

Broken Hallelujahs

Written by Ærogirl

Spoilers: "Smoked," "We The People," and late season-7 eps, especially "In Country" and "Enemy Below"

Summary: A conclusion to the seventh-season finale, "Enemy Below." The JAG crew rallies around their injured comrade and struggles to deal with the aftermath of the failed terrorist attack.

Author's Notes: Well, this year's cliffhanger wasn't nearly as cut-and-dried as last year's, now was it? I realize that there are a lot of very different viewpoints about the last five minutes of "Enemy Below," and I know that I won't be able to please everyone with my take on it. But I've never been one to leave well enough alone, especially since we've been left hanging for four months with no word on what will happen to poor Bud. If you'd rather choose to believe that the whole thing was a dream/vision/whatever, you may want to skip this story, 'cause I'm not going that way. Also, the timeline for the end of the episode was a little vague, but for the purposes of this story, Bud and P.O. Coates went ashore soon after the missile incident, so Mac and Harm are still aboard the Seahawk. Hope that clears things up.

Incidentally, the title comes from Rufus Wainwright's "Hallelujah," which West Wing fans will recognize from the season finale: it played while C.J. learned of Simon's death and as she walked the streets of New York. The theme of the song doesn't really fit this story, but I thought that line conveyed the appropriate amount of disillusionment for my purposes.

When you're in the middle of a hurricane, you lose a certain amount of perspective. You're fighting so hard just to get through it that you're thrilled beyond words to see the clouds finally break. That kind of thinking can be dangerous, though. Sometimes the storm has passed, sure – but sometimes you've only reached the eye of it, a brief respite before another, equally harrowing struggle. Even if you've been in and out of these things all your life, you can still be lulled into a false sense of security by the eye. Those are the times the damned thing really gets you. You think you've won, but half the test still lies ahead.

2243 Local
Wardroom B, USS Seahawk
Somewhere in the Arabian Sea

"Hey, Sundance."

Sarah Mackenzie glanced up with a tolerant smile and shook her head. "You're not going to let that one go, are you?"

Still in his flight suit from his earlier mission – although the word 'mission' hardly did it justice – Harmon Rabb flashed a grin and slid into a chair beside his partner. "Probably not. It fits you."

"You don't mind being Butch Cassidy?"

"Well, it sure beats that Batman and Robin thing we had going for a while in there." Harm stretched his shoulders and took a sip of his coffee. "I swear to God, that was the longest post-flight debrief I've ever done, and that includes the time I pushed Tuna by the tailhook."

“Are you surprised? You played tag with a nuclear missile that could’ve cooked half the battle group. I expect there were a fair number of questions about your tactics.”

“What, you didn’t approve?”

Mac fixed him with a look that was far more serious. “I didn’t say that. I’m just glad I didn’t have to explain to your mother how you went down in that proverbial blaze of glory we’ve been talking about.”

“Never would’ve happened,” he asserted, leaning back in his chair as she lifted an eyebrow.

“Awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you, flyboy?”

“It’s not that. Believe me, nobody’s more surprised than I am that I still have a Missile-EX record on this ship. Come to think of it, I’m not sure I ever knew I had one in the first place.”

“If you’re so obviously mortal, then how can you be so convinced that you wouldn’t have bought the farm out there?”

“Well, for one thing ... you weren’t with me.”

She blinked at him, not understanding, but he explained. “That’s the way it’s supposed to go, right? Butch and Sundance were always together. You never would’ve seen one of them come tearing out of that building without the other.”

That oddly endearing statement, coupled with his open smile, somehow touched her. Not knowing what else to do, she simply smiled back. “You just keep thinkin’, Butch,” she quoted with a twinkle in her eye. “That’s what you’re good at.”

Their gazes locked for a long moment, and although neither would have admitted it, both officers were thinking along similar lines. Right now, their normal, everyday lives at JAG were far away, in more than just the geographical sense. Over the past couple of weeks, while they’d worked to combat the emerging terrorist threat, they’d managed to reach a different level of confidence in each other. As difficult as it was to imagine, living and working in country had actually brought them even closer. After the tumultuous year they’d had, it was something of an unexpected benefit.

But Afghanistan had hardly been the place for any personal discussions, and they were long past due for one. Now that their immediate duties had been fulfilled, the slightest trace of uncertainty had resurfaced – uncertainty about where exactly they were headed. Location may not change who we are, Harm mused silently, but it sure as hell changes what we can do about it.

He didn’t dare put a voice to the tension. Not yet, anyway. They would be back in Washington before long, and maybe once life had returned to some semblance of normal, they’d be able to make sense of it all. Instead, he took another sip of his coffee. “Is Bud back yet? I owe him a rematch from the last time we were on board.”

“How many moves did it take him to beat you?” Mac asked innocently, receiving a withering look in response.

“You doubt my skill at chess?” She merely watched him, disbelieving, until he relented. “Well, I made a good game of it, at least.”

"I don't think they're due back for a while yet. They were going out to visit a school site or something. Are we leaving on the morning COD, or what?"

He nodded. "Up with the dawn patrol, at 0435. I figure I've got time for a really long shower and a few hours of sleep. Nothing like a few days in the desert to make hot-bunking on a carrier feel like heaven."

"You squids are all wimps," she accused him good-naturedly, giving him a gentle shove.

"Oh, and I suppose you aren't at all looking forward to getting home?"

"Sure I am. I can't wait to get into my favorite pajamas, climb into my big, soft, real bed along with –"

Harm's head swung around, startled.

"– Jingo," she finished, enjoying his reaction. "Where was your mind just now?"

He rolled his eyes, vaguely irritated at being caught so easily. "You need to get out more, Marine. There's more to life than cuddling up with your dog."

"And you would know this how?"

He had to admit that she had a point. "Okay, we both need to get out more." He almost left it at that, but something compelled him to continue. "Let's work on that when we get back, all right?"

This time, she was the one caught off-guard, and it took her a moment to realize how serious he was. "That's a deal," she replied quietly.

He reached toward her, intending to touch her arm, but when a sailor appeared at the hatch, he instinctively pulled back. "What is it, Petty Officer?"

The young man wore a grave expression and twisted a piece of paper in his hands. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, ma'am," he offered hesitantly. "I, um, have news from Lieutenant Roberts's shore party."

Immediately Mac felt an inexplicable chill. "Why do you look like you want to crawl into a hole, Petty Officer ... Garcia?"

Garcia swallowed and fixed his gaze on a point above their heads. "Ma'am, there was an incident in the village ... a little boy, in a minefield ..."

As he elaborated to the best of his knowledge, Mac whirled to face her partner, and watched all the blood instantly drain away from his handsome features. "Oh, God," Harm breathed, his voice barely audible. "Bud?"

"He's alive, sir," Garcia hurried to assure them. "They stabilized him on scene, but he's in rough shape. They're going to help him back here to assess his condition, and then decide whether or not he needs an evac to Landstuhl. The skipper thought you'd want to know right away."

The two senior officers just sat there for a time, unable to believe what they'd just heard. This wasn't supposed to be possible. Not now, after they'd fought so hard to make everything all right – not to Bud, after all he'd overcome ...

But there was no time for questions now. Training eventually kicked in, and Mac was the first to find her voice. "What's their ETA?" she asked.

"Fifteen minutes, ma'am."

"All right. You're dismissed, Petty Officer. Thank you."

"Aye, ma'am." The young man came to attention and exited quickly, leaving Harm and Mac to stare at each other, stunned.

Harm was still struggling to piece his jumbled thoughts together. "How ... why would ..."

Tears stinging her eyes, Mac reached out to grasp his hand, and she was barely surprised when he pulled her into a brief embrace. Both of them had a certain amount of experience in watching their world blown to pieces, and they knew that they'd need to lean on each other if they were to have any hope of getting through this.

"Things are going to get crazy pretty fast," he said quietly. "Let's get up there and find out what the hell's going on."

They were out of the wardroom in seconds, and everything that had previously been on their minds – the shower, the flight home, the recently-made pact – was instantly forgotten.

...In sickbay, a trauma team was efficiently readying the area for their incoming patient. Harm and Mac stood silently off to the side, staying out of the medics' way, until a senior corpsman noticed their presence and attempted to head them off. "Sir, ma'am, you really shouldn't be here –"

"Let them stay, Chief," ordered Captain Johnson as he stepped through the hatch. He studied the flight-suited commander and the colonel in desert BDUs who came to attention at his approach. "As you were. You and Lieutenant Roberts have really managed to change my impression of lawyers, you know."

"May we take that as a compliment, sir?"

"You may indeed." The captain sighed. "The helo's on deck, so they should be down here any minute. They say the lieutenant's in shock and doesn't really know what's happened to his leg. I just wanted to warn you, so you'll be ready when you see him."

Harm really, really didn't want to ask the question, but he knew he didn't have a choice. "What did happen to his leg, Captain?"

"It's gone, Commander. Severed at the right knee. According to the team that picked him up, there was nothing left of it."

They barely had time to process that information before a voice called "Gangway!", and a huddle of crewmen flooded into the room, bearing a stretcher. Instinctively, Mac's hand found its way into Harm's without conscious direction from either of them. If the skipper noticed, he didn't comment. The trio stood against the far bulkhead, watching the controlled chaos of the medical staff. The blanket that covered most of their friend's body was tossed aside, and they were confronted with the hideous reality of the wound. Even bound up in layers of dressing, the stump of his right leg was unmistakable. Neither of the attorneys flinched visibly, but their entwined hands tightened almost as one unified motion.

Bud was partly conscious, and he blinked, bewildered, at his surroundings. "A.J.," he mumbled incoherently. The corpsman frowned, not comprehending.

"That's his son, Chief," Harm explained quietly.

Through the bleak haze of shock, Bud seemed to recognize his friend's voice. "Commander?" he managed to say in faint, halting speech. "Wha..."

"Relax, Bud." Harm stepped closer, forcing a more reassuring expression onto his face. "Everything's okay. You're back on the Seahawk."

"Leg hurts..."

At that, the proud, stoic aviator almost faltered, but he squeezed his partner's hand even tighter and responded. "Don't worry about it. You'll be back home with A.J. before you know it."

Bud's gaze focused on him for a fleeting moment, and there was trust radiating through the deep pain in his eyes. When Harm recognized it, he felt sick. This was wrong, plain and simple. As the injured officer lapsed back into unconsciousness, he pulled away from Mac and faced the wall until he could get a better hold on his emotions.

Mac had seen him retreat into himself before, though, and she wasn't about to let it happen again. "Say something," she asked softly. "We're in this together, remember?"

His voice was low and almost bitter as he responded. "I step on a mine because of dumb luck, and I get to walk away. He steps on one because he's trying to help someone, and this happens?"

"Don't think like that. Especially not now. We have to be here for him, and – " She broke off, a new idea taking hold. "Harm, we've got to call Harriet. The official notice will take forever if he's in transit."

"She can't hear something like this over the phone."

Mac started to question, but stopped as she realized that he probably knew best. After all, twelve years ago, it had been a midnight phone call that had informed his mother of his own accident on this very ship. "She can't hear it from ZNN, either. If the press gets a hold of it soon, and releases his name ..."

"Call the admiral," he suggested. "He can get to her before the press. Will she be at the office? What time is it in Washington?"

"Late afternoon, but it's Thursday, and she usually goes home early on Thursdays for A.J."

Six different lines of thought were simultaneously racing through his head at equal speed. The time for shock was over. Now they had to act in the best interests of their dear friends. "They're going to transport him to Landstuhl, aren't they?"

"It looks that way. There's no point in keeping him here."

"All right. Will you go with him?"

She looked at him as though he'd lost his mind. "I'm sure as hell not leaving him now. Why are you?"

“Because he’s going to need his wife and son, and Harriet’s going to need someone to make the trip with her.” He raised his voice. “Captain?”

The Seahawk’s skipper pulled his attention away from his crewman and glanced up. “What is it, Commander?”

“Sir, I’m going to need a Tomcat and a refueling point somewhere between here and Andrews.”

Mac was almost as surprised as the captain at the bold request, but chose not to comment. “And what makes you think I can give that to you?” the older man inquired neutrally.

Harm’s tone and stance were respectful, but he was well aware that his next words were bordering on insubordination. “Sir, under any other circumstances I would never play this card ... but after what happened here over the past couple of days, I think this ship owes me one.”

For a moment, there was a stony silence, while the commander wondered if he’d just knocked himself back a stripe or two. Finally, Captain Johnson replied in a cool, controlled voice. “And under any other circumstances, I would probably toss you to the sharks for even suggesting such a thing. Given the situation, though, I think a certain amount of ... tolerance is called for. I’ll talk to the CAG and the air boss. We’re due to be relieved by the Coral Sea in a few weeks, so we can probably scrounge up a spare aircraft for you. Colonel, please tell me you don’t intend to take the backseat.”

“No, sir. I’d like to stay with Lieutenant Roberts, if I may.”

“Then you have more common sense than your partner.”

“That’s usually the general consensus, sir.” Harm looked as though he wanted to object to that statement, but she fixed him with a look that told him precisely what she thought of his plan, and he decided to quit while he was ahead.

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll be ready to go as soon as your people can arrange it.”

“Then you’d better saddle up. My plane crews are a lot faster than the ones Toby Ingles has on his boat. Your bird will be on deck as soon as I hang up the phone.” Mac had never seen a carrier captain smirk before, but she figured Harm deserved it for his earlier remark. The attorneys came to attention and left the sickbay area, waiting until they were in the corridor to regroup.

“Are you off your rocker?” Mac asked bluntly. “You’re going to dead-head all the way back to Andrews? That’s got to be a fourteen-hour trip, and it’s been a long time since you last slept.”

“Hey, if the bomber crews can do it, so can I.”

“The bomber crews have co-pilots.”

“It’ll be a milk run, Mac. They’ll give me a polar route, so it won’t be as long. Besides – I handle this kind of thing better when I’m occupied. If I stayed here, I’d probably kick in a bulkhead or something, and what good would that do Bud or Harriet?”

“Well, I handle this kind of thing better when you’re with me,” she shot back without hesitation, surprising him slightly. “And now you’re going to ditch out on me?”

"I'll meet you at Landstuhl," he promised quietly. "Come on, Mac, this isn't about us. They both need help right now, and we're in the best position to give it to them."

"I know. I just ..." For a moment, her confidence wavered, but the Marine's formidable strength came through once again. "Just do me a favor and check the weather report this time, all right?"

It took a few seconds for her meaning to sink in, but when it did, it left him temporarily without words. They'd been in country for so long that he'd managed to forget what day it was, but now it all came rushing back with blinding clarity. It had been a year, almost to the day, since the aborted wedding and the infamous crash. A year ago, he'd been the one rushed to sickbay, and she'd been helpless, hundreds of miles away. As their gazes met, he saw again how deeply it had affected her. Jesus, has it really been that long? So much has happened ... so much hasn't happened.

