



Shades of Gray

Rating: PG-13

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: "Adrift," "Mixed Messages"

Author's Notes: If you haven't seen the episode, the basic concept is this: Webb and company claimed a Navy cryptanalyst who was killed was actually a mole for the Chinese. He wasn't, of course, and they used that misinformation to trap the real mole, but the lies were devastating to the man's family. The Intel folks hadn't counted on Harm, though. I've already forgotten the names of Cmdr. Stoechler's family (let's face it, the episode wasn't that great), so I apologize for any holes.

1049 EDT

JAG Headquarters

Falls Church, Virginia

Harm strode through the bullpen with a barely-concealed scowl. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been nearly this frustrated. A spy would not be brought to justice. A dedicated officer would not get the honors he deserved. A young family would not be whole again.

Sometimes he honestly hated this job.

"Harriet, is Mac in this morning?"

He didn't have the first clue what to say to her, but he had to talk to someone. Unfortunately, the lieutenant was shaking her head. "Sorry, sir - the board says she's on leave today."

Harm frowned in the direction of the colonel's empty office. "Figures. Listen, I'm at Andrews for the rest of the day, so if she happens to call in, tell her I need to go over some files with her."

"Aye, sir."

"Misplace your partner again?"

Harriet watched the senior attorney's features instantly darken at the sound of the other man's voice. She quietly picked up her paperwork and headed for her husband's office. From what little Bud had told her about the recent case, she could tell that this was a good time to get out of the line of fire.

Harm's tone was cold as he continued toward his office. "Stay out of my way, Webb. Our business together is finished."

Clayton Webb hadn't been expecting a warm welcome, so he wasn't put off. "Not entirely. But I can appreciate why you might not be in my fan club at the moment."

"That's a hell of an understatement. Gunny! Where'd you stow my flight gear?"

"Under the empty desk in the corner, sir," came the immediate response.

"And my new helmet?"

"Master sergeant says it'll be waiting for you on the flight line."

"You're the best, Gunny." Harm retrieved his olive-drab duffel from under the correct desk and went into his office without another word toward his visitor.

Undaunted, Webb followed. "You're going flying?" he inquired.

"I am. What's it to you?"

"Nothing. It just doesn't seem like that long since you were treading water in the Atlantic."

"It's what I do, Webb. When I'm not getting screwed over by intelligence agents, that is."

The CIA deputy rolled his eyes. "Right. Why is it that I once again get to be the designated asshole on this?"

"You know damn well why," Harm returned, eyes flashing.

"Hey," Webb said defensively. "I'm not losing any sleep over my role here. It's a shame your friend died, but everything that happened afterward was done for a greater good. It's ugly, but that's what we do. And he knew that when he signed up."

"Oh, bullshit," Harm snapped, letting his anger loose for the first time. "He didn't sign up to let you trample his memory for the 'greater good'. He didn't sign up to put his family through the agony of wondering whether their husband and father might have been a traitor. You got what you wanted, sure, but the ends don't justify the means. They don't even come close."

"And what makes you the final judge of that?" Webb demanded. "God, Harm, do you really think you're seeing the larger picture here? We got it done. We protected U.S. interests, and the *Jimmy Carter* is safe for another day. I came here to apologize for what Commander Stoechler's family has had to put up with for the past week. But I'm *not* going to apologize for doing my job. I thought you understood how this works."

"Well, obviously I don't," the commander fired back, his voice laced with contempt. "It's beginning to look like I don't understand a damn thing about you, Webb."

It was a purposefully nasty remark, and it stung more than either of them had anticipated. These two men had faced countless tests together. At times, they'd considered each other friends, a meaningful term in a profession where friends were few and far between. But at other times, they couldn't have been further apart.

Webb walked over to the window without speaking. Finally, he said, "You have a lousy memory, you know that? I went to the mat for you when Sergei Zhukov went missing,

remember?”

“And look how well that’s turned out so far,” Harm replied without missing a beat.

Exasperated, Webb spread his hands wide. “Oh, for Christ’s sake. Now *that’s* my fault, too?”

“Well, I typically blame State and the intelligence community at large, but since you’re so eager to represent ...”

“What do you want from me? I’m not ashamed of what I do! It may not be fit for the front page of the Post, and I may not get medals for it, but I’m serving my country, just like you.”

“You are *nothing* like me,” Harm spat out. “I deal in truths. And if Rick Stoechler’s sons ever find out the truth about what happened to their father, it will be no thanks to you.”

A realization dawned on him, and before he could think better of it, he was already talking. “Oh, now I see. It’s personal, isn’t it? Just like always. Reality check, Commander - some people accept the world as it is. Not every kid who loses his father goes off on a thirty-year quest for redemption.”

Instantly a shadow fell across the other man’s face, and Webb knew he’d crossed the line. In that moment, he was more afraid of Harmon Rabb than he’d ever been, up to and including the night he’d stared down his pistol three years before.

Harm leaned across his desk and spoke in a very low, very dangerous tone. “Get the hell out of my office before I throw you out.”

