

*Rox called the kinetic energy from the storm clouds around her. Adrenaline washed over her, and with it came the will to stop running, to turn around, and fight ...*

*The van came careening around the corner just as Rox snapped her fingers. Lightning the color of a perfect sunset slammed down into the front of the van, flipping it over. Shards of glass and bits of broken metal flew through the air towards them like bomb fragments.*



Home. In tropical Southeast Asia, Rox has finally reunited with her family. No more dumpster diving, shelter hand-me-downs, and rules about living on the run. This is her chance to start over and to finally figure out who she's meant to be.

But even the orderly streets of Singapore can't keep Rox safe. The scientist who experimented on her ten months ago discovers her new location and threatens to tear apart all she has fought and died for. With her loved ones under attack, the fragile relationships she has worked so hard on repairing fracture. She's tempted to disappear, but she's tired of running. Rox is finally ready to fight back, and she is willing to sacrifice everything to do so.

The Evolved Ones Trilogy:



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BOOK TWO



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THE EVOLVED ONES

# SACRIFICE

BOOK TWO

NATASHA OLIVER



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*To Mom and Dad.*

*Thank you for your unwavering love and support  
as I hopped from here to there and everywhere.*

*Oh, and Mom, I spilled nail polish remover on your  
brand new Queen Anne coffee table when we were  
living in the apartments in Maplewood. I used all  
of my pocket money to pay a furniture repairman  
to fix it before you came home from work.*

*And Dad, you should know that was the only mistake  
I ever made and I still remain your perfect little angel.*

*I love you both, more.*

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something more valuable than his own safety. And what's greater than that?"

"You think he knows where the healer is?"

Leona shrugged. "No idea. But whatever he's looking for is worth risking his own life. So that makes me interested. Very interested."

## CHAPTER TWO



### Home

3rd August, 5:38pm

Siglap, Singapore

Rox came around the corner too fast, slipped on the metal grate that covered the sewer drain, and lost her footing. She went down on her side, but recovered with the determination of someone with something to prove. The sky crackled white, and a few seconds later, thunder drowned out the sounds of her heavy breathing. The clouds finally released their hold on the moisture they had been accumulating for over a month, and rain fell in deafening drops around her, washing away the fatigue that had settled in her muscles.

She was about six hundred meters from home. *Home*. Her stomach still contracted whenever she thought about it. She pulled on the kinetic energy from the storm and shortened her stride. She pumped her arms and sprinted up the hill towards belonging. She was grateful for the rain because even though it made the road slippery, it was a reprieve from Singapore's oppressive heat. At 20 to 6 in the

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evening, it was still suffocating. But it beat itchy blankets and the cold floorspace of the random buildings she had been forced to seek shelter in during the winter months back in the US.

The rain was too loud for her to make out the neighbor's barking dog as it ran alongside her behind its fence. Shaira would never let something as pedestrian as a gate stop her from giving chase.

Rox was surprised how often her mind wandered to the wolf. She hadn't seen her since they were forced to separate back at Watership, and Rox wondered how she was getting on. Probably fine. She was an animal after all. She had more than likely forgotten all about Rox, especially now they had Val, Sam's sister, back home.

Sam. That was another name that often captured her attention despite her best efforts to focus on the here and now. The comfort of his embrace and the images of him bursting into Miles' room to rescue her accompanied her to sleep each night. He was the promise of what she could have had, of what she had sacrificed to return to her family.

Rox wiped her eyes as she turned left through the open gate that enclosed Michael's property. MJ sat in the doorway with his stopwatch in hand, the wraparound porch protecting him from the rain. He jumped up and pressed the stop button when her foot hit the first step.

He looked down at the stopwatch with the expectation of a child, but then his smile slipped, just a little. "It started raining," he said, offering her an excuse for not setting a personal best.

A combination of intense joy and guilt brought tears to her eyes as she realized she would never receive more love from another human.

"I slipped and fell," she said, hoping that her son hadn't noticed the catch in her voice.

"Ugh, you're wet and sweaty," he said as she pulled him in for a hug, but he wrapped his arms around her anyway.

It was almost five years ago that everything changed for Rox – or perhaps *began* would be more accurate. She awoke without memory and discovered she had the involuntary ability to heal. If that wasn't enough to come to grips with, she didn't wake up in Singapore with her family, but instead in the US with Josh, a stranger and a master manipulator.

The only reason she made it back home was because she agreed to work for GFO. It hadn't been an amicable arrangement. They had dangled information about her true identity in front of her with the caveat she work for them, on their terms. It was an *easy no thank you* until she realized they were her best chance at not only finding her family, but also protecting them from people like Dr Tusk.

"You and Dad still going out?" MJ asked.

She had forgotten about that. "Think so," she said. "Where is he?"

"Call," MJ said, which meant Michael, her husband, was in the room off to the left of the kitchen that served as his home office, more than likely with the door closed and his headset on so he wouldn't be disturbed.

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MJ sat in front of the television and resumed playing his video game. Rox would have followed him, but the floors were marble so she walked along the side of the house to her quarters at the back.

It was the nicest place she'd stayed in since leaving Josh. The walls were a pale yellow with an off-white border, and when she first arrived, smelled as if it had been recently painted. The furniture was new and looked like it belonged on the cover of a high-end magazine for beachfront property. A few family photos were spread throughout her single room, which made it feel warm, almost inviting, and although it was on the outside of the main house, it had become her sanctuary.

Rox pulled off her wet running clothes and dropped them into the bathroom sink. If she left them there, they would disappear and reappear a day later, laundered, pressed, and folded in the drawer designated for her workout gear. She shook her head at the drastic turn her life had taken.

