

## Wife Mask 101

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Fueled by growing impatience and a need for answers, the brothers exchanged restless glances.

Then, without another word, Myles squared his shoulders and marched straight into the CEO's office. Cole, a world-class hacker with skills sharp enough to breach military firewalls, must have already been one step ahead and tuned in to the museum's internal camera feeds, calmly watching the finals from his phone.

Myles didn't come in to interrupt—just to watch alongside.

Catching on fast, Aron and Hugh exchanged a glance and then marched in after Myles without hesitation.

Sure enough, Cole sat at the desk, legs crossed, phone in hand, eyes fixed on the live security footage playing on- screen...

The moment the racket hit his ears, Cole lifted his eyes with a cool detachment, sizing up the trio who'd barged in without so much as a knock.

The trio and Cole had grown up thick as thieves, their bond a rare thing, giving them more guts than most to face Cole, the man who could freeze a room with a glance.

Myles, the eldest, was always shoved to the front lines, a role that had molded him into the spearhead for his two younger brothers.

"Mr. Evans, how about a glass of water? You look parched," Myles offered, flashing a polite grin under Cole's piercing stare. He sauntered to the desk, setting the glass down with a gentle clink. His moves were all respect and sincerity, but his eyes kept sneaking toward Cole's phone.

Cole, sharp as a tack, saw right through Myles' little game.

For all Myles' scholarly looks—those glasses, that calm demeanor—his curiosity could rival a nosy aunt at a family wedding.

Nobody would peg the poised, steady assistant Myles as the guy with a phone gallery stuffed to the brim with juicy gossip: who was sneaking around with who, who was split up, who had undergone cosmetic surgery-he had the dirt on everyone.

In contrast, Aron and Hugh, the younger two, were as guileless as puppies.

Cole shot Myles a look of quiet disdain but didn't send him packing. Truth be told, he was feeling a little smug and wanted to flaunt his brilliant wife.

Seeing Cole wasn't kicking him out, Myles relaxed visibly and dared to lean a little closer to get a better view of Cole's phone screen.

Aron and Hugh took that as their cue and shuffled up to the desk too, craning their necks.

Cole, mildly amused but keeping up his frosty act, gave Aron and Hugh a side-eye and asked, "And what are you two doing here?"

"Ahem!" Aron coughed awkwardly, fully aware his lie wouldn't hold water, but he pushed through anyway. "We thought you might be bored, so we came to keep you company."

"Ha-ha!" Hugh found the excuse weak but he had nothing better, so he just chuckled and said, "Yeah, to chat."

Cole snorted, unimpressed. "Pair of goofballs!"

He threw them a disdainful glance but didn't make a move to shoo them away, returning his gaze to his phone.

The four of them could be employer and employee on paper, but they had shared a childhood. Their relationship had always been more laid-back than formal.

Myles, the same age as Cole, was the most intelligent of the three brothers. He was well-read and steady in his actions.

Aron and Hugh, younger than Cole by two and four years respectively, were more muscle than mind-great in a scuffle, but hopeless in strategy.

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Naturally, Cole spoke with more respect to Myles and treated Aron and Hugh like overgrown kids who needed regular scolding to stay out of trouble.

And Aron and Hugh had long gotten used to it. A week without a Cole-style tongue-lashing felt incomplete. Being called goofballs just now? It weirdly warmed their hearts—it almost sounded affectionate. Did that mean they could stick around and gossip? Grinning from ear to ear, they sidled closer to Myles, eager to peek at what Cole was so intently watching. Meanwhile, at the museum, the competition was heating up.

Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*, Paige's *Riding the Waves*, and Bentlee's *Brick Bridge* were battling it out for the top three spots. But to the seasoned judges, the verdict was all but obvious.

Compared to the other two, *Brick Bridge* lacked both finesse and depth. It was the clear third-place pick, no debate needed.

That left the true showdown between *Lonely Sunset* and *Riding the Waves*-Elliana versus Paige.

But even here, the judges didn't see much of a toss-up. Paige's work had charm and solid technique, but Elliana's piece was in a league of its own. The difference was night and day.

Still, the rules required that the announcement be delayed for dramatic flair. The judges would put on a show, letting the audience soak in every brushstroke and nuance before delivering the final call.

As the competition entered the final showdown, tension crackled through the museum.

Luciano was drenched in sweat, nerves fried by the suspense.

Paige gripped the hem of her gown so tightly that it looked like the fabric might tear. Elliana! Elliana! The name buzzed like a broken record in her mind.

Paige's painting, *Riding the Waves*, captured a lone white-sailed boat battling a wild, churning sea. It was a masterpiece of detail, with a composition that sang and a vibe that screamed. It was like a

pep talk on canvas, radiating ambition and progress. Its direct and striking expression immediately conveyed the artist's intent.

