



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: nothing specific, just Mattie's general existence

Disclaimer: The characters don't belong to me in any sense of the word. They just kept me entertained until I got home from this five-week mini-odyssey of mine.

Author's Notes: The "lesson" in this story is more or less historically accurate; it was a part of an officership seminar I received during the class I just finished taking. (No, I'm not an officer, but the rest of the class was.) I thought it might provide a good framework for a random little Academy tale. Apologies if I screw up any Academy details (Allison, I'm looking at you to set me straight), because I have almost zero points of reference.

1623 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Hey, buddy -- how busy are you right now?"

Sturgis continued typing another two lines at the end of his report as he replied. "Not particularly busy. Why, what are you hoping to hand off?"

When he glanced up, Harm was ushering a glum-looking Mattie Grace into his friend's office. "Can you keep an eye on Baron von Richtofen here for a half-hour or so? Mac and I came to terms on the Beckwith case, so we have to go enter his plea."

Sturgis lifted an eyebrow inquisitively. "Since when do you require someone to keep an eye on you in the office, Mattie?"

Mattie studiously examined her toes. "Since I got caught trying to download a software patch for Microsoft Flight Simulator on one of the computers in the school library," she admitted.

Sturgis smiled, but a glare from Harm wiped the amusement from his face. "Ah, in that case, there's a seat for you right there." He indicated one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Any other instructions, Dad?"

"Yeah -- don't let her on your computer. I'll be back in a few..."

After Harm disappeared around the corner, Mattie slouched into the proffered chair. "He's gonna lock me up for a month, isn't he?"

Sturgis shook his head. "I doubt it. It's not like you held up a convenience store or anything."

"Yeah, but this is Harm we're talking about. There aren't too many things he does halfway, so what are the odds that discipline is going to be one of them?"

"True, but keep in mind that he was fifteen once, and if Microsoft Flight Simulator had been around then, you can bet that he would've been messing around with it, too."

Mattie shrugged. "When I first met him, I thought he was more of a rebel, but that kind of person doesn't take custody of a stray teenager, and that kind of person wouldn't go back to the Navy after everything that happened. So I can't always tell if he's going to come down hard on the rules or not, you know?"

"Well, whatever he does, I can promise you that he has your best interests in mind," Sturgis assured her.

"You've been friends with him for a long time, haven't you?"

In response, the commander gestured toward a set of photo frames on his bookshelf. Mattie got up to examine them, and her eyes immediately fell upon a picture of five young men in gleaming white dress uniforms, one of whom was her guardian. She turned back to Sturgis, a curious expression lighting her features. "Wow. When was this?"

"That was our graduation day. But we actually met almost four years earlier, back when we were barely eighteen years old and just starting out at the Academy."

Mattie gazed at the picture, trying to envision a teenage version of the man who'd single-handedly rescued her from a harsh future. "What was he like back then?" she asked.

Sturgis leaned back in his chair, considering the question. "I'm not sure if I know what I was like back then, even. But I can tell you that the way we met made a pretty big impression."

October 1981
US Naval Academy
Annapolis, Maryland

"What is this, the Girl Scouts? Get the lead out, men!"

As a dozen plebes dashed back and forth across the dormitory corridors, readying their rooms for inspection, an upperclassman paced the hall with an expression of sadistic satisfaction. "You punks are gonna have to get with program sooner or later, and you're sure as hell not going to wreck up my report, so let's see some action, all right?"

Sturgis Turner hustled out of his room and snapped to attention between his roommate and the doorway. Their tormentor du jour, a second-class, had enlisted a couple of his friends to implement a no-notice inspection, and compliance was the younger class's only option. The upperclassmen poked through every room on the hall, pointing out scuffed shoes or less-than-perfect bedsheets at every turn. When they came upon his room, Sturgis prepared himself for the inevitable onslaught.

"Turner! What the hell do you call this?"

What did I forget? Mind racing, he turned around to see one of the upperclassmen holding up the civilian shirt he'd worn to church the day before. Typically he went to chapel on campus, but sometimes his father gave a sermon at a nearby church, and after this week's service he'd hung the shirt on the closet handle and promptly forgot about it. *Aw, man ...*

"Is this how you present your quarters for inspection?"

"Sir, no excuse, sir!"

"No kidding. You just earned your company some cleaning duty for this week." There was a smattering of groans from the others, quickly damped by the watchful eyes of the upperclassmen. "Take it and like it, numbskulls -- we'll be back ..."

As soon as the plebes felt safe enough to relax, one of Sturgis's company mates shot him a reproachful look. "Nice work, Einstein. Way to screw us all."

