

Chapter 65 No.

The flight to Aspen was usually a display of Holloway excess—champagne, caviar, fawning attendants. But this time, Caden was alone on the jet. Adalynn had thrown a tantrum about the cabin pressure affecting her sinuses and decided to fly commercial first-class later with her "support team" (her stylist).

Caden stared out the window at the clouds.

He held Elara's drawing in his hand. Jared had delivered it without a word, just leaving it on his desk.

Mommy is the hero.

The crude crayon lines mocked him. The figure of himself running away... is that how his daughter saw him? A coward?

He crumpled the paper, then smoothed it out again.

He pulled out his phone. He opened his encrypted messaging app.

To: Private Investigator

Update on Eulalie?

Reply: Subject remains in Seaport District. Digital footprint is deliberately misleading—cycling old social media data through a VPN. However, physical surveillance confirms lights on, food deliveries. Thursday night records show she ordered pizza and the network traffic corresponds to three hours of online gaming.

Caden frowned. Pizza? Video games?

This felt like a performance. A deliberate act of misdirection. She wanted him to think she was relaxing, eating junk food.

She was changing. Or maybe... she was showing him a side she had always kept hidden, a playful cunning that was now being weaponized.

against him.

He thought about the night at the Nexus gala. The way she commanded the room. Confident. Technical.

It was no longer a question of if she was the architect. The question was what she was building now. And why did it feel like a cage for him? The doubt was a worm in his brain, eating away at his certainty.

Meanwhile, on Thursday night in the Seaport District loft, the hero was currently losing.

"No, jump! Jump now!" Elara shrieked, bouncing on the sofa.

Eulalie mashed the A button on the controller. Her character, a small mushroom person, fell into a pit of lava.

Game Over.

Elara groaned, throwing her head back. "Mommy, you're terrible at this level."

"I'm rusty," Eulalie defended herself, grabbing a slice of pepperoni pizza from the box on the coffee table. "And this is a smokescreen."

"What's a smokescreen?" Elara asked, skeptical.

"It's when you make a lot of noise over here," Eulalie said, waving a pizza slice, "so the bad guys don't see what you're really doing over there." She wiped tomato sauce from her lip.

She looked around the living room. It was messy. There were blankets on the floor, pizza boxes, toys scattered everywhere.

It was perfect.

For five years, she had lived in a museum. Everything white, everything clean, everything cold.

Here, there was mess. There was life.

Elara crawled over and rested her head on Eulalie's shoulder.

"Mommy?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"If you win... against the monsters... do we have to go back to the big house?"

Eulalie put the controller down. She wrapped her arm around Elara.

"No. Never."

"Promise?"

"I promise. When this is over, we can live wherever we want. Maybe a house with a yard. Maybe near the beach."

Elara smiled, closing her eyes.

"I like the beach. The sand doesn't care if you build a messy castle."

Eulalie laughed softly. "No, it doesn't. Sand is very non-judgmental."

She watched Elara drift off to sleep, the sugar crash from the soda finally hitting.

Eulalie didn't move for a long time. She just sat there, holding her daughter, feeling the weight of the trust placed in her.

She picked up her phone and snapped a picture of the two controllers sitting side-by-side on the messy table.

She sent it to Jory.

Eulalie: The hero's sidekick is asleep. The hero is ready to mobilize. We fly commercial tomorrow morning. Keep the jet grounded. I don't want a paper trail.

Jory: Copy that. Professor Liu is speaking at the Aspen Institute on Saturday night. I've arranged a private meeting beforehand.

Eulalie looked at the screen.

Saturday night

Caden would be there. Adalynn would be there.

It was time to crash the party.

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