

The Double 211

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just handed over the competition materials the Gilbert family sent to Mr. Hammond without saying a word." Mirabella drawled her tone dripping with nonchalance. "But your little stunt DALSL"

Mirabella shook her head, the gesture as dismissive as her tone, and straightened up. She left me with nothing but a smirk that could chill one's bones, then sashayed out of the classroom.

Summer watched Mirabella's retreating figure, her eyes suddenly snapping wide open. Sure, anyone could find out the Gilberts had sent the package by poking around the courier service. But did Mirabella give it to Mr. Hammond?

In the past few days, neither the teachers nor Mr. Hammond had come looking for Summer.

at meant Mirabella probably hadn't dropped Summer's name to Mr. Hammond... but no way did she buy that Mirabella would pass up the chance to smear her.

Summer's thoughts were a mess. Despite her gut screaming that Mirabella was playing her, paranoia was taking root. If Mirabella really hadn't mentioned Summer's name to Mr. Hammond, this might all blow over. But with the forum fiasco now... Summer grabbed her phone in a hurry and logged onto the forum, only to find the thread locked by the admin. Her head was pounding.

Summer slumped into her seat, her complexion ashen.

After Mirabella's exit, the other students who had overheard their exchange looked at Summer with puzzled expressions.

They were not only curious about how Mirabella and Summer seemed to know each other but also intrigued by Mirabella's parting shot about the materials 'sent from the Gilbert family.' It reeked of conspiracy!

Oblivious to the trouble she'd caused, Madeline peeked at Summer cautiously and said, "Don't overthink it, Summer. It's just Mirabella being..."

Summer didn't want to hear Madeline's voice. Pressing a hand to her temple, Summer snapped, "Would you just zip it and let me have some peace?" If not for this—blundering idiot, Summer wouldn't be in this embarrassing spot.

Madeline had never seen Summer lose her cool Madeline bit her lip but whispered, audible only to both. "I was the one who posted anonymously on the forum. I just wanted to stand up for

YOU"

Summer closed her eyes, a sneer curling her lips. Stand up for Summer? Madeline had just thrown Summer into the eye of the storm.

"Enough," Summer said, her patience wearing thin. "I've got it under control."

Madeline opened her mouth as if to say she'd explained everything to the homeroom teacher, but seeing the grim look on Summer's face, she thought better of it and stayed silent. Maybe it

10.09

was best to wait until Summer was in a better mood to bring it up again.

On the way back to The Advanced Class from Prodigy Class, Jenna was babbling nonstop beside Mirabella, her mouth running a mile a minute.

Mirabella suddenly paused and turned to Jenna. "You got your phone on you?"

"Huh?" Jenna, mid—ramble, hit the brakes and looked at Mirabella, quickly regaining her composure. "Yeah, I've got it."

Mirabella took it from her, asked for the unlock code, and, without any secrecy, logged onto the school forum.

Jenna assumed Mirabella just wanted to check out the latest gossip and averted her gaze. saying, "It's all just fence-sitters enjoying the drama. Don't mind those comments." Jenna had read through a couple hundred comments herself and saw quite a few taking jabs at Mirabella, which nearly sent her through the roof.

"Right." Mirabella hummed in response, her gaze fixed on the phone screen. Her fingers moved deftly, and soon after, she handed Jenna back her phone.

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Jenna was fiddling with her phone, casually unlocking it as she spoke. "That thread on the forum got pretty heated. I noticed the admins locked it down just a while ago... Huh, why are the comments open again?"

Mirabella continued walking ahead with an indifferent gaze.

In the afternoon. Mirabella was surprised to receive a message from James on Messenger. [Free after school?]

Mirabella pondered for a few seconds before quickly responding. [Should be.]

[Knox whipped up a couple of new dishes. He specifically asked me to check if you're free tonight.]

Mirabella's fingers brushed the phone screen. Without much hesitation, she replied. [Yes!] Getting new knowledge and good food? Well, count her in!

James. [See you at the school gate after class then.]