Rox flipped the switch for the hot-water heater and wrapped a towel around herself. Working for GFO meant she had a legitimate job and a real paycheck, but she didn't make enough to afford the dresses that hung in her closet. Those were gifts from Michael when she had returned with only a single change of clothing.

Reuniting with her family had been exhilarating, at first. There was so much to learn, and she wanted to hear everything, no matter how small the detail. She also wanted to tell them everything, how Josh had found her and then how he trained her and taught her to defend

herself. But to share that meant she'd have to explain her personal relationship with him. She didn't know how to explain that they had been lovers, and then at one point she had considered him her enemy, but now, after all that happened, in those quiet moments when she was honest with herself, he was her family.

Rox glanced at the clock. She had forty minutes to get ready; that was more than enough time. She'd simply tuck her curls back at the sides with a few hair clips she had picked up from Chinatown. They were far from expensive, but living on the street had taught her not everything worthwhile came with a high price tag – which was the opposite of her new life here where people had the attitude of “you got what you paid for”. Everything in Singapore felt grand, even down to the hawker centers that served her morning coffee for under a dollar.

By the time Rox was showered, her hair washed and styled, and in her evening dress, she had twelve minutes before they had to leave. She decided to put on a little make-up and grab a clutch from the box of Tara's designer handbags that Michael had stored away for Ruby and Emma when they got older.

Ever since returning “home”, her life had become a series of repetitive moments. There were school drop-offs, pick-ups, homework, tuition classes, tutors, co-curricular activities, birthday parties, and a never-ending stream of exams. In between that, she attended two weekly briefings with Meita and had a workout schedule that consisted of three, two-hour sessions per day – once before the sun

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rose, another before lunch, and the last one was before dinner (or after, depending).

Tears blurred her vision when she accidentally poked herself in the eye with the mascara brush. She never took this much pain with her appearance even when she was with Josh. Maybe some lipstick and blush. But since arriving in Singapore, she felt the need to fit in with the other mothers. They were beautiful, salon-finished, educated housewives who sacrificed their careers for playdates and calendar-overload. The few mom-friends she reconnected with were well-traveled, held advanced degrees, and had never spent a day worrying about where their next meal would come from. They spoke about their lives before children or their travels abroad. Some even talked about the businesses they recently started now their kids were old enough. They remembered things about her that left her feeling inadequate and altogether a lesser version of her former self. When she was with Josh, they had dined at some of the best restaurants, but never did she feel like a fraud.

Rox knew how to run. She knew the importance of a good hiding space and how to go unseen. She knew how to take a hit and get back up. She knew that not all smiles were friendly and that everyone wanted something. She also knew that outside of this gilded bubble she had entered, there was a world where her kind were being kidnapped and experimented on by people who would stop at nothing to uncover how evolved ones got their ability. But she didn't know how to slip that into the conversation when everyone was talking about how their children had grown

or the worry that consumed them when their kids were challenged.

Rox had just met her children. She didn't know their likes any more than she did their challenges. She had no idea what they were like as toddlers so she couldn't say things like *she's finally come out of her shell* or *her reading's improved wonders. Remember when ...* Remember when what? When they were taking their first steps? When they said their first words? First day of school? Hell, the memory of their *last* day of school would have been an improvement.

She placed the applicator back in the tube. Who could tell if she had on mascara anyway? Michael's award ceremony was in one of the most expensive hotels. She couldn't remember the name, but she knew the room would be dark, or *darkish* at least. People weren't there to see her anyway. She was just a bit of the candy on the side, the missing (and then found) wife of a very successful businessman, the mother of his three children – one of whom wished she had never returned. She put the make-up back in its bag and looked at the stranger staring back at her in the mirror. There were some things even a high-end concealer couldn't hide.

The rain had stopped by the time Rox entered the main house through the kitchen door. Michael was in the living room chatting with their eldest, Ruby, who had made it quite clear that Rox was not the same woman who had given birth to her.

It was obvious that buried underneath all of Ruby's anger was a chasm of pain. She had grieved the death of

her mother, and for Rox to return was reopening a wound that had probably never truly healed.

“You look pretty,” MJ said as he leaned over the back of the sofa when she came in.

Rox blushed. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be in my room,” Ruby said, rolling her eyes.

Michael sighed and waited until his eldest disappeared up the stairs. “I keep telling myself it’s just a phase.”

“She’ll come around sooner or later.”

“More like never,” MJ mumbled as he returned to his video game.

“He’s right, though,” Michael said. “You do look beautiful.”

The dress was designed by someone whose name she was sure at one time she was able to pronounce. It was a deep shade of maroon with a sheer overlay that flowed with her movements. She grabbed a pale pink shawl to wear over her shoulders because despite the obvious beauty of the dress, it was wholly impractical for indoor affairs where the air conditioning would be set to arctic.

Rox went over to the shoe cupboard and took out a pair of heels. The hem of the dress brushed along her ankles, allowing the design of the shoes to be visible. They, too, were impractical. She would never be able to run in them if the situation arose. Go unseen? Not likely with the noise they would make with each stride across the marble floor.

“That workout routine has your arms toned.”

That workout routine still made her nauseous. Mika, her personal trainer provided by GFO, took it as his life’s mission to find new ways to torture her. She swore he took

pride every time she had to crawl off to the side and dry heave – second lesson in training with Mika, never arrive with a full stomach.

First lesson: never train with Mika.

Sam probably wouldn’t recognize her now. Not with all the make-up and fancy attire. She was sure the image he had of her was one of bloodstained clothes and matted hair. That was if he even thought about her at all. She could have easily been nothing more to him than a means to rescue his sister. She hadn’t heard from any of them, except Josh. He couldn’t project his thoughts into her mind because of the distance, but they had a way of knowing when it was time to reach out, and she wondered if that meant something. If they had a special connection that she would never have with Michael, or anyone else for that matter.

