

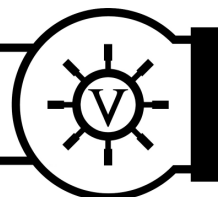
# The Pony in My Pocket

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## Table of Contents

|              |    |
|--------------|----|
| Kawari       | 2  |
| Homecoming   | 12 |
| Dawn's Light | 35 |

PONY FICTION VAULT



I had a dream last night.

In my dream, I was flying with Rainbow Dash, flying high above the clouds, watching Equestria unfold below us. We laughed and we smiled, trying to outfly each other. She didn't seem to mind that I was human. She only wanted to have fun, and I was perfectly content with that.

We flew until the sun dipped over the horizon, and by then the sky was fiery orange. But when I looked up I felt intense heat on my face, and I smelled smoke. Dash said something to me, but I had gone deaf. Then I realized that the sky didn't just look like it was on fire; it was on fire. The clouds had turned to blobs of ugly black smoke, and columns of flame burst from the sky's maw, trapping us in a cage of fire. My hearing returned, and I heard the hungry roar of the flames. I heard my heart beat faster. I heard Rainbow Dash gasp for air.

Then it appeared.

A monster, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It seemed to be made of the very flames from which it had just emerged. I saw its crimson eyes, its holocaustic teeth, and I heard it bellow in a voice that knocked us both from the sky and shook the ground that we collapsed upon.

It bore down on us. I had no energy left. I couldn't move. I was bleeding. Rainbow Dash was crying... with fear? Realization? Or maybe... helplessness?

I never found out. At that moment, the fiery monster was practically on top of us. I didn't know what to do.

The monster was going to kill me.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Rainbow Dash threw herself in front of me. Before either of us could make a sound, the fiery monster slammed into her, and I saw a look of helpless pain rip across her face. Her tears evaporated, her wings singed, and her rainbow hair caught fire. But she didn't scream, nor did she writhe.

Rather, she looked at me.

Her eyes were wide with fear, and for the first time I realized that the famed Rainbow Dash was not invulnerable. She began to hyperventilate as her chest glowed red. She said something, many things, but I didn't hear her.

She knew what was going to happen. Closing her eyes, she let herself be consumed by the flames.

Rainbow Dash disappeared inside a vortex of fire. As I screamed, the vortex contracted and then exploded, hurling a wall of fire toward me. I could do nothing but curl up in a protective position and wait for the flames to swallow me whole.

Nothing happened.

I looked up. The flames were gone. It was daytime. A few flecks of ash were all that remained of the great pegasus Rainbow Dash.

That, and the beautiful, iridescent rainbow that stretched over the cloudless sky...

• • •

That was last night. I had awoken the next morning bathed in sweat, so much so that the guy in the bed beneath me, Private Jimmy Tochak, thought I had pissed myself through the mattress.

For some reason, during my time in Afghanistan, training at Bagram Airfield or running patrols outside Kawari, nothing stood out as much as the dream. I couldn't decide whether it was a dream or a nightmare. I'd been through hell and back in Afghanistan, dodging bullets and bombs, watching friends get killed or wounded so badly they wished they were dead. Not a day went by during my time there when I didn't feel like I wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

But then...

There I was now, sitting at the foot of my bunk in the barracks. It was 1102 hours. My unit was set to patrol Kawari within an hour. It was a cool August day – at least, cool for Afghani standards. The thermometer in the window read 93° Fahrenheit. And yet I was so cold, so utterly chilled...

Rainbow Dash...

• • •

My daughter, Julia, was the one who got me into My Little Pony. When my unit, the 13th Army Expeditionary Unit, ended combat operations in Iraq, I went home to my wife and daughter in Connecticut, if only temporarily. I knew I wouldn't be in the States for long. We were taking casualties in Afghanistan, and though Obama kept preaching to the choir about troop withdrawal, I knew that we were being shuttled out of one shithole and dumped into another.

Still, the day I came home from Iraq was one of the happiest days of my life. I remember the snow falling outside and the happy shrieks that burst from Julia and her mother when I knocked on the door. I remembered our Siberian husky, Michelle, practically spazzing out with joy. Even our neighbors, the Thompsons, who had cousins in Iraq, came over. It was a night of happiness, of elation.

But it wouldn't last. I was home no longer than two weeks. But those two weeks, I will never forget. Julia, then nine, had lost another tooth. My wife, Loren, had gotten promoted at her law firm. Everything seemed to be going well.

Then I had to tell them that I was going back.

Loren protested. Julia bawled and begged. Even Michelle seemed to avoid me, ducking away whenever I tried to pet her. I had suddenly become an enemy to my family, and I couldn't blame them.

*It is what it is*, I had told Loren three days before I had to ship out. *I have to do this*.

I knew that every day she feared that she would get a phone call or that a man would knock on the front door and tell her that her husband was dead. I knew she worried to the point where she tried to Skype me nearly every week. I knew what would happen if Julia had to find out that she no longer had a father.

I knew, but I didn't want to think about it.

The day before I went to Afghanistan, I caught my daughter in front of the television, absentmindedly stroking Michelle's fur, her eyes glued to the screen. I sat down beside her and asked what she was watching.

"My Little Pony," she replied, smiling. "It's my favorite."

Of course, I had heard about My Little Pony before, but this was back in the 90s when they were just objects of marketing ploys aimed at little children. This show seemed

different. The characters were well-rounded, the content was amusing, and little by little I found myself engrossed with the ponies of Equestria...

"Oh yes, she loves that show," Loren had said. "Can't get enough of it. She's got toys and dolls of it in her room."

So I went up to Julia's room and found, alongside with typical nine-year-old-girl bedroom material, pony figurines, pony drawings, and pony coloring books. Half the room was dedicated to ponies.

I felt safe in that room, for some reason. I felt like I belonged.

And so it began.

• • •

The day of my deployment, at JFK Airport, after our hugs and kisses and tearful goodbyes, my Julia stopped me one last time.

"Daddy!"

I turned around, the blast of the air-conditioning ruffling my fatigues. She ran up to me, Loren close behind. She was wearing her Disney princess shirt and a purple jacket, but she held something light blue in her hand. Her eyes glittered with tears as I knelt down to her.

"What is it, sweetie?"

Hiccupping, she stretched out her hand, revealing the blue object.

It was a pony figurine: a cyan, winged horse with a mane of rainbow hair, and a multicolored lightning bolt across its flank.

"This is Rainbow Dash, Daddy," Julia said sadly. "I want you to have her."

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say. "But, Julie, that's your toy..."

"Rainbow Dash represents the spirit of loyalty," my daughter whispered. "She won't leave you, Daddy. She'll always be with you."

My heart leapt at that point. I hugged my daughter so hard that I was afraid I might choke her, so I pulled away and fought back tears of my own.

"Thank you, honey," I said, taking the pony from her hands and slipping it into my pocket. "You'll always be with me, too."

I kissed her cheek, and she wrapped her little arms around my neck.

I never wanted to let go.

• • •

"Corporal!"

I had been running my fingers over the plastic pony, daydreaming, when the sharp bark of my commanding officer brought me to attention. The Rainbow Dash figurine fell from my hands and, thankfully, rolled out of sight next to my trunk.

"Yes, Sergeant!" I called, standing at attention.

Sergeant Lionel Kassel, referred to by some as Lion Castle, stood in the doorway of the empty barracks. A powerfully built, battle-hardened man, his dark eyes matched his skin, stone-cold, icy. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy. Men who make sergeant generally are.

"Corporal Wolfe," he said, addressing me and stepping further. "Your convoy rolls out for Kawari at 1230 hours. Explain to me why you are not dressed and ready to go."

His voice was low, but not scathing. I had to pick my answer carefully. Staring straight ahead, I said, "I have no explanation, Sergeant!"

"Well then, Corporal, let me explain something to you: if I don't see your sorry hide at Hanger 3, fully dressed and geared, in the next half-hour, I will put you on KP until the next rotation. Is that clear, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"Get to it, soldier!" He turned on his heel and walked out.

I sighed and was about to get dressed when I remembered the Rainbow Dash figurine. Stooping down, I clutched it and observed it, wondering if I should bring it with me.