Mirabella's eyebrows lifted slightly, and after sending back an affirmative, she pocketed her phone.

After school as Mirabella stepped out of the school gates, she spotted James' unremarkable black sedan. Wyatt was standing by the car door, and as Mirabella approached, he greeted her proactively. "Good day, Ms. Mirabella." There was a tone of respect in his voice.

Mirabella nodded slightly in response.

Swiftly. Wyatt opened the rear door of the car for Mirabella, and after she got in, he closed it behind her..

James turned to look at Mirabella as she settled in, a gentle smile gracing his chiseled features. "Right on time."

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, glancing at him, "One should always be punctual to an appointment."

James rested his hand on his knee and instructed Wyatt to drive, casually starting a conversation, "How's your competition going?" He was referring to the BrainSpark Nationals.

Mirabella leaned lazily against the car window. "It's alright, just advanced to the nationals."

"Congratulations."

Mirabella waved her hand dismissively. "No big deal her voice carrying a touch of pride.

"What competition?" Wyatt, who was driving, asked curiously.

"Just some dull quiz show." Mirabella replied offhandedly.

At her side. James' eyebrows twitched slightly at the response.

Ever since Mirabella had given James a box of Incense of Calm, Wyatt had been constantly thinking about building a good rapport with her. After a pause, he inquired further. "What's it called? Can I find it online?"

Mirabella shared the name with him.

Wyatt made a mental note, and during a red light, he searched it up on his phone, his expression turning puzzled after a quick skim. Had he been out of school too long, or was he just uninformed? Was Ms. Mirabella really finding a competition that offered a direct admission slot to Prestige College merely 'dull?'

"The national competition isn't in this city, is it?" James tapped his knee idly.

"No, it's in Riverdale." Mirabella tilted her head, her gaze fixed on James, steady and unwavering, without a hint of discomfort or awkwardness.

Noticing Mirabella's gaze, James' usually cool demeanor took on an air of unease. He lowered his eyes slightly before asking, "When is it?"

Mirabella pursed her lips, not finding any reason to withhold the information. "Next Saturday and Sunday."

James was silent for a few seconds before saying, "Coincidentally, I have to make a trip to Riverdale next week. If you have time, I could show you around."

Considering Leo's situation, Mirabella waved her hand. "Might not be possible. I probably won't have the time."

"We can touch base when the time comes," James didn't press the issue.

“Sure.” Mirabella turned to look outside at the streets, “Not going to the same place we ate last time?”

“No, we’re heading to Knox’s place,” James replied casually.

Mirabella mused for a few seconds before falling silent.

Forty minutes later, the car finally stopped outside the grand entrance of Mendoza Estate.

Mendoza Estate was not some opulent villa but rather a residence with a rich, antique charm. Standing outside the gates, Mirabella felt as if she was about to step through a portal to a bygone era.

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It was an undeniable testament to a family steeped in food therapy.

Mirabella averted her gaze and suddenly remembered a concern. She turned to James, who was approaching, and asked in earnest, “I didn’t bring a housewarming gift. Do you think I’ll be shown the door for that?”

James couldn’t help but chuckle at the young girl’s question. Shaking his head, he reassured her, “Don’t worry, the Knox family isn’t that fussy.”

Mirabella touched her nose, about to speak, when she saw Wyatt arriving, bearing two neatly wrapped boxes in his hands. She decided to let the matter drop.

The Mendoza family’s butler soon greeted them with impeccable manners and ushered them into the great hall. “Mr. James, Mr. Knox is currently in the kitchen preparing a meal. Please enjoy some tea, and he will join you shortly.”

James nodded politely in acknowledgment. The butler excused himself, leaving them in the grand room.

Settled in an antique mahogany chair, Mirabella looked around and nodded in approval. "Quite the interesting abode," she remarked.

James poured a cup of tea for Mirabella, inviting her to drink. "Centuries of tradition run deep in families like the Mendozas. Their ancestors were court chefs specializing in medicinal cuisine. Times have changed, but their prestige in this city remains unshakable."

