

A Child in Red

The Horrors of War

by

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Day 1

SPC Kevin Walsh

The helicopter lifted off, leaving Specialist Walsh and his fellow Archangels on the gravel Landing Zone (LZ). Sergeant Kerr had recommended naming their platoon Archangels, because, “They were the good guys, but totally bad ass.”

Wind from the rotor wash coated Walsh’s rucksack and duffel bag with a thin layer of gray dust. He tipped the rucksack on its side and banged it against the ground hoping to knock some off before throwing it onto his back.

The smell of burnt fuel lingered in the air below the helicopter. It blended with the damp smell of wet stone. Everything was cool and dingy here. The clouds hung low, choking out the sun. The Archangels would have their work cut out for them here at Combat Outpost (COP) Najil.

Sergeant Owens met them at the LZ and walked them up to their barracks. The entire base was built into the side of a hill. It was a series of steps flattened out to support the American construction, linked by a winding road that snaked its way almost a thousand meters up to the Death Star. The Death Star was an observation position designed to allow maximum visibility into the valley, and like so many other things, the previous unit hadn’t taken advantage of it.

“Your barracks are all ready for you guys. The last platoon bailed on us yesterday,” Sergeant Owens explained to them.

“No, battle hand off huh?” Sergeant Kerr asked.

“Apparently not, they took the first bird out they could and weren’t shy about it either,” Owens replied.

They walked up the sandbag path to the level above the LZ and followed Sergeant Owens to a stone path leading to yet another level. “That right there, is the Internet center,” he said, pointing at the small wooden building with sandbags on the roof and a satellite dish pointing into the sky. It was on the same level as a row of wooden barracks.

He guided them up another sandbag stairwell that led to a larger road and a row of barracks hidden behind even more sand filled barriers. Spray painted on the walls of the building were various images of hell.

“I would have preferred a pin-up model riding a missile or something,” Specialist Miller said.

“For real, I just want to dump my bags,” Walsh said, looking at the depiction of the river of blood with the tortured souls scrambling to get out. Devils paddled around in small rowboats, holding peoples’ heads under the water with their oars, while their arms flayed above the surface.

“They did do a really nice job though,” Miller said, staring at two centaurs on the edge of the river firing arrows at various sinners within.

Walsh adjusted his pack pulling his rifle strap away from the already raw part of his neck. “I’m going inside to dump my shit.”

“Cool, I’m right behind you,” Miller said.

Sergeant Kerr was walking into the building beside it. “This one’s mine. You guys are in that one.” Kerr pointed at the adjacent building. “That’s the junior enlisted barracks.” The buildings ran parallel to a cliff side, where a row of benches had been set up and a small pile of cigarette butts was in the center. Walsh opened the door of their

barracks and found a series of makeshift walls. It looked like some Mad Max creation, an amalgamation of junk used to construct something functional.

“You got the second room on the right,” Specialist Agdal yelled. “I better not hear you masturbating in there tonight.”

“Why? You going to be too tempted to join me?” Walsh said passing the first door and maneuvering past the protruding springs of the bed frame that had been laid on its side to create a wall. The room was small, barely large enough for his bed and the table in the corner. He lurched forward and dumped his bags onto the bed. The cheap wooden bed was set onto four metal ammunition cans; flipped upside down they worked well to elevate the bed, allowing more storage capacity underneath.

“*Asalam alaykum*,” a girl’s quiet voice said from behind him.

Walsh spun, banging his foot against the ammo can, knocking the can out from under one of the legs. The other wooden legs slipped from the metal cans and crashed onto the ground. He jumped back to avoid further damage, then looked to the doorway where he had heard the girl’s voice... but she was gone.

“What the fuck, Walsh?” Agdal yelled, down the hall.

“For real, bro. What if I was trying to sleep?” Miller added from his room.

“Fuck you both,” Walsh said, turning around to his leaning bed, the back leg the only one remaining on the overturned ammo can. It listed lazily back and forth.

Climbing underneath, he raised the bunk up with one hand and maneuvered the other three cans back into place with his free hand and foot. Once each can was in place he looked closely at each one to ensure it was settled.

“Qoo qoo qoo barg,” a girl’s voice quietly sang above him.

Nervously he looked out and saw two small feet dangling off the edge of the bed.

“Miller!” Walsh yelled.

“What bro?”

“Come here and get this kid out of my room while I fix my bunk?”

“Fuck, man. A kid?”

The two small feet kicked casually and the girl continued to sing, “Qoo qoo qoo.”

From under the bed, Walsh saw Miller’s feet appear in his doorway, “What fuckin’ kid are you talking about?” Miller asked.

“Ummm, the one sitting on my bed.”

“Bro, your shit is the only thing on your bed.”

“Qoo qoo qoo,” she sang sweetly.

“What does she look like?” Miller asked indignantly.

“Fuck, I don’t know. All I see are her dirty red sandals. Don’t you see her?”

“Other than your dumb ass sliding around on this rodent infested floor, no.”

“Qoo qoo qoo,” she continued to sing.

“You don’t see a little girl on my bed?” he asked, desperate now..

“I don’t get it,” Miller asked.

“You don’t see her?”

“Nope. But if there were a girl there, I would help you bang her. Is that what you are asking me?”

