

The Double 271

Chapter 271

Your leg alright now?)

Mirabella sent the text and waited a couple of minutes, but with no reply, she put her phone down and went about her business.

She rummaged through her closet and pulled out a set of workout gear, glancing down to adjust the watch on her wrist before unzipping her backpack to check its contents. Shortly after, she stepped out of her room, ready for the day ahead.

Meanwhile, James had just finished giving instructions to his crew and was lounging on the couch, rubbing his temples in apparent fatigue.

Wyatt, noticing James' weariness, asked in a low, concerned voice. "Is everything okay with you? Feeling under the weather?"

James took a moment to rest his eyes before responding. "I'm fine."

Wyatt hesitated. His gaze fell on James' calf before he thought better of it and held his tongue, fearing he might end up reassigned to some godforsaken outpost.

James picked up his phone from the coffee table and, while browsing through his messages, casually inquired, "How's everything at the gallery?"

Wyatt sat up straighter. His demeanor automatically turned more solemn. "All's quiet on the front. Curtis has already checked in there. With him on watch, nothing will slip by."

James offered a noncommittal hum as he opened Messenger to reply to Mirabella. [Leg's fine. Your competition wrapped up?]

By this time, Mirabella was already in a cab headed to the antique exhibition, with her phone in her hand. [Yeah, just waiting on the final standings.]

James texted, [Let me know when the results are out.]

The Pill replied, [Will do.]

James asked. [When's your flight back?]

The Pill said, [Tonight at seven.]

James paused briefly, then simply texted back, [Safe travels home.]

James ended the chat, and his expression lightened slightly. There was a faint pallor on his otherwise flawless face that was nearly imperceptible unless you looked closely. He said to Wyatt. "Get the car ready."

Scratching his head, Wyatt asked, "You heading to the gallery?"

"Yeah," James replied casually, standing up from the sofa. As he rose, a sharp pain shot

through his call, but it vanished as quickly as it had appeared, almost as if it had been an

illusion.

James' brow furrowed slightly.

Wyatt, noticing the subtle change in James' expression, couldn't help but ask, "Something wrong?"

"It's alright." James shook his head and strode towards the door, with Wyatt following closely behind.

The hotel where Mirabella was staying was a good forty–minute drive from the exhibition hall. After settling the cab fare, she looked up at the historic building not far away. Under the brim of her baseball cap, her lips curved into a smile as she slung her backpack over her shoulder and sauntered towards the exhibition hall.

The exhibition wasn't entirely open to the public. One needed a special pass from the organizers to get in, and those who had it were far from ordinary.

The main entrance was surveilled by infrared cameras positioned at strategic angles, and four stern–faced security guards in black uniforms stood watch. Their expressions were as unreadable as if they were emotionless machines.

On the other side, in the gallery's security room.

“Everything's cool today, boss.”

Having just finished a round of surveillance in the exhibition hall, Curtis walked back into the control room, pulled off his leather gloves, and tossed them onto the table. He hooked a chair with his foot, sat down, and turned his attention to the large screens in front of him. The multiple feeds monitored every corner of the exhibition hall. After a brief glance, he turned to his subordinate and said, “Pass me the laptop.”

The man, hearing the order, quickly grabbed the black laptop from a desk and placed it respectfully in front of Curtis.

Chapter 272

Curtis' fingers danced rapidly across the computer keyboard. His eyes scanned the relentless cascade of commands on the screen. After a minute, his eyebrows knitted together in concern. “Was there any funny business at the exhibit hall around 6:30 this morning?” he asked. His voice was deep and serious.

His associate, stationed nearby, shook his head promptly. “Nope, we just did a sweep of the exhibit hall. Everything’s as it should be.” He paused, then added with a hint of curiosity. “Curtis, you spotted something off?”

Curtis gaze was locked on the computer screen. After a moment, he finally said, “Someone has breached our surveillance system.”

The associate blinked in surprise. “But didn’t you code a top–notch security program? We didn’t get any alerts this morning...”

Regarded as the seventh best hacker globally, Curtis had established programs and firewalls that were nearly impenetrable – unless you were one of the top five on that list.

Just then, the door to the control room swung open. Curtis looked up to see his boss entering and immediately stood, nodding respectfully. “Boss.”

James strode in. His eyes shifted to the surveillance footage as he asked in a cool tone. “What’s the situation?”

