

Harlow lingers off to the side, not wanting to interrupt. The storms had been rough for a few days now, but after this long they were itching for a distraction; the promise of information regarding a familiar magic was more than tempting, bringing them this far but not able to break the others' concentration. They watched while Sigbjørn move with the weather mages, while they hang a few paces back.

The storm does not hide them as well as they think, or perhaps he's just more in tune with the way the winds move in this space and have spotted the disruption. They lock eyes for a moment and, to Harlow's surprise, they smile. That he would be smiling isn't the surprise, just that it was directed at them.

"Enjoin' t'show?"

They inhale, as they shift slightly at the teasing, unsure what else to do. There was something about the good natured affect of it that provided ease, a camaraderie they had missed in recent weeks, but they only roll their eyes.

"Didn't want to interrupt, but I thought I'd find you up here... if you've got a moment?"

Harlow watches them finish their spell, brushing their hands on their pants as if discarding any leftover arcane energy there. "'Course," he says, though to them the action was answer enough.

"You've got enough in you after that to show me your fish?" they ask, still watching the way Sigbjørn moved, as if trying to seek out answers already.

There is a breath of amusement that they do not quite understand, followed by a nod. "I could go a couple more rounds," he says, "You ready now?"

Harlow nods. "Haven't done much today, so I could use the practice." The explanation is offered as if this interaction was not previously agreed upon, something that needed to be explained away. That might be for themselves more than Sigbjørn though, whatever guilt at learning this particular trick outside of the Knights. Though it was not as if she was going to be the one to teach them, even if they were home, and it would be better to know than to wait.

They are used to turbulent weather, and the rain here was warmer than in Eyri, but even still they hope to slip below deck for this. "Do you want to get out of the rain?" This was going to take energy and focus, and it would feel better to be a bit sheltered.

"I dunnae ken if there's a good space to do this below deck beyond the sleeping quarters — have y'seen anywhere?"

Truthfully, near where they had been sleeping was exactly where they had been thinking. There was enough room there to sit down and get the spell up and working. They doubted control was going to come quickly enough to need the space for sparring. "I thought that would be enough... We can stay up here if you think that's better." They were the expert, after all.

“Let’s get out of the rain,” he says, another surprise, while his chin bobs with a nod. Before Harlow can answer, they’re already moving to the stairs that lead further into the hull of the ship. Harlow catches up with their longer strides, but still follows. They both find a place against the wall, Sigbjørn with their knees bent and Harlow with theirs splayed out across the wooden floor.

For once, the knight seems a bit more relaxed.

“When I saw it before... some of the other knights who were...” They don’t stumble, but it is clear they are selecting their words with care. Accuracy is important to them in this moment, as well as guarding a few vulnerable spots in their well cared for armor. “I suppose more faithful. It seemed almost like a prayer for them.”

It’s clear from the way the other is looking at them, that the halfling is listening to every word, which only reinforces their desire to be careful.

“I cannae pretend t’know how the knights summon the abilities of their...” Harlow waits to see what is said as Sigbjørn pauses for a moment, thinking for a moment and settling on, “diety.” Still though, as they speak, they don’t sound particularly certain. Where the confusion lies, Harlow isn’t quite sure, but they make note of it. Strange to see it there at all, when the idea of Evara was so commonplace to them.

“The knights — are all of the knights a religious sort?”

“The Skoldvatten Knights were all created under Evara, but we ... it’s not a church. I’m not a priest.” There’s a quiet breath of laughter at even the idea they might be. “Faithful as well, I suppose.” They were supposing quite a bit today, and the admission feels heavy, uncertain even. Perhaps that was what faith was meant to be, a somewhat cumbersome burden that you carried anyway. They reach for the ring circling their arm, twisting it slightly.

“Enough to let them slap this on me”

It’s a strained attempt at humor, and they can tell it did not quite work when Sigbjørn’s gaze falls to the ring. Harlow inhales slightly, waiting for whatever was to come. They had only known the other for a short time, but they knew well enough that the misstep in their speech would not be left alone.

“That phrasing makes it sound like you dinnae want it.”