Rox was surprised at the change in their relationship. Josh had become the support she needed as she tried to adjust to her new life here. She looked forward to their catch-ups, even if they were handwritten and sent by snail mail. And she missed his son, Jay, who always included a separate letter in with Josh’s. She was grateful he was adjusting to his new school and his home life at Halo where he and Josh now lived. MJ reminded her a lot of Jay. It was the way they looked at her, like her best would always be good enough.

“Tara?”

“Oh, sorry, yes. I’m ready to go.” It had taken more time than she thought it would adjusting to her new – *old* – name. People often had to call her a few times before she realized someone was speaking to her.



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Michael held the car door open for her until she was seated with her dress tucked safely inside. He had two cars and one Ducati he only took out on the weekends.

When Rox found out the price of a car in Singapore, she almost had a heart attack. When she discovered the amount he had paid for this two-seater, she thought the man had more money than sense. For that amount, she could have hired Meita herself to find her family *and* still have some left over for the children's college funds.

Michael put the car in gear and slipped his hand over hers. "You're quiet. How was your run?"

"Sorry. Just a bit distracted. How was your day?"

"Good. Productive. Finally figured out what we're doing for V-R's five-year anniversary next year."

Michael had built a virtual reality social media platform that allowed users to interact in real time as either themselves or an avatar they custom built. It was lauded as one of the most revolutionary pieces of technology of its time, and he was being given an award from the Chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore. It wasn't a particularly prestigious award, but it was a way for him to pay homage to his national roots given he wouldn't move the company's headquarters to the US despite some tempting offers.

Michael chose to remain an American citizen, but had lived in Singapore for the past twenty years, and he and his family had become permanent residents. His company was registered in Singapore, so it brought in a lot of revenue and jobs to the small island-state. Not that the country was hurting for money. Never had Rox seen such opulence

from a government – though to be fair, Rox's memories only covered the last five years. Every time they drove from his home in Siglap into the Central Business District, she was struck by the pristine skyline and bright lights. Even on a cloudy day, the skyscrapers visible from the East Coast Parkway were impressive.

He ran his fingers up her arm to give her muscles a squeeze. "I'm gonna become afraid of you if you keep this workout routine up."

"It's torture. Absolute torture. I'm perpetually sore."

"I could give you a massage later."

The offer was so unexpected she stared at him for a moment. They had tried to be intimate a few times since her return, but it always ended in awkward laughs and the agreement to give it more time. They were still working on getting to know one another, she reasoned, which was surprisingly difficult with their schedules. Michael traveled a lot between China, India, and the US. It was no secret he loved what he did by the number of hours he dedicated to his work.

"I can always have someone come by and give you one if—"

"No, it's not that. I mean, sure. Thanks. I haven't had one in a long while." Rox looked out the window and wondered, not for the first time, if this were real or if she were still trapped in some tank in Wonderland, creating this fantasy to cope with whatever new experiment Tusk was running on her.

"I was thinking, once we've gotten through the anniversary planning, maybe we can have a family holiday.

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Term break's coming up in a week or two. Why don't we go to Bali or Koh Samui? I should be able to get away for a few days."

She chuckled. "You know, a year ago this time, I remember sifting through the dumpster of a Dairy Queen."

He frowned, and Rox wasn't sure if she had upset him or if he was simply concentrating. "I would have never stopped looking for you had I known you were still alive."

"No, no it's not that. It's just ..." she thought about all she had gone through to get to this moment, here, in his car, on this road and driving to his award ceremony. "It's been a long journey, and sometimes it's hard to believe that I'm actually here."

"If you ever want to talk more about it ... I mean I know you've told me a little bit, but ..."

It wasn't the first time he had offered to listen to her story, but she wasn't even sure where to begin. She had told him about her complicated relationship with Josh, the training he put her through, and her life on the run. But she hadn't mentioned anything about his abilities or the fact that she was evolved. In hindsight, she guessed she wanted Tara's life to remain unsullied by Rox's.

She also hadn't told Michael about Sam. Or Watership Down or Wonderland. The timing never seemed right. Those days were dark, filled with pain and suffering. Finding her family on this literal tropical island was like a fresh start, an opportunity to leave all the bad things in the past behind.

"Alright, how about this: I accept this award, I do thirty minutes of obligatory mingling, and then we head up to

some rooftop bar somewhere and see where the night takes us."

Rox settled back into the soft leather seats and smiled. She liked Michael. He wasn't perfect. He could be curt and dismissive when he was working on something, which was always, and she was convinced he thought he was the smartest person in the room. But her real reservation about him was that she wished she *felt* something when she was around him. Some kind of connection – something that pulled her to him. If not a memory, then a feeling.

But maybe it didn't work like that. Maybe real love, the kind that lasts, simply took time. Maybe she was asking for too much too soon. She had only been back for ten months, and in the grand scheme of things, that was just the blink of an eye. Could she really fill six years in just ten short months? Maybe what she was hoping to feel for him would come in time. She just needed to be patient.

"That sounds like a nice idea. I like the view of this city from high up," she said and took a deep breath. She could wait.



## Instincts

3rd August, 8:45pm  
Bayfront, Singapore

"So, you're staying here and hiding in the room?" Josh asked.

"Leave him," Meita said as she stood up and smoothed

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“I seriously doubt it. I believe she’s gone back to Dad and told him.”

“Or one of those guys who came to the house. Who were they?”

She didn’t know who they were. There was a tension in all of them, even the man who had come to train Rox had seemed different when they were all together. “Listen, we can’t get separated. We have to fight if they try to take us away from one another.”

His bottom lip trembled, but he nodded. “I won’t let them take you away from me.”

