

NOTHING TO LOSE

(EXCEPT YOU)

"...the sky will grow dark, cold rain will fall and all trace of the right way will be blotted out. You will be all alone. And still you will have to go on."

Richard Adams, Shardik

ONE

EVEN IN THE hospital, with its discrete air conditioning running through the proudly civilised arch of the corridors, the smell lingered. A part of it had to be her, and she knew it: the stink of sweat and the odour of stale water that accompanied the muffled squeak of each left footed step - the boots would want replacing before she left this place to the long grasp of memory - but that was far from all of it. Outside, in the heat, the air carried the echo of rot and the onrushing breath of disease, held back only by exhaustive effort. Taxis and tuk-tuks lined the streets and ambulances formed a convoy, still bringing in wounded two weeks after the wave had hit. The long fall out was beginning even before the devastation was over.

It took time to find a nurse not bent over a patient, and time was precious. Still, it was faster than joining the throng of arrivals in Phuket Hospital's surprisingly welcoming reception.

"Excuse me? Hey, uh..." she searched her strained grasp of Thai for the right phrase. "Kor toht?"

The nurse looked up, dark bags under his eyes.

"I'm looking for Doctor Veerabhadra. He's asked to see me. I'm with the Red Cross." Her hands flapped aimlessly, as though such gestures might make her easier to understand.

He pointed through the stream of offensively cheerful sunlight that filled the next corridor. "Down to the end. Last room."

"Thank you. Kon Kun Maak."

Veerabhadra's door was open, and his office was empty. She knocked anyway, and stepped inside.

So ridiculously British, she thought.

The room was small; a curtained off plastic covered bed, two chairs, and a worn wooden desk with a slim computer screen and a framed picture of an Indian wedding; beaming parents standing on either side of a delicately painted young woman who wore an expression of dazed happiness. A window that looked out over the steel frame of an air-con outlet gave the place the feel of a cut rate hotel room.

Sharp footsteps broke through the rush of sound from the rest of the hospital, and the shape of a man filled the doorway. He was tall, broad across slumped shoulders, with the weathered skin of an outdoorsman and the greying temples of age. He peered at her through half-moon glasses with a single thumbprint at the edge of one lens.

"Can I help you?"

"Doctor Veerabhadra?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"I'm Rachel Tackett, with the Red Cross. You sent a message that you needed to see me."

"Yes. Thank you for coming." Veerabhadra closed the door behind him as he stepped into the room, and sank into the chair by the desk. "We're both very busy people, so I will waste no time. They tell me you are a deva. Is it true?"

"Sorry?"

"A deva. An angel. A God."

She hid a flinch. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Doctor Tackett - "

"I'm not a Doctor, either. Not yet, anyway."

Veerabhadra sighed, and off took his glasses, thumb grazing the left lens in the same place as the print. "Miss, then? Miss Tackett. We are in the middle of an international crisis of unprecedented scale, and the death toll rises every day. Do you really think that your secret is worth protecting in the face of this devastation?"

"I..."

"I met a deva once before. Once, only. Nearly fifty years ago. He could heat metal until it melted, just by touching it. Now somehow, by some miracle, word reaches me that in the middle of all this horror, there is another, working not three miles from my office."

"I..."

"If what I have heard is true, you identified the parents of a little girl who gave you no more information than panicked screaming. Apparently, all you did was sit and stroke her hair, but the next day you managed to pick her parents out of a crowd, and reunite them. I don't care if you read her mind, or if the Gods themselves showed you her entire family tree; I just need you to repeat whatever it was that you did with another patient in my care."

Silence, for a moment. Then:

"I didn't read her mind." Tackett said quietly. "And I don't think I believe in God anymore."

"Go on."

"I can... I don't know how it works, but I can share someone else's memories. Like watching a film, or being in one, but one where all the scenes are out of sequence."

Veerabhadra inclined his head. "I see."

"Will you tell anyone?"

"My concern here is saving lives, not crushing them."

"Thank you."

He stood, gesturing towards the door. "Will you see my patient?"

Tackett nodded. "Yes, yes of course."

TWO

VEERABHADRA LED HER through the cramped hospital to a small ward where the intrusion of extra beds had made the light and pleasant space slightly claustrophobic.

