

The night before the *Vagabond* is due to dock in Kanatrium, Phoebe seeks out Harlow. Unexpectedly, she finds them alone on deck, their forearms propped on the railing as they gaze out over the dark sea.

A small, cowardly part of her considers continuing past them, as if she is merely up and about at this hour for nothing more than a walk around the deck before bed, as has become her custom these past two weeks sailing on the *Vagabond*. But she's already given herself plenty of space from Harlow, and from their last, disastrous conversation, throughout those two weeks — space she's needed in order to process, and decompress, and prepare for what might come next. What *she* might bring next, if she's successful here.

So, the larger, more practical part of her pushes her to keep to her plan, and approach.

Phoebe laces her fingers behind her back to keep her fidgeting from view, then leans into their line of sight. “Did you want to be alone, or... do you have a moment?” she asks, keeping her tone as light and pleasant as possible.

Harlow turns and straightens; if they're surprised that she's speaking to them, they don't show it. “What do you need?”

Phoebe takes a deep breath, tamping down her irrational impulse to tartly retort over imagined slights. *This is just how Harlow engages with others; they can be brusque, but that's how Skoldvatten has shaped them*, she reminds herself. *Whatever they say to me — however they say it — I shouldn't take it so personally.*

Still, Elska's advice is more easily spoken than taken. *She* at least recognized the pain that Phoebe was still in over taking a life, and comforted her without doubting whether she was justified in feeling it. Trying to get Harlow to understand the same has been like tearing down a wall with nothing more than her bare hands, and Phoebe knows her hands are bloodied enough.

But before she retreats entirely, she can at least make one last effort to reach out — and pray she fares better than Harlow's own attempts.

"Elska... put some things into perspective," Phoebe starts slowly. "If the five of us are going to be traveling together — working together — we need to be on good terms. And I..."

Phoebe trails off; she half-expected Harlow to cut in by now. But as far as she can tell, they're listening quietly and intently, turned fully towards her with only one hand resting on the railing. Even though the dim light of the lanterns doesn't reach far, it still catches the edge of the fleck in Harlow's left eye, giving it the uncanny look of a third pupil.

"How's your eye?" she blurts out.

Though Harlow looks similarly taken aback by the change of subject, they fortunately don't seem upset. "No different," they say after a moment. "But it, um... never *felt* different. It just — you know —" Harlow runs a hand through their ragged hair, clearly trying to put their thoughts together. "It just showed up," they finish simply. "And then the divination showed up."

Even though this turn *does* serve her overall argument, Phoebe feels a pang of remorse for reminding Harlow of the mysterious magic following them. And yet, she knows she'll feel so much worse after what she says next.

"This is going to sound awful of me, but..." Feeling her fingers loosen, Phoebe instead wraps her arms around herself and digs her hip into the railing to still her restless swaying. "When we discovered it was you, I felt so *relieved* it wasn't me. But when I saw *your* reaction, I just — I felt so guilty that *that* was my first thought." She forces a small, shame-faced smile. "It is a terrible thing to think, isn't it?"

"No," Harlow says without hesitation. "Why would you want this?"

Phoebe feels her face slacken with surprise. She'd anticipated condemnation — at *least* as much as she'd heaped upon herself — but once again, Harlow's bluntness has completely derailed the conversation she's so carefully plotted.

*But... this is good, right?* she tries to reassure herself. *They're... startlingly receptive. There's still a way forward.*

“Regardless of our differences,” Phoebe continues cautiously, “I — I’m sorry you have such a weighty thing to bear.” She inhales, feeling herself steady as the crisp sea air fills her lungs. “And if there’s anything I can do within my power — within my capabilities — to help you figure out what it is, or how to handle it, I’ll do it.”

Harlow straightens a little more — or stiffens — as they stare at her.

“I will *not* kill,” Phoebe says firmly. “For you, or for anyone else.” *Even if I did act in defense of others — in defense of Harlow — it’s still a weight I can’t bear much more of.* “But if there’s a capacity for me to help you in any other way... I swear to you, I *will* do it.”

Harlow still stares, and says nothing. Lifting her chin in what she hopes reads as confidence rather than defiance, Phoebe meets their gaze and waits.

“First of all —” Harlow sighs deeply, rubbing at their temples with their free hand. “I have an oath. You don’t have that.”

*... Right.* Phoebe’s stomach sinks. *Their* oath.

