

## Immortal MacKenzie

"'It'll be simple,' he says. 'Just go in, talk to him, and arrest him,' he says." Commander Harmon Rabb shook his head and then ducked a little lower as another shot chipped away at the wooden crate he was hiding behind with his partner.

"So Webb was wrong," Lieutenant Colonel Sarah MacKenzie acknowledged.

"There's an understatement," Harm muttered.

"As fascinating as it is to discuss Clay's shortcomings with you, I think we need to do something about the situation."

He raised from his crouched position and squeezed off two shots in the direction of the attackers. The instant he ducked back behind cover, a dozen bullets came back at them. He shook his head and looked to his friend in aggravation. "I'm open to suggestions."

The marine took stock of the situation. They were in a large warehouse filled with a maze of wooden crates. So far, the crates had all been proof against the bullets flying around, but that would only last so much longer. They were trapped into one side of the warehouse, the only exits available to them being windows about eight feet above ground level. The regular exits were through the half dozen gunman. She turned back to Harm and said, "Maybe we should give them a chance to surrender."

He grinned back, but it lacked the force it usually held over her. "Yeah, we've got them outnumbered two to six. You want to make that offer, Counselor, or shall I?"

A single shot came at them from a slightly different direction than the previous ones had. It ricocheted off their cover and embedded itself into the wall behind them.

"They're closing in," noted Mac. "How're you doing on ammunition?"

"Two in this clip and one more full one. You?"

"Three and one. I hate to say this, but we have to split up before they flank us."

He sighed heavily and nodded. "That door behind them is the only exit," he agreed. "See you on the other side. Semper fi, Marine."

She smiled at him. "Hoo-ya, Sailor," she responded in the SeAL's traditional battle cry.

He grinned back. "Hoo-ya." Standing suddenly, he fired two more shots blindly and darted toward one side, heading for the far wall.

Taking her partner's cue, Mac headed the other direction.

Coming to a crashing halt behind another wooden crate with Japanese characters stenciled on the side, Harm rapidly pressed the clip release on his weapon and rammed his remaining full clip in. Peeking in the direction he had come from, he couldn't see Mac. Breathing a silent prayer of protection for her, he inched his way around the side of the crate that was his temporary shelter.

Still short of leaving his cover, he froze in his tracks when he heard the crackle of a radio. A few moments later he faintly heard a shoe scuff along the ground. He tentatively placed one of the bad guys on the far side of the next box over.

Silently retracing his last two steps, Harm returned to his empty, discarded magazine and grabbed it again. Returning to his previous spot, he took a deep breath and jumped into action. Tossing the clip one direction, he moved around the intervening box the other way. He knew it was one of the oldest tricks in the book, but he was running low on choices.

It worked. When Harm saw the man, he was facing the wrong way, trying to track the sound made by the clattering decoy. Harm's gun was already up, and he quickly moved it in line toward his target. The moment before Harm pulled the trigger, they both heard a sharp crack from the direction that Mac had gone.

Rabb forced himself to keep to his course. Lining up his shot, he smoothly pulled the trigger twice.

The man was twisting around to check on the source of the previous gunshot and caught both bullets in the side, throwing him away a few feet to land in an undignified heap, his own gun coming to a clattering halt a few feet from his lifeless hands.

Seeing that his target was down for good, Harm was about to turn toward where the previous shots had been fired when he saw movement further along the uneven "hallway" that the crates formed. Jerking his attention that way, he met the startled gaze of another man, who immediately brought his gun up.

Harm won the impromptu quick draw. Squeezing off two more shots into the chest of his latest target, Harm ducked back behind cover as bullets

converged on where he'd been standing.

He immediately breathed a sigh of relief. There were three separate sources of gunfire. That meant that the earlier shot was Mac, and that she'd won that round. Determining the rough locations on the three remaining gunmen, he scuttled forward to the first man he'd shot and stripped the radio from him and grabbed the discarded gun on his way to a quiet spot behind another crate. Quickly tucking his pistol back into the holster hanging off his belt, he checked his newest weapon, easily recognizing the MP-9 submachine gun. He admitted to himself grudgingly.

