

Under the Heiress' Facade

Chapter 486

Hera coughed and confessed, "You kept complaining about getting sick before you went online. Three years ago, you told me you couldn't mentor me anymore because of your health. You even wanted me to hone my skills alone."

"You hardly went online after that. I thought you were close to kicking the bucket."

Tyler did not look amused. "I told you I was sick because I was swamped and needed an excuse to stay offline! As for what I said three years ago, I reckoned you were good enough that you didn't need my guidance anymore..."

At the time, he had just joined Astral Nova and had been swamped with work. It didn't help that the grandmaster often sent him on missions to some rural place with no reception, which prevented him from going online.

However, Tyler had to keep these a secret from Hera. With a flap of his hand, he said dismissively, "Oh, forget it. I thought you were a cloistered bumpkin, and I was annoyed when you kept pestering me to take you under my wing back then."

"I only agreed because you proved to be talented and a fast learner. I guess we're even."

Hera shot him a withering look.

Tyler added, "Had I known you were such a babe, I would never have made up the final two rules of our arrangement." The rules were that they would not look into each other's background and that they would never meet in person.

He continued shamelessly, "If fantasy tropes have taught me anything, it's that we'd make a good couple-a mentor and his protégé, one falling in love with the other and all that jazz. I can overlook your previous bad relationship choices as long as you come back to me."

She speechlessly listened to his nonsensical rambling. She would never have believed that the playful man who had a tendency to run his mouth was the legendary S if he hadn't told her things only the both of them knew.

He had seemed so cool and aloof online, save for the countless times he playfully warned her not to fall in love with him just because he was kind.

"I thought of you as a father figure after you took me under your wing," Hera said, declining his offer. "I'd probably take care of you in your old age, but I've no interest in dating you."

"Tsk. Ingrate," Tyler grumbled, though he dropped the topic after that and changed the subject. "Anyway, why did you show up here? You're risking discovery."

"I came to see someone," Hera explained.

"Who?"

"Vulcan."

Tyler frowned at the name. "Why do you want to see him?"

"I need him to recover lost data," she answered frankly. If even the infamous Raven could not retrieval need the lost data, there was little hope for anyone else.

Still, Tyler pressed, "Why didn't you come to me?"

"You said we couldn't meet in person. It's one of your rules," Hera reminded icily.

"The rule's been abolished!" he declared.

"Oh," was all she said, letting him have his way simply because he was her mentor.

"Show me." As he said this, he sat down before the office computer desk.

Hera hesitated for a moment and did not move. After all, he had forbidden her from looking into the Killians before.

When she did not budge, Tyler did not press further and said, "Well, if it's nothing urgent, how about you come with me to meet the Deputy Commissioner of the National Space Administration? He'd like to meet you."

Hera would be granted diplomatic immunity if the National Space Administration recruited her.

happened, Miridian would go

up on

their hunt for her.

Nodding, Hera agreed and left the office with him. Upstodatee from

Chapter 487

Hera had only just left the office with Tyler when she saw Bernard coming toward them. Her heart leaped to her throat. When he said he was attending a banquet this evening, she hadn't expected it to be this one!

Bernard's eyes lit up when he spotted Hera. A smile curled his lips, and he looked nothing like his usual aloof self as he appraised her. She looked like a temptress in her black, fitted dress that accentuated her curves.

However, his smile faded when he noticed she had left the office with Tyler. A dark look passed over his face as he assessed the duo.

Bernard approached Hera and shrugged off his jacket. He draped it over her shoulders and wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her toward him and away from Tyler. "Cover up the next time you're attending an event."

She felt a little embarrassed to have been caught with Tyler, so she did not put up a fight as Bernard pulled the jacket around her and buttoned it up. At this point, he might as well swaddle her.

"Don't be such a killjoy, Mr. Killian. The dress was designed that way. Have you no appreciation for art?" Tyler asked, clicking his tongue in mock disapproval.

Bernard cut him an icy look. "Only single scumbags like you would want women to dress in mere scraps of fabric." With that, he led Hera away as if Tyler were the plague.

Tyler gaped after him. If anyone was a scumbag, he reckoned it was Bernard.

Bernard did not stop until they entered the banquet hall and staked out a quiet corner. He turned and assessed Hera coldly. "Don't get too close to him, and don't ever go into a room alone with him again! Especially when you're dressed like that!"