There it was, though it’s said with more kindness than expected, given the way he had pressed on Argum and others before. Harlow was expecting a similar third degree.

Harlow shakes their head at the words.

“I wanted it more than anything.” It was just complicated now. “Did you have something you wanted to be when you were a child?” they try, offering a comparison, as they were uncertain how else to explain. Whatever that was for them, being a Knight of the Iron Brand was for Harlow.

“I wanted t’be a healer,” he offers after a beat. “I sort o’got tha’, I suppose, in a twisted kind o’way.”

Another surprise. There was something about them that seemed a bit rougher than Harlow would have expected than of someone with that desire, but certainly things could change since childhood. They’re curious, but unlike Sigbjørn are reluctant to push. Getting to know someone was give and take, and Harlow had enough secrets to be reluctant about such an exchange.

“... so the fish isn’t religious then?” It’s a drastic change of topic, circling back to their original question. She had always conjured the brand itself, something with storied history and with a connection to the divine. Harlow realizes the leap they’ve taken though and offers an apology. “Sorry, it just seemed familiar to me.”

Harlow watches as they look up at the ceiling, in thought maybe. “‘s not religious — at least, my intent is not that, maybe it is t’someone else, I dunnae.” His shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “There are other things tha’ are more apt to the religious aspect, but t’fish — those fucks in the apothecary just seemed like they should get wha’ they deserved an’ a dead fish was it.” The corner of his mouth peaks upwards slightly, “an’ it was a little funny, y’have t’admit.”

They exhale another amused breath at the other’s insistence of the humor of the dead fish slapping the goons around. “Yeah,” they agree, nodding. “Unexpected, certainly.” They cannot help the way their brow furrows though. They had not meant the form of the fish exactly, but the ritual behind it and the magic there. “I had — the way it looks, what it’s made of, that’s what seemed familiar.” Their shoulders shrug in the same way the other’s had a moment before, two of them circling around uncertainties and secrets. “A bit like a storm.”

“Tha’ would make sense given tha’ it’s a spell focused from Vinfaf when I use it an’ ‘m primarily a Tempest Cleric. Storms an’ lightning an’ the ... anger behind them are kind o’where I pull from.”

“Vinfaf?” they ask, unfamiliar with the world. Even as they ask though, they are trying to match what he’s saying with their memories of her. When brought to their mind, anger was not there first. “I’m not familiar.”

“Vinfaf the Strong,” they say, voice carrying a sort of sincerity it did not usually, “Hero-god of Hjemsgaarda and God of the common folk.” Head shakes as they dismiss any guilt Harlow might have felt for their lack of knowledge. “I wouldn’t expect y’t’be familiar. Save for Hjem, people usually aren’t.”

Still, Harlow listens carefully, wanting to understand. The idea of smaller dieities was not unfamiliar to them, and they offer that in an attempt to relate to Sigbjørn. “There are folk deities in the north, though... it is mostly superstition now.” Evara was everywhere these days, and whatever gods lingered behind her were nearly forgotten.

“They’re real.”

Harlow glances over to the other and feels their stomach dropping. The realization that they have spoken wrong leaving them unsteady. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make... the wrong comparison."

" — 'm sorry, tha' was ... punchy of me. "

Whatever the fate of the northern gods, they were certainly different than those Sigbjørn found comfort in. Likewise, even these days, the people of Eyrri found comfort in their small practices, and that was not lessened by their status. "That's your patron then?"

"Vinfaf and four others," he mutters.

A breath, half amused and half surprised, leaves Harlow. "And here I am exhausted with just the one. Five gods?"

Sigbjørn smiles again, which Harlow takes as a good sign after their earlier misstep, and nods. "Aye, five gods. They all help me in their own ways."

Their mind returns to the task at hand, how their new companion calls to not one but five dieties, and how she used to call to Evara for the same purpose. There's a drive there, a want to learn, and Harlow tugs the carved wooden amulet that had been beneath their shirt free. They're not certain it would help in this instance, but perhaps they were not immune to Eyrian superstition. "Show me how you do it?"

