

The Double 181

Chapter 181

Mirabella's computer desktop was a model of minimalism, sporting a scant collection of apps. She clicked on an icon resembling a dewdrop, and immediately, a login box sprang up.

Entering a string of credentials, she hit the enter key, and a chat interface popped up, looking not much different from the usual messaging tools,

No sooner had she logged in than a little leaf icon at the corner of the page began to flicker rapidly someone was looking for her.

Casting a brief glance at the notification, Mirabella opened the settings and switched to 'Do Not Disturb' mode without hesitation.

She skimmed through the messages from people, who were concerned about why she had been off the radar for over a year, but she didn't bother replying to any of them.

Instead, she went straight to a group chat in her list. The group wasn't large, just about two dozen members, and about half of them were online, engaged in lively conversation.

Mirabella didn't bother scrolling through the chat history; her fingers danced across the keys as she typed.

The Pill: Anyone here dealt with Solace Stern lately?

The group's members were from all corners of the globe, their identities shrouded in mystery. dealing in goods that ordinary people wouldn't come across.

The lively chatter came to an abrupt halt at the sudden appearance of "The Pill." It was as if they had all been struck mute, and the chat fell silent for a long moment.

Watching the screen, which seemed to have frozen in time, Mirabella blinked in surprise. Over a year had passed, and was she already forgotten?

After a brief pause, her fingers tapped out another message.

The Pill: Hello?

As the question mark hit the chat, the stunned crowd seemed to snap out of their trance.

Sky's the Limit: Holy smokes, Pill dude, you've finally resurfaced!

Get Rich or Die Trying: Thought I was seeing things. But nope, it's for real.

No Stealing My Meds: A VIP entrance for the big boss, nothing less for

you

lot.

Admission Fee: One Billion: Good thing I didn't hit the sack yet, or I'd be kicking myself forever!

Mirabella watched as the group went completely off-topic and rubbed her temple in mild frustration.

The Pill: So, can anyone answer my first question?

No Stealing My Meds: I don't have Solace Stem. I have only ever heard of it in whispers.

Get Rich or Die Trying: I'm just a humble rat poison salesman. Solace Stem? That's way out of my league.

Sky's the Limit: The number of chemists who can whip up a batch of Solace Stem must be few and far between these days, let alone sell it.

Mirabella closed the chat without further ado since the group had no leads on Solace Stem. A short while later, her avatar lit up with a private message. It was from "No Stealing My Meds," an old acquaintance with whom she'd always had a decent rapport.

No Stealing My Meds: Pill, you were asking about Solace Stem. Is something up?

The Pill: Just found traces of it in a friend, unexpected.

No Stealing My Meds: Few can make that stuff. Tell you what, I'll ask around. I've got some pals in the Guild.

The Pill: Thanks, much appreciated!

No Stealing My Meds: No sweat. Can I get your contact deets?

After a moment's thought, Mirabella sent over her Messenger handle. Soon enough, her Messenger pinged with a new contact request, which she promptly accepted. Then, as if by unspoken agreement, neither delved into idle chatter.

Mirabella shut down her computer, stood up, and approached her wardrobe, retrieving a suitcase she had brought to the Davis household.

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Mirabella flicked through the assorted bottles and jars in the chest with a rare hint of solemnity gracing her usually impassive features.

Solace Stem was a neurotoxin, not aggressively potent, but insidious enough to slowly ravage every nerve in a human body.

For most, the poison would remain dormant without causing noticeable harm unless the body suffered a nerve-related injury. However, once triggered, it would spread like vines, stealthily assaulting the neurons until the victim was left a shell of their former self.

The clinical signs were intermittent mental agitation, a distinct purplish hue at the temples, and, as the poison advanced, rapid weight loss accompanied by subtle reddish blotches on the skin. Its insidiousness lay in its affinity for nerves, eluding detection by standard blood tests.

Mirabella was baffled as to how Leo had contracted Solace Stem. Judging by his current state, the toxin was proliferating into a more advanced stage. Without intervention, the outlook was grim.

The concoctions at her disposal were merely suppressants, not antidotes. Crafting a cure was a complex task, exacerbated by the absence of proper alchemical equipment. It was a headache, to say the least.

Massaging her temple, she eventually selected a vial that could offer temporary control and exited the room.

Downstairs.

Shawn, about to retire to his room, halted at the sight of his daughter descending the stairs. "Mira, you're still up?"