Hoping to get some useful information, he hooked the small two way radio over his ear. He was immediately rewarded.

". . . assume our radio's been compromised. Maintain radio silence, but kill these two assholes!" The transmission cut off with a harsh spurt of static. He thought ruefully.

Leaving the radio hooked on his ear just in case it DID provide more information, Harm cautiously made his way forward again. Listening for all he was worth, Rabb worked his way around one crate at a time.

Taking a short breather behind crate number three, he heard a series of three shots. "Wilkins," he heard over his headset. When silence gave him his answer, the voice muttered a quiet, "Shit," before shutting up again.

Harm moved out again with a grin. Mac was doing well. More importantly, she was still alive. Stepping around the eighth crate since his rest break, Harm ran to an abrupt face to face with one of the remaining gunmen. Harm had his gun turned the wrong way. The other guy didn't.

After a small start of surprise, the opposing man leveled his gun at Harm and said, "I'm going to enjoy this."

There was nowhere to go. It was three steps to any kind of cover, four steps forward to the guy, and it would take longer than that to bring his gun around. The bad guy well and truly had the drop on Harm. Not willing to watch the end of his life, Rabb closed his eyes and said a quick prayer for Mac.

He heard three gunshots and braced himself for nothingness.

He wasn't completely disappointed.

Nothing happened.

Finally daring to crack one eye open, Harm was immeasurably relieved to find his opponent lying on his side with a pool of blood forming under him. Standing over him, Mac held another of the MP-9's and was looking at Harm in amusement. "Can't bear the sight of me?" she teased.

Smiling broadly, Harm stepped forward with his arms outstretched, intending to pull her into a hug. When he was still two steps away, she was suddenly thrown forward practically on top of her latest victim by the half dozen bullets striking her in the back.

In an overpowering rage, Harm turned the corner where Mac had been standing and fired at the man standing there, hitting him more than a dozen times before the clip on his own MP-9 ran dry. Dropping the now useless submachine gun, Harm turned around to assess the damage.

It took less than a second for his rational mind to come to the conclusion that Mac was going to die in the next few seconds. Five or six bullets had entered her back, probably hitting all the major organs, and producing a bloodstain that left no doubts as to the immediate outcome.

Biting back the strangled gasp that threatened to burst from his lungs, Harm fell to his knees beside Mac. He pulled her into his lap as well as he could, ignoring the blood still pouring from her destroyed back. When he moved her, her painful gasp told him that she was still alive, however temporary that situation may be.

Against all probability, she opened her deep brown eyes and smiled at him. "Harm, I-" Whatever she would have said was cut off as she gave a convulsive shudder and went suddenly limp in his arms.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the rising tears soon proved to be pointless. He leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers as shuddering sobs tore through him.

He may have been crouched there in a little ball of misery for five seconds or five hours. He had no way of knowing, nor did he care.

What he DID care about was when the still body in his arms gave a sudden jerk. Shocked to feel Mac moving again, he pulled his head up and watched incredulously as she gave one sudden gasp as lungs started functioning again. Her back arched instinctively, and she started coughing as the blood in her lungs made itself known.

Once her coughs had subsided, Mac pulled her hand down from where she'd reflexively covered her mouth. Only then did she open her eyes.

Her partner was staring at her in slack jawed amazement. "Are you trying to catch flies with that mouth, Harm?" she asked quietly with a small smile.

His mouth remained open, but his head started slowly shaking in denial. He worked his jaw once or twice before any sound emerged. "How . . . But . . . You . . ."

While Harm had been working toward coherent speech, Mac was looking around and taking in the situation. She thought to herself. Especially if this relationship was going to progress in the direction she hoped it would.

