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Mr. Smith stood up straight and said, “I don’t care then. I’m the one who had my eyes on the painting first, and I hadn’t declared precisely that I’m not buying earlier.”

The middle-aged man on the side was displeased as he said, “Boss, here’s 500 thousand dollars. Sell me the Picasso piece. Your original price was 460 thousand dollars, and now I’m making you a higher offer, so there’s no need for you to prioritize the first- come, first -serve basis anymore, is there?”

The sound of people gasping in shock could be heard coming from the crowd at once. “Whoa! 500 thousand dollars is enough to buy a luxury villa. He’s filthy rich!”

“This shows that this really is a genuine artwork of Picasso’s. He is a renowned painter after all. If he is so famous, it seems that 500 thousand dollars isn’t considered expensive.”

“It’s not considered pricey, of course. Look at the painting. It’s impressive. Hanging it on display in one’s home will taint the home with its artistic value, and perhaps it can even boost the family’s impressiveness. Sigh, what a waste that I’m poor. Otherwise, I would’ve bought it too!”

“That’s right. If you have friends over at your house, they’d be really impressed to see Picasso’s original work too.”

Mr. Smith heard the audience's remarks and felt even more determined. She clenched her teeth and said, "600 thousand dollars! Boss, I'll get it for 600 thousand dollars and I'll make the payment now."

600 thousand dollars!

Upon hearing the number, the joy in the owner's gaze could not be concealed anymore. Moreover, he looked straight into the eyes of the middle-aged man and they exchanged glances. He had already come up with an idea.

The painting was actually a forgery, and its cost price was only about 4,600 dollars. If the painting could be sold at 600 thousand dollars, it would be a hefty profit! Moreover, judging by the buyer's foolish behavior, the person would not be able to do anything even if he were to discover that it was a forgery.

"Hey, you, you must be trying to compete with me to see who's richer, aren't you?!" The middle-aged man feigned anger.

Mr. Smith immediately said, "Sir, I really need this painting. Please just let me have it, alright?"

Noticing the person's sincerity, the middle-aged man hesitated for a long time before he said with great difficulty, "Alright, I can see that you're a nice person, so I shall let you have it then. Boss, sell it to him. 600 thousand dollars is a steal, sigh..."

The crowd was discussing how it was a good price in a timely manner too, which pleased Mr. Smith very much upon hearing that. She felt as if he had truly gotten herself a huge bargain.

“Boss, do you accept card payment here? I don’t have that much cash on me now.”

“Yes, we do! ” The owner hastily took out the POS terminal.

Just as Mr. Smith took out her credit card and he was about to make the payment, Zayn could not bear to watch anymore. He stepped forward and clapped while laughing. “Impressive, impressive. It’s been a long time since I’ve witnessed a fraud that involves so many people.”

In an instant, everyone looked toward him.

Apart from the owner of the antique store and the middle-aged man from earlier looking at him with a hostile gaze, most of the crowd was also gazing at him with murderous intent.

Mr. Smith froze in the midst of swiping her card subconsciously.

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“What kind of nonsense are you going on about, huh? You good-for-nothing brat!” scolded the owner of the antique store as he peered down at Zayn rudely. He was seething with rage.

Mr. Smith had her brows furrowed as well as she glanced over at Zayn in equal puzzlement and indignation.

As she came from a wealthy family, she was raised to possess a refined palate and impeccable taste. She occasionally dabbled in the world of paintings and murals as well. From what she had to go off of, the Picasso painting looked like the real thing, and she was sure that it had not been tampered with at all. On the other hand, the man in front of her was claiming that it

was a fake. Was he really challenging her expertise? In a certain sense, he was also trying to humiliate her.

Zayn kept a level head despite the many murderous gazes staring back at him. He casually circled the room, a relaxed smile playing on his lips. “I’m the one talking nonsense? You’re the ones who are asking me to pay 600 thousand dollars for a phoney painting that’s worth what three to four thousand dollars? You have some real nerve. That amount of money could land you in jail for years.”

