

Chapter 4: Peitho

721 P.F.

Fall Equinox

Rhetra

There need to be baths in the basement - divided by gender. These are exclusively for the Eristics so they don't have to use the public baths.

The doors of the Eristic keep are massive, functional, unadorned, and hideous. The whole facade looks like it was designed by an architect with a head wound.

"After today, none of you are allowed off school grounds until you complete your first year," the Lash says.

My hands clench in confusion. "Your Honor, what of the gods? Certainly we must be allowed to visit the temples in the city?"

"There are temples inside the school."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

We walk into an unimaginative ante-chamber filled with infuriating geometric scribblings that fill the walls.

Any space can be made sacred, daughter. The seeds of Justice grow where they are planted, and those who follow Rhetra always prevail. Yes, Mistress.

We pass rooms filled with shelves, poorly organized scrolls, and hunched writers scribbling in silence.

"Your Honor, what is the purpose of having students copy old manuscripts?" Ergon asks.

"Fascinating. Do you believe there is a single purpose to writing day?" The old man frowns, somehow making himself look bigger. "Speculate, novice."

"Your Honor, I ask because I don't know," Ergon says.

"Then remain silent in your ignorance, child."

The cute boy with the little nose shoots a look at the Lash's back.

You like him, don't you, sister? Quiet, Eugenia.

We climb two flights of stairs and while the walls continue to be plastered with infantile designs, the bannister is lovely, unfamiliar wood stained to a brown so deep it's almost black. I run a finger down it, and it feels as lustrous as it looks.

"This is the novice's hallway," the Lash says. He walks us to the end where a single dismal window looks out into a garden below.

"Ten doors," Ergon says. "Your Honor, how many total students are there in the Eristic school?"

The Lash ignores him and points at a door. "Elenchus, Peitho, and Achlys are in that one." He points across the hall. "Ergon and Xeno will share the other with Eirene."

I can't offer nightly prayers to the Goddess while these people joke and spout their Skeptical nonsense. "Your Honor, you can't mean for us to share bedrooms?"

He leers, his papery face a mismatch of tight and wrinkled. "Calm yourself, novice. It's a room assignment. Half of you will be gone before the year is up."

The warrior for Truth knows when to dig her feet into the ground and to be pushed no further. Yes, mistress.

"I must insist that we get our own rooms."

"Insist if you must. These are your room assignments."

One of the doors opens. A woman draped in the same black hooded robe steps out into the hallway. A vicious purplish birthmark mars an otherwise pretty face. Her hair lies flat and straight against her head, cut short in a tight frame that stops just above her shoulders.

"These are the new Fall Equinox group of novices, Your Honor?" She asks.

The Lash walks toward the stairs. "Get them fed and watered for tomorrow."

"My name is Eirene," she says blinking patiently. "Welcome to the Eristic school."

Achlys touches an ugly cube of metal on the outside of the door and slides a piece of metal back and forth on it. "That's fucked. An exterior bolt?"

"Nothing says welcome like extra locks," Elenchus says.

She pushes past Elenchus and ducks around Eirene into the room. "Farmboy here likes to spout shit he thinks passes for wisdom. Turns out he's mostly passing gas."

Elenchus makes a fart noise. Xeno giggles.

By the Spear, those two are children.

"Hey Princess, looks like everyone gets their own bedroom with a door that locks and everything. You'll only have to share a common room," Achlys shouts.

Princess? Did she call me Princess?

I go through the other door. *You will find your people. Remember who you are, daughter. You are a Pure Maiden of Rhetra.* I open a bedroom door. There lies a mattress slapped on a clunky wooden frame covered in muddy colored sheets. I close the door, lay down, and shut my eyes.

Eirene's voice crawls under the door and brings me out of a dreamless sleep. "Peitho? Are you alright? I'm going to walk everyone to lunch. Are you hungry?"

Irritation grumbles in my head. *The warrior adapts herself to any challenge.* Yes, Mistress.

"Ok." I get up and open the door.

Eirene stands with hands clasped. She sighs. "I don't know your story, but I can tell you mine and maybe it will help."