“Me either. But if it happens, you gotta promise me you’ll keep trying to escape.”

He turned away from her to look out the window. From this altitude, they could see the silver lining around each cloud. Dawn was here and it was beautiful. She wasn’t sure what awaited them beneath those clouds, but for now, she sat back in her seat, grabbed her brother’s hand and simply enjoyed the sunrise.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” MJ said.

She pulled him into her lap and placed a kiss on his head. She would kill anyone who harmed him, or she would die trying.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



### Awakening

5th August, 6:09am (-1 SGT)

Wiang Kaen Province, Chiang Rai, Thailand

Whoever was in charge of this warehouse didn’t do much in the way of maintenance. Dust floated in the daylight that broke through the grime on the windows. Most of the glass panes were still intact, but a few had cracks. Grass sprouted through the fractures in the concrete floor, giving it an urban jungle feel. The paint looked faded from the sun, but otherwise bore no marks of wear and tear. There were no signs or fences to prohibit entrance, but these weren’t necessary with a neighborhood watch willing to poison and potentially kill trespassers.

Josh had read the couple’s minds with Mika’s help, and they were surprisingly light on details. All they knew was that in exchange for reporting anyone asking questions about the warehouse, they would get a bonus on top of the US\$200 stipend they received monthly for acting as “concerned citizens”. Last night was meant to be a massive payout for them, and Rox couldn’t hide

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her mounting frustration anymore. All she wanted was her two children back, but now, they also had to figure out whether it was Mika's contact or Meita's who had double-crossed them.

Mika half carried, half dragged one of the men who had shown up at the house to collect their bodies. Rox had to concentrate not to heal his ankle, but it wasn't as hard as it used to be.

A square crate a little shorter than waist height sat in the middle of the empty warehouse. A single fan was directed at the box, and Rox assumed it was to keep the contents from overheating, which seemed like a futile exercise given the corrugated tin roof acted like a grill top, roasting whatever was inside.

Mika stopped and inhaled while Josh turned his head to the side like he heard something.

"What?" Meita asked.

"Someone's in there," Mika answered first.

Rox started toward the crate, but Meita pulled her back.

"It could be a trap," Meita explained. Her tone said that should have been fairly obvious, but Meita couldn't feel the energy the way Rox could.

"He's trying to be quiet," Josh said. "Well ... I think. His thoughts are running all over the place."

Mika exhaled sharply through his nose like he was trying to expel something. "And he's not been allowed to use the toilet."

"I think he's a kid. No ..." Josh cocked his head to the side again. "Late teens." He shrugged. "It's hard to pinpoint; he's not thinking about his age."

Rox turned and looked at the man who was grunting in pain. She hadn't really given it much thought before, but now that she found herself in a derelict warehouse, her kids missing, and another victim stuffed inside a crate not large enough to allow them to stretch, she realized that on some subconscious level, she always assumed being a healer meant she was supposed to do no harm. It's why killing Connor Chatsworth back at Watership Down gave her nightmares even though she had won that fight fair and square. It was why she couldn't shake the guilt over stealing energy from a man who lay helpless while she searched for something to aid in her escape after just having her throat slit. It was also why she doubted her ability at everything – every goddamn-thing from being a good healer to being an adequate mother. It was all because she believed she was supposed to be good and pure, and perfect and worthy of such an ability.

But the more she thought about it – when she actually stepped back and looked at her life, or the last five years roughly – the more she realized that there was no such thing as pure and perfect. People weren't worthy of a lot of things. Often they got lucky or they worked hard until luck came their way. She had been thinking about her ability all wrong. She wasn't a healer. She wasn't some kind of benevolent EO sent to heal the world.

*Rox?*

Her ability interacted with energy, and that energy could heal people, but it could also harm them. And as much as she hated to admit it, Katherine was right. There had to be consequences.

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She looked at Meita and then at Mika, who were both staring at her. Good. Let them wonder. She could take Josh's energy and Mika's, leaving them incapacitated, and while Meita was a better fighter, she wouldn't stand a chance against Rox amped up on adrenaline.

*Good strategy, but why are we thinking about turning on one another?*

*Because I'm tired of being afraid.* She wasn't sure if she spoke aloud, but she was past caring.

"We're going to find them," Mika said softly, but Rox had lost interest in the conversation.

She felt the hum from the dormant electricity sitting inside the walls of the warehouse just waiting for a switch to be flipped. She felt kinetic energy from everyone's elevated heart rate and the breeze created by a poorly oscillating fan. There was all this power around her, and she had never thought to tap into it.

The storm outside was passing, but she felt the charges in the clouds hop from one to the next, reversing its pattern to reach her. The memory of the lightning strike broke her train of concentration, but then just as quickly she wondered if maybe she could direct it.

"Can we test that hypothesis later?" Josh asked her.

She didn't want to. A parent's right to protect their child superseded everything. Laws were simply there to keep society in check, but they messed with her children, and there were going to be consequences.

She wanted this man who was silently crying, watching her every move, to know the torment of being stuffed inside a box like you didn't matter.

*Rox—*

She started towards the man who was happy to deliver them up like they were goods at a merchant bazaar. The tips of fingers pulsated as she balled them into a fist and then stretched them out wide again.

Mika stepped in front of her, but she pulled, and he crumbled.

*Me estás asustando, mi amor.*

Good. He should be scared because she was tired of being the only one.

The man Mika was holding fell, then flipped over on his stomach and attempted to crawl away from her. He was saying something in Thai, but she couldn't understand him, and she didn't care anyway.

When they were back at that couple's house, she felt a sense of clarity settle over her. She had spent so much time trying to figure out her abilities, that she had never once simply surrendered to them to see what would happen. But now ... now, she had been struck by lightning and instead of being dead, she was more powerful.

