

The Double 391

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Delilah eased her car into the garage with practiced precision, and as she stepped out into the cool evening air, she noticed Zach was still in the yard, waiting for her. She walked towards him with an unusual expression, "Why aren't you inside?"

Zach's gaze lingered on his mother's face before he spoke, "Mom, did you meet with Summer tonight?"

At the mention of Summer, a shadow crossed Delilah's face, and she took a moment before nodding, "Yeah,

she had something to discuss with me."

Zach fell silent for a beat, "About Leo, right?"

A soft hum escaped Delilah, laced with a pang of sorrow. "I never imagined she could do something like this, completely disregarding years of sibling bonds."

Had it not been for the call she received from Summer, Delilah would have been oblivious to the online debacle, and she wouldn't have fathomed Summer's personality becoming so radical.

"It's probably because she feels we have wronged her somehow," Zach said with a calm detachment.

He vividly remembered the day Summer turned her back on the Davis family, sneering at their modest means, eager to leave what she deemed a life too shabby for her taste.

Despite being raised with the finest of everything, from clothes to education, she still resented their family's lack of wealth, craving a life of affluence that they couldn't provide.

What was more ludicrous was that she might've not even remembered the reasons behind Nick's departure to a foreign land.

Zach collected his thoughts and asked, “Mom, she wants you to get Leo to clear things up online, doesn’t she?”

Delilah’s smile was tinged with bitterness as she nodded. The daughter she had cared for had hurt her own flesh and blood; the irony of it all was not lost on her.

Zach’s lips twisted wryly. “I thought as much. Everyone has to face the consequences of their actions. You don’t have to put yourself in a difficult position over a sense of kinship that has lost its meaning.”

If Summer had any regard for family ties, she wouldn’t have done what she did. Now that she had crossed that line, why should they respond to her playing the family card? Forgiving her once would only pave the way for a next time.

With a shake of her head, Delilah turned and walked towards the house.

Zach watched her retreat, keenly aware of the struggle and hesitation of a mother for the child she had raised for over a decade.

He pulled out his phone and sent a text message to Summer.

The next day.

Summoning all her courage, Summer still went to school. She pretended not to hear the whispers of her classmates, burying herself in her books all day. Whether she absorbed a word was another matter entirely. When the final bell rang, she packed up and quickly left the classroom. Zach had asked to meet her.

Descending the school steps, Summer ran into Mirabella. Seeing Mirabella suddenly made the whispers of her classmates seem insignificant. It was only in the presence of Mirabella’s aloof demeanor that Summer

felt the biting sting of humiliation.

Clenching her fists, Summer called out to her.

Flanked by Jenna, Mirabella gestured for Jenna to go ahead as she walked with Summer toward the edges of the school field, where they could have some privacy.

Summer faced Mirabella with a gaunt expression devoid of her usual bravado. “Are you enjoying this?”

“Having another episode?” Mirabella arched an eyebrow, clearly not understanding why Summer would confront her with threats or accusations time and again.

With a twisted smile, Summer thought of Delilah’s reaction the previous night and Zach’s invitation to meet today, and suddenly, she threw her head back and laughed.

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Summer tried to mask the worry nibbling at her edges with a laugh before she spoke, “So what if I’m the butt of a few jokes for now? It’ll all blow over soon, and your brothers won’t hold it against me.”

She paused, her gaze distant, then added, “Even if you’ve returned to the Davis family, don’t forget I also spent a good chunk of my life there. A small slip-up and I bet your folks and your brothers will forgive me all the same.”

Summer felt let down by her foster family the night before and a sting of resentment for their unanswered calls, but Delilah eventually showed up, didn’t she? Delilah remained silent, but Zach’s late-night text, asking her to meet, spoke volumes. It was an olive branch, and Summer knew it.

She watched Mirabella, who was idly kicking a pebble at her feet, and suddenly asked, “Where did you get that song from?”

Summer had been hoping to see a flicker of discontent on Mirabella’s face but was taken aback when the question came. Her sharp expression froze, and after a long moment, she scrutinized Mirabella with narrowed eyes. “You’re telling me you don’t know the origins of my song?”

“Should I?” Mirabella retorted with a half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

After a brief pause, she continued slowly, “Leo’s tune had barely been penned, and someone had already leaked the complete track online. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

As Mirabella’s words hung in the air, shock tightened Summer’s grip on her own arm.