"Yep." Mirabella glanced around the living room. "Has Leo gone to bed?"

Nodding, Shawn replied. "He just flew in and said he was beat. He's probably resting."

"Then you should get some sleep too, Dad," Mirabella suggested before turning to head back upstairs.

The entire back-and-forth took less than a minute.

Watching his daughter's retreating figure, Shawn stroked his chin, feeling a twinge of discontent. Zach was enough trouble; now, Leo was back. Was a simple, cozy family life of three too much to hope for?

The following morning.

Approaching the stairwell, Mirabella peered down to see Leo in the living room. She paused, retreating to her room before reemerging with the vial she had picked the previous evening.

Descending, she approached him with a polite greeting. "Morning, Leo."

"Good morning, Mirabella," Leo nodded slightly.

His complexion had improved after a night's rest, but the shadow at his temples persisted. Mirabella discreetly took note, confirming her diagnosis from last night. After a brief pause, she handed him the vial. "Here, for you."

Leo's eyes lingered on the vial, accepting it after a moment of hesitation. "What's this?"

Before Mirabella could reply, Shawn emerged from the washroom and nonchalantly offered an explanation, "Vitality Boost Pills."

Leo raised his eyebrows.

"Your sister's been handing these out as welcome-back presents. I swear, I've felt more robust than ever lately," Shawn boasted, throwing a punch in the air to demonstrate. He accidentally knocked over a wooden figurine, and his face fell.

Mirabella's mouth twitched, and she averted her gaze.

After a moment, Shawn picked up the wooden figurine from the floor with a smile and placed it back on the corner table, casually hiding his slightly trembling hands behind his back. He capped the moment with an addendum, “Anyway, your sister’s remedy is really effective!”

Leo looked on, dumbfounded. He had never seen his father act so goofy before. However, his attention quickly returned to the porcelain bottle in his hands..

What were these so-called “Vitality Boost Pills”? Were they some kind of libido supplement like his dad thought?

Sure, he had injured his spine, but his libido... Leo suddenly felt a hit to his pride.

Sensing his thoughts, Mirabella pressed her temples and said, “The one you’re holding is different from Dad’s.”

Leo’s expression then eased slightly.

Mirabella cleared her throat and spoke more formally. “This is Crimson Sage. It specifically targets toxins that accumulate in the body and repairs physical functions. It will be beneficial for your current condition.” She left out the more detailed benefits, knowing that bombarding him with too much jargon wouldn’t make sense to him.

Shawn, hearing this, narrowed his eyes, always feeling there was something offbeat about Mirabella. She always spouted terms he’d never heard before. She sounded like one of those scams he’d heard about on the news that conned people into buying fake medicines.

Leo wasn’t as internally dramatic as his dad. He was just surprised by his sister’s last comment about the remedy being useful for his ‘current physical state.’

He looked at Mirabella in astonishment, and as their eyes met, there seemed to be a knowing depth in her clear gaze. Did she know about his injury?

Leo paused, about to say something, but Mirabella winked at him, her tone unusually serious. “Leo, trust me, you need to take this, one pill every three days, don’t forget.”

After a pause, Leo murmured a soft acknowledgment, “Yeah, I got it.”

Mirabella turned and walked towards the dining room. She was not entirely sure he had taken her words to heart, but she didn’t push further.

With a hint of bitterness, Leo slipped the porcelain bottle into his pocket. His sister meant well, but no remedy could bring back the dreams he had for the stage, now lost to his ailing body.

Soon after breakfast, Mirabella got ready for school. Leo offered to drive her, but Shawn declined on her behalf, using the excuse, ‘Don’t be a bother to your sister.’

So, Shawn ended up taking Mirabella to school, his worry about his daughter getting snatched

away overnight soothed. Humming a tune, he walked towards the parking lot, content. Mirabella followed, puzzled by his cheerful mood.

When they reached the car, covered by a tarp, Shawn pointed at it mysteriously and said, “Darling, do the honors.”

Mirabella glanced at it, then back at him. “Got a new car?”

“Yes, the old one was getting too run-down. With my quarterly bonus from work, I decided to upgrade.” Shawn said, nodding emphatically. He didn’t mention it was also a reaction to the Gilbert family’s

intimidating display of wealth.

“Come on, unveil it, and see what you think,” he urged with a grin.

Touching her nose, Mirabella reached out and pulled off the cover.