Instinct told her to lift her hand, and when her fingers snapped, a charge of energy raced across an invisible line and struck the man in the center of his back. His body went rigid, his scream paused.

"Rox!" Meita's voice was insistent, and for some reason that made Rox feel good.

She lifted her hand again, but something slammed down on her thoughts that prevented her from connecting her fingertips.

"Babe, listen to me, okay." Josh slowly walked around

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until he was within her peripheral vision, and then moved even slower until he was in her full line of sight. His hands were up and the look on his face said he was concentrating hard on stopping her from snapping her fingers. “You’re kinda scaring us right now. Mika was on our side. He’s one of the good guys, remember.”

A small part of Rox wanted to listen to him, but the energy she had built up was itching to be used. “There’ve got to be consequences,” she said between clenched teeth.

“And there will be,” Meita said. “But we’re not cold-blooded killers.”

“They took my children.”

Josh groaned from the effort it was taking to hold her, and she smiled. “That lightning made me stronger.”

*No shit.*

*Let me go.*

There was a moment of silence where she knew he was weighing up his options.

*Rox, you know I’d never hurt you.*

*Then let me go.*

*You’re the only mom Jay has. Please don’t do this.*

*Stop using kids against me like they’re a fucking weapon.*

*It’s cheap and it’s getting old.*

*It’s the only one I’ve got left, amor.* Sweat was dripping down his face from the effort it was taking to keep her two fingers apart.

She hated him. She hated him for the myriad of emotions he had made her feel since waking up. Tears of frustration threatened to fall, but she was so damn tired of

crying. It seemed like all she did was cry, or fret over this, fight through that.

*How ‘bout this, I’ll let you fry the guy after you wake Mika up. Hmm?*

Josh was opening his mind to her, allowing her to see things from his perspective, sharing his concern over her actions. It hurt him that she thought she hated him, but he was mostly trying to get her to focus on their shared objective: saving her children. He would stop at nothing to get them back. He felt he owed her that much. She had given herself up for Jay, and he thought he would never be able to repay that, but now was his chance.

“You don’t owe me anything, Josh. I would have done it even if you hadn’t wanted me to.”

She put her arm down and the hold on her mind eased.

“We good?” he asked.

Rox looked back at Meita, whose weapon was drawn and pointing directly at her. If Josh hadn’t talked her down, there was no question that Meita would have pulled the trigger.

*It’s not like you can’t heal. C’mon. You had us freaking out.*

*No, but it’s good to know where she stands.*

*Meita didn’t survive this long by wishful thinking.*

Rox’s eyebrow raised. *Oh, since when did you become a Meita fan?*

Josh rolled his eyes. “Go wake him up.” *Hey, any idea what his ability is?*

Rox shook her head as she leaned over Mika. *But he moves with such grace. He’s not someone you ever wanna have to face.*

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*Yeah, I meant to tell you you're looking good. He's helped move some of the weight from there,* he pointed to her thighs and midsection, *to up here.* He was referring to her shoulders and arms.

"You know, I might only have about five years' worth of memories, but even I know you never talk about a woman's weight."

Josh chuckled as Mika's eyes flew open. He grabbed his head and attempted to sit up. "What happened?"

"You tripped," Josh teased.

"Rox?" It came from inside the box, and everyone stilled.

Rox reached out with her energy and a familiar wave rushed back to her.

"Oh my god." Miles!



## Anger-related

5th August, 5:37pm (-1 SGT)

Wiang Kaen Province, Chiang Rai, Thailand

The truck rumbling into the warehouse had long since given up on living, but its owner had different ideas. It was a patchwork of repairs and mismatched paint jobs. One of its tires was new while the others looked like they were desperate for retirement. It was early evening, so the headlights were on, but one kept flickering like it was giving advance notice of an imminent shutdown.

The man on the passenger side got out first, his weapon drawn as he gave the place a quick once over. He walked

to the crate and looked inside, where Rox pretended to be a scared Miles. It was an easy role to play because she was petrified. Josh, Meita, and Miles were lying face down on the warehouse floor, pretending to be unconscious beside the man with a broken ankle, who didn't need to pretend.

The truck's passenger shouted something in Thai, and the driver got out, but left the engine running. He walked to the back of the truck, lifted the tarpaulin, and two more men climbed out, their weapons drawn.

*Mika says there's a total of four. Three armed.* Josh said.

*I count the same,* Rox told him as she peered through the crate's small breathing holes. *How do we play this?*

*Sec, let me ask Mika.*

Rox's thoughts were tempted to drift to Sam. He would have an idea about how to handle this situation, but she couldn't let her mind get away from her. Sam wasn't here. She hoped he was safe and that he was trying to make his way back to her. To all of them.

"มานี่แล้วช่วยฉันยกหน่อย," the passenger shouted to the driver, as he swung his rifle strap over his shoulder.

The driver hopped out and walked over to his companion. Neither one of them looked at Rox as they lifted the crate. They could see that someone was inside, but they didn't appear bothered or even surprised by it.

*Mika's going to get their attention. Be ready in three ... two ...*

"วางปืนลง," Mika shouted from somewhere behind the metal girders at the back of the warehouse.

The two from the back of the truck raised their weapons, pointing in the direction of his voice. All of a sudden Rox

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felt herself dropping, and then the crate crashed onto the floor. Wood splintered and dug into her hands and side, and she cried out, but Josh told her to remain still.

One of the men shouted, “นี่ใครนะ? เดินมานี่ซิ.”

“โอกาสสุดท้ายแล้วนะที่จะวางลง,” Mika warned.

She had no idea what they were saying, but could see from the look on their faces they were about to fire.