My daughter's voice drifted into my mind. *She'll always be with you, Daddy...*

I sighed and got ready, putting on my fatigues and slipping the plastic pegasus into the chest pocket.

I was geared in less than fifteen minutes, and when I stepped outside, I was blinded by the sun and slammed by the heat, both of which I had assumed I had gotten used to. Bagram was rife with activity today. A-10s and Blackhawks flew overhead as Humvees rolled down the tarmac. Crossing the base, I finally reached Hanger 3, catching sight of my men, armed and prepared. Sergeant Kassel was addressing them.

"...expect little crossfire, but the locals think Hazaras and Tajiks may be at each other's throats in Kawari territory. This is a routine convoy assignment; get to Bravo Point, drop off the supplies, then get the hell out. Short and sweet. Private Tochak, I want you in Wolfe's Humvee as gunner. Schmidt and Lewis, ride with Velazquez in the truck. Everyone else, to your usual positions. Let's roll out!"

A cry of *Hooah!* rose up from the soldiers, and I joined in, even though I knew this was going to be a walk in the park.

See, I keep saying that I know things. But that, I didn't know. I didn't think it would be hard. I didn't think that by the end of the day, more people whom I had come to call friends would be dead than ever before.

I never could have known.

• • •

Planning on vacationing around the world? Take my advice. Skip Afghanistan. Just imagine the Mojave Desert, except it's filled with people that hate you. That's how the place felt. I was riding shotgun in my Humvee. The driver, a private named Collins, wore aviators that were too big for his face. Dust practically blinded our vision as we drove along the unpaved road on our way to Kawari.

"So, Ben," Collins said with a Texas drawl.

"So what?"

"So anything. I dunno, what else is there to talk about?"

"How about we don't talk, and you keep your eyes on the road?"

"Oh, sure. What am I gonna do, hit a dust cloud? Maybe a scorpion or some shit?"

"Collins..."

"Fine, fine, just tryin' to make conversation."

That was Ryan Collins for you. Never knew when to shut up, but a helluva good soldier.

A voice crackled over the radio. "Gold Four, come in. Over."

I picked up the radio. "Roger, this is Gold Four, go ahead."

"Gold Four, this is Gold One, be advised, possible rocket fire coming from Kawari, northwest, about 113 degrees. Eyes on smoke trails, but no confirmed targets, over."

I frowned. Rocket fire? "Gold One, acknowledged. Be prepared for possible enemy contact, but continue mission."

"Solid copy, Gold Four. Over and out."

I leaned back in my chair, feeling sweat drip down my brow. Collins giggled.

"Maybe we'll kill some towelheads today."

It was the last thing he ever said.

• • •

The moment the first Humvee entered the city limits of Kawari, I knew something was wrong. There were four Humvees in our convoy, followed by two cargo trucks. I was in the fourth Humvee, but I knew something was up. Call it what you will, but I had a feeling like we were in real deep shit.

My suspicions were confirmed when, from nowhere, a rocket screamed down the road and slammed into Gold One, exploding through the windshield.

"SHIT!" I yelled. "CONTACT NORTH! MULTIPLE MEN DOWN! GOLD ONE IS DOWN!"

Private Collins swerved around Gold Three as Gold Two, unable to stop in time, rammed into the back of the burning Humvee. Another rocket spiraled down, and I saw from the trail that it had come from a multistory apartment building to the northeast.



The rocket detonated about twenty feet from the burning hulk of Gold One, throwing dust and smoke over the street.

Then the gunfire started, a steady rattle of AKs and M60s. Collins stepped on the gas as I readied my weapon, but suddenly a loud *crack!* drew my attention, and before I knew what was happening, our Humvee was on a collision course with a columned building.

We rammed the building at about thirty miles an hour, and had it not been for my seatbelt, I would've been killed. As my mind cleared and my vision returned to normal, I saw the cause of the accident: Private Collins had taken a sniper's bullet to the throat, killing him instantly, and his weight had shifted itself onto the gas pedal. I pulled the radio as the battle raged around me.

"This is Gold Four! My driver is down! Multiple contacts to the north and RPG in the multistory building to the northwest!"

I didn't wait for a response. Above me, Jimmy Tochak was not firing the mounted machine gun, and when his body fell through the opening in the roof of the Humvee, a bloody hole where his left eye had once been, I knew I was on my own.

I stumbled from the wreck of the Humvee. My nose was broken, and I was sure I had a concussion. But when the ground next to my boot snapped up, I became alert, taking cover behind a pillar on the covered sidewalk, returning fire.

It was a bottleneck. The combatants were firing from the north, and a rocket had managed to disable one of the cargo trucks, effectively blocking any way out of the city. We were trapped. The radio was a constant crackle of updates and screams. I heard the phrase "man down" over and over, but soon the gunfire had become so loud that I couldn't hear anything except a ringing whine.

I fired on the multistory building. I fired down the street. If I saw movement, I fired. Shrapnel had shattered the ACOG scope on my M4A1, and I could barely see as it was.

Something slammed into my heart.

"FUCK! I'M HIT!"

I saw black. The world was spinning. Everything seemed so distant, so muffled. Nobody was coming to save me. I was dead.

I was dead...

• • •

When I finally came to, the battle was mostly over. I found out some of our boys had gotten CAS from Phantoms and Apaches to nearly obliterate Kawari. I found myself strapped to a stretcher, the rhythmic thumping of Blackhawk rotors filling my ears.

I wasn't dead.

But so many others were.

The bullet had gone through my vest, though it had caught on the Kevlar and slowed down minutely. Something else had stopped the bullet. I should have been dead.

The medics said nothing as they loaded me onto the Blackhawk. I didn't say anything either. I was wondering how I was still alive.

Then I remembered.

Pain shot up my side as I reached into my bloody chest pocket, feeling the bullet hole and biting my tongue to keep from crying out.

There.

I withdrew my hand. In my palm were bloody fragments of plastic and shrapnel, once blue. The biggest piece, torn and marred by the bullet, was covered in my blood, but through the crimson I could see it was a head, a head with rainbow-colored hair...

The pony in my pocket. Shattered, bloodied.

The pony in my pocket saved my life.

I thought back to my dream, when I flew with Rainbow Dash, when she exploded in flame, when she dove in front of me, to...

To save my life.

I smiled. On a day of wanton death, I smiled.

Thank you, Julia.

Thank you, Rainbow Dash.

I'd be lost without you.

I closed my eyes and let sleep overtake me, and my sleep was peaceful and dreamless.

Life.

There was so little of it.

No life in the metal walls of the Blackhawk around me. No life outside in the searing hell that was the Afghani desert. No life in the faces of the soldiers, their faces masked by dark sunglasses, Kevlar helmets, and curling lips.

My job was to take lives in order to save lives. But how could I do that in an environment where so little life existed in the first place?

Except there had been life, and I had taken it.

Inside the Blackhawk, buckled in and waiting to drop boots on the ground in Kabul, I could do little else but think. Even then, the shaking and the roar of the rotors jarred my brain. I couldn't think straight. My head was pounding. My hands were shaking. It was as if my body were telling me that I was flying to my doom, like how some animals can sense when they're about to die.

My chest started to ache. I reached up and felt around the chest pocket of my vest, gingerly touching the place where I knew a red scar lay, forever etched into my skin. And, sure enough, I also felt hair and rough plastic. I slowly pulled the plastic thing out.

It was a blue bulb about the size of a ping-pong ball, caked in blood and topped with a shock of fake hair that used to be colored in the rainbow. The bulb's eyes were so chipped and bloodied that they looked less like eyes and more like sockets, fleshless and foreboding, twin holes that plunged eternally into darkness...

Rainbow Dash.

It had been a month since Kawari, and I still kept her shattered head in my pocket. It was all I had left of the little toy my daughter had given me on the day I went to Afghanistan.

That morning, nine months ago, was still fresh in my mind as if I had just kissed my wife and daughter goodbye yesterday.

That, and the Wednesday afternoon, one month ago. When that cheap, plastic toy was the last thing between my heart and my vest to stop the shrapnel of ricocheting Kalashnikov fire.

When my daughter saved my life.

When Dashie exploded across my heart.

