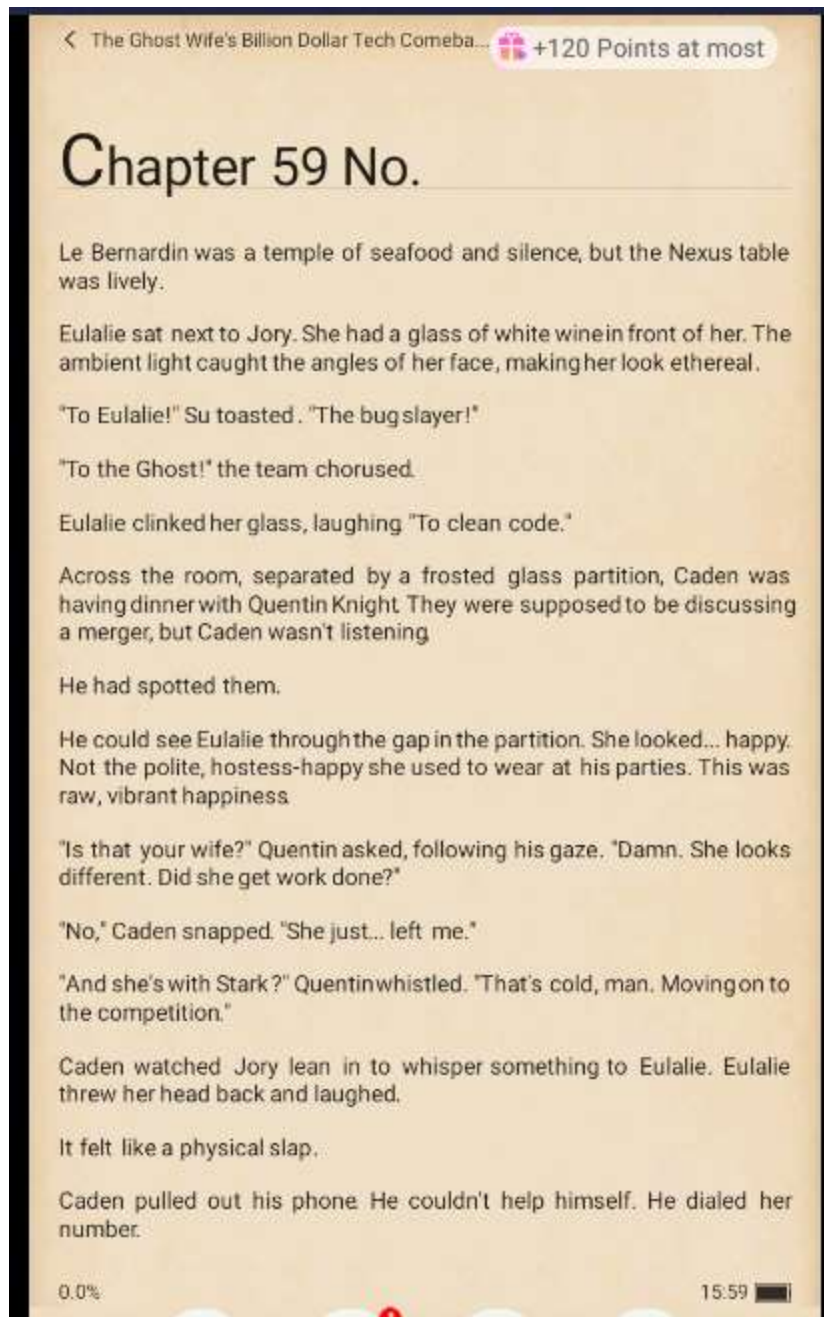


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At the Nexus table, Eulalie's phone lit up. Caden.

Her smile vanished. It was like a light switch being flipped.

She hit Decline.

Caden watched her do it. He saw the dismissal. Rage flared.

He dialed again.

She declined again and flipped the phone face down.

"Everything okay?" Jory asked, touching her arm.

"Just spam," Eulalie said.

Caden slammed his phone onto the table. "She's ignoring me."

"Maybe she's busy," Quentin suggested unhelpfully.

Just then, Caden's phone rang. It was Martha.

He answered, his voice sharp. "What?"

"Mr. Holloway," Martha said, sounding stressed. "It's Elara. She's with me at the penthouse, she had a nightmare and she's crying. She wants her mother. I told her Mrs. Holloway was at a dinner, and she... well, she's inconsolable."


Caden looked at Eulalie across the room. She was raising her glass for another toast.

An ugly thought formed in his mind. A weapon.

"Is she crying now?" Caden asked, his voice low.

"Yes, sir. She's sobbing"


Caden's eyes narrowed, the jealousy curdling into something vicious. He saw Eulalie laugh again, a bright carefree sound that felt like a personal insult. Without a second thought, his thumb moved to the screen recorder function on his phone. He wasn't instigating the crying he was simply capturing it. Weaponizing it.

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He let the recording run for ten seconds, capturing the high thin, heartbreaking wail of his own daughter crying for her mother through the phone's speaker.

Then he stopped it.

He opened his messages. He attached the audio file.

He sent it to Eulalie.

Caden: Enjoying your date? This is what you're missing

He watched.


Eulalie's phone buzzed. She picked it up. She looked at the screen.

She tapped play.

Even from across the room, Caden saw her posture collapse. The joy drained out of her body as if she'd been shot. She pressed the phone to her ear, her face twisting in pain.

Gotcha.

Caden took a sip of his whiskey, feeling a grim, toxic satisfaction. If he couldn't have her happiness, he would make sure she didn't have it either.

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

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