The owner of the antique store became even more infuriated, though you could see a twinge of guilt in his eyes. Refusing to drop his act, he spat back coldly. “You’re crazy.

You're just here to stir up trouble, aren't you? I'm starting to think that you're a pathetic competitor of mine who can't make a deal for his life, so instead you come over and harass me because you're jealous I can make over 150 thousand dollars without getting on my knees and begging!"

Despite his untruthfulness, one had to acknowledge his quick thinking. The owner of the antique store had whipped up a lie on the spot by accusing Zayn of being a fellow competitor who was only here to stir up trouble because of his uncontrollable envy.

The tomboy nodded to herself, considering the possibility by the owner's side of the story due to his rather convincing statement. Zayn was rendered speechless upon noticing her reaction. What was going on in that tomboy's brain? How could she not see through such a poorly-crafted ruse? It did not take much for her to be swayed.

At the same time, a voice was heard shouting out from the crowd of onlookers. "Hey, I know him! Everyone in Waltz City knows him because he married into the Carters. What is he doing here anyways?"

"Is that so? Why haven't I heard of him then? What is he even famous for?"

"He's infamous for being a good-for-nothing deadbeat! Hah-hah-hah. You're not from there, so you wouldn't know. Everyone knows him for being a worthless loafer."

"Hah-hah, now that you've said that, I have a rough idea. His wife is an absolute doll, isn't she? He's well-known for all the wrong reasons. I heard he's close to useless, and

that he just hides out in the Carter family home while relying on them for everything. He's an embarrassment to all men!"

"Ain't that right. That's no way for a man to live. If I were him, I would've pulled the plug on myself a long time ago."

"Speaking of which, if he's hiding out at the Carters, why is he outside?"

Simply because someone had recognized Zayn, he was now being bombarded by an endless torrent of verbal abuse.

"Married into the Carters?" The tomboy, Mr. Smith, was rather surprised. Her glare was laced with spite as her eyes dug a hole into Zayn's despicable face. She hated nothing more than when men who had no desire for self-improvement paraded their terrible attitude. A man who was willing to marry and live with his wife's family, could there be anything more pathetic?

Zayn was unbothered. It was not due to a lack of dignity, but the many years of disrespect that had left him desensitized. Many people misunderstood him, and he had long given up on trying to change their many biased opinions of him.

The owner of the antique store breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the crowd's unanimous discussion. It seemed like he had nothing to fear, Zayn was merely a good-for-nothing deadbeat who married into his wife's family. There was nothing threatening about him at all!

“Not so tough now, are you? P*ss off, get out of here and stop disturbing my paying customers!” cried the owner triumphantly.

At his command, two burly staff members marched over to escort Zayn outside.

The owner directed his attention to the tomboy, “Mr. Smith, he’s a lunatic. Ignore him. You can swipe your card at the register, and I’ll wrap the painting up personally. I know for a fact that your father-in-law will love this painting!”

The tomboy kept her hands on her credit card. She was starting to suspect that something was off. The owner was rushing her to make the transaction. Even if she had no concrete proof of the painting being forged, she recognized the owner’s strange behavior.

“I’m not in a rush. How about we listen to his explanation?” The tomboy asked Zayn curiously. “What’s the basis of your argument? Why do you think this painting’s forged?”

There was a brief flicker of apprehension in the owner’s expression, but he hid it well. His features darkened as he exchanged glances with the middle-aged man who stood before him. They sensed the hatred in each other’s eyes, acknowledging they had a shared loathing for that freeloading deadbeat.

“Alright. Since you believe this painting’s forged, what part of it is forged exactly? If you can’t back up your claim, you’ve basically committed slander! Don’t come crying to me when I stop going easy on you.” The owner sneered threateningly.