Mirabella took a delicate sip of her tea and mused, "Sounds like I may have missed out on a grand opportunity."

James fixed his eyes on her. With a little cough, 'Mirabella waved off her previous comment. "It's nothing."

Before long. Knox appeared, wearing an apron and carrying a freshly prepared medicinal dish, followed by a spry elderly man. This was none other than Nikolai.

Knox set the dish on the table, greeted James, and then gestured towards Mirabella, introducing her to Nikolai, "This is the talented young lady I've been telling you about."

Turning to Mirabella, he smiled warmly, "This old man was an apothecary. Just call him Nikolai."

Mirabella stood and gave Nikolai a polite nod. "Hello, Nikolai. I'm Mirabella."

Nikolai stroked his graying beard, returning the nod with a benevolent smile. "Pleasure to meet you."

After a brief glance at her, Nikolai turned his attention to James. "It seems you've recovered well these past weeks."

"Yes, partly thanks to the remedies you provided." James responded slowly.

Nikolai simply smiled and shook his head.

“Let’s not stand on ceremony,” Knox interjected. “Try my new dish before it cools and loses its flavor.” His eyes shone with particular brightness as he stared at Mirabella.

Mirabella didn’t hold back. She picked up a fork and took a bite.

“Well?” Knox asked eagerly, his anticipation clear.

Beside them, Nikolai looked at Mirabella with a hint of surprise. It was rare for someone to catch Knox’s eye, especially someone so young. Could she really understand the intricacies of their craft?

Setting down her fork, Mirabella raised her eyebrows. “You want the truth?”

Knox’s mouth twitched. “I hate flattery.”

Mirabella nodded seriously. “Alright, this dish could benefit from a dash of bitter orange seeds and a pinch of musk powder. It would enhance the effects.”

“Bitter orange seeds and musk?” Knox stroked his chin, lost in thought.

Mirabella hummed in agreement, then continued eating at her leisure.

Nikolai, having heard her suggestion, focused intently on Mirabella. After a long beat, he stared at her in disbelief.

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“Little lady, I can’t help but notice you’ve got a real knack for herbs. Does your family dabble in alternative medicine?” Nikolai asked, his voice tinged with surprise.

When Knox perfected this recipe, incorporating some herbal remedies into the dish, he had even consulted Nikolai during the process, so Nikolai was well aware of every ingredient and its intended effect, believing the concoction to be nothing short of perfection.

However, when the young girl suggested adding two more herbs, Knox savored the dish again and discovered a subtle brilliance to her recommendation. It was as if she had seamlessly filled in the gaps he hadn't noticed. Someone who could point out such easily overlooked details had to be exceptionally skilled in the art of herbal medicine. Moreover, she made her own suggestions after merely tasting the dish.

Mirabella looked up calmly and replied, "No, I don't."

Nikolai's eyes widened with even more astonishment. "But you seem to have a deep understanding of pharmacology."

With a slight smile and a composed demeanor, Mirabella said, "I've read some medical texts, that's all. I hope you don't think I'm trying to show off."

Nikolai stroked his long beard, his gaze upon Mirabella betraying his skepticism. Could someone who'd merely glanced at a few medical books possess such precise insights? If so, she was a prodigy among prodigies.

Mirabella remained serene under his scrutiny, the picture of quiet grace.

Knox, snapping out of his reverie, scooted his stool closer to her, blinking earnestly. "Kid, are you sure you don't want to consider being my apprentice?"

The corners of Mirabella's mouth twitched at Knox's overt attempt to appear endearing. Was this how people were trying to stay hip these days, by acting cutesy at every turn?

"I really have no interest in cooking," she said with a firmness that belied her gentle expression. "And what are you interested in?" Knox probed, his tone suggesting he was ready to cater to her every interest.

Before Mirabella could reply, Nikolai chimed in slyly, "How about alternative medicine? Does that pique your interest?"