"She was brought in just over a week ago." Veerabhadra told her, voice low. "I need to know who she is, where she's from. I doubt she's local, but that's not impossible."

"Is she comatose?"

"Catatonic. She doesn't speak even when she has her more lucid periods. If she were worse, I'd prefer to move her to Manarom. If she were better, I'd send her home. As it is..."

He drew back the patterned curtain with one lightly callused hand. The girl on the bed didn't react to their presence, only sat with a listlessness that made her look weary, eyes unfocussed and face hollow. Angry red and blue bruises dappled the darkness of her skin in a stark contrast to the clinical mint green of the hospital gown.

Tackett gripped the rail across the bottom of the bed. "Do you know anything about her?"

"Nothing. She was wearing a bracelet with a name plate, and we have chosen to assume that it was hers."

"Alright." She breathed deeply. "Alright."

"Do you need anything?"

"No." Tackett paused. "Actually, yes. Where's the bracelet?"

"In the bag."

He unhooked a small plastic bag from the frame of the bed, and took a woven leather bracelet from inside. A tiny metal plate gleamed through a patina of dirt that had been smeared away enough to reveal a single hand carved word: '*Jocelyn*'.

"When we started running out of space, we put personal effects into bags from the cafeteria. It meant we could take out the cabinets. Make more room."

Tackett turned the bracelet over in her fingers, sitting down on the end of the bed as she did. "This will help. It's good to have a focus. Somewhere to start. Memory is... well it's usually a mess."

Veerabhadra said nothing, only watched as she slipped her hand around the girl's unmoving fingers, and began.

CHRISTMAS

DINNER IS UNCOMFORTABLE for all of them, although none of them tries to make it that way. Mags is the one who holds it together, and both Jo and Alinafe try to hide their gratitude for her easy charisma. She insists that they wash up together, and

by the time they're done the awkward uncertainty is beginning to pass.

"I wanted to get you both something," Alinafe tells them. "To say thank you for coming all this way. I know there are easier ways to spend Christmas."

"Maybe," Mags tells him. "But we couldn't think of anything more important."

Jo agrees, feeling more comfortable.

"It's only a little thing," he says. His voice is rich and deep. He's picked up the local accent over the last ten years, and it makes him sound slightly strange. "A boy down at the beach makes them, and I thought you might like them. I know we said no presents, so these aren't for Christmas - they're just... just because."

He passes them both little packets of tissue paper; Jo first, then Mags. They unwrap them carefully and pull out matching leather bracelets, carefully woven into shining metal clasps. Each has a name plate that glitters in the pulsing lights from the tiny tree by the window.

"Thank you, dad." Jo tells him. It's the first time she's ever called him that.

Maggie smiles.

HURT

THEY WADE, KNEE deep in detritus, through the lobby of a hotel. Jo can hear other people somewhere; distant voices that swirl in the air, muffled by the sound of the water.

"Are you okay?" Maggie's voice is almost like a memory as they climb over the broken barrier in the stairwell.

"My arms hurt. Back, too."

"Maybe from when you tried to hold on to me, before. With the car."

"Maybe."

Maggie slides her cold hand into Jo's. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"I love you too." Her breath feels ragged.

"Don't leave me."

"I won't. I promise."

MIRACLES

THE WATER BEATS at her face, her chest, her arms. She can hear people calling to her. She tries to call back, but the water fills her mouth and it's foul. Salt stings at her eyes, but she keeps them open. She has to. She'll only get one chance here, because Maggie can't swim.

Jo lets go of the railing with one arm. The water seems to pull harder, threatening to drag her into the river that has now filled the main street, sweeping away everything in its path.

"Grab my hand!" She shrieks. "Grab my hand!"

And Mags tries. She's a thrashing mass of arms and blonde hair, bright blood on her panicked face, a helpless passenger. She flails, weeping uncontrollably, and throws both hands out towards the girl who brought her here.