Zayn chuckled softly. Despite every pair of eyes being trained on him, he did not falter in his confidence. One would expect him to be overwhelmed with fear and dread, but in fact, it was the complete opposite. Noticing his cool demeanor, the tomboy could not help but wonder whether his behavior was expected of a deadbeat who married into his wife's family. She doubted so.

“Can you please hand the Picasso painting over? I need to take a closer look.” Zayn requested of the tomboy, a well meaning smile on his lips.

The tomboy considered for a moment, nodded, and passed the Picasso painting to Zayn obediently.

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“Thank you.”

Zayn placed the painting flat on the table. He made note of the canvas material being very worn. It looked quite old. The linen canvas had yellowed with age, but the material was thick and rough. The oil paint was dried and hardened, giving it the effect of being painted from a past century.

Judging from the material, there were no weak points. Moreover, the piece of artwork was painted with cubism in mind. A layman would have no way of telling the real from the fake.

In fact, even an art lover would have a hard time recognizing it was forged. Anyone who could confirm it to be a counterfeit was certainly a connoisseur.

It was such a waste that Zayn specialised in such a niche field. As a young boy, he was pressured by his father into pursuing cultured pastimes such as music, chess, and painting. It also helped that he was exceptionally gifted in the arts. Combined with his honed skills and dedicated training, an average expert was no match for a prodigy like himself.

“Boss, I would like to inquire-how long has it been since the Cubism period?” questioned Zayn with an unsuspecting smile.

The owner grunted once before retorting, “You’re just a simpleton, just as I expected. Why accuse me of selling a fake painting when you don’t even know how long it’s been since the Cubism period?”

Zayn was not at all deterred by his brash remarks, instead he continued to smile. “Since you haven’t given me an immediate answer, I can safely assume that you don’t have a clue either. Is that right?”

The owner grimaced, confirming Zayn’s theory. He was, in fact, spot on. The owner of the antique store knew little to nothing about the Cubism period.

The middle-aged man from earlier chimed in, “The Cubism period spanned from 1909 to 1919, it’s been close to 100 years.”

Zayn maintained his smile, just as he had prior. “In other words, you’re claiming that this painting is at least 100 years old.”

“You can say that.”

“You’re lying!” Zayn objected abruptly, startling quite a number of people.

The owner lowered his voice threateningly. “How could I be lying? If you don’t manage to explain it concisely, you’re not walking out of this store alive!”

The corners of Zayn’s lips curled ever so slightly into a disdainful smirk. “I assume that it is common knowledge to everyone here in this room that a painting’s authenticity, besides examining the artwork itself, is determined by a number of other factors. For example, the material of the canvas, the original stretcher, and the layering of the paint which act as indicators during the painting’s appraisal. On the other hand, the latter indicators are significantly harder to forge, which means that they play the most crucial part in the whole process.”

The tomboy nodded to herself as she digested his words. She had a sneaking suspicion that whatever Zayn was talking about actually held an inkling of reasoning behind it.

“That’s true,” she said.

Zayn continued on, “ Everyone is aware that it’s been 100 years since the Cubism period. Picasso’s artwork has been preserved for an eternity. However, even well preserved pieces will wear from time, and this piece is supposed to be very old indeed. Don’t you find it strange that the painting before us looks so new?”

The middle-aged man spat with a cold glare, “That’s all you have to back up your accusation? It’s obvious you’re just a layman!”

“What an attention seeker.”

“Calm down, I wasn’t done talking yet.” Zayn smiled as he explained, “The work of any renowned artist can be preserved for an extensive period of time, on the grounds that high-quality paints are applied. Despite this, such high quality paints will inevitably age over the course of a century. The oil paint on this painting looks like it hasn’t aged a day-how abnormal. This is an indicator.”

“Secondly…”

Zayn went on to elaborate his points with proper terminologies only a connoisseur would be eloquent with. The crowd consisted largely of art lovers, so the majority could roughly understand his long expositioning. Mr. Smith’s eyes lit up with each word that left Zayn’s lips. It finally confirmed her suspicions of the painting being a counterfeit.