Levering herself up to a standing position, she stretched out as well as she could, ignoring the way the her uniform top stuck to her back. Once she was in relative control of her body again, she looked down at Harm who was still sitting on the floor where he'd been cradling her dead body not

more than a minute previously. "Are you going to sit there, or are you going to get up, Harm?" she asked calmly.

He shook his head but slowly stood, staring at Mac the whole time. Swallowing hard, he asked, "What's going on, Mac?"

She sighed. "It's complicated. Now is not the time to talk about it, Harm. At the moment all that you need to know is that I'm alive."

They both heard the door to the warehouse come crashing inward, followed by multiple shouts. "Freeze! Police!" When they didn't get any immediate reaction, the invading cavalry spread out and started a search.

Mac turned back to Harm. He was focused over his shoulder, and she could see him take a breath to shout out their location.

"Hold it," she hissed to him. When he focused his confused look onto her, she continued, "Before they get here, you must know that NOBODY can know that I was shot. I promise to explain it to you later, Harm, but this CAN'T be told to the police."

"But . . . Why?" he asked in confusion.

"No time," she said in exasperation. "Just trust me, Harm. Everything happened just like we remember it, except the last guy. I saved your six from this guy," she waved at the corpse they were standing over before hurrying on. "You came over to me. When you got here, you saw him," she turned and pointed at the man who'd killed her, "and shot him. End of story. Okay?"

Her pleading look caused his hesitation to melt. Whatever was going on, he would go along with it for now. For her sake.

At his accepting nod, she smiled gratefully at him before bolting for the side of the room.

Once he lost sight of her, he turned back to the sounds of the slowly advancing police. "We're over here!"

One moment of silence before the general search made an obvious shift toward where Harm stood. Mac joined him at the same time that a police officer got within sight of them. She was wearing her uniform jacket again. Harm realized.

The approaching police officer was clearly a member of the SWAT team, carrying a submachine gun and wearing full armor. "Hands up," he barked. When the two officers complied, he asked, "Who are you?"

Harm answered, "Commander Rabb and Lieutenant Colonel MacKenzie of JAG Corps."

"Harm? Mac?" asked a voice coming up behind the officer.

"Webb?" they asked together.

Clayton Webb came up behind the police officer and looked them over. Giving a short nod, he said to the officer, "They're the team I sent in earlier." The officer immediately lowered his gun and walked toward the body on the floor.

Without the gun pointed at them, the two officers lowered their hands again. Mac folded her hands behind her back casually, but Harm folded his arms across his chest. "What's going on, Webb?" he asked angrily.

Webb had stepped toward them slowly, keeping his eyes on the only body within his line of sight. "What happened?" he asked, totally ignoring Rabb's question.

"We got here at 13:26," Mac promptly answered. "The door was open, and nobody answered our shouts. We entered and started looking around. Once we made it back to that wall," she gestured vaguely back toward where they'd originally been pinned, "six men opened up on us with submachine guns. We pulled out our own sidearms and returned fire."

"You two killed all six of them?" Webb asked with a touch of amazement.

They both glared at him. "I'm a Marine," Mac ground out. "I've been shot at in Bosnia. I can handle myself in a firefight."

"Easy, Colonel," Webb held up both hands in a placating gesture. "I wasn't saying you couldn't do it. I was simply impressed that you could do so without getting yourselves hurt."

Mac's glare softened a little.

The scene was swarming with police by this time, both of the armored and plainclothes varieties. "Okay, does anyone want to explain this mess to me?" growled a balding man holding up a lieutenant's badge.

Harm had to repeat the story to the newly arrived lieutenant, which led to one detective following each of the military officers as they retraced their paths from their original hiding spot (or "place of cover" as Mac called it). Both groups finally converged at the central spot again.

Webb had been quietly poking around the entire time but now pulled the police lieutenant to the side for a long, whispered conversation. Junior detectives were meanwhile bagging all the evidence, including all the shell casings they could find and each individual gun.

