

The Double 241

Chapter 241

Jenna shook her head. “No thanks, I’m up to my ears in essays to write.”

Bethany, sensing the brush-off, didn’t press further. She grabbed her phone, resting it on her knees, and slipped her earphones back in.

Jenna offered a wry smile, her gaze inadvertently catching a glimpse of Bethany’s screen. She took a couple of steps, ready to plop down beside her and dive into her own pile of work, when suddenly her steps faltered. Her eyes darted back to Bethany’s screen.

Noticing Jenna’s puzzled look, Bethany blurted out in surprise. “Jenna?”

Still baffled, Jenna stared at the phone, lost in thought. A minute later, she fished out her phone. from her pocket and swiftly sent a message to Mirabella on Messenger. [Queen Mira, your brother... he’s a singer?]

Mirabella, who had just finished dinner and was about to head upstairs, paused when she received Jenna’s message. She replied, [Uh, sort of an amateur singer, I guess? Or a cover artist? I never really asked him in detail.]

Jenna’s lips twitched at the response before she, driven by a pressing curiosity, shamelessly typed, [Can I see a pic of your brother, pretty please?]

Mirabella stroked her chin, then glanced towards Leo, lounging in the living room devouring a slice of strawberry cheesecake, and replied, [Let me ask if he’s cool with it.]

Jenna responded eagerly, [Yes, please!]

Mirabella turned back to the living room, “Hey Leo, can I snap a pic for you?”

Leo, who had just popped a strawberry in his mouth and smeared cream on his lips, was momentarily shocked by the request. Mumbling through his mouthful, he said, "Let me strike a pose first." He wasn't fond of photos, but for his sister, it somehow didn't seem so bad.

"No need, got it already." Mirabella said, snapping a quick photo while he was mid-sentence.

Leo, who hadn't even decided on a pose, was left bewildered.

The photo showed Leo in his casual house clothes, sitting on the couch with an unguarded expression of surprise. A strawberry was trapped between his teeth, his eyes wide with shock, and his curly locks in a tousled state. He looked both dazed and adorable.

Mirabella thought the picture was perfect and hit send.

Regaining his composure, Leo had a sinking feeling, "You didn't..."

Mirabella met his gaze, "Yeah. Remember my classmate you met the other day? She wanted your photo."

Leo was at a loss. It wasn't for his sister's personal album?

More importantly... he glanced down at his casual attire, eyed the strawberry cheesecake on the coffee table, wiped the cream from the corner of his mouth, and recalled his just-captured expression.

Suddenly, Leo felt his cool image crumble. Dropping his fork, he stood up without even bothering with his shoes. "Tell me you didn't send it yet?"

Mirabella's response was devoid of mercy, "Already did."

Leo could see his carefully curated aloof persona fall to pieces.

Meanwhile, Jenna, upon receiving the photo, was utterly stunned. It took her a good while to collect herself before she sent a couple of messages back to Mirabella with a mix of emotions. Jenna: [Honey, do you have some kind of misconception about amateur singers?]

Jenna: [Or some bias against cover artists?]

The Pill: [?]

Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heart, Jenna continued to message. [Seriously, is that really your actual brother?]

Chapter 242

Mirabella absentmindedly touched her nose before looking up at Leo, who seemed on the verge of a breakdown. Despite his goofy appearance, she couldn't help but think-

[You'd think it'd show in the face.] she texted back.

Among the Davis siblings, Mirabella and Leo looked the most alike. Put them side by side, and no one would doubt they were blood-related.

Jenna couldn't help but scoff at the message. [If he really was your brother, wouldn't you know he's the chart-topping pop sensation J Justin?]

J Justin?

A chart-topping pop sensation?

Sounds like a big deal, doesn't it?

Clutching her phone, Mirabella froze for a solid two minutes before snapping back to reality. She tilted her head and called out to Leo, "Juztin."

At his sister's sudden shout. Leo shivered, reflexively responding. "Mira?"

The corner of Mirabella's mouth twitched as she averted her gaze, looking down to text Jenna. [Just checking if you're a fan of my brother.]

Jenna: [—]

The Pill: [So, how much for a snapshot of this pop idol?]

Jenna: [???] Was this girl for real? Who even asked that?

Mirabella closed Messenger and opened a web browser, typing "Juztin" into the search bar. Instantly, a plethora of news articles and photos of Juztin, a.k.a. her brother Leo, popped up. No wonder she found nothing under the name Leo before—he was using a stage name.