“There’s nothing unusual in the exhibit hall, but the surveillance system was hacked this morning.” Curtis reported gravely.

James narrowed his eyes. “Any leads on who it might be?”

“Just found out. I’m on it.” Curtis replied and resumed his seat at the laptop.

His fingers flew over the keys, tracing the digital footprints of the intruder, but after several minutes, he shook his head in frustration. “I can only trace the hacker’s IP to somewhere in Riverdale. Pinpointing the exact location is a no–go.”

-Even You

can't track them down? Sounds like this hacker's skills might top yours." Wyatt commented from the sidelines. His voice was heavy with implication.

Curtis leaned back in his chair. His eyes were deep and focused on the screen. "True. They're slick. They dodged the firewall, and covered their tracks. If I hadn't scrutinized the command log, I might've missed it."

He paused, then added, "Feels like they left this tiny loophole on purpose, as if waiting for us to find it." Otherwise, a hacker, who was skilled enough to infiltrate so silently and erase their traces, wouldn't have left such an oversight.

"It's a blatant provocation," muttered Wyatt.

Curtis glanced at him, with a wry smirk touching his lips, but he remained silent. A system

breach was one thing, but should anyone dare to step into the exhibit hall and lay hands on the items within, they'd face a web of traps and surveillance.

Wyatt dragged a chair over and placed it silently behind his boss, not daring to break the concentration with further chatter.

James stood with his hands clasped behind him. His gaze never left the surveillance feed. The usual coldness on his face was replaced with an air of lethal seriousness.

Seeing this, Curtis gestured discreetly to the subordinate. The message was clear, and the man exited swiftly.

Closing his laptop, Curtis lifted his head, joining his boss in scrutinizing the vast array of surveillance images. Every corner, every person that appeared, was under their watchful eye. The absence of anomalies was, paradoxically, the anomaly. If someone had chosen this moment to hack the system, it meant the unseen enemy had begun to make their move.

A cold smile played on Curtis' lips, and his rugged face took on an even edgier look. He stood up decisively. "I'll head to the scene and keep an eye out."

Without another word, he strode out of the control room, ready to face whatever

was coming.

Chapter 273

Mirabella strolled leisurely into the exhibition hall, taking her time as she wandered through the displays. Of course, due to the museum's strict policies, all the artifacts and treasures were secured behind special counters, safely ensconced under glass made of a unique material. Visitors were only allowed to admire the pieces from a distance of one meter.

The exhibition spanned two floors. On the ground level, artifacts dating from the 15th century to the late 19th century were showcased, and their value was beyond any conceivable estimate.

After perusing the first floor without finding what she had come to see, Mirabella made her way to the second floor. The second-floor collection was even more illustrious, with items so precious they could easily be deemed world-class treasures. The security here was tighter. than downstairs, with surveillance that left no corner unchecked.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, Mirabella casually adjusted the brim of her baseball cap as if by accident, then sidestepped towards a wall niche. She then slipped out a pair of seemingly ordinary glasses and put them on. Instantly, her vision was filled with a dense grid of infrared beams surrounding the rare exhibits. To trigger one would sound the alarm, and some of these. security measures were even potentially lethal. The designated pathways, set a meter from the displays, were the only safe zones.

Mirabella smirked, tilting her cap even further, and took a quick glance around the second-floor gallery. Less than a minute later, she removed the glasses and tucked them away.

At the center of the exhibition, under the most advanced security apparatus, lay an emerald. pendant adorned with an intricate pattern. Its splendor was enhanced by the focused lighting of the display case.

The emerald was practically flawless. Its lifelike carvings were a testament to the craftsmanship of that era. Mirabella's eyes sparkled with admiration. "Truly a stunning piece," she murmured.

The second-floor gallery had other visitors apart from Mirabella, including a small group of onlookers and two people who stood with their arms crossed, seemingly engrossed in a conversation about the emerald – all in unknown language.

Meanwhile, Curtis emerged from the control room backstage and entered the first-floor exhibition through an internal passage. His sharp gaze swept over the visitors. Detecting nothing amiss, he slowly made his way upstairs.

His glossy dress shoes made a soft clack against the stairs. He was clad in a dark suit, and his aura was undeniably foreboding. Soon, he reached the top of the staircase and stood poised at the landing.

Through his earpiece, his team reported no unusual activity. His gaze first settled on the pendant display at the center of the hall before shifting to the crowd who was admiring it.

