



The Only Constant

Rating: PG-13 (mild language)

Classification: vignette, some angst

Spoilers: "Adrift, Part II," "Hail and Farewell, Part II"

Disclaimer: After all this time, I think you all know better by now, but for the record: Characters are not mine. Episodes are not mine. Way-cool airplane referenced herein is also, sadly, not mine. But I'm gonna get a ride in the Stearman that's hangared at our local airport if it's the last thing I do ...

Author's Notes: Just because this story doesn't "fix" anything doesn't mean I believe things can't be fixed. Wanted to make that clear from the start. There's nothing earth-shattering here - just a couple of vague ideas that were flickering in the back of my brain. Don't really want to go any further until I see where the next couple of episodes take us, because I'm sorta trying to fit this in with some of the various spoilers I've heard. And in case the title phrase isn't as well-known as I think it is, I'll cut off any curiosity at the start and mention that "the only constant is change." Unless you count death and taxes, I suppose, but who wants to write a fic about either of those?

Additional AN: Shortly after originally posting this, I got a heads-up from a former USAF F-4 WSO and onetime Navy exchange officer that I'd blown a detail in here. Air Force fighters have rear-seat flight controls; Navy and Marine fighters do not. Therefore, a certain passage in this first part requires some heavy usage of artistic license. Thanks, Bingo, for educating me.

I am flying, and for the moment, I am at peace.

The wind whips my face with a satisfying sting that serves as a subtle reminder: *You are fully alive, and you are fully in control of your own destiny.* I've always liked that about flying. Granted, there is always the possibility of some occurrences that might be beyond my control: weather, mechanical problems, and less experienced pilots in other planes making life difficult for the rest of us. For the most part, however, anything that happens while airborne is a direct result of whatever I do or don't do, and that's exactly the way I want it. As my first instructor used to say on a daily basis, "Fly the airplane -- don't ever let the airplane fly you." That always struck me as pretty metaphorical for a guy who never seemed to venture more than fifty miles from the local airport. But I took it to heart.

I'm flying my airplane. Except, of course, when I'm not.

"Let me do the landing!" Beth Hawkes's voice comes through my headset, and in the mirror mounted on the front-cockpit instrument panel, I can see the half-pleading, half-mischievous look in her eyes. No one is more professional in a Tomcat than Skates, but this is decidedly an off-duty day, and she's got all the self-control of a six-year-old when she gets in the Stearman. I've only had her up once or twice before, whenever she happened to be in town for a few days, but she's hooked, so here we are again.

"Have you been checked out in tail-draggers?" I reply, just to tweak her a little. A lot of people assume that RIOs, as 'non-flying officers,' are merely skilled passengers and have no knowledge or training to actually fly their birds themselves. Not true by a long shot. While not every backseater is a qualified pilot of some type, a good many of them are, and nearly all of them have learned quite a bit along the way about basic control of the aircraft. Only a really dim bulb would climb into a two-seat combat aircraft without any thought to how he or she would at least stabilize the damn thing in an emergency.

The look I receive in the mirror is withering, to put it lightly. "You afraid I'll scratch the paint?" Skates is an above-average pilot in her own right; she's instrument-rated and can hold her own in just about anything with a single engine. Tailwheel biplanes aren't the most intuitive things in the world to land, though, and not too many people have experience with them. So my hesitation isn't completely without merit.

But Skates has saved my ass on a number of occasions, and it occurs to me that if I could trust her when we flew together over Kosovo, I can probably trust her in the middle of Virginia. So I wave my hand. "Knock yourself out, but I'll be right on the controls if you need anything. You have the plane."

"You're the best. I have the plane." She keys the radio. "Blacksburg traffic, Navy Four-One-Niner is five to the north, inbound to land."

She maneuvers us into the traffic pattern with little difficulty and centers the runway in the windscreen. With a few minor corrections necessitated by the wind, she sets us down, the tail making only a slight thud as it hits the concrete.

"Not bad, Commander," I call to her as the last of our speed drains away.

"Thanks, but I can't taxi one of these for anything, so she's all yours."

"All right, all right." I lean into the left rudder pedal and swing the plane around onto the grass near the fuel stand before shutting it down. We both hop down to the ground, and after flashing me a quick grin that conveys both satisfaction and gratitude, Skates just looks at me and waits. She's always had a bit of a knack for judging my needs in the friendly-ear department. We're not here today just to fly, and she tumbled to that conclusion a good while ago. True, she's only in town for about a week, and I did promise her a ride the last time we got together, but the timing of her visit -- just when I need to talk a few things out -- is pretty fortuitous.

I tilt my head toward a wooden bench near the hangar, and we amble comfortably in that direction.

"You were serious, I assume, when you said on the phone that Colonel Mackenzie's boyfriend came back from the dead?"