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As the tarp slowly peeled back, the bold Spirit of Ecstasy hood ornament of a Rolls–Royce caught Mirabella’s gaze, causing her hands to freeze mid–air and her expression to shift subtly.

It’s a Rolls–Royce.

Mirabella looked up, her face a mask of utter bewilderment. “Dad,” she quipped, “did your quarterly bonus come with a pot of gold or something?”

Shawn’s face was the picture of nonchalance as he replied, “It’s decent.” Noticing his daughter’s stunned look, he cleared his throat and added, “Actually, this car isn’t that expensive, just... around a million or so.”

He remembered the last time the company accountants had visited their home; Mirabella nearly mistook the poor man for a debt collector. If he told her the car was worth ten million, it might just give her a heart attack. It was best to let it slide.

After all, his daughter was a bit of a bookworm. Her world revolved around studies and little else – cars were certainly not her forte.

Mirabella sighed as she firmly pulled the rest of the tarp off the car. Instantly, the sleek and sophisticated yet utterly cool lines of a Rolls–Royce Phantom stood before her, its noble presence undeniable.

Heh, a million–dollar Rolls–Royce Phantom. Who was her dad trying to kid?

“Are you sure this car ‘only’ cost a million?” she enunciated deliberately, biting down particularly hard on the word ‘only.’

With the claim already out there, Shawn couldn't very well retract his statement. He coughed, slightly, maintaining his composure with an effort he'd never mustered before. "Yes, my dear, don't be fooled by its flashy looks; it's really not that pricey!"

Mirabella was at a loss. Oh, she couldn't believe this.

Shawn, avoiding his daughter's piercing gaze, glanced at his watch and hurriedly said, "We're running out of time. Get in, and I'll drive you to school."

With that, he quickly fetched the keys, unlocked the car, and settled himself in the driver's seat, his guilt almost palpable.

With a light, almost mocking chuckle, Mirabella decided not to press further and got into the

car.

Twenty minutes later, Shawn dropped his daughter off at school. Since the vehicle was, anything but subtle, Mirabella opted to hop out a good distance from the main entrance.

The Gilbert family's car arrived around the same time, and their driver, catching sight of the Rolls-Royce executing a U-turn ahead, couldn't help but comment, "A genuine imported

Rolls-Royce. Whoever's behind that wheel must be someone of note.

Summer, engrossed in her smartphone, only looked up after the driver's words, but by then the Rolls-Royce had already driven off, leaving her with nothing to see. However, Mirabella, strolling casually toward the school, was very much within view.

Soon, the Gilberts' car overtook Mirabella.

The memory of Aiden sending Summer's file to Mirabella soured her mood considerably. She peered out the window and then instructed the driver to pull over.

As Mirabella approached, Summer rolled down the window and called out just as she passed by.
“Mirabella.”

Mirabella halted at the sound of her name, glancing over with an air of cool disinterest. Her striking features set in a lazy, challenging arch of her brow.

A flicker of envy passed through Summer’s eyes as her fingers tightened and then relaxed on her knees, her composure swiftly returning.

“Here’s a piece of advice,” Summer said flatly. “Withdraw from the competition while you can, before the results come out.”

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Mirabella glanced at Summer with a smirk playing on her lips. A gentle breeze teased a strand of her hair across her face, which she casually blew aside. Her voice was languid with a hint of arrogance. “And who the hell do you think you are to command me like that?”

Her voice, a little husky, carried a natural haughtiness that somehow made even her coarsest words sound stylishly rebellious.

Summer’s usually composed expression froze momentarily before a sardonic smile curled her lips. “Do you really think acing a few tests makes you something special?”

Mirabella’s brows arched with insouciance. Deep down, she’d always wondered why the bonal fide Gilbert family heiress was so persistent in seeking attention from her. Was this what it meant to return to a life of privilege, basking in parental adoration, with nothing better to do than play pretentious games?

Shaking her head in mild amusement, Mirabella withdrew her gaze, too indifferent to continue the conversation, and turned to continue her way toward the school gates.

Watching Mirabella's retreating figure, Summer's face darkened with disdain. She absolutely despised that superior air Mirabella wore like a second skin as if she were some kind of aristocrat. It was laughable, really, considering Mirabella had grown up in some backwater town. Did she truly see herself as such a big deal?

Summer rolled up the car window with an annoyed flick of her wrist and instructed the driver to leave.

Inside the classroom, Mirabella noticed Jenna, who had made it to class that day. After taking her seat, she gently tapped Jenna on the shoulder.

