

## Chapter XXXI

### A Miraculous Sign

September 11, 1943

Sheffield jumped through the open hatch to get out of the way of the outboard elevator that was hurtling toward him. The force of the elevator smashing into the bridge wing knocked him down, throwing him to the deck on the bridge.

In the process, a small piece of shrapnel hit him in the side of the head, knocking his helmet partially off. The shrapnel caused a nasty gash that began oozing blood. The elevator crashed into the wing bridge, pinning his left leg between the hatch and the bulkhead. The force which had propelled him caused his body to twist as he fell to the deck, snapping his femur about five inches above the knee, resulting in a compound fracture.

The men on the bridge tried to force the hatch open wide enough to free him, to no avail. The force of impact against the superstructure had been sufficient to knock everyone off their feet. It also broke loose a piece of the overhead support structure. Using the steel bar, three men were able to get enough leverage to pry the hatch open far enough for Yeoman Gover to pull the Captain free.

“Get the first aid kit!” Morris yelled as he bent over Captain Brason’s lifeless body. He removed his helmet and laid his head on the deck. Listening, he could not detect any breathing. Next he placed two fingers on the Captain’s throat and found a faint pulse.

The officer of the deck handed Morris the first aid kit and he went to work to try and stop the blood coming from his head. Instinctively the first aid training he had received as boy scout came to mind. First he removed the piece of shrapnel, which fortunately did not penetrate the skull. Using a compress he applied pressure to the wound which slowed the bleeding.

While Morris was trying to stop the bleeding from the head wound, Hospital Apprentice Third Class Eldon McCormick, from the nearest first aid station, arrived and worked on the leg wound. He straightened out the leg, allowing the bone to retract so he could stop the bleeding.

All the while, Sheffield was unconscious and not breathing. While holding the compress with one hand, Morris placed his other hand on the captain’s head and uttered a blessing. In the chaos, no one noticed the act.

Pharmacist’s Mate First Class Richard Montoya arrived momentarily, with a stretcher. Captain Brason gasped and began breathing and opened his eyes. He reached up with one hand and clutched Morris’ arm. He was obviously in a great deal of pain. The pharmacist’s mate gave him a shot of morphine. The Captain released his grip on Petty Officer Gover and closed his eyes. His breathing was labored as the morphine began to take effect.

With the bleeding slowed sufficiently, Morris wrapped his head with gauze to hold the compress in

place. Together, the two medics had taken care of the leg enough to move him. They gently picked him up and put him on the stretcher and carried him to his emergency cabin adjacent to bridge and laid him on his bunk. Morris stayed with him but stood back, allowing the medics to do their work.

Commander Terry had been summoned to the bridge and arrived just as Captain Brason was being carried away. Assessing the situation, he immediately assumed command. His concern for his friend had to be put aside. He was in good hands but the ship was in serious trouble. Reports began coming in from the damaged areas of the ship.

The secondary explosion in the bomb storage compartment had caused a hull breach, allowing sea water into the ship. The magazine was flooded, which prevented further bombs from going off. Just aft of the magazine, the forward port boiler room was flooded.

All of the boilers had been extinguished due to the damage to the uptakes. Without steam, the ship lost power, and propulsion. The emergency diesel generators came on and provided electrical power critical for the damage control teams and firefighters who fought to contain the fires and make the essential repairs to bring the boilers back on line.

The blast that ripped through the port hull, not only launched the outboard elevator, but it tore through the fuel bunkers that lined the hull. Burning oil seeped into the sea and as the ship slowed to a stop, the flaming oil slick stretched along the hull from that point aft. The flames ignited the paint on the hull and raced upward toward the hangar and flight deck. Two destroyers came along side and trained their fire hoses on the burning carrier.

One deck up, on the fourth deck, the refrigerated storeroom where the bomb detonated was completely destroyed. Fire had spread to the adjacent dry stores compartment and to nearby lockers. For the time being, the fire wall between the damaged area and the machinery spaces was keeping the fire out of the boiler rooms.

On the third deck, the sick bay was on fire and had to be evacuated. A lot of critical medical equipment and supplies had been destroyed. Fortunately there were caches of medical supplies, in limited amounts, scattered through out the ship. Lieutenant Commander Bashor, the chief medical officer, and two other doctors were among the casualties with severe burns. The remaining doctor and medical staff had to set up emergency treatment locations wherever they could. Firefighters fought to contain the fire in hopes of saving the operating room.

