

SNAFU (Just Like Always) By Scribblesinink

"I'm just sayin', Sarge. This ain't right." The complaint drifted across the army camp, loud enough for Jake to catch it over the general cacophony of humvees, drills and helicopters.

He paused in checking the tarp to glance over his shoulder at the speaker, a tall Marine private with a spider tattooed on his neck. The Marine was grouching at a sergeant of Hispanic descent, half a head shorter, who ignored him, and kept striding onward.

"We should be gettin' on a plane home." The Marine wasn't so easily discouraged, even if he had to jog to catch up with his sergeant.

Jake watched them come his way with a kind of amused dismay. This must be his new escort. And judging by the Marine's tone, and the look on the sergeant's face, they were about as happy with the last-minute assignment as he was. With a strong tug on the ropes, Jake confirmed the tarp was tied down securely over the truck's frame before he turned right away from the truck and waited for the sergeant to reach him.

"Where the fuck is Mosul, anyway?" The Marine was clearly the sort who didn't know when to keep quiet.

"Shut up, Piggie." The sergeant glared up at the private, not letting lack of height get in the way of his authority. "I know it ain't right. But orders's orders. And your orders right now are to get your ass to Mosul. Gripin' about it ain't gonna change a damn thing. So suck it up." Without waiting to see if he got obeyed, the sergeant turned toward Jake.

"You the driver?"

"Yep." Jake held out a hand. He'd learned that being civil with the troops usually went a long way to making things more pleasant all around. "Jake Green."

The sergeant looked at the outstretched hand for a moment. "Mendez." There was a hint of a wry grin around his mouth as he shifted his weapon and accepted it with a firm grip. "Also Jake." He tipped his helmet back a little and surveyed the truck. "You all set to go?"

"Yeah. Whenever you and your men are ready, Sergeant."

Despite his apparent enthusiasm, Jake didn't like the job one bit. The roads in Iraq might be a little safer today than they used to be, but he still preferred to travel in convoys accompanied by a dozen Ravenwood guards. Now they were sending him off alone. At

least J&R had gotten him a bunch of Marines who were also headed for Balad—and, judging by the exchange he'd overhead, beyond that to Mosul—to watch his back.

Dammit, he shouldn't even be making the run in the first place; he was supposed to have the rest of the day off. But his complaint at the J&R office that he'd been working the trucks for twenty-four hours straight fell on deaf ears; the clerk flat out told him that this was *urgent*, and, tough luck, he was the only driver available. Jake couldn't imagine what the hell could be so damn important that it couldn't wait for a proper transport.

He also hadn't asked, of course.

Mendez was waving his squad into the back of the truck, before climbing into cab on the passenger side. With everyone on board, Jake hoisted himself into the driver's seat and put the truck into gear. With a low rumble, the large vehicle jerked forward.

"Smoke?" Mendez offered him a pack, one cigarette sticking out.

Jake shook his head. "Thanks, no. I don't."

"Huh." The sergeant thoughtfully studied the pack for a moment, before stuffing the cigarette back into the foil, and the whole pack into his chest pocket. Jake gave him a quick glance as they reached the main road from Baghdad International Airport to the city. Route Irish, until recently one of the most dangerous roads in Iraq. Turning the truck onto it, Jake tried not to think about that.

"Tryin' to quit." Mendez had caught his look. "My wife says it's bad for my health. Tells me those things'll kill me. 'Cause, ya know...." He uttered a brief laugh and a quick wave at the building they were just passing. The skeleton of blackened beams and crumbled clay walls offered no clue as to what function it might've once served. "She's got a point, though."

Jake grinned back. "She sounds like a smart lady, your wife."

"Yeah, that she is." Mendez raised his voice to be heard over the noise of the engine growing louder as Jake pressed down on the gas. "What about you? You married?"

"No." A vision of a blond head flashed through Jake's mind. He willed it away; it wouldn't do to think of Emily. She'd made it very clear, right before he left Jericho, that she wanted nothing more to do with him. "Never got the chance." Not for lack of trying, though. He'd asked her once, in the parking lot of the video store. They hadn't gone through with it, and it had been the right decision at the time, but—.

Sergeant Mendez's next words hauled him back to the present. "That's too bad. A man should have a family to go back to after gettin' out of this shit hole."

