

Chapter XVIII

It's on the fifth floor, very far right. Number 203." the receptionist explained to her, giving her a crooked smile.

"Thank you," Persia muttered, lifting her lips barely before dropping them again.

"If you need anything."

The woman tried, but Persia was already heading up the flight of stairs.

For some reason, his energy was collecting at some hotel, even if they needed to get back to the Domo as soon as possible.

And when Persia asked about him, the woman told her he had been there all day.

She could push her wonder aside and finally reached the first floor.

Her body stopped, allowing her eyes to wander along the dark halls, doors aligned each side.

It felt as if she was going to throw up any moment.

But she urged herself to move further up, until she stood in the entrance to the fifth floor.

His energy was heavy, cast a weight into her chest.

Persia took a breath, shook her head.

She moved forward without even thinking clearly.

199.

200.

201.

202.

"203?" she exhaled so softly as if it wasn't any more than a simple thought.

What was she supposed to do, knock?

One of her hands rose, closed in a loose fist.

It stopped an inch in front of the wood, collapsed against it and laid as a flat palm.

Persia took a breath, let her eyes fall shut for a moment.

Then she gave the woods two fast but quiet taps, forcing herself to stand her ground instead of running back down the hall.

Nothing followed, seconds after second passing.

She thought about turning around and leaving when it creaked open by just a bit.

"Who's there?" he asked.

Persia bit down on her tongue.

"It's me."

Silence surrounded them for a while, Persia was convinced he'd just close the door on her.

She would have honestly preferred that.

Druig exhaled a short breath, then shoved the door a little to the side.

"Why are you here?"

He was barely visible, she could see his face halfway, the room was dark and the only small light didn't reach his body.

"You saved Maya." It slipped from her mouth even if she didn't mean to say it.

The boy stayed silent, clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"I don't remember."

"Please don't lie to me," she whispered, rubbing the back of her aching neck.

Druig's fingers wrapped around the door defensively, hiding himself further from her gaze.

"I wanted to thank you, that's all." Persia lied, turning on her feet to get away.

The air was growing too stuffy.

A thousand thoughts on her mind and she couldn't bring herself to speak a single word out loud.

Was it embarrassing?

She didn't know.

"You didn't come here to thank me, did you?"

Still playing the smart guy, he hadn't changed at all.

Cold air slashed her ankles, made the hair on her arms stand.

Persia looked down, past the threshold into the room. She could peek at the sheets of a white blanket, pillows.

Thrown to the ground.

Her brows furrowed.

There was red sticking to them.

Then she smelled it, very faintly.

"Are you bleeding?" she asked, taking a step towards the door.

Druig didn't answer, but tried closing the door further discreetly.

The old wood creaking betrayed him.

Persia put her foot between her and the door before he could shut it on her.

"Are you hurt?" she urged a little louder.

"I'm not."

But Persia wasn't stupid.

She knew how he spoke.

There was a drowsiness to his voice, the faint hint of a hiss.

"I'm coming in," Persia spoke, shoving herself against the door and barging in.

Her body pushed past the entrance, a wave of cold making her spine rush with shivers.

"Why is it freezing in here?" she asked, walking through the dark towards the windows.

They were open widely, a chair placed right in front.

The room was tiny, only a bed, a closet pushed into the wall and a cabin.

There was a bathroom too, light peeked from the small space at the bottom.

She pulled the chair back and closed the windows, rubbing the fabric of her shirt against her skin.

Her teeth were chattering.

Persia turned around and met Druig's eyes, who still looked at her from the very front of the room.

He had a shirt thrown over, loose pants.

The strands of his deep brown hair were all over the place.

She couldn't see him properly, searching the room with her eyes for the bloody towels she had spotted before.

They were gone.

"Druig please," she pleaded, walking up to him.

He took a step back, face twisting in pain, while one of his hands instinctively raised to his side.

It dropped down when he noticed.

Persia stopped, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

His chest was raising heavily, jaw pushing out.

"Do you want me to ask again?" she tilted her head to the side, eyes shimmering worried.

The boy still didn't move, but dropped his shoulders.

"What do you want, Persia?"

The lashes of her eyes twitched as he said her name, holding her breath as if she could feel it past her ears.

Persia's hand lifted to the doorknob of the bathroom, opening it slightly so light would hit them.

Druig raised his hand in front of his face, squeezed his eyes shut.

His muscles twitched, body bending over convulsively.

"You're obviously hurt," she said, "Let me help you."

"Help me?" he scooped, but dropped into a pained sound.

"Lift your shirt."

"What?"

"You do it or I do it," she cooed, opening her arms, "I'm giving you a choice here."

Druig lowered his hands, grabbed at the bottom hem of his shirt and pulled it up lightly on the left side.