Two small feet kicked innocently above Walsh, while his elbow rested in a hard pile of rat droppings. His hand was dangerously close to a readied mousetrap.

“Well, I appreciate it,” Walsh ceded, sliding out from underneath the bed. *I’m going crazy. It’s the first day, and I’m seeing an imaginary child.*

“Whatever, it’s only the first day. Don’t be losing your mind just yet,” Miller said as he turned around and walked out of the room.

He nervously watched the two dirty feet moving back and forth while she sang the same chorus over and over. A piece of him expected to emerge from underneath the bed and find two severed feet dangling. But when he looked, there she was sitting as

innocently as any child. She wore a long red dress with a simple red scarf wrapped around her head, and she had the brightest green eyes he had ever seen.

“Asalam alaykum,” she said with a big smile.

“Wa alaykum,” he replied, exhausting his knowledge of the local language.

She grinned and began to sing. Behind her was a mountain of bags to unpack, Walsh looked around and leaned around her to grab his personal bag. He pulled out a pad of paper and the box of crayons his niece had bought for him to give to a village classroom when he arrived.

Showing the girl the paper and crayons, he then set them on the small table and motioned her toward them.

“Komak karateem ke lenah karame,” she said, extending her arms out to him.

It only makes sense that the little girl I’m imagining is needy and has me wrapped around her finger already.

Walsh set his hands under her armpits and lifted her off the bed. Setting her down on the ground, she walked over to the table and began to draw. With her distracted and out of the way, he began to unpack.

For an hour she sang quietly to herself while Walsh unpacked.

Smack.

Miller’s hand connected with the wooden frame of the wall outside his door.

Walsh jumped.

“You ready to see what kind of slop the cooks have prepared for us?” Miller asked, taking a step into the room.

“Umm, yeah,” Walsh replied, glancing over in the corner to realize that his companion had abandoned him and left only a small drawing behind.

“I see you have been busy,” Miller said, holding up a drawing of Walsh in his uniform, holding hands with a small girl in red.

“So it seems,” he replied, surprised that the drawing was real.

“Is this the girl you were going to share with me? She’s a little young for my tastes. You know I like my women, you know...women.” Miller laughed setting the drawing down and walking out of the room.

Walsh looked at the drawing and headed out the door.

This is going to end up one of those movies where it turns out I’m the serial killer and I didn’t even know it.

Dinner was turkey disk and gravy, with something that resembled mashed potatoes. Leave it to the army to make mashed potatoes a questionable food item.

Walsh left most of the conversation to Miller, who was happy to talk about his opinions of the valley, its people—who he had yet to meet—and their leadership.

He returned to the room to find three more drawings. Each drawing was of the small girl and himself: one inside the room, another outside the building, and a final one on the LZ with a Blackhawk behind them, strangely, the Blackhawk had a red cross on the side of it.

She didn’t return the rest of the day, and although he expected her to be staring at him when he woke up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, she was nowhere to be seen.

Day 2

SPC Kevin Walsh

The sound of rustling paper roused him from his slumber.

He rolled his head to the side to see her, drawing as innocently as he imagined any other four year old child might do. She was the same age as his niece Karina, and appeared to view the world around her with the same level of curiosity and wonder.

She turned her head and smiled. "*Sahar bakhair,*" she said.

It wasn't an entirely bad way to wake up in the morning, her beautiful green eyes looking at him, ready to see what the day had prepared for them.

"Good morning," he said, rolling over onto his elbow to see what she was drawing.

She had several drawings prepared. She was coloring the ground with a bright red crayon. The image was of a pile of bodies around a gnarled tree, with armed men wearing dark green fatigues, and carrying what looked like AK-47s.

What is this!

There was another drawing of a woman screaming on the side of a road with a tank driving over her.

He put his hand to his mouth in surprise.

Oh my god.

The final image was of a mother holding her child and lying on the ground, with an armed soldier standing over them, a ribbon of blood drained away from the mother's head.

I don't even know how to ask her what this is.

Walsh looked down at the cherubic face smiling up at him. He squeezed her shoulder and sat up in the bed. Quietly, she hummed while staining the stones below her pile of corpses red with her warped crayon.

What are these drawings of? The uniforms are too dark to be American. Maybe Russian. That would have happened long before she was born. Unless she is a ghost left over from that time. Was she killed by the Russians? I wish I spoke whatever their Derka language is, so that I could ask.

"You want breakfast bro?" Miller said, popping his head into the doorway.

Walsh looked over at her, still humming to herself and scribbling away.

"Yeah, let me go take a quick shower," Walsh said.

I don't really need to shower. But I'm not going to change in here with her. Am I nervous about changing in front of a ghost?

He gathered his uniform, hygiene gear, rifle, and walked down to the shower trailer. She sang her "Qoo qoo qoo," song and followed him out of the door.

"I'm not sure how to tell you this, but I need a little privacy in the shower," he tried to explain to her.

She smiled in return and grabbed a piece of his shirt to hold on to.

"What is your name?" he asked. "You don't know what I'm saying."

Pointing to himself, he said, "I'm Kevin."

She pointed to herself. "I'm Kevin."

"No, no, no." He waved and pointed back at himself. "Kevin."

He pointed at her.