I feel the pressure of possible tears building so I don't say anything, I just nod.

"I expected to turn 20, fail the test, and go home. That's what everyone told me would happen. That's what I was told my whole life, all through school. No one else in my

village had ever been Plucked. So when the Eristics told me I had been picked, I was terrified. They took all my stuff and dressed me in a black robe. The Lash was a snob. The older students were cruel. The Dean acted like nothing was wrong. But I had my group. The six of us, the six novices, bonded. We helped each other. You've got a good group too. You can help each other."

"I miss my family, my temple. I miss my sisters and Mistress Kharti." Here come the tears.

Eirene moves in gracefully for a hug. The crying takes over and she holds me through it. *The soldier of Rhetra lives with her eyes open, ready for opportunity.* Yes, Mistress.

"I miss my family too," she says softly.

I sniffle and sob, but still manage to talk. "Where are you from?"

"A little village outside Iygia."

I step back and wipe my eyes. "That short girl is mean."

"She's scared and she misses home, same as you," Eirene says.

"Those two boys are children."

"The one with the little nose is cute, though, especially when he laughs. I think he said his name is Elenchus?" She asks.

"Yeah. I guess he's cute."

She gives me a smile. "Do you want a moment so they can't tell you were crying?"

I must look terrible, like a homesick little girl. "Am I still blotchy?"

"Tiny bit," she says. "Wait here and I'll get you some water."

I lay down. I miss the bunk beds at the temple. The mattresses were nice and you always had someone to talk to at night. *Eirene could be a good friend, Sara.* Not as good as you, Eugenia. *Give her a chance, sister.* Alright.

Eirene comes back in. I sit up and drink.

"You look better now," she says. "Ready?"

I nod. She takes my hand, just like Eugenia would have. I push back a second bout of tears.

We walk across the hall. The door is open. The two boys and Achlys are sitting at a table playing cards. Ergon is hovering over them, eyes intent on the game, asking questions about the rules.

Achlys looks up, her eyes flicking between me and Eirene. *Save who you can, but there will always be those who you can not help.* Yes, Mistress. *That girl is dangerous.* Yes, Mistress.

Achlys slaps three cards on the table.

"And what does that mean?" Ergon asks.

"That Achlys is a Fancy at cards," Xeno says.

Achlys makes her voice sound like the Dean. "Novices! Welcome to the Eristic card table."

They laugh together. *Keep all paths open and clear. Let the spear of Rhetra find its mark. Patience.* Yes, Mistress.

Achlys flings herself up and tromps toward the door, her movement and voice an exact match for the Lash. She claps. "Now that you've all played your fascinating fucking card game, let's get you fed and watered."

Xeno jumps from his seat, his face cracked with awe. "How do you do that?"

Eirene steps past Achlys and takes the lead, guiding us down the hall and stairs, winding through hallways to what must be the mess hall. Students hunch around huge, mostly empty oaken tables.

The walls, once again, are filled with pointless geometric designs.

We join a line that ends at a table covered in an impossible variety of foods. A servant on the other side of the table, dressed in white, gawks at me.

"It's all delicious," Eirene says. "Just point to what you want."

More cow eyed women in white stand behind endless, unidentifiable platters. I gesture at the least bizarre foods and they are deposited onto the plate. At the end of the line, I ask for an empty plate and when the servant balks, I tell her it's for the Goddess and she relents.

Eirene leads us to an empty table.

Xeno picks up a long pale green vegetable with his fingers. "Should I taste it first, or learn the name first?"

"Eat it," she says. "Don't let the name flavor your experience."

His face changes from expectant, to surprise, and finally to delight. "Wow. What do the skeptics from Youel say, Peitho? I will reserve judgment."

Play along, sister. Play along. I force a laugh.

Achlys pushes food around her plate. "How many novices bail out of this sty?"

"You mean run away?" Eirene asks.

"Why would anyone run from the opportunity of a lifetime?" I ask.

Achlys sniffs a piece of toast then flops it back on the plate. "You mean the chance to be a sucker in the Fancies' heist?"

