

Chapter V

Five years since they last spoke.

"Come at me, before I make you regret it."

Sweat was pearling on her forehead, heavy breaths filling her throat with a strained feeling. Still, there was more to push.

"I will not fight against you, Persia, if you don't do it properly."

Persia dogged his beams, then twisted around herself and grabbed him by his forearm.

The sun was hitting her face so brightly that it hurt her eyes. Dust around her made her stance slippery.

Ikaris ripped from her grip and elevated o the ground, forcing her to roll around to the other side.

One of her hands shot in front of her chest, feeling as it filled with a ball of energy and threw it his way.

"Then you have to fight properly too, you're treating me like a toy," she hissed, throwing another blast his way.

"Go easy on that energy, Persia," he grinned, getting back down on the ground.

He wasn't even sweating.

She felt like she was fighting for the first time, that's how stupid he made her feel.

Persia took a few deep breaths, trying to regulate her rhythm.

Her body was rushing with energy, filling every inch until it was threatening to burst.

She could feel how it leaked from her hold.

"Now focus on making it go away. Don't let it take control of you."

Her eyes closed, mind rushing with the lust for more. It buzzed around her like a swarm of bees, all eager to feed o a singular flower.

It took her a second before she could think clearly, then drowned the feeling out until there was nothing le .

It made her corpse quiver, but she fought for her stand.

Her body felt heavy, but her breathing light.

She opened her eyes and found those of Ikaris, who gave her a pleasing smile.

"Good, you're getting faster."

"That won't help me during a fight. I need to put a brake on it instantly and have it under control the whole time."

Ikaris walked up next to her, putting a few harsh pats to her shoulder.

"The owner has to teach the dog how to sit before it can trust it to be let o its leash."

Persia was tempted to brush him o , but understood.

"Do you know how long it has been since you last lost control?"

"Five years. The last time I can remember at least."

"Keep that score," he spoke with a low tone, not letting go of her eyes until he was sure she understood his encouragement.

"Have you talked to Druig?"

There it was.

She had been bracing herself for it the whole time. It was stuck at the back of her mind.

Didn't matter who trained with her, they always asked.

"No," she pu ed, letting her eyes wander o , "not since that day, you know."

Ikaris looked at her for a while, then tilted his head. "When you fight, do you think about him?"

Persia took her time thinking about her answer.

"I used to."

"Does it make you lose o fight for control?"

"Neither," it was more of a whisper to herself than to him, "It makes me angry that he enabled me to take control, that is why I want it so bad. But when I recall his words"

Ikaris had a worry in his face that she didn't want.

Pity only made it worse, a er all those years.

"It is like I forget how to keep control."

When Ajak told her it was best that she kept her distance from Druig, she accepted the help.

Five years.

With time, it fueled her anger.

His too, she could tell.

And she was angry that he was, he had no right to feel that way.

Selfish that's what he was.

Selfish and self centered and pushing-

"Persia, stop."

Her hands were clenched tight, his voice pushing through to her. Her eyes wandered down to see a gleam of black protrude from her fists.

She gasped and made it fade.

"I didn't mean."

"It's fine," she muttered, rubbing along her knuckles.

Ikaris looked guilty now, with his lips downturned and eyes so ened. Somehow that only made her more furious.

"I think we should continue tomorrow," he spoke, dusting o his clothes.

"Yeah," she replied half minded, trying to collect herself and sort her head.

"Will you eat with us?"

Persia nodded firmly and put a smile on.

"Sure."

—

Kingo reached over the table, whipping the fruit basket from Makkari, though it was no use since she sped up behind him and snatched it from his hands.

With her chin tilted up, she gave him a cheeky smile until her eyes were barely visible.

Hey, at least give me an appli gino signed, putting on a pout.

Makkari took an apple out of the basket and tossed it over to him.

The dining area was set up quite nicely, with a long wooden table covered in little things which they got from all around the area.

It stretched across the room, five sitting on one, six on the other.

Persia was squeezed between Gilgamesh, who chugged some kind of drink down his throat and Makkari on the other.

Ajak in front of her.

Chutney, dates, mangos and berries.

And somuch bread.

Way toomuch bread, even for eleven people.

Persia laughed at something Kingo said, having to hold her belly and wipe the tears from her eyes.

„You should be an entertainer, Kingo. If we get to be around that long."

"I am already quite popular," he exclaimed, pushing his chest up. "I just wish there was a way to capture my beauty, like a cut in time..."

"That's brilliant!" Phastos smiled, his eyes lighting up at the idea. "I am brilliant, thank you for pointing it out though."

Phastos was not even listening anymore, Persia could practically hear his thoughts working. At least until Ajak put a hand to his shoulder.

"No working today, Phastos," she said with a so expression to soothe his disappointment.

Persia let her eyes rush about her family and listening into their little conversations, occasionally joining in.

She even got to argue with Thena about which one of them lost control more frequently.