Jenna had been in a daze since arriving at school, a stark contrast to her usual eagerness to greet Mirabella. Startled by the tap, Jenna finally snapped out of it.

"Queen Mira, you're here," Jenna murmured, her voice drained.

Mirabella studied Jenna's haggard face, noting her dark circles, and asked. "Were you up all night?"

Laying her head on the desk, Jenna half-closed her eyes and said hoarsely, "Couldn't sleep. Just thinking about my dad makes me so upset."

"Take care of yourself, Jenna. You don't want to end up sick when your dad wakes up. That'd only make everyone worry, not to mention your mom needs you," Mirabella spoke softly.

It wasn't that Mirabella was unwilling to help; it just wasn't the right time. Jenna's dad had just undergone major surgery, and his body was still healing. If Mirabella intervened with her acupuncture now, it might've done more harm than good.

Sniffing. Jenna tried to perk up. "Yeah, I know."

Mirabella smiled and pulled out a notebook from her desk. She turned to the math notes she had organized the day before and placed them on Jenna's desk.

Jenna's eyes warmed at the sight of the neatly penned pages, which broke down complex equations and highlighted key points for the exams. "Thank you," she whispered.

With a playful lift of her eyebrow, Mirabella confessed, "I can't have my friend falling behind, can I? What would that say about me as the top student in our grade?"

Jenna hummed in acknowledgment, clutching the notebook without further words. Time was of the essence in their senior year, and anyone who devoted their own study time to help a friend the essence in their senior year, and anyone w

was a true ally.

During the third period of the morning. French class was underway. The French teacher walked in, distributed a set of test papers, and then unexpectedly called Mirabella to the office.

Being summoned by the language arts teacher had become routine for Mirabella, but being called away by the French teacher, especially mid-lesson, was bewildering indeed.

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Miss Sinclair, the young and vivacious French teacher at Parkside High School, was under thirty and a graduate of the prestigious University of Chicago's Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Her command of French grammar was renowned, and her teaching ratings were the envy of the entire language department.

She studied Mirabella, and her usual sharp edge softened somewhat. "Mirabella, there's no need to be so tense," she began, her tone more cordial than usual. "I've called you to my office to discuss something important with you."

Mirabella blinked, quickly defending herself with earnest sincerity. "I'm not nervous, Miss Sinclair."

Her teacher couldn't help but chuckle at the response, clearing her throat before continuing. "Well, the thing is, the State Department of Education is organizing a French-speaking competition. Each high

school can nominate five students, and given your stellar performance in French, you're a natural choice to--"

As soon as Mirabella heard the word 'competition,' she felt the all-too-familiar shiver of dread. She didn't wait for Miss Sinclair to finish, interrupting, "I appreciate that, Miss Sinclair. My French may look good on paper, but my spoken skills are a different story."

The very thought of another competition so soon after the BrainSpark Nationals debacle was too much for Mirabella. Moreover, without any prize money on the line, her interest was less than zero.

Miss Sinclair was taken aback. "Really? I would've thought your spoken French was quite proficient. This morning, Mr. Hammond specifically asked me to put your name forward. But I thought it best to get your opinion first."

Mirabella's lips twitched in frustration--was she being set up by Mr. Hammond again? Taking a deep breath, she managed a tight-lipped smile. "Miss Sinclair, there might be some misunderstanding about my speaking abilities. Good grades don't necessarily translate to good conversational skills. And as a specialist, you must know that these aren't one and the

same."

Miss Sinclair nodded in agreement. "You have a point."

"So, let's give this opportunity to someone else. I'd hate to embarrass Parkside High and give Mr. Hammond a reason to expel me." Mirabella said with earnest gravity.

As she approached the office door, she nearly bumped into Mr. Hammond, who was about to step inside. He had overheard the tail end of her comment. That was downright impertinent--was he seen as someone who jumped to conclusions without reason?

Noticing Mr. Hammond at the door, Miss Sinclair's demeanor instantly shifted to one of respect. "Mr. Hammond, hello."

With her back to the door, Mirabella quickly straightened up and turned around, greeting him

with a nod and a confident voice. "Good afternoon, Mr. Hammond."

Despite being caught red-handed for the earlier quip, Mirabella showed no sign of discomfort.

Mr. Hammond gave Mirabella a long look before stepping into the room. "Why aren't you interested in the competition?" He

missed the earlier part of the conversation between Mirabella and Miss Sinclair.