The forward uptake was mangled beyond immediate repair. The ruptured uptakes caused the smoke from the fires below to be drawn up to the second deck, making the damage control efforts extremely difficult. Consequently, a huge plume of smoke was being emitted from the stack.

On the second deck, the bakery and galley had been demolished and fires were threatening

surrounding compartments, including the crew mess hall.

On the main deck, the central hangar bay had been closed off to keep the fire from spreading to forward and aft hangar bays. A number of planes were in the central bay and were on fire. The fire quickly spread from one aircraft to another. Fortunately, most of the planes had been drained of fuel and the ammunition removed. The two or three that had not been, caused particular problems as their fuel tanks exploded, spreading the fire further. Several firefighters were mowed down when some fifty caliber machine gun bullets went off.

Upon penetrating the flight deck, the bomb passed directly through the captain's stateroom and exited through the deck as it continued on its trajectory. That in and of itself didn't do much damage. The problem was the fire raging in the central hangar bay directly below. The fire found its way through the hole in the deck and spread to the stateroom. As the hangar fire burned, along with occasional explosions, the overhead caught fire and burned through to the galley deck.

On the flight deck, flames and smoke poured from the crater in the center of the deck and the wooden planks around the edge of the hole began to burn. Firefighters worked to keep the fire from spreading. At the edge of the flight deck, the outboard elevator was missing. It was now leaning against the forward superstructure, wedged in place.

On the bridge, the view of the the flight deck was obscured by the elevator. The planes in the air were ordered to abort their missions to land at the army air bases on Sicily with further orders to make their way to Algiers via airfields in Tunisia and eastern Algeria.

The ship had coasted to stop and was dead in water with a four and a half degree list to port. The Alameda had come along the starboard side to assist in fighting the fires. The Bismark, Syracuse, and the three destroyers steamed in a circle around the carrier, standing guard in the event that another German air attack materialized. The remaining destroyer was searching the water for survivors of the Percival which had exploded and sank within seconds of being hit by one of the guided glide bombs.

While every effort was directed to bringing the fires aboard the ship under control, Morris stayed with the medics who were attending to Captain Brason. Pharmacist's Mate Montoya stayed with him and worked on keeping him from going into shock while Hospital Apprentice McCormick went below to get traction splint. Morris did whatever he was asked to do. His first and foremost responsibility was to his captain.

Sheffield was conscious and in a great deal of pain. He wanted to know know what was going on with the ship. Morris returned to the bridge to get an update from Commander Terry. Morris assured Captain Brason that Commander Terry was on top of things. Progress was being made below decks but the biggest problem was the fire in the hangar.

Sheffield felt that his duty was on the bridge and at on point attempted to get up. He soon found out

how badly injured he was and laid back down on the bunk. He had enough confidence in Commander Terry and the rest of the officers and crew to know that they were doing everything they could and were doing it right.

Petty Officer McCormick was gone for quite a while and they were wondering if something had happened to him. After a considerable length of time, he returned. "Sick bay is pretty much gone," he said. "I had to go to one of the main dressing stations on the third deck to find one of these."

"Alright Captain, we'll get you fixed up here. We need to remove your trousers, alright."

"I'll do it." Yeoman Gover volunteered. The pant leg had already been ripped off in order to treat and dress the wound. His lower leg was bruised and swollen where it was pinned.

After removing his shoes, Morris gently loosened his belt and undid his zipper and carefully slid his trousers down over the wound on this left leg. He then stood back and watched as the medics applied the splint. The outside splint was laid along his leg, up past his hip. The inner splint was placed along the inside of his leg. The two pieces were held together by straps that were fastened around his waist and pelvis to secure the splint firmly to his body. Two other straps went around his upper leg to keep it snug.

The tricky part was attaching it to his lower leg from the break down. A sling was strapped around the bottom of his foot that pulled down on his leg as tension was applied. Once his leg was stretched sufficiently, Petty Officer Montoya said, "Okay, where going to set the bone now. Its going to be painful."

"Yeoman, hold him down."

Morris positioned himself over the Captain's shoulders and pinned him to the bunk.

"Ready, sir?" Pharmacist's Mate Montoya asked.