She grinned, and giggled.

I think I'm going to have a very different experience at war than other guys.

"Kevin," he said pointing at himself again, and then directing his finger back at her.

"Afsoon," she said.

"Afsoon," he mimicked.

She nodded, pointed at him, and said, "Kevin."

"Afsoon," he said, pointing at her.

"Kevin." She pointed back at him.

"Yes. I'm glad we got that under control. Now, at least I know what to call you,"

Walsh said, walking down around the barriers and opening the door of the shower trailer.

Standing in the doorway was old Sergeant Krandall in all his wrinkled, naked glory.

Afsoon screamed, turned around and ran.

That's probably for the best.

Stepping inside, he tossed his things down on the bench and hung his towel on a hook beside an unoccupied shower.

"How is it going, Sergeant?" Walsh asked, taking off his shirt.

"Same ol' shit. They stuck me on the LZ, told me it was my job to manage,"

Krandall said, bending over to pick up his shampoo from the back corner of his shower, directing his bare bottom at Walsh.

"Is that good or bad?" Walsh asked, shying away and trying to focus on grabbing what he would need from his hygiene bag.

"It's bull shit. I had a combat jump before most motherfuckers on this base were even alive, but whatever. I got one of those John Deere Gators. I'm going to mount a machine gun to the front. And fuck anyone who tells me otherwise."

"I can't wait to see it," Walsh said, turning the water on in his stall.

* * *

There was a lot of talk about the Reaper Platoon having been out on their first patrol. Apparently it hadn't gone very well.

Walsh returned from breakfast with Miller to find Afsoon drawing away. She had a scattered pile on his bed and a desk of various images of the same massacre and the same gnarled tree.

"You are going a little overboard with all your drawings, Walsh," Miller said, glancing briefly at the scattered crayon drawings in the room.

"Yeah, for real," Walsh said, wondering where she was getting all the paper.

Afsoon turned around. "Kevin!" she squealed, taking a few steps toward him. He took a knee and pretended that he was setting his rifle down while he hugged her, just in case someone was watching.

She kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear. "*Mam dost dargeyam hech kolah zalah mah karateem.*"

He squeezed her in reply as he was not sure what she had said and then stood back up. He gathered up the papers.

There were decapitations, mass graves, and lines of bearded men beside women wearing blue burkas, all of whom were kneeling in front of soldiers holding rifles to their heads.

Setting the papers in a neat stack at the corner of his bed, he pulled a movie up on his laptop.

The door to the barracks opened. Around lunchtime, Sergeant Kerr yelled into the room, "Suit up boys and be on the LZ in an hour. We have a patrol."

"About time," Miller said.

Afsoon drew while he put his gear on.

Walsh paused his movie and slid his laptop underneath his pillow.

Miller was out the door in fifteen minutes. The guy who would be late to his own funeral, was going to be forty-five minutes early to this patrol. "Come on, bro," he said from the doorway.

"I thought we had an hour," Walsh said, looking at Afsoon working diligently at his desk.

"Yeah, but you know how it is, fifteen minutes early to fifteen minutes early to fifteen minutes early. We are fucking late already." Miller smiled.

"OK, give me a minute." Walsh grabbed the last of his gear, picked up his rifle, squeezed Afsoon's shoulder and walked out the door.

She waved goodbye to him while he was walking out of the room.

They didn't get back in until dinner was nearly over. Their lieutenant had to complain to the cooks so they would open up the kitchen. After reheated chili and macaroni, which is best prepared by military cooks, they finally made it up to their barracks.

Afsoon was waiting patiently for him with a stack of drawings. He gave her a big hug and opened up his laptop to start his movie again. It played while he dropped his equipment and stretched his shoulders a bit. Seven hours had taken its toll on his young body. Jumping onto the bed, he leaned back against the wall of his room.

Afsoon must have heard the movie starting, because she climbed up onto the bed and nuzzled her head underneath his arm, snuggling up close to him. *I'm glad this one is kid friendly.*

She fell asleep under his arm before the movie was over. He carefully set the laptop on the table and changed into his pajamas while she shifted around on his pillow. *Is it weird that I'm going to sleep with a little dead girl? It isn't like that though. Fuck, man. This is so fucked.*

He scooted her close to the wall and slid in behind her, tossing his arm over her small body.

She grabbed his hand in hers and pulled it to her chest. She felt warm against him.

Day 3

SPC Kevin Walsh

The sound of Afsoon singing woke him up before the lights turned on. Fumbling around, he found his flashlight under a pile of papers on the desk where she was busy drawing. Clicking the rubber button, it illuminated the corner. He flashed it over toward her. She smiled back at him. The incandescent light illuminated her green eyes and cast a crisp shadow behind her. Her head was outlined in red from the scarf she kept wrapped around her head.

Looking down at the images, he was pleasantly surprised to find they were of the two of them, holding hands and walking around the base together. Several had the black dogs sitting beside them, one on either side, their own private guards. Smiling to himself, he turned off the flashlight and rolled back over in bed.

Before he fell asleep completely, he felt her climbing into bed. She had been unable to on her own, but he had set a box under the bed that she could use as a step stool.

She slid under the covers and slid up against him.

“Mam dost dargeyam kevin. Mam hech kolah egazah na dai geyam ke zalah orah teem,” she whispered in his ear.

