



Chapter 36

He stopped the car outside of a withered down three-story townhouse with a triangle-shaped roof and ripped linens hanging in the windows where glass should be.

I got out and clutched my stomach when it felt it drop into a bottomless pit.

I had no idea where we were but my heart broke over the fact that people lived like this here, in a place where the king had an entire palace for him and his staff. The palace foyer alone was bigger than this house.

We walked up the squeaking stairs leading to the door and whereas I thought we'd be knocking like civilized beings, Gabe pressed open the door which was already hanging on its last hinge and he held open the satin drape for me to walk through.

I gave him an eery look but he flicked his head gesturing for me to hurry inside.

He looked out onto the street like he was worried someone would see him but this felt like a place you went to knowing what you got. I looked over my shoulder and saw him press on the door to close it as best as he could before he dusted his hands off.

The heavy smoke tickled my throat and made my eyes water but no matter where I looked it didn't seem like there was an area not covered in the smoke. I wanted to turn around and leave but staying to Gabe felt like the safest bet.

He, however, disappeared into the tobacco-scented smoke and all I had as guidance was his blurry back.



"Gabe?" The hallway was dark but we walked toward a flicker of light behind another linen drape.

I looked around but my vision was getting blurrier and the light wasn't enough for me to know where to walk. The scent of tobacco was burning my nose and the sound of music mixed in with the foggy ambiance.

"This way," his fingers wrapped around my hand and he gently pulled me behind him as he pulled the drape aside and we walked into the heart of the house.

Bright lamps were placed around the room lighting it up and people were smoking cigarettes and hookahs with the smoke filling every corner.

Several men sat comfortably in expensive suits on the worn-down sofas and around the tables playing cards with a drink in hand and a tray of rare cigars at their disposal.

A girl sitting on the table took a drag from one of the cigars, her red lipstick stained the mouthpiece and she blew rings into the air. The man chuckled, licked his lips, and dragged his hand up her leg under her dress.

The girls were barely dressed, covered in sheer linen and some in heavier mesh fabrics but they were moving their hands to lift their dresses and expose their legs.

A man had a girl on his lap, she was leaning back, her head rested on his shoulder and her eyes flickered while she laughed.

He lifted a thinly rolled cigarette to her lips and she took a deep drag - he watched her, and smiled when her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her lips pulled up in euphoric glee.

His hand which rested on her leg moved up and he cupped her breast - he



took a deep drag and passed the cigarette to another before he leaned down and started kissing his way up her neck.

All of this, the seduction and the exposed girls, the way that the men laughed and stretched their necks like they were winning something - it all reminded me too much of the Hunt.

These girls were being used for the male's attention and pleasure.

One girl pulled her hand gracefully up her leg, stretching it out in the air while lifting her dress to show off the lace underneath.

A man grabbed her leg and raised it, he kissed her knee and up her thigh.

Another was walking around the room, she was pulled down by a man on the sofa and he brought her down on her knees. I noticed something on his chest pocket - a pin - it was a sigil that only the most prominent men in the Council wore. I fought to keep my eyes from widening.

That man was part of the Council.

He fisted her hair and she placed her hands on his knees.

I looked away, my eyes locked on a visibly shattered vase glued back together on a broken mantle.

I looked at the slivers and counted the cracks. Anything to keep my attention away from what was happening. My throat closed and my stomach twisted in knots at the sight. I remembered Iliana after the Lycan King was done with her the night of the Hunt, the way her eyes looked haunted the rest of the night, a memory and pain that will stay with her forever. That was what we were to them, amusement and pleasure, theirs to play with when they pleased and we'd been taught to take it like the good wives they wanted us to be. But these women weren't



wives, they weren't marked, they were just used over and over again for as long as the men had money to give.

"Don't look away," Gabe said and grabbed my chin. He forced my head back and leaned down to whisper, "It's disrespectful."

I pulled away from his grip and stared into his eyes. It could've been conceived as a challenge and maybe in some ways, it was.

"Disrespectful is you bringing me here in the first place. I have watched enough girls be used and abused- many of them probably still experiencing it- I have enough horrific memories to last me a lifetime, I don't need any help creating more nightmares. I'll be waiting in the car," I spat and turned to leave.

Gabe grabbed my hand and pulled me back. He cupped my cheek and gently pressed my chin out while putting his lips close enough by my ear that his breaths sounded like the echoes of the wind. "You're not going anywhere. Look around, Hazel, this is a boutique with the world's most uniquely beautiful objects," He leaned back and his eyes glimmered joyfully as he continued, "We're here to shop."



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