



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 for language, violence

Classification: JAG story, angst

Spoilers: "Gypsy Eyes", "Legacy", "Family Secrets"

Author's Notes: A few ground rules. First, in order for this to work, you have to accept the assumption that Sergei was released by the Chechens after being imprisoned for about six months. You also have to be okay with the fact that Brumby and Renee have somehow dropped off the radar screen. (Hold your applause.) This would be set somewhere around the present time (season seven), except for the fact that I'm basically ignoring "Lifeline" and anything that comes after it. On another subject, I don't pretend to be well versed in international politics, so the missile-defense part of the plot is an extremely generalized, extremely pessimistic view of one way things could possibly turn out in real life. I'm not an activist or anything. And the Russian words are just off an online translator. I don't expect them to make any sense grammatically - I just wanted it to look good. If something doesn't fit, just roll your eyes at my ignorance and move on.

Setting the scene ... This is kind of my alternative to the usual Sergei stories, where he typically ends up coming to the U.S. and joining the Marines or something. With all due respect to those writers who have gone that route, my feeling is that no one with Rabb genes would leave his country that easily, even for the proverbial amber waves of grain. Recall the end scene of "Legacy, Part II" for more on that front. Without further ado ...

1841 EST Reagan National Airport Washington, D.C.

"Harm," Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie said sweetly but firmly, "park your six in a chair. You're driving me up a wall."

Her partner paused midway through his measured pacing and offered an embarrassed shrug. "Can I help it if I'm anxious?"

"No, but you could try exercising some of that world-famous aviator's control." She folded her arms and fixed him with an I-know-you-too-well look. "He survived half a year as a prisoner of war. He's not going to be held back by any airline snafus."

"What about customs?" Harm grumbled, but reluctantly took a seat next to her. "Sorry about being so neurotic. This is kind of a new experience."

"You mean, getting to spend more than a few hours with your brother? Actually learning something about who he is? I can see how that could be a little nerve-wracking."

"More exciting than nerve-wracking. But ... yeah, it's that, too."

"How long is he here for?"

"Two weeks. He just finished officers' training, and he gets his first command assignment next month." There was a hint of pride in his voice. "I'm going to take some time off, show him around."

"And introduce him to your mother?" Mac inquired gently.

Harm hesitated. "Jury's still out on that." It had been a difficult realization for the family of Harmon Rabb, Sr., learning that he'd had a new life in Russia during those last years. Trish Burnett understood better than anyone the significance of accepting reality and moving forward. But her son - his namesake and very image - knew that Sergei's existence had torn open wounds that had never fully healed.

He changed the subject by smiling over at his friend. "Thanks for coming. And for putting up with me."

"Hey, I wouldn't have missed it."

The doors opened then, and passengers began to stream out into the terminal. Harm sprang to his feet when he caught sight of the young Russian soldier scanning the room with an uncertain stance. "Sergei!" he called.

Sergei smiled and made his way over, coming to attention in front of the American officers. "Lieutenant Zhukov reporting, sir."

"If you call me 'sir' one more time on this trip, I'll ship you home." Harm grinned broadly, and the brothers embraced. "They make you travel in uniform even when you're on leave?"

"This is the rule. But I am tired of people staring. I intend to put on blue jeans as soon as possible." He turned to greet Mac as well. "It is good to see you again, Colonel Mackenzie."

"Please call me Mac, Sergei."

His eyebrows lifted in not-quite-legitimate puzzlement. "That is not Harm's special name for you?"

"Sergei," Harm warned, and Mac stifled a laugh.

"No, it's everyone's nickname for me. I'm surprised Harm hasn't been calling me 'jarhead' behind my back."

"Who says I haven't?" Harm took his bags, and the trio started toward the parking deck. Along the way, he took the opportunity to study the half-brother he barely knew. Sergei looked happy, but there were subtle reminders in his young eyes that spoke of the ordeal he'd experienced. He'd insisted that he'd been treated relatively well by the Chechen rebels, but even so ... Harm had seen that look from many veterans of another hideous war, so many years ago. He wondered if Sergei now resembled their father even more.

"Harm says you just got your commission," Mac commented. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. I was very fortunate to be chosen. It is difficult to get a place in the officers' school if you do not have the right background. It is - what is that word you used?"

"Nepotism," Harm supplied. "The few families that can buy a job or an education are the ones that get ahead and stay there."

"It is not so bad as you say. There are better rules now. It may have been luck for me, but I do not refuse luck. Now that I am an officer, I can try to do more to make things better for the other men." Sergei smiled. "I have told my friends from class that I am coming to America to see my brother. The officers all ask me to bring them video games and hockey sticks. But they are better than the enlisted men."

"Why, what do they ask for?"

He looked faintly embarrassed. "Britney Spears."

Mac couldn't help it - she cracked up laughing. Harm rolled his eyes. They stepped outside into the warm September air, and Sergei paused to take in all the sights and sounds of the chaotic city. "So this is America," he mused.

"No, this is Washington. It's not exactly representative of the whole." Harm rested a hand on his shoulder. "Come on. If you're not jet-lagged out of your mind, I've got tickets to the Redskins game tomorrow."

2219 EST
North of Union Station

Washington, D.C.

Mac carried a stack of plates over to the sink and went to begin cleaning up the living room. "That's the last of them."

Harm was up to his elbows in soapy water, and Sergei was handling the drying duties. The elder Rabb had held a small get-together at his apartment so that his friends and coworkers could meet Sergei, and it had been a very pleasant evening. Mac had been somewhat surprised and relieved to see the effect of this visit on her best friend. Harm had clearly been enjoying his brother's company. Returning to the office after their road trip along the coast, he'd been outright cheerful to everyone in his path, up to and including Lieutenant Singer.

"How'd you like Harm's biplane?" Mac asked Sergei, returning to take a seat on one of the kitchen stools.

"The loops were fun. But I like my helicopter better."

"No match for a Tomcat," Harm countered without looking up. Sergei responded by tossing the damp towel at his head.

"You and this Tomcat. No wonder you are not married."

"Ouch. What about you? Is there a girlfriend out there?"

"Between coming home from Chechnya and going to officers' school? When would you have me find a girlfriend?"

"Maybe one will find you," Mac suggested with a mischievous smile. "Over here, your accent alone might get you a few phone numbers."

"Don't encourage him." Harm drained the sink and dried his hands on his brother's back. Sergei ducked out of reach, but shrugged.

"It's your shirt, big brother."

Mac shook her head. Was it possible that these two had first met only a year ago? "I'd better get going. See you at work?"

"You got it. Thanks for the help."

"Nothing to it. Night, Sergei."

"Good night, Mac." Sergei went over to the couch after she'd gone. Harm grabbed two beers from the fridge and joined him. "I do not understand why you look at her as a partner and not as a woman."

"I do see her as a woman." Harm avoided his gaze. "Just not as an attainable one."

Sergei knew better than to press that particular subject. "I like this home of yours, but this city is too big for me. What is the name of those mountains we saw?"

"The Appalachians."

"Yes, they remind me more of home. I will show the pictures to my mother." He leaned back, setting his drink down. "You have not asked me about the prison camp."

"I didn't know whether you wanted to talk about it," Harm replied quietly.

"It is all right. We were not tortured or starved. They were very calm about what we were worth to them, but also very cold. The hardest part was when they singled me out. They said the Russians and the Americans were both trying very hard to find me. They could not decide whether to give me up or kill me to send a message."

He said it dispassionately, but a fire burned behind his pale eyes. Then he lifted his gaze. "Mac told me that you wanted to come look for me. That before the news came, you were ready to give up your career. I do not think I am surprised, but I am grateful."

"You're family, Sergei. I don't have that much in the way of family, so I protect what I've got."

The young man smiled. "I believe you would have made it, too. It is good that we found each other. I am glad to see our father's country through your eyes."

Harm nodded his acknowledgement. "I'll drink to that."

