

## **The Double 361**

### Chapter 361

“Collins, do you have Jay’s number?” Mirabella inquired.

Collins blinked, a bit taken aback, but then nodded, “Yeah, I’ve got it.”

“Then send it to me later. I need it,” Mirabella stated.

“You’re not thinking of calling him, are you?” Collins assumed reflexively.

Mirabella just pursed her lips. “No, it’s not that.”

Collins figured Mirabella wasn’t the type to do such a thing. So he agreed, “I’ll send it to you on Messenger in a bit.”

\*Thanks,” Mirabella nodded, and then she was off.

Watching her leave, Collins shook his head, a touch of exasperation in his gesture. Why had he gotten into such a deep conversation with Mirabella? She couldn’t really help with the situation

anyway.

Soon after, Collins hopped into his car and drove away.

Back at the villa, Mirabella washed up quickly and then settled at her desk. She booted up her computer and crafted a small program, sending it to both Jay’s phone and his computer.

After finishing her task, she finally laid back in bed to rest.

The next day, Leo didn't go into the office. Collins had called him, insisting he take a day off at home. Leo didn't overthink it.

With an unfinished new song on his mind, Leo drove back to his own villa. It had a full suite of professional music equipment, with which he had previously crafted his lyrics and melodies. Once there, he locked himself in his music room, determined to complete the songwriting process that day.

By five in the afternoon, with the lyrics and a rough demo in hand, Leo finally left, intending to swing by the office.

Halfway there, his sister's call came through. Slipping on his Bluetooth headset, Leo answered cheerfully. "Hey, Mirabella."

She could hear the lightheartedness in his voice. Clearly, he was unaware of the online buzz. She asked, "Leo, are you at home? Or somewhere else?"

"Just heading back to the office, got some stuff to take care of." Leo glanced at the lyric files beside him.

Mirabella massaged her temple. "Heading back to the office this late?"

"Yeah, I just finished the lyrics for my new song, and I'm taking the demo back to tweak it a bit,"

Leo replied candidly.

Mirabella thought for a moment, then asked, "You've been writing new music?"

"That's right, been prepping for over half a year now, Inspiration hit, and I wrapped it up," Leo said, his voice tinged with a hint of emotion. He had almost given up on everything due to health issues before,

but now that he had fully recovered, it was time to pick up where he had left off.

“Oh, I’m quite curious about your new song. Do I have the honor of hearing it first?” Mirabella asked.

Leo chuckled, “You’re my little sister, so of course, you can be the first. But right now, it’s just a rough cut. How about you wait until I polish the final version?”

“It doesn’t matter. A rough cut is still your song,” Mirabella stated, unfazed.

That was the kind of response that really hit home. Immediately, Leo made a U–turn, “Alright, you’ll hear it first, then. I’ll take it to the office later.”

“Great, just come home, Leo. I’ll wait for you,” Mirabella sweetly replied.

“Okay, I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

With that, Leo ended the call.

While waiting for Leo, Mirabella took the opportunity to scroll through Twitter again, listening carefully to Jay’s accusation that Leo had stolen his song.

Though she wasn’t musically inclined, she could appreciate the song’s essence. Having listened to Leo’s music for some time now, the song on Twitter clearly resonated with his style. If anyone was guilty of imitation, Jay seemed the more likely suspect.

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Twenty minutes or so later, Leo strolled back into the house, a cassette tape in hand.

Mirabella glanced his way and, noticing his usual casual demeanor, called out, “Les, toks back.”

With a nonchalant hum, Leo lifted the tape for her to see. “Got a new track for you to check out It’s still rough around the edges, though.”

“Sure,” Mirabella said, setting aside her smartphone.

Leo ambled over to the stereo, slid the tape in, and hit play. A raw acapella version of a song filled the room. The sound was unpolished, stripped of studio magic, revealing the song’s bare

essence.

Mirabella listened intently, recognizing the melody and lyrics as almost identical to the version she had stumbled upon online.

Standing by the stereo, Leo waited for the song to end before arching an eyebrow at his dice, his face brimming with cocky confidence. “What do you think? I’ve got the chops, don’t I?”

“It’s good,” Mirabella nodded, then after a brief pause, she added, “Play it again, Leo.”

His smirk deepening, Leo obliged and pressed play once more. After another listen, Mirabella casually inquired, “Have you played this song for anyone else yet?”

