



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette, angst

Spoilers: through "Hail and Farewell"

Author's Notes: This will hardly be my only fic to deal with the events of the season finale - after all, they crammed in enough life-altering events to last us authors for a good long while. But this is the first thing that popped into my head, just because I felt like the admiral could've used a more in-depth sendoff. I'm assuming the officers' club at Annapolis is near the water; I don't have any solid basis for that, so just humor me.

Directly following the episode

Harm walked along the sidewalk that bordered the O-club, lost in a labyrinth of thoughts. After Mac had given him the news, he'd comforted her as best he knew how, too stunned by the turn of events to do much more than hold her as the tears came. After a while, she'd drawn herself upright and dried her eyes, saying that they really ought to go back into the party, at least long enough to offer their best wishes to the admiral. He'd decided to give her a few minutes to reestablish the careful façade she'd created for tonight, and had wandered off alone.

In truth, he needed the time almost as much as she did. The utter unfairness of what she'd just told him had already begun to gnaw away at him. After all she'd endured over the past few days, the past few months, how could a supposedly benevolent God curse her with yet another test?

He'd vowed to always be there for her, even before this, and he'd reasserted that commitment as soon as she'd forced the whole story out. *How* exactly to be there for her, though, would be a constant question. What would she ask of him? What would she try *not* to ask of him? Would she always accept his support ... would she maybe, someday, be able to accept his love, or would such a cruel blow as this compel her to shut her heart away for all time?

So many things had begun to fade from his life over the past few days. Mattie had started to slip away -- for all the right reasons, of course, but that comfort only went so far. The man he'd served for the better part of a decade was riding off into the sunset. A good friend's smile would no longer brighten the office every day. And Mac ... well, regardless of the final outcome of all this, neither of them would ever be quite the same people they'd been at the start, either separately or together.

"Commander."

Jarred out of his musings, he turned toward the voice and instinctively straightened. "Admiral. I'm sorry, I didn't realize anyone else was out here."

"I was just leaving, in fact." A.J. Chegwiddden approached his sometime apprentice with his hands in his pockets, less than perfectly at ease.

"So early, sir?"

He shrugged. "I can't imagine it'll come as a shock to learn that I'm not really one for teary farewells."

Harm offered a small smile, knowing it would probably look weak. "I suppose I could have assumed as much, sir."

A.J. glanced back at the building as the sounds of the party caught the spring breeze. "Everyone seems to be having a good time," he remarked.

"Certainly, Admiral."

An uncertain silence hung in the air between them for a moment, before A.J. spoke up again. "Thing is, it seems like I saw you step out here with Colonel Mackenzie a few minutes ago, and I must say that neither of you looked particularly cheerful."

The younger officer did his best to mask a wince. The last thing he wanted to do was dampen the man's retirement celebration. "Sir, if you're concerned that the colonel and I are in the middle of one of our prototypical duels --"

"I'm not. Body language may not be my strong suit, but even I can tell whether a problem is surface level or something more serious." A.J.'s studious gaze suggested that he did in fact have a fairly good idea that something was very wrong, and a part of Harm wanted nothing more than to unload his fears and frustrations on someone. Not now, though, and not like this.

"With all due respect, sir, it's Mac's story to tell if and when she chooses to do so. I wouldn't feel right discussing it."

"Fair enough." A.J. waited a beat or two, as if weighing whether or not to speak his mind. On this night of all nights, however, he wasn't inclined to let much of anything pass. If he said nothing, another chance might never present itself. "Harm, right now you have the look of a man who's watching the water rise all around him and isn't sure whether or not it's going to stop before it gets too deep."

Harm was a little surprised that his former CO had called him out, but in a sense, it gave him some measure of relief to know that all their years of service together had counted for something. "Admiral, all I can say is that I believe I've proven, both literally and figuratively, how well I can keep my head above water. In this case, I'll just have to do it again." He dropped his gaze, his voice falling to a low murmur. "I don't have any other choice."

A.J. let the statement pass unquestioned, turning to look out over the water. As the silence stretched thin, he turned slightly back. "You're the only officer remaining who predated me at JAG," he commented, as if just coming to the realization.

"Have been for some time, sir. Eight years is an awfully long tenure in today's military."

"If I'd had any hair when I started here, you'd have made short work of it, I expect."

Harm had to smile. "Well, a good officer keeps his commander alert, sir."

"You've been a singularly good officer, then," A.J. deadpanned, and the two men shared a short laugh, something they'd rarely done before. Soon, though, a pensive expression came into his eyes. "Throughout my career, no one has served under my command longer than you have."

"Even when factoring in my various breaks in service?" Even as he said it, Harm was rethinking the wisdom of that question. But the admiral gave a slow nod, watching a small boat pass by.

"We never did completely find our footing again after your last 'break,' did we?" There was no censure in his voice; if Harm hadn't known better, he might have identified the vague note as regret.

"If we didn't, sir, it wasn't for a lack of trying, or any fault on your part."

"Or yours. Last summer wasn't one of the high points of my professional judgment." A.J. met his gaze squarely. "I think it's possible that we've always had slightly different expectations of each other ... I pushed you. I always have."

"I pushed back, sir. Harder than I had any right to, in some cases."

"And believe it or not, I'm glad you did."

That wasn't quite the sentiment Harm had been expecting, and it forced him to reevaluate his viewpoint. This past year, more than any other, he'd been unsure of his footing around the office, given everything that had transpired after he'd handed in his resignation. Maybe the admiral understood far more than he'd given him credit for.

"Admiral, I've been trying to think of a way to state the impact you've made on everything and everyone around here ... Sir, when you arrived, JAG was just a duty station. It's much more than that now, to all of us. I know I'm far from the only person to be grateful for that."

A.J. appeared only slightly uncomfortable with the compliment, giving a single nod of acknowledgement. After a moment, he spoke again. "You've probably heard from the others that I've been giving away some of the things in my office. I didn't forget or ignore you."

"Neither of those possibilities occurred to me, sir," he fibbed smoothly.

A.J. snorted. "Sure they did. I just wasn't sure how ... I almost chickened out and mailed this to you, if you can believe that, but I'm just as glad to get the opportunity now." From the pocket of his jacket, he withdrew a small, flat box and held it out.

Harm opened the lid to discover a silver coin engraved with the four points of the compass. A.J. explained, "My SEAL team gave it to me when I transferred over to the surface fleet. Said I'd never needed an actual compass, just a reminder every so often. I think the same could be said of you."

Taken aback, Harm struggled to come up with an appropriate response. A.J. spoke quietly. "You *are* an excellent officer, son. One of the finest I've ever known. I never stopped believing that."

"Sir, I ..."

He extended a hand, and the two officers exchanged a firm handshake. "Stay the course, Mr. Rabb. Give Mac my best, and don't either of you ever hesitate to look me up. I'm not just saying that to be polite."

As he turned to leave, Harm at last found his voice. "Admiral." When the admiral turned back, he drew himself to attention and saluted his mentor one last time. "Sir, the watch stands relieved."

With the faintest hint of approval, A.J. returned the salute. "Carry on."

He headed toward the parking lot with purpose in his stride. Harm watched him disappear from sight, feeling the physical and symbolic weight of the coin in his hand. Maybe the old man was right. Maybe he didn't need anything else to point the way, even now.

Slipping the box into his own pocket, he set himself on the course that would take him back to Sarah Mackenzie.

*** THE END ***