Sheffield simply nodded his head.

"Alright. Brace yourself." The two medics proceeded to line up the femur.

Sheffield grunted and groaned from pain as they worked.

One of them held it in place while the other loosened the tension on the split enough for the bone to come together. Then they strapped his lower leg into the splint.

"There you go sir. That should do the trick until you can have a doctor take a look at it. They won't be able to put you in a cast until that wound heals."

To weak to speak, Captain Brason saluted the medics in appreciation. Morris covered him up with a blanket. Sheffield closed his eyes and, overcome by exhaustion and the affects of the morphine, drifted off to sleep.

Yeoman Gover stayed by his side for several minutes and when it was obvious that he was in a deep sleep, he got up to leave. Morris made his down to the ship's store on the second deck. He found that it was intact, but just a little further forward he could see the damage.

He went into the store and told the storekeeper that he needed a pair of trousers for the Captain. After giving the size, a pair was found. Chief Audmanson happened to be across the passage way in the tailor shop assessing the situation there. He asked Morris to give him the trousers and he would fix them up so they'd fit over the splint.

In just a moment he had the inseam ripped out and some ties attached to hold it closed. "Take these to him for now." the Chief said. "Tell him that I'll fix up something better when I can."

Morris took the trousers and went back up to the Captain. Finding him still asleep. He ventured onto the bridge to get an update of the situation so he could inform captain once the awoke.

That Saturday morning, a quarter of the way around the world, Ramona awoke from a particularly restless night. It was unusual for her to toss and turn, nevertheless at a certain point she woke up with an uneasy feeling. It was as if someone had been in her bedroom watching her. She put that notion out of her head as being ridiculous but she had a hard time going back to sleep. After struggling for a quite some time, exhaustion took over and she eventually went back to sleep.

It was just a little before nine o'clock before she finally woke up and got out of bed. There wasn't anything in particular she had in mind for the day so it really didn't matter. She slipped off her nightgown and stepped into the shower with the radio turned up so she could hear it.

As she lathered her body, she sang along with Frank Sinatra to As Time Goes By.

*You must remember this  
A kiss is still a kiss  
A sigh is still a sigh  
The fundamental things apply  
As time goes by*

*And when two lovers woo  
They still say: "I love you"  
On that you can rely  
No matter what the future brings  
As time goes by*

*Moonlight and love songs - never out of date  
Hearts full of passion - jealousy and hate  
Woman needs man - and man must have his mate  
That no one can deny*

*It's still the same old story  
A fight for love and glory  
A case of do or die  
The world will always welcome lovers  
As time goes by*

As she sang, her thoughts turned to the man that she loved. "It has been a while since I have heard from him." she said when the song was over, "Maybe today." the next song she didn't know that well and just hummed along as she washed and rinsed her hair.

Turning off the shower, she opened the curtain and reached for a towel. "And now for the news." the radio announcer said.

"This is the CBS Radio Network. A War Department news release this morning states that heavy Nazi air attacks utilizing a secret weapon has sunk or damaged three U.S. ships, including an aircraft carrier, off the coast of Italy. We will bring you more as details become available. And in other news..."

Ramona wrapped the towel around her and sat down on the toilet seat in shock. A host of things began racing through her mind. Foremost was, "The Reprisal is the only American carrier off Italy, was it the one sunk or was it damaged? Is Sheffield alright?"

Then she began to worry and imagine the worst. It was January 1929 all over again when she and Geannie received the tragic news that their husbands had been involved in a midair collision over the Gulf of Panama during routine exercises. What followed was three days of agony, which didn't end well for her. Tom was dead but Sheffield was eventually rescued.

"Now maybe something terrible has happened to Sheffield, and its all my fault. I'm cursed. If only I hadn't told him how I felt about him."

After a moment of unsubstantiated irrational thinking, she pulled herself together and got up and moved into the bedroom to get dressed. Still she was concerned and needed more information. Skipping breakfast, she rushed out to buy a newspaper. Standing there at the newsstand she saw the headline on the front page of the Washington Post.

"Navy Takes Beating Off Salerno.

"AP Washington. The War Department announced this morning that Nazi air attacks utilizing a new secret weapon has been carried out on US Navy ships operating off the coast of Italy in support of the Army beachhead at Salerno. The weapon is reported to be a guided bomb which is released from the attacking aircraft at a distance. This is the same weapon that reportedly sank an Italian battleship two days ago.

