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The meeting did not take place in a sterile boardroom or a lavish office. Professor Liu had summoned Eulalie to the Hayden Planetarium. They sat in the empty theater, the vast, star-dusted dome arching above them in the darkness.

"The universe is elegant," Liu said, his voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space. "It operates on a set of unbreakable rules. Mathematics. Physics. It does not care for ego or ambition. It only rewards truth."

He turned to look at her, his silhouette outlined against the faint glow of the Milky Way projection. "Your code is elegant, Bradford. It has truth in it. That is why it works."

"Caden's worked too," Eulalie countered. "For a time."

"His was a lie," Liu stated simply. "A system built to look like one thing while doing another. It mined data, created dependencies and punished dissent. It was a reflection of its creator. Lies are inherently unstable. They always collapse."

A third figure emerged from the shadows at the base of the theater. A woman with a severe haircut and an impeccably tailored suit that spoke of government authority.

"Ms. Bradford," the woman said, her voice crisp. "I'm Dr. Aris Thorne, from DARPA. Professor Liu speaks very highly of you."

Eulalie stood, shaking her hand. Dr. Thorne's grip was firm, her eyes analytical. "I've reviewed the security audit of CUAP 1.0 that your team published this morning. It's... alarming. The backdoors were sophisticated."

"Caden likes to have leverage," Eulalie said.

"The Department of Defense cannot afford that kind of leverage in the wrong hands," Dr. Thorne stated. "We are building the next generation of autonomous defense systems. They require a neural network that is not

only fast and intelligent, but incorruptible. Your CUAP 2.0 protocol, with its decentralized verification and quantum-resistant encryption... it's the only viable candidate we've seen."

This was it. The ultimate validation. Not just a commercial success, but a matter of national security.

"Caden Holloway is a major defense contractor," Eulalie pointed out. "He has powerful friends in Washington."

"Mr. Holloway sells hardware," Dr. Thorne said with a dismissive wave. "And his friends are becoming... concerned. The scandal you're embroiled in is a nuisance. But the technological vulnerability you exposed? That is a threat. Washington does not reward threats."

She handed Eulalie a thick folder. "This is a preliminary proposal. A multi-year contract to develop a custom version of your protocol for our systems. The funding is substantial. But more importantly, it will place Nexus AI under the protective umbrella of a national security interest."

Eulalie looked at the folder, then up at the projected stars. A government contract. It was an iron shield against Caden's lawsuits and media attacks.

"His lawsuit will allege that you stole the foundation of this technology from him," Dr. Thorne warned. "We will need absolute certainty of your ownership."

"I have the patents," Eulalie said. "They are secured in a trust that predates my marriage."

Professor Liu smiled for the first time, a rare, thin curving of his lips. "The universe is elegant," he repeated. "And sometimes, it is also just."