“With all of that being said, I can affirm that this so-called Picasso piece is nothing but a counterfeit!” Zayn declared assertively, his voice resonating throughout the space, “The

jig is up, you'll be put to jail all because of your sad excuse of a counterfeit. You'll be paying 600 thousand dollars for your crimes, so you're not going anywhere for eight or ten years."

As the words hung in the air, you could see the color drain from the owner's face.

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Many of his accomplices in the crowd were severely taken aback as well.

Resentment grew inside the tomboy as she tried to swallow the fact that someone had attempted to swindle her. They truly were a bunch of audacious con artists!

600 thousand dollars would not leave a dent in her pockets at all, but it would be mortifyingly embarrassing if news of the incident were to circulate. She was just about to burst from humiliation just thinking about it. "You very well had the audacity to try and swindle me with your counterfeit! You must be tired of living-let me relocate you to a living hell!"

She ordered her two bodyguards to contact the police so that the owner of the antique store could be detained and tried. Realizing this, the owner of the antique store fled hurriedly in the other direction. Though, he could not outrun the tomboy's bodyguards, as he was quickly captured before he managed to gain distance.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged man who had been his co-accomplice was starting to lose his cool. He seized the opportunity to slip into the crowd and escape once he knew everyone was distracted amidst the chaos.

“It’s a little too late to be hatching your escape plan, isn’t it?”

The voice piped up from behind him, before a hand grabbed at the man’s shirt aggressively.

The middle-aged man’s features contorted unhappily the moment he was seized. He turned around to face the menace, staring daggers at him vindictively. “Hey, why is your hand on my shirt?”

Zayn said, “You did a great job pulling off that act of yours and tampering with the authenticity of the painting. Everyone thought you were a real buyer. Why are you panicking now that your accomplice is in cuffs?”

Zayn’s remark had drawn the attention of a couple of people.

The tomboy asked in disbelief. “You’re saying that he’s an accomplice to the owner?”

“Of course, he’s his co-accomplice,” confirmed Zayn mockingly.

“That is of course. He is the supporting accomplice,” said Zayn mockingly.

Many from the crowd began degrading the middle-aged man. Anyone with a brain could realize that he was an accomplice, and he did it all in an attempt to swindle the tomboy.

Once the situation had escalated beyond proportion, the middle-aged man could not suppress his rage anymore. He panicked before throwing an unexpected punch at Zayn. “F*ck you!”

It was evident that the middle-aged man’s reaction speed was rather impressive, and that his punch was also painfully strong. Anyone besides Zayn would have taken his punch right to the face.

It was such a shame that it just so happened to be Zayn.

Zayn dodged the punch like it was just like a practice session, and as a return gift, he delivered a kick to the man’s knee that was so hard it made him fall to his knees. He gritted his teeth as cold sweat started to drench his forehead.

It had now dawned on the middle-aged man that fleeing was no longer an option. He scowled at Zayn. “I’ll remember you, son-in-law to the Carters! How dare you ruin our master plan! Our organization won’t let you off so easy, just you wait!”

With that, he burst into hysterical laughter, as if the concept of fear had suddenly just escaped him.

Zayn walked forwards to deliver a few slaps to his face, glaring at him with disdain. He had hit him so hard that he was already experiencing heavy swelling. The murderous intent in Zayn's eyes was enough to snap the middle-aged man out of his frenzy, and instead make him beg for forgiveness

Zayn called the police in advance, so it did not take long before the police had arrived.

It was discovered through a quick investigation that the duo were wanted criminals with padded criminal records. They committed crimes of forgery and counterfeiting in the past, but managed to evade capture on numerous occasions. They happened to be cornered by Zayn this time around.

Zayn's act of noble courage and quick wit was recognized immediately. The police wanted to present him a medal to honor his contribution to society. There were even journalists who wanted to interview him on his heroism, yet he turned them all down. He did not want to keep a high profile.