"Weren't we chosen to serve Rhetra?" Xeno asks while plowing through his food.

"I prefer the phrase 'press ganged'," Elenchus says.

Xeno shrugs. "How can you c...c...complain when the food is this good?"

"Farmboy would fucking complain if he sat on the Empress' throne," Achlys says.

Elenchus snickers. "It's the most reasonable place in the world to complain from. Do you know the one thing all the friends, family, and enemies of the Empress have in common? They all want the Empress dead... and she knows it."

Achlys waggles at Elenchus with a pale green vegetable. "Every scent is a fart to Farmboy."

The conversation continues with fart jokes and card games for the remainder of the meal. I make a small pile of food on my second plate and murmur an offering to Rhetra.

Elenchus raises a puzzled eyebrow at me but says nothing. He has the decency to not say something offensive at this moment, but doesn't have enough piety to offer up anything of his own to the Goddess.

Eirene stands. "Looks like we're all done eating. Time to show you the rest of the place." We leave the cafeteria and Eirene guides us through the halls and rooms of the school, each more visually egregious than the last. "The Lash said there are temples inside of the school?"

"In the basement. I'll show you," Eirene says.

She leads us back to the stairs, toward the front entrance, next to the rooms of people copying text, but this time we go down instead of up. It stinks of moulding paper.

Eirene slips a piece of bread out her robe, pops it in her mouth, and hums gently. A small glint of white light appears above her shoulder.

"Finally, a fucking trick in the Fancy palace," Achlys says.

That girl swears too much. We should be awed and honored. At least the others look impressed.

At the bottom of the stairs is a beat up wooden desk with two uncomfortable looking stools behind it. Two hooded students, hunched over quill and ink with white lights just like Eirene's hovering above them. They glare up at us.

The room is dusty and undecorated. Everything from the two doors on either side to the walls looks ignored and cobwebbed.

"Showing the new Fall Equinox novices the temples," Eirene says.

One of the two makes a clucking sound. "Not copying anything?"

"Guides are exempt," she says.

"Must be nice," one says, tugging the hood forward and obscuring their face.

They ask what we're carrying, our names, what year we are, if we've eaten today, if we've slept recently, and several other pointless questions. We're searched. Do we have to do this every time we come down here? *The function of ritual is not to produce results, but the act of performance itself.* Yes, mistress.

Eirene writes our names down on a paper that's filled with names and dates.

The two students are already back to ignoring us.

We through the door on the right into a vast open space of shelves and tables cluttered with endless arrays of scrolls, papers, parchment, and dried clay tablets. A few tables are occupied by more hunched figures with hovering white lights scrawling over paper.

"Is this the entirety of the basement? Texts?" Ergon asks, his eyes scanning everything.

Eirene offers another smile. "Most of the space is a library, yes."

"Where is all the paper coming from?" Ergon asks.

"There is a block in the inner city dedicated to paper making," Eirene says.

"If they've got that much money, they should dedicate a block to tailors too," Elenchus says.

"You want a paper cloak?" Xeno asks.

Everyone laughs and immediately a student swoops over and scolds us to be silent. *See, sister, they can be good friends.* True friendship, Eugenia, is based in Truth, not humor.

We walk in silence through endless stacks until Eirene finally leads us to a door. On the other side is a hallway of bruised wooden doors. No one is there. "Here are the temples. Meet you back at the stairs later?"

Everyone except Elenchus turns to walk away.

"You're going to leave her in the dark?" He asks.

The cute one cares about you. Be quiet, Eugenia.

She jumps slightly and turns. "Sorry, I forgot you can't... sorry." She fumbles through her robe and draws out a pastry.

"Is that a trick? Pulling food out of your robe?" Xeno asks.

Eirene laughs. "No, no. I keep food with me. We call them rubrics, not tricks. Tricks is kind of a Bore word."

Eirene plucks an almond out of the pastry, palms it, and eats the rest. In a voice between a chant and a reccistation, Eirene sings wordlessly. The nut glows, somewhat dimmer than the light floating above her shoulder.

Xeno applauds.

Eirene blinks clumsily and hands me the almond. "Not besht effort, not worsht."