The secret of Summer’s rebirth was something she dared not reveal, yet Mirabella... Mirabella wouldn’t ask such a question if she had also been reborn. However, her expression seemed to suggest she knew something.

For a moment, Summer was at a loss as to what Mirabella truly meant.

After a beat, Summer replied coolly, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She glanced at her watch, adding, “Oh, I’ve got to run. Your dear brother, Zach, wants to meet to help me sort out this online mess.” With that, she strutted off, leaving Mirabella without a chance to respond, her pride leading the way. Mirabella watched Summer’s retreating figure with an amused curl to her lips. No wonder Summer had come to test her, questioning if she was the real Mirabella.

Summer left school and hailed a cab on the roadside to meet Zach at the agreed-upon spot. The online scandal had made her life with the Gilbert family rather uncomfortable lately; Mandy hadn’t even arranged for a driver to drive her about.

Twenty minutes later, she arrived at a downtown restaurant known for its private dining rooms. Expecting to see only Zach, Summer was taken aback to find Leo there too. She hesitated at the door before approaching and sat opposite the brothers, removing her sunglasses and face mask. Her voice was low as she greeted, “Zach, Leo...”

“Don’t call me Leo,” he said, his lips tight, his tone cold.

The color drained from Summer’s face as she clenched her hands on her knees, her nails digging into her

skin. He was so detached from Summer yet so eager to please his real sister, Mirabella. The disparity filled Summer with an intense loathing.

Summer's eyes reddened, and she turned her head away.

Looking at his former sister, Zach felt a stir of emotion, and unlike Leo, he wasn't quite as harsh.

Adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose, he broke the silence, "I'll cut to the chase. You want Leo to clear your name publicly... It's not impossible."

Summer's voice was tight with desperation. She asked directly, "What's your condition?"

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Zach's hand knocked against the table's wooden surface, his fingertips intertwined as he paused for a long moment before slowly starting, "Actually, the Davis family and the Gilbert family don't really have much to do with each other. And since your last name is actually Gilbert, maintaining this connection with my folks... doesn't seem to have any real significance, does it?"

Summer's eyelids drooped slightly, a look of desolation in her eyes. She had seen this coming. He was cutting ties with her for good.

Taking a deep breath, Summer replied, "It's not up to me whether we stay connected or not. Even though my last name is Gilbert now, my affection for the Davis family over the years still exists. Zach, if you're using this to weigh against the love of the past decade and a half, doesn't that seem a bit too callous?"

Leo, who had been listening, couldn't help but furrow his brows at her words.

"Callous? Did you consider how callous you were to Leo with the stunt you pulled online?" Zach hadn't expected this kind of moral manipulation from the Summer he used to know.

"I just wasn't thinking straight, and besides, it's not like it's caused any real issue now, has it? Do you really have to push me to the brink?" Summer's face was pale and drawn, her expression pitiable.

"Who's pushing you? Can you stop playing the victim all the time?" Leo had lost all respect for Summer's act. She had been playing the same role for years, making the whole family feel indebted to her.

Summer pressed her lips together, saying nothing.

"I've taken a look at your current situation, and if Leo doesn't press charges, you might still salvage your reputation. But if this goes legal, forget your future prospects. You'll have a permanent mark on your record," Zach said coolly.

Taking a sip of water from his glass, Zach added, "Of course, being the heiress to the Gilbert family might not matter to you. After all, inheriting a fortune doesn't require a clean resume."

Hearing this, Summer's gaze returned to Zach's face. His scholarly visage, which seemed so gentle and harmless, was the coldest and most ruthless in reality.

His words sounded like an offer of choice, but in truth, they were a warning that she had none. If she could have taken over the Gilbert family's empire, she wouldn't have entered the entertainment industry in the first place.

Ten minutes later.

Zach and Leo exited the private room. Just a few steps down the hallway, Leo suddenly clutched his stomach, then said to Zach, "Hey, Zach, why don't you head to the car and wait for me? My stomach's acting up. I'll just hit the restroom and be right back."

Without suspicion, Zach nodded, "Sure thing." With that, he made his way toward the exit.

