

BREAKTHROUGH

"Easy, Doc, easy"

Julia's eyes flew open and frightened and confused she looked around. She realized she was in her tent. Devon stood gasping for breath next to the cot, and glared down at her. Devon? Julia moved her head to see better. She remembered that she was fighting with Devon and that the woman fell off a cliff...

John Danziger took the Gear set off her head. Julia felt her limbs go weak when immense relief flooded through her. *This* was real. She had not killed Devon; that had merely been a virtual reality program.

Renewed panic washed over her when she realized she was tied to her cot and unable to move or sit up. They knew! Memories came back. Talking to Reilly. True suddenly appearing in the blue VR-environment. Chasing the terrified girl. Denying the accusations. And then... nothing.

"Who were you talking with in VR, Julia?" Devon asked urgently, suppressed anger in her voice. Julia frantically shook her head. She wasn't allowed to say. She *couldn't* say.

Yale bent over her. "You can trust us, Julia," he said. "Tell us who's out there." His tone was gentle but she could see the distrust in his eyes. Her features contorted as she struggled to find her voice. Why? To tell her secret? Or to merely say something, anything? It didn't matter. Her vocal cords adamantly refused to follow the orders of her brain.

"She's not going to talk to us, Yale," Devon said. She placed a hand on his shoulder, signaling him to follow her. Julia tried to plead with them with her eyes. Please, understand!

But they turned and walked out of the tent, conferring in low voices.

Julia was about to let her head fall back on the pillow when her gaze fell on another person, who was sitting silently on a crate at the foot of the bed. Alonzo. His dark eyes were ablaze with the anger and pain of her betrayal.

Shaking his head, the movement itself an accusation, he slowly stood up and walked away, leaving the tent. She tried to follow him with her eyes, for as long as possible, and when he disappeared, Julia wanted to scream. She desperately longed to tell the truth, to apologize, to say anything that would make that accusatory fire disappear from those eyes. She remembered how kind and gentle they had been when he told her she should

take credit for who she was, just before he kissed her.

She bit her lips and moaned while she stared up unseeingly at the ceiling. Unfortunately, Julia was unable to tell them the truth. The Council had seen to that.

oOo

"So, you don't trust me," Julia told her mother hotly. Her blue eyes smoldered with anger. "You want me to leave everything behind to go on a mission that will keep me in suspension for twenty-two years, knowing that I will never come back. And then you don't trust me to keep my mission confidential?"

"It's not about trust, Julia," her mother said calmly. "It's about Council policy. What I'm asking you to do is what we demand from all our agents. The block is only designed to help you keep your orders secret. It ensures that nobody can access your memory and dig those orders out, with or without your consent." The older Heller paused and stapled her fingers together, elbows resting on the surface of the desk before her. "You believe in the Council, don't you?" she asked softly. "You *know* that this planet is humanity's best chance to survive as a species. We merely desire to make certain the colonization of G889 goes accordingly to our best interests."

Julia nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

"So you will agree to undergo this procedure," her mother concluded. "It is scheduled for tomorrow morning. Dr. Balmer expects you in his office at 8 am."

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The following morning the clock chimed eight when Julia pushed open the door to Dr. Balmer's office. She expected a secretary and was surprised to find a kindly looking middle-aged man standing near the small counter that held the coffee machine. His face was ruggedly handsome, his hair graying near his temples.

"I'm looking for Dr. Balmer," she said hesitantly.

"That's me," he replied with a friendly smile. "You must be Dr. Heller. I was told to expect you. Coffee?"

Julia shook her head. "No, thanks." She was keyed up enough as it was without adding caffeine to her system.

"Nervous?" he asked, pouring himself a mug of steaming black liquid and sipping

cautiously.

"A little," she admitted. She tried to keep her voice steady. She was more than a little nervous; in fact, she was terrified.

"There's no need," he said, motioning to a small seating area with upholstered chairs. In her unease, Julia had failed to notice the seating area before. "Let's sit, and I'll explain to you what I'm going to do."

They both sat down, Julia on the edge of the seat while Dr. Balmer leaned back comfortably. "It's actually quite easy," he explained. "All I'm going to do is put you under deep hypnosis, where the mind is most susceptible to suggestions. Then I'm going plant some of those suggestions on how to keep certain matters confidential. Things that the Council wants kept secret. It's not painful in any way. As a matter of fact, you'll never even notice the suggestions are there, unless someone tries to entice you to break confidentiality."

Julia nodded uncertainly. She wasn't sure she liked the idea of being under hypnosis, of yielding control over her mind. Who knows what this innocent looking doctor could do to her?

As if he were reading her mind, Dr. Balmer chuckled. "Don't worry about the stories that you heard," he said. "I won't have you cluck like a chicken or dance a jig on the table. I couldn't *make* you do that, even if I wanted to. It's just not possible to make someone under hypnosis do something that they would never do otherwise. You are still in control over your actions. Just not on a conscious level. This mind-block works the same way. It's merely a tool to help you."

