

One

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...Alexandra...

I pushed through the glassteel door and crossed the lobby of the Division Five building. It was a large, open space tastefully decorated in shades of gray. It managed to be both welcoming and impersonal at the same time. Typical government construction.

I waved at the guards at the security desk, then started down a side corridor, away from the public spaces. A guard stood at a checkpoint. As I approached, I reached under my jacket, took out my ident card and handed it over.

“Good morning, Agent Sinclair.”

“G’morning, Ray.”

Ray slipped the ident card into a reader. As information filled a screen I drew my Waller-Jackson PTwo-ten and stunner, and set them next to the station’s twin scan posts. I patted myself down, took out my celfon and notepad, and set them next to my weapons.

Ray checked the screen and nodded. I stepped between the posts and waited for the scanner to make sure I wasn’t carrying anything prohibited. He watched his screens for a minute and nodded again.

“Alright, Agent Sinclair. You’re clear. Have a good day.”

I returned the pistol and stunner to their holsters and the rest to jacket pockets. I waved goodbye to Ray and started for the bank of elevators at the end of the corridor. He wasn’t bad, actually. If I preferred men, I might’ve asked him out. If I preferred men. Things have been a bit tedious lately. Maybe I’ll ask him out, just for variety. Momma always said variety is the spice of life.

My celfon buzzed as I stepped into the elevator car. I took it back out, and picked up without checking the screen. “It’s me.”

“I’m glad it’s you, Alexa. Where are you?” It was our receptionist and head of Technical Support, Cheryl Dolan.

I checked the car’s indicator. “I’m on my way in, Cheryl. Am I needed?”

“Not yet. I wanted to make sure everything’s alright before you are needed.”

I checked my watch and frowned. I was a few minutes behind schedule. “Sorry, Cheryl. I was reading the latest chapter of Harmony and Melody’s new novel, and lost track of time.”

Cheryl laughed. “Too bad you don’t have perfect time sense to go with your perfect memory. Now, where are you?”

The car stopped and the doors parted. “Look up.”

Cheryl looked up from her desk and array of screens. Irritation crossed her

pretty, round face. "Why didn't you just say you were in the elevator?"

"Then I wouldn't have gotten to see the look on your face. What fun would that've been? I pocketed the celfon and walked to Cheryl's desk.

"You have an odd sense of humor. Excuse me."

Cheryl turned back to the desk and picked up one of the many lines coming into the building. "EarthGov Security, Division Five, Reception. How may I direct your call?"

I watched her for a moment, then started through the maze of desks and cubicles that made up the DFive Operations Center. Being early in the day, it was still quiet. It would be busier later in the day, as agents returned from and prepared to head out on assignments.

I don't like the downtime between assignments. I'd rather be out in the field. Of course, for DFive, the field is everything outside the home system. Our mandate restricts our activities to all Earth Admin colonies, as well as Confed worlds and facilities. That's the exciting part of it. Every assignment is a different world. Maybe even a different race.

That's why I signed up with DFive. I've seen enough of the world. I want to see what else is out there.

Of course, being a courier, most of my assignments are rather mundane. Most of the time, making a delivery involves walking into an office, reciting information then leaving. If needed, I'll have another agent with me as a bodyguard. On occasion, I'll have to use one of my three aliases, and I'm trained to fight my way to a delivery if I need to. Most of the time, though, it's all pretty routine.

I reached my cubicle near the back of the Ops Center and signed into my terminal. There were a couple of emails waiting to be read, reminders of tweaks to existing procedures. Nothing that required immediate attention. A check of my schedule showed a light day, with only a staff meeting at eleven.

I leaned back in my chair. "Coffee."

I was about to set my vidfon to forward calls to my celfon when it rang. I checked the indicator in one corner of the screen, saw it was from Director Bernard's office and picked up.

"It's me."

The face of Marissa Tolliver, Director Bernard's executive assistant, appeared on the screen. "Nice of you to show up, Alexa." I love Marissa's accent. She sounds like she should be lounging on a beach in her native Rio de Janeiro.

"Sorry, Marissa. Lost track of time this morning."

A quick smile flashed across her face. "We'll let it go this time. Come up to Xavier's office. He has a delivery for you."

"I'll be right up."

I hung up and sighed. Another assignment, another packet of data to deliver. Time to get to work.

The smell of fresh brewed coffee filled Director Xavier Bernard's office. Director Bernard sat behind his desk, Marissa at his shoulder. Behind was a large window looking out over Oneonta. To one side was a corner table with a coffee pot, and stack of recyclable cups.

The two men in front of the desk raised my suspicions.

I slowed as they turned, and my instincts started screaming that something was wrong. Without introduction, I knew they worked for the government, probably one of the other EGS branches. There was a holier-than-God look in their eyes that I did not like.

Director Bernard gave me a reassuring smile, and nodded toward the table. "Good morning, Alexa. The coffee's fresh. Help yourself."

"Thank you."

