

The Island of Almosts

Book 1 of the Elsebeneath series

by Juno Threadborne

For my son, Sam.

Chapter One: The Tangle

Sam stood in the driveway, holding his yo-yo like it was mocking him.

It wasn't a bad yo-yo. It was blue and shiny and balanced *just right*—just like the videos said it should be. Sam had measured, cut, and tied the string *exactly* the way he was supposed to. He'd practiced. A lot.

But still... the stupid thing wouldn't listen.

He tried the trick again. "Around the World," just like Jamie had done at school. Sam swung the yo-yo hard, but it twisted in midair, slammed into the ground, and bounced back up in a weird wobble that smacked him in the leg.

"Ow!"

He winced, grabbing the string.

Across the street, Jamie was finishing a combo trick Sam didn't even know the name of. Something with a loop, a flip, and a spin at the end. When he landed it, all the kids cheered like he'd just caught a Pokémon with one hand.

Sam didn't look. He didn't clap. He just sat down on the curb, his yo-yo in his lap, arms crossed in defeat.

"I'll never be good at this," he mumbled.

The wind blew a little. Quiet. Like it wasn't sure what to say.

Sam stared down at the tangled string in his hands. He tugged it. Twisted it. Tried to unknot it. But somehow, no matter what he did, it looked worse than when he started.

And then—

The world got *quiet*. Not just regular quiet—*magical* quiet. The kind of quiet where something is *about to happen*.

Sam blinked.

The curb under him had vanished. The road nowhere in sight. Even Jamie's cheers had faded. And the yo-yo in his hand?

Still there.

But now he was sitting on soft, springy grass. The sky above him was lavender, and the clouds looked like upside-down question marks. In the distance, he heard... was that a juggler? Or a goat trying to play violin?

A voice behind him said:

"Ah. A visitor. Just in time. Let me guess—you were *almost* ready to give up?"

Sam turned.

And standing there was a turtle wearing glasses, a hat made of moss, and the warmest smile Sam had ever seen.

The turtle stepped closer, grass rustling softly under his feet. He wasn't in a hurry. In fact, he moved like the world would wait if he needed it to.

His shell was wide, with tiny mushrooms growing near the bottom edge. His glasses had one cracked lens. And his eyes... his eyes looked like he'd watched a million suns rise and memorized every single one.

He held out a stubby hand.

"Welcome to the Island of Almosts. I'm Practicio. Resident listener, patient walker, and—should you accept—your guide."

Sam blinked, still holding the yo-yo.

"Where... am I?"

Practicio smiled. "Where people go when they think maybe—*maybe* they're just not good enough."

Sam looked down at his yo-yo, then back up. "Is this a dream?"

“Maybe.” The turtle shrugged. “But it’s also *real*. Most of the good places are.”

Practicio turned slowly, gesturing with his hand, as the sky above them shimmered. Far in the distance, a trumpet tooted a note that didn’t belong in *any* key. While a squirrel balanced on one paw reading upside down. A kite flew in loops above the trees—*with no string at all*.

“This island is full of people and creatures who were *almost* good at something. Some gave up. Some are still trying. And some...”—he looked at Sam—“just need to see things from another angle.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying I’m not good at yo-yo tricks?”

Practicio chuckled, completely unbothered.

“I’m saying you’re not *done* yet.”

He turned again, slowly starting to walk down a gently curving path made of scattered notebook pages and half-finished to-do lists. With each step, the grass beneath him glowed faintly.

“Come with me. I want to show you something. Three some-things, actually. Stories. And all of them? Almosts.”

Sam hesitated.

Then—he stood up. Yo-yo still tangled, heart still sore, but maybe... *just maybe*... a little curious.

And he followed.

Chapter Two: The Bird Who Never Sang

Practicio led Sam along the winding path. The sky above shifted from lavender to soft peach, like it was blushing from some secret joke.

Soon they reached a clearing filled with music—but not full songs. Just... beginnings.

A few notes here. A riff there. A melody that almost made sense before drifting off into nothing.

Sitting in the middle of it all was a tiny bird with feathers like scattered piano keys—white, black, and shimmering blue. She wore a scarf made of sheet music. And around her were dozens—*hundreds*—of little scraps of paper with lyrics, verses, and lines.

She noticed them and quickly stuffed one of the pages under a wing.

“Oh! Visitors? Um. Sorry. I’m still... working on something.”

Practicio gave a small bow. “Sam, this is Thimble. The best almost-singer I’ve ever met.”

Thimble looked embarrassed. “That’s not really a title, is it?”

“It is here,” the turtle said gently. “Why don’t you show Sam one of your songs?”