Elliana's Lonely Sunset was a breathtaking autumn scene where the water melted into an endless sky. The setting sun and a single wild goose glided in perfect harmony. The colors were pure magic, wrapping you in a serene, almost otherworldly calm from the first glance.

As soon as the Lonely Sunset was unveiled, the judges' jaws hit the floor. They zoomed in on their tablets, dissecting every brushstroke, and then shuffled up to the canvas itself, eyes wide with awe. The closer they looked, the more they were hooked.

The technique felt like it was touched by the divine—effortless yet perfectly balanced, flowing like a river. Even the old-timers, grizzled veterans of the art scene, stood there dumbfounded, humbled by its mastery.

But what really blew their minds wasn't just the flawless craft—it was the painting's soul. At first, it seemed like a stunning landscape, vividly alive with the autumn sky, the setting sun, and that lone goose soaring in sync. The details popped like nobody's business.

But linger a little longer, and it was like diving into an emotional whirlpool. Sorrow, joy, melancholy, exhilaration—it all crashed over someone, pulling them into a strange, vibrant world of feeling. Some folks felt like laughing, others like sobbing, and a few wanted to scream at the top of their Lungs.

When the emotions hit their peak and they snapped back to reality, that jaw-dropping scene was still there, staring back at them.

It was like a spellbinding work of art, with a depth and uniqueness that left the judges feeling like they couldn't hold a candle to it.

The judges dissected the Lonely Sunset with their expert eyes, while the crowd just went with their gut. Either way, everyone was floored, caught in a shared state of wonder.

Nobody saw it coming—not from Elliana, the girl whispered to be a talentless nobody with no charm to speak of. Heads kept turning toward her, sitting quietly in the corner, as the murmurs rippled through the room.

"I'm no art critic, but my gut's screaming Elliana's piece blows Paige's out of the water."

"Same here."

"Isn't it wild? Everyone said Elliana was a zero. How's she pulling off this kind of talent? Did she really paint it herself, or did she pay someone?"

"Nope, it's all her. I saw the live stream of 'The Heiress' Graduation Trip.' She painted it right there on camera."

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"That's insane. Who knew Elliana was a secret art prodigy?"

"Anyone catch that broadcast? Luciano tore into Elliana's work, and Paige didn't say a peep to back her up. Looking back, that's pretty low."

"Bet Luciano and Paige schemed to keep Elliana down, figuring no close-ups on the live feed would bury Elliana. But Elliana flipped the script by entering this competition."

"Now they're eating crow in front of everyone, and they've got it coming."

Luciano and Paige, catching the whispers, were on pins and needles, their faces twisted with unease.

In the back row, Darin's and Kiara's smug grins had melted into panic and disbelief. They couldn't wrap their heads around Elliana suddenly shining in the world of oil painting. No way could they stomach their daughter being outdone by her.

The room buzzed with a tangled mix of vibes—some snickering, some fuming, others just soaking in the drama.

Elliana, the eye of the storm, stayed cool as a cucumber, like the whole circus was just another Tuesday.

Hailee, meanwhile, was practically bouncing off the walls. "Elliana, you're unreal! I'm totally fangirling over you right now!"

Elliana shot her a playful glance. "Chill out."

"Chill? No way!" Hailee was hyped, like she'd won the prize herself. "It's obvious—you're taking home the crown. After tonight, you're gonna be the art world's new rockstar, and I get to say I'm pals with the champ. How am I supposed to stay calm?"

Then, with a flicker of doubt, she added, "You're not going to ditch me for being too ordinary, right?"

Elliana chuckled and gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Don't be silly."

Hailee, still buzzing, clung to Elliana's hand. "Oh man, I finally scored an epic friend. No way I'm letting you go!"

Elliana, caught between amusement and not knowing what to say, just smiled.

Suddenly, a judge standing by the Lonely Sunset let out a shout. "No way! This can't be real!"

Every head in the room turned toward the judge, eyes locked on the source of the outburst.

The judge gawking at Elliana's Lonely Sunset had silver- streaked hair and carried the vibe of an old-school artist, his eyes practically glowing with a lifelong love for the craft. This wasn't just any judge—he was Luca Wilde, a legend in the art world.

Luciano, much younger, was from a different camp, a rising star in the art scene's political jungle.

Luciano had climbed the ladder by snagging the presidency of the Calligraphers and Painters Association, leading the faction that played the power game. Luca, on the other hand, held no fancy titles—his clout came purely from his art, honed over decades of devotion.

When it came to pulling strings and making deals, Luciano was the go-to guy. But when the talk turned to painting itself, Luca was the one everyone looked to, hands down.

The art world loved to gossip about how both Luciano and Luca swore they were die-hard fans of the iconic Rosa.

