



If I Should Fall Behind

Rating: PG

Classification, Vignette, Angst

Spoilers: "Rules of Engagement", "Lifeline", "Adrift"

Author's Notes: This little exercise in strangeness deals with two episodes almost exactly two seasons apart. It starts in the middle of "Adrift, Part II", but flashes back to a scene that could have been an epilogue for Harm and Mac's brief match-up in "ROE". If you're overseas or otherwise missed "Adrift", recall that Harm was having problems with his memory shortly after his rescue - looked ridiculous on screen, in my opinion, but it gives me a way to frame this story.

*"So let's make our steps clear so the other may see
I'll wait for you, and should I fall behind, wait for me..."*

May 28, 2001

10:40

Mac stared at the unblinking green numbers of the clock for what felt like an eternity. *What a choice of words*, she thought ruefully. Discussing eternity on a ferry half a world away might just have been the push that had set this whole crazy ride in motion. One man had backed away, and another had simultaneously rushed forward. Now, a year and a half later, she was sitting in her car at the airport, already missing Chloe and wondering if she was any closer to happiness.

Of course they'd had to postpone the wedding, she rationalized. What other choice had there been? Harm was missing, and then barely alive - how could she possibly have gone ahead with the biggest day of her life?

10:41

But that wasn't the whole story, the defiantly glowing clock accused her. A few minutes ago, after they'd waved goodbye to Chloe like the perfect couple, Mic had dropped a stunner on her. He'd given up on rescheduling the wedding. Mic, who'd practically begged her for this chance, was finally beginning to get frustrated with her hesitation. And this time it wasn't just petty jealousy rearing its ugly head. This time, the look in his dark eyes had made her question more than just herself.

10:42

Where did that leave them? In three days, she'd gone from blushing bride to barely engaged. Some part of her suspected that she could undo the damage by falling into Mic's arms and asking him to run off to Vegas with her - but she didn't want to do that. In all honesty, she wasn't sure how far she was willing to go to salvage this wedding ... which, at this point, was probably the only way to salvage the relationship.

So what did she need now? Was there anyone or anything out there that could help her make sense of it all? Only one answer came to mind, and she sighed. Either this would help her to see things more clearly, or it would blur it all beyond recognition.

As the clock flashed 10:43, she threw the Corvette into gear.

Mac was halfway to Bethesda before the current state of affairs fully registered in her mind. She was running to Harm, not for any coherent reason but because she couldn't think of anywhere else to go. He wasn't really the Harm she knew, though. When they'd all come to visit him yesterday after he'd been transferred from the carrier, there had been flickers of the man they recognized, but the gaps and twists in his memory had made any conversation awkward at best. He was getting better, the doctors promised, and she knew him too well to believe that anything could hold him down for long. Still, it was a grim reminder of what could have been.

Another thought occurred to her as she strode through the wide double doors of the hospital. What if Renee was with him? Although the other woman - again, great choice of words - would never say so, Mac was sure Renee at least partially blamed her for the crash. Certainly she understood that there was both a bond and a tension between the partners that Harm had never been able to acknowledge. After all, if Renee didn't suspect something, the bizarre moment at the rehearsal dinner never would have occurred.

Mac had taken an almost perverse pleasure in having her internal clock challenged like that ... it had been twenty-seven minutes, damn it. Not twenty-eight. *Never send a video princess to do the work of a Marine.*

Fortunately for them all, as she approached Harm's room on the fourth floor, Renee was not in evidence. Mac took a deep breath and stepped inside, quickly realizing that he was asleep. She hung back for a moment, debating whether or not to slide into the nearby chair. Harmon Rabb looked out of place in a hospital bed, she decided: there was something about it that threw off her sense of normalcy. In other circumstances, he could be quietly angry, contemplative, or even shamed into silence, but even then you always felt his towering presence. Here, knowing that he barely had the strength to stand ... it was disconcerting.

She sat down and unconsciously brushed her fingers along his cheek. The bruises there were only the beginning of the story - below the sleeves of his loose gray T-shirt, his arms bore another set of fading scars, and she'd overheard Renee tearfully telling Harriet about the soft moans of pain whenever he moved his leg. All because of a glitch and a storm ... all because he was a man of his word. *Damn it, Harm. Look at the mess we're in now, and it's all our own fault.*

"How did we end up here?" she murmured aloud. In response, he stirred slightly, and she instinctively pulled her hand back. After a few seconds, his eyes flickered open, and a slow, faint smile came to his weary features.