A bandage ran once across his torso, a thicker long pad lying beneath it to his skin.

But the area around it was tinted colors of red, as if a rash spread around it.

"You didn't do it properly, that won't heal."

Persia said, placing a finger on the outline of the white fabric.

The skin was burning hot.

Druig let his shirt drop again, Persia pulling her hand back.

He eyed her, pupils wide.

He didn't look like himself, but it had been a while since she had observed him closely.

Jumpy, restless. Not the centered boy which she had encountered in his little village.

"I can give you instructions, I won't have to."

"I don't mind you doing it," he interrupted, shrugging his shoulders but escaped her eye contact.

Persia closed her mouth, then nodded.

"Sit down on the bed."

Druig moved over to it, seated himself right at the very edge of it.

Persia walked into the bathroom, blinking rapidly against the blinding light.

Things were all over the place, the corner was stuffed with the bloody towels which she had seen before.

Rubbing alcohol sat on the sink, bottle open.

She grabbed one of the cleaner towels, ripped a part of it and wet it.

Persia folded it once, stepped out back into the bedroom.

Her eyes shifted back up to Druig, who had his back slouched, sight turned towards the window.

She cleared her throat to grasp his attention, he apologized under his breath and pulled up his shirt again.

Persia silently removed the bandage first, then the pad.

Druig so lightly groaned as the tape ripped off his skin, laid his head slightly back.

"You've had this wound since the attack," Persia started wiping the cloth along the skin.

"I saw it."

"Yeah," Druig returned, his voice quiet.

She crouched down further, he leaned up to the best she could and then applied pressure to the wound.

"Hold that there."

She made her way back into the bathroom and got a paper towel and put some of the alcohol on it.

When she came back to him, she bit the inside of her cheek in concentration and peeled the hand which held the cloth against his body away.

"This will hurt."

Persia put the alcohol to the wound and heard how Druig started breathing heavier and let a whimper slip.

She laughed, "Oh, stop crying, if you had taken care of it sooner, we wouldn't have to do this."

"Yeah, I guess that wasn't my first priority."

His tone was cold, rejecting.

She nodded, didn't speak as she put a new bandage over it.

"You will have to change it in a few days. If it gets irritated, do it as soon as you can."

"Thank you," he murmured, flattening his shirt against his skin, covering the new bandage.

Persia straightened her back, looked him up and down.

"Why did you come here?" he suddenly questioned, meeting her eyes.

"To say thank you, I already told you."

"You're a bad liar, your nose twitches when you do," he puffed, giving her a curved grin.

The exhaustion dragged down his body, making his features droop. But the slight turn lit it up by a bit.

Her face almost turned too when she saw him give her that expression.

It made her warm for some reason.

"Why did you help me?" he said again, cocking his head slightly.

The smile fell.

Persia fumbled with the cloth she was holding, breaking the tie between their eyes.

"You saved Maya, I didn't want to be in your debt."

That was the feeling which tugged at her that time.

It wasn't anger or sadness, frustration.

Guilt plagued her.

"I didn't save her," Druig tried to argue, for whatever reason.

"I told her to go to the river, she still almost died."

He noticed too late that he got caught up in his own lie.

"No... wait"

Persia's mouth pulled down and she let go of a laugh. "Why won't you admit you helped her?"

She quipped, eyes darting strain.

A swallow hurt down her throat.

"Why don't you let me be grateful for once?"

"I don't want you to be grateful to me," he whispered.

Persia wondered when they had spoken this so long to one another before.

She even questioned if they ever talked that long without arguing.

The guilt just kept getting worse.

Even if it wasn't her fault.

She could have done more.

Persia gazed back up, caught Druig staring at the window again.

He seemed so lost in it.

Then she noticed it, very light.

Barely even there.

As he turned towards the left, she noticed a fresh cut on his forehead.

She took a careful step towards him and he put up his hands defensively.

"There's another wound."

Druig eyed her, then nodded.

Persia crawled on the bed next to him, leaned into him and carefully cleaned the wound.

Her eyes thinned in concentration, grabbing his chin hesitantly to make him stay in place.

Druig tugged his hands behind his back, held his breath until she released her hold.

She pulled back, crumbled the tissue in her hand.

They sat so close to one another, his energy melted into hers.

The human trapped in the vessel of an immortal.

She recognized it, but not in that way.

The energy which crept into her head, it was never that one.

"Will you tell me what's wrong or are we playing pretend?" he pulled his chin up, torso pushed back from her warmth.

"There's a third option," he added,

"you leave and neither of us acted like this ever happened."

Persia forced herself to look back at him, then moved up to his left brow.

Above it, to be exact.

The small scar.

It was right there.

She held her mouth closed, then put her hand up against his cheek. He flinched back, tensing up.