Luciano never missed a chance to name-drop Rosa at big events, piling on the praise with a flair that felt like he was auditioning for her fan club president, even joking he was her "unofficial protégé."

Luca often talked about Rosa, but his way of expressing himself was different from Luciano's.

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When Luciano talked about Rosa, he used flowery language, almost like poetry. In contrast, Luca referenced specific works of hers, using straightforward language to highlight the beauty of her art.

Over time, the art crowd split them into two camps: Luciano, the dreamy romantic, and Luca, the grounded realist.

These two heavyweights rarely crossed paths, their orbits barely touching, which led outsiders to think their worlds just didn't overlap much.

But those in the know? They'd say Luca wasn't a fan of Luciano's flashy style and made a point to dodge events where he'd be holding court.

The Starry Oil Painting Competition finals were the art world's Super Bowl, and Luca had been roped into judging, even if it meant sharing the spotlight with Luciano.

Luciano knew full well Luca looked down his nose at him, and it ate him up inside. He was always itching for a chance to put Luca in his place, but Luca lived like a hermit, consumed by his art, giving Luciano no openings to pounce.

When Luca let out his stunned exclamation, Luciano's head snapped toward him, a bad feeling crawling up his spine. His pulse kicked into overdrive, and sweat beaded on his brow.

The host hustled over to Luca, all respect. "Mr. Wilde, got something to share?"

Luca was still reeling, his eyes glued to the Lonely Sunset, scanning it with a magnifying glass like he was decoding a treasure map, left to right, top to bottom. After soaking in the painting one more time, he spun toward the host, practically vibrating. "Can we get the artist of this piece up here?"

"You got it." The host didn't miss a beat, calling out to the crowd. "Miss Elliana Marsh, the genius behind the Lonely Sunset! Can you join us on stage? Mr. Wilde's got something to say."

Every head swiveled toward Elliana, tucked away in the corner.

Hailee yanked at Elliana's sleeve, buzzing with excitement. "Elliana, they're calling you up!"

"I heard," Elliana said softly, then rose and walked to the stage, each step steady and sure.

This was a high-stakes competition, but Elliana kept it low -key, rocking a simple black tracksuit. Paige, by contrast, was decked out like she was headed to a gala, dripping in a glitzy gown and pricey jewels.

Elliana's outfit was plain, her makeup a touch bold, but she owned the room with a fresh, magnetic presence that had everyone's eyes glued to her as she moved from her seat to the stage.

Luca's gaze never left her, and when she stood before him on the display stage, his voice shook with barely contained awe. "Is Lonely Sunset really yours?"

"Yup," Elliana said with a calm smile and a nod. "I painted it this afternoon during my live-stream class. Millions of viewers can back me up, so no need to wonder, Mr. Wilde."

Luca's lips trembled, and he stared at her, speechless, for what felt like forever. "Elliana.. You.."

Elliana got it-Luca had clocked Rosa's style in her work. Unlike Luciano, who was all talk, Luca knew Rosa's art inside and out.

"Mr. Wilde, try not to get too worked up," Elliana said with a gentle smile, hoping to dial him back.

But Luca was too far gone, his excitement spilling over. Without even glancing at the other judges, he turned to the crowd and declared, "Lonely Sunset is hands-down the winner!"

Luciano shot to his feet, his face stormy with rage. "Mr. Wilde, aren't you jumping the gun here?"

Right now, Luciano had only one thing on his mind—Elliana must not win the championship. If she outshined Paige, his name would be dragged through the mud.

Of course, Luca's bold declaration of Elliana's *Lonely Sunset* as the winner broke the competition rules. According to the guidelines, judges were supposed to deliberate together and vote before announcing a result.

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Luciano jumped at the loophole and went after Luca without hesitation.

Paige, too, didn't want to see Elliana take the crown. She stood up right after Luciano, her tone sharp and biting. "Mr. Wilde, I've always admired your place in the art world. I never imagined you'd toss aside your principles for personal gain. Tell us, how much did Elliana offer you to make you risk your name and break the rules?"

Paige and Luciano cornered Luca with their accusations. He realized he'd gone too far—but he showed no sign of remorse. Instead, he composed himself and answered calmly. "I apologize for my outburst. I spoke out of excitement. What I said earlier was just my personal opinion. The competition will go on as planned."

But everyone knew—those words were as good as casting a vote.

After that, Luca turned to Elliana. His tone softened, his eyes sincere. "With my level of skill, I'm not qualified to vote on your work... What made you suddenly decide to enter the *Starry Oil Painting Competition*?"

The audience stirred. They couldn't understand why Luca, usually reserved and proud, was now so humble before Elliana.

"Mr. Wilde is known for his integrity. He never flatters anyone. What's going on?"