"Hi, Mac," he offered in a voice roughened by seawater. "What's goin' on?"

He was focused on her, more or less, but the glassy look to his pale blue eyes betrayed him: pain medication. That leg must have been worse than she'd realized. "Wow, sailor," she said lightly, teasing him. "You look about as high as a kite."

"Give me a break," he answered with a weak laugh. "If you were stuck here, you'd want

drugs, too.”

“Probably. How are you feeling?”

Harm shrugged a little, the humor beginning to fade. “Dumb, mostly ... I hate not remembering things...”

“Hey, it’s all right. The docs say the swelling’s going down, and you sound like you’re breathing better. I’m sure you’ll be back at work pissing us off in no time.”

He didn’t respond to that, and she wondered if he’d heard. Abruptly he smiled again, a little wistfully. “You’re always waking me up, you know that?”

Mac frowned, not comprehending, but he seemed to be off in another place. “I never said I was sorry, did I?” he asked vaguely. “I didn’t know it would change everything ... all I wanted was to fly...”

“What are you talking about, Harm?” she questioned gently, ignoring the fresh stab of hurt that resulted from that last statement. *All you ever wanted was to fly. I never should have let myself believe otherwise.* “Is this about the wedding?”

“What wedding?” he asked in all innocence, and she fought back a combination of frustration and sympathy. Coming here had obviously been a mistake - between the head injury and the medication, he simply didn’t know what was going on.

“Never mind.”

“I never said I was sorry,” he repeated more insistently. “I never made you understand ... you deserved better.”

With a flash of insight, she realized what he meant. It wasn’t the qual or the crash he was apologizing for: it was the six months he’d spent reclaiming a long-dormant dream out on the *Patrick Henry*. Somehow, his scrambled mind had transported him back to the very beginning of the rift between them, and she suddenly remembered just when it was that she’d last woken him up.

“Oh, Christ, Harm,” she finally replied, attempting to smile. He didn’t need any more guilt right now. “It’s all right. You needed to go. I didn’t get it then, but I think I do now. You don’t have to apologize for following your heart.”

She’d meant it as reassurance, but his features clouded over. “I don’t think I know how to follow my heart,” he suggested, and the all-too-familiar sadness in his voice nearly brought her to tears.

“Maybe I don’t, either,” she confessed.

He tried to lift his gaze to meet hers, but already he was drifting back into a drug-induced oblivion. “Thanks, Mac,” he mumbled as his eyes slid closed again.

“Sleep well,” she whispered, exhaling a breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding. She was no closer to understanding where she and Mic stood; just the opposite, in fact. The memory Harm had uncovered was one that she’d almost managed to bury entirely. She

suspected that he'd remember little, if anything, of this conversation later, but he'd left her with plenty to think about. *Thanks a lot, flyboy*, she thought with a trace of bitterness. *Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*

Twice now he'd cut out her heart for the sake of an airplane. And twice he'd returned, but to a somewhat different world than the one he'd left. This time, though, he'd seen her anger-cloaked pain for what it was - even if he'd only dared admit it through a veil of sarcasm - and he'd nearly destroyed himself for the sake of his promise to her. That was the present: the rest truly was history. So why was he now apologizing for something that had happened a year and a half ago?

Maybe the two situations were closer than she'd thought. As her best friend slept peacefully, unaware of her turmoil, she settled back in the chair, lost in the past.

October 3, 1999
USS Patrick Henry
In the Mediterranean Sea

Mac knocked on the thick steel hatch, feeling a little self-conscious up in flight-crew country. The court-martial of Lieutenant Andrew Buxton was over, and her irritation at being beaten in court by a non-practicing lawyer was beginning to fade. Still, she wasn't entirely sure how to close out this odd reunion with Harm. Were they friends? Colleagues? Certainly not partners, not anymore. But she needed to see him one more time, to convince herself that they were both doing the right thing. *Wait, what do I have to prove? I didn't do anything. I'm not the one out here living out a premature mid-life crisis.*

Before she could continue the internal dialogue, Harm's bunkmate opened the door. "Ma'am," he said automatically. "Uh, you're here to see Commander Rabb, I assume?"

