

## With a Little Bit of Luck...

by Angela Reese

*This story is the sixth in the Eden fifth season universe.*

Julia Velar slipped into her twin's room. "Lorien? Are you still awake?"

Lorien flipped on the light and sat up. "What's wrong?" she asked worriedly. "Couldn't you get to sleep?"

Julia plopped down on the bed. "I have a little problem."

"How little?"

"Very little, at the moment." Julia sighed. "Remember when I was visiting Iliana and Maryatt, two months ago? And the return ship was routed through the Teal-Vandor area and delayed, due to repairs?"

"Of course. And?"

"Remember I told you I met this really cute guy in a bar while I was waiting?"

"Uh-huh...Oh. Oh, no, you don't mean..."

Julia sighed again. "Unfortunately, I do mean. I'm pregnant."

Lorien hugged her. "Oh, dear. What are you going to do? Father will have a fit."

"And Mother will have two. Yes, I know." Julia groaned. "I don't even know the guy's name - how can I be having his baby?!?"

Lorien rubbed her sister's back soothingly. "Do you have any idea what you'll do?"

"Yes. I've been thinking about it all night; I'm going to take that job the agency offered."

"The one out on Sigma Altair? That's way out on the frontier!" Lorien gasped. "You'll go nuts out there - you said so yourself! What on earth does a pioneer world need a top-class programmer for?"

Julia grinned. "Well, it's not exactly a pioneer world - it'll be more like a resort. Five of the big travel companies got together and bought up the rights to the planet. They're designing it as a luxury stopover point on vacation cruises. They're also offering all sorts of crossover incentives between their companies, so the computer design to keep everything straight will be really tricky to set up. The agency said I was one of the three people they specifically requested."

"Wow." Lorien sighed. "I guess you're right, that is the best thing to do; but I'll miss you. What will you tell Mother and Father?"

"Nothing about the baby; just that I'll be taking this job and leaving in a week." She grinned weakly. "Who knows, maybe I'll meet someone out there who's willing to marry a single mother, and then I can tell them."

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Servalan glared up at the quivering aide standing before her. She was still in trouble over losing Orac, and was perfectly willing to take it out on anyone available. "This had better be good news," she said coldly.

He blanched. "Er, unfortunately, I have to report that Maryatt's family has disappeared. According..." he noticed that she was looking even more angry, and paled even more. "According to the neighbors, his wife said they were going to visit relatives."

"And?"

"I, uh, traced down all their relatives: none on Maryatt's side, parents and sister on the wife's side, all living outside Federation space, and a sister and nephew on Sigma Altair. It appears that they went to visit the sister outside our territory."

Servalan frowned. "Which means we can't touch them, unless they return." She paused, thinking, then smiled evilly. "However, that doesn't mean we can't send her a message..."

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"Julia Velar?"

Julia stared at the troopers at her door, confused. "Yes, I'm Julia Velar," she replied. "Is there a problem?"

The troop leader ignored the question. "You're related to Iliana Maryatt?"

"Yes, she's my sister," Julia said, getting worried. "Is something wrong? Is she alright?"

Attracted by the voices, Doran came toddling out to the door. "Mama?"

Julia put her arm around him, not taking her eyes off the troop leader. "I repeat, is my sister all right?"

In response, he nodded at his men. Two of them stepped forward and took Julia by the arms, while another two held Doran the same way. Terrified, he began screaming.

"What are you doing?" she cried, panicked. "What's going on?"

The troop leader unshouldered his rifle. "The Federation has a message for you to send to your sister: that we do not tolerate traitors and deserters, and that this is how we deal with them." With that, he took aim at Doran.

Julia stared, shocked, then screamed in anguish as her son was killed before her eyes.  
"NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

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"...and so with Iliana staying with me, I haven't spoken to Julia in nearly a year; it hasn't been safe." Lorien grinned suddenly. "Listen to how I go on. Sorry, you must be bored silly."

"Not in the least," Deeta replied, gazing at Lorien across the table. She noticed him staring and blushed. Smiling, he picked up his glass and raised it in a toast. "To happy meetings." She smiled and drank. He sipped at the wine, then continued. "Marry me."

Lorien nearly choked on the wine. "What?!" She stared at him in shock. "What did you say?"

Deeta reached over and took her hand. "I said, marry me. Please?"

"But we just met!"

He grinned at her. "Oh, that was hours ago." Without releasing her hand, Deeta moved his chair so that he was closer to her. "Besides, I've known you for ages."

"What do you mean?" Lorien asked, puzzled. "I just met you this afternoon."

"Ah, but you see, I've been dreaming about you for years."

"Dreaming about me?" she echoed, incredulous.

"Absolutely. We meet in a bar, you see, on dark, rainy night..."

"Oh, yes, a dark, rainy night. Of course."

"...and we are instantly attracted to each other, and spend the rest of the night making mad, passionate love together."

"Well, it would be a pretty pointless dream otherwise, wouldn't it?" she kidded him.

Deeta glared and kissed her nose. "It is obviously a sign," he declared loftily. "It must be our destiny to be together. You wouldn't argue with destiny, would you?"

"I'd argue with anyone who tried such a weak rationale," she laughed. "Destiny? Dreaming? Come on!"

He kissed her.

Several minutes later, Lorien sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. "Well, when you put it that way..."

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The door was opened by a cold, emotionless woman. "Yes?" she asked shortly. "What do you want?"

"Julia Velar?" the man asked.

If possible, she withdrew even more into herself. "Yes."

He smiled gently. "I have a proposition for you; I need a good programmer, and..."

She cut him off. "I'm not interested." She started to close the door.

"...and I can help you get back at the person who had Doran killed."

She froze, stared at him, and light seemed to come back into her eyes. Vengeful, angry light. She opened the door again and waved him in. "Start talking."

"My name is Carnell..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three years later...

The Federation guard examined the ID carefully, comparing it with his screen and with the impatient woman before him. "I wasn't told of any inspection, Technician..." he paused and glanced at the name again.

"Koralnik. Of course you weren't told of my arrival; that is why they're called surprise inspections. Now, trooper...Paral, is it? Are you going to take me to your commander, or shall we debate this all afternoon?"

The guard handed back her ID card and tapped a code into the intercom beside him. In moments, a second trooper appeared.

"Escort Technician Koralnik to the Commander, then return to your duties."

