

Chapter 63 No.

The loft in Seaport District was silent, save for the hum of the server rack Eulalie had installed in the climate-controlled closet.

Eulalie sat in her study. She had been there for four hours.

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 coding she was building a trap.

She was finalizing the kernel of the CUAP protocol version 2.0. The version Caden was using was 1.0. This wasn't just a rewrite; it was an evolution she had been planning for months, but kept dormant until now.

And she was making sure that Version 2.0 would be fundamentally incompatible with Version 1.0.

If Caden tried to force a merger, if he tried to integrate Nexus's new tech into his old systems without the encryption key only she possessed, the systems wouldn't just fail. They would cannibalize each other.

It was a "Poison Pill" defense. If he swallowed Nexus, he would die.

A soft knock on the door broke her concentration.

"Mommy?"

Eulalie froze. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She took a breath, letting the cold logic of the code drain away, replacing it with warmth.

"Come in, baby."

The door creaked open. Elara stood there in her pajamas, holding a stuffed rabbit by the ear.

"I can't sleep," Elara whispered. "My chest feels a little tight."

Eulalie turned her chair around. Seeing her daughter standing by the door, she extended her arms.

"Come here," Eulalie said softly.

Elara padded across the room and climbed into Eulalie's lap. She curled up, burying her face in Eulalie's sweater.

"Are you working on the castle?" Elara asked, looking at the screens filled with unintelligible symbols.

"Yes," Eulalie said, resting her chin on Elara's head. "I'm building the walls right now. Very high walls."

"To keep the monsters out?"

"To keep everyone out who doesn't know the password," Eulalie corrected.

Elara watched the cursor blink. "Can I have a password?"

Eulalie smiled. "You are the password, Elara. Everything I do is keyed to you."

Elara didn't understand the technicality, but she understood the sentiment. She relaxed.

"Mommy?"

"Hmm?"

"Daddy called. On my iPad."

Eulalie's muscles tensed. "When?"

"Before I came in. He asked where we were."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said we were at the castle. He got mad. He said castles aren't real."

Eulalie felt a flash of anger. Caden, stripping away magic because he couldn't control it.

"He's wrong," Eulalie said fiercely. "Castles are real if you build them yourself. Did he say anything else?"

"He said he's going to win. He said he's going to get a big prize at the meeting this week and then everything will go back to normal."

The Tech Summit.

He was so confident. He thought the acquisition of Nexus was a done deal. He thought he could bully the board, buy the shares, and erase Eulalie's legacy.

Eulalie looked at the screen. The code for the "Poison Pill" was complete. It just needed to be compiled.

"Did he now?" Eulalie whispered.

She reached out with one hand, while holding her daughter with the other, and pressed the Enter key.

The screen flashed green.

COMPILING VERSION 2.0...

"We'll see about that," Eulalie murmured.

Elara yawned, her eyes drooping.

"Can we get ice cream tomorrow?" Elara asked sleepily. "Since my tummy's better?"

Eulalie kissed her temple.

"We can get anything you want. Now sleep. The walls are up. You're safe."

Elara closed her eyes. Eulalie went back to watching the progress bar.

25%... 50%...

Her phone buzzed on the desk. A message from Jory.

Jory: I found out who Adalynn is trying to impress at the Summit. It's Professor Liu. She's trying to get him to join the Holloway advisory board.

Eulalie stared at the message.

Professor Liu. The man who had already recognized her at the Nexus gala, the one who knew exactly who she was and what she was capable of.

If Adalynn got to him... if she charmed him with Caden's money and lies... it would be a betrayal. It would be an attempt to co-opt the last piece of Eulalie's academic legitimacy.

Eulalie typed back one-handedly.

Eulalie: She won't get him. Liu hates fakes. She won't charm him with intellect. She'll try to use Caden's money and press connections to pressure him. I need to see him. Before the Summit.

Jory: He's in Aspen for a pre-summit retreat. Caden is going there too. I can arrange a meeting.

Eulalie looked at the compiling code.

100%. COMPLETE.

She shut the laptop.

"Then I guess we're going to Aspen."

