

SECOND CHANCES

"You screwed up, Citizen. Big time." His face was grim, with an angry glint in his eyes.

"I know," she replied, her eyes downcast guiltily. She stood before him in VR as she had so often in the past few weeks. Her hands were folded behind her back. She shifted uncomfortably, bouncing on the balls of her feet. He was right; she had performed badly. And why? In a misplaced attempt to save a little boy's life. "I'm sorry --"

"Sorry' just doesn't cut it, Heller," he interrupted her. "You had *direct* orders to perform a certain procedure on the boy. You ignored your orders, finagling on your own instead. And failing miserably, I might add. I'm sure the Citizen Status Review Board will have something to say about it."

Julia's head shot up, her blue eyes suddenly wide with concern. "You can't take my Citizenship," she gasped incredulously. "My mother --"

"Your mother is long dead," he cut her short. "She can't help you, not anymore. You had better think about how you want to plead your case and explain your actions. Your transport will be there soon."

Her ears perked up, despite the Gear currently covering her head. "Ssh," she whispered, motioning him to silence. "I hear something." Listening more closely Julia recognized the sound of an approaching vehicle. "You're not sending a surface transport, are you?" she asked. He shook his head.

"I didn't think so. Someone's coming. I've to go."

"Heller," he warned her while she prepared to leave the VR environment, "just remember your orders..."

She drew back the eyepiece and quickly disassembled the special VR module that she used to communicate with the satellite circling high above. The soft hum of an electrically powered vehicle came closer steadily. Julia threw a quick look out the tent's entrance. A single headlight was bobbing up and down in the distance as the vehicle moved across the rough ground. An ATV, she realized. Who would it be? And why?

Glancing around the near empty tent Julia realized she had no weapons, nothing she could use to defend herself with. If someone had come back to kill her... She scooted out of the tent and hid in a nearby brush.

When the vehicle came closer, she recognized the driver. Solace. He was alone. At least

as far as she could tell.

In the gleam of the lamp tied atop the ATV she caught a look at his face. It was etched with concern, a worried furrow between his eyebrows and Julia smiled to herself. It didn't look like he intended to kill her. Fool. Following his sword instead of his brains. Probably frozen to mush during one cold sleep too many, she thought.

Her mind reeled with sudden possibilities. Maybe it wasn't all lost yet. Maybe she could redeem herself in the eyes of the Council. If she played her cards right...

It occurred to Julia that she should look disheveled, agitated, scared half out of her wits. After all, her only chance would be to convince him to take her back. Work on his conscience, she decided. Not to mention his hormones. She barely suppressed a giggle.

Julia ran her hands through her hair, messing it up, and bit on the inside of her cheek till tears sprang into her eyes. She quickly smeared some dirt on her face and cautiously pushed a branch out of the way. The pilot was pulling the tent flap aside, calling her name. Not yet, she decided. Let him squirm a bit.

Her would-be rescuer walked back to his vehicle and powered up the MagPro, wearily glancing around for possible danger. Perhaps he wasn't as dumb as his good looks made people think. Better be careful. She let the branch fall back into place and the sudden movement caught his eye.

Throwing his weapon carelessly aside, he pulled her up and held her in his arms. She clung to him, knees buckling. It didn't take much for her to pretend to be really desolate. All she needed to do was think of a possible Tribunal before her peers. Losing her Citizenship might be the least of her worries if she didn't pull this off.

Alonzo drew back a little. Gently, he wiped the tears from her face. "Julia, I'm so sorry," he said and she let out a small sob. "We should never have left you. But it'll be okay now, I promise," he whispered in her ear. She allowed a quick smile to flit across her face. Julia knew she had just gotten her second chance.

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