Her escort nodded once, then gestured for her to follow him. Trooper Paral, meanwhile, returned to his previous impassive stance.

Several hours later, Julia leaned back in her chair and sighed, massaging her neck. Base Commander Coran had, fortunately, not questioned the arrival of "Technician Lisal Koralnik" for a surprise inspection of the computer system. He had, however, insisted on providing her with an escort for the duration of her visit. 'For your own safety,' he'd said. 'I don't want the men to forget their manners just because you're the first woman they've seen in months.' She had been forced to accept.

//That's all I need,// Julia thought wryly, //a Federation officer with a sense of chivalry.// Well, she'd just have to pull an "early-riser" surprise inspection tomorrow, and hope her escort didn't expect her to be up before dawn. The terminal in her room, though not adequate for her job, at least had helped her find what appeared to be a usable terminal set off in a back room - someone's office, perhaps? Julia didn't care, as long as she got a few uninterrupted minutes with it.

She recalled her instructions clearly: "Bastet - I require access to the Federation base on Diranas. Set up an ID in their computer, as influential a person as you can manage, under the name 'Commissioner Earl Omeran.' ID card has already been taken care of; the ID code follows. -Ra." All she had to do was create the personage in the base's main computer, then link it to the ID code

for his card. She could do it in her sleep...but not on a terminal that was being monitored, such as the one in her room. She would have to take care of it first thing in the morning, before her escort caught up with her, or signal Carnell to abort the visit for now. Anticipating an early morning and a long day, Julia went to sleep.

//So far, so good// Julia thought, casually strolling down the hall. The trooper assigned to escort her had apparently assumed she would signal him when ready; there had been no sign of any guard or signal device on her door. The room she wanted was fairly close to her quarters; she had carefully wandered around a bit in case the halls were monitored, so it didn't look as if she were going straight there. If all went well, she could get the ID taken care of, then go pester the computer ops in the main room till her escort found her. //Gotta keep up the image// she thought to herself, grinning, as she reached the door to the room she wanted.

Julia tried the door - unlocked. //Good// It was indeed an office; a bare, dusty office, but with a terminal that - hopefully - worked. //At least it's not likely I'll be interrupted by the resident// Julia grinned, switching on the terminal.

Meanwhile, the door quietly slid closed behind her, and the sounds of the terminal starting up masked the soft hissing of gas from the ceiling. Julia suddenly found herself falling sideways off the chair...

Julia woke to find herself strapped to a chair, in what appeared to be the detention area. As if signaled by her movement, Commander Coran entered with two guards and closed the door.

Julia immediately went on the offensive. "What is the meaning of this? How dare you treat an inspector in this way! Release me immediately!"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible just yet," Coran replied calmly. "You tripped a security device in a restricted area, and must therefore be held in detention until further instructions are received."

Julia only half-listened to him; she frantically retraced her steps to the point when she passed out. //The terminal hadn't fully activated yet, so they don't know what I was trying to do... If that's the only reason I'm being held...// "What instructions?" she demanded. "There was no notice that the area was restricted; I was doing my job!"

Coran raised an eyebrow. "By sneaking off into dusty rooms?"

Julia glared at him. "My job is to test the security and integrity of the base computers. I can't do that on the guest terminal in my room, so I went to find another. It looked like an unused office. If it was restricted, it should've said so!"

Coran sighed. "Be that as it may, I have my orders. Anyone entering the restricted area who sets off the security system is to be held in detention until Commissioner Sleer is notified. Unfortunately, as she is presently touring the far Outer Worlds, it may take some time to contact her." Coran stood and nodded to the guards; they began unstrapping her from the chair. "I'm sure that once she understands the situation, you'll be free to continue your inspection. Until then, you will be detained in this room, without computer access. I will, however, make our booktape library available to you."

"Thanks so much," Julia replied sarcastically, rubbing her arms. She didn't bother getting up.

"I'll let you know as soon as we hear from Commissioner Sleer," Coran said as he left. The guards followed, and Julia heard the door lock behind them.

Standing, she put her hands on her back and stretched...in the process pressing the

subcutaneous signal device the guards hadn't found - or hadn't looked for. //I hope you haven't already left, Carnell// she thought worriedly, trying to appear annoyed for the cameras. //I hope you don't try to use that ID...//

"Commissioner...Omeran, was it, sir?" Trooper Nory asked, glancing from the screen to the distinguished-looking visitor.

"Yes, yes, that's right," he replied, fidgeting fussily with his clothes. "Do hurry up and let me in, won't you? I'm on a very tight schedule, and this detour is delaying me as it is."

"Just one moment, sir." Nory stepped over to the intercom and picked up the handset, apparently to clear his arrival. Carnell waited calmly...well, as calmly as the impatient "Omeran" would be at further delay.

About a minute later, Nory set down the handset and another man opened the door to the entranceway. "I'm Base Commander Coran," the new arrival introduced himself. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, Commander. I am Commissioner Omeran, and I was instructed to stop here to collect some information. Here are my orders, and the note to you releasing the information needed," Carnell said, handing over the expertly-forged documents. "I really am rather rushed, so I hope we can take care of this quickly."

Coran carefully looked over the papers. "These appear to be in order, if a bit strange in their request. I must admit, Commissioner, that we have something of a situation here. Your ID does not register in our computer."

Carnell affected an incredulous, shocked look. "What?! Are you saying that your computer thinks I'm dead?"

"No, sir, our computer claims you don't exist. Now, it's just possible," he went on quickly, before the annoyed Commissioner could reply, "that this is linked with an incident we had yesterday. I did not think the computers were affected, but I'll have my technicians run another check to be sure. Meanwhile, I hope you'll enjoy our hospitality? Trooper Nory will escort you to our guest quarters. I'm sure this will be cleared up in no time." Coran watched as the irritated Commissioner was whisked off to a guest room, sighed, and headed back to his office. //Two problems in two days// he thought tiredly. //What next??//

Meanwhile, Julia's signal was received by Carnell's computer; in the absence of any human response, a computer command rerouted it to the emergency system which forwarded it to Osiris...

Narissee finished setting the last course change back to Eden and grinned up at her passenger. "You know, Vila, I never asked - did you volunteer for this run because you like my ship, or because Ann was coming?"

Vila winked at her. "Well, I didn't want Ann to have to fly back all by herself, if the sale went through."