Scratching her head nonchalantly, Mirabella replied, "My spoken French isn't up to par."

"Not even for a scholarship of a hundred thousand dollars?" Mr. Hammond raised an eyebrow.

Mirabella was stunned. That was a tempting offer.

Clearing her throat, she turned back to Miss Sinclair, "Actually, I think my speaking skills are pretty decent. Maybe... I should sign up."

Miss Sinclair was at a loss for words. Mirabella's story had changed rather quickly.

"That settles it then," declared Mr. Hammond, not bothering to look at the stunned French teacher. His attention was focused on Mirabella. "Come with me to my office." With that, he turned and walked out.

Mirabella nodded politely to Miss Sinclair and followed behind Mr. Hammond.

It took a moment for Miss Sinclair to collect herself before she finally exhaled deeply. She had never seen such a genial principal, nor had she ever encountered a student who could remain so composed in the face of authority.

That was impressive!

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In Mr. Hammond's office.

"Take a seat on the couch, Mirabella," Mr. Hammond said, pouring her a glass of water before settling into the chair opposite her. "I called you here to discuss the possibility of you switching classes."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow. "Switching classes? Why would I want to do that?"

"I believe you have a real knack for the sciences. Staying in a humanities class might not do your talents justice," Mr. Hammond said earnestly.

He had planned to place her in the science class from the beginning of the term, but the whole Riverdale incident had delayed him. By the time he returned, Mirabella had already been slotted into the humanities class.

Mirabella chuckled and shook her head at the mention of changing classes. "No need. It doesn't make much difference to me whether I'm in humanities or sciences." After all, she had already self-studied all nine subjects required for the senior year.

Mr. Hammond, reading brimming confidence from Mirabella's face, touched his nose thoughtfully and ventured, "Do you not want to switch because of Morgan?"

Prodigy Class 1 was a science class, and Morgan was the teacher who had been so reluctant to accept Mirabella at the start of the year.

"Him? No," Mirabella replied indifferently, almost forgetting the man existed unless mentioned.

After a brief pause, she added with a teasing tone. "If you keep pushing for me to switch classes, you might find yourself in a duel with Miss Annette."

Mr. Hammond chuckled, clearly seeing that Mirabella truly didn't mind either class. He sighed and said, "Alright, I won't force you, but do you remember Professor Wade? He visited recently and is from the Education Association."

Mirabella nodded. Her memory was sharp; she certainly remembered, especially since Mr. Hammond had made a point of introducing him at the time. Professor Wade is an honorary member of the Education Association, no less.

"To be honest with you, Wade is a professor in the biology department at Prestige College and was quite impressed with you. He even reviewed your exams and mentioned that you strongly grasp biological research."

Mr. Hammond recalled how Wade had called him just the day before to inquire about Mirabella, adding, "He just couldn't understand why you were placed in a humanities class."

That was the main reason behind Mr. Hammond's sudden urge to move her to the science class. Mirabella immediately got it.

"Though, to be fair, given your academic prowess, you don't see much of a difference between

humanities and sciences." Mr. Hammond didn't dwell on the matter. "Professor Wade is on the lookout for a protégé, and he sees potential in you. You should seize this opportunity because you're destined for more than just this place. Riverdale is a complex web, and not having connections can be disadvantageous."

Specialized talent, in particular, was rare, and if it couldn't be recruited, it was often destroyed. so that no one could have it exclusively. Once certain balances of power were disrupted, the consequences were more than just turmoil.

Listening to Mr. Hammond's veiled advice, Mirabella understood his underlying message. She watched him with a stoic expression and simply said, "I appreciate your support and guidance." It was clear that

the Prestige College biology professor's interest in her was due to Mr. Hammond's influence. A few competitions and exams hardly delved into real research territory. While she didn't need it, she acknowledged the favor Mr. Hammond had extended to

her.

Mr. Hammond waved a dismissive hand. "If you really want to thank me, just bring home a title from this year's international competition."

He wasn't specifically asking for gold, silver, or bronze – just a place on the podium. Mirabella's eyes sparkled with amusement. Mr. Hammond obviously underestimated her, but she didn't boast. Instead, she humbly replied, "That will be a piece of cake."

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Mr. Hammond watched Mirabella, who wore a veil of modesty on her face that was betrayed by the confidence in her voice. He shook his head, picked up his mug, and took a sip of his chilled

iced coffee.