JAG Headquarters Falls Church, Virginia

Dressed unobtrusively in a button-down shirt and khaki slacks, Sergei sat in the back of the courtroom and watched his brother at work. It was amazing, he reflected, this system of justice. So many rules; all of them precise to the letter, most designed to protect the accused. A year ago, he would have wondered how the Americans ever convicted anyone this way. But that was before he himself had been accused.

"We would all like to believe that this kind of thing doesn't matter in the Navy," Harm was telling the jury, wrapping up his closing argument for the defense. "We all wear the same uniform and salute the same colors, and we'd like to believe that we share a common set of principles and values. But the truth is, we all have different opinions on any number of themes, and we're entitled to disagree. To persecute an officer for expressing his views would run counter to the ideals we all swore an oath to defend. Don't put limits on our freedoms. Acquit Ensign Davis of this dangerous charge. Thank you."

As court recessed for deliberations, he gathered his files and went to meet his guest. "It is very dramatic, this thing you do," Sergei observed.

"Not usually. There's a lot of paperwork and boring research, too."

"Rabb, I'd swear you were going liberal on us," remarked the prosecutor on his way past.

"Don't start vicious rumors, Mattoni," Harm tossed back. "I'd fake fascism if it'd help me win a case." They headed back through the bullpen, where Sergei accepted smiles and 'hi's from the people he'd met the night before. Everyone was professional, but friendly, too. It was a very different military from the one he was used to.

Entering his office, Harm was surprised when Sergei closed the door behind them.

"Are we conducting an espionage deal?"

"I have something I must tell you, and I think you will not like to hear it."

"You're wanted by the Russian police and have to defect?" he suggested, his pleasant demeanor wavering.

"I received my new assignment before I left to come here. When I return home, I will be what you would call an executive officer, for a support squadron."

"Where's the part I won't like?" Harm asked warily.

Sergei hesitated. "We will be deployed to the east, near Khabarovsk. We are to fly equipment and personnel to a new joint-service facility outside Pyongyang."

There was an awkward pause as the implications of that concept began to take hold. They had both avoided the subject of the tenuous relationship between their two countries, primarily because the current outlook was less than rosy. Russia had grudgingly accepted the U.S. plans to build a regional missile shield, but the remaining communist nations of the world - namely China and North Korea - had not been as accommodating. And since Russia's struggling economy needed the stability provided by their many weapons contracts, it had become official Moscow policy to keep the 'friendship' with Beijing strong. That meant playing nice with Pyongyang, which tended to make Washington nervous. No one on either side of the Pacific was under any illusions about the possibility of another missile crisis.

After a moment, Harm spoke in a low voice. "You shouldn't have told me that."

"It is not a secret. If you ask Mr. Webb, he will tell you more than I could. I do not know what will take place at this facility. I only know that it will be constructed by Russian forces as well as Korean. And I am to assist with the supply route."

"No," Harm answered decisively. "Your squadron can assist with the supply route. You need to ask for another assignment."

Sergei looked faintly amused. "Are you my mother now as well? I do not choose where I go. You understand."

"Not this, I don't. The North Korean government has nothing but a lot of weapons and a lot of desperate people. If they can provoke us into formally taking a stand against them, they'll get China involved, and then we'll all be two steps away from World War Three. Russia's only trying to keep from pissing China off, but this won't get it done. At least, not for

long. You know that, don't you?"

"No, I do not," he countered. "Maybe *you* know that, from this view in Washington. I know that my job is to fly. It is the leaders' job to keep the peace. If I do not believe in them, then I am in the wrong profession." Their voices began to rise in volume and intensity.

"So you buy the party line? Helping North Korea gear up for a war against the West will really be good for your country?"

"It does not matter what I believe!" Sergei's fists tightened in frustration, trying to make his reasoning clear through faltering English. "I am a soldier - I do not reject orders because of - of *politika!*"

"*Predatelya!*" Harm returned sharply.

Outside in the bullpen, Bud Roberts stopped dead, shocked to hear the commander and his brother arguing at all, much less in Russian. Curious, he turned to Mac, who'd clearly understood the words. "Colonel?"

"His accent's getting better," she replied thoughtfully, without elaborating. Knowing there would be time for questions later, she headed back to her own office, leaving Bud to wonder.

Meanwhile, Sergei just stared at Harm, not backing down an inch. "A traitor?" he repeated, disbelieving. "Because I follow orders that you disagree with, this is what you call me?"

"I didn't mean that. Anger and a lousy vocabulary don't go well together." Some of his ire fading, Harm shook his head. "Sergei, don't do this. Please."

"Don't do what - the same as you would do? You have been an officer for half your life. You do not refuse your duty when it does not fit your beliefs. Otherwise, it all falls apart. Our father -"

"Don't you dare bring him into this!" he hissed, barely keeping his emotions in check. "He lost his freedom and his life to those 'comrades' you're defending!"

The younger man was wise enough not to take that as a personal accusation. Instead, he recognized the pain behind it. "He gave his life because he believed in his country. How can you or I do any less?"

Harm dropped into his chair, drawing a weary hand over his eyes. The kid would have made a good lawyer. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I don't have any right to judge you or challenge your decisions. I'm just afraid you're going to get caught in the middle of something you can't control."

"Do you really think that anyone wants to intentionally start a war?" Sergei asked honestly.

He sighed. "I think there are people who believe that war is the only way to hold their own against us. Peace is such a fragile thing, Sergei. Everything can go up in flames with even the slightest word ... I trust you, but I'm still going to be worried about you. It's part of the job description."

"I suppose I would expect nothing else. But have faith, big brother. It was you who showed me that one person can make a difference. Maybe one time, that person could be me."

Their eyes, so similar yet so different, met and held. "Just be careful, little brother," Harm implored him softly.

"I am always."

2031 EST Vietnam Memorial Washington, D.C.

From a distance, she could make out the familiar silhouette standing near the Wall, hands in his pockets and head bowed in quiet contemplation. She approached him, but waited a few steps back until he looked up.

"You found me again," Harm observed, his voice flat.

Mac shrugged. "It's not too hard. Especially since Sergei dropped by before he left and told me you'd be in a funk. Did his flight get off okay?"

"Yeah, he should be somewhere over the Atlantic." He went back to staring at the section of stark ebony granite that was burned into his memory. By now, he'd come here so many times that he'd memorized even the names that surrounded his father's. Their father. Damn it. "Did he also tell you the reason for this so-called funk?"

"No, but I'm guessing it has something to do with the shouting match you two had in the office earlier." The graceful Marine pulled her jacket tighter against the evening chill. "Are you ready to talk about it?"

He didn't answer her directly. It didn't bother her. She'd known coming in that she would have to be patient. "In the Civil War, there were stories of relatives meeting up against each other in battle," he said absently. "Friends, cousins, even brothers. How did they stand it? How could they live with the fact that someone they loved was on the other side?"

"Harm, we're not at war," she pointed out gently. "Sergei isn't taking up arms against us."

"No, he's just supplying North Korea, for some facility that will do God-knows-what to the nuclear test ban that's keeping us all sane. If the time comes to take sides on this one, you can bet he won't be on mine."

Mac paused, immediately understanding the paradox. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it was that bad."

"I don't know how bad it is. I just know how bad it could get, and it scares the hell out of me." Harm finally glanced over, letting her see the turbulence in his expressive eyes. "It's the ultimate Catch-22, isn't it? I have to let him do this because I care about him, but because I care about him, I can't stand to see him do it. I have to respect his choice, but I fundamentally believe that he's helping the bad guys. How am I supposed to resolve that?"

"I'm not sure you can," she responded, wishing she had a better answer. "Everyone has to pay a price for loving someone, but God, this is higher than most people could ever dream of. I'm sure there will be times when it's easier than this, but it probably won't ever be truly easy. If anyone can handle it, though, it's you."

"I guess it could be worse," he stated, with bitter irony. "My dad could be alive to see it."

