



Children Will Listen

Rating: PG

Classification: Vignette, angst

Spoilers: pilot, "Déjà Vu," any recent Sergei eps

Author's Notes: I know, I know, I should branch out and talk about Mac for a change, but I just can't help it. Harm is so deliciously mixed-up. Each of these little stories requires a little background info, although I expect that most of you know all this already: 1) Harm's father was shot down on Christmas Eve 1969, 2) Harm went to Laos to look for him when he was sixteen, 3) Harm suffered a ramp strike on the USS Seahawk due to the night vision problem that eventually landed him at JAG, and 4) Sergei needs Harm Sr.'s letters to do a DNA match and prove his paternity so that he can gain U.S. citizenship. Also, Frank Burnett is Harm's stepfather, seen only in the episode "To Russia With Love."

The title and the lyrics that begin each section of the story are references to the song "Children Will Listen," from Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Just so you know.

This story is dedicated, strangely enough, to someone who doesn't even know I'm a part-time writer, but nonetheless will always be one of my heroes. Love you, Mom.

Part One: Gold Star Child

*How do you say to your child in the night
Nothing's all black - but then, nothing's all white ...*

June 15, 1975

"Mom! I'm home!"

Upon hearing her son's shout and the bang of the front door, Patricia Rabb immediately put aside the laundry she'd been folding and stood up. No sooner had she braced herself for the assault than an eleven-year-old tornado came tearing into the room and barreled into her, throwing his arms around her waist. "Well, hello to you, too," she offered once she'd regained her breath. "I take it tryouts went well?"

"Coach Ryan says he's going to make me a center 'cause I'm tall. I don't really know what a center does, but as long as I get to play, it's okay with me." Harm disengaged himself from his mother and dove headfirst onto the overstuffed sofa.

"Harmon, what did I tell you about the furniture?"

He immediately stopped bouncing. "Sorry."

Trish shook her head, unable to stay angry. It was days like this, when his energy seemed limitless, that she found herself putting aside her worries and enjoying life again. Everything had come to such an abrupt halt on that Christmas morning, over five years ago now, and ever since, her greatest fears had been for little Harm. She'd worried at first that he might forget his father completely, but that fear hadn't lasted. He'd continued to wear his favorite USS Ticonderoga cap, and play with his model planes, and he continued to tell everyone who'd listen that he was going to be a Navy pilot like his dad.

Still, she could see the differences between him and the other boys in the neighborhood. He carried himself differently: more serious, with a quiet determination in everything he did. Where other kids would create imaginary worlds with youthful abandon, losing themselves in the simple act of having fun, Harm's backyard fantasies were always deliberate and purposeful. He would always be flying a plane or sailing on a ship, and he would be intently focused on each detail. Eventually her fears reversed themselves, and she wondered if maybe his father's influence was too great rather than too little. She'd been all too happy to let him try out for the summer basketball team, if only to pry him out of his latest favorite book, a biography of World War II aviator Jimmy Doolittle.

"So when are practices going to start?" she asked, moving toward the kitchen to fix him a snack. There was no immediate answer, and she turned back to see what was going on. "Harm, did you hear me?"

He was looking out the window with a distant expression that made her heart sink. Immediately she could see that his carefree mood had vanished, replaced by an all-too-familiar gravity. "Mom, what happened to Dad's service flag?" he asked quietly.

Trish sighed. She should have known that he'd notice within minutes. The small white flag with the red border had hung in their window ever since Harm Senior had first shipped out to the South China Sea, before little Harm was even old enough to know what it meant. The blue star that graced its center, representing a family member off at war, had remained even after the awful news arrived that Christmas Day - she had chosen not to exchange it for a gold one, which would have represented a family member killed in the line of duty. The blue-starred flag had hung there for five and a half years, while hope slowly dimmed with each passing day. After the war ended, the few remaining flags began to disappear from sight all over San Diego, and she'd finally decided it was time. Explaining that decision to her son, however, was something she'd dreaded.

"I put it away, honey," she replied simply, trying to sound reassuring. "It's in the box upstairs with all his medals and everything."

"Why?" he asked cautiously, as if afraid of the answer. "He's not home yet. You're supposed to leave the flag up until he comes home."

Oh, Lord, don't make me do this, she pleaded fervently, to no avail. Until now she'd stubbornly avoided voicing any doubts in his presence. She'd always tried to share his childlike faith, but as time went on, she'd found herself doing little more than pretending. There would be no happy ending here, no Norman Rockwell-like homecoming; no matter how hard they wished for it. She couldn't recall the moment she'd first realized that, but she knew it was true. The odds were just too great.

She was alone, the only parent to a young son, and now she would have to be the one to shatter his illusions forever. Was there anything in life so cruel as that?

Taking a shuddering breath, she spoke softly. "Sweetheart, it's been so long. The war has been over for months now, and everyone who was left has already come home."

Harm stared at her as though she were a stranger. "So what are you saying?" he asked bluntly. "You think he's dead?"

Hearing the words jolted her, and her voice was unsteady as she answered. "I hope not. But - "

"Well, he's not! You don't know what's going on over there. He could be lost, or something. They could find him, and he could come home tomorrow. You don't know!"

"That might be true," she admitted, his fierce determination tearing at her heart. "And I'll always hope for that. But I'm afraid it might not be."

He pulled away from her guiding hands and stalked out of the room. "I'm calling Grandma," he insisted, heading up the stairs. "I bet she didn't take her flag down. She wouldn't give up like that."

As he fled, she sank into a chair and let the tears flow. He was probably right. Sarah Rabb was probably the strongest woman she'd ever known, and she wouldn't be surprised if there was a service flag in the window at the farmhouse twenty years from now. Why couldn't her faith be that strong?

When she finally felt calm enough to go after her son, rehearsing a dozen different explanations in her mind, she stood up - and was surprised to see him standing on the stairs, looking utterly lost.

"Grandma says she took her flag down two weeks ago," he mumbled tonelessly.

"Oh, baby," Trish breathed, as he fell into her arms and held on desperately with all the power in his small body. He didn't cry: he rarely did. She could tell he wanted to be strong - he wanted to be like his father, even though he'd barely known him. But she couldn't escape the feeling that a part of his childhood had just been ripped from his grasp.