Mirabella glanced at her wristwatch and, seeing the time, decided to head to the restroom. She had only taken a few steps when she felt a piercing gaze sweep over her. Voices from downstairs suggested a security check was underway.

With a subtle narrowing of her eyes, she continued forward nonchalantly. The intense scrutiny lasted but a moment before moving away. She pressed her lips together, with a faint trace of concern flickering across her face.

Before she reached the corridor leading to the restrooms, the bright lights of the exhibition hall suddenly went out. Darkness enveloped her, and panic ensued as startled cries echoed throughout the space.

In the enveloping blackness, Mirabella's lips curled into a sly grin. She remained still, once again donning her night vision glasses. Her gaze, now unobstructed by darkness, focused precisely on the central display case housing the emerald pendant. The two people who had been near the case were now nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 274

In the gallery's video surveillance backroom, James was lounging in his chair. His gaze rested casually on the array of screens before him. Though darkness had enveloped the exhibit hall below, the monitors told a different story, painting a picture that was far from pitch black.

Wyatt stood by James' side. His eyes too were fixed on the surveillance feed.

Downstairs, the main exhibit hall was in utter chaos, while the upper level was even more crowded. The sudden blackout had triggered a panicked stampede among the visitors, who, stumbling in the dark, were more likely to trip the infrared beams.

Tripping those beams would set off the gallery's intricate traps, potentially harming many. Considering the guests were a mix of national and international elites and tycoons, an incident in the gallery could lead to a public relations nightmare.

Wyatt, with a face ashen as storm clouds, said, "Boss, we might have to shut down all the security mechanisms."

Damn it, those bastards actually dared to pull this off, using human lives to force them into disabling the gallery's security system.

James' fingers were idly drumming on the armrest of his chair. His expression was as serene as a summer sky. After several seconds, he uttered a nonchalant "Hmm."

Wyatt relayed a few commands into his headset. Instantly, the entire array of the gallery's lethal security devices, including the infrared sensors, was deactivated.

"Lock down all the exits," James said coolly.

Wyatt complied.

“Seal off the stairways between the first and second floors.”

“Activate the corridor infrared alarm.”

“Turn on the signal jammer.”

“Start up the...”

Each command flowed from James in a calm, measured sequence, showing no sign of perturbation despite the disarray below.

Meanwhile, Mirabella was blending into the crowd. Her head never once tilted upward to glance at the ceiling since she had entered the gallery. She was aware of the countless cameras hidden and visible overhead. Despite the darkness shrouding the gallery, she knew the backroom screens would be as clear as daylight.

Mirabella’s gaze narrowed slightly as she noted the infrared beams around the artifacts had been turned off. It meant anyone could now approach these treasures without the risk of

triggering the traps. Although the items could be safely taken, whether one could leave the gallery alive was a completely different matter.

Soon, the two people who had vanished from sight reappeared as if they had been waiting for this moment. Their goal was clear: to snatch the jade centerpiece of the exhibit.

Amidst the crowd, Mirabella watched their actions and shook her head. She wondered which underground ring had sent such inept thieves – it was almost unbearable to watch.

They were bold enough to bet on the gallery’s security being disabled with the lives of many. but how could they fail to see that the entire gallery was already a spider’s web?

Did they really think the emerald pendant was just sitting there for the taking?

Just as the two people began to cut a small section of the glass casing with a precision cutter, Curtis, who had already locked onto the pair like a predator, silently instructed his men to close in on them.

Mirabella glanced at Curtis. His scar running from his ear to the back of his head was unforgettable. She touched her nose thoughtfully, then turned her attention back to the oblivious foreign thieves, unable to bear the sight any longer.

She fiddled with the watch on her wrist.

Chapter 275

As her fingers danced across the buttons next to her wristwatch, the camera overhead seemed to fritz out, and the monitor room's feed remained frozen on the scene where Curtis had just approached the two people. It was as if the image was stuck in time.

Now was her moment. Mirabella made her move.

In the security hub.

"Uh, the second floor's feed's got the jitters." Wyatt, who was vigilantly watching every corner, quickly noticed that the entire feed from the second-floor gallery had become static.

"Signal interference." James spat out coldly, as a familiar scenario unfolded before him.

He rose from his chair. His gaze swept over the second-floor gallery screen before locking onto a figure in the crowd. It was a person wearing a baseball cap, never once lifting his head. He pointed a commanding finger. "Check out that guy's ID."

