

Harmony strode confidently into the chorus room, coolly scanning her competition. It wasn't much, really. No one she saw was good enough to beat *her*. She had worked hard for this day: the audition for the 9th grade chorus's soprano solo of the year, and she wasn't going to let anyone get in her way of winning the solo. This was Harmony's first year at the high school, and she wanted to make a big impression on everyone-and earn a huge title of honor and glory. Harmony flipped her long blonde ponytail, studied the others one more time, and glided over to her front row seat, right next to her BFFs Altaria, Bree, and her BFFL Sila. As the last person filed into the room, Harmony tensed as the time she'd been preparing for finally came.

Ms. Lilay, the chorus teacher, banged her finger cymbals once, twice, three times. Suddenly all whispers and relaxed chatter ceased, and the room became dead quiet as everyone turned their attention to her.

"Welcome, everyone, to the solo tryouts. Mrs. Hemingway, Mr. Birch, and I will be the judges. Feel free to start whenever you want, and then Ms. Haylee will start playing the accompaniment on the piano with you. As always, no talking in the audience, and please hold your claps till the end. I know all of you have worked hard for this moment, and I wish you all good luck. Now, who wants to volunteer to be the first?"

Mary's hand immediately shot into the air, and once she had sung, everyone else went, one by one, alphabetically by last name, until only Harmony was left. She was just fine being last-everyone's attention was on her.

As Harmony calmly walked up to the judges, just for a moment, she felt slightly bad that she hadn't given some encouragement to her friends. But what did it matter? It would blow off after a while, just like it always did, and it would be like nothing had ever happened. And besides, when it came to competition, especially *this* competition, Harmony made no exceptions. Even for family and friends. It was all about her-and that was the way it was.

Harmony briefly went over the lyrics in her head, but she already knew it by heart. She felt no nervousness or fear. Harmony had looked and searched for the perfect song to sing, a song so beautiful and full of emotion that when she sang it, the judges just *had* to pick her. And once she

had picked her song, she listened and listened, and practiced and practiced until she almost didn't want to sing it anymore. Until the song was second nature, a part of her she couldn't get rid of. She heard it in her teachers' lectures, in the running of the shower water. She heard its rhythm in the tingling of the wind chimes on her porch, in her classmates' footsteps, in the ticking of the clock. She heard its notes in the soft chirping of the early birds in the morning, in the whirl of her electric toothbrush, in the creaks and groans of her rusty locker. And it played incessantly in her head- especially in her dreams, taunting her of the bitter memories of her past failures, and showing her the sweet taste of victory.

She was ready.

And with this knowledge, Harmony opened her mouth and sang.

She sang of the story in the song, its powerful words twisting and turning in the air, finally shared as Harmony let them out. She shared her story, letting her past emotions of envy, exhaustion and persistence fly free through the song. And most of all, Harmony sang with everything she had put into this audition, every ounce of her that had screamed and cried and begged during the torturous hours of practicing for this moment, her tears of pain and anger and desperation, and her determination to be recognized as a talented, accomplished singer at the high school.

And as Harmony crescendoed to the peak of the song, her whole body hummed with a glowing energy that she felt spread across every inch of her, lighting her with an invisible power that made her come alive. The notes poured from her mouth like a roaring waterfall, gushing and swirling around her until everything else faded away, and Harmony became lost in the song, its soulful notes, herself. And with that, she let go. She let everything go.

At some point, the song ended, and Harmony felt herself swirling back to earth. Everyone and everything slowly came back. She opened her eyes.

The rushing in her ears was gone, replaced by a calm silence. Harmony wasn't sure exactly how long she'd been singing. She could barely remember what she had just been through, or exactly how good she had sounded. But when she glanced at the judges, they all had smiles on their faces. They motioned for her to sit as they scribbled their last notes, and Harmony floated

back to her seat in a daze of happiness. Altaria's face had a look of awe on it, and Bree's jaw was about to hit the floor. Sila just grinned and slapped Harmony a high-five so hard it stung.

"You totally rocked that song! Where did that come from?!"

Harmony shrugged nonchalantly with a small smile on her face, but inside she was cheering wildly and doing a victory dance. It was probably one of the best moments of her life. And, for bonus points, everyone was staring at her!

Ms. Lilay stood.

"Alright, everyone! That's the end of solo tryouts. We are very impressed with all of you and applaud all your hard work! As usual, the name of the soloist will be posted tomorrow -"

Ms. Lilay smiled when she was interrupted with a chorus of groans and protests from the auditioners.