Leo pulled out the cassette and sank down on the couch beside her. “Nope, just showed an early version to Collins and the guys in the band. You’re the first to hear the finished product

Mirabella tapped her chin thoughtfully and then asked, “Do you musicians ever run into a situation where you accidentally create a tune that sounds like someone else’s?”

Leo chuckled and glanced at his sister. “Well, that depends. If someone else’s track inspires you, you might end up with a similar melody or vibe. But that’s just imitation on a musical level.”

“What if the lyrics and melody are exactly the same?” she tilted her head.

“That’s even less likely unless it’s a case of internal plagiarism or theft,” Leo replied, then squinted suspiciously at her. “Why do you ask all of a sudden?”

“Oh, just curious,” Mirabella said with a nonchalant.

Leo lifted his chin in pride. “The chances of your brother here creating a tune that clashes with someone else’s are slim to none. Not to toot my own horn, but in this industry, it’s always others taking cues from me.”

Mirabella reached out and playfully ruffled his curly hair. “Mhm, Leo, you are the best.” The look on her face was utterly indulgent.

Leo was momentarily lost for words. There it was again,

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Her gaze slightly narrowed, and Mirabella lazily crossed her legs. Leo’s song had just been finished today. So, where did Jay get that even more polished version he had?

If Jay had once gotten his hands on an early version of Leo’s track and tried to complete it himself, there would be differences in the tune. It would be a one-in-a-million coincidence even if they

somehow ended up exactly the same.

The origin was indeed a mystery.

Just then. Mirabella’s phone buzzed at her side. She pulled her thoughts back, picked up the device, and glanced at it. She then calmly fished out a pair of headphones and put them on.

Tapping on an app, she was soon listening to a conversation through her earbuds · a woman talking. The man’s voice was unfamiliar, but the woman’s was unmistakably recognizable.

Mirabella was taken aback, her fingertips lightly grazing the earphones.

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The familiar voice on the other end was none other than Summer. The length of the audio call wasn't substantial, just a minute, and it didn't contain any cryptic messages. But Summer's phrase, "It's all good," had an intriguing ring to it.

What was all good? Something about Leo?

Mirabella took off her headphones, her expression unreadable, shadowed with thought.

"Odd, has my Twitter account been hacked?" Leo wondered aloud.

Beside her, Leo, phone in hand, stared at the message that read, "Account risks detected. You have been forcibly logged out," his face etched with irritation.

Mirabella shot him a half-smirk. "Leo, did you wander onto some shady websites by any

chance?"

At her words, Leo's face darkened instantly. He shot Mirabella a glare, retorting, "Are you questioning my integrity?"

He turned back to his phone and tried re-entering his username and password, only to find himself still locked out. His frustration grew.

"Still can't get in?" Mirabella raised an eyebrow.

“Nope, it just won’t let me in for some reason,” Leo said, scratching his head and handing his phone to Mirabella. “Look, it keeps saying my account’s at risk.”

“These things usually clear up in a few days. It’s nothing. Try logging in again later,” Mirabella said nonchalantly.

“Alright.” Leo conceded, giving up on his verified account for the moment. He began typing another set of credentials into the login field. “Can’t access my main account, but I’ve got a backup. I’m curious to see what’s going on with my main one, what’s this ‘risk’ they’re talking about.”

Mirabella sighed. Hacking one account was easy, but you could never predict how many backup accounts one might have.

Leo was about to check his main profile when he saw a trending topic about plagiarism allegations against him. He frowned and clicked on the trending hashtag.

[I can’t believe the person I’ve been a fan of for years could do this. Stealing a bandmate’s creation to launch a career is just despicable.]

[So, is Juztin’s silence due to guilt? Is he too afraid to face our questions?]

[I thought Juztin’s new song teaser sounded fresh, but who knew the truth would be so disappointing?]

[There must be some misunderstanding. After all, Juztin shared a snippet of a new song and

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melody months ago. It’s possible someone is trying to smear him.]

Jay’s got the full track already. What misunderstanding could there be?)

Leo stopped browsing and went straight to Jay's tweet. [Four years of working together, and some truths are too much to bear. If you still care, please stop your thievery.] A link to an audio clip followed.