That's the price of using the Art? It makes you drunk? "Are you alright?"

"Just shtupid moment. For a moment. Two lights at once hard," she says slowly. "See you bye."

They walk away, Ergon plying Eirene with questions about food and the Art, Eirene slurring half nonsense sentences.

Nailed above each door is a small wooden board. I step to the nearest one and see that it has a spear etched into it. I smile and put my hand out. Rhetra. The wood feels smooth, comforting.

The almond flashes brightly then goes dark.

I freeze. If I was safe before then I should stay here and not move. Should I yell? No.

My hand moves along the door and finds the handle.

It's locked.

Wise lady of war,

Wise lady of justice,

Grant me your patience

Grant me your strength

A voice drifts down the hallway. Lights appear around a corner. Three of them. My eyes close against the brightness.

Thank you, Lady Rhetra.

“...said they were looking for shortcuts. Always with these first and second years. Will it make them faster, stronger, and smarter? If not, they don't care.”

“Is there someone standing by your door, Kallista?”

I squint at the lights, brilliant and dazzling against the former darkness. Three older women stand at the end of the hallway. “I was looking for the temple of Rhetra and my light went out.”

One woman steps forward, leaning on a cane. She wears the hooded black robe of the school, replete with silver triangle and embroidered eagle patch. “If the light is yours, why not make another, novice?”

My cheeks get hot. *The warrior is humble. Humble and honest.* Yes, mistress. “This is my first day. I asked to be led to the temples and was left here with a light. It went out.”

She pulls back her hood, pouring out a long rope of gray hair. She touches the almond in my hand and it leaps with light.

She gives a firm smile. “A brave warrior searches through darkness alone to seek the Golden Goddess?”

I return the smile.

“Come in,” she says, opening the door. “Welcome to the Eristic temple of Rhetra.”

“Good day Kallista,” the other two say, moving past us.

Hearing her name a second time fires my memory. This is Mistress Kallista, my Rhetran grandmother, the woman Mistress Kharti told me to seek out when I arrived.

“Ladies,” Kallista says.

“You're Mistress Kallista.” My voice sounds childish, too small for this wonderful space.

She smiles and hugs me. We stand there forever while I cry, not needing to say anything. Her embrace is a warm, favorite coat, and she smells like candles.

“Come inside,” she finally says, brushing away my tears and ushering me into the room. The decoration is simple and awe inspiring: four unpadded wooden benches, a lectern, and three huge murals on the walls.

The left painting depicts Rhetra the Just and her brother stalking Eryx. The hunters are inside a mud hut, poised in mid battle. Leontius has just missed his shot, arrow stuck in a wooden table. Rhetra's arm is pulled back to full extension, the sacred spear Dianioia about to sever the paw of the Fox.

The scene on the right depicts the founding. Rhetra the Scout dominates the foreground, muscles taut, releasing the sacred spear to fly toward the confluence of the Laomai and Moirai rivers. The Incomparable shield Noesis leans on an oak stump. The blessed companion, Episteme, completes the composition on a branch, the holy necklace Pistosis slung around her neck.

The center mural depicts the madness of Leontius. Rhetra the Warrior squeezes her brother around the waist, her arms veined with effort. Her brother, foaming at the mouth, has empty black sockets for eyes.

The interior light is a warm glow, cast by hundreds of candles lit in pocketed alcoves around the room. I want to lay on the floor and absorb the space, to become the room.

"This way, sister." She leads me to a smaller side room, an immaculately kept private office. The shelves are filled with meticulously organized scrolls, and carefully arranged wooden figurines of all the gods and heroes. The top desk is a thick, elegant wood rectangle. Each leg is a sculpted Etymon, muscled arms held up vertically, as if holding up the world itself. On top the desk are a dozen small bronze versions of Rhetra, two cups, and a decanter. I find Rhetra the Pure and touch her carved toga with a finger.

She hangs her cane on a hook that hangs from the bottom of a shelf. She pulls out a chair and sits. "Kharti and I have exchanged letters but I want to hear your words."

