

**Theme:** Echoes of the Protectors

**Title:** The Little Girl He Protected

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I have been here for years, sitting at the doorstep where I once lay in glory, my paws pressed gently against the warm earth. The white paint on the walls, once bright as snow, has greyed at the edges. The cozy corners of the house has collected dust little by little, yet the memories prevail. I can't sense the familiar smell of home anymore, but I can vividly remember all the love and laughter that ceaselessly spilled among these walls. Even today, it reverberates, even though the house has grown quieter. And I remain. Watching. Waiting.

Time has passed, and the world has changed in the way worlds do. The little girl is older now, her hair flowing down, her hands no longer the size of my paws. She has come home today, her usual brown bag on her side and black glasses on her eyes. She stands still for some time, as if breathing in her childhood heaven, and slowly unlocks the front door. She steps into the house and I follow her, though she cannot see me.

She moves through the house like someone turning the pages of an old, treasured book, tracing the spine that's barely held together,

running her fingers over words once familiar. She goes to the bookshelves first, and traces the line of books carefully tucked inside, her grandfather's most prized possessions. She spends a long time there, taking out books randomly and carefully wiping away the dust from the pages that were once her gateway into the world. The scent of old paper lingers, bound with the ghost of her grandfather's voice and wisdom.

The little girl who was once smaller than me has grown taller, so I climb onto my master's study table to take a better look at her face. She looks strong, her shoulders shaped by the weight of years. She's wearing a pink dress with purple embroidered flowers on it, her two favorite colors. Her eyes, slightly glassy with tears, looks the same, the ones that danced in joy at the sight of me and shone bright like a golden lamplight as her grandfather read her stories of stars and beetles.

"She's still the same," I think to myself. She's always cried so easily.

I remember when she was small enough to fit in the crook of her grandfather's arm. He would lift her onto his lap, a children's newspaper spread open before them, her tiny hands clutching the edges. Together they would trace lines and letters, draw and color, and read stories. Her grandfather would teach her new words and she would repeat after him, her voice bright and eager. It was the

same way in the garden, where she chased butterflies with the same wonder she chased stories. They made *kompittu* rice together, decorating them with jasmine flowers. He made her crowns from jackfruit leaves, which she wore around the house with pride. Her grandfather was her first explorer and her first teacher, guiding her way through the magic of the world. He was her gateway to the little earthly wonders that often go unnoticed. And I was always there, jumping around at times, and lightly resting my head on her little legs when I'm tired, always watching over her.

Then came the day my master took my little best friend to the university he taught at. When she got home, she couldn't stop talking about her experience of a lifetime. She talked of animals and human babies preserved in jars, of specimens suspended in liquid, and of skeletons arranged in neat lines, her eyes wide with fascination.

"*Sudu Doni* loved the biology lab at the university," I later heard my master say on the phone.

That night, while my master was singing her to sleep, with me lying close on my mattress, she had asked him, "What happens when things die, Seeya?"

He had smiled, resting a gentle hand on her head. The kind of smile that could heal any soul, despite the pain hidden within them.

*“They stay with us and they protect us, in different ways.”*

She did not understand then. She didn't know *loss* then.

Just weeks after she turned five, I fell sick. I remember her sitting by my side for hours, stroking my fur with her tiny hands, looking at my eyes with her big, teary ones. I was 14 years then, dying from old age. I had no regrets. I had lived a long, happy life since I was adopted by my master at the age of 2. But, I wished I had a little more time with my little friend. Her life was just getting started.

I remember my own death like it was days ago. In my final hours, my master and his granddaughter never left my side. They told me what a good friend I was, and that no other dog can ever take my place. Amidst their love, that has always fulfilled my heart, I passed peacefully. Despite physically leaving, my soul never left their soul.

I watched my master dig a grave near the tamarind tree in his front yard. He was wiping his tears every now and then. I stared in disbelief. The first time that I saw him cry, I wasn't with him to comfort him. He gently lifted my body and placed it inside the grave, curled up to the right side. Then he put the shovel aside, and started covering my grave with his bare hands, fistful after fistful of earth. The little girl joined his him right away, following his actions. Soon, her fair hands, rosy cheeks, and yellow dress were covered in brown.

She didn't cry right away. When I studied her face, she looked sad and confused.

"Right, she doesn't understand loss yet. She has never lost anything before." I thought to myself. For a second, I wish things stayed that way. Her heart was still too little to be broken.

After my grave was fully covered, my little friend made a suggestion.

"Seeya, let's cover *Bino* with flowers. Like you said earlier, isn't he sleeping on his way to heaven? He'd feel happy to see flower when he wakes up!"