"I'll do that," he said finally. "If you get a chance, grab my sea bag before you leave. Tell the admiral that I'm arranging transport for Harriet, but don't tell him I'm in the air. I'll deal with that once I get there."

"I'll do my best, but if he asks to speak with you, I'm not going to lie to our commanding officer."

"I know. You wouldn't be my favorite jarhead if you did." He tried to smile, but it was a flimsy, hollow attempt. "I'll see you in about a day, okay?"

"Okay. Good luck."

"You, too."

They waited for a long moment – just watching each other, wanting to say so much – before going their separate ways at last.

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0056 EDT
Rosslyn, Virginia

Harriet Roberts was still sitting on the new couch in the new living room. Their new living room, supposedly, but it didn't feel much like theirs at the moment. Bud hadn't even seen the house that was to be his home yet: and so now, when she most desperately needed to feel some connection with him, there was nothing. Only the bare walls and a few scattered toys, and that couch.

She'd known from the moment the doorbell rang that something wasn't right. Maybe she'd subconsciously known it for most of the day. When she'd opened the door that afternoon to reveal a subdued Admiral Chegwidden, though, the vague, nagging discomfort coalesced into real terror, and she'd barely been able to hold herself upright. But she forced herself to get through it, drawing on every last scrap of military bearing she'd ever had, until the full explanation was out. Then, something unexpected had happened. Her commanding officer, a two-star admiral and a decorated SeAL, had broken his careful focus; and for a moment, he looked just like her father, wanting to shield her from the cruelty of the outside world. When that happened, her defenses instantly crumbled, and she burst into tears.

He'd stayed with her ever since, comforting her in the only way he knew how. He'd quietly fixed little A.J.'s dinner and read his namesake a bedtime story, and he'd made the

necessary calls to Bud's father and brother when she realized she wouldn't be able to get through it. Mostly, though, he simply stayed, understanding that she didn't want to be alone. She couldn't think in terms of the future just yet. Truthfully, she couldn't think much at all. She just sat on the couch, holding a long-since-cooled cup of coffee and staring at the bare walls.

The admiral returned to the living room, putting his cell phone away in his pocket. "That was Colonel Mackenzie," he reported, taking a seat across from her. "They've just arrived at Landstuhl, and they're going to take him into surgery fairly soon. They've replaced a lot of his blood volume, so he's looking good. They just need to do some work on his leg."

Harriet nodded, feeling numb. "I guess I should start thinking about how I'm going to get out there," she said hesitantly. "I know I won't be able to get a flight until morning, but what about A.J.? I don't want to leave him, but I don't know if I can handle a nine-hour trip with him ..."

"Is there any way Mikey could go with you?"

"He's about to leave for Plebe Summer – I couldn't ask him. Bud would be crushed if I let Mikey do anything to mess up his chances at the Academy."

"It's up to you, Harriet," Admiral Chegwiddden said gently. "There are plenty of us who'd be willing to take A.J. while you're gone, if you'd like. Or you can wait and decide a little later."

"How much later, sir?" She turned her wide, pleading eyes toward him. "I don't know what I should do, but I know I don't want Bud to be alone ..."

"He won't be alone," he promised. "Harm and Mac are with him, remember?"

"Actually, sir, that's only halfway true."

Both jumped, startled; they hadn't heard the front door open. Harm was standing in the doorway, still wearing his flight gear and a Seahawk squadron cap. He was probably close to the last person either officer had expected to see, and this was hardly the way they were used to seeing him, but Harriet soon recovered from her surprise and stood up.

"Commander! Sir – how did you get here so fast?"

"Mil-power most of the way, and a really good tanker crew out of Keflavik," Harm answered, not meeting his CO's gaze for fear of disapproval. If the admiral was angry with him, though, he hid it well.

"The Seahawk crew let you take a Tomcat?"

"I, ah, managed to persuade them." Harm took off his cover, looking at Harriet with aching helplessness. "Honey, I'm so sorry," he said softly.

With that, she fell into his arms, weeping bitterly. After the first few hours, she'd thought that all her tears for a lifetime were gone, but apparently she'd underestimated herself. Eventually Harm guided her back to the couch, tossing his keys and cover on the table.

Harriet composed herself quickly, brushing the tears away and seizing onto him as the best available link to her husband. "You've seen Bud, then? How is he?"

"He was asking about little A.J." The commander offered a halfhearted smile. "They've kept him sedated. He lost a lot of blood, but he's going to be all right. That's the truth, Harriet."

She nodded, biting her lip. "Sir, what really happened?" she whispered.

He sighed. "He and Petty Officer Coates went ashore to observe the ground-breaking for a new school that they'd helped get the money to build. He saw a little boy playing in a minefield, and ... you know Bud. He had to try."

The JAG had been listening quietly from a few feet away, but now he spoke up. "Commander, I know your presence is appreciated, but why did you come all this way tonight?"

Harm straightened. "To take Harriet and little A.J. to Germany, sir." Almost as an afterthought, he turned back to Harriet. "That is, if you want to go."

She blinked, confused. "Now? How – "

"There's a C-38 on standby at Andrews. It'll be more comfortable than flying commercial, and we can go directly into Landstuhl. As long as you can put up with me as a co-pilot. Short notice, and all."

"Thank you, sir," she breathed, eyes shining with gratitude. "I'll go pack some things and get A.J. ready to go."

As she hurried up the stairs, Admiral Chegwidden turned to his senior attorney and folded his arms. "So how many favors did you have to call in to make all this happen?"

Harm still wasn't entirely sure if he was going to get chewed out for his somewhat unconventional actions, but he didn't dare hold back the truth. "Every last one of them, I think. I also dropped your name a few times, sir, and I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be. I just wish I could go along. But someone's got to hang around to report on everything that's happened over the last few days, and I'll be damned if I'm handing it off to Singer." The older man gave a humorless smile, studying the part-time pilot in front of him. "Do you know anything about flying a C-38? I know you've proven your skills with a Tomcat, a COD, a Stealth fighter, and a 747..."

Harm recognized the oblique attempt at lightening the atmosphere, and was relieved by it. "Also a Learjet once, sir. A long time ago, at the very beginning of your tenure at JAG, but it's close enough to a C-38."

"Right ... Didn't you end up evading Cuban air defense forces with that thing?"

His response was utterly deadpan. "They loop much better than you'd expect, sir."

The admiral rolled his eyes. "No wonder my predecessor didn't outlast your antics."

"He wasn't a SeAL, sir."

"Damn right." Admiral Chegwidden glanced up as Harriet appeared in the hallway, a sleepy toddler on her hip. He lowered his voice, the humor instantly gone. "Take care of her, Harm."

"I intend to, Admiral."

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0614 Zulu/Local

32,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean

Harriet wandered aimlessly across the small, empty cabin of the aircraft, checking on her son for the twentieth time. A.J. was blissfully unaware of the reasons behind this trip: he'd fallen asleep across a pair of seats almost immediately after takeoff, leaving her to wonder about the next week, and the next month, and the next year.

Her husband was now an amputee. He would wake up every day for the rest of his life with a part of his body missing. What would that mean for them? Although she hoped he wouldn't need it, Bud would almost certainly be offered a medical discharge from the Navy. And regardless of that ... she was beginning to realize how much she'd depended on everything going as they'd planned. Part of her confidence in buying the house had been based on the assumption that Bud would soon make lieutenant commander, and the extra money from his promotion, added to his hazardous duty pay –

Abruptly she cursed herself for a fool. He'd been earning that so-called 'hazardous duty' pay for weeks now, and she had never allowed herself to think about the reasons why. Her time at sea had seemed anything but hazardous, and even as the war progressed, she'd never truly believed that Bud was in any real danger. How shortsighted she'd been.

She sank into a seat just as Harm emerged from the cockpit, running a hand through his short hair. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Please do." She waved absently, and he took the seat across the aisle from her. "You're not nervous about leaving the Air Force in charge of the plane?"

He smiled a little and shrugged. "Might as well let them do what they do best – straight and level flight. Besides, Captain Weiss is probably a bit more alert than I am at the moment."

"You do look tired, sir."

"Please try to forget about the 'sir' thing right now, Harriet. If you can convince your brain to go against instinct, of course. But yeah, I've crossed more time zones today than the sun. Actually, I don't even know what 'today' is anymore." He stretched his long legs out in front of him. "I hope Mac remembered to bring my sea bag over from the carrier. I think I've been wearing this nasty flight suit for two straight days."

She didn't respond for a moment. "What you did was pretty incredible," she said finally. He glanced over at her, surprised. "It hasn't hit the news yet – I don't know how much they want the public to know – but the admiral told me the whole story. And Bud wrote to me about it, actually. It was the last message he sent before ..." She paused to gather herself, but continued in a steady voice. "Saving five thousand lives in three minutes – it must have been surreal."

"That's one word for it." Harm sighed. "Somehow none of it seems all that incredible right now," he said quietly.

Harriet looked back at A.J. again before speaking up. "Sir – Harm – can I ask you something?"

"Anything," he replied solemnly.

"After your ramp strike, how badly were you hurt?"

He hesitated for just a second, choosing how best to reply. The circumstances surrounding his original change of designator weren't something he spoke of often, although he knew

there were a number of rumors on the subject that occasionally circulated around JAG.
“Pretty badly, I guess. I wasn’t at death’s door or anything – ”

“No, that was last year,” she commented under her breath, surprising him yet again.

“ – but they weren’t sure how well I was going to be able to walk when it was all over. I had to have surgery to fuse two of my vertebrae and stabilize my spine.”

“But you came back,” she pointed out, reining in the note of hopefulness that kept creeping into her voice. “I mean, you came all the way back. You even got back in the cockpit.”

“Yeah, I did.” He decided not to mention the fact that it had taken him five years to get there, and most of another four before his return to active flight status. He also left out the months of utter despair and disillusionment he’d felt as he’d pushed himself to heal. “I was determined. Bud will be, too. And I didn’t have someone as amazing as you to lean on. It’s going to be all right, Harriet.”

“I know.” She sighed, tucking an uncooperative lock of blond hair behind her ear. “I’m just afraid that this is going to change him, somehow.”

“I think that’s one of the few things that you can help him with. If you try not to see him any differently now, maybe he’ll be able to do the same.”

“I hope I’ll be able to handle that,” she said uncertainly, turning her head toward the window as they flew toward the rising sun. He interpreted the motion as a signal that she didn’t want to talk anymore, and leaned back in the seat to close his eyes for a while before landing. After a few minutes, though, she spoke up again. “Harm?”

“Yeah, Harriet?”

“Do you know what happened to the little boy? The one Bud was trying to help?”

The commander felt a dull twinge of guilt as he realized that the thought had never crossed his mind. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I expected as much.” Still gazing out at the feathery clouds, she shook her head. “Little boys playing in minefields ... The world is awfully screwed up right now, isn’t it?”

“I think the world is always screwed up in one way or another. We’re just now getting around to finding out about some of it. Those mines have been there for decades, and they’ll probably be there for decades longer, no matter what we do or don’t do about it.” As the words left his mouth, he heard the ringing pessimism in them, and regretted speaking at all. Of all people, she didn’t deserve to bear his frustrations. But as she turned back to look at him, there was very little sadness in her eyes.

“Maybe. But who was it that said ‘all that is needed in for the forces of evil to triumph in this world is for men of good will to do nothing’?”

Not for the first time, he was impressed by her quiet strength. “Women of good will are pretty good, too.” Harm met her gaze and offered a small smile. “I don’t remember who said it first. But I’m glad you said it again.”

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0827 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

“Tiner, where is Lieutenant Sims?”

Petty Officer Tiner looked up at the petite yet utterly intimidating figure in front of his desk and swallowed hard. “Um, ma’am, I don’t know. Maybe she took a personal day today?”

“Then shouldn’t that be marked down somewhere?” Lieutenant Singer folded her arms, her patience already wearing thin. She had about a million forms to file: since JAG’s Three Musketeers were still off on the Seahawk and Watertown, respectively, all the after-action reports had fallen to her, and she wasn’t particularly happy about it. And since the administrative officers seemed to be disappearing just when she needed them ...

“Ma’am, the admiral’s on his way in – maybe he knows something.”

“You’d better hope he does,” she informed the young man icily, stalking back toward her office. Just as she reached the doorway, however, a voice called out, “Attention on deck!”, and Admiral Chegwidden strode through the bullpen.

“As you were,” he said briskly, not slowing his pace. “I want the entire staff in the bullpen in ten minutes, and that means everyone who’s not in court, TDY or otherwise off-duty. If anyone’s up in the library or outside having a smoke, get them back in here ASAP. That is all.” The last sentence was punctuated by the closing of his office door.

Singer lifted an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. Maybe something was happening. She wasn’t actually hoping for another terrorist plot, of course, but anything had to be better than all the reports she was currently facing. She’d been in her element during the crisis of the past few days, and any further opportunity to prove her skills would only make her stock go up.

Precisely ten minutes later, the full complement of JAG officers and staff was present in the bullpen, wondering what kind of news their CO had for them. The admiral stepped out of his office, and they saw for the first time that he looked tired. More than just tired, really: he looked older, somehow. Singer immediately recalled the colonel’s rehearsal dinner the year before, how the admiral had been forced to break the festive mood and tell them about the commander’s crash. This look was eerily similar, and she wondered if something had happened out on the Seahawk.

“Approximately twenty-four hours ago,” the JAG began, “Lieutenant Roberts was badly injured in Afghanistan. He stepped on a mine while trying to help a child, and was evacuated to Landstuhl for medical treatment. According to Colonel Mackenzie, the lieutenant’s condition is stable, but he suffered a leg injury that will likely require some surgeries and the use of a prosthetic. Lieutenant Sims is en route to Germany as we speak.”

There was a stunned silence in the room, and Singer found herself leaning against her office door in order to maintain her equilibrium. Bud Roberts? That couldn’t be right ... could it? As she watched Admiral Chegwidden’s steely eyes, though, it was clear that there was no mistake.

“I know this comes as a shock to everyone, because we don’t think of ourselves at front-line personnel, but the important thing right now is to let Bud know that we’re here for him. To that end, Petty Officer Tiner will collect any kind of cards or gifts you wish to send to the Roberts family. If anyone wants to coordinate a larger gift, you have my blessing.” He sighed, and straightened his shoulders. “We’ve got to go on with business now, so that’ll be all. Lieutenant Singer.”

She jumped a little, startled. “Sir?”

“My office, in fifteen minutes. We need to discuss the possibility of you going out to the Seahawk to replace Lieutenant Roberts for the remainder of the cruise.”