Knox's face soured as he turned to glare at Nikolai. "Pssh, you medicine peddler. You think it's appropriate to have a young girl selling remedies with you?"

Nikolai lifted his chin with a chuckle. "And you think it's appropriate to have her in the kitchen, training to be a chef?"

"Get lost! My biggest mistake today was inviting you over." Knox retorted. The nerve of Nikolai,

trying to poach Knox's potential apprentice right in front of him!

Mirabella watched the two elders on the verge of a quarrel, massaging her temples before speaking up, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have no interest in either cooking or selling medicine. Really, there's no need for this fuss."

Knox sighed, then shot Nikolai another venomous look. All this chaos, thanks to this troublesome old man!

Nikolai could only shrug in response.

Observing the esteemed elders squabble over Mirabella, Wyatt couldn't help but touch his nose. and regard her with renewed curiosity.

Based on all the information he'd gathered about her, aside from her melodramatic background. Mirabella was just an ordinary girl who grew up in a small town, relying on her grandmother. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Yet, here she was, a simple high school student, and these two were vying to take her under their wing. Their eagerness didn't seem like mere jest. It was all so baffling, like knowing there was a mystery but being unable to see through it.

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After supper, James didn't wait long before he took off with Mirabella. On their offered Nikolai a lift for good measure.

way out, they

Vincent rarely came to the family estate these days and had just arrived home when he saw his grandfather, Knox, seeing off some quests. He lingered in the yard for a while, watching the group depart from a distance. For a fleeting moment, he thought he had caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, but by the time he focused, the person was already getting into a car.

Before long. Knox approached him, "Kid, what's gotten into you to drop by today?"

Vincent had already shifted his gaze away, his handsome face as cool as ever. Only when looking at his grandfather, would his eyes soften unconsciously, "Didn't you tell me that you whipped up a couple of new dishes? I'm just here to play guinea pig for your culinary experiments."

Normally, this would have touched Knox, but tonight, he just huffed, "Not necessary. Your palate is only good for eating. You never have any constructive feedback."

As Knox headed inside, he continued, "I've been telling you to learn cooking from me, but all you do is make excuses about solving puzzles. Are puzzles really that enticing?"

The same went for that girl who had sparked his interest in taking on an apprentice, always talking about needing to study. What was with the youth today? Shouldn't they be eager to pick up some practical skills?

Every time Vincent heard Knox's ramblings, his head ached, so he didn't take the bait. Instead. changing the subject, "Grandpa, who were those guests just now?"

Knox raised an eyebrow, giving Vincent a sidelong glance, "Why, you know them?"

Vincent's gaze intensified slightly, "Not really. It's just rare we have visitors, so I was curious."

"Don't be nosy. Some people aren't your business to inquire about," Knox said seriously.

Vincent acknowledged the point. "Understood."

Suddenly, Knox patted his shoulder with a hint of melancholy. "One day, the Mendoza legacy will be in your hands. I might not be around much longer, but I'll set everything up for you. So for now, enjoy doing what you like."

"Grandpa, come on. It's windy out here. Let's get inside," Vincent said as he steadied Knox, guiding him towards the main house.

Knox chuckled and let himself be led away.

In the car, with Nikolai present, Mirabella kept to herself, leaning against the car door, eyes closed, resting.

When her phone buzzed in her pocket, she opened her eyes and fished it out.

It was a message from Leo, asking when she'd be home.

Mirabella glanced outside and then at Nikolai, who was chatting with Wyatt in the front. After a brief moment, she spoke up, "Wyatt, you can drop me off at the next intersection."

Wyatt instinctively glanced at his boss in the rearview mirror. James turned to Mirabella, "Something up?"

Mirabella responded softly. "I'll just grab a cab home."

James, ever the gentleman, didn't pressure her, merely advising, "Stay safe."

Wyatt had already pulled the car to a stop by the curb. Mirabella waved goodbye, opened the door, and stepped out. "I'm off."

After Mirabella got into a taxi on the roadside, Wyatt didn't immediately drive away. He watched. until Mirabella was settled in the cab before moving on.