"Okay, I guess," Julia said slowly. "I'd like to get it over with."

"Of course," Dr. Balmer agreed. "I want you to sit back in that chair. Make yourself comfortable. Try to relax a little." When she complied, he pulled out a small chain from his pocket. A thin, silver ring dangled from the end. He leaned forward and swung it back and forth close to her face. "Look at the ring," he said quietly, his tone calm but commanding. "Follow it with your eyes. Now feel yourself relax. Deeper and deeper and..."

oOo

Julia awoke to the cry of a bird in the distance. She opened her eyes and squinted in the brightness of the tent. Groggily she sat up and glanced around. Her eyes widened and she pushed back the strands of hair that hung in her face. The tent was empty, except for the

cot she was sitting on and a small chest standing near the head of the bed. Suddenly the memories flooded back.

On wobbly legs, she walked to the entrance of the tent. She certainly had some apologizing to do today. Experimenting on Uly. Kidnapping Morgan. Scaring the wits out of young True.

As Julia ducked out the tent, she froze in mid-step. The area around the tent was empty. She was standing in a small clearing in the woods, surrounded by trees and low brushes. The camp was gone, disappeared without a trace. No glowing embers of last night's fire, no bustling people readying breakfast and packing vehicles. In fact, besides the birds in the trees, there were no signs of life at all. She was alone.

She plopped down on the ground where she stood, her legs no longer able to support her. "They left me behind," she whispered in disbelief. The sound of her voice startled her; despite the low tone it sounded loud in the quiet of the woods.

Julia remembered the looks in their eyes, last night. At least, she thought it was last night. Hurt betrayal, angry and accusing, or pleading for her to talk. Julia couldn't blame them. She deserved to be left behind. After what she tried to do to Uly...

While she stared at the grim beauty of the wilderness around her, Julia knew she was going to die.

Before she did, however, she desired one thing. And that was to clear her conscience.

She got back to her feet and returned to the tent. She was gratified to discover they had left her a Gear set, giving her a chance at life. She wasn't going to use it though, at least not to send out a distress call. She was *not* going to betray them again by calling Reilly and ask for his help. If she did, she would have to tell him where she was. And that would give him the one thing she had kept from the Councilman: the location of the Eden Advance group. She wasn't sure why she'd kept the location secret. All she knew was that she didn't trust Reilly. And these past few weeks on the planet had cast serious doubts over her once firm belief that the Council knew what was best.

She took the set, put it on her head and toggled it to record mode.

"Devon," she began. Her voice was hoarse and she cleared her throat before starting again. "Devon, I hope that some day you will view this message. This confession, if you like. I want to explain why I did what I did. I never meant to harm your son." Talking became more difficult as her throat constricted. Julia took a deep breath and attempted to continue. "My orders—" Her voice broke and she had to struggle for breath. "The..."

Coun... cil..."

She cried out when a sudden, sharp pain lanced through the back of her head. The world went black and stars danced in her vision while blood roared in her ears. It occurred to Julia that she was close to losing consciousness. Leaning forward, she rested her head between her knees and waited for it to clear. After a little while, her vision cleared, the pain receded and the roar in her ears muted to a dull buzz.

She tried again, willing herself to explain the mission, to confess her actions and reveal her contacts on the Gear's recording chip. The pain was even worse this time and her scream reverberated through the woods. Startled birds flew up and landed again in confusion on other branches a few meters away.

Julia rolled herself into a ball on the narrow cot, sobbing while the pain in her head slowly abated. Apparently, the mind-block was stronger than she thought. "It wouldn't hurt," she muttered glumly, remembering Dr. Balmer's assurances.

Abruptly she sat up, moaning when the pain worsened momentarily. She remembered something else he had told her. She was supposed to be in control. The suggestions he planted would only work as long as confessing her secrets was something she wasn't fully prepared to do. Maybe she didn't really wish to tell Devon.

Confused Julia shook her head. But she wanted to tell! The throbbing behind her eyes made it hard to think. She had a memory of Alonzo telling her that nobody made her, despite the tampering with her genes. Her life was in her hands. And she desperately desired to explain to him, to make him understand and to let him know she never meant to hurt him or betray him.

She switched the Gear back on for a third attempt. This time, however, she didn't address an imaginary Devon. Instead, she visualized Alonzo, as she had last seen him, and began to talk to the image in her mind.

Something snapped inside her head and she literally felt an invisible barrier give way. The words started tumbling out of her mouth, recorded by the Gear for posterity.

After she was finished, Julia realized the light was fading from the sky fast. Night was approaching. She put the Gear away, carefully wrapped up in a piece of cloth and placed in the crate. Maybe, hopefully, some day someone would find it and understand what she did and why.

With a last glance at the empty tent, she walked out and disappeared into the undergrowth. The nights were cold; winter was approaching. Dying from exposure

wouldn't be such a bad death, she thought.

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