• • •

The fallout of Kawari was, as I expected, swift and unforgiving. When I woke up I was no longer in the Blackhawk but in the medical quarters of Bagram Air Force Base. Standing at my bedside was none other than newly-promoted Sergeant Major Lionel Kassel, known by the 13th AEU as Lion Castle. Of course, he wasn't there to give me a get-well card. He told me what I already knew.

Private Tochak and PFC Collins were dead, and their bodies had been recovered. Everyone in Gold One, the first Humvee in our convoy at Kawari, was dead. Two more were killed from Gold Three, and next to me lay four soldiers from Gold Two with wounds that made mine look like paper cuts.

Seven KIA. And whose fault did Kassel say it was?

His own.

I'd jerked so hard from my bed that the IV in my arm nearly tore in half. Lionel Kassel was blaming himself. Not that it wasn't his fault, but... he'd find a way to put the blame on someone else, usually me.

Then he did something else that I'd never see him do before.

He cried. Bawled his eyes out.

He had seen boys blown up in front of him. He'd seen men and women die, and he'd even done it himself.

But he was crying, and to this day, I really don't know why.

• • •

I never would find out.

Bagram got attacked by the hajjis the day after I was discharged from the medic's bunker. My unit had only been stationed at Bagram temporarily, but this would turn out to be the beginning of the end of my time at the base. I'd been watching *Breaking Bad* with a

couple of my guys in the house bunker when I heard the shots. A few quick cracks, nothing to be worried about, but then came a steady stream of mixed machine gun fire, punctuated by the booms and quakes of rocket-propelled grenades.

Our reaction was instantaneous. The base went to red, and the call came out to hit the line. My buddies and I grabbed our rifles and hastily threw on vests and helmets that we had stored in the closet next to the gameroom, and, making sure we had enough 5.56 to go around, we sped out of the living quarters and into the bright sunlight of Bagram.

The fire was coming from the south side, and already soldiers were making a beeline toward the wire posts that marked our defense line. I saw a line of hajjis firing from the hilltops, some with RPGs, some with Kalashnikovs, and some that looked like they had no weapons at all, but were attacking nonetheless. They were way off in the distance, far out of range, and the men I'd been hanging with were not from my unit, nor were they necessarily my friends. I caught sight of a truck with a half-dozen troops in the bed and decided to hitch a ride, running alongside the truck and allowing boys from the 10th Mountain to pull me aboard.

The wind and the sand blasted my uncovered face as I tried to adjust the vest and helmet that I had so clumsily put on. The hajjis were after the planes, no doubt about it. One had taken aim at an A-10 and sent a rocket into its cockpit, nearly blowing the nose off. Then the first bullets began to snap up around the truck as it sped down the tarmac, flanked by other soldiers, some fully geared, some not. A few of the Mountain boys began to return fire, answering the insurgents' AKs bullet for bullet, as the driver, an Afghani trooper, swerved and spun. It was like *Grand Theft Auto*, except I had only had one life that I had come way too close to losing before.

As I thought of this, my hand instinctively went to my chest pocket. I grabbed Rainbow Dash's head and held it in my palm, but then the Afghani driver took a hard right and ran over a rut in the tarmac, and the jolt knocked the plastic pony head out of my hand. For a fraction of a second I thought it was going to fly out of the bed, but then it landed in one of the grooves of the truck bed's floor. Despite the gunfire and the nauseating motions of the truck, only then was I frightened. I couldn't lose her. I couldn't.

I reached down, tripping and falling on my face next to Rainbow Dash's battered head, and then the world inverted.

A rocket blew up next to the truck, sending a shower of sparks and dust into the air, only to be sucked up by the fire. The truck flipped, and everything seemed to happen in slow motion. I saw the 10th Mountain boys tumble head over heels as the truck did a 360 in

midair. I saw the unforgiving ground rushing up to meet me. And I saw Rainbow Dash's head, spinning off to my left. My eyes were drawn to it, and then my full head, twisting my neck to see it.

That was what saved me. The impact of man on tarmac was excruciatingly painful, and I felt as though I'd broken every bone in my body. The vest absorbed some of the impact, but my unprotected arms were rubbed raw as I slid across the tarmac, the skin on my elbows literally melting off of my arms. The worst impact was my head, but it could've been a lot worse. I hit the ground headfirst, but my helmet absorbed much of the hit. Still, it felt like someone had taken a swing at my skull with a sledgehammer, and I was seeing stars and blackness when I finally stopped rolling.

Smoke curled over my broken body. I could still move, which was relieving, and the hajjis had probably seen me move and knew I wasn't dead, so without waiting to reflect on what the *fuck* just happened, I ran.

But not before I saw a little blue sphere on the ground, and not before a voice, my daughter's voice, reminded me of what Rainbow Dash stood for.

She didn't leave me. Why should I leave her?

Cursing to myself, I ignored the bullets penetrating the ground around my toes and swiped up the plastic toy remnant, stuffing it in my pants pocket. My head was pounding, and I could smell the burnt flesh on my arms and elbows. Other than that, I seemed to be fine, but my head wouldn't stop aching.

Then I saw the truck, or what was left of it. The rocket burst had torn it from its axles and tossed it around like a Hot Wheels truck. Now it rested on the bullet-riddled tarmac, smoking and shattered, and its occupants, the Mountain boys, were scattered around it, dead or dying. A few had managed to escape, but those whose legs had been crushed by the truck were being picked off by sniper fire. It was sickening to watch, but in my pounding mind I knew I was lucky not to be one of those men. I was lucky that my neck hadn't snapped when the truck flipped. The back of my helmet and vest must've saved me.

If I hadn't looked at Rainbow Dash as I spun out of control...

"CORPORAL!"

The jarring voice of Lionel Kassel broke me from my trance, and I realized that I was standing in plain sight of the hajjis, and that a severe crosswind had been the only thing

preventing their bullets from tearing into my flesh. Kassel was tending to a wounded GI that hadn't made it to the line, and they were both taking cover behind a huge, damaged supply crate. I ran like hell as the ground exploded, joining Kassel and the wounded soldier.

"Sergeant Kassel!"

"Fucking Christ, Corporal! You were in that truck?!"

"I was, Sergeant!"

"How'd the fuck you get out of there?!"

"With all due respect, Sergeant, now's not the time! We don't want another Kawari!"

At this, his eyes seemed to harden, and for a moment he looked like he was going to break my nose. But then he radioed in to the command post across the way.

"This is Sergeant Kassel, I've got multiple men down in Sector 2-4, repeat, multiple men down in Sector 2-4! Need medical assistance for wounded GIs! Situation is fubar! Repeat, situation is fubar!"

I didn't hear the response, as the pounding in my head was drowning out the noises of gunfire and men crying out. Then, all of a sudden, I was covered in Lion Castle's blood. Sarge had taken a direct hit in the small back of his neck, and the bullet had done a through-and-through. Before I knew what was happening, blood from Kassel's severed carotid artery blinded me, and I fell back, yelling as the blood stung my eyes. As I wiped my eyeballs clean, I saw Kassel fall onto the wounded man, who also looked like he was on his way out. The radio was still blaring, and Kassel was still twitching. A few seconds passed, then he lay still. Blood pooled around the hole in his neck, much like blood had flooded Ryan Collins's neck when a sniper's bullet did him in back at Kawari...

In a matter of moments, both men were dead, my sergeant and the soldier he'd been trying to save. The battle meant nothing anymore. I'd had enough.

I'd had fucking enough.

Suddenly I was in a haze, and I was no longer in control of my body. I had been usurped by a man who had seen so much death that it seemed he himself had become death, and yet he lived still. Noting this paradox, the man who stole my body pulled the M9 out of my pocket and placed the cold barrel on my temple.



I felt a slight nudge, and by now I knew what it was before even looking. Sure enough, Rainbow Dash had rolled out of my pocket, and when I saw her I saw Julia, I saw Loren, I saw my old life, the life that I was about to so selfishly abandon in self-afflicted death...

Unconsciousness saved me, and I slumped onto Lionel Kassel's leg, bathing in his blood.

• • •

After the hajjis had done a few good men in, somebody finally had the brains to realize that Bagram was an air force base, and that maybe to defend themselves, they should use the air force. Less than ten minutes after I blacked out, a couple of pilots and Rangers had managed to get a chopper off the ground, and from then on it was like a wolf hunt in Alaska. The Rangers picked off the insurgents with scoped rifles and machine guns while the pilots guided the Blackhawk above the dunes of southern Bagram. Twenty minutes later, all the hajjis were dead.

