

perfect.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/59389597) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/59389597>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Hololive (Virtual Streamers)
Relationship:	Cecilia Immergreen/Gigi Murin
Characters:	Cecilia Immergreen , Gigi Murin , Raora Panthera , Elizabeth Rose Bloodflame , Koseki Bijou , Fuwawa Abyssgard , Mococo Abyssgard , Nerissa Ravencroft , Shiori Novella , Ceres Fauna , Hakos Baelz , Nanashi Mumei , Ouro Kronii , IRyS (Hololive) , Tsukumo Sana
Additional Tags:	Enemies to Lovers , Alternate Universe - High School , Slow Burn , Eventual Romance , Hurt/Comfort , Bickering , Rivalry , Other Additional Tags to Be Added , Drama , Autofister , Fluff
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-10-02 Updated: 2025-07-05 Words: 213,953 Chapters: 13/?

perfect.

by [aboredweeb](#)

Summary

Cecilia Immergreen is who you would call a perfectionist—possessing perfect grades, a perfect image, and an unwavering determination to maintain her status as the best performing student in her year. However, her world would come crashing down when Gigi Murin, her carefree and lazy classmate, unexpectedly steals the top spot in the rankings.

Little Miss Perfect

Cecilia Immergreen is who you would call a perfectionist. Perfect grades, perfect image, you name it. Despite her young age, she was the gold standard of academic success. Teachers adored her, and her classmates admired her seemingly limitless ability to excel in every subject, from science to math. Every morning, she would arrive at school impeccably dressed, her fluffy pale-green hair flowing, a friendly smile plastered on her face. In fact, her confident and pretty appearance prompted many of her schoolmates to describe her as a perfect doll.

One particularly scorching Monday, Cecilia waited for her bus under the shade of the bus stop. The green haired girl was donned in her school attire and was ready to head off for school.

It has been only a few months since she began her first year at Cover High, and yet, she has already made a name for herself, carrying over her pristine reputation from Junior High. She was even named one of the class presidents less than a week into the first term.

“Cecilia!” a voice called out. Cecilia perked up upon hearing her name, turning to see who was calling for her. A girl with long pink hair ran up to the bus stop, panting as Cecilia went to greet her.

“Good morning Raora,” Cecilia says to her best friend. The pink haired girl grins, adjusting her backpack.

“Morning! Did I keep you waiting?” Raora Panthera asked as she and Cecilia sat down.

Cecilia shook her head, waving her hand. “No, no, of course not! I just got here too,” Cecilia replies with a smile.

“Thank goodness,” Raora sighed, before bringing out her phone, “Oh, by the way, wanna see my art assignment?”

Raora reached into her bag before pulling out the sheet of paper that was her assignment. Last week, the girls’ art teacher assigned them homework to do over the weekend. Their task was to paint up a landscape while using the color contrast techniques she had taught them previously.

Fortunately for Raora, she was a one-of-a-kind artist, whose skills surpassed those of even some professional artists. So when Raora brought out her assignment for Cecilia to look at, the perfectionist was not surprised in the least to see that her friend's artwork was as immaculate as always.

“It's beautiful, Raora. How long did it take you to do this?” Cecilia exclaims, fawning over the art piece. Raora puts on a proud expression, placing her hands on her hips dramatically.

“Oh, you know... under an hour,” the artist boasts flamboyantly, before breaking and giggling along with Cecilia.

“Alright, alright, Da Vinci. You're a genius,” Cecilia smiles as she reaches into her own bag, pulling out her own assignment. Although it was not as stunning as Raora's, it was still pretty decent, and it was evident the perfectionist put in a lot of effort into the work she did.

“Looks good,” Raora praises as she scans her best friend's work, “You'd definitely get an A for this.”

Cecilia chuckled, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Hehe, when have I not gotten an A for anything?” Cecilia boasts jokingly.

“You do have a point,” Raora replied, putting her artwork back into her bag before smirking, “But when was the last time you got an A for PE?”

Wincing a little, Cecilia scoffs. “Okay, you got me there,” Cecilia mutters, “But what I mean is, when have I not gotten an A in anything *useful*?”

“Exercise is important,” Raora pointed out.

“I go on strolls from time to time,” Cecilia shot back.

“Not sure if that really counts,” Raora remarked.

Strangely enough, despite excelling in everything academic-related, Cecilia always found Physical Education (and exercise as a whole) to be an impossible hurdle to overcome. It wasn't as if she didn't try her best at it. She tries her best at everything. But no matter how much she tried, she never really could score anything past a passing grade for PE.

At last, the bus arrived, rumbling to a stop in front of them. “Finally,” Raora said, standing up and adjusting her bag, “Let's get going.”

Cecilia nodded and followed her friend onto the bus. They found seats together, and Cecilia gazed out the window as the bus started moving, the familiar sights of their town blurring past. “Your art really is amazing,” Cecilia sighed, glancing at Raora, “I wish I could paint like you.”

Raora smiled softly. “You're already incredible at so many things, Cecilia. Your art is nothing to scoff at. I'm sure you'll master it soon,” Raora winked. Cecilia nodded, feeling a mix of admiration and determination. She appreciated Raora's encouragement, even if it highlighted the gap she felt between their skills in art.

As they made their way to school, she made a mental note to keep pushing herself in her art skills. She couldn't help it. Deep down inside, Cecilia harbored a competitive spirit, a drive that wouldn't let her settle for anything less than perfect. Whatever it was, she had to excel. It was an unspoken pressure she placed on herself, one that never truly went away, no matter how many accolades or perfect grades she earned.

Aside from meeting and greeting a few of their classmates who boarded the bus, the rest of the trip to school was uneventful. Eventually, the bus screeched to a halt in front of Cover High School. The many students in the bus proceeded to shuffle out steadily, their chatter filling the air as they stepped onto the bustling school grounds.

The main courtyard was already lively with students either hurrying to their classes or lingering in small groups, catching up on the latest gossip or cramming for their first class. Meanwhile, the familiar sounds of shoes against the pavement, lockers slamming shut, and distant laughter echoed throughout.

Cecilia and Raora stepped off the bus and joined the crowd as the school's towering building casting long shadows over the courtyard. Banners for upcoming school events hung from the walls, and the faint smell of freshly cut grass mixed with the scent of coffee from the nearby café where older students gathered before the bell rang.

"Looks like another busy day," Raora muttered, glancing around as they navigated through the sea of students.

Cecilia nodded, adjusting her bag as they passed by a group from the computer club discussing their next project. Up ahead, the front gates to the school welcomed the incoming swarm of students inside.

"Good morning, ladies," a soothing British voice greeted Raora and Cecilia. The duo turned around to face Elizabeth Rose Bloodflame, a tall scarlet haired student, who was the other class president in the girls' class.

"Morning' Liz," Cecilia and Raora greeted the tall girl, who smiled at them.

"First period is in Art Room 5, don't forget it," Elizabeth winked, as she continued walking past the pair.

"She's such a charmer, isn't she?" Raora noted, with admiration in her eyes, "She's in our year and yet she's so... so..."

"Mature, tall, beautiful, soothing..." Cecilia lists, counting the amount of adjectives she could come up with on one hand.

"Yeah! No wonder she's a class president," Raora remarks as they enter the first years' classroom block.

Cecilia and Raora walked down the corridor toward their first class, the faint humming of ceiling lights overhead harmonising with the energetic conversations around them.

Finally, after some difficulty navigating through the crowd, they reached their classroom's entrance. A few students were already seated, their heads bent over books or phones. The smell of textbooks lingered in the air, along with the faint scent of sweets someone had sneaked in.

The classroom itself was as normal as classrooms go. Rows of desks arranged in neat lines, a large whiteboard at the front with the day's date scribbled in blue marker. Posters of historical figures and motivational quotes adorned the walls, while the teacher's desk was cluttered with papers and worksheets.

Raora made her way to her seat near the front, dropping her bag on the desk with a thud. "Let's get our art stuff and head to the art room. I can't wait to show Miss Candace my work," she said, as she began unpacking her bag. When she received no reply from her best friend, Raora looked around, realizing Cecilia was not behind her.

Cecilia had paused in the middle of the room, her sights focused on a girl with dirty blonde hair styled in pigtails. The blonde seemed to be scribbling frantically on a piece of paper, most likely rushing to finish her art assignment.

"Cecilia?" Raora called out, her voice breaking through her friend's hyperfixation on the girl.

Cecilia blinked and turned her head. "Give me a sec, Raora," Cecilia muttered, making her way over to the blonde's desk, "I think Gigi's rushing her homework again."

Raora glanced at the pigtailed girl, Gigi, then back to Cecilia. "Are you going to pick a fight with her again?" Raora asked, smirking a little, as she clutched her sketchpad and pencils into her arms, "You know that never works... eh, Cecilia?"

The artist spun around, only to realize Cecilia had already started marching towards Gigi's desk.

Although Cecilia wasn't one to get angry often, Gigi Murin had a way of getting under her skin. The girl was always rushing her homework or assignments at the very last minute, seemingly without a care in the world. As class president, Cecilia took her responsibilities seriously, and watching someone like Gigi constantly cut corners grated on her.

Their interactions over the past few months since school began had mostly consisted of Cecilia reminding Gigi about deadlines and Gigi offering a casual shrug in response. Sometimes, these exchanges would even escalate into full blown arguing and squabbling. It was a routine that frustrated Cecilia to no end, even if Gigi never seemed to notice.

"Gigi," Cecilia says, only for the blonde to ignore her. The perfectionist's eye twitched a little, before she cleared her throat loudly. Upon noticing Cecilia at Gigi's desk, the students that were in the class immediately braced themselves for the upcoming verbal jousting.

"Gigi *Murin*," Cecilia says through gritted teeth, emphasizing the blonde's last name.

The pigtailed girl's eyes darted towards Cecilia before shooting back towards her assignment. "What's up?" Gigi replies in a nonchalant manner, her tone casual as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Cecilia crossed her arms, her patience wearing thin. "You know exactly what's up. That art assignment is due in ten minutes, and you're just now finishing it?" Cecilia snapped, as Gigi

chuckled.

“Correction: I just *started doing* it,” Gigi grinned, irritating Cecilia further.

“You- Ugh, do you have no sense of responsibility?” Cecilia huffed, her fingers tightening around her arms, “This isn’t a joke, Gigi. You’ll fail if you leave things to the last minute!”

Gigi leaned back in her chair, unfazed. “Relax, *doll*. I’ll finish it in time. I always do,” Gigi replies, her smile slowly drooping.

“Don’t call me a doll!” Cecilia retorted, her voice rising slightly, “And the point is, you can’t keep winging it like this. You’re in high school now, you need to take things seriously.”

Gigi shrugged as she narrowed her eyes. “And yet, here I am, still managing just fine,” she twirled her pencil in her fingers lazily, “Maybe you should stop worrying so much, Cecilia. You’ll get wrinkles.”

Cecilia’s jaw clenched, her frustration bubbling over. “This isn’t about me!”

Their classmates watched them silently, some of them enjoying the show, some of them exchanging glances as the tension in the room grew. It was always a spectacle when Cecilia and Gigi clashed, and today seemed no different.

“C’mon, don’t be mad... you’re class president!” Gigi continued, leaning back with a smug grin, “Shouldn’t you be setting an example of patience and understanding?”

Cecilia’s eye twitched again. “I *am* setting an example. By trying to make sure you don’t completely mess up your grades!” Cecilia retorted.

Gigi waved a dismissive hand, turning back to her half-finished assignment. “You’re too worked up over this. Chill, okay? I’ve got it under control,” Gigi sighs, twirling her pencil.

“Under control?” Cecilia repeated, incredulous, “You haven’t even started shading yet!”

As the argument escalated, Raora shot Cecilia a glance from across the room, giving her a small shake of the head. But Cecilia was already too far in, her frustration fueling every word.

“You just don’t care about anything, do you?” Cecilia pressed, her voice tight. Gigi glanced up again, her smile fading just slightly.

“It’s not that I don’t care. I just don’t see the point in stressing over every little thing like you do,” Gigi snapped back, her voice rising as well. The pair glared at each other, tensions clearly having risen to a near breaking point.

“Woah! Look at the time! Come on Cecilia, let’s head to the art room,” Raora chimed in to deescalate the situation, grabbing Cecilia’s arm, before smiling and winking at Gigi, “You should finish that up quickly, Gigi.”

“Aye aye,” Gigi replies, saluting, before she continues scribbling.

As they made their way toward the door, Cecilia shot one last glare at Gigi over her shoulder. “You better turn that in on time,” she called out, frustration still simmering.

“Oh, relax!” Gigi replied, her tone light and carefree.

Raora nudged Cecilia gently, her voice low. “You’re going to give yourself a headache if you keep this up. Just let her be,” the pink haired girl advises the perfectionist.

Cecilia sighed, as she grabbed her materials, trying to shake off her annoyance. “I just can’t stand how careless she is. It’s like she doesn’t even try,” Cecilia huffs as they walk out of the classroom.

Raora shrugged. “Maybe she has her own way of doing things. Not everyone is as uptight as you,” Raora suggests.

“Uptight?” Cecilia repeated, incredulous, “I’m trying to help her but all she does is make stupid jokes and-”

“Maybe she doesn’t want your help,” Raora replied, a hint of amusement in her voice, “By the way, you’re funny when you’re all flustered, you know that?”

As they stepped into the art room, the atmosphere shifted. The walls were lined with vibrant artworks, and the air was filled with the buzzing sounds of the projector. Cecilia took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind of Gigi’s nonchalance.

“Let’s just focus on the day ahead, okay?” Raora suggested, pulling out her sketchpad and flipping to a fresh page.

Cecilia nodded, though her mind kept wandering back to Gigi. “Fine, but I really hope she gets her act together before it’s too late,” Cecilia mumbles as more of their classmates begin streaming into the room.

A few minutes later, their art teacher, Ms. Candace, began marking the attendance sheet. Almost everybody seemed to be present... except two students.

“Hm, has anyone seen Miss Koseki and Miss Murin?” Ms. Candace asked the class.

“They’re present today ma’am. I saw them in the hallways this morning,” Elizabeth replies, raising her hand, “Although... I’m not sure where they could be at the moment.”

Cecilia glances at the clock. In a few more seconds, the bell would ring, indicating the start of the first lesson. If Gigi and her friend Koseki Bijou did not show up after the bell rings, they would be considered late.

On one hand, Cecilia hoped that the pair would make it for class as Ms. Candace was a really nice teacher who doesn't deserve to be stressed out over a couple of rogue students. On the other hand, however, a part of Cecilia hoped that Gigi would come in late and face the consequences of her actions.

Miraculously, the two missing students dashed into the room right before the bell sounded. “Good morning Miss!” Gigi panted as she supported Bijou, who was leaning over in exhaustion.

“You two were almost late,” Ms. Candace notes as she sighs as the new arrivals, “May I know why?”

“Sorry, Miss!” Bijou apologized, still catching her breath.

“Yeah, our bad, Miss... See, we, uh, got lost,” Gigi explains awkwardly, as she put on an ashamed expression. Bijou nodded weakly beside her, a little too out of breath to say anything coherent.

Ms. Candace sighed, though it was clear from her expression that she wasn’t particularly surprised or convinced by their excuse. “Please try to be more punctual next time,” she said, gesturing for them to take their seats.

As Gigi and Bijou made their way to their desks, Cecilia shot a glance in their direction, her lips pressed into a thin line as she shook her head in disapproval.

Gigi caught her gaze and gave a cheeky wave before plopping herself down onto her chair. Cecilia huffed quietly and turned back to her work, trying not to let the irritation linger.

Soon enough, the art lesson began with Ms. Candace instructing the class to hand in their completed assignments. As students approached her desk, she meticulously reviewed each piece.

When Raora stepped up, Ms. Candace’s expression softened into a smile. “Excellent work, Raora,” she said, admiring the intricate detail, “You’ve truly outdone yourself once again.”

“Thank you, Miss Candace” Raora replied, pleased, before heading back to her seat. Next up was Gigi. She placed her assignment on the desk with a casual grin.

Ms. Candace raised an eyebrow as she looked over the rushed lines and barely finished sections. “Gigi, this looks like it was done in a hurry,” she remarked, looking at the hastily done artwork.

Gigi chuckled, unfazed. “You know me, Miss, I work best under pressure,” the blonde quipped, earning her a sigh from her teacher. Ms. Candace shook her head slightly as she added Gigi's work to the pile of assignments on the table.

“That may be, but I hope you could hand in something less rushed next time,” Ms. Candace insisted firmly.

“Will do,” Gigi replied, flashing a thumbs-up before returning to her seat, clearly not worried. As the rest of the class handed in their assignments, Ms. Candace continued to offer words of praise or critique.

With all the assignments collected, Ms. Candace moved on to the next part of the lesson. “Now that your assignments are in, let’s talk about technique,” she said, writing a few key

terms on the board, “Today, we’ll focus on light and shadow and how to add depth and dimension to your work.”

The class shifted in their seats, some eagerly grabbing their sketchpads while others, like Gigi, leaned back with a casual expression, seemingly disinterested.

Ms. Candace demonstrated a few examples on the board, explaining how simple shading could bring life to an otherwise flat piece of art. She glanced around the room, making sure everyone was paying attention. Most students scribbled notes, while a few began testing out shading techniques in their sketchpads.

Cecilia, as always, was fully engaged, her pencil moving swiftly as she tried to replicate the shading Ms. Candace demonstrated. Raora, seated beside her, was already sketching out ideas for their next assignment, not even breaking a sweat while doing so.

Across the room, Gigi half-heartedly drew on the edge of her paper, her eyes wandering around the room. Even though her casual demeanor never changed, there was something deliberate about the quick strokes she made on her sketchpad, though it seemed like she wasn’t fully paying attention.

Ms. Candace continued walking around the room, stopping now and then to give feedback. “Remember, subtle changes in light can make a huge difference,” she reminded them, moving from desk to desk, “Don’t be afraid to experiment with contrast.”

Cecilia held up her drawing of an orange, groaning upon seeing the results. The shading didn’t seem to have the depth or contrast she wanted. Despite her best efforts, the transitions between light and shadow appeared flat, lacking the dimension Ms. Candace had been emphasizing. “I don’t get it,” she muttered, frustrated, “It just looks... dull.”

Raora glanced over from her own sketch, noticing Cecilia’s struggle. “Let me see,” she said, leaning in to get a better look. “You’ve got the basics down, but you need to push the contrast more. See here?” Raora says, pointing at a section of Cecilia’s drawing, “The shadows should be darker, and you can blend the light more gradually.”

Cecilia frowned, examining her work closely. “I thought I was doing that,” the perfectionist muttered. Raora gave her a reassuring smile.

“You’re close, but don’t be afraid to go a little bolder. Try adding more pressure to your pencil in the darker areas, and use lighter strokes to blend out the highlights,” Raora explains, demonstrating what she was talking about on her own sketchpad as Cecilia watched with intense focus.

With Raora’s guidance, Cecilia picked up her pencil again and carefully followed her advice. Bit by bit, the depth in her shading started to improve, and the contrast became more noticeable. She could feel the frustration slowly lifting as the piece began to take shape the way she envisioned.

“Better?” Raora asked, watching Cecilia work.

“Yeah, much better,” Cecilia replied, a small smile tugging at her lips, “Thanks, Raora. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

One hour later, the school bell rang, signaling the end of the lesson. The sound echoed through the room as students began packing up their materials, the quiet hum of chatter echoing around the room as they prepared to move to their next class.

Cecilia glanced down at her work, feeling more satisfied than she had at the start of the lesson. The shading had come together nicely, thanks to Raora's help, and while it wasn't perfect, it was a noticeable improvement.

“Not bad,” Raora commented, nudging Cecilia's arm playfully as she stuffed her sketchbook into her bag, “See? Told you you could do it.”

Cecilia smirked. “Yeah, yeah. I'll admit it helped,” the perfectionist chuckles, as she began gathering her own supplies.

As they headed toward the door, Gigi, Bijou and their friend Shiori Novella were already making a quick exit, Gigi tossing her bag over her shoulder with her usual carefree attitude. Cecilia caught a glimpse of her rushed work still sitting on the drying rack, and despite herself, she couldn't help but wonder how Gigi always seemed so relaxed about everything, as if nothing ever fazed her.

Raora noticed Cecilia's gaze lingering on Gigi and chuckled. “She never changes, huh?” Raora smiles as she reads Cecilia's scrunched expression.

“Yeah,” Cecilia muttered, shaking her head, “But one day, it's going to catch up to her.”

After returning to their classroom, the students settled into their seats as the homeroom period began. Ms. Lee, their homeroom teacher, stood at the front of the classroom with a stack of papers in her hand. Her authoritative voice quieted the murmurs in the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” Ms. Lee started, adjusting her glasses as she glanced around the room, “I hope you're all settling into the semester well because it's about to get a little more serious. I have your first semester test schedules here. The papers start in two weeks, so I suggest you begin preparing if you haven't already.”

A few groans echoed through the class, while others exchanged nervous glances. Cecilia sat up straighter, already feeling excited for the tests ahead.

“Cecilia, Elizabeth, could you two please help me pass these out?” Ms. Lee asked the class presidents, as she divided the stack of schedules into two.

“Of course, Miss Lee,” Cecilia replied, rising from her seat. Elizabeth, the other class president, nodded and joined Cecilia at the front, taking her share of the schedules. They moved through the classroom, systematically distributing the papers.

As Cecilia reached Gigi's desk, the blonde was doodling absentmindedly in her notebook, barely noticing Cecilia approach her. “Gigi,” Cecilia said, offering the schedule. Gigi glanced

up, a lazy grin spreading across her face.

“Are you ready for this?” Cecilia asked, her tone edged with challenge.

Gigi smirked, leaning back in her chair. “Guess I’ll just wing it,” she replied with a casual shrug.

Cecilia huffed softly, resisting the urge to comment further as she handed over the paper. She couldn’t fathom how someone could be so carefree about something as crucial as exams.

After Cecilia and Elizabeth finished handing out the schedules, they returned to their seats. Ms. Lee reminded the class to review the schedules carefully and plan their study time. The bell rang soon after, and students began packing up, their chatter gradually increasing as they headed off for lunch.

“Chemistry, Algebra, History... we really have our work cut out for us, huh?” Raora whined sadly as she and Cecilia made their way to the cafeteria. Cecilia opened up her purse, carefully counting the allowance she had for the week.

“Don’t worry, Raora. We have more than enough time, there isn’t much content to cover...” Cecilia reassured her friend as she tucked her wallet back into her school blazer, “Plus, I can help you prepare for the tests. I have to return the favor for all the help you gave me with art, after all.”

Raora smiled, her mood brightening slightly. “Yeah, I guess it’s only fair. You’re a lifesaver,” Raora chuckles.

As they entered the cafeteria, the noise level increased, the area was filled with rowdiness and laughter. Cecilia scanned the room for an empty table, spotting one in the corner near the windows. “Let’s sit over there,” she suggested, pointing toward it.

They made their way to the table and set their bags down. Raora looked around at the food stalls open that day. “I’m feeling... Italian food today,” she said, her brow furrowing slightly.

Cecilia giggles. “You’re a real patriot aren’t you?” Cecilia says to her Italian friend. Raora shrugs.

“What can I say? I can’t live without pasta,” the artist winked, as she stood up to order her meal.

“Now you’re making me crave some too,” Cecilia replied, whipping out her purse, “Come on, let’s join the queue before it gets too long.”

After ordering their pasta, Raora and Cecilia returned to their table, where a few of their classmates were already eating. “Cecilia! Raora! Over here!” two cutesy voices called out. The Abyssgard twins waved at the duo, who promptly joined the twins at the table.

“Good morning, girls,” Cecilia greeted the twins as she and Raora sat down, “What are you guys having?”

Fuwawa Abyssgard presented two lunch boxes containing a generous portion of omelets and rice. “We’re having some leftover omurice from last night,” Mococo Abyssgard announced happily, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Cecilia and Raora exchanged impressed glances, their mouths watering at the sight. “It looks delicious,” Raora said, leaning in to get a better look at the colorful meal, “You always have the best lunches!”

“Thanks! Mama made it,” Fuwawa said with a bright smile, “She knows how much we love omurice.”

Cecilia couldn't help but giggle at the twins' adorable charm and the way they effortlessly brighten the atmosphere around them. “I’m jealous! My lunch isn’t nearly as interesting,” Cecilia admitted, glancing at her plain pasta.

“Oh, but your pasta looks nice too!” Mococo chimed in, her tone encouraging, “What kind is it?”

“It’s just regular spaghetti, but I think I told the lunch lady to add some extra cheese to make it less boring,” Cecilia replied, shrugging modestly.

“Ooh, good idea!” Fuwawa said, before her eyes shone, “Hey, you should try sharing a bite of our omurice! It’s so fluffy and flavorful!”

“Definitely! I’d love to!” Raora added, eager to taste the twins' meal.

The four of them exchanged bites, as they sampled each other’s lunches. Fuwawa grinned as Cecilia took a bite of the omurice. “See? Isn’t it amazing?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Cecilia nodded, her mouth full. “Wow, this is really good! Your mom is a great cook!” the perfectionist notes as she savored every bite.

Mococo nods enthusiastically. “She should try her desserts. She makes the greatest donuts ever!” Mococo says.

The rest of lunch went by relatively quickly, with the group exchanging stories about their favorite meals and plans for the weekend. As the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, Cecilia gathered her things and stood up.

“Ready for History?” Cecilia asked her best friend, glancing at her watch.

“Not really, but we have to go,” Raora replied with a sigh, shouldering her bag.

The two made their way to the classroom, where their history teacher was already setting up the projector. “Find a seat, everyone!” he called out as students shuffled in.

Cecilia took her usual spot near the front, pulling out her notebook and pen. The teacher cleared his throat, as he began writing on the board. “Today, we’re diving into the start of the

first World War,” he announced, projecting a slide on the board that displayed a long list of dates and figures.

The lesson quickly took on a dry tone as their teacher began detailing the complexities of political conflicts in the 1900s, his voice steady but monotonous. Cecilia jotted down notes, the relentless stream of facts about historical events not phasing her in the slightest

As the minutes dragged on, students in the classroom felt their minds wandering despite their best efforts to stay awake. Cecilia glanced around the room, noticing a few classmates stifling yawns as their teacher continued his class. One of the students who weren't paying attention was Gigi, who was already out cold. Cecilia narrowed her eyes, glaring at the sleeping girl as though staring hard enough would wake her up.

Behind her, Raora was also dozing off. Cecilia turned around, dropping a box of mints into her friend's palm. “Hey now, don't fall asleep. We're learning some really important stuff right now,” Cecilia scolded her friend, “I guarantee you it's coming out for the test.”

Raora yawned softly, before opening up the box of mints. “Mm? Oh, right. Thanks,” the pink haired girl uttered, still in a daze as she popped three small mints into her mouth, “I'm sorry Cecilia, but History is simply the most boring subject there is.”

“I think it's intriguing,” Cecilia replies, before slowly turning back to the front, “Don't worry Raora, there's only forty minutes left.”

The artist nodded, slapping herself lightly as she sat up straight.

What felt like an eternity soon passed as the bell signifying the end of History rang. The sound echoed through the classroom, jolting several students back to attention. “Remember to review the notes from this lesson. This topic might come back to haunt you during the semester test,” their teacher called out as the class began to pack up, “Cecilia, Elizabeth, could you two be a dear and distribute the practice tests?”

Cecilia quickly nodded, rushing over to retrieve the marked papers with Elizabeth. “Well done Cecilia,” Elizabeth praised the perfectionist, placing her practice paper onto her desk, “You got a perfect grade.”

Beaming, Cecilia took a quick glance at her worksheet. Sure enough, a big red ‘A+’ graced the top corner of the first page with an additional comment from their teacher stating ‘*Excellent work.*’

“Thanks Elizabeth,” Cecilia grins, flipping through her stack of papers to see if Elizabeth’s worksheet was in her pile.

“Oh, look, you did really well too!” Cecilia exclaims, showing Elizabeth the ‘A+’ written on her paper.

“That's great!” Elizabeth smiles, before lowering her voice, “We better give these papers out quick though; we don't want to hold anyone back.”

Cecilia nodded, her focus shifting back to the task at hand. “Right, let’s get started.”

Cecilia moved around the classroom, passing out the practice papers to their classmates, offering a quick word of encouragement or congratulations from time to time. As Cecilia handed a paper to a student in the back, she caught sight of Gigi, who was casually chatting with Koseki Bijou.

“Bijou, Gigi,” Cecilia says, extending the pair's worksheets towards them.

Gigi took it with a playful grin, eyes glistening at her score. “Would you look at that?! I got a D+!” Gigi notes happily, showing her work to Bijou proudly, “Man, I thought I would flunk that one.”

Bijou chuckled as she showed her own paper, which was graded a ‘B+’. “Lucky you! You only started doing it like fifteen minutes before the deadline didn't you?” Bijou recalled as Gigi nodded proudly.

“You can definitely tell by *that* handwriting,” Cecilia smirks, causing Gigi’s eyes to shoot towards her.

“You got something to say, *doll*?” Gigi asked, folding her arms as Cecilia glared at her.

“Don't call me-” Cecilia snapped before taking a deep breath, “What I meant was, your work looks like it was written in a rush, and it’s kind of hard to read.”

Gigi shrugged, unfazed. “But I got the job done, didn't I?” she shot back, a cocky smile spreading across her face, “Besides, I passed! What's the big deal here?”

“Neatness counts for something, you know,” Cecilia replied, her patience thinning again, “Especially when you’re a student and should care about how your work looks.”

“Chill out, Cecilia,” Gigi retorted, waving her hand dismissively, “I'm not trying to win a calligraphy contest or anything.”

Bijou giggled at their banter, clearly entertained by the back-and-forth. “Hey prez, you should probably give out the remaining papers,” she warned with a grin, before gesturing at the clock, “Our next class is starting soon.”

Sighing, Cecilia nods before shooting Gigi a warning look, but the blonde just grinned wider. “Alright, but I’m warning you. You’ll fail if you keep up with that attitude of yours,” Cecilia huffed, as Gigi rolled her eyes.

“Love you too, doll,” Gigi replies, blowing a kiss towards the green haired girl. Cecilia groaned in response before swiftly handing out the rest of the papers.

That afternoon after school, Cecilia was seated next to Raora on the bus home, frustration etched across her face. She leaned her head against the window, watching the world blur by.

"I can't believe Gigi sometimes," she began, running a hand through her hair as if trying to smooth out her thoughts, "Every time I try to remind her about her bad habits, it's like I'm talking to a wall. I swear she doesn't listen to a word I say!"

Raora chuckled softly, glancing up from her sketchbook. These rant sessions about Gigi have become somewhat of a regular occurrence. "You've mentioned this a few times now," Raora says, smiling at Cecilia, "Are you sure you're not just getting worked up over nothing?"

"I'm not!" Cecilia huffed, crossing her arms tightly as she turned to face her friend, "It's just—she's so carefree about everything. It's infuriating! I mean, how can she just shrug off a *D+* like it's nothing? It's like she doesn't care about her future or anything."

"Maybe she just doesn't stress over grades as much as you do," Raora replied, trying to keep her tone light, "You've got to admit that you take school more seriously than most people do."

"I get that, but she's in our class, and I'm supposed to be the class president! I feel like I should at least try to help her, but it's like she doesn't care!" Cecilia sighed, shaking her head in disbelief, "It's become a chore, you know? Every time I see her, it's just endless reminders and arguments. I feel like a broken record."

Raora raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile creeping onto her face. "You could also just... *not* do that?" Raora giggled.

"I can't help it," Cecilia leaned back, her frustration bubbling up again, "Like today, she was all smug about her *D+*, acting like it was an accomplishment. I don't get it! Does she not realize what grades like that will do to her future?"

"Maybe she doesn't feel the pressure like you do. I mean, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. What if her strengths aren't academics focused?" Raora suggested, her voice gentle.

"Hmm," Cecilia muttered, staring out the window as the scenery whizzed by, "Sometimes I wonder how she even passed the entrance exams."

"Just don't let it drive you crazy. You can't 'fix' everyone, Cecilia," Raora said lightly, closing her sketchbook with a soft thud.

"Now that's an idea," Cecilia said, slowly calming her mind down.

Raora nodded enthusiastically. "See? Maybe you're just thinking about this a little too deeply," Raora says.

Cecilia smiled a little, her spirits lifting as the bus rattled on. "Thanks, Raora. I guess I just needed to vent. You always know how to help me sort through my thoughts," the green haired girl sighs, resting her head against the window of the vehicle.

Raora grinned, giving Cecilia a playful nudge. "What are best friends for? Just remember to pay me back via some tutoring," Raora reminds her friend slyly.

"Yeah, yeah," Cecilia replies, her mood slowly improving.

The three weeks leading up to the semester tests was a whirlwind of activity. Cecilia completely threw herself into her studies, determined to maintain her perfect record. Her schedule was filled with pomodoros, study sessions and endless notes as she prepared for the upcoming exams.

On top of her studies, she had her class president duties to juggle, but she managed to stay organized, keeping everything on track. As promised, Cecilia also spent a lot of time being tutored by Raora in art, and with a lot of effort, the perfectionist managed to make big improvements in her skills. In return, she helped out Raora for subjects the latter struggled with, patiently helping her understand difficult concepts better.

Meanwhile, Gigi continued to live her laid-back lifestyle, seemingly unfazed by the impending tests. Cecilia often caught glimpses of her during lunch, her eyes glued to her phone as she played Roblox or League of Legends with her friends.

It was a common sight. Gigi would laugh and chat animatedly, completely immersed in her game while the rest of the class focused on preparing for the exams. Cecilia would sometimes feel a twinge of annoyance as she watched Gigi's carefree attitude, especially when she overheard her boasting about her latest in-game achievements.

Every time Cecilia attempted to remind Gigi about their assignments or the importance of studying, Gigi would just shrug it off with a playful grin. "*I've got this! What's the worst that could happen?*" she'd say, brushing her off like it was no big deal. This attitude frustrated Cecilia to no end, as she simply couldn't comprehend how Gigi could treat school so lightly.

As the weeks passed, Cecilia made it a point to push herself immensely, often finding herself in the library surrounded by piles of textbooks. Raora would join her sometimes, as did the Abyssgard twins and Elizabeth.

Despite her hyperfocused mindset, Cecilia couldn't help but think of Gigi at times, and wondered why the blonde seemed so stress-free. The other students had already started discussing their upcoming tests, forming study groups and sharing tips, while Gigi remained blissfully ignorant of the growing pressure. Cecilia would hear snippets of Gigi's conversations with Bijou about game updates or funny TikTok videos, and she couldn't help but feel exasperated.

One day, as Cecilia passed by Gigi's usual hangout spot in the cafeteria, she overheard Gigi animatedly recounting a recent game win, the laughter and excitement in her voice ticking off the perfectionist. Cecilia sighed and continued on her way, shaking her head slightly.

The test dates drew closer, and as the pressure mounted, Cecilia noticed more students getting serious about their studies. Gigi, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in her lazy environment. Upon Raora's suggestion, Cecilia even (reluctantly) tried to invite Gigi to a study group, hoping that perhaps a change of environment would help her focus. However, Gigi simply replied, "Nah, I'm good. I work better under pressure."

As the semester tests loomed ever closer, Cecilia eventually decided to push thoughts of Gigi out of her head. The days ticked by slowly, and eventually, it was time for the semester tests.

The first day of the semester tests arrived, and the students of class 1-2 sat in neat rows, their pens poised over their papers as they waited for the signal to begin. Cecilia sat near the front, her focus completely on the test in front of her. The room was silent, save for the occasional scratch of pens and the shuffling of paper as students worked through the questions.

Every now and then, as Cecilia finished a section or paused to think, her eyes would drift towards Gigi, who was sitting a few rows behind her. To her surprise, Gigi didn't seem the least bit fazed by the situation. She scribbled away on her test paper, her expression calm and almost carefree, as if this were just another casual day at school.

Cecilia furrowed her brow, returning her attention to the test. How could she be so relaxed? It made no sense to Cecilia. Gigi hadn't seemed to study much at all in the lead-up to the exams, yet here she was, handling the test like it was nothing.

The hours passed slowly, with the clock ticking in the background. Cecilia answered each question carefully, making sure she didn't skip over anything. She glanced around the room occasionally, noticing the tension on her classmates' faces as they worked through their papers. But whenever she looked at Gigi, the blonde girl seemed unfazed, working at her own steady pace.

By the time the invigilator announced that there were only five minutes left, most students began reviewing their work frantically. Cecilia scanned through her answers, making small corrections where necessary. She peeked one last time at Gigi, half-expecting her to be rushing through the final questions. Instead, Gigi leaned back in her chair, stretching casually, eyes closed as she set her pen down well before the time was up.

Cecilia shook her head slightly, unable to believe what she was seeing. The test was almost over, and Gigi didn't even seem the slightest bit worried. Did she perhaps... study? No, that's impossible, Cecilia told herself.

The next two weeks of exams were a blur of early mornings and late-night study sessions. Every day brought a new subject: Chemistry, Algebra, History, English, and more. Cecilia approached each test with the same determined focus, walking into the exam hall with her notes memorized and strategies planned.

In the classrooms, students huddled over their desks, faces furrowed in concentration. The air felt heavy with the stress of the exams, the sound of pencils scratching furiously against paper becoming a familiar, almost comforting sound. Cecilia was always one of the first

students to finish, neatly organizing her papers before handing them in, her routine meticulous and precise.

Meanwhile, Raora stayed by her side during breaks, the two of them reviewing material together whenever they had a spare moment. Between tests, the cafeteria and hallways echoed with students frantically discussing answers and comparing notes, but Cecilia tried to tune it all out, moving from one subject to the next with confidence.

The days seemed to stretch endlessly, yet one by one, the exams passed by. Every classroom seemed to have the same atmosphere: the ticking of the clock, the shuffle of papers, and the quiet murmur of students packing up their bags after another grueling test. Each night, Cecilia returned home and prepared for the next day, her schedule unchanging but effective.

Though Gigi sat through the same exams, Cecilia hardly paid her any more attention. Occasionally, she caught a glimpse of the blonde girl lounging around during the breaks, laughing with her friends or scrolling on her phone as if exams were the last thing on her mind. But the focus had shifted: There were more pressing things than keeping track of Gigi's nonsense now.

Two weeks quickly passed by as the semester test season came to an end. The last bell signaling the end of the final exam echoed through the halls, and a collective sigh of relief washed over the students. Pens were set down, papers collected, and chairs scraped against the floor as everyone eagerly packed their bags, eager to leave their classrooms.

In the hallways, chatter picked up immediately. Students exchanged relieved smiles, discussing the answers to their last test and already making plans for the upcoming summer break. Raora stretched her arms overhead, looking more than ready to be done with exams. "Finally, it's over," she groaned as she caught up with Cecilia, who was putting her things back into her bag with the same composed energy she had carried throughout the past two weeks.

"I swear, if I have to sit through one more exam—" Raora began, but her words were drowned out by the crowd of students eager to escape the building.

Cecilia smiled slightly, zipping up her bag. "Yeah, we're finally free," Cecilia smiles. The stress that had been lingering in the air for the past few weeks seemed to lift as students streamed out of the classrooms and into the afternoon sun.

Another week went by in a flash. By this point, the first years had already gotten back most of their papers to review.

Today was the day where the rankings for the semester's top performers would be displayed on the school bulletin board. Cecilia and Raora made their way through the bustling

hallways, the sound of excited chatter growing louder as they approached the board where students had already begun gathering.

“I wonder how we did this time,” Raora mused, clutching her bag strap tightly, “I’m sure you’re up there again, as always.”

Cecilia offered a small smile but stayed focused. She had always been the top performer in her grade, a reputation she’d maintained since junior high. Many of their classmates and peers, especially those who had been with her since those days, fully expected Cecilia to top the rankings once again. It was almost a given at this point.

As they navigated through the crowd, Fuwawa and Mococo spotted them and waved excitedly. “Cecilia! Raora! You guys came to check too?” Fuwawa called, bouncing slightly on her toes.

“Of course! We can’t miss out on this,” Raora grinned, joining the twins, “Have you guys seen the rankings yet?”

“Not yet!” Mococo chimed in, “The rankings haven’t been pinned up yet, but they’re about to be in a while.”

Just then, Elizabeth approached the group, as calm and composed as ever. “I figured you’d all be here,” she said with a smile, glancing at the board, “Well then, let’s see how we did.”

Cecilia’s heart thumped a little faster as she stood before the board, a familiar tension setting in as she prepared to check if she had held onto her spot at the top. Her peers, especially those from her old junior high like Fuwawa and Mococo, eagerly anticipated seeing the perfectionist’s name at the top once again.

Eventually, a teacher pushed past the sea of first year students, pinning up one copy of the rankings on the bulletin board before putting up another three copies. The crowd began to get more rowdy as they surrounded the rankings.

As Cecilia and her friends slowly made their way to the front, they could hear gasps and murmurs ripple through the crowd of students gathered around the bulletin board. The excitement was felt, and it only added to the pressure mounting in their chest. Whispers of surprise suddenly began to spread, but Cecilia couldn’t make out what was being said.

Raora, standing close behind her, nudged her gently. “Come on, let’s take a look,” Raora says, leading the way forward.

Cecilia nodded and finally reached the front of the board. Strangely, she began hearing her name being whispered by the people around her, their shocked glances towards Cecilia only adding to the perfectionist’s anxiousness.

Fuwawa and Mococo, standing behind her, seemed just as eager to find out. “What’s going on?” the twins whispered simultaneously.

Elizabeth, already looking at the board, turned her gaze toward Cecilia but said nothing. Cecilia gulped as she squinted at the list, her stomach tightening.

2024 FIRST YEAR BATCH SEMESTER TEST RANKINGS:

1. GIGI MURIN

2. *CECILIA IMMERGREEN*

3. *ELIZABETH ROSE BLOODFLAME*

4. *SHIORI NOVELLA*

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Cecilia's jaw dropped, her eyes widened in disbelief, staring at the board as if it were some kind of mistake. Gigi Murin, the girl who never seemed to care about deadlines or put in any visible effort, had taken the top spot. Right above her name.

Raora, peering over Cecilia's shoulder, gasped audibly. "Gigi... got first?" she whispered, equally stunned. The shock seemed to ripple through the crowd of first years. Fuwawa and Mococo exchanged glances, both clearly at a loss for words.

Cecilia clenched her fists at her sides, trying to make sense of it all. Gigi? The same Gigi who spent most of her time playing sleeping in class? Who barely seemed to take anything seriously? And now she had outperformed Cecilia, who had spent hours upon hours preparing for these tests?

"How...?" was all Cecilia could manage, her voice barely above a whisper. Suddenly, Gigi, Shiori and Bijou appeared near the front, looking at the rankings themselves.

"Woah! You topped the rankings, Gigi!" Shiori exclaimed, clapping Gigi on the back.

"Dang it! Does that mean I lost the bet?" Bijou whined, as Gigi grins in a carefree way.

"Yeah! Better pay up..." Gigi chuckles, as Bijou reluctantly passed her a two dollar note.

Meanwhile, Cecilia couldn't stop staring at Gigi, simply dumbfounded by this turn of events. The crowd of students eventually dispersed, as they went off for their first lessons.

"Shall we head to class?" Elizabeth asks the twins, Cecilia and Raora. Raora and the twins nodded, turning to leave, when they noticed Cecilia still staring at Gigi.

"Cecilia?" Raora called out to her friend, whose fists were clenched. Almost reflexively, Cecilia began marching towards Gigi.

"*Oh no*," Raora thought to herself as she watched her friend stomp over to the laughing Gigi.

Gigi noticed Cecilia approaching her, before grinning at the green haired girl. "Hey there," Gigi begins, pointing towards the rankings on the board, before cupping her ear towards Cecilia, "Could you repeat what you said last time about, *ahem*, me failing if I 'kept up with that attitude of mine'?"

In stark contrast to the chuckling Gigi, Cecilia was positively beside herself with rage. "How... How did you do so well? Have you been studying hard all this time?" Cecilia whispers, glaring at the pigtailed girl.

Gigi smirked, before shaking her head. "Nope! I mugged for most of it actually," Gigi replies happily, "In fact, I think I only started studying for each paper the night before!"

That was the tipping point. Gigi's nonchalance ignited something deep within Cecilia. "You can't be serious!" she exclaimed, her voice rising slightly, drawing the full attention of her and Gigi's friends, "You did that for all the tests?! Even... even the History paper?!"

Gigi shrugged, her grin widening. "I told you, I just work better under pressure. It's kind of my thing," she replied, her tone teasing.

Cecilia felt a wave of frustration surge through her body. "It's not a 'thing'! It's irresponsible! Some of us actually put in the effort, you know!" Cecilia snapped.

"Aw, don't shout at me like that, *doll*," Gigi said, rolling her eyes playfully, "I thought you were supposed to be the perfect student. You know, Miss President and all."

This remark only fueled Cecilia's irritation further. "This isn't a joke, Gigi! You might not care about your grades, but I do!" Cecilia growled.

Gigi leaned closer, her expression shifting to mock seriousness. "Oh no, did I hurt your precious feelings? Don't worry, you still got second place! That's like, totally impressive. What's the big deal?" Gigi shrugs.

Cecilia could only stare, incredulity washing over her. "The big deal is that you didn't even try!" she snapped, shaking her head as she struggled to comprehend the situation.

Raora, sensing the tension, stepped in quickly "Okay, let's just... cool it, yeah? We should head for the first period soon..."

But it was too late, Cecilia was already running away, her thoughts racing wildly. She couldn't shake off the sting of Gigi's carefree attitude and how she had stolen first place, *her* first place in the rankings. As she ran, Cecilia felt a small tear run down her cheek as she ignored her friends calling after her.

Cecilia hurried into the school garden, seeking refuge from the world around her. The vibrant flowers and lush greenery did nothing to comfort her as she found a secluded spot behind a cluster of roses. Sitting on a bench, she took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure, but the sting of Gigi's carefree attitude lingered.

Wiping a tear from her cheek, Cecilia felt a mix of frustration and disappointment swell within her. Gigi's smug expression replayed in her mind, a harsh reminder of the hard work she had put into her studies. Being the top student meant a lot to her, and now that title she held onto so dearly... has been relinquished to someone who couldn't care less about her studies.

As she sat in the garden, the sounds of her classmates faded, replaced by rustling leaves and distant chirping. Alone in her frustration, she pulled out her phone, hoping for a distraction but found none. "*Just how did it end up like this?*" Cecilia sighed, wiping away the moisture in her eyes, when suddenly, she heard a voice call out, "There you are!"

Cecilia looked up from her phone, her eyes locking onto Gigi Murin, who had just arrived in the garden. "You run surprisingly fast," Gigi grinned, her tone teasing, "I mean, after seeing your performances in PE, this really came as a surprise."

Cecilia furrowed her brow, rising to her feet. "You... What are you doing here? Are you here to mock me again?" she shouted, her voice sharp. Gigi's smile faltered for a moment.

"I came here to get you, stupid. We wouldn't want our class president to be late for class, right?" Gigi retorted, striding towards Cecilia with confidence.

Cecilia held out a hand, her frustration boiling over. "Leave me alone," she snapped, her heart racing.

Gigi paused, her expression shifting from playful to something more serious upon hearing the girl's voice break a little. "What's wrong?" Gigi asked cautiously as tears began slowly streaming out of Cecilia's eyes.

"It's just not fair!" Cecilia exclaimed, stepping closer to Gigi and grabbing her by the collar, "You don't even put in *half* the effort I do! I work my butt off for all my studies, giving my all, and here you are, just breezing through the tests like they're nothing!"

Gigi raised an eyebrow, unfazed by her blouse being grabbed. "Again, what's the big deal? It's just a grade!" Gigi brings up, causing Cecilia to shake her head in disbelief.

"No, it's not just about the grades! You don't understand what it's like to work so hard for something only for someone like you, who treats everything like a *joke*, to ace it like it's nothing!" Cecilia exclaims, "It feels like a slap in the face to everyone who actually cares about their work!"

Gigi's expression was unreadable, but one thing was clear: All traces of amusement had been wiped off of her face. "When you say 'everyone who cares'... you really just mean *yourself*, don't you?" Gigi mutters.

"You don't get it... for as long as I can remember, I've been perfect at everything. And that's because I work so hard to be that way," Cecilia whispers, "So if I work my ass off only to achieve anything less than '*perfect*', am I even worth anything?"

A silence fell upon the pair as Cecilia's grip on Gigi's collar slowly released. Cecilia didn't know why, but she expected Gigi to immediately come up with a reply to what she just confessed. However, the silence remained, and what was only a few seconds in reality felt like ages. Gigi's mouth eventually opened, her expression completely unreadable.

"I think I understand now, *Little Miss Perfect*," Gigi says venomously, "But let me tell you something. It's not all about perfection. You keep saying you work hard and shit, but have you ever thought about why you feel like you need to be perfect? It's like you've put yourself in this box and are terrified of stepping out of it."

Cecilia's jaw fell slightly. She didn't know how to answer that question. "I have my reasons," Cecilia utters, avoiding eye contact with the shorter girl, "You don't know what you're saying."

"What I'm saying is you care way too much about perfection," Gigi asserted, "You care so much that you completely break the moment you falter even a little bit."

The pair glared at each other once more, as the morning sun shone down on them brightly. "How is it... that you can ace... everything without trying?" Cecilia asks angrily, drawing herself up to her full height, "You must be lying or something. There's no way you could get those scores without putting even a little bit of effort into your revision."

"Well, I'm what some people might call a *genius*. But that's not the point," Gigi whispers, moving closer to Cecilia, who felt her back hit the trunk of a tree, "You're changing the subject."

Cecilia felt her knees weaken, her face flushing a deep red color as Gigi leaned in and lifted her chin up. "Come to think of it. You seem to be really interested in everything I do," Gigi says softly, Cecilia feeling her breath against her cheeks, "Always nagging at me when you really don't have to... It's almost like you're obsessed with me."

The green haired girl's cheeks flushed an even deeper red color (somehow) upon hearing those words, pushing Gigi away slightly. "I'm just trying to be a good class president," Cecilia mutters, her voice barely audible.

"You sure you aren't obsessed with me, *doll*?" Gigi asks, a grin returning to her features, "You were really worked up when I beat you in the rankings."

"I beat you in the rankings"

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

“I beat you in the rankings”

“I’m what some people might call a genius”

"I beat you in the rankings"

"I'm what some people might call a genius"

"I beat you in the rankings"

"...a genius"

"I beat you in the..."

At that moment, Gigi's words awakened something in Cecilia. Deep within her, something that wasn't anger or regret ignited—*Determination*. It was an intense determination unlike anything she had ever felt before. The class president backed Gigi against a nearby tree assertively, grabbing her collar once more. Gigi's cheeks turned bright pink as Cecilia pinned her against the tree.

"Who do you think you are?" Cecilia spat, her voice low but simmering with intensity, "You think being a 'genius' gives you the right to look down on everyone else? Look down on me?"

Gigi's eyes widened slightly, her playful demeanor vanishing as she stared at Cecilia, whose grip on her collar tightened. "You think you can keep brushing off hard work like it's nothing? Like it's some kind of game? I've put my heart and soul into everything I do, and you just saunter through life without a care in the world!" the perfectionist ranted.

Cecilia leaned closer, her breath hot with emotion. "You're not better than me just because you got lucky this time. You're about to see just how hard I can push myself," Cecilia says firmly. The fire in her chest burned brighter as she spoke, a furious wave of energy fueling her resolve.

"Just you see. I'll *destroy* you and take my place at the top of the rankings, I can promise that," Cecilia growls, passion seeping through her voice as she finally lets Gigi go.

The blonde was speechless, taking a few seconds to recover from the shock she just experienced. Cecilia glares at Gigi with contempt. The perfectionist couldn't let Gigi think she had won. "*This semester was just a fluke,*" Cecilia thought to herself as a renewed passion coursed through her entire body, "*I'll show her.*"

Gigi's face was not visible. After Cecilia had asserted herself, the pigtailed girl was left staring at the ground, seemingly deep in thought. And as Gigi began to look up, Cecilia had hoped her smug expression was gone, now replaced with utter fear. However, the blonde was smiling. Smiling brighter than Cecilia had ever seen her smile. "There she is," Gigi says, expressing a toothy grin at Cecilia, before getting up.

"I was starting to think you'd continue being a whimpering mess... Thank goodness I was wrong," Gigi teases, her bubbly energy returning.

"You better keep your promise, *doll*," Gigi grins, putting emphasis on the word 'doll'. The blonde begins walking away from Cecilia, before turning her head back and winking, "I'll be waiting for you to *destroy* me."

Cecilia's knees began wobbling once more as she watched Gigi leave. However, her newfound passion remained. The perfectionist was ready to go all out and do whatever it takes to defeat Gigi and claim her place at the top once more. Cecilia gathered herself before walking out of the garden and clenching her fists. "She's going down."

Rivalry

To say that morning in the garden left an impression on Cecilia would be a massive understatement. Although she managed to return to class in time, something was different.

Cecilia, who normally raised her hand to answer the teachers' every question and was quick to clarify any doubts, remained strangely silent throughout the entirety of the first lesson. She sat through the class with a distant look in her eyes, her mind elsewhere.

Her... encounter with Gigi in the garden plagued her thoughts, replaying over and over again, leaving her unable to focus on anything else.

And it wasn't as if nobody noticed the change in the class president's demeanor. Her best friend Raora, in particular, was especially worried.

"Is Cecilia alright? She's never been this uninvolved in a class before," Elizabeth asked the artist, tapping her from behind. Raora turned her head slightly so as to not draw the attention of their teacher, who was currently droning on about algebra up front.

"She's probably still in shock from getting second place," Raora whispers to the other class president, "I know it may seem like a small thing to be hung up over, but she takes those rankings really seriously."

Raora knew better than anyone that Cecilia had always been fiercely competitive and relentlessly determined to maintain her perfect image. '*First place*' was not just a simple title to Cecilia, it was a testament to her hard work, her identity.

Raora had seen it countless times before: The many hours of studying, the extra effort put into every assignment... They were all driven by Cecilia's need to be the best. As such, '*second place*' wasn't just a slip in the rankings, it was a blow to everything Cecilia had worked for.

"Oh dear, that poor girl... She must be really upset," Elizabeth notes sympathetically as she glances at the dejected-looking Cecilia, before adding, "Do you think that argument with Gigi at the bulletin board may have something to do with it?"

Raora crossed her arms. Even though the pair's verbal battles weren't a rare occurrence, that particular argument seemed to have struck a deeper chord in Cecilia. After all, it had ended with the perfectionist running off somewhere, which wasn't like her at all. Gigi had always been a thorn in her side, but this time it seemed like much more than just petty squabbling.

"Yeah, it might have," Raora whispered back to Elizabeth, "Gigi pissing her off isn't something new or anything, but that argument probably hit harder than usual. Cecilia's competitive, and losing first place to Gigi... well, that was probably enough to really mess with her."

Elizabeth gave a weak smile as Raora turned back to face the front, focusing her sights on Cecilia. The green haired girl was slouching and didn't seem to be paying much attention to the lesson at all.

In fact, Cecilia's mind was miles away from the classroom. She couldn't focus, no matter how hard she tried. The words from that morning with Gigi were ingrained into her head, replaying over and over.

She could even recall and picture every single detail of the encounter clearly: The way she yelled at the blonde, the way the fiery flame of frustration within her morphed into passion, a newfound passion to defeat Gigi.

However, there were a few other aspects of that scene that repeatedly played in her mind.

For some reason, Cecilia couldn't help but think of how Gigi had backed her against a tree and lifted her chin—How her legs felt so weak and how her heart had raced in a way she hadn't expected. That moment lingered in her mind, confusing her.

It wasn't just the words, but the way Gigi had looked at her, the intensity of it all. Cecilia wasn't sure if it was anger, fear, or something else that had been stirring within her. The fact that Gigi, who Cecilia had always dismissed as lazy and irresponsible, could provoke such a powerful reaction from her unsettled the perfectionist to no end.

Cecilia slowly glanced behind her, glaring at Gigi, who was currently doodling on her worksheet. "*Tsk*," Cecilia thought in disapproval, "*She's as carefree as ever.*"

Suddenly, their math teacher clapped her hands loudly, bringing Cecilia back to the present. "Okie dokie, let's take a look and see if you've been paying attention," the teacher says, before writing down a particularly challenging algebraic equation on the whiteboard, "Now this little question may seem difficult, but if you had been listening to what I've been saying for the past hour, you should be able to do it with no problem. Now, do we have any volunteers? If not, I'll call one of you up here."

Cecilia's heartbeat began accelerating. She had spent so much time thinking about Gigi that she hadn't absorbed a single word of the lesson. Panic surged through her as she stared at the equation on the board.

Normally, this would be the moment where she'd confidently raise her hand to solve it, but now, her mind was blank. She could feel the eyes of her classmates turning toward her, some of them expecting her usual perfection, her usual initiative to volunteer. Her palms began to sweat as the teacher scanned the room. Any moment now, she'd be called on, and Cecilia had no idea how to answer.

The math teacher's gaze lingered on Cecilia for a moment, as if she too expected the class president to raise her hand. Instead, Cecilia followed the tactic she had seen her classmates utilise when they wanted to avoid being called on... and quickly averted her eyes from the teacher.

“Right, if there aren't any volunteers...” the teacher began, looking around the room once more before saying, “Gigi! Looks like you're pretty busy over there? Why don't you come up to the board and solve this equation?”

Gigi jumped in her seat, dropping her pen onto her doodle-covered worksheet when she heard her name being called out. Despite herself, Cecilia let out a small chuckle. “*She's definitely not solving that after slacking off the entire lesson,*” Cecilia smirked to herself, expecting Gigi to remain seated and come up with an excuse to not answer the question.

“Well, Gigi? I'm waiting,” the teacher says, raising her eyebrow at the blonde.

To Cecilia's surprise, Gigi simply blinked, caught off guard for a moment before standing up. She walked to the front of the class, a focused look on her face as she approached the whiteboard. The teacher had written out the quadratic algebraic equation: $2x^2 - 4x - 6 = 0$

After taking a few seconds to read the equation, Gigi began moving with remarkable speed, expertly applying the quadratic formula. Her marker danced across the board as she calculated the discriminant, quickly writing down her steps. She worked through the equation, swiftly simplifying it.

The pigtailed girl worked through the discriminant effortlessly, and within moments, she had determined the solutions, confidently turning to the class with a casual expression. “So... x is either three or negative one,” Gigi concluded, stepping back from the board.

The class was silent for a moment, surprised at how quickly and effortlessly she had solved the problem. Meanwhile, Cecilia watched, a mix of frustration and disbelief churning in her stomach at how Gigi made it look so easy.

“Excellent! As expected of our top student,” the math teacher praised the blonde, clapping her on the back, as some of Gigi's friends applauded teasingly, “Now for homework...”

The class groaned upon hearing the word ‘homework’ as the teacher began listing out the pages of their workbook they had to complete before the next lesson. Gigi handed the marker she was holding back to the teacher, who gave her an approving nod.

The blonde then walked by Cecilia's table near the front row, noticing how the green haired girl's jaw was still wide open from Gigi's display of efficiency.

Smirking, Gigi winked at the perfectionist, prompting Cecilia to furrow her brow as she glared at the blonde. Huffing, Cecilia turned away from Gigi as she took a deep breath to compose herself. Gigi's nonchalant attitude once again fueled her irritation... but she couldn't deny the flicker of admiration she felt when she watched the blonde solve the equation from earlier.

However, the perfectionist quickly pushed that thought out of her head. “*Ugh, I hate her so much,*” Cecilia thought to herself angrily.

When the recess bell rang, sounds of chairs shifting and loud chattering filled the classroom as students rushed to gather their belongings. Cecilia stood up from her seat, before realizing

that the latest pages of her notebook, which she usually filled to the brim with notes and annotations were completely blank.

Raora approached her desk, looking concerned. “Are you okay, Cecilia?” she asked, as their classmates exited the room, spilling into the hallway. Cecilia nodded absently, sitting back down as she clicked her pen.

“I’m okay, Raora. I just... I just forgot to copy down notes during math,” Cecilia replies shamefully.

The artist raised an eyebrow worriedly, before crouching next to Cecilia. “Are you sure you’re alright? You never not take notes... and you’ve been silent the entire morning,” Raora asks the perfectionist, who sighed deeply.

“I’ll be fine. I’m just a little upset about the rankings, but I’ll get over it,” Cecilia replies, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

Raora wasn’t convinced however. “If you say so,” the pink haired girl says, before patting Cecilia’s shoulder, “Just know I’ll be here if you wanna talk to me.”

After Cecilia copied down the algebra notes on the board, she and Raora headed off for recess. As they walked through the courtyard, Cecilia’s thoughts remained clouded. She couldn’t shake the feeling of being overshadowed, a nagging voice in her mind reminding her that Gigi had outperformed her yet again.

Raora and Cecilia purchased two bowls of ramen from the Japanese food store, before sitting at their class’ usual lunch table. The Abyssgard twins were already seated, engaged in a lively discussion about the latest trends in fashion and gaming. Fuwawa and Mococo waved excitedly at Raora and Cecilia as they approached, their smiles brightening the atmosphere at the table.

“Hey! We brought some of Mama’s donuts today,” Fuwawa exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“We even brought a little extra for you guys to try!” Mococo added, holding out a bag of Pon de Rings.

“Thanks, you two!” Cecilia forced a smile, trying to engage despite her lingering thoughts. Raora, on the other hand, took a seat beside their friends, eager to try the food they brought. The twins and Raora continued chatting animatedly, but Cecilia found it difficult to concentrate on their conversation.

“Cecilia, are you listening?” Fuwawa teased, noticing the green-haired girl’s distracted demeanor. Cecilia blinked, trying to refocus.

“Yeah, sorry, I...well...” she trailed off, not wanting to spoil the mood.

“Are you okay?” Mococo prompted, her curiosity piqued, “You look a little off today...”

Cecilia shook her head, forcing another smile. “Nothing, just thinking about... schoolwork,” she said, her tone indicating her lack of honesty.

The twins and Raora exchanged glances, and Cecilia could tell they weren’t convinced. “Hmm, maybe eating something sweet will help you out of your funk,” Raora suggested, holding out a donut towards Cecilia.

With a reluctant sigh, Cecilia took the donut from Raora’s hand, the bright colors of the snack glistening in the light. As she bit into it, the soft, chewy texture and sugary glaze quickly started to melt away her worries. The flavors danced on her tongue, and she felt a hint of warmth spread through her.

“See? Told you!” Raora said, grinning as she took a bite of her own donut.

Cecilia let a genuine smile slip through, the sweetness of the donut helping to brighten her mood, even if just a little.

As they continued to chat, Cecilia found herself gradually sinking into the moment, as the thoughts that plagued her earlier slowly began to vanish... until-

"Woah! Fuwamoco, are those Pon de Rings?" Gigi asked, suddenly appearing alongside Shiori and Bijou.

The twins nodded happily as Gigi eyed the bag. "Mind if I grab one?" the blonde asked sheepishly.

"Go ahead!" Fuwawa beamed, holding the bag out for her. Gigi took one with a grin, her excitement evident as she bit into it.

"Thanks, you two always bring the best stuff," Gigi says, indulging in the delicious mochi donut.

Cecilia’s smile faltered, her sour mood from earlier creeping back as Gigi joined the table. She focused on the donut in her hand, trying to ignore the feeling in her chest.

Shiori and Bijou joined the group as well, indulging in conversation with the twins. Although Cecilia desired to join in the talks and laughter of the table, Gigi's presence made it difficult for her to be in a better mood.

The group laughed at a joke Shiori made, with Gigi cackling the loudest. “Never say that again!” Gigi tells Shiori, clearly out of breath as her friend grins at her.

“But you're laughing!” Shiori pointed out as the girls continued giggling.

As Gigi wiped a small happy tear out of her eye, she briefly glanced at Cecilia, who was still frowning, seemingly not paying the conversations much attention. Gigi raised an eyebrow, before getting off of her seat, walking over and sitting across the perfectionist.

“Hey there, doll,” Gigi greets the class president, who narrowed her eyes.

“Hello,” Cecilia mutters dryly, avoiding Gigi’s stare.

“How are you holding up after our dramatic morning in the garden?” Gigi asks teasingly.

Cecilia glares at Gigi, gritting her teeth. “Well, thanks to you, I couldn’t concentrate for the entirety of math...” Cecilia says in a low voice, “I couldn’t jot down my notes, and I couldn’t stop thinking of...”

The perfectionist paused. She had almost admitted thinking of Gigi for the entire morning out loud. “Couldn’t stop thinking of...?” Gigi presses, a smirk crawling up her lips. Cecilia’s cheeks flushed as her mind went into overdrive to think of something.

“Couldn’t stop thinking of how to beat you!” Cecilia snaps, standing up and pointing at the blonde, who was giggling away. The group sitting at the table turned their heads to look at Cecilia and Gigi, bracing themselves for whatever was about to happen.

Gigi stands up as well, looking up at the taller Cecilia as her smug expression remains. “So you were thinking of me the entire time?” Gigi asks cheekily, clasping her hands together as she puts on a mock embarrassed expression, “Oh my god, you are so obsessed with me~”

“I’m not!” Cecilia retorted, her voice louder than she intended, as the distance between them seemed to shrink with every word. Her pulse quickened, and the frustration bubbling up inside of her was becoming impossible to control.

Gigi’s smug expression only fueled the fire. “Oh, but it sure sounds like it,” Gigi said, her tone teasing.

Cecilia’s hands clenched into fists, her face turning red, not from anger this time, but from embarrassment. The group around them watched silently, unsure whether to intervene or stay out of it. Raora shot Cecilia a worried look, tempted to step in, but something about her best friend’s expression told her otherwise.

“Keep dreaming, Gigi,” Cecilia snapped, jabbing a finger against the blonde’s arm, “The only reason you’re on my mind is because I refuse to let you win again.”

“Hehe, so what happened in class earlier didn’t count?” Gigi challenged, as Cecilia narrowed her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Cecilia questioned, placing her hands on her hips.

Gigi smirked. “You know... how I answered that question on the board while you stared at me all slack-jawed,” Gigi reminds the perfectionist, who blushes, “I mean, I counted that as a win!”

Cecilia’s face burned with embarrassment as Gigi’s words hung in the air. “That was *not* a win,” she snapped, crossing her arms in defiance.

“Oh, come on,” Gigi continued, leaning in slightly, her smirk only growing wider, “You couldn’t even pay attention because of me. I’d say that’s a pretty big win.”

Cecilia's frustration surged, but she struggled to find the right words. The way Gigi was so nonchalant, so carefree about it all—It drove the perfectionist mad. "You..." Cecilia utters, her voice shaky but filled with determination, "...I'll show you what a real win looks like."

Gigi chuckled, clearly entertained by Cecilia's reactions. "I'm looking forward to it, *Little Miss Perfect*."

The rest of the table watched the scene before them, half amused at the pair's exchange, and half worried that the confrontation might escalate. "When summer break is over, it is *so* on," Cecilia exclaims, eyes locked against Gigi's, "I'll make you eat your words."

"I guess I have something to look forward to then," Gigi grins, unfazed by the green haired girl's declaration.

The pair continued their strange staring contest for a few more seconds, before Cecilia broke it off. "Come on, Raora, let's go back to class," Cecilia says, huffing as she grabs her empty ramen bowl.

As Cecilia stormed off, Raora scrambled to gather her things and quickly followed, her expression a mix of confusion and concern.

"Don't think of me too much, doll," Gigi teases as she watches the green haired girl depart.

"Shut up!" Cecilia snapped again, not even looking at Gigi. The perfectionist's cheeks were still flushed, and Raora, still baffled, could only trail behind as they headed back to class, leaving the rest of the group in stunned, amused silence.

Raora struggled to keep up with Cecilia as the latter stormed through the hallways. "Uh, Cecilia, what exactly is going on between you two?" Raora asks, finally asking the question she had in mind.

Cecilia crossed her arms, turning to Raora with a pouty expression on her face. "That idiot thinks she's got me," Cecilia mutters, "But I have a plan."

"A plan?" Raora repeated, exasperation seeping into her expression. Cecilia chuckled, giving her best friend an evil grin.

Raora gulped. Whatever this was, it couldn't be good. "Cece... What kind of plan are we talking about here?" she asked cautiously.

Cecilia's eyes lit up with determination as she placed a hand on her hip. "I'm going to challenge Gigi to a series of academic competitions after summer break," Cecilia schemes, "She thinks she's so smart, huh? Well, we'll see who gets the higher scores when school reopens."

Raora raised an eyebrow, still trying to catch up. "Wait... you're challenging her to what, like... tests?"

"Exactly," Cecilia nodded, her pout turning into a smug grin, "There's an algebra quiz on the first day back, and I'm going to study like hell during the break. She won't even know what

hit her."

Raora blinked, exasperation growing. "You're seriously going to spend your entire break training for... algebra?"

"Not just algebra! Everything!" Cecilia exclaimed, her voice full of conviction, "I'll outscore her in every subject, no matter what it takes."

Raora sighed, realizing a tiny flaw in the plan. "But Gigi never takes unweighted tests seriously," she pointed out.

Cecilia nodded, having already thought of this. "I'll challenge her upfront," she replied confidently, "Make it a real competition. The kind she can't brush off or ignore."

Raora raised an eyebrow. "And how exactly are you going to do that?" the pink haired girl questioned.

"Simple," Cecilia said with a smirk, "I'll make it about pride. She'll never back down from a challenge like that, especially if I say something along the lines of '*Let's see who's really the best.*' She won't be able to resist."

Raora shot her friend a look of concern. "Okay, but... if you, and I'm saying this hypothetically, *lose* the contest, you aren't going to drive yourself crazy right?"

Cecilia shrugged. "No, because I'll win," the perfectionist replies, the fire of determination burning bright within her.

A few hours later, when the final bell of the day rang, Cecilia immediately stood up from her seat and marched to the back of the class as Raora followed her closely. Gigi was currently stuffing her doodles and (blank) chemistry worksheets in her bag, apparently not having brought a file to keep her materials in. Cecilia groaned internally at the untidiness Gigi displayed, but decided not to nag at her about it today.

"Gigi!" Cecilia says, her same evil grin showing as she approached the blonde's desk. Gigi, who had a tired expression on her face after the long and mundane chemistry class, instantly brightened up upon seeing Cecilia.

"Hiya! What's up, doll?" Gigi grins as Cecilia winces at her nickname.

After taking a deep breath to calm herself, Cecilia points at Gigi, drawing herself to her full height. "Remember how I said I'll make you eat your words?" Cecilia asks, smiling confidently.

Gigi raised an eyebrow. "Yeah... why?" the blonde asked, still seated comfortably.

"When the new semester rolls in, let's compete to see who gets the higher scores for each and every little test," Cecilia paused dramatically before continuing, "We'll start with that algebra quiz when school reopens. Just you, me, and that test. First day back after summer break."

Gigi blinked, surprised by Cecilia's sudden challenge. Her tired expression turned into one of amusement, her signature smirk slowly returning. "An algebra test?" she repeated, leaning back in her chair, "Are you sure you wanna do that, doll? I mean, we haven't forgotten algebra class this morning have we?"

Cecilia gritted her teeth, trying to keep her composure. "That was different. This time, I'll be ready," Cecilia growls, "I'm going to study like hell over summer break, and you'd better not slack off."

Raora stood behind, watching the exchange in silent exasperation. "Here we go again..." she muttered under her breath.

"Oh, and it's not just algebra, either," Cecilia declared, crossing her arms, "I'm challenging you to every subject. Math, science, history, you name it."

Gigi's eyes widened slightly in surprise, but her smirk wavering a little "Oh? Every subject, huh... Do really we have to?" she replied, her tone light but intrigued, "That seems like a lot of work..."

Cecilia smiled confidently. "You better be serious about this, because I definitely am!" Cecilia says as a few of their classmates started to watch their exchange.

"Could we perhaps stick to one test? I mean, you wouldn't like losing over and over again would you?" Gigi bargains, grinning as Cecilia huffs in indignation.

"I will not lose," Cecilia assures the blonde, before smirking herself, "Hmm... why the hesitation, Gigi? Afraid you'll lose?"

Gigi stands up as she grins at the perfectionist. "I never said that," Gigi shot back, enticed by the challenge. Cecilia's smirk widened as she leaned in slightly, her voice dropping just a bit.

"Then prove it. Let's see who's really got what it takes to be the top student in our year," the perfectionist replies.

Gigi's eyes widened with excitement. "You're on, Immergreen. Just don't come crying when I sweep you in every subject," Gigi warned, as the pair closed the distance between them.

"Same goes for you," Cecilia retorts, standing her ground.

"What's happening?" Elizabeth asks, having just returned to the classroom.

"I think they're flirting or something," Bijou snickers as Raora shakes her head.

"Have you ever seen anyone flirt like that before?" Raora asked, sounding exasperated.

"Only in shows," Bijou giggled, watching as the tension between Cecilia and Gigi continued to escalate.

Elizabeth glanced between the two rivals, confused but intrigued. “I am so confused right now, are they fighting?” the scarlet haired girl mutters, as Raora shakes her head

“This isn't just fighting anymore,” Raora sighed, rubbing her forehead. “This is war.”

TWO WEEKS LATER

As promised, Cecilia wasted no time diving into her revision once summer break began. By the time the first semester's school bell rang, signaling the start of the summer break, she had already outlined a strict study plan for herself. Algebra on Mondays...Chemistry on Tuesdays... English on Wednesdays...

The perfectionist would tackle each subject with an intensity few could match. She spent hours every day, pouring over textbooks, her notes scattered across her bedroom floor. Post-it notes with formulas and definitions plastered the walls, and her desk was cluttered with study guides and pens.

While the heat outside tempted most students to the beach or air-conditioned malls, Cecilia remained firmly planted at her desk, a fan whirring softly by her side. The only breaks she allowed herself were for meals and short naps, her mind continuously focused on how to beat Gigi when the new semester began. The memory of Gigi's smug expression from their last encounter replayed over and over, spurring her on whenever her energy began to wane.

As the days passed, Cecilia's routine became almost mechanical. Wake up, revise, eat, revise again. Her phone sat forgotten on her bedside table, and her usual summer activities, such as swimming, painting with Raora, or reading bad novels were completely abandoned in favor of relentless studying. She knew she couldn't afford to slip, not if she wanted to prove Gigi wrong.

There was no room for failure.

It has been two weeks since the start of summer. Cecilia had just finished her light lunch of tea and biscuits and was scribbling away on an algebra worksheet when a soft knock echoed on her bedroom door. She didn't hear it at first as her focus had been entirely consumed by the equations laid out in front of her.

The door creaked open slightly, and her older sister Fauna peeked inside. Cecilia, still absorbed in her revision, remained oblivious to her sister's presence. Fauna raised an eyebrow, her gaze sweeping over the chaotic study setup: Papers strewn across the floor, books stacked high on the desk, and her little sister hunched over, furiously writing. With a small smile, Fauna knocked once more, this time louder.

“Cecilia,” Fauna called softly. Still no response. Stepping into the room, she sighed and placed a gentle hand on Cecilia's shoulder. The perfectionist jumped, startled, before looking

up with wide eyes.

“Oh, Fauna! I didn’t hear you,” Cecilia muttered, blinking as though she were pulling herself out of a deep trance.

Fauna takes in the usually messy nature of her sister's room before sitting down on the bed. “Cece, you've been studying non-stop ever since those rankings came out,” Fauna says in a soothing tone, “Are you going to take a break any time soon?”

“I can't,” Cecilia replies simply, “If I slack even just a little bit, I might lose to her again.”

The perfectionist's sister sighed, recalling Cecilia's many rants about Gigi. “Is beating that... Giselle or Gillian or whatever her name is really *that* important to you?” Fauna asks, as her sister clicks her pen.

“Her name is Gigi, and yes, it *is* that important to me,” Cecilia replied firmly, her grip tightening around the pen, “I can't let her win again, Fauna. You don’t get it—she just... She doesn't even try, and yet she aced everything!”

Fauna rested her head against a pillow, hugging one of the stuffed animals on the bed. “I get that it’s frustrating, but come on, Cecilia, it's summer break! You’re supposed to enjoy yourself, not hole up in your room drowning in worksheets,” Fauna says as Cecilia shook her head, determination etched into her expression.

“I am enjoying myself. People find joy in different things, you know,” Cecilia smiles, “Studying just so happens to be that thing for me.”

Fauna sighed, walking over to her sister’s desk. “Summer is meant for more than just studying. You deserve a break too. Go outside, have fun. There’s more to life than competing with some girl who probably isn’t even thinking about school right now...”

“But...” Cecilia muttered stubbornly, glancing away.

Fauna shook her head, stepping closer and swiping away the worksheets Cecilia was busy completing. “Hey, give that back, sis!” Cecilia protested, trying to snatch her papers back.

“Nope,” Fauna replied, holding the worksheet above her head, well out of reach, “I'm kicking you out of the house for today. You need to get some sun and touch some grass. Go find Raora or something.”

Cecilia groaned in defeat, her arms falling to her sides as she gave up. “You can’t be serious,” the perfectionist whined, resting her cheek on the backrest of her chair.

“I am very serious,” Fauna said with a mischievous smile, “You’re not going to spend your entire summer buried in textbooks. Go do something fun. You’ve got brains, but you’ve also got a life.”

With a huff, Cecilia pushed her chair back and stood up. “Fine,” she muttered, “But I’ll be back later, and you better not hide my worksheets.”

Fauna chuckled at the tantrum her sister was throwing, before replying, "Deal."

Right after stepping out of her house for the first time in two weeks, Cecilia breathed in the fresh air around her. It was almost unfamiliar, a huge contrast to the stuffy air in her room. The warmth of the sun hit her skin, making her squint as she adjusted to the brightness. She glanced around, taking in the sights of her quiet neighborhood, where kids played on the street and a soft breeze rustled the leaves of the trees.

It felt strange to be outside, with no study materials in her hands or academic goals clouding her thoughts. As much as she hated to admit it, there was a sense of relief in stepping away from her desk, even if it was temporary. It was then a thought hit her: What should she do now?

As she strolled through the neighborhood, Cecilia began brainstorming different ways she could pass the time. A nice swim was out of the question—she had yet to get a new swimsuit. A trip to the library also crossed her mind, but she quickly dismissed it, knowing she'd just end up studying. She frowned, realizing how much of her life revolved around schoolwork.

What else could she do? Cecilia then thought about what Fauna said. *"Go find Raora..."*

Of course. Cecilia slapped her forehead as she dialed Raora's number, realizing she should have done so in the first place. It took a few beeps, but Raora eventually picked up. *"Hello?"* the artist says upon picking up.

"Raora! Are you free to hang out right now? My big sister kicked me out of the house," Cecilia explains, as she hears sounds of excited chattering on Raora's end.

"Cecilia, I'm going to the bowling alley with some of our friends right now," Raora replies as Cecilia's heart sinks.

"You went out... without asking me?" Cecilia asks sadly, feeling hurt by Raora's supposed betrayal.

"I literally texted you yesterday and asked if you wanted to come along! But you said 'Oh, I'll pass. I have to grind for algebra'," Raora reminds the perfectionist, who laughed nervously.

"Oh right! Hehe, sorry, must have slipped my mind," Cecilia apologized as Raora sighs.

"Well, I'm not gonna let you miss out. Hurry up and come to the bowling alley at the mall. We'll wait for you there," Raora instructs as Cecilia smiles gratefully.

"Will do. Thanks Raora," Cecilia says gratefully before ending the call.

Making a beeline to the train station, Cecilia boarded the train headed for the mall. As she settled into a seat, she gazed out the window, watching the familiar scenery blur past. The perfectionist allowed her busy mind to rest for the first time in days and it was actually pretty therapeutic.

Maybe Fauna was right. Maybe she did need this little break. The thought of spending time with Raora and the others made her feel excited, a welcome change from the constant revising and overthinking that had been plaguing her for weeks.

When the train pulled into the station near the mall, Cecilia hopped off and quickly made her way towards the bowling alley. Unsurprisingly, the mall was considerably crowded, the summer break drawing in swarms of students with free time on their hands. Groups of girls wandered between stores, clutching shopping bags and taking advantage of the sales or enjoying a meal at the many restaurants in the area.

Lively chatter and laughter filled the air, as soft background music played over the mall's speakers. The colorful lights of the arcade flickered from the upper floor, and Cecilia could hear the occasional cheer from someone winning a game. She had to navigate through small crowds of young folks sporting carefree expressions, before finally reaching the bowling alley.

Cecilia soon spotted Raora, the twins, and Elizabeth waiting by a table near the reception. "You made it!" Raora beams as Cecilia walks up to them.

"Thanks for waiting guys," Cecilia says as she hugs her best friend.

"You're just in time!" Fuwawa and Mococo greeted the green haired girl, who gave them a hug as well.

"Now that everyone's here, let's meet Gigi at the counter. We need to give the receptionist our shoe sizes," Elizabeth says, causing Cecilia to pause mid-hug, her smile faltering slightly.

"Wait, Gigi's here too?" Cecilia asked, a hint of hesitation creeping into her voice. She hadn't mentally prepared for another encounter with the blonde so soon.

"Yeah, I invited her," Raora confirms, before patting Cecilia on the back with a reassuring grin, "Relax. We're all just here to have fun. No fighting today, alright?"

Cecilia sighed, forcing herself to nod. "Right. I'll try to keep my cool," Cecilia promises.

As they walked towards the counter, the sounds of bowling balls crashing into pins echoed, along with cheers and shouts from nearby lanes. Cecilia could already see Gigi leaning casually against the counter, her back turned, chatting energetically with the receptionist. Even from a distance, Cecilia could recognize her signature messy pigtails.

"Here we go..." Cecilia muttered under her breath as they approached.

"There you are! You sure took your time," Gigi smirks as the group joins her at the counter. Cecilia's mouth twitched.

"Nice to see you too, Gigi," Cecilia greets the blonde as the receptionist typed away on his keyboard.

"Right, unfortunately, each lane only supports four players at a time. And since there are six of you... two of you will have to use a separate lane," the receptionist explained, glancing

between the group as they exchanged looks.

"Guess we'll have to split up," Raora shrugged.

"No big deal, we can play in groups," Mococo agrees, "But how are we splitting up?"

Before anyone could volunteer, Gigi grinned mischievously and walked up to Cecilia. "How about it, doll? You and me, same lane?" Gigi suggests as she wrapped an arm around the taller girl's shoulder, "We'll see who bowls better."

Cecilia's eyes narrowed. Some part of her predicted that Gigi might turn this into another competition. "I'd rather not. I'm not the best at sports," Cecilia tells Gigi in a monotone voice.

"Is that chickening out I hear?" Gigi instigates, sticking her tongue out at Cecilia, who snapped.

"Fine!" Cecilia huffs, accepting the challenge, "Let's do this!"

The group chuckled as the two stared each other down as if they were boxers. Elizabeth stepped in, chuckling as she held out her hands. "Alright, alright. You two can fight it out in your own lane later on," the scarlet haired girl says, "For now, let's settle the shoes."

"Sounds good to me!" Fuwawa chimed in excitedly, Mococo nodding along.

Cecilia shot Gigi one last glance before heading to the counter to get her bowling shoes, determination shining in her eyes. "Don't go too hard, you two," Raora says to the rivals, who were giving off a tension-filled aura.

"Don't worry about me, Raora. This is going to be easy," Gigi replies confidently, to which Cecilia scoffed.

"Easy for me, you mean?" the perfectionist shot back, as she retrieved her shoes. To the group's slight exasperation, the pair continued their back and forth all the way to the lane.

After reaching their lane, Gigi instinctively keyed in her and Cecilia's name into the interface, which proceeded to play a looping GIF of poorly animated 3D bowling pins. Upon seeing the terribly animated sequence, Gigi couldn't help but erupt into a fit of laughter. "PFFFT HAHAAHAHAHA," the blonde cackled as she watched the pins dance on the overhead screen.

Despite herself, Cecilia also let out a small giggle. "Do you usually get so amused by stupid stuff like this?" Cecilia asks as Gigi tries to catch her breath.

"Do you not find it funny?!" Gigi wheezed, prompting Cecilia to roll her eyes.

"I don't," Cecilia replies, attempting to hide her smile.

"You're a liar," Gigi retorted, as she grabbed a bowling ball, "Just wait till you see the GIF they play for when we actually knock down some pins."

Cecilia folded her arms as Gigi prepared to roll her bowling ball. The pigtailed girl took a deep breath as she steadied her technique. With a quick motion, Gigi hurled her ball down the lane, managing to knock down six of the ten pins. "Good attempt," Cecilia quips as Gigi smirks.

"Oh, I'm not done yet," the blonde insists, grabbing another ball from the rack.

After taking aim, Gigi rolled the ball towards the remaining pins. As it made its way down the lane, the ball began to lose some of its speed, causing it to only knock down two of the pins that were remaining.

"Damn!" Gigi cursed. Her frustration immediately subsided however, when she heard Cecilia laughing hard. Gigi returned to the seating area, slightly shocked at how hard her rival seemed to be laughing.

"I'm sorry!" Cecilia apologized, gasping for air, "You were right, the GIFs are so stupid!"

Gigi whipped around, looking up at the screen, which displayed a looping video of eight bowling pins falling over, after which a stock explosion effect played over the fallen pins.

Now fully understanding why Cecilia was laughing so hard, Gigi joined her in laughing at the GIF. "HAHAHAHA! Seriously, *that's* what got you?!" Gigi snickers, as Cecilia slapped her arm playfully.

"It got you too!" Cecilia giggles, gasping for air, "Jeez, it's so stupid..."

As their laughter began to die down, Gigi glanced over at Cecilia, still smiling wide. "You know," Gigi said, leaning back casually, "You should smile more. It's a good look for you."

Cecilia's laughter faltered instantly, her cheeks turning pink as she blinked in surprise. "W-What?" she stammered, her heart skipping a beat at the unexpected compliment.

Gigi grinned, leaning a little closer. "I'm serious. You look cute when you're not yelling or glaring at me for a change," the blonde winked. Her tone was teasing, but there was a hint of sincerity beneath it that only flustered Cecilia more.

Cecilia quickly turned her gaze away, crossing her arms defensively. "Stop saying weird stuff," she muttered, her face still warm as she tried to compose herself.

"Your face is red, doll," Gigi snickered, poking Cecilia's cheek, prompting the green haired girl to slap her hand away.

"Hurry up and finish your turn, stupid!" Cecilia scolds.

Gigi points to the screen indignantly. "It's your turn, weirdo!"

Cecilia blinked, then quickly turned her gaze to the screen. Sure enough, her name was displayed. "Oh..." she muttered, flustered again as she got up.

"Weirdo..." Gigi repeated, folding her arms smugly, "Go on, show me how it's done."

Cecilia shot Gigi a glare, grabbing her ball. “Just watch, I’m going to strike this and wipe that grin off your face,” Cecilia huffed, marching towards the lane with renewed determination.

Behind her, Gigi chuckled under her breath, watching Cecilia intently. “Go ahead, impress me.”

With her irritation fueling her, Cecilia gritted her teeth, grabbing a ball from the rack before violently tossing it down the lane. To both her and Gigi's shock, the ball managed to knock down all ten pins at once.

Cecilia widened her eyes, before hopping up and down excitedly. “S-strike!” Cecilia cheered, ecstatic and she turned to Gigi, who had a bewildered expression as she watched the strike animation on the screen, “Ha! That's how it's done!”

The pigtailed girl frowned as Cecilia got up in her face. “Well played,” Gigi remarked, clapping slowly as Cecilia smirked proudly.

“You better keep up, Gigi. I'm already two pins ahead of you,” Cecilia challenged, looking satisfied with herself.

“Ohohoho, it is so on now, Immergreen,” Gigi warned, rushing to grab the ball.

For the next hour, Gigi and Cecilia were completely locked into the game, each roll of the bowling ball being a test of who could one up the other. Every time they finished a turn, they would spend a few moments teasing and mocking each other. Gigi would eventually catch up, even overtaking her rival's score. However, Cecilia would follow up with a sensational play of her own.

Neither of them could maintain the lead for long, with the scoreboard constantly flipping between the two. The competition was fierce, and the duo found themselves sweating more than they thought they would.

Their friends couldn't help but chuckle at how evenly matched they were, shaking their heads every time one of them pulled off a great shot, only for the other to do the same. “They're relentless,” Elizabeth muttered, amused as the match stayed close, neither willing to let the other claim victory.

At long last, it was the final round. Cecilia massaged her hand as she made her way to the battlefield that was the bowling lane. “Gutter! Gutter! Gutter! Get a gutter! Gutterrrrr!” Gigi yelled at Cecilia, irritating her immensely.

“Shut up!” Cecilia snapped, as she grabbed a ball from the rack.

With a mighty swing, the perfectionist rolled the ball down the shiny lane. The ball traveled down the center of the lane smoothly, not straying off course one bit, before striking all the pins.

Cecilia whooped as she and Gigi rushed to look at the final scores. To their dismay, their fierce match had ended in a draw. “Oh, come on!” Gigi whined, a little disappointed with the results, “I was sure I'd beat you!”

The perfectionist raised an eyebrow. “Looks like you were wrong then,” Cecilia says, in a slightly haughty manner.

“Hey, you didn't win either!” Gigi retorted, as they began to glare at each other again.

However, this time, their staring contest was broken up by a fit of giggles. “Good game,” Cecilia says as she smiles, sticking out a hand towards Gigi, “It was really fun.”

Gigi's mouth fell agape, taking a few seconds to register what Cecilia just said. She was caught off guard by the perfectionist's gentle tone. “Uh... yeah, good game to you too,” Gigi finally replied, shaking Cecilia's hand, “Are you going soft on me, Immergreen?”

“You wish,” Cecilia scoffs as the pair broke off the handshake, “I haven't forgotten about our competition.”

“Oh, right! That,” Gigi says, before smirking, “You don't have to fret too much, doll. I didn't touch any of my notes yet.”

That last statement ticked Cecilia off. She had been spending the last two weeks relentlessly revising and Gigi... hasn't even started?

“What have you been doing in the past weeks then?!” Cecilia asked incredulously as Gigi tapped on the interface in front of them to end their bowling game.

“Playing Roblox with Mumei and Biboo mostly,” Gigi shrugs, as she senses her rival's anger, “Hehehe, don't tell me you've started the grind already?”

Cecilia turns away from Gigi, as she tries to restrain herself. “I've done a little studying here and there,” Cecilia lies, to which Gigi smirks.

“You totally started grinding!”

“So what?! It's good to start early.”

“You should take a chill pill, doll. It's summer! Smell the grass! Play some Roblox with me!”

“I am NOT playing Roblox with you.”

“Pleaseeee?”

“No.”

“Please, please, please, please, pleaseeee????”

“I said no!”

The twins, Elizabeth, and Raora walked up to the duo, having just finished their game themselves. "Who won?" Fuwamoco asked simultaneously as Gigi and Cecilia turned to their friends.

"It was a draw," Cecilia replied, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

Gigi crossed her arms, leaning against the interface. "Barely," she added, flashing a grin, "Next time, you won't be so lucky."

Fuwawa and Mococo exchanged glances, then turned to the duo. "A draw?" Mococo asked, surprised.

Raora laughed. "Now that's surprising. I thought Cece would lose for sure," the artist jokes, earning her a slap on the shoulder from Cecilia.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "So, no winner today? I can't say I'm not a little disappointed," the scarlet haired girl admits, as the group began to make their way out of the bowling alley.

"If we ever do this again, you can bet on me taking the gold," Gigi grins, giving a thumbs up to Elizabeth.

"Don't be too sure of yourself," Cecilia cut in, narrowing her eyes at Gigi, "I'm not going to make it easy."

Gigi shot her a confident grin. "Oh nooooo, I'm so scared!" the blonde whined sarcastically, prompting Cecilia to elbow her, "OWW! LIZ, SHE HIT ME!"

Raora rolled her eyes, chuckling as they reached the exit. "You two are unbelievable..."

ONE HOUR LATER

On the bus ride home, Cecilia rested her head on Raora's shoulder as they talked about the day's outing. "Thanks for inviting me out, Raora," Cecilia yawns as the bus cruises through town, "I had more fun than I thought I would."

Raora smiled softly, resting her own head against Cecilia's. "No problem. I figured you needed a break from all that studying," she said, giving a small chuckle as the bus continued its slow journey through the dimly lit streets, "Besides, I wasn't about to let you waste your entire summer hunched over your textbooks."

Cecilia sighed, closing her eyes for a moment as she recalled the events of the day. "I know... it's just hard to stop sometimes. You know me. I can't fall behind..."

Raora snickered. "Falling behind? You're ahead of the curve in almost everything. I think you're the only one who's even thinking about the next semester right now," Raora points out.

Cecilia smiled faintly. "You know what I'm talking about," Cecilia says as she lets the gentle hum of the bus calm her into a peaceful daze, watching the different sights pass by through the window.

"Gigi, huh?" Raora chuckles as Cecilia nodded, "Speaking of her..."

"What about her?" Cecilia asks, as a teasing smile crawls up Raora's lips.

Raora gently nudged the perfectionist, with a playful gleam in her eyes. "Come on Cece, you can't tell me you didn't enjoy bowling with her," the artist giggles, "You were practically beaming the whole time."

Cecilia's face warmed as she crossed her arms in defense. "I mean, I did enjoy myself," Cecilia mutters, "But it's not like I loved every second of it or anything..."

"Sure... In any case, I'm just glad you're getting along with her," Raora says, clearly not buying whatever Cecilia just said.

Cecilia bit her lip, unable to deny that she had enjoyed the game, maybe more than she'd expected. There had been something oddly fun about sparring with Gigi in that lighthearted competition at the bowling alley. It wasn't about proving who was better—It had felt more like they were pushing each other, making the game more exciting.

"I'm still planning to beat her to a pulp next semester," Cecilia says stubbornly as Raora sighs.

"I thought so," Raora said, patting Cecilia's head, "Just don't forget to loosen up every once in a while."

After a few moments of comfortable silence, Cecilia spoke up again. "Raora...do you think I'm too hard on myself?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Raora turned her head slightly, glancing at her friend. "Sometimes, yeah. Not sure if you noticed, but you set really high expectations for yourself," the artist points out.

Cecilia lifted her head slightly, looking thoughtful. "Maybe," she murmured, "I've been thinking and it's just... I don't want to keep feeling like I'm not good enough. I don't want to lose to *her*."

Raora rolled her eyes playfully. "You really let her get to you, huh? I mean, she's smart, yeah, but you two couldn't be more different," Raora says, "Maybe it'll help if you don't think about beating her so often?"

Cecilia sighed again, sitting up and leaning her head against the window this time. "I know, but it's hard not to. Everything comes easy to her," Cecilia mumbles.

Raora raised an eyebrow. “Who knows? Gigi might make it look easy, but that doesn’t mean she’s not putting in the work. Maybe you just don’t see it.”

Cecilia paused, considering Raora’s words. She had always viewed Gigi as someone who breezed through life without much effort, but what if that wasn’t true? What if Gigi had her own struggles that Cecilia had never bothered to notice?

“I never thought about it that way,” Cecilia admitted, her tone softening, “I guess I’ve been too caught up in trying to beat her to really pay attention.”

Raora smiled knowingly. “That’s because you’re stubborn as hell,” she teased, nudging Cecilia with her elbow, “But seriously, Cece... you should give yourself more credit. You’re amazing in your own way.”

Cecilia smiled faintly, her heart warming a little at Raora’s words. “Thanks, Raora. You’re the best.”

“That’s what best friends are for,” Raora replied, grinning, “Besides, I’ve known you long enough to know when you need to hear it.”

Cecilia chuckled softly, the tension from earlier easing out of her body. She leaned back into the seat, feeling more relaxed than she had in days.

They sat in a peaceful silence for a while longer, the gentle rocking of the bus soothing their tired minds.

Cecilia glanced out the window again, watching the familiar sights of their neighborhood come into view. The small grocery store where she used to stop for snacks after school, the park where they had hung out on countless afternoons. All of it felt so familiar, yet distant at the same time. Maybe it was because she had been so focused on revision lately that she had forgotten to appreciate the little things in life.

“Hey, Raora?” Cecilia said after a while.

“Hmm?”

“Do you ever feel like... you’re missing out on stuff? Like, you’re so focused on one thing that you forget about everything else?”

Raora tilted her head, thinking for a moment. “Yeah, sometimes,” she admitted, “But I try to balance it. I mean, you gotta live a little, right? Otherwise, what’s the point?”

Cecilia nodded slowly, her mind thinking about Raora’s words. Balance. That was something she had never been very good at. It was always all or nothing with her. Either she was completely focused on something, or she wasn’t doing it at all. Maybe that was why she felt so stressed all the time.

“I think I need to figure out how to do that,” Cecilia said quietly, “You know, balance things better. I don’t want to burn out before the new semester even starts.”

Raora smiled, nodding in agreement. “That’s the spirit. And hey, you’ve got the rest of summer to figure it out. No rush,” Raora reassures.

Cecilia smiled back, feeling more sure of herself than she had in weeks. Maybe she didn’t need to push herself so hard all the time. Maybe it was okay to slow down and enjoy life a little. After all, there was more to life than just grades and tests.

As the bus pulled up to their stop, the two girls stood up, stretching their arms after the long ride. The cool evening air greeted them as they stepped off the bus, and Cecilia breathed in deeply, feeling refreshed.

“Wanna walk the long way home?” Raora suggested, glancing down the street that led through the park.

Cecilia nodded, her steps feeling lighter as they started walking. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

The duo strolled down the quiet street, the sounds of crickets chirping and leaves rustling in the breeze filling the air. The park was peaceful at this hour, with only a few people still lingering on the benches or walking their dogs.

Cecilia took in her surroundings and smiled to herself, the perfectionist now realizing how nice it is to just live in the present. That's not to say she didn't have the future in mind, however. Cecilia was still committed to beating Gigi when the new school term starts, but something about how the perfectionist viewed her upcoming competitions with Gigi had changed.

At first, all Cecilia wanted to do was mercilessly destroy the blonde in every aspect of academics and take her place at the top of the rankings. But now, after spending time with Gigi at the bowling alley, Cecilia realized just how exciting competing with the blonde could be. And more than that, the prospect of beating Gigi had shifted into something else—a genuine challenge, not just about proving superiority. Gigi wasn’t just an obstacle in her way; She was someone who pushed her to be better.

Cecilia stared into the sky, her thoughts drifting. Perhaps it wasn't just about winning anymore. Sure, she still wanted to come out on top, but the rivalry seemed to have taken on a new energy. And maybe, just maybe... that will be for the best.

Sleepover

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In a densely crowded bookstore, Cecilia runs her fingers against the many spines of exercise books sitting in the ‘*Mathematics*’ aisle, occasionally taking one out to examine.

Many weeks have passed by since Cecilia went out bowling with the others, and while she has loosened up a little, her goal to beat Gigi still remained unshaken. Despite having changed her attitude and mindset regarding how she goes about competing with Gigi, old habits die hard, and she still found herself studying during most of her free time.

The end of summer was also fast approaching, and with it, the beginning of the new semester.

The green haired girl was currently shopping for new workbooks after completing several previous ones over the course of the summer. The only problem was... finding a workbook that she hasn't already completed. “*Algebra 101 ... Adding Up: The Essential Algebraic Guide...*” Cecilia reads, picking up two books with a ‘*New Arrivals*’ sticker pasted on their covers, “Guess I'll give these a go.”

Cecilia placed the books into her tote bag, before walking over to the shelves containing the physics books. The girl spent the next few minutes probing the aisle, only to realize that she had already owned and finished all of the Year 1 Physics books that were available.

Sighing in disappointment, Cecilia decided to head to the counter to pay for her books, seeing as there was nothing else left for her to browse. She shifted the weight of the tote bag on her shoulder and made her way towards the front of the store. The familiar scent of paper and the sounds of distant conversation filled the air. It was a comforting environment for someone like her.

Cecilia reached the counter, passing her haul to the cashier. As the cashier scanned her books, she allowed her mind to wander for a moment. The summer was slipping away, and soon the cyclical routine of school life would begin again.

As much as she liked to be prepared, the thought of returning to that pressure of academics made her stomach knot slightly. She shook the feeling off as the cashier handed her the receipt. Grabbing her bag, Cecilia gave a brief nod and turned to leave the store, when she spotted a familiar face.

Gigi Murin was standing at the ‘*Fiction*’ aisle, seemingly engrossed in the story of a book she picked up. Surprisingly, the blonde's hair was down, flowing onto her shoulders in loose waves, which was a stark contrast to her usual pigtails. It was a small change, but it made Cecilia stop in her tracks.

There was something about seeing Gigi in this more casual state that made Cecilia do a double take and caused her heart to soften, though she quickly caught herself and straightened up. Adjusting her bag on her shoulder, she debated whether to say something or simply slip out unnoticed. But even as she started to walk toward the exit, she found her gaze drifting back to Gigi.

Cecilia paused mid-step, her curiosity tugging at her despite her better judgment. What was Gigi doing here? A bookshop felt to her like the last place the blonde would be spending her time in. Cecilia hesitated for a moment longer, biting her lip, before finally relenting. With a small sigh, she turned on her heel and slowly made her way toward Gigi, careful not to make her presence too obvious just yet.

Peeking from behind the corner of a shelf, Cecilia watched her rival read the book with an engrossed and relaxed expression. The blonde's fingers glided along the words on the page, as if she were embracing each and every word of the novel. Cecilia had never seen the rambunctious girl so... focused on anything before. It was almost enthralling to witness.

Two boys walked past the green haired girl, eyebrows raised at Cecilia's sneaky behavior. She quickly stood up straight in an attempt to look more casual, though her cheeks were already warmed from embarrassment. Glancing back at Gigi, she was struck again by how serene and at ease the girl seemed. It was disarming to see this side of her, so different from the loud and energetic person Cecilia was used to.

Despite herself, Cecilia couldn't help but inch a little closer, her curiosity fully piqued now.

Cecilia walked over to the blonde, looking over her shoulder before clearing her throat awkwardly. "Whatcha reading there?" Cecilia asks, causing Gigi to jump a little.

"Cece?! What are you doing here?" Gigi exclaimed, nearly dropping her novel, as she smoothed out her hair.

Cecilia giggled at how spooked Gigi got, before lifting up her tote bag. "I wanted to get some books for myself," Cecilia replies simply, "What are you doing here?"

"I got bored at home so I came here to see if there's anything interesting in stock," Gigi explains, before narrowing her eyes at Cecilia, who had begun chuckling, "Hey, what's so funny?!"

"You read? That's news to me," Cecilia remarked, her tone light and teasing.

"Oi, what does that mean?" Gigi shoots back, "Of course I read!"

"Really? You don't strike me as the type who'd sit quietly and indulge in a good book," Cecilia replied with a smirk, tilting her head.

Gigi huffed, closing the book and waving it at Cecilia. "Just because I don't brag about it doesn't mean I don't know how to enjoy a nice book, alright?" Gigi says as Cecilia raised an eyebrow, amused.

“Okay, okay. So what's caught your attention so much that you didn't even notice me sneaking up on you?” Cecilia asks as Gigi reveals the cover of the book to her.

“It's a mystery-fantasy novel. Nothing too heavy, unlike those textbooks you're probably lugging around in that bag,” Gigi grins, as she hands the book to Cecilia. “*Myths*... “ Cecilia reads aloud, “*An aspiring detective inherits*... hmm, so you're into these kinds of stories?”

“I don't really have a specific genre I'm into, I just pick whatever seems interesting at the time,” Gigi shrugged, still smiling as she crossed her arms, “What about you? All workbooks and no fun, as usual?”

Rolling her eyes, Cecilia shrugged. “I like to stay prepared,” the green haired girl defended herself, “Plus, I find studying to be therapeutic.”

“Nerd.”

“Idiot.”

“Heh, I guess calling you a nerd would make me a bit of a hypocrite,” Gigi chuckles, taking the novel from Cecilia before dropping it into a basket next to her, “I'm getting quite a few books today.”

Cecilia reached into Gigi's basket, looking through the books inside while Gigi continued browsing the shelves. To her astonishment, there were several romance novels mixed in with the various titles. Cecilia raised an eyebrow, glancing over at Gigi, who seemed entirely unbothered as she flipped through more books. “Romance novels?” she muttered under her breath, feeling a mix of amusement and surprise.

“Yeah, I've got a bunch of 'em,” Gigi said, crouching down next to Cecilia. “I've even got some BL and GL in the mix.”

Cecilia felt her cheeks heat slightly at the unexpected discovery. “I didn't think you were into those kinds of stories,” she admitted, a hint of fluster in her voice.

Gigi shrugged, unphased. “Why not? They're loads of fun. Especially if they're shitty, like this one,” Gigi says, holding up a GL light novel from the basket.

Cecilia couldn't help but steal another glance at the titles, her curiosity battling with a lingering embarrassment. “I guess I just never pictured you as the romantic type,” she replied, feeling flustered by Gigi's choices.

“Maybe there's more to me than you think, doll,” Gigi shot back with a teasing grin, nudging Cecilia with her shoulder as she stood back up, lifting up the basket.

The pair then made their way to the counter, where they joined the queue. “Oh, you're still here?” Gigi remarked, noticing the taller girl behind her.

Cecilia averted Gigi's gaze, feeling a bit flustered. “Yeah, just decided to stick around for a bit,” she replied, adjusting the tote bag on her shoulder.

“Heh, are you stalking me or something?” Gigi teased, glancing sideways at her with a grin.

Cecilia huffs, before furrowing her brow. “You know what, maybe I’ll just leave,” Cecilia snaps before making a move. However, Gigi grabbed her wrist as she grinned at the taller girl.

“I was just kidding!” Gigi laughs, as she pulls Cecilia back into the line, “It’s just a goof!”

The green haired girl pouts as looks away from Gigi. “I hate you,” Cecilia sighed as she stood next to Gigi.

“I know you mean love~” Gigi replied, teasingly bumping against Cecilia’s shoulder.

When the person ahead of them stepped up to the counter, Gigi suddenly turned to Cecilia with a grin. “Wait here a sec,” she said, before dashing off to a nearby shelf.

Cecilia blinked, watching her go. “What now?” she muttered under her breath.

Moments later, Gigi returned, triumphantly holding up a Roblox gift card. “Had to grab this real quick,” she said with a smirk.

Cecilia stared at the card, then back at Gigi. “Really...” Cecilia remarks dryly, “...Robux?”

Gigi shrugged. “Hey, I have needs, don’t judge me,” Gigi winked as they walked up to an available counter.

“That will be seventy-three dollars,” the clerk announced after bagging Gigi’s items. Cecilia’s jaw dropped upon hearing the total.

“Seventy-three dollars?” the green haired girl muttered, wide-eyed. But Gigi was completely unfazed, casually digging into her pocket and pulling out a few coupons along with her bookstore membership card.

“Don’t worry,” the blonde said confidently, handing them to the clerk, “I’ve got points saved up.”

The clerk scanned the coupons and card, significantly reducing the price of Gigi’s haul. “That brings your total down to... twelve dollars,” the clerk says as Cecilia blinks, completely dumbfounded.

“How...?” Cecilia says, impressed by the huge discount. Gigi shot her a smug grin as she handed over the money.

“Perks of being a regular,” Gigi winks, “You should get a membership card too! Trust me, you won’t regret it.”

Cecilia glanced at the poster behind the counter listing out two different schemes for a bookshop membership card.

MEMBERSHIP SCHEME

1 YEAR SCHEME: \$15

3 YEAR SCHEME: \$30

"I guess I can try it out," Cecilia says, as the cashier brings out a box of cards from underneath the counter.

After Cecilia purchased the one-year membership scheme, the pair exited the bookshop and stepped into the bustling mall. The sounds of people conversing, the hum of background jazz music, and the scent of food from nearby restaurants filled the air. Gigi stretched her arms overhead, looking pleased with her haul.

"So, what now?" Gigi asked, glancing over at Cecilia with a playful grin, "You sticking around for a little more, or are you gonna go off and study again?"

Cecilia rolled her eyes, her bag shifting slightly on her shoulder. "I don't *just* study, you know," Cecilia argued as Gigi smirks.

"Wow, did I just hear that right?" Gigi gasped dramatically, "Who are you and what did you do with Cecilia Immergreen?!"

"Haha, very funny," Cecilia says sarcastically, before tucking her hair behind her ear sheepishly, "Okay fine, I admit I *was* going to head home and get some work done. "

Gigi raised an eyebrow. "Figured as much. But since you're already out, why not stick around a bit longer?" the blonde suggests, "We could grab something to eat or, I don't know, window shop or something."

Cecilia hesitated, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "I don't know..."

"Come on, Cece, you've already bought your books. What's a little break gonna hurt?" Gigi nudged her, eyes gleaming with playful insistence.

Cecilia's gaze met Gigi's wide, pleading eyes. The two had never hung out one-on-one before, and the thought of it made her stomach flutter with nervousness and curiosity.

"I... suppose it wouldn't hurt," Cecilia relented, shifting her tote bag again, "But just for a little while."

Gigi's smile widened. "Perfect! I know just the spot," the blonde said happily, and without waiting for Cecilia to reply, she grabbed the taller girl's arm and started leading her toward the escalators.

"Wait, where are we going?" Cecilia asked, trying to keep up with Gigi's eager pace.

"You'll see," Gigi winked.

“Table for two?” a waiter asked as the pair approached the entrance of a cheap Italian restaurant Gigi had chosen.

Cecilia blinked, looking around the cozy restaurant, which had a soft lighting and an easygoing nature. It wasn’t exactly where she pictured herself spending the afternoon, certainly not alone with Gigi, of all people, but something about the laid-back vibe of the place felt strangely inviting.

“Yep!” Gigi replies to the waiter brightly as she follows him to a booth near a window, practically skipping with each step. Cecilia trailed behind, her bag slung over her shoulder, still processing how quickly she had ended up here instead of heading home to study.

The pair settled into the booth, Gigi immediately grabbing the electronic menu with an eager grin while Cecilia glanced out the window, watching the mall crowd pass by. It felt odd—sitting across from Gigi in such a casual setting. They’d hung out before, sure, but always with a group. This was new.

Cecilia’s gaze drifted back to Gigi, who was now leaning forward over the menu with her elbows on the table, eyes scanning the list. “Alright, doll,” Gigi grinned, flashing her usual playful smirk, “What’s it gonna be? My treat, since I practically kidnapped you out of that bookstore.”

Cecilia gave her a look, raising an eyebrow. “Kidnapped is a strong word, but sure,” she said dryly, though the edges of her mouth twitched upward.

Gigi chuckled, waving her hand dismissively. “Eh, same thing. If I didn’t ask you out you’d just return to that study cave of yours,” the blonde says as she tapped on the menu, “Come on, live a little. Order anything.”

Cecilia hesitated, picking up the menu and glancing over it. Although she felt just a little awkward having lunch with Gigi, something about the latter’s outgoingness was contagious. “It’s alright, you don’t have to treat me,” Cecilia smiles as she adds a plate of carbonara pasta to her order, “The prices here are pretty good.”

“Well, let me at least treat you to the drinks,” Gigi insists, taking the tablet out of Cecilia’s hands, “We can use the free-flow drink bar here for only three bucks!”

“You don’t have to treat me. I’m pretty sure I can afford three bucks,” Cecilia argued as Gigi put up a finger.

“How about this: I’ll treat you to the drinks bar today, but you’ll have to return the favor and get me something the next time we go out?” Gigi compromises, flashing a toothy grin at the green haired girl.

Cecilia relents, knowing there is no changing the blonde's mind. "Fine..." Cecilia agrees reluctantly, a slight frown appearing on her face.

"Come on... live a little," Gigi laughed, glancing up at Cecilia, "It's a special occasion! I mean, who would've thought the two of us would be hanging out like this?"

"It's definitely a plot twist," Cecilia giggled as they placed their orders on the tablet.

"Right? We're basically best friends now," Gigi beamed. Cecilia chuckled at the blonde's over-the-top enthusiasm.

"Let's not get too ahead of ourselves here," Cecilia counters as Gigi pouts.

"You can be so cold, you know that?" Gigi says, before standing and dragging the taller girl up, "Come on, let's go get our drinks!"

At the drink bar, Gigi excitedly filled her cup with a mix of orange soda and grape juice. "What on earth are you doing?" Cecilia questioned Gigi, slightly shocked yet amused at her mixing of the different choices of drinks.

"Let me cook here," Gigi defended herself, as the contents of her drink turned purple-orange, "Hehe, this feels like one of our chemistry lab lessons."

Cecilia laughed, watching her. "It's *nothing* like chemistry..." she says, before pouring a blend of lemon-lime soda and a hint of cranberry juice into her glass, "Look at this, I call this concoction '*An Immergreen Surprise*.'"

Gigi stared at Cecilia's unusually colored mocktail, chuckling. "What's the surprise?" Gigi asked as they made their way back to their booth.

"Bleh... its taste," Cecilia answered, taking a sip from her drink before wincing a little.

"Are you sure about that?" Gigi snickered as Cecilia cringed from the sourness of her creation.

"Hey, I didn't say anything about its quality," Cecilia pointed out as the pair broke out into a fit of giggles.

After they returned to their table, they found their meals to have already been delivered. Cecilia's carbonara appeared rich and creamy, while Gigi's squid ink pasta shone enticingly under the restaurant lighting.

"Wow, that was fast!" Gigi exclaimed, settling back into her seat. She twirled a forkful of her pasta, before stuffing her mouth with the inky black pasta.

Cecilia took a bite of her carbonara, savoring the rich flavor that enveloped her taste buds. "This is really good," she said, nodding in approval.

"Right? Cheap food that tastes good... what more could you want?" Gigi said, flashing a grin as she shoveled another forkful of squid ink pasta into her mouth.

Cecilia glanced up at Gigi, only to stifle a laugh. “Uh... Gigi,” she started, her voice wavering with amusement.

“What?” Gigi asked, her mouth full of pasta.

“You might want to check a mirror,” Cecilia chuckled, unable to hold back her laughter anymore, “You’ve got the black sauce all over your teeth.”

Gigi blinked, confused at first, before grabbing a napkin and wiping at her mouth. “Oh no...” the blonde groaned, seeing the stains, which only made Cecilia laugh harder.

The rest of their lunch went by smoothly, with the pair bantering as well as indulging in lighthearted conversations.

Gigi wiped the last ink stains from her mouth with a napkin, smiling at Cecilia. “You know, this might be the first time we’ve actually just... talked,” Gigi noted as she fiddled with the remaining sauce on her plate.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, setting her fork down. “What do you mean? We’ve talked before,” Cecilia asks, resting her chin on her hand.

“Not like this,” Gigi replied, leaning back in her seat and spinning her glass lazily, “Usually, we’d just be at each other’s throats. But today... we’re just having lunch together, like a couple of bros.”

Cecilia thought about it for a moment, sipping from her drink. “I guess you’re right. We never really just sat down and had a proper conversation,” Cecilia smiles as Gigi nods excitedly.

“Exactly!” Gigi said, leaning forward, her eyes twinkling with enthusiasm, “It’s kinda nice, don’t you think? Just two people, having a normal conversation. No competing, no fighting.”

Cecilia smiled, a bit surprised at how relaxed she felt. “Yeah, I’m not used to this with you. I mean, you’re usually pissing me off for one reason or another,” Cecilia comments.

“Which is fun and all,” Gigi added quickly, smirking, “But I could get used to this too.”

Cecilia nodded. The usual tension that surrounded the pair whenever they were within the vicinity of each other seemed to have eased just a little. “Maybe we should do it more often... just hang out like this,” Cecilia suggests shyly.

Gigi grinned. “Ooh? Am I hearing this right? Cecilia Immergreen wants to spend more time with me?” Gigi jests, hiding her face jokingly.

Cecilia shot her a half-hearted glare but chuckled in spite of herself. “Don’t push it, Gigi.”

The pair finished their meals in relative silence and when they were done, Gigi stood and stretched, glancing at the bill the waiter had placed on the table. “Okie dokie, I’ll get the bill,” Gigi volunteers, reaching into her pocket.

“I don’t mind covering the drinks, you know,” Cecilia began, before Gigi cut her off.

“No, no, I’ll cover it,” Gigi insisted, pulling out a different set of coupons, “I’ve got some more discounts to use, so it won’t cost much anyway.”

They paid for their meals, with Gigi gleefully handing over her points card to knock a few more dollars off the total. Once everything was settled, the two of them grabbed their bags and headed for the exit. The cool air of the mall’s AC greeted them as they stepped outside the restaurant, and Cecilia was once again struck by how natural the whole outing had felt.

As they walked side by side, Gigi glanced over at Cecilia. “It’s only half-past four,” Gigi observed, glancing at her phone, “Do you wanna hang out a little more?”

Cecilia locked eyes with the blonde, who seemed to be trying her best to appear casual, though her eyes held a hint of hopefulness. Gigi was practically bouncing on her feet, but she wasn’t saying anything directly. Cecilia thought for a moment, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“I guess I have some time,” Cecilia replied, trying to sound as neutral as possible, “So what do we do now?”

Gigi’s face lit up slightly at Cecilia’s response. She turned her head and pointed towards a part of the mall filled with colorful machines lined up in rows. “Oh, I know, how about there?”

Cecilia followed Gigi’s gaze to the section of the mall littered with gacha machines, bright and enticing with their promises of figurines, keychains, and other little trinkets. The rows of machines stretched out ahead of them, and a small part of Cecilia felt a little curious about the appeal.

“You seriously spend your time on gacha?” Cecilia asked, raising an eyebrow as they approached the machines.

“Hey, don’t knock it till you try it!” Gigi grinned, already rifling through her bag for some spare change, “It’s not just about what you get—it’s the thrill of it, the randomness, taking a chance!”

Cecilia scoffed. “Well I think they’re pretty predatory and a waste of money,” Cecilia says as Gigi rolls her eyes, inserting a note into the token dispenser with a smirk.

“Says the girl who spent like twenty bucks on two algebra books this morning,” Gigi snickers.

Cecilia opened her mouth to retort, but Gigi was already turning the knob on the machine. A small plastic capsule dropped into the dispenser, and Gigi’s eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. She eagerly popped it open, revealing a tiny figurine of a character wearing a volleyball jersey.

“Oh, look at this!” Gigi exclaimed, holding it up for Cecilia to see, “Isn’t it adorable?”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow but couldn't help a small smile. "Yeah, I guess it's cute. Where's this guy from?" Cecilia asked, as she inspected the tiny figure.

"From a volleyball anime," Gigi answers, grinning wide, before handing Cecilia a token, "Come on, it's your turn."

Cecilia sighed, stepping up to one of the machines. She hesitated for a moment as she retrieved a token from Gigi. It felt a little silly, but the thrill of not knowing what she would get from the machine intrigued her greatly.

The green haired girl dropped a token into the machine, turning the knob, as a small capsule clinked into the tray below. Opening it, Cecilia found a miniature keychain of an octopus holding a book. Gigi peeked over her shoulder, before wheezing.

"Pfffttt, what the hell is that?!" Gigi teased, nudging her playfully, "An... octopus?"

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, but her lips curled into a smile. "An *intellectual* octopus," Cecilia corrects, as the pair broke out into a fit of mad cackling.

The two of them continued strolling through the gacha machines, occasionally stopping to try another machine. Every time they got a new trinket, they would show it off to each other proudly, and eventually, Cecilia would start spending some money on tokens herself.

As they wandered, Gigi's loud laughter filled the air, and though she didn't say it outright, Cecilia had a feeling that Gigi wasn't in any rush to leave. The subtle glances Gigi shot her, the way she lingered at each machine... it was clear that she wanted to stretch out their time together.

And Cecilia, much to her surprise, didn't mind.

By the time the pair were done with their gacha spree, they had to store all their new trinkets in a separate bag. Gigi had gone all out, snatching up anything that caught her eye, while Cecilia managed to resist the temptation for the most part, though a few cute charms made their way into her collection.

"Looks like someone's got a problem," Cecilia teased, glancing at the bulging plastic bag Gigi was struggling with.

"They're limited edition *Haikyuu* figurines!" Gigi shot back, trying to maintain her grip on the handles, "You can't just leave these behind, Cece."

Cecilia smirked. "Uh-huh, sure. You just keep telling yourself that."

As they strolled further into the mall, the day winding down, the earlier awkwardness seemed to fade completely. They didn't need to talk constantly. Gigi would point out a

random store or window display, and Cecilia would make a remark in return, but it all felt natural.

They passed by a row of brightly lit shops when Gigi, checking her phone, glanced at the time. "It's... now six o'clock. Are you sure you're not tired?" she asked, her voice a mix of curiosity and hope.

Cecilia glanced at Gigi, sensing there was something unspoken in the question. Admittedly, she was a little tired, but despite herself, she really didn't mind staying a little longer. "We could... hang around just a little more, I guess," Cecilia says, looking at a distant shop in order to avoid Gigi's gaze.

The small smile Gigi flashed at her in response made Cecilia's chest warm, though she said nothing. They continued walking around when suddenly, Cecilia paused in front of a music store. She stopped to admire the many shiny instruments on display, while Gigi leaned her shoulder against hers.

"Instruments?" Gigi asked, her voice softening slightly as she noticed Cecilia's fascination.

"Yeah, I was just looking," Cecilia replied, her gaze lingering on a beautiful violin in the window. The craftsmanship of the instrument drew her in, the wood polished to a warm shine that reflected the bright lights of the mall.

Gigi smiled before taking the taller girl by the hand. "We could go in if you wanna," she suggested, glancing at Cecilia with a sparkle of encouragement in her eyes, "Come on... I've been dragging you everywhere all day. Let's go somewhere *you* wanna go."

Cecilia hesitated for just a moment, feeling the warmth of Gigi's hand wrapping around hers. "Okay," she finally agreed, feeling a sense of excitement within her. The two of them stepped inside the music store, the air filled with the soft playing of notes and chords from various instruments being tested by other customers.

As they entered, Cecilia's eyes widened at the sight of the vast array of instruments displayed on the walls. There were guitars of all shapes and sizes, drums with vibrant finishes, and keyboards that were begging for a melody to be played. But it was the string section that truly captivated her attention.

Gigi wandered a few steps ahead, clearly delighted by the sheer variety. "Look at all this stuff! It's so... shiny," she said, her voice rising with enthusiasm, "Do you play any of these?"

Cecilia bit her lip, feeling a familiar nervousness creeping in. She was no stranger to the violin, but that didn't stop her from feeling a little self-conscious whenever it came to playing in front of others. Still, the allure of the instrument was too strong to resist. She moved toward the display where the violins were carefully arranged. "Yeah, I've played the violin a lot when I was a kid," Cecilia replies as she traces a finger on the wood of the string instruments.

Gigi watched her with a gleam of hope in her eyes. “You know, you should show off a bit. I bet you’re amazing,” she said, leaning against the display case, her tone teasing yet supportive.

“I’m not *amazing* amazing, so don’t be too disappointed,” Cecilia replies. With a deep breath, Cecilia picked up the violin, a blend of comfort and anxiety swirling within her. She tucked it under her chin, adjusting the position just right as the sensation of the bow gliding across the strings sent a shiver of excitement down her spine.

“Alright, let’s see what you’ve got, doll,” Gigi encouraged, her eyes sparkling as she watched Cecilia closely.

Cecilia’s fingers danced over the strings, bringing out a melody that echoed softly through the shop. She lost herself in the music, the notes flowing effortlessly as she played a complex, yet beautiful tune. The vibrations resonated through the violin, filling the air as the heads of other customers turned to the green haired girl.

Gigi stood enthralled, her eyes widening as Cecilia continued. She was amazed by the gracefulness of which Cecilia operated the instrument. The notes seemed to pop out from the strings, each one drawing in the blonde even further. It was a side of Cecilia she hadn’t seen before, and she couldn’t tear her gaze away.

Cecilia felt a rush of exhilaration as with each stroke of the bow. The world around her blurred, and all she could hear was the music filling the store. She glanced over at Gigi, catching the blonde’s enchanted expression and feeling her confidence swell.

Finishing the piece, Cecilia lowered the violin, her heart racing with a mix of thrill and apprehension. She glanced at Gigi, who was still standing there, clearly captivated. “What do you think?” Cecilia asked, trying to mask the vulnerability in her voice.

“W-woah, that was incredible!” Gigi exclaimed, her voice filled with genuine admiration, “You’re so talented! I had no idea you could play like that.”

Cecilia felt a blush creep to her cheeks. “Thanks,” she replied, a shy smile breaking through her initial nerves, “I’m surprised it came out all right. I haven’t performed in front of others for quite some time...”

“You should do it more often!” Gigi insisted, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, “You could be, like, a professional or something. I’d come to watch you if you held a concert.”

Cecilia chuckled, feeling the warmth of Gigi’s encouragement envelop her. “I don’t know about that...”

“Well, it’s fun for me to watch you!” Gigi said, bouncing on her heels as she tried to catch Cecilia’s gaze.

Cecilia found herself smiling at Gigi’s enthusiasm. “Heh, I’ll consider it then,” the green hair girl said shyly, feeling a newfound sense of confidence.

“Come on, let’s find something else to play with!” Gigi said, leading Cecilia further into the store. They wandered through the aisles, stopping to admire various instruments, from grand pianos to sleek electric guitars.

Gigi picked up a small ukulele and strummed a few playful chords. “I remember playing the ukulele back in my Junior High days,” Gigi recalls as she strums.

Cecilia laughed, her heart feeling lighter than it had all day. “Not too shabby,” she remarked as Gigi began strumming mindlessly.

Their laughter echoed through the store, drawing the attention of a few other customers. Gigi leaned closer to Cecilia, her expression a mix of amusement and mischief. “What if we put on a show right here? Just us and the ukulele and violin. We could be like a musical duo,” Gigi suggests playfully.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, unable to hold back her grin. “Something tells me we’d just be goofing around,” Cecilia chuckles.

“But it’ll be fun!” Gigi insisted, plucking a few more strings before giving up, “Alright, alright, I was just kidding, but I’m so glad we came in here. It’s nice to see this side of you.”

Cecilia felt the same warmth spread through her chest, realizing how much she appreciated Gigi’s company. “Yeah, me too,” she admitted, her voice softening slightly.

As they continued to explore the store, Gigi picked up a few random instruments just to tease Cecilia, making exaggerated sounds that made them both burst into laughter. It felt easy, uncomplicated, and more than anything, fun. They tried out various instruments, experimenting with sounds and rhythms, their laughter echoing through the aisles.

Finally, they made their way to the exit. Gigi turned to Cecilia, her expression softening. “I really had a great time today, you know? I mean it,” Gigi says.

“Yeah, me too,” Cecilia replied, her voice genuine, “Thanks for dragging me around.”

Gigi nudged her playfully. “Anytime! We should do this sometime again,” the blonde smirked.

“Definitely,” Cecilia agreed, a small smile spreading across her face.

As they left the mall, the sun began to set, casting a faint golden glow onto the streets below as dark clouds swirled above them. Cecilia felt a sense of contentment wash over her. There was something special about today, as much as she didn’t want to fully admit it.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” Gigi mumbles as they felt a strong wind blow past them. “I guess so,” Cecilia replies, “I’ll be walking home. My house isn’t too far from the mall. What about you?”

“Oh! I live in the area too! We could… walk back together if you’d like… I mean you don’t have to but…” Gigi began nervously, glancing sideways at Cecilia, who smiled warmly in response.

“That would be nice,” Cecilia said, her smile brightening even more as Gigi’s expression shifted from nervousness to beaming with excitement.

“Okay! Let’s get going then,” Gigi grinned, and the pair hit the road.

As they walked side by side, the clouds began to gather ominously above them. The first few drops of rain fell, lightly tapping against the pavement, but the sound quickly escalated into a steady drizzle. Gigi glanced up, frowning slightly. “Looks like we’re in for some rain. I hope it doesn’t get too bad,” Gigi observes, as she shielded her face from the onslaught of raindrops.

Cecilia looked at the sky, a flicker of concern crossing her face as the drizzle began to intensify. “It’s okay. We can just walk a little faster,” she suggested, quickening her pace.

They continued down the street, the rain picking up in intensity, eventually evolving from a light drizzle into a steady downpour. Gigi pulled her jacket closer around her, her hair beginning to cling to her forehead. “Maybe we should find some cover,” she said, glancing around as the wind picked up.

As they approached a bus stop, a rumble of thunder echoed in the distance, startling them both. Cecilia felt her heart race a little, partly from the storm and partly from the thrill of being out in the rain with Gigi. “We could wait here for a bit,” she suggested, stepping under the bus shelter.

Gigi nodded but frowned slightly as she watched the rain fall heavily. “Man, I hate waiting in the rain,” she admitted, “And it looks like it’s going to pour for a while too.”

Cecilia considered their options, her thoughts racing. “Well... my place is just a few blocks away. If you don’t mind, you could come over until the rain stops,” the green haired girl suggested, the words spilling out before she thought things through.

Gigi’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? Are you sure? I don’t want to impose,” she replied, her cheeks flushing a soft shade of pink.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Cecilia reassured her, turning away to hide a blush, “I promise it’ll be more comfortable than waiting out here.”

Gigi hesitated for a moment before her expression brightened again. “A-alright then. Off we go!” she said, her voice filled with renewed energy.

The pair ran out of the bus stop, braving the rain, ducking under their arms and hurrying along the sidewalk, laughing as they dashed towards Cecilia’s home. The storm seemed to fully unleash its fury right as they reached Cecilia’s doorstep, the wind blowing so strongly it began howling.

Once inside, the duo shook off the water as best they could, Gigi laughing as she tried to wring out her hair. “I look like a wet dog!” she exclaimed, making a funny face in the mirror at the entrance corridor

Cecilia chuckled, her own drenched hair falling into her eyes as she wiped the water from her cheeks. “Don’t worry about it, you look kinda cute like that,” she teased, as Gigi turned to her with an exaggerated gasp.

“You’re going to make me blush!” she replied, covering her face with her hands.

Cecilia felt warmth rise in her cheeks as she moved to grab a couple of towels from a nearby shelf. “Idiot. Here, dry off a bit,” she said, handing one to Gigi, “I’ll grab some hot drinks.”

“Thanks! You’re the best,” Gigi replied, grinning widely as she dried her hair.

As Cecilia moved into the kitchen, she could hear the patter of rain against the windows, the sound oddly soothing. She proceeded to prepare a couple of steaming mugs of hot chocolate, the rich aroma filling the small kitchen. While waiting for the milk to heat, she took a moment to collect her thoughts, reflecting on how easy it was to be around Gigi today.

“Who knew we could get along like this?” Cecilia smiles to herself.

When she returned to the living room with two mugs in hand, Gigi had settled comfortably on the couch, her legs tucked under her. “Wow, your place is really nice,” she said, sniffing as she accepted a mug from Cecilia, “It’s cozy... ahh.. ahh. AH CHOO!”

Cecilia frowned upon hearing the blonde sneeze. “You’re gonna catch a cold. You should go take a shower, Gigi,” Cecilia instructed as Gigi shook her head.

“It’s fine, I’m... I’m- AHCHOOO!” Gigi sneezed, to which Cecilia narrows her eyes.

“Just do it, or I’m kicking you out into the rain!” Cecilia groaned, dragging Gigi towards the bathroom.

“Fine...” Gigi relented, before grinning mischievously, “But you’ll have to join me~”

The taller girl threw a change of clothes directly at Gigi’s face, causing the blond to yelp in shock. “Shut up! I’ll use the other bathroom!” Cecilia snaps, her face flustered.

After a warm shower, Gigi took a sip of her hot chocolate and sighed happily. “This is perfect. Just what I needed after getting soaked out there,” she whispers to herself, her eyes sparkling with warmth.

Just then, the other bathroom door opened as Cecilia stepped out, drying her hair with a towel. The green haired girl then sat by the sofa with Gigi before turning on the television.

The two sat quietly for a moment, sipping their drinks and listening to the program currently on TV as the heavy rain continued tapping against the windows.

“So... do you play any other instruments?” Gigi asked, breaking the silence.

“Just the violin, really. I also played the piano, but I never really kept up with it,” Cecilia admitted, shrugging slightly, “I think I enjoy the violin the most, though. It feels like an extension of myself.”

“I get that,” Gigi said thoughtfully, “It’s like how I feel about dancing. It’s just... liberating, you know?”

Cecilia nodded, intrigued. “You dance? I had no idea!” Cecilia exclaims in shock.

“Just for fun! I took some classes when I was younger, but I haven’t had the chance to practice lately,” Gigi replied, her cheeks flushing a bit, “I wish I could be more serious about it.”

Cecilia snickered, to which Gigi shot her a glare. “What’s that laugh supposed to mean?!” Gigi demanded irritably.

“Haha, I’m sorry, it’s just... the thought of you dancing is strangely amusing,” Cecilia explains as Gigi furrows her brow.

“You’re mean,” Gigi huffs, before giggling along with Cecilia.

As they continued to chat, the rain outside continued to grow more intense, the thunder beginning to grow louder. After a while, the door unlocked as Cecilia’s older sister Fauna walked in, soaked from the rain.

“I’m home, Cece,” Fauna announces as she walks into the living room, pausing upon seeing Gigi, “Oh! And who’s your friend here?”

Cecilia stands up as she tossed a towel towards Fauna. “Welcome back sis. Uh, this is Gigi, my classmate from school,” Cecilia introduces, as Gigi waved at Fauna, “Gigi, this is my big sister, Fauna.”

“Oh! The same Gigi you told me so much about?” Fauna asked, her eyes lighting up as she caught the towel Cecilia tossed her. She quickly dried her hair, shaking her head like a wet dog, which made Gigi giggle.

“Yes, that’s me!” Gigi replied, a hint of pride in her voice, “Nice to meet you, Fauna!”

Cecilia watched as her sister and Gigi exchanged smiles. Fauna had always been welcoming, and Cecilia could tell Gigi appreciated the friendly atmosphere.

“Cecilia talks about you all the time, you know,” Fauna said, giving her sister a teasing grin, “It’s nice to finally meet the person who gets her all riled up.”

“She talks about me all the time?” Gigi asks, mischievously smirking at Cecilia, whose face turned bright red.

“Not *all* the time,” Cecilia mutters in embarrassment.

“So what brings you here, Gigi?” Fauna asked curiously.

“Cece and I went on a date and she invited me over,” Gigi jokes, placing her hands on her cheeks in mock embarrassment. Fauna widened her eyes as she looked at her little sister in surprise.

“My sister on a date, whad'ya know?” Fauna said proudly as she dried her hair.

Cecilia sighed, slapping Gigi's arm, to which the blonde yelped. “Don't listen to her,” Cecilia groans, “We just went out... as FRIENDS, and it started raining on our way home so I invited her over to wait for the storm to pass.”

Fauna blinked. “The storm's not gonna pass until tomorrow morning, haven't you seen the forecast?” Fauna asks, showing the pair her weather app. Sure enough, the app displayed a graphic showing that the rain would stick around for the night. Additionally, there was an alert notifying that there was a high chance of flash flooding in the area.

“Oh no, how will you go home now? Do you wanna call your parents over to pick you up?” Cecilia asks Gigi, who averts her eyes.

