

Unlawful Sorcery (and the Trouble with Oat Cakes): Another Romantically Smutty Little Story
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Caelian Moonweaver was a dangerous man. Caelian Moonweaver was a soul stealer. Caelian Moonweaver would corrupt the entire village. Caelian Moonweaver was looking to enslave every hard-working man, woman, and child in the land. Caelian Moonweaver wanted coin, power, and infernal knowledge.

At least, that's what the village elders had decided when, while passing through on my way to Waterdeep, they realized who I was, who my father and grandfather were. The name Moonweaver still sent shivers down spines in these parts, thanks to my grandfather's infamous pact with a devil lord that had turned an entire noble family into his personal puppets. That same pact had twisted our bloodline, giving me powers I never asked for. The village was only four days' journey from Waterdeep, but remote enough that such stories still lingered, a legacy that I hated to bear. I mean, really...if I had that sort of power, would I be wasting it on the rubes in this tiny little town? I had actual business in Waterdee, a promising position with the Watchful Order of Magists that would finally let me build a reputation of my own.

One minute, I was eating a delicious oat cake, the next I was in chains. For two days, I'd been sitting in the Millbrook jail, locked in one of two dusty, dingy, long unused cells that occupied the small building by the town hall. Through the narrow window, I could see the bustle of village life continuing without me, merchants' carts raising dust on the unpaved streets, children chasing chickens, the occasional guard patrol eyeing my window suspiciously. The early summer heat made the cell feel like an oven, and the smell of fresh-baked bread from the nearby bakery was pure torture.

Only one guard posted outside my cell, a half-orc with skin a deep jade, and stubby tusks that made his strong profile look even more imposing and ruggedly handsome. He wore his hair pulled back with the sides shaved, black as his thick mustache and goatee were. Big, tall, and broad shouldered, his shirt opened underneath his studded vest he was using as armor, and I could see the smattering of chest pelt underneath.

I usually had an easy time charming my way out of situations like this, especially when I had a good looking tough guy in front of me. Those types of men tended to like human guys who had softened features, which I attributed to elven blood far back in my line. I would just twirl my long copper hair around my well-manicured fingers, blink my sweet eyes, green as the fresh summer grass, and flash my gleaming smile and the walls in front of me would fall. Of course, it helped that I would cast a charm spell on these men, pursing my lips with innate magic. That didn't seem to work here and I didn't know why, so I just sat around, waiting for my seemingly inevitable execution without trial. I had to find a way out of this fast.

I had tried to chat up the guard a few times over the past two days, and met with nothing but grunts and head shakes. Typical tusker, all brawn and no people skills whatsoever. The isolation

was getting to me, watching life continue outside while I sat here in silence, my attempts at conversation falling flat against his stoic demeanor. I was going stir crazy. Finally, when the guard brought my one and only meal, mid-day rations of gruel, bread and a tankard of soured ale that was more akin to horse-piss than a proper brew, something in me snapped.

"Hey, swamp-skin!" That got the guard's attention, as I saw his big body turn, eye cocked in my direction. I got more bold. "I'm going crazy in here. Don't you have any books? Parchment and a quill? Hell, a ball to throw against the wall or something?"

For the first time since I'd been in this cell, the guard spoke. "Am I supposed to feel bad that you feel bored?" The guard had a deep rumble in his voice that made my insides tremble, and not entirely in a bad way. The half-orc lumbered closer to me, a good foot taller than me, and I was not a halfling by any means. "You are in jail, demon. You're not supposed to be entertained."

"Speaking of jail, I still don't know why I'm here. I demand to speak to the village council. This is an outrage!" I stomped to the back wall of my cell, pouting. "I am not my forebears. I travel to lend my aid and magic to people who need it. I don't rob, I don't cheat, I don't steal." I slunk down to the hard, cold stone floor, and stared blankly ahead, despair setting in. "And I most certainly do not steal souls." My gaze rose to meet his deep set eyes, black as his coal colored locks. "If I did, I would have stolen yours. Though I don't know if I'd get more than a few copper for it. You look like you kick kittens."

My captor chuckled. "Fat chance of anything like that happening in here. The Elder Mage of this village put an ironclad ward on this building." A slick smile crept across his face. "Just for people like you." Well, at least I know why my magic didn't work here.

"And tell me about 'people like me' or whatever," I smiled sweetly. "Cute boys with full kissable lips and a butt that won't quit?" I turned around and shook my pert, jiggly ass while looking back with a mischievous grin.