After a moment, he drew back to look at her. "If you think he might be dead, why didn't you put up a gold star instead? Why did you take the whole flag down? You don't want to think about it?"

How could she explain this without destroying what was left of his idealism? Her reasoning for taking down the flag had been partly motivated by resignation, yes, but also by an instinct to protect her child. She'd often hid the newspapers from him when the anti-war protests made headlines: she didn't want him to see the screaming banners or the veterans being tormented. She didn't want him to suffer for his father's role in a tangled, misunderstood war. She'd do anything to keep him from ever hearing an angry voice calling his hero a baby-killer ... even if it meant allowing him to believe that she'd given up hope.

"Harm, there are a lot of people who don't agree with the reasons the U.S. got involved in the war," she began, unable to keep the sadness out of her expression. "You know that,

right?”

He nodded uncertainly. “We talked about it in school, a little. But - they needed our help, didn’t they?”

“It’s not quite that simple, honey. We were trying to help, but it was hard. A lot of people wanted the U.S. troops to stop fighting and let the people over there handle it. Some of our soldiers even felt that way.”

“Did Dad think that?”

She swallowed painfully and replied, “Dad knew there were some questions, about who was really fighting us and who wasn’t. But he understood that the real goal was to protect the people who couldn’t protect themselves, and he believed in that. He also believed in doing whatever his country called on him to do, even if he didn’t fully understand it. That’s a hard thing to do sometimes. There are a lot of people here at home who aren’t able to respect that. They believe that anyone who fought over there was wrong, and they can be very hurtful. I just don’t want you to have to deal with that.”

“I’m not afraid of them!” he protested hotly. “I don’t care what they say. Who cares what they think, as long as we know?”

With that, something inexplicably clicked in her head, and she swiftly changed her mind. Maybe it really was that simple. If he wanted to show his admiration, she would be damned if she stood in his way. “All right,” she said, taking his hand and guiding him upstairs to the hall closet. “Do you want to put the flag up in your window?”

The expression that came into his eyes wasn’t quite a smile, but it was close. The determination there filled her with both pride and sorrow, and she wondered if he’d ever know just how much of his father she saw in him. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

She took the large box down from the top shelf and set it down in front of him. Harm took off the lid and pulled out two service flags: one with a blue star and one with gold. He looked up at her, not comprehending. “The officers’ wives gave me the gold one a long time ago,” she explained quietly. “You can put up that one if you want. It doesn’t mean we’ve given up or anything.”

“You always used the blue one,” he pointed out.

“I know. It’s your choice. Dad would just be happy to know that we’re thinking about him.”

There was a long pause, and the little boy seemed to age before her eyes. There comes a time in each child’s life when he comes to the difficult realization that wishes can’t always come true. For her son, it was a clearly defined moment: she was watching it happen right in front of her.

At last, he reached out and unfolded the flag with the gold star. “If he comes home...” He trailed off, and it took all of her strength not to break down. Before, it had always been ‘when’. Now it was ‘if.’ He lifted his chin with a measure of defiance - he’d realized that he was changing, just as she had, and he was trying to hold on to just a fragment of his former idealism. “If he comes home, I’m going to burn this flag and swear

I never saw it,” he vowed. “But for now ... I guess it’s close enough.”

She helped him hang it in his bedroom window, beside the shelves full of books and model airplanes. When he’d finished, she helped him down from the chair and kissed him gently on the cheek. In spite of it all, life continued. “You never told me when basketball practices start,” she reminded him with a faint smile.

“Umm, Thursday. At three-thirty.”

“Well, then, you’d better go work on your shot. I’ll have dinner ready in an hour.”

“Can we have spaghetti?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

“Neat. Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, honey.”

They are the Gold Star children, war’s innocent victims, and their pain shimmers across the years pure and undimmed. They pass through life with an empty room in their hearts where a father was supposed to live and laugh and love. All their lives they listen for the footstep that will never fall, and long to know what might have been.

LtGen Harold G. Moore, “We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young”

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Part Two: Coming of Age

*How do you say to a child who’s in flight
Don’t slip away, and I won’t hold so tight ...*

August 9, 1980

It was almost nine at night when the faint knock at the door broke the tense silence. Silence had become a way of life in the Burnett home over the past two weeks: unless there was a specified purpose to the conversation, both Trish and Frank had generally avoided talking very much. They’d tried, at the beginning, but all too often it deteriorated into anger and tears. Even though they both knew intellectually that none of the harsh words were really directed at each other, the pain they caused was inescapable. Eventually they’d surrendered to the silence.

Eleven days ago, there had been no real indication that anything was wrong. Harm had been keeping to himself most of the summer, supposedly catching up on some reading and preparing for his interview for Annapolis. When he’d asked for permission to go camping with some friends, it hadn’t taken them long to agree. After all, if he got into the Naval Academy, this would probably be his last real summer vacation. His mother and stepfather had waved goodbye to him on Friday morning and continued on with their day, entirely unsuspecting.

Then Sunday came, and Harm didn't arrive home when the other boys did. Trish had called his friend Gary's house, only to discover that Harm hadn't gone on the trip at all. A chill descending over her, she'd bolted up the stairs to his bedroom and discovered a note on his desk. From there, everything had fallen to pieces.

Her son, more a child than a man at sixteen years old, was gone. In the note, he'd apologized for deceiving them, but said that he needed to try to find his father, to find the truth, wherever it led. He didn't know when he'd be back, but he promised that he would be safe with the soldiers he'd found. If he'd meant it to be a comfort, he'd failed. Trish had collapsed to the floor in sobs so wrenching that Frank had almost called for an ambulance. They'd searched his room for any evidence as to where he'd gone or who he'd met - they'd called the police and the State Department and anyone they could think of - but eleven days later, they were still waiting for any word at all.

Everyone had tried to tell her that things were different now: that Vietnam had changed since the war, and that American officials in Laos or Cambodia would be able to locate him before long. She hadn't believed a word of it. Those hideous jungles had swallowed up any trace of her husband more than ten years ago, and he'd been a trained naval officer. Little Harm - no matter how much he hated the diminutive nickname, he was still little in her eyes - had none of that knowledge or experience. He had only a boy's reckless idealism, and that would be more likely to hurt him than save him.