Right then, Mac felt every bit as helpless as him. This world was a strange place. She did the only thing she could think of to do, which was to wrap her arms around him and pray for some sort of guidance. After a moment, he returned the embrace. "Thanks," he said simply.

"Any time, partner. Come on, it's getting cold out here."

He allowed her to guide him along the sidewalk, but his thoughts strayed back to the impassive Wall. *Dad, he said silently, if you've got any pull at all up there, don't waste your time on me. Save whatever divine influence you've got for Sergei, all right? For once in my life, I'm going to admit that someone else needs you more than I do. I'm begging you, Dad. Just keep my little brother safe.*

1002 EST
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

When Harm glanced up from his computer and saw Clayton Webb standing in the doorway, his blood turned to ice. The last house call he'd received from the CIA deputy director of operations, nearly a year ago, had begun an agonizing six-month wait for any word on his brother. It had now been five weeks since Sergei left for home, and while he wanted to believe everything was perfectly all right, this was not a man who dropped by simply to discuss the weather.

Webb watched the stoic officer go pale before his eyes, and he shook his head. "Relax. I'm not Sergei Zhukov's babysitter, but as far as I know, he's fine. The Russian flights into North Korea have stopped, so we're inferring that his team is through over there."

Harm closed his eyes in relief, but didn't entirely relax. "So this visit doesn't have anything to do with him?"

He hesitated. "Not directly."

"Webb, don't screw with me on this one."

"Listen, I'm here to ask for help. Mac's in the admiral's office already. If you can wait ten seconds, I'll lay it all out for you."

"All right, lead on."

Mac was indeed standing in the JAG's office, talking with a Marine colonel Harm didn't recognize. Admiral Chegvidden was sitting at his desk, arms folded across his chest.

"Commander Harmon Rabb, Colonel Derek Jackson. Colonel Jackson is the J-5 Plans staff commander of Marine Expeditionary Unit One-Nine in South Korea."

"Sir," Harm greeted the other man automatically. "Admiral, what - "

Chegvidden cut him off with a gesture. "I'm sure we're about to find out. Take a seat. Mr. Webb, the floor is yours. Try not to make me regret it."

Webb was used to these incessant jabs; he easily ignored this one. "We've been monitoring the construction of a new facility in North Korea. It's supposedly a scientific lab, but there have been an awful lot of army types milling around, and they're not just Korean. The site was developed with the full cooperation of the Russians."

Harm did his best not to flinch.

"Our intel's still piecing it all together, but we have reason to believe it's a testing site for a new weapons system. They've been making noise about the test ban treaty for a while, and State doesn't quite know how to take it. The optimists say they're just annoyed about our missile shield, and that it's harmless posturing. The realists say they're *very* annoyed about our missile shield, and that they're pushing development for possible first-strike capability."

Everyone sat in stunned silence for a long minute, the terrifying possibilities slowly sinking in. "The Russians are in on this?" Mac asked skeptically.

"They have the technology, but no funding to develop their own missile defense. The North Koreans aren't exactly rolling in cash, either, but they're more willing to throw it into big guns like this. The theory seems to be that the best defense is a good offense."

"Nuclear first-strike capability," the admiral repeated. "And even the basic elements of our missile defense won't be operational for a good two, three years. If they even look at us cross-eyed, we'll have to go back to the SAC days of twenty-four-hour alert. It'll be 1960 all over again."

"Which is why life would be better for all concerned if we could head this off before it even starts." Colonel Jackson took over. "The Joint Chiefs have very quietly asked us to begin developing options for taking the facility off-line."

"You mean destroying it," Harm demanded, his fear mounting. "That's an act of war! North Korea's allies would have the excuse they need to team up and take us on, especially if there are Russian soldiers in that facility - "

"We're aware of the complications," Jackson stated calmly. "We know we can't go in and blow it sky-high. That's why we need options. Right now, the most promising idea is to send our Recon unit in to simulate a test failure. If they've got a missile on the stand, we could blow the igniters before it's armed. There would be time to evacuate, but it would set their plans back substantially. While they pick up the pieces, we can revisit the treaty through diplomatic means. Hopefully cooler heads will prevail."

Mac frowned. Something was missing from this equation. "Respectfully, sir, if you came here to get the legal angle on this, you're out of luck. We'd be breaking six different kinds of international law if we attempted a covert op of this kind. I realize the other side is breaking twice that many, but even so, I don't think we can help you."

"I'm not in the market for legalities, Colonel. I'm here to ask the admiral's permission to borrow one of his officers."

Harm felt the two men's eyes shift to him, and he immediately started shaking his

head. "Wait, back the hell up. You want *me*? What in God's name for?"

"To help with the insertion. Getting into North Korean airspace is going to require a very believable cover, and we need a pilot who won't panic. We want to use a small commercial cargo plane on a regularly-scheduled route. It will develop engine trouble and go down in the mountains. The locals will be distracted by the crash, and they won't realize that a dozen Marines parachuted out of the thing ten minutes before it ever hit the ground."

"A dozen Marines and one washed-up fighter jockey?" Harm was tempted to laugh. This was the sketchiest plan he'd heard in a long while, and he was an expert in sketchy plans. "Don't you have pilots who train for this kind of thing?"

"You're a compromise. CIA wanted one of their people along, but the Ops staff said no way - military only. When Deputy Director Webb got on the scene, he suggested you. Apparently you're on a very short list of people the Agency trusts."

"Remind me to express my gratitude later." He glared at Webb, but the admiral spoke up.

"As I recall, Commander, you barely blinked when I ordered you to do a HA-LO insertion with the SEALs a few years back."

"I was young and stupid, sir," the senior attorney replied tightly. Mac lifted an eyebrow; this was a story she hadn't heard. "And this is not like busting drug runners. How do we know this test site isn't meant for defense rather than attack?"

"We know," Webb insisted. "Harm, sooner or later, you're going to have to accept the fact that the Russians just don't like us much. I know it has to hurt, with Sergei out there, but this is a damn good chance to prevent a conflict that he would most definitely be involved in. If we do this right, it'll protect them as much as it'll protect us, because it'll keep the balance."

"And if we do it wrong? We'll be in a conflict for sure, only we'll be the aggressors. That's not what I signed up for."

"It won't necessarily end up a firefight," Jackson maintained. "They're violating the treaty just by developing this thing, and they know it. They'll want to keep it as quiet as we do. As long as we don't start shooting, they won't either."

Harm didn't trust either man's assessment of the situation, but he could hear the young Russian voice in his head: "*You do not refuse duty ...*" Maybe - just maybe - this would help get Sergei off the front lines. For no other reason than that, he knew what he had to do.

"I don't suppose you could promise me that my brother's already miles away from that place?" he asked grimly.

"I never promise," Webb replied, "but to the best of our knowledge, the Russian Army finished their part and headed for home days ago."

He glanced over at Mac, whose dark eyes were nearly as conflicted as his own. Without exchanging a word, it was clear that she wanted to tell him not to go. This would be one of the more dangerous things he'd done in recent memory. But she would keep those fears to herself, as she so often did. Someone had to go, after all.

"All right," he said, with little enthusiasm. "When do we start?"

"We're verifying the details right now, and you can start training with the unit ASAP. I'm sure you'll need a few hours to tie up any loose ends around here and come up with a good excuse for leaving town."

"I'll be ready by 1430."

"Transport will be waiting at Andrews."

Harm rose from his chair and came to attention. Admiral Chegwidden nodded once. "Good luck, Commander. Dismissed."

As he strode for the door, Mac stood up as well. "Sir, request permission to - "

"Granted."

Caught off-guard, she paused. "Sir?"

"You were about to request leave. Your request is granted." The commanding officer looked up at her with a placid expression. He'd given up trying to keep her from following her partner around. "Might I suggest a visit to the Far East? Kunsan, maybe?"

"You read my mind, Admiral."