"It's a pity it didn't," Ann commented as she entered the flight deck. "It's even more of a shame that we had a wasted trip; if Jenna had been in comm range when we left, she might've known about this group, and warned us."

Vila looked disgusted. "I still can't believe they were trying to pass those rust buckets off as space worthy. They'd barely hold air, let alone a crew!"

"So speaks Vila the spaceship expert," Ann laughed.

"He has a point, though," Narisse said. "I think even the twins would've seen through those

ships..."

"Literally," Vila interjected.

"...and they're only a year and a half old. Those traders should've been shot for insulting their customers' intelligence."

"Oh, I don't know," Ann replied. "It could be an interesting project - the study of old models of Federation ships and where they fall apart first. Could be useful."

"Oh, sure, and I'm..." Vila was interrupted by a loud beeping from the console. "Are we back already? That seemed quick."

"It was quick, if that's the base," Narisse replied. "We shouldn't be in range yet." She brought the message up on her screen, read it quickly, and tapped out a reply. "No, not the base - just a note from an old friend." She cleared the screen, then stretched and grinned at Ann and Vila. "Do you think you two can occupy yourselves till we reach Eden? We have about half an hour before they contact us, and I have some things to take care of."

Vila leered at Ann and put his arm around her. "Oh, I think we'll come with something to do..."

Ann gave him her most innocent look as Narisse left. "Why, Vila, whatever do you have in mind?"

Narissee locked the equipment room behind her and went to a cabinet in one corner. She and Jenna had installed it in *Spirit* before taking her back to Eden; Narisse didn't mind taking passengers on *Spirit* for runs, but she had to keep anything to do with Osiris hidden away. The only person likely to find her special equipment now was Vila, and she was fairly sure that he had been the one who had helped Deeta learn who she was.

She pulled out her monitoring and comm unit and quickly set it up on the desk nearby. The emergency signal that had come in required verification; if Carnell did not personally cancel it, her verification signal would return directly to this unit, bypassing the *Spirit's* main comm system.

While she waited for the reply, Narisse wondered what the signal might mean. Carnell rarely left his base personally, preferring to hire specialists to do what they were best at. For him to have used the emergency signal, either his base security had been breached - exceedingly unlikely - or something had come up that was so important he wouldn't trust it to anyone else. Either way, it meant he had probably been captured, and hopefully she could pull him out before his cover was blown. If Servalan got hold of him, her revenge would make Deeta's treatment seem like a restful vacation.

Narissee was startled out of her thoughts by the comm light flashing. //That was too fast,// she frowned. //I wonder...// Then she stared at the message that had just come in - it was not the reply. "Another signal?" she muttered, puzzled. "But that's a one-shot signal device."

Two minutes later, the light flashed to signal another incoming message - the verification from Carnell's base computer. "Well, that's definite, anyway," she said to herself, disconnecting the equipment and restoring it. "He went and got himself in trouble somewhere, and wants me to come find him and pull him out." She closed the cabinet, locked it, and paused. "Hmmm...well, we're nearly back at Eden now; I'll take a peek at the comm monitor and see what they've picked up."

Once back on Eden, Narisse shut down the *Spirit's* systems while Ann and Vila went off to report; as soon as they were gone, she headed for the comm room that constantly monitored Federation communications traffic.

She found a very confused tech on duty. He looked up as she entered and brightened. "Oh, good, would you come look at this and tell me I'm not seeing things, please?" he asked, gesturing at a screen in front of him. "The computer picked up an ID request from the Diranas base," he continued, as Narisse walked over to him. "There has apparently been no reply yet, but the image

scan matched a listing in the database of our operatives."

"Which means it's someone we know," Narisso commented, reading the text message as the tech began to pull up the image. //Female. So, it's not Carnell.// "So what's the confusion?"

"She hasn't left Eden," he replied dryly, as the picture appeared. "In fact, I just saw her this morning."

Narisso stared at the woman's image. She recognized her immediately, but the tech's confusion was understandable. //Julia. Now I understand the double signal; they must've both been captured.//

"It's Lorien," the tech mused, shaking his head. "It must be a trick; she certainly hasn't been captured. What do you think it means?"

"I don't know," she lied, "but I think Blake and Deva should hear about this right away. Tell you what; why don't you take a printout of the message and picture to them right now, and explain how and when it came in. I'll stay here for you and watch for anything else."

He hesitated for a moment, but evidently decided that her acquaintance with Blake, Avon, and other major figures meant she could be trusted with the computers. Printing out the information, he hurried out.

Narisso waited till he was gone, then grinned and patted the computer. "Alone at last," she murmured, sliding into the chair. "Let's see...Diranas base, he said? I wonder what else they have to say..." She quickly had the computer search the day's communications for references to Diranas, and was rewarded by three messages. The first was the weekly report and requisition, the second was the request for ID on Julia, and the third...was Carnell.

Narisso quickly read the ID request on 'Earl Omeran' and shook her head. From the times on the messages, it was obvious what had happened: Julia had gone in with her fake ID to set up Carnell's fake ID, and something had gone wrong. //She must have tried to signal him when she was caught.// Narisso mused, //only he'd already left, so his computer forwarded the signal to me. Odd...this message doesn't sound as if they've linked the two of them.//

She carefully buried the messages by pulling up several more records and scrolling through them, then recalled Julia's so that it was the most recent. Then she waited for the comm tech to return, and planned.

As it happened, Avon arrived with the tech. "Welcome back," he said, smiling at her. "Blake's already called a meeting to plan a rescue; we'd like your input on it,"

"Of course," Narisso replied, already moving toward the door. "So, the woman's been identified, then?"

"Lorien believes it is her twin sister Julia," Avon responded, leading the way down the hall to the conference room. "She has no idea, however, why her sister would be on a Federation base, using an assumed name."

"Is Julia working with the rebellion?"

Avon snorted. "As far as Lorien and Iliana knew, Julia was living on one of the outer worlds, quietly raising computers and her son. They've apparently been out of touch awhile," he added dryly.

Narisso grinned but didn't respond, as they entered the meeting room. Blake, Deeta, Del, Lorien and Deva were already there, looking at a map of Diranas.

"...and the base is here, built into this mountain." Deva glanced up at their entrance, then continued. "Unfortunately, we have no plans of the interior. The base is relatively new, only three years old, and we haven't been able to infiltrate it. It hasn't been very high priority," he added, sounding almost apologetic.