“My... parents? Uh, it's fine, I could just use an umbrella or something,” Gigi says, suddenly looking shift.

Fauna shook her head. “We're talking about a thunderstorm out there. It's not safe,” Fauna says firmly, before a small smile crept up her lips, “Hold on, I have an idea. Why don't you stay over for the night, Gigi?”

Gigi blinked, caught off guard by Fauna's offer. “Stay over?” she repeated, clearly surprised. Her eyes flickered between Cecilia and Fauna, unsure of how to respond.

Cecilia frowned, sensing something off in Gigi's reaction. “Yeah, it's no big deal. I mean, unless you really want to drown out there in a potential flood...” she said with a hint of sarcasm, though her voice was more concerned than teasing.

Fauna nodded in agreement. “Exactly. It's not safe to go out in this weather. Besides, we've got plenty of space. You can crash here, no problem.”

For a moment, Gigi hesitated, still avoiding eye contact. “I don't want to be a bother...” the blonde muttered, scratching the back of her head.

Cecilia sighed, rolling her eyes. “You're already here. Just stay over. It's fine,” Cecilia insists.

Gigi shifted awkwardly but finally relented, her shoulders relaxing a bit. “Well, if you're sure...” she mumbled, still looking a little uncertain but clearly not wanting to argue further.

Fauna grinned, clearly satisfied with the outcome. “Great! I'll cook up some dinner, and you two can hang out for the night. It'll be like a sleepover!” she said, already heading toward the hallway to prepare.

As Fauna disappeared, Cecilia turned to Gigi, who flopped onto the couch with a sigh, glancing out the window where the rain continued to pour. "Guess I'm stuck with you for the night, huh?" she grins, her tone a little lighter now.

Cecilia smiles. "Looks like it," the green haired girl sat down beside her, the sound of the weather outside filling the room as they settled into the unexpected situation.

After enjoying a warm dinner prepared by Fauna, Gigi and Cecilia headed to the latter's bedroom. "Sorry if my house feels a little cramped," Cecilia apologized as she lets Gigi into her room.

"It's okay, I'm not complaining!" Gigi assures as she plops herself down onto the bed.

Gigi looks up at the ceiling before turning to Cecilia, who was unloading the books she bought onto her study desk. "Hey Cece, do your parents live with you?" Gigi asks, out of the blue as Cecilia takes a seat on her chair.

"That's a little random," Cecilia notes as she flips through her new books.

"I was just wondering, since I noticed there are only two bedrooms here," Gigi says sheepishly as Cecilia closes the workbook.

"My parents have work overseas," Cecilia explains, "And since it's just me and Fauna most of the time, my parents decided to save some money and just get a two bedroom home for us."

"Oh," Gigi said, nodding as she took in this new piece of information, "Doesn't it get lonely though?"

Cecilia shrugs, her expression neutral. "I've gotten used to it. Fauna's here, so it's not like I'm completely alone," Cecilia says, before staring at the ground, "Besides... I'm not super close to my parents or anything."

"Yeah, I'm not exactly besties with my parents either," Gigi remarks, "But at least your sister seems cool!"

"She's great... when she's not teasing me, of course," Cecilia chuckles.

The pair fell silent, although the sounds of the storm outside the window softened the stillness. "So... uh, what should we do now?" Cecilia asked awkwardly, tapping her feet.

"I don't know. What do you do for fun around here?" Gigi asked, her toothy grin tugging at the corner of her lips. "And don't say 'studying'!"

"I wasn't going to!" Cecilia protested, though the slight pause in her voice betrayed her. Gigi's grin widened, but Cecilia quickly walked over to her bookshelf, crouching down and pulling a small, rectangular box from the bottom shelf. She held it up for Gigi to see.

"Connect Four?" Gigi raised an eyebrow, "Really?"

Cecilia shrugged. "It's a classic."

Gigi hopped off the bed, walking over to where Cecilia was setting up the game on the floor. "Well, I guess it's better than sitting around doing nothing. But don't think I'll go easy on you just because it's old-school," Gigi challenged.

Cecilia rolled her eyes. "You talk too much. Let's do this," Cecilia replies firmly.

With the game set, they both settled on the floor, Gigi taking the red discs and Cecilia the yellow ones. The pieces clinked against the plastic grid as they started playing. Gigi immediately began dropping her pieces with no clear pattern, while Cecilia carefully examined the board before each move, trying to figure out her best strategy.

Gigi leaned back on her hands, eyeing Cecilia with a smirk as the other girl hesitated on her next move. "You're overthinking it," Gigi remarked casually, dropping another red piece into a corner slot.

"I'm not overthinking, I'm strategizing," Cecilia muttered, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Sure," Gigi said with a knowing look, as if she already had something up her sleeve. Her next move was quick, almost careless, but Cecilia couldn't shake the feeling that Gigi was plotting something beneath all the joking around.

A few minutes later, as Cecilia was about to make what she thought was a game-winning move, Gigi slammed her final red piece into place, securing a diagonal line of four. "Boom!" Gigi yelled, raising her hands triumphantly, "Gotcha sucker!"

Cecilia blinked, looking at the board in disbelief. "Wait, what? How—?"

"I told you, doll. You were thinking too hard." Gigi grinned widely, clearly enjoying Cecilia's flustered reaction, "Sometimes you just gotta go with the flow."

Cecilia exhaled sharply. "You just got lucky," Cecilia huffed as she reset the game. "Oh, you wanna call it luck, huh?" Gigi taunted, leaning forward with a playful gleam in her eyes, "How about best two out of three?"

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, her competitive spirit sparked. "Fine. But don't expect to win again."

And thus their little competition began, Gigi still riding the high of her victory while Cecilia focused even harder than before. Gigi tossed a red disc into the grid, smirking as she spoke. "So, what else do you do for fun?" Gigi asks as they played.

Cecilia rolled her eyes but responded, "Other than studying, I read, obviously. I play games now and then... and sometimes I go on walks with Fauna."

Gigi's smile softened for a second before a cheeky expression formed on her face. "Is *'winning Connect Four'* on the list?" Gigi mocks as she drops another piece.

Cecilia snorted. "You really think you're going to beat me twice in a row? You wish," Cecilia affirms.

The game continued with both girls focused, though Gigi still threw in the occasional jest, trying to break Cecilia's concentration. Cecilia was determined this time, and as the pieces piled up on the board, she spotted an opening that Gigi had missed.

Gigi, mid-laugh from another teasing remark, suddenly stopped when Cecilia dropped her final yellow disc in place, completing a horizontal line of four. Cecilia grinned triumphantly. "Gotcha, sucker."

Gigi blinked, staring at the board in shock. "Wait, hold on... no way!" she leaned forward to check again, her expression shifting to exaggerated disbelief, "I can't believe I let that happen."

"Overconfident, huh?" Cecilia smirked, leaning back with her arms crossed, "Guess it's not as easy as you thought."

Gigi shook her head, but she was smiling. "Alright, alright, you got me. But next round, you're cooked," Gigi replies enthusiastically.

They played a few more rounds, with wins and losses traded between them. Before they knew it, they had run through five rounds, and both girls were sprawled out on the floor, laughing about their most ridiculous moves and teasing each other about their playing styles.

"Okay, okay," Gigi panted between laughs, "I think I'm done. No more Connect Four for me tonight."

Cecilia chuckled softly, pushing the box aside. "Agreed. We'll call it a draw."

Gigi sighed, staring up at the ceiling as the sound of rain still softly pattered against the window. "This was fun though. I'm glad I didn't just head home," Gigi admits, yawning, "Well, not that I could with the rain and all..."

Cecilia glanced over at her, feeling a warmth that she wasn't used to. She wasn't exactly sure what had shifted between them today, but whatever it was, it felt like something new and unexpected—and definitely not unwelcome.

"Yeah, well, thanks for staying," Cecilia said quietly.

Suddenly, Fauna opened the door. "Sorry to interrupt, but I made some tea. Would you guys like to come downstairs for some?" she asked, leaning against the doorframe.

Cecilia sat up, brushing the stray strands of hair out of her face. "Sure, we'll be right down," she replied.

Gigi perked up at the mention of tea. "That sounds good," the blonde said, quickly getting to her feet. She offered a hand to Cecilia, who rolled her eyes but accepted it nonetheless, allowing Gigi to pull her up.

As the two followed Fauna downstairs, they found the living room dimly lit, the rain outside still relentlessly pouring against the windows. Fauna had set up a cozy atmosphere, with soft pillows on the couch and a steaming pot of tea on the coffee table.

"Feel free to grab a cup and join me," Fauna said, already seated on the couch with a blanket draped over her legs as she turned on Netflix, "I was thinking of watching something to pass the time. Maybe a horror movie?"

Gigi's eyes widened slightly. "H-horror?" she stammered, but quickly cleared her throat, trying to act nonchalant, "I mean, sure. Why not? Sounds... fun."

Cecilia gave her a sideways glance, clearly amused but said nothing as she poured them both a cup of tea and sat down beside Fauna. Gigi hesitated for a moment before plopping down on the other side of Cecilia, holding her cup tightly as if it were her shield.

Fauna smiled as she browsed through the catalog of films on screen. "Perfect. Let's watch *Hallows' Eve*. It's supposed to be really good," Fauna suggests, as she pressed play on the movie.

Gigi swallowed hard, but nodded. "Y-yeah, sounds great," she said, her voice a little shaky.

As Fauna hit play, the opening credits rolled, the eerie music filling the room. Cecilia, already used to her sister's love for horror, relaxed into her seat, sipping her tea. But Gigi... she was a different story.

It didn't take long for the scares to start. The first time a ghost appeared, Gigi let out a loud shriek and jumped in her seat, nearly spilling her tea. Cecilia glanced at her, a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips.

"You okay there, Gigi?" Cecilia teased lightly.

"I-I'm fine," Gigi muttered, clearly embarrassed, but her eyes stayed glued to the screen. Her knuckles whitened around her cup as the next scene unfolded, more tension building in the dark house on-screen.

As the movie continued, Gigi became more and more fidgety, her legs drawn up to her chest and her eyes darting nervously. When another jumpscare hit, Gigi couldn't help herself, and latched onto Cecilia's arm without thinking, holding on tight.

Cecilia stiffened at the sudden contact, blinking in surprise. Gigi immediately realized what she had done and quickly let go, her face flushing red.

"S-sorry," Gigi mumbled, avoiding Cecilia's eyes, "I didn't mean to—"

Cecilia, feeling a bit flustered herself, waved her off. "It's fine. Don't worry about it," she glanced at Gigi, who still looked a bit embarrassed but was clearly too scared to focus on anything other than the movie.

Another jumpscare caused Gigi to flinch again, causing her to instinctively grab Cecilia's arm once more. But instead of pulling away, Cecilia sighed softly, allowing her to hold on

this time.

Gigi shot her a grateful look but didn't say anything, focusing back on the screen, though she still clung to Cecilia's arm like it was her lifeline. The green-haired girl tried not to think too much about it, but Gigi was clinging so tight, that it felt as if her arm could fall off at any moment.

Fauna, seemingly oblivious to the subtle exchange between the two, was engrossed in the film, occasionally sipping her tea and murmuring criticism about the plot. As the movie reached its climax, Gigi was practically hiding behind Cecilia, her face buried in the taller girl's shoulder.

Cecilia couldn't help but chuckle at the blonde throughout the movie. She glanced down at Gigi, who was still hiding, her eyes squeezed shut during the scariest parts.

"Hey, the movie's almost over," Cecilia whispered, trying to reassure her, "You'll survive."

"I'm never watching another horror movie ever again," Gigi muttered, though she didn't move from her spot, still clutching Cecilia's arm like a safety rope.

By the time the credits rolled, Gigi finally let go, exhaling deeply as if she'd just run a marathon. "That was... terrifying."

Cecilia stretched her arm, feeling the relief of having it back to herself but smiled lightly. "You made it through, though," Cecilia giggles.

Fauna, meanwhile, stood up and stretched. "Well, that was fun," she said, oblivious to Gigi's terror, "I'm heading to bed now. Good night, girls." She waved before retreating upstairs.

Gigi stayed frozen on the couch for a moment longer before finally peeling herself off of Cecilia. "Uh, sorry... again... for, you know, nearly crushing your arm," she mumbled, scratching the back of her neck.

Cecilia stood up, offering a small, amused smile. "It's fine. Let's just get some sleep."

When they returned to the bedroom, Cecilia laid out a futon onto the floor, before turning off the lights and switching on the bedside lamp. "I can take the futon," Cecilia volunteers as she carries two pillows from her bed, "You're free to have the bed."

Gigi raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? I don't mind taking the futon. Plus, it's your bed," Gigi argues as Cecilia crosses her arms. "You're my guest, Gigi, you can take the bed," Cecilia insists as Gigi shakes her head.

"Ehh, it doesn't feel right," Gigi says reluctantly.

Cecilia sighs, before sitting on the futon, looking up at Gigi. "How about this: You can take my bed tonight, but you'll have to return the favor if I ever go to your house for a sleepover," Cecilia suggests, mirroring Gigi's compromise from earlier that afternoon.

The blonde chuckles softly, sitting on the bed and grabbing a blanket. “Fine, good night, doll,” Gigi relented, lying down on Cecilia's bed as the green haired girl switched off the bedside lamp.

Cecilia smiles as she retreats under the covers of her futon. “Good night, Gigi.”

However, less than a minute later, when Cecilia was about to doze off, she was immediately woken up by Gigi, who was kneeling next to her on the futon. “Cece... Cece... Cece... Oi, Cece!” the blonde calls out as Cecilia jolts awake.

“What?! I was about to fall asleep!” Cecilia groans as she pulls the blanket over her head.

Gigi remained quiet for a few seconds, taking a deep breath before speaking. “I... this is gonna sound so weird but... c-can I sleep next to you tonight?” Gigi asked the taller girl, the usual confidence and boisterousness of her voice completely gone, “I swear to the heavens above, that movie... kinda freaked me out. You don't have to say yes or anything but...”

Cecilia peeked at the blonde through the corner of her blanket. She has never seen Gigi like this before. Nervous, almost vulnerable, a far cry from her usual nature. Cecilia sighed, her mind racing, but she couldn't exactly bring herself to say no to that face.

“Alright, fine,” Cecilia muttered, shifting over to make some space on the futon, “But no funny business, okay?”

Gigi immediately brightened up, flashing a relieved smile. “I swear, no funny business!” she promised as she quickly slid under the blanket beside Cecilia.

The bed was a bit cramped with the two of them, and an awkwardness hung in the air as they lay there, both staring up at the ceiling. After a few moments, Gigi hesitantly shuffled a little closer, her shoulder brushing against Cecilia's.

“Didn't know you were such a scaredy-cat,” Cecilia mocked lightheartedly, her voice lacking any real bite.

“Yeah, yeah... just go back to sleep,” Gigi whispered, her voice soft.

The night came and went, and with it the massive thunderstorm that loomed over the town. Gigi was the first to awaken, her eyes blinking awake as the sun's rays seeped into the room. Yawning, Gigi stretched out her limbs, before turning on her side, coming face to face with a sleeping Cecilia.

Gigi lay still for a moment, watching Cecilia's chest rise and fall with each slow breath. Her eyes drifted over Cecilia's face—Softer and more peaceful than she'd ever seen it before. The faint sunlight illuminated Cecilia's doll-like features, her long lashes resting gently against her cheeks, and the small strands of green hair that had fallen out of place during the night.

A smile crept up at Gigi's lips as she shifted slightly closer, careful not to wake her. There was something calming about seeing Cecilia so relaxed, so different from the usual sharp focus or occasional annoyance that Gigi was used to provoking. She had to admit, it was kind of... cute.

Her eyes wandered over Cecilia's lips, slightly parted as she slept, and then back to her softened brow. Gigi found herself staring longer than she probably should have, tracing the lines of Cecilia's face in her mind, wondering how someone could look so effortlessly beautiful.

She reached out without thinking, her hand hovering just above Cecilia's hair, but she quickly pulled it back, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "*What am I doing?*" Gigi thought, almost laughing at herself, "*I'm such a creep...*"

However, she couldn't help herself, and the blonde reached out once more, sweeping Cecilia's fringe away from her eyes. At that moment, the green haired girl slowly stirred awake, as Gigi withdrew her hand with lightning speed.

"Mmhh," Cecilia mumbles, before opening her eyes, "Oh, good morning Gigi."

"Morning', doll," Gigi greets Cecilia as she sits up and stretches.

The green-haired girl stood up, walking over to her bedroom window and opening it. The morning air, cool and fresh from the rain the previous night, flowed into the room. She took a deep breath, feeling the lingering moisture in the breeze.

"Looks like the rain finally let up," Gigi said softly, her voice cutting through the quiet. She sat up on the futon, running a hand through her messy blonde hair, trying to shake off the sleep still clinging to her.

Cecilia glanced back at her, the sunlight making her green eyes sparkle just a bit more than usual. "Yeah... guess it did," she replied, sounding a little groggy but more awake now. She stayed by the window for a few moments longer, taking in the serenity of the early morning after the storm.

"Wanna head down for breakfast?" Gigi asked, standing up and stretching again.

Cecilia nodded, stepping away from the window. "Sure, we could make some toast," Cecilia said as she looked around the room, noticing the scattered pillows and blankets from their night.

The pair made their way downstairs, making themselves some French toast for a light breakfast. After they had eaten and cleaned up, Gigi glanced at the clock, noticing the time.

"Guess I should head out soon," Gigi said, standing up from the table and brushing some crumbs off her shirt.

Cecilia nodded, following her to the door. "Yeah, I'll walk you out," she said, a small part of her not wanting Gigi to leave so soon. Although to be fair... they did just spend an entire day

(plus a sleepover) together. The pair stood by the entrance, as Gigi slipped on her shoes with no rush at all.

“Oh, and don’t forget to return my clothes,” Cecilia added, her tone light but with a hint of insistence. She pointed at the T-shirt and shorts Gigi was still wearing, borrowed from Cecilia the night before.

Gigi smirked, tugging at the hem of the shirt playfully. “What, don’t want me to keep them as a souvenir?” she joked, making Cecilia roll her eyes.

“Just don’t forget, okay?” Cecilia repeated with a sigh, but there was a small smile on her face.

“I won’t, I won’t!” Gigi said, waving her hands in mock surrender, “I’ll get them back to you after they’re washed, I promise.”

The blonde finally stepped outside, the morning sun bright above them as she turned back to Cecilia. “Thanks again for letting me crash at your place,” Gigi said, a genuine smile on her face this time.

“Yeah, no problem,” Cecilia replied, leaning against the doorframe, watching as Gigi took a few steps down the walkway. Cecilia wasn’t sure why, but her heart felt a little empty upon seeing Gigi leave. However, when Gigi reached the gate, she turned back and waved at Cecilia one last time. “See you later, doll!”

Cecilia’s heart fluttered as she nodded, waving back, watching until Gigi completely disappeared down the street before finally closing the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

heya thanks for reading!! im so so so glad a lot of you enjoy this fic as much as i enjoy writing it 😊😊😊

Genius

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gigi Murin is who one would call a genius. Perfect grades, an almost unnatural ability to excel in everything she touched, you name it. Despite her carefree appearance, Gigi was a prodigy amongst other people her age. Even as a child, she found almost no difficulty in mastering whatever skill or subject she put her mind to. Her classmates could only watch in awe as Gigi breezed through exams, never breaking a sweat while doing so. Her brilliance placed her on a pedestal—an unreachable goal for everyone else.

To the people around her, Gigi wasn't just smart, she was on a different level altogether. Her confidence, the ease with which she handled every challenge, made it seem like she wasn't even trying.

For some, it was frustrating to witness, knowing that no matter how hard they pushed themselves, they'd never come close to matching her. Most simply admired her from afar, respecting the gap that separated them.

For a while, the blonde did enjoy all the attention she got from being deemed a '*genius*'. The awe, the admiration—It was flattering for a time... until it wasn't.

“Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Murin, thank you for taking some time off your schedules to be here today,” Gigi's principal greeted the blonde's parents as they took a seat in front of his desk.

A seven year old Gigi stood nearby, her eyes wide and curious at the scene before her. “She's not in trouble is she?” Mrs. Murin asked the principal, who shook his head in amusement.

“No, of course not,” the principal chuckled, “I just wanted to bring some attention to her academic performance.”

The principal opened his desk drawer, retrieving a file from within before placing it onto his desk. “Gigi here has been scoring consistent perfect scores in every single subject, though I doubt that comes as a surprise to you.”

Mrs. Murin raised an eyebrow, exchanging a quick glance with her husband. “Actually,” Mr. Murin began, adjusting his tie awkwardly, “We haven't really been paying too much attention to her grades.”

The principal blinked, visibly surprised. “I see... Well, then, allow me to fill you in.”

He opened the file, revealing several sheets of test results. “Not only has Gigi been excelling, but we also gave her tests from grades *above* her level. And... she scored perfectly on all of them too,” the principal says, as the Murin parents glossed over the immaculate grades their daughter achieved.

Mrs. Murin’s eyes widened as she looked through the papers. “Tests from higher grades?” she repeats in shock.

“That’s right,” the principal confirmed, leaning back in his chair, “We’re not talking about just one or two grades either. Gigi’s performance is simply exceptional. She’s mastering material from Junior High. It’s rare to see a student like her, even rarer at such a young age.”

Mr. Murin looked at his daughter, who was absentmindedly fiddling with the hem of her hoodie. “So, what are you saying?” Mr. Murin asks in anticipation.

The principal smiled warmly. “Your daughter is special, Mr. Murin. Her abilities go beyond what we typically see in students,” the principal replies, matter-of-factly, “She has the potential to achieve great things, and I wanted to bring that to your attention now, so we can make sure she’s given the right opportunities to grow.”

Gigi narrowed her eyes, watching as her parents conversed with her principal. Strange. Whenever she brought home a perfect spelling test, or a mistake-free math quiz, her parents didn’t seem to care too much. The most praise she has probably gotten was a simple “*Ooh, well done sweetie!*” from her mother. Unfortunately, that bit of praise was then followed up by a “*Now, hurry off to your room, Mama’s in a really important call right now.*”

It was kinda surreal. Ever since she had begun elementary school, she’s been receiving endless amounts of praise from her teachers and stares of admiration from her classmates regarding her academic abilities. Some teachers have even gone so far as to call her a ‘genius’.

Yet, at home, it felt like none of that mattered at all. Her mother and father were always too busy, too distracted by other things to pay her achievements any mind.

Of course, she had been receiving plenty of attention in school already. And sure, being called a ‘genius’ by her teachers and peers was nice, but it never seemed to mean much at home. No matter how many perfect scores she brought back, no matter how much her teachers sang her praises, it didn’t seem to matter to her parents.

Well, until now, that was.

Gigi was not sure if her parents had ever talked to her as much as they did on the way home from the principal’s office. In what seemed like forever, her parents were spending more than a few minutes talking to her, asking about her schoolwork, her teachers, and how she found the tests. It felt strange, almost like they’d just noticed she existed.

But the genius didn’t mind.

She happily indulged their questions, excited to finally have their attention. For once, they were interested in her world, her achievements. It felt like a breakthrough, like maybe now they'd start paying attention more often. But even as she answered their questions, something nagged at the back of her mind. The more they talked, the more she realized they weren't really talking about her. They were asking about her studies, results, about what the principal had said, about the future.

Gigi smiled, but deep down, she couldn't help but long for an intimate kind of conversation. Something about her, something about her likes, dislikes, hobbies, literally anything other than her studies.

The blonde pushed these thoughts away however, coming to the conclusion that perhaps this was just a momentary thing. After all, her parents did just receive good news, and what kind of sane human being wouldn't take a few moments to relish in some good news?

"They're calling her a genius, dear, our child, a genius!" Mrs. Murin exclaimed as the family got into the car.

"Indeed they did..." Mr. Murin chuckled as he started up his car, "According to the principal, we should get started as soon as possible."

"Get started?" Gigi repeats in confusion, strapping her seatbelt across her chest.

"Why, of course," Mr. Murin answers, as he turned on the engine, "You have great potential, Gigi. And you know the saying: With great potential comes great opportunities!"

Gigi blinked. She was pretty sure that wasn't how Uncle Ben said it to Spider-Man. But she nodded along anyway, unsure how to respond to her father's sudden enthusiasm. "What kind of opportunities?" Gigi asks her parents, wanting to continue their conversation.

"Remember that book I got you? *Who Moved My Cheese?*" Mrs. Murin smiles as the car drives out of school, "If you were a mouse in a maze, and one day you discovered your regular stash of cheese is gone. Would you stay put? No! You were blessed with a good nose—Use it to sniff out your new cheese, or in this case, new opportunities!"

Gigi tilted her head slightly, eyebrows furrowed. "But Mama, that's not really the point of the book," Gigi points out, "It's about adapting to change and not being afraid to move on when things don't stay the same. It's not just about having a good nose for cheese."

Mrs. Murin waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, details, details. The point is, you've got potential, Gigi. And when opportunities come up, you've got to take them. That's how you get ahead in life," Mrs. Murin says firmly, smiling.

Gigi sighed and leaned back in her seat, not entirely convinced her mom had even finished the book. "Okay, so... what should I do?" Gigi asked, fiddling with her thumbs.

"Your mother and I discussed it with your principal earlier, and we all agree that it would be best if you are transferred to a more prestigious school where you can truly blossom," Mr. Murin answers, causing Gigi's heart to drop slightly.

"T-transferred to a new school?" Gigi mumbles, "That's gonna be quite the change."

Her parents shot her a brief glance. "Remember the moral of the cheese book, dear," Mrs. Murin said with a reassuring smile. "You've got a good nose for opportunities, and this new school will be full of them. It's where you'll really shine!"

Gigi stared out the window, her heart sinking further. Transferring to a new school wasn't what she had in mind at all. "But... I have some friends at my current school," she tried to argue softly.

Her parents didn't seem to hear her, or maybe they chose not to. Mr. Murin then chimed in with enthusiasm, "It's a big change, but it's for the best. You'll thank us when you're older."

A few months passed, and Gigi had finally completed her second year of elementary school. As expected, she had achieved the highest scores in the entire grade, effortlessly outpacing the rest of her peers. Her teachers couldn't stop praising her, and the admiration was no longer confined to just the classroom.

One morning, Gigi was called to the front of the school assembly, where the principal announced her name for an award recognizing her '*Outstanding Academic Performance*'.

Walking up to the stage, Gigi could feel every eye in the room on her. Her footsteps echoed in the quiet auditorium as she accepted the glimmering plaque from the principal. The applause that followed was polite but felt somewhat distant. There were no cheers or excited whoops, just a reserver clapping that felt more obligatory than genuine.

Gigi stood there for a moment, holding her award as she smiled for the audience. But even as the principal patted her on the back and the camera flashed, it felt empty... meaningless. The applause faded, and she walked back to her seat, her footsteps feeling heavier than before.

Sure, her parents were proud. They had even come to the assembly, clapping enthusiastically as she crossed the stage. But the other kids? They didn't seem to care. During recess a few days ago, she overheard a few girls talking about her behind the playground slide.

"She's just showing off," one of them whispered, not realizing Gigi was within earshot, "I don't know how she does it. I bet she doesn't even try."

"Yeah," another agreed, "She's like some kind of robot or something."

Gigi felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. It wasn't the first time she'd heard comments like that, and it probably wouldn't be the last. She'd become used to hearing things like

‘genius’ and ‘prodigy’ thrown around whenever her name came up. It used to make her feel good, even special. But now, it just made her feel... separate.

At lunch, the distance was even clearer. She sat down with her usual group of friends, hoping today would be different. Maybe they’d talk to her like normal again. Maybe they’d finally include her in their conversation. But as soon as she sat down, the chat that had been lively just moments ago died down a little. The other students exchanged awkward glances, their voices lowering to almost whispers.

Gigi gathered up her confidence, before wearing a false smile on her face. “What are you guys talking about?” the blonde asked the group, as they exchanged glances.

“You wouldn’t get it,” one of them said, barely looking at her. Another muttered something about how *“Gigi’s always too busy being perfect.”*

It hurt more than she wanted to admit. It wasn’t that they disliked her. No one was being outright mean, no one was bullying her. But they treated her like she was different, like she wasn’t really one of them anymore. The gap between her and her classmates didn’t seem to be something academic related—it was personal, too. The more she excelled at everything, the more isolated from the others she became. It wasn’t something anyone said out loud, but she could feel it.

During free time, when everyone else was busy playing games or showing each other their favorite accessories, Gigi found herself sitting alone more often than not. She would pull out a book or do some mindless doodling, pretending she didn’t mind being left out. But the truth was, it stung.

Excelling had set her apart in a way she hadn’t expected. Gigi had always thought that being good at everything would make her popular, and while it did, it also elevated her onto a level of which her peers felt that she was unreachable. It was almost like the reverence she received had reached a point where admiration came with a quiet distance.

On the way home, her parents spent the whole ride praising her perfection and endlessly fussing over the shiny plaque. The plaque was nice, and the recognition was great, but it couldn’t fill the growing emptiness that Gigi felt inside. Being brilliant had its perks, but as she looked around her increasingly lonely world, she wondered if maybe, just maybe, there was a downside to being ‘too special’.

“Excellent job, dear. Let’s hope you continue this performance when you enter the new school next term,” Gigi’s mother praised, causing a light bulb to appear above the blonde’s head.

That’s right. She’ll be heading off to a new school soon. A school with more talented students just like her, a place where she might finally feel like she belonged. Gigi’s heart lifted at the thought. Maybe at this new school, things would be different.

Maybe there would be other kids who were high scorers, maybe the gap between her and the kids there wouldn’t be as large. Maybe... she wouldn’t have to feel so distant from everyone.

Gigi smiled to herself, her optimism quickly returning. This new school could be the fresh start she needed, a place where she could make friends who saw her as more than just a genius—a place where she could be herself.

“You look pretty happy,” Mr. Murin chuckles as he looks at Gigi through the front mirror. Gigi nods, practically jumping up and down on her seat.

“Maybe you were right, guys. This new school thing might be good for me,” Gigi grins, feeling more hopeful and lighthearted than she did in ages.

“Hehe, glad you came round to it, honey,” Mrs. Murin smiles back at her daughter, “After all... we know what's best for you.”

Gigi spent her school holidays optimistically anticipating the start of her new life in her new school. The blonde did some reading online about this new prestigious academy she would be attending. Apparently, it was renowned for its rigorous curriculum and high-achieving students.

The more Gigi read, the more excited she became. This was the kind of environment where she could truly thrive, where her abilities would be challenged, and where she might finally meet others who could keep up with her.

When she wasn't researching the school, Gigi spent much of her break with her nose buried in books. Aside from devouring mountains of novels like *Twilight* (among some other books that were definitely *not* meant for her age group), Gigi also spent some time reading through her new textbooks. In no time at all, she was quickly equipped with knowledge of what she would be learning in the next term.

“Oh look, you can sign up for a lot of clubs in the new school,” Mrs. Murin notes as she looks through the school's website, “Debate, Drama and... even a Student Council!”

“A Student Council in an elementary school?” Mr. Murin says in bewilderment as he clicks away on his work laptop, “This school is really something else.”

Gigi turned a page of the book she was reading. “I was thinking of joining the dance club,” Gigi mentions, to which her parents turned to her with shocked expressions.

“Dance? But why? There are so many clubs here that would look much better on your portfolio,” Mrs. Murin asks, bringing up the Student Council's page as an example.

The blonde dragged her finger along the spine of her book, thinking of how to answer her mother's question. In all honesty, Gigi had never taken an interest in dance up until a week ago, when she binged an idol anime called *Love Live!*. Prior to her watching the show, Gigi thought of dancing as a pointless activity, and too much work at that. But after watching the

characters work so hard to improve their dancing and achieve their dreams, something about it clicked for her. Now, the idea of learning how to dance seemed... exciting, even challenging.

Gigi looked up at her mother, shrugging slightly. "I don't know, Mama. I guess it just looks kind of fun. Something different," Gigi says, tapping the cover of her book absentmindedly, already imagining herself learning how to dance, "Plus, it's good exercise, right?"

"You have to think about the bigger picture, Gigi. Having a record of you being a member of something like the Student Council would really elevate how future institutions, or even employers, view you," Mr. Murin argues, looking up from his laptop.

Gigi raised an eyebrow at how (though she wouldn't say it outright) ridiculous her father's argument was. "Papa, we're talking about an elementary school Student Council here," Gigi points out, trying to sound as polite as possible, "I doubt any employer would go '*Oh, hey, you were the Student Council president of your elementary school? You're hired!*'"

The blonde's parents frowned at their daughter, who laughed sheepishly. "It's just an expression," Gigi mutters awkwardly, rubbing the back of her head.

Mrs. Murin sighs, walking over to Gigi and hugging her. "Gigi... you know how much we care for you, don't you?" Mrs. Murin begins as Gigi raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah...?" Gigi replies, unsure if she liked where the conversation was going.

"We just want to make sure you're getting the best opportunities, dear. The Student Council is one of those opportunities that will help you stand out, even if it's just elementary school," Mrs. Murin explains, patting Gigi's head.

Gigi sighed but nodded. "Alright, fine. I'll join the Council," she said, though the idea of more responsibilities didn't quite excite her.

Mr. Murin smiled approvingly. "Smart decision! This is how you set yourself apart," Mr. Murin exclaimed, not even looking away from his screen

"And while we're at it," Mrs. Murin added, "How about you sign up for a dance class outside of school? You seemed interested, and it's something you could do outside of school."

Gigi paused. "Yeah, I guess it could be fun," she admitted, a small spark of optimism rising within her, "It'll be fun to try something new."

"Exactly!" her mother said brightly, "See? It's a win-win. You get to beef up your portfolio *and* learn something you like!"

Gigi shrugged, a tiny smile tugging at her lips. "I guess so."

Although she had already seen the school in pictures, Gigi was still positively amazed by the sheer spectacle that was the academy building.

Its towering architecture, gleaming windows, and large courtyards seemed even more impressive in person. The meticulously trimmed lawns, stone statues, and careful designs felt almost unreal, like something straight out of a movie. It was far grander than her previous school, and it made her excited.

"This place is huge," she muttered to herself, clutching her bag a little tighter as she stepped through the front gates.

After exploring the expansive school grounds, Gigi finally arrived at her classroom. The massive building and its sparkling corridors filled her with awe, a massive contrast to the surroundings of her old school. She had seen photos of the school's point of interests online, but nothing had prepared her for the grandness of the real thing.

As Gigi stepped into her classroom, the chattering of her new classmates died down, as they turned their attention to Gigi. The teacher smiled warmly at the blonde, motioning at her to come closer. "Class, we have a new student joining us today. This is Gigi Murin," the teacher says, "She transferred here recently, and I hope you will all make her feel welcome."

Gigi gave a friendly nod and smiled. "Hiya, everyone. I'm really excited to be here," she said, her voice steady despite the many butterflies fluttering around in her stomach.

The blonde quickly found an empty seat toward the back, and after a brief moment of silence, the other students fell back into their talking.

Gigi let out a quiet sigh of relief. It was always awkward being the new kid, but at least the formalities were over. Now all she needed to do was ease into the new environment. She'll do just fine.

From her very first day, Gigi realized this school was everything she had hoped it would be and more. The classes were demanding, far more challenging than what she had been used to, and the standards were much higher. While at her old school she had been the top student without much effort, here she felt the need to try a little. Everybody in her new class seemed to possess a competitive side and Gigi found herself rather enjoying the prospect of being challenged.

The school itself was simply marvelous. Its campus contained beautiful yards, colorful gardens, and wavy trees that cast shady shadows.

Gigi's favorite location, however, was the library—A massive, spacious wordy haven filled with rows upon rows of stories. After only a few days, it quickly became the blonde's favorite place to spend her free time.

She also found herself following an informal routine of sorts. Classes in the morning, reading sessions in the library, and the occasional meal with her new classmates at the cafeteria.

Even though she had only been there for a short time, Gigi felt like she had finally found her place. The other students were extremely bright and capable, just like her. For the first time, she felt like she was not the odd one out.

The blonde had even joined a group of classmates to study with. They would meet after classes, discussing homework, working through problems together, or just share normal conversations. Gigi loved spending time with her new friends, as she found it a huge relief to finally be around people who she felt relatively normal around.

Of course, there was the Student Council. At first, Gigi had joined reluctantly, more to appease her parents than out of any actual interest. While she had her doubts, Gigi found herself getting pretty involved as time went on.

It was unusual enough for an elementary school to have a Student Council, but they somehow made it work. It was responsible for organizing school events, managing the study body, and even overseeing communication between the students and teachers. Gigi quickly realized that she had a knack for her council duties, given her natural affinity to excel in anything she touched.

Her role on the council also gave her a sense of purpose. There was something strangely satisfying about working alongside her council mates to make the school a better place. She took pride in her ability to lead projects, even if she was the youngest member of the council. Her wit and skills quickly earned her the respect of her senior council members. It was pretty busy, but Gigi enjoyed the challenge it could provide.

Lunch breaks were another time she looked forward to. For the first few days, when she was still relatively new to everything, Gigi lost herself in the sea of books the school's library provided. The establishment housed more books than the blonde had ever seen in her entire life, so naturally, she felt an instant connection to the place.

Eventually, she would join her new classmates in the cafeteria. Her classmates who would endlessly drone on about studies, upcoming exams, or which Junior High they were aiming to go to. While she didn't relate to every single thing the girls talked about, Gigi was happy to finally be in the company of others again.

Outside of school, Gigi's life was just as busy. As promised, her parents had signed her up for dance classes and to her pleasant surprise, she found herself enjoying the lessons. Unlike her studies, dancing didn't seem to come to her naturally. The blonde wasn't disheartened however, as it felt different from the monotony of schoolwork, as well as adding a little variety to her routine. In addition, her dance instructor was strict but supportive, and Gigi appreciated the guidance she provided.

At the end of third grade, Gigi had already made a name for herself as the brightest student in the academy. Her peers began to see her as the gold standard of what a student should aspire to be.

As the school year came to a close, Gigi found herself growing increasingly nervous about the upcoming rankings. The academy would release its academic standings at the end of each

semester, and while she had always been the top student at her old school, she wasn't sure how her new schoolmates would react if she secured the top spot here.

It was strange. A part of her wanted to prove she belonged among the best, but another part of her was silently praying that she wouldn't stand out too much.

Gigi had seen how competitive her peers could get. While most of them were friendly, there was an underlying rivalry between all of them, a silent tension in the air whenever the subject of grades came up. Gigi didn't want to be at the center of that.

It wasn't as though she was afraid of the competition. The blonde just found the possibility of being shunned (just as she was in her old school) frightening. After all, she had finally found a place where she felt she belonged, and she didn't want to risk losing that sense of comfort..

As the days to the release of the rankings neared, Gigi poured herself into her council duties and dance lessons, trying to keep her mind on non-academic related things. She also spent long hours in the library reading rather than revising, occasionally glancing up from her novels to look at the hardworking students around her. Although Gigi was already completely familiar with her curriculum, she couldn't help but feel slightly guilty watching everyone work so hard while she took a backseat.

As the sand in the hourglass began to fill up, more questions infiltrated her train of thought. What if she did come out on top? Would she be alienated once again? She shook her head, trying to push the thoughts away. It wasn't worth overthinking about a future that may not even happen.

When the rankings were finally released, the entire school buzzed with excitement. Students crowded in front of the notice boards enthusiastically. Some were hopping up and down in excitement, while others were frowning in disappointment.

Gigi took a deep breath as she approached the board where the rankings were posted, her heart thumping in her chest. She wasn't sure what she wanted to see, but whatever it was, she sure hoped it wouldn't change things.

As her eyes scanned the list, she found her name. There it was, sitting at the top.

Her stomach dropped. She hadn't even realized she was holding her breath until she let it out in a forced exhale. She had done it. She was the top student in her grade. However, instead of the sense of pride she had expected, a rush of dread washed over her.

Her friends would see this. There was no way this would go unnoticed.

Gigi shivered as she caught a few of her classmates approaching her out from the corner of her eye. Here it comes. The indignation, the silent stares, the...

"Congratulations, Gigi," one of her classmates said, a wide smile on their face. Another repeated the sentiment, and another, and another, and another...

There was something in their tone that gave Gigi goosebumps. Was it admiration? Jealousy? She couldn't quite tell. She thanked them quietly, forcing a small smile of her own.

As the day wore on, she noticed the subtle shifts in how people interacted with her. Some seemed more distant, while others were overly enthusiastic in their praise.

A few of her friends from the study group congratulated her as well, but the conversation quickly paused, leaving an awkward silence in its wake. Gigi couldn't shake the feeling that things were different now, that she had crossed some invisible line she hadn't meant to.

Later that evening, as Gigi sat in her room staring at the plaque she had been awarded, the same hollow feeling from before crept back into her chest.

Her parents, of course, were over the moon. They fussed over her achievements, boasting to all their friends and relatives about their genius daughter. Their perfect daughter.

But as they started droning on about her bright future ahead, Gigi found herself zoning out, lost in her thoughts. She should be feeling happy with herself. But something deep within her was preventing that. But why?

The remaining years of elementary school blurred by for Gigi, each one passing with an unchanged routine: perfect scores, top rankings... and more distant stares from her classmates.

By the time she reached fifth grade, Gigi's once tight-knit group of friends had mostly dissolved. Similarly to her old school, it wasn't as if anyone was openly disdainful towards her. Instead, the distance that grew between them was subtle, and unfortunately the blonde felt more hurt than she felt in her old elementary school.

Every time the rankings came out, the gap between her and her peers seemed to deepen. Her classmates and friends who used to ask her to join them at lunch or sit with them during breaks suddenly seemed to stop doing so. Instead, they gravitated towards each other, leaving Gigi outside their orbit.

Gigi tried to ignore it at first, continuing to give everything she had towards dance classes and Student Council activities. But the more she showed her excellence, the more her classmates seemed to distance themselves from her.

It all came to a head one afternoon in fifth grade. It was the exam period and, as usual, her schoolmates were fully locked into their revision. Gigi, who felt bored that day, decided to message her group of friends from the study group.

She had been playing Roblox a lot, finding comfort in a game she obsessed over lately. Perhaps they would be up for a game, she thought. After all, this period was stressful, and a

little break might do them all some good.

geegee: hi!!!

geegee: i got a little bored and started playing roblawksanyone wanna join!!!!

At first, no one responded, which was unusual. Gigi shrugged it off, assuming they were busy with last-minute revisions. But when the first reply came through, it made her stomach sink.

rockyroads: I don't know, Gigi I don't have the luxury of taking a break right now. Some of us actually have to study to do well

Gigi stared at the message, unsure how to respond. She blinked, rereading it, hoping she had misunderstood the tone. But before she could type anything, another message popped up.

yellowww: Yeahhhhh no, unlike some people, I need more than five minutes to memorize the material, lol

The second message stung even more than the first. She hoped they were joking, but the underlying meaning was clear. Her friends were frustrated with her. They didn't see her as one of them anymore. She was the girl who always came in first, who never seemed to struggle, who could breeze through the material without breaking a sweat.

But was it her fault for being able to grasp things much easier than they did? Plus, it wasn't like she didn't put in any effort. She still had to learn the material, just like they did, but her success made it seem effortless from the outside. And now, it felt like that success was pushing them away.

geegee: oh, i didn't mean it like that i just thought we could use a break, you know?

geegee: but it's fine i'll get back to my revision too good luck everyone!!

The chat went silent after that, and Gigi felt the familiar dread washed over her once more.

As the school year trudged on, Gigi found herself withdrawing more and more. Gigi found her motivation to do anything to have dwindled significantly, her council activities starting to feel more like a chore than anything.

Gigi also began to reflect on herself a lot. Perhaps she went too far that day when she invited everyone to play Roblox with her. Perhaps she hadn't taken their feelings into consideration that day. They must have been under a lot of stress. The blonde thought about sending an apology message to her group chat, but seeing as nobody bothered to start a conversation after that last message she sent... Gigi eventually decided against it.

By the time sixth grade rolled around, Gigi had grown accustomed to the isolation. She stopped trying to bridge the gap with her classmates, and in return, they stopped pretending to reach out. She still had acquaintances, people who smiled at her in the halls, but it never went beyond that. There were no more lunch invitations, no casual after-school hangouts, and certainly no more game nights.

The worst part about all this was having to listen to the gossiping in the corridors and classrooms, and how people began to talk behind her back.

"It's that genius girl..."

"The one who's always topping the rankings?"

"Yeah! My gosh, something about her ticks me off."

"Ha! Bet you're jealous she's the best at everything huh?"

"It's not even that! I heard from her classmates that she barely even tries!"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah! They say she invited her to play freaking Roblox with her while everyone was studying!"

"Does she have no shame at all?"

"Yeah, she thinks just because she's a genius she can flex on everyone like that?"

"Honestly, who cares about the rankings?"

"Yeah, it's not like we can ever beat Miss Smarty Pants at the top now can we?"

"Hehehe Miss Smarty Pants~"

"I mean that's all she is, isn't she?"

"Why are they talking about me like I'm not just a kid like the rest of them?" Gigi thought, wiping a tear from her eye as she hurried into a bathroom. Gigi splashed a handful of water into her face as she stared at the mirror. Just how did things get to this point? Why does she feel... so *empty* inside?

Her parents, oblivious to the growing emptiness in her life, pushed her harder with each passing year. They talked more and more about Junior High, about the advanced programs she should apply to, about the need to stay ahead of the competition. They meant well, of course—they wanted the best for her. But the pressure only added to the sense that her world was shrinking. The more successful she became, the less room there was for anything else.

The final months of elementary school felt like a slow march toward something Gigi couldn't quite piece together. There was no big moment of realization, no dramatic fallout with her classmates. Just a gradual understanding that the life she had at this school, this once-promising place, wasn't what she had imagined. She had achieved everything she was supposed to, yet somehow, it felt like she had lost.

As graduation approached, Gigi found herself thinking back to that first day at the academy. The excitement, the hopefulness, the belief that she had finally found her place. Was that optimism for nothing?

After graduating from elementary school, Gigi entered a period of change. The break after graduation, which should have been filled with days of bliss and freedom, was anything but. While some of her old schoolmates were off enjoying their vacations, Gigi's days were packed with rigorous prep work for the next stop in her academic journey: An elite junior high school that her parents had set their sights on.

The Murin parents had been floating the idea around even before she finished elementary school, but ever since Gigi graduated, the discussions took on a more serious, almost fussy tone. They talked endlessly about scholarship programs, prestigious academic pathways, and how important it was for Gigi to get into the best possible academic institution.

At first, Gigi tried to keep up with their whirlwind of expectations. She signed up for the tutoring her parents had recommended and even started working on advanced materials months ahead of the start of the school year. But deep down, she was beginning to feel an aching, a sense of dissatisfaction she hadn't fully acknowledged up until this point.

The first real sign of that change came with her dance lessons. Gigi had grown attached to her dance classes, practicing hard and attending lessons. The challenge of coordination and staying in beat provided much enjoyment to the young girl, and it was a much needed escape from everything else in her life.

But as school break went on, her parents' pressure on her skyrocketed, and they began to talk about her hobby differently. What had once been encouraged as a fun side activity was now seen as a distraction. One evening, after Gigi had returned from a dance class, her parents sat her down on the sofa.

"Gigi," her father began, his voice calm but firm, "We need to talk about your priorities from here on."

Her mother, seated beside him, nodded in agreement. "Yes, Gigi, you've done so well with your studies, and we're so proud of you," she said with a smile that lacked any genuineness, "But we've been thinking about the road ahead. Junior High is going to be more demanding than elementary school, and we want to make sure you're fully focused on your future."

Gigi felt a knot form in her stomach. She knew where this was going. "I am focused," Gigi replied, trying to keep her tone light, "I've been working with the tutor you guys hired, and I've been grinding for the entrance exams non-stop. I'm doing everything you asked."

Her father leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "We know you are, and that's why we think it's time to reconsider some of the activities you're involved in. Dance, for example. It's great that you've enjoyed it, but do you really think it's something you need to keep doing? Especially now that Junior High is right around the corner?" Mr. Murin says, with the straightest face imaginable.

Gigi blinked, feeling caught off guard. "But... I like dancing," the blonde said, her voice quieter now, "It's fun, and it's... freeing."

Mrs. Murin exchanged a glance with her husband before responding. "We understand that. But you have to think about the bigger picture. Dance isn't going to help you get into the top schools or earn scholarships," Mrs. Murin explains, "You're a brilliant student, and we need to make sure you're focusing on the things that really matter."

Gigi sat there stunned. She had expected this conversation sooner or later, but that didn't make it any easier to hear. Dance had been one of the few things that made her feel liberated, like she wasn't constantly being measured or judged. Now, it seemed like even that was slipping away.

"But what if I want to keep dancing?" she asked, her voice shaking slightly.

Mr. Murin shook his head and sighed. "Gigi, you're old enough to understand that sometimes we have to make sacrifices for our future. You've already proven that you can excel academically, and that's where your focus should be," her father says, the patience in his voice wearing thin, "Dance is fun, but it's not going to get you into the best schools or set you up for success later in life."

Her mother reached out and gently took Gigi's hand. Gigi expected her mother's hand to provide warmth, comfort. But for some reason, Gigi found that holding onto Mrs. Murin's hand felt like dunking hers into a bucket of icy water.

"We're doing this because we love you and want what's best for you," Mrs. Murin said softly, "You have so much potential. We just want to make sure you're putting that potential toward the right things."

Gigi nodded, though she didn't feel any better. She knew arguing would be pointless. Her parents had made up their minds. And so, with a heavy heart, she agreed to quit dancing.

In the days that followed, Gigi tried to fully immerse herself into her studies, telling herself that her parents were right—that she needed to focus on what really mattered. She has to, or she wouldn't be '*perfect*' anymore. That being said, a small part of her couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong—That maybe she didn't want to be 'perfect' anymore.

The start of junior high came faster than Gigi had anticipated. The elite academy her parents had chosen was everything they had promised. Rigorous, competitive, and filled with ambitious students. But the excitement she had felt when she first entered her new elementary school wasn't there this time. Instead, she felt a growing sense of weariness.

Her parents continued to push her, signing her up for every scholarship program and advanced course they could find. They talked endlessly about the importance of maintaining her top rankings, and building a resume that would impress the best high schools and colleges. And Gigi complied every time. She studied harder than ever, aced every test, and continued to top the rankings.

But with each passing day, she began to realize something that had been at the edges of her mind for years: Her parents didn't seem to care about her.

Sure, they cared about her achievements, about her perfection, about the bright future they envisioned for her. But they didn't see the girl behind the perfect scores. They didn't see the growing loneliness, the exhaustion, the way her world seemed to shrink a little more every time she achieved anything.

It became more obvious when Gigi started paying attention to how her parents spoke about her to others. Whenever relatives or friends came over, her mother and father would go on and on about her accomplishments, proudly displaying her awards as if they were the only things that mattered.

"Gigi's just brilliant," Mr. Murin would say with a wide smile, "Top of her class every year! We're so lucky to have such a perfect daughter."

Her mother would nod enthusiastically, adding, “She’s already looking into scholarships for high school and college. We couldn’t be prouder of her!”

And while they said all of this, Gigi would sit there, listening quietly, feeling like an item they were showing off to everyone. Gigi was sure her parents cared for her (though she couldn’t tell in what way exactly), but the way they talked about her made it clear that they loved her perfection more than they loved her. They loved the brilliant, perfect daughter they could boast about, not the girl who sometimes just wanted to be a kid, who wanted to play games and goof off with friends without feeling guilty for not studying.

That realization hit Gigi hard one evening, as she sat alone in her room, surrounded by textbooks and notes. She had been studying for yet another scholarship exam, one her parents had insisted she take even though she didn’t really need it.

The pressure to succeed, to live up to their expectations, felt suffocating. And for the first time, Gigi wondered if this was what her entire life would be. An endless cycle of striving for perfection, of meeting goals that weren’t hers.

She stared at the scholarship application in front of her, her pen hovering over the paper. But instead of filling it out, Gigi found herself pausing, her mind drifting to the last time she had felt truly happy. It wasn’t when she had topped the rankings or received another award. It was back when she had been dancing, losing herself in the music, or when she had fun playing video games with her friends—laughing, joking around...

But that part of her life is gone now. Her parents had made sure of that.

With a sigh, Gigi put down her pen and leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling. She knew what she had to do. She would fill out the application, take the exam, and continue to play the role her parents wanted her to play. She would keep being the perfect daughter, the genius they could brag about.

But deep down, Gigi couldn’t help but wonder how much longer she could keep it up. How much longer she could pretend that this was what she wanted, that the life her parents had mapped out for her was the one she wanted for herself.

Because the truth was, Gigi wasn’t sure anymore.

“Mama, Papa, can I talk to you for a moment?” Gigi asked, standing at the edge of her parents’ bed. Her voice trembled slightly, but she held her ground. She couldn’t be dismissed. Not now. Her parents barely glanced at her. Mr. Murin was engrossed in his work laptop while her mother was flipping through a document.

“Can it wait, dear?” her mother sighed, not even looking up, “We’re a little busy right now.”

“No, it can’t wait,” Gigi insisted, her frustration bubbling up. She took a step closer. “I need to talk to you now.”

Her father finally lowered his laptop, raising an eyebrow in surprise at her tone. “What’s this about, Gigi?” Mr. Murin sighs, looking at Gigi.

“It’s about the scholarship,” Gigi answers, her heart hammering in her chest. She could feel the tension building, the confrontation she had been avoiding for too long. “I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to be part of it anymore.”

Her mother’s face fell. “What are you talking about? We’ve gone over this,” Mrs. Murin says, “This is your future, Gigi. These programs will open doors for you-”

“No, Mama,” Gigi said, her voice shaking with anger and desperation, “I don’t want to do any of it! You made me quit dance, you’ve signed me up for all these classes, all these programs... and for what? To make me into someone I’m not?”

Her father stood up, his expression stern. “Gigi, we’re not having this conversation. You’re too young to understand the importance of these opportunities. We’re doing this for you,” Mr. Murin says in a dangerous tone.

“No, you’re not!” Gigi snapped, her fists clenched at her sides, “You’re doing it for yourselves. You don’t care about what I want. You just want me to be perfect.”

Her mother’s eyes flashed with anger. “How dare you talk to us like that after everything we’ve done for you? We’ve sacrificed so much to give you the best education, the best future —”

“I didn’t ask for any of it!” Gigi shouted, her voice breaking as tears welled up in her eyes “You don’t even care about me! You just want me to be the genius daughter you can brag about to everyone. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of always having to be perfect.”

Mr. Murin's face turned red with fury. “Gigi, you don’t understand-” Mr. Murin growls before being cut off.

“No, you don’t understand!” Gigi cut him off, her voice rising, “Do you know what it’s been like for me? I’ve spent years being ‘*perfect*’, trying to make you proud, but all it’s done is ruin my life!”

Her parents exchanged a confused glance, as if they couldn’t comprehend what she was saying.

“I don’t have friends anymore!” Gigi cried, her tears falling freely now, “Do you even know what it’s like to be in a room full of people and feel completely alone? Everyone used to hang out with me, but when they saw how I top the rankings all the time, they stopped! To them, I’m just the ‘smart one,’ the ‘genius’, some... unreachable goal! They didn’t even see me as a person anymore!”

Her mother looked taken aback. “Gigi, you’re exaggerating-” Mrs. Murin says, in an attempt to calm her daughter down.

“I’m not!” Gigi yelled, her voice filled with emotion, “They stopped inviting me to things, they stopped talking to me. And when I do try to hang out, they make me feel like I don’t belong. Do you know how embarrassing it was when I asked them to play a game with me before exams? They looked at me like I was crazy, like I didn’t understand how ‘important’ exams were. They said I wouldn’t get it because I’m ‘too smart’. Do you know how I felt that day?!”

Her parents were silent, their faces a mix of shock and confusion. Gigi could see they didn’t get it. They never had.

“Everyone thinks I’m perfect,” Gigi continued, her voice quieter now but filled with pain, “But being perfect has ruined everything. I’m alone, and I hate it. I can’t keep doing this anymore.”

Her father took a deep breath, trying to regain control of the situation. “Gigi, we know it’s hard, but you’ll make new friends. You’re going to be successful, and all of this will be worth it in the end,” Mr. Murin mutters, averting her daughter's eyes.

Gigi let out a bitter laugh, wiping her eyes. “Worth it? For who? For you?” Gigi spat, “Because it sure ain't worth it for me.”

Without waiting for a response, she pulled the scholarship application from her pocket. Her hands shook as she stared at the papers that had come to symbolize everything she resented. Then, before either of her parents could stop her, she ripped the application in half, the sound of tearing paper filling the room.

“Gigi, what have you done?!” Mrs. Murin exclaimed in horror.

“Pick it up. Now,” Mr. Murin ordered, his eyes narrowing as he took a step forward.

“No,” Gigi said, her voice firm, even as her hands trembled, “I’m done. I’m done with all of this.”

Her mother grabbed her by the arm, her voice rising in panic. “You’re throwing away your future, Gigi!” Mrs. Murin cries, “After everything we’ve done for you, you’re just going to ruin it like this?”

“You’re the ones ruining it!” Gigi shouted, pulling her arm free, “You’re ruining my life! You don’t care about me, you care about your genius daughter, the one you can show off to everyone. But I’m not perfect, and I don’t want to be.”

Her father’s voice was cold, dangerous. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Gigi. You’ll regret this.”

“I already regret it,” Gigi whispered, her voice barely audible as she dropped the torn application to the floor, “I regret letting you control my life.”

Without another word, she turned and bolted from the room, her parents' angry voices following her down the hallway. She slammed her bedroom door behind her and locked it, her breath coming in gasps as she collapsed against the door.

Her father pounded on the door, shouting, "Open this door, Gigi! We're not done talking!"

But Gigi didn't move. She pressed her back harder against the door, wiping away her tears. They weren't going to listen. They never will.

Her mother's voice was softer but no less frustrated. "Gigi, sweetie, let's talk. We'll figure this out together. You don't want to make a mistake you'll regret," Mrs. Murin begged as she knocked.

But Gigi couldn't respond. The combined weight of everything had crashed down on her, and she felt exhausted. She stared blankly at her room, feeling the void in her heart fall onto her again.

She had torn up the path her parents had laid out for her, but now what? She didn't have the answers, and she didn't know where to go from here. But for the first time, she had made a choice for herself.

From that day on, Gigi and her parents barely spoke to each other. They would only communicate when it was completely necessary. But Gigi didn't mind that one bit. In fact, she was relieved that she doesn't speak to them as much anymore.

One thing that remained constant, however, was how her parents only talked to her about academic-related topics. Despite them not being as pushy as they were in the past, they still seemed to care a lot about her performance. Her father, in particular, would ask how Gigi did on a test she had taken, usually giving a dry compliment when she told him how much she had scored. Her mother, on the other hand, seemed to be a more special case.

Gigi couldn't shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe, her mother had felt a sense of guilt on the day of their argument. Mrs. Murin's main form of communication with Gigi now consisted of silent head nods and weak smiles, with the occasional probing about her scores, of course.

Other than that, Gigi was now more free than she ever was. With both her tutoring and dance lessons scrapped, Gigi found herself spending a lot of time on video games, books and TV shows. Eventually, Gigi managed to meet a few friends who shared her interests.

Namely, Shiori Novella, a bookworm who shared Gigi's love of literature, and Koseki Bijou, a girl the blonde had met on Roblox. The three instantly hit it off, and when the time came for Gigi to pick a High School to go to, she immediately selected the one Bijou and Shiori would be going to: Cover High.

It was by no means the best school in the country, but it was still pretty decent. Gigi hoped that by attending Cover High, she would finally escape the tense environment of the prestigious schools she had been going to for years. Now all she needed to do was tell her parents her decision.

Gigi sat at the dinner table, nervously picking at her food. Her parents had been waiting for her decision on a high school, and now was the time to tell them.

“I’ve decided,” she began, glancing between them, “I’m going to Cover High.”

Her father set down his fork, frowning. “Cover High? Gigi, that’s not even close to the top schools we talked about. You could aim so much higher,” Mr. Murin grumbled.

“I don’t want to aim higher,” Gigi said, trying to stay calm, “I’ve been to prestigious schools my whole life, and I’m tired of it. I want to go somewhere that feels... normal. Where I can make friends and not feel all that pressure.”

Her mother sighed, exchanging a look with her father. “But you have such potential. Don’t throw that away just to be comfortable,” Mr. Murin tries to convince his daughter once more.

“I’m not throwing anything away!” Gigi’s voice wavered, her frustration boiling over, “I just want to be happy for once. I want to go to school with my friends. I want to enjoy high school without all this stress!”

Her parents exchanged glances but didn’t push further. The room fell into an awkward silence, the clinking of cutlery the only sound, until Mrs. Murin finally nodded. “Well, if that’s your decision...”

Dinner continued quietly, as Gigi felt a small sense of relief. She finally got to choose a path of her own, and it felt... liberating.

The first few weeks of her high school life went off without a hitch. Gigi found herself settling into Cover High with surprising ease. The environment was a breath of fresh air compared to the suffocating atmosphere of her previous schools. No longer was she held down by the constant pressure to outperform everyone around her. Instead, she was surrounded by people who cared more about the present moment rather than endless competition.

Shiori and Bijou quickly became her closest friends. They spent lunch breaks talking about books and games, sometimes debating the latest anime. Gigi finally felt like she could relax. It was a different kind of life, one where she wasn’t put on a pedestal or treated like an unreachable goal.

Her grades were still excellent, but that didn't seem to matter much here. No one was obsessing over rankings, and no one treated her any differently for being smart. Gigi thrived. She laughed more, felt lighter, and was starting to believe that maybe, just maybe, she had made the right choice by coming to this school.

And then she appeared—Cecilia Immergreen.

In all honesty, Gigi barely acknowledged the green haired girl's existence until she was scolded by her for not completing a piece of work on time.

That was something else that had changed about Gigi. In the past, the blonde would diligently finish her homework on time, but now that she was free from the shackles of pressure, she started being more... careless in her studies. She hadn't fallen off or anything, in fact, she already knew the entire curriculum by heart. It's just that she didn't feel the need to give her all in everything anymore. Gigi quickly settled into a routine of doing work at the last minute (or not at all), or sleeping in classes she found to be monotonous. Her teachers were dismayed at times, but they never bothered to correct her. Nobody did. So when Cecilia Immergreen began confronting her about not finishing her homework one day, Gigi was caught off guard.

The class president's eyes narrowed at the blonde. She had reminded Gigi time and time again not to leave her homework undone and to take her studies seriously. But no matter how many times she did so, Gigi would just shrug it off. But this time—this time, her patience had run out for the blonde.

“Gigi... I'm sorry, but haven't I told you a million times... to finish. Your. Homework?!” Cecilia snaps at the pigtailed girl, who hid her face underneath her hoodie.

Gigi raised an eyebrow, peeking out from a small gap in between her hoodie and fingers. “Cut me some slack, prez... I had things to do,” Gigi tries to explain herself.

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Cecilia demanded, crossing her arms.

“Roblawks,” Gigi replies, struggling to hold in her laughter. Cecilia was not amused, however.

The pair soon started a long squabble that only ended when Cecilia's friend Raora pulled her away from the blonde, who stuck out her tongue at Cecilia. “Why you...” Cecilia growled as Raora pulled her away from the cackling Gigi.

“Man, what was that about?” Bijou asks Gigi, who moved to the side to let her friend share a seat with her.

“I don't know,” Gigi replies, “I didn't know class presidents could be this scary...”

Shiori approaches the duo, crouching down next to Gigi's table. “Jesus, Gigi, what did you do to make Cecilia Immergreen, of all people, mad?” Shiori chuckles as Gigi widens her eyes in confusion.

“What do you mean? Is she not usually like this?” Gigi questions Shiori curiously. Shiori shook her head.

“I knew her in Junior High and she's a sweetheart,” Shiori says, “Everybody loved her then and everybody loves her now.”

Gigi raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? And why’s that?” the blonde asked, rolling her eyes, “She doesn’t seem like the type of person anyone would want to hang out with.”

Shiori chuckled. “I mean you wouldn’t think so, but she’s actually pretty well-liked. Cecilia’s dependable. Teachers love her, she’s always on top of things, and not to mention... She's a real doll too.”

Gigi couldn’t help but stare at Cecilia. She took in her delicate features, her striking green eyes, and the effortless way her hair flowed around her head. There was an elegance in how Cecilia held herself, her posture always straight, her movements controlled yet graceful. As much as Gigi hated to admit it, there was something undeniably captivating about her.

“Beauty queen, huh? Figures,” Gigi muttered, her cheeks turning slightly pink, trying to brush off her thoughts.

“You don't secretly like her, do you?” Bijou teased, poking Gigi’s arm.

“Me? Like someone like her? No way!” Gigi scoffed, crossing her arms defensively, “I just don’t get why she’s so uptight about some stupid homework.”

“Maybe she’s just the type who takes things super seriously,” Shiori suggested with a shrug, “Who knows?”

Gigi didn’t respond, but her gaze lingered on Cecilia for a second longer. Something about her was... infuriating and intriguing all at once. She turned her focus back to her friends, but in the back of her mind, she couldn’t stop thinking about Cecilia.

“Gigi, where's your practice paper?” Cecilia asks the blonde one day after a chemistry lesson, a hint of annoyance in her voice as she leans over Gigi’s desk, eyes narrowing.

“Oh, I thought we were turning that in next week?” Gigi looks up from her notes, feigning innocence. Cecilia crosses her arms, her brow furrowing.

“No, it was due today. You know that. We’ve talked about this,” the perfectionist scolded, slamming a stack of papers onto Gigi's desk.

“Maybe you talked about it,” Gigi retorts, sticking her tongue out playfully, “But FYI, I wasn’t taking notes.”

Cecilia huffs, clearly exasperated. “You can’t just slack off all the time! Put some effort into your work!” Cecilia snaps.

“Sorry if I’m not sweating over every little assignment like you, doll,” Gigi shoots back, smirking as she scribbles a doodle onto a blank worksheet.

“Maybe you should try it sometime,” Cecilia replies sharply, her eyes narrowing further, “You might actually learn something.”

“Ha! As if I need to learn anything from you!” Gigi retorts, a light chuckle escaping her lips, “I mean, who even cares about practice papers anyway? They’re just practice, right?”

Cecilia’s expression shifts from annoyance to disbelief. “You seriously don’t get it, do you? It’s about responsibility!” Cecilia exclaims in indignation, “You can’t just ignore assignments because you think you’re above them!”

“Wow, you’re really on a roll today, huh?” Gigi laughs, leaning back in her chair, “Maybe you should take it down a notch before you burst a blood vessel.”

Cecilia rolls her eyes, turning away. “You’re impossible.”

“Thank you! I’ll take that as a compliment,” Gigi responds with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

As the months passed, their bickering became a regular occurrence, much to the amusement of their classmates. It was as if the pair had established an unspoken routine of events: One would irritate the other (usually Gigi), and the fights would ensue. Sometimes it was playful, other times, it felt as if they could start brawling it out at any moment.

Their classmates began to notice the dynamic, exchanging knowing glances when Gigi and Cecilia squared off over the smallest of things. Some of them even placed bets as to how many fights they would get in everyday.

“Three bucks on them duking it out after Math or Chemistry. Four bucks on both,” Bijou smirked as she, Fuwamoco and Shiori watched Gigi and Cecilia’s latest clash.

“Do they just not run out of energy for this?” Shiori questions, looking slightly concerned at the increasing volume of the argument.

“Nah. Moco-chan and I fight all the time,” Fuwawa smiles as she plays with her sister's hair, “There's nothing wrong with a little teasing here and there.”

“I don't think they’re just teasing each other...” Mococo says, shaking Fuwawa's hands off her head as she gestures towards Cecilia and Gigi. The distance between the two seemed to be closing the longer they fought.

When the battle finally subsided, Gigi collapsed onto her chair in exhaustion. “Oh my gosh, she won't stop yapping about school and studies and exams and ughhhh,” Gigi groans, stomping her feet, “How can anyone be so into academics like that? It really isn't all that...”

Bijou sits on Gigi's desk as she watches Cecilia walk away in irritation. "Hehe, maybe she cares for you," Bijou suggests, as Gigi sat up straight.

"God, I hope not. She sounds like my parents," Gigi mumbles, her face planting itself against the surface of her table. She closes her eyes, recalling her old experiences. Aside from Cecilia's nagging, which reminded her of her own parents, Gigi found that Cecilia felt a lot like the elite kids from her old school, especially the ones who were always too obsessed with their studies.

Gigi took a deep breath, trying to shake off the unease she felt. The memory of her previous school years stung deeply. By this point, the ranking release had turned into a dreadful event she had no excitement for.

"Hey, Gigi!" Bijou's cheerful voice called out a few days later, "You okay? You've been awfully quiet."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Gigi replied, forcing a smile, "Just thinking about the rankings coming out tomorrow."

Shiori tilted her head. "You really shouldn't worry about it. You'll do great!" Shiori encourages as Gigi nodded, appreciating her attempts to cheer her up.

Of course, Gigi wasn't worried about whether she would do well or not. Instead, she was wondering if her new schoolmates would shun her if she were to claim first place once again. The blonde sighed, shaking her head. She couldn't wait for tomorrow to pass by.

"I messed up English, so I'm kinda nervous," Bijou admitted as she, Gigi and Shiori headed to the noticeboard the next day.

"Don't fret too much, Beebs, it's only our first semester here," Shiori giggled as they joined the crowd.

Even though the rankings were not on the board yet, there was already a significant amount of first years. Soon enough, a staff member pinned up the rankings as the sea of girls crowded around the poster.

2024 FIRST YEAR BATCH SEMESTER TEST RANKINGS:

1. GIGI MURIN

2. *CECILIA IMMERGREEN*

3. *ELIZABETH ROSE BLOODFLAME*

4. *SHIORI NOVELLA*

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

The hallway of students let out a collective gasp as they saw who got the top spot. Upon laying her eyes on the poster, Gigi's heart sank. Many other pairs of eyes focused on her as heartbeat accelerated. *"Not again,"* Gigi thought to herself, bracing for the judgmental stares from her peers.

However, it never came. Instead, she received a ton of pats to the back and many words of congratulations.

"WOAH HOW'D YOU DO IT GIGI?"

"But how?! You must be a super genius or something!"

"Congrats GG, that was insane!"

Gigi had to do a double take as everyone around her praised her. They weren't... angry at her?

The crowd eventually began to disperse as Gigi stared into space, still surprised at this turn of events. Unlike her previous schools, the compliments Gigi was receiving seemed to be lighthearted and genuine.

“Woah! You topped the rankings, Gigi!” Shiori exclaimed, clapping Gigi on the back.

“Oh dang it, does that mean I lost the bet?” Bijou whined, as Gigi grins in a carefree way. Gigi snaps out of her daze, grinning as she remembers the bet she made with Bijou. The blonde was confident she would likely rank among the top students in her grade, which is why she agreed to Bijou's bet about making it onto the Top 10 list a few days ago.

“Yeah! Better pay up...” Gigi chuckles, as Bijou reluctantly passed her a two dollar note.

As she laughed with her friends, Gigi almost didn't see Cecilia walking up to her with clenched fists.

Gigi eventually noticed Cecilia approaching her, before grinning at the green haired girl. “Hey there,” Gigi begins, pointing towards the rankings on the board, before cupping her ear towards Cecilia, “Could you repeat what you said last time about, ahem, me failing if I *‘kept up with that attitude of mine’*?”

In stark contrast to the chuckling Gigi, Cecilia was positively beside herself with rage. “How... How did you do so well? Have you been studying hard all this time?” Cecilia whispers, glaring at the pigtailed girl.

Gigi smirked, before shaking her head. “Nope! I mugged for most of it actually,” Gigi replies truthfully, “In fact, I think I only started studying for each paper the night before!”

That was the tipping point. Gigi's nonchalance ignited something deep within Cecilia. “You can't be serious!” Cecilia exclaimed, her voice rising slightly, drawing the full attention of her and Gigi's friends, “You did that for all the tests?! Even... even the History paper?!”

Gigi shrugged, her grin widening. “I told you, I just work better under pressure. It's kind of my thing,” she replied, her tone teasing.

Cecilia felt a surge of frustration. “It's not a ‘thing’! It's irresponsible! Some of us actually put in the effort, you know!” Cecilia snapped.

“Aw, don't shout at me like that, doll,” Gigi said, rolling her eyes playfully, “I thought you were supposed to be the perfect student. You know, Miss President and all.”

This remark only fueled Cecilia's irritation further. “This isn't a joke, Gigi! You might not care about your grades, but I do!” Cecilia growled.

Gigi leaned closer, her expression shifting to mock seriousness, although a hint of irritation shone through. “Oh no, did I hurt your precious feelings? Don’t worry, you still got second place! That’s like, totally impressive. What’s the big deal?” Gigi shrugs.

Cecilia could only stare, incredulity washing over her. “The big deal is that you didn’t even try!” she snapped, shaking her head as she struggled to comprehend the situation.

Raora, sensing the tension, stepped in quickly “Okay, let’s just... cool it, yeah? We should head for the first period soon...”

But it was too late; Cecilia was already running away. The group of them—Gigi, Raora, the twins, Elizabeth, Shiori, and Bijou—watched as Cecilia took off.

“Where’s she going?” Fuwawa exclaimed, concern flickering across her face as everyone began to look worried.

“Should we go after her?” Mococo added as Raora started to jog in the direction Cecilia had fled.

Gigi’s mouth fell open. “*Oh shit, I really pissed her off now,*” she thought anxiously as a surge of adrenaline kicked in. She took off past Raora without a second thought.

“I’ll go find her! You guys head back to class first. I don’t want you to be late because of me!” Gigi announced, not even waiting for a reply as she sprinted away.

The blonde dashed through the school’s corridors, heart racing as she recalled the flash of hurt on Cecilia’s face. The thought was ingrained into her head. She had to apologize.

Gigi turned a corner and spotted a glimpse of green hair disappearing around another bend. With renewed energy, she weaved through a small crowd of students as she continued running.

After what felt like an eternity running, Gigi burst into the school garden. It was quiet and empty, and as the blonde scanned the area, she saw no sign of Cecilia. Panic set in briefly, but Gigi reminded herself to breathe.

She sped further into the garden, looking for any trace of the class president. Finally, just as she was about to lose hope, she spotted Cecilia sitting on a bench near a cluster of roses.

Gigi stood frozen for a moment, taking in the sight of Cecilia’s still form. A rush of emotions surged within her as she watched Cecilia alone in the garden, surrounded by falling petals. Eventually, she mustered up her courage, before calling out, “There you are!”

Cecilia looked up from her phone, her eyes locking onto Gigi in a way that suggested the blonde was the last person she wanted to see.

“You run surprisingly fast,” Gigi grinned, attempting to lighten the mood, “I mean, after seeing your performances in PE, this really came as a surprise.”

Cecilia furrowed her brow, rising to her feet. "You... What are you doing here? Are you here to mock me again?" she shouted, her voice sharp. Gigi's smile faltered for a moment.

"I came here to get you, stupid. We wouldn't want our class president to be late for class, right?" Gigi retorted, striding towards Cecilia with confidence.

Cecilia held out a hand, her frustration boiling over. "Leave me alone," she snapped, her heart racing. Gigi paused, her expression shifting from playful to something more serious upon hearing the girl's voice break a little.

"What's wrong?" Gigi asked cautiously as tears began slowly streaming out of Cecilia's eyes. It was clear Cecilia was in no mood to joke around. Gigi slowly approached Cecilia, as her mind raced to think of a way to comfort her, to say... anything. But at this very moment, Gigi was at a loss for words.

"It's just not fair!" Cecilia exclaimed suddenly, stepping closer to Gigi and grabbing her by the collar, "You don't even put in half the effort I do! I work my butt off for all my studies, giving my all, and here you are, just breezing through the tests like they're nothing!"

Gigi raised an eyebrow, unfazed by her blouse being grabbed. Just what was Cecilia so angry about?

"Again, what's the big deal? It's just a grade!" Gigi brings up, causing Cecilia to shake her head in disbelief.

"No, it's not just about the grades! You don't understand what it's like to work so hard for something only for someone like you, who treats everything like a joke, to ace it like it's nothing!" Cecilia exclaims, "It feels like a slap in the face to everyone who actually cares about their work!"

Gigi furrowed her brow. Who the hell did Cecilia think she was? Talking down to the blonde like that. Gigi's initial sympathy faded away, slowly realizing that Cecilia was truly just another one of those kids from her elementary school days.

"When you say '*everyone who cares*'... you really just mean yourself, don't you?" Gigi mutters, unable to help herself from challenging the perfectionist.

"You don't get it... for as long as I can remember, I've been perfect at everything. And that's because I work so hard to be that way," Cecilia whispers, "So if I work my ass off only to achieve anything less than 'perfect', am I even worth anything?"

A silence fell upon the pair as Cecilia's grip on Gigi's collar slowly released. "*Tsk, why's she so worked up over being perfect? What a weirdo,*" Gigi thought to herself, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu.

"I think I understand now, *Little Miss Perfect*," Gigi says venomously, "But let me tell you something. It's not all about perfection. You keep saying you work hard and shit, but have you ever thought about why you feel like you need to be perfect? It's like you've put yourself in this box and are terrified of stepping out of it."

Cecilia's jaw fell slightly. She didn't know how to answer that question. "I have my reasons," Cecilia utters, avoiding eye contact with the shorter girl, "You don't know what you're saying."

Gigi scoffed. She knew better than anyone what it was like to be '*perfect*' and believe her—It isn't all that it's cracked up to be.

"What I'm saying is you care way too much about perfection," Gigi asserted, attempting to dissect Cecilia piece by piece, "You care so much that you completely break the moment you falter even a little bit."

The pair glared at each other once more, as the morning sun shone down on them brightly. "How is it... that you can ace... everything without trying?" Cecilia asks angrily, drawing herself up to her full height, "You must be lying or something. There's no way you could get those scores without putting even a little bit of effort into your revision."

"Well, I'm what some people might call a *genius*. But that's not the point," Gigi whispers, moving closer to Cecilia, who felt her back hit the trunk of a tree, "You're changing the subject."

Gigi didn't know what came over as she backed Cecilia against the tree. It was truly a spur of the moment thing, as her body didn't seem to be in control of her at the moment. Gigi stared at the green haired girl's porcelain features as she got closer to her.

"Come to think of it. You seem to be really interested in everything I do," Gigi says softly, lifting Cecilia's chin, "Always nagging at me when you really don't have to... It's almost like you're obsessed with me."

The green haired girl's cheeks flushed an even deeper red color upon hearing those words, pushing Gigi away slightly. "I'm just trying to be a good class president," Cecilia mutters, her voice barely audible.

"You sure you aren't obsessed with me, doll?" Gigi asks, a grin returning to her features, "You were really worked up when I beat you in the rankings."

There was silence. A silence that seemed to pause time at that very moment. Gigi took deep breaths as Cecilia glared at her again. This was different however, as the perfectionist's eyes seemed to gleam with something more than anger.

Gigi yelped as Cecilia suddenly pushed her towards a nearby tree, grabbing her collar once more. The blonde felt her cheeks turn warm as she and Cecilia's faces were just inches apart.

"Who do you think you are?" Cecilia spat, her voice low but simmering with intensity, "You think being a '*genius*' gives you the right to look down on everyone else, especially me?"

Gigi's eyes widened slightly, her confidence slowly draining away as she stared at Cecilia, whose grip on her collar tightened. "You think you can keep brushing off hard work like it's nothing? Like it's some kind of game? I've put my heart and soul into everything I do, and you just saunter through life without a care in the world!" the perfectionist ranted.

Cecilia leaned closer, her breath hot with emotion. “You’re not better than me just because you got lucky this time. You’re about to see just how hard I can push myself,” Cecilia says firmly. The fire in her chest burned brighter as she spoke, a furious wave of energy fueling her resolve.

“Just you see. I’ll destroy you and take my place at the top of the rankings, I can promise that,” Cecilia growls, passion seeping through her voice as she finally lets Gigi go.

Gigi was at a loss for words. She stood there, breathless, as Cecilia let go of her collar. Her mind raced, trying to piece together what had just happened. It was the intensity in Cecilia’s voice that threw her off, the raw emotion and determination that hit her like a slap to the face. This... was different from the experiences she’d had with her peers in the past. Cecilia wasn’t angry because Gigi was a roadblock or some unattainable goal. No—Cecilia saw her as something else entirely.

Gigi had been used to the people around her distancing themselves, treating her like an immovable object, too far ahead to compete with. They either idolized her or avoided her, unable to connect with someone they deemed ‘perfect’. But Cecilia? Cecilia didn’t seem to be like that at all. She wasn’t intimidated, nor did she look at Gigi with resentment born from a sense of inferiority. Instead, she looked at Gigi as someone to beat, someone standing directly in her path. Not someone above her, but beside her, in the same race.

Cecilia doesn’t fear Gigi’s brilliance, she wants to challenge it.

As Gigi leaned against the tree, catching her breath, something in her shifted. For the first time, someone had looked her in the eyes and refused to let her status intimidate them. “*She actually believes she can beat me,*” Gigi thought, Cecilia’s words still replaying in her mind.

Gigi didn’t feel like an untouchable goal on a pedestal anymore. She felt like a rival—one Cecilia was determined to surpass.

The realization left her both shaken and strangely... excited.

As she looked up at Cecilia, Gigi found herself smiling. The biggest smile she’s smiled in forever. Maybe this school wasn’t going to be like her past experiences after all.

Gigi grinned at the perfectionist, gathering herself before saying, “There she is.”

The blonde stood up, a sense of playfulness suddenly rising up within her.

“I was starting to think you’d continue being a whimpering mess... Thank goodness I was wrong,” Gigi teases, her bubbly energy returning.

“You better keep your promise, *doll*,” Gigi grins, putting emphasis on that last word.

She began walking away from Cecilia, before turning her head back and winking. “I’ll be waiting for you to destroy me.”

Without a second thought, Gigi walked away from the perfectionist, who was once again left speechless. Once she was out of sight, Gigi began sprinting towards the nearest

bathroom.

Gigi slammed the bathroom door shut behind her and leaned against it, her heart still racing. She couldn't help but groan, the realization of what happened in the garden truly sinking in. "What the fuck was that, Gigi?" she muttered under her breath, her hands rising up to cover her face in embarrassment.

She had cornered Cecilia against a tree. A tree. And to make matters worse, she had said the most cliché line possible

"I'll be waiting for you to destroy me."

The words echoed in her head, and she cringed all over again, sliding down the bathroom door until she was sitting on the floor.

"What am I, some Saturday morning villain?" Gigi muttered to herself, burying her face in her hands. The whole thing felt ridiculous now that she replayed it in her mind. And the worst part was, Cecilia might have actually taken her seriously. *"Well it's your fault for provoking her like that,"* Gigi's conscience pointed out.

She let out another groan, staring up at the ceiling, trying to erase the memory of her smug grin and that wink she'd thrown in for good measure. She cringed again just thinking about it. Why did she have to wink? It was like she had been possessed by some over-the-top, theatrical version of herself, saying all the wrong things at exactly the wrong moment. Has she been reading too many novels and watching too many shows?

But... as mortified as she felt, there was something else beneath the embarrassment. Gigi sat up straighter, remembering the fire in Cecilia's eyes, the way she had pushed back with such intensity. That part wasn't a mistake. In fact, it was the first time in a long while that someone had made Gigi feel genuinely... alive.

"I was starting to think you'd continue being a whimpering mess... thank goodness I was wrong."

The truth was, she was relieved. Cecilia wasn't just another distant face in the crowd, blending into the background of her life. She was different—someone who wasn't content to stay in Gigi's shadow.

As cringeworthy as it all had been, Gigi couldn't deny it. She was genuinely invigorated by Cecilia's challenge. It was something she hadn't realized she'd been craving for years now. Competition. A real rival. Not the kind that resented her from afar, but someone who would stand face-to-face with her.

She sighed, pulling herself up from the floor and staring into the mirror. “You better keep your promise, doll,” she said to her reflection, mimicking the cocky grin she’d given Cecilia, though now it felt more ridiculous than anything.

Still, the thought of Cecilia working hard, preparing herself to topple Gigi from the top of the rankings, sent a thrill through her. Gigi hadn’t felt this kind of excitement about school, or anything, in ages.

Her thoughts then hovered over the way Cecilia’s eyes had flared up with determination, how her cheeks had flushed with anger, or maybe something else. There was something about that intensity, the way Cecilia had stood up to her, that made Gigi’s heart race just a little faster than she’d expected.

Shaking off the awkwardness of the encounter, Gigi straightened up, smoothing out her uniform. She might have made a fool of herself back there, but deep down, she was glad. Cecilia’s declaration of war wasn’t just a simple challenge. It was something much more than that.

And Gigi was ready.

Chapter End Notes

AAHHHH SORRY FOR THE LATE UPDATE LIFE HAS BEEN HECTIC
RECENTLY!!!

i've been seeing quite a few tweets talking about this fic AND IM SO GLAD YALL
LIKE IT SO MUCH EHEHEHEHE

i'll try to update this soon... i hope

The New Semester

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was four in the morning, and Fauna was awoken by strange noises coming from downstairs. Grumbling a little, she reached out for her bedside lamp, turning on the lights as she rubbed her eyes to adjust her vision to the sudden change in brightness.

Fauna groggily made her way downstairs, walking with her hands outstretched to make sure she didn't bump into anything. After feeling her way to the first floor, she spotted her younger sister Cecilia sitting at the dining table, one hand stuffing her mouth with a sandwich, and the other... holding a textbook.

“Cecilia, it's...” Fauna began, before glancing at a clock on the wall, “...four AM. Why are you awake?”

Cecilia turned to look at her sister, who had taken a seat next to her. “Mmfh, mmfh!” Cecilia hummed, swallowing her food before replying, “It's the first day of the new semester. I'm just doing a little last-minute revision for that algebra test Gigi and I are gonna compete over.”

The perfectionist took another large bite out of her sandwich, eyes darting down to the pages of her textbooks as she flipped through its contents. “Aren't you already prepared for this? I mean, you've been grinding for the paper since summer began,” Fauna questioned, yawning a little.

“You can never be too prepared,” Cecilia replies, as Fauna stood up to get herself some breakfast, “Plus, I have to give it my all if I'm gonna beat Gigi.”

Fauna muttered a soft 'Of course' in response, pouring herself some milk. Even though it's been some time since she had seen Cecilia fully throw herself into the realm of academics, Fauna could see that her sister's competitive streak hasn't changed one bit.

However, something about Cecilia... changed. The bitter and angry aura the perfectionist gave off whenever she was busy revising had been replaced with something lighter... almost playful.

Fauna didn't mind this change however. Sure, her sister's fire was still there, but her competition with Gigi now seemed more like a game she was excited to play, rather than a war she had to win.

Despite this, waking up before the break of dawn to get in some ‘last-minute revision’ was definitely not healthy—especially considering the fact that Cecilia already knew the material inside out.

“If I were you, Cece, I'd just get my full eight hours of sleep,” Fauna cautioned, watching over Cecilia's shoulder, before smirking, “Imagine if you fall asleep during the test later...”

Cecilia shook her head, lifting up her cup. "It's okay, I made myself some coffee," Cecilia replies with a smile, taking a sip before wincing.

"I thought we were a 'no-coffee' household," Fauna says, crossing her arms.

"Don't get me wrong. I still DESPISE coffee," Cecilia clarifies, lifting a finger up, "But desperate times call for desperate measures."

Fauna shot a blank stare at her sister. "I wouldn't call an unweighted test 'desperate'..."

As Cecilia buried her face in her textbook once more, Fauna observed a small smile tugging at her sister's lips every now and then. It was a rare sight. Usually, studying would have the perfectionist frowning, her brows knit together in complete concentration. But now? Now, she looked like she was having fun.

Cecilia looked up from her textbook, blinking as she watched her sister giggle lightly. "What's so funny?" Cecilia asked curiously as Fauna smiles.

"Oh, it's nothing... it's just that you seem to be enjoying studying for a change," Fauna replies, resting her chin on her hand.

"I always enjoy studying," Cecilia denies, forcing down another sip of coffee, "Nothing's changed."

"What I mean is that you seem more... smiley," Fauna continues, giving her sister the side-eye, "Could it be because of that Gigi girl?"

Cecilia nearly choked on her coffee, setting the cup down as she tried to cover up her flustered expression. "It's not like that!" Cecilia insisted, "I just enjoy a good challenge!"

"Sure," Fauna grinned, enjoying the sight of her sister's flushed cheeks.

Cecilia turned away from her sister, ducking behind the pages of her textbooks. "You're imagining things..."

The ringing of the school bell echoed throughout its grounds, as students and teachers streamed into its gates for a brand new semester. Friends ran up to each other, laughing and catching up on stories from their summer break.

Meanwhile, Gigi trudged through the gates, yawning loudly as she walked into the school grounds. She had barely gotten any sleep the previous night, instead playing a new card shop simulator she discovered recently. Needless to say, the blonde felt exhausted. Ah well, she could always take a nap in History class later on.

“Gigi!”

Gigi whirled around as she saw Bijou and Shiori waving and walking up to her. The blonde grinned, holding onto her bag's straps as she skipped towards the two. “Hey guys,” Gigi grinned, her friends noticing the dark circles around her eyes.

“You look like shit,” Shiori chuckled as they began walking, “Were you up studying for that algebra quiz?”

Gigi shook her head. “No, I have that in the bag,” the blonde replies, “I was just up playing that card shop simulator last night... Barely got a wink of sleep.”

The three girls retreated into the shelter of the school hallways, swimming past crowds of students as they navigated their way to the first class of the term. “So,” Bijou began, leaning against Gigi's shoulder, “Are you prepared for Cece's challenge?”

Gigi's eyes widened as her tired expression cleared up. That's right. Cecilia's challenge from the previous semester begins today. With a grin, Gigi began walking with a spring in her step. “Hehe, the question isn't if I am ready,” Gigi replied jovially, “It's if *she* is.”

“You sound confident,” Shiori noted in amusement as they turned a corner.

The trio eventually reached their classroom, where the atmosphere was already alight with chatter and laughter.

“Hello ladies,” Elizabeth greeted the three girls as they stepped into the room, “Has everyone had a good break?”

Gigi nods, flashing a toothy grin. “Yeah! It was pretty good,” Gigi replies, scanning the room for her rival as her friends caught up with Elizabeth.

The blonde spotted the familiar green-haired girl seated near the windows, her expression neutral and her posture straight. The morning sun seemed to enhance the perfectionist's doll-like features, almost giving her an ethereal glow. Gigi felt some heat in her cheeks as she admired Cecilia from afar.

The blonde then snapped out of her trance, as she felt a sudden urge to tease the perfectionist. For some reason, she simply couldn't wait to get a rise out of the green haired girl. However, before she could reach Cecilia's seat, their classmate Nerissa Ravencroft got to the class president's seat first.

“Cece... have you done our English holiday assignment yet?” Nerissa asked frantically, holding up a worksheet in her hands.

Cecilia sighs as she gives the blue haired girl a small smile. “Nerissa, don't tell me you haven't started on the essay... We were given a whole summer break to finish it!” Cecilia chided as she shook her head.

“I know, I know...” Nerissa cries dramatically, before looking at Cecilia with pleading eyes, “Could you perhaps... let me copy off your paper?”

“Nerissa, you can't copy off an essay,” Cecilia pointed out as Nerissa gasped in horror.

The green haired girl chuckles, before taking out her own paper. “Hmm, let's see, English is right after recess...” Cecilia begins, as her mind raced, “How about this: There's still ten minutes before History class. I can guide you through the writing process, and if you concentrate, I'd say you could finish the essay by the end of recess.”

Nerissa lit up upon hearing Cecilia's proposition, as she gave the class president a big hug. “Oh my gosh, you're a lifesaver Cece!” Nerissa exclaimed, as she embraced Cecilia, “What can I ever do to repay you?”

Gigi frowned upon seeing the scene that just unfolded before her. She thought about approaching the green haired girl but it seemed she was currently... occupied with Nerissa at the moment. Maybe she should talk to Cecilia later during recess instead.

For some reason, Gigi felt a strange sense of disappointment within her as she went back to her own seat. Her disappointment didn't go unnoticed however, as Bijou smirked and leaned in close.

“Why so pouty Gigi?” Bijou asked teasingly, her eyes darting towards where Gigi was looking.

“Uh... pouty? Me? Whatever are you talking about? I'm perfectly fine!” Gigi denies, looking away from Cecilia, who was now sitting with and tutoring Nerissa.

“Oh, it's nothing,” Bijou brushes off, before grinning, “I just thought you looked little jelly looking at Nerissa and Cece over there.”

Gigi shook her head furiously, as she waved her hands about. “Jelly? Why would I be jelly?” Gigi splutters, “I just wanted to talk to her about the quiz later. And you know... maybe piss her off a little—the usual!”

“Sure~” Bijou sang, prompting Gigi to put the shorter girl in a headlock.

“You're. Imagining. Things!” Gigi grunted as she wrestled with Bijou.

A few minutes later, Cecilia finished tutoring Nerissa. The blue haired girl hugged Cecilia once again, a big smile plastered on her face. “Thank you so so much!” Nerissa says gratefully, her eyes gleaming with enlightenment, “I understand it much better now!”

“Of course,” Cecilia grins as Nerissa lets go of her, “I told you, didn't I? It's actually much easier than it seems.”

“It's all thanks to your teachings, prez,” Nerissa replies, bowing to Cecilia.

Gigi kept her eyes on the two girls, waiting for a moment to strike. Once Nerissa returned to her seat, Gigi felt a rush of adrenaline, standing up as she began to make her way to Cecilia's seat. However, the moment she stood up, their history teacher walked into the classroom. “Alright class, settle down, take out your textbooks...”

Gigi groaned, plopping back down into her seat. All that anticipation only for the teacher to ruin her timing. The blonde glanced over at Cecilia, who was already pulling out her history notes diligently.

“Guess I'll have to wait till recess,” Gigi sighs under her breath sadly.

History class dragged on at a snail-like pace, each second feeling like an eternity as the teacher droned in his nasally voice. The blonde's eyelids grew heavier with each passing second as the words projected onto the board blurred. Before she knew it, her head had dropped to her folded arms, and she drifted off.

The next thing she knew, the sharp ring of the recess bell jolted her awake. Gigi blinked, lifting her head groggily and wiping away a trace of drool from the corner of her mouth. She looked around, noticing her classmates already packing up and filing out into the hallway. With a small yawn, she quickly straightened up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Finally," she mumbled to herself, the spark of energy from earlier rekindling.

Gigi leaped out of her seat, her eyes immediately darting towards Cecilia's desk. However, the green haired girl seemed to have already left the classroom.

Gigi's gaze swept the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of Cecilia, but her seat was empty. She frowned slightly, wondering where Cecilia had gone off to already. Usually, Raora and Cecilia would be together when they went for breaks, so Gigi's curiosity piqued when she noticed Raora still lingering at her desk, slowly packing her things.

Gigi strolled over, hands tucked behind her back casually. “Hey, Raora, what's keeping you? Aren't you usually with Cece?”

Raora looked up and gave a small smile, tucking a book into her bag. “Oh, Cecilia's outside chatting with some girls from the karate club,” she explained.

Gigi tilted her head thoughtfully, a hint of surprise flickering across her face. “The karate club?”

Raora nodded, tossing her pencil case into her bag. “Mhm, I believe they're talking about some logistics regarding the cultural festival,” the artist replies as Gigi raises an eyebrow.

“Huh. I didn't know she did karate,” Gigi noted, smiling slightly at the thought of Cecilia doing martial arts.

Raora chuckled, shaking her head in amusement. “Haha, no, she *definitely* doesn't,” Raora said as she and Gigi made their way out of the classroom, “Cecilia just likes to help out other clubs from time to time, especially when it comes to planning events or handling logistics. People know they can go to her for assistance.”

Gigi raised her eyebrows, surprised but impressed. “Really? So she's like everyone's unofficial consultant or something?” Gigi asked as Raora nodded.

“Pretty much,” Raora grins, “It’s only been a few months since we entered this school, but it feels like she’s got a hand in everything around here. People trust her to get things done right.”

Gigi’s smile grew as she processed this new piece of information. “That does sound like her,” she muttered under her breath, intrigued.

Sure enough, Cecilia was standing just outside the classroom, deep in conversation with a few first years from the karate club.

“It’s so unfair!” one of the karate club members cried in frustration, “We tried negotiating with the dance club to get them to share the space at the foyer, but they won’t even let us have a quarter of what we need for our booth.”

Cecilia listened carefully, nodding as she processed their complaint. “I get it,” she replied, “If you don’t have enough room, you can’t really demonstrate anything properly. Just a table won’t do.”

Another member sighed, crossing her arms. “Exactly! But no matter where we ask, it seems everything’s already taken.”

After a thoughtful pause, Cecilia brightened. “How about setting up near the library entrance? It’s a little quieter, but it’s way more spacious than the foyer, so you’ll have more space there to show off your moves without being too crowded. Plus, people tend to walk by there between events,” Cecilia suggested, raising up a finger.

The karate club members exchanged hopeful glances. “You really think we could use that spot?” one of them asked, her eyes lighting up.

Cecilia nodded confidently. “I could help you talk to the events committee and see if we can make it official. That way, you’ll get plenty of foot traffic,” Cecilia offers with a smile.

“Ahhh! You’re the best, Cecilia!” one of the girls beamed.

“Yeah! You’re a great help!”

“I can’t wait to see the looks on those dancers’ faces when they see our booth! We owe you one Cece!”

Cecilia chuckled nervously, putting up her hands. “Alright, alright, I didn’t do anything yet,” Cecilia says, clearly flustered by the karate club members’ enthusiastic praise, “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ll do my best to convince the committee, but it’s not a guarantee!”

Before Cecilia set off to the events committee’s clubroom with the karate club members, she spotted Raora standing outside the classroom.

“Oh, Raora! You can go on without me, I’ll catch up with you later!” Cecilia calls out, as Raora nods.

“Just don’t keep me waiting,” Raora replies jokingly, crossing her arms.

Cecilia shook her head. "I won't..." the perfectionist assures, before meeting eyes with Gigi.

The blonde grinned at the green haired girl, giving her an enthusiastic wave. Cecilia felt a light blush rush to her cheeks upon meeting Gigi's gaze, but quickly composed herself, waving back with a small smile.

After Cecilia left with the club members, Raora couldn't help but notice how Gigi was still looking in the direction Cecilia went. "Huh, that's weird," Raora noted, raising an eyebrow at Gigi.

The blonde snapped out of her daze as she turned to Raora. "What's weird?" Gigi asks, as a smirk appears on the artist's face.

"Nothing, I'm just surprised you two didn't start attacking each other the second you made eye contact," Raora replied with a teasing glint in her eyes.

"We don't fight *all* the time," Gigi defended herself as they made their way to the cafeteria, "In fact, I think we're pretty capable of interacting like regular human beings."

Raora giggles, looking slightly unconvinced. "Are you sure about that?" Raora asks, as Gigi nodded in confirmation. "Yeah! We've been... civil lately," Gigi explains, glancing away.

"Well that's good," Raora says, "So how about that contest she challenged you to? Is that still happening?"

Gigi grins, flamboyantly placing her hands on her hips. "You bet! I feel sorry for poor Cece though... she doesn't stand a chance," Gigi jests, as Raora raises an eyebrow in amusement.

"Don't be too confident, Gigi," Raora warns, "When Cece's set on something, she'll do everything in her power to see it through."

The blonde shrugged, unfazed by the artist's warning. "I know! I'm counting on her to give it her all," Gigi says excitedly as she jumps up and down, "Hehehe, this is gonna be fun!"

To Gigi's disappointment, she was once again out of luck.

Just as Cecilia returned from the events committee clubroom and made her way toward the cafeteria, a group of first years from the drama club intercepted her at the entrance.

"Cecilia, can you help us out?" one of the students asked, holding up a notebook, "We're totally stuck on ideas for our booth at the cultural festival."

Cecilia blinked, a bit taken aback by their eagerness, but quickly gave them a warm smile. “Of course! What do you all have in mind so far?”

“Our seniors are already putting on a big play in the auditorium, so us first years are just in charge of running the booth near our clubroom,” one of the girls elaborated, “But... we’re not really sure what would be fun or attract people.”

Cecilia nodded, a thoughtful expression appearing on her face. “Hmm... alright, how about this: you could put on small improv shows throughout the day. It doesn’t need much prep, and improv tends to grab attention. People could even throw in suggestions or themes for you to act out on the spot!” Cecilia suggests, with a gleam in her eyes.

The drama club members lit up at the idea, exchanging excited glances. “Oh, that sounds perfect!” one of them beamed.

“And it wouldn’t take a lot of set-up either!” another nodded in agreement.

“Yeah! We could even come up with some funny scenarios ahead of time to be ready,” yet another girl added eagerly.

Gigi, seated just a few tables away, leaned back with a sigh as she watched Cecilia get pulled into yet another project. “It’s like she’s on a mission to fix everyone’s problems today,” she mumbled to herself, rolling her eyes.

Yet despite herself, Gigi couldn’t take her eyes off Cecilia, who was now deeply engrossed in discussion with the drama club. There was just something so admirable about Cecilia's willingness to help others so enthusiastically—and Gigi couldn't help but be captivated by the way her eyes lit up when she was brainstorming, her voice confident and warm as she shared her ideas.

Still, the blonde felt a tinge of annoyance at how Cecilia was completely absorbed with other girls once again. It was almost as if she was feeling a little... jealous?

“Wait, what am I thinking? I don’t own her or anything!” Gigi thought to herself as she looked away from Cecilia, *“Besides, they have legitimate reasons to talk to her... while I just wanna piss her off.”*

Surprisingly, the drama club members finished their talk with Cecilia rather quickly, prompting Gigi to brighten up. The blonde then began thinking of a perfect jab she could throw at the perfectionist for when she got to their lunch table.

When Cecilia eventually reached the table, Raora shifted a little, allowing the perfectionist some space to sit. “You're pretty busy this morning,” the artist comments as Cecilia sighs.

“Yeah,” the green haired girl replied, “It seems like the clubs are really getting serious about the cultural festival. Everyone wants to make a good impression.”

“It's a good thing you're there to help them, huh?” Gigi says, unable to resist butting in, “The almighty Cecilia Immergreen! Savior of clubs!”

Cecilia rolled her eyes at the blonde, before opening her mouth to retort. “Gigi—”

However, just before the perfectionist could say anything, three girls from the aquatics club appeared behind her. “Cecilia! We need help!”

The perfectionist turned around in surprise as she faced the three aquatics club members. “How may I help you?” Cecilia asks the three girls, who stared at her expectantly.

“Our seniors asked us to come up with some ideas on how to spice up our booth at the clubroom, since the last few festivals have been pretty dull,” one of the girls explained, biting her lip nervously, “But we’re totally stuck and don’t know where to start.”

Cecilia crossed her arms, giving their predicament some thought. “Okay, let’s brainstorm a bit. First off, what kind of impression do you want people to have when they visit your booth?” Cecilia asked the girls, who exchanged glances, one of them fidgeting slightly.

“We want it to feel... you know, like really aquatic. Something that’ll make people think of the ocean or lakes, that sort of thing,” one girl replies.

“Hmm, and what’s your vision for the booth? Do you want it to be informational? Flashy?” Cecilia continues, “Maybe a little interactive with games and stuff?”

“A combination of all three of those sounds perfect honestly,” a club member nods.

Cecilia thought for a moment, then smiled. “In that case, how about incorporating some visuals to set the atmosphere?” she suggests immediately, “You could have marine or aquatics-related illustrations that really show off the club’s spirit... and it could really even add an ocean-y feel to the clubroom!”

The girls looked at each other, idea bulbs lighting up above their heads. “That sounds great and all, but... none of us are really good at art.”

Cecilia’s eyes lit up as an idea struck her. “Lucky for you, I know a great artist,” Cecilia says, turning to Raora, who had been quietly listening.

Raora smiled, her gaze meeting Cecilia’s. “I’d be happy to help! I can help you create some illustrations and other decor if you’d like,” the artist tells the club members.

The girls from the aquatics club beamed, visibly relieved. “Thank you so much, guys! We really appreciate it!”

Gigi watched from the sidelines, her posture slumped as she watched Cecilia help out yet another club. “*Wow, she’s really busy with the clubs today,*” Gigi notes, pouting, “*Are people really that into the festival prep?*”

The blonde glanced around the cafeteria, trying to eavesdrop on the conversations happening at nearby tables. It seemed like everyone was caught up in festival planning—discussing booth designs, performance ideas, and ways to stand out. Gigi raised an eyebrow, slightly baffled by the passion everyone was showing.

“Seriously?” she muttered to herself, crossing her arms, “It’s like they’re planning some huge event, not just a school festival.”

Sure, she had heard that high school cultural festivals were a big deal, but this level of dedication still confused her. It wasn't like she was currently part of any club to feel the pressure herself. Still, a small part of her couldn't help but remember her time on the council back in elementary school.

Back then, she did her fair share of organizing, but given that it was only an elementary school council, the events were far smaller and simpler than the ones in high school. They mostly just set up class parties or small celebrations, with a few posters and some cheap decorations thrown around. Nothing like the elaborate booths, costumes, and performances that the high schoolers seemed to be planning.

Upon entering high school, the first years were all given a variety of clubs to choose from. However, Gigi opted not to sign up for any of them, her reasoning simple: She wanted more time to herself.

After all, back in elementary school, she had no choice but to join the student council. Her parents, determined that she ‘*learn some responsibility*’ and ‘*develop her portfolio*’, had pressured her into it. It had been draining. While other kids her age had time to relax and play after school, she’d been handling tasks that, frankly, felt way too grown-up for someone her age. Hence, the blonde figured she would make up for that missed time and join the ‘going home club’ when she entered high school.

Despite this, after being exposed to talk of the upcoming festival for the entirety of the morning, Gigi started feeling a disconnected from everyone else, and a part of her wondered if maybe, just maybe, she should have joined a club after all.

Her dampened mood continued on towards the end of English class later that day, and she found it difficult to stop thinking about just how much she could be missing out on. The blonde groaned, her head resting on the table as Bijou turned around to look at her.

“Why do you look so grumpy?” Bijou asked, as she began to balance a few erasers on top of Gigi’s head.

“I'm having a crisis right now,” Gigi replied, seemingly clueless of the tower of erasers being built on her head.

“Yeah? What kind of crisis?” Bijou asked, not really paying much attention to Gigi as she placed a pen across two erasers.

Gigi sighs, her face still planted onto the table. “I dunno,” Gigi mumbled, “Just thinking about clubs, I guess.”

Upon stacking yet another eraser on the blonde’s head, Bijou paused, raising an eyebrow. “Clubs? Like school clubs? I thought you said you didn't care for them?” Bijou says, as her stationery construct wobbles slightly.

To Bijou's horror, Gigi finally sat up, the tower of stationery on her head tumbling onto the floor as she did. The blonde blinked in surprise, before picking up the fallen items. "I don't! Or, well... I didn't," she admitted, glancing around at her classmates animatedly chatting about festival plans, "But it's like... everyone's doing something for the festival! You're in that tabletop club, right? What's going on there?"

"Ehe, the seniors want to make a life sized version of snakes and ladders—with huge dice and everything," Bijou replied excitedly as Gigi's eyes sparkled with interest, "We haven't started on it yet... but the concept itself is pretty cool."

"That *does* sound pretty cool!" Gigi comments, dumping the fallen stationery onto her desk, "Believe me, I'd be first in line at the festival."

"You can help us beta test it if you like," Bijou suggests, "We do have a few other ideas too, so the booth won't be too stale."

"I'll take you up on that offer," Gigi replies, winking, before her moody expression returns.

"Your grumpy face is back," Bijou points out, now stacking her erasers on Gigi's arm, "Seriously, what's going on with you?"

Gigi looked up at Bijou. If the blonde was being completely honest, she couldn't quite piece together the feelings swirling within her. But with her friend staring at her so expectantly, she decided to try.

"I know it seems a bit sudden, but it's just... seeing everyone so caught up in their clubs," Gigi admitted, her voice softer than usual, "I don't know, it's like everyone's got this... purpose, I guess? They're all so into it, and I feel kind of... left out."

The blonde let out a frustrated sigh, running a hand through her messy hair. "It's like I don't have a place in all of this."

Bijou paused mid-eraser stack, her usually playful expression softening. "You know, if you feel that way, maybe you just need to join a club you're interested in," Bijou suggests.

Gigi groaned, crossing her arms defensively. "I don't know..." the blonde said, eyes drifting to a nearby table where a group of aquatics club members were busy drawing on a large sheet of paper as Raora guided them. She was soon snapped out of her thoughts, as Cecilia approached her desk.

"Gigi, may I have your English essay?" Cecilia asked the blonde, whose mind blanked out for a few seconds.

She must have been staring at the class president's face for a few seconds too long however, as after a few moments, Cecilia's cheeks began to redden. "Hey, stupid. I'm talking to you," Cecilia mutters, placing a hand on her hip.

"M-my essay?" Gigi says, looking away from Cecilia's green eyes, "Oh right! Hey, is it alright if I submit it tomorrow? I kinda left it at home..."

Cecilia narrowed her eyes, clearly unconvinced. “You say that, but it's probably stuffed into your file somewhere!” Cecilia huffs, as Gigi opens her mouth in mock shock.

“How dare you! You'd really suggest I'd LIE to you? You really think I'd LIE?!” Gigi exclaimed teasingly, unable to resist the urge to irritate Cecilia, “I'm better than that, you know!”

The perfectionist placed the stack of worksheets she was holding onto on Gigi's desk. “Yeah, I think you're lying,” Cecilia replies simply, before kneeling down.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Gigi asked, raising an eyebrow as Cecilia began rummaging through Gigi's underdesk.

The perfectionist then pulled out a thick file from under the table with a triumphant look in her eyes. “I'm gonna see if you're lying,” Cecilia answers, prompting Gigi to grab one side of the file.

“Uhh, you don't have to do that,” Gigi says nervously, as she attempted to take the file away from Cecilia's hands.

“Oh yes, I do!” Cecilia argues as the pair began a tug of war with the thick file, “Why so defensive, Gigi? There's nothing to worry about if you have nothing to hide!”

Gigi tightened her grip on the file, as Cecilia stood up to stand her ground. “I'm not hiding anything!” Gigi protested, “I mean you wouldn't want some weirdo to randomly swipe your stuff away right?”

“*You're* the one being a weirdo!” Cecilia shot back through gritted teeth. With one final, determined yank, Cecilia managed to tug the file away from Gigi, causing the latter to stumble forwards slightly.

Cecilia swiftly opened the file, her eyes scanning its contents as Gigi tried to recover her composure. The class president flipped through the pages, her expression gradually morphing from satisfaction to exasperation.

“Really, Gigi?” she sighed, holding up a completely blank assignment sheet, “This is your ‘essay’? Not even a single sentence?”

“Okay, in all fairness, I left the homework files in my locker over the break,” Gigi tried to reason with an unimpressed Cecilia.

The perfectionist sighed, pinching her temple. “It feels like we've had this exact argument a hundred times,” Cecilia exhaled, returning the file to Gigi.

“It's probably because you *did* have this argument a hundred times,” Bijou pipes in softly, having enjoyed the entire scuffle between the two.

“Okay, okay!” Gigi tells Cecilia as she starts writing her name onto the worksheet, “I'll hand it in next week, I promise!”

Cecilia crossed her arms. “No, you'll hand it in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Gigi repeated incredulously, before meeting Cecilia's glare and relenting, “Okay, fine! I'll hand it in tomorrow!”

“That's better,” Cecilia huffs, furrowing her brows, as she adjusted her headband, “Jeez, you're hopeless.”

“I love you too!” Gigi quipped, as a wide grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. Watching Cecilia roll her eyes and mutter something unintelligible under her breath, Gigi couldn't help but feel a sense of amusement. Something about their banter always brought a strange thrill to Gigi's day. It was like a little spark that kept things interesting, especially when she felt like the school day was dragging on forever.

The perfectionist picked up the stack of assignments on Gigi's desk, her expression softening. “I can't chase you for homework forever, Gigi,” Cecilia sighs, as Gigi grinned in a carefree manner.

“I mean, you don't have to chase me for my work, I'd think that's the teacher's job,” Gigi pointed out, “Or maybe you're just finding an excuse to talk to me every day?”

Cecilia scoffed, though a faint blush crept onto her cheeks. “Don't flatter yourself. I have more important things to do than chase after your work,” she replied, though her tone softened as she glanced down at the assignments in her hands.

Gigi giggled at the green haired girl's reaction, before remembering why she wanted to talk to her earlier. If she wanted to tease Cecilia about their competition, the time was now—

“Cecilia, could you be a dear and drop the assignments in my locker?” their English teacher called out suddenly, “I have to rush to my next class!”

The perfectionist turned towards her teacher, who had already scurried off for his next lesson. “What the—?” Cecilia says, in confusion, before making an announcement to the rest of the class, “Alright everyone, I'll be handing the essays in soon, so please submit your work to me if you haven't done so already!”

“Drat,” Gigi thought to herself. She missed yet another chance to rib Cecilia about their competition. She slumped back in her chair, watching as the class president diligently gathered the rest of the assignments from their classmates.

It was the end of lunch break, and the atmosphere in the classroom shifted as everyone prepared for the upcoming algebra quiz. Textbooks and notebooks were spread across desks,

some students whispering formulas and solving problems in hushed voices while others frantically scribbled last-minute notes.

Bijou, seated near Gigi, flipped through her notebook, her eyes darting back and forth as if trying to absorb the formulas by sheer willpower. “Why did they have to make it algebra right after lunch?” she groaned, shaking her head.

“I get you,” Shiori replies, as she closes her textbook, “I want nothing more than to just fall asleep.”

Gigi yawned. She had eaten a considerably heavy lunch, which didn't help her lingering tiredness whatsoever. “Do you think the teacher'll let me take a nap during the test?” Gigi asked, as her friends turned to her with exasperated faces.

“You're the top ranked student in our grade. I'd say she'd let you sleep through the test and into her class as well,” Bijou snickered as Gigi laughed nervously.

“Maybe you should freshen up in the bathroom, Gigi,” Shiori suggests, pointing at the blonde's dark eye circles, “You look like you could just collapse at any moment.”

Gigi nods, standing up sleepily. “Yeah, you're right,” Gigi replies, stifling a yawn as she leaves her seat, “I'll be back!”

The blonde shuffled down the hallway toward the bathrooms, stifling another yawn. As she splashed cool water onto her face, the exhaustion she had been ignoring all morning began to settle in. Listening to everyone chatter about the cultural festival had only added to her fatigue—and hearing her classmates so engaged in their clubs made her feel strangely disconnected.

She glanced at herself in the mirror, smoothing out her hair. Her mind drifted back to Cecilia, who she had been thinking about a lot for the whole day. The blonde was unable to bring up the contest with Cecilia, who had been occupied talking to peers from different clubs even during the lunch break. It seemed the perfectionist really was as dependable as people say.

Gigi frowned at her reflection, feeling a twinge of irritation. Cecilia had been so busy helping everyone else that she hadn't even mentioned the competition they'd agreed on. Had she forgotten about it entirely? Gigi couldn't decide if she felt annoyed or... disappointed.

With a sigh, Gigi dried her hands, wishing she could shake off the nagging thoughts about Cecilia and the festival.

When she finished freshening up, Gigi stepped out of the washroom, and was shocked to find herself face to face with Cecilia Immergreen herself. “Woah, Cece! You scared the hell out of me!” Gigi exclaimed as the green haired girl crossed her arms.

“Are you frightened that easily?” Cecilia questions, as she smiles slightly.

“You know how I am with horror stuff,” Gigi replied, before smirking, “So you can't exactly fault me when something as scary as your face suddenly appears in front of me.”

Cecilia's eyebrow twitched upon hearing that jab. “Don't make me bring up what happened when you stayed over at my house,” Cecilia warned, as Gigi's cheeks flushed pink, “... and how you were soooo spooked that you had to sleep next to me!”

“Hey! That... that was a... natural reaction!” Gigi defended herself, as Cecilia snickers.

“Oh, sureeee it is,” Cecilia says, rolling her eyes, before looking past the blonde and at the bathroom entrance, “So, uh, anyway...”

Gigi realized where the perfectionist was staring, immediately jumping aside. “Oh sorry, I didn't mean to block the way,” Gigi apologized, to which Cecilia shook her head.

“I wasn't going to the bathroom,” Cecilia says, avoiding looking at Gigi's eyes.

The blonde raised her eyebrows. “So what were you doing standing outside the bathroom, weirdo?” Gigi asked, in mock disgust, irritating the perfectionist.

“Don't say it like that!” Cecilia snapped, before her voice softened, “I just wanted to talk to you...”

Gigi blinked, a bit taken aback by Cecilia's tone and sudden shift in expression. Before she could even respond, Cecilia pointed at Gigi with a determined glint in her eye. “I hope you didn't forget about our competition,” Cecilia declared confidently. “Because I'm going to destroy you!”

It was at that moment when Gigi felt a flicker of surprise and warmth in her chest. “You... you actually remembered?” she stammered, feeling a bit of unexpected happiness swell within her. She had half-expected Cecilia to not bring up their competition, considering how busy she'd been all day, bouncing from one group to another, handling everything they asked of her without complaint. But here she was, taking time out of her hectic day to find Gigi and bring it up.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, as she grinned. “Of course I remembered. I challenged you to it, didn't I?” Cecilia replies, crossing her arms, “I'm not gonna let you off that easy!”

Gigi felt a smile slowly spread across her face, her earlier tiredness melting into excitement as her competitive spirit flared back to life. “Well, good. Wouldn't be much of a competition if you chickened out halfway through, would it?” Gigi winked, struggling to contain her relief and happiness.

Cecilia narrowed her eyes, her smile turning sly. “Keep talking, Gigi. We'll see who's chickening out when I leave you in the dust!”

Gigi felt her heart beat a little faster as the challenge reignited between them, a sense of thrill swirling within her. “It's on, doll. You better give it all you got!”

With her mood reinvigorated, Gigi returned to the classroom alongside Cecilia, and upon reaching her desk, she was greeted by curious stares from Shiori and Bijou.

"What's up with you?" Shiori asked, raising an eyebrow as she took in Gigi's strangely cheerful expression, "You look... oddly jolly. Did something happen?"

Bijou chimed in, tilting her head. "Yeah, you've been moody all day. What gives?"

Gigi glanced at them, unable to fully suppress her grin. "Oh, nothing!" she said, a mischievous glint in her eye, "I'm just... really excited for the quiz later!"

Shiori and Bijou exchanged bewildered looks, both equally shocked by her sudden enthusiasm. "Excited?" Bijou repeated, frowning and tapping her chin as Shiori gave her a sideways glance.

"Maybe she's lost it," Shiori whispered as they watched Gigi kick her legs up happily.

As the test began later on, Gigi quickly scanned through the questions, her mind buzzing with renewed energy. She scribbled answers confidently, occasionally glancing up to look at her rival. Across the room, Cecilia sat at her desk, focused and composed, as she breezed through the questions with her usual elegance.

Every so often, Gigi would peek in Cecilia's direction, silently hoping the perfectionist would glance her way. When Cecilia did finally look up, their eyes met for a brief second. Cecilia raised an eyebrow, as if to say, *'I hope you're taking this seriously.'*

Gigi smirked back, determined to show Cecilia she was absolutely up for this. Their silent exchange fueled Gigi's determination, and she found herself tackling the questions with more focus than she had had all day.

When the test was over, Cecilia heaved a sigh of relief. The questions came at a relatively ease for her, given that she had studied endlessly for them. However, one of the last questions was particularly challenging, and the perfectionist had no idea if she would get that one right.

The prospect of that one question possibly being the determining factor in her beating Gigi rattled her, and she found herself drowning out the sound of the algebra teacher's voice for the rest of the class.

Meanwhile, Gigi seemed to be happy... a little too happy. Cecilia glanced behind a few times during the class, attempting to study the expression on Gigi's face. "*Why is she so happy? Did the test not rattle her one bit?*" Cecilia thought to herself as she stared at Gigi from the corner of her eye.

A moment later, Gigi's eyes met the green haired girl's once more, prompting the blonde to give the latter a tiny wave. Cecilia narrowed her eyes, mouthing "*Pay attention!*" as Gigi stuck a tongue out at her.

Eventually, algebra class ended, and with it came the end of the school day. The chairs in the classroom shifted as everyone gathered their things, preparing to depart the classroom.

Raora stretched her arms with a groan, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “That quiz was harder than I thought it’d be,” the artist admitted, glancing over at Cecilia with a tired sigh, “I thought I had it, but that stupid last section got me...”

Cecilia chuckled, slipping her notebooks into her bag. “You did fine, I’m sure,” Cecilia reassures her best friend, “You always do better than you think.”

Raora smiled appreciatively, before pausing as Cecilia turned to her. “Ready to head out?” Cecilia asked, “We can grab a drink on the way back if you’re free!”

“Actually,” Raora replied, adjusting her bag’s strap, “I’m gonna stay back a little longer. The aquatics club needs a little more help with their festival booth, and I promised I’d lend a hand.”

Cecilia nodded, a slight look of admiration crossing her face. “Oh right! I almost forgot about that,” Cecilia says, “I could wait for you if you’d like. I don’t think I have anything on my agenda today.”

“Oh no you don’t. You barely got any sleep last night,” Raora replies immediately, crossing her arms, “You should really head back home and hit the hay!”

Cecilia waved her hands defensively as she tried to protest. “No, no, I’m perfectly awake. I even drank some of that coffee you gifted to me last April Fools’...”

The artist widened her eyes in amusement. “You actually drank it?” Raora says in a surprised tone, “Please tell me you liked it.”

“In your dreams, Raora,” Cecilia shot back with a chuckle, “I drank it because I had to.”

Raora grinned as she and Cecilia stepped out of the classroom. “Aw, that’s a shame,” the artist remarked in disappointment before her voice took on a more stricter tone, “But even if you drank the coffee, you still need to get some rest!”

“Fine...” Cecilia relented as she shared a hug with Raora, “Guess I’ll catch you later then.”

The artist giggles as she lets go of her friend. “Mhmm, see you!”

After saying goodbye to Raora, Cecilia began walking in the opposite direction when she spotted Gigi at the lockers. The green haired girl smirked, as she thought of a mischievous idea. She slowly made her way towards the blonde, making as little sound as she sneaked up on her before whispering, “Boo!”

Gigi yelped, nearly falling over as Cecilia started laughing and wheezing at the former’s jumpiness. “You jerk, I nearly died!” Gigi cried as she recovered from the jumpscare.

“Oh, don’t be dramatic,” Cecilia giggles, helping the blonde up.

“Dramatic? I was reacting like how any other person would! How would you feel if I jumpscared you?” Gigi snaps, as Cecilia smirks.

“Uhh... One, I wouldn't even flinch,” Cecilia replied, lifting up one finger, and then another, “Two, who would be scared of *you* of all people?”

Gigi gasped dramatically, scoffing at Cecilia's remark. “You're a mean one, Miss Immergreen,” Gigi quipped, before smirking smugly, “So... how was the quiz?”

Cecilia flinched as she struggled to think of what to say. “Ehhh, it was... easy. Nothing I couldn't handle,” Cecilia replies as Gigi raised an eyebrow.

“Really? Are you confident you'll beat me?” Gigi snickered, to which Cecilia blinked rapidly.

“O-of course! I studied my butt off so there's no way I'd lose,” Cecilia said, somewhat unconvincingly.

“Oh my god, you know what'll be fun?” Gigi suggested with a cheeky grin, as Cecilia raised an eyebrow suspiciously, “We should have like a punishment for whoever gets the lower score in the quiz!”

“What... kind of punishment do you have in mind?” Cecilia questions cautiously.

Gigi shrugs. “Hmm, I'll have to think of something,” Gigi says with an evil grin, “What about you? Do you have anything in mind in the event that I lose?”

Cecilia's lips curled into a mischievous smile as an idea immediately popped up in her mind. “Oh, I know just the thing,” she said, her eyes glinting, “If you lose, you'll have to watch another horror movie.”

Gigi's face immediately twisted into a look of horror. “You're kidding, right? After the last one, I couldn't sleep for a week!”

“That's the point,” Cecilia replied, crossing her arms with a smug expression.

“No way, no way,” Gigi protested, waving her hands, “Can't we do something else? Like... I don't know, eat a really spicy chip or something,”

Cecilia chuckled, clearly enjoying Gigi's reluctance. “Oh, come on. Afraid of a little spooky story?”

“You know how bad I am with those movies!” Gigi argued, glancing away, “I'll have nightmares for weeks!”

“Oh, so you're admitting defeat already?” Cecilia teased, her grin widening, “Come on, I'll even watch it with you!”

Gigi huffed, narrowing her eyes at Cecilia. “Fine, fine! But when I win, you'll have to do whatever I say.”

“Just nothing crazy, alright?” Cecilia says, raising an eyebrow.

The blonde giggled, winking at the perfectionist. “Hehe, I can't promise anything~”

Just then, a group of girls from the dance club appeared from around the corner, and upon spotting Cecilia, they rushed over excitedly. “Cecilia! There you are!” one of them chirped, her eyes bright, “We’re rehearsing for the festival and wanted to see if you could watch us and give us some feedback!”

Cecilia blinked, momentarily surprised, before offering them a warm smile. “Oh, sure, I’d love to help,” she replied, adjusting her bag, “I don’t know how much I can offer, but I’ll definitely take a look.”

As the dancers eagerly launched into a description of their routine, Gigi couldn’t help but frown slightly, crossing her arms. Watching them all fawn over Cecilia was starting to grate on her nerves. The way they seemed so... infatuated with her, as if she was some kind of goddess they needed approval from—it was starting to feel a bit ridiculous.

She tapped her foot impatiently, glancing at Cecilia, who was now nodding along, fully engaged in their conversation. Gigi suppressed a groan, wondering if Cecilia being pulled away by the clubs in the school would become a regular occurrence.

Gigi took this as her cue to leave. With a sulky sigh, the blonde began walking away from the classroom. However, just as she began walking down the stairs, she felt a hand grab her wrist. Turning around, she found herself facing an irritated-looking Cecilia.

“You’re just leaving without saying goodbye?” Cecilia huffed, narrowing her eyes.

Caught off guard, Gigi blinked. “I mean... you looked pretty busy with them,” the blonde mumbled, shrugging as she looked away, a faint pout on her lips.

Cecilia rolled her eyes but then hesitated, a faint flush coloring her cheeks. “That doesn’t mean you can just vanish without saying a word!” the green haired girl scolded before sighing and softening her tone

“You... danced before, right?” Cecilia asked, avoiding Gigi’s gaze, “Maybe you could stay with me and help give some feedback... Y’know, if you’re not busy, of course.”

Gigi’s face lit up, but she tried to play it cool. “Oh, I guess I could help give them a few pointers,” the blonde replied with a casual shrug, though she was clearly pleased.

“Good,” Cecilia said, glancing away to hide her flustered expression, “It’s... nice to have another perspective. Besides, they’d appreciate feedback from someone who has danced before.”

“Hey, don’t worry. I’ll give them the hard truth—no sugarcoating,” Gigi teased, before the pair made their way to the dance room together.

It was Gigi's first time stepping into the school's dance room, and she was immediately struck by its atmosphere. The shiny wooden floor stretched across the spacious room, while a wall of glimmering mirrors reflected the dancers as they stretched and warmed up.

Gigi glanced around, memories from her own dance classes flooding back. Back then, she had spent hours in a studio just like this, learning routines with great enthusiasm. The swishing of feet on the floor, the air gliding through her skin as she moved—she remembered it all.

There was something about seeing a group of dancers, all moving to the beat, that stirred a sense of nostalgia in her. Maybe it was the rush of excitement, or the pride of finally nailing a tricky routine. Whatever it was, she felt these familiar sensations rising up within her—simply by taking in the vibes of the dance room.

The first-year dancers lined up, their faces lit up with a mix of excitement and nerves as they looked to Cecilia and Gigi for approval. One of the girls, Hajime, who was the center, cleared her throat. "Alright we'll be doing a sneak preview of the festival routine! Let us know what you think!"

Cecilia and Gigi nodded, as the music began. The dancers moved with careful precision, each step light yet graceful. Gigi's eyes followed the group closely, picking up on the beats they nailed and the minor stumbles. She couldn't help smiling at the energy they poured into the routine—she knew how much it took to make something look this coordinated.

Once the music stopped, the dancers looked to Cecilia and Gigi for feedback, a few of them still catching their breath. Gigi grinned, nodding approvingly. "You guys were great! The energy was insane!" Gigi praised, clapping enthusiastically, "There's a bit during the bridge that could be a bit smoother, though. If you really let your body loosen up, it'll look perfect!"

Cecilia stared at Gigi with amazement. She hasn't heard the blonde sound so... passionate before.

"And maybe add a bit more contrast between your soft and sharp movements," Gigi continues to note, "It could make the whole piece more dynamic and really complete the performance."

Hajime and the other dancers looked at each other in surprise as they nodded at one another. "That... could actually work," Hajime said, as she and the others looked at the recording they just took of their routine, "Alright, girls, lets try this again!"

The perfectionist glanced at Gigi, who was looking at her with a curious expression, eyebrows slightly raised. "What?" Gigi asked, blinking in confusion.

Cecilia simply shook her head. “Nothing. Just... you sounded kinda cool giving feedback earlier,” Cecilia admitted, looking down for a moment, as if she was almost too shy to admit it, “It’s like I’m seeing a different side of you.”

Gigi gave the green haired girl a small smile. “I didn’t say anything amazing or anything... I was just... saying what I thought?”

“Still though,” Cecilia says, as the dancers took their places once more, “It was cool.”

“Alright, everyone!” Hajime called out, clapping her hands to rally the girls, “Let’s hit it from the top! Remember what Gigi said—more contrast, loosen up a little!”

As the music began again, Gigi and Cecilia stood side by side, watching the dancers make subtle changes to their movements. There was a fluidity and confidence that hadn’t been there previously, a new energy that made the dance routine feel slicker and more expressive.

When the dancers finished their routine, Gigi and Cecilia stood up, clapping enthusiastically.

“That was amazing!” Cecilia beamed, eyes sparkling, “You guys really nailed it that time!”

The dancers exchanged smiles and high-fives, clearly pleased with the praise. Hajime took a look at the latest recording, beaming as she watched it. “Thanks! Your feedback made a huge difference, Gigi. I think we’re getting closer to where we want this to be for the festival.”

Gigi nodded, stepping forward with a cheeky smile. “You all should be really proud of yourselves. This looked way more polished than before, and it’s only going to get better from here,” she paused, then added with a small smirk, “And just so you know, I don’t usually get impressed this easily.”

That last comment brought a round of chuckles and a few relieved sighs from the dancers, their spirits higher than before.

As the dancers began grabbing their water bottles, preparing to go over what else they could improve upon, Cecilia turned to Gigi. “You know, you really helped them improve just now. I could tell they were inspired by what you had to say.”

Gigi blinked, surprised by the compliment. “Oh, well, it wasn’t a big deal,” she said, scratching the back of her neck, “They did all the hard work. I just gave them a few pointers.”

Cecilia shook her head, her gaze showing a rare warmth. “Don’t sell yourself short, Gigi. You clearly know a lot about this stuff... and it shows,” she hesitated before adding, “I think it’s... it’s....”

Gigi felt a flicker of pride mixed with an odd warmth in her chest. She decided to put on a nonchalant front however, saying, “Cool? Heh, guess you’re finally starting to realize what I’ve been saying all along.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, giggling in spite of herself. “Alright, alright, don’t push it.”

As they continued watching the dancers, Gigi gradually began to experience a familiar sensation in her chest. Watching the girls try their best and encourage each other between takes made her realize just how tightly-knit they all were. A small, uncomfortable feeling bubbled up inside the blonde. If she could describe it, Gigi would say it was like a feeling not unlike that of homesickness.

She tried to shake it off, but her mood must've shown, because Cecilia was glancing at her with a curious expression. "Something up, Gigi?" Cecilia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing!" Gigi said quickly, forcing a grin, "Just tired from all this... watching, I guess."

She let out a hearty laugh, hoping to brush it off, but Cecilia wasn't convinced.

"You're a terrible liar," Cecilia pressed, crossing her arms, "What's going on?"

Gigi shifted her weight, rubbing the back of her head as she considered whether to actually admit it. But one look at Cecilia's expectant expression told her she wasn't going to get away with brushing it off.

"Alright, alright," Gigi sighed, finally relenting, "It's just... well, you know, with everyone talking about their clubs and all these plans for the festival... I dunno, it feels like I'm missing out on something. Like everyone's got this big thing they're part of, and I'm just... here."

The blonde shrugged, trying to sound indifferent, but the words hung a little heavier than she had intended.

Cecilia seemed to ponder over Gigi's words for a moment, before a small frown crossed her face. "Is that so...", she said, "Why didn't you join a club back when school began, then?"

Gigi paused. "Guess I wanted to have more free time for myself," Gigi answers, "But that's another story on its own..."

She looked at Cecilia, fully expecting her to judge her reasoning. However, Cecilia didn't seem judgmental at all. Instead, she gave the pigtailed girl an understanding nod. "Yeah, I didn't join a club for the same reason. I wanted to spend more time studying," Cecilia admits, before shooting Gigi a suspicious look, "But I bet you just spend your free time playing games or whatever..."

Gigi chuckled nervously. "Heh, you got me there..."

Cecilia sighed, before smiling a little. "Hmm, I have an idea," Cecilia lit up, "Why don't we go check out some of the clubs together? Maybe we'll find you one that you'd wanna join."

Gigi raised an eyebrow, a bit taken aback by the suggestion. "Wait, you'd actually go with me? Aren't you busy with, like, a million things all the time?"

Cecilia rolled her eyes with a smirk. "Please, I can make time," Cecilia says, nudging Gigi lightly.

Gigi snorted, but the idea of walking through the different clubs with Cecilia didn't sound half bad. At the start of the year, Gigi didn't even bother checking out what the school had to offer, so maybe a little tour of the different clubs would help enlighten her.

“Okay, where do we start?” Gigi asked the perfectionist, who simply gestured towards the practicing dancers.

“What about dance?” Cecilia suggested, “I mean, you took classes before, and you're obviously pretty knowledgeable about dancing...”

Gigi thought about Cecilia's suggestion. She had loved dancing when she was younger, and it was something she'd chosen for herself back then. Dance had been a way for her to express herself, a liberating space where she felt free from expectations. But now, as she looked at the dancers practicing, she felt a reluctance she hadn't anticipated. If she had a choice, she wanted to explore something new, and discover something that felt just as free and different as dancing.

“Eh, I dunno,” Gigi replied casually, shrugging it off, “I mean, dance is cool and all, but I'm kind of in the mood to try something else, y'know?”

Cecilia looked at her, a little surprised. “Really? You seemed so into it back there.”

“Oh, I am!” Gigi said, grinning as she gestured toward the dancers, “Watching them reminds me of how much fun it is. But... maybe I want to see what else is out there this time.”