Sensing his anger, she placated, "Yes, yes, whatever you say. Don't be jealous, all right? You're the only man I like."

Only then was Bernard appeased. He pointed at his lips. "And?"

Hera fell silent. She glanced around the hall at the busy crowd. Some were rubbing shoulders and clinking glasses, while others were on the lookout for Raven. Everyone was huddled in groups and talking among themselves.

When she made sure no one was looking their way, she rose on her tiptoes and pecked him on the lips.

Satisfied, Bernard asked despite already knowing the answer, "What are you doing here?"

Hera spotted Gideon hovering nearby, nursing a glass of wine as he chatted with a few other guests. She gestured in his direction and said, "I came with Gideon. Would you like to greet him?"

A bemused look flashed in Bernard's eyes. He was admittedly impressed with her seamless acting.

"All right." He played along, intending to see how long she intended to keep up the act.

The event kicked off at 7:00 pm when the emcee announced Damian as the opening act of the anniversary party.

After Damian had performed a song

on stage, Theo, the CEO of XS

et

Corporation, took to the stage to deliver his speech. The lights above the audience dimmed, and the crowd was abuzz with activity.

QUMS

Those who were on the lookout for Raven, Vulcan, and S were probing each other's intentions, hoping to find allies in their hunt.

A few hackers were exchanging and cross-checking information, confirming that they had not seen any guests whose invitations were addressed to Vulcan, S, or Raven.

Hera observed the crowd silently and spotted Rhett and his son nearby. Neither looked too happy, and she could only assume their minivan chase went awry.

Theo wrapped up his speech,

n

et

following which the audience was left to mingle among themselves. Just then, a loud bang sounded from the far corner of the hall. The guests turned toward the sound.

QUMS

Two children were arguing at the moment. The taller child had shoved Gino against the claw machine, hence the loud bang. "I saw the claw machine first, so why'd you cut me in line?"

Gino's back had hit the sharp edge of the claw machine. The pain made him see black spots in his vision, but he stubbornly rose to his feet and retorted, "The video game console is inside the claw machine. The rules say we get three tries each to pick up the console, and whoever picks it up gets to keep it. Content belongs

to

"You guys cheated! You're hogging the machine even though you didn't pick up the console after three tries. Do you think you're all that just because your cousin is a hacker on the guest list?"

The taller child noticed the crowd's questioning stares and snapped, "I do think I'm all that! Why don't you have your brother help you if he's good at programming too?"

Chapter 488

Gideon and James shoved through the crowd to get to Gino. "Are you all right?"

Gino was moved to see them come over to check on him. He reached behind him and rubbed his throbbing back. Gideon immediately lifted the child's shirt, only to see a large bruise on Gino's back. Clearly, the kid had been shoved against the claw machine with quite some force.

"Apologize to him now!" Gideon snapped at the boy who had pushed Gino. He and Gino might not get along most days, but he was still protective of the latter when it counted.

However, the boy who had pushed Gino merely lifted his chin and eyed Gideon defiantly. The teenager standing behind the boy smirked as if Gideon had just cracked a joke.

At that moment, a heavysset woman stormed through the crowd and came to a stop next to the smarmy-looking pair who had assaulted Gino. "Which imbecile dares to accuse my son of cheating? How dare you demand an apology after insulting the Atkinses' good name?"

James recognized her right away. Mabel Hutchinson was married into the Atkinses, which happened to be one of the top ten prestigious families of Jedburg. The youngest boy must be Roland Atkins, her son.

Linda hailed from the Atkinses before she married into the Killian family. It was thanks to the Killians that the Atkinses had grown from a small-time factory to the largest original equipment manufacturer in Agrecia a decade ago. They became one of the top ten prestigious families because of it, too.

The Everetts were in no position to cross the Atkinses. Nothing good could come from it, especially because Mabel was a famous shrew in Jedburg. Roland straightened up at the sight of his mother and pointed at Gino. He said boldly, "He was the one who accused me and Silas of cheating!" "Nonsense! Silas is the 99th-best hacker on the Global Hacker List! He wouldn't need to cheat on some childish game. You're just insulting our family on purpose!" Mabel snapped, determined to accuse the Everetts of libel.

After that, she summoned an attendant. "Who are these insubordinate fools? What are they even doing at XS Corporation's anniversary party? Throw them out right now!"