Standing right before her, Leo caught a glimpse of her browsing his ipfo and puffed out his chest, a sense of pride bubbling up as if to say, "Your bro is kind of a big deal."

Mirabella quickly pocketed her phone and looked up at Leo, who stood ramrod straight, eagerly awaiting some kind of praise. She let out a resigned sigh and said. "Put on your shoes. The floor's cold."

Leo was left gobsmacked.

This was not the reaction he had expected!

Time flew, and the first day of the BrainSpark Nationals arrived.

The national preliminaries were set for Saturday, while the finals would unfold over the

weekend. So, on Friday afternoon, a select group of Parkside High students were shepherded to the airport.

Their flight was at 3:30 PM, and they arrived at the airport by 2:00 PM. After the security check, everyone settled in the waiting area.

Mirabella sat alone in a corner, earphones in, as she'd recently become a fan of listening to music. She had always been a bit of a loner.

The Advanced Class had started with a small group, and only two had advanced to this stage— Mirabella and a shy boy who felt an inexplicable pressure whenever he tried to talk to her, enough to dissuade him from trying.

But Vincent was not so easily discouraged.

“Are you reading a French book?” Vincent took a seat next to Mirabella, noticing the untranslated book resting on her lap.

Surprise flickered in his eyes.

The volume on Mirabella's earphones wasn't loud, and she heard him clearly, removing one earbud to look at him. “Signed up for the French oral competition.”

Vincent raised an eyebrow, puzzled, “Why would you bother with such a dull contest?” Weren't physics and chemistry more enticing?

“Dull? It's fine, I guess. There's a hundred grand prize money.” Mirabella replied earnestly.

“So, you’re in it for the prize money?” Vincent asked, his expression a mix of surprise and instant comprehension.

Mirabella nodded, her gaze drifting back to the pages of her book.

Vincent couldn’t help but glance at her book. He prided himself on his French skills, but the text before him might as well have been written in code.

He felt a slight sting to his ego.

Leaning back, he muttered with a wistful air, “This time, I won’t lose the national competition to you.”

Without even lifting her head from the page she was turning. Mirabella replied with a breezy, “Oh, then best of luck to you.”

Those who usually threw down that gauntlet ended up eating their words. She could only offer encouragement.

Time flew by, and soon, the airport staff began announcing it was time to board.

Mirabella was one of the last to stand up, leisurely packing her book and pulling the small, wheeled suitcase her mom had prepared for her towards the gate, where she handed her ID and boarding pass to the attendant with a swipe.

Her seat was by the window, and as soon as she was on the plane, she powered off her phone. pulled her hoodie over her head, and nestled into her seat to rest.

Two and a half hours later, the plane touched down at Riverdale Airport. It was just past six, and the sky hadn’t completely darkened yet.

After deplaning, everyone gathered at the exit as the preliminary rounds were set to start the next day. The airport was filled with students and participants from all over the country.

The competition was at Prestige College, and most schools had booked hotels nearby. Parkside High School was no exception.

Elsewhere, Wyatt, who had just emerged from the VIP corridor, spotted Mirabella amidst a group of students while he was on a call. He did a double-take, making sure he wasn't mistaken. He had overheard Mr. Hammond mentioning that he would bring students to Riverdale for a competition but hadn't expected to bump into them.

After ending his call, Wyatt approached James, nodding towards Mirabella, "Sir, look over there, that's Ms. Mirabella."

James lifted his gaze, his cool eyes landing on a girl who seemed to command attention wherever she stood, even in her casual pose.

It was as if she sensed she was being watched; she suddenly looked up, her eyes finding him with precision.

Their gazes met in mid-air, and a subtle smile played on James' lips. What a sharp kid.

Wyatt hesitated before asking in a low voice. "Should we go over and say hello?"

After a brief glance from Mirabella that quickly withdrew, James shook his head. "No need, let's go."

With that, he turned away, his usual icy demeanor settling back over his features as he walked

off.

Meanwhile, Anthony gathered all his students once they were accounted for and led them toward the airport parking lot. Mr. Hammond had already arranged for their transportation.

Coming from the esteemed Hammond family of Riverdale, Mr. Hammond had ensured a driver from the family estate was there to meet them, parked in a private lane within the airport.