* * *

When he awoke the second time, he was alone. He rubbed his eyes and stretched out with his feet dangling over the edge of the bed. Looking at the drawings that Afsoon had left him, and then thinking about getting something to eat for breakfast, he peeked under the bed to see if he was really alone, then changed and headed out.

They had another patrol at fourteen-hundred. This one was going to be quick. They were going to be working to establish more of a presence in the valley whether the locals liked it or not. Stepping outside the gate, the cool breeze was welcome. It wasn't until they got to the edge of the bazaar that they started to see locals. Men were busy shopping, while the women moved quietly behind them, carrying the items that had purchased.

The shops were rail cars, stacked on top of one another, the open ends facing the single lane dirt road.

Walsh watched carefully from his position near the front of the patrol, keeping his eyes up, watching the second story of the bazaar which was built into the mountainside.

"I think you have a girlfriend, Walsh," Agdal yelled from behind him.

Walsh turned around to see Afsoon, walking ten meters behind him.

What is she doing here? Agdal can see her.

"Where did she come from?" Walsh asked.

"Probably an Afghan man fucking an Afghan woman," Agdal said.

"Thanks," Walsh rolled his eyes, looking stunned at the child following him. "You know what I mean. How long has she been following me?"

"Not sure. I turned around to check on the guys behind me, and when I turned back she was there. She has been keeping her eyes glued to you buddy."

"Yeah, well you know the ladies love me," Walsh said, staring at Afsoon.

Is she real? What's going on?

She didn't smile at him, only watched him, her green eyes following him the entire patrol.

They turned around at the end of the bazaar. Walsh was careful not to draw too much attention to his concern for Afsoon.

Why can Agdal see her now?

She followed them through the field, moving beside him once they were away from the bazaar. When they reached the barracks, Kerr held the gate door open for them, counting each soldier as they passed through.

"You're letting her in?" Walsh asked the Sergeant.

"Who, Miller? She is a little annoying but I don't have much of a choice," Kerr said.

"Ha, ha, Sergeant, I heard that," Miller said, clearing his weapon inside the gate.

Afsoon ran up the hill, her small feet expertly navigating the rocky incline.

"He means his girlfriend," Agdal said, stepping through the gate.

Good, he can still see her.

"You mean that little girl that was in the bazaar?" Kerr asked.

"Yeah, she dropped off once we got out of there, and haven't seen her since.

Looks like the fantasy of making beautiful, little, brown babies lives on for Walsh," Agdal said.

So, they can't see her anymore. This isn't getting any easier on me.

"You are fucking brown, Agdal," Miller said, slapping his magazine back into his rifle.

"I'm *good* brown though. These people give brown a bad name," Agdal explained, lifting up the top of his machine gun, letting the belt fall out and slap against the side of the plastic drum.

"I swear I saw your dad out there. Looked just like you," Miller said.

"Fuck you," Agdal replied, slapping the cover of his weapon back down.

“Don’t be mad. A beard and some local garb and no one would know the difference,” Miller continued.

“This is bullshit. You are a racist,” Agdal said.

“Ha, ha. Weren’t you the one just calling them dirty brown?”

Everyone laughed and started walking up the hill back to the barracks.

Walsh found his room unoccupied. Afsoon’s crayons and drawings were stacked neatly in the corner of the desk.

“Let’s get some chow, man. I heard it’s taco night,” Miller said.

“I’m sure Agdal will love that,” Walsh said.

“That’s right,” Miller said. “Hey Agdal, they’re playing the song of your people.”

“I don’t hear anything. What song are you talking about?” Agdal replied from his room.

“Tacos, mother fucker,” Miller said with a big smirk on his face.

“Fuck you, Miller.”

“I love you too buddy,” Miller replied. “Let’s go,” he said to Walsh.

Dropping the last of his equipment, Walsh grabbed his rifle and followed Miller out the door.

After dinner, Walsh returned to his room.

Waiting for him was Afsoon, a big beautiful smile stretched across her face.

“Hey,” Walsh said, setting his rifle down against the back wall.

“*Wa alaykum?*” she replied, turning back to her drawings.

Walsh leaned over her shoulder to see what she was working on now.

Her small hand held a piece of white paper with an image of various soldiers wearing gray uniforms, hanging from the twisted tree in the center of the graveyard.

These soldiers looked like Americans.

He snatched it out from underneath her crayon, leaving a brown streak down the bottom of the picture.

What is this?

Afsoon's head shot up and she glared at him.

Underneath that drawing was another of her standing beside a figure that looked like him, while he was shooting a line of other soldiers.

Oh, no! I can't. She can't.

Afsoon tried to stop him, but he grabbed the picture. It was one of many in a pile of drawings, all of them grizzly depictions of soldiers dying. The final image was of him standing behind her, holding a head in each hand with a black dog on either side.

I have to get rid of these.

She began to scream, the kind of high-pitched scream that every little girl has tucked away for when they don't get what they want. Walsh was envious of his fellow soldiers who were unable to hear her.

He grabbed every drawing she had made and piled them up. He slung his rifle over his back and walked out of the room, leaving the screaming child where she stood, still holding the brown crayon. Outside, he could still hear her screaming but it was muffled. On the other side of the barrier, just down the road was a fifty-gallon drum that they had been using to burn envelopes with families' addresses and other sensitive documents.