Ajak didn't think it was funny.

Persia felt how her posture relaxed, face heating with a little color. "Sprto, could you give me some of that bread?" Persia asked, pointing to the fresh loaf at the end of the table.

Instead, Druig gave it to her, not saying a word.

"Thank you."

He quickly thinned his lips, then drew it again.

From the corner of her eye, she saw how Sersi looked over at her.

Persia ignored it, just like she did any other time.

Druig and her hadn't exchanged more than a few words in years. Even if she had been alive for centuries she needed more than ten hands to count on, those years were surprisingly long.

She didn't miss it, at all.

But a er those endless centuries, it felt out of place.

"Persia?"

"Hm?" she hummed, looking up at Ajak.

"Why don't you show the others what you have been working on?"

"I thought no magic?" Phastos whined sarcastically, falling back. "I can," Persia responded, giving Phastos a short apologetic glance.

She opened her palm, listened to how everything around her started quieting until all she could hear was the so buzz of her power increasing.

Her fingers twitched, heat forming within until she was centered enough to collect her energy into a ball.

The golden strings warped like threats hovering just over her hand, growing until it was the size of the apple that Kingo was eating.

Impressive Makkari signed, not letting go o the ball with her eyes.

"It could destroy this tavern if I lost control."

"But you won't," Ajak smiled.

Persia looked around and saw how everyone stared down at her hand.

Until they met Druig.

He was looking at her.

She swallowed, shallow breathing hollowing through her body. Anger crashed in without warning, but in time for the ball to collapse in her hand before anyone noticed. Through her sharp eyes, she noticed how the golden strings faded to black.

Then vanished.

"Sorry," she cleared her throat, "I can't hold it that long."

Sprite clapped and shot a big grin her way.

"That was amazing!"

Persia returned the expression.

A sour a ertaste of the magic made her face muscles wince, a nausea grow in her stomach.

She took a few deep breaths, hoping it would calm her although the anger faded as soon as she moved her glance from Druig.

But somehow, an edge of the feeling was still knitted into her skin. Fingers still trembling under the table where she hid them from the others.

Again, she discreetly closed her eyes and tried the technique which Ikaris had been training with her.

Collection, Overwhelming and Drowning it out.

It didn't work.

Her mind was blocked.

Persia opened her eyes, her vision slightly blurry.

It was going to be okay.

The feeling would fade once she got a moment to herself.

Suddenly, something hit her shin, making her jerk back. She ran her eyes across the row opposite her.

Irritated, she looked away when no one seemed to have done it on purpose, when it happened again.

Persia's eyes stopped on everyone.

First Thena, then Kingo, then Ajak.

No one looked at her.

Then Sprite, who was juggling with her food on the plate.

Lastly, she looked at Druig, who was talking about something to Sesi on the opposite side.

Persia narrowed her eyes, tempted to look away when something hit her leg another time.

Druig gave her a quick glance.

She tilted her head, intrigued.

Her head started aching from the pressure of her power.

His elbow was supported on the table, moving his hand long with the conversation.

Then she saw it.

First, he almost closed his hand into a fist, though with both his index and middle finger slightly protruding. Then he extended the two into an almost right angle, with his thumb peeking from the center.

He looked at her for just a split moment, like he was trying to check if she saw it.

Persia knew what he did, Makkari asked her that multiple times a week.

Are you okay?

Though she was confused why he would ask that.

Another nudge to her leg, this time when she looked at him, he opened his eyes slightly more, raising his brows with them.

He was pushing her.

She flattened her hand and moved it up to her forehead, looking like she was brushing hair o it, then moved it outwards while shaking her head slightly.

I don't know.

Probably not the right response.

Well, it was true.

She had no clue what was going on.

And it only got worse.

But why did she tell him?

Persia looked at him again, only to be confronted with him not bearing her a glimpse.

She sighed in relief that it must have been a mistake of some sort.

The rest of the evening, she did not look in his direction once.

—

As soon as she entered her tavern, she sat down to the ground and closed her eyes.

Her heart was threatening to beat out of her chest.

The sore ache has been running through her for hours.

And the faint gleam of the cosmic energy still pulsed in her veins.

Persia inhaled a couple times, trying to drown it out. But she was simply too frustrated.

She had waited too long.

Teach the dog how to sit Ikaris recalled in her mind.

Centering the power.

Not even that worked.

It was so faint and scattered, she was unable to grasp it at all.

She went on, thinking clearly.

Nope, failed.

There was nothing to drown out because she couldn't feel it properly. If she couldn't do it now, could she ever do it in a fight?

There was no hope, she needed to find Ajak.

Persia got up, ran her shaking hands over her face.

There it was again, the urge to faint.

She clenched her teeth shut and walked to the door, but didn't make it very far before her body forced her to stop again.

A quivering breath a er another.

"Persia?"

She turned, trying to find where the voice had come from. "Sorry Kingo!"

"Not Kingo."