"In today's attacks, which began around 10:00 am local time, a cruiser performing shore bombardment duties was hit by one of these powerful new weapons. The ship was observed on fire with her bow nearly awash. Casualties are said to be high.

Soon after, a similar attack was carried out against a carrier task force farther off shore. A destroyer in the screen exploded and sank in seconds with most of the crew. Only a handful of survivors were pulled from the water.

At the same time, the carrier at the center of task force was also struck. The ship was last reported to be on fire amidships, listing and dead in the water. Again the number of dead and wounded is said to be high, the ship's captain among them."

Ramona clutched the newspaper to her breast and began sobbing right there in front of the newsstand. It was more detail than the radio had given; much more. "So something has happened to Sheffield." she muttered aloud. "But is he among the dead or wounded?"

"What's that lady?" The newspaper vendor asked.

Ramona didn't answer. She hurried back to the car with her newspaper and just sat behind the wheel, squeezing it tightly with both hands. With her head bowed, tears streamed from her eyes, falling in her lap. She took a deep breath and prayed, "Dear God Above, you've already taken Oliver and Tom from me. Please, please don't take Sheffield too. Of them all, I love him the most. I plead with you to spare his life and bring him home to me. I need him so much."

Her entire body trembled. She was barely able to engage the starter pedal with her foot. Her hands shook as she put the car in gear to drive home. Once at her apartment, she just sat in her car for several minutes. Wondering what to do next, she went inside and picked up the telephone. Her voice choked she gave the operator the number to the Brason Residence in Roanoke.

On the other end Ellen's cheerful answered, "Hello."

"Hello Mrs. Brason, this is Ramona." She sobbed.

"Why, what's the matter dear?" She asked.

"Something terrible has happened to Sheffield." Ramona blurted.

"What happened?" Ellen gasped.

Ramona told her what she had heard on the radio and Ellen listened carefully as she read to her to the newspaper article.

"Oh dear, that's horrible news." Ellen sighed. "We can only hope for the best for Sheffield until we get more information. If you hear anything at all, call me immediately."

"I will, but news like this is slow in coming. We may not hear anything for days. My guess is that the ship will make for port. Hopefully he'll be able to get a letter off to us. Even at that it will take a few days for it to get here. Perhaps with my connections, I could get a casualty report, but being Saturday, I wouldn't be able to contact anyone until Monday. But, I'll be sure to let you know anything I find out."

"I'm going to let you go now, Ramona. Thanks for calling."

After hanging up, Ramona tried to be positive, but she had been here before. She knew that it was going to be difficult time, regardless of the outcome.

Sheffield woke up two hours later. Yeoman Gover was right there with him. The first thing he said was, "How long have I been asleep?"

"About three hours, sir." his faithful assistant assured him. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit by freight train. I hurt all over."

"You took quite a hit, sir. There was a couple of minutes there when you weren't breathing."

Sheffield tried to sit up but the splint attached to his waist wouldn't allow him to. "Good." he said.

"We're underway."

"Yes, sir. The last I knew we were making nine knots. Commander Terry wanted me to let him know when you woke up. Shall I go get him?"

"Would you? I want to know whats been going on."

"I'll be right back."

Yeoman Gover left and went the short distance to the bridge and returned momentarily. "He'll be right here, Captain."

"Thank you Morris. Have you been with me the whole time?"

"Pretty much. I did leave long enough to go get you pair of trousers. Chief Audmanson altered them for you so you can pull them on over your splint. Would you like me to help you with them before Commander Terry gets here?"

"Yeah, I suppose I ought to be presentable."

Morris gently slide the the Captain's pants onto him and did them up for him. He was tying the pant leg closed when Commander Terry came in.

"How are you feeling Captain?" Commander Terry inquired.

"Like I was just telling Yeoman Gover, here, I feel like I've been hit by train. I'm stiff and sore all over."

"I'm just glad thats all the worse it is. They tell me that they thought we were losing there for a few minutes."

"Tell me Hank, how many casualties are there?" His first concern was for the crew over the ship.