Grabbing a lighter out of his pocket—he didn't smoke but found that it often came in handy—he lit the corner of the small stack, waited until the flame took hold, then tossed it into the barrel.

Why is this happening? Does she want me to kill them? Is she predicting that I will kill them? I never would.

He stared into the fire, watching the paper curl and turn black.

“Atam menah rasmem hayech, badah toh bayet bakhshesh dawayee,” Afsoon’s voice yelled from behind him.

Walsh turned to see her standing in the middle of the road, a black dog on either side of her.

“I don’t care what you say. That isn’t right,” he said, pointing behind him at the barrel with her burning drawings.

She glared at him, then turned and walked up the road and around the barrier.

Walsh turned back to watch the fire burn itself out, then returned to his room. It was empty. The crayons were put away and in the box was tucked neatly on top of a clean stack of white paper in the corner of his room.

The other soldiers milled about in their rooms until the lights went out. One by one they all fell asleep. Walsh stayed up, expecting Afsoon to make a reappearance but she never did. Eventually he crawled into bed himself.

Just as he was beginning to fall asleep he heard someone enter his room. He knew the sound of Afsoon’s small sandals shuffling across the floor. He rolled over to see her small head peering at him at the edge of the bed. He could barely make out her outline in the room. The small lights from the various electronics throughout the barracks cast a soft glow across everything, just enough to see her shape, but little more.

Her silhouette loomed at the edge of the bed.

“You are welcome to join me if you want,” he offered.

She stood there.

“Suit yourself,” he said, looking back up at the ceiling, trying to ignore her and fall asleep.

Every time he got close to falling asleep she shifted and he’d be reawakened.

I’m not going to be beaten by a little girl. Even if she is a ghost, or whatever.

He stared at the ceiling ignoring her until the sun came up, and Miller was in his doorway asking about breakfast.

“You look like shit bro, did you sleep?”

“Nope, I don’t know what happened,” Walsh said, staring at the empty space where Afsoon had stood the entire night.

Day 4

SPC Kevin Walsh

After breakfast Walsh returned to his barracks. He was getting frustrated, mostly with Afsoon, but also with the state of things on the COP. He hadn't done anything but eat, shower and be tormented by Afsoon since he had arrived. Some of the other guys were content, but he was growing restless. It may have also been the lack of sleep.

"Qoo qoo qoo," Afsoon's song was loud enough to hear outside of the barracks. She was singing, loudly and off-key.

Miller was droning on about how horny he was and what kind of burger he was going to order when he got home.

I wish I wasn't the only one who could hear her. Not just because it makes me feel crazy, but then I wouldn't have to suffer alone.

He found her standing at his desk drawing a photo of a Humvee rolling down the hill and crushing someone. Her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth while she concentrated on coloring the rocks red around the flattened soldier.

I'm not putting up with another day of this. I may not be able to stop her, but I'm not going to make it easier on her.

Afsoon started screaming the moment he reached over her, sprawling herself across her beloved drawings.

I don't care. This game is over.

He picked her up and set her at the edge of the bed. She squirmed in his arms and tried to get to the table before he cleared it, but she was too slow.

Her shrill scream followed him out the door.

She wasn't out of earshot until he was beyond the barrier. Lighting the papers and tossing the crayons on top, he didn't leave until the papers were black and the crayons were a pool of drying wax slowly dripping down into the barrel.

He didn't see her the rest of the day. His room felt eerily quiet, and he missed having her company while he watched movies until the lights went out, even if her company was a bit more morbid than he preferred.

Another twenty minutes passed before he finally decided to give in and try to sleep.

Walsh slid under his covers and turned his back to his door. That was when he heard her small sandals dragging across his wooden floor. She kicked them off at the box he had set up as a step for her, and she climbed into bed.

I hope she is here to apologize.

Adjusting herself beside him she set her small hand on his shoulder and leaned into his ear. *"Toh menah dorogh maikah,"* she whispered.

"Mam hech wakhtah egaza nadegeyam kee zalah orah teem."

"Mam gazah daigeyam karah sey waree."

Walsh rolled over and looked her in the face. The dim light highlighted her round features and big eyes.

Maybe if I ignore her.

She wouldn't let him. Every direction he rolled, she followed, always whispering into his ear, never letting him relax enough to fall asleep.

The night dragged on for what seemed like an eternity.

Day 5

SPC Kevin Walsh

“Didn’t you sleep again?” Miller asked, standing in his doorway.

Walsh ground his teeth, staring at the small girl seated on his chest peering down at him. “Nope.”

“You are starting to worry me bro. Change quick and you can tell me about it on the way down to breakfast. I’m starving,” Miller said.

Sure, no problem. So, this little girl with the most beautiful green eyes you have ever seen; this bitch won’t let me sleep because I burned her drawings of me murdering all of you and playing with your corpses. Yeah, he’ll believe me; may even be able to help.

The look on Afsoon’s face told him otherwise. Her green eyes continued to bore into him.

Rolling to one side he dumped her against the wall with more malice than a child of her size deserved, and then climbed out of bed. Pretending as if she wasn’t there, he changed, grabbed his rifle and left the room.