Jo stretches out enough that her ribs ache. She misses Maggie's right hand, somehow fights a panic that threatens to drown her faster than the water can, and finds the left. Their fingers lock around each other in a wet vice. The water batters angrily at them; Maggie's weight is staggering, and for a moment Jo thinks she'll lose her grip and that both of them will be swept away. She opens her mouth to shout something, and realises that she's stretched out so far that she can't breathe. She pulls, both arms screaming, but she's not strong enough to fight the current. She looks at Mags, but the other girl is looking past her, pale skin still bloody, mouth open in a round O of horrible surprise. Jo turns to see the car coming towards them, dragged on the same current that they're trying to fight.

Mags thrashes, animal panic sealing her off from the world.

Jo fights to keep hold, desperately looking for a miracle to save them.

There are no miracles.

SIX

TACKETT WAS SHAKING when she let go of Jo's fingers. She flinched violently when Veerabhadra's hand touched her shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"Were you successful?"

"I... no... well a little." Tackett stood, and put one hand out to the wall to steady herself against a wave of nausea.

"You're sure you're alright?"

"I will be. It's disorienting, that's all. You were right about her name, although she prefers Jo to Jocelyn. She was on holiday with her girlfriend. They're British, or at least they sound like they're from London. Her father lives here – he's not native but he must have been here a while."

"That may be enough; I can contact the embassy, see if we can locate either of the other two."

Tackett shook her head. "There's something not right though. There's a weird sensation with the memory fragments, almost like diplopia. I don't understand it."

"I would attempt to offer advice, but I'm afraid we're well beyond my field of expertise here." He smiled apologetically.

She sat down again. "I'm going to take a second look. There's something not right there. Beyond the obvious, I mean."

"Be careful, Miss Tackett."

"I will."

UNDERWATER

THERE IS A moment of confused peace, and she almost relaxes into it. The world turns to stained glass, and dappled sunlight refracts across everything she can see. The screaming voices are dulled as though heard from another floor of an old building, or as though she was... as though she was underwater.

The current spits her back to the surface, and the world regains its harsh clarity. She coughs up silty water, arms pin wheeling as she fights to... what...? get out? stay alive? why?

The water closes around her face, filling her nose and her mouth, and she goes under again, still asking the question.

There's nothing left to lose.

Not anymore.

Not without her.

SHORELINE

THEY WALK BACK along the beachfront with their hands wrapped together. Their matching bracelets clink together with every other step.

"That was nice." Mags murmurs.

"Yes."

"Feel better?"

Jo nods. "I think he liked you."

"That's because I'm amazing."

They laugh; a quiet, comfortable sound. The susurrus of the shoreline drowns their footsteps.

"I was nervous." Jo says finally, admitting what they'd both known since Alinafe's letter had arrived on their doorstep three months ago.

"Me too."

"You?"

Mags shrugs. "Well, I was worried he wouldn't approve of me. Being with you, I mean."

"Because you're a girl?"

"And white."

"He wouldn't be the first, or the last."

"No." Mags sighs.

"I think he had a hard time with it." Jo says, and the words are laced with sadness.

"I think he tried not to. He made it his problem, not ours."

Jo squeezes her fingers. "It's a start. It's not perfect, but it's a start."

FLAMES

THEY FLY TOGETHER, hands clasped, the world spread out below them. Maggie laughs, fighting to control her hair in the precocious wind currents. Her hair. Her beautiful hair, like sunlight. She laughs as they race across the sky, rising, always rising towards the ceiling of the world. She laughs as she catches fire, becoming Phaethon in his father's chariot; wild and uncontrolled.

She laughs as she burns; skin blistering, hair a bonfire that trails thick black smoke. She laughs as she pulls them together to share the flames, and their flesh begins to melt. She laughs, and she laughs.

Then the dream is over, and she is silent.
And somehow, that is worse.

Jo lies on the cracked concrete of a balcony, curled around Maggie. Her pale skin, although reddened with sunburn and dehydration, is cold to the touch, and her hair has matted into a wet blanket.

Then:

"Hey! Hey, are you alright?"

A voice from the courtyard below them.

Maggie's eyes snap open. "Don't move."

"What?" Jo whispers, frozen in the act of turning to look. "Why?"

"You can't let them find us. They'll take me away. Don't let them take me away. You have to stay with me."

Jo is confused, but she says nothing, transfixed by the look of fear that has painted itself onto her girlfriend. She knows something is wrong, but the dream still burns at the edge of her memory, and so when the rescue team enter the hotel, the two of them slip away into the gathering dusk.