"I've been there," Narisso informed them quietly; instantly, everyone's attention was riveted

on her. "Not long, I was in and out in a few hours, but I can find my way around. I'm sure I could find the detention area."

"That's great," Blake declared, smiling at her. "Now, how do we get in?"

"Why not the same way she did?" Deeta suggested. "Create an ID for someone to get in, then get to her?"

Deva shook his head. "Too risky. They'll be double- and triple-checking the ID's for all unknown visitors for awhile." He thought for a few moments, then looked at Avon. "What if a squad of Federation troopers arrived, with orders to transfer the prisoner to Space Command HQ? Korin's good at forging Federation orders. Top secret, Commander's eyes only, much wanted rebel spy, that sort of thing."

Avon thought about it. "It might work," he admitted reluctantly. "Risky, but it might just work. As long as the 'troopers' had the right sense of officialness and secrecy about them, the Commander shouldn't question it until it's too late."

"We'll risk it," Blake decided. "Now, who's going?"

"I am," Lorien declared, before anyone else spoke.

"Oh, no you're not!" "Absolutely not!" Both Del and Deeta spoke at once.

She glared defiantly at both of them. "Julia's my sister - you give me one good reason not to go!"

"I'll give you three," Narisse said, interrupting whatever Deeta had started to say, and earning a glare from him. She ignored it. "I'm going - I'm the only one who knows the base - and I want Deeta along; he's the best person here with a gun, other than me."

"Gee, thanks," Deeta muttered. Narisse ignored him.

"This means that, firstly, if both of you are at risk, you risk orphaning your daughters. Secondly, if Deeta is worrying about your safety, he won't have his full attention on the mission."

Lorien was looking resigned to being left behind...but not happy about it. "And third?"

"Thirdly, we can't risk your sister recognizing you," Narisse replied. "It would look very suspicious if the prisoner knew one of the troopers."

"To say nothing of how suspicious it would look if you were seen without your helmet," Avon pointed out dryly. "I believe even the average Federation trooper might be able to make the connection that you were related."

Lorien sighed. "All right, okay, I'll stay behind. Just get her out!"

Deeta hugged her. "Don't worry, love, we will." He looked at Blake. "So, when can we leave?"

Blake, in turn, turned to Narisse. "You know the area; I'm putting you in charge of the mission. When can you be ready?"

"As soon as the forged orders are ready. What ship are we taking?" she asked Deva.

"The *Predator*. She's fairly recent Federation-class, and she's just been refitted with Avon's latest engine improvements. She should be able to outrun whatever you run into."

"Good. We'll need to be fitted for uniforms," Narisse continued. "Del, I'm outfitting you as troop leader - you have the most recent experience with Federation procedures." //Since I'm not going to tell any of you about my experience,// she added to herself. She turned to Blake. "There's just one change in those orders - we'll be collecting two prisoners."

"Two?" Blake repeated, puzzled. "Who's the second person?"

"The Federation apparently hasn't identified him yet," Narisse replied. "While I was in Monitoring, I ran a check on other communications from Diranas. I found a second ID request, a few hours after Julia's, on a male whose ID did not register in the base computer. The rebel database didn't find a match on his description, so it wasn't flagged, but they may have been working together."

Blake nodded. "At the very least, it can't hurt to get them both out; we can sort out the man's identity when you're all off Diranas." He stood up. "Right, then I'll get Korin started on those orders; you three take care of the uniforms. Avon, Deva, make sure *Predator* is ready to go, would you? Good luck."

Two days later, as Del prepared to land on Diranas, Narisse finished stowing a few extra surprises in various pockets and reviewed the plans. "I want you both to keep two things in mind," she said firmly. "Firstly - both prisoners are getting out. Whatever it takes. Secondly, once we leave this ship, my word is law. No arguments, no discussions. If you have any problems with the plan, now's the time to mention them." She looked at them - silence. "All right. Del, if something happens to me, you're in charge. Deeta, if we both get taken out, it's up to you. If all goes well, we'll be back in orbit within a couple hours. Let's go."

Coran looked over the orders carefully. "I'm surprised you've come so soon, Captain Ritel; I haven't yet even received a response to my request for the prisoners' identities. Which, I notice, are not listed on these orders," he added, looking up quizzically.

"Top secret, sir; can't risk any of the local rebels finding out who we have." Del smiled briefly. "Even we aren't allowed to know who they are, sir."

Coran rose. "Well, I don't want to delay you. Come this way." He led the way from his office to detention, followed by Ritel and his two quiet, superalert troopers. //It's a pity I don't have men that alert// Coran sighed.

Just as they reached the detention block, the intercom signaled. "Commander Coran to the gatehouse, please. Commander, please report to the gatehouse."

"Busy week," Coran muttered. He waved the detention guard over. "Crin, Captain Ritel is here to collect your prisoner. Take care of it, will you?" He turned back to Ritel. "Sorry, but duty calls. The man is still being held in our guest quarters. Crin will release the woman to you, and I'll be right back to escort you to the other one."

"No problem," Del replied, "I quite understand. We'll be out of your way shortly."

As Coran left, and Crin turned away to open the doors, Del gave the other two a quick, relieved look. As soon as the doors opened, he marched in, followed by Narisse and Deeta. "So, where is she?"

"Over here, sir," Crin replied, unlocking one of the cell doors. "All right, you! Hands on your head and come out slowly!" He waited until Julia was out of the cell and being covered by one of the troopers, then holstered his gun and picked up a set of restraints. "Arms out!" he ordered. Julia quietly held her arms out in front of her; Crin attached the wrist restraints and stepped back. "She's all yours, Captain."

Gesturing with their weapons, Narisse and Deeta nudged their 'prisoner' into motion and headed toward the door, followed by Del and Crin.

Coran was standing in the hall, just outside the exit, with four troopers behind him. "There seems to have been something of a misunderstanding, Captain Ritel," he said, coldly. "These men are also here with orders to collect a prisoner - but only one of them. Furthermore, they have orders directly from Commissioner Sleer. Care to explain?"

Narisce was moving before he finished. In a single motion, she released a smoke grenade, brought up her gun and destroyed the intercom. Deeta shoved Julia behind him and began firing at the guards. "That way!" Narisse ordered, shoving a confused Julia in the correct direction. "Move it!" She heard a thud and glanced behind her long enough to see Del on the floor, dead or unconscious, just as the detention door slammed shut between them. Swearing under her breath, she let off another wide blast, then sprinted after Deeta and Julia.

