



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: "Ice Queen"/"Meltdown"

Summary: Follow-up to the eighth-season episode "Meltdown." Harm faces two of the people affected most by his trial.

Disclaimer: Well, TPTB, since you have the NCIS crew to play with now, you won't mind me borrowing the JAG crew, right? Since you didn't really give them much of a workout this week ... All right, all right. Characters and setting belong to DPB. Sigh.

Author's Notes: Just trying to fill in a couple of blanks here, and make a flimsy attempt at rationalizing Harm's behavior. I know there were real-world reasons for it, but Mac didn't have a single line in this episode! Good lord, people. Also, has anyone noticed yet that I really, really like Jen Coates, for no apparent reason? I thought that the most interesting part of the episode was when she actually looked to Harm for guidance on how to answer the prosecutor's question. Hence, this fic. Does this episode pair really need more explanation than what I'm giving it? Yeah, I think so. But I'd almost rather pretend that these two eps didn't exist in the timeline at all, so this is as far as I feel like going with it.

0735 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

Sarah Mackenzie was accustomed to being one of the first people in the office in the mornings. Sometimes the admiral or Sturgis beat her in, and many times she'd come in to find a petty officer or two trying to get ahead on administrative work, but more often than not, she was the one turning on the lights and starting the coffeemaker.

Today, she reached for the bullpen lights about a half-second before realizing that they were already on. The coffeemaker in the breakroom was brewing contentedly as well, but there was no one immediately in evidence. Mac scanned the windows circling the bullpen and discovered her partner's office lit. Conflicting desires clashed in her mind, and she sighed. She hadn't been permitted to speak to him during his trial, and now that it was over, she wasn't entirely sure how to strike up a conversation.

Had to start somewhere, though. Finding his door slightly ajar, she pushed it partway open.

"I can't remember the last time I saw you here so early."

Harm turned, midway through the motion of re-hanging a picture frame on the wall. Though his face smiled, his eyes didn't follow suit. "Hey. I figured I should get started on unpacking my office."

"Yeah, when those NCIS guys gather evidence, they don't mess around." Mac stepped in and looked around at the bare walls.

"You're telling me. They released all my files last night - it took me two hours just to organize them." He glanced down at the desk, avoiding her gaze. "Also, I kinda wanted to sneak back into things, rather than make an entrance this morning. Standing trial for murder wasn't exactly my finest moment."

"Nobody in this office thought for even a minute that you'd actually done it. NCIS was way ahead of themselves to even bring charges before getting all the analyses and considering other suspects."

"I didn't handle it spectacularly well, though. At any point throughout, actually." Leaning on the back of his chair, he forced himself to meet her gaze. "I misled you and withheld information during the investigation on the Seahawk."

"Yes, you did," she replied, careful to make sure that her voice betrayed nothing.

A glimmer of sheepish apology flickered in his eyes. "Do you want me to beg forgiveness for it? Because I'm okay with that."

That surprised her a little, but she chose to simply offer a smile. "I'm trying not to take it personally. You got yourself into far more trouble with Agent Gibbs and company, and they clearly don't screw around. Compared to all that, leaving me out of the loop hardly registers on the scale." The smile faded quickly, and she shook her head. "Harm, what in God's name were you *thinking*?"

"I don't know. Honestly, Mac, I don't. All I could see was Sergei, and it all just snowballed until suddenly everything seemed to be pointing back at me, so I went into defensive mode, and ..." He raked a hand through his hair. "I made a lot of lousy judgment calls, and in the end, Sergei didn't even need my protection. How's that for an object lesson in criminal procedure?"

"Well, obviously it could have been worse. The truth did finally come out." Mac reached into the nearest box on his desk and started replacing files in his file cabinet. "Lindsey. Go figure."

"I know. I can't believe the bastard had the guts. When I first joined JAG, he was so ..." He waved a hand, searching for the right word. "Timid. Even when he was our CO, he was timid."

She shrugged. "Since then, your star's been rising, and his career's gone nowhere. And we won't even get into how he feels about me. I guess he just started slipping, and he finally hit rock bottom."

Harm paused, a framed law school diploma in his hand. "And Singer's dead," he stated quietly. "I still haven't gotten used to that idea, either."

"And the idea that she was involved with Lindsey, and the idea that she was flying to Ireland - "

"Ireland?"

Mac's lips twisted wryly. "The investigators decided to start sharing some information with us after all. Her plane ticket was for Shannon, Ireland."

He shook his head, at a loss. "We really didn't know a thing about her, did we?"

"Not a damn thing. I guess some questions really don't have answers." Finishing the file cabinet, she turned toward the door. "Anyway, I'll leave you to catch up on everything. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I appreciate it. Listen, if you see Petty Officer Coates come in, could you send her in here? I'm going to lay low for a while."

"Yeah, sure." Her hand was on the doorknob before his voice halted her.

"Mac?"

She turned back, questioning.

"I really am sorry. I won't make that mistake again."

"Protecting your brother?"

