



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (barely)

Classification: vignette, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: none

Disclaimer: Attention, all who seek to sue me for copyright infringement. These are not the fics you're looking for. I can go about my business. Move along. (For those of you who recognize the Star Wars reference, you're apparently as big a geek as I am.)

Author's Notes: This is for Judy, from whose devious mind the idea for a wordplay fic sprung. The basis for this plot, such as it is, is the severe JAG moment I have whenever a certain subject comes up at work. My hold on sanity is slipping, I tell you.

I'm not the type of person who embarrasses easily. If I were, becoming a female Marine would have been an unwise career choice. I speak with purpose, and I don't often stick my foot in my mouth. When I say or do something, it's decisive, even when I'm not at all sure of myself. All in all, I think I conduct myself with a fair amount of poise. In my professional life, anyway.

So how the hell did I get myself into such an unbelievable mess today?

Everything started off normally. I'd been in court most of the morning, getting beaten by Harm in a dereliction-of-duty case. I was defending for a change, and I'd known going in that it was going to be a long shot. But when Harm started in on the duty of sailors to protect their shipmates as well as the people they defend, it was clear that we were sunk.

I wasn't overly annoyed about it, either, which was a bit of a switch. I'm competitive enough about cases that losing to an emotional appeal often gets under my skin. This time, though, I couldn't summon any real irritation. For some reason, my well-developed immunity to his passion was faltering, and I found myself taken in by his argument, admiring ...

... well, if I'm honest, I was admiring more than his courtroom passion.

Maybe that's part of the reason why I was so off today. Lately, he and I have been easing back into a rather pleasant friendship. We're sharing lunch almost every day, running together on weekends, and generally feeling more comfortable around each other than we have in ages. I'm loving every minute of it, but every time I lie down to sleep or drive away from his apartment, something in the back of my mind makes me wonder anew where it's all leading. For once, I'm pretty sure where I *want* it to lead - I'm just not entirely sure how to get there from here.

So it's possible that I was just slightly distracted when I approached the kitchen that afternoon, hoping to score a leftover cinnamon roll from staff call. As I neared the doorway, I could hear Admiral Chegwiddden and Sturgis talking inside. One word caught my attention, and I instantly slowed up.

"How are you coming along on the Harm issue?"

The 'Harm issue?' That didn't sound good.

"To be honest, sir, I think we're headed for an Article 32," Sturgis replied. They were facing away from me, and didn't seem to have heard me stop cold in the doorframe.

"I'm well aware of the commander's record and his maverick tendencies - "

"This one goes beyond that, Admiral. He showed blatant disregard for standard procedure, and the action nearly resulted in disaster. At some point, a line has to be drawn."

I almost had to clap a hand over my mouth to stifle the indignation bubbling up in my throat. What the hell was going on here? I'd heard nothing to suggest that Harm had had any trouble on any of his recent cases - certainly nothing that would rise to the level of a disciplinary hearing. I wasn't sure whether I was angrier at Sturgis, for so calmly hanging his friend out to dry, or at our CO, for allowing such a discussion to take place within earshot of the staff.

The admiral's voice was stern. "Culpable negligence?"

"That'd be my recommendation, sir."

"All right. Set it up."

At that point, my protective instincts took over, and I spoke up in the coolest tone of voice I could muster without losing my civility. "Excuse me, sir, Commander. I couldn't help overhearing your discussion, and I was wondering if you'd gotten Commander Rabb's side of the story yet."

Both men turned slightly, but neither looked particularly abashed at the idea of someone hearing their conversation. In fact, the admiral almost looked amused. "His 'side?' Commander Rabb isn't the sole source for all things aviation-related, Colonel."

That only confused me more - did this have something to do with Harm's qualms last week? - and furthered my outrage that they could treat a coworker's career so casually. I held it together, though, responding tightly, "In that case, sir, may I request assignment to the defense?"

Sturgis frowned at me, but I ignored him. If no one else was going to stand up for Harm this time, then damn it, he would at least have me. Chegwidden lifted an eyebrow. "Is there some special significance to this case that I'm missing?"

