



SACRIFICE

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*Things need not have happened to be true.
Tales and dreams are the shadow-truths that will endure
when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot.*
— Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*

*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood,
but against principalities, against powers,
against the rulers of the darkness of this world,
against spiritual wickedness in high places.*
— Ephesians 6:12

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Gabriel could barely keep running, but stopping wasn't an option. The Shadows that pursued him were too close. He didn't need to look behind him to know that.

He had never seen a Shadow before, but after the long minutes of running from them he knew them well enough. They wouldn't stop until they had him.

Snow covered his brown hair, and his coat didn't manage to protect him. It was so cold that his throat hurt with every breath. Yet he could sense that if one of the Shadows managed to reach him, he would feel a chill much colder than the air that surrounded him.

The stone walkway over which he ran offered him a clear path to follow. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here, but that didn't matter now. All that was left was to run. To escape. To prevent the Shadows from touching him.

It was a dark night, but a hoary light allowed him to see a few meters ahead of him. Though he couldn't be sure, it seemed as if the light became brighter and brighter as he ran, as though he were getting closer to its origin.

How much longer would he have to run before he reached it?

It was then that he felt it. Something had grabbed him by the ankles. Something colder than the snow on which he trod. Gabriel tripped and fell hard to the ground.

The Shadows surrounded him and now he couldn't see the light that he had been chasing. A darkness even blacker than the night enveloped him. He couldn't see anything, he couldn't even breathe. He knew he was going to die.

He was only fifteen.

Someone began to sing then; a feminine voice, sweet but firm. He couldn't decipher the words, but he understood their meaning. They were about the light that he should reach.

The song sought him out, getting closer and closer to where he had fallen. The Shadows receded, as though they had been dispelled by the music, and he could once more see the light.

Clenching his teeth, numbed by the terror of being touched by them again, he ran. He ran with the speed of a man fleeing death itself.

The song grew fainter and fainter, but the light shone brightly on. When he was only a few meters from it, he no longer felt the Shadows behind him.

What he saw however was not a light, but rather a giant bird, whiter than snow, more radiant than the stars.

With a smile, Gabriel approached it and caressed one of its wings.

If he had thought he was going to die when the Shadows surrounded him, touching the bird was incomparably more painful. He felt his heart was going to explode, his body burned while his mind tried to reconstitute the ashes of who he once had been.

Gabriel awoke suddenly, gasping for air, his body stuck to sheets soaked with sweat.

It had been years since he had called for his mother when he had a nightmare. This time would be no different. He drank water from the glass left on his nightstand each night, and tried not to close his eyes. He knew that if he did he would once more see the Shadows.

He never imagined that in that same moment, something else had awoken.



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