"-on the front board," Ms. Lilay continued. "Thank you all for coming and -"

Two people suddenly burst into the room and ran up to Ms. Lilay. The woman, who looked rich and stylish but very frazzled, began talking immediately to Ms. Lilay in a frantic tone, placing her hand on the shoulder of the young girl beside her.

"Hi! I am Mrs. Jefferson, Shirley's mother. I was the one who emailed you about Shirley's audition. I'm terribly sorry for being late, but I had anticipated a much earlier arrival. We got stuck in a traffic jam and just got here. I was wondering if -"

Ms. Lilay stopped the woman's distressed chatter by calmly interrupting her.

"Don't worry; I know exactly who you are. And you got here just in time-we were just about to end! Of *course* Shirley can still audition. We've been expecting you. Please, sit!"

Ms. Lilay guided the woman, who Harmony now knew was Shirley's mom, to a chair off to the side. Then Ms. Lilay approached the girl Harmony assumed was named Shirley, and they started a whispered conversation.

Quiet chatter broke out among the students as they discussed this new arrival. Instead of talking to her friends, Harmony carefully observed the newcomers. The woman, Mrs. Jefferson, looked young at first sight, but she had some wrinkles, so Harmony assumed that she was in her late 30's or early 40's. She had a beauty and glow that she seemed to have passed on to Shirley. She was short for a grown woman, but her face showed kindness and warmth. Next, Harmony turned her attention to the little one. Her fur coat and shiny leather boots screamed "rich!" to all the onlookers. The girl was very pretty-*but not as pretty as me*, Harmony thought-and had a nice smile, but honestly? She looked like she belonged in a 5th grade classroom, not at a 9th grade solo tryout! Harmony exchanged looks with her friends, who all had confused expressions on their faces too. Harmony frowned at the girl. *What is she doing here?!*

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the girl smiled and nodded to Ms. Lilay, and they stopped talking. Ms. Lilay turned towards Harmony and the others.

"Sorry everyone, but you're going to have to stay a little longer. This is Shirley Jefferson. She's transferring from a private school in Washington, D.C to here and just arrived. Shirley hasn't had much time to prepare for this, but she's willing to give it her best shot anyways. Let's all welcome our new student and be attentive as she sings!"

Harmony understood *everything* now. So this new girl was rich and spoiled whose father probably had some type of government job. She bet Shirley was an only child, too. But that left one question in her mind.

Harmony raised her hand.

Ms. Lilay looked at her. "Yes?"

Harmony didn't try to stop herself from directing her stare at Shirley."You sure she's in the right place? This is the high school, not the middle school, in case she was mistaken."

Harmony smirked triumphantly as snickers and giggles broke out from behind her. Ms. Lilay frowned when Shirley's rosy, flawless cheeks turned pink, but she lifted her head high and faced Harmony with a reply before Ms. Lilay could answer.

"I look younger because I am. I'm 11 but I skipped 4 grades, so that's why I'm here."

“... and your singing is just as good as your grades?” Harmony countered, raising a perfect brow. The room was now completely silent, with some of her classmates staring at her like she was crazy, or with disgust. But Harmony sat, unfazed by their looks. She crossed her arms over her chest. *Who does she think she is, anyway? I’ll make sure to put her in her place-for talking like that to me.* Harmony felt Sila nudge her with her foot, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Sila’s struggle to hold back a smile. The corners of Harmony’s mouth twitched, and her displeasure at this new guest immediately evaporated.

Harmony turned her attention back to Shirley, whose unfortunately ruby red lips were-in a smile? Her eyes sparkled with amusement. Ms. Lilay shot Harmony a warning glare and took a step towards Shirley, probably ready to apologize or end their face-off. But Shirley put a small, slender hand up to stop her from advancing, and, looking at Harmony, laughed. It sounded like a light tinkling of little bells. Harmony suppressed a growl. Annoyance flowed through her, and her brows knitted together. She didn’t know why this girl bugged her so much, but one thought occupied her mind.

This is so on.

“That’s a good one!” Shirley said, still smiling. “And as for my singing? I think so. Let me show you.”

Ms. Lilay backed off, and as Shirley’s lips parted, the most beautiful sound Harmony had ever heard flew from Shirley’s mouth. Harmony didn’t want to admit it, but Shirley was *good*. Prodigy good. The clear, precise notes flowed from her mouth in waves of exhilarating sound, the highs and lows of the melody dancing and gliding in the air. Shirley sang of deep emotion, of the tragic love story in the song, and the stunningly light and simple, but influential and meaningful notes kept on going forever.

