

Crossroads

By Scribblesinink

Jake sat motionless on the hard, straight-backed chair, forcing himself not to shift nervously. An occasional tremor made his left hand twitch, the cuffs holding his wrists together rattling against the cold, metal surface of the table. He clenched his hand into a fist, willing his muscles to quiet.

The doctors had never found a cause for the shaking; it wasn't because of any nerve damage, they'd said. So they ascribed it to stress and called it a some sort of nervous tic brought on by anxiety.

Jake thought he had plenty of reasons to feel anxious right now.

He'd been left alone in the chilly, windowless room for a long time. He refused to check his watch, just in case they were looking, but instincts honed through long nights of vigilance told him it was at least an hour. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the waiting was slowly getting to him—which was probably the entire point; he'd been in enough contest-of-will situations to recognize the tactics. But he'd be damned if he gave them the satisfaction of blinking first. So he stayed on the chair, even though part of him wanted to jump up and pace.

Not that the room provided much opportunity for pacing. It wasn't very large, and most of it was filled with a metal table bolted to the ground, with swiveling seats attached to the frame opposite each other. There was nothing else to distract himself with. The single door had no handle on the inside; the walls had been painted dingy olive green, and there were no decorations. Overhead, stark white fluorescents glared. One of the lamps was close to burning out, buzzing and flickering ever once in a while. Jake discussed the odds with himself: would the lamp give up the ghost before, or after, he got taken out of the room?

His hand quivered, and he wished he could stuff it in his pocket to hide it until the tremor passed. However, the cuffs made that impossible, so he grabbed his left wrist with the other hand and held on tight.

Anxiety, his ass.

Truth was: he was fuckin' *scared*. In a way, he was more scared than he'd ever been during the fighting in Mosul, or the bombs going off around him in Baghdad. Because there, even in the midst of flying shrapnel, with death a plausible outcome, he'd retained some control over his life. Here, he was helpless. His entire fate rested in the hands of prosecutors who were out for blood, a veteran judge who'd lost himself an eye in

Vietnam, and a defense counsel who was a pimple-faced lieutenant barely out of law school.

So, yeah, he had plenty to worry about; the odds were really stacked against him. And while he'd discovered in his first meeting with his defense counsel that the eager, spotty kid wasn't as stupid or green as he looked, the arraignment had made one thing very clear: the military was determined to have someone take the fall for the Fallujah fiasco—and Sergeant Jake Mendez of the Ten Thirteen had been designated for the mission.

The snick of the lock and creak of the door swinging inward startled Jake from his thoughts. The young lieutenant who'd been assigned his case scurried in, briefcase in hand. His face was flushed and his eyes gleamed. "Sergeant, I have good news!"

He was near to bursting with excitement and couldn't seem to stand still, hopping from foot to foot. The mere sight of it made Jake nervous and his hand wanted to twitch again.

"Please, won't you sit, Lieutenant?" he suggested, nodding at the chair across from him. The kid's cheeks grew redder, and he plopped down on the seat, but it didn't diminish his agitation in the least.

"They're offering a deal," he said breathlessly. "A very, *very* good deal. And I don't think you should take it."

Jake stared at him, puzzled. "I don't understand, sir."

"Ah, yes." The lieutenant cleared his throat. "I talked to the prosecutor. They're prepared to go with willfully disobeying an order. If you plead guilty, they'll drop all other charges against you, and against the rest of your men."

Jake kept his face impassive; he couldn't dare let himself hope. But maybe, just *maybe*, their prospects weren't as bleak as he'd believed. Maybe there *was* an escape from the foxhole he'd gotten the Ten Thirteen stuck in.

"I pushed a little," his defense counsel continued, "just for appearance's sake." The kid grinned widely. "They're even prepared to reduce the sentence to a dishonorable discharge, and one year jail time!"

Jake blinked, trying to process what he heard. There had to be a catch somewhere: compared to the original charges, it would seem like a slap on the wrist. For a brief moment he wondered if they had him confused with someone else.

"You know what this means?" The lieutenant leaned forward across the table, his voice

dropping. "It means they're desperate. It means they're not nearly as sure about their chances as they pretend to be. It means they want this to go away with as little fuss as possible."

"But you don't want me to take the deal?"

"No." The lieutenant sat back and opened his briefcase. "I think we can do even better, Sergeant Mendez. The offer tells me we got a real chance of beating this. If we can prove that the order you refused should never have been given in the first place—," he took a couple of forms from his case and pushed them in Jake's direction, "—their entire case falls apart. And we got sixteen dead soldiers to confirm you may have had good cause."