Aside from high school, when he would stay up late playing video games he had never lost so much sleep. His steps felt unsteady. He felt drunk. Miller worked hard to

get something out of him to explain his lack of sleep, but he wasn't going to tell him that a ghost girl was tormenting him.

"It's just this place, man. Must be getting to me," Walsh said, while they walked back from breakfast.

Miller looked at him with skeptical eyes. "If there is something more, you know I'll listen, and I'll only call you a pussy if you deserve it."

Walsh laughed. "Thanks. What would I do without you?"

"Probably find some other dude to pour your homosexual infatuations all over, but I don't blame you for wanting this sweet ass. It doesn't get better than this. But you won't get it. I'm saving it for the right guy," Miller joked, slapping himself on the ass.

"I'm just letting you know, if I were to go gay, it wouldn't be for you. I've seen you in the shower. Not impressive."

"You did strike me as a Size Queen," Miller said.

Walsh laughed, the first time he had in several days. He opened the barracks door and let Miller pass up the stairs in front of him.

"You should do something about those drawings bro. That shit is getting out of hand," Miller said casually, walking by Walsh's room.

How did she...?

"What can I tell you? Kids love me," he tried to cover up his surprise.

His room was empty, but there were scattered drawings on his bed and table. Each one was him, hanging from different locations: the edge of the Death Star, the gnarled tree, or the center of the barracks. In others, he was lying in a pool of his own blood with a rifle in his mouth. In some of them he had slit his own throat. And still another depicted his insides were being torn out by black dogs.

No.

Into the burn barrel.

As calmly as he could, he gathered the pictures, rolled them up and carried them out the door. His hands were shaking, partly from sleep deprivation, and partly because he really didn't know what to do. This was spinning out of control fast.

He found himself nearly fell asleep as he stood over the fire. He was that tired.

Before he really knew what was happening, his body began to list back and forth; then he tumbled toward the flaming barrel.

"Aiyeee!" Afsoon's screaming voice ripped him back to reality, if that's what it was called.

He caught himself and managed to stumble past the barrel rather than into it. With his balance regained, he looked back at the girl standing in the center of the road with her fists balled at her sides and her mouth open. Her scream ripped through the air out of her tiny lungs.

Trying to ignore her, he stared back at the pile of burning papers.

Her scream didn't diminish. It changed in pitch and timbre but she didn't stop. Her little ghost lungs were more than capable of dragging the terrible sound out longer than humanly possible.

The fire burned itself out before she stopped. Her green eyes tightened into slits, glaring at him.

Walsh glared back at her.

I don't care. I'm going to try to lie down.

He brushed past her. She didn't move right away, but after he was about ten meters past her, her small feet shifted in the gravel and started to follow him.

"You can follow me, but I'm telling you right now, I'm going to burn everything you draw," Walsh said, turning around and looking at her.

She stopped. *"Mam tie nah dee nafrat daram."*

“Now that we have that settled,” Walsh said, turning back around and continuing to head toward the barracks.

He tried to lie down for a nap but Afsoon wouldn't allow him any rest. He ended up staring at the ceiling until dinner time, while she screamed at him from the bedside every time he closed his eyes.

At one point, she tried to climb into the bed, but he pushed her back before she could climb up.

She followed him to dinner, standing on his bench seat while he ate, screaming in his ear while he tried to talk to Miller, eventually giving up and standing on the table between the two of them. She crouched low and stared at him in the face, ensuring he couldn't avoid her gaze. She quietly watched him while he ate his meal and tried to listen to Miller's complaints about his girlfriend back home.

After lights out, she stood at the foot of his bed. Her screams filled the barracks all night, mingling with Sergeant Krandall's snores.

I don't think I can do this much longer.

When his brain began to drown out the screams, she tugged at him, her small hands gathering bits of his blanket and trying to pull it off him.

I can kill her.

No one knows she is even here.

She is a child.

“Aiyeee!”

Day 6

SPC Kevin Walsh

It was the third night in a row without sleep. Delirium was beginning to set in. His vision was blurry and every step uncertain. Miller brought him breakfast. “Just stay in bed, man. You fucking need it.”

Afsoon pushed the tray aside and began to draw. She had found a handful of crayons somewhere and was drawing an image of a soldier’s headless corpse beside a dog beside a dog on its hind legs with a human head. He snatched the image up before she could finish coloring in the sun. Crumpling it in his hand, he pulled his lighter out of his pants pocket and walked outside, barefoot, wearing nothing but his boxers. He lit the corners of the drawing, tossed it into the barrel and stomped back into the barracks. Grabbing a handful of French toast, he plopped back down on the bed and stared at Afsoon.

She was already working on a new image of him with a rifle under his chin and a fountain of blood shooting out the top of his head.

He repeated his former action, grabbed the paper and walked out of the room.

When he returned from the burn barrel, Miller was standing there with Agdal behind him.

“We are taking you to go see Doc,” he said.

“You’re taking me?” Walsh replied, watching Afsoon drawing yet another picture in his room.

“You can either get dressed or we are taking you as you are, but you don’t have a choice. This is for your own good,” Miller said.

“I’ll get dressed,” he replied, walking into his room.