They ducked around the corner and paused. "We'll have to bluff our way out fast, before the Commander gets to the entrance," Narissee said, jogging down the corridor toward the outer blast doors. "Let's hope these doors are soundproofed. When we get there, follow my lead."

Deeta didn't move. "Where's Del?" he demanded, looking back down the hall. "What happened?"

Narissee paused and looked back at him. "The detention guard hit him while he was still inside, and locked the door. I don't know if he was unconscious or dead, but we'll have to get out of here first, then find out."

"No! I'm not leaving my brother here! I'll..."

"You'll do as I say, or I swear I'll shoot you myself and leave you here with him!" she hissed. Deeta blinked, stunned, as she continued. "I told you on the ship - no arguments! Blake put me in command of this mission. If Del is alive, we will get him back, but we are leaving this base right now!" Narissee turned to the very confused Julia. "We're going to get you out of here. Try and act like a prisoner; we'll have to bluff our way out. Deeta, keep her covered." With that, Narissee turned and opened the doors, then marched double time down the hall toward the exit, hoping the guard hadn't been able to hear any of Deeta's yelling. Deeta and Julia quickly caught up and fell into formation behind her.

The guard looked relaxed at his post. //Good// Narissee thought, //he hasn't heard yet// He looked up at them, evidently recognizing Julia. "So, you got the orders straightened out with the second group, then?" he asked. "Where's your Captain?"

"Back in the Commander's office," Narissee replied casually, as he opened the door. "They're taking care of some paperwork; our orders are to stow the prisoner and prepare for departure."

"Ain't that just like the officers?" he sighed. "Tossing back a nice glass while we take care of the work." He grinned and waved them through. "Safe landings."

Narissee nodded in response, then hustled Deeta and Julia toward their ship.

Once out of sight of the base, before reaching the landing field, Narissee led them behind some rocks and began stripping off her uniform. Underneath, she wore a snug jumpsuit of mottled grays and browns, that perfectly matched the landscape.

"Put that on," she told Julia, indicating the uniform, then looked at Deeta. "Board the ship as if nothing is wrong. They won't see a prisoner, so if anyone tries to stop you, tell them the base sent you to secure the ship. Take off as soon as you can and head for the asteroid field at Alpha Omega IX; wait there for me to contact you. If you don't hear anything in 48 hours, get back to Eden."

"Where are you going?" Deeta asked.

Narissee grinned. "I'm getting on the other ship," she replied cheerfully, then sobered. "I did come prepared for this eventuality," Narissee said calmly. "I will not allow Del to fall into Servalan's hands, nor will I allow her to take the other prisoner, whoever he is." She emphasized the last three words slightly, giving Julia a meaningful look that Deeta missed. "Either all of us will be free in 48 hours, or..."

"...or?" Deeta prompted.

"Or there will no longer be another ship," she replied calmly, "and neither you nor Blake are to send any further rescue efforts. None," she emphasized, watching Deeta until he sighed and nodded. "Now get moving, before the other squad leaves." With that, she took off, sprinting through the rocks, almost invisible.

//Lucky for me Del has to be carried// Narissee thought as she slithered through the rocks by the Federation ship. //I may not've had time to get here otherwise// As soon as the guard outside the ship spotted the returning group, Narissee swarmed across the area of bare ground and underneath the ship to the closest inspection hatch. Pulling a small tool out of a pocket, she quickly

picked the electronic lock, slid inside, and quietly closed the hatch behind her. Narisse paused for a moment to recall the ship's layout, then began to quickly and quietly move through the ship's duct system.

She had reached an intersection when she felt the engines start. Activating the magnetic clamps in her boots, she braced herself against two walls to avoid sliding during takeoff. As soon as they left orbit, she disengaged the clamps and continued on.

Soon afterward, Narisse reached a grating overlooking the flight deck and settled down to wait. Once she was certain that no one was near enough to hear her, she pulled a small disk from another pocket and carefully attached it to the grating. Quietly moving on, she repeated this procedure at gratings opening into the sick bay, mess hall, and engine room.

Narissee waited until she was certain that most of the crew was either at dinner or at their stations, then put on a thin mask and hit a button on a wrist control. Simultaneously, each of the disks released a clear, odorless knockout gas - one that Servalan had had made, and that Narisse had stolen from her two years ago, just after Servalan had killed the inventor. It took effect almost instantly.

As soon as everyone in sight was unconscious, Narisse opened the grate and slipped into the main corridor. She quickly and thoroughly investigated the entire ship, top to bottom, to make sure no one was awake; she could not allow anyone who saw her to survive, and her preferred plan required that the crew be either entirely alive or entirely dead. Del and Carnell were locked in the brig, blissfully unconscious along with their guards. Narisse finished her inspection with the bridge, then sat down and debated what to do with the crew.

"Kill them, or dump them?" she muttered to herself, checking the computers for planets in the system they were passing through. "The gas will keep them out for at least ten hours; do I dump them on a planet, or in space? Hmm... " She sighed. "The planet, I guess. I must be getting soft." She picked out a likely planet, uninhabited, and set course for it.

As soon as they were on board *Predator*, Deeta hustled Julia into a seat, strapped himself into the pilot's chair, and took off. When they were on course for Alpha Omega, he finally relaxed and slumped back into the chair, removing his helmet. He stared blankly off into space for a long moment, then shook himself and turned to smile at his passenger.

"Sorry, you must be a bit confused by now," he apologized, seeing the puzzled look on her face. "My name's Deeta Tarrant. You're Julia Velar, yes?"

Julia had been watching her rescuer ever since he removed the helmet. He looked familiar in some way, and apparently knew her, but she couldn't place him. "Have we...have we met before?" she asked slowly.

He looked startled. "Not that I recall," he replied after a moment, then grinned. "You are fairly well acquainted with my wife, though."

"Your wife?"

"My wife, Lorien," he added, smiling as he watched her reaction.

"Lorien...my sister?" Julia stared at him as she realized who he meant. "You're married to my sister? How is she? Where is she?" She glanced around the flight deck, half expecting Lorien to pop out somewhere.

"She's back at base," Deeta replied. "We're with Blake's group. Our computer flagged the Diranas request for your ID, because it recognized you as Lorien. When we realized who you were, we set out to rescue you...and the other prisoner. Who was he, anyway?" Deeta asked, curious.

