

Chapter 85 No.

The amber glow of whiskey was the only light in Caden's office. It was three in the morning. The city outside was asleep, but he was wide awake, haunted by the memory of his daughter's accusing eyes. He had lost the moral highground and he knew it.

His phone buzzed on the desk. It was a text from his lead investigator. Stark is clean. Ex-girlfriends say he's a workaholic. Finances are immaculate. He re-mortgaged his apartment to fund Nexus AI's seed round. True believer.

Another dead end. His campaign of personal destruction was failing.

He turned to his laptop, the last resort of a desperate man. He wasn't Googling legal terms anymore. He was on the dark web, a part of the internet he hadn't visited in years, a place where information was a commodity and morality was a liability. He had put out a bounty, a seven-figure sum for any exploitable flaw in the CUAP 2.0 protocol.

An incoming call request blinked on his encrypted messenger. The handle was "Daedalus." A legendary black-hat hacker, known for breaking into systems considered unbreakable. Caden had paid a fortune just for this consultation.

He accepted the call. The voice that came through the speakers was synthesized, metallic, and devoid of emotion. "Mr. Holloway."

"Did you find anything?" Caden asked, his voice raw.

"I have been examining the protocol for seventy-two hours," the voice stated. "I have analyzed its architecture, its encryption, its decentralized verification process."

There was a pause. Caden leaned forward, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Your bounty is insufficient," Daedalus said.

"I can pay more," Caden said instantly. "Name your price."

"You misunderstand," the voice replied. "There is no price. I am not for hire. I am withdrawing my services. This was a professional courtesy."

"What are you talking about?" Caden demanded. "Why?"

"Because the code is perfect," Daedalus said. The synthesized voice was flat, but the words carried an undeniable weight of professional reverence. "It's not just secure. It's elegant. A work of art. To attempt to corrupt it would be an act of vandalism. Whoever 'Ghost' is, she is not merely a coder. She is a master. I will not be a party to destroying her work."

The line went dead.

Caden stared at the silent laptop. He had just been judged and found wanting by the highest authority in the digital underworld. His own hired gun had refused to shoot, not out of morality, but out of sheer respect for the target.

It was the ultimate humiliation. His money couldn't buy him a weakness that didn't exist. His power was useless against a superior intellect.

He stood up, his movements stiff. He walked to the window overlooking the silent city. He had built his empire on the belief that everything and everyone had a price, a flaw, a point of leverage.

Eulalie had none.

With a roar of pure, impotent rage, he swept his arm across his desk. The whiskey glass, the laptop, the framed photos of a life that was no longer his—they all went crashing to the floor in a symphony of destruction. It was the sound of a king breaking his own crown.