Once he was at a distance, Leo doubled back into the private room. After the two men left, Summer slumped into her chair, her body limp as if drained of all strength, her gaze unfocused. When Leo reentered, she barely registered his presence.

“Where did you get that song of mine from?” Leo asked, his voice steady even as he looked at Summer, seemingly unaffected by her disheveled state.

There was a long pause before Summer finally came back to herself, turning her head to look at Leo, and scoffed, “I wrote it myself.”

Leo narrowed his eyes. “Impossible.”

Why couldn’t I have done it if you could? Summer looked away, her pride evident.

After a brief pause, Summer turned back with a mocking smile, “Don’t flatter yourself as some kind of genius. It’s nothing special.

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Leo furrowed his brow in frustration.

Summer pushed herself up from the table, stood, and grabbed her mask and sunglasses from beside her. Without a second glance at Leo, she slipped past him and walked out of the private booth.

Leo turned and watched her leave, somewhat dazed. Something about Summer was off today—she was unpredictable, and it was like trying to read smoke.

Shaking his head, Leo made his way out.

It had only been five days since the infamous song theft incident, and Leo’s rollercoaster of a career had plummeted with a loss of hundreds of thousands of followers, only to surge back with millions of new fans after the truth came to light.

The buzz online was all about whether Neon Paradox would disband. After all, a band known for internal disputes that went public was hardly likely to stick it out together.

At the Lamont Entertainment office, Collins leaned against his desk.

“Are you sure you want to leave the band?” Collins asked, eyeing Leo. He wasn’t particularly surprised by his decision.

“Yeah,” Leo replied without hesitation.

Collins, resting against the desk’s edge, continued, “Well, the higher-ups were planning to replace Jay and have scouted a new drummer. They’re hoping you’ll stay on as the leader.”

Lounging on the couch, Leo’s cool expression didn’t waver. “No thanks, it wouldn’t mean anything.”

Collins stroked his chin, nodding in understanding. “Alright, I respect your choice. I’ll talk to the execs.”
“Mm.”

Switching gears, Collins pulled a document from his desk drawer and handed it to Leo. “Got a call from a sports brand manager. They’re interested in having you and your sister shoot a commercial.”

Leo, hearing this, didn’t even glance at the document before saying, “Pass on it.”

Collins raised an eyebrow. “Why? They said your sister wouldn’t need to show her face, and they’re offering a pretty penny.”

The siblings had worn a signature sportswear line in the last episode of “Country Comfort,” and it had become an instant hit online. Now, the brand was knocking on their door.

“My sister won’t do it. She’s not interested,” Leo said, shaking his head. He knew his sister well—she would find it too bothersome.

Collins glanced at him. “Maybe I should ask her?”

“Can’t I do it alone?” Leo asked, referencing past solo endorsements.

At that, Collins gave Leo a complicated look. “Nope, they’re adamant about having both of you.”

After a pause, Collins added, “To be frank, there’s been a number of calls from brands wanting to feature your sister alone in their ads.”

Although it was a testament to his sister’s appeal, Leo felt a sting.

“You’re not the problem, but ever since you joined ‘Country Comfort’ with Walker, your image has taken a hit

It’s a far cry from the cool persona you’ve cultivated. Standing next to your sister, you look more like the younger sibling.” Collins chuckled and shook his head playfully.

Leo replied with a frosty glare, “I’m requesting a new agent.”

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Leo left Collins’ office, his mind already on the descent down the stairs.

When he reached the elevator, as fate would have it, he bumped into Jay’s agent, Vicky, who was also heading down.

The last time they’d crossed paths, Vicky had taken the opportunity to kick Leo when he was down, so this time, Vicky saw Leo and just shot him a cool glance before looking away. He casually pressed the button for the underground parking, level B1, and smoothly pulled a face mask from his pocket, slipping it over his nose and mouth.

Vicky, also bound for the parking garage, often strutted around Collins with a cocky air. But lately, Jay’s drama had left him red-faced at the office, avoiding people when he could.

Leo's nonchalant demeanor that didn't even warrant a 'hello, made Vicky feel a distinct discomfort stirring within.

Thinking back to that tweet Leo had posted defending Summer, Vicky suddenly looked up, his voice laced with a sharp edge, "You did it on purpose, didn't you? Letting Summer hand over that song to Jay?"