“That's... really thoughtful,” Cecilia says in surprise, “Okay, let's check out the other clubs then!”

Gigi nodded enthusiastically, a sense of excitement surging through her veins. “Lead the way, doll!”

Cecilia smiled, nodding at Gigi's enthusiasm as she began the tour of the school's various clubs. The school atmosphere was alight with bustling energy. Club doors were open, as music from the school's concert band and choir spilled out into the corridors. Gigi found herself curious about what lay behind each doorway, wondering just what they had in store for her.

They pair started with the Art Club. The moment they stepped inside, Gigi's eyes were drawn to the walls, which were lined with paintings and sketches of many different styles.

There were a few students in the room, covered in paint splatters as they bent over their easels, completely absorbed in their work.

“Oh, this one's cool,” Gigi whispered, admiring a vibrant painting of a city skyline at sunset. The mix of colors and textures felt almost alive, like the city was breathing right off the canvas. Gigi then read the signature near the bottom of the work.

“Raora made this?!” Gigi exclaimed in shock as she took a step back. She knew the pink haired girl was good at art, but... not *this* good.

“Yep,” Cecilia says, almost proudly, as she touches the edge of the canvas, “She's amazing at drawing... it's actually crazy how good she is.”

Gigi nods as she stares at the work. Seeing Raora's masterpiece instilled a sense of inspiration within the pigtailed girl.

Noticing the determined look in Gigi's eyes, Cecilia smiled. “Why don't you try drawing with them right now?” Cecilia suggests, “I know one of the seniors in this club and I think they'll be happy to let you in on the action.”

“Yeah, sure!” Gigi replies excitedly, as Cecilia waves at one of the seniors at the easels.

The senior, a shy-looking girl named Ina, walked over and offered them a quick art lesson. Cecilia took to it easily, her strokes on the canvas controlled and careful, while Gigi had fun experimenting with the colors, blending them messily but with a smile on her face.

“It's... definitely one of the paintings of all time,” Gigi muttered, looking at her chaotic creation. While she appreciated the atmosphere and the craft of the club, something about it didn't quite feel like her vibe.

After thanking Ina, Cecilia and Gigi headed to the next stop: The Aquatics Club.

As they entered the clubroom located near the back of the school, they could see the room was already alive with the vibe of the ocean. Posters of marine life decorated the walls, and the sounds of chatter filled the room, while tanks of tiny fish could be seen around the room.

Raora, who was still helping out the club's members, was surprised when she saw Cecilia and Gigi together.

“Am I seeing this right? The two of you... together... and not beating each other up? Has the world gone crazy?” Raora jokes, smiling as the pair walk up to her.

“Guess nothing's impossible,” Gigi replies in a jovial manner, before Raora shoots Cecilia a glare.

“Wait a minute, aren't you supposed to be at home and sleeping?” Raora asked, crossing her arms at the perfectionist who chuckled nervously.

“Wait, wait, I have a good reason!” Cecilia defends herself, before explaining everything to the artist.

Raora tilted her head, as she looked at the two girls. “So that's the situation...” Raora noted, as she placed a hand on her hip, “And that's why you guys are here?”

“Yeah!” Gigi confirms, her face lighting up, “We just came from your club, by the way. Saw one of your paintings, the one with the city? It was incredible.”

“Awww thanks Gigi!” Raora thanked the blonde, wrapping the shorter girl in a big hug, before saying, “Well, if you wanna know more about the aquatics club, I know just the person to help you out... Gura, you have visitors!”

Within the room, a petite senior with light blue hair and a hoodie waved at them. “What’s up?” she asked, skipping up to the three girls.

“Gigi here is interested in your club, would it be okay if you gave her a little tour?” Raora asks Gura, whose eyes lit up immediately.

“Of course, follow me!” Gura grins, leading them over to a table where members of the club were carefully constructing a model of a coral reef. It was impressively intricate—complete with vivid colors, miniature fish figurines and tiny sea plants to top it all off. “We’re going all out for the festival,” Gura explained, “We’re going for a theme that shows just how beautiful the ocean can be.”

Cecilia’s eyes widened. “Wow, this is incredible,” the green haired girl commented in awe, as she looked into the coral reef model.

“Yeah, you guys really know your stuff,” Gigi added, feeling an unexpected admiration for the dedication of the club members.

Next, Gura took them to a station where another student was setting up a virtual reality headset. “This is a deep-sea dive simulation our senior who graduated gave us,” she explained, “It’s pretty sick actually, you can swim around the ocean and even interact with the sea life!”

Gigi’s eyes lit up. “No way! So people can actually feel like they’re swimming underwater?”

“Yep, well kinda!” Gura beamed, “We’re hoping it’ll help people connect with marine life. We definitely can’t bring the actual ocean into our clubroom, so this is the next best thing!”

After showing them the VR experience, Gura led them to a station where some members were organizing a ‘Touch Tank’ with live sea stars, fishes, and small shells. “At the festival, visitors can interact with these guys,” she said, motioning to the small creatures in the tank, “It’s a way to make the ocean feel more real to people, you know?”

Gigi nodded, genuinely impressed. “That’s a brilliant idea,” Gigi says, “This place is really awesome!”

“Well, duh! You’re welcome to join us, of course... After all, the more the merrier!” Gura says, as Gigi took some time to think.

While Gigi found the aquatics club to be an absolute joy, she still couldn’t decide if she wanted to join or not. Plus, she still had a bunch of clubs to check out, so she decided not to rush a decision.

After saying goodbye to Gura and Raora, Cecilia and Gigi headed to their next stop: The Debate Club.

The room was intense, buzzing with intellectual conversation. Gigi and Cecilia took seats at the back, watching as two students debated fiercely over a social issue. The structure, the quick responses, the fiery arguments—it was impressive. Gigi found herself grinning as she listened, immersed in the tension of the debate.

As the debate wrapped up, a senior club member approached them. “Hey, there. I haven't seen you two around here before. Are you here to watch?” she asked in a friendly way.

Cecilia nods. “Yup, we just wanted to check the club out,” the perfectionist explained as the senior nodded her head in understanding.

“I see, I see... Well, since you're here, wanna a quick round?” she asked, handing them a topic written on a card—the topic being: *‘Is it better to plan every detail or go with the flow?’*

Gigi and Cecilia exchanged grins as they took the stage. Cecilia, unsurprisingly, took the ‘plan every detail’ side, laying out her points logically, backing them with examples, while Gigi took the ‘go with the flow’ approach, throwing in humor and multiple anecdotes.

“You don’t need a plan for everything!” Gigi argued playfully, “Sometimes the best moments are the unexpected ones!”

Cecilia smirked, countering, “But a little organization goes a long way. Imagine trying to travel with no plan—you’d get lost, wouldn't you?!”

They both laughed as the debate ended, but Gigi knew this wasn’t quite right for her either. She liked lively discussions, but the formal structure of debating didn’t really suit her that much.

Next up was the Photography Club.

They entered a dim room where students were examining photos with intense focus. Cecilia looked intrigued, but Gigi was caught off guard. She hadn’t really thought about photography before, but the images that the club members displayed on the walls managed to capture her attention.

A student lent her an old-school polaroid camera, showing her how to adjust the lens and focus. Gigi held it up, aiming at Cecilia and snapping a candid shot. Cecilia chuckled, and when they checked the photo, it had come out blurry, prompting the perfectionist to burst out in laughter.

“Artistic, isn’t it?” Gigi jokes, though part of her actually found the process interesting. She appreciated the creativity behind it, the way each photo told a story, but after a few more shots, she handed the camera back.

“Photography’s cool and all,” Gigi admitted as she and Cecilia left the room, “But it really isn't for me.”

“That's okay,” Cecilia replies in a supportive manner, “We still have other clubs to check out.”

The pair continued to visit many other clubs, their latest stop being the concert band. And just like the rest of the clubs she's seen today, the concert band just wasn't Gigi's cup of tea. The blonde's indecisiveness caused her mood to dampen a little, leaving her to wonder why she hasn't found anything she truly wanted to be a part of yet.

“Still haven't decided?” Cecilia asked gently, as Gigi shook her head.

“There's a lot of great clubs, but I just don't think I've found my thing yet,” Gigi says, sighing.

Cecilia gave her a reassuring smile as they sat down at a nearby bench. “Well, there are plenty more to check out,” Cecilia reminds the pigtailed girl, “Don't worry too much, Gigi. You'll find a club that suits you soon enough.”

Gigi nodded, a hint of relief in her expression. Although she felt a little restless, spending time with Cecilia and exploring all the different clubs was genuinely fun, and she was grateful for the green haired girl's support.

“Yeah, well, thanks for being my tour guide, Cece,” Gigi says gratefully, yawning as she leaned her head on Cecilia's shoulder, “I really appreciate it.”

The perfectionist's face quickly flushed a deep red upon feeling Gigi's head rest against her. She contemplated yelling at Gigi to not do something so embarrassing without warning...but she found herself hesitating. The warmth in Gigi's words, combined with the softness of her tone, somehow made Cecilia's heart race even faster. For some reason, she couldn't bring herself to snap at her.

The pair shared a moment of silence as they sat on the bench, simply enjoying the present moment. Cecilia felt the gentle brush of their arms as they sat close together, the warmth radiating from Gigi soothing yet invigorating. Both of them were tired, but they both embraced the comfort of the peaceful present. As Gigi leaned her head against Cecilia's shoulder, a soft sigh escaped her lips as she closed her eyes.

Cecilia was all too aware of the contact between their arms—the touch. Without fully processing her actions, Cecilia's fingers twitched, and she slowly reached out, her hand brushing against Gigi's.

Gigi didn't notice at first, lost in her thoughts and the calmness surrounding them. But when Cecilia's hand found hers, a soft gasp escaped her lips. She turned, surprise spreading across her face. Yet, instead of pulling away or questioning the sudden gesture, she relaxed into it, letting her hand rest comfortably in Cecilia's grasp.

Cecilia's heartbeat accelerated at the unexpected connection, her cheeks flushing even deeper. The world around her seemed to fade away as she focused on the warmth spreading from her fingers to the rest of her body. Her heart thumped in her chest and she couldn't help but glance sideways at Gigi, their eyes meeting for a brief second.

The moment was cut short however, when Bijou suddenly appeared from behind the pair. “Well, hello~” Bijou greeted, causing Cecilia and Gigi to quickly move away from one another, “What are you two doing here?”

“Biboo!” Gigi cried, trying her best to stop her face from flushing a deeper shade of red, “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I just went for a bathroom break...” Bijou smirked, looking between the flustered girls, “And I was on my way back to the clubroom when I saw the both of you sitting here, so I decided to make a quick stop and say hi!”

Cecilia shifted slightly, feeling the warmth still lingering in her hand. “Oh! Well, we were just, um, taking a break,” she managed to say, trying to sound casual despite the heat that had settled on her cheeks.

“Oh really?” Bijou teased, her gaze sharp and playful, “Looks like a cozy break to me. I didn’t know you two were getting so close.”

“No, we’re not!!” Gigi shot back, trying to deflect the attention, “We were just resting! You know, after all that exploring.”

“Exploring?” Bijou repeated in confusion.

After the pair explained what they had been doing for the past few hours, Bijou nodded in understanding. “Checking out clubs, huh? Hmm, why don’t you stop by the tabletop club?” Bijou asks excitedly, “We’re playing a TTRPG today!”

“Roleplay?” Gigi says, as her cheeks return to a normal color. While the pigtailed girl didn’t have much experience with role-playing, she did enjoy the few times she’d dabbled in tabletop RPGs before. The mix of storytelling, creativity, and strategy had fascinated her, and the unexpected chaos that it could provide really struck a chord with her. “That could be fun,” Gigi admitted, her interest piqued.

“Totally! It’s going to be a blast!” Bijou exclaimed, “We’ve got a great one today, and I think you’d really enjoy it.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never mentioned being into tabletop games before, Gigi.”

“I haven’t really played much,” Gigi replied, a little defensively, “But I remember enjoying it when I did.”

Bijou clapped her hands together, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Perfect! How about you, Cece? Wanna join us?”

Cecilia tilted her head, considering the offer. “I’m not sure I’m ready for a whole RPG session, though. I’ve never really played those before,” she admitted, “I am pretty curious about them... but I’ll just watch you guys play.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Bijou said, waving her hand dismissively, “Watching the game is equally as fun!”

Gigi felt a sense of excitement bubbling within her. “Okay, let’s do it!” the blonde declared, a grin spreading across her face, as Bijou began leading them to the clubroom.

“Great! Follow me!” Bijou says as they make their way through the halls.

When they arrived at the tabletop club, Gigi was greeted by a dim and cozy room filled with various game boards, figurines, and two seniors seated around a table.

“Hey, everyone!” Bijou called out as they entered, “These are my friends, Gigi and Cecilia.”

Seated at the table were the two other members of the club—the club president Calliope, and... Fauna?

“Wait, what are you doing here, sis?” Cecilia asked in surprise.

Fauna looked up from her character sheet. “Oh, hey, Cecilia! I’m part of the tabletop club, didn’t you know?”

Cecilia’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I thought you were only in the gardening club. You never mentioned this!”

Fauna shrugged, her face bright with enthusiasm. “Must’ve slipped my mind,” Fauna chuckles, “Will you and Gigi be joining us? We’re playing a wild west RPG today.”

“Gigi’ll be playing,” Cecilia replies, “I’ll just be a spectator for today.”

Calliope nodded, leaning forward, as she waved around the character sheets in her hand. “Alrighty then! Gigi, would you like to get started?” Calliope asked as Gigi nodded.

“Absolutely!” Gigi jumped in, eager to dive into the narrative. The idea of playing a character in a wild west setting sent a thrill down her spine.

With that, the group began to create their characters. Gigi watched as Calliope detailed the rules of the game, explaining how the narrative unfolded through dice rolls, while Fauna chimed in, sharing some tips of her own.

Gigi decided to play a noble, god-devoted westerner named Galliope Gibrelle, who brings calamity everywhere she goes.

“Okay, let’s get started!” Calliope announced, shuffling her notes and preparing for the session, “Our story begins...”

As the adventure unfolded, Gigi found herself completely immersed in the world they were creating. The combination of vivid descriptions and the enthusiasm from her fellow players made every dice roll feel exhilarating. They navigated through tense standoffs, thrilling chases, and unexpected plot twists, with each member contributing to the story in their own unique way.

Cecilia, still on the sidelines, couldn't help but get swept up in the excitement of it all, her curiosity piqued by the creativity displayed at the table. The humorous ways the story played out nearly causing her to start cry-laughing at times.

Bijou nudged Cecilia, her eyes gleaming. "You're missing out, Cece! You really should join us the next time we play," Bijou says as Cecilia wiped a small tear from her eye.

"Maybe I will," Cecilia replied, a faint smile on her lips.

The hours flew by as Gigi became more confident in her character, taking daring actions and weaving her story effortlessly. Dungeon Master Calliope masterfully guided the group through the plot, ensuring everyone had a chance to shine.

Fauna, in particular, seemed to be having a blast with her character, a divorcee whose one goal in life is to kill off her ex—a man by the name of *Bones Malone*. Her quick wit led to the group erupting into fits of laughter every few minutes, as well as adding on to the immersion of the world.

Eventually, the session wrapped up, and Gigi leaned back in her chair, exhaling. "That was incredible!" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushed with excitement, "I can't believe how much fun that was!"

"Right?" Bijou said, her smile bright as she looked at Gigi, "You did awesome!"

"I actually enjoyed that more than I thought I would," Cecilia admitted, as Gigi stood up to stretch.

As they packed up the game materials, Gigi felt a sense of fulfillment wash over her. This was everything she had hoped for and more.

"Thanks for inviting us, Biboo," Gigi said, her gratitude genuine, "This was a blast."

"You know, you could just join our club!" Bijou says, as she helps to pack up the items on the table, "That way, you could play with us every week!"

Gigi considered Bijou's words, a smile creeping onto her face. The time she spent at the club had been filled with laughter and utter chaos—the blonde realizing just how much she enjoyed the quick-thinking, the wild ideas, and the clever twists they came up with together. The club members were hilarious, imaginative, and easy to get along with. Plus, she also felt a sense of comfort she hadn't expected to feel when playing with them earlier.

Gigi took a moment to let that feeling sink in. This was exactly the fresh start she'd been hoping for—a place where she could try something new and connect with people she could bounce off of and vibe with.

"You know what? Sure, I'll join the club," Gigi smiles as the other members of the club cheered happily.

Gigi received the sign-up form from Calliope, feeling a sense of satisfaction as she filled it out. She glanced at Bijou and Fauna, who were still overjoyed that another member has

finally joined their small club.

“Alright, all done,” Gigi said, sliding the form back to Calliope with a smirk, “Guess you’re stuck with me now.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Calliope replied, grinning as she took the form and placed it carefully in the club’s folder.

Cecilia and Gigi made their way out of the school gate together, the latter feeling more refreshed than ever. Upon noticing how happy Gigi looked, Cecilia gave Gigi a small nudge. “Looks like you found a club that actually suits you,” the perfectionist said with a satisfied smile.

“Guess so,” Gigi replied, a hint of pride resonating through her tone, “Thanks for dragging me around today, Cece. I owe you.”

“It’s no problem,” Cecilia replies, smiling warmly as they walk side by side, “I’m just glad you found a club you liked.”

Gigi glanced at Cecilia as they walked, a sense of appreciation welling up in her as she thought back on the day they had spent together. She couldn’t quite shake off just how patient Cecilia had been, leading her from one club to the next without a single complaint. Throughout their time ‘club hopping’, Cecilia didn’t lay any pressure on the blonde at all, instead encouraging her throughout the whole experience.

And there was that moment, earlier, when they had taken a break on the bench. Gigi could still feel the warmth from Cecilia’s shoulder, the soft weight of her hand in hers. She wasn’t thinking too much of it at the time, but looking back, something about that closeness had left her strangely flustered. The gentle way Cecilia’s fingers slowly intertwined with hers had set her heart racing. Gigi tried to brush it off, but she simply couldn’t forget the warmth and the flutter of nerves from that moment.

Gigi wasn’t one to get flustered easily, but somehow, Cecilia’s presence had an effect on her that was difficult to ignore.

“You really are something else, huh?” Gigi thought, stealing another glance at Cecilia, as her heart skipped lightly.

As far as she knew, Cecilia had been the only one daring enough to meet her head-on, challenging her in ways no one else dared. Gigi couldn’t deny the thrill it gave her—the way Cecilia would call her out without hesitation. It was refreshing.

It wasn't just the rivalry either. Cecilia had a way of balancing her fierce firmness with a surprising amount of warmth. She hadn't just gone along with Gigi today—she made sure Gigi was enjoying herself, happily aiding her in learning more about the different clubs.

And then there was their banter, their constant jabs at each other—it was as natural to them as breathing. And somewhere in between the teasing, Gigi had realized just how much she valued Cecilia's company.

It all felt so different from anything she had experienced before. Gigi looked over at Cecilia again, catching the faint smile on her lips as they walked together under the evening light, and felt that same odd flutter she had been trying to ignore for a while now.

"Oh..."

It suddenly hit her like a wave—she might have actually fallen for Cecilia.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the long wait! uni's been eating me alive 🙄🙄🙄

OH YES @pentatoniczed made a WIP song based on this fic and it's a banger so do check it out!! 🙌🙌

<https://x.com/pentatoniczed/status/1851887908892086320?t=pEfG7Yg-uZRTetA27oelwg&s=19>

ANYWAYS I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS FLUFFIER(?) CHAP!! I'LL TRY TO UPDATE SOON

The Festival

The sports hall was filled with the squeaky sounds of sneakers skidding on the polished wooden floors and the thud of volleyballs hitting the ground. Shouts and cheers bounced off the high walls, as students donned in their sports attire ran and maneuvered around the court.

Cecilia sat by the bleachers, staring at one of the classes playing badminton in the distance. The perfectionist sighed, resting her head against the wall beside her. It's been more than a month since the new term began, and her competitions with Gigi... weren't going too well at the moment.

It all began when their class got back the algebra test they did on the first day of the new term.

It was a Monday—and while everyone else was suffering from the Monday Blues, reluctantly dragging themselves into the school gates, Cecilia was positively beside herself with anticipation.

“You look pretty restless today,” Raora observed, glancing at Cecilia who was busy fidgeting as she stared out the bus window.

Cecilia nodded, rubbing her arms nervously. “Yeah, we're getting back our algebra tests today, remember? I'm so nervous...” Cecilia mumbled, to which Raora smiled empathetically.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Raora reassured her friend, as the bus stopped at one of its stops, “You studied for it since the start of summer break for crying out loud—There’s no way you won't do great.”

“It's not that I'm worried about,” Cecilia replies, tapping her fingers against the window.

“Oh right, Gigi,” Raora remembers, smirking slightly, “Don't fret so much, it's just a little contest isn't it?”

Cecilia shot a manic stare at the artist, her eyes twitching as she did so. “Raora, she studied for that quiz on the way to school,” Cecilia says, “If I lose to her even after spending the whole summer studying, I'll—I'll never live it down! I can already imagine that look on her face if she wins...”

In her mind, a version of Gigi manifested, hands on her hips and grinning smugly. “*What~? You scored lower than me?*” the imaginary Gigi cooed, her voice dripping with mock pity,

*“Even after all that grinding? Face it, doll. You’ll never beat me!
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”*

Cecilia winced, shaking off the absurd vision in her head. *“Get a grip, Cecilia,”* the perfectionist told herself, as she tried to focus on the hum of the bus’ engine, *“Overthinking won’t help things…”*

Later that day, the class settled into their seats as their algebra teacher entered the room. “Alright, today we’ll be going through the quiz you have done on the first day back,” the teacher announced, separating a stack of worksheets into two, “Cecilia, Elizabeth, could you two help give the papers out?”

The two class presidents stood up instinctively, taking the stacks from their teacher. Moving through the rows, they handed out each test paper carefully, avoiding eye contact with the students who looked either anxious or already appeared defeated. Sounds of chattering gradually filled the room as more students received their papers.

Cecilia’s heart raced a little faster with each worksheet she gave out. She hadn’t caught a glimpse of hers nor Gigi’s scores yet, which only added to her amounting anticipation. With curiosity overtaking her, Cecilia took a quick glance at the stack of worksheets she had on hand, eventually spotting her quiz.

Then, she saw it—a big red 48/50 circled at the top of her paper.

For a moment, she nearly stopped in her tracks, a mix of relief and pride flooding her chest. All those hours spent studying through summer, all the effort… it had paid off. Just two points shy of perfection. Despite this, she couldn’t help the small, satisfied smile that tugged at her lips.

It was then however, when a realization hit her—she hasn’t seen Gigi’s scores yet.

A rush of energy surged into the perfectionist’s veins as she gave out the rest of the papers at a supersonic pace. After giving out the last quiz in her stack, Cecilia swiftly marched towards Gigi’s table.

Surprisingly, Gigi wasn’t asleep on her desk, as Cecilia had half-expected. Instead, Gigi was deep in conversation with Bijou, who sat in front of her, animatedly chatting about something. Cecilia overheard bits and pieces as she approached. It sounded like they were discussing plans for their tabletop club’s booth for the upcoming cultural festival.

But what caught Cecilia’s eye even more was how Gigi’s desk was still void of any worksheet.

“Oh hi, Cece!” Bijou greeted, as she noticed Cecilia approaching them. Upon hearing Cecilia’s name, Gigi immediately lit up, grinning brightly as she waved at Cecilia.

“Mornin’, doll,” Gigi greeted before smirking, “I don’t suppose you have my quiz with you?”

“Good morning, you two,” Cecilia greeted back to the pair before shaking her head at Gigi, “Unfortunately no. I actually came over to see if you've gotten your test back yet.”

“It's probably still with Liz,” Gigi reasoned, a sly smile crossing her lips, “Or maybe the teach' is holding onto it because it was just too impressive to give back with the rest.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, folding her arms as she tried to keep her expression neutral. “Yeah right... with that handwriting of yours?” she countered, a hint of a smirk tugging at her own lips.

Before Gigi could retort, Elizabeth approached with a few remaining papers in hand. “Gigi, here's yours,” she said, handing it over with a quick smile before moving on.

Cecilia's gaze flickered toward the paper in Gigi's hands, unable to hide her curiosity. She and Bijou both leaned in as Gigi unfolded the quiz, the red inked score coming into view.

48.5/50

For a moment, Cecilia stared, her mind trying to process the half mark difference. Somehow, Gigi had managed to score half a point more than her.

Gigi's eyes lit up as she spotted the score, a smug expression spreading across her face. She turned toward Cecilia with a look that was half-victorious, half-playful. “Well, there you go,” the blonde jested, as Cecilia looked on in horror, “Seems like that summer grinding of yours was juuuust enough to put you... half a mark behind me!”

Cecilia's fists clenched, though she forced herself to keep her composure. “A half point... it's basically the same score,” the perfectionist muttered, trying to shrug it off.

Gigi leaned closer, her grin widening. “Sure, Cece, if that helps you sleep better. But a win's a win, wouldn't you agree?” Gigi chuckles, causing Cecilia's eye to twitch a little.

“I guess so,” Cecilia relented, sighing as Bijou patted her on the back.

“Don't worry Cece, you'll annihilate her next time,” Bijou comforted the perfectionist, who smiled gratefully.

“Oi, I'm still here, you know,” Gigi says, crossing her arms at Bijou in indignation.

“Well, I better head back to my seat. Class is starting soon,” Cecilia says, preparing to walk back to her desk.

However, just as she turned to leave, Gigi stood up from her seat, grabbing the perfectionist's hand. “Hold it!” the pigtailed girl interjected, as Cecilia turned back around.

“What's up?” Cecilia asks Gigi, who smiled mischievously.

“I hope you didn't forget about that bet we agreed on,” Gigi says, winking, “You know... the punishment for whoever gets the lower score?”

Cecilia gulped, her gaze sharpening in suspicion. She had almost forgotten about that bet, and seeing the gleam in Gigi's eyes now made her suddenly wary.

“Yeah... I remember,” Cecilia muttered, trying to steady her voice, “Why?”

Gigi shifted, her smirk softening as she scratched the back of her neck, a hint of pink dusting her cheeks. “Well, since you got the lower score, I think it's only fair you hold up your end of the deal, right?” Gigi says before hesitating, glancing down briefly before meeting Cecilia's eyes, “So I was thinking... maybe you could, I don't know, take me out somewhere fun as your punishment.”

Cecilia felt her face heat up, her heart skipping a beat at the unexpected request. “Take you... out?” she echoed, trying to mask her own embarrassment.

Gigi nodded, her expression almost shy now. “Yeah, you know... just the two of us. Doesn't have to be anything big. Just... a day out or something.”

Cecilia glanced away, her mind racing as she tried to keep her composure. She felt a tug of nerves at the thought of spending time with Gigi outside of school. All things considered, this ‘punishment’ wasn't all that bad. Besides, she'd been on a one-on-one outing with Gigi before during the summer, so this shouldn't be any different... right?

Gathering her courage, she nodded, attempting a casual tone. “Fine. I... I guess I did lose,” Cecilia murmured, cheeks still warm, “I'll think of something.”

A small smile spread across Gigi's lips, her flushed cheeks still visible. But before either of them could say anything further, the teacher called out for everyone's attention. “Please return to your seats, everyone. Class will be starting soon!”

Throughout the entire lesson, Gigi found herself utterly unable to concentrate. It wasn't like she normally paid much attention in algebra class anyway, but today was different. Her mind was stuck on that brief exchange, replaying it over and over. In all truthfulness, the blonde didn't actually expect Cecilia to agree to her proposal that easily.

“Take me out somewhere fun.”

Gigi's cheeks flushed as she gagged at the words she uttered mere moments ago. The idea had seemed easy enough to suggest in the moment, but now, she cringed at the thought of how nervous she had sounded. She only hoped the perfectionist hadn't noticed the blush on her face the entire time.

Gigi glanced out the window, pretending to listen to the lesson, though her mind was far from the equations. The funny thing was, she hadn't even asked Cecilia out just to tease her. There was something else beneath it all—a feeling she hadn't exactly planned on admitting to herself before, yet it was there, clearer than ever. Just recently, she had come to terms with it: she had fallen for Cecilia.

The realization had come slowly, like a puzzle falling into place piece by piece, until she couldn't ignore it any longer. At first, she brushed it off, chalking it up to a 'friend crush' or something along those lines. But now, every time they bantered, every time they competed, every time they were even around each other, Gigi's heart would skip a beat.

In fact, Gigi had even started to notice the little things about Cecilia—the way she furrowed her eyebrows when she was focused, or how she had a tick of fixing her hair ribbon every now and then.

Gigi couldn't help but feel her gaze drifting toward Cecilia whenever they were in the same room, her attention pulled in by the subtlest of her rival's characteristics. Her mind would often wander to moments between them, replaying bits and pieces of their conversations or the way Cecilia would scoff and roll her eyes with a small smile during their usual back-and-forth. It was as if every tiny habit and expression of Cecilia's had lodged itself somewhere in Gigi's memory, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

But now, with each reminder of these feelings came a growing sense of uncertainty. Gigi didn't know what to do about her feelings, or if she should even do anything at all. Part of her wanted to keep it buried, to continue things as they were—just two friends, two rivals, nothing more. But another part of her, one she was less comfortable with, felt an undeniable urge to bridge the distance between them.

The blonde pressed her forehead against the surface of her table. Just what could she do when something as simple as a smile or a stray glance from Cecilia made her heart flutter?

Gigi didn't have the answer to that question, and it left her feeling more vulnerable than she had ever expected.

Maybe it was best to keep her feelings hidden for now, she thought to herself—masking them behind her usual playful and mischievous demeanor. She would simply continue teasing Cecilia, keep pushing her buttons, and maybe, just maybe, figure out a way to deal with her feelings another time.

As the teacher droned on, Gigi let out a small sigh, resigned to her hopeless daydreaming. Perhaps one day she'd find the courage to figure out just what she wanted to say to Cecilia, but for now, the status quo felt like the safest option.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the room, Cecilia was deep in her thoughts as well, her mind occupied with Gigi... just not the way Gigi's mind was occupied with her. Instead, Cecilia was completely focused on the quiz they had just received back. Specifically, to the single question that had cost her two precious marks—and the chance to beat Gigi.

Her fingers twirled her pen as she replayed the problem in her head, dissecting each step she had taken. The question, with its tricky stream of equations, threw the perfectionist off the first time she did it, but now, she could see exactly where she had gone wrong.

She had misread a 'minus' sign, instead treating it as a 'plus' while simplifying one of the equations. It was a careless oversight, one she would have caught and rectified if she had

taken just a few extra seconds to quadruple-check her work. The realization gnawed at her as she stared down at the neat writings in her notebook.

A mere half-mark had managed to separate her from Gigi, and cause the pigtailed girl to come out on top once again. Cecilia's grip on her pen tightened slightly. Even after all that effort, all that time revising for the quiz, she still ended up losing.

Still, she couldn't dwell on it forever. What's done is done. Instead, her thoughts turned to something more pressing: their deal. She had agreed to take Gigi out somewhere fun, but she hadn't the faintest idea where to go.

Cecilia tapped her pen against her desk, her brows furrowing. What exactly counted as 'fun' in Gigi's eyes? It wasn't like she knew her rival's hobbies inside out. The perfectionist then thought back to the time she spent with Gigi during the summer, trying to think of anything that could help her get the cogs turning.

For one thing, she knew Gigi loved games. The rounds of Connect 4 they played when Gigi slept over at her house were surprisingly fun.

Gigi also loves reading, as Cecilia recalls, thinking of the time she met the former at the bookshop. At the time, finding out that Gigi was actually an avid reader came as a great surprise—albeit not an unwelcome one.

After racking her brains, Cecilia's mind began flipping through a few possibilities of where she could take Gigi out to. A café? That seemed safe. An arcade? Gigi seemed like the type to enjoy something like that. What about a library? Even though she knew Gigi fancied reading, that particular idea seemed a little mundane for an outing between friends.

Cecilia exhaled softly, glancing towards Gigi's seat out of the corner of her eye. The other girl looked as relaxed as ever, her head resting on her desk, not listening to a word their teacher was saying.

Cecilia's cheeks warmed slightly as she forced herself to look away. She couldn't overthink this. It was just a casual outing. Nothing more.

But even as she tried to convince herself, she couldn't shake the feeling that planning this outing might end up being more complicated than she had anticipated.

“Cecilia? Cecilia?”

The green-haired girl was snapped back to reality at the sound of her algebra teacher's voice. Blinking rapidly, she straightened up in her seat, realizing that the entire class had gone silent. All eyes were on her, a few of her classmates exchanging amused glances.

“Are you feeling alright, Cecilia?” the teacher asked, in concern. She was standing at the front of the room, holding a hefty stack of worksheets and gesturing for Cecilia to come forward.

Cecilia felt a rush of heat rise to her cheeks as she quickly stood up, trying her best not to look flustered. “Yes, ma’am! Sorry, I just... zoned out for a moment,” she stammered, her voice shaky as she hurried to the teacher’s desk.

The teacher handed her a smaller stack of papers. “I need you to help me take these down to the staff room, alright?” she said, before studying Cecilia’s face for a moment, “Are you sure you’re feeling alright? I could have someone take you down to the nurse’s office if you’d like.”

“I’m fine, really,” Cecilia assured her, forcing a polite smile as she received the worksheets. The teacher nodded, although a hint of suspicion remained.

Hurrying out of the classroom, Cecilia breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind her, blocking out the gazes and murmurs of her classmates. She clutched the stack of papers tightly.

“Stupid Gigi,” the perfectionist muttered under her breath, the words escaping from her mouth before she could stop herself.

Gigi technically had nothing to do with the wave of embarrassment washing over Cecilia at that moment, yet the ease with which the pigtailed girl managed to linger in her thoughts irritated her to no end.

“Hey, Cece,” a familiar voice greeted from behind the perfectionist suddenly.

Cecilia whirled around in a startled manner, and found herself face-to-face with none other than Gigi herself. The pigtailed girl stood a few steps away, her hands stuffed casually in her pockets, a small, smug smirk plastered onto her expression.

“What are you doing here?” Cecilia asked the blonde, her tone harsher than intended.

Gigi shrugged, leaning slightly against the wall. “Told the teach’ I needed to use the bathroom,” she said nonchalantly, before giving Cecilia a quick glance, “But really, I just wanted to check up on you. It’s not like you to start daydreaming in class, you know.”

Cecilia’s cheeks flushed instantly, a mix of irritation and embarrassment bubbling up within her. “Daydreaming?” she repeated, her voice rising defensively, “I wasn’t daydreaming. I was... thinking.”

“Sure you were,” Gigi teased, her smirk widening, “You were so out of it the teacher had to call your name like three times. That’s pretty out of character for you, doll.”

Cecilia’s grip on the stack of worksheets tightened, as she narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me, but if anyone here is known for zoning out during class, it’s you,” she retorted sharply as she

glared at Gigi, “So maybe you should spend less time worrying about me and more time paying attention yourself.”

Gigi blinked, amused by the bite in Cecilia’s words, but quickly brushed them off with a chuckle. “Wow, someone’s touchy,” she said, holding up her hands in mock surrender, “Relax, Cece. I was just worried. Guess I shouldn’t have bothered.”

The comment made Cecilia pause, her irritation subsiding for a brief moment. Although Gigi's tone carried her usual teasing quality, the blonde genuinely did seem a little concerned for her.

Cecilia sighed, a rush of guilt washing over her. “I’m sorry, Gigi, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Cecilia apologized to the pigtailed girl, whose eyes widened in surprise.

“Wait, why are you apologizing? I should be the one saying sorry for pissing you off...” Gigi says sheepishly, rubbing the back of her head, averting Cecilia's eyes before glancing back at her again, “Sooo... what’s so important in your mind that you didn’t even notice the teacher calling you?”

Cecilia hesitated, swaying back and forth casually. “It’s nothing,” she replied quickly, her voice a little too high-pitched to sound convincing.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually sick?!” Gigi exclaimed in shock, pressing a hand against Cecilia's forehead to feel for the latter's temperature.

Upon feeling Gigi’s hand against her forehead, the perfectionist blushed furiously, stepping back from the blonde swiftly. “I’m not!” Cecilia protested, prompting Gigi to furrow her brow.

“Then what’s up with you?!” Gigi exhaled in exasperation, folding her arms.

The pair locked eyes, a few moments of silence passing over them. With a small sigh, Cecilia relented. “Fine, I was busy planning our outing earlier,” Cecilia admitted, breaking away from Gigi's gaze.

Gigi felt heat rise to her cheeks upon Cecilia's admission. Cecilia had been thinking about her? About their outing? The thought sent a wave of warmth into Gigi's chest, prompting her to start scratching the back of her head, as she tried to mask the flustered expression creeping across her face.

“You... you really don’t have to put so much thought into it,” Gigi mumbled, her voice quieter and more awkward than usual, “I mean, it’s not like it’s some big deal or anything. Just... do whatever you think is fun.”

Cecilia glanced at her again, this time more composed but still faintly blushing. “I’m not going to half-ass this, Gigi,” she replied firmly, “You won, fair and square, so I’m gonna make it worth your time.”

Gigi shifted uncomfortably, feeling both flattered and embarrassed. She didn't know how to respond to Cecilia's sincerity, so instead, she opted for a different response—one more mischievous and teasing.

"You know," the blonde began, her tone now playful, "It's kinda funny how a half mark difference led to you spacing out in class earlier."

Cecilia froze, her scowl returning in full force as her eyes narrowed into a glare. "What did you just say?" she asked, her voice dangerously calm.

Gigi raised her hands defensively, taking a cautious step back but unable to hide her grin. "I'm just saying, Cece, maybe if you weren't so busy thinking about me, you wouldn't have embarrassed yourself in front of everyone."

Cecilia's embarrassment boiled over into frustration as she jabbed a finger in Gigi's direction. "T-that will never happen again!" she declared, her voice rising slightly as her glare intensified.

Gigi giggled, amused by the rise she managed to get out of her rival. "Alright, alright, relax!" she said between chuckles, "It's just a joke, Cece. No need to get so defensive."

But Cecilia wasn't done. She straightened her back, determination showing in her features. "I'm serious, Gigi. I'll beat you next time, no question about it," Cecilia declared, "Starting with the chemistry quiz next week!"

"There's a quiz next week?" Gigi blinked, racking her brains, to which Cecilia narrowed her eyes.

"Yes," Cecilia says, rolling her eyes, "Just you see... I'll utterly obliterate you for all our future quizzes!"

Gigi chuckled, clearly enjoying the fire in Cecilia's tone. "Oh yeah?" Gigi giggled, sticking out her tongue at the green haired girl playfully.

"Yeah!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

For a moment, the two stared at each other, the awkward air from earlier slowly dissipating. Cecilia was the first to break the silence, turning on her heel abruptly. "I need to get these papers to the staff room," she said coolly, as Gigi chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah," Gigi replied with a wave of her hand, a small, knowing smile still playing on her lips, "Don't trip over yourself on the way down."

Cecilia shot her a final glare over her shoulder but said nothing, her footsteps echoing down the hallway as she marched away.

As Gigi watched Cecilia disappear from her sight, she couldn't help but let her mind wander off. The way Cecilia's green hair shimmered under the sunlight, the determined look in her eyes when she declared she would beat Gigi next time, the rosy color on her cheeks.... all of it stuck with Gigi far longer than it should have.

What was it about Cecilia that made her so impossible to ignore? Gigi frowned, shaking her head as she rubbed her temple. She really didn't like to dwell on things like this, but lately, every time she thought about Cecilia, her heart felt like it was trying to do somersaults.

The pigtailed girl let out a soft groan, leaning back against the wall as she stared at the ground. Maybe she was overthinking it.

Before Gigi could dive further into her thoughts, the classroom door swung open, and her algebra teacher's voice snapped her out of her headspace. "Gigi?" the teacher asked, her tone sharp and unimpressed, "I thought you were going to the bathroom? Why are you just loitering out and about? Are you trying to skip class?"

Gigi's head shot up, holding her hands up in defense. "Uh, no, ma'am," she replied quickly, offering an awkward smile.

The teacher crossed her arms, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "Then I suggest you get back inside before I mark you absent."

"Y-yes ma'am!" Gigi spluttered, saluting the teacher before hastily scurrying back into the classroom.

The next few weeks passed in a flash, the rivalry between Cecilia and Gigi burning brighter than ever. It all began with the chemistry quiz—the one Cecilia had challenged Gigi to in the hallway.

Cecilia sat at her desk, hovering her pen over the test paper as she flexed her mind furiously. The quiz was easy enough, but Cecilia knew she had to leave no error if she wanted to get a higher score than her rival. In fact, she could practically hear Gigi's smirk from across the room, and that alone was enough to sharpen her focus.

When the marked papers were given out at the end of the next class, Cecilia clenched her fists in triumph. 19 out of 20. She then glanced toward Gigi, who seemed unbothered as she received her paper from one of their classmates.

The perfectionist quickly rushed over to Gigi's seat, as she took a peek at the latter's scores. "F-full marks?!" Cecilia blurted out in disdain as Gigi cackled at her disappointment.

"All too easy," Gigi yawned, before winking at Cecilia, "Is there a punishment game for this too? I bet I can think of something—"

“No! This was just a harmless contest!” Cecilia huffed, as she glared daggers at the one multiple-choice question she messed up, “Crap, I even wrote down the correct option at first...”

Gigi grinned, patting the taller girl on the shoulder. “Looks like you have a long way to go, little one,” Gigi teased, putting on a smug expression, to the immense irritation of her rival.

Upon hearing Gigi’s mocking words, Cecilia focused her icy glare on the blonde. “Shut up, Gigi.”

The history quiz the next week didn’t go any better for Cecilia. Determined to close the gap, she spent hours pouring over her notes, confident she would nail every question. But when the papers were returned, she found herself staring at a familiar sight: a single mistake.

“Nineteen out of twenty again?” Cecilia murmured under her breath, her fingers tightening around the edges of her paper. That one point felt like a personal attack, especially when she saw Gigi casually flip her own quiz over to reveal another perfect score.

“I take it you did well, doll?” Gigi asked, flashing a toothy grin at the perfectionist as she approached.

Cecilia bit her lip. “Not as well as I wanted to,” she admitted curtly.

“Ah,” Gigi replied, eyes narrowing as she grinned, her tone light and nonchalant, “I guess there’s always next time.”

It took Cecilia's full concentration not to strangle the blonde right then and there.

It wasn’t just quizzes anymore. Their little competitions started going beyond the small quizzes, even bleeding into their daily school lives. One particular chemistry lab session became the stage for yet another challenge. Their teacher, holding up two boxes of chocolates, announced that the first pair to successfully finish that day's experiment would win the prize.

Cecilia immediately focused on the task ahead, tuning out the chatter around her. Her lab partner, Elizabeth, sighed as she arranged the apparatus on the table. “Titration, huh? Can't say I understand it too well,” the scarlet haired girl admitted to Cecilia, who gave her a reassuring smile.

“Don't worry, Liz, I can guide you along. I studied quite a fair bit on it already,” Cecilia says, to Elizabeth's relief.

“As expected of you,” Elizabeth replied warmly, her ladylike demeanor intact as she handed a flask over to the perfectionist, “I'll follow your lead then.”

Cecilia nodded, as she began carrying out the first few steps of their task. However, her concentration broke when she glanced across the room to see Gigi and her partner, Shiori, chattering away, having not even started setting up the experiment.

The perfectionist smirked to herself as an idea lit up in her head. She was already a few steps ahead of Gigi. Perhaps she should take this chance to challenge the pigtailed girl to another contest.

Cecilia waved her hand at Gigi, immediately catching her attention. “What?” Gigi mouthed, perking her head upwards.

The green haired girl pointed at the apparatus on her table, before gesturing towards the boxes of chocolates sitting on the teachers desk. “You up for this?” Cecilia mouthed, as Gigi and Shiori stared back at her.

Although she couldn't quite piece together what Cecilia was mouthing at her, Gigi instantly understood what she was suggesting. The pigtailed girl flashed a thumbs up at the perfectionist, before swiftly reaching out for the flask on her table.

“What's going on?” Shiori asks the blonde, who seemed completely locked into the new challenge.

“We're competing to see who can finish the experiment first,” Gigi replied, swiping a pipette from the apparatus basket.

“Don't I get a say in this?” Shiori asks, half-amused, half-exasperated.

Gigi simply grinned in response. “Don't worry, Shiori, we'll be done and dusted in no time flat!”

Meanwhile, at Cecilia and Elizabeth's table, the casual air of the task at hand turned into something more urgent. “Alright, you gotta add the acid into the burette,” Cecilia instructed Elizabeth hastily, nearly dropping the pipette in the process.

“Woah, there! What's the rush?” Elizabeth chuckled as Cecilia poured some alkali into the pipette, “You must really want the chocolates, huh?”

“Not exactly,” Cecilia replies, her hands moving rapidly and precisely, “Gigi and I are in one of our little contests right now...”

Elizabeth nodded in understanding, as she finished pouring the acid into the burette. “Ah, I see. Well then, we better be quick.”

Cecilia nodded sharply, grateful that Elizabeth understood just how urgent this contest was (well, to Cecilia anyway). She couldn't let Gigi walk away with another victory. Not again.

Cecilia moved methodically, measuring each solution with practiced precision. Elizabeth, meanwhile, seemed to get the hang of the process, eventually matching Cecilia's pace.

On the other side of the room, Gigi and Shiori were moving just as fast as the other pair, if not quicker. The blonde was efficiently multi-tasking, juggling between instructing Shiori on what to do and focusing on her own tasks effortlessly.

As the timer neared its final minute, Cecilia was certain she and Elizabeth were ahead—until she heard Gigi’s triumphant shout.

“We’re done!” Gigi declared, raising her hand.

Cecilia’s head snapped up, her heart sinking as the teacher approached Gigi and Shiori’s station to confirm their success.

“Well done, you two,” the teacher said, handing the chocolates to Gigi with a nod.

Cecilia’s grip tightened on her pipette, nearly breaking in the process as a look of dejection spread across her face. The perfectionist didn’t look at Gigi, but she could feel the blonde’s eyes on her, as she imagined her smug expression.

During lunch later that day, Gigi and Shiori were happily sharing the boxes of chocolates with their classmates at the cafeteria. “Mmm, these are delicious, what brand is this?” Nerissa asked, after stuffing her mouth with a bar of ‘coffee and cream’ flavored chocolate.

“It’s Merci,” Shiori replied, reading from the wrapper of a bar she was unwrapping herself, “Definitely not one of the cheap ones.”

While the rest of her classmates were happily indulging in the candy, Cecilia was busy sulking at the side of the lunch table. Raora glanced at her best friend empathetically, before taking a bite out of her chocolate. “Come on, Cece... are you still mad about chemistry?”

“I’m not mad. I’m just a little peeved, that’s all,” Cecilia pouted, looking up at the artist as she rested her chin on her hand, “I mean—I had a head start, a brilliant partner... heck, I even know the titration process like it’s the back of my hand, so I just don’t get—”

The perfectionist was abruptly interrupted as something small and sweet collided with her lips. Her eyes widened in shock as she realized it was a piece of chocolate, now awkwardly perched between her teeth.

“Hey! Don’t talk with your mouth full, Cece,” Gigi teased, standing behind the perfectionist with a mischievous grin on her face, “You’re not missing out on this candy just because you’re sulking.”

Cecilia blinked, her face heating up as she instinctively bit into the chocolate. The rich flavor of hazelnut and dark chocolate melted on her tongue, but it was overshadowed by the indignation rising in her chest.

“Gigi!” she sputtered, swallowing quickly, “You can’t just—what are you, five?!”

Gigi shrugged, clearly amused. “I thought it’d cheer you up.”

Cecilia glared at the blonde. “Hmph, I don’t need your pity chocolates,” she huffed, crossing her arms.

“Pity chocolates?” Gigi gasped, feigning offense, her grin never wavering, “Cece, these happen to be really tasty chocolates, and I just happened to think you deserve one. No strings attached!”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, before turning her head away slightly. “Fine, it *was* really tasty,” Cecilia admitted, still pouting a little, “Thank you.”

The rest of their classmates watched the exchange with varying degrees of amusement. Nerissa nudged Raora, whispering into her ear. “They have an... interesting relationship, huh?”

Raora chuckled, taking another bite of her chocolate. “It’s like watching a married couple argue,” the artist commented, loud enough for Cecilia to hear.

Cecilia shot the artist a warning look, but before she could say anything, Gigi plopped down next to her. “So, doll, what are we gonna compete on next?” Gigi asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

The perfectionist looked into Gigi's anticipating eyes, taking a moment to think before shrugging. “I... don't know. There aren't any quizzes coming up for a while,” Cecilia replied as Gigi frowned.

“Aw, don’t tell me you’re getting tired of losing already,” Gigi teased, her smirk as confident as ever.

“Tch,” Cecilia tutted, but before she could launch into a rebuttal, Gigi slapped a hand on the table.

“Hey, I got it! Why don't we shake things up a little?” Gigi exclaims brightly.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, wary of whatever idea the pigtailed girl was brewing up. “What do you mean?”

“Volleyball! We’ve got PE later, right? Let’s see who’s got better skills on the court,” Gigi replies, as she clapped her hands together.

“Volleyball?” Cecilia repeated, skeptical, “Really? Gigi, you know how bad I am at sports.”

Gigi grinned maliciously. “Cece, do you hear that?” Gigi asked no one in particular, batting her eyelashes as she cupped her ear, “It kinda sounds like... chickening out!”

“I am not chickening out!” Cecilia snapped, grabbing Gigi's collar, “I just suck at PE!”

“Chicken.”

“Shut up.”

“Bawk.”

“Gigi, shut up.”

“Bawk, bawk, bawk.”

Despite herself, Cecilia began laughing heartily. The perfectionist caught herself mid-laugh, her hand still clutching Gigi’s collar. She quickly released it and folded her arms, trying to regain her composure.

“Fine! If you want to do it so badly, then let’s! But I won’t be going easy on you!” Cecilia declares, still trying to stifle her laughter.

“Now, that’s the spirit,” Gigi grinned, before standing up and joining her friends at the other side of the table, “I’ll be looking forward to our match later, doll!”

Later on, in the sports hall, Cecilia rested her head against the wall as she sat on the bleachers. The PE lesson hadn’t even started yet and she was already regretting accepting the blonde’s challenge.

Raora, who had been silently observing the moody Cecilia, finally spoke up. “Cecilia, are you sure you wanna do this? I thought you hated sports,” the artist asks Cecilia, who looked at her best friend in distress.

“Raora... What am I gonna do?” Cecilia whined, clutching her best friend’s arm for support, “I went ahead and challenged Gigi, and now I’m gonna make a fool of myself!”

Raora smirked, gently prying Cecilia’s hands away from her face. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have let her get under your skin,” Raora soothed, patting Cecilia’s head.

Cecilia shot her an unimpressed look. “It’s not my fault she’s so annoying,” Cecilia pouted.

Before Raora could reply, the coach blew the whistle, signaling the start of the class. “Alright, everyone, pair up and practice your serves and returns!”

Gigi wasted no time, making her way to Cecilia with her signature grin. “Hey, doll, ready to lose again?” Gigi snickered, as Cecilia stood up reluctantly.

Cecilia’s jaw tightened as she stood up. “Not happening,” Cecilia retorted, although she didn’t sound too sure herself.

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “Big words for someone who couldn’t hit a ball to save her life for the past few PE classes,” Gigi teased as they walked over to the basket carrying all the volleyballs.

“Oh, shut up,” Cecilia snapped, grabbing a ball before hurling it at Gigi’s face.

The first few minutes were a disaster.

Cecilia's serves barely cleared the net, and when Gigi returned them, her spikes were so strong that Cecilia couldn't react fast enough to block them. Each failed attempt earned a snicker from the blonde.

"Come on, Cece, is that all you've got?" Gigi teased, effortlessly catching the ball after another failed return from Cecilia.

"How are you so good at spiking when you're so short?" Cecilia asked, as she grabbed her knees to catch her breath.

"How are you so bad at it when you're taller than me?" Gigi chuckles, serving the ball back over the net.

Elizabeth, watching from the other end of the court, shook her head with an amused smile. "Well, at least Cecilia is *trying*," the scarlet haired girl noted as she and Raora watched the pair go at it.

Raora, however, sighed, as she served her own ball towards Elizabeth. "Yeah, no, this is kinda painful to watch."

Back on Cecilia's side of the court, the green haired girl's frustration was mounting. Gigi's smug gaze was beginning to infuriate her.

"You know," Gigi called out, twirling the ball on her finger, "This would be way more fun if you actually put up a fight."

"Shut up!" Cecilia yelled. She gritted her teeth, determined not to let Gigi have the satisfaction of seeing her break.

When Gigi served the ball again, Cecilia forced herself to focus. Her hands shook as she positioned herself, but this time, she managed to hit the ball back. It wasn't perfect, but it was something.

Gigi caught the ball with ease, a genuine look of surprise crossing her face. "Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to try!"

Cecilia didn't respond, her eyes locked on the blonde as they continued. Bit by bit, she began to improve, her movements becoming more confident. The smirk on Gigi's face faltered slightly as she realized Cecilia wasn't backing down.

"Not bad, Cece," Gigi muttered under her breath.

The turning point came when Cecilia managed to return one of Gigi's spikes with a perfectly timed hit. The ball whooshed over the net, landing just inside the boundary line. "Ha! Take that!" Cecilia grins as she thrusts a fist in the air in celebration.

"Lucky shot," Gigi replied, wiping sweat from her forehead as she picked up the ball, "But the real game begins now."

"Oh, it's on," Cecilia shot back, her voice filled with newfound determination.

The game escalated, both girls putting everything they had into each serve. Cecilia's movements—once awkward and erratic, were now controlled and precise. Watching how Gigi played earlier made her reconsider her technique.

She had observed how relaxed Gigi's muscles seemed to be and how she positioned herself when receiving the ball. After imitating her rival's stance, Cecilia was surprised by how much easier it was to play the game. Now that she wasn't moving as randomly as she was earlier, Cecilia found her mind to be much clearer as she stood in the court. Eventually, the perfectionist was able to keep up with Gigi, even matching her pace as they sent the ball back and forth.

Then, it happened.

Gigi, grinning mischievously, sent the ball high into the air, forcing Cecilia to chase after it. It was a cruel move, one that required Cecilia to leap if she wanted even a chance to return it.

She jumped, her body straining as she reached for the ball. Her fingers barely brushed the surface before she landed awkwardly on her foot. A sharp, searing pain shot through her ankle, and she collapsed onto the floor with a cry.

“Cece!” Gigi’s voice rang out as she rushed to her side in a hurry.

Cecilia gritted her teeth, trying to push herself up, but the pain was too much. “I’m fine,” she muttered through clenched teeth, though her pale face said otherwise.

“You’re not fine,” Gigi said, kneeling beside her. Her usual demeanor was gone, replaced by genuine concern. “Shit, where are you feeling the pain?”

Elizabeth and Raora hurried over, the former quickly assessing the injury. “That fall looked really bad. You might’ve even sprained your ankle,” Elizabeth said, her voice calm, “I think you need to go to the nurse.”

“It's alright, I don’t need—” Cecilia began, but Raora cut her off.

“Don’t argue. You can’t even stand, Cece,” Raora scolded as their coach spotted the commotion from afar.

Their coach jogged over to the fallen Cecilia, assessing her swelling foot. “Oh dear,” the coach said, as she knelt over to take a look at Cecilia’s injury, “We have to get you to the nurse's immediately. Gigi, could you take her down?”

“O-of course,” Gigi replied immediately as she helped Cecilia up. The perfectionist hesitated, cringing from the sharp pain radiating from her ankle. Reluctantly, she allowed Gigi to support her as they hobbled toward the exit.

The journey to the nurse’s office was awkward and slow, with Cecilia leaning heavily on Gigi for support. “Does it hurt a lot?” Gigi asked quietly, her voice lacking its usual confidence.

Cecilia glanced at her, noting the genuine concern in her eyes. "It's not great," she admitted, trying to keep her voice steady despite the throbbing pain in her ankle.

Gigi winced at her words. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I shouldn't have made you jump for that ball..." Gigi muttered in a guilty way, averting Cecilia's eyes.

Cecilia shook her head firmly, though the movement made her grimace. "It's not your fault, Gigi. I'm the one who accepted the challenge. I pushed myself too hard."

"But if I hadn't—"

"Stop," Cecilia interrupted, her tone gentle but firm, "You didn't force me to do anything. I wanted to compete with you, remember? So don't blame yourself."

Gigi bit her lip, clearly unconvinced, but she nodded nonetheless.

When they arrived at the nurse's office, the school nurse, a kindly woman with short, silver hair, greeted them with a concerned look. "What happened here?" the lady asked as the pair entered the room.

"Cecilia, here, hurt her ankle during PE," Gigi explained quickly, helping Cecilia into a chair.

The nurse knelt in front of Cecilia, carefully examining the swollen joint. Cecilia winced in pain as the nurse prodded the area gently.

"Hmm... it's a sprain alright," the nurse said after a moment, "Nothing too severe though, but you'll need to take good care of it. I'd reckon a few weeks for a full recovery."

"A few weeks?" Cecilia groaned, leaning her head back against the chair, "Great, just great."

The nurse gave her a sympathetic smile as she began pressing an ice pack against Cecilia's swollen ankle. "I can only administer some cold compress and lend you some crutches for now," the nurse ordered, "But it's probably best if we call your parents to come and pick you up so you can head home and get some rest."

Cecilia winced, not from the cold but from the thought. "Um, my parents are overseas right now, so that wouldn't work," she admitted sheepishly.

"I see," the nurse noted, "Do you have any other relatives?"

"I live with my sister Fauna, but her classes end late today," Cecilia replies, letting out a sigh.

The nurse frowned thoughtfully, but before she could respond, Gigi straightened up from where she was standing awkwardly by the door. "I'll take her home," Gigi volunteered

firmly.

Cecilia looked up at her, startled. “Gigi, you don’t have to—”

“Yeah, I do,” Gigi interrupted, her voice sheepish, “It’s kind of my fault you got hurt, so let me help, okay?”

“It’s not your fault,” Cecilia insisted, but Gigi ignored her, turning to the nurse instead.

“Is that okay, ma’am?” Gigi asked, her tone unusually serious, “I can make sure she gets home safely.”

The nurse hesitated, glancing at Cecilia. “Well, if it’s okay with Miss Cecilia...”

“Alright,” Cecilia relented defeatedly, “PE’s the last period of the day anyway. I might as well head back and get some rest.”

The nurse nodded, her expression softening. “Alright, but make sure she keeps that ankle elevated and doesn’t put too much weight on it,” she instructed Gigi before turning to Cecilia, “And if the pain worsens or the swelling doesn’t go down in a couple of days, you’ll need to see a doctor.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll make sure of it,” Cecilia replied obediently.

Once Cecilia was settled comfortably with her crutches, Gigi glanced back at the nurse. “I’ll go grab our bags from the sports hall real quick and then take her home,” the pigtailed girl said, before turning to Cecilia, “Wait here, alright?”

Cecilia waved her off with a small smile. “I’m not going anywhere, don’t worry.”

Gigi jogged back to the sports hall, her heart still full of guilt. As she entered the hall, she immediately spotted Raora and Elizabeth sitting on the bleachers and chatting while waiting for the class to finish. Their conversation took a pause as they noticed Gigi approaching.

“Gigi! How’s Cecilia?” Raora asked, her tone full of concern as she stood up.

“Oh yes, I hope her injuries aren’t too serious?” Elizabeth added as she and Raora walked up to the blonde.

“She’s okay,” Gigi replied quickly, running a hand through her hair, “It’s a sprain, but the nurse said it’s not too bad. She should be fine in a few weeks.”

Raora let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear. Honestly, I thought she’d need crutches just to make it back from the sports hall,” the artist says, placing a hand on her chest.

“She does,” Gigi said with a dry chuckle, “But I’m taking her home after this.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her tone. “Oh? So you’re her official chauffeur then?”

“Something like that,” Gigi muttered, crouching to pick up both her bag and Cecilia’s, “This whole thing was kinda my fault in the first place... Anyway, I just came to grab our stuff.”

Raora crossed her arms, smirking a little. “You know, it’s kind of sweet,” Raora noted, “You really do care about her, huh?”

“I-it’s the least I can do for her,” Gigi replied instantly, her cheeks reddening, “I just don’t want this on my conscience, you know. I gotta right my wrongs... Karma and all that! I’m sure you get it... I mean, it’s only natural—”

As Gigi continued her word vomit, Raora and Elizabeth exchanged a subtle look, clearly amused. “Well, it’s nice to see you taking responsibility over her,” Elizabeth commented teasingly, as Gigi turned to hide her flushed expression.

“Alright, lecture’s over,” Gigi grumbled, slinging both bags over her shoulder, “I’ve got a girl to get home.”

Before she could leave, however, the PE teacher approached, clipboard in hand. “Gigi,” she called out, her voice firm.

“Yes, Miss!” Gigi greeted, standing up straighter.

“I assume you’re here for your and Cecilia’s belongings?” the teacher asked, her eyes flicking to the bags slung over Gigi’s shoulder.

“Yes, ma’am,” Gigi replied, “I’m going to bring Cecilia home. She has a minor sprain, but the nurse says it’s nothing too bad.”

The teacher nodded after a brief pause. “Very well. Make sure she gets home safely, and tell her to take care on my behalf, alright?”

“Of course,” Gigi promised.

As Gigi turned to leave, Raora called out teasingly, “Don’t forget to text us when you’ve tucked her into bed!”

“Ha,” Gigi shot back, sticking her tongue out at the artist.

As soon as Cecilia and Gigi stepped out of the school gates, the former awkwardly shifted her weight onto the crutches, trying to adjust to the unfamiliar motion of walking with them.

Meanwhile, Gigi hovered at her side, watching her every move like a hawk.

“Gigi, I’m fine,” Cecilia said, embarrassment seeping into her voice, “You don’t have to stare at me the whole time.”

“Sure you are,” Gigi replied, reaching out to steady Cecilia as she wobbled slightly, “But I’m not taking any chances, so deal with it.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes but didn’t argue further, focusing instead on making it to the school gates without falling flat on her face.

The journey to the bus stop was slow and awkward, with Cecilia trying to maintain her balance and Gigi carrying both their bags. “Y’know,” Cecilia said after a while, “You really didn’t have to do all this.”

“Yeah, I did,” Gigi replied, her voice unusually meek and soft.

Cecilia glanced at her, surprised by the lack of her usual energy. “You’re really hung up on this, huh?”

“I just feel bad, okay?” Gigi admitted, avoiding her gaze, “I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard.”

Cecilia sighed. “Gigi, for the last time, it’s not your fault. I’m the one who got carried away trying to keep up with you,” Cecilia reassures once again, looking down at the shorter girl.

Gigi didn’t respond immediately, instead adjusting Cecilia’s bag strap shiftily. “Still... sorry,” the blonde mumbled after a moment, her eyes locked onto the ground.

“Why does she look... kinda cute like this?” Cecilia thought to herself, before smiling at the blonde.

“Apology accepted. Now can you stop looking so miserable? You’re gonna make me feel guilty for making you feel guilty,” Cecilia chuckles, as she nudges Gigi lightly.

That earned a small laugh from Gigi, and for the first time since the accident, she looked more like herself. “Hey... just let me feel bad for a little, okay?” Gigi said, her grin finally returning.

Eventually, the pair managed to get onto the bus, enjoying a quiet ride through the town. By the time they reached Cecilia’s home, the perfectionist was visibly worn out. “Careful, there’s a step,” Gigi pointed out as they reached the front gate, holding out her arms to catch Cecilia in case she fell.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna trip,” Cecilia replied, her heart softening by how careful Gigi seemed to be with her, “I’m not hopeless, you know.”

“Well, the chances of you falling down aren’t zero!” Gigi argued playfully as they made their way to the front entrance, “You could trip on a stray rock or something and fall over and start crying like a little baby~”

“Don’t make me hit you with my crutches,” Cecilia shot back dryly.

Once they were inside, Gigi helped Cecilia settle into her bed, arranging a few pillows under her foot. She then hovered awkwardly for a moment before setting their bags near the door.

“You sure you’ll be okay on your own?” Gigi asked, glancing at Cecilia’s ankle.

Cecilia leaned back into the pillows with a sigh. “Yeah. Fauna will be back later, and I’m not going anywhere in the meantime,” Cecilia smiles.

Gigi hesitated, her brow furrowing. “I could stay until she gets here....”

“No need,” Cecilia interrupted, as a blush crept up into her cheeks, “You’ve already done a lot. Go get some rest yourself.”

Gigi shifted, looking like she wanted to protest but finally relented. She nodded, adjusting the strap of her bag. “Alright. But don’t do anything dumb, alright?” Gigi says, as she places a hand on her hip.

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to,” Cecilia quipped with a smirk, gesturing towards her sprained foot.

“Good,” Gigi says, before scratching the back of her head and averting the perfectionist’s green eyes, “Well, I guess this is goodbye then. See you later, doll.”

“Yeah, see you,” Cecilia mumbled shyly, “And thanks for all the help.”

“Yeah! Don’t mention it,” Gigi replied, with feigned nonchalance.

The pair looked into each other’s eyes for a moment—a moment brief yet intimate. Then, Gigi turned on her heel, the sound of her footsteps echoing softly as she walked down the hallway and out the door.

After Gigi left, Cecilia lay back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. The silence in the room was suffocating. The unusually loud sounds of the mattress as she shifted slightly only emphasized how empty the space around her felt without Gigi’s presence. Her swollen ankle throbbed beneath the pillow propped under it, but the strange aching in her chest was harder to ignore.

She tried to shake off the strange sense of loneliness creeping in. Gigi had been loud, teasing, and persistent—exactly the kind of person Cecilia normally couldn’t wait to get away from. Yet, now that she was gone, the room seemed devoid of the energy that had filled it just minutes ago.

Cecilia glanced towards her desk, where her exercise books and notes rested. Normally, she would have started doing something productive to distract herself, but even that felt meaningless now. The emptiness weighed down on her as she gazed out the window, watching the bright afternoon light seep through the curtains.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed faintly on the bedside table. For a moment, hope sparked that it might be Gigi checking in, but it was just a notification informing her of her screen time that week. The green haired girl sighed and set the phone back down, the small flicker of hope leaving her feeling even more deflated.

The quiet in the house grew heavier as the minutes dragged on. Cecilia's thoughts then wandered back to the way Gigi had fussed over her earlier—her normally playful tone replaced by genuine concern and care. It was so unlike Gigi, and yet... somehow, it felt natural.

Cecilia tried to dismiss the thought. It wasn't like she needed anyone to watch over her, least of all someone as aggravating as Gigi. But the lingering warmth of her touch, the soft 'see you later, doll' she had mumbled before leaving—it all stuck in Cecilia's mind like a stain she couldn't remove.

Closing her eyes, Cecilia exhaled slowly, trying to calm herself. She wasn't used to this feeling—this strange sense of loss, this longing for something she couldn't quite define. She shifted in her bed uncomfortably, the ache in her ankle now taking a backseat to the more prominent and confusing ache in her chest.

Cecilia then pressed her hands over her face, groaning softly. "What's wrong with me?"

A few days later, Gigi was attending another session with the tabletop club, where they would be doing some final preparations before the cultural festival. The club room was filled with chatter as everyone worked together, assembling materials for the life-sized snakes and ladders booth. The project had already become their pride and joy, and with the festival just around the corner, the members of the club were busily cutting out large cardboard squares and arranging decorations.

Gigi, however, was not as enthusiastic as the others. She sat near one corner of the room, quietly sketching some ideas for their booth layout, but her mind wasn't really focused on it. She was still upset about Cecilia's injury from the other day.

The blonde couldn't shake the image of Cecilia crumpling to the floor, clutching her ankle in pain, and the helplessness she felt as she helped her to the nurse's office. Gigi tried to push those feelings down, telling herself it wasn't her fault, but every time she thought about it, the guilt weighed her down immensely. She hadn't meant for it to go that far. She didn't even want to win the volleyball match in the first place, but she couldn't help herself. She hated how it all ended.

Fauna was the first to notice the pigtailed girl's downcastedness. She wandered over to Gigi, leaning over the table to get a closer look at her sketchbook.

"Gigi, you've been kinda quiet lately," Fauna said, her voice soft and soothing, "Everything alright?"

Gigi looked up before nodding and forcing a smile. “I’m fine,” she muttered, quickly flipping through the pages of her sketchbook, “Just... busy, you know? The festival’s coming up, and there’s a lot to prepare.”

Fauna didn’t buy it. She studied Gigi’s face for a moment longer, then sighed, sitting down beside her.

“You know, if you’re still feeling bad about what happened with Cecilia, you can always talk to me about it,” Fauna said, her voice gentle but firm.

Gigi tensed up at the mention of Cecilia’s name. She didn’t know how to respond—what could she even say? That she regretted being so competitive? That she hated herself for causing her friend pain?

Fauna noticed the blonde’s hesitation and smiled reassuringly. “Cecilia’s doing just fine, you know. I’ve been checking on her, and she’s resting up like the nurse told her to. You don’t need to worry so much.”

Gigi blinked, surprised at Fauna’s casual tone. For a moment, she felt a weight lift from her chest. At least Cecilia wasn’t suffering because of her.

“Yeah, but—” Gigi started to say, but Fauna held up a hand to stop her.

“Seriously, Gigi. I know you’re feeling guilty, but she’s a tough girl. She’s not going to hold this against you. Just... don’t let it get to you, alright?” Fauna said, placing a comforting hand on Gigi’s.

Gigi gave a small nod, looking down at her hands in her lap. She knew Fauna was right. Cecilia was resilient and she would be fine. Despite this, the guilt lingered.

Before Gigi could respond, Calliope and Bijou walked over, both carrying large boxes filled with pieces of the game board.

“We’re making good progress here,” Calliope said, grinning, “I’m pretty sure this is going to be the highlight of the festival! How about you, Gigi? Have you finished the designs yet?”

Gigi gave them a weak smile and nodded. “Yeah, almost done. Just need to make a few adjustments.”

Bijou raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? You’ve been kind of spaced out today. Don’t tell me you’re still brooding over that volleyball match,” Bijou teased, poking Gigi’s cheek teasingly.

Gigi flushed a little, her fingers tightening around the pen in her hand. “It’s not that!” the blonde chuckled, looking down at her work. “I’m just a little distracted.”

Fauna gave her a knowing look, but didn’t press further. Instead, she turned her attention to the others. “Well, we’ll all pull through together. Everyone’s been working hard, and I’m sure our booth’s going to be a huge success.”

Gigi half-smiled, grateful for the distraction. She glanced back down at her sketch. For now, she had to finish the task at hand. The festival was coming up fast, and she couldn't let the team down. Not when things were finally starting to come together.

Shortly after, the group gathered around the large mat spread out across the floor, the oversized game board filled with colorful squares. Fauna, Calliope, Bijou, and Gigi then stood by their creation, ready for their playtest.

"This came out much better than I thought it would," Calliope noted, crossing her arms as she examined their magnum opus. The squares were clearly marked, with ladders and snakes represented by distinct symbols.

"Alright, Fauna, you're up first," Calliope said, as Fauna rolled the large dice, tossing it onto the board. Fauna then hopped across the squares as the others watched on in amusement. When she landed on a ladder, everyone cheered as she jumped ahead to the next set of squares.

"Ooh, nice one, Fauna," Bijou grinned, watching her climb the board.

"Thanks!" Fauna called, throwing the dice towards Bijou, who after tossing the dice and skipping across a few squares, landed on a snake.

"Dang it!" Bijou exclaimed as everyone laughed, "Already?!"

"Looks like a skill issue," Gigi teased, sticking her out playfully, to her friend's irritation.

"Oh yeah?! I'd like to see you do better!" Bijou retorted, throwing the dice at the blonde with all her strength.

Gigi stumbled as she barely caught the dice. "Just watch me," Gigi snickered, rolling the dice, landing on a number that allowed her to move a few spaces forward. As she moved her piece, she landed on a ladder, quickly climbing up a few more squares.

"You got lucky," Bijou pouted, but Gigi just smiled and shrugged.

"Skill," Gigi replied, giving an exaggerated wink.

They continued playing, laughing as they progressed through the game. By the time they reached the final round, everyone had moved a few spaces ahead, and the game was nearing its end. Gigi rolled the dice one last time, landing a six. She moved forward confidently, landing on a square just short of a ladder.

"Almost made it," Gigi said with a sigh, glancing at her clubmates.

Calliope then took the dice, taking a deep breath before rolling it dramatically. The dice settled on a three—allowing Calliope to move to the final tile and winning her the game.

"Well done Calli!" Bijou congratulated her senior, before looking at the tail of the snake she ended up on during her last turn, "Man, I really got unlucky huh?"

“Our game’s actually pretty good,” Gigi remarked, as they got off the mat, “We’re definitely gonna draw the crowds in with this.”

“Definitely,” Fauna agreed, “We’ve got a solid thing going here. Just a few more adjustments, and we’ll be ready for the festival.”

With that, the group agreed to call it a day. The booth was nearly ready, and the playtest had gone smoothly. But as they packed up, Gigi’s thoughts briefly drifted to Cecilia. She had been thinking about making up for the whole ankle incident and with the festival fast approaching, a light bulb lit up in the pigtailed girl’s mind.

Gigi knew Cecilia wouldn’t want to miss the festival, and thought it would be nice to bring her around during the actual day—give her a chance to enjoy it, even with her sprained ankle.

She glanced over at Fauna, who was busy packing up some items. Gigi’s eyes brightened with the idea, and she quickly decided to present her idea to Fauna and get her thoughts on the matter.

“Hey, Fauna,” Gigi called out, catching her attention.

Fauna turned toward her, looking up from the booth. “What’s up, Gigi?”

“I was thinking of bringing Cecilia to the festival,” Gigi said, tilting her head slightly, “You know, show her around and all that. She might get bored at home, and I don’t want her to miss out on all the fun.”

Fauna’s face softened with understanding. “That sounds like a great idea. She’d probably appreciate that,” Fauna agrees as Gigi gave a small nod, feeling a little more confident.

“I wanna keep it a surprise though, so don’t tell her anything alright?” Gigi winks, holding up a finger to her mouth.

Fauna smiled, giving the blonde a thumbs-up. “I’m sure she’ll love it. Just make sure you don’t overdo it, yeah?” Fauna reminded Gigi as the latter chuckled softly, shaking her head.

“Don’t worry, I won’t!”

As Gigi left the school later that day, she felt a small weight lift off her shoulders. It was a simple idea, but it felt right. She hoped Cecilia would agree—it’d be nice to make up for the latter’s injury, and more importantly, spend some quality time together.

The day of the festival had finally arrived.

Fauna rushed around the kitchen, pouring milk into a bowl of cereal for Cecilia. She glanced at the clock—only a few minutes left before she had to head out for school. "Here you go, Cece," Fauna said, setting the bowl down on the coffee table in front of Cecilia, who was seated on the couch, still in her pajamas.

Cecilia smiled up at her sister, who was tying her shoes. "Thanks, big sis," she said, taking the bowl and gently stirring the cereal, "Good luck at the booth today. I know it's gonna be awesome."

Fauna gave a quick nod, grabbing her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. "I hope so. I'll try to send you some pictures once it's set up," she smiled.

"Thanks, sis," Cecilia replied, lifting her bowl slightly, a soft chuckle escaping her lips.

Fauna grinned as she put on her shoes. "Alright, I'll be off!" she said, before muttering under her breath, "Now where on earth is Gigi?"

According to Gigi, she would arrive at their household early in the morning to surprise Cecilia, but there was no sign of her. Fauna glanced at the clock again. She needed to leave now if she wanted to get to school on time. The festival preparations were waiting, and she had to help set up the tabletop club's booth before the rush of visitors began.

Fauna paused at the door, looking back at Cecilia, who was still sitting on the couch, munching on her cereal. "I'll see you later, okay? Don't forget to call me if you need anything," Fauna said, turning around as she placed a hand on the door handle.

"Bye, sis!" Cecilia called out, smiling at her sister.

As Fauna stepped outside, she continued wondering where Gigi could be. Maybe she had gotten caught up with something last-minute? It was at that moment when a streak of blonde hair dashed past the front gate.

Fauna blinked as she walked up to the gate, looking in the direction where someone had dashed towards. Peeking her head out, she spotted Gigi standing at her neighbor's front gate, looking a little lost.

"Gigi?" Fauna called out, raising an eyebrow.

Gigi turned around, her face flushing as she quickly jogged over. "Oops, I went to the wrong gate," she admitted sheepishly, "Guess I'm a little too excited, hehe."

Fauna chuckled, shaking her head. "You're lucky you didn't end up halfway down the street," Fauna signed, patting Gigi's head, "Well then, you better get moving. When the festival crowd pours in, it *pours* in."

"Gotcha!" Gigi says, saluting as Fauna lets her into the gates.

"I'll get going first. Biboo and Calli are gonna need an extra pair of hands," Fauna says, waving as she turns to leave, "See you later!"

“Bye!” Gigi replied to Fauna before heading further into the Immergreen household.

The pigtailed girl could see Cecilia sitting on the couch, sitting in front of the TV. After gathering some courage, Gigi knocked on the front door, as she stood back, waiting for a response.

Moments later, the door opened and Cecilia appeared, her eyes still a little groggy from just waking up. She blinked at Gigi, clearly startled.

“G-Gigi?! What are you doing here?” Cecilia asked, leaning on her crutches.

Gigi chuckled nervously before flashing a toothy grin. “Surprise!”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, glancing at Gigi’s overly eager expression. “You didn’t just break into my house, did you?” Cecilia asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What?!” Gigi’s eyes widened in mock horror, “I knocked, didn’t I? I’m no criminal! Besides, your sister was the one who let me in!”

“I’m still a little creeped out,” Cecilia muttered though a smile crept up her lips, “So what are you doing here?”

“I’m here to make up for the whole sprained ankle thing,” Gigi declared, pointing at the perfectionist, “Come on, get dressed, I’m going to take you out to the festival.”

Cecilia blinked in confusion, before glancing at her ankle. “The festival? But—my ankle, remember?”

“I know, I know. But you’re not staying cooped up here all day. Our booth is actually insane,” Gigi says, as she grabs onto Cecilia’s wrist, “Come on, let’s go have some fun!”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, still skeptical. “I don’t know... I’m not exactly in the best shape to be walking around.”

Gigi gave her a playful, exaggerated pout. “Come on, don’t be such a stick in the mud!” Gigi whined, “I’m giving you five minutes to get changed... and hurry! We can’t be late!”

Cecilia sighed, rubbing her temples. “Five minutes? You’re seriously in that much of a rush?”

Gigi grinned widely, her hands on her hips. “Of course! We’ve got a whole festival to enjoy. If we wait around too long, we’ll miss out on all the fun!” Gigi says, bouncing up and down, already halfway out the door, “Go. I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

With that, Gigi shut the door in Cecilia’s face, leaving her alone in the entrance hallway. Cecilia looked at her wrist where Gigi had held onto, before shaking her head. Her ankle wasn’t in terrible shape, just really sore, and she figured a little walk wouldn’t hurt. She just hoped Gigi wouldn’t drag her around too much. “Alright, fine. I’ll go,” the green haired girl said to herself, glancing back at the couch, where she had been spending the past few days.

As she started heading toward the bedroom, she couldn't help but feel a little excitement bubbling up inside. Gigi's energy was contagious, and while she wasn't sure about how much she could handle today, a part of her was looking forward to seeing the festival. With a quick glance at her ankle, she decided it would be okay—just as long as she didn't overdo it.

By the time she finished changing, Gigi was already back at the door, practically glowing with anticipation. "Hurry, hurry! We're gonna be late if you don't get a move on!" Gigi chastised as she stuck her head through the entrance doorway.

Cecilia shook her head, lightly chopping the blonde's head. Gigi yelped, pulling back with a dramatic gasp. "Hey! What was that for?" the pigtailed girl exclaimed.

"For being annoyingly loud," Cecilia said flatly, brushing past Gigi as she stepped out of the house, "Let's get going before you give the neighbors a headache."

Gigi trailed behind, still rubbing her head, before smirking. "You're lucky I'm such a forgiving person," she muttered, her tone playful as caught up to the perfectionist.

When the pair reached the school, they were met with quite a chaotic scene. Students moved with speed, some carrying stacks of flyers while others hoisted decorations or banners onto their designated booths. The track and field club could be seen setting up an agility challenge on the parade square, as their loud voices rang out throughout the grounds. Nearby, the drama club members were busy setting up their improv booth, giggling madly at the wild scenarios they had planned.

Meanwhile, within the main school building, the singing voices of the choir practicing in a classroom mixed with the occasional string of sound from the concert band down the hall.

Gigi let out a low whistle, as she took in the atmosphere of the school. "Oh my gosh, I love the vibes of the festival already," Gigi thought out loud as Cecilia gave a nod, "Everything looks great."

"I agree," Cecilia replied, admiring the colorful decor all around them, "Everyone's put in so much effort."

As they made their way down the corridor, a small group from the dance club appeared, their portable speakers tucked under one arm. One of the dancers, a bright-eyed girl with a wide grin, waved enthusiastically as they approached. "Cecilia! There you are!"

Cecilia paused, widening her eyes as she waved at the group. "Hey guys, what's up?"

"We just wanted to check in. How's the ankle holding up?" a short girl asked the perfectionist.

“I'm feeling much better now,” Cecilia replied with a warm smile, “Still moving slower than usual, but I'll live.”

Another dancer chimed in, “That's great! Oh, by the way, we wanted to thank you again for securing our booth near the library. It's such a good spot!”

Cecilia nodded as the girls looked at her with gratitude. “Hehe, no problem,” the perfectionist replied, adjusting her weight on her crutches, “I'm just glad you guys managed to fully realize the booth you wanted to put up.”

One of the dancers then shifted her gaze towards Gigi, who had been awkwardly standing to the side the whole time. “Hey, you're Gigi, right?”

Gigi perked up at the mention of her name, tilting her head slightly. “Uh, yeah, that's me. Why?”

The dancer beamed. “We just wanted to thank you too! Your feedback from when you watched us practice really helped,” she said, taking Gigi's hands in her's.

Another dancer nodded eagerly. “That's right! Our routine feels way more polished now!”

Gigi blinked, clearly caught off guard by the praise. “Oh, uh... it's no big deal,” Gigi mumbled, scratching the back of her neck nervously.

“Nah, don't sell yourself short,” another dancer added with a grin, “You've got a good eye. You should totally swing by our booth later and check out the performance!”

“We'll check it out later, no doubt,” Cecilia smiled before she and Gigi continued exploring.

The pair continued walking, passing the art club mid-battle with a banner that refused to hang straight. One student balanced on a ladder, calling out instructions, while another frantically dabbed paint on a missed corner. Amongst the art club members setting up the booth was Raora, who was busy adding some extra touches on a painting.

“Good morning, Raora,” Gigi and Cecilia greeted the artist, who turned around in surprise.

“Cece! Gigi!” Raora exclaimed, hugging the two before facing Cecilia, “Hold on, what are you doing here, Cece?”

“Gigi decided to drag me out as an apology for screwing up my ankle,” Cecilia jokes, to which Gigi shot her a pouty look.

Raora chuckled, setting down her paintbrush. “Well, that's a surprise! I figured you'd be taking it easy for a while longer,” the pink haired girl says, as she wiped sweat off her forehead.

Cecilia shrugged lightly, leaning on her crutches. “That was the plan, but you know how persuasive Gigi can be,” Cecilia points out, glancing towards the blonde.

“Damn right I am,” Gigi cut in with a smug grin, “Couldn’t let her miss out on the fun. Plus, I’m personally escorting her around like the great friend I am...”

“Raora!”

The artist perked up upon hearing her name being called. “Oop! Someone’s calling me. I’ll have to catch you two later. Have fun!” Raora said, waving at the pair, who returned the gesture.

After bidding goodbye to Raora, the pair passed by the robotics club, who were testing a small remote-controlled car that nearly plowed into a stack of boxes. Gigi stifled a laugh, prompting Cecilia to nudge her lightly.

“Don’t laugh,” Cecilia chided, glancing at the commotion with some amusement herself.

“Don’t act like you find it funny too, hypocrite,” Gigi retorted, unable to contain her giggling fit.

The closer they got to the tabletop club’s booth, the more organized the chaos became. Booths were beginning to take shape, with polished signs and displays hinting at what was to come. The pair slowed their pace for a moment, taking in the environment around them.

“Gotta admit,” Gigi said, spinning around lightheartedly, “This whole thing’s shaping up to be pretty awesome.”

“It really is,” Cecilia agreed softly, her gaze drifting across the bustling hallway.

With that, they pressed on, eventually arriving at the tabletop club’s booth. Props scattered about as a large mat—the life-sized Snakes and Ladders board—was spread across the floor, its bright colors popping under the morning sunlight.

Bijou was bent over, checking the numbers on the squares, while Calliope was carefully setting up the club’s small information display. Fauna, standing by a stack of rolled-up flyers, spotted them first.

“Oh, good! You two made it!” Fauna called out, waving enthusiastically as she approached.

“Of course we did,” Gigi replied, puffing her chest out dramatically, “I promised I’d bring her, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” Fauna giggled, before lingering her gaze on Cecilia, “How are you holding up, sis?”

“Pretty good,” Cecilia replied, propping up one of her crutches, “I think I’m getting the hang of walking with these.”

“That’s good to hear,” Bijou piped up, glancing over Fauna’s shoulder, “We were just talking about how everything’s finally coming together.”

As the others chatted, Gigi took a moment to look around. Seeing the booth fully assembled filled her with an overwhelming sense of pride. It took weeks of planning, brainstorming, and late nights tweaking every little detail, but it was all worth it. The board looked amazing, the rules were printed neatly on a poster nearby, and even the giant dice looked perfect.

“Well, what do you think?” Bijou asked, bumping against Gigi's shoulder as she noticed her thoughtful expression.

“I think...” Gigi started, crossing her arms and nodding approvingly, “...this might actually be the coolest booth in the whole festival.”

“That’s the spirit!” Calliope chimed in with a grin as she clapped Gigi and Bijou on the back, “We’re definitely going to turn some heads with this masterpiece!”

Gigi turned to Cecilia, her excitement showing. “Hey, now that you’re here, how would you like being our first player? You know, to test it out before the crowds show up,” Gigi offered, grinning at her rival.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “Me? I don’t know... I’m not exactly in game-playing condition right now,” Cecilia points out.

“Don’t worry,” Gigi said with a playful shrug, “I’ll play with you. We can go as a team. Come on, it’ll be fun!”

Cecilia hesitated, glancing at the oversized mat. The idea seemed a little silly, but the enthusiasm in Gigi’s bright eyes made it hard to refuse. “Alright, fine. But only if you promise not to let me fall flat on my face.”

“Deal,” Gigi said, already grabbing one of the foam dice, “Alright, everyone, let’s do this!”

Bijou, Calliope, and Fauna quickly joined in, eager to kick off the first game. They all stood at the edge of the mat, ready to roll the dice and see where the game would take them.

Cecilia and Gigi went first, taking their spot on the starting square. Gigi pressed her forehead against the dice, praying for a five—which would get her to the first ladder.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” Gigi said, tossing the dice onto the mat. Miraculously, the dice landed on a five, earning a cheer from Cecilia.

“You did it Gigi!” Cecilia cheered, as she and Gigi moved up a ladder.

“See? You have nothing to worry about, kitten!” Gigi announced flamboyantly, carefully guiding Cecilia up the spaces, “We’ve got this in the bag.”

“K-kitten?!” Cecilia spluttered in confusion as the pigtailed girl cackled.

The game continued, each player taking their turn with a strong sense of competitiveness. Bijou groaned loudly when she landed on a snake’s head, sliding all the way back to square ten.

“Oh, come on, this is rigged!” Bijou exclaimed dramatically, flopping onto the mat in defeat.

“It’s literally just luck,” Calliope pointed out, rolling her own dice. She advanced a few spaces, narrowly avoiding a snake herself.

Meanwhile, Cecilia and Gigi were making lots of progress, having already arrived at square 50. When they landed on a ladder, Gigi whooped loudly, helping Cecilia move up the board excitedly.

“We’re unstoppable!” Gigi declared, striking a triumphant pose, as she and Cecilia giggled madly.

“I’m legitimately praying for your downfalls now,” Fauna said in a soft voice, rolling a modest three.

The game continued, filled with playful banter and groans of triumph and despair. Bijou eventually made a comeback, climbing a ladder to jump ahead of everyone else, while Fauna steadily crept up the board.

When Cecilia and Gigi finally landed on the winning square, Gigi threw her arms up in celebration. “Yay! We did it, Gigi!” Cecilia whooped, beaming brightly.

“It’s only natural,” Gigi scoffed playfully, puffing her chest out at the amused tabletop club members in a show of pride.

Cecilia laughed, shaking her head at Gigi’s prideful behavior “I didn’t think I’d say this, but that was actually pretty fun.”

“See? Told you,” Gigi said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Congrats to the power couple,” Bijou teased, holding out a small bag of chocolates as their prize.

Both Gigi and Cecilia froze for a second, their faces turning a shade pinker than usual.

“P-power couple?” Gigi stammered, snatching the chocolates from Bijou’s hand, “That’s not—what are you even talking about?”

Cecilia cleared her throat, looking anywhere but at Gigi. “She’s just being silly,” the perfectionist muttered, fiddling with her crutches.

Bijou giggled, clearly pleased with their reactions. “Hehe. You two are so easy to mess with!”

“Keep it up, and I’ll throw these chocolates right at you,” Gigi warned, narrowing her eyes.

“Do it! I can take it!” Bijou challenged with a sly smirk.

“Oh, I will!” Gigi retorts, aiming the chocolates at Bijou jokingly.

“Relax, Gigi,” Fauna said, stepping in to diffuse the situation with a chuckle, “You know she’s just joking. Now, let’s reset the board before—”

Calliope, standing near the entrance, suddenly straightened up. “Uh, guys?” she interrupted, motioning for the group to look outside.

They followed her gaze to the walkway beyond the booth. A growing number of visitors, from parents to excited kids, were wandering into the school grounds. Some were holding the school's festival maps, while others stopped to admire the decorations lining the corridors.

“Looks like the festival’s officially started,” Calliope noted, resting her hands on her hips, “We’d better get ready. It’s gonna get busy real soon.”

Fauna nodded, stretching her arms out. “Alright, everyone, let’s make sure everything’s in place. Biboo, gather the dice. Calli, can you make sure the flyers are good to go?”

“You got it,” Calliope said, heading to the small stack of neatly printed handouts.

“What about me?” Gigi piped up as Fauna turned to look at her.

“You don't have to worry about our booth. We've got it from here,” Fauna whispered to the blonde before smirking, “Go bring Cecilia around and make sure she has fun.”

“Alright,” Gigi replied confidently before turning to Cecilia, “Well, let’s get going, doll. We wouldn’t wanna get caught up in the queues, now would we?”

The green-haired girl’s cheeks flushed faintly as she gazed at Gigi’s resolute expression and toothy grin. “Right,” Cecilia replied as they began walking away from the booth.

“Gigi! Wait up!” Calliope called out suddenly, jogging over with a bundle of fliers in hand, “Since you’ll be walking around, hand these out for our booth, will ya? We could use the extra promotion.”

Gigi accepted the stack without hesitation. “No problem. I’ll make sure everyone knows the tabletop club is the best booth out here.”

Calliope smirked, giving her a thumbs-up. “Thanks! Now go enjoy yourselves. Looks like the crowd’s only going to get bigger.”

As they explored the festival, Gigi began waving the fliers in the air, handing them out to anyone and everyone. “Come to the tabletop club's booth! We have a life-sized Snakes and Ladders game for you to play!”

Although she managed to give out a quarter of the fliers fast, Gigi started using sketchier marketing tactics to increase her chances of swaying the visitors.

Upon walking up to a family of four, Gigi purposely dropped a few fliers, scattering them onto the floor. When the family noticed this, they bent over to help pick up the fallen fliers, passing them back to the pigtailed girl. “Here you go, sweetie,” the mother of the family said, handing Gigi the fliers.

“Thanks ma'am! You are as kind as you are beautiful,” Gigi says flamboyantly, bowing to the lady.

“Oh, how polite!” the lady chuckled as a mischievous glint shone in Gigi's eyes.

“Oh hey, since you're here, do check out the tabletop club's booth! We have a life-sized Snakes and Ladders game I'm sure your adorable kids will enjoy!” Gigi says smoothly, handing a flier to the lady, who giggled.

“Why, aren't you smooth,” the lady smiles, before glancing at her kids, “Well then, I suppose we could head over there now. We were looking for something fun to do anyway.”

After watching the family leave, Cecilia turned to Gigi with an impressed look on her face. “I'm shocked that it actually worked,” Cecilia laughs, as Gigi winks at her.

“Maybe I have a future in marketing,” Gigi snickered in response as Cecilia rolled her eyes.

The hallways were alive with excitement as the festival swung into full motion. Visitors began filling up the halls of the school, as they took in the lively vibes of the event.

“Do you have anywhere you'd like to go?” Gigi asked Cecilia, who nodded immediately.

“Yeah, actually. I was thinking about checking out the aquatics club,” Cecilia replied, “I heard Gura-senpai's been hyping up their setup for weeks.”

It wasn't hard to find the aquatics club, as their booth stood out even from a distance. A glowing sign reading ‘*Dive into the Deep*’ hung above the entrance, while the room itself was dimly lit, with blue-tinted lighting casting an ethereal glow.

Projections of fish and other marine life swam across the walls of the clubroom, creating the illusion of being underwater.

“Welcome, you two!” Gura's cheerful voice greeted them before she bounded over, brimming with energy, “Come on, let me show you around!”

Before they could respond, Gura had dragged them past tanks of live fish of different species, before stopping in front of a large coral reef model that stood as the booth's centerpiece. The bright, popping colors and intricate details of the coral, shells, and fish were simply stunning.

“This is our pride and joy,” Gura declared, “Took forever to finish, but totally worth it. Look at the details on those fish!”

“It's impressive,” Cecilia admitted, leaning closer to examine a particularly lifelike anemone.

“And over here...” Gura gestured to the VR setup at the side of the room, “...is the big draw of the whole thing. You've gotta try it!”

Cecilia hesitated, glancing at Gigi, who smirked and nudged her forward. “Come on, Cece. It’s a free VR experience!”

Reluctantly, Cecilia stepped up to the VR station. As soon Gura settled the headset over her eyes, the room around her disappeared, replaced by a vivid underwater world. Rays of sunlight pierced the crystal-clear virtual water, and schools of fish darted past. She instinctively reached out toward a turtle that swam lazily by.

“This is... unbelievable,” Cecilia murmured, turning to follow a cluster of jellyfish that glowed softly.

Gigi watched from the sidelines, arms crossed. “*Why’s she so adorable?*” Gigi wondered to herself, trying to keep her composure as she watched Cecilia make little sounds of amazement.

When Cecilia finally removed the headset, there was a sparkle in her eyes. “That was incredible. It really felt like I was underwater.”

“Told you it was worth it!” Gura beamed, “The senior who gave it to us modeled the entire 3D environment on her own. It’s simply amazing!”

After thanking Gura, they headed out to explore more of the festival. The sound of music soon led them towards the foyer, where a stage had been set up for the dance club’s performance.

The performers moved in perfect unison, their steps sharp and precise. Each leap and spin drew cheers from the growing crowd, and the energy of their routine was infectious.

“They’ve been working hard for this,” Cecilia said, her eyes following the dancers as they executed a particularly complex formation.

“Looks like it paid off,” Gigi replied, clapping along with the audience.

As the routine ended, they joined in the applause before continuing their exploration. The scent of food wafting through the air then drew them toward the festival’s food stalls.

Rows of booths lined the area, each offering a variety of snacks and dishes, as the students manning the stalls called out to the visitors, advertising their products with enthusiasm.

“Alright, let’s start with something light,” Gigi said, scanning the options.

They stopped at a stall selling freshly made and steaming hot taiyaki, before purchasing one to share. Gigi, having taken a huge bite right off the bat, nearly burned her tongue in her eagerness. “Ow, hot!” Gigi yelped, fanning her mouth.

“Maybe try waiting a second next time,” Cecilia chuckles as Gigi continues to fan her tongue.

“Good idea,” Gigi grinned, still exhaling from her mouth before blowing onto the pastry to cool it down.

“Here, have a bite!” the blonde offered, holding up the taiyaki near Cecilia’s mouth.

Cecilia’s eyes widened, a soft blush creeping up her neck. “You really expect me to just—?” she trailed off, her voice faltering as she felt her heart beat a little faster. The taiyaki was closer than she expected, and she wasn’t sure if the heat from the pastry or the situation was making her more flustered.

“Come on, I’m sharing!” Gigi urged, leaning the taiyaki closer, “Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned. I already took a bite.”

“That’s the problem, you idiot,” Cecilia thought to herself, feeling more flustered by the second.

After hesitating a little, Cecilia leaned in, her cheeks a little warmer than usual as she took the offered bite. She couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious, but it didn’t stop her from savoring the crisp, warm pastry.

"Happy?" the perfectionist muttered, her tone a little quieter than usual as she glanced at Gigi, who appeared a little flustered herself.

“As long as you’re fed,” the pigtailed girl quipped, before turning away quickly to hide her own blush.

They moved on, feasting on skewered meat, mochi, and even a strange fusion dish that surprisingly turned out delicious. At one stall, Gigi convinced Cecilia to try a spicy dumpling.

“It’s not that spicy,” Gigi insisted, handing it over.

Cecilia took a bite, only for her eyes to widen as the heat hit her. She quickly grabbed a drink, much to Gigi’s amusement.

“You’re the worst,” Cecilia muttered, still recovering.

“And you’re a good sport,” Gigi shot back, still cackling at the green haired girl's plight.

As the afternoon wore on, they found themselves drawn to the sound of instruments being tuned. The orchestra was preparing for their performance in the auditorium, and the two decided to check it out.

Inside, the seats were filling quickly. They found spots near the center just as the conductor took the stage. The music began softly, growing into a beautiful melody that filled the room.

Cecilia sat quietly, her focus not entirely on the performance. Beside her, Gigi leaned back slightly, her face relaxed as she watched the performance with awe. Maybe it was the lighting of the hall, soft and warm, casting gentle highlights on Gigi's features, but Cecilia found her gaze drifting towards her more often than she liked to admit.

Gigi’s expression was soft yet striking, the lines of her jaw sharp against the warm glow of the lights. Her lips, slightly parted in concentration, appeared inviting. The way her hair

framed her face seemed to bring out the shape of her eyes even more—those bright, almost mischievous eyes that always seemed to carry a spark of energy.

Before Cecilia knew it, the final piece then ended with a powerful crescendo, and the audience erupted into applause.

“That was beautiful,” Gigi said, applauding along with everyone else.

“Y-yeah,” Cecilia stammered, although her attention wasn't on the performers.

The pair stepped out of the auditorium, feeling the cool November air hit their faces. The crowds outside seemed to be thinning, with fewer visitors strolling about as the festival neared its end. Most of the students had begun heading home, their footsteps fading into the distance. The lively atmosphere from earlier in the day had died down, replaced by a quieter, more serene one.

Cecilia glanced around, letting the calmness of the evening embrace her. It had been a long day of exploring and having fun, but despite her growing tiredness, she felt a sense of satisfaction. The kind of satisfaction that came from genuinely enjoying herself.

She turned to Gigi, who was lightly skipping beside her. “Hey,” Cecilia began, her voice softer than usual, “Thanks for today. I... I really appreciate you bringing me around, making sure I had a good time.”

Gigi glanced at her, surprised by the sincerity in Cecilia's voice. She chuckled lightly, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. “It's... nothing,” Gigi mumbled shyly, “I'm just happy I got you out of the house.”

Cecilia nodded, a contented smile creeping up her lips. “Yeah, but still...” Cecilia continued, hesitating for a moment, then added quietly, “It was nice. Really nice.”

Gigi's eyes softened slightly at her words, but before she could respond, they had already reached the tabletop club booth.

Calliope and Bijou were busy, but their eyes lit up when they saw the pair approach. Calliope immediately stood up, a grin on her face. “Welcome back, you two!”

Bijou joined in, her voice playful. “How was the date?” Bijou snickered as she glanced at the duo.

Cecilia's face reddened once more, but before she could protest, Gigi spoke up. “We had loads of fun! Right, Cece?”

Cecilia chuckled, feeling a warmth in her chest. “Yeah,” the perfectionist replied as she smiled.

According to Calliope, the tabletop club's booth had been a huge success, judging from how much money they had managed to earn in the end.

As Gigi joined Calliope and Bijou in packing up the booth, Cecilia found herself sitting on a bench nearby, watching them work.

Fauna, who had just finished clearing up some stray litter, came over, dusting off her hands. She then caught sight of Cecilia at the bench before heading over.

"Hey, Cece," Fauna said, walking over.

"Hi, big sis," Cecilia greeted as she shifted to make space for her older sister.

"You know, no matter how many times I participate in one of these festivals," Fauna began, sitting down beside Cecilia, "I always end up feeling so fulfilled. There's just something about the energy of it, you know? It's different each year."

Fauna smiled to herself, clearly fond of the memories she had made over the past festivals she participated in. "It's a lot of work, but it's worth it, don't you think?"

Cecilia nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, everyone seemed to be having fun today."

Fauna chuckled. "Mhm. Well, it's nice. We students tend to get caught up in work all the time. But the festival—it allows us to give our minds a break and enjoy ourselves for a bit," Fauna says, before chuckling, "I'm definitely yapping at this point aren't I?"

The two sisters chuckled heartily, before Cecilia shook her head. "No, no," the perfectionist says, as her eyes focused on Gigi, who was rolling up the Snakes and Ladders mat, "I get what you mean."

For a moment, they sat in comfortable silence, watching the subtle hustle around them as people finished up their final tasks for the day. Fauna then looked over at Cecilia, whose eyes were still on Gigi, with a knowing expression.

"So," she began, with a hint of curiosity in her voice, "How was your day with Gigi? The two of you were together all day, and you both looked pretty happy."

Cecilia's heart warmed at the mention of Gigi, thinking of all the fun they had had. The day had been filled with unexpected joy, and she found herself grateful for it.

"Well, to put it simply..." Cecilia said, her smile growing wider as she considered her words, "It was perfect."

Christmas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gratitude is a virtue Cecilia took very seriously. To her, it wasn't just about saying the words 'thank you', and calling it a day—it was about actions, about showing people just how much their efforts meant to her.

The perfectionist prided herself upon recognising the kindness of others and the thought of leaving a debt of gratitude unpaid for never rested well with her.

Ever since the cultural festival, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about Gigi. Even though Cecilia had to wobble around on a sprained ankle, Gigi had made sure that she had a good time. From visiting various club booths, to watching impressive performances, Gigi really went out of her way to make the perfectionist's day enjoyable.

Cecilia had replayed the day in her head countless times. Admittedly, it had been one of the best days she'd had in a long while. And every time she thought back on it, guilt would creep in. She still hadn't followed through on the 'punishment' for losing their algebra quiz bet.

Sure, Gigi hadn't pressed her on following up with her end of the deal, but that only made the perfectionist feel worse.

Cecilia prided herself on keeping her promises, no matter how small or silly they might seem, and letting this one slide simply wasn't an option. Besides, the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to repay Gigi's kindness during the cultural festival.

There was only one problem though—she had no idea where to start on planning the outing. Cecilia knew a few things about Gigi, like her love for reading and gaming, but beyond that, she wasn't sure what else to go off of. Gigi was still a mystery to her in so many ways. She was always full of energy and quick with a joke, but did she like quiet places or noisy ones? Did she prefer grand, exciting outings, or something more low-key?

Thinking back, Cecilia did recall what Gigi said that one time they talked about the outing a few weeks ago.

"You... you really don't have to put so much thought into it," Gigi had said, "I mean, it's not like it's some big deal or anything. Just... do whatever you think is fun."

What the pigtailed girl said stuck with Cecilia, though she didn't fully understand why she was so relaxed about it. After all, this wasn't just some casual hangout to Cecilia, it would be

her way showing just how grateful she was to her friend. As a result, the perfectionist had already decided that if she was going to do this, she was going to do it right.

Cecilia buried her face into her pillow. “Ugh... why is this so hard?” she groaned, her voice muffled. She kicked her legs in frustration, feeling more overwhelmed than she thought she would.

Why did planning something for Gigi feel so complicated? It wasn't like her to struggle this much with planning or decision-making but for some reason, nothing she thought of seemed good enough. She wanted to make sure Gigi had a great time—something simple yet memorable—but every idea she thought of felt either too dull or too extravagant.

At that moment, Cecilia felt her phone buzzing as a notification beep sounded. Opening up her messages app, Cecilia was greeted with a message from Gigi in their group chat with a few of their classmates.

geegee: hey ladies 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔

bigcat: No

rockhard: no

erb: No.

nyavella: no

geegee: i haven't even said anything?????

geegee: i was just wondering heehehe since we just finished our term tests

geegee: if any of you would like to hop onto the rift with me 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔

imgreen: no

rockhard: no

geegee: you guys are BULLIES

geegge: this is BULLYING

bigcat: No we just don't wanna play league of legends

nyavella: we'll be up for literally anything else tho!

geegee: JUST ONE MATCH PLEASEEE

geegee: ONE IS ALL I ASK OF YOU

geegee: PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE
PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE

jailbird: I'd be down actually

geegee: *i love you nerissa*

jailbird: I love you too gigi

erb: Okay I'll join as well.

bigcat: Eh??? What's with the change of heart Elizabeth??

jailbird: It's because I'll be playing too amirite Liz

erb: No.

geegee: cece how bout you

imgreen: fine but you'll have to carry me as usual

geegee: ofc ofc 🙄🙄🙄

Cecilia sat up, feeling a surge of energy coursing through her body. The perfectionist wasted no time as she rushed towards her desk and opened up her laptop.

She then entered the voice channel, as she waited for the other girls to join. However, after a few minutes of silence, Cecilia began to wonder where everyone was.

Suddenly, a ‘boop’ noise played, indicating that another person had joined the channel. Cecilia's eyes darted towards her screen as she saw Bijou’s name appear in the voice channel list.

“Biboo?” Cecilia said, slightly surprised, “What are you doing here?”

Bijou’s playful voice crackled through the mic. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that, Cece? Didn’t you guys agree to start in ten minutes?”

Cecilia frowned, her eyebrows raised. “We did?”

“Yup,” Bijou said with a small laugh, “Check the group chat.”

Cecilia immediately opened the chat, scrolling up to find a flurry of new texts.

jailbird: sorry guys im gonna need like ten minutes!!

jailbird: gotta finish my dinner real quick

geegee: okie dokes!

Cecilia cheeks flushed slightly as she realized her mistake. “Oh... I missed a few messages...”

“Thought so,” Bijou teased lightly. “You must've been really eager to hop on, huh?”

“I wasn't eager,” Cecilia retorted, her tone betraying her, “I just... wanted to join a little early. You know... to accompany whoever... might be in the VC already...”

“Sure...” Bijou replied, her voice laced with amusement, “Super responsible of you, Cece. Anyway, I won't be sticking around for long—I'd rather not force myself to play League with you guys.”

“Why did you join the VC, then?” Cecilia asked, smirking a little, “Having second thoughts?”

“Hah! Good one! I just popped in because I thought you looked a little lonely in here all by yourself,” Bijou replies lightheartedly as Cecilia chuckles.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I was doing perfectly fine on my own here,” Cecilia shoots back teasingly.

Bijou gasped dramatically. “Well, if that's the case, maybe I'll just get going!” she cried in mock hurt.

“I'm kidding! I'm kidding!” Cecilia replied quickly, softening her tone. As the perfectionist shared a laugh with Bijou, an idea popped up in her mind. Bijou seemed pretty close to Gigi, perhaps she could provide some insight into the outing plans.

“Hey, Biboo,” Cecilia began hesitantly, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what's up?” Bijou replied casually.

“If... hypothetically, you wanted to plan a fun outing for someone, but you have no idea how to start planning it... and this hypothetical someone tells you to not put so much thought into it but you really wanna make it worth their while...what would you suggest?” Cecilia asked, keeping her tone casual and carefully avoiding saying too much

Bijou paused for a moment, struggling to digest the word vomit Cecilia just threw at her, before asking, “*Hypothetically?*”

“Yes, hypothetically,” Cecilia said, shifting slightly in her chair.

“Hmm...” Bijou says thoughtfully, resting her chin on her arms, “I’m gonna need some backstory, Cece. Who are we talking about here? A boyfriend? A girlfriend?”

A dash of pink quickly dusted the perfectionist's cheeks, caught off guard by the sudden interrogation. “No, no, nothing like that,” Cecilia clarified, quickly waving her hand as if to dismiss the idea entirely, “It’s just... a friend.”

“A friend, huh?” Bijou replied, her eyes narrowing slightly with a playful glint, “This hypothetical friend must be someone special if they’ve got you stumped like that... does this hypothetical friend have a name?”

Cecilia opened her mouth, then closed it again, her cheeks flushing deeper. “That’s not... relevant,” she muttered, suddenly feeling like this conversation was spiraling out of her control, “And they’re JUST a friend.”

Bijou’s smirk widened. “Mmhmm. Definitely not someone special or anything.”

“It’s not like that!” Cecilia insisted, “Look, are you going to help me out?”

“Alright, alright,” Bijou said, holding up her hands in surrender, “So, what’s this very normal and not special at all friend like? Do they have any hobbies? Give me some clues, and I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Cecilia hesitated for a moment before replying. “Well, they’re pretty hyper and carefree,” Cecilia replies, fiddling with her fingers, “They also like reading... playing video games...”

Bijou tilted her head knowingly, her smirk widening further. “Huh... Say, this hypothetical friend doesn’t happen to be... her, right?”

“What?! I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Cecilia lied, her voice rising slightly as she crossed her arms.

“Okay, okay!” Bijou replied, laughing. “I’ll keep it ‘hypothetical.’ But you’re not exactly being subtle, you know?”

Cecilia uncrossed her arms, leaning back in her chair and muttering under her breath. “This was a mistake.”

“Relax, Cece. I’m just teasing,” Bijou said, softening her tone, “So, if this friend really is as carefree as you say they are... Why put so much thought into it? You could just take them out for lunch or something—That should suffice.”

“That’d be a little boring though. I really wanna make that day—,” Cecilia began, before pausing to consider her next words carefully, “You know...”

Bijou giggled softly, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards. “Special?” she completed for Cecilia, who gave a low hum in response.

“Something like that,” Cecilia replies, her cheeks warming up once more.

“If that's the case, maybe you shouldn't overthink it,” Bijou replies casually, “Sometimes, the simplest things end up being the most memorable.”

Cecilia sat up straighter as she leaned closer towards her laptop. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“I don't know... maybe a PC café?” Bijou says, clapping her hands together, “It's chill, it's fun, and you both like gaming, right? You could have fun while eating loads of yummy desserts!”

Cecilia tapped her fingers on the desk as she considered the idea. “It's not a bad suggestion... but wouldn't that be too casual? I want to make sure they're having a good time...”

“Cece, you're taking out a friend, not hosting a VIP event,” Bijou chuckles, rolling her eyes, “You don't have to make things so intricate.”

“You think so?” Cecilia asked worriedly, still sounding a little unconvinced.

“Yeah! Just keep it simple,” Bijou said with a grin, “You don't need to pull out all the stops. The point is to spend time with them, right? Besides, if the two of you really are friends, I'm sure they'll appreciate whatever you plan for them.”

Cecilia paused as she took a moment to take in Bijou's advice. “Huh, that does make sense,” Cecilia says, “You're actually pretty good at giving advice..”

“What can I say? I'm a people person,” Bijou smiled before adding, her tone turning playful again, “Oh yes, and if this is about Gigi—which I'm not saying it is—you don't need to fret. I bet she'll be happy with literally anything you do.”

Cecilia felt her heart skip a beat, and she quickly brushed off the comment, trying to sound as casual as possible. “I-it's not about Gigi,” she said softly, to which Bijou let out a hearty giggle.

“Sure,” Bijou snickered, when another ‘boop’ noise interrupted their conversation.

“Hey, hey, hey everyone!” Gigi's familiar loud voice greeted as she joined the voice channel.

“Oh, great timing!” Bijou said playfully, “Alright, I'll be heading out now. You two have fun.”

“Wait, what? Leaving already?” Gigi sounded mock-offended, “Did I scare you off?”

“Not at all! I just have... something to do all of a sudden,” Bijou replied promptly, leaving the call with a quick ‘boop’.

Gigi blinked, confused at her friend's abrupt departure from the voice channel. “That was weird,” Gigi noted, as her curiosity began to set in, “What was all that about?”

“No idea,” Cecilia lied, her quick response drawing suspicion from the pigtailed girl.

“Reallyy?” Gigi asked, drawing the word out, “You two must have been talking about something... come on, tell me!”

“It wasn't anything important,” Cecilia replied, as she booted up League of Legends, “Now, are we gonna hop on League or what?”

The pigtailed girl puffed up her cheeks, pouting at Cecilia's profile picture. “Hey, you're changing the subject! You can't just brush me off like that! What were you two talking about?”

“I told you, nothing important!” Cecilia said, clicking through on the game's icon with an exaggerated speed, “Stop being so nosy.”

Gigi scrunched her face into a dramatic pout, sticking out her bottom lip. “I'm not being nosy! I'm just curious!” she insisted, her voice rising as she leaned closer to the mic, “You're not hiding something, are you?”

“Why would I be hiding something?” Cecilia asked, rolling her eyes but unable to suppress a tiny smile, “Stop making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Gigi huffed, clearly unconvinced, “You're acting all suspicious, though. I bet it's something super important and you're just not telling me because you're a big meanie.”

Cecilia let out a small groan. “Yeah, yeah, I'm a big meanie,” Cecilia sighed, trying not to break out into a fit of giggles.

It was at that moment when two more people, Elizabeth and Nerissa, joined the voice channel. “Oh, everyone's here already,” Elizabeth remarked, her voice carrying its usual soothing tone.

“Nice,” Nerissa added smoothly, as she booted up the game, “Hope we're not interrupting anything.”

“Not really,” Cecilia said quickly, but Gigi wasn't about to let it go.

“Actually, yes, you did!” Gigi exclaimed, her voice full of mock indignation, “Cece's keeping secrets from me! She and Biboo were whispering about something earlier, and now she won't tell me what it was!”

Elizabeth let out a soft chuckle. “Whispering, huh? Sounds serious.”

“Right?” Gigi whined dramatically. “She's being so mean to me! Liz, tell her she has to spill the beans!”

“I am NOT being mean to her!” Cecilia shot back, “Liz, she's trying to gaslight you, don't believe her! Liz!”

A long, exasperated sigh escaped Elizabeth. “You two are like five-year-olds, I swear,” the scarlet haired girl remarked as Nerissa giggled.

“You're such a mother,” Nerissa teased, her voice dripping with playful amusement.

“Oh, don't even start,” Elizabeth groaned softly, “Are we gonna play or what?”

“Of course!” Gigi beamed, “I call top lane!”

The next morning, Cecilia woke up to a cold breeze drifting in through a small gap in her window. Blinking sleepily, she reached for her phone on the nightstand and squinted at the time on her screen, which read *10:07 a.m.*

She frowned slightly. That was later than she usually woke up—far later, in fact.

It didn't take long for the memories of last night to resurface. She and the girls had stayed up way too late playing League, laughing, cheering and cursing other players.. They'd promised ‘just one more game’ at least a dozen times before finally calling it quits somewhere past 3 in the morning.

Dragging herself out of bed, Cecilia shuffled toward the window, pulling the curtains aside. Her breath hitched for a moment as she was greeted by a world blanketed in shimmering white. Snowflakes fluttered gently from the sky, covering the streets, rooftops, and trees outside. It wasn't the first snowfall of the season, but there still was something magical about waking up to such a sight.

Cecilia stood there for a moment, watching the snowfall in quiet awe before another chilly breeze brushed against her skin. Shivering, she hugged her arms around herself and turned away from the window, her feet moving lazily as she made her way downstairs. The faint aroma of hot chocolate greeted her as she reached the living room, where Fauna sat comfortably on the couch with a steaming mug in her hands and a bowl of biscuits in front of her.

“Good morning, lil sis,” Fauna said with a warm smile, her eyes landing toward Cecilia, “You don't usually wake up this late. Did something keep you up?”

The perfectionist rubbed her head sheepishly as she thought of a way to explain herself. However, before she could respond, Fauna tilted her head knowingly. “Let me guess... you were up playing League again last night,” Fauna said, setting her mug down on the table.

Cecilia's cheeks warmed as she rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. “Was I that loud?”

Fauna chuckled softly, shaking her head. “Let's just say I wasn't surprised to see you drag yourself out of bed so late today,” Fauna smiled, taking another sip, “Though I'm guessing it was fun?”

Cecilia nodded as she plopped down next to her sister. “Yeah, it was,” Cecilia admitted, grabbing a biscuit from the bowl.

“I’m kinda disappointed,” Fauna sighs, “The number of times you rejected the chance to play DOTA 2 with me... and now you’re pulling all-nighters for League?”

Cecilia rolled her eyes in amusement. “It’s not the same thing, Fauna.”

“Whatever you say,” Fauna replied in a hurt tone of voice, “Next time, I’m dragging you into a match whether you like it or not.”

Cecilia chuckled as she got up and made her way to the kitchen. “Good luck with that,” she teased, pulling out a mug and grabbing the cocoa powder from the pantry.

The soft sound of a spoon clinking against the mug filled the room as she stirred her hot chocolate, its sweet aroma diffusing into the surrounding area.

“You made some chocolate for yourself too?” Fauna asked as her sister returned to the couch with her drink.

“Mhmm,” Cecilia replies, embracing the warmth of her drink, “It adds to the winter vibes.”

The perfectionist then turned her attention to the TV, where the morning news was displaying the day’s weather forecast. Meanwhile, Fauna dunked a biscuit into her beverage, barely paying attention to the television, while scrolling through her phone.

Curious, Cecilia glanced over at her sister and noticed the pictures Fauna was swiping through. The images showed brightly lit festive decorations, large crowds, and colorful stalls selling festive treats.

“What are you looking at?” Cecilia asked curiously, leaning over slightly to get a better look at the screen.

Fauna paused mid-swipe and turned her phone toward Cecilia. “It’s this year’s Christmas Carnival at the mall,” she explained, “My friends and I were thinking of checking it out. It actually looks pretty nice this year—lots of food stalls, games, live performances, and that giant tree outside.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that the same thing they do every year?”

“Maybe,” Fauna admitted, “But it’s still fun! Plus, it’s more about the vibes, you know? The lights, the carols, hanging out with friends—it just feels so festive.”

Cecilia nodded as her gaze lingered on one of the pictures Fauna was looking at—one of a happy family strolling through the crowded event. The wholesome image caused Cecilia to smile slightly, as she tried to recall when was the last time she went to one of those carnivals.

“I haven’t been to one of those since I was... what, nine or ten?” Cecilia said thoughtfully, leaning back in her chair, “Mom and Dad used to take us every year. Do you remember?”

Fauna glanced up from her phone, a nostalgic smile spreading across her face. “Of course I remember. Dad always let us pick out our treats from the stalls, and Mom would spend most of the trip nagging about this and that.”

“Haha! Yeah,” Cecilia grinned, stirring her drink absentmindedly, “And remember how Dad used to lift us up to put our wishes on that giant tree?”

“Of course! That reminds me, I seem to remember most of your wishes being ‘*I want to ace all my tests!*’ or something along those lines,” Fauna chuckled as Cecilia smiled sheepishly, “Did you really have no other wishes back then?”

Cecilia let out a soft laugh, resting her chin in her hand. “It’s not that I didn’t have other ones in mind,” she admitted, “Mom was the one who got me into the habit of writing those kinds of wishes. She always said that if I wanted something, I had to put it into words first... Kind of like setting a goal for myself.”

Fauna tilted her head, a neutral expression crossing her face. “That does sound like something Mom would say,” she agreed, “Always practical, even when it comes to... Christmas wishes of all things.”

A loud silence fell between the two as Fauna studied Cecilia's unreadable expression.

Breaking the silence, Fauna set her mug down with a small clink and changed the subject. “Anyway,” she began, her tone light, “My friends and I were talking about the carnival yesterday. We’re planning to head there later this week.”

Cecilia glanced up, curious. “Oh? What are you guys planning to do?”

“Well, knowing Bae and Irys...” Fauna said, rolling her eyes slightly, “It’s only a matter of time before those two start a snowball fight in the middle of the carnival. In fact, they’ve already started discussing their upcoming battle.”

Cecilia chuckled. “Sounds chaotic,” the perfectionist remarked as Fauna nodded.

“Right? And after that,” Fauna continued, a mischievous smile spreading across her face, “I’m planning to take them onto one of those little mall trains. You know, the ones that drive around and play jingles. It’ll be hilarious watching Kronii try to squeeze into those tiny seats.”

The mental image of such a scene made Cecilia burst out laughing, and as Fauna continued talking, an idea began to take shape in her mind. The perfectionist's gaze shifted back to the falling snow outside, and a light bulb flickered to life over her head.

“Hmm...” Cecilia muttered to herself, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“What’s that look for?” Fauna asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, nothing,” Cecilia replied, her tone far too casual, “Just... wondering...”

Fauna gave her a suspicious look. “Oh, come on, tell me!”

Cecilia sighed, relenting. She knew her older sister would continue to pester her if she didn't spill the beans.

Cecilia sat up straight, as her cheeks warmed slightly. "Alright, fine," she admitted, staring down at her mug, "I've been thinking about taking Gigi on an outing. Like, just the two of us."

Fauna blinked, then a slow, knowing smile spread across her face. "Oh? That's cute," she smiled, leaning forward, "So, what's the problem?"

"I just... I don't know what to plan," Cecilia confessed, fidgeting with her spoon, "I want it to be fun and memorable. Something she'll really enjoy. But every idea I think of just doesn't click."

Fauna chuckled softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Cece, you overthink everything. It's Gigi! She'll be happy with whatever you plan," Fauna insisted, placing her phone onto the table, "You could take her to a park to feed pigeons and she'd be thrilled."

Cecilia chuckled lightly, although a hint of doubt still lingered upon her expression. "What makes you say that?" the perfectionist asked, crossing her arms.

"Again, it's Gigi we're talking about. She vibes with literally anyone," Fauna said, before her lips curled up into a subtle smile, "Plus, considering it's you who's taking her out, I'm sure she'll be extra delighted."

Cecilia tilted her head slightly, her brow furrowing. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing," Fauna replied casually, taking another sip of her drink.

Raising her eyebrows in confusion, Cecilia cleared her throat before continuing. "Anyways," Cecilia began, as she averted her sister's eyes, "Now that you've brought up the carnival, I was wondering if taking Gigi there would be a good idea..."

"I think it's a brilliant idea," Fauna says encouragingly, "The carnival's bound to be loads of fun. I think she'll like it very much."

Cecilia nodded, considering her sister's words carefully. "It doesn't seem too lazy, does it? I want it to feel..." Cecilia paused slightly before continuing, "...special. Not like I just went with the easiest thing I could think of."

Fauna shook her head, amused yet partially exasperated at her sister's worries. "Cecilia, this isn't a test. Gigi's not gonna grade your hangouts," Fauna giggles, rolling her eyes, "Simply spending time with you will make her happy. Trust me on this."

Cecilia looked up, locking eyes with her sister as her mind raced. Both Fauna and Bijou have said the same thing: Gigi would be happy with anything she planned. And maybe they were right. After all, Gigi didn't seem to be a nitpicky type of person. Perhaps she didn't have to overthink things and just go with the flow, as Bijou and Fauna have advised her.

Her mind now set, Cecilia smiled to herself and grabbed her phone. “I think I’ll ask her to the carnival,” she said, her voice now sounding more assured.

“Alrighty,” Fauna chuckled, as Cecilia opened her messaging app. With a small smile tugging at her lips, she began typing out a message to Gigi, the glow of her phone illuminating her face.

Meanwhile, Gigi was still sound asleep, her peaceful breaths steady as she slept. Her expression, usually upbeat and excitable, was now calm, basked in the faint light streaming through the half-open window.

But the window let in more than just the morning sunlight. A cold breeze crept into the room, brushing against Gigi's skin. She shivered slightly in her sleep, curling up instinctively for warmth. Her blanket had slipped off the bed sometime during the night, leaving her exposed to the chilly air.

Outside her room, her mother walked down the hallway, a laundry basket in her arms. She paused for a moment as she passed Gigi’s door, her attention caught by the sound of soft breaths and the faint cold drifting out into the hall.

For a moment, she hesitated. She hadn’t been talking to Gigi much lately, yet as she peeked inside, seeing her daughter shivering lightly in her sleep, her hesitation melted away. Quietly, Mrs. Murin set the basket down and walked into the room. The floor creaked slightly with every step, but Gigi didn't stir, still deeply asleep. Mrs. Murin proceeded to bend down, picking up the blanket from the floor, shaking off any bits of dust that might have latched onto the fabric.

She then unfolded it carefully, draping it back over Gigi with a tenderness that surprised even herself. Her hands lingered for a moment, smoothing out the creases in the blanket as she tucked her daughter in. Mrs. Murin glanced at her daughter’s peaceful face, smiling despite the slight sadness she was feeling.

Without a word, Mrs. Murin stood up, closing the open window before exiting the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

A moment later, Gigi blinked, finally waking up. Smoothing out her messy bed hair, she rubbed her eyes before noticing the blanket covering her body. Her eyebrows raised slightly in confusion.

She would always wake up with her blanket halfway across the floor. It was practically a tradition at this point. Yet, here it was, still neatly covered over her.

Gigi tilted her head, a puzzled expression crossing her face. She didn’t recall waking up and fixing it herself, but she didn’t dwell on it too long. Maybe she was too tired last night to toss and turn like she usually did.

The blonde stretched out her arms and legs as she reached for her phone. Upon turning it on, she began to scroll through the notifications. Most of them were the usual—social media updates, pings from her rhythm games, but one particular pop-up stood out from the rest of them.

A message from Cecilia.

imgreen: hey gigi you awake?

imgreen: i wanna ask you something!

Gigi sat up straight, her sleepy state vanishing in an instant. For some reason, texts from Cecilia always made her feel strangely giddy—more so than when she receives messages from anyone else.

The blonde opened up her chat with Cecilia and stared at the two messages. Her finger hovered over the keyboard, but she hesitated. Since Cecilia had only sent the texts three minutes ago, would replying to them immediately make her seem too... eager?

Gigi leaned back against her pillow, her mind's cogs working at full capacity. What could Cecilia be asking her about anyway? Was it something about League? About their holiday assignments? Or... was it something more important? The possibilities were endless and Gigi couldn't stop herself from overthinking every single one of them.

Shaking her head, Gigi slapped her cheeks to refocus. "You're being ridiculous. It's just a message," she muttered to herself. But instead of calming her nerves, her brain doubled down on the pressure.

"Stupid, stupid," Gigi groaned, kicking her legs rapidly as she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. The blonde then sat up straighter, determined to come up with a perfect reply.

geegee: HIII WHATS UP

Her finger hovered over the send button. No, too chirpy. She deleted it and started over.

geegee: hi! how can i help you?

Gigi winced as she stared at her second draft. It sounded a little too... professional?

After several more drafts and frustrated sighs, Gigi finally settled on a reply that she meticulously thought of—a reply that was casual yet not too preppy, a response that was direct yet not too professional. It was perfect.

After what felt like a lifetime of internal debate, she exhaled deeply, cracked her knuckles, and typed out her magnum opus.

geegee: yo whats up

Gigi buried her face into her pillow, holding her breath. The simple act of replying to a text took her way longer than she'd like to admit. Her phone less than a minute later, and she quickly sat up, snatching it off her stomach. Cecilia had replied.

imgreen: are you free this christmas eve?

Gigi stared at the message for a few seconds. She wasn't expecting this. Christmas Eve? That was... this Tuesday. A thousand thoughts rushed through her head as she wondered what Cecilia could possibly have in mind.

Is something happening that day?

Was Cecilia... asking her out? Her brain went into overdrive, analyzing every word, and running through every possibility.

She let out a soft exhale, trying to calm her nerves. She was being silly again. After all, it was just a simple question and there was no need to overthink things.

geegee: yeah actually!!!

geegee: why

It didn't take long for Cecilia to reply, and when her message popped up, Gigi's eyes widened.

imgreen: i was thinking of going to the Christmas carnival... and was wondering if you'd like to come along...

Gigi's fingers hung over her phone for a moment before she smiled, a sense of immense joy spreading through her chest. After silently whooping and kicking her legs on her bed excitedly, Gigi cleared her throat, before furiously typing out a reply to Cecilia's proposal.

geegee: OF COURSE!!

geegee: who else is coming?

Cecilia looked up from her phone after reading Gigi's replies. Was Gigi expecting it to be a group outing? For a moment, Cecilia hesitated, her thumb hovering over her phone. She could see how the blonde might have come to that conclusion—especially since they've mostly been hanging out with their larger friend group recently. However, this wasn't one of those hangouts.

Cecilia took a deep breath, typing out her reply carefully. She then stared at the screen for a moment before hitting send.

imgreen: well... it's just the two of us

On the other end, Gigi's heart skipped a beat as she read the message. Her eyes darted back to the screen, rereading it to make sure she hadn't misinterpreted anything. Just the two of them. The realization sent a warm rush of excitement through her. Before she could start overthinking or let her excitement spiral out of control again, another message from Cecilia popped up.

imgreen: actually... this is my end of the deal we made

Gigi blinked, her expression softening into a thoughtful one. It took her a second to connect the dots, but when she did, she giggled with amusement. Right—the punishment game. The one where Cecilia had to fulfill whatever 'punishment' Gigi wanted after losing to her in

their last test. At the time, Gigi had joked about making Cecilia take her out, but she didn't know she would actually take it so seriously.

geegee: omg cece i can't believe you actually remembered that 🙄🙄🙄🙄

imgreen: of course i did

imgreen: because unlike someone, i have a functional memory

geegee: EXCUSE ME??

geegee: my memory is AMAZING thank you very much

imgreen: oh really

imgreen: what's the name of the poem we were assigned for lit class before the break?

Gigi froze, her fingers hovering over the keyboard.

geegee: ok but like... does that even matter

imgreen: thought so

geegee: ugh whatever

geegee: you're lucky i'm nice enough to forgive this SLANDER

imgreen: it's not slander if it's true...

geegee: i h8 u so much rn

imgreen: ok

imgreen: i don't mind calling it off if you hate me that much

geegee: WAIT NO NO NO NO

geegee: I TAKE IT BACK

geegee: i don't actually h8 u!!! i LOVE you and ur amazing!!! pls don't cancel T_T

imgreen: hmm... i don't know

imgreen: you were pretty mean just now.

geegee: mean?? ME??? NEVER

geegee: ur the best cece i swear

imgreen: that's more like it.

geegee: smh the things i do for you

imgreen: 🙄🙄

geegee: *im kidding*

imgreen: *relax i wasn't actually gonna cancel*

geegee: *ur evil*

imgreen: *and yet you're still coming*

geegee: *ofc i am*

geegee: *wouldn't miss it for anything :>>*

Cecilia blinked at the message, as a warmth filled her chest. She hesitated for a moment before typing back, keeping her response simple.

imgreen: *good*

On the other side, Gigi beamed at her phone, clutching it to her chest as she kicked her legs in excitement. Her blanket tangled around her feet as she rolled onto her side, unable to contain the joy within her. Cecilia wanted to spend Christmas Eve with her—just the two of them.

The thought made her heart flutter and she couldn't help but grin widely. But as she buried her face in her pillow, a voice in her head nudged her back to reality.

“Don't get ahead of yourself, Gigi,” she muttered to herself softly, “It's probably just a normal hangout... or, you know, the ‘punishment’ from that dumb deal.”

She sighed, trying to calm her excitement. As much as she wanted to believe there was more to this, she reminded herself that Cecilia might not feel the same way. Besides, Cecilia said it herself—the proposal was to cover her end of the bet. Gigi had no reason whatsoever to believe this was anything more than that.

Shaking her head, the blonde hugged her pillow tight. “*Don't expect the impossible, Gigi. Just enjoy it for what it is,*” Gigi told herself, deciding to keep a positive mindset.

Still, despite her best efforts to stay rational, her cheeks hurt from smiling. Even if Cecilia didn't feel the same way, the thought of spending the day with her was enough to make Gigi's heart race.

Meanwhile, Cecilia heaved a sigh of relief as she set her phone down on the coffee table. She leaned back, staring at the ceiling, while Fauna, sitting nearby, leaned over with a curious look.

“You've been staring at your phone for the past five minutes,” Fauna remarked casually, “Is that Gigi?”

Cecilia looked up at her sister, nodding with a small smile. “Yeah. She's free for the carnival.”

Fauna's gaze dropped to the phone on the table. Without warning, she gently picked it up and skimmed through the texts.

“Fauna!” Cecilia protested, reaching out, but her sister pulled the phone just out of her grasp, her eyes scanning the screen quickly.

“Relax,” Fauna said, smiling as she read, “You two are so sweet... ‘*You're lucky I'm nice enough to forgive this slander*’? ‘*I h8 u so much rn*’? Hehe, this is gold.”

Cecilia blinked. “How is that sweet?” she muttered, averting her sister's gaze.

Fauna giggled, returning the phone back to her sister. “Anyway... you seem pretty psyched about this, lil' sis,” Fauna remarked, smiling.

“I guess I'm kinda looking forward to it,” Cecilia shrugs, as Fauna shifts over to lean on her.

“Well, as long as you have fun,” Fauna said simply, hugging onto her sister's arm gently, “Just remember: Don't think too much and enjoy the moment.”

Cecilia nodded. Fauna was right—she needed to stop overthinking everything. If she kept second-guessing herself, she'd never be able to enjoy her time with Gigi. She sighed, fiddling with her phone as a small smile tugged at her lips. “Right,” she replied simply, as a sense of optimism began to swell within her.

It was Christmas Eve, and the holiday spirit could be felt everywhere. The sun had just begun its descent below the horizon, casting its warm glow onto the glistening snow coated streets below. Light snow drifted from the sky above, falling onto rooftops, trees and heavily dressed pedestrians.

Young children littered the streets as they ran around and played, engaging in intense snowball fights, while families got together for their respective celebrations.

Stepping out of the train station, Cecilia took a moment as she took in the fresh winter air. The perfectionist adjusted the pale-green scarf around her neck, its smooth fabric shielding her from the evening chill, before taking in her surroundings.

The streets were adorned with festive decorations—strings of soft yellow-and-red lights twinkled along lampposts, and wreaths hung proudly on shop doors, their vibrant greens accompanied by red ribbons and tiny gold ornaments. Storefronts and cafés glowed warmly, contrasting against the glimmering white world around them.

Cecilia took a seat on a cold metal bench before glancing at the time on her phone. It was nearly six in the evening, and she was about thirty minutes early. A small sigh escaped her lips as she slipped her phone back into her coat pocket. As she had always done before going to meet anyone, she had told herself it was better to arrive early than risk being late, but now, sitting alone on the cold bench, she began to second-guess her decision.