Julia gave him her best blank look, remembering the woman's warning. "What other prisoner? I was the only one in the cells."

Deeta raised an eyebrow. "We were hoping you knew who he was. Oh, well. The kid who was caught is my little brother Del; the woman who went after him is Narissee. And I pray the gods she's successful," he added quietly.

"So, how is Lorien?" Julia asked, changing the subject. "I haven't heard from her in, oh, four years. When did you get married?"

"We met a little over three years ago; she interviewed me after one of the Teal-Vandor skirmishes." He smiled reminiscently. "We were married about a month later."

Julia looked amazed. "You got Lorien to make a decision that fast? I'm impressed."

He smiled wickedly. "I was very persuasive. We have twins - girls - that are eighteen months old now." He grinned at Julia. "It seems to run in the family. Which reminds me - Lorien said you and your son were living on Sigma Altair. Is he somewhere safe, or do you need to...what's wrong?" he asked abruptly, interrupting himself as Julia paled and stiffened in her seat. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Doran - my baby - is dead," she said in a rough voice, eyes closed. "Servalan had him killed four years ago, just after she had my brother-in-law killed."

Deeta paled. "Oh, no. Iliana escaped..."

"It was a message from Servalan," Julia continued bitterly. "The trooper said to tell Iliana what happened to 'traitors and deserters.' Then his men grabbed me and Doran, and shot him in front of me."

Deeta reached over and squeezed her hand. "Oh, Julia, I'm so sorry."

She shook herself and smiled bleakly at him. "It wasn't your fault. Or Iliana's, for that matter. It was Servalan, and those troopers. Shortly after that I joined...a group fighting the Federation." She abruptly stood up, eyes glinting. "I think I'd like to lie down now, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Deeta replied, gesturing toward the door. "There are several rooms that way - use any of them. I'll let you know when we hear from Narissee." He watched her leave the flight deck, a worried look on his face.

After hauling all the troopers out onto a deserted area of Eldon VI, Narissee tossed out a few crates of rations and a distress beacon. The Captain she locked in the brig. She moved Del and Carnell into officers' quarters, settled them in, then took off again. As soon as they were on course, she carefully disarmed the explosive device sewn into her jumpsuit, that would have been detonated had she been captured. After signaling *Predator* that she would rendezvous in ten hours, Narissee set the course on automatic and went to check on the ex-prisoners.

Del was still unconscious, but seemed all right; she went into the next room and found Carnell just waking up.

He blinked up at her, then smiled dazzlingly. "Another miracle rescue, Osiris? I'm impressed. How did you manage it?"

She winked. "A girl has to keep some secrets, Ra. Incidentally, your fellow rescuee doesn't know who I am, and I want to keep it that way."

"Of course." He sat up and stretched. "What about Bastet? Did you get her out?"

"She's safe and sound, on another ship. We'll rendezvous with them soon. Before we do, what about you? Are you taking the captain's shuttle and disappearing, or would you rather hang around and hope no one identifies you?"

"Hmmm... Much as I would enjoy visiting with you and Bastet, my dear, prudence dictates I exit quietly. Shall I leave the shuttle adrift, or would you like it to disappear?"

"If you can find someone who looks like the captain, have him sell it and get a ticket to the outer worlds. This ship, I think, will be donated to the rebellion."

"A bit of misdirection?" he asked with a delighted smile. "Marvelous! Commissioner Sleer should choose her subordinates more carefully, if her captains are prone to killing their crew and deserting to the enemy. Do you have plans for our dear captain?"

"I thought I'd see what information we can get from him, then dispose of him. Incidentally, he didn't kill the crew - he dumped them on a primitive planet with rations and a distress beacon."

Carnell tut-tutted. "You're getting soft, my dear...and more devious. No one saw you, I assume?"

Narissee managed to look affronted. "I should think not! What do you take me for, an amateur?" She grinned at him as he stood up. "Come on, we should get you on your way before Del wakes up. Did he get a good look at you?"

Carnell shook his head. "The poor boy was unconscious when they dumped him in the cell; he was just starting to wake up when your gas hit us." He smiled consolingly and patted her on the shoulder. "You won't have to get rid of him, dear, he hasn't seen me."

"Very funny."

As they walked down the corridor to the shuttle bay, Carnell sighed. "I wish I had at least gotten a glimpse of the information I went in for. It won't be safe to try again for ages, and she may move it entirely."

"What was it?"

"I've no idea," he admitted with a wry smile. "Whatever it is, it has extremely high security, with - as you saw - instructions for any intruders to be held for Servalan's personal interrogation. It has to be something terribly incriminating, and yet she either cannot or will not destroy it. I would dearly love to know what it is."

"That curiosity of yours will get you killed one day," Narisse scolded him. "It nearly did this time. If the rebel computer hadn't flagged Bastet's picture, I might not've tracked you down in time."

"Hmmm...perhaps I should see about adding a backup signal device - one that is activated by the presence of gas or drugs. That would have given you several extra hours." He grinned. "In fact, it would have prevented my being captured at all."

Narissee looked thoughtful. "Yes...the problem would be to make it sensitive enough to register unconsciousness or drugs, without getting false alarms from, say, sleeping, viruses, antibiotics, et cetera." She grinned at Carnell. "That one may take even your team at least a day or two."

"Very amusing, my dear," Carnell replied blithely, climbing into the shuttle.

Narissee paused and glared through the hatch at him. "That's the best you can do? 'Very amusing'?" She laughed and followed him aboard. "You really need to work on your comebacks, Ra; you're obviously out of practice."

She found Carnell checking over the controls. "So," he asked, without looking up, "what are the plans for Bastet?"

"She's expected back at Eden, primarily," Narisse replied. "She hasn't seen her sisters in over three years; it would look odd if she didn't at least visit, and I'm assuming she won't want to pass up on the visit. Whether she'll want to stay or not, I don't know."

"Hmmm..." Carnell gazed thoughtfully into the distance for a moment, then gave her an impish grin. "Sorry, not enough information to predict it. Have a seat and tell me everyone's life story."

Narissee rolled her eyes and patted him on the head. "Have a nice trip, O Great and Wonderful Manipulator."

"Psychostrategist," he interjected.

"Manipulator," she reiterated, grinning. "Now get going before Del wakes up and starts

wandering around. I'll contact you later." She slipped out and sealed the hatch.

