



Echoes

Rating: PG for mild language

Classification: Vignette, angst

Spoilers: "Crossing the Line", pilot episode

Author's Notes: Self-explanatory, provided you can recall the second-to-last scene of the episode in question. If not, here's a little hint to jog your memory ... The pilot who'd claimed harassment (Lt. Marilyn Isaacs), desperate to prove her skills, put her Tomcat into the ramp. Isaacs was killed, and her RIO (Skates, remember?) nearly "went through the screws", as she later put it. Fortunately, our hero was in place for another daring rescue. This story picks up directly afterwards, and is based on the emotions behind the unspoken conversation between Harm and the CAG on the deck. There, you're all caught up.

2135 Local USS Seahawk

Major Sarah Mackenzie stared out at the burning Tomcat, trying to put a name to what she felt. Shock? Horror? Not really. Mainly a sensation of sorrow, for the tragic end to a conflicted woman's life; and a vague sense of guilt, for her own misjudgment of the situation. They'd all failed a little that day - everyone except perhaps her strong-willed partner. Once again, he'd managed to end up right. This time, though, she suspected that no 'I told you so's would be forthcoming.

From her vantage point on the bridge, she watched as Harm lowered Lieutenant Hawkes to the deck, moving away to allow the medics in. He rose wearily, and she could see a trickle of blood tracing a path down the side of his face. His fatigue, however, was less likely to be a result of any injury than of the bleak circumstances surrounding them. Losing a fellow aviator always affected him strongly. Losing one to something like this ...

For a moment, Mac watched him exchange a meaningful glance with Captain Boone as they witnessed the flames overtaking the powerful aircraft. Then, quickly, she made a decision and started toward the hatch. As she turned, her gaze caught Congresswoman DeLong's, and she saw true shock and horror in the older woman's face. Mac had no

comfort to give her, and she wasn't sure she'd want to even if she could. She simply turned on her heel and left the bridge.

By the time she reached the flight deck, the fire was out, and Harm was gone. A well-meaning corpsman informed her that the commander had refused a visit to sickbay, which was just about par for the course with Harm. She shook her head and wandered below decks in search of his stateroom. After stopping for directions twice, she at last found the correct door and rapped her knuckles on the heavy steel hatch.

The voice that responded was not the usual calm, confident voice of her partner. "What?" he demanded listlessly.

"It's me, sailor."

There was a pause. "Can it wait?"

"Come on, Harm. Just let me in."

"Fine, whatever."

Knowing that response was all the affirmation she would get out of him, Mac pulled open the hatch and stepped inside. Harm was at the sink, making a halfhearted attempt to clean the blood off his forehead. His ruined uniform shirt lay on the bunk behind him, and he stood there in a white T-shirt that was still dirty with smoke and ash. He didn't acknowledge her arrival.

"Lieutenant Hawkes is going to be fine," she reported, studying the cut over his eye. "You should really get that looked at."

"I've got Band-Aids." His hands still blocked most of his face from view, but she could tell he was struggling to keep his guard up. For a long time, she'd suspected that the great Harmon Rabb, Jr. wasn't nearly as cocky as he liked to pretend. Maybe she'd known it ever since that first day, when he'd met her gaze and his handsome features seemed to shatter. But the mask hadn't wavered for long, even then. It never did.

"You did a good thing out there. You saved a life."

"Yeah, that's me, lawyer in shining armor." He continued to swipe at the dust and blood, turning slightly away from her.

Mac sighed and crossed over to him. "At least let me help."

"Dammit, Mac - "

But she'd already pulled his hands away, and what she saw shocked her into silence. His intensely expressive eyes were stinging with tears; and she knew instinctively that they weren't from the smoke. These tears were born of a long-buried pain.

He stared at her for a long moment, letting her see the raw emotion there for the first time. "What's wrong?" he asked harshly, jerking his wrists free from her grip. "Isn't this what you expected? Did you think you were the only one around here with memories best

forgotten?”

After a few seconds, she regained her composure. “I don’t know what I expected,” she answered quietly. “I just knew you were hurting, and I wanted to help.”

“Well, you’re about six years late.” He shook his head and softened his tone. “I’m sorry. It’s just - God, it was like watching my nightmares played out in living color. Every time, I know what’s going to happen, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it ...”

He swiped at the moisture in his eyes and paced across the small cabin. “Isaacs wasn’t like you,” Mac replied firmly, hoping that she spoke the truth. There was still much she had yet to learn about this man, her partner. “She thought she had something to prove. She didn’t have your skill or your judgment.”

“Does it matter? The end result is the same. Someone ended up dead. Only this time, the person who didn’t screw up gets to keep living, and the person who did isn’t here to feel the guilt. Somehow that seems more fitting.”

“You don’t mean that,” she exclaimed, stunned to hear the depth of his hopelessness.

“Maybe not. But there was a time when I would have given anything to change places with Mace. That was his name - Brandon Mace. He was a good man, a good officer. And the only reason he’s dead is because I made a mistake. How could I not take responsibility for that?”

“Responsibility is one thing. Letting it dominate your life is something else. You’re stronger than that. Hell, you have a Distinguished Flying Cross to prove it.”

“I know, and I’ve been doing better. I’m not ashamed to set foot on a carrier wearing my wings anymore. But still ...” Harm’s piercing eyes met hers again, searching for solace. “Do you hear what they say about me in the wardroom, and the mess? Every time I come on board, it’s the same thing. There’s always someone who remembers, or someone who knows someone who was there ... They give me the strangest looks - somewhere between sympathy and contempt. Then they start whispering to each other, and suddenly it’s news all over again. And it’s not just here. Can you imagine what it’s like to have to explain to every new person I meet why I’m a JAG with wings? It’s not the type of thing that makes for great small talk, you know?”

Mac felt a twinge of shame as she realized that it had never crossed her mind. How many times had he given that same, seemingly easy explanation he’d given her months ago? Had he ever allowed anyone to see what it cost him to say it? All this time, she’d thought she was the one with a past to overcome ...

“Harm, anyone who judges you for that isn’t worth your time,” she stated simply. “You’re an outstanding officer. You don’t need me to tell you that. Take it from someone who knows - if you spend all your time looking backward, you’ll miss an awful lot of good things.”

He didn’t respond for a long moment, staring down at the gold wings still gleaming on his discarded uniform. Then he finally met her gaze, and a trace of that irrepressible humor flickered in his blue eyes. “You know, for a Marine, you make an awful lot of sense

sometimes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Wow, what a sweet thing to say, Commander.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.” He smiled, but the teasing faded from his voice.
“Seriously, Mac - thank you. Days like today are hard, but I’m okay. I promise.”

“I know.” Mac hesitated for a second, then pressed ahead. “Would you yellow-light me if I tried to give you a hug?”

She wondered fleetingly if he would make a sarcastic comment, but he only shook his head. “Not a chance.”

They embraced briefly, any flickers of awkwardness overshadowed by the recognition of this newly-strengthened bond. Separately, each one wondered if maybe they had more in common than first thought. Just as quickly, though, Mac stepped back and turned toward the hatch. “I should get going. Sure I can’t walk you down to sickbay?”

“Ma-ac ...”

“Can’t blame me for trying. See you at breakfast?”

“Count on it. Night, partner.”

“Good night.”

She closed the hatch behind her, and found herself wearing a small, inexplicable smile. He was a puzzle, that Harmon Rabb. Not a typical fighter jock, and not a typical lawyer. Hell, not a typical anything. But a strong person, and a good friend. Yeah, they were going to do just fine.

*** THE END ***