Chapter II

Gupta Empire, 400 AD

"I really don't want to wear it!"

"Oh, come on Sprite." Persia laughed, pulling the girl back towards her by her tunic.
"One night. You know Sersi will appreciate it."
Sprite groaned dramatically, throwing her head into the crook of her neck.

"I will get off once the wedding is over."
" Deal" she replied, smiling into her face.
Both welled in silence as Persia put the beautiful tunic on Sprite, adjusting the fabric she had dyed with the other women.

It helped her calm.

She'd occasionally hum soft tunes she had picked up on because she spent too much time around the citizens.

Ajak didn't like that.

Just the day before she told Persia that she needed to be more careful.
She stopped the humming and swallowed a clump down her throat.

„ Persia"
She raised her face to look back at the redhead.
„Are you going to the ceremony too?"

Persia sighted under her breath and went back to smoothing a few imperfect wrinkles.
„I'm not sure."
Sprite took a step forward causing Persia's hands to drop into her lap.
The girl looked down at herself, then back at her.
„it's not your fault that you lose control. No one blames you for it."

Persia took a couple breaths before she spoke with a lowered voice.
She knew that wasn't true.
They did think she wasn't innocent.
„thank you, Sprite."
„We are your family" she replied, smiling lightly. „and you are ours."
Persia returned the soft expression and went to hug her.

„Woah, a hug without me?"
Sprite rolled her eyes, then flipped them towards the entrance.
„Do you know privacy, Kingo?"
The man laughed, then stepped in and let himself drop onto a chair covered in fabric and fur.
„Is that the tunic you made, Persia?"
She looked over at him, then at Sprite, who demonstrated her clothing by making a few turns.
It reflected the light beautifully through the sun.
„Yeah, it's not perfect yet. But there was not enough-"
„Oh no, I love it!" he clapped, gesturing to himself.
„I am just upset that you didn't make one for me."
Persia laughed again, feeling her face heat a little. She hadn't been this happy in a long time.

"Of course, next time you will get the most eye-catching one of all."
Kingo seemed to be taking this far more seriously that the two girls, getting up with a raised chin.
"I hope so."
He walked towards the entrance, waving after them over the top of his head.

"I will be seeing the both of you later!"
Persia was about to say something when Sprite took the air from her.
"You will, we'll be there."
The girl mischievously looked at her,
"That was mean. You know he won't leave me alone if I don't show up now."
Sprite covered her mouth and breathed in sharply.
"Oh no I totally didn't think of that! I am so sorry!"
Persia playfully jolted towards her, Sprite running out of the tavern laughing.

Persia cleared her throat as she sat down at the very back of the room, watching the ceremony closely.

Sersi looked so beautiful.
She adored her like a mother.
Her cheeks were pinched with a hint of red, flickering in the shine of the flames.
Her eyes glowed with passion and love.
It was what she deserved.

Sprite was casting illusions over the couple and the crowd.
Depicting beautiful pageants of colors, the history of the world and the Eternals.
The corners of her lips curled as she watched them closely.

„Is the ceiling more interesting than the wedding?"

Persia twitched, looking over to the right, „Somehow everyone loves startling me."
Ajak grinned and walked over next to her.
„Not intentionally, Persia."

She stood there for a while watching Sersi and Ikaris looking at each other. Persia still had her eyes on the woman next to her though.
She wore blue, with a scarf over her head.
„I understand it must have been hard for you to be here today."
Ajak exclaimed, making the girl look away in embarrassment.
„I am here for Sersi and Sprite."
she replied, looking down at her hands. „And because Kingo wouldn't have left me alone."
Ajak laughed firmly. „Yes, I figured."

Meanwhile, the fiancé and fiancée finally kissed. They were married now.
The first connection after over 5000 years.
It made something shift in her heart.

„I want you to be happy here too."
Persia found Ajak's eyes again. Her face twisted into a sorrowful expression.
She didn't know what to say.

„We are your family"

„You are not the first to have told me this today." it slipped from Persia.
„I don't like it when you others talk about me."
„What I said yesterday doesn't mean I don't want you to have a life."
She nudged her head towards Ikaris and Sersi. They were dancing now.

„I want you to be aware that you should pay attention to yourself. You can harm yourself and other-"
„I know, Ajak."
Persia pressed, trying to hide that her words punched her gut again.
„I understand, really."