"Even if he likes her painting, there's no need to lower himself like this. She's a newcomer. He's a legend."

No one could make sense of Luca's sudden change in tone. Luciano and Paige were just as confused—and furious.

Luciano, who had always disliked Luca, could barely keep his cool. His jaw tightened, and anger boiled beneath his skin. "What's gotten into Luca?" he muttered under his breath.

Paige gave Luciano a side glance, her face clouded with unease. "Mr. Scott, grumbling won't fix this. We need to stop Luca before he makes things worse."

Luciano didn't answer. He took a deep breath and marched toward the stage.

The host, seeing Luciano approach, quickly introduced him. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Mr. Scott, president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association. He is an expert in oil painting, with numerous awards to his name. Please give a warm welcome to Mr. Scott!"

Applause followed, though it was lukewarm. Everyone's focus was still on Luca and Elliana.

With a grim expression, Luciano took the microphone and launched his attack. "Mr. Wilde, you've always presented yourself as a calm and upright man. Today, you've made everyone question that. Are you and Elliana more than just judge and contestant?"

Luca didn't flinch. He didn't even glance at Luciano. His eyes remained fixed on Elliana, still waiting for her response.

Being ignored like this stung. Luciano's pride took a hit. He chuckled coldly and struck even harder. "Everyone knows you and I don't get along. Still, I've always respected your seniority and stayed professional. But today, you've crossed a line. If you're going to disrupt the finals like this, I won't stand by. Let's settle this now! Is this really about art-or are you just trying to hurt me by favoring Elliana over my protégé, Paige?"

He took a step forward, voice rising. "You're a master, a role model for the younger generation. Yet, here you are, misusing your authority out of personal spite. Don't you feel ashamed?"

The atmosphere thickened. Tension filled the room like smoke.

The crowd only dared to whisper. No one wanted to step into a fight between two giants. Luca was a respected elder. Luciano held power as president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association. No one wanted to offend either side.

Seeing Luciano take control of the moment, Paige followed his lead. She lifted the hem of her gown and walked onto the stage. But unlike Luciano's sharp tone, she played the victim. "Mr. Wilde, if this is what it takes to ease your tension with Mr. Scott, then I'm willing to step down from the competition..."

From a young age, Paige had turned manipulation into an art form, wearing manufactured innocence like a tailored gown. Her tears weren't just convincing—they were a performance, expertly crafted to tug at every heartstring in the room.

Whispers of sympathy began to stir, and one by one, the crowd leaned into her side.

"Mr. Wilde, personal disputes with Mr. Scott are one thing, but dragging them into this competition is unfair. As a judge, you're expected to critique with impartiality, not grudges."

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"Mr. Wilde, even if something's gone sour between you and Mr. Scott, know that Paige doesn't deserve the fallout. She just became Mr. Scott's disciple today—don't let your conflict overshadow her chance."

Seeing the atmosphere shift in her favor, Paige's heart danced with satisfaction, though she kept her expression wounded and gently touched her damp lashes with the edge of a tissue.

Luca, who had never compromised his principles, could barely contain his fury. His jaw clenched, and a line of veins flared up his temple as he stared Paige and Luciano down. He gave Luciano a hard, frigid stare and said in a steady, low voice, "I don't care for you. But that doesn't mean I'm here to pick a fight or twist the truth just to spite you. If you're curious about why I chose Ms. Marsh's painting, then go see it for yourself."

With that, Luca shifted to the side, making space for Luciano, and pointed at Elliana's painting. "Didn't you say Rosa was your muse? Then go on. See it for yourself."

The mention of Rosa's name hit Luciano like a cold wind. He didn't know where Luca was going with this, but his gut told him it wasn't headed anywhere good. Still, with eyes watching from every direction, he couldn't afford to flinch. He stepped forward, forcing composure, and turned his attention to Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*.

Back during the live class, Luciano had barely given Elliana's work a glance. It was decent, maybe even impressive-but he'd mocked it anyway, hiding behind the excuse of being honest while really just playing to the cameras. But this time, Elliana's painting was a finalist. It wasn't some throwaway display anymore. He had to show at least a pretense of serious critique.

Luciano pretended to admire the artwork for a moment, then straightened up with the smug confidence of a self-proclaimed expert and said with exaggerated flair, "Elliana's piece has its strengths, sure, but when placed beside Paige's, it clearly doesn't measure up."

Once he laid down his critique, he turned to Elliana, wearing the kind of expression meant to pass as wise and well-meaning. "Elliana, I did call you out during the live session this afternoon, but it wasn't without cause. You treat your instructor and the craft itself too lightly. Without genuine respect for both, even a good painting won't take you very far. What I said wasn't meant to tear you down. It was simply guidance, one artist trying to steer another in the right direction. There's no need for resentment, is there?"