"Are you scared of me?" she asked, dropping it.

That wasn't the first time she asked him a question like that.

"You used to tell me that I wasn't part of the family," her heart droned in her ears.

"Do you still think that?"

Druig furrowed his brows in confusion, let his eyes rush about her face.

She was spitting words without connection back and forth, spoke her mind.

Maybe she should have just left.

"All that time, seven thousand years," she felt tears rise into her eyes, "you only ever told me that I ruined everything, that I destroyed your family."

Druig stiffened his face, "I..."

"Then why did you save me, Druig?" a tear rolled down her cheek unwillingly, a crack disassembling her words.

"Why did you save my life so many times if the only thing you ever wanted was for me to be gone?"

The boy gasped a breath of air, mouth bobbing open so.

His bottom lip started trembling, eyes jumping back and forth between the water running down her skin.

She wiped her hand over her face aggressively, trying to get the tears to stop.

"Why did you hate me so much while being the only one who cared?"

Druig shook his head.

"I never hated you."

Persia bit down on her lip, "Don't say that."

"I told you, I'm not a liar," he breathed, nudging forward a little.

"It would be easier if you were," she mumbled, putting a hand to her forehead and squeezing her eyes shut.

"Because I can't understand. Why did you do it?"

Druig ran his tongue over his teeth, chest heaving with quick breaths.

"Sersi told you."

"She did, but I had a feeling before," she stared down at her open hands, finally giving into the truth towards herself.

"I can tell energy apart. I just thought it was the easy way out if I kept telling myself it was you."

"Is that why you came to me?"

Persia lifted her face, stomach dropping.

"In 1993."

The girl strained her teeth, gritted them shut.

"You didn't talk to me, but I knew you were there." Druig dragged his words into thin air.

"You're not the only one who can tell energy, Persia."

"I was in a bad place," she whispered, "I lost control a few hundred years."

"That's why you came to me?" his face tilted to the side, a questioning look pulling up his eyebrow.

"We split on bad terms, and I was the first person you went looking for?"

Persia shrugged, felt the sudden need for something to support her back.

"I don't know why."

She tried finding the right explanation but couldn't.

"I had a life, a husband. Things seemed to be working out for me. But I destroyed it and."

A heavy sigh made her lungs fill with the cold air, arms pulling and up and dropping again.

"You were the only one who never told me that it would be alright. Maybe I just needed someone to give me a shout so I could get myself up."

"I don't think that's true," he replied, holding out his hand in front of her.

"Put your hand on mine."

Persia shut her mouth, mind blanking.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

She let her hand slide over his, first it only hovered barely above it until she dropped it completely.

Hands so, the touch against her skin made a known feeling travel down hers, running down her back.

So hesitant, almost frightened.

Opposing him in every way, yet it wouldn't be him if it weren't there.

The same as it was back in 400.

Not the least bit changed no matter how much they did otherwise.

His energy was so close, it slung around her.

That feeling.

"You can tell, don't you?" he mumbled, flattening his palm.

"Can you?" she mirrored, pushing against his fingers with hers.

"Always"

Druig swallowed, put his other hand to her cheek, cupping it as light as he could.

"I'm not scared of you."

Persia flipped her glance up, the cold tips of his fingers caressing her skin.

It was all too familiar, and she started remembering.

The night when he soothed her into calming.

All alone, without tapping into her mind.

"The color gold," her lips murmured, pausing to connect her thoughts.

"It reminds you of the first beams of the sun, the shimmer of it touching your skin."

Druig finished her thought, exhaling into a weak smile.

Persia felt how a knot clasped around her heart, then fell apart into a breeze wafting inside her body.

"Do you remember it now?" he asked, a slight worry set into his face.

"But, why did you keep the pier between us, if you knew we could have resolved it?"

"I did despise you in the beginning, because I thought you were just too lazy to control. Humans, this planet, they mean a lot to me."

Druig started, nostrils flaring a little.

"When I realized and the others finally told me, I was angry at them. Myself I wanted to help you, but..."

A pause took up the space between them.

"I couldn't."

And I figured it was easier to keep you coming here."

"That wasn't fair," Persia contended, the corners of her lips pulling down.

She searched for the dull anger inside his blue eyes, but there simply was none.

"I know," Druig brushed his thumb over her face, "Back in Tenochtitlan, I lie for the people. But also lie because I couldn't bare watching you crumble under my hate."

Persia couldn't process at all what he said.

It was the Druig she had known speaking.

But it didn't feel like she deserved to be spoken to like that.

"It was selfish," he pushed his jaw out.

"I should have told you the truth."

"You're always playing ten steps ahead," Persia chuckled into herself.

"It did take me a while to realize that the hate I felt for you wasn't actually there," Druig admitted.