

Under the Heiress' Facade #Chapter 411 - Read Under the Heiress' Facade Chapter 411

Chapter 411

Nicholas recognized Samantha too, and he could tell she was Hera's best friend from their interactions. He said, "Hera and I plan to go on a week-long road trip down the Pinecoast Route. We're leaving tomorrow. If you have the time, you're welcome to join us."

As much as he wanted to go on a road trip alone with Hera, he knew the way to a woman's heart was to win over her best friend.

Samantha looked at Nicholas incredulously. "Just the two of you?"

Leaving aside the fact that Hera was seeing someone, Nicholas sported a mop of auburn curls and a myriad of piercings. Samantha doubted the alternative, lip stud-wearing man before her was Hera's type at all.

Knowing Hera, Nicholas did not stand a chance at all. He was lucky Hera hadn't ripped his heart out and stomped on it yet.

"That's right," Nicholas confirmed. He then introduced himself, "I'm Nicholas Sanderson."

"Well, Mr. Sanderson, I would hate to turn down your enthusiasm. Count me in for the road trip!" Samantha beamed. She paused for a second before she mused, "I'm guessing you don't know Hera is seeing someone. You're rather bold for pursuing her with such gusto."

"Hey, she's fair game as long as she doesn't have a ring on that finger. Besides, if I had beaten Bernard to Hera, he wouldn't have stood a chance. The first person to marry her wins," Nicholas pointed out.

Hera raised a brow. She didn't remember agreeing to this nonsense.

Samantha gave Nicholas a thumbs-up for his baseless confidence. "If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Sanderson, how old are you?"

Nicholas was baffled by her question but answered frankly, "I'm 23. I'm younger than Bernard." He emphasized the latter part.

Samantha crooned, "What a pity. You're destined to lose."

Mathematically speaking, how could Nicholas beat Bernard when it came to knowing Hera first if he was born two years later than Bernard? He might stand a chance in his dreams.

Nicholas did not understand what Samantha meant by that and merely gave her a confused look.

In the spacious CEO's office at Shuttle Ventures, Chad threw the newspaper he had been reading onto Bernard's desk. There was a thud as he demanded, "Why the hell did you interfere that day?"

Bernard glanced at the newspaper. It was dated a month ago, and Camille's true colors being exposed headlined the news.

Chad had just so happened to be

attending an international

conference abroad, and he learned about the incident on the day itself. However, the conference was too important for him to deal with Camille's incident right away.

Upon returning to the country today, he immediately rushed to Shuttle Ventures to confront Bernard.

Bernard leaned into his chair and crossed his legs. He cast Chad a lazy, assessing look and drawled, "You wanted me to marry Dr. Shadow, right? I agreed to it, so I went."

Chad was rendered speechless. He never thought Camille had been impersonating Dr. Shadow. "I told you to marry Camille, so don't argue about semantics!" he snapped.

However, he softened his tone as he

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added, "I admit I was blindsided by Camille's antics. You're free to choose a different bride before change my mind about my previous decision. You can marry whoever you like except the real Dr. Shadow."

Bernard straightened up and leveled an icy stare at Chad. "Who are you to decide who I can and cannot marry? Not even Dad could make me do something I didn't want to while he was around, so what makes you think I'd listen to you?" Content

"Because I'm your older brother!" Chad thundered. "Don't forget you owe me a life debt, Bernard!"

Bernard snorted. "Should I get on my knees and thank you for sparing me all those years ago?"

A dark look flickered across Chad's face. He didn't want to argue with Bernard anymore, so he changed the subject. "Do you even know who Dr. Shadow is?"

Bernard kept his expression icy and neutral as he stared at Chad mutely. As the two locked gazes, they each knew the other was perfectly aware of Hera's identity.

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The next day, Nicholas got up before the break of dawn and washed up. He took care in picking out his wardrobe for the day and spritzed himself with cologne. He then grabbed his car keys and drove to the florist.

After picking up the roses he had ordered last night, he went straight to Youngworth Miracle Clinic to see Hera.

Today was the first day of their romantic holiday, and he was determined to use every second of the trip to win Hera over.

He had already planned the itinerary. Now, all he had to do was wait for Hera to get out of bed so that they could grab breakfast together. Then, they could head to the airport where Samantha was waiting.

Nicholas was whistling a lighthearted tune as he pulled up in front of the clinic, only to realize it was closed.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly seven in the morning. He wondered if Hera was sleeping in.