Harmony hated how everyone (and, yes, even herself) was hanging on to every crisp note, every dive and turn, twist and twirl of the alluring melody, and the song that this little 11-year-old had somehow created out of nowhere. And she couldn’t blame them. Shirley, with her eyes closed and long, curled eyelashes fluttering, her long, wavy ringlets of golden hair, and that infuriating flawless, glowing skin and pouty pink lips, she looked like an angel sent from heaven to deliver God’s last glorious message. She reminded Harmony that she was not perfect...but

perfect had found Shirley. It *was* Shirley. It was obvious in the way her voice had captivated everyone in an instant, in Shirley's too-good-to-be-true looks, in her unbelievable brains, and in her cheerful, optimistic, innocent-but-brave personality-and enough spark to challenge *her*. This was what Harmony despised the most about Shirley. Harmony had clearly underestimated the new girl, and was totally thrown off by how Shirley managed to be the biggest pain in the neck of all time!

If Shirley keeps going like this, I'm dead. The rest of us are all fried!

By the looks on their faces, the judges had already made their final decision.

Harmony sighed, frustrated, and leaned back in her chair-just as the last few notes faded away and floated in the air for a moment before completely disappearing.

Everyone was still caught in the trance for a minute-and then they all burst out into a rumbling applause. Harmony even caught a few whistles. She glanced at Altaria, Sila, and Bree-who, to her shock, were also clapping hysterically. Jaw dropping, Harmony finally forced her eyes away from her traitorous friends to Shirley. She was beaming proudly with a radiant expression on her face, and meeting everyone's eyes. When she saw Harmony, her smile faltered, and she looked concerned. But at Harmony's murderous glare, her smile slipped back and she mouthed," Good luck tomorrow!"

Harmony slid low in her seat, and tried to block out all the noise. She couldn't believe what she was seeing-and even worse, Shirley was being nice to her! Out of all people!

This day had turned from the best to the worst.

The next morning, as Harmony and the girls walked through the front doors of the school, she noticed a huge crowd around the bulletin board. She tensed up when she saw Shirley, but Sila squeezed her hand encouragingly.

Harmony gave her BFFL a grateful look. "Thanks," she said softly.

Ally, Sila, Bree and Harmony managed to work their way to the front. Harmony's eyes frantically searched for the result, and everything stopped when her eyes fell on the name on the white sheet of paper.

Harmony shook as she read the name over and over again. *Shirley Jefferson. Shirley Jefferson. Shirley Jefferson. Shirley...* She clenched her hand so hard the empty Styrofoam cup in her hand cracked.

Harmony blew out a long breath. Well, who was she kidding? Though she hadn't wanted to admit it to herself, she had known all along that Shirley would win.

Harmony abruptly turned and found Shirley in the crowd, who was smiling and graciously accepting any congratulations. Harmony walked up to Shirley and tapped on her shoulder.

Harmony stuck out her hand and forced a smile on her face. "Congratulations, Shirley. You definitely beat us all by a long shot."

Shirley grinned and shook it. "I know you did a fabulous job, too. Unfortunately, I missed most of it, but I managed to catch the end of your audition. You're really good!"

Is she trying to trick me or something? Why is she being so nice? Harmony thought.

"Thanks," she said warily. Harmony turned to leave, but Shirley grabbed her arm to stop her.

Shirley smiled. "I know you don't really like me that much, but I'm not kidding when I said you were good. You're fabulous!"

Yeah. Right. Buttering me up is not going to earn you any brownie points when it comes to me, new girl.

"Cut all the lying and just let me go!" Harmony snapped impatiently. She didn't want to spend any more time around *Sunshine Girl* than necessary-especially because being around Shirley rubbed the fact that she lost in her face.

Shirley shrugged and let go. "If you want to be in a bad mood, then so be it. Anyways, I've got to meet all of the other people in our grade, who'll hopefully be friendlier than *some* people I've met so far."

Before Harmony could shoot a retort, Shirley laughed and weaved her way through the busy crowd.

“Catch you later!” she yelled over her shoulder, giving her a wave and a sunny smile.

Harmony rolled her eyes and started slogging slowly through the crowd toward her homeroom. She couldn't bear to walk up to her friends and try to have a normal conversation, after what was *supposed* to be the best moment of her life had turned into the worst. For the first time, Harmony felt *just a bit* tired and defeated. But she still stood up straight - with shoulders squared, chin lifted, and her signature attitude. No matter how much Harmony tried, she knew that the solo results would be a black cloud hanging over her head the whole day. But Harmony couldn't afford to be sad. She needed to be strong and independent and perfect, exactly what everyone expected her to be. And just like any other day, she would give them just that.

Harmony wasn't ready to forgive Shirley anytime soon. She sought out Shirley in the hallway with her eyes, and with one last look of hatred and disgust, she forced herself to push away the past. She had to get over it and move on.

After all, there's always a next time.