"We don't have a full count yet sir, but so far there are ninety three dead, two hundred and twelve injured, including you and Doctor Bashor. There are still fifty three unaccounted for. We're in the process of cleaning up now, and I'm sure they will turn up among the debris. All of the injured seem to be accounted for. Sick back was pretty much destroyed so I have had the planes in the repair hangar brought up and it is being used for a temporary sick bay until we reach Algiers. There is a navy hospital ship there standing by to receive our casualties. We should be there by Monday morning. Speaking of casualties, I don't know if you know that the Percival went down."



"I saw it explode out the corner of my eye while tracking the glide bomb."

"It broke in half and went down in seconds. Only fifteen men out of two hundred and ten were pulled from the water."

"What about the ship?"

"Well, they were get for boilers re-lit. But Boiler Room Number One was is flooded and it will be a while before it can be pumped out and repaired. Where making nine knots right now . They tell me that we should be capable of fifteen. We have been able to correct the list to three degrees and all of the fires are out.

"The damage is quite extensive. We're looking at several weeks in a stateside navy yard to get back into fighting shape. There is a gapping hole in the flight deck and the elevator is wedged against the superstructure. It will take one of the Vulcan's big cranes to remove it." Commander Terry went on to describe the damage to the ship on lower decks, including the fact that his suite on the galley deck was nonexistent.

Captain Brason listened intently to his complete report, taking in the extent of the damage. Commander Terry told him that it could have been much worse if he hadn't given the order to defuel and disarm the planes that were aboard. "If not for that," Commander Terry added, "We could have suffered the same fate as the Wasp a year ago."

"How many operational planes are there aboard right now?"

"Thirty seven, including the entire Bat Team. The planes that were in the air all made it to bases on Sicily, except for nine that didn't have enough fuel to make it that far. They landed on one of the British carriers before continuing on their way. They have orders to make their way to Algiers and meet up with us there."

"So we don't have any air cover right now?"

"No sir, but there is a heavy cloud cover that should conceal our position and the rest of the task force is still with us."

"That's all very good, Hank. You've done a great job of taking care of things. I always new that I could count on you."

"Thank you sir. I think I've told you about everything. I better get back to the bridge now. I'll let you know if anything comes up. I'd rather let you call the shots."

"Thanks again for everything Hank."

After Commander Terry left, Sheffield closed hie eyes for a moment.

"Is there anything I can get for you, sir?" Morris asked.

"Yeah, I could use a bite to eat."

"Let me go find Reggie and see what he can round up for you. I'll be right back."

When he returned, Sheffield was resting, but not asleep. Not long after that, Reggie came to his cabin with a sandwich and a few carrot sticks. "I'm sorry sir, but between the galley and the storeroom taking a hit, we don't have much food left."

"Thanks Reggie. This will be fine. Are you alright?"

"Yes sir. Not a scratch on me. You look like you're hurting real bad sir."

"I have felt better, that's for sure. Thanks for the sandwich. Say do you think you can round up a Coke for me?"

"Sure thing, sir. I'll be right back."

While Reggie was gone to find a Coke, Hospital Apprentice McCormick returned to check on his patient and to change the dressing on his bandages. "Are you comfortable enough, sir?" he asked

"I hurt too much to be comfortable. Is there any way this thing can be modified so I can sit up?"

"I'm afraid not sir. The whole purpose of it is to immobilize your leg so the break can mend. Keep in mind, this is only temporary. Once we can get you to a hospital, it will be replaced by something more permanent."

"How am I supposed to go to the head?"

"Well sir, that's what bedpans and orderlies are for. Tell me, do you have any feeling in your leg?" he asked as he rewrapped the leg wound.

"Do you mean besides pain? Yes it is kind of tingly."

"Let us know it persists, sir."

"How does your head feel?" He asked as he took off the bandage. "Have you experienced any light headedness?"

"No."

"That was quite a gash." Petty Officer McCormick said as he treated the wound and rebandaged it.

When he was finished he said, "Lieutenant Crockett will come and check on you as soon as he can. He really has his hands full with a bunch of pretty serious cases right now. With the other doctors out of commission, he's handling everything himself."

"I understand." Captain Brason assured him. "You're doing a good job, Petty Officer McCormick. Thank you."

"Well, that should do it for now. If you need anything, send Yeoman Gover to fetch me and I'll come running. Oh by the way, I'll send an orderly up with a bedpan."