Every knock at the door, every phone call, brought equal parts hope and fear. It could be good news, or it could be bad. When this knock came, she and Frank just stared at each other, too terrified to move. Eventually they heard the door slowly open, and they both rushed into the front hallway, coming to a screeching halt in front of the stairs. Upon seeing the newcomer, Trish's eyes flooded with tears, but she remained still, paralyzed by a clash of emotions. "Oh, Christ," she whispered.

The young man that stood there could hardly be recognized as Harmon Rabb, Junior. He wore a tattered fatigue jacket and utility pants, and a dusty backpack was slung over slumping shoulders. He'd always been thin, but his lanky frame appeared even lighter than before. His skin was tanned, but certainly not in the way of his beach-loving classmates. A faded bandana pushed longish hair back out of deadened eyes. Those eyes ... they held a trace of guilt, and a trace of determination, but mainly they held nothing.

When he spoke, his voice was rough and low, and he didn't meet their gaze. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

Trish took a tentative step toward him, but went no further. What was she supposed to do at a time like this? "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, her own voice unsteady.

"No."

"Then why did you come home?"

"Because - it was too hard..." Pain flickered across his features, but it was quickly shut away. "Can I explain it later?"

"Later?" she echoed, a harsh undercurrent in her tone. Relief had nearly overwhelmed her at first, but anger was what held her together now, and anger was frighteningly easy

to focus. "Eleven days wasn't enough? I have to wait some more?"

"Trish," Frank began, but she cut him off.

"Frank, please go call Mr. Galloway at the State Department and tell him that he can stop looking for our son." Some dark, ugly part of her mind had used the word 'our' on purpose: she knew damn well that Harm refused to consider himself Frank's son in any way, shape, or form. That was the whole point of this bizarre escapade, after all. Her husband reluctantly acquiesced, leaving mother and son to face each other alone.

There was the barest hint of amusement in Harm's voice as he answered. "You called the State Department on me?"

"If I'd had the President's number, I would've tried him next. What did you expect us to do? You disappeared without a trace!"

"I told you where I was going," he offered, fully aware of how weak it sounded.

"You think that made it better? Knowing that if you were telling the truth - which was somewhat hard to be sure of - you'd run half a world away, to a place where thousands of people have died? When I find out who these ex-soldier friends of yours are, I swear to God I'm going to try and get them charged with kidnapping..."

"They didn't want to take me. I didn't give them much choice. It was my decision - "

"You don't get to make those kinds of decisions! You are sixteen years old, Harm! You did an incredibly stupid thing, and you're lucky to even be alive to realize that!"

As it so often did, his temper flared. "So I'm stupid? Because I'm not willing to give up and forget about it, like you? You think Dad would really be more proud of you than me right now?"

His words stabbed right through her, and when she finally answered, it was little more than a whisper. "You don't have any right to talk to me like that," she said in a low, cold voice. "You don't have any idea what you're talking about. I am never going to forget him. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't do it. Not when my son looks at me with his eyes, and his face, and his name. Don't you dare presume to understand that."

There was a long, painful silence, and at last he spoke up again. "I know I shouldn't have gone. I really do. I just..."

"You just *what*? Tell me, please - give me something I can understand."

Finally, he looked up at her, and it became clear that from this day forward, they would see each other in a different way. "I had to," was all he could say.

"You had to. That's perfect, Harmon. God ... I can't deal with this right now. I don't even know where to start. Just - just go to your room, all right?" She turned and fled into the study, desperate to escape his gaze. Whatever he'd seen over there, whatever he'd done, it had changed him. He wasn't the same sullen teenager he'd been two weeks ago; and she wasn't sure yet, but something told her that this new part of him might be even worse. She knew she could never be afraid of her own son, but that look of

emptiness in his eyes - his father's eyes - terrified her beyond words.

How could he do this? she thought hopelessly for the thousandth time. How could he not understand what he'd done to her, to all of them? After eleven tortuous days with no word at all, did he really expect 'I had to' to be good enough?

Her gaze fell on a large envelope on the desk, and she recognized Harm's application to the Academy. In a moment of blind hatred, she snatched up the stack of papers and prepared to tear them in half. *You don't get to have my son*, she thought fiercely, directing her fury at the largest target she could find. *You've already taken his father and his soul. You don't get to have his life.*

"Trish, don't."

Frank stepped into the study and pulled the door shut behind him. She laughed bitterly. "Why not? Apparently he hasn't learned yet that his actions have consequences. This might as well be one of them."

"You can discuss that with him later. Don't do something this big in the heat of the moment."

"In the heat of the moment? The only reason I didn't do it last week is because I couldn't be sure that he'd even be alive to graduate high school!"

Frank stood back, realizing that comfort was not what she wanted. "Well, now that he's back, we can think about this logically. You think it would be better if he went to UCLA or USC?"

"He should go to Stanford. His grades are good enough - "

"And what if he decides to do something like this again?" he interrupted reasonably. "Stanford's not going to hold his interest. They won't kick him out if he disappears for a semester to wander around Southeast Asia. Hell, they'd probably give him study-abroad credit. At Annapolis, they'll be tough on him. It might be good for him."

"And after that? He goes off to flight school, and spends the rest of his life living in a steel shoebox and earning hazardous duty pay? What if he ends up in a war? I can't live like that again, Frank! I won't do it! I did my part for God and country ten years ago. Wasn't that enough?"

"Trish, you won't be able to change his mind - "

"He is my son, damn it, not yours!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, she heard them echo in her mind like a verbal slap across his face, and she realized with a jolt that she was reacting exactly the way Harm had. Frank remained very still for a minute before replying in a quiet, controlled voice. "After what's happened these past two weeks, don't you think I know that?"

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"It's all right. It's the truth. I know I don't have any right to tell you what you should do here, but I'm going to tell you what I think anyway." He sighed. "Honey, if you want to punish Harm for running away, do it. I think you should. But don't determine his future for him. It'll only make things worse in the long run. Maybe he needs to be an aviator, and maybe he doesn't. He's the only one who can really convince himself of that, or anything else. He needs guidance, and support, but he's a fundamentally good kid who will eventually straighten himself out on his own terms. You can't protect him from the whole world."

She stared long and hard at the papers in her hand, and finally put them down on the desk. "I guess I should be able to put this whole thing in perspective," she stated, suddenly feeling all the tension drain out of her body. "He's not doing drugs or committing crimes - at least none in this country. His intentions were good ... I think..." She scrubbed fiercely at the tears that were beginning to spill over. "I just don't have any idea what I should do right now."