“Aye, sir,” she responded awkwardly, her mind still churning. A few minutes ago, she would have been cheering at the idea of taking that assignment. She’d coveted it from the start, and the fact that Bud had beaten her out for it had always irritated her. A few minutes ago, everything had been different. Now, instead of triumph, she felt vaguely ill.

Bud Roberts, a man for whom she’d rarely held anything but contempt, had been in a war zone, and he’d braved a minefield to help a child. And it had almost cost him everything. Lauren Singer had always clung stubbornly to her belief that anything was possible if you were willing to look out for yourself above all: but somehow that tenet seemed hollow now, and she was surprised to discover just how much she ached for the embattled family. It didn’t make sense, and it didn’t fit her self-image, and all of that only made her feel worse.

Shutting the door to her office, she sat down at her desk and rifled through the drawers, searching for a box of Kleenex. The bottom drawer caught on something, and she reached around to extract whatever had tripped up the rollers. When she pulled the obstacle free and looked at it, she immediately dropped it on the desk in shock. It was a crinkled picture of Bud and little A.J., playing in a sandbox and apparently having a marvelous time. The photo must have been left behind when she’d cleaned Bud’s personal effects out of the office ...

Suddenly she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the involuntary gasp that bubbled up from her throat, and she resumed the search for Kleenex with new fervor. This is stupid, she chastised herself even as the tears welled up. I don’t even like him, and his wife drives me nuts. I don’t need to cry over them. I’m stronger than that.

But for the first time, she was beginning to understand that she wasn’t nearly as strong as she’d thought she was, and it was wrecking her whole worldview. Surrendering, she put her head down and cried for a few minutes. Then, carefully, she fixed her makeup, lifted her chin, and strode toward the admiral’s office.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

1752 Local
Medical Center
Landstuhl Air Base, Germany

“Colonel?”

Mac shook off the remnants of a light sleep and blinked at the young nurse standing in front of her. “Is he out of post-op?”

“They just moved him up to his room. The doctor’s in with him now, explaining the extent of the procedure to him.”

The ‘extent of the procedure’ sounded far kinder than cold reality did, Mac thought grimly. At that moment, Bud was learning the full truth: that every step he took from here onward would be with the aid of a prosthetic limb. “Can I see him when they’re finished?”

“Of course. It’s room 218. Also, I’ve been instructed to tell you that there’s a C-38 inbound from the States, ETA in half an hour.”

“Thanks.” She shook her head at that, almost finding the will to smile. Trust Harm to make things happen, even in the middle of the night. Mac stood up and braced herself to go talk to her friend.

He was gazing blankly at the wall when she approached the door, his features entirely unreadable. The sight gave her pause. It wasn't as if he looked awful: other than a few cuts and bruises, and the leg hidden from view by a blanket, he looked fairly good. But in her experience, there had always been a spark of something indescribable and unique behind Bud's round blue eyes. When he'd faced baby Sarah's death, there had been blinding anguish, but at least there had been life. This ... this nothingness was simply surreal.

"Do you mind if I come in, Bud?"

He glanced up with a start, then waved a listless hand. "You're better-looking than my last visitor," he replied faintly.

The remark wasn't typical of him, but Mac chose to see it as a good sign that he was attempting to make jokes. "I come with better news, too," she told him, coming around to stand by his bed. "Harm's bringing Harriet in. She'll be here within the hour."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed his face, and for the first time she wondered if maybe he didn't want to see his wife just yet. But he nodded bravely. "So she knows?"

"We figured we should tell her before some idiot reporter did." Mac chewed on her lower lip, unsure how to proceed. "How are you feeling?" she asked finally, when no other words came.

Bud gave a weak, humorless chuckle. "Incomplete," he answered dully. "Other than that ... I don't know how I feel yet."

"Well, don't worry about a thing. Just concentrate on getting better, and your friends will take care of anything else you need."

He looked up at her with painful questions in his eyes. "Ma'am," he asked solemnly, "how much 'better' do you really think I'm going to get?"

She closed her mouth, at a loss. Sure, she could try to reassure him with empty platitudes, but what good would it really do right now? "Harm made me watch 'Men of Honor' with him last month," she offered lamely. "Carl Brashear stayed in the Navy with one leg, and he was a diver. The suits have got to be lighter now than in his day – you could take up scuba diving on the side."

"Right." He hesitated slightly. "Ma'am, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but..."

"But it's not helping, is it?"

Bud shrugged a little. "I think I just need some time on my own to try and get a handle on all this."

Mac tried valiantly to smile, despite the way her heart twisted at his words. "Of course. I'll be around if you need anything." She touched his shoulder briefly, then moved to the door before he could see the tears forming.

In the hallway outside, she slid down the wall, feeling drained and very alone. There was literally nothing she could do, and no one to bear this helplessness with her. Unconsciously she wished that Harm would hurry up and walk through those doors, and she was vaguely surprised at how much she needed to see him. Somehow, it felt as though he was the only one who could ease her mind right now. Perhaps it was because he alone would understand

exactly how she felt. Or maybe it was because they'd hardly been separated at all during the past two weeks, and she simply didn't want to be without his warm voice and expressive eyes any longer.

"Colonel Mackenzie?"

The small, shaky voice came from somewhere off to her right, and she blinked a few times, focusing on the young sailor who stood there crumpling her cover in her hand. "Petty Officer Coates," she greeted, a little surprised. "When did you get here?"

"The skipper let me take a couple days of liberty," Jennifer Coates answered quietly, looking nothing like the brash, misguided girl she'd been when they'd first crossed paths at Christmas. "I hopped on the COD and found a transport over from Khalid, but I have to be back in forty-eight hours. Is Lieutenant Roberts, um ... how's he doing?"

"He's okay, but he's got a lot to deal with. I don't think now is the best time to go in and see him."

Bud's legalman nodded, but her face fell. "Ma'am, this is – this is really hard," she confessed, a slight tremble in her voice. "I mean, when they gave me the choice to join the Navy, we weren't at war or anything, and ... I just didn't expect something like this to happen, not to somebody I know."

Mac sighed, feeling suddenly aged. "Neither did I," she said quietly.

Jen scrubbed at her eyes for a moment. "Do you know if the lieutenant's wife and son are coming here, or ...?"

"Lieutenant Sims should be here any minute – Commander Rabb's bringing her in. I think she probably has little A.J. with her."

"That's good. He's always thinking about them, you know – we have a calendar up in the legal office to count down the days until the end of the cruise. He tacked up a picture of A.J. next to it. They must be a pretty amazing family ... They'll be okay, won't they?"

Mac watched the young woman, looking so hopefully to her for reassurance; and if possible, she actually felt more hopeless. What reassurance did she have to give?

Finally, as if to rescue her, the elevator doors opened to reveal her godson, her friend, and ... what was the right term to define Harm? She dismissed the nagging question, letting it be washed away by her overwhelming relief at seeing him. But she didn't go to him: instead, a silent greeting passed between them as he stood back, allowing her to greet Harriet first.

The two women embraced, with little A.J. in between them, and Harriet gave a watery smile. "It's so good to see you," she said softly.

"Likewise," Mac replied warmly. "Was the flight okay?"

"The flight was fine, but the landing almost got interesting. They put us in a holding pattern and then tried to divert us, but the commander threatened the controller's career –"

"It wasn't his career I threatened," Harm corrected, a little embarrassed. "It was a vital part of his anatomy. But we got here, didn't we?"

“Oh, I’m not complaining, sir.” Harriet paused, recognizing Petty Officer Coates. There was a moment of awkward silence, but then A.J. toddled over to the girl and looked up at her.

“Hi,” he said brightly.

Jen smiled back, anxiously. “Hi, cutie,” she responded. “Your daddy loves you a lot, you know.”

“I know,” A.J. said matter-of-factly, and even Harriet had to smile.

“Come on,” Mac suggested. “Let’s get you in to see Bud.”

The trio disappeared behind the door, leaving Harm and Jen behind in the hallway. “How are you holding up, Petty Officer?” Harm asked gently, picking up on her discomfort.

“To be honest, sir, I’m not doing so great,” Jen answered truthfully, her dark eyes glistening. “I just remember hearing the explosion, and then everyone was running around, trying to get to him without setting off any more mines. It was just so crazy, and ever since, I haven’t been able to close my eyes without seeing it ...”

She shuddered visibly, and Harm reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Jen, the only thing that matters now is that he’s going to be all right. It’s not going to be easy, but trust me – he’s a lot tougher than he looks.”

“I’ll believe that, sir.” But she still seemed unable to shake that fear, and when she lifted her chin to meet his gaze, her careful calm was on the verge of slipping. “Commander, I’m aware of how totally improper it is of me to ask this, and it pisses me off that I’m about to perpetuate a female stereotype ... but I honestly think I’d feel a hell of a lot better right now if I could just get a hug or something.”

She flinched a little, anticipating a negative response, but his lips curved upward in a small smile. “You may be on to something there.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, she was holding onto him desperately, her face pressed into his flight-suited shoulder to hide the few sniffles that escaped. After a moment of surprise, he closed his arms around her, feeling awkward. He’d never really been the type of person others looked to for comfort, but he had been the one to help her all those months ago, and she didn’t have anyone else.

A minute or two later, Jen pulled back and swiped a hand at her reddened eyes. “Thanks, sir,” she murmured, somewhat apologetically. “I think I’ll go figure out where the enlisted quarters are before the colonel gets jealous.”

Harm raised an eyebrow. “Before the colonel gets jealous?” he echoed pointedly, and a look of guilt flickered across her face.

“I mean, um ... she looked like she could use a hug, too ...” And with that, the petty officer escaped through the stairwell doors, leaving him to shake his head.

...“Hey, Bud, look who I found.”

Bud shook himself awake and lifted his gaze to the doorway, where Mac stepped back to allow Harriet into the room. The senior officer watched as husband and wife went through the same range of emotions simultaneously: relief at finally being together, coupled with bravely disguised pain. “You got here so fast,” Bud began tentatively. “Um, what day is it, anyway?”

"In Germany? I think it's Saturday evening." Harriet tried to smile, dropping her tote bag on a chair.

Soon, A.J. had wormed his way through his mother's legs to peek over the edge of the bed. "Daddy!" he exclaimed happily, and the expression of anguish that darkened Bud's eyes made Mac's insides clench.

"I'm going to let you guys have some family time, all right?" She inched back toward the door, but Harriet's use of her name briefly halted her.

"Mac ... thank you. For everything you and Harm have already done, and for everything I know you're going to do. We can't thank you enough."

"That's what friends do." She disappeared around the door, leaving the Roberts family alone together for the first time in months.

Harriet immediately rushed to the side of the bed and kissed her husband long and hard. "I've been waiting so damn long to do that," she whispered, grasping his hand tightly within hers. "Are you okay? I mean, are you in any pain?"

He shook his head, feeling a stab of shame for putting her in such a hideous situation. "The doctors said I can probably go back to the States in a few days. There'll be a couple more surgeries, and some fittings for a prosthetic, and a lot of time at a rehab center to learn how to use the new leg..."

Automatically, she glanced down at his legs as he said it, looking at the unnatural outline underneath the sheets for the first time and forcing herself not to react. He watched her carefully, waiting. "I thought you'd be crying already," he observed softly.

"I've cried enough," she answered, just as quietly. "I cried when I didn't have you, and yes, I cried most of the way over here – but now I've got you back, so there's nothing to cry about."

He pulled her close, once again amazed by this woman. Before long, a three-year-old's claim of "My turn!" separated them, and Harriet lifted A.J. up onto the bed. Bud felt his son's tiny arms clinging to him, and it took everything he had to hold back his own tears. What would fatherhood be like for him now? Would a game of touch football in the backyard ever feel the way he'd expected it to?

"What happen?" A.J. asked curiously, taking in the strange hospital surroundings. "Hurt, Daddy?"

Bud met his wife's gaze questioningly, and she shook her head, mouthing 'He doesn't know.' He forced a note of cheerfulness into his voice. "I got a pretty big boo-boo, A.J.," he explained simply, hoping that maybe the boy wouldn't be frightened if he didn't sense his parents' fear. "I have to get a new foot before I can get up and play with you."

"New foot?" Confused, A.J. scrambled around to look under the blanket before Harriet could stop him. He blinked, then returned to hug his daddy as if seeing the bandages was absolutely normal. "Miss you, Daddy."

Bud exhaled in relief. "I missed you too, sport."

...Outside the door, Mac just looked at Harm, unable to find words for the events of the past day. Finally he held out a hand to her, and she allowed him to lead her over to a cushioned

bench in the corner. "You're a sight for sore eyes," he remarked, weariness creeping into his voice.

She smiled sympathetically. "I brought your sea bag over, and I got us a couple of rooms at the nearest hotel, since the Q was booked. We can take Harriet and A.J. over whenever they're ready."

"That's my Marine – always prepared," he said, before realizing what that sounded like.

She merely fixed him with an amused glance. "Your Marine, huh?"

He shrugged, too tired to come up with a decent excuse. "Blame it on the jet lag?"

Although she had every intention of filing that comment away for later use, she chose to let it go for the moment. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I haven't been airborne practically non-stop for the last twenty-six hours and fourteen minutes," she countered.

"Yeah, but as soon as I slow down, I'm going to have to actually think about all this, and I'd rather avoid that." Harm leaned back against the wall, defeat echoing in his words.

"He's going to be okay, Harm."

"I know. I just did my best to convince Petty Officer Coates of that. It's going to be so hard on them, though. As if they haven't been through enough already."

"Yeah." She toyed absently with his Academy ring for a moment before weaving her fingers through his. Neither one commented on the slightly unusual display of closeness. "I heard from the air boss that Captain Johnson's putting you up for a Navy Cross."

At that, he turned his head toward her with an expression of disbelief and dismay, and she raised her free hand in surrender. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. I just thought it might be a semi-bright spot in an otherwise horrific week."

"Getting a Navy Cross? When one of my best friends is getting a plastic leg? It's going to take a lot more than another damned medal to brighten my day." Almost immediately, he softened his tone. Why on earth was he snapping at her, of all people? "Sorry. That sounded pretty awful. I just ... God, Mac, when I walked into the house and saw Harriet – I thought I was stepping back in time. I could've sworn that it was my house, and my mother, and being on the other end of it all just about killed me."

"It's not the same thing," she told him firmly. "It's not even close. We're making sure of that. Listen, why don't you try to catch a few minutes of sleep? I'm sure Harriet won't want to leave for a while, and I've been told I'm a pretty decent pillow."

"You offering your services?"

"Isn't that what it sounded like?"

"In that case, I gratefully accept." He disentangled his fingers from hers and studied the bench critically. "All right, I think I can make this work." Without another word, he swung his

legs up onto the bench and laid his head down on her thigh, and she closed her eyes, inexplicably reassured by his nearness.