Ajak elongated her chin higher.
She turned towards Persia with a motherly smile. Lip tucked in.
Understanding.
„We are your family, you don't need to fight alone."
Persia nodded.
Ajak looked at her for a while before she went off into the crowd.

Persia breathed out heavily, like she had been holding it the whole time Ajak talked to her. She was scared.
For no reason at all.

She cradled further into the corner and watched the night pass before her eyes.
For the last minutes, when the air was stuffed with sweet liquor and people spoke with lower voices, she got out from her little spot and mixed between the people.
She would have regretted it later if she hadn't at least done something

Her eyes spotted Phastos talking to the Natives, deep in a conversation. He was clearly no longer fully minded.
Kingo and Sprite clung onto each other, laughing about something that she couldn't make out between all the talking.
She had seen Sersi and Ikaris go off somewhere hours ago.

Something brushed her shoulder, and she turned to see Makkari.
On your way to get your hands on something valuable? Persia teased, scrunching her nose.
I don't steal, Makkari replied angrily, I borrow
Persia nodded with half lidded eyes, the corners of her lips turned down.

Dance with me, Makkari suddenly signed.
Persia stopped and stared at her in surprise.
Dance?
Makkari placed her hands to her hips.
Yes, dance.
There's no music, Persia signed, then put her hand over her mouth in realization.

Makkari only shook her head playfully before grabbing at her hands and intertwining her fingers with hers.

Persia froze, then melted into the touch.
She looked at the girl, calming her breathing as they started moving back and forth.
A rhythm settled between the two, falling into a pattern of movement.

Persia smiled as one of her hands fell around Makkari's waist and pulled her towards her.
Makkari placed one hand to her shoulder, letting her chin rest on her other.
Her feet lost feeling, allowing herself to be fully guided by Makkari.
She enjoyed the security that followed when she was around.

She didn't know how long they stayed like this.
At some point she closed her eyes and they only opened when she heard someone clear their throat.

Her head lifted to look at Gilgamesh who was obviously embarrassed to disturb them.

Sorry he signed but mouthed the words along.
I need your help Makkari. Thena is gone
Makkari nodded, her face falling into a stern look.
She stepped away, gave Persia one last squeeze with her hand before she went off behind Gilgamesh.

The space in front of her felt empty now.
Makkari could comfort her without words. She wouldn't know what to do without her.
She stood in the middle of the room for a long time lost in thought, on display for everyone.
What was that feeling in her chest?
A smile fell wrong when she put one on.

"Huh, I didn't believe you'd show up."
Persia closed her eyes.
"I did."
"Why?"
She opened her eyes and huffed. "Because I was dragged here by chains."
Druig blinked at her.
He wasn't wearing his normal outfit, to her surprise. His shoulders also weren't as raised as they usually were.

„Is it really that hard believing that I showed up because I want to be here?"
„You don't want to be here."
She opened her mouth to give him a response but closed it in confusion. His face was gentle. A little too gentle.
It felt like a trap.
Another trick to make her feel bad by seeming empathic.

„I am here for my family"
That word felt strange on her tongue.
It hadn't fallen from her mouth in a while.
It also felt wrong

She wanted to be back in her tavern.

„You shouldn't be here." he said, pronouncing heavily as he spoke.
Persia was speechless, although she was used to it.
„I know." she inhaled, not having the energy to fight him.

Persia turned on her heels ready to walk down the path outside, her back already turned when someone tugged at her hand.
Her head turned with speed, going to spit something into Druig's face.
„Druig please, not-"

„Dance with me."

Persia looked the boy up and down, pulled her hand out of his grasp and rubbed the back of her palm.

„Why would I dance with you?"
she asked in confusion, pushing her face towards him.
„Why would you want to dance with me?"
He glimpsed, then shrugged.
Persia couldn't believe her ears or eyes.

" Answer me" she urged with an edge to her voice.
"You can dance with Makkari, so why shouldn't I?"
Not the answer she wanted.
Really, it didn't even make sense.

"Is this an excuse to stab me or something?"

Druig laughed, then reached for her hands again.
His touch was surprisingly light, humane. The skin on his hands soft.
He ran his thumbs over the back of her hands.

„I won't stab you, Persia"

She couldn't remember the last time he had said her full name.
No one said it like he did.
That little roll he added unintentionally, he pronounced it with a stand, but tender.
She didn't know if she loved or hated it.

"Allow me a dance," he mumbled.
Persia stared at him, then noticed he was still holding her hands.

