

50 Ghosts On The Canvas

Hades~ 1

She walked out of the elevator, and I could immediately read the uneasiness on her face and in her body language. She tried to conceal it with the way she raised her chin when our eyes met. I had let Kael choose the clothes she was wearing. I had suggested something not too formal, a bit casual and light, just to put her at ease and not make her feel like she was going to stand trial.

Now, she was clad in a softer ensemble—nothing extravagant, but elegant enough to fit the occasion. A simple cream blouse, paired with a flowing skirt that brushed just above her ankles. Kael had chosen well, though I hardly cared about the specifics. What mattered was that it made her look approachable, not too defensive or closed off.

When her eyes met mine, she straightened her posture, trying to mask whatever doubt lingered beneath the surface. I could see it, though. The small hitch in her breath, the way her fingers lightly brushed against the fabric of her skirt, as if grounding herself.

"Comfortable?" I asked, my tone flat, giving nothing away.

"Fine," she responded, though I could hear the slight tension in her voice.

Without another word, I offered my hand, and she finally let her eyes wander a bit from my face. I had chosen something casual as well—or rather, Kael had. A grey polo and black pants. I would have preferred black on black, but my Beta had said something about not going to a damn funeral.

Her eyes returned to my face, and I watched her throat work as she gulped. When she took my hand, hers was clammy. She was a bundle of nerves.

"Where are we going?" She attempted to sound curt, but her words were laced with uncertainty.

"You'll see," I murmured as I led her out of the tower. Today, my guards were not flanking us. I had to make sure she was completely at ease.

The ride was quiet, just me watching from the corner of my eye as she looked out the window, tapping her leg with her fingers. She couldn't seem to stay still.

"You can relax, Red," I murmured.

She turned to me. "Where are we going, Your Majesty?"

"It's a surprise," I smirked.

She swallowed again, as though my words had only increased her fear. "Am I going to be punished for making you apologize?"

For the first time since the night began, I was the one caught off guard. It was like her special talent—stunning me. "What?"

"That's it, right?" she asked.

The fear in those ocean depths became even more palpable. "Red—"

She flinched at the nickname. What was happening? Had my accusation done this? Or was it everything else? It was beginning to dawn on me just how hard it was going to be to get her to trust me. 6

I tightened my grip slightly, not enough to cause pain, but enough to steady her. She was trembling—subtly, but enough for me to notice.

"No," I said after a pause, keeping my voice as cold and flat as ever. "You're not being punished. This isn't a trap."

Her eyes flickered with uncertainty, and for a moment, I could see the war waging inside her head. She wanted to believe me, but everything she'd been through told her not to. Even after that night... Sex had always been an effective way to get into a woman's head, but it seemed it hadn't worked. Who was this woman? 3

The limousine came to a stop, and we got out. She kept her head down, as if she couldn't bear to look at what awaited her. I had rented the place for the night so no one would disturb us.

I watched her as we stepped into the gallery, my expression carefully neutral, as always. Ellen's eyes widened, her lips parting slightly as she took in the room—massive canvases, intricate sculptures, every inch of the space soaked in artistic history. She looked... entranced. Like a child seeing snow for the first time.

Her gaze darted from piece to piece, and for a moment, I thought she might sprint toward the nearest painting. Instead, she stood still, wide-eyed and silent. I pretended to study one of the paintings, a dark oil portrait that meant nothing to me. I wasn't here for the art, after all. This was for her. To make sure she remained... compliant. 3

"An art gallery!" she gasped.

"Yes, Red."

This time, she didn't flinch at the nickname.

"Look at this," she whispered, her voice trembling with something close to reverence.

I glanced at her, catching the light in her eyes, the sudden flush on her cheeks. She pointed toward a large landscape, painted in deep blues and greens. "It's almost like the sky is weeping into the earth. You can feel the sorrow in the strokes." Her fingers hovered near the canvas, as if she could feel the emotions in the paint. She shared her thoughts with me like she wanted to take me along for the ride.

I gave a low hum, pretending to listen, but really, I was calculating. Assessing. This was all part of keeping her off-balance. A gesture. Something simple. It seemed to be working more than sex. 4

She looked up at me, those damn wide eyes expecting... something. I found myself glancing back at the painting. It was all right, I supposed, for a mess of color. Still, there was a strange pull to hear what she would say next. I couldn't explain it, but her words had a way of making even the dullest thing seem... less dull.

Something like a familiar ache pulsed in my chest. It was torture because I had done this once before, with my Danielle... 2

"The texture of the brushstrokes—it's like the artist wanted to make the sky bleed. There's anger here, hidden beneath the sadness," she added, her voice soft, thoughtful.

I frowned, not at the painting, but at myself. Why the hell was I even considering what she was saying? When she looked up at me again, her eyes turned from turquoise to an achingly familiar emerald green. I blinked. I touched the emerald earring on my left ear. 2

She moved on to another piece, her excitement palpable. I followed her, keeping my expression cold, indifferent. Ellen was running her fingers across the air in front of another painting, talking about shadows and light, her voice growing more animated with each passing second.

I half-listened, nodding when appropriate, my mind drifting back to my plans and the strange feelings in my chest. But every now and then, she'd say something that caught my attention—a phrase or an observation that dug its way into my thoughts. Like when she started explaining

the use of negative space in a piece, the emptiness between the figures.

"The space says more than the figures themselves, don't you think?" she asked, looking up at me again. 2

I stared back at her, feigning interest. "Perhaps."

She smiled, as if my half-hearted response meant more than it should. It made something twist in my chest.

She turned back to the paintings, her awe growing, while I kept my distance—just watching and musing. But for reasons I couldn't quite understand, I found myself wondering what she would think of the next one. What insight she might have, what words she'd use to describe it.

I kept my mask in place. This was just another tool, another piece of the puzzle. I wasn't interested in her or her thoughts on art.

Not at all.

Even if, as she rambled about colors and shading and negative spaces, it pulled me back to a different time. A time when I had dared to be happy.