After a few seconds, Webb found his voice. “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry in the least. Not for the right things. Do what you have to do, Webb. I’ve got a ride waiting for me.”

He swept past and stalked through the bullpen, flight gear in hand. The intelligence officer decided to risk one last shot, and raised his voice. “After all the things you’ve seen and done, how can you still see everything in such black and white terms?”

The staff members in the room fell silent as Harm slowly turned back. “Because sometimes I have to. Sometimes there are such things as right and wrong, and throwing in grays just makes us more like the people we’re claiming to fight. We’re the good guys, Webb. We tell ourselves that because we have moral responsibilities that separate us from them. There are rules - we follow them, they don’t.”

“It’s not nearly that simple - ”

“Right now it is. One of the rules is that we don’t hurt people who aren’t involved. Another one is that we don’t abandon our own. When you break the rules, you’re no better than they are. Pleasant dreams.”

And he was gone.

1322 EDT
National Cemetery
Arlington, Virginia

From his place behind the Stoechler family, Harm watched his friend's wife accept the folded flag with only the slightest tremble. There had been no commendations read, but the two of them knew that Richard Stoechler had died bravely, in honorable service. For now, that would have to be enough. The rest lay locked away, awaiting an elusive 'someday'. Someday, when all the truths were safe.

As the memorial ended, he remained with the family, offering silent support as they greeted the other mourners. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Clayton Webb's approach, and he moved in to head him off.

"She doesn't have anything to say to you, Webb."

Most people would have backed away from a possible confrontation with a six-foot-four-inch naval officer in full dress uniform. Webb was not most people. "Maybe not. But I have something to say to her. Mrs. Stoechler?"

The small blonde woman turned slightly, and froze as recognition set in. "I don't know what you could possibly want right now, Director," she said stiffly, her voice tightly controlled.

"Only to apologize, ma'am," he replied solemnly. Harm lifted an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "Your husband was a good officer, and I take full responsibility for the actions that were taken in his name. I wish I could explain to you why we felt they were necessary, but unfortunately that isn't possible right now. I only hope that you'll believe me when I say that I do regret them."

Mrs. Stoechler just stared at him for a long minute, searching his gray eyes for sincerity. "Why should I?" she asked honestly. "If you really felt this farce was necessary, why should you feel any differently now?"

Webb met her piercing gaze and answered. "Because someone reminded me that we have a responsibility to protect our own. That should have included you and your family."

Harm gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, and after offering their condolences again, the two men moved away from the group. They stood under a stately oak for a while, both quietly watching the scene below.

Finally, Harm spoke. "I'm beginning to understand why very few people stay in after their twenty years are up."

Webb shook his head. "Give me a break. The day you leave the Navy will be the day we have to put *your* ass in this place."

"Probably. Still ..." His features were calm, but something ached behind his azure eyes. "I'm tired of being a pallbearer, Clay."

"Me, too."

After another minute, he turned his head. "So. Were you exercising your double-talk skills back there, or did you mean what you said?"

"Give me a little credit. I meant it. I do regret what happened. It doesn't mean I've stopped believing in the fundamental necessity of what I do. None of your jury-speech sound bites are going to shake that."

"Good," he mused quietly, earning a surprised glance from his companion. "I didn't have any right to jump on you the way I did. It's not like I resent your entire existence. It's just - the things you have to do sometimes ... I don't think I could ever bring myself to do that."

"I know you couldn't. That's the difference between you and me." Webb scanned the unending rows of simple white markers with unflinching eyes. "One night back in May, I was working late on an op-plan when one of my analysts came in and said that my 'pilot-lawyer friend' had crashed his Tomcat off the coast. Our information was pretty sketchy, if you can believe that. They told me you were dead."

Startled, Harm turned to him, but couldn't find any words. Webb gave a little shrug and continued. "I sat at my desk for a good hour, just feeling profoundly depressed. Eventually, the director wandered by and asked what was wrong, and all I could think of to say was, 'We just lost an honest-to-God hero.' "

There was an awkward silence until Harm began, hesitantly. "Clay, I'm not - "

"Sure you are. And what's more, you know it as well as I do. You're an all-star in the air and in the courtroom, and you make the recruiting posters look good. Most importantly, you won't compromise your ideals, no matter what the cost. We need people like you, and we need the public to see that people like you are out there, defending them and representing them. People they can admire and take pride in. They don't need to see the people like me, because we don't always do the most admirable things. But I know they need us, too. We're the good guys because of you, but not in spite of me. We both have a place, and a duty ... and a legacy to uphold. I don't think either of us has outlived our usefulness just yet."

Their eyes met and locked for the briefest of moments: long enough for a silent understanding to pass between them. Then, each went back to gazing across the flawless green fields.

"Look, I have to get going. More smoke-and-mirror tricks to plan, and all that. I'll see you around." He started toward the path, but Harm called after him.

"Clay."

He turned halfway back. "Yeah?"

"Actions make heroes, not images."

"You earned it on your actions."

“So did you. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Even me.”

The barest hint of a smile flickered across his face, and he gave a short nod. “Take care of yourself, Harm.”

“You too, Clay.”

***** THE END *****