The bird shuffled. “They’re not *done*.”

“They don’t have to be.”

After a pause, Thimble pulled out a slip of paper and hummed a few bars. It was light and strange and hauntingly lovely.

Sam listened, eyebrows raised. “That’s *really* good.”

Thimble smiled shyly. “It always *starts* good. But then I mess it up. I think of a better idea halfway through. Or I hear someone else’s song and mine feels... smaller. So I stop. And I start over. Again. And again. And again.”

Practicio gave her a kind look. “How many songs have you almost written?”

Thimble looked down. “...a hundred and forty-seven.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “Why not just finish one?”

The little bird sighed. “Because what if it’s not perfect?”

Sam didn’t answer.

He looked at his yo-yo.

Then at his hands.

Then at Thimble.

She noticed. “You’re stuck too, huh?”

He nodded.

Thimble hesitated, then pulled a scrap of paper from the ground—one with a single, delicate line of lyrics—and tucked it into Sam’s pocket.

“Here. It’s not finished. But it’s still *mine*. And maybe... that’s enough for now.”

Practicio gave a soft smile as they turned to go.

“Not everything needs to be a masterpiece to mean something.”

The wind carried a few quiet notes behind them as they walked away—half a melody, unfinished... but still beautiful.

Chapter Three: The Snail Who Raced a Cheetah

The next part of the island felt *slower*. The air was thick with the scent of rain and earth, and the grass here grew in soft spirals that curled inward like sleepy question marks.

Practicio led Sam to a shallow hill with a tiny track carved into the mud—like someone had been running laps very, very slowly.

Sam squinted. “Is that... a snail?”

A voice groaned from under a little leaf umbrella.

“Was. Used to be. Sort of.”

The snail was wearing a headband—damp, droopy, and too big—and had tiny racing stripes painted (badly) down his shell. Around him were posters that read things like “**YOU’VE GOT THIS!**” and “**SHELL ON, HEAD HIGH!**”

Sam knelt down. “What happened?”

The snail sighed. “Name’s **Zoomie**. I was going to be the fastest snail in the *entire world*. I trained for *weeks*. Left slime trails everywhere. Even built this track.”

Practicio nodded. “He was doing well. Making progress. Consistent. Dedicated.”

Zoomie gave a proud little shrug. “Then one day, I looked up—and saw a cheetah.”

Sam tilted his head. “An *actual* cheetah?”

Zoomie nodded. “It was amazing. Legs like wind. Moved like a thought. Ran from one side of the island to the other in the time it takes me to *blink*.”

He lowered his voice.

“So I stopped. What was the point? I’d never be *that* fast.”

Sam was quiet.

Practicio looked at him gently.

“Comparison can make you forget how far you’ve come. Zoomie was never supposed to race cheetahs. He was supposed to race *yesterday’s Zoomie*.”

Sam looked down at his yo-yo.

“I keep thinking I’m supposed to be as good as Jamie.”

Zoomie snorted. “Well *don’t*. Jamie’s Jamie. You’re you. If I’d just kept training, I might’ve been the fastest snail *in history*. Now I just... sit here and collect motivational posters.”

Sam reached down and peeled one off the mud. It read: **YOU’RE STILL MOVING, AND THAT COUNTS.**

He smiled.

And Practicio smiled, too.

“On this island,” the turtle said, “the race is never against someone else. It’s against the part of you that wants to stop.”

Chapter Three and a Half: The Shortcut

After saying goodbye to Zoomie, the trail forked.

One path kept winding gently forward, deeper into the island. But the other was narrower. Crooked. Twisted. At the end of it, Sam could see a shimmer—like the place he came from.

He pointed.

“Is that... the way home?”

Practicio looked at it for a long time.

“Sort of. It leads back. But it skips the rest.”

Sam’s fingers tightened around his yo-yo.

“I don’t know if I want to see more Almosts. It’s kind of... sad. Like, what if I end up like them? What if *this* is just my Almost?”

Practicio didn’t answer right away. He just watched Sam. Not pushing.

Sam looked down the shortcut again. It was tempting—quiet and safe. No more unfinished songs. No more muddy tracks.

But something tugged at him. A memory. A page in his pocket.

“Thimble gave me a song,” he whispered. “And Zoomie gave me a poster.”

He looked at the yo-yo in his hand.

“I think they *kept* going. Somewhere. Even if it didn’t work out.”

Practicio nodded slowly.

“The shortcut skips the struggle. But it skips the story, too.”

Sam looked down the crooked path one last time.

Then turned away from it.

“Let’s keep going.”