There was something about the cap-wearer that set off his instincts, despite the person's seemingly normal appearance.

After giving the order, James strode out with an air of deadly seriousness. Wyatt glanced in the direction his boss had left, then quickly instructed his team to spring into action. He too

stepped out of the security room.

Meanwhile, Mirabella silently counted the seconds. At the precise moment the glass case housing the emerald was cut open, she closed in on the two people, reaching in first and effortlessly lifting the artifact out. Her speed was so swift that those two barely registered what had happened.

Mirabella glanced down at the artifact, admiring its beauty, but as her fingers touched its base, she frowned. Had she really spent a good fifty bucks on cab fare for this fake trinket?

Mirabella's expression darkened in an instant, and she stuffed the object back into the case. Whoever wanted it could take it.

When the people came to their senses and saw the emerald back in its place, fear flashed across their eyes.

Suddenly, Mirabella felt the air thicken with a new, potent sense of danger. She lifted her gaze but couldn't spot the source of this malice. Taking a step back, she sidestepped Curtis' advance and quickly headed towards the restroom corridor.

Under her watchful eye, the corridor entrance was laced with a dense network of infrared beams. Anyone approaching would be immediately detected, especially with two guards stationed there.

Glancing back, Mirabella noticed the escalators to both the first and second floors had been

shut down.

Her signal jammer would be cracked in a minute, tops. By her calculations, she had about ten seconds before the security feeds were back online, which meant she had to get out in less

than that.

Mirabella sifted through the building's escape routes in her mind and then set her sights on the nearby fire alarm. With the security personnel distracted, she stealthily approached and smashed her hand down on the alarm.

Instantly, the shrill sound of the building's alarm system filled the air, amplifying the fear already lurking in the hearts of the visitors shrouded in darkness.

In the gloom, the lone, illuminated emergency exit sign seemed like a beacon to everyone there. In an instant, the basic human instinct for survival kicked in. Without a moment to ponder what had transpired, everyone rushed towards the exit indicated by the sign.

Even the most sophisticated of technologies could not contain the primal survival instinct of a crowd in panic. Thus, the sealed passages were forced open.

Chapter 276

Mirabella adjusted her cap firmly on her head. Just a second before the jammer ceased its buzzing, she took down the two guards stationed at the corridor entrance with swift grace, leaving them sprawled on the floor. With no one left to stand in her way, she blended seamlessly into the crowd and strolled out of the gallery without a hitch.

As she departed, a chilling sense of danger grazed her, but she didn't bother to look back.

After a brief blackout, the gallery's lights flickered back to life, and the normality was restored as if by magic. The shrill of the alarm had been silenced in less than a minute.

The chaos that had erupted was swiftly managed by the security team, and order was reinstated. Aside from those who had exited through the emergency passageways, and a small cut on the glass case that once secured the emerald, it was as if nothing had transpired.

Those visitors who hadn't yet left were cordially escorted to the VIP lounge. When Wyatt ascended to the second-floor gallery to report, he was met with a glare from his boss that could curdle milk. He didn't dare say more than necessary.

James stood before the now-vulnerable glass case. His eyes were fixated on the emerald inside. After a few seconds, he tilted his head slightly. "Let everyone go."

Wyatt blinked in surprise. "But we haven't finished screening everyone..."

"No need. The person we're looking for has already left," James said flatly.

At that moment, Curtis, who had finished interrogating two suspects, approached. "Boss, those two have spilled the beans. The person who took the emerald and then returned it isn't one of their crew."

Curtis hadn't been wearing night vision goggles, but he was aware of someone approaching him at the time. He hadn't expected the intruder's speed and agility, which allowed them to complete the task and trigger the alarm in under twenty seconds.

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Wyatt recalled the individual in a baseball cap that his boss had ordered to be checked out in the surveillance room. He asked his team through the earpiece about any updates. Seconds later, Wyatt relayed, "The person you asked about, James, he's got no records. It's as if he's appeared out of thin air."

"Who is it?" Curtis turned to Wyatt.

Wyatt pulled out his phone, showing Curtis the snapshot taken from the surveillance feed. "This one."

Despite the clear image, the individual's head was covered with the cap, never once lifted, which concealed not only the face but even the gender from the cameras.

Because of the extensive surveillance coverage in the gallery, there were no personnel

stationed inside. After making inquiries, it was clear that no one, not even the guards at the main entrance or the two who had been knocked out, had noticed the person in the baseball cap. This was a clear indication that the individual was a pro with exceptional skills in avoiding detection.

