listening, were you?" Sam shook his head. "It's like you're not here any more, Buzz. Or do I just bore you?"

"Samraj, don't be like that. I just didn't catch what you said. It's not a big deal."

"You're lying, Buzz. You're a stranger and have been for the last six months." There was a bitter tone to Sam's voice. "Something happened, and I can always tell when you're thinking about it." His slim fingers picked at the strap of the duffle bag. "If I'm really your best friend, tell me what happened to you."

Buzz opened his mouth. The words were there. They could explain how six months ago he'd bumped into an American girl called Mari who was on her way to her grandmother's house. They'd explain how he and Mari had witnessed the goddess of Sunday being kidnapped by Loki's dragon. How after that,

the world had got stuck on a twenty-four-hour loop called the Unmorrow Curse and that people had become more cruel because of it. His words would describe the quest for the Runes of Valhalla and how Buzz, Mari, and a boy named Theo had travelled to the underworld to free the Norse gods and reunite them with the runes. How they'd saved the world.

Buzz could tell Sam all these things, but almost everyone had forgotten the Unmorrow Curse in a strange case of collective amnesia, so what damage might he do if he made Sam remember?

Oh, who am I kidding? Buzz thought. He didn't want to tell Sam what had happened because it hurt. All those terrifying, breathtaking, amazing experiences were behind him now. No gods, no mythical beasts, no adventure. Just a talking squirrel who he saw once in a while and a very normal, boring life. Talking about what had happened just made him feel worse.

Buzz crossed his arms. "Just drop it," he said. "Nothing happened, okay?"

Sam's lips were a thin line. "Fine. Have your secrets and I guess I'll have mine."

Something about Sam's tone made Buzz pause. His friend was angry with him – he could hear that – but there was something else in his voice as well. *Sam almost sounds scared.*

Buzz grabbed his friend's shoulder. "Hey, Sam, listen, you know you can tell me anything."

Sam shrugged him off. "You mean like the way you tell me?

It's okay – it's probably nothing." His voice had almost become a whisper. "It'll go away if I ignore it and—"

"Are you Samraj Matharu?" A young man of about eighteen was looking down at them as they sat on the park bench.

Buzz frowned. The guy was wearing shades. Big ones. It was warm for the end of March, but the oversized sunglasses were definitely unnecessary.

"That's me," Sam said. "And you're Jack Pretorial?"

The older boy nodded. "You got the goods?"

Sam stood up and unzipped his bag with a flourish. He then brought out a slightly faded cereal box, followed by a small action figure in a see-through plastic case. "One limited edition Dortmeld the Barbarian from the 1984 Cheerios' campaign, with original cereal box. I think your client is going to be very happy." Sam's cheeks were flushed with pride.

The older boy's shoulders shook for a moment as he looked at the small figure with its bejewelled sword. "Amazing," he finally managed to say.

A prickle of unease crawled up Buzz's neck. Jack Pretorial was either overcome with emotion by what he'd seen, or he was laughing at Sam. Buzz wasn't sure. *Not yet.*

"And did you take a photo of the rest of your cereal-box toy collection and email it to me as requested?" Jack's shoulders began to shake again, and he covered his mouth. "It's important to my client that I can prove the providence of the collectible and show it has been well looked after by an expert."

Sam frowned. "Don't you mean 'provenance' rather than providence?"

The older boy waved a hand. "Whatever. If my client is going to accept the merchandise, he needs to know where it's come from and that it's been looked after."

"You'll have no worries on that front." Sam carefully placed the cereal box back in the bag. He then held up Dortmeld so Jack could take a closer look. "I've taken photos of my whole collection but also made a video of my upkeep regimen for the toys and what protective casings I prefer to use. I thought it might be of interest to the third party you'll be giving Dortmeld to." Sam gazed down at the little action figure, his finger running along the case. "I'll be sad to see him go, but it'll be worth it."

"Of course, I understand. It must be so difficult to say goodbye to Dorkmeld." The older boy smirked.

Dorkmeld. Buzz felt his unease bloom even further. *This whole thing stinks.* And it wasn't just the smirking expression that was putting him on edge. Jack also looked really familiar.

"Dortmeld," Sam corrected in an aggrieved voice.

The older boy laughed until he almost couldn't catch his breath. "Yeah, right, my mistake."

Now, Buzz didn't exactly get Sam's hobby of collecting fantasy action figures, but Sam's dad was a big collector also, and Buzz wasn't going to have others laughing at his friend. "Something funny, Jack?"

"Don't start, Buzz," Sam begged. "Just ignore him, Jack."

"Don't start?" Buzz leapt to his feet. "This guy's laughing at you. Can't you see that?"

"Stop it," Sam demanded. "You do realise it doesn't always have to be about you? And you can't pick and choose when you're going to take an interest in me."

