

Chapter 9 No.9

The next morning Aurora sat in a bustling coffee shop in Midtown. The air was thick with the scent of roasted coffee beans and ambition. It was loud, crowded, and perfectly anonymous.

She had her laptop open, the screen a waterfall of green text. The Vanguard Pharma stock had plummeted at the opening bell, just as she had predicted. Her \$4,700 investment in put options had exploded, turning into a war chest of nearly \$80,000. She had already closed the position, the cash secured in her hidden account.

Now, for Phase Two.

She navigated to the backend servers of Pulse Interactive. The company was in a death spiral. Their flagship game, Cyber-Realms, was a buggy mess, crashing every few hours due to a server overload error their development team couldn't pinpoint.

Aurora found the flaw in ten minutes. It was a simple memory leak in the chat protocol. Amateur hour. A problem she could fix in her sleep.

But she didn't just fix it. That was the work of an employee, and she was done being an employee. She was here to be an owner.

She sent an encrypted email to the CEO, Victor King. The subject line was a simple, elegant hook: I fixed your game. Let's talk about the future. The body of the email contained the patch for the memory leak, a single line of code that would stabilize his entire network. But attached to it was a second, much more important file: a password-protected link to a private server.

At the Pulse Interactive headquarters three blocks away, chaos reigned. Victor King was on the verge of firing his entire lead development team.

Sir! a junior developer shouted from across the open-plan office. "The servers... they just stabilized! Latency dropped to zero! The crashes stopped!"

Victor rushed to the main console. The cascading red error logs were gone, replaced by a steady stream of green. "What did you do?"

Nothing. The system patched itself. An external IP pushed an update.

Victor's heart hammered. A hack? He ran back to his office and checked his email. The subject line stood out. He read it, downloaded the patch, and saw its elegant simplicity. Then he saw the link.

He clicked it. A password prompt appeared. The password was in the email: Phoenix.

The link opened to a video file. It was a tech demo. No fancy graphics, just raw gameplay footage of a world so detailed, so physically realistic, it looked like a live-action film. The water physics alone were a decade ahead of anything on the market.

At the bottom of the screen, a single line of text burned in white: The Apex Ascendant Engine The future is not for sale. It is for partners.

Victor felt the blood drain from his face. This wasn't just a game. This was a revolution. This was a billion-dollar key that could unlock the entire industry.

Twenty minutes later, Victor Kingburst into the coffee shop. He scanned the room until he saw the woman with the phoenix sticker on her laptop, just as the email had described. He marched over, his face a mask of desperation and awe.

Are you Phoenix? he demanded, his voice a low, urgent whisper.

Aurora looked up calmly from her screen. "Sit down, Mr. King. You're making a scene."

Victor slid into the chair opposite her. "That engine... is it real?"

It is, Aurora said. "And it's mine."

She slid a single page document across the table. It wasn't a resume. It was a partnership agreement.

Phantom stock options? Victor read the terms, his eyes widening. "Twenty percent of the company? And total anonymity? You want to be a silent partner?"

I don't care about the credit, Aurora said, taking a sip of her coffee. "I care about the results. And the control. With my engine and your infrastructure, we can crush the competition. Without my engine you'll be bankrupt in six months."

She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a confidential, lethal whisper. "Sign it, Victor. Because if you don't, my next meeting is with Sterling Thorne. And I hear he's in the market for a new engine to launch his 'revolutionary' new game. I wonder what he would pay for the tool that could guarantee his victory and your destruction."

Victor paled. The threat was not just credible; it was an executioner's blade poised over his neck.

He looked at the woman in front of him. The worn laptop, the simple clothes, the eyes of a predator who had already mapped out the entire hunt.

He grabbed the pen from the table. It felt heavy in his trembling hand.

He signed.

Smart man, Aurora said, taking the document. She turned her laptop around and initiated the full file transfer of the Apex Ascendant source code to his secure server.

Outside the coffee shop window, a black Maybach pulled to a silent stop at the curb.

Elias Thorne stepped out. He hadn't been tracking Aurora. He had been tracking Victor King. Pulse Interactive was a potential acquisition target, and Elias kept a close watch on his competitors.

He saw Victor King in the window, looking both terrified and elated. He saw him shaking hands with a woman whose face was obscured by the glare on the glass.

Elias froze on the sidewalk as Victor left and the woman packed up her laptop. She walked out of the coffee shop and nearly collided with him.

You again, she said, her expression unreadable.

You know Victor King? Elias asked, his voice guarded, his mind racing to connect the dots.

We had a business meeting, Aurora said smoothly. "You could say I made a good impression."

She checked her watch. "I'm late."

For what?

City Hall, she said, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. "I have a divorce to finalize."

Elias didn't hesitate. He opened the rear door of the Maybach, a silent, powerful gesture.

Get in, he said.

I can take the subway.

Get in, Aurora, Elias insisted, his eyes locking onto hers. "I want to witness this."

Aurora looked at him. She saw the curiosity in his gaze, the respect. She saw an ally.

She got in.

30

Our ads aim to provide better support for authors.

