

## Pythia

They've come for so many reasons; love, war, power, death--a dangerous thing, to want to know what will come. I still wonder, every time someone passes through the temple, how desperate they must be to look at what only the Fates should know. But men think power is knowing the future, and so they come, and they ask, and Pythia answers.

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My grandmother stares squint-eyed up at the temple, wizened hands gripping my shoulder for support. "I grew up with this oracle. Or was it the last one?"

"It was the last one, Grandmother. You--"

"--she was horrible to me as a girl. She pushed me into the dirt once, just because I stole the man she wanted to marry. Not my fault his eyes worked." As we struggle our way up the hill, the sun bears heavy on us, turning Grandmother's dark eyes into wrinkled slits. "But look at us now. She's dead, and I'm still in the peak of health." She pauses to hack for a moment. "Don't tell anyone, but Hades answered my prayer."

"Grandmother, that's horrible. She was Pythia, chosen by Apollo."

"Hmph. Chosen to desert her family and spend the rest of her short life closed up in a temple pestered by old men and their questions."

"It's a great honor," I remind her. "I think you're just jealous."

Grandmother scoffs. "Jealous? Never. The only time I plan on spending in temples is to give my due to the gods in order to get my answers prayed. You'll learn, girl. That's as far as worshipping Apollo you need to go." I shush Grandmother as a man surrounded by several soldiers passes. All I can really see of him as he passes is his dark curly hair, eyes darting around

beneath heavy brows. I can't help but stare at the swords dangling off the hips of the soldiers, watch as one of the men tightens his grip on the pommel as they pass.

They're in the distance when I turn to look at Grandmother. She remains unimpressed. "Men. Does he really need all of those barbarians surrounding him like needy children?" she scoffs.

"He must be important," I say as we continue on.

"Wealthy, at least. But riches don't make a man powerful. If anything, they make him weaker," she says.

I smile a little. "You almost sound wise, Grandmother. Are you sure you're not Pythia?"

Her expressions sours and she swats me with her hand.

#

I'm told to wait outside. I don't see why, but Grandmother persists in seeing me as a child. Though that doesn't stop her from throwing every eligible young man at my mother and me. A couple of the soldiers from before wait outside as well, sweat beading at their temples. I make my way around the temple, down to the springs. I don't care for the soldiers' stares and attempts at polite conversation.

I watch behind a tree, making sure Pythia and Apollo's priests are done at the spring. When I see all remains quiet, save for the birds, I approach the water. I slip off my sandals and step into the spring.

I imagine slipping off my chiton, bathing naked in the spring like the oracle. Perhaps Apollo himself would chance upon me. I wonder if anyone has ever chanced upon her, seen her

old, wrinkled body as the purifying waters weave their way along the creases of her skin. But I don't, letting my daring stop at simply standing in the water.

"Hello," a cheerful voice calls from behind me.

I turn, cheeks reddening. It's one of the soldiers, his helmet underneath his arm. He's young, no creases or gray in his hair yet like Father. His smile makes me feel odd.

"Sorry," the soldier continues, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

I try to find my voice. "No, I--I probably shouldn't be here," I say. "And neither should you."

He laughs. "So you're not Pythia, then?"

I blush. "No. Perhaps in forty years, but..."

"Forty years? I thought oracles were beautiful, young virgins."

"They were. Until a military officer carried one off."

"Shame. Now you. You look like an oracle to me." He nears, and I don't know whether to get out of the spring or not. I stay put.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment? Because the current oracle is near my Grandmother's age, and I'd rather not look like her for a while yet." My voice sounds strange in my ears, tripping in my throat.

He's still smiling. I wish he'd stop, so my head would stop feeling fuzzy. "I meant you looked like my idea of an oracle." He stops near the tree I hid behind earlier.

"Oh."

"Want to see if Apollo's spirit will take hold of you? I'll ask you a question," he says. I want to stop him, but he goes ahead. "Will King Perseus triumph over Rome?"

My heart skips a beat. “Is that--is that who you’re with? The king of Macedon?”

He leans against the tree, the sunlight warming his cheek. “You’re not answering my question.”

“I--” I stop, and wonder what to do. I consider telling him to leave. Or I could. That’s what Grandmother would expect. There’s something dangerous, being alone with a strange man as hordes of people swamp the temple nearby. The wind rustles through the branches, and for a moment, the odd urge to slip off my chiton and dive into the spring strikes again. But I shake it away, and just take a step back into the spring, wetting the hem of my chiton to mid-calf. The water is cool, a contrast to the feverish heat rising in my cheeks. This is wrong. I should leave. But his dark eyes remain on me, just watching as I step back again. The water is to my knee. Another step back, and it’s to my thigh.

“Perhaps you’re really a Naiad. Trying to dive back into your watery home,” he says.

“Maybe,” I respond. I step back until the water is up to my waist. I let the water soak through my chiton, feel the wet linen stick to my bare skin. But even the spring can’t dampen the adrenaline rushing through my core. “Ask me again.”

