

Chapter 61 No.

The Nexus AI office on the 40th floor was no longer a workplace; it was a forge. The clock on the wall read 3:14 AM. The air was thick with the scent of ozone from the server racks and stale coffee. Jory had ordered pizza hours ago, but the boxes sat largely untouched. No one was hungry. They were witnessing the birth of a revolution.

At the head of the conference table, bathed in the spectral blue light of three monitors, Eulalie was not merely typing. She was conducting a symphony of destruction and creation. Her fingers were a blur on the mechanical keyboard, the staccato clicks a machine-gun rhythm that filled the silence. This was her true language. In this space, she was not an ex-wife. She was Architect 01.

"He thinks he can cage me with the law," she muttered, her eyes never leaving the waterfall of green text. "He doesn't understand. I don't live in his world. I build the worlds."

As the first gray light of dawn broke over the East River, she typed the final line of code. She leaned back, cracking her knuckles, a warrior surveying the battlefield. She hit Enter.
COMPILE: CUAP_V2.0_GHOST_KERNEL .

Forty hours later, with the new protocol secretly deployed and the first fires of Caden's legal assault extinguished by a wall of cryptocurrency, a fragile peace had settled over her Seaport District loft. The battle had shifted from corporate servers to the home front. The air here was warm, smelling of old books and the faint, clean scent of ozone from the server rack Eulalie had installed in a climate-controlled closet. This was her command center. Silverware didn't clink here; the only sound was the soft click of her keyboard, a rhythm that was building an empire and tearing one down simultaneously.

Eulalie sat, not with a rigid spine but curved over her desk, her focus absolute. Three monitors surrounded her, casting a pale, spectral blue light onto her face. Her eyes darted across lines of code that scrolled like a waterfall. She wasn't just working she was forging a weapon.

To her right, on a plush rug, sat Elara. She was propped up with pillows, still pale from her ordeal, a light blanket over her legs. Her daughter was wearing comfortable cotton pajamas, not a stiff, velvet thing with an itchy lace collar. She was building a tower of blocks, a structure of cheerful, primary colors that defied the cold logic on her mother's screens.

Elara's legs were crossed, a sign of contentment, the only real sign of life in the focused silence of the room.

Eulalie paused, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. She looked at the empty takeout container on the corner of her desk. No Dover sole she had no intention of eating. Just the remnants of a shared Margherita pizza, a meal chosen by a five-year-old, a meal that tasted of freedom.

The thought of Grandmother Holloway was a distant, cold echo. A woman made of steel wool and pearls, whose sharp eyes could no longer cut anything in Eulalie's world. The mahogany table, Caden's empty chair... they were artifacts from another life.

That life was trying to claw its way back in. Her phone buzzed, a summons from the past. It was a text from Caden's mother.

Grandmother Holloway expects you and Elara for Sunday dinner. Do not make a scene.

It wasn't a question. It was a command from a queen who didn't realize her castle was under siege.

Eulalie didn't look away from her screens.

She typed a reply without emotion.

We will not be there. Elara is home. The reply tasted like clean, cold water in her mouth. She knew exactly where Caden was. He was likely with Adalynn, soothing her latest manufactured crisis, or perhaps planning a counter-attack from a place where the lighting was dim and the wine was expensive.

Her phone buzzed again, instantly. A huff of digital air.

This is unacceptable. You are still a Holloway on paper. Or has that girl completely turned your head? The one who dresses like a showgirl?

Eulalie gripped her mouse tighter. The plastic bit into her palm. Caden trying to blackmail her? The old woman didn't understand. She wasn't being blackmailed; she was being held hostage by Caden's refusal to sign the divorce papers she had filed months ago.

Before she could formulate a response, a small hand tugged on her sleeve.

Eulalie turned to look at Elara.

Elara pointed to her block tower. It had just collapsed with a soft clatter. She scrunched her face into a mask of sudden, theatrical agony.

"Ouch," Elara groaned. Her voice was a little too dramatic, but effective. "My tower has a tummy ache."

Eulalie's lips twitched into a smile.

"A tummy ache? Did it eat the gluten bread?" Eulalie asked, playing along.

"I think it's going to throw up," Elara announced, her eyes wide and glistening with summoned laughter.

Eulalie imagined Grandmother Holloway recoiling, pressing a napkin to her mouth as if architectural nausea were contagious.

This was not a jailbreak. This was sanctuary.

Eulalie stood up immediately. She scooped Elara up from the floor.

"Then we must perform emergency surgery," Eulalie said, moving toward the living area. "I'll take her to the operating room."

"Go," Eulalie whispered to herself, mocking the dismissive wave she knew she would have received. Children these days. So fragile. No. So resilient.

Eulalie carried Elara to the large sofa, the city lights twinkling through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The moment they were away from the cold blue light of the monitors, Elara's body went limp in her arms.