It sounded like a question, but his tone was drenched in certainty. Leo's gaze landed on Vicky, but he kept silent.

As Vicky pieced together recent events in his head, enlightenment dawned, and he chuckled, slapping his forehead. "I have to give it to you guys, playing dirty to kick Jay out of the band. I was wondering why you didn't step

n as the frontman of Neon Paradox. You had it in for Jay all along, huh?"

Had it not been for Leo's online show of support for Summer, Vicky might have remained in the dark about the real situation. With these thoughts, Vicky's face grew dark as storm clouds.

Leo watched the myriad of emotions cross Vicky's face. The man's capacity for conspiracy theories, a true mark of his profession, seemed to dwarf those of any ordinary person.

He had wanted to clarify that he didn't even care for the position of band leader in Neon Paradox anymore. Still, it appeared that no explanation could compete with Vicky's suspicion.

The elevator soon reached level B1, and with a 'ding, the doors opened. Without a word, Leo stepped out and walked away.

Vicky stood in the elevator, his gaze cold as he watched Leo's retreating figure. He snapped out of his reverie just before the doors slid shut again.

Leo had just slipped into his car and was about to start the engine when his phone rang. He pulled it out with ease, his expression showing a flicker of surprise at the caller ID before he answered, "Hey, Emmitt." "Got some time? Let's grab a bite," came Emmitt's voice from the other end.

Leo considered for a moment before replying, "Sure. Shoot me the address, and I'll head over."

Emmitt gave him the details and after a brief pause, added, "How's Mirabella doing lately?"

Leo was taken aback by the sudden inquiry about Mirabella but quickly responded, "She's doing okay. Buried in her books and cramming for her senior year of high school."

After a pause, he added softly, "Should I call Mirabella and see if she wants to join us for dinner?"

Emmitt's gaze dropped, his eyes lingering on the floor for a long moment before he finally said, "No need. Better she stays home to study."

"Alright then," Leo didn't push the issue. "See you in a bit, Emmitt."

With that, he hung up and started the car.

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Twenty minutes later, fully geared up, Leo strode into the restaurant they'd agreed to meet at.

Emmitt had arrived just moments before, having only just finished ordering their meal.

Once the waiter had left them in privacy, Leo finally removed his mask, hat, and glasses, placing them on the chair beside him.

"Dúde, every time we grab a bite, you're dressed like you're heading into battle. Doesn't that get exhausting?" Emmitt asked, pouring Leo a glass of iced tea as he spoke.

Leo took the glass and sipped the refreshing drink. "I'm used to it now. Thanks, Emmitt."

"I caught that reality show you were on, you know, the one that was live-streamed. You were genuinely funny, man." Emmitt leaned back, a casual smile on his handsome face.

Leo fiddled awkwardly with his curly hair atop his head. "You watch that kind of fluff?"

"I keep up with all your shows," Emmitt replied, his expression darkening for a moment as if a shadow had crossed his thoughts.

Catching the shift in mood, Leo glanced at Emmitt and said, "Honestly, Mirabella's got way more camera charm than I do. Most of the new followers I've got are there for her. It stings a bit, you know?"

Emmitt gave a noncommittal hum. "She is quite something." Whenever he saw his siblings interact on the stream with that look of trusting adoration in their eyes, Emmitt felt a pang of envy followed by a deep sense of regret. He, too, had the chance for that once, but he had destroyed it with his own hands.

"Anyway," Leo changed the subject, "did you want to talk about something specific today?"

Emmitt snapped out of his reverie and glanced at a box resting on a nearby chair but decided against picking it up. "Not really, just thought it's been a while since we had a meal and caught up."

"Right," Leo murmured, glancing out the window beside them. "Has Summer reached out to you recently?"

At the mention of Summer, Emmitt's face clouded over, and after a moment, he looked down, a touch of bitterness in his voice. "Not much contact, no. The sister he once cherished was now a constant reminder of how blind and prejudiced he had been.

"That's good," Leo went on. "Zach and I met her a few days back. I cleaned up some mess for her online, and she said she'd cut ties with us, that we'd be strangers from now on." As he spoke, Leo shot Emmitt a sidelong glance.