I guess somebody found me and got me to safety, because when I woke up I was back in the medical quarters, still covered in Lionel Kassel's blood, though the sergeant's body was nowhere to be seen. The MQ was filled to bursting with wounded Rangers, airmen, SpecFor, and other soldiers that had been stationed at Bagram at the time of the attack.

They told me I was only here for trauma treatment, and that I could go in the morning. Though the moans of dozens of troopers disturbed me, I hoped that my dreams would rid me of my visions of blood, explosions, and death.

I was so wrong. So fucking wrong. Because the night after Bagram got attacked, the nightmares began.

• • •

*A man is standing on the dark street corner, trying to warm himself in the rain. There are no cars in the street. There are no other people out tonight, other than him. The single, wavering light of the streetlamp is all that separates the man from the cold, wet darkness that has surrounded him. The blackness is so complete that even the lights of the city are swallowed up in the miasma of dark. He is alone.*

*A voice. A girl's voice, crying softly, penetrates his ears. The rain still bombs the earth, but the girl's sobbing cuts through the storm. The man recognizes the voice. It belongs to someone close to him, very close.*

*The girl is in pain. Her sobs are intermittent with soft pleas for help. So weak and so emotional are they that the man begins to cry himself, his tears indistinguishable from the raindrops on his face. He walks in the direction of the voice, forfeiting the sanctuary of the streetlamp.*

*Eternity passes in darkness. The man cannot see. There is nothing to feel except for cold rain and biting wind. The girl's crying has become the only sound in the night, drowning out even the consistent pattering of raindrops on the street. Then the man realizes that he no longer feels asphalt beneath his feet. He feels nothing beneath his feet. He is walking on darkness.*

*A light breaks through the black miasma. It is another streetlamp, wavering, flickering, miles away from where the man stands. Fascinated, he begins to run toward the streetlamp, and as he does the crying grows louder and louder. An indistinct shape appears to be lying underneath the streetlamp, and it appears to be the source of the crying. After running for years, the man reaches the edge of the light and views the crying girl.*

*It is no girl. It is a small blue creature, winged and hoofed, with a face like a beaten cantaloupe and hair colored in the rainbow. Across its flank is a lightning bolt, also rainbow-colored. The thing is crying, and it is covered in blood. But she doesn't appear to be injured.*

*Then the man looks down and realizes that he is bleeding from every orifice. His mouth, his nose, his rectum, and every opening in his body are spewing forth shadowy blood that covers the creature as it cries. But the man isn't hurt. He doesn't feel a thing other than confusion. Within moments, every drop of blood in the man's body is gone, and the creature is covered in it. No longer is its hair multicolored, or its skin blue; only its eyes were any different color than crimson. It is still crying. Its eyes are crying as its body drowns in blood. The light begins to fade, but the creature speaks one word, one time, as the world collapses.*

*"Daddy..."*

*Julia.*

*...*

*"GAAH!"*

I was back and apparently I had pissed myself. The remnants of my dream floated around in my brain long enough to frighten me into hysterics. Like a madman, I dug into my fatigue pockets until my fingers closed around a crusty bulb of plastic. Taking Dash out, I foamed and raved, waking some of the other soldiers up, but I didn't care. It was the middle of the night, and security had been doubled after yesterday's attack. But I didn't care.

I'd had enough. Reaching for my pistol, I kicked the door open and went outside into the cool Afghani night.

The stars were shining, but I didn't care. Incensed, I threw the Rainbow Dash head on the ground. Fury, unknown fury, overtook my body.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?!" I roared, taking aim. "WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS FUCKING SAVING ME?! WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"

Of course, the plastic head didn't answer, and I could barely see it in the darkness. But I didn't care. I flicked the safety off.

"YOU WANNA FUCKING DIE?! THEN DIE!"

BLAM.

For half a second, I saw Dash's head on the ground, covered in dried blood, her eyes absorbed by dual orbs of darkness.

BLAM.

Again.

BLAM.

AGAIN.

BLAM.

"WHY WON'T YOU FUCKING LEAVE ME ALONE, YOU..."

When I shot at the ground for the fifth time, I saw her eyes.

Not Rainbow Dash's. Julia's eyes, in Rainbow Dash's bloody plastic head. I saw her chocolate brown eyes staring up at me, wondering why her father was shooting her.

I choked on the foam that had formed in the back of my throat, and before I knew what was happening a sentry had knocked me to the ground. The tarmac was cooler than it had been during the attack, and I barely heard the sentry's words as he roared into his radio and a spotlight bathed my body in white light. The pistol had fallen away, landing about ten feet from my hand, but Dash started to roll towards my outstretched palm. The soldier was going through my pockets, asking me what the fuck I was doing, and I was suddenly afraid that he'd step on Rainbow Dash.

I struggled. I swore. I did everything I could to make sure the plastic toy remnant made its way toward me. When the soldier got done patting me down, I gripped Dash's head with my teeth and shoved it in my mouth, tasting my own dried blood. The soldier shoved me into a truck, undoubtedly heading for the prison, but I didn't care.

When the truck pulled up in front of the prison, I spat Dash out and hastily tucked it into the thigh pocket of my boxers, which were supposed to be contraband.

But I didn't care.

• • •

*The creature is back, and this time it has no eyes. It is crying tears of blood, but it has no eyes with which to cry. The man is not moving. He is like stone, like bronze, frozen in time and space, forever doomed to listen to the eyeless, blood-covered beast sob and utter that single word over and over.*

*"Daddy..."*

• • •

The next morning when I awoke in my cell, the worst thing to ever happen to me happened to me.

I met Derek Frost.

The soldier who entered the prison that morning was a young, extremely fit guy with a black crewcut, a thin five o'clock shadow, and a face that reminded me of a cross between Shia LeBeouf and that guy who plays the medic in *Saving Private Ryan*. He wore a black Houston Astros baseball cap, a short-sleeve T-shirt underneath his combat vest, and

fingerless Gore-Tex gloves. His M4 was slung over his shoulder, and two pistols, a Beretta 9mm and, to my astonishment, a .357 Desert Eagle, sat in holsters on either hip. He had a sort of swagger to his walk, and I immediately knew he was with Special Forces. Only in SpecFor did they allow punks to walk around like that.

He sidled up to the cell in which I sat and knocked on the bars.

"So, how's the accommodations, Wolfie?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Name's Frost. Derek Frost. But you can call me Dex."

"What do you want? I thought Special Forces didn't associate with grunts."

"Whoah, whoah," Frost said, putting up his hands in mock defense. He had a cocky sort of voice, and his heavy Brooklyn accent made him sound like a punk. "Who said that? Was that Pullman? Kerlainowitz? Those jokesters... eh, joke'll be on them when I..."

"I'll repeat the question," I said, standing up, not caring that I was being disrespectful. "Why the hell are you here?"

He made a dismissive noise and rapped the bars of the cell. "You don't like this setup, I imagine. I don't blame ya. Then again, not many guys'll go out in the middle of the night and use the ground as target practice."

"What's your..."

"The ups think you're screwed, man!" he exclaimed, rotating his finger around his temple in a crazy-person sign. "They think you snapped when this place went t'shit!"

"And that's why you're here?" I growled. "To make fun of the crazy guy? To laugh while I get court-martialed, hauled back home, a laughingstock..."

"Okay," Frost said, and I noticed that he had stopped using his patronizing tone. "I'll cut the bullshit, okay? I know about Rainbow Dash."

My eyes widened. The world seemed to shrink. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Word gets around, man. Hey, don't worry. I don't judge you. In fact, I'm with you. Ponies are awesome, am I right?" He balled his fist and put it against the bars of the cell,

as if waiting for me to do the same. I didn't, and after several awkward moments his fist returned to his pocket.

"Geez, man, denying a fellow bronny a brohoof..."

"Denying who a what?!"

"You mean you don't watch *My Little Pony*?"

"I... no!" I yelled, trying to avert my eyes. "I mean... yes, sometimes with my daughter... but I'm not a... whatever you called it..."