BROKEN

JO'S FIRST THOUGHT when she finds Mags is not one of relief or joy, but one of horror. Maggie's body is twisted at a bad angle; one leg almost on backwards. Her eyes are open, staring up at the sky as though she were looking for shapes in the unconcerned clouds, and there's so much blood in her hair that its once lovely sunshine blonde is now a matt of claret. Worse, she isn't moving. She doesn't move all through the decades it takes for Jo to close the distance between them in a limping run that has all the conviction of an Olympic sprint, and even when she slams to her knees, with rockets of pain launching themselves through her joints, Maggie is still; pale, almost paper white, fingers stiffened into claws.

Jo nudges at her shoulder, and the girl rocks gently. Water, pooled under her, squeezes free and runs away from them in rivulets like tear tracks.

"Mags." Another nudge.

"Mags." Again.

Jo's throat tightens. "Mags, stop fucking around. Get up."

But Mags lies there and says nothing; a portrait of broken elegance.

"Get up. Get UP. GET UP GET UP GETUUUUP!" Jo's face puckers, and the walls of her grief collapse, baring angry teeth. Fists balled, she beats her hands on Maggie's chest, leaving muddy prints in the dirty sky blue cotton of her t-shirt.

And then, somehow, Mags is rolling onto her side, coughing and retching, the noise confused by the underlying groan of pain as her broken ribs grind against each other.

Jo's eyes widen in surprise and confusion. She sits back, thighs squelching down onto her calves, the tops of her feet squirming a little in the mud.

Eventually, Maggie stops trying to throw up, and lies back down, crying.

"You're alive." Jo says. *No she's not*, her mind screams back, *no she's not, she's dead*.

"Guess so."

She's dead and you know it.

And yet... and yet... Jo reaches out, fingers shaking, almost like she expects them to just pass straight through her. Instead, they connect with Maggie's temple with a dull, wet thump, right where the car had hit her.

ELEVEN

TACKETT FLINCHED AS a lance of pain fired through her temple.

"Are you alright?" Veerabhadra was leaning over her. The half-moon lenses caught the deep light of early evening as it wrapped lazily around the room, giving his face a strangely ethereal quality.

"Fine, fine." She lied, swallowing away the taste of bile. The pain refused to shift.

He looked unconvinced, but didn't press. "I brought tea. I thought that perhaps you would be thirsty. Actually, I thought you'd fallen asleep."

"How long was I in there?"

"About four hours."

She shook her head. "Felt like days."

"Well, I will not presume to be an expert in such matters." Veerabhadra lifted the lid of the tea pot, releasing the strong, warm smell of brewed leaves.

"This is turning out to be more difficult than I expected."

"Have you ever worked with trauma victims before?"

"Not until I came here. And only once while I've been here. The little girl."

"That was kind of you." He smiled, pouring.

"I came here to help people. She needed helping." Her mind drifted to the last person she'd tried to help. The four months in a Cambridge hospital afterwards. The miracle of her being alive to even have this conversation.

"You have burst a blood vessel in your left eye." Veerabhadra said, calmly.

Tackett shrugged. "It's nothing."

"I have a daughter, you know." He said. "About your age."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She lies about as well as you do, but she is a good girl and so I do not mind. She deceives only when she thinks it is to protect someone."

She smiled. "I thought we agreed I was the expert?"

"Well, at least we agreed that I am not. I am, however a doctor."

"Yes."

They sat in silence, surrounded by the smell of tea and the sound of the world past the privacy curtain.

"If you think you need to carry on, I won't stop you. I would only ask that you be careful."

"I will be." Tackett murmured, swallowing the lie with the last of her tea.

LIAR

WHEN MAGGIE FALLS down for the first time, she refuses to let Jo help. She shoos her away with one weakly flapping hand, insisting in a barely audible voice that she is alright, that she will be okay, that she just needs a moment to catch her breath. Jo crouches next to her, the muddy soup of the water as high as her bunched thighs, waiting for the pounding of her own heart to settle. The filthy blonde edges of Maggie's fringe hover just above the water's unsettled surface, and her breath puffs tiny swirling eddies into it.