The guard just cocked an eyebrow. He stared at me briefly...was that the forming of a grin on his face? "No. Cute boys who should be burning in Avernus instead of menacing small towns like ours." He turned and walked back to his post.

"Well," I muttered to myself, hanging my arms through the bars of the cell. "At least he thinks I'm cute."

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A few days later, I was still restless. The night air drifted in through the narrow window, finally offering some mercy from the day's stifling heat. I lay on my back atop the straw pallet, arms folded behind my head, staring at the ceiling stones that never changed. Outside the bars, the guard was pacing again. Not in his usual tight patrol loops, but slower... like he was restless. Or maybe...dare I dream?...bored.

"You keep this up," I called softly, "and I might start thinking you like the sound of your own boots."

The pacing stopped.

"For someone in a cage," came the gruff voice, "you talk too much."

"Oh, sweetheart. That's what everyone says. I take it as a sign of my sparkling personality."

Silence.

I turned my head toward the bars. I couldn't see much, just the flicker of torchlight behind his silhouette. Big. Broad. Still a brick wall of a man, even at rest.

"You've been standing out there longer than usual," I said, softer now. "Trouble sleeping? Or do you just enjoy watching me toss and turn?"

"You could say thank you," he replied.

"For what? Your sparkling conversation? The gruel? The iron bars?"

"For not leaving you to rot out in the stocks like the council wanted."

That shut me up.

After a moment, I said, "...So that was you."

No answer.

A quiet stretched out between us. Not hostile, just... heavy. Like neither of us quite knew what to do with it.

I sat up slowly, rubbing a hand through my hair. "Why didn't you?"

He shifted, but didn't answer. The firelight caught one edge of his face now; I saw his sharp jaw, that thick dark mustache, the faintest crease between his brows.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Maybe I've got a weakness for pain-in-the-ass pretty boys." I blinked. Then grinned. "Flattery? From you? Careful...I might swoon."

"I said maybe. Don't let it go to your head."

I chuckled quietly, then rested my arms against the bars. "You've got a nice voice, you know. Like distant thunder. Or maybe earth being plowed."

"That's the worst pickup line I've ever heard."

"I wasn't picking you up. Yet." Hm, maybe I should try a misdirect. "I mean, could I even? You're twice, maybe three times my size!"

No chuckle. Another silence.

A beat. Then, softer, I asked, "Do you ever get lonely out here? Watching over people who hate you for your blood?"

He didn't answer.

He didn't have to. The way he lingered there, just a few paces closer than he'd ever stood before, was answer enough.

Eventually, I slid back down onto the bedding and closed my eyes.

He stayed there until I drifted off.

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The morning sun had barely crested over the hills when I heard the bolt on the cell door slide open. I sat up, groggy, expecting the usual delivery of tasteless porridge and stale bread. Instead, the guard stepped inside holding... not a tray, but a small stack of worn books. He didn't say anything. Just walked over to the edge of the bars, knelt slightly, and slid them through the gap.

I stared at them. Then at him. Then back at the books.

"Wait... are you bribing me?" I asked, rubbing sleep from my eyes. "Gods, is this finally a seduction attempt? I mean, I'm flattered, truly, but you could have just led with a kiss."

He exhaled through his nose. It could have been a huff of annoyance, but I swear it carried the edge of a smirk.

"You said you were going stir crazy," he grunted. "Figured you'd rather be reading than trying to flirt your way through the bars."

I picked up the top book, *A Survey of Southern Realms: Volume III*. The next one was some tattered poetry collection with a pressed flower stuck between the pages. The third had no title but smelled like old candlewax and faintly of lavender.

"Well, well..." I flipped one open with a flourish. "A guard with taste. Do you moonlight as a librarian?"

"Don't make me take them back."

I pressed a hand to my heart. "You wound me. I would never insult a generous act. Especially from a tall, brooding slab of mystery like you."

He ignored that, but he didn't leave, either. Just lingered a moment while I flipped a page or two, watching me with those unreadable eyes of his.

"You're not what I expected," I said without looking up.

"You either," he said.

And then he turned and walked out, shutting the door behind him with only the faintest click. I held the poetry book in my lap and smiled to myself.

Not seduction. Not quite. But maybe... curiosity.

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The next evening, he brought me my supper. Maybe it was a reward for leaving him in peace...my nose buried in those dusty old tomes he'd dropped off like he wasn't thinking about me at all. Sure. Let's go with that.