"Oh, my mistake, then," Frost replied, and he sounded genuine this time. "Well, I happen to love the show, and I think your daughter has great taste. But I'll cut to the chase. Word got around that you got saved in Kawari by Rainbow Dash. I didn't know whether that was just a bunch of bullshit or what, so I..."

"Came to ask me?"

"For starters, yep."

I sighed. Not many people knew about the pony in my pocket, but it wasn't like I was trying to keep it a secret. "A bullet ricocheted off a building and hit me in the chest. That's where I was keeping her... it. It was the last thing to slow it down before it reached my skin, and so it saved me."

Dex whistled. "Damn, man, talk about guardian angel. Or in this case, guardian pegasus..."

"Okay, enough with this fucking nonsense! Why are you here?"

He looked around and began to whisper. "Okay, look, a bunch of higher guys think you're nuts. Me, I don't think so. Seen plenty o' guys lose their shit once and a while, and believe me, you ain't the first guy to shoot up Bagram in the middle of the night. I heard about what your unit pulled in Mazar-i-Sharif, man. That's what got me here in the first place."

He was referring to about three months back, two months before Kawari, when I had just become Corporal. We had gotten into a heavy firefight in Mazar-i-Sharif. All of us made it out uninjured. The enemy had lost every man.

"That was luck, Frost," I said. "Nothing more."

"Fuck luck, man! I got a guy in my group, Juarez, he's got at least thirty rounds in him, and he don't feel lucky. In my line of work, there's no such thing as luck."

"This fucking toy," I snarled, holding up the Rainbow Dash head, "has saved my ass three times. Is that not luck?"

Frost shook his head. "The Catholics got a word for luck. God. The Muslims got a word for luck. Allah. You've got two words for luck. Rainbow Dash."

He was turning into quite the comedian, something that I didn't think suited a Special Forces soldier well. "You still haven't told me what you want."

"Okay, look. You've got a good unit. Good bunch of guys. Heard about Lion Castle, and I ain't gonna lie, that hit me hard. LC was one of my bros, man, even though he was in AEU and I'm with Viper Platoon. Look, your unit is basically fucked. You lost your top NCO, and in the view of the commanders, the second-tier NCO just went apeshit. You're fucked, man, unless you come with me."

"What?!"

"I gotta spot open, man. Another guy, Benji, caught the plague or something and they had to fly him back to Kazakhstan or something. Thing is, we were about to gear up for Kabul, for a data run, when Bagram gets lighted up. Now I'm down two men. I got one. I need another."

"And you want me?!"

He nodded stupidly as I tried to comprehend the magnitude of what he was asking.

"I'm not even in SpecFor, Frost! What would your commanding officer say?!"

"He'd say fuck yeah. I am the commanding officer."

"You're the CO of Viper Platoon?"

"Yup."

"But still, how?"

"We're fucking Special Forces, bro! They don't call us special for nothing!"

"What if I say no?"

"If you say no, then I get some other grunt to go. Meantime you rot in here until they decide what t'do with ya. Not very pleasant."

His voice dropped. "I'm offering you a chance out, man. Besides, that other guy I mentioned, the one who took Benji's spot? You might wanna meet him."

"Why?"

"Cause his name's Adam Collins, man. He's Ryan Collins's brother."

• • •

And that's how I found myself fully geared and staring out into the Afghani desert from the open Blackhawk bay door. The doors had opened because Kabul was in sight. Across from me, Derek Frost was packing extra ammo into his pockets, and he was wearing the exact same outfit he wore three days ago when he visited me in prison. Two other Special Forces guys, who went by the nicknames Donnyboy and Lancer, remained silent. An Afghani trooper, Hamet, rubbed his hands nervously as he anticipated our arrival.

And then there was Adam Collins.

When I first saw him, I thought Ryan Collins had come back from the dead. He was the spitting image of his brother, minus the Texas accent, because according to Dex, Adam had grown up in Minnesota. But he still had Ryan's mousy face and thin eyes, but these did not diminish his physical fitness. Adam Collins looked like he could wrestle an ox into submission.

Derek tapped the side of his headset, indicating that he wanted to speak to everybody. I got the phones on in time to hear his instructions.

"Alright, we've been over this a million fucking times, so let's go over it again. The target is in the InterContinental Hotel, on the top floor, from what our source tells us. Egyptian by the name of Azid Nakesh has got information compiled on al Qaeda movements and camps across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, pretty much the whole fucking sandbox. It's likely the information is stored on encrypted files and computers, which is why we brought Lancer along."



"You sure it wasn't for my good looks and the fact that you can't aim worth shit?" the one named Lancer said, a young Asian man who grinned widely, showing perfect teeth.

"Not like you need a gun, Lancer," Donnyboy, a heavily-bearded thirty-something man, joked. "One look at your face by one of those goddamn ragheads and they'll drop over like they just saw fuckin' Death himself."

"As I was saying," Frost cut in, "the target is on the top floor. We don't know which room, but we have a plan for that. Mason Station in Kabul is allowing us to cut power to the ICH for Operation Fuck-'Em-Up, and without elevators and with two teams of two on either staircase, only place Nakesh will be able to go will be the roof."

"He could still destroy the computers, right?" I said, fidgeting with the familiar bulb in my pocket.

"He can try," Lancer said. "But he won't get anything by me."

"Don't get too cocky, Lance," Frost said again. "Here's the game plan. Mason Station's loaned us a few snipers for this mission, and we've got a green on don't-ask-do-kill. You all know what that means. If they've got guns and they're pointing them at you, blow their brains out. If they ain't pointing them at you, blow their brains out. This may be the first time in history an actual fucking US military mission will resemble anything like *Call of Duty!*"

"I prefer *Battlefield*, myself."

"Shut up, Lance. Okay, Collins and I will head up the left staircase while Donnyboy and Wolfman take the right. Lancer will stay back with Hamet and a few of Mason Station's guys until we get an all clear. Once we've cleared the top floor, our objective is to secure the data and apprehend Nakesh. HQ prefers him alive, but I doubt they'll cry if we send him back in a plastic bag. We'll be landing outside of Mason Station, about three miles from ICH."

"Why don't we just land on the roof of the building?" Collins asked, speaking for the first time.

"Ever seen *Black Hawk Down*?"

"Yeah."

"That's why."

"What?"

"Collins, I don't got time to explain it to you, so I'm going to respectfully ask you to shut the fuck up."

Nobody said anything else until the chopper pilot radioed that we were five minutes until landing. I braced myself, waiting for what lay ahead.

WHAM!

BOOM!

"WHAT THE FUCK?!"

"WE'RE HIT! WE'RE HIT!"

"NO SHIT!"

"This is Falcon Six, be advised, we've taken a rocket to the tail. We might have to ditch it, guys."

"Can you close the goddamn doors?!" Frost screamed as the helicopter began to whirl out of control. Everybody was strapped in, but the spinning still made me sick.

"Negative, doors are stuck. Target zone is below, repeat, target zone is below. You'll have to jump it, I can't take it any lower."

"Do we have word from Mason Station?!"

"Negative, over."

"GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!"

That wasn't the half of it. I thought everybody had been buckled in.

I was wrong. Adam Collins's seat was empty, and as I looked out the window, through the smoke of the damaged tail rotor, I could see his limp body maybe thirty feet below, unmoving on the roof of the InterContinental Hotel.

"FUCK! COLLINS FELL OUT!"

I didn't hear what Frost said next, because I suddenly had the urge to unbuckle my harness and jump out of the crashing helicopter. No sooner did I have this urge than did a rocket plunge into the side of the chopper, killing Lancer and Hamet and severely wounding Donnyboy. The chopper was going down, and I had no other choice.

I grasped my heart, hoping that Rainbow Dash and Julia would forgive me, and, tightening my grip around my gun, I unbuckled my harness and fell through air, landing with a sick thud onto the roof of the hotel, succumbing to blackness.

