

## Chapter 46 No.

The headquarters of Nexus AI was a fortress of glass and steel in the Financial District, a stark contrast to the old-money mahogany of Holloway Holdings. Here, everything was white, chrome, and silent.

Eulalie walked into the executive conference room. Jory Stark was waiting. He was wearing a t-shirt and a blazer, looking like the billionaire boy-genius he was.

"Welcome home, Ghost," Jory said, grinning.

"Eulalie," she corrected, dropping her garment bag on the sofa. "Ghost is for the code."

"Right, Eulalie." Jory slid a tablet across the white table. "We have a situation. Caden is making a power play. He's leveraging the \$50 million Series B funding round his firm is leading to force a 'strategic liaison' onto our executive team."

Eulalie raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess. He wants to plant his mistress here to spy on us?"

"Worse. He's recommending her for Chief Brand Officer. He's threatening to hold up the capital injection unless we accept his nominee. He thinks he can use her to influence our public image and gain leverage for an eventual takeover bid."

Eulalie looked at the tablet.

Name: Adalynn Pennington

Position: Chief Brand Officer

Experience: Influencer (2M followers), Lifestyle Guru.

Eulalie laughed. It was a cold, sharp sound. "Chief Brand Officer? She thinks branding is putting a filter on a selfie. And Caden has no idea I hold the majority voting shares, does he? He thinks she's bullying a startup."

"She has reach," Jory played devil's advocate. "And Caden is pushing hard. He's framing it as a 'synergistic partnership'."

"We don't need his money," Eulalie said. "And we certainly don't need his Trojan horse."

She stood up and walked to Jory's desk. Sitting there was a heavy, red rubber stamp. An old-school analog tool in a digital world. It said VETO.

It was a joke gift she had given Jory when they founded the company. The Architect's Veto.

"She's toxic, Jory," Eulalie said, picking up the tablet. "She destroys systems. She destroyed my marriage. She's destroying my daughter. I won't let her destroy my code."

"Is this personal?" Jory asked, watching her.

"Everything is personal," Eulalie said.

She set the stamp aside and laid the tablet flat on the desk. Her fingers flew across the virtual keyboard, entering a string of alphanumeric code into a command-line interface that appeared on the screen. A moment later, a red, holographic seal bearing a stylized wolf's eye materialized over Adalynn's file before shattering it into digital dust.

APPLICATION STATUS: DENIED. REASON: INCOMPATIBLE VALUES. FUNDING SOURCE REJECTED.

"Done," Eulalie said. "Tell the other investors we're passing on Holloway Capital. We'll self-fund the expansion."

Across town, in a plush salon chair, Adalynn was getting a pedicure. Her phone pinged.

"Oh! That must be the offer!" Adalynn squealed to the nail technician. "I'm going to be a Chief Officer! Caden promised!"

She opened the email.

Dear Ms. Pennington, Thank you for your interest in Nexus AI. After reviewing your qualifications...

Adalynn's eyes scanned down. Denied.

"What?!" She shrieked, kicking her foot out. The water in the basin splashed onto the technician's apron. "They rejected me? Me?"

She dialed Caden immediately. "Caden! They said no! They said I have 'incompatible values'! Fix it!"

Back at Nexus, Eulalie watched the city skyline.

"She's going to come for us at the Gala," Jory warned.

"Let her," Eulalie said. "I'm not hiding anymore."