James raised an eyebrow, noting that Mirabella was becoming quite perceptive.

"That young lady..." Nikolai, sitting in the passenger seat, began slowly.

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Wyatt glanced at Nikolai and blurted out. "Last time..."

"She's just an ordinary high school senior." Before Wyatt could reveal that she was the one who had provided the 'Incense of Calm, James' cool voice wafted from the back seat. Wyatt caught a glimpse of James in the rearview mirror and immediately clamped his mouth shut.

Nikolai didn't notice Wyatt's expression and merely commented, "The girl seems to know her herbs. If she were to study medicine, I reckon she'd have quite the knack for it."

James' gaze was crisp and thoughtful as he stared out the window. After a long pause, he finally spoke. "Perhaps."

Nikolai pondered for a moment before hesitantly making a request, "I have a favor to ask."

"Go ahead."

“It’s rare to come across someone with a good understanding of herbal medicine these days. If it’s not too much trouble, James, could you share the young ladies’ contact details?”

Nikolai was a bit embarrassed as he made the request. He had wanted to ask back at the Mendoza residence but was wary of provoking Knox’s ire, so he had held back.

Wyatt, driving, twitched his lips at the request. Was this some grand scene of talent poaching?

After a brief silence, James said, “I’ll ask her.”

“Thank you.”

James took out his phone and sent Mirabella a message on Messenger.

[Nikolai would like your contact information.]

It didn’t take long for Mirabella to respond.

The Pill: [Sure.]

James looked up at Nikolai sitting in front and asked, “Will Messenger do?”

Although Nikolai was well advanced in years, he kept up with the times. He was quite adept at using Messenger and immediately responded with a delighted hum, “Just ask her to add me. My Messenger ID is the same as my phone number.”

James quickly forwarded Nikolai’s phone number to Mirabella.

The Pill: [Added.]

Nikolai pulled out his phone, checked for the notification, and swiftly accepted the friend request. He even went the extra mile to send a friendly emoji as a greeting.

On receiving Nikolai's emoji, Mirabella couldn't help but chuckle. Out of courtesy, she sent back an identical emoji. After exchanging a few casual messages, the conversation ended. As she

neared the gated community, Mirabella got out of the car just before passing the local pho shop.

She grabbed two servings of pho and picked up a cake from the bakery next door, cheerfully carrying her purchases as she walked home. Before long, she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Sweetheart, you're back," Delilah mumbled, her speech muffled by the face mask she wore while lounging on the sofa.

Shawn was also there, absorbed in the TV show, but when he turned to spot his daughter and the pho and cake in her hands, his eyes lighting up. "Did you bring back a midnight snack for your old man?"

Mirabella set the spicy soup on the dining table, sparing no feelings as she retorted. "Nope. your figure could do without late-night snacks."

She glanced down at Shawn's round belly.

That hit a sore spot.

Looking around the living room and not seeing Leo, Mirabella figured he might be in his room upstairs. She took out her phone and sent him a message on Messenger.

Leo received the message and soon came downstairs. By then, Mirabella had dished out the two servings of pho, one hot and the other mild. She pushed the mild one towards Leo as he sat down at the table, "Eat up, Leo."

"Leo, have you not had dinner?" Delilah peeled off her mask and casually inquired as she stood

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Leo let out a resigned sigh, thinking. “You’re asking so obliviously, Mom. Anyone would think you’re the evil stepmother from one of those old fairy tales.”

Looking up, Leo was about to speak when Shawn interjected. “Honey, why even ask? He’s grown enough to know when to grab a bite.” Shawn shook his head in mild exasperation.

“I was just making conversation,” Delilah retorted with a side glance at her husband, patting her face as she briskly headed to her bedroom.

Leo was left speechless. His heart felt like it had been put through a shredder since moving back home.

Mirabella glanced at Leo, who was with his self-absorbed, dazed expression, sipped her soup, and then reached for the cake box beside her, placing it in front of him. “The strawberry shortcake from this place isn’t half bad.”