1741 Local Kunsan Air Base South Korea

"No offense, sir," commented one of the Recon corporals, "but we're not really used to working with lawyers, you know?"

Harm smiled wryly. "Don't worry. If I brought my copy of the UCMJ along on every assignment I took, I'd be in as much trouble as anyone else." Christ, these kids were young. When had he gotten so damned old? Now there really were guys half his age out here. Even Sergei was barely twenty-one ...

He consciously banished any thoughts of his brother. It would wreck his concentration, and once this thing got started, he wouldn't be able to afford the lapse. He'd been training with the Marine unit for two days, taking a crash course in everything from parachute technique to infrared evasion to hand-to-hand combat. He'd held his own, but light infantry had never been his first career choice.

Last night, he'd done something that he'd only done two or three other times in his life. He'd written one of those 'in case I don't make it back' letters. After it was done, he'd written another, and another. To his mother, and Sergei - as if he'd ever get it - to Mac, the admiral, Bud and Harriet ... hell, if he'd had anything to say, he would have written one to Renee. They were sincere, but surreal, since he couldn't properly picture the eventuality in which they'd ever be read. *I'm a Tomcat driver. I walk on water. I'm bulletproof. Right?*

The truth was that this mission felt wrong - off, somehow. He was beginning to think the intelligence people didn't have the whole story, but it wasn't as if he could do anything about it. They were taking off at sundown, and if everything went as planned, the world would still be in one piece by morning.

Mac wandered out to where he was securing his gear, striking in her blue civilian sweater among the grays and greens of the Korean landscape. "Anyone ever tell you that you look great in cammies?" she called lightly.

He only rolled his eyes at her. "I'm too old for this shit, Mac," he complained, only halfway teasing.

"Watch your mouth. And come up with a better cliché." She dropped down to sit beside him on the ground. "When do you take off?"

"We've got final briefing and preflight in a couple of hours. I figured I'd rack out for a while before then."

"Like you'll actually get any sleep at this point. You gonna be ready for this?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have choices. It's just that they're not always good ones." Tucking her knees up to her chest, she looked over at him. "You're doing the right thing, sailor. It might look shaky from here, but there's a greater good to be served."

"I don't know, Mac. Russia didn't invalidate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. We did. The 'land of the free' wanted to put up a wall around ourselves, and when the law said no, we found a way to do it anyway. I mean, I voted for the guy and everything, but it's hard not to wonder if we brought some of this on ourselves."

"Not this. We didn't build new offensive nuclear weapons. We just wanted a way to stop the ones aimed at us. It's not like they're not out there, Harm. As much as I'd love to believe that there are no more enemies in the world, I know better. And so do you, or you wouldn't bother to put on that uniform."

Harm sighed. "I know. I just hate jumping out of perfectly good airplanes."

Mac smiled and got to her feet, offering him a hand up. He accepted it, and they stood there for a moment, the momentary playfulness fading in the face of the task ahead. "Just be careful out there, all right?" she said softly.

Without noticing, he echoed Sergei's response. "Always." As she turned to head back inside, something made him call after her. "Hey, Mac?"

When she turned, questioning, he realized why he'd done it. He had one last opportunity to tell her what was on his mind: what he'd written in her letter, the hardest and most heartfelt one of all of them. But immediately he dismissed the idea. Right now, he had one focus. If he came back, they'd have plenty of time to talk. If not ... maybe she didn't need to know.

He offered a halfhearted smile. "Be good for Webb while I'm gone."

"No promises."

2314 Local Somewhere over the Korean Peninsula

"Okay, one last time," the gunnery sergeant shouted over the roar of the cargo hauler's engines. "When you hit the ground, pair up and fan out. I don't want to hear a peep off those radios unless you trip over frickin' Elvis, got it? Once Jennings and Kesler get everything set, you'll hear a non-verbal signal, and you'll clear out for the rendezvous point. If things don't look like we expect 'em to, you can improvise up to a point, but stay the hell out of sight. The cockroaches shouldn't even know we're there. That's the whole deal, gentlemen. Who are we?"

"Recon! Hoo-rah!" answered six voices in unison.

The gunny nodded his approval and climbed forward to the cockpit. "We're good to go, Commander," he reported. "Just give the word."

"All right, let's get this show on the road." Harm reached over to shut down the number two engine, and the old plane lurched. "You're on, Sergeant."

A young Marine keyed the radio and used his best Australian accent. "Mayday, mayday. This is Victoria Freight Lines flight eight-four. We've lost an engine. Repeat, number two engine is out ..."

As he read a few more lines from the prepared script, Harm signaled that they were over the target area. One by one, the Marines stepped out of the hatch into oblivion, and after locking the autopilot into a dizzying descent, the pilot followed.

They floated to earth in a midnight silence that was quickly shattered by a spectacular fireball in the distant mountains. Harm hit the ground and rolled to soften the impact. His 'buddy', Staff Sergeant Carlsen, landed easily on his feet. "You see that crash, sir?" he grinned. "Outstanding."

"Yeah, hope that doesn't count against the landing score on my next quals." They rapidly packed up their chutes and started off in the direction of the coordinates. Approaching from the southeast, the two men crouched in the brush outside the drab gray building that was their objective. The security system appeared to be primarily automated: not a single guard was visible on the perimeter. Harm glanced sideways at Carlsen, who shook his head in contempt. No computer was going to stop a Recon squad.

The sergeant looked at his watch and silently counted to five. On 'five', nothing changed - except a previously-unnoticed hum in the air had disappeared. Harm had to admit that he was impressed. Those techies, Jennings and Kesler, knew their stuff. They crept along the wall and entered the building without so much as a click from the disabled sensors.

The two techies were really the essential part of this operation. They were to locate the demo warhead that was allegedly being tested, and reprogram its rocket motor to overtemp and burn itself out. There would be a minor fire, most likely, but the resulting chaos would do as much damage to the program as a total loss.

The other three pairs were simply along for protection. One would remain outside to monitor, and two would take up posts around the main test cell to guard against any unexpected interruptions. Of course, eight people were far more likely to be spotted than two, but Marines didn't send anyone anywhere without adequate backup.

In a dimly-lit hallway - didn't any foreign powers ever pay electric bills? - Carlsen froze in place and flattened himself against the wall. Harm instinctively did the same. After a few seconds, the sergeant moved in close and spoke in a barely-audible voice. "This ain't right, sir. I'm hearing weird crap going on. Rifles clicking, boots on metal plate, and it sounds like a lot of junk getting hauled around. I don't think there's any test going on today."

Harm didn't ask how he could hear all that - he was Recon. "You think there's troops around that aren't just guarding the building?"

"Dunno, sir, but they don't feel too friendly. I say they're up to something."

This was decision time. Jennings and Kesler would be hacking their way into the test cell in minutes. If they were about to walk in on a roomful of armed soldiers instead of a deserted lab, now was the time to call them off. "We need more info, Carlie," he said soberly.

"Aye, sir." The Marine edged forward along the wall until a sharp sound at the end of the hall sent them scrambling for cover. A door opened, and four men strode down the hall in perfect cadence, carrying a large piece of unfamiliar equipment. The uniform was clearly recognizable: Russian army.

As more men followed, carrying more equipment and weapons, the situation began to make sense. They weren't testing here today. They were bugging out. Why the hell would they leave a brand-new site, unless ...

Unless they know we're coming.

For once, Harm cursed like the sailor he was, and fumbled for the radio. "Abort, abort!" he hissed. "This place is crawling with soldiers, and they're expecting company!"

He and Carlsen ducked toward the nearest way out, only to be nearly run over by another group of men coming back in. The Russians had more numbers and a split-second of warning on their side, which was enough opportunity to lash out at their guests with brutal speed.

Harm wiped blood from his lip and slowly picked himself up off the floor. An older man, his insignia identifying him as a colonel, stood over them as his two officers relieved them of their weapons. "You might as well speak," he told them in careful English. "It is not as if we don't know you are American Marines."