Buzz knew he was gaping like a goldfish and so he forced some words out instead. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you like the drama, you like it when you get to swoop in and save the day, but unless you get to be the hero you're not interested in me." Sam's hand clenched on the plastic casing around the action figure with a crunch. "I don't need your help. I don't even know why I invited you."

"And I don't even know why I came." Buzz eyed his bike. *I'll just go. Leave Sam to it.* But his feet didn't move.

Sam was looking at Jack. "Let's see it then. And we can make the swap."

"Ah yes, Brightblader from the 1964 box of Chocoflakes." Jack pointed at the bag by his feet. "Please help yourself."

Sam knelt down. His hands trembled.

Buzz held his breath as Sam unzipped the bag. He didn't know what his friend was going to find in there, but he was pretty sure it wasn't going to be Brightblader.

Sam's brow crinkled. "There's nothing in here except an iPad."

"Pick it up and press the big white button on the screen," the

older boy said. "It's all set up." He pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head and stared down eagerly at the tablet.

Buzz realised now why his face looked so familiar. It was Liam Simms' older brother, Dylan.

"Hey, I know you," Sam said at the same time. "Dylan, right? I didn't know you were into collectibles." Sam's frown became even deeper. "Wait, why did you lie about your name?"

"Into collectibles?" Dylan snorted. "Do I look like a serial loser? Just press call."

Sam's hands were still trembling, but Buzz knew it wasn't from excitement any more. His friend touched the screen.

Liam Simms' grinning face suddenly appeared.

"All right there, Sam," he said. "Happy birthday!"

"It's not my birthday," Sam said.

"It isn't?" Liam's face fell. "When's your birthday, then?"

"April first," Sam replied.

"What? Actually on April Fool's Day?" Liam began to laugh. "Oh man, that would have been too perfect. How did I not know that?"

"What do you want, Liam?" Buzz demanded, peering over Sam's shoulder.

"Hey, Buzz, you're there as well. Ace. Thought you'd be sulking in a corner somewhere."

"I don't sulk," Buzz said.

"Whatever," Liam replied. "Tell Theo to call me if you see him, please."

"What do you want?" Buzz asked again.

"Well, I want to give Sam his birthday present." Liam wrinkled his nose. "Okay, early birthday present." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "And not exactly present. More like prank." He leaned in so his whole head filled the screen. "That's right, Sam. There's no Brightblader, and there's definitely no client who wants to swap him for your dorky Dortmeld." Liam grinned again. "But thanks for that video about how to look after action figures. It's really fascinating. I wonder if anyone else at school will find it as interesting as I do. Laters, loser!" Liam ended the call and Sam dropped the tablet as if it were red hot.

"Hey! Careful." Dylan scooped up the tablet and gently placed it in his bag. "I just got that." He gave a sniggering laugh. "Ah, come on, guys, don't look so glum. You've got to give it to my little brother—it's a good prank. I taught him well. He even gave me an anagram for my alias. Thought that was a nice touch."

Buzz swiftly tried to sort the letters of Jack Pretorial in his head, but Sam was quicker.

"Practical Joker," Sam whispered. He shook his head. "I don't understand. How did Liam know I collected vintage action figures?"

Dylan zipped his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "I think that boy Theo told him. Doesn't matter, does it?"

Sam whirled around to face Buzz. "Yeah, it matters. Because

there's only one person in the whole wide world who knew about my collection."

The sinking feeling that had been growing in Buzz's stomach was taking on *Titanic*-like proportions.

"I, er, um—"

"I can't believe you told him."

"It was only because I was trying to think of a birthday present for you. I thought Theo might have an idea."

"Wow, Buzz, you really have changed if you think Theo is capable of having a good idea. He's a moron."

"That's not true," Buzz said. "It was once, but not any more." He knew defending Theo was not going to help things with Sam, but Theo had changed over the last six months. And the fact was, they had faced down a rampaging, power-hungry god together. Buzz couldn't help that Theo was his friend now.

"You're a fool, you know that? The only reason Theo is even hanging out with you is because he's got a crush on Tia."

No way, Buzz thought. His sister was two years older than Theo, and whenever their paths crossed she treated him like something she had accidentally stepped in.

"Listen, I'm sure it was an accident that he told Liam. He really was interested in helping me find a present for your birthday."

"Buzz, there's only one gift I want from you, and that's for you to leave me alone. Permanently."

"Sam, please—"

"Okay, guys, as entertaining as this little domestic is, I've got to be going," Dylan interjected. "But it's been a blast. Thanks."

He ambled away, up the paved path, his bag swinging from his shoulder.

Sam stared after him. A bead of sweat crested on his brow. His whole body began to tremble.

Buzz sniffed. He could smell something acrid and sharp, and his throat felt scratchy. He looked down to see that Dortmeld's plastic case was melting in Sam's grip. Dortmeld did not look happy about it.

There was a yelp followed by a curse, and looking up, Buzz saw Dylan throw his bag to the ground and begin to stamp on it.

It was on fire.