"I thought yer band was yer holy symbol." Sigbjørn had other things on their mind, it seems.

Harlow glances down at the amulet, unsure how to answer. "Both work." The amulet was a bit more personal, the band a bit more functional.

"I dunnae ken if the verbal or somatic incantation is going to be the same for you, but I can teach ye what I know." They watch as the other moves their hands, making note of the somatics of the spell. It's not exactly the same as hers, but similar enough to be traced and understood, the same way their words were accented common. "Start here."

They shift themselves to mimic the movements, trying to add in the details they remembered. They know enough about magic to know it would be more than just this though, and ask for further detail. "What do you think about when you call it?"

"Protection," he murmurs. "Strength." Harlow glances down at light in the corner of their vision, catching the sight of magic like lightning beginning to flicker between their smaller hands. "But never for me, always for others."

It was admirable. Harlow would remember that.

The ideas don't seem foreign either, and they could imagine her calling on the same to bring this weapon to life, so they nod and close their eyes, focusing on the same. There's a sign of something beginning to flicker, closer to licking flames than cracking lightning, but present nonetheless.

"There you go," he coaxes, and Harlow is almost distracted enough by the gentle encouragement — so different than how they had learned other spells — to look up and let the magic go. "Push a little."

Eyes close and they try to lock in on the effort. It's more smoke than anything at this point, some unseen mountain wind making it a challenge, making sure they really need this. Their left eye squints open, observing the spell with a critical gaze.

"Tell me what next," they push, jaw tight. It felt unwieldy as it did uncertain, more than any spell they had tried before, and Harlow hangs onto the energy with a tight grip. Yet, Sigbjørn only tells them to breathe. It's almost frustrating as they so easily pull a hammer from thin air, but it pushes them to keep going. They needed to prove themselves.

"Focus on what you want the weapon to be, to look like."

An inhale comes, but their gaze remains intense locked in on the flames. They nod slowly, as if any sharp movement would mean the loss of this trial, before slowly parting their hands. Looking less than solid, hardly secure, is an image that is familiar to them; the twisted metal of an iron brand, glowing nearly white on one end. It was ... hers, more than theirs, but traditional to the order nonetheless.

Again, the gentle nature of Sigbjørn's encouragement — this time in the form of a light touch to their wrist — nearly pulls them from the spell completely. "You've got it. Pull this hand down just slightly. Y'need t'let the magic breathe too."

They take guidance better than might be expected, letting the hand fall a few inches. The image flickers, then returns a little strong. It still wasn't the same strength as they hoped, but closer. They exhale, happy with that at least.

"Aye, that's it. That's how it should feel, just as you have it. With practice, it'll get stronger, more corporeal, easier to wield. Then y'll be able to push it out, away from you an' it will stay. Probably feels like a muscle tha' y'haven't used, aye?"

Their tone is gentle, and Harlow almost just listens to the way it sounds rather than the words themselves. Sigbjørn is a kinder teacher than Harlow has known in some time, which feels strange though they won't speak that observation aloud. They meet their gaze but, still self conscious of their eye and the magic that lingers there — especially around the one person who saw it plainly — they glance back to the brand.

"Yeah, it's always a bit strange."

“Start to pull in opposite directions, on an angle,” he instructs, putting a light pressure on their wrists. “This is where it might be uncomfortable for a little while, keeping the shape and the intention while trying to make it something usable.”

Harlow tries, but something isn't quite right — a movement too quick, or a faltering of thought — and they watch as the image flickers away like a candle extinguishing itself. They sigh, head leaning back against the hull of the ship. They weren't expecting to know it perfectly this quickly, but it was still frustrating.

“Yeah. Just need practice.”

“Do you want to try again?”

Harlow is quiet for a moment, but then nods. They have a determined look to them, and though it is clear that even the effort expended a good bit of energy, they want to keep going. At least one more shot. They consider how an additional weapon might have shifted in the tides fights before this, how it might help in those to come.

They just wanted to keep people safe.