"You assume correctly." She stepped over the knee-knocker and into their quarters, surveying the orderly yet intimidating piles of paperwork on the desk. The shade curtains on the lower rack were closed, and the younger pilot seemed to be hesitating. "Is this inappropriate, Lieutenant? I'm short on time, but I can come back a little later - "

"No, ma'am, it's fine. We flew late last night, is all - recon over the Serbian border. Let me just wake him up." Regaining his inherent aviator's confidence, he picked up a nearby football and zinged it through his bunkmate's drawn curtains.

"Owww," came a disoriented but familiar voice. "What the hell, Tuna?"

"Come on, Pappy, duty calls."

"Thought we were on Bravo today."

"We are, but you've got a visitor of the female kind. Hope you're decent in there."

The voice was still groggy and growing increasingly annoyed. "Skates, if you put him up to this, I swear to God I'll make you hurl all the way back from the no-fly..."

Mac broke in, amused. "Well, you know me and Tomcats, Harm. I'd probably hurl no matter

what you did.”

There was a surprised, uncomfortable pause as he realized that she wasn't his RIO. “Um, hi, Mac,” he said lamely, pushing back the dark curtains and pulling himself out of the rack.

For a minute, the two former partners just stood there, sizing each other up. Rarely had their differences been so clearly defined. Mac's uniform was immaculate, the very image of a squared-away staff officer. Harm was fully awake now and standing in a black squadron T-shirt and boxers, looking like any one of three dozen fighter jocks on alert that day. Their brief courtroom skirmish aside, he hardly resembled the attorney she'd once thought she knew so well.

“Morning, Colonel,” he said more formally, shooting a crosswise glance at his bunkmate, who was skulking near the closet. “Tuna, toss me my bag, would you?”

“Come again?” Tuna smirked not-so-innocently, enjoying the awkwardness.

“Lieutenant!” Harm snapped, exasperated. “Give me my damn bag already.”

“Aye, sir.” The younger pilot dutifully threw a flight suit over. Harm was into it in seconds, lacing up his boots and reaching for his VF-218 ship's cap.

“Shall we look for someplace a little more accommodating, ma'am?”

Mac inwardly winced as he said 'ma'am'. It sounded wrong coming from him, and it was yet another reminder of the distance between them. “Lead the way, Commander,” she replied calmly, and after another glare at Tuna, he stepped out into the corridor.

They ended up on the fantail, leaning on the rail and watching the waves rush by. “You're leaving on the COD this morning?” Harm asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Yeah, I think I've had enough of smartass aviators for a while.” She regretted the remark almost immediately, but he wasn't about to let her see his full reaction.

“So that's how it is?” he asked quietly. “When I'm a lawyer, I'm worth talking to, but out here, I'm just another knuckle-dragging pilot?”

“You know that's not what I meant.”

“How do I know that?” he demanded. “I've sent at least a dozen emails. I told you about quals, where I was being assigned, what the squadron was like - and I think I've gotten maybe three replies, none longer than a paragraph. Certainly none of them mentioned anything about a major promotion. Did I officially abdicate my place as your friend, or what?”

She wanted to scream at him that this wasn't just about friendship; that before he'd left, she would have jumped at the first signal from him that they could be more than friends. But all that had disintegrated in mere seconds, when he chose to walk out on their partnership, and she was forced to reevaluate what they really meant to each other. Because of that, she could only trust herself to go so far. Still...

“Wait a minute,” she objected, allowing her indignation to creep through. “Am I not allowed to feel a little abandoned here? You know I'm not any good at email or any of that stuff. And

we can't exactly have the same kind of friendship we had before while you're off in the wild blue yonder, can we?"

"So we give up entirely?"

"Of course not. I just - " She shook her head, feeling powerless. "Harm, for three years, you've always been just down the hall. Now, if I can't crack a witness, or if I have a lousy day, I turn around to find you and you're not there. That hurts so much, I can't even begin to write a damn letter about it. Is that somehow unfair?"

For a moment, she dropped her gaze, wondering if she'd already gone too far. But as he stared out across the water, she could see the conflict in his expressive eyes. "No, it's not," he answered in a low voice. "It does hurt. I knew it would - I guess I just didn't know how much. But when the only mail I get after a rough mission is a note from my mother ... I can't tell her what I'm doing out here. She already worries enough without me unloading horror stories about engine flameouts and one-wire traps. I guess ... I just want someone to care about what I'm doing."