Aside from the Hammond family vehicle, there were several black limousines with government plates. A few men stood in a disciplined line, their expressions stern, exuding an aura that warned strangers to keep their distance. It was as if they were there to pick up someone of great importance.

Chapter 244

As Anthony ushered his group of students by, the leader of the sleek black sedans had already ignited the engine, and the men standing beside the vehicle were beginning to file in.

A curious student, eyeing the procession of cars, noticed something unique about their license plates and blurted out, "Check out the plates on those cars!"

The student's voice wasn't loud, but it was enough to make one of the men, who was about to get in his car, turn around with a piercing glare that seemed to carry the weight of death itself. The student shivered involuntarily and huddled closer to his classmates for comfort.

Mirabella, trailing at the back of the pack, lazily lifted her gaze to take in the scene before quickly, and without emotion, turned her attention away.

Standing in the Hammond family's section, the driver bowed respectfully to the stern man, keeping his silence until the last car had driven away. He wiped the sweat from their brows and, without explaining to the students, opened the door to the minibus and ushered everyone inside.

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Once on the bus, the frightened student seemed to snap reality, his face still showing traces of shock as he murmured to a classmate, “That guy was terrifying, like one of those cold-blooded hitmen you see on TV.”

“I feel you. His gaze was like it could crush anything.”

Most of the students who had come to Riverdale for the competition were from ordinary walks of life, sheltered from the more sinister and bloody aspects of the world, living their lives pure and carefree.

Mirabella looked out the bus window, her expression detached, her eyes lost in the distance.

Beside her sat Vincent, who overheard the front row students’ conversation and couldn’t help but glance at Mirabella. From the moment she boarded the bus, her face showed no signs of fear or panic like the other students. Her composure was as if she had merely encountered an everyday person dealing with everyday matters.

Vincent’s family was well-known in Radiant Ridge, and though he had seen his fair share of high-stakes situations, the sight of those men had stirred a subconscious dread within him. Albeit not enough to make him lose his composure like the others.

But Mirabella, she seemed like someone who had been exposed to far grander scenes.

“Aren’t you scared at all?” Vincent asked her quietly.

Mirabella turned to look at him, her answer serious, “Of course I am.”

Vincent was puzzled. Was she scared? She didn’t look it.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she pulled it out to read a message.

James: [Where’s the hotel your school’s booked?]

Mirabella didn't bother to hide it and typed back: [Near Prestige College.]

James: [Studying tonight, or do you want to check out the town? Riverdale's nightscape is pretty decent.]

The Pill: If I go out, Mr. Hammond will probably break my legs, 'seriousface.jpg.')

James let out a light chuckle on the other side of the phone, his usually stern face relaxing into

a lazy smile that seemed to spread a good mood throughout the car.

Curtis, who was driving, caught sight of his boss' smile in the rearview mirror and almost dropped his jaw in shock.

What was going on? He had never seen the boss with such an expression. Downright spooky!

Sitting in the passenger seat, Wyatt seemed accustomed to his boss' occasional departure from his usual stern demeanor.

Wyatt didn't notice Curtis' reaction and looked back to casually suggest, "James, maybe we should invite Ms. Mirabella for dinner later?"

Chapter 245

James?

Curtis' eyes bulged in disbelief, taking a quick glance at Wyatt. Had grown so bold as to address the boss in such a casual way?

But then... "Ms. Mirabella?" Who was that?

It was only then that Wyatt turned to Curtis. “Oh, the box of Incense of Calm that the boss has was a gift from Ms. Mirabella.”

Curtis, of course, knew about the boss’ unexpected acquisition of a top-quality box of Incense of Calm that had been helping him relax. To return the favor, Curtis had been coerced into sneaking into Donald’s private collection to steal a box of prized coffee beans, a deed that ensured he dared not show his face around Donald since.

“Ms. Mirabella, who is she?” asked Curtis, his curiosity piqued.

Authentic Incense of Calm was rare in the market. The precise blend of herbs required the incense maker to have a deep knowledge of their properties, not to mention that the dosage directly affected the effectiveness of the incense.

“Just a high school senior,” replied Wyatt, his voice as nonchalant as his expression.

Curtis’ grip on the steering wheel tightened. He was sure his ears were playing tricks on him. A high school senior?

Not someone from a reclusive and influential family?