Webb finally approached the patiently waiting lawyers. "You two are free to go. Lieutenant Johnson has agreed to turn over the investigation to . . . my people," he finished after a fractional pause. He knew he wasn't fooling these two, but old habits died hard. "I'm sure AJ will give you two a few days to get over this. Just don't leave town."

"We know the drill, Webb," Harm interjected.

The intelligence officer nodded and looked at Harm for a moment before sighing and lowering his gaze. "For what it's worth, Harm, I didn't expect this to explode into a gunfight. I really DID think he'd go quietly. I'm glad you two weren't hurt."

"Thanks, Clay," Mac answered softly.

His usual impassive mask firmly back in place, Webb nodded shortly to the two and turned away to continue the investigation.

Harm quietly led Mac through the swarming police officers back out to his SUV, which both of them had ridden in from Fall's Church. Harm wordlessly climbed behind the wheel and headed them back toward the DC area and their apartments.

Twenty miles passed before he broke the tense silence. "Are you going to explain this now?"

She shook her head. "Not now, Harm. Just get us back to my apartment, and I'll explain everything after we get cleaned up."

He glanced at her momentarily before returning his full attention to the road. "I'm holding you to that, Marine," he warned in a low voice.

Smiling slightly, she turned to stare out the side window again. "I wouldn't have it any other way, Squid," she whispered her reply.

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An hour later found them safely ensconced in Mac's apartment, both freshly showered and with a pizza on the way.

"Okay, NOW will you explain what's going on?" Harm asked from where he was reclining on her couch in a pair of sweats he'd left at her apartment who knew how long ago.

She paused where she was fiddling with starting a fire in the fireplace. She thought with a resigned sigh.

Giving up on the fire for the moment, Mac took a seat on an overstuffed chair facing her partner and curled a leg under herself. Taking a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves, she turned to stare at the unlit fireplace and began speaking in a calm, uninflected voice. "We call ourselves Immortals. We will heal from almost every injury imaginable, including ones that will kill everyone else." She stopped, still not looking at Harm. She didn't want to volunteer any more information than he could deal with right now, so she waited for the questions to start.

"We?" Harm finally asked, forcing his voice to stay steady.

With a nod, she agreed, "We. There are hundreds of Immortals in the world, maybe thousands. It's not like there's a directory of us somewhere to look it up."

"How is this possible?" he wanted to know next.

Deciding that an unlit fire wasn't something worth looking at, Mac got up from her chair and moved over to the fireplace. "Nobody's quite sure," she answered his question as she struck a match to the newspaper she'd left beneath the logs. "We don't even know where we come from. None of us have parents. We're all foundlings."

"But, your mom and dad," Harm objected.

She shook her head, eyes still on the rapidly burning newspaper. "That story I told you about why I went to California was so you wouldn't question the trip. I had to go out there to . . . take care of some business."

"What kind of business?" he asked curiously.

She was silent for a long minute, watching as the paper was completely consumed by the fire and the logs began to burn in earnest. "You really don't want to know, Harm," she quietly answered. Reaching forward, she pulled the glass doors closed on the fireplace and took the two short steps back to her chair, deliberately keeping space between her and Harm. Pulling one leg upright in front of her, she wrapped both arms around it and rested her chin on top of her knee, once again staring at the fireplace.

"Why won't you look at me?" Harm wondered quietly.

Her lip tried to twitch into a sad little smile, but she just shook her head. "Because I can't face you, Harm."

"Why not?"

She bit her bottom lip and sniffed as a lonely tear snaked a winding trail down her left cheek.

Harm came to her and knelt by her chair. Pulling her head up with one gentle finger to look at him, he asked, "Why won't you look at me? What's wrong, Sarah?"

Forced to look at him, she held herself together until his question. At that point, she placed both hands over her face and forced back the sobs by sheer willpower. Once she was certain she had her voice under control again, she said, "That's just it, Harm. I'm NOT Sarah MacKenzie."