With that in mind, he called her number. The first call went unanswered, and so did the second. The third one finally went through, and Hera demanded huskily on the other line, "What is it?"

Nicholas groused, "Don't tell me you're still in bed! This is our first date. At least show some enthusiasm—"

He was cut off by a beeping sound, indicating Hera had hung up. He couldn't believe her audacity. Normally, he was the one who ended the call first. Then again, he liked Hera for her feistiness. He called her again.

"The person you called is unavailable..." A mechanical female voice sounded on the other line.

Nicholas pursed his lips. Was he

getting stood up? None of his calls went through after that, and no one answered the door when he rang the bell. For the first time in his 23 years of life, things did not go his way.

He sat in the car and sulked as he sent Hera a voice note, "You should be flattered that I'm even interested in you. Get up and open the door right now! If you don't open the door in three minutes, I'll kick it down!"

Three minutes passed, but the door remained tightly shut, and his message was unanswered.

Nicholas gritted his teeth and sent another voice note, "I know you women like to preen and doll up or whatever. You have ten minutes to open the door, or I really will kick it down!"

When ten minutes passed, the door remained shut, and his messages still went unanswered.

Nicholas had dated a dozen women before, yet he was never as patient with any of them as he was now.

"You have half an hour left before I kick that door down!" he warned.

Half an hour later, Nicholas stood before the clinic entrance and wondered how he should kick the door down. It would be embarrassing if he did not make good on his threat.

At that moment, Catherine, Wayne,

and Everly showed up to open shop. They stopped when they saw a young man with a mop of auburn curls bending over to inspect every inch of the clinic door.

"Nic-"

"Burglar!"

No sooner had Everly opened her mouth to greet Nicholas did Wayne bolt toward the clinic entrance and kick Nicholas on his butt.

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Nicholas toppled forward and hit his head on the door. He let out a grunt of pain before clapping a hand to his throbbing forehead, cursing, "What the hell?"

"Sorry, Mr. Sanderson! I didn't get a proper look at you. I thought you were a burglar!" Wayne confessed apologetically, rubbing the back of his neck as he flashed Nicholas a sheepish grin.

"Burglar? Have you ever seen a burglar as handsome as me, you nitwit?" Nicholas snapped. He was about to raise his leg to return Wayne's kick when Wayne dodged.

Upon seeing the red bump on Nicholas' forehead, Catherine quickly opened shop and brought him an ice pack to bring down the swelling.

After that, Everly applied a soothing ointment on the bump. The swelling went down within moments, leaving only a faint, greenish bruise to heal on its own.

The entire ordeal lasted for about an hour before Hera finally deigned to emerge from the western wing, yawning. She cut a withering look at Nicholas and drawled, "Isn't our flight at noon? What are you doing here so early? Do you crave a beating that badly?"

"All you do is sleep! Are you in hibernation or something? Don't you know how much time one wastes on sleeping? You can sleep all you want after you're dead!" Nicholas barked.

He rubbed his throbbing forehead begrudgingly. The curls he had spent a better part of the morning blow-drying and setting were ruined after the ice pack. He wouldn't be in such a pathetic state had a certain young lady bothered to wake up sooner.

"I suggest you keep your mouth shut, Mr. Sanderson. Hera usually works late into the night and wakes up later in the morning. Also, she's not a morning person, and she hates getting woken up," Everly pointed out.

Nicholas grumbled, "Whatever. Go wash up and have your breakfast, Hera. We'll leave for the airport after that."

"Mr. Sanderson, you just hit your head and might be a little disoriented. It isn't safe for you to drive. How about I come with you? I can drive," Wayne offered.

Nicholas cast Wayne a sidelong glance. He was starting to think Wayne had kicked him on purpose. He ground out, "No need! I'm perfectly fine!" "Oh, just let Wayne drive you guys. Herie doesn't have a driver's license, and Samantha isn't the best driver.

"You'll be exhausted from driving the entire week. If Wayne goes with you, you could tap out any time and have him drive," Catherine suggested gently.

She was Hera's grandmother, and Nicholas wanted to get on her good side. As such, he had no choice but to agree to her suggestion even if he didn't want to.

He was even more certain now that the kick from Wayne had been intentional.

After breakfast, the three headed to the airport, where Samantha was waiting for them. They boarded the plane following that.

