



Curse of the Ancients

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

For teachers everywhere, especially my two favorites:
Al and Roni de la Peña
—M.d.I.P.



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PROLOGUE

EVERY OTHER time Sera has warped through history with Dak and Riq, it's happened in an instant. She gets sucked into a void, her stomach climbing up into her throat, her whole body shifting into floating particles, no longer a solid thing—it's beyond any roller-coaster free fall imaginable. And then, just before she gets sick, she opens her eyes in another time and place.

But this warp is not like the others.

Instead of time speeding up, it slows down.

And a wall lifts inside her mind.

She sees herself hurrying through flooding streets, out of breath, underneath a blistering twilight sky. Thick tornados ripping through neighborhoods in the distance. The bloodred sun hovering closer to Earth than seems possible, electrical surges shooting out from its core, making the swirling wind intolerably hot and sticky. Acid rain gushing down in slanted sheets. People leaning out of upper-story windows. All of them wide-eyed and screaming. Holding one another.

But Sera can't afford to stop and help.

She has to keep moving. Has to get where she's going before it's too late.

She is alone now, but she didn't come here alone. Ilsa was with her. Ilsa, her enemy. Sera left her behind where she had collapsed, left her with a promise to return. A promise to get them both to safety.

But not yet. Sera has something to do first.

The water rushing through the streets rises quickly until it's nearly head high, and Sera is forced to scale a fire escape where she shoves up against a wall, sucking in breaths and looking all around her. The world is ending. Right before her eyes.

She spots a small motorized emergency raft tied to a looted fire truck. No one inside. She launches herself toward it, splashing into the water and swimming frantically. She hacks the rope in half with a switchblade, climbs in, and hot-wires the engine. In seconds she's speeding through intersection after intersection, steering herself around all the bodies floating facedown in the water. Some are children. Some, old people. She moves past men who squat alone on overturned cars, expressionless as zombies.

One man turns and looks Sera dead in the face as she veers around him, sending a chill down her spine. Because, in his lifeless eyes, she sees the truth of the Cataclysm.

It's not only the disintegration of the world, but the world's people, too.

That's when Sera realizes she's screaming. She's screaming and crying and gunning the raft, shouting at

anyone within earshot, "Somebody help us! This can't be happening!"

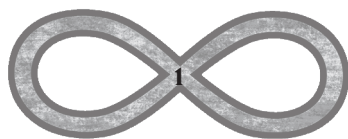
But it is.

All around her, there are military trucks on their sides and old stubborn trees split down the middle and charred black, people flushed from their homes by the surging floods. Gaps are opening up in the Earth's crust, splitting roads in half, swallowing entire buildings, clusters of people reaching out for help, calling the names of loved ones who are no longer alive.

Sera zips past all of it, turning onto her childhood street.

She lets off the gas as she nears her house, then dives overboard and swim-walks her way up the flooded driveway, fearing the unspeakable horrors she's afraid she'll find inside, what will she find inside, what will she find . . .

Just as she reaches a trembling hand out for the door-knob, though, the memory slips away.



Storm Warnings

SERA OPENED her eyes, shaking.

She was kneeling in clay-colored dirt, completely out of breath and clutching the Infinity Ring to her chest. The first thing she saw when she looked up was a short, dark-skinned woman dressed in a tunic-like *huipil*, holding a baby in each arm, hurrying past what looked to be some kind of ancient temple. A boy and a girl, both younger than Sera, ran by next, followed by a man wearing an elaborate headdress.

Sera turned to Dak and Riq. They were watching the same thing: dozens of people rushing past them, trying to get away from something.

But what?

Sera's heart still pounded inside her chest.

These trips through time were typically hard enough on her body, but this one had been different. It seemed to have shaken loose part of her repressed memory of the Cataclysm. During a previous mission, she'd taken

an accidental trip to the future, which had given her a glimpse of the end of the world. When Sera came back, though, she was so traumatized by the experience she could only remember a few details, as if unconsciously protecting herself from what she knew she couldn't handle. So, technically, it hadn't been a lie when she told Dak and Riq she had nothing of interest to tell them about her warp without them.

Now that she remembered reaching for her door, though, she was desperate to recall what she had found inside her house. Why couldn't she remember?

Sera shook the Cataclysm from her mind for now and forced herself to take in her surroundings. The three of them were partially hidden behind a row of trees. The sky was full of clouds. The air smelled clean, the way it sometimes did just before rain.

"Dude, why are you crying?"

Sera turned and found Dak staring at her. "I'm not crying," she said, straightening her posture. "Why would I be crying?"

"Uh, I don't know," he said. "That's kind of why I asked."

Sera dismissed him with the wave of a hand and stood up, reaching for her face on the sly — sure enough, warm tears met the tips of her fingers. "I'm definitely not crying!" she snapped at her supposed best friend. "Maybe the time travel's just getting harder on our bodies. Did you ever think about *that*, Dak?"

“It’s definitely getting harder on mine,” Riq said. He gave Sera a subtle nod that meant he had her back.