“I do not ask that you kill, or anything like that. You live your life how you want to. But...” Harlow drops their hand from their face, looking far wearier than before. “I’m going to uphold what *I* need to. And as far as help...” They sigh again. “I... don’t want to put any of you in danger.”

Try as she might, a small, bitter laugh still escapes her. “And what if we’re already *in danger?*”

Harlow considers that. “That’s a fair assumption,” they admit. “But...” Some grimness creeps into their expression. “I think *this* is personal.”

Phoebe swallows. She hardly disagrees with Harlow’s assessment of the peril the party could be in from constant scrying from an unknown source — *but my danger is personal, too.*

“What do you mean, ‘personal’?” she asks instead, but winces at the words a split-second after she says them. “Sorry, I — I suppose *that’s* personal as well.”

Unexpectedly, Harlow chuckles, and the low, wry sound almost startles Phoebe into laughter herself. *Is... this the first time I’ve ever heard Harlow laugh?* she wonders amusedly. *I honestly wasn’t sure they even could.*

As if they can hear her, Harlow quickly sobers. “Maybe I *should* be more worried about whatever this is seeing you — seeing the rest of them.” They turn away from her, gripping the railing behind them with both hands. “But I just... have a feeling it’s just me.” Harlow exhales, face strangely stricken. “That it’s my fault.”

*It’s not your fault*, Phoebe wants to insist. But she’s all *too* aware that she doesn’t know Harlow well enough for her knee-jerk reaction to be any reassurance. *And judging from what I have seen of Harlow, they’re not one for empty platitudes regardless.*

Wrestling with what she *could* say, Phoebe shifts position along the railing, turning away from Harlow and towards the sea. A chill breeze sweeps down the port side of the *Vagabond*, and her arms tighten around herself further with her shiver. *That first night aboard, before she and the party joined Captain Buraria and Hyrn for dinner, she’d carefully folded her capelet and tucked it into her satchel; she hadn’t worn it since. If anyone had asked, she would’ve told them she didn’t want the silk stained with saltwater, or with any of the sauces and stews she was preparing with Claudia.*

*Despite knowing now where the divination is centered, she can’t shake the dreadful suspicion that she isn’t protected in the way she assumed.*

“I may not have an oath I’ve spoken,” Phoebe finally says, “but... I have a calling. I always have.” Without her capelet to keep it in place, the locket around her neck sways with the wind, thudding against her chest like a second heart. “It’s what’s taken me this far, and... I’ve neglected it for far too long.” She glances up and over at Harlow. “It’s high time for me to start getting back to it.”

Harlow scrutinizes her for a moment. “You’re religious,” they say without preamble. “During the game, you drank.”

Phoebe suppresses a sigh of relief; out of all the prompts she'd drank for during their party's unfortunate game of Never Have I Ever that first night, *this* is one she's at ease elaborating on. "One of my mothers is a member of Evara's clergy," she confirms. "I was raised faithful."

Harlow's forehead furrows. "Is that related to your calling?"

"*Oh*. No, um —" Phoebe laughs a little. *I have some of Emer's skills, but certainly not her serenity*. "My calling is my gift. My music. It was clear from a young age that I had a talent for it, so when I got older..." She trails off, shrugging slightly. "Well, I'd honed my gift as much as I could where I was. But Beszar was very small and very far from the rest of the world." Phoebe catches her locket between her fingers, working the pad of her thumb into the face of the pendent, with its engraved *P* and floral stylings. "So my village rallied around me. Raised the money and gathered the resources to ensure I could travel to Uryn to study."

"And — and *that* was a great gift, too, but... it carries a great responsibility." Her hand winds a little tighter around her locket, the gold warming within her palm. "I owe it to my family and my community to make the most of the opportunity they all gave me." A sudden lump rises in her throat. "To help others with my gift, since I wouldn't have achieved it without others' help."

Leaning back against the railing, Harlow takes in her words thoughtfully. "I... don't quite understand what it means to be gifted," they say. The corners of their mouth almost crook up: a stunted sort of smile. "But... I understand the responsibility."

Phoebe blinks. *Was that Harlow... agreeing with me?*

Unexpectedly, Harlow continues. "Where I'm from, Eyrri... it's beautiful. But it's isolated. Vulnerable." Their gaze shifts, settling into a distance she can't fathom. "I joined the Knights to keep Eyrri safe."