Hera brought only a backpack while Samantha had two large suitcases in tow.

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Nicholas watched as Wayne helped Samantha with her baggage and sat with her during the flight. He began to see the bright side of having Wayne tag along on the trip; he could keep Samantha company while Nicholas spent some quality time with Hera.

He had two tents readied for the trip. If Wayne had not come along, Hera and Samantha might have gotten spooked while camping by the sea at night and burrowed into Nicholas' tent instead.

But now that Wayne was in the picture, Nicholas might just convince him to share a tent with Samantha while Hera bunked in his.

He mentally approved the plan. The romance aspect of the trip was back on track. As he rubbed his bottom, he began to think Wayne's kick had been worth it.

The four of them disembarked the plane at three in the afternoon and gathered by the airport exit.

"We'll be heading toward our first

destination

after our car

arrives-Greecia Lakeside. We'll

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watch the sunset and set up camp on the beach. We can stargaze at night and watch the sunrise "

Nicholas listed out the activities he had planned.

"Wow, how romantic!" Samantha said in a sing-song voice. She asked Hera, "What do you think about the plans, Hera?"

Hera was busy scrolling her phone. She answered absentmindedly, "I'm fine with anything."

Nicholas licked his studded lip when he heard this. He was looking forward to spending the night with Hera in his tent. At the thought of that, he quickly made a call and urged his friend to bring the car around.

At that moment, a black BMW X7 pulled up in front of them just as Nicholas heard his friend say on the other line, "I'm here!"

"Get in," Nicholas said, hanging up. He opened the door to the backseat, only to find Bernard sitting inside.

"What are you doing here?" Nicholas demanded loudly. He immediately opened the door to the driver's side, but to his eternal dismay, his friend was not behind the wheel. Shaun was. He cursed under his breath, "This is the wrong car..." Content

He turned around to see Samantha happily climbing into the passenger seat while Hera made herself comfortable in the middle seat with Bernard. Wayne heaved the baggage into the trunk and slid into the back seat.

Nicholas was the only one left standing outside.

"Are you getting in or not? If not, we'll leave without you," Shaun prompted coolly.

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Nicholas scooted into the last row and glowered at the two pairs of passengers in front of him. He then glanced at his seatmate.

He wouldn't have minded as much if the person next to him was a beautiful woman. Unfortunately, he was saddled with Wayne, a bumpkin who was taking in every part of the luxurious car in wonder.

This was nothing like the romantic holiday he had in mind!

"Is this your idea of repaying my favor?" Nicholas grouched as he leaned forward and propped his chin on the back of Hera's seat, looking dejected.

"You asked me out on a week-long trip, and here I am. Why are you complaining?" Hera countered.

"I'm happy you agreed to go out with me for a week, but what about the rest of them?" Nicholas asked pointedly, casting a meaningful look at Bernard and Shaun.

"You didn't say I couldn't bring friends," Hera said.

Nicholas fell silent. He wanted to swear.

How more obvious could he have been? Had the elaborate planning not been enough to demonstrate his intentions to Hera? Did he have to spell them out for her? This

"You got a problem?" Bernard asked from up front as he cut Nicholas a sharp look.

Nicholas shuddered when he caught the icy gleam in Bernard's eyes. But Nicholas had never been one to cower, or he wouldn't have thought about pursuing Hera in the first place.

So, he snapped, "Why don't you try putting yourself in my shoes and see if you'd have a problem with this?"

"You can either put up with this or get out of the car. It's up to you," Bernard bit out coldly. He would never have agreed to let the pissant into the car if Hera hadn't said he could come along on the trip.

Bernard was no fool, and he had seen through Nicholas' filthy thoughts the moment he heard about the road trip.

He thought it was rather bold of Nicholas to pursue Hera. It seemed the punk needed someone to teach him a lesson about boundaries, and Bernard was happy to sign up for the task.

"This was my trip to begin with! Why should I get out of the car?" Nicholas seethed as he leaned back into his seat, refusing to give in to Bernard and disembark.

Samantha laughed from the front and attempted peacemaking. "Now, now, the more the merrier, right? I asked Shaun to tag along.

"Besides, it'll do your reputation wonders to hang out with the scions of two of the four influential families. You could brag about it to your friends after the trip!"

She had a point.

Nicholas knee Shaun from the

times they ran into each other at nightclubs. They had even had drinks together a few times. Shaun's moods were unpredictable, and everyone, even Nicholas, dared not cross him.