By now, I was gritting my teeth. How could they be so cold? "Sir, with all *due* respect, sending a comrade to an Article 32 hearing strikes me as an action which deserves far more delicacy than it's currently receiving. If you and Commander Turner are ready to simply charge ahead with this before fully comprehending all viewpoints - "

"Colonel, I did a thorough investigation," Sturgis objected, beginning to look a little offended. "If Commander Rabb is acquainted with the incident or with Lieutenant Commander Brooks, he sure hasn't mentioned it to me."

In a dark corner of my brain, warning bells were beginning to chime loudly, telling me that the pieces of information I was missing were numerous and vital. But at that point, I was trapped. "Who is Lieutenant Commander Brooks?"

Sturgis's jaw slackened, utterly exasperated. "The man you just requested to defend!"

Trying to wrap my mind around the idea that my best friend might not be going up on charges after all, I responded somewhat weakly, "You said this was about Harm ..."

Suddenly, a light bulb went on for the other two, and they began to hide their smiles. Patiently, Sturgis explained, "An AGM-88 High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile. Commander Brooks used one on a target of opportunity in Afghanistan, despite knowing full well that it wasn't programmed for the target type - he barely missed a nearby government building. *That* kind of HARM."

Oh, God ...did I ever screw this up. Desperately, I searched for a way to escape this conversation. "Admiral, Commander," I began awkwardly, "I, ah, apologize for the clearly incorrect assumptions I've made ..."

Chegwidden regarded me rather placidly, probably fascinated by the unique shade of scarlet overtaking my face. "You honestly thought that we were summarily passing judgment on Commander Rabb? Not that I haven't had my moments, but what in God's name for?"

"Sir, it was a mistake, and I offer no excuses. I know better than to believe that you would do something like that to one of your own without cause."

"I'd like to think that I wouldn't do something like that to anyone without cause," he pointed out, folding his arms.

Helpless, I looked to Sturgis, who smiled reassuringly. "Relax, Mac. It's all right." Then a wicked gleam came into his eye. I could see what was coming, but there was nothing I could do except stand there and take it. "No *harm* done."

"Isn't *that* the depressing truth."

That unexpected remark came from the unwitting subject of our discussion, as he wandered into the kitchen with a file folder in hand. Belatedly, Harm glanced up from the file, realized who Sturgis was talking to, and looked mildly chagrined. "My apologies, Admiral, Mac. That was obviously an inappropriate comment for the workplace."

I was so flustered by then that it took me a long moment to realize that Harmon Rabb had just made a fairly self-deprecating comment about his own sex life.

"Save it for the locker room next time," the admiral suggested. "However, in the category of engaging mouth before brain, I think the colonel's got you beat this time."

Harm gave a short laugh. "That'll be the day." Then he noticed my burning cheeks, and his eyes widened. "Wait, what did I miss?"

"A simple misunderstanding," Sturgis replied smoothly, earning my complete and utter gratitude.

"Precisely. Admiral, Commanders, if you'll excuse me ..."

And I beat it out of there before Harm could get any details whatsoever.

I stayed holed up in my office for most of the afternoon, hoping to avoid my fellow senior officers until tomorrow. At the earliest. Oddly enough, I was more worried about running into Harm than the others, even though he hadn't been part of the conversation.

Who am I kidding? He was the biggest part of the conversation. I jumped in to defend him from what I perceived to be a substantial career threat, and I ended up jumping off the deep end along the way. What in the world possessed me to rush in blindly like that? Am I really that afraid of anything disturbing our comfortable little status quo?

God, maybe I am. At the very least, I'm afraid of tipping my hand and letting him see how much I need him. Then again, it's entirely possible that upon hearing about my performance today, he'll do nothing more than chuckle at my foolishness and move on, totally unaware of the limb I stepped out on and why.

That possibility is the main reason I'm sitting here on my bedroom floor, studiously going through my closet. Spring cleaning isn't usually an after-work activity, but I need to be *doing* something right now, instead of just running my mind right off the rails.

knock knock knock

What now? It's 2050 - I don't get many unannounced visitors at this hour. Then it hits me. Thursday is Harm's night to play basketball with Sturgis, and they probably finished up a little while ago. I'll bet Sturgis caved in and told him about the scene at work, and I'll bet he wandered over here to tease me about it. Lovely.