Jake didn't reply. There was nothing to say: he'd burned those bridges a long time ago, and he didn't know if he'd ever even make it back to Jericho.

He shifted into a higher gear. "You been in country long?"

"Two tours." The sergeant slid down in the seat a little until he could plant one booted foot against the dash. His M16 rested on his knee. "Supposed to go home before Christmas." A hint of bitterness crept into his voice. "Instead, they tell us to get our asses up to a town called Mosul."

"Sorry."

Mendez shrugged. "That's the military, man. Nothin' I can do about it."

Jake hmm'ed his agreement and concentrated on the road. Silence descended on the cab, broken only by the roar of the engine that made further conversation nearly impossible anyway. Leaving Baghdad behind, they headed north, the Iraqi desert slipping by steadily, the sun's glare on the endless road bright enough to hurt his eyes despite his sunglasses. The sergeant in the shotgun seat dozed, helmet drawn down over his brow. Jake yawned.

Without warning, there was a loud *bang* underneath the hood and the truck lurched hard. Jake's heart jumped into his throat; for a moment he was afraid he'd hit a IED or a mine. Although, on second thought, if he had, he probably wouldn't have been around any longer to worry about it.

"What the fuck...?" Mendez shot up straight in his seat, making a grab for his weapon.

The engine hiccuped and the truck shook itself. "Goddammit," Jake swore out loud, fright making him use stronger language than normal. He pulled over, making very sure he stayed off the actual shoulder of the road, and killed the stuttering engine.

"Car trouble?" Mendez sounded incredulous. "Here? You gotta be kiddin' me."

"I wish." Jake cursed the J&R mechanics under his breath. They were supposed to keep the trucks in good shape, even in the face of the ever-blowing gritty sand and the rough roads. The last thing they could afford was to get stranded in the middle of nowhere, where they'd be sitting ducks for anyone with a gun and a grudge—which seemed at times to be everyone and their uncle in this damned country.

Climbing out, Jake automatically surveyed the landscape around them. At least it was empty: no dust trails announcing approaching cars, no herders grazing their goats in sight of the road.

"*Crap.*" Mendez dropped from the cab. Without being ordered, his men poured out the back, and he started forming them into a perimeter around the truck while Jake popped the hood.

"Check the spark plugs." It was the tattooed Marine. He leaned back against the fender, gaze roving restlessly across their surroundings. "And the distributor cap."

Jake shot him a look. "You a mechanic?"

"Back in the world."

"Piggie, c'mon, leave the man to work." Mendez had hustled back round to the front of the truck.

"Just givin' some advice, Sarge."

Mendez turned to Jake. "You need help?"

Jake shook his head. He'd already seen what the trouble was: while the wire shouldn't have come loose at all, it wouldn't be hard to repair. "Nothing a little duct tape can't fix." He was just grateful to discover the problem was mechanical, and not something related to the computerized parts. If it had been the ignition module or something like that, they'd have been stranded out here until help could be sent from Baghdad. Not a very appealing thought. "I'll have us on our way in a couple minutes."

"Good." Mendez squinted at the desert. "I don't wanna hang out here any longer than necessary."

You and me both, Sergeant, Jake thought as he dug up the duct tape from a box in the cab and tightened some of the other wires. True to his word, he was able to fire up the engine again five minutes later. It wasn't running as smoothly as it should've been, but it beat not running at all.

"Nice job," the sergeant commented as the truck lurched back into motion. The rumble was even louder now, and the engine occasionally popped or hiccuped, making Jake hold his breath and send up silent prayers. But his repairs held, and the rest of the journey passed uneventfully.

It was after dark when they finally arrived in Camp Anaconda, seventy miles north of Baghdad.

Mendez shook his hand. "Thanks for the ride, Jake."

Jake offered a tired smile. "Thanks for the escort." He signed the clipboard some J&R clerk showed him, and waited for the clerk to scan the bar codes so the system'd know he'd delivered his load. "Hope you get to go home soon, Sergeant."

"Yeah." Mendez cocked his head a little. "You too, Jake."

He offered a final, small nod before turning away. Jake watched him go. He reckoned the sergeant and his squad would make it home before he did. After all, he first needed to figure out where home *was*, these days.

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