Elliana couldn't hide the amusement curling at her lips. If he wanted to keep up the charade, she was more than happy to let him. The further he went, the harder he'd fall.

A scornful laugh escaped Luca before he could stop it. He no longer had doubts—Luciano clearly knew nothing about oil painting. Anyone with real knowledge wouldn't compare Paige's *Riding the Waves* to Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*, let alone call the former superior.

Another truth settled in Luca's mind—Luciano's admiration for Rosa was nothing but an empty claim. If Luciano genuinely admired Rosa's work, he wouldn't overlook the distinct traces of Rosa's influence in Elliana's *Lonely Sunset*. Even if he couldn't name the artist right away, he should've at least noticed how closely it mirrored Rosa's style.

Luca's disdain deepened with every breath. To think that the president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association was nothing more than a fraud—it was both ridiculous and revolting.

"Tell me, Luciano. Did you actually look at Ms. Marsh's *Lonely Sunset*, or were you just pretending again?" Luca asked, his voice sharp.

The moment Luca pressed him, dread clawed at Luciano's spine. He hated being cornered. Like this—under scrutiny, with sweat trickling down his back, terrified of slipping up in front of a crowd that wouldn't miss a beat.

Wanting to avoid further scrutiny, Luciano pulled a long face and snapped, "Mr. Wilde, must you insist on challenging me like this?"

"Ha!" A single, biting laugh shot from Luca's throat.

With a chilling smirk, Luca said, "Luciano, a hypocritical scoundrel like you isn't worth my time!"

"You!" Luciano was seething, his chest rising sharply as his face contorted with fury. "Mr. Wilde, I've held back out of respect for your reputation and seniority in the art world. But don't test my patience, or I won't bother with pleasantries next time!"

"I'm not interested in your so-called pleasantries," Luca retorted. "You think Paige's piece deserves praise? Fine. Let's see what the rest of the panel thinks."

As sparks flew between the two titans, the host stood frozen -caught between awe and panic, unsure whether to interrupt or let the storm play out.

Snapping out of his daze at Luca's cue, the host scrambled to regain control, ushering the other judges forward to cast their votes.

The entire panel of judges, much like Luca, were devoted enthusiasts of oil painting. They shared his peculiar passion. In their world, prestige and social ties held little sway-what truly mattered was the art itself.

That was why no one cared that Luciano was the president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association, or that Paige had connections to Merritt. All that mattered was which painting genuinely stood apart.

Therefore, when Luca expressed such unrestrained admiration for the Lonely Sunset, the other judges took notice. One by one, they drifted toward the piece, their eyes narrowing with curiosity and quiet reverence.

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Rosa was a legend—an innovator whose work these judges had studied for decades. And the Lonely Sunset carried echoes of her unmistakable style. It seemed likely Elliana was a devoted student of

Rosa's craft, perhaps emulating her technique in admiration. That might've been what first captured Luca's attention-what left him so awestruck.

But as the judges brought out their magnifying glasses and subjected the painting to close inspection, a hush fell over the room. "Hold on. This can't be," one of them murmured, voice wavering.

They exchanged astonished looks and then turned as one to face Elliana.

These were not just any judges—they were some of the most respected authorities in oil painting, regularly called upon to authenticate masterpieces. And now, each of them had arrived at the same, almost unthinkable conclusion. It was an original Rosa. Since Elliana had painted it live—on camera—there was only one possible explanation. Elliana was Rosa.

What followed was nothing short of surreal. Just like Luca, the rest of the judges surged toward Elliana, their expressions a blend of awe and exhilaration as they bowed with deep reverence. They echoed Luca's question with near breathless wonder. "What inspired you to submit a piece to the Starry Oil Painting Competition?"

The competition was meant for rising talents—for newcomers. For Rosa, a globally celebrated master, to enter such a contest was inconceivable. It was like a world champion stepping into a local amateur ring. The idea was so outlandish that it defied logic.

The judges' reverent reaction sent the audience into a frenzy.

"What's going on?" "What's so special about Elliana's painting?" "Why are they treating her like royalty?"

Confusion rippled through the crowd, but no one was more lost than Luciano. The sense of being utterly in the dark gnawed at him like a parasite. Frustration overtook him, shattering his carefully curated poise. "What the hell are you old geezers doing?" he bellowed, abandoning all sense of decorum.

Gasps echoed throughout the hall. No one could believe what they were witnessing-Luciano, usually composed and dignified, reduced to an angry, red-faced caricature.

Luca scoffed and turned away, letting him unravel in public without a shred of sympathy.

The other judges saw it clearly now. Luciano wasn't just clueless about oil painting—he was a fraud. He had been abusing his title, stifling true talent while elevating his own protégés. This kind of petty tyrant was everything they despised. Luca's earlier disdain now made perfect sense.