Within minutes, his even breathing signaled that he'd fallen asleep, and she felt a flutter of warmth at the idea of having a grown man and a decorated aviator sleeping across her lap. Not just any man, of course. No other man she'd ever met had the power to monopolize her thoughts the way that he did. She drifted back to that aborted conversation in the Seahawk wardroom, and the resolution they'd made in the last moment of peace they'd had before all this madness. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was asking her out. Had it meant anything close to what she thought it meant – and after everything that had changed, did it still mean something?

Deliberately she put those thoughts aside. This wasn't the time or the place. Right now, what mattered was their friends. Anything else could wait. Even if they'd already waited half a lifetime.

...Harriet pulled A.J. off the bed and into her arms. "You haven't seen Harm yet, have you?" she asked suddenly. "He's here. He flew all the way to Washington to come get me."

"I know. Colonel Mackenzie told me." Even here, Bud found it difficult to separate his friends from their ranks. He wasn't overly concerned about preserving protocol at the moment, but Harriet had always been better at loosening up than him.

"Would you like to talk to him? I'm sure they're both just outside." She glanced toward the door.

He couldn't think of a single thing to talk about with the commander or anyone else. "That's all right – tomorrow's good enough. It's getting late. You guys should go get some rest."

She frowned. "Are you sure? I could hand A.J. off to Mac and Harm for the night and stay here."

In truth, he wasn't at all sure. But parts of this nightmare still hadn't completely sunk in yet, and he didn't know if he could handle it all with others looking over his shoulder. Even his wife. "Honey, I'm still really zoned," he replied truthfully. "I'm just going to sleep for about a hundred hours. You might as well do the same."

Harriet seemed to sense some of his reticence, and acquiesced. "All right. I'll go see if Mac ..."

When her voice trailed off, Bud followed her gaze to the hall window, wondering what had captured her attention. "Honey? What's going on out there?"

"You may not believe me if I tell you."

"Harriet ..."

She looked back at him with a glimmer of surprise and hope in her wide blue eyes. "Harm is passed-out asleep in Mac's lap. He's got his arm tucked up around her knees, and she's kind of stroking his hair ... I know I shouldn't be reading anything into it, but I swear it's the most adorable thing I've seen in ages. I guess I needed a cuteness break right about now."

Bud couldn't decide how to react to that. He knew he should be happy for them, or at least not unhappy. But it was hard to muster any kind of enthusiasm, even for something that

ordinarily would have had him jumping in the air. The only thought that surfaced was the realization that he couldn't have jumped even if he'd wanted to.

"Sorry you'll have to disturb them," he said finally. "But a bed would probably be more comfortable."

Harriet nodded, carefully shielding her disappointment. Already she could sense him pulling away. "Okay," she said quietly. "I'll call the nurse's station and give them the number of the hotel as soon as we get in. Promise you'll call if you want anything. Absolutely anything."

"I promise," he agreed dutifully.

"We'll be back first thing in the morning."

"I know."

She sighed, then bent down to allow A.J. one last hug. "Love you," she offered tentatively.

"I love you, too." Bud watched her square her shoulders before stepping back through the doorway. Alone once again, he closed his eyes and prayed for something to help him make sense of it all.

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0025 Local
Weirmann Hotel
Landstuhl, Germany

Mac heard the muffled sounds through her fitful sleep. She'd secured them a pair of rooms in a local hotel; it was the best she'd been able to do on short notice, so she was sharing a room with Harriet and little A.J. Harriet had protested and tried to pay for the room, especially since there turned out to be only one bed. Mac, however, had simply replied that the fold-out couch looked far better than the bunk she'd been stuck with all week, and that had ended the discussion.

Now, she became aware of a quiet sniffing from across the room. Thinking that it was just A.J., afraid of the strange place, she tried to block it out. After a minute, though, she realized that it wasn't the little boy who was crying.

"Harriet?" she called softly, rolling easily to her feet.

"I'm sorry," the younger woman mumbled from her place by the window. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I just –"

"Don't apologize." Mac tugged her standard-issue green T-shirt down and crossed the room, careful not to wake the sleeping toddler. "I'm aware of how ridiculous this question is, but are you okay?"

"No. I mean – oh, I don't know." Harriet scrubbed at her reddened eyes in frustration. "I told him I was finished crying. I said there was nothing to cry about. God, I'm so pathetic ..."

"Don't even think that. This whole thing sucks, and you're entitled to cry about it as much as you want. It's better than throwing things, which would probably be my reaction."

She smiled weakly and gave a brief nod. "I'm trying to put it all in perspective. I know he's going to be okay. It's going to be tough, but I know it'll be all right. The thing is, I can't tell if he knows that."

“He will,” Mac assured her. “It might take some time, but you know how strong Bud is.”

Harriet turned to her, and for the first time since baby Sarah’s death, the Marine saw real despair in her friend’s graceful features. “Mac, there were times in there tonight when I almost didn’t recognize him,” she whispered.

Mac had no words for that, and soon Harriet stood up. “Um, would you mind watching A.J. for a while? I just need a little time on my own – I don’t think I’ve been alone since before all this started.”

“Where are you going to go?”

She shrugged helplessly, and Mac waved her back down. “Then you stay here. I’ll just go next door and bug Harm for a while.”

“Oh, no – he’s probably asleep – ”

“I’d bet money that he’s wide awake. Jet lag knocks him around every time.” She didn’t add that she was beginning to feel even more helpless herself, and she selfishly wanted his comfort. “It’s all right. Really. If all else fails, I’m sure the couch in his room is just as good as the one in here.”

Harriet gave her a grateful half-smile, and Mac slipped into a pair of PT shorts before moving to the door between their rooms. They’d left it purposely unlocked, but just as she put her hand on the knob, a hint of Harriet’s typical impish humor crept back into her voice.

“What if he sleeps naked?”

“He doesn’t,” Mac answered automatically, approximately two seconds before her brain informed her that she’d just incriminated herself. Recovering, she shot a dirty look at Harriet, who looked to be even more shocked than Mac herself was. “And don’t ask me how I know, because the answer is not that exciting, believe me.”

That was only partly true, but it hardly mattered. Before the other woman could question further, she slid into Harm’s room without another word, and was greeted by darkness.

“Flyboy?” she whispered hesitantly. “You alive?”

“Last I checked,” was the response from somewhere within. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah. I’m just giving Harriet some privacy, that’s all.” Her eyes still hadn’t adjusted to the dark, so she reached a hand out in front of her. “Where are you? Would you kill me if I turned on a light?”

“Sorry – I closed the shade curtain in a failed attempt to convince myself to go to sleep. Stay there a sec.”

She could hear him rise from the bed and make his way toward her. “When they fixed your eyes, did they give you infrared implants, or what?” she asked lightly.

“You caught me. I’m the Six-Million-Dollar Man.” His voice was low and soothing, and before long, she felt his warm hands close around her outstretched ones. “Tag, you’re it,” he said, the levity sounding only slightly forced.

She forced down the flush that rose at his touch, but didn't pull away. "Very funny. Would you please find us some light before one or both of us falls on our face?"

"All right, all right. Come here." Instead of reaching for a lamp, he guided her over to the window and pulled the curtain back. The lights of the street and the waning moon bathed the room in the perfect amount of soft light: and instinctively she stepped back just an inch, as if seeing his face made his presence more real somehow.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," he responded in kind. Clad in a pair of sweatpants and a rumpled T-shirt, he hardly projected the swaggering, devil-may-care persona that so many people associated with him. She knew better, of course. He'd never been even half as self-assured as one would expect. Harmon Rabb had fears – not many, but the ones he had often paralyzed him. Then again, she reflected, the same could probably be said of me.

"If Harriet weren't otherwise occupied, we'd have a lot of damage control to do," she informed him, smiling a little.

"How so?"

"Well, let's just say she's eventually going to wonder exactly how I know that you don't sleep naked."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Let her wonder." At her surprised expression, he shrugged. "Is it that dangerous an assumption?"

"Since just about everybody we know has probably made a similar assumption at some point ... I guess not." Mac expertly shifted the focus. "So you couldn't sleep?"

He shook his head. "Between the flying and the staggering amount of caffeine I've consumed over the past forty-eight hours, my body's convinced that it's about three in the afternoon." He gave a rueful smile, but she wasn't fooled. Of all the reasons for this particular brand of insomnia, jet lag was probably the last item on the list.

"We came so close," she mused quietly. He frowned, not entirely comprehending. "We survived everything this bizarre war could throw at us. The mine, the bombing run, the nuke scare ... after all that, I was sure life owed us a break."

"So was I," he admitted. "I never thought that Bud – I mean, this crap is supposed to happen to us, isn't it?"

That statement began to confirm her suspicions. "Harm, you don't honestly feel guilty about this, do you?"

He shrugged, his features impassive. "I don't know what I feel," he replied. "I know that Bud learned from us, and that when it comes to personal responsibility, I'm a truly terrible role model. How many times has he watched me do something risky or reckless or flat-out stupid, and then just walk away? I should be dead so many times over ... I should ..." His voice trailed off uncertainly as this odd realization took root in his mind. Why the hell aren't I dead, anyway?

Unaware of his sudden introspection, Mac reached out and grasped his arm. "Listen to me," she said firmly. "I feel awful about what happened, too, but beating ourselves up over it won't change anything. Bud wasn't being reckless or stupid – he was coming to the aid of

someone who needed him, and he was putting that child's life above his own. In that department, I think you're an incredible role model."

He didn't respond right away, and the fact that she'd just given him a rare compliment barely seemed to register. In an instant, her resolve began to falter. "Harm? Have I lost you entirely?"

When he finally met her gaze again, there was a new, strangely vulnerable light in his turbulent eyes. "Mac," he began slowly, "if it had happened to me..."

"Don't go down that road," she warned. "There's nothing good to find there."

"I think maybe there is. It was barely a week ago that I was the one standing on a mine, remember? It almost did happen to me."

"But it didn't. Primarily because I was watching your six once again, if you recall." She'd meant the remark to sound lighter than it did. It didn't matter. Nothing was going to ease the weight of this conversation.

"Yeah, you were." And just then he realized what he needed to make her understand. She hadn't merely saved his life: she was the reason life had meaning. "But if it had happened ... would you still be there, watching out for me?"

Sensing the depth of this question, she had to steady her voice before replying. "You know I would," she said softly. "I'll always be watching out for you."

"Always?"

Without conscious effort, they'd somehow moved closer, and he held her gaze with a surprising level of emotion behind his eyes. What kind of reassurance did he seek from her? Could she give it to him without revealing her own vulnerabilities?

"Harm," she answered finally, "if it had been you, I would have broken my back to help you, and I wouldn't have left your side without the application of a crowbar to my fingers. If I'd been halfway around the world, like Harriet, I would have commandeered a transport ..." She cut herself off as she realized just how much force she was putting into the words. Was this really the way she wanted to tell him – comparing them to Bud and Harriet? This kind of conversation always seemed to end badly ...

Expecting to find shock and possibly panic in his expression, she looked up – and was stunned by the relief and wonder she found there. "You mean it, don't you?" he asked in a near-whisper.

She managed a small, almost shy smile. "I'm your Sundance, aren't I?"

"Yeah, you are." Reaching up to brush back a stray lock of hair, he allowed his hand to linger against her cheek. "You're my Sundance, and my ninja-girl, and my Marine, and ..." He glanced away for a moment, but forced himself to follow through. "My everything," he finished simply.

A jolt of surprise shot through her, and she stared at him, almost daring him to back down. But there was no trace of regret in his eyes, and in an instant of revelation, she realized that this pledge was as true as hers had been. "You meant that, didn't you?" she echoed, her voice catching slightly.

In response, he leaned in and kissed her.

Unlike the scattered few they'd shared in the past, it was neither tentative nor desperate. This kiss was something different – something more. It made sense, somehow, and it was utterly natural for her to let herself melt into his arms. They clung to each other, giving and receiving strength in a way that was both familiar and entirely new.

Soon, though, Mac broke away, doubt flickering in her dark eyes. This felt right, but she'd allowed her heart to be trampled before, and she wasn't willing to let it happen again. This had to be certain – airtight, even – or it would surely collapse like a house of cards. "Harm, what are we doing?" she whispered.

"I thought it was pretty obvious," he replied, a little hesitantly.

"I'm being serious. I need to know if ... I mean, if you aren't absolutely sure how much you mean it, I can't ..."

That stung a little, but intellectually he knew that a number of the emotional scars she carried had been his doing. For that reason, above all others, he had no choice but to give her the full truth.

"Mac, I always meant it. I just couldn't admit it, and I don't have any excuse for that. But I swear to you, I meant it on the admiral's porch, I meant it on the dock in Norfolk, and the only difference between then and now is the fact that I'm finally able to stand here and say it to you. The truth is, you have this way of breaking down every wall I've ever built, and somewhere along the line I gave up on trying to build them at all. I'm sorry that it took me so long to get to this point, and I wish to God I'd been able to keep from hurting you in the process, but I'm sure now that I need you in my life. You're the only person I've ever wanted to be with through both the good and the bad. All this chaos has made me think about how careless and shortsighted I've been to deny that, and if it's not too late, I'd like the chance to prove it to you."

Finally free of that difficult proclamation, he watched her anxiously for a reaction. As tears welled up in her eyes, she looked away, and a twinge of fear resurfaced. "Or we could keep blaming all this on jet lag," he suggested lamely.

"Oh, don't you even think about backpedaling now," she retorted tearfully, yanking his head down to meet hers and initiating another, deeper kiss that left him reeling. "You said it, now you're going to have to deal with it."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, pulling her close again.

Nearly twenty minutes later, they were still standing by the window in each other's arms, reveling in the newfound strength of their bond. At last, Mac lifted her head from his chest. "I should probably go," she commented uncertainly.

As she moved to step away, he caught her arm, halting the motion. "Stay with me," he implored quietly.

"For the night?"

"For a start." He smiled, but the request was sincere. "You don't have a bed in the other room. Besides, I managed to sleep when we were together earlier. Maybe it would work again."

Somehow, that touched her almost as much as his previous declaration. "I guess Harriet knows where to find me," she decided, allowing him to pull her down onto the bed. Another idea flashed through her mind, and she added awkwardly, "You are talking about actual sleep, right? Not..."

To her relief, he snorted in amusement. "Mac, if I were really feeling that ambitious at the moment, believe me, you'd be the first to know."

"Okay. Just checking."

They settled against each other comfortably, as if it were the hundredth time they'd shared a bed and not the very first. Before long, each drifted off toward sleep, taking solace in the idea that if they could come this far in a single night, nothing was truly out of reach.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

0943 Local
Medical Center

"Where did Harm wander off to this morning?" Harriet asked as she herded little A.J. into the elevator.

