



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: vignette, angst, romance

Spoilers: "Lifeline," "Adrift," "Enemy Below" / "Critical Condition"

Summary: Post-episode story for the eighth-season premiere, "Critical Condition," based primarily on the final image of the ep. Being Superman sure isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Author's Notes: Whoa, writing in second person present tense. This kind of thing could give even the most dedicated grammar wonk a headache. Hope the whole stream-of-consciousness thing works.

It's getting late. Or maybe it isn't. There's really no way to know anymore. You've jumped a few time zones lately, and besides, nobody really wore a watch out in the foothills of Afghanistan. It's hard to recall exactly what it was like out there, though two weeks in a war zone would normally be a pretty memorable experience. Still, all you can seem to remember now is the last God-knows-how-many hours you spent in the cold, unfeeling passageway outside sickbay, praying like never before ... longer and harder even than you'd prayed a year ago, when it was your own life hanging on the edge and not your dear friend's.

That realization isn't a surprise. You don't have a wife and a young son who would be devastated without you. Bud does. God, little A.J.'s only three years old - even you have more memories of your father than he would. And that's what it really comes down to, isn't it? Among the pangs of misplaced guilt you've been shoving aside all day, in between the flashes in your mind's eye of Bud alive and healthy and standing on two feet, you kept seeing those uniformed men getting out of their car and coming up Harriet's driveway. It's an image that every military family member dreads, but you have a different take on it, because you've seen it from the very front row. Your reaction to that image isn't fear - it's hatred, plain and simple.

When the surgeon finally emerged and put an end to your torture, the sheer magnitude of your relief was almost painful. Mac seemed so surprised to see the tears in your eyes. You're still not sure why. She was with you on the Hornet and in Russia, so she's been a witness to just about every tear you've cried over the past ... well, thirty years, give or take. And that grates on your mind, too. Everyone's under the impression that you perfectly fit the alpha-male stereotype of not showing that kind of emotion. They've got you pegged as invincible, a

Superman, and a number of people probably resent you for it. God knows it frustrates the hell out of Mac on a regular basis.

Thing is, they've got it so wrong that it makes you want to kick something. You don't *want* to keep your anguish locked away. You'd like more than anything to be able to really cry right now, more than just a few silent tears. You'd give just about anything to be able to look Sarah Mackenzie in the eye and confess everything you've ever felt for her. You just can't make yourself do it. Whether it's a result of the training or the gender roles, or the childhood you wasted trying to be too strong, the end is always the same. You're emotionally paralyzed, and the worst part of it is that you're completely aware of it.

Now, you're lying awake in your rack, in exactly the same place where you collapsed upon first entering the room. Mac would be able to tell you precisely how long it's been, but you don't know or care. Securing quarters aboard ship can be a complicated process when you don't have orders to be there in the first place. You wonder idly if you'll be facing charges when you get home, or if Mac will, or both. As strange as it seems, contemplating a matched set of courts-martial actually sounds more pleasant than contemplating Bud's future as an amputee.

Normally, you'd go up to the weather deck if you couldn't sleep, but watching Chinooks and Hueys land never really did anything for you, so you don't bother. It's probably just as well. If you were still aboard the Seahawk, you might be tempted to borrow a Tomcat and take a sortie or two to clear your head. Flying, even in combat, is uniquely cathartic that way. Chasing that damned nuke had actually been easier to deal with than this tragedy. At least you were trained for what happened up there. There weren't any courses that prepared you for walking into sickbay and seeing Bud just barely alive. Bud Roberts, of all people, whom you still sometimes see as that eager young ensign who dutifully followed your every move. He wanted to learn so much from you, and now that it's come to this, it's difficult to convince yourself that you haven't failed him.

Someone is pounding on the hatch, and you've got a pretty good idea who it is.

"Harm, it's me."

Sure enough. You don't respond right away, torn as to whether you really want to see her. True, holding onto her may very well have been what held you together earlier - but everything hurts so much right now, and being utterly unable to make her understand that might just make it all worse.

"Harm, come on. I know you're in there." Her voice isn't altogether steady, and for a brief, irrational moment, you resent her for having the ability to be so open about her feelings. "I don't care if you think you want to be alone. Let me in, damn it."