Curtis turned his head to look at Wyatt again and opened his mouth to say something, but then. Wyatt continued speaking. “Ms. Mirabella’s academic record is stellar. She’s been in a competition where she’s scored top marks repeatedly.” Wyatt said, almost with a tinge of admiration that one struggling student might have for a top achiever. He had seen her rankings and scores online.

Curtis was speechless. Great, first it was his ears, and now his eyes were deceiving him too.

Wyatt noticed Curtis’ shocked expression and said quite seriously, “Curtis, focus on driving, will ya? You’re giving everyone the jitters.”

Curtis kept quiet. He’s not thw one blabbing on the side.

Fifty minutes later, the bud pulled up in front of the hotel entrance.

Mirabella stepped out, luggage in hand, and not long after, Anthony handed her a key card.

Two people per room. Among the several students who advanced in the competition, there were only three girls; the other two were classmates and naturally roomed together, leaving Mirabella with a single.

They took the elevator to the sixteenth floor and went to their respective rooms. The four–star hotel’s standard room was clean and tidy overall. Mirabella closed the door behind her, took a quick look around, and tossed her luggage into the nearby wardrobe.

After a quick trip to the restroom, she returned to her phone, incessantly pinging with new messages. She checked it to find Anthony had created a temporary group chat, informing everyone to meet for dinner at the buffet on the second floor in five minutes.

Mirabella replied with a “Got it” and promptly muted the group chat notifications. She rested for a few minutes before heading out the door. She then joined the other students who were headed there as well and rode the elevator down to the second floor.

At the entrance of the restaurant, Mr. Hammond and Anthony were deep in conversation. Seeing Mirabella approach, Mr. Hammond’s stern expression softened slightly. “First time in Riverdale, isn’t it? Is everything to your liking? No issues with adjusting, like, say, the change of environment?” Mr. Hammond inquired with concern.

Mirabella nodded politely at Mr. Hammond. “I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

Mr. Hammond smiled and added a word of advice, “Get some rest early tonight. You’ll want to be at your best for the preliminary round tomorrow morning.”

Mirabella nodded obediently, acknowledging with a quiet “Mm–hmm.”

Satisfied, Mr. Hammond didn't press further and gestured for her to head on to dinner.

Once Mirabella had moved away, Anthony leaned in and asked in a low voice, "Mr. Hammond, what do you reckon the odds are of Mirabella taking first place again this time?"

Chapter 246

Mr. Hammond stared after Mirabella's retreating figure for a long moment before he turned to Anthony, one eyebrow arched in a leisurely fashion as he uttered a few words with absolute certainty. "One hundred percent.

Anthony blinked, a bit stunned. One hundred percent... Was Mr. Hammond really that sure?

"But Vincent was only two points behind her in the last round."

Mr. Hammond just smiled. "Those two points might seem small, but they're not so easily overtaken."

The person who had nearly sent the entire education system of several top universities into meltdown wasn't someone who could be surpassed so simply. The breadth of knowledge Mirabella possessed had long outstripped the current curriculum.

Vincent was undeniably a top student, but next to Mirabella, he was destined for second place. It was a stroke of luck that they had recruited Mirabella. If she'd gone to another school, Mr. Hammond might truly be pulling his hair out by now.

Refocusing. Mr. Hammond clapped Anthony on the shoulder. "First or second doesn't matter. What matters is that our very own Parkside High School students hold both the top spots.

Whoever takes the lead is all the same to us."

"True enough." Anthony replied with a chuckle.

“I’ve got some errands this evening, so the kids are in your hands. Let’s try to keep them at the hotel tonight unless there’s a good reason not to,” Mr. Hammond advised, glancing at his watch.

Anthony nodded. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

Mr. Hammond soon departed.

After selecting her meal, Mirabella found a quiet corner to sit down.

While eating, she pulled out her phone and opened her contacts to a name saved as ‘Adler.’ sending a message, [Hey, wanna meet up?]

Adler was dining when he received the message, and at a glance, his hand twitched so violently he nearly dropped his phone into his bowl of soup.

Ever since she had inquired about the Education Association, there had been no contact from her, and he hadn’t dared to initiate any. Now, the big shot herself was suggesting a meet-up? This was utterly shocking. He had tried to arrange a face-to-face several times, only to be relentlessly rebuffed.

Suppressing his inner turmoil, Adler typed back hastily. [Are you in Riverdale right now?]