They're about to begin again when they feel both Sigbjørn's gaze heavy on them and a gentle, unexplained warmth that skitters up their wrist. At first, they wonder which part of themselves has caught the other's attention, and though they cannot be sure they have a suspicion. The self conscious feeling fades at the feeling of unexpected comfort.

“You've got it,” he encourages.

The illusionary flames begin to flicker a little higher between their hands, the iron brand forming once again. They move through the motions, and it lasts a little longer this time, but before long it peters out. Once again, they lean back against the ship, sighing. Eyes close, exhaustion sinking in. It took quite a bit out of them. “That might be it for today,” they murmur quietly.

Sigbjørn gets up and moves away, and for a moment Harlow wonders if they had disappointed him. They return a brief moment later with a bottle of wine and that worry fades.

“Y'did good. You'll get it.”

Unfamiliar, once again.

Harlow nods, accepting the reassurance, though in their mind this *wasn't* good. They would get there, they did believe that, but not today. The bottle is taken and they drink, before setting it down between them.

“Eventually.”

“What was the weapon y’were trying to conjure? I’ve never seen tha’ before.”

Their eyelids part just enough to look sideways at their temporary teacher for a moment and then explain. “It’s traditional. There’s a number of knightly orders, I joined the Iron Brand so that...” it seems silly almost saying it, “it’s an iron brand. Most times I have seen this spell before, it’s been one of those.”

He nods, seeming to understand, but then offers an alternative. “Y’know it doesn’ have t’be tha’. If y’choose tha’, it’s fine, but y’can get creative with it.”

Harlow glances down at their hands, but truthfully they cannot even consider the idea. “Yeah, I think for now I will just stay with what I know.” They needed something familiar, something that called back to the north and the people there.

“Understood.”

They’re grateful for that, and the guidance they had provided. They wouldn’t have made it thus far without the other. “Thanks. I haven’t had the change to learn something like this for some time.”

“Happy t’help,” they offer, before changing the direction of the conversation. “Y’told me about the cuff, can I know about the amulet?”

It’s a gentle ask, and Harlow reaches up to touch the amulet. It’s nearly delicate for what it was, carved wood inset with a single stone. “My father made it,” they explain. “The base at least. The stone and the enchantment were added on one of his trading trips.” Lachlan and Halle often left Eyrri for bigger cities to sell their wares, and right before Harlow joined the Knights of the Iron Brand, he had come back with this. Harlow had kept it close since then.

“He’s a good craftsman.”

Harlow nods quickly, sure of the truth of the statement. “He is.”

“It doesn’t have to be now, but I’d like to hear more about him and his trips.” They were beginning to understand that they were frequently in search of stories, so the request does not particularly surprise Harlow. Neither does the next question, “What does the enchantment do?”

“He and my brother are craftsman, and Evara willing their trips are not exiting.” The one time it had gone wrong had led Harlow to where they are now. They glance down at the amulet again as they explain it. “It sort of acts as a conduit for some divine magic. I can ... intimidate, magically. The enchantment supports the effort so I can keep it up a bit longer.”

“I suppose tha’ would be the wish, wouldn’t it... Is it jus’ you an’ yer brother? Or dod you have other siblings?”

“Er, Halle and Katri, my sister.” The three of them, a somewhat mixed group, but siblings nonetheless.

Sigbjørn places the bottle down again, not particularly hard but enough that Harlow finds themselves glancing down at the object due to the sound. Then they speak, and their attention is drawn up again.

“Probably should see if they need help.”

Harlow understands the obligation and thus will not keep them. If he is needed, he should go. They nod, agreeing with the sentiment.

“Keep us upright, Bjørn.”

It’s a wish of luck for weathering the storm, knowing well how winds can turn against you.

“Gods willing, Harlow,” they murmur as they push up, heading towards the stairs. “Get some rest, aye?”

Harlow nods once again, quietly noting the fact that they invoke multiple deities in their expression. They don’t rise themselves quite yet though, needing a moment longer where they are with their head leaning against the wooden hull. They need a moment to process how close they had come.

*Title credit: I’m Here to Take the Sky by Destroy Rebuild Until God Shows*