• • •

*The creature is back, but the blood is fading. It now only covers certain parts of her body.*

*The rest of it spreads across the man's hands and chest.*

*"Daddy... you promised you'd come back..."*

*"I'm going to come back, Julia. I'm going to come back."*

*The creature begins to sob, refusing to believe the man. Darkness is closing in.*

*"Daddy... I can't protect you now..."*

*"No, you can, Julia. Both of you can. You and Rainbow Dash. I know you can."*

*"But Daddy..."*

*"I'll be back, honey. I promise you."*

*The creature continues to sob. It doesn't believe her father.*

• • •

I woke to the sound of Arab voices. It was evening, from what I could tell, as my eyes were only open a sliver. Collins lay next to me, unconscious and bleeding, but otherwise alright. I opened my eyes a bit further, and my breath caught in my throat.

Standing around me were four heavily armed Afghanis, each equipped with a turban, an AK-47, and enough ammo to last a single man over a year. They thought we were already dead. Something warm and salty ran down my face, and I knew that one of the insurgents had just relieved himself on my body. They chattered away in Arabic, not noticing me as I lay still, not daring to breathe.

One of them reached down onto my chest, and for a second I was terrified. Would he feel my heartbeat, realize I was still alive, and shoot me where I lay? The Arab rummaged around my pockets, probably looking for valuables or ammo. His friends had walked off, heading for the stairs, and from their hand motions I figured they were bringing tools to do something to me and Collins.

Then the Arab felt Dash. He pulled the crusted bulb and turned it over in his hands. My eyes were half-open now, enough to see the toothless face of evil manhandling the broken spirit of loyalty underneath the starlit sky.

Suddenly I was overcome with fury. Who was this motherfucker to kill us both, and to take my only gift from my daughter? Who the fuck did this guy think he was?

The Arab didn't see my right hand inch ever so slightly down the concrete. When he turned to call out his friends, I struck.

The Benchmade 9050 auto combat knife was a favorite amongst the ranks, especially over in SEAL and Navy country, but I found it just as useful. In less than a second, I had plunged the knife into the back of the Arab's knee, and before he could yell out, I was all over him.

I knew the jump had probably broken both of my legs, so I was surprised that I was able to stand up. Adrenaline must have been pushing me on as the three insurgents turned around and pointed their guns. Not taking a chance, I pulled my Beretta from my pocket and opened fire, shooting three times, each a straight shot to the head that painted the walls of the roof exit with their blood. Not wasting a second, I turned the gun on the Arab, not giving a shit about military decorum. As far as I was concerned, these assholes had just killed my entire squad.

My squad...

I knew the enemy was still around. The gunfire had not ceased since I had fallen out of the chopper, so Mason Station was still going strong. I spared a moment to try to pinpoint the wreck of the Blackhawk in the darkness, but there were too many fires in Kabul to determine which one was coming from the downed chopper. Kalashnikov fire forced me back down to Collins, and as my adrenaline wore off and the pain of my shattered legs surfaced, I reached for the private's radio and tried to contact Frost.

"Niner Four, this is Niner Two, do you copy?! Dex, are you there?!"

Static. Then suddenly...

"Wolfe?!"

"Frost! Holy shit!"

"Wolfie! I thought you were dead!"

"So did I," I breathed, relieved to hear the bigheaded SpecFor soldier's voice, but also fearful of the insurgents coming to investigate the roof. "What's happened?"

"Chopper went down half a klick from the ICH. Donnyboy bled out before we could get him out. It's a fuckin' mess down here, Wolfie. Mason Station almost got overrun. Someone leaked our secret source and lopped his head off with a chainsaw before blowing up the entire square. They knew we were comin', Ben."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm two blocks down from the hotel. Coupla Rangers got a defense post set up outside Mason Station, so we're literally holding down the fort. What about you? Are you okay? How's Collins?"

"Bad," I said, examining the unconscious private. "He took a bad fall, and he's not waking up. I think my legs are busted, too. And Derek?"

"Yeah?"

"You heard a couple of Beretta shots a minute ago, right?"

"Yeah. That you?"

"Yeah. You heard them, but so did the enemy."

"Gotcha, Wolfman. I ain't gonna leave you stuck up there, but hey, I got banged up when the Blackhawk went down. Bagram's got two gunships comin' in hot, plus we got word of an RAF transport inbound. But... shit..." I heard him curse in pain over the radio. "I dunno if I can get up there, man. We're pinned down as it is, and I don't wanna lose any more guys. If we get a shot, we'll get up there, but for now, you're on your own."

I stood in shocked silence as the cries of a dozen hajjis filled my ears. Then I saw Rainbow Dash in the dead Arab's hand, now bloodier than ever. I reached down and collapsed under my broken legs. As I moaned in pain, the Dash-head rolled out of the Arab's palm and into my own.

I smiled amidst the pain and held the radio up to my mouth.

"No we're not, Dex. We're not on our own."

My M4 was gone, and Collins's was too far for me to grab with my broken legs. I made do by pulling the pin of one of my grenades and tossing it at the rooftop stair exit. The first one blew the door off, and the second one landed cleanly in the stairwell. I was lucky. I got in about four bombs before I ran out, each a perfect hit in the stairwell. I had bought us some time by collapsing the stairway, but there was another at the far end of the hotel, and I soon realized that I had started a fire in the building.

So Collins and I were either going to burn to death, get shot, or get out alive.

I prayed for the third option. Then Collins woke up.

"Holy shit..."

"Easy, kid," I said, wincing from the pain in my legs.

"What's going on?"

"We're on the roof of the hotel. Everything's gone to hell. Exfil's on its way but we have to hold out here."

"I can't feel my legs..."

"You're lucky then," I moaned, trying to laugh. "Mine feel like someone beat them with a hammer."

"Frost?"

"Still kicking. Made it out of the 'Hawk. He's down with Mason Station."

Smoke curled up from the staircase as Collins and I lay side by side. My breath was shallow. I looked up into the purple sky, and for a moment I thought I was going to lose consciousness.

Then a gaggle of insurgents burst through the far door. I raised my 92FS, and Collins struggled to do the same. They saw us.

Lead flew. Some found flesh. Some found concrete. A bullet shattered my kneecap, but I barely felt it through the pain of my already-broken legs. I know I popped two hajjis, and Collins dropped another. The fires were spreading underneath us, and we lay on our backs, pushed up to the guardrail of the roof, firing as we crawled. Collins lobbed a few grenades, most of which missed their mark, and a cry of pain and spray of blood told me

he'd been shot in the abdomen. The wound hadn't killed his ability to fight, though, as he emptied clip after clip into the swarm of insurgents that spawned from the far staircase.

Eventually the enemy decided to fall back and try and pick us off from afar, and we had to take cover behind an air-conditioning unit as the ground grew hot beneath our boots. Bullets and shrapnel bounced off the AC unit as we tried to catch our breath. My leg was bleeding like crazy, and Collins's face was pale. If we didn't get out of here soon, we'd never make it.

In the midst of that firefight, for whatever reason, maybe because I was dying, I thought about Julia. Her face flashed in my mind's eye, her tear-streaked face. I saw her at JFK Airport, putting something in my hand. I saw myself hugging her...

"Collins."

My voice was low and choked with pain. He looked over as I reloaded my Beretta.

"I don't think we're gonna make it, son."

"Don't talk like that, Corporal. We'll get out of this."

"I want you..."

"No," he said firmly, even though the bullet wound in his chest stunted his breathing. "I... I'm not going to die here... not like..."

I realized he was talking about his brother, and suddenly I knew why he'd been so taciturn around me.

"Adam..." I moaned, trying to make myself heard over the gunfire. "I..."

He looked at me, looked into my bleeding soul.

I made my decision.

"Take this," I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bloodied Rainbow Dash head. Something kicked me when it exited my pocket. I think it was shrapnel. I'd never know.

"It was my daughter's. It saved my life... I..."

Blackness set in. The last thing I saw before passing out was the confused look in Adam Collins's eyes.

• • •

*"You're not coming home, are you?"*

*"I don't think so, honey."*

*"Why not?"*

*"The bad people... they... well..."*

*"But..."*

*"You saved me, honey. Both of you. Did I ever tell you that? Something hit my heart, honey, and she saved me..."*

*"Who did?"*

*"You did."*

*"Daddy, I couldn't have. I'm not with you."*

*"Don't say that, honey. You are with me. You've helped me more than you can imagine. Both of you."*

*"Daddy..."*

• • •

I awake with Derek Frost standing over me. He is grim-faced. There is blood on his chin and ash in his eyebrows. There is a distinct pulsing sound somewhere around me. Thunder rumbles.