"Unfortunately, yes." I'm still fairly incensed at that entire situation, underneath the healthy coating of fatalistic indifference that has recently settled in. I'm furious with Webb for setting that chain of events in motion and for making very little discernible effort to shield Mac from it. But it's been pointed out to me in sharp detail recently that it's not my place to voice that kind of concern, so I've made an attempt to dial it back. However, I'm still plenty pissed, enough so that I really don't care what potential security breaches I may be committing by recounting the event to a friend. What's done is done, and it's not like anyone bothered to debrief me after the fact, so this is me trying to reclaim some control over my surroundings.

I exhale a long, calming breath. "He was trying to smoke out an assassin, and he let Mac be used in the process. It turns out that Mac is a little too persistent at following leads, though, so between us, we managed to track Webb down in short order, and in so doing, we kind of led the killer right to him."

"So where did you finally find him?"

"Just sitting on the beach. The son of a bitch." Actually, that's not fair. I like Porter Webb and have a lot of respect for her. Quite a bit more than I have for her son at this point. We take a seat on the weathered bench, and I mentally reach back to the events of that day.

Webb turns slightly at my approach. "I wasn't sure you were going to find me."

"Luck may have played a small part in that."

"Is Sarah back at the house?"

"Yeah, with her good friend Agent Tanveer."

Webb leaps to his feet. "She's alone with him? Here?"

The flash of panic in his eyes illuminates the situation like a crack of lightning, and suddenly I see everything. "You knew it was him all along -- and you let Mac be used to set the trap? You twisted, soulless bastard - "

"The options were weighed, and this was deemed to be necessary. I would have thought that after your time as one of us, you'd understand that logic."

"You think six months of flying airlift and recon made me 'one of you'?" I shake my head, amazed and repulsed. "We're not the same. If we were, if I could make the choices that you've made, I think I'd step off a cliff."

It's an excessively harsh condemnation, but I can't make myself care. Suddenly I can't even look at him and see the same man I'd once trusted - grudgingly at times, but trusted nonetheless. I spin around as fast as I can in the coarse sand and head back toward the house, trying to formulate a plan.

Webb starts after me. "We have to work together on this, at least for the time being."

I whip back around and just barely restrain myself from shoving him to the ground. "Let me be perfectly clear about something, Webb. Were it not for consideration of Mac's situation and the barest hint of moral sensibility, I would shoot you right here and now."

"You're more than entitled to that viewpoint. But let's get Sarah out of there first and worry about the rest later."

We say almost nothing more as we approached the house, and I realize that if we ever say another word to each other again, it will be too soon.

Skates leans forward on her elbows. "It's over now, though? The guy's dead, and the colonel told Webb where to shove his decoder ring?"

"That's about the size of it, yeah. She doesn't have nearly the level of hatred for him that I currently do, but Webb's never going to be able to get out of the business, and I don't think he'd ever try, even for her. So she walked away." I weigh my options for a moment, then decide to go ahead and say what I've been thinking. "I swear to God, a big part of me wishes he really had been killed the way the cover story said."

I'm a little concerned about her possible reaction to this. Skates hasn't had the exposure to the intelligence community's brand of ethical relativity that I have. On her scope, there are friendlies and there are bandits, and anything unidentified will eventually be marked as one or the other. I miss the simple assurances of that world more than anyone knows.

But she doesn't react, except to ask, "For your peace of mind, or for Colonel Mackenzie's?"

She's good. "A little of both. Neither of us got anything but pain out of this last go-round with him -- far more for her than me, obviously -- and it didn't exactly help us with each other, either." I lean my head back against the hangar wall. "She's been flat-out clobbered by life in general lately, and I really want to be able to help her somehow. But either I'm screwing it up, or she doesn't want that from me."

"Are you sure about that? What did she actually say?"

"That day, when it was all over, I asked her to talk to me instead of Webb. She said she wasn't ready, and I told her to let me know when she was. Problem is, that was seventeen days ago."

Skates winces slightly in understanding. She doesn't fall into the standard sympathetic routine, though, and presses further. "Did you mean it?"

"Of course I did. I want her to be able to come to me if -- *when* she's prepared to talk." She cocks an eyebrow at the word "if," which may or may not have been a Freudian slip on my part. The truth is, I don't know for sure that Mac and I will ever get there. At one time, I had some confidence that it would happen eventually, but that certainty fades with every day that passes. "I'm not going to sit on her doorstep waiting for it, but when she asks, I'll be there."

My favorite RIO considers this for a moment, then says, "Is it possible that that's part of the problem?"

Now she's lost me. "You've lost me."

"You've been trying to demonstrate that you're open to talking about all this, which you have to admit is something of a departure from your usual M.O."

"I've made this kind of offer before," I feel the need to point out. Skates isn't fooled.

"And the result was?"

Renee's father died, and everything went FUBAR on us again. All right, I get the picture. "Circumstances," I mutter, drawing one bent leg toward my chest and leaning on it. For the record, this is *not* a defensive pose.

"She doesn't know how this kind of thing is going to turn out. Neither do you," Skates theorizes, pushing her sunglasses up onto her head and looking at me intently. "I can't blame her for being a little hesitant, given what she's had to deal with lately."

She's right, I guess -- I mean, I know I was trying a little too hard to prove to Mac that I could help. And I know it's not my call to dictate how she should deal with anything. The thing is ...