Seeing the crowd around her laughing and beaming as they walked past her made her somewhat self-conscious about sitting there all alone. There's no one to blame but myself, she told herself as she watched a group of boys her age cackle at a joke one of them made.

She then clutched onto the straps of the tiny bag she brought along—her gift to Gigi. Similarly to when she was planning the outing, Cecilia couldn't help but feel completely stumped when picking out a Christmas gift for Gigi. It wasn't like she couldn't think of anything to get her, rather, the perfectionist had trouble selecting from the list of options she meticulously drew out herself. A Robux gift card? A League of Legends skin? She had even considered getting even a BL novel... before realising that she would never have been able to step into a bookshop and actually buy one without dying of embarrassment.

In the end, Cecilia decided to seek advice from Raora when she tagged along for the latter's Christmas shopping trip. She felt a little embarrassed admitting how unsure she was about picking out a present for Gigi, but Raora listened patiently as always.

"You can get her some cinnamoroll merch!" Raora enthusiastically suggested, pointing out a display of said merchandise, "She is obsessed with those..."

"She already has dozens of those though," Cecilia noted, sighing.

Sensing her hesitation, Raora gave her a light nudge on the shoulder. “Okay, I have an idea. Just keep an eye out for anything that strikes your fancy while we’re walking around,” Raora suggested, winking at her best friend.

Cecilia frowned, unconvinced. “That’s easier said than done.”

Raora smirked, rolling her eyes. “Don’t be so negative. Sometimes the perfect gift finds you when you’re not looking for it.”

With that, they continued their shopping trip, Raora dragging Cecilia into various stores as they both scanned for potential ideas. They wandered through sections of quirky trinkets, clothing racks, and even the occasional book display, though Cecilia quickly avoided lingering near any of the BL novels, her cheeks reddening at the thought.

Eventually, they found themselves in a jewelry store—one of Raora’s planned stops for her own shopping. While Raora busied herself inspecting a delicate bracelet, Cecilia wandered aimlessly through the store, her gaze scanning past the shiny displays.

Suddenly, her eyes landed on a pair of earrings—simple pearl studs resting delicately on a small display stand. They weren’t anything flashy or fancy, rather, they were simply smooth, polished pearls that would sit comfortably on the wearer’s earlobe. Cecilia’s eyes fell upon them as a thought crossed her mind: Gigi would look really good in these.

She pictured it for a moment. The subtle shine of the pearls would complement Gigi’s hair color and features in a subtle, yet effective way. The pearly white gleam of the earrings also reminded the perfectionist of Gigi’s bright smile—warm and inviting. They were simple but elegant, and something about them just felt right. Cecilia hesitated, wondering if they might be too plain. Would Gigi even like them? But the more she looked, the more certain she became.

Checking the price tag, Cecilia was relieved to see they were well within her budget. She smiled a little, satisfied with her choice.

Raora, who had been glancing around nearby, noticed Cecilia’s interest and walked over. “Find something?” the artist asked, leaning closer to look.

“Yeah! I was thinking about getting these,” Cecilia said, pointing at the earrings.

Raora studied them for a moment and nodded. “Ooh! Good pick. They’ll definitely suit her quite nicely,” Raora commented, imagining the shiny pair of earrings on Gigi.

Cecilia nodded, Raora’s comment cementing her decision to purchase the pair.

Back in the present, Cecilia peeked into the small bag, breathing a sigh of relief as she glanced at the box within. The soft glow of the pearls inside made her smile. It was simple, yes, but the more she thought about it, the more she was sure Gigi would love it.

Her fingers traced the edges of the box before she closed the bag again, trying not to think about it too much. The hardest part was over—the outing was planned, the gift was ready, and now she could focus on the evening ahead.

She glanced at the time on her phone once again, only to realize it was still twenty minutes until the agreed time. She let out a small sigh, already feeling the butterflies in her stomach. It felt like time was moving too slowly, and she found herself scanning the area repeatedly, as if hoping to spot Gigi early.

A few moments later, as Cecilia scrolled through some videos on her phone, she received a message from Gigi herself.

geegee: hey cece

geegee: i might have woken up a little late and im gonna be an hour late...

Cecilia blinked at the message on the screen before a mixture of frustration and confusion rose up within her. Huffing, the perfectionist began typing away furiously.

imgreen: ??????

imgreen: IM ALREADY HERE

imgreen: ARE YOU EXPECTING ME TO WAIT ALONE FOR THE NEXT HOUR???

geegee: HAAHHSSHSHSHG

geegee: i was just joking cece

Cecilia clutched onto Gigi's gift tightly, resisting the urge to throw it with all her might.

imgreen: jokes are supposed to be FUNNY

geegee: IT WAS FUNNY

geegee: i laughed!!!!

imgreen: where are u anyway

geegee: right behind u.

Cecilia froze, her eyes wide. She slowly turned around, expecting to see Gigi standing behind her, only to find the space empty. She blinked, then glanced back down at her phone, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Before she could process it, however, a sudden voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Cece!”

Startled, Cecilia spun back around in her seat—and found herself face to face with a grinning Gigi. The blonde was standing there, dressed in light brown coat while sporting an orange scarf around her neck. Her hands rested on her hips, while her smile was as wide as ever.

Cecilia blinked at her, heart racing in surprise. “Gigi!” she exclaimed, her voice a mixture of relief and annoyance.

“I got you good, didn’t I?” Gigi laughed, clearly enjoying Cecilia's reaction.

Cecilia sighed, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips despite herself. “You’re so stupid,” she muttered, as she stood up.

“And yet, here you are—about to hang out with me. Funny how that works,” Gigi teased, her grin only growing wider.

Cecilia rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress the chuckle that escaped her. “I tolerate you,” she shot back, crossing her arms.

“Uh-huh. Tolerate me so much that you showed up early,” Gigi retorted, a smug look plastered across her face.

“Well, so did you. You're twenty minutes early,” Cecilia pointed out, pointing at her watch.

Gigi shrugged, nudging the perfectionist. “Well, it's only polite to make sure you aren't left waiting too long,” Gigi says, puffing out her chest proudly.

“You're a saint,” Cecilia remarked dryly, before she and Gigi began walking, “Come on, let's get going.”

“Where to?” Gigi asked, skipping towards Cecilia to catch up with her.

Cecilia turned to look at the blonde, before grinning. “You'll see.”

As they walked down the brightly lit streets, Gigi's attention shifted to the small paper bag Cecilia was clutching tightly. She raised an eyebrow, tilting her head toward it. “Ooh, what's in the bag, Cece?” Gigi asked, trying to sound casual.

Cecilia hesitated for a moment, glancing down at the bag. “It's... a gift for you,” the green haired girl admitted, her voice quieter than usual.

“For me?” Gigi's eyes lit up, her grin spreading from ear to ear, “Aww, you're the best!”

“I know,” Cecilia replied jokingly, as Gigi leaned in to take a closer look.

Gigi's grin only grew wider as she tried to sneak a better look at the bag. “What is it? Is it something cool? Something cute? You have to tell me! Please, please, pretty please?” she asked, practically hopping up and down.

“Stop trying to guess,” Cecilia said, pulling the bag closer to her chest. “You'll find out when you open it.”

“Well, aren't you mysterious,” Gigi replied with a pout, before suddenly straightening up, reaching into her bag and pulling out a small box, “Well, as it happens, I got you something too!”

Cecilia blinked, visibly surprised. “You... got me a gift?”

“Of course!” Gigi said proudly, crossing her arms, “You don't have to sound so surprised, you know...”

Cecilia tilted her head slightly. “I just didn't expect it, that's all,” Cecilia admitted, glancing at the blonde curiously.

“Well, now you've got something to look forward to,” Gigi said with a wink, before adding, “But... let's not exchange them yet. We'll swap at the end of the day, after we've had all our fun. Sounds good?”

Cecilia considered it for a moment, then gave a small nod. “Alright. You have yourself a deal.”

“Hehe, trust me, Cece, you're gonna LOVE my gift,” Gigi said, her smugness drawing an amused eye-roll from Cecilia.

The two continued their walk down the bustling streets, taking on a leisurely pace as they soaked in the festive atmosphere. The glow of Christmas lights painted across the streets, as vendors lined the sidewalks, selling treats ranging from tidbits like roasted chestnuts and beverages like hot cocoa. The cheerful chattering of families and laughter of children filled the air as everyone made their way to the carnival.

As they approached the mall, a giant Christmas tree came into view, its reflective ornaments glittering in the light of the star perched on top.

“Whoa, look at that!” Gigi exclaimed, pointing excitedly at the tree, “I bet it took like... a million years to decorate that.”

Cecilia smirked. “A million years, huh? That’s some math you’ve got there.”

“Hey, you’re one to talk,” Gigi shot back with a smug grin, “I remember decimating you in math last semester, remember?”

Cecilia’s smirk faltered for a split second before she rolled her eyes. “Let’s not talk about that,” she muttered, quickening her pace.

Gigi laughed triumphantly, clearly enjoying Cecilia’s flustered reaction. “Don’t worry, Cece, if you ever need tutoring, you can rely on me,” Gigi proclaimed, winking at the perfectionist.

“Shut up!” Cecilia groaned under her breath, picking up her pace as Gigi continued to chuckle behind her.

Eventually, they entered the carnival grounds of the mall, which had been transformed into a winter wonderland. A towering Christmas tree dominated the center, as festive pop songs blared from speakers. Stalls and booths were scattered around the area, each one offering their own unique games, food, and merchandise.

Gigi’s eyes widened as she took in the scene. “Whoa, this is amazing!” she exclaimed, spinning around to take it all in, “They really went all out this year.”

“It really is something,” Cecilia agreed. The perfectionist’s mouth fell agape as she looked around the bustling environment, a sense of nostalgia washing over her as she recalled her past experiences at the carnival. Watching a family of four play beer pong nearby immediately reminded her of when her own family participated in the same activity many years ago.

The father of the family took aim, concentrating before tossing his ball confidently. The ball smoothly entered a cup on the other end of the table in front of him, prompting his wife and children to erupt into cheers. Cecilia couldn’t help but break out a soft chuckle as she watched the youngest daughter struggle under the weight of the grand prize—a large rabbit.

“Alright, where do we start?” Gigi asked excitedly, snapping Cecilia out of her daze.

Cecilia glanced at Gigi with a teasing smile. “It’s a surprise,” she said cryptically.

“A surprise?” Gigi tilted her head, as she crossed her arms “Okay, now I really need to know!”

“Oh calm down, you’ll find out soon enough,” Cecilia replied, smirking as she led Gigi away from the bustling carnival stalls.

They swam through the crowds and into the mall, the noise from the carnival slowly fading away as they walked. Gigi couldn’t help but glance around curiously, trying to piece together where Cecilia was taking her. When they finally stopped in front of a cozy PC café tucked in a quieter corner, Gigi froze for a moment, her eyes lighting up in excitement.

“A PC café?!” Gigi exclaimed, her voice filled with giddy disbelief. She looked through the glass door, taking in the rows of sleek gaming setups, the bright glow of monitors, and the prominent sounds of keyboard clicks.

“This is where you wanted to take me? This is awesome!” Gigi exclaimed, before dialing down her excitement by a notch, “Hold on... are you sure this is a good idea? Shouldn’t we spend more time at the carnival?”

Cecilia placed a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow. “Relax. It’s still early,” the perfectionist reassured, “Besides, the carnival’s way cooler when it gets dark out—all the lights and decorations will look a hundred times better then.”

Gigi blinked, a little taken aback by her friend's insistence.

“Besides,” Cecilia continued, as she led Gigi into the café, “We can have dinner here, and I know how much you love gaming... so I figured we could have some fun here before we head back out into the cold.”

Gigi stared at her, momentarily speechless. Her excitement was still there, but now it was complimented by a familiar fluttering in her heart. Her cheeks turned a faint pink as she realized just how much thought Cecilia had put into the day. Cecilia had clearly planned this with Gigi in mind, and the gesture made her heart beat in a way she hadn’t expected.

“Wow, Cece,” Gigi said, her voice softening, as she scratched the back of her head, “You really went all out for this, huh?”

Cecilia, oblivious to Gigi’s blush and softer tone, shrugged. “Well... I figured you’d like something like this,” Cecilia replied, attempting to sound nonchalant, “Now come on, let’s grab a setup before the place fills up.”

Without waiting for a response, Cecilia headed toward the counter to book their slots. Gigi followed close behind, her heart feeling warmer by the second.

As they reached the counter, the staff handed them menus to browse while their gaming setups were being prepared. Gigi scanned the options, squinting her eyes as she read the menus on the wall. Before long, the pigtailed girl pointed at the shelf housing the instant ramen packages.

“Cece! Let's get some ramen,” Gigi suggested, her mouth already watering, “Eating some in this weather will really hit the spot.”

“We came to a café and you're eating instant noodles?” Cecilia laughed, as Gigi smirked.

“I mean, they're not exactly selling any delicacies here, are they? Look! A quarter of their items are nacho variations,” Gigi pointed out, gesturing towards the menu.

Cecilia squinted her eyes at the tiny words on the wall menu before giggling a little. “You have a point,” Cecilia says, before placing a finger on her chin, “We'll be eating loads of snacks at the carnival later anyway, so I guess it wouldn't matter that much.”

Once their food was sorted, the two headed toward their assigned table, where two glowing gaming monitors awaited them. Sliding into her chair, Cecilia adjusted her seat and glanced at the screens. Just as she reached for her mouse, Gigi's gasp of excitement made her look over.

“Cece, look! They have League!” Gigi exclaimed, pointing at the familiar icon on the desktop.

“And?” Cecilia replied, leaning back with a smirk.

“And?!” Gigi shot back, dramatically placing a hand on her chest, “We HAVE to play! Come on, two setups, ramen on the way, and League installed—it's like heaven!”

“Fine,” Cecilia relented, as she opened up League of Legends on her computer.

“Don't worry, Cece,” Gigi said, flashing her a confident smile as she adjusted her headset, “I'll carry us. Just follow my lead, and we'll be unstoppable.”

Their ramen arrived just as the game loaded, with the waiter placing the steaming bowls in front of them. “Oh man, this smells so good,” Gigi said, her chopsticks poised, “Let's eat while we dominate.”

“Hey, don't spill anything on the keyboard. If their tech is damaged we'd probably have to pay for it out of our own pockets,” Cecilia warned, though she couldn't help but smile as she watched Gigi warm up her fingers and slurp up many strands of noodles simultaneously.

The match soon began, Gigi took the lead, her Teemo darting across the top lane with ease. Cecilia followed her instructions, occasionally fumbling but managing to keep up.

As the game went on, Gigi began to disregard the bowl of ramen in front of her, opting to fully lock in for the match. She racked up kills, setting up traps with Teemo's mushrooms, and directed Cecilia confidently. Cecilia, while not as experienced as Gigi, found herself genuinely enjoying the match thanks to Gigi's guidance.

At one point, Cecilia even managed to land a crucial assist that saved one of their teammates in a fight. “See? I can contribute,” Cecilia grinned, pumping her fist in the air.

“Never doubted you, doll,” Gigi complimented, giving Cecilia a quick congratulatory wink.

After her earlier assist, Cecilia spotted two low-health opponents retreating toward their turret. “I’m going for it,” she announced, her fingers already moving furiously on the keyboard.

“Wait, Cece,” Gigi called out, her tone alarmed, “Don’t get greedy!”

But Cecilia was already in too deep. Ignoring Gigi’s warning, she dove forward, taking out one of the opponents in a flurry of attacks.

Just as she was about to retreat, the second enemy turned around, and two more appeared from out of nowhere.

“WHAT THE HELL?!” Cecilia yelped as her champion was surrounded. She mashed her keys desperately, but it was no use. Her Ahri went down in a blaze of glory—or, rather, utter humiliation.

Gigi burst out laughing, one hand clutching her stomach while the other stayed firmly on her mouse. “I told you not to get greedy!” Gigi scolded in between laughs.

“Ugh, I HATE them,” Cecilia groaned, “I wanna report them.”

“For what?!” Gigi cackled, wiping a tear from her eye, “Playing the game?!”

Cecilia pouted, taking a spoonful of soup from her bowl of ramen. “For being assholes...”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Gigi teased, looking up from her screen to look at Cecilia’s raged expression, “It’s definitely not because you got greedy.”

“I wasn’t greedy!” Cecilia argued, puffing her chest out proudly, “I was being proactive.”

“Yeah, proactively feeding them kills,” Gigi quipped, as she and Cecilia started laughing uncontrollably once more.

After an intense session of gaming, both matches ended with victories for Cecilia and Gigi’s team. The first win was hard-fought, while the second match was much smoother, as Cecilia took Gigi’s guidance more seriously.

“We did it! Two wins in a row!” Gigi cheered, leaning back in her chair and stretching her arms triumphantly, “Not bad, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cecilia muttered, shutting down her computer with a slight smile, “But in my personal opinion, I’m the MVP for both matches! We really wouldn’t have won without my support.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Cece,” Gigi teased, standing up and grabbing her coat, “I carried you, and you know it.”

“Okay, fine, you did,” Cecilia admitted, giggling as they made their way out of the dark room.

The two headed out of the PC café and stepped back into the bustling mall. The glow of the Christmas lights and the distant sound of carols greeting them as they walked. The air outside the café felt cooler, and the festive decorations seemed even brighter as night began to settle in.

“Well, that was fun,” Cecilia admitted, tucking her hands into her coat pockets.

“Fun? It was amazing!” Gigi said, skipping beside her, “You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy wiping the floor with those noobs.”

“Okay, yeah, it felt amazing,” Cecilia agreed, before grinning diabolically, “I bet those two idiots who targeted me are feeling good about themselves now!”

Gigi gasped, covering her mouth in mock horror before patting Cecilia on the head, mouthing ‘pat, pat’ as she did so. “I-I’m so proud of you (pat, pat),” Gigi said, pretending to sound emotional, “Y-you’re really starting to grow into a fully fledged League player.”

“I... don’t know how to feel about that,” Cecilia muttered in response.

Soon, the livelines of the carnival engulfed them as they dived into its colorful embrace. Now that the sun had set, the energy of the Christmas carnival seemed to have multiplied. Cecilia and Gigi swam against the sea of people as they made their way into the heart of the festivities, the crowd growing denser with each step.

At one point, Gigi glanced back at Cecilia, furrowing her brows. “You okay?” the blonde asked, her voice just loud enough to cut through the chatter and laughter around them. However, just before Cecilia could respond, Gigi reached out and grabbed her hand firmly.

“H-hey! What are you doing?” Cecilia asked, looking down at their clasped hands.

“Making sure I don’t lose you,” Gigi replied, winking at the perfectionist, “What if you get swept away by the crowd, huh? Who’s going to carry all my prizes?”

“If anyone was going to get lost, it was gonna be you,” Cecilia shot back, smiling as she and Gigi closed the distance between one another.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m holding your hand, then,” Gigi countered, giving Cecilia’s hand a playful squeeze, “You’d miss me too much if I vanished into this crowd.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes. “Whatever floats your boat, Gigi.”

Gigi continued to lead the way as the pair continued weaving through the crowd. Around them, the carnival roared with life—children tugged at their parents’ hands, couples strolled arm-in-arm, and groups of friends took part in games, their cheers overpowering the blaring holiday music.

It wasn’t long before Gigi spotted a booth she fancied—ons decorated with bright targets and toy bows strung up on racks. Her eyes lit up as she tugged Cecilia toward it, practically jumping with excitement.

“Cece, look! Archery! Let’s try this one!” Gigi exclaimed, pointing at the row of colorful bullseyes set up on the backboard before dashing towards the counter.

“You sure? It’s a dollar per shot,” Cecilia pointed out, crossing her arms as she followed Gigi to the booth, “It kinda sounds like a ripoff—”

Cecilia quickly clapped her hands over her mouth upon realising that she had been too loud. She quickly mouthed a soft ‘sorry’ to the booth's attendant, who was glaring at her, before rushing to Gigi's side.

“Come on, what’s a few bucks for fun? Plus, I’ll probably nail this,” Gigi said confidently, handing over her money to the booth attendant.

She grabbed a toy bow and her first arrow, squinting as she aimed at the center of a target. With a determined pull, she released the arrow—and missed completely, the foam projectile hitting the wall to the side.

Cecilia stifled a laugh. “Wow, you're a natural,” the perfectionist teased as Gigi shot her a look.

“Shut up! It’s just a warm-up,” Gigi huffed, reaching for another arrow.

Her second and third attempts weren’t much better. The arrows bounced off the edges of the targets or veered off course entirely. Gigi groaned, slumping dramatically. “Okay, maybe this game is rigged.”

The booth attendant, who had been watching Gigi's attempts, let out an audible groan. “Ugh, it’s not rigged, kid. You just have to aim properly,” he muttered, exasperated.

“Damn, what's his problem? I was just kidding,” Gigi muttered to Cecilia, who giggled.

“Maybe he's right, and you just suck,” Cecilia snickered, earning her a tiny slap on the arm from Gigi.

“You do it if you're so smart,” Gigi grinned, handing the bow to the perfectionist.

“Sure,” Cecilia says, accepting the challenge, “Let me show you how it's done.”

Handing over her own dollar, Cecilia grabbed the bow, her expression focused. She notched an arrow and took aim, her stance steady. With a smooth pull and release, the arrow flew straight and hit the center of one of the smaller targets.

“You did it! You're crazy! You're crazy!” Gigi shrieked, grabbing onto Cecilia's arm enthusiastically.

Cecilia blinked rapidly, unable to process what just happened. She only participated to have a little fun, fully expecting to completely miss the target. “I—I did!” Cecilia exclaimed as she clasped Gigi's arm, the two of them hopping up and down in celebration.

The booth attendant clapped reluctantly, before handing Cecilia a prize—a small, somewhat comical-looking plush pug with oversized eyes and a lopsided tongue. Cecilia held it up with a triumphant smirk.

“This is your prize?” Gigi asked, eyeing the plush.

“Yeah!” Cecilia said, smiling teasingly, “Actually, it kinda looks like you!”

Gigi gasped, clutching her chest as though she had been mortally wounded. “Excuse me? Are you saying I look like that?” the blonde exclaimed, pointing at the pug’s goofy face.

Cecilia nodded, barely suppressing a chuckle. “Yep. The resemblance is uncanny.”

“I hate you,” Gigi groans, crossing her arms, as she leaned in, now face-to-face with the pug, “Wait, never mind, you might be onto something here...”

After departing from the archery booth, Cecilia and Gigi found themselves drawn to a nearby stall advertising steaming cups of hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and marshmallows. The rich, sweet aroma drifting through the air was impossible to resist, and Gigi immediately grabbed Cecilia’s wrist, dragging her toward the stall.

“God, I could do with some hot cocoa right now!” Gigi declared, already fishing into her pocket for cash.

Cecilia chuckled, letting herself be dragged along. “I agree. I do need something hot right now,” Cecilia says, prompting Gigi to snicker.

“What’s so funny?” the perfectionist asked, as she and Gigi got into the queue.

“Should I say it? No, I won’t say it,” Gigi says, still chuckling at whatever was on her mind.

“Say it, Gigi, say it,” Cecilia pressed, bracing herself for whatever Gigi was about to blurt out.

However, the blonde shook her head. “No, no, no, you’ll think of me as a degenerate...”

“I already think you’re a degenerate,” Cecilia quipped as Gigi gasped in mock horror, “Just say it, Gigi.”

“Okay, fine! You don’t need anything hot... since *I’m* already here,” Gigi says in an overly flirty tone, winking at the perfectionist suggestively.

“I’m leaving,” Cecilia says, trying her best to suppress her laughter.

“But you told me to say it!” Gigi whined, as she grabbed onto Cecilia’s arm to prevent her from leaving the line.

Before long, the pair reached the front of the queue, purchasing their beverages before heading back into the crowds. Gigi took a long sip from her cup and sighed in contentment.

"This is it. This is the meaning of life, Cece. Hot chocolate. Whipped cream. Marshmallows. Absolute peak," the blonde concluded, breathing out a cloud of vapour after taking a sip.

"It can't be *that* good," Cecilia replies skeptically, carefully blowing onto the surface of her own drink.

"Don't be such a negative nancy," Gigi says, nudging her friend lightly, "You haven't even tasted it!"

Once her drink cooled down, the perfectionist took a sip as the drink's flavors exploded in her mouth, the rich and creamy chocolate contrasting the fluffiness of the marshmallows perfectly. "Oh, it *is* that good," Cecilia remarked, her eyes widened as she turned to Gigi, "You might be right about the whole 'meaning of life thing', Gigi, this is amazing."

"What did I tell you?" Gigi grinned as she and Cecilia clinked their cups against each other.

As they walked through the bustling carnival, sipping their hot chocolate, they heard a familiar voice call out from nearby.

"Cece! Gigi!"

The two turned to see none other than the Abyssgard twins, Fuwawa and Mococo, accompanied by Shiori, Bijou, and Nerissa. The group stood near the towering Christmas tree at the heart of the carnival grounds, as they clutched their own hot drinks.

"Cece! Gigi!" Nerissa called out, smiling as she waved them over, "Fancy seeing you two here!"

Cecilia's eyes lit up as she stepped closer to the group, Gigi right beside her. "Hey, guys!" she greeted with a warm smile, "What brings you all to the carnival?"

"We thought it might be fun if we went together," Shiori replies, leaning against Nerissa, "What have you two been up to?"

Gigi chuckled, nudging Cecilia playfully. "We've been making the rounds. Cece just won this super ugly pug plush," she said, holding up the squished, goofy toy.

"It kinda looks like a mini Gigi," Bijou noted, as Cecilia held out the toy for everybody to see.

"That's what I said!" Cecilia giggled as Fuwawa and Mococo squeezed the soft toy's arms.

"Hey!" Gigi pouted, the group erupting into a fit of laughter.

While the group continued to catch up, chatting about the carnival's highlights and what they had played and won so far, Bijou's gaze flickered over to Cecilia. There was a small, sly smirk on her face as she leaned in slightly, whispering just loud enough for Cecilia to hear.

"So, the *hypothetical friend*," Bijou began with a teasing tone, her eyes glinting with amusement, "It *was* Gigi, wasn't it?"

Cecilia froze for a moment, a blush creeping up her neck as she realized Bijou had caught onto her. She glanced over at Gigi, who was busy joking with Mococo and Fuwawa, her expression completely unaware of what was going on. Cecilia bit her lip, trying to remain calm and collected.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about," Cecilia murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bijou's smirk widened, clearly enjoying the moment. "Sure you don't," Bijou teased.

Cecilia sighed, as her eyes continued to linger on Gigi. "I suppose I should thank you, Biboo," Cecilia says, smiling a little, "The PC café idea was pretty good."

Bijou's smirk deepened, clearly savoring the moment. "It's no problem..." she teased, her voice light but filled with amusement, "I hope it was fun."

Cecilia, caught between embarrassment and a sense of appreciation, glanced at Gigi before looking back at Bijou. "Well, yeah, it was," Cecilia replied, "Gigi and I really enjoyed ourselves."

"Cece! Fuwamoco just told me there's a bumper car ride! Let's go!" Gigi's voice suddenly called out. The blonde could be seen hopping excitedly as she waved at Cecilia, who rolled her eyes playfully.

"Alright, wait up!" Cecilia replied, quickening her pace to catch up with the blonde.

The two bid a quick goodbye to the group, giving them all a bright wave. "See you later!" the pair called out cheerfully, before Gigi began pulling Cecilia along toward the bumper car ride.

The pair made a beeline to the bumper car booth, which proved to be quite popular. The line was longer than they expected, but the pair Gigi undeterred, tapping her foot impatiently as they waited their turn. The neon lights of the ride flashed brightly in the distance, drawing people, particularly children, in from all directions.

As they approached the front of the line, the attendant handed them both helmets before ushering them into the arena. "Ehehe, I'm so pumped!" Gigi said as she and Gigi searched for an available car.

"Don't go too crazy," Cecilia warned as she and Gigi got into an empty bumper car, "Most of our opponents are kids."

It wasn't long before the ride started. Gigi wasted no time, steering her car in wild circles and ramming into others chaotically. The arena was filled with the sound of collisions and laughter as the bumper cars swerved around aimlessly.

However, just as Cecilia and Gigi were getting used to the high speeds, a group of young girls in a nearby car began to jeer. One of them, a girl with a mischievous grin, turned to her friends and said loud enough for Cecilia and Gigi to hear, “Look, let's go for those losers! They look like easy targets!”

The others giggled in response, with one of them even sticking her tongue out at the pair. The comment did not go unnoticed, however, as Cecilia’s grip tightened on the steering wheel, a sense of immense irritation rising in her chest. Gigi, sensing the change in Cecilia’s demeanor, shot her a questioning glance. “Cece, are you okay—WOAH!”

The pair's bumper car swerved violently as they collided with the group of young girls, who screamed in shock. “Cece, what's gotten into you?” Gigi yelled, amused at Cecilia's newfound spark, “What happened to not going crazy?”

Cecilia shot back a look of determination. “Screw that! Let’s destroy them,” she declared, her voice dripping with resolve.

Gigi blinked for a moment before her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Now that’s more like it,” she said, her grin widening. Without another word, she grabbed onto one side of the wheel, the both of them now hell bent on outmaneuvering the younger girls. They quickly targeted the group, ramming into their cars with precision and speed. The younger girls' earlier laughter soon turned to squeals as they were sent spinning in every direction, their earlier taunts drowned out by the loud crashes of bumper cars colliding.

Gigi and Cecilia exchanged a quick, satisfied glance as they skillfully navigated through the battlefield, still targeting the group of girls, who struggled to find an opening to fight back.

Eventually, the ride ended. Gigi and Cecilia immediately hopped out of their car, their faces glowing with triumph. They had put the younger group in their place, and couldn't resist a smug smirk when they watched the group exit their car grumpily.

“I feel a little mean... but that was a little too fun!” Cecilia exclaimed as she and Gigi giggled madly, still relishing in their victory, “Did you see the looks on their faces?”

“Ohohoho, they were MAD at us,” Gigi chuckled, as she and Cecilia quickened their paces to avoid the girls.

The duo continued to wander through the carnival, hopping between different booths and games. They tried their hand at a few more, including a ring-toss game where Gigi’s aim was off at first, but she eventually knocked them all down with a single throw. Cecilia followed suit, her precision allowing her to clear the game with ease. They both ended up with matching Christmas tree keychains as prizes, which they clipped onto their bags.

They then tried a fishing game where the fish were small plastic toys in a pool. Cecilia's attempts were a mess, the pole slipping from her hand multiple times. Gigi, however, seemed to be pretty experienced in the game, easily pulled up a brightly colored fish and claimed another prize. “I don’t know how you do it,” Cecilia sighed, as Gigi took her time with the prize selection.

“What do you think of this one?” Gigi asked, holding up a plush toy of a smirking cat emoji, “Does it spark joy?”

“It looks annoying,” Cecilia admitted, frowning at the smug expression on the plush cat.

“It’s perfect then,” Gigi giggled at Cecilia’s remark, before claiming the plush toy for herself.

From there, they moved on to another variety of other games, including a ball-toss game, beer pong and even a shooting range with nerf guns. The pair bumped into the group consisting of Nerissa, Shiori, Bijou and the twins once more, taking some time to watch them play a high striker game.

Once the noise from the games started to get a little overwhelming, the pair made their way to a nearby snack stall. The smell of freshly made dango and mochi drew them in, and they stood in line, eagerly awaiting their turn. When it was finally their turn to order, Gigi picked up a skewer of dango, while Cecilia opted for a box of mochi.

After paying for their snacks, they navigated through the less crowded areas of the carnival, looking for a quiet place to sit. They eventually found a bench tucked away near the edge of the grounds, a bit farther from the main crowds. The area felt more peaceful, with only a few scattered couples or groups of friends relaxing in the same spot. The air was cooler here, and the noise of the carnival felt more distant.

“I am tuckered out,” Cecilia yawned, popping a mochi into her mouth.

“At least we covered some good ground today,” Gigi winked, casually biting into her dango.

They sat for a while in comfortable silence, the distant buzz of the carnival slowly slipping into the background as they chewed on their snacks. The soft glow of nearby lamps illuminated the area, and it felt as though they were in a little bubble away from the rest of the world.

Cecilia leaned back against the bench, closing her eyes for a moment. The rush of adrenaline from earlier in the evening, the constant movement from game to game, was starting to fade. She took a deep breath, letting the cool night air fill her lungs, as she felt relief wash over her body. Her endless planning and worrying over planning this very outing seemed silly now that she thought about it. As it turned out, she really didn’t have to worry about anything at all. Gigi seemed to have had a blast, and so did she. More than anything however, she was simply glad to be in the present moment.

Gigi, too, seemed to be settling into the peace and quiet of the moment. She leaned back, letting her arms rest at her sides as she gazed up at the sky, her usual upbeat energy tamed by the calm around them. The stars were barely visible through the light pollution, while the bright crescent moon hung above the carnival.

The sounds of the carnival, while still audible, took a backseat to the serenity to this particular section of the grounds. It felt like a different space entirely, one that wasn’t dominated by the voices of excited kids and the rush of the crowd.

Gigi stretched her legs out, a contented hum escaping her as she let her body sink further into the bench. "It's so peaceful here," the pigtailed girl sighed, putting aside her empty dango sticks.

"Yeah," Cecilia yawned, as she gazed into the distance, "I feel like I could fall asleep any second now..."

"You better not!" Gigi replies, before unzipping her bag and pulling out Cecilia's gift, "We still have to unbox our presents!"

Cecilia blinked, momentarily startled as Gigi placed a neatly wrapped box in her lap. The paper was a cheerful red with small snowflake patterns, and the ribbon was tied in a slightly slanted bow. Cecilia glanced at the blonde, who was grinning expectantly, her energy suddenly back in full swing.

"Go on, open it!" Gigi urged, bouncing slightly on the bench as though she couldn't wait another second, "You've gotta see it!"

"It better be good," Cecilia joked with a faint chuckle. She carefully untied the bow and peeled back the wrapping paper, revealing a small, elegant box underneath. She opened it slowly, her eyes widening as a beautifully crafted clockwork bird with a tiny top hat came into view. The bird, about the size of her palm, was painted in gold and bronze colors that reflected faintly the warm lights from the street lamps.

Upon laying her eyes upon it, the perfectionist was immediately enthralled, won over by the beauty and cuteness of the tiny gift. "It's adorable," Cecilia says, unable to get her eyes off of the bird, "What is it?"

Gigi leaned forward, her excitement barely contained. "It's called Ototori! The top hat is its wind up key. Wind it up and it waddles around and plays music. Try it!"

Cecilia hesitated for only a moment before winding the tiny key. As soon as she released it, the bird sprang to life, waddling in small, adorable steps across the bench while a soft violin tune played from within its body. Cecilia watched, entranced, as the bird completed its little performance before coming to a gentle stop.

"It's... incredible," Cecilia said, her voice quiet but full of awe, "And that song..."

"Oh yeah! Neat, huh? The store let me pick out a song of my choice and I knew what to pick immediately!" Gigi says, as Cecilia looks up at her, "It's the same tune you played when we were in that music store, remember?"

Cecilia's mind immediately brought her back to that day—the first time she and Gigi went out together. One of the stops on their trip out was the music store, where Gigi convinced the perfectionist to show off her talent with the violin. Although Cecilia felt a little self conscious, Gigi had nothing but praise for the perfectionist before and after her performance.

"Y-you remembered that?" Cecilia stammered, her cheeks warming as she clutched the tiny bird in her hands.

"Of course I did," Gigi said with a shrug, "How could I forget? You were amazing that day—it was literally angelic! You turned literally every head in the store too!"

Cecilia felt her face grow even hotter. She glanced away, pretending to adjust the ribbon on the gift box. "You're exaggerating."

"I'm not!" Gigi insisted, leaning closer to Cecilia, "I could see how much you loved playing. That's why I wanted to get you something special—something that reminds you of that moment."

Cecilia's grip on the bird tightened slightly as she absorbed Gigi's words. And without a moment's hesitation, Cecilia found herself hugging the blonde. "W-woah," Gigi whispered, surprised as her friend embraced her.

"Sorry, I just felt so... happy," Cecilia apologised, swiftly backing away, before smiling at Gigi gratefully, "Thanks for the gift, Gigi, I love it."

"It's nothing," Gigi replied, a small blush creeping up onto her cheeks, before she was reminded of something.

"Wait, there's more!" Gigi said suddenly, reaching into the box and pulling out another item: a hair ribbon. It was almost identical to the one Cecilia currently wore, except its color matched the gold-bronze tones of the bird. The fabric shone faintly in the light, giving it an elegant, refined look.

"This one's so you can match Ototori," Gigi explained, holding it up, "And because, well, I know how much you like these."

Cecilia took the ribbon from her, running her fingers over the smooth material. "It's beautiful," she murmured, genuinely touched, "You didn't have to go all out like this."

"Of course, I did! I'm just amazing like that," Gigi replied with a shrug, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. Then she leaned back again, a smug grin spreading across her face. "Now, where's my gift?"

Cecilia chuckled, reaching into her bag and pulling out a similarly wrapped box. "Patience, it's right here," she says, handing the box to Gigi, who accepted it with a mix of excitement and curiosity.

"Hehe, you're really spoiling me today," Gigi teased, though her fingers worked eagerly to unbox the gift. When she lifted the lid of the small box, her eyes widened in disbelief. Sitting within was the pair of pearly white earrings, their delicate shine immediately catching Gigi off guard.

"Cece..." Gigi says, her voice trailing off, staring at the gift as if it were a priceless treasure, "These... are you serious? This looks expensive!"

Cecilia waved off her concern, her expression calm. "Relax, it was well within my two-digit budget. Don't overthink it."

“But why would you get me something like this?” Gigi asked, her eyebrows raised, “I mean, I’m not really the type for fancy accessories like these. I don’t think they’d even look good on me.”

Cecilia scoffed, crossing her arms. “What are you talking about? The moment I saw those, I immediately thought of you. I knew they’d suit you perfectly,” Cecilia argued, crossing her arms and staring at Gigi incredulously.

Gigi blinked, surprised by Cecilia’s confidence. “You... really think so?”

“Of course I do,” Cecilia said firmly, meeting Gigi’s gaze, “You underestimate how great you would look with them. Trust me on this one.”

For a moment, Gigi seemed to hesitate, her fingers lightly brushing over the earrings. It was then Cecilia tilted her head slightly and asked, “Have you worn earrings before?”

“Yeah, I have, as a kid,” Gigi admitted, shrugging, “Not often, though.”

“Good. Then no excuses,” Cecilia said, with a cheeky smirk, “Go ahead—try them on.”

Gigi chuckled, shaking her head as she carefully took the earrings out of the box and began putting them on. She fumbled a little with the first one, but soon enough, both earrings were in place.

She turned to Cecilia, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Well? How do I look?”

Cecilia leaned forward slightly, her eyes studying Gigi carefully. For a moment, she said nothing, and Gigi shifted nervously under her gaze. Internally, the perfectionist was freaking out over two things. One—her accurate prediction that Gigi would rock the earrings and two—just how pretty Gigi looked with them on. As she expected, the whites of the earrings contrasted amazingly with Gigi’s features and gleamed just as brightly as the blonde’s signature grins.

More than that, however, the earrings seem to have brought out a beautiful, cute side to Gigi Cecilia had never really paid attention to before.

“Cece?” Gigi prompted, her voice meek and expecting.

“You look...” Cecilia paused, her expression softening, “Beautiful.”

Gigi froze, her breath catching for a split second. “Beautiful?” she repeated, her voice barely audible.

“Yeah,” Cecilia said simply, her tone devoid of hesitation, “They suit you even better than I thought they would.”

Gigi’s cheeks turned a deep shade of pink, and she quickly looked away, trying to mask her flustered expression with a laugh. “You’re too much sometimes, Cece,” the pigtailed girl chuckled, trying to suppress the fluttering feeling in her chest.

Gigi was soon snapped out of her daze when Cecilia opened up her camera app, pointing the front facing camera towards Gigi. “Take a look. It really does suit you,” Cecilia reassures as Gigi opens her eyes.

After staring at the screen for some time, Gigi finally let out a soft chuckle. Her fingers brushed lightly against the earrings as she tilted her head, examining how they looked from different angles. “Huh,” she murmured, a small smile returning to her lips. “You might actually be right.”

Cecilia gave her a triumphant nod, lowering the phone. “Told you. They’re perfect for you.”

Gigi looked at Cecilia, her expression shifting to something softer, almost uncharacteristically so. “Thanks, Cece,” she said softly, “Really... and not just for the gift, but the whole of today. It was so much fun.”

Cecilia blinked, surprised by the change in Gigi’s tone. “Well, you’re welcome,” the perfectionist replied with a smile, her voice quieter now, “I’m glad you had fun. Honestly, I did too.”

“You must have spent a lot of time planning this, huh?” Gigi grins, prompting Cecilia to sit upright.

“What makes you say that?” Cecilia asks the blonde who giggled.

“It’s been like what—more than a month since we made that bet, and I know for a fact you’ve probably kept yourself up a few nights thinking about your ‘punishment’,” Gigi concluded, shooting Cecilia a smug look.

The perfectionist groaned. Gigi had her there. “Don’t make me regret all that lost time,” Cecilia sighs as Gigi nudges her playfully.

“I’m kidding! I’m kidding!” Gigi laughed, leaning on Cecilia’s shoulder.

After a while, Gigi glanced at Cecilia again, her smile returning but with a hint of shyness. “Seriously, though. I know you probably went through a lot of trouble planning all this, and I just... I really appreciate it.”

Cecilia felt a small warmth spread in her chest. “Well, it was worth it,” she replied simply, “Seeing you happy? That’s enough for me.”

Cecilia’s words struck the blonde’s heart like darts onto a board. The fluttering feeling in her chest grew stronger by the second and she wasn’t entirely sure how to handle it. Gigi turned her gaze away, pretending to focus on the carnival lights in the distance, but her mind was spinning. Those words echoed in her head, soft yet so undeniably genuine.

For once, she didn’t have a quick comeback or a playful jab ready. Instead, she took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. However, when she turned to look at Cecilia, she found herself unable to tear her eyes away from her. The perfectionist’s eyes were closed, seemingly

deep in thought, her posture and expression giving her an air of beauty that made Gigi's heart race even further.

Before she knew it, Gigi's eyes landed upon Cecilia's cheek—soft and slightly pink from the cold weather. For a brief moment, the blonde was struck with a powerful urge to lean in closer, to close the gap between them... but she couldn't. She simply couldn't.

Before long, Gigi's hand had found its way into Cecilia's, their fingers intertwining naturally as though it had always been meant to happen. The touch was warm and steady, yet it sent a wave of energy through the both of them.

Cecilia's eyes opened, the soft glow of the distant lights reflecting in her gaze as she glanced down at their hands. For a moment, she didn't move, her mind processing the unspoken gesture. Then, slowly, her fingers tightened ever so slightly around Gigi's, silently accepting the connection.

Gigi's thumb fiddled over Cecilia's knuckles absentmindedly, a small motion that she wasn't even aware of doing. Her gaze flickered between their hands and Cecilia's profile, her chest tight with happiness. Meanwhile, Cecilia found her thoughts surprisingly calm despite the unexpected intimacy of the moment. The warmth of Gigi's hand in hers was comforting, almost reassuring.

Neither of them spoke, the contentment of the moment enveloping them both completely.

Chapter End Notes

hi everyone sorry for the late update! i hope you enjoyed this chapter because the next few chapters won't exactly be as fluffy hehe-

Not Enough

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Gigi... Gigi!”

“Hmmm?”

Gigi yawned, her head buried in her arms as she slouched over her desk. Homeroom period had just ended, and she had somehow managed to sleep through the entire thing. The classroom was lively with chatter and the shifting of chairs as everyone prepared to depart the school. However, the rowdy environment around the blonde didn't seem to affect her blissful slumber one bit, as she continued snoring without a care in the world.

“Wake up already!” Cecilia sighed, gently pulling on the stray strand of hair sticking out of the blonde's head. Gigi yelped, as she sat up straight, trying to see past the sea of stars clouding her vision.

Rubbing on the spot where Cecilia had yanked her hair, Gigi pouted. “That HURT, Cece! What was that for?” Gigi cried, as Cecilia crossed her arms.

“That was for missing the whole of homeroom,” Cecilia replied, as Gigi glanced at the clock on the wall, “Do you even know how important today's briefing was? Or were you too busy drooling on your desk?”

Gigi blinked, swiftly using her sleeve to wipe away a tiny spot of drool on her desk. “No... I never drool,” Gigi muttered unconvincingly, looking up curiously, “And what briefing are you talking about?”

“The briefing for our finals. The one our teacher spent thirty minutes explaining while you snoozed away” Cecilia exhaled in exasperation, before adding, “Here.”

The perfectionist handed Gigi a sheet of paper, still warm from the printer. Gigi took it lazily, her eyes skimming over the bold title that read *First-Year Final Exam Schedule*.

“Finals already? Feels like we just had the last set of papers,” Gigi groaned, rubbing the back of her neck.

“Yeah we did, Gigi,” Cecilia grins, her voice taking on a mocking tone, “But that’s how school works—one set of exams after another. Maybe if you’d stayed awake for more than ten minutes everyday, you'd notice the pattern by now.”

“Hey... you're in no place to be flaming me,” Gigi smirked, poking Cecilia's sides teasingly, “You know I always ace these things.”

Cecilia’s eyebrows twitched slightly. “That's not the point,” she replied sharply, “Besides, I've been hard at work for the past few months. I'm pretty sure my chances of beating you in

the rankings are—”

“Blah, blah, rankings, blah, blah, work,” Gigi snickered, making a ‘*blah, blah*’ gesture with her hand, “You don’t have to tell me again, doll. You’re like a broken recorder...”

“And *you’re* like a walking headache,” Cecilia shot back, though her tone was more tired than angry.

Bijou glanced between the two, having watched the entire exchange with a smile on her face. “Why are you two still competing?” Bijou piped up as Cecilia and Gigi turned to look at her, “I would have thought you’d gotten tired of it by now.”

“Of course not!” Cecilia replied dramatically, with a confident air, “I’ve been on the grind, pouring my blood and my soul into my revision. I’m definitely not going back on my word! Because if I do—I will never forgive myself!”

Gigi and Bijou blinked at Cecilia’s flamboyant speech, before erupting into a small round of applause as the perfectionist took a bow. “That was inspiring!” Bijou cried, mock wiping a tear from her eye.

“Yeah! Riveting!” Gigi added, before looking Cecilia in the eye and smirking, “It’s too bad that speech was all talk, though...”

“Shut up,” Cecilia rolled her eyes, moving to sit next to Bijou, who had made some space for her on her chair.

Bijou glanced up at Gigi. “What about you, Gigi? What are your motivations for competing with Cece?”

Gigi placed a finger on her chin, staring into space as she thought hard about it. She knew Bijou was joking, but the question actually had her pondering for a moment. The answer was clear in her head however, and it was surprisingly simple.

“It’s fun —competing with Cece,” Gigi replied, flashing a toothy grin at Cecilia, “She makes things interesting.”

Cecilia blinked, a warmth rising up in her chest at Gigi’s words. Gigi didn’t seem to be saying it to tease or mess with her. In fact, her words sounded nothing but genuine. For a moment, Cecilia was caught off guard, turning her gaze quickly to the side, trying to hide the flush creeping up her neck.

“You’re being weird,” Cecilia muttered as Gigi crossed her arms indignantly.

“Hey, I’m being nice!” Gigi protested, “Besides, I’m stating facts here. You make all the boring school stuff way more fun than it has any right to be.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, mumbling something unintelligible as she continued to avert Gigi’s cheeky gaze. Bijou, bent forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the perfectionist’s expression. However, this proved a difficult task thanks to Cecilia’s wavy hair shielding her face from sight. Despite this, Bijou managed to catch a glimpse of red on the girl’s ear.

“Are you saying something, doll?” Gigi asked, waving a hand in front of Cecilia.

“I think your rizz got to her, Gigi,” Bijou said in amusement, as Cecilia looked up in annoyance.

“Anyway, you better not slack off anytime soon...” the perfectionist says, quickly changing the subject, “...because I’ll be giving this my all.”

“I’m not worried about that in the slightest, Cece,” Gigi said, leaning back in her chair with a smirk, “After all, I did slack off in the first semester. You also gave it your all, and yet... I still beat you.”

Cecilia froze, blinking at Gigi’s blunt remark. Her mouth opened, then closed, clearly struggling to come up with a response. Bijou bit her lip, holding back a laugh as Cecilia’s brows furrowed, her mind racing to come up with a clever comeback.

“I...well,” Cecilia began, standing up from Bijou’s seat, “That’s irrelevant. I’ll just have to... give *more* than my all this time.”

“*More* than your all?” Gigi asked, raising an eyebrow with a slight chuckle, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Cecilia smiled evilly, placing her hands on her hips with her nose pointed upright. “Well, I can afford to sacrifice some sleep,” Cecilia declares, listing it down on a hand before her eyes lit up, “Oh yes, and I still have a full box of that coffee Raora got me! I can afford to sacrifice my taste buds too...”

“Firstly, how dare you, the coffee I got you is excellent,” Raora says, suddenly appearing behind the perfectionist, who flinched in a startled manner, “And second of all, you are *not* losing a ton of sleep over studying again!”

Cecilia chuckled sheepishly as Raora glared at her in disapproval. “I wasn’t gonna lose a *ton* of sleep!” Cecilia argued, making a pinching gesture with her fingers, “I’ll just sleep an hour or two later than I usually do!”

Raora shook her head as Elizabeth walked up to the group. “Yeah, we both know that’s not happening. You’re just gonna push yourself too hard again,” Raora finished, giving Cecilia a firm look.

Cecilia opened her mouth to argue, her expression now indignant, when Elizabeth cut in. “She’s right, you know,” Elizabeth smiles, “If that happens, we’ll have to deal with a sleep-deprived Cecilia ranting about how ‘*efficiency is everything*’ and how terrible coffee tastes again.”

“It is not terrible...” Raora muttered under her breath, but her glare remained fixed on Cecilia.

“I don’t rant...” Cecilia huffed, puffing her cheeks slightly, “...do I?”

Elizabeth and Raora exchanged a look. “You do,” the pair replied in unison.

Bijou giggled, watching as Cecilia sputtered in protest. Meanwhile, Gigi leaned forward on her desk, resting her chin on her palm as she watched the exchange with immense amusement.

“Hey, cut her some slack guys... You’re acting like she’s gonna drop dead from studying,” Gigi said, waving a hand, “She’ll be fine. This is Cecilia Immergreen we’re talking about!”

“Gigi...” Cecilia beamed, glad to have someone on her side.

“That’s exactly the problem,” Raora chuckled, “This is Cecilia we’re talking about.”

Cecilia groaned, huffing as she crossed her arms. “Okay, okay! I get it! I won't overdo it!”

“I don't believe her for some reason,” Bijou instigated, grinning at the perfectionist’s increasing irritation.

“Neither do I,” Raora agreed, “There's something about her tone that screams ‘*liar*’.”

Cecilia pouted, glancing around at her chuckling friends. “I'm not lying... I never lie!” Cecilia defended herself, before turning to a cackling Gigi, “Shut up, Gigi!”

“I didn't say anything!” Gigi laughs, as the corners of Cecilia's mouth twitched upwards.

“Well... you were gonna!” Cecilia shot back, amusement slipping into her tone as she turned to the rest, “You guys are mean, you know that? Have some faith in me!”

Raora giggled, a hint of doubt still lingering in her eyes. “Sure,” the artist replied, “We’ll have faith in you if you solemnly swear not to burn yourself out.”

Cecilia sighed, rolling her eyes before placing a hand over her heart. “Fine, fine. I solemnly swear I won’t burn myself out.”

As it turned out, however, Cecilia was, in fact, a liar.

Despite what she told everybody, she couldn't help but go all out once again.

The thought of beating Gigi this semester was simply too tempting to ignore. She had always been serious about studying, but this time, she pushed herself harder than she ever did before. The perfectionist spent every free moment making notes, doing practice questions, and going through exam papers of years past.

And, of course, she started sleeping less. At first, it was just an hour later than usual. Then another. Before she knew it, she was running on coffee (reluctantly) and determination, convincing herself it was all worth it as long as she managed to beat her pigtailed rival in the end.

Meanwhile Raora knew that the oath Cecilia took in front of everyone was no more than a mere performance to stop them from nagging at her.

It only took a week for her suspicions to pile up. Cecilia was still sharp in class, still as quick with her answers, but there were little things that stood out. She paused just a second too long when answering questions. She rubbed her temples more often. And most importantly—she started talking less. And if there was one thing anyone knew about the perfectionist, it was that she could never stay silent for long.

By the second week, Raora's suspicions were more or less confirmed. The faint bags under Cecilia's eyes were hard to miss, even if she tried to act like everything was normal. Raora sighed, watching as Cecilia fought back another yawn during lunch. "You're losing sleep, aren't you?" the artist sighed.

Cecilia looked up from her sandwich, freezing for half a second before shaking her head. "No, no, no, I'm fine," Cecilia says, smiling unconvincingly.

Raora crossed her arms. "Uh-huh. And those dark circles under your eyes? You finally decided to try a goth phase?" Raora questioned, pointing her fork at Cecilia's eyebags.

"You must be hallucinating Raora!" Cecilia brushed off lightly, taking a sip from her tea hastily, "I look the same..."

"No, she's right, you look terrible," Elizabeth concurs, "Whatever happened to that big oath of yours?"

Cecilia chuckled nervously, avoiding the stares of her two friends. Was she really that obvious? As far as she knew, she was being perfectly low-key.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Cecilia said, waving a hand dismissively, "I feel great. Never better."

Raora and Elizabeth exchanged a glance.

"Cece, be honest. How many hours have you been sleeping lately?" Raora questioned, still pointing her fork as if she were holding Cecilia at gunpoint.

Cecilia hesitated, trying to come up with a convincing number. "E-enough," the perfectionist answered softly.

Raora shook her head. "Uh-huh. Which means 'not enough.'"

"Four hours?" Elizabeth guessed.

"Pfft, no," Cecilia scoffed, though she avoided eye contact, "That's way too little sleep for a human being!"

Raora narrowed her eyes. "Three?"

Cecilia immediately took another sip of tea.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “Cecilia...” the scarlet haired girl muttered in disapproval.

Cecilia put the cup down with a nervous chuckle. “Oh, come on, it’s not that bad—”

“It’s three, isn’t it?” Raora groaned, dragging a hand down her face.

“Okay, but listen! I’ve been super productive—”

“Nope, that’s it,” Raora cut her off, “I’m confiscating your coffee.”

The perfectionist stuck out her tongue at her best friend teasingly. “It’s okay, I didn’t need to drink ANY of that yucky stuff anyway,” Cecilia replied childishly, prompting Raora to gasp in indignation.

“A-ha!” Elizabeth exclaimed, “You didn’t deny losing sleep!”

Cecilia sighed, setting her teacup down and flashing them both a reassuring smile. “Okay, fine, I might have been losing a few hours of sleep, but I’m fine, honestly,”

Raora narrowed her eyes. “Are you really telling me that beating Gigi is worth messing up your sleep schedule?” the artist asked.

Cecilia leaned her chin on her arms. “Gigi’s a monster,” she said, mostly joking, though there was a hint of seriousness behind her words, “You can think of this as my training arc. I mean, she’s basically like an overpowered final boss, right? And I’ve got to level up to match her. You know how it is. Like, the more I push myself, the more I get in her zone. It’s like a constant challenge, but in a fun way, you know? And if I can beat her, then it proves I’ve really come a long way. Every quiz, every test, it’s like another step toward taking her down! It’s not about just beating her, it’s about sending a message. The stronger I get, the harder it is for her to stay on top.”

Elizabeth stared blankly at Cecilia, while Raora let out a long, heavy sigh. “That’s uh, great and all, but, just to clarify... we’re still talking about exams here right?” Elizabeth said slowly, rubbing her temples as she tried to keep up with the perfectionist’s tangent.

“Exactly!” Cecilia continued, looking more awake than she did all day, “It’s like every test is a mini-boss, and Gigi’s the final one. So, I’ve got to make sure my strategy is perfect! Trust me, when you’re up against someone like Gigi—”

When it was clear Cecilia was about to start going on another tangent, Raora groaned and shot Elizabeth a look. “I’m gonna need a lot more coffee to get through this *yappa yappa*,” Raora smiled weakly as Elizabeth chuckled.

After finishing their meals, the three girls slung their bags over their shoulders before heading out of the cafeteria. Cecilia stretched her arms out, yawning, before turning to the other two. “Are you guys down for some studying at the library? Our first paper’s coming up really soon,” Cecilia asked, eyes glimmering with excitement.

“I’d love to, but I have to head down to the art club today,” Raora smiles apologetically, “I could join you next time though!”

“Awh,” Cecilia says disappointedly before turning to Elizabeth, “What about you Liz?”

“Sorry, Cecilia, I have to meet up with Nerissa in a while. We have acapella practice today you see...” Elizabeth explains as Cecilia pouts.

“Meanies,” the perfectionist whined, as she began to walk ahead of her friends, “So you're just gonna leave me all alone?”

Raora caught up with her best friend, clutching her arms playfully. “Don't be like that Cece...” Raora giggled, “I'll make it up to you!”

“How?” Cecilia asked, unable to hold back a smile.

“Maybe Raora can take back what she said about confiscating your coffee,” Elizabeth suggested with a smirk, as the other two burst into a fit of giggles.

Cecilia groaned, though more amused than anything. “I hate you both.”

After bidding goodbye to Elizabeth and Raora, Cecilia made her way to the library, having agreed to wait for the artist to finish her club activities so they could head home together. And as she still had a few hours to kill, Cecilia decided that it was as good a time as any to get some work done.

On her way to the library, Cecilia passed by the tables near the staff room. The area was usually crowded with students seeking consultations from their teachers, but today, it was relatively empty, with the exception of two people.

Gigi stood by one of the tables, her hands behind her back as she rocked on her heels, looking up at their Literature teacher with an awkward look on her face. The teacher, arms crossed, let out a tired sigh.

“Gigi, this is the tenth time this semester. I can't keep chasing you down for your assignments,” the teacher said, exasperation clear in her voice.

“I know, I know,” Gigi replied, nodding quickly, “And I swear I was gonna submit it! I just... uh... misplaced it. For a little bit. But I found it! So that's good, right?”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, slowing her steps. Typical.

The teacher shook her head. “You used the same excuse three excuses ago,” she pointed out, as Gigi gulped nervously.

“I did?” the pigtailed girl asked in surprise, scrunching up her nose as she tried to recall, “Oh my gosh! You're right! Hehe... guess I have to start recording down what excuses I've used before—”

Gigi quickly shut her mouth upon meeting her teacher's venomous glare. “W-what I meant was... I'll hand it in first thing tomorrow morning!”

Cecilia had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing. Gigi's ability to dig her own grave was nothing short of impressive.

The teacher pinched the bridge of her nose, clearly at the end of her patience. "You'll hand it in today, Murin. No more excuses. If I don't see it on my desk by the end of the day, we're having a very long talk after class tomorrow," the teacher said, crossing her arms.

Gigi straightened up, nodding rapidly. "Yes, ma'am! End of the day! Crystal clear!" the blonde saluted.

The teacher gave her one last look before turning and heading back into the staff room, leaving Gigi standing there, looking thoroughly relieved.

Cecilia finally stepped forward, hands on her hips as she smirked. "Quite a show you put on there," Cecilia jokes, as Gigi turned, groaning when she saw the perfectionist.

"Oh, great. You heard all that?" Gigi sighed, waving at her friend.

Cecilia nodded, looking way too pleased. "Every word."

"You're not gonna start lecturing me are you?" Gigi asked cautiously, preparing herself for another scolding.

"Mmm...nyam, nyam, nyam," Cecilia mumbles, placing a finger on her chin as if deep in thought, before grinning, "Nah, I think our dear teacher already chewed you out enough."

Gigi let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Whew, I thought I was about to get another one of your '*Gigi, you need to take your school work seriously*' talks," Gigi jokes, wrapping an arm around Cecilia, who scoffed.

"Well, I was definitely tempted to," Cecilia chuckles, "But you already hear it from me every five minutes so I'll just let you go this time."

Gigi chuckled. "Wow, how merciful of you, doll," Gigi says in a mocking tone before grabbing her bag off a table, "So what're you up to?"

Cecilia adjusted the strap of her bag. "I was just on my way to the library to get some studying done," she said matter-of-factly.

Upon hearing Cecilia's explanation, Gigi made a face. "Booooring," she groaned before perking up, "Hey, how about we ditch that and go get some bubble tea instead? I'll treat ya!"

The perfectionist raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Right, because you totally have time to waste when you still have an assignment to hand in by the end of the day," Cecilia rolled her eyes.

"Oh. Right. That," Gigi muttered in disappointment, "Do you think the teach'll let me off with another warning?"

“Come on, why don’t you just come with me to the library? You can finish your work there,” Cecilia offered, “I could sit with you while you finish the essay.”

“Are you asking me out on a l-l-library d-d-date?” Gigi asked, covering her face as she stuttered mockingly.

Cecilia huffed, making a heel turn as she started walking away from the blonde. “Oh, shut up.”

Gigi grinned, dropping the act as she slung her bag over her shoulder. “Alright, alright, fine. I guess I could use the company while I suffer through this essay,” the pigtailed girl chirped happily.

Cecilia smirked. “Good. Maybe some of my super admirable responsibility will rub off on you,” Cecilia says jokingly.

Gigi gasped dramatically. “Are you implying I’m irresponsible?”

Cecilia gave her a deadpan look. “You lost your assignment did you not?” she pointed out.

Gigi clicked her tongue. “Damn. You got me there.”

The weeks leading to the start of the exams passed by relatively quickly. Cecilia kept up with her intense revision regiment, spending many long nights burying herself under piles of worksheets and books.

Surprisingly, she even managed to reel Gigi into studying with her and the others. It wasn’t easy at first, however. Gigi whined, got distracted, and tried every excuse to escape—but somehow, Cecilia made it work. Whether it was through sheer persistence or resorting to gaslighting, she eventually managed to get Gigi to settle into the habit of revising with the group.

Every day of studying felt like one step closer to victory. Cecilia wasn’t just aiming to do well—she was determined to utterly crush Gigi in the rankings. The optimist in her had hope that this semester would finally be the one where she pulled ahead. Gigi may have beaten her before, but this time, things would be different.

As the days passed, the familiar pre-exam tension filled the air. Students could be seen hitting the books in every spare moment, the library was packed more than ever, and late-night review sessions became the norm. Unlike many others, Cecilia thrived in this environment, fueled by the challenge. The exhaustion was there, sure, but the thought of seeing her name above Gigi’s on the ranking board kept her going.

Before everyone knew it, the exam season had begun. The entire school was in full-on test mode, with students rushing to cram in last-minute studying, anxiously flipping through their notes in the hallways.

Cecilia, of course, had been preparing for this for weeks. Her notes were organized, her formulas memorized, and her practice papers completed down to the last question. If there was one thing she was confident about, it was her preparation.

Each paper came with its own challenges, and the moment the first paper began, everybody's mood shifted entirely. No more casual study sessions, no more joking about dying from stress—the moment they had been spending many nights preparing for was here and now.

Cecilia swept through each exam relentlessly, going over her answers multiple times before time was up. She wanted to be sure there weren't any mistakes and no careless errors. She couldn't afford to slip up, not when she was this close to beating Gigi.

Every single time Cecilia left an exam room, exhausted from racking her brain over tough questions, she would glance over and see Gigi looking completely unbothered. The girl would be stretching, casually chatting with their classmates, or, worst of all, grinning like she didn't just take an exhausting test.

In all honesty, it was kinda irritating. Cecilia had to rant about it to Raora one day after their English paper, the two of them sitting on the benches outside the exam hall while waiting for their next test.

"She just walks out like that—like it was nothing," Cecilia huffed, shaking her head, "Meanwhile, I'm over here crashing out over every single question..."

"That's our top ranker for you," Raora chuckled, clearing her throat upon Cecilia throwing her a look.

"I guess so..." Cecilia agreed reluctantly, "It's like she already knows she's gonna do well, and UGH it makes me kinda mad."

Still, there was no point dwelling on it too much. She had her own exams to focus on, and more importantly, her own goal to reach: Beating Gigi once and for all.

As the weeks went on, the exams became more grueling. Math was a challenge, as always, and history simply drained the perfectionist's energy completely. Her physics paper, in particular, had some tricky problems that prompted Cecilia to do a double take and ponder on.

Despite the lengthiness of the exam season, the perfectionist never let herself slow down. Every evening, she went home and studied for the next subject, even if her brain was begging for rest. The finish line was in sight, and she wasn't about to let exhaustion hold her back.

At long last, the day of the final paper had arrived. Cecilia took a deep breath as she stepped into the exam hall, gripping her pen tightly. This was it. Once she was done with this chemistry paper, she could finally rest.

Cecilia glanced over at Gigi, who was, once again, looking way too calm. The pigtailed girl stretched her arms above her head, making eye contact with Cecilia before smiling and

winking.

Whatever fatigue Cecilia may have had from staying up instantly vanished at that moment. The perfectionist returned a smile to Gigi before turning back around.

The second the exam papers were distributed, the hall fell into silence. Cecilia's eyes scanned the first page, her mind immediately racing. This was the final stretch. She could do this.

The school garden was one of Cecilia's favorite places. It was quiet, peaceful, and best of all, empty. Barely anyone ever came here, which made it the perfect place for her to relax whenever there was something troubling her.

Her favorite spot was a secluded bench behind a cluster of roses. It was shaded by a few trees, and from there, she could see most of the garden without being too exposed. It was the perfect place to clear her thoughts, which was something she desperately needed today.

It had been two weeks since the end of exam season, and today was the day the rankings would be announced.

Cecilia had woken up early, her nerves refusing to let her sleep any further. Rather than sitting around at home, she decided to come to school early, hoping the fresh air would help calm her down.

It didn't.

She had worked so hard this semester, pouring her heart and soul into her studies. Every night, every practice test, every note... had all been leading up to this. She wanted to be the one at the top. She had to be.

The thought of not beating Gigi again made her stomach twist. What if she didn't make it? What if all that effort still wasn't enough?

Cecilia took a deep breath, leaning back against the bench. Worrying wouldn't change anything now, she told herself. The results were already set. All she could do was wait.

She glanced at her phone. Still early. The school grounds were quiet, only a few students here and there. The rankings wouldn't be posted until later, but she knew the moment they were up, the halls would be filled with students rushing to check their names.

Cecilia closed her eyes, letting the cool morning breeze brush against her face. She just had to be patient.

Suddenly, her phone vibrated. Curious, she held it up before realising she had just received a text from Gigi.

geegee: hey cc where u at rn

geegee: (▯ ▽ ▯)

imgreen: at school

imgreen: why

imgreen: (▯ - ▯)

geegee: well since today's the big day i wondering whether you wanted to go see the rankings together 👉👉

imgreen: sure i don't mind

geegee: WAIT A MIN UR THERE ALREADY????

geegee: damn u must be REALLY hyped

imgreen: oh shutup i've been waiting for this

geegee: hehe as it happens

geegee: im in sch too!!

geegee: i got a little too excited myself...

imgreen: stupid

geegee: oi

geegee: so where are you and the others im feeling a lil lonely

imgreen: actually im on my own rn

imgreen: raora didn't wanna wake up so early...

imgreen: im at the garden come find me

geegee: okie dokes

Sure enough, just a few moments later, Gigi appeared at the entrance of the garden, looking around for a second before spotting Cecilia on the bench. She walked over, hands in her pockets, and gave a small grin.

"I thought you'd be camping outside the noticeboard already," Gigi said, raising an eyebrow, "What are you doing all the way out here?"

Cecilia glanced up at her, shrugging slightly. "I guess I needed some space to myself," Cecilia smiles, "Plus, I love it here. It's quiet, peaceful... and nobody ever comes here. It's a perfect place to give my mind some rest."

Gigi leaned against the bench, glancing at the empty garden. "Fair enough," she said, before giving Cecilia a sideways look, "I assume something must be on your mind, then?"

Cecilia paused for a second, then shrugged again. "It's nothing serious. It's just—I'm a little on edge," she says, rubbing the back of her neck, "I've put in a lot of work... and the thought of it not paying off is making me nervous."

Gigi looked at the perfectionist with a reassuring look. "Hey, don't fret about it too much. You've done what you can."

Cecilia giggled, looking up at Gigi.

"It's funny hearing that from you," the perfectionist mumbled, crossing her arms, "You're the one I'm trying to beat."

Cecilia proceeded to stare at Gigi's carefree expression curiously. How was it that Gigi didn't seem worried in the slightest? There didn't seem to be anything particularly off with her demeanor, almost as if nothing about today rattled her.

"You're staring," Gigi grinned, before striking a pose and blowing a kiss towards the perfectionist, "Do I look *that* cute today?"

"Stupid," Cecilia shot back before her smile faltered just a little, "I was just wondering how you look so... unbothered. Like personally, I'm nervous as hell for the release of the rankings."

Gigi shrugged, taking a seat next to Cecilia. "Because whatever happens, happens. Freaking out won't change the results."

Cecilia let out a small huff, leaning back against the bench. "That's easy for you to say. You don't drain your life energy stressing over these rankings."

"Yeah, because I have a life," Gigi shot back, grinning when Cecilia bumped against her shoulder lightly.

Gigi sighed, as she began fiddling with her thumbs. "Okay, to tell you the truth, I am a tiny little bit nervous," Gigi admitted, to which Cecilia raised an eyebrow.

"Really? You? Nervous?" Cecilia asked, "That's kinda unexpected."

"Only a little though!" Gigi clarified, "It's just I don't know... maybe a part of me doesn't wanna lose to you just yet."

"Hehe," Cecilia giggles, gaining a sudden urge to tease her rival, "Are you finally worried I'd beat you?"

Gigi returns a small laugh. "Not exactly," Gigi replies, her tone honest, "I'm just worried our competition would end if you did beat me."

Cecilia blinked, having not expected that answer in the slightest. She opened her mouth to say something—anything, but for some reason, she was unable to form any sort of coherent answer.

They sat in silence for a moment, the growing sounds of footsteps and voices indicating that students were finally starting to arrive. Soon, the hallways would be packed and the rankings would be up.

Gigi promptly stood up, her cheeks now pink as she offered a hand to Cecilia. "Guess we should start heading over, huh?"

Cecilia took a breath, steadying herself. "Yeah. Let's go."

The pair exited the garden, making their way through the increasingly dense hallways. Everyone they passed by already seemed to be talking about the rankings, though neither Cecilia nor Gigi paid much attention. Instead, their focus was on two familiar figures they spotted standing near the staircase—Elizabeth and Raora.

Raora was stretching her arms above her head, looking half-awake, while Elizabeth was sipping from her flask. As soon as they noticed Cecilia and Gigi approaching, Raora perked up and waved.

"If it isn't our two academic weapons," Raora teased, hugging the pair, before turning to Cecilia, "Though... I figured you'd be first in line at the noticeboard by now, Cece."

"Very funny," the perfectionist smiles, rolling her eyes.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at the duo. "Did you two come to school together?"

"Nah," Gigi answered, shoving her hands into her pockets, "We just happened to arrive early. Cece here was off sulking in the garden."

"I was not sulking," Cecilia retorted as the others laughed.

Raora smirked. "Then what were you doing?" the artist piped up, amused at Cecilia's growing irritation.

"I was... thinking," Cecilia hesitated before saying.

"Thinking about how to sulk even further once we see the rankings?" Gigi guessed teasingly.

"Thinking about whether I should keep you guys as my friends," Cecilia snapped, swatting at Gigi and missing.

Elizabeth signed, taking another sip from her flask as she watched Cecilia make further attempts to swat Gigi's shoulder. "Alright, alright. Should we get moving? I believe the rankings should be posted soon."

Gigi and Cecilia paused, ceasing their little game of tag before replying in unison. "Yeah, let's."

Raora clapped her hands together. "Alright then, let's go see how bad I did this semester," the artist grinned.

With that, the four of them started walking toward the noticeboard, the uneasiness in Cecilia's stomach returning with each step.

Eventually, the group reached the main hallway, where a crowd had already gathered near the noticeboards. Students were chatting excitedly, some standing on tiptoes to get a better look at the rankings.

Before the group of four could push forward, Bijou's familiar voice called out, "There you guys are!"

Turning toward the sound, they spotted their classmates—Nerissa, Shiori, Bijou, and the twins—standing off to the side. The moment Cecilia and Gigi approached, Shiori smirked.

"Perfect timing," Shiori said, arms crossed, "We were just placing bets."

"Bets?" Gigi echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"On which one of you got first place, obviously," Nerissa chimed in, gesturing at Cecilia and Gigi, grinning, "It's bound to be either one of you!"

Bijou nodded enthusiastically. "Half of us think Gigi's still holding onto the top spot, but the other half think Cecilia finally pulled through this time!"

Fuwawa glanced at Cecilia. "Just so you know, I bet three bucks on you," Fuwawa winked at the perfectionist, "But no pressure or anything..."

Mococo pulled Gigi aside, whispering in her ear. "I bet five bucks on you, Gigi. Don't let me down!"

Cecilia groaned, rubbing her temples. "You guys are the worst," Cecilia huffs, "Are we race horses or something?"

Gigi chuckled, trying to hold back her laughter at how absurd this whole thing was. "C'mon, Cece. Let's just get this over with."

Raora clutched the blonde's arm as she pointed at an elderly man carrying a few posters in his arms. "Looks like it's time," the artist says, as every head in the corridor turns to the poster-carrying man.

Cecilia took a deep breath.

The students in the hallways held their breaths in anticipation as the rankings were finally posted. Students surged forward like a tide, eager to see their names. Cecilia's stomach twisted into a knot as she followed, Raora's grip firm on her hand.

Her mind immediately went into overdrive as she began thinking up of the possible outcomes that could occur the moment she saw the rankings. If she was first, what then? What would she feel? Pride? Relief? Would it feel as satisfying as she had always imagined? More importantly, how would Gigi react?

And if she didn't get first place? Cecilia swallowed. She didn't want to linger on that thought for too long, but she couldn't help it. It was all she could think about. She had done all she could—studying late into the night, skipping outings, and even considered drinking another cup of Raora's coffee. If that was not enough now, then what? What more could she have done?

She took another deep breath, steadying herself as the crowd parted. The rankings were in sight now. One way or another, she was about to find out.

2024 FIRST YEAR BATCH YEAR-END TEST RANKINGS:

1. GIGI MURIN

2. CECILIA IMMERGREEN

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Her eyes darted to the top of the list, her heart experiencing a familiar sinking feeling when she saw her name under Gigi's once again. Second place. The same as before. Despite

everything—every sacrifice...it still wasn't enough.

The optimist in her had almost convinced herself that this time would be different, that this time, she'd finally come out on top. That she'd see her name at number one, and it would all be worth it. But there it was, in black and white, clear as day—Gigi Murin had once again topped the rankings.

Immediately, there was an uproar of chatter as the first years reacted to the results. Both cheers and groans could be heard as the crowd closed in, many of them giving Gigi their congratulations.

“First again?!”

“You're crazy, Gigi.”

“The reigning monarch once again!

“You've gotta teach me your ways Gigi...”

Gigi chuckled nervously as the onslaught of praise went her way. “Heh, lucky me!” the blonde smiles, though her mind wasn't on the crowd around her. Rather, the pigtailed girl was trying to see past the sea of her peers, in attempt to catch a glimpse at Cecilia, who was out of sight.

“Are you okay Cecilia?” Elizabeth asked the perfectionist, placing a gentle hand on the latter's shoulder. Cecilia nodded, smiling weakly as Elizabeth and Raora studied her expressions. If she had to be honest, however, she did not feel okay.

The truth was, the sting of once again coming in second place hurt more than she wanted to admit. She wanted to lash out—to express just how angry she was at herself. After all that work, all those late nights...

The perfectionist then thought back to the end of the first semester—when she first found out Gigi had beat her. Safe to say, Cecilia wasn't exactly proud of how she acted back then. The way she snapped at Gigi, the way she threw a tantrum in front of everybody as if she was a little girl.

But throwing a tantrum hadn't changed anything back then, and it wouldn't change anything now.

Cecilia exhaled slowly, unclenching her fists. In her eyes, she still had every right to be upset. She had poured everything into this semester, sacrificed so much time, effort, and sleep, and still, it hadn't been enough. But being angry wouldn't change anything.

Besides, this wasn't the end. This was only their first year. She still had plenty of chances to beat that pesky pigtailed girl. The thought immediately calmed her down. This loss didn't mean she would always lose. If anything, this just meant she had to bounce back and push herself further.

“Why don't we all head to a café after school to celebrate the end of the school year?” Raora suggested, winking at Cecilia, who managed a small smile, “I'll even treat you to some tea.”

“You promise you're not gonna lace it with coffee?” Cecilia chuckles as Raora nods, raising her hand and crossing her fingers.

At that moment, a rather nervous-looking Gigi approached the group, having just escaped from their schoolmates. Elizabeth and Raora shared a knowing look, before quickly stepping away from Cecilia to watch whatever was about to happen next from a distance.

The blonde gave the perfectionist a cautious grin as Cecilia stared back, an awkward silence befalling them.

“Hey, you feeling okay, Cece?” Gigi asked as a mischievous thought crossed Cecilia's mind.

The perfectionist narrowed her eyes, her lips pressed as she let an awkward silence ring out. She crossed her arms, exhaling sharply through her nose as she turned away from Gigi.

Gigi's face fell, immediately tensing up. “Oh no,” she muttered, taking a step back, “You're mad, aren't you? Look, if it makes you feel any better, I actually did study a little this time ___”

Cecilia rolled her eyes as she began giggling, unable to commit to the bit any further.

Gigi blinked, completely bewildered. “Huh?”

The perfectionist smirked. “Hehehe, relax, Gigi, I'm messing with you,” she laughed, before stretching out a hand towards Gigi, “Congrats on getting first again.”

Gigi stared at the outstretched hand, processing the situation, before scoffing and shaking it. “You're such an asshole!” the blonde muttered, as Cecilia grinned proudly.

“It's your fault for falling for such an obvious joke, stupid,” Cecilia retorted, as the rivals let go of the other's hand.

“So you're really not mad?” Gigi asked, a hint of doubt still lingering within her.

“Not really,” Cecilia replied, “I mean I'm definitely a little pissed, but I'm not letting it get to me. I still fully intend to beat you... eventually!”

Gigi grinned, a wave of relief washing over her. “Heh, we'll see about that.”

The days after the release of the results drifted away, and eventually, the school year ended. Spring break had finally arrived, and with it came a collective relief from the first-years. The stress of exams and grinding was finally behind them and they finally had a chance to breathe a little. Some students had already left for vacations, while others made plans to do absolutely nothing for the whole break.

Cecilia took the break as a chance to catch up on sleep—spending the first two days doing nothing but stay in bed for as long as she wanted, free from the grueling grind. When she wasn't sleeping, she was finally starting to loosen up again, letting herself have some much needed fun.

She played games she had been itching to play, hung out with her friends without a care in the world and even initiated multiple outings with her friends. Whether it was grabbing bubble tea, wasting hours in front of her computer, or just sitting around at home doing nothing in particular, she finally let herself unwind.

There was just one problem however—Gigi was acting off.

At first, Cecilia didn't think much of it. Maybe Gigi was just busy with her own plans, or maybe she just wasn't in the mood for games. But as the days went by, it became difficult to ignore.

Gigi barely joined their gaming sessions anymore, and when she did, she never stayed for long. She was quieter in the group chat, replying late or sometimes not at all. But the biggest red flag? She hadn't asked to play League of Legends even once. Gigi, the same Gigi who would drag them into matches at ungodly hours, hadn't so much as mentioned it in the past week. That alone was enough to set off alarms in Cecilia's head.

Then there were the outings. Normally, Gigi was one of the first to agree to plans, always up for whatever nonsense their group got into. But this break? She hadn't shown up to a single one. Not for tea, not for their trip to the movies—nothing. Every time they tried inviting her to hang out, she either gave a vague excuse or didn't answer at all.

It wasn't like her. Not one bit.

"What's on your mind, Cece?" Bijou asked, taking a lick out of her ice cream.

Cecilia and Bijou were currently sitting on a bench outside a convenience store, each holding an ice cream cone. Cecilia tapped her spoon against the rim of her cup, frowning. "It's Gigi. She's been weird lately," the perfectionist says, absentmindedly staring at the pedestrians walking past them.

Bijou tilted her head. "Weird how?"

"You've noticed, right? She barely joins the VC anymore, and she hasn't come to a single outing," Cecilia pointed out, "I mean, it's *not* not weird, right?"

Bijou hummed, thinking for a moment. "Yeah, I guess that is kinda odd. She's usually the first to drag us into stuff. Have you tried talking to her?" she asked, setting aside her dessert.

"Not yet," Cecilia admitted, poking at her ice cream, "But I feel like something's up. She never shuts up for this long."

Bijou nodded slowly. "Maybe she just needed some time to herself? I mean, the school year was kinda intense. Maybe she's just cooling off."

Cecilia wasn't convinced. "If that were the case, she'd at least tell us, wouldn't she? Besides she got—" Cecilia began, before clearing her throat, "Ahem... first place."

Bijou sighed. "Yeah. But she's the type of person who'd rather act like everything's fine than admit something's bothering her," Bijou chuckles weakly.

Cecilia crossed her arms, her expression hardening. "Well, if she won't tell us, I'll just have to get it out of her myself."

"The way you say it makes it sound like you're gonna hold her at gunpoint," Bijou giggles.

Cecilia smirks, scooping up some ice cream. "Well, if that's what it takes."

That night, thunder could be heard rumbling in the distance as Cecilia and Fauna sat across from each other at the dining table. Outside, the cold and stormy winds howled while small raindrops began pitter-pattering against the windows. Dinner was simple—nothing too fancy, just some takeout Cecilia got on the way home.

Cecilia ate in silence, absentmindedly poking at her rice in between bites. Her eyes kept flicking to her phone on the table, fingers tapping against its surface.

Fauna, noticing the distracted look on her sister's face, set her chopsticks down. "Are you good? Something on your mind?" she asked, her voice soft and concerned.

Cecilia blinked, looking up as if she just remembered Fauna was there. "Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

Fauna raised an eyebrow, looking doubtful. "You sure? You've been staring at your phone like it's about to blow at any moment."

Cecilia sighed, pushing a stray grain of rice around with her spoon. "Oh alright, it's Gigi. She's been acting weird lately," Cecilia says, sighing.

"Really?" Fauna asked, her interest piqued, "I didn't notice anything off during our last club session."

"It started after spring break began," Cecilia explained, exhaling deeply, "She's barely been around. She doesn't play games with us, she skips out on all our hangouts, and she never gives a straight answer when we invite her to do anything. It's just... not like her."

Fauna rested her chin on her palm, thinking. "Maybe she's just busy?"

"Maybe," Cecilia muttered, still unconvinced. She then picked up her phone, staring at her messages app. "I was actually thinking of texting her. Just to check in, see if she's okay."

Fauna nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. Hopefully, it's not anything serious."

Cecilia hesitated for a second longer before unlocking her phone and typing out a message.

imgreen: hey gigi

imgreen: i just wanted to check in and ask

imgreen: are you doing alright?

Cecilia stared at the message for a moment, debating whether to add anything else. After a moment's hesitation, she pressed send.

The message was marked as delivered, but no immediate reply came. Usually, when she sent Gigi a message, the blonde would instantly reply, but this time, nothing. No notification, no read receipt, nothing.

Cecilia frowned, glaring at her phone as she set it face-down on the table. She picked up her spoon, took one bite of her food—then flipped her phone over again. Still nothing. She squinted at the screen, as if that would magically make a reply appear.

“Unbelievable!” the perfectionist muttered, “Leaving me on ‘sent’ like this...”

“Cece... you literally just sent the message,” Fauna pointed out in exasperation.

“I know,” Cecilia huffed, tapping her fingers against the table, “But usually, she answers fast! What if she saw it and decided not to respond? W-what if she’s ghosting me? What if —”

“Cece.”

“What!?”

“Eat your food.”

Cecilia let out a dramatic groan, dropping her spoon. “This is ridiculous.”

Fauna chuckled, shaking her head. “You have the patience of a toddler,” she smiled.

Cecilia slumped in her chair, arms crossed, staring at her phone like it had personally wronged her. “If she doesn’t answer in ten minutes, I’m calling her.”

Fauna sighed. “You’re such a brat.”

A few moments later, Cecilia reached for her phone again, her thumb hovering over Gigi's contact. "I'm gonna call her."

Fauna, who was calmly finishing her meal, shot her a look. "You're acting like she blocked you or something."

"Who knows? Anything's possible at this point!" Cecilia replies, tapping her foot nervously as Fauna opens her mouth to reply, only to be interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

The sisters immediately turned their heads toward the door. "Are you expecting someone?" Fauna asked her younger sister, who shook her head.

Cecilia frowned, setting her phone down. "No... Are you?"

Fauna shook her head.

There was a moment of silence before someone knocked on the door.

Cecilia pushed back her chair. "I'll answer it," she volunteers as Fauna nodded, turning her attention back to her dinner.

After exiting the kitchen, Cecilia made her way to the entrance. A flash of lightning illuminated the dark living room as thunder roared. Cecilia took a quick glance through the windows and frowned. Who could be knocking at this hour— and more specifically, in this weather?

She hesitated for a moment before stepping forward. The knocking came again, slightly more urgent this time.

Cecilia reached the door, unlocking it with a quiet click. "Hello?" she says, opening the door, before widening her eyes at the person standing in front of her.

Gigi stood there, completely drenched, her hair plastered to her face. Her usual bright expression was nowhere to be seen—her eyes were red, her breath shaky, and she looked like she had been crying.

Cecilia gasped at the sight of her friend in this state. Before she could say anything, however, Gigi suddenly stepped forward, wrapping her arms around her in a tight, desperate hug.

"Cece..." Gigi whimpered, her voice breaking as she embraced Cecilia.

"Gigi," was all Cecilia could muster as she hugged Gigi back, not caring about the fact that she was completely drenched. It was clear she wasn't okay. Something was very wrong.

Cecilia tightened her hold on Gigi, feeling the shorter girl tremble against her. She didn't demand an explanation, she didn't ask any questions—whatever happened, it could wait. Right now, it was clear Gigi just needed someone to hold on to.

“You should come inside,” Cecilia finally said, with Gigi nodding as she shivered from the cold wind. She didn’t let go until Gigi did, guiding her in and shutting the door behind them.

Chapter End Notes

gasp another late update

! Σ(¬_¬;)

do check out the webtoon of this fic by oko, kail and wrence!! im so grateful and happy that they adapted it you have no idea ehehehehe

remember to show them some love OR ELSE 🙏🙏🙏🙏

(here's the link)

https://m.webtoons.com/en/canvas/perfect/list?title_no=1015203

Facing Them

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Raora glared at her opponent with conviction, unwilling to let her guard down. She had to show him that she wasn't intimidated by his killer stare one bit, for if she lost focus, even for a second, it would all be naught.

Her opponent—plump, grumpy and (really) fluffy, narrowed his eyes further, his face scrunching up in irritation. He wasn't playing around either.

Raora leaned in closer, narrowing her own eyes as she smirked smugly. “Don't think you're gonna beat me,” she muttered, “I don't intend on losing to you!”

The cat simply stared back, its tail waving about casually.

“Nothing to say? You're not scared are you?” Raora mocked, sounding a little shaky. She could feel her inevitable blink approaching with each second, and she could only hope that the feline in front of her didn't notice the strain in her eyes.

The cat, however, seemed to sense his opponent faltering. His expression grew increasingly smug—well, as smug as a cat could appear anyway. “You think you've already won, huh? Ha! Not a chance,” Raora mocked through gritted teeth.

“Raora, what are you doing?” Cecilia snickered, bringing over a tray of desserts with Elizabeth at her side.

Raora giggled, her eyes still locked with the cat's. “Shh! I'm in the middle of something important.”

“Having a staring contest with a cat?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“Yes,” Raora said, dead serious, “And I'm winning.”

Cecilia and Elizabeth exchanged looks before turning back to the absurd scene in front of them. Meanwhile, the cat, who seemed to have had enough of the artist, let out a low purr, before finally turning away, blinking.

Raora gasped. “Oh my god. He blinked first! I win!” she cheered, pointing at her fluffy opponent in triumph.

The cat, completely unbothered, let out a slow, lazy yawn before curling up into a loaf, looking as if he had never cared about the contest in the first place. Cecilia rolled her eyes, setting the tray on the table. “Congrats. You just won a battle he wasn't even fighting.”

Raora crossed her arms, grinning. “Doesn't matter. A win's a win,” Raora defended herself.

Just then, the crumpling of plastic drew their attention. Gigi strolled in, hauling two large bags of cat treats in her arms. “Alright, I got the goods,” she huffed, dropping the bags onto the floor with a loud thud.

The effect was instantaneous—several cats in the room perked up at the sound, ears twitching as they turned towards Gigi with a newfound interest. A particularly chubby orange cat—the same one Raora had been staring down moments ago—abandoned its curled position to waddle over, tail held high.

“Aww... they love me,” Gigi grinned, patting the head of a grey tabby cat as she unwrapped a bag of treats.

Cecilia giggled, watching as the sea of felines swarmed around the pigtailed girl. “I’m pretty sure they’re just gluttons,” Cecilia joked as Gigi tossed her first treat onto the floor. Instantly, the cats pounced into a chaotic flurry of fur and paws as they scrambled for the snack.

Gigi beamed. “Look at them! They’re so happy!”

Elizabeth shook her head, smiling as Gigi handed her a bag of treats. “They’re food-motivated, not your adoring fans.”

“Hey... let me have this,” Gigi chuckled with a wave of her hand, tearing open another bag.

The chubby orange cat—Raora’s former opponent—stared up at Gigi expectantly, tail flicking. Gigi grinned and held a treat just out of reach. “Nuh uh, you gotta work for it. Do a trick!”

The cat responded by sitting down and doing absolutely nothing.

“Lazy ass,” Gigi snickered, feeding the cat a treat anyway as the orange creature happily chomped it down before marching away like royalty.

Raora shook her head. “You just got played, Gigi, you need to make them show you respect!”

“Nah, I respect the hustle,” Gigi grinned, handing Cecilia and Raora their bags of cat treats.

Cecilia smirked. “I agree with Raora you’re just enabling them at this point,” Cecilia pipes in as a group of cats swarmed around her.

Before Gigi could respond, a cream-colored cat leapt onto her lap, sniffing curiously at the bag in her hands. Gigi gasped dramatically as her heart melted at the sight of the feline. “Oh my god. This one chose me.”

“It definitely chose the food,” Elizabeth giggles, before two hungry cats snatch the bag of food out of her hands, “Hey!”

“I’m starting to see what you mean,” Gigi replies cautiously, side-eyeing a trio of cats stalking nearby, their eyes locked onto the bag Gigi was holding.

Cecilia and Raora laughed as Gigi struggled to defend her treats from the ever-growing swarm of cats. No matter how high she held the bag, their relentless paws kept reaching for it, their eyes locked onto the prize.

The group had decided to visit the cat café after school, a well-earned break after the stress of the past semester. The café itself was pretty warm and inviting, filled with the comforting aroma of pastries and beverages, along with the footsteps of the creatures that dwelled within. Cats lazily slept across their beds, or draped themselves over customers as though they were just another piece of furniture.

Gigi, having brought in the cats' favorite treats, had drawn the most attention, being surrounded by a small army of cats. After realising the cats were only approaching her for the food, she sighed in defeat as Cecilia sipped her tea, enjoying the entertainment.

"Best decision we've made all week," Cecilia thought, watching as Gigi pouted at the furry army around her.

"We deserve it," Elizabeth smiles, dusting the stray cat hairs off her hands, "After a semester like that, we earned a little relaxation."

Cecilia nodded, stretching her legs under the table. A quiet afternoon with tea, pastries, and a bunch of cats felt like the perfect way to unwind.

The perfectionist absentmindedly stirred her tea before glancing up at Raora, who was busy inspecting one of the cat treats curiously.

"You know..." Raora tilted her head, as she examined the treat, "These actually look kinda tasty."

Cecilia immediately smirked, sensing an opportunity to pick on the artist. "Oh yeah? Why don't you try one?"

Raora scoffed, rolling her eyes. "No, that's gross," Raora declined, putting away the cat treat.

"Oh, come on," Cecilia pressed, nudging the bag toward her, "Just one little bite. It won't kill you!"

"I'm not eating cat food, Cece," Raora says, as Cecilia took a piece out of its packaging.

"But you just said they look tasty," the perfectionist smirked.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I want to eat them!" Raora huffed, crossing her arms.

Cecilia leaned forward, her smirk widening. "You're curious, aren't you?"

"No."

"I think you are."

“I’m not.”

“Just take a bite.”

“I’m not eating them!” Raora protested, turning her attention back to her drink.

Cecilia hummed, pretending to drop the subject as she leaned back in her chair. Raora, satisfied that the conversation was over, took a sip of her coffee and let her guard down. That was a big mistake however, as the next thing she knew, Cecilia had shoved a cat treat into her mouth.

Raora choked, nearly spitting it out as she gagged. “Gah—Cecilia! What the hell?!”

Cecilia burst into laughter, watching as Raora frantically tried to scrape the taste off her tongue.

Elizabeth sighed, shaking her head. “Cece, don’t bully her.”

“I’m not bullying her,” Cecilia defended between wheezes, “I’m helping her try new things!”

Raora shot her a glare as she grabbed her cup, praying the coffee would wash away the taste of the treats. “It was disgusting,” she groaned, after chugging a mouthful of coffee.

At that moment, Gigi, who had been giggling at the chaos before her, casually picked up a treat and popped it into her mouth. The table immediately fell silent.

Gigi chewed thoughtfully, her expression unreadable. After a moment, she shrugged. “I don’t see what the big deal is,” Gigi grinned, “It’s not the worst.”

Raora gawked at her. “Are you serious? That thing tasted like cardboard!” the artist protested, amazed at Gigi’s lack of reaction towards the cat food.

Cecilia looked equally stunned as she stifled a laugh. “Oh my gosh, Gigi, what is wrong with you?”

Unbothered, Gigi reached for another one, only for Elizabeth to snatch the bag away. “Okay, that’s enough. That can’t be good for your stomach.”

Gigi pouted but didn’t argue, though she did eye the treats sadly as Elizabeth shoved the bag aside. Meanwhile, Cecilia was still doubled over in laughter, wiping tears from her eyes, and Raora, still recovering from the betrayal, grabbed another napkin and dramatically wiped her tongue again.

“Well, that was fun!” Gigi grinned, placing her hands behind her head as she skipped along the pavement. The four friends traveled down the streets, which were lively with the rush hour crowd, the evening sky a deep shade of orange.

Gigi walked a few steps ahead, arms stretched behind her head. “Oh my god,” the pigtailed girl grinned, skipping with a spring in her step, “The cats were so cute and, and, and the desserts were amazing! We should totally come back another day.”

Cecilia adjusted the strap of her bag, poking Gigi before pointing at Elizabeth. “I think some of us ate a little too much, though,” Cecilia snickered.

Elizabeth let out a groan, pressing a hand to her stomach. “Ugh, I think I ate too much cake.”

Raora patted the taller girl on the back. “Take it easy, Liz,” she sighed, holding back the urge to make fun of the scarlet haired girl.

The group continued chatting about random things—their plans for the break and whether they should plan another outing soon.

As they walked, the conversations went on, thanks to Cecilia's endless tangents. She jumped from one topic to another, effortlessly filling the time talking about this and that. One second she was talking about a new game update, the next she was debating whether or not to get a pet cat herself. Gigi played along, contributing to the conversation with her snarky remarks and dumb jokes.

Eventually, they reached the station and the spot where they would split up. One by one, they walked off, offering lazy waves and goodbyes. “Alright, same time tomorrow?” Raora asked, stretching her arms.

“Yeah, let's invite the others too,” Elizabeth agreed, adjusting the strap on her bag.

“Alright, see you guys tomorrow,” Cecilia says, with a yawn, “Oh, I'm pooped. I'm gonna hit the sack the moment I get home.”

After waving goodbye to the others, Gigi lingered for a moment before stuffing her hands into her pockets and heading off. The energy she once had when she was around her friends earlier dissipated, a strange sense of loneliness washing over her.

By the time she reached home, the night had fully set in. The house was quiet—the same quiet she was used to by now. No television playing in the background, no chatter filling the area, just the faint hum of the running electricity and the occasional creak of the floorboards under her feet.

Gigi kicked aside her shoes, stepping further inside, but as she did, she picked up some sounds from within her home. Raised voices, muffled through the walls, coming from down the hall.

Gigi hesitated. Those voices could only belong to two people—the only other people residing in her home.

She swallowed, her steps careful as she inched closer, the wooden floor cool beneath her feet. The door wasn't fully shut, just enough for her to see a hint of light spilling into the hallway. Something told her she shouldn't be eavesdropping on her parents, but the fact they seemed to be arguing intrigued her greatly. She had to know what was going on. Leaning in just a little, Gigi kept her breaths silent.

“Dear, I get what you're saying, but shouldn't she have a say in the matter?” Mrs. Murin reasoned, “This feels too sudden...”

“She'll understand,” Mr. Murin assured, his tone tired, “This is about her future. She's proven she can do more, and I won't let that potential go to waste... not again.

Mrs. Murin hesitated before replying. “I agree. She does have immense potential,” she began with a sad smile before her voice softened, “But she seems so much more... happier nowadays. Haven't you noticed? I think she's made some new friends in the past year.”

Mr. Murin scoffed. “And? Friends come and go. This is her future we're talking about.”

Mrs. Murin frowned. “That's not the point. She was always so tense before, always trying so hard,” Gigi's mother continued, “Something about her changed—haven't you noticed? She actually smiles when she comes home. I'm just not sure if we should take that from her...”

Gigi swallowed, her nails pressing into her palms. “*Get to the point already,*” the pigtailed girl groaned internally.

Mr. Murin crossed his arms. “Think about it, dear, think about how much further she'll go... She excelled because of us. With our help, there's no limit to her capabilities!”

Mrs. Murin didn't answer right away, her eyes glued to the floor. “But have you thought about how hard this would be on her?” Mrs. Murin asked, crossing her arms, “Leaving her friends? Adjusting to a completely different environment? I know I've thought about it. It wasn't easy the first time we made her do that.”

“She adapted before and she can do so again,” Mr. Murin says conclusively.

“You don't know that,” Mrs. Murin sighs, finally looking up at her husband, “Dear, perhaps we should talk to her first, you know, just to keep her updated.”

There was another long silence broken only by the sound of Mr. Murin's phone buzzing. The man took a quick look at the pop-up notification on his homescreen before turning to his wife. “The meeting with her principal has been scheduled. We'll discuss it with her tomorrow morning.”

Gigi stepped back from the door, her heart hammering. Principal? Meeting? Her stomach twisted. The more she thought about it, the more her mind spiraled. What exactly had her

principal told them? Had she done something wrong? No, that didn't make sense—her grades were fine, better than fine. They were perfect.

Maybe that was the problem.

Her father's words echoed in her head.

“Think about it, dear, think about how much further she'll go... She excelled because of us. With our help, there's no limit to her capabilities!”

Of course, he'd think that. It was never about her—never about whether she was happy or if she wanted this. It was always about pushing further, achieving more.

Her mother, at least, seemed hesitant. But that didn't mean much. She had been the same way her whole life—just as strict as her father, just as demanding. Now, just because she noticed Gigi was happier, she thought that was enough to stop this from happening?

Gigi wanted to laugh. Instead, she felt sick.

It seemed her father had already made up his mind. The meeting was scheduled. This wasn't just some passing idea they were floating around—this, whatever this was, is happening.

But would she even get a choice? A say in the matter?

She turned abruptly, making her way back to her room. Her breathing felt uneven. She wasn't taking in as many breaths as she thought she should be. With her hands cold, Gigi shut the door behind her.

Gigi sat on the edge of her bed, staring blankly at the floor. What was she supposed to do? Argue? Fight? Would they even listen? Would she even win? The previous, and only, time she had stood up to her parents felt like a miracle in and of itself, and the pigtailed girl wasn't sure if she could perform such a miracle a second time.

Her fingers curled into the sheets. If she had to leave—if they forced her to—what would happen to her close friends? To everything she had built here? What about... Cecilia?

Gigi sucked in a breath, her chest tightening. Cecilia was the first person who had ever truly felt like an equal to her. She wasn't just another classmate or a friend, she was someone truly special. Sharp, confident, always challenging her, always there.

They competed in everything, from test scores to video games, always pushing each other further. It was simply exhilarating. Cecilia never let Gigi slack off, always kept her alerted, and Gigi loved that. She lived for it. Every moment. The banter, the competitions... everything.

And yet, somewhere along the way, it stopped being just about winning.

She loved the way Cecilia grinned when she got the upper hand, the way her eyes lit up with mischief before she threw out a challenge. The way she nudged Gigi playfully after a win, or smirked in that adorably confident way that made Gigi's stomach twist.

Gigi buried her face into her pillow, groaning quietly. She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to leave *her*.

But what was she supposed to do about it?

She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. "No. I can't think like that. Not yet," Gigi told herself. Tomorrow morning. That was when she would find out just how much control she really had over her own life.

The next morning, Gigi barely registered the sound of her bedroom door creaking open. A familiar voice pulled her from sleep. "Gigi, wake up," Mrs. Murin said, her tone gentler than usual, "We're heading to your school soon."

For a second, Gigi thought she had misheard. Then she remembered. The meeting.

Deja vu settled in, heavy and lingering. It was just like last time. The anxiety, the feeling that things were about to change forever. She had been younger then, too confused and scared to fight it. She wasn't sure if she had it in her to fight now either.

Gigi sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. "Okay," she muttered, barely looking at Mrs. Murin.

Her mother blinked, studying her expression closely. "That's it? No questions?"

Gigi shrugged, forcing herself out of bed. "You already scheduled the meeting, didn't you?" Gigi replied, her tone bitter.

Mrs. Murin hesitated, almost like she wanted to say something else. But instead, she just sighed. "Get ready. We're leaving soon."

Gigi nodded and got to her feet, feeling like she was moving on autopilot.

The pigtailed girl said nothing to her parents as she got into the car with them. She stared out the window, watching the familiar streets zoom by. What seemed like an ordinary car ride felt like anything but to Gigi. It felt distant, and her head wasn't in the present in the slightest.

Mrs. Murin occasionally glanced at her from the front seat, not saying anything, while Mr. Murin kept his eyes on the road.

Gigi's hands curled into fists on her lap. Every minute that passed only made the feeling in her chest tighten.

She wasn't ready. She thought she had more time. Time to process, time to figure out how to respond. But now they were already on the way, and she still didn't know what to say, what to do.

Would they listen if she spoke up? Or had they already made up their minds? Her breath felt shallow. The school was getting closer.

Gigi swallowed hard and tried to steady her breathing, telling herself that no matter what happened, she would have to face it.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Murin, how very nice to meet you,” the principal greeted, shaking their hands as he let the family into his office, “And of course, Gigi—welcome.”

Gigi gave a polite nod, but her throat felt too dry to say anything. She followed her parents inside, her hands buried deep in her hoodie pocket. The office was neat and professional, lined with bookshelves and framed certificates. A small plaque on the desk bore the principal’s name, but she didn’t bother reading it.

The pigtailed girl’s mouth curled upwards into a small smirk, finding it strangely funny how she hadn’t managed to catch the principal’s name even after going through an entire academic year. Her amusement was quickly cut short however, when the principal’s voice broke through her thoughts.

“Please, have a seat,” the principal smiled, gesturing to the chairs in front of his desk.

Gigi sat down between her parents, her back feeling a little stiff. She could feel her father’s excitement, practically radiating off him. He hadn’t even sat down fully before he spoke.

“You mentioned on the phone that Gigi has been doing exceptionally well,” Mr. Murin said, leaning forward slightly.

The principal nodded. “Yes, indeed. I wanted to personally commend Gigi on her outstanding performance. Her grades have consistently been at the top of her cohort—near perfect, in fact,” the principal beamed, turning his monitor toward the Murins, displaying a breakdown of Gigi’s academic record, “Her test scores are obviously remarkable, but what’s even more impressive is her consistency across the board.”

Mr. Murin beamed with pride, nodding along. “That’s what I always tell her. Hard work and discipline—those are what lead to results.”

Gigi rolled her eyes slightly. She kept her gaze on the screen, her face neutral, as if she weren’t listening.

“But her academic performance isn’t the only thing I wanted to discuss,” the principal says, scrolling through some files before pulling up another window, “Gigi is also very involved in extracurricular activities. She’s been a dedicated member of the Tabletop Club and has even taken on roles in organizing events.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Murin’s eyes flickered toward Gigi, surprised. Gigi gave her mother a small nod, realizing she hadn’t told her parents about joining a club in high school—or anything about her high school life for the matter.

The principal nodded. “Her teachers and club advisor speak very highly of her. She’s not just an excellent student—she’s also demonstrated creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork through her club participation. Frankly, I believe she has the potential to achieve much more beyond this school.”

Gigi’s fingers clenched slightly in her hoodie pocket. “*Here we go,*” Gigi groaned to herself.

Mr. Murin straightened, sitting on the edge of his seat. “Go on.”

The principal smiled. “Given Gigi’s academic performance and extracurricular involvement, I’d strongly encourage her to apply for academic scholarships. There are several prestigious programs that would not only recognize her efforts but also provide her with greater opportunities.”

“Scholarships?” Mrs. Murin echoed, looking at her daughter.

“Not *just* scholarships,” the principal continued, “There are elite institutions that would be eager to accept a student of her caliber. If Gigi were to transfer to a more competitive academic environment, she’d be surrounded by peers who challenge her and push her further. Plus, it’d look good on her portfolio!”

“Yes,” Mr. Murin agreed immediately, his voice firm, “That’s exactly what I’ve been saying. She needs to be in a place where she won’t hold back—where she’ll be forced to keep improving. I can already imagine the doors it’ll open for her...”

“Indeed,” the principal chuckles, before turning his monitor around to bring up a few websites of the elite schools mentioned earlier.

The adults’ words floated around Gigi, but she barely registered them. She knew her father well enough to recognize that she wouldn’t have a say in this conversation.

The principal was still talking, mentioning specific schools, listing scholarship options, discussing applications and deadlines. Mr. Murin absorbed every word like a man listening to a lecture on success. Mrs. Murin, on the other hand, sat with her hands folded, her expression slightly uncomfortable.

Gigi, however, felt like she wasn’t even in the room.

They were talking about her future like it was a chess game and at that moment, she couldn’t help but feel like a pawn in all this.

Elite institutions...

Scholarship applications...

A better, more competitive environment...

The pigtailed girl clutched her pockets tightly. If she spoke up now, what would happen? Would they actually listen?

Or would her father dismiss her concerns like always? Would her mother hesitate, only to concede in the end?

Her mind then flashed to her friends. To the Tabletop Club. To Cecilia.

No, she had to speak up. This was her future they were talking about.

Gigi took a slow breath, forcing herself to sit up straighter. She couldn't let this conversation keep going like she wasn't even there.

She cleared her throat, prompting the adults to turn to her. "Um, what if I'm not interested?"

The conversation halted. The principal blinked, while her father turned his head sharply toward her.

Mr. Murin frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked in a low voice.

"The scholarships. The elite institutions..." Gigi says, forcing herself to keep her tone in check, "What if I don't want to apply for them?"

Mr. Murin gave her a look like she had just said something ridiculous. "What do you mean '*you don't want to apply for them*'? Gigi, do you even understand what you're being offered here?" her father asked incredulously.

The principal exchanged a quick glance with her father before offering her a kind smile. "Gigi, these aren't just any opportunities. You've put in so much effort, and your results are proof of that. It would be a waste not to use them to their full potential," the principal says, sensing some tension between father and daughter.

"Exactly," Mr. Murin said, his tone firm and his eyes sharp, "Do you even understand what this means for you? The kind of doors this can open? You could pursue engineering, medicine, law—any high-earning, highly respected career. Companies will be fighting to hire you before you even graduate. You won't have to struggle like others do, scrambling for jobs or worrying about financial stability."

Gigi swallowed, feeling her fingers twitch in her hoodie pocket.

"This isn't just about the present," her father continued, "This is about setting yourself up for the rest of your life. You could be a top surgeon, a leading researcher, a CEO. But you'll need to push yourself to get there."

Gigi gritted her teeth. "And what if I don't want any of that?" she asked, feeling her anger rising by the minute.

The room went dead silent once more.

Her father's expression darkened. "What did you just say?"

Gigi's hands curled into fists, her patience melting away. "What if I don't want to transfer? What if I don't want to apply for these scholarships?" she challenged, her voice was rising despite her efforts to keep it steady, "Do I even get a say in any of this?"

Mr. Murin's expression tightened as Mrs. Murin glanced between the two worriedly. "Gigi, don't be childish. We're talking about your future, not some hobby or passing interest—"

"This is MY future!" Gigi snapped, pushing herself up from her seat, "Why are you acting like it belongs to you? Like I don't get to decide what I want?"

It was at that moment where her father's patience finally thinned. "Enough," he snapped, his voice low, firm, cutting through the room like a blade. He turned to fully face her, eyes cold.

"You're acting ungrateful. You have an opportunity most students can only *dream* of, and instead of appreciating it, you're whining about how inconvenient it is for you?" Mr. Murin says, his voice raised in anger.

"I'm just pissed you never bothered to ask about what I want—how I want to live *my* life!" Gigi snapped, glaring daggers at her father.

"And what is it that you want?" Mr. Murin challenged, "To sit around and play with your little club forever? To live an easy life with no ambition?"

Gigi's frustration boiled over. "I just want to be *happy*! Is that so unreasonable?!"

Her father stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. "Do you think life is about doing whatever you feel like? Success comes from discipline and sacrifice. If you can't understand that, then maybe you don't deserve these opportunities."

Gigi felt something snap inside her. She held her breath, her chest tightening painfully. She didn't trust herself to say anything else. Without another word, she turned and stormed out of the office.

The sound of her footsteps echoed down the hallway, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. She barely registered the principal saying something in the background, or her father calling her name, his voice dripping with irritation.

She needed to get away.

She barely made it ten steps before she heard her mother's voice behind her. "Gigi—wait."

However, Gigi didn't stop.

"Sweetheart, please," her mother called out once more. Something about her mother's voice—gentler than usual, lacking the usual sternness she had grown up with—made her slow down, though she didn't turn around. Mrs. Murin caught up in a few strides, her heels clicking against the floor.

“You can’t just walk out in the middle of a discussion like that,” her mother said softly.

“A discussion I had no part in?” Gigi muttered, her voice shaky.

Mrs. Murin sighed. “Your father—”

“I know what Dad thinks,” Gigi interrupted, her voice bitter, “I’ve always known. He never listens. He just decides things for me.”

Her mother hesitated, struggling to come up with a reply.

“You can’t even deny it,” Gigi scoffed.

Mrs. Murin let out a tired breath. “It’s not that simple,” the woman says sadly, as Gigi rolls her eyes.

“Then explain it to me,” Gigi groans, turning to face her mother fully, “Tell me why he gets to decide my future before I even get to think about what I want.”

Mrs. Murin frowned, gulping as she tried to process her daughter's words.

Gigi shook her head. “See? You don’t get it...”

“I do get it,” her mother said quietly, “More than you think.”

Gigi let out a dry laugh. “Oh, yeah? Since when?” the pigtailed girl scoffed, preparing to continue walking away.

However, just before Gigi could take another step, Mrs. Murin sighed. “I have noticed that you’re happier.”

Gigi paused.

Mrs. Murin continued, her voice quieter now. “I see the way you come home now. You look more at ease. You go out more, I hear you talking to your friends over the phone almost everyday... That... wasn’t how things used to be, was it?”

Gigi swallowed but said nothing. Mrs. Murin’s gaze softened. “I recognise just how much I used to push you, too. Just like your father,” her mother says, let out a small, sad smile, “Please trust me, sweetheart, I’m trying. I’m trying to understand.”

Gigi looked away, something bitter rising in her throat. “Then why didn’t you say anything?”

Her mother sighed. “Because your father—” she hesitated, choosing her words carefully, “He believes in pushing you because he thinks that’s what will give you the best future. And as your parents, we want you to go above and beyond.”

Gigi clenched her jaw. “So what? You’ll just let him make all the decisions?”

“It’s not that simple,” Mrs. Murin repeated, her tone more exhausted than defensive, “We’re your parents, Gigi. We worry about you. We want you to have opportunities.”

“But what if I don’t want them?” Gigi’s voice cracked slightly, frustration, exhaustion, and everything else boiling over.

Mrs. Murin was quiet, once again at a loss for what to say.

Gigi exhaled sharply, running a hand through her hair. “I just—” she says, her voice faltering as a tear ran down her cheek, “I just wanted to be asked.”

And with that Gigi began walking ahead once more, though not before turning back one last time. “I’ll wait by the car.”

“Gigi,” Mrs. Murin mutters, reaching out towards her daughter, who disappeared behind a corner in the hallway, “Gigi...”

A week had passed, and yet, Gigi had barely registered the passing of time.

The days cycled by quickly, as Gigi lost herself in an endless scrolling of TikTok videos on her phone. The short form videos, the brainrot, mindless distractions—she let them wash over her, in an attempt to numb everything she was feeling.

She barely texted her friends. They had messaged her at first—Raora asking if she wanted to play a game online, Bijou sending her some dumb meme... but she simply couldn't respond the way she would have liked to.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to talk to them. She just didn’t know how. What was she supposed to say? That she might be leaving? That her father had already started arranging visits to prestigious schools? That she felt like she was drowning, but instead of struggling, she was just... floating, letting the current take her wherever it wanted?

It was easier to say nothing.

Her friends had invited her out multiple times—once for a movie, another time just to hang out at the mall—but she had turned them down with half-hearted excuses. “*Not feeling great today. Busy with stuff. Maybe next time!*” she would reply.

Maybe they could tell she didn’t have the energy. Or maybe they just assumed she needed space. Either way, they stopped asking after a while.

That was fine.

She didn't want to burden them with her troubles anyway.

If there was one person who did have energy, however, it was her father.

He had thrown himself into planning their school visits with the same efficiency he used for everything else in life. Within days, he had scheduled tours at three different institutions—two prestigious high schools and one pre-university program, all of which had been recommended by the principal.

"You're lucky, you know," he told Gigi as they sat in the car on the way to the first school, "Not every student gets to choose between these kinds of opportunities."

Gigi ignored him, simply staring out the window, watching the city pass by in a blur.

Her father took her silence as permission to continue. "We'll compare their programs, look at scholarship options, and see which has the best track record for top universities. It's important to think long-term, Gigi. This isn't just about high school—it's about setting yourself up for the future."

Gigi pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window. *Her future...* It didn't even feel like hers anymore.

The school visits were all the same.

A well-dressed administrator greeted them with a firm handshake and a polite smile. They walked through shiny hallways filled with achievement boards and glass-walled classrooms. Students in neatly pressed uniforms moved in perfect order, focused and disciplined.

Everywhere they went, her father asked questions. "What's your university acceptance rate? What kind of research opportunities do you offer? How does your curriculum compare to international standards?"

The questions wouldn't stop, and after a while, they began to sound like nails on a chalkboard. Every time her father opened his mouth to speak, the pigtailed girl would get an intense temptation to stuff the school's brochure into his mouth in the hopes of getting him to shut up.

Every now and then, her mother would turn to her and ask "What do you think?" and she would force out something half-hearted, like "It's nice."

Just what else was she supposed to say?

Her mother was quieter during these visits. She listened, nodded at the right times, occasionally exchanged glances with Gigi, but never objected. She wasn't fighting this.

Gigi had tried to fight. It hadn't worked. Maybe this was just how things were. Maybe fighting it was pointless.

By the end of the week, Gigi felt as if she had no control over her own life, as if she was indeed just a pawn in the game her father was playing.

She went through the motions—woke up when she was told, sat through meetings, let her father talk about the ‘next steps’ for the trillionth time. She barely touched her phone, except to scroll mindlessly through TikTok, letting the videos drown out her thoughts.

She wasn’t even angry anymore.

She was just tired.

Tired of fighting. Tired of hoping. Tired of waiting for someone to ask her what she wanted. Because at this point, it didn’t matter, did it? Her father had already decided and her mother wasn’t going to stop him.

Gigi sat up, sighing. She hasn’t felt this dejected, this hopeless, in an eternity. It was almost funny how things felt so normal, so joyful, just a week ago—when she and her friends enjoyed each other’s company at the cat café.

Suddenly, a shine on her desk caught her attention. Gigi slowly trudged towards the source of the shine, before picking up two pearly white earrings—the ones Cecilia had gotten her. A warmth spread throughout her body as she fiddled with the earrings. After receiving it from Cecilia, Gigi barely went a day without wearing them.

She ran her thumb over the smooth surface, remembering the way Cecilia had given her the gift, and the way she felt after receiving it. More than that, however, Cecilia’s words after seeing Gigi try on the jewelry had stuck with her, like an arrow pierced into her heart.

“You look... beautiful.”

Gigi swallowed hard. She had laughed it off at the time, pretending her face wasn’t burning, pretending her heart hadn’t just flipped inside her chest. Cecilia probably hadn’t meant it the way Gigi had taken it. She probably hadn’t meant it the way Gigi wanted to take it. But even now, even after everything, the memory still stuck with her—warm and inescapable.

She clenched the earrings in her palm, inhaling sharply. What was she supposed to do? Pretend none of this mattered? Pretend she hadn’t spent the past week feeling like a puppet? Pretend she didn’t care about leaving everything behind? Pretend she didn’t care about leaving Cecilia behind?

Her grip loosened, and she looked down at the earrings again.

Then, without thinking, she grabbed her phone and opened Cecilia’s chat. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

What could she even say? *"Hey, remember when you called me beautiful? I was thinking about it and how much I might be in love with you, but I also might be shipped off to some elite school against my will, and I have no idea what to do about it?"*

Yeah, not happening.

She exhaled sharply, shaking her head. Her eyes flickered back to her notifications. Unread messages stacked up from both the tabletop club’s groupchat as well as her friend group’s.

She had ignored all of them for a few days—turned down every invite, brushed off every attempt to reach out.

She had convinced herself it was easier that way. That nothing she did would change anything. That there was no point.

But now? She wasn't so sure. Her friends obviously cared for her and loved her, but here she was, refusing to reach out to tell them what was on her mind. It seemed almost... unfair.

The nihilism in Gigi began to peel apart slowly. Perhaps she should continue fighting. Maybe if she tried telling her parents just what was on her mind, they would finally hear her out.

Gigi took a deep breath, placing her earrings back onto the desk. She had to try again.

Moments later, she stood in the living room, her fists clenched in her pockets. Her father barely spared her a glance, still scrolling through his laptop. Meanwhile, her mother sat beside him, silent but attentive, like she was waiting for something inevitable to happen.

Gigi swallowed. Her heart was hammering so loudly it almost drowned out the sound of the television. She could still walk away, go back to her room, pretend she hadn't come out here at all.

But that would mean giving up. And she wasn't ready to do that just yet.

"Dad."

He barely looked up. "Hmm?"

Gigi forced herself to take a step forward. "I need to talk to you," Gigi says.

Mr. Murin sighed, fingers still tapping away on the keyboard. "If this is about the scholarships, we'll discuss them when the time comes. Right now, I'm trying to narrow down the best options—"

"It's not just about that," Gigi interrupted, her voice sharper than she intended, "This is important."

Her father exhaled through his nose, closing his laptop with a quiet click. "Fine," he says, folding his arms together, "What is it?"

Gigi hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words. Then, she inhaled sharply and opened her mouth. "I don't want to follow the path you want me to go on."

Her words hung in the air. Mr. Murin didn't react right away, instead pinching his temple. "Gigi," he said slowly, like he was talking to a child who didn't understand the simplest of things, "We've been over this."

"No," she said, her voice steadier now, "*You've* talked about it. You've made plans. But you never actually asked me what *I* wanted."

Mr. Murin's brow furrowed, and his voice hardened. "Because this isn't just about what you want. It's about what's best for you."

Gigi grit her teeth. "But this *is* what's best for me! I'm happy with my friends, I'm happy with my life... I'm—"

"High school friendships aren't a reason to throw away opportunities," Mr. Murin countered, "I understand that you feel attached to your current situation, but feelings pass. The future doesn't wait."

"Attached?" Gigi repeated, a hollow laugh escaping her, "That's how you see it? Like I'm just some dumb kid who doesn't know what's best for herself?"

Her father didn't respond right away, and she hated the way his silence told her everything she needed to know.

She clenched her fists harder. "I found people I actually care about," she pressed on, "People who make me feel like I actually belong somewhere. Do you know how long it took for me to have that? Do you know how long I spent feeling like I had no one?"

Her mother shifted slightly beside her father, watching her husband like he was a ticking time bomb.

Gigi took a shaky breath. "I worked so hard, just like you wanted. I made the grades, I stayed at the top of my class, I joined a club, I did everything I was supposed to do. And now, when I finally have something that makes me happy, you just want to rip it all away?"

Her father exhaled sharply. "But you aren't reaching your full potential, Gigi! You're too young to understand—"

"I understand just fine," Gigi cut in, voice rising, "I understand that nothing I do will ever be enough for you!"

Mr. Murin's eyes narrowed. "That is not true."

"Isn't it?" the pigtailed girl shot back, "You say you want what's best for me, but it's never been about me. It's about what *you* think is best. You've never actually listened to what I wanted."

Her father's patience finally snapped. "Because what you want isn't practical in the long run!" he snapped, standing up abruptly, "Do you think life is just about having fun with your friends? That you can waste your potential because you're comfortable?"

Gigi flinched but didn't back down. "I am not wasting my potential," she growled, "I am living my life! But you don't care about any of that, do you? You just care about making me into whatever you think I should be!"

Mr. Murin's eyes darkened. "I am trying to give you opportunities. I am trying to make sure you don't regret throwing them away when you're older!" Mr. Murin shouted, now standing up.

Gigi's breathing was uneven now, her body shaking from barely contained frustration. "But what if I don't want them?" she said, her voice cracking, "What if I just want to live my life, on my terms? I'm not gonna fail in life just because I don't follow your little road map!"

Her father shook his head. "You don't understand what you're giving up."

"No," she said, her voice quieter now, but no less fierce, "No, you don't understand. You don't understand me one bit!"

The silence stretched between them, and for a split second, she thought maybe—just maybe—her father would soften. Maybe he would take a moment to actually think about what she was saying.

But instead, he just sighed.

"We'll talk more about this later," he said dismissively, reaching for his laptop again, "We've already made our decision."

Something inside Gigi broke. She stared at him, disbelief and anger and exhaustion mixing into something sorrowful. Gigi turned to her mother. "Mom, please," Gigi pleaded, looking her mother in the eye desperately.

However, Mrs. Murin could only shake her head.

Gigi felt tears welling up in her eyes as her earlier hopelessness returned. With a sniff, Gigi quickly exited the living room, dashing towards the front door.

"Gigi—" her mother called after her, standing up.

"Don't follow me!" Gigi snapped, her voice cracking as her mother stopped in her tracks. And just like that, Gigi stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

Gigi ran without direction. She wasn't sure how long she had been running, nor did she care. Thunder roared as rain poured down relentlessly, drenching her clothes and weighing down her hair, but she barely felt it. She barely registered the cold. Her body screamed for her to stop, her lungs burning, her legs aching, but her mind refused to let her slow down.

She just needed to keep moving. It didn't matter where she ended up.

Because what was the point?

What was the point of trying, of arguing, of caring when, in the end, she had no say in her own life? Her father had made that painfully clear.

Her fists clenched at the thought of him—of his words, of the way he had dismissed her feelings like they were nothing. Like she was nothing.

Every word from that argument replayed in her mind like a broken record. It was suffocating. Every conversation with her father felt like she was drowning, gasping for air while he kept pushing her head underwater. And her mother—her mother had hesitated. She had wanted to defend her, Gigi could see it, but in the end, she had let it happen. Just like always.

What was the point of fighting back when she would always lose? What was the point of trying to be heard when no one was listening?

Her pace slowed slightly, her feet dragging against the wet pavement.

She didn't want to think anymore.

She didn't want to care anymore.

But when she thought about truly giving up—about resigning herself to whatever her father had planned for her—a strange, hollow feeling settled deep in her chest.

Was that all she had left? A future she had no control over?

Her fingers twitched. Her mind, once filled with anger and frustration, now felt empty.

Maybe this was just how things were meant to be. Maybe no matter what she did, it would never change anything.

The thought made her feel sick.

She barely realized where she was going until she turned a corner and saw a familiar house standing in the distance.

Cecilia's house.

Gigi's steps faltered. Her mind screamed at her to turn around—to not bring this mess to Cecilia's doorstep. She had already ignored her friends for an entire week, pushing them away when they had only wanted to help. Why would Cecilia even want to see her like this? And yet, her feet kept moving.

Before she knew it, she was standing at Cecilia's doorstep, her soaked clothes clinging to her, her hair sticking to her skin.

She hesitated for a second before raising her finger and pressing the doorbell. No answer. She proceeded to knock the door, this time with more urgency.

Her breath halted as she caught her reflection in the windows. Her eyes were red and puffy, her face pale, her entire body trembling. She looked pathetic.

Before she could think too much about it, however, the door opened.

“Hello?”

Cecilia’s voice was cautious, but the second her eyes landed on Gigi, her entire expression changed. “Gigi?”

Gigi didn’t respond. Instead, she stepped forward and threw her arms around Cecilia, burying her face into her shoulder.

“Cece...” the drenched girl whimpered, her voice breaking.

“Gigi,” Cecilia mutters, stiffening for a brief second before wrapping her arms around her friend, holding her close.

Gigi squeezed her eyes shut, gripping Cecilia tightly. She hated how badly she was shaking. She hated how fragile she felt. But she needed this.

Cecilia didn’t ask questions. She didn’t demand an explanation. She just held her. And for the first time since running out of her house, Gigi felt like she could breathe.

“You should come inside,” Cecilia finally murmured, her voice gentle but firm.

Gigi nodded, shivering as she finally loosened her grip. Cecilia kept a hand on her back as she guided her in, shutting the door behind them.

The warmth of the house was almost overwhelming. The contrast between the cold rain and the comforting heat of Cecilia’s home made Gigi’s head spin.

Cecilia left for a moment, returning with a towel. She draped it over Gigi’s shoulders before sitting beside her on the couch.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then, Cecilia hesitantly reached out, her fingers brushing against Gigi’s hand. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

Gigi swallowed. Did she? Could she even put it into words? She stared down at her lap, her fingers clenching the towel. “I didn’t know where else to go,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Cecilia’s expression softened. “You’re always welcome here,” the perfectionist says with a small smile.

That simple sentence nearly broke her. Her throat tightened. Gigi wanted to believe it. She needed to believe it. Because if she was going to lose everything else—her school, her friends, herself... then at the very least, she wanted to hold onto this. Onto Cecilia.

“Who was at the door?” Fauna yawns, walking into the living room. Her eyes immediately fell upon the disheveled Gigi, who gave the older girl a small wave.

Fauna gasped, instantly rushing to Gigi's side. "Oh my, Gigi, what on earth happened? Are you alright?" she asked, as she grasped onto the pigtailed girl's cold hands tight.

"No, not really," Gigi mumbled, as Fauna looked her up and down.

"You need to take a hot shower. Now," Fauna ordered, helping Gigi up before turning to Cecilia, "Cece, could you make her a cup of tea?"

Cecilia blinked, still in mild shock over seeing her friend in the state she was in, but nodded nonetheless.

Gigi stood under the shower head, staring into blank space as water washed over her. Strange. The sensation of the water droplets hitting her skin wasn't unlike that of being soaked by the rainwater, as she had been earlier. However, she felt more... warm this time, but it had nothing to do with the water heater whatsoever.

The blonde stared at her reflection in the glass of the shower cabinet, before slapping her cheek lightly. A wave of embarrassment soon spread throughout her body as the events of the past finally hit her.

"Oh God, I really did show up looking all pathetic," Gigi sighed, leaning her forehead against the glass. However, somewhere through the embarrassment, she felt extremely relieved that Cecilia and Fauna took her in without much questioning. Gigi had needed a safe haven, a place where she could be away from her parents—a place the sisters provided unconditionally.

After making a mental note to find some way to repay the sisters, Gigi ended her shower, getting changed into a fresh set of clothes Cecilia provided her with.

"Smells like her," Gigi thought to herself as she threw on her friend's shirt. She stopped, feeling a heat rise to her cheeks upon having that thought.

"Don't be a fucking creep, Gigi," Gigi's conscience scolded harshly as she hastily put on the rest of the clothes.

After making sure her eyes didn't look as puffy as they did early, Gigi stepped out of the shower, rubbing her head with a towel before nearly walking into Cecilia.

The perfectionist blushed, taking in the sight of a post-shower Gigi. "Come to my room," she instructed, holding up a hair dryer, as the pair avoided eye-contact, "I'll dry your hair for you."

"It's okay, you don't have to do that," Gigi smiled meekly, "I can handle that—"

"Well, I insist," Cecilia argued, her eyes narrowing at Gigi, who giggled a little.

“No, really, I can do it myself,” Gigi smiles, to which Cecilia sighs in exasperation.

“If you don't let me do it, I'll kick you back out into the rain,” the perfectionist huffed, turning around before dragging Gigi along.

“You wouldn't actually do that!”

“Try me.”

“Okay, okay...”

When the pair headed up to Cecilia's room, the perfectionist sat Gigi down on her bed, before sitting behind her. “You have really messy hair,” Cecilia chuckled, plugging in the hair dryer, “It's like a wet dog's.”

“Did you just call me a dog?” Gigi giggled, as Cecilia began drying her hair thoroughly, “That's so mean...”

“If you want ‘mean’, I'd gladly throw you out into the rain,” Cecilia shot back, running her hands through Gigi's messy hair.

Cecilia finished drying Gigi's hair, setting the hair dryer aside with a nod. “There,” she said, ruffling the shorter girl's hair, “That's better.”

Gigi ran a hand through her now-dry hair. “Thanks, doll.”

Cecilia sat back, glancing at her. A silence between them—heavy, but not unwelcome. Gigi could tell Cecilia was dying to ask what happened from the way she was sitting, but she wasn't pushing, seemingly waiting for Gigi to start talking when she was ready.

“So... you must be wondering what the hell happened,” Gigi began awkwardly, to which Cecilia nodded with a tiny chuckle.

“Yeah, maybe a little,” Cecilia quips, smiling a little, “But don't worry, you don't have to tell me if you're not ready...”

Gigi sighed, massaging her temples before stretching out her arms. “Nah, I think I have to get this off my chest...”

“Whenever you're ready,” Cecilia says, handing Gigi the plushed pug she won from the Christmas carnival.

Gigi stared into the eyes of the ugly plush on her lap before taking a deep breath. “Okay, where do I even begin?” she muttered, gripping the plush a little tighter.

Cecilia sat in front of her, silent but attentive, waiting for Gigi to gather her thoughts. The silence in the room was almost deafening, the same kind of silence that came with knowing something important was about to be said.

For a moment, Gigi considered holding back. Maybe giving a quick summary, making light of it. But no—Cecilia didn't know. She had no idea about the kind of childhood Gigi had, the way her parents controlled every aspect of her life, the way it all led to where she was now. If she was going to tell her anything, she had to tell it properly.

So, she started from the beginning.

"I was about seven when my parents found out I was... 'gifted'," Gigi said, hesitating, "Before that, they had no clue. No one really noticed, not even me. I just did well in school because it was easy. I liked reading, I liked learning, but I never thought too hard about it. Then one day, my principal called my parents in for a meeting and told them I was... different. And just like that, everything changed."

Cecilia didn't interrupt, but Gigi could tell she was paying attention to every word. "They pulled me out of my school immediately. Didn't ask me how I felt about it. Didn't even frame it as a choice. They just said, '*You're going here now*' and that I would be leaving my old school behind... my old friends behind. But, you know, at the time, I wasn't too upset. Because right before I left, I started noticing how people were treating me differently."

She clenched her hands around the plush. "I used to have friends. We used to play together, laugh together, but then... I don't know. Something changed. People started talking about me like I was this unreachable goal. Like I wasn't a person anymore—just a name at the top of the rankings. They stopped inviting me to things, started whispering when I walked by. They began treating me like... like I wasn't just a kid like the rest of them," Gigi exhaled sharply, shaking her head, "So yeah, I wasn't exactly heartbroken about leaving. I thought maybe this new school would be different. Maybe I'd fit in better. But before I even stepped foot in the place, my parents were already making decisions for me."

She turned to Cecilia, her expression unreadable. "They forced me to join the student council. Said it would 'build my portfolio' or whatever," Gigi muttered before adding, "I was eight back then, by the way,"

Cecilia's eyebrows furrowed. "They made you join the student council? In elementary school?"

Gigi scoffed. "Yeah. And I didn't even want to. I wanted to do dance. But my parents said if I really wanted to, I could take outside classes—on top of school and student council. It was a compromise. Or at least, that's what they called it... But in the end, I took it. Because I loved dancing."

She leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "For a while, the new school was fine. I made friends. I felt like I was actually part of something again. But then, of course, the rankings came out. And stuff began to change."

Gigi frowned, remembering the way her peer's smiles became strained, the way her friends started slowly distancing from her.

"At first, I didn't get it. I thought maybe I was imagining things. But then I started noticing the way people would only talk to me when they needed something. The way they stopped

inviting me to hang out. The way they started comparing themselves to me every time grades came up. It was like I wasn't Gigi anymore—I was just a... benchmark."

Gigi chuckled, but there was nothing about the laugh that was remotely humourless. "I remember inviting some of my friends to play a game during the exam season this one time—one time, mind you, just to blow off some steam," Gigi recalls, "But I must've come off as prideful or something, because after that they started distancing themselves from me. People even began gossiping about me... calling me shameless and talking about how I love to '*flex on everyone*'."

"But you didn't mean to come off like that, did you?" Cecilia says indignantly, her tone rising, "And gossiping about you over something that small just blows things out of proportion!"

The blonde narrowed her eyes, the memories rushing back and hitting her like a wave. "Heh, well I got used to all of it eventually," Gigi smiles weakly, "My parents didn't care, of course. Friends? Social life? Not important. What was important was that I was excelling. That I was proving how special I was. And then, one day, they told me I had to stop dance lessons. Said I needed to focus on my academics if I wanted to 'maximize my potential.'"

She laughed again, but this time, it was almost hollow. "That was when I started wondering if I even wanted to be 'perfect' anymore," Gigi spat.

Her grip on the plush loosened slightly. "When I entered junior high, they started pushing me toward scholarships. It was all about the future, about prestige, about making sure I got into the best possible institutions. And that was when I realized—they didn't care about me. They only cared about what I could achieve."