"Idti na preicpodnya," Harm answered scornfully, hoping the phrase meant something close to what he thought it meant.

The colonel only raised an eyebrow. "Hell is no place for a Siberian like myself. Come now. Make this simple for all of us, and tell us where your comrades are so that we may escort all of you out of the country before the press notices."

"Oh, is that how this works? We all say we're sorry and walk away?"

"It is the more pleasant option. I would not find pleasure in killing you with your own weapons and fabricating a story for your ZNN, but I would do it. 'The attempt to illegally penetrate this scientific facility ended in a tragic mistake, as the American attackers opened fire on each other ...' " He shook his head. "Be reasonable. You cannot possibly have as many forces here as I do."

Harm said a silent prayer that the other teams had heard his warning and were headed for the rendezvous point. "Maybe you're right. Have you ever played American football, Colonel?"

The man frowned, wary of a trick. "Why would you ask?"

"You'd be a natural for it. What do you think, Carlie? Defensive line, maybe?"

"Definitely, sir. I was a center, myself."

"I played around at quarterback. Decent arm, but no finesse."

"Ever go for a quarterback sneak?"

By now, the Russians were both confused and suspicious. Harm tensed up, grateful that Carlsen seemed to have gotten the message. "Oh, yeah. I've got scars to prove it."

Nothing but pain right from the word *hike*.”

On ‘hike’, both men surged forward, knocking all three of their captors off-balance with a hit any offensive line coach would admire. Before anyone could recover, they were sprinting through the double doors.

“Excellent play-calling, sir,” Carlsen said approvingly. They wouldn’t be alone for long, though. Sirens soon wailed throughout the complex, and they barreled through the near-darkness with soldiers in close pursuit. Harm darted into a side corridor and realized belatedly that they’d gotten split up. He had approximately four seconds to wonder about Carlsen before a young Russian stood up into his path. The two grappled for a while, and just as Harm felled him with a right hook, another body slammed into him. He responded with a solid kick that knocked his adversary to the floor and sent his sidearm flying. Retrieving it, the American aimed it at the other man ... and everything seemed to come to a jarring halt.

“Oh, God, no,” he breathed.

Sergei stared up at him, shaken in more ways than one. “It is ... a small world,” he finally managed to say.

“What are you doing here?”

“Should that not be my question? This is what you do when your ‘paperwork’ is finished?”

As if suddenly waking up, Harm lowered the gun, but didn’t return it to his brother. His mind was reeling, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins kept the situation sharply real. “I’m sorry. I don’t have time to explain.”

“Actually, I would like to hear it.”

He recognized the colonel’s voice and knew it was too late to bring his weapon around. *Damn. This isn’t happening.* Options were rapidly vanishing all around him.

“Is it possible that you two have met?”

“No, Colonel Marakov,” Sergei answered cautiously. “I think maybe this one has a conscience.”

“A Marine with a conscience? How unexpected. And unfortunate for him.” Marakov was holding Harm’s own pistol trained on him. “I have changed my mind. I do not think I can let this incident go unnoticed, even if it does draw attention to us. How will you choose to go down in history, Marine? Can you leave this room alive without causing an international incident? These are the choices I see. You can surrender your weapon, in which case I will parade you before the cameras as a spy and a representative of the American imperialism we resent. If you are fortunate, your execution will be swift. Or you can try to shoot me, although I will most certainly shoot you in return. And even if you managed to survive that, you would have to shoot the lieutenant as well. Do you think you can do that? This brave young man, whose honorable death might inspire his country to retaliation?”

Harm kept his expression carefully controlled, but the direction this conversation was taking chilled him to the bone. The colonel’s musings took on a calculating, almost wicked quality. “Perhaps that is the best solution of all for us. Do try it, Marine. Kill your enemy, and make him a martyr for Mother Russia.”

“Now why would I want to do that?” he asked harshly, willing himself not to meet Sergei’s gaze. “It won’t get me out of here. You’ll still shoot me.”

“There is risk in everything, I suppose, but you certainly gain nothing by staying here. Besides, I think this picture is perfect. So perfect that if you will not kill him, I will do so in your name.” He shifted his aim to his junior officer. “It is an American weapon, after all.”

“No!” Harm forced the desperation out of his voice. “For God’s sake - he’s a kid! Is that the way you fight? By sacrificing your own people?”

“We do not live by the ‘all for one’ mentality here. When there is a greater goal in sight, a Russian soldier will accept his fate. Lieutenant Zhukov understands this: do you not, Lieutenant?”

Still on the floor, Sergei lifted his head, and only his eyes betrayed his fear. “It is our way,” he said simply. The brothers shared a glance that spoke volumes. Oblivious to its significance, Marakov shook his head.

“What is your decision, Marine? Do you go down fighting or talking?”

A new, terrible solution took shape in the American commander's mind. "There's another option you haven't considered," he declared. Very slowly, he turned the gun in his hand back toward himself.

Sergei went white. Marakov looked almost impressed. "Would you do this? Do you have that kind of strength?"

Harm's voice was deadly serious. "Try me." And he clicked back the hammer.

"Harmon, no!" Sergei cried.

As he turned to his brother, his ice-blue eyes were clear. "You may very well die for your country, but I'll be damned if it's because of me."

Marakov watched them, fascinated. "You are the one?" he asked curiously. "The American naval officer whose brother is a Russian soldier? Can this be true?"

"What do you think of this solution, Marakov?" Harm demanded, ignoring the query entirely. "Point-blank shot to the head, execution-style, with a Russian gun? It won't play well on the cover of the *Washington Post*, or even at the Kremlin. And you can forget about making up your own story. As soon as I fire this weapon, my team will be in here in seconds. They won't leave me behind, alive or dead, because that's not how we do things in the United States military. We fight for our country, yes, but we also fight for each other. I don't suppose that's something you'll ever understand."

For an excruciating length of time, the three men stared at each other, no one moving. Then a sound at the door snapped the tension, and a startled Marakov whirled toward it with his weapon aimed. There was a sharp crack and a flash of light, and the colonel fell.

From there, it was as if time stretched itself across a limitless expanse. It all happened so fast, yet it was never-ending. The Marine who'd reacted to Marakov's threat wasn't alone, and in an instant the corridor was alight with gunfire as Russian guards rushed to investigate. Harm spun around and crouched low, scanning for targets. The politics of the matter had suddenly taken a backseat to keeping himself and his team alive. "Fall back, Recon!" he commanded, shouting over the anarchy. "Head out!"

As his eyes swept the area, a crushing blow awaited him - in the form of his brother, lying in the middle of the room, a victim of the crossfire.

"NO!!!"

He wasn't sure he'd ever screamed before, but this was unquestionably a scream. Harm raced to Sergei's side, the bullets ringing past without ever registering in his mind. The young man's chest was a hideous mess of crimson, and he struggled to breathe. "Get - out of here," he choked out.

"Not a chance," Harm replied shortly, tearing the fabric of his black fatigues to staunch the flow of blood. "Damn it, little brother, am I always going to have to bail you out of trouble?"

Sergei tried to smile, but his strength was flickering, and soon his eyes had fallen closed. Terrified beyond anything he'd ever known, Harm lifted him over his shoulder and made his way toward the exit, firing halfheartedly at the Russians who trailed behind. There was a flash of blazing pain - he couldn't tell where - but he kept moving, finally reaching the open air at last.

The Marines looked at him as though he'd grown another head. "Sir, what the hell?" the gunny demanded, gesturing to the injured Russian soldier they'd acquired.

"He's coming with us. No arguments. Go!"

They double-timed it to the rendezvous a few hundred yards away, leaving the gunfire behind. Someone with authority must have realized the gravity of the situation, because the Russians didn't continue the chase past their own gates. Besides Marakov and Sergei, it didn't appear as if anyone else had been seriously wounded. Maybe there was still hope.

Then again, maybe they'd just touched off a spark that would lead to war.

