

As light as the tap on her shoulder is, the hidden strength in the hand still pins her in place.

“Do you have a minute?” Behind her, Harlow’s voice is as inscrutably, unnervingly even as ever.

Before her, the rest of their party proceeds out of the dining room, unheeding of Phoebe’s silent, desperate prayer that *someone* would turn around and urge them both to hurry along. Still, she has to content herself with the fact that if they waited in the foyer, they would be close enough to hear — and hopefully intervene — if the conversation took an undesirable turn.

Phoebe swallows. “I — I suppose I do,” she concedes. She turns towards Harlow, but takes as much of a step back towards the double doors as she can subtly manage.

Harlow still seems too close for comfort. “The conversation we had before,” they state without preamble. “About the divination.”

*Oh, thank Evara, this isn’t about me snapping at them.* “Oh. Yes,” Phoebe says, trying not to sound *too* relieved. “What about it?”

Harlow hesitates for a split-second. “It wasn’t contained to the estate,” they say. “It followed us.”

Ice floods Phoebe’s veins. “*Oh,*” she manages. “And — you’re sure of that?”

“I had the spell up for ten minutes.” From someone else, the statement would have been defensive, but with Harlow, it’s decisive and starkly factual. “It was with us the entire time.”

Phoebe fights the shudder seizing her already-tense shoulders. “Well... that’s not good,” she says unsteadily. “If it was *just* at the estate, that would be troubling enough, but — *following* us?”

“It means it’s one of us.” Harlow’s forehead furrows in near-imperceptible perturbation. “I didn’t know how to bring it up to everyone else.” Their gaze shifts to her. “If we should?”

*This* response comes immediately. “We *should*,” Phoebe insists. “I mean, this could put not just *us*, but the whole crew of the *Vagabond*, in danger! If we’re being *tracked* somehow —”

“I don’t know who it’s on.” Another quiet fact that could have easily been protest from a more predictable speaker.

Phoebe chews her lip and thinks. “Well,” she offers, “I’ll let Vasira know, you tell Elska, and whoever gets to Siggy first can fill them in. And then... we’ll meet up tonight and...” Her fingers worry a corner of her capelet. “We’ll see if we can figure out who it’s following.”

Harlow nods. “We still have our suite from last night. In the Tower District,” they say. “You and Vasira can meet us there.”

Phoebe returns the gesture: perhaps *too* eagerly, but she’s more grateful to get the matter settled than she is careful to keep composure. She pivots on one heel towards the doors, pushing one of them back open —

“You’re upset about something.”

Phoebe freezes. A thousand prospective replies, tearful or tart or any tenor in between, spring ready to her lips, but she lets none of them fly. Instead, she takes as deep an inhale as she can manage without her breath shaking, and then, once again, she forces herself to turn and face the threat at hand.

“And — if I am?” she says, trying her best to not sound so arch. *But there’s no ‘if’ about it, and we both know it.*

Admittedly, it’s her own fault that Harlow’s seen past her sunny façade. Her impulsively pointed question about *what* kinds of situations they hoped to keep the party out of, *precisely*, had been unfortunately gratifying in the moment, but she’d

realized after the fact just how *close* her indiscretion had come to undermining her argument for unity. And whatever petty satisfaction it had given her *certainly* wasn't worth gaining Harlow's notice now: *exactly* the sort of attention she'd hoped to avoid.

Curiously, and concerningly, Harlow's stance remains neutral. "I'm just checking in." They pause, as if to measure their response further. "You don't seem like you've been in a lot of fights before," they say simply. "I wanted to make sure you're okay."

All Phoebe can do is stare at them, stunned into silence. Regrettably, she can't help but recognize that if Harlow had shown her this earnest consideration at any other time, she would have been all too susceptible to their efforts to care.

But *now*, after everything she's endured this past day, their show of sympathy is an affront.

"Of course I'm not 'okay,'" she forces out.

Something like surprise flickers across Harlow's face.

Phoebe bites down hard on her lower lip, struggling with how much to say beyond that. *I can't risk another outburst — and certainly not while within arm's reach of Harlow*, she thinks, no small amount of dread coiling in her stomach. *But —*

"Why did you have to kill that guard?"

Unbelievably, Harlow looks *confused* by the question. "It's... how it's done," they say slowly.

"That's *not* a good enough reason," Phoebe retorts.

Harlow stares back at her with the barest of blank looks: like they almost understand what she's said, but can't take that last step toward accepting it. "If you show weakness in that moment," they say, a little surer, "they learn from that."

Bile surges in Phoebe's throat, and she swallows thickly. She wants to ask what a dead man could *possibly* learn from being killed, but the last thing she wants is to come off like she's making excuses for the guard — insisting he was just following orders —

*because, the influence of implanted components aside, she thinks, with an acidity that surprises her, orders can be refused.*

*But now that he's dead — murdered — he will never have a chance to make that decision for himself.*

"It's..." Harlow sighs, clearly unable to put their thoughts into words any better than she can. "You don't have Knights down here. It's complicated."