"He'll be here in a few minutes," Mac replied, lifting the toddler up to press the correct button. "Apparently he promised to call his mother, quote, 'the moment he got his six out of Afghanistan,' unquote. He never really had an opportunity before now, and since Public Affairs is probably going to offer his latest exploits up to the press soon, he figured he'd better call her before she found out exactly what he'd been up to."

"Probably a good idea," Harriet agreed. "I don't know much about his mother, but if this little guy ever pulls a stunt like that and then doesn't call me, he'll be in the doghouse for a year." She ruffled A.J.'s hair affectionately, and the little boy beamed up at her. "So. Get any sleep last night?"

Mac sighed, not surprised that she'd already found her way into this topic. But it was hard to be truly irritated, since she had such fond memories of her partner's gentle kiss, just before she'd slipped back into her own room early that morning. "As a matter of fact, I got nothing but sleep last night, thank you."

"Whatever you say ..."

"Harriet. Do you really think I went over there to –" She censored herself quickly, glancing down at A.J.'s innocent face. "I mean, after everything that's happened, neither of us was really in the right frame of mind for that."

"Sorry. It's just that – it seems like you two really have a chance this time, don't you?"

Unable to repress her growing excitement, Mac nodded with a silent, secretive smile. Almost immediately, though, she clamped down on it, feeling a twinge of guilt for allowing herself to be so hopeful when her friends were hurting so badly. Harriet noticed, and shook her head. "Mac, be happy. I want you to. I need something to feel good about right now, you know?"

Mac smiled gratefully and took A.J.'s hand as the elevator doors opened. As they approached Bud's room, a helpful intern informed them that the lieutenant was downstairs in the orthopedic unit, having some tests done on the remaining bone structure in his injured leg. The women chose to wait, and took over the same benches that had been their post the day before.

Soon, Harm came through the stairwell doors, wearing a brown T-shirt and desert BDU pants that were identical to Mac's. They'd been living in their cammies for most of the past two weeks, but she couldn't resist needling him a little about it. "Didn't you pack any khakis, sailor?" she asked as he approached.

"One set, and they're wrinkled beyond repair. It's either these or that rank flight suit I stole. Besides, you're just mad because somebody's wearing the same outfit as you." He folded his arms across his chest.

"You look like a Marine," Harriet commented to him, surprised and amused.

"I know. Depressing, isn't it?" He immediately braced himself as Mac leapt to her feet, ready to defend the Corps' honor. "All, right, all right, I give," he said jokingly, attempting to duck her playful shove. "I'd better start with someone smaller this morning. What's up, A.J.?"

"Hiya!" A.J. said cheerfully. "Pick me up?"

"You got it, little buddy." Harm swung the little boy up onto his shoulders, earning a delighted squeal. "Hey, I bet if we stretch really high, you could touch the ceiling. Want to try?"

"Yeah!" A.J. waved his small arms, reaching up as high as he could.

An orderly pushed Bud's wheelchair around the corner then, and he caught sight of the crowd in the corridor. Seeing his son playing so enthusiastically with the commander deflated him ever so slightly: he'd been waiting months to be reunited with his family, but in this condition, he was no match for a three-year-old. A.J. needed someone to run and crawl with him, someone one with a willing body and spirit. Someone like Harm, he admitted grudgingly, and even though he knew he should be grateful for his friend's presence, he couldn't hold back a flicker of resentment.

"Bud!" Harriet saw him first and rushed over to greet him. "How are you doing?"

"Better, I think." He kissed her hello, then watched as Harm set A.J. down and let the child dash over to his father. Bud smiled and patted his lap. "Want to come up, A.J.?"

A.J. considered the offer for a moment, but his attention was captured by something down the hall, and he suddenly took off. Bud instinctively started to rise, but quickly realized the futility of his action.

"Don't worry, I've got him." Harm took two long strides and snagged A.J. around the waist, throwing him over his shoulder. A.J. shrieked happily as his godfather set him down carefully in Bud's lap.

"Thank you," Harriet said as she gave her son a disapproving look. "He's in that sprinting stage."

Bud kept his expression neutral, trying not to betray the fact that the past few minutes had just highlighted everything he could no longer do in living, brutal color. "It's good to see you, sir," he offered uncertainly.

"Not half as good as it is to see you, Bud." Harm grasped his hand warmly, looking totally at ease. The man was at home just about everywhere, Bud noted. He even managed to look normal in cammies, something the junior officer hadn't quite mastered. When he'd been issued his own BDUs aboard ship, Bud had come to the conclusion that some people were

just meant to be sailors, if for no other reason than because other uniforms looked wrong on them.

"I hear you'll be cleared to come back to the States in a couple of days," Mac mentioned as she joined the group.

"Morning, Mac. Yeah, so they say. It'll be Bethesda for a while, but eventually I'll get to see this new house I supposedly have." He managed a weak smile. Harriet took charge of the wheelchair then, guiding him out of the hallway and into the room. The other officers waited near the door, a little tentative, as he struggled to pull himself up onto the bed. "So the admiral hasn't ordered you back to Washington yet?"

"We're on leave," Mac answered with a shrug. "Sturgis got in last night, so they're not totally undermanned. The admiral basically ordered us not to come home until you did."

Bud nodded – it was typical of their CO. "Who's going to be taking my place on the Seahawk?"

Harm and Mac exchanged a glance, but it was the commander who replied. "It sounds like it's going to be Singer."

"Thank God for small favors," Harriet said vehemently, then instantly clapped a hand over her mouth as the others gave her curious looks. "I mean ... oh, screw it. I just don't want to deal with her any more."

"Well, she'll probably be back at the end of the cruise, so our respite won't be very long," Mac pointed out with a rueful smile.

"Hopefully it'll be long enough for her to forget about a certain incident from last week." The petite blond shifted uncomfortably as three pairs of eyes bored into her, looking for answers. "She was practically gloating about the fact that you two were unaccounted for during the airstrike, and we, um, had a bit of a disagreement."

"What kind of a disagreement?" Bud wanted to know, concerned.

"The kind that ends with a black eye."

There was a stunned silence for a moment, and then Harm cracked up laughing. Mac wasn't far behind, and Harriet offered an embarrassed grin. "It felt awfully good," she admitted, which only made them laugh harder.

"Harriet, you actually hit her?" Harm managed to say when he'd composed himself. "Does anybody else know about this?"

"I have a feeling Tiner and the admiral have their suspicions, but she didn't turn me in. I've been looking over my shoulder every five minutes at work, waiting for retaliation." The two senior attorneys were still trying to control their laughter, and she shot them an accusatory glare. "It's easy for you to laugh! You outrank her! I'm just glad she'll be gone for a while. Maybe when she doesn't get any mail out there, she'll start to understand why I spend so much time on Instant Messenger."

"Well, at least your days of relying on IM are over for a while," Mac said, trying to sound reassuring. "You'll be together, and I'm sure Bud will be back at JAG Headquarters with us before too long."

Bud wasn't at all sure of that, but he nodded as casually as he could.

"Go potty," A.J. announced suddenly. Harriet took his hand to lead him toward the door, but on his way the little boy grabbed Mac's hand as well. She laughed and gave a small shrug as he pulled her along, leaving only Harm and Bud in the room.

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air for a moment as the two men searched for something to talk about. "You heard about the NBA playoffs, right?" Harm offered finally.

"Yeah, Sacramento's out. And there's no way the Nets can take on L.A."

"I know. The damn Lakers are going to end up winning it all yet again." Another silence fell, until the senior officer reached over into Harriet's bag. "Hey, I found this in the gift shop. Thought you might be able to put it to good use."

He handed over a folding magnetic chessboard. "Thanks," Bud replied, setting it on the table. "That was a good idea."

"Seems like I promised to get you back for the last time you kicked my six aboard ship. Although you'll probably just beat me again."

Bud hesitated. He recognized the other man's intent, and on some level he appreciated it. But focusing on one of the few areas in which he had a measure of superiority over Harmon Rabb wasn't going to help his mood. Rather, it only seemed to accentuate the multitude of avenues in which he felt anything but superior. Hell, if he would simply devote his full attention to it, Bud had no doubt that Harm would find a way to beat him at chess, as well. Never before had he been so painfully aware of the differences between them.

"I don't know if I'm ready to think that hard right now, sir. Maybe some other time."

Harm's eyes betrayed no disappointment, but he seemed to sense the growing discord. "Bud, I'm not wearing my oak leaves," he said quietly. "I'm here because I'm your friend. You know that."

"Of course I do. It's just – I'm sorry, sir, but things are pretty confusing right now."

The stilted exchange came to a halt when Petty Officer Coates stuck her head around the door. "Morning, sirs," she said with a smile, oblivious to the tension. "You up for a little more company, Lieutenant?"

"Jen, come on in." Bud brightened considerably as the young woman stepped into the room.

"You look good, sir. They treating you okay over here?"

"Not too bad. I'm glad to see you, though. I guess I should have followed my own advice, huh?"

"You mean the part about not stepping off the road?" Jen shrugged. "If you had, that little boy would have been French-fried."

"Did you ever find out what happened to him? Was he okay?"

The petty officer chewed on her lip helplessly for a moment. "I wasn't really paying attention, sir. It was all pretty crazy ... I'll ask around when I get back to the ship, all right?"

“Yeah, thanks.” Bud clamped down on the wave of frustration that was rising. Making sense of what had happened was difficult enough. Now he couldn’t even hold onto the certainty of saving a life?

Harm watched the two shipmates and realized that he had no place in the hellish memories they shared. “I’m going to go grab a cup of coffee,” he declared, getting to his feet. “Anyone want anything?”

Receiving a pair of ‘no, thank you, sir’s in response, he left the room and came upon Mac and Harriet, returning with little A.J. “Jen Coates is here,” he told them, jerking a thumb toward the door. “I thought I’d give them a few minutes.”

Harriet merely nodded, deciding to take A.J. down to the vending machines for a snack. Mac studied her partner carefully, trying to discern what had changed in his bearing. “Everything okay?” she asked quietly, winding her fingers through his without a second of hesitation.

He smiled at the simple act, lifting their entwined hands to brush a kiss across her knuckles. Amazing how easily everything had changed for them. “Sure,” he replied.

But she knew him far too well to be dissuaded. “Sailor, tell me what you’re thinking,” she commanded, calmly yet firmly.

He sighed. “I can’t get Bud to stop calling me ‘sir.’ ”

“Harm, sometimes he does that even in his own home. It’s just Bud.”

“But he called you ‘Mac’ this morning. He called you ‘Mac’ and me ‘sir.’ I don’t know, it just feels like he’s not comfortable around me all of a sudden.”

“After what he’s been through, I think it’s natural that he’d be a little shaken up, don’t you? Besides, who are you to complain? After your crash last year, you couldn’t even remember his rank.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” He glanced over toward Bud’s room and noticed that Jen was setting up the chess set on the table. Shaking off the vague traces of hurt that resulted, he squeezed Mac’s hand. He had no right to judge his friend’s state of mind. “You’re right. I’m sure it’s nothing. Let’s go get some coffee, okay?”

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Two days later

1625 EDT

Andrews AFB, Maryland

Admiral Chegwidden shielded his eyes against the late-afternoon sun and stepped out onto the tarmac to greet his arriving officers. The hulking C-130 aircraft had taxied to a stop near the main hangar, and the ramp had been lowered to allow the passengers to egress.

A.J. smiled as he caught sight of the Roberts family. His namesake was sitting obediently on Bud’s lap, and Harriet was pushing the wheelchair with her usual cheerful determination. Harm and Mac followed behind at a polite distance, and he was surprised at how worn-out they looked. Before long, though, they caught sight of him, and identical expressions of cool confidence overtook their faces.

“Admiral, this is an unexpected pleasure,” Harriet said brightly as the group approached. “You didn’t have to come out to meet us.”

“Lieutenant, you’d be surprised at how many people wanted to be here today. I had a stack of leave requests on my desk a foot high. But I figured you wouldn’t be all that prepared for a welcoming committee, so I pulled rank.”

Bud looked up at their commanding officer with cautious gratitude: he wouldn’t have wanted to face the entire Headquarters staff today, and he suspected that the admiral knew it. “Thank you, sir,” he said simply. “Hope you’ll forgive me for not standing at attention.”

“Just this once, son.” The JAG shook his hand firmly. “Transport’s here to take you over to Bethesda. As soon as you’re up and around, I’ll be ready to discuss your next duty station. No rush, of course, but I’ll see that your office is ready for you. Right now, you just concentrate on recovering.”

“Aye, sir.”

“We’ll be in touch.” He clapped the junior officer on the shoulder and turned to his senior attorneys. His calm demeanor didn’t change, but he quirked an eyebrow. “Is this a new development?”

Harm and Mac followed his pointed gaze – and at the same moment, both realized, with no small amount of horror, that they were still holding hands. They’d spent so much of the past few days keeping that simple yet reassuring contact that it had become almost second nature. Unfortunately, their lack of foresight had effectively backed them into a corner, and now they would have to begin confronting the issue of their new relationship only days after its genesis. “Um, you could say that, sir,” Harm offered weakly, rapidly coming to the conclusion that honesty was the best policy.

The admiral’s dark eyes gave no sign of approval or disapproval. “Keep it out of the office,” he instructed, and moved on. “It’s a good thing you’re back. Tiner’s been working himself toward a stroke trying to keep up with all the calls you’ve been getting. You’ll both have to deal with a fair amount of press requests – especially you, Commander. The services could really use a positive story to talk about right now, and Public Affairs is jumping on this nuke-chasing stunt of yours with a great deal of enthusiasm. I trust you’ll be able to provide what they need while still maintaining an adequate caseload?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then I’ll see you both at 0800 tomorrow. Go home, and get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir.” They came to attention briefly, relaxing only after he’d turned toward the parking lot. “That didn’t go quite like I’d expected,” Mac commented quietly.

“You and me both. I guess that means we’re not in trouble.” Harm shrugged and hitched his duffel bag higher on his shoulder. “So he ordered us to go home. He didn’t specify that we each have to go to our respective homes, did he?”

She only rolled her eyes at him. “Don’t push your luck, Navy.”

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Four weeks later
1328 EDT
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Bud stood next to his wife in the elevator, leaning gingerly on his crutches. The prosthetic lower leg was still new, and he wasn’t at all used to how it felt. He wasn’t sure he’d ever truly

get used to it, but he was beginning to come to terms with the fact that he had no choice in the matter. The phantom pains that sometimes woke him up at night were surreal, but tolerable. Physical therapy, on the other hand, was sheer torture. Not painful, really, but humiliating. His three-year-old son could run and climb with ease, it seemed, yet he still stumbled on the smallest steps. The stairs in the new house taunted him on a daily basis.