The thunder is coming from guns and bombs that randomly go off below. Frost yells something, and a soldier I do not recognize stands over me and puts his hands underneath my back. He is wearing a beret and odd-looking desert camouflage. He must be British. Frost says words to me, but I can't hear him. I can't hear anything except the low thunder and pulses.

I strain to look to my left. Hovering five feet from my face is the open bay door of a Royal Air Force transport helicopter, the ramp of which lays on the very edge of the hotel. I see the faint outline of Adam Collins inside the helicopter, strapped down and apparently unconscious.

It is nighttime. The stars are blotted out by the flames that lick the sky. I feel their heat, feel their rage as they consume everything below me. I hear a low roar, the last breath of a dying creature.



The British soldier picks me up and makes for the chopper. Frost is already aboard, and for once there is no trace of humor in his face. He has taken shrapnel to his arm. The roaring continues, growing steadily. I look up into the burning purple sky and see the Brit's face.

We are mere steps from the ramp, from life.

A bullet bursts through the Brit's left eye, blowing it out in a splurge of blood and muscle. I feel myself falling, then pain as I collapse onto the roof.

I see the shocked and brokenhearted face of Derek Frost for the last time.

The roof gives way to the fire in a heave of destruction, caving into itself and taking me with it. The pain is unimaginable. Flames caress my body as I tumble into hell, finally coming to rest in a pile of fallen sheetrock.

The helicopter is gone. Frost is gone. I can hear nothing except the crackling of flames and the slowing beat of my heart...

Silence. Utter. Complete.

I no longer hear the groaning of damaged support beams, nor do I hear the crackling of the fire. It is burning me, burning my flesh, searing my skin away from my body. It is entombing me.

And yet I feel no pain. I feel nothing.

The flames divide. I see a shadow through the smoke. The shadow approaches me, passing through the fire and debris as if they didn't exist.

I know what it is.

Rainbow Dash appears over me. She has my daughter's eyes. She is crying tears of blood.

I can't move. The fire has become my grave. I am dying here. I am burning.

She is not.

She is crying tears of blood, crying for her father.

Julia...

Rainbow Dash?

She moves closer until she is an inch away from my face. Her bloody tears drip onto my face. I hear her sobs. I hear her crying, but nothing else.

Her hooves phase through the destruction that has trapped my broken body until they are behind my back. Instantly, she is corporeal. I feel her warm embrace. It is not warm like the fires around me, but warm with love, with passion, the better kind of warmth. Her crying escalates. Twin rivers of blood flow from my daughter's eyes. I reach up with my battered arm and run my hand across her flank. She is warm and shaking, like a newborn puppy. Her hide is softer than anything I've ever touched.

I am crying with her, but the fire is evaporating my teardrops.

Her head rests on my bloody chest. We are still locked in embrace, bound in a hug that warms my fading soul.

Seconds left. Fire all around.

I hear her speak.

"I love you, Daddy."

Dash's voice? Julia's voice? Which?

I want to say...

I want...

I...

...

...fire...

...

...pain... oh, God...

...

...dying? Am I dying? Am I...

...Julia...

...

...I'm sorry, Julia... I'm so sorry, honey...

...Daddy will miss... you...

• • •

Whiteness all around. Bright. *Too* bright. Painful.

No pain. No more.

I can't think straight. I can't see where I am, what I'm doing. I try to look around but all I see is an endless void of white, stretching for miles, endlessly, into the horizon.

Where the hell am I?

I get up with surprising ease. Shouldn't I be dead? I'm supposed to be dead! But nowhere is the caved-in hotel. I am naked, yet clothed in a robe of light. My wounds are gone. I can still walk.

And there is no pain. I conclude at first that the pain of my many injuries is so great that my brain can no longer comprehend it, but this is not... *can* not... be the case.

I am waiting for something.

I am?

I should be confused, but something is caressing my brain, telling me to be patient. I want to move, to speak, to do anything, but I can't.

Then she appears, coalescing in the whiteness, a spectral form that is also somehow corporeal. At this point, I'm not even surprised she's here.

Rainbow Dash. Of course she's here. I must be dead.

"No, you're not dead, Ben Wolfe."

She speaks in her own voice, not my daughter's, and without emotion. Though her brow is furrowed and her eyes are hard, she does not look sad.

My voice begins to work again, and I say, "How am I not dead?"

"I can't answer that, Ben."

"But you saved me before!"

"No, I didn't. Rainbow Dash is not real, Ben."

"But... you..."

"I'm surprised," she says, remaining emotionless, though I can detect minute frustration in her voice. "I'm surprised how long you have maintained this fallacy. There is no Rainbow Dash, Ben Wolfe. The ponies of Equestria are fictional. They always have been. They always will be."

I feel like I should be more shocked than I currently am, but continue to speak. "What about Kawari? Bagram? Kabul?"

"Do you believe in God, Ben?"

I look at her incredulously. Her face remains expressionless. "I... well, yeah..."

"Would you say God saved you all those times?"

"No," I answer firmly. "They told me the figurine, *your* figurine, was the last thing that the shrapnel hit before stopping, back at Kawari. At Bagram... I looked at you, and if I

hadn't I'd have been killed in the truck wreck, or I'd have shot myself. Then at Kabul... the helicopter... Adam Collins..."

"You don't honestly believe the loyalest pegasus in Equestria would risk her wings to save your skin not once, but four times?"

"I thought you said ponies were fictional."

"They are," she replies. "Rainbow Dash is a fallacy, Ben. She is a cartoon character whose plastic figurine happened to be with you all those times you were in danger."

"Then why are you here? And what are you?!"

She smiled, but it was not a kind smile. "You will not like my answer. I've never known you to be partial to crypticism."

"Tell me!"

"I am whatever you want me to be, Ben."

I say nothing else. My mind is roiling. She continues.

"Some call me God. Some call me Satan. Some call me an angel, a savior, while others call me a demon, a monster, the devil himself. You call me Rainbow Dash, or Julia Wolfe. You call me Loren Wolfe. You call me Lionel Kassel, Derek Frost, Adam Collins, and everyone you have ever known. I am everyone and everywhere, Ben Wolfe, and I live and die for everything."

She is speaking cryptic bullshit. And she is right; I'm not partial to it.

"What the fuck are you talking about?!"

"I am that which watches the world. I am that which maintains the cycle of life for all things. They who call me death, I appear as life. They who call me life, I come to them as death."

She isn't making sense, and my head is starting to hurt.

"You only see me as Rainbow Dash because you want to see me as Rainbow Dash. I have witnessed your brutal trials, Ben Wolfe. You question your sanity, wonder whether or not the world is as it seems. The world is *not* as it seems. This place, your home, is rife

with all things good and evil, and to provide balance, neither must ever outweigh the other."

"What are you saying?" I ask as she steps closer.

"Kawari. Bagram. Mazar-i-Sharif. Kabul. You were supposed to die."

My heart stops. My breath catches in my throat. Her eyes are cold and penetrating. "What?"

"At Mazar-i-Sharif, when your men dodged every bullet and every bomb, I was the one doing the shooting and bombing. At Kawari, when a ricocheting sniper's bullet pierced your chest, I was that sniper. At Bagram, when the rocket flipped your truck, I was that explosion. And at Kabul, when you were lying on your back, dying, I was the fire that brought you down to my level, to finish you off for good.

"But I couldn't. She was too powerful. She would not let me, even when you gave her to Collins. She would not let me take your life."

"R-Rainbow Dash? But... you said she..."

"No. Not Rainbow Dash. Your daughter."

Ice fills my body, only to be melted by a surging flame in my heart. "Julia?"

"Her love for you, Ben. That's what saved you. Not some plastic pony. Her love for you. I never knew until I saw you give the doll head to Collins, and even then, she was too powerful. You cannot imagine the power a young girl's love for her father wields. The power of love, especially in the face of death, is more powerful than any force in existence. Even death cannot break love. Nothing can break love."

I am crying now. I know what she is saying is true, and she has tears in her eyes as well. "Julia... my little girl..."

"She never knew," Rainbow Dash says, gasping. "She never knew that she'd given you... that she'd made you... invincible..."

Invincible.