It occurs to you that leaving her out there when she needs someone to lean on would be the act of a first-class jerk. So you pull yourself upright, blink away the throbbing behind your eyes - you probably should have ingested something besides coffee today - and yank open the hatch.

Mac stares at you for a long moment, then steps over the knee-knocker and shuts the hatch behind her. "You look about as good as I feel," she comments with a half-hearted smile. "You think the admiral's gonna have us shot?"

"I don't know. But I'll defend you in court if you'll defend me."

"Deal. I talked to the surgeon again. They're going to transport Bud ashore as soon as he's strong enough for it. He might need additional surgeries for his leg at some point, and it'd be better to have a specialist for that."

"Doesn't seem like there's much left for them to cut up." You hear the bitterness in your own voice, but you can't do much about it now. You can feel Mac's gaze on you despite the fact that you're intently studying the bulkhead.

"He's going to be okay, sailor. He's already through the worst of it, remember?" She's expecting a response, but you don't have one to give. "What happened to all the determination you had at the beginning of this whole thing?"

"I'd call it denial rather than determination, and that train ran out of steam around the time I actually got a look at him. You're not supposed to have to see your friends like that, Mac."

"No, you're not," she replies quietly. "But now you know what it felt like to walk into that room at Bethesda last year and see you lying there."

Shit. That's a curveball. "There's no way I ever looked that bad," you protest on instinct. "I was hypothermic, and that was basically it."

"Right. That's why they kept you hospitalized for two weeks." But she doesn't want to relive that any more than you do, so she changes the subject. "Anyway, Bud may not be quite as indestructible as you are, but - " At your snort of contempt, she turns around, mystified. "Now what?"

"Nothing. It's just that the superhero metaphors are starting to get on my nerves."

Her dark eyes are lined with concern, and it's not just for Bud. "If it helps, I don't think anyone really believes them."

"Do you?"

"No, I don't. On the contrary, I think you're punishing yourself for not being all-powerful. You wish you had the power to change this awful situation we're in, but you can't, and you never could." She takes a step closer and tentatively touches your arm. "You're also doing your best to hide what you're really feeling right now, and I wish you wouldn't."

"Do you think I *want* to be like this, Mac? I don't! I'm not like you. I can't stand here and tell you what I'm feeling, because I barely know that myself. I can't explain to you what it is that makes it so damned hard for me to open up or let go or do whatever it is that everybody expects me to do. Whichever part of the brain takes care of that particular aspect of human behavior is hopelessly stunted in my case, all right?"

Of all the possible responses, that one won't be making any Top Ten lists. But you're saved once again by the fact that it's Mac you're speaking to. The only person who can deal with all your idiotic actions without losing a shred of her own dignity. She merely watches as the angry flush fades away, seeing it for what it really is. Then she moves to lean her cheek against your chest, and without hesitation you pull her into a desperate embrace.

"I don't want to hide, Mac," you mumble into her hair. "Especially not from you. I just - I don't know where to start, you know?"

After a minute, she gently disengages herself and takes a seat on the bed, inviting you to join her. "It's all right," she says, her voice low and soothing. "How about this? I'll tell you how all this makes me feel, and you can just agree or disagree with that."

Under any other circumstances, and coming from any other person, you'd dismiss this concept as New Age-Oprah crap. But that might be the testosterone talking, and that's part of the original problem. Besides, she knows you better than anyone else on this planet. You have to connect with her, and you're willing to grasp at a few straws. "Okay."

"Okay." As you sit down next to her, she picks up the uniform shirt you'd discarded earlier and brushes the gold wings with her fingers before setting it aside. "I guess I'm relieved - I mean, of course I'm relieved, in a way. Bud's going to be able to come home eventually - he'll be back with Harriet and A.J. soon, and he'll learn to walk again ..." She gives a small shudder. "Just saying that sounds horrible."

"Yeah, it does." You really ought to say something more than that. "We're on the same page so far."

"I think I'm also angry, because it all seems so unfair. I don't know whether I'm angry at whoever planted the mines, or whoever blew up the school in the first place, or the Navy for putting him out there, or freaking bin Laden ... maybe I'll stick with him, since I already want to see him burn in hell ..."