Cecilia inhaled sharply but didn't interrupt.

"So, I snapped," Gigi continued, her voice quieter now, "I told them I didn't want to do it anymore. That I wasn't happy. I got into a big fight with them—barely remembered half of what was said, but I do remember taking one of the scholarship applications they printed out and tearing it up right in front of them."

She exhaled. "After that, something broke between us. We barely talked. They stopped asking me about school, and I stopped telling them anything. And for the first time, I felt... free," Gigi says, glancing at Cecilia, "And then high school happened. I picked our current school—against their wishes, of course, and I met Biboo and Shiori. For the first time in forever, I had friends who didn't see me as competition. And then I met you..."

"Which was the best thing to ever happen to you," Cecilia jokes, as Gigi chuckled.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Gigi laughed, lightly throwing the pug at her friend.

Gigi sighed once more, her eyes drifting elsewhere. "I was finally happy," Gigi reflects, leaning her head against the wall, "I have fun in school—hanging out with everyone, I wasn't constantly being subjected to endless yammering about my future... life was pretty good."

Cecilia nodded, waiting for Gigi to go on. She knew there was a 'but' coming up.

"But recently, shit's been stirring up again," Gigi went on, recalling the events of the past week, "The principal called my family into his office last week. He told them about my grades, and encouraged my parents to get me into scholarships or even... switch to an elite institution."

Cecilia's eyes widened upon hearing that last part. Gigi? Changing schools? The perfectionist's face darkened as the thought crossed her mind. "That's such a drastic change," Cecilia whispered.

"Tell me about it," Gigi groaned, "My dad was all over the idea. The second we got home, he was already talking about applications, researching the best schools, looking into scholarship programs. He didn't even ask if I wanted it. Just assumed, like always, that I'd comply."

Cecilia's brows furrowed. "And... what did you say?"

"I tried fighting back," Gigi said, voice strained, "I told him I was happy where I was. That I had friends, that I actually enjoyed my life for once. And he just... shut me down. Like my happiness didn't even matter. Like all that mattered was making sure I was 'living up to my potential.'"

The more Gigi went on, the more her voice began to break. "My mother, on the other hand, didn't seem to be totally on board with my father this time, though," Gigi says, thinking back.

"Isn't that good?" Cecilia asked, some hope forming in her expression, "Maybe she can help you negotiate with your dad."

A spiteful laugh exited Gigi's mouth as she shook her head. "Yeah, I don't see that happening. Ugh, I don't get her, you know? She claims that she understood me, that she noticed how much happier I am nowadays," Gigi began, crossing her arms, "But despite everything she told me, she's STILL set to go along with whatever my dad's planning."

"After I realised my mom was also another lost cause, I... sorta broke. I began losing hope that I could have a say in my future, that I could continue spending time with you guys, that I could continue being... happy," Gigi says through clenched teeth.

Cecilia didn't realize she had been holding her breath until she exhaled. She had never heard Gigi talk like this before. And now, hearing everything at once, it made her furious. Before she could say anything however, Gigi gave Cecilia an apologetic look. "That was why I kinda went MIA this whole week... I'm sorry if I made you worry..."

Cecilia's expression softened. She reached out to take Gigi's hand as she stared at Gigi firmly. "You don't have to apologise for anything," Cecilia reassures the blonde, "You were obviously going through a lot."

"Thanks, Cece," Gigi finally said, taking another deep breath, "Anyway, earlier today, I decided to talk to my dad about it again..."

“I told him I was happy here, that I didn’t want to leave. But he didn’t care. He just talked over me like always,” Gigi clenched her fists, “And my mom—she just stood there. She didn’t defend me. Didn’t stop him. Just let it happen. After that, I just lost it. I ran away... and I ended up here.”

Cecilia frowned, her expression growing sour once more. Gigi could see the frustration in her face, the things she wanted to say but held back.

“I feel small when I talk to him,” Gigi muttered, “Like nothing I say matters. Like I don’t even have a choice.”

Cecilia squeezed her friend's hand. “You do have a choice,” the perfectionist said.

Gigi let out a shaky breath. “Then why does it feel like I don’t?”

“Because your dad’s wrong,” Cecilia says firmly, “He’s wrong for dismissing you. Wrong for acting like your choices don’t matter. You matter, Gigi. What *you* want matters.”

Gigi felt something in her chest unclench. She hadn’t realized she was crying until Cecilia wiped away a tear.

She then let out a quiet laugh. “You’re good at this...”

“At what?” Cecilia asked, raising an eyebrow.

“At making me feel like things might actually turn out okay,” Gigi smiles.

The two girls sat quietly for a minute before Cecilia broke the silence first. “So... what do you want to do now?” the perfectionist asked, running a finger over Gigi's knuckles.

Gigi exhaled, tilting her head back against the headboard. “I don’t know,” she admitted, “I think I need time to sort out my thoughts.”

“That makes sense,” Cecilia nodded.

There was another pause before Gigi glanced over hesitantly. “H-hey, Cece, can I... stay over for the night?” Gigi asked, her tone meek.

Cecilia blinked, as if surprised by the question, but she didn’t hesitate. “Of course, you can.”

Gigi let out a small breath of relief. “Thanks, Cece.”

“But... Do your parents need to know?” Cecilia asked, as Gigi swallowed.

Did they? Would they even care? Her dad was probably too busy researching scholarships and elite schools to care that she was gone. And her mom... well...

Cecilia must’ve caught the flicker of doubt in Gigi’s expression because she spoke again, more gently this time. “At least let your mom know. Just so she knows where you are,”

Cecilia advised.

Gigi blinked. Would her mom even care? Her dad was probably too busy making calls and researching schools to care that she was gone. And her mom—well, she'd never fought for Gigi before. Why would she start now?

Still, she should at least let her know. Not because she wanted to, but because if she didn't, there was always the chance it'd turn into another argument later. Another thing her dad could use against her.

"...Alright," Gigi muttered, "I'll text her."

Cecilia gave a small nod and leaned back, watching as Gigi pulled out her phone. For a moment, Gigi simply stared at the screen. What was there to even say? She didn't want to explain anything, didn't want to invite a conversation that would only lead to more frustration. Eventually, she typed out a simple message.

Gigi: staying over at a friend's. i'll be gone tomorrow.

*Gigi: *home*

The blonde prepared to put her phone away. However, a notification soon popped up, making her pause.

Mama: Okay.

That was it. No questions, no concern—just a single word. Gigi stared at the screen for a moment longer before locking her phone and tossing it onto the bed beside her. She wasn't sure what she expected. Maybe nothing. Maybe some kind of weak attempt at checking in.

She forced a breath out and leaned back against the headboard. "Well, that's done."

Cecilia, who had been watching quietly, didn't press for details. Instead, she just nodded before standing up and stretching. "Alright. I'll get you an extra pillow," she says, opening up her closet.

"Just one?" Gigi jokes, her heart feeling lighter now, "What if I steal yours?"

"Then I'll throw you out into the rain," Cecilia repeated, rolling her eyes as she tossed a pillow towards her friend.

Gigi chuckled, shaking her head as caught the pillow and hugged it to her chest. “Hey... Thanks, Cece,” Gigi says, a hint of pink dusting her cheeks.

Cecilia turned back to her, raising an eyebrow. “For what?” the perfectionist asked, sitting in the bed.

“For this. For letting me stay. For listening,” Gigi swallowed, glancing down at the pillow in her arms, “It really does mean a lot.”

Cecilia’s expression softened, her cheeks reddening a little. Then, she crossed her arms and smirked. “Well, of course it does. I’m amazing,” she jokes, puffing out her chest proudly.

Gigi snorted. “And humble, too.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. Instead, she sat down on the edge of the bed, nudging Gigi’s leg lightly. “You’re not alone in this, you know. No matter what happens, I’ve got your back.”

The blonde felt her heart melt once more, barely thinking before she moved. Before Cecilia could react, the blonde wrapped her arms around her, squeezing tightly.

Cecilia stiffened at first, clearly caught off guard, but after a moment, she sighed and gave in, awkwardly patting Gigi’s back. “Alright, alright. You’re getting sappy now,” she muttered, her voice softer than usual.

Gigi just laughed quietly into Cecilia’s shoulder. “Shut up and let me have this,” Gigi mumbled.

Cecilia giggled, trying to come up with some witty reply when a knock sounded at the door.

“Girls?” Fauna’s voice sounded as she gently pushed the door open.

Upon witnessing the two girls still tangled in an embrace, Fauna raised an eyebrow before smirking. “Oh? Did I interrupt something?”

Cecilia instantly pulled away, clearing her throat. “Nope. Nothing. What do you want?”

Fauna smirked but didn’t push it. Instead, she walked up to Gigi, placing a hand on her hip. “Just wanted to check in. How are you holding up, Gigi?” she asked, concerned.

Gigi hesitated before shrugging. “Better. Not great, but... better,” she says, before rubbing the back of her neck, “Thanks for letting me stay Fauna... I needed this.”

Fauna nodded, patting Gigi's head affectionately. “Don't worry about it. If you need anything, just let me know,” Fauna smiles, before turning to Cecilia, “And don’t keep her up with your yapping all night, okay?”

Cecilia scoffed. “I do *not* yap,” Cecilia grumbles, standing up as she began pushing Fauna out of the room.

“Whatever you say~” Fauna teased before waving them off and heading back down the hall.

As Cecilia closed the door, Gigi let out a small giggle. “Man, I love Fauna,” Gigi sighs, hugging the plush pug.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, but there was no real bite to it. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t let her hear you say that, though. She’ll never shut up about it,” Cecilia jokes.

Gigi smiled, sinking further into the bed. “Still, it’s nice. Having someone looking out for you like that.”

Cecilia gave her a look before flicking her forehead lightly. “You have people looking out for you too, idiot,” Cecilia reminded, pointing at herself.

Gigi rubbed her forehead with a pout. “Ow,” she muttered, “You don’t have to remind me....”

Cecilia simply smirked before walking over to turn off the lamp. “Get some sleep, Gigi.”

The blonde let out a content sigh, hugging the plush pug closer. “Alright, alright. Goodnight, Cece.”

Cecilia settled into bed, pulling the covers up. “Goodnight.”

A few minutes later, Gigi opened her eyes, shifting slightly as she hugged the plush pug closer. The room was dark, the only sound was the faint hum of the air conditioning and Cecilia’s quiet breathing beside her. She had been moments from sleep when a sudden realization struck her—she was sharing a bed with Cecilia.

Her body tensed. She hadn’t really thought about it before. It had just sort of happened. But now, lying here, it felt impossible to ignore. The warmth at her side, the occasional movement of the blankets... it was all too much.

She swallowed, forcing herself to relax. It wasn’t a big deal. Besides, this wasn’t new—they’ve shared a futon before. But despite that reasoning, her heartbeat refused to settle.

Carefully, she turned her head to sneak a glance at Cecilia, only to find the girl’s back turned, her body curled slightly under the covers. At least she seemed unaffected. That should have been a relief, but for some reason, it made Gigi even more restless.

She fidgeted again, trying to find a position that didn’t make her feel awkward. After a few minutes, the warmth at her side started to feel less suffocating and more... calming. Her body slowly relaxed, and her eyes fluttered shut.

Maybe she was overthinking it.

Meanwhile, Cecilia had been completely comfortable—until Gigi began moving.

It wasn't like she hadn't noticed they were in the same bed, but Gigi's constant movements really hammered home the reality of the moment. The slight shift in weight, the rustling of blankets, each soft sigh that followed. Every little movement sent her heart fluttering in a way she couldn't quite explain.

Her breathing remained steady, but her mind was racing. It's just Gigi. That was the thought she clung to, the one that should have made this feel normal. But lying here, aware of every inch of space between them, it didn't feel normal at all.

The perfectionist forced herself to stay still, pretending to be asleep. If she didn't acknowledge it, maybe the weird feeling in her chest would go away.

Eventually, Cecilia felt Gigi's breathing evening out, body fully relaxed at last.

Cecilia let out a slow breath of her own as the pink on her cheeks mellowed out. It wasn't a big deal.

"Does she intend on coming back? It's pouring outside," Mr. Murin muttered, glancing up from his laptop.

Mrs. Murin looked up from her phone, where Gigi's texts still lingered on the screen.

Gigi: staying over at a friend's. i'll be gone tomorrow.

*Gigi: *home*

She had already typed a simple response, 'Okay', before setting the phone aside. "She's staying over at a friend's tonight," Mrs. Murin answered, her tone unreadable.

Mr. Murin scoffed, shaking his head. "Unbelievable."

He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "She just storms out, doesn't tell us where she's going, and now she's acting like nothing happened?" he grumbled, pinching his temple.

Mrs. Murin pressed her lips together but didn't respond. She had learned, over the years, that sometimes it was best to let him talk.

“She doesn’t appreciate what we’ve done for her,” Mr. Murin continued, rubbing his temple, “All the opportunities, all the doors we’ve opened—does she think any of this just falls into place on its own? We’ve planned so much for her, pushed her because we know what she’s capable of. And what does she do? Throws it all away. Runs off to some second-rate school, refuses scholarships, and now she won’t even listen when we try to steer her toward a future that matters.”

Mrs. Murin sighed, fingers curling against her lap as she stared out the window.

“She could be at the top,” Mr. Murin went on, voice rising, “She should be at the top. But no, she’d rather waste time with—what, playing games? Fooling around with people who’ll never push her to be better? Honestly, it’s pathetic. She’s going to ruin herself.”

Mrs. Murin inhaled slowly, steadying herself. She had let him speak. Had let him vent his frustrations. But that last word—pathetic—landed wrong.

“She’s not pathetic,” Mrs. Murin argued, her hands clenching.

Mr. Murin looked up, brows furrowing. “What?”

“I said,” Mrs. Murin repeated, lifting her gaze, “She’s not pathetic.”

“Don’t tell me you’re taking her side in this,” Mr. Murin says incredulously, letting out a small chuckle.

“This isn’t about sides,” she said, her voice quiet but firm, “It’s about our daughter’s well being.”

“Our daughter is throwing away her potential!”

“She’s old enough to decide what she wants for herself!”

Mrs. Murin’s words cut through the air, sharper than either of them expected.

Mrs. Murin held her ground. “She’ll be sixteen soon,” she repeated, voice softer now, “And she’s spent her entire life chasing expectations she never set for herself. Expectations WE set. Maybe she doesn’t want to be at the top. Maybe she just wants to be happy.”

Mr. Murin scoffed, shaking his head. “Happy? And what, exactly, does that mean? Scraping by in mediocrity? Wasting her intelligence—her talents, on nothing?”

Mrs. Murin hesitated, because she knew this was the core of it—their fundamental difference. To her husband, success was everything. The future was everything. Gigi’s happiness, in his mind, was something that would come after she had reached the heights he envisioned for her.

But the thing was—Mrs. Murin had once believed that too.

There had been a time when she stood right beside him, nodding along as they mapped out Gigi’s future. She had shared his mindset, convinced that pushing their daughter toward

greatness was the only way to ensure she'd live a life worth something. She too once scoured scholarship programs, researched elite schools, and reminded Gigi—again and again—of how lucky she was to have these opportunities.

But as time went on, Mrs. Murin began to doubt everything she believed in. The first time it happened was when Gigi was still in junior high. She had given her daughter yet another scholarship application to fill up. However, instead of filling up the form, Gigi entered their room, announcing her intention to not fill it up, telling them that she was tired of being 'perfect'.

Mrs. Murin was frustrated at first, not understanding why her daughter would want to throw away everything she and her husband had prepared for her. But the more she thought about Gigi's words, the more she began to empathise and realise that she and Mr. Murin never really gave Gigi a choice.

Up until that moment, it had never crossed her mind to ask what Gigi wanted. She and her husband had simply assumed that their daughter would be grateful for all the opportunities they laid out for her. That she would understand, in time, why they had pushed her so hard.

But Gigi's words that night had stuck with her.

"You're doing it for yourselves. You don't care about what I want. You just want me to be perfect."

"Do you even know what it's like to be in a room full of people and feel completely alone? Everyone used to hang out with me, but when they saw how I top the rankings all the time, they stopped! To them, I'm just the 'smart one,' the 'genius', some... unreachable goal! They didn't even see me as a person anymore!"

"...being perfect has ruined everything. I'm alone, and I hate it. I can't keep doing this anymore."

Mrs. Murin had been stunned silent after that night, staring at her daughter as if she were a stranger. She had never seen Gigi like that before—so raw, so worn down. It wasn't just frustration in her voice. It was pain.

At the time, she hadn't known what to say. Her husband tried to reassure her, dismissing Gigi's words as overdramatic, as an excuse to slack off.

And Mrs. Murin, still somewhat rooted in the same beliefs, had stayed quiet, agreeing with him. But now? She regretted that silence.

Gigi hadn't been looking for admiration—she had been looking for connection. For understanding. And all they had given her was another speech about success.

Sitting in the dimly lit living room, listening to her husband rant about their daughter yet again—the way he talked about their daughter as if she were nothing more than wasted potential, as if she were failing them simply by wanting something different, Mrs. Murin felt a sense of guilt in her chest.

Maybe she should have said something back then. Maybe she should say something now.

“She’s not wasting anything,” Mrs. Murin said at last, “She’s just trying to figure things out on her own.”

Mr. Murin let out a bitter laugh. “And you think letting her run off like this is the way to do it?”

“I think,” she said carefully, “That if we keep pushing her like this, we’re going to lose her.”

That made him pause. Just for a second. But then he scoffed, turning back to his laptop. “You’re being dramatic.”

Mrs. Murin didn't argue. However, as she glanced at her phone again, she couldn't shake the feeling that, this time, she might be right.

Cecilia yawned, stretching her arms out. Despite having to share a bed with Gigi, the night's sleep had been surprisingly restful.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, Cecilia reached out, only to feel the cool sheets where Gigi had been. Her brows furrowed. “Gigi?” she murmured, pushing herself up.

There was no response. She glanced around the room only to realize the blonde was gone.

A strange, uneasy feeling settled in Cecilia's chest. Had Gigi left? No, she wouldn't just leave without saying anything... right?

Her worry spiked, but then, as she turned toward her desk, she spotted it—Gigi's phone, sitting untouched.

Cecilia let out a breath. She wouldn't have gone far without it.

Feeling a little more awake now, she slipped out of bed and made her way to the door. As she stepped into the hallway, the house was quiet, the morning air settling in. Then, as she

reached the stairs, she finally saw her.

Gigi sat on the bottom step, elbows resting on her knees, hands loosely clasped together. She was staring ahead, eyes distant, her entire posture radiating with exhaustion.

Cecilia had seen Gigi upset before. She had seen her frustrated, snappy and tired... but this?

She had never seen Gigi like this, and it made her heart ache.

“Hey, Gigi, are you doing okay?” Cecilia asked, taking a seat next to Gigi.

Gigi didn’t answer right away. Her fingers tapped against her lap, and her gaze remained fixed on the floor. For a moment, Cecilia wasn’t even sure if she’d heard her.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, Gigi exhaled. “I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Cecilia frowned, watching her closely. It wasn’t like Gigi to be this quiet. Even when she was frustrated, she usually had something witty to say, some humorous remark to lighten the mood. But now, she just looked... exhausted. Worn down in a way Cecilia wasn’t used to seeing.

“Did something happen?” the perfectionist asked gently.

Gigi chuckled, shaking her head. “Nothing new,” she muttered, shaking her head, “Just... thinking, I guess.”

Cecilia waited, letting the silence settle between them. She knew Gigi well enough to know that pushing wouldn’t help.

Sure enough, after a moment, Gigi spoke again. “I keep replaying everything in my head,” the blonde admitted, her voice tight, “And I just—I don’t know what to do.”

Cecilia glanced at her friend sadly, as hints of morning light made the tiredness in her features stand out. Gigi looked like she hadn’t really rested, despite having slept through the night.

“You don’t have to figure it all out right now,” Cecilia said eventually, placing a hand on Gigi’s, “You just got away from all that mess last night. Give yourself time.”

Gigi’s hands loosened slightly, her shoulders dropping just a bit. She nodded, though the weight in her expression remained.

Cecilia nudged her lightly. “Besides, you’re not alone in this, remember? I’m always here to talk.”

Gigi sighed, but this time, it wasn’t as strained. “Thanks, Cece.”

Before Cecilia could respond, she picked up the scent of something cooking through the air. She lifted her head just in time to hear Fauna's voice floating up from the kitchen.

"Breakfast is ready!" Fauna called, "Get down here before I eat all of it!"

"Coming!" Cecilia replied, rolling her eyes before hearing a tiny growling noise at her side.

The perfectionist glanced at Gigi, who was clutching her stomach with a sheepish expression on her face. "Oops, my bad," Gigi blushed, "I didn't have my dinner yesterday..."

"No time to lose then—Come on," Cecilia said, standing up and offering a hand to Gigi, "Let's get some food in you."

Gigi grinned before accepting her hand.

They soon reached the warm kitchen, which was filled with the smell of toast. Fauna stood by the stove, flipping something on a pan, her hair tied up in a messy bun.

"Took you guys long enough," Fauna smiled, turning to glance at them, "I was about to start without you."

"Like we'd let that happen," Cecilia chuckled as Gigi just gave a small smile. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Fauna to notice something was off.

They ate in relative silence, the occasional scrape of utensils filling the gaps where conversation normally would be. Fauna glanced between the two younger girls, intrigued and concerned by Gigi's silence.

From her interactions with Gigi at the club, Fauna could tell that the blonde's current state was something out of the ordinary. Gigi always had something to say—whether it was something of substance or not, the younger girl always managed to find a way to keep a conversation going.

Eventually, Gigi finished her meal and stood up. "I'll wash my plate," she murmured, carrying her dishes to the sink.

The moment she was out of earshot, Fauna leaned in, lowering her voice. "Okay. What's up with her?" she asked, glancing at Cecilia.

Cecilia hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "She's just... dealing with some stuff at home," she explained, keeping it vague, "Her parents, mostly."

Fauna's brows furrowed, but she didn't pry. Instead, she rested her chin on her palm, thoughtful. "Is there anything we can do?"

Cecilia glanced toward the sink, where Gigi stood rinsing off her plate, her posture still slacked.

“I don’t know,” Cecilia admitted, sighing, “I think, for now, being there for her is the best we can do.”

Fauna smiled softly, tilting her head at her younger sister. “You’re sweet, you know that?”

Cecilia immediately felt a heat rise to her cheeks. Scoffing, she crossed her arms. “I’m just looking out for her, that’s all,” Cecilia mumbled, glancing away.

Fauna chuckled, clearly amused but not pushing it further. “Of course,” Fauna said lightly, but Cecilia could still hear the teasing tone in her voice

The sisters then glanced at Gigi, who had just finished washing up.

Gigi set the dish cloth down, hovering by the sink for a moment longer than she thought necessary. She could feel the sisters’ eyes on her, but she wasn’t sure what to say. Because, really, what now?

She hadn’t thought that far ahead when she left home last night. At the time, all she could focus on was getting away. But now, as she was standing there in the kitchen, reality settled in.

She couldn’t stay here forever, even if she wanted to.

She rubbed her arm, avoiding eye contact with the sisters as she joined them at the table once more. Maybe she should go home soon. Her parents probably knew where she was by now—her mom had read the text, at least. And dragging this out wouldn’t change anything. On the other hand, she knew that deep down, she wasn’t ready to leave.

Because the second she stepped back into that house, everything would come crashing down again. The feelings of hopelessness, the expectations, her father’s disapproval. Even if her mother didn’t scold her, there would be that quiet, strained silence, that awful in-between where nothing was resolved, just hanging in the air.

Here, at Cecilia’s, she could at least breathe.

Gigi inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. But no matter how much she tried to push the thought away, it was still there—she had to go home eventually. The question was just... when?

In the hours after breakfast, Cecilia took it upon herself to keep Gigi distracted.

She dragged her over to the living room, shoving a controller into her hands before plopping down onto the couch beside her. “Alright, I’m bored. Let’s play KeyWe,” Cecilia announced, turning on the console, before winking at Gigi, “You can’t say ‘no’ by the way.”

Gigi blinked at the screen, recognizing the game immediately. It was one of their favorites—a puzzle game where two players controlled tiny kiwi birds working in a post office. Normally, she'd be pretty hyped up for this, but today, she just... wasn't feeling it.

Cecilia could tell Gigi wasn't too eager to play the game. Despite this she was determined to help Gigi lighten up. "Come on, we haven't played in forever. And let's be real, you need to redeem yourself after last time."

Gigi let out a soft snort, but it lacked her usual energy. "Pretty sure I carried last time."

"Pfft, sure," Cecilia scoffed, waving a hand dismissively, "Now hurry up and pick up a joycon!"

Gigi inhaled slowly, then pressed a button to join. The game started and before they knew it, they were thrust into its usual chaotic gameplay. Cecilia was talking the whole time, mindlessly voicing out her inner thoughts.

"Hey, do you think real kiwis would actually make good postal workers?" she wondered aloud, hoping that Gigi would add on to the dumb conversation.

However, Gigi simply shrugged, barely focusing on the game. "Dunno," the blonde muttered, forcing a small smile.

Cecilia frowned slightly. Normally, this was where Gigi would say something equally as stupid, maybe even start a ridiculous argument with her about the kiwis' worker's rights. But instead, she was quiet.

Cecilia glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. Gigi was slumped against the couch, barely paying attention, her hands moving on autopilot. Even when they failed a level, something that usually had Gigi groaning or cackling, she barely reacted.

Cecilia let the game run for another minute before sighing and hitting the pause button.

"What happened?" Gigi blinked, looking at Cecilia.

"You're not even playing," Cecilia pointed out, her expression full of concern, "Are you feeling alright?"

Gigi looked down at the controller in her hands. She wanted to say something, but nothing came.

Cecilia's heart ached at the sight of Gigi's current state once more. "You're really out of it, huh?"

Gigi exhaled through her nose. "Yeah," she admitted, voice barely above a whisper.

Cecilia studied her for a moment, then set her own controller down. "You know, bottling everything up like this isn't going to make you feel better anytime soon," the perfectionist said firmly.

"I know," Gigi muttered, gripping onto the controller for support.

"Then talk to me," Cecilia pressed, "Keeping it all inside is just going to make it worse."

Gigi let out a slow breath, her shoulders slumping. "I just... I don't know when I'm ready to go back home," she admitted, "Or if I even want to go back at all."

Cecilia leaned back against the couch, crossing her arms thoughtfully. "Maybe you should," Cecilia suggested, watching Gigi carefully, "Maybe the best thing to do now is go home and face them head on."

Gigi's jaw clenched. She knew Cecilia was right.

"I mean, if anything bad happens, just keep standing your ground, right? You can't avoid them forever," Cecilia pointed out, to which Gigi let out a bitter laugh, shaking her head.

"You don't get it," the blonde sighed.

"Then make me get it," Cecilia shot back.

"It's hopeless, Cece!" Gigi snapped, glaring at Cecilia, "I've tried. I've tried standing my ground. I've tried explaining myself. But no matter what I say, no matter how I say it, they don't listen! It's like talking to a brick wall! I could scream at the top of my lungs and they'd still find a way to act like I never said anything at all!"

Cecilia opened her mouth, racking her brains to come up with a reply, but Gigi wasn't done.

"I'm tired," Gigi continued, her voice breaking, "I'm so tired of trying, of fighting, of thinking that maybe this time will be different. It's like—like I'm running in circles, and no matter how fast I go, I always end up back where I started. I don't know what else to do. I'm fucking hopeless."

Cecilia's expression hardened, something snapping within her. "You are not hopeless," she hissed as Gigi blinked at her.

The perfectionist's hands curled into fists. "Don't say that. Don't ever say that," she scolded, "I don't care how many times it feels like you've failed—giving up isn't the answer."

Gigi looked away. "It's easy for you to say—"

"No, it's not," Cecilia cut in sharply, "Because you know what? I haven't given up either."

Gigi frowned, confused. "What are you talking about?"

Cecilia huffed, shaking her head. "Do you think I've stopped trying to beat you in the rankings?" she asked, "Do you think I just accepted that I'll always be second place to Gigi Murin? Because I haven't. Every single time, I give it my all, and every single time, I still end up below you. And yeah, it's frustrating. Yeah, sometimes I want to throw my notes out the window and... dropkick you. But you know what I didn't do? I didn't give up."

Gigi stared at her, at a loss for words.

"You think you're running in circles? Fine. Then run harder. Find a way to break out of it," Cecilia insisted, "But don't just sit here and act like you've already lost. Because you haven't. That's not you."

A loud silence hung between the pair. Gigi swallowed, her chest tight. She wanted to argue. Wanted to tell Cecilia that their situations weren't the same. But the words wouldn't come. Because, deep down, she knew Cecilia was right.

"You're right," Gigi sighs, standing up, "I'm sorry for snapping at you, Cece."

Cecilia waved a hand dismissively. "You don't have to apologize. I know you're going through a lot," the perfectionist smiles.

Gigi returned her a small, tired smile before rubbing the back of her neck. "Okay, guess I'll get going."

Cecilia raised a brow. "You don't sound too sure about that."

"I'm not," Gigi admitted, her voice hesitant, "But you're right—I can't avoid them forever. No matter how much I want to."

Cecilia studied her for a moment before standing up as well. "Alright, I'll walk you home," Cecilia announced, prompting Gigi to blink rapidly.

"What? No, it's fine. You don't have to," Gigi chuckles as Cecilia crossed her arms, giving her an unimpressed look.

"You don't have a choice," the perfectionist says, her mind already set.

Gigi let out a giggle, shaking her head. "You're really stubborn, you know that?"

"And you're really bad at accepting help," Cecilia shot back, already heading toward the door, "Let's go before you change your mind."

Gigi sighed but followed. She supposed she should be grateful. Walking home felt a little less daunting with Cecilia by her side.

"Now that I think about it, it's strange I've never been to your house before—considering it's pretty close by," Cecilia noted as she and Gigi strolled along the pavement.

"Yeah," Gigi chuckles, tying up her hair into pigtails as they walk, "I guess you haven't."

“You don’t sound too thrilled about it,” Cecilia chuckles as Gigi sighed, securing the last hair tie before stuffing her hands into her pockets.

“It’s not that. It’s just... weird, I guess. You seeing that part of my life,” Gigi admits with a small blush.

Cecilia frowned. “Gigi, I don’t care about all that stuff. Your parents, your family life... they don’t change how I see you.”

“I know,” Gigi muttered, “That’s not what I meant.”

Cecilia tilted her head. “Then what?”

Gigi hesitated, her gaze fixed on the pavement. “You’ve only ever seen me when I can just... be myself. But at home, it’s different. I feel different,” Gigi says, exhaling and shaking her head, “I don’t know. Maybe I’m overthinking it.”

Cecilia nudged her lightly with her elbow. “You? Overthinking? Never.”

Gigi giggled, but the smile that flickered across her face was brief. “Seriously, though. I don’t know how this is gonna go. My dad was already pissed when I left.”

Cecilia’s expression softened. “You don’t have to go in alone, you know.”

“No, it’s fine. This is my mess,” the pigtailed girl says, shaking her head.

Cecilia frowned but didn’t argue. “Still... if things get bad, just send me in,” Cecilia jokes, placing her hands on her hips.

Gigi snorted, rolling her eyes. “What, you gonna storm in there and lecture my dad?” the pigtailed girl smirks.

“Obviously. I’m great at scolding people. I mean, you would know,” Cecilia replied.

Gigi let out a small laugh, but it faded quickly as her house came into view. Her steps slowed, and she felt her stomach twist.

“You’re hesitating,” Cecilia noted, instantly recognizing Gigi's apprehension.

Gigi sighed. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Probably. But you have to do this eventually,” Cecilia smiles, holding Gigi's hand.

Gigi let out a weak chuckle. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try,” the perfectionist reassured.

Gigi stared at the front door. It felt like a wall, one she wasn’t sure she could climb. But she knew Cecilia was right. She couldn’t just avoid this forever.

“Alright,” Gigi murmured, forcing her feet to move forward, “I’m going.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“No,” Gigi admitted, “But I’m doing it anyway.”

“That’s the spirit,” Cecilia grinned.

Gigi took a deep breath and turned toward the house. As she stepped onto the porch, her eyes flickered to the row of shoes neatly lined up by the door. Her mother’s shoes, her own sneakers, a few pairs of slippers—but her father’s work shoes were missing. Her chest loosened slightly. He’s already gone.

She immediately felt a rush of relief swell up within her. The idea of walking straight into another argument with him had been weighing on her the entire way home. Now, at least, she had time. Time to figure out what to say, how to brace herself for the next inevitable confrontation.

Cecilia must have noticed the way her shoulders eased, because she tilted her head. “What?”

Gigi nodded toward the empty space on the porch. “My dad’s shoes aren’t here. He’s at work,” Gigi explained as Cecilia blinked.

“Oh,” the perfectionist replied, simply as she watched Gigi stare at the door.

“Guess that means I won’t have to deal with him right away,” the pigtailed girl snickered, looking a little too complacent.

Cecilia gave her a look. “You’re not off the hook, you know.”

“I know,” Gigi muttered, reaching for the door handle. However, before she could even touch the handle, the door swung open from the inside. Gigi jolted slightly, stepping back as she found herself face to face with her mother. Mrs. Murin’s brows were slightly furrowed, her expression unreadable as she looked between Gigi and Cecilia.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Gigi balanced on the balls of her feet, unsure of what to say. She hadn’t expected to be greeted at the door, much less by her mother. But the silence stretched on, and she figured someone had to break it.

“...Hi, Mom,” Gigi finally muttered.

Mrs. Murin’s lips parted slightly, as if she wasn’t sure how to respond at first. Then, after a brief pause, she gave a small, tired smile. “Welcome back.”

There was a warmth to her mother's words that made Gigi’s chest tighten just a little.

Mrs. Murin’s gaze then flickered past her daughter, and only then did she seem to notice Cecilia standing just behind her. Her expression shifted slightly, eyebrows raising in curiosity. “And... this is your friend?”

Gigi nodded, glancing over her shoulder. “Uh, yeah. This is Cecilia Immergreen, from my class.”

Cecilia straightened up, offering a polite smile. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Murin,” the perfectionist greeted with a tiny bow.

Mrs. Murin smiled, then nodded in approval. “Nice to meet you too, Cecilia.”

She glanced between them again, a thoughtful look crossing her face before she stepped aside. “Would you like to come inside for a while?” she offered awkwardly.

Cecilia blinked, looking to Gigi for confirmation. Gigi hesitated, but after a moment, she shrugged. “I mean, if you wanna...”

Cecilia smiled slightly. “Sure, why not?”

And with that, the two girls stepped inside, the door closing softly behind them.

A few minutes later, as Cecilia sat on the couch, she couldn’t help but notice the deafening silence hanging between Gigi and her mother. It wasn’t exactly cold—just... awkward. Like neither of them knew what to say.

Gigi sat stiffly across from her, her hands resting on her knees, while Mrs. Murin busied herself with the laundry, though it was clear she was just fidgeting.

Wanting to break the tension, Cecilia glanced around the living room before offering a smile. “Your house is really nice, Mrs. Murin,” she said, hoping to ease the atmosphere a little, “Very homey.”

Mrs. Murin looked up, her expression softening slightly. “Oh, thank you, dear. I try to keep it tidy,” she smiles at Cecilia, “So, Cecilia, how did you and Gigi meet?”

Cecilia perked up at the question. “Oh, we’ve been in the same class for a while. But we really got to know each other because we’re kinda... rivals,” Cecilia admitted.

Mrs. Murin blinked, her eyebrows raising in mild surprise. “Rivals?”

“Yeah, we’ve been competing for the top spot in the rankings. It’s like an unspoken thing at this point,” Cecilia chuckled, glancing at Gigi, who only gave her an amused side-eye.

Mrs. Murin hummed in thought before nodding approvingly. “That’s nice. A bit of friendly competition never hurts,” Mrs. Murin muses, before looking at her daughter with a small smile, “I’m glad you have someone who pushes you to do your best.”

Gigi huffed, crossing her arms. “She’s not pushing me to do my best—she just wants to beat me.”

“Tomayto, tomahto,” Cecilia says, trying to hide her smirk.

“Why are you being so smiley, Miss Second Place?” Gigi chuckled as Cecilia glared daggers at her.

“Call me that one more time—I dare you,” Cecilia jokes, pointing at Gigi threateningly.

Mrs. Murin chuckled at their banter, and for a moment, the tension in the room eased. She and Cecilia continued talking for a while, the conversation flowing more naturally.

Meanwhile, Gigi sat quietly, her hands curled into her lap as she tried to find the right moment to speak. Every time she opened her mouth, the words stuck to the back of her throat. She didn’t want to ruin the lighthearted mood, but she knew she had to say it sooner or later.

Cecilia, however, noticed the way Gigi fidgeted—the way she kept glancing at her mother, then looking away. Realizing what was on her friend’s mind, Cecilia gave her a subtle nod, silently encouraging her to go for it.

Gigi inhaled deeply, readying herself before finally speaking.

“Mom,” she said, her voice firm despite the nervousness in her gut.

“Yes?” Mrs. Murin replies, sitting at attention.

Gigi swallowed before exhaling. “I need you to know that I’m standing my ground against Dad.”

Mrs. Murin paused. Her gaze proceeded to flicker from Gigi’s eyes to her hands, which were clenched into fists. She sighed quietly, her shoulders slumping slightly.

“I… understand you’re frustrated,” Mrs. Murin began, her voice measured, “But you must realize your father doesn’t make these decisions lightly. He only wants what’s best for you.”

Gigi’s jaw tightened. “But it’s not what’s best for me, Mom. It’s what he thinks is best. I’m not living for him. I need to live for myself.”

Mrs. Murin’s eyes softened for a moment. She shook her head slowly, as if she couldn’t quite find the words to bridge the gap between her and her daughter. “I know you’re upset. I know it feels like you’re trapped,” Mrs. Murin began, her eyes radiating with inner conflict, “But Gigi… your father’s way is tough, but it’s because he believes it’ll make you stronger in the long run.”

“I don’t care about the long run anymore. I care about now,” Gigi snapped, frustration leaking into her voice, “I can’t keep pretending everything’s fine when it’s not. I can’t be who he wants me to be.”

Mrs. Murin opened her mouth to speak, but Gigi quickly cut her off. “I get it, Mom. I get what you’re saying. But you don’t know what it’s like for me. I’m done trying to meet his expectations. I can’t keep doing it. I can’t keep living for him when it’s not my life anymore.”

Mrs. Murin looked at her daughter, her face a mixture of concern and something else—regret. She shifted slightly in her seat, as if considering what to say next.

“I know it’s not easy, Gigi. I know you feel like your father’s pushing you away from your own dreams. But have you thought about what would happen if you just... let him help you?” Mrs. Murin continues, trying to maintain neutrality, “If you trusted his way, however hard it might seem, perhaps it could actually give you something in the end?”

Gigi’s chest tightened at her mother’s words. She could feel the frustration building up again, the familiar hopelessness creeping in once more. “And what if it doesn’t, Mom? What if I’m just wasting my time?”

Mrs. Murin looked at Gigi with a quiet sadness in her eyes. “You’re not wasting your time, Gigi. You have potential. I know it’s hard to see that right now, but I don’t want you to lose hope.”

Gigi paused for a moment, her thoughts swirling up. The nihilistic feeling in her chest flared up again. Maybe her mother wouldn’t be able to help her. Maybe no one could. The road ahead had never felt so uncertain, and the weight of it made her want to collapse under its pressure.

The pigtailed girl turned away slightly, trying to regain control. “I’ve tried, Mom. I really have. But nothing changes. I can’t be happy following what he wants.”

“I know, Gigi. And I know your father’s ways might seem overwhelming, but he wants you to succeed,” Mrs. Murin says, although her tone suggested she wasn’t entirely convinced by her own words, “This path he’s put you on, it might seem wrong, but it’s just... his way of preparing you for something bigger. For your future.”

Gigi felt the urge to shout, to tell her mother that she didn’t get it, that it wasn’t what she wanted. But instead, she clenched her fists tighter. The words didn’t come. Maybe it was because she was starting to believe her mother wasn’t really listening, or maybe it was because she didn’t feel like anything would ever change.

There was a long silence as Mrs. Murin sat back, thinking carefully before she spoke again. “I want to help you, Gigi. I do. But I also want you to understand what your father is doing... it comes from a place of love. It may not seem that way, but he’s trying to prepare you for the world in the way he knows best.”

Gigi’s frustration finally boiled over, and she stood up abruptly. “That’s the problem, Mom. He thinks he knows what’s best for me. But I’ve been living with this for years. He doesn’t understand what I really want.”

Mrs. Murin was quiet for a long moment, as if weighing her words carefully. “I know, dear. But maybe the future your father is talking about will turn out better than you think. Maybe it’s not the way you would have chosen, but it might be good for you in the long run.”

Gigi felt the hopelessness rise again, heavier this time, and her chest tightened. Was this really all there was to it? Was her mother just going to let things play out as they were?

Before she could speak, Cecilia, who had been sitting silently through the conversation, suddenly stood up. “I’m sorry, but I can’t just sit here and let this continue.”

Gigi and her mother turned towards the perfectionist, surprised. Cecilia, her voice firm and resolute, continued. “Gigi needs someone to back her up, not just give her more reasons to feel stuck. I get that you care about her, but sometimes it feels like you’re avoiding the hard conversations. She’s not getting any younger, and she needs your support right now.”

Mrs. Murin blinked, caught off guard by Cecilia’s bluntness. “I’m not avoiding anything,” she said, her tone careful, “I just don’t want to make things worse.”

Cecilia frowned. “But that’s exactly what you’re doing. Sitting on the fence, acting neutral—it’s not helping Gigi. It’s hurting her,” Cecilia says, gesturing towards Gigi, who sat stiffly, her hands clenched in her lap, “You keep saying you understand, but you’re still making excuses for your husband. You’re asking Gigi to keep waiting, to keep hoping, while nothing changes. Do you really think that’s fair?”

Mrs. Murin opened her mouth, then hesitated. Her fingers curled slightly as she looked at her daughter. Gigi was staring at the floor, shoulders tense, lips pressed together like she was bracing for another disappointment. It was a look she had seen too many times before.

Cecilia continued, her voice softer but no less firm. “If you really want to help her, stop trying to keep the peace and start standing up for her. Gigi has been standing alone for too long.”

Mrs. Murin inhaled, her expression unreadable, before exhaling slowly. She turned to Gigi, really looking at her this time. Her daughter, tired and wary, was waiting for her answer.

A deep sense of regret settled in Mrs. Murin’s chest. She had been trying to balance everything, trying to keep both her husband and her daughter’s interests in mind. But in doing so, she had let Gigi suffer in silence. Finally, she spoke, her voice quieter but steadier. “You’re right.”

Gigi’s head snapped up in surprise.

Mrs. Murin gave a slow nod, as if coming to terms with the weight of her decision. “I’ve spent too long trying to keep the peace. But this isn’t peace, is it?” Mrs. Murin smiles weakly, “I’m sorry, Gigi, I should have stood up for you a long time ago. I see that now.”

Gigi swallowed hard, her throat tight.

Mrs. Murin reached for her daughter’s hands, squeezing them gently. “I’ll talk to your father. I won’t just try to ease things over—I’ll make him listen.”

Gigi’s breath hitched. “Mama... you’ll do that?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Murin nods, her lips pressed together, “Because you’re my daughter. And I should have been on your side from the start.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, something inside Gigi cracked. Before she could think twice, she threw her arms around her mother.

Mrs. Murin widened her eyes, startled. But then she relaxed, wrapping her arms around Gigi in return.

It was the first time they had hugged in years.

Gigi squeezed her eyes shut, clinging to her mother like she was afraid she'd disappear, as tears ran down her cheek. Mrs. Murin stroked her back gently, her hold firm and warm.

Cecilia, standing off to the side, crossed her arms with a satisfied nod.

Gigi let out a shaky laugh, her grip on her mother tightening for just a moment longer. Then, slowly, she pulled away, wiping her eyes before she could get too emotional.

Mrs. Murin smiled softly. "No more waiting. I'll do what I should have done a long time ago."

Gigi nodded, feeling a sense of genuine hope swell up within her.

imgreen: remember to keep me updated!!!

geegee: okie dokes

geegee: 🤔

Gigi set her phone aside. Her father will be home any minute now. She could already picture it—her father stepping through the door, his usual stern expression set in place, eyes scanning the room before settling on her. The inevitable questions. The judgment. The exhaustion in his voice when he told her, once again, that she was making a mistake.

But this time, she wasn't alone.

Mrs. Murin sat beside her, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes tired. She had spent most of the evening quiet, lost in thought. But Gigi knew that whatever decision her mother had made, she wasn't going to back down now.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway made Gigi tense. Footsteps followed, the sound of heels clacking against tiles echoing throughout the home. Then the front door unlocked, and Mr. Murin stepped inside.

He was still in his work clothes, his tie slightly loosened, his face tired, but his eyes sharp. He shut the door behind him and exhaled, setting his briefcase down before glancing at his wife and daughter. His eyes lingered on Gigi, and his expression hardened.

“So,” he said, closing the distance between them, “You finally decided to come back.”

Gigi’s grip on her pants tightened, but before she could respond, Mrs. Murin stood up. “We need to talk, dear,” she said to her husband, her voice calm but firm.

Mr. Murin raised an eyebrow, glancing between them. “I assumed that’s why she was here,” the blonde man sighed, rubbing his temple, “Alright, Gigi, I hope you used your little stunt to clear your head, because this nonsense has gone on long enough.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Mrs. Murin cut in, her tone sharper than usual.

Mr. Murin blinked, caught off guard. He looked at his wife properly now, as if only just realizing she was standing between him and Gigi. “What?”

“She’s not here to listen to another lecture,” Mrs. Murin continued, arms crossed, “She’s here because she wants to make something clear—and I think it’s time you actually listened.”

Gigi’s breath hitched. Her father narrowed his eyes.

“This isn’t about listening,” Mr. Murin muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose, “It’s about reality. About what’s best for her future. You know how this works, Gigi. You can’t just run away from your responsibilities and expect everything to be fine.”

“I didn’t run away,” Gigi said, forcing herself to hold his gaze, “I left because I needed to think. And I’ve decided I’m not giving up on the life I have now—the life I’m content with, just because you don’t approve.”

Mr. Murin exhaled sharply, looking at her like she was being ridiculous. “Gigi, you’re setting yourself up for failure. You’re wasting your potential on something that won’t guarantee stability.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” Mrs. Murin said before Gigi could react.

Her husband turned to her, his frustration growing. “Dear, you’ve been acting so strange recently. Since when did you start encouraging this?”

“Since I realized how much we’ve been hurting our daughter,” she replied, “I should have seen it sooner, and it’s time you did too.”

Mr. Murin scoffed, shaking his head. “That’s not true. I’ve been trying to guide her.”

“No,” Mrs. Murin countered, stepping forward, “You’ve been trying to control her. There’s a difference.”

Gigi had never seen her mother like this before—so unwavering, so unshaken by the weight of her father’s presence.

Mr. Murin looked genuinely taken aback. “I’m doing what any responsible father would do. I want her to have a stable life, not chase some fantasy that will leave her struggling,” Mr. Murin argued.

“Why do you assume she’ll struggle?” Mrs. Murin challenged, “She’s a genius, we all know that. But she’s also a strong girl. And if she does struggle, so what? That’s life, isn’t it? You struggled when you started out, and yet you expect her path to be laid out perfectly?”

“She’s young,” Mr. Murin argued, “She doesn’t understand the consequences of these choices.”

“Then let her learn,” Mrs. Murin shot back, “Let her make her own mistakes and victories. You can’t puppet her around forever, and you certainly can’t keep treating her wants like they’re worthless.”

Gigi’s heart pounded. She had imagined this moment a hundred times, but she had never expected her mother to be the one leading the charge.

Mr. Murin’s jaw tightened. “And what happens when she fails? What then?”

“Then she picks herself up,” Mrs. Murin said simply, “And she keeps going. Just like anyone else.”

Gigi took a shaky breath before speaking again. “I’m not asking for your approval, Dad. I’m asking for you to respect my choice. I’m standing my ground on this,” Gigi says firmly.

Mr. Murin stared at her, his expression darkened. It was clear he was trying to think of yet another rebuttal.

However, before he could speak, Mrs. Murin sighed. “I know you think you’re doing what’s best, but you’re not seeing the bigger picture. She was never happy following the path we forced her to go on, and she never will be.”

“I just—” Mr. Murin exhaled, dragging a hand down his face. He looked at Gigi again, as if searching for something in her expression.

But Gigi didn’t waver. The pigtailed girl glared at her father with a steely determination. She didn’t care if he yelled or chided her anymore. She’ll hold her ground, no matter what.

Finally, Mr. Murin sighed. “I don’t agree with this.”

Gigi’s chest tightened.

“But,” he continued, rubbing his temples, “I won’t stop you. It’s clear I can’t.”

Gigi's eyes widened slightly. "That doesn't mean I think it's a good idea," Mr. Murin added quickly, "But if you're so set on this, then fine. It's your life. I won't force you to do anything."

Gigi swallowed. It wasn't the acceptance she had hoped for, but... it was something.

Mrs. Murin nodded, her stance still firm. "That's all she's ever wanted from us. To be heard," Mrs. Murin says, as Mr. Murin sighed again, looking exhausted and frustrated.

Mr. Murin turned to Gigi, glaring at her with an immense anger he seemed to be doing best to hold back. "Just don't come running back when things don't go your way."

Gigi clenched her jaw, but before she could respond, Mrs. Murin spoke up. "She won't need to," she said, "Because she'll figure it out herself."

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then, finally, Mr. Murin nodded, exhaling hard. Without another word, he walked past them, heading towards his room.

The moment the door clicked shut, Gigi let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding this entire time. Mrs. Murin turned to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Gigi nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think so."

Her mother squeezed her hand gently. "He's definitely not going to get over this anytime soon," Mrs. Murin chuckled softly, before giving Gigi a reassuring look, "But I meant what I said. I'll keep standing up for you, no matter what."

Gigi swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thanks, Mama," Gigi smiles, leaning her head against her mother's shoulder.

Gigi let out a small, breathy laugh. She couldn't believe it was actually over. She had braced herself for another bitter fight, an endless argument, half-convinced that no matter what she said, nothing would change. And yet—here she was. Although her father hadn't completely backed down, he had relented. He wasn't standing in her way anymore.

Mrs. Murin stayed quiet, rubbing slow circles on Gigi's back, as if giving her time to process everything. Gigi wasn't sure how to feel. Relieved? Shocked? Maybe both.

"That was a relief, huh?" Mrs. Murin says, resting her head on her daughter's.

Gigi blinked, feeling lightheaded, before nodding. "Yeah, it was."

A few days later, things were... pretty different. Gigi found herself talking to her mom more than she had in years. It was awkward at first—neither of them quite knew how to navigate

this new step in their relationship. But Mrs. Murin tried, and that was more than Gigi could say for before.

It wasn't just small talk anymore. Her mother would now make attempts to check in on her, ask how her day was going, even sit down to chat with her over breakfast. This made Gigi extremely happy, as she finally felt like her mother wasn't just paying attention to her for her grades.

She was grateful. Even if things weren't perfect, even if her mom wasn't always there for her, she had stood up for her when it mattered most—and that meant everything.

Her father, on the other hand... hadn't spoken to her since the confrontation. Gigi wasn't surprised, nor was she particularly upset about it. She had expected this—her father's silence, his refusal to accept the decision she had made for herself. He hadn't argued further, but it wasn't because he had changed his mind. If anything, he probably still believed she was throwing everything away. And for some reason, it kinda hurt.

As much Gigi wanted to pretend otherwise, a part of her regretted that they couldn't make peace. She knew it wasn't something that would be solved overnight—maybe not even for a long time. But deep down, some part of her wished he would just accept her for who she was, rather than what he thought she should be.

Still, she wasn't going to let that drag her spirits down today. Because today, she was finally going out to see her friends again.

The mall was bustling with life, as it always was on a weekend. Gigi swam through the crowds, hands stuffed in her pockets, before spotting a familiar group gathered near the entrance of a karaoke place.

Elizabeth, Raora, Cecilia, the twins, Bijou, Nerissa, and Shiori—her whole friend group, all waiting for her.

As she approached, she caught bits and pieces of their conversations. Bijou was excitedly talking about a game she started playing with their senior Kaela, while the twins were busy hyping up a daifuku shop that opened up nearby. Meanwhile, Nerissa and Shiori were busy messing with Elizabeth while Raora watched on with amusement.

And then there was Cecilia. Usually, the perfectionist would be busy chattering away with the others, but for some reason, she seemed to be standing away from the others, instead keeping an eye out for something—or someone.

As soon as Gigi reached them, the group turned to her, waving excitedly. "There you are!" Bijou grinned as Gigi joined the group, "Feels like it's been forever since we've seen you!"

Gigi chuckled. "It hasn't been that long, surely," Gigi grinned as Raora gave her a big hug.

"Long enough," Elizabeth said, smiling, "You've been MIA for days."

Before Gigi could apologise, Cecilia huffed, uncrossing her arms. “And now you’re late,” Cecilia scolded, placing her hands on her hips.

“Seriously? Not even a ‘Hey, Gigi, nice to see you again’?” Gigi pouted as Cecilia raised an unimpressed brow.

“You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago,” the perfectionist pointed out.

“Ten,” Gigi corrected.

“Fifteen,” Cecilia repeated firmly.

“It’s ten if you round it down,” Gigi shot back, stuffing her hands into her pockets.

Cecilia huffed once more, a hint of amusement showing on her expression. “That’s not how it works... Let me guess, you overslept?”

“Guilty as charged!”

“I should’ve expected that.”

The others had clearly been listening in, but none of them bothered to jump into the conversation. They were used to the two of them bickering by now, and it was always more entertaining to watch from the sidelines.

Cecilia sighed, shaking her head before finally dropping the argument. “Whatever. We have time to kill anyway.”

Nerissa nodded, piping in. “Mhmm, we have about twenty minutes till our time slot,” Nerissa says, before glancing at the twins, “Fuwawa and Mococo were talking about a new daifuku place earlier. We could grab some before heading to karaoke.”

“Sounds like a plan, Rissa,” Shiori concurs as the group nodded their heads in agreement.

The group began making their way towards the daifuku shop, the twins leading the discussion on what flavors the shop had and which ones they should get.

After everyone bought their desserts, Gigi walked over to where Cecilia was waiting. The perfectionist had decided not to get a dessert for herself as she had just eaten. However, Gigi felt compelled to get an extra bag of strawberry daifuku for her anyway. It wasn’t much, but after everything Cecilia had done for her, Gigi wanted to show her appreciation in some way.

The blonde approached Cecilia, who was scrolling through her phone, leaning against a pillar near the shop. Without a word, Gigi held out a singular daifuku to her.

Cecilia glanced up, then down at the dessert in Gigi’s hand. “What’s this?”

“A thank-you,” Gigi said simply, “For, you know... everything.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t I say I wasn’t hungry?” Cecilia smiles as Gigi shrugged.

“Yeah, but I figured... you’d have no choice but to have some if I went ahead and bought a bag for you anyway,” Gigi smirked, holding out the daifuku towards Cecilia’s mouth.

Cecilia gave her a long look, her cheeks reddening before sighing. “...You’re lucky I like strawberries.”

Gigi smirked. “I know.”

Cecilia took a small bite out of the daifuku Gigi had fed her, chewing thoughtfully. After a moment, she muttered, “It’s good.”

“Right?” Gigi giggles, flashing a toothy grin at Cecilia.

The perfectionist stood quietly besides Gigi, glancing at her from the corner of her eye. “You seem... different,” the perfectionist said after a moment.

“Different how? More beautiful? More stylish?” Gigi jokes, striking a pose.

“More like yourself again,” Cecilia smiles, rolling her eyes.

Gigi wasn’t sure how to respond to that. The past few days had felt almost... surreal. Everything had worked out better than she had expected—better than she had even dared to hope. And now, she was here, surrounded by her friends, free from her worries at last.

She glanced at Cecilia, who was still watching her, waiting for her response. Gigi cleared her throat, suddenly feeling awkward.

“You know,” the pigtailed girl muttered, crossing her arms, “I just really wanna thank you again...”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

Gigi looked away, her cheeks warming. “For calling my mom out the other day. I mean, I was trying to convince her, but you—” she began, waving a hand, “—just said everything I couldn’t. And you kinda looked... cool while doing it.”

Cecilia blinked before her lips tugged upwards into a smug grin. “Cool, huh?”

“Forget I said anything,” Gigi chuckled.

“No, no, I think I’d like to hear that again,” Cecilia insisted, before blushing and rubbing her neck, “...Though, honestly? That was hella embarrassing. I don’t think I’ve ever talked to an adult like that before. I kinda just snapped. And now... nyam, nyam, nyam... I keep wondering if your mom hates me for it.”

Gigi blinked at her. “Hates you?” the pigtailed girl repeated, incredulous.

Cecilia sighed. "I mean, I basically called her out in her own house. That's not exactly the best way to make a good first impression."

Gigi shook her head, smiling. "You're overthinking it. She doesn't hate you at all. Actually..." Gigi says, hesitating for a moment before continuing, "She's been talking about you a lot these past few days."

Cecilia's eyes widened slightly. "Wait, what?"

Gigi nodded. "Yeah. We've been talking more since that night, and you've come up a few times. She asked about our competitions and stuff—how long we've been doing it, if you ever managed to beat me."

"Tch, and what did you tell her," Cecilia grumbled.

"The truth," Gigi smirked, "I told her no."

"Yeah, I think I got that part," Cecilia pouts as Gigi feeds her another daifuku.

"But I also told her you never back down, even when you lose," Gigi added, her tone softer, "That you always keep pushing forward, and that's why I find our competitions so fun."

Cecilia blinked, looking away. "... Well, yeah. What's the point if I don't at least try?"

Gigi chuckled. "She actually thinks it's nice that I have someone like you to keep me on my toes."

"Well... that's a relief," Cecilia sighs, looking relieved.

"Oh, and she called you impressive," Gigi added casually.

Cecilia's head snapped toward her. "What?" the perfectionist utters, looking flustered.

"Yeah, she said, 'That Cecilia girl is 'impressive'," Gigi winked, recalling her conversations with Mrs. Murin.

Cecilia opened her mouth, then closed it, her face growing redder by the second. "I—well—she's just being nice."

"Nah," Gigi said, amused, "She meant it, and she's right— you ARE pretty impressive."

Cecilia let out a huff, crossing her arms again as she tried to think of a reply. None came.

"Not as cool now, huh?" Gigi teased.

Cecilia shot her a look before grabbing a daifuku from her dessert bag and stuffing it into Gigi's mouth. "Shut up."

Chapter End Notes

WOAHH LONGEST CHAPTER (so far...?) HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT
in other news we're finally at the halfway point of the story yippee!!! i wanna thank you
guys for sticking around and i hope yall enjoy reading this fic as much as i enjoy writing
it ehehehe blushing emoji

The Council

Cover High's Student Council was just like any other. They helped address the student body's concerns, managed clubs and oversaw important events. Their responsibilities ranged from organizing festivals and school-wide competitions to mediating disputes and managing club budgets.

The student council's work wasn't just about making decisions—it was about making sure the voices of the students were heard, as well as creating a school environment that was fair, engaging and efficient. And in a school as busy and chaotic as Cover High, the council assumes a vital role in keeping everything running smoothly. Running it required dedication, excellent teamwork and strong leadership.

But right now, the president of the council, Hakos Baelz, wasn't feeling leader-like at all.

The redhead groaned, slamming her forehead onto the desk with a thud. "We're done for," she muttered, her voice muffled by the wood of the table. The entire room went quiet for a moment, and then the other council members exchanged confused glances, unsure of what was going on.

"Uh, what's wrong, Bae?" the vice-president, Irys, asked. It wasn't like Baelz to look so gloomy as she was usually one of the more talkative and energetic members of the council. She rarely showed signs of stress, let alone defeatedness.

The treasurer, Ouro Kronii, glanced up from her phone, seemingly just now noticing everyone's attention on the slumped-over redhead. After a moment, she raised an eyebrow, taking in the room's mood shift. "You don't look like you're having a g'day, Bae," she remarks at the Australian Baelz, "Haha. Get it? G'day?"

A long, awkward silence followed as Kronii glanced around at the straight faces of the council members, her joke falling flat. "No?" she muttered, scratching the back of her head, "Ah well..."

Fellow Australian, and the events coordinator, Tsukumo Sana, let out a tiny giggle. "I thought it was funny, Kronini," Sana said

"Thank you, Sana," Kronii exhaled, appreciative that she managed to amuse at least one of her friends.

The council's secretary, Fauna, just shook her head, a soft smile on her face, before looking over at Baelz. "So... what's going on, Bae? What's got you so worked up?" she asked in her usual soothing tone.

Baelz sat up, rubbing her forehead (which was now numb after she slammed it onto the table earlier), before letting out a long sigh. "Basically, we're screwed. The council's screwed and it's all my fault..."

Everybody in the room glanced at one another, not fully understanding what was going on. "What do you mean 'screwed'? And how is it your fault, exactly?" Irys asked, crossing her arms, "You've been doing a pretty good job handling the council. Why the sudden panic?"

Baelz pressed her iced coffee cup against her forehead before lifting her head, looking around at the others. "Well... I realized that all of us will be third-years when the new semester rolls in," she said, her voice filled with dread, "Meaning the council will *only* be made up of third-years. And since nobody from the grade below us joined last year, we've got no one to take over when we graduate."

"Oh right, we'll be graduating soon," Fauna remembers, staring out the window absentmindedly, "Time sure does fly by, huh?"

Irys nodded, looking a little sentimental. "It feels like only yesterday when we first entered this school," she sighed before groaning, "Arrrghhh! I don't wanna grow up!"

Baelz blinked at her council members, who were now reminiscing their past two years of High School and talking about their upcoming final year. "Guys, focus! We're not getting any younger here! We need to find new members before we graduate, or this whole council will just... poof—gone!" Baelz exclaimed, spinning around in her swivel chair.

"I mean, we could try and recruit new members when the semester begins. Maybe some of the new first-years would be open to joining us," the public relations official, Nanashi Mumei, reasoned, as she nested on a bean bag.

Baelz groaned, slumping forward onto her desk. "Yeah, but last year, none of our juniors joined. How are we supposed to make sure the *next* batch of first-years will care?"

"We could bribe them," Kronii suggested dryly.

"Ooh! Maybe offer them a salary," Fauna giggled, "We could even embezzle the school's funds..."

"Would we get a salary as well?" Sana played along as Baelz slapped her forehead.

"We are not bribing, embezzling or implementing any sort of salary system!" Baelz sighs, before thinking about Fauna's suggestion again, "Although, now that you've mentioned it... we do often end up with a lot of extra event funds..."

Irys promptly chopped the president's head roughly. Baelz flinched, rubbing her head where Irys had chopped her. "Ow! Fine... we won't do anything illegal. But how else are we supposed to make sure we get new members then?"

Mumei turned to look at Baelz, having just snapped out of a small daydream. "Maybe we can host a 'join the student council' event and bribe them with snacks or something. People will join anything if you throw in free food," Mumei suggested.

"Wasn't that how *you* got roped into the council? I remember our seniors luring you in with treats," Baelz snickered as Mumei grinned.

“Well, it worked, didn't it?” Mumei shrugged, before staring up into the ceiling once more.

Baelz spun around in her chair as her mind raced with thoughts. It wasn't just about getting new members, it was about making sure that the council's legacy lived on. She paused, her hands gripping the edge of the desk as she stared at the group. “To tell you the truth guys... it's not just about filling the spots,” the president began, “I'm worried that if we don't find the right people... the council will just fall apart when we graduate. We and our seniors have been working so hard to make things better for the school, and if we leave and there's no one to carry that forward, it'll all be for nothing. We can't just let it disappear.”

The chatter and laughter in the room died down as Baelz's words hung over the group. They all exchanged quiet glances, realizing just how serious this was to her. At that moment, the usual joking atmosphere of the council's headquarters changed.

Fauna was the first to speak, her voice gentle and understanding. “I get it, Bae,” she said softly, offering a reassuring smile, “I wouldn't want everything we've worked for to be for nothing either.”

Baelz exhaled slowly, her shoulders slumping as if a heavy weight had settled on them. “Exactly. We've all put so much time and effort into making sure this council works for the students, and I just... I don't want that to be forgotten once we leave.”

Kronii, sitting up in her chair, nodded in agreement. “Well, you're right. We can't just find any member to fill the gap,” Kronii concurs, “We need people who can carry on our work. Someone who actually gives a damn.”

“I'm sure there are plenty of such people out there,” Sana noted, stroking her chin thoughtfully, “The only problem standing in our way is whether the new juniors will actually want to join the council.”

“We could try convincing the second-years to join up too,” Irys says, “There's bound to be someone perfect for the job.”

Baelz glanced at each of them, her chest tightening under the weight of her thoughts. “But how do we find someone like that?” Baelz sighs, taking a sip from her coffee.

Fauna's eyes immediately brightened as a light bulb lit above her head. “You know what... there's someone I know who might be exactly what you're looking for.”

Baelz raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Really? Who?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

Fauna smiled, her expression softening as she spoke. “My younger sister, Cecilia,” Fauna replies, leaning forward slightly, her hands resting on the table, “You've all probably heard of her—she's one of the smartest students in the grade below us. People always talk about how brilliant she is.”

Baelz blinked, a spark of recognition lighting up her eyes. “Wait, you mean Cecilia Immergreen, right? The one who aced basically every exam last year? I've heard her name around.”

The others nodded in agreement. They were all aware of Cecilia's reputation as one of the brightest students in the school.

"Yes, that's her. But it's not just about her grades. She's really reliable and always involved in school activities," Fauna explained, "She's also been helping out clubs with their issues and everyone knows her as an approachable, hardworking person they can count on."

Baelz nodded thoughtfully, her fingers drumming on the desk. *"She definitely sounds like she has potential..."* she thought to herself, *"But I still feel like I need to see it for myself."*

"She does sound like a solid choice," Baelz said aloud, her voice neutral, though the wheels in her mind were turning, "I mean, from what you told me, she sounds like the perfect fit!"

"I really think she is," Fauna nodded.

Kronii smirked slightly. "Well, if she's anything like Fauna, she's got a good shot at making this council even better."

"And if she's that smart, I'm sure she won't be easy to beat in future elections," Sana agreed with a smile.

Baelz nodded again, but she wasn't fully on board just yet. *"Just in case though... I'll have to investigate her first. Make sure she's really as good as Fauna says she is,"* Baelz told herself, *"There's no way I'm letting the council be left in the hands of someone who's not all in."*

A new school year had officially begun. Students poured in through the gates, chatting excitedly, while some yawned sleepily. The hallways were packed with activity—friends catching up, first-years trying to figure out where to go and teachers standing by to guide them. The slamming of lockers could be heard while flyers for club recruitment were already being handed out by eager club members.

Near the noticeboards, a large crowd of second-years had gathered, scanning the posted class lists. Some groaned upon learning they would be separated from their friends, while others cheered, relieved to see familiar names beside theirs. A few students tried squeezing past the crowd for a better look, while others began discussing which teachers they would be getting this year.

Amidst the chatter, Cecilia Immergreen stood near the front, her eyes scanning the page for her own name. To say she was a little nervous about which class she would be in would be an understatement.

"I don't wanna be separated, Raora!" Cecilia whined, clinging onto her friend's arm desperately, "What if you're not with me this year and all my new classmates are all

weirdos!”

“Then you'd fit right in,” Raora teased, as Cecilia glared at her.

The artist kept her eyes peeled, scanning the lists on the notice board for her name. However, the crowd of people in front of her made it a little difficult to read the list. “I can't see a thing,” Raora complained, standing on tiptoes in an attempt to see past the sea of heads.

“Ugh, we should just push our way to the front,” Cecilia grumbled, shifting impatiently on her feet.

Raora chuckled, shaking her head. “Yeah, let's not cause a stampede on the first day, okay?”

At that moment, the duo noticed Elizabeth, who had just arrived, standing a little apart from the crowd. With her height, she had no trouble seeing over most of the students gathered around the board. Spotting Cecilia and Raora, she made her way over, her expression as composed as ever.

"Having trouble, ladies?" Elizabeth asked, looking at Cecilia clinging onto Raora with amusement.

"Yes," Cecilia admitted without hesitation, looking up at her taller friend with hopeful eyes, "Liz, could you use your height advantage and help us see which class we're in?"

Elizabeth let out a small chuckle. “Of course,” she obliged, stepping closer to scan the lists. It only took her a moment to find their names. "Alright... Let's see here... Ah! You're both in Class 2-1."

Raora let out a triumphant noise, nudging Cecilia lightly. "Looks like we're stuck together for another year."

Cecilia exhaled, relieved. "That's good," she said simply. She had been worried about being separated, and while she wasn't about to get overly sentimental about it, knowing Raora would be in the same class put her at ease.

“What about you, Elizabeth?” Raora asked the taller girl, who glanced back at the list.

“I'm... in 2-1 as well," Elizabeth says happily.

Cecilia looked over at her, reassured even further. "Oh, that's great! That means we'll all be together again this year," Cecilia grinned, relieved. Having both Raora and Elizabeth in her class meant she wouldn't have to navigate a new group of classmates alone.

“Is there anyone else we know with us this year?” Raora asked, still trying to peek over the people in front of her.

Elizabeth's eyes scanned the names on the board carefully before her eyes lit up. “Oh, what do you know? Gigi's with us as well!”

Cecilia felt an unexpected warmth in her chest, and before she knew it, a small smile tugged at her lips. She wasn't sure why, but the thought of Gigi being her classmate once more made her heart flutter. Then, catching herself, she quickly rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated groan. "Great, I have to spend another year nagging at her," Cecilia sighed, though her small smile remained.

"You don't look too sad about it," Raora smirked as Cecilia raised an eyebrow.

Elizabeth chuckled before continuing. "Now, as for the others... looks like Nerissa, the twins, Shiori, and Biboo are all in 2-2."

Raora widened her eyes, pouting in disappointment. "Seriously? Aw, that sucks," the artist says, crossing her arms.

Cecilia nodded, her initial excitement dimming a little. "Yeah, that's a shame. It would've been nice to have everyone in the same class again."

"We'll still see them during breaks. And besides, 2-1 doesn't seem too bad. We might even get along with some of our new classmates," Elizabeth reasoned, taking on a more optimistic view.

"Speaking of the others... Where are they?" Cecilia wonders aloud, glancing around the hallway for their friends.

It didn't take long to spot them. A short distance away, a familiar voice cut through the noise of the crowd. "Oh nooo, Biboooo!" Gigi whined dramatically, throwing her arms around Bijou in an exaggerated hug, "They've split us apart! How will I survive?"

Bijou clung back just as dramatically, swaying them both side to side. "Gigi, noooo! This is the worst timeline! What if we drift apart? What if we forget each other? What if—"

"Promise me we'll still see each other everyday," Gigi huffed, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye and finally pulling away, "But still. Now I'm stuck with a bunch of weirdos."

Cecilia, along with Raora and Elizabeth, immediately stepped forward. "Oh?" Cecilia said, raising an eyebrow, "And what exactly do you mean by that, Gigi?"

Gigi turned her head and found the three of them standing there, arms crossed and unimpressed. She blinked, then grinned, rubbing the back of her neck. "Oh, uh, didn't see you guys there," Gigi says sheepishly before grinning, "What I meant was... I'm stuck with a bunch of the most *beautiful* people in school!"

"That wasn't what you said earlier," Cecilia scoffed, flicking Gigi's forehead.

"I'm gonna miss you guys," Nerissa sighed, wrapping Elizabeth and Raora in a tight hug dramatically, "It was fun while it lasted..."

Shiori placed a hand on her hips, giggling. "Don't be dramatic Rissa, it's not like we'll never see them again."

Fuwawa nodded. "Yeah! We can still see each other around school!"

"And hang out during lunch!" Mococo added.

Bijou groaned, leaning against Gigi. "Yeah, yeah, but it's not the same! I need my bestie with me during class. Who am I supposed to draw funny things on worksheets with now?"

"You could always try paying attention for once, Beebs," Shiori winked as Bijou gasped, clutching her chest.

"Pay attention?" Bijou repeated, looking mildly offended, "You ask for the impossible..."

Gigi snickered, patting Bijou's head. "Don't worry, Biboo. I'll continue doodling on worksheets in your name."

Bijou's eyes widened as she took Gigi's hands in hers. "Gigi..."

Nerissa finally let go of Raora and Elizabeth, stretching her arms. "Well, I guess we should start heading to class. Wouldn't want to be late on the first day," Nerissa yawns, putting her arm around Shiori's shoulders.

"Yeah, let's go!" the twins replied in unison.

Cecilia watched as their friends in 2-2 began to walk off, a small part of her wishing they could all stick together just a little longer. But as she glanced at Raora, Elizabeth, and Gigi beside her, she felt a sense of relief. Even though things weren't going to be quite the same, it was nice to know she still had them by her side.

The perfectionist glanced at Gigi, who was busy chatting away with the other two. It was odd—how much lighter she felt knowing Gigi would be in her class again. To be frank, she hadn't even considered the possibility of Gigi not being in the same class as her. And now that she was, Cecilia couldn't quite explain why it made her so... happy.

Lost in thought, she found herself staring at Gigi, taking in the way the pigtailed girl's eyes lit up as she spoke, the way her hands animated her words. It wasn't until Gigi suddenly turned her head that Cecilia realized she had been caught staring.

Gigi blinked, a dash of pink dusting her cheeks, before smirking. "Oh?" Gigi grinned, tilting her head, "Do I look that beautiful today, doll?"

Cecilia rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. "No, actually. There's just a bug on your forehead," Cecilia lied, smirking mischievously.

Gigi's smirk faltered. "Huh?" Gigi muttered, before going into full panic mode, "It's not still on me, is it?! GET IT OFF, GET IT OFF!"

The pigtailed girl's hand immediately shot up to swat at the supposed insect, her smug expression quickly shifting to an alarmed one. Cecilia proceeded to step closer, feigning concern. "Hold still. I'll take care of it."

Gigi froze, eyeing her warily as Cecilia raised a hand. Then, with a quick flick of her fingers

"Eek!" Gigi yelped, staggering back and rubbing her forehead, "Did you have to do it that hard?!"

Cecilia smirked, satisfied. "You should be thanking me! The bug's gone."

Raora snorted, while Elizabeth merely shook her head in amusement. Still grumbling, Gigi shot Cecilia a pout. "I'm starting to think there was never a bug..."

Cecilia shrugged, before turning on her heel with a smile on her face. "Come on, let's get to 2-1."

With Gigi still rubbing at her forehead and the others laughing, the four of them walked down the hall, making their way to their new classroom.

Meanwhile, from behind a nearby corner, two third-years quietly observed the entire interaction unfold.

Baelz leaned against the wall, arms crossed, as she watched Cecilia and her friends walk away. "So... the tall girl with the hair ribbon. That's Cecilia, right?" she asked, eyes narrowing slightly in curiosity.

Beside her, Mumei let out a quiet yawn, barely paying attention. "Huh? Hold on, let me check..." she murmured, rubbing one eye before sleepily pulling out her phone. She scrolled through Instagram, taking her time before finally landing on one of Fauna's old highlights—a selfie taken with Cecilia.

Mumei quickly held up the screen toward Baelz. "Yep. That's her," Mumei confirmed, "White hair, green streaks, hair ribbon, good looks. Definitely the little sister."

Baelz tilted her head, observing Cecilia a little longer. "Huh, now that I think about it, she doesn't really look much like Fauna..."

Mumei slid her phone back into her pocket and gave Baelz a tired look. "Okay, but remind me why we're spying on a second-year again?" Mumei asked, raising an eyebrow and grinning, "It's kinda creepy..."

"No, it's not! I just wanted to see what kinda person she is, that's all," Baelz explained, waving a hand dismissively.

Mumei stretched her arms over her head, stifling another yawn. "Alright, so what's your verdict, Bae?" the brunette asked, "Does she meet your expectations?"

The student council president stroked her chin, thinking hard. From what she saw at the noticeboard, Cecilia seemed normal enough. She had a group of friends who clearly liked her, and her posture suggests she carried herself with confidence. But other than that, there wasn't much to go off of just yet. Sure, Cecilia seemed proper and put-together—typical class president material—but Baelz wanted to see more.

"Not much to go off of so far," Baelz admitted, crossing her arms, "I still need to see more. Y'know, just to get a better read on what kind of person she really is."

"Do I have to be here for the entire spying process?" Mumei asked, smiling, "I could go help out with the council's booth instead..."

"Nice try," Baelz smirks at the brunette, "But you're not getting out of this one."

"Aw man," Mumei pouts, before asking, "Anyways, what now?"

"We continue stalking her!" Baelz announced, when suddenly the school bell rang, its sharp chime echoing through the hallway.

Both girls immediately froze.

"...Oh crap," Baelz muttered.

Mumei blinked. "Oh crap," she repeated, "We're late for homeroom.. "

The morning classes came and went, and soon enough, the students were ushered toward the school auditorium for the annual opening ceremony. The hallways were once again filled with chatter as second and third-years caught up after the summer break, while first-years stuck close to their new classmates, still adjusting to the unfamiliar environment.

Cecilia walked alongside Raora, Elizabeth, and Gigi, moving with the flow of students toward the large hall. As they walked, they managed to join their friends from 2-2 as they all made their way to the auditorium.

By the time they arrived, the venue was already filling up. Rows of seats stretched out in front of the stage, where a podium stood waiting for the speakers. Teachers lined the sides of the hall, making sure their students found their seats quickly.

Before long, Cecilia and her friends managed to find some space in the middle of the second-year section, the chatter around them gradually dying down as more students took their places.

A hush fell over the room as the principal stepped up to the podium. Then, he adjusted the microphone before launching into his speech, welcoming both returning students and new arrivals. His words were nothing too special—something about striving for excellence, upholding the school's values, and making the most of the year ahead.

Cecilia listened attentively at first, trying to maintain her image as a model student, but as the speech dragged on, she found herself drifting off. Beside her, Raora stifled a yawn, while Gigi leaned back in her seat, already asleep.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the principal wrapped up his speech, before gesturing towards the side of the stage. “And now, a few words from our student council president, Hakos Baelz.”

The audience applauded, the sounds of claps echoing through the auditorium as Baelz strode confidently onto the stage, her signature red hair standing out under the bright lights.

To the surprise of the first-years, her uniform was noticeably unkempt—her blazer hung loosely over her shoulders, the top button of her shirt was undone, and her tie was slightly crooked. A few whispers spread through the younger students, clearly expecting a more polished appearance from the student council president. Some exchanged amused glances, while others seemed intrigued by her casual confidence.

Cecilia straightened in her seat, mildly curious. She hadn’t paid too much attention to the student council before, although she did know the president was a friend of Fauna’s, having heard her name in passing.

Baelz gripped the podium and scanned the crowd before speaking, her voice carrying effortlessly across the hall. “Yo, yo, everyone! Hope you had a great summer!”

A few chuckles rippled through the student body at her casual greeting, the difference between her and the principal immediately apparent. Most council presidents kept things formal, but Baelz seemed to be taking a different approach.

“New year, new opportunities, blah, blah, blah,” Baelz continued, waving a hand dismissively, “Look, I could stand up here and give you the same speech about hard work and school spirit, but let’s be real—you’ve already heard it a million times. So instead, let me just say this.”

She leaned forward slightly, her grin widening. “High school isn’t just about studying. It’s about the memories you make, the people you meet, and the stupid, maybe even embarrassing, stuff you’ll look back on years from now and laugh about. So don’t just aim for perfect grades—aim for a perfect year. One that you can be proud of!”

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd. Even Gigi, who was busy snoozing away earlier, sat up a little, paying a little more attention to the energetic Baelz.

Baelz let the crowd settle down before nodding. “Okie, that’s enough from me. Let’s make this a great year, guys!” the president grinned, flashing a thumbs up to the audience. And with that, she stepped back from the podium, and the auditorium erupted into applause.

“Why can’t all speeches be like hers?” Gigi chuckled, applauding loudly.

Elizabeth smiled, clapping as well. “Despite how short it was,” Elizabeth noted, chuckling, “Her speech was definitely more engaging than the principal’s.”

“Yeah, it was short and sweet,” Raora nodded as the applause began to die down.

Cecilia tapped her fingers against her armrest, watching as Baelz hopped down from the stage with an easygoing grin. “She’s got energy, I’ll give her that,” the perfectionist smiled, “And charisma too.”

Before they could continue their discussion, the teachers began ushering students out of the auditorium. The auditorium soon filled with conversation as students made their way back to their classrooms, still high off the energy of a new school year.

As Cecilia joined the crowd with her friends, she noticed Baelz and a taller pink haired girl walking towards the backstage. For a moment, Baelz’s gaze flickered toward her, and Cecilia could’ve sworn the council president smirked before turning away.

“Weird,” Cecilia murmured to herself before shaking it off.

“What?” Gigi asked, slowing her pace so Cecilia could catch up.

The perfectionist turned to Gigi, still thinking it over. “I could’ve sworn the student council president just smiled at me.”

“Well, that makes sense. You’re eye candy, after all,” Gigi winked at Cecilia, who rolled her eyes in response.

“Not what I meant,” the perfectionist groaned.

Gigi chuckled, nudging her playfully. “Relax, doll. You could be seeing things,” Gigi chuckles, “Or maybe... you’ve got a secret admirer!”

Cecilia shot her an unimpressed look. “Haha, very funny.”

Meanwhile, behind the stage, Baelz barely had time to react before her vice-president's voice called out to her.

“Bae, come on.”

The student council president turned to find Irys standing there, arms crossed, giving her a look that was both exasperated and fond. With her neatly brushed hair and ironed outfit, she looked every bit like someone who took her appearance seriously—unlike Baelz, who still hadn’t fixed her uniform.

Baelz blinked, then grinned. “Uh... good speech, right?” she tried, throwing up a peace sign.

Irys chuckles, shaking her head. “Oh yeah, real inspiring. Though I did catch the principal raising an eyebrow when you went completely off-script,” Irys says as Baelz laughed, utterly unfazed.

“Looks like I got his attention, huh?” Baelz mutters, looking slightly sheepish.

Irys shook her head before, before rubbing her temples. “You seemed to have gotten the attention of the first-years too. I heard some of them who were sitting up front talking about how chaotic your uniform looked,” Irys says, crossing her arms, “And they were right! Your tie was a mess, your blazer wasn’t even buttoned, and you somehow made a formal address sound like a YouTube intro. At this point, I’m surprised you didn’t throw in a ‘Don’t forget to like and subscribe’ at the very end.”

Baelz snickered. “Okay, but that would’ve been kinda funny.”

“Okay, yeah, it would’ve,” Irys giggled, but her smile faded as she gave Baelz a more serious look, “But in all honesty, you should probably make a better impression on the first-years. If you’re serious about recruiting new council members this year, you can’t look like a mess in front of them. You might be the council president, but you’ve got to show them you’re someone they can take seriously.”

Baelz scratched her head, looking at her disheveled uniform. “Yeah, you’ve got a point there. Maybe I should’ve at least tried to look a little more polished today.”

Irys sighed, her expression softening. “Mhmm. We should at least show that the council has some sort of order, you know, to make a good impression. Maybe tone down the casual vibe next time and leave the ‘relaxed’ speeches for... I don’t know, family reunions or something,” Irys joked as Baelz nodded thoughtfully.

Baelz leaned back against the wall, her eyes twinkling. “Alright, but hear me out. What if I keep the casual tone in my speeches, but like... make it a little more formal?” Baelz suggested, “That way, the audience can both stay awake and know I mean business.”

“Hmm, that could work, actually. If there was anyone who could pull that off, it’d be you,” Irys nodded, smiling, “Just don’t forget what I said about the whole attire thing.”

“I won’t,” Baelz replied, her voice softer now. She then glanced at Irys, a warm smile creeping onto her face.

“Thanks, by the way,” Baelz said, rubbing the back of her neck, “For, y’know... keeping me in check. I know I can be a handful sometimes.”

“Where is this going, Bae? You’re not trying to butter me up, are you?” Irys giggles.

Baelz laughed before taking a small step closer. “Naur... but seriously, though. I couldn’t ask for a better vice president.”

Before Irys could respond, Baelz quickly leaned in and pressed a shy kiss to her cheek. It was brief—just a second—but enough for Irys to freeze in place, her breath hitching as a warmth flooded her face.

Baelz pulled back just as fast, her own cheeks now dusted with red. “Uh... yeah. Just wanted to say thanks,” Baelz muttered, scratching her cheek, as she avoided Irys’s gaze.

Irys blinked, still processing, before clearing her throat and chuckling awkwardly. “Bae, we... you know we have to be careful in public,” she murmured, voice quieter than usual.

Baelz shrugged, pouting at Irys. “It’s fine. No one’s backstage right now, anyway,” the student council pointed out, looking a little disappointed.

The pair stared into each others’ eyes for a few moments as Irys grinned at the redhead’s flustered expression. “Well, when you put it that way,” the pink haired girl says slyly, before closing the distance between their faces.

“W-what are you doing?” Baelz stuttered, staring at Irys’ lips anxiously.

Irys giggled. “Your eyes are crossed, Bae.”

“Wow, you are... a mood killer,” Baelz frowned, glaring at her vice-president before they both erupted into a fit of giggles. The pairs’ lips inched closer, and closer, and closer... until suddenly, the door to the backstage swung open.

Baelz and Irys practically jumped apart as Mumei stepped inside, casually walking in as she glanced between them. “Oh, hi! You guys still back here?”

Baelz coughed into her fist. “Uh. Yep. Just... talking.”

Irys nodded rapidly, a little too fast. “Yep! Student council stuff. Very important business.”

Mumei blinked, staring at the flustered pair before smirking. “Sure. Anyway, Bae, it’s lunch now. Are we still gonna spy on that second-year?”

“Wait, what second-year?” Irys asked, crossing her arms before recalling the conversation in the council room last week, “Wait... you don’t mean Fauna’s sister, right?”

Mumei nodded. “Yep. Cecilia Immergreen!” the brunette replied as Irys raised an eyebrow.

“Hold on, why are you spying on her?” Irys asked, placing a hand on her hip suspiciously.

Baelz chuckled nervously, “Well, she’s caught my interest for one. I kinda wanna see what her deal is... and maybe recruit her into the council.”

“Everybody knows she’s a top scorer,” Mumei says, holding up a finger, “But after I did some digging amongst the juniors, I learned that she was a solid class president last year.”

“Plus... Fauna told us she helps out the clubs a lot,” Baelz adds, as Mumei lifts up another finger.

Irys sighed, crossing her arms. “So, what, this is a scouting mission now?”

Baelz grinned, waving a dismissive hand. “You make it sound so serious. We’re just gonna observe, that’s all.”

“Just don’t freak her out, okay?” Irys shook her head, amused, “We don’t want the student council prez getting reported for stalking, do we?”

“It’s okay, Mumei and I will be super duper quiet,” Baelz promised, flashing a thumbs up at Irys, before heading for the door, with Mumei following behind closely.

“If you say so,” Irys chuckles before winking, “By the way, Bae...”

The redhead turned around, raising an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

“You owe me,” Irys replies, blushing slightly as she makes a subtle gesture to her lips.

Baelz felt a warmth rise up to her cheeks once more as she made a heel turn and marched out the door. “I-I’ll... text you later!” Baelz says hastily, before running out of the room.

“Hey, Bae, wait up!” Mumei called out, before chasing after Baelz.

Irys watched them go, shaking her head again before turning back to straighten up the backstage area. The vice-president then touched her lips before smiling. “Oh, you better text later...”

A few minutes later, on the way to the cafeteria, Mumei turned her head towards Baelz, getting the sudden urge to tease the redhead. “Hey, Bae.”

Baelz, still feeling the warmth on her face from earlier, shot her a wary look. The president could tell from Mumei’s expression that she was about to be subjected to a bout of teasing. “What?” Baelz asked, already bracing for whatever nonsense Mumei was about to say.

Mumei smirked, walking with her hands behind her back. “Are you and Irys back together?”

Baelz nearly tripped over her own feet. Her entire face went red as she let out a dramatic groan. The president then started flailing at Mumei’s shoulder, smacking her repeatedly with light, frantic slaps. “MOOMS, SHUT UP,” Baelz gasped as Mumei laughed, dodging half-heartedly but letting Baelz get a few hits in.

“Ow, ow—Bae! Abuse! I should report you to the public morals committee!” Mumei giggles, while Baelz huffs, crossing her arms.

“Then don’t say these things out loud!” Baelz retorted, as the other students in the hallway shot them curious looks.

The redhead tried to will away the heat on her cheeks but failed miserably. After a second, she sighed. “Ugh... It’s... kinda complicated, okay?” Baelz finally answered shyly.

Mumei tilted her head slightly, her smile unwavering “But you *are* back together, right?”

Baelz hesitated, rubbing the back of her neck before mumbling, "...Yeah."

Mumei nodded, as if she had just confirmed something completely obvious. "Huh. So what is this, like... the third time you two have broken up and gotten back together?" the brunette asked, counting on her fingers.

Baelz shot her a glare before looking away, kicking at an imaginary pebble on the floor. "... Maybe."

"Are you serious?" Mumei chuckled as Baelz scowled.

"It's not like we *try* to keep breaking up," Baelz muttered, "It just... happens."

Mumei raised an eyebrow, her expression amused but genuinely curious. "Oh yeah? And whose fault was it this time?"

Baelz groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "Honestly? Both of ours."

Mumei blinked. "Oh?"

"We just kept arguing over the dumbest stuff," Baelz admitted, crossing her arms, "Like, we'd start bickering about something tiny, and before we knew it, we were full-on fighting! And then one of us would get fed up and say, 'Maybe we should just take a break,' and then boom—breakup."

"Sounds exhausting," Mumei remarked, tilting her head.

"It is," Baelz sighed, "But it's also... I don't know. We can't seem to not find our way back to each other."

Upon adding that last part, Baelz's features softened. "Even when we fight, I just... Irys still feels like home, y'know?"

"That's kinda sweet, actually," Mumei smiles, patting Baelz on the back.

Baelz huffed. "Yeah, well, remind me of that next time we're arguing over where to eat and somehow it turns into a whole thing."

"So what's the bet on how long it lasts this time?" Mumei snickered as Baelz gave her an unimpressed look.

"Oi, don't bet on something like that," Baelz muttered, nudging the brunette.

As they reached the cafeteria doors, Baelz narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Wait a sec. Why are you even asking about me and Irys all of a sudden?"

Mumei blinked, then suddenly averted her gaze, rocking on her heels. "Oh, you know... just curious..." Mumei lied.

"Mooms," Baelz squinted, crossing her arms.

“Well... I may have peeked into the backstage earlier,” Mumei explained before Baelz’s eyes widened in horror.

“You what?” Baelz croaked.

Mumei giggled, skipping ahead before Baelz could grab her. “Don’t worry, you two looked very cute.”

Baelz’s face turned scarlet. “YOU WERE SPYING!?”

The brunette quickly raised up her hands defensively. “I like to watch!”

“You—”

Mumei dodged as Baelz lunged at her, laughing as they entered the cafeteria.

As was the norm for the cafeteria during lunch, the place was loud and packed. Conversations filled the air, forks and spoons scraped against plates, and shoes squeaked against the floor as students squeezed into their usual spots. The smell of freshly prepared food hung in the air, as queues stretched along the length of the space.

Near the entrance, some first-years hesitated, trays in hand, scanning for open seats. A few stuck to their new friends, whispering, while others loitered near the vending machines awkwardly. Meanwhile, the upperclassmen had already settled in, eating and chatting without a second thought.

By the windows, a group of seniors had pulled out a deck of cards, slapping them down to make their plays as their table erupted in either groans and cheers.

“Is it just me, or is it extra loud today?” Gigi asked, sitting down with Elizabeth, Raora and Cecilia. The four of them were seated at the corner of their new class table, a spot they had quickly claimed as their own.

Elizabeth took a sip of her tea before looking at Gigi, who had set her tray down. “Well, it’s the first day. Excitement levels are high,” the scarlet haired girl says, gesturing toward the rest of the cafeteria, where first-years still fumbled their way through the chaos, some looking completely lost while others latched onto upperclassmen for guidance.

Raora leaned back in her chair, picking at her food. “Not that I mind. At least it’s not quiet. That’d be worse.”

“I agree,” Gigi mused, poking at her rice, “In other news, at least our class seems decent so far. No one’s been weird or annoying.”

“Other than you, you mean?” Cecilia smirked as Gigi pouted.

“Hey!” Gigi shot back indignantly, before resting her chin on her hand, “Anyway, it’s rare for a classroom to have a good balance, okay? No one’s too loud, no one’s too awkward. It’s been nice... so far.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Agreed. It feels like a well-rounded group.”

Raora shrugged. “Yeah, I haven’t talked to everyone yet, but first impressions are looking good so far,” the artist agrees, before turning to Cecilia with a knowing look, “And you already memorized everyone’s names, didn’t you, Cece?”

Cecilia nodded without hesitation. “Yes. In fact, I’m already acquainted with some of them,” the perfectionist replies, picking up her cup.

Raora raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Since when?”

Cecilia took a sip of her tea before answering. “Last year, a few of them had club issues—creative conflicts, scheduling conflicts, that sort of thing,” Cecilia explained, “But I managed to help them sort things out.”

Elizabeth smiled. “You really are helpful, Cecilia.”

Cecilia gave a small shrug, rubbing the back of her neck. “Oh, it’s nothing, I just did what I could...”

Gigi smirked, pointing her fork at Cecilia. “Well, it’s nice to have some connections early on,” the pigtailed girl remarks.

Cecilia hummed in agreement, setting her drink down. “Yeah, it does make things easier.”

Behind Cecilia, at a table just within earshot, Mumei and Baelz leaned in slightly, listening in on the conversation. Mumei rested her chin on her hand, her eyes gleaming with amusement.

“In other words,” the brunette whispered, “She’s basically doing the council’s job for us.”

Baelz scoffed, arms crossed. “Eh, talk is cheap. So far, it’s all just words,” she muttered, “I wanna see if she does those things with my own eyes.”

Mumei tilted her head slightly, still watching Cecilia. “She does seem the type, though. If she says she’s gonna help, she probably will.”

Baelz tapped her fingers against the table, unconvinced. “We’ll see.”

“Hey, aren’t you the student council president?” a first-year sitting in front of the council members asked.

“Yeah, she is!” another first-year confirmed, “We loved your speech—it was so funny!”

Baelz gasped, immediately shushing them, pressing a finger to her lips. “Oi, keep it down!” she hissed, darting a glance toward Cecilia’s table to make sure they hadn’t been overheard.

The first-years exchanged confused looks but obeyed, leaning in closer. “Why?” one of them whispered.

Baelz smirked, lowering her voice dramatically. "Because we're on a secret council mission," the redhead said, eyes glinting mischievously, "Gathering intel. Super classified."

Amused, Mumei nodded, playing along. "Yep. Top secret. If we told you, we'd have to—" the brunette began before making a slicing motion across her neck.

The first-years' eyes widened in awe. "Whoa... so cool," one of them murmured.

Baelz grinned, satisfied. "Exactly. So keep your voices down and act normal, got it?"

They all nodded enthusiastically as Baelz turned her attention back to Cecilia's table, her ears perking up as she resumed eavesdropping. However, just as she began to listen in, a dash of blue entered the scene, stopping beside Cecilia's seat.

"Hiya, Cecilia! Are ya done with lunch?" third-year Gawr Gura asked, walking up to the lunch table.

Cecilia looked up, slightly surprised by the sudden appearance of her senior. She glanced at her tray before shaking her head. "Hi, Gura. I just have my drink left," she said, lifting her cup slightly, "Anyway, what's up?"

"The aquatics club wanted to get your opinion on our recruitment booth," Gura explains, balancing on tiptoes, "We're still in the process of setting it up, and we figured you'd have some good input!"

Cecilia blinked before nodding. "Oh, sure. I'd be happy to help," the perfectionist smiled, before standing up and turning to her friends. "I'll catch up with you guys later."

Elizabeth gave a knowing smile. "Go ahead. I'm sure they'll appreciate your help."

"Remember to be on time for the next class," Raora winked.

Cecilia rolled her eyes at the comment, but before she could respond, Gigi leaned forward with a smirk. "Yeah, don't be gone for too long, or I'll start missing you," Gigi teased, blowing Cecilia a kiss.

Cecilia shot her a flat look. "You'll live," the perfectionist replied dryly.

Gigi feigned an exaggerated sigh, clutching her chest. "I don't know, Cece, it's gonna be tough."

Cecilia ignored her dramatics, turning on her heel to leave. "I'm gonna go before you continue speaking."

Just as Cecilia left with Gura, Mumei shot Baelz a look. "Well? What do you think now?" the brunette whispered.

Baelz clicked her tongue, watching Cecilia's retreating figure. "Still just words. Gotta see the results first," she muttered, but there was less skepticism in her voice now.

Mumei chuckled, resting her head on her arms. "C'mon, Bae. You're telling me you're not even a little bit impressed?"

Baelz exhaled through her nose. "Okay, she's got great 'word of mouth' so far," she admitted reluctantly, "But let's see how she actually handles something."

"So, what, are we gonna follow them?" Mumei asked, glancing at the departing Cecilia and Gura.

Baelz grinned, revealing her pointy teeth. "Absolutely."

"Do we have to?" Mumei complained, "We haven't had our lunch yet..."

Baelz rolled her shoulders. "C'mon, what better way to see if she's the real deal? Besides, I promised I'll treat you to a meal after school, didn't I?"

Mumei sighed, already standing up. "Fine, fine. But if we get caught, I'm throwing you under the bus."

Baelz smirked. "Fair. Now move, agent. We got work to do."

The two quietly slipped away from their table, trailing after Cecilia and Gura, making sure to keep a safe distance.

After the council members took their leave, Gigi narrowed her eyes, her attention lingering on their retreating figures. She hadn't caught their full conversation, but she definitely heard Cecilia's name—and something about stalking. That was enough to make her ears perk up.

She knew Mumei, at least in passing. They'd played Roblox together with Bijou a few times and she seemed nice enough. Although at times, the brunette would say something completely unhinged and act like it was the most normal thing in the world.

But Baelz? She didn't know much about her. Sure, she'd seen her around—she was hard to miss, what with the loud personality and the whole student council president thing. But beyond that, she was a total stranger to Gigi.

And now she was watching Cecilia.

Gigi tapped her fingers against the table, thoughts swirling around in her head. As far as she knew, Cecilia had never really been involved with the student council business before. Perhaps they needed her help with something? No, Baelz didn't look like she was here to ask for help—she was observing.

But what for? What exactly did Baelz want from her? And more importantly, was it something Gigi needed to be worried about?

Gigi quickly gulped down the last of her ramen before standing up. Elizabeth and Raora glanced at her as she pushed her chair back, stretching her arms with an exaggerated groan.

“Oh! Ugh! Guys, my tummy's not feeling too hot right now...,” the pigtailed girl said casually, grabbing her bowl before stepping away from the table, “I'm gonna head to the bathroom real quick...”

Raora raised an eyebrow but didn't question it. “Okay... we'll see you in class later then,” the artist smiled as Gigi clutched her stomach.

“Don't take too long,” Elizabeth added, nodding along.

Gigi saluted her two friends before turning on her heel, slipping away to clear her empty bowl before they could say anything else. The moment she was out of their direct line of sight, her pace slowed, her movements becoming relaxed.

Baelz and Mumei weren't far ahead, still trailing behind Cecilia and Gura, keeping a respectable distance. Gigi followed them at an even greater distance, weaving between students and pretending to check her phone when necessary.

Her curiosity had completely taken over. If Baelz wanted something from Cecilia, Gigi was going to find out exactly what it was.

Eventually, Cecilia and Gura reached the aquatics club's clubroom. The last time Cecilia had been here, she wasn't alone—Gigi had been with her, and the place had looked completely different.

It was during last year's cultural festival, and the aquatics club had gone all out with decorations, turning the entire space into something that resembled the ocean itself. The tanks had been lit up more vibrantly than usual, showcasing fish and other creatures in their best light.

Now, the clubroom looked far less festive. It was still well-maintained, of course, but the decorations were gone, leaving it as an ordinary clubroom filled with tanks, shelves of equipment, and a faint scent of freshwater.

Gura led Cecilia towards the center of the room, where a few other club members were gathered around a table cluttered with papers, sketches, and small props. “Alright, here's what we've got so far for the recruitment booth,” she said, gesturing at the scattered materials, “We were planning on setting up a small display with some of the tanks, giving people a close-up look at some of the creatures we take care of. You know, something to draw them in.”

Cecilia scanned the papers, nodding thoughtfully. It was a straightforward yet effective idea, and she could already see how they could refine it. However, before she could comment, Gura scratched the back of her head and sighed.

“Buuut we hit a little snag this morning,” the third-year admitted, “Turns out, some of the aquatic creatures we picked kinda... creeped out the first-years who stopped by.”

“A few of ‘em got spooked and bolted before we could even explain anything. Not exactly the best first impression,” another club member, Shion explained.

Cecilia folded her arms. “I see,” she said, glancing toward the tanks, “What exactly are we dealing with here?”

Aqua, a pink haired girl with pigtails, shyly stepped up towards a row of tanks, pointing at the inhabitants residing within them. “Well... it’s mostly these guys,” she said hesitantly.

Cecilia stepped towards one of the tanks, peering into the water. Inside it were several unusual-looking creatures—a mix of freshwater and saltwater species that, while certainly fascinating, weren’t exactly conventionally cute.

Another tank housed a large axolotl floating near the glass, its feathery gills twitching. Next to it, a handful of ghost shrimp traveled across the gravel floor. Meanwhile, in another tank, an alien-looking isopod rested, its many legs tucked under its body.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow at the strange looking creatures. “I can see why some first-years got creeped out,” she chuckled.

“Right?!” Shion huffed, crossing her arms, “I mean, *I* think they’re adorable, but apparently, not everyone shares my taste.”

Aqua sighed, crossing her arms “The problem is, we wanted to show off some of our more unique creatures to get people interested. But if they’re scaring away potential recruits, then we might have to rethink that plan.”

“We *could* keep them in the clubroom while solely displaying the more popular species,” Gura says, leaning against a table, tapping her fingers against the wood, “But that kinda defeats the purpose. We wanted to show what makes this club special, y’know?”

Cecilia hummed in thought, glancing between the club members and the creatures in the tank. It was a tricky situation—they needed to make a good first impression while still keeping the booth true to the club’s identity.

The perfectionist studied the setup more closely, her eyes flicking to the small cards placed beside each tank. The club already had fun facts about the creatures written on them, but they were easy to overlook—small, neatly printed, but ultimately just another part of the display rather than something that grabbed attention.

She turned back to the club members. “Okay, I think I got it. First off, don’t shelve these guys just because some first-years got creeped out by them,” Cecilia said firmly, “Not everyone is going to like every animal, but that doesn’t mean you should hide what makes this club unique. If anything, you need to lean into it.”

Aqua blinked. “Lean into it how?”

“Make your fun facts the forefront of the display. Right now, they aren't exactly the most eye-catching,” Cecilia began, pointing at the axolotl's ‘fun facts’ blurb, “Instead, they should be what draws people in. Frame them in a way that makes people curious about them.

“Take this guy for example,” Cecilia continued, gesturing at the isopod tank, “Don't just say ‘*This is a giant isopod*’, make it something dramatic, like ‘*Meet the Deep Sea's Ultimate Survivor: This Creature Can Go for Years Without Eating!*’”

Gura's expression brightened. “Ohh, I see what you're getting at. If we make the descriptions fun and engaging, people won't just look at the creatures and go ‘ew’,” Gura says, “They'll be interested before they even have a chance to get weirded out!”

“Exactly,” Cecilia replied, snapping her fingers, “It's all about the marketing. If you draw attention to what makes these creatures unique and fascinating, people will surely take an interest in them.”

Shion smiled, nodding her head in approval. “Not bad, Cecilia. You might have a knack for marketing.”

“I wouldn't say that,” Cecilia said, Shion's compliment making her feel a little embarrassed.

Aqua clasped her hands together, inspiration shining in her eyes. “This could actually work! We wouldn't have to hide anything—we'd just be showing them off in a way that gets people excited!”

“Yeah, and we can mix them in with the popular species so people transition naturally instead of being hit with the ‘weird’ ones right away,” Gura chuckled.

Cecilia folded her arms, watching as the club members nodded in agreement, already bouncing ideas off each other. The perfectionist felt a sense of satisfaction swell in her chest. The girls seemed to have a clear direction for their booth now, something to build on instead of second-guessing the club's identity. Seeing their excitement, their renewed energy, made Cecilia genuinely happy that she could help.

Yet, even as she focused on their conversation, a small prickling feeling settled at the back of her neck. Like someone was watching her.

Cecilia turned to look at the entrance of the clubroom.

She could have sworn she saw two figures peeking in from the outside. “Huh,” she muttered, staring out the door for a few more seconds, “Must've been my imagination.”

Outside, Baelz and Mumei were crouched behind a stack of equipment just outside the clubroom, their faces barely visible through the slightly ajar door. Baelz's eyes widened in panic as she noticed Cecilia's gaze briefly shift toward them.

“Holy shit, holy shit, did she see us?!” Baelz gasped in a harsh whisper, quickly ducking lower behind the equipment, her red ears twitching.

Mumei, on the other hand, didn't seem as concerned. Instead, she leaned back against the wall, her expression slightly amused. "Eh, it felt kinda exciting, don't you think?" she said, her tone almost too nonchalant for the situation.

Baelz shot her a glare, clearly judging her. "Exciting? We nearly got caught being creeps!"

Mumei shrugged, unfazed by Baelz's irritation. "Well, we didn't get caught, did we? Besides, you're the one who wanted to follow them."

Baelz sighed, her expression a mix of irritation and disbelief. "Yeah, but I didn't plan on almost getting busted like this!" she muttered, glancing back at the door to make sure Cecilia hadn't come after them.

"Relax, Bae. It's not like she knows who we are or what we're doing... I think," Mumei reassured, amused by Baelz's flusteredness.

"Yeah, yeah... but next time, we need a better plan. One where we don't almost get caught in the act," Baelz says, taking a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down.

Mumei just grinned, adjusting her posture and looking down the hallway. "Coast is clear," she reported, "I think we're safe to continue our eavesdropping."

Baelz nodded, her expression softening as she glanced back toward the clubroom. "I gotta admit, though," the redhead muttered, "That Cecilia really is pretty impressive."

Mumei hummed in agreement, her gaze still on the door. "Yeah, she really is. She didn't even look fazed when the girls told her about their problem. And the way she came up with that solution on the spot? Insane."

Baelz nodded, her ears twitching as she thought back to the scene. "Right? And the solution itself sounded pretty good."

"Totally," Mumei agreed, "She doesn't just think things through, she acts fast and delivers. I could barely keep up with how smoothly she turned the whole situation around."

Baelz chuckled, a bit of respect creeping into her voice. "Yeah... maybe she is a perfect candidate..."

"I guess we'll see. Maybe she's got more to show than she's letting on," Mumei said thoughtfully.

Baelz was quiet for a moment, considering this. "Maybe... but for now, I'll give her credit where it's due. She handled that situation like a pro."

While the duo continued spying on Cecilia, they didn't realize they were being spied on themselves. Gigi had been hiding in the bushes a few meters away, her eyes narrowed as she listened in on their conversation. However, she couldn't help but smile as they spoke so highly of Cecilia—it was clear she had made quite an impression, even on Baelz, who had initially been skeptical.

Gigi knew the seniors had been following Cecilia for a reason, and their reaction confirmed it. They were obviously interested in her, but why? Gigi's brow furrowed as she began to think of a few possibilities. Were they just curious, or was there something more to their sudden interest in Cecilia?

"Huh," Gigi thought to herself, careful not to make any noise, *"Seems like they're impressed with her... but what exactly are they up to?"*

She fiddled with her fingers as she reflected on the council members' words earlier. *"Sounds like Cece handled the aquatics club's issue pretty well..."* Gigi thought, her pride in Cecilia swelling.

The pigtailed girl then thought back to what Baelz called Cecilia earlier. *"A perfect candidate..."* Gigi recalled, narrowing her eyes, *"Hmm, they're not just watching her, they must be planning to rope her in... to the council?"*

Just as Gigi was lost in thought, she noticed a group of people exiting the aquatics club's clubroom. Cecilia emerged, waving goodbye to Gura, Aqua, and Shion with her usual graceful smile. Gigi's heart fluttered at the sight. The blonde had always loved how pretty Cecilia looked when she smiled, but she quickly pushed aside the feeling. She had other things to focus on.

It didn't take long for Baelz and Mumei to follow Cecilia at a distance, sneaking along the corridor behind her. Gigi's instincts kicked in, and she quickly darted out of the bushes, making sure to stay far enough behind so that neither of them noticed her. She made sure her movements were silent as she followed them, careful not to draw any attention to herself.

Cecilia walked with her usual stride, unaware of the eyes tracking her every move. Gigi, meanwhile, stayed a safe distance behind Baelz and Mumei, keeping her focus sharp.

Eventually, Cecilia walked by the foyer, where several clubs were already setting up their booths for club recruitment. The perfectionist paused as she admired the work everyone has done so far. She always loved how much passion the students of this school had towards their clubs.

However, before Cecilia could continue looking at the booths, she was suddenly called out by two students in the middle of a heated argument.

"Hey, Cece! We need your help!"

"Immegreen, over here!"

She turned just in time to see two girls approaching her—one from the student broadcast club, wearing a headset around her neck, and another from the gardening club, arms crossed tightly over her chest. Cecilia looked at the two girls, who were glaring daggers at each other, the tension between them obvious.

Cecilia stopped, already sensing she was about to get pulled into something. "How can I help?"

The gardening club member huffed. "The broadcast club is hogging too much space! This whole section of the foyer was meant to be shared, but look at how much room they're taking!" she complained, gesturing towards the equipment spread across the area—tripods, soundboards, tangled cables leading to speakers, and even a half-assembled interview setup.

The broadcast club girl adjusted her headset, looking just as frustrated. "We're just following what the events committee told us. They said we could set up here," the girl defended herself, sticking out a tongue at the gardening club girl.

"That's the problem! They didn't even ask if we were okay with it!" the gardening club girl shot back, "We have to arrange our plant displays carefully. Our space is supposed to be our space, not overflow storage for someone else's setup!"

"Well, we need the space too! We simply have too many items to store in one small area!" the broadcast club girl retorted.

Cecilia let out a quiet breath, glancing between them. It wasn't hard to see why they were annoyed—the gardening club needed more space for their setup, while the broadcast club had to keep the space they were occupying now if they didn't want to squeeze all their equipment together.

The perfectionist stroked her chin thoughtfully. If the events committee had really promised this space to both clubs, then someone had clearly miscalculated.

The foyer was already crowded with other clubs setting up their booths. Some were setting up decorations, others testing equipment, and a few were already finished with their preparations. Moving things around last-minute wouldn't be easy, and Cecilia doubted the events committee would want to deal with it right now.

"Alright," Cecilia said, keeping her tone neutral, "I see why you're both upset. The last thing we need is a messy setup before the exhibition even starts."

The two club members nodded, watching her expectantly.

"They want me to decide this right here and now, don't they?" Cecilia gulped nervously.

But she wasn't about to give them a solution without thinking it through.

"I'll give it some thought," she told them instead, "Let me take a look around first, see if there's any way to make things work for both of you."

The gardening club girl frowned. "But—"

"It's better than making the wrong call too fast, isn't it?" Cecilia pointed out, smiling.

That seemed to settle it, at least for now. The two girls exchanged glares once more before stepping back, giving her space to move.

Cecilia nodded in thanks before strolling into the foyer, taking in the environment. The clubs that had already claimed their spots were busily arranging their displays—she spotted

the girl scouts decorating their booth, the art club posting their works up on a wall and the robotics club carefully positioning their latest projects on a carpet.

It was clear that the space was tight, but if she could figure out a way for the broadcast and gardening clubs to coexist without one feeling pushed out, she'd consider it a success.

She just needed to think.

And as she walked, completely unaware, Baelz and Mumei trailed a few meters behind her, watching her every move.

Before listening in, Baelz and Mumei had quickly swiped two gardening hats for themselves, somehow blending into the crowd. Neither of them had said a word during the whole exchange—merely listening in on Cecilia's conversation with the two clubs.

As the younger girl strolled further into the foyer, Mumei leaned slightly toward Baelz. “She’s moving again,” the brunette whispered.

Baelz didn’t respond right away. She watched Cecilia with a curious glint in her eyes, observing the way the girl moved so calmly despite the mess she had just gotten herself into. There was a grace to her and her reaction which suggested she was used to dealing with messes that didn’t belong to her.

“I’d like to see how she solves this,” Baelz finally said, tugging her hat a little lower, “Space conflicts are always a pain in the ass.”

The two council members followed from a distance, hats tipped just enough to keep their faces shadowed. Ahead of them, Cecilia slowed her pace, studying each booth she passed.

The stargazing club, set up near the center of the foyer, looked nearly finished. Their setup was compact but well-planned—somehow managing to fit their equipment in neatly with their many charts. The girl scouts’ booth was almost done as well, and they were currently occupied with pinning up colorful ribbons and arranging pamphlets into little pyramids. Their display wasn’t very large, just bright and decorative.

Meanwhile, a few other booths were still in the middle of being arranged. The newspaper club’s area was mostly bare save for a stack of printed sheets and a few students huddled together arguing about where to hang their banner. Across from them, half of the calligraphy club's materials were still in boxes, their members beginning to look frantic.

Cecilia’s eyes flicked from one side of the room to the other, noting which clubs had claimed more space than they needed and which ones were simply disorganized. She wasn’t looking to move anyone yet—just understand the environment. The gardening and broadcast clubs weren’t the only ones here, after all, and she couldn’t go around forcing others to compromise for them.

She then started estimating. The newspaper club wouldn’t need much space once they figured out their layout. Neither would the chess club, whose setup only required a single

table and some chairs. Even the literature club could do with less than they were currently occupying if they just rearranged their display.

But it was the booth at the far corner of the foyer that drew her attention most—the Tabletop Club.

It had a generous space allocation, much more than most clubs around it. A few folding tables were already set up, but there wasn't much else. A cloth banner hung overhead with the club's name, and boxes of game pieces, cards, and dice were still stacked along the floor, unopened. "Eureka," Cecilia smiled to herself before making her way over.

Bijou sat cross-legged on one of the tables, absently shuffling a deck of cards. She looked up when she noticed Cecilia, perking up immediately. Their third-year senior, Calliope, stood nearby, unloading games from their boxes.

"Heya, Cece," Bijou greeted, surprised to see Cecilia at the foyer.

"Hi Biboo," Cecilia replied, grinning.

"Oh, Cecilia! What brings you here?" Calliope asked, dusting off her hands.

"Sorry to bother you, but I was just wondering... will you be using all the space your club was assigned?"

Calliope and Bijou looked at each other before laughing. "Nah. We just need a couple tables, really. Some chairs too," Calliope replies, "The rest of it's just there so people can walk around and peek in on the games. We're not doing any big displays or performances, hehe."

"Yeah, I don't know why the events committee gave us the space they did," Bijou giggled, "It's not like we need a stage or anything. Just space for people to sit down and throw some dice."

Cecilia nodded, feeling a sense of relief. This could work. "That's good to hear," the perfectionist said, "Because I wanted to ask if you'd be okay swapping booth spaces with the gardening club."

Bijou blinked, glancing at the gardening club's booth on the other side of the foyer. "Huh? Why?"

Cecilia crossed her arms, taking a deep breath as she prepared to explain the issue at hand. "The gardening club and the broadcast club were both assigned the same section of the foyer, but there wasn't enough space for them to coexist properly," Cecilia explained, "The broadcast club is taking up more room than expected, and the gardening club is upset because their display needs careful arrangement... so now both clubs are beefing."

"Oof. That does sound like a mess," Bijou chuckles.

Calliope raised an eyebrow, already seeing where this was going. "And you think switching our booth space with the gardening club will fix this problem?"

“Mhm! You guys said you don't need much space, and the area where the gardening club is set up now is much smaller than what they ultimately need,” Cecilia says, “But if they move here, they’ll have more flexibility to arrange their display properly.”

“You might be right,” Bijou nods, tapping her chin in thought, “Since we don’t need that much space anyway, we’d still be fine in the gardening club’s current spot.”

“Exactly,” Cecilia confirmed, “The gardening club would get a better setup, the broadcast club wouldn’t have to squeeze all their equipment together, and the tabletop club would still have enough room to function. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

Calliope rubbed her chin, considering Cecilia's proposal. “Huh. Well, I don’t see a problem with it,” Calliope smiles, glancing at Bijou. “What do you think, Biboo?”

Bijou grinned. “I’m down! We don’t really care where we are as long as people can come by and play.”

Cecilia exhaled, grateful that at least one part of this puzzle was falling into place. “Great. I’ll let the gardening club know and see if they’re on board.”

“Need me to come with?” Bijou asked, lifting up a tiny fist, “I’ll beat them up if they give you any trouble.

“Ha! As if *you* could do any real damage to them,” Cecilia teased, winking, “But it's okay, I’ll handle it. Thanks, Biboo. You too, Calli.”

Cecilia quickly made her way back to the other end of the foyer. Now all she needed to do was to propose her solution to the gardening club.

When Cecilia returned to where the two club members were waiting, she found them still locked in a tense standoff. The gardening club girl had her arms crossed, clearly annoyed, while the broadcast club member was fiddling with her headset, tapping her foot impatiently. Neither of them looked pleased, but they seemed to be trying their best to hold it together for Cecilia.

“Ah, you're back,” the broadcast club girl said, looking at Cecilia expectantly, “Got a solution?”

Cecilia nodded. “I spoke with the tabletop club. They’re willing to swap booth spaces with the gardening club,” she replied.

The gardening club girl blinked, clearly confused. “Wait, what?”

Cecilia pointed toward the far corner of the foyer, where Bijou and Calliope were still in the middle of setting up their tables. “The tabletop girls told me they didn't need all the space they were assigned,” Cecilia explained, “And right now they have more space than you do. So, if the gardening club moves there, you’ll have more room to arrange your display the way you want.”

The gardening club girl's eyes widened as she considered the idea. "Hmm. That could work!" she said excitedly.

"And the broadcast club won't be bothered?" the broadcast club girl asked skeptically, to which the gardening girl shot her a look.

"Nope," Cecilia replied, "You'll stay exactly where you are, with all your equipment. The only change is that the gardening club will have a bigger space."

The broadcast club girl bit her lip, glancing at the gardening club girl. "Hmm, alright, I guess that makes sense," she muttered, still looking a little unsure but clearly open to the idea.

The gardening club girl turned to her, a small smile forming at her lips. "Yeah, I mean, if we get more room, I can actually make the display look way better than it would have in this cramped space," she chirped, grinning.

The broadcast club girl let out a sigh, rubbing the back of her neck. "Yep, it's a decent solution."

Cecilia smiled, feeling the tension ease up between the two clubs. "I'm glad you both think so. It's all about making sure everyone has enough space to do their thing, right?"

The gardening club girl nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! Thanks, Cece. You really came through for us."

The broadcast club girl gave a small, almost reluctant smile. "Yeah, I guess we owe you one. Thanks for working all this out, Cecilia," she said, bowing gratefully.

Cecilia waved it off, her smile staying warm. "No problem! I'm happy to help. It's just a matter of looking at things from different angles."

"Well, you certainly solved this in a way neither of us saw coming," the gardening club girl said, her tone softer now, "Thanks again, Cece."

Cecilia chuckled lightly. "Anytime. I'll even help you let the events committee know about the change after school," Cecilia offers, "If all goes well, then everything should be good."

As the two girls gave her their thanks one more time, Cecilia smiled, turning to make her way out of the foyer. After watching her go, Baelz and Mumei removed their gardening hats, silently returning them to the gardening club's table.

"Okay, I'm kinda sold on her now," Baelz says, as one of the gardening club members shot them a confused look.

Mumei tucked her hair behind her ear, as she and Baelz made their way out of the area. "Right? Mumei smiled, a touch of admiration in her voice, "Heh, she really is doing our job for us."

Baelz, who still wasn't totally won over, was visibly impressed, nodding in agreement. "Yeah. She's way more capable than I gave her credit for."

But then, her expression turned thoughtful, and a mischievous gleam sparkled in her eyes. "But just to be extra, extra sure... I think I'll follow her to the events committee after school."

Mumei stopped in her tracks, looking at her with wide eyes. "Seriously? What more do you need to see? She handled everything perfectly—twice now. That's got to be enough."

Baelz crossed her arms and grinned. "You never know, Mooms. I just need a little more assurance."

Mumei sighed, rolling her eyes but clearly entertained. "Fine, I'll play along," Mumei says, "But only because I enjoyed stalking her so far."

Baelz chuckled. "That's the spirit."

"Yeah, yeah," Mumei muttered, shaking her head with a small smile. "Come on, then. Let's head for our next class."

When the seniors departed, Gigi peeked out from behind the pillar she was hiding behind. *"They're gonna follow her after school as well?"* Gigi thought to herself, narrowing her eyes, *"Their recruitment process sure is elaborate..."*

Later that afternoon, the bell signaling the end of the day's classes rang, and the students of 2-1 quickly packed up their things, eager to return home or head to their clubs

Raora and Elizabeth were part of the latter group, hastily packing their things. "See you later, Cece! Gigi!" Raora called back as she and Elizabeth waved goodbye to the pair.

"See you!" Cecilia smiled at her friends.

"Yeah, have fun!" Gigi added, waving back.

Once the two were out of sight, Cecilia took a moment to adjust her hair ribbon before turning toward Gigi. "So, are you heading for the tabletop club soon?" the perfectionist asked casually.

Gigi looked up from where she was packing her bag. "Yeah, that's the plan," the blonde grinned, glancing at the clock on the wall, "I'm helping them set up the booth later. Should be fun. We've got a bunch of games we think the first-years would like."

Cecilia nodded, eyes flickering briefly to the hallway, thinking about her own next steps. "I'll be busy myself. I'm heading to the events committee in a while," she said thoughtfully,

“I need to confirm a few things for some clubs and make sure everything’s sorted before the exhibition tomorrow.”

Gigi perked up. “Hey... want me to follow you?” the pigtailed girl asked, trying to sound as casual as possible, “I could keep you company for a while—you know, make sure you don’t die of loneliness.”

Cecilia looked at her, surprised at first by the offer. But she wasn't opposed at all. “Heh, you aren't projecting are you?” Cecilia smirked as Gigi elbowed her in indignation, “But sure. I’d appreciate the company. It’ll be nice to have someone around while I sort things out.”

Gigi grinned. "You're very much welcome," she said jokingly, “Aren't you lucky to have a friend like me around?”

The perfectionist rolled her eyes. “Whatever makes you happy,” Cecilia smiles, shaking her head.

Gigi chuckled before packing the rest of her bag in silence. She only offered the suggestion because she knew Baelz and Mumei were likely to follow Cecilia after school anyway. If they really were going to be following Cecilia, Gigi wanted to be there to keep an eye on them.

As they stepped out of the classroom together, the hallway had begun to thin out, the rush of students heading to their respective destinations growing faint behind them. A warm breeze floated through the open corridors, making Cecilia’s hair flow in the wind as she led the way down the corridor.

Gigi walked just slightly behind her, hands tucked into her pockets. “So,” Gigi said, casually striking up a conversation, “What political chaos are you tangled up in this time, doll?”

Cecilia let out a soft laugh. “Political chaos?” she repeated with a giggle, “Welll, coincidentally enough, it involves your beloved tabletop club.”

Gigi raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do tell.”

“Your booth was placed in a spot that's a little too spacious,” Cecilia explained, adjusting the strap of her bag.

“Oh yeah, I heard about that from Mori Calliope,” Gigi notes, catching up to Cecilia’s side, “Biboo and I were having a laugh about it earlier.”

“Yeah, she found it pretty funny,” Cecilia recalls, chuckling before she continued, “Anyway, the gardening club was stuck in a cramped area because the broadcast club's equipment was taking up too much space.”

“So naturally,” Gigi said, eyes twinkling, “You untangled the entire mess and made everyone shake hands and promise to get along.”

“Something like that,” Cecilia replied with a light smile, “I talked to Calli and Biboo, and they were fine with switching spaces with the gardening club. That way everyone gets what

they need without stepping on anyone's toes."

Gigi gave a low whistle. "You're a miracle worker, Cece," the pigtailed girl praised, sounding genuinely impressed as she nudged her friend's shoulder.

"What can I say?" Cecilia replied, shrugging, her tone full of mock smugness.

"How humble," Gigi chuckles.

They continued walking, the afternoon sun gleaming down on them as they moved. After a brief moment of silence, Gigi spoke again. "Hey," she began casually, "Have you ever thought about joining the events committee for real?"

Cecilia glanced over, eyebrows raised. "Me?"

"No, the other Cecilia Immergreen," Gigi deadpanned, "Yes, you."

Cecilia hummed in thought. "Not really. I mean, I already work with them often enough—helping clubs out with logistics, forms, requests... It's kind of like I'm a ghost member already."

"Right? You basically are on the team," Gigi said, tossing her head a little, "I bet they'd roll out the red carpet if you actually joined."

"Maybe. But right now, I prefer studying at home rather than joining a club," Cecilia says.

Gigi tilted her head, genuinely curious now. "Why, though? You seem like the type who'd thrive in a club. Like, leading one or something. Bossing everyone around."

"I just never found one I really wanted to join," the perfectionist admitted, glancing out one of the windows they passed, "Studying gives me enough structure, and I don't feel like I'm missing out."

Gigi raised an eyebrow. "Huh. That's kind of surprising."

Cecilia smirked and added with a wink, "Besides, if I joined a club, it might distract me from my main goal."

"Oh?" Gigi asked, amused, "And what goal would that be?"

"Beating you," Cecilia replied smoothly.

That caught Gigi off guard. She blinked, a faint flush rising in her cheeks as her steps faltered for half a second. Cecilia noticed the silence and turned around smugly. "What? Did I scare you?"

Gigi snapped out of it with a scoff, trying to play it cool. "No. I just forgot you were so obsessed with me," Gigi shot back teasingly.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, but her smile remained. "Stupid."

Gigi grinned again, trying to flush down the warmth in cheeks. They kept walking side by side. Although they were now quiet, they continued to enjoy each other's company.

Before long, the pair reached the events committee's clubroom. Gigi stretched her arms over her head, already looking bored. "Alright, I'll just wait out here while you deal with the boring stuff," the pigtailed girl declared, leaning against the wall beside the door.

Cecilia gave a small laugh. "Figures. Fine, suit yourself," Cecilia said as she reached for the door handle, "Don't miss me too much. This shouldn't take too long."

"I won't," Gigi smiled.

As Cecilia disappeared into the clubroom, Gigi took a subtle glance at the reflection in the clubroom's window. At first, it was just her own face staring back, but then—something else caught her eye. She had a feeling she and Cecilia were being watched on their way to the committee, and her suspicions were confirmed when she noticed two figures peeking out from a nearby corner.

Keeping her expression neutral, Gigi casually pushed herself off the wall and started walking away from the clubroom, pretending as if she hadn't noticed anything. She kept her pace steady, her hands stuffed in her pockets as she rounded the hallway.

Then, the second she reached the corner—

"BOO!"

A loud yelp erupted from behind the wall as Baelz practically jumped a foot in the air, while Mumei flinched so hard she nearly knocked into the wall.

Gigi smirked, arms crossed. "Wow," Gigi shook her head, "For a couple of stalkers, you two are *terrible* at being sneaky..."

"Gigi?" Mumei gasped, as Gigi offered a hand to help her up.

Gigi gave Mumei a cheeky look as she pulled her to her feet. "Fancy seeing you here," she said dryly, before turning to Baelz, arms still crossed, "And you... you're the student council president, right?"

Baelz dusted herself off, still recovering from the jumpscare. "Yeah, I'm Hakos Baelz," she said, regaining her composure, "And you are...?"

"Gigi Murin," Gigi replied simply, "So, mind telling me why the student council were hiding around the corner spying on Cece?"

Mumei laughed nervously, rubbing the back of her neck. "We weren't spying—"

Baelz cut in, pointing at Gigi. "Hold up! How do you know Mumei?"

Gigi shrugged. "We've played a few games together online."

“Mostly in Roblox,” Mumei admitted, before smirking, “You should join us next time, Bae. Gigi’s a blast.”

Baelz waved a hand. “Okay, whatever. That’s not important,” Baelz says, narrowing her eyes at Gigi, “The real question is: Why do you care about what we’re doing?!”

Gigi huffed indignantly, drawing herself up to her full height. “Well, I dunno, Hakos Baelz, but if you saw two people sneaking around corners watching your friend, you’d get a little concerned!”

“She got us there, Bae,” Mumei remarked, amused.

Baelz opened her mouth to argue, but Gigi cut her off with a smug look on her face. “Besides, I already know you two were following Cece during lunch. I was following *you*,” Gigi revealed as Baelz’s eyes widened in outrage.

“You were stalking *us*!?” Baelz exclaimed in shock.

Mumei snorted. “Yeah, uh, I don’t think we, of all people, should be offended by that,” the brunette pointed out.

“That’s—okay, that’s fair, but still!” Baelz spluttered, while Gigi leaned against the wall, tilting her head.

“So? Are you gonna tell me what this is all about? Or do I have to start making guesses? Let’s see... student council president sneaking around observing Cecilia Immergreen... Are you trying to recruit her?” Gigi asked, crossing her arms.

Baelz sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You’re so annoying.”

“I get that a lot,” Gigi said lazily, “Now spill.”

“Okay, fine, I was working on figuring out if Cecilia would be a good fit for the student council,” Baelz admitted, crossing her arms, “I mean, the way people come to her for help—the way she solves their issues efficiently and effectively? She’s practically doing the work of a council member without the title.”

Gigi shot Baelz a teasing look. “So you spent an entire day stalking her just to figure that out?”

“Well, yeah,” Baelz replied with a dramatic wave of her hand, “And after watching her all day, I’ve come to the conclusion that Cecilia Immergreen would be a perfect student council member.”

Mumei nodded in agreement. “She’s got the work ethic, the brains, and the patience to deal with the chaos.”

Gigi giggled, recalling the many squabbles she had with Cecilia over undone homework. “Yeah, patience most of the time.”

Baelz leaned forward. "Exactly! You agree, right? She'd be perfect!"

"No arguments there. Cece's got all the makings of a model student council member," Gigi nodded, "Responsible, competent, obsessed with order. Hell, I'd say she probably even enjoys bossing people around a little."

Baelz grinned triumphantly. "See? Even you think she'd be great for the council!"

"Sure," Gigi said, "But there's just one tiny problem—Cecilia isn't really interested in joining clubs."

Baelz blinked. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah," Gigi continued, stretching her arms above her head, "She prefers studying at home rather than getting involved in an actual club. I even asked her about it just now, and she straight-up said she doesn't really have one she wants to join."

Baelz groaned, slumping against the wall. "Are you serious? That's such a waste! She'll be amazing at the job!"

"Yeah, it kinda is a waste..." Gigi muttered thoughtfully.

Mumei gave Gigi a surprised look. "You actually agree?"

Gigi sighed. "I mean, yeah. Cecilia's the type of person who'd thrive in leadership roles. She's reliable, she knows how to get things done, and let's be real, the council could probably use someone like her to help things run smoothly."

Baelz pointed at her. "Exactly! So why won't she join!?"

"Well, like Gigi said, I prefer to study," Cecilia says suddenly appearing in front of the three girls. All three girls immediately jolted at Cecilia's sudden arrival.

"GAH!" Baelz nearly tripped over herself, "How long have you been standing there?!"

Gigi, recovered quicker, narrowing her eyes at Cecilia. "Yeah, how much did you hear?"

Cecilia, looking entirely unbothered, shook her head slightly. "Everything from 'stalking' onwards."

"Ooh, we got caught~" Mumei giggled as Baelz groaned.

Gigi then raised an eyebrow. "Wait, how did you hear everything? Weren't you supposed to be inside handling your 'boring stuff'?" Gigi asked.

"I was. But it turns out I didn't have to do anything after all," Cecilia says with a smirk.

Baelz blinked. "What?"

“The gardening club and broadcast club members already spoke to the committee on my behalf,” Cecilia explained, “Apparently, it was their way of thanking me for helping them out.”

“Heh, how convenient,” Gigi chuckled as Baelz looked stunned.

“Wait, so you just walked out and heard everything while we were talking about you?” Baelz questioned nervously.

Cecilia nodded, looking far too smug. “Pretty much.”

Gigi sighed, shaking her head. “You really are scary sometimes, Cece.”

The perfectionist turned towards Baelz, her smiling drooping a little. “So, Hakos Baelz, you were spying on me the whole day, huh?” Cecilia sighed, shaking her head.

“I wouldn't call it ‘spying’...” Baelz says, trying to come up with something, “It was more like observing...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, just give it up, Bae,” Mumei says, placing a hand on Baelz's shoulder.

“Okay, fine, we were spying on you... but for good reason!” Baelz told the perfectionist, who raised an eyebrow.

“Mhmm... yeah, the whole ‘finding out if I'm a good fit for the council’ thing,” Cecilia says, nodding.

Baelz perked up immediately. “Right! And now that you know why, we can get to the important part,” Baelz exclaimed, clearing her throat.

The redhead swiftly straightened her blazer, placing a hand over her chest as if she were making a royal decree. “Cecilia Immergreen, on behalf of the esteemed student council of Cover High, I formally invite you to join our ranks!”

Cecilia stared at her blankly for a moment. Then, with a calm tone, she replied, “No.”

Baelz's confident expression cracked instantly. “What—just like that?! You didn't even think about it!”

“I don't need to,” Cecilia replied, smiling and adjusting her hair ribbon, “I've already decided I'm not interested.”

Baelz groaned in frustration, throwing her arms up. “But why?! You're literally perfect for the job! You're already doing half the work of a council member without even realizing it!”

Cecilia sighed, crossing her arms. “And I'd rather not do the other half.”

“That's so wasteful!” Baelz exclaimed, looking absolutely devastated, “You have all this skill, all this leadership ability, and you'd rather just—what? Study? That's it?”

“Yes,” Cecilia said simply.

Baelz turned to Gigi, wild-eyed. “Come on, you agree this is a waste, right?”

Gigi, who had been watching the exchange with a smirk, lazily shrugged. “Yeah, kinda.”

Baelz nodded eagerly. “See?! Even your buddy here agrees! That’s gotta mean something!”

“But,” Gigi continued, stretching her arms behind her head, “That doesn't mean you can force her to join the council, you know. She can make her own choices.”

Cecilia gave Gigi a small nod of approval, while Baelz groaned dramatically. “B-but it’s such a waste!”

Mumei tilted her head. “I mean, she’s still using those skills, just not in an official capacity.”

“That’s not the same!” Baelz insisted, “She’s already doing council-level work... So why not join the real thing officially? Become an official member?”