He hadn't moved except to place his arm along the arm of the chair she was in. "Then who are you?" he asked in quiet amusement.

"Diane Schonke," she answered in a barely audible whisper.

Harm's mind stopped responding to commands as his memory spun back to a series of flashes: His aggravation when he had to leave a note on his apartment door for Diane since he would be working when she would be getting there; Diane's pale face and blood soaked uniform as she lay dead on that gurney at the Norfolk docks; His heart wrenching grief when he finally accepted that the woman he'd grown to love had been taken away from him just as he was ready to accept his feelings; A pretty Marine major standing in a rose garden offering him a hand and a smile.

His heart started beating again, and Harm shook his head to dislodge the cobwebs. "How . . ." he trailed off, unable to voice any one of the million and one different questions spinning through his mind at that moment.

Diane was now looking over at Harm where he'd sat on the floor by reflex as his mind was occupied elsewhere. "I know you investigated my First Death, Harm, so I don't have to explain it to you. I woke up hours later in a morgue to find a kind man standing over me and trying to explain why I wasn't dead. He took me to Red Rock Mesa and started my training. Once I received enough training that he was willing to let me go, he helped me manufacture the identity of Major Sarah MacKenzie. I was happily working out of San Diego when I was pulled to DC to meet my new partner." She smiled at him, remembering how he looked in his dress whites and gold wings in the White House Rose Garden.

"But Diane was part of the crypto department. How could you get your law degree that quick?" objected Harm.

She rolled her eyes. "Lots of cramming," she answered dryly. "Truthfully, I didn't get my law degree. Since Matt and I were creating this entire identity, we gave her the degree so she could immediately start practicing. I look too old to still be a student, so . . ." She trailed off with a shrug. "Anyway, I looked up stuff as I needed it. I also watched several lawyers arguing in front of juries before I let myself get into that situation."

He smiled and said absently, "Imagine what you could do after some classes, Mac." His mind was still clearly processing everything going on. "How much of your history do I really know?" he asked curiously.

She smiled slightly. "Diane's or Sarah's?"

He opened his mouth to answer but grinned ruefully instead. "Okay, start with Diane's and then Sarah's."

She shrugged. "We met in the Academy and I was totally honest with you about my history then. I had no idea about Immortals at the time of course, let alone the fact that I would eventually become one. I just told you that Sarah MacKenzie sprang into being less than a year after I died. So what we've done together is actually most of Sarah's history, as it were."

The doorbell rang before either of them could say another word. Diane stood gracefully and answered it, paying for the pizza before returning to Harm. She placed the box on the coffee table in front of him and headed into the kitchen. After she returned with two bottles of mineral water and plates, she got herself some food and began eating.

Harm had been watching her silently the entire time. As he absently pulled a piece of pizza to his plate, he said, "You know, I've been trying to think of everything different between Diane and Mac and the list is getting pretty long. You already told me about your law degree. How about your voice, personality, mannerisms?"

She rolled her eyes. "You should know better, Harm," she began in Diane's voice only to shift to Mac's. "All it takes is a few acting and voice lessons." On to an amazing imitation of Renee Peterson, "With a little practice, just about any voice is possible." She cocked her head and went on in Harriet Simms-Robert's voice, "Is this good enough, or do you want me to do Sydney's too?"

Harm's eyes had already gotten wide by this point. "How long did it take you to learn that?"

She shrugged and resumed in her normal voice which was mostly Sarah MacKenzie's, "Couple weeks of instruction and several months of practice with a tape recorder. Don't tell me this is a surprise. Palmer's used the same trick."

He frowned in distaste at the thought of the assassin. Changing the subject, he said, "Diane didn't have your sense of timing, either."

"I AM Diane, Harm," she reminded him softly.

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "You know what I mean."