Curtis zoomed in on the photo. The cap was nondescript, and although he had seen the cap in the surveillance room before, he hadn't paid close attention to the person beneath it.

"Could this be the same person who stole the Flying Apsara two years ago?" Curtis mused with a grave tone.

Wyatt looked up, surprised. "I doubt it. If it were them, they would've swiped the piece without any fanfare, right?"

This level of commotion didn't match the thief's known style.

"Well, that's anyone's guess." Curtis paused, and then added, "But there's one thing that puzzles me. If he had the emerald in his possession, why return it?"

"Do you think he realized it was a fake?" Wyatt stroked his chin, arriving at the only plausible conclusion.

Curtis shot Wyatt a look, replying, "Impossible. Even a specialist can't identify authenticity instantaneously, let alone under those circumstances."

Chapter 277

"Well, this is a real head-scratcher," Wyatt muttered under his breath, turning his attention to James who had been unusually quiet. "Sir, what's your take on today's fiasco?"

James was the only one who had had any contact with the person who had managed to snatch the device, albeit briefly. And although the perpetrator had slipped through their fingers before they could properly nab him, Wyatt always trusted his boss' judgment.

James' gaze was detached. His eyes were not quite focusing on anything in particular. After a moment he finally spoke, "I'm not sure."

At his words, both Wyatt and Curtis fell into a contemplative silence. If even James wasn't sure, then they had to consider that today's slippery foe was on par with the one who had stolen the device the last time.

"I'll keep digging," Curtis said in a low tone.

James' gaze drifted off, signaling the end of the conversation.

After Mirabella left the exhibition hall, she didn't head straight back to her hotel. Instead, she instructed her driver to take a leisurely detour around the city before finally returning to her accommodation.

Her phone had been switched off the entire time, and she only powered it back on once she was safely in her room. The moment her phone came to life, it was bombarded with a barrage of messages and alerts from Messenger, not to mention several missed call notifications.

The calls were from Mr. Hammond, and they were all made within the last half hour. Ignoring the texts and Messenger for the moment, Mirabella quickly dialed Mr. Hammond back.

It was already past three in the afternoon, and the results of the final competition should have been announced.

As soon as the call connected, Mr. Hammond picked up immediately; as if he had been waiting for her to get in touch. "Mirabella, your phone's finally on. I've been trying to reach you for ages," Mr. Hammond's voice sounded urgent.

Mirabella's eyes dropped slightly as she searched for an excuse, "I went out for a bit, phone died."

Mr. Hammond was standing near the flower beds at the base of the Prestige College administration building, taking a deep breath before asking. "Did you check your results yet?"

"Not yet," she drawled, glancing at the time. Hearing a hint of something unusual in Mr. Hammond's voice, she couldn't help but ask, "Uh, Mr. Hammond, are my results...?"

Before she could voice her concerns that her performance might have been less than stellar, Mr. Hammond cut in, stopping her words.

On the other end, the principal of Prestige College was calling for Mr. Hammond, who politely nodded in acknowledgment to someone before interjecting. "Ah, you did great, but I can't talk right now. The principal just asked me to fill out some paperwork for your scholarship nomination. I'll send you a pass shortly. Be sure to come over to the administration building at Prestige College ASAP. Gotta go."

After saying that, Mr. Hammond hung up before Mirabella could respond.

Holding her phone, Mirabella soon received a picture message from Mr. Hammond. She checked it and didn't waste any time, changing back into the outfit she had worn for her exams. that morning, and quickly left her room.

Minutes later, Mirabella arrived at the gates of Prestige College, showing the guard the pass Mr. Hammond had sent her.

The guard remembered her as the most stunning student from the exams and was quite friendly, allowing her entry without much fuss.

Being easy on the eyes had its perks, as the guard even helpfully pointed out the way to the administration building. Mirabella thanked him politely and followed the directions to the building.

Mr. Hammond's detailed instructions were for an office on the third floor. Reaching the first floor, she eyed the elevator for a second but then decided to take the stairs next to it.

Chapter 278

Mirabella ascended the stairs to the third-floor corridor and surveyed the area – all offices as far as the eye could see. She pulled out her phone and shot a quick message to Mr. Hammond via Messenger.

It wasn't long before Mr. Hammond emerged from an office at the very end of the hallway. Spotting Mirabella, he waved her over with a casual flip of his hand.