"Come on, Dobson, like you've never blown an inspection," his roommate pointed out.

"I never got the whole hall put on additional duty 'cause I forgot to put away my civvies, did I?" Dobson demanded, looking sullen.

"Look, man, I'm sorry," Sturgis apologized. "I'll do the worst of the scut work, all right?"

"Hey, as far as I'm concerned, you did the whole crime, so you can do the whole time."

"They didn't assign it to just him, did they?" Another company mate spoke up, one with whom Sturgis hadn't exchanged more than a few words in the months they'd been at Annapolis. "They assigned it to all of us, so deal with it and move on."

Dobson wasn't going to be so easily handled. "How is it my fault that this guy decided to go off-campus this weekend? Just because he felt the need to go bond with his people or whatever ..."

"My people?" Sturgis echoed, beginning to heat up. Before he could take a step forward, though, the other student did it for him.

"Don't take that road, Dobson," he warned, a dangerous note in his voice.

"Stay out of it, would you, Rabb? C'mon, Turner, isn't the chapel good enough for you? Or is it too white for - "

The sentence was never finished. In a flash, Rabb had the antagonist's arm twisted painfully behind his back. "Leave that black-white shit at the gate," he said harshly. "It's not gonna work here. You get that?"

He released Dobson, who rubbed his arm and glared daggers at him. "Whatever you say," he muttered, turning back toward his room. "Asshole."

Still trying to figure out what he'd just witnessed, Sturgis turned to his benefactor with a guarded expression. "You didn't have to do that. It's not like nobody's ever said that kind of thing to me before."

"I know. But the sooner he learns to shut up, or better yet wise up, the better off all of us'll be." Rabb shrugged. "I know I should know your name by now, but I don't -- I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Sturgis Turner." He stuck out his hand, and it was accepted.

"Harmon Rabb. At least we can commiserate about both having ridiculous names." Rabb gave a self-deprecating smirk and turned to head back to his room.

Sturgis called after him. "Hey, Rabb - not that it's any of my business, but that move you pulled on Dobson was pretty slick."

Rabb read the implied question in his voice. "I learned how to take care of myself a long time ago. Drives my mom crazy, but what the hell, you know?"

And with that enigmatic response, he left Sturgis wondering just what kind of person he'd just befriended.

"Harm really did that?"

"He did," Sturgis confirmed. "Can't say it would have been my preferred approach, but it was effective. Dobson never got in my face again, although he and Harm tangled on a number of occasions."

Mattie looked fascinated. "Tell me more stories."

Sturgis was about to respond when he noticed Harm approaching the doorway. "You're telling her stories?" Harm questioned calmly, folding his arms over his chest. "What kind of stories, pray tell?"

"Just about how you guys met in the dorms, when that one guy was being a dumbass bigot," Mattie volunteered.

"What did I say about the language?"

"I know, I know, keep it clean at school and in the office." Mattie rolled her eyes at her guardian, who leaned casually against the doorframe.

"Anyway, that's probably when we first introduced ourselves, but I wouldn't call that 'when we met,' necessarily." Harm tilted his head. "If we're going to tell stories, might as well go all the way."

Catching his meaning, Sturgis gave an expansive gesture. "The floor's yours, buddy."

November 1981
US Naval Academy
Annapolis, Maryland

"Put away your notebooks," instructed Lieutenant Jeffries, moving to the blackboard and picking up a piece of chalk. "This isn't a testable lesson. All you have to do is listen carefully to the scenario and choose a course of action."

The twenty-four plebes in the classroom were all too eager to lay down their pens. The instructor continued. "Each of you is commanding a flight of eight aircraft. Your air wing commander is brand-new to the battle group, and none of you knows anything about his command style yet. Word comes down that the air wing is going to be involved in an operation, and the CAG calls all the flight commanders together to brief you on the plan. Each flight is to overfly a specific enemy sector at five-minute intervals and drop flares on the target. You are not to carry any air-to-surface weapons nor engage any enemy SAM sites, and all flights must take the same approach vector and same altitude to the target."

From his seat in the third row, Harmon Rabb was already shaking his head. Jeffries noticed immediately and looked in his direction. "I take it you've already got a problem with the approach, Mr. Rabb?"

"Yes, sir. If all the flights take the same approach and same altitude at five-minute intervals, every flight after the first one will be a sitting duck for surface fire. The enemy will know exactly where to aim."

"Very likely," the lieutenant allowed. "However, your CAG has given the orders, and despite all the protests from you, the flight commanders, the orders stand as given. Now, all of you have some options here. Listen to the choices I outline and decide which one will best accomplish the mission."

