

The old man looked small in the bed and exceedingly vulnerable. So fragile, in fact, that his son had the fleeting sensation he was looking at a stranger. Purplish marks above and below the plastic tubing taped to his arm attested to many failed attempts to locate a cooperative vein. That battle done, he was deep in a medicated sleep now, slack jawed and breathing shallowly. Traces of dried spittle had collected at one corner of his mouth.

The other occupied beds on the ward were few in number and were yards away. "Chief," Damon called out in a normal tone. That elicited no response. Somewhat louder, "Dad?" Nothing more than the flutter of an eyelid. Damon laid his hand over the old man's and leaned in closer. "Daddy," he said softly. The eyes flew open then, and in a moment focused on him. Damon curled his hand round his father's fingers, smiled at him and waited for his mind to clear.

"Damey. You come all the way from Mayport, Damey?"

"From Quantico, Chief. You remember. I'm back at Quantico now."

The chief nodded, wetting his lips with his tongue. Damon poured water from the bedside carafe, supported his father's head and held the cup to his lips. As he slowly drank the mental cobwebs seemingly melted away. "I knew that," he said when he had finished. "I knew that." He looked long and appraisingly at his son. "You look good."

"So do you," Damon lied.

"Your mother call you?"

"Rose."

"Well, she shouldn't have. I'm all right."

"I can see that. But you wouldn't begrudge me a couple days away from duty, would you, Chief?"

"You been there a couple months already and didn't see fit to visit."

"You're absolutely right," Damon agreed, smiling again. "But maybe I needed a really good excuse to get away."

A silence ensued reminiscent of those common between them in the days following Damon's decision for the priesthood.

"So how's the church business?" his father said at last. "You saving souls?"

"Right and left."

"And solving problems, you fellas with all the answers?"

"Not me."

"Well, don't tell your mother that. She thinks there's nothing her boy can't fix."

"Mothers are like that."

"She used to think that about me, you know. But no more."

Silence. Damon had never known how to talk to his father, not really. So much shared, yet so little in common. The Chief was a good man, Damon knew, faithful to the laws of the Church, but hardly spiritual. Physical prowess had always defined his self-worth and shaped his opinions of other men, his son included. The day Damon finally bested his father at arm wrestling was the day he earned his respect; and the day he entered the seminary nearly a year later was when he all but lost it.

"You weren't praying over me, were you?" The Chief's gaze was faltering. He was fighting to stay awake.

"Maybe I was," Damon answered, falling easily into the old litany, knowing what was next.

"Let me see your hands," The Chief demanded.

Damon held out both hands for his father, who felt of the fleshy parts of his palms like a butcher grading meat.

"Not as soft yet as a baby's ass," he announced weakly, "but getting mighty like a woman's."

Damon pulled his hands away. He hated that teasing ritual, never quite knew what to say.

"But you wouldn't know about that," his father finished.

Another silence, emptier and more desolate than before.

"I need to make a head call," the old man said suddenly. "I can't use that thing," indicating the bedpan. Damon glanced down the ward at the brightly lit nurse's station, where a corpsman sat reading. "No, no," the Chief growled, "you help me. I just need a boost."

And so Damon helped his father sit up, feeling his aged boniness where there had always been muscle; and he slid his father's feet into woolly scuffs, and supported him as he stood. He guided the intravenous trolley while the old man shuffled to the nearest stall with a commode, and he waited at the door. When he helped The Chief settle back into the bed, he saw the old man's eyes were wet.

The Chief pulled his son down closer to him and whispered near his ear, "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"You can pray for me if you want."

"I do. I always do."

"You can give me Last Rites if you want."

Damon nearly laughed. "Dad, you're not dying. I can anoint you tomorrow, if you like; it's a healing sacrament. But I can give you the Sacrament of Reconciliation now, if you need to confess. What is it that you want?"

"I want to sleep," The Chief said.

Damon stretched out across an empty bed and watched his father drift back into the depths of drug-induced slumber, praying all the while with all his heart. When it was safe to do so, he blessed him and kissed his sleeping face.