"Mrs. Atkins, perhaps there's been a mistake. Children argue all the time during games. There's no need to cause such a scene," James pointed out. He didn't want to get on the Atkinses' bad side.

It seemed Mabel had not noticed

James and Gideon's presence until

that moment. She drawled mockingly, "Well, if it isn't the

net

Everetts champions of the nouveau riche. Dheard you were bankrupt last year and only turned things around with XS Corporation's help. In other words, you're nothing more than a bunch of lap dogs!"

et

James truly did not want to cross the Atkinses, but his pride did not allow him to take a public degradation. Furious as he was, he did not want to cause a scene in front of so many people, so he let the insult slide.

Gideon, however, stepped forward to shield his family and snapped, "We might or might not be XS Corporation's lapdogs, but at least we aren't going around barking like a bunch of mad mutts like you and your son!"

"Why you! How dare you call me a dog!" Mabel shrieked. "You Everetts owe me an apology for disrespecting my family! Better get to it before I tear your pitiful fortune out from under you!"

"What kind of apology are you looking for?" Gideon asked.

Mabel thought he was intimidated by her threat. She sneered, "I want the three of you to apologize to us. Also, have the kid beg my son for forgiveness. After that, we'll let this incident pass."

Roland and his cousin, Silas Atkins, crossed their arms as they assessed the Everett trio cockily, smirking as they waited for the latter to kneel. Male pride kept the Everett trio from kneeling.

Gino was fuming. He hadn't been in the wrong. He had been shoved against the claw machine, and his back was still hurting from it. He refused to beg for forgiveness.

He whined, "They cheated! I saw it! So what if he's the 99th-best hacker on the Global Hacker List? He's è ranked second-last here among the other pros. He couldn't even pick up the console from the claw machine even after he cheated!"

"And you're accusing me of insulting you? If you're so great, why don't you pick up the console in the claw machine? I'll prove to everyone that my accusation against you isn't baseless!"

Chapter 489

Roland grew defensive and protested loudly, "We're not your dogs, you know! Why should we have to prove to everyone that we didn't cheat?"

"Mrs. Atkins, don't expect us to apologize if you can't prove my brother's accusations are false. If anything, your son should apologize to my brother for pushing him and bruising his back," Gideon said with lethal calm as he stared at Mabel.

Mabel bristled. She couldn't believe a family of nobodies had the nerve to go against the Atkinses.

Determined to put them in their place, she turned to Silas and said, "Silas, show them how you work the claw machine and shut these yapping lapdogs up! I want everyone here to see the Everetts for the unreasonable bottom-feeders that they are!"

A smug look flickered across Silas' face. It was true that he hadn't managed to pick up the console earlier. The claw machine looked like the common variant found in malls and arcades, but it had actually been modified by XS Corporation for hackers to challenge each other's programming skills.

It looked ordinary enough, but its programming was extremely complicated. The machine's motherboard, in particular, had been coded with an algorithm that affected the claw's grip. By decoding and reprogramming it, a hacker could adjust the grip of the claw and increase their chances of picking up a prize from the machine.

Silas had figured this out after several tries earlier. If he proceeded with the theory and decoded the initial algorithm, picking up the console would be child's play.

"Sure," he said. "But where's the fun in a one-sided demonstration? Let's have a friendly match. The person who picks up the most prizes in two out of three matches wins, and the loser will have to beg the winner for forgiveness."

Silas stared at Gideon, his gaze full of malicious glee. He was determined to make the latter pay for humiliating him in front of the other guests. He ranked 99 on the Global Hacker List, and he would be damned if he did not save his reputation.

Upon hearing this, Roland knew Silas was confident about this win. He piped up arrogantly, "Well, how about it? Are you scared? If you are, just apologize already!"

To prove his innocence, Gino snapped, "I'm not scared of some lame competition!"

Pleased to see the boy rise to the bait, Silas feigned generosity and suggested, "You could have your brother help you. I wouldn't want these people to think I was picking on a kid."

"I don't need his help! I know how programming works," Gino argued stubbornly. Gideon was clueless about programming and would only further embarrass him.

Many guests began to swarm around the claw machine when they caught word that a match was going on. Some of them even started betting on who would win.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the hall, Tyler had only just introduced Hera to Jim Hawkins, the Deputy Commissioner of the National

heard the commotion on the opposing end of the hall.

Space Administration, when the

Bernard gave Douglas a look.