Brushing off my shorts, I head for the door, take a cursory glance through the peephole, and open up with my defenses firmly in place. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

For once, he doesn't have a witty response at the ready, which chips away at those aforementioned defenses right away. His hair is still damp from a post-game shower, and he's wearing a T-shirt and jeans that look as though they've dedicated years to molding themselves to his body in all the right places. Best of all, his stance and expression make it clear that he doesn't know or care how he looks, even though the only word that springs to my mind is 'delicious.'

"Hi," he says simply, with a softer-than-usual smile. "Am I disturbing you?"

"No, never." Well, maybe that was a little strong. "I mean, come on in."

"Thanks." Harm steps into the apartment and closes the door behind him. I don't have to tell him to make himself at home; if he wanted to, he'd do it without needing an invitation. But tonight he doesn't move toward the couch or wander into the kitchen for a drink. Instead, he stands with his hands in his pockets, his gaze coming to rest on my face.

"You heard about my little disaster this afternoon, didn't you?" I wasn't asking him a question so much as I was confirming what I already knew.

"Sturgis wasn't too hard to crack. He thought I should know, and now that I do, I'm inclined to agree with him."

"What, so that my humiliation can be complete?"

"Humiliation? No. If I got on your case about acting before thinking, I'd be a pretty severe hypocrite." Harm idly twirls his keys around in his hand. "I actually came over to say thanks."

Well, *that* wasn't what I expected. "Thanks for what?"

The corner of his mouth turns upward. "You went toe-to-toe with the admiral for my sake."

"I accused both him and Sturgis of disloyalty and incompetence without even the most basic grasp of the situation." Warily, I decide to test his resolve. "I'm lucky they were both in a forgiving mood. I'm not sure I earned any thanks."

"I'm not concerned with the validity of the argument. I'm just trying to express my gratitude for having someone like you so solidly in my corner, no matter what."

I'll be damned. I think he gets it.

Feeling a little more secure, I lift an eyebrow. "Someone like me, huh?"

Harm flashes a quick grin. "You're going to mess with me now? After I refrained from making fun of your predicament?"

"Sure, but what have you done for me lately?"

The levity flickers and fades, and suddenly there's an intensity in his gaze that catches me off-guard. "When I say 'someone like you,'" he elaborates solemnly, "I mean someone with amazing powers of intelligence and vision, with great capacity for compassion, and with the courage to stand up to God himself for a person, group or issue that is worthy. And I'm sincerely thankful that at this moment in time, you saw fit to put me in that category. I don't take it for granted, and I don't ever want you to think I do."

Um ...wow.

He offers a small shrug and turns his head toward the window. "*That's* what I've done for you lately."

After being blindsided like that, it's all I can do not to fall over from shock. It's not that I thought he wasn't capable of such eloquence: my case fell victim to that very skill just this morning. It's just that I've never heard it directed at me before.

I'd better find my voice before the stars fall out of alignment and he clams up again. "Thank you," I reply, with only a slight tremble. "That's without question the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me."

"That was my intent."

My next response bypasses my conscious brain completely. "Why did you say it?"

He turns back to me, surprised but not offended. "I meant it, Mac."

"I know - that's not my question. I'm just trying to figure out the timing, I think."

"You and me both," he tosses back, but it's only a stall tactic, a minor stopgap until he can properly format his answer. Sensing this, I wait, and after a moment, he continues. "What happened today was nothing. The admiral will have forgotten about it by Monday, and it wasn't nearly embarrassing enough for Sturgis to keep in his mental database. What matters is why it happened."

"Because I've been hanging around you too long, is my guess."

"And now you're back to messing with me."

"Sorry. But I don't know if there's a reason why it happened. It just did. People screw up sometimes." He merely watches me, not speaking, a trace of self-assurance creeping into his expression. Oh, great. It's a puzzle now. "You think there's a reason, don't you? And furthermore, you think you know what it is."

"I do. What I'm interested in is whether you know it, too."

"I should, if it's my reason."

"True, but you just said that you didn't know if there was a reason at all."