The meal was a little more substantial than what I'd been fed previously. A small portion of roast boar, tender vegetables, a hunk of bread to sop up the gravy, and a cup of cool, clear water. It smelled divine and tasted even better. Peeking through the bars, I saw he was eating the same thing.

"Well, look at that," I said, flashing a grin. "A proper dinner date with my jade prince."

"There was extra." He didn't look directly at me, just cast a glance from the corner of his eye. "I was feeling generous."

I was ravenous. The meat practically melted on my tongue, and despite my best effort not to look like a starving gnom, I tore into it with what I could only assume was a truly unflattering level of enthusiasm.

"Easy now, pretty," he chuckled. "You'll choke."

I swallowed and pointed my spoon at him. "Finally! A real smile. I didn't expect it to suit that rugged jaw of yours quite so well."

Was that a flush? Just a flicker of red, barely there, crossing those green cheeks?

“Stop,” he muttered, looking away. Conversation dropped.

I waited a beat.

Then, casually, “You’ve not told me your name. I believe you at least owe me that. I want to know who’s keeping the village safe from me blowing it sky high.”

He hesitated. I saw the internal tug-of-war on his face before it slipped away into something more neutral.

“Morden,” he said. “Morden Stonefist.”

I perked up. “Stonefist! Your family...big orc clan out east, right? Rulers, if I’m not mistaken...”

His gaze dropped. “Wouldn’t know. My father wasn’t a king or a chieftain. Just a footsoldier with a distant connection of name. And when the clan found out he’d impregnated a human woman--a prostitute, no less--they wanted nothing to do with us. Out of sight, out of mind.” He drank from his tankard, his voice tightening. “And my mother? Decided I was too wild to raise. Left me at the brothel she worked in and disappeared. I lost a mother and gained a house full of aunts. At least they were kind. They pushed me toward the guard. Said it’d give me a future. The training did help. I left, found road work, took this job. Decent pay, room and board, and I don’t need much sleep. Three years later, I’m still here. The town council trusts me.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Why are you so interested in me?” Gods, he really didn’t see it, did he?

I leaned back on my elbows, grinning. “Why are you telling me all these juicy details of your life, Morden? You know I haven’t cast any spells on you, there being wards and all.”

He let out a low laugh. “I guess no one’s ever cared enough to ask. Let alone a prisoner.” A pause. “Anyway, you’ve hardly told me anything about yourself.”

I pressed a hand to my chest in mock scandal. “Don’t you already know? I’m the demon-sworn sorcerer, cursed by blood, lusting after power and riches and oh, the delicious destruction!” I struck a dramatic pose, then gave him a wink.

That earned another smile. I could really get used to seeing him smile. “Okay, okay...” Morden shook his head. “Say you weren’t the evil, power-hungry sorcerer everyone says you are.” His voice lowered. “Tell me about you.”

Damn, he was really sexy when he dropped the gruff act.

"I... I don't know." I sat up straighter, quieter. "Everyone ties me to my grandfather and father. Truth is, I barely knew them. My grandfather died when I was small. I have only one real memory of him. I remember I was maybe four or five, being told to sit still and be silent in his presence. He looked like a demon, all sharp bones and colder eyes. I remember him handing me a gold coin with this... this awful smile. It haunted my dreams until I realized I meant nothing to him. I was just the next heir to his damned legacy."

Morden was quiet. Listening. Fully.

"What about your parents?" he asked gently.

"My father? Barely there. My mother sent me away to boarding school, probably the smartest thing she ever did. She visited, but Father never did. Except on high holidays, that is. He'd check my grades and then go off about his magical experiments, his power plays, how he was helping lords gain control, ruin rivals, enslave entire villages. Every year he looked worse. Like the rot inside him was seeping out through his skin. I knew I never wanted to become that." I looked down at the last bit of bread, my appetite flickering.

"And then... the demon came. My father's patron. Turns out he'd bargained for more power with my mother's soul. When he tried to fight it? Well, he lost his too." My voice caught for a moment, but I pushed it down. A single tear slipped free anyway. "I guess I should feel lucky he didn't throw mine on the pile. All for power. And then some how, it came to me through the blood anyway. This power. Power I never asked for."

I looked up, met Morden's eyes. His gaze was steady. Soft.