Dak stood up, too. “What time period are we in anyway? There are supposed to be Spanish conquistadores all over this place, right? And Franciscan monks. The Yucatán was crawling with those guys in 1562. All I see are scared-looking Mayas.”

Sera studied the people hurrying past the temple across from them. It was true, they were all Mayan. She looked down at the Infinity Ring. They were supposed to have landed in 1562. She was sure she’d programmed in the right coordinates.

“Who has the SQuare?” Riq asked.

Sera handed it to him, saying, “According to the display, we’re in Izamal. I don’t understand what I could’ve done wrong.”

She watched Riq study the screen, then step out from behind the trees to stop a passing boy. “Friend, please hold on for a second,” he said in a foreign popping tongue that Sera’s translation device had momentary trouble rendering into English. “Where is everyone going?”

The boy slowed. After looking the three time travelers up and down, he shouted, “The great storm is coming! Everyone must find shelter right away!”

The boy turned and hurried off.

Sera looked up along with Dak and Riq. The sky was full of gray clouds, sure, but it didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary. Definitely not a “great storm.” Then

again, according to what she'd learned in school, the Maya were incredibly superstitious. Maybe something had gone wrong at one of their ceremonies.

Dak must've been thinking the same thing because he kept shaking his head. "Funny, I thought we would be the ones running for our lives." He turned to Riq and Sera, clearly readying himself for one of his infamous historical rants. "You *do* know that the Maya are considered a violent and hedonistic civilization, right? They sacrificed people, and they were always at war, and they ate the hearts of their own dead family members."

"Never read about any heart eating," Riq said.

"Okay, maybe not that last part, but —"

"That's enough, Dak," Sera said.

"What? Their big contribution to the world was that they wrote the Great Mayan Codex. And it's only considered great because it warned us of the curse, how our world is heading toward a massive Cataclysm —"

"And that our only hope was a group that would one day come along known as the SQ," Riq interrupted. "We've all read the same history books, Dak."

Sera cringed at the mention of the Cataclysm. She pictured herself reaching for the door of her house again. And then nothing. *Concentrate on the here and now*, she told herself, taking the SQuare back from Riq and rechecking their last series of instructions. They seemed straightforward enough. "Help the Maya. 1562." Then a series of coordinates for the Ring.

Dak tapped Sera on the arm and motioned toward Riq. "I liked it better when we hated this guy."

"We never hated him," Sera said.

"Speak for yourself."

"Believe me," Riq said. "The feeling was mutual."

"Maybe we should turn back the clock," Dak said. He elbowed Sera and gave her a big, goofy smile. "Get it? Turn back the clock?" He pointed at the Infinity Ring tucked safely back inside the satchel hanging from her belt.

"You truly are a child," Riq said.

"And you're a clown."

"Stop," Sera said. "Please. I need to think. If there are no conquistadores, like Dak said, maybe we really are in the wrong time. Because we're definitely in the correct geographical area."

"You really don't think we're in 1562?" Riq said.

"I don't." Sera looked back down at the Square. There had to be some scientific explanation for this. Science had never failed her before.

"There's no way we're in 1562," Dak said. "All you have to do is look at that temple across the way. If it was 1562, it would have already been turned into a church. The first thing the Franciscans did when they arrived from Spain was modify the major temples into churches. They wanted to teach the locals there were other ways to live. I can't believe you guys don't know that!"

“Easy, Dak,” Sera said. “I’m not feeling real patient right now.”

Just then, the sky exploded in thunder directly above them.

A light rain began to fall.

Sera looked up, shielding her eyes with her free hand. The clouds seemed darker now. And the wind was beginning to stir. The Mayas continued hurrying past them along the sparkling white road into the distance.

“Take shelter!” a man shouted. “The great storm is coming.”

What “great storm”? Sera thought. And what did these people know about predicting the weather anyway? Back home, meteorologists only got it right about a third of the time, and they had the most up-to-date equipment known to man.

“Come on,” Riq said. “Let’s go find a place out of the rain. And we have to do something about these Japanese clothes.”

“It was fun being a samurai while it lasted,” Dak said sadly.

As they stepped out from behind the trees and started across the raised white road, Dak poked Sera in the shoulder. “It really did look like you were crying. Was it because the Ring took us to the wrong time?”

Sera shook her head and focused her eyes in front of her. She was done thinking about the Cataclysm. They had too much work to do.

“Did you have one of those Remnant things?”

“I wasn’t crying, Dak!” Sera snapped. “Just leave it alone already.”

“Jeez,” Dak said. “Bite my head off. Maybe I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

The sky lit up with lightning, followed by the crashing sound of more thunder. All three of them cowered as they ran.

Sera followed Dak and Riq behind a short row of stone huts, her mind slipping back to the horrible details of what she’d seen and heard of the Cataclysm. The sounds of screams over a chorus of never-ending sirens. The earth’s violent shifting under her feet every few minutes.

They had to fix the rest of the Breaks or else.

And warping to the wrong time wasn’t exactly a promising start.