



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: none

Author's Notes: The recent events in the United States don't need to be dramatized - reality is shocking enough. I sincerely hope that this effort doesn't offend anyone. My goal was only to find an outlet for my own thoughts and feelings that others could relate to in some way.

*"Oh beautiful, for heroes proved in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved - and mercy more
than life ..."*

**2146 EST
Georgetown**

When all this began, I thought that I would end up wanting a drink more than anything else in the world. I thought I'd want to blur the images that have been burned into my memory over the past dozen hours, to dull the panic and the anguish I saw today. But strangely enough, I don't. I don't want to surrender my focus for one second. Because now that the world outside my immediate duty is beginning to creep into my mind, I can put a name to the emotion I feel most strongly - and it is rage.

I may spend my days in a courtroom, but the uniform I wear is Marine green, and right now I want to feel like a Marine. I want to defend my country, the people I love, from the monsters that could do something like this. Were they human? Could a thinking, feeling human being actually take control of an airplane and willingly steer it into a building? I've seen many things in my life, things I didn't want to believe could be true, but this is beyond anything I've ever imagined. The world I woke up in this morning wasn't what I thought it was. It never will be again.

Like everyone else, I'll be able to recall exactly where I was when everything went to hell. I was at work. In the courtroom, to be precise, about to launch into my opening statement in the Tanner court-martial. A young petty officer rushed into the room, ignoring every protocol in the book, and spoke quietly to the judge. I didn't know Admiral Morris could go pale like that, but he did. Immediately he ordered a recess and directed all of us back to Ops. Bud and I just looked at each other and took off, knowing instinctively that something was very wrong. But I had no idea what I was walking into when we reached the bullpen.

Everyone - and I do mean everyone - was standing in front of the bank of television sets, just staring in utter shock. Even Harm, the acting JAG today, had been paralyzed by whatever horror he'd just witnessed. After everything we'd seen and done together, the look on his face at that moment was the most frightening thing I'd ever seen. "Mac," he said hoarsely, his eyes never leaving the screen, "there's been an attack."

I didn't dare ask where. I turned to follow his gaze, and saw the towers burning ... and from then on, one way of life was finished, and another had begun.

The phone rang, sharply breaking the moment, and Tiner dove for it. "Sir," he reported, handing it to Harm. My partner listened for minute, and any remaining color in his features fled. He gave a curt "aye, sir" and hung up, instantly in command mode.

"Listen up!" he ordered, tearing everyone's attention away from the awful scene for a moment. "As of now, we are at Delta. Implement all security procedures and wait for further instructions. That is all."

As officers began to secure the building, efficiently but worriedly, he punched another button on the phone. "This is Commander Rabb in Ops. Lock down the gates. No one in or out without express permission until further notice."

It was all too surreal. In my entire military career, we'd never once gone to Threatcon Delta at a stateside base. "Harm, what the hell's happening?" I demanded, following him back into the admiral's office. He collapsed into a chair, running a frustrated hand through his short hair.

"Mac, if I had the first damn clue, believe me, I'd tell you." He sighed and leaned forward. "Two commercial jets flew into the towers about twenty minutes apart. It's way too coordinated to have been an accident. There's reports flying all over the place about another one here in Washington, but everything's in chaos - nobody knows what's going on ..."

There were shouts and gasps from the bullpen, and we both ran to investigate. On the screen, another fire raged, this one infinitely closer to home.

"Jesus Christ," Harm breathed. "The Pentagon."

Everyone in that room had friends or shipmates across the river at the Pentagon. It was our center, our headquarters, and one of the most impressive buildings I'd ever set foot in - and it was in flames. "Harm," I whispered, praying no one would overhear, "the admiral's in there today."

Even before the words were out, I could see in his eyes that he'd come to the same chilling realization. "Which side is that? Which side got hit?"

I searched my mental map. "E Ring, over by the highway, across ... Oh, God. It's our side."

Within three seconds, Harm had made a decision. He stalked back into the office and retrieved his cover and car keys. "You're in command. I'm going over there."

I wasn't about to question his need to act, as futile as it might be. The problem was, I

felt it, too. "Why you?"

"Two reasons. One, because you'll do a much better job of keeping things under control here than I would." He was probably right, although I wouldn't tell him so. "And two, because if they need as much help as I think they do over there, the nine inches and eighty pounds I have on you might make a difference."

"All right. Be careful. And for God's sake, keep your cell phone on." We embraced hastily, and he was out the door before anyone in the bullpen could wonder. I reached for the phone. "This is Colonel Mackenzie. I'm taking over in Ops, and Commander Rabb is headed for the gate. Make sure he gets through."

I took a few moments to compose myself before addressing the staff. "People, we're going to get you home to your families as soon as we can. As soon as we have confirmation that the airspace has been secured, we'll start opening the gates, but you're going to have to be patient. We'll use the recall roster if we need to get any information out later on. I know we're all worried about a lot of different things, but we can't afford to guess at anything right now. All I can say is that you can be sure we'll get through this."

I felt like a fraud even for attempting to uphold any kind of confidence at that moment, but there was nothing else to be done. We spent hours in front of those damned TVs, grasping at any information we could find, but none of it could tell us what we really wanted to know. Who, and how, and why.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the phone on Tiner's desk rang again. Inexplicably, the yeoman smiled after he answered it, and he quickly put it on speaker for the rest of us. "Hey, Ops," came Harm's voice, tired but strong. "There's somebody here who'd like to have a word with you."