Cecilia exhaled slowly, her patience wearing thin. “I don’t need a title or a position to do what I want to do. If someone needs help, I help them. I don’t see why I have to join a club for that.”

Baelz crossed her arms, still looking dissatisfied. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Cecilia replied firmly.

Baelz looked ready to argue further, but Gigi stepped in with a lazy grin. “Face it, prez. Maybe Cece's better off being a lone wolf,” the pigtailed girl jokes.

Cecilia shot her a look. “Hey, I'm not a lone wolf.”

Gigi’s grin widened. “Oh yeah? Then prove it. Join the student council.”

“Hey, whose side are you on?” Cecilia muttered, flicking Gigi’s forehead.

Baelz glanced between the two before a sense of defeat overtook her. She was so sure she had found the perfect person to step up for when the current council members graduated, but now that hope seemed to be fading.

She proceeded to let out a long sigh. “Okay. I won't pester you anymore. Sorry for the whole stalking and recruitment thing...” Baelz apologized genuinely as she bowed at Cecilia.

Mumei watched her retreat for a moment before calling out, her voice softer. “Hey, Bae, are you okay?”

Baelz didn’t stop. She didn’t even seem to have heard the question, her steps slow and heavy, as if each one took more effort than the last. She walked away without a response, her

back hunched, her usual spark of energy gone.

Cecilia watched her leave, but she didn't follow. Something about Baelz's demeanor felt off. She seemed genuinely bummed out about Cecilia's rejection.

Mumei turned to Cecilia, eyes thoughtful. "That wasn't like her," she murmured.

Cecilia nodded, feeling a sense of worry and guilt in her chest. "She seemed... down."

Mumei gave her a small smile before turning to follow Baelz at a slower pace. "I'll check on her," Mumei says, preparing to leave, "Sorry for all this..."

Gigi and Cecilia waved the brunette goodbye and watched as she caught up with Baelz, slowing her pace to match, eventually walking beside her.

"Hey, Bae?"

The redhead didn't respond.

"Baaeeeee??"

"..."

"Bae. Bae. Bae. Bae. Bae."

"What," Baelz said finally, looking at Mumei grumpily.

Mumei held the president's hand. "Are you mad at Cecilia?" the brunette asked.

Baelz immediately shook her head, letting out a weak chuckle. "At Cecilia? No, no, she didn't do anything," Baelz smiles weakly.

"Then why do you look so... down?" Mumei asked softly.

The redhead gulped. "Mooms... can we talk about this later? I need to think," Baelz requested, her voice slightly shaky.

Mumei blinked. This wasn't like Baelz at all. She always had so much energy, so much drive, even when things didn't go her way. Seeing her like this made Mumei's heart sink just a little.

The two walked in silence for a few moments before Mumei finally spoke again. "Take your time," she said quietly, "I'm here when you're ready to talk."

Baelz nodded appreciatively, tightening her grip on Mumei's hand. "Thanks, Mumei."

"We might be onto something special here," Fauna remarked, looking at the progress they'd made so far with their recruitment booth. The posters were being carefully aligned, the display stand was taking shape, and a few cute illustrations (courtesy of Sana) were already drawn up.

Sana, who was busy organizing stacks of printed photos from the council's past activities, looked up and gave a small smile. "Yeah, I think it's coming together nicely. The photos should catch people's eyes," she says, carefully sliding another photo into its place in a folder.

Irys, who had been working on the pamphlets, checked her watch. Her brow furrowed slightly. "Hmm..." she murmured, "Where are Bae and Mumei? We're already behind schedule and they're running late."

The council's booth had strangely only just started taking shape and it was obvious that they were a little behind time. Kronii, who had been casually writing on the whiteboard with a list of tasks and duties for the booth, looked up from her notes. "I wouldn't worry too much. They'll show up when they show up," Kronii pipes up, giving a nonchalant shrug.

Irys glanced at Kronii, still looking concerned. "Okay, moving on from them, I just don't get why we're always running behind, especially for something like this. The booth should've been ready to go by now. What if we don't have enough time to set everything up?"

"We'll manage," Kronii said, turning back to her list, "We always do."

"Mhmm... Hey, remember these events?" Fauna asked, holding up pictures of the council during the previous year's sports day and cultural festival. She spread them out on the table, the images full of laughter, teamwork, and a surprising amount of chaos. Each photo was filled with memories of the council working hard to organize everything but also enjoying each other's company.

Sana, her face lighting up with fondness as she looked over the pictures, nodded. "I think people will love seeing those," Sana giggles, "It'll show them what we're about, you know? That we're not just a group of people who sit in a room and organize things, but that we've got real experience."

Irys couldn't help but smile slightly as she glanced at the photos, but then her expression shifted back to worry. "Yeah, but what if we mess something up this time? I don't want to be scrambling at the very last minute."

Kronii rolled her eyes but kept her voice light. "Don't be such a worrywart. We know what we're doing. Remember last year? We got through everything without any major issues."

"True. We always find a way to make it work," Fauna agreed, "It's just a matter of keeping it together. No matter what happens, we've always got each other to rely on."

Sana chuckled. "You know, I think our seniors really helped make those events special. They always knew how to keep things fun, even when everything was a mess. It wasn't just about getting things done—it was about making memories."

"Yeah, they had a way of turning every stressful situation into a good time," Irys reminisced, "They made everything feel less like work and more like we were just... having fun together."

Kronii's expression softened as she nodded. "They made it look so easy too. Even when things weren't going according to plan, they always kept the mood light."

Fauna smiled, a wistful look in her eyes. "I really miss them, really."

Irys sighed, looking down at the table. "Yeah, me too. I still can't believe they're all graduated. It feels like the council isn't the same without them."

The group fell silent for a moment, the weight of their seniors' absence settling over them. But after a few beats, Sana cleared her throat and grinned. "Well, hey, we're still here, right? We'll make this booth just as great as the last one. They'd want us to keep going, even if they're not around."

Kronii smirked, crossing her arms. "Exactly. Let's make it a good one."

Irys looked at her teammates, a small smile forming on her lips. "Right. We've got this."

Suddenly, the doors to the room opened as Mumei and Baelz walked in. The rest of the council greeted the pair enthusiastically while Baelz trudged towards her desk.

"Hey, where were you two?" Fauna asked, looking at Mumei.

"We were, uh, stalking your sister," Mumei said plainly as Fauna raised an eyebrow.

"Wait, what?" the green haired girl uttered, caught off guard with Mumei's answer.

Mumei waved a hand dismissively. "Not in a creepy way... I think. Bae just wanted to see if Cecilia lived up to the hype."

Kronii let out an amused snort. "The hype?"

"Yeah, you know," Mumei continued, "Everyone talks about how great she is—top grades, super reliable, all that. Bae wanted to check it out for herself."

"Wait, so you guys have been busy with Cecilia since this morning, huh?" Irys says, remembering what happened backstage earlier that day, "So... what did you guys learn?"

Mumei shrugged. "It's better if you ask Bae."

At that, all eyes turned to Baelz. She was slumped over the desk, her arms folded beneath her head. Silent. Unmoving. Sana, who had been shuffling through the stack of photos, tilted her head. "Uh, Bae? You good?"

No response.

"Earth to Bae?" Kronii added, sitting up straight to get a good look at their leader.

Still nothing.

Sana then held up a handful of pictures and smiled. "Hey, Bae, wanna help me sort through these? I could use another set of hands."

Baelz finally sat up, lifting her head just enough to glance at the photos. Then, with a deep sigh, she let herself slump back over the desk. "Sorry guys, I just... need a minute," she mumbled.

The room fell into a brief, uneasy silence. The council members exchanged looks, concern flickering in their eyes. It wasn't like Baelz to be this quiet.

Fauna's expression softened as she walked over to the president's desk, patting Baelz's head. "Take your time, Bae," Fauna says soothingly as Baelz simply hummed in reply.

Soon after, the rest of the council huddled in a corner of the room, prepared to properly interrogate Mumei. The brunette crossed her arms, glancing back at Baelz before sighing. "Alright, so here's what happened," she began.

"We followed Cecilia to the events committee room, but she caught us pretty quick," Mumei let out a dry chuckle.

Irys raised an eyebrow. "Not surprising. I bet you guys weren't subtle."

"Yeah, we weren't... but that didn't stop Bae," Mumei continued, "She just went straight into recruitment mode, trying to convince Cecilia to join the council. Said she was already doing the work, so she might as well make it official."

"Sounds like her alright," Sana smiles.

"Yeah, except it didn't work," Mumei said, rubbing the back of her neck, "Cecilia shot her down—hard. She didn't even hesitate. Just told Bae that she wasn't interested, and that was that."

"And normally, you'd think Bae would just shake it off, right? It's not like this is the first time she's failed to get something done. But..." Mumei says, glancing back at Baelz, who remained motionless at her desk, "It's weird. She's never gotten bummed out like this over a simple 'no.'"

The council fell silent, their gazes flickering back to their usually energetic president. "She isn't upset at my sister, is she?" Fauna asked worriedly.

"She said she wasn't," Mumei replies, shaking her head, "I think it's something else entirely... something to do with what she said about finding the right people to lead the council when we've graduated."

Kronii's expression turned thoughtful, her arms folding loosely across her chest. "She's been talking about that a lot lately," she said after a moment, "About what happens after we're gone. Who's gonna take over. Who's gonna care enough to keep things running."

"I thought she was just being dramatic," Irys added softly, "But... maybe she's really been thinking about it seriously."

Sana leaned back slightly, her voice quieter than usual. "We've all been together for so long—keeping things running, having fun... it's easy to forget this doesn't last forever."

Mumei nodded slowly. "She said Cecilia might be the perfect fit. Someone who already does the work without needing recognition. Someone dependable."

They all looked over again at Baelz—still quiet, still unmoving—her fingers loosely gripping the edge of the desk like the energy had drained from her completely.

"I guess the rejection hit her harder than she thought it would," Fauna murmured.

No one said anything more. The room remained still, the sound of the clock ticking faintly in the background.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Irys let out a sigh, placing her hands on her hips.

"Okay, that's it. She needs to tell us what's on her mind," Irys said, her voice firm.

Without waiting for anyone to agree or stop her, she marched straight over to Baelz's desk. The others watched, unsure of what was about to happen. Baelz didn't move as Irys approached. Her head remained buried in her arms, her body still slumped like a ragdoll.

Irys stopped right beside her and crossed her arms. "Bae. You can't just sit there wallowing in silence forever. Whatever you're feeling—bottling it up is only going to make it worse."

"I'm fine," Baelz muttered, looking up at Irys, "I just need a few min—"

"I'm serious," Irys interrupted, kneeling down so she could look her in the eye, "You don't have to keep pretending to be okay around us. We're your friends. We care. So tell us why you're feeling so down."

Baelz shifted slightly. Her voice came out low, almost a whisper. "...It's stupid."

"Doesn't matter," Irys said gently. "Tell us anyway."

The council gathered around Baelz, all of them looking at her expectantly. Their president glanced around at them, before sighing. "Okay, it all started just before spring break," Baelz began, "On our seniors' graduation day."

A few days before the start of spring break, the auditorium was packed. Folding chairs filled every corner of the floor. Teachers, parents, and juniors were all in attendance, cameras in hand. The buzz of conversation filled the space, quieting only when the principal stepped up to the podium to open the graduation ceremony.

Large banners with the words ‘Congratulations, Class of 2024!’ hung across the back wall. Sunlight shone through the windows, giving everything the ceremony an almost dreamlike atmosphere. At the front, the graduating cohort sat in neat rows. Third-years dressed in neatly buttoned uniforms, their posture a little stiffer than usual. Some whispered to their friends while others clutched the folded program brochures with nervous fingers.

A few rows back sat the student council. Baelz, who was recently elected president, was right in the center. Her red hair was pinned back neater than usual. She didn't talk. She just sat quietly, hands in her lap, eyes fixed forward.

As the ceremony went on, certificates were awarded, names were read, applause filling the air between each one. The others beside Baelz—Kronii, Fauna, Irys, Sana, Mumei—clapped when appropriate, smiling when the cameras from the newspaper club panned their way.

Then came the next portion of the ceremony. The valedictorian's speech. The valedictorian, who was also the previous student council president, walked slowly up the steps. She adjusted the microphone, looked out over the sea of students, and took a breath.

“I’m not sure when it started feeling real,” she began, “Maybe it was the first time I got lost trying to find my classroom in first year. Or maybe when I stayed up all night finishing a project and still somehow forgot to print it out. To my group mates who had the misfortune of having to experience my blunder, I’m still sorry, I hope you have forgiven me.”

A round of laughter erupted around the hall, particularly amongst the valedictorian's old group mates.

The valedictorian smiled, waving at them before glancing back at her script. “But I think for most of us, it crept up slowly. One class at a time. One semester at a time. And suddenly, here we are. Three years later. The same buildings. The same uniforms. But we’re not the same.”

“Over the past three years, we’ve changed. We’ve figured things out... or failed at figuring them out. We’ve joined clubs, met new friends, lost old friends, made up, and grown closer. We’ve had our fights. We’ve cried in bathrooms and pulled each other through each exam season. We’ve stood under umbrellas waiting for the rain to stop. And most importantly, we’ve had fun.”

She then paused briefly, her tone softer now. “These past three years... they weren't always perfect. Some days were rough. Some lessons didn’t stick. Some things didn’t turn out the way we hoped they would. But it’s funny, isn’t it? That even the worst moments feel smaller when you look back. That time you were late for class, that time you failed a quiz, or even that time

your group project completely fell apart. To my other group mates who know what I'm talking about, I apologise once again."

More laughter erupted as a few heads nodded knowingly.

"We won't remember everything. We'll forget some names. We'll lose track of old classmates. But we'll remember how it felt to be seventeen, sitting in this room, thinking this was the end of something big."

The auditorium was silent. The only sound was the occasional creak of chairs. "And now we have to move forward. Some of us know exactly what we're doing next. Others are still figuring it out. That's okay. There's no correct timeline. No perfect path. The only thing that matters is moving forward with determination. And remembering that we didn't get here alone."

She looked down briefly, then back up, eyes landing on the second-year student council members. "I want to end this by thanking the people who helped make this place what it was. My friends, my classmates, our teachers. And of course, the next generation of student leaders."

Her gaze locked with Baelz's. "Bae, as the new student council president, I know you're going to carry this place to greater heights. I know you and the rest of the council won't let me down. Because I've seen how much you care. You won't always know what to do. But you'll always persist. And that matters more than anything."

Baelz didn't move, feeling her throat turn dry as her fingers curled tighter in her lap. Her eyes then met the valedictorian's, the latter smiling at her warmly before returning to her speech.

"To everyone else... Thank you," the valedictorian continued, "Thank you for giving me a place to grow up. I'll miss it more than I can say. But let's not end things on a somber note! We did it! We've graduated! So go out there—have fun, take pictures... and have an amazing graduation day!"

The valedictorian bowed, beaming at the audience. The applause came seconds later, as the audience filled the air with cheers and whoops. Baelz clapped along happily. However, the words from the previous president stuck with her, her eyes lingering on the stage even after it emptied.

Half an hour later, after saying goodbye to some of the third-years, Baelz and Irys began to set their plan into motion. "Alright, let's round up everyone," Baelz says excitedly, "Go get Kronii, Mumei, Sana and Fauna. I'll go kidnap our seniors!"

"Sounds like a plan," Irys chuckled, winking at Baelz before departing.

The student council president let her neatly styled hair loose, undoing the top buttons of her shirt before keeping her eyes peeled. Baelz scanned the dense crowd in the courtyard, weaving through groups of students and families huddled under the early spring sun. The sakura trees had just started to bloom, scattering bright pink petals across the stone paths.

The graduation day was finally winding down, leaving room for students exchanging hugs, snapping selfies and wiping tears. Baelz moved quickly, her eyes sharp.

Soon, she spotted the former treasurer crouched near a flowerbed, conversing with some of her friends and juniors. Without hesitation, Baelz jogged over and tapped her on the shoulder. “Sorry guys, borrowing her!” she called over her shoulder, already pulling the senior along.

“Bae?! Where are we going?” the former treasurer asked, surprised.

“You’ll see,” the president winked, pulling her senior along.

The secretary came next—laughing with a group of friends under one of the sakura trees. Baelz waited until the conversation died down a little, then stepped in and pointed at her with both hands. “You. With me. Now,” Baelz commanded.

The girl blinked in confusion as the former treasurer gave a tiny wave. “Give me a sec guys,” the former secretary grinned, before coming along with Baelz, “Alrighty, where to?”

The former vice-president took a little longer to track down. Baelz finally found her on a bench, sipping a vending machine coffee and staring out at the field with her parents. “Perfect timing,” Baelz said, panting slightly, “Come on. Almost got everyone.”

The senior’s parents could only stare in amusement as the former vice-president was being whisked away. “Ehhh?! What’s happening?” she exclaimed as the former secretary and treasurer dragged her along.

Finally, the former student council president—the valedictorian, could be seen standing at the center of the courtyard, surrounded by a crowd of admirers asking for signatures and selfies. Baelz lingered at the edge of the crowd until the third-year noticed her and excused herself gently.

“Excuse me, ladies,” the short haired third-year excused herself, smiling at the squealing underclassmen around her.

She eventually made it out of the swarm, coming face to face with Baelz and the former council members. “President,” she greeted, giving Baelz a warm hug.

After letting go, Baelz scratched the back of her neck. “Hey, prez. Mind following us for a bit?”

The valedictorian didn’t even ask what for, simply smiling and nodding. “Sure thing.”

Soon, all four graduating council members stood under the courtyard’s largest sakura tree. Irys returned as well, with the current council in tow—Kronii, Fauna, Mumei, Sana—all slightly out of breath from running around the school.

Baelz clapped her hands. “Alright! Before you guys vanish forever, I thought we could take a photo. Full lineup. One last time.”

The seniors exchanged glances before smiling in unison. The group gathered—juniors in front, seniors behind them. Someone passed their phone to a nearby first-year, who eagerly took on the role of photographer.

They arranged themselves casually—no formal poses, just wide grins and arms slung over shoulders. Sakura petals drifted through the air as the shutter clicked a few times.

Baelz stood in the middle, the current president surrounded by both the past and the current members of the council. Her smile was bright, but her grip on her blazer sleeves tightened just slightly. Even then, something in her chest ached—a realization that this would be the last time they'd all be together like this.

While the rest of the council exchanged well wishes with the graduating members, Baelz stood off to the side, smiling at the happy looks on everybody's faces.

The valedictorian then took notice of the unusually quiet Baelz, before walking over and sitting down with her. "Why so glum, Bae?" the valedictorian asked, wrapping her arms around Baelz, "We're celebrating my retirement!"

"Retirement?" Baelz repeated in amusement, "You're old but not THAT old."

The valedictorian grinned. "Feels like it, though. So, come on. What's eating you?"

Baelz laughed softly, brushing a petal off her shoulder. "It's nothing serious. Just... y'know. You guys are all leaving. It's weird."

The valedictorian tilted her head, smiling teasingly. "Sad we're leaving?"

"Of course I am," Baelz said, smiling despite herself, "But that's not all of it. I guess I'm just... a little anxious."

"About?" the valedictorian asked.

Baelz picked at the hem of her sleeve. "What if I screw up? What if I don't live up to everything you guys built? You made this council work, you kept things in order. What if I can't do the same?"

There was a short silence before the valedictorian let out a quiet snort. "You serious? That's nonsense," the short-haired senior brushed off.

Baelz blinked.

"You're gonna do amazing," the older girl said firmly, before taking on a more joking tone, "You were practically my apprentice for the last year, weren't you? I taught you everything I knew!"

Baelz let out a small laugh. "I suppose you did..."

"And you're not alone," the valedictorian added, nodding toward the rest of the group, "You've got them. Fauna, Kronii, Irys, Sana, Mumei. That's one hell of a team. You don't

have to carry the whole thing on your back.”

Baelz looked over at them—at her council mates, past and present, still laughing, still living in the moment. The valedictorian then leaned back, arms resting behind her. “I expect great things from you, Bae. I really do. You’re gonna carry on what we started... and probably do it even better.”

She gestured to the others, the sunlight catching in her hair. “Look at them. That’s your council now. And you’ve got what it takes to lead them. I know it.”

Baelz didn’t say anything at first. She just watched them, a soft smile growing on her face as the wind scattered more petals through the air. The laughter of her friends echoed across the courtyard, grounding her back to reality.

“Don’t worry, Prez,” Baelz finally said, staring firmly at the valedictorian, “I won’t let you guys down.”

“Yeah, so...” Baelz rubbed the back of her neck, having just finished telling her friends about what happened on their seniors’ graduation day, “That’s kind of where it started. I made a promise. I told her I wouldn’t let them down.”

She glanced up, eyes sweeping across her council mates—each of them listening intently, waiting. “They gave us so much. Our seniors,” Baelz smiled, “They didn’t just run the council. They kept it a group that the students can rely on.”

Baelz exhaled. “The prez—our seniors... They trusted us to carry that on. Handed it off like a baton. And I took it. I promised I’d keep it going. I meant it.”

“But now, after a few months of being president... it’s different. The pressure’s real. Everything we did after they stepped down, every decision we made—it feels like it reflects on them, not just on us,” she continued, sighing.

Baelz looked down, her brows furrowed. “But now, I just keep thinking... What if I don’t live up to the promise I made to them? What if I’m not good enough to keep their legacy going? What if, when we leave, they look back and feel like we let them down?”

She hesitated, then looked at the others again. “Don’t get me wrong. I think this council—we’re great. All of us. I trust you guys completely. But that’s the thing... we’re third-years. We only have so much time left. And I’ve been thinking more and more about what happens after us.”

“That’s why it hit me so hard when Cecilia said no,” Baelz explained, “Because I’m trying to find the right people. People who can take this over when we go. Not just fill the roles—

but really get it. Understand what the council means. Carry it forward.”

“I want to be able to pass the torch the same way our seniors did—with confidence. I just want to make sure what they built doesn’t end with us,” Baelz says, her voice breaking a little, “I don’t want to let them down.”

Mumei was the first to move. She crossed the short distance between them and wrapped her arms around Baelz in a quiet, comforting hug. Baelz blinked a few times, her mouth trembling into a small, grateful smile.

Sana scooted over, joining the hug. “You’re not letting our seniors down, Bae,” she smiles reassuringly, “The fact you care this much already proves that. You’re not just holding onto the title of student council president—you’re holding onto what it means.”

Fauna placed a gentle hand on Baelz’s shoulder. “I know it’s scary, Bae. I feel it too. But you’re not doing this alone. We have each other—and we’re doing good. We really are.”

Mumei leaned back, giving Baelz a reassuring pat. “And you don’t have to find the next council all in one day. We’ve got time. We just have to look in the right places..”

Kronii, leaning against the window frame, crossed her arms and tilted her head. “Speaking of the right places, we’ve got the club recruitment exhibition tomorrow, don’t we?”

Baelz blinked. “Oh, yeah...”

Kronii shrugged. “Then that’s our shot. Our booth is already booked. We put ourselves out there. Let’s show them what the council stands for. What it can be.”

Irys pointed toward Baelz with a small grin. “Exactly. We’ll give it our all. Talk to the first-years. If the right people are out there, we’ll find them.”

Baelz glanced at all of them—her council. Each of them appeared steady, serious, and supportive. Although the weight of responsibility on her shoulders didn’t vanish, it felt... shared now.

“...Okay,” she said softly, wiping at her eyes, “Then tomorrow... let’s really show them who we are.”

“That’s the Bae we know,” Irys giggles, holding one of Baelz’s hands.

“Hehe, thanks guys, you’re the best council mates I could ever ask for,” Baelz grinned at her friends.

Mumei chuckled. “Okay, enough before it gets too sappy.”

The council girls shared a hearty laugh as their president’s spirits were lifted. As the laughter finally died down, Baelz clapped her hands together, standing up with renewed energy. “Okay, someone give me an update on our booth’s progress,” Baelz instructed as Irys and Sana saluted.

The girls proceeded to show Baelz everything they've done so far, to her immense satisfaction. "Great! Looks like we're getting somewhere," Baelz says, before a light bulb lit up above her head, "Hold on... Kronii, Irys, how are the flyers coming along?"

"Pretty good! But we're still finalising the design, prez," Kronii nods, moving to show Baelz their design on her laptop.

"Great! I've got an idea for the slogan," Baelz says excitedly as Kronii hands her the laptop.

Meanwhile, Fauna and Mumei stood off to the side, smiling at Baelz's energy. "It's nice to have our president back," Mumei said softly, arms placed behind her back.

Fauna nodded, her eyes on Baelz as she enthusiastically pointed at the screen and bounced on her heels. "She always bounces back. No matter how hard it gets, that's just who she is."

Fauna's gaze then drifted toward the windows near the entrance of the council room. Something moved just beyond the glass—two girls, hiding in plain sight. One had a gold ribbon in her hair that shimmered slightly under the hallway lights, while the other had messy, dirty blonde hair tied up in pigtails.

Fauna watched them quietly for a moment, her smile returning—gentle and knowing. She didn't say anything to the others. Instead, she turned back to her friends, listening to Baelz now suggesting potential slogans with increasing excitement.

That evening, Fauna returned home, yawning as she placed her keys in the key bowl. The green-haired girl casually strolled into the living room, where her little sister was busy scribbling on workbooks.

"I'm back, Cece," Fauna announced, removing her socks, before noticing the math workbook Cecilia was occupied with, "Eh, you're doing workbooks already?"

"Hey sis. Well, I gotta start early if I'm gonna beat Gigi this semester," Cecilia said, pumping her fist in the air with gusto, "Anyways, I got you a salad from the convenience store earlier. I've already had my dinner."

"Thanks, you're a doll," Fauna said, before smirking and crossing her arms. For some reason, Cecilia was averting Fauna's eyes, her pencil tapping just a little too quickly against the page. Fauna raised an eyebrow, getting a sense that Cecilia was absolutely dying to say something.

"You look like you've got something on your mind," Fauna said calmly.

“Huh? What? No, not at all!” Cecilia laughed, way too loudly and way too obviously, “I’m just focused on math! Super focused. Hyper focused. Extremely focused!”

“Mhm,” Fauna says, seemingly letting it slide with a smile, walking a few steps toward the kitchen. But then, just as she reached the entrance, she stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “So... did you enjoy watching the council’s conversation earlier?”

Cecilia froze, her pencil slipping from her fingers. “H-Huh?! How did you—?”

“You and Gigi aren’t exactly... masters of stealth,” Fauna said with a wink, “Your gremlin of a friend practically pressed her face to the glass.”

Cecilia’s face turned red. “We were being subtle!”

Fauna chuckled. “Also, it’s not polite to eavesdrop on people, you know.”

Cecilia spun around, indignant. “Excuse me?! Two members of your council eavesdropped on me *first*! This is only fair!”

Fauna raised an eyebrow. “Fair?”

“Absolutely fair,” Cecilia huffed, crossing her arms, “Also, since when were *you* in the student council? Weren’t you already in the tabletop and gardening clubs?! How do you even have time for things?!”

Fauna just smiled, taking a seat on the sofa. “Older sister magic.”

Cecilia blinked. “That’s not an answer!”

“It’s the only one you’re getting,” Fauna teased.

Cecilia grumbled and picked up her pencil again. “Hmph, whatever...”

Fauna chuckled, patting her sister’s head, before noticing the hair ribbon sitting neatly atop her snowy white-green locks. “*Strange. Did she get a new ribbon?*” Fauna thought to herself. Curious, she gently pinched one end of the ribbon between her fingers before speaking.

“Hey, sis, did you get a new ribbon?” Fauna asked as Cecilia tilted her head up to look at her.

Cecilia blinked, then followed Fauna’s gaze to the ribbon. “Oh, this?” she mumbled, her cheeks flushing slightly, “Gigi got it for me last Christmas.”

“Awwhh... Wait, didn’t she get you the clockwork bird?” Fauna asked, raising a brow.

Cecilia quickly shook her head. “Well, she got me the ribbon as well...” she muttered, eyes darting away.

Fauna grinned, clearly enjoying this. “Woah, two gifts, huh?”

Cecilia hesitated for a moment before mumbling with a tiny pout, “Technically, I got her two gifts too...”

“You did?” Fauna raised an eyebrow, “Didn't you just get the earrings?”

“Each earring counts as one,” Cecilia added defensively, arms crossed.

Fauna held in a laugh, patting her sister's forehead. “How very generous of you.”

“I know,” Cecilia grumbled into her workbook.

A few moments of silence passed, just the faint scratching of Cecilia's pencil on the page, until Fauna reappeared from the kitchen, salad bowl in hand. “So...” Fauna started slowly, sitting down on the couch once more, “What did you think of the council's conversation?”

“Hm?” Cecilia hummed in response, snapping out of her intense focus on her equations.

“You know,” Fauna said casually, like she was asking about the weather, “Back at the council room. When you and Gigi were very subtly eavesdropping.”

Cecilia bit her lip. “Oh, that,” Cecilia sighed, leaning back and twirling her pencil between her fingers, “It was kinda... a lot. I mean, I didn't realize the president felt that way, or just how much she cared about the council and the work you guys do.”

Fauna nodded slowly, listening as she speared a cherry tomato with her fork. Cecilia turned her head slightly, as she continued. “She's not just doing it for herself. She's doing it because someone believed in her. And now she wants to believe in someone else.”

“...It made me feel kinda bad for saying no,” Cecilia muttered, more to herself than to Fauna.

Fauna blinked and looked up from her salad. “And why did you say no again?”

Cecilia dropped the pencil she was twirling, looking at her sister. “Well, the same reason I haven't joined any club in the first place: To focus on my studies,” Cecilia replies, picking up the pencil before sighing, “To be honest, I would've accepted the president's offer...”

“But...?” Fauna says patiently.

“I don't know,” Cecilia murmured, “Ever since Gigi beat me in the rankings in the first semester last year... that reason—to focus on studying—it's only gotten stronger. Or maybe... it's more like it got more necessary after I lost.”

Cecilia sighed, tapping the pencil's end against her knee. “So... nyam, nyam, my reason for not joining a club doubled down. I was convinced that if I continued solely focusing on my studies... I'll be able to claim the top spot from Gigi.”

“I remembered the period of time after that first semester. You were so obsessed over your revision, I had to kick you out of the house so you could have some fun,” Fauna recalls, smiling.

“Heh, thanks for that,” Cecilia smiles, “You made me remember there was more to life than just studying...”

Fauna chuckles, setting her salad bowl down. “See? You changed, Cece. You began loosening up more, spending more time with your friends... and yet your grades are still amazing.”

“I guess,” Cecilia sighs, resting her chin on her folded arms, “Anyways, when Baelz asked me to join the council, for a moment I... I actually wanted to. I thought that hey, I managed to balance having fun and studying at the same time... But a voice in my head just went, ‘You can’t afford to make time for this’, ‘You can’t afford to fall behind’, ‘You already lost twice’”

Cecilia looked down, her expression a mix of guilt and frustration. “I don’t know, maybe I don’t trust myself not to fall behind if I take on too much. Like, hanging out with friends is one thing—I can still go home and study after,” Cecilia reflects, joining Fauna on the couch, “But a club? That’s a real commitment. Meetings, responsibilities, events... it’s different.”

She clenched her fists lightly against the table. “I don’t regret loosening up. I’m glad I did,” Cecilia says, “But honestly, every time I think about clubs or anything that might eat into my study time, a weird anxiety comes back. That if I slip even once, that’ll be it.”

Fauna leaned back, stretching her legs out as she gave Cecilia a thoughtful look. “Cece... I think you’re seriously selling yourself short.”

Cecilia blinked, surprised at the firmness in her sister’s tone. Fauna wasn’t usually so direct with her. “You’ve already proven you can handle more than you think,” Fauna continued, folding her arms over her lap, “You’ve balanced school, friendships, responsibilities—you’ve even learned how to enjoy yourself without compromising what matters to you. And your grades haven’t suffered one bit.”

Cecilia looked away, a little flustered. “That’s because I’m careful. I only loosened up when I knew I could afford to.”

“Exactly,” Fauna said, leaning forward slightly, “You’re careful. You’re smart about your time. You’re not reckless, Cece. You wouldn’t join a club just to slack off—you’d join it because something about it meant something to you. Like... maybe helping other people the way you’ve always did.”

Cecilia paused, taking a moment to think about Fauna’s words.

“I know you,” Fauna said more gently, “You’re not the type to suddenly forget your goals just because you signed up for a few council meetings. If anything, I think you’d grow even more from it. You’re already working so hard to be the best version of yourself... what if this is part of that?”

The older sister paused, before shrugging and smirking. “And look, I get it. Gigi’s... well, she’s something else.”

Cecilia lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“As much as I want to tease you for obsessing over her,” Fauna went on, grinning a little, “She really is special. Not just because she’s smart—but because she challenges you in a way no one else does. She brings something out of you. Makes you push yourself. I think she’s the kind of rival people dream of having.”

“Don’t make it sound so cheesy,” Cecilia grumbled, pointing at her sister accusingly.

Fauna grinned wider. “Cheesy, sure. But it’s true. Just because she’s ahead now doesn’t mean she always will be. You’re more than capable of catching up—and maybe even passing her. Club or no club.”

There was a moment of silence before Cecilia let out a soft, suspicious hum. “Wait a second,” the perfectionist said, narrowing her eyes, “Are you trying to recruit me into the council too? Is this a whole operation?”

Fauna burst out laughing, raising her hands in mock surrender. “What? Me? No! I’m just your loving, supportive sister who also happens to think you’d be really good at it.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, though she couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t believe you,” Cecilia huffs, crossing her arms.

“All I’m saying,” Fauna added, nudging her shoulder lightly, “...is maybe give it another thought. You wanted to say yes, didn’t you? Even if it was just for a second.”

“...Yeah,” Cecilia admitted quietly. “I did.”

“Then don’t let fear be the only reason you don’t,” Fauna winked.

Cecilia rested her head against the couch cushion. Though her mind is still pretty clouded with thoughts, she knew one thing was for sure—Fauna wasn’t wrong.

She had learned how to balance her desire to beat Gigi with the time she spent with her friends. She was still the same Cecilia Immergreen—driven, determined, always striving to be her best. Her thoughts then drifted to Baelz. The way she had stood in the council room earlier that day, that raw passion in her tone when she spoke about the council and not letting her seniors down. The weight she carried on her shoulders. Hakos Baelz genuinely cared. About the council. About serving the school. About living up to her seniors’ expectations. It was honestly kind of inspiring.

She wanted to protect what the older council had built, to prove herself capable of carrying the torch. That kind of dedication... Cecilia could understand it. Respect it. Maybe even be part of it.

Then, something flickered within Cecilia—courage, perhaps? Maybe joining the council wouldn’t hurt after all. Maybe joining the council really would help her become the best version of herself, just as Fauna said.

Cecilia sat up slowly, squeezing her plush pug tightly. “Alright,” she said to Fauna, “I’ll give it a shot.”

As expected, the club recruitment exhibition the next day was bustling and crowded. It was after school, and most of the first-year cohort had shown up, wandering around the foyer and courtyard to explore what clubs Cover High had to offer. Rows of booths were lined against the walls, each one decorated with their unique posters, flyers, props, or colorful tablecloths. Someone from the drama club was even giving out candy (possibly as a way to bribe the first-years into joining), while a group of third-years from the track team were awkwardly dressed in mascot suits.

Cecilia stood at the foyer, watching the lively event take place before her eyes. To her relief, the gardening club's booth managed to flourish in the end, their booth attracting a crowd of awe-struck students admiring the beautiful plants on display.

“Cece!” the gardening club member who Cecilia talked to called out, “Over here!”

Cecilia smiled warmly, heading over before being hit with the aroma of flowers. “Mmm! The flowers smell great,” Cecilia says, as the girl gave her a hug, “I’m so glad it worked out for you guys in the end.”

“I should be thanking *you*!” the gardening club girl grinned, “The extra space really gave us a chance to let the booth bloom and flourish!”

Cecilia giggled at the girl’s flowery puns when suddenly, the girl from the broadcast club showed up, her arms crossed.

“Oh, it's you,” the gardening club girl sighed, turning to face the broadcast club girl, “What are *you* doing here?”

“Chill out, I just wanted to take a look at your booth,” the broadcast club girl explains, before bowing to Cecilia, “...And to thank you, Immergreen, you know, for solving that whole conflict yesterday.”

Cecilia waves a hand, shaking her head. “Oh, it's nothing... I just did what I could.”

The broadcast club girl nodded, adjusting the headphones around her neck before taking a look at the bright display of flowers in front of her. “You know what? Your booth ain't half-bad flower girl,” the broadcast club girl complimented the gardening club girl, “A little too colorful for my taste but still... kinda pretty.”

The gardening club girl widened her eyes, her cheeks reddening. She was clearly surprised by the other girl's compliment. "O-oh? I'm so glad you like it. I spent quite a bit of time coordinating it," the gardening club girl giggled, before picking out a small flower from the booth and holding it towards the other girl, "Here!"

"What's this?" the broadcast club girl asked, caught off guard by the sudden gift.

"A peace offering," the gardening club girl replied, "Sorry if I was a little heated yesterday."

The broadcast girl's cheeks immediately turned red in turn as she averted the other girl's stare. "I should be the one apologising... I'm sorry if I was difficult yesterday," the broadcast club girl apologised, before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a piece of candy she received from the drama club member, "Here's my peace offering."

The gardening club girl giggled in amusement as she accepted the sweet. "Peace?" the gardening club girl says, holding out a hand towards her former enemy.

The broadcast club girl rolled her eyes, chuckling. "Peace."

Cecilia shook her head, smiling as she walked away. "I'll just leave those two to it," the perfectionist muttered to herself, amused.

She continued strolling through the booths, before eventually ending up at the tabletop club's booth, where there was a huge line of first-years queuing up to play Uno with Calliope and Bijou. Gigi, who was handling the queue, brightened up when she spotted Cecilia, waving at her.

"Hey, doll!" Gigi called out, waving excitedly as the first years at the front of the line turned their heads curiously.

Cecilia blushed upon meeting the stares of the juniors, hastily walking up to Gigi and flicking her forehead lightly. "Hey! What was that for, you lunatic?" Gigi whined, rubbing her forehead.

"Don't call me 'doll' in front of the juniors, it's embarrassing!" Cecilia hissed as Gigi laughed.

"Oh? You're still embarrassed by a little nickname?" Gigi teases, "I thought you've gotten over it by now..."

Cecilia huffs, crossing her arms. "I hate you," the perfectionist sighed, before looking at the long queue in front of the booth, "You know, you guys really outdid yourselves again."

"Yeah! Mori Calliope was super shocked when she saw just how many juniors wanted to play cards with her," Gigi snickered, before rubbing her hands, "Hopefully this means we'll be getting more members this year."

"I'm sure you will," Cecilia smiles as she heard Bijou shout 'Dang it!' after being slapped with a '+4'.

Gigi and Cecilia laughed out loud at their friend's misfortune, but as the laughter died down, Cecilia noticed Gigi's smile falter just slightly.

"Hey," Gigi said, her voice lowering a little, "They're not still following you around, are they? The council, I mean."

Cecilia blinked. "No," she said, shaking her head, "They haven't approached me since yesterday."

Gigi let out a breath, relieved. "That's good to know, though..." Gigi grinned, leaning her head against her friend's arm, "...The stuff we overheard from them was kind of surprising, huh?"

"It was," Cecilia nodded slowly, allowing Gigi to rest her head on her, "But... I don't know. I actually found their passion for the council kind of admirable."

Gigi raised an eyebrow. "You serious?"

Cecilia looked at her. "They're a little quirky, sure. But they care. About the school, the clubs, the students... even if they're a little dramatic about it."

Gigi smirked faintly. "A *little* dramatic? Baelz was acting like she was recruiting warriors for a secret war."

Cecilia laughed under her breath. "Okay, *very* dramatic. But I think that kind of energy is what makes them who they are."

"I guess so," Gigi said, before raising a fist, "Still. If they come after you again, I'm stepping in."

The perfectionist shook her head in amusement. "Oh yeah? What're you gonna do if they do?"

"I'd challenge Baelz to a game of Uno," Gigi declared, puffing her chest out, "Winner gets to decide your fate."

"That's ridiculous," Cecilia remarked as the pair erupted into a fit of giggles.

"Thanks for the offer, Gigi, but you won't have to challenge her to Uno anytime soon," Cecilia says, winking.

Gigi lifted her head away from Cecilia's arm, curious. "Why?" the pigtailed girl asked, "It'll be amazing."

"Yeah, it would," Cecilia replied before brushing some hair behind her ear, "But I've actually given it some thought. And... I've decided to join the council after all."

Gigi's eyes widened slightly. "Wait, seriously?"

Cecilia nodded. "Seriously."

For a moment, Gigi just blinked, then let out a short laugh. “Huh. I mean, I’m surprised—but not like, against it or anything. Just didn’t think you’d actually go for it.”

“Well,” Cecilia said, “I’m still going to stay on my academic grind. That hasn’t changed.”

“So... you’re going to do both?” Gigi asked, raising an eyebrow, “Council work and try to beat me in the rankings?”

Cecilia nodded, confidently thrusting her fist into the air. “Of course! I can handle it!”

Gigi chuckled. “Well, hopefully all that student government drama doesn’t distract you too much from trying to take me down,” the pigtailed girl teased.

“Don’t worry, Gigi. Nothing’s going to distract me from beating you,” Cecilia giggled, lifting up a pinky, “I pinky promise!”

“Woah... that’s how I know you’re serious,” Gigi gasps dramatically, wrapping her own pinky around Cecilia’s as the pair erupted into another fit of giggles.

Meanwhile, the student council’s booth seemed to be attracting quite a fair bit of attention as well.

Baelz stood up front and center, her energy on full display as she hyped up the council to passing first-years. She waved around her arms, a megaphone in hand, as she shouted things like “Want to change the school? Join the student council!” and “Future leaders, this is your calling!”.

Her theatrics and enthusiasm did end up attracting plenty of amused looks and curious juniors, drawing a crowd of first-years around their booth.

The rest of the council helped out in their own ways as well. Fauna and Mumei gave out the pamphlets, their gentle voices helping to calm down students who looked overwhelmed by Baelz’s theatrics. Irys, meanwhile, showed off photos of past council activities—event planning, inter-club meetings, charity drives, all laid out on poster boards. At the same time, Sana was helping answer questions from the more interested first-years, walking them through what kind of commitment the council required.

As a group of curious students finally wandered off to explore the next booth, Kronii sighed and crossed her arms, standing behind the booth’s table. “Great,” she muttered, holding up the still-blank sheet of paper clipped to a clipboard, “We’ve had over forty people stop by, and not a single one’s written their name down...”

“It’s only been an hour, Kronii,” Baelz replied, still grinning as turned off the megaphone, “The juniors just started looking around. We’ve still got time. Some of them will circle back.”

Kronii raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that? Because I’m starting to think they just came for the free stickers.”

Baelz shrugged, unfazed. “Hey, if stickers get them to stop and listen, that’s a win in my book,” she grinned, eyes scanning the crowd with determination.

Kronii chuckled, before tossing the president a bottle of water. “Here, drink up, I promised Irys I wouldn’t let her girlfriend die of dehydration,” Kronii smirks as Baelz chuckles.

“Thank you very much,” Baelz winked before meeting Irys’ eyes. The vice-president was still at her post by the poster boards, making a gesture for Baelz to hydrate herself. The redhead grinned back, mouthing ‘thank you’ at her vice-president before taking a sip of water.

Suddenly, just as Baelz chugged down the entire bottle, Cecilia showed up, staring at Baelz’s megaphone. “Where’d you get that thing from?” Cecilia asked, raising an eyebrow in amusement, “And why don’t the other clubs get one?”

Baelz widened her eyes. Cecilia was the last person she thought she would see at the booth today.

“Oh, you know... being student council president comes with special benefits,” Baelz replies jokingly, before sighing, “Hey Cecilia, I wanna apologise again for the whole... stalking thing. I shouldn’t have followed you like that, and I definitely shouldn’t have tried pressuring you into joining the council.”

Cecilia gave a small, amused sigh. “It’s fine. You were just really into it.”

Baelz scratched the back of her head sheepishly. “Still, it was over the line. I let my enthusiasm get the better of me, and I didn’t respect your space. That wasn’t cool.”

There was a pause as the two locked eyes. Baelz looked genuinely remorseful, and Cecilia’s expression softened a little. “Heh,” Cecilia said, a mischievous expression forming on her face, “Funnily enough... I thought it over. And I’ve decided to join after all.”

Baelz’s mouth dropped open, but before she could shout anything, she held up a hand. “Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. Are you for real? What made you change your mind?”

“You, actually. Well, you and the other council girls,” Cecilia explains, “The way you guys are so passionate towards what you do, the way you want to live up to your seniors’ expectations, and the way you’re determined not to let them down... it’s all pretty inspiring.”

Baelz blinked a few times, clearly taken aback. She hadn’t expected that answer at all. “That means a lot to me, Cecilia,” she said softly, “We’ve been, and will continue to, work hard to live up to the example our seniors set, and having you join, well, that’d be amazing.”

Cecilia gave her a small nod. “I’m still going to focus on my studies, but I think I can balance it with this. I’ve got a lot to learn, but I’m willing to give it a shot.”

Baelz’s grin returned tenfold, as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The president proceeded to spin around to address the rest of the council, her voice booming through the

megaphone. “EVERYONE! CECILIA IMMERGREEN IS IN THE COUNCIL! WE GOT HER, GUYS!”

The other council members turned their attention towards Baelz and Cecilia, their faces brightening up as they walked over. At the same time, many first-years in the area also focused their sights on what was happening at the council's booth. Some of the first-years even began discussing the loud announcement in their small groups.

“Who's Cecilia Immergreen?”

“Oh, I know her! My big sister says she's one of the school's top ranking students!”

“She must be brilliant then!”

“Yeah, I heard she's a real beauty as well!”

“The student council president just announced she's joining the council!”

“I'm surprised she wasn't in it already after everything my seniors said about her!”

“I'm low-key feeling tempted to join the council now...”

Cecilia felt a small flush rise to her cheeks at the sudden attention, but she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face as the other council members surrounded her. The council members, all excited to have her, greeted her warmly.

Sana was the first to speak up, her voice bright and cheerful. “Aww, Cecilia, you're so cute!” she exclaimed, flashing Cecilia a big smile, “I'm so glad you're joining us!”

Mumei quickly shuffled over, looking sheepish. “I'm sorry about stalking you yesterday, by the way...” she said, rubbing the back of her neck before smirking, “But I'm really happy you're joining. I promise I'll try not to follow you around anymore.”

Cecilia chuckled, before raising an eyebrow. “It's okay, Mumei, I—hold on, what do you mean ‘*try not to*’?”

Irys proceeded to step forward next with a reassuring smile. “We'll take care of you, Cecilia,” Irys said, placing a hand on the younger girl's shoulder, “You're part of the team now. If you ever need anything, just ask.”

As they continued to make her feel welcome, Kronii reached over, holding out a form to Cecilia. “Here you go,” she said, “Sign this, and you're in.”

Cecilia took the pen and signed her name, her handwriting as neat as always. She handed the form back to Kronii, who nodded in acknowledgment, satisfied. Baelz glanced at the

form, looking overjoyed at finally seeing a name on the list. "You won't regret this, Cecilia immergreen!" Baelz declared, pointing at Cecilia before something hit her.

"Hold on," Baelz says, lowering her voice and moving closer to Cecilia, "How did you know about the whole 'living up to my seniors' thing. Your sister didn't snitch on me, did she?"

Cecilia giggled, shaking her head. "No, no, of course not," she replied before winking mischievously, "I just 'happened' to overhear your conversation in the council room yesterday."

"You were *eavesdropping* on us, weren't you?" Baelz gasped, before sighing, "Though I guess I do deserve that after stalking you for an entire day..."

After Baelz returned to her post to continue hyping up the council's booth, Fauna walked up to Cecilia, giving her a little wave. "Well, looks like you're officially in," Fauna chuckled, as the other council members got back to work, "Welcome to the council, lil' sis."

Cecilia met her sister's gaze and grinned, feeling a sense of warmth as she looked around at the group she'll be working alongside with. "I'm glad to be here."

The Empty Seat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Darn, my phone’s acting up again,” Sana muttered, pouting as she tapped her screen repeatedly, “It’s frozen again.”

“That’s what you get for using an android,” Irys said immediately, her tone filled with smugness, as if she'd been waiting for the chance to say it.

Kronii looked up from her own phone, already exasperated with the vice-president. “Oh, here we go again.”

“I’m just saying,” Irys continued, finally setting her iPhone down like it deserved its own spotlight, “iPhones barely lag, they don't freeze, their camera quality is pristine...”

“Yeah, well, at least androids don't treat their users like prisoners,” Kronii shot back, holding up her Google Pixel, “I can download anything I want, I can customize it how I want, and I don't have to pay forty bucks for a charger. It's a *premium* experience.”

“Right, because nothing says ‘premium experience’ like watching a pop-up ad every time you breathe,” Irys retorted, smirking.

“I don’t get pop-up ads,” Kronii says dryly.

“And your battery lasts half as long,” Irys added, ignoring Kronii, “Plus, your interface looks like it was designed in 2012.”

Baelz looked up from the documents she was busy with, shooting a look at Irys. “That’s kinda rich coming from someone who's still using a lightning cable.”

As Irys went back and forth with the other two, Sana leaned over towards Cecilia for help. “Hey, Cece, while they're busy debating, can you help me out here?” Sana asked, giggling at the ensuing argument in the background.

Cecilia scooted her chair over and took Sana’s phone. “Sure, what seems to be the issue?”

“It keeps freezing whenever I try to open anything,” Sana said, frowning as she handed it over, “I swear it’s possessed.”

Once the phone was unlocked Cecilia began poking around the phone's interface. A few taps later, she raised an eyebrow. “Uh... Sana? You have over two hundred tabs open in your browser.”

Sana blinked. “Wait, what?”

Cecilia turned the screen to show her, revealing a ridiculous number of tiny, overlapping tabs. “Two hundred and eighteen, to be exact,” the perfectionist chuckled.

“I do a lot of research...” Sana said defensively, then paused, “... and I have a habit of not cancelling my tabs, hehe...”

“That explains it,” Cecilia muttered, already swiping through to close them, “From a quick glance, I can see many tabs about art, astrology and... hold on, what's Sonadow?”

Sana instantly turned red, moving to swipe the phone away from Cecilia's hands. “It's... Sonic and Shadow's ship name,” Sana explains, as Cecilia held the phone away from her reach, “Y'know, from Sonic the Hedgehog?”

“You were reading fanfiction about two hedgehogs?” Cecilia giggled as she continued cancelling the browser's tabs.

Sana nodded sheepishly, before quickly recovering from her brief embarrassment and puffing her chest out instead of backing down. “Hey! I'll have you know Sonadow is a peak ship!”

Cecilia shook her head, amused. “Pfft, really? But they're animals! Fictional animals!”

“Yes, really,” Sana said, dreamily staring out the window, “Enemies to lovers, deep emotional arcs, angst, action, redemption... It has everything.”

“I knew you were into weird stuff, but I didn't expect that specific flavor of weird,” Kronii snorted as Sana shot her a look.

“Don't judge me!” Sana defended herself before her eyes lit up, “Hold on, Kronini, we should watch Sonic 3 this weekend! You promised and I've been holding onto that promise since last year!”

Kronii groaned. “Sana, that was last winter...”

“Well, now we're *way* past last winter now,” Sana points out, “So we're having a watch party whether you like it or not!”

Kronii stared into Sana's eyes before sighing and relenting. “Fine... I'll watch Sonic the Hedgehog 3 with you this weekend.”

“Yipee!” Sana cheered, clapping excitedly as Cecilia finished clearing the browser's cache and tabs.

Cecilia gave one last tap on Sana's screen, double-checking the settings before handing the phone back. “There. I closed all your tabs, cleared the cache, and restarted the system. It should run a lot smoother now,” Cecilia says, holding the phone out towards its owner.

Sana received the phone, her eyes shining with gratitude and amazement as she observed how smoothly her phone now ran, holding it like she had just been reunited with a long-lost

friend. “Cecilia, you’re an angel. A technological goddess. I owe you my life,” Sana thanked the perfectionist gratefully.

“You owe me nothing,” Cecilia replied with a small smile, “But maybe next time don’t leave two hundred tabs open. Your phone’s not a supercomputer, you know...”

“Hey, I need those tabs. What if I want to reread something later?” Sana asks as Cecilia shook her head sternly.

“You didn’t even remember they were open,” Cecilia pointed out.

“I guess you’re right,” Sana sighs, as she begins typing in her browser’s search bar, “Guess I could always bookmark my next Sonadow fic...”

Kronii and Cecilia glanced at each other, both amused and exasperated at the same time. “I really worry about you sometimes,” Kronii deadpanned at Sana while the latter cheerfully opened up AO3.

Just then, the council room door opened, letting in a cool breeze and the sounds of footsteps. Fauna stepped in first, carrying a folder neatly tucked under one arm, followed by Mumei who was still balancing a stack of forms. Behind them, two first-years entered—Mizumiya Su and Kikirara Vivi, the newest additions to the student council.

The two first-years joined a day after Cecilia did, drawn not just by the council’s presence at the club recruitment exhibition, but by the reputation of their second-year senior. Word had spread quickly among the first-years—about how Cecilia, the doll-like senior with top grades and composure to match, had chosen to join the student council. It was all the inspiration Su and Vivi needed to submit their own applications the next day.

“Here are the forms for the food drive,” Fauna announced as she stepped into the room, exhaling as she placed the folder neatly on the table, “We took longer than expected. The staff room was pretty chaotic.”

“Someone knocked over the copy machine,” Mumei added, wobbling slightly as she set her stack down beside Baelz, “Not me, by the way.”

Baelz looked up, raising an eyebrow suspiciously. “Sure.”

After Su and Vivi placed their stack of forms on Baelz's desk, they took their seats next to Cecilia. “Cecilia-senpai! Could you help me out with my math homework? I've been stuck on this question for ages!” Vivi complained as she whipped out a thick book in front of Cecilia.

Su rolled her eyes, pushing the book away from Cecilia's face. “Hey, you didn't join the council just so you could have Cecilia-senpai babysit you right?” Su sighed before turning to Baelz and Irys, “Anyways, we bumped into the club advisor on our way back. She told us to let you two know that the principal wants to speak with you.”

Irys blinked. “The principal? What for?” she asked, her interest piqued.

Before Su could respond, Mumei chimed in with a cheeky expression. “I'm sorry to say this Bae, but... you've been fired.”

“I've been what?!” Baelz gasped, the student council president freezing as Irys snorted.

Fauna let out a soft laugh as she placed her bag down beside the table. “Relax, it's probably just a briefing about the school anniversary preparations. It's only a few weeks away now.”

“Oh, right,” Baelz muttered, slumping back in her chair, “Just thinking of the work we're gonna have to do is exhausting...”

“At least we have the events committee to help us out for these events,” Irys reassures as she and Baelz stood up, “Well then, we should probably get going.”

The president nodded, brushing her hands on her skirt as she stood up. “Yeah, let's go see what the big boss wants.”

When Baelz and Irys arrived at the principal's office, they found someone already waiting—Takanashi Kiara, the energetic head of the events committee. She was seated just outside, tapping her feet against the floor, as she scrolled through her phone mindlessly.

“Yo, Kiara,” Baelz greeted, waving at the redhead.

Kiara looked up with a wide grin. “Took you long enough! Are you guys excited? I know I am!”

“You're excited already? We haven't gotten the briefing yet,” Irys chuckles as Kiara slipped her phone back into her pocket.

“Well, I mean, it's pretty obvious what it's gonna be about!” Kiara pointed out, lifting up a cup as she wink, “The school anniversary is just around the corner, isn't it?”

Just then, the door to the principal's office creaked open. The principal, who was as neatly dressed as ever, adjusted his glasses and smiled at the three girls.

“Ah, good. All of you are here,” he said, stepping aside to invite them in, “Please, come in.”

As the girls took their seats in front of the desk, the principal settled into his own chair and folded his hands on the desk's surface. “I'm sure you've guessed why I've called you here,” he began, glancing at the trio, “As you all know by now, the student council and the events committee are traditionally in charge of organizing our annual school anniversary celebration.”

Baelz gave a small sigh, slouching a little. “That time of year again, huh?” she remarked as the principal nodded.

“Yes, but this year will be a little different,” the principal replied, matter-of-factly.

“Oh? Different how?” Irys asked, intrigued, as she sat up straight.

“This year marks our fiftieth anniversary—our golden jubilee,” the principal replied, “It’s a major milestone for Cover High, and the school board has asked that we make the celebration truly memorable. They’ve even allocated additional funding to help us achieve that.”

Kiara’s eyes lit up immediately. “Extra budget? Yippee! Does this mean we can rent out confetti cannons... or even fireworks?”

“Uh... sure! If it’s within the budget,” the principal replied, sounding a little nervous.

Irys leaned forward. “So you’re saying we get to go all out this year?”

The principal nodded. “Exactly. I want both of your teams working closely together to design an event that reflects the pride and legacy of this school. I’m trusting you to make it happen.”

“Hmm, so if we’re making it bigger... does that mean we’re not just talking about decorations and performances?” Baelz asked thoughtfully, tapping her chin, “Can we think bigger in terms of venue too? Like, maybe not the auditorium this time?”

The principal raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well,” Baelz said, glancing at Kiara and Irys for backup, “The auditorium’s fine for a normal year, but the fiftieth? It feels a little... cramped. Maybe we could use the courtyard? Or even rent out the local community center? Somewhere more spacious and festive.”

Irys nodded. “I agree. The extra space could really make this year's celebration something to remember!” the vice-president comments, “We could have the usual live performances from the choir and concert band, along with some booths!”

“And fireworks!” Kiara added, practically bouncing in her seat, “And a bigger stage! Maybe even invite some alumni bands or performers!”

The principal chuckled at their growing excitement. “Alright, alright. I love the enthusiasm. But you’ll still need to work within a few boundaries.”

“Oh, like permits?” Baelz asked, straightening up as the principal nodded.

“Exactly. And if you’re planning anything outside school grounds, you’ll need to handle permissions. Plus, keep in mind noise regulations for evening events,” the principal said, ticking the points off one by one, “And of course, it must all remain appropriate for a school environment. No wild parties.”

At this, Kiara pouted slightly, feeling a little disappointed, but nodded anyway. “Family-friendly fun. Got it,” the redhead agreed reluctantly.

“Good,” the principal smiled warmly, “Let your imaginations go wild—reasonably wild. I want this event to be something students and guests will remember for years. But you'll need to submit your full plan to me for approval first.”

Baelz grinned, fired up. “Sounds good. We won't let you down.”

As Baelz and Irys made their way back to the council room, Baelz was practically skipping with excitement, her red twintails bouncing with each step.

“This is going to be insane,” Baelz said happily, “A bigger venue, extra guests, extra budget, and the principal basically told us to let our imaginations go wild. I'm so excited!”

“I know!” Irys grinned, matching her energy, “It doesn't feel real—Us? Planning the fiftieth anniversary? We can't mess this up, Bae!”

“We won't,” Baelz winks reassuringly before clapping her hands together, “We should brainstorm right now. Like, right now. I've already got ideas.”

Irys chuckled, shaking her head. “At least wait until we tell everyone first.”

The moment they pushed open the door, they were greeted by a chorus of curious stares. Mumei was the first to speak, setting down her pen. “So... were you actually sacked?” she asked Baelz in an innocent voice.

The president shot her an exasperated look. “No, Mumei. I'm still the president.”

“Shame,” Kronii deadpanned from her seat, smirking a little.

Sana leaned forward from her seat eagerly. “If you weren't fired, then what happened? Spill!” she demanded excitedly.

Irys grinned as she dropped her bag onto the floor. “Big news. We've been officially tasked with planning the fiftieth anniversary celebration,” the vice-president announced as the council members stared at each other.

“The fiftieth?” Cecilia repeated, perking up from her seat beside Vivi and Su.

“Yup. It's a big one,” Baelz said, practically vibrating, “The principal said there'll be a lot more guests this year—parents, alumni, even retired teachers.”

“We're definitely no strangers to planning the anniversary events,” Fauna says, smiling as she placed a steaming teapot onto the coffee table, “But planning the jubilee celebration sounds like a real honour.”

“It really is! Which is why we have to make it the best celebration it can possibly be!” Baelz declared, pumping her fist into the air.

“That’s not the best part,” Irys added, unable to contain her excitement, “They’re giving us *extra funding*.”

The third years of the council all widened their eyes in surprise as Cecilia and the first-years looked on with confusion. “Wait,” Su said, glancing between the older girls, “Is that... unusual?”

Fauna gave a small laugh, setting down the teacups with a clink. “Very. Normally, our anniversary budget is just enough to cover the basics—decor, snacks, maybe a special guest if we get lucky.”

“Yeah,” Kronii added, lazing in her seat, “Last year we had to settle for balloon arches and a slideshow.”

“Don’t forget the karaoke machine that would break mid-song,” Mumei said, poking her head over the back of the couch.

Cecilia blinked. “So this time... we’re getting more than that?”

“Way more,” Baelz replied dramatically, “Like, actual event-level money.”

“But how much more?” Fauna asked again, her curiosity piqued.

“I was so excited I forgot to check,” Baelz admitted with a sheepish grin as she fished out a folded document from her pocket, “But the principal gave us this—”

She slapped the form onto the table as the council gathered round. They took a moment to scan through the contents of the form before focusing on the number written at the bottom of the form. Upon registering just how much they were allowed for the event, the room gasped collectively.

“Oh my,” Sana whispered, clapping her hands over her mouth.

“That much?” Kronii wondered aloud, picking up the paper to make sure she hadn’t misread anything.

Mumei narrowed her eyes. “We never worked with this much cash before,” Mumei noted, swiping the form out of Kronii’s hands, “Is this a test? Like, if we mess up, we get expelled or something?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Baelz laughed, “It’s a special occasion! The principal just said to ‘let our imaginations go wild’—within reason, of course. We still have to submit our plan for approval.”

“Okay, but,” Kronii leaned in, tapping the paper, “With this kind of budget, we can do more than decorate the auditorium. We could change venues entirely. What if we booked the gymnasium? Or even something off-campus?”

“Off-campus?” Fauna tilted her head, “That’s a bold idea.”

“We discussed that earlier, actually. It really would give us way more space,” Irys nodded, “And if more guests are coming this year, it’d be nice to host them somewhere that feels special.”

“But wouldn’t we need a load of permits and paperwork for that?” Cecilia asked, folding her arms thoughtfully.

“Probably,” Baelz said, “But the big boss didn’t say no. And with this much funding, I doubt they’d be against it if the plan’s solid.”

“We’d need a theme,” Irys says, eyes sparkling now, “Something memorable for our golden jubilee.”

“What about loads of gold?” Vivi suggested, grinning, “We could have gold streamers, gold cutlery... or even those gold flakes that make food look fancier!”

“Okay, let’s be realistic here,” Su sighed, shooting down her fellow first-year’s idea.

Baelz smiled, happy to see the newest members of the council already so engaged. “Alright, gang! Ideas on the whiteboard! Let’s throw everything out there and trim it down later. Theme, venue, logistics, everything.”

The room came alive, voices overlapping as the discussion and planning commenced.

“We could make it 80s themed?”

“Maybe a wall with a timeline of Cover High’s history?”

“What about fireworks?”

“Kiara had the same idea...”

“Do we need a stage permit for that?”

“Can we hire an orchestra?”

“We already have our own orchestra...”

However, despite everyone’s energy at the start, the planning quickly hit a wall. The whiteboard was quickly filled up with ideas, but none of them seemed to stick. Themes clashed—some wanted a formal, fancy tone, while others pushed for something fun and bright.

The discussions on potential venues didn’t go any better. The auditorium felt too plain, the gym too cramped, and some offhand suggestions—like renting a zoo or holding it on a cruise ship got laughs but weren’t serious options.

Baelz stood in front of the board with her marker paused mid-air, unsure what to write next. Irys scrolled through rental spaces on her phone but kept frowning. Fauna and Mumei looked over old event reports from previous years, hoping to find something that would spark inspiration. The room got quieter as the council members ran out of suggestions.

Cecilia sat beside Vivi and Su, her notebook open but mostly blank. She had expected this to be easier. Planning an event sounded like the kind of structured task she would be good at—pick a theme, book a venue, list the tasks. But this wasn't like class committee meetings or organizing study groups with her friends.

Everyone wanted something that stood out. Something that felt important. But what did that even look like?

She looked up at the board again. There were too many ideas and no clear direction. Picking something that would actually feel 'special' was proving to be harder than she thought.

After a few minutes of thoughtful silence in the room, Sana stood up from her seat, snapping her fingers. "Wait! I just remembered something," Sana said, pulling out her phone as everyone turned to look.

"There's going to be a total solar eclipse on the day of the school anniversary," Sana continued, scrolling quickly before holding her phone up to show the date, "See? Full visibility from our town! It's supposed to start around 5 in the afternoon!"

A brief silence passed before the council members began murmuring in interest. "That could actually be... really cool," Irys said, crossing her arms.

"Totally," Mumei added, nodding along, "It already feels special. We wouldn't even need to do much to make it memorable."

Sana nodded, eyes gleaming. "Exactly! I mean, how often does something like that line up perfectly with our school's biggest celebration?"

"It really is a perfect coincidence," Kronii remarked, smiling.

"It's a start," Fauna said, chuckling as she leaned forward, "It gives us something unique to build around. That's more than we had a few minutes ago."

Sana tapped her phone again before her eyes lit up once more. "Hey... what if we held the celebration in an open area? Like the local park?"

"That's actually a good idea. The park's big enough for a crowd, and the sky's clear from there. Everyone would have a direct view of the eclipse," Cecilia notes, as Sana beamed.

"Plus, the park is a total vibe in the evening. I bet the atmosphere will be amazing," Su mumbled, already imagining it.

Baelz glanced toward Irys. "It's settled then," the president says, "We just need to check if we can book the park, get the permits, handle the cleanup—y'know, the usual headache."

“But if we can pull it off...” Irys begins, glancing around the room, “...This could be something truly special.”

Excitement quickly returned to the room. With the eclipse and a new venue on the table, the ideas started flowing more easily.

“We should definitely increase the number of food and game stalls this year,” Mumei suggested, leaning forward with her elbows on the table.

“Yeah,” Sana added, “And they could all be manned by students! It’d be a fun way for more people to get involved.”

“The performing arts clubs will want their usual slots, of course,” Fauna noted, already jotting things down, “The choir, the orchestra, the dance club—those are always a hit.”

“The park has a pretty decent stage we could use,” Kronii muttered, mostly to herself, “It’s probably big enough for the performances.”

At that moment, Baelz clapped her hands together. “Actually, that reminds me—what if we opened the stage to non-club performances, too? Like, let students volunteer themselves even if they’re not in a club. We’ve got so much talent in this school that never gets to show up at big events.”

The council members glanced at each other for a second before the room responded with murmurs of agreement. “Hey, that’s a great idea,” Fauna said, “That way, we could have a longer show “

“And it’d keep the crowd engaged,” Mumei added, “People love cheering on their friends.”

As the council continued listing out ideas, Cecilia jotted down each and every one of them into her notebook enthusiastically. “You seem pretty hyped up for this, Cece,” Irys smiles at Cecilia, who looks up from her notebook.

“Yeah, I think we’ve got a hit on our hands,” Cecilia says, winking at Irys.

The vice-president chuckled, stretching out her arms. “Let’s hope so.”

The next two weeks passed by relatively quickly, with the council working at full speed.

Their proposal for the golden jubilee was formally approved by the principal, and with the support of the school board, they secured the park as the venue for the celebration. Permits were filed, cleanup plans were arranged, and a loose schedule for the evening was drafted. Everything, so far, was falling into place.

Preparations across the rest of the school picked up fast. The usual performers—the orchestra, the drama club, the choir, and the dance club, had already begun their rehearsals. The events committee prepared posters and digital notices that went out to every class, instructing them to prepare either a game booth or a food stall for the day of the celebration. Each class threw themselves into the task, eager to outdo one another.

Excitement bounced through the halls of Cover High. Students whispered and gossiped about the jubilee between classes, debating who had the best stall idea or what snacks would be sold. Everyone was curious about what the eclipse would look like—and whether the weather would be merciful that day.

Posters designed by the art club were plastered across the school wall, featuring dark silhouettes of students watching the sun darken in a clear evening sky, paired with the title: ‘Cover High’s 50th Anniversary – Eclipse Jubilee’

However, despite how smoothly everything was going, one problem remained.

The sign-up sheet for the open stage performances—meant to showcase student talents outside of the performing arts clubs, remained pinned to the hallway bulletin board, untouched. Not a single name had been written down.

“Oh crap...” Baelz muttered one council session, staring down at her tablet with a grimace, “No one’s signed up for the open stage yet.”

The room fell quiet, the gentle clinks of tea cups stopping as everyone turned their attention toward her. Cecilia glanced up from her notebook. “Can’t we just scrap it, then? If nobody wants to go up, it’s not really worth forcing something, right?”

Baelz shook her head. “I already submitted the final event schedule to the principal’s office. There’s a block of time specifically set aside for open stage performers.”

Irys leaned over Baelz’s shoulder to look at the schedule. “Yeah, it’s slotted right after the club performances and the eclipse...”

“Plus, it’s printed on all the posters,” Mumei added, frowning, “If we cancel it now, it’ll throw everything out of sync.”

Baelz sighed, rubbing her temples. “I thought once people saw the signup sheet, they’d get excited and jump at the chance. But it’s just been... crickets.”

“Maybe they’re too nervous to sign up? It’s not like performing in front of a park-sized crowd during a solar eclipse is low-pressure,” Fauna points out, sipping from her teacup.

Kronii raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, it’s kind of a tall order. Most students aren’t used to performing solo outside club events.”

Baelz exhaled deeply, crossing her arms. “We need to figure this out soon. If that block stays empty... it’s going to be a very awkward gap in the middle of the program.”

“Maybe Vivi and I could sign up and do something. Like a skit or something funny... you know, to get the ball rolling,” Su suggests.

Vivi shakes her head, sighing. “That'd be nice, but we're on crowd-control duty, remember?”

Sana sets down her phone, looking up from the daily horoscope before pointing at Su. “Your idea's actually pretty neat,” Sana remarks, “We just need someone to volunteer themselves to be the first name on the list. Maybe after that, we'll start getting more names!”

“Does anyone here have any hidden talents?” Mumei asks, glancing around the room with hopeful eyes, “I'd volunteer myself to sing but my throat hasn't been all that great recently...”

The council glanced at each other expectantly, waiting for someone to speak up. A loud silence hung over the room until Fauna suddenly perked up.

“Hold on, Cece plays the violin,” Fauna recalls, turning her gaze towards Cecilia, “And she's really good too. Hey, sis—why don't you sign up?”

Cecilia blinked. “Me?”

The others turned to her, and in an instant, she could feel the pressure pile onto her shoulders. She looked around the room. Everyone's eyes were on her now—curious and hopeful. She wanted to say no. She really did. But with all those eyes on her, the word got stuck in her throat.

“That's actually a great idea,” Vivi said suddenly, sitting up straighter, “Cecilia, you're like... the perfect person to go first. If you sign up, it'll definitely inspire other people to follow.”

Cecilia furrowed her brow. “Am I really?” the perfectionist asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah. You were the reason Vivi and I joined the council in the first place. Everyone looks up to you,” the first-year smiled, “If you sign up, I bet everyone else will too!”

Cecilia's stomach twisted a little, and she didn't know if it was from the idea of performing or from the sudden spotlight everyone was putting on her. “But... I'm probably really rusty. I haven't played the violin for some time now,” Cecilia mutters as Fauna places a hand on her shoulder.

Fauna gave her a gentle smile. “Hey, knowing you, you could easily pick it back up again.”

Cecilia looked down at her hands, then back up at the group. No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, Cecilia couldn't help but feel the piercing stares from her fellow council mates. Eventually, she sighed, the pressure finally winning her over.

“Alright,” Cecilia said, rubbing her temples, “I'll do it. I'll sign up.”

The room lit up instantly with cheers and relieved smiles. Fauna gave her shoulder a squeeze, as Baelz and Irys whooped.

“Thank you, Cece!” Baelz beamed, “You’re a godsend!”

But Cecilia held up a finger, her expression still a little stiff. “Don’t expect miracles just because I’m going first,” she warned, “I’m not a miracle worker. People might still ignore the sheet, even with my name on it...”

Ironically enough, two days after she wrote her name down on the list, Cecilia found herself standing in front of the once-empty sign-up sheet in the corridor, staring at it in disbelief.

Fifteen names.

Fifteen students had volunteered to perform on the open stage. Cecilia read each one carefully, scanning the growing list. Near the top were Nerissa Ravencroft and Elizabeth Rose Bloodflame, who had signed up together to perform a duet. Further down, she recognized three members from the dance club who were planning to perform their own original choreography, separate from the main performing arts showcase. The rest were solo singers, instrumentalists, or students trying their hand at comedy or storytelling. It was a variety—and more than she’d ever expected.

She blinked at the sheet, still not quite believing it. “Looks like our strategy worked out after all,” came Baelz’s voice from beside her.

Cecilia turned to see the student council president grinning with arms crossed, a smug look on her face. “I’m not saying I told you so,” Baelz added, “But... I told you so.”

Cecilia didn’t respond right away, her eyes drifting back to the sheet. Her name was still at the very top, written neatly. She could almost feel her stomach twist again looking at it. “... Huh,” she muttered.

The perfectionist took in a deep breath, a sense of anxiety filling her chest. This anxiety... wasn’t anything like the usual exam nerves she had. It felt different—more... personal.

Cecilia slapped her cheeks lightly, shaking the feeling off. “Nope. Not thinking about it,” she muttered under her breath, turning away from the noticeboard and marching down the hall. She had classes to get to, quizzes to take, and a history quiz to finish revising for. Thoughts of her performance could wait.

Or so she told herself.

She made it all of ten minutes into the homeroom before the topic came up again. A pair of second-years behind her were chatting animatedly about how the park setup was going to be beautiful under the eclipse, and how they were going to dress up for the occasion.

Then, between the second and third period, Bijou approached her in the hallway, asking her directly. “Are you really performing, Cece? With a violin? That’s so cool!” the shorter girl

asked, grinning mischievously, “Don't mess it up!”

Cecilia simply gave her a little nod and hurried off before the questions could pile up.

Even during lunch, she wasn't safe. Raora brought it up while stirring her yogurt. “So, what are you playing? Something classical or something flashy? Oh! What are you gonna wear? A dress? You'd look funny in a dress...”

“I haven't decided,” Cecilia muttered, sighing.

By mid-afternoon, the word was clearly out. All anyone could talk about was the celebration. Students began trading guesses about who else might sign up to perform and what kinds of acts to expect. It was clear that the jubilee had become the school's main conversation topic.

Cecilia tried her best to block it out and focus on her studies. She answered questions in class, solved problems at her usual pace, and didn't let slip an inch.

But no matter how hard she focused, the thought stayed in the back of her mind: Her name was up there. She was going to perform. In front of everyone.

The perfectionist slammed her forehead onto her desk, groaning. “Why am I fretting over this so much,” she grumbled, her table muffling her voice.

Gigi, who had been watching her all day, raised an eyebrow before walking over to her friend's desk. “You look like shit,” Gigi says, squeezing herself into Cecilia's chair.

“Shut up,” Cecilia groaned, making some space for the pigtailed girl.

Gigi tilted her head slightly, patting Cecilia's head reassuringly. “There, there,” Gigi says, as Cecilia glanced at her, “You clearly have something on your mind. C'mon! Tell Doctor Gigi about it.”

“Where'd you get your doctorate from, Doctor Gigi? What experience do you have in the therapy industry?” Cecilia smirked as Gigi shrugged.

“Uh... BetterHelp?” Gigi replied, grinning as Cecilia scoffed.

“That's not very reassuring,” the perfectionist replied dryly as she and Gigi shared a laugh.

After laughing heartily, Gigi nudged Cecilia's shoulder, her expression softening. “So... what's really going on? You really *do* look like shit.”

“It's nothing,” Cecilia replies, as Gigi looks at her unconvinced.

“Is it about the open stage performances?” Gigi asked, as Cecilia leaned on Gigi's head.

Cecilia let out a tired breath. “Yeah, kinda,” she replied

Gigi stayed still, waiting for her friend to continue. “It’s just... weird,” Cecilia muttered, her voice lower now, quieter, “I’ve performed before in recitals when I was a kid, but this feels different, and I don’t know why. I feel weirdly nervous.”

Gigi blinked, surprised by the confession. “Wait. You? Nervous? Are you seriously telling me you’ve got stage fright?”

Cecilia shook her head slowly, brows furrowed. “No, it’s not that. I’m not scared of being on stage. I think I’m just... conflicted. I don’t know. It’s stupid.”

Gigi leaned back a bit so she could look her in the eye. “You know, you can always pull out,” she suggested as Cecilia shook her head.

“I’m not pulling out,” Cecilia replies immediately.

“Yeah, I figured,” Gigi replied, smirking, “You’re not the type to go back on your word. You’d rather explode than admit you changed your mind.”

Cecilia’s cheeks dusted a light pink at the remark. “You know me too well,” she muttered, eyes narrowing, “It’s creepy.”

Gigi gasped, clutching her chest. “Wow. Hurtful. Here I am offering support like the caring, emotionally available bestie I am, and you call me creepy?”

“I didn’t say it was a *bad* creepy,” Cecilia said with a tiny smile, “Just... *Gigi* creepy.”

“Oh, that clears it up,” Gigi grinned, rolling her eyes, “Now I feel *so* much better.”

The pair stared out the open classroom door, watching as a group of second-years passed by, chatting about the jubilee event with great enthusiasm.

“It’s no use thinking about it too much,” Cecilia says, more to herself than Gigi, “I’m just gonna have to go through with it.”

Gigi chuckled. “Of course you are,” the pigtailed girl smiles, “You’re a special kind of stubborn.”

Cecilia glanced at Gigi, struggling to decide whether she should hit her or thank her. “You could phrase it a little more nicely,” Cecilia remarked as Gigi laughed.

“It was a compliment!” Gigi defended herself, “I’m just talking about how determined and strong you are!”

Cecilia narrowed her eyes. “Now you’re just buttering me up so I don’t get mad.”

“Is it working?”

“...Maybe.”

Admittedly, talking to Gigi helped calm her nerves more than she expected. Cecilia made it through the rest of the school day without spiraling again, though the anxious feeling in her chest never left her completely.

That night, after finishing her revision and brushing her teeth, Cecilia stepped into the shower and stood there longer than usual, letting the hot water soak into her scalp. The thought of performing at the jubilee stuck with her, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

By the time she dried off and returned to her room, her hair towel-draped and skin still warm from the steam, her nerves had returned in full force. The perfectionist dropped onto her bed with a sigh, glancing toward the window where the bright moonlight poured in.

“The moon looks pretty tonight,” Cecilia says to no one in particular, hoping to distract herself a little. However, her busy mind soon began doing mental gymnastics and before she knew it, she started thinking about the upcoming eclipse, and eventually, the jubilee celebration and her inevitable performance.

Cecilia sat there for a moment before her gaze slowly drifted to her mirror. She then stared at the reflection of the rectangular case sitting underneath her bed covered in dust.

“Well,” she muttered, sliding off the bed, “Might as well see if I still have it in me.”

Cecilia crouched down and pulled the violin case out from its hiding spot. Dust clung to the surface, and she wiped it off with a sleeve before setting it on the bed and clicking open the latches. Inside, her old violin lay still and quiet, its once-bright exterior dulled slightly with time.

She picked it up carefully, feeling the familiar curve of the neck against her palm. It was lighter than she remembered. Or maybe she had just gotten stronger over the years.

Cecilia brought the violin to her shoulder, nestling it beneath her chin. Her fingers naturally found their way to the right positions, her muscle memory kicking in. But just as she raised the bow to try a first note—

“Arrgh!” Cecilia screeched, a sharp twang echoing through her room as one of the strings snapped clean off, recoiling wildly. Cecilia flinched back instinctively, the string missing her cheek by mere inches.

The perfectionist lowered the violin quickly, her eyes wide and her heart pounding. She stared at the broken string dangling loosely from the peg, then looked over the rest. The others weren’t faring much better—each brittle, dusty, and straining under age and neglect.

Cecilia sighed, letting the violin rest on her lap. “Right. I haven’t changed your strings in years, huh?” Cecilia remarked, leaning back on her hands and staring at the ceiling. She

remembered a time when she would practice almost every day, even during exam seasons. But somewhere along the road, the poor instrument ended up under the bed.

Still, she didn't want to back down now. Cecilia stood up, carefully placing the violin back into its case. "I'll go to the mall tomorrow," she says to her violin soothingly, "Get you a new set of strings, a new polish... maybe even get myself some nice clothes to wear for our performance."

Cecilia clicked the latches shut and slid the case under her bed again. Then, with the flick of a switch, the room dimmed to darkness, and she crawled beneath the covers.

One performance. That was all she had to do. And even if she was a little rusty after all this time, she figured she owed it to herself to try.

The concert hall was packed. The audience, composed of parents, teachers, and relatives, filled every row. Some chatted in low voices, others flipped through the program booklet, and every so often, polite applause echoed from the stage as one performance concluded and another began.

Backstage, eleven-year-old Cecilia sat on a bench with her violin across her lap. Her posture was straight, just like her teacher taught her, but her grip on the instrument was tight. She had already tuned it twice, even though she didn't have to do so a second time. The young girl simply needed something to do with her hands.

The air backstage smelled like wood, dust and something faintly chemical—probably the polish on the shiny planks on the floor. Other kids sat nearby, waiting for their turns, some humming softly to themselves, some fidgeting. But Cecilia didn't look at them. Her eyes kept flicking toward the curtain that led to the stage, even though there was nothing to see yet.

She wasn't scared of the audience. She had played in front of crowds before. She knew the piece, too—Winter from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It was a fast and technical piece. Her teacher had said it was too advanced when she first brought it up, but Cecilia insisted. She had spent months practicing the first movement, going over her score obsessively until her fingers moved without thinking.

No, the reason why her heart was racing was because she knew someone special would be in the audience tonight.

Her mother.

She had agreed to come to Cecilia's performance that night, to the young girl's immense joy. Despite Ms. Immegreen's endless meetings and business trips, she had actually agreed to be there tonight. And perhaps, that was why this performance felt different.

Cecilia wanted it to be perfect. Not just because the piece was hard or because the crowd was large—but because she wanted her mother to see it. To notice it. To notice her.

Cecilia adjusted the red hair ribbon complimenting her red dress, quietly going over the first few bars in her head. The triplets, the sharp dynamics, the precise strokes... It was a piece about winter, but it wasn't calm, it was fast and urgent. Cecilia closed her eyes, playing the melody in her head. She knows this piece by heart. She's got this.

Cecilia glanced at her phone. It was nearly eight o'clock. She would be up there any moment now. The young girl then opened a text notification from an hour ago. It was from Fauna.

Fauna: hey cece we just reached the concert hall

Fauna: all the best :DD

Cecilia smiled, feeling a sense of reassurance knowing that her family was already seated and waiting for her performance to begin.

Suddenly, a round of applause could be heard echoing throughout the concert hall, signaling that the previous performer had wrapped up their performance. It was then when a staff member peeked backstage and gave her a quick nod. "You're up next, Cecilia."

She stood up slowly, gripping the neck of her violin tightly. This was it. It was time to give the best performance she could. "Let's make Mom proud," Cecilia whispers to her violin as she makes her way onto the stage.

Cecilia stepped out under the bright stage lights and walked to the center of the stage, her violin tucked securely under her arm. The spotlight felt hot against her skin, but she kept her back straight and her movements minimal just as she had practiced. The clapping from the audience quickly died down as the pianist prepared to start playing his part.

Cecilia bowed, the edges of her dress creasing slightly as she bent at the waist. As she rose, her eyes scanned the audience.

And there they were—Mr. Ceres and Fauna, sitting in the middle rows. Her stepfather gave her a small wave and an encouraging smile, while her older sister beamed at her with both thumbs up. Cecilia's heart fluttered for a second, but then her eyes landed on the seat next to Mr. Ceres.

It was empty.

Her gaze lingered on it longer than she meant to. The seat was clearly meant for her mother. She said she would come. She said she would be there. But she wasn't.

Cecilia's chest tightened as her eyes remained locked onto the empty chair, until a movement from the corner of her vision snapped her back to the present. The pianist next to her was giving her a look. Not annoyed, but definitely confused.

Right. The performance.

Cecilia gave a small nod to the pianist, stepped into position, and raised her violin to her chin. She took in a deep breath and let the bow touch the strings.

The first few bars came out fine. Her fingers knew where to go. Her arm clutching onto the bow moved on instinct. But her mind wasn't there.

Instead, she kept glancing at that empty seat in the crowd. Her mother wasn't coming.

She wasn't late. She just... wasn't going to show up.

And that thought—that disappointing, heart-wrenching thought was enough to throw her entire performance off the rails.

Her tempo slipped. Her bow caught on the wrong string during a fast passage. The rhythm became uneven. The clarity and precision she had practiced for months were missing. Although the piece itself already had a fast pace, it began to sound more like a blur of notes struggling to stay upright.

She tried to correct herself, tried to catch the pianist's timing again, but the disconnect grew with every measure. By the time the piece ended, the final note trailed awkwardly in the air as Cecilia gasped, letting out a breath she didn't realise she was holding.

There was a pause. A long awkward pause. It was clear to the audience that something had gone wrong. Then came the applause—polite, but not excited. They weren't particularly impressed.

Cecilia stood frozen for a moment before quickly bowing again and walking off stage, her heart heavy. She wasn't just upset that she had messed the performance up. She was heartbroken that in the end, her mother—the person she wanted to perform for tonight in the first place, had failed to show up.

She blinked rapidly, trying to hold back tears as she stepped behind the curtain. One slipped down her cheek, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand before hurrying down the hallway, violin in hand, not stopping until she was alone.

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Cecilia woke up with a start, panting softly in the early morning's light. Her bedsheets were tangled around her legs, her forehead damp with sweat. She sat up slowly, letting her eyes adjust to the faint light creeping in through the curtains.

The nightmare she just had wasn't a dream at all. It was a memory.

She rubbed her eyes, exhaling as the details came rushing back. The stage. The empty chair. The moment her bow slipped. The polite, hollow applause.

“Ugh,” Cecilia muttered, falling back into bed and pressing her arm over her face.

It had been five years since that day, but the feeling still stuck to her. She hadn't touched her violin since then, and hadn't fully gotten over the events of that night. But now here she was, volunteering herself for the open stage act like it was no big deal.

No wonder she was feeling anxious. It wasn't stage fright. It was everything. That memory, buried for years, had clawed its way back out the moment she picked up her violin again. And now, it wouldn't let go.

Cecilia turned to stare at the violin case leaning against her desk chair. “I'm so stupid,” she whispered, closing her eyes tightly.

What had she been thinking, agreeing to volunteer so easily when deep down she knew she didn't want to perform?

Still, she knew she couldn't back out. Not now. Gigi was right—she wasn't the type to go back on her word. Even if every part of her wanted to.

Cecilia sighed, sitting up again and glancing at the clock. It was half-past eight in the morning.

She might as well get dressed. She had a mall trip to make.

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As expected on a Saturday morning, the mall was pretty packed.

Cecilia stepped through the automatic glass doors and was immediately met with the sounds of chatter, laughter, and blaring pop music. Families with toddlers in tow, clusters of high schoolers in casual clothes, and couples strolling hand-in-hand filled every corner of the complex.

The perfectionist clutched her violin case a little tighter and started weaving through the crowd, trying to tune out the noise. She took in the smell of popcorn from the cinema entrance, along with the scent of fresh crepes from a nearby stall. A young boy nearly ran into her while chasing his little sister, and Cecilia had to sidestep quickly to prevent a collision from happening.

Her eyes narrowed on the overhead signs as she walked past a row of clothing stores and bubble tea stalls. If her memory served her well, the music repair shop should be located somewhere on the second floor.

Cecilia pressed on, her sneakers squeaking against the polished tile floor. She went up the escalator, turning her corner before reaching a clothes store.

She paused in front of the entrance, eyeing the display mannequins dressed in the latest collections. She remembered there was a shortcut through the repair shop. Cutting through would save her a few minutes, and anything that got her out of the crowd faster sounded good right now.

With a soft sigh, she stepped inside. The lighting of the clothes store was a little dimmer than the main mall, and the air smelled faintly of new fabric. A couple of teenagers giggled by the accessories rack, and a cashier called out a greeting as Cecilia walked past.

Cecilia gave a small wave in return before turning a corner near the fitting rooms. It was then when the perfectionist bumped into someone.

“Oof—!” Cecilia muttered, stumbling slightly, catching herself before she dropped her bag. She looked up to apologize profusely, only to pause.

The woman she had bumped into had dirty blonde hair loosely tied back. She wore a long beige coat, slacks, and low heels.

“Mrs. Murin?” Cecilia says, widening her eyes at the older woman, who looked at her, surprised.

“Cecilia?” Gigi’s mother replied, as Cecilia immediately bowed sheepishly.

“I’m sorry for bumping into you,” Cecilia apologised, still bowing, “I wasn’t looking where I was going...”

“That’s quite alright, dear,” Mrs. Murin smiles politely, “You’re not hurt, are you?”

Cecilia shook her head as she straightened up. “Oh no, I’m fine,” she replies, chuckling.

The two stood there in awkward silence, filtering out the background music of the store as they both searched for what to say next.

After a moment, Cecilia cleared her throat. “Um... so what brings you to the mall?” she asked politely, her voice a little stiff.

Mrs. Murin gave a warm but slightly surprised smile, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Just clothes shopping for—”

“—Mama, which dress do you think will really get me the ladies’ attention?” a familiar voice cut in.

Cecilia turned just in time to see Gigi walk up, holding two dresses—one a sparkly navy-blue dress, the other a short orange one with frills. Her eyes were shining mischievously, but the moment she noticed Cecilia standing next to her mother, she froze.

“Huh?!” Gigi blurted out, cheeks flushing pink, “What are you doing here?!”

Cecilia didn’t say anything at first, simply raising a hand and flicking Gigi’s forehead lightly.

“Don’t be so loud,” Cecilia said calmly, “We’re in public.”

Gigi rubbed her forehead with the back of her spirit before chuckling nervously. “Oh, my bad,” Gigi says, her voice dropping in volume as she felt the stares of the other mall goers on her, “What brings you to the mall?”

“I’m here to get my violin fixed,” Cecilia explains, before smirking at the dresses in Gigi’s arms, “What are you doing shopping for dresses?”

The pigtailed girl grinned, holding up the two items she had picked out. “The jubilee’s gonna be THE event of the season, right? Plus, I overheard some girls at school talking about what they’re gonna wear, so…” Gigi shrugged, a little sheepish, “Figured I might as well make an effort. Gotta look good for the crowd.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, amused. “So now you care about fashion?”

“Hey, I always care,” Gigi replied with mock offense, then gestured toward her mother, “Mama’s helping me pick something that looks decent.”

“I was heading out to get groceries anyway, so I figured I tagged along,” Mrs. Murin adds, chuckling.

Cecilia glanced back at the dresses, then at Gigi again. “So which one are you leaning toward?”

“That’s the problem,” Gigi groaned, holding them up again, “The orange one’s got, like, hip genki girl energy, but the blue one screams *‘I’m hot and I know it.’*”

Cecilia snorted. “Pfft—You sound ridiculous.”

“Come on, wouldn’t I look gorgeous in this?” Gigi insisted, holding up the blue outfit to her chest, “I’d have women falling for me everytime I take a step!”

Cecilia shook her head, making a retching face to Gigi’s chagrin. “Just pick the orange one,” Cecilia said flatly, crossing her arms, “It suits your vibe a little more.”

Mrs. Murin laughed lightly and nodded. “I have to agree with Cecilia on that one. The blue’s... a bit much.”

Gigi sighed dramatically. “Fine, fine. Orange it is. You two are clearly fashion experts or whatever,” she huffed, holding up the orange dress.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, glancing at the time on her phone. “Anyway, I should get going. I need to get to the instrument repair shop before a queue forms.”

“Oh, we passed by it earlier,” Mrs. Murin said, her expression apologetic, “There was already a line forming outside.”

“Figures. I knew I should’ve come earlier,” the perfectionist groaned.

“Better get moving, then,” Gigi said, nudging her with her elbow, “You don’t wanna spend your entire day in a line, do you?”

Mrs. Murin smiled. “It was lovely seeing you, Cecilia. Good luck with the repair.”

“Yeah,” Gigi added with a small grin, “See you around, Cece.”

Cecilia nodded, her grip tightening slightly around her tote bag. “Right. See you...” Cecilia says to the mother-daughter pair. Her voice dipped slightly at the end, a hint of reluctance in her tone as she turned to head toward the repair shop.

Even if it was brief, a part of her wished the encounter with Gigi had lasted just a little longer.

Cecilia made her way out of the clothes store before finally spotting the shop she hadn’t visited in years. The old music repair store still looked the same—small, quiet, and tucked away like a secret only a few people knew about. An LED sign hung over the windows, slightly faded from age, and the glass door was decorated with posters of bands from the 2000s.

A long line had already formed outside, just like Mrs. Murin had warned. A teen boy cradling a cello stood near the front, chatting softly with his girlfriend, while two kids with violins and a parent stood behind them.

By the time Cecilia reached the back of the queue, she was eleventh in line. The perfectionist sighed, joining the queue, adjusting the strap of her violin case as she looked toward the front window of the shop. Through the glass, she could just barely make out the silhouette of the old man at the counter, who was busy tending to a customer.

It really had been a long time.

She stared down at her feet. The last time she came here, she was a confident violinist—eager to get back to practice the second she left. Now? She was a high school girl with a dusty instrument and knots in her stomach over a performance she had agreed to too quickly.

“Boo,” a soft voice whispered into the perfectionist’s ear suddenly.

Cecilia jolted, turning on instinct, heart jumping to her throat. “Wha—?!”

Behind her, Gigi stood grinning from ear to ear, clearly pleased with herself.

Cecilia stared, blinking hard. “Gigi!”

Gigi was already snorting with laughter, clutching her stomach. “You should’ve seen your face! It was like—like this,” she says, pulling an exaggerated shocked expression that looked nothing like Cecilia but still somehow got the point across.

“Seriously?!” Cecilia hissed, frowning hard, “You can’t just sneak up on people like that!”

“But it was so worth it,” Gigi said between giggles, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, “Besides, it’s payback for the time you did the same thing to me!”

Cecilia huffed, crossing her arms. “What are you even doing here?”

Gigi shrugged, slinging the bag containing her new dress over her shoulder. “I figured I’d hang out with you.”

Cecilia stared at her. “Why?”

“We’re both at the mall, right? I was done with the clothes shopping thing, and you looked like you were having such a great time standing in line,” Gigi teased, leaning just slightly closer.

Cecilia narrowed her eyes. “Where’s your mom?”

“She went to get groceries—told me to be responsible or whatever and not blow all my money on bubble tea and manga,” Gigi explained casually, “Anyways, after that, I remembered you were still at the mall, so I figured, hey, why don’t I bother Cece for a while?”

“Oh man, poor Cece,” Cecilia replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes with a smile on her face, “But you’re welcome to stay. The company would be nice.”

They stood side by side in the slowly moving queue, as *Canon in D* began playing over the shop’s speakers. Every few minutes, they would shuffle forward, but neither of them seemed to mind the wait. Gigi idly rocked back and forth on her heels, while Cecilia fiddled with the strap of her violin case. Occasionally, one of them would point out something odd about a passerby or make a remark about the nearby flute player’s strange outfit before giggling to themselves.

They passed the waiting time through lighthearted chatter and banter. Gigi made a joke about how long the line was taking, while Cecilia added a remark about how some people probably wanted their instruments rebuilt from scratch. Gigi chuckled, elbowing her lightly in response. Their familiar back-and-forth was easy—comforting, even.

After a pause, Gigi’s voice softened as she glanced sneaking. “Y’know... we haven’t really been hanging out much lately.”

Cecilia blinked, turning towards her. “Yeah,” she said after a second, nodding, “I guess we haven’t.”

It was true. Ever since she joined the student council, many of her afternoons had been filled with meetings and paperwork. Gigi, meanwhile, had gotten more involved in the tabletop club after a bunch of juniors joined.

Along with the heavy load of schoolwork they've been getting, the gap between them had slowly widened without either of them meaning it to.

“I guess we both just got... busy,” Cecilia said, rubbing the side of her thumb with her finger.

“Yeah,” Gigi murmured, eyes forward.

Then, without warning, the pigtailed girl turned slightly, enough so that her hair fell across her face, hiding it from view. “I missed this,” she said, her voice just barely above a whisper, “Spending time with you.”

Cecilia froze.

For a brief moment, it was like something sharp had struck her heart. The soft rhythm of her own heartbeat filled her ears as a sudden warmth spread across her cheeks. She stared at Gigi, unsure if she had imagined it. But the girl still wasn’t looking her way.

Cecilia looked down at her shoes. She opened her mouth, trying to think of something to say, but before the words could come, a gentle chime rang from the shop door. The old man at the counter had just finished speaking to the last customer and was now waving them forward.

They both moved at once, stepping up shoulder to shoulder—but neither of them met the other’s eyes.

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“Are you kidding me?” Cecilia huffed, marching out of the repair shop with Gigi catching up to her, her expression somewhere between sympathy and amusement, “All that queuing and they still tell me to come back in an hour? What was the point of the line then?!”

Gigi snorted. “You sound personally offended.”

“I am personally offended,” Cecilia grumbled, clutching her now violin-less case like it had betrayed her, “I could’ve slept in. Or gotten breakfast. Or done literally anything else instead of standing around for thirty minutes just to be told ‘*come back later.*’”

Gigi chuckled behind her, clearly enjoying the rant. “Your hater side’s really showing right now, Cece.”

Cecilia shot her a glare. “Don’t act like you wouldn’t be mad too,” the perfectionist muttered.

“Oh, I would be,” Gigi replied with a grin, “But it’s way more fun watching you get mad.”

Cecilia sighed, still fuming as they descended the escalator. “Ugh. Now we’ve got an hour to kill.”

“So, what should we do?” Gigi asked, lightly skipping alongside her friend, “Wanna get a snack? Or should I treat you to bubble tea to calm your rage?”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, but then her gaze shifted to one of the clothing stores they passed. “Actually... I was thinking of picking out something to wear for the performance.”

Gigi perked up immediately, nearly tripping over her own feet from how quickly she turned. “Wait, seriously?! You wanna shop for clothes?”

“Yes, Gigi,” Cecilia replied flatly, “I do wear clothes.”

Gigi beamed, practically bouncing with excitement. “Oh, I am *absolutely* helping you pick something out! And you can’t say no!”

“Why do I feel a little terrified?” Cecilia muttered.

“Oh, don’t be such a downer,” Gigi says, clutching Cecilia’s arm, “Come on! Let’s go shopping!”

Cecilia sighed with mock exasperation, but the smile on her face was unmistakable. “Just don’t make me try on anything stupid.”

The pair spent the next half-hour looking at every store with even a hint of formal wear. Cecilia kept trying to steer them toward simpler, more low-key outfits—a long black skirt, a white blouse, maybe a plain blue dress with clean lines. But Gigi would have none of it.

“No, no, no,” Gigi said, wagging her finger at a beige cardigan Cecilia held up. “You are not about to look like a librarian on stage. This is your moment, Cece. You need something that REALLY screams *‘I will step on you’*.”

Cecilia blinked. “Don’t project your weird fantasies onto the selection of my outfit,” the perfectionist deadpanned.

“I’m not!” Gigi denied, grabbing a glittery navy outfit from a rack and thrusting it into her arms, “C’mon, trust me! Now go. Try this on.”

After trying on an assortment of outfits, Cecilia allowed herself to be dragged into another nearby second-hand clothes store. The lighting of the store was warm and flattering, and the

racks were lined with semi-formal dresses that looked like they belonged at concerts, or maybe even a wedding.

Gigi darted through the aisles as if she was on a mission. “We’re aiming for stage presence. But also elegance. And, you know, just a hint of danger.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Cecilia sighs from behind the dressing room curtain as she wriggles into the first dress.

After the curtain pulled back. Cecilia stepped out in a sleeveless burgundy dress with subtle gold bits along the hem. It was a little tight at the waist and she wasn’t used to the way it showed her arms, but it was... nice.

Gigi clasped her hands together. “Oh my god. Shoulder back. Chin up. Show me those arms!”

Cecilia stared at her. “You’re not even pretending to be normal anymore, are you.”

“Hey, just play along,” Gigi ordered, whipping out her phone to snap pictures, “You’re serving so hard right now.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes but adjusted her posture, standing a little taller. “This feels stupid.”

“Nice pose!” Gigi exclaims, circling her like a fashion critic, “You want people to gasp when you walk out. You want the first note you play to feel like it’s been summoned by a goddess!”

They continued cycling through the wide variety of outfits the store had to offer. Gigi made the perfectionist try on a navy jumpsuit that shimmered too much under the lights along with a lavender blouse that made Cecilia look like a walking grape. And each time Cecilia stepped out, Gigi clapped like she was in the front row of a runway show.

“Work it! Show me some leg!” Gigi barked, kneeling on the floor to take pictures of her test subject from a different angle.

At first, Cecilia glared at her, muttering that this was stupid and loud and kind of embarrassing. But the longer it went on, the harder it became to hold back her laughter. She posed more deliberately, spinning in place, which sent Gigi into a fit of wheezing laughter.

The two of them were cackling over a particularly hideous brown dress shirt that made Cecilia look like a curtain when a store clerk appeared out of nowhere, arms folded.

“Girls,” the staff member said sternly, “Please keep your voices down. This isn’t a playground.”

They both froze. Gigi coughed. “Of course. Sorry. We’ll, uh... be proper now.”

Cecilia ducked back behind the curtain, biting her lip to keep from laughing again. She hadn’t had this much fun in a while.



The perfectionist sighed, carefully slipping out of the latest dress and hanging it back on the rack inside the fitting room. None of the outfits felt quite right. The green one from earlier was beautiful, sure—but maybe too beautiful. She stared at her reflection in the mirror, fiddling with the loose strands of her hair.

Her eyes then drifted toward a different hanger at the corner of the fitting room. A tailored black blazer. Below it, matching slacks. A smooth white dress shirt, folded neatly beside a slim, black tie.

She blinked, not recalling ever picking out that outfit. A teenage boy probably brought it in and forgot to take it out after he finished trying it on.

She stared at the outfit, imagining how it would look on her. “Ah, what the hell, I’ve been messing around this whole time anyway,” Cecilia told herself, pulling it off the hanger.

A few minutes later, she adjusted the collar nervously, flattening the blazer straight. It fit surprisingly well—not too tight in the shoulders, tapered just right at the waist. It looked... sharper than she expected, but also completely unlike anything she usually wore.

She then took a breath and stepped out. “Okay, don’t laugh,” she said to Gigi, brushing a hand through her hair, “Do I look ridiculous?”

Gigi looked up from her phone and blinked. The blonde’s mouth opened, but no sound came out as her eyes flicked from the polished black blazer up to the tie, then to Cecilia’s face. She blinked again before erupting into a fit of coughs.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “That bad, huh?”

“No,” Gigi finally said, before clearing her throat and speaking again, “You actually... look pretty good in a suit.”

Cecilia tilted her head. “Yeah?”

Gigi nodded once, slowly. “Yeah. Like, unfairly good.”

Then Gigi quickly looked away, pretending to examine a price tag on a belt that was definitely too tacky to wear in public. “It’s kind of scary, actually. You wear that and you’ll have half the auditorium proposing before you’re done tuning that violin of yours,” Gigi chuckled, stealing another look at Cecilia.

The perfectionist snorted, arms crossed. “You’re being dramatic again.”

“I’m serious. It’s giving ‘dashing butler’... or ‘office boss’ kinda vibes,” Gigi says, standing up and crossing her arms, “What I’m saying is... I’d let you fire me—”

“You’re just saying things... you freak,” Cecilia shook her head as she spun around, smiling in spite of herself. She looked back toward the mirror just outside the fitting room. Her reflection met her gaze—composed, confident, a little androgynous, a little elegant. It’s not a bad look.

She glanced back at Gigi, who was now very deliberately not making eye contact. “Should I buy it?” Cecilia asked, looking a little uncertain.

Gigi peeked up at her with a grin. “Yeah. You should,” Gigi replies, “It really suits you well.”

After paying for the suit, Cecilia and Gigi left the store with a shopping bag swinging lightly at Cecilia’s side. The two wandered aimlessly for a while, letting their legs carry them through the mall’s upper floors. Gigi insisted on getting bubble tea, dragging Cecilia along to a little stall next to the bookstore she frequented.

Cecilia ordered a jasmine milk tea while Gigi got herself a sweet, fruity drink complete with rainbow tapioca pearls. They sat on a bench near a glass railing, chatting and sipping their drinks as they watched the mall crowd go about their business.

“I still can’t believe you actually bought the suit,” Gigi finally said, nudging her, “Never thought I’d see Cecilia Immergreen of all people strutting around looking like a butler.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe I bought it either. I’m going to look ridiculous at the performance. Everyone else will be in nice dresses, and I’ll be the only girl in a suit.”

“There’s nothing wrong with standing out a little,” Gigi replied, turning towards her, “Besides... for what it’s worth, I think you looked kinda handsome in it.”

Cecilia blinked. Her grip on her drink tightened just slightly. She glanced at Gigi, who was sipping casually, like she hadn’t just dropped a word like that into the middle of their conversation.

“...You’re stupid,” Cecilia muttered.

Soon, they finished their drinks and made their way back to the repair shop. By the time they arrived, the line had disappeared, leaving the old man behind the counter, who was polishing a cello bow with precision. “Ah, you’re back,” he said, not looking up at first.

The man then stood up and disappeared into the back, returning with a familiar hard case. “My colleague managed to get your violin back into working shape. Do be more gentle with your instrument from now on, young lady.”

“I *am* gentle,” Cecilia replied, accepting the case with both hands.

“Your violin disagrees,” the man said flatly, smiling slightly.

Gigi stifled a laugh behind her hand as Cecilia bowed and muttered a thank you before the two exited the shop again.

The sun shone down on them as they left the mall, casting their shadows along the sidewalk. They walked side by side, the street packed with people and passing cars.

Cecilia exhaled, looking at her violin case and newly-purchased outfit. “I really can’t believe I went through with all this. I’m gonna show up looking like a try-hard.”

“When are you *not* a try-hard?” Gigi chuckled, placing her hands behind her head, “Plus, it’s a nice suit. You pull it off. Everyone’s gonna be too busy admiring how clean you look to think it’s weird.”

Cecilia glanced at the hoodie the pigtailed girl always wore before sighing. “That’s easy for you to say…”

After a while, they passed by the edge of a park, which was bustling with children and families. A few couples were scattered across picnic mats, while a group of high schoolers were laughing around a food stall by the entrance.

Gigi slowed down, nudging Cecilia with her elbow. “Hey, wanna hang out here a bit?”

Cecilia nodded, taking in the peaceful sights of the park. “Sure.”

They made their way to a quiet spot near the playground, settling down at an empty table under a tree. The breeze had picked up slightly, swaying the leaves above. From their seat, they could see the swingset and the jungle gym, and further off, the reservoir shimmering under the afternoon sun.

Gigi stretched her arms out, yawning as she leaned against the bench. Meanwhile, Cecilia rested her violin case by her feet and sat back as well, watching a group of boys cycle by. It wasn’t the kind of afternoon Cecilia had expected to have today, but she didn’t mind it at all.

The pair continued to sit like that for a while, soaking in the atmosphere of the park on a weekend when suddenly, Gigi’s eyes shifted to the violin case resting against the bench they were sitting on.

Gigi tilted her head slightly. “Hey,” she said, nodding toward the case. “Now that it’s fixed… think you could play something?”

Cecilia blinked. “Here?”

“Yeah. Why not?” Gigi smiled, not teasing this time, “It’s been a while since I’ve heard you play.”

Cecilia looked down at the case, then around the park. Kids were still running about, their shrieks and laughter filling the air. A woman nearby was blowing bubbles for a toddler. A couple walked past holding hands. No one seemed particularly interested in the two high schoolers under a tree. Still, she hesitated.

Gigi, sensing Cecilia’s hesitation, smiled warmly. “You don’t have to. Just thought it’d be nice.”

Cecilia pursed her lips, then finally leaned down to undo the latches. “Alright. Just a little.”

She pulled the violin from its casing and rested it in her lap. A few careful twists of the tuners followed. She proceeded to hold the bow close to the instrument, listening intently as she plucked and adjusted each string. The motions came back quickly. Muscle memory had always been her strength.

Once tuned, she positioned the violin against her shoulder and let out a small breath. Her fingers settled on the fingerboard, hovering the bow for a moment before it glided down in a smooth motion.

*Pachelbel's Canon in D*—the same piece that had been playing in the repair shop earlier, began to echo softly through the trees.

Gigi leaned forward on the bench, elbows on her knees. Her usual mischievous expression morphed into something softer, her gaze firmly fixed on Cecilia. The notes were steady and warm, complimenting the park's serene atmosphere. A gentle wind brushed against Cecilia's skin as she fell back into the rhythm of playing the instrument she was once so passionate about.

Cecilia herself was startled by how natural it felt. The sound was clean... smooth. The idea of performing in public after the incident at her last recital wasn't easy to think about. But here, under the shade of a tree, with only Gigi beside her, it didn't feel like a performance. She glanced at Gigi briefly, feeling a sense of ease wash over her. It was as if Gigi had a way of helping her get over her anxiety.

Cecilia recalled the time she played the violin for the pigtailed girl at the music store almost a year ago. It had been the first time she really played the instrument in years, and now, just like then, there was something comforting about Gigi's presence. It felt reassuring... almost intimate.

Then, she opened her eyes.

There was a small crowd now—families, couples, a few teenagers standing with folded arms and tilted heads. The music had gathered them like a tide, one by one, until a small ring of strangers encircled the two girls. Phones were raised, and all eyes were on the perfectionist.

Cecilia's pulse accelerated as she tried to ignore the crowd around her. However, the stares of the spectators were simply too piercing to ignore.

The sight of the crowd reminded her of the concert hall she stood in five years ago. The mental image of her mother's empty seat was all she could see, while the murmurs in the audience from back then filled her ears.

She remembered standing there, slowly losing control of herself. The hall was filled to the brim with parents, music teachers and other kids who were performing that night... and all she had been able to do was freeze.

Now, in the park, under the shade of the tree, those memories clawed their way back into her mind.

The perfectionist gripped her violin tighter. The bow slipped.

The note she played came out sharp, wrong. Several people in the crowd flinched. Someone whispered. Her cheeks burned. Her gaze dropped to her lap, to the trembling in her fingers. It

was happening again. Her chest felt too tight, her breaths short and shallow.

She hated this. Hated how easy it was for her to lose control.

Cecilia lowered the violin.

There was a pause as she finished the performance, keeping her head down in fear of meeting the crowd's gaze.

And then, without a word, Gigi reached forward and wrapped her hand gently around Cecilia's.

Cecilia didn't look up, but her breathing managed to stabilize. The crowd seemed to blur around the edges of her vision, their presence suddenly distant.

Eventually, the spectators began to lose interest. Some walked away, while a few lingered a little longer, then left with quiet steps and hushed voices.

When the last person finally turned and walked off, Cecilia let out a breath she had been holding in for what felt like an eternity.

They sat in silence for a while longer. To Cecilia's relief, she continued to feel the warmth of Gigi's hand in hers. The perfectionist swallowed, squeezing Gigi's hand tight.

She remained silent, setting the violin down in its case, careful with each movement.

The wind moved through the trees again. A few kids squealed in the distance from the jungle gym. A woman walked past with her dog, smiling politely at the two girls before continuing down the path.

Cecilia stared at her hands a moment longer before turning towards Gigi and whispering, "Thanks."

Gigi stared at the newly formed tears at the corner of her friend's eyes, concern etched onto her expression. "Are you... okay, Cece?" Gigi asked softly.

Cecilia quickly looked away, blinking hard. "I'm fine."

Gigi didn't move, simply raising an eyebrow. "You're crying."

"No, I'm not, stupid."

"Yes, you are," Gigi replied simply.

Cecilia's knuckles moved up to her cheek, her hand coming away damp. She took a deep breath, tried to hold it. Her eyes still stung. She sniffled and rubbed her eyes again, harder this time. "I don't understand," she muttered, her voice low, "Why did I mess up so badly? I should've played it perfectly... It should have been perfect."

"It wasn't bad," Gigi says reassuringly.

Cecilia let out a short, bitter laugh, leaning back against the bench. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Gigi asks.

“Lie to me,” Cecilia clarifies, staring Gigi firmly in the eyes.

The pigtailed girl shook her head. “I’m not! You really did sound great,” Gigi insists.

“I’ve played this piece thousands of times,” Cecilia said, still not looking up, her hands clenched together in her lap, “Back when I was little, I could do it with my eyes closed. And now...”

Gigi gave her hand a little squeeze. “Maybe you just need time. To get back into the swing of things.”

Cecilia shook her head. “No. That wasn’t it. I was doing fine. The first half was clean, no hesitation. I knew exactly what I was doing,” she says, her voice dipping, “Until I didn’t.”

Gigi stayed quiet, letting Cecilia catch her breath. The laughter and footsteps of the park carried on around them, as the blonde tried to think of something to say.

“Do you know why that happened?” Gigi asks, as Cecilia stared at the kids playing in the playground.

The perfectionist shook her head. Deep down, she did know why but saying it out loud felt like tearing open a wound she had worked so hard to cover. Cecilia’s hand tightened around Gigi’s, the thought alone making her chest tighten.

The perfectionist looked away. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Gigi blinked, still watching her friend carefully. “You sure?”

Cecilia gave a small nod, eyes focused ahead. “It’s embarrassing... and it’s stupid. And thinking about it would just make me feel worse.”

“It might not be as stupid as you think,” Gigi suggests, “And maybe if you talk to me about it, you’ll feel better.”

Cecilia sighed. The passing breeze tickled the back of her neck as the smell of freshly cut grass drifted in from across the park. For a second, she looked like she might say something. Her lips then parted slightly before she shook her head. “No,” she said finally, “It’s okay. I’ll feel better not thinking about it.”

Gigi opened her mouth to argue, but didn’t push further. She leaned back against the bench instead, giving Cecilia space. “Well, if you say so...”

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“Cece? Cece? Where are you?” a twelve-year-old Fauna called out as she wandered through the backstage.

Cecilia lifted her chin, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She was tucked behind a stack of stage boxes, knees drawn up to her chest, her violin case beside her, unopened. The echoes of the recital's current performance could be heard bouncing off the dark walls of the backstage, overshadowing Cecilia's soft whimpering completely.

She must've been hiding there for half an hour. Maybe longer. She hadn't been keeping track.

Cecilia's phone buzzed silently in her pocket for the fifth time. Another call. Another text. All of them from her father. A few from Fauna. She didn't check any of them. She didn't want to see the words. She didn't want to hear the apologies or the reassurances. She didn't want to talk. Not now. Not when she felt so empty inside.

She wasn't in the right state of mind, and she knew it. But knowing that didn't help.

The empty seat. That single, unoccupied seat had gutted her the moment she saw it. Every other seat was filled. Parents applauding, friends cheering, other kids waving to their families. And that one chair. Her mother's... was empty.

All this time. All the lessons, the rehearsals, the late nights practicing until her fingertips blistered and bled. All the quiet pressure she kept bottled inside. All of it had been for that one performance. That one moment where she had imagined her mother watching her, beaming with pride, eyes watery with awe.

But her mother hadn't come.

Cecilia blinked, feeling the ache behind her eyes. She clenched her fists, trembling. All she had wanted, since the beginning, was to play for her. To be good enough. To be perfect. And yet, what use was being perfect—for if the person she was doing all this for won't give her the time of day?

“Cece?” Fauna's voice was closer now, “I know you're hiding. Can you just... come out?”

Cecilia wiped her eyes with the strap of her violin case, but the tears kept slipping out anyway. She didn't move.

The curtains rustled faintly in the distance. A door creaked open, then shut, as faint footsteps echoed along the corridor.

She curled tighter into herself, trying not to sob aloud. All that effort. All that hope. And for what?

Her heart, which had beat so furiously onstage, was now dull and aching in her chest. She felt hollow—hopeless, as if the strings inside her had snapped all at once.

She had wanted to make her mother proud.

But now, alone in the dark behind the stage boxes, Cecilia couldn't help but wonder if her mother had ever cared in the first place.

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The perfectionist was awoken by her blaring alarm. It was seven in the morning and it was almost time to head off for school. Outside, thunder roared as tiny drops of rain hit her bedroom's windows. Cecilia blinked up at the ceiling for a few seconds before slowly pushing herself out of bed.

Dragging her feet across the wooden floor, she slipped into her uniform without a word, buttoning her collar sleepily. Her hair was damp from the shower, tied loosely behind her. The grey of the morning sky seeped through the windows as the wind howled outside.

The perfectionist moved to her desk and checked her bag, making sure her notebook and planner were packed. The day ahead would be long, and she had to be ready.

It wasn't until she reached for her bag strap that she paused, a small sigh leaving her lips. There was something she was forgetting. The violin.

Of course, how could she have forgotten? The council would be holding a dry run of the jubilee event later that afternoon.

Cecilia hesitated picking up her violin case. It wasn't as if she was performing in front of a huge crowd. It's just a dry run—and the only people who will be watching are the council members, members of the events committee, the performing arts groups, the open stage participants...

Okay, that actually was quite a lot of people.

Cecilia froze, her hand hovering over the handle of the case. She could already picture it—the folding chairs lined up near the gym stage, the low humming of the sound equipment being tested, the chatter of the other performers. And in the middle of it all, her, with her violin in hand.

But what if she messed up again? What if her bow slipped? What if her hands started trembling? What if, just as she did in the park, stop playing in the middle of the song?

She gritted her teeth, trying to block out the memory. The crowd. The phones. The moment her vision blurred and her form faltered. The loud silence after the performance collapsed. Her heart was already beating faster just thinking about it.



Even though no one laughed, and no one had booed, it didn't make it less humiliating. She could still feel the heat rising to her ears. Still remember the look on Gigi's face—concerned, gentle, like Cecilia might break in two if she said the wrong thing.

She didn't want anyone looking at her like that again.

Cecilia sighed. A large part of her wished she never signed up for the open stage performance in the first place.

Then again, it wasn't too late to drop out. Technically. She could talk to Baelz or Irys, say she had overcommitted, or that she was helping with another act. She could cite stress, her workload, semester test revision—any excuse would do, really. It wasn't like anyone was forcing her to go through with it. There would be no consequences... no damage done.

The thought lingered in her mind. It really was tempting—walking away from it all.

And yet...

*"You're not the type to go back on your word. You'd rather explode than admit you changed your mind."*

The perfectionist closed her eyes, Gigi's words engulfing her like a wave. As teasy as Gigi could be, she wasn't wrong.

Cecilia didn't back down. She never did.

She had signed up for the open stage herself. Voluntarily. She had agreed to it when the council first asked. She had made a promise, even if no one else knew how much it would affect her.

Even if her hands still trembled at the thought of playing, even if the memory of the park and of the recital was still fresh in her mind, she had to go through with the performance.

Cecilia slowly lifted the violin case into her arms. The latches clicked softly as she opened it, her fingers brushing over its interior. The instrument gleamed faintly, its polished surface reflected the dim light shining down from her ceiling.

The perfectionist slung the case across her left shoulder before switching off the lights and heading off. Although her nerves hadn't settled, and the tightness in her chest hadn't gone away, Cecilia kept moving. The hallway was quiet, her footsteps echoing off the walls as she made her way to the front door. She paused only briefly to adjust the strap of the violin case. It felt heavier than usual today—not physically, but in the way that it reminded her of everything on her mind.

Despite this, she would go forward with the performance.

Not because she had to. But because she chose to.

To prove to herself that she wasn't a quitter. To show Gigi she could do it—because she didn't want to let her down.

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Baelz and Sana stood by the entrance of the auditorium, greeting each new arrival with a nod or a smile. The area was full of energy and anticipation, as the first dry run for the Jubilee got underway.

Students from all across the performing arts groups were filing in, chatting excitedly as they found their seats. The choir arrived in clusters, their voices naturally harmonizing as they joked around. The band followed, carefully balancing their brass and woodwinds with ease. The dance club showed up in their sports uniforms, stretching idly as they waited for instructions.

Members of the orchestra cradled their cases carefully, setting them down near the front rows. Meanwhile, the drama club hauled in their props, carrying tote bags with makeup kits, scripts, and half-finished costumes.

There was no music yet, no lights or audience, but it already felt like showtime. Everyone was excited, yet focused. The energy was high. It was clear they were all ready to make something special.

Baelz turned to Sana with a grin as they greeted a group of choir members. “Sure is nice to see everyone fired up, huh?”

Sana nodded, eyes sweeping across the auditorium. “I know, right? I can’t wait for the actual day. The park, the performances, the eclipse—it’s gonna be wild seeing it all come together.”

Baelz bumped against her playfully. “Well, thank you for the idea in the first place. Seriously. I think the Jubilee’s gonna be unforgettable this year.”

“Let’s make sure it is,” Sana winked.

At that moment, the two council members heard the clacking of heels as Kronii and Mumei strolled in, both dressed in nearly identical outfits: crisp white button-up shirts tucked into black jeans. Their hair was neatly styled, posture upright, and even their walk was in sync—like they were already in emcee mode.

“Whoa,” Sana said, doing a double take as she placed her hands on Kronii’s shoulders, “Matching outfits? That’s adorable.”

Mumei nodded, twirling around happily. “Mhmm! Do you like it?”

“You guys are dressed like it’s the real show,” Baelz chuckled, eyeing the polished look, “You know this is just a dry run, right? Everyone else is in their school uniform.”

Kronii blinked once, then turned her head slowly toward Mumei. “Hold on, you said we were supposed to wear this today.”

Mumei’s smile faltered. “Oh no, did I get it wrong? I thought we were supposed to be all dressed up!” Mumei says, as she looks down at her outfit, “Eh, whatever, I still think we look nice...”

Baelz laughed. “You do, actually. Very professional.”

Kronii crossed her arms. “I suppose we do,” she said coolly, though a faint smile could be seen forming on her expression.

Sana leaned in toward Baelz and whispered, “She totally likes it.”

Baelz grinned. “Yeah, she isn't fooling anyone.”

At that moment, another group of students entered the hall—the open stage performers. Fauna led the group in, her clipboard tucked under one arm as she gave a wave to Baelz and Sana. She was chatting easily with Hajime, one of the dance club heads, as she ushered her group toward the designated section at the back of the auditorium.

Among them were Nerissa and Elizabeth, walking side by side... though ‘walking’ might have been generous. Nerissa was practically glued to Elizabeth’s arm, holding it tightly with both hands as if letting go would send the latter floating into space.

Elizabeth, for her part, looked like she was trying very hard to remain composed, though the pink tint to her cheeks betrayed her. The scarlet haired girl cleared her throat as they were guided to their seats. “Nerissa, you can let go of me now.”

“I don’t want to,” Nerissa whined, not loosening her grip in the slightest.

Elsewhere, Fuwawa and Mococo had already begun practicing a few synchronized steps near their chairs, humming the melody of their chosen song under their breath. The twins’ movements were perfectly in sync, earning a few admiring glances from the choir members sitting nearby. Fuwawa gave a little wave to one of them, beaming with pride, while Mococo poked her sister's sides, bringing her back to reality.

As the last of the open stage performers streamed in, Cecilia stepped into the auditorium with an uneasy look on her face. She walked in slowly, her violin case slung over one shoulder, hair slightly wind-blown from the stormy afternoon outside. Her posture was as straight as ever, but there was a stiffness in her stride—like she was forcing each step. Her eyes scanned the auditorium quickly, before spotting Baelz and Sana walking up to her.

The student council president caught her eye first and crossed her arms with a cheeky grin. “Well, well. If it isn’t the council's professional violinist. You’re not nervous, are you?”

Cecilia blinked once, caught off guard, then composed herself. “I’ll be fine,” she replied simply, moving toward the end of the row without saying anything more..

But Baelz had caught the look on her face. There was something a little too off about the way Cecilia was holding herself, like she was bracing for impact. Her jaw was tight, and her lips pressed together nervously. Even her grip on the strap of her violin case seemed strangely tense.

“She looks a little off today, don't you think?” Baelz whispered to Sana as they watched Cecilia take her seat.

Sana glanced at the perfectionist, whose eyes were fixed onto the hem of her skirt. “Yeah,” Sana replies, sounding concerned, “Do you think she'll be alright?”

Baelz placed a hand on her hip, licking her lips. “She's Cecilia,” Baelz reasoned, “Of course she'll be fine.”

Cecilia tapped her fingers on her violin case, trying to maintain her composure. She had been dreading this moment the entire day, and now that it was here, every nerve in her body was on edge.

“Hey, Cece,” a familiar voice chirped from beside her. Cecilia turned slightly to see Nerissa in the seat next to her, with Elizabeth leaning forward with a warm smile.

“You're the reason we signed up for this, you know,” Nerissa said, leaning in slightly, “At first, we hesitated in signing up for this, but after seeing your name on the list, we decided to go for it.”

Cecilia blinked, caught off guard. “Is that so?” she asked, her voice barely audible over the loud auditorium.

Elizabeth nodded, brushing a bit of hair behind her ear. “You're someone people look up to, Cecilia. Even if you don't realize it. Seeing your name gave us, and the other open stage performers, the push we needed.”

Cecilia laughed softly under her breath, a little flattered but mostly embarrassed. “Well, I'm glad I could help,” she said, sounding a little weak.

Elizabeth studied the perfectionist's features for a moment, concern flickering across her face. “Are you feeling alright?” she asked gently, “You look kind of pale.”

Cecilia quickly straightened her back. “I'm fine,” she replied, brushing it off with a chuckle, “Just... a bit of nerves, that's all.”

Elizabeth didn't look entirely convinced, but Nerissa took the cue to steer the mood back up. “Hey, you'll be great. We all will. Just think—we'll look back on this in a few years and laugh about how scared we were.”

Cecilia gave a small nod, but before she could respond, Nerissa's attention shifted to the back of the auditorium. “Oh—look who just walked in.”

Cecilia followed her gaze toward the auditorium doors, before spotting a familiar pigtailed girl.

Gigi Murin strolled in with her usual unbothered stride, hands in the pockets of her hoodie, her eyes casually scanning the room. When she spotted Cecilia, her expression softened, and she made her way toward the back rows with Raora, Biboo and Shiori in tow.

Cecilia's throat tightened. Just seeing Gigi made her heartbeat quicken—not in panic, but in something more... complicated. She quickly looked away, trying to appear calm and collected. Elizabeth, who was waving at their friends along with Nerissa, turned towards Cecilia with a smile.

“Cecilia, I think Gigi's trying to get your attention,” Elizabeth noted, as Cecilia turned around.

Gigi enthusiastically jumped in her seat, waving both her hands excitedly as she yelled out a string of cheers.

“WOOHOO! CECE! YEAH! YOU CAN DO IT! SERVE SOME—”

“Shut up!” Cecilia mouthed, frantically shaking her head as some of the spectators turned to watch the hyperactive blonde.

Elizabeth stifled a laugh, and Nerissa leaned over with a mischievous grin. “She's totally your number one fan.”

Cecilia sighed, her cheeks turning pink. But deep down, she couldn't help but smile. Gigi was being ridiculous, as usual—but her support, loud and embarrassing as it was, meant more than she could ever admit out loud.

A few moments later, the lights dimmed slightly as Kronii and Mumei stepped onto the stage. The chatter in the auditorium quieted, and all eyes turned toward the front.

“Alright, alright,” Kronii said, holding up a hand as the murmurs died down, “Let's get things started.”

The blue haired girl stood tall and composed beside Mumei, who offered the crowd a bright smile.

“Good afternoon, everyone!” Mumei greeted the crowd cheerfully, “Thank you all for being here for the first dry run of the jubilee event! Whether you're performing, helping out, or just here to observe—your presence really matters.”

Kronii nodded beside her. “Today's rehearsal is a chance for everyone to get a feel for how things will go on the big day. So take your time, settle in, and don't stress too much.”

“It's just a rehearsal,” Mumei added, “No pressure. Mistakes are expected—it's all part of the process. We just want to see everyone give it a try, and have fun while we're at it.”

Several members of the performing arts groups nodded along, and a few open stage performers gave quiet sighs of relief. Cecilia sat back in her seat, keeping her fellow council mates' words in mind. It's just a rehearsal. No pressure.

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The rehearsals went on pretty smoothly, all things considered. The choir performed their set with only a few missteps in timing. The band followed, and while one of the trumpet players missed their cue, they quickly picked up again without throwing the rest of the group off. The orchestra, however, sounded clean and confident, and the drama club's skit, while still rough around the edges, showed a lot of promise.

Applause followed each performance, as the spectators and other performers cheered on the efforts of each act. Baelz, Irys and Sana stood off to the side, checking off notes and timing each act while Mumei occasionally offered encouraging reminders from the stage.

Cecilia stayed in her seat, rubbing her hands together. She tried to look calm, but the cold feeling creeping into her palms was impossible to ignore.

As the last of the performing arts groups—the dance club took the stage and the open stage segment drew near, her stomach turned slightly. Her name was first on the list.

She exhaled slowly, fingers flexing, trying to will the cold away. Her chest tightened with the memory of Saturday. The crowd. The mistake. The silence. She couldn't afford to mess up. Not in front of everyone.

At that moment, Irys tapped on the perfectionist's shoulder, smiling. "Cece, you're up next. Go meet up with Kronii backstage," the vice-president instructed.

Cecilia nodded, as she nervously slung the violin case around her shoulders once more. The time was now.

With each step up towards the backstage, Cecilia tried to distract herself from the growing pit in her stomach. Her mind scrambled for something—anything, to focus on besides the dozens of eyes that would soon be fixed on her.

"Helium, two protons, two neutrons, two electrons. Carbon, six protons, six neutrons," she recited silently, clenching her fists, " $\sin^2 \theta + \cos^2 \theta = 1$ .  $\tan \theta = \frac{\sin \theta}{\cos \theta}$ .  $\sec^2 \theta = 1 + \tan^2 \theta$ —"

"Hey," Kronii greeted, snapping Cecilia out of her thoughts as she reached the backstage, "You're up right after the dancers wrap up. Just wait here."

Cecilia nodded silently and moved toward the edge of the curtain. She then peeked through the narrow gap, watching as the dance club performed. Their movements were sharp and coordinated, their feet pounding against the wooden stage powerfully. But her eyes didn't

stay on the performers. Instead, they drifted across the stage, past the curtains and towards the audience.

She stared at the rows of students before pausing. It was happening again. A flash. A memory.

She saw it again. That seat. That single, empty chair from the recital. Her eyes locked onto her own empty seat in the audience. And for a moment, it was like she was back there, behind the stage boxes, clutching her violin case and trying not to cry.

Her throat tightened as her legs started to wobble. “*No. Not now,*” Cecilia pleaded to herself.

She took a shaky step back. The cold in her palms returned in full force. Her breath hitched as she imagined it again—her hands trembling, the sound of a wrong note, the entire room watching her crumble...

“I can’t,” she muttered under her breath, feeling hopeless.

The dancers were finishing their routine, heading into the final pose when Cecilia turned to Kronii and Irys, her voice low and urgent. “Skip me. Just go to the next one,” Cecilia says, keeping her head down.

Kronii blinked. “Wait, what?”

“I said skip me,” Cecilia repeated, “Go to whoever’s after me. Please.”

Irys looked confused. “Cece, are you sure? You don’t have to—”

But the perfectionist was already backing away, clutching her violin case like a shield.

Meanwhile, in the audience, Raora leaned toward Gigi, Bijou, and Shiori. “The open stage acts are next,” the artist whispered, “Cece’s up first.”

“Finally,” Bijou said, bouncing in her seat, “Let’s go, Cece!”

But when the lights changed and Mumei and Kronii stepped out onto the stage, they weren’t smiling.

“Thank you to all the performing arts groups for the great work today,” Mumei announced, holding her microphone with both hands. “We’ll now begin the open stage segment, featuring a mix of acts from our very own students who wish to perform independently!”

“Before we begin,” Kronii followed up, eyes briefly scanning the crowd, “Our first open stage performer, Cecilia Immergreen, will not be participating in the rehearsal due to... unforeseen circumstances.”

A quiet murmur spread through the audience. Confused faces turned to one another. Raora sat up straighter. Gigi frowned, looking toward Cecilia’s now-empty seat.

“Huh?” the pigtailed said, confused, “She was just here.”

“Maybe she went to the restroom or something?” Bijou guessed, as Gigi’s brow was furrowing.

Gigi kept her eyes peeled for any sign of the perfectionist, but was unable to spot her anywhere in the auditorium. Something was wrong.

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Cecilia managed to slip out of the auditorium mostly undetected, thanks to the side exit at the backstage that most students didn't know about. She took quick and hasty steps as she made a beeline past the hallway, down the side of the school building, and towards the one place she knew she wouldn't be bothered: the school garden.

The grey clouds above swirled as the winds picked up, brushing against her cheeks, but she barely noticed. Her inner thoughts were simply too loud.

*“Pathetic...”*

*“You walked off stage. You didn’t even try...”*

*“You said you were going to go through with it...”*

The perfectionist clenched her fists tighter around the handle of her violin case.

*“And yet here you are...”*

The garden was quiet. Here, the bustle of the dry run could barely be heard. Her footsteps slowed as she reached the far end of the pathway, ducking behind a wall of thick rose bushes.

Cecilia took a seat on her favorite bench, sighing heavily as she set down her violin. She allowed the tranquility of the garden to envelop her, listening to the occasional rustle of leaves and flowers around her. Normally, it calmed her. But today, it just made her feel small.

She squeezed the hem of her skirt tightly as she stared at the gravel path between her shoes. “What is wrong with me?” Cecilia mutters, feeling a sense of shame and disappointment in herself.

*“Is it just nerves? Am I not cut out for this? I’m supposed to be better than this,”* Cecilia says to herself bitterly, *“I’m Cecilia Immegreen! I don’t quit...”*

*“And yet, here you are...”*

Cecilia glanced at her reflection in a nearby puddle, a wave of self-loathing hitting her.



Her council mates supported her. Nerissa and Elizabeth had looked up to her. Gigi believed in her.

And she'd let them all down.

Worse—she'd let herself down again.

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, trying to bury the rising tension in her chest.

*"You're not supposed to be like this, Cecilia."*

*"So why are you?"*

The perfectionist stayed there, frozen on the bench, too ashamed to go back and too afraid to move forward.

"Cece?"

Cecilia's eyes widened as she spotted Gigi walking towards her. The pigtailed girl's trademark smile was nowhere to be seen. Instead her expression displayed nothing but genuine care and concern.

Cecilia wiped her watery eyes as she tried to steady her breathing. Gigi walked up to her, with her hands in her pockets. "Thought I'd find you here," Gigi says, waving, "Are you alright?"