*Shoot! Tell him to shoot!*

Two rapid gunshots fired, both of them taking out their intended targets. Meita and Josh were on their feet, the weapons they had been concealing by lying on them now aimed at the driver and the passenger.

Rox kicked the side of the crate and it collapsed. She stood up and looked at the two guards from the back of the truck, both thankfully dead. She breathed a sigh of relief, just as she realized she was standing far too close to them.

“Shit!” She turned to run away, but death’s energy slammed into her like an invisible force from behind, knocking her forward onto her knees.

The need to exorcise the energy was there, but unlike previous times, she didn’t feel the urge to do sit-ups. She pushed to her feet as a tingling sensation raced up her back and around her waist to coalesce in the center of her chest. Death’s energy had never done that before. It was attempting to merge with her natural energy, and she knew the moment their frequencies aligned because her muscles twitched, like she had touched an exposed wire, but instead of the raw pain she expected, it felt like a colony of ants marching underneath her skin. She wanted

to scratch, but when she looked down at her hands, an arc of orange light jumped from one fingertip to the next.

Rox didn’t think it was possible for her heart to beat any faster. “Did you see that?”

She spun around, but Josh was helping a visibly unstable Miles to his feet. Mika was tossing the guards’ weapons in the back of the truck, and Meita kept her attention (and her weapon) on the driver and passenger.

“See what?” Josh asked without looking at her.

“You think anyone heard the gunshots?” Meita asked.

“I’d rather not wait to find out,” Mika said.

“Holy shit,” said Josh.

Everyone turned to witness brilliant sparks of orange energy hopping from one finger to the next. Rox pointed her hand at the far wall, and a ray of light as thin as a strand of thread snaked its way into an explosion on the far side of the warehouse. A jagged hole punched through the cinder blocks, and the evening’s fading light seeped in through the dust and debris.

Rox’s breath caught as she looked at Josh. Did she just shoot a beam of energy and create a hole in the wall? A concrete wall?

“Can you control that?” Mika asked.

Rox wasn’t sure she understood his question. “What?”

“Do you have any control over that? Or are you going to be blowing holes in things involuntarily?” Meita elaborated.

How was she supposed to know? This was the first time anything like that had ever happened. “I don’t think so, why?”

Meita sighed. “Josh, find out what they know. Mika will



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translate for you.” Then she turned her attention to Rox. “Because if they didn’t hear the gunshots, they definitely heard the huge hole you just made.”

“Please don’t leave me again,” Miles said. He was standing off to the side, shaking from adrenaline and fear. He limped his way over to Rox, but she met him halfway.

So many emotions played across his face as she allowed her energy to heal him.

“You’re OK now.” She had no idea what he had been through or how he had gotten in that crate, but she knew it had to have been traumatic. No one wound up in a box in a derelict warehouse in a foreign country without a story containing horrors.

For a while, she just stood there letting him cling to her while he hiccupped through his tears. When he grew quiet, she lifted her head so that she could see his face. “Why did you run?” she asked.

“You block the emotions,” he said too quietly for anyone else to hear.

She didn’t know what that meant, but then he continued. “Everyone’s feelings are so intense. Fear and anger or sadness, and you just make them go away so I can ...” he shrugged, “so I can just feel what *I’m* feeling.”

“How’d they get you?” Meita interrupted.

Miles gave Rox a look that asked if it were OK to answer, so she nodded. He stepped out of her embrace and turned to Meita, but then cocked his head to the side as if studying her. “I can’t feel you.” He took a tentative step closer, then shook his head. “Nothing.”

Meita smiled, and then placed her hand on his shoulder. “Do you think you can help us? Can you tell us how you wound up in the box?”

He nodded. “They jumped me in the bathroom at the park. I felt them before I saw them, but there were three of them, and one of them injected me with something. It was pretty strong because the next time I woke up, they were taking me off some boat and putting me on a plane.”

“Did anyone talk to you? Tell you where you were going?”

He shook his head. “Not long after I was put on the plane, I passed back out. The next time I woke up, I was inside that.” He pointed to the pieces of the crate, and then looked down to the front of his trousers.

Rox’s anger grew at the thought of not letting another human relieve himself. When was the last time he ate? Drank? Was the same thing happening to her children now?

Rox held up her hands, and for a moment, everything was covered in an orange tint. She felt Josh roaming in her head and looked at him, but he was busy staring at her. They all were.

*Babe, I think you need to calm down. This might be anger-related. It’s definitely an emotional response.*

The orange tint that covered everything faded as Rox wrapped her arms around Miles. She pulled him in and rocked him like she had Emma. “You’re safe now,” she said softly.

“I hate to break this up, but we need to move,” Mika said.

Twenty minutes later, the driver was back in the driver’s seat and Mika was in the passenger’s. Rox, Josh, Meita,

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and Miles were in the back underneath the tarpaulin, attempting to hold on as they veered towards the border between Laos and Thailand. Destination, Pak Tha.



## My own hero

5th August, 6:43pm (-1 SGT)

Luang Prabang, Laos

MJ screamed just like Ruby told him to, not too loud so they attracted the attention of others, but alarming enough to bring the guard.

It worked. A chair scratched against the hardwood floors, followed by urgent footsteps approaching.

The bathroom door swung open, and Ruby threw a basket of used toilet paper she had filled with water in the guard's face. He cried out like it had been scalding hot, but that was just his mind playing tricks.

She followed the guard as he backstepped out of the bathroom and bumped into the round table behind him. He lost his footing, and for a moment he forgot about the wet paper stuck to his forehead as his arms swung out in an attempt to regain his balance.

The look on his face as he righted himself scared Ruby into action. She ran up to him, planted her left foot and drove her right knee up into his groin. Pain like nothing she'd experienced ricocheted down her shin, and for a moment she thought all was lost because she might have dislocated something, but when she placed her foot back

on the floor, it could bear her weight. Not a lot, but enough.