Mirabella was somewhat surprised at the quick response, replying with a simple. [Yep.]

Seeing her reply, Adler didn’t even bother to finish his meal. He stood up and headed for the door, texting as he went. [Name the place, I’ll be right there.]

Mirabella paused mid-typing when Vincent approached with a tray and sat directly across from her. She raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Vincent gave her a neutral look. “Anthony asked me to tell you, don’t leave the hotel tonight. unless it’s necessary.” With that, he started on his meal.

“Got it,” Mirabella responded, then finished messaging Adler. (Sorry, I can’t do it now. I have a competition tomorrow and need to review tonight. How about we meet after the event tomorrow?)

Adler, about to twist the doorknob and step out, froze solid as he read her message.

Competition?

Review?

Could this big shot actually be a student?

He remembered the last time she’d mentioned something about studying... Suddenly, Adler felt utterly perplexed, as if something in his mind had shattered.

It took him a while to snap out of his daze, his fingers trembling as he typed. [You’re... still a student?]

Chapter 247

Adler was still reeling from the revelation when his phone vibrated with a new message. [Hmm, senior year of high school.]

He had no idea how he managed to digest the bombshell. The big shot he was talking to was still a student. All he knew was that he was in for a sleepless night.

If she had been a doctoral student, he might have found it somewhat logical, but a high school senior... that was downright unsettling.

Oblivious to the effect her words had on Adler, Mirabella pondered for a moment before texting him again. [Could you get me a few ingredients?]

Despite the boss being a student, Adler responded with courtesy. [Name them.]

Mirabella sent a list of ingredients and their required quantities.

Adler was taken aback by the request. (You're making an antidote?)

Mirabella didn't hide her intentions, [Yep.]

[Most of the ingredients you can get easily, but... Hellebore might be a bit tricky to find.] Adler typed back quickly.

Mirabella's fingers glided across the screen of her phone. She was well aware of the rarity of Hellebore. After a brief contemplation, she replied, [Leave that one to me. Send me an address where you can receive deliveries, and I'll have it shipped to you.]

[Sure thing.] replied Adler.

Soon after, Mirabella asked Adler for his bank details and, within minutes, transferred a sum of money to him.

Ending the chat with Adler, Mirabella put away her phone and looked across the table at Vincent, who was still engrossed in his meal. She stood up. "I'm heading to my room to rest."

Vincent looked up and simply acknowledged with a "Sure."

Before long, Mirabella was back in her room. The room had everything, including a computer. She sat at the desk and pressed the power button on the tower. The hotel's computer wasn't top-of-the-line but sufficed for internet browsing.

After booting up and connecting to the internet, Mirabella quickly navigated to a website, passed through a couple of security checks, and finally landed on the homepage of "The Mirror."

“The Mirror” was an elite online marketplace where one could find the unfindable—from goods and information to even contract killers. However, becoming a member was an uphill task, with very few spots open annually, not to mention the strict hierarchy. The tiers determined the access one had to different purchasing privileges.

Mirabella skimmed the homepage without spotting anything intriguing. She then accessed the exclusive section of the website and promptly posted an ad for Hellebore.

She had a premium account, so the minute she posted, “The Mirror’s” admins featured her ad prominently on the main page, even providing a complimentary “shoutout” service. The shoutout meant that every member online would receive a notification about Mirabella’s post, essentially giving her a forced promotion.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow at this modern touch, noting the site had kept up with the times during her absence.

The number of online members was substantial, given that evenings were prime relaxation time. It didn’t take long for someone to contact Mirabella directly. The person who messaged her was a novice member.

“The Mirror” excelled at user privacy. Transactions were usually straightforward: agree on a price, and the deal was done. The site’s discreet couriers would deliver the items, ensuring no address leaks.

Chapter 248

Mirabella needed a dose of the rare and pricey herb called “Hellebore.” Negotiating the price was a breeze itself, and soon, she transferred the funds without a hitch.

No sooner had the transaction been completed than the website’s admin slid into her DMS.

CloudAdmin: [Hey there, dear Baby. Could you drop me your delivery address, please?]

Mirabella's username was "BaldBaby."

Resting her fingers on the keyboard, Mirabella couldn't help but feel a twinge of annoyance at the admin's choice of words. She typed out Adler's address and hit send.

CloudAdmin: (Got it, dear Baby. Your package will be with you by 10 a.m. tomorrow, sharp!)