I put the still glowing almond on the table. This woman, this Mistress of Rhetra did that. I will learn, in the name of Rhetra, to do that.

The chair has a plush feel to it. "I was only a year from being anointed a pure maiden of Rhetra."

She lifts the familiar figurine, the same image that lives in my temple, in my home, with all my sisters as the living Goddess. "Rhetra the Pure, the face that reminds us of our ideal selves."

I hold back more tears. "Mistress Kharti has been my mentor from birth."

"She was younger than you are now when I met her." She sets down the figurine, picks up the decanter and fills the two cups.

The water is so cold it hurts my teeth.

"She called me mother which makes you my granddaughter, doesn't it?"

I take another drink, my mind spinning too fast to come up with words.

She runs her fingers along her braid and smiles. "Does Kharti still wear her hair in braids?"

"Yes. I helped her with her hair every morning." I breathe deliberately to help keep the tears away.

"You are safe here, Sara of Youel. Let go."

My old name, spoken in the real world, rips the sobs from me and I give in, curling my head onto the desk. Firm hands rub my back. Feelings drain out.

When it's over, the Mistress is sitting across from me again calmly sipping her water. A pristine white hand towel sits on the desk before me.

"Thank you." I wipe my face.

The Goddess strengthens you, daughter. Yes, Mistress.

"Open your hand, granddaughter."

I open my hand and the Mistress places a bronze necklace in my palm.

"I thought we... I mean, novices weren't..."

She reaches into the neckline of her cloak and pulls out a necklace. The bronze shield of Rhetra catches the light and she smiles. "We are all allowed to wear religious jewelry."

I begin crying again, this time with a smile as I put on the necklace.

"Meetings are every day after dinner. We will see you tomorrow, Sara of Youel."

"Yes Mistress Kallista." I stand, feeling taller.

I breathe in the beautifully simple arrangement of her office one more time. "Welcome home, granddaughter."

"Thank you, grandmother." I take the glowing almond off the desk and walk out of the office and the temple.

Out in the hallway, I collide with Eirene, who has her hand up, ready to knock. The rest of the group is behind her.

I tuck the necklace of Rhetra into my robe.

"There you are," Eirene says.

"Looks like the Goddess brightened your nut," Achlys says.

Xeno snickers.

These people can't hurt me. *Sister, do not be so quick to give up on them. The shield of Rhetra can cover us all.* "She did."

"Think Rhetra would bless my nuts?" Xeno asks.

"You'd never have to piss in the dark again," Elenchus says.

Achlys raises a hand and raises both eyebrows. "Or fuck."

The three of them laugh. Fools.

Eirene takes the almond from my hand. "This isn't my rubric anymore."

"It flickered out after you left."

"Oh no. I'm sorry." She hangs her head. "I can keep up two lights in the classroom, but I've never gotten that far away from one of them before."

I reach out and squeeze her arm. "No. If it hadn't faded, my meeting with Mistress Kallista wouldn't have been so perfect."

We hug.

Eirene smiles. "That's good. It's not easy to make connections here, and it's even harder to keep them."

Eirene takes my hand and leads us along the hallway, past the desk, up the stairs, and to the first floor.

Xeno wanders next to us. "Did you get to hear any music at the temple?"

"No, it was just the mistress and me talking."

"My favorite part of temple service was always the music and the dancing."

"Yes. I loved singing with my sisters at the temple of Youel."

He grins. "I had a friend who loved to dance to the music like a pirate."

What is this stuttering fool talking about? "Ok."

"He did it for the lute."

They all laugh this time.

"By the Spear, that is an awful joke," I say.

"Can't expect too much from a kid whose mom dropped him so many fucking times his eye floats," Achlys says.

Xeno frowns theatrically. "It was just the one time mama dropped me."

"Once was clearly enough," she says.

Eirene steers us past the hallway to the mess hall. "This is the battle room."

There are no handles or locks. A tight seam runs between the brutal looking doors, interrupted only by a silver triangle in the center. Ergon walks up and reaches out a hand.

Eirene seizes his wrist. "Stop."

He steps away.

