

PEACE AND PURITY

by ellerean

He didn't want to admit it, but Yune had been right. The tower was incomprehensible, both of this world and not, both cramped and infinite. The room was dark, but Rhys squinted against a light he couldn't see. There were signs of battle all around, of swinging weapons and rearing horses, but he could hear none of them.

He didn't belong there.

He could make out shadows of comrades, their features hazy in his vision. There was Titania, thank the Goddess—could he still say that?—and Commander Ike, both so close and too far away. Rhys remained in what he thought was the rear. King Caineghis had wordlessly thrust the *rexaura* into his hands, a weapon he'd never handled before, though it felt warm and familiar to the touch. Still, he hadn't opened it. He was busy, anyway, with the healing. So much healing; so much blood. He bit back a wave of nausea as he heard a high-pitched scream, a child no longer a child, fighting against the haze of light to find Rolf.

He shot arrow after arrow, his hip soaked in blood. Rhys wasn't sure the boy even noticed. "Rolf, fall back! Let me help you!"

Healing the children never got easier, ironic seeing how quickly their wounds closed up. Rolf had stopped shooting long enough to receive his blessing, wincing under the light of his staff. Of all things in the haze it was Rolf's pained face that was clearest, the Goddess's attempt at proof that they were wrong, a sign that he tried not to look at as he poured healing energy into the wound.

"Stay in the back a while," Rhys offered. "You can go back when you're fully healed."

He didn't know how much the boy had understood. He scowled, his expression too hard, too thirsty for battle. When Rolf pushed his hair away from his forehead, Rhys realized it was sticky with blood. But there was no other wound he could see. It was possibly not even his blood, but that wasn't something he wanted to think about, either.

"How did it come to this?" Rhys whispered, staring at the staff in his hands. "What have we done wrong?"

He shielded his eyes from the sudden blast of light—peace and purity, pouring over him, intent to kill.

It was so long ago—the clean bedsheets, the elderly bishop. The damp towel on his forehead, which only made him shiver even more. Beside him lay a staff. It was a small one, but he'd never seen a staff so close before.

"But how can I heal others?" Rhys asked. He slowly blinked up at the bishop.

"You can do it with the Goddess's aid," the bishop replied. "She will bless you with peace and purity."

But still, Rhys hesitated. He studied the staff, visually tracing the carved symbols on its shaft, and instinctively squinted at the orb on top. It had stopped glowing, at least, but only when he didn't try to touch it.

"How can She help me?" Rhys averted his eyes, staring out the window instead. Birds had gathered again on the windowsill, and he tried not to feel envious. "I can't ever help others if I'm sick all the time."

The bishop's hand was warm on his forehead. It made the damp cloth warm again, too, and he stopped shivering. "Don't worry, child," he replied. "If you have faith, She will guide your ways."

"Rhys! Rhys, wake up!"

There was the telltale throb of being newly-healed, the pounding in his head that he'd vowed never to experience again. Once had been enough, during the Mad King's War. Rhys didn't remember lying on the ground, but now it was an effort to sit upright, to feel the sudden rush of blood to his head.

"H-How. . . ?"

"Rhys!" A hand on his shoulder. The voice more familiar than the touch, the hand bigger than he remembered. Rolf. It was Rolf. "Mist helped you! Rhys, you have to get up!"

He scrabbled for his staff. It was warm to the touch, recently-used; he hadn't thought Mist could use the Recover well enough to heal him.

So many things had changed, even in the course of this tower.

Planting one foot on the unsteady ground, up to bended knee. Like he bowed to Ashera's presence.

Then the other foot, forcing himself to stand.

"You are dismissed in the name of the Goddess, Creator of peace and purity, Protector of us all. Bless the holy name of Ashera."

He'd messed up a lot of the rituals. He was glad for his ragtag congregation, the band that had probably never stepped foot inside a chapel before. Rhys wiped his sweating palms on his robe, smiling behind the pulpit as the mercenaries filed out of the storeroom-turned-chapel.

But Commander Greil hadn't moved yet. He still sat on his wooden bench, now without his children beside him. His hands were clasped, head bowed like he was still praying. Rhys tidied the small pile of sermon notes and tucked them into his book. He hesitated. What was protocol, for a priest? Should he wait for everyone to leave before dismissing himself? Or was it his duty to sit with him, and talk? He hardly knew the man, and didn't know yet what he would prefer.

To his relief, Commander Greil lifted his head. "That was a good sermon, Father Rhys."

Rhys's hands trembled as he hugged his book. "T-Thank you, Commander. And 'Rhys' will be just fine."

He nodded. "Rhys." Commander stretched his arms behind his back, like he was suddenly tired of all this praying. "Let me ask you something, Rhys. If the Goddess is all peace and purity, why do we have to do what we do?" He smirked. "Don't get me wrong; I love this line of work. But it shouldn't be necessary, should it?"

Rhys stared down at his fingers. They'd stopped trembling, but they were suddenly cold. He stepped down from the pulpit and immediately felt more at home. He sat on the bench across the aisle—not too close, but within reach.

"I think about that every day," Rhys admitted. "But it's us who bring conflict to the world, not the Goddess. We're imperfect and we need Her guidance."