"Yes love, let's do that," said my master. I can sense that he was on the verge of tears. Knowing him, he wouldn't keep the reality away from his granddaughter, but he wasn't ready to break the truth to her just yet.

After that, they took their plucking flowers, jasmines, temple flowers, and what not. So many colors. Then, they carefully placed them over me, one by one. After some time, my little friend stopped placing flowers and started watching my master with intent. She watched the fragile and achingly slow movements of my master, placing flowers over me with a love and reverence she has never seen before. Seeing him this pained and vulnerable was a first for

her. When the last flower fell on the soil, she instantly burst into tears.

My master didn't try to console her, neither did he wipe her tears away. Instead, he took her into his embrace, hiding her little face on his neck.

"Bino is not sleeping, right Seeya. Tell me, is he really not just sleeping. Won't he wake up anytime now?" she spoke through her tears.

"No love. He's not sleeping. He's dead. But he lived a long, joyful life which I'm sure he is grateful for. So don't cry too much. I don't think he wants to see you cry."

"Dead? What does it mean?"

"When someone dies, they leave this world physically. But, they stay right next to us. We go on loving them, and they go on loving us, although we can't see, hear, or touch them," replied my master, but I saw him wipe his tears again when his granddaughter looked away for a second.

After a long pause, she asked, "Will *Bino* stay with us?"

"He will, love, He most certainly will. He loves you too much to leave you. He'll stay, and he'll protect you, but in different ways," said my

master. Once again, I was marveled at his wisdom and his ability to find the perfect words at any situation.

The little girl nodded, not quite understanding, her adorable face flushed with tears. It was a heartbreaking sight. Despite her not voicing out her thoughts, I knew she was holding onto his words like a secret. Like a religion.

I watched her every day after that, my paws no longer making prints in the soil, my breath no longer warming the air, her hands no long tracing lines on my fur. But I stayed, watching her slowly become her joyful self again, because she still needed me.

Then, just two short years later, came the funeral without me.

My master fell sick a few months before she turned seven, but he and everyone else did their best to hide this from her. She didn't come around as often but whenever she did, he somehow managed to get up from the bed. Despite his illness, he even let her sleep next to him, holding her small hands with his big, warm ones.

She knew something was odd, but she couldn't say what exactly was happening. The house was always full, and whenever she visited, there was always someone around to distract her.

Finally, that dreadful day came. No one dared to tell her that the person she loved the most in this world has died. Believing my master was sleeping, she came near the coffin from time to time, talking about her breakfast, schoolwork, and all the relatives she met at the funeral after a long time. She even gently patted his bluish face thrice. Everyone else couldn't stop their tears, yet the little girl had no clue.

After some time though, I think she realized.

When the coffin was about to be lifted to be taken to the crematorium, the little girl shouted, "Wait a minute! I have something to give Seeya!"

She was older, but her hands still shook as they folded a piece of paper, scribbled in smudgy crayons, just as they had been when she was small. She placed it in his hands, inches below his heart, before they closed the casket. And she waited. Waited for his eyes to open, for his voice to fill the silence, for the words that always made the world gentle again.

But they did not come. And she understood, finally, what he had meant. *"When people die, they stay with us and they protect us, but in different ways."*

Her mother took hold of her as they closed the casket shut. Finally crushed under the weight of her loss, she couldn't stop crying. I followed her on the way to the cemetery, and watched her cry till the dark ashes flew up the crematoriums chimney. But this time, she had no one to hold her hand. And so I sat beside her, unseen but ever present. Because she was still mine to protect.

Today, she still lingers at the doorstep, the weight of memories settling over her like dust on old pages. She walks through each and every room in the house with slow, lingering steps, reminiscing the memories that once shaped her.

I watch her, and I get this epiphany. She has become him in so many ways. The books. The curiosity. The quiet strength. Despite her visible sadness, sometimes, she reads out a quote from his books aloud. Sometimes, she smiles at one of her old toys. Another time, she takes out a phone and snaps a picture of the beautiful framed photo of my master and herself.

She brings her mouth closer to her phone, and speaks, "Girls look! This is my grandfather that I always tell you about. I'm so proud of him, and I love him so much." She doesn't know that my master is immensely proud of her too.

I continue watching her, and I know that she carries him with her in the stories she tells, in the lessons she passes on, and in the way she still tilts her head to the sky as if searching for something beyond the clouds.

And I see myself in her, too. The way she loves fiercely, the way she guards the past, and in the way she lingers in doorways before stepping forward.

The wind shifts. It carries the scent of old paper and of *samaposha* in a distant kitchen. And I understand, at last. My waiting is over.

A voice, gentle as the rustling of pages, whispers through the air.  
“*She’s ready.*”

I rise, and I step forward. And I go, leaving the doorstep empty for the first time in years.