Frank crossed the room and pulled her into his embrace. He'd run out of words of comfort a long time ago, but despite his stepson's lingering bitterness toward him, he knew he belonged here, with her. Sometimes it felt like that was all they had. He held her quietly as she cried out her hopelessness, and at long last spoke up with a gentle suggestion.

"Go up and see him. He looked so exhausted when he came in, I thought he might pass out."

A twinge of guilt resurfaced, and she wondered how she could have been so oblivious to her son's pain. He'd made a mistake, yes, but the experiences he'd had out there were probably at least as bad as any punishment she could give. "Thank you," she whispered tearfully into her husband's shirt. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

It was a few minutes before she found the courage to climb the stairs to her son's room, praying for some kind of guidance. She didn't know what to say to him, but somewhere underneath that dark mask he'd acquired, he was still her little boy, and he needed to know that she loved him.

When she reached his door, she found him already asleep, lying on top of the covers. He hadn't bothered to take off his dirty, worn clothes - she wondered when he'd last had a shower or a real bed. He moved restlessly, mumbling something, and she realized again how this terrible trip had changed him. Even in sleep, he seemed unable to find peace. What in God's name had happened to him out there?

With a start, he cried out and sat straight up in bed, the nightmare painfully close. As he struggled to regain control, Trish forgot all her anger and rushed into the room to take her son into her arms.

He looked up at her with wild, unseeing eyes. "She's dead," he choked out, shocking her into silence. "She wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for me..."

"It's okay," she whispered, stroking his matted hair. After a moment, he relaxed against her, and his body trembled with fear and pain that he didn't dare explain. She didn't ask him to: when he could, he would. As awful as it seemed, for right now, that would have to be enough. "It's okay, sweetheart. It's over."

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Part Three: Guiding Hands

*How can you say it will all be all right
When you know that it might not be true
What do you do ...*

November 24, 1990

Trish squared her shoulders and brushed at her cheeks, hoping to erase the evidence of the hundreds of tears she'd cried on the flight. A simple phone call had shattered their peaceful evening - one phone call, and suddenly they were halfway around the world, hanging on by little more than prayer. Some part of her was grateful that it had been a phone call: if they'd showed up to her door in uniform, the way they had twenty-one years before, she might have lost any kind of belief in the fairness of the world.

He's not dead, she kept repeating over and over in her mind, trying to keep herself under control. *He's hurt, perhaps badly, but he's not dead. Fate wouldn't be that cruel.* The voice on the phone had calmly told her that there had been an accident on the Seahawk, and that her son was being airlifted to Landstuhl Air Base in Germany for medical treatment. She hadn't heard much more than that before the receiver had dropped from her hand - but Frank had blessedly caught both the phone and her with one swift move. He'd gotten information about a transport plane leaving Miramar that night, but no details of the accident. Hardly a surprise. Even Harm tended to keep them in the dark about the activities aboard the carrier. But they'd been in the Mediterranean, part of the troop buildup associated with Desert Shield, and with all the uncertainty in that part of the world, 'accident' could mean just about anything.

Frank, always her rock, had thrown some clothes in a suitcase and gotten them to the Miramar flight line in record time, and they'd spent a harrowing fourteen hours on the plane with no word at all on Harm's condition. The waiting had steadily eaten away at her nerves as she silently begged any God who would listen to please spare her child's life. A young airman had met them at Landstuhl and assured them that Lieutenant Rabb was indeed alive, but that he was coming out of a long, difficult surgery. Now, as she walked into the medical center's ICU with her husband at her side, there was a physical ache in her chest.

"Trish?"

She looked up to see a man who hadn't crossed her memory in some time, a man who would always be linked to her first love in her mind. At that moment, though, seeing any familiar face in this stark, cold place was a welcome sight. "Tom, how in the world - ?"

"I was in Italy when I heard. Thought you could use some company." Captain Thomas Boone kissed her cheek gently and shook Frank's hand. "I'm in port for the next few days, anyway. They got you out here pretty quick."

Trish nodded, a little lost. "Does Harm know you're here?" she asked distractedly.

Tom hesitated. "Trish, Harm doesn't know anyone's here," he said as kindly as possible.

"He's been unconscious since the accident."

She trembled a little, but was determined to maintain her composure. "Tom, what happened?" she whispered.

He sighed. "It was a ramp strike," he replied. "They had to punch out over the deck. I talked to Captain Graham on the Seahawk, and he says the weather was a mess. There was no visibility..."

With a jolt, she understood what he wasn't saying. He wasn't offering evidence of a malfunction, or telling her about hostile action. That left a possibility that she almost didn't dare consider. "Oh, God ... you don't think it was his fault, do you?"

"Trish, I wasn't there," Tom said firmly. "A lot of things could have happened. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

She let it go at that, not sure she really wanted to know any more. Another sudden thought struck her. "What about Anthony? His RIO?" He hesitated again, long enough for the terrible truth to register in her mind. "Oh, no. He's not - " She choked back another sob, remembering the polite, eager young man who'd come home with Harm on their last liberty. "I should - I should call Cindy Mace. What time is it in Minnesota?"

"Honey, one thing at a time," Frank suggested gently. "Let's just concentrate on making sure Harm's all right."

She wanted to scream at both of them for being so damn reasonable. Didn't they see that she needed to focus on something, something other than her son's fragile grasp on life? "Well, is anyone going to tell me anything, then?" she returned harshly. "Where are the doctors?"

"One of the surgeons is checking on him now - Commander Lang. He wouldn't tell me much, since I'm not family. I'm sure he'll be out here in a minute."

Sure enough, it wasn't long before a man in blue scrubs came through the doors at the end of the hall, looking about as tired as the rest of them felt. "You're with Lieutenant Rabb?" he asked, his face unreadable.

"We're his parents," she replied, telling her standard almost-truth and gripping Frank's hand tightly. "How is he?"

"The surgery went well, all things considered. There was a substantial trauma to his vertebrae on impact: we had to remove a few small bone fragments from his lower back, and we had to put a temporary pin in his pelvic bone to stabilize it. There was very little organ damage, which is very good news. The head trauma wasn't as severe as it could have been, but we'll need to keep an eye on the swelling, just to be safe. His wrist was broken, but not badly - it's already been set. All in all, I'd say he was fairly lucky."