BaldBaby: [...Okay, but can I ask if there's a way to file a complaint about the site's services?

CloudAdmin: [Excuse me?]

BaldBaby: [The whole 'dear Baby' thing...?]

CloudAdmin: [..]

One minute later-

CloudAdmin: [Dear BaldBaby, our site doesn't currently offer a complaint feature. Wishing you a pleasant night, farewell.]

A smirk twitched at the corner of Mirabella's lips as she closed the chat window. Her avatar blinked with a new message, and she hesitated for a moment before checking it.

CoolAutumnBreeze: [Just saw your trade post, buying botanicals for someone?]

BaldBaby: [Yeah.]

CoolAutumnBreeze: [Cool, bro. Mind if I ask you something personal?]

From “dear Baby” to “bro,” Mirabella leaned back in her chair, exasperated. It seemed her online persona was beyond salvage.

After a brief pause, she typed: [Shoot.]

CoolAutumnBreeze: [You from Riverdale?]

BaldBaby: [Nope.]

At the other end, Hartlee scratched his head in surprise. After a couple of seconds, he typed back: [Thought you took on an A–tier challenge once.]

Mirabella’s fingers danced lightly over the keyboard but didn’t respond.

Seeing no reply, Hartlee sent another message: [Heads up, Riverdale’s tight on security these days, especially during the antiquities exhibit.]

Mirabella’s eyebrows arched slightly as she replied: [Oh, I’m not exactly free to roam anyway.]

Hartlee’s lips twitched. Did the old baldie mean he would go if he had time?

CoolAutumnBreeze: [Just looking out for an old friend. Take care, and don’t bite the dust.]

Mirabella, who hadn’t been particularly interested before, suddenly felt a spark of curiosity: [When’s the exhibit?]

CoolAutumnBreeze: [?]

As Mirabella waited for a response, she sent her own question mark. But before she could hit send-

The other user logged off.

She shrugged and closed the website, quickly picking up her phone to check the group chat before setting it back down. Rising from her seat, she opened her suitcase, grabbed some fresh clothes, and headed into the bathroom.

The next morning, Mirabella was up bright and early. After a quick wash-up, she headed straight to the second-floor dining area for breakfast.

The place was nearly empty. Besides herself, Vincent was the only other contestant up at this hour.

When they bumped into each other, Vincent raised his eyebrows in surprise. As he went to load up his plate with breakfast fare, he asked, "You're up early, too. Nervous about today's competition?"

Mirabella glanced at Vincent, noting his dark circles and tired complexion. It was clear he hadn't slept much. Not wanting to burst his bubble, she replied nonchalantly. "Oh, I'm just used to waking up early."

Chapter 249

Vincent's hand paused as he held his plate, an inexplicable feeling of being challenged rising within him. He glanced over at Mirabella, but seeing her expression unchanged, he dismissed the thought.

Maybe he was just being oversensitive?

"By the way." Vincent casually mentioned, "after the prelims today, if you're free this afternoon, how about we take a stroll around Prestige College? My cousin is studying there and could give us a tour."

Mirabella was balancing two plates of breakfast. "Thanks, but I'll pass. I've got plans this afternoon," she declined.

Vincent didn't press the issue.

Students began to trickle into the dining hall, and after finishing her meal, Mirabella didn't return to her room. Instead, she went straight down to the lobby to wait.

The competition was set to start at nine o'clock, and the hotel was only a brisk one-hundred-and-fifty-meter walk from Prestige College—a matter of minutes..

Anthony led the students, reminding them of several essential points along the way. He especially warned them not to wander around Prestige College once they arrived. Prestige College wasn't just any university; there were areas strictly off-limits to students, enforced by the college's stringent rules.

As the top-ranked institution in the nation, Prestige College was the embodiment of thousands of students' aspirations. Merely standing outside its gates, gazing upon the inspirational motto.

emblazoned on the entrance, could stir a fiery passion in the heart, its century-old legacy commanding immense respect.

Mirabella looked up at the imposing gates of Prestige College, unsure of what others were feeling, but she was quite moved.

Indeed, the atmosphere of study seemed to be truly found within the walls of an educational institution. She had never felt this before, but now that she had experienced it, it was as though her love for learning had intensified.