She's on the verge of crying again, and you instinctively draw her close, not sure who's comforting whom. "Yeah, that about covers it," you admit, grateful to have her in your arms again. It doesn't happen often, but whenever it does, you end up wondering how you lived so long without it. Something about that contact gives you enough strength to take a step forward, figuratively. "I'm with you on all of that, but I've got another one to add. I'm angry at myself, because I feel all the same things that you do, but I needed you and a metaphorical crowbar to get at them."

Her voice is slightly muffled, due to the fact that her face is buried in your shoulder. "And you thoroughly detest needing other people, don't you?"

"Not if it's you."

She's very still, and for a second you're not sure that those words actually left your mouth. After a pause, during which all the risks inherent in this line of conversation race through your head at top speed, she speaks again. "Well, since you're making strides in the self-awareness department, I should try to keep up. To be honest, I'm worried. About Bud and Harriet, definitely, but also about you."

At this, you tighten your hold, not wanting her to shift somehow and be able to see the look on your face. "Me, huh?"

"Yeah. I saw a lot more cracks in your armor today than I think I've ever seen before. And while in some ways I feel like that's a good thing, I also think you're struggling with it."

You attempt to laugh, as if you're not about to watch her deconstruct your entire psyche. "You ought to be the leading expert in the field of cracking my armor."

She pulls back, and her eyes burn right through you. "My goal was never to obliterate the walls you've put up around yourself. I only ever wanted to get inside them."

"You don't think you've accomplished that?"

"I think I've cleared most of them. The one that's left, however, is starting to look like a regular Sisyphean labor."

You don't have to ask what she means. You've known for some time now that it would eventually come down to this between the two of you. All you can do now is hope that both of you are ready for what's to come.

"Does that mean you've given up on me?"

"If that were the case, would I be here right now?" she counters gently. "Do you really think I could, even if I wanted to?"

"I don't know." Your voice is faltering, because this knot has formed in your throat and refuses to let go. "I'd deserve it if you did, but - Jesus, Mac, there's so much I want to do and say, and I don't understand why I can't. Just please say you believe me, you believe that I'm trying, okay?"

The desperation registers with her, and she wraps her hand around yours, trying to offer reassurance while battling her own apprehension. This is what all your years of avoidance have done: they've created that flicker of doubt that springs into her eyes every time this subject comes up. But this time, she doesn't seem afraid anymore. She realizes that the tattered lifeline you've clung to all this time is crumbling, and she throws you another one.

"Tell me how to help you," she whispers urgently. "Tell me how to show you that you don't have anything to be afraid of. Tell me how to understand what it is you want."

You can feel her nearness almost like a magnetic force, and the desire to simply reach out and kiss her is overpowering. But that isn't enough, any more than it was a year ago on the admiral's porch. You have to find a way to get the words out, or none of it will mean a thing. Come on, hotshot. She's gotten you this far. You can do this.

"What I want hasn't changed - it's to never lose you. But it's more than that, too. I want to be with you, really with you, for as long as you'll have me. You're what I need most in this world, and I wish to God I knew how to prove that to you - "

She breaks into your helpless plea by turning your face toward her with a delicate hand. "Don't look now, flyboy," she says softly, "but you just did."

As that realization takes hold, you clutch her to you again, hungrily searching out her lips. This is so right, so perfect; this is what you need, both of you. A release from all the fear and pain of the last few hours - the last few days, really. It doesn't erase your awareness of Bud's plight, but for the first time you feel like you might be able to handle it. You might be able to be the strong, dependable friend that he and Harriet are going to need. As long as she's there with you.

She rests her forehead against your cheek, taking solace in the shared comfort. "So you're going to quit playing Superman, right?"

"I guess. I have to say, though, that you're the best looking kryptonite I've ever seen."

You get a strange, mildly offended look in response. "Thanks a lot. I'm a rock that hurts you whenever you get within ten feet of me?"

"You obviously didn't read enough comic books as a child." Favoring her with the first real smile since this nightmare began, you lift her hand and place a light kiss on her fingertips. "Kryptonite didn't really hurt Superman. It took away the thing that separated him from everyone else. It made him human."

Never disengaging herself from your body, she kicks off her shoes and pulls you down onto the bed. You remain there, tangled up and clinging to each other, until sleep comes at last.

*** THE END ***