He hadn't intended to come into JAG for a good long time. He wasn't entirely sure he intended to really come back to JAG at all, but that was an issue for another day. Today, he was here only because Harriet had begged him to come. She worried constantly that he wasn't seeing enough of his friends, that he was too far removed from all the things that had made up his life before his fateful tour on the Seahawk. Even though his life before the tour felt as distant as childhood, he'd reluctantly agreed to pay Headquarters a brief visit simply to placate her. After all, everyone in the office had been incredibly supportive: all the food they'd sent over had given Harriet a two-week break from cooking.

He could handle a few minutes of suffocating sympathy. Right?

The elevator doors opened, and he took a deep breath before making his way into the bullpen. Harriet hovered a step behind, keeping a watchful eye on his progress.

A few minutes later, Harm glanced up from his computer, hearing the mild commotion outside his office window. Through the half-open blinds, he could see a group of officers crowding around the Robertses, and a faint ray of optimism played across his mind. Maybe Bud was beginning to get back into the swing of things. He'd tried numerous times over the past few weeks to draw his friend out. He'd helped Harriet wallpaper A.J.'s room; he and Mac had invited the three of them to dinner at least twice; but each time they met, Bud had seemed even more withdrawn, speaking only to answer a direct question. If he looked up at all, it was at Harriet or Mac, and the rift between the men was serving only to enforce Harm's ever-increasing sense of guilt.

The media frenzy over the threat to the Seahawk battle group had been more intense than anyone predicted. For a week or two after their return, Harm had found himself doing more interviews than cross-examinations – it had gotten to the point where he desperately wanted to answer every phone call with a curt “No comment.” The whole experience had drained him, and not simply because he was tired of parroting the same rhetoric to every news agency on the planet. Every time they made him go back through it all, his mind drifted toward the courageous lieutenant who was learning to walk all over again. No one was asking Bud for interviews. The Navy wasn't parading him in front of the cameras in a flimsy attempt to capture a few fleeting moments of good publicity. Somehow, that seemed wrong, and it tugged at the proud commander's mind a little more every time Bud refused to meet his gaze.

Maybe, now that most of that chaos seemed to be past, he could close some of the distance that had opened up between them. Moving to the doorway of his office, he caught a glint of panic in the younger man's eyes, and he decided to rescue him from the throng of well-wishers.

“All right, people, give the man some air.” The staff members dutifully scattered at the sound of the senior officer's voice. “Come in, Bud. Take a load off.”

Bud looked up at Harm, gratitude and apprehension battling for control in his head. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, he thought irrationally. Forcing a smile, he hobbled into the commander's office and dropped less than gracefully into a chair.

“Thanks for the save, sir. There's only so much of that kind of thing a guy can take.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling.” Harm’s expression wavered as he realized what that sounded like. “Well, not entirely, I guess. So, uh, it looks like you’re doing pretty well with the rehab.”

“I still can’t keep weight on the leg for very long.” Bud studied his folded hands, offering nothing further. After a minute, Harm tried again.

“You know, the weather’s been great lately, so I was thinking about taking Sarah up this weekend. You think you could sneak out and come flying with me?”

Flying. He’d always enjoyed it in the past, but now it felt like yet another shining example of how naïve he’d been, practically worshipping the ground the commander walked on. If nothing else, this accident had jolted him back to reality – he was never going to be the same kind of person Harmon Rabb was. The realization seemed neither good nor bad: it was just a fact, and as a result, he couldn’t summon the effort to make any friendly overtures toward the man he’d once considered his closest friend.

“Wouldn’t the colonel be better company, sir?”

“She doesn’t enjoy it as much as you do. Come on, it’ll be great. We can skim the hills and scare the campers.”

“I appreciate the offer, sir.” Bud was at once ashamed of his own coldness and powerless to change it. “But I don’t think so.”

Only the slightest flinch was visible in Harm’s ever-composed demeanor, but anyone who knew him would have recognized the wounded note in his voice. “Bud, I don’t know how comfortable you are talking about this,” he said quietly, “but I want you to know that I respect the hell out of you for what you did – ”

“Of course you do.” He knew he should stifle the bitter irony in his words, but he couldn’t find the energy. “It’s exactly what you would’ve done, isn’t it?”

Caught off-guard by his bluntness, Harm waited a moment before replying. “I’d like to think so,” he said honestly. “But that’s not all. I respect you for being able to get through it. I’m sure it’s been just about the worst thing in the world to have to endure, and I just wanted to say that you don’t owe anyone any explanations for how you choose to handle any of it. If you don’t feel like hanging out or anything, we’re not going to feel slighted ...”

Bud stared at him, uncomprehending. “Wait a minute. You’re pardoning my behavior? I didn’t realize I needed any excuses for myself.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that. What I meant was, I know we can’t understand what you’re dealing with, but if you ever need someone to be a sounding board...” He trailed off as the lieutenant’s gaze grew steadily more disbelieving and, shockingly, more contemptuous.

“You’re offering to be my therapist now? That’s a fascinating idea.” Bud gave a short, utterly humorless laugh as he climbed to his feet. “You’re right – there’s no way you could possibly understand. This isn’t the way it works for you. Thank you, Commander, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d just as soon do without your pity.”

He stalked toward the door with an uneven gait, and Harm quickly came around the desk to stall him. “Bud, I – ”

Bud turned slightly, and the hollow gaze he leveled on the senior officer stunned him into silence. “Just don’t bother, sir.”

That final ‘sir’ cut him to the core, and it was a few seconds before Harm recovered enough to go after him. At that moment, though, Admiral Chegwidden strode out of his office, and Tiner interrupted the business of the bullpen with a sharp “Attention on deck!”

Harm halted, cursing inwardly. The admiral noticed Bud’s presence and raised his voice. “Good to see you, Lieutenant. Stick around, since this invitation applies to you as well. A week from this Thursday, JAG will effectively be closed from 0930 to 1300. Ops will be minimally staffed to cover urgent business, but any ongoing trials will be postponed so that senior staff may attend an awards ceremony at the White House. What ceremony would that be? I’m glad you asked.” He opened a file folder and began to read aloud. “By order of the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense, the Navy Cross is to be awarded to Commander Harmon Rabb, Junior, for his extraordinary accomplishments on the twenty-first of May, 2002 ...”

Harm didn’t listen to the rest of the announcement. He remained expressionless, knowing that numerous eyes were upon him, but he searched out Bud’s gaze, silently pleading with him to understand. He knew it was useless, though. Whatever it was that seemed to be separating them, a Navy Cross and a ceremony led by the President certainly wouldn’t help.

Bud took the opportunity to move slowly through the glass doors toward the elevator, never meeting the other man’s eyes. By the time the official announcement was over, he was gone.

“I trust I don’t need to remind anyone that a White House ceremony means dress uniforms,” Admiral Chegwidden finished. “Congratulations, Commander, and don’t you dare let it go to your head. That is all.”

As the staff returned to their work, Harm accepted a few handshakes and smiles before starting toward the doors, only to realize that the elevator had already come and gone. With a rapid about-face, he took four long strides to catch up to the admiral. “Sir, may I have a word with you?”

The JAG paused just in front of the door to his outer office. “What is it, Mr. Rabb?”

Harm hadn’t given himself much time to think this through, but he charged ahead. “Admiral, about this award ...”

“Are you already bucking for an upgrade to the Medal of Honor, or what?” The admiral’s faint humor vanished when he recognized the uncertainty in his officer’s features.

“On the contrary, sir. I was wondering if possibly this whole thing has been made out to be more than it is.”

Admiral Chegwidden folded his arms across his chest. “Unless I read the after-action reports incorrectly, and you in fact did not guide a nuclear missile away from an aircraft carrier, I don’t see how ‘this whole thing’ could possibly be made out to be more than it is. Do you have some reason to dislike the idea of receiving the Navy Cross?”

This wasn’t going at all well. “No, sir. I’ll wear it with pride. It’s just that this ceremony ... the White House...” Harm squared his shoulders and decided to go for broke. “I’d rather not go through it like this, that’s all. If there’s any way to have a quieter ceremony – ?”

His commanding officer frowned. “Does this have something to do with Lieutenant Roberts?”

How could he answer that question? As he fumbled for a response, Admiral Chegwidden narrowed his eyes. “Commander, I know you’re not shy, so regardless of what’s bothering you, I suggest you suck it up and find a way to accept it. ‘Quiet’ is not going to happen here. It’s not just a question of publicity: there’s the issue of morale to consider as well. This is going to make a lot of people feel better about the state of the services right now. And even if none of that mattered, the simple fact is that you don’t cancel on the President. Have I explained the situation clearly?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“All right.” The admiral softened his expression and spoke in a lower tone. “Don’t worry about Bud. He’ll get back in the saddle eventually. That’ll be all, Commander.”

Harm turned on his heel and escaped back into his office, closing the door securely behind him. Both Mac and Harriet watched his exit from opposite sides of the bullpen, pondering upon what they’d just overheard. While Harriet went off in search of her husband, Mac chose to give her flyboy some space. She’d find a way into his thoughts soon enough.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

2052 EDT

North of Union Station

“I’ve never seen Bud look like that before, Mac – not anywhere close. He’s been pissed off at me before, but this felt like ... I don’t know, like he didn’t even want me to exist. It just about killed me to let him walk away.”

Mac hung the dishtowel on its hook and moved to join Harm in the living room. They’d settled into a comfortable routine: he cooked dinner, she did the dishes. Usually, they discussed their cases over dinner, just to get work out of the way for the evening. Not tonight. Tonight, he’d said hardly a word; until she’d pressed him for details about Bud’s visit, at which point the floodgates had opened.

“I don’t think either of us can hope to comprehend what’s going through his head right now,” she pointed out, taking a seat on the couch beside him. “You may have just touched a nerve. It probably has nothing to do with you personally.”

“No, it had everything to do with me personally. He said something that really got to me – he said ‘this isn’t the way it works for you.’ And he’s right, kind of. I mean, I’ve never had to pay that kind of price for trying to help someone.”

“You’ve risked it plenty of times, though,” she reminded him. “A strong sense of duty is one of the things that the two of you have in common – it shouldn’t be a point of divisiveness.”

“But think about it from his perspective. He’s done everything anyone’s ever asked of him, and he’s never rocked the boat. For the past few months, he’s given up his family life, which is something I’ve never had to do. He’s been a model officer, while I’ve gone off and tied the rules into knots since the very moment I boarded the Seahawk that day seven years ago.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “I guess I’m starting to wonder what he really thinks of me now. And I’m wondering if I really deserved whatever admiration he ever had for me in the first place.”

Mac watched the storm clouds moving across his handsome features, considering how best to respond. She sometimes forgot that Harm and Bud had worked together months before she’d met either of them. What must it have been like for that young ensign, she wondered,

to see a man like Harmon Rabb step onto the deck and directly into the role of Hollywood hero? How many of Harm's flaws had Bud allowed himself to see before now?

"Okay," she said finally. "So that's why you felt the need to essentially tell the admiral that the SECDEF must be a moron to be giving you a Navy Cross?"

Her no-nonsense reply diffused some of his self-pity, and he cast a sideways glance in her direction. "When you put it that way, I sound like an over-dramatic whiner."

She smiled apologetically, sliding over on the couch to wrap her arms around him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to trivialize your point of view. But I don't believe for a second that you've done anything to lose Bud's respect, and furthermore, I don't think you really believe it either. He's hurting, Harm. That's the driving force here. I know it sucks, not being able to help – it's frustrating the hell out of me, too. But while he's still working through all this, we can only get as close as he's willing to let us."

"I know. I swear, I understand that. I remember what it felt like when I was in rehab after my ramp strike – I pushed everyone away, and I lashed out at anyone who dared to get within reach. I know it has to be ten times worse for him, but honestly, in some ways it seems even harder to be on the other side of it like this."

She watched his long fingers play across her leg, the wheels turning in her mind as well. "Have you considered telling him about that? About what happened after your crash?"

Immediately he hesitated. "Mac, it's not the same thing. The way I was back then – even you wouldn't have recognized me. He'll take one look at me today, and he won't be able to relate. It's been so long ..."

"Has it been long enough for you to forget?" she asked gently. "Has it been so long that you don't ever feel that pain anymore?"

He turned toward her, and even if she hadn't known the answer already, she would have been able to read it in his eyes. "I'm not sure that's possible," he replied quietly.

"Then you have at least a small measure of help to offer. You understand."

After holding her gaze for a long moment, he gathered her close and pressed his cheek to her collarbone. "You're the sole reason I'm hanging on to my sanity, you know that?" he murmured.

"I had a hunch." She placed a row of tender kisses from his temple down along the line of his jaw, and he reached up to stroke her silken hair. Soon, the kisses grew from gentle to insistent, and even as he returned them with ardor, a small voice in the back of his mind questioned whether this was really the way they wanted it to be. They'd been together nearly every day since their return, but by some unspoken agreement, neither had pushed for a more physical relationship. It wasn't that they didn't want to take that step: far from it. The idea of taking Sarah Mackenzie to bed and worshipping every sensuous curve of her body was definitely appealing. But he was still terrified of making a catastrophic mistake by asking too soon. With all the strain that had surrounded their lives recently, he'd come to the conclusion that they were simply being ... cautious.

When she pulled herself gracefully into his lap, desire clashed with doubt, and it took everything he had to pull back and make certain there would be no miscommunications. "You're not offering me a sympathy fuck, are you?" he asked lightly.

She smacked him in the head and climbed to her feet, mildly exasperated by the crude, clumsy question. "Don't be an ass. You're not very good at it."

"I'm sorry. I just wasn't sure what you – "

Understanding his concern, she grabbed his hands and pulled him up, looking directly into his eyes. "I'll clarify. I'm not offering any kind of fuck, sympathetic or otherwise. I'm giving you a not-so-subtle message that I want you to make love to me. Do you have an objection to that?"

As he struggled to get his bearings, she took the opportunity to meld her body to his, pulling him down to meet her waiting lips. Feeling him respond instantly, her resolve was strengthened, and she gasped in surprise and pleasure as his hand slid across the thin fabric of her blouse. "Should I take that as a no?" she whispered against his ear.

His response was impeded by her hair and his suddenly ragged breathing. "You talked me into it."

...A few hours later, he lay awake, a thousand thoughts flitting in and out of his mind. She was curled up against his side, sleeping peacefully, and it occurred to him that this might be the exact feeling he'd been unknowingly seeking all his life. There was also a trace of confusion; it didn't seem right that after a night of truly passionate sex with the woman of his dreams, he still couldn't entirely shake the remnants of their earlier conversation.

Maybe she'd been right about that, as well. Maybe he could find a way to show Bud that he understood. As the beginnings of an idea took shape, he carefully slid out from under her and moved silently across the apartment to the bookshelf. It took him a few minutes of searching before he came upon the book he wanted, partially hidden behind another row, and the dark cover had faded somewhat since he'd last seen it. After a long moment of indecision, he placed the book in his briefcase and slipped back into bed.