“Even though she wronged me, neither Zach nor I wanted to ruin her. But she agreed to our proposal so quickly, as if all those years meant nothing to her,” Leo said, his mouth twisting wryly

Emmitt looked up at his brother, fully aware of the underlying message. In the whole family, Emmitt was the one who always believed Summer, and it was often her offhand comments that drove him to push Mirabella further away, to the point of no return. Leo was reminding Emmitt that the family bond he valued so highly meant nothing in the eyes of the sister he’d loved.

Emmitt’s mouth opened, his voice rough. “I know.”

The conversation fell into silence, with both men lost in their thoughts and eyes downcast until the quiet was broken by the door opening and the waiter returning to serve their food.

Leo shielded his face with his hand until the waiter left, then dropped it again just as his phone began to ring from his pocket.

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Geo fished out his phone from his pocket, surprised to see that Nick was calling him. He quickly answered the call.

“Nick, what’s up? You never call out of the blue,” Leo said, curious and a bit amused.

Across the table, Emmitt looked up from his plate of a half-eaten burger and fries, his gaze shifting to Leo.

Nick, gripping his phone, sat hunched over his laptop, his eyes scanning an article on the latest news. “I just caught wind of the buzz online,” he mentioned casually.

Realization dawned on Leo. “Oh, that. It’s all water under the bridge now, Nick. No need to sweat it.”

“Be more careful next time,” Nick replied, his tone light. Though his face was still a shade too pale, he looked markedly healthier than before.

“Yeah, I got it,” Leo acknowledged with a nod.

Something seemed to click in Nick’s mind, prompting him to rise from his chair and push open the balcony door to step outside. “By the way, how are you feeling? Did you get a check-up recently? How’s the recovery going?”

Leo hadn’t shared the details of his health with Emmitt, so he responded vaguely. “I’m back to a hundred percent now.”

Nick paused, not probing further, and simply advised, “Even if you’re feeling better, try to avoid any rough sports for a while.”

Leo tapped his nose, a signature gesture when he was about to reveal something. “What I mean, Nick, is that I’m completely healed.”

Nick’s grip on the phone tightened. “What do you mean?”

Standing up, Leo walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window, lowering his voice slightly. “Mirabella hooked me up with this remedy, and after taking it, I was good as new. It’s quite the miracle.”

“A remedy from Mirabella?” Nick sounded puzzled

“Yeah, it’s a long story. I’m grabbing a bite with Emmitt right now. Do you want to say hi to him? Leo glanced back at Emmitt, a gentle offer in his tone.

“No need. You two enjoy your meal. Send Emmitt my regards,” Nick said, his voice calm and even.

Leo touched his nose again and replied, “Will do.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Nick said before hanging up.

Leo pocketed his phone and returned to the table. “That was Nick. He says hello.”

Emmitt, who seemed lost in thought, nodded silently, his appetite waning as he picked at his food with his

fork.

After finishing their meal in quiet, they didn’t linger for chitchat. Once they called the waiter over to settle the bill, they left the private dining room.

As they stepped out of the restaurant, Leo retrieved his car keys and turned to Emmitt. “Guess I’ll head out now, Emmitt.”

Emmitt gave a brief nod, his voice filled with genuine concern. “Take it easy on the road.”

“I will.” Leo waved and was about to head to the parking lot when a waiter from the restaurant hurried out

after them.

“Sir, you’ve left something behind.”

Leo stopped in his tracks and turned to see the waiter holding a beautifully wrapped box.

Instinctively, Leo looked at Emmitt.

Emmitt glanced at the box in the waiter’s hands, then quickly averted his eyes, his voice detached. “Your must be mistaken. That’s not ours.”

Without another glance at the waiter, Emmitt told Leo, "Let's go," and strode off toward the parking lot.

The waiter, puzzled, scratched her head. "But... I'm pretty sure this was on your table..." The private dining room had been cleaned right before their arrival; it couldn't belong to anyone else.

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Mirabella had just finished her dinner, a classic meatloaf with a side of creamy mashed potatoes, and was about to head upstairs to tackle the stack of homework her teacher had assigned. But a buzz from her phone stopped her in her tracks – a text from Wyatt. After a moment's thought, she didn't head upstairs but instead walked over to her dad, who was lounging in the living room with a freshly brewed cup of coffee. "Dad, I'm stepping out for a bit to walk off dinner," she said.