And just when Leo thought, “Only my sister really gets me.” he was left bewildered.

Strawberry shortcake? What the heck? He was not a girl!

Meanwhile, Mirabella continued to slurp her soup, seemingly oblivious to Leo’s baffled look.

With a complicated mix of emotions, Leo picked up his spoon. His hunger stripped him of his usual grace as he speared a meatball and bit into it fiercely, only to splatter his shirt with greasy stains.

Awkward much?

Mirabella cleared her throat but said nothing as they ate in silence. Then, struck by a thought, Leo looked up at his sister. “Mirabella, that medicine you gave me, was it expensive?”

Collins had told him about the rarity of the medicine, urging him to ask Mirabella where she had gotten it from.

“It was okay.” Mirabella replied nonchalantly, finishing her meal. Leaning back contentedly, she added, “I’ll get you another bottle in a few days. You’ll be back on your feet in no time.”

Leo looked startled. His fingers involuntarily tightened on the tabletop as he echoed, “Back... on my feet?”

Mirabella just winked at him before standing up to clear the dishes, cheerily saying over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Leo. I’ve got your back.”

Watching Mirabella’s retreating figure, Leo felt a fog clouding his thoughts, trying to grasp the implications of her words while another part of his mind urged him not to overthink it.

After washing up, Mirabella emerged, seeing him deep in thought but chose not to say more. simply remarking. “Leo, I’m heading upstairs.”

Snapping out of his reverie, Leo replied, “Ah, sure.”

Once Mirabella ascended the staircase, Leo stood and walked into the living room, sinking into the couch with a puzzled gaze towards Shawn. “Dad, do you ever feel like Mirabella is... I don’t know, kind of mysterious when she talks?”

“Mysterious?” Shawn squinted, then suddenly lobbed a throw pillow at his son. “Can you believe it? Your sister brings you a midnight snack, but you decide she’s being all crazy?”

Leo’s mouth twitched. He’d said “mysterious,” not “crazy” clearly, his dad was just looking for an excuse to tease him.

Scratching his head, Leo continued. “Didn’t the Gilbert family raise Mirabella in that small county town with her grandmother? Her friends should be limited to classmates and neighbors. from there, right?”

Shawn glanced at him. "What's your point?"

Leo hesitated before saying, "Well, she gave me this medicine a while back, and I had someone consult an expert about it. They said it's priceless and extremely valuable."

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Shawn's thoughts drifted back to his wife's migraines, which seemed to have magically disappeared. He had noticed that she never complained about them anymore.

Curiosity about where his daughter acquired her remedies did cross his mind, but he respected her privacy. Shawn believed everyone had their secrets and saw no reason to pry. The family had missed seventeen years of her life, and now that they were finally reunited, simply being together was enough. There was no need for suspicion or doubt.

Shaking off his reverie, Shawn patted his belly reassuringly and asked with a hint of levity. "You think your sister would do you wrong?"

Leo, caught off guard, instinctively shook his head.

"See? No need for all these wild thoughts. She'll share when she's ready." Shawn had a knack for seeing the bigger picture.

His mind then wandered to Emmitt, prompting him to add with emphasis, "The last thing we need in this family is distrust. It can hurt more than any outsider ever could. Leo, I don't want you holding any prejudices against your sister."

Leo was taken aback to hear his father speak with such seriousness. Although it was surprising, he listened intently and responded with conviction, "She's got a sweet temper, and she's well-behaved. Why would I have any prejudices? And even if she did have her quirks, she's still my sister."

“That’s my boy!” Shawn said approvingly. Pausing, he corrected, “And for the record, your sister doesn’t have any quirks. She’s a lot more dutiful than any of you boys.”

Leo choked back a retort. “I was just making a comparison.”

Shawn gave him a sharp look. “Even so, no comparisons.”

“By the way.” Shawn continued, “why are you so free these days? Hasn’t the company got work for you?” There was a detectable note of disdain in his voice.