"Hiding something from you."

The warmth in her eyes gave him her reply. "I know, flyboy. I'll see you later."

Having completed the reorganization of his office in about half an hour, Harm had turned his attention to his backlog of email messages. Upon hearing a knock at his door, he looked up. "Enter."

Jennifer Coates stepped inside, somewhat hesitantly. "Welcome back, sir. Colonel Mackenzie told me to come see you?"

"Thank you, Petty Officer. Close the door, please."

Jen obeyed, then stood stiffly in front of his desk, waiting.

Harm watched her for a moment. "You look - concerned."

The young woman seemed to deflate a little under his gaze. "I'm assuming that you wanted to talk to me about my testimony at the trial, sir, and I haven't quite figured out how to apologize yet."

"What did you do that warrants an apology? Tell the truth, as you were sworn to do?"

"I wasn't stating a fact, sir. It was just my opinion. And it wasn't even really my opinion. I mean, it's not like I actually believed that you'd hurt her - "

"Coates," he broke in, quietly but firmly. "The only thing you could possibly have to apologize for is thinking you needed my permission to answer the question honestly. I appreciate that you wanted to help me, but don't try to manipulate the court, no matter how tempting it is or how small the issue. Understood?"

She raised her chin, her features set. "Aye, sir."

Harm paused a few seconds, trying to gauge her thoughts. "On the conditions that your answer will have no effect on your work here, and that you don't have to answer at all if you don't feel comfortable, do you mind if I ask you something difficult and a little personal?"

Dread darkened her features, but she held her ground. "Go ahead, sir."

"Now that you're out of court and have had time to think about it without pressure, do you stand by the response you gave in the witness chair?"

For a brief instant, the attitude that he'd encountered upon first meeting her shone through. "You think there's *less* pressure on me right now to stand here and tell you that?"

He gave a small smile, conceding the point. "Okay. If it makes you feel any better, my world's pretty screwed up right now, so I'm not exactly focused on intimidating you. I just ... I want to know if you honestly saw something that frightening and familiar in what I did that night."

A vulnerable light glimmered behind her dark eyes, and he realized just what he was asking of her. The question that she'd faced on the stand had forced her to revisit elements of a life that she'd worked hard to escape. Now he was doing the same thing, simply to satisfy his conscience.

"You know what, Coates, never mind. I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"I'm not afraid to answer, Commander. It's just a complicated question." Jen met his gaze without flinching. "The major asked me if I identified the way you grabbed Lieutenant Singer and the way you talked to her as abusive behavior. Based on my extensive personal experience, I guess. Sir, I don't believe that you ever intended to hurt her. I think that she did everything she could to press your buttons, and it worked. I think you were desperate to make her see your side, and that it was enough to make you do something that was beyond yourself. But the question was about what I saw in that moment, and ... I'm sorry, sir, but you just sounded so angry - I couldn't help but hear my dad's voice." Her own voice began to waver, but she plunged ahead. "Believe me, I didn't want to make that comparison. It's just that I can't ever really get away from him, you know?"

"It's okay. I'm sorry that you had to go back through that. I'm especially sorry that I was the cause of it." Harm rose and stepped around the desk. "I've never had any experience

with an abusive relationship, so I don't really know what one looks like. All I know is how much people I care about have been hurt by them, and I swear I've been lying awake nights this week in utter terror that I might actually be capable of falling into that myself."

"Sir, you are *not* the same kind of person as my father. I promise you that. He thought that what he was doing was right, even when he was in the middle of hitting her. He didn't get it - he didn't respect other people at all - and I know you do, or you wouldn't have said what you just said. What happened with the lieutenant was just one moment, and the trial made it into more than it should have been. That's why I wish I hadn't had to answer that question."

"Well, I'm not in the brig, so I guess I can handle it." He tried to smile. "Can I ask you something else?"

Jen looked to be nearing her emotional limit, but she shrugged helplessly. "Shoot, sir."

"After everything you saw, and everything it must have made you feel, you didn't try even once to avoid working with me or anything. How did I manage to keep your faith?"

Her lip trembled. "You gave me yours, sir," she replied softly, struggling valiantly to keep the tears at bay. "It wasn't all that long ago that my life was complete crap, and you were the first person in I don't know how long to give a damn about me ..."

He wasn't about to let her stand there and sniffle, propriety be damned. With a combination of gratitude, admiration, and a trace of fraternal instinct, Harm moved forward and closed his arms around her. She allowed herself a few silent tears in his embrace. "You earned it, Jen," he told her quietly. "All of it and more."

Mac was standing by the copy machine when Jen emerged from Harm's office a few minutes later. Noticing the faint redness of the younger woman's eyes, she began to worry all over again. "Petty Officer?"

Jen stopped. "Ma'am?"

Mac lowered her voice. "The commander didn't say something to upset you, did he?"

"Oh, no - completely the opposite. He gave me the highest compliment I think he'd give anyone."

"How's that?"

"He compared me to you, ma'am."

**** THE END ****