A transport helo appeared over the trees, and the group dashed for the clearing. Fatigue weighed him down, but Harm stubbornly pushed on, finally hauling himself and his brother into the waiting helo.

"I thought I told you guys to clear out!" he shouted across the open bay. The gunny shrugged.

"We improvised, sir. To carry out the mission."

"How's that?"

Jennings and Kesler looked at each other, a hint of satisfaction evident in their weary faces. As the helo ascended to leave the area, curls of dark smoke were visible around one end of the building. "You blew the test cell anyway," Harm stated incredulously, shaking his head. "You jarheads. Unbelievable."

He sank back against the inner frame of the aircraft, and the gunny studied him, frowning. "Commander, you're - "

"Later," he said distractedly, his attention returning to the motionless form in his lap. Sergei's pulse was weakening, and sweat matted his hair to his forehead. His eyes fluttered, but didn't focus. "Harm?" he gasped out, his voice ravaged.

"Right here," Harm assured him, keeping the wadded fabric pressed to the wound. "You're going back with us, and you're going to be fine. Just hang in there, okay?"

"I will try ..."

"Don't just try, damn it!" he ordered, his own pain and desperation threatening to take over. "You are not allowed to die on me, Sergei!"

He almost managed the slightest trace of a smile. "Yes, sir ... I am sorry, big brother ..."

Before Harm could protest, he had slipped into unconsciousness again. His heart aching, the proud, determined commander squeezed his eyes shut against the tears that burned there. "So am I," he whispered.

Same time Kunsan Air Base South Korea

Mac watched Webb listen tensely for a few minutes, and moved in as soon as he'd hung up the phone. "They're inbound?"

The intelligence officer nodded grimly. "It wasn't pretty. The place was full of Russian army regulars trying to pack everything up. Something must have tipped them off that we'd be coming, but apparently they didn't know when. The damn thing turned into a shootout."

Mac cursed inwardly. "Casualties?"

"Only minor injuries to our team." He sighed. "But they're coming back with one wounded Russian."

She held her breath, not daring to believe. There was only one reason to bring back a Russian soldier. "Not Sergei." Webb nodded. "Oh, God. What's going to happen now?"

"I don't know, Mac. We'll throw some diplomats together and try to stop this from escalating, but I just don't know."

They hurried out to the flight line and waited with the medical team for the helo to touch down. As soon as the skids hit the concrete, the door opened, and chaos spilled out.

Harm surrendered his brother to the corpsman's waiting hands, an expression of defeat marring his handsome features. As the Marines piled out after him, Mac ran up to her partner, immediately detecting the bloodstained hole in the left shoulder of his fatigues. He barely seemed to notice her presence.

"Sergei," he mumbled, eyes clouded by deep physical and emotional pain. "Don't let him die ..."

"We've got him, Harm. Come on. You need help." She reached a hand out to him, but he shook his head.

"It's his blood."

"It's not, Harm. It's yours, too."

He looked down at his shoulder, but the realization that he'd been hit as well didn't appear to register. "His blood, my blood ... what's the difference?"

Bitterness and regret echoed in his soft voice. Her own heart breaking, Mac's arms shot out to steady him as he swayed, the blood loss and exhaustion finally catching up to him. "Get another stretcher!" she ordered, and two corpsmen hurried to comply. Harm didn't resist as she guided him onto the gurney. "Mac, stay with Sergei," he begged weakly, but she was already shaking her head.

"The doctors will take care of him. My duty station is right here with you."

"Please, Mac ... make sure he's okay ..."

"I can't help Sergei, Harm. I *can* help you." It was a flimsy argument, but she was caught in a dilemma of her own. She wanted - needed - to stay with him, but his injury wasn't nearly as serious, and if she could ease his mind at all by doing this for him ...

"All right, flyboy," she promised quietly. "I'll go with him. But I'll be back."

Only half-conscious now, he was falling deeper into his remorse. "It's my fault ..."

"No, it's not. Harm, listen to me. It's *not* your fault."

But his hand had gone limp in hers. Mac sighed heavily and started toward the med center, trying not to think about how her dear friend would get through this if his brother did not.

0138 Local Kunsan Medical Center

Harm slowly came to consciousness in much kinder surroundings than the ones he'd left. His shoulder ached in a vague, dull sense, and he was more tired than he'd ever been. But there was a cool pillow under his head, and a familiar hand stroked his cheek.

He forced his eyes open and looked up at Mac through a thick haze. She smiled faintly. "It's just the anesthetic wearing off," she told him gently. "They had to stitch you up. But they'll let you out in a day or so if you're good."

"Sergei?" His mouth didn't seem to be responding to his brain, but she understood immediately.

"He's in surgery. I couldn't stay, so I came here. They're optimistic, but they're not making any promises."

Managing a slow, cautious nod, he focused more clearly on his partner. She looked so tired - it must be the middle of the night - but as strong as ever, as if she were trying to take some of his pain onto herself. Though they both knew it wasn't possible, he was grateful for the effort. He was grateful for her.

"Did we ... start a war?"

Mac sighed. "State's got someone on the phone with the Foreign Ministry in Moscow. It all basically depends on how much they're willing to admit. If they go public with a claim of aggression from us, they'll have to tell the world what they were doing there in the first place. Both sides have a pretty good reason to back off ... as long as everyone calms down enough to recognize it."

Harm nodded again, finding his voice at last. "Maybe we succeeded, after all," he mused. "They could still choose to blame the mishap on a test failure. I sure as hell wouldn't call their bluff."

She watched him struggling to grasp all that he'd seen. "Harm, what happened?" she asked softly. "You didn't - I mean, it wasn't you who - ?"

His eyes flashed in surprise, realizing what she meant. "No. God, no. I did not shoot Sergei. I couldn't have - even if -"

"I know. I'm sorry. I just thought maybe it could have been an accident."

"All of it was an accident." He was silent for a moment, growing distant as he relived the terror. "I couldn't do it. The colonel, Marakov, wanted to sacrifice him, make him a fallen hero that all of Russia could rally behind and rise to avenge. He tried to make me kill my own brother ... and instead, I pointed the gun at my own head."

His expression was nearly as stunned as hers. "I would have done it, too. If the Recon

guys hadn't shown up, and the world hadn't exploded around us, I think I would have pulled the trigger. I didn't know I could do something like that."

She reached over and clasped his hand tightly. "You're learning the first rule of unconditional love," she told him. "Sometimes it's hell."

"You have no idea." He met her gaze, his anguish so close to the surface. "When I saw that he was hit, it was like I couldn't breathe. I felt like I'd tried so hard, but I failed because I couldn't protect him ..."

He was battling to hold back tears. She could see it, and she knew it was tearing him apart. So she drew him into her arms and waited silently until the inevitable sobs wracked his body. This was something no one else would ever see. To the world at large, Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr., was an icon, the personification of a dashing aviator and defender of justice. Few people ever saw the times when his admirable determination spilled over into rage, hopelessness, or desperation. He wasn't perfect, and too often, he punished himself for it. This time, as in so many others, the task of helping him weather the storm fell to the person who understood him better than anyone else.

"You did as much as you could," she murmured into his ear. "You got him out, and you probably saved his life. He's going to be okay, Harm. You have to believe that."

"I'm trying," he whispered, catching his breath. "I swear to God, I'm trying."

After a few minutes - she'd been ignoring her internal clock of late - she eased him back and brushed a hand through his dark hair. "Get some rest. I'll get an update on Sergei."

Already succumbing to exhaustion, he let his eyes close. "What would I do without you, Mac?" he asked vaguely, falling into a troubled sleep.

Mac watched him and shook her head. Knowing he wouldn't hear, she answered softly. "Let's not find out, all right?"

1229 Local Same location

In the hallway outside Intensive Care, Harm leaned against the wall to regain a more solid footing. Mac tightened her left arm under his uninjured right one. "There's no shame in using a wheelchair, sailor."