She nodded. "Yes, but it's surprising me how easily you're adjusting to all of this."

He grunted in amusement. "Are you kidding? This the best of all possible worlds for me, Mac. Not only do I find that the woman I loved years ago is still alive, but it turns out she IS the woman that I already . . ." He trailed off and went slightly pale as what he was saying soaked in.

Diane was staring at him with wide eyes. "Do you mean that?" she asked in a timid voice.

He opened his mouth and closed it again before taking a deep breath. Hanging his head and staring hard at the pizza on his plate, he muttered, "It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, 'it doesn't matter'?" she asked, trying to keep her tone neutral.

He placed his plate of pizza on the table, suddenly having lost his appetite. Leaning back in the couch and staring at the ceiling. "I can't be in love with you, Mac," he said in quiet anguish.

"Why not?" she asked levelly.

"You're practically engaged!" he exploded.

"No, I'm not," she corrected. "Even if I were, I'd say that you have a longer standing claim than Mic would. Not that I'd appreciate anyone trying to claim me, mind you," she added with a smile.

"You're not practically engaged?" he asked in confusion, still stuck on the first part of her answer. "I'd say that wearing another man's diamond ring is reason enough for me to stay away, regardless of which hand it may be on."

Chuckling, she put her plate down and held her hands up for his inspection, backs facing him. "Does it LOOK like I'm wearing a diamond ring, Commander?"

Starting at her right hand, he quickly checked each finger and found that indeed she wasn't wearing the diamond ring that he'd always seen as proof that he'd waited too long. The only jewelry on her hands was her class ring. He vaguely wondered where it had come from if her history had been manufactured.

"I'll take that as a 'no', Counselor," she teased, picking up her pizza and taking another bite. She studied him as she chewed thoughtfully. "You never answered my question, Harm," she pointed out after swallowing.

"Which question?" he asked, still working on wrapping his mind around everything.

"Whether you were serious when you said you loved me all those years ago."

"You never answered my question, either," he responded, trying to avoid her question. "Diane never had Sarah's time sense."

"It took me months to get it to work. You're avoiding the question, Squid," she answered with a hard stare.

He propped his hands on his knees, hid his face behind his hands, and took a couple deep breaths, trying to bring his heart rate under control. "Yes," he eventually answered in a soft tone. "I was serious when I said that I had loved Diane."

"What about the rest of the sentence? You were saying something about it being the best of all possible worlds that the woman you HAD loved was the same woman who . . ." She trailed off, expecting him to finish the thought.

"The same woman who I'm now in love with," he quietly finished the sentence.

Mac closed her eyes and breathed a soft prayer of thanksgiving. She had finally heard the words that she'd been waiting years for. Seeing that Harm was still hiding behind his hands, she put down her pizza and slid onto the couch beside her partner. Pulling one of his hands down, she kept hold of it with both of hers and said, "Harm, I want you to know something. As Diane I was looking forward to that weekend. I'd decided that I had waited long enough and was going to suggest that we take our relationship beyond friends and start dating." She smiled at his startled expression and continued. "I was getting tired of waiting for you to ask me out on a date, LIEUTENANT," she teased, addressing him by the rank he had held at the time.

He continued to stare at her for a few more seconds before breaking into strained laughter. Lightly squeezing her hand under his own trapped one, he said, "I was looking forward to that weekend, too. I was going to suggest we start dating. Great minds, huh?"

She smiled sadly. "I know. You told me about it, remember?"

"Yes, I suppose I did," he acknowledged, thinking about the whole Holbarth fiasco. "Wait a minute. After that kiss that you thought was for Diane, how did you not even give me a hint?"

"That I THOUGHT was for Diane?" she repeated, one eyebrow raised and a smile trying to force its way to the surface.

His stricken look was priceless. "Ah, what I meant was -"

She interrupted with a wide smile, "Too late, Squid. You just admitted that the kiss was to Mac, not Diane." She leaned back, her grin widening into a self-satisfied smirk.