She stirred ever so slightly at his return, and he dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. "Hey, Mac," he said softly, hoping to coax her back toward wakefulness for just a moment. "You awake?"

"Mmm," she answered drowsily, snuggling back into the crook of his arm. "What is it?"

"Do you have a uniform here for tomorrow?"

"Umm ... hanging in your closet."

"Oh, right. Sorry about the lack of closet space. Is there enough room in there?"

"For the moment." She rubbed at her eyes. "If I said no, you wouldn't go on a cleaning binge at 0035, would you?"

"Hell, no. You wore me out, Marine."

"Wimp." She smiled, closing her eyes again.

"Mac?"

"What, Harm?"

"You know I love you, right?"

At that, her eyes sprang back open, but he'd already closed his. Ignoring the tear that slipped down her cheek, she said a silent prayer of thanks and tightened her hold. "Yeah, flyboy, I do," she whispered.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Same time
Rosslyn, Virginia

Harriet trudged down the stairs, pulling her robe tighter and walking toward the sound of the television in the living room. "Sweetie, please come to bed. We have to be up early if I'm going to get you to Bethesda before 0800."

"I'll just sleep down here." Bud waved a hand toward the couch. "I'm too tired to fight the stairs right now."

Harriet sighed. He slept down here more often than not these days. Sometimes, when she woke up alone, it was hard to remember if he was home or still out on sea duty. Although she'd never dare confess it to anyone, there were times when that illusion seemed more comforting.

"Anything happen at JAG today?" she asked quietly, taking a seat across from him and trying not to look at the unnatural plastic foot that lay abandoned under the table. He glanced up, but only shrugged listlessly.

"Nothing special. I survived it."

"What did you talk about with the commander?"

"Why? What did he say?"

"Nothing, Bud. He said absolutely nothing for pretty much the rest of the day. If I had to describe his demeanor, I'd say he looked like someone ran over his cat. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

He looked at her, faintly surprised by her directness. "What makes you think I would?"

"Because you've barely spoken two words to him in the last five weeks, in spite of his best efforts. Granted, you're not speaking all that much to anyone else, either, but one thing at a time. What am I not getting here? Did Harm do something to make you suddenly resent him?"

"It's not a big deal, Harriet. I'm just figuring out that I don't relate to him as well as I thought, all right?"

"And you relate better to Mac? Or the admiral? You've at least been civil to them. But Harm's the one who's been trying the hardest to be there for you, and yet he's the one you keep pushing away. Is there a rationale behind that?"

He could tell from the impatience flashing in her eyes that this wasn't just about the commander. He'd distanced himself from her as well, but that wasn't a subject he was prepared to confront just then. "Well, I'm sure he'll find a way to get over it long enough to pick up his Navy Cross from the President next week."

Harriet stared at him incredulously, trying to gauge his sincerity. "Don't tell me you begrudge him that."

“Oh, of course not,” he retorted, the sarcasm cold and invigorating against his throat. “I mean, he did save the day yet again, didn’t he?”

“I don’t believe you!” she exclaimed, springing to her feet. “Bud, for God’s sake – he doesn’t even want it! You should have seen him in the office today. He was begging the admiral to get him out of the ceremony, as if that were possible at this point. He feels terrible about all of this. Everyone does, and you’re not helping any.”

“So it’s my fault?” he demanded. “I’m supposed to ease everyone’s collective conscience? I didn’t ask for their pity. If the commander’s so broken up about what happened, why does he suddenly seem to be joined at the hip with Colonel Mackenzie?”

“Bud, stop it right now,” she commanded, angry with him and with herself for being unable to get her point across. If pounding it into his thick skull was the only way, then damn it, she wasn’t going to hold back. “These are your best friends, and if you can’t find it within yourself to be just a little bit happy for them, then you really do deserve pity. Do you really think they’re blissfully happy right now? They’re not! I know – I always thought that if Harm and Mac ever finally got together, JAG would magically turn into one gigantic ‘happily ever after.’ Call me pathetic, but I basically expected balloons to fall from the ceiling and the MPs to start singing the Hallelujah freaking Chorus. But that isn’t what happened. Nobody’s excited for them – even themselves – because they’re all too busy being worried about you. Don’t you see that?”

He was silent as her tirade hit home. After a long silence, he replied at last. “What do you suggest I do? Put on a happy face and pretend I can’t wait to come back to JAG? I don’t fake that kind of thing very well. I can’t find a whole hell of a lot to be happy about right now, so I’m not inclined to work too hard at making everyone else feel better.”

She drew a long breath, then made a careful decision. Kneeling on the floor in front of him, she spoke again, in a more even tone. “Sweetie, at some point you’re going to have to start looking on the positive side of things. I know how dumb it sounds, but the only way you’re going to feel better about yourself is if you stop thinking about what you’ve lost and start thinking about what you still have. Like your friends, and A.J... and me. You still have a life, Bud. There are a lot of people who don’t have nearly so much to be grateful for.”

He didn’t respond right away, but the harsh light in his eyes flickered and faded into shame. “You deserve better than this,” he said quietly. “All of you do. I don’t want to take more than I can give. It isn’t right. I promised myself when I was a kid, when we were living off food stamps in base housing, that I’d never ask for anyone’s charity ever again. Isn’t this the same thing?”

“You think you’re a burden to me? To JAG? Is that why you’re doing this?” She shook her head, and forced him to meet her gaze. “You’re a long way from being a charity case. Eventually you’re going to be walking just as well as you did before, and things aren’t going to look nearly so bleak. Push all you want. Your friends aren’t going anywhere. And neither am I.”

Her earnest declaration touched him deeply; it was as if he had no choice but to share her faith. He leaned forward to kiss her softly, remembering how it had felt to do that very thing for the first time on the fantail of the Seahawk, more than five years ago.

Five years ago, however, she hadn’t responded by sliding up against him and urging his lips apart with her tongue. Bewildered by the unexpected transition, he didn’t react for a minute, while she nimbly wound her way up into the oversized chair next to him. Other memories

were evoked by the precise motions of her delicate hands, and for a fleeting moment he allowed himself to be swept away by her exquisite ministrations.

Then, as if waking from a dream, he was jolted back to reality. “Harriet, w-we can’t ...”

She stared back at him with an expression that was somehow both innocent and heated. “Why can’t we?” she asked matter-of-factly.

He swallowed hard, flushing with embarrassment. “Well, for one thing, the logistics are bound to be awfully complex ...”

“So we’ll adapt. I’m flexible.” Only the slight twinkle in her eye betrayed her awareness of the double meaning.

“Honey, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but – ” He averted his gaze, the thought literally painful. “You can’t tell me that you aren’t just a little repulsed by the idea of sleeping with a man with one leg.”

Her heart cracked a little further at his words, but she refused to let it show. “Bud, look at me,” she said quietly, waiting until he did so to continue. “You’re my husband, and nothing in the modern world could stop me from being attracted to you. Nothing has changed about the way I see you, or the way I feel about you. And nothing ever will. You hear me?”

There were tears in her eyes as she slipped out of her robe, and as he watched, his eyes were bright as well. “Besides,” she went on, reaching for his belt, “we talked about having another baby someday. Don’t you think we could use some practice?”

He lifted a trembling hand to her face. “God, I love you,” he breathed.

She kissed his fingertips. “Then show me.”

That night, both of them slept downstairs on the couch.

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1106 EDT

Ambulatory Rehabilitation Center
Bethesda, Maryland

“Nice work, Lieutenant. Want to call it a day?”

Bud gritted his teeth and all but collapsed onto a bench next to the sidewalk. “Definitely. Do you mind if I stay out here for a while?”

“No problem. I’ll let your wife know where to find you if she comes looking. See you tomorrow.”

As the physical therapist wandered back into the building, Bud took a moment to catch his breath. Walking outside had seemed like a good idea before – the scenery was a vast improvement over the drab walls of the rehab suite. But the heat of the late-June day was starting to settle in, making any kind of exertion rather unappealing. Especially since he didn’t dare wear shorts in public.

He drank in the fresh air for a few minutes, until a familiar voice behind him caught his attention.

“Mind if I join you?”

Turning, he unconsciously straightened up. "Commander. What brings you out here?"

"I had to take a deposition from one of the ER doctors this morning. Harriet mentioned that you'd be around." Harm stepped around the bench and took a seat on the opposite end. "How are things going?"

"Things get a little better every week," he replied, forcing himself to relax. "Might as well get it over with. "Sir, about what I said the other day –"

"It's not important."

"I think it is. I handled the whole thing badly."

"So did I, Bud. Let's just leave it at that, all right?" Harm's gaze flicked over to the gathering of ducks near the edge of the pond. "Harriet said you were thinking about leaving the Navy." Bud's head jerked toward him, startled, but he held up a hand. "It's all right. Mac and I are the only ones she told. She's afraid you might really do it."

"It's not like I've made any decisions yet. I'm eligible for a medical discharge. If I went into civilian law, we wouldn't have to worry about money so much."

"If you resurrect Brumby and Brumby, so help me, I will kick your ass," Harm warned, and they enjoyed a quick laugh. "Seriously, though, Bud. Money has never been your first priority before. You'll make lieutenant commander soon enough, and you've got some benefits coming. What's the real reason?"

"Besides not wanting to suffer through PFT every year on a leg and a half? How many reasons do I need?" He flinched under the other man's unwavering gaze. "I'm just not sure I can perform the duties expected of me anymore, sir. That's all there is to it."

Harm was beginning to suspect that this disillusionment extended beyond just the injury he'd suffered. "Because you're unable to do so, or because you're unwilling?"

There was a long pause before Bud answered. "I've been watching the news a lot lately," he said distantly, fixing his gaze on a rock in the path. "The Pentagon says they're going to be pulling some of our troops out of Afghanistan, because they don't expect to fight any more major battles with Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. I guess I'm starting to wonder if we achieved any of our objectives over there, or if we're just giving up and going home."

Harm was at a momentary loss: he'd always tried to avoid thinking too hard about it. "Are you afraid that everything we did over there was a waste?"

"Well, what good did it do? I mean, what good have any of us done? Bin Laden's still out there, isn't he? Even if he isn't, it's not like there aren't others just like him. Is the world really any safer from terror today than it was on September 10th? For Christ's sake – nobody can even tell me if that little kid is alive or dead!"

The bitterness in his voice hung in the air until Harm finally responded. "Do you think that makes what you did any less important? I don't. I hate what happened to you, but I swear I admire you every day for doing it."

Bud shook his head, disbelieving. "How can you say that, of all people? You did what you did to save an aircraft carrier full of people. I did what I did to save a kid I don't even know. One little kid."

"Bud, it's a lot easier to do the right thing when five thousand lives are on the line," Harm said quietly. "When the stakes aren't as clear, it's infinitely harder. But that's when it's real heroism."

The younger man sighed. "Sir, I understand what you're saying, but I don't know if I can believe it just yet."

"That's all right. You will someday." Harm opened his briefcase and withdrew a small, weathered book. "Anyway, I brought you something. Once upon a time, it helped me a lot. Maybe it'll help you."

Bud accepted it, examining the plain cover warily. "Sir, no offense, but I'm not really in the right frame of mind to appreciate one of those inspirational 'overcoming all obstacles' stories."

"This isn't one of those. It's actually pretty damned depressing at times. It's a true story, about a Navy lieutenant who's injured in an accident and has to give up the career he loves."

"Does he get it back?"

"Kind of, but not in this story. It ends with him trying to move on."

A glimmer of suspicion dawned in the back of Bud's mind. "And how did he do that?"

"He went to law school, Bud." Harm stood up from the bench and began to walk back toward the building. "Like I said. Maybe it'll mean something. Or maybe not."

Bud opened the hardbound book and immediately recognized his friend's distinctive scrawl filling the pages. He looked to the corner of the page and read the date: March 20, 1991. Surprised and a little awed, he called after him. "Comm – Harm? Are you sure...?"

Harm paused and turned back with a shrug. "I can't tell you if the world is any safer today than it was on September 10th. All I know is that it is safer when people like us stand guard than when we don't. That's the best reason I can give you for why I'm still here. You have to decide for yourself whether that's enough for you."

When he was gone, Bud stared long and hard at the journal in his hand. Finally, he decided to put it away until he got home. Whatever those pages contained, he was certain that they would demand his full attention.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

March 20, 1991

Before I get very far into this, I just want to state for the record that I'm doing this under protest. I don't know what the hell they think I'm going to get out of writing everything down like a damn third-grade girl, but Dr. Meyer says write, and I'm not really in a position to argue, even with a shrink ... so here goes.

Why do I need a shrink? What an excellent fucking question. Apparently the gods of the Navy are under the impression that I'm traumatized in some way. I don't know where they'd get that idea. Let's see – two weeks ago I was with my squadron in the Arabian Sea. One week ago, I woke up in a hospital in Germany. Today, I'm stuck in this room, with nothing to do but stare at the walls and think about how badly I've fucked up my life. But traumatized? Whatever would make you think that?

Shit, I'm in hyper-sarcasm mode today. Okay, start over. My name is Harmon Rabb. I'm twenty-seven, and I'm a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. Up until a few days ago, I would have phrased that sentence differently. I would have said that I'm an aviator in the U.S. Navy. That's the way it's always been – what I did was always more important than who I was. I was a pilot. I flew. Notice the past tense there, though. Now, I don't know what I'm going to do, and consequently, I'm not sure I know who I am, either. All I really know for sure is that I can't fly.

Twelve days ago, I was coming in for a night trap in rough weather. Night traps always suck, but we've all done a hundred of them before, and this one shouldn't have been any different. Something obviously was different, though. I don't have a real clear picture of what happened – concussion, they tell me – but I came in low, and our bird hit the ramp. I think I remember my RIO yelling, but for all I know it could have been me yelling. Next thing I knew, my mother was sitting by my bed crying, and I couldn't move my legs. It was most of a day before anyone got up the courage to tell me about Mace, my RIO. They said he'd punched us out too early – his parachute had pulled him into the wreckage while it was still burning. Ever since then, I've been seeing flames every time I close my eyes, even though I can't really remember the crash. I guess it's the least I can do, since I'm the reason he's dead.

Bud read the page over again, shocked by the tone of the words. The man who'd written this wasn't the man he knew – it wasn't even the man he'd met seven years ago, still too consumed by his shame to wear his hard-earned wings. The evolution was difficult to imagine. He turned the page, almost afraid of what he'd find.

I can't even count the number of people who've tried to tell me that it wasn't my fault. Right. This isn't rocket science here. I was the pilot, I was the one trying to land the damn plane, and I was the one who screwed the pooch. Hence, my fault. Q.E. fucking D. This thing with my eyes – all it means is that my time as a naval aviator is over. It doesn't erase my responsibility for what happened. Nothing can do that. I'm always going to be the guy who got his RIO killed. The best I can hope for is to somehow figure out something else to do with my life, so I won't be hearing Andy Mace's voice in my head until the end of time.