On his way out the room, he reached for his rifle, only to find it gone.

“Do you know where my rifle is?” Walsh asked nervously.

“I had Agdal grab it while you were out,” Miller replied, gravely serious.

They think I’m suicidal.

“It’s like that?”

“I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t care.”

Walsh grunted in reply. Looking back into the room, Afsoon waved to him, a smile on her face.

I bet you are enjoying this, you little bitch.

The three of them walked down to the Aid Station set into the corner of the LZ, where they could easily load and unload casualties if they needed to be evacuated by air.

The aid station felt like a cave. The ceiling was angled off the cliff. The back wall was dirt with shelves built into it. Lights dangled from the reinforced ceiling that was covered with sandbags.

Doc Tucker was there with Doc Knightley and Doc Lopez.

“Is there any reason you can think of why you can’t sleep?” Tucker asked.

“Just stress. First deployment, you know,” Walsh replied.

“That doesn’t explain three days without sleep. I’m going to give you some sleep aids,” Tucker said. “Would you like to crash on one of our cots for a while, get you away from your platoon for a bit?”

Walsh looked over at the cot. Afsoon was sitting on it, her small feet dangling off the edge. "I'll be fine. I appreciate it, Doc."

I'm going to have to kill her.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to call. Anytime. You can wake us up too," Tucker said, handing him the small bag with instructions hand written on the outside and little pills inside.

Afsoon jumped off the cot and followed them out the door.

He spent the entire walk back up to the barracks thinking about wrapping his hands around her neck.

If she is a ghost, do I have to dispose of her body?

Will it dissolve?

Do I need a weapon?

"You are going to take a pill and get some sleep. If you need anything, we'll get it for you," Miller directed.

"I know you mean well, but I do hate being told what to do," Walsh said.

"I don't like it either," Miller said, walking him to his room.

Afsoon ran into the room before him and climbed onto his bed. Piled up on his desk were more gruesome drawings.

Maybe I do need some sleep.

He popped a pill in his mouth and washed it down. Stripping down to his boxers, he piled his uniform haphazardly in the corner.

Afsoon watched him curiously from her seat on his bed, until he picked her up and set her down in front of the desk.

Draw your twisted fucking drawings. I don't care.

Climbing into bed, he rested his head on the pillow, and closed his eyes.

A small hand grabbed his blanket and ripped it off of him.

He grabbed it and yanked it back. He rolled it tightly around his body. He turned his back to her.

She climbed onto the bed and put her mouth to his ear.

"I'm going to kill you if you scream in my fucking ear," Walsh mumbled into his pillow.

"Aiyeee!"

He rolled back over to see her, eyes wide open, screaming at the top of her lungs. His hands reached out and wrapped around her throat. The first hand was more than enough to make her squeak and silence her scream. His second hand wrapped around her neck. He adjusted his hands until his thumbs were pressed into her small throat. Her neck was barely bigger than the width of his own thumb.

Her eyes opened wider and her small hands grabbed at his wrists.

Die, I don't care. Fucking die!

She shook and clawed desperately for release.

Fucking die!

He pressed with all his might until her windpipe popped, and his thumbs dug deeper into her collapsed airway.

Her beautiful green eyes rolled up, fluttering, just at the top of her eye socket, and then dropping down. The tops of her pupils rested just above her bottom eyelid. He no longer felt the pressure of her small hands against his wrists. They flopped lazily to her sides and her head lolled backward. The screams stopped and her mouth hung open.

Pushing her back, Afsoon's small body toppled off the edge of the bed and smacked onto the floor.

Walsh looked off the edge of the bed. Her crumpled form was contorted awkwardly onto itself, her head tucked under her body, her legs protruding in different directions, one arm jutting out toward the wall away from him.

Maybe I can get some sleep now.

He rolled back over. The room was quiet. For the first time in three days, it was quiet. A cloud rolled over his mind and dragged him to sleep.

Day 7

SPC Kevin Walsh

The sound of shuffling paper woke him up to a dark room. He could make out Afsoon's small shape standing at the edge of the bed.

No please.

Walsh fumbled on his desk for his flashlight. Finding it, he clicked it on. The light bounced around his room, illuminating every corner.

Every inch of his walls and across his ceiling was covered in Afsoon's drawings of the two of them, playing. Some had the dogs; in others they were just running. The sun shone brightly in every image.

How can this be?

He moved his flashlight beam back toward her.

I can't take this.

She was holding his rifle out to him, a smile stretched across her angelic face.

"Badah tie nah nobat hastah."

"No," he said, waving it aside.

She looked down at it, then pointed it at the room next to his, aiming it at where Miller slept, her finger moving toward the trigger.

"Toh bayat tasmeem gorie."

Lunging forward, Walsh grabbed at the rifle, hoping to point it upward.

She stared at him, the rifle locked in her arms. It didn't budge. She didn't budge, her small feet remaining firmly planted. He used every ounce of strength he had but he couldn't move the rifle from the direction of Miller's head.

"Please no," he quietly pleaded, releasing the rifle and dropping to his knees in front of her.

She pointed it at him.

"I can't do this." His voice cracked and tears began to roll down his cheeks.

"Toh bayat kosh karee."

She pointed it back at the quarter inch thick wall the other side of which contained Miller's sleeping body.

