

Chapter 12 No.12

The lobby of Pulse Interactive looked less like a corporate headquarters and more like a dormitory after finals week. Pizza boxes were stacked in precarious towers on the reception desk, and the air smelled of stale coffee and ozone.

The receptionist, a young girl with purple streaks in her hair, didn't look up from her phone when Aurora walked in.

Deliveries in the back, the girl mumbled, popping a bubble of gum.

Aurora didn't stop. She walked past the desk, past the security turnstile. She pulled a plain white keycard from her pocket—one Victor had couriered to her grandfather's apartment the night before—and tapped it against the sensor.

Beep. Green light.

The receptionist dropped her phone. "Hey! You can't go in there!"

Aurora pushed through the double doors into the main development floor.

It was chaos.

Dozens of developers were shouting over the hum of cooling fans. Monitors flashed red with error messages. In the center of the room, a man with disheveled hair was pulling at his own scalp.

Liam Smith. Lead Developer. He looked like he hadn't slept since the release of the first iPhone.

The rendering engine is crashing! someone yelled from the back. "We're losing the framerate on the water physics!"

Cut the water! Liam screamed back. "Just make it a desert level!"

We can't change the build two days before the patch!

Aurora stepped into the center of the room. She was wearing her worn black slacks and the white blouse, looking utterly out of place in the sea of graphic tees and hoodies.

Silence, she said.

She didn't shout. She didn't have to. The tone of her voice was a frequency that cut through the noise like a diamond cutter through glass.

The room didn't go silent immediately. A few heads turned. Some snickered.

Chloe Miller, the HR manager, rushed over, her heels clicking frantically on the concrete floor. "Miss, you need to leave. This is a secure area. Who let you in?"

Aurora ignored her. She walked straight to the main server terminal, a massive console dominating the far wall.

Liam stepped in front of her, blocking her path. He was tall, lanky, and smelled of Red Bull.

Who are you? Liam demanded, his eyes bloodshot. "You looking for the cleaning crew? We're in a crisis here."

Aurora looked up at him. Her expression was bored.

I'm the one signing your paycheck now, Liam.

She stepped around him. Before he could grab her, her fingers were already on the mechanical keyboard.

She didn't sit. She stood, typing with one hand while she used the other to bring up the command prompt on the main screen.

Clack-clack-clack-clack.

The sound was machine-gun fast.

Hey! Liam reached for the keyboard. "Don't touch that! You'll crash the—"

He stopped.

On the massive wall screen, the cascading red error logs froze. Then, they vanished.

A single progress bar appeared.

Optimizing Shader Cache...

Re-routing Memory Allocation...

System Stable.

The bar hit 100% green.

The room went deathly quiet. The hum of the fans seemed to drop an octave as the processors stopped overheating.

Aurora hit Enter one last time with a flourish. She turned around to face the room.

My name is Aurora Vance, she said, her voice echoing in the silence. "I own Pulse Interactive."

Liam's jaw was unhinged. He looked at the screen, then at her hands. He recognized the syntax. He recognized the speed.

You... Liam whispered. "You used the Phoenix patch."

I wrote the Phoenix patch, Aurora corrected.


She walked over to the conference table and threw her flash drive onto the surface.

That drive contains the source code for Apex Ascendant, she announced. "It's a new engine. It handles fluid dynamics without crashing your servers. We are scrapping the desert level. We are building an ocean."

She looked at the stunned faces of the team.

Well? she raised an eyebrow. "Are we making games, or are we just burning electricity?"

Liam looked at the drive. He looked at Aurora. For the first time in months, the desperation in his eyes was replaced by hunger.

We're making games, Liam said. He grabbed the drive. "Let's load it up." 



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