There was a pause, and then the unmistakable voice of our commanding officer filtered through. "Don't worry, folks," said Admiral Chegwidden. "I'm not that easy to get rid of."

There was a muted celebration, for as relieved as we were to know that he was all right, there was no escaping the knowledge that so many others were not. It wasn't long after that word came down to allow people to leave the grounds, and so when it was all said and done, I ended up sitting here on the couch, the TV news silently showing a montage of terror over and over. I don't want to see it anymore: I can't bear to watch those magnificent buildings crumbling yet another time. But I can't turn it off. I have to know. I have to know where to focus this anger, this pain. I don't know what else to do.

While all this played continuously in my head, a knock sounded at the door. With a dim sense of who it was already, I got up to answer it. True to form, Harm was standing there, looking like an absolute mess. Dust and grime were streaked across his face and uniform, and the lifeless expression that darkened his blue eyes was like nothing I'd ever seen. He held up a duffel bag of clothes - apparently he'd learned something from me after all this time. "Mind if I borrow some soap and water?" he asked simply.

I let him in without a word, and waited for him to get cleaned up. I turned off the TV: its stories had suddenly taken a backseat to my friend's hellish experience. Within ten minutes, he emerged from the bathroom in a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, and sank onto the couch beside me. It was a few seconds before he spoke, and when he did, defeat resonated through his warm voice. "I just didn't feel like going home," he said dully. "As soon

as I got in the car, and I was alone for the first time ... being alone just reinforces how helpless I am.”

“I know,” I said quietly: it was exactly the reason I was so glad to have him here. “But you weren’t helpless. You did something about it.”

“Not very much.” Harm leaned back and drew a weary hand over his eyes. “I was over there for hours, and all I could really do was carry stretchers and direct the paramedics. Eventually there was nothing for me to do, but I couldn’t leave. I just - how could I give up and go home, knowing that there were so many people still in there ...”

“It’s one of our most basic principles,” I answered. “We never leave people behind.”

“I guess. But what I saw was nothing compared to what’s going on in New York. Thousands of people, just going about their lives ... damn it ...” He shook his head. “I talked to my mother. She was panicking because I told her I had a meeting at the Pentagon this week. Frank knows a lot of people in Tower One - some firm he does business with. They were both trying to get me to tell them how this could happen, as if I had any answers. I didn’t know what to say. We give up so much to defend this country, and then something like this happens - and it’s hard not to feel like we’ve all failed a little.”

“They’re already talking about retaliation,” I told him, finally putting my hours in front of the television to use. “The President’s authorized a massive call-up of the Reserves. They’re calling it a war, but we don’t know how to fight it.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way,” he replied absently. After a moment, he looked over at me for the first time. “You think they’ll recall me to flight status?”

Surprised, I could only shrug. “I don’t know. I guess if they’re short of pilots, they might. I hadn’t thought about it. Would you want to go?”

“Hell, yes, I would. At least then I could do something about this, instead of sitting here, feeling useless. More than that - Mac, right now I’m so angry I can’t see straight. What in the name of God did these animals hope to accomplish? How is it that there can be people who actually caused this to happen, and plenty more who are thrilled that it did? What is so repulsive about our society that makes people resort to such things?”

“They think we’re bullies,” I said, wishing I had a better answer. “They think we’re too powerful, and they want us to stay out of other countries’ affairs.”

“That’s just it. We *are* that powerful. And because of that, we have a hell of a lot of responsibility. When we *don’t* act in defense of others, we get slammed for it. When we do, we still get slammed. We’re screwed either way.”

I carefully ignored the defeatist tone; it sounded so wrong coming from him. “Maybe so. But that doesn’t mean we can stop following our collective conscience. Americans aren’t the only ones who deserve the kind of freedom we provide. If we let injustices continue in other places, the whole ‘liberty and justice for all’ concept doesn’t ring as true. And if we let fear dictate our way of life, even after something like this ... well, then we’ve lost just as much.”

“The voice of a Marine, all right.” There was a trace of humor in his voice, but it didn’t reach his face. “There’s going to be a lot of fear now. Maybe we were wrong not to

fear before.”

“I don’t think so. I think we should build those towers right back up. Maybe not to 110 stories, but I think we need to do it. As a symbol, if nothing else. We’re a strong society. We won’t forget, but we can recover. I’m sure of it.”

He met my gaze again, and shook his head in quiet anguish. “Mac,” he whispered, “I’ve never doubted your word before, but right now, I just don’t know if I can believe that.”

At that, I fell silent. If this man, whose ideals had remained unshakable throughout so many ordeals, could lose faith in something, the world was indeed a different place. Harm stood up and went to the window, his handsome features a mask as he stared out at the silent streets. I turned the TV back on, needing to feel some connection with the outside world. And after a few minutes, I saw something that restored the tiniest glimmer of hope to my soul.

“Harm, come see this.”

“I don’t want to see any more.”

“I don’t care. Get over here.”

He glared, but returned, and together we watched as a group of firefighters ran a pristine American flag up a makeshift pole. The bright colors stood out as a beacon over the wreckage of New York’s proudest buildings, and I found myself blinking back tears. Noticing, Harm reached over and squeezed my hand, his own eyes bright.

“The sun is going to come up tomorrow,” I said softly. “Everything else may be a mess, but at least that much is true. Maybe that’s all we need.”

***** THE END *****