"They were warlocks, Morden. Begging for gifts they didn't earn. Me?" I took a drink of water. "I was born into it. The weave wove through me before I could even speak. That's the difference between a warlock and a sorcerer." I raised my cup like a toast. "They sold their souls for their power. I inherited mine."

Then I smirked. "And thank goodness! I've got skin like fresh parchment. The fires of Avernus would give me the worst sunburn."

Morden barked a laugh.

And just for a moment, in the flicker of the torchlight, it felt like I wasn't a prisoner...Just a man, sharing a meal with another.

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I hadn't realized how quiet it had gotten until I looked up from one of the books Morden had brought me and noticed he was gone.

He'd left me provisions: some hard cheese and dried meat, two apples, and a carafe of water. And what was that? An oat cake! I was elated, one of the only luxuries I had been afforded here.

The rations were enough to last the day, I suppose, if I didn't wolf down the oat cake, but it wasn't like him to disappear for so long.

The sun was already dipping behind the hills when I finally heard the door creak open. I looked up with a smile. "I thought you'd run off with a traveling band of minstrels."

Morden raised an eyebrow, stepping into the torchlight. "I'm not allowed to run errands now?"

"I suppose you are," I said, lowering the book. "Though I was beginning to think you'd left me to rot on bread and poetry."

"I had to pick up the laundry from the marm," he said, setting down a cloth bundle. "And more provisions. For both of us, mind you. Then I had a meeting with the council."

The moment he said it, something inside me tensed.

I rose and crossed to the bars, curling my fingers around the cold iron. "Did they say anything about me? When I'll be let go?"

Morden's eyes dropped. "They're still assessing the threat you pose." There was a shift in his voice, something drier, darker.

He looked back up at me. "By the sounds of it, you've committed a heinous, vile act."

I blinked. "I did no such thing." My mouth had gone dry. "I walked through town. I bought an oat cake. I was heading to the inn when the guard stopped me. That's it. That's all I did."

Morden's expression softened. His gaze held mine, those deep black eyes, full of something I couldn't quite name. Sadness, maybe. Or recognition.

"You believe me, don't you?" I asked, quieter now. "Don't you?"

His hand lifted, slowly, and touched mine through the bars. Warm fingers on mine. Solid. Real. We were close now. Too close. I could feel his breath. The scent of leather and fresh hay clung to him, with the faintest trace of musk and soap. It made my head swim.

"Are you casting a charm spell on me?" he asked softly.

I swallowed. "No," I murmured. "But I could ask the same of you."

I leaned in before I could stop myself, closing the gap between us.

His tusks grazed my cheek. Then his lips found mine, warm, steady, unhurried. Our mouths moved together, and the world disappeared.

He tasted faintly of ale and something sweeter, like fruit left too long in the sun. His tongue brushed mine, coaxing, exploring. I felt it all...his strength, his tension, his hesitation...and beneath it, a gentleness that made my chest ache. Then, slowly, he pulled back.

We stood there, breathless, eyes locked.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, voice low, unsure.

"But you did," I whispered. "And you believe me."

He nodded once. "I do."

I reached for him again. "Then believe me when I say this: I would love nothing more than to spend the night in your arms."

Morden's jaw tensed. I saw the conflict in his eyes, plain as day. Then he stepped back, just enough for the chill to return between us.

"Not now," he said. "Not tonight."

I nodded, looking down. "I understand."

He backed up and turned to walk to his room. He paused, then looked back over his shoulder. "Believe me, pretty," the rumble in his voice betrayed a sultry growl. "When it comes time, I'm going to devour you like an oat cake."

I felt my face burn to a hot red. I had plenty to think about.

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Two uneventful days passed. I read, getting lost in the poems on the pages. I stared out the window of my cell, small as it was, watching the ebb and flow of daily life in the village. I recited incantations and warding spells in my head, in case I ever did make it to the school I was expected at. I did that all day. Until finally, it was late. It was dark. It was quiet, the kind of quiet only found in deep stone and chill in the night air.

I was closing my eyes for another sleepless night. They opened and I looked up when I heard the door open, already knowing who it was.

Morden stood there in the dim glow, shirt loose at the collar, hair slightly damp. No armor. No sword. Just him. His eyes searched mine, his expression unreadable, but his presence hummed with decision.

"I couldn't sleep," he said.

"Because of me, or the acoustics?"

He didn't smile, but his voice softened. "You."

The key turned in the lock. The sound sent a shiver down my spine.

"You're letting me out?" I asked.

"Just for a while," he said. "If you want."