"It wouldn't hurt you. I don't think. What I do know is we're not allowed in. Not unless we make it to 3rd year."

"Make it? Does that mean we can quit?" Xeno asks.

Eirene makes a face like she's sick. "It's possible."

"Doesn't sound like you'd recommend it," Elenchus says.

She shakes her head. "Unless a student is found to have... inadequate capacity, there is no consequence free way to leave the school."

"In other words, they'll break your fucking arms and bury your people in a mudslide," Achlys says.

Does she have to swear so much?

Ergon is staring at the doors. "Why wait until third year to let students into the battle room?"

"They used to put all students into battle room sessions right from the day they became novices."

"And it didn't work?" Ergon asks.

"There were many injuries, some deaths, and a few were Cooked."

"Cooked?" Ergon asks.

"It's when you use too much of the Way and you become... empty."

She leads us away from the doors, back past the mess hall, and up the stairs.

We sit down in the common room of Eirene's suite. Is that it? That's the whole tour?

"How many are in each new crop of novices, Eirene?" Ergon asks.

"Mine had six. Yours has five."

"How many total students are in the school?" Ergon asks.

"Around 500."

"If there are 5 sections of new students per year and 5 people per section, that would be 125 students per year, so with 4 years of students, that's 500."

Eirene stops walking. Everyone else stops. We're standing in the middle of another stairway, the walls painted dully with repeating squares stuck in triangles.

"Eristics study for five years."

"So the average is lower? 4 students per section?" He asks.

"No, five is right."

Ergon blinks silently a few times. "Then one out of every five students fails to graduate."

"Can I volunteer?" Elenchus asks.

Eirene grabs his sleeve. "Don't joke about that."

Elenchus glances at her hand. "I was kidnapped from my family, and put in this prison, what could be worse?"

"It's not kidnapping, it's the deal everyone in Koinon agrees to."

"I don't remember making a deal with the Eristics when I got shoveled into school at age five," he says.

"The numbers don't add up," Ergon says.

She nods. "Half the students in the academy at any time are Returns."

"What's a Return?"

"Returns are Eristic graduates. They come back to the school every five years for a season to reconnect with the school."

"The wayward prisoners return," Elenchus says.

Can we get out of this stupid stairway, please? *Sister, they are becoming friends. Be part of it.* Hush, Eugenia.

Again, Ergon stands silently and blinks. "That would mean on average three in five students fail to graduate."

"Well I promise a pig's party to whoever fucking makes it," Achlys says.

Heavy footsteps come from above. The dean appears on the landing. His smile, though clearly meant to be warm, makes my palms sweat. *Align yourself not just with power, but power that pushes towards Truth.* Yes, Mistress.

"Tonight, after dinner, each of the novices will come to my office one at a time," the Dean says.

"I will show them to your office, Your Honor," Eirene says.

He bows ever so slightly to her.

She bows deeply.

When he's gone, Elenchus laughs. "He never bows to us, the lowly novices, but he bows to the second years?"

Achlys opens the door to the rooms. "Come piss your robes in terror one at a time," she says in the dean's voice.

Xeno giggles as we all find places to sit. "Maybe each year you survive earns you a 5 degree deeper bow from the Dean?"

"How long would you have to study in order to get the Dean to put his head up his own ass?" Elenchus asks.

"36 years," Ergon says.

They all laugh.

"When do we learn the Way?" Ergon asks, face still innocently serious.

"First year is mostly reading and writing. History, philosophy, mathematics and combat."

Achlys snorts. "I can't read."

Why is she here?

"You'll be assigned a tutor."

"Isn't the goal to make us Eristics? Why not teach the basics of the Art?" Ergon asks.

Eirene upturns her hands. "They call it building your base. When Eristics use the Way, they draw on their knowledge. The more knowledge you have, the more you can do with the Way."

"If knowledge is the Eristic base, then why do you eat bread to make the light appear?" He asks.

Eirene flushes slightly. "It's a bit of a crutch to use food, it's the way the Syllogistics do it."

"So not all schools build their base in the same way?" He asks.

I close my eyes and stop listening. I need a nap.