"Alpha Flight decides to fly the mission as planned, but arrives on target ten minutes before the scheduled drop time in order to ensure the element of surprise. Bravo Flight decides to take another approach vector and fly five thousand feet higher than the designated altitude in order to evade possible SAM fire. Charlie Flight's commander refuses to lead what he views to be a suicide mission and turns command over to his XO, knowing full well that he will face charges for his actions. Delta Flight flies the profile but equips its aircraft with air-to-surface munitions and engages a SAM battery just outside the target area. And Echo Flight flies the mission exactly as specified."

Jeffries wrote "A - B - C - D - E" on the board and turned back to the class. "Which course of action do you take?"

Harm gave the scenario barely a moment's thought. He'd studied air combat tactics from WWI up through Vietnam, but this didn't require a whole lot of tactical knowledge. No sane person would fly into combat without defensive weapons of some type. It was as simple as that.

"I know which one not to choose," a classmate spoke up. "You don't refuse the mission and give command to someone else, because they're just going to be stuck with the same tough decision, and the same group of lives is still going to be on the line. That's not why they gave you command."

"You're right about that." Jeffries crossed the 'C' off the board. "What about the other options? Can we get a show of hands? Who opts for Alpha?"

When the votes were tallied, the choices were more or less evenly split between B, D, and E. The instructor nodded, then addressed the group. "If you chose Bravo, stand up." Seven or eight students rose, and Jeffries pointed to one of them. "This class is your flight. Pick four people. They'll be the ones you got killed because you changed the mission arbitrarily."

The student looked abashed, and Harm hid a smirk. But the exercise wasn't over. "Everybody who picked Delta, on your feet." Jeffries leveled his gaze on Harm. "Why?"

"Because I'm obligated to protect my crews," he answered with confidence. "A mission of this type doesn't constitute a lawful order."

"A lawful order. That's an excellent point to bring up. But your change to the mission got an entire team of sixteen ground troops killed, so sweet dreams."

Thrown off-guard, Harm sank back into his seat as Jeffries continued. "What was unlawful about this order? By regs, a lawful order must pertain to duty or welfare, be clear and unequivocal, be received and understood, and be within the authority of the issuing officer. Which of those statements doesn't apply to this particular order?"

There was a brief silence. "But you can't just send people off on a suicide mission," one student objected. "It's like the daylight bombing raids in World War Two - they just don't work."

"Was this a bombing raid?" Jeffries asked innocently. "I believe I said that the mission was to drop flares, not bombs."

"That makes it even worse!" Harm protested before his common sense could kick in. "What kind of mission is that, opening yourself up to hostile fire by walking in the front door with nothing but *flares*?"

"This kind." Jeffries picked up a stack of papers and began to hand them out. Harm scanned through the first paragraph, and the color drained from his face.

"This is the same basic setup used in the mission to liberate the Son Tay POW camp in North Vietnam," the lieutenant told them. "The flare runs were primarily to be used as a diversion, but also to signal the special-ops teams on the ground that the mission was underway. Theater command had reliable information that said SAM fire would not be effective at an altitude of twenty thousand feet, and so the mission was designed to fly exactly at that level. Furthermore, intel suggested that any engagement of the SAM batteries would provoke a serious response from the North Vietnamese. Therefore, the plans were drawn up exactly as

stated earlier, and deviations from them would have caused massive problems for both the other flights and for the troops on the ground.”

The class took a moment to absorb that information. “But in a real situation, we’d be better informed,” someone suggested. “We’d be able to see more of the rationale, so we wouldn’t think we were being sent off to get our crews killed.”

“Maybe, maybe not. The security level on the Son Tay operation was extremely high. Any indication that such a raid was going to take place might have alerted the North Vietnamese. The commanders who flew that mission had very little information, and a lot of them raised objections, just as you did. A few of them even resigned their commissions rather than fly. But the mission went off as planned, and the only reason it wasn’t a stunning success was that the camp had been cleared out two weeks before the US forces got there.”

Jeffries gave each of them a hard look. “An order is an order and is to be obeyed. There’s a time and a place for proper dissent, but when your chain of command says go, you go, and you don’t hesitate, because those above you will undoubtedly have more information than you do. You can’t sit in your little corner of the world and make decisions as to what’s best for the mission if you can’t see the whole game board. That is something every one of you will have to accept before you pin on your bars. You’re dismissed.”