"Not *that* complicated," Phoebe says tightly.

Harlow considers that. "No," they say after a moment. "I guess not." They pause again, their keen green gaze refocusing on her. "But... you *can't* stop, at that point. It isn't a risk I'm willing to take."

"It's not a *risk*," Phoebe protests, stomach churning anew with commingled dread and disgust. "It's a *mercy*."

Harlow exhales heavily, running one hand through their ragged hair. "It... should've been cleaner; I'll admit that."

"*That's* your regret?" Phoebe exclaims, appalled.

Harlow's eyes narrow, ever so slightly. "I'm not... *trying* to be barbaric."

Phoebe flinches. Though Harlow's frown seems to speak to some genuine disquiet, it still summons a specter of broken screams and blood on marble and *better to send a message*.

Seeing her reaction, Harlow hastily schools their face, but their eyes remain wary. "You don't have to agree with me," they say evenly. "Like I said: I just wanted to see if you were okay." They inhale. "I... think you did very well."

Phoebe's breath hitches. Harlow hasn't advanced an inch on her, but the weight of those six words still lands like a gauntlet across her cheek.

"I did *well*?" she asks, unable to keep her voice from shaking.

Harlow nods. “Yes. You held your own.”

This time, Phoebe can’t swallow her bile. “Of *course* I did well by *your* standards,” she bites out.

A shadow falls across Harlow’s expression, casting it in a more uncertain and unsettled light than before.

Though she still doesn’t feel like she has the upper hand, Phoebe presses her opening.

“I *know* I have power,” she says, trying to come back to a more familiar cadence. “And I’ve worked hard over the years to harness that power to *serve* others, not harm them. It’s my responsibility as a bard to use my talents and my music to help people, and last night, I *failed* in that.” Her lungs are burning, but Phoebe resists the undignified urge to gasp for breath — or worse, regress into wordless screams or sobs that would do nothing to serve her argument. “I *don’t* consider last night a victory.”

Harlow’s forehead furrows again, more clearly concerned. “Is protecting people not a victory?”

Phoebe falters; she *knows* this tone from Harlow, and the uselessness of trying to respond to a question framed thusly. “Of *course* it is, but —”

As expected, Harlow cuts in with their own answer. “Then I don’t think you failed,” they say: simply, but with certainty. “I told Elska the same thing last night. It’s about knowing when to use what.”

“And *I’m* saying,” Phoebe rejoins, “I *shouldn’t* have used my music for *that*.” And *I should never have* killed, period.

Her mothers had known death well in their lives before her: Ursula on the battlefields of the Incursion and the Velvet War, Emer in the plague wards of Kessistrad. They’d learned, and they’d taught her, that death inexorably followed life, and could never be staved off for long. It made seizing the moments one *could* all the more vital. And it made the matter of bringing death oneself all the more grave.

*It's never just about you taking a life, honeybee.* Emer's voice echoes in her head now, soft, yet insistent. *You're taking them from the people they loved, and the places they called home. You're taking their hopes and their dreams and their memories and the lived experiences that were uniquely theirs.* She pauses, and Phoebe can almost picture the gently grieved expression on her face. *You're cutting the thread before the shape of their life is fully stitched. Gods can make that choice every day and still bear the weight of it. Mortals aren't meant to.*

Unbidden tears burn her eyes, and Phoebe just barely blinks them back. Just another reason her mothers would be ashamed of who she is now. Just another tie cut between her and them, like so many others she's severed with her careless selfishness.

But she could never say all of that to Harlow — unyielding Harlow, with their unwavering certainty in their order's philosophy — and have them understand.

"If you think so," Harlow says: the closest thing to a concession she'll get. "If that's what you're comfortable with."

Silence falls between them. In the still, Phoebe suddenly becomes aware that she's trembling, and draws her capelet around herself to disguise it.

Harlow coughs, shifting their weight between their feet. "... We should find the others."

Phoebe bites the inside of her cheek hard; she can't trust herself to speak right now.

Harlow regards her, their gaze equal parts concerned and uncertain. "Do you want to be alone?"

Phoebe swallows down a sob. Evara, she *wants* to, but there's no *chance* of her being alone anytime soon: not with all they have to do before leaving Thyram. And if she runs off *now* — if she explodes at Harlow, if she flees in tears — it would only reflect poorly on *her*. What would Vasira and the others make of her driving wedges between them instead of building bridges? How could the Burarias not second-guess their vows to shield someone so quick to find fault with their allies?

Harlow has her trapped. If they wanted this party to rally around them and carry out their plans, they're in the perfect position to set demands and put an end to her defiance. She knows they're more than capable, and she knows they have the creed to back them.

And yet, here they stand, waiting for her answer with worrying consideration.

Phoebe lets slip the breath she's been holding. "I don't know what I want anymore," she says bitterly, and turns towards the doors.