Her training kicked in and she knew just because an attacker was brought to his knees, didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. Before he could rise, she grabbed him by the ears and slammed his head onto the edge of the table he had just stumbled into. A loud crack echoed around the room as a section of it splintered off.

The guard was disorientated, but still conscious. Ruby performed a side kick, aiming for his head which was now about waist height. But the pain in her knee threw off her balance, causing her foot to slip perfectly in between the space just below his jaw and above his shoulders, dislocating two of his seven cervical vertebrae. His body slumped forward onto the floor, creating an awkward silence around the room.

Ruby stumbled back, and it was MJ who kept her upright. She didn't think she had the strength to do that to a grown man. Not as large and as muscular as this one. He was as tall as her dad, and definitely wider. This man worked out, and she was just a sixteen-year-old girl who took judo lessons twice, sometimes three times a week. She hadn't meant to kill him. But hadn't she threatened to do just that if he touched her brother?

Ruby clasped her hand over her mouth as she stared at the guard.

"Is he dead?" There was fear in MJ's voice, like he knew they had done something that could get them into trouble. But then again, what could be worse than the trouble they were already in?

Ruby tried to think through her fear. They needed to

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find a way out before anyone came to check on them, or came looking for the cause of the ruckus.

“We should check his pockets,” Ruby said as they approached the guard slowly like he could jump up at any minute and grab them. But he didn’t. He couldn’t.

Ruby’s heart soared when MJ passed her a mobile phone that was lying on the floor near the broken edge of the table. “Please ...” she prayed, hoping there was sufficient battery to call her father. There was, but the phone was locked.

“Try 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,” MJ suggested. But that didn’t work, and neither did six zeroes, six ones, or six nines.

Ruby groaned in frustration when the screen said the phone was disabled for six minutes. She felt like throwing it across the room, but remembered they needed to be quiet. This wasn’t the time to give in to her anger. Or her fear.

She looked around the small room to see if there was something she could use to defend them, but it was sadly bare. A dirty, stained mattress was pushed up against the wall in one corner and an equally-used wood laminate dresser with half its drawers missing were the room’s only other items besides the broken table and its single chair.

An intense feeling of fatigue settled over Ruby, and for the briefest of moments she thought about lying down to take a nap. They had been through so much already, and now she had to orchestrate their escape. Where was her father? Why hadn’t he sent someone to get them by now? Did he even know where they were?

“What’s this?” MJ pressed a button and a blade sprung free. He hissed as it nicked the palm of his hand.

*Protection*, Ruby thought as a boost of adrenaline renewed her hope. It was too small to do much damage, but it would give them the element of surprise if someone tried to stop them.

“It’s just a scratch,” he said and licked the small cut.

Ruby was grateful because she doubted this room had much in the way of antiseptic. “I’ll carry it.” She closed the blade as they both crept to the door. Ruby put her ear against it while MJ came up behind her and laid on the floor to peer through the crack underneath. He shook his head when he got up.

She hated what had to come next, but the only alternative was to cower and wait, so she took a deep breath and twisted the knob as slowly as possible until the door creaked open wide enough for her to take a look.

The hallway was clear. The door across from them blessedly closed.

She took MJ’s hand and they crept down the stairs with their backs pressed against the wall. They were halfway down when she realized their clothes were making a soft rustling sound, and so she told him to walk down the center. The stairs were impossibly noisy, and by the time they got to the landing beneath them, Ruby’s hands were shaking so badly she put the switchblade in her pocket for fear of dropping it.

There were two doors facing one another on the next floor, just like on the floor above. It would be so much easier if she knew there was someone on the other side

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willing to help them. They were only kids. Who did this to children?

Ruby swallowed her sob as she looked back at her younger brother. He was frightened, too, but he looked up at her with such confidence and belief that she had no choice but to be brave and figure things out. They had to keep moving and trust that luck would find them.

She turned the next corner and stopped. The front door was at the base of the stairs. It was open, and the late evening breeze from outside carried the acrid scent of cigarette and rain. One of the men who had taken them was sitting on the porch talking to someone she couldn't see. For a moment, she simply froze, too afraid to move. She slowly stepped back into MJ, who immediately understood they weren't going to escape via the front. They went halfway back up the stairs and waited. Five seconds. Fifteen seconds. After about a minute, Ruby breathed a small sigh of relief. They hadn't been seen. But now what?

MJ pointed to the two doors they had passed, and she nodded. They didn't have any other choice. Ruby went to the one nearest them on the left and quietly tried to open it, but it was locked.

Hot tears burned her eyes as she realized she was going to have to step back into the opening of the landing to try the other door. She signaled for MJ to stay where he was as she took another deep breath and tiptoed over to the second door. If the men sitting outside turned around, they'd see her standing at the top of the stairs, so she kept her movements slow and light. She twisted the knob and

it squealed. She stopped and waited a few seconds before she continued.

It was dark inside the room except for the intermittent light coming from the TV. It took a moment for Ruby's eyes to adjust, but when they did, she saw a woman lying on the bed, her light snores competing with the volume and the tick-tick-ticking of the oscillating fan near the bed.

Ruby didn't know what to do. If they woke her to ask for help, she might call the men downstairs. If they went into the hall, they risked being seen. If they went back upstairs to the room they had just left—

No, they weren't going back.

Ruby was thinking about trying the door opposite them again when she spotted a window. Its sheer curtains billowing out and then back in as the breeze from outside shifted. She placed her hands over her mouth to smother her cry of joy when she realized she had found their means of escape. She turned back to MJ and waved him in with one hand, and the other signaling for him to be silent.