"I'm all right," he insisted. "I just want to ... I don't want him to think it's any worse than it is. I don't want him to worry about anything."

Sergei had come through the surgery well. The doctors had repaired the damage to his kidney and removed his spleen, and he was expected to recover, slowly but completely. For the time being, he was still receiving blood transfusions, and would be upgraded to stable once that step was finished. And his brother was determined to be with him at the first opportunity. So Mac had rustled up a pair of BDU pants, boots and a black T-shirt for her partner, and there they were.

Harm stood at the window into the ICU for a moment, watching the machines that monitored Sergei's condition with a guarded expression. "This is what it's like, I guess," he said quietly, his gaze never leaving the young man's unmoving form. "My mom has talked about the day I crashed - how she had to wait forever until they'd let her see me, and then when they finally did, how it killed her to know that she couldn't do anything to take it away ... it must have felt a lot like this."

With his friend behind him, offering unspoken support, he entered the small, sterile room and slid into the chair beside the bed. "Hey, little brother," he began uncertainly. "Wake up and keep me company, will you?"

Mac squeezed his hand and went out into the hall to give them some privacy. Before long, Sergei stirred, and after a few seconds, he dragged his eyes open.

"Harm," he whispered, slowly recognizing the person by his bed. He looked as though he wanted to say more, but the drug-induced fog was hampering his language skills.

"We're in Kunsan, South Korea," Harm told him, trying to sound reassuring. "Are you in pain?"

"I will be, once I stop floating ..." His vague half-smile disappeared as he caught sight of the sling. "You are hurt?"

"It's nothing. I've had plenty worse." The older brother shook his head. "You scared the hell out of me, you know that?"

"Me? I am not the one who pointed a gun at himself." Sergei's eyes reflected the fear that his weakened voice failed to convey. "I am thinking that my brother is crazy."

"Not crazy. Just desperate." Harm sighed, reaching over to grasp his hand. "Sergei, we didn't come to destroy the base. We were trying to stop the test before the rest of the world found out what was going on there. I swear to you, I only agreed to come because I thought it might keep you and everyone else out of a war. Please say you believe that."

Ever so slightly, he nodded. "Of course I believe you," he said faintly. "I thought, when they ordered us to move out, that we would prevent this as well. But we are both wrong, are we not?"

"Not yet. No one's launched any attacks so far." Harm rubbed his eyes wearily. "I just wish I knew what that meant for the future."

Sergei was quiet for a moment, but spoke up again. "Will my commanders tell my mother that I am missing again?" he wondered. "Or even dead?"

"I don't know. For a while, they probably won't say anything. They won't want the public to know what happened."

"Even so ... will you try to get a message to her?" He looked up with clear, honest eyes. "Tell her that I am safe ... because my father's soul watches out for me through my brother."

New tears stung his eyes, but Harm nodded solemnly. "I'll do that."

... Outside, Mac turned as she heard Webb's approach. "How's our 'Russian prisoner'?" the intelligence agent asked dryly.

"Not bad, considering. Is that really what they're calling him?"

"Not officially. They're just trying to scare us into begging for forgiveness."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Is it working?"

Webb hesitated. "There's a meeting of the UN Security Council in three days. All our back channels are suggesting that as the do-or-die point. Even if the Russians don't raise the issue, North Korea may do it through China. We've got about thirty hours to figure out what we want the world to hear." He shifted his gaze to the window, seeing the powerful reunion taking place inside. "Every so often, that partner of yours reminds me that he's human."

"Every so often?"

"Face it, Mac. If it doesn't involve his father, you, or now Sergei, he's got ice water in his veins."

Mac chose to acknowledge only part of that statement. "You just don't know him well enough, Clay. He goes to the wall for the people he cares about. I thought you would have realized after the Palmer incident that you're on the short list, too."

"I take your point. But this time's different. Finding out about Sergei changed a lot of things, didn't it?"

"Probably more than we'll ever know," she replied honestly. "Kinda makes me wish I had a brother, too. How about you?"

"After the hell they just went through for each other? Not likely." An idea flickered in a corner of his mind, and for the first time since this bizarre standoff began, he had a hope for a way out. "Mac, I want you to listen to something, and tell me if I've lost my mind."

... Harm glanced up to see Mac and Webb entering the room. "Well, you two look fantastic," Webb remarked. "How are you feeling, Sergei?"

"I am alive. That is all I can say." He offered a tired smile. "Should I be surprised to see either of you here?"

Mac moved past Webb to place a kiss on Sergei's pale cheek. "We're always where the trouble is," she quipped. "Are you up to talking to us for a while?"

"It would depend on what you want to talk about."

She flashed a look over at her companion. "Director Webb has an idea about how to clear all this up, and I think it's a good one."

Harm looked from one to the other with suspicion. "Webb, your idea is what got me into this mess in the first place."

"I know, but hear me out, because I really think you can do this." He turned back to Sergei. "I just talked to your doctors, and they agree that if we keep a corpsman on hand, you can be transported within a couple of days. I realize how much I'm asking here, but would you be willing to come back to the United States with us?"

Sergei frowned, looking wary. "I do not think I will be ready for any more sightseeing just yet."

"Don't worry. There's only one landmark on your schedule."

"And that is?"

"The United Nations building."

1310 EST Outer Chamber, UN Security Council New York, New York

Harm adjusted his sling for the seventeenth time, attempting to get the ribbons of his dress blues to lie flat underneath. "Please tell me this isn't happening," he moaned. "Tell me Webb didn't convince the Secretary of State to pin our hopes for peace on my powers of persuasion."

"You are not the only one, big brother," Sergei answered, also in full uniform but sitting down to conserve his strength. "If this does not work, my countrymen may call me *predatelya* for real."

The door opened, and Clayton Webb entered, in 'special assistant' mode. "They're about to get started. Ready to give the performance of your life?"

Harm shot him a withering look. "I'm a lawyer, Webb, not an actor."

"Okay, then, the closing argument of your life. Just give them everything you've got."

The brother shared a glance, and once more, no words were needed. "All right. Let's go."

They took their seats in the gallery, immediately sensing the undercurrent of tension. Although no one expected the Russians to bang any more shoes on the table, all were aware that this would be a tumultuous session.

When the meeting of the UN Security Council was called to order, the Russian delegate was coolly patient. He knew his turn would come soon, as China had agreed to give its time to him. Their accusations of the American aggression would be the first entered into record, and therefore would be the most damaging. But he hadn't counted on the wonders of alphabetical order.

"The delegate from Australia would like to turn the floor over to the special representatives from the United States."

Harm and Sergei strode boldly down the aisle to the podium as the buzz in the room intensified. Taking a deep breath, Harm stepped up to the microphone.

"Thank you, Madame Ambassador, honored delegates. My name is Harmon Rabb, Junior. I am a commander in the United States Navy."

As the translators did their work, Sergei leaned in and spoke in his native language. "[And I am Sergei Tietyevich Zhukov. Lieutenant, Russian Army.]"

Harm continued in English. "This past week, we and our colleagues were involved in an incident at a military testing facility in North Korea. You have not heard the full story of this incident because many laws were broken on many different sides. Some people would have you believe that Russia and North Korea struck first by developing an illegal weapon. Others would have you believe that the United States crossed the line by moving against a foreign installation, and by being first to fire in anger. We who witnessed these events are asking for neither, because in the end, no one benefits from blame. Instead, we call upon all parties to work toward a peaceful resolution to this incident."

He glanced over at Sergei, and willed his heart to stop pounding. "Lieutenant Zhukov

and I did not come before you because of politics. We are not simply warriors who met across battle lines. We are also brothers - sons of the same father, an American naval aviator who was shot down over Vietnam and later escaped deep into Russia. We met for the first time only a year ago, but immediately we recognized many things in each other. One of these things was the dedication to duty that our father possessed. We have each sworn an oath to defend our countries ... but last week, that oath led us to take up arms against each other.”

