

CHAPTER 34

“You had to do just one thing! One thing!” Weaver exclaimed, beside herself.

Her eyes were popping out of their sockets as she continued with her tireless spiel. Catra watched her without much interest. She casually wiped away a drop of saliva that had splattered on her cheek, but she said nothing.

“Get in, take the components and get out! Your orders were clear, Catra,” said Weaver.
“That’s precisely what we did,” she replied coolly.

They were in one of Horde High’s basement rooms. The place resembled an interrogation room; the four walls were lined entirely with spy mirrors, so they couldn’t know for sure if someone was watching them on the other side of their reflections.

Despite having lived there practically all her life, Catra was been aware of the web that stretched through the school’s basement. She had limited access to a very specific area of the complex, but it seemed that the chaos of corridors connected to a larger network. It was a labyrinth, with a multitude of soundproofed rooms with electronic locks and security cameras in every corner. It looked like that’s where the highschool’s funds had gone.

“I made it very clear that you were not to be seen! Your orders did not involve nostalgic reunions with your childhood friend,” exclaimed Weaver.

Catra flinched involuntarily. She took the blow trying to keep a neutral expression while she glared at Scorpia. She had been the one to report to Weaver after arriving at the base and, as usual, she had talked too much. She was going to have a word with her later. Scorpia seemed to understand, because she shrank back with a regretful expression and took a step back, trying to blend in with the column behind her. Catra clicked her tongue irritated and turned again to face Weaver.

“The running into Adora was pure chance, we complied with everything you asked us to do,” she said, keeping an even tone of voice.

“Revealing your identity has compromised the entire operation!”

Weaver kept pacing up and down the room nervously. Her hair, normally perfectly slicked back to clear her haughty forehead, was now completely tangled. Catra followed her with her eyes, not letting any emotion show on her face.

In recent months she had learned to be indifferent to everything. Catra had realized that impassivity inspired respect; that her words did not carry more weight because she spoke them louder, or shouted them. It was all in the sound, the candor with which she pronounced each syllable. Orders given in a low, monochord voice tended to be obeyed almost immediately. Controlling herself meant controlling her surroundings. And Catra had discovered that she was good at it, at least in the public eye. And that got on Weaver’s nerves.

Catra stood up before speaking.

“The fact that they are aware that I am involved in the operation will not be a problem,” she said confidently. She gave a haughty half-smile, “I know Adora, she won’t do anything

that could compromise me. Besides, the ECS people are still tied hand and foot, it's their people who bear the brunt of the attacks. I am a mere observer," she concluded.

"You don't know that," Weaver said in a venomous hiss. She stopped her pacing and looked at her viciously. A cruel smile spread across her narrow face. She looked more haggard than ever, but she didn't pass up the opportunity to savage Catra as soon as she could, "We'll see what Hordak thinks when he reads my report.

"There's no need. I told him myself before I came down here," Catra replied.

Weaver glared at her furious. She clenched her fists tightly, digging her nails in, trying to restrain herself. For a moment Catra thought she was going to hit her. The memory of the room where she had locked her up as a child flashed in her mind for a moment and her heart skipped a beat.

"Don't worry, it's all over now" whispered Adora's voice in her mind. Catra shook her head, pushing the memory away to the corner of her mind.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you Catra?" Weaver said as she brought her face close to hers. Catra smelled her stale breath. The cloth she used to cover the lower part of her face had slipped down to her neck, and Catra could see her crooked teeth grinding furiously. "But you don't know what you've gotten yourself into, child," she spat at her.

Weaver turned away from her abruptly and headed for the exit, yanking open the metal door.

"You won't be able to get away with this forever," she sneered before walking out.

Catra stopped holding her breath. She didn't plan to let Weaver crush her again, but sometimes she couldn't help but feel like that little girl cowering terrified in the corner while the witch came to lock her in the tower.

Waiting for Adora to come to her rescue.

It wouldn't happen again.

"W...wow, that was intense" Scorpia stammered after a few seconds. Catra glared at her.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut," she snapped. Scorpia cringed.

"I'm sorry, Catra" she muttered under her breath. "It won't happen again."

Catra ignored her completely and left the room. She walked the corridors of the complex almost by inertia with Scorpia trailing behind as she analyzed what had happened.

The coup had gone off without a hitch. Their objective had been to attack the commercial area of the city, right at the edge of the territory they controlled. It would allow them to expand their area of influence in addition to looting that area as a source of raw materials. While Catra supervised the operation from the shadows, Scorpia had been in charge of installing Horde's control devices around the perimeter. Catra was about to remove the people when she had appeared. It wasn't the first time she'd seen her; Adora and her new friends had been trying to intercept them for a couple of months now, shortly after she left Horde. And Catra had been watching her ever since, from the shadows. She watched as Adora confronted her agents, always trying to pin them down for questioning, without much success. Catra had given orders to withdraw immediately at the slightest hint of the presence of She-Ra and her group, they couldn't risk ECS getting any relevant information.