As for Bernard, Nicholas had never hung out with him before he met Hera. Rumor had it that he was not the easiest person to get along with, and his former career in the special forces meant Nicholas would never beat him in a fight.

Nicholas could stand to be the bigger person in this scenario.

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It was just a trip. Bernard was just a soldier grunt from the special forces, so he was probably a loser in the romance department. In other words, he wouldn't stand a chance against someone as experienced in the dating field as Nicholas. Content

Nicholas would bet good money that by the end of this trip, Hera would forget all about Bernard and become putty in his hands!

The thought of the triumph that awaited him gave him a thrill. When it came to a battle between men, business acuity and combative skills were nothing in the face of refined emotional intelligence!

"What are you grinning about, Mr. Sanderson?" Wayne asked, giving Nicholas a curious look.

Nicholas' smile faded at once. "That's none of your business! I wasn't grinning! You're the one who's grinning, you buffoon!"

Wayne simply raised a brow at him.

Nicholas continued grumbling as he stared out the window. He inadvertently caught the sign at the fork of the road. They were going in a different direction instead of heading toward Greecia Lakeside.

"Wait, you went the wrong way! I want to see the sunset at Greecia Lakeside!" he wailed. He would have climbed over the middle row to take over the wheel from Shaun if Wayne hadn't stopped him.

"Shut it! Another word from you and I'm tossing you out of the car!" Bernard barked warningly.

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Nicholas glanced out the window again and noted the busy highway they were on. It was a complex structure that stood above rushing rapids. At the sight of this, he immediately shut up.

He was the only son of the Sanderson family. Not once in his entire privileged life had he been made to endure such indignation. Nothing had gone according to his plan today, and he wondered why the world was out to get him.

This was supposed to be his trip, for heaven's sake. He was supposed to be the main character.

An hour and a half later, they pulled up at a beautiful farm. The boulevard leading up to the farm was paved with vibrant flowers, and a wide meadow lay behind the farm. The landscape was bordered by a distant mountain range, offering a breathtaking view.

Hera and Samantha made a beeline for the meadow the moment they got out of the car.

Hera had learned to ride a horse during her time with the Killians, but she had not seen a meadow since she went to live with Catherine in the mountains.

Samantha, on the other hand, had dabbled in horseback riding while she was abroad, but she doubted the royal equestrian club covered even a third of this meadow.

Bernard, Shaun, and Nicholas followed the ladies out to the meadow. Wayne, having parked the car in the designated area, went to check them into their rooms.

"Want to ride?" Bernard asked when he stopped next to Hera.

Horse groomers were leading horses across the meadow while the tourists on horseback drank in the view around them.

Hera nodded. "It's been a while since I rode on horseback."

"Let's go! Maybe we could go a few rounds before nightfall," Samantha said as she led the group toward the stables.

Nicholas' eyes lit up when he heard that they were going horseback riding. He was brilliant at this sport, if his track record at Jedburgh's equestrian club was any indication. Having been silenced and made to feel small the entire journey here, he was itching to show off now.

When the five of them arrived at the stables, Nicholas suggested, "If we're all well-versed in riding, what do you say we have a friendly race?" "Will the winner get a prize?" Samantha asked eagerly.

"The first one to cross the finish line will be the commander of this trip. Whatever he or she says goes!" Nicholas declared.

"You're on!" Samantha agreed. "But we must go easy on Hera. She hasn't ridden on horseback for a while."

"It's fine. I'm here just for the fun of it. You guys can race all you want," Hera said dismissively.

Bernard shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

Shaun piped up, "It's a little juvenile, but I'm in if everyone's up for it."

Following that, each of them selected their mount.

Samantha chose an elegantly built Asterian Horse; Nicholas chose a black Thoroughbred; Shaun's mount was a white Quarter Horse; Hera settled on a silvery-white Heavenly Horse, and Bernard's horse was a chestnut-colored twin to Hera's.

They led their horses to the meadow, where a horse racing section had been marked with flags.

Nicholas pointed at the flag flapping in the distance, marking the first thousandth yard of the racecourse. "The first person to reach that red flag wins." Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Ready...and go!"

At the sound of the attendant's whistle, Nicholas and Samantha took off flying. Shaun, despite having called the race "juvenile", could not help his competitiveness as he chased after them.