"I'm okay, I'm okay."

"You're such a liar."

Mags drags herself into a ragged squat and tries to smile. "Maybe."

"Please let me help you."

She nods. "Okay."

Jo slips one hand around Maggie's hips, and the other girl loops an arm over her shoulders with a pained wince.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

SUNLIGHT

IN ALL THE world, there is nothing and no one more beautiful than Maggie Peters. She lies splayed on her back, one arm and one leg loosely fallen from the nest of bedcovers, porcelain skin catching the pale light of the rising sun, blonde hair like delicate strands of waving silk, mouth open, snoring like it's a competitive sport. Jo leans on the door frame, watching her with an indulgent smile as the sunlight tracks a path across the pillow through a crack in the imperfectly drawn curtains. As the warmth of it begins to tickle her face, Mags snorts and opens her eyes, blinking owlishly.

"Is it time to get up?" She slurs, still half asleep.

"It's only half past six."

"Good. Come back to bed."

And so she does.

TIDE

TRANG'S BEACHFRONT IS already awake and busy when they shuffle sleepily out past the clean white faux marble pillars of the hotel in search of late breakfast. A gentle breeze brushes at their ankles.

"It's weird." Jo says. "Being outside in shorts at Christmas, I mean."

Mags laughs gently, rubbing sleepily at one eye. "Nice though."

"Yeah."

Giggling children and pink faced tourists weave past them under sturdy palms.

"Tide's a long way out." Jo says, pointing at the fishing boats that lie out across the sand, their rope tethers stretched as though they were dogs, straining against their leads in excitement at the rest of the world.

"You'd think they'd build longer piers."

"Mmm."

They step off the walkway and into the low reed-walled yard of a café, sandled feet kicking up tiny plumes of dust as they slip into metal chairs that scrape against the concrete floor.

They order coffee and talk about nothing in particular. They don't pay much attention to the people in the street, pointing and shouting. They have each other; they don't need anything else.

When the first cold rush of the returning ocean sweeps across the floor of the café like exploring fingers, they actually laugh.

FIFTEEN

IN THE GLOOM left behind by sunset, Veerabhadra didn't see that Tackett was bleeding until the first drop, richly dark and hanging from the tip of her aqualine nose, finally let go under its gathered weight and tumbled to the pristine white of the bedsheet.

"Miss Tackett." He touched her shoulder, hand firm.

"No." Her voice was that of a sleepwalker.

"Miss Tackett, I think you should come back now."

"No."

"You are bleeding."

"I said *no*."

Tackett left him behind, face twisted with concern, and forced herself to fall deeper still into someone else's mind.

TRUTH

MEMORIES FLY AT her like birds as she pushes her way into Jo's mind like a burrowing tic, each one hitting with vivid flashes of light, sound, pain, ecstasy, grief, joy: the darkness of mornings in winter, the feel of paint brushes and running water, the rumbling of a London subway train, Maggie, blurts of music, faces framed in sunshine, harsh words from kind people, Maggie, tiny moments of victory, the smell of turpentine, a theatre after closing time, fireworks over the river, a hand clasped tightly in hers, Maggie, rising up over the city with London spread out below them like a painting, the noise of pencil on canvas, Maggie, the dull intercom alert of an aircraft, the chink of metal from bracelets as they walk across the beach, Maggie, GET UP, fists leaving muddy prints in the dirty sky blue cotton of her t-shirt -

and there it is, the schism, the impact centre of the injury, the point at which the double vision begins

GET UP

and she does, but she shouldn't because she *is* dead

GET UP

she doesn't fall down because she's injured, but because she's been *dropped*

GET OUT

the pain in her back and her arms isn't from *holding* Maggie

"GET OUT"

it's from carrying her body

"GET OUT"

"I won't. Not without you." Tackett's voice is distant to her own hearing; slowed down and strange.

The memories stretch and distort, and still she pushes through, feeling her mind peeled back and left open as she does.

Then there's sand under her toes, and the sound of the tide.

"Who are you?"

Tackett turns slowly, feeling the grainy warmth of the beach shift beneath her heels.

"Hello Jo. I'm Rachel."

"Hello Rachel. Why are you here?"