Ergon stands up, excusing himself. When the door closes behind him, Achlys bounces to the center of the room and puts on a toothy grin. "Who wants to fly this sty and sneak out?"

"Don't do that," Eirene says.

Xeno lights up, ignoring Eirene. "To see the Mote?"

Her smile vanishes. "What the fuck is the Mote?"

"The old guy I was listening to," he says.

"The Wanderer has the hots for the philosopher in the wig. Cute."

What are they talking about?

Eirene stands up. "This is a terrible idea. If you get caught, the penalty will be massive."

"Not getting caught is my fucking specialty," Achlys says.

The door swings open and Ergon comes back in, eyes fixed on Eirene as if she is a book to be read. "I was hoping you could explain each of the schools methods one by one. For instance, how do the healers build their base?"

"The menders aren't a school."

This is about to get even more boring. Despite my heavy limbs and how good the couch feels, I stand up. "I'm going to lay down before we eat."

"Sleep tight, Princess," Achlys says.

The warrior knows some battles are not worth fighting. Yes, Mistress.

I find silence in my bed. I breathe and imagine the temple at Youel, Eugenia, the other sisters, and Mistress Kharti. We are singing, arranging offerings of bread and meat to the Goddess. The Mistress passes me a broom, and we are cleaning together, but inexplicably I am sad...

"Time for dinner," Eirene's voice pierces the door.

I am Peitho of Rhetra now.

I get up, dress, then stop at the threshold. *The warrior does not lie down in the past. The fight is in the present.* Yes, mistress.

Outside the door, Eirene takes my hand. "You looked like you needed a rest, so we waited as long as we could to get you."

In the mess hall, the women in white fill the plate in front of me. Eirene guides us to our table.

"I'd expect a princess to be a picky eater," Achlys says.

Strange, colorful food stares back at me. I pick a purple leaf off my plate and bite. Crunchy and bitter. After chewing, I decide it's interesting, maybe good. I don't know. My head is still dream fogged. "You don't know me."

She snorts. "Ouch."

If you're mean to me, I'm going to be mean back.

The Dean, hands clasped eagerly in front of him, strolls up. "Elenchus, will you join me in my office?"

"False choice," Elenchus says.

The Dean opens his hands in a wide arc. "You are always free to do whatever you want, although there are consequences to every action."

Elenchus stands up. "Sounds a lot like how someone in charge would justify their position."

The Dean knits his hands back together. "What is freedom?"

The two of them, still arguing, leave the room.

Eirene asks everyone what their favorite new thing they've tried in the mess hall is. After that, Achlys asks what the grossest thing we've ever eaten is, and so the conversation devolves. We finish eating and walk back up to the room.

Ergon shifts his bulk on the couch. "Why did the Dean ask Elenchus what freedom is?"

Xeno leans forward. "It's a word game."

"I don't understand what games have to do with freedom," Ergon says.

Xeno shrugs.

"Should we teach Peitho how to play cards?" Eirene asks.

We're halfway through a fourth game when Elenchus walks back through the door. He points at me. I blush at the sudden attention.

"Your turn."

I stand up, and Eirene does too. "I'll show you the way."

"Farmboy," Achlys says, changing her voice to sound like Ergon, "Why the fuck did the Dean ask you about freedom?"

Xeno, who was halfway through drinking a cup of water, sprays liquid out his nose. Elenchus falls to his knees with laughter. Achlys stays still, her face implacable, her posture stiff.

Eirene leads us out of the rooms. "Those three get along well."

Why does she put up with them? "It won't get them anywhere."

We go down one flight to the second floor. "Isn't enjoying one another's company enough?"

"Not when there is no purpose."

The walls are narrow and the ceilings too high here, leaving the eyes left wondering over the endless monotony of squares and triangles painted everywhere.

"Maybe some of us are better at a grand purpose and others are better at filling the small moments with meaning," Eirene says.

Only the Goddess can provide True purpose. Of course, Mistress.

We stop at one of a dozen unremarkable oak doors with a slightly green copper handle.

The Dean's voice floats from the other side. "Come in, Peitho."

