

# Painkiller

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The girl opened the door for me in a sweat-stained singlet and baggy shorts. Her dishevelled black hair looked like it hadn't been washed in a week. She looked up at me with lifeless eyes weighed down by black bags, and asked, "Are you the Painkiller?" She couldn't have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four.

"I am. May I come in?"

She walked back inside but left the door open, which I took as a yes. I closed the door behind me and stepped over several empty cups of instant noodles and torn chocolate wrappers, visible only by the light of her muted TV, which looked like it was on a commercial break.

"Can you do it?"

I looked up. The girl had curled up in a ball on her couch, arms wrapped tightly around her legs and her chin on her knees. "Can you end my pain?" she continued.

"Let's see," I replied, and reached out with my mind. As soon as I reached hers, the shadow latched to her back became visible. If I'd reached out to touch it, I'd have just been waving through empty space like a madman. Nothing was actually there, not physically, at least. Yet my mind, my telepathy, whichever it was, always chose to represent everyone's mental illnesses like this. A bipolar person's shadow might have a mask both manic and miserable, a schizophrenic's leaving afterimages and whispering in both ears. This shadow was resting what passed for its face – distinguishable only by the flat, white glowing circles that passed for its eyes, and the crescent that was its mouth – on her shoulder. The corners of its mouth curved down, giving the shadow a look of exhausted boredom as it slowly, inaudibly whispered in her ear. Depression, no mistaking it. Its most prominent feature, however, was the arm that reached around her side and up her body, starting as a formless shadow like the rest of it but condensing into a tangible, skeletal forearm as it reached her chest, the bones of its fingers clutching her throat tightly as if to choke her. The hand of the reaper, I'd come to think of it. One so solid always meant the victim was on the precipice of suicide.

"There's nothing too see," said the girl. "Will you kill me, or won't you?"

I stepped around her coffee table and brushed an open but empty box of shapes aside to sit down next to her. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I won't kill you."

"Then what good are you?" she asked, turning to me, her voice accusatory and laced with bitterness. "Some painkiller you are."

I sighed sadly and raised my hand to her face. "I am no murderer," I said. "Though it seems that you have forgotten, death is not the only way to end pain such as yours." As confusion clouded her expression, I poked her forehead with my index and middle finger, and reached into her mind.

The room had had a dim, bluish quality to it before thanks to the poor lighting, but now, every last shred of colour receded to shades of blue-tinted grey as I perceived the world through her eyes. I probed further, catching glimpses of memories – an open book, her father's smile, a tub under a crimson-brown desk in primary school – until I found the latticework of veins of darkness strangling her mind, the true form of the shadow on her back. I grasped them tightly and slowly, ever so carefully began to pull.

The girl's breath caught in her chest and her eyes went wide as I uprooted the shadow from her mind. I suppressed her fear and panic, calming her down. I gradually inched my fingers back from her forehead, drawing the darkness out carefully so as not to further damage her mind. She looked up at my hand, at the tendril of black vapour. She opened her mouth to say something, but the words caught in her throat.

As I pulled the darkness out, the shadow on her back began to change. First, it loosened its grip on her throat before letting go altogether. Then its arm began to drop, becoming fuzzier and darker, and then just another blotch of black receding into its formless body. Its face contorted in

shock, its mouth gaping in a silent wail as it was sucked into her back. By now, the black vapour at her forehead was about as long as my hand and gently twisting and pulsing. I smiled grimly as I pried open its remaining grip on her mind and tore the last of the shadow out.

The girl gasped and fell forward, and I caught her by the shoulder she took in deep lungfuls of air. Fear and panic evaporated and relief flooded through her, as if full, vibrant colour were returning, she was returning to the surface to breathe, her chest bursting, and had discarded the weight of a mountain from her back all at once. Once she caught her breath, she sat back against the arm of the couch and stared at the vein of black vapour coiling around above my hand. "What . . ."

I smiled. "This *was* all the depression and suicidality that you were suffering from." I closed my hand around it in a fist, and a burst of light crackled through it, burning it away. "Now, it is nothing. You're free." She stared up at me as I stood, tears welling up in her eyes. That didn't surprise me; being released from such a nightmare so suddenly was often overwhelming, it seemed. "If you need my help again, or know someone else who needs it, please don't hesitate to ask."

The girl nodded and clutched the card to her chest. "Thank you," she whispered, tears beginning to flow. "Thank you . . . thank you!"

"You're welcome." I patted her head and wiped my face from her memory – I'd learned there was some sense to the cliché of superheroes guarding their true identities. "Goodnight," I murmured, walking to the door and locking it behind me.