Soon, all the students began to file orderly into Prestige College, where staff were ready to greet and check them in. The regulations were strict: each student had to register and wear an ID badge for the competition—no badge, no entry. The numbers on the badges were not only for identification but also served as their seat assignments in the exam hall, randomly assigned regardless of previous scores.

Mirabella's number was eleven, while Vincent's was forty-something, so they were not in the same room. As two of the most promising candidates in the national competition from the

same school, it was natural they'd be separated.

Before long, all the students from various regions across the country were escorted by Prestige College staff to the exam hall in the West Academic Building.

Before entering the exam hall, students had to surrender all electronic devices like mobile phones. The entrance was even equipped with infrared detectors, making cheating virtually impossible.

Mirabella found her seat at the end of the third row. As she looked around, she realized she was the only girl among a dozen or so competitors.

Shortly after, the invigilators entered with the exam papers and began distributing them. Mirabella skimmed the test, immediately checking the more complex problems at the end. The big questions were evenly split between chemistry and physics, each appearing intricate and challenging.

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, a serious glint in her eyes. The previous rounds had been child's play, but finally, the examiners had decided to pose questions that packed a punch. "This is what a real exam should feel like," she thought to herself.

Luckily for her, this thought remained unspoken. If the examiners and her fellow competitors knew what she was thinking, it would surely attract a horde of ill will.

The supervising teacher soon announced the start of the exam.

Chapter 250

Mirabella poised her pen above the exam sheet and confidently scrawled her name at the top. With a deep breath, she dove into the questions.

The first section was a hodgepodge of arts and sciences, a veritable smorgasbord of disciplines that tested rote memory, analytical prowess, and depth of understanding. Even deciphering the questions posed a challenge for those students with a less-than-stellar breadth of knowledge.

This prelims round was a marathon, not a sprint, clocking in at a hefty three hours.

As the first hour ticked by, while most of her peers were still wrestling with comprehension and multiple-choice questions, Mirabella was already tackling the hefty essays at the end.

The invigilator, a seasoned professor, paced the classroom with the slow gait of a watchful guardian, occasionally glancing over the students' progress.

The presence of a single girl in the sea of anxious faces was a spectacle that he couldn't ignore. Mirabella's calm, collected demeanor starkly contrasted with her peers' furrowed brows and nervous ticks. Drawn to her composed aura, he found himself circling back to her

desk more often than not.

His surprise was palpable when he noticed Mirabella had already progressed to the final questions. He checked his watch in disbelief—had she really breezed through the initial sections in just an hour?

Impressed and slightly incredulous, the invigilator couldn't help but recall the conversations had among the professors during the exam's construction. They had voiced concerns that the allotted time might be insufficient due to the difficulty of the questions. The consensus was that even the faculty might struggle to complete the test in under two hours.

Casually, he glanced at the name on the answer sheet beside her.

Mirabella.

As one of the competition's organizers, he was familiar with the name. Her track record was impressive: top scores in the initial rounds, city prelims, and city finals—dominating her peers. with perfect scores, save for one instance where the answers to the questions had exceeded the curriculum.

Such results had made her the subject of keen interest among the competition's faculty. If she maintained her performance through the national prelims and finals, she stood a chance at ranking internationally.

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The thought alone sent a ripple of excitement through the invigilator, his her shining with admiration. Yet, not wishing to disturb her concentration, he lingered but a moment before resuming his pacing.

With another hour gone, Mirabella laid down her pen. The final questions had posed a

challenge, indeed. Since she needed to answer them with the knowledge within the high school curriculum, the circuitous paths to their solutions had demanded a good half hour of her time.

An hour remained on the clock, but she was done. She handed in her paper, leaving the exam room while others gawked in disbelief. Her early submission sent shockwaves through the ranks. This was a

cutthroat competition, where only the crème de la crème advanced to the nationals, and her audacity heaped pressure on those who had only just started on the latter sections.

Stepping out of the exam hall, Mirabella retraced her path down the academic building. Perhaps it was the quiet of a Saturday morning or maybe the school's deliberate scheduling, but she encountered not a single soul from Prestige College on her way out.

Adjacent to the academic building were the administrative offices and a lounge area where teachers from various provinces and cities waited for their students to emerge from the battleground.

The administrative door was ajar, and next to it, a large glass window offered a clear view of the building's exit.

Anthony was deep in conversation with a colleague from another school when something caught his eye.

"Huh, someone's turned in their exam early?" he remarked, a hint of curiosity in his voice.