I drew a cup from the pot on the corner table in one corner of the office. "What can I do for you, Director? Marissa said you had a delivery for me."

Director Bernard nodded toward the two men. "This is Special Agent Barkin and Special Agent Heywood from Division Four."

Division Four.

Wonderful.

Division Four is the most secretive of all the divisions of EarthGov Security. Like Division Three, DFour engages in covert ops. The operations conducted by DThree will eventually become public knowledge. DFour's ops are so secretive, no one will ever know the kinds of activities they're engaged in. Their mandate also allows them to pull agents from the other division if they're needed.

As much as I like a challenge, I was hoping that wasn't the case.

(I have a special kind of loathing for Division Four. My parents had been agents with DFour. They were reported killed in the line of duty twelve years ago. No one in DFour would give me details about their deaths, or the assignment they were on. I called in every favor I could. The silence from DFour is deafening.)

I said, "DFour only comes to visit when they want something. Or someone. What's the op?"

Barkin looked me over like I was an Enhanced Human on the auction block. "During one of our operations, information came into our possession that could be of use to Confed Security. The delivery needs to be made quickly."

"Of course it does. That's where I come in."

Heywood looked like he was having trouble accepting my role as a courier. "You? You're Wanderer?"

Huh?

Didn't they know who they were coming for?

Of course they did. DFour knows something about everyone in EGS. So why was

Heywood surprised?

Director Bernard massaged his eyes and shook his head. "As we discussed, agents, Special Agent Alexandra Sinclair, Wanderer, is one of my top couriers. She's the one you want."

I smiled. "Please, Director Bernard, my modesty."

Marissa laughed. "Your modesty borders on narcissism, Alexa."

Heywood still seemed unconvinced. "How old are you, Agent Sinclair?"

"I'll be twenty-nine in June. Why is this important?"

"You look very young. You're not an artificial, are you?"

Director Bernard leaned forward, and Marissa's back straightened. I kept smiling. "No, I'm not an Enhanced Human, Agent Heywood. I am a member of an Enhanced Human's surrogate family. And since you seem unaware of it, Marissa is an Enhanced Human. Marissa, your batch was designed to be bodyguards. Correct?"

She crossed her arms. "Yes, we were."

"Maybe you should watch your language."

Barkin and Heywood exchanged looks. "We should get on with it."

I crossed to Director Bernard's desk. "Yes, of course. Enough idle chatter. What's the program?"

"That's classified."

"You're going to tell me anyway."

"You'll be in Record Mode. You won't consciously remember it until you get the security code. Also, Director, we'll need you and Agent Tolliver to leave the office while we're recording the information."

Director Bernard frowned. "Is this necessary, agents? This office is secure. Anything said here, stays here."

Barkin's eyes narrowed, and his expression grew hard. "Understood, sir. However, this is our operation. We'll follow our protocols. Before we record, yourself and Agent Tolliver will leave the office."

Marissa shook her head and looked disgusted. "*Tamanha arrogância!* You think you can just walk in here and tell us..."

"Stand down, Marissa," Director Bernard said. There was resignation in his voice. "He's right. Their operation, their rules. As much as we may not agree..."

Marissa looked annoyed and shook her head. "If you insist," she muttered.

I flashed her a quick smile then turned back to Barkin and Heywood. "How long's the program?"

"About forty-five minutes. Have a seat." Barkin waved a hand toward one of the chairs in front of Director Bernard's desk.

As I settled down, Barkin started pacing. "You'll be meeting with Senior Special Agent John Harker of Confed Security. The delivery will be on Midas, one of Confed's older colony worlds."

Heywood said, "It was one of the first colonies established in their last wave of colonization. It was planted in twenty-one twenty, recognized as an independent world in twenty-one seventy-four."

"We'll review the rendezvous procedure after the recording. Director Bernard, Agent Tolliver...if you will?"

Director Bernard sighed, pushed back from his desk and stood. He gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and Marissa flashed a truly stunning smile as they started for the door. As they left the office, Director Bernard said, "See you before you leave, Alexa."

"Are you ready," Heywood asked.

I took a long drink of coffee and searched my pockets for the bottle of eye drops I keep on hand for long programs like these. "Pause the recording about halfway through. Put a couple drops in each eye."

"Eye drops, Agent Sinclair," Barkin said.

"I don't blink when I'm in Record Mode, Agent Barkin. Have you ever tried to keep your eyes open for forty-five minutes?"

Instead of answering, Barkin said, "Wanderer, record."

I felt myself relax, like I was falling asleep. Barkin's face, the last thing I was looking at, was frozen in my mind, and I heard only silence. I knew the information was being recited and stored in a part of my memory that had been locked away from me. (It used to bother me, having hyperthymesia but knowing there was something I couldn't remember. I've reconciled with it in the six years I've been with DFive.)

I let myself relax further. There was nothing I could do until the recording was finished. This didn't seem that difficult a delivery. Meet a CFS agent, get the security code, recite the information and leave.

How hard could it be?