I stepped out and into his orbit, close enough to feel the heat of him. He led me quietly into his small sleeping chamber. The room was bare, but it smelled like him, leather, hay, something musky and warm.

I turned. "Still not too late to change your mind."

He met my gaze and said, "I don't want to."

That was all I needed.

We kissed fast, urgent, and I backed him toward the bed, fingers already tugging at his belt. He stopped me for a moment, forehead resting against mine. "You don't have to..."

"I want to," I cut in, voice low. "Let me."

He sat on the edge of the bed, breathing uneven. I dropped to my knees between his legs. I looked up at him as I undid the laces of his trousers, slow and deliberate. "You've been brooding at me from in front of that cell door for days. I think it's time you relaxed."

His mouth twitched like he wanted to say something, maybe a protest, maybe a joke, but then I freed him, and the only sound he made was a soft, helpless exhale. He was thick and already throbbing and hard, his cock heavy in my hand. His phallus was huge, like a jade obelisk crowned with plum purple. It was much bigger than I expected, but then again so was he. I wrapped my fingers around the thick base, leaned in, and dragged my tongue up the underside with slow reverence. His hips jerked slightly.

"Gods, Caelian..."

I smiled. "Say that again later."

I stretched my mouth over the flared knob and slowly took him into my mouth, inch by inch, savoring the weight and heat of him. He filled my mouth gradually, and when I glanced up, his

head was tipped back, eyes closed, one hand clenched in the blanket beside him. I bobbed my head in a slow rhythm, sucking gently, swirling my tongue around the head. When I hollowed my cheeks and took him deeper, he groaned a deep, guttural sound that went straight to my spine.

“Fuck,” he muttered, voice strained. His hand moved to my hair, fingers threading through, not pushing, just holding on, gently guiding me.

I moaned around him, letting the vibration tease him further, and felt his thighs tense on either side of me.

“You’re gonna make me...” he started.

I pulled back with a slick pop and grinned up at him. “Not yet. I have plans.”

He barely had time to catch his breath before I stood, stripped my tunic off, and pressed him back onto the bed. He rolled with me, pulling me beneath him, kissing me hard, hungry now, unrestrained.

Clothes were gone before I knew it. His skin against mine, hot and rough and perfect. I kissed him everywhere I could reach, teeth scraping over his throat, his shoulder, his chest. His weight over me was everything I didn’t know I needed, anchoring, overwhelming in the best way. He reached for the oil tucked beneath his bed. Practical man. I smiled as he coated his fingers and reached between my legs, I gasped as his big, rough fingers found my tight opening, prepping me with slow, careful pressure.

“Still thorough, I see.”

“Quiet,” he growled, voice rough.

I arched into him. “Make me.”

He made me by shoving his tongue in my mouth as his fingers left me and I felt the great morningstar between his legs start pushing into me. I whimpered into his mouth and he returned with a grunt and deep, rolling growl.

When he entered me, it was slow and deep. I gasped, hands gripping his back, nails digging in as he filled me completely.

“Caelian...” he whispered, like it meant something sacred.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Gods, yes, you feel...so...” I couldn’t finish the thought. Didn’t need to.

He rocked into me in steady, powerful strokes, his body pressed flush against mine, forehead to forehead. Every movement was pleasure and pressure and too much and not enough.

"I'm yours tonight," I whispered. "I'm yours as long as you want me..."

He didn't answer. He just kissed me like he believed it.

We moved together in the dark, bodies tangled, moans swallowed into mouths. His thrusts grew faster, rougher, chasing the edge.

I came first, spilling between us with a cry muffled into his shoulder. He followed not long after, his huge member pumping, pulsing deep inside me. He flooded me with a broken groan, clutching me like I might vanish.

Afterward, we lay in the mess of it, limbs tangled, his hand on my chest, his breath slow and warm against my neck.

"Still think I'm dangerous?" I asked quietly, half-laughing.

He chuckled softly. "Only to my sanity."

I smiled and closed my eyes.

When it finally broke, when we came apart in each other's arms, I was breathless, sweat-slicked, and completely undone. He curled beside me after, one arm across my stomach, breath warm on my neck.

"Next time," I said, voice thick with sleep, "I want dinner first."

He chuckled against my shoulder.

"I'll see if the bakery's got more of those oat cakes."

I smiled.

"Perfect. You bring the cakes, I'll bring the charm."

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We were both dressed. Mostly.