With measured strides, Mirabella approached him. "Mr. Hammond," she greeted, nodding slightly.

Today, Mr. Hammond's face bore none of its usual stern austerity. Instead, he was practically beaming with a joyous radiance. "Mirabella, you got here pretty quick," he remarked with a hint of cheeriness in his voice.

He began walking back into his office, with Mirabella following suit. Inside, there were three other teachers. One had been an invigilator for the past few days, another was the physics professor referred to by Matthew at lunch, and the third was someone Mirabella hadn't met before. Mirabella greeted the three teachers with a polite nod of acknowledgment.

The unfamiliar man, who turned out to be the head of the records department, held a document in his hand. Upon Mirabella's entrance, he looked up, with a playful jab at the ready. "Hammond, do all the bright sparks at your school also come with such high-caliber looks?"

Mr. Hammond's eyebrows arched mischievously. "Absolutely. Our school is all about substance and style – we've earned our stripes."

The head shook his head slightly, then handed Mirabella the document along with a pen. "Young lady, fill this out for us, will you? There's a desk by the window – take a seat there."

Mirabella thanked him, took the documents, and made her way to the indicated desk. She sat down and began to fill out the form with earnest precision. It was similar to an enrollment form but far more detailed, even requiring her to specify her intended major after graduation.

Meanwhile, the physics professor, who had been sipping water, sidled up to Mr. Hammond and inquired, “Hey, Hammond, I’m curious. With scores like Mirabella’s in physics, why didn’t she compete in last year’s Physics Olympiad?”

The professor’s interest had piqued after seeing the final contest results, especially when he learned that someone had solved his challenging physics problem. He had dug up the student’s test paper for a closer look and was astounded by the sheer talent on display. The final problem he issued was a high-caliber physics question, developed based on international competition standards, a brain teaser so sophisticated that even university freshmen might struggle to unravel it promptly. However, this teen prodigy, Mirabella from Parkside High School tamed this beast of a problem. But what’s even more astonishing is that, she tackled it using the solution methods endorsed at an international competition level.

Mr. Hammond glanced at the professor. “Because last year, she wasn’t a student at our

Parkside High School.”

The professor expressed his regret. “If she had competed in the Olympiad last year, she might have ranked well.”

Mr. Hammond paused before sighing. “Yeah, that problem from last year that only one person solved? That would’ve been a piece of cake for our Mirabella. If she had participated, we’re not just talking about ranking – she could’ve been a contender for the top spot.”

The professor blinked, and then his realization dawned. “Wait, Hammond, are you saying she could’ve solved that physics problem?”

Mr. Hammond straightened up, and his pride was evident. “Oh, that? Piece of cake. A mere trifle.”

He mentally kicked himself for not saving the solution on his phone – it would’ve saved him from having to convince everyone that, yes, it was indeed true.

At that moment, Mirabella had completed the application form and stood up, walking towards the Dean of Prestige College. With a polite nod, she handed over the form.

The Dean of Prestige College had barely extended his hand to receive the form when physics professor swooped in and grabbed it first, prompting a puzzled glance from the dean.

The physics professor only skimmed the form, but his focus sharpened when he saw the intended major section. His eyebrows shot up in surprise when he noted that the young lady had chosen the biology department. He felt his blood pressure surge as if he were experiencing an invisible storm.

Lifting his gaze to meet Mirabella's, he questioned with a tinge of agitation, "Your physics grades are stellar. Why aren't you considering physics as your major?"

"I have a bit more interest in biological research." Mirabella replied after a moment's contemplation.

"What's so great about biology? I think you're cut out for physics. Change it. Don't waste such a talent," the professor urged, pointing to the relevant section on the form with a look of heartfelt

distress.

Mirabella touched the tip of her nose, wondering if it was even possible to be compelled to change her major on the spot. This was the esteemed physics professor that Matthew had spoken of with such respect. Would he take offense if she rejected his advice?

Seeking an ally, Mirabella turned to Mr. Hammond, who was standing nearby.

Mr. Hammond, having witnessed the exchange, cleared his throat and deftly retrieved the application form from the professor's hands. He then handed it back to the Dean of Prestige College, saying,

"Choosing a major should really be about the student's personal interests. Besides, Wade has also expressed interest in having Mirabella join his department. We shouldn't force her hand."