Practicio smiled, and they walked on.

Chapter Four: The Painter Who Erased the World

The path curved gently into a forest of giant mushrooms and sea-glass trees. Light filtered through the leaves in ripples, like they were underwater. Everything shimmered softly, as if the island was holding its breath.

Ahead was a clearing filled with *canvases*. Dozens of them. Hundreds. All propped up or tossed aside—some half-painted, others smudged over in grey.

And in the center, hunched over one of them, sat an octopus wearing a beret. Each of her arms held a different brush—and each brush was dipped in a different color.

She didn't notice Sam and Practicio right away. She was busy painting, erasing, painting again—faster and faster until the canvas turned into a muddled blur of brushstrokes.

Practicio cleared his throat softly.

The octopus startled and whipped around.

"Oh! Visitors! Just a moment, I'm—well, actually, I'm *restarting*. Again."

"Sam," said Practicio, "this is *Inky*. She's one of the most talented painters I've ever met."

Inky waved a brush. "I *was*. Maybe. Before I started *thinking* about being good."

Sam stepped closer. "What do you mean?"

Inky gestured to the wreckage of canvases around her. "I used to love painting. I'd make jellyfish galaxies and upside-down sunsets. But one day, I looked at my work and thought, 'Wait... what if someone else sees this and thinks it's *bad*?'"

She frowned. "So I erased a little. Then a little more. Then I started fixing lines that didn't need fixing. And then I erased the fixes."

She picked up a brush with a sigh.

“Now I paint and repaint until the colors forget what they were trying to be.”

Practicio gently touched one of the canvases. It was beautiful—soft blues and oranges, like a dream about the ocean—but the center was completely smudged away.

“Sometimes,” the turtle said, “we lose the joy of making because we’re too busy judging the making.”

Sam swallowed. That one hit close.

“But what if it is bad?” he asked.

Inky gave him a crooked smile. “Then it’s *one step closer to being better*. You don’t learn anything by hiding a blank canvas.”

She dipped a new brush in orange and handed it to Sam.

“Here. Try. Just a line.”

Sam hesitated. Then drew one wobbly stroke.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it felt *real*.

And that was something.

Chapter Five: Fall Number 4,030

The path rose again, gently winding up a hill scattered with pebbles and wildflowers. The sky above had shifted into soft golden-pink, like a sunset that didn't want to end.

Practicio walked a little slower now.

Sam walked beside him, yo-yo still tangled, but his hands holding it differently—like it wasn't broken, just paused.

At the top of the hill, they heard it.

WHOOOSH—CLUNK—POOF.

And then:

“WELL, THAT COULD'VE BEEN WORSE!”

Sam stepped over the ridge and burst out laughing.

At the bottom of the hill, tangled in her own tail and lying in a puff of glittery dust, was a kangaroo. She wore a too-big helmet and elbow pads that had definitely seen better days. Her skateboard had rolled into a bush.

She sat up, shook her head, and grinned.

“Fall number 4,030! Who's counting? *I am!* Wanna see 4,031?”

Practicio chuckled. “Sam, meet **Kip**. She's been practicing the same trick for three years.”

Sam's eyes widened. “You're still not done?”

Kip pulled a leaf out of her helmet. “Nope! But I'm way better than I was at fall number 83. And *way* less bruised than 2,012.”

Sam stepped forward. “Don't you get tired of failing?”

Kip tilted her head. “I don’t fail. I *fall*. It’s not the same.”

She stood up and dusted herself off. “Every time I fall, I learn something. Sometimes it’s big—like where to put my feet. Sometimes it’s small—like ‘don’t practice after eating six apples.’ But every time, I get closer.”

“And someday, I’ll land it.”

She looked at Sam’s yo-yo.

“You fallin’, too?”

Sam nodded.

“Then you’re already on the way.”

Kip grinned and grabbed her skateboard. “Race you to the next fall!”

Sam laughed. “I think I’ll walk.”

Practicio placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve seen the island now. The Almosts. The Could-Have-Beens. But you, Sam? You’re not done yet. And *that* makes all the difference.”

The sky shimmered.

The world softened.

And then—

Chapter Six: The First Trick

Sam woke up.

The driveway was back. So was the yo-yo. But the knot didn't judge him anymore.

His grip was different now.

He untied the knot carefully. Rewound the string. Took a breath.

And tried again.

The yo-yo dipped, spun, wobbled—and bounced.

Not perfect.

Not even close.

But it was the first time it didn't feel like a failure.

It felt like a beginning.

And somewhere, quiet and patient, the wind shifted again—
as if wondering when he might return.