

Chapter 6 No.

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Eulalie pulled her hood up as she walked into the electronics superstore. She didn't look at the cameras. She went straight to the components section.

Four NVIDIA H100 Tensor Core GPUs. A soldering station. A stack of Raspberry Pi modules. Three high-end gaming laptops.

A sales clerk with a beard approached her. "Building a mining rig for your boyfriend, miss?"

Eulalie dropped a box of industrial-grade thermal paste into the cart. She looked him in the eye. "No. I'm building a neural network architecture to bypass a localized firewall. Do you have the shielded CAT8 cables and the physical hardware keys for two-factor authentication in stock, or do I need to go to Micro Center?"

The clerk blinked, his mouth snapping shut. "Aisle 9. Top shelf."

At the checkout, she pulled out a black debit card. It wasn't a Holloway card. It was drawn from an offshore trust her grandmother had set up for her—money Caden knew nothing about because he never asked about her family history.

Back at the Loft, the air smelled of ozone and hot metal. Eulalie sat cross-legged on the floor, a soldering iron in her hand. Sparks flew as she modified the motherboard of the main server. She was creating a dedicated, isolated subnet. Even if someone traced her IP, they would hit a wall of encryption so dense it would take a quantum computer a century to crack.

Once the hardware was primed, she opened a secure chat app. Signal.

One contact: Jory Stark.

Jory was the CEO of Nexus AI. The face of the company. But everyone in

the inner circle knew he was the hype man. The brain had always been Ghost.

Ghost: "I need a ticket to the Global Tech Summit. Keynote access. Anonymous."

Three seconds later, the dots danced.

Jory: "Ghost? Holy sht! Is this real? You've been radio silent since the wedding"

Ghost: "I need the ticket, Jory."

Jory: "Done. But you owe me a drink. And an explanation. Are you back in the game?"

Ghost: "I am the game."

Jory: "Sent. Section D, Row 40. Shadows, just how you like it."

Meanwhile, at Holloway Holdings.

The conference room was a scene of carnage. Caden slammed his hand on the mahogany table.

"What do you mean we can't patch it?" he roared.

The CTO, a sweating man named Miller, adjusted his glasses. "Sir, the legacy code in the core algorithm... it's locked. It has a cryptographic signature we can't replicate. It's the CUAP Protocol. It's... it's brilliant, but it's impenetrable."

"I don't pay you for brilliant!" Caden shouted. "I pay you to fix bugs! Who wrote it?"

Miller hesitated. "The documentation just says 'Ghost'. We thought it was a vendor alias. We can't find them."

Caden growled, loosening his tie. "Fix it. Or you're all fired."

Adalynn walked in, carrying two lattes. She massaged Caden's shoulders. "Babe, don't stress. I heard Nexus AI is presenting something new at the Summit this week. Why don't we go? Maybe we can just buy their tech and replace this old junk"

Caden sighed, leaning into her touch. "You're a genius Adalynn. Yes. The Summit. Get us VIP passes. Front row."

In the Loft, Eulalie received the QR code for her ticket.

She opened her closet. It was empty, save for the hoodies and jeans she had packed. She realized she needed a new armor. The pastel florals Caden insisted on were left behind in the penthouse, dead relics of a past life she was ready to bury.

She went online. Yves Saint Laurent.

She ordered a Le Smoking tuxedo suit. Sharp lapels, cigarette pants, severe and elegant.

In the penthouse, chaos reigned.

"Where is it?!" Elara screamed, tearing apart her toy chest. "Where is Mr. Fluff?!"

It was a raggedy stuffed rabbit, her comfort object.

Martha cringed. "I don't know, Miss Elara! Your mother usually puts it away!"

"I want Mommy!" Elara shrieked, throwing a plastic block at the wall.

Caden stormed in, holding his head. "Stop screaming! It's just a rabbit! I'll buy you ten rabbits!"

"I don't want a new one! I want Mommy to find it!"

"Your mother isn't here!" Caden yelled, losing control. "She left us! Stop asking for her!"

Elara froze. Her lip trembled. She looked at her father with wide, fearful eyes. She had never seen him look so ugly.

She whimpered and curled into a ball on the floor.

In the silence of the Loft, Eulalie sneezed. She rubbed her nose, staring at the screen. The code for CUAP 2.0 was compiling. It was faster, smarter, lethal.

"Compiling.." the screen flashed.

"Completed."

Eulalie smiled.