Of all the words that were flying through Trish's head at that moment, 'lucky' was hardly topping the list. "So he's not in danger?" she managed to ask in a choked voice. "He's not going to die?"

Lang offered a weary half-smile. "No, ma'am," he reassured her. "But he's got a

difficult road ahead. He won't be able to move from his bed for a long time, maybe two weeks or so. After that, we can probably release him to go back to the States, but he'll need a lot of physical therapy to start walking again. There's still a possibility that additional surgery will be necessary, but I'm hoping to avoid that. Eventually, I think he can get back to normal. It's just going to take some time."

Back to normal. It sounded so bleak in this context. "Can we see him?"

"Certainly. ICU rules are to allow one visitor at a time. Once he's moved upstairs to a regular room, sometime tomorrow, you'll all be allowed in. I expect he'll regain consciousness in the next couple of hours. I'll come by later to check on him and tell him what I just told you."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said quietly, turning her head toward the far door. Beyond that door, her only child was lying in a cold, sterile bed, unaware that his body had been shattered and that his friend was gone. She took a step toward the door, but faltered and turned to her husband with pleading eyes. "Frank, could you ... could you go first, and tell me what he looks like? I think I need to be prepared - I don't know if I can take it..."

She knew it was terrible of her to ask him. He loved Harm, too, and seeing him like this would undoubtedly be hard for him as well. But he instantly nodded, reminding her again how amazing he was. "Of course. I'll be back in a minute."

As he disappeared into the room, she leaned back against the wall, and snatches of Tom's hushed conversation with Lang made their way to her ears. They were obviously attempting to keep her from hearing, but knowing that only made her strain more.

"Doc, 'normal' for this kid is four Gs," Tom told the surgeon in a low voice. "He drives Tomcats for a living. Is that in his future now, or not?"

"Respectfully, sir, that depends, doesn't it?"

"On what?"

"On whether or not he screwed the pooch."

A few feet away, Trish squeezed her eyes shut against new, burning tears. Tom Boone's eyes darkened, and he continued in a dangerous tone. "Listen up, Commander. I don't want you to ever say a thing like that again. Not within five miles of his mother. If you knew even a little of the stuff she'd been through already..."

"I apologize, Captain," Lang said immediately. "I didn't mean any disrespect. I'm just saying that the lieutenant's flight status is going to have a lot more to do with the results of his FENAB review than it is with anything that I say. Do you know what happened, sir?"

Tom sighed, and once again, it was the silence that broke Trish's heart. "Whatever it was," he said finally, "it's going to change a lot of lives."

Frank emerged from the room then, and she straightened quickly as he took both of her hands in his. "He doesn't look too good, honey," he began softly. "He has a lot of bruises, and he's awfully pale. They've got him pretty much immobilized, but you can

hold his hand. You could even try talking to him if you wanted.”

She nodded and took a few breaths, trying vainly to slow her pounding heart. Pressing a kiss to her husband’s cheek, she stepped up to the door and pushed it open.

The small room was insulated from the constant noise of the hallway: the only sound was the soft, rhythmic beeping of the monitors. The outside world faded away in an instant as she took in the sight of her son’s body, so very still and fragile in the imposing hospital bed. He’d always been the tallest boy in his class, every year since third grade, but that impressive height did nothing for him here. Here, he didn’t look at all like the strong, dashing aviator he’d become. Now she was forced to wonder if he’d ever be that person again. Would he be able to fly? Would he even be able to stay in the Navy? If his recovery didn’t go as well as hoped - if he couldn’t walk normally - what would he do?

Abruptly she shoved those thoughts aside and moved to his side, pulling the chair closer to the bed. Those questions wouldn’t help him now. All she could do was be there for him as he fought his way back. If anyone could do it, he could. He had the sheer willpower to accomplish just about anything. Didn’t he?

How much more pain could he take before that willpower was finally crushed?

Trish slid into the chair and stroked his face gently, being careful of the bruise that darkened one otherwise-perfect cheekbone. “Hi, honey,” she said softly, hoping for even the slightest flicker of a response and receiving none. “It’s Mom. I’m right here, and everything’s going to be all right. Don’t worry.”

She reached for his uninjured right hand and grasped it, startled by how cool and utterly motionless it was. When she used to check on him at night, as a child, she’d always kiss his forehead and squeeze his hand, and even in the deepest sleep his hand would instinctively tighten in hers. Now, there was nothing - and even though she knew on some level that she shouldn’t have expected it, the idea still chilled her.

“Harm, please,” she begged in a whisper, feeling the tears threatening yet again. “I need you to wake up, all right? I’m so scared for you, and I don’t know how long I can take this. Please, baby, just open your eyes for a minute and look at me ... that’s all I need...”

But of course, there wasn’t even a hint of movement, and her emotions finally got the best of her. She laid her head down by his arm and sobbed, feeling more helpless than ever before. When there were no more tears left, and her throat ached from the effort, she allowed herself to fall into a light sleep for the first time in more than twenty-four hours.

It was this same position from which she awoke with a start some time later. Glancing at her watch, she noticed that a little over an hour had passed, and that her neck was vaguely stiff from leaning against the bed. Then she realized what had woken her: a brief, weak motion from the hand that she still clutched. Maybe he was coming around. She hastily smoothed her hair down and reached for the compact in her purse. If she was to be the first thing he saw, she didn’t want to look like she’d been hit by a truck. He didn’t need to see in her face how awful it had been.

A faint moan escaped his lips, and she blinked rapidly, trying to return some moisture to her reddened eyes. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” she reassured him, regaining some

confidence. "I know it hurts, but it's okay. You can wake up."

A few minutes passed with little change, as he struggled to escape the effects of the anesthetic. At long last, his eyelids flickered, and with agonizing slowness, he dragged his eyes open.

"Good morning," she offered quietly, forcing a smile. The glassy, unfocused look to his blue eyes was disconcerting, and a brief spike of fear shot through her as she recalled some mention of a head injury. But after a moment, she saw the recognition there, and although his voice failed him, his lips formed the word *Mom*.