She sighed, „a short dance." she gave in.

Druig's face twisted into a faded smile, then slowly moved towards her.
His hands first tested for her reaction when he wrapped his fingers between hers, then he grew bold and rested the other on her waist.
Persia held her breath, waiting for him to laugh.
Or stab her.
She still believed that to be an option.
But nothing happened.
Her arm crawled around his shoulder and neck.

Druig stepped even closer, until his nose almost brushed her cheek.
Her guard was still up, but she tried relaxing into the touch.
It wasn't something she was used to.
It was completely different from Makkaris tight squeezes, Kingo's nudges or Sersi's gentle hugs.

They started moving back and forth slowly.
She noticed how Druig started running his hand gently up and down her back.
His fingers ran between the fabric of her tunic, feeling along her vertebrae.
It felt strange.

„Why are you like this?" she muttered.
"Like what?" he hummed.
She raised her shoulders, then dropped them again.
He droned a short breath into her neck, making shivers travel down her back.

"I couldn't tell you how long I wanted to do this."
"What?"
"Ask you for a dance."
Was he being serious?

Persia was never this confused or at loss for words than at that moment.
Druig brushed his lips past her ear, gently rising his chest up and down.
„I don't understand." it slipped off her lips, no volume to her voice at all.
Druig just nodded in response.
Almost like a silent agreement.
I don't understand either, she could hear him in her mind.

„Do you think they will be happy?" he questioned, incredibly quiet.
„Ikaris and Sersi? I hope they will. I think they will."
Vivid images of the two filled her head and it made her smile. Both deserved that happiness. A life.
She pulled her face from his shoulder to meet his eyes.
His were closed.

„Druig."

„I like it when you say my name."

„Really? I don't think I ever said it that quiet, I feel like i'm always screaming it."
Persia scoffed softly, taking in the features of his face.

There was a scratch above his brow she hadn't noticed before.

And wouldn't have if she hadn't been this close to him.

„No I do really like it." he said, his tone raspy.
„Even when you're angry."

„ Druig" she repeated, watching as his jaw tightened a little.
There was a slight arch to his lips, part of his dimples showing.
Persia was tempted to loosen her hand and run it across the line of his face. The urge to trace his features with the sensitive tips of her fingers.

Finally, he opened his eyes and caught her looking.
A smile formed on his lips.
They were still moving in that steady rhythm.

Persia took a deep breath.
Then she finally noticed.

Hell, it finally clicked

Her face, only inches before Druig's.
And when he breathed, all she could smell was the sweet liquor which he had drunk all night with the villagers.
The whole time she thought it was the sour aftertaste of the people.
But the intensity of it came right from him.

He wasn't changed or gentle.
Solely drunk

And Makkari was gone. There was no one he could be around, so he reached for her.
She was an idiot. A full on moron.

Why did she not question him?

It was worse than his insults or blade stabbed through her heart.

„You are cruel, Druig." she barked through gritted teeth, ripping from his touch and stepping backwards until they were at least five feet apart.

She suddenly felt lightheaded.

The places where his hands had set were hot, slashed with their sudden vanish.
Her chest rose with heat, her eyes flipping back and forth between his features.

The cut above his brow.

Druig dropped his head to the side, his arms still hanging in the air where they had rested on her body.
Rested on her body.
Tears raised into her eyes because of the anger for herself that she felt bubbling in her veins.

„Persia I-"
„No, stop that." she choked. „Never say my name again."

His mouth dropped.
„I hate you." she whispered, hugging her arms to her body because she suddenly felt cold.

Persia ran out of the tent, holding herself back from scratching her skin to forget the touch.

„Remember to stay calm, Persia We don't want you to blow something up!
Maybe this one time you won't hurt your family" she heard Druig yell after her.

The tipsy tone to his voice was so audible. However, she didn't pick up on it before.
Maybe she just pushed it away.

His words stung worse than usual.
She wanted him gone.
She wanted herself gone.

„Persia!" Sersi called after her.
Wherever she came from.
Her body refused to stop, but her head turned to face the girl.

She violently shook her face from one side to the other, tears spilling to the ground.
Sprite had seen it.
Kingo did.
Ikaris too, probably.

They all saw it.

Sobs shook her throat as she ran along the path into the woods behind the taverns.
God, why was she always crying
Why was she always falling for his stupid ways even when he wasn't even trying?

Continue reading next part □