Catra snorted in disbelief. For a few weeks now it seemed that the people of the city had become aware of the presence of a mysterious figure dressed in white who was confronting the evil doers who were tearing the city apart. A tall, long-haired blonde girl and her group of friends. She-Ra, they called her. It was ridiculous. Catra had burst out laughing the first time Scorpia told her about it. And yet that name was taking more and more traction on the streets. But Catra wasn't about to let that happen. She was going to crush them.

That's why when she had seen Adora helping that ECS girl to get up, anger blinded her, and without thinking she came out of her hiding place. She did it almost by inertia, by instinct. The same instinct that had led her to run away from there as soon as she realized that Adora recognized her. Because Catra knew she would go after her, she was sure. She knew that Adora had been looking for her, that she had tried to contact her. That she had gone so far as to sneak into the Horde grounds to go looking for her. Catra had seen it all, had felt her insides twist into a knot that grew tighter and tighter every time she caught a glimpse of Adora. She had been tempted to let her find her, see what would happen. But then she remembered what had happened the night Adora left, and she knew that if she let her touch her she would break down again. She didn't plan to do that again.

And that's why she didn't want to remember. She didn't want to feel Adora's forehead on hers; her warmth enveloping her, while her sweet breath caressed her cheeks.

"Come with me, come with me, come with me..."

Catra fired a fist full of rage, sinking it into the metal locker in the hallway. Scorpia let out an exclamation and went over to help her, but Catra gave her a look charged with such fury that the girl didn't dare touch her. Catra tried to control her breathing, keeping her mind blank. She didn't want to think about Adora, didn't want to think about anything. She had sworn to herself, that she would be stronger than anyone else, that she would never break down again.

She hated it. She hated her own weakness. If it were up to her, she would remove her heart from her chest, anything to get rid of that accelerated heartbeat that thundered in her ears, that wouldn't let her think.

Catra straightened and ran a hand through her hair trying to gather herself before continuing on her way. She had more important things to think about. She decided to focus on her next objective.

Nothing and no one was going to stop her.

She had been acting as second-in-command of operations for a couple of months now, only behind Hordak and Weaver. The director had given her free rein in organizing her people and Catra had set to work. She did not know exactly the ultimate goal of the organization that controlled Horde, she had only been able to deduce that above Hordak there was someone more powerful, the Frightfield faction being only one of many in a larger system. And that the first short-term goal was to take control of the city without attracting attention. Catra didn't need to know any more.

The abductions Adora had become obsessed about were Weaver's idea. She intended to use bioelectric devices developed by her team to control people. Her initial plan had been to install the chips little by little until she had a large number of followers, but the operation had one major drawback: the chips were controlled by radio frequency and the signal covered a very limited distance, making it very difficult to control the captured people.

"The old woman can't take much more" Catra thought mockingly as she sped through the corridors. Weaver was still above her in the hierarchy, but that was about to change very soon.

Catra was going to make sure of it.

Her steps led her to the most secluded corner of the complex. This area was located just below the basketball stadium, away from the main building. It was difficult for the noise of explosions to be muffled by the many layers of earth covering the laboratory.

Scorpia caught up with her at last, wheezing.

"Y...you're going too...fast," the huge girl said trying to catch her breath.
"Did you bring what I asked for?" said Catra, ignoring her.

Scorpia nodded and handed her the tablet. Catra smiled satisfied as she opened the access door to the lab.

They were greeted by the sound of loud Japanese music. At the back of the lab, on a huge metal workbench Entrapta sat on a stool. She was bobbing her head in time to the music, her huge pigtailed waving rhythmically as she was focused looking through a microscope. Entrapta had always been obsessed with anime; Adora and she had sometimes spent hours talking about series and video games that no one else understood. It seemed that the strange girl was only interested in what was going on in her own virtual world, and rarely let herself peek into reality. That was why Catra had been extremely surprised to discover that Entrapta had been involved in the operation almost from the beginning. She had been under Hordak's orders since she had started highschool. It was Hordak who had provided her with his laboratory and all the material she needed for her inventions.

"Entrapta!" Catra called her.

The girl remained absorbed in her task without paying attention to her. Catra grunted in annoyance. She went to the socket where the speakers were plugged in and yanked out the cord, cutting off the melody. Scorpia sighed relieved and stopped covering her ears with her hands.

"Hey, who...?" Entrapta complained as she turned away from the microscope.

