
by Rachel Starr Thomson

Exile

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Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1)

by Rachel Starr Thomson

Chapter 1

“There’s someone in the net—Tyler, haul the net in!”

Dark clouds were billowing over a choppy sea, the boat charging up and down the waves, when the words sank in. Through the Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) spray and the looming storm Tyler saw it too—an arm, a flash of shoe. He braced himself and hauled, every muscle in his Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) arms and back straining, and Chris joined him, still shouting:

“Pull!”

The wind Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) gusted and pushed them like a thing alive.

They got the net over the rail and dumped it on the deck, silver fish flapping, detritus, and the person—a girl—a woman, young. Alive.

Tyler's eyes darted to the cliffs a mile off. "Did you fall?" he screamed over the wind.

She shook her head, hugging herself, gathering her feet beneath her. Long hair, water-dark, clung to her face and neck.

"I jumped," she said.

"Why the—" he started to swear, but one look at her hollow, tormented grey eyes shut his mouth.

* * *

The rain had just begun to fall from black clouds when they finished tying up the boat safe in the cove and began the trudge up the cliff path to the cottage—not that it mattered much to the boys, spray soaked as they were, and their guest seemed to feel nothing, see nothing.

An hour later she sat cross-legged on the ratty plaid couch in the side room, surrounded on three sides by big, screened windows that Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) showed the sweeping cliffs, sky, and clouds. The bay seemed far off and far below, farther than it really was. Stacks of ragged paperbacks and a Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) few board games in cardboard boxes sat beneath the low windowsills, wearing permanent impressions in the brown shag carpet.

She wore jeans and a button-up shirt that belonged to Tyler—he was the smaller of the two—and had a Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) fuzzy flannel blanket, dull green, wrapped around her shoulders.

The electric Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) heater in the corner of the room creaked and seemed to settle its feet. Tyler pressed a steaming mug of tea into her hands.

As her Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) fingers tightened around it, her eyes met his. The same pain that had punched his anger away on the boat was still there, making him wince, but this time there was an openness there too—and a reaching, a plea. For a moment. Then it switched off, and she retreated again behind the pain.

Like a film over her eyes, Tyler thought.

He cleared his throat. "Hope that'll warm you—get the rest of the chill out."

She nodded. She Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) had showered, and with a plastic comb of Chris's had patiently worked all the tangles out of her long, straight hair, which was drying to a dark blonde. Despite the shower and the blanket and the heater radiating too-strong electric heat, she still looked cold.

“Thank you,” she said.

Rain beat against the windows in a sudden assault. Tyler settled awkwardly on the ottoman across from the couch, displacing a couple of fishing magazines. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands in front of him.

You weren’t supposed to leave suicidal people alone, right? And Chris was doing the laundry.

“You’re, ah ... you’re welcome.”

A click and more settling from the heater.

The question just jumped out. “You lose someone?”

Something flickered in her eyes. Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) “I lost ... yeah.”

“A husband?” Another flicker—deeper pain. He kicked himself inwardly. Idiot.

But she said, “No.”

Tyler took a deep breath and wished he’d made a second cup of tea. Not that she was drinking hers—she was just holding it while it steamed between her hands.

“Well, somebody must be looking out for you,” he charged in again. She shot him a look, but he just kept going. “To survive that fall in the Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) first place ... and then for us to pull you out like that, in the whole bay to be in just the right place, and with a storm comin’ in ...”

He shook his shaggy head. “Somebody didn’t want you to die today.”

When he Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) looked up from his speech, she had turned her head and was staring out the wall of windows toward the sea. One arm rested on the back of the couch, and she was covering her mouth with the heel of her hand. The tea sat nestled in her lap.

His heart did an awful sort of plunge, and he swallowed hard and stood up. His throat hurt. “I’ll come ... check on you. Later.”

The room was an add-on. Tyler stepped through the old side door into what had once been a mudroom but now housed a washer and dryer, an old dog kennel, a pile of fishing nets, and Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) lots of unclaimed clothing—coats, boots, Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) old socks without partners. He concentrated, for a moment, on breathing.

Cripes. It wasn’t supposed to be this hard. Still.

Chris poked his head and big shoulders through the kitchen door. Unlike Tyler's unruly head of long blond curls and ever-present scruff, Chris's red hair was neat and short and his face clean shaven. At Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) the moment he looked concerned.

"How's the patient?"

"Warming up," Tyler managed.

"You left her alone?"

"She needs space."

"But what if she—"

"She's not going to hurt herself. She just ... it's grief, Chris. She lost somebody. She needs space."

Chris looked unconvinced. "I'm calling Mum."

"Yeah, okay. Good idea."

The Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) kitchen door shut, and Tyler heard the sounds of Chris dialing from the other side. Trapped between worlds, suspended in the mudroom for a couple of minutes, Tyler waited.

Thunder rumbled, and the rain drummed on the roof.

* * *

With windows on three sides that covered nearly the whole wall from a foot above the floor to just below the low, sloping ceiling, Reese felt enveloped by Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) the storm. Black, tumultuous clouds. Forked lightning; thunder that shook the walls. Pelting rain. It was a classic coastal storm, wind slamming the cliffs and churning the sea in a white frenzy she could just see from here, despite the darkness.

Bitter tears ran down her face, but she hardly noticed them. Her eyes were perpetually swollen and tender; light hurt them. Had ever since the ... since the loss.

She stood by the window, placed Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) a hand on the glass. Thunder cracked, and the glass strained against the wind howling up the cliff and battering the cottage.

Surrounded by the storm—except that she stood behind windows, in the warmth, smelling the faint Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) burnt smell of an old heater, wrapped up and clean Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) and dry except for her hair.

She was done with miracles. But perhaps they weren't done with her.

She sighed and leaned her head against the window like it was too heavy to hold up on her own.

Something Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) made her Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) open her eyes.

She saw it coming and jumped back an instant before the huge, black thing shattered the window and went straight for her throat.

* * *

Diane Sawyer's tea kettle was just starting to whistle, the high-pitched sound joining the thunder. She pinched the phone between her ear and shoulder, freeing both her hands to switch off the gas and lift the copper kettle off the burner.

"She what? I'm sorry, son, the thunder ... yes. I heard you that time. Well, that's a little hasty, don't you think?" Steam wet her hand as she poured the water into the old ceramic Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) pot, and she stuck her fingers sideways into her mouth to suck off the burn.

She frowned. "You don't know that, Christopher."

She switched the phone to her other ear, relieving the crick in her neck. "Mm-hmm. Yes, I'll come. But you'd probably be best off just—"

A Exile (The Oneness Cycle Book 1) sound like mirrors smashing came from the other end of the line, Chris swore, and Diane said "Christopher? What's going on?" just as an image loomed fully formed in her mind's eye, blacking out all other vision and sound for an instant. When she came back to her kitchen, she realized Chris had hung up.

She grabbed her purse, tea forgotten. Storm or no storm, she had to get up to the cottage.

* * *

Reese stood in the midst of the shattered glass, breathing hard and staring at the object in her hand. Behind her, first Tyler and then Chris tumbled into the side room.

"What is *that*?" Tyler blurted, pointing at the corpse on the floor, at the same time that Chris demanded, "Why are you holding a sword?"

Why indeed? She'd not thought to hold one ever again.

"Didn't think I ... could," she offered, aware that her trailing answer wouldn't make

sense to them. She nudged the thing on the floor with her toe and winced at the broken glass everywhere.

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