Eirene opens the door and I walk in. There is art everywhere. Paintings, sketches and tapestries crowd every inch of wall. Figurines are crammed in potted plants hanging from the ceiling. A shelf is overstuffed with ornamental weapons, shaped candles, and a dyed black leather bag. The desk is awash in paper, ink, and styluses.

The Dean, sitting behind the desk, smiles at me and all I can think of is Achlys' face when she imitates him. I ignore both the urge to laugh and to grit my teeth. "Your Honor."

"And what is your assessment of my office?"

He wants a particular answer, doesn't he? "You like art."

"And what does that say about me," he touches the frame of one of the paintings, "if I love art?"

His face is relaxed, almost slack, yet still smiling. Is he bored? Am I boring? Is the whole process boring? "I don't know if it says anything, other than you love art."

His smile fades. "A careful answer."

"Is everyone here a skeptic?"

He revisits the possibility of a smile. "What brings you to that idea?"

"The Lash made it sound like no one could live here and believe in the gods for long."

"And why do you think he said that?"

"Because he's a skeptic."

He picks up a tiny wooden Rhetra from his desk and places it in my palm. It's an aspect I haven't seen before, one holding pens and a scroll. "See the version of Rhetra we lovers of writing have made?"

That's what the pens are about.

He drums his fingers on the desk. "If donkeys had a god, what would it look like?"

"A donkey."

"And cats? If they had a god?"

"A cat, Your Honor."

He takes the figurine back. "If skeptics had a god, what would it look like?"

Is that a joke? Should I laugh? "What?"

"What do skeptics value most?"

"Nothing. Anything. They have no direction, no purpose. They have no values at all."

He stands and plucks two small statues off a shelf. He considers them both, then sets one in front of me. "What did this artist believe in?"

It's a wolf. The shoulder blades and spine strain against the skin. The belly is swollen with pregnancy. The eyes are wide, bulging out from the face. "It's the she-wolf from the story of the Source. But how would I know anything about what the artist believed?"

He lifts up the statuette. "What do you see in the eyes?"

What does he want from me? "Intensity. Desperation, maybe?"

"Yes. Now look at the whole figure again. What does the artist believe in?"

The warrior is calm under pressure, so she can see the whole of the battlefield, not just the blade in front of her. Yes, Mistress. "Survival. The artist believes in survival."

"Why do you say that?"

The space behind my eyes aches. "Because the wolf is obviously suffering and she didn't quit. She endured. She survived."

"And what do you believe in, novice?"

"The Golden Goddess, Your Honor, and the power of the Five Gods."

He sits back down. "Tell novice Ergon he is next."

It's over. "Your Honor."

I shut the door behind me. Was that a test? I'm sweating. What an infuriating and awful man.

When I arrive at the rooms, laughter bubbles from behind the door. They all deserve each other.

I go inside. "Ergon, the dean says he'd like to see you next."

Ergon stands, sets his cards down, and walks to the door. Eirene rises but I wave for her back down to the couch. "I'll show him the way."

"The Princess and the machine," Achlys says.

Xeno snickers.

"Ever turn that razor sharp wit on yourself?" Elenchus asks.

"The despot can't handle the sharp end of her own blade," I say and stride out the door.

Elenchus bursts out laughing. "Despot! That's perfect!"

The door swings closed behind us. I lead Ergon down the stairs.

"Do you think Achlys is truly a despot?" He asks.

"I think she's rude and selfish."

He pauses. "What did the Dean speak to you about?"

"I don't know. All his questions were some sort of test, but I don't know what for."

"Interesting."

I can tell he wants to ask me more about the interview, but luckily, we're at the Dean's door. "This is the room. May the Golden Goddess hold her shield for you."

He nods awkwardly.

I walk back to the rooms. *All for the glory of Rhetra.* Yes, mistress.

The group still is chattering away over cards, and they don't even notice me walk past into my bedroom. I don't feel tired, but when I lay down, my head throbs with fatigue. How many students will be at the temple tomorrow? How many will sing and clean in praise of the Wise Goddess? *Sweep the temple floors alone, if needed, daughter.* Yes, mistress.