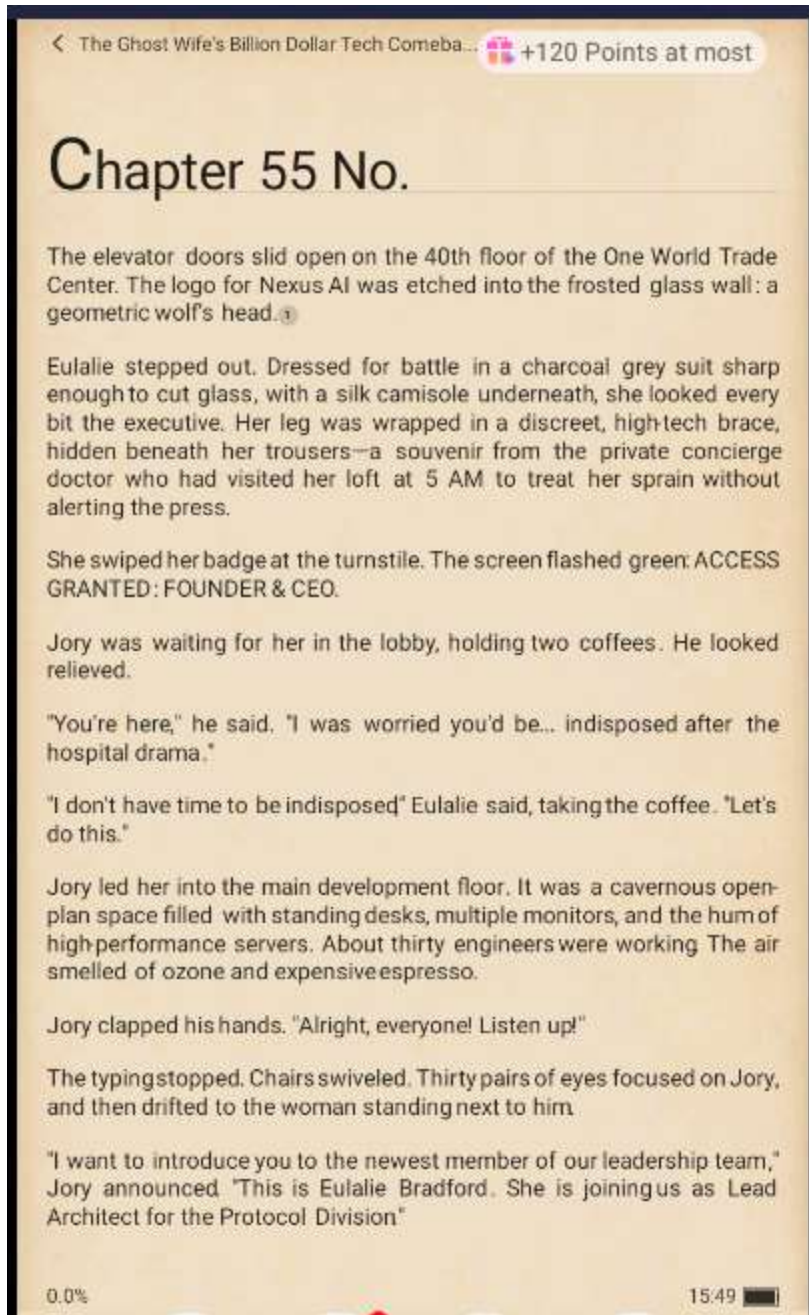


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Silence.

It wasn't a respectful silence. It was a confused, skeptical silence.

Most of the engineers were men in their twenties and thirties. They looked at Eulalie—a woman in a tailored suit who looked more like a board member than a coder—with open doubt.

From the back corner, a chair scraped loudly against the concrete floor.

Karli Trevino stood up.

Karli was the current Lead Engineer. She was brilliant, abrasive, and fiercely protective of her territory. She wore a hoodie that said Code is Law and looked at Eulalie with undisguised hostility.

"Bradford?" Karli said, her voice carrying across the room. "As in Caden Holloway's ex-wife?"

"That's right," Eulalie corrected calmly.

Karli scoffed. She walked toward the front of the room, her arms crossed. "Jory, are you serious? This is a dev floor, not a country club. We heard about the gala, but a theoretical breakthrough isn't the same as shipping code under pressure."

A few engineers snickered.

Jory frowned. "Karli, watch it. Eulalie is a founder."

"A silent founder," Karli shot back. "I looked her up. Her GitHub is a ghost town. Last public commit was five years ago. She's been on the sidelines. Do you really think someone who's been planning parties for half a decade can just drop in and fix the deadlock in the CUAP kernel? The tech has changed. She's rusty."

Eulalie's expression didn't flicker. Let them believe the cover story, she thought. The one I built so carefully. It makes them careless.


Karli pulled a remote from her pocket and clicked it. The massive screen on the wall changed. It displayed a LinkedIn profile. Eulalie's old profile. The one she had curated for Caden.

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Eulalie Holloway, Philanthropist, Event Planner.

"Look at this," Karli sneered, gesturing to the screen. "Skills: 'Table arrangements', 'Donor relations'. Jory, I respect her past work, but her recent experience is irrelevant. It's insulting to the team that's been grinding on this for weeks."

The room was tense. The "Brogrammer" culture was thick in the air. They saw a woman who looked like she belonged on a magazine cover, and they assumed she was past her prime.

Eulalie didn't flush. She didn't look at Jory for help.

She took a sip of her coffee and set it on a desk.

"Are you finished?" Eulalie asked.

Karli blinked. "No. I'm not. If she's leading this team, I walk. I'm not reporting to someone who thinks a stack overflow is a problem with pancakes."

Karli looked around the room, gathering support. "Who's with me? We are building the future here, not indulging a founder's vanity project."

Jory stepped forward, his face darkening. "Karli, that is enough. Pack your things."

Karli froze. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Jory said. "You're fired. Insubordination. And creating a hostile work environment."


The room gasped. Karli's jaw dropped. "You can't fire me. I'm the only one who understands the deadlock logic! The demo is in two days! If I leave, this project tanks."

She looked at Eulalie with pure venom. "It's her or me, Jory. The code or the girl."

Jory looked at Eulalie. He didn't hesitate.

"The girl is the code," Jory said. "Get out, Karli."


Karli turned red. She grabbed her bag. "Fine! Good luck fixing that race

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condition! I hope your stock goes to zero!"


She stormed out, slamming the glass door so hard the walls shook.

The silence that followed was terrified. The engineers looked at Jory, then at Eulalie, waiting for the disaster to unfold. They had just lost their best coder because the boss wanted to protect his friend.

"Well," Eulalie said into the silence. She walked over to Karli's empty desk. She ran a finger over the mechanical keyboard.

"That was dramatic," she noted.

She turned to face the room. "Now that the noise is gone, let's get to work."

 "Help me, and I'll give you a special reward!" Check

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