"So you want me to hear it all, so I can worry more? Like I don't worry enough when the weekly theater reports come in? For Christ's sake, Harm, you walked willingly into a war zone!"

"I know, and I'm sorry it had to be like this - "

"It *didn't* have to be like this! No one wanted it to be like this except you. You made the choice, and don't give me any crap about duty and service. You paid your dues a long time ago, and the rest of the carrier kids were doing just fine without you. The only reason you're out here is because of a self-indulgent obsession that you hold higher than everything else in life!"

"Oh, now the truth comes out," he retorted sharply, attempting to disguise the note of pain in his voice and not entirely succeeding. "You never did get it, did you? I don't know why I'm surprised. I guess we don't know each other as well as I thought. Good thing we got this out in the open. Next time I need support, I'll know to look elsewhere. Have a good flight, Colonel."

He touched off a clipped salute and turned on his heel before she could return it. Mac squeezed her eyes shut against the threatening tears and made a quick decision. If she didn't stop him now, they might very well be slamming the door forever on the most important friendship of her life.

"I didn't give you permission to be dismissed, Commander," she barked out in her best command voice. Almost to the hatch, he stiffened and slowly turned back, and she got directly into his face. "You're right, I don't get it. I don't understand what happens to you up there to make everything else seem secondary. I get into a plane and the first thing on my mind is how fast I can get back out. You get out and the first thing on your mind is how fast you can get back in. Sometimes I think we're never going to get past that, but don't you dare accuse me of not caring. I care a hell of a lot more than you realize."

There was a long pause, and then finally Harm surrendered. "I don't know how to make you understand, Mac," he said quietly. "I've spent just about every night since Pensacola trying to figure it out, and I haven't gotten anywhere."

"Maybe you can't," she whispered, looking away. "Maybe this is how it has to be."

They went back to gazing out at the waves for a while, each masking the torrent of emotions let loose by that dismal conclusion. After a few seconds, he spoke up again. "I, ah, haven't really made any decisions about my next post yet. I love it here, but barring a miracle, I'm likely to get rotated stateside after a couple more tours. I guess ... I'm still considering my options."

Faint hope flared up as she turned to look at him. "Meaning what? You might try to come back to JAG?"

"I don't know. If the admiral has his way, I'll probably never set foot in Falls Church again, but ... as much as I want to, I can't just focus on flying. I have to figure out what's best all around." He glanced over at her, cautiously teasing, as if testing her for a reaction. "You think you could handle having me around after all this?"

"As long as you give me fair warning," she responded lightly, but soon they were serious again. "I can't promise you that we can pick up where we left off, but - God, Harm, you know we'd love to have you back. All of us."

"Except Brumby, maybe." Before she could scold him for the comment, though, he stepped forward and brushed her hair back with a gentle hand. She started a little: this wasn't the kind of attention she was used to receiving from him. Was he - ? Why now, of all times ... "I miss you like crazy, Mac," he confessed, and there was no mistaking the sincerity in his eyes.

"Me, too," she said softly, and at least that much was clear to both of them. Anything else would have to wait for another, less complicated day. "Walk me to the flight deck?"

"Of course."

As the COD aircraft made its preparations for departure, she watched Harm say his goodbyes to Bud and Mic with the calm, easy charm he'd always shown. When her turn arrived, they instinctively came together in a warm embrace. "I promise to do better with email," she vowed. "As long as you promise to tell me as soon as you decide on your plans, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, with a faint smile that softened the formal address. "Safe trip, Marine."

At last, she boarded the plane, settling into a window seat and surprising her coworkers. On the flight out, she'd studiously avoided looking out the window: they assumed she simply didn't like flying. Now, though, she watched the tall, handsome aviator striding back across the deck and wondered just how long it would be before she saw him next. Would he be able to walk away from his dreams again, even by choice? Was there anything in Washington that held enough power over him to bring him home?

Remembering the feel of his fingers in her hair, she allowed herself the tiniest shred of hope that she might have some of that power. *If he turns around and looks back, there's still a chance*, she told herself. *Please, God, make him turn around.*

Her eyes followed him all the way to the tower, where he paused at the hatch and turned back toward the aircraft. Swallowing the cry of triumph that bubbled up in her throat, she offered a quick wave. He returned it, smiling - but just then, Tuna and Skates stepped out of the hatch and approached him, drawing him away with animated gestures and laughter. Mac

watched the trio's quiet comradeship, her hopes dulled slightly but not extinguished. Harmon Rabb was nowhere close to being gone from her life.