The midshipmen filed out into the hallway, shaking their heads. Dobson waited for Harm to emerge from the classroom before tossing a barb in his direction. “Well, I wouldn’t sweat the screw-up, Rabb. I mean, those POWs have probably been in there for a long time already. What’s another couple of weeks?”

Harm kept walking. “Back off, Dobson,” he fired over his shoulder.

“No, really. I’m sure PFC Joe Schmo doesn’t mind sitting in his little bamboo cage for a little while longer - ”

Whirling, Harm shoved him into the wall, a nearby doorknob impacting a rather sensitive part of his anatomy. “I said back the f—k off,” he seethed, and as the other student wilted in pain, he stalked toward the doors and threw them open.

He was most of the way back to the dorm when he heard hurried footsteps on the sidewalk behind him. “Man, you walk fast,” came a deep-voiced comment.

Harm turned halfway to see Sturgis Turner catching up to him. He didn’t slow his pace. “Only when highly motivated to do so.”

“What kind of motivation did you have for turning Dobson into a temporary soprano?”

“Leave it alone, Turner. Let him turn me in to the company commander and be done with it.”

“Well, it’s a little late on that front, because I already told him that you had a good reason for being pissed and that you wouldn’t take it out on him again in the future.”

At that, Harm stopped and spun on his heel. “What the hell made you decide to take that initiative?”

Sturgis was unperturbed. "It looked to me like it was the truth."

After a long moment of staring the other student down and finally judging his motives to be sincere, Harm let his defensive posture drop. "Dobson doesn't know a damn thing about me, or you, or anyone else. His world extends a grand total of three feet in front of his face."

"I agree. But I'm guessing you didn't put him into a wall just because he taunted you about making the wrong call in class today." Turner shifted his books to one side. "So what is it that he doesn't know about you?"

This wasn't a subject he'd particularly wanted to bring up among his classmates, but Harm didn't see that he had much choice anymore. *You made your own problem here, genius, so get out of it your damn self.* "That my father was shot down over Vietnam eleven years ago, and that he's still unaccounted for." He gave the last two words a slightly sardonic twist, kicking a nearby rock with his immaculately-polished shoe. "For all I know, he was in Son Tay when they organized that mission."

Sturgis gave a slow nod, absorbing that revelation with impressive gravity for a teenager. "You were a plebe sitting in a lecture. The decision you made today had no context or experience behind it, so there's no reason to believe that you'd necessarily make the same decision as a professional combat aviator in the field. Is that what you're worried about?"

The assessment made Harm stop his train of thought entirely. He hadn't even had time to work through that idea in his own mind; the idea that a near-stranger could pull it out of the air in mere seconds was hard to grasp.

Suddenly, Sturgis shook his head. "I'm sorry. You didn't ask for my opinion, so I had no right to shove it at you. I'm second-generation, too, for what it's worth."

"I'm actually third." Harm gazed out across the quad. "Came here to carry on the family tradition of naval aviation, or something like that. Of course, my mother's afraid I'll carry on the other family tradition of not coming home." He turned back to his companion. "You probably didn't come here to follow in your dad's footsteps as a chaplain."

"No, can't say as I've had that calling. I'm aiming for nuke school."

"You want to live in a tin can underwater?"

"How's your tin can above the water any better?"

Harm let himself smile at that, but the other thoughts swirling around in his brain wouldn't allow him much of a respite. "It never occurred to me that just wanting it might not be enough," he said quietly. "What happens if we work our asses off, but for some reason we just don't make the cut? What if somebody asks me a question like Jeffries did today, and I give them the wrong answer? I don't exactly have a fallback plan here -- if I don't get picked up for aviation, I don't know what I'll do instead."

"I'm guessing you'd choose another path and finish out your commitment like the officer they're training you to be," the other student replied easily. "But why dwell on that possibility when there's no good reason to think you'll need it? Your academic average is pretty close to top in the class, isn't it?"

"We haven't even finished a full term yet." Harm had never been particularly comfortable with talking about grades, even though his had always been fairly impressive.

Sturgis waited a few seconds, considering whether or not to speak. Finally he remarked, "Listen, you've got no reason to take my advice, but since you haven't walked away yet, can I make a suggestion?"

Wary, Harm shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

"All right. Dobson's a jerk who's all talk. Everybody knows that. But if you keep getting physical with him, pretty soon he's going to respond, and getting in a fight is something that really *could* affect your shot at flying. Know what I mean?"

That deflated him a little, and he stared down at the sidewalk until he could get himself better under control. "I haven't always been that kind of guy, believe it or not," he said quietly. "I guess I probably look like some kind of bully right now."