Morden had managed to tame his hair into something resembling order, and I had traded my prison-creased tunic for a fresh one he'd tucked away in a chest. It was still a bit snug across the shoulders, but I wasn't complaining. If anything, I rather liked the way it hugged my waist.

He was adjusting his belt, very focused on it, while I rifled through the pile of books near the bed.

"I left one of the poetry volumes in the cell," I said absently.

Morden looked up. "You sure?"

"Positive. I remember because I bookmarked a line about yearning with a piece of dried apple." He gave me a long-suffering look but said nothing as I crossed into the hallway and walked toward the cell.

The heavy door creaked as I pushed it open, except it didn't creak much, because it was already slightly ajar.

I paused. I hadn't left it that way.

I stepped inside, scanning the small space. My blanket was still folded. The carafe was where I left it. And there, on the cot, sat the book. Exactly as I remembered. I picked it up, brushing a bit of imaginary dust from the cover. Then came the sound of fast-approaching boots.

Morden appeared behind me in the doorway just as the outer door to the holding area slammed open and a young man in a courier's vest came barreling in, cheeks flushed, breath ragged.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

There we stood. Me in Morden's tunic, holding a book. Morden behind me in the narrow cell, arms crossed.

The messenger blinked once. [Twice](#). Then said, "...Why is the cell door open?"

I offered my brightest, most innocent smile. "Oh! We were, ah...doing inventory."

Morden pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I was told to bring the prisoner, sorry, the *guest*, to the council chamber. Immediately." He looked at Morden. "You too. They're waiting."

"Who is 'they'?" I asked, smoothing down the hem of my borrowed shirt.

The messenger shrugged. "Didn't ask."

He gave the cell door one more suspicious glance before turning on his heel and jogging back the way he came.

I looked at Morden. He looked at me.

Then he muttered, "Well. That could have been worse."

I smirked. "He didn't even notice the hair."

Morden grunted and walked off muttering something about wanting to crawl into the nearest well.

I followed, book tucked under my arm, utterly unrepentant.

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We were ushered across the town square, and I couldn't help but notice...no chains this time. No magical manacles, no dramatic declarations of doom. Just a brisk walk and a very tight-lipped escort. Something was definitely afoot. When we entered the council chamber, I saw what.

Three figures stood near the front, all draped in robes bearing the unmistakable silver sigil of the Watchful Order. Definitely not locals. They looked clean. Organized. Somewhat scandalized to be here. One of them, a tall, tightly wound man with a neatly trimmed beard, was pacing in tight little circles, the kind that said "I left important spellwork for this." The other two, a younger scribe and a woman with steel-gray hair and sharp glasses, were holding a slate and parchment between them.

The woman was clearly in charge. "All right," she said crisply, voice slicing the room in half. "Let me make sure I have this correct. The reason Mr. Moonweaver was detained... is because he was eating an oat cake?"

The head councilman cleared his throat. "Well...he was observed drawing symbols in the dirt."

"While eating the oat cake," another elder offered helpfully.

She paused. "I see. Go on."

"And then..." the councilman hesitated. "A goose started acting strangely."

The quill in her hand froze. "I'm sorry?"

"A local goose," another elder clarified. "Agatha. She reportedly honked three times, flapped in a counterclockwise motion, and then walked in a spiral. Which we took as a sign of bewitchment."

From the doorway, I stared. "You've got to be kidding."

The older woman looked up and caught my eye. “Ah. You must be Caelian Moonweaver.” She crossed the room and offered me a dry, but not unkind, smile.

I returned it with a look I can only describe as barely restrained existential crisis. “I didn’t hex anything. Especially not a goose.” I turned to the elders. “I was practicing a protection ward. In the dirt. For personal study. One minute I’m chewing on an oat cake, the next I’m being arrested...for poultry-related witchcraft?!”

Even the pacing mage stopped mid-step.

The younger scribe was clearly losing the battle to suppress a grin.

The woman exhaled through her nose. “You’ve been detained without authorization. Held for nearly two weeks. And no one thought to follow up on his letter to the Order?”

The head councilman muttered something that might’ve been “we were going to,” but the effect was ruined by the high-pitched wheeze at the end.

The woman turned to Morden next. “You’re the guard?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you at any point believe Mr. Moonweaver had bewitched a goose?”

Morden glanced at me. “No, ma’am. He’s been the best prisoner that I’ve ever held.” Our eyes locked. Did Morden give me a sly wink? My heart fluttered. Thankfully, the woman didn’t notice as she made her note.