He sighed in defeat. "Not that it apparently mattered, but yes it was to Mac, not Diane. I let you think it was for Diane because I was afraid of fracturing our friendship by bringing my emotions into it." He abruptly leaned forward intently, going on the offensive. "What about you, though? Here I am spilling my guts. I have yet to hear you say whether you love me."

"I did, Harm," she replied quietly, "on that ferry in Sydney Harbor."

His smile died. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Sarah." Instead of more words, he retrieved his hand from her grip and pulled her against his chest and wrapped her into a tender hug.

Enjoying the feel of his arms around her, she spoke up reluctantly, "You're taking this all way too calmly, Commander."

He pulled back slightly so he could look at her out of the corner of his eye. "How's that?"

"I've just admitted to holding a secret from you since meeting you in the Rose Garden. I've also admitted to being something that is not quite human. You're not angry, confused, frightened?"

He laughed lightly and pulled her back against his chest firmly. "I've known Sarah MacKenzie for five years. If I thought there was a problem, I know you would have already done something about it. I will trust that if there's anything about this whole Immortality thing that I need to know, then you'll tell me. I trust you, Mac."

They held their pose for a few more seconds before he started chuckling again.

"What's so funny?" she asked, relieved that everything seemed to be working out. There was still a great deal he had to hear, but everything seemed to be going in the right direction.

"What do I call you? Diane, Sarah, Mac, Marine, Ninja-Girl, Cryppie?"

She laughed through the threatening tears. "Any of the above will work, Stick Boy, but remember that Diane Schonke is officially dead. In front of others, you'd better stick with calling me Mac."

"Will do," he agreed. "Now what?" he quietly asked after a moment.

She pulled back from his embrace. "Now," she said cheerfully, "I'm going to eat my supper before it gets any colder."

He laughed, relaxed at the bantering tone. "Always thinking with your stomach, Marine."

She pretended a pout. "Remember that I'm a graduate of the Naval Academy. You can't blame the Corp for my appetite."

He smiled slightly at her comment before repeating, "Seriously, now what?"

She stopped with her water bottle halfway to her mouth. Looking at him, she answered softly, "We've admitted our feelings for each other, Harm. Even if we could go back to our partnership and friendship, would you want to, or do you want to go forward?" She fought the urge to hold her breath, waiting for the answer.

He shook his head immediately. "No, I don't want to go back, Sarah. I've wanted to go forward for years but never had the courage to say it."

She started breathing again. Giving him a small smile, she said quietly, "I'm glad, Harm."

The next few minutes passed in silence as they both ate quietly. Harm caught Mac sneaking glances at him, and she caught him staring at her once. For all their self assurance under almost every other circumstance, neither knew what to say or do next.

When Diane caught him staring at her the second time, she started giggling. Quickly composing herself, she said, "Look at us. It's like we don't know how to act around each other."

He gave her a soft little smile and said, "We're seeing each other in a different light. I for one don't know what to do about it."

"I have a few ideas," she returned with a mischievous glint in her eye.

He grinned back, and she got the full effect of his "flyboy grin" as she'd privately tagged it. "Oh, really?" he drawled.

"Really," she confirmed with a mostly straight face. Her light tone vanished, and she went on, "However we need to talk about a few things, first."

"Bobbi has offered me a position on the Hill," he said almost casually. "If the admiral won't permit us to have a relationship with both of us working for him, I can take Bobbi up on her offer. That would remove that obstacle, but I don't think it'll be a problem. The admiral worked it so that Bud and Harriet both stayed at JAG after their wedding after all."

Her eyebrows were both riding high. "You've thought about this?"

His bashful grin answered her question more than any words could.

She smiled and went on, "Thank you for the offer, but that's not what I was getting to. I was referring to the things you need to know about me and my Immortality."

His grin faded. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Mac," he said hesitantly.