Seaman Jackson returned with a bottle of Coca-Cola as the medic was leaving. "Here you go sir. I had to look long and hard to find it. We seem to be running out of pretty near everything on this ship. That was

a bad place to get hit.”

“Thanks Reggie.” He took a long swig of the refreshment. “Awww, that's good.”

“Yeoman Gover, Draw up the paperwork to promote this man to Ship's Serviceman Third Class. And while you're at it give yourself another stripe. You've both been really good to me and have taken care of things in a first rate manner. This is my way of saying thank you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Morris responded.”

Reggie added, “Thank you, sir. My mama will be mighty proud.”

Sheffield took another swig, then said, “It's the least I can do for the both of you.”

Before leaving, Reggie asked, “Is there anything else I can get for you, sir?”

“No thank you, Reggie. I'm fine for now.”

As Reggie left the cabin, Sheffield turned to Morris and asked, “Would you go find out what is going on. I need to know.”

Sheffield, left to himself, closed his eyes to try rest.

Before long, Morris returned with an update. “They're cleaning up and assessing the damage.” he reported. “The biggest mess is the central hangar bay. Between all of the destroyed planes, a good share of the galley deck has crashed down into it. I'm afraid all of you suite is gone sir. My office is still intact but burnt out. Simon and I are going to have find somewhere else to bunk for now. On the positive side of things, it looks like all of your files survived thanks to the fireproof file cabinets that Lieutenant Commander Gates found for me.

“On the grim side of things, forty seven more bodies have been recovered. That brings the death toll to a hundred and forty six with six still unaccounted for.

“Commander Terry wanted me to tell you that even with a patch, the flight deck would still be unusable because there are no support structures. They all came down with the galley deck.

“Supplies are running low since most of them were destroyed. With some rationing, what there is should last until we make Algiers in just over a day a half.”

“Thanks for the report, Morris. I feel like I need to be out on the bridge, but it sounds like Commander Terry has things under control.”

Just as Yeoman Gover was finishing his report, a knock came to the door. It was an orderly with a bedpan.

“This isn't going to be pretty, Morris. Why don't you go see if you can find a place to bunk.”

Morris left and the colored orderly began helping the captain with a rather unpleasant task.

Late in the afternoon, Commander Terry stopped in to brief him on the salvage operations. But first, he wanted to know how the captain was doing.

After giving his report, he added, "Five more bodies had been recovered and the debris is being pushed over the side. In all of the rubble, someone found this." He said as he handed him a framed picture. "It appears that this is the only thing of your belongings that came through intact."

Sheffield looked at the portrait of Ramona with disbelief. "Thanks Hank. It's like a sign or something, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know Sheffield, maybe somebody's trying to tell you something. I've got to get back to work now. I'll check in with you in the morning, alright"

"Sure Hank. Thanks. Oh, can you set this on the desk over there where I can see it?"

"Sure thing Captain. How's this?"

"Perfect. Goodbye Hank."

"Goodbye sir."

Sheffield lay there staring at Ramona's picture and wondered at the miracle as to how it had survived. Was it just a coincidence or was someone trying to tell him something? He had no idea of the torment that she was going through over him at that very moment. It was obvious that he would be heading stateside in a few days. Perhaps he shouldn't wait until after the war to ask her to marry him. As he thought about that, a satisfying feeling came over him, suggesting that idea definitely had merit.

He searched his heart and decided that his love for her was genuine and found that it ran deeper than he had been willing to admit to himself. He determined that his desire to spend the rest of his life with her was out of love and not loneliness.

His thoughts were interrupted when Reggie brought him his supper consisting of macaroni and cheese. "Rations really must be getting low." he commented as he thanked his faithful steward.

A little later Morris returned. He had found a typewriter and typed up the promotion orders and brought them to be signed. Laying flat on his back Sheffield found it difficult to sign them. "This is effective immediately. Now take these to the paymaster."

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate this."

"No. Thank you. I really appreciate you."

"Is there anything else I can do for you sir?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Sit down, Morris. You remember Ramona don't you?"

"Of course. She seems to be a very nice lady."

"Do you see her picture there? Somehow it survived the fire in my quarters. Pretty amazing, huh."

"Yes, sir. I'd say so."

"What do you think it means? Morris, you're a man of faith, do you think it might be a sign or something."