Suddenly I'm not sure of my footing. It's starting to feel like he understands a lot more than I gave him credit for - but I don't dare come right out and say so. *Yes, Harm, there was a reason. I did it because I subconsciously realized that in spite of everything we've put each other through, you're the best thing that could ever happen to me. I did it because I was primed and ready to do battle with anything or anyone that threatened to take you out of my life. And if that's irrational behavior, well, then, bring out the white coats. I'm not going to hide.*

Except I am hiding, aren't I? I want to say all that because it's the honest-to-God truth, but the words sure don't seem to be coming out.

Finally, I settle for simplicity. "I thought you were in trouble," I tell him, looking him straight in the eye. "And there's no one I'd go further to protect."

"I know. And you know the reverse is true."

At that, I lower my gaze. "You go to the limit for a lot of people, and a lot of principles. It's something I've always admired about you."

Then, something incredible happens. He steps forward and touches my arm, causing me to look up at him and instantly sink into his fathomless eyes. "I'd go a hell of a lot further for you."

I'm not sure I'm breathing anymore, but I manage to force out the one word on my mind. "Why?"

"Because ..."

When his voice trails off, my defenses kick in without warning. "Last I checked, 'because' wasn't a valid reason for - "

The thought ends abruptly as his lips come down over mine. Powerful arms encircle me with a sensation that speaks of something both thrilling and familiar, and I can do nothing but surrender.

"That's why," he says, between shallow breaths, when we part at last. "Because lately we've been lingering in this unnatural place between perfect friendship and complete uncertainty, and I finally decided that I couldn't keep going without showing you the truth about how I feel. This ... this, here, is the truth. I've been putting it aside and locking it away for a long time, and I thought that if you'd been doing the same thing, then maybe this afternoon was some weird Freudian effect of that. I don't know, maybe it's a fantastically stupid idea, but ..."

I don't believe it. For once in our bizarre-beyond-words relationship, we are absolutely on the same wavelength.

"No, I'd say you pretty much nailed it."

He glances up, startled. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Well, um ... really?"

Doesn't know how to accept victory, does he? To emphasize my point, I yank him forward and deliver a kiss designed to rival the previous one, not to mention the scattered few before that. "Are you finished second-guessing me?"

He looks dazed, to say the least. "This wasn't supposed to be so easy."

"*Easy?* Have you not factored in the *years* of total confusion that preceded this encounter?"

"No, I was focusing on tonight. All the way over here from the gym, I was running through options in my head - what to say, how far to go ... But as usual, it all went out the window when I came face to face with you."

His fingers brush through my hair, and I have to concentrate to get my next thought out coherently. "As usual?"

His smile turns almost bashful, and the sheer adorableness of it instantly convinces me that five inches is the perfect distance from which to view this man. In a low voice, he says, "Do you have any concept of how many times I've thought about showing up here, throwing rational discourse to the wind, and just kissing you until you saw things my way?"

Suddenly I'm feeling just a little too capricious to be a Marine. I wrap my arms around his neck and settle my head on his shoulder, and good lord, does this feel wonderful. "Maybe I should have made you 'argue' your case a little while longer, then."

"Well, you never know. It could always come up for appeal."

"I can't believe you just said something that cheesy."

"You started it."

Okay, he's got me there. "Well, if this afternoon's experience taught us anything, it should be the fact that you do in fact have the power to make me act like an idiot."

He shakes his head, pulling me tighter. "So we've both done some leaping before looking. I'm not exactly an expert, but I'd categorize that as a prerequisite for falling in love, wouldn't you?"

Did he actually say - ?

I pull back and stare at him, but there's no reservation anywhere in his expression. Amazing. "You mean, like letting go?"

"If that's what you want to call it, yeah. I'm still not entirely sure what it was I was holding onto, but I promise you, my hands are now otherwise occupied."

"And I'd like to keep them that way." I press my lips to the pulse point in his neck. "I, ah, I don't want to wreck this moment by charging forward, but what's next?"

Harm shrugs ever so slightly, careful not to jostle me. "Anything and everything," he replies, and sweeter words have never fallen from those lips.

Maybe going to work tomorrow won't be so bad after all.

*** THE END ***