

Chapter One

—Derrick—



I watch the sun rising over the city from my spacious corner office. Outside my impenetrable windows, the purple night surrenders to the persistent dawn. The sky is already congested with rush hour traffic. Without the giant electrostatic air filtration towers eating up the smog, air travel would be impossible.

Has it already been ten years since the towers were installed? Time speeds along like the sleek air breathers darting about like darning needles on pre-programmed courses above and below my office. My eleven-year career as an investigator has flown by like the air breathers outside my windows. The past six months in my new position have flown by even faster. Is time speeding up as I transition into my thirty-fifth year of life? I have made a pledge to myself to appreciate every moment of my position as Director of the Investigative Division of the *National Science Service*. Theoretically, the practice of being present will expand each moment and slow the hectic pace of time.

I ignore the news, official documents, and interoffice messaging on the three inlaid screens of my absurdly expensive workstation. Impressive desktops are signs of prestige and achievement in this organization. I'd rather be the object of respect rather than my workstation. Be that as it may, no one has asked me for my opinion on the subject.

I am using my time to mentally prepare for the individual who will be arriving in my office at any minute. He has arranged the meeting here to avoid interruptions. When I tried to detect the nature of our meeting, the executive assistant gave me no clue. She apologized for her lack of information and deemed it an oversight due to our superior's grueling schedule. Without further intel, I anticipate the meeting will be a performance review. If that is the case, I have nothing to worry about.

I hear the heavy footsteps of a man about as tall as I am. I can make this estimation because I am trained to extrapolate the source of ambient sounds. I've left my office door open as a friendly gesture.

My guest arrives and knocks on my doorframe to garner my attention. His neutral expression leaves what will follow a mystery.

I stand. "Please come in."

Commissioner Kyle Arnold oversees the *National Science Service* and the *National Security Authority* of the *Federated Corporate States*. His dual role resulted from the sudden death of the *NSA* Director, and a replacement has yet to be found. With two agencies to run, the Commissioner's time is limited. One does not secure an appointment with him without an important reason

underlying it.

I've been in Arnold's office only once before. The occasion turned out to be a happy one. Commissioner Arnold told me he had decided to appoint me as Director of the *NSS*. His decision came after my partner and I completed a classified and extremely dangerous mission involving the theft of advanced, proprietary technology.

Without asking, the Commissioner seats himself in a duplicate of the executive chair he uses in his office. I ordered it from the Furnishings Department to make him feel comfortable. The neutral expression on his gray-bearded face dissolves into a serious one. The Commissioner is a study in gray this morning—gray suit and tie, gray skin accented with silver cufflinks. He stares at me with maddening intensity from an electronic eye complemented by a natural brown one. My superior has opted for bionic implants in his brain and eye. The implants allow him to function as if he were at his workstation, anytime, anywhere. These upgrades were offered to me. My previous boss encouraged me to undergo surgery to improve my job performance. I declined. Some of my colleagues look down on me for it. I don't care. Call me old-fashioned.

Commissioner Arnold's voice snatches me from my thoughts. He doesn't waste a second on pleasantries.

"The report on your last mission was lost in the shuffle when I fired Clive Borinsky. My assistant found it on one of your predecessor's computers when she reviewed its files before erasing them to repurpose the workstation."

Now I know why I haven't been called to Arnold's

office for disciplinary reasons after my last mission: Borinsky's report went missing. I thought my indiscretion with Aurora and our unorthodox tactics had escaped censure due to our mission's success. How naive of me.

"Needless to say, I'm disappointed with you *and* your predecessor. In hindsight, I suspect Borinsky sat on the report because it reflected badly on him."

I sit quietly without attempting to defend my actions.

"You disappeared for three days, then lied about your whereabouts."

"I did it to protect a very important friend of the *Federated Corporation of States*. And, I knew Borinsky couldn't handle the truth."

"I think it's high time you filled me in on *the truth*."