By the time Narisse got back to Del, he was waking up. She plopped down on the side of the bed and grinned at him. "Hey, sleepyhead, 'bout time you rejoined the fun."

Del blinked up at her. "Huh? Where are we? What hap..." he paused and his eyes widened as he remembered. He put a hand to the bump on his head. "I was hit! Did you get Julia out?" He looked around at the well-furnished room and the open door, confused. "Are we prisoners?"

"On board a Federation transport, yes you were, yes we did, no we're not," Narisse replied. She stood up. "When you're feeling more mobile, come join me on the flight deck and I'll tell you the whole story."

Del glared at her, trying not to grin. "Are you always this perky waking someone up? Avon must love that."

Narissee affected a blank look. "Pardon? What does Avon have to do with my waking people up?"

"Oh, I spotted him passing a note to Vila that Vila gave you," Del replied, smirking as he slowly got up. "Sneaky, very sneaky."

She patted him on the head patronizingly. "Silly boy. He was sending me a request for some supplies he wanted me to pick up for him. I don't know why you'd think we'd be interested in each other." Narisse grinned at him and left.

Del waited till she was gone before he replied. "Because I managed to read the note," he said quietly, smiling, "and unless Avon's using a very strange code, it wasn't asking for supplies."

Julia woke up to hear voices on the flight deck, and wandered back to see who Deeta was talking to. Narisse was on the screen.

"...and we'll meet you there," she was saying. "I want to make it look as though this ship is going to the rebels - but to a known rebel planet, not to Eden."

"But Del's okay?" Deeta asked anxiously.

Narissee laughed. "Yes, mother hen, he's fine; you haven't lost your competition. See you on Eden." With that, she ended the transmission before he could respond.

Deeta glared at the screen, grinning wryly. "I hate it when she gets the last word," he muttered, then glanced over to Julia. "Hi, there. Feeling a bit better?"

She nodded. "A bit, yes. The rescue went well, then?"

Deeta grinned. "The miracle worker strikes again - she dumped the crew, captured the captain, and the ship is being 'donated' to the rebellion. Just another average day for us rebels." He frowned slightly. "It's odd, though; she didn't mention the other prisoner. I wonder what happened to him..."

Julia shrugged. "Maybe he was never on the ship to begin with. Perhaps whatever he was being held for got straightened out."

"Hmmm...you're probably right. Well, I'd better get us on our way," he said, sitting down at the controls again. "Strap yourself in; next stop Eden base."

Julia settled in to the other flight chair and got comfortable, then looked over at Deeta. "So, on the way, tell me more about how you and Lorien met."

He smiled happily. "Well, let's see...there I was resting up after the fight, when I opened my eyes..."

Several hours later, Deeta signaled Eden for landing permission, then stared at the screen when the base responded. "How did you get back already?" he demanded.

Narissee shrugged, smirking. "Good ship. Very fast. We even picked up some supplies; want to hear the flight plan?"

"No!" he grumped, glaring at her. "I'm going to have to talk to Avon about his so-called improvements," he muttered, then sighed. "Okay, okay, so you beat us back. Would you like to please tell us where we can land?"

She looked thoughtful...if you could ignore the impish twinkle. "I don't know...what was that about the engine improvements? Avon's right here, did you want to talk to him?"

"No, thank you," he replied, just as sweetly. "I'm sure Julia's anxious to see Lorien, though, so if we could just land...?"

"Any time you're ready; the coordinates have been in your flight computer for the last, oh, 90 seconds." She grinned at his expression. "Meet you in the hangar!" The screen went blank.

Deeta glanced over to see Julia trying not to laugh, and glared at her. She looked innocently at him. "She does seem to enjoy getting the last word in, doesn't she?" As he turned back to the controls, she heard him muttering something about trying women. Julia grinned to herself. If Ra had picked her out - and Narisse had seemed to know him - then she was likely to be very trying indeed when she wanted to be.

The hangar doors closed above them as *Predator* settled to the ground. Julia gazed out the viewscreen at the vast underground hangar bay they were in. "Impressive," she murmured, looking around at the variety of ships surrounding them. "Is the rest of the base this elaborate?"

"You'll have to see for yourself, when you get the tour." Deeta locked down the controls and unstrapped himself. "Come on, then; are you just going to stare at the screen all day? Lorien's waiting."

Needing no further incentive, Julia was out of her chair before Deeta reached the door. He grinned and opened the door, then stepped aside when he saw Lorien running toward the ship. "Julia!"

Julia's face lit up. "Lorien!" She dashed down the ramp and met her sister at the floor.

Lorien hugged her fiercely. "Oh, Julia, thank the gods you're safe!"

Behind them, Deeta pretended to pout. "I'm safe, too, you know," he pointed out to no one in particular.

Lorien laughed and hugged him as well, then grabbed their hands and pulled them toward the exit. "Come on, let's go in. I made the twins wait in our quarters with Vila, and they can't wait to meet their long-lost aunt."

Julia noted the many double-takes they attracted passing through the base, and grinned. "Just like old time, sis; I guess not everyone heard who was being rescued."

"Well, it's a big base. Here we are," Lorien commented, as Deeta keyed a door open and ushered them through.

Two little whirlwinds immediately pounced on the adults. "Daddy! Daddy!" Another man - Julia assumed this was Vila - came over and scooped up one of the girls as she was about to leap from a chair, then set her down on the floor. Deeta had simply sprawled on the floor with both girls climbing on him, and was being hugged and kissed thoroughly as Lorien looked on. Despite preparing herself for the meeting, Julia could feel tears pricking at her eyes. //Oh, Doran// she mourned.

"Hello," a voice said at her elbow, "I'm Vila." Julia turned to see the man who had been watching the twins. "Don't tell me, let me guess...you're related to Lorien, right? I can see a faint resemblance."

She laughed, liking him instantly. "Yes, actually," she replied, "I'm her mother, here to see my grandkids. And what do you do, youngster?"

Vila grinned back at her. "I can see I should be dating more grandmothers," he laughed.

"Come on, let's see if we can't pry the kids loose yet." He went over to Lorien and tapped her on the shoulder. "Think Deeta's had enough of being a play toy yet?"