Hera couldn't care less about who got to be commander of the trip. All she wanted was to ride her horse in peace. She turned and saw Bernard pulling the reins, steering his mount toward her.

Up ahead, Nicholas and Shaun were

neck-to-neck as they charged

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toward the red flag. They were closing in on the last hundred yards when @silvery-white Heavenly Horse whizzed past them in a blur, beating them to the finish line.

The horse elegantly slowed to a trot after it passed the red flag.

There was no one riding it.

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Shaun and Nicholas gaped at the riderless horse. Samantha, the fourth to cross the finish line, exclaimed as she stared at the silvery-white Heavenly Horse ahead. "What? Isn't that Hera's horse? Where's Hera?"

The three looked around panic, wondering if something had happened to Hera. They turned around, only to see a chestnut-colored Heavenly Horse running freely across the meadow with a couple on its back.

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Hera's back was pressed against Bernard's sculpted torso as they rode through the borderless meadow, the horse under them galloping through the wind that kissed their faces. There was something idyllic and romantic about the scene that made everyone stop and stare.

Nicholas was wide-eyed as he did a double-take. Bernard had cheated! He had said he would participate in the race alongside Hera, but he took her off her horse and pulled her onto his mount instead.

"Wow, that looks fun! I want to try that too!" Samantha's eyes were bright as she dismounted with an easy grace and jogged over to Shaun, only to mount his horse.

Shaun wrapped his arms tightly around her and held the reins. With a firm shout, he steered his horse toward Bernard and Hera, leaving Nicholas behind with three horses.

Nicholas ground his teeth. This was ridiculous. Surely, he deserved more respect than this!

It had been a long time since Hera rode on horseback. She allowed Bernard to guide her for a lap until she adjusted to the sensation and muscle memory kicked in. After that, she took over the reins and sent the horse galloping across the meadow.

When Shaun and Samantha caught up to them, they galloped a few more laps across the meadow before Hera decided to return to Nicholas' side. When she saw Nicholas sullenly leading the horses back to the stables, she leaped off Bernard's mount and asked, "So, who won?"

"You did, Hera! You're officially the commander of this trip!" Samantha said happily.

"No dice! Her horse crossed the finish line without her. That's cheating!" Nicholas snapped.

Bernard remained atop his horse and looked down his nose at Nicholas. "You said the first one to cross the finish line wins, but you didn't state that the horse must have a rider. It's a bad look to be a sore loser, you know."

He then looked at Hera and prompted, "Go ahead, sweetie. You're commander now, so make him back out of the trip."

Hera eyed Bernard witheringly. Could these men be any more childish?

Nicholas' eyes widened as he raised his heckles and barked, "That's considered cheating! I might not be a straight-A student, but even I know horses run faster without a rider. You're exploiting a real tiny loophole!"

"Well done, you know what a loophole is. I didn't think you would!" Samantha gave Nicholas a look of mock amazement. She prodded Shaun and said, "You should've let me ride on your horse too."

Nicholas couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Hera was equally speechless.

"Babe, you know we're not cut out for playing commander. We'll leave that sort of work to someone else," Shaun said, holding Samantha around the waist.

"You have a point." Samantha gave

him a peck on the cheek, not at all caring that everyone was subjected to their public display of affection. Hera, thankfully, had grown immune to it after Shaun picked up her call on Samantha's behalf the last time.

"I refuse to be the commander. If the race was unfair, we'll just have to race again," Hera suggested. All she wanted was to ride. She had no intention of dictating how the rest of their trip should go.

Nicholas' eyes twinkled at the hope of a comeback. He licked his lips and said excitedly, "Fine by me! I'm ready to race!"

As he said this, he shot Bernard a taunting look. The first thing he would do as commander was kick Bernard out of their group.

Bernard knew what Nicholas was thinking. He scoffed. He didn't recall permitting Nicholas to win.

Samantha and Shaun didn't care about being commander, but they participated in the race for the fun of it.

The two men did not care about anything else as they raced for the finish line. It was only when they were halfway there that they noticed the other horses and riders catching up to them.

Bernard fell silent at the results. Nicholas, on the other hand, was incredulous.

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Nicholas had gone from second place to last in the second race, and he wasn't sure he could recover from it.

He took the horse for a lap around the meadow and grumbled angrily, "Don't want to be the commander, huh? It's been a while since you rode on horseback? You could at least pretend to be rusty! Women are liars!"

