

## CHAPTER 61

PLACEHOLDER

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It was official. There was no other choice.

As she struggled to breath through her hacking cough, Cassidy Maran decided she was probably going to have to give up on coffee.

She'd thought she'd found the perfect solution. After some quick research, she'd discovered that her heavy-duty travel mug could be accessorized with a magnetic-base. She'd never bought anything faster. Once it showed up, Cassidy had been able to stick the mug right to her workspace directly in front of her. She'd had to ask maintenance for a new steel-top desk, but that hadn't been too much of a hassle. She generally didn't think she made too much trouble for Central's service workers, making it her first big ask. There'd been a couple odd looks, but that was about it. Finish it all off with an extra long metal straw, and Cassidy had managed weeks of content, *undisturbed* indulgence in her rapidly-growing caffeine addiction. The new setup let her work while drinking, typing away happily at her ever-expanding list of notes, which meant that she'd quickly managed to let herself slip from 2 or 3 mugs of coffee a day to twice that. She hadn't expected it to be an issue.

As it turns out, however: More drinking means a higher likelihood that one is in the *middle of swallowing a mouthful of hot liquid* when their computer screen blares defcon-orange.

Continuing to choke and cough, Cassidy pounded at her chest with one hand, trying to clear her offended lungs. Her office door had been mercifully shut, but just the same Wekesa seemed to have heard her hacking from next door, because the first lieutenant's face appeared at the window wall, looking concerned. Blinking away tears,

Cassidy waved that she was okay with her free hand, indicating the coffee mug—still unfuriously magnetized to the desk just as it was supposed to be—and her neighbor got the picture. With a sympathetic look, Wekesa offered a thumbs up to say she understood, then disappeared again, returning to her office. It made Cassidy think she was probably developing a reputation as some kind of specialized coffee clutz, but for the moment that was fine.

Once her coughing finally subsided, it meant she could take in the computer screen without further interruption.

Wiping at her mouth with the back of one hand while taking in the notification, Cassidy didn't bother trying to comprehend. Part of her wondered if she'd *ever* get used to seeing those two words pop up in her alerts, and doubted it in the same thought.

USER-UNIQUE

“What in the MIND is *happening* out there?” she groaned, pulling up her NOED and placing the call.