"Why?"

Slowly she drew the charging handle back.

"Bayat ke wanekeh leh."

She can't be. I can't.

She released it. A round slid forward into the chamber. The sound was deafening in the quiet room.

The rifle was now loaded.

"Toh badahya tasmeem gorie chaikie."

"What was that?" Miller asked, his voice a groggy, half mumble.

She pointed it back at Walsh.

"Khodie neg gah wanee."

He licked his lips and took the rifle barrel in his shaking hands.

“Hey, Walsh, you up?” Miller asked.

Walsh placed the cool muzzle underneath his chin, the butt of the weapon on the ground. He looked down and heard the clunk of the rifle safety switching to fire.

“Walsh!” Miller screamed, from the other room.

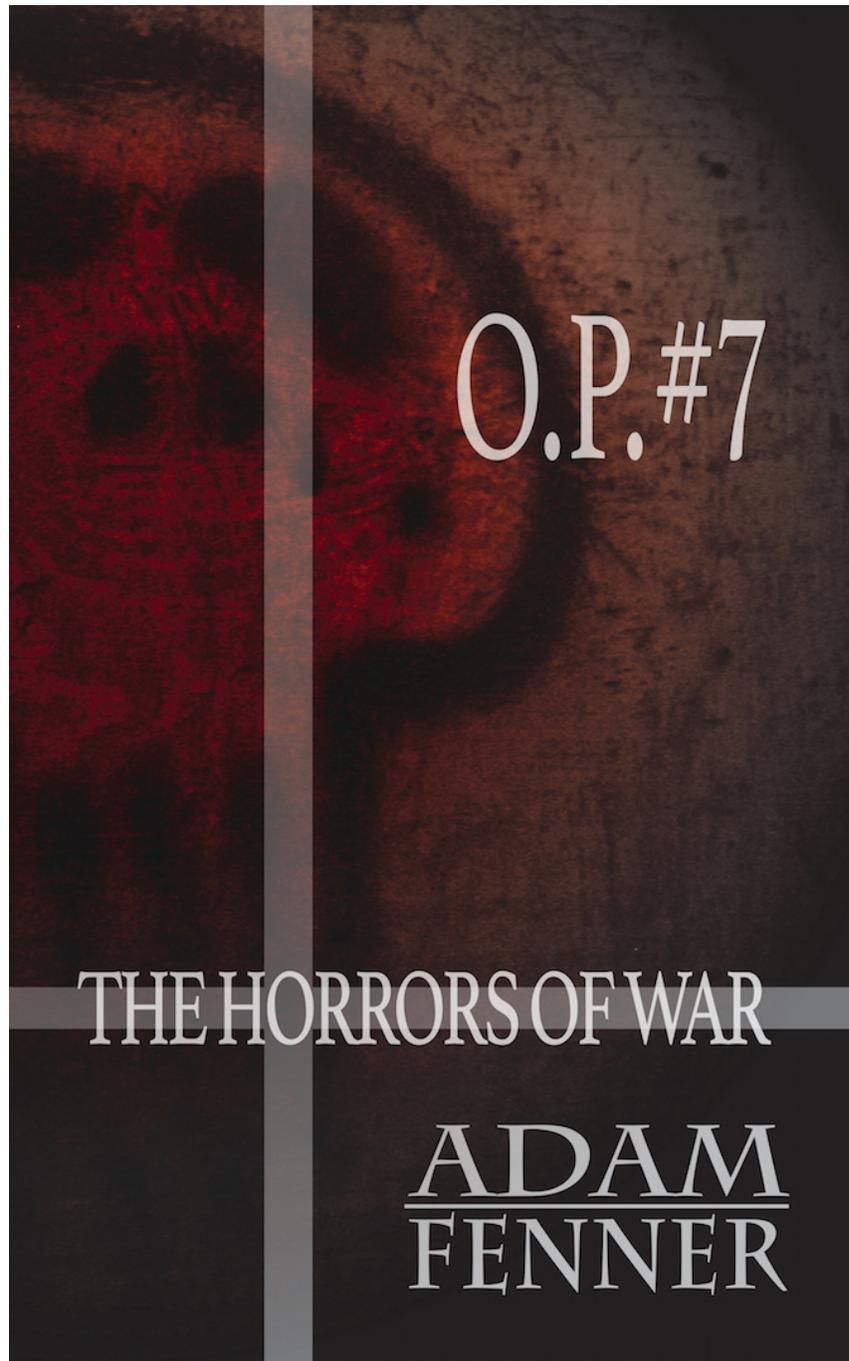
“Khodie neg gah wanee Kevin.”

Afsoon’s small fingers pressed down on the trigger.

He heard a pop.

O.P. #7

Coming in Winter of 2014



For updates on the upcoming novel from the Horrors of War series, follow Adam Fenner on Facebook, by clicking [here](#).

About the Author

Award winning author Adam Fenner has served in both the US Marine Corps and the Nevada National Guard. Adam is the author of "On Two Fronts" the Silver Medal winner of the Independent Book Publisher Associations Bill Fisher Award (Nonfiction) and the "Deployment Wisdom" series. He is a student pursuing his Bachelors degree in Accounting at UNLV, and is currently working on a dark fantasy series.

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