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A Couch

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A Couch Cam Torrents

It's two o'clock in the morning when we finally complete our six-hour flight from Morocco back to our home base in Germany. I don't have time to be exhausted. Our nation is under attack. New York's twin towers are gone, the Pentagon is burning, and no one knows where the crashed plane in Pennsylvania was heading. My head refuses to process the scope of destruction; whether this is extreme terrorist event or a 'day which will live in infamy.'

My boss, Lt Col "Lips" Lipinski, greets me on the tarmac with a handshake. "Not bad. The headquarters dudes have a bet going that you couldn't get all your folks and planes out of Morocco in a day."

"What the hell? Where's the love?" I'm disappointed. Yes, our C-130s were still flying low level over the Atlas Mountains when we found out about the towers. Yes, we were spread out between two Moroccan bases, expecting another week of joint training. And a final yes—we had to overcome the bureaucratic inertia of a Muslim country, paralyzed by the world's outrage, who couldn't decide if they should prevent us from leaving North Africa, or put a boot in our ass to hurry us along. But we're trash haulers—those staff weenies should have more faith.

"You still sure you want to go down on the first plane? I can give you twelve hours here and send you down tomorrow night ... the advance team can set up ops without you."

"I'm going."

There is no way I'm not going. It's not just the outrage at what's happened back in the US—those people in New York, or my brothers and sisters in the Pentagon—it's also this belief, that everything I've trained for in the air force has pointed toward this moment. A chance to put my training to use both in the cockpit and leading our airmen. I'm not going to miss out on the start of this conflict because I was too tired from a week-long deployment to Morocco.

My commander had explained the two-phase plan over a sat phone before we departed Marrakesh earlier today. Quick-turning the four C-130s I commanded in Morocco is the fastest way to execute the mission the president has dropped on the supreme allied commander in Europe: pull US marines out of Kosovo and get them on carriers already steaming for the Middle East. Our planes will stage out of Sigonella Naval Air Station on Sicily and extract the marines from Pristina, Kosovo. Helicopters at Sigonella will shuttle onto the carrier in the Med. The press claims the White House is still investigating who is behind the attacks, but our mission proves they know something. The carrier is headed east. Toward the Suez Canal.

"I know where we packed everything," I add. "These new crews you're swapping in don't know how we have it organized." I cringe at my weak argument, but finish it anyway. "It'll go quicker if I'm there from the start."

My commander smiles, as if he knows his question is rhetorical. "Well, get your ass home, kiss the fam, get some shut-eye—be back here in four hours. We need to be flying missions out of Sig by tomorrow afternoon."

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I head into the squadron where I stow my gear behind my desk. I plop in the chair and call my wife, Linda, so I don't scare her when I come home a week early in the middle of the night. She's already in bed, but sounds wide awake when she hears my voice.

I tell her why I'm home and she's unsurprised. Everyone knows what has happened. Everyone knows things will be different. But I'm unprepared when she speaks.

"When I picked up the kids at Frau Petra's, they were watching on TV. Natasha is asking questions. I tried—but you're going to need to talk to her, too."

"I'm going to be leaving before they even wake up," I remind her. "I'll have to do it when I get back from this next op." This one's a gut-wrencher. Natasha's only five—but she's smart as a whip, innocent as a lamb, and it breaks my heart to think she's upset about something a child shouldn't have to understand.

"No. You just got done doing this. Your squadron has five other majors. Tell Lips to pick another deployment commander."

I'm silent. There's no way. My stomach ached when Linda told me about Natasha's questions. Now my heart hurts.

I met Linda in pilot training and she's been flying planes as long as I have. She commands the C-9 aeromedical evacuation squadron at our base, and the only reason she hasn't been called in to launch her planes is because this event hasn't maimed or killed anyone in Europe.

"I'm the only one they have who can do what they need to do." It's a lie, and Linda will recognize it. It's the standard line pilots tell their loved ones when they're rationalizing why they would purposely leave their loved ones behind to go do what they love.

"Let's talk about it when I get to the house. I've got four hours." I can't bring myself to tell her on the phone that I've already decided.

"No." She pauses after the word, and I'm unsure whether she means 'No,' she doesn't want to discuss it when I get home, or 'No,' she doesn't believe me about being the only one. Turns out, it's none of the above.

"No—don't come home. If you're leaving again, then just stay at the squadron. You've got a sleeping bag in your deployment gear. Use it."

She hasn't even finished her sentence when I speak. "Come on. I've got time to see you. Time to look in on the kids. I'm coming home."

"Don't." She's holding back tears now—I can hear it in her voice. "I'm asking you to please not come home."

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I don't know what to say. She's right about the five other majors. That's why my commander asked me if I was sure. Others could do this. But I want it to be me. And I want Linda to be proud—and happy—that it's me in the lead. That when the shit hit the fan, her husband stood up and said, "I'll go." Instead, she's pissed.

"Linda—" But the phone has disconnected.

I pull my sleeping bag from my deployment gear and head for my ops officer's office. He has a hide-a-bed couch in there that's saved an aviator or two from a risky drive home after a hard night at the club. I roll out my bag, my nose wrinkling at the stiff mattress smelling of ass, and lean over to turn off the light. I'm down to three-and-a-half hours until we launch. My stomach churns from the telephone call, and I have no idea how I'm going to get any rest.

I turn on my side and take deliberate breaths—in through the nose and out through the mouth. And I sleep.