Her father, Shawn, looked up in mild surprise. His daughter usually retreated to her room after meals, so this sudden desire for a post-dinner stroll was out of character.

He glanced regretfully at his steaming cup, thinking he could've joined her for a walk around the neighborhood if he hadn't made coffee.

"Sure, sweetie, just be safe," Shawn said with a casual wave.

"Will do," Mirabella replied before heading out the door.

As she reached the neighboring villa's gate, Wyatt was already waiting, eagerly swinging the gate open for her. They walked into the villa, one after the other.

"Hey, kiddo, have you had dinner?" James called out from the dining room as he spotted Mirabella. He raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

The dining room was brightly lit, casting a glow on his strikingly handsome face, which appeared even more refined and aristocratic under the soft light.

Mirabella couldn't help but admire him for a moment before answering, "Yeah, I've eaten."

"That's a shame. I was hoping you'd try the chef's new recipe," James said, glancing at the sumptuous spread on the table.!

She shot him a look and said rather bluntly. "Then it doesn't seem like you were really sincere about inviting me over for dinner."

James' eyebrows arched playfully. "How about I sincerely invite you for dinner tomorrow evening? Would

that work?"

Mirabella waved it off as she walked towards the living room. "Nah, I'm swamped."

A smirk tugged at James' lips as he watched her settle onto the couch with easy grace. Shaking his head with amusement, he pulled out a chair and sat down to eat in peaceful silence.

Once seated, Mirabella pulled out her phone and opened a game, ready to dive into a team battle, but a notification from Messenger popped up. She tapped it open.

LIN: [Mirabella, Leo said that some medicine you gave him totally fixed him up?]

Ever the research fanatic, Nick couldn't shake off the words his brother had mentioned during their last call. So he decided to get straight to the point and messaged his sister directly.

Mirabella pondered for a couple of seconds before slowly typing back. [Leo wasn't that sick to begin with. He just had a hard-to-detect poisoning.]

Nick was even more surprised, [Poisoning? I didn't detect any poison when I examined him before. How could he have been poisoned?]

After a pause, he typed another message. [Was it a reaction to the medicines?]

If the toxin from Solace Stem was that easy to detect, it wouldn't be known as a high-grade poison. Mirabella, of course, wasn't going to spill the beans and simply replied. [Not really, maybe Leo just had some bad luck with a backstabber.]

Wyatt brought over a glass of water for Mirabella, and she looked up to thank him before diving back into her messaging.

Wyatt couldn't help but glance at her phone screen, noticing she was deeply engrossed in her conversation on Messenger. Touching his nose thoughtfully, he walked away.

Curtis sat with a laptop perched on his knees and a headset on, occasionally speaking into the mic.

Wyatt leaned against a nearby cabinet and asked, "Curtis, do you think you, as a computer hacker, could hack into someone's phone to see what they're chatting about?"

Curtis lifted one side of his headset and looked at Wyatt. "What did you say?"

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Wyatt flashed an awkward smile at Curtis, who hadn't heard his previous mumble and shook his head. "It's nothing."

Curtis glanced at him and put his headphones back on. "Don't bother me if it's nothing."

His voice dripped with annoyance.

Wyatt craned his neck to peek at Curtis' computer screen, which was covered with what looked like gibberish running amok, and asked, "What are you hacking into now?"

Curtis' noise-cancelling headphones, combined with the sounds already playing in his ears, meant he didn't hear Wyatt's question. With Curtis' dismissive attitude and incomprehensible chaos on the screen, Wyatt pursed his lips and walked back out of the den.

No sooner had he left than the number seven flashed on Curtis' computer screen. He sighed at the sight.

Still in seventh place.

He couldn't help but wonder what insane levels the top two hackers on the leaderboard had concocted that seemed impenetrable. Curtis took off his headphones and closed his laptop, setting it aside on the desk.

James had finished his dinner and wandered into the living room, where he caught a glimpse of Mirabella curled up lazily on the couch, engrossed in her phone. He paused briefly.

She was swathed in an oversized hoodie, which made her look rather petite. Strands of her long hair fell across her delicate profile, adding to the tranquility of the scene.

Feeling his gaze, Mirabella looked up, her eyebrows arching in question at the sight of James standing still.

