

Echo of the Protector

She woke up, startled. The pressure of the bedsheet still seemed to press down on her neck. She could also hear the sound of the gunshot, sharp and deafening, piercing through the cold, dark atmosphere of the alley on the night of her father's death. It had always been like this since that incident, but recently, the nightmares had become more frequent. However, that was not the only thing troubling her. Every time she tried to approach her father's lifeless body, sprawled on the cold ground in the alley of her nightmare, she was forcefully pulled back by strong yet gentle hands. The voice of the man who owned those hands—urgent, insistent—constantly warned her, "Step back. Don't go there! You have to run. You must! Run! It's dangerous. We need to go!"

That wasn't the only time she felt the presence of that mysterious man. She was certain she was going to hang herself the day before when, suddenly, she felt the warmth of those same strong, firm hands on her legs. She felt herself being hoisted up just as she was

succumbing to the unconsciousness that threatened to drag her into the darkness consuming her mind and vision. She was aware that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder could cause hallucinations and delusions, but she had never heard of such delusions being anything positive, especially when the victim was immersed in negative thoughts. It was even more unlikely that a delusion could save someone's life. Had she truly hallucinated a person who, in reality, had saved her life? In addition, more troubling still, why was he intruding on her nightmares—nightmares of an incident that had occurred long ago and had ended differently from what she had been dreaming about recently?

The doctors didn't believe her when she told them about the mysterious man. When she was suddenly attacked by PTSD and nearly took her own life, she always felt as though those extreme emotions and impulsive actions weren't truly hers. They felt forced upon her, as if something—or someone—was manipulating her mind. The most unsettling part was that whenever she reached the brink of death, she would forget everything afterward. It was as if those

moments, those dark and overwhelming episodes, vanished as soon as she crossed over, only for her to wake up in a hospital bed, disoriented and trapped in a cycle of nightmares.

They called it *Amok Syndrome*, a psychological condition where an individual, often overcome with intense emotions, suddenly loses control and acts violently or recklessly without memory of their actions. They prescribed her medication, but she never truly took it. In the beginning, she had tried, but the pills felt like a futile attempt to control something that wasn't within her grasp. After a while, she pretended to take them—swallowing them in front of the doctors and nurses—while in reality, she simply hid the pills under her tongue or spat them out when no one was looking. The *Amok Syndrome* did not seem to affect her as severely anymore, but the nightmares, they lingered. She had learned how to suppress the episodes, or so she thought.

Of course, she never intended to tell them about the appearance of the mysterious man. His presence, despite the comfort he seemed to

bring, still unsettled her. What would they say? Would they tell her it was just another symptom of her fractured mind? They might just push for more medication, more ‘treatments,’ and perhaps even label her as truly insane. No, she wasn’t ready to risk that—not unless she was ready to inhale medicine instead of oxygen for the next few weeks. And yet, despite her fear, the man’s image lingered in her thoughts, creeping into her nightmares and her waking hours, like a puzzle she had no intention of solving... until now.

It only took a few more days for her to get used to the intruder. During the daytime, she would happily work in her flower shop, and at night, the man would intrude into her nightmares until she started feeling comfortable whenever she sensed the presence of those warm hands.

One particular day, she, Araya Celeste, came to her small apartment feeling down, her face tired and gloomy. She had just broken up with her boyfriend because he had indirectly implied that her ‘mental health’ might not allow her to ‘properly’ maintain a relationship in the

future, and that he was ‘having a lot on his plate already and his parents might not agree’. She knew she had certain issues, but she definitely was not crazy, as the doctors seemed to think. She certainly did not openly reveal her mental health condition just to hear him say that. She thought she could trust him and that he would support her. He was a paranormal investigator, and she secretly hoped that he could help her solve the mystery behind her father’s death. The police and forensic pathologists said that it was ‘High-Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE)’ that seemed to fit the situation. However, she felt sure that the sound of the gunshot that night was not imaginary. But she had lost hope of investigating further into the matter for the time being because the source of that hope was no longer present.

That night, she cried silently, shivering uncontrollably too exhausted to even shut the windows or fully cover herself with the quilt on the side of the bed. Half asleep, she was slowly surrendering to unconsciousness when she suddenly felt the warmth of a gentle touch—two firm, manly hands. One hand was slowly rubbing her right leg, while the other gently caressed her cheek with the back of it.

She knew at once that it was him, but she was neither surprised nor startled to suddenly feel his presence in her real life, unlike previous times. She also did not feel scared or alarmed to find herself being touched by an unfamiliar man like this. She did not make a sound even when fingers warmed with passion and desire gently squeezed her boobs under the skinny she was wearing. Instead, she let her hands slid behind the man's back and caresses it slowly while her cold shivering lips were covered with his and their tongues intertwined together until she could hardly breathe in. "Will you... do you want to let me in?" he asked when their lips parted for a short moment to breath in. She looked at those clear hazel eyes that were glistened by the moonlight coming from the window dazedly, and whispered "...yes...yes, I want it. Yes!" when her hands slid inside his shirt. He chuckled quietly and suddenly sat up on the bed. He gazed passionately at her and removed his shirt and her skinny rapidly while her hands pulled down the tight jeans he was wearing.

The atmosphere between them was getting hot in the middle of that cold night. Her cold body was dyed rouge with lights nibbles from him,

while her soft moans reflected the pleasure she was feeling, to the young man whose movements were getting faster and faster.