Trish held back fresh tears and squeezed his hand, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief when he finally managed a feeble squeeze back. There was a question in his gaze, and she hurried to explain. "You're in the hospital in Germany, darling. Don't worry about a thing. You're going to be fine. Just rest."

With that, some memory of what had happened seemed to return, and a shadow fell across his pale features. She started to ask if he was in pain, but he was already attempting to speak again. The effort resulted in only the faintest sound, and she leaned down to hear the single word that he was determined to convey.

"Mace?"

Her heart twisted in her chest - she'd known this was coming, but she'd hoped to have a little while longer to figure out her response. She briefly considered lying to him, just until he was stronger. After all he'd been through, what did it matter if he found out now or two days from now? It would shatter him just the same. But as she watched his eyes on her, his trust so absolute, she knew that she could never do it. She could never lie to him, not even to protect him.

"Harm, h-he didn't make it."

Instantly she hated herself for telling him, and cursed the fates for forcing her to do so. He closed his eyes, but not before she could see the blinding anguish there. She knew her son, and she knew that whatever lay ahead for him would always be colored by the knowledge of what he'd just learned. Whether he went on to make a thousand more traps or never flew again, this moment would always be with him.

"It wasn't your fault, honey," she tried to reassure him, not knowing how much of that statement was true. "With the weather, it could have happened to anyone..." But there was no use in going any further. There wasn't a thing she could say that would help right now. He didn't open his eyes to look at her, and for a moment, she wondered if he'd fallen back into a drug-induced unconsciousness. Maybe that would have been better - maybe for a time the pain wouldn't reach him there. But the tear that slipped down his bruised cheek betrayed him: he was all too aware of his surroundings, and he was ashamed to face her.

He had always been the kind of person who needed time and space to come to terms with things in his own way. For the moment, although it killed her to do it, she decided to take the hint and give it to him. "You should rest," she said gently, rising from her chair and bending to kiss his forehead. "I'll be right outside if you need me, okay?"

He didn't respond, and it took all of her strength to walk away from him. Once she was safely outside in the hall, she sank into a chair, and Frank hurried to join her. "How's he doing?"

She didn't answer the question directly. "Why do I always have to hurt him?" she murmured, her voice flat and defeated. "Why is it that whenever something awful happens, he always has to hear it from the person who loves him most in this world? I was the one who told him about his father, and now I'm the one who told him about Anthony..."

"You're also the one who got to tell him about his acceptance to the Academy," Frank pointed out quietly.

"And look where that got him."

"Trish, he's going to need you now. More than all those doctors and therapists, more than his friends and shipmates - he's going to need you, because you do love him more than anyone else in this world."

"I know. I just don't understand why things happen sometimes..."

He sighed. "Not too many people ever do, sweetheart."

They spent most of the next few days there, leaving the hospital only to sleep and sometimes to search out more appetizing food. Tom Boone was called back to his ship before Harm ever knew he'd been there at all. Harm was eventually allowed to sit up in bed, and his range of motion convinced the orthopedic specialists that additional surgery would likely be unnecessary. Unfortunately, the emotional scars were every bit as deep as the physical ones, and much more difficult to treat.

He barely spoke to any of them, answering each of the doctors' questions with the minimum amount of explanation possible. Both Trish and Frank attempted on several occasions to start conversations with him, about everything from the recent Army-Navy game to Trish's work at the gallery. Each time he nodded impassively and offered a few noncommittal words, never meeting their gazes. Slowly she began to recognize flickers of the troubled young man he'd been all those years ago, before he'd gone to Annapolis. The Navy had changed him, as they'd hoped: it had given him the sense of purpose he'd so desperately needed. Now, as she watched him shutting himself away again, she wondered hopelessly if maybe she should have torn up that Academy application after all.

"I heard Tim Watson is marrying Susan Harper," Trish commented one morning, still searching for another way to reach him. "Didn't they graduate with you?"

"Tim did. Susan was '82."

"Oh, that's right. Susan was one of the cheerleaders. I remember she used to have the cutest little crush on you..."

"Mom, do you have to do this?" Harm said abruptly, still not looking at her.

"Do what?"

"Make stupid small-talk to pretend everything's okay? Everything is obviously not okay, so can we just accept that and leave it alone?"

The words were harsh, but they were the most she'd gotten out of him since she'd arrived. "What would you like me to do?" she asked carefully.

He hesitated for a moment before replying uncertainly. "I think I'd like you to let me do this on my own."

As much as that stung, Trish didn't react to it: she'd halfway expected as much. "Do you have a second choice?"

"Mom - "

"If you want me to go home and leave you here, you can forget it. We're not leaving until you're well enough to come back to the States with us. You can stay at the house until you get back on your feet."

"I don't want to come home."

"The farm, then. Grandma would love to have you - "

"Mom, please." There was a note of desperation in his voice, and she fell silent. "I don't know where I want to go. I don't know what I want to do. I don't even know what I can do anymore."

"It's all right. You don't have to think about that yet."

"Then what am I supposed to think about? How badly I've screwed up my life? How a good friend is dead because of something I did? The past is a mess, and the future's not looking much better, and the only thing I want to do is drive my fist into a wall ... and I can't even do that, because I can't freaking stand up. So tell me, Mom - what am I supposed to do?"

Being confronted with that level of raw, unadulterated pain might have been enough to tear most mothers apart. Not her, though. Not anymore. Frank had been right. Her son needed her, and she was finally beginning to understand how. "Harm," she said simply, and the calm, quiet tone surprised him enough to actually look up at her. "Have you cried?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. When was the last time you cried, about anything?"

He dropped his gaze again. "I can't even remember," he admitted in a low voice.

"Maybe it's time to stop pretending you're made of stone," she suggested gently. "I think maybe you could use the release."

As he began to comprehend her suggestion, a dubious, defensive expression clouded his

eyes. "Mom, I'm not going to fall apart here," he insisted. "I'm okay."

"Harm, listen to yourself. You're nowhere close to 'okay'. You just said that you don't know what to do or what to think about. You won't say a word about what happened, and the only time you speak at all is to lash out at someone. You may think you're just angry, but you're not. You're also hurt, and scared, and feeling guilty, and if you continue to shut it all down the way you have, it's going to destroy you. Let someone help you."

He didn't fully acknowledge her assertion, but he didn't deny it, either. "You don't want me to unload all this on you. You don't want to hear some of this."