Leo, now accustomed to his father’s insinuations to get out of the house, replied with thick-skinned ease, “Yeah, they gave me an extended leave.”

Shawn squinted suspiciously. “You’ve been acting odd lately. Is something up?”

“Nothing, just felt like taking a break,” Leo said, keeping his composure.

Satisfied with the answer, Shawn dropped the subject. But his thoughts returned to the

medicine his daughter had provided Leo, which was said to be priceless and rare. What about his own?

Rubbing his chin, Shawn stood and retreated to his room, pondering.

The next day.

Mirabella had just arrived at school when an unusual Friday announcement called for an all-school assembly. Typically, assemblies were a Monday affair. The sudden change had the students whispering in confusion.

Soon, the entire school gathered on the field, with Mr. Hammond taking the stage instead of his usual deputy, which was a rare occurrence.

Mirabella and Jenna stood at the back of their class.

“I’ve got a hunch today’s meeting has something to do with that forum post from yesterday.” Jenna murmured to Mirabella.

Mirabella glanced at the stage, thoughtful. “Could be.”

“Were you on the forum last night?” Jenna prodded.

“No,” Mirabella replied, lazily tracing patterns on the ground with her shoe.

“You went to see Summer from the Prodigy Class yesterday, right? Then someone posted your conversation in the forum’s chat section. Now, there’s a lot of speculation about your relationship with her.”

Jenna’s love for gossip shone through as she continued, “Summer used to be a Davids, but after the whole baby mix-up saga, she took her birth parents’ last name. Queen Mira, don’t tell me you’re the one she was swapped with?”

The theory was a bit melodramatic, but it wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility.

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Mirabella arched an eyebrow, finally turning her gaze to Jenna. A sly smile played on her lips before she resumed her usual cool composure. Her voice was neutral, yet there was a hint of dryness as she said, “Congratulations, you got it right.”

“Right... Pff, it’s actually true?” Jenna had her suspicions, but hearing it confirmed was a whole other kettle of fish.

She had bumped into Summer at the school's front gates some time ago, and had only thought that Mira and Summer might be kin. It never crossed her mind that they could be tied by a baby-switching scenario.

Jenna touched the tip of her nose. "So, this Summer chick is all jealous because you're acing classes, and she decided to set you up, hoping to run you out of Parkside High School... Man, I knew there was something off about her classic wolf in sheep's clothing."

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Even after returning to her wealthy biological parents, with no further ties to her foster family, she still plotted against the biological daughter of her foster parents. That envy was just too much.

"It just goes to show how exceptional I am." Mirabella said with a flick of her hair behind her ear, and a proud statement that caught Jenna off guard.

Jenna was struck speechless. "You can see it that way?"

Watching Jenna's dumbfounded reaction, Mirabella lifted a hand and placed it on her shoulder, steering her back to face the front. "Pay attention to Mr. Hammond."

Mr. Hammond on the stage was not one for unnecessary chatter. He dove straight into the subject at hand, which, unsurprisingly, focused on the forum post accusing Mirabella of cheating in the competition.

With the forum in an uproar, the school administration, despite its intentions, was too late to quell the noise. Moreover, Mr. Hammond, having seen the post the day before, never intended to sweep this matter under the rug.

To Mr. Hammond, Mirabella wasn't just any student; she was a talent he had personally recruited. The slander she faced within just over a month at Parkside High School was not only an affront to her but a defiance of the school's code of conduct.

As the principal of such a prestigious institution, Mr. Hammond’s decision-making skills and authoritative tone were beyond doubt. In a terse twenty-minute speech, he managed to make every student who had participated in the forum discussion feel a cold sweat of shame. Madeline felt as if she was filled with lead – heavy, confused, and her mind was buzzing. She was the one who posted the message, and each of Mr. Hammond’s words seemed to signal a severe punishment for the person behind the rumors. Although the post was anonymous, the fear gripping her was unmistakable. She knew the school’s investigation would lead to her.