An afterthought struck him, and he added. "The city finals results won't be out for another couple of days, but I'm pretty sure you're a shoo-in. Next up is the nationals. I checked the schedule: they're likely next weekend. Prestige College is spearheading the event in collaboration with the Education Association, so the national competition will be right here in Riverdale. The prelims and finals will take place over two days, with results announced on the spot. You'd better start getting ready."

Mirabella's eyes sparkled at the mention of Riverdale, but then she rose from her seat.

"Understood. I'll head back to class now."

“Alright, go hit the books,” Mr. Hammond waved her off, then added as an afterthought. “And don’t forget about the French oral exam. I have no doubt your spoken skills are up to par.”

Mirabella paused mid-stride and glanced at Mr. Hammond, who was grinning knowingly. She felt a mix of emotions and wanted to ask how he could be so sure, but decided to let it slide.

A \$100,000 scholarship was at stake. Her father, that gold-gobbling dragon, had just splurged on a new luxury car worth millions. Surely, Mirabella should celebrate his new acquisition with a gift, right?

Mirabella thought of the new car and lamented her shattered dream of experiencing poverty. Alas, it seemed she was the one who had picked up the wrong script in the play of life.

Leo had planned to recuperate at home for a while, but for some unknown reason, the higher-ups got wind of his injury, and he was summoned to the company.

Inside Collins’ office, the atmosphere was tense.

Collins’ face was a stormy shade of grey. “Who the hell leaked the news about your injury? I had everything locked down tight!”

As an artist with a physical injury, even with his voice intact, he could no longer deliver the thrilling stage performances of the past. This clearly meant a full stop to his career prospects. No agency would continue to back

an artist who couldn’t generate greater profits, even if Leo

was at the pinnacle of his career.

Leo sat in the chair, his face pale, a hint of sickness in his eyes. His gaze was icy as he fixed it on the desk, and after a while, he spoke, “Just tell them the truth. There’s no point in hiding it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Collins’ voice dropped to a whisper. “If you admit to being injured, how will you ever sing again?” The executives had already approached Collins, and he had vehemently denied any issues with Leo, insisting Leo was merely exhausted and would be

taking a break from all commercial engagements for a short while.

Leo lifted his head to meet Collins’ gaze, a self-deprecating sneer on his lips. “Do you really think I can keep singing?”

“Why can’t you?” Collins shot back. “You’re in good health right now. You just can’t dance, your voice is unaffected, and your songwriting and composition talent is unmatched.”

Leo turned away.

Collins, frustrated, slammed his fist on the desk. “Can’t you let go of your pride at a time like this? Do you really want to be replaced by someone else from the company?”

A knock on the office door interrupted them.

Collins wanted to continue, but the knock signaled a pause in the conversation. He composed himself and walked to the door, and before opening it, he turned back to Leo.

“Leo, I want you to keep quiet during this meeting. I’ll handle everything with the company,” he said firmly.

With that, he opened the door.

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Collins expected the knock at his office door to herald the arrival of some high-ranking executive, so he was surprised to see it was just a fellow agent.

But not the friendliest one.

Narrowing his eyes, Collins' voice came out distant and cool, "What do you want?"

Cory, the embodiment of smug superiority, glanced at Collins, sauntered past him into the office, and casually said after a brief pause, "Oh, right. Close the door, will you? We need to

chat."

The flippant request floated over from behind Collins, causing a slight furrow in his brow. Nevertheless, he shut the door quickly, pivoted, and returned to his desk.

Cory sprawled out on the couch like he owned the place, leaning back in a relaxed pose. His gaze landed on Leo, who had managed to compose himself and adopt his usual icy demeanor by the time Collins had opened the door. Now, under Cory's scrutiny, Leo couldn't help but scowl.

"Such a shame," Cory tsked, shaking his head with a hint of mock pity. "A bright future potentially dashed to pieces. Yet you two seem... oddly calm." –

With a leg nonchalantly crossed over the other, Cory's overt confidence didn't falter as he spoke, clearly unafraid of ruffling feathers.

Collins approached, his expression unreadable. "Spit it out, Cory. No need to beat around the bush."

"Everyone at the company knows about Leo's injury. He can't perform on stage anymore. I just came to show some concern, buddy. Why the hostility?" Cory's smile was carefree.

Cory and Collins were the company's top agents. Cory had always been in Collins' shadow, especially with Leo being Collins' ace. Now that Leo was sidelined, Cory was curious to see how Collins would fare without his star.