With unspoken agreement, the judges turned their backs on Luciano. And though Luciano burned with the need to understand what was happening, their silence was deafening—intentional, calculated, and absolute.

"You.. You've crossed the line!" Luciano choked on his own fury, his jaw clenched so tightly that it looked ready to snap. His hands trembled at his sides, veins bulging, face flushed an alarming crimson—he was moments from imploding.

Surrounded by the cold, impenetrable silence of the judges, Luciano exploded, "You dare insult me—the president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association? Then you insult every artist under its banner! This is outright insolence. Do you all want to be blacklisted from the art world?"

The room held its breath, but Paige saw opportunity in the chaos. With Luciano unraveling in real time, she slid in like a vulture sensing weakness, her expression painted with faux concern. "Please," she said sweetly, placing a steadying hand on Luciano's arm, her voice just loud enough to carry. "Let's not make a scene."

Then, she pivoted, eyes flashing as she faced the judges, her voice suddenly razor-sharp. "I'm shocked. Truly. I never thought the Starry Oil Painting Competition—a place where rising talent could shine—would become this tainted. An entire panel reduced to puppets, bought off to champion a fraud."

She didn't say Elliana's name. She didn't need to. The accusation hung in the air like smoke from a fire everyone could smell.

"You, the revered pillars of this industry, falling over yourselves for some no-name. Or is it because she has the Evans family pulling strings behind the curtain?" In Paige's mind, the final blow had landed. She pictured headlines, scandal, Elliana's reputation in tatters.

But reality didn't bend to her narrative.

The judges didn't flinch. These weren't amateurs easily rattled by cheap theatrics—they were titans, long weathered against storms far more vicious than this.

They looked at her not with anger, but with quiet disbelief. And something worse-pity. A slow, amused grin crept across Luca's face as he stepped forward, his voice a velvet dagger. "The only fraud in this room is Luciano."

Luca's latest jab hit its mark, and Luciano's patience snapped, his rage rising like a tide ready to crash. "Luca! What is that supposed to mean? How exactly am I the fraud here?"

Luca didn't flinch. He lifted a brow, voice drenched in sarcasm. "Come on, Luciano. You know exactly what you pulled. Why act dumb now?"

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While Luciano seethed, barely keeping himself together, Luca lounged in place, unbothered and smug. Luca's taunting stare bore down on Luciano like a weight, making it harder to breathe with each second.

Luciano shifted uncomfortably. Had the truth slipped through, exposing his act? Impossible. He'd covered every angle—no one could've found out! The ghost painter he controlled was paralyzed with fear, far too scared to ever expose him.

Just as Luciano tried to steady his racing thoughts, Elliana spoke in an even, unshaken tone. "People keep asking why I decided to join the Starry Oil Painting Competition. The answer's simple-I refuse to stay silent while frauds in the art world keep lying to the public and abusing their influence."

A murmur of confusion spread through the crowd, but the judges exchanged knowing looks—they understood immediately.

Luca let out a heavy breath. "You always kept your distance from Ublento's art circle. I hate that its filth is what finally pulled you in."

The other judges gave solemn nods, their faces tight with embarrassment. "It never occurred to us that you'd be the one forced to clean up the mess plaguing Ublento's art world"

Seeing these revered judges bow their heads to Elliana, the crowd exchanged baffled looks, struggling to comprehend the shift. Was this the same Elliana who'd once been cast aside as worthless? When had she become a figure these titans of art treated with deference?

Luciano, cornered and unraveling, lost his grip and hissed at the judges, "Enough with your cryptic games, you old fools! If you've got something to say, say it!"

The judges answered as one, their eyes sharp with contempt.

Luca let out a derisive snort. "Luciano, the truth is right there in the Lonely Sunset. If you can't recognize it, then there's only one explanation—you've never understood oil painting at all. You're a complete fraud."

The crowd burst into chaos. "Hold on—what? Luciano knows nothing about oil painting?" "But he's won dozens of awards!"

"He's the president of the Calligraphers and Painters Association! He's supposed to be a master! What the hell is Luca saying?"

"Luca pointed to the Lonely Sunset—but what answer is he even talking about?"

The growing murmurs swept through the crowd like a tide, prickling down Luciano's spine.

Noticing the shift, Paige gently released Luciano's sleeve and inched backward, quietly creating space between them as if distancing herself from a crumbling monument.

A voice suddenly rang out from the crowd—sharp, impatient. "Mr. Wilde, what is it? Just spit it out already and end the suspense!"

"Come on, out with it already!"

Luca flicked a glance at Elliana. When she gave no sign to stop him, he stepped forward and declared, "The answer is simple. Lonely Sunset is an original Rosa piece."