Leo, brow furrowed, clicked on the audio. As soon as he heard the melody, his expression darkened. Three minutes later, he was scowling.

The full version of the audio Jay had posted was almost identical to the demo in Leo's possession, except his was still unpolished, the final touches yet to be made. But the real kicker? He had just finished creating his song an hour ago, while Jay's post was dated yesterday.

He was certain he'd never heard Jay's version before. So, how could these two identical songs exist?

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Leo pondered the question his sister had posed to him as soon as he got back, wondering if there was any chance his tune had bumped into another on the charts. Looking up at Mirabella, he inquired with a casual smirk, "You knew about the Twitter fiasco already, didn't you?"

Inevitably, the truth would surface, so there was no point in keeping secrets. Mirabella nodded. "Caught wind of it scrolling through Twitter last night."

"So, that's what you and Collins were whispering about yesterday?" It all clicked for Leo in an instant. No wonder they had skirted around him during their conversation.

"Yeah." Mirabella rubbed her chin thoughtfully, then offered her version of a pep talk with earnest conviction, "Leo, don't let those online trolls get to you. Keep your chin up. The truth will come out sooner or later." Consoling others really wasn't exactly her strong suit.

Leo watched his sister with a mix of amusement and exasperation. Setting his phone aside, he shrugged, "I've been down this road before, Mirabella. I've learned to take it in stride."



After a brief pause, he continued, “What really throws me for a loop, though, is how Jay’s leaked audio could be an exact match for the tune I just polished off today.” Sure, he had shared early drafts with the band, but even if Jay was out to nick his tune, an exact copy was beyond the pale.

Was it some kind of clairvoyance? Or had they just hit that one-in-a-million melody match?

The more Leo mulled it over, the stranger it seemed. Standing up, he grabbed his phone and strode out.

Mirabella was still processing Leo’s unexpected composure when she saw him heading for the door. She quickly asked, “Leo, where are you off to?”

“I’m going to get some answers from Jay,” he called back without turning around.

After a moment’s hesitation, Mirabella got to her feet and declared, “Count me in.”

Half an hour later, Leo pulled up to Jay’s upscale neighborhood. Standing at Jay’s front door, he felt a twinge of nostalgia. There was a time when the band would regularly huddle up in Jay’s living room, brainstorming tracks and plotting their future. Those days, it seemed, were long

gone...

A shadow of sadness flitted across his eyes, but he quickly pushed the doorbell. Mirabella stayed back, waiting in the car.

Soon, the door swung open, revealing not Jay but his assistant.

“Oh, J Justin? What brings you here?” The assistant propped herself against the door frame, clearly taken aback.

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Lee looked at her and cast her into the house. "I'm here for Jay."

The assistant's eyes darted away. "Jay's not here right now."

Leo's brow furrowed. "Cut the crap. I know he's in there. Just let him come out and talk to me."

Tim sorry, Juzon, but Jay really hasn't come back yet." The assistant paused, then added, "But he did say if you came by about the Twitter thing, all you need to do is post a sincere apology online. After all, we're all friends here, right?"

At that Leo let out a scoff. "I'm curious. How does he have the gall to lift my tune, play the victim on Twitter, and then expect me to apologize? Where does that confidence come from?"

The assistant touched her nose awkwardly, her response muffled and unclear, "I'd like to give you the benefit of the doubt, but the evidence... Well, it's a mess, and it's got everyone all

twisted up."

The insinuation was clear just own up to it, and let's not make it worse for everyone.

\*Juztin, just head out, will you? Jay's not here, and honestly, this whole Twitter debacle's got him feeling pretty low. too." Jay's assistant sighed again.

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Leo's gaze was icy as he pushed open the door and strode in, well aware that Jay would be inside.

"Ah, come on, Juztin, don't be like that..." With a sigh, the assistant failed to stop him, so he closed the door and followed Leo.

Entering the living room, sure enough, there was Jay lounging on the couch.

“Where did you get that track?” Leo asked, cutting straight to the chase.

Jay unfolded his legs and stood up, his androgynous beauty marked by a decidedly nonchalant expression. “The audio is my own creation.”

“There’s no one else here, so cut the act. We both know you wouldn’t produce music like that,” Leo said with a heavy tone.

Jay chuckled lightly. “So, only you’re allowed to be creative, and the rest of us can’t? Don’t you think you’re a bit of a bully, Juztin?”