The groaning stopped instantly.

"Did you fix it, Mommy?" Elara whispered.

Eulalie set her down on the soft cushions. The chauffeur was not waiting outside. There was no town car. There was only them.

Elara smoothed out her pajama top and looked up at Eulalie with a conspiratorial grin.

"That code smelled like old socks," Elara said.

Eulalie let out a breath she felt like she'd been holding since she sent the first declaration of war. She crouched down, bringing her face level with her daughter's.

"You are a terrible liar," Eulalie said, a real smile finally reaching her eyes. "But thank you."

"I didn't want you to be sad about the mean lady's text," Elara said, her smile fading slightly. "Daddy's not coming is he?"

Eulalie hesitated. She brushed a stray hair from Elara's forehead.

"No, baby. I don't think he is."

Elara shrugged a gesture too weary for a five-year-old.

"It's okay. I like it better when it's just us in the castle."

Eulalie's heart squeezed. She ushered Elara under a warm blanket.

"Martha is in her apartment, but she'll be up in the morning," Eulalie said. "For now, it's just us. But I do have an errand to run."

"But Mommy," Elara protested.

"It will take twenty minutes," Eulalie promised. "I have to pick up something special. You can watch your show. I'll be back before the episode is over."

She watched Elara get settled, the red light of the server rack blinking like a distant, watchful star.

Eulalie didn't get into a car immediately. She needed to walk. She needed to feel the city's energy, to burn off the residual tension of her old life. She walked down the busy streets of Seaport District, the crisp wind a welcome bite against her cheeks.

She stopped in front of a small, nondescript shop tucked between a gallery and a cafe. The sign read simply: Fine Watch Repair.

She went inside. Ten minutes later, she emerged with a small velvet pouch in her pocket. Inside was a Patek Philippe Delmar Bradford's watch. Her grandfather, the patriarch who had taught her to play chess and read stock charts. She had pawned it years ago, in secret, to pay for a PR crisis Caden had caused early in their marriage, a desperate act from a woman who didn't yet know she was sitting on a fortune in Bitcoin. It had taken her this long to track it down and buy it back.

It felt heavy in her pocket. A reminder of who she used to be. A reminder of the bloodline she was fighting to redeem.

She turned to walk back toward her apartment, passing the glittering window display of a high-end jeweler.

"Eulalie?"

The voice was familiar. It was the voice of a man who expected people to stop when he spoke.

Eulalie froze. She knew that tone. She turned slowly.

Standing in the doorway of the jewelry store was Grady Pennington. Her biological father. The man who had abandoned her mother, helped Caden try to plunder her family's legacy, and now stood there in a bespoke suit that cost more than most people earned in a year.

He looked older than the last time she'd seen him. His hair was thinner, dyed a harsh, unnatural black.

"Grady," Eulalie said. She didn't call him Dad. She hadn't done that in a decade.

Grady stepped out onto the sidewalk, blocking her path. He looked her up and down, his eyes critical.

"I heard about your little stunt at the restaurant," he said, his voice a low snarl, all pretense of sympathy gone. "Threatening Caden? Filing counter-motions? What do you think you're doing?"

Eulalie stared at him. The audacity was breathtaking.

"I'm protecting my assets," Eulalie replied coolly. "Something you should understand."

Grady chuckled. It was a dry, rattling sound.

"You have no assets, girl. You have a little startup that Caden is about to swallow whole. You're making this messy. You're embarrassing Adalynn and you're jeopardizing my partnership with Holloway Holdings."

"I'm doing just fine, Grady."

"Are you?" Grady took a step closer, lowering his voice. "Look, I'm going to give you some fatherly advice. Stop this. You're out of your league. You're fighting Caden, and you're fighting me. Adalynn is the future of that family."

"She's your daughter," Eulalie corrected. "There is a difference."

"She is the future," Grady snapped, his pleasant mask slipping. "She has Caden's ear. She has the vision. You? You were always ... background noise. Useful for organizing dinners, sure. But Adalynn is a star."

Eulalie felt a laugh bubbling up in her throat. It was hysterical. He truly believed it. He believed Adalynn was the genius and she was the accessory.

"You should be grateful. Adalynn is convincing Caden to offer you a settlement at all," Grady continued. "Take the money. Sign the papers and disappear quietly."

"Disappear," Eulalie repeated.

"Yes. Go to Europe. Find a nice, quiet life. Let the adults handle the business."

Eulalie looked at this man. This small, greedy man who thought he held the world in his hands.

"I'm not going anywhere, Grady," she said softly.

Grady's eyes narrowed. "You're being selfish. Just like your mother. You're holding on to a man who doesn't want you, blocking your sister's happiness."

"I don't want the man," Eulalie said, her voice turning to ice. "And as for my sister's happiness... I think she's about to find out that happiness is very expensive."

Before Grady could respond, the door to the jewelry store opened again.



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