

A Cold Dawn

It had to be done.

The man sighed, a misty little gust of air escaping from his lips into the almost-winter sky. He was standing in the bird pen - had been for a while now - watching the horizon pick on a tinge of pale pink. The town was quiet. Inside the house, his daughter and his wife slumbered silently. For a fleeting moment, he felt like the only man in the world, but a quick rustle of feathers reminded him that he was not alone.

The goose nestled against the wooden fence was undeniably a majestic creature, even in sleep. Large and healthy, its clipped wings were like sails when unfurled. It was pristine in every sense of the word - the bird was white, white, white.

He was suddenly brought back to the day when he'd picked it out at the market, hoping it would lay eggs. His daughter had been ecstatic, cupping the gosling in her hands, even as it nipped at her fingers with a sunset bill. His wife had looked on quietly, a soft smile dancing around her mouth.

With every passing day, every caress of soft girlish hands, the bird had grown larger and stronger, the white of glossy feathers replacing the ashen grey of down. And still, no eggs. It didn't take long for him to realize that they weren't going to get any eggs out of it - out of him.

I should've done it then, he thought almost desperately, before -

He shook away the thought in favour of sinking into sweet memories again. The skyline was brighter now, more orange, like the goose's bill, the bill that had nearly twisted off the thumb of anyone who'd dared to come too close to his daughter. There was a certain fierceness about it that was unique to beautiful things.

"A watchdog with feathers," the neighbours called it good-naturedly, and his wife would laugh with that too soft laugh of hers. The girl would too, arms wrapped snugly around the bird.

It didn't have a name - not for lack of love, but because it never needed one. To the little girl, its name was Spirit, its name was Boldness, its name was Life.

The man sighed again. Beside him, the goose stirred, neck stretching elegantly, a bright black pearl of an eye blinking open. Impassively, it gazed at him with eyes that did not look quite as animal as they should have.

He looked away, thinking of his daughter's smile, of his wife's laboured breath, of this bird that was more than a bird. It had to be done, because what he needed - no, what she needed - was not spirit, nor boldness, nor a watchdog. What she needed was food, food to make her strong again, and make her voice as bright as it used to be.

Yes, it had to be done.

The sun was already slightly above the horizon. He'd waited too long. Grasping the knife at his belt, he took a step forward. The goose did not move, did not blink. Walking forward, he thought of his wife.

The goose's neck was warm, soft, and it vaguely occurred to him that he'd never touched it before. He wondered if the blade at its throat felt cold. Still, it did not move, merely looked at him, seeing.

The man clenched his jaw. He wished it would struggle. *Fight, damn you!*

He couldn't do it. He couldn't -

A shrill scream rang through the morning air, girlish and despairing. The goose let out a deafening bellow, great wings beginning to beat, neck writhing and twisting in his grasp, finally fighting like the beast it was. Footsteps, sharp and familiar, coming towards him as he held a storm in his arms, and it had to be done, before she came. He didn't want her to see -

I'm sorry, he thought. *I'm sorry*.

Scarlet on frost, morbidly beautiful. Vaguely, he registered the sticky red warmth on the ground, his cold hands. His daughter's face swam in his gaze, almost animalistic in its grief, hatred carved in every line. Because she really did hate him, in that moment. He could tell. Perhaps, one day when she became older and wiser, she'd be thankful, for her mother. But for now, as she hunched sobbing over the still-beautiful corpse, fingertips being stained red -

She hated.

After all, it was more than a bird he'd just killed.