The perfectionist took in a deep breath before smiling weakly. "I need to find a new secret hideout," Cecilia jokes, chuckling, "You found me way too easily..."

Gigi didn't laugh. Instead, she stood still in front of the bench, her gaze fixed on Cecilia's face with an uncharacteristic seriousness. "Are you okay, Cece?" she asked as Cecilia's smile faltered.

Cecilia's eyes immediately darted to the roses, then to the gravel under her shoes. "It's nothing," she finally said, brushing a few strands of hair behind her ear, "I just... don't feel like talking about it."

There was a pause before Gigi walked over and sat beside her, leaving just enough space between them that Cecilia could've shifted away if she wanted to. She didn't.

"You know," Gigi said after a moment, "Someone once told me that *'bottling everything up like this isn't going to make you feel better anytime soon'*."

Cecilia turned her head slightly. Gigi was staring straight ahead now, her elbows resting on her knees. "Someone?" the perfectionist echoed, confused.

"That someone was *you*," Gigi replied, glancing sideways at her.

Cecilia let out a dry, humorless laugh. "That's not fair, Gigi."

Gigi gave a half-smile, shrugging. “Fair’s fair,” she grinned, “You let me say everything when I was falling apart. You didn’t laugh. You didn’t walk away. You just listened. So maybe... it’s okay to let someone do the same for you.”

Cecilia felt her heart melt at Gigi’s words as she met her firm gaze. She didn’t really know why, but the blonde’s presence gave her a sense of comfort and safety. Perhaps Gigi was right. Maybe she just needed someone to talk to—a shoulder to cry on.

The perfectionist felt her eyes water, as she prepared to release the bottled up emotions within her. Her throat felt tight, and the corners of her eyes were starting to sting. She looked down at her lap again, unable to meet Gigi’s eyes.

“I couldn’t do it, Gigi,” she said, the words came slowly, as if dragged out of her, “I couldn’t even get onstage. I told myself I was ready, that it was just a rehearsal, that I’d push through. But when it was about to be my turn, I just... froze.”

She inhaled sharply through her nose, trying to keep her voice steady. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t know why I got myself into this in the first place,” Cecilia ranted in frustration, “I thought I’d move on—after all these years... but the truth is: I hadn’t.”

“Move on from what?” Gigi asked, holding onto Cecilia’s hand firmly.

Cecilia swallowed, rubbing her thumb against Gigi’s knuckles. “My last violin recital,” Cecilia replies, as images of the day flashed through her mind.

“I was eleven back then. It was supposed to be my big moment,” Cecilia began, closing her eyes. When she reopened them, she found that the environment around her and Gigi had morphed entirely. They were now in the packed concert hall, sitting amongst the audience.

Cecilia turned to her right. She could almost see her mother’s empty seat vividly. She gulped, feeling her train of thought start to derail. However, once she turned to her left and met Gigi’s kind eyes, the perfectionist sighed and grounded herself again. The concert hall faded. The illusion lifted, replaced by the familiar rose bushes and soft rustle of leaves in the school garden.

“She said she’d come,” Cecilia continued, her voice low, “My mom, I mean. She said she’d be there. I even saved a seat for her—right where she could see me clearly. But when the curtains opened... It was empty. And it stayed empty.”

The perfectionist glared at the gravel by her feet, clenching her fists. “I remember scanning the crowd as I walked out. Looking for her. Hoping she’d show up at the last minute. But no one ever sat there. And I had to start playing anyway.”

“I got through the first part of the piece fine. But halfway through, I started faltering,” she continued, “My tempo dipped, I started playing the wrong notes...”

“By the time I finished, I knew—the audience knew, that I had fucked it up,” Cecilia says, her voice breaking, “But my terrible performance wasn’t what hurt me the most. It was what she said when I confronted her about her not being there at the performance.”

“When I saw her the next day, I asked her why she didn't show up when she said she'd be there. I told her how hurt I was...” Cecilia recalled, frowning, “But she didn't even look away from her laptop. She just gave me a half-assed apology, telling me that ‘*work came up*’.”

Cecilia closed her eyes, shaking her head. “You know...the embarrassment I felt from messing up that night didn't really matter much in the end,” she sighs, “I just wanted her to see me. To say she was proud.”

Gigi squeezed Cecilia's hand, as she kept quiet, not wanting to rush her.

“But I never got that,” Cecilia whimpered, tears running down her cheek, “We were never that close to begin with. She was always busy. Travelling. Working. She never really talked to me that much.”

“But if there was one thing I knew about her, it was that she loved classical music,” Cecilia says, “I remember how she'd always have it playing on the radio when she worked from home, and how she'd always hum along to a piece or two.

“So I thought... maybe if I got good enough at something she cared about, I'd get a piece of her attention,” Cecilia says, smiling weakly, “That was the reason I picked up the violin in the first place. Not because I had any prior interest in it. But because I wanted to be good at something that meant something to her.”

She looked back at Gigi, and this time there was no attempt to hold anything back. The tears began dripping down her cheeks at an accelerating rate. “After that recital, I stopped trying. I stopped going for lessons... and I avoided playing in front of a crowd again. Every time I think about it, I see that empty seat and I feel like I'm back there again.”

Cecilia paused, taking another deep breath before continuing. “Anyways, when I signed up for the open stage, I was a little hesitant at first... but I decided to go through with it,” Cecilia says, “I thought I'd be ready. But I wasn't. I started getting nerves that wouldn't leave me alone. Then there was the day at the park with you—when I tried to play for you...”

Cecilia's voice trailed off for a moment, her hands tightening on her knees. “I embarrassed myself so badly,” she said, her voice thick with bitterness, “My fingers wouldn't move right, I couldn't hold a note, and I ended up crying in front of you. After we went home that day, I kept thinking about how you looked at me. How weak I must've seemed.”

“I hate this. I hate that I'm like this. I hate that I'm so... vulnerable. It's been five years, Gigi. Five. I don't know why this is still affecting me like it just happened,” Cecilia says through gritted teeth, trying to force the sobs back down, “It's pathetic. I should've moved on. But I can't. I don't know why I can't.”

Gigi sat beside her in silence for a moment, then wrapped an arm around Cecilia's back, steady and warm. “You're not pathetic, Cece. And you're not weak or vulnerable either. You're just human.”

Cecilia shook her head, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. “That doesn't make it any better,” she whispered, voice hoarse, “Even if I'm ‘human’, I hate that I'm letting some

old memory—some stupid, painful memory, control me like this. It's messing me up."

"And that's perfectly normal," Gigi says, as Cecilia glanced at her, "We all have shadows that weigh us down—memories that haunt us. But that doesn't mean we have to let them control us."

Cecilia looked away again, her gaze drifting to the rose bushes ahead. "So what, then?" she asked quietly, "How do I move on?"

Gigi didn't answer right away. Her fingers tapped gently against Cecilia's hand as she leaned back, putting on a thoughtful expression. Then, finally, Gigi spoke. "I think... maybe we have to start at the root of it," the pigtailed girl said, "You picked up the violin to impress your mom. That's where it all began, right?"

"Yeah," Cecilia answered, nodding her head slightly.

"Well... if your mom can't be bothered to care about your playing—even when you poured yourself into it, then maybe it's time to change the reason you play the violin," Gigi suggested, shrugging.

Cecilia blinked and turned her head, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... don't play for her anymore," Gigi said simply, her voice firm, "Play for someone who actually matters."

Cecilia tilted her head slightly, still not quite following. "Who?"

"You, silly," Gigi said, "Play for you."

The perfectionist blinked. She didn't know why, but Gigi's words struck a chord with her. However, before she could think of a reply, Gigi continued speaking.

"Think about it," Gigi repeated, her voice softer now, "Playing for her only brought you pain, Cece. You poured so much of yourself into it, hoping it would mean something to her. But it didn't. And all that hurt you felt... it never really left."

Cecilia nodded, the blonde's words hitting close to home.

"You've been carrying that moment around like it defined you," Gigi said, her tone gentle, "And maybe a part of you still plays for her. Maybe, deep down, you're still holding out hope that if you play perfectly, she'll finally turn her head and notice."

"But that motivation—it never gave you anything except sadness," Gigi continued, "It's now nothing but a burden weighing you down. And it's okay that it hurts. It makes sense that it still does."

Cecilia closed her eyes. She didn't say anything, but Gigi could tell she was listening—really listening. "So maybe it's time to let go of why you started," Gigi said softly, "Maybe it's time to stop playing for someone who never showed up."

The pigtailed girl smiled, reaching out and brushing away the tears on Cecilia's cheek. "Play for you," Gigi said, quieter this time.

Cecilia breathed onto Gigi's hand, swallowing. "But... how do I do that?"

Gigi chuckled as her thumb gently brushed the last of the tears from Cecilia's cheek. "Start small," Gigi replied, "When you're playing, remind yourself that you don't have to prove yourself to anyone else."

The perfectionist thought about Gigi's words carefully before nodding. "I presume the next step is to not sound terrible?" Cecilia jokes as Gigi giggles.

"You won't sound terrible," Gigi assures.

Cecilia chuckles, raising an eyebrow. "You sound more confident than I do," Cecilia remarks, amused.

"I'm serious," Gigi said, lowering her hand from Cecilia's cheek, "You're amazing at the violin. I still think about that day in the music store."

Cecilia blinked. "You mean last year?"

"Yeah. You were nervous at first. But once you started playing... I was completely caught off guard," Gigi said with a grin, "You probably didn't notice, but a few customers were watching too. And I just stood there, staring, because I had no idea you could do something like that. You were incredible, Cece."

Cecilia blinked, her cheeks warming. "W-was I really that good?"

"Of course," Gigi replied. "That piece—the one you played, it stuck with me. I went home humming it for days. You made it unforgettable."

Cecilia looked away, feeling a warmth settle inside her. Gigi's words stirred something in her—a sense of confidence, like what she felt back at the music store. She then thought back to playing *Canon in D* at the park last Saturday. Though she played the first half effortlessly with only Gigi by her side, she faltered as the crowd gathered, stumbling near the end. Yet, in that quieter moment before the audience arrived, Gigi's presence had put her at ease, making everything feel effortless.

The perfectionist exhaled, feeling the many thoughts in her mind begin to clear. Cecilia glanced down at her hands, fingers resting lightly in her lap as the warmth inside her deepened. She couldn't help but smile a little to herself as she thought about how Gigi had always been standing alongside her, supporting her, always with that encouraging smile. Even when Cecilia had messed up in the park, even when she ran away from the dry run, Gigi hadn't looked at her with disappointment.

No, Gigi had been there, cheering her on, not caring about the mistakes she had made. "*She really believes in me, huh?*" Cecilia thought, her heart swelling with gratitude. Perhaps taking Gigi's advice wasn't a bad place to start. She owed it to her to at least try.

Cecilia felt a tightness in her chest, a feeling she couldn't quite explain, but it was full of warmth—appreciation and gratitude. And for the first time in days, she felt her mind clear.

Taking a deep breath, Cecilia lifted her gaze to meet Gigi's. "Thank you," she said softly, her voice filled with emotion, "Thank you for talking to me, Gigi. I really do feel much better now."

Gigi's eyes softened, and she gave Cecilia's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Anytime, doll. I'm always here for you."

Cecilia took a moment to let those words settle in, then, with a newfound resolve, she nodded. "You know, I think... I think I'm going to give your suggestion a try. I'm going to find a new reason to play—one that's not about impressing anyone. Not even my mom."

Her words felt freeing, the weight of pressure lifting from her shoulders. She was ready to let go of the terrible memories from her last recital, of her desire to play for her mother.

"I think that's a really good idea," Gigi said, her voice bright with pride, "I know you'll get through this, Cece."

Cecilia's heart warmed at the praise, but there was still one more thing she wanted to ask. She knew Gigi had been so supportive so far, but now she wanted to take that next step. She needed to see for herself if this new approach would really help her move forward. "Hey, um... could I practice in front of you? Right now, I mean," Cecilia asked, a little hesitantly, her fingers nervously twitching, "I know it's a bit sudden, but I want to see if I can just... let go and play for myself. Not for anyone else."

Gigi's grin widened, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "Are you saying THE Cecilia Immergreen wants to play for me?" Gigi teases, her jovial self returning in full, "Ehehehehe... I'd be honoured...."

Cecilia rolled her eyes, shaking her head, as she smiled. "Don't make it weird," she muttered under her breath, standing up from the bench.

Gigi scooted back a little to give her room, settling in and resting her chin on her hands, eyes fixed on Cecilia. The perfectionist turned, grabbing her violin case and unclipping it with steady fingers. The shape of the instrument in her hands felt familiar again, feeling almost... lighter.

She checked the strings, adjusted the chin rest, and pulled the bow across lightly. A soft hum filled the air, as she nodded to herself. She raised the violin to her shoulder, inhaled deeply, and started to play.

The opening chords of *Canon in D* came gently, her bow smooth across the strings. She didn't rush it. She just played, focusing on each note as it came. Gigi didn't say anything, didn't move. She just sat there and listened, letting the music fill the space between them.

Cecilia closed her eyes halfway through the first progression. She didn't need to look at the strings. Her hands knew what to do. As she continued playing the delicate melody of the

piece, she began hearing the voices and chatter of students outside the garden.

Cecilia took in another deep breath, imagining herself standing in the concert hall once more. It was vivid—the room, the audience... everything.

She continued gliding the bow across the instrument's strings as she felt the audience watching her. She scanned across the room, before eventually visualising her family's seats. Her father was there. Fauna was there.

Then, she saw it. The empty seat. The one her mother should have been sitting in. Cecilia felt her form stumble slightly as the negative thoughts began swirling in her head once more.

However, when she opened her eyes and saw Gigi sitting in front of her, enthralled by the music, she was snapped back to the present. Cecilia met the blonde's eyes for a moment, feeling a rush of determination and assurance.

She played through the familiar swells of the piece, letting the melody rise and fall. She didn't overthink her every movement. She didn't freeze up on the high notes. Even when she came to the section where she had slipped up last weekend, she kept going.

Her breathing stayed calm. Her grip didn't tighten. Her thoughts didn't spiral.

She felt okay.

By the final repetition, the notes came softer, more deliberate, like the piece itself was winding down with her thoughts. When she played the final note, she let the bow linger for just a second, before concluding the piece.

She lowered her violin slowly and looked at Gigi. "Was I okay?" Cecilia asked, looking a little anxious.

The speechless Gigi sat there, looking positively enchanted. It was as if whatever she just witnessed was something magical. And to the blonde, it kinda was.

After a pause, Gigi beamed, standing up and applauding. "That was perfect!" she cheered, "I've heard that song many times now, but the way you played it really was something special!"

"Thanks," Cecilia replied, brushing some hair behind her ear, "I think that was the first time in a while when I didn't feel scared while playing."

"You looked like you were in your own little world," Gigi said, smiling, "I didn't want to breathe too loudly in case I messed you up."

Cecilia laughed, sitting down on the bench. "You wouldn't have. I was... thinking about you the whole time."

That came out too fast. Cecilia's cheeks immediately flushed pink as she looked away in embarrassment. Gigi blinked, her own cheeks reddening, before chuckling. "Well, it's a good thing you're so obsessed with me then," she jests, winking.

Cecilia scoffed, shaking her head with a small smile on her face. “Whatever,” she says, before kicking her feet against the gravel pavement, “Hey, would it be okay if I continue practicing in front of you? It... seems to be helping a little.”

Gigi's blush deepened as she coughed loudly. “I—ahem! I wouldn't mind at all,” Gigi replied, putting on a nonchalant front, “I mean, I'm cool with that...”

“Cool...” Cecilia chuckled, tapping her feet casually, “Cool...”

The pair fell into an awkward silence as they sat and enjoyed the cool breeze. Cecilia broke the silence, standing up and resting her chin on her violin once more. She looked down at Gigi with a small, grateful smile. “Well, then I guess you'll have to be my audience for a little while longer.”

Gigi looked up at her, offering a cheeky grin in return. “It'd be an honour.”

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Cecilia spent the next two weeks easing herself back into the violin, practising the piece she performed at the recital five years ago—*Winter by Vivaldi*.

She had chosen to perform this piece at the upcoming event in order to make up for the train wreck of a performance she had back then. The first few days were rough—But slowly, with each practice, the old muscle memory started to return. Her bowing grew more precise. Her tone began to steady. It wasn't perfect, but it was progress. And through it all, Gigi was there.

Whenever they both had free time—after classes, before club meetings, or even during lunch breaks, Cecilia would pull Gigi aside and ask if she could play for her. Gigi never said no. She always showed up, always sat still and listened like it was the most important part of her day. Sometimes she'd give a small comment afterward. Sometimes she'd crack a joke to cheer Cecilia up after she made a mistake. And for Cecilia, that was more than enough.

Outside of those moments, Cecilia continued helping the student council with Jubilee Festival preparations. There was still a lot to do, and she didn't want to let anyone down. When she returned to one of the meetings, she made a point to apologise for missing the earlier dry run.

“I didn't feel prepared,” she admitted to the group, bowing her head sheepishly, “I'm sorry if I disappointed you guys...”

However, no one scolded her. Nobody judged her. In fact, most of the council just nodded in quiet understanding. It was Irys who finally spoke up. “Do you think you'll feel confident enough to join the next rehearsal,” she asked, smiling at Cecilia.



Cecilia took a moment to really think about it. She wanted to say yes. She wanted to be back to her old self. But deep down, she knew she still needed more time.

“...No,” Cecilia said softly, “Not yet. I want to get there, but I’m not ready.”

Baelz leaned back in her seat and gave her a calm nod. “That’s fine. Take all the time you need. We’d rather have you feeling good about it than pushing yourself too soon,” the president winked, grinning.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Fauna added, crossing her arms, “If anything, it’s nice to end rehearsals five minutes earlier.”

“Thanks, guys,” Cecilia replied, feeling immensely grateful for her council mates’ understanding.

The support she received from those around her really did mean a lot, and as the days passed, her confidence slowly started to rebuild.

One afternoon after school, Cecilia messaged Gigi to meet her in the garden again. She had perfected a particularly challenging section of Winter the night before, and thought it was time to try it out in front of someone. But when Gigi arrived, Cecilia was surprised to see a few others walking alongside her—Raora, Bijou, and the Abyssgard twins.

Cecilia blinked, her eyebrows raised. “What’s with the crowd?” she asked, smiling.

Gigi grinned back, her arms folded behind her back. “Oh, it’s nothing, I just thought it might help if you got used to a bigger audience.”

“We’re excited to hear you play!” Fuwawa and Mococo chimed in unison, beaming as they waved.

Raora gave Cecilia a nod and leaned against the garden wall. “Yeah, let’s see what secret talent you’ve been hiding from us this whole time,” Raora agreed, placing her art materials on the ground.

Bijou nodded, placing a hand on her hips. “You better not mess up, Cece. We wanna hear something exquisite!” Bijou demanded, clapping her hands cheekily.

The perfectionist sighed as the others took their seats. “If you’re gonna pressure me like that, you might hear something less than exquisite,” Cecilia grumbled, taking the violin out of her case.

“Don’t be like that, Cecilia,” Raora says, giggling as she sat down and laid out her art materials, “I’ll work on some decor for the jubilee event while you play. Just pretend I’m not here!”

“Yeah, we were never here,” Bijou concurs, hiding behind a tree.

Cecilia sighed, shaking her head. “I’d notice you less if you didn’t stand there,” the perfectionist says as Bijou pouts, walking away from the bark of the tree.

“You're no fun,” Bijou whined, plopping herself down next to the twins.

Cecilia let out a soft laugh, setting her violin case down on the bench. “If I start breaking down in the middle of it, I’m blaming you, Gigi,” she said, shooting a look at the pigtailed girl, who had been watching the entire exchange in amusement.

Gigi raised a hand to her heart, her expression mock-offended. “Hey! I’m doing you a huge favour here.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t keep the smile off her face. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s get this over with then.”

Cecilia took a breath, stepped into position, and raised her violin to her shoulder. Her fingers rested on the fingerboard as she adjusted her grip on the bow. The garden went quiet. Even Bijou stopped fidgeting. Everyone waited.

The perfectionist gave the strings one last check, nodded, and began. The sharp, quick opening notes of *Vivaldi’s Winter* sliced through the air. Her bow moved fast. Her fingers flew up and down the fingerboard without hesitation. The tempo was intense, but her posture stayed solid. She didn’t stumble. She kept going, every note clean and deliberate.

“Holy crap,” Bijou whispered, eyes wide.

“She’s going so fast,” Mococo muttered as Fuwawa watched with admiration.

Raora, who had been sketching out designs for the jubilee events's decor, looked up, looking pretty impressed. “Didn't know she had that in her,” she commented softly, putting down her sketchpad.

Cecilia kept going, barely looking at anyone as she tried tuning out everything outside of the music. Her focus stayed on the rhythm and the feel of the strings under her fingers. She wasn’t thinking about messing up, nor was she thinking about her mom. It was just her and the music.

Then the first section ended. She let the last note hang in the air before finally lowering her bow. Her chest rose and fell with her breathing as her grip on the instrument loosened.

The other girls all stared at the perfectionist in awe, before erupting into a round of applause.

“Okay, yeah. That was awesome,” Raora grinned, clapping her hands excitedly.

“Yeah, you crushed it,” Bijou added, playing an invisible violin to imitate Cecilia's performance, “You were going so fast!”

“We wanna hear the rest!” the twins shouted together.

Cecilia looked down, her face a little red from all the praise. “Oh come on, I messed up a few notes,” she muttered.

“Hey, no one noticed,” Gigi said, walking up beside her, “Not even me, and I’ve heard you practice like... a million times now.”

Cecilia gave her a sideways glance, then rolled her eyes with a small smile. “I guess you're right,” she says, before holding out a fist towards Gigi, “Guess all I have to do now is practice until I don't notice any mistakes.”

Gigi grinned, bumping Cecilia's fist. “That's the spirit.”

Cecilia continued pushing forward.

She even played a small piece for the student council during one meeting that week. It all started when Vivi asked what kind of music she would play for the Jubilee. Some of them had heard of the piece before, while the others who didn't began pressing her to play a snippet of the piece.

After some convincing from the others, Cecilia relented, picking up her violin. The moment she began playing, the entire room fell silent as the trills of the violin. Her juniors sat in front of her, looking stunned by Cecilia's fast, yet precise playing.

By the time she lowered her instrument, the council instantly burst into cheers and whoops. Vivi leaned forward in her seat, eyes wide with surprise, while Su clapped enthusiastically next to her. Irys had her hands together and smiled brightly, as Baelz gave a sharp whistle of approval.

“You mean *that* was what we could've heard at our rehearsals?” Mumei exclaimed, shocked.

“You’ve been holding out on us,” Kronii added, leaning back in her chair with a grin.

Cecilia felt her cheeks grow warm but kept her composure, quietly putting the violin back in its case. “It's still not perfect, though,” Cecilia admitted, placing the case onto the floor.

“Does it really have to be?” Sana asked, beaming, “It sounded excellent to me!”

“I agree!” Baelz concurs, sitting back down at her desk, “You have to play at the next dry run! I'm pretty sure everyone's dying to hear your performance!”

Cecilia opened her mouth to reply only for Fauna to pipe up. “We don't have a ‘next dry run’, remember?” Fauna reminded the student council president, “The jubilee event is on Saturday.”

Baelz slapped her forehead. “Of course, how could I have forgotten?” the red haired girl says, before turning to Sana, “Sana, are you absolutely sure it's not gonna rain this Saturday? It'll be a shame if we have to move the celebrations back to the auditorium...”

“Don’t worry,” Sana said confidently, “I checked at least five different weather forecasts. We’re in the clear.”

“Excellent, let's get back to work,” Baelz grinned, dumping a stack of papers onto her desk.

“More paperwork?” Mumei groaned as Baelz shot her a look.

“Come on, we have like four days till the big day, just hold out for a bit more,” Baelz says, clapping the slumped brunette on the back before turning to everyone, “Alrighty, everybody, a few forms just came in...”

Cecilia leaned back in her chair as the conversation moved on to decorations and food arrangements. The art club, led by Raora and her senior Ina, had nearly wrapped up the final pieces of decor they’d been crafting for weeks—colorful banners, delicate paper lanterns, and a large painted backdrop of the school crest for the main stage. Meanwhile, the events committee had just submitted a finalized list of food preferences, including students who had requested vegetarian, vegan, and halal options, which Fauna quickly began sorting through to coordinate with the catering service.

“Okay, so...” Baelz said, flipping through the stack of forms, “We’ve got changes for the open stage block. The girl performing the stand up act dropped out, so we’re allowing that band—ReGLOSS to perform another song of theirs.”

“Good,” Kronii says, with a small smile, “She barely got a laugh out of anyone who watched the rehearsals.”

“Hey, that’s a little mean,” Irys says, although she chuckled, “It wasn’t that bad...”

Upon hearing Irys’ reply, Kronii shook her head. “Remember how quiet the entire auditorium was?” Kronii asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mumei sucked in some air through her teeth as she recalled the terrible stand up act they witnessed. “You know what, maybe her dropping out was for the best...”

Cecilia tapped her pen against the edge of her notebook, watching as Fauna handed her a sheet to review. It was the final schedule for the student acts—her name listed under the ‘Open Stage’ block. Just seeing it printed made her heartbeat quicken a little.

“Are you still alright with being the first open stage performer?” Fauna asked her in a low voice.

Cecilia looked at it for a moment before nodding. “Yeah. I think I’ll be ready.”

As the meeting went on, the group split into smaller clusters to handle different parts of the prep. Sana and Fauna went over the sound system checklist, while Kronii and Irys reviewed the stage setup with Mumei and Baelz. Cecilia, along with the two first-years, moved over to help double-check the logistics list—lighting cues, backup equipment, emergency contacts, all the things most people would overlook until something went wrong.

The perfectionist looked around the room, noticing how concentrated every member of the council seemed to be. Despite the growing pressure, they seemed to be managing everything just fine. No one complained. Everyone simply did what had to be done in order to pull off the upcoming event perfectly. It was the final stretch and everything they had been working toward was finally coming together.

Cecilia glanced down at her name on the schedule one more time, then flipped the page and got back to work.

Before long, the council's session wrapped up. Cecilia and Fauna made their way out of the school together, walking through the halls as the late afternoon sun shone its golden rays onto school grounds.

Even as the school day winded down, traces of activity could still be heard—students in the sports hall shouting, teachers chatting, and the echoes of students practicing for the jubilee event.

The sisters passed by an empty classroom, where Elizabeth and Nerissa were busy practicing their duet. Shortly after, as they passed the music wing, snippets of the choir's rehearsals drifted through the clubroom's open doors. A soft harmony filled the hallway, layered voices rising and falling in sync. Further down, the orchestra was running through their main piece for the event. Strings swelled under the direction of their strict conductor, as the low hum of brass instruments resonated through the empty hallways.

Cecilia slowed for a moment, listening. Her gaze stayed on the orchestra room before she turned back and continued down the hallway with her sister.

"It's nice hearing you play again, you know," Fauna said as they exited the building and passed through the school gates, "Feels like you never really stopped."

Cecilia chuckled lightly, adjusting the strap of her violin case on her shoulder. "It's kinda nice getting back into it. But I didn't just pick it up and play like nothing happened. Took a lot to get my rhythm back. Still does. I've been practicing every day just to feel like I'm close to ready."

Fauna nodded, a small smile on her face. "I know. You've been bringing your violin to school a lot more lately," Fauna remarked, "You must be practicing really hard."

"Mhmm, whenever I have spare time I'll head to the garden and spend some time playing it," Cecilia confirms, glancing at her violin case.

"That's neat," Fauna says, patting her sister on the shoulder before grinning and adding, "Gigi seems to enjoy your playing a lot."

Cecilia looked away, cheeks tinting slightly. "H-huh? How did you—"

"I've been passing by the garden every now and then," Fauna replied, smirking, "It was kind of adorable, honestly. No matter how many times she's heard you play that piece, Gigi still looked like she was watching something truly special."

Cecilia sighed through her nose but couldn't stop a wide smile from appearing on her face. "Yeah," she said, voice softening, "She's been showering me with a lot of praise. It's kinda overwhelming... but it's not like I hate it or anything..."

"I could tell," Fauna said, her tone teasing, "It was cute."

They walked in silence for a few more seconds, the sound of the orchestra fading behind them as they turned down the street toward home. The air was starting to cool, as a light breeze swept fallen leaves off the ground and into the air.

“I’ve still got four more days,” Cecilia said quietly, “I’m not gonna let myself mess this up.”

“You won’t,” Fauna said without hesitation, “You’ve been working so hard, Cece. And no matter what happens on that stage, I think you’re already doing more than enough.”

Cecilia gave a small grateful nod, her grip tightening slightly on the violin case. “Thanks, sis.”

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The big day had finally arrived. It was three in the afternoon—a whole hour before the jubilee event would begin, and yet crowds of alumni, parents, teachers, students, and other guests had already shown up, streaming through the school gates with visible excitement.

The weather was just right—cool and crisp, with a comfortable breeze that carried the scent of flowers across the air. The sky was clear, besides a few slow-moving clouds, and the soft sunlight made everything feel brighter and calmer. It was the kind of day that seemed tailor-made for something truly special.

Everyone looked like they had dressed with care. Students were decked out in formal wear of their own personal tastes.

The art club’s decorations hung proudly across arches. Strings of paper lanterns, colorful banners, and handmade signs fluttered lightly in the breeze as guests and even some park goers stopped to admire them.

Students who arrived early were already mingling around the courtyard, gushing over each other’s outfits and complimenting each other’s hairstyles and accessories. Phones were out everywhere, as selfies were being taken in front of the flower arch by the entrance of the event grounds. Many of the performing students lined up by the stage, posing with their costumes or instruments as they smiled for a group photo.

Food stalls and other student-manned booths had started to open along the outer paths, filling the air with the smell of fried snacks and sweet drinks. Ushers from the events committee handed out pamphlets to guests, directing them to the seating areas near the stage.

In a shaded area near the stage, the choir was warming up with soft harmonies, while the orchestra was already tuning their instruments nearby. Bits of melody—snippets of what was to come drifted through the air, adding a musical backdrop to the festive atmosphere.

Not far from the stage, Cecilia, dressed up in her school uniform, stood with her violin case in one hand, scanning the crowd as she took it all in. The chatter, the atmosphere, the nerves—it was happening. And she would be part of it.

“I knew the turnout would be huge, but not like this!” Baelz exclaimed, wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead as she and Irys observed their surroundings.

Cecilia perked up, walking over to the two heads of the council. “I know, right?” Irys agreed, squinting her eyes to look into the crowd, “It's hard to believe we made all of this happen.”

“We did great,” Cecilia says, walking up to the pair who blinked upon seeing her.

Baelz crossed her arms, grinning. “Yeah, we did!” Baelz chuckles before wagging a finger at Cecilia's uniform, “Hey, uh, Cece, are you gonna be wearing *that* for your performance?”

“Yeah, everyone's all dolled up today,” Irys adds, giggling, “Why'd you show up in the school uniform?”

Cecilia smiles, gesturing towards a tote bag she had brought along. “I brought along my actual outfit for the performance. I just... feel a little embarrassed to wear it,” Cecilia explained before Baelz swiped the bag away from her, “Hey!”

The student council president glanced into the bag before gasping and handing it to Irys, who gasped as well. “You're wearing a suit?” Baelz asked, bewildered.

“Don't be a thief!” Cecilia huffed, swiping the bag back before blushing a little, “Anyway, it wasn't my first choice of outfit, so...”

“Why'd you get it then?” Irys asked teasingly, placing her hand on her hips.

The perfectionist's blush deepened as she cleared her throat. “Gi—ahem... my friend said I looked ‘handsome’ in it, so I thought—why the hell not?” Cecilia explained, as Irys and Baelz looked at each other mischievously.

“Well, now you HAVE to put it on,” Baelz says, whipping out her phone.

Cecilia rolled her eyes, laughing it off. “Oh, I will... eventually.”

“You really like leaving people in suspense don't you?” Kronii says, suddenly appearing with Mumei. The two emcees were decked out in their matching outfits, microphone in hand.

“Yeah, first with your insane violin skills,” Mumei recounts, smiling, “And now, with your outfit for today...”

“That's only, like what, two things?” Cecilia defended herself, chuckling.

Just then, Fauna approached from the side, adjusting a clipboard in her hands. She had swapped her usual uniform for a flowing green dress that matched her hair, and her eyes lit up when she saw her little sister surrounded by her council mates.

“There you are,” Fauna said, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, “The council’s been hyping up your performance all week, you know. You better live up to the hype.”

Cecilia raised an eyebrow, pouting. “No pressure, huh?”

“None at all,” Fauna teased, “Jokes aside, I know you won’t let us down.”

Cecilia crossed her arms, her expression softening. “Where are the others, anyway? I thought the whole council would be together for this.”

Baelz, who was busy tapping something on her phone, glanced up. “Su and Vivi are somewhere in the crowd helping with ushering... and Sana’s with the events committee handing out the eclipse glasses.”

“Oh right!” Irys added, “According to Sana, the weather’s just right for the eclipse viewing later on. Ehe~ It’s all coming together now.”

“It has to,” Baelz grinned, glancing at her third-year council mates, “It’s probably the last big event us seniors’ll be organising together. It’s only natural that we go out with a bang.”

As they spoke, the voices of the gathering crowd grew louder behind them. Guests were still pouring into the park, some wandering toward the food stalls while others settled on picnic blankets or folding chairs set up near the stage. Soft instrumental music from the orchestra tuning up drifted through the air, as the choir began their warmups.

Mumei checked her mic and turned to Kronii. “We should probably get ready for our cue.”

Kronii nodded, giving Cecilia a quick thumbs-up. “Break a leg out there, Cece. We’ll be cheering for you.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it,” Cecilia said with a small smile. She watched as the two emcees made their way toward the stage, before turning back to the others.

Baelz was on her phone, nodding and cupping her mouth to the speaker to filter out the many different noises around the park. “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” Baelz muttered, glancing towards the far end of the event grounds, “Alright, I’ll head over to lend you a hand.”

The student council president slipped her phone into her bag slung around her shoulders before sighing. “A bunch of kids are crowding around the area reserved for the fireworks,” Baelz explained to the others, “Kiara wants us to head over and help her round ‘em up.”

“I’m still surprised she managed to get those fireworks approved,” Fauna smiles.

Irys shrugged, dusting off her white dress with a light chuckle. “It’s Kiara. Of course she managed to get them approved.”

“No time to waste then,” Fauna says, stretching out her arms before pointing towards the far end of the grounds, “Seems like she’s having some trouble.”



The remaining council members turned to look at the direction their president was pointing to, before laughing in amusement. Kiara was busy chasing down a small group of middle schoolers who had ducked under the rope barrier near the fireworks zone. She waved her clipboard in the air like a sword, shouting something that was lost in the loud music and chatter of the park, but her flustered expression said enough.

“Looks like she needs our help,” Irys remarked, trying to suppress a grin at the scene.

“Let's get going then,” Baelz says, rolling her eyes, “We still have to greet the VIPs at the entrance later on.”

The girls began making their move, walking away from the stage when Fauna noticed Cecilia following them.

“Don't worry, Cece. We'll handle this,” Fauna tells her sister, “You better go get changed for your performance!”

Cecilia blinked, glancing at the time displayed on her phone screen. It was only twenty minutes past three. “We still have some time before the event starts though,” the perfectionist points out, “Plus, my performance starts right after the eclipse at five. I'm sure I could help —”

Fauna gently patted her shoulder, giving her a knowing look. “Exactly. Which means you have less than two hours to mentally prep yourself. You don't want to get worked up handling logistics right before you go on.”

“She's right,” Irys added, pausing mid-step to glance back, “You've done enough, Cece. You've been helping out non-stop these past few weeks. The best thing you can do now is chill and save your energy.”

Cecilia hesitated, clutching the tote bag with her suit. She looked toward the edge of the park where Kiara was now herding the kids with a mix of stern pointing and exaggerated gestures. Baelz was already half-jogging toward her, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Let us handle the chaos,” Fauna said softly, stepping closer, “You're about to play in front of practically the whole school and a bunch of other guests. Trust me, the last thing you want is to show up to the stage all sweaty and stressed out.”

Cecilia exhaled slowly, glancing down at her bag. “Alright,” she muttered, “I will.”

“Good,” Irys grinned, turning back around, “Now go get changed into that suit. And, remember—no backing out just because it makes you feel shy.”

“Suit up, Cece!” Baelz called over her shoulder, already a few paces ahead with her phone in hand.

“See you at the front row,” Fauna said with a wink, before jogging to catch up with the others.

Cecilia stayed rooted in place for a moment, watching them go. The late afternoon sun shone down onto the park, casting golden patches over the stage and the paths leading deeper into the wider park. She could hear a soft drawl of string instruments warming up in the distance, and scattered laughter from students posing for group photos under the event banners.

She took another deep breath, then turned on her heel and headed for the changing tent near the staff booths. “Alright,” she murmured to herself, gripping the tote strap a little tighter “Let’s hope nobody spots me immediately...”

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After changing into her suit in the dark and cramped changing booth, Cecilia took a look at herself in the mirror. She adjusted her vest, straightening her tie before smoothing out the creases of her blazer. After taking off her hair ribbon, Cecilia whipped out a comb to smooth out her white-green neck-length hair.

She then stared at her reflection for another moment. The black fitted blazer and matching trousers were sharper than anything she usually wore. The white undershirt and her emerald green vest added variety to the outfit's overall color scheme. Her hair—which she had tucked behind her ears, framed her face more naturally, and with her usual ribbon gone, she felt oddly exposed.

“Well,” she muttered to herself, brushing some lint off her shoulder, “This is the best I can do.”

Her brows furrowed slightly as she studied her look again. Despite how neatly everything came together, a twist of doubt coiled in her stomach. “*Why am I the only girl wearing a suit?*” she thought with a small, internal cringe, “*Everyone else is out there in cute dresses and elaborate makeup, and here I am looking like I’m ready to negotiate a business merger.*”

After taking a breath to steel herself, the perfectionist squared her shoulders, and exited the changing booth.

As she stepped out, a pair of voices met her ears. Nerissa and Elizabeth had just arrived, holding tote bags with their outfits, and chatting casually as they approached their own changing space. However, when Nerissa caught sight of Cecilia, she immediately stopped in her tracks.

“Oh my God,” Nerissa said, eyes wide with delight, “Cece, you look— so handsome right now. Like, seriously. You’re SO dashing! What gives?!”

Cecilia blinked as Nerissa walked a circle around her, dramatically fanning herself. “Look at this!” Nerissa motioned to the blazer, “The tailoring! The color coordination! The way it’s

hugs your body—”

“Alright, alright, I get the picture,” Cecilia laughed, holding up a hand, cheeks reddening, “So I don’t look ridiculous?”

Elizabeth was still holding onto her dress, but her attention was now entirely on Cecilia. “Not even close,” Elizabeth chimed in, her voice warm and true, “It’s a good look for you. Confident. Clean. Feels... right.”

Cecilia’s expression softened, her embarrassment settling into a small, grateful smile. “Thanks,” the perfectionist said, brushing a hand down the front of her blazer again, “I was kinda nervous about it.”

Nerissa raised an eyebrow. “Why? Trust me—everyone out there’s gonna love it. You’re gonna be swooning all the ladies out there!”

Cecilia rolled her eyes, but her smile remained. “That’s not really my goal here, you know.”

“Maybe not,” Nerissa said with a wink, “But it’s definitely gonna happen.”

Elizabeth chuckled softly as she stepped toward the booth beside Cecilia’s. “Ignore her. Don’t feel too self conscious about how you look, Cecilia,” the scarlet haired girl reassures, smoothing out Cecilia’s blazer, “You’ve always carried yourself well. The suit complements that nicely.”

Cecilia opened her mouth, then paused, touched by the sincerity in Elizabeth’s voice. She gave a small nod. “You’re really good at pep talks, you know that?” the perfectionist chuckled.

“She’s such a mother isn’t she?” Nerissa giggled, poking Elizabeth’s sides playfully.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, her cheeks turning slightly pink. “Ahem! We should probably get dressed. We’ll catch up with you later, Cecilia,”

Cecilia nodded, waving as she watched the two girls disappear into their changing booths. “Yeah, see you guys later...”

With her nerves eased and her suit adjusted one last time, she turned and headed back toward the main event area, the afternoon sun glinting faintly off her silver tie pin. The sounds of the park’s crowd greeted her again—chatter, laughter, the occasional hum of orchestral music. A few kids were tossing frisbees off to the side, while the choir rehearsed their harmonies somewhere near the main stage. The event was simply filled with life.

She made her way to her seat near the front row, setting down her violin case before checking the time on her phone. There was still about twenty minutes until the start of the event.

Cecilia stood for a moment, letting the scene settle around her. The air was clear and crisp for a late afternoon in spring, cool enough to be comfortable but bright enough to add a cheerful vibe to her surroundings. She could see her schoolmates scattered across the

grounds, all dolled up—silk, laces, and sequins in every shade imaginable. Some were exchanging compliments, others snapping selfies in front of the decorative backdrops the art club had set up earlier that day.

It was strange, seeing everyone like this. Giggling. Glamorous. It all felt a little unreal.

Cecilia wandered off toward the line of food stalls that curved around the outskirts of the performance area. The scent of grilled yakitori and candied sweet potatoes hung in the air, mixing with the sugary scent of fruit soda. One stand was already swarmed with kids lining up for limited-edition parfaits. Another was giving away special bookmarks the first-years made a week prior to the event.

She paused near a takoyaki stand, watching a student from the events committee hand out paper fans with the school crest printed on them.

For the first time that day, Cecilia allowed herself a small moment of pride. Everything around her was only made possible through the efforts of her and the council. *“We really pulled this off,”* she thought, smiling to herself.

Turning to head back, she caught sight of a familiar cluster of girls by one of the drink stalls—Raora, who was dressed in a ruffled pink dress and matching hair clip, chatting animatedly with Bijou, who looked like a porcelain doll in her frilly white outfit. Shiori stood next to them, elegant as ever in her gothic black gown with fluffy sleeves, and next to her—Cecilia’s heart skipped—was Gigi, her hair let down in soft waves, the orange dress she had picked out a few weeks ago fitting her like it had been made for her.

Cecilia approached the group, offering them a wide smile. “Hey there.”

All four girls turned, immediately shrieking in varying degrees of shock and delight.

“Is that really you?!” Raora gasped, eyes going wide as she took a step back for a full view, “Cecilia, you look—so manly! What the hell?!”

Bijou’s jaw practically hit the grass as she pressed her hands on Cecilia’s cheeks, as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “I wasn’t expecting an ikemen look, but why does it weirdly suit you so well, dang it?!” Bijou exclaims, rubbing Cecilia’s cheeks playfully.

“She just has that in her, it seems,” Shiori added with a smirk, folding her arms, “Also, it’s just nice to see something different after walking through a sea of dresses out here.”

“Thanks guys,” Cecilia chuckled, trying to peel Bijou’s small hands away from her face before glancing at Gigi, “As it happens, Gigi helped me pick this outfit out.”

Gigi, who had been staring at Cecilia for way too long, quickly snapped out of her trance, clearing her throat. “H-huh? Oh right, I did,” Gigi stuttered, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before turning to the others, “I ran into her at the mall and joined her hunt for an outfit.”

Cecilia tilted her head, the corners of her mouth lifting. “You didn’t just join me. You made me try on a million different outfits and made me pose like we were at the Met Gala or something.”

The group laughed, Gigi laughing along before looking Cecilia up and down once more. “Well... I'd say it was a successful hunt,” she chuckled before lowering her voice, “You look really good, Cece.”

Cecilia blinked, her heart doing a little skip as she felt some heat rise to her face. “Thanks,” she said, voice softer than before as her gaze flicked down then back up, “You look... really good too. The orange suits you. And your hair... it’s nice down.”

Gigi's hand reflexively rose to her hair, brushing it back. “You think so?”

Cecilia gave a small nod, placing a hand over her chest sincerely. “Yeah. You look really pretty.”

That did it. Gigi immediately turned away with a nervous laugh, her face now a distinct shade of pink. “D-don’t say embarrassing stuff out of nowhere, geez...”

The two stood there, suddenly very aware of each other and what they'd been saying for the past minute.

Raora raised an eyebrow as Bijou bit her lip to stifle a giggle. Shiori, meanwhile, glanced at them, nodding. Without needing to say a word, the trio agreed to change the topic.

Raora clapped her hands together. “Sooo! Who wants to try the parfaits 2-3 are selling before they run out?”

Bijou perked up, latching onto the change of subject. “Ooh, yeah! I saw the line earlier—it’s brutal. We gotta go now if we want one.”

“Agreed,” Shiori said, stepping forward and giving both Gigi and Cecilia a teasing glance, “Let’s move before the show starts... and give these two some room for themselves.”

Gigi sputtered. “W-what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Nothing at all,” Shiori replied sweetly, already turning on her heel.

Raora grinned, turning to Cecilia and Gigi with a cheeky grin. “What she meant was... are you two gonna continue flirting here or are you gonna tag along for parfaits?”

“Raora!” Cecilia scoffed, trying very hard not to look mortified. She failed.

Bijou simply skipped ahead, grinning. “Come on, lovebirds! Parfaits await!”

Cecilia watched Raora, Bijou and Shiori make their move, sighing before turning to Gigi. “Ignore them, they're being stupid,” Cecilia says, holding a hand out to Gigi, “Well? Are you coming?”

Gigi, whose face was still relatively flushed, quickly nodded. “Y-yeah! No time like the present!”

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By the time the girls finished eating their parfaits, it was time for the jubilee event to finally begin. Cecilia waved goodbye to the others, before making her way towards her seat near the stage. She passed lines of chairs that were quickly filling up. Students in formalwear were chatting excitedly, parents were adjusting camera angles and teachers scanning programs and whispering instructions to one another. Beyond them, the areas around the various food stalls had begun to quiet down as the focus shifted toward the main stage.

The seats near the front were reserved, neatly roped off, and marked with names on polished placards. Cecilia spotted her name on one near the center and settled in, smoothing out her blazer and glancing around the park. Every banner, light fixture, and centerpiece bore the school’s crest or a stylized ‘50’ in a glorious gold font.

The crowd gradually settled into their seats. A hush then swept across the audience as the stage lights flared gently to life, casting the emcees in a spotlight.

Kronii stepped forward first, her posture upright, microphone in hand. “Good afternoon, everyone.”

Mumei stepped beside her, offering a bright wave. “Welcome to Cover High’s 50th Anniversary Jubilee!”

The audience erupted into cheers and applause.

“We’re your emcees for today,” Kronii said, tone smooth and calm, “I’m Kronii, and this is my delightful partner Mumei.”

“Aww, aren't you sweet?” Mumei teased, nudging her cohost lightly.

Kronii sighed dramatically. “Don't get used to it. I'm just sticking to the script you wrote.”

The crowd chuckled.

“Jokes aside,” Mumei said, voice brightening, “We want to thank all of you—students, teachers, alumni, parents, staff, friends, for being here today to celebrate this incredible milestone.”

“Fifty years of tradition, growth, and excellence,” Kronii added, smiling at the audience warmly, “And none of it would’ve been possible without every single person who helped build this community.”

The emcees paused to let the applause rise again, before Mumei lifted a hand. “And now, without further ado, it’s time to welcome our guests of honour.”

A triumphant instrumental began playing from the concert band as Baelz and Irys appeared at the edge of the park’s central carpeted aisle. The two student council leaders were dressed impeccably—Baelz in a sleek red dress with black highlights, and Irys in a flowing dress with blue trims.

Trailing behind them were the principal and vice principals, followed by members of the school board, elderly alumni dressed in formal wear, and a few distinguished guests from the community. The crowd stood as they passed, applause rising again as they made their way toward the front of the stage. Cecilia stood too, her hands clasped neatly in front of her, eyes scanning the group for familiar faces.

When the guests of honour took their seats, the concert band’s fanfare came to a halt as the emcees returned to the mic.

“Now that our honoured guests have arrived,” Kronii said, “We can officially kick off the event.”

Mumei gestured upward, prompting the audience to look to the clear skies above. “As many of you know, we’ve got something special happening later on. At exactly five o’clock, a total solar eclipse will take place right here, over the city.”

The crowd murmured in excitement, some of them glancing at the eclipse glasses that were being handed out earlier. “We’ve prepared viewing glasses for everyone,” Kronii continued, “So don’t worry, you’ll be able to enjoy it safely.”

“But before we get to the celestial wonder,” Mumei added, her smile bright, “We’ve got an evening of performances lined up, prepared by our very own students from Cover High’s performing arts clubs!”

“From music to dance to drama,” Kronii said, “Tonight is all about showcasing the talent, passion, and creativity that makes our school truly special.”

“So sit back, relax...” Mumei said, glancing toward the wings of the stage, “...and get ready to be amazed.”

“Because the show...” Kronii finished, “Starts now!”

The spectators at the park erupted into an explosive round of applause as the opening ceremony officially commenced. A sense of excitement radiated through the crowd, the atmosphere thick with anticipation and the soft clicks of cameras snapping photos of the event.

The first part of the event was dedicated to the school’s long and storied history. The emcees stepped aside as the stage lights adjusted, illuminating the central podium where the principal took his place. Dressed in a dashing suit, he addressed the crowd with a gusto, reflecting on the school’s journey from a modest institution to the thriving, diverse campus it had become

over the past five decades. His words were thoughtful and filled with pride, touching on the accomplishments of students and faculty alike, and paying tribute to those who had contributed to the school's enduring legacy.

Following the principal, several members of the school board stepped up to the microphone. Each offered their own words of celebration—some recalling their time as students themselves, others reflecting on the future and the evolving goals of the school.

At one point, one of the more senior board members cracked a joke about how students used to *'actually talk to each other, rather than having their noses buried in their phone screens'*. The joke didn't exactly land well with the younger members of the audience, although some of them still offered a courteous chuckle or two.

Then came the alumni speakers. Three were invited to represent different decades—one from the 1980s, one from the early 2000s, and a recent graduate from the 2010s who had made a name for herself in the arts. They spoke fondly of their time at Cover High, sharing anecdotes that resonated with both students and older guests alike.

There was the older alumni's tales of school festivals long gone, and the younger graduate's story about putting on her first stage play in the school's drama club—an experience that cemented her interest in acting, catapulting her into the professional-grade theater career she enjoys today.

When the speeches concluded, the applause that followed was upbeat. The tone of the event then shifted as the lights dimmed and the emcees returned to the stage to announce the next portion of the jubilee event. The ceremonial portion was over and it was time for the performing arts clubs to take center stage.

First up was the school choir, arranged in a semi-circle across the stage. Dressed in coordinated uniforms with golden sashes for the anniversary, they began with a medley of songs spanning generations, energising students past and present. The medley consisted of a few pop arrangements, and a rendition of an old folk piece that everybody seemed to recognize.

Next came the concert band. The brass and woodwinds glimmered under the stage lights as they played a bold and energetic medley of movie soundtracks, drawing cheers from students in the crowd whenever a familiar theme popped up.

Then, the orchestra took the stage, offering a more classical yet breathtaking performance. The strings swelled in harmony as the violins led a sweeping piece that echoed across the park. Cecilia watched with admiration, her fingers twitching against her violin case as she anticipated her own time on stage.

After the orchestra, the dance club exploded onto the scene. Dancers in flowing costumes twirled and leapt across the stage to a fast paced techno beat. Their coordination was impeccable, and the applause that followed was among the loudest of the evening so far.

The drama club followed, performing a short original skit. The script was sharply written, and all the jokes managed to land. However, what drew the most laughter from the audience



was the improvised quips the drama club members pulled off. Their unscripted jabs and banter managed to draw chuckles from even the more elderly spectators.

When the drama club took their bow, the audience applauded, cheering and whistling at the humorous performance they had just witnessed. The performances so far had been nothing short of dazzling, and there was still more to come.

Kronii and Mumei returned to the stage, along with Sana, who was in charge of briefing the audience about safety measures to take note of before the eclipse.

“Hope you enjoyed the wonderful performances from our various performing arts groups!” Mumei says, as the drama club members swept up their props and exited the stage area.

Kronii nodded along, before placing a hand on Sana's shoulders. “Indeed, you could tell everybody gave their all for this!” the blue-haired girl agrees, “Now, we’ve got someone very special to introduce. This is our good friend Sana—resident space nerd and the tallest astronomy enthusiast you’ll ever meet.”

A few chuckles echoed through the crowd as Sana stepped forward, waving both hands enthusiastically. “G’day, everyone!” she beamed excitedly, her voice ringing across the park. “How good is this weather, huh? Absolutely perfect for an eclipse!”

The audience responded with a few cheers and some amused whistles. Sana stood confidently at the front of the stage, her dark star-patterned outfit fluttering slightly as she held up a tablet and tapped on it.

“As you all probably know—because I’ve been yelling about it all month, today we’re getting a total solar eclipse! It’ll be starting in about ten minutes, so this is your heads-up to get your eclipse glasses ready if you haven’t already!” Sana says, pumping her fist into the air.

A few student volunteers moved through the crowd with baskets, handing out any remaining eclipse glasses. Some kids were already wearing theirs, testing them by staring at the sun and gasping in delight at the darkened view.

“Now, let's have a quick crash course on the eclipse!” Sana continued, tapping her tablet to display a diagram on the projection screen behind her, “Unlike a partial eclipse, what we're about to see will be a full blackout. That's to say, the moon’s going to completely cover the sun. That means we’ll see the corona—the sun’s outer atmosphere, which you never get to see with the naked eye under normal conditions. The sky will darken, the temperature will dip, and it’ll feel like twilight in the middle of the day. Creepy, right? But also really, really cool!”

The tall girl paced around a little as she spoke, clearly in her element. “Just remember, leave your glasses on until totality hits. That’s the only time it’s safe to look at the sun directly…”

There were murmurs of anticipation and a few more cheers. Students clutched their glasses, and parents adjusted their cameras to capture the rare moment. “Alright, that’s all from me,”

Sana finished with a grin, “If you wanna nerd out more, I’ll be over at the telescope booth later. For now—get ready to witness something amazing!”

As the crowd applauded, Kronii stepped up beside her. “Thank you for the science lesson, Sana,” she remarked with a chuckle, patting Sana’s shoulder, “Always a pleasure.”

“Any time,” Sana grinned, giving the audience a salute before jogging offstage.

Mumei took the mic again. “Alright! In just a few minutes, the eclipse will begin. Make sure you’ve got your glasses on and find a good spot to watch.”

“But don’t head home yet,” Kronii added, gesturing back to the stage, “Once the eclipse wraps up, we’ve got our open stage performances lined up—featuring a variety of talents who’ve been preparing to show off their skills!”

“It’s the perfect way to end the celebration,” Mumei said with a bright smile, “So enjoy the eclipse, and we’ll see you all back here shortly after for the final stretch of the Cover High Jubilee!”

The crowd cheered again, their excitement growing as the light began to dim ever so slightly across the park. The moment everyone had been waiting for was nearly here.

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Cecilia sat by a bench near a pond, her violin case resting beside her like a quiet companion. She had excused herself from the audience right after the dance club wrapped up their performance, hoping some time away would help her settle her nerves. But now, as the eclipse loomed and the open stage segment crept closer, a familiar sense of stillness gripped her body. Her hands were numb.

She flexed her fingers slowly, staring at her palms as if they didn’t belong to her. The noise of the crowd had faded into the background. The soft thudding of her heartbeat was the only thing she could hear.

Cecilia sighed and leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. “You’ve worked hard for this,” she murmured under her breath. “No backing out now. You don’t have a choice.”

The words did nothing for her nerves whatsoever, but she forced them out anyway. Logic over emotion. Preparation over fear. That was always her way. Still, the crowd—so many eyes, so many people... it was like she was about to plunge into an ocean she tried so hard to avoid.

“Hey.”

Cecilia blinked and turned. Gigi was walking towards her, hands in the pockets of her orange dress. Her hair was down, flowing slightly from the breeze, and she wore a look that was half-concerned, half-amused.

“I knew I’d find you here,” Gigi said, slowing as she reached the bench.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow. “What the—How’d you even know where I went?”

“I stalked you,” Gigi replied with a completely straight face, “Saw you slip out and followed you like the totally unhinged creep I am.”

Cecilia scoffed. “Tch. Freak.”

“At least I’m proud of it,” Gigi said, grinning.

Without waiting for an invitation, Gigi plopped down beside her on the bench. The two sat in silence for a moment, watching the gentle ripples across the pond. Somewhere behind them, a flock of birds took off from the trees, startled by the loud instrumental booming from the event grounds.

“You still nervous?” Gigi asked.

Cecilia let out a breath. “Of course I am. But it’s like... I don’t know. I’ve been nervous all day, and now I can’t even feel it anymore. I’m kinda numb to it now, haha.”

The perfectionist glanced at her reflection in the water, quiet for a moment. “It’s surreal, the thought of going up there. I haven’t performed in front of this many people since... since five years ago.”

Gigi’s smile softened. “That recital?”

Cecilia nodded.

“Well,” Gigi said, nudging her gently with her shoulder, “This time’s gonna be different. I know it. I’ve believed it from the start. You’re gonna nail it.”

Cecilia turned toward her, surprised at how much those words affected her. A familiar warmth bloomed in her chest again—the kind only Gigi seemed to spark. It made the numbness fade just a little.

“Thanks,” Cecilia said quietly, “For being here with me.”

Gigi gave her a toothy grin, all confidence and sunshine. “Always,” she said, placing a hand on her knee, “I’ll always be here for you.”

Suddenly, a wave of gasps and murmurs echoed from the direction of the main event grounds. Gigi tilted her head towards the noise, startled. “Huh? What’s happening now?”

Cecilia looked up, noticing the shadows shifting and the light dimming more rapidly. The sky had taken on a strange hue, and the atmosphere felt different—like the air before a storm,

but calm.

She reached into her blazer, pulling out a pair of eclipse glasses. “We better put these on,” she said, as Gigi whipped out her own pair.

After putting on their glasses, the pair tilted their heads toward the sky as the long awaited solar eclipse finally commenced.

Across the park's grounds, spectators fell into a hush. The eclipse had begun.

What had been a bright, cloudless day had now shifted into a surreal, dark twilight. Through the protective lenses of their glasses, the sun appeared as a narrowing crescent, gradually eaten away by the moon's silhouette. The world dimmed, not like dusk, but like the light itself had been carefully drawn, as if a curtain were being drawn over the sky.

People raised their heads in unison. Some reached for their phones and cameras, their screens flickering as they tried to capture the surreal display above them. Children clung to their parents, their voices hushed in astonishment. The once-noisy field of chatter and excitement had quieted into something serene, a collective astonishment washing over the crowd.

Near the stage, the student council members sat together in the front row, their attention fixed skyward. Kronii leaned back in her seat with a low whistle, staring at the celestial event with bated breath. Fauna's eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open, like she'd momentarily forgotten how to breathe. Mumei had her phone lifted, recording the whole thing, while Baelz muttered a quiet ‘whoa’ under her breath.

But it was Sana who practically lit up. “This is incredible!” she gushed, bouncing slightly in her seat, “The moon's completely covering the sun—look at that corona! You can see the solar prominences! Oh my gosh, this is perfect!”

The tall girl pointed wildly, gesturing as though trying to sketch the event in the air. “We're witnessing totality—this is the real deal!”

The others didn't say much in response, but their eyes spoke enough. Wide, shimmering, full of amazement.

And off to the side, just beyond the noise and crowds, two girls sat together on a bench, silent.

Cecilia and Gigi's gazes remained fixed towards the sky, their eclipse glasses catching the calm light. Neither spoke. Neither needed to. They had stopped thinking about Cecilia's performance or anything else. It was just them and the sky now, quiet and immense.

In fact, they were so mesmerized by the eclipse that they didn't notice when their fingers had found each other.

Cecilia blinked, realizing she was holding Gigi's hand only as the last rays of sunlight began to return, a faint orange shining back down along the horizon. The eclipse had passed.

“That was...” Gigi said slowly, still gazing upward, “...really beautiful.”

“Yeah,” Cecilia whispered, “Like something out of a dream.”

Before they could collect their thoughts any further, a wave of motion drew their attention back toward the main event grounds. People were standing again, talking, pointing at the sky, then slowly returning to their seats. The emcees were making their way back to the stage. It was time.

Cecilia glanced down at their joined hands. She squeezed gently before pulling away and stood, brushing off her blazer. “I should get going.”

Gigi stood as well and grinned. “You’re gonna crush it,” Gigi says sincerely, “Remember, if you feel nervous, just know I’ll be there in the audience—cheering you on.”

Cecilia turned, catching that grin with a quiet smile of her own. “Thanks, Gigi.”

Then, with the violin case in hand, she began making her way back to the stage area.

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“Well, ladies and gentlemen, I think it's safe to say we witnessed something truly special, wouldn't you say, Kronii?” Mumei addresses the crowd as she and her fellow emcee took the stage, “I coulda sworn your eyes were watery for a moment back then...”

Kronii rolled her eyes, scoffing. “Must be your imagination,” she retorted, brushing back her hair with exaggerated nonchalance, “I was just blinking... very slowly.”

The crowd chuckled, still basking in the afterglow of the eclipse. Mumei grinned and turned back to the audience.

“Anyways, along with our usual club showcases at Cover High’s anniversary events,” she said, “This year we’ve got something a little extra for you all—something we’re really excited about.”

“That’s right,” Kronii added, “A bunch of brave, talented students signed up for our open stage performances, and they’re here to show off everything from musical flair to vocal power.”

Mumei nodded eagerly. “We’ve got solos, we’ve got a powerful duet, and yes, there’s even an amateur school idol band ready to light up the stage!”

The audience roared with enthusiasm, cheers and whistles echoing across the park. “But first up,” Kronii continues, “Let’s kick things off with a classical performance. This violinist

will be playing *Winter* by Antonio Vivaldi—a piece known for its intense tempo and depth. A true challenge even for professionals.”

Mumei gestured grandly toward the side of the stage, winking at Cecilia, who stood at the ready with her violin. “So please give a warm welcome to our first performer of the night...” Mumei says, nodding towards Kronii before the both of them exclaimed.

“Cecilia Immergreen!”

Cecilia drew in a deep breath, grinding her teeth together nervously before stepping out onto the stage. To her shock, the sheer scale of the event grounds seemed so much larger now that she stood exposed to everybody. Rows and rows of people stared toward her, waiting. Expectant. Hopeful.

She kept her arms close, her violin snug in her grip as she made her way to the center. Her legs were moving, but she barely felt them. Her fingers twitched involuntarily. Her mouth was dry. A light breeze brushed against her blazer, but she barely noticed.

Then, the memories came flooding back. The recital hall. The rustle of score sheets. The gaze of the audience. The tremble in her hand as she raised the bow. That one wrong note. Then another. And then the silence.

That silence had lived inside her ever since.

Her heart was pounding now. Harder than before. She could feel it behind her ribs, pushing, hammering. For a moment, Cecilia wasn't sure she could even lift her arm, let alone play. Her whole body felt distant, like she was floating just above it, watching herself stall.

But then she looked out.

Fauna. Front row, smiling, hands clasped as she sat with the council. The twins, Raora, Bijou and Shiori, sitting with wide eyes. Elizabeth and Nerissa, their eyes locked onto her, mouthing something she couldn't quite read. And Gigi—sitting amongst them all, her fists curled up tight.

The perfectionist met the gaze of her teachers, her classmates, her friends... They were all watching.

Cecilia exhaled sharply and gave a nod to the stagehand. The lights dimmed just slightly. Then, the piano backtrack began to flow from the speakers, bright and sharp, as the first bars of *Winter* echoed into the cool evening air.

She raised her bow.

Her fingers moved on instinct. Precision. Agility. The notes shot from her strings like lightning, cascading and slicing through the open air. The tempo raced forward, and so did she.

Just like five years ago.

But this time, she wouldn't slip. She can't. Her hand didn't tremble. Her notes didn't sway.

Meanwhile, in the crowd, mouths began to open slightly. Some leaned forward. Others grabbed the arms of their seats. Each draw of Cecilia's bow cut through the air elegantly, as the perfectionist radiated nothing but brilliance. A fury of notes filled the park, each stroke honed and perfected.

She didn't look at the crowd. She didn't need to. She could feel their awe. The first section soon ended, as Cecilia made mental note of the checkpoint she had reached. She kept her bow poised and her breath steady. It wasn't over yet.

Cecilia sighed. Everything seemed to be going well so far. She hadn't made a single mistake, and she still felt relatively confident that she could get through the rest of the song without faltering.

Then, she opened her eyes.

The crowd before her blurred as rows of people—teachers, classmates, alumni, strangers, faded into a haze, their forms melting into a mesh of colors. The air around her felt cooler, and in the blink of an eye, Cecilia wasn't at the park anymore.

She was eleven years old again, standing in the middle of the glossy wooden stage of the recital hall, the pressure pressing down on her chest like a weight she couldn't remove. Her fingers faltered slightly, the hand holding the bow slowed. Her confident strokes weakened—not enough for the average listener to notice, but Cecilia knew. She always knew.

Her thoughts began to spiral. Her breath shortened. The warmth she had just felt bled away from her fingertips.

No. Not again.

She didn't want to look. But her gaze drifted to the audience anyway, to the exact spot where she remembered it—an empty seat, bare and hollow in the sea of seated spectators. There it was. Just as vivid as she had always seen it.

Her mother's seat.

Cecilia's heartbeat accelerated. The all-too-familiar ache of abandonment clawed its way back into her chest, striking at her like an attack she hadn't braced for. Her grip tightened on her violin, and panic bubbled beneath the surface of her reserved expression. What if she slipped again? What if she broke down again? This time the crowd was ten times bigger. She'd never live it down. She'd humiliate herself in front of everyone. In front of her friends. In front of—

Then the vision cleared. The light from above caught her eyes, and suddenly the seat wasn't empty anymore. Someone was there. Someone was smiling.

Gigi.

In place of her mother, Cecilia saw her—sitting in the empty seat, lips stretched into the widest grin, eyes sparkling with joy. She was clapping her hands softly against her knees, practically bouncing with excitement. Her expression was that of pure, unadulterated wonder.

Cecilia's heart slowed. The sharp pressure in her chest dulled as the recital hall faded away.

She was back at the park, the stage beneath her feet, the cool evening air brushing her cheeks. She felt her hold on the bow tighten as she recovered from the momentary lapse in her playing.

And in the real crowd, Gigi was still there, amongst the sea of enthusiastic audience members. Cecilia spotted her easily. After all, the pigtailed girl stood out in any crowd.

They locked eyes.

Gigi was beaming, giving her two exaggerated thumbs-up like an overenthusiastic coach on the sidelines.

Cecilia couldn't help but smile. "*Stupid...*" she thought to herself, before shifting her bow once more.

Her fingers danced as the music surged. The first movement resumed with renewed energy, and Cecilia launched into it like fire catching dry leaves. Her confidence returned in a flash, each note more passionate, more alive than the last. Her recovery had been so sudden, so clean, it startled even her.

And then it hit her—a sense of liberation. She wasn't playing for a judge. She wasn't performing for a panel. And most importantly, she wasn't playing for her mother anymore.

Cecilia felt enveloped in this state of freedom as she basked in the music with a boldness unlike anything she ever felt before. Her strokes were no longer flimsy, and were instead electric and expressive. Each movement carried her forward, and with every note she played, the weight of what happened five years ago lifted, note by note, breath by breath.

Gigi's voice echoed in her mind, as clear as if she were whispering in her ear right then.

*"Play for you."*

Cecilia hadn't embraced those words fully back then, but now, under the evening sky, with her violin singing through the air and the crowd watching on, she realized just how right Gigi had been.

She was playing for herself—and it worked wonders. There was no pressure to impress anyone, no need to chase after anyone's approval. The performance belonged to her and nobody else.

And yet.

As her eyes flicked back to Gigi, still beaming from where she was sitting, Cecilia felt something else stir in her chest. Something deeper.



Yes, she was playing for herself... but she also wanted to play for her.

For the girl who supported her no matter what. For the girl who told her she'd believed in her from the start. For the girl who, even when Cecilia tried to run away, still came back to see her try again.

Cecilia didn't know what kind of feeling that was. Not exactly. But it didn't matter right now. Because whatever it was, it made her feel unstoppable.

And as her bow carved through the final lines of the first movement, Cecilia's music burned brighter than ever.

Then, it was over. She lowered her instrument as she let out a breath she had been holding in for a few seconds now.

For a moment, there was nothing—no cheers, no noise. Just Cecilia, her violin at her side, her breath still catching up to her.

Then the sound hit her. A massive round of applause boomed throughout the park, starting loud and only growing louder. Hands clapped together with force, whistles pierced the air, and a cheer rose from the crowd she was facing.

Cecilia stood frozen for a moment, overwhelmed. Her eyes widened slightly as the sight in front of her began to register: people rising from their seats—rows and rows of them, offering her a standing ovation. The cheers washed over her, echoing across the park. Not a single face held back their awe.

Her heart thudded hard, but this time, it wasn't from fear. It was from something else entirely. She felt warmth bloom in her chest, crawling to her throat and eyes. Her fingers trembled—not from panic, but from the weight of relief and joy.

She scanned the crowd, and there they were—her friends. The student council, waving and whooping with abandon. Fauna stood amongst them, her hands cupped around her mouth as she shouted something Cecilia couldn't hear. The rest of her classmates, her teachers, her peers... all of them were smiling.

Then she spotted her—standing halfway back, tall on her seat, pumping both fists into the air like a maniac. Gigi's voice rang out over the rest of the crowd, completely unfiltered.

“YOU DID IT CECE, YOU DID IT!”

Cecilia couldn't stop the laugh from escaping her mouth. She blinked away the sting at the corners of her eyes and stepped forward, bowing low at the waist.

The applause swelled again as she rose, a single tear slipping down her cheek. “I did it...”

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The perfectionist headed to the backstage, giving Kronii and Mumei a hug as she passed them. She was still in disbelief, not quite registering what just happened.

Behind the curtain, Elizabeth and Nerissa stood in their matching outfits, holding hands as they prepared for their upcoming duet. When they saw Cecilia approach, Elizabeth's eyes widened with admiration.

"That was spectacular, Cecilia," the scarlet haired girl said, "You really set the bar high."

Nerissa nodded eagerly, hugging Cecilia tightly. "I don't know how we're supposed to follow that, but I'll take it as inspiration, not competition," Nerissa giggled, winking.

Cecilia smiled, still catching her breath. "You two will be amazing. I'm looking forward to it."

With a nod of gratitude, she stepped past them and made her way back toward the front of the stage, where the rest of the open stage performers were gathered.

Several members of ReGLOSS, still in their coordinated stage outfits, turned to greet her with excitement. Their leader, Ririka, beamed as she took Cecilia's hand in both of hers.

"That was incredible! Seriously—we were all holding our breath the entire time," she said, her teammates echoing their agreement.

Cecilia bowed slightly, offering a quiet thank-you. Compliments were never easy to accept, but the sheer sincerity and awe in everybody's voices made it hard not to embrace them.

She found an empty seat just a few rows from the front and finally let herself sit down, the day's events beginning to settle within her. Her violin rested beside her, its work done.

Though the performance was still vivid in her mind—the stage lights, the racing tempo, the image of Gigi cheering from her seat... Cecilia gently pushed it all aside. There would be time to reflect later. For now, it was her turn to support the others.

She looked up as the lights dimmed again. The duet was about to begin.

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The open stage performances that followed were nothing short of extraordinary.

Elizabeth and Nerissa's duet opened with a powerful swell of harmonies that silenced the entire park in seconds. Their voices, perfectly balanced, rose and fell in unison, drawing the audience in and holding them close. Nerissa's bold, expressive vocals along with Elizabeth's controlled, almost regal tone was an unlikely combination that worked beautifully. By the

time they hit their final note, the crowd erupted with applause, many on their feet in appreciation.

Next up was ReGLOSS.

If Elizabeth and Nerissa had shaken the audience emotionally, ReGLOSS jolted them physically. Their electrifying song-and-dance number filled the stage with a vibrant energy. The group moved in perfect sync, their voices sharp and their choreography sharper. Spotlights moved with the beat as the five girls took stage, belting out the chorus with intense gusto.

Several students in the crowd were up and dancing along in the aisles, unable to resist moving along to the beat. It was the perfect act to engage the crowd after the previous two powerful performances.

After that, the stage opened to a range of smaller but no less impressive acts. A third-year student performed a sleight-of-hand magic routine that drew many gasps and chuckles, pulling playing cards from thin air and making coins vanish and reappear in unsuspecting audience members' pockets.

Following the magician were the Abyssgard twins, who gave a hair-raising idol performance. The twins, who were usually in sync, seemed to be extra coordinated today. Their flurry of dance moves painted the stage with immense liveliness.

Then, there was the acoustic guitar soloist who played a compilation of retro tunes from the 80s, hyping up many of the older members of the audience. The variety of open stage acts left the crowd impressed, with each performer adding something fresh and new to the celebration.

Before everybody knew it, time passed as the sun began dipping lower into the horizon, bathing the park in a magnificent orange glow. By the time the final act had concluded, the stage lights flickered down as soft music began to play from the speakers.

It was 6:30 PM when Mumei and Kronii returned to the stage, greeted once again by enthusiastic applause. "Well, that wraps up our concert portion for the evening!" Mumei announced, waving to the crowd with a bright grin, "Let's have a huge round of applause for all our amazing performers tonight! Every single one of them brought their best and gave us a show to remember!"

"Seriously," Kronii added, arms crossed with a proud smirk, "We had everything: classical songs, magic, skits and even a rave thanks to our dear friends from ReGLOSS. Some of you even made me tear up... and I don't tear up easily."

"That's a lie," Mumei whispered into her mic with a wink, earning a round of laughter from the audience.

Kronii ignored her. "Anyway. That doesn't mean the Jubilee's over! In fact, we're just moving into the next part... our post-concert celebration!" the blue haired girl announced.

Mumei nodded eagerly. “That’s right! From here on out, feel free to roam the grounds, take pictures, visit the food booths, or just hang out with your friends. Meet the performers, congratulate them, and enjoy the rest of the evening under the stars!”

“Let’s make the last few hours of the Cover High Jubilee unforgettable,” Kronii said, raising a hand, “You all earned it.”

The crowd cheered once more as the stage lights dimmed fully. Students began to rise from their seats, some immediately rushing toward the front to greet the performers, others heading off in search of snacks, drinks, or friends they hadn’t seen all evening.

Cecilia made her way through the sea of guests, politely greeting those who stopped to praise her for her performance. Compliments ranged from impressed teachers to excited underclassmen, all offering words of awe and encouragement that made her cheeks warm with pride. Her violin was now safely tucked in its case, slung over her shoulder, but the adrenaline from her performance continued to surge through her veins.

Near the front of the stage, she finally spotted the council members gathered in a semicircle, laughing and cheering amongst themselves.

“There she is!” Irys called out suddenly, as a few arms went up in greeting.

Cecilia smiled as she stepped into their circle. The group greeted her with cheers and a few playful shoulder bumps, the atmosphere full of shared relief and happiness.

“I can’t believe everything actually went off without a hitch,” Su said, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“The perfect conditions we had for the eclipse today was insane,” Sana added with a dreamy sigh, clasping her hands before turning to Cecilia, “And your performance was just wonderful, Cece... Seriously, my soul left my body and floated into the stratosphere.”

Fauna leaned toward Cecilia with a wink. “You were breathtaking, Cece. But let’s not forget these two,” she added, gesturing to Mumei and Kronii, “Our emcees absolutely nailed it. You two really carried the vibe tonight.”

Mumei did a little bow, arms wide. “Oh, stop... we do our best.”

“We *are* the best,” Kronii added smugly.

Cecilia gave a short laugh, feeling herself loosen up as she stood amongst them. “There’s no arguing there,” the perfectionist grinned, crossing her arms.

Then Baelz, standing slightly off to the side, clapped her hands twice to get their attention. “Guys... we really killed it. Everything from the stage to the schedule, the flow of the acts— it all came together. I’m proud of us,” Baelz beamed before pausing, “It’s kinda sad though, huh? This might be the last big event like this that we plan together.”

The sentiment hung in the air for a moment, as everyone reflected on the whole experience. But before anyone could say more, a new voice interrupted them. “Well done, everyone.”

The group turned to see the principal approaching, the vice principal a step behind him. He had his hands clasped behind his back, his expression calm but clearly pleased.

“I was thoroughly impressed,” he continued, looking around at the council, “Everything was executed flawlessly. The performers were incredible, the timing was perfect, and the atmosphere—you could feel the joy all around. You girls have outdone yourselves.”

The vice principal nodded. “It’s no easy feat managing an event this large. But you all made it look effortless,” she nodded along.

The council murmured their thanks, bowing slightly in appreciation. “We’ll be heading off now,” the principal said with a smile, “But again, truly—well done.”

With that, the two staff members turned and made their way through the crowd, leaving the girls behind, still glowing from the praise.

“Did he just praise us?” Irys asked, raising an eyebrow with a small chuckle.

Baelz nodded, looking a little confused herself. “I’m as shocked as you are,” the redhead grinned before turning to the underclassmen of the council, “It’s not easy getting the big boss’s praise like that.”

Su and Vivi glance at each other excitedly as Cecilia smiled, a sense of pride filling her up as she watched the principals depart.

“Alright, who’s up for some takoyaki?” Mumei suggested.

Vivi perked up. “Actually, Su and I are gonna meet up with our classmates first. They’re somewhere near the photo wall.”

“Yeah!” Su added, giving a little wave, “Let’s link up again later, though!”

“Got it,” Baelz nodded, giving them a thumbs up, “Go have fun, you two!”

As the two underclassmen darted off into the crowd, Cecilia turned toward the others. “I’ll be meeting up with my friends too. They said they’re near the stalls. You guys can go ahead without me.”

“Aww, ditching us already?” Mumei teased, pouting.

“Oh, let her go,” Kronii smirked, “She’s earned it.”

“Tell them we said hi,” Sana grinned.

Cecilia chuckled, waving as she turned to leave. “I will. See you guys later.”

The others watched her go, her white-green hair catching the last hints of sunlight as she disappeared into the tide of guests. Fauna watched for a moment longer before letting out a small breath. “Well... it’s just the six of us again,” the green haired girl smiles.

Sana nodded slowly, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “Feels like we blinked and the event's already wrapping up.”

“Hey, don’t get all sappy yet,” Baelz said, folding her arms, “We’re still in the middle of the best night of the semester.”

“Exactly,” Mumei grinned, “And what better way to celebrate than checking out Ina’s takoyaki stall?”

“I could go for five,” Irys said immediately.

“I’m getting eight,” Kronii added, already beginning to walk.

Irys smirked mischievously, glancing at Kronii. “What happened to that whole diet thing you were boasting about?”

Kronii narrowed her eyes. “First off, I wasn't boasting,” Kronii began, “And secondly, it's okay to let loose every once in a while—”

Clearly amused by Kronii's irritation, Irys opened her mouth to add fuel to the fire when a voice rang out above the noise of the crowd.

“Guys!” someone called from behind them. The council widened their eyes, turning in unison toward the source of the voice.

To their pleasant surprise, a small group of familiar faces stood just beyond the crowd—a few older girls, waving and walking toward them with wide smiles. The council’s eyes lit up.

“Our seniors?” Mumei blinked, incredulous.

“It’s really them!” Fauna gasped, the rest of the group already hurrying forward to greet the returning seniors.

The one leading the group—tall, poised, with a confident stride, had once worn the president’s badge herself. Standing with her were the former vice president, treasurer, and secretary, each wearing expressions of pride and nostalgia.

“You guys!” Baelz grinned, bouncing on her feet as she reached them, “What are you doing here?!”

“We wouldn’t miss this for the world,” the ex-president said, stepping in for a hug, “We heard about the event a few weeks ago, so we figured we’d see how our little baby juniors were holding up.”

“Well, now you know,” the former treasurer said, giving a playful nudge, “They're holding up pretty damn well.”

“You girls did an incredible job,” the former vice president added, “Seriously. This place is gorgeous. The vibe, the booths, the stage... It’s better than anything we ever pulled off.”

The ex-secretary gave a small, warm laugh. “And the emceeing? That was professional-level stuff. Who knew Mumei had a flair for the stage?” she chuckled.

“Hey!” Mumei said, mock-offended, “I’ll take that as a compliment!”

Baelz beamed, her voice softening just a little. “It’s really, really great to see you all again,” the red haired girl beamed, looking at each of her seniors longingly, “We really missed you.”

The ex-president placed a hand on her shoulder. “I always knew you wouldn’t let us down, Bae. None of you would.”

Baelz’s grin wobbled slightly at the edges, but she straightened up, pride blooming in her chest. “Thanks, Senpai.”

Irys, already fishing her phone out from her pocket, lifted it up. “Okay, okay, before the tears start coming, let’s take a group photo! Who knows when will be the next time we meet?”

Everyone nodded, immediately shuffling together, Kronii and Mumei tugging Fauna and Sana into place, the past and present council members laughing and bumping shoulders.

Irys spotted a classmate nearby, eagerly asking if she could help them snap a photo. Once her classmate agreed, the vice-president rushed to join the others as they all posed.

“One, two, three, say cheese!” the classmate called out.

“Cheese!” everybody exclaimed as the camera flash blinked.

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Meanwhile, Cecilia was swimming through the crowds, trying to locate her friends near the stalls. Her eyes flicked around until she spotted Raora and Bijou near a food booth, waving at her with wide, excited smiles. Cecilia perked up, relief washing over her. She then began to make her way toward them, only to find herself intercepted.

A sudden flurry of footsteps surrounded her, and before she could react, a group of first-year girls had swarmed around her like moths to a flame. Most of them she didn’t even recognize. They beamed up at her, eyes glittering with excitement.

“Your performance was amazing, senpai!”

“Can we take a selfie?”

“You looked so cool out there!”

“You look great in that suit, senpai!”

“Is it true you’ve been playing since you were little?”

Cecilia blinked, caught off guard by the juniors around her. “Ah, thank you,” she said, trying to smile politely, “I’m really glad you enjoyed it—um, if you’ll excuse me—”

But no matter how she angled her steps or tilted her shoulders, they clung around her, tossing compliments, questions, and giggles her way. She didn’t want to be rude, but the flattery was getting overwhelming. She was only a few meters away from her friends and yet, she was completely stuck. It was then when someone grabbed her hand.

“Eh—!” Cecilia yelped as she was yanked backwards out of the crowd, spinning around just in time to catch sight of the person who’d pulled her away.

It was Gigi.

The pigtailed girl gave the crowd of juniors a toothy grin. “Sorry, guys,” she said with a wave, “But she’s busy.”

Cecilia’s face heated up. “You could’ve said something instead of dragging me,” she mumbled, but there was a hint of amusement behind her voice.

“Hey, you should be thanking me. It looked like you were gonna drown in there,” Gigi said, completely unbothered as she continued dragging her towards the group. Cecilia let herself be pulled along, still flustered but grateful.

“Finally!” Raora called as they approached, “Took you long enough, Miss Superstar.”

“She’s so popular now. You’re getting as much attention as ReGLOSS,” Fuwawa chimed in, smiling sweetly as she gestured slightly with her chin.

Sure enough, a few meters away, the ReGLOSS girls were surrounded by a crowd of fans—students eagerly chatting and snapping photos with them.

Gigi scoffed, arms crossed as she glared back at the cluster of first-years she saved Cecilia from. “Maybe she shouldn’t have worn a suit if she didn’t want to get swarmed like that...”

Cecilia turned to her, crossing her arms. “Oi,” she replied, eyebrows raised, “You helped pick it out, remember?”

Gigi didn’t answer, as she took a sudden interest in something the distance. Bijou raised an eyebrow knowingly at the exchange but said nothing.

“I’m thirsty,” Shiori announced, fanning herself slightly, “Too much crowd, not enough hydration.”

“Oh!” Nerissa perked up, pointing, “There’s a bubble tea stand near the pond. Saw it on the way in.”



“Perfect,” Bijou said, “Let’s go before the queue gets too long!”

Cecilia smiled as the group started moving. Her heart was still light from the performance, her hand still tingling where Gigi had grabbed it. She turned to the pigtailed girl, who was walking beside her casually, just a step behind the rest of their friends.

The perfectionist glanced down, then looked back at Gigi. “Hey,” she said softly.

“Hm?” Gigi tilted her head.

“Thanks,” Cecilia said. Her voice wasn’t loud, but the sincerity in it was unmistakable.

Gigi blinked. “For what?” Gigi asked, sounding a little confused.

“For... being there. Throughout this whole violin thing,” Cecilia’s eyes dropped to the ground, “Your advice, your cheering, your stupid thumbs-ups—it helped. More than you know.”

Gigi let out a short laugh, kicking at a stray pebble as they walked. “I didn’t do much. I just yelled from the crowd,” the blonde grinned, glancing sideways, her grin lopsided, “Why are you giving me so much credit?”

Cecilia opened her mouth, then hesitated. Her mind went back to the moment on stage when her music faltered, when she looked into the crowd and saw not her mother’s empty seat but Gigi’s radiant smile.

She remembered the spark in her chest. The way the music had surged forward again, brighter, fuller. The way she’d realized she wasn’t just playing for herself anymore.

Her cheeks flushed.

“I...” she trailed off. That feeling from earlier was too complicated to explain—too big, too delicate to put into words while walking next to the very person who caused it.

So she tucked it away, brushing her hair behind her ear as she turned away from Gigi. “Oh, it's nothing.”

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It was nearly ten o'clock. The jubilee celebration had reached its end. After a full day of performances, laughter, applause, and celebration, the once-bustling park grounds were beginning to empty. Stalls were packing up, lights dimming, and the cool evening breeze rolled in like a gentle curtain call.

It had been an exciting, unforgettable day, but like all things, the fun had to come to an end.

Back at home, Fauna and Cecilia stepped through the front door, the warm light of the entryway welcoming them back. Fauna kicked off her shoes first, stretching her arms above her head as she sighed in contentment.

“Today was great,” she said, slipping off her bag, “I don’t think I’ve laughed that hard in ages.”

Cecilia, trailing behind her, let out a tired breath. “Mm... we really pulled it off.”

Fauna chuckled. “You should’ve heard the stories one of my seniors told us earlier at the park—something about a fake snake prank in her college dorm showers,” she remarked, “Bae nearly cried from laughing.”

Cecilia gave a sleepy smile. “Wish I could’ve heard that,” she mumbled as she made her way to the living room and flopped onto the couch like a ragdoll. Her hair splayed across a cushion as she let her limbs go limp.

Fauna followed after her, shaking her head with an amused smile. “You should go take a shower. I don’t even want to imagine how sweltering it was, wearing that suit since this afternoon.”

Cecilia groaned, face half-buried in the cushion. “I’ll do it later,” she yawned.

“Suit yourself,” Fauna said, placing her bag down near the entryway. She rolled her shoulders before her phone buzzed on the side table, the screen lighting up.

Fauna reached for the device absentmindedly, but as she read the message, she paused. Her eyebrows rose as her expression shifted.

From the couch, Cecilia turned her head slightly, still halfway buried in the cushions. “Who texted?”

Fauna glanced at her, hesitating before speaking. “You might want to check your phone.”

Cecilia blinked, sitting up slowly. Her brows furrowed as she reached into her bag and pulled out her phone. A single notification blinked on the screen.

### *Family Group Chat (3 New Messages)*

She stared at it, barely registering what she was seeing. Her family never used that chat.

A chill of uncertainty ran up her spine as she tapped it open, and then her eyes widened, her heart skipping a beat when she read the messages at the bottom.

*Dad: Good evening girls.*

*Dad: Your mother and I are stopping by in town next week.*

*Dad: Let's have dinner together once we settle in* 👍👍

Cecilia froze, her breath catching in her throat as the words sank in.

## Chapter End Notes

sorry for the long wait everybody 🙏🙏🙏 i would've uploaded this last week but I've been pretty busy as of late (and will be busier in the coming weeks) anywaysss hope you enjoyed this chapter! we're finally entering the cece arc gaspppp

## Someone Perfect

*Dad: Good evening girls.*

*Dad: Your mother and I are stopping by in town next week.*

*Dad: Let's have dinner together once we settle in 👍👍*

Cecilia's throat felt dry as she stared at the message her father had sent. This felt... remarkably sudden. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to feel. Excited? Nervous? Maybe a little apprehensive?

She felt none of those in their entirety, however. Perhaps the feeling in her chest was simply a twisted mix of all of them, buried beneath... everything.

The perfectionist's thumbs hovered over the screen, but she didn't type anything. "I'll go shower," Fauna says suddenly, already preparing to head for the bathroom before pausing at the hallway entrance to glance at her sister, "You okay?"

Cecilia snapped out of her daze, meeting Fauna's eyes with a small smile. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Fauna didn't look convinced. "Are you sure?" Fauna asks her younger sister, "You're...not bothered by—"

"No," Cecilia replied too quickly, "Why would I be?"

Fauna offered a quiet nod before slipping off toward the bathroom. A moment later, Cecilia heard the water running.

Now alone, she sank into the soft cushions of the couch, sighing. She felt her gaze drift towards the framed family photo resting on the TV console—her father's idea, taken just before their parents moved to Europe four years ago. She hadn't seen either of them in person since then. Her mother's sharp eyes and thin smile stared back at her from behind the glass.

Her phone then vibrated once more as another notification from her family group chat popped up.

*Dad: Good evening girls.*

*Dad: Your mother and I are stopping by in town next week.*

*Dad: Let's have dinner together once we settle in* 👍👍

*Fauna: Sure! We'll cook something nice :D*

*Dad:* 👍👍

Cecilia waited, watching for the read receipt to appear under her father's messages. But her mother's profile icon remained dim. Unread.

Figures.

She put her phone aside as she laid across the couch, grabbing and hugging one of the throw pillows.

Already, her mind was going into overdrive. Four years was a long time, and she and her parents had much to catch up on. Cecilia chuckled, knowing her father would have many humorous stories prepared about their time in Europe. Her mother on the other hand...

What would she even say when they met again? Cecilia was never close to her mother, and small talk between the both of them was a rarity. She could talk about what she's been up to recently—talk about the new friends she had made and how she adjusted to high school life.

However, a thought clawed at her from the back of her mind: Would her mother even care to hear about any of it?

Would she care that Cecilia had been a class representative? That she joined the student council? That she performed at the Jubilee, the biggest school event of the year?

Cecilia stared up at the ceiling, her jaw clenched. Maybe she could talk about Gigi, and how the two of them started out as rivals, how they were constantly at each other's throats. Maybe that would catch her mother's attention. After all, Mrs. Murin had shown interest in their little 'rivalry', even asking Gigi for more details regarding their many competitions. If Gigi's mother could show that much interest, perhaps her own mother would be interested in hearing about her rival—the one girl who could get under her skin, challenge her, support her...

Cecilia snapped out of her thoughts before laughing under her breath bitterly. "Who am I kidding," she muttered.

She shut her eyes and shook the thoughts from her head, holding the throw pillow tighter against her chest. Cecilia clenched her eyes shut, as if forcing her brain to stop spiraling. She breathed out slowly through her nose, forcing the tightness in her chest to loosen.

“Not now,” she told herself, “You’re tired. You can think about this later.”

The living room was dim, as the sounds of the running shower water from the bathroom echoed throughout the house. The warmth of the couch and the softness of the pillow lulled her gently, and as her breathing steadied, the whirlwind of thoughts slowly drifted away. Her grip on the present slipped, and somewhere between the cool night air and the calm of her home, she drifted off as well.



## **ELEVEN YEARS AGO**

A five year old Cecilia Immergreen sat on her bed, adjusting the latest piece she had been learning on the electronic keyboard's music stand. Für Elise— it was a piece Cecilia had heard plenty of times, thanks to her kindergarten teacher, who had been playing it on the school's piano every lunch hour.

Cecilia flipped the score to the first page before turning on the keyboard and adjusting the volume. The young girl had found both the music book containing the piece, as well as the keyboard itself in the storeroom a few weeks ago. She assumed it belonged to her mother given how neatly everything had been packed away, almost forgotten. Still, no one stopped her when she dragged it out into her room. She did however, ask, just in case.

“Mom, can I use this?” she had asked, holding up the sheet music like it was something fragile.

Her mother barely glanced up from her laptop at the kitchen table.

“Yes,” Ms. Immergreen said, her voice flat and distracted, already typing again before the word had even fully left her mouth. That was all. No “*Are you interested in music?*” or “*Do you want me to help you learn?*”

Just a quiet, distracted yes and then nothing more.

So Cecilia taught herself. She figured out the notes using the diagrams in the book, cross-referenced rhythms and notations using her mother's iPad. And every day after school, once the house settled into its usual quiet, she sat at the keyboard and played. Over, and over, and over again.

Despite her age, Cecilia had always had a strange focus for things like this. If she wanted to learn something, she didn't stop until she did. Whether it was spelling, drawing animals, or memorizing lines for the preschool play, she put her whole heart into it. And music... music felt special.

Despite the immense progress she made in just a few weeks, her mother never asked how she was getting along with it. Never poked her head in to listen. Never commented.

Cecilia turned back to the keyboard, brushing her bangs out of her eyes as she placed her small hands over the keys. She was determined to get the middle section right this time.

And so, the young girl hovered her ring finger over the E note before playing the familiar melody of Für Elise. The song itself had a pretty memorable tune that Cecilia found calming and strangely sad.

Her feelings on the piece were all but verified when she asked her kindergarten teacher about its origins. Legend has it that, Beethoven, the man behind the piece, had written the song for a young lady he had fallen in love with—Elise. He had composed the song such that even a novice pianist like Elise could play it easily. However, when he found out that she was to be married to another man, he wrote the rest of the song to make it nearly impossible for her to continue.

Cecilia hadn't stopped thinking about that story ever since. She once saw the piece as beautiful—tragic, even. But after learning the full story, it recontextualised everything. She couldn't help but find it funny now. Not '*haha*' funny, but pretty ironic that such an iconic, widely admired piece of music was, at its core, written out of pettiness.

It made the ominous middle section feel less like a romantic outburst and more like a tantrum. Beethoven had wanted to immortalise a heartbreak, but he also wanted to prove a point. And Cecilia could respect that.

Her fingers, still small and unsure, brushed along the score delicately. She hit a wrong note, winced, and tried again. And again. No tantrums, no giving up. Just focus. Effort. Precision.

Because even if no one ever asked how she was doing, even if her mother never noticed, Cecilia would make sure she got it right anyway.

Cecilia took a deep breath before switching on the in-built metronome. After getting a feel of the rhythm, she hovered her ring finger over the E note once more.

She began again, keeping her movements slow and steady while letting muscle memory guide her.

This time, she made it to the fast middle section. Her fingers danced across the keys in a blur of motion, not flawless, not perfect—but for the first time, she made it to the end of the segment without slipping up. Until, right before the transition back to the main theme, she fumbled. She had applied much pressure on the wrong key. As such, the momentum she had been building up collapsed in an instant.

She blinked, hands still on the keys... then she smiled. It was progress. One step closer to perfecting the piece. She could feel it. Her hands were getting used to the nature of the piece and her mind was catching up with the pace of the middle section. Soon, she would be able to play the whole song through without slipping once.

Suddenly, someone knocked on her door. She turned to face her bedroom's entrance, confused. That was rare. No one ever knocked on her door. Especially not her mother.

The door cracked open. And there she was, Ms. Immergreen, still in her work attire, blazer unbuttoned, dark circles under her eyes. Her presence was enough to make Cecilia straighten up, her posture suddenly perfect.

"You were playing on my old keyboard?" her mother asked tiredly. It seemed like she had a long day at work.

"Yes, mom," Cecilia replied, still breathless from playing. Her heart thumped, hopeful. Maybe she'd say something. Maybe she'd say Cecilia was good. That she sounded nice. That Für Elise was a hard song for someone so young and that she was impressed.

But the praise never came.

"I see," was all her mother said.

Cecilia's fingers flinched slightly on her lap, but she kept her expression calm.

"Anyway," Ms. Immergreen continued, "I came to tell you that we'll be going out on Christmas Eve."

Cecilia blinked. "We are?"

Her mother nodded, already glancing at her watch. "A coworker I've been seeing invited me. He's taking his daughter too. I said I'd bring you along."

"...To where?"

"The Christmas Carnival in town. It's apparently quite well put-together this year."

Cecilia blinked. She and her mother never did anything for Christmas. At most, they'd go to her grandparents' for a quiet, routine dinner.

This was... new. Strange.

The young girl tilted her head curiously. "What's the occasion?" she asked, wide-eyed, "I thought we were going to Grandma's for dinner, like always?"



“Well, there's been a change of plans,” her mother said plainly before smiling weakly, “Besides, he's been pestering me about this carnival for weeks now.”

A Christmas carnival?

Cecilia had never even heard her mother mention someone new, let alone someone she was seeing. But still, she nodded. “Okay.”

As her mother turned and left the room, Cecilia sat still for a moment, still processing the strange announcement. She hadn't known her mother was seeing someone new.

Then again, there was a lot she didn't know.

However, the other half of her mind that wasn't lingering on these new developments was already ablaze with anticipation.

A Christmas carnival.

The very idea felt unfamiliar to her, but exciting nonetheless. As far back as she could remember, her mother had never taken her out for anything fun. No impromptu trips to the park, no movie nights at the cinema, not even a simple dessert run. Outings were always purposeful and structured, limited to events like medical checkups or family obligations.

But this? This was something else. Something new.

A small smile crept onto Cecilia's face. She had overheard kids at school gushing about the annual Christmas carnival and how the air smelled like almonds and buttery popcorn, how the lights shimmered like stars, how the rides spun so fast it felt like flying. She had never been herself, but it always sounded like something out of a storybook.

The thought that she might finally experience it, with her mother no less, filled her chest with a quiet sort of giddy warmth.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe... this time, she'd get to see her mother's smile for real.

Cecilia looked down at her hands, still resting on the keyboard. She closed the lid gently, stood, and walked over to the window. The night outside was dark and atmospheric, the wind cool and gentle.

For the first time in a while, she felt like there was something to look forward to. She hugged her arms around herself, smiling. “Hehe, I can't wait for Christmas,” Cecilia smiles to herself.

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Two months had passed since Ms. Immergreen had first told her about the plan, and in all that time, the excitement bubbling in Cecilia's chest never once faded. If anything, it grew stronger with each passing day.

Every chance she got, Cecilia found herself on her mother's iPad, looking up everything she could about the carnival. The official website displayed photos of beautiful light displays, tall swaying Christmas trees, game booths lined with plushies, and food stalls offering classic Christmas treats like candy canes, mini-log cakes and much more.

She even memorized the map of the carnival grounds, planned what she wanted to see first, what snacks she wanted to try, and what rides she was brave enough to attempt.

But as the date crept closer, another thought began to occupy her mind— her mother's coworker and his daughter. What would they be like?

Her mother had mentioned in passing that the girl was about Cecilia's age. "Six, maybe seven," she had said, barely looking up from her laptop.

Cecilia found herself wondering more and more about what this girl she would be meeting on the day of the carnival. Would she be chatty? Shy? Would the both of them get along?

And the coworker... Cecilia tried to imagine the kind of man who could get her mother to agree to an evening out. She couldn't picture it, no matter how hard she tried.

Still, she held onto the hope that this evening would be one to remember. That it wouldn't be like the quiet dinners at her grandparents' house, with polite conversation and long silences. This time, she wanted to feel like she was part of something fun. The thought of it kept her heart light and full as the day drew nearer.

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Before long, it was Christmas Eve.

Cecilia was already dressed, her coat buttoned neatly over her festive red sweater, a soft scarf wrapped around her neck. The little hair ribbon her grandfather had given her last year sat perfectly atop her white-green locks, tied with extra care that morning.

She'd been ready for half an hour now, almost thirty full minutes ahead of when her mother's coworker, Mr. Ceres, and his daughter were supposed to arrive. But she didn't mind the wait.

Cecilia knelt by her tote bag one last time, double-checking its contents: her lip balm tucked into a side pocket, two pairs of heat packs sealed and ready for use, a pack of tissues in case the cold got too biting. Everything was in its place.

Then came the doorbell.

Her heart gave a small jump. Eager, she hurried out of her room, joining her mother in the living room as Ms. Immergreen rose to answer the door.

The girl hid behind a wall as she watched her mother greet the people on the other end of the main entrance. When the door opened, a man with fluffy green hair and a young girl with silky, flowy green hair stood in the doorway, both of them bundled up against the winter cold.

Mr. Ceres' green hair was slightly ruffled from the wind, and his scarf was looped loosely around his neck, his cheerful grin unbothered by the cold. Beside him, the young girl peeked out shyly from behind his coat, her silky green hair spilling over her shoulders, her eyes wide with curiosity. She clutched at the hem of her sleeve, her bright eyes darting curiously around the entryway.

"Merry Christmas," Mr. Ceres said warmly, his voice carrying a sense of friendliness, "I hope we're not too early. Fauna here's been pestering me all afternoon about when we're leaving."

He placed a hand on his daughter's head as she giggled in embarrassment.

Ms. Immergreen, as composed as ever, bowed her head in greeting, the faintest of smiles forming on her lips. "Good evening, Ceres. Merry Christmas. Don't worry, you're right on time," she says as she glances over her shoulder, "Cecilia, come greet them."

Cecilia hesitated for just a moment, smoothing the front of her coat as she stepped out from behind the wall. The ribbon atop her white-green hair sat perfectly, not a strand out of place. Her scarf was tightly wrapped around her neck, her posture immaculate. She gave a small, polite smile, hands clasped in front of her.

Mr. Ceres' eyes lit up at the sight of her. "Well, hello Cecilia... just look at you! All ready to go, huh? Very responsible," Mr. Ceres greeted Cecilia before looking at Ms. Immergreen, "Alrighty, should we get going? We don't wanna miss too much of the carnival now, do we?"

But before they could set off, Ms. Immergreen spoke again, her tone still calm but firm. "Ceres, would you mind giving me five minutes? There's a spreadsheet I need you to review with me before we head out. It's the one for the year-end summary."

Mr. Ceres blinked, then laughed warmly and unbothered. "Dear, it's Christmas Eve! That spreadsheet's not going anywhere tonight."

"It'll only take five minutes," Ms. Immergreen said, already turning toward her study.

He shook his head with a grin, hands raised in surrender. "All right, all right... I can't say no to that face," he added flirtatiously as he winked at her.

With that, the two adults disappeared down the hall, leaving Cecilia and Fauna standing together in the living room. The room felt too quiet all of a sudden, the ticking of the wall

clock filling in the silence between the both of them.

Fauna shifted slightly, glancing at Cecilia from beneath her eyelashes. Then, with a grin, she broke the silence. “Did you see that? My dad’s flirting is so embarrassing. He thinks he’s so cool,” Fauna jokes before imitating the way her father winked earlier.

Cecilia blinked, then giggled despite herself, some of her nerves easing. “Yeah... it kind of was.”

Fauna stepped closer, tugging her scarf down to reveal a friendly smile. “I’m Fauna,” she said, offering her hand, small and mittened.

“I’m Cecilia,” Cecilia replied, taking the hand gently and giving it a light shake.

With the introductions out of the way, Fauna let her gaze wander around the living room, taking in the spotless shelves, the carefully arranged newspapers on the coffee table and the symmetrical cushions on the couch. “Wow, your house is really neat,” she said, sounding pretty impressed.

Cecilia gave a small shrug, glancing towards the hallway where her mother had disappeared. “My mother likes things to be neat,” she said simply, her tone making it clear that was just how things always were.

Fauna tilted her head, her eyes twinkling with interest. “Do you think... Maybe you could show me your room while we wait?”

Cecilia tilted her head, fiddling with her sleeves before nodding. “Sure, right this way,” Cecilia smiled warmly.

Cecilia led Fauna down the hallway, their small footsteps light against the shiny wooden floor. As they reached her room, Cecilia pushed the door open, revealing a space that mirrored the neatness of the living room. The walls were painted a pale red and the shelves lined with neatly stacked books and small keepsakes arranged neatly. A small potted plant sat on the window sill, its leaves turned toward the evening light. Cecilia’s bed was perfectly made, the blanket tucked in tight, and her desk was clear except for the electronic keyboard that sat atop it, the score for Für Elise still resting on the stand.

Fauna stepped in, her eyes sweeping over everything with interest. “Wow... your room’s really nice. It’s much neater than mine,” she remarked, glancing over her shoulder at Cecilia with a small grin.

Cecilia followed her inside, closing the door softly behind them. She gave her a shrug. “I like to keep my things in place,” Cecilia says with a small smile, “Plus, neat things make my mom happy... I think.”

Fauna nodded, before wandering closer to the desk, her gaze landing on the keyboard. Her face lit up with curiosity. “Do you play the piano?” the older girl asked, pointing at the instrument.

“A little,” Cecilia replied, brushing a speck of dust off the edge of the keyboard as she spoke.

Fauna’s grin widened. “Ooh! Could you show me? Pretty please?” Fauna requested, clasping her hands together.

Cecilia hesitated, but something about Fauna’s eagerness made it hard to refuse. She pulled out her chair and sat down, adjusting the music score. For a moment, she simply stared at the keys, fingers hovering above them, letting herself focus. Then, slowly, she began to play.

The familiar opening notes of Für Elise filled the room, gentle and delicate. Her fingers moved smoothly over the keys, the melody flowing as naturally as her own breath. She reached the middle section, the part that had challenged her so much in the past, and pressed on.

The pace quickened, the rhythm maintaining its lively nature. Her small hands worked hard to keep up, and though she slipped slightly, she kept going. By the time she struck the final chord, the sound echoed off the walls, before the room settled into another silence.

When she turned around, Fauna’s eyes were wide, shining with admiration. “That was so impressive!” Fauna exclaimed, clapping her hands softly, “You play so well!”

Cecilia blinked, caught off guard. “You really think so?” she asked, unsure whether to believe it.

“Of course!” Fauna said, her voice full of certainty, “That was amazing... especially that part where you went DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUNNNNNNN! I couldn’t do that even if I tried a thousand times!”

Cecilia felt something warm spread in her chest at Fauna’s words. Praise wasn’t something she often received, and hearing it now made her heart ache in a way she hadn’t expected. She glanced at the door, her smile faltering just a little.

“Do you mean it?” Cecilia asked, her cheeks dusted with pink, “I wouldn’t call it amazing...”

“But it was!” Fauna says, clasping the younger girl’s hands in herself, “Anyone could see that!”

Cecilia embraced the warmth of Fauna’s hands and the sincerity behind her words. No one had ever said something like that to her, not about her playing, not about anything she had worked so hard on.

Fauna beamed, her eyes bright. “Your mom must be super impressed whenever she hears you play like that!”

The pink in Cecilia’s cheeks began to fade as she looked away, back at the keys beneath her fingers. “She’s probably heard me,” Cecilia replies softly, “But she’s never really commented.”

Fauna tilted her head, confusion flickering across her face. “Not even once?”

Cecilia gave a small shrug, trying to seem unbothered. “No. Maybe it’s because I still have a long way to go before I perfect it. She probably doesn’t think it’s worth mentioning yet.”

For a moment, Fauna simply stared at her, as though trying to make sense of it. Finally, she nodded slowly, though her brow furrowed. “That... makes sense, I guess,” she said, though she still sounded uncertain.

Before either of them could say more, they heard Mr. Ceres’s cheerful voice calling up from the living room. “Girls! Ready to head out?”

Cecilia straightened, pushing her chair back and standing. “We should get going,” she said, offering Fauna a small smile. She smoothed down her coat and adjusted the ribbon in her hair, taking one last glance at the keyboard before leading the way out of the room.

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Upon reaching the mall grounds, Cecilia felt her breath catch in her throat. The Christmas Carnival revealed itself before her and it was far grander than she had imagined. Strings of twinkling lights criss crossed the open square, illuminating the snow-dusted grounds. Everywhere she looked, families moved about cheerfully, wrapped in scarves and coats of every color. Children darted between the crowd, playing tag and laughing as their boots crunched over the fresh snow.

Cecilia took a deep breath, and the sweet air filled her senses. The aroma of cookies, sweets, and hot chocolate seemed to float on the breeze in a way that made her stomach rumble hungrily.

But as magical as it all was, it was also crowded. People moved from stall to stall, queuing at food carts or pointing excitedly at the towering Christmas tree that glimmered against the night sky. Mr. Ceres glanced over his shoulder, smiling at the girls. “Alright, stay close, okay? Wouldn’t want to lose either of you in this crowd.”

Without a second's hesitation, Fauna reached out and took Cecilia’s hand, her small fingers wrapping warmly around hers. Surprised but grateful, Cecilia met her gaze and smiled, feeling a little steadier amidst the bustling crowd.

“Do you want to try the games first?” Fauna asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she gestured toward a cluster of colorful stalls lined with prizes—plushies and toys of all shapes and sizes. “There’s, like, a hundred different ones!”

Cecilia blinked, still trying to take it all in. The lights, the sounds, the laughter... all of it felt so overwhelming in the best possible way. “O-Okay,” she stammered, nodding as her awe

slowly gave way to eager curiosity, “Let’s... let’s go see!”

Hand in hand, the two girls began weaving through the crowd, while Mr. Ceres called out to them. “Don’t stray too far, girls!” Mr. Ceres says, before pointing at a seating area, “We’ll wait for you by the hot chocolate stand!”

“Okay!” Fauna replied, grinning as she guided Cecilia along.

Cecilia felt her heart race with a mix of excitement as she and Fauna made their way from stall to stall. The carnival seemed endless. It was a maze of flashing lights, colorful banners, and laughter that filled the air.

Each game they played offered a new challenge, and Cecilia took on each one with laser focus, as if winning a plush toy or tiny trinket was a matter of life or death. At the ring toss, she clenched her jaw, adjusting her stance after every throw. The first few rings missed their mark, clinking harmlessly against the bottles, but when she finally landed one, she felt a jolt of satisfaction shoot through her. She couldn’t help but glance sideways at Fauna. “See? See? I can do it too,” she beams at the older girl.

At the shooting gallery, she took even longer than most kids, squinting one eye and lining up each shot with painstaking care. The carnival worker raised an eyebrow at how serious she looked, but said nothing as she knocked down target after target, each small success feeding the competitive fire within her. Fauna, on the other hand, played more casually, giggling as she aimed without much thought, celebrating whether she hit or missed.

When they reached the fishing game, where paper fish floated lazily in a small pool, Cecilia crouched low, analyzing the movement of the fish before picking up the magnetic rod. She bit her lip in concentration, determined to swipe up the one with the highest points printed on its back. Fauna watched, hugging her stuffed rabbit, her eyes twinkling with amusement at how intensely Cecilia was taking the game.

Eventually, when Fauna noticed Cecilia pouting at how many fishes the older girl had caught, she was unable to keep it in any longer. Fauna leaned closer and asked with a laugh, “Cecilia, why are you trying so hard? It’s just a game! Look at you... you’re so serious about it!”

Cecilia froze for a second, blinking as if the question hadn’t occurred to her. She straightened up, looking away with a tiny huff, her cheeks a little pink from both the cold and the embarrassment of being called out. “I just... I can’t lose to you,” she said, the words coming out more childish than she had meant them to. But once they were out, she didn’t take them back.

Fauna laughed again, bumping Cecilia’s arm playfully. “You’re so funny, Cecilia!” she said warmly, “It’s just a game, you know...”

Cecilia felt a strange tightness in her chest at that, unsure whether to feel embarrassed. But she let herself smile, her competitive edge dulling slightly.

The two continued playing and competing for a while longer, moving from one stall to another. Sometimes they won, sometimes they didn't. But with each passing game, Cecilia felt the night shine brighter somehow, as if her world had expanded beyond the usual edges of her mundane life..

Their little arms grew heavy with small prizes of all sorts—a plushed tapir, a rubber ball, a tiny snow globe filled with glitter and much more.

The air was cooler now and the crowds weren't as dense. Fauna slowed her steps, hugging her rabbit close as she breathed out a puff of mist into the chilly air. “Wanna go find my dad and your mom?” she asked, glancing around at the crowd.

Cecilia nodded, pushing her hair back from her face and tucking it behind one ear. “Yeah, okay,” she replied softly, still half-distracted by the glow of lights and everything around her. Together, they started making their way through the bustling crowd, their small figures weaving between the sea of carnival-goers.

Before long, the two girls spotted their parents seated at a small table near the hot chocolate stand as steam rose from their cups. The glow from nearby Christmas lights made everything look warm and cozy despite the chilly weather. Mr. Ceres was the first to notice them emerging from the crowd, his expression brightening as he waved a hand.

“Ah, there you two are!” he said cheerfully, pushing out a chair with his foot, “Come, take a seat. Look at the menu and pick out a drink. They’ve got all sorts of scrumptious ones here.”

The girls settled into the chairs, brushing away snowflakes from their coats. Fauna eagerly grabbed one of the menus, her eyes sparkling as she scanned the options. “Wow, everything looks so yummy,” she observed, her breath fogging the plastic as she leaned closer.

She then turned to Cecilia, eyes wide with excitement. “What do you wanna try?” Fauna asked the younger girl, “I heard the signature hot chocolate’s the best! They even have little marshmallows on top!”

Cecilia’s gaze darted all over the menu. There were so many choices. Peppermint cocoa, cinnamon-spiced milk tea, caramel lattes, and much, much more. The descriptions themselves sounded mouth-watering, and she felt her heart beat faster with excitement at the thought of trying them. “I... I think I’ll get the hot chocolate too,” she said after some hesitation, still slightly overwhelmed by the sheer variety of beverages available.

Mr. Ceres called over to the vendor and placed the order, and soon enough, the girls were cradling warm paper cups in their hands. The sweet scent of cocoa filled the air, as the two girls inhaled its alluring aroma.

Cecilia took a careful sip, her eyes widening at how rich and creamy the drink was, while Fauna grinned over the rim of her cup, clearly delighted.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ceres and Ms. Immergreen had resumed their conversation, the two adults’ voices dropping slightly as they fell back into office talk. Ms. Immergreen was clearly engrossed, her brows being slightly furrowed as she went over numbers and timelines in a



hushed voice, her hands occasionally gesturing as if she were sketching invisible charts in the air. Mr. Ceres listened patiently for a bit, nodding, before he gave a soft chuckle and leaned back in his chair.

“You know, maybe we should talk about something else for a change,” he said lightly, glancing at the girls, “Like these two. Are you enjoying the carnival, girls?”

Cecilia lifted her gaze from her drink, her cheeks still warm from the chocolate. “Yes! It’s my first time at a carnival like this,” she said honestly, “It’s really fun.”

Fauna nodded eagerly in agreement, hugging her rabbit plush tighter. Ms. Immergreen, however, tried to steer the conversation back, her mind clearly still focused on work. “That’s good, but we really ought to review those numbers before it gets too late, Ceres. We’re cutting it close as it is,” Ms. Immergreen says, staring at Mr. Ceres seriously.

However, Mr. Ceres shook his head gently, a smile forming on his lips. “Come on, dear, it’s Christmas Eve. We can go over the numbers later tonight, after we’ve had a bit of fun with the kids!”

Ms. Immergreen hesitated, her lips parting as if to argue, but the earnestness in his tone, and the hopeful glances from both Fauna and Cecilia softened her. She exhaled slowly, her shoulders relaxing just a tiny bit. “Alright,” Ms. Immergreen said at last, her voice still carrying some reluctance, “But only for a little while.”

Mr. Ceres grinned, clearly pleased. “That’s the spirit.”

And with that, the little group rose from the table, ready to dive back into the carnival’s festivities. Cecilia stayed close to Fauna as they wandered from booth to booth.

The first game they tried was a darts game. Fauna, with some help from her father, managed to hit a bullseye on her third throw, earning her a small plush bear. Cecilia, after getting a boost from her mother, was determined not to be outdone. She concentrated hard, adjusting her stance after every attempt. Though it took her several tries, she finally succeeded and felt a wave of pride when the booth attendant handed her a little keychain shaped like a snowflake.

The group moved on to the shooting gallery the girls went to earlier. This time, both Mr. Ceres and Ms. Immergreen joined in. Mr. Ceres laughed heartily whenever his shots went wide, while Ms. Immergreen managed to hit the targets with a precision that surprised even Cecilia. Fauna cheered them both on, clapping every time the bell rang to signal a hit.

Game after game, Cecilia found herself swept up in the joy of it all. There was something exhilarating about competing with Fauna and the adults, and the rare sight of her mother actually participating in something fun. Cecilia couldn’t remember a night where she had laughed so much, or felt so happy in general.

Eventually, their wandering brought them to the heart of the carnival: a giant Christmas tree that towered over the grounds. Strings of lights wrapped around its massive body, and hundreds of colorful slips of paper fluttered gently from its branches—wishes written and

hung by visitors. The atmosphere was extra magical as people penned down their hopes and dreams beneath the glorious festive tree.

Cecilia stared up at the star atop the tree, the sight of it filling her with awe. She took one of the slips of paper offered at the booth nearby and a pencil, but as she stared at the blank space, her mind went equally blank. What did she want to wish for? Around her, the others were busy with their own papers. She heard Fauna's voice nearby, thoughtful and a little unsure.

"I don't know what to wish for..." Fauna said, frowning down at her paper.

Mr. Ceres ruffled his daughter's hair gently. "That's okay, dear. You're young. You'll have lots of chances to make many more wishes over the years. Just pick something fun for now!"

Fauna brightened at that, tapping the pencil against her chin. After a moment of deep concentration, she grinned. "Okay! I wish to see a real tapir one day!"

Mr. Ceres let out a warm chuckle. "A tapir, huh? That's a good one."

Cecilia smiled at their exchange, but her own paper remained blank. She looked over at her mother, who stood a little apart from the group, her gaze distant as if lost in thought. Gathering her courage, Cecilia approached. "Mom," she asked quietly, "What should I write?"

Ms. Immergreen blinked, as if pulled from some faraway place, and looked down at Cecilia. "That's up to you. The wishing tree is just superstition anyway," Ms. Immergreen replied plainly.

Cecilia's shoulders sagged a little at the answer as she stole another glance at Mr. Ceres and Fauna, who were busy scribbling down their wishes. She hesitated, then tried again. "But... if you were going to write something, what would it be?" Cecilia asked, shifting around on her feet.

Ms. Immergreen was silent for a moment, thoughtful. Then she said, "If I were you? I'd wish for something practical," Ms. Immergreen replied, "Like doing well in your studies. That's something that'll serve you well."

Cecilia's eyes lit up, the idea striking a chord with her. "That's a neat idea," she said, quickly scribbling it down.

*'I wish to do well in my studies.'*

She looked up at her mother with a small, determined smile. "Hehe, I finally have a wish..." the young girl beamed, "... and I'll work hard to make it come true!"

To her surprise, Ms. Immergreen's expression softened, and for the first time in what felt like ages, she offered Cecilia a genuine, gentle smile. "Good," her mother said approvingly, "If you want something, it's good to put it down in writing."

"Why?" Cecilia asked, tilting her head curiously, still not used to the expression on her mother's face.

"Because," Ms. Immergreen replied, placing a hand on her daughter's shoulder, "It's a great way of setting a goal for yourself. And goals are what help us move forward."

Cecilia gazed at the wish in her hand, her mother's words resonating with her greatly. And as she carefully hung it on the tree, her heart swelled with a resolve she hadn't felt before.

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Two years later, life looked very different for the young Cecilia Immergreen.

It felt like those two years had passed in the blink of an eye, yet so much had changed. After that Christmas carnival, a night that Cecilia would cherish for years to come, Mr. Ceres and Ms. Immergreen had grown closer. They would share more dinners together, go on more outings together, and eventually, there would be a quiet wedding. It wasn't a grand affair—the guest list consisted of family and a few friends, but to Cecilia, it felt like a huge deal.

Now, Mr. Ceres wasn't just the coworker her mother had been seeing. He was her stepfather. And Fauna wasn't just that nice girl she had met on Christmas Eve. She was her older sister.

After the wedding, they had moved into a new house, one that stood in a quiet neighborhood just a short walk from Cover Elementary—the new school Cecilia and Fauna were to attend. The house wasn't huge, but it was enough and everyone had their personal space.

Cecilia's new room had a window that overlooked the park across the street, and her desk sat right by it. It was perfect for catching the morning sun as she worked.

And Cecilia did work. From the moment she unpacked her books in that new room, she had thrown herself into her studies with a fiery resolve. The memory of that Christmas wish—the simple words she had written on that slip of paper, stayed with her. She kept a copy of it on her desk, and whenever she felt tired, she would glance at it, and it always gave her that little push she needed.

School became something of a mission. She approached every subject with care, every test with focus, every assignment with the mindset that she could do well, that she would do well. And slowly, it started to show. Her grades, which had always been solid, climbed higher. Teachers began to take notice, as did her classmates.

Yet, it wasn't just about getting good scores anymore. It was about keeping that promise to herself, that goal she had set under the glow of that Christmas tree. She wanted to be worthy of the wish she had made. She wanted to make her mother proud and see that rare expression her mother had offered her under the Christmas tree once more.

Fauna, now her supportive older sister, cheered her on through it all. They walked to school together each morning, Fauna chatting away about anything and everything, while Cecilia listened, her thoughts often half on her next quiz. But even as she worked hard, Cecilia found that her world felt a little brighter now. The house, the family dinners, the walks home from school with Fauna—they all made her feel grounded, made the hard work feel worth it.

Cecilia's first day at Cover Elementary went much better than she thought it would. The young girl had fears regarding the change of environment, and felt a little nervous when she made her way to her new school. She'd have to adjust to the school's atmosphere and settle in with a cohort of students she didn't know. Cecilia tried pushing these thoughts down, reminding herself that her learning came first and that she didn't necessarily need friends to survive elementary school. Despite this, her doubts and fears continued to linger.

On the first day, she had woken before her alarm went off, sitting at the edge of her bed with her uniform neatly ironed and ready, her school bag packed and repacked twice the night before. The memory of her Christmas wish was fresh in her mind, reminding her what she was here to do. "I'll work hard. I'll do well. I'll make Mom proud," Cecilia repeated to herself.

Fauna walked with her later that morning, chattering happily about what she'd heard about the school—the friendly teachers, the big library, the playground that everyone said was the best in town. Cecilia nodded along, but her mind was elsewhere, caught up in imagining how the day would go, hoping she wouldn't embarrass herself in front of her new classmates.

The school building loomed large as they approached, the white walls bright in the blazing sun. Fauna gave her an encouraging squeeze on the shoulder before they parted ways at the entrance. "You've got this, Cece! I'll see you at lunch, okay?"

Cecilia managed a small smile and nod before turning toward her classroom. "Alright."

Her first period was art, and as soon as she stepped into the room, she felt herself shrink a little at the sight of all the students already chatting, already at ease. She picked a seat near the window, unpacked her supplies, and tried not to fidget too much. When the teacher handed out the assignment, which was to paint something that made them happy—Cecilia froze. Her mind went blank as she stared at the empty page. The paints, the brushes... they all felt unfamiliar in her hands.

It was then that a girl slid into the seat beside her. She had bright pink hair that shone under the lights and bright yellow eyes. With a friendly smile, she nudged a palette toward Cecilia. "Hi! You look like you could help, hehe," the girl grinned, "I'm Raora Panthera by the way!"

Cecilia blinked at the gesture, feeling some of the tightness in her chest ease. "Thanks," Cecilia says gratefully, "I'm Cecilia Immergreen."

“No problem, Cecilia!” Raora said brightly, “Art’s more fun when you don’t stress too much about it. Here, I’ll show you how I mix the colors.”

With cheerful confidence, she dabbed her brush and showed Cecilia a simple way to blend the watercolors. The two girls ended up working side by side, chatting quietly about their favorite colors and what they were painting. Cecilia’s strokes grew more confident under Raora’s guidance, and by the end of class, she had managed to complete a painting of the Christmas tree from that night she treasured.

As the day went on, Raora stuck close, introducing Cecilia to others in their class, helping her figure out where to line up for lunch, even showing her the best spots to sit during break. Raora’s kindness didn’t stop there. Over the next few weeks, she would wave Cecilia over whenever she spotted her alone, or offer to partner up during class activities. When the teacher announced group projects, Raora always made sure Cecilia was included.

“Hey, we’re all going to play tag after school,” Raora said one afternoon, bouncing up and down excitedly, “Come on, it’ll be fun! You’ve got to meet the others, Shiori, Fuwawa, Mococo—they’re all super nice!”

Cecilia hesitated, her gaze shifting to the books in her bag. “I—I can’t. I have to finish my homework first,” she said, forcing a smile, “Maybe next time?”

Raora’s face fell for just a second before she recovered. “Okay. But next time for real, alright?” Raora pouted.

And so the pattern repeated. Raora would invite her out—to the park, to the arcade, to little get-togethers with their classmates, and Cecilia would gently refuse, always with the same reason. She buried herself in her studies, determined to climb higher, to prove that she could fulfill the wish she’d hung on that tree.

Yet at night, when she was lost in her thoughts, she would sometimes think about Raora’s stories of her adventures with their classmates—how they played hide-and-seek across the school grounds, how they shared snacks and laughed until their sides ached.

A little sting of loneliness would bloom in her chest, but she would shake it off. “This is my choice,” she’d remind herself, glancing at that slip of paper on her desk, “I have to keep to my wish. I have to make Mom proud.”

And so, as Raora grew closer with their other classmates, Cecilia kept to her path—focused, determined, and just a little bit lonely.

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Another year passed, and once again, it was time for the list of top performing students to be released. Ever since that fateful Christmas Eve, Cecilia had made it her personal mission to see her name written onto the rankings. It would be a written indication of just how much progress she had made in the wish she had made three years ago.

Cecilia and Raora stood outside the auditorium as more students from their grade streamed in. The two girls had arrived a little earlier that morning, the anticipation keeping them both on edge.

“Raora, what if I’m not on the list again,” Cecilia whined, clinging onto her best friend’s arm, “What if... what if I flunked everything?!”

Raora rolled her eyes but smiled. “Cece, come on. You do nothing but study! I bet you’ll be up there this time.”

Cecilia bit her lip, not convinced. “But what if I messed up? What if I forgot something in the exam that brought me down?” Cecilia says, running her fingers through her hair nervously.

“You’ll live...” Raora said simply, “But you probably didn’t. Let’s just go look.”

The teachers came out and pinned the sheets of paper to the boards. Almost at once, the students crowded forward, everyone trying to see their names. Raora tugged Cecilia along, squeezing through the crowd until they were close enough to read the list.

Cecilia scanned the paper quickly, heart beating in her chest. Then her eyes locked on a familiar name.

“Number eight,” she said, almost too quietly to hear, “That’s me. I’m number eight.”

Raora cheered and gave her a firm pat on the back. “See? I told you! That’s awesome, Cece! Number eight in the whole grade!”

Cecilia stood there for a few seconds, just staring at the paper. All the late nights and hours spent at her desk—this was what it had all been for. Her heart felt full. She felt fulfilled. And most importantly, she couldn’t wait to tell her mother.

“I can’t wait for Mom to see this,” she said, smiling at Raora, “She’s going to be proud of me. I just know it.”

“I’m sure she will,” Raora grinned, as the two girls shared a hug.

That evening, after dinner, Cecilia sat in the living room with her report card and the printed ranking sheet next to her. She kept glancing at the door, waiting for her mother to come home so she could share the news. The minutes ticked by and the house grew quieter. Fauna had already gone upstairs for bed. Still, the door didn’t open.

Finally, the lock clicked and the door opened, but it wasn’t her mother. Mr. Ceres stepped in, looking a little tired from the day but smiling when he saw Cecilia.

“Hey, Cece,” he said, hanging up his coat, “You’re up late.”

Cecilia stood quickly, holding up the papers. “Dad! I made it into the top ten! I’m number eight this time!”

Mr. Ceres’s face lit up. He knelt down and ruffled her hair. “That’s fantastic, Cece. I’m really proud of you. I know how hard you’ve worked for this,” her father exclaimed, lifting her up affectionately.

Cecilia felt a warm sense of pride at his words, but she couldn’t help looking past him at the door again. “Thanks Dad,” the young girl grinned as her father plopped her down on the couch, “Wait, where’s Mom?”

Mr. Ceres’s smile softened. “She’s still at the office. She’s been staying late a lot recently. There’s a big project, and... well, they’re preparing her for a promotion, so she’s had to put in extra hours.”

Cecilia nodded slowly. “Oh. She’s really hard working,” Cecilia remarked, looking a little downcast.

“She is,” Mr. Ceres said, sitting beside her, “She always puts her all into everything she does. Just like you.”

Cecilia looked down at the paper in her hands. She felt good about what she had done... really good. But there was a small part of her that longed to hear her mother say it. Still, she felt proud of herself. Her mother had always worked hard. And now, so did she.

She could always tell her mom tomorrow, and maybe... she’d see that smile again—the same one from the Christmas carnival.

Despite all her efforts to reassure herself, Cecilia’s excitement and hope kept her wide awake. She told herself again and again that she could share her good news tomorrow, that her mother would probably be tired, that waiting would be the sensible thing to do. But the thought of seeing her mother’s reaction, of hearing praise straight from her lips, made it impossible to go to bed. So she stayed there on the couch, legs tucked and eyes flicking to the clock every few minutes.

The house was quiet now. Mr. Ceres had gone up to bed not long after their conversation, telling Cecilia not to stay up too late. Fauna’s light had gone out too. But Cecilia couldn’t bring herself to leave the living room. She kept glancing at the door, waiting, heart quietly racing each time she thought she heard footsteps outside.

It was late when she finally heard the soft click of the lock turning, the creak of the front door opening. Cecilia sat upright at once, clutching the paper she had been holding in her lap all evening. Ms. Immergreen stepped inside, looking drained. Her usually neat hair was loose around her face, her posture slouched. She placed her bag down with a quiet sigh and rubbed the back of her neck, not noticing Cecilia right away.

Cecilia didn't hesitate, immediately running up to her mother and hugged her tightly. "Welcome home, Mom!" she said, relieved that her mother was finally here, "How was work today?"

Ms. Immergreen blinked down at her, caught off guard. She gave a tired little smile and patted Cecilia's back gently. "It was tiring," her mother admitted, "But fulfilling. I'm making good progress on my projects.."

Cecilia followed as her mother walked to the couch and sank down into it, resting her elbows on her knees and rubbing her eyes. The girl sat beside her, clutching her paper. She hesitated for just a second, then spoke. "Anyway, I have good news! I... I made it into the top ten of my grade! I'm number eight!"

Her mother stayed quiet for a breath, barely lifting her head a little to look at Cecilia, her eyes looked dull from fatigue. "Hm? Oh, that's nice," she said, her tone polite but distant. She then leaned back into the couch and closed her eyes, clearly needing the rest.

Cecilia smiled at the words. It felt good. She had waited all day for this. But at the same time, there was a strange hollowness inside her. The praise felt so small after all that waiting. She didn't know what she had expected. Maybe a hug, or for her mother's eyes to light up the way they had that night at the carnival. Maybe for her to say she was proud. But she pushed those thoughts away. Her mother was tired. That was all.

Still hoping to connect somehow, Cecilia added, "I'm living up to the Christmas wish I made... Remember? That time we all went to the carnival together. I wished that I'd do well in my studies," Cecilia grinned.

Ms. Immergreen opened her eyes again, looking at Cecilia, puzzled. "What wish?"

Cecilia paused before giving a small, awkward laugh. "You know... when we went with Dad and Fauna to the Christmas Carnival for the first time. I hung it on that big wishing tree..."

There was a pause before a hint of recognition flickered on Ms. Immergreen's face. "Oh. That wish," she says, nodding faintly before standing up and stretching a little, "I'm going to take a shower and turn in for the night. I need to be up early for a meeting."

And with that, she gave Cecilia's shoulder a gentle pat before walking toward the bathroom.

Cecilia stayed seated on the couch, watching as her mother disappeared down the hallway. She stared at the paper in her hands. She felt happy in a way. After all, she had gotten to share her success.

She had heard the words '*that's nice*', but she couldn't deny the strange emptiness that remained in her chest. Perhaps she had been hoping for more. Maybe she was hoping that it would feel like that night again, when her mother's smile had made her feel like the most special girl in the world.



But instead, Cecilia felt strangely unfulfilled, and she was left alone with her thoughts, wondering if working hard and making wishes come true always felt like this.

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One year later, not much had changed, at least, not in the way Cecilia had hoped they would. Ms. Immergreen would eventually receive her promotion, just as Mr. Ceres had said she would. The announcement had come with a small celebration at home. There were cakes, drinks, and even toasts from her parents' coworkers.

Mr. Ceres pulled both Cecilia and Fauna in for a hug, beaming. "Let's be proud of your mom. She worked really hard for this," he says.

Cecilia had smiled then, genuinely happy for her mother. But along with the promotion came even longer hours, more meetings, more travel, and far less time at home.

Cecilia kept up her own hard work, just as she always had. She studied late into the nights, filling entire notebooks with neat handwriting, solving problem after problem, memorizing dates, terms, and formulas.

Her grades stayed high. In fact, they got better. Bit by bit, she climbed the rankings. Each report card felt like proof that she was keeping her promise, that she was living up to that wish she had made beneath the Christmas tree all those years ago.

But as the months passed, she couldn't shake that feeling buried deep within her. Every time the results came out, and every time she made an effort to share them with her mother, the response was always the same. A distracted 'I see', or an obligatory 'That's nice, dear'.

Her words sounded kind enough. But they felt... weightless.

Cecilia started to wonder about that. Why did it leave her feeling so empty every time? Was she being unfair? Maybe her mother was just too busy to pay much attention to grades right now. Maybe she wasn't doing well enough yet—maybe top ten wasn't enough. Perhaps she had to aim for top five, or top three... or maybe even the top spot.

Maybe then her mother would really look at her the way she had that night at the carnival.

These thoughts followed Cecilia everywhere. They occupied her mind during study sessions, during school breaks and during family dinners.

One evening, after a long day, Cecilia sat at the dining table, reviewing her notes. The sound of keys jingling at the door made her glance up. Mr. Ceres and Ms. Immergreen stepped inside, both looking worn out from work. Cecilia watched as her mother sighed and placed her bag down. "I'm going to shower," Ms. Immergreen said quietly before heading down the hall without much else.

Cecilia stayed where she was, watching her mother's back as she disappeared around the corner. The house felt too quiet again, like it often did these days. Fauna came down the stairs, hair tied up in a bun, and plopped down on the couch. She glanced at Cecilia, then at their father. "We don't really see Mom that much anymore, do we?" Fauna said, sounding a little sad.

Cecilia nodded a little, chewing the inside of her cheek. "Yeah," she said softly, staring at her open notebook.

Mr. Ceres gave them both a tired smile and sat at the table with Cecilia. He rubbed his face with his hands, clearly just as drained as Ms. Immergreen. "She's been swamped," he said after a moment, "The promotion's been good for her career, but... well, it came with a lot. She's juggling so many things now."

Fauna curled up on the couch, hugging a cushion. "It must be hard for her," she said thoughtfully.