Her face lit up when she saw the two of them at her back. She loved having them come down to visit her in her lab. Entrapta gave a little squeal of delight and pounced on Catra with open arms. Catra was already expecting the assault, so she moved out of her way in a graceful feint, leaving Scorpia at the mercy of her embrace. The girl climbed onto her back as she squealed excitedly, while Scorpia tried her best not to let her fall to the ground head first.

"Well?" Catra asked when it became clear to her that Entrapta was not going to calm down.

Catra had two objectives since she had taken command of operations. The first was clear; destroy ECS. Catra had planned every move with cold anger. Using ECS as a scapegoat was just an excuse, what she was really looking for was for the scandals to reach such heights that the city government would have no choice but to close the academy. That's why she had made special emphasis on making the attacks more and more violent and aggressive; on making the ringleaders of the attacks the former students of the academy. And it was working, with the added bonus that they had almost doubled the territory controlled by Horde in less than three months. The result? Hordak had given her a free rein to operate as she wished and Weaver had gone into a rage. Two birds with one stone.

So what if people called She-Ra their heroine? Catra would be done with them before they knew what was happening.

"It was just what I needed, thank you, thank you!" Entrapta finally disentangled herself from Scorpia's shoulders to dance over to her microscope in excitement. "You're going to love it, I've finally completed them."

Entrapta began typing unintelligible commands into the computer on her desk. Scorpia and Cara came over to peer over her shoulder, but could not disentangle a word. The girl connected the microscope to the computer monitor. Suddenly, a strange logo lit up the screen.

"What are you do..." Catra started, but an electronic voice interrupted her.

"Welcome Entrapta, what do you want to play today?" the machine asked. It was a female voice.

Entrapta gave a little squeal of excitement and clapped her hands like a little girl.

"Hi Emily! I want to play invaders," she exclaimed.

Catra and Scorpia looked at each other confused. Entrapta looked at them with a beaming smile.

"Come on, say hello! You have to introduce yourselves," she sounded like a proud mother. Catra's patience was wearing thin.

"I made it very clear to you that you cannot use the resources of the laboratory for your stupid projects," she said in a dangerous tone. "If you haven't achieved anything..."

An image suddenly appeared on the monitor.

"Ah, it finished loading!" Entrapta turned to the microscope again and adjusted the focus. The image projected on the monitor became cleaner and Scorpia and Catra could clearly see what Entrapta had been working on for the past few months. "Meet the invaders - custom made nanobots! The components you brought me were great, I needed a few semiconductor chips to get my kids ready to go out into the world." she said with a beaming smile

Catra moved closer to the screen to watch them closely. Each tiny device was in the shape of a small metallic legged spider. Its abdomen was decorated with the red diamond also found on Weaver's neural chips. But this was something else.

"How do they work?" Catra asked enraptured.

Entrapta rubbed her hands together excited. Nothing made her happier than her friends being interested in her work. She lived for it.

"I've relied on the workings of neural chips to develop their software, but the level of bioelectrical hijacking of these little guys goes way beyond that."

Entrapta typed a series of commands into the computer, and the microscope image was replaced by a simulation. It showed how one of the tiny devices was anchored to a nerve root, as if it were a parasite. The nanobot's abdomen glowed red and a substance began to emerge from its backside, like a spider's web, tangling along the entire length of the cord.

"Their nucleus is loaded with a neurotransmitter synthesizing system. They use the human body's own components to replenish themselves so that they can continue to produce them. They are completely autonomous." Entrapta had to conduct an in-depth study of the workings of the

human nervous system and the transmission of nerve impulses and bioelectrical signals in order to design their little invaders. It had been worth every minute. The brain was a fascinating organ, even computers couldn't match it. Entrapta continued with her explanation, "These little guys are capable of completely intercepting the electrical signal developed by the subject's brain...and molding it to their whim," she concluded.

Cata's pulse quickened. This was it. It was just what they needed.

"How can we control the signal?" Cata straightened to look at her.

A strange gleam lit up her eyes. With this kind of control they could take over the entire city in a matter of weeks. Days even. And it would be undetectable.

Entrapta did not notice the eager expression on Cata's face and continued with her explanation. The interface of the program that had welcomed them reappeared on the screen.

"That's Emily's job! I have reprogrammed her and now she is a full-fledged artificial intelligence. I have designed a version for portable devices, you only have to install her application on your tablet and she will allow you to control the invaders. Isn't it beautiful? ~~Here~~ There is no problem of range, working through the internet we can control them from anywhere in the city, no matter the distance. The problem would be to supply them to the test subjects.

- Don't worry," Cata interrupted her. A half smile spread across her face. It was clear to her what the next step was going to be - I'll take care of it.