He then lashed out at Shaun and Samantha, "And don't even get me started on you two! You went on and on about how you didn't want to be the commander, but oh, you two were sly! You didn't have to make me put my guard down. If you wanted to be commander so badly, just say so!"

Hera tried to explain, "Would you believe me if I said muscle memory kicked in after I took the horse for a couple of rounds?"

Samantha piped up, "For the record, I really don't want to be the commander of the trip. I was only trying to catch up to Hera and didn't realize how fast I was going."

"Curse my competitiveness," Shaun mused, clicking his tongue. He cast a thoughtful look at Bernard and drawled, "What happened back there, Bernard? It isn't like you to be slower than Samantha."

He was definitely amused by Bernard's loss.

Bernard fell silent. He had been careless and too focused on beating Nicholas. But he didn't mind how the race turned out. He steered the horse toward Hera and said, "I figured I'd cut you guys some slack for going easy on Hera."

Shaun rolled his eyes. He had no comeback for that.

Nicholas, on the other hand, was stumped. Despite his effort, he was made the butt of the joke.

Night gradually fell, and the five of them led the horses back to the stables before they returned to their lodging house.

"Well, as the rules stipulate, Hera is now officially our commander for the trip. We'll go along with whatever plans you have, Hera," Nicholas said.

Hera truly didn't want to be appointed as commander, which was just another way of addressing an over-glorified tour leader. She would have to plan the itinerary, book the group's lodgings, make meal arrangements, and do all that miscellaneous work.

She could have kicked back and let someone else do it instead.

When she spotted Wayne approaching them, a bright idea crossed her mind. She announced, "In that case, we'll leave the planning to Wayne! Whatever he says goes!" This

Wayne gaped at her, unable to wrap his head around the duties suddenly placed on him.

After a long day, the six of them had a humble farmer's fare for dinner before retiring to their rooms for the night.

Nicholas tossed and turned in bed, but sleep would not come to him. If things had gone according to his plans, he should be sharing a tent with Hera by the lakeside now. But Bernard just had to come along and ruin everything!

Why was Bernard different from what he had expected?

If this went on, the trip would become a honeymoon trial for Hera and Bernard.

Nicholas refused to let that happen. It was time he pulled out the big guns.

He pondered his next move and bolted upright in bed, grabbing his phone to call Hera.

Meanwhile, Hera was in a separate

room, leaning against the headboard

and scrolling through her phone.

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When the sound of running water coming from the bathroom stopped, she quickly set her phone aside and picked up the book about

programming on the nightstand.

She might be on holiday, but her acting skills were not. She had to look like she was serious about improving her programming.

Bernard emerged from the bathroom in a set of black pajamas.

When he saw Hera reading on

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bed, he drank a glass of water before burrowing under the covers. He snaked his arms around her and read with her under the lights.

Just then, Hera's phone rang. She picked it up, and Bernard frowned when he saw Nicholas' name flashing on the screen. He reached out to answer the call and put it on speaker.

"Hera, I don't feel so good. Can you come over and take a look?" Nicholas groaned on the other line.

"Can you describe your symptoms?" Hera asked coolly.

"I'm lightheaded and nauseous. I've been retching and having palpitations. I'm just sick all over. I think I'm dying," Nicholas whined.

"Do you think it's because of the altitude?" Hera asked.

Nicholas answered immediately, "Yes! I think so. Could you come here and take a look?"

Hera relented. "Fine. Give me a second."

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The moment Nicholas ended the call, he turned down the temperature to 60 degrees and hurtled into the bathroom. He stripped himself bare and jumped into a cold shower.

Nights in the region were cold in May. Nicholas was shivering when he came out of the bathroom, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. He then lay in bed like an invalid and let the cool air blow over him.

Just then, he heard knocks coming from the door.

Nicholas touched his forehead. His skin was cool, just like he hoped it would be. Turning off the air conditioner, he mumbled, "Come in. The door's unlocked."

When he heard the door opening, he hurriedly lay sprawled on the bed and groaned, "I feel sick and weak and cold. Maybe a hot bath will warm me up. Could you help me to the bathroom?"

The first thing Wayne saw when he opened the door to Nicholas' room was Wayne writhing in bed in nothing but his boxers. No wonder Bernard had sent him in Hera's place. Even he found Nicholas' current state to be rather obscene.

He reached out to grab Nicholas by the arms to hold him upright.