"Why? Because I'm your mother?" He didn't respond, and suddenly she understood. For twenty years now, he'd done everything he could to be strong for her: he'd seen it as his duty. He'd learned to keep his fears and sorrows away from her, trying in his own idealistic way to ease her burden. After all this time, he simply didn't know how to open up to her. "That's it, isn't it?"

After a long hesitation, he replied softly, "I just don't want to hurt you any more. I've done enough of that to last a lifetime."

Swallowing hard around the lump in her throat, Trish just shook her head. "You're my baby," she whispered, reaching out to brush a hand through his dark hair. "I'm going to hurt for as long as you do, no matter how much you try to hide it. It's genetically programmed."

At that, Harm almost smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I don't know if I can talk about it yet," he confessed, his voice catching slightly. "I don't even really know what happened. I just - I couldn't make out the deck, and the lights were all blurring together, and everything just went to hell so fast ... I don't even remember the - " he nearly choked on the word " - the crash."

"Maybe that's for the best," she offered solemnly. "Were you afraid?"

His answer surprised them both. "Not really. I kinda went on auto. They always say that your training will just take over, but I don't think I believed it ... I don't know, maybe it was over before I had time to get scared." He tried to laugh, with a trace of ruefulness, but the sound was hollow. "Guess I've got plenty of time to be scared now."

"Of what?"

There were bright, proud tears brimming in his expressive eyes, but he refused to let them fall. "Everything," he said helplessly. "Of never being able to do any of the things I love anymore ... of having to leave the Navy and find a completely new life at twenty-seven years old ... of hearing Mace's voice in my head every time I see a jet take off..." He swiped at the tears with his good hand, frustrated at the world and at himself for what he now faced. "What am I now, Mom? What am I going to be for the rest of my life?"

Without another thought, Trish slid onto the bed and carefully wrapped her arms around his battered body, and at last the dam burst. He laid his head on her shoulder and wept brokenly for the first time since that Christmas morning half a lifetime ago. It had been so long since he'd allowed himself to lose control in her presence that the sheer force of his emotions overwhelmed him, and he cried harder, his breath coming in gasps and sobs

until what little strength he had was entirely devoted to holding onto her. And for the first time in all those years, he began to recall just how pure and perfect his mother's comfort could be.

Neither of them saw Frank pass by the window and immediately step back to allow them their privacy. Right now, they both needed this: he needed her help, and she needed to help him. In a strange way, Trish's faith began to return as soon as she felt him surrender. At long last, he was holding nothing back, and she knew somehow that they would never again be as distant as they'd been before. "I don't care what you are to the rest of the world," she whispered into his ear, rubbing his broad back in slow, soothing circles. "Long before you were an officer, or a pilot, or anything else, you were my little boy, and that's what matters to me. That much is never going to change. You started out with only that much once before. You can do it again. From here on, it can only get easier. I promise."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Part Four: Always

*What do you leave to your child when you're dead
Only whatever you put in his head
Things that your mother and father had said
Which were left to them too ...*

April 25, 2002

Trish stepped off the elevator and began to take in her surroundings. She'd expected JAG Headquarters to be a busy place: Harm's phone calls always seemed to bear that fact out. It was a calm, efficient sort of busy, though. Officers moved about easily, discussing cases and other duties with professionalism and grace. It was hard to believe that Harm had been assigned here for nearly seven years, more or less, and she was only now seeing it for the first time. He was one of the most senior officers at Headquarters, a distinction that never failed to fill her with pride. It had taken time, and no small amount of pain, but she felt sure that her son was finally where he wanted to be.

"Mrs. Burnett!" She turned to see Sturgis Turner crossing the hall with a wide smile, and was relieved to find a familiar face. He immediately grasped her hand warmly. "You look lovely, as always. Wow, how long has it been?"

"Long enough that you don't have to call me 'Mrs. Burnett,' Sturgis. Your middie days have been over for a while now." She smiled back, feeling at ease. "It's wonderful to see you again."

"That sneaky son of yours didn't tell me you were going to be in town."

"That sneaky son of mine doesn't know I'm here. Frank had some business in Washington, so I thought I'd come here and surprise the hell out of Harm." She shrugged with a hint of mischief.

"He's in court, but they'll probably recess in a few minutes for lunch. How about letting me show you to his office?" He gestured to the box in her hand. "Care package? If there

are butterscotch cookies in there, I might just do something drastic.”

“Not this time, dear. These are just some things from home that I’ve been meaning to give Harm for a while.”

“Damn. I have fond memories of those cookies. Anyway, if you wanted to drop anything off at his apartment, I think Colonel Mackenzie has a spare key.”

“That’s all right. To be honest, I thought about going over there first, but ... I wasn’t sure if anyone would be there.” She chewed on her lower lip, hoping he’d understand.

Being the son of a chaplain had taught Sturgis a few things about empathy. Being a lawyer had taught him about deductive reasoning. “You haven’t met Sergei yet, have you?” he probed gently.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she hurried to explain, even though it wasn’t entirely the truth. “I just thought I should wait for Harm to introduce us. I don’t know what it’ll be like to see him. I don’t know what it’ll feel like.”

“It’ll probably be hard,” he admitted. “But Sergei’s a good kid. I suspect that you’ll recognize a lot of things in him that you love about Harm. It’ll be all right.”

She attempted to reclaim her earlier smile. “You’re your father’s son, Sturgis.”

“I appreciate that, ma’am. If you’d like to follow me?”

He led her through the bullpen, and she stepped into Harm’s empty office with a touch of curiosity. She was close to her son, but only as close as was possible from the other side of the country. She heard about his cases and his friends, but she didn’t experience them. This place, as much as anything else, was his life. She set the box down on a chair and looked around at the pictures and shelves, sensing his influence immediately.

“Commander Turner, a moment?” came a strong voice from the bullpen.

Sturgis moved out of the doorway to meet the voice’s owner, an older man with a SeAL’s trident on his chest and two stars on his shoulders. This had to be the admiral, Trish realized, and she quickly took a step back, hoping she wasn’t interfering with anything.

“Yes, sir?” Sturgis questioned.