Jay detested the way Leo acted. It was as if he was the only one with talent when, in truth, Jay’s gifts were substantial, yet constantly overshadowed.

Leo stared at Jay, years of knowing each other now reduced to this alienation. With a sarcastic twist of his lips, he said, “I don’t care whether you can create tracks or not. I’m asking you how you got this piece!”

Jay’s lips pressed together, his face just as cold, his stance resolute. “It’s my original work! It’s you who stole my creative vision.”

Leo watched him silently, then, without another word, turned and left.

Jay watched Leo’s retreating figure, half-expecting him to say something more, but Leo just left without another word. This wasn’t his usual style.

Narrowing his eyes, Jay thought about the origin of the melody, then pulled out his phone and dialed Summer’s number, which he had called just an hour before. The phone was answered quickly.

“Your brother came knocking, asking about the track,” Jay said directly.

Summer, on the other end, seemed to have anticipated this. Her voice was calm and even, “The track is yours. What are you afraid of?”

“I’m curious, how exactly did you come by this track?” Jay asked.

When Summer first approached Jay, he had asked the same question. She had said nothing, only that she could help him topple Leo’s rising career. He hadn’t taken it seriously at first, but as Leo’s popularity continued to soar, Jay’s resentment became uncontrollable, leading to that fateful tweet yesterday.

“You don’t need to worry about the details. You have the finished track, and even if he wants to defend himself, he has no evidence,” Summer said steadily,

After a pause, she added with certainty, “Trust me, there will be no problems.”

Reassured by Summer’s words, Jay’s unease began to fade. “I hope you’re right because if not, you won’t escape the fallout either.”

“I don’t need your reminders. Don’t call if it’s not important.” Summer replied coolly.

“Fine, gotta go,” Jay said dismissively and hung up. With Summer’s assurances, Jay found little left to worry about.

After hanging up, Summer’s gaze turned frosty. Thinking of the scrutiny Leo was about to face, a smirk crept onto her lips.

So they underestimated her? Scorned her?

Leo’s own creation undermined him, and Summer was eager to see how he would recover this time. Feeling increasingly pleased, Summer turned to head back to the living room, only to see Aiden standing not far away.

Summer furrowed her brow, unsure if her little brother had overheard her phone conversation. But it didn't really matter if he did catch any of it. She doubted he understood a thing,

Shaking off the distraction, she strode toward Aiden and casually asked, "What are you doing standing around here?"

"Who were you just on the phone with?" Aiden asked, his eyebrows knitted together as he looked at Summer. He had caught snippets of her conversation—something about not having evidence and nothing going wrong. It didn't sound like anything good.

Summer glanced at him dismissively. "Mind your own beeswax, will you?" The last thing she needed was for this blockhead to make her the talk of the town again.

"Are you cooking up some nasty scheme?" Aiden cut to the chase.

Hearing this, Summer's face darkened. "Aiden, I'm your sister. Do you really think so low of your own flesh and blood?"

She couldn't fathom it. In their past lives, they weren't exactly close, but they had never been at each other's throats like this.

"I don't have a sister with such a cunning mind," Aiden scoffed and walked away, leaving Summer with a sour taste in her mouth.

Meanwhile, Leo left Jay's place and sank into his car seat, his mood visibly deflated.

Mirabella, one earbud in, was half listening to the recorded conversation and half watching him. "Leo, did you manage to get anything out of him?"

Leo let out a hefty sigh and a wry smile, "He didn't budge an inch. He insists he wrote the song himself. I shouldn't have even bothered."

But Mirabella, eyebrow cocked, disagreed, “I wouldn’t say that.” If Leo hadn’t shown up at Jay’s doorstep, she wouldn’t have captured such an intriguing conversation.

Still wrapped up in his thoughts, Leo barely registered Mirabella’s comment, lamenting, “I never would’ve guessed Jay could change so much. We used to be such good friends, open and honest with each other.”

Mirabella removed her earbud, patted Leo on the shoulder, and said nonchalantly, “People change, and sometimes, being too kind isn’t doing you any favors.”

Leo’s mouth twitched at the edges. Was that supposed to be comforting? It sounded more like a backhanded compliment.