"Hang on!"

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Just as he was about to leave, someone called out from behind him. He turned around to find that it was the tomboy, Mr. Smith.

Zayn stopped in his tracks. "Anything else?"

The tomboy had very delicate features, and her complexion resembled the pure, driven snow. She was a very beautiful woman, and anyone could make that conclusion in just a glance, which was why she dressed the way that she did. Ironically enough, she was far more attractive than most of the young male artistes on the entertainment scene.

As she walked over, Zayn noticed a faint scent radiating off of her body. Zayn was curious, was she unaware of how masculine she appeared in the mirror before leaving the house?

"Thank you for your help earlier. If it wasn't for your timely rescue, I would've gone home with a fake painting." The tomboy thanked Zayn sincerely, expressing her heartfelt gratitude to him for his assistance.

Zayn said, "Don't mention it, it's no trouble to me at all."

The tomboy continued sheepishly, "Goodness, it's all my fault for jumping the gun like that. I had no idea that they were con artists. By the way, I hope you don't mind me asking, are you a connoisseur? How could you tell that painting was a counterfeit? I didn't suspect a thing, and I was looking at it for quite some time."

It was something that the tomboy could not wrap her head around. From what she had heard from the crowd, Zayn was a married man who lived with his wife's family. Plus, he was apparently notorious for being unable to hold a stable job. He acted nothing like the man the crowd was claiming him to be.

In fact, Zayn's confidence and sensibility was something that many successful young men had yet to master.

Zayn responded, "I was only throwing out wild guesses, I'm not whatever connoisseur you think I am."

Realizing that Zayn refused to entertain any of her further queries, the tomboy was slightly displeased, but she respected his wishes. After all, they barely knew each other if at all.

"Please, allow me to introduce myself. Call me Alex Smith," said the tomboy amicably as she offered a handshake. In truth, her birth name was Alexandra Smith, but she went by a more androgynous contraction of her name when she was masculine presenting. She was rather proud of herself, as she believed that no one could see through her carefully crafted guise.

Who would have thought that Zayn saw right through her.

Faced with a gorgeous, confident woman who was masculine presenting, Zayn had no idea what to feel about her frankly, he found her rather strange. It took a moment of

consideration before he accepted her handshake as he introduced himself as well. "I'm Zayn Larson, pleasure to meet you."

"Zayn Larson, what a nice name." Alexandra spoke in an impressively deep and resonant voice that easily fooled most people. "Hey, dude. I bet you're starving too, aren't you? I could go for some good food right about now. Maybe we could have a beer or two, so what do you say? Hah-hah-hah..."

Zayn felt uncomfortable. She was fully committing to her identity, and while admirable, it was starting to feel slightly off putting.

He shook his head as he politely declined, "No thanks, I'm actually quite full..."

However, his stomach betrayed him. Before he could even finish his sentence, his stomach growled in protest. To say that it was awkward would have been an understatement.

Alexandra punched his chest playfully as she burst into a fit of laughter. "Hey, dude. What? Do you think you're too good for me? Come on, there's a Hadesian restaurant nearby that serves killer food. Who knows when I might see you again, so let's celebrate and bond over a good meal!"

Zayn insisted helplessly, "There's really no need, I still have to..."

“Yikes! If you decline my invitation one more time... We’re both men, we’re supposed to be open! We’re supposed to be reckless!” Alexandra just could not help herself. She pounded at her chest as she boasted rather haughtily. “Otherwise, what makes us different from the women?”

Zayn’s jaw almost dropped. “Woman, you do realize you’re a woman too, right?”

Alexandra was doing everything in her power to prevent Zayn from getting away. She had actually wrapped her arm around Zayn’s shoulder, and dragged him forcefully along with her.

She was four inches shorter than Zayn, so when she clung onto him, she was practically hanging off of Zayn’s body. It made Zayn unbelievably tense.