Madeline’s eyes fell on Summer, who stood in front of her, and she couldn’t help but tug at her sleeve.

Summer, herself agitated, sensed Madeline’s action and turned slightly. Her face was devoid of its usual warmth.

Madeline was still rattled by Mr. Hammond’s words, and didn’t catch the change in Summer’s expression. “Summer, what should I do? Mr. Hammond is talking about tracking down the person behind the post.”

Summer pinched her fingers together. Her voice was cold, “Didn’t you consider the consequences before posting?”

“I.. I just wanted to stand up for you,” Madeline murmured.

“Enough. Stop using me as your excuse. Did I ask you to do this?” Summer retorted. impatiently.

The post had kept her up all night. She was fearful that the situation would escalate. As the assembly began, her fears were confirmed – this was not going to simply blow over.

Madeline bit her lip in disbelief. This was the first time she had seen Summer so irritable.

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Summer realized her composure had slipped and took a deep breath, trying to smooth out her voice. "You posted anonymously, right? The school shouldn't be able to trace it back to you." She didn't really think the school would hire a hacker just to track down the IP address behind a forum post.

"But Mr. Hammond just said they're going to crack down hard, and besides..." Madeline's voice trailed off. She was too scared to finish her thought.

Summer frowned, sensing that this fool had done something else she wasn't aware of. "Besides what?"

Madeline hesitated for a moment before spitting it out with gritted teeth, "If it was just the anonymous post, I wouldn't be panicking... but I, I went to see our homeroom teacher."

Upon hearing this, Summer felt her head spin with frustration, at a loss for words to describe her current mood. "Are you out of your mind? Posting anonymously is one thing, but you went to our homeroom teacher?"

Rubbing her temples, Summer looked up, exasperated. "You really have a talent for screwing things up."

Tears were welling up in Madeline's eyes. "I was just upset when you mentioned how your foster sister was pressuring your dad to pull strings for competition materials. I felt bad for you, so I wanted to talk to our homeroom teacher to clear things up."

Summer recalled casually mentioning the competition materials to Madeline, hoping she'd spread some rumors to make Mirabella's life at school a bit harder, but she never imagined she'd have such a blundering ally, who effectively shot herself in the foot.

"Summer, what should I do? I think they're going to call me to the office after the meeting." Madeline said. Her face was pale and her voice was trembling with despair.

"There's nothing I can do. You created this mess; you'll have to deal with it yourself," Summer replied with a sneer.

Staggering backward, Madeline reached out to grab Summer's arm but saw her already turning away. Her indifferent demeanor clearly signaled her intent to wash her hands of the matter. The sight pierced Madeline's heart. If it hadn't been for Summer sharing her grievances with her, would she have impulsively sought justice on her behalf?

But now, Summer was putting all the blame on her.

Madeline felt a tightness in her chest.

With her back turned, Summer's eyes were cold and detached. She quickly pulled out her phone from her pocket and sent a text message.

[Dad, because my brother sent the materials to Mirabella, she complained to Mr. Hammond about me, and I might get punished by the school Dad, I can't afford to have this stain on my

school record. Do you have any way to help?]

After the school meeting, as expected, Madeline was summoned to the office by Morgan, with Mr. Hammond present.

Faced with Mr. Hammond's authoritative demeanor and Morgan's stern interrogation, Madeline wanted to deny everything, but she couldn't hold back and ended up confessing to everything.

It was Madeline's adamant assertions that had led Morgan to address the issue with Mr. Hammond the day before. Now, as Madeline revealed the reason behind her actions, it was almost like she was causing Morgan to embarrass himself in front of Mr. Hammond all over again.

In all his years of teaching, Morgan had never encountered such a narrow-minded student.

"Go on, send Summer in," Morgan said, no longer wanting to look at Madeline. His voice was tinged with exhaustion.

Madeline glanced at Morgan and then at Mr. Hammond. Her eyes were red and brimming with tears of regret. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hammond. I never meant for things to get this out of hand. Please, I'm begging you. Don't expel me from school."