She pushed the door closed slowly, and when she turned back around to MJ, he was already over at the window. He eased it up a few more inches so that they could fit through, and Ruby crept over to gauge how far the drop would be.

The window looked out onto a narrow alley that separated the house they were in from the neighbor's. Down the alley and to the right was the front of the house, but to the left she thought she could make out a small road. She tilted her head to the side and listened for the distinctive sounds of motorbikes. It was too dark and the

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rain prevented her from seeing far, but her instincts were telling her that once they were out, they should go left.

She looked down at the broken alley just underneath the window. It was a big jump. Two stories. She couldn't tell if the ground was concrete or dirt, but it didn't really matter.

Ruby pulled MJ so close that when she whispered, she felt his ear brush against her lips. "You cannot make a sound. When you drop down, quickly move to the back of the house because I'm coming down right after you."

Sirens blared from the TV, and they both froze. They looked back at the woman to see if she would turn over or give any indication that her sleep had been disturbed, but when she didn't, Ruby pushed MJ to go.

He placed one leg out of the window followed by another, then he spun around with his legs dangling and his stomach resting on the bottom of the window frame. He used his upper body strength to lower himself from the window as far as his arms would stretch, and then he let go.

Ruby stuck her head out and looked down after him. He had landed quietly and was up and moving like nothing was broken. She turned back and looked at the woman once more before she followed after her brother. She landed on her feet, and pain ran down her knee through to her shins. She thought of the man she had just killed—

"C'mon!" MJ grabbed her hand and pulled her down the alley to the back of the house. It opened up onto a narrow street. Motorcycles whizzed by just like they did in Phuket where their family often went. The sidewalks had been inconsistent there, and she thought it might be the

same here. They would have to watch their steps. Neither of them could risk getting injured.

"Where do we go now?" MJ asked her.

"We need to find a phone. One that's not locked."

"You think someone will let us use their phone?"

She was too afraid to ask anyone if she were honest. Without knowing who to trust, she felt like everyone was the enemy.

Ruby took his hand and they walked down the street, both of them taking turns to look over their shoulders. It was rainy season, which meant that most of the shops had shortened hours or were closed altogether.

Twenty minutes later, they passed a motorbike with a gas-cylinder stove attached to it underneath a portable canopy. A woman was stirring ingredients in a wok, and the food smelled so good Ruby contemplated grabbing a few handfuls and running off. But the woman looked up, and Ruby blushed with embarrassment. The woman picked up a thin stick and skewered several pieces of barbecued meat onto it before passing it to MJ.

"F-O-C," she said. "You take."

MJ's eyes lit up. He took a big bite that reduced the portion to half, but then he passed the remainder to Ruby. "It's so good, Rubes." He smiled at the lady. "Thank you. We were starving."

The lady nodded and then turned her attention back to the contents of her wok.

Ruby mumbled a thank you, too embarrassed by the stranger's generosity to say more as they continued down the uneven pavement. Most of the tourist shops they passed

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were closed, but a few were still open selling things that once upon a time Ruby would have given anything to go in to see, but now, held no interest to her. She needed to find a way to contact her dad. To do that, she needed to find someone she could trust.

“We gotta get a bit further away from this area,” she said to MJ. “We don’t know who those guys were working with, but it makes sense they would be known in this neighborhood.”

“So where do we go?”

She had no clue, so they walked in the opposite direction of the house, lost and jumping at any loud sound or the many stray dogs that crossed their paths. Ruby wasn’t sure how far they had walked, but it was night now and everything was closed except the bars and a few late-night restaurants.

MJ said he needed a break, so they huddled underneath the awning of a 24-hour bookshop that was situated down a narrow alley off the main road. It was mostly dark, but a few of the lights were still on inside and it looked empty.

Instinct told Ruby they needed to stay away from the rowdier establishments, but where could they stay that was warm, dry, and safe?

Two girls with beautifully embroidered handbags slung over their shoulders looked down at them as they exited the bookshop. They were only a few years older than Ruby, and they were speaking about the bargains to be had during rainy season. But what Ruby found most interesting about their conversation was the fact that they were conversing in Chinese.

Ruby jumped to her feet. “对不起，你能帮个忙吗？”

The girls turned and looked surprised to hear their mother tongue from someone who was obviously not Chinese asking for help.

Ruby took their moment of hesitation to continue on. She told them that she and her brother had their passports stolen, and then she asked if she could borrow their phone to call her father who was wondering what had happened to them.

Ruby hated lying, but she wasn’t sure if she told them the truth about being kidnapped they would want to get involved.

The girls eyed her carefully, and Ruby wondered for the first time how she must look to a stranger. Was her hair disheveled? Her clothes stained and rumpled? She probably didn’t look like someone you should pass your phone to, even if it were only for a minute. But then they turned to MJ.

“你好，” he waved with a big smile.

The girl who looked to be the eldest smiled back, and then reached into her bag. She ran her fingers across the screen in a specific pattern to unlock it. “Can you read Chinese?” she asked.

“Oh, you speak English?” Ruby asked with relief. Of course they spoke English!

The girl smiled as she passed her the phone. “Yes. You can call your Dad now.”

Ruby pressed the plus sign, followed by 6 and 5, and then dialed home.

He answered on the second ring.

“Daddy?”

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If you liked *Sacrifice*, leave a 5-star review from wherever you purchased this book. Bookstore purchases can be reviewed on GoodReads.com. Your positive reviews make it possible to reach more readers.

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Born in South Carolina, Natasha Oliver has lived in NYC, Boston, DC, Tokyo, England, and Singapore, and has spent 15 years working in North and South Asia. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Goddard College and a Bachelor of Science in Marketing at Lehigh University. Natasha enjoys writing strong, mature female characters in fantasy settings.