Mirabella leaned back, relaxed, and generously offered, “Come on, Leo. Let’s grab a bite. I’ll

treat you to a feast and perk you up a bit. Get a good night’s sleep, and who knows? Tomorrow

might bring a pleasant surprise.”

Leo stole a glance at his sister, once again feeling their roles were reversed. Who was the sibling in charge here, anyway? But he had to admit, his spirits lifted a bit.

Starting the car, Leo pulled out of the neighborhood. Mirabella mulled over for a moment before giving him an address. It was the location of Knox’s food therapy joint.

Remembering James mentioning that the bistro was by invitation only and often required reservations, Mirabella had sent Knox a message en route.

Knox was thrilled at the prospect of Mirabella visiting the bistro, offering to personally whip up a couple of specialties for her, which she promptly and firmly declined.

She'd had her fill of these eager old grandpas, each one either wanting to mentor her or become her protégé. It was all a bit too much.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up outside Knox's food therapy joint.

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Leo parked the car and strolled up to the entrance, caught off guard by the charming exterior of the place. "This spot's got quite the vibe," he mused.

It had an old-world charm about it. With a name like "Herb & Hearth—it hinted at something from a bygone era.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, "They specialize in food therapy here, and it's actually pretty tasty."

"Food therapy? That's a new one for me. Dishes made with herbs and such?" Leo asked, a hint of skepticism in his voice.

"Yeah, all kinds of nourishing dishes. Come on, let's head inside," Mirabella said, already making her way through the door.

Leo followed, his gaze sweeping the room while simultaneously keeping an eye out just in case someone recognized him. However, his worries were soon proven unnecessary as they stepped inside. The seating was arranged with privacy screens, and there weren't too many patrons.

The waiter who came to greet Mirabella had already been tipped off by a call from Knox. He respectfully ushered them into a private dining room.

When the waiter presented the menu, Mirabella browsed it, and her expression turned into a comical grimace. She dug into her purse and pulled out a VIP card, flashing it at the waiter, "I've got this discount card. How much does it take off?"

Knox had insisted she take the card last time. She was glad she did. Otherwise, she'd be bleeding cash today—the prices were astronomical!

The waiter took a gander at the card and froze, mouth agape, at a loss for words. Someone was actually treating Knox's token as a mere discount card... What would Knox think if he found out? Besides, with that card in hand, who needed to pay?

Standing just outside the private dining room, the restaurant manager witnessed Mirabella's interaction with the waiter and shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't fathom why Knox had given this young lady the token—she clearly seemed out of her element in such an establishment.

This manager was the same person who had followed Knox the last time, deeming it ridiculous how Knox had treated a girl who had simply rattled off a couple of herb names like royalty. He'd been instructed to personally attend to Mirabella. Still, upon realizing it was the same young lady from before, his enthusiasm waned, which is why he delegated the task to one of the waiters.

Now, watching Mirabella's naïve demeanor, he felt more convinced of Knox's lapse in judgment. Shortly after, he left the vicinity of the private dining room, making his way to the

kitchen. Knox's grandson was coming over for a cooking lesson today, and he figured he'd

better spend his time teaching him instead.

The waiter regained his composure at the table and explained, "This isn't for discounts. With Knox's token, you can dine at any of the Mendoza family's Herb & Hearth establishments without a reservation, and it's all on the house."

Mirabella's eyes lit up, "Really? No one mentioned that when they gave it to me."



The waiter offered an awkward smile, thinking to himself that nobody needed to mention it—flashing the card was usually enough.

Meanwhile, Leo, having overheard his sister's inquiry about a discount, wanted to bury his face in his hands. Their family wasn't exactly short on cash for dining out, and why on earth was she asking about discounts?

Could it be that their parents hadn't given Mirabella spending money? Was that why she was being so frugal?

With these thoughts in mind, Leo quietly reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, ready to cover whatever costs were necessary.

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Leo flipped open his wallet and fished out a card, casually placing it in front of his sister. "Here, go wild with this one," he said with an easy grin.

Mirabella was about to hand Leo the menu when his gesture stopped her cold. She looked up at him, her face a canvas of question marks.

Clearing his throat, Leo added, "If you're short on cash, just tell me, okay?"

The eyelids of Mirabella's mouth twitched fiercely. Did she look like she was out of money? She was just trying to be frugal for crying out loud!