"What am I supposed to do, then? How long do I wait?"

Skates purses her lips thoughtfully. "Maybe you don't."

That's not an answer I was prepared to hear. I asked Mac to wait indefinitely once -- could it really have been three years ago? -- and even though I realize now how unreasonable that was, it never occurred to me that what she's asking now has some echoes of similarity.

In a low voice, I offer a counterargument. "Not too long ago, she asked me point-blank if I would always be there. I promised her that I would. I don't break promises."

"I'm not suggesting that you start. You can be there for her, a friend to her, without waiting by the phone. If you step back a little, maybe she won't feel so pressured."

"And maybe she'll feel abandoned."

She spreads her hands, acknowledging that possibility. "You're the one who called a jetjock instead of a counselor. You take my advice at your own risk."

The irony is that if said advice had come from a qualified counselor, I wouldn't lend it nearly as much credence. Skates is different. We don't talk nearly as often as we should, hampered somewhat by carrier group deployments, but when we do, we connect just as closely as we ever did as an aircrew. Not even Mac has seen all the facets of me that Skates has. No one else got in my face and refused to let me give in to the smothering darkness brought on by those awful hours out in the Atlantic. No one else was there to stay with me in sickbay for two days, when I spent my few conscious hours coughing up seawater and had to re-learn her name every time I woke up. That kind of bond doesn't easily fade.

So when Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Hawkes tells me something about myself, you're damn right I pay attention.

"Think about the last year. In a lot of ways, you aren't the same person you were a year ago -- even I can see that. One word to sum that up: Mattie." I have to share her smile, knowing just how right she is. She continues, "The colonel hasn't had that kind of experience, something to really make clear what it is she wants on a fundamental level. You can't relate in that way anymore, and so maybe you need to let her work that out on her own."

That makes me stop and think. Not about what Mac wants out of life -- I can't possibly trust any answer I might come up with on that front -- but about what *I* want. If we come out on the other side of this latest fiasco and we're no closer to a happily-ever-after, how long will I be willing to stay in this state of limbo? I never gave that kind of question much thought in the

past, but there's no getting around the fact that I'm forty years old. I don't want to reach retirement age and have no one to spend it with. It's not the kind of outlook I would have expected from myself, and it took a teenager with unparalleled willfulness to make me realize it, but that doesn't make it any less true.

The question is, which do I want more? The prototypical American dream life, or the only woman in recent memory I've seriously considered living it with? What happens if there comes a time when, for my own sanity, I have to choose?

After a few moments, I realize that this line of thought isn't going anywhere fast, and I purposefully draw back from it with a nod in Skates's direction. "I'll give her some space," I tell her. "Not many other choices at this point, anyway."

She lays a hand on my arm and gives it a reassuring squeeze. "Don't look so bleak. She and you have more to tie you together than any two people I know, and I'm willing to bet that those ties are just as important to her as they are to you. They're not going to up and vanish. Just give it a little time."

Actively avoiding a cloud of melancholy that seems to be hovering in the distance, I give her a smile. "Yeah, I guess I know. Thanks."

Skates glances at her watch. "I hate to fly, chat and run, but I'd better hit the road. Jason and I are going to Philly tomorrow to see his sister's new baby."

I can't resist needling her a little. It's a big-brother kind of instinct. "Planning to pick up any advice for tackling that adventure yourself?"

She looks almost -- smug? No, just pleased. Maybe I was closer to the mark than I realized. "There is that possibility," she allows. "I'm rotating stateside pretty soon, so if there was ever a time to think about starting a family ..."

I pull her into a quick embrace, happy that she has her life so well in hand. I'm envious as all hell; I can admit that, but I'm happy for her.

"Tell Jason I owe him one for letting his wife come out to play." We both rise to our feet, and the height difference forces her to drop her arms from around my neck. "And ... just thanks. You know the rest."

"That I do. Take care, Harm."

As I watch her Mazda 6 disappear down the empty Virginia road, I wander back to Sarah and do a quick visual preflight check before climbing back into the cockpit. There's still a lot to think about, but I'm to the point where I know things can't be solved simply by thinking them through. Right now, all I can do is clear my head, and this is the purest way I know how.

As I walk away, gaze fixed on the waves brushing up against the shore, I can feel her eyes on me like a weight. Did she want me to stay? I can't read her anymore -- assuming I ever could. I left because I felt an almost physical force compelling me to move, to act, to somehow break out of that suffocating stillness. I just wish I could tell whether that force is pulling me back or pushing me forward.

I know I have the option to look back, and possibly get some kind of answer to my question from those eyes, but I just can't. I did mean what I said. When she's ready, and willing to say so. But I can't force that to happen any more than I can will the tides to change.

For what feels like the first time, I actually want to take the first step. But for the first time, the first step is unequivocally not mine to take.

"Blacksburg traffic, Navy Four-One-Niner is taxiing to Runway Zero-Five for northbound departure."

Tomorrow, as with all days, there will be choices to make and changes to accept. But for now, I am flying, and I am at peace.

*** THE END ***