There was a long, tense silence.

The pacing mage finally stopped, turned sharply toward the village elders, and barked, “Well? Aren’t you going to apologize to young Master Moonweaver?”

The councilmen exchanged panicked glances. The head elder gave a weak cough. “Well... his name is Moonweaver, after all, and that’s a, you know, historically troublesome name...”

“Moonweaver,” the woman cut in, “is just that...a name. We judge people by their works, not their ancestors.”

One of the other village elders muttered, “But the goose is a trustworthy, upstanding goose.”

The pacing mage rounded on him. “It’s a GOOSE!”

The poor scribe in the back lost it completely, slapping a hand over his mouth to contain a laugh.

The woman took a calming breath, turned back to me, and said with finality, "Come, Mister Moonweaver. You don't need to be here anymore."

And just like that, I was being ushered toward the door. No chains. No spells. Just freedom. And Morden, one pace behind me.

The goose, blessedly, was not present.

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Outside in the town square, the three from the Order made sure my belongings were returned to me: my traveling case, my satchel of herbs I'd collected along the road, my extra tunic (now mysteriously laundered), and, perhaps most importantly, my half-eaten oat cake, now hopelessly dried out and utterly inedible.

I held it up and sighed. "Tragic. I'll need to stop by the bakery for a replacement. For closure."

The Order scribe chuckled as he scribbled furiously. The woman, still businesslike but clearly more relaxed now, was dictating details of my travel papers.

"...And make sure you log his route with the waystations. We'll want eyes on the road to Waterdeep. His arrival is expected within the week. We will need to arrange for an escort..."

"I'll take him."

The words came simply. Morden stood a few paces behind me, posture steady, voice low but clear. The Order representatives turned to look at him, then at the village elders, who had gathered awkwardly by the well and were doing their best impressions of background shrubbery. There was a tense pause.

Then the head councilman muttered, "We... approve."

The pacing mage from earlier gave him a sideways glare. "How magnanimous."

The Order woman nodded briskly. "Very good. We'll mark you as his official escort."

I looked up at Morden, a slow smile tugging at my mouth. "Well, well. My own personal guard. I feel important already."

Morden gave a slight shake of his head, but there was the smallest hint of a smile in return. We left the square behind and walked side by side through the village, the people now avoiding our eyes, or mine at least, with a level of embarrassment that felt almost polite. When we reached the jail, Morden pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"I don't have much. Most of this came with the job." He gestured around the room once we got to the small guard's quarters. "It'll be easy to pack."

I leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "That makes one of us. I'm debating whether I should bring that little poetry book. It has marginalia. Some of it mine. Some of it older and likely enchanted. And it makes me feel mysterious and emotionally unavailable."

Morden glanced back. "You're many things, Caelian. Emotionally unavailable isn't one of them."

"Oh, you flatter me. But also? Shh. Let me have the mystique."

He rolled his eyes and started folding a blanket with military precision.

I watched him for a beat, then said, "Once we get to Waterdeep... what will you do?"

He didn't look up from his bag as he answered. "Might look into the city guard. I know the job."

I tilted my head. "So you'll just...stick around?"

"Someone's got to keep an eye on you."

My heart did an awkward little somersault, which I did my best to ignore.

"What about the village elders?" I asked, mostly to fill the silence. "Won't they be devastated to lose their one competent employee?"

He shrugged. "They'll survive."

"And the goose?"

He paused, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "It'll learn to cope."

I grinned. "And you really think babysitting me is a better use of your time than guarding a cell no one ever uses?"

This time, he turned to me fully, eyes steady. "It's not about guarding you. It's about being where I want to be."

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. I covered it with a smirk. "You know if you keep saying things like that, I might get ideas."

He stepped close, close enough that I could smell that familiar mix of leather and warmth again. "Get them." His arm curled around my waist and pulled me close by the small of my back.

I swallowed. "I intend to."

We stood there for a moment longer, tension buzzing between us. Then he leaned in and kissed me with a slow and certain strength, the kind of kiss that made me believe this wouldn't be over when we reach the city. His lips were warm, and his free hand cupped the side of my jaw, thumb brushing just under my ear.

When we finally pulled apart, I took a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Okay," I said, grabbing the poetry book off the cot. "Now I'm ready."

He picked up his pack, slung it over his shoulder, and held the door for me.

Together, we stepped out into the morning sun.