Jake was shaking his head. "No."

The lieutenant looked up. "Sergeant?"

"I don't want to drag them into it. Sir." Those men had left sixteen families behind to grieve for them. And this kid wanted to tell them their sons and brothers and fathers shouldn't have died? No way. No matter the truth, Jake didn't want to destroy those people's illusion that those deaths had at least served a purpose.

"Sergeant, I'm giving you a direct order to enter that building. Now!" The voice over the radio crackled with fury. "Are you telling me you refuse?"

Jake took a deep breath, filling his lungs with air heavy with smoke and dust. He glanced at the small group huddled behind the wall with him. Marshall had just finished the tourniquet around Leon's arm—and from the look of it, Jake feared Leon was gonna lose it regardless, but at least he might live to tell the tale.

A little further down, the Roman boys crouched together, as always. Albie was talking urgently to his brother, the white of Hank's eyes a stark contrast with the soot and paint smearing the rest of his face. Hank was close to losing his shit altogether.

Beyond the brothers, Big Stan lay glaring along the barrel of his M16 so angrily he looked ready to tear the enemy apart with his bare hands. Derz was reloading, while Mikey murmured something even as he held down the trigger and released a stream of bullets. Jake suspected it was a prayer.

He turned back to the radio. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir, but I won't lead my men into a trap."

Little had he known that the captain would simply order another platoon to take their place. He'd thought he could reason with the man. He'd believed that fifteen years of

service and two tours in Iraq counted for something. That it would at least lend his words enough weight that someone would consider them: *Yes sir, the building offers a good vantage point; yes sir, it 's not heavily defended; and yes sir, I think it's a set up. It's too easy; we should wait; proceed with caution.*

But he'd believed wrong; nobody wanted to listen.

Guys fresh from the States, their sergeant not half as old a hand at the Iraqi insurgents' guerrilla tactics as the more experienced men of the Ten Thirteen, had entered in their stead. Jake, and the men with him, had watched helplessly while the building lit up like a rocket and the ground beneath them shook with the force of the explosions as the Marines triggered the booby traps Jake had suspected.

Once the dust had settled, sixteen men were gone.

"Sergeant?" Jake realized that the chief prosecutor, a major, had joined them in the small room. "Did your defense counsel explain the terms?"

If he hadn't argued the captain's order, it would've been him and his guys buried beneath the rubble. Anna would've been a widow; Luke would've had to grow up without a father. Instead, he'd saved his men's lives. But for what? So they could be stripped of their honor and put to death back in the States on trumped-up charges of mutiny and conspiracy to disobey orders in time of war?

Those charges were so ludicrous, he almost laughed when he first heard them. And maybe the lieutenant was right; maybe the military did want to avoid the embarrassment of a trial they could easily lose. But Jake had served long enough to know that he was expected to play ball. Close ranks. Don't air the dirty laundry in public. And if he *didn't* play along.... If he followed his lawyer's advice and went up against the powers that be...? Fifteen years of loyalty would mean nothing; they'd spare no effort to have him and his men convicted of the worst possible crimes they could make stick. Disobeying an order would be the least of it. Without the plea bargain, that alone could lead to the death penalty. For everyone.

And then those sixteen men in Fallujah really would have died for nothing.

"What about my men?" Jake asked. "If I sign this, they go free?"

"Yes." The major, a tall, hawkish man, glared down at him over the rim of his glasses. "They'll be cleared of all charges, discharged honorably, all pay and allowances intact." He straightened and made for the door, where he paused. "I'll give you time to discuss this further with your defense counsel. But, sergeant?" Jake glanced up from the documents.

"Be aware the offer expires in five minutes. We won't be making it again."

"I don't need five minutes." Jake looked the major squarely in the face as he spoke. He had no choice, really. One year in jail couldn't be harder than two tours in Iraq. And while losing the allowances he'd earned over the years would hurt, he could start over. He and Anna had begun with nothing once before; they could do it again. "Gimme a pen?"

The lieutenant's mouth dropped in protest, but Jake ignored him as he took the pen the major offered: an inscribed silver Parker ballpoint that looked expensive. Jake signed his name in all the places the major pointed out to him.

It was hard to write properly, what with the tight cuffs on his wrists. But he figured that was something he'd best get used to right away....

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