The crowd exploded—louder, more chaotic than ever. "What the hell?"

"Wait—hold on. If Lonely Sunset is a Rosa original, and we all saw Elliana paint it, does that mean Elliana is Rosa?"

"No way! This is unreal! How does a complete nobody suddenly turn into a legend?"

The audience's reaction was electric. Luciano and Paige stood rooted to the spot, faces blank with shock.

"You've got to be kidding!" Paige broke the silence first, yelling over the uproar. "Elliana's been rotting away in some dusty shed behind the Jones family's house! She's a dropout who's never touched a paintbrush in a classroom. There's no way in hell she's Rosa!"

The crowd froze, stunned into silence by her outburst.

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Luca responded with a composed smile, "I won't speculate on how Ms. Marsh came to be Rosa, but I'll gladly stake my reputation on this—Lonely Sunset is undeniably a Rosa original."

"We're in full agreement. There's no doubt Lonely Sunset was painted by Rosa," the other judges chimed in, their voices steady and certain.

The crowd stirred again, a wave of murmurs spreading as excitement reignited.

"Every single judge confirmed it-Elliana really is Rosa!"

"No way! That girl the Jones family always called worthless turned out to be a world-class artist?"

"My daughter absolutely adores Rosa—she's obsessed!"

Elliana didn't move, her gaze fixed on Luciano with a half-smile that shimmered with quiet triumph. Luciano still hadn't recovered from the blow.

Elliana's voice cut through the silence like a blade. "Mr. Scott, you've gone on and on about how I'm your favorite artist. So why is it that you couldn't recognize one of my paintings?"

Luciano's mind was a storm of static-thoughts collided, fragmented, and then vanished before he could grasp them. He could see, hear, feel everything, but none of it made sense. His body stood frozen, his brain adrift in fog. He stared at Elliana like she was an illusion. Her? This plain,

forgettable woman was Rosa—the legendary Rosa he \_ had worshipped from afar, name-dropped in speeches, and exalted as the pinnacle of artistic brilliance? Unthinkable. How could someone like Elliana be the same person whose work had hung in international galleries, whose brushstrokes had inspired movements?

Luciano reeled. His years in the art world meant nothing now. He hadn't painted a thing in his life, yet had clawed his way up to the presidency of the Calligraphers and Painters Association through charm, flattery, and carefully chosen alliances. Not talent. Never talent. And now, all of it was crashing down.

If he had known from the beginning—if he had even suspected Elliana was Rosa—he would've bowed at her feet, flung open doors for her, begged to be her apprentice. Just one nod from her could've inflated his reputation tenfold. His status, his power, his reach—it would've all soared. But instead, he'd insulted her. Mocked her. Rejected her work with smug contempt. He hadn't missed an opportunity. He'd set fire to the very bridge that could have carried him to immortality in the art world. And it was all Paige's fault.

Fury simmered beneath his shock. He had backed Paige to cozy up to Merritt's wealth and influence. He'd imagined cash flowing in, exhibitions in his name, his legacy carved in gold. Instead, he was standing in the wreckage—humiliated, exposed, and circling the drain. His presidency? As good as gone. His standing in the art world? Shattered. Worse than being ruined, he was on the verge of becoming a punchline—a cautionary tale whispered at galleries and galas, a fallen fraud Laughed out of every room he entered.

Though Luciano's thoughts were screaming collapse, his pride refused to yield. His voice, sharp and defiant, cut through the tension. "There's no way this nobody is Rosa! This is a setup—you're all conspiring to make me look like a fool!"

The judges had confirmed, without hesitation, that Elliana was none other than Rosa, the elusive icon of the oil painting world.

Paige, struck by the weight of it, staggered backward, her knees nearly buckling. She gripped the edge of the table for balance, wide-eyed, and then turned her gaze to Luciano. She silently begged him to pull out a last-minute miracle. Anything.

But Luciano looked anything but composed. Desperation clung to him like sweat as he Lashed out, wild-eyed and cornered. "What proof do you even have that Elliana is Rosa?" he shouted, his voice cracking. "You can't just slap a legendary name on some random amateur and expect us to swallow it!"

To the audience below, the scene was equal parts surreal and pathetic.

The Starry Oil Painting Competition's judging panel wasn't just a group of experts-it was a cross-section of the Ublento art establishment. Their authority was ironclad. Since they said Elliana was Rosa, then she was Rosa.

Luciano's outburst wasn't righteous indignation. It was a tantrum. A drowning man flailing in public. The judges didn't even bother replying. Their silence said it all—he wasn't worth the energy.

That was when Clement rose. "Let me verify the authenticity!"

A murmur rippled through the crowd as Clement stepped forward.