“I just got a call from downstairs. Apparently a guest signed in to see Commander Rabb, but the guard didn’t have her listed as a scheduled appointment.” Admiral Chegwiddden rolled his eyes. “Why they let her in first and called later, I don’t know, but they did. Do you know anything about this?”

“I might, sir. The guest’s name wouldn’t happen to be Patricia Burnett, would it?”

The JAG narrowed his eyes. “It would indeed. Would you like to tell me who Patricia Burnett is?”

“That would be me, Admiral.” Trish stepped out, a little hesitantly. The admiral looked

at her as though he'd expected someone different, but said nothing. "I'm sorry for causing a problem - I should have realized that you have security procedures."

"Ma'am, do you have an appointment with the commander, or not?"

She wasn't sure whether to be amused or annoyed by being called "ma'am" by a two-star. She chose to be amused. "Not exactly."

"Mom?"

Harm had come into the bullpen, accompanied by a lovely young Marine whom she recognized instantly. There was something of Diane in this woman, yes, but something entirely unique as well. After years of stories, she was finally going to meet Sarah Mackenzie. As soon as she extricated herself from this somewhat embarrassing display, of course. "Surprise, darling," she offered sheepishly.

After only a moment of awkward silence, he stepped in to embrace her, and the junior officers in the vicinity watched with curiosity. Sometimes it was easy to forget that people like Harmon Rabb had mothers, too. "'Surprise' doesn't quite cover it," her told her with mock-disapproval. "Are you trying to get me in trouble, or what?"

"Commander, I'm assuming you weren't aware that your mother was in the neighborhood?" the admiral remarked dryly.

"Sir, I wasn't aware that she was in the time zone." Harm straightened and gestured to the others. "Um, everyone, this is my mother, Patricia Burnett. Mom, I'd like you to meet Admiral A.J. Chegvidden and Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie. And you already know this numbskull."

"Hey, what did I do to deserve that?" Sturgis objected, but Trish just shook her head and extended her hand to the JAG.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Admiral. I am sorry for the confusion."

"Not at all, ma'am. Your son has done his damndest to keep my life confusing for the past few years."

Trish smiled. "Just think, I've had to deal with him for the past thirty - "

"Ahem," Harm broke in, rolling his eyes, and she looked back at him innocently before turning to Mac.

"Colonel, I've heard so much about you."

"Mostly good things, I hope," Mac replied warily, her gaze darting over to her partner.

"Nothing but," he answered with a quiet grin that spoke volumes.

"I'd really love to swap horror stories sometime, but if I could steal my son for just a minute - there's something I need to discuss with him. Harm?"

Seeking and receiving a nod of approval from his C.O., Harm shrugged. "Sure. Come on in."

He closed the door to his office behind them, and folded his arms across his chest with a familiar smile. "It's good to see you," he said softly. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming out? I could've asked for some leave."

"Would you have gotten it?" she responded knowingly. "Things look busy."

He sighed. "Word is that they may be holding the Al Qaeda tribunal aboard the Seahawk, and some of us may have to go out there to handle it. I don't know if I'll be getting much of a break anytime in the next few weeks."

"I'll put my flag up in the window for you," she promised quietly.

"Mom, it's a tribunal, not an air strike. I'm not getting deployed."

"Don't argue with me, Harmon. If they send you into a war zone, lawyer or not, I'll put up my service flag when I damn well feel like it."

His lips twisted wryly. "Yes, ma'am. But you didn't answer my question."

"I came out here with Frank. He had some sort of business meeting. We're only in town for a couple of days."

It still wasn't a direct answer, and he was beginning to sense her hesitation. "Mom, if this is about Sergei, I'm not going to try and talk you into anything," he said solemnly. "If you don't want to meet him - "

"I do want to meet him," she interrupted resolutely, before she could rethink the decision. He closed his mouth, surprised. "I mean, I'm still nervous about it, but I want to do it. If you have time tonight, we'd like to take you both to dinner."

Harm waited a moment before replying. The magnitude of this choice was something that no one else would ever understand - even he himself couldn't fully grasp it. "Thank you," he said simply. "That would mean a lot to him. And to me."

"There's more. I didn't want to tell you I was coming because I thought I might lose my nerve and change my mind about this. But I haven't yet, and here I am, so here goes." She reached down to pick up the box she'd brought and held it out to him. "Go ahead and open it."

Carefully, he set this box down on his desk and took off the lid. When he recognized the faded, yellowed papers inside, a powerful combination of shock and relief washed over him, and he had to blink rapidly to clear the tears from his eyes. "Mom," he breathed. "This is - God, this must have been hard."

He lifted out the stack of envelopes, all postmarked between 1966 and 1969, all addressed in the choppy handwriting of Lieutenant Harmon Rabb, Sr. The contents of that box were nearly all that remained of her first husband, her first love, and she'd clung to them for as long as she could remember. But they also represented the only chance Sergei Zhukov

had to conclusively establish his bloodline, and at long last, she'd decided that his future outweighed her past.

"When I thought about it some more," she began tentatively, "I realized that I was probably the only thing standing between your brother and an American citizenship, and I just felt so selfish for holding on to these. I mean, it's not his fault that I ended up in this position - he shouldn't be punished for anything. If he'd been deported back to Russia, what would that make me?"

"Human," Harm replied honestly, putting the letters down and reaching over to brush her tears away. "I swear I'll do everything I can to get these back to you. I know what they mean, and I just ... Mom, I love you so much!"

They held on to each other for a measureless time, as Trish did her best not to let her tears fall on her son's immaculate white uniform. "I love you, too, darling," she whispered. "And I'm so proud of you. Don't you ever forget that."

At last, she drew back and tried to smile. "Just remember that you're going to owe me now," she commented slyly.

"Name it. Whatever you want," he vowed immediately.

"Oh, I don't know ... I think a grandchild or two would do nicely."

"I should've known," he muttered, rolling his eyes skyward. "Anything a little less lofty on your wish list?"

"Darling, you're not backing down from a challenge, are you? Maybe I'll have to approach this from another angle."

"Oh, and what other angle would that be?"

"Harm, after almost six years of weekly phone calls, I know a lot more about this place than you give me credit for." She sauntered toward the door with an air of confidence that was clearly hereditary. "Sturgis, dear, is Colonel Mackenzie in her office?"

Harm's eyebrows shot up.

"MOM!!"

*** THE END ***