Just as the sudden acceleration of the catapult slammed her back into her seat, she imagined she could see him glance back one final time before disappearing through the hatch.

The effects of the weekend's storm still lingered over the East Coast, as evidenced by the drizzling rain that now ran down the window in front of her. Mac felt the cool glass against her fingers and realized she'd nearly dozed off in the chair by her friend's bedside. *Ancient history*, she thought again, surprised that she'd nearly managed to forget about the encounter entirely. In the complex story of their relationship, it paled in comparison to that night on the admiral's porch - God, was that only a few weeks ago? Still, there had been something compelling about being with him out there on the carrier, looking as natural and confident as she'd ever seen him. It was a part of him, as much as anything else ever could be.

Why hadn't things worked out after that? A few weeks later, he'd written to tell her that he was in fact returning to JAG after the cruise ended. It should have made everything better - right? But the distance and the awkwardness - not to mention the difference in rank - were still lingering in the background, and rather than fading over time, they only built upon each other until ... that damn ferry. *Which brings me right back to where I started.*

Sometimes she wondered if Harmon Rabb truly wanted happiness. He certainly seemed to be an expert at ducking for cover whenever a hint of it came his way. Maybe he honestly couldn't believe in it: considering all he'd endured, perhaps he'd always be looking over his shoulder, waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop and destroy everything all over again.

You're hardly one to talk, a little voice reminded her coldly. *You knew you wanted him, and you had a pretty good idea that he wanted you too. But regardless of the other distractions, you didn't exactly welcome him home with open arms.*

A series of tiny choices, times they went left when they should have gone right. By the time either of them realized how lost they were, precious little remained to point them back in the right direction. Nothing she could have said or done in Sydney could have magically changed all of it, but right now it was hard to tell if she'd made a single correct turn since.

No. She couldn't allow herself to believe that the past year and a half was nothing more than a mistake: that would be a surrender of her identity, somehow. Never in that time had she seriously considered putting her life on hold for the mere possibility of finally receiving the attentions of a confused and disillusioned flyboy. She had the opportunity for more - she deserved more, for Christ's sake. Mic had demonstrated that time and again. Mic wanted to be everything for her, despite her time-honored instincts toward independence. Maybe they weren't a match made in heaven, but she wasn't about to give up the chance they still had so easily. Even after a night of so many truths.

But as she turned back to the still-sleeping Harm, not yet healed from that hellish night, her resolve continued to waver.

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Wait."

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes."

Decision or no decision, part of her wondered if she'd somehow betrayed her dearest friend.

"What's the story, Colonel?"

Mac glanced up and offered a tired half-smile to her commanding officer, who'd appeared in the doorway. "Morning, sir - actually, make that 'good afternoon, sir'. Um, they've got him on some pretty strong stuff today. He's been in and out, I guess."

Admiral Chegwiddden moved into the room, studying his injured officer for a moment. "How's his memory?"

"Hard to say, sir. He tried to apologize to me for something that happened a year and a half ago."

If the admiral had chosen to do the math and theorize as to what that apology might have meant, he kept it to himself. "Better late than never?" he suggested with a small shrug.

"That's what I decided, too."

After a moment, he turned his attention fully to her. "Not that it's any of my business, Mac," he began slowly, "but have you decided what you're going to do?"

She knew he was referring to the wedding, but so many questions were swirling around in her brain just then. With all the confidence of her Marine training, she met his gaze and stated honestly, "Sir, I'm going to keep putting one foot in front of the other. And I'm going to hope that whatever fates were smiling on Harm a few nights ago are still smiling on all of us. That's about the best I can do for now."

She stood up, head held high, and strode toward the door with a nod of acknowledgement to her C.O. Admiral Chegwiddden returned it, silently admiring her willpower. Sarah Mackenzie had made plenty of less-than-perfect choices in her life, he knew, but she was amazingly good at keeping her footing. He looked down at Harm's motionless form with an odd kind of sympathy, well aware that neither of his best lawyers had any idea how much he knew and understood. After all, it had been his porch.

"Son, you're awfully damned lucky to still be with us after what happened," he remarked quietly. "But when you shake this off, you're going to be stunned at how effectively you've turned everything upside down, and I'm not sure even you can put it all back again. So get your rest while you can."

**** THE END ****