Sergei took over. “[Throughout much of my childhood, I was taught that American capitalism was a crime against the people, against the whole of society. When communism fell in Moscow, the change was not so clear out on the banks of the Taiga. We continued to believe in the basic good of Mother Russia, and I saw no reason to trust in any part of the United States. I was twenty years old before I ever met a true American - and it was this man. My own blood, my own eyes looking back at me. For the first time, I questioned how we could really be so different. Although he would lay down his life for his country, as I would, he did not wish to fight any more than I did. Because of this, I no longer believed that the ‘evil Americans’ wanted to destroy us.]”

“War is a horrible thing,” Harm declared, gazing out at the assembly. “Those who have seen it firsthand would do anything to erase it. No sane person truly wants to fight. But the weapons we have developed over the course of the last century have altered our viewpoint. We have nuclear missiles so powerful that the term ‘mutual assured destruction’ has become part of our vocabulary. If someone gets us, we’ll get them back, until there is nothing left. There are no winners in that scenario, and everyone knows it. But what choice do we have, as long as the bombs are out there? So we all comfort ourselves with the idea of ‘first-strike’ capability - hit them hard enough and fast enough that they simply can’t hit back. It’s precise, and efficient, but it ignores a fundamental principle of civilized society: to create, rather than destroy, whenever possible. I will defend my country to my last breath, but first-strike is not a defense. Escalating into another arms race, keeping our armies on constant alert ... these things aren’t a defense. They’re a knee-jerk reaction from a world terrified of its own technology. We’re smarter than that, and more compassionate. All of us, regardless of nationality, recognize the moral travesty of nuclear war. We can’t allow ourselves to use this accident to become the start of a conflict we can’t control.”

Beside him, Harm felt Sergei beginning to falter. Determined not to let anything take away from their words, the young soldier steadied himself with a supporting hand on the podium. Without missing a beat, Harm immediately grasped his other hand and locked his arm under Sergei’s elbow. Behind the podium, the two brothers stood together to bring their message home.

“We all want the same basic thing,” Harm maintained earnestly. “A world where our children can grow and thrive. We have the potential for a completely peaceful coexistence, so long as we refuse to let fear dictate our actions. I’ve been afraid many times in my life, but until recently, my fears about war have all centered on the idea of someone I care about being hurt by some faceless enemy. That’s not what I fear anymore, because the so-called ‘enemy’ from the past now includes someone I care very much about. Now, I’m just as afraid for him as I am for us. When that happened, I realized that many people’s fears would disappear if they could simply put a face to this ‘enemy’. So in the hopes of doing just that, we stand here to offer ourselves as an example. My name is Harmon, and I am American. Sergei is Russian. But we are brothers. That’s all you need to know.”

There was a weighty silence in the room as they walked back up the aisle, Harm keeping a careful eye on his brother. In the gallery, Sergei sank gratefully into a chair, and they waited for the response.

“Damn, you’re good,” Webb muttered, rejoining them. Harm shook his head.

“I didn’t tell them anything they don’t already know. I just hope the emotional appeal made it through all the translations.”

The delegate from Canada leaned into his microphone. “Mister Chairman, I would like to introduce a resolution,” he began.

Harm listened carefully to the details. Russia and North Korea would acknowledge their fault in conducting unauthorized tests, and in turn, the United States would acknowledge

its wrongdoing in sending an operation onto foreign soil to neutralize it. All three countries would face minor sanctions, and furthermore, the General Assembly would work to develop a broader resolution to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons testing, as well as revisiting the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The council members scattered to their offices in order to confer with their respective governments, and the visitors were left to wait.

"It'll have to be unanimous to have any teeth," Webb commented. "North Korea doesn't have a seat, thank God, but if China or Russia dissents, it'll be a de facto rejection, and there'll be a very public shouting match."

"As long as it doesn't deteriorate into a very public annihilation." Harm studied Sergei. "You sure you're all right? I really don't want you passing out on me."

"I am all right. I do not start anything I do not intend to finish." Sergei smiled nervously. "And how could I not watch history being made?"

"Hopefully we're preventing more history than we're making."

As the members took their seats once again, the chairman read the roll call. Harm unconsciously tightened his fist as the votes were tallied.

Australia, yea. Canada, yea. China, yea.

Webb closed his eyes. One part of the disaster had been averted, but the real test lay ahead. China had far less at stake than their neighbors to the north.

Egypt, yea. France, yea. Germany, yea. India, yea. Israel, yea. Japan, yea. Mexico, yea. Norway, yea. Peru, yea.

Sergei said a silent prayer for his countrymen and held his breath.

Russia, yea.

As the United Kingdom and the United States made it official, the two brothers embraced, elated and immensely relieved. Even Clayton Webb couldn't hold back a smile. "Nicely done, you two. You make a good team."

Sergei grinned up at his brother. "So it is true," he said simply. "One person can make a difference."

"Or two," Harm answered. They hadn't quite saved the world. There would still be weapons, and people who were not afraid to use them. But tomorrow looked brighter than today, and that was enough.

"I think Dad would have been proud," he said softly.

Sergei nodded. "I think you are right."

(Epilogue)

2151 EST

North of Union Station

Washington, D.C.

Late that evening, as he unpacked his bags, Harm came across a stack of plain white envelopes. Remembering that night in Kunsan, when he'd written until his hand ached, he sat down on the bed and opened them, one by one. On the last, he stopped, and read it again. As the events of the past week - the past year - the past five years - replayed in his mind, he came to a decision. The simplicity of it startled him, but once it was made, he knew instinctively that it was the right one.

Replacing the letter in its envelope, he tucked it into his briefcase.

1506 EST

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

"Absolutely. Thank you, Major. I'll be in touch as soon as the prelim report comes

through.” Mac hung up her phone and noticed her partner leaning against the doorframe in his informal khaki uniform. “I thought you had the day off.”

Harm gave a half-shrug. “Sergei’s transport left two hours ago. I thought I’d get caught up on some things. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, come on in.” She watched him, trying to gauge just what had changed in his bearing. He wasn’t nervous, but the air of confidence that usually radiated from him was absent. Finally she decided to call him on it. “You look different.”

“Normally I have a matched pair of functioning arms.”

“Very funny.” Mac shook her head. “So. We’re not headed for World War Three?”

“Not any faster than usual, at least. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. I just wanted to give you this.”

Without fanfare, he handed her the envelope. She looked at it for a moment, sensing that this was important. “What is it?” she asked slowly.

“Something I wrote last week, before the mission.”

“You mean, in case - ?” She felt her pulse quicken as he nodded. “But you’re still here,” she pointed out, trying to keep her voice light. “Why do you still want me to read it?”

“Because I realized that it would be pointless to wait until I was dead to tell you a lot of these things. Worse than pointless, really - it would be more like criminal negligence. I’ve gotten a lot of things straightened around in my mind over the past few days, and this is part of my new resolution to stop taking so much for granted.”

“Why do I have to read it?” she asked quietly. “Why don’t you just tell me?”

“Hey, one step at a time. I’m new at this.” His smile was forced, and it soon faded.

“Mac, it’s pretty brutally honest. I don’t want to influence your reaction, make you feel any pressure to respond right away. Just read it when you’re ready, and if you still want me to, I’ll say it all back to you verbatim. You have my word.”

“All right,” she managed to say, simultaneously enthralled and petrified. As he turned to leave, she called out, “Harm - thank you. I know this kind of thing is difficult.”

He paused in the doorway, a strange expression lighting his features. “Don’t thank me yet. You don’t know what it says.”

Mystified by his cryptic response, Mac stared long and hard at the unmarked envelope in his hand. Then, decisively, she steeled her nerves and tore it open.

Harm didn’t wait to see her decision. It wouldn’t change his mind. Instead, he walked out the door without so much as a glance behind.

**** THE END ****

I know, I know ... that was mean. But all will soon be made clear. I promise. Shippers, stay tuned for “The Letter” - non-shippers, you’re dismissed.