The Starry Oil Painting Competition was the museum's crown jewel, and Clement had attended every final round since its inception. He'd expected tonight to be just like any other— anointing fresh talent, celebrating youthful ambition. What he hadn't expected was all the drama that was unfolding before him.

Hearing Eliana's name spoken-confirmed by the panel as Rosa -had nearly made Clement drop his glass. He'd needed a moment. Several, in fact, to wrap his head around what he'd just heard. Finally, he snapped out of his shock.

Dressed in a crisp black suit and tie, Clement exuded a quiet authority. Each step he took toward the stage was deliberate, heavy with expectation.

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Everyone knew Clement was a devoted Rosa scholar. He had studied her works obsessively, analyzing her brushwork, color choices, even the way she signed her name. If anyone could speak on the authenticity of the Lonely Sunset, it was him.

Reaching the stage, Clement gave Elliana a polite nod, greeted the judges with professional reverence, and accepted the mic from the stunned host. Then, he turned to Luciano, voice calm and precise. "If I personally verify Lonely Sunset, will you accept the result, Mr. Scott?"

Clement's neutrality gave his words weight. He had no stake in this scandal-only a devotion to truth and art. Luciano, sensing the room closing in, gave a hasty nod. "Fine. Yes."

"Good," Clement replied, allowing a small, knowing smile to tug at the corner of his lips. He then turned to the crowd. "Anyone here object to me taking the lead on this?"

"No objections!" "Let's hear it, Mr. Morgan! Give us the truth!"

The audience erupted in encouragement. They trusted Clement. If he gave the word, it would be final.

With a nod of acknowledgment, Clement turned to the Lonely Sunset. He approached the painting with reverence, as though he were standing before a sacred relic. Then, like the judges before him, he produced a magnifying glass from his coat pocket and leaned in. He began his examination—inch by inch, stroke by stroke.

The room held its breath. No one dared to speak. Even the smallest sound felt like interruption.

Clement took his time. He wasn't rushing for drama—this was how he worked. Thorough. Precise. Meticulous. And then, finally, he straightened.

The pause was unbearable. Anticipation tightened like a noose.

The entire hall waited, but Clement didn't speak. Not right away. Instead, he placed the magnifying glass down with careful precision, then adjusted the cuffs of his suit jacket and smoothed back his neatly combed hair...

Once composed himself, Clement turned to Elliana, his posture crisp, voice steady. He said, bowing his head slightly, "Rosa, thank you for gracing the Starry Oil Painting Competition with your presence. It's an honor—for this museum, and for the art world."

His declaration echoed like a final verdict. There was no room left for debate. No cracks left to pry open.

The crowd didn't erupt this time. Instead, they murmured with quiet awe, heads nodding as though they'd known all along.

"Knew it. No way a panel Like that would mess up."

"Since even Clement confirmed it, Luciano's got nothing left to say."

On the sidelines, Paige's last flicker of hope died. Jealousy burned like acid in her chest. Elliana was actually Rosa? She couldn't accept it—it felt like a cosmic joke. But there was nothing she could say. No move left to make. Her voice would only betray the panic rising in her throat.

Meanwhile, Luciano looked like a man who had aged a decade in a minute. Gone was the bluster, the pomp. His complexion was ghostly, lips pressed into a thin, bloodless line. The fall from power had stripped him bare, and the crowd could see it—how small he truly was beneath the titles and bravado.

Luciano stumbled backward, like the weight of the moment had knocked the breath out of him. Then, with one last gasp of pride, he raised his head and spat venom toward Elliana. "You hid who you were on purpose, didn't you?" he shouted. "You couldn't stand me basking in your glory, so you strung me along just to humiliate me. Some legend you are, Rosa—petty and vindictive!"

Elliana, mid-conversation with Clement, slowly turned to Luciano. Her smile was razor-thin and cold as frost. "Luciano," she said, voice calm but laced with steel, "whether you were a fan or a parasite doesn't matter to me. I'm not here to cater to egos—or clean up your mess."

Her voice wasn't raised, but it struck like a hammer—measured, controlled, and unshakably firm.

"What bothers me," Elliana said, her eyes locked on Luciano, "isn't that you climbed the ladder. It's how you did it. Pretending to understand art, rigging awards, and then flashing those credentials to secure the top spot in the Calligraphers and Painters Association."

She took a step forward, unblinking. "You've used that position to crush fresh talent, silence innovation, and polish your ego with other people's work. Normally, I wouldn't care. Your dirty games didn't touch me. But then you picked a fight you couldn't win. And I can't just let that slide."

Luciano's pride wouldn't let him stay silent. Even with his back to the wall, he bristled. "So what if I'm not your fan?" he snapped. "Yeah, I pulled some strings and played the system. Who hasn't? Don't you dare say I don't know art. I've won awards!"