Sturgis regarded him carefully. "I think you look like a forty-year-old soul in an eighteen-year-old body," he replied.

It surprised Harm to discover that he didn't resent that display of what he would ordinarily call arrogant presumption. Something about the other student's thoughtful, penetrating gaze made it clear that he could be trusted implicitly, and in the next breath Harm found himself baring as much of his soul as he'd ever dared.

"About a year and a half ago, I spent some time in a place where the only way to do anything was to not only stand up for yourself, but knock down anyone who got in your way. I saw ... I saw and did a lot of stuff there, and I've tried to get that mindset out of my system, but it's hard to unlearn, you know?"

Sturgis's brow creased, not entirely comprehending. "None of my business, but - ?"

Oh, what the hell. I could probably use a good confessor. "I took a somewhat unauthorized trip to look for my dad."

To his credit, once he put two and two together, there was nothing in Sturgis's expression beyond mild disbelief. "No kidding?"

Harm nodded, with an awkward half-shrug.

Sensing that he wasn't excited about pursuing the subject further, Sturgis simply replied, "I give you points for sheer guts. I can't remember the last time I so much as left for the store without letting my dad know."

Relieved at the opportunity to shift their focus, Harm commented, "Preacher's kid, huh?" At the other's nod, he smiled. "Maybe you need to get out a little."

"Yeah, I think maybe I do." Sturgis cast him a sideways glance, and for the first time he appeared slightly self-conscious. "You and your roommate look like you could give me some pointers on that front."

"Who, Keeter? Keet's forgotten more than I'll ever know about having fun. You should come with us this weekend -- we're going to a concert in Baltimore."

"Who's playing?"

"Who cares?"

With a soft chuckle, Sturgis accepted the invitation. "Thanks. Long as I can be in church, awake and on time, on Sunday." After a pause, he added, "My dad always cooks after services when I come home. You could get some decent free food if you came along."

Harm recognized the opportunity Sturgis was extending, and indecision wavered in his mind. He could listen with half an ear to a church service and make nice with a classmate's father -- Sturgis hadn't mentioned a mother - or he could make an honest attempt at dealing with the insecurities that seemed to be relentlessly pursuing him. And if he was going to open up to anyone, it might as well be someone outside Annapolis, someone who answered to a higher authority than the United States Navy.

"Won't I ... stick out?" he asked.

Sturgis gestured around. "Any more than I do here?" he pointed out wryly.

"Good point. Okay -- thank you." Just then, Harm caught a glimpse of Dobson striding down the path, and he instinctively tensed. Feeling the weight of Sturgis's gaze, he held out a hand to get Dobson to slow up.

"Hey, I want to apologize for before. I was way out of line."

Dobson raised his eyes, but only for a second. "Yeah, sure," he muttered, shouldering past them and continuing at a rapid pace.

Sturgis shook his head. "Well, at least you have the satisfaction of knowing you took the high road for the last few miles. Anyway, I'm headed to the chow hall. You coming?"

Harm shifted his books to one side and lifted his chin. For the first time since he'd arrived for Plebe Summer, he was beginning to feel a little less alone. "Yeah. Right behind you."

"So my roommate and I showed Sturgis how to live a little, and Sturgis introduced me to his dad, who helped me get into a mindset that better matched my ambitions. Fast-forward a couple of decades, and there you have it."

Mattie absorbed every word in fascinated silence. "I'm having a hard time picture you -- you know, smacking guys around, even if they deserved it," she said at last, scrutinizing his expression.

Harm gave a small shrug. "Every so often you come to a point where your better judgment gets overridden by something or other. It happens. If you're lucky, you have someone looking out for you who sets you back on course."

Sturgis smiled, accepting the tacit acknowledgment. Mattie cocked an eyebrow at her guardian. "Does that mean I'm supposed to thank you for today's little 'course correction'?"

"No, what you're supposed to do is keep in mind the lesson that I blew in that class twenty-some years ago."

She only had to think about it for a moment. "An order is an order and is to be obeyed?"

"Very good." He leaned over to drop a light kiss on her blond curls. "Go grab your bookbag out of my office and let's go home, all right?"

Mattie stood and offered Sturgis a smile. "Thanks for the hospitality, Commander."

"You can call me Sturgis, Mattie, and it was my pleasure. Good night."

Harm lingered in the doorway after she'd gone. "Did I handle that okay?" he queried his friend.

"Don't know if I'm qualified to answer that, but yeah, I think you did just fine."

"Good. Thanks, Sturgis. For this, and for back then."

"We're even on that score, buddy. Always have been and always will be."

*** THE END ***