Nicholas finally opened his eyes to take a proper look, hoping to see Hera. However, when he met Wayne's gaze, both men went still.

"What the fuck? What's wrong with you?" Nicholas yelled as he rolled off the bed and fell to the floor. "What are you doing here?"

Wayne scrambled to get off the bed as well and snapped, "Who else did you think would come in? Mr. Killian said you were unwell and asked me to check on you. You look perfectly fine to me!"

Nicholas swore under his breath. He should have been more careful not to let Bernard screw with his plans again. When he caught the amused look on Wayne's face, he snapped, "Don't just stand there gawking! Help me up!"

Wayne didn't like Nicholas at all, but he gave Nicholas a hand anyway on account of his friendship with Hera.

Nicholas gripped Wayne's hand and

hoisted himself up. A sudden thought crossed his mind as his fingers tightened around Wayne's. He blurted, "You have to do me a favor now that you've seen naked." Content belongs

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Wayne blinked at him. "I don't owe you anything. I didn't force you to strip, you know."

He immediately tried to pull away, but Nicholas refused to let go. He might look skinnier than Wayne, but he was strong.

A terrible foreboding filled Wayne when he noted Nicholas' hesitation and stubborn grip. He jumped and forcefully broke away, putting a healthy distance between them as he regarded Nicholas warily.

Nicholas shot him a withering look.

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He snapped, "What are you doing over there? I won't bite!" He closed the distance between them, but Wayne took a step back, then. another when Nicholas stepped forward again.

Wayne was frightened out of his mind. "Use your words!"

"Now that Hera has delegated the role of commander to you, I want you to kick Bernard out of the group tomorrow when you get the chance!" Nicholas said.

Wayne stared at him incredulously. "I-Is that all?"

"What else is there?" Nicholas snapped. "What did you think I'd do to you? Did you even hear what I said just now?"

"Screw you! Get the hell out of my room, you ass!" Nicholas seethed.

Wayne didn't want to stay with a naked pervert in the room any longer either, but he had felt how cold Nicholas' skin was earlier. He asked worriedly, "Are you sure you're alright?"

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"What are you going to do about it if I'm not? Get out of here and tell Hera to come see me!" Nicholas snapped as he chased Wayne out of the room and slammed the door shut.

Wayne was speechless. He was about to turn and leave when the door behind him creaked open. Nicholas warned through the gap, "Get back here. Don't you dare tell anyone what happened just now, or I'll give you hell when we go back to Jedburgh!"

The threat might have left a bigger impact had Wayne not turned around and seen Nicholas poking his head through the gap in the door. He looked so ridiculous with his auburn curls that Wayne told Bernard about the incident immediately upon returning.

Outside another hotel room, Bernard snorted after hearing Wayne's report. He had expected a more elaborate plan from Nicholas, only to be disappointed. Contentt belongs to N0ve/IDrâ/ma.O(r)g!

"Got it. Keep an eye on him," Bernard said as he handed Wayne a bank card.

The image of Nicholas lying in bed naked, save for his boxers, made Wayne's stomach churn. He would have refused to do Bernard's bidding had Bernard not given him a bank card.

With his limited academic qualifications and work capabilities, Wayne would never make enough money in Jedburgh to cover his and Everly's costs of living. While Hera had been kind enough to provide him with free lodging, his male pride did not allow him to depend on Hera's generosity.

As such, he made up his mind to do whatever Bernard tasked him with. At least the money was good. He took the bank card and promised, "Alright, I'll keep an eye on him. I won't let him bother you and Hera."

When Bernard returned to the room, Hera asked, "What happened?"

"I won the bet. Nicholas was only pretending to be ill," Bernard declared triumphantly as he closed the door behind him. He locked it and crossed the room to the bed in a few long strides. "Guess we're doing it my way tonight."

Hera fell silent. She had wanted to swing by Nicholas' room to check up on him earlier, but Bernard did not permit her to leave. He even made a bet with her that Nicholas was pretending to be ill to get her attention.

To prove that his hunch was right, Bernard sent Wayne to check up on Nicholas.

"How did you know he was faking it?" Hera asked, pressing a hand to Bernard's chest to keep him from inching closer.

"Because I'm a man and I know how he thinks," Bernard said.

"Oh?" Hera eyed him with faint amusement. "I'm guessing you've pulled the same trick before."

Bernard gave her a withering look. "Stop talking and kiss me," he murmured as he dipped his head to kiss her on the lips.