Next instant, he suddenly asked with a low grunt "Are you ready?" and she parted her legs under him in reply. She felt herself gradually being filled in as she gasped in painful pleasure, a feeling that was hard to explain with words. He was coming farther inside, and that hard thing was exploring the deepest parts of her body while that scorching heat burned her insides. She was pressed down under him while he was thrusting up and down until she felt like she could not hold onto consciousness anymore. However, he did not stop and her insides were constantly moved in and out until she was in a daze at the end of it. She screamed until her voice was hoarse and he was gasping with quick breathes. At last, when she released, he fell on the bed beside her and she snuggled into his arms. Before she fell asleep, she could feel him wrapping the blanket around them and murmuring, "Do not try to investigate this further. It is for your own good. It was his fate, and we cannot change what happened anymore. Just trust me. You are not alone anymore. Not alone..." The

last thought she had before she lost consciousness was, "I am not alone... at last."

The next morning, she woke up alone in bed, and the only thing that indicated something had happened was the bloodstain on the white bedsheet she had been lying on just a moment ago. She gazed at it for some time, unmoving, and the emotions in her eyes were difficult to discern. It was unclear whether she felt happiness or confusion. Her body was sore from everything that had happened the night before, so she washed herself and returned to the room.

It was her day off, and even if it had not been, she didn't feel like going anywhere. She wanted to reflect on the dream she had experienced during her deep slumber. Before anything else, she had her usual nightmare of that cold night. But this time, as she felt the presence of the young man behind her, the scene changed drastically.

What she saw felt like a recollection of past memories from a third-person perspective, as if someone was quietly observing. It was an

omniscient view of two people, her father and the young man, engaged in tasks—both paperwork and manual labor—with no sound, like scenes from a drama. The young man seemed to be a close ally or subordinate of her father, always exuding an aura of protection around him. Though she couldn't hear or make out their conversation, it was clear that he played a significant, protective role in her father's life.

She remembered feeling confused and torn until the end of the recollection, when her father looked toward her, smiling gently before entering the hut and closing the door. The happiness and astonishment she felt seeing his smile lingered, one she had missed so much. It didn't feel like she was in the dream; rather, it was as if the omniscient viewer was Amie herself, invisible to everyone. She stared at her father, hoping he would appear again, when she suddenly felt the young man's gaze, still beside the hut, as if it were tangible, touching every part of her. She stared into those clear hazel eyes, which seemed to reveal a silent plea and a gentle smile— a plea urging her not to dwell on the past any longer, and a smile that

reassured her he was on her side, not her enemy. They gazed at each other for some time, though she didn't feel physically present there, until the scene shifted one final time.

She found herself sitting in a small courtyard of a traditional house, holding a nameless letter. In the dream, she instinctively recognized her father's handwriting—the last letter he had written before his sudden death. The letter's contents were simple, and she knew instinctively that she had to take its words seriously.

The letter read:

"Beloved Araya,

By the time you read this, I will be gone. Whatever they say about my death, accept it and don't investigate further. Don't let the past burden you, as it can't be changed. Wherever I am, know that I am happy and reunited with your mother. Trust the person who saves you—he is a man of faith, and I've entrusted

your protection to him. He will care for you. Live well, my daughter. I will always love you."

As she finished reading, she opened her eyes to the ceiling of her bedroom, two teardrops falling into her hair.

Now, she sat on the couch in her room, deeply convinced that she must not investigate any further, though she wasn't sure where that conviction had come from. She believed her strange dreams had something to do with it, but she felt lost and confused, as though everything was unreal.

She desperately longed to see her young man, who seemed to be fading into a beautiful delusion in her mind, mixed with the confusion she was feeling and the dreams she had. A headache began to throb in her head when the doorbell suddenly rang. She said, "Coming," and slowly went to open the door for the unexpected visitor. When she opened it, the sight of him left her momentarily unsteady and astonished, but that quickly transformed into a feeling of relief and happiness.

It was him—the one she had desperately wanted to see. He smiled and asked, “Am I invited, my lady?” She stared at him, moved aside, and let him in. As he stepped through the door, she closed it behind him and hugged him from behind, her hands clasping his waist tightly.

He slowly turned around, allowing her to nestle into his chest, as though she were a fragile kitten seeking warmth from someone who would care for her. In that moment, they were both lost in the intimacy, and Amie felt an undeniable connection. She felt as if she had known this man for a lifetime, as though he were her lifeline—something that tethered her to this world. Since her father's death, her world had been shrouded in darkness, loneliness, and sorrow. But for the first time since then, she felt a profound sense of peace and happiness.

He kissed her forehead softly and whispered into her ear, "I'm sorry for being late to stand by your side. From now on, I will always be with you, never leaving you alone, never causing you pain. I will be yours, and yours alone." His hand was rubbing against her cheek and she

was tilting her face to that side, letting him caress her for a while until he moved his lips near her ear and gently rubbed his tongue against it. He lightly clasped it between his teeth and she trembled slightly while her hand clasped his jacket tightly. She helped him remove his jacket, closing her eyes as he gently lifted her, continuing to place soft kisses on her face. He whispered, "I am your guardian and lover too," as he gently placed her on the bed. His words were so soft that she could barely feel the warmth of his breath against her ear. She said nothing, simply gazing at him in silence, her eyes silently guiding him. His eyes became dark with desire and he came down at her ferociously, making the bed creak up and down with each of his thrust. She could feel insides turning upside down when the deepest parts of her body were pressed hard by him, so hard that she could not even scream. But she did not resist because she trusted him completely. The echo of his voice would forever resonate in her heart.