“God does work in mysterious ways, sir. It says somewhere that we receive no witness until after the trial of our faith. The only sure way to know is to search your heart for feelings that are beyond your own. It doesn't hurt ask Him either, you know.”

“I have done a lot of thinking and searching, but I haven't thought to ask. That would have been one of the first things my wife would have done. I should have thought of that thanks.

“Would you take a letter for me. I was just about to write to Ramona but its kind of difficult to do it laying down. It might get a bit personal, but I trust you.”

“Alright sir.” he said picking up the tablet and pen that were laying on the desk next to Ramona's picture. “I'm ready.”

Sheffield began, “September 11, 1943

“At sea aboard the USS Reprisal

“Dear Ramona,

“I'm sure that you noticed that this in not in my usual handwriting. I'm slightly incapacitated so I am dictating this to Yeoman Gover. I'm sure that you remember him.

“This morning started off as just another day at war. We were providing air cover both for the troops ashore at Salerno and the ships offshore. Our planes over the bombardment ships reported an attack on the cruisers by some sort of a new weapon. Not long after that, we too came under attack. The bombers released a glide bomb at a distance which was guided to its target. Two of them were coming after us. I was watching from the wing bridge so I could give orders for evasive maneuvers. One of the bombs fell into the sea astern. While I was watching the second one, out of the corner of my eye I saw one of our destroyers explode. It sank in seconds with nearly all of its crew.

“As the bomb continued toward us, it was as if time slowed down. I watched the bomb dive into the deck. It penetrated deep and exploded, knocking me to my feet. I quickly got up as a secondary explosion ripped through the hull sending the outboard elevator hurtling in my direction. I dove through the hatch onto the bridge to get out of the way.

“That was the last thing I remember. The next next thing I knew, I was laying on the deck in a lot of pain. Yeoman Gover and two medics were hovering over me. They tell me that I wasn't breathing for a couple of minutes. To make a long story short, I received a nasty gash on the side of my head, a compound fracture a few inches above my left knee, and a badly bruised ankle from being pinned in the hatchway.

“I'm laying in bunk with a traction splint on. That's why I can't sit up to write to you. I hurt all over, and I have a tingling in my broken leg.

“The ship was badly damaged on all decks, We lost one hundred and forty six dead and two hundred and twelve wounded, including myself, and six still unaccounted for. One of the areas damaged was our

sickbay, consequently most of our doctors were injured. My quarters were completely demolished, except for your picture. Can you believe that? It was found intact amongst the debris on the deck below.

"It's very fortunate that the first one missed. I very much doubt we would have survived two hits. As it was we were left dead in the water, listing and on fire. Even that hit could have been much worse, if it wasn't for sea water flooding the bomb storage compartment. If they had gone off, it would have ripped out the bottom and that would have been the end of the Reprisal.

"We are now returning to Algiers and then most likely back to the states for repairs, so I guess I'll be back in the next few weeks.

"So how was your day?

"I got your last letter the day we sailed so I haven't been able to respond until now. I'm glad that dress fit you. I'm sure that it looks terrific on you. I can't wait to see you in it. So, when I do make it home, I'd love to take you with me to Roanoke. I don't know how long it will be before I can travel. You would know better than me.

"I have spent the afternoon thinking about things. It is like your picture is a sign or something. I have done some pretty serious soul searching and I have come to realize that I love you more deeply than I have been willing to admit, even to myself. I also realize that I want to spend the rest of my life with you because of that love. Once I get through whatever lies ahead in the immediate future, be prepared to change your name.

"As soon as I know what the lies in store for me, I'll let you know. I imagine that it will be two or three weeks before we can bring the ship home. It will most likely be in the yard for several months undergoing repairs. That should give us lot of time to invest in our love affair and see what develops.

"I too like the term lovers better. It does sound so much more intimate, being boyfriend and girlfriend is for kids. But I must say, being in love makes me feel like a kid again.

"Love Sheffield

"P.S. We won't arrive in Algiers until the day after tomorrow. Before I have this posted, perhaps I can tell you more then."

After carefully taking down everything Captain Brason said, Yeoman Gover asked, "If you like, I can type it up for you and let you sign it."

"That would be great. It has been a rough day, I think I'd like to try and get some sleep. Good night Morris and thank you again for everything you have done for me today."

"Good night sir. I hope you sleep well."

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