"Death does not stop for anything, Ben Wolfe. But... I cannot take you. Her... her love is... is..."

The pegasus breaks down in tears. I am a waterfall of emotion, and I cannot control myself. Before I know what I am doing, my arms are locked around her body, my tears mixing with hers, and we are crying, embraced.

I embrace Death. She welcomes me with open arms.

"I cannot... I will not... take you from your daughter, Ben Wolfe. But... you will give her a good life. A meaningful life. You are her father. You..."

The light is fading. She is fading with it. I hear a low rumble, like thunder. Something pounds in my chest, and my fingers tingle. I am going. Leaving.

"I will."

She blinks. The world shatters and reforms, and suddenly, my life is over.

• • •

"...Contact! South, up two floors in the green apartment building!"

"Reloading!"

"Someone get more rounds for the SAW!"

"Zenith, this is Retriever, come in..."

"Hold him steady! Is the tourniquet in place!"

"Affirmative, sir!"

"Hold the fucking thing steady, Jaydog! Hold the thing steady!"

"I'm tryin', Dex!"

"You Yanks ready t'lift out?"

"Bet your limey ass, man. EVERYONE! PULL OUT! Jaydog, Hazmat, get Wolfie onto the Puma pronto! The limeys'll cover your asses! Now MOVE!"

Hello, darkness, my old friend. The dawn has come to see your end.

I don't know why I am freestyling Simon & Garfunkel. Perhaps I am delirious, or perhaps my brain has been damaged.

But, impossibly, unbelievably, *incredibly*...

I am alive.

My eyes are open just a sliver, and I see the red fingers of dawn in the horizon, ready to tear away the night. Red also zips past me, billows in flowerlike pulses. Flashes of yellow and white blind me, and everything else is black. I can see only colors and hear only voices.

"Zenith, this is Retriever, Oscar is hurt bad, but still kicking. Ready for droprun, over."

A crackle of static. "Copy, Retriever, Thunderbolts are inbound. ETA 10 minutes. Get your boys outta there."

"Solid copy, Zenith. See you back at base."

I feel myself leave the ground and push forward. Shadowy figures are standing over me. I hear a rhythmic *whuping* sound, the sound of helicopter rotors.

I am alive.

"Collins! You need any 5.56?"

"Negative! I've got enough!"

"Bloody fuck, he looks bad!"

"Talk about it later, Churchill, just get him secured!"

"FUCK! The G36 jammed!"

"Take mine! Just keep shooting!"

Because I could not stop for death...

I read that somewhere. It was a poem. Who wrote it? Whitman? Thoreau?

I feel a sharp pain in my arm, and a few seconds later my mind is free and careless. Probably morphine, or something, but hey, I don't care, I feel *good*.



"We're off!"

"About goddamn time!"

"The others?"

"Chinook got 'em all out, Adam. We'll be back at Bagram in a jiffy. In the meantime, just sit back and watch the fucking fireworks..."

I can't hear anything else. The voice echoes in my head. Then blackness usurps my vision, and I am bathing in a darkened void.

Dickinson. It was Emily Dickinson who said that...

• • •

I am awake. Again.

Bright light, brighter than any light I've ever seen, fills my eyes, then fades away as the room around me begins to fall together. Painfully bright.

What is it with bright lights? They hurt me, burn me...

Burning...

I am alive.

I cannot speak. My eyes are the thinnest of slits out of which barely anything can be seen. I can't feel my legs. The only sound I hear is the ominous beeping of an EKG monitor.

So I'm in a hospital. Where? Bagram? Kabul? Maybe even...

"...Wolfe?"

That is the voice of Derek Frost. I know it is.

So I'm still in Afghanistan. And I'm alive.

"Wolfe! Wolfe, holy shit! He's awake! BEN'S AWAKE!"

Hurried footsteps. Gasps of relief and amazement. I see shapes in the darkness approach, only to be shunted back by the shape that I know is Derek Frost.

"GET THE DOC IN HERE! GET SOMEONE FUCKING IN HERE NOW!"

The shape turns to me. "Wolfe... oh, God, Benny... I'm so sorry, I fucked up... I shouldn't have let you come... what they did... I didn't..."

I want to speak, but my voice is shot. My whole body seems to have shut down. My heart beats slowly. My breathing is shallow. And yet...

Blackness. Total.

Hello, good friend. How've you been?

• • •

Then I'm awake again.

Sunlight shines through the window. My sight has returned. I can make out the distinct shapes of the IV rack to my left, coupled with the EKG monitor and a dozen other machines that look old, battered, and rusted. I am in a room of steel. It is very hot.

Back at Bagram.

And there they are, Frost and Collins. They see me awake, and they are overjoyed. Collins looks like shit and Frost looks like vomit. I'll bet both of them look better than I do.

"Toldja he'd be back 'n kickin'," Frost laughs. "How you doing, man?"

"..." Once again, my voice refuses to work. So I raise my hand and give them a sideways thumb.

"It's okay, Corporal," Collins says sheepishly. "The team here's fixed you up pretty well. It's just..."

"Well," Derek grunts. "Uh... your legs... they had to..."

I look and see why I can't feel my legs.

I don't have legs. Both have been amputated.

• • •

It is three days later.

They're telling me that I'm going home tomorrow. So're Derek and Adam.

I have no legs and I'm missing three fingers on my right hand. I'm blind in one eye, and the other has a permanent redness to it. I've got so much metal in me the TSA would rip me apart if I ever tried to fly commercially again. Plus my head hurts and I still can't speak properly. I guess I was screaming so much when the hotel's roof caved in that I burned out my vocal cords.

But I'm finally going home.

I'll get to see Julia.

• • •

The Boeing C-17A is waiting on the tarmac. It is dawn. The sky is bloody with newborn sunlight. Adam Collins has stopped me.

I'm starting to speak again, but the wheelchair is becoming a real pain in the ass, both figuratively and literally.

Adam's saying something. The roar of the Globemaster's engines drowns out his words.

But then he opens his hand.

It's Rainbow Dash's head, still caked in dried blood and fragmented from shrapnel.

He lays it in my palm and says something else. I've gone deaf.

I'm crying inside, but on the outside I've cried so much that there are no more tears for me to shed.

That will soon change.

• • •

Touchdown.

A cheer goes up inside the Boeing. I join in, my voice raspy and low. We slow to a halt on the tarmac at JFK. Frost and Collins, both dressed in casual fatigues, help me into my

wheelchair. Frost looks more professional and well-rounded now that he's clean-shaven and not covered in sand.

The doors open. A crowd is waiting at the far side of the tarmac.

In my mind's eye, I can already see them. But I yearn to feel them.

I am the last one off. Frost and Collins help me down the ramp of the C-17 and wheel me toward the crowd.

A cry of joy.

"DADDY!"

She bolts from the crowd, dressed in her pink sweatshirt and sweatpants. Her hair is longer and her face fuller, but she is still my Julia.

Suddenly, she's on me, and we are locked in embrace, father and daughter, our love pouring forth like a fountain.

Loren emerges with Michelle. She is crying, both at the sight of my broken body and at the sight of my alive body. Michelle barks and goes head over heels, tearing down the tarmac and stopping at the last second so as to not knock me over. Loren joins Julia in hugging me, and I kiss them both, my dried lips wet from my tears.

"Daddy..." Julia chokes, looking down. "You don't have legs."

"No, sweetie." I can barely speak. My heart is bursting. The sun is shining. I don't care anymore that I am half a man.

I am still a man.

Michelle is licking my face, going absolutely nuts at the return of her master. Frost and Collins wheel me out of the way of the other returning soldiers. Julia will not stop hugging me. I don't want her to. Loren is only a few feet behind, trying to collect herself.

As they wheel me toward the crowd, Julia looks up at me. "Did Rainbow Dash protect you, Daddy?"

At this, I cry even harder, so hard that Julia is confused. She thinks she upset me. I shake my head.

"You both did, Julia. You and Rainbow Dash... you both did. You saved Daddy's life, sweetie. You both did."

She is smiling, teary-eyed. The strain is too much. I lie back in my chair and feel the calming fingers of sleep. I know they will not mind if I close my eyes for a moment.

The last thing I see before I shut my eyes is the blue sky, and across it, an iridescent rainbow, unwavering.