"I'm repeating this for the record because I'm sure this meeting is being recorded. As I stated in my report, Aurora Zolotov and I traveled to another dimension to recover a file stolen by a rogue Android named Romulus. We risked our lives and completed a very difficult mission. And we did it without leaving any advanced technology behind. We prevented the plans for building nearly Human Androids from falling into the hands of criminals and terrorists."

The Commissioner leans back in the pearlescent-trimmed executive chair and turns his head to one side. I feel like I'm being pet-scanned by his electronic eye.

"I find it hard to believe what you said in your report about interdimensional travel. You didn't bother to include any details about how you did it."

"I left the technology out of my report to honor an

agreement I made with Adrien Mattias.”

I immediately regret mentioning Adrien’s name.

“I know Adrien personally, and I know about his company. He’s a fine man and an astute businessman. I’m sure he’ll understand that a man in my position, I should say positions, is entitled to know about this new transdimensional technology.”

“I’m not going to betray Adrien’s confidence. He made Aurora and me promise not to talk to anyone about it.”

Thoughts of Aurora and our doomed relationship sadden me—again.

“The recovery mission brought me into very close contact with Adrien. We’ve become good friends. I should not have mentioned his name. My reasons go beyond my friendship and agreements with him. I’ve been in high-level negotiations with Adrien concerning the retail and industrial use of his nearly Human Androids. I don’t want to upset our discussions.”

“You needn’t worry about your friendship or agreements. I’ll take it upon myself to ask Adrien directly. ”

I’ll apologize to Adrien and warn him you’ll be calling, I say to myself.

“Let’s talk about something else,” the Commissioner says. “Your lying to your superior about your whereabouts and mission activities was incidental compared to what Borinsky discovered subsequently.”

Here it comes.

“You had an intimate relationship with your partner, Aurora Zolotov. Your irresponsible behavior dangerously impacted the mission and Miss Zolotov.”

“That’s simply not true. Borinsky falsified his report

to cover his ass.”

Kyle Arnold waives his hand dismissively. “That’s all beside the point. What’s at issue is your character and your behavior. After returning from the mission, you had the nerve to ask your pal, Adrien Mattias, to help you continue working at the Agency with Aurora as your partner while carrying on an intimate relationship with her outside of work. Who do you think you are to disobey ironclad rules to suit your personal needs?”

I say nothing.

“I’m waiting for an answer.”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Then let me answer for you. Your actions in this matter are appalling and unacceptable. If you didn’t have a record as an exemplary investigator, I’d fire you right here and now. I’d make sure you never got a job with law enforcement anywhere in the *Federation*.”

The Commissioner pauses to let his words sink in.

“Unfortunately, men with the skills to do this work are becoming harder and harder to find. It’s abundantly clear that Human Beings are becoming lazier and lazier with every passing generation. I’ll give you an example. In addition to my current responsibilities, the *Federated Assembly* has asked me to clean up the mess at the *Central Intelligence Authority*. They can’t find a qualified candidate for the Director’s position. Now, I’m involved with three intelligence agencies. Before you know it, we’ll all be replaced by Androids!”

I give the Commissioner time to regain his composure.

“Your punishment is a slap on the wrist compared to what it should be. I’m rescinding your appointment as

Director of the *NSS* and sending you back downstairs to the Investigations Bureau. You will be demoted to the rank of Investigator Second Grade. I'm promoting Brendt Williams to Investigator First Grade. He will be your team leader."

"Brendt Williams is a half-wit."

"Are you questioning my judgment?"

Without responding, I look to my right. Through the row of windows, the city looks magnificent from the top of the *NSS* Building. I will miss the view from this angle.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

I look back at the Commissioner. I don't trust myself to say a word.

"Your silence speaks volumes, Agent Faulk. If I were you, I'd be happy to have a job. We're done here. Clean up your office and report for duty downstairs at the beginning of the week."