Lorien smiled. "Oh, I think he'll survive. Come on, girls," she declared, picking up Della, "I want you to meet your aunt Julia. Julia, this is the younger of the two, Della, and Lora is...Julia? Julia, are you all right?" Lorien asked worriedly, as her twin suddenly turned pale.

Julia stared at Della in shock. Doran...they were so alike, they could be twins. Suddenly, she remembered Doran's first birthday, when she realized how much he looked like his nameless father. In a flash, Julia abruptly realized why Doran looked so similar to Lorien's children, and why Deeta had looked so familiar. Stunned, she nearly fell into the chair behind her, staring from Della to Deeta and back. "Oh, dear gods," she murmured. "Oh, gods, I don't believe it."

Lorien sat down beside her. "What is it?" she asked anxiously. "What's wrong, Julia? Are you all right? Were you injured on Diranas?"

Julia gripped Lorien's hand tightly, staring intently at Deeta. "That was you in the bar on Teal, wasn't it? Six years ago?"

"Six years ago?" he repeated, puzzled. "Six years ago on Teal I was..." suddenly he stopped, paled, and sat down himself. "No," he breathed, shocked, "no, it can't be."

Vila looked at the three adults, staring at each other in shock, and decided it was time for a quick exit. "Come on, kids," he said quietly, scooping them up and hurrying out the door, "let's go see what we can find in the way of a snack, shall we?" He keyed the lock on the way out, leaving the other three to be undisturbed.

Deeta stared at Julia and Lorien, glancing from one to the other, looking dazed. "I thought it was a dream," he murmured, dazed. "I never thought...when I met Lorien..."

"You thought what was a dream?" Lorien asked, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"Lorien...do you remember the night I told you I was going to Sigma Altair?"

Lorien looked at her sister, puzzled. "Yes, of course; you were leaving because of Doran."

"Yes, because of someone whose name I didn't know, whose face I vaguely remembered, who I met one night on Teal." Julia looked intently, almost pleadingly at her sister. "Lorien, that person I met...it was Deeta."

"What!?" Lorien stared at them both in shock, then looked at Deeta for an answer.

He looked numb. "I didn't think it really happened," he said quietly, still sounding stunned. "The next morning, she...you...had already left; I thought I had dreamt it all. Then, when I met Lorien..."

"It was as if the dream came true," Lorien finished for him. She grinned weakly. "Remember? That was one of the lines you used on me to get me to marry you."

"I worked, didn't it?" he replied, grinning, then abruptly sobered. "So...what happens now?"

Julia shook herself back under control. "What happens now is that we all catch up on things, and I rejoin R...the group I work with." She caught Lorien's dubious look and hugged her, glancing up at Deeta. "Would you mind giving us a few minutes alone, Deeta?"

"Hmmm...Oh! Sure, absolutely, I'll be just outside if you need me," he replied, hastily scrambling to his feet and out the door.

Julia turned to Lorien. "Listen to me, sis; I know what you're thinking."

"You always did manage that," Lorien giggled, then sniffed.

Julia sighed. "Lorien, I am not after Deeta. We had one short night, and that was all we were meant to have." She grinned. "Look at it this way...maybe in the great scheme of things, this was all planned so he'd notice when you came along later."

"But what if he wants you?" Lorien replied unhappily. "You're the one he dreamed about for years, remember - after just one night. I'm just the one who happened to resemble the dream."

"He didn't marry our picture, Lorien," Julia said sharply. "He married you. Your personality, your character, your quirks. Don't forget that. I've gotten the impression that Deeta is someone who goes after what he wants. Don't you think that if he'd wanted me that badly, he would've tracked me down, even not knowing my name?"

"I suppose so," Lorien replied quietly. "But..."

"What?"

"That means...Doran is his son."

Julia winced and looked away. "Was his son."

"Was? What do you mean?" Lorien stared at her. "Julia? What happened to Doran? I know I lost touch when Iliana came to stay with me; I didn't want the Federation to track her down. What happened?"

"Servalan wanted to send a message to Iliana," Julia said bitterly, "and I was the only relative within reach of the Federation. She had Doran killed while I watched."

"Oh, no! Oh, Julia!" Lorien hugged her sister tightly as Julia continued.

"As soon as I found out who was responsible, I joined a group fighting the Federation, and Servalan in particular. That was over three years ago."

Despite herself, Lorien grinned. "And there we were, both staying out of touch with the other, so we wouldn't drag the other down into rebel associations...and both of us were associated with the rebels anyhow! What a pair we are, sis."

Julia laughed, then stood up, pulling Lorien with her. "Come on, then."

"Where are we going?"

"Well, we can't leave your husband standing about in the hall all night. Besides, Vila's wandering about with the twins somewhere, and I still need to get a tour of the base."

"Why don't we start with dinner," Lorien suggested, "and, if you feel up to it, you can tell us about Doran."

Julia paused, then smiled gently. "Yes," she mused, "I think I can manage that...now."

"I wish you'd reconsider, Julia," Blake said again, wistfully. "We could use another computer expert."

Julia laughed. "Oh, no you don't, Blake. You could not possibly imagine the trouble you'd have with two strong-willed, opinionated computer geeks in the same base. Eden would be in ruins within a month." She patted his arm. "Trust me. I'm needed elsewhere, and Avon & I would just be in each other's way here." She turned to Narisse. "Ready when you are."

"Let's move out, then." As Julia hugged Lorien and Deeta goodbye, Narisse looked over to where Avon and Deva were tinkering with some equipment. "Avon! The machine will wait; *Spirit* won't! Are you coming or not?"

Still talking to Deva, Avon collected the bag at his feet and strolled over to *Spirit*. He bowed slightly to Narisse, almost smirking. "Ready, m'lady captain."

Narisse twitched back a grin and shooed him on board. "We'll be back in a week or so, Blake," she declared, as Julia finished her good-byes and headed aboard the ship. "Any additional supplies we should pick up?"

"No, the list Avon has will be enough for now." Blake grinned at her. "I hope having two computer experts on board doesn't destroy *Spirit*, though. Sure you want Avon along? I could always send someone else, if you don't get along."

Narisse grinned back at him. "Oh, I'm sure we'll get along fine. We are grown adults, after all; I'm sure we'll think of something to keep from getting bored." She waved, then headed up the ramp. "So long, Blake."

Blake quickly headed to where the others were standing, out of blast range. "Boredom," he

muttered, as *Spirit* departed, “will be the least of your worries...”

The End for Now...