Phoebe stares at Harlow for a long time, equal parts startled by their honesty and her sympathy. Despite her objections to the tenants of the Order of the Iron Brand, she more than understands the desire to defend one's home; it's what Emer left the Lodge to

do, and it's what Bogdan and Ursula still do. And as much as she treasures her own gifts, there are times she truly envies their ability to stand between Beszar and what lies further north, and *win*.

"That's a noble endeavor. And I do mean that," she adds earnestly.

Harlow looks back at her: their eyes refocused, but their expression as unguarded as she's ever seen it. "Thank you."

Almost before she realizes what she's doing, Phoebe offers Harlow a slight, but real smile in return.

*But... if Harlow has such affection for where they're from, a part of her can't help but wonder, why would they travel south and leave their home undefended? Oh, sweet Evara, Phoebe, you can't ask that, she thinks just as quickly. You only just succeeded in striking a balance here; what if you upset that? Or them?*

Again seeming to read her thoughts, Harlow inclines their head slightly towards her, silently asking her to just speak her mind.

Phoebe's fingers slip from around her locket. "If... your oath was to protect your village," she ventures, "then... why are you so far south? I'm sorry if that's an uncomfortable question," she adds, *far* faster. "I just... was curious."

Harlow tilts their head the other way in a half-shrug. "That's not my oath *exactly*," they say. "It's the reason I took it, but... the motivation and the actual words are a little different, if that makes sense." Harlow turns back towards the railing, their posture straightening seemingly on instinct. "We are supposed to lead, and to defend the weak, and —" They pause, their gaze flicking over to her.

Phoebe realizes she's holding her breath.

"... Well." Harlow's mouth twitches again, as if they're unsure whether what they're about to say is a joke or not. "The third part's the part you don't like." Their palms anchored on the railing, they look away from her and out to sea. "But I don't have to be home to try and lead, or keep people safe."

Phoebe tears her gaze away, suddenly afraid to see what might be on their face. “And... the third part?” she asks, unable to keep the trepidation out of her voice entirely.

Harlow doesn’t answer her at first. Then: “Temper hope.” Their posture doesn’t change, but their voice comes out quieter than she expected. “You don’t let your enemy have any, and you don’t let the innocent have too much.” Harlow exhales. “It’s... harsh, where I’m from. You can’t be too unrealistic.”

Phoebe’s own breath shudders from her, too. As much as she wants to reject Harlow’s perspective, a part of it still rings terribly true.

There’s a small, flimsy, foolish hope she’s been clinging to ever since leaving Uryn — an utterly stupid hope that everything she’s done in service of that and since then has been a *mistake*. That she’s put together the pieces all wrong, that she’s leapt to the worst possible conclusion from what she’s uncovered, that she’s overreacting to something that could be completely innocent. That everything she felt she had to flee from is what she always believed it to be.

But even if that *was* improbably true, so much of the fault would still lie with her.

“... I suppose so,” she manages.

Harlow finally looks back at her, and their gaze is once again in an unreadable middle ground. “Fire warms as much as it devastates,” they say softly.

Phoebe can’t read it as more of a comfort or a warning. She takes it as both.

“... True enough,” she says, hoping her voice is steady enough to gesture towards some finality. “Thank you. For explaining more.”

Thankfully, Harlow takes the hint. “Thank *you*. For listening.” They straighten further and step away from the railing. “Unless you have immediate concerns —” Harlow gestures towards their left eye “— I’m going to leave this alone for now.”

Phoebe tries not to let her disappointment show on her face. *And here I thought I actually got somewhere.*

“Well, if — if something *does* come up...” She tries for another smile, but this one comes out far more forced than the last. “Like I said before, I don’t know much about divination magic. But if there’s anything else you think I might be able to help with, I’ll try.”

Harlow gives her a darkly wry look. “If there’s a change, I think you’ll know.”

Phoebe winces. “That’s... not comforting.” She wraps her hands around the railing, but it still doesn’t stay her freshly-fidgeting fingers. “But I suppose it’s true.”

Some of the wryness slips out of Harlow’s expression. “If I’m right in assuming the spell *did* show up at the same time... we’ll all know.” With that, they finally, fully turn from her and go.

Phoebe lingers at the railing, staring out over the darkly glimmering Velvet Sea. All the company left to her is the wind whispering around her stiff shoulders, and the locket’s cold weight on her chest.