Cecilia nodded again, feeling a twinge of guilt in her chest. Here she was, thinking about grades and praise when her mother was working so hard, taking on so much. Was she being selfish to want more attention? To want a bigger reaction to her report cards? She tapped her pencil against the edge of her notebook. "Do you think she's okay?" Cecilia asked, glancing at her father.

Mr. Ceres's smile softened. "She's tired, but she's doing what she believes is right. Your mom has always been like that. When she sets her mind on something, she gives it her all."

Cecilia looked down at her notes. That sounded familiar. Maybe she was more like her mother than she thought. But somehow, that didn't make her feel any better. The emptiness was still there, sitting quietly in her chest.

She thought back to the times she'd rushed up to her mother with her results, hoping to see her eyes light up, hoping for more than words that felt like afterthoughts. She thought about the late nights when she'd stayed up just to share her success, only to be met with a distant pat on the head. And she wondered again if maybe she wasn't doing enough. Maybe if she worked harder, climbed higher, then her mother would see her the way Cecilia longed to be seen.

Still, she told herself, her mother had so much on her plate. It wouldn't be fair to ask for more right now. And if her mother could work so hard for her job, then Cecilia could keep working hard too, for her studies... and to make her mother proud.

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Later that night, the Ceres-Immergreen household fell into a peaceful silence, the only sound that could be heard being the soft clicking of Ms. Immergreen's keyboard as she worked at the dining table. Cecilia came into the room quietly, holding a warm cup of tea she had made. Without saying a word at first, she set it down gently beside her mother.

Ms. Immergreen blinked, looking away from her screen for a moment. When she saw what Cecilia had done, a genuine smile formed on her lips. "Thank you, dear," she said softly, her eyes meeting her daughter's.

Cecilia felt a wave of warmth wash over her at that. "You're welcome, Mom," she replied, sitting down nearby.

For a few moments, they stayed like that. Cecilia watched as her mother sipped the tea and went back to typing, the keys clacking relentlessly. Eventually, Cecilia spoke again. "Mom, are you coping okay with work? You seem really busy lately."

Ms. Immergreen glanced at her, then back at the screen. "I'm coping fine. I'm way ahead of all my deadlines," she said, her tone calm.

Cecilia tilted her head in confusion. "If you're ahead of deadlines, then why do you seem so busy all the time?"

The older woman paused briefly, as if considering whether to answer, then added. "I've actually been taking on future tasks too—things that aren't due yet. It helps me stay ahead and be more efficient," Ms Immergreen says in a nonchalant manner, "Besides, I like being busy. It helps keep me sharp."

Cecilia nodded thoughtfully. "Ooh... maybe I should try that for school too. Like... do homework earlier, or read ahead?"

Her mother gave a small nod, eyes still focused on the screen. "Hmm, yes, that's a good habit to build, dear. You'll thank yourself for it later."

As they sat there, a familiar melody began to play quietly from Ms. Immergreen's speaker—a piece of classical music Cecilia had heard many times before. The smooth, flowing sound of violins filled the space between them, and Cecilia found herself listening more closely this time.

"You like this kind of music, don't you, Mom?" Cecilia asked after a while, glancing at the screen where the playlist was still running.

Ms. Immergreen nodded, still typing. "I do. Classical music helps me calm my nerves and helps me focus. I've always found it somewhat relaxing," she says, "Especially the violin. Yes, I find the violin particularly soothing."

Cecilia let the sound of the violin fill her ears. The way the notes rose and fell, the way they seemed to paint a vibrant picture in her head, even in the stillness of the room...

She could see what her mother meant. For the first time, she really noticed the music, not just as background sound, but as something that was present in the room with them.

Over the next few days, the music stayed with Cecilia. She started paying attention whenever her mother played it. The violin, in particular, stood out to her—the way it could sound sad and soft one moment, then bright and engaging the next. She found herself wondering how it would feel to play one. Could she learn to make music like that? And if she does, would her mother appreciate her playing? After, all, Ms. Immergreen did say she enjoyed listening to the violin.

One Saturday during lunch, Cecilia finally worked up the nerve to ask a question she had been holding onto for days. The family was seated around the table. Mr. Ceres set down the plates as Fauna chatted about her morning. Meanwhile, Ms. Immergreen was busy scrolling through her phone, responding to emails between bites.

“Mom?” Cecilia began, glancing at her mother, “Can I learn to play the violin?”

Ms. Immergreen didn’t look up, her fingers still moving over the screen. “Ask your father, Cecilia. I need to finish this email,” she said, barely present.

Mr. Ceres gave her a gentle look. “Maybe you could set that aside for now, love? It’s the weekend. Let’s eat together.”

Ms. Immergreen shook her head slightly, exhaling a little. “I’ll be done soon. Don’t mind me.”

Mr. Ceres turned his attention back to Cecilia, smiling. “So, what got you interested in the violin all of a sudden, Cece?” Mr. Ceres asked, smiling.

Cecilia hesitated. In her head, she thought about saying ‘because Mom likes classical music’, but instead, she said, “I’ve been listening to a lot of classical music lately. It makes me feel... inspired.”

Fauna perked up. “Like Mom’s album?”

“Yeah,” Cecilia nods sheepishly.

Mr. Ceres grinned. “Well, that’s a pretty good motive. We can look into lessons if you’re serious about it.”

Cecilia felt a small spark of excitement. “I think I am.”

Fauna clapped her hands together. “Ooo, I bet you’ll be really good at it, Cece!” the older girl says encouragingly.

Their mother didn’t join in on the conversation, her attention still fixed onto her phone. Cecilia glanced at her, a part of her hoping she would chime in, say something about how nice that sounded. But Ms. Immergreen was completely absorbed in her work, her fingers tapping quickly.

That evening, Cecilia lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The idea of playing the violin stayed with her. She imagined holding the instrument, gliding the bow across the strings, filling a room with music like the pieces her mother listened to. It wasn't just about playing the violin, it was about feeling closer to her mother, maybe understanding her world a little better.

She knew her mother was busy. She knew that her work was important. But still, she hoped that one day, the music would give them something new to share.

And upon drifting off to sleep, Cecilia decided that she would give it her all, just like she did with everything else.

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Over the next year, Cecilia would spend hours upon hours practicing on the violin. On her birthday, Mr. Ceres surprised her with a brand new violin, encased within its comfortable looking case. The moment she lifted it out and placed it on her shoulder, Cecilia felt a thrill of excitement. It wasn't just a gift, it was a new challenge. A way to connect with the music she had come to admire and, maybe, with her mother too.

Soon after, she began formal lessons at a nearby music school. At first, holding the bow correctly, learning how to place her fingers, and even playing a clean sounding note from the violin was hard. The screeches and uneven sounds frustrated her, but Cecilia was used to hard work. Just as she tackled her schoolwork, she approached the violin with grit and determination. Every day, after school and homework, she set aside time to practice. Scales, simple songs, bowing exercises, you name it.

But Cecilia wasn't satisfied with just learning the basics. Each time she heard her mother's classical albums, especially the familiar one she always played while working, Cecilia felt drawn to one piece in particular—*Winter from Vivaldi's Four Seasons*.

The strong, dramatic sounding notes... the speed... the way it energised the room. She wanted to play the piece. To perfect it, just like the musicians in her mother's album.

One afternoon, after her lesson, Cecilia stayed behind while her classmates packed up. She turned to her teacher, a supportive and kind figure in her musical journey. "Miss," Cecilia said, gripping her violin tightly, "I want to learn Vivaldi's Winter. Can you teach me?"

Her teacher raised an eyebrow, surprised. "Winter is very challenging, Cecilia. It's not something beginners take on so soon. There are many pieces you should learn first... pieces that will help you build the skills you need for something like that," her teacher replies, crossing her arms.

"I know it's hard," Cecilia said quickly, "But I'm willing to practice. I'll practice until my fingers melt if I have to. Please. I really want to play it."

Her teacher studied her for a long moment, then finally sighed and smiled a little. "Alright. But you have to promise me you'll keep up with your other practices too. This piece can be discouraging if you take it on too soon."

"I promise," Cecilia said, her eyes shining bright.

From that day on, Cecilia's practices became even more intense. The opening of Winter had her struggling to keep up. But she didn't give up. Day after day, she played the tricky bits over and over, breaking them down into small parts. Slowly, the notes began to come together. And as she played, something changed in her.

While she initially picked the violin up to impress her mother, Cecilia slowly found herself appreciating the instrument itself.

She loved how expressive it was, and how she could either make it hum softly or burst forth passionately. She loved the feeling of the wood under her chin and the way the strings resonated.

As she grew more confident, Cecilia even started trying to write small pieces of her own. She would scribble down melodies in her notebook, experimenting with different rhythms and melodies. It wasn't the easiest thing in the world, but it was fun.

Even on nights when her mother stayed late at work, typing away at emails with the classical album playing softly in the background, Cecilia would sit in her room, practicing or jotting down ideas for her next piece.

Needless to say, the household was full of music now, sometimes hers, other times the recordings from her mother's albums.

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Yet another year passed, and Cecilia had grown a lot, both in her schooling and in music. What started as a small fascination with her mother's favorite music genre had blossomed into something much deeper. Every afternoon, after finishing her homework, Cecilia would practice the violin. Some days, she lost track of time, playing until her fingers were sore and her arms ached.

She didn't mind this however. In fact, she loved it. Her passion for the violin had become something she had truly embraced.

She worked her way through exercises, scales, and a great many pieces, with her teacher taking note of her dedication every week. Cecilia rarely made the same mistake twice, always returning better, sharper, more precise.

And of course, there was 'Winter'.

The piece had become her magnum opus. From the first time she heard it in her mother's playlist, Cecilia had been captivated by its intensity and emotion. Despite her teacher's initial hesitation, Cecilia insisted on learning it, even if it meant slow progress and frustrating practices.

But over time, she made her improvements. Day by day, note by note. Until one day, she played it straight through with the right speed, expression, and accuracy. When the final note stopped, her teacher stayed quiet for a moment, then clapped slowly.

"That," her teacher said, smiling, "Was incredible."

Cecilia stood there, violin still in hand, catching her breath.

"Do you know what I think?" her teacher continued, stroking her chin, "I think you should perform that at the next recital."

Cecilia's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Absolutely," her teacher said, "You've basically mastered it. And more importantly, you've poured your heart into it. That's what makes a piece truly good—not just technique, but feeling."

A grin slowly spread across Cecilia's face. "I-I'd love to," Cecilia says excitedly, before pausing for a moment and looking down at her instrument, "But... Do you really think I'm ready to play 'Winter' in front of a crowd? It's such a complicated piece, and I might... mess up."

Her teacher nodded without hesitation. "You are more than ready. You've practiced harder than any student I've ever taught. I have no doubt you'll do great. The audience is going to be blown away."

Cecilia nodded, heart beating with excitement. For the first time in a while, she felt that same spark she had all those years ago—that same fire that lit within her when she made her wish under the Christmas tree.

In the weeks that followed, Cecilia couldn't stop thinking about the recital. The very thought of performing 'Winter' in front of an audience—her family among them, filled her with a palpable excitement. It was a big step, but she was determined to make it perfect. Every day after school, after finishing her assignments, she'd make a beeline to her room or the corner of the living room and begin her practice session. Hours would pass, each movement and finger placement etched into her muscle memory. She listened carefully to her teacher's advice, corrected her posture, worked on her dynamics, and made sure she wasn't just playing the notes, but expressing herself.

She practiced with her ultimate goal in mind: to impress her mother. She wanted her to see it—to hear it. She wanted her to know how much she had grown.

All those lessons, the sore fingertips, the endless repetitions—it was all for that moment. A single flawless performance. Something her mother could be proud of.

One afternoon during a lesson, as Cecilia was packing up her violin, her teacher handed her a small slip of paper.

“The recital tickets are available now,” she said, “You should ask your family if they’d like to come. It’s going to be a full house, so it’s good to get them early.”

Cecilia took the paper, glancing down at the details before smiling. Then, she hesitated.

She thought about her mother. About how late she had been coming home lately, how often she stayed up in the living room finishing work emails. There were some days when Cecilia barely saw her at all, apart from a quick ‘good morning’ or ‘good night’. Her mother had always been busy, but since her promotion, she seemed to have disappeared into her job entirely.

Would she even have time to come?

That evening, the family gathered at the dinner table. It was a rare occasion when all four of them were present. Mr. Ceres had finished work early, and Ms. Immergreen had managed to make it home before 8:30. As the metallic clanking of utensils filled the room, Cecilia took a deep breath. “Um, everyone... I wanted to tell you something.”

Everyone looked up as Cecilia smiled. “My violin teacher said tickets for this year's recital are out. I’m going to be performing.”

“Oh, that’s awesome!” Fauna grinned “You’re playing ‘Winter’ right?”

Cecilia nodded, smiling a little. “Yeah. I’ve been practicing for weeks.”

“Heh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Just tell me how many tickets we need,” Mr. Ceres says, taking a sip from his cup.

“Put us down for the front row,” Fauna winked, wagging a fork at her younger sister.

Cecilia chuckled before turning to her mother, whose attention was still half on her phone. “Will you be able to come, Mom?” Cecilia asked softly.

Ms. Immergreen didn’t look up right away. “I’ll have to check my schedule. Things are really tight next month. There’s a quarterly review coming up.”

At this, Mr. Ceres raised an eyebrow. “You’re always ahead of schedule. I’m sure you can make a bit of time for our daughter, especially with how hard she’s been working,” Mr. Ceres points out, as Ms. Immergreen glanced at him.

Ms. Immergreen proceeded to look over at Cecilia, her expression unreadable. She let out a sigh and nodded. “Alright. I’ll try to make it work.”

Cecilia’s face lit up. “Really? You’ll come?”

Her mother gave her a hint of a smile. “Yes. I’ll be there, I promise.”



Without thinking, Cecilia got up from her seat and ran around the table to hug her. “Thank you, Mom,” she said, her voice muffled as she pressed her face into her mother’s shoulder.

Ms. Immergreen patted her back lightly with one hand, the other still holding her phone. “Of course.”

For a moment, Cecilia just stood there, arms wrapped around her mother, feeling relieved. She had gotten the answer she hoped for. Her mother would be there. She would get to hear the culmination of all her hard work. Maybe then, Cecilia would finally see that approving smile she cherished so much once more.

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Cecilia entered the backstage, her violin case securely slung around her shoulders. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

She could already hear the audience from beyond the thick curtains. The atmosphere was something truly special. She could almost feel the anticipation of the audience as well as the nerves and excitement from the students around her.

She walked quietly, finding an empty bench in the corner to settle down. The familiar weight of her violin in its case grounded her. Her hands moved instinctively, unclipping the latches, checking the strings, tightening the bow. Everything seemed to be in place, but the tremble in her fingers betrayed just how much this night meant to her.

“Ah, there you are.”

Cecilia looked up to see her teacher approaching, dressed in a smart black blouse and skirt, her clipboard tucked under one arm and a warm smile on her face.

“I saw the set list,” her teacher said, crouching slightly to meet Cecilia’s eye level, “You do realize you’ll be playing the most difficult piece of the night, right?”

Cecilia blinked. “Heh, that’s not nerve-wracking at all.”

Her teacher laughed softly, then leaned in, lowering her voice playfully. “Between you and me, I’m pretty sure it’s going to be the most impressive performance tonight. Don’t tell the others, though,” she snickered, winking.

Cecilia let out a laugh, trying her best to hide the way her heart had just jumped in her chest. “Way to add onto the pressure.”

Her teacher held up her hands. “Heh, sorry... But I only say that because I’ve seen the work you’ve put in, Cecilia. No one deserves to shine tonight more than you,” she says, her expression softening, “You’ve earned it.”

Cecilia felt her shoulders ease, even just a little. She offered a small smile. “Thanks, Miss.”

Her teacher tilted her head. “Is your family here?”

“They should be seated any time now,” Cecilia replied, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, “My sister says she'll text me when they're here.”

“Good,” her teacher said, nodding with approval, “It always helps to have the people you love in the audience.”

Cecilia gave a small nod, though her thoughts lingered on one person in particular. Her fingers unconsciously traced the surface of her instrument, and for a moment, she steadied herself.

Her teacher patted her gently on the shoulder. “You’ll be brilliant. Just play the way you always do, and the music will do the rest.”

Then, with one last encouraging look, she turned and walked off to check on the other students.

Cecilia sat back down, glancing once again at the closed curtains. She took in a deep breath, letting it fill her chest before slowly releasing it. The stage was just moments away now. So was her moment.

And her mother would be there to see it.

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“Cece? Cece? Where are you?” Fauna called out as she wandered through the backstage. The green haired girl frowned as she peeked into every nook and cranny. Her younger sister had to be here somewhere.

“Cece?” Fauna called out once more, “I know you’re hiding. Can you just... come out?”

Fauna’s footsteps paused as she rounded the corner behind the stacked stage boxes and finally saw her.

Cecilia was curled up against the wall, her red dress crumpled around her knees, violin case shut tightly at her side. Her face was blotchy, eyes swollen and rimmed with redness. She looked up the moment she saw her sister, her lips trembling.

Fauna’s heart sank. “Cece...”

Cecilia didn’t speak. She simply stood and threw her arms around Fauna’s waist, burying her face in her sister’s chest.

“I... I thought she might’ve come late,” Cecilia choked out, voice shaky, “Is she here? Did she come?”

Fauna hesitated. The silence that followed said everything. Then softly, she replied. “No... Mom had to head to the office. She said something urgent came up.”

Cecilia’s arms slackened slightly, her head still against Fauna’s shoulder. She didn’t cry aloud. No more tears came. Just the silent collapse of hope inside her chest.

Fauna rested her chin gently atop her sister’s head, arms holding her close. She knew what this recital had meant to Cecilia. She had watched her practice day and night. She had seen her beam when their mother promised to come.

Cecilia stood there, numb. Her fists clenched into the back of Fauna’s blouse.

“She said she’d come,” Cecilia whispered, more to herself than Fauna, “She said she would...”

Fauna gently pulled back, cupping Cecilia’s cheeks. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Cecilia nodded weakly, the fire in her eyes gone. She felt so small... so tired.

Fauna reached down and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Come on. Let’s go find Dad. He’s probably worried sick.”

Cecilia didn’t answer, but she didn’t resist either. She simply followed her sister, violin case in hand, her steps slow and heavy as they made their way through the quiet corridors of the concert hall.

Before long, the girls found their father standing by the reception. He paced about, anxiously rubbing his knuckles with his fingers. Upon seeing his daughters emerge from the hallway, his expression immediately shifted from worry to relief.

“Cece!” Mr. Ceres rushed over, kneeling down and pulling Cecilia into a hug the moment she was close enough, “Where on earth have you been? I’ve been worried sick!”

Cecilia dropped her violin case beside her and wrapped her arms around him, clinging tightly. Her voice was muffled against his shoulder. “Mom... didn’t come...”

Mr. Ceres’s expression softened further, and he stroked the back of her head gently. “There, there, sweetheart,” he murmured, “It’s okay. I know.”

Cecilia didn’t say anything more. She simply stayed there, pressed into his chest, holding on like she might fall apart again if she let go.

After a while, Mr. Ceres pulled back slightly and looked at both his daughters. “You’ve had a long day, Cece. Let’s go home, alright?”

Sniffing, Cecilia nodded silently before Mr. Ceres picked up her violin case with one hand and wrapped the other around her shoulder. Fauna walked close on the other side as the three

of them exited the building together, the cool night wind brushing past them as they took their leave.

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Cecilia didn't remember much of what happened after they left the concert hall that night. She barely recalled the drive home.

The moment she stepped through the front door, she went straight to her room and collapsed face-first onto her bed.

No shower. No supper. Just the feeling of her chest hollowing out as the exhaustion, both physical and emotional, swallowed her whole. Sleep took her before she even realized she had closed her eyes.

When she woke up, the sky outside was a dark cloudy blue. It was six in the morning. She sat up slowly, her body aching as if it had just returned from a battle. Her red dress was still crumpled on her, the ribbon in her hair now tangled and loose. She blinked, disoriented, and then her eyes landed on her violin case, lying exactly where she had left it the night before.

It was then when a sharp bitterness clawed at her stomach.

The memories came rushing back. The blinding lights, the murmurs of the audience, the nerves crawling under her skin... and then that awful moment.

That empty seat.

The sight of it had knocked the wind right out of her chest. She had faltered then, losing her rhythm, bowing too hard, and missing many notes. The worst part was... it wasn't subtle. Every mistake echoed louder than the applause that followed.

They had definitely noticed.

She gritted her teeth, her fingers digging into the fabric of her dress.

Then, with a burst of frustration, she kicked the violin case. It slid harshly across the floor before lodging itself under her bed, just out of sight.

Good.

She didn't want to look at it.

Throwing off the covers, she dragged herself to her feet and grabbed some fresh clothes. She opened her door slowly, peeking out into the hallway before stepping out quietly, making her way down the corridor towards the bathroom.

She prayed she wouldn't run into her.

The shower was scalding hot—just the way she liked it when she needed to feel something. She stood under the shower stream with her arms crossed, staring blankly at the wall as the water poured over her.

Fifteen minutes later, with her hair damp and skin still steaming, she stepped out into the living room... and stopped.

There, at the coffee table, sipping coffee and already dressed for work in her usual sleek office wear, was Ms. Immergreen.

She looked composed. Impeccable, as always.

She glanced up from her laptop and, without missing a beat, said, “Good morning, Cecilia” as if nothing had happened.

Cecilia clenched her fists, fighting to keep the tears from running. That was it? No ‘*Sorry I couldn't make it*’? No ‘*I want to apologise for...*’?

Cecilia drew a breath and stepped into the kitchen, her bare feet against the cold floor.

“Mom,” she finally said, standing across from her, “Why weren't you at the recital last night?”

Ms. Immergreen didn't look up right away. She was sipping her coffee, her laptop open beside her plate. “I'm sorry dear, could you repeat that? I didn't catch what you said,” Ms. Immergreen requested, her sight falling back onto her laptop.

“I asked you something,” Cecilia said, her voice strained, “You said you'd come. I practiced for months—for you.”

There was a brief pause as her mother tapped something on the keyboard. “Sorry, dear. Something came up at work. I'll go next time,” she says with a weak smile.

Cecilia stared at her, raising an eyebrow. “I messed up on stage. I couldn't focus because I saw your seat was empty. I thought... I thought you'd show up.”

Ms. Immergreen glanced up. “That's unfortunate,” she said, her attention partially on her screen, “But you still performed though, right? That's what matters.”

The indifference hit like a slap across the face.

“I wanted you to be there,” Cecilia said, her voice cracking, “I worked so hard to make it perfect for you... but you didn't even show up.”

“Cecilia, dear, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this now. I've got a meeting in less than an hour,” her mother said, not unkindly, but already moving on, “We can talk about this later.”

Cecilia's chest clenched. Her mouth opened, but no words came. She turned sharply and walked out, her eyes stinging.

As she headed down the hall, Mr. Ceres emerged from the bedroom, hair tousled and still half-asleep.

"Cece? What's—"

She brushed past him without stopping, her footsteps quick and heavy, her door shutting behind her with a dull thud.

Mr. Ceres widened his eyes. Cecilia had never had an outburst like that—not even as a little girl. He turned toward the kitchen where Ms. Immergreen was still seated, coffee in hand, now scrolling through a tablet with her laptop open beside it.

"Honey," he said softly, walking over, "What happened?"

She didn't glance up. "She's upset I missed her recital," Ms. Immergreen replied matter-of-factly, as if commenting on the weather, "I told her I had work."

"Yes, you missed it," he said gently, but firmly, "And she was devastated."

This time, she did look up. Her expression was tired, but her tone remained as stoic as ever. "It wasn't intentional. Something huge came up yesterday. The higher-ups called for a strategy meeting."

Mr. Ceres pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. "I get that work can be unpredictable, but this was important to Cecilia. She's been talking about that performance for weeks."

Ms. Immergreen sighed, then swiped through a set of slides on her tablet before turning it around to show him. "The company's considering expansion. Overseas operations. We've been in talks with a major client in Europe. Yesterday's meeting confirmed the interest. If things go well, we'll be preparing for a new branch. It's a big opportunity."

He blinked in surprise. "A new branch?"

"Both of us might be needed to work abroad—at least temporarily," Ms. Immergreen says, nodding, "We'll need to be present on-site for the set-up. Anyways, the timeline's tight. That's why I couldn't miss yesterday's call."

Mr. Ceres exhaled and leaned back in his seat. "So... that's it? We're moving to Europe just like that?" he asked, crossing his arms, "What about Fauna....and what about Cecilia? We're talking about changing her entire world. She already feels like you're not around."

Ms. Immergreen paused, fingers resting on her tablet. "I'll... talk to her about it later."

"You keep saying that," he said pointedly, "But she's growing up... and right now, she feels invisible to her own mother."

Ms. Immergreen was quiet for a moment. Then, instead of responding, she turned her eyes back to her slides. "I'll deal with it later, dear," she says, before gesturing to her slides, "For now, I need to inform you on the potential merger proposal involved..."

Mr. Ceres sighed. He knew his wife could be quite distant. In fact, her practicality was one of the things that had drawn him to her all those years ago. But there had to be a line. There had to be a point where work didn't come first.

Cecilia wasn't just anyone. She was their daughter.

Still, he didn't press further. If his wife said she would handle it later, then maybe she would. After all, she WAS Cecilia's mother. Surely she knew what was best.

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A year had gone by since that night at the recital. Cecilia was older, quieter, and more reserved than before. The bright eagerness that once lit up her face before every lesson, every performance, had dulled. Ever since that fateful night, she had lost all motivation to play the violin.

She stopped going to lessons, avoided playing in front of anyone and eventually, she stopped playing altogether. Her violin, once polished and opened with awe each day, now lay untouched under her bed gathering dust.

And yet, the memory refused to fade. She could still picture the stage lights burning down on her, hear the notes trembling from her strings, feel the sinking feeling in her chest as her eyes scanned the crowd and landed on the one empty seat that shattered her world.

She never really got over it. The disappointment, the hurt, and certainly not the indifference that her mother showed afterwards. So, when her parents sat her and Fauna down in the living room one afternoon and told them they'd be moving to Europe for work, Cecilia didn't say a word. For some reason, she wasn't surprised.

"We've been offered a long-term assignment in Europe," Mr. Ceres explained gently, seated beside Ms. Immergreen on the sofa, "It's a big opportunity for the company, and for us."

Fauna, sitting next to Cecilia, frowned. "When will you be back?"

Mr. Ceres glanced at his wife, then looked back at the girls. "That's... hard to say. It depends on how things go over there," he answered truthfully.

Ms. Immergreen crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap. "We believe it would be best if both of you stayed here and continued your education at home. We've arranged everything already," she says plainly.

“It would be best if you went to Cover Junior High like your sister,” Ms. Immergreen continues, turning to Cecilia, “The both of you will be moving into a smaller home while we’re overseas. It’s quite close to the school and it’s easier to maintain.”

Mr. Ceres gave the girls a small smile, though there was a hint of worry behind it. “Of course, it’s not like you don’t have a say in this,” Mr. Ceres says, “We wanted to ask if you’d be alright staying on your own... or if you’d prefer living with a relative. Your aunt has offered, if that’s what you want.”

Cecilia didn’t answer right away. She wasn’t sure what she felt. Before she could come up with a reply, Fauna piped up.

“It’s okay. I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to handle things at home,” Fauna smiles, “There’s no need to trouble Auntie. She’s got enough on her plate already.”

Mr. Ceres looked at her with a mix of pride and concern. “Very well,” he said with a small nod, before shifting his gaze towards Cecilia, “Cece... and how about you? Are you okay with this?”

Cecilia blinked, snapping out of her thoughts.

Was she okay? To be honest, she didn’t know. She didn’t know what to think or what to feel. It was all so unexpected. Her parents were going off to Europe, leaving her and Fauna behind. Sure, she’d miss her father’s optimism and lame jokes... but her mother?

The mother and daughter pair were never particularly close, and Ms. Immergreen hadn’t exactly made much of an effort to change that, even after the recital.

Cecilia sat there in silence, her fingers pinching into the fabric of her skirt.

A part of her wondered if she was a bad person for feeling this way. For thinking that maybe... it would do her some good to be apart from her mother for a while. That perhaps the distance might hurt less than the constant reminder of her absence, even when she was physically present.

Although, really... *Was her mother ever truly here in the first place?*

Cecilia looked up, meeting her father’s gentle eyes. She forced a small nod, her voice barely above a whisper. “Yes.”

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After she dropped the violin, Cecilia threw herself into her studies like she had never done before.



She didn't do so out of any grand revelation, nor did she have any new dream to chase. It was simply an aching emptiness inside her chest that needed to be filled... somehow. So she studied. She memorized textbooks, solved a great many math problems and wrote out notes until her fingers cramped. She just wanted to occupy herself with something... anything.

At first, her teachers were surprised. She was always a diligent student, but this was something else entirely. She no longer asked for help, no longer raised her hand in class unless she was called upon. Her eyes were always fixed on the next task, her expression unreadable.

And so, the days slipped by. Cecilia's life became a routine of study sessions, homework, and practice papers. It was easier this way. If she filled every second with work, she wouldn't have to hear her own thoughts. Wouldn't have to think about the recital. The empty chair. Her mother's indifference.

Sometimes, it came back to her when she would least expect it. She would be doing math problems at her desk and suddenly see the audience again. The rows upon rows of clapping audience members. Except for that one seat.

She hadn't just lost the music that night. She'd lost the part of herself that had believed, for even a moment—that her mother cared.

However, instead of addressing her feelings head on, the young girl chose to ignore them in favor of her studies.

Then came the last week of school. The end of elementary. The final academic rankings were going to be posted and everyone knew it. The chatter in class was louder than usual. Students were taking guesses, whispering predictions, stressing over the placements.

Cecilia sat at her desk, reading a book she had brought to school, trying to tune them all out when suddenly—

“Cece! CECE!” Raora's voice rang across the room explosively.

Cecilia glanced up, puzzled, just in time to see her friend sprint toward her desk. “You have to come see this,” Raora gasped, tugging her by the arm before Cecilia could even react.

“What are you talking about?” Cecilia asked, confused, “What's going on? Raora?”

“Just come!” Raora said, practically dragging her towards the noticeboard where the paper containing the rankings had been pinned. A small crowd had already gathered, pointing and turning to look in her direction.

Cecilia's heart started to beat a little faster. Something about all this felt... a little off. But the glint in Raora's eyes made her follow.

She peered over the heads of the students, scanning the sheet half-heartedly... until she saw it.

## 1. Cecilia Immergreen

She froze. Her eyes widened. She stared, not entirely believing what she was seeing. Her name was at the top. She blinked. Once. Twice.

It was still there.

She hadn't even been aiming for it. She hadn't been trying to win anything. She had only been studying so hard to distract herself from her depressive thoughts.

And somehow, she had made it to the top.

She felt lightheaded. Like the world had gone quiet around her, like all the noise in her brain had suddenly stopped.

Raora laughed beside her, beaming. "See? I told you, dummy. I told you you were gonna top it this time."

Cecilia looked at her friend in disbelief. Her hands were still trembling slightly. "I... I didn't think I would..." she admitted, adjusting her hair ribbon sheepishly.

"You worked your butt off, Cecilia," Raora said, poking her cheek, "Don't act like this came out of nowhere."

One by one, her classmates offered their congratulations. Some with grins, some with high-fives, others with a pat on the back or a quick word of admiration. She heard her name again and again.

And in the middle of all the noise, the congratulations and smiles, Cecilia felt something warm in her chest— a strange, unfamiliar kind of fullness.

It wasn't pride, nor was it joy. But maybe something close.

She wasn't sure what it meant. She didn't know if this was the start of something new, or just a fleeting moment. But as the warmth filled her chest once more and her eyes widened ever so slightly, she smiled.

For the first time in a forever... she felt validated.

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“You look smiley-er than usual,” Fauna remarked as Cecilia returned home after a day out with Raora.

Cecilia’s fingers tightened around the strap of her bag, a huge smile spread across her lips. She hesitated for a second, unsure whether to say it aloud. But Fauna was watching her expectantly, arms crossed, eyes shining with curiosity.

“I... got the top spot in the rankings,” Cecilia said quietly.

There was a moment of silence when suddenly—

“WHAT?!” Fauna squealed, practically launching across the living room, “Cece!!”

The older sister wrapped her arms around her little sister in a tight hug, lifting her right off the floor. “You’re telling me you aced the entire year and didn’t tell me right away?!”

Cecilia let out a small gasp, giggling at her sister's sudden excitement. “I only just found out today...”

Fauna rocked her back and forth before setting her down, grinning ear to ear. “That’s amazing. You worked so hard... I’m so proud of you, Cece. Like, really,” she grins, “We have to tell Mom and Dad!”

That was when Cecilia’s smile faltered a little. “They’re still packing for Europe, right?” she said, eyes flicking toward the hallway, “I don’t know if... Mom would even look up from her suitcase.”

Fauna frowned, stepping back slightly. “Cece...”

“I mean, she didn’t even...” Cecilia’s voice trailed off, unsure how to finish the sentence, “It’s just school rankings. It’s not like it matters to her.”

Fauna reached out, placing a hand on Cecilia’s shoulder. “Hey. This isn’t just school rankings. You came out first. That’s huge,” Fauna says, nudging her a little, “Come on. We have to tell them. Even if Mom’s in work mode again, it’s too big not to share.”

Cecilia looked up at her sister. Fauna’s firm gaze was all too convincing. “Alright, fine,” she relented as she allowed herself to be dragged to their parents’ room.

The door to their parents’ room was slightly open. Fauna knocked once, then entered. “Mom? Dad?” she called out, “Cece has something to tell you.”

Inside, Mr. Ceres was rolling up a few pairs of socks into neat bundles while Ms. Immergreen was sorting through a stack of documents beside an open suitcase on the bed. The room was cluttered with folded clothes, bags, and envelopes. But at the sound of Fauna’s voice, both parents turned to look.

And to Cecilia's surprise... her mother actually looked up from her work. Not just a glance, not just a nod of acknowledgment, but full-on eye contact.

Cecilia froze for a second. Then, slowly, she stepped forward and took a breath. "I... I got the top rank," she said, her voice softer than she expected, "For the final semester. First in the whole cohort."

There was a short pause before Mr. Ceres beamed, his eyes lighting up. "What?! Cece!" he boomed, making his way across the room and pulling her into a tight hug, "That's incredible! Top of the level?! That's a huge deal!"

Cecilia giggled, feeling a little shy. She hugged her father back, smiling. "Thanks, Dad... I didn't really expect it."

When she pulled away, her gaze slowly turned to her mother. Ms. Immergreen was still standing near the bed, but she was no longer sorting through her papers. Her expression had softened, the corners of her mouth curving into a small smile.

It was the same smile Cecilia remembered from that Christmas Eve years ago, when she had hung her little wish on the tree.

"Well done, Cecilia," Ms. Immergreen said simply.

Cecilia stared. Just for a moment. Because for once, her mother wasn't distracted, wasn't brushing her off. She was fully present—watching her, speaking to her.

Those words hit harder than she expected.

"...Thank you, Mom," Cecilia said, a little awkwardly, unsure what else to say.

Her mother nodded, the smile remaining. "I used to top the rankings all the time when I was in school," she added, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, "Keep up the good work."

And that was it. That was all she said. But to Cecilia, it was enough. In fact, it was more than enough. Somewhere deep inside, a new spark flickered to life as a sense of motivation filled her heart.

She felt it build up from her chest to her throat, something brave, something bold.

"I will," Cecilia said suddenly, eyes locked on her mother's, "And I'll top all the rankings from now on."

There was another pause. Then a hearty chuckle sounded from behind her. "Well, well," Mr. Ceres said, grinning as he ruffled her hair, "It's been a while since I've seen you this fired up."

Cecilia smiled, her posture straighter than before. A renewed sense of purpose had awakened within her—something she had only felt twice before.

The first was when she stood by the Christmas tree as a child. The second was when she first picked up the violin.

Now, as she stood there in her parents' room, her heart still pounding from her bold declaration, she felt it again.

She had done it. She was finally good enough to earn her mother's genuine praise, not out of politeness nor an afterthought, but something truly sincere.

*"Well done, Cecilia."*

Those words stuck with her, deeper than she ever would have expected... and she wasn't going to let them be the last.

She would keep studying, keep working, keep reaching for the top—because the next time her mother came back from Europe, Cecilia wanted her to see that smile again.

She wanted her to look and see someone brilliant. Someone worth being proud of. Someone perfect.

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PRESENT DAY

Upon waking up, Cecilia sat cross legged, staring into blank space.

The memories had flooded back—like floodwaters rushing past a broken dam. She didn't know what triggered them, only that now they refused to leave. Every image was clear, every moment vivid. Her wish under the tree, the recital, the empty seat, the indifference... the day she reached the top of her class and decided she would never fall again.

That day had meant something. It had lit a fire in her—a drive to be flawless, unstoppable, untouchable. She had clung to that goal year after year.

But ever since she entered high school, she had to grapple with the fact that she was second. Second to Gigi Murin.

Despite fully devoting herself towards her studies—staying up late to study, missing social gatherings.. she still fell short. She had tried so hard to keep her promise to herself, to maintain that place at the top. To be perfect.

But it was not for herself. It was *never* for herself.

Everything she'd ever done was to win a smile. To make her mother proud. That cherished smile, the one she first received on Christmas Eve so many years ago—she had chased it like

a ghost ever since.

But now... she didn't know anymore.

She was second. She didn't have anything to show for when her mother comes back.

She swallowed hard, her chest feeling tight. What was the point of chasing a person who never stopped to turn around? What was she even chasing anymore?

Cecilia buried her face in her hands. She didn't move. She didn't cry. She simply sat there, unsure of where to go from here... unsure of what she wanted anymore.

Just The Two of Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey sis, does this taste funny to you?” Fauna asked her younger sister, holding out a ladle of vegetarian broth towards Cecilia.

Cecilia blinked, looking up from the chopping board of carrots she was currently occupied with. Leaning forward a little, she blew some air into the ladle of broth Fauna held out to her, before carefully taking a sip.

After savouring the broth's filling taste, she smacked her lips as her eyes widened slightly. “It's better than I thought it'd be,” Cecilia noted, going in for another sip.

Fauna frowned, holding the ladle away from Cecilia before tutting. “Were you expecting something worse?” she asks in a mock hurt tone.

She grins, expecting Cecilia to fire back with one of her quick witted retorts, but it never came.

“Oh... I didn't mean it like that,” Cecilia says, turning back to the chopping board, “Sorry sis...”

Fauna raised an eyebrow, saying nothing. After spending a few more seconds glancing at Cecilia, she sighed.

She had noticed it for a while now. Ever since that message from their father popped up in the family group chat, the usually chatty Cecilia, who was so quick with her witty sarcasm and quicker with her opinions, had gone... quiet. Not quite cold, but very much distant. It was as if she was constantly distracted by something she couldn't, or wouldn't, put into words.

It wasn't just this moment. It was every time Fauna tried to strike up a conversation over breakfast and got half-hearted hums in return. Or the way Cecilia would stare off at nothing during TV shows they used to make fun of relentlessly. She was still there, just not present.

Fauna stirred the broth absentmindedly, watching her sister from the corner of her eye. “You've been kinda quiet lately,” she said casually, not looking directly at her, “Everything okay?”

Cecilia paused, her knife hovering above an uncut carrot. “Yeah,” she answered a little too quickly, “Just tired, I guess.”

Fauna frowned, not buying it in the slightest. It was clear Cecilia was bracing herself for something, and Fauna had seen that look before. Back when Cecilia was eleven, rehearsing late into the night for that violin recital, or when the final rankings for a school term loomed close.

Fauna gave the broth one last stir before lowering the heat. “Well,” she said softly, “Just so you know... if you ever feel like being tired out loud, I’m right here.”

Cecilia didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, finally, she muttered a soft “Thanks” as she resumed chopping the carrots, a little slower this time.

Fauna gave her a small smile before turning away and sighing. She knew her sister always had... issues when it came to her mother. It was made pretty apparent to her right after Cecilia's recital all those years ago.

Back then, it broke her heart to see her sister curled up on her bed for days, her pillow stained with tears after their mother failed to show up that night. Fauna had tried to talk to her, tried to tell her that it wasn’t her fault, that she was amazing regardless of how the performance went. However, Cecilia would only look up with a hollow expression and say she was fine, and that Fauna didn’t need to worry about her.

But Fauna worried anyway. She always did. Cecilia was her little sister, after all.

So when, almost a year later, she started seeing that spark return—the drive, the passion, the fire in her sister’s eyes, Fauna had been so relieved. Cecilia was pushing herself hard again, aiming for the top of her level, and succeeding. She began taking on responsibilities left and right, and for the first time in a while, seeming proud of what she could do. Fauna felt happy for the younger girl, believing that Cecilia had made peace with whatever was hurting her.

But now, seeing her like this again—quiet, dull and withdrawn...it brought back all those old concerns. What made it harder was the uncertainty. Was it really about their mother coming back?

That was the obvious answer, sure, but if Fauna remembered correctly, things hadn’t seemed bad between Cecilia and their mom right before their parents left for Europe.

So what changed?

Fauna furrowed her brows, watching Cecilia quietly clean up the kitchen counter. Something heavy was definitely weighing Cecilia down internally, and that scared her. She could deal with her sister's rants, breakdowns, and even her angry outbursts, but it was the silence that always unsettled her.

Fauna dried her hands on a dish towel, eyes still on Cecilia. Maybe her sister didn’t want to talk now. Maybe she wouldn’t want to talk tomorrow either. But she would stay close and continue keeping an eye on her, just in case.

About an hour passed, and the doorbell rang. The two sisters quickly dusted themselves off as they made their way to the main entrance. Cecilia stared at the door handle blankly, her silence ringing louder than any tangent she would always go on.

The perfectionist rubbed her knuckles, feeling a sensation that wasn't quite dread but wasn't quite anxiety either. It sat somewhere in between.

Suddenly, she felt something warm wrap around her hand. Cecilia blinked as Fauna gently reached over, locking their fingers together.

She turned to look at her older sister, who had a quiet and warm expression on her face—the kind of look that told Cecilia that she'd be there for her.

A breath escaped Cecilia's lips as she gave Fauna a small, grateful smile.

Then the door opened. Before either of them could react, Mr. Ceres swept forward like a race car, pulling both girls into a massive bear hug. "My girls!" he laughed, lifting them off the ground with surprising ease, "You've grown so much! I almost didn't recognise you!"

He set them down with a small grunt, clutching his back dramatically. "Urgh, okay, maybe I've grown too old."

Fauna let out a short giggle, brushing her hair back behind her ear. "It's been four years, Dad."

"That long already?" he mused, ruffling Fauna's head before doing the same to Cecilia's fluffy hair.

Then, quieter footsteps followed behind. Ms. Immergreen stepped through the doorway, her posture as poised as ever. Her coat was perfectly ironed, her hair neat, her expression unreadable as her eyes scanned the home.

"Hey, Mom," Fauna greeted, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around her without hesitation.

Ms. Immergreen blinked, briefly startled, before returning the hug with one arm. "It's good to see you, Fauna," she says, her eyebags appearing to lighten a little as she embraces her daughter.

Ms. Immergreen's gaze shifted to Cecilia and for a moment, neither moved. Cecilia's hands fidgeted by her sides, as she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her mother. It was stiffer than Fauna's hug, more brief and less forward. Her mother's hand gently patted Cecilia's back once, then rested there for a second longer.

"Welcome home," Cecilia murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ms. Immergreen nodded, smiling tiredly. "It's good to be back."

Then came Mr. Ceres again, sniffing the air dramatically. "Wait a second... Something smells amazing. Is that... garlic? Soy? Miso?"

Fauna perked up, turning towards the kitchen. “We made dinner for you guys,” she said proudly, “Vegetarian stew with tofu and handmade dumplings.”

“We even made that broth you used to cook a lot, Dad,” Cecilia added, her voice returning just a bit of its usual brightness.

“Well,” he beamed, putting an arm around both girls, “I think this homecoming just got a million times better!”

The family of four settled into dinnertime without a hitch. It was as if the girls' parents had never left. Their spoons dipped into the rich broth Fauna had prepared, passing around bowls and plates as they began catching up on everything that has happened in the past four years.

Mr. Ceres led most of the conversation, chatting easily with Fauna. “So, I remember you telling me you're in the student council,” Mr. Ceres says, his mouth full of broth coated garlic bread, “I hope things haven't been too stressful there!”

Fauna grinned. “Things only get pretty... chaotic when we have to plan out events,” she replies, “Although the admin work can be pretty taxing at times.”

“She’s good at it though,” Cecilia added quietly, “Fauna's secretary and has to remember all the things our president and vice-president forget.”

Fauna grins, nudging Cecilia's shoulder. “Cece's no slouch either,” Fauna says, “Ever since she's joined the council, we've been plowing through admin work like it's nothing.”

“Ha! What do you know? My two daughters—heads of the school!” Mr. Ceres chuckled, reaching for another dumpling, “Honestly, I’m not surprised. You two have always been little powerhouses.”

Ms. Immergreen ate quietly, her expression stoic. She nodded once or twice during Fauna’s stories but added little else.

Cecilia picked at her rice, keeping her eyes mostly on her plate, stealing glances at her mother every now and then. Mr. Ceres then turned toward her, his tone gentle. “And you, Cece? How’s everything been on your end? Are you still getting those top spots?” Mr. Ceres asks, smiling warmly, “You were valedictorian in Junior High, were you not?”

There was a pause as Cecilia lifted her head slowly, almost cautiously. “Actually... I’ve been getting second place since the start of high school,” Cecilia says sheepishly.

“Oh wow,” Mr. Ceres said, nodding with genuine admiration, “Second place in high school? That’s no joke either! You must be working so hard.”

“It’s been... a lot,” Cecilia admitted, her voice quieter now, “But I’m managing.”

Then came her mother’s voice. “Oh? I thought you said you were going to top the rankings.”

Cecilia looked at her, just for a second. She wanted to say something. Anything. But her mouth wouldn’t move. Her chest felt tight again, and the sound of her heartbeat rushed in her ears. Ms. Immergreen’s tone was neutral. She wasn’t judging Cecilia, nor was she shaming her in any way. Despite this, Cecilia still felt that familiar sting, wincing slightly as a sense of déjà vu hit her like a truck.

Mr. Ceres laughed lightly, trying to defuse the sudden tension in the air. “Hey, don’t fret about it! Number two is still a huge deal.”

“It’s fine,” Cecilia said quickly, offering a weak smile, “I’ll keep trying.”

But even she could hear how hollow that sounded.

Fauna cleared her throat. “Anyway,” she began, her tone gentle as she turned to Cecilia, “Now that we’re on the subject, maybe you could tell them about Gigi!”

Cecilia blinked, thrown for a moment. “Gigi?”

Fauna nodded. “Mhm! After all, she’s your rival for the top spot.”

“Oh yeah... Gigi’s... just this girl I’ve known since first year. She’s the one I’ve been trying to wrestle the top spot away from,” Cecilia says, before smiling, “She’s really smart, but also really annoying... and stupid... and annoying...”

“You said ‘annoying’ twice,” Fauna pointed out, giggling as Cecilia blushes ever so slightly.

Mr. Ceres chuckled. “Sounds like a good friend to me.”

“She’s more than that. She’s... she’s someone who pushes me,” Cecilia said after a brief pause, her eyes falling to her lap, “In a good way.”

“That’s great, dear. A good rivalry can be pretty exciting! We would know, wouldn’t we, dear?” Mr. Ceres says, dipping another piece of bread into the broth before facing his wife, “Tell em’ about that French startup that popped up recently!”

Ms. Immergreen didn’t look up from her bowl. “They’re overfunded. Poor logistics. No real scalability. We’ll sweep them within the quarter,” she said simply, with a hint of a smile, before she continued eating.

A long awkward silence followed.

Cecilia shifted uncomfortably in her seat while Fauna twirled her chopsticks in her fingers. Mr. Ceres glanced between them all with an awkward smile. It seemed even he didn’t know how to add on to the conversation.

“...Right,” Mr. Ceres spoke up after a few seconds, “Well! Speaking of getting swept—remember that pickpocket incident in Rome?”

Fauna raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “What?”

“Oh yeah,” he nodded, brightening as he set down his spoon, “Your mom and I were in the city center when someone took off with my wallet. I panicked, obviously, but your mom—she just took off running. Full sprint, and in heels too!”

Cecilia blinked. “She ran?”

“Caught the guy too. Grabbed the back of his collar like a hawk,” Mr. Ceres chuckled, bumping his shoulder against his wife's affectionately, “As a matter of fact, the local police were so impressed they gave her a commemorative award!”

Fauna laughed. “That can’t be real.”

“It's not,” Ms. Immergreen confirmed, shaking her head, “I received no such honour.”

The rest of dinner passed with a little more chatter, mostly carried by Mr. Ceres and Fauna. The warmth of the food tried its best to fill the gaps in between the silence as the girls’ father continued sharing humorous stories of their time abroad.

Eventually, Mr. Ceres pushed his bowl away with a content sigh. “We’ll be around town for a bit,” he said, “Some work at the main branch. Don't worry though, we won't be a bother—we've already booked a hotel room for ourselves.”

Fauna smiles, helping to clear her parents’ empty dishes. “Hey, don't say it like that, Dad. It's nice to see you guys again after all these years,” Fauna chuckled.

Mr. Ceres smiled warmly at that, reaching out to pat Fauna’s head. “Well, aren't you sweet?”

Fauna rolled her eyes playfully. “You know me,” Fauna grins, making her way to the sink.

The girls’ father laughed once more as he stood to help her carry the rest of the dishes to the sink. Cecilia rose as well, stacking her own bowl atop a plate as she made her way to the counter. “I'll wash the plates today,” Fauna says warmly at Cecilia, who smiles gratefully.

“Thanks, sis,” Cecilia says before turning towards her parents, “I think I’ll head up first, I'm a little pooped.”

“Of course,” Mr. Ceres said with a nod, reaching out to squeeze her hand, “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight, Dad,” Cecilia says, placing a hand over her father's, “Night’ Mom.”

Ms. Immergreen, who had already pulled out her tablet at the dining table and was thumbing through what looked like work documents, gave a slight nod in return. “Sleep well,” she replied without looking up.

Cecilia climbed the stairs slowly. When she entered her room, she didn't turn on the lights. The moonlight through the curtains was enough. She sat on the edge of her bed, shoulders loose as she stared blankly at the floor.

Some part of her had known this would happen—knew that her mother wouldn't change, knew there would be no sudden warmth or bittersweet reunion. But another part of her, albeit a more naïve, stubborn part, had still hoped for something. Even just a kind word. Just one.

“Oh? I thought you said you were going to top the rankings.”

That single line felt louder than anything her father had said tonight. Louder than the stories, louder than the laughter. Once again, there was no praise, no encouragement... just the same indifference she should have been used to by now.

Cecilia leaned onto her hands, eyes fixed on the floor. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, her fingers tightly knit together.

Was there some threshold she still hadn't crossed? Some invisible standard she had failed to meet?

She thought about everything she had done—all the time and effort, the hours spent chasing excellent grades. And yet, she was still second.

Was it not enough? She had immersed herself in every exam season, buried herself in every subject, passed on outings and weekends out just to stay ahead.

And her efforts did pay off. After all, like Mr. Ceres said, second place was no joke. But somehow, 'second' always felt like 'last' when it came to her mother.

Was anything less than perfect ever going to be enough to earn her praise? Her... attention?

Cecilia's fingers loosened slightly as she glanced upwards, unfocused.

She remembered it. That first time she topped the rankings. The way she had stood in front of the results board, barely able to believe it. However, it wasn't the title of top ranker or the immaculate scores she remembered most—it was her mother's smile. That rare, fleeting sign of approval that made her feel seen.

She had held on to that moment for years, clinging onto it like there was no tomorrow.

Perhaps if she could do it again, if she could get back to number one in the next semester tests, her mother would look her way again... smile like that again.

There was only one issue.

Gigi always got first. No matter how hard Cecilia tried, no matter how much she studied or sacrificed. That pesky girl breezed through everything and still stood at the top. Would it even matter to try again?

She exhaled softly, sinking further into the bed. Still... it wasn't like she had any other plan. No other direction.

She could give it one more shot. Just one more. Maybe this time, it would be enough.

With this goal in mind, Cecilia proceeded to lose herself in her studies completely.

The days began to blur by. Mornings started earlier, nights ended later. She would wake up before dawn, already at her desk with highlighters and textbooks open before most students had even begun to blink awake. The free moments between classes were no longer for chatting or joking around with her friends. Nowadays, she would be found scribbling notes, flipping flashcards, or reviewing equations from memory.

Her friends noticed her change of behavior almost immediately. Although, in all fairness, it was impossible not to notice it.

"She's gone full robot mode again," Raora commented worriedly one afternoon as she watched Cecilia refuse lunch in favor of reviewing history notes, "It's like junior high all over again."

Elizabeth had tried offering to study together before the literature exam, something they used to do frequently, but Cecilia declined with a polite shake of the head, saying she wanted to give the upcoming tests her utmost focus.

Bijou, on the other hand, brought snacks to Cecilia's desk during lunch break, attempting to talk to her about a new game release. But the perfectionist barely looked up, simply humming in reply, her attention fully on her textbooks and workbooks.

Gigi tried lightening her up as well, attempting to lean into their usual banter, challenging Cecilia to beat her in mock math papers, even proposing contests with punishments. But Cecilia would just offer a half-smile and say she didn't have time. Her gaze was always somewhere else, somewhere past the classroom, past Gigi.

Cecilia's recent distance stung, but Gigi didn't blame her in the slightest. In fact, the pigtailed girl was more worried for her friend than anything.

"She's really not letting herself breathe," Gigi muttered one day as she sat beside Shiori and Nerissa during lunch, watching Cecilia pack up her untouched bento, "It's not like her."

Shiori glanced toward Cecilia, then back. “Yeah, she looks so out of it,” she said simply, “More so than I've ever seen her...”

The exam season eventually arrived, bringing with it an almost oppressive air. The hallways grew quieter as eyes grew duller.

The school's usual club activities took a pause, extinguishing any remaining semblance of energy the school had before the exam season began.

Cecilia took her tests with a near-obsessive focus. She barely blinked, barely hesitated. Her handwriting was tight and steady. Every answer, every thought came with precision, as if she had memorized the curriculum itself.

It wasn't easy for Cecilia, of course. Distancing herself from her friends... from Gigi... hurt her more than she'd like to admit. But she had a mission to accomplish, a hurdle to pass. She couldn't afford to slip in the slightest.

Before everyone had time to process it, the exam seasons passed by in a flash. A huge sense of relief washed over the school as they returned to their usual pre-exam routines.

Rowdy chatter filled the hallways once more. Clubs resumed their activities, students swapped horror stories from the exam season, and teachers began loosening up. With the semester drawing to a close, everyone's attention shifted towards one thing and one thing only—summer break.

Even Cecilia, much to her friends' quiet relief, began to return to them.

It happened gradually. A few lunches eaten with the group again, nods and brief smiles instead of silence. And finally, one afternoon, when Bijou, Raora and Gigi asked if she wanted to join them for a karaoke outing, Cecilia actually said yes.

Upon hearing Cecilia's reply, Raora raised an eyebrow, chuckling. “Didn't think we'd ever see you again, Cece.”

Cecilia smiled weakly. “Well, here I am.”

Despite agreeing to go out with the others, Cecilia remained distant. She laughed at jokes but without spark. She sang one song, softly and half-heartedly, then spent the rest of the outing scrolling on her phone blankly.

Gigi, who had been watching her the entire time, stuck close.

She sat beside Cecilia, leaned in with dumb puns, nudging her shoulder, trying many other ways to rile up the perfectionist. But today, Cecilia barely blinked.

“You okay?” Gigi finally asked, her curiosity getting the best of her.

Cecilia gave a tired smile in return. “Yeah. Just exhausted.”

Gigi frowned. She knew Cecilia well enough to know when she was lying. The perfectionist was still, quite clearly, not in the right state of mind. Her usual chatterbox self... her reciprocation to Gigi's attempts at banter—none of it was there.

“Something is definitely up, stupid. Just tell me about it! Maybe it'll make you feel better!” Gigi pushes, as Cecilia's eyebrow twitched, “Remember what you said about not bottling up ___”

“I said I'm fine, Gigi!” Cecilia snapped, louder and fiercer than she had meant to sound.

Raora and Bijou both stopped mid-song. The karaoke room went silent as the focus shifted to the other two.

"Hey, are you guys fighting?" Raora asked, glancing over at them, her voice low with concern.

Bijou's eyes flicked from Cecilia to Gigi and back, her smile fading. “Did... something happen?”

Cecilia's hand was clenched tightly at her side, her chest rising and falling faster than usual. Her eyes were still locked onto Gigi's—but something in her expression shifted. The fire in her glare faltered when she noticed how Gigi's shoulders had stiffened, how she avoided looking at her directly now. There was no snark, no rebuttal from Gigi. Just silence. And a slightly hurt look in her eyes that made Cecilia's throat tighten.

“...Sorry,” Cecilia muttered eventually, pulling back, “I'm just... tired. That's all.”

Gigi didn't respond immediately. She stared at the floor for a moment, fingers fiddling with her pockets. “...Okay then,” she said quietly.

Raora gently slid off the couch, stretching before waving a hand toward Cecilia. “Go rest if you need to, Cece. Seriously. Don't push yourself,” she said, her tone soothing, “And let us know if we're being too loud.”

“Yeah,” Bijou added, nodding as she came to Gigi's side, “C'mon, Gigi. Let's do that duet we picked earlier!”

Gigi blinked, still a little out of it, but managed to nod. “Right... yeah. Okay.”

Bijou gave her a small smile as she tugged her toward the microphones. “C'mon, lighten up! We've got a show to perform!”

As the screen lit up again with the next song, and the music started to swell, Cecilia leaned further into the corner of the couch. She didn't look up. Her hands were resting on her lap, still and cold.

An intense guilt rushed through her veins as she pinched her skin hard.

“Why did I snap at Gigi like that?” Cecilia thought to herself, “She was only looking out for me...”

She glanced up at Gigi, who was preparing to sing the song she and Bijou and picked out. Cecilia locked eyes with her once more, bowing her head apologetically.

Gigi blinked, before offering an empathetic smile in return, the hurt in her eyes slowly disappearing. "It's okay," Gigi mouthed, winking at Cecilia.

The perfectionist felt her heart melt upon seeing Gigi's familiar grin return. It was comforting in a way she had come to recognise yet never quite acknowledge.

Another week went by, and the semester's rankings were finally ready to be released to the student body.

There was a sense of excitement in the air as students gathered around the bulletin board once more. A crowd huddled into the hallway near the board, all eyes eager to find out which one of Cover High's academic titans had claimed the top spot this time. Would Gigi Murin remain unbeaten? Or would this be the moment Cecilia Immergreen finally overtook the reigning top ranker?

Cecilia stood back from the crowd, her arms crossed. Gigi stood just behind her, her fingers curled around the strap of her bag.

"Alright, who're we betting on this time?" Fuwawa asked, as Mococo placed a finger on her chin thoughtfully.

"I went for Gigi last time... but I have a feeling it'll be Cecilia this time!" Mococo replied as Nerissa and Shiori followed behind them.

Gigi placed a hand on her hips, raising an eyebrow. "You're placing bets on us again, I see," Gigi chuckles as the twins flashed her wide grins.

"Can you blame us? It's tradition at this point," Nerissa says, before looking at Elizabeth, "Heck, we've even gotten Liz to join in this time!"

Cecilia and Gigi stared at the scarlet haired girl in disbelief, as she began blinking rapidly and avoiding eye contact with the pair. "I just thought it'd be fun..." Elizabeth admits, looking sheepish.

Raora shook her head, chuckling at her friends' exchange when suddenly, she spotted a staff member with the ranking sheets tucked under his arm. "It's time, guys!" Raora pointed out excitedly.

The hallway's bustle grew louder as the staff member stepped up to the board. Soon, heads turned as conversations hushed, all eyes now on the staff member. The man proceeded to pin

the fresh sheets of paper onto the corkboard, smoothing them flat, before walking off without a word.

In seconds, the silence broke as several students surged forward.

“Move, move, move!”

“I can’t see!”

“Who got first?!”

Cecilia didn’t move. Her feet remained planted as she watched everyone else scramble. She heard her name tossed around more than once, and Gigi’s just as much. It seems their rivalry had become something of a spectacle to behold.

Raora craned her neck as she pushed forward, then sucked in a breath. “Ooh...”

“What? Who is it?” Bijou asked, hopping up and down behind her.

Raora turned back slowly, her eyes widening. “It’s Gigi!”

A few gasps erupted within their friend group. A few cheers. Some groans from those who lost their bets.

Cecilia’s breath stayed even. Her eyes didn’t widen. Her arms didn’t uncross. Instead, she just stepped through the crowd calmly, eyes scanning the board until they landed where they always did.

2025 SECOND YEAR BATCH SEMESTER TEST RANKINGS:

1. GIGI MURIN

2. CECILIA IMMERGREEN

Her gaze lingered on the list for just a moment longer than she intended. Then she turned to Gigi beside her, only to find that the latter had been looking at her the whole time. The blonde seemed to be more concerned about Cecilia's reaction to the rankings than the rankings themselves.

Upon noticing the worried look on Gigi's face, Cecilia quickly snapped out of her thoughts. "Congrats," Cecilia said, managing a small, strained smile as she held out a hand towards Gigi.

Gigi's eyes widened in surprise. "Thanks," she said cautiously, taking Cecilia's hand in hers.

Their friends watched from the side, with the twins blinking in tandem, Bijou fidgeting with her sleeves and Raora biting her lower lip.

But Cecilia didn't linger for long. She stepped back, smiling at her friends. "Well then, should we get going? We've got a class to catch," the perfectionist says, winking.

Cecilia turned, clenching her fists slightly. She felt as if she needed to scream or cry. But she didn't. In fact, she couldn't quite feel... anything at the moment.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Whispers followed her wherever she went, whispers of curiosity and the same awe that always came with her name. Still, it barely registered.

"You did amazing, Cece!"

"That's Cecilia for ya!"

"You'll get her next time, Cece!"

She offered smiles to those who came by to offer words of congratulations or encouragement, but the truth was, she really couldn't care less about any of it.

When the final bell rang, report cards were passed out. Cecilia sat in her seat, the envelope sitting unopened on her desk for a long while before she finally slid her finger under the seal.

Her eyes swept over the numbers. One by one. A perfect score, a distinction here and there...

After scanning through the document, she came to a realization: These were the highest scores she had ever gotten. The absolute best she had ever done—not just in high school, but her whole life.

But it still wasn't enough.

Her hand trembled slightly as she gripped the paper. She glanced up across the room. Gigi was at her own desk, holding her report card loosely, her expression unreadable.

Cecilia swallowed. She looked back down at the paper in her hands.

All that effort. Every sleepless night. Every page. Every word. Every essay. Every cancelled hangout. All those times she told herself it would be worth it in the end...

Was it? She couldn't tell.

In spite of herself, Cecilia stood up, walking over to Gigi's desk. Gigi looked up, grinning. "Heya," Gigi greets, holding up her report card, "I'm guessing you're here to compare our overall scores?"

Cecilia swallowed. Truthfully, she had no intention to come over to her rival's desk, as she usually had done every time they got back their report cards. She simply wasn't in the mood at the moment.

Still, something within her had moved. Some instinct within her took the lead way before her mind could catch up, carrying her to Gigi's side like it always did.

Gigi tilted her head. "You good?" she asked, her eyebrows slightly furrowed, "You spaced out for a sec."

Cecilia blinked. Her eyes focused, and for a moment, all she could do was stare at Gigi's face. Her sharp, playful eyes, always sparkling with mischief. The delicate shape of her lips, parted slightly in concern. Her earrings caught the light every time she turned, suiting her more than they reasonably should've.

Cecilia's breath caught. She didn't understand what was happening. Why she was noticing every detail? Why was her heart...

She turned away for a second, blinking fast. "I, ugh, yeah. I'm fine."

"You sure?" Gigi asked, voice softer now, "You're acting kind of..."

"Off?" Cecilia suggested, chuckling.

"I was gonna say stupid, but yeah, that too," Gigi teased.

The comment earned the smallest of smiles from Cecilia, but it faded quickly as she looked back down at the report cards in their hands.

"Well?" Gigi says, lifting hers a little, "Out of a thousand?"

Cecilia looked down at her card. "Nine hundred and seventy-three."

Gigi blinked. Then her smile grew, wide and bright. "Nine hundred and seventy-five."

Cecilia's heart didn't sink this time. Not in the way it usually did, but it didn't soar either. It just... lingered, hovering somewhere unbeknownst to her.

"That's the closest it's ever been," Gigi whispered, then burst into a half-disbelieving laugh, "You were two points away. Two!"

She grabbed Cecilia's hands without warning, squeezing them tight. "Cece, what the hell? You're starting to scare me," Gigi admitted, sounding exhilarated, "I think I actually stopped breathing just now."

Cecilia's fingers twitched in hers. Her eyes flicked down to their hands. Gigi's grip was warm, secure... earnest.

Then, quietly, Cecilia smiled. That hollow feeling in her chest warmed. Gigi's energy can be pretty infectious at times. "You're stupid," Cecilia muttered, giggling as she squeezed Gigi's hands.

Gigi gasped, swiping her hands away from her rival. "Hey, I was complimenting you!" the pigtailed girl pouted.

"Saying you're scared of me isn't exactly a compliment," Cecilia shot back, a hint of her usual snark shining through.

The pigtailed girl scoffed, pouting playfully before glancing at Cecilia with hope in her eyes. "In all seriousness... you're amazing, Cece," Gigi says, her cheeks flushing slightly, "I wouldn't be surprised if you beat me next time."

Cecilia blushed, Gigi's compliment sending a familiar melting sensation into her heart. "Yeah," Cecilia says, her smile faltering slightly, "Next time..."

That night, Cecilia's parents came over for dinner, with Mr. Ceres deciding to try out the household's kitchen for the first time. The green haired man cooked up a delicious, savory vegetarian stew, complete with tofu he had seasoned to perfection.

After the family of four took their seats at the dinner table, Mr. Ceres proudly lifted the cover off the pot storing his work. "Woah, something smells good..." Fauna remarked, having just returned from a council session alongside Cecilia.

"What's for dinner, Dad?" Cecilia asked, taking in the aroma of their father's dish.

"Stew..." Mr. Ceres replied, stirring the smooth mixture in the pot before unveiling a plate containing mashed potatoes, "...with some potatoes on the side! Come, sit, sit, there's enough to go around."

After scooping up some stew, rice and mashed potatoes for herself, Cecilia began indulging in the dinner her father made. "Mmm, this is delicious," Cecilia muttered, savouring the fragrant stew.

"Yeah, Dad, your cooking is amazing in general, but this is something else," Fauna commented, munching on some enoki mushrooms, "What gives?"

Their father shrugged, handing a bowl of stew to Ms. Immergreen, who muttered a small 'thank you' before typing away on her phone. "Oh well, since it's the end of another school

semester, I thought you two deserved a little treat,” Mr. Ceres says, his eyes shining with curiosity, “Speaking of... have you gotten back your report cards?”

Cecilia paused, holding her spoon above her stew as she glanced at Ms. Immergreen, who was still busy with emails. “*Look away from your phone, Mom... please,*” Cecilia pleaded internally.

Coincidentally enough, Ms. Immergreen set her phone aside as she began scooping up some mashed potatoes for herself.

Cecilia fiddled with her food, wondering how her mother would react this time. Given how uninterested she usually was with Cecilia's achievements, the perfectionist couldn't help but feel a little anxious. Maybe she should bring up the fact that this was her best performance in all of her schooling life? Surely she'd be amazed with something as impressive as that... right?

“We just got them back today,” Fauna answered her father, before sighing, “I kinda messed up on Bio, but other than that, I'm not too disappointed with my grades this time.”

“Great job, dear,” Mr. Ceres chuckled, patting Fauna's back, “Remember, don't give up hope! I'm sure you'd do even better next time!”

Fauna smiled, shaking her head. “Yeah, yeah...” she says before turning to Cecilia, “What about you, sis?”

At that moment, all pairs of eyes at the dining table, including Ms. Immergreen's, were focused on Cecilia. The younger girl gulped, avoiding her family's expectant stares.

Without another moment's hesitation, Cecilia reached into her pocket, taking out the folded report slip she had received earlier. “Well, the good news is... these are the best grades I've ever gotten in my whole life,” Cecilia began, handing the card to Fauna, who widened her eyes upon seeing the score written on it.

“Cece... these grades... they're spectacular,” Fauna gasped as Mr. Ceres quickly held out his hand, reaching out for the card.

“Ooh, let me see!” Mr. Ceres requested.

Fauna obliged, handing over the card to her father, whose jaw dropped after scanning through the document. “Woah, Cece, this is wonderful!” Mr. Ceres says, hardly believing his eyes, “Your performance this semester is simply... astounding!”

Cecilia blushed at the compliments thrown her way. Mr. Ceres and Fauna had never seemed so stunned or impressed before.

She smiled as her father and sister swooned over the results. However, her heartbeat began to accelerate as the card was passed onto her mother.

Ms. Immergreen took the card, staring at it for a good while before tilting her head. “You said this was the good news?” Ms. Immergreen asked curiously, “Does this mean there's bad

news as well?”

Cecilia expected her heart to sink upon hearing those words exit her mother's mouth, but she was more confused than anything. *That* was what she was focusing on?

“O-oh, the bad news...” Cecilia says, averting her mother's gaze, “Well, the bad news is... I only managed to get second place in the rankings again.”

Cecilia stared at the wood of the table, counting the little scratches upon its surface, observing the many different shades of brown that were visible once you really paid attention. In that moment, Cecilia felt nothing but emptiness... and maybe, just maybe, a hint of fear. Fear to look up. Fear of facing her mother. Fear to hear what she'd say next.

“Hmm... the top ranker's grades must be something truly special,” her mother remarks, “Is she the same girl you were talking about the other day? Gigi?”

It was then when the last traces of warmth, spark, or any semblance of hope that lingered within Cecilia's heart went out. She was at a loss for words. Her mother had just seen the report card detailing her best performance yet, and instead of praising her, she asked about *Gigi*?

Cecilia exhaled. She wanted to burst out in anger, to cry—to feel anything, really.

But for some reason... it was impossible.

“Cecilia?” came her mother's voice once more.

Cecilia glanced up reluctantly, feeling completely empty inside. “Huh? Oh yeah, it's Gigi...” she managed to utter, before turning back to her food.

Mr. Ceres raised an eyebrow, tapping his wife's foot under the table and shooting her a look. Ms. Immergreen blinked for a moment before nodding in realization. “Well, regardless, good job you two,” Ms. Immergreen says, sounding a little too rehearsed for her own good, “Be sure to rest up well during the summer.”

Fauna and Cecilia nodded, as a loud silence fell over the table for the rest of dinner time.

Cecilia couldn't remember much of what happened after the conversation at the table. She simply shut herself off from everything around her, even when her father was telling them a story about European architecture.

Cecilia excused herself not long after, claiming she was tired.

She climbed the stairs without really feeling her feet. The hallway felt longer than usual, darker somehow, even with the dim ceiling lights illuminating the way.

She then entered her room, closing the door gently behind her.

She didn't even bother changing out of her uniform. Instead, she moved automatically, setting her bag down, pulling the curtains slightly before crawling into bed. The sheets were

cool on her skin. The pillow firm. She stared at the ceiling, then turned to face the wall.

There were no thoughts left in her mind. No fury, no sorrow, no frustration...just blankness.

Like her body had processed all it could and simply shut the rest of her down.

Cecilia closed her eyes. She wasn't even sure if she was sad, or disappointed, or tired. Maybe it all of it... or maybe it was none of it. Regardless, she didn't feel like crying nor did she feel like thinking.

So, she didn't.

The next morning, Fauna stood by Cecilia's door, knocking lightly. "Cece? Are you awake?"

There was no answer at first. Fauna frowned, hesitating. Then, with a quiet sigh, she pushed the door open.

Inside, the curtains were still drawn, the sunlight barely streaming into the room. Cecilia sat on the edge of her bed, already dressed in her uniform, her posture stiff. Her eyes were open but distant, as if she were staring at something far away.

"Morning," Fauna said softly.

Cecilia blinked, turning her head towards the door. Fauna tried to read her expression... but there wasn't much there to read. "You okay?" Fauna asked, taking a cautious step inside, "You've been kinda... out of it since dinner yesterday."

In response, Cecilia gave a small nod and not much else. Fauna pursed her lips, feeling a pang of pity and worry for her younger sister. "Cece..." she says gently, stepping closer, "Are you upset with Mom?"

There was a pause. Cecilia didn't look at her. Instead, she gave a silent hum that didn't quite mean anything.

A dull ache tugged at Fauna's chest. Without another word, she reached out and pulled Cecilia into a hug. "I'm here, you know," Fauna whispered, "If you ever wanna talk about it, or if you don't. I'll still be here."

Cecilia blinked. The warmth of her sister's embrace slowly reached her, and she allowed herself to lean in. "Thanks, sis," she murmured, wrapping her arms around Fauna in return, "I'll be fine."

Fauna didn't believe it entirely, but she smiled anyway. "Okay. Just don't keep everything inside, alright?" Fauna says, giving Cecilia's arm one last squeeze before stepping back, "I should get going. Kronii and Mumei are probably waiting for me."

Cecilia nodded as Fauna stood for a moment longer, before leaving the room and closing the door gently behind her.

Cecilia moved through her morning on autopilot, packing her bag without much thought. As she slung her bag over her shoulder, she glanced towards the mirror, barely looking at herself. Her reflection in the mirror was blank, the light in her eyes darkened.

She left the house with the same robotic movements, reaching the bus stop and boarding the bus just as it pulled up.

It was the last day of school before summer. Most students were beyond excited, talking about the upcoming break and already making plans for outings and beach trips. But the chatter from the students seated around her barely registered. Cecilia sat near the back, her bag in her lap, her fingers curled around the strap.

The school gates soon came into view. A few students on the bus stood from their seats, preparing to alight. However, Cecilia didn't move. She had made it out of the house, yes, but she felt no motivation to do anything at all. The bus drove on, and the closer they were to the school, the heavier her chest felt.

And then it hit her—flashes.

That familiar noticeboard in the hallway, her name written on the rankings list, large and bold, right underneath Gigi's. The memory struck like a crashing wave, her mother's voice echoing soon after.

"You said this was the good news?"

"Does this mean there's bad news as well?"

"Is she the same girl you were talking about the other day?"

Cecilia's stomach twisted. Her grip on her bag tightened as her eyes squeezed shut. The bus heaved to a stop in front of the school gates as the doors opened. The crowd of students thinned and eventually, the doors closed again.

Cecilia stayed in her seat, unmoving. She leaned her head against the window, feeling the cool glass on her cheek. Stepping into school today would only remind her of everything she didn't want to think about. Everything she didn't want to feel.

For a moment, she considered heading home. Climbing into bed, pretending the world didn't exist. But then another thought occurred to her.

What if she didn't go home? Maybe... she should stay and see where the bus took her.

The thought immediately filled her with a sense of thrill. It was something rebellious, something unfamiliar. Usually, she would've scoffed at the very idea. But right now, she felt like anything but her usual self.

"It's fine," Cecilia reasoned to herself, turning away from the school, *"It's the last day. I won't miss anything."*

She exhaled and leaned back in her seat. For once, she didn't care about what she was supposed to do.

Outside, just a few steps away from the bus, Gigi was walking towards the school gate, earbuds in and her bag swung over one shoulder. She wasn't paying much attention to her surroundings until something caught her eye from the corner of the bus window. A glimpse of white-green hair along with a hair ribbon atop it.

Gigi paused, turning her head slowly as she squinted up at the bus. The inside of the vehicle was nearly empty now—all its passengers having gotten off. Everyone except one.

"Cece?" Gigi muttered under her breath.

For a second she assumed Cecilia had just fallen asleep, but something about her posture was off. She didn't appear slumped. Instead, her arms were crossed and her gaze was far off, as if she was barely paying attention to the world around her.

Without hesitating, Gigi darted towards the bus just as it let out a mechanical hiss and began to roll forward. She picked up her pace, jogging up to the doors and slapping her palm against the front doors.

"Wait!" she called out to the driver as he raised an eyebrow upon seeing her.

The doors opened with a reluctant whirr as Gigi climbed aboard, the echo of her footsteps filling the quiet interior of the bus. She made her way down the aisle, eyes fixed on the lone girl in the middle row.

Cecilia looked up at Gigi, who had made her way beside her with a slight pant in her breath, brushing a few strands of hair behind her ear as she slid into the seat.

"You missed the stop," Gigi said, her voice more curious than accusing.

"I know," Cecilia replied simply, her eyes returning to the passing scenery.

Gigi took a seat next to her rival, watching her for a moment. "Are you planning on going to school today?"

There was a brief pause before Cecilia answered. "No."

Gigi tilted her head, having not expected that answer. "...Okay," she said slowly, "So where are you going?"

Cecilia shifted in her seat slightly, leaning her head against the window. “I don’t know yet.”

Gigi blinked. “You’re not worried about tarnishing your perfect attendance record?” the pigtailed girl teased, attempting to lighten up the conversation.

Cecilia shrugged. “It’s the last day before summer break. It doesn’t matter.”

Gigi's jaw dropped slightly, taken aback. The Cecilia she knew—the studious, meticulous hard worker, would never skip out on a day of school. “Are you okay?” Gigi asked, her voice gentler now.

Cecilia turned towards her, with a small smile. “You should probably head back to school,” she says.

Gigi raised an eyebrow. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No,” Cecilia replied with a small sigh, “I just don't want you to risk getting in trouble because of me.”

Gigi leaned her chin into her hand, her eyes glinting. “Please. Playing truant with the model student of Cover High? How could I say no?”

That finally got a reaction. Cecilia laughed softly at first, then louder and heartier, as if something had cracked open in her chest. “Stupid,” she said through her laughter, “Well, if you insist on following me, then I won't stop you.”

The two fell into a comfortable silence after that, the air-con blowing down upon their heads. As they sat quietly, Gigi couldn't help but steal a few glances at Cecilia. Something still seemed off. Her expression was neutral, her shoulders were lowered and her stare was distant.

It’s been like that for a while now, Gigi realized. If she had to pinpoint when she had started acting off, it'd be right after the Jubilee event.

The day of the Jubilee was the last time she saw Cecilia’s eyes truly light up—when they were surrounded by their friends, indulging in delicious snacks and laughing together. Since then, it was like something had quietly drained out of her.

She had asked Cecilia if she was okay more than once since then. Tried to tease it out of her, pry it out gently, even just nudge her enough to talk. But each time, Cecilia only smiled weakly and said she was fine. That word was starting to irritate Gigi more than she wanted to admit.

Cecilia wasn’t fine. That much was obvious, and Gigi hated how she couldn’t do anything about it. She wasn’t, however, going to stop trying.

Before she could summon the nerve to ask again, however, Cecilia turned slightly in her seat. “So... where are we going?” Cecilia asked.

Gigi raised an eyebrow, looked at her friend incredulously. “What do you mean, ‘where are we going’? You’re the one who had the idea of playing truant! I’m just following you!” Gigi pointed out, poking Cecilia's cheek.

Cecilia burst out into a fit of giggles, lightly slapping away Gigi's hand. “Ehehehe, right, right,” she says, flashing a wide smile, “Then... how about the coast? I'm pretty sure the bus stops there.”

“The coast?” Gigi replies, raising an eyebrow, “You do know that’s like... more than an hour away, right?”

“All the better!” Cecilia said, her eyes shining with a mischievous glint that hadn’t been there in days, “It’ll be like a little adventure with just the two of us!”

Gigi turned away, her cheeks flushed pink. “Yeah... sure. Just the two of us.”

The bus drove quietly, cruising along the road to the coast. Aside from the driver and a few passengers who boarded and alighted within the first few stops, the bus was mostly empty. It was just the two of them now, seated side by side, with the window next to Cecilia fogging slightly from her breath.

Gigi sat upright, glancing at Cecilia beside her. The taller girl sat quietly, gazing out the window, her head tilted slightly. The tension that had been in her shoulders seemed to have loosened a little, her expression lighter. Gigi hesitated, wondering if now was finally the time to try again. Maybe this was the peaceful space Cecilia needed to open up.

But just as Gigi turned her head, ready to speak, she realized Cecilia had already dozed off.

Cecilia’s head leaned gently against her's, her short, fluffy hair brushing Gigi’s cheek as the girl exhaled. Gigi blinked in surprise, frozen for a moment, before letting out a breath of her own and smiling faintly.

“You’re impossible,” the pigtailed girl murmured, barely above a whisper, not moving away.

The ride continued quietly. Gigi kept still, careful not to wake Cecilia as she sat there, watching the scenery shift from town to sea. Eventually, the bus slowed to a halt with a loud hiss as chime signaled the stop at the coast.

Gigi reluctantly nudged Cecilia. “Hey, wake up. We’re here.”

Cecilia stirred awake, blinking groggily as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Mmm... we are?” she muttered sleepily.

“Yep,” Gigi replied, standing, “Come on, sleepyhead.”

The pair stepped off the bus and were met with a gentle breeze, and the fresh, salty aroma of the sea in the air. The coast stretched out before them, waves crashing softly in the distance, the sky a pale shade of blue. A few clouds drifted above them while the sun shone down on them.

Cecilia took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the coastal air as the wind brushed against her hair and uniform. The way her ribbon fluttered in the breeze mirrored the spring in her step. For the first time in days, she felt relatively weightless.

“This is nice,” Cecilia said, turning to Gigi with a genuine smile, her bangs bouncing slightly as she turned, “Really nice.”

Gigi felt her chest ease at the sight of her. The brightness in Cecilia’s eyes seemed to have returned.

“So,” Cecilia asked with a grin, her voice full of a playful energy Gigi hadn’t heard in a while, “What should we do first?”

Gigi blinked, unsure of how to answer. Cecilia’s expression was almost too relaxed—her posture casual, her voice full of energy. Her smiles, as dazzling as they were, came so suddenly it left Gigi oddly unsettled.

Was she *really* okay now?

Gigi studied her closely. The way Cecilia’s eyes crinkled when she smiled, the way she spun in place as the sea breeze caught her hair, the way her laughs echoed brighter than the crashing waves. It was all so... normal. Too normal, maybe.

The same girl who had seemed distant, barely speaking to anyone in days, was suddenly dragging her to the coast and giggling about it. Gigi’s eyes narrowed slightly as she tried to piece it all together.

Before she could speak up, Cecilia pointed suddenly across the street. “Oh, look! Bike rentals!” she chirped, grabbing Gigi’s hand and tugging her towards it, “Let’s go, Gigi, maybe we could ride along the coastline!”

“Wait, Cece—” Gigi began, but Cecilia was already halfway across the walkway, looking back with a grin.

“It’ll be fun!” Cecilia said brightly, “Besides, it’s been ages since we did something stupid like this.”

Gigi sighed softly but allowed herself to be pulled along. “What’s gotten into you?” Gigi questioned, trying to keep up with the energised girl.

“Come on, where’s your whimsy?” Cecilia winked as Gigi sighed, relenting.

When the pair reached the rental stand, they were met with a handwritten sign swaying slightly in the wind.

BICYCLE RENTALS: \$10/hour — Helmet included!

Cecilia leaned in to look at the sign, brushing her fringe away from her eyes, “Ten bucks isn’t bad,” she said, then turned to Gigi with an almost pleading look, “Can we? Just for a bit?”

Gigi eyed her for a long moment, before folding her arms and rolling her eyes. “Well... I suppose so. Since you’re so eager.”

“Yipee!” Cecilia beamed, turning to the clerk behind the stand, “We’ll take two bikes, please!”

The clerk, an elderly lady wearing a sunhat and seated on a folding chair behind the counter, chuckled softly as she pushed herself up to prepare their bikes. “Isn’t it nice to be young?” she mused aloud, watching Cecilia move excitedly as she helped Gigi pick out helmets, “All that energy and nowhere to put it. Enjoy it while it lasts, girls.”

Cecilia grinned brightly in return. “We will, ma’am!”

Moments later, the two girls were wheeling their bikes out to the start of the path. They strapped on their helmets, placing their bags in the baskets in front, and mounted up. The coast stretched ahead of them as calm waves crashed gently against the shore.

“Race you!” Gigi called out suddenly, already pedaling ahead with a laugh.

Cecilia blinked. “Huh? Hey!” she yells, watching Gigi gain distance with ease before pouting, “You didn’t even count us down!”

“Nah, you’re just too slow!” Gigi shouted over her shoulder, her voice teasing and full of pride.

“Ugh, you idiot! You’re gonna regret this!” Cecilia huffed, kicking off the ground. She began pedaling furiously, her skirt fluttering behind her as she chased after the girl.

As the wind picked up, Cecilia leaned into her handlebars, her pout shifting into a grin. She was gaining on Gigi much faster than either of them expected.

“W-woah!” Gigi yelps, looking over her shoulder and widening her eyes as Cecilia zips up alongside her, “Where did that come from?!”

“Guess I’m not so slow after all!” Cecilia declared triumphantly, sticking her tongue out as she passed her.

Gigi narrowed her eyes. “Oh, it’s on, doll.”

The wind howled between them as they sped down the path. The path of the pavement curved gently, leading them along the edge of the ocean. Cecilia stole a glance at Gigi, who was quickly catching up to her, before smirking and pedaling faster.

But less than three minutes into her burst of speed, Cecilia’s energy gave out. Her legs began to wobble, and her pedaling slowed until she was practically dragging herself forward.

“Hah... whew, oh my god,” Cecilia gasped, her shoulders drooping and her arms sagging over the handlebars, “I’m dying.”

Gigi hauled to a stop up beside her with a smug grin. “That was so dramatic. You really thought you were going to win with that little stunt?”

“I did win,” Cecilia replied between breaths, still catching her breath, “In spirit.”

“Right,” Gigi smirked, “You’re *spiritually* fast.”

Cecilia turned her head and stuck her tongue out again, but this time with far less energy. “You’re lucky I don’t have the stamina of an athlete, otherwise I’d-I’d—”

“Oh nyo, I’m so scaawwed,” Gigi teased, before waving at Cecilia, “Try to keep up, slowpoke!”

Cecilia's eye twitched as she watched Gigi zoom away at top speed, her pigtails flapping behind her.

“Hey!” Cecilia shouted. Her legs were aching and her chest was still rising and falling from earlier, but pride was a powerful motivator, and Gigi’s smug little wave was enough to light a spark from within her.

Without another word, Cecilia gritted her teeth, straightened her posture, and pushed off again. Her legs protested, but she forced them to move, faster and faster, picking up speed with each cycle. The wind swept past her face, whipping at her fringe and pulling at her sleeves as the environment blurred beside her.

Up ahead, Gigi cast a glance over her shoulder and jumped in her seat slightly. “What the—no way!”

“You thought I was done?” Cecilia yelled as she accelerated.

“You're crazy!” Gigi shouted back, flashing a toothy grin at her pursuer.

And with that, the chase began again. They sped past the smooth path, racing past benches, trees, and the occasional passerby who stepped aside to watch the chaos unfold. Their laughter echoed across the coast, bringing a bombastic energy to the nearly empty area.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing, however. Cecilia nearly swerved off the path at one point, and Gigi nearly crashed into a lamp post trying to one-up her in speed.

However, despite a few near accidents, the pair were having the time of their lives.

Eventually, their stamens burned themselves out, and they slowed to a more comfortable pace, cruising side by side as their breathing gradually steadied.

“Okay... okay, truce,” Gigi panted, resting her chin briefly on her handlebars, “I don’t think I can feel my legs anymore.”

“You started it,” Cecilia said, giggling. Her hair was a mess, her ribbon slightly askew, and her cheeks were flushed red from the thrill of the ride... but her eyes were brighter than they had been in days.

They rode in silence for a few moments, letting the wind carry them as the afternoon sun shone down upon them.

“Wanna take a break?” Gigi asked, gesturing ahead at a bench overlooking the water.

Cecilia nodded, pushing her bike off the path and into the grass nearby. “Yeah,” she said, exhaling, “Let’s.”

As they parked their bikes beside the bench, Cecilia gave the coastline a sweeping glance before something caught her eye: A small building just a short walk away. It looked fairly new, the paint still crisp and the signage bright. A shuttered restaurant sat on the upper floor, still closed for the day, but on the ground floor was a small snack store with noren curtains flowing gently in the breeze. Upon squinting her eyes at the sign hung out front, Cecilia read, “Fresh Handmade Daifuku...”

Without another word, Cecilia reached out and gave a little tug on the hem of Gigi’s blouse.

Gigi blinked and looked down. “What?”

Cecilia pointed with her chin. “There’s a daifuku place. Come on, let’s go check it out!”

Gigi followed her gaze, squinting against the sun. “You do know places like that charge, like, double near the coast, right?” she says, crossing her arms.

“You’re no fun,” Cecilia replied with a childish pout.

Gigi rolled her eyes with a small grin. “You’re such a brat,” she muttered under her breath, but she didn’t resist as Cecilia grabbed her wrist and began dragging her across the path towards the store.

They wheeled their bikes along with them, the gravel crunching beneath their tires. The aroma of sweet red bean paste and mochi grew stronger as they approached, making Cecilia’s mouth water. Her footsteps picked up the pace the closer they got.

Then she saw the price list, causing her jaw to drop.

Gigi leaned over her shoulder, smug as ever. “I told you...” the blonde muttered, shrugging as Cecilia stared at the numbers in disbelief.

“Three-twenty for one piece? Isn’t daifuku supposed to be, like, a buck a piece?” Cecilia groaned, eyeing the overpriced treats hungrily.

“I believe they call this ‘tourist tax’,” Gigi remarked, watching Cecilia's expression in amusement.

Cecilia sulked, hugging her wallet as if trying to protect it from the predatory prices. “This is outrageous... it's unfair...”

Gigi nudged her side with an elbow. “We could always share a bag,” she winked as Cecilia perked up immediately.

“You're a genius!” Cecilia says, snapping her fingers, before glaring at the shopkeeper, “Although... we should probably refrain from buying too much...”

Together, they stepped up to the small window, placing their order as the scent of mochi filled the air.

After making their purchase, the girls returned to the bench with their small paper bag of daifuku in hand, parking their bikes beside them in the grass. The light breeze brushed past their hair as they settled onto the bench, the sweetness from their bag of treats drawing them in.

Cecilia opened the bag, embracing the sweet aroma from within, before plucking one of the fluffy white pieces and holding it delicately between her fingers. Without hesitation, she leaned toward Gigi.

“Say 'ah!'” she said playfully, nudging the daifuku toward the shorter girl’s mouth.

Gigi blinked. “W-woah, hey...” she stammered, face already beginning to redden.

Cecilia grinned, inching the treat closer. “Come on. I know you want it...”

“I didn’t ask to be fed like a toddler!” Gigi protested, but Cecilia popped the daifuku into her mouth before she could argue further. Gigi nearly choked, more out of surprise than anything else.

“There,” Cecilia said with a pleased little smile, “Perfect fit.”

Gigi chewed slowly, cheeks puffed, trying to hold onto what remained of her dignity. “You can be such a pain sometimes,” she muttered, mouth half-full.

“I know,” Cecilia said lightly, taking a bite of her own as she grinned, “But admit it, you liked being fed to, didn't you?”

“Again, I'm not a toddler,” Gigi reiterated, slapping Cecilia's shoulder softly.

They continued sharing the soft sweets and bantering lightly between bites. As they finished the last piece, Cecilia leaned back against the bench, gazing out over the horizon as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

“It’s really nice out here,” Cecilia murmured, voice quieter now, her eyes focusing on the foam gathering along the edge of the shore.

Gigi followed her gaze, the sun warm on her skin. “Yeah. It’s... peaceful,” she agreed, before remarking, “The closing ceremony is probably over by now...”

Cecilia didn’t reply right away, simply giving a small nod, her gaze still on the horizon. Then, after a moment, she turned her head slightly away, her shoulders tensing up.

Gigi, who had been eyeing her the whole time, quickly took notice. “Hey,” she said softly, “Can I talk to you?”

Cecilia blinked, her lips tightening. “About what?”

“Well...” Gigi hesitated, then leaned forward slightly, voice careful, “About you.”

Cecilia’s smile returned, but it wasn’t as genuine this time. “I told you, I’m fine,” she says.

Before Gigi could respond, Cecilia stood up, brushing off the crumbs on her skirt and gesturing toward the distance. “Ooh, look. There’s a pier over there,” she said with forced cheer, “Let’s go check it out!”

She took a step forward, but before she could get far, she felt something tug at her hand. Gigi had reached out and grabbed it.

Cecilia froze as Gigi stared into her eyes firmly. “Cece,” Gigi said, her voice quiet but firm, “Stop trying to run away.”

Cecilia let out a forced laugh, as if trying to brush off the sudden tension in the air. “You’re being weird all of a sudden,” Cecilia said, tilting her head away from Gigi.

“I’m serious,” Gigi said plainly, standing her ground, “We need to talk.”

Cecilia’s smile vanished. She pulled her hand away sharply, her voice rising. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

She turned on her heel and stormed toward her bike, grabbing the handlebars with more force than necessary. Gigi blinked, momentarily stunned, before chasing after her.

“Where are you even going?” Gigi called, climbing onto her own bike.

“We’ve got to return the bikes before we get charged extra,” Cecilia snapped, eyes locked straight ahead.

“You’re running away again,” Gigi says, attempting to keep the pace.

“I’m not running away from anything!” Cecilia shouted, gripping her handlebars tightly, “Just drop it!”

“No,” Gigi said, her voice strong despite the wind against them, “I’m not going to drop it. You’ve been off ever since the Jubilee, Cece. You’re quieter, more distant... you barely talk to anyone!”

Cecilia pressed harder on the pedals, ignoring the pigtailed girl. “Something’s obviously wrong. I don’t know what it is, but I know you. And you need to talk to me,” Gigi insisted, cycling faster.

“I said drop it!” Cecilia snapped, not even turning around.

Gigi didn’t flinch. “Remember when I had the whole situation with my parents?” Gigi says, “You told me not to bottle everything up! So why are you bottling everything up now?!”

That was the breaking point. Cecilia’s bike screeched slightly as she pulled the brakes, her entire body jolting with the stop. The ground beneath her crunched as she dismounted, her eyes flashing as she turned around.

“You don’t get it!” Cecilia shouted, “Even if I told you, you wouldn’t understand!”

Gigi stopped too, staring wide-eyed as Cecilia continued, her breath shaky and her fists clenched around the handlebars. “You’re a genius, Gigi! Everything’s easy for you! You slack off and still get first. You don’t have to fight for it like I do. You don’t know what it’s like to try your hardest and still come in second! You don’t know what it’s like to...”

Her voice cracked as she swallowed hard and looked away. “You don’t know what it’s like to never be good enough!” she yelled.

For a few moments—moments that felt like forever, there was silence. The sound of the waves crashing in the distance filled the void. Gigi looked stunned, her lips parted slightly, the hurt in her expression unmistakable.

Cecilia looked away, blinking rapidly, her vision blurring. She dismounted her bike and walked to the nearest bench, sitting down with her arms hugging her knees tightly to her chest, feeling her eyes water.

Gigi stepped off her own bike, eyes still fixed on Cecilia. Slowly, she approached and sat beside her. She didn’t speak right away, simply reaching out and gently taking Cecilia’s hand in hers.

The physical contact broke something in Cecilia as guilt began to spread throughout her chest like smoke. “Gigi... I’m so sorry,” Cecilia whimpered, her voice broken, “I didn’t mean anything I said. I wasn’t... I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“I know,” Gigi replied softly, giving her hand a squeeze.

Cecilia’s grip tightened, her fingers wrapping around Gigi’s as a teardrop slid down her cheek, falling onto her lap. She looked down at it, as if surprised to see it there. Another followed soon after.

Gigi held on, her thumb brushing gently against Cecilia's knuckles. "Hey," she murmured, "You can talk to me. I'm here."

Cecilia blinked again, another tear dripping free. Her shoulders trembled as she held onto Gigi's hand like it was the only thing keeping her grounded. "Cece," Gigi prompted again, gently, "What's going on?"

Cecilia swallowed, taking a deep breath. All the emotions she had been bottling up within her—the exhaustion, the conflict, had finally risen to the surface. She clutched Gigi's hand tighter, grounding herself in the warmth of it. A deep, shaky breath escaped her, and when she finally spoke, her voice was meek.

"I've been thinking a lot lately," Cecilia began, "About everything. About why I do the things I do... why I'm like this."

Gigi didn't speak, giving Cecilia the space to keep going.

"I've always pushed myself hard. Studied harder. Practiced more. Slept less. I'd go above and beyond even when no one asked me to. And you might think it was just because I liked being the best, that I was just ambitious or driven. But... that's not really it."

Cecilia laughed softly, but there was no joy in it. Just bitterness and weariness. "For as long as I can remember," Cecilia continued, "I've been trying to get my mother to look at me—to *really* look at me... to say she was proud... to smile at me. That was all I wanted."

Her grip on Gigi's hand loosened slightly, as she gazed off into the sea. "Everything I've ever done, everything I poured myself into... it always had her at the center of it. My studies, the violin, everything. It's always been about her. It wasn't just about success. It was about being good enough for her to notice me."

Cecilia swallowed, her voice cracking as tears welled again. "But she never did," she spat, sniffing.

Gigi narrowed her eyes, her own heart twisting with every word Cecilia said. "My mother was always busy," Cecilia went on, her voice trembling, "Work, meetings, calls, whatever it was. I'd come home with awards, certificates, scores higher than most people in my year, and she'd barely look at them. She'd only nod, say 'good job' like it was a formality, and go right back to her laptop."

Cecilia turned to Gigi slightly. "Remember what I told you about the recital?" she asks as Gigi nodded slowly, "She didn't come. She said she had a meeting she couldn't miss. I told myself then that I should stop trying so hard for her. But then..."

She paused. Her grip on Gigi's hand returned, tighter now. "But then, when I topped the rankings for the first time... she smiled at me. This rare, genuine smile that I've never forgotten. It wasn't much, but to me? It was everything. I thought... maybe this was it. Maybe if I did it again and again, she'd smile like that more often."

Cecilia exhaled, her voice bitter now. "So I chased that smile... again and again. All through junior high, I made sure I stayed at the top. And for a while... I was happy. I thought I was doing something that finally made her proud," Cecilia says, before letting out a hollow breath, "I was so stupid."

"No, you weren't," Gigi said quickly, but Cecilia shook her head.

"Recently, my parents came back to town," Cecilia said, "I told my mom I'd been getting second place ever since I started high school, and do you know what she said? She just said, *'I thought you said you were going to top the rankings?'* It felt like everything I did meant nothing, like the work I put in didn't matter at all."

Gigi's eyes narrowed. "What the hell? You've been doing amazing. Anyone would see that," the pigtailed girl says firmly.

Cecilia smiled sadly, a tear slipping from her chin and hitting her skirt. "And just yesterday, I told her about how I did in the semester tests," she says, inhaling sharply, "They were the highest scores I've ever gotten in my life... and she didn't even say anything about it. She just asked if the top ranker was the same girl I talked about last time. You."

Gigi's breath caught in her throat. "She asked about me?"

Cecilia nodded. "Not to compare me to you. But because... I think she just assumed that if I wasn't first, the person who was must be more impressive. She didn't even realize what her words meant. Or maybe she did and didn't care."

There was a long silence that hung between the pair, the only sound being the light crashing of waves and the rustling wind through the palm trees near the coast. Cecilia sat motionless, her eyes watery and her face tired.

"I'm sick of it," Cecilia sighed, "I'm sick of pretending like it doesn't hurt, of acting like I'm fine when I'm not. I've been telling everyone I'm okay, trying to bury everything I've been feeling, like none of it gets to me... but it really does."

Gigi squeezed her hand, then moved her other hand to gently cup Cecilia's cheek. "You don't have to pretend with me, Cece."

Cecilia's lips parted as her throat tightened. Slowly, she nodded, her body trembling as she leaned into Gigi's shoulder gratefully, drawn to the warmth she had been subconsciously yearning for. And Gigi, without hesitation, wrapped an arm around her, holding her close.

The pigtailed girl lifted her hand towards Cecilia's face, gently wiping a tear away from her cheek. Gigi sighed, heartbroken to see her friend in this state. Cecilia had been spending so much time carrying her pain alone, so much time being weighed down by her burdens.

"I just... I don't know where to go from here," Cecilia says, firming her grip on the blonde's hand, "All this time, I thought that if I just worked hard enough, if I became the best, then maybe I'd feel like I was enough for her. Like I mattered. But now... I've never felt more lost."

“I keep thinking... if nothing I did made her proud, then what was it all for?” Cecilia murmured, “And if I stop now, if I stop chasing, what do I even have left?”

“After reflecting on this, I feel like I’ve built my whole life around trying to impress someone who was never really watching. And now that I’ve finally let myself admit that...” Cecilia says, her voice breaking, “...I don’t know what I’m supposed to do anymore.”

Cecilia chuckled softly, shaking her head. “Heh, sorry, Gigi. I know all of this sounds a little dramatic,” Cecilia apologised, offering her friend a weak smile.

“It doesn’t,” Gigi said instantly, “It doesn’t sound dramatic.”

Upon hearing those words, Cecilia's expression morphed from a tiny smile to that of something more vulnerable. Gigi traced a finger over Cecilia's knuckles soothingly, as Cecilia continued resting against her shoulder.

“So basically, it's like you've put yourself into a box and are terrified to step out of it,” Gigi says, closing her eyes thoughtfully.

Cecilia widened her eyes. Gigi had said those exact words to her one year ago, during their confrontation in the garden. “You've said that to me before,” Cecilia mutters as Gigi grinned.

“Oh, you remembered?” Gigi chuckles, before looking at Cecilia tenderly.

Cecilia nodded, staring at the waves in the distance. “I didn’t get it at the time... but you were right. You were completely right.”

Gigi took in a deep breath as she sat up straight. “Well, I guess the important question here is: What's stopping you from stepping out of the box?” Gigi asks, “If we could pinpoint the core of the issue, it could help you get out of your funk.”

Cecilia paused, furrowing her brows as she tried to put words to the feelings within her. These feelings... they were always there in plain sight, but she had always chosen to ignore them, choosing not to face them. And yet, somehow, Gigi, with her kind probing and gentleness, was unlocking all of it. It was almost like Gigi had the key to a door Cecilia had kept locked for the longest time.

“I think it's the fact I’ve been doing this for so long. Striving. Performing. Making sure I never slipped. It became who I was. Or at least... who I thought I was supposed to be,” Cecilia reflected, closing her eyes, “I lived in that box because it gave me purpose. Being perfect, being first, making my mom proud—it made things clear... simple. I knew what I had to do. I didn’t have to question anything as long as I kept pushing forward.”

“But now that I’ve stopped, now that I’m finally letting myself see how empty it all feels... it’s like I don’t know where to go,” Cecilia admits, exhaling, “It's honestly kinda terrifying.”

Cecilia glances at Gigi, as tears streamed down her face. “So I guess the reason I haven’t stepped out is because I don’t know who I’ll be without that goal,” Cecilia says, “If I'm not always striving to be the best, if I'm not trying to impress my mom, then what do I have left?”

What do I even want? I don't have a plan anymore. I don't have a reason to keep pushing. I'm just... tired and empty. Like there's this huge hole where all my motivation used to be."

Gigi stared off into the horizon, her mind deep in thought. The pigtailed girl then turned, her eyes meeting Cecilia's. "Maybe right now you don't have a want," she said, voice calm and sure, "And that's okay."

Cecilia blinked, tilting her head in confusion. "What do you mean by that?"

"Really," Gigi continues, "It's perfectly fine to just live for a while. It's perfectly fine to breathe, to laugh and to just let the waves roll in without needing some big purpose behind it."

Gigi took a pause as Cecilia let those words sink in. "You don't have to chase anything to justify your existence," Gigi says, "You don't have to rush into finding a new goal in life. Just let yourself be. Give yourself time to breathe first, and the rest will come when it's ready."

Cecilia's eyes lingered on Gigi, watching a strand of blonde hair brush across her cheek in the wind. Cecilia stared at the sea, losing herself in her thoughts. She had never looked at life this way. Almost every day of her life since elementary school had been dedicated to pushing herself, striving to surpass her limits—all of it aimed towards climbing that summit she had longed to conquer.

Gigi's words lingered in her mind like seagulls over the tide. Stepping out of the box... could that really set her free?

"That does sound nice," Cecilia says, "But stepping out doesn't sound easy."

Gigi chuckled, shrugging lightly. "I guess it isn't," she admitted, "But most things that matter take time. You won't wake up tomorrow and feel completely different. You'll have to take small steps until the box feels farther and farther away."

Cecilia nodded, as the salty breeze brushed her cheek, and her gaze shifted to the distant pier. "You know, I thought, at the Jubilee, when everything went well... When I played for myself, when I felt happy that night, I thought I was over her—over needing her approval," she laughed, scoffing, "But the moment she came back to town, it was as if everything I buried within myself was dug up."

"Moving on from everything with my mom... it's going to be hard. Because no matter how much I talk about letting go, at the end of the day..." Cecilia continued, her throat tightening, tears welling up again as she pressed a trembling hand to her chest, "...all I really wanted was for her to see me."

Gigi felt the ache in Cecilia's words as if they were her own. Slowly, she raised the hand not wrapped around Cecilia's, placing it on top of her friend's head.

Cecilia widened her eyes. Somehow, that one action from Gigi was the straw that broke the camel's back. Her chest rose and fell uncontrollably as more tears began to travel down her

cheeks. She cried for a few seconds, fully letting her emotions loose. Gigi sat still, lending her friend a shoulder to lean and cry on.

The pigtailed girl then adjusted her arm, giving Cecilia's hand a firmer, grounding squeeze. "I know," Gigi said quietly, "And it's okay to still want that. I don't think that wanting will disappear overnight."

Cecilia wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, her voice shaking. "But I hate that it has this power over me. I hate feeling so small every time she looks past me."

"You're not small," Gigi said without hesitation, as if stating a universal fact, "Not to me, not to your sister, not to your friends. Your mom's the one with the blind spot."

Gigi released Cecilia's hand from hers, lifting her hands and gently cupping Cecilia's face, her thumb brushing away the dampness on her cheek. "Cece, listen to me," she said earnestly, "Everyone who actually sees you thinks you're amazing. Our schoolmates, our friends, your sister—everyone! Everyone loves you for who you are."

A dash of red bloomed across Gigi's cheeks, but she didn't look away. She took a breath, gathering her courage, before pressing on. "And I..." she began, her pulse racing, "...I love you for who you are. Not for your scores. Not for how perfect you try to be. Just... you."

Cecilia's eyes widened, shimmering with tears once more. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Gigi's palms held her face now, grounding her back to reality. "So don't you dare think you're small," Gigi whispers, "Not for one moment. You're perfect the way you are."

The ocean breeze swept between them, Gigi's gaze warming Cecilia's heart like nothing ever has before. For the first time since her parents returned, the ache from within Cecilia softened.

Cecilia closed her eyes, inhaled shakily, and leaned forward until their foreheads touched. The pair remained still for a while, their foreheads leaning against each other, sitting in silence. "Thank you, Gigi," Cecilia finally said, blushing, as she let out a fragile but genuine laugh, "I think... I needed to hear that more than anything."

"Then I'll keep saying it," Gigi grinned, her own cheeks still flushed, "As many times as you want."

Cecilia giggled, pushing Gigi's face away playfully. "Don't be silly," she laughs, as Gigi grins.

Cecilia settled back against the bench, Gigi's words resonating with her. They felt like ripples in a puddle, reaching the places she had kept sealed away for so long. She then glanced at the sunlight shining across the water, the waves moving forward infinitely, never wondering where they were headed.

Perhaps that was what stepping out of the box meant. Maybe it was about allowing herself to go with the flow, rather than stressing over a goal she may never even achieve. If the path

she had paved for herself only left her empty, perhaps it was time to put the shovel down and simply move forward.

She didn't know if it would heal her. She didn't even know if she could keep from gravitating back to old habits. But she owed it to herself to try. Just one small step at a time, like Gigi said.

The breeze returned, as the sun's beams grew stronger. After sitting in silence for a few more moments, Cecilia rose up. She stretched her arms overhead, before yawning softly, feeling a surprising looseness in her shoulders.

Gigi watched her stand, her eyes widening slightly. Cecilia's face looked lighter than it ever had. "I'm going to take your advice," Cecilia said, rolling her wrists, "I don't know what the road ahead will be like. But... even if it's rough, I'll try to take it slow."

Gigi stood up as well, breaking into a bright smile. "That's my girl."

Cecilia's cheeks warmed. She turned her gaze toward the distant pier where seagulls flew overhead. Finally she spoke, her tone cautious yet resolved. "And as my first step outside the box... I'm going to try not to focus on the rankings anymore."

Those words left her lips unevenly, almost as if she were unsure of what she was saying, but they were out. Beside her, Gigi's grin faltered.

She had pushed Cecilia to break free, and she knew this might be a necessary step, yet a hint of disappointment tugged at her heart. Their rivalry—their routine competition to best one another, was something she had come to cherish.

Still, she knew this new step could be vital for Cecilia's healing, so she pushed a bright smile back onto her face. "That sounds... good. Healthy, even," Gigi said.

Cecilia offered a small nod, as her own melancholic feelings began to bubble up. She would miss the adrenaline of their rivalry, but she reminded herself that this change was probably for the best.

She exhaled and rubbed her palms together, turning toward the bikes. "We should probably head back," Cecilia said, smiling, "We're already down twenty bucks on rental time."

"Good point. I'm not donating anymore of my savings to the coast's tourist trap fund," Gigi agreed, chuckling.

Cecilia headed over to her bike, wheeling her bike onto the path, with Gigi falling into step beside her, the both of them ready to ride back.

As they began cycling back to the rental stand, Cecilia embraced the breeze against her face. She closed her eyes for a few moments, and for a split second, it almost felt as though the wind itself were sweeping the final bits of pressure from her. Every push of the bike's pedal felt lighter than the one before, and by the time the rental shop came into view, Cecilia's chest felt light, and her mind clear of all conflict.

Cecilia and Gigi stepped out of the shop a few minutes later, receipts crumpled in their pockets after returning the bikes. In the time since they had arrived, the boardwalk had transformed completely. Voices and chatter rose all around them, as beach-goers brought out their umbrellas, and clusters of students, some still in uniform, ran towards the shore.

“Wow,” Cecilia said, scanning the growing crowd, “It was practically deserted an hour ago.”

“I guess it's official, then,” Gigi replied, stretching her arms overhead, “School’s finally out.”

Cecilia glanced at the bustling boardwalk around them, before turning to Gigi. “Should we head home before it gets crazier?”

“No way.” Gigi replied immediately, flashing a toothy grin, “We have to enjoy a little more beach time. It's the first day of break, remember?”

Cecilia smiled back, chuckling. “Okay, okay, you're right,” she replies, shading her eyes with her hand.

“There's one problem though,” Gigi said, eyeing their uniforms carefully, “We might get our fits dirty...”

“Please. We won't be wearing them for weeks. If they get sandy, they get sandy,” Cecilia says dismissively, rolling her eyes.

“My mom might kill me if I come back drenched, though,” Gigi mumbled before, then shrugged, “Eh, worth it.”

They stood there for a moment, the squawking of seagulls and rowdiness of the crowd enveloping them. The duo glanced at each other in amusement, before bursting out into a fit of giggles.

Suddenly, Cecilia reached out and flicked Gigi’s forehead. “Tag,” she said, with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Ow! What the hell!” Gigi rubbed the spot, feigning offense, “What was that for?”

Cecilia only giggled, shrugging exaggeratedly, as she bolted towards the shore. “No idea!” she smirks playfully, “But catch me if you can!”

“Oh, you are not getting away with that, doll!” Gigi threatened, breaking into a run after her. The two of them tore through the sand, their laughter chasing them as intensely as they chased each other.

When Gigi's strides finally closed the gap, she lunged forward, hooking an arm around Cecilia's waist as gravity did the rest. They tumbled onto the warm sand, coming to a stop with Gigi sprawled across Cecilia's stomach, breathless. The pair, with their cheeks flushed, stared at each other as they laughed giddily.

"We're ridiculous," Gigi wheezed, brushing sand from Cecilia's hair ribbon.

"Speak for yourself," Cecilia shot back, her cheeks dusted pink, "Come to think of it...we should at least get a mat so our bags don't end up buried in the sand."

"Fair," Gigi said, rolling off and helping Cecilia to her feet.

And with that, they set off, eventually coming across a boardwalk stall and buying the cheapest woven mat they could find. Back at their spot, they set it down and placed their bags in the center, as Cecilia glanced at their surroundings cautiously.

"We should keep an eye out," Cecilia piped up as Gigi took her socks and shoes off, "What if someone decides to steal our stuff?"

Gigi shakes her head, flicking her friend's forehead lightly. "And who in their right mind would bother stealing textbooks and math notes, stupid?"

"Ow!" Cecilia rubbed the spot, glaring at Gigi, who darted away with a laugh.

"Hehe!" she taunted, sprinting toward the tides.

"Dumbass..." Cecilia smiled, removing her own socks and shoes before shooting after Gigi.

The chase resumed, as their footprints zig-zagged in the sand. When Gigi splashed ankle-deep into the water, Cecilia rushed in after her, sending a spray of seawater over both their uniforms. "You got our clothes all wet, you lunatic!" Gigi exclaimed as Cecilia stuck her tongue out.

"Quit whining, you started it!" Cecilia retorted.

"Ohoho, we'll see who's whining by the end of this!" Gigi says, cracking her knuckles before sending a scoop of water Cecilia's way.

The girls traded light splashes, shrieking, and yelling out threats until their skirts clung damply to their legs. Beachgoers donned in swimsuits could only watch in amusement as they went at it, seemingly oblivious to everything and everyone else around them.

Eventually the girls were worn out by their intense battle in the water.

Cecilia and Gigi made their way back to the boardwalk, ordering burgers, fries, and two absurdly large slushies from a fast-food shack. Settled on the mat, they devoured their feast as their conversation flipped from mocking sandcastles a group of kids were building to criticising the greasiness of their meal.

After lunch, they lazed under the sun until the salty breeze dried their uniforms, when suddenly, a loud thwack sounded as something round bounced off of Cecilia's shoulder.

Cecilia flinched, yelping as a volleyball smacked her shoulder and ricocheted into the sand, rolling to a stop by their mat.

A skinny boy with brown hair skidded over, eyes huge behind his goggles. "Ah, sorry, Miss!" he apologised profusely, "I threw the ball a little too hard!"

"It's okay," Cecilia reassured, brushing sand from her blouse before handing him the ball. "No harm done."

Four other kids ran up to the boy—a girl with twin tails, another boy in oversized board shorts, and another girl wearing a sunhat that was way too big for her.

"You're so careless!" the girl with twintails scolded, crossing her arms at the brown haired boy.

The boy quickly raised his head in defence. "It was an accident! I was serving!"

The girl in the sunhat peeked around the brim of her hat, eyeing Cecilia worriedly. "Are you okay, big sis?"

"Yeah, I'm perfectly fine," Cecilia said warmly, before she stood up, an idea lighting up in her head, "Hey... do you guys have room for 2 more players?"

The twintailed girl eyed Cecilia up and down. "But you're kinda tall...you'll just spike over us."

"Don't worry about it," Cecilia replied, winking, "I'm honestly not that good."

Gigi stood up, nudging Cecilia slightly. "Yeah, she's terrible at sports, anyway," she teased, winking at the kids, "You'll survive."

"Oh, shut up," Cecilia groaned as the group of children giggled.

The boy in board shorts pointed from Cecilia to Gigi. "Okay, let's make it fair," he says, pointing at a spot a few meters away, "Short one over here with us boys, and big one over there with the girls! That makes three on each side."

"Sounds like a plan," Gigi nods approvingly, before her eyes narrowed, "Hey, what do you mean by 'short'?"

Cecilia and the two girls quickly moved to take their positions. The girls looked up at Cecilia, excitedly jumping up and down. "We're counting on you, big sis!" the girl in the sunhat beamed.

Cecilia's heart warmed at the little girl's trust. She knelt down, lowering herself to eye level. "We'll be the ultimate team, okay? Just shout if the ball comes high, and I'll chase it down."

The girls pumped their fists in the air, shouting, “Yes, ma’am!”

Across the sandy court, Gigi paced around the boys, putting on a stern face. “Alright, team—remember to aim for empty spaces out of the girls’ reach!” Gigi instructed, before lowering her voice, “And if the tall freak over there somehow manages to spike, just duck and pray.”

“I heard that!” Cecilia called out, raising an eyebrow

The game soon commenced, as the volleyball began flying from one side of the battlefield to another. Cecilia dodged sprays of sand as her teammates sent the ball skyward in clumsy bumps. She returned it with a controlled strength, keeping in mind the children’s pace. Gigi mirrored the courtesy on her side, gently nudging the ball back over the line whenever it crossed into her end.

That calm lasted only a few minutes, however.

Gigi, emboldened by her easy saves, turned towards the boys, nodding. They then shifted their formation, and Gigi's next serve came in low and fast, whisking into the sand past Cecilia’s feet as a sudden spark flickered in Gigi’s grin. The serve after that had even more bite, forcing Cecilia to jump into the air just to reach the ball.

Suddenly, a sense of adrenaline coursed through Cecilia's veins, as a familiar competitive heat roared from within her. Cecilia brushed sand off her skirt, smirking as she called for the ball.

The moment the ball touched her fingertips, Cecilia leapt forward, smashing the ball back into Gigi's side of the court with an unexpected force. Gigi widened her eyes, barely catching the ball as it shot into her court.

“Ha! How's that?” Cecilia boasted proudly as the same competitive flame ignited within Gigi as well.

The pigtailed girl regained her footing, tossing the ball up in the air and catching it, her expression growing more enticed by the second. “You just started a war,” Gigi replied, serving the ball with more energy now.

“Oh no, I'm so *scawwwed*,” Cecilia cooed in a mocking tone.

The momentum of the game shifted. The kids scrambled to keep up, as each new serve soared higher and harder. Cecilia’s feet darted left and right instinctively, saving impossible balls with digs and wide swings. Gigi matched her pace, smacking the ball with her eyes blazing.

The group of children took a step away from the raging war, falling into a hush as they watched the ball trace aggressive arcs over the service line, ricocheting back with a sharp velocity.

“They're crazy,” one of the younger girls whispered to her friend, wide-eyed.

“Are they... holding back at all?” the skinny boy muttered as he ducked for cover.

The answer was clearly no. With each exchange, Cecilia and Gigi descended further into the thrill, their uniforms flapping, their cheeks flushed. The netless boundary hardly mattered to them as their instincts took over—jumping, leaping, and whipping their arms beneath the ball at top speed.

Finally, Cecilia surged forward, rolling her wrists before dropping a sensational shot just over the imaginary net. Gigi dove, her fingertips brushing against the ball before it thumped into the ground, kicking up a puff of sand. Cecilia straightened up, her chest heaving and her eyes bright with the rush of the game. Across from her, Gigi sat up, brushing sand from her knees, breathless but amused.

“That...” Gigi panted, “...was something else.”

The group of children erupted into a round of applause as Cecilia bent at the knees and offered the kids a playful curtsy. They clapped, whooping and cheering as Gigi sighs, standing up.

“Well, shall we go for round two?” Gigi asked, brushing dust from her knees, “Just... maybe try not to spike at the speed of light?”

Cecilia chuckled. “I’ll try,” Cecilia winked mischievously.

It was then when the group of kids immediately pointed at Cecilia, hopping up and down excitedly.

“You’re on our team!”

“No, join the boys team!”

“Hey, no fair!”

“You can’t just change the teams all of a sudden!”

“But we don’t wanna be stuck with the short girl!”

“Hey, hey, look who’s talking! I carry you guys for ten minutes and this is the thanks I get?” Gigi growled at the boys, who yelped as they tried hiding from Gigi’s death glare.

One of the boys shrugged, mumbling, “Well... green girl IS taller.”

Cecilia laughed. “Alright, let’s shuffle,” she says, joining the boys’ side while Gigi joined the younger girls. A new line was traced, and they jumped right back in.

This second game was just as fast-paced and filled with excitement. The high schoolers seemingly dialed down the intensity of their playing, wanting to let the kids play as well.

Beachgoers paused to watch the odd uniforms-and-kids matchup, drawn in by the sheer energy of the match.

Eventually, the sun began to dip. After what felt like five minutes but was actually closer to an hour, hunger and fatigue fell over the group. The little sunhat girl's older sibling called from a towel halfway down the beach, waving at them to pack their things.

"We need to head home," the twintailed girl said, out of breath but smiling, "Thanks for playing with us, guys!"

"Yeah, you're both super cool!" the skinny boy added, flashing a toothy grin at the pair.

Gigi knelt to give them each a gentle smile and an enthusiastic high-five. "You guys are awesome teammates."

Once the kids took their leave, Gigi and Cecilia dragged their feet back to their mat. The moment they sat, their muscles sighed in relief.

Cecilia stretched her legs out, pouring sand out of her shoes. "I haven't run around like that in years."

Gigi collapsed beside her, arms out like a starfish. "Yeah, I thought I'd cook you for sure until you started pulling those ninja saves!" Gigi exclaimed.

Cecilia laughed, tilting her head back. The beach was quieter now, the crowds from earlier having dispensed ever so slightly. "You know," Gigi continued after a minute, "Seeing you dive like that... I got a little scared. I thought you were going to snap in two!"

Cecilia rolled her eyes, still smiling. "Oh, please."

They glared at each other for a moment, before giggling. The sounds of the beach softened in the background, as Cecilia spread herself out onto the mat, her eyelids drooping, the light breeze and her spent energy lulling her to sleep.

Gigi turned her head, taking notice of Cecilia's slow breathing. "Hey, don't you dare pass out on me..."

However, it was too late. Cecilia was already out, her chest rising in slow breaths.

Gigi shook her head, a fond grin forming on her face. She lowered herself onto the mat, folding her arms behind her head. After a long sigh, she let her own eyes close. "Yeah," Gigi murmured to no one in particular, "I could use a little snooze too."

Within minutes, the world around them hushed as they fell into a well-earned nap.

Cecilia yawned, stretching her arms. Her elbow bumped Gigi's cheek, jerking the other girl awake.

Gigi blinked, squinting. "Oi... what's that for?"

Cecilia rubbed her eyes. "Oh sorry, I didn't see you there," Cecilia apologised, sitting up. As she looked around, she noticed the orange glow on the sand and the sun slowly setting. Only a few people remained on the beach, packing coolers or heading for the parking lot.

"Oh, God, it's late," Cecilia muttered, before glancing at Gigi, "Why didn't you stay awake?!"

Gigi opened her mouth in indignation, placing a hand on her chest. "Why are you blaming me?" Gigi retorted, "You fell asleep first!"

Cecilia pouted, before pulling out her phone. Her lock screen was stacked with notifications from group chats and a few missed calls from Fauna.

4 MISSED MESSAGES FROM "liz's darlings"

erb: @imgreen Will you be coming to school today?

bigcat: Dont tell me youre gonna be late ceci 🥳🥳🥳

erb: @imgreen Are you alright?

erb: And @geegee are you gonna be late as well?

10+ MISSED MESSAGES FROM "GIRLIES + biboo"

bigcat: @imgreen @geegee @imgreen @geegee

bigcat: @imgreen @geegee stop ghosting us!!

rockhard: why are they both MIA tosay

*rockhard: *tiday*

*rockhard: *tiday*

notachihuahua: tiday

notfuwawa: tiday

jailbird: tiday

nyavella: third times the charm beebz

rockhard: SHUT UP!!!!!!

*rockhard: *today*

rockhard: seriously tho where the beeb are those two

10+ MISSED MESSAGES FROM “❤️❤️Council Family❤️❤️”

irystocrat: @imgreen are you showing up for today's session

whatabae: @imgreen theres a LOT of paperwork we gotta get thru

whatabae: 📄📄📄📄📄

whatabae: ik you can't resist it

moomin: CC are you leaving us :<

whatabae: i'll sneak coffee into your tea next session @imgreen

moomin: i think shes serious cc

astrogirl: @imgreen try to pick up soon!! faufau's getting a little restless

10+ MISSED MESSAGES AND CALLS FROM “konfauna”

konfauna: cece are you in school?

konfauna: raora says you didnt show up in class

konfauna: are you feeling sick? do you need me to come home?

konfauna: hey quit leaving me on sent

5 missed calls from konfauna

konfauna: if youre asleep rn text me when you wake up

konfauna: CECE WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU ITS STARTING TO GET LATE

6 missed calls from konfauna

Cecilia sucked in air through gritted teeth as she scrolled through the messages. A pang of guilt soon hit her as she realised how much worry she had probably caused Fauna. She proceeded to dial her sister, holding up the phone to her ear as she braced herself for Fauna's inevitable lecture.

It only took a few beeps for her sister to pick up, and, just as Cecilia had predicted, Fauna was furious.

“Cece! Where the hell were you?!” Fauna snapped, her usually soft and sweet voice now fierce and sharp.

Cecilia quickly moved her phone away from her ear. Her sister's voice was loud enough through the speaker that even Gigi could make out what she was saying.

“Hey, sis... I'm fine, don't worry,” Cecilia says, wincing, “I kinda needed a break... so I decided to skip school today and head to the beach.”

“Skipping school? That's not like you!” Fauna repeated, livid, “You should've at least dropped me a text! Do you know how worried I was?!”

“I’m sorry,” Cecilia murmured, sounding genuinely remorseful.

Fauna huffed. *“Why would you go to the beach alone, anyway?”* she asked.

“Well... I’m not alone. Gigi’s with me. She tagged along,” Cecilia quickly explained.

Fauna paused, as if to think about what Cecilia had just told her. *“Oh?”* she says, her tone softening, *“Fine. We’ll talk when you get home. And I expect that uniform not to smell like seawater.”*

Before Cecilia could answer, the line clicked off. She sighed, lowering the phone as she glanced at Gigi, who covered her mouth, a tiny laugh slipping out.

“Hey, what's so funny?” Cecilia asked, narrowing her eyes.

Gigi shrugged, grin spreading. “Oooh, someone’s in trouble~”

“Shut up,” Cecilia shoots back, before slinging her bag over her shoulder, “Come on, we should get going.”

They shook sand from the mat, rolling it tight, before Gigi tucked it under her arm. With their bags slung over shoulders, they headed up the steps to the boardwalk, the wooden planks creaking under their shoes as they made their way toward the bus stop.

Along the way, Gigi slowed down, before stopping. “Hold up,” she says, pointing out to sea.

The sky had turned bright orange, fading to a deep red near the horizon. “Look at that,” Gigi muttered as Cecilia stopped walking.

Before Cecilia could reply, Gigi jogged off the boardwalk toward a cluster of large rocks near the shore. “Wait up!” Cecilia called out.

However, Gigi was already hopping from one boulder to the next. Cecilia sighed, hurried after her, and climbed up the rocks, taking care not to slip.

Gigi stood with her hands tucked in her pockets, eyes fixed on the sinking sun. Cecilia reached her side, breathing a little hard, and the view hit her all at once. She gazed into the distance, the sun nearly resembling a glowing orb floating on the water's surface.

“It’s... beautiful,” Cecilia remarked, her mouth falling open.

“Yeah,” Gigi said, her voice just above a whisper.

They watched in silence as the color of the sky shifted from orange to pink.

Suddenly, Gigi crouched, picking up a flat stone, and flicking her arm sideways. The pair watched as the rock skipped three times across the water, before sinking into the depths.

Cecilia whistled. “Woah! How’d you do that?” she asked, bending down slightly.

“Oh, it's easy! Just grab a flat-lookin’ stone and HIYAH!” Gigi exclaimed, tossing a stone across the water before looking up at Cecilia and handing her another stone, “Go, ahead, try it out!”

Cecilia felt the smooth pebble in her palm before mimicking Gigi’s flicking action from earlier. The stone flew straight ahead... before belly flopping with a single sad splash. Cecilia sighed, her shoulders slumping. “That... was kinda pathetic.”

Gigi laughed, patting Cecilia's shoulder. “Hey, nobody nails it on the first throw,” Gigi winked.

The pigtailed girl rose up, stepping behind Cecilia, before slipping a hand around her wrist. “Here. Keep your elbow a bit lower and your wrist more relaxed,” Gigi instructed, her other hand resting lightly on Cecilia’s shoulder to adjust her stance.

The sudden closeness sent an immense warmth to Cecilia’s cheeks, but she managed to shake it off, focusing on the task at hand.

“Snap from the wrist...” Gigi said, voice near Cecilia's ear, “...and release when you see your hand just above the water's surface.”

Cecilia nodded, swallowing as she prepared to try again. After picking up another stone, she drew her arm back, flicking forward as the stone skimmed the surface once, twice, three, four times before sinking. Her jaw dropped. “W-woah, did you see that, Gigi?!”

Cecilia bounced on her feet excitedly, almost losing her balance on the slippery rock. Fortunately, Gigi managed to steady her with a quick grab at her waist. “Hey, be careful!”

The taller girl grinned widely, a mischievous expression forming on her face. “Come on, let’s play a little game: Furthest stone wins,” Cecilia challenged, pointing at Gigi confidently.

Gigi plucked another stone, rolling it between her fingers. “Game on, doll.”

The pair spread out along the boulders, each scavenging for the flattest pebbles. Gigi found one no bigger than a coin while Cecilia grabbed one the size of her palm. Then, they threw their rocks, counting their skips out loud.

“Two?” Gigi teased after Cecilia’s next toss, “What rookie numbers...”

Cecilia stuck her tongue out. “I was going easy on you!”

“Yeah, right,” Gigi shot back, sending her stone skipping five times before it vanished into the water.

Cecilia narrowed her eyes, feeling determined. The thrill of trying to top Gigi’s record flared in her chest—the same spark she used to feel whenever she competed with Gigi over tests.

Her next attempt resulted in four skips, then six skips. ”Ha!” Cecilia threw her arms up.

“You’re catching up too fast for my liking,” Gigi jokes, letting out a dramatic groan.

They kept at it, going back and forth relentlessly. After each throw, they would jeer at each other before analysing their forms, making sure to make slight adjustments whenever necessary.

After ten rounds, Gigi chalked up seven skips. Cecilia retaliated with a stone that flew low, touching the surface seven times before vanishing.

Cecilia whooped, pumping a fist in the air as Gigi giggled. “Alright, alright, why don't we call it a tie?” the pigtailed girl suggested, taking a seat on the large rock they were standing on.

“Fine...” Cecilia relented, sitting down next to Gigi.

They remained sitting on the rocks until the last rays of sunlight disappeared beneath the horizon. Their shoulders made contact, their hands leaning on the stoney floor beneath them as the edges of their fingers occasionally grazed against each other.

“You know... we did much more today than I thought we would,” the pigtailed girl remarked, “We cycled along half the coastline, played volleyball with those kids, tossed rocks like we were five...”

“We sure did,” Cecilia agreed as she began to reflect on the day herself: Leaving the house, skipping the school gates, cycling, pouring her heart out to Gigi, the volleyball matches...

She had woken up that morning feeling directionless, despondent. But now? Now she felt liberated. The shackles of pressure she had locked onto herself were finally starting to come off.

Cecilia remembered those volleyball games and the stone-skipping contest she just had with Gigi. Every time she competed with Gigi, a rush of energy flowed through her like nothing else ever did. This feeling... it wasn't a need to validate herself to anyone, it was something more. Something exhilarating.

She had nearly forgotten that aspect of their rivalry she had come to hold dear—the thrill of the challenge, the adrenaline.

Cecilia fiddled with her fingers as she gave it some thought. Deep down, she didn't want to end her rivalry with Gigi. She only wished to cut off that part of her life burdened with the desire to gain her mother's approval.

The answer seemed obvious now: She *could* continue her rivalry with Gigi, pushing and racing, albeit for the right reason.

Cecilia then sat up, clearing her throat as she turned to Gigi. "Hey, remember when I mentioned I would stop focusing on the rankings?" Cecilia began as Gigi tilted her head.

"Yeah?" Gigi replied curiously.

“Well, I gave it some thought and... I don't want to end our rivalry,” Cecilia says, looking up into the clouds.

Gigi's eyes grew large as she raised an eyebrow. “What about that first step out of the box?” Gigi asked, wondering where Cecilia was going with this.

“I'm still taking that step,” Cecilia said, sounding assured of herself, “But I'm changing the goal. I won't chase first place just to get her to notice me anymore. If I aim for the top again, it'll be because I like racing you.”

The pigtailed girl took a pause, before smiling widely. “I can work with that,” Gigi nodded, trying to restrain the sheer happiness bubbling up within her at the moment.

“And hey, if you ever relapse into that old spiral...” Gigi added, holding up a pinky, “I'll be there to smack some sense into you.”

Cecilia laughed heartily, wrapping her pinky around Gigi's. “That's fair.”

They sat in a blissful silence for a moment, their fingers still interlocked. “So what made you change your mind?” Gigi asked, finally letting go of Cecilia's pinky.

“Well... it was all those ridiculous games we played today,” Cecilia replies, glancing at the water, then back at Gigi, “They reminded me of how much fun we have when we compete and I...I don't want to lose that.”

Gigi's ears turned pink at Cecilia's words. “Yeah, we really did have fun,” the pigtailed girl concurred, looking down at their shoes, then back to the water.

They sat quietly for a while, listening to the waves roll in and pull back. A flock of seagulls hovered close by, soaring in the orange-tinted sky.

Gigi turned her face to the horizon, closing her eyes. “To tell you the truth, I'm glad our rivalry isn't over... I was hoping it wouldn't be,” Gigi admits, smiling brightly, “I have a lot of fun competing with you too.”

Cecilia watched as Gigi's features reflected the last rays of daylight, her hair flowing in the breeze, that easygoing grin shining bright on her face, as radiant as the sun itself.

Suddenly, something stirred in Cecilia's chest—something warm, curious and irresistible. Before she could think twice, she leaned in, pressing a quick kiss to Gigi's cheek.

Gigi froze, her eyes snapping open as she stared straight ahead. One hand lifted to her cheek, her fingertips hovering over the spot where Cecilia had kissed her, before a deep blush spread across her face.

At the same time, Cecilia's own face went red hot. “Uh—” she muttered, standing fast and almost tripping on the uneven rock, “W-we should go. Fauna will murder me if I'm later than this.”

Gigi turned slowly, still wide-eyed and dumbfounded. “R-right, the bus stop,” she said, the pitch of her voice a little higher than usual.

Cecilia grabbed her bag, trying to hide her fluster. “Let’s...yeah, let’s hurry,” Cecilia agreed, hopping off the rock hastily as she made her way towards the boardwalk.

Behind her, Gigi touched her cheek one more time, completely at a loss for what to say.

Chapter End Notes

woah the slow burn is finally burning 🥳🥳🥳

THANKS FOR READING THIS CHAP!!! i'll be pretty busy with projects for the next 1-2 months so this could be the last chapter i post for a while 💔💔💔

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