After a long and lingering kiss, he covered Hera's eyes with his hand. Her heart careened from beat to beat when she sensed what he was about to do next. Panic flooded her as she clutched the front of his pajamas.

"Do you have to?" Hera asked, her soft voice strained and without its usual composure.

Bernard glanced down at the fingers clutching the front of his shirt and knew she was terrified.

Hera's heart thumped wildly as she thought about what would happen next. Her breathing grew labored, and she instinctively shook her head.

"Don't worry. I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere," Bernard promised softly as he kissed her lips. He reached past her and turned off the lights in the room.

Hera stiffened as the lights went out with a click.

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Hera closed her eyes. When she felt Bernard shifting and rolling away from her, she immediately reached out to grab him.

"Don't be scared. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere," Bernard promised gently. He could feel her body stiffening and hear her breath coming up short.

His heart broke to see her panicking like this. He nearly caved and turned on the lights for her, but he stopped himself when he remembered how her last nyctophobic episode had turned out.

Hera's nyctophobia was too critical for her not to learn to overcome it. He could leave all the lights on at home every night, but he could not keep the night's darkness from the rest of the world.

Bernard didn't want Hera's system to go into overdrive the next time her nyctophobia acted up and he was not with her.

"The room isn't completely dark. You can open your eyes and look around when you're ready," he murmured. He was lying on his side with his arm under Hera's head. He slowly splayed his fingers while keeping his hand over her eyes.

Hera took several deep breaths, mustering her courage as her eyes fluttered open.

She peered through the gaps in Bernard's fingers. When she saw the glittering swirls of the galaxy and its countless stars playing over the dark ceiling, her breath hitched. It was beautiful.

Back when she was living in the mountains, she did not go out after nightfall for fear of the dark. She stayed indoors and read books instead. After she arrived in the city, her nyctophobia did not act up as much because the city was always well-lit even at night. Still, she did not go out after dark unless absolutely necessary and preferred to stay indoors.

Hera never thought the pitch-black and seemingly abysmal night sky could make her feel anything but fear. But at that moment, she was stunned by the breathtaking view of the galaxy projected above her.

She was surprised, and a little scared. Her heart was skipping several beats at once, and she could hear her pulse in her ears.

Bernard felt her lashes brush against the underside of his fingers, tickling him. He asked softly, "The galaxy might be dark, but countless stars are shining in it. It's beautiful, don't you think? Would you like to see more of it?"

Hera nodded slightly as the hand covering her eyes slowly pulled away.

Darkness enveloped her at once. Her body trembled uncontrollably as she reached out to grab Bernard's shirt, her knuckles turning white.

"Don't be scared. Relax," Bernard

said as he pried her fingers apart

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and slipped his fingers through the gaps between them. Once their hands were intertwined, he reached for the remote and switched the image projected on the ceiling. "tere, look at this one. This is the Milky Way."

Hera listened as he explained the workings of the universe to her, his low and husky voice like a soft

lullaby. She felt the warmth of him et

hand and breathed in his familiar scent. Slowly, but surely, the fear and panic in her ebbed.

She tried to ignore the darkness around her and focus on the image above.

Gradually, her body loosened with relief. When Bernard sensed the change in her body, he turned to look at her face, which was mere inches away.

Hera's side profile was delicately chiseled, and he could see the galaxy reflected in her eyes. She was mesmerizing.

"There's a meteor shower tomorrow night. We'll be camping by the lakeside, so why don't we do some stargazing while lying on the grassy fields?" Bernard asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

Hera looked away from the ceiling and fixed her gaze on Bernard. The darkness around her made her head spin.

She took a moment to regain composure. Focusing on the light from the projection, she got used to the dimness and said, "Okay."

"Let's turn off the projector and try again, alright?" Bernard suggested. He had to strike while the iron was hot.

Hera's breath hitched. He could tell she was nervous and encouraged patiently, "You're doing so well adjusting to the dimness. Let's try total darkness for a bit, alright?"

She gulped and tightened her grip on his hand. She encouraged herself. She was with Bernard, and there was nothing for her to be afraid of. "Okay. Just for a bit," she said meekly, nodding once.

"Alright. Don't be afraid. We'll leave the lights on if it gets too much for you," Bernard promised, coaxing her as one would a skittish animal. After she mentally braced herself, he turned off the projector.