She pressed her fingers to her temples and sighed, "I don't need it." There was a hint of resignation in her voice. She then proceeded to ignore his generous offer, ordering four dishes and soup before passing the menu back to the waiter.

Leo watched with a mix of admiration and melancholy as Mirabella declined the card. If this were Summer, she'd have snatched up the opportunity and gone on a shopping spree by now, he mused.

Mirabella couldn't read Leo's mind, but his goofy expression was enough to make her shake her head slightly. How did such a goofy guy become a top-tier celebrity in the entertainment industry? Was he cheating life or what?

"You can take off the mask, Leo. We're pretty secluded here, and you won't get recognized," Mirabella mentioned, noticing the mask still covering his face.

Snapping back to reality, Leo peeled off the mask and stuffed it into his pocket. His curiosity piqued, and so he asked, "How did you stumble upon this place? And who's this Knox the waiter mentioned?"

Mirabella explained nonchalantly, "A friend introduced me to it a while back. I got lucky and scored a token from the owner. That's it."

Leo touched his nose thoughtfully. Clearly, it wasn't just about the token. The waiter's attitude had hinted at something more. But he had to admit, the place was quiet and private.

"Try the pastries. They're not half bad," Mirabella suggested, pointing to a plate on the table.

Leo eyed the sugary confections warily but still took a bite. To his surprise, he admitted, "They're actually pretty good."

"Enjoy them," Mirabella said with a faint smile, her lips barely parting.

Soon after, the waiter brought out the dishes, though the soup was still pending. The presentation was simple yet elegant.

"The dishes look light," Leo commented.

"The cuisine here is light but nutritious, perfect for someone who uses their voice as much as

you do," Mirabella explained while serving him a portion.

Leo watched her attentively, an internal sigh escaping him. “My status as a protective brother is in jeopardy,” he thought. He lowered his head and focused on his meal.

Back in the kitchen, Vincent ladled the finished soup into a bowl, ready to serve. The waiter reached for the tray, but Vincent waved him off, “I’ll take it to them.”

Every week, Vincent took a day to learn cooking at the restaurant, always seeking feedback from customers to improve. The maître d’, however, frowned at the idea. He knew of Vincent’s culinary pursuits, but this particular soup was for the young lady in the private room—Mirabella. Recalling her blunt critique of Knox, he worried she might be too forthright and said, “Mr. Vincent, perhaps skip the soup this time. Let’s focus on the next dish.”

Vincent peeled off his gloves, barely glancing up as he replied, “It’s fine. I’ll return to the kitchen after delivering the soup.”

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The steward sighed softly, unable to deter Vincent, and reluctantly followed behind him.

Soon, Vincent walked into the private dining room with a tray in hand. As he approached the doorway, he caught sight of Mirabella and paused, taken aback by her presence. He hadn’t expected to encounter her here.

Mirabella also noticed Vincent and appeared equally surprised.

Vincent stepped closer, setting the soup on the table. “What a coincidence, Mirabella.\*

His gaze then drifted to Leo, feeling a sense of familiarity, yet he couldn’t quite place where he had seen him before.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow. She knew that Vincent shared Knox’s last name, so she asked, “You’re Knox’s grandson?”

Vincent was taken aback. "You know my grandfather?"

"We've met a couple of times," Mirabella nodded in confirmation.

The steward, who had followed them in, glanced discreetly at Mirabella. Knox had given her his personal token, and yet she casually mentioned 'meeting a couple of times' as if it was nothing.

Vincent suddenly remembered the familiar figure he had seen at the family estate some time ago and blurted out, "You had dinner with my grandfather recently, right?"

"Yes, I visited once," Mirabella acknowledged, though she hadn't seen Vincent then.

That explained it. Realization crossed Vincent's face, and he became curious about how she knew his notoriously discerning grandfather.

Meanwhile, Leo, who had been ignored thus far, looked up, his eyes scanning Vincent with a cool, detached expression. He then turned to his sister. "Are you two classmates?"

"Yes, same grade, different classes," Mirabella replied briefly.

At that, Leo narrowed his eyes slightly. Same grade, different classes, yet this guy seemed quite familiar with his sister? His sister was beautiful. Could this boy have ulterior

motives?

Vincent then felt the sting of Leo's unfriendly gaze, leaving him somewhat perplexed.

"I made this soup myself. Give it a try, and feel free to comment on anything that needs improvement. Vincent said, regaining his composure.