"Yes, I do," she returned. Leaning back into the cushions, she balanced her water bottle on the arm of the couch. "Here goes," she mumbled to herself. Taking a breath, she dove in. "As you saw, Immortals will heal from things that will kill mortals. However, there IS a way to kill an Immortal. If my head is removed from my shoulders then it's all over. I'm telling you that just in case the fact ever becomes important. Most Immortals will leave me alone, but many will not. If I ever tell you to walk away, Harm, you MUST do it. You may feel that you can protect me, but you must understand that you'll simply get yourself killed if you try."

"But -" he interjected with a frown.

"No!" she reiterated firmly, staring him down. "This point is non-negotiable, Counselor. You have no concept of how ruthless some Immortals can be. Swear to me that you'll stay out of Immortal business, Harm. Because if you can't, then I'm going to ask for a transfer or resign and move away. It'll break my heart to do it, but that would be better than the alternative if it meant keeping you alive. Swear it, Harm."

He was frowning, but he nodded agreement. "Okay, I agree. I just don't understand why other Immortals are a danger to you."

She sighed. "You really don't want to know," she said sadly, thinking of the Game, Quickenings, and that There Can Be Only One. Her teacher encouraged her to stay out of the Game as he was, but he had also explained to her what the Game WAS in order for her to understand what motivates other Immortals.

Harm's frown deepened. "You know that you can tell me anything, right?"

She gave him a tired little smile. "I know you think so, but this is really something that you have no need to know, Harm. Please drop it."

He nodded slowly. "Okay, but if it ever becomes a problem, will you tell me then?"

she thought sadly. She had no compunctions against using a gun to stop an attacking Immortal, but she never took their Quickenings. She'd survived years by avoiding fights completely, and she had no plans to change that pattern now. To answer his question she said, "Yes, if it becomes a problem, I'll explain it then. I promise."

He nodded and leaned back comfortably. "Okay, now what happened to Brumby's ring?"

She grinned. "I was wondering how long it would take you to ask that question. We've been having problems on and off since he moved here. Referring to me as his fiancée to ZNN was the final nail in the coffin, though it still took weeks after that before I returned his ring." Her lip twisted in aggravated amusement at his relieved sigh. "I knew you didn't like him, Harm, but do you really have to be THAT obvious?"

He flashed her his most devastating flyboy grin. "I'm greedy. Now that I have you, I want you all to myself."

"You don't HAVE me, Commander." The tone was sharp, but her soft expression removed any sting the words may have carried. "Speaking of having you all to myself, what about Renee?"

Harm rolled his eyes. "Maybe we should set her and Mic up on a blind date."

Diane started laughing, picturing the two of them together. "Then we can set up Singer with Palmer, and they can all double date," she added around her giggles.

Harm threw back his head started laughing at that mental image. Mac relaxed, seeing that his reaction also meant that he was comfortable with her Immortality. Once he had collected himself, she asked, "Seriously, what about Renee?"

Rabb shook his head. "We haven't seen each other in weeks. It just wasn't working out for us."

Diane resisted the urge to say something biting about the Video Princess. Instead, she leaned forward and put her water bottle onto the coffee table. Scooting over to Harm, she pivoted on her near leg, throwing the other over his lap so that she was kneeling over her still sitting partner. She laced her hands behind his neck and said, "I could say that I'm sorry about you and Renee, but I wouldn't be."

Harm looked up at her through half closed eyelids. "I'm not very sorry about you and Mic, either. I still think you could do better."

"Really?" she drawled out, running both thumbs along the back of his neck and producing goosebumps in their wake. She slowly lowered herself until she was sitting on Harm's knees, facing him. "Would you perhaps know someone who IS good enough for me, then?" she asked in a teasing tone.

He grinned slightly. "Oh, let's see. I know of a naval aviator who's fond of you," he said as his hands crept up to lightly grip her hips.

"Only 'fond'? I'll have to work on that," she said as she leaned forward.