Suddenly recalling a recent event, the physics professor blurted out, “That explains why Wade rushed to drag me away at lunch. He was planning this all along!” He realized that there had been an intentional effort to keep him in the dark about the young lady’s impressive scores, to poach her for the biology department.

Cunning move!

Mr. Hammond, not quite following, looked at him questioningly. “What do you mean?”

The professor laughed bitterly and didn’t elaborate; instead, he muttered, “Such shameless tactics, leading the young astray, tsk!”

He took a deep breath and turned back to Mirabella, speaking earnestly, “Kid, there’s no rush to pick a major. You’ve still got the better part of a year before your finals. Think it over, but don’t squander your gift.”

Mirabella felt a disconnect between the kind-looking professor before her and Matthew’s description of him.

After a pause, the professor pulled out his phone and said, “You have Messenger, right? Add me. If you ever have questions about physics, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

And so, Mirabella’s phone contacts expanded to include another mentor eager to teach her—a chef, a pharmacist, and now, a physicist.

Shortly thereafter, the physics professor excused himself due to other commitments. Before he left, he made a point to remind Mirabella to reach out to him online with any questions, to which she could only manage a polite nod and a couple of half-hearted “sure” responses.

Once the professor had departed, the Dean of Prestige College filed Mirabella’s paperwork. He retrieved a trophy and a certificate of honor from a cabinet, both prepared in anticipation of her visit.

“Congratulations,” he said, handing her the awards.

Mirabella accepted the trophy and certificate with a gracious “thank you,” her eyes finally settling on the certificate. National Champion, it read, with her score of 200 points printed below.

A perfect score, once again.

Alright, it seemed there were still shortcuts to success.

Soon after, Mirabella and Mr. Hammond left the hallowed halls of Prestige College.

As they walked, Mr. Hammond spoke with newfound anticipation in his voice, “Next up is the international competition.”

Chapter 280

Clutching the trophy in her arms. Mirabella listened silently to Mr. Hammond’s words, not uttering a sound.

“International competitions are brimming with talent. Today’s questions would just be a warm-up compared to the ones on the world stage. Our students who’ve gone abroad may have been national champions here but had not even made the top ten there.”

Mr. Hammond shook his head with a wry smile, then glanced sideways at Mirabella and added. “Mirabella, among all the competitors over the years, you’ve consistently scored perfectly. I believe you have a shot at breaking into the top ten.

Before, he had thought that any international ranking would do, even if it were the twentieth or thirtieth. However, after today’s national competition results, he felt that Mirabella’s abilities far surpassed his expectations.

He didn’t dare dream of the number one spot internationally, but the top ten... that seemed within the realm of possibility. What if miracles happened?

Standing at the curb, with the traffic light still red, Mirabella tilted her head towards Mr. Hammond and said quite seriously, "I think you could set a more precise goal"

Mr. Hammond blinked in confusion, not quite understanding her.

As the light turned green, Mirabella stepped onto the crosswalk and floated out the words. "Like, first place."

Mr. Hammond's eyes widened, stunned by her seemingly preposterous assertion for a good five seconds before he caught up with her stride.

First place was such a daunting goal. Watching Mirabella's slender figure walk ahead, her back straight and exuding an innate air of arrogant confidence, a bubbling excitement ignited within

him.

Perhaps... it was worth anticipating.

After returning to the hotel, Mirabella rested briefly before packing her bags for the seven. o'clock flight back to Ashford. It was already approaching five. They would soon gather to head to the airport.

While waiting for the flight, Mirabella found time to buy some gifts. The gifts were for her two lovable parents and two funny brothers, whom she loved dearly.

With gifts purchased and time to spare, Mirabella placed her items at her feet, then pulled out her earphones, launched the music app, and cued up Neon Paradox in her favorites to play on a loop.

That was when a text message popped up. It was from an anonymous, hidden number.

(Causing such a commotion at the Riverdale Antiquities Exhibition wasn't your handiwork, was

it?]

Mirabella touched her nose and quickly replied: [I was studying. Who's got the time?]

Anonymous: [.....]

Anonymous: [I guessed not. It's not your style.]

Mirabella pursed her lips, no longer interested in engaging with the stranger, and stopped replying. She pocketed her phone, pulled her hoodie over her head, and closed her eyes to rest.

At half-past nine, the plane landed on time at Ashford airport. Mirabella, pulling her luggage, walked out while powering up her phone.

Several missed calls and a bunch of messages on Messenger awaited her.