Mirabella was surprised, "I wouldn't have pegged you for someone who can cook medicinal cuisine." After all, he was so young and didn't seem like someone who would spend time in the kitchen.

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"Family traditions must continue," Vincent shrugged nonchalantly.

Fair enough.

Mirabella took a spoonful of the soup, ready to taste it, when she saw Leo extend his

empty bowl to her. She glanced at him sideways.

Leo sat up straighter. "Mira, serve me some, please."

And so, Mirabella set down her bowl and ladled soup into his.

Only then did Leo look satisfied, taking a small sip before turning back to Vincent, "Do you want the honest truth?"

Vincent paused, then nodded.

"It's mediocre. The medicinal taste is too strong, like swallowing a bowl of herbal tonic. All I taste is medicine," Leo shook his head in critique. His face clearly read: not impressed.

Mirabella took a sip from her bowl and glanced warningly at her brother before addressing Vincent, "Don't mind him. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Leo was lost for words. There it was, his sister siding with a stranger.

Vincent just smiled, showing no sign of being offended by the criticism.

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“The soup is actually quite good, and a little less lotus seed would make it better,” Mirabella commented.

She had ordered a simple, nourishing soup, not concerned with the perfect medicinal balance that Knox might have sought.

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Vincent reflected on the slightly astringent taste of the soup he had sampled earlier. “Indeed, I may have been a bit heavy-handed with the lotus seed. Lesson learned for next-time,” Vincent said slowly, his tone even.

Mirabella nodded, her eyes then scanning the spread of dishes on the table before inquiring, “Did you whip up these dishes as well?”

“How do they taste?” Vincent probed further.

Mirabella gave a thumbs up, her smile bright. “You’ve got a real knack for cooking.”

Though the dishes were common fare, and the recipes had become standardized, every chef brought their own touch to the flavors. Vincent’s offerings, indeed, had a certain appealing zest to them.

Leo, who had been observing from the side, couldn’t help but smirk dismissively. “Talent in cooking,” he thought, “is that really something to boast about?” He conveniently forgot how he had enjoyed the meal just moments ago.

With his usual air of aloofness, Vincent felt a sense of pride at the compliment. In the Mendoza family's younger generation, he was known to have a particular gift in the culinary arts. So, hearing Mirabella's praise naturally stoked his ego. After all,

academically, he had long been outshone by the likes of her. It was comforting to know he excelled in another arena.

Soon after, Vincent excused himself with a brief, "Enjoy your meal. I won't intrude any longer," and departed without lingering.

Once Vincent had left, Leo turned back to Mirabella. "The guy sure carries himself with an

air of arrogance."

Mirabella cast a sideways glance at her brother. "What do you expect from the top scholar of our school year?"

Leo's jaw dropped in disbelief. "The top of the class, and he's moonlighting as a chef?"

"Every job has its value," Mirabella replied, returning her attention to her soup.

Leo touched his nose self-consciously. "Why do you always advocate for him?"

"Are you sure you're not just picking on him?" Mirabella shot back, her gaze steady on her brother.

Leo averted his eyes, feigning innocence. "Me, picking on him? I'm just stating facts."

Mirabella let the conversation drop, knowing that pushing further would only make Leo more defensive.

Critique of their grandfather's newly developed medicinal recipe.

Vincent paused mid-chop, looking up in surprise. “You mean she’s been taste-testing Grandpa’s creations?”

Nodding, the steward elaborated on how everyone’s perception of perfection seemed to find its flaws once it passed Mirabella’s lips.

Upon hearing that his grandfather had actually been pleased by her discerning palate, Vincent’s astonishment gave way to understanding. He realized the steward harbored some bias against Mirabella but laughed it off, saying, “Well, it seems you still don’t quite grasp Grandpa’s temperament.”

Criticism was one thing, but constructive feedback that led to improvement was what truly caught his grandfather’s eye.

It dawned on Vincent that Mirabella must’ve possessed some knowledge of pharmacology; otherwise, his grandpa wouldn’t have extended an invitation to their home.

This realization was a humbling blow. Vincent had thought that despite falling short academically, he wouldn’t face another defeat in a different field. Yet, it was now clear that while being overshadowed was unlikely, recognizing the reality of his limitations was vividly outlined before him.