Douglas left and returned a few moments later. He whispered to Hera, "Ms Youngworth, it seems your family has gotten into a dispute with Mrs. Atkins and her family They're getting into a match and the crowd's betting on who would win."

"Pardon me, Deputy Commissioner Hawkins," Hera said politely. "I'll return shortly."

Jim's secretary looked scandalized

by this. Countless people had tried

1

and failed to meet Jim, yet the young lady who had just been introduced to him would excuse herself and leave him hanging.

Swn

Fortunately, Jim was an understanding person. When he heard the commotion across the hall and figured Hera was needed there, he nodded and let her leave to sort out the matter.

Chapter 490

James whispered worriedly, "Are you sure you can handle him?" It was preposterous for the Atkinses to expect or even force an apology out of the Everetts.

"Yes," Gino confirmed. He would look like a wimp if he backtracked now, so he had no choice but to see the challenge through. Besides, there was no embarrassment in losing to a pro hacker.

On the contrary, it wouldn't be an honorable win for Silas, who ranked 99th on the Global Hacker List, if he beat a programming rookie in a match. Presently, the crowd had placed their bets in Silas' favor, though it was out of sycophancy for the Atkinses more than anything. Those who dared not cross the Atkinses had not bothered placing bets at all.

No one bet on the Everetts, and Mabel was pleased to see how the Everetts lost favor with the audience. She wanted them to be punished for going against the Atkinses.

"Ready?" Roland asked Gino smugly. He couldn't wait to see Gino apologize. He would make Gino grovel to the point of tears.

Gino squared his shoulders. "Cut the crap. Which of us goes first?"

Silas was still pretending to be the bigger person. "Are you sure you don't want your big brother to help you?"

Gideon clenched his fists. Had he known this day would come, he would have picked up coding and programming alongside his younger siblings. At least then he wouldn't have to stand here and let Silas run his mouth.

Just then, an icy voice rang out from the crowd. "Where's your confidence? Drop the goody-two-shoes act. You're outright picking on a child!" Gino whirled in the direction of the familiar voice, his eyes sparkling as he cried, "Hera!"

As if on cue, Hera emerged from the crowd, who parted to let her through. An oversized men's jacket was draped over her shoulders, its loose silhouette shifting as she moved. Even then, she looked aloof and stunning.

Falling in step behind her was none other than Bernard, whose domineering presence stifled the restless crowd.

"Mr. Killian," James greeted immediately, his tone full of respect.

Only then did the crowd remember the Everetts were Dr. Shadow's family, and Dr. Shadow was Bernard's lover.

They cursed inwardly and wondered if it was too late for them to bet on the Everetts instead. They did not care about the match or who won. They only wanted to rub shoulders with the right folks.

However, Mabel was unfazed by Hera and Bernard's arrival. Her sister-in-law was married to Rhett, the CEO of Killian Corporation. Bernard had nothing on them!

More importantly, Rhett was also in attendance this evening. Mabel was confident he would take the Atkinses side if Bernard decided to cause a scene. Emboldened by the thought, she snorted and said, "Don't get all high and mighty unless you want to take Silas on, toot

Hera had gathered the gist of the incident from the crowd's exchange earlier. She glanced at Gideon and James, whose displeasure flashed in his eyes. At last, her gaze fell on Gino, who clenched his jaw and looked endearingly defensive of his pride.

Hera would not let anyone pick on her family. "Very well, then. Let's have some fun, shall we?" She flexed her fingers to make a point.

Silas snorted at her audacity. "Aren't you arrogant? You must run in our circle. What's your codename?"

Hera drawled coldly, "You're not good enough to know."

He scoffed. He would make her pay for her arrogance and humiliate her so badly that she would give up hacking forever.

Mabel pointed out snidely, "If you're
taking part in the match, you'll have

to apologize to the others if you lose." It would be quite the sight
behold if Dr. Shadow, who was
Bernard's lover, were to apologize.

QUMS

et

"Tsk. You sure love hearing yourself talk. Start the match already," Hera snapped impatiently.

Gino was excited to join forces with Hera for the match, but he couldn't help worrying, either. Standing next to her, he squeezed her hand and said solemnly, "If you lose, I'll apologize on your behalf too."

Hera gave him a withering look, wondering at his sudden pessimism.

Bernard jerked his chin at Douglas, who immediately had an attendant bring out a laptop and a table and chairs.