Persia looked up and finally saw him step out of the shadows. Her eyes widened.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know," Druig replied, voice heavy with air.

"No you don't understand," she whispered, raising a hand to her forehead. Sweat was forming, „if you want to argue, now is the best time."

"I don't want to argue with you."

Silence filled them unwillingly.

"I can feel it."

Persia starred, his outlines blurring. She needed to sit down somewhere.

"Feel what?"

"The cosmic energy you're holding."

"I can't deal with this right now," she muttered, turning around and walking back into her room.

The anger that came with his presence made her want to scream.

Still, he didn't get it. His steps followed hers.

"Get out," she spoke, sitting down at the edge of the bed. Her hands tangled at the roots of her hair, pulling at it.

"You are going to lose control."

"I know"

Druig stood opposite her, looking down and watched her swoop over her eyes and nose with her hand.

A laugh made her body erupt.

"Is that not what you want? For me to burst? To finally have a reason to deem me hopeless?"

Druig felt how the veil of the black power thicken around her.

"No."

"Then what do you want?" she asked, lacking oxygen to breathe.

"I want to help you," he mumbled, „if you allow me to."

"Help me by getting Ajak, please."

The boy knelted down to look into her face. Persia turned away.

"I will," he said, getting up but she grabbed his hand.

The pressure was familiar, she didn't know why. So , light. Humane

"If you want me to get her, I will."

"Hold on," Persia still held his hand, raising her other one too and imbedded both inside his palm.

Druig extended his other hand for her to grab, and she did.

Persia allowed her hands to feel his touch.

His hands were cold, hers burning.

The shaking calmed slightly.

"Why are you like this?"

A question she had asked herself multiple times over the course of her life, though never directed towards him.

Not that she remembered.

It did feel like her tongue had spoken the words before.

Druig did not reply.

"You can come with me and hold my hands while I bring you to Ajak."

Teeth chattering, they bit her tongue when she tried speaking. Metallic taste expanding in her mouth.

"I don't think she can help me," she spoke under her breath. He stayed silent, slowly got back down on his knees. "Persia, talk to me."

"Why am I like this?" she asked desperately, clenching his hands tighter.

"You should have killed me in the woods, five years ago, it would have been better for all of us."

Druig inhaled sharply, eyes widening.

He didn't understand.

"Don't say that."

She didn't say another thing.

Persia teetered back and forth, still trying to center her thoughts.

"Look at me," he said and she did.

"Tell me what to do, or what you think. Just continue speaking."

Her eyes grew glassy, suddenly she forgot how to form a sentence.

"Could you- could you help me get down to the floor."

He nodded, loosened one of his hands out of her cramping grip to support her back while she got down on the carpet.

"I- I really don't want you to be scared."

"I am not scared of you."

"Could you..." she gestured to his chest.

Druig nodded and scooted over, lowering her head until her ear was up against his heart.

Warmth spread in her veins.

"Keep talking."

Persia clasped her hands tighter around his, turning up her nose.

"How did you know?"

"There's always a thin shell of power around you, like static. It was ten times worse while we ate."

Persia nodded against his chest, starting to feel sleepy.

She held her breath, focusing on his heart pumping the blood through his body. It wasn't a rhythm she felt familiar with.

"You need to keep talking."

Persia didn't want to talk, it felt like it would set o a bomb and take the village down with her.

Herself.

Druig.

"Tell me the story about the great Perseus," he muttered.

Of course, it was her favorite story.

She spread it across every new place they visited, welling in the shine which didn't leave peoples faces.

A weak smile formed on her lips.

"You've heard it millions of times," she replied, taking a shaking breath.

"I will keep you talking," Druig said, pushing his back against the wooden bed frame. One of his hands rubbed along her shoulder.

"The great Perseus," she whispered, pausing to grab on her thoughts through the aching mess.

"He was half god, with a mortal as his mother and Zeus as his father. You know, he appeared as a shower of gold to persuade her."

"Why did you make that part up?" he asked gently, a little laugh making his chest go up and down.

She shrugged, "I like the color of gold, the shimmer, it's like the first beams of sun in the morning. Makes me feel warm. It could definitely persuade me."

Druig pressed his lips on top of each other to suppress a bright smile from taking over his face, even if she couldn't even see it.

"Go on."

"They had a lot of children. Perseus was the best of course," a little pu , supposed to be a laugh but sounded more like a screech, escaped her lips.

"I don't know why they made me a boy."

"Maybe they thought only a man could bear that much fierce and strength and confidence."

"No," she interrupted, feeling how her chest got less tight, "I was better at it."

Druig rocked his feet back and forth, breathlessly smiling at her remarks.

"He didslay a gorgon."

"Shedid. He beheaded Medusa and now it's on the front of Athena's shield. To ward o her enemies.

But ourThena would never do that."

"Yeah, she couldn't," Druig agreed, allowing his chin to rest against the top of her head.