

Echoes of the Protector

by Sapuni Gamage

The walls tremble with the fury of voices clashing in the other room. I curl up on my bed, my body shaking with silent sobs. The moonlight filters through the sheer curtains, casting soft, ghostly shadows on the floor. I press my palms against my ears, desperate to shut out the sounds, but they slither through every crack, drilling into my already fragile heart.

Tonight is just another night in the endless war that rages within these walls. My parents' voices are weapons, their words slicing through the air, leaving invisible wounds that never truly heal. It has been like this for as long as I can remember—shouting matches, slammed doors, nights spent trembling in bed, wondering if this would be the time it all finally breaks apart.

I bury my face in my pillow, the fabric soaking up my tears, and let myself drift into the past. The memories come unbidden, like waves crashing against the shore, each one more painful than the last.

An eleven-year-old me, hiding beneath the dining table as my parents scream at each other.

A thirteen-year-old me, flinching as a vase shatters against the wall, missing my mother's head by inches.

A fourteen-year-old me, sitting alone in the school cafeteria, ashamed to invite friends home because I never know what kind of warzone awaits me.

A fifteen-year-old me, holding back tears as my father storms out the door, slamming it behind him, my mother collapsing onto the couch in quiet sobs.

My breath hitches as a fresh sob wracks my body. The only constant in all those memories—the only beacon of warmth in the darkness—was him.

Tango.

The massive black German Shepherd was my silent guardian, my protector in the chaos. He would nuzzle against me, his warmth shielding me from the cold loneliness that lived inside our home. Tango was my anchor, the only one who could chase away the monsters that lived in the echoes of my parents' rage.

As if conjured by my thoughts, I feel a presence. A soft shuffle of paws against the floor. Then warmth. Tango's familiar weight presses against my side. I slowly turn my head and, through tear-blurred eyes, see him. His black fur shimmers under the dim light, his deep brown eyes watching me with quiet understanding.

I reach out, fingers trembling, and touch his fur. The comfort is instant, the chaos in my heart momentarily silenced. He has always been there when I needed him most.

I clutch onto him, burying my face in his thick coat, inhaling the familiar scent of safety. His heartbeat thrums softly beneath my fingers, steady and strong, anchoring me to something real, something safe. I whisper to him, my voice breaking, telling him how tired I am, how much it hurts. He does not respond with words—he never had to. His presence alone is enough.

A sigh escapes my lips, my body growing heavy with exhaustion. The weight of years, of pain, of memories. My fingers remain tangled in his fur as sleep finally claims me.

I wake with a start, a sharp gasp escaping my lips as I sit up. My breath comes in quick bursts, my heart pounding against my ribs. But something is different. The walls aren't the same. The ceiling, the bed, the soft hum of city traffic outside—it's all unfamiliar, yet strangely known.

My eyes dart around the room, my mind struggling to grasp the shift. The bedroom is no longer the small, dimly lit sanctuary of my childhood. Instead, I find myself in a modern, sleek apartment,

the morning sun casting golden streaks through the large windows.

Then it hits me.

I'm not sixteen anymore.

I'm twenty-eight.

The realization crashes into me like a tidal wave. The teenage years are long gone. The girl sobbing into her pillow, drowning in pain and fear, is just a memory—a fragment of time that no longer defines me.

My breathing slows. I run a hand through my hair, feeling the soft waves cascade through my fingers. The nightmares have come again. The same ones that have haunted me for years, pulling me back into a past I have spent so long trying to escape.

I turn my head slightly—and freeze.

A dog sits at the edge of my bed, watching me with quiet patience. Not Tango. He is long gone, lost to time and life's cruel inevitability. But this dog—this one is different. A black Cocker Spaniel, smaller than Tango, but with the same deep, understanding eyes.

Trevor.

A soft whimper escapes his throat as he inches closer, pressing his warm body against my side, much like Tango had done all those years ago. I hesitate for only a moment before reaching out, my fingers sinking into his silky fur. A comforting warmth spreads through me, soothing the remnants of the nightmare lingering in my chest.

A lump forms in my throat. Trevor has never known Tango. But somehow, in this moment, I feel it—an unspoken connection between the past and the present. A tether between the girl I was and the woman I have become.

Tears well in my eyes, but this time, they aren't from pain. They are from understanding.

Tango is gone, but his presence has never truly left me. He watched over me in my darkest days, and now, in this new life I have built, Trevor has taken his place—not as a replacement, but as a continuation. An echo of the protector who had always been there.

I stroke Trevor's fur, my breath catching as a wave of emotion swells within me. The years have passed, but the pain has not entirely faded. I have learned to live with it, to carry it quietly in the depths of my soul. But at this moment, with Trevor beside me, I allow myself to feel it again—to acknowledge the girl I once was, the girl who once thought she would never escape.

I close my eyes, pressing my forehead against Trevor's. The weight of grief and gratitude intertwines, creating something bittersweet, something whole.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice trembling with emotion.

The past will always be a part of me. The echoes of trauma, of fear, of pain—they will never completely fade. But I am not that helpless girl anymore. I have survived. I have grown. And just as I once found comfort in Tango's presence, I now have a new protector to remind me that I am never truly alone.

Trevor lets out a content sigh and nestles closer, his warmth a silent promise. A promise that, no matter where life takes me, I will always have an echo of love and protection to guide me home.

And for the first time in years, I let the tears fall, not in sorrow, but in gratitude.

- The End -