

## The Risk

Humans are brave. They endure pain we couldn't even imagine, all while smiling and telling us that everything is alright. The only time we see through this mask is when they come home and sit down next to us, holding our faces in their hands and announcing their love. They are happy then.

My human and I had a strong relationship. I would sniff around in front of him, searching for landmines or other dangers. But he had the hard job. Andrew had to follow me as I cleared the path, shooting at the people who wanted to destroy our home. We trained together, talked together, and fought together. We went through battle after battle, war after war, and came out shining on the other side. We were invincible. Apparently, what I had taken as fact was just hope.

Two years after I met him, Andrew died to protect a friend. We were ambushed in Iraq when an enemy aimed his weapon at one of our squad members. Andrew jumped in front of him and took the bullet to the chest. His valiant death didn't make up for the pain I felt as I watched his grave get lowered into the earth. I didn't move a muscle for the entire process. Finally, I understood why humans took the pain. There was no other choice.

In the 8 years since I was first sent out into the field, I had 5 partners. Some lasted longer than others, but each one inevitably left me. I fell into a cycle of sadness, then recovery, then more sadness until my emotions blended into a depressing hole the same color as the world around me: gray. I gave up on the fight. When I attacked one of my partners, the military had me sent to the pound to be euthanized. I had never imagined myself being as temporary as the rest of the world. But it was too late for me. I accepted my death and hoped that the pain would end when I did. But I never got the chance.

A young woman entered the pound a few weeks after I had been sent there. She pointed at me, on the floor of my cage, looking more dead than alive, and yelled at the people who ran the place. She then wrestled me out of my cage and took me to her house. To most people, that would have seemed like a blessing, but I just felt empty. After all, it didn't matter where I was or who I was with. Everything in the world was going to leave inevitably. Soon, in my case. Nevertheless, the woman clipped a brand new leash to a brand new collar that lay on my lifeless fur. I watched as she set up a bed, food and water bowls, and a new home that was just for us. Still, I felt nothing.

I have spent a year with her. She took me by the paw and helped me along, helping me remember that there was still good in the world. The emotions that had been buried under years of depression dominated my life once again. I felt loyalty, love, and happiness. One day, she told me that the spark had returned to my eyes.

I contemplated what she said to me. It was true. My spirit, which had been torn and smashed until it was useless, had been reborn. Our time together would not be permanent, but I would take the risk and love her anyway. I hadn't felt feelings that strong since Andrew.

As I sit here now, I understand why he sacrificed himself. He was brave, braver than I could ever be. He loved those friends as I love my home, and protected them just as I would protect my new life. I used to believe that with that love came weakness in the form of risking his own life. Now, I understand that it was not weakness, but courage.

Soon, I will leave my home just as others have left me. My soul will exit the mortal plane, and my body will become a husk of what it once was. The woman will come home,

unsuspecting, until she sees that I am not sitting next to the door, waiting for her. She will cry, break down, and lay beside me. It will hurt more than anything else she has ever experienced, but she is strong. I think Andrew felt the same way about me.