"So you think we're contributing to this conflict, being mercenaries?"

"Not at all!" He sat up straighter. "Commander Greil, we are doing Her work. We are helping to bring peace back to the world."

Ashera's defenses were weakening. He knew how that felt. His head still pounded, but he walked. It was slow, labored, his steps heavier the closer he came. Tome in one hand, staff steady in the other. There was no one, nothing, in his path. Even the floor itself was clean of blood and conflict, not a stray arrow nor scrap of torn fabric to be seen. It was like the army parted for him, for their makeshift priest, to approach his Goddess.

He squinted. Her light had dimmed in the exhaustion battle, but it still pained him to look directly at her. *She will guide your ways*, the mantra he'd adopted when thrust into the ministry. *If you have faith, She will . . .*

"My child."

He skidded to a stop. Only the apostle should hear the audible voice of the Goddess. Rhys wasn't certain anyone else heard; it was a mere whisper in his ear. Ashera was surrounded by an otherworldly wind, the weakening defenses, the invisible attacks that she deployed seemingly at random. They flowed past him, around him, never touching even the hem of his robes. Distantly, there were the echoes of his voice surrounded him. But not by Her. Never by Her.

Rhys fell to his knees.

"Rhys! Are you sure you're well enough to be up?"

"Yes. My fever's completely gone."

He had been unsteady, and not solely because he'd been bedridden for a week. It had taken several long moments sitting up in bed before gaining the courage to stand. His legs still trembled when he walked. But Goddess willing, he was getting up. Commander Greil had given him the duty of weekly worship service, and he had already missed two in a row. He'd spent the week studying and taking notes, and had a lovely sermon on the power of spiritual healing. "My strength doesn't come from me," he'd written, "but from our holy Goddess."

If he'd had physical strength, he wouldn't depend on Her nearly as much. But the Goddess always helped him. He wasn't physically strong, but he became strong in Her.

So when news came that the children had been kidnapped, Rhys had no choice but to take up his staff and follow.

His skin was warmed as if by a fire, or a quilted blanket, or by a fever. His cheeks were damp, silent tears streaking the blood and grime, salty on his lips and soaking his collar. He dropped his staff but clutched rexaura in both arms, like She'd try to take it away from him.

"Saint Rhys," She whispered, though her lips didn't move. The warmth filled his chest, his soul, burning under his robes. "My beloved child. You see the error of their ways. Join me, and I will grant you your peace and purity."

The battle plunged into cold silence, the shadows of warriors surrounding him. Deputy Commander's horse whinnied silently, an unseen pull on the reins. King Caineghis reared back, poised for attack, claws extended. Rolf, arrow in hand, ready to notch. The very air itself was heavy, but his limbs were lightweight. He grasped the tome tighter, fearing he would drop it. Rhys lifted his head. Higher. His eyes burned with tears and holy light, but he looked, meeting the eyes of the Goddess Ashera.

But her eyes were empty, hollow, filled with neither peace nor purity. Filled with contempt.

“Why?” His voice resonated more than he’d expected. The warrior shadows turned toward him, darkness against darkness. Rhys balled his hands into fists, ragged fingernails piercing his palms. The tears tasted of iron, of the blood washed from his cheeks. “*Why?*”

“This is your punishment.”

Her laughter was cold, a sudden shock from Her soothing warmth.

The floor was like ice, his knees frozen to it, his robes whipping in an unfelt wind. It was an effort to move, to rise again. The wind nearly knocked him down, but he braced against the invisible force, and he forced his body to move. To fight against it. To stand.

At home, he’d gathered an impressive collection of books for a man who’d never been an ordained priest. He had notebooks of prayers and sermon notes, of Her history and Her people. But it was the *rexaura* that weighed most heavily in his hands, the massive tome not intended for Her study, or Her holy name. When he opened the book, it remained open. Her unseen weapons were powerless against it. His fingers traced the spells, foreign and yet so familiar.

Ashera would not plead, but the ground shivered beneath him. “Saint Rhys.”

He sucked in his remaining breath. “I renounce you.”

The light descended, once thought to be a holy and pure light, crashing down on what was once thought to be its creator.

“Our fates are our own. Blessed Ashunera created us, but She granted us the power to live freely as we will. It’s up to us to decide what’s most important. For me, it’s my family. Here, with all of you. She allowed our path to cross, but it was our decision to create these bonds that rival blood relatives.

We’re imperfect, and we make mistakes. But that’s the beauty of life! Our mistakes help us learn. And they make us stronger. We will fight, and there may be war again. But it will be because of us, not because of the divine Being’s punishment. We’re building a new Tellus, and She is leaving it to us to build it the best way we can.”

Rhys looked around the small chapel. It was nice, not meeting in an old storeroom anymore. There were the same wooden benches, and the room still needed a little dusting. But light spilled through the windows. And the air was clearer. The benches were filled with not only his mercenary family, but other people from town. Other people he would have to greet after the sermon, who knew things had changed, and who had more questions than Rhys knew the answers to.

He lay a hand across his book, and smiled at the small congregation. “You are dismissed in the name of Goddess Ashunera, Creator of all. May you go in peace.”