Of course, Collins knew Cory was here to kick them while they were down, so he didn't take the bait. Flicking his finger nonchalantly, he drawled, "Seems my boy Leo's just too hot to handle. Envy's an ugly beast, eh? Starts all kinds of rumors."

Suddenly, Cory stood, the sarcasm on his face dissolving quickly. "Let's cut the crap, Collins. We both know the score with Leo's injury. Out of professional courtesy, I could help you keep the lid on your little secret."

Collins' lips pressed into a thin line, his gaze steady on Cory, aware that the real proposition was about to be unveiled.

"Just have Leo step down as the lead of the Neon Paradox, and I'll squash all the rumors for you," Cory said slowly as if proposing a simple business deal.

Collins' eyes narrowed, his expression darkening in an instant. "Are you dreaming?"

Cory shrugged. "Given your client's current predicament, it's better to step down gracefully than be stripped of the position by the company. At least you can maintain some dignity, right?"

He paused. "Think it over. Give me a call when you've made up your mind. Opportunities like this don't wait around." With those flippant words, Cory didn't wait for a reply, striding confidently towards the exit.

As he left, he even had the courtesy to close the door behind him.

Collins, steam practically billowing from his ears in anger, couldn't contain his temper any longer. "That backstabbing jerk! How dare he even suggest you give up the lead of the Neon Paradox?"

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e even

Who exactly is Neon Paradox? They were the hottest, most popular band. They were internationally recognized as one of the most influential rock groups around!

Their unique rock vibe had captivated countless youths, and their albums over the past couple of years had been nothing short of blockbuster hits. Every record was sold out with pre-orders before it even hit the shelves. It was fair to say their clout in the domestic music scene was downright frightening.

As Neon Paradox's leader, Leo wasn't only revered for his natural leadership abilities. His creative genius and impeccable stage presence were the heart and soul of the band. With a personal fanbase nudging the hundred million mark, Leo was a bona fide superstar.

So, when some shameless opportunist tried to make a move during a moment of weakness, it was no wonder Collins was ticked off. Even if their star, Leo, could never perform on stage again, it wouldn't be the turn for some lowlife to trash his legacy.

"He wants me to hand over the lead to Jay," Leo said with crisp clarity in his eyes as he looked

at Collins.

Jay is an artist Cory groomed and a Phenomenal Band member. He wasn't the lead singer. He and Leo's relationship had been relatively calm over the past few years, but as Leo's fanbase and commercial deals grew, so did Jay's envy. With Leo's recent injury, Jay saw his chance to

stir trouble.

"Jay's got some talent, sure, but he's too arrogant, too full of himself. Anything he creates is all flash, no substance," Collins remarked with undisguised disdain.

Originally, Jay was meant to be Collins' protégé, but he had turned him down.

Leo pursed his lips but said nothing more.

Collins glanced at Leo and sighed softly, then as if remembering something, he added, "By the way, a friend of mine suggested you could try alternative medicine for your condition."

Leo listened without a visible change in emotion. If even Nick, the genius, said Leo couldn't perform anymore, what good would alternative medicine do? Shaking his head, Leo replied nonchalantly, "We'll see."

Collins patted Leo's shoulder, reassuringly stating, "As long as there's a glimmer of hope, I won't give up. You head back home and get some rest. I'll handle things at the company and smooth everything over."

Leo was signed with Lamont Entertainment, not quite the industry titan, but definitely a powerhouse capable of making waves in the business. Rich in resources, they had propelled many artists to stardom. This made a contract with Lamont Entertainment highly coveted but difficult to secure due to its high standards.

Having worked at Lamont Entertainment for nearly a decade, evolving from a rookie assistant

to a top agent, Collins' capabilities were unquestionable. If he said he could handle it, he could. Looking earnestly at Collins, Leo said, "Thanks, Collins."

Collins waved it off, "No thanks needed. Just focus on getting better." He paused, then added "You might want to stay away from your private villa for a while. Cory's no good; better to play it safe."

Leo hummed in agreement, then stood up. As he reached into his pocket for his face mask, he also pulled out the bottle of medicine Mirabella had given him that morning. He paused, momentarily distracted, having forgotten to leave it at home amidst the day's disruptions.

With his sharp eyes, Collins noticed the bottle and asked curiously, "What's that fancy-looking bottle you got there?"

Holding the porcelain bottle, a warmth spread across Leo's features, "It's a welcome gift from my sister."