“What?”

I raise my arms, feel the water slide down them towards my chest. “Ask, and I will answer.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Maybe you are Pythia. You do sound mad.” He nears the spring, but stops before his feet hit the water. “Will King Perseus triumph over Rome?” His voice echoes as he raises his arms, mirroring mine.

I can't help my small smile. A warmth rushes through me, spreading out to my fingers and toes, and I feel on fire. My mouth opens, and for once, my thoughts are slower than my tongue, and I'm not sure what's going to come out. "Your king's victories will be as the seasons. Rise and fall, temperate as the moon. Aries' blessing lasts only so long, soldier. Even for a king."

The soldier stares back at me, head tilted, curious. I see myself through his eyes, a small, frail bird of a girl, chiton glued to her smooth skin, water running in rivulets down her thighs. There's a light in her eyes, and it scares me. Suddenly the fire rushes out of me, and I just feel the coldness of wet linen against bare skin, just see the soldier standing in front of me, brow furrowed. The birds sing and the wind rustles the leaves, and the soldier and I just stare at each other. "And you say Pythia is in there," the soldier finally says, his eyes glancing at the temple.

"She is. I'm no one," I say. But in that moment I didn't feel like no one.

We stay still, just watching each other. The thought of a predator and his prey leaps into my head, but I shake it off. "Shouldn't you be guarding your king?" I ask.

The soldier just smiles and holds out his hand. "Come on. You must be cold," he says.

I hesitate, looking at his hand. It's calloused, blistered. The hand of a killer. I swallow hard and look up into his eyes. They're dark, two spheres burning at me like an eclipse. I fear if I touch him, I'll go up in smoke.

The soldier's patience wears thin, and he waves his hand. "Well? Do I have to go in there after you?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine." I wade out of the water, ignoring his hand. His expression darkens and he steps back as I step back into the cool air. A breeze rushes through, and I shiver. I look down at myself, half-soaked, thin fabric sticking to the curves of my legs and waist. I look

up, and notice the soldier looking as well. “You’re not Apollo, are you?” I ask the soldier, hesitant. I’ve heard the tales of young girls being taken by lusty gods. It never ends well.

The soldier laughs. “No, I don’t think so. Last I checked, I’m better with the sword than the lyre.”

I try to smile. I think I’m meant to, but I...something in that spring keeps drawing my gaze back. But whenever I look, it’s the same, still water. I ignore the feeling and put my sandals back on.

The soldier and I start walking back to the temple. I linger a last glance on the spring, the boughs of the nearby trees arching towards it. Echoes of laughter weave by on the wind, and for a moment, the sun shines a bit brighter, reflecting off the watery surface, warming my cheeks. It’s only when the soldier touches my shoulder that I notice I’ve stopped walking.

I flinch at his touch, and he draws back. “Are you all right?” he asks.

I nod and put on a smile. “Lost in thought,” I say, but the word ‘prophecy’ echoes in my head instead. I blame it on the soldier, and whatever ill notions he’s put into my head.

We continue on and reach the front of the temple. The other soldiers stare at my wet chiton. “You didn’t push her in the spring, did you, Aniketos?” one of the other soldiers calls out.

Aniketos. Not Apollo. The soldier--Aniketos--shakes his head, and I watch as his dark locks sway back and forth against his temples. “I found her like this,” he calls back.

I blush.

My grandmother exits the temple, squinting about her at the soldiers and sun. Then, her eyes land on me, and they widen. “Euphemia! You stupid girl!” she screeches. Perhaps she’s actually a harpy. It would explain her prayer to Hades.

She rushes towards me faster than I’ve seen her move in years and grabs me by the ear. I wince, and the soldiers laugh at me. They shut up when Grandmother glares at them. But Aniketos’ eyes just remain on me, head tilted, curious. It sends a shiver down my spine.

“What did you do?” she asks.

“I...fell in....the spring,” I manage to mutter.

She shakes her head and pulls me back towards town. I take one last look at Aniketos, dwarfed by the temple, his eyes on me. I can still feel him staring when I look away. I wouldn’t be surprised if his eyes were burning holes into my back. I shift in my chiton, uncomfortable.

“I leave you alone for ten minutes, and you embarrass yourself like this! We need to marry you off, the sooner the better! And...” Grandmother’s voice recedes into the distance as I retreat into my own thoughts. All I can think about is the fire that coursed through my very being, the cool water slinking along my legs, the danger in those dark eyes of the soldier...the energy. I still feel it. But then Grandmother says something that catches my attention. “Turns out that man with all the soldiers is the king of Macedon! I suppose he wanted to ask Pythia the day of his death, or something ridiculous like that,” she grumbles.

“He’s going to war with Rome,” I mumble, and Grandmother looks at me. “But Aries’ blessing only lasts so long.” Grandmother gets a strange look on her face, but my gaze trails upwards, at the sun, glowering down on us.

Pythia. What a lonesome life it must be, to tell powerful men their Fate.