What the hell am I supposed to do, though? I can't even think about it. Christ, right now I can't even walk. They keep promising me that I'll be able to get back to normal eventually. I believe them some of the time – mostly when I'm lying down. When they drag me out of bed and force me to stand up, on the other hand, my back hurts like nothing I've ever felt before, and that usually convinces me that they're full of shit.

I honestly have no idea where I'm headed next week, next month, or next year, and it scares the hell out of me. So here I am, hating life and writing in a stupid fucking journal about it. Hope you're satisfied, Dr. Meyer, because I don't feel the slightest bit better about myself.

As Bud continued to read, he began to get a picture of his friend that was a far cry from the one he'd previously had. The raw pain, anger, and guilt that rang in the words were almost blinding, but he recognized in them a familiar thread. God knew he'd buried enough frustration and bitterness over the past few weeks – if that patronizing rehab counselor of his had forced him to write his own feelings down, he probably would have reacted in a similar manner.

The entries continued throughout the spring and summer of 1991, as the young Lieutenant Rabb struggled through another back surgery and subsequent recovery. He wrote of his new doubts about choosing a Navy life, of following his father's path without question and

suddenly feeling betrayed by that legacy. Bud was overwhelmed – the words could have been his own. Like him, Harm had detested his own weakness and resented the help he needed. Through it all, there was an underlying current of determination, the strength of will that was so characteristic of the man he'd become. Bud kept turning the pages and drinking it all in, immensely grateful to feel just a little less alone.

... ..Had to go before the board of inquiry yesterday, down at Pensacola. It was the first time I'd put on a uniform since it happened, and I think I looked fairly pathetic in it. The questions weren't so bad at first. The officers on the panel weren't trying to accuse me of anything. They just asked me how it happened, and even though I couldn't remember it clearly for a couple of weeks afterwards, I sure as hell remember it now. Somehow I don't think I'll have any problems recalling any part of that day for a long, long time. But that's off the subject. What really started to get to me was the way they looked at me – so damn sympathetic. They felt sorry for me. Maybe that's what I deserve. It's not like they have any reason to respect me or anything. I'm not sure anyone does anymore.

It's probably a mistake to even put this on paper, but sometimes I really wish –

Bud dropped the book onto the table, unable to believe what he'd just read. He fumbled through the pages to confirm that his eyes hadn't played a trick on him. Harm couldn't possibly have written that and meant it – right? Re-reading the entry, he knew there had been no mistake, and the idea floored him.

He glanced up at the clock, considering his options. Harriet wouldn't be home until later – she was picking up A.J. at his playgroup. Quickly, he made a decision and reached for the phone. There was something he just had to know, and it wouldn't wait another day.

Same time
North of Union Station

Mac was the first one to hear the tentative knock, and crossed the apartment to look through the peephole. Faintly surprised by the visitor, she yanked the door open. "Bud, come in. Is everything okay? You didn't drive here, did you?"

"I took a cab. I, uh..." He trailed off, suddenly rethinking his actions. "I'm sorry, ma'am – I should have called..."

"Don't worry about it." Harm appeared from somewhere behind his partner, immediately noticing the journal in his hand. "We were just cleaning up from dinner."

"But you've got company – "

"I'm not 'company,' Bud. I'm practically a permanent fixture these days." Mac smiled and tucked the dishtowel into her belt. "Get in here already."

Relenting, he limped into the apartment, eyeing the low-seated couch with distrust. Reading his thoughts, Mac pulled out the desk chair for him, and took a seat on the couch herself. Harm finished up the last of the dishes and came over to join them. "What's up?"

Bud hesitated. "Si – Harm, there's something I want to ask you, but it's pretty personal." Mac rose to leave the room, not wanting to intrude, but he shook his head. "Not to me – personal to you, I mean." He held up the journal with a tentative expression.

Mac looked to Harm for guidance, and he laid a hand on her arm. "I don't want to have any secrets from you," he told her quietly. "Stay." To Bud, he said simply, "Go ahead."

Bud summoned his courage and explained. "I got about as far as May, just after the inquiry, and there's something in here that I just couldn't believe you'd ever think, much less write. I guess I wondered if maybe you'd done it just to see what it looked like, or ..."

"Are you asking me if I really wanted to die?"

Mac gave a little gasp, utterly taken aback. She didn't know quite what she'd expected to hear, but that certainly wasn't it. Harm merely waited for Bud's silent nod of assent before answering. "For a while in there, yeah, I think I did. But you have to keep in mind that there's a big difference between having thoughts about not wanting to live and actually considering suicide. If I'd really wanted to kill myself, I could've done it. It's not like I didn't own a sidearm. But I never got to that point. It was more the idea of taking Andy's place, I think. I wanted to be the one dead instead of him. At the time, I was having a hard time getting past that guilt, and I honestly couldn't convince myself that there was anything worthwhile out there for me."

He offered a wry smile. "You might have noticed that I have something of a one-track mind when it comes to flying. It's the thing I hold onto when I'm not sure about anything else. Sometimes I find that it creates more problems than it solves, but it's hard to go against instinct." He risked a brief glance in Mac's direction as he said it, and although the significance of it escaped Bud's notice, that admission spoke volumes to her. "Losing that sense of direction just destroyed me. Aviators are a strange bunch – we all have this idea that we're destined to be what we are, and when it didn't work out for me, I thought that my life was basically ruined. I'm not proud of it – it was a pessimistic, immature attitude, because I had a lot more going for me than I was willing to admit. I'm so embarrassed by some of what's in that book that I almost decided not to give it to you. I didn't have a permanent disability, and I knew it."

"But you were alone," Bud protested. "You didn't have the kind of family and friends to lean on that I do. You had to give up the one thing you'd wanted to do all your life and practically start over. I don't have to do that – I can still practice law just as well with one leg as I could with two." Slowly, he realized that he'd never verbalized that thought before.

Harm lifted an eyebrow with a trace of a smile. "Then you've probably got more going for you than you're willing to admit, too. Actually, I know you do. But read the rest of it, if only to let me feel like I redeemed myself. You'll see that I didn't stay hopeless forever."

"Nice going, flyboy – you're giving away the ending," Mac tried to scold teasingly, still trying to come to terms with all she'd heard.

"Some help you are, Marine," he fired back good-naturedly. "Bud, why don't I drive you home? Harriet's bound to send out a search party sooner or later."

"That'd be great. Thanks." Bud climbed to his feet, shaking his head. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, sir, but I'm really amazed at how far you've come since then. Now that I can really see what it was like for you then, and since I know how hard it is to get through this kind of thing ... I don't know, I guess I'm just impressed. I mean, look at where you are now – you've got everything you ever wanted ..."

To his surprise, Harm shook his head with a small smile. "Bud, if that were completely true, my life would look a lot more like yours." He glanced over at Mac again, and this time the younger man saw and understood. "But I'm getting there."

Bud returned the smile as they made their way to the door. "Listen, do you have a free evening next week? I still owe you a game of chess."

When Harm returned to the apartment half an hour later, he found Mac still sitting on the couch in the exact same place she'd been when he left. A strange expression creased her graceful features, and he frowned. "Mac? Everything all right?"

"Hmm? Oh. You're back." She blinked and looked up at him, bringing herself back to the present. "That was a good thing you did," she said honestly. "Letting him see everything you felt, good and bad ... I think it went a long way toward making him feel better about all this."

"I hope so. I hope I didn't totally overstep my bounds, since obviously I can only relate to what he's going through up to a point. But it sounds like he understands. I think he'll be okay." He slid onto the couch next to her. "The question now is: what can I do to make you feel better?"

"Me?" She feigned confusion, but he wasn't buying it.

"Something's bothering you. Is it the fact that Bud now knows substantially more than you do about that particular part of my life? Because if you want to read it, too –"

"It's not that, although I would like to read it sometime. It's more about trying to imagine you in that state of mind. I've never seen you be that ... vulnerable, I guess. You have to admit, you're pretty good at appearing indestructible. It's hard to envision what you must have been like at that time, but I certainly have some personal experience with feeling hopeless ..."

She shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Maybe I'm just realizing that we have even more in common than I thought."

He nodded understanding, reaching over to trace her cheek with a gentle finger. "You don't think I'm vulnerable now?" he asked. "Sitting here with the woman I love more than life, the only person who sees through every defense I've got?"

Marveling at the way those words seemed to fall so easily from his lips, she smiled a little. "What you said to Bud before you left, about wanting your life to be more like his – was that for his benefit or mine?"

"Maybe both. But why does it matter? It was the truth."

"A family and a house in the suburbs?"

"You don't think you're up to the challenge?"

She didn't respond for a moment, and he briefly regretted being so forward. They hadn't discussed anything relating to the future – maybe she'd just laugh it off, and they'd be able to dodge the looming questions implied in that comment ...

But she didn't laugh it off. Instead, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. "I love you, sailor," she said simply, and settled into his welcoming embrace.

2216 EDT
Rosslyn, Virginia

"Bud, are you coming up?"

"Five minutes, sweetie. I just need to finish this last page."

Bud had explained the meaning of the journal to Harriet as soon as he'd arrived home. He'd had no choice: she'd noticed the difference in his bearing immediately, and upon hearing the full story, she'd looked happy enough to kiss the commander senseless. He couldn't blame her – he felt stronger than he had in quite some time, and the feeling was contagious. But he needed to read the rest of the journal, to witness his friend's transition from utter hopelessness to true resolve.

... ..I still can't look back on these past few months and find much to be proud of. Sure, I'm healed – I passed my PFT on the first try yesterday, which surprised the hell out of the sergeant keeping score. Take that, punk. And I've got something to do with myself, although I still don't know whether it's going to work out or not. Who talked me into this lawyer thing, anyway? It's been a long time since I last cracked a book, and I've never been all that thrilled about the idea of public speaking. Not to mention the fact that the fleet JAGs were always prime targets for harassment by the aircrews. But what the hell – it beats retraining as a navigator, or a comm officer, or a damn cook. Maybe I'll actually be halfway decent at it. Stranger things have happened, right?

I know I could have gotten out and gone civilian, but the truth is, I already know that it wouldn't have worked. I realized that when I got back to Norfolk last week to clean out my apartment. Being back on the naval station just felt right, and I can't explain it any better than that. It's just who I am, I guess. I'm an officer. That much didn't change when everything else went to hell. Maybe now, who I am will start to be as important as what I do.

I don't think I'm ever going to be one of those people who believes that everything happens for a reason. I can't find a single good reason that Mace had to die, and at the moment, I can't find a reason why I should be here in Washington instead of thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic. But if I spend all my time thinking about that, I know I'm screwed before I even start. I guess I'm willing to entertain the possibility that things are going to turn out all right.

Better get going – Keet's in town, and he promised me a memorable night out before he ships out on the Roosevelt. Classes at Georgetown start Monday morning. Wish me luck.

Bud put the book away with equal parts satisfaction and wonder. If someone had told Lieutenant Rabb eleven years ago that he'd soon be one of the most accomplished attorneys in the Navy, that he'd be able to reclaim his flight status and receive medals from two different presidents, he wouldn't have believed a word of it. For Bud Roberts, the inference was clear: a future beyond his imagination awaited him, as long as he could maintain his faith. A future at JAG, with his friends and family ... Stranger things have happened, his mind echoed.

He made his way up the stairs, putting just a bit less weight on the railing this time, and ducked into A.J.'s room long enough to place a kiss on his sleeping son's forehead. Then he slipped into bed beside his wife and reached over to turn off the light.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The following week

0948 EDT

White House Rose Garden

“Stop fidgeting, squid!”

“It's not my fault the damn thread broke!”

"No, but it is your fault that you didn't notice the loose button in the first place. So hold still, would you?"

With impeccable accuracy, Mac slid the safety pin into place, securing the second button of her partner's dress whites in its rightful position. "There. No one will be able to tell."

"I sure as hell hope not. That's all I need, the President of the United States thinking I can't keep my uniform from falling apart." Harm caught her hand and kissed it before she backed away, some of the apprehension in his eyes fading. "Did somebody show my parents to their seats?"

"Sixteen minutes ago, Harm. Relax." She studied him for a minute. "You must really be freaked. You never refer to your mother and Frank as your parents."

"I am not 'freaked'. I'm just tense. Besides, maybe I want to do right by Frank after all this time. Did that ever occur to you?" She merely cocked an eyebrow at him inquisitively. "I've been thinking more and more about the things I take for granted," he explained quietly. "So I'm trying to appreciate what I have. Make sense?"

"Perfect sense," she answered with a smile, taking a second to peek out around the building at the gathering crowd.

"Have you seen..." He trailed off, not wanting to sound too hopeful.

Her smile wavered, and she shook her head. "Not yet. We've got seats for them, but they weren't sure if they were going to make it."

"I know. I wouldn't blame him for not wanting to come to this circus. I don't even want to be here."

"Not even a little?"

"Okay, maybe a little." He cast a glance around the garden, his expression wistful. "History really does repeat itself, doesn't it? It's been almost six years since we were here last."

Comprehending immediately, she followed his gaze to a spot near the curb, only a few yards away. "We met right there, didn't we? God, was it really six years ago?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" He shook his head with a wry grin. "You thought I was an arrogant jerk."

"You were," she returned smoothly, eyes twinkling for just a moment. "You looked at me and saw someone else."

"Not for long," he assured her. "And the admiral took one look at us and said –"

" 'Don't get too close. You have to work together.' "

Both officers turned to see Bud Roberts standing by the gate in his dress whites, leaning only on a cane. Harriet stood behind him in her own dress uniform, holding little A.J.'s hand and smiling at them. "I guess that means we're all back where we started."

"Not by a long shot." Harm quickly crossed the path to shake his hand firmly. "Glad you could make it, Lieutenant."

“Congratulations, sir. I was impressed the last time we did this, and I’m impressed again.”

“And just think – this time, I even voted for the guy who’s giving me the medal.” He sized up his friend carefully. “So does this mean you’re thinking about holding onto that uniform, Bud?”

Bud shrugged with a smile. “Can’t see any reason to get rid of it just yet, sir.”

Each of them managed to mask their reactions, but inwardly, his wife and closest friends breathed identical sighs of relief. Maybe things were finally looking up.

“Good answer.” They were interrupted by announcement for the guests to take their seats, and said a quick goodbye before going their separate ways. Mac reached up to place a delicate kiss on her flyboy’s cheek, and after straightening his cover, she hurried out to join the rest of her friends.

As Harm took his place with the rest of the honorees, Bud took a deep breath and went to take his place among the crew of JAG Headquarters. He was welcomed with warm smiles and greetings, and for the first time in ages, they gave him comfort. This really was his place – he belonged here with them. Right then, that seemed like the most important thing in the world.

*** THE END ***