"Because it's time to wake up. I've come to lead you home." Then, because she is honest, and because there can be no lies

between them here, with their thoughts so open, "Or at least, I'm going to try to."

"I'm not coming with you."

"Why? There's nothing here but death."

"There's her." She points at the gently sweeping line of the tide, and the girl with blonde hair that stands, watching the water run over her bare feet. "She's only real here. She's only alive where I can remember her. If I leave, she'll really be dead, and that will mean I killed her."

"I don't think she'd want you to stay."

"How would you know?" Jo's dark eyes narrow with the start of anger, and the sky above them turns to thunder.

"I know her almost as well as you do. I love her almost as much. I remember everything about her that you do. Every little thing. Where we are now, how we are... this is as close as two people ever can be, I think."

One day, Jo will understand that Tackett is deeply wrong, that the two of them have only scratched the surface of that possibility. In this place, at this time, she only shakes her head. "What about what *I* want?"

"Look. Right now, you're in a hospital in Phuket, staring at wallpaper and being spoon-fed by whoever has the time to look after you. Do you think Mags would want that? Really, can you look me in the eye and tell me that's the truth? Can you do that here?"

Jo does look her in the eye, and Tackett begins to worry that she cannot persuade her to let go of this grief. It is too much; one loss among many, one final blow from which she cannot recover.

Then; "You're bleeding."

Tackett nods. "I'm haemorrhaging. It'll start with blood vessels in my eyes, nosebleeds, then my fingernails and my gums, but eventually my brain will start to bleed as well. Being here... I don't think I'm meant to be here. It's killing me."

Jo's face contorts with panic. "You have to go."

"Not without you."

"Just go!"

"Could you leave without me? After being here? After sharing this... whatever this is? Could you have left her?"

"That's exactly what you're asking me to do!" Jo screams, tears flying from the corners of her eyes. "You're telling me that if I don't leave, you'll die, but you know that if I do leave, I'll be the only thing left of her."

Tackett shakes her head. "Not the only thing. I'll carry her with you."

"She'll be dead!"

"She's already dead." And oh, how it hurts to say that here. "She's gone, Jo. But you don't have to go with her."

"I want her back. *I want her back.*"

Jo begins to weep; violent shaking sobs that are a doorway to every grief that ever touched the human soul. Tackett says nothing, only wraps her in the circle of her arms, and together they are carried away from Jo's dream on the river of her tears.

SEVENTEEN

TACKETT WOKE TO a world that had turned darkly painful. She could taste the dull tang of iron in her mouth, but distantly.

"I really do think you should take a break." Veerabhadra told her, voice stern.

She nodded, too exhausted to argue, and made an effort to stand that did nothing more than slide her unceremoniously off the hospital bed and into a crumpled heap on the floor, the fingers of one hand still gripping the top cotton sheet.

"I think my days helping people here are probably done now." She said, half choking as the warm, salty blood at the back of her nose oozed its way down into her throat.

"What do you mean?" There was alarm in the doctor's voice.

"I don't think I'll be able to move much for a while; they'll probably chalk it up to contracting a fever and ship me home."

"I... here, let me help you."

Strong hands helped her stand, and she leant over the bed, nose welling again.

"Could you get me a tissue or something?"

Veerabhadra reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of them. "I am a father and a grandfather. I always have tissues."

They stood in silence until the bleeding slowed.

"Can you tell me who she is now?" Veerabhadra asked. "I think I would prefer that you didn't try to do anything drastic, but anything you know might be very helpful."

Tackett smiled. With one eye bloodshot and bloody smear marks under her nose, it made her look incongruously predatory. She turned away from him, and slid one hand up the bed until it nudged Jo's fingers.

"Jo. Sweetheart. It's time to come back."

And slowly, one deep brown finger stretched out to hook over her hand.

Veerabhadra's breath caught. "Oh my."

The single finger was joined by another. Then a third. They squeezed together, weakly.

"Don't forget what you said." Jo's voice was hoarse, barely more than a whisper.

"I won't." Tackett promised, squeezing back.

She pulled herself onto the bottom of the bed and curled into a rough hoop, head against the cool sheet, eyes closed to fall into dreams that were not, and never again would be, entirely her own.