James' eyes narrowed slightly, and he walked over, settling down not far from her. He draped his arm casually over the back of the couch, his posture relaxed as he glanced at the TV and asked nonchalantly. "Wanna watch something?"

Mirabella chuckled, and she tucked her phone into her jacket pocket. Shifting closer to James, she said, "No need for TV, but I do need to check your pulse."

"Sure."

James sat up a little, extending his hand toward her, his voice soft, "Then take a good look">

Mirabella glanced at him and then placed her fingers on his wrist. A few seconds later, she withdrew her hand, "You're just a bit stressed, nothing else."

Wyatt, who had been listening, asked, "What does that mean exactly?"

It sounded... well, a bit suggestive to him.

Wyatt glanced at his boss' lower abdomen. Noticing his gaze, James' face darkened instantly.

Mirabella raised an eyebrow, her response tinged with amusement, "Google it, and you'll find everything." Hearing this, Wyatt shook his head. It was probably something that would wound James' pride; it was best not to look it up. But Wyatt couldn't help but wonder how James ended up 'stressed?'

Pondering and stroking his chin, Wyatt asked again, "So, how do we fix this?"

James massaged his temples. "You could start by being quiet."

Wyatt immediately clamped his mouth shut.

Mirabella looked sideways at James, noting a faint blush on his ears. Was this man actually capable of

feeling shy?

As she caught James' eye, he covered his mouth and coughed. His features flushed a deeper shade of red, inexplicably enchanting.

Mirabella averted her gaze, slid her legs off the couch, slipped on her slippers, and stood up.

After a moment of thought, she said, "I'll come by tomorrow to give you another acupuncture session, but you'll need to prepare some herbs. I'll send you a list on Messenger."

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James cleared his throat with a hint of formality. "Alright."

should be heading out, Mirabella said, giving a casual wave as she stood up.

James rose to his feet, his movements measured and calm. "Let me walk you out."

No need, Mirabella replied with a shake of her head, already sidestepping him to make her exit.

Her slippers betrayed her, catching on the rug and causing her to stagger. Before she could regain her balance, a firm grip encircled her arm, steadying her. "Watch your step," came a deep voice from above.

Lifting her gaze, Mirabella locked eyes with James' penetrating stare. She paused momentarily, then straightened up. "Thanks."

James let go, the very picture of a gentleman. "No problem at all."

"Off I go," she declared, this time with noticeably more care. A few steps later, she ran into Curtis, who emerged clutching his laptop. He offered her a polite nod in greeting.

Mirabella returned the gesture, but as she passed by Curtis, a glimpse of his laptop screen made her hesitate. She turned back to look at his computer.

Curtis, sensing her scrutiny, looked up with a quizzical expression. "Ms. Mirabella?"

She pointed at his screen. "Is your computer frozen?"

The screen was a void of black, save for the flickering characters. Curtis' mouth twitched in a wry smile. Not everyone was a tech wizard, and he didn't bother to explain. Instead, he just nodded

noncommittally.

Mirabella withdrew her gaze, her expression neutral, and continued toward the front door.

After she had gone, Curtis, with a laptop in his arms, joined James in the living room.

James glanced at him. "Still trying to break the record?"

Curtis, eyes on the code running automatically on his screen, grunted in affirmation. "Whoever this 'Y' is, they're a coding genius. Their firewall is impenetrable."

Leaning back on the couch, James tapped his fingers idly on his knee. "If it were easy to crack, you would've taken the top spot by now."

Curtis looked down, stung by the truth in James' words, too embarrassed to admit that after weeks of trying, he was still clueless.

Wyatt, who had been glued to his phone, suddenly chimed in. "Just got a message. Donald's coming."

Curtis nearly dropped his laptop, his cheeks twitching. "Who did you say is coming?"

"Donald," Wyatt said, his face a picture of doom. "I hope he hasn't noticed his favorite tea is gone."

Curtis shivered and turned to his boss. "Boss, I request a transfer to Antarctica. Effective immediately."

Wyatt's lips twisted. "That's harsh."

James gave Curtis a fleeting look before turning to Wyatt. "When's he arriving?"

Wyatt shook his head, his voice low. "No